

St Ignatius of Loyola period engraving



St Ignatius of Loyola

A PILGRIM IN THE HEART OF HISTORIC ROME

TRF visits the magnificent world of the Roman Baroque; Donna Orsuto tells of the life, teachings and Roman traces of St Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits

by Donna Orsuto

One idea for a hot Roman afternoon is a visit to the Chiesa del Gesù, the mother Church of the Jesuits (Piazza del Gesù) for the daily Baroque light and music spectacle in the Chapel of St Ignatius. Around 17.30 (5.30pm), in the left transept, lights begin to flicker and the dramatic eighteenth century music of Domenico Zipoli commences.

Keep an eye on the recently discovered altarpiece by Andrea Pozzo (1642-1709) which gradually disappears to expose a statue of St Ignatius of Loyola. There's a short narration (in Italian) which captures in a few words the message of St Ignatius for today – make sure to stay long enough to see the whole nave lit up. Delight in this experience of Baroque religious culture commemorating one of the most influential men of all times, St Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), whose feast day is celebrated on 31 July and who is buried right below the action.

Starting the St Ignatius of Loyola pilgrimage

The altarpiece recalls a key moment in Ignatius' life when, while praying just outside Rome, he perceived that God the Father was placing him with Jesus his Son. Chosen to found a society totally dedicated to Jesus, bearing his name, and carrying on his work, Ignatius was convinced in the depths of his being that God was saying, "I will be favourable to you in Rome."

If you want to know more about Ignatius, enter the door on Piazza del Gesù 45 (marked *Collegio Internazionale del Gesù*), just next to the Church, and go to the austere quarters where he worked and prayed. Put your camera away and just 'be' in this contemplative space where Ignatius lived and died. Open 16.00-18.00, Monday to Saturday, you

will see his pilgrim shoes, a sampling of his letters, and an early copy of his *Spiritual Exercises*.

City dweller in pilgrim shoes

Born in Loyola in 1491, Ignatius's dramatic religious conversion took place while convalescing from a broken leg in 1521. At that time, he probably could not have imagined spending many years in Rome. When his courtier and soldier days were over, he lived as a 'poor pilgrim' while offering advice to anybody who would listen. At the age of 33, when the Spanish Inquisition chided him for his lack of theology, he went back to school, first with schoolboys to learn Latin and then eventually to the University of Paris. He led his Parisian companions through a month of guided prayer, and afterwards, they decided to go to Jerusalem. When this plan failed, they came to Rome and offered their services to the pope. Though Ignatius always considered himself a pilgrim, he spent the last 19 years of his life in the city of Rome. When Ignatius arrived in Rome in 1537, it was like a small town. He eventually moved from the outskirts into the simple quarters that you can visit today in 1544. The headquarters were situated at a strategic location where processions passed and people gathered to socialize. Ignatius was happy to live in the heart of the city where he started a house for reformed prostitutes, gave his *Spiritual Exercises* to important citizens, instituted colleges and universities all over Europe, and guided his companions scattered throughout the world. "Finding God in all things," a touchstone of his spirituality included finding God in the heart of a city.

Prolific letter writer

During these years, Ignatius wrote 6,815 letters, including a large proportion sent to women, making him the most prolific letter writer of the sixteenth century. He guided missionary activities on three continents and his religious order expanded rapidly. Though he had started out with only ten companions in 1538, by his death, there were 1,000 Jesuits. The numbers continued to grow after his death and by 1640 the religious order had grown to 15,683. Even today, the Jesuits are the largest male religious order with more than 18,000 members.

