

# Along the track

## The Pilgrim

'If you are not hurting, you have not done the Camino.' That's how our guide and companion finished our twelve-day, 240 kilometre Camino. And all of us were hurting somewhere. It is not an easy walk!

It is not just the Camino's persistent invitation to get up each day and join the other pilgrims along the way that is sometimes tough, sometimes steep and taxing, and other times a very pleasant stroll. It is the quiet rhythm of the Camino that is so powerful. It is not like any other walk. It is not just the stunning and ever-changing scenery, the beautiful little villages, the religious symbols and markers dating back for hundreds and hundreds of years, or the feeling of connection with the tens of thousands of pilgrims who have walked here before you, and those who welcome you today with such generosity. No, it is the quiet rhythm of the daily walk that invites you, in the words of Michael Leunig, 'to move at the speed of natural creatures and feel the earth's love beneath our feet'.

It is not a race or an endurance test. Sadly, some have come to treat it as such but I suppose that is to be expected when, in the eighties about five thousand pilgrims walked this ancient trail. Now over a quarter of a million people 'do' the Camino every year. It can get quite crowded but the daily rhythm slows you down, the pace of life slowly fades and a more natural pace takes over. Feeling the earth's love is a potent way to express this incredible journey.

Trudging along these faith-filled paths each day where step-by-step we may feel the movement of creation in our hearts. And lead us there where side-by-side we may feel the embrace of the common soul. God lead us to the slow path; to the joyous insights of the pilgrim; another way of knowing: another way of being. (Leunig)

The daily walk does make the pilgrim feel the embrace of the common soul – the camaraderie, the connection with others (past and present) is quite extraordinary. It is a journey of memories as well as hopes and dreams. We are not just tourists. We are on this journey of the spirit together, even if only for a brief time. These companions accompany us for a while, then take another route. Sometimes we don't share our companions' language, or their faith but we do share an understanding, a common purpose.

The landscape was, in so many ways, a metaphor for life. It was not simply there, something to be traversed, to be walked on until we arrived at Santiago. In a sense, the landscape is alive – it invites conversations, it calls, provokes reflection. 'That reminds me of...' sprang to mind many times, as did memories of every hue.

Sometimes its familiarity with other places made us remember past events, hopes and perhaps forgotten dreams, but its steep climbs also challenged us to persevere, to imagine possibilities and new horizons and reminded us of our need for endurance. There were both tears and laughter.

Sometimes the undulating earth just rolls on and on, sometimes with no trees and few landmarks, sometimes driving winds and even rain. But just like the pilgrims of the past, in our own small way, we shape this land as we walk through it, we leave something of ourselves as we pass by. And it shapes us as well. Just ask those with the blisters.

Pilgrims before have built churches, shrines, places of quiet reflection. Pilgrim markers dot the way, dating back hundreds of years. They link us with the past and they help us embrace with those who have gone before and those still to come in our common search for meaning, for faith. These faith-filled places leave their mark. The churches, villages and shrines invite prayer and reflection and, in so many ways for those who are open to it, the wonder of the presence of God of all ages is very real.

So on this 'slow path' where we feel the earth's love beneath sometimes very sore feet, I am reminded of the Irish poet John O'Donoghue's question – *ask yourself*, he wrote, *'ask yourself what the earth thinks of you? Take some time to think about the stillness and ancient memory of the land, and consider what it might be like for the land to have us walk upon its generous surface'*. The Celts have great connection with the land and the seasons, a fertile imagination about how the material and the spiritual — the visible and the invisible — intertwine in human experience. It was an interesting challenge along the way to think of this ancient surface that has played host to thousand and thousands of us who have walked these paths in search of something – inner peace perhaps, deeper faith, meaning, whatever. What did this land remember about us?

Above all else, it is a journey which expresses the human spirit's yearning for the infinite, a path taken by individuals and in community in order to draw closer to God.

Regards  
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