

Ignatius in the Holy Land

It is now 500 years since Ignatius' pilgrimage to the holy places (1523-2023)



On 1 September 1523, Ignatius and his fellow pilgrims disembarked at Jaffa harbour. For Ignatius this was the fulfilment of a dream that had taken root in him at his conversion. Enamoured of Jesus Christ, how could he not visit the place where Jesus was born, the places where he ministered, the place where the Paschal mystery was fulfilled?

Ignatius asked for “interior knowledge of the Lord, who for me become man, that I may love him and follow him” (*Spiritual Exercises* no. 104). He wanted to walk the same roads that Jesus walked, to see and touch the same places that Jesus had experienced: the places where our salvation was fulfilled. Ignatius desired this so that he may draw ever closer to Jesus. In the early years after his conversion, Ignatius took all this quite literally.



Bethlehem, Basilica of the Nativity. Main Nave.

The very meaning of the Holy Land for Ignatius was tied in with the mystery of the Incarnation. The plague and local circumstances at the time did not allow Ignatius and his fellow pilgrims to visit Nazareth and the other holy places in Galilee. But they could and did visit Bethlehem and the Church of the Nativity, even spending the night in a prayer vigil there.

Many years later, when he was ordained a priest, Ignatius had hoped to return to the Holy Land, and celebrate his first Mass in Bethlehem. When this proved impossible, after waiting a year, Ignatius decided to celebrate his first Mass at the Basilica of St Mary Major in Rome, at the altar that held the relic of the manger from Bethlehem.



Bethlehem, Basilica of the Nativity. The Grotto.
- (left) Star marking the birthplace of Jesus.
- (above) The Manger.



Place of the Baptism at the Jordan river.

The pilgrimage was not restricted to Jerusalem and Bethlehem. They visited the sites on the Mount of Olives, and Bethany, linked to the lives of Lazarus, and his sisters Martha and Mary.

As pilgrims often do today, Ignatius and his companions also went down to the Jordan river, most likely to the area of *Kasr al Yahud*, to commemorate Jesus' baptism and the beginning of his ministry.

They wanted to visit the Mount of Temptation but were prevented by their local guides.

On the way to Jericho, they would likely have seen the Inn of the Good Samaritan, as well as the *Deir el Qelt* (St George of Koziba), a monastery, then in ruins, tied to the memory of St Joachim and Anne, where Joachim received the news of the birth of Our Lady.



Bethany, Tomb of Lazarus.



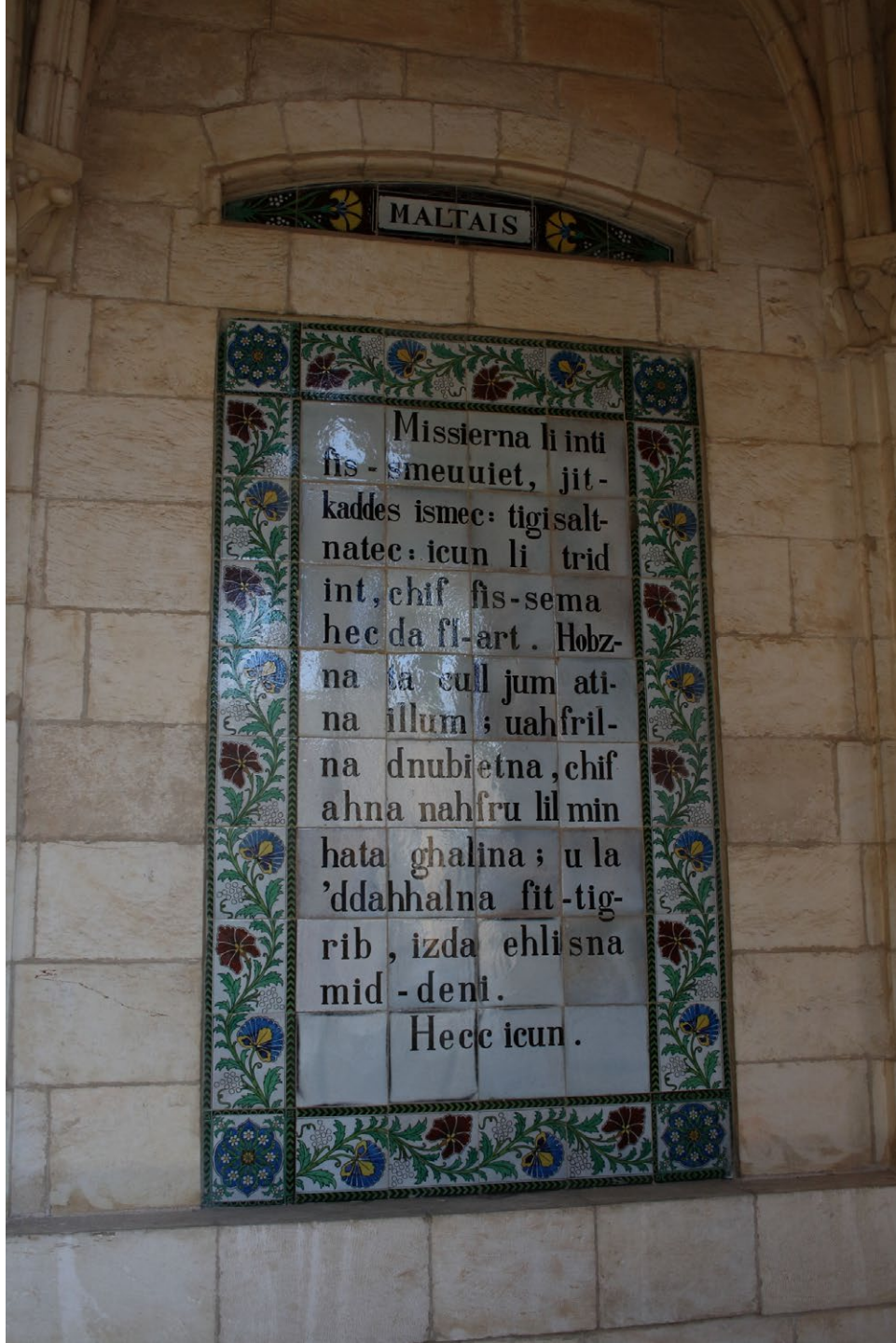
Bethany, Remains around the Church of St Lazarus.



