

*From Revd Dr Michael Smith SJ, Director of Campion Centre of Ignatian Spirituality, Australia.*

As we walk with Jesus towards Calvary, I have been reflecting on my experience of his act of love. It happened to me on the Ignatian Camino. In September 2013 I accompanied a group of 20 pilgrims on the 686 km pilgrim route taken by Saint Ignatius of Loyola in 1522 from his home in Spain's Basque country to Manresa in Catalonia. You can read more about our experience at: <http://ignatiancamino.com/>

The first eight days of the Ignatian Camino, while physically very demanding, went well. Then on the ninth day we had a rest day in the city of Logroño. After the rest day we embarked upon a long and, as it turned out, disastrous stage of the Camino from Logroño to Alcanadre. As we walked through the city streets of Logroño I began to feel the sharp pain of shin splints in my lower right leg. I thought I could walk through the pain, but I couldn't. As the day wore on the pain started in my left leg too. It was excruciating to walk. After 12 kilometers we arrived at a small town. I wanted to take a bus or a taxi or a train to our lodgings in Calahorra, but none was available. I had no option but to keep on walking. After 19 kilometers we arrived at another small town. Still there were no taxis. So I again had to keep on walking. I walked the whole 30 kilometers in pain. We left Logrono at 8.20am and it was 6.10pm when we finally arrived. We were on the road for almost 10 hours. It was a very long and painful day only made possible with liberal smearing of Voltaren cream on my legs, popping 600mg Ibuprofen and Panadol tablets and very supportive fellow pilgrims.

The next morning I could barely stand up. I could only hobble. I had set myself to walk the entire Ignatian Camino but I knew I that I could do myself serious and long-term physical damage if I continued to walk. So I took a rest day in the hotel with ice packs on my right shin to bring down the swelling. When the others left on the walk I had a deep sense of loneliness. I also felt a failure. I could not walk the whole distance and they could. The group carried on without me. I felt frustrated at not reaching my goal and ashamed of my weakness. It took six days of rest, a visit to a hospital, and some physiotherapy before I was able to walk again.

The morning that I recommenced the Ignatian Camino with the other pilgrims I was filled with deep apprehension. Would I make it through the day? Or would my body break down again? As we began our walk I found myself saying to Jesus, "I need you to be my companion today." At that stage on the pilgrimage we were contemplating Jesus in his Passion. In this period of the Spiritual Exercises Ignatius suggests that we ask God for the following grace:

[203] In the Passion it is proper to ask for sorrow with Christ in sorrow, anguish with Christ in anguish, tears and deep grief because of the great affliction Christ endures for me.

The last two words "for me" are critical. Ignatius uses these words carefully and deliberately because he wants me to know that the awful events that are unfolding are an act of love "for me".

As was our custom we walked for the first two hours in silent prayer. I was filled with a deep sense of Jesus accompanying me and loving me. As I walked with Jesus I had the deep felt-sense that he was walking on his way to Calvary for me, that he was suffering for me. I felt consoled and supported. I had never before had the heart-felt knowledge that Jesus died *for me*, but I received it that morning. That was my conversion experience.

When I look back on that day I realize that if I hadn't had shin splints, if I hadn't failed in my goal of walking the whole Ignatian Camino, if I hadn't felt ashamed of my failure, if I wasn't filled with apprehension, then I wouldn't have needed Jesus to be my companion and I probably wouldn't have received the grace of heart-felt knowing that he died for me.

In this Easter, as you walk with Jesus to Calvary over the next two days perhaps you could allow the two words "for me" to be the focus of your devotion. Maybe you could ask God for the grace to believe in your bones that Jesus is suffering "for me".

Wishing you every blessing in this Easter.

Yours in Christ Jesus,



Approaching the final step: Manresa!