



The Spiritual Exercises

St. Ignatius of Loyola

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Ignatius of Loyola (1491- 1556) was a Spanish knight from a Basque noble family, hermit, priest since 1537, and theologian, who founded the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) and was its first Superior General. Ignatius emerged as a religious leader during the Counter-Reformation, and his devotion to the Catholic Church was characterized by unquestioning obedience to the Catholic Church's authority and hierarchy. After being seriously wounded at the Battle of Pamplona in 1521, he underwent a spiritual conversion while in recovery. *De Vita Christi* by Ludolph of Saxony inspired Loyola to abandon his previous military life and devote himself to labour for God, following the example of spiritual leaders such as Francis of Assisi. He experienced a vision of the Virgin Mary and the infant Jesus while at the shrine of Our Lady of Montserrat in March 1522. Thereafter he went to Manresa, where he began praying for seven hours a day, often in a nearby cave, while formulating the fundamentals of the Spiritual Exercises. In September 1523, Loyola reached the Holy Land to settle there, but was sent back to Europe by the Franciscans. Between 1524 and 1537, Ignatius studied theology and Latin in Spain and then in Paris. In 1534, he arrived in the latter city during a period of anti-Protestant turmoil which forced John Calvin to flee France. Ignatius and a few followers bound themselves by vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. In 1539, they formed the Society of Jesus, approved in 1540 by Pope Paul III, as well as his Spiritual Exercises approved in 1548. Loyola also composed the Constitutions of the Society. He died in July 1556, was beatified by Pope Paul V in 1609, canonized by Pope Gregory XV in 1622, and declared patron of all spiritual retreats by Pope Pius XI in 1922. The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, written from 1522-1524, are a brief set of Christian meditations, prayers and mental exercises, divided in four thematic 'weeks' of variable length, designed to be carried out over a period of 28 to 30 days. They were composed with the intention of helping the retreatant to discern Jesus in his life, leading then to a personal commitment to follow it. Though the underlying spiritual outlook is Catholic, the exercises are often made nowadays by non-Catholics. The 'Spiritual Exercises' booklet was formally approved in 1548 by Paul III.

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