Spiritual Exercises

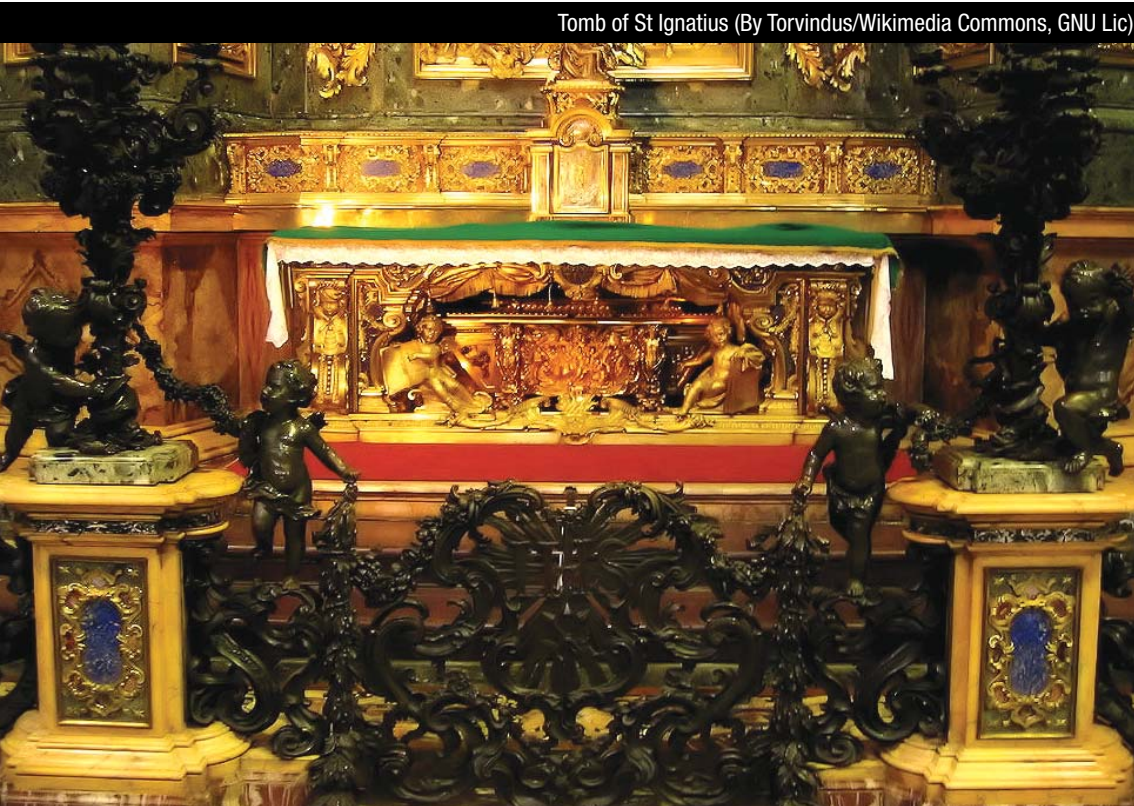
Best known for his *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius explains that "just as taking a walk, traveling on foot, and running are bodily exercises, so is the name spiritual exercises given to any means of preparing and disposing our soul to rid itself of all its disordered affections and then, after their removal, of seeking and finding God's will". A four-week intensive 'exercise program' is facilitated by a spiritual director who serves as a sort of 'personal trainer' giving guidance for entering into a prayerful dialogue with God. The Spiritual Exercises are about growth in inner freedom and in new horizons for knowing, loving and serving God.

Both the baroque chapel of St Ignatius and the humble rooms where he died on July 31, 1556 speak powerfully of a desire to live a life for God and for others. It is a life dedicated to the greater glory of God, *ad Maiorem Dei Gloria*. St Ignatius not only did that himself, but he showed others the path, and he continues to do so, even today.

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Tomb of St Ignatius (By Torvindus/Wikimedia Commons, GNU Lic)



Further reading:

Jesuit website: www.jesuit.org

On Ignatius and Rome: *Saint, Site and Sacred Strategy* (1990) and *Landmarking, City, Church and Jesuit Urban Strategy* (1997, chapters 4, 5 and 6) by Thomas Lucas.

On Ignatius and the Jesuits: *The Cambridge Companion to the Jesuits*, ed. by Thomas Worcester (2008).

On the Chiesa del Santissimo Nome di Gesù: www.chiesadelgesu.org

On the daily baroque spectacle in the chapel of St Ignatius, see "Lost Baroque Work is a Spectacle Again" by Elisabetta Povoledo (*New York Times*, 14 June 2008).