The Ignatian Way: A healing walk to freedom

*The Inner Way: the experience of ignatian pilgrims in the 21st century*

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We present this document written jointly by several authors from Europe, Australia and China, to provide future pilgrims with a tool to help them advance along their inner, spiritual path. All the authors are pilgrims themselves, not only from the Ignatian Way but from other pilgrimages, such as the Camino de Santiago in Spain or other pilgrims’ trails in their own countries. It is from their own experience and knowledge of Ignatian spirituality that they offer this inner guide. F. José Luis Iriberri, sj. was the final compiler of the work, but he has respected the original style of each author. © January 2015
The Ignatian Way: a new pilgrimage for a new century

By F. Josep Lluis Iriberri, sj.

Here we begin a journey following the paths of the Ignatian Way, from Loyola to Manresa and Barcelona. A pilgrim road springs from an initiative, in this case that of the Society of Jesus, and tasked to me and my two fellow adventurers, Jaime Badiola sj. and Christopher Lowney, by the superior provincials. In late 2010 we started designing this new pilgrimage for the 21st century, following the footsteps of San Ignacio, our holy founder. The goal we set ourselves was apostolic and so the Spiritual Exercises were a core element from the outset. We understood that a path of pilgrimage should always be a tool in the service of human beings, of their growth as a person in the service of ideals and in response to the inner search for meaning and happiness. This is how the Ignatian Way was born, with over thirty volunteers from five different countries, embarking on a journey centred on the Ignatian spirit and legacy.

This is the beginning, but actually a true Way of Pilgrimage is created through the hundreds and thousands of experiences that pilgrims will live down through the years. Pilgrimage is created by pilgrims and the contact established between their experience and the inhabitants of every town and city that are on their ways. Research has shown that territories come closer and habits are modified or even new cultures are created through dialogue, laughter and sharing of knowledge that occurs on routes trodden by the sandals or boots pilgrims wear. It would be unfair not to recognize the transfer of knowledge in areas such as health, gastronomy and architecture, which arrived in medieval Europe from the Muslim Peninsula, thanks to the Camino de Santiago: pilgrims, some rich and some poor, some nobles and yet others commoners, explained and shared not only their spiritual experiences but also developments that they heard of or witnessed among many cultures during their travels along their various pilgrim routes.

This humble introduction continues the tradition of building a pilgrimage route through relating the thoughts, feelings and experiences of the pilgrims, its main characters. A particular experience is relatively insignificant, so instead of relating my own experience of the Ignatian Way, I join the other pilgrims, men and women, in building our story together. This and no other is the spirit of pilgrimage. It is our sincere hope that the nearly 700 km of Ignatian Way today also serves to unite people of many different cultures and interests.

My own experience as a pilgrim was of a few thousand miles mostly alone and on foot, as master Ignatius frequently suggested. But if when speaking of pilgrimages the reader is left with the impression that what matters is the distance or trodden kilometres, he will commit an error of approximation that I would like to help dispel: pilgrimage is not walking the greatest distance in the least possible time. This would be a physical competition or perhaps a spiritual journey in which the physical component is very important. Those who know the pilgrimage routes are well aware that the more space the physical body occupies, the less space is left for the spiritual side. The "external physical path" is simply a beautiful instrument to open the door to the "inner journey" that leads the human beings to profound self-discovery and knowledge of being deeply loved by the One who gives birth to the Universe and personally to each of us. And for this, to feel deeply loved, people do not need to walk thousands of miles, not even hundreds of them: God surprises us in the same way that He surprised Ignatius of Loyola in his room. He also expects us at any point of the route we follow. As Ignatius would say today, it is not the distance travelled that feed and satisfies the soul but simply the act of tasting internally what we live in every step.

One of the pilgrims who collaborated in the preparation of this reflection, Sarah Davis, shared this anecdote when she returned home after 30 days of pilgrimage:

“On the first leg of the plane journey on the way back I sat next to a guy who had been touring around in Europe, finishing in Spain. He also asked me what I had been doing and when I told him, his first question was how many kilometres I'd walked. 400? Well, he had a friend who'd walked 800km on the St James camino. If people think pilgrimage is a competition of kilometres it will be good to show a different side in what we write.”
It seems very appropriate to begin with this comment, since it touches the essence of what we want to provide with our reflection: a pilgrimage like ours is not measured by distance but by the depth to which we come into contact with each other, and with that divine essence within us. And this meeting is achieved by walking and through human relationships, meditation, and contemplation of the environment, through the efforts of the talks, readings of one’s life and new meanings that on reflection appear in it.

Over the next few pages together we’ll walk along this inner path which is the Ignatian Way, as I try to communicate not only my feelings and ideas but also those of my pilgrim friends through our shared experience.

Let’s set off then. Have a nice Way!
Part I. The Ignatian Way as a healing walk to freedom

The Ignatian Way: a walk for contemplation
By F. Josep Lluis Iriberri, sj.

Many are the ways enclosed in the Ignatian Way, from the exuberant nature in his body language, to the mysterious intangible presence of his sacred spaces.

What the Ignatian pilgrim will discover along the way will be beautiful landscapes that vary in their colours and smells, according to the different seasons during which he wants to live his experience. The bright green in spring beech and oak; green or ripe grain fields that turn into golden ones as the days go by and the pilgrim moves away from the Cantabrian Sea to come close to the Mediterranean; open fields and stone walls; castles that speak of a different past and big houses that show the wealth that the land offered to its people.

