

## THE IGNATIAN WAY: TRANSFORMING PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES

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### **Abstract:**

The Ignatian Way (IW) is a pilgrimage route that Saint Ignatius of Loyola took in 1522, which goes through five different Autonomous Communities in the north of Spain, starting in the Basque Country location of Loyola, following La Rioja, Navarra, Aragón and ending in the city of Manresa (Catalonia). It is walked by pilgrims from all over the world, mostly from the Jesuits' net.

Released in 2011, the path celebrated in 2022 the 500th anniversary of the journey Ignatius of Loyola made from his hometown of Azpeitia to a cave at the bottom of Montserrat mountain. With more than 650 kilometers, it includes significant tangible and intangible cultural heritage attractions that enrich this immersive four-week journey. The IW is an opportunity for pilgrims to find their inner selves, discover their life meaningfulness, look inside to make a deep reflection and socialize with others.

The present study explores the transformative power of this way not only for visitors in search of change but also for communities. 11 in-depth interviews were carried out with multi-stakeholder approach connected to the Jesuit network. The findings demonstrate the IW potential to transform people and societies, focusing on economic, cultural, social, religious, and environmental impacts. Pilgrimages may contribute to sustainable development and transformative tourism. Recommendations for further research and professionals are suggested, with a special focus on avoiding commodifying faith and tradition and reinforcing alliances with destinations and society.

**Keywords:** cultural heritage, Ignatian Way, pilgrimage, religious tourism, spiritual tourism, transformative tourism.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The UNWTO estimates 300 to 330 million tourists visit the world’s key religious sites every year, with approximately 600 million national and international religious voyages in the world, 40% of which take place in Europe. There, about 30 million Christians, especially Catholics, annually spend their holidays on a pilgrimage or visiting holy places (Llurdés and Romagosa, 2016). Studies demonstrate that 25% of the global tourism market is interested in this type of tourism (Martínez, 2022). Furthermore, religious tourism is no longer a niche market (Bar and Cohen-Hattab, 2003; Olsen, 2014). Catholic places of worship attract thousands of tourists and pilgrims every year, some driven by the desire to explore destinations and discover new places, and others motivated by faith and spiritual reasons.

As mentioned by Martínez (2022) Spain is one of the countries with more cultural tourism associated with tangible heritage and the second in religious buildings with heritage worldwide recognition. Regarding intangible heritage, it ranks in 16th position related to religious and spiritual meaning, below Asian and South American countries. Pilgrimages are included in the active participation forms of religious and spiritual tourism. Spain leads European Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe based on religious heritage, with the Saint James Way pilgrimage certified in 1987 and visited by more than 1,5 million people (Griffin and Raj, 2018). The Ignatian Way (IW), a sacred itinerary inspired by the life and spirituality of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus, stretches across beautiful landscapes in the northeast of the country and offers pilgrims the opportunity to immerse themselves in a spiritual transformational experience.

Transformational tourism involves embarking on a pleasure trip to promote some kind of change. According to Soulard et al. (2021), transformational tourism focuses on taking tourists out of their comfort zones, promoting inclusive worldviews, fostering intercultural understanding, and social empowerment. However, transformation does not only occur in pilgrims. Destinations and places are also being transformed by this emergent and significant route.

This study examines how the IW transforms destinations, considering social, cultural, environmental, and economic dimensions. Understanding the impact of the IW can offer valuable insights into how local communities can benefit from or adapt to the influx of pilgrims and tourists. Moreover, further exploring the transformative role of the IW can open new avenues for the sustainable development of tourist destinations. Both religious tourism and pilgrimage can help to drive sustainable tourism development (Romanelli et al. 2021). This research may help identify practices and policies that promote responsible tourism and contribute to the well-being of local communities, and consequently, to enhance the tourist experience.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage**

The concept of 'religious tourism' merges the ancient history of religion with the comparatively modern notion of tourism. While religion has deep historical roots, tourism is a more recent phenomenon, and the evolution of these two terms has taken divergent lines (Tobón and Tobón, 2013). The literature explains that religious and spiritual tourism

has been one of the earliest forms of tourism. Pilgrimage appears to be one of the initial non-monetary journeys invented by mankind (Duda and Doburzyński, 2019). Thus, some authors mention that religious tourism's first goal is staying in holy places to strengthen a specific faith (Macleod and Carrier, 2009).

