(Re)creating a Pilgrimage: A Century of Pilgrimage Reports from Jesuit Novices in Canada (1864-1968)

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In 1864, a new type of pilgrimage was implemented in Canada: the Jesuit novitiate pilgrimage. Since the creation of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in 1540, a month-long pilgrimage is one experience required of new members. This formative moment has been enshrined in the Constitutions of the order. The experience is also reminiscent of the journey of the founder, St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), who went to Jerusalem as a young man desirous to imitate Christ, and later applied the moniker ‘the pilgrim’ to himself in an account of his life confided in Luis González da Câmara (1555). Pilgrimage was designed as a formative tool to prepare the novices for a life where apostolic availability and poverty were paramount. The experience was often realised after a month-long silent retreat called the Spiritual Exercises that nurtured their spiritual life. In the Canadian novitiate of the Society of Jesus, 1,456 novices undertook such pilgrimage between 1864 and 1968. After the conclusion of their journey, they would write a report on their experience. The Archive of the Jesuits in Canada contains an extended and coherent collection of 1,078 pilgrimage reports that have survived to present and provide invaluable information about the journeys of these pilgrims. This article explores the creation of this pilgrimage as a vernacular adaptation of a formative pilgrimage grounded in a long tradition, codified in the Jesuit Constitutions, and adapted through local ‘Rules for Pilgrims.’ The archival material demonstrates the crystallisation of pilgrimage report as a genre, offering a narrative of the experience in an apostolic key. The Canadian novitiate pilgrimage shares many characteristics with other types of pilgrimages, but shows its originality in its consistent care for personal reports and its core experience of discovery of the local Church through its parishes and pastors.

Key Words: pilgrimage, Jesuit, Society of Jesus, novitiate, Ignatius of Loyola, Canada

In the Canadian novitiate of the Society of Jesus, at Sault-au-Récollet (1853-1959), near Montreal, the pilgrimage tradition started in 1864, 22 years after the return of the Jesuits to Canada. Over a century, between 1864 and 1968, 1,456 young men undertook such pilgrimage. After the conclusion of their journey, they would write a report on their experience. The Archive of the Jesuits in Canada contains an extended and coherent collection of 1,078 pilgrimage reports that have survived to present and provide invaluable information about the journeys of these pilgrims. This article explores the creation of this pilgrimage as a vernacular adaptation of a formative pilgrimage grounded in a long tradition, codified in the Jesuit Constitutions, and adapted through local ‘Rules for Pilgrims.’ The archival material demonstrates the crystallisation of pilgrimage report as a genre, offering a narrative of the experience in an apostolic key. The Canadian novitiate pilgrimage shares many characteristics with other types of pilgrimages, but shows its originality in its consistent care for personal reports and its core experience of discovery of the local Church through its parishes and pastors.

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a report, of which 1,078 have survived. This trove of pilgrimage reports offers a window into the social and religious landscape of Canada. The implementation of this ancient Jesuit tradition in that part of North America was also ground-breaking by bringing a medieval tradition into public view, while inculturating it as a formative tool in a particular ecclesial context. Moreover, the pilgrimage reports evolved from ephemeral notes into a proper genre.

This article is grounded in a foray into an extensive sample of pilgrimage reports. I will first analyse the existential sources of Ignatius’ own personal narrative of pilgrimage, and the contours of the novitiate pilgrimage expressed in the Constitutions. After having exposed the ecclesial context in which the pilgrimage was implemented, I will sketch the general framework of the pilgrimage, and lay out the rules given to the novices. Moving finally to the pilgrimage reports, I will present the genre in which they developed, before analysing the core experiences that they relate, showing its originality in the context of a plurality of pilgrimages.