He will experience rugged mountains of the Basque country; deep, fertile valleys; almost imperceptible slopes and gentle walking along the Ebro River as he passes through the Aragon valley; fields of vineyards in La Rioja, which change colour as fruits become ripe; lagoons and rivers that with their constant presence over more than four hundred kilometres make the Ignatian Way a way of water; but also a way of land and dust, and asphalt as well, which cannot be avoided as it is the result of modernization and efficiency in transport; ways of stones that help us to contemplate the difference between us, as these stones on the way; clay roads where the footprint stays forever; paths between trees and shadow less paths.

Important cities offer pilgrims the necessary contrast to value what you have and evaluate the distance that you inwardly have to travel at that time. Moving from the lonely silence of rural roads, certainly very little trodden, to the well-known hustle and bustle of big cities, represents a challenge for the pilgrim who is called to integrate what he experienced on the solitary roads with the real world he knows so well. In small towns, very often the pilgrim is warmly welcomed by people who appreciate his effort and who come to his aid. The surprise displayed on the faces of people when one mentions the Ignatian Way is characteristic, but sometimes that same surprise takes the pilgrim when he discovers that wherever he went others before him had spoken of their path. So, despite the newness of this experience, there is already talk of it. How can it be?

The pilgrim will experience many different relationships in direct human interaction and, of course, the relationship with the sacred experiences in six well-known shrines of pilgrimage over the centuries: Loyola, Arantzazu, El Pilar, San Pedro Claver, Montserrat and La Cova de Manresa. Marian shrines and Ignatian shrines, three and three, drawn on the same route. Some are major shrines with correspondingly large number of pilgrims, yet others are humble ones keeping a discretion that might not be necessary to
maintain. The pilgrim will respectfully contemplate the faith that has appeared in such places for centuries, living its traditions to draw the Spirit that lies in there. Way of Shrines.

And finally, the Way of the Rising Sun. The Ignatian pilgrim moves towards the rise of the new sun every morning. The sun illuminates the steps that show the direction to take every morning. The sun that as a new eastern star guides the pilgrim towards that encounter with the risen Jesus from the night of death.

**Our search for Healing: the motivation at the beginning of the pilgrimage**

What makes us embark on a pilgrimage? Is there a special call that leads us to the road towards somewhere?

Generally speaking, we can say that it happens this way: a pilgrimage starts as a personal call, as an invitation to leave the comfort zone in which we usually live and which locks us into a series of routine habits that makes us feel life as "already known" and repetitive. Sometimes, depending on the age and type of lived experience, the feeling that there is much to reconcile is the call that puts us on track. Sometimes it arises in situations that call for change and sometimes it's a good start in facing an unsolved crisis. The call to pilgrimage is a call to go out to experience the outdoors, to feel the courage to take the present from the past and focus it into a new future.

It is also true that research on the motivation of the pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago show that many of them set off without knowing the real reason; some even claim to have responded to a call from the road itself. Friendship or the aim of accompanying family is also presented as a powerful reason. Few people see a pilgrimage exclusively from the point of view of physical challenge or merely as hikers. It is true that one passes through idyllic landscapes worthy of a detailed inspection, but others lose any charm they might otherwise have because of their seemingly endless monotony. We can conclude that to become a pilgrim there must be an inner strength that speaks more of our spirit than of our physical appearance. Sometimes, although a pilgrim does not initially have conscious motivation, something happens along the way that leads him to discover that hidden call.

The starting point of my own pilgrimage was the experience of thirst: *I am thirsty*, was the expression that filled my meditation and the first mass celebrated in the Chapel of the Conversion of Ignatius Loyola. That was my personal need: thirst for life, thirst for God, thirst for meeting, thirst for knowledge and thirst for inner guidance. The routine of secular life slowly dries the spirit. Despite the fact that feelings are alive, they lack the true spirit of life, the guidance that pushes the true horizon of promised happiness. Yes, we often feel that our past is irrelevant to our present and this makes us question our future: do I really want that? Why did I choose that? I need guidance. And so, abandoned in doubt as we are, this situation just does not satisfy us, does it? Here is where we find that thirst for God, that thirst to encounter Jesus Christ, the model and guide for humankind. Moreover, our thirst is for the Spirit that will guide us to the Truth.

And we are all wounded beings by nature. We all carry the triple wound the poet Miguel Hernández wrote about: We all come to the Way with three wounds, that of Life, that of Love and that of Death. Modern psychology confirms what we say. A wound may manifest itself in many different ways, but those manifestations have one thing in common: we feel unsatisfied. The dissatisfication concerns a present that seems to us as received and not chosen, although we are aware of having decided many times over it. We are wounded by routine and by experienced dropouts; wounded by misunderstandings and failures; wounded by imagined fears that have twisted our lives; wounded by lengthy and unsolved searches; wounded by encounters that should not have happened. Injured by beatings, either by our blindness or by other’s; wounded by many logical reasons why doors were closed to our growth and development as human beings in Love; wounded beings ... We are all wounded, as a friend once told me when I did not believe a psychologist friend who warned me about my own injuries in life: If you do not want to admit the true situation that will not make it smaller. Denying it will not help its healing.