Bethany, Ruins of a Medieval Tower.



Wadi Qelt. Monastery of St George of Koziba.



Jerusalem, Mount of Olives. Church of the *Pater Noster*.
- (above) Crypt of the Our Father.
- (left) One of many plaques with the Our Father in various languages, here in Maltese (pre-1930 orthography).

In the Autobiography, Ignatius writes little about his Holy Land pilgrimage, but he speaks of the many consolations he received. We may only imagine what Ignatius must have experienced interiorly, for a man so much in love with the Lord Jesus, whom, at that point, he had taken to heart as his Lord and King.

In and around Jerusalem, the pilgrims visited many holy places. Some of the routes have changed over the centuries, as places shifted and adjusted to new understandings, devotions, and practical circumstances.

The *Via Dolorosa* as we know it today, for example, had not yet developed in Ignatius' day. Pilgrims followed instead a "Holy Circuit", starting from the Holy Sepulchre, recalling many familiar sites and stories.



Jerusalem, *Via Dolorosa*. Today this site is the 5th station, commemorating when Simon of Cyrene helped Jesus carry the cross. At the time of Ignatius, this place marked the house of Simon the Pharisee, where an anonymous woman washed the feet of Jesus and anointed them with precious oil.



Jerusalem, *Via Dolorosa*. The house of Veronica (today the 6th station) was even then recalled at the same site. The name is often read as a corruption of *Vera+icona* (true image or icon), recalling the legend of the woman who wiped the face of Jesus as he carried the cross, with the image of Jesus' face Imprinted on the cloth. Some traditions identified her with the woman suffering from haemorrhage whom Jesus had healed.



Jerusalem, the Cenacle. The architecture of the room today is essentially as it would have looked in 1523. There were then two altars, one recalling the institution of the Eucharist, the other the washing of the feet. The *Mihrab* on the right is a later addition, after the room was transformed into a mosque.

Jerusalem is the city where Jesus completes his mission, and where the Paschal mystery is fulfilled.

On each step of the journey, Ignatius could walk the places that commemorate all these events, starting with the Last Supper and the washing of the feet at the *Cenacle*. He then headed down to Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed, and was arrested.

The Cenacle was then part of the Franciscan Convent, a situation that was to change in the following years. With the Ottomans in control, the Franciscans were unceremoniously thrown out of their convent, and some even served time in prison.



The cloister of the complex of the Cenacle, then the Franciscan Convent. Ignatius himself, who travelled as a cleric from Pamplona, is likely to have been a guest here. On the ground floor is the memorial of the Tomb of David, now a synagogue.



Jerusalem, Gethsemane. The Garden of Olives.



Jerusalem, Gethsemane. The Cave of the Apostles.



Jerusalem, Armenian Quarter. Church of the Holy Archangels (and the House of Annas).