**The Prototype: The Pilgrimage(s) of Ignatius of Loyola**

The founder of the Society of Jesus, St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) undertook at around age 30 a fateful pilgrimage to Jerusalem, in the footsteps of Christ. In a narrative about his life – sometimes called the Testament, or the *Autobiography* – Ignatius devoted the first half of the relation to his conversion and the subsequent pilgrimage to Jerusalem, including a prolonged stay in Manresa. It demonstrates the importance that Ignatius, by then an old man, was still attributing to this pilgrimage. While he was hoping to remain in the Holy Land, his forced return to Europe led to a greater interiorising of the journey. He had to find God’s will not simply as the (geographical) imitation of Christ’s place, but as a discernment in his life of God’s call. Such a process, extended over years, would lead him to study in Barcelona, Alcalá, Salamanca, and Paris. He would eventually make his way to Rome with the companions he had gathered in Paris. The arrival in Rome as the final destination where he would spend the rest of his life marks the end of the narrative of the Testament.

More than simply describing an important pilgrimage as an event, Ignatius talks about himself in the Testament as ‘the pilgrim.’ This came to define his identity, as he cast his experience of searching for God’s will through a multi-layered framework of pilgrimage (Brouillette 2018). Interestingly, Ignatius is never named in the narrative.

The original narrative of the Testament was later absorbed in a biography, *The Life of Ignatius of Loyola* (1572) by Pedro de Ribadeneyra (Ribadeneyra 2014), which became the standard, while the simpler narrative by Câmara was removed from circulation and forgotten. The pilgrim theme is not as crisp in the Life, since the scope of the narrative extends beyond his final arrival in Rome, and Ignatius is Ignatius, not simply ‘the pilgrim.’ Although a Latin translation of the Testament was published in the 18th century, the original (in Spanish and Italian), was published for the first time in 1904. Around the same time arrived translations in modern languages: two in English in 1900 (made from the Latin), and one in French, in 1922. The ‘rediscovery’ of Ignatius’ pilgrimage narrative happened during the timeframe of pilgrimages that we are discussing. A question can then be raised about the potential influence of the rediscovery of this original pilgrim narrative of St. Ignatius on the Canadian novices on pilgrimage.

**The Experience of Pilgrimage in the Jesuit Novitiate According to the Constitutions**

Years before Ignatius narrated his life story he had already established the framework of the formation of future Jesuits. Alongside a month-long experience of caring for the poor and the sick, and a spiritual retreat of 30 days, the ‘Spiritual Exercises,’ he anchored the experience of a month-long pilgrimage as part of the initial formation of candidates to the Society of Jesus – a first among religious orders in the Catholic Church. The place of pilgrimage as a formative tool was enshrined in

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3. The pilgrimage reports are housed at the Archive of the Jesuits in Canada (AJC), based in Montreal, filling six archival boxes (Accession numbers: R-0010-31-1 to 6). The overall statistics come from the *Note d’histoire et statistiques concernant l’expérience de pèlerinage par les novices canadiens* 1864-1968. The oldest report dates from 1866, the most recent from 1968. During the first decades, many reports were either never produced or were lost. For the sake of confidentiality, all references to more recent reports are anonymised (I will just give the year of the report), whereas for 19th century reports, reference to the author is given.

4. Ignatius confided his narrative to Luís Gonçalves da Câmara, who wrote the final text (Ignatius of Loyola, 2020).
the Jesuit Constitutions, officially approved in 1558, in these words:

_The third experience is to spend another month in making a pilgrimage without money and even in begging from door to door, at appropriate times, for the love of God our Lord, in order to grow accustomed to discomfort in food and lodging. Thus too the candidate, through abandoning all the reliance which he could have in money or other created things, may with genuine faith and intense love place his reliance entirely in his Creator and Lord_ (Ignatius of Loyola, 1970:67).

The Constitutions emphasise a certain adaptability to austerity of life by having to beg, and to experience discomfort. The material simplicity of pilgrimage is at the forefront, not the devotions, the destination, the journey, or the encounters. The second element emphasised is a spiritual fruit, namely a growth in the trust in God. These aims of the pilgrimage of the novitiate were integrated and expanded in the _Rules of the Pilgrims (Règles des Pèlerins)_ utilized in the 20th century in the Canadian novitiate.

