

Along the track

Reflecting on the Journey

Perhaps the words of Pope John Paul II best summarise the Camino experience:

Duc in altum! (Put out into the deep) These words ring out for us today, and they invite us to remember the past with gratitude, to live the present with enthusiasm and to look forward to the future with confidence....

Without doubt the Camino journey invites us to recall the past with great respect and deep gratitude. It is alive with history. Old buildings rich in memory and story adorn towns and villages, testifying to the faith and devotion of hundreds of thousands of people who have lived here and those who passed through. Each place has its own story to tell. For many of today's pilgrims, there is a great desire to link with that past, to be inspired by the faith and dedication of those who have gone before, to walk in their footsteps. What kind of faith inspired them to leave home and journey for weeks or months across unknown and sometimes dangerous lands? What kind of faith made the local people welcome these strangers with such warmth and generosity? I wonder what that is trying to say to us today? The Camino story is still engaging and still inspiring.

On one hot afternoon, as we traversed some rather flat and featureless farm land, we came across an oasis, three adobe huts with seats under the few trees. Three years ago, a young couple, one an Australian, set up this pilgrims' rest. There was water available, fresh fruit, soup, a vegetable casserole. 'Just take what you need', they said. 'No money, no payment'. They were certainly 'living their faith with enthusiasm.' Is this what the Camino was like in past times?

The Camino has become enormously popular. Early in the day it felt a little like Bourke Street in Christmas shopping mode (well, perhaps that is an exaggeration) but the fastest and the fittest soon left us behind to our peaceful journey. It is not a race, a competition, another adventure to cross off the list. In its own way it does call you to launch out into the deep. It takes commitment, persistence. One of our group walked ten days in sandals as blisters prevented her from putting on her well-chosen walking shoes. That wasn't easy. True, some pilgrims have been known to walk the whole way in bare feet. I didn't see any of those. Others carried huge back packs. I didn't. Just the baggage of seventy two years, I suppose. The journey seems to unite people – a common purpose, a sense of shared enthusiasm and commitment. It was a joy to meet and dialogue with other pilgrims of shared faith and those on a different journey.

'May I sit here?' was the beginning of a friendship forged along The Way. Paul joined us for the first of several memorable evenings. He was three weeks from retirement as a parish priest in Ireland. He sought us out each evening when we were staying in the same towns. His reflections on fifty years of ministry in turbulent times was a great gift to us. The retired Japanese diplomat kept crossing our paths along the way. 'Are you Christians?'

she asked. With quite genuine curiosity she asked 'Why?' It was her second Camino. We walked with a courageous survivor of quite radical surgery for cancer. Her persistence was inspiring and her humour added much to our journey. A young woman from Monaghan, north of Dublin joined us for a while one day. She comes to Spain for a week every year and walks a different part of the Camino. Her humour and enthusiasm was infectious. We met quite a few from across Europe who also walk parts of The Way each year. It is their annual retreat experience. Would that Australia was closer!

Walking ancient faith-filled paths, quiet reflection, story telling and sharing all made up the fabric of this journey. Sometimes you walk alone, sometimes a chance encounter along the way provides company and conversation. It is filled with the simple human kindnesses so often taken for granted, when complete strangers walked with those who were getting tired, when someone carried another's pack without fuss or fanfare, the quiet encouragement to keep going. Some evenings, an hour or so before we finished walking, two American women appeared with a packet of chocolate biscuits, just when we needed the sugar hit. The people we met along the way seemed to come at the right time to help us go that bit further or to discover that new wisdom. The evenings in the town squares were something special, where pilgrims welcomed pilgrims, complete strangers to each other, as they finished the day's journey. The atmosphere is hard to describe. Sharing meals with fellow pilgrims was a delight. That enthusiasm, joy, the easy acceptance of each person is perhaps what I will treasure from this experience.

The Camino is a gift. It is a reminder about the essence of faith – journeying together in the footsteps of those who have gone before us in search of meaning, in search of a closer connection with God and each other. It shows how today's faith is enriched by dialogue, that small kindnesses matter, that friendship and community matter. It is a hard walk in places but that adds to its potency, its effectiveness. You have to stick at it. Just like faith. It would have been easy to give up, to take the bus. Some do. Whether this journey was undertaken for religious reasons, or curiosity, or by those who were 'spiritual but not religious,' it makes its mark.

Regards
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