Recollections of the Passion were highlighted in various sites and chapels. Some have become part of the itinerary of many Catholic pilgrims today, including the *Via Dolorosa*.

Others have slowly fallen out of the collective memory of Catholic pilgrims, such as the two Armenian churches, which were built on the sites of the House of Annas and the House of Caiaphas, the High Priests. The house of Annas was located at the Church of the Holy Archangels in the Armenian Quarter, and the house of Caiaphas at the Monastery of Our Saviour, right outside Zion Gate.

Unlike some other communities, the Armenians frown on pilgrimages as tourism, and the churches are not open for visits. But they do welcome the faithful (and pilgrims) for prayer and for their daily liturgies. In some ways, this preserves the prayerful atmosphere of the places, often lost elsewhere.



Jerusalem, Armenian Monastery of Our Saviour.

(top) View of the complex, with the entrance to the old monastic compound. In the background, Dormition abbey.

(left) Interior of the church. To the left, the place behind the curtain is venerated as the prison of Christ.



Jerusalem, Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The locations of Crucifixion (left), our Lady of Sorrows (centre), and Jesus nailed to the cross (right).

At the heart of it all is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which encloses the places related to Jesus' crucifixion, burial and resurrection.

It is a church held dear by various Christian communities. Even today, they share the spaces of the complex through a set of complicated arrangements.

Pilgrims like Ignatius would have visited these sites primarily as participants in processions and devotions. A daily procession, not too different from that in which Ignatius would have participated, is still conducted today by the Franciscan Friars who serve at the church for pilgrims of the Latin rite.

Ignatius and the pilgrims also spent the night in prayerful vigil. We may imagine Ignatius, in front of the crucified Jesus on the rock of Calvary, asking himself: "What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What should I do for Christ?" (*Spiritual Exercises* no. 53)



Jerusalem, Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Two moments of the Franciscan procession. (top) The stone of Unction. (left) The Tomb of our Lord.

Both places were already venerated at the time of Ignatius. But they now look very different to what was there then, as reconstructions and renovations have adapted them to changing tastes.

Of course, the Paschal mystery does not end with the death of Jesus on the cross, and his being laid in the tomb. Much as the devotion for Calvary is important, the heart of the church is the empty tomb, the place of the Resurrection, or the *Anastasis*.

Close to the Holy Tomb itself, the north transept of the church is dedicated to the apparition to Mary Magdalene, as narrated in the Gospels.

This church, however, also holds another tradition which finds itself in the *Spiritual Exercises*. Medieval tradition held that the Arches of the Virgin (what survives of the *triportico* of the Constantinian complex) is where Mary, the Mother of Jesus, walked toward Jesus' tomb early on Easter morning. The Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament is dedicated to the apparition of Jesus to Our Lady. In the *Spiritual Exercises* (no. 218-225, 299) we find this as the first apparition of the Risen Lord.



Jerusalem, Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

(top) The chapel of the apparition to Mary Magdalene.

(left) The Arches of the Virgin, what remains of the *triportico* of the original Constantinian complex. Medieval tradition held that Mary, Mother of Jesus, walked along this way to visit the tomb of her son, who first appeared to her.



Ignatius had hoped to stay in Jerusalem, both for his personal devotion and to help souls. Divine Providence led him elsewhere.

On 22 September 1523, the Franciscan superior informed him that it was impossible for him to stay, and ordered him to return back to Europe. Ignatius' dream was shattered, but he submitted to Church authority. Here, Ignatius started to learn how God's will in his life is not simply a matter of personal discernment, but one where obedience to legitimate Church authority has an important role.

As he himself narrates in the *Autobiography*, Ignatius left the group and returned alone to the place of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives, not once but twice, to see in which direction Jesus' feet were pointing. Perhaps he was trying to understand where to head to next, which direction his life should take.



Jerusalem, Mount of Olives. The Mosque of the Ascension.

Once his absence was discovered, the concerned Franciscans sent to find him, and had him escorted back to the convent to make sure he did not abscond again. The following day, the pilgrims left Jerusalem for Jaffa, and then back to Europe.

Ignatius' dream of returning to Jerusalem remained alive. Even when the first companions made the vows at Montmartre, their first plan was to return to Jerusalem and the Holy Land. Going to Rome, and placing themselves at the disposal of the Pope, was their plan B.

Ignatius was, however, never to return. Circumstances at the time did not make a return pilgrimage possible, and once this became clear, the companions went to Rome, to fulfil the second option of their vows.

And following their deliberations about their future, they founded the Society of Jesus.

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