The pilgrimage is thus positioned as an instrument of human healing: due to its own nature, a pilgrimage is a lengthy period of holistic exercise of the human being. Body, mind and heart, what we could call our physical corporeality (muscles, nerves, fluids, internal organs ...), intelligence (our inter hemispheres and
neural spaces, their interrelationships, the world of ideas, knowledge and their frame reference ...) and emotions (alive through the perceptions and forms, interacting with our feelings and expressed in a wide range of responses), all interacting in the pilgrim along their hard way. Our wounds as are needs that lie in our deep entity and are in the heart, mind and body, always with more or less intensity, and they awaken in the sequence of steps that create the personal journey of each pilgrim. This is the inner lab where our past memories coalesce with the sensations of the present moment to produce unexpected, surprising reactions, in which God himself plays a role.

The pilgrimage is healing because without artificially inducing the meeting with yourself, what is sacred in your life and others, that actual encounter is caused by the intrinsic nature of the suggested experience. But what really causes the healing effect is the experience of reconciliation, something very characteristic of the story that Ignatius makes of his own life. Indeed, Ignacio, carrying the burden of his far-from-exemplary life of the past, needs to be reconciled and he sincerely searches for this reconciliation, firstly in Montserrat, by means of a long three-day confession, and then in Manresa, with its extreme penances which often resulted in disease. Ignacio himself admits that in his youth, knowing full well what he was called to do, his real life was a bad example to those who knew him and knew of his adventures. He returned back to his hometown, Azpeitia, as a necessary repair of a dark past that would weigh on his mind for years. The return of the pilgrim to his origin is a further stage of the process of his personal healing.

Reconciliation is the healing of the wound, its actual healing. Of course, a healed wound still hurts very often, but in a totally different way and, above all, there is no risk of infection. The pilgrim will return to his home place, and not suffering with an open wound, but totally recovered, healthy and ready for new adventures. He is ready to be reconciled with the past, with those moments spent in pain or despair. Making up with loved ones who maybe are not near. Reconciliation is also with oneself, for the poorly trodden paths and unwise decisions that prevented me and others from being happy. Reconciliation, perhaps also with the image of God we have and whom sometimes we accuse of not being present, of apparently not having given his support at the necessary moments. Reconciled with the destiny to which we have not given proper response or that maybe we have not given proper response. The whole experience of reconciliation is accomplished by the pilgrim due to the extraordinary encounter with something that we may call sacred presence in his life. The experience of reconciliation is a foundational moment for the pilgrim: a new reality makes its way into the present and as a consequence, this way one experiences the freedom and strength to move towards a renewed horizon.

Reconciliation is one of the fruits of the pilgrimage, but the benefits of healing obtained are multiple and varied. It is well known today that mystery surrounds us. Years ago it was more problematic to speak of intangible energies interacting with us, but today, with the benefit of experimental science, we can say that we are immersed in an intangible reality: if the visible physical universe is only about 4% of the total, we recognize that we exist and are part of an immense mystery which we are surprisingly able to access through our mind, our heart and our sensory corporeality. Modern medicine tends to see the human being as a whole, a set in which the states of dysfunction or discomfort have multiple causes that interact between them. So the emotional world interacts directly with the materiality of our fluids and organs, and the mind, through our thoughts and our ability to focus, can heal the sickness in us. Pilgrimage, which brings the human being together, can heal both a person’s inner and outer state. Pilgrimage establishes a dialogue between the parts of us that have fallen into isolation and thus have caused a disintegration of our being. Mind, heart and body do not always agree and sometimes are in clear opposition. Walking at the appropriate personal pace, maintaining a balanced effort over time, leaving ourselves a mental space far away from everyday worries, enables us to create an emotional distance that allows us to balance life experiences and its relations ... all this together with the contemplation of landscape and receiving multiple signals that we are heading along the road ... this is how we heal our wounds along our journey.

I have found many times that pilgrims in severe pain, suffering from tendinitis or from mere foot blisters, are reluctant to leave their path, because they are held by their inner strength. At the end of the road, overall healing has taken place: legs, feet and backs are strengthened while interiorly they are pacified.
and reconciled. One of our authors, Gillian, explains that the key for her to overcome pain and experience deep acceptance time was just waiting for the arrival of her fellow pilgrims, lying in a field of grown wheat. The golden field, the blue sky, the silence that surrounded her and the feeling of the impotence of her injured leg led her to the peace of those who are finally reconciled with the non-accepted past that still hurt yesterday, despite the passing of many years. The inner healing allowed her to continue walking with the group, simply taking precautions and not going beyond 15 km a day. She arrived at Barcelona still on crutches, but despite a negative medical prognosis, she was able to fly back home, leaving her crutches behind her. The flight, taken as a metaphor, helps us to understand that at the end of the pilgrimage there is a lighter weight that gives us new wings to fly freely.

Freedom is at the end of the journey
As the reader can well understand, reconciliation is the source of freedom wherever it has been present. Freedom is experienced inside, actually, but it has a remarkable external impact: the pilgrim who has made his way consciously, who has lived it with the required intensity from the very beginning he decided to join it as Ignatius says in his Exercises with a big soul and very generous freedom, in exchange, he receives the same gift of being free to the point of unthinkable proportions ... and that is felt in his legs! One feels lightweight luggage, lightweight walking, moving effortlessly. In a good mood, with a smile on his face and with laughing eyes, the pilgrim sings on the road, speaks and plays with other pilgrims. He freely shares memories, with gratefulness and without bitterness.

