

ON FOOT WITH IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA

My Experience of the Camino Ignaciano

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AN OLD SPANISH royal road—*el Camino Real*—connects the 21 Franciscan missions in California, stretching from San Diego de Alcalá in the south to San Francisco Solano in the north. But *el Camino Real*, ‘the royal way’, can also be translated into English as ‘the real way’. After going through the experience of walking the Camino Ignaciano in Spain in the summer of 2015, I felt invited to live out the fruits of that pilgrimage in real life. This way has become for me a symbol of the pilgrimage I continue to walk in my daily life: on the Camino Ignaciano, I was invited by God to walk along *el camino real*.

I often hear people say after an experience such as a pilgrimage to holy sites that, when they come back home, life continues as usual, remains the same as before they embarked on the journey. But I tend to believe that, even though the feeling of sameness may be there, God continues to work in the hearts of pilgrims as they live their daily lives after the spiritual experiences of pilgrimage. When they come back to real life, God continues to work in them on *el camino real*, calling them to a continued conversion. The pilgrimage continues in the depths of their hearts, consciously (in reliving memories and graces received) or unconsciously. Only God can say what new spirit is gradually forming.

The first question that came into my mind as I embarked on the Camino Ignaciano was: what is the point of going on pilgrimage? My main reason for going was to gain what St Ignatius of Loyola calls ‘spiritual capital’, which would enable me to grow in the love of God.¹ With this spiritual capital, I would be able to be of service to other people. I found the Camino to be a way of emptying myself to be available to others. It was a healing walk that would enable me to be free to serve.

¹ See *Constitutions, Formula of the Institute* [4].

I brought to the Camino some issues in my life about which I wanted to talk to God and others as I walked. I felt supported and heard by God and my fellow pilgrims as we journeyed together. I felt empowered and loved just the way I am: an imperfect human being yet called to be a Christian. At the end of the Camino, I felt a sense of healing and of God's love pervading my consciousness. The Camino was not just a touristic adventure, but an outward journey leading to an inner transformation that continues throughout my life. Spiritual transformation was taking place slowly, sometimes in undiscernible ways, in my heart and the hearts of the other pilgrims. As I walked in the Spanish summer heat, I was continually reminded to trust that God was the one working in me even when I did not feel God's presence.

***An outward
journey leading to
an inner
transformation***

The Camino deepened my love for St Ignatius, because of the firsthand experiences that it brought of places where the saint lived his life; as I walked in Loyola, Montserrat and Manresa, I felt permeated by the spirit of St Ignatius. At the end of the pilgrimage, I had a deep desire for intimacy with God like the desire that St Ignatius experienced as he walked the same way centuries before. I learnt many things about myself, St Ignatius and God as I walked. I felt that God always walks with me in the company of my fellow Christian pilgrims. The Christian journey, just like the pilgrimage, is not easy; there are ups and downs, but what is important is to keep going.

The pilgrimage also made me grow closer to Our Lady. We visited many chapels of Our Lady and saw many portraits and statues of her along the way. She was a constant companion to us, helping to increase my devotion and love for the mother of Our Lord Jesus Christ. I felt her protection and guidance as we walked. We prayed the rosary and sang Marian hymns on several occasions.

The pilgrimage helped me to deepen my trust in God's providence. Each morning we would wake up not knowing what we were going to find ahead of us, but we were always hopeful that we were moving closer to God as we went along the way. The orange arrows and the green plaques were our guide. The arrows pointed towards where we were to go, and we trusted that they would lead us in the right direction. These arrows symbolized for me the people in my life who have journeyed with me, helping me to discover God's will for me. Our guide, Fr José Lluís Iriberry, was such a person. His availability to his mission as a guide to the pilgrims, his love and kindness to us pointed us to God. Reflecting on that experience, I too felt challenged to be an arrow that points others

in the right direction: towards what God wants them to be. I gave thanks to God for sending into my life people who, by their lives of faith, have helped me to follow the Christian path.

During the pilgrimage there were times when we missed the arrows and were lost for a while. In such situations, Fr Iriberry would follow individuals or groups who had lost their way and bring them back on track. This, too, was a powerful image of our Christian life. Sometimes we can lose sight of our Christian way, but God still seeks us out and turns us back to the right direction. As I reflect on this, I am reminded of the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15, where the shepherd leaves the rest of the flock and goes out of his way to look for a lost sheep and bring it back.

The frugal life that we led throughout the pilgrimage also led me to value God's providence and feel solidarity with the poor. In the hostels where we stayed along the Camino Ignaciano, we had to share what minimal amenities were available. The experience brought to my attention how individualistic I had become. The need to share the things that I have received from God was an invitation as I walked the Camino. Solidarity with the poor and sharing what I have were lessons that I learnt as I walked. It is not always necessary to give something big to the poor, sometimes our presence with them is what God desires rather than material goods.