Turnbull (1981) highlights that it is necessary to differentiate between religious tourism and pilgrimage. He explains that pilgrimage " belongs more to the religious or spiritual realm than to the cultural one," while religious tourism involves both religious and cultural meanings. Literature suggests that pilgrimage is not a mere tourist excursion but a spiritual retreat that involves sacrifice and is motivated by deep religious reasons. Pilgrimage has been defined as a journey resulting from religious causes, externally to a sacred site, and internally for spiritual purposes and inner understanding (Abad et al., 2016).

However, despite efforts to differentiate between pilgrimage and religious tourism, the boundaries between these concepts have become increasingly blurred today. Notably, the concept of pilgrimage has gradually lost its purely religious focus. As mentioned in Abad et al. (2016), not all the people that participates in a pilgrimage way do it for religious reasons and many of them have other trip motivations. Although pilgrims may have a deep religious motivation, during the route they are also immersed in touristic activities (Millán et al., 2010). Nowadays, pilgrimage, when in contact with tourism, takes on new nuances, is redefined, and acquires additional meanings, becoming a complex and polysemic social phenomenon (Shmueli et al., 2014; Gomes et al., 2019). It has become a more spiritual, touristic, and post-secular phenomenon. A myriad of travelers peregrinates yearly in the direction of multiple shrines and religious sanctuaries worldwide. Pilgrimages vary in size and duration depending on the proximity of sacred places to the pilgrims' places of origin, ranging from local to regional, national, or international. Finally, the religious traveller is universally known as a highly devoted kind of tourist, identified with brief but periodic visits to holy sites and loyal to destinations (Robles, 2001).

Smith's model of the pilgrim-tourist continuum has evolved beyond the dichotomy of tourist/pilgrim (Smith, 1992). Today, mobility for religious purposes and faith-based includes a cultural component that moves people to get in contact with religious tangible and intangible heritage. Aligned with this, Griffin and Raj (2018) explain that pilgrimage motivations can go from secular desires to fervent and religious purposes, all of them analyzed as part of religious tourism and considering their uniqueness. Therefore, sacred places open their alternatives to visitors considering the diverse range of interests (Smith, 1992; Martínez and Cruz, 2023).

According to the literature, when analyzing pilgrim and tourist behavior, both behave in a similar way, during the trip and in destinations. Considering experiential, experimental, and existential modes of travel, pilgrimage is like other types of tourism (Santos, 2000). Even though secular, spiritual, and religious motivations are different, when visiting the destinations and routes on religious tangible and intangible cultural heritage, shared common features. Abad et al. (2016) summarize them in a list: seeking growth and personal enlightenment; some personal space and autonomy for liberation; experiencing enjoyment in contact with nature; existential authenticity and usually enjoy the local population with their culture and tradition.

Traditional pilgrimage routes have a double challenge: to keep alive the authentic devotional motivation avoiding commodification, and embrace other tourists with non-religious purposes. That means that the local community should accept all the visitors; suppliers should provide quality hospitality services, public administration should support and invest in tourist development, and all the stakeholders should work together to manage the environment for a successful tourist experience for all the pilgrims' profiles (Kastenholz et al. 2012; Martínez and Cruz, 2023). Thus, pilgrimage routes can be considered as cultural tourism products, with unique value propositions (Millán et al., 2010).

Moreover, understanding the motivations that lead millions of people to travel to sacred places is an essential condition for the sustainable development of destinations (UNWTO, 2017). In the last years, the potential and the role of religious tourism and sacred places as a tool for the socio-economic and cultural development of destinations was encouraged. Thus, religious tourism may contribute for example to promote but also protect religious heritage (UNWTO, 2015). Religious tourism, particularly through the development of religious routes, has been recognized as a significant driver of economic and social development in various regions. As Podda and Secchi (2021) highlights, religious sites and routes have the potential of attracting visitors and contributing to the development of local economies. This is further supported by Rasul et al. (2016), who emphasizes the role of religious tourism in generating revenue and benefiting entrepreneurs.

