

On Pilgrimage

In *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage*, Paul Elie compares pilgrimage to “a journey undertaken in the light of a story” (x). For Elie, Catholic literature is connected to the transformation of the self and society because it explores the implications and challenges of faith for everyday life. As Elie observes, “it is writing that invites the reader on a pilgrimage. Because it has to do with questions of belief - questions of how to live — it makes the pattern of pilgrimage explicit. ... Certain books, certain writers, reach us at the center of ourselves, and we come to them in fear and trembling, in hope and expectation - reading so as to change, and perhaps to save, our lives” (xiii, xiv).

Although Elie examines the lives and writings of major 20th century American Catholic writers such as Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Walker Percy and Flannery O'Connor, his understanding of pilgrimage defined by the transformative impact of literature can apply more widely, especially to Ignatius of Loyola, the 16th century Spanish courtier-turned-Christian and founder of the Jesuits. While recovering from an injury in battle, Ignatius responded to a call to follow Christ — actually to imitate other followers of Christ like St. Dominic and St. Francis — while reading a then popular life of Christ and compendium of lives of the saints. As a result of his literary pilgrimage or his initial conversion through literature, Ignatius elaborated on and practiced an imitation of Christ with a group of companions, an imitation that, as documented by historian John O'Malley in *The First Jesuits*, combined spiritual retreats and prayer, intellectual life, and social justice ministries.

This understanding of pilgrimage was highlighted meaningfully for me during my trip on the first Ignatian Pilgrimage in summer 2004 (during which I also read Elie's book). On this spiritual and scholarly trip, our group traced the life of Ignatius from his conversion in Loyola, to the retreats and mystical experiences in Manresa and Montserrat that inspired his creation of the Spiritual Exercises, and finally to his apartments in Rome where he formulated the Constitutions for the Society of Jesus. The

celebration of mass throughout the trip — in the castle at Loyola, in the cave at Manresa, and in the apartments of Ignatius in Rome — impressed upon me that our group was slowly being unified into a new group of companions. In my view, we engaged in a pilgrimage to read Ignatius' writings and to "read" the "text" of Ignatius's life, or the key places that informed and transformed his life and vocation. In other words, Ignatius' life-shaping and life-transformative encounter with literature had itself become a "text" for us to interpret, possibly for the purpose of a transformative impact on us.

Like Ignatius who wrestled with how to translate his life-changing encounters with literature and with Christ into action, my challenge is to continue the pilgrimage, to channel a transformative encounter with a "text" into action, or more specifically to integrate my firsthand knowledge of the origins and early history of the Jesuits with my teaching at a contemporary Jesuit college. My hope is that my teaching in theology opens up an educational space for what feminist theorists and theologians call transformative learning. That is to say, my hope is that my courses offer students a similar opportunity for a literary pilgrimage — for a transformative encounter with historical and contemporary theological writings across the diversity of Catholic tradition that demonstrate the links between theological claims and social justice.