### The Canadian Context of Pilgrimage

When Ignatius integrated pilgrimage as a formational tool in the Jesuit novitiate, he could rely on a strong medieval tradition of pilgrimage throughout Europe. Major pilgrimage sites were reached by walking for weeks and months (Rome, Santiago de Compostela), and sometimes going by boat (Jerusalem). In the Canadian context, no such tradition of extended walking pilgrimages existed. In the 17th century, a small chapel was built by grateful sailors in Sainte-Anne de Beaupré, near Quebec City. However, only toward the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th would large numbers of pilgrims flock to that sanctuary and those of Notre-Dame du Cap, near Trois-Rivières, and Saint Joseph’s Oratory, in Montreal.

In the 19th century, the French-speaking population of Canada – a majority in the province of Québec – was almost exclusively Catholic, whereas the English-speaking population was mostly Protestant. By the middle of that century, the parish system with a resident pastor was steadily developing, and several new dioceses were created out of that of Quebec (1674), starting with Montreal (1836). The mid-19th century also witnessed an influx of French religious communities who established numerous institutions in French-Canada. Consequently, a network of institutions was present that could be welcoming to walking pilgrims, despite the challenges of travel at the times.

The re-creation in Canada of the Jesuit tradition of pilgrimage as a formative experience was nonetheless not universally approved. In 1865, one year after the first two novices undertook a pilgrimage, three dioceses (Quebec, Montreal, Saint-Hyacinthe) agreed to let novices do a pilgrimage in their jurisdiction, but a note in the _diarium_ of the minister of the novitiate reveals that the bishop of a fourth – unnamed – diocese did not consent to this ‘innovation.’

### (Re)creating a tradition

This pilgrimage was part of a two-year program of formation to religious life for young men. Jesuit novices were usually in their late teens or early twenties. The pilgrimage was designed as a month-long journey in rural Quebec or Ontario. It happened usually in May or June, towards the end of the first year of formation, after the experience of month-long Spiritual Exercises. The pilgrimage was for those young men a first extended stay outside of the cloister and its careful institutional rhythm. Despite some rules, and the companionship of a peer, they were given space to exert responsibly for their freedom and live out their budding religious identity.

With little warning but great expectations, novices were sent two by two, in pairs announced on the day of the departure. A ritual marked their sending: blessing of the crucifix and staff at the chapel, prayer to the Virgin Mary at the grotto in the garden, then hymns sung while the second-year novices watched the pilgrims leave the premises. Wearing their cassocks, pilgrims

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5 The pilgrimage to the Marian sanctuary of Cap de la Madeleine was launched by Fr. Frédéric Janssoone OFM, in 1888 after a miraculous event. Brother Andrè Bessette, CSC, canonised by the Roman Catholic Church in 2010, founded Saint Joseph’s Oratory, in Montreal, in 1904. Both are important Catholic sanctuaries in Canada.

6 Pilgrimage reports from the 19th century make frequent mention of adventures surrounding river crossings. Novices often expressed with religious medals their gratitude to locals who helped them cross.

7 Transcribed in _Expériment de pèlerinage (Noviciat)_ , Note d’histoire (AJC, R-0010-31-6). Note: All translations from the French are mine.

8 Prince P and Dugas LN (1885). There were some slight variations of the ritual over the years. For example, when Bishop Ignace Bourget, the former bishop of Montreal
The number of Jesuit novices undertaking the pilgrimage from the Montreal novitiate varied significantly over the years. For the first forty years, it was mostly in the single digits, but would average close to 20 by the 1920s, and reached an all-time high of 38 pilgrims in 1935. In the 1960s, a time of rapid social transformation in French-Canada and in the Catholic Church, the experiment of pilgrimage evolved, being sometimes limited to a single location for a month of volunteering (e.g., in a parish or an orphanage). 10 A 1965 novice wrote about his ‘stay’ (séjour), instead of a pilgrimage, acknowledging that, ‘The pilgrimage is not itinerant. Only the skeleton of the pilgrimage remains. But there is the whole inner pilgrimage.’ In 1968, a novice who later left the community harshly critiqued pilgrimage in its traditional form (begging, itinerant ministry in parishes) for its meaninglessness. It was the last year of the pilgrimage experiment because the traditional novitiate closed, before a new novitiate reopened two years later.