Wall's triple geographical division (1997) also may help to identify, manage, and minimize negative impacts in religious routes and consequently to design and apply sustainable destinations policies. Religious paths may have different “points of attraction” that concentrate a large number of visitors (cathedrals, shrines, or burial sites are a religious or spiritual heritage that can vary in attraction power from international awareness to primarily local practices). Added to this, “lines” or concrete paths may help to disperse and enhance tourist mobility. Lastly, there are “areas” that potentially attract large number of visitors with a wide surface to cover and services to offer (Olsen, 2014).

Consequently, when adequately planned and managed, religious tourism can serve as an effective instrument for fostering inclusion and sustainability, owing to its threefold advantages: fostering awareness and preservation of human heritage, contributing to local development, and promoting mutual cultural understanding (UNWTO 2015, Griffin and Raj, 2018). Challenges related to the preservation of religious sites, the respect for local traditions and religious practices; and the inclusive development of the local communities should be also considered.

Pilgrimage host communities' tangible and intangible heritage must be protected in all its forms: cultural and natural: their cultural diversity, human creativity and a sense of communities' identity and continuity. Religion is a part of this heritage, available for tourist use (Martínez, 2021). However, sacred sites, activities and religious practices have an identitarian function as part of the local culture of societies (Aulet and Vidal, 2018). As Martínez (2021) suggests, although the commodification of religious heritage is occurring due to tourism activity, public and private agreements at all levels (heritage conservation associations, public authorities, tour operators, residents, and other groups of interest) should work together to prevent negative impacts. Religious tangible and

intangible cultural heritage could reach the maximum qualification of World Heritage by UNESCO and enhance its protection as a global responsibility.

## **2.2. Transformative power**

Transformative tourism is a progressively expanding area of study within the tourism industry. It revolves around creating experiences that transcend simple leisure and entertainment and strives to instigate personal development and favorable changes in individuals. Reisinger (2013) identifies various types of tourism that can lead to personal transformation, such as educational, volunteer, wellness, religious or spiritual tourism. One of the most common ways to experience transformational tourism through religious tourism is through pilgrimages. “The Camino de Santiago” is a clear example. It is a network of pilgrim routes leading to the shrine of the apostle Saint James the Great in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, northwestern Spain. Pilgrims' motivations for undertaking the Camino de Santiago vary, and the route has been associated with exceptional human experiences and transformative aftereffects (Murray, 2014; Brumec et al., 2022). As Frey (2004) explains modern pilgrims to Santiago rather than having a unique religious motive, are often on the road for cultural, spiritual, athletic, and personal reasons.

Religious tourism has been recognized as a significant driver of personal but also societal transformation. It emphasizes spirituality and provides experiences that prompt tourists to reflect on their lives and worldviews, fostering personal and social change (Tomljenović and Dukić, 2017). The World Tourism Organization (2015) declared that religious tourism must protect and respect religious sites and their host communities, empower them through authentic businesses, promote dialogue and intercultural understanding, encourage sustainable policies, enhance socio-economic benefits for locals, foster public-private cooperation involving communities, improve the quality of experiences and reinforce alliances between all the stakeholders.

Seočanac (2022) delves into the potential of nature-based transformative tourism, enhancing sustainable destination development. She explains that transformative experiences will lead to more involved and committed tourists and stakeholders in preserving the destination, occurring internal and external transformation. By focusing on sustainability and fostering community participation, transformative tourism can contribute to living and travelling better (Štreimikienė et al., 2020). As literature explains, religious tourism has been identified as a catalyst for environmental, social, cultural, and economic regeneration, prioritizing the environment and the well-being of local communities (Martins and Santos, 2022; Ateljevic, 2020). It has the potential to contribute to the wider benefit of societies and minimize the damaging effects of tourism. Moreover, research suggests that religious tourism may encourage the development of regional and national economies, impacting cultural, ecological, and social dimensions (Redžić, 2019). It generates tourism income, develops local economies, and creates employment opportunities (Kasim, 2011).