The pilgrim now has the freedom to live. In our case, talking about the Ignatian Way, freedom to follow Jesus Christ, who guides the mission of every one of us. Saint Ignatius is constantly looking for Jesus' acceptance to join his team and build the Kingdom together. After his experience of 1522, Pilgrim Ignatius looks for other pilgrims to walk the same path and hence The Society of Jesus was born, also deeply marked by the experience of pilgrimage, not only in the initial formation of the Jesuits but also in their own lifestyle. The freedom that comes from the experience of the Spiritual Exercises is an active freedom aimed at the Kingdom, in such a way that it is committed to building a new world. The freedom that is experienced is also a freedom gained in the fire of discernment of spirits, as Ignatius tells us. Indeed, along the Ignatian Way pilgrims do not lack appropriate times to experience and discern their spirits. Daily experiences penetrate the person and in their internal laboratory discerned decisions are made.

Recently, several days after the event, some French pilgrims even explained to me with tears in their eyes the difficulties they experienced on the road reaching Montserrat, when a motorcycle with two people skidded a few feet away from them and hit a safety barrier protective fence. The pilgrims were unharmed, but one of the bikers lay lifeless on the road while another was desperately crying a few feet away. Faced with this unexpected and traumatic situation, the two pilgrims came to his aid. With only a blanket and a mat they tried to make the waiting for the ambulance easier. Unexpected and traumatic situation. After an hour, they managed to be on their way to the famous monastery, shocked by the experience. Once away from the group of policemen and nurses, they stopped to breathe and relax. There they found a family of Peruvian immigrants celebrating an anniversary. They kindly invited the pilgrims to eat with them, and the pilgrims, amateur musicians, played songs for the family. Finally, they reached the stage of Montserrat and after such intense personal experience it was time for the culmination of the day for one of the pilgrims: inside the basilica, listening to the chorus of boys and monks singing and praying, the excitement of all he had lived arose and consciousness flourished within a new understanding of life and death, which meant the peaceful acceptance of his father’s death years ago. That day and those moments in Montserrat were still very present in them when they shared their story with me days later.

The laboratory is always open to the pilgrim. What kind of life have I lived? What kind of life am I now living? Why did certain experiences happen or why are they happening? The intention of Ignatius Loyola is that the pilgrim, by asking and discovering, goes slowly guiding his free will to the greater good, the greatest. We should not content ourselves with little if we can go further. What will I do with my rediscovered life? What will I build with my new freedom? Ignacio thinks any pilgrim who has understanding eventually will offer himself to help build in building the Kingdom of justice, peace and
love that Jesus constantly proclaimed in the hearts of all men and women. The French pilgrims unexpectedly came across by the sense of a life that is gained and lost so easily. Ignacio lay on his sickbed wondering the same thing. Life is worthwhile if it is lived in the service of Love, and Ignacio found in Jesus, poor and humble, the model of that way.

A final point to note about the experience of freedom also lies in the experience of reconciliation. A Latin American pilgrim recalled the long years of growing distance between himself and his wife. One of the reasons for their pilgrimage was to know how to close that distance. Disoriented, he looked to God for a sign of what he had to do. Almost at the end of his pilgrimage he was amazed to discover that God wanted him to do nothing, but to live with peace and hope, finding His Holy Presence in daily events. Not to reject anything but to accept with generosity and dedication what was about to come. Somehow he realized that in replacing his anxiety with peace of the Spirit he would be closer to a solution to his problem, rather than retrying an approach which had failed before.

**Conclusion: we became Pilgrims Forever**

The transformation experienced is lasting. San Ignacio de Loyola himself considered his life a continuous pilgrimage and called himself "The Pilgrim". What is remarkable is that the experience endures over time, as pilgrims themselves testify on their return home. Many recognize that their approach to life has changed. There is less haste and one values much more what one has. Different priorities have been formulated and the experience of the Way is used as a metaphor to apply in everyday life. A female pilgrim says:

“Life has returned me to work and to the routines of family and friends, but I have retained the lovely spiritual shift and peace that I experienced on the pilgrimage. In fact, I am surprised (by that wonderful God of Surprises) that the feeling is actually slowing increasing and spreading into other aspects of my life.”

Some pilgrims explain they are better able to experience the presence of God, as if they had tuned a tool to capture God more and more in all things. The fact of living the Ignatian pilgrimage experience hand in hand with St Ignatius along with his autobiography and the visit to the places where he lived or spent part of his experience assists a great deal in that discovery. In the words of a pilgrim, by following the Ignatian Way we can put flesh to the spirit, or in other words, you can experience the Ignatian Spirituality in physical form, through the encounter with history in significant places for that spirituality.

Finally, I must admit that at the end of the road there surfaces a fear of the future about continuing to live what has been learned in a different environment, whilst following an ordinary and unremarkable routine. The pilgrim feels ready to return home and even looks forward to it, like the disciples of Emmaus after meeting with the Master. But they are not fools: they know that the people with whom they are going to continue to share their lives have not had the pilgrimage experience and have not the keys of understanding they have already acquired. The pilgrim has changed, but the environment remains as before. One of our pilgrims tells us:

“We are feeling wonderful, but still coming to terms with our return to a world that hasn’t changed!!! Our age group especially, being in the last quarter of our lives, seem to be searching for greater spiritual meaning, as we were, at this time of their lives. Penance, forgiveness, healing and transformation seem to be often spoken about by our friends and peers of the same age. The Ignatian pilgrimage goes right to the heart of these matters and therefore is well suited to the needs of people of our age group - known as the "Baby Boomers" in Australia.”