An example of such notebook can be found in the Archive of the Jesuits in Canada. This method has been confirmed in oral reminiscences from novices from the 1950s.

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10 In 1965, novices did a month-long volunteering stay in lieu of the itinerant pilgrimage. In 1967, the novices visited the English-speaking Canadian novitiate in Guelph, Ontario.
The Rules for Pilgrims

Pilgrims were given clear rules to frame their experience. Such a document is traditional in religious life, starting with rules of life for the religious community as a whole. The regimented life of the novitiate was already governed by a clear *ordo*. The *Règles des Pèlerins* (Rules for pilgrims) were not meant to be all-encompassing, but to offer guidance for novices in that particular experience. I consulted a copy of the rules dating from the middle of the 20th century, but an 1872 report already mentioned rules for pilgrims. They state the purpose of pilgrimage in the following terms:

*The purpose of the pilgrimage is not to exhaust the body or to travel long distances, but to reap a spiritual fruit; it is in this spirit that it must be fulfilled. In the Society, one never travels for pleasure, but by necessity, according to the directives of the superior and by the shortest way (Règles des Pèlerins).*

The journey is a necessary means to a spiritual end – that is not specified. Pilgrimage is related to travel, but separated from any hint of pleasure seeking. Travel must be utilitarian. The distinction from touristic contamination was made very clear in the description of the poverty expected in the journey:

*They should avoid any unnecessary expense; they should behave like the poor on trains and on boats, and not as tourists; no visits that are unnecessary, out of curiosity, or simply pleasant in cities. They will only receive the alms necessary for the moment (Règles des Pèlerins).*

The rules integrate and expend – especially with regard to humility and mortification – the few lines devoted to the pilgrimage in the Jesuit Constitutions. The rules emphasise the configuration to Christ and his apostles, as pilgrims were invited to endure needs of the body while keeping in mind that Christ himself had no place to lay his head (Matt 8:20), and that the apostles were sent without money (e.g., Luke 9:3). The imitation of Christ would also take the shape of enduring insults and mockery. An important invitation was to make Christ their ‘companion on the road’ through constant prayer and meditation. The spiritual focus of the pilgrimage was on Christ, then his apostles, and not on the historical example of Ignatius of Loyola (who is not even alluded to in these rules). Other rules explained how to behave at the rectory, how to proceed in case of illness, etc.

In sum, the pilgrimage was designed as an experience to test, gently, the desire and resilience of the novices, and give them the opportunity to live out their vocation in the open with a clear ministerial purpose, while living in the sheltered environment of parish rectories.

The Pilgrimage Reports

The reports are usually pocket-size documents, and the number of their pages varies (often around 30-40). Some were constituted of loose leaves assembled afterwards, whereas many others were similarly shaped booklets. Most were written in French, but some in English.11

While the very first reports were notes taken along the way, and not necessarily intended to become a public document, an early understanding of the public nature of the document developed. A 19th century novice asked for forgiveness to future novice readers for having written his report in pencil, and not in ink (Adam & Jetté 1883). In the last years, some reports were even typewritten. The public evolution of the reports is revealed by the dedicatory prayers, preambles thanking people (most often their pilgrimage companion), or addressed to future readers, drawings, and the bindings. A 1929 report had all the trappings of a real book: date of edition, (fake) permission by the superior (*imprimi potest*), and an address to the reader. Some even had footnotes commenting on the narrative! At the end of one report, the various readers played along by signing their names in an anonymised fashion: Nemo, Ego, Tis, Aliquis, Anthrôpos, Anèr, etc. Each report was left in the collection of the novitiate; they were not private papers.

Reports were individual creations – though sometimes one person would write the report for the pair, or they would divide the itinerary in two and each write about one half. The personality of the author sometimes shines through the humour, the artistic talent, the vivacity of observations: psychological, anthropological, sociological, aesthetical, and religious.

A certain genre progressively took shape. The earlier reports were more personal affairs, written on the fly, but they would soon evolve into *post-factum* narratives.