Moreover, pilgrimage routes need adaptations in terms of heritage preservation, environmental protection, and the development of infrastructure to accommodate this specific tourist activity. These adjustments extend from the provision of essential services such as hotels and restaurants to an inclusive governance of the way. As noted by Millán et al. (2010), this transformation in the tourism landscape should address the needs of religious and pilgrimage tourists, emphasizing the importance of preserving cultural



legacy and ensuring the availability of amenities and services to enhance the overall visitor experience. Thus, destinations change to meet the evolving demands and expectations of travellers.

### 2.3. The Ignatian Way

The IW could be classified as a catholic linear Spanish pilgrimage route based on Saint Ignatius's religious heritage, founder of the catholic Society of Jesus and the St. Ignatius Spiritual Exercises (Abad et al., 2016). The IW helps to understand the complex world and historical moment in which Ignacio de Loyola lived (1491 Azpeitia – 1556 Rome): the urban predominance over rural, the evolution from the Gothic to the Baroque, the religious reform and counter-reform, the political changes in Spain and Europe, etc. Added to this, the IW relates to other places in Europe where the saint lived, underlining the uniqueness and historicity of the route and the diversity of landscapes and cultures along its way. All this heritage is recently available for 21st-century pilgrims through an application for smartphones by the Society of Jesus (<https://jesuitpilgrimage.app/>).

The IW journey is designed to complete approximately 650 km. in 4 weeks, following the 4 stages of St. Ignatius Spiritual Exercises. These exercises are guided by an expert all along the way. Its recent opening in 2011 explains the pioneer and main religious motivation of its pilgrims and the close relationship of the participants to the Society of Jesus network (Abad et al., 2016). The IW tangible cultural heritage includes six significant sanctuaries along the way; that represent milestones for their territories and communities: the Shrine of Loyola and the Shrine of our Lady of Aranzazu (Euskadi); the Shrine of El Pilar (Aragón); the Shrine of St. Peter Claver, shrine of Our Lady of Montserrat and shrine of La Cova of Manresa (Catalonia). In Manresa, the last stage, the pilgrim can complete the seals of the IW credentials, as the travelers of St. James Way do with “La Compostela” in Santiago. It also crosses many other county towns and villages with important sacred sites (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** The Ignatian Way itinerary



Source: <https://caminoignaciano.org/en/>

The growth potential of the IW is high as the Society of Jesus has a worldwide presence with more than 16000 priests, from 112 countries. Additionally, the International Association of Jesuits Universities joins more than 180 higher education institutions, with around 800.000 students (and their families) and more than 3 million alumni. Jesuits network also includes schools, social services, and pastoral ministries (Jesuits, 2024; IAJU, 2024). In the walking guide written by Iriberry and Lowney (2015),

the authors emphasize that the IW is a spiritually transformative experience, where everyone creates their path, connecting with their inner source of light and happiness, leading to healing, conversion, and freedom. Moreover, the IW brings the opportunity to understand pilgrimage and destination needs, how the territory can be adapted to the growing demand and its impacts (Abad et al., 2016; Santafé and Vidal, 2022; Delpech, 2023; Pi and Tosi, 2024).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was chosen to deepen the comprehension of the diverse impacts of the IW on individuals, societies and destinations. Qualitative research enables researchers to explore the topic in-depth, offering a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied. As Altinay and Paraskevas state (2008), qualitative research aims to develop an understanding of the context in which phenomena and behaviors take place, rather than adhering to areas that have been pre-determined by the researcher. As prior literature explains, qualitative methods are dynamic, flexible and adjustable to different research studies (Carson et al., 2001), enabling researchers to delve deeper into individuals' thoughts and inner issues (De Ruyter and Scholl, 1998).