Let me add just a note about my experience as a guide of the Ignatian Way. Joining the pilgrimage with the group, walking with them, sleeping in the same places, experiencing the same sun and rain, eating in the same places and sharing moments of reflection, silence and the Eucharist, the guide becomes the guide not only by his preaching or more or less successful words, but also because of his manner and attention. Guiding a group of pilgrims on their Ignatian experience of Spiritual Exercises is done through the whole person, just as it is the whole person who is involved in the pilgrimage. The guide shares the
experience from his own situation and looks at the evolution of each of the pilgrims. One of the pilgrims, John, reflecting on our own pilgrimage, says that «as a guide you became a “physical” Spiritual Director of the Camino in the framework and essence of the Spiritual Exercise. You are doing spiritual direction by “deeds” instead of “words”. I have felt deeply the care, compassion, considerateness and humility in the Ignatian way». The guide is a testimony of the Presence and keeps the focus on the objectives in the Exercises. Being guide of the Ignatian Way is a vocation.

The pilgrimage has been successfully accomplished when finally the pilgrim can experience the difference between being a tourist and being a religious pilgrim. The testimonies that now follow are of those who are able to appreciate the difference.
Part II. The Ignatian Way as an incarnate experience

1. When God forgives us, he really means it

By Sarah Davies

It is difficult to identify exactly what drew me to undertake the Ignatian Way at this point in my life, except to say that I believe God knew that I needed it. Mid-career, already planning a job transition, I had arranged 3 months leave when I saw an e-mail advertising this small group pilgrimage in the middle month of my planned break. I had a strong desire to be part of that trip before I even really knew what it was and as I started to read and talk to others about pilgrimage experiences everything seemed to confirm that desire. I obviously wanted change. I was already making changes in many of the external aspects of my life and here seemed the perfect opportunity to look internally at my spiritual life as well.

I saw my spiritual director before leaving and we identified some of the things I hoped for from this experience: a strengthening of my trust and reliance on God; being able to truly understand in my heart that I am loved; and accepting the circumstances of my life, especially the parts I wish were different or easier. I hoped the pilgrimage would bring some kind of significant spiritual conversion or transformation, though at the same time, I was somewhat fearful of what that might mean for my comfortable life.

At the end of the Way looking back, I can see that through God’s grace I received all that I hoped for and more besides. My transformation gradually took place and it was nothing to fear. On the contrary, the only small grain of fear I was carrying as I travelled back home was the thought of being dragged back into old ways of being by finding everyone and everything else still the same!

So what happened on my journey? I shared this pilgrimage with 5 others over 30 days, 20 of them walking days. We followed together the Spiritual Exercises developed by St Ignatius. Each walking day we spent the first 2 hours in silence, reflecting on the theme and scriptures for that day. Sometimes that developed into some serious discussions on the road, and other times we continued walking sharing stories, a laugh, a song, commiserating about our aches, pains and blisters or just walking companionably together. At the end of each day we also shared our reflections and the Eucharist together building our small community.
Taking the energy from Saint Ignatius’ land and God’s Love

We began in Loyola, in the family home of St Ignatius where the energy was palpable. I had only recently read St Ignatius’ autobiography and I had been impressed by the story. Seeing places where he had been, both in Loyola and at other points along the physical journey though, made a real connection for me to the actual person and to the spiritual path we were following.

One of the first things we were asked to think about was how emptiness is the condition for receiving. This not only connected with some of the experiences of my life but also with the beginning of this pilgrimage as we left behind all the things that normally occupy our time and energy to open ourselves to the journey. I found the more time we spent on the road, the more the demands of life at home faded and the more daily life became simplified. As pilgrims we were called each day to walk, reflect, pray and be in companionship with each other and that was all.

The first part of the Ignatian Way is in the Basque Country which is green and beautiful. Here it was easy to begin the Exercises reflecting on the love of God in creation and in my life. I have always liked to walk, especially out in the countryside, finding a sense of peacefulness and nourishment in the beauty of nature. I tend to be someone that lives in my head a lot, who can over-think things. Freed from the everyday tasks and work back home and simply walking I found there was plenty of time to just be. Having the time to look back I became aware that I have received, though not always recognised, an abundance of God’s love manifested through the actions of friends and family. This realisation brought about a profound sense of gratitude reinforced by our magnificent surroundings.

With love, our contemplations in the first week were also on sin and the great gift of mercy. I noted in my journal the verse from Romans 5:8 “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”. It’s amazing how many times you can see or hear something but not really take it in properly. I felt like this was starting to happen now, processing slowly... So, he died for me and I didn’t deserve it. Nothing I do will ever make me deserve it. I can be confident of the love and mercy of God and with that confidence I can walk in freedom. When God forgives me, he really means it, He doesn’t hold onto things like I hold onto things. I start to see in myself that holding onto guilt, regret, grudges can create a prison, walls that are barriers to being able to love.

Episodes from a particular period in my life keep returning where I had great intentions of service for others but found myself drained of empathy and with an inability to love the very people I had wanted to help. At this point in the journey I know in my mind that God loves me just as I am without having to do anything to earn that love, but in my heart I don’t fully feel it. It becomes clear to me that unless I can completely accept that unconditional love, I can never hope to give it. If I try to rely on my own resources without putting Jesus at the centre and recognise his walking with me I will end up burnt out every time. But something is blocking me and it will take more time walking this journey, peeling back more layers to get to the heart of it.