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11 The Montreal novitiate served at one time the Northeastern part of the United States of America and Canada, then only the latter, and eventually only the French-speaking Jesuit province of Canada, after the opening of an English-speaking novitiate in Guelph, Ontario.
written within a month of the return. While the 20th-century *Rules for Pilgrims* specified that novices should take notes along the way, then write a report within a week of their return, such short delay has not been the constant practice. Reports include descriptions of landscapes, weather, churches, rectories, decorations, and individuals. Most provide edifying narratives about devotional practices (personal prayer, *examen*, confessions, with an attention to obedience to the rules), description of ministerial activities, or events on the journey. At times, it became normative to have a presentation of the other companion, both in his physical aspect and his character, often in a humorous tone. The general light tone was even claimed overtly by some, when they titled their 1929 report, ‘New volume of original jokes, censored edition’ leaving no ambiguity to the fact that they aimed at entertaining their readers. By the 1920s, some reports were clearly sophisticated in their format: overall structure of a play, elaborate sketches, or careful handwriting. A separate page with the itinerary, sometimes with the distances, was often included. The steady evolution of the genre was likely determined by the fact that novices had access to prior reports, by the instructions given to them by the novitiate authorities, but also by the personal creativity
of the different novices. Interestingly, an element that was in short supply was self-reflection or soul-searching; those reports were not intimate spiritual diaries. They were enthusiastic narratives of youthful men.

An early hypothesis that I explored was whether the narrative about the life of St. Ignatius of Loyola, often called the Autobiography, had an influence on the pilgrimage reports from the novices. I was looking for possible indications that the young men undertaking the pilgrimage would read their own experience through the lens of Ignatius’ journey of self-discovery in the face of God. Unfortunately, they are rare. The pilgrimage reports are generally not new iterations of Ignatius’ Testament. However, in terms of references and models, Christ and the Apostles are mentioned – as they were already in the Rules for pilgrims. A more introspective and lyrical novice showed that he had interiorised the comparison of his pilgrimage to that of Christ sending his disciples, writing in 1882:

_We are twelve: the twelve Apostles, who left the Upper Room, filled with the Holy Spirit. At the voice of the Lord: ‘Ite per universum mundum, praedicate Evangelium omni creaturae’ [Go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel to all creatures – Mark 16:15] they divide the world, and each takes the road to the country he is to evangelize. Thus we are, but it must be said however that the comparison is a little bold. While they are going to evangelize by example and by word, we are only going to evangelize by example. While they have to fight in this battlefield against visible and invisible enemies, we only fight against invisible enemies. While their virtue is strong enough against lusts, what can be said about ours, poor novices, novices, yes, novices in virtue. It is precisely for this, to strengthen our virtue, rather to make it grow, that we are sent on pilgrimage_ (Champagne & Hudon 1882).

The Experience of Pilgrimage Expressed in the Pilgrimage Reports

Because of the sheer number of pilgrimage reports and their great diversity over a century, I present in this article only in broad strokes the experience of pilgrimage expressed in them. The experience reported can be divided in two main trends: the events on the journey, and the discovery of the local Church.

The pilgrimage reports give ample details about the journey: roads, transportation, times, events, encounters, and – obviously – weather. Information, personal reflections and anecdotes abound. In that regard, they are comparable to many other travel narratives – dealing with pilgrimages or other types of journeys. The description of various encounters is a prominent feature. These include visits to former professors or colleagues, to candidates, and to family members of Jesuits – parents of the very pilgrims, or of other Jesuits. These visits are all the more important because of the limited contacts that the cloistered novices had with their own families. They could receive letters, and at given times visitors, but they were not allowed to visit. The pilgrimage was an opportunity to foster the relationship of Jesuits with the families of other Jesuits in a corporate way. For instance, a 1941 report mentions a delicate attention: the itinerary included the participation of the novice in the priestly ordination of his sibling. Other encounters described were more fleeting in nature and pertained to two spheres. On the one hand, small unsolicited humiliations suffered along the way, especially on the part of taunting youth. This was an area of humiliation mentioned in the Rules for Pilgrims. On the other hand, the reception of alms, either money, food, or passage, which was accompanied by generosity or scorn. Both correspond directly to expectations from the Rules for Pilgrims, which might have influenced their inclusion in the reports, since novices were expected to revise the rules regularly, and would thus notice their little humiliations.

