

BETWEEN ROME AND CASTILE
THE SANCTUARY OF LOYOLA PROJECT AND ITS FUNCTION AS A VISUAL
MARKER IN THE SOCIETY OF JESUS

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Abstract:

Ignatius of Loyola was born in 1491 in the family home in Azpeitia, located in the Spanish province of Gipuzkoa, and it was also there in 1521 that he underwent his spiritual conversion after having been wounded in the siege of Pamplona. These two events turned the “tower-house” of the Loyola family into a place of special devotional and symbolic importance for the Jesuits, who, as early as the end of the 16th century, set out to acquire the Santa Casa in order to convert it into a sanctuary in memory of their founder. This process between the Society of Jesus and the heirs of the Loyola family lasted for a whole century, until, once the Santa Casa had been acquired by the Jesuits of the province of Castile, the Queen Mother Mariana of Austria –as patroness of the institution– proceeded to found the Royal College of San Ignacio de Loyola in 1682.

The choice of the architect responsible for the design of the project is illustrative of the tensions between the provincial authorities of Castile and the Roman curia. The order’s rule established that new foundations were the responsibility of the provincial superiors, who had to choose the architect. However, given the exceptional nature of this foundation, the superior general Giovanni Paolo Oliva decided to appoint the architect himself, choosing Carlo Fontana –a disciple of Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Oliva’s first choice–. Fontana designed a circular church in the centre of a rectangular structure that housed the Santa Casa inside as a “reliquary”. However, his design was slightly modified by the local architects who were commissioned to carry out the work.

The visual programme of this church –built between 1689 and 1738– must be placed in relation to the great pictorial cycles of the places of Ignatian worship which, also promoted by Father Oliva, were deployed in Rome in the last decades of the 17th century. There were some general guidelines in the visual programmes of Jesuit churches, but, at the same time, they could adapt to the devotional particularities of each place. There was, therefore, a balance between the universal and the local, an example of which was the soteriological and Ignatian programme –based on the meditations of the two flags and the eternal king– displayed in the Sanctuary of Loyola, an authentic visual marker for Jesuit spirituality.