CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The Quest for the Historical Ignatius

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Ignatius of Loyola founded perhaps the most influential modern Catholic religious order. He was baptized Íñigo as Christopher Columbus was getting ready for his first transatlantic voyage and the so-called Catholic Monarchs were preparing an edict expelling their Jewish subjects. These two events of 1492 would profoundly affect the development of the Society of Jesus, or the Jesuits.

Íñigo spent the first few years of his life in the castle of Loyola, which belonged to his noble Basque family. An orphan, he was later sent to the household of Juan Velázquez de Cuéllar, the chief treasurer of the Spanish Crown (Map 1.1), in Arévalo (province of Ávila in Castile), where he served several years as the treasurer’s page and acquired chivalric skills expected of a Spanish nobleman. He also became aware then of the importance of the converso, or “New Christian,” network, of which Velásquez de Cuéllar was part. After his patron’s death in 1517, Íñigo enlisted in the military service of the duke of Nájera, Manrique de Lara, in the Kingdom of Navarre. In 1521, he participated in the battle of Pamplona that Lara fought against the French. Wounded by a cannon ball, Loyola returned to his family’s castle, where he spent his convalescence in the company of devotional books, including the Leyenda de los santos, and experienced a religious conversion. It resulted in, among other radical changes in his life, a strong desire to undertake a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. On his way to embark in the Mediterranean harbor of Barcelona, he stopped at two places: at the Benedictine monastery of Montserrat and in nearby Manresa. In the former—known for being influenced by devotio moderna—Íñigo made his long general confession. In the latter he composed the basis of the Spiritual Exercises—the fundament of Ignatian and Jesuit spirituality. In Manresa, he first engaged in his apostolate with other lay people, in a fashion similar to the converso Juan de Ávila (1499–1569).

In 1524, after completing his pilgrimage and retracing Jesus’s life in the Holy Land, Loyola came back to Barcelona and undertook some schooling that would allow him to enroll two years later at the University of Alcalá de Henares to study philosophy. There, distracted from studies, he met a number of people influenced by the alumbrado and Erasmian ideals, which drew attention of church authorities and the Inquisition and resulted in his incarceration and trial. His troubles with the ecclesiastic authorities continued during his brief studies at the University of Salamanca. In 1528, he decided to enroll in the faculty of arts and theology at the University of Paris.
During his long seven years of studies there, Ignatius attracted to his spiritual exercises and apostolic ideals a group of students who became companions of his religious mission. After their ordination in 1537 in Venice and failed attempt to embark for Jerusalem (where they planned to proselytize among Muslims), Ignatius and his companions moved instead to Rome to offer their services to the pope. There they decided to found a new religious order which was officially approved by Pope Paul III in 1540, when Ignatius was almost fifty. A few months later, he was elected superior general of the order. With the help of his converso secretary, Juan Alfonso de Polanco, whom he recruited some years later, Ignatius addressed his confreres around the world through numerous instructions and letters, and composed the Society's rules—the Constitutions—which to the Jesuits became much more than just a legal text. Loyola governed his order for fifteen years until his death in 1556.

After his death, devotion to Ignatius grew, a fact demonstrated by numerous artistic representations of him commissioned from the most famous artists of the time, Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) included. These images were an important means of gaining support for Loyola's beatification in 1609 and canonization in 1622.

Ignatius's spirituality quickly crossed the borders of the Society of Jesus itself to influence other religious congregations, especially women's orders. Some modern scholars have investigated the impact of the Spiritual Exercises and the Constitutions on the transition from medieval to modern conceptions of humanity and the world in general, and on the formation of the modern self and objectivity in particular. Others have looked at the reverberations of Ignatian spirituality in influential European writers who, despite their Jesuit formation, sometimes became Ignatius's vitriolic critics.

During a roundtable sponsored by the Journal of Jesuit Studies at the 2013 Sixteenth Century Studies Conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico, David Myers of Fordham University suggested that one of the most important foci for scholars of Jesuit history today should be “the quest for the historical Ignatius,” recalling Albert Schweitzer's attempt in the nineteenth century to reconstruct and separate the life of Jesus from the devotions and beliefs that sprang up about him. Certainly this quest had already started with the publication initiative of the Monumenta Historica Societatis Iesu in the late nineteenth century, but today, over a hundred years later, we still lack a comprehensive biography of Ignatius that would meet contemporary academic standards. What is necessary now first is to critically reassess approaches that have been used in studying the complex and fascinating figure of the founder of the Jesuit order.

Of course, this Companion does not pretend to be as groundbreaking as Albert Schweitzer's quest for the historical Jesus, but we do want to offer the