

Learning how to discern along the Way

Robin Koning sj

Step 21 - Camino Ignaciano experience

Interesting spiritual journey yesterday. I began my 33km walk feeling somewhat anxious about the day, finding it hard to stay in the present, which was actually quite delightful, with my mind always looking ahead to later in the day when I would be trudging along wearily in the heat. As I was trying to speak to the Lord about this, I had a sense he was saying it was up to me - up to me whether I wanted to do this long walk today, and how I approached it (race on to get it over with and get to the Jesuit community earlier, or take it gently in stages with a number of breaks along the way, or go some distance and then get a bus...). It was a bit like some people who, when travelling together, decide that one will plan one day's activities and the other will plan the next. It was as though Jesus were saying this one was mine.

I felt much lighter after this - letting go the sense of this as a hard duty I just need to get done, and sensing the Lord just happy to be with me whatever I decided to do, and that good things would come of whatever options I chose.

That was all well and good until, after a long lunch break at a restaurant in Alcarras, I set off in the mid-afternoon heat when any sensible person would be having a siesta. I trugged along for what I was sure must have been 6 or 7 km until I got to a sign saying I'd only gone 4. I found myself feeling resentful along the way - why wasn't Jesus making this easier, giving me more consolation along the way? Why was he making me do this anyway? Silly things, at one level, and yet the sort of thoughts and feelings that emerge at times and reveal something of how we perceive God, whatever our articulated image of God might be. (Some speak of this as our operative image of God - what actually operates in our lives, at least at times or in moments of greater stress, rather than the nice things we might articulate). Here it was revealing part of me that just wants God to make things feel good, to ensure plain sailing, on the one hand, or as the cruel slave-master forcing me to do this pointless long walk (as it seemed that afternoon).

As I sat pondering this in Butsenit, Jesus reminded me of the morning's conversation (he's got a pretty good memory) - that the day was mine to decide what to do with. I had set it up, in that stage after lunch, as something I had to do - finish this stage on foot. Jesus had given me freedom to do what I wanted. I still had 10km to go - I could check out bus options, taxis, call the Jesuits in Lleida for help. The only one forcing me to walk the whole thing was myself.

Again, I felt freer and lighter. This was confirmed by a reading in the Office from Galatians for yesterday: « You are not a slave anymore.” So obvious, and a message I know - but needed to learn again.

In the end, I chose to continue walking, with the promise that most of the way was along a river. A brief conversation with an artist as I left Butsenit seemed confirmation of this decision. He was finishing a mural on a wall there which he hoped would welcome and encourage pilgrims as they walked that way. He certainly welcomed and encouraged me. And soaking my hat and shirt in the river waters along the way cooled things down nicely. Still a tough haul into town since I could see the city for some kilometres before getting there, and it never seemed to get closer. But step by step, we got there.

Josep Ll Iriberry sj to Robin: keep in mind that God is always walking with you and this is the deepest lesson that you can learn in our Ignatian Way: in the good and in the bad... He is always there... and He asks us just to be faithful to Him... like Jesus walking to Jerusalem... for the good and for the bad... are we not going to take the bad? Real life! Always with the Love of God singing in our ears... if we keep a bit of silence... just the silence needed to contemplate the artist finishing his Paint on the wall.