Following Jesus with his Love and through the sufferings

In the second week of the Exercises we are asked to contemplate the call of the King and the question of who are we following?. Our change in focus is reflected in a change in landscape as we move from the green Basque Country to the drier, flatter wine region of La Rioja. I’m getting used to walking now and the routine of the pilgrim, constantly on the move. We’re asked to consider that the call of Jesus is such that we can’t predict where our life journey will take us and this seems underlined by our continuous movement forward each day through unknown territory as we follow the Ignatian Way.

We reflect on Jesus’ ministry as a “doer”. I place myself in the some of the scenes of his healing work and I realise that I would probably have been reticent to ask for Jesus’ help, fearful of what I might be asked in response. At the same time though I’m also filled with a feeling that there is complete futility in any way other than asking to follow Jesus. Worldly paths do not bring true happiness and do not last. We brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing out of it. I’ve underlined in my journal Jesus’ words to
Jairus “Don’t be afraid, just believe”. And then also a snatch of two lines from a favourite song “with love...just don’t do it alone”, connecting back to those reflections of the first week.

Jesus’ ministry was counter-cultural in his time, as is the call to Christians today. In this week I am able to sift through a lot of the sources of my internal motivations, what is driven by the expectations of society and family and what is not. If only every intention and operation of mine could originate from God and not me. There are so many competing influences in life!

As we changed our exterior landscape again entering the more desolate Los Monegros plateau, the Exercises also moved into bleaker territory contemplating the cost and the courage, the suffering and sacrifice of Jesus’ way. Reflecting on Jesus’ own pilgrimage from Galilee to Jerusalem and his journey to the cross while making our own physical and spiritual journey made for some strong connections. I saw parts of the story that I have known all my life in a different way. I felt the courage and sacrifice more than ever and I think for the first time I really understood that my choice in following Jesus’ way could lead to difficult paths. I came to understand that subconsciously I have had a kind of “Pollyanna-ish” type of attitude to my faith, that it would provide a protection against the bad things we can experience in life, but of course this is not how it works.

Contemplating Jesus’ suffering brought me to an important turning point in my own inner pilgrimage. I was able to re-enter the times in my own life when I have felt completely alone and powerless, discouraged and broken. Finally I was able to recognise the root of one of those roadblocks in my heart preventing me from being able to fully accept God’s love. I still harboured a deep-seated resentment and blamed God for a time when I felt he had abandoned me. I thought I had already come to terms with this period in my life and accepted it as a “growth” experience but the deeper examination drawn out through this pilgrimage made me realise that those feelings were still holding me prisoner, preventing me from going forward. Taking this to the Eucharist that evening, and in praying together I finally felt at peace with this time.

In this week my understanding of my call to follow Jesus was also deepening. I have long felt a call to service but have often been so busy “doing” that God has somehow ended up out of the picture. I am now becoming more conscious of being an instrument of God, understanding I am not capable of loving people as I should without God’s love flowing through me unobstructed. I’m coming to more fully understand that dedicating my life to Jesus’ way won’t guarantee an easy life, but I will never be alone on the journey, no matter how I feel at times.

In the final week of our journey we spent time considering God’s life in all its fullness; our journey to freedom, new life and eternal happiness. Reading the road to Emmaus story again, I related to those men on the road so locked into their ideas about how things should be, they couldn’t see Jesus right beside them. I think about how we limit ourselves by trying to control our own destiny.

I reflected in this week on how I feel that my perspective on life is being turned inside-out through this journey. In the past I have often thought about my call in life being about developing the gifts I’ve received to fulfil my God-given potential. Thinking now instead of the call being more about working together to build the kingdom of God, I feel an important change from an inward to an outward-looking focus.

Fog at the end of the Way

On the day before we walked up to the monastery at Montserrat, I was starting to feel a little sad that the pilgrimage was drawing to a close, but on the day of that walk I had a very strong sense of wanting to get back to regular life again but with my new perspectives: bring God’s love; build the kingdom; don’t be afraid; be the me that God loves no matter what the world expects.

In Montserrat we had time again to connect directly to Ignatius’ story. Ignatius had his idea about changing his life in Loyola, but the vigil he kept at Montserrat confirmed his intentions and here he left behind his sword and the clothes of his old life, to don the pilgrim’s clothes and begin anew. Likewise we
made our own vigil, praying the Stations of the Cross and sharing the Eucharist. This night the station where Veronica wipes the face of Jesus really stood out for me, a beautiful example of loving service that I can perhaps aspire to follow. I too symbolically leave an item that belongs to me in Montserrat, representing those things in my life that I want to leave behind as I also begin anew.

We had not had much rain on our journey but on the day we walk from Montserrat to Manresa it is dull and wet and much of the mountain and the valley is obscured by fog. It seems a fitting metaphor for the inner way, stepping out into the unseeable and unknowable future. On this walk I find myself testing the question again “Do I know in my heart that God loves me just as I am?” and this time, for the first time in many years, the answer is yes.

In Manresa we visit the sites important to Ignatius, including the place on the hill overlooking the town where it is thought he received his great illumination. In his autobiography Ignatius says that he understood and perceived many things at this point: “a lucidity in understanding so great that if he added all the other helps he received from God and everything he knew together it would not be as much as he received on this one occasion.”