Despite the expressed ban on tourism and curiosity, many visits of historical or noteworthy sites, potentially initiated by their hosts, are recorded. On a sociological note, it is interesting to see how contemporary events show up as explicit themes in the narrative: epidemics,

12 A main cause for suffering, in additional to the physical hardship of walking, was inclement weather. Rain would be the main concern. But novices were often rescued by carriages or cars, despite the prohibition to use those means of transportation.
The discovery happens in a special way through the encounters with the parish priests and their communities in their own setting. While parish rectories were the main focus, other religious institutions were also visited: Jesuit communities, colleges, convents, residences from other congregations. Since pilgrims were usually residing in rectories, pastors were their main interlocutors. In larger parishes, there could be more than one priest residing at the rectory, in addition to potential domestic help.

ethnic or religious demographics (Natives, Protestants), wars, and social transformations. The reports also regularly mention the religious exercises performed (e.g., attendance at Mass, confession).

The core experience depicted in the reports is, however, a discovery of the local Church. This is where the originality of these pilgrimage reports and of that particular experience of pilgrimage is more prominent.

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or family members. Pastors were also their temporary employers. Therefore, they loom large in the pilgrimage reports. Descriptions of parish priests abound: learned, old, young, dynamic, edifying, strange, or facetious. Most priests were very welcoming to the pilgrims, and many knew Jesuits or had some personal connection to the Society of Jesus. It is not unusual to read vibrant homages to some of them. Along those lines, an 1879 report lauds Fr. Archambault, pastor of the parish of St. Barthélemi, as a man with great oratory talent, but with an even more excellent heart (Bérard & Richard 1879). Thanks to his zeal, ‘one sees blooming in all corners of the parish the spirit of family, of religion, of innocence, and of piety.’ His preaching is grounded in the Old and New Testament and ‘inspired in the people an insatiable hunger for the divine word.’ He leads a simple life, close to his parishioners, and they have in him the ‘best of fathers, and the wisest counselor.’

The ministerial dimension of the pilgrimage is highlighted by the detailed description of the activities undertaken by the novices, mostly catechetical instructions. The reports enumerate the activities and describe the people attending them: Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, children in catechesis groups (especially for first communions), youth groups. Pilgrims could also visit the sick with the pastor, or serve meals to the poor. The ministerial activity constituted the daily backbone of this experience of pilgrimage.

What Kind of Pilgrimage is it?

Pilgrimages have taken multiple forms over the years, even when considering only the Christian tradition (Greenia 2018). The pilgrimage of Jesuit novices in Canada takes its place among them as a vernacular recreation of a formative experience coming from the early modern European context, and rooted in an even longer religious tradition.

From the perspective of the structure of the pilgrimage, some features should be highlighted. The reports display an itinerary, moving from one place to the other, from one day to another, but they do not exude a sense of inner journey. The itinerary is usually not known from the beginning. The destination, for the same reason, does not act as a magnet marshalling the energies of the pilgrims, unlike in a traditional Christian pilgrimage to a holy site. However, the return to the novitiate is underlined in more than one report as a high note. An 1884 report clearly contrasts the peace of the cloister to the false pleasures of

Conclusion

In the end, an apostolic dimension characterises the Canadian pilgrimage novitiate revealed in the pilgrimage reports. Borrowing traditional elements of pilgrimage, and drawing on the prescriptions of the Jesuit Constitutions, the journey is centred on the discovery of the ecclesial context to let the novices be inspired by its actors, to see its flaws and challenges, and to test their spiritual resolve to follow in the footsteps of the Apostles of Christ. Symbolically, two by two, the pilgrimage was their first experience of being sent on a journey to do God’s work as companions of Jesus.
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