

Ignatius, the Wiseman: Reflection #4

An ongoing series exploring how Ignatius the Pilgrim discerned the spirits in his quest for Christ.

A Long and Winding Path

... This is a mental representation of the place. It will consist here in seeing in imagination the way [of Joseph and Mary] from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Consider its length, its breadth; whether level, or through valleys and over hills. (Saint Ignatius, Spiritual Exercises, #112)

In Ignatius's meditation of the journey to Bethlehem, Ignatius wonders if the way was short and straight or long and winding. No doubt he himself imagines it to be long and winding with lots of valleys and hills. Indeed, this was his own experience of the journey.

Plan A. Before having much of a relationship with God, Ignatius pursued the life of the knightly courtier. He dreamed of winning important battles and also winning the hand of some royal princess. Then, in his first battle as a Spanish soldier, his leg was shattered by a cannonball. No chance of becoming a heroic knight with a bum leg!

Plan B. Ignatius experienced a profound conversion as he lay crippled in bed. He knew what path to follow: he would be a knight for God! He would travel to the Holy Land and convert all of the invading Turks! Once well enough to walk, that is what he set out to do. But when he got to the Holy Land the Franciscans in charge threw him out so that he would not get killed or kidnapped by the Turks. Though he tried returning several times, he was blocked at every turn.

Plan C. Returning from the Holy Land, Ignatius found himself the leader of a small band of men wanting to live as Ignatius lived. Ignatius began to form these men only to have every one of them abandon him in short order. Discouraged, Ignatius transferred to University of Paris and "by chance" ended up sharing space with two men named (Saint) Francis Xavier and (Saint) Peter Faber. And the rest is history.

I could go on in recounting the twists and turns of Ignatius's path: how he himself wanted to go to distant shores as a missionary but instead ended up spending the rest of his life behind a desk in Rome, running the Society of Jesus; how he thought the Jesuits would be an entirely missionary order but instead found himself founding and running the largest international network of schools the world has ever known. I could go on and on, but you get the point.

No doubt, the Wisemen themselves traveled a long and winding way. W.H. Auden's famous poem about them imagines a difficult and painful trip:

*A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey...*

What about you? Has your journey to Christ been a long and winding one, filled with wrong turns and blind alleys? A kind and wise Jesuit once described a group of misguided religious fanatics. He said, that he imagined God loving and admiring them for their zeal and good intentions. He laughed and said that he imagined God saying to them at the Pearly Gates, "Well, Guys, you certainly took the long way around, but I'm glad you made it." Have you in some ways "taken the long way around?" Don't not be discouraged: you are in good company. Ignatius and the Wisemen will be there to greet you when you finally arrive.

Questions to ponder

1. What have been the twists and turns, the valleys and hills of your own path? What has been your Plan A? Plan B? Plan C? Speak to God about your long and winding path.
2. Imagine God smiling warmly while looking at your circuitous route to Jesus. Imagine him saying with a twinkle in his eye, "Well you certainly took the long way around, but I'm glad you made it." Bask in the warmth of God's patience and love towards you.

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