As I spend some time in this place, I breathe it in deeply with the sun on my chest warming my heart, watching a bird flying playfully in the wind and I feel very, very happy. Not in the sense of the wondrous joy in God’s creation that I felt in the first week of the pilgrimage but a kind of full contentment. I know that life externally may continue as before but internally I am different, and this means I will see every aspect of my life differently from now on. I think back through the last weeks of this pilgrimage and feel the many small moments where my eyes, my heart, my mind and my spirit have been opened to a new understanding. My own little illuminations. I sense the healing in my heart and the love I can now accept. I feel completely free, free to choose to follow Jesus’ way no matter where He leads me.

2. Disappointed after 30 years of generous life spent loving and serving others

By Andrew Walsh

Several years ago, during a period in our lives when we were examining and questioning the meaning and purpose of ourselves, our place in the world and others around us, we both sought out Jesuit retreats. During the retreats, each quite different – one for men entering the “last Quarter” of their lives, and the other an 8-day silent retreat, the Ignatian approach to examining our lives appealed and drew us.

At the time, and at our age we were seeking renewal and re-invigoration of purpose and meaning, and undertaking a great deal of self-reflection and psychological work, yet there was a critical element missing - a spiritual one which reflected the Christian values and practices we had both grown up. We had both reached a critical time in our lives – late fifties, and were in the middle of the 58 – 63 age range which is known as the time when people either regenerate or degenerate, creating either lives of freedom or remaining caught in the enticements of modern life and human expectations. It was a time when we stood back and wanted to appraise our lives, openly, honestly and with a depth that revealed our true selves. Cynicism, pessimism and doubt had crept in after having worked in fields of giving to the lives of...
others that were damaged, difficult and often destructive. At the age of 60 both of us were asking, after having given over 30 years each to others, why we still felt unfulfilled, disappointed and simply not free.

It was not as if we were not aware of our own personal needs within this work, or of the wounds we were attempting to heal within ourselves... it was that we had a sense of failure and that our spiritual selves were still imprisoned, trying to find a way to freedom.

We had followed the recipe, the rules and the regulations, had good families, had good friends, yet somehow we had gone off course, taken big hits, carried personal regrets and sadnesses including the biggest question – why? And how did I end up in this position because it was not where I wanted to be, and I was not who I knew I was?

**Getting ready to challenge our past in order to plan our future**

With this inner disquiet and misgivings, we sought a way in which we could strongly and authentically challenge and confront the old model of ourselves. Initially, we tinkered with the idea of the French Camino of Saint James knowing that a long journey, physically challenging and away from our regular lifestyles, distraction and seductions would be the only way we could find the space and the time to take a deep breath and unravel ourselves. Yet the French Camino did not capture us: it lacked something we couldn’t put our finger on. No matter how many people we talked to, their description of their inner and outer journey seemed to lack a critical element. Finally, it was during the Jesuit retreats that we attended individually that we both came across the Ignatian Way.

In retrospect, the time we then spent attending Jesuit information evenings, preparing through Adult Education Courses for walking and meditation, was much more important than we realised... in fact our pilgrimage had actually started long before we reached Spain. Here we were - focused, willing and organised... and then suddenly the planned Camino Ignatiano was cancelled... It was not until it disappeared from our lives that we sensed how much this pilgrimage had begun to mean to us. We dug in, and searched for our own way of getting to Spain and to make the journey happen. Everyone told us it wouldn’t happen... but again God’s hand directed us to people who made the pilgrimage possible. Everything fell into place and we knew it was meant to be... small group though we were... we were on our spiritual pilgrimage already without having left Australia. And little did we know how important breathing would be when we were climbing the mountain to Arantzazu!!! Clearly, we were being prepared by a greater hand for a journey that would be challenging, frightening, joyous and freeing.

Without the time to prepare, reflect and question, our arrival at Loyola would have been very different. Although at the time, we thought we knew what we were looking for, the Ignatian Way was about to show us that there was a great deal more. The walking was not simple, it was not strolling through fields on sunny days... it was arduous, difficult, boring, stressful and challenging. It brought multiple blisters, sore feet and angry demeanours, but it also gave us great joy, enormous satisfaction and eventually, as it married with our internal journey, the rhythm brought great peace, with each step a connection with the earth and the opportunity to meld with nature, the sky, the trees, the birds and to see things in a new light. Every day we walked through God’s world, its majesty and grandeur ever breathtaking.

**Walking inside with Ignatius**

Our silence each day gave us the opportunity to hear the rhythm of our own steps as well as our fellow pilgrims, and the time to contemplate and reflect on those who had trod the path before us – especially Saint Ignatius as he wrestled with his own past, his shame, guilt and fears. As he evolved in his love of God and reflected, so too did we reflect on our own past and how God saw us and how we saw him in our lives. The inner journey mirrored the external journey – exhausting, wounding, wearing, frustrating – yet out on the road there was the huge open space and freedom to let all of this rise to the surface and to examine it within the framework of St Ignatius’ spiritual exercises. On a daily basis our evening reflection time gave us a safe space to externalise these inner joys and torments, while the Mass gave us an
opportunity to open before God and the fellowship of others, to heal gently the trials of the day as well as the trials of our souls.

Walking heals wounds and as it does, the body gets better at it, and the soul becomes freer to soar through the space and to daily look into the eyes of God in the world around us.

Image: Stage 3, walking to Urbia

3. My conversion on the Ignatian Camino
By F. Michael Smith, sj.

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. We walked virtually the same route that Ignatius did, passed through many of the towns that he did, prayed at churches where he prayed, and marvelled at the same natural wonders that he saw.