**Table 1.** Interviewee's profile

| Interviewee | Location                     | Role/Position  | Date          |
|-------------|------------------------------|--|---------------|
| I1          | Barcelona                    | 5th Century celebration Pilgrim and Jesuit school teacher  | May 2022      |
| I2          | Barcelona                    | 5th Century celebration Pilgrim and Jesuit school Pastoral responsible                           | May 2022      |
| I3          | Barcelona                    | 5th Century celebration Pilgrim and Jesuit university staff                                      | May 2022      |
| I4          | Barcelona                    | 5th Century celebration Pilgrim and Jesuit Migration social work                                 | May 2022      |
| I5          | Barcelona                    | 5th Century celebration Pilgrim and Jesuit University Pilgrimage organizer                       | May 2022      |
|             |                              |  | April 2023    |
| I6          | Manresa (Barcelona)          | 5 <sup>th</sup> Century celebration Pilgrimage Organizer and Director of the IW Pilgrim's Office | May 2022      |
|             |                              |  | April 2023    |
| I7          | Manresa (Barcelona)          | Director of the Manresa Tourism and Fairs Foundation   | December 2023 |
| I8          | Palau d'Anglesola (Lleida)   | President of The Way Friendship Association  | December 2023 |
| I9          | San Vicente de Arana (Álava) | Owner of Bus company   | December 2023 |
| I10         | Manresa (Barcelona)          | Activities organizer at Sanctuary “The Cave”   | December 2023 |
| I11         | Navarrete (La Rioja)         | Sta. María de la Asunción Parish Priest  | December 2023 |

Source: own elaboration

The study was conducted by 11 in-depth interviews with different stakeholders collaborating with the IW during 2022 and 2023. This method will offer a more detailed and contextualized view of how representatives of the public and private sectors perceive the transformative power of the path, as well as its impact on local communities and the sustainability of destinations. The snowball sampling method was applied to identified participants, with the collaboration of the Director of the Pilgrim's Office of the IW (see Table 1 for the interviewee's profile). The length of the interviews was 45 minutes, and they were conducted through online meetings.

## **4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1 Pilgrimage Transformation.**

Considering Griffin and Raj's (2018) classifications and Smith's model (Smith, 1992), the IW can be included in the categories of traditional/religious tourism or non-religious/secular tourism. During the first years, most of the participants of the IW had a religious bond/ association (pious pilgrims), motivated by the search for authenticity and spiritual desires. They may be motivated by religious events such as Spiritual Exercises or the jubilee celebration. However, different factors such as the increased number of travel agents that collaborate with the IW, and the Covid-19 consequences on enforced popularity of domestic travel with sustainable drive have attracted pilgrims with non-primary religious purposes. The market size increased and a wider profile of pilgrims was targeted, individuals with less time to spent, some of them driven by the site history, educational or touristic day-tour purpose. The same occurred to long-life pilgrimage ways such as the St James Way, which increased their number of participants, from the less faith-based pilgrims to the secular tourists, becoming a worldwide famous tourist attraction. Participant 8 adds: *“new technologies could help pilgrims better plan their route and have more relevant information. Pilgrims need to be able to share their experiences, no matter what type of tourists you are”*.

Abad et al. (2016) also mention that IW has the potential to open the pilgrimage experience to those that are not close to Ignatian spirituality but want to have a spiritual journey, work on significant internal growth, or even enjoy its tangible cultural heritage and nature diverse landscapes. For example, the individual belief systems of secular pilgrims can also be modified by this kind of experiences transformative experiences. Interviewees highlight how pilgrims discover their inner self thoughtfully and deeply, which would not be possible to experience in daily life, where noise and stress are constantly taking place in the surroundings. In addition, living this in the background of nature makes it more meaningful and pleasant, and it is a transformational process that fulfils one's existence. Participant 2 highlights: *“it as a physical and spiritual experience being in constant interaction with nature. Combining it with the spiritual exercises that St. Ignatius developed daily is a lovely experience to share with others”*.