The experience of praying together each morning and evening during the Mass was significant. Each morning we walked for two hours in silence, meditating on a theme from the *Spiritual Exercises* that was suggested to us earlier in the day. In that silence, I felt deeply united with God and my fellow pilgrims as we went along. One evening, we decided to walk in silence each praying the Examination of Conscience. As I walked alongside a fellow pilgrim, I felt the presence of Jesus in my companion, and I reflected on Jesus' walk to Emmaus with the disciples in Luke 24: 13–35. Sometimes it is difficult to recognise Jesus' presence in our ordinary life experiences until our eyes are opened by reflection and prayer. I felt called to deeper intimacy with Jesus through prayer as I walked. Jesus always walks with us, even in difficult times when we do not sense his presence.

There was a good community atmosphere among the pilgrims. Although we were from different cultural backgrounds, people took care of one another and reached out to those in the group who needed support. We were indeed 'friends in the Lord', as the first Jesuit companions called themselves. The Christian journey is a journey of friendship; you make as many friends as you can along the way. Although there were different attitudes among the people in our pilgrimage group, which could



The author (right) and his pilgrimage group

easily have divided us, there was still a sense of understanding and forging ahead with a common mission as Christians. I imagine walking as a lone pilgrim would have been much more difficult. We all need a community to flourish; it is a milieu in which we find joy and fulfilment. I experienced God's love and care for me in the context of my pilgrimage community, and that community taught me how to be available and caring for others, too.

The diversity of cultural perspectives in our pilgrimage group helped me to appreciate our humanity. Our group was composed of pilgrims from Spain, Vietnam, the Philippines, Mexico, Kenya and the United States of America. We were all brought together as children of God in a common journey. In spite of the diversity in the world, all humans are created in the image of God. Our dignity is bestowed on us by God, and that is why we are all in the Christian journey together. We are all God's people whatever our race or gender. This does not mean that our diversity is to be forgotten; we celebrated one another's cultural perspectives as we shared the stories of our lives on the way.

Hospitality to one another, despite being different, was a hallmark of our pilgrimage, and this helped me to discern how to be hospitable to others, especially strangers and the poor. Our *hospitaleros* at the hostels where we lodged taught me first-hand how to care for others even if I do not know them. The word *hospitalero*, which describes any hospitable person or anyone entrusted with caring for another, captivated me because it implies *cura personalis*, the personal care for each individual with whom we come into contact. During the pilgrimage I felt that God was calling me to be a true *hospitalero* to the people I meet along my pilgrim journey.

Eating together was another powerful symbol during the Camino. I remember one day we had walked for many kilometres without finding any shade where we could rest and eat. Then all of a sudden we stumbled upon a little animal shed at a farm. That shed became a blessing to us. We just went in and started eating our lunch there without thinking about how dirty the place looked. What was important for us was that we were united in God and that we were all moving in the same direction. Eating together made us bond together in love. As the pilgrimage continued, I realised that we grew more and more at home with each other, especially during mealtimes. The Eucharist was another 'eating moment' that brought us together in a profound way. There are several African proverbs that emphasize the importance of eating together as a way of building communion. For example, there is one which says, 'those who eat together never eat one another'²

The pilgrimage also involved some suffering: we were walking in high temperatures, over long distances to which I was not accustomed; we had blisters, and aches and pains; and some of our luggage was stolen. Most of the walking we did on the Camino was through desert-like environments, which reminded me of the desert where Jesus was tempted in Mathew 4:1–11. This desert experience was necessary for my slow conversion to being the person God wants me to become. It was an experience of struggle for my soul, out of which a new identity would emerge, through the grace of God. The Camino reminded me that when I am tempted to give up on my Christian pilgrimage I should not give in, but keep going along the path towards God.

The misery and pain of walking in the desert reminded me that I am only human, and that suffering is part of my human life. It helped me to identify with Jesus' suffering. My attitude towards suffering changed during the Camino. I had a sense that, even as I underwent pain, I was still feeling united with Jesus and the other companions with whom I walked. I do not suffer alone; I suffer with others. I felt pain, but also had a deep sense of joy. I was undergoing a kind of purification, which was to make me a better person in life. It was an invitation to go into the desert, away from everyday comforts, where I could encounter God in a radical way. Suffering is not necessarily a negative thing: good things can come out of it. After death, there is always hope for resurrection. The wounds that I had sustained during my whole life up to the time I went

² Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2008), 150.

on pilgrimage were continually healed as I walked in the presence of others and with God. I felt called to be a 'wounded healer', an instrument of reconciliation and service to those in need. As Christians, we are all wounded in one way or another, but by walking together and supporting one another on the way we help to heal one another's wounds.

