News



Jesuit Fr. Josep Lluis Iriberri points toward Manresa, where his group of pilgrims will conclude the Ignatian Way pilgrimage, in Spain, July 9. (AP/Joseph Wilson)

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Manresa, Spain — July 28, 2025

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Jesuit Fr. Josep Lluís Iriberri helps celebrate Mass at a mountaintop basilica, swaps his priest's robe for a hiking backpack and rallies his latest group of pilgrims literally following him in the footsteps of the 16th-century St. Ignatius.

Iriberri is the do-it-all Jesuit who designed the pilgrimage route to honor the founder of the Society of Jesus and for over a decade has almost single-handedly kept it alive.

Since 2012, when Iriberri started the Camino Ignaciano (Ignatian Way) at the orders of his Jesuit superiors in Barcelona, this 65-year-old Spaniard spends six months a year guiding pilgrims along the trail that recreates the life-changing journey Ignatius made over 500 years ago.

"The Camino Ignaciano is putting flesh on the bones of Ignatius," Iriberri said recently while an Associated Press journalist accompanied him and about 20 teachers from Jesuit schools in the United States on the final day of their pilgrimage.

At one point on the 8-mile hike as the path dips from a village through some woods, Iriberri stops the group to tell them that Ignatius — or his mule — surely stepped on the very stones they stood on, making them natural "relics" of the saint.

"We all know the history of Ignatius, because we have read about it, but being here, walking here, is what lets you feel like you know Ignatius. He now has a body for me," Iriberri says.

> 'The sweat, the foot pain, the blisters, the hunger, they help you understand little by little that ultimately it doesn't all depend on you. There is something else that carries you forward.'
> —Jesuit Fr. Josep Lluís Iriberri
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True to the Jesuit tradition of being active in the world, Iriberri stays busy problem-solving. Nothing is too transcendent or too mundane for him to tackle.

Besides celebrating Mass and dishing out historical and spiritual knowledge about Ignatius, he often carries a can of spray paint to touch up the hundreds of orange

arrows he left on rocks and sign posts to mark the way. He even pitches in helping a server with orders at a bar that served as a refueling post.

"From rising in the morning until going to bed, I take care of everything," said Iriberri, walking briskly through the sunbaked countryside.

"He's so knowledgeable and so deep. But also just like a fun person to be around," said pilgrim Amanda Murphy. "I feel like he's always got a tidbit to surprise you or help you learn more."

Following Ignatius' transformational journey

Iriberri had worked for the Jesuits Refugee Service in Morocco and had walked Spain's popular Camino de Santiago, or St. James' Way, six times when he was assigned the gargantuan task of creating from scratch a Camino Ignaciano. The idea was to try to mimic some of the success of the Camino de Santiago, which drew nearly half a million walkers last year.

Walking the nearly 370-mile Camino Ignaciano can take a month, broken into 27 stages by Iriberri. Most pilgrims, like the teachers from the U.S., do a shorter version in just over a week that combines bus rides with daily walks.

Iriberri charted the route along public footpaths, including some stretches of the Camino de Santiago in the opposite direction, to reconstruct the journey Ignatius made in 1522 from his hometown of Loyola in northern Spain to northeastern Manresa, about an hour from the Mediterranean coast.

That journey was part of a profound religious transformation of Íñigo the man-of-arms into Ignatius the man-of-God who would go on to found one of the most influential Catholic orders. The Society of Jesus today has over 14,000 members around the world and has left an indelible imprint on modern education and humanistic thought. The late Pope Francis was the first Jesuit to head the Holy See.

Christian Zombek is a 29-year-old Jesuit in formation who teaches in Washington, D.C. He said he would never forget his week in Spain.

"It just moves me to gratitude and honestly to tears to be able to pray in front of the same statues, pray the same churches that Ignatius was at, and recognize a man

who's done so much for me and helped me to grow in our relationship," he said. "Now I can see how God did it with him."



A pilgrim walks along the Ignatian Way heading toward Manresa, Spain, July 9. (AP/Joseph Wilson)

The culmination of the pilgrimage is the cave in Manresa where Ignatius meditated and found inspiration for the Spiritual Exercises, a central tract of Catholic how-to spirituality.

To enhance the pilgrim experience, Iriberri wrote a guidebook for the Camino Ignaciano. Besides practical information, it recommends daily spiritual exercises drawn from Ignatius' foundational text. They include meditations on Ignatius' teachings, on Christ and on the pilgrim's own life and relation to God.

"When you go on a pilgrimage, it is difficult to find an internal guide. You have external guides, the signposts, the route markings, but nothing to help you internally," Iriberri said. "And that is what the Camino Ignaciano is, it is an internal

pilgrimage."

The pilgrimage faces uncertain future

Iriberri received a boost last month when the Vatican's Dicastery for Culture and Education granted him patronage for the pilgrim path. That recognition could potentially increase awareness of the path, but it doesn't come with any financial support.

Almost 4,000 registered pilgrims have completed the trail since its creation, with about 400 people doing it each of the last six years — with the exception of 2021 and 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many were personally guided by Iriberri, who this year plans to lead nine groups of pilgrims.

Iriberri admits that those numbers are not enough to allow the path to survive without his stewardship. He says more help is needed from local authorities to promote it as well as more hostels for pilgrims on some of the more isolated stages to ensure his work doesn't end up a quixotic quest.

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Pilgrim Dawn Kelly, a retired teacher from Houston, says the route is "very specific" for those interested in Ignatius and the Jesuit tradition.

"You have to be into wanting to know about Ignatius," Kelly says, even though Iriberri insists that it is open to people of all faiths and even avid hikers seeking an alternative to the sometimes crowded Camino de Santiago.

Fortunately for the Camino Ignaciano, Iriberri is going strong even at retirement age. He already has three pilgrimages lined up for next year and has open dates for more.

Wiry, with a graying, trimmed beard, he swings his walking stick at the front to set the pace, or stays behind his pilgrims on climbs like a shepherd worried he'll lose a stray. He exhorts the American pilgrims in fluent English to keep their feet moving when the going gets tough.

The discomfort, after all, deepens the experience, he teaches.

"The idea is to bring the head, the heart and the body together," Iriberri said. "The sweat, the foot pain, the blisters, the hunger, they help you understand little by little that ultimately it doesn't all depend on you. There is something else that carries you forward."