Regarding personal transformation, Participant 5 mentions: *“If you are looking for tranquillity, the IW is for you, less crowded places than other sacred places. It offers an instrument of personal transformation; it has an extraordinary component of religion that provokes a sacred experience. Something worth the grief and gives strength and values. We took the figure of Saint Ignatius because he experienced those values and strengths,*



*he identified himself as a pilgrim*”. As Iriberry and Lowney (2015) explain, there are at least three human themes that link pilgrims of all religious traditions: desire, hope and the itinerary. Thus, the itinerary itself bonds people and communities. Going further, Participant 9 mentions: “*with the 'excuse' of the road, interreligious commissions have been created, for example, that include everyone, from Catholics, Protestants, Buddhists, Muslims, contributing to interreligious dialogue*”. Transformational experiences permit individuals to acquire a larger feeling of happiness or personal welfare, as well as enlightenment that directly promotes a sense of belonging and care (Pope, 2021).

## **2.2 Destination transformation**

When analyzing religious tourism from a spatial approach (Wall, 1997), the IW includes some important buildings (points), from its beginning in Loyola (the Basilic of St. Ignatius) to The Cave (“La Cova”) in Manresa. The last one, for example, received 44,000 visitors in 2014 (Camps, 2015; Llurdés and Romagosa, 2016). In between, there are several shrines such as the millenary Montserrat, that yearly attract millions of visitors. Thus, the IW has points with different levels of attractiveness, considering mainly their historical significance. Literature states that the core function of these places is the conservation and preservation of religious tradition and being a place for worship, prayer and meditation (Shackley, 2001; Olsen, 2014). Recent inclusion of the celebration of the IW jubilee year (2016, 2022 and 2029) also extends the category of pilgrimage festival and cultic significance (Nolan and Nolan, 1989; Griffin and Raj, 2018).

Moreover, the IW is a main linear route driven from the Jesuit network in alliance with different autonomous governments of the north of Spain. Thus, cooperation and coordination were key to success as most of the places involved were far from being well-known tourist destinations. Alliances and the need for a deeper collaboration with destinations and places of the itinerary also emerged in the interviews. According to Participant 6, “*Institutional relationships still need to be improved, especially with the cities of the Way*”. The IW route is a living cultural and historical treasure: over the centuries, the Roman Empire first and the Islamic world later, various Spanish kingdoms facing each other, and devout Christians left fascinating traces in the architecture, the churches, the sacred places, and the objects to see along the way (Iriberry and Lowney, 2015). Participant 6 also adds: “*The 5 autonomous communities must work together to promote the path and give it visibility since it is relatively new*”. Participant 1 agrees: “*Much more promotion is needed by the five Autonomous Communities because the route is practically new*”. As Millán et al. (2010) explain, adapted and adequate advertisement campaigns may contribute to the tourism development of the route and its destinations.

The IW spatial characteristics require specific attention for its point of attraction, lines, and areas, and consequently, suitable management policies for each context and place. The case of Manresa and its surroundings is a clear example of how the IW transforms an area and a local community. Before Covid-19, tourism was at the preliminary stage of development in Manresa, not ready to compete with other similar mid-sized destinations. After the pandemic, the local community and its representatives recognized the tourism potential inherent in their area, alongside the imperative for urban regeneration within the city. The Ignatian cultural heritage was recognized and promoted. For example, in 2022 they coined the term “Ignatian Manresa” and in 2023 a group of multi-stakeholders worked together on the dynamization and communication plan of the IW (Llurdés and Romagosa, 2016). The plan of the Catalan local and regional public

administration to develop and promote the region under the Ignatian Manresa cultural heritage, could widen it into the “whole town” category (Shackley, 2001).

However, many of the regions crossed by the IW still need economic and administrative support to develop tourism and respond to the needs of growing demand. Participant 6 explains that *“there is still a lack of resources for pilgrims, such as more shelters and services to enhance the experience. Public support is needed to increase the number of pilgrims and for private investment to flourish. For example, there is a need to enhance the accommodation offer. There are some parts of the way (Igualeda, for instance), without any option to stay at, or only expensive options”*. However, other respondent mentioned that now the public-private cooperation has started solving this problem in that city.

The IW may promote urban and economic development of regions and destinations. It may boost tourism growth. Added to this, Participant 9 explains: *“We strive to ensure that infrastructure and equipment improvements in cities are adapted to benefit the maximum number of residents. We do not and will not implement projects for tourism without considering their impact on the local population. For instance, when addressing accessibility, we cannot adapt only to a specific tourist area while neglecting the non-tourist, more local areas. We are not going to do that.”* Enhancements in buildings, services and infrastructures transform and remodel the city towards a responsible tourism model (Llurdés and Romagosa, 2016).