The theme of suffering remained with me as I contemplated the passion façade of the Sagrada Família basilica in Barcelona, with its gruesome images of Jesus' passion, I felt united with Jesus as he suffered on the cross. This reminded me the third week of the Spiritual Exercises, when the retreatant contemplates the passion of Christ by asking for 'sorrow with Christ in sorrow; a broken spirit with Christ so broken; tears; and interior suffering because of the great suffering which Christ endured for me' (Exx 203). As I remembered the difficult paths of the Camino, I could see how God continued to give me hope and strength to continue, in same way God does in my Christian life.

Two incidents that illustrate Christian charity have remained with me in a profound way. As we were on our way from Montserrat to Manresa, in very high temperatures, one pilgrim could not cope with the difficult hike. His companion offered to carry him. That was for me an image of how God helps us along the Christian way as we undergo trials and



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The passion façade of the Sagrada Família

temptations. At another point in the journey, some of the pilgrims had lagged behind for a long time. The group ahead wondered what was going on, but they kept waiting. Two of them volunteered to run back and check what was happening to the others. They offered to help them carry their luggage, to lighten the burdens of those weary pilgrims. God cares for us in the same way, carrying for us the heavy luggage that we bear, so that we can walk easily: 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest' (Matthew 11:28). The generosity of the pilgrims towards others who were suffering was a challenge to me. I kept asking myself: how do I care for those who need my help? Do I go out of my way to help those in need? These are questions on which I will continue to reflect in my Christian life.

The pilgrimage taught me about caring for the environment as well as for other people. The high temperatures that we experienced as we walked were partly the result of global warming caused by human activities. The summer of 2015 was one of the hottest on record in Spain.³ Water was another environmental issue of which I became increasingly conscious as I walked the Camino; my appreciation for its value reached a new level as I had constantly to carry enough water to get us through the day. I had previously taken for granted how lucky I was to have water at my disposal all the time. As I walked with a limited supply, I felt a new solidarity with the people who live their whole lives without enough water. I felt challenged to be a steward of the environmental resources that God has bestowed on us, as Pope Francis encourages all people of good will to be in his encyclical *Laudato sí*. The environment is a gift from God that needs human protection in order to support human life. Everything that God created on earth is good (1 Timothy 4:4) and, as God's children, it is our duty to preserve that goodness. I felt that the preservation of the environment begins with me. Through my own example of good environmental practices I may be able to influence others to do the same. The heat and thirst were a personal call from God.

As we walked along the Way of St Ignatius, we continually met yellow arrows pointing towards Santiago de Compostela while the orange arrows that we were following were pointing towards Manresa. The arrows became for me images of the saints: St James the Apostle and St Ignatius of Loyola. Saints point us to God, but in different ways. They lived their

³ See Manuel Planelles, 'El verano acaba como el segundo más cálido de los últimos 54 años', *El País* (22 September 2015), available at http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2015/09/22/actualidad/1442908634_137465.html.

vocations in different places and times. They took different paths towards God but, in the end, they were united with God. Even when there are manifold vocations, all Christians are pointed in the same direction—towards God. The ways that we take on our different vocational paths does not matter as long as we are all on our way to God. This led me to reflect on the relationship between the laity and the clergy in the Church. The temptation of clericalism and the abuse of power, to the detriment of the Church, are real. I prayed that I might continue to appreciate the role of the laity in the Church and avoid the temptations of clericalism, since lay and clerical vocations are two sides of the same coin. Both clerics and the laity belong to one people of God, who called them to their corresponding vocational paths.

As we walked on pilgrimage, we came across many churches with diverse architectural styles and devotional works of art. Their Baroque, Romanesque, Gothic and Modernist artistic representations were all symbols through which God communicates to finite human minds God's presence and love for us. Art became a means by which our hearts were stirred and lifted up towards God, whose beauty surpasses all that human beings can conceive. Our pilgrimage taught us about Spanish and wider European history and culture as well as bearing spiritual fruit.

Three months after completing the Camino Ignaciano, some of us came together to share how God had continued to walk with us in our daily lives, in *el camino real*. I was filled with joy and awe at how God continued to be present in the lives of my fellow pilgrims. We were continuing to walk together in our different vocations, but with the same vision: looking towards God. We were still in solidarity with one another even though months had passed since our pilgrimage. Our companionship on the road, guided by St Ignatius and Christ, continues throughout our lives. As I sat there listening to the others share their journeys, I realised that what we had embarked on three months earlier was a lifetime's journey together. We will always grow in the love of God together wherever God sends us on our daily mission of evangelization.

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