Added to this, some respondents explain the impact of the IW on local culture and society. *“The arrival of pilgrims from around the world has enriched our town with cultural exchanges and knowledge sharing. Outreach initiatives, like outings and film screenings about the Camino, have educated locals about this historic route. Now, the Ignatian Way is better known and appreciated, fostering a strong sense of local pride”* (Participant 10). The literature also suggests that it is necessary to prevent the commodification of cultural heritage and the negative consequences of tourism consumption (Llurdés and Romagosa, 2016). Participant 3 mentioned that *“Many of the Pilgrim offices are managed by the public administration, However, the public administration cannot guarantee Ignatian spirituality. It is necessary to ensure the authenticity of the product and avoid commodification”* Romanelli et al. (2021) add a crucial dimension to this discussion by emphasizing the need for sustainability-oriented policies in religious tourism, which can ensure the long-term preservation of heritage and the well-being of local communities. Aligned with this, Participant 4 mentions: *“I did the Camino de Santiago, and after doing both routes, I would continue choosing and recommending the IW, since it is quieter and not overcrowded”*.

Finally, the preservation of the environment also appears as one of the most important issues they are addressing. Participant 9 mentions: *“There is a global issue affecting not just the Ignatian Way, but all such paths: environmental preservation and sustainability. This includes managing visitor numbers, parking, and minimizing environmental impact. We are addressing these concerns. The IW faces less pressure because it is not circular”*. One of the most important values of the path is the unique natural environment and therefore it is necessary that it be clean, protected and well preserved. Several associations related to the IW are responsible for preserving this environment and maintaining the different sections of the road. Participant 10 also adds: *“Our association oversees*

*maintaining a certain section. We believe that whoever walks the path is already moved by an interest in environmental sustainability.”*

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The IW deeply transforms pilgrims on an internal and personal level. The IW pilgrims, as Abad et al. (2016) mention, grow on a spiritual level, whether they began the journey for religious reasons or for other reasons. The participants also highlight the transformative power of the path. They explain how the IW allows self-discovery and inner search, in a unique natural environment and is guided by the spiritual exercises of Sant Ignacio. Iriberry (2021) suggests that the future of tourism activity must always integrate human values, contact with nature and cosmic sensitivity, making the experience transformative for the individual but also society.

Therefore, the IW may change humans but also places. Most of the participants interviewed agree that the public and private sectors should work together to minimize the negative impacts of tourism and at the same time, promote the positive impacts of it. For example, some cities have increased the number of visitors and consequently, preservation efforts have also increased. When analyzing the positive transformation of destinations, improvements in different areas were detected by participants. For example, the promotion of local businesses, and the development of tourism infrastructure and services. Added to this, cultural exchanges, socialization, interfaith dialogue, and cultural and environmental preservation appear as key benefits for host communities. Maintaining the environmental and cultural integrity of the IW is a major focus for stakeholders. Participants emphasized the importance of a clean, protected environment, with various associations actively working on conservation. Despite the efforts detected, those interviewed highlight the need to improve tourist services, such as hotels, restaurants, and transportation.

The results demonstrate that alliances and synergies are key for the success of the IW, reducing externalities and, going further, promoting practices for regenerative tourism. Strategic planning for avoiding unsustainable practices and commodification of the IW will be fundamental for the sustainable development of the route and its destinations. As Ferrari et al. (2021) suggest, the well-being of locals should be on the agenda of all stakeholders involved as it will determine tourists' satisfaction. Both tourists and locals should be ambassadors of IW values. Jesuit community, local governments and professionals should continue working together to increase participation and enhance the pilgrimage's transformative potential. For further research, a deeper analysis of pilgrims' expectations and experiences may be considered. Added to this, their impact on local communities also requires deeper attention. Comparing the effects and impacts of participatory governance along the way can also contribute to expanding research on pilgrimage tourism.

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