Now I would like to tell you what a great success it was… but instead I will tell you about my failure on the Camino and how that became an experience of conversion for me.

Our days were quite structured. Each morning before we began walking we gathered outside the particular hotel at which we happened to be staying at 8.00am and I gave the pilgrims points from the Spiritual Exercises to pray on during the day. Then we walked the first two hours in silent prayer. In the evenings we had Mass and shared our experiences of the day over dinner.

Walking into your thoughts through suffering

Walking the Camino somehow gets your head straight. Kierkegaard notes:

« Above all, do not lose your desire to walk; every day I walk myself into a state of well-being... I have walked myself into my best thoughts, and I know of no thought so burdensome that one cannot walk away from it... If one just keeps on walking, everything will be all right. »

Well, I tried to keep on walking, but sadly, everything was not all right. The first eight days of the 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 Logroño at 8.20am and it was 6.10pm when we 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.

I woke up the next morning feeling very sore. It was difficult to even stand up after getting out of bed. I could only hobble. I had set myself to walk the entire Ignatian Camino but I knew that I could do myself some 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 others 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.

“Jesus, I need you to be my companion today”

The morning that I recommenced the 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 retreat 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 we walked for the first two hours in silence 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 the 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.

My Camino was not about success or failure. It was about acknowledging my utter dependence upon God. Pain and failure opened me up to God. I met my limits and there I encountered Jesus.

A healing walk that never ends

I would love nothing more than to be back on the Camino, to pull on a pair of boots and hike across Spain in search of God and self, but I cannot. I have responsibilities in Australia. A story helps me to come to terms with this:

In the 10th century there lived a man who gave his whole life to pilgrimage. He walked thousands of kilometers until finally, in his old age, his legs told him “Enough!” and he retired to a monastery hidden in the mountains to get a well-deserved rest.

The old man, though he never sought such, earned the reputation of being one of the wisest men, if not the wisest man in the known world. As a result, many young pilgrims from far and wide began to come to him in search of counsel.

One day a young Pilgrim arrived at that monastery. Despite his youth, he had completed the majority of the known pilgrimages. He approached the elder and asked him, “Master, what must I do to be a true Pilgrim?” The weathered man looked him in the eye and felt compassion for him. “Son, if you truly want to be an authentic Pilgrim, return home to your family, your neighbours, your friends and enemies and listen to them, serve them, forgive them and love them. In that way you will become a true Pilgrim.”
They say that the young man dropped his gaze, turned and left that place without saying a word, deeply saddened because while he would have been perfectly able to hike thousands of kilometers more with a heavy load on his shoulders, he was incapable of carrying out the task that the wise old man had entrusted him.

Our primary task is to listen to, serve and forgive our families, our neighbours, our friends and our enemies. In serving, forgiving and loving them we will become a true pilgrims.

I would like to finish with a prayer from Thomas Merton:

My Lord God I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that my desire to please you, does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.¹

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Image: Stage 7, Ville of Laguardia and walking to Lapuebla de Labarca

4. A healing walk – My Ignatian Way
By John Ng, some sparks from his journal of pilgrimage.

My intention of doing the Camino Ignaciano is a conscious decision to re-discover life and address its disorders. The celebration of the Eucharist in the Chapel of the Conversion in Loyola before departure confirmed my initial intent: to live and love freely and fully. To say something like this is easy but to realize this in real life can only be a grace from the Divine. For me, it is a repeated spiritual navigation and self-growing process, living the real life in the tension of mixed desires and self-emptying, overcoming deep-rooted attachments and life patterns, the wrestling with past wounds, fears and insecurity. Following the steps of St Ignatius, I prayed heartedly and invited Jesus to walk with me, with my inner child and its wounds. I hope I will have my real healing and conversion without which I see no way to live and love freely and fully.

¹ Thomas Merton, Thoughts in Solitude, 1956, p.81.
The thorns of life and goodbye to Arantzazu

We ended the day’s journey by the welcome of the Arantzazu Shrine, which claimed St Ignatius’ arrival in 1522 after his conversion and on his pilgrimage to Montserrat. We marvelled the faith of the many souls who had realized the astounding architecture. I almost personalized the modern basilica as a lost impressing friend, same age as me, with three spiky towers representing the thorns of the hawthorn bush. Arantzazu actually means “a place full of hawthorn bushes – the symbol of life.” I was moved in my reflection - the pain installed by thorn became the source of life. For me this had not happened, but the image of the inward-turning 13th-century Vigil remains vividly close and consoling. St Ignatius said goodbye to his relatives in Arantzazu. Our guide, Joseph’s words, “Let’s say goodbye to Arantzazu” kept swirling in me during the uphill journey through the lustily green forest filtering the morning sun. I kept saying goodbye to those parts of me which I didn’t like to be associated with, the disgraceful parts, hurts and wounds which either I had instilled in others, or others had instilled in me. The process was reiterative and continuously cleansing. I prayed at Erroiti, the legendary fountain where shepherd Rodrigue of Baltzategi found Our Lady of Arantzazu. Yes, I prayed to the Virgin to heal those hurts and wounds. I prayed for the coolness of the morning forest to purify them into sacred wounds.

Breathing in and Embrace the mud

The downward journey to Araia overlapped the Camino de Santiago and some Roman pavers carved by ancient wheels. As I worked through the woods cautiously, the journey became rougher and muddy. Suddenly I found my heart beating very fast. I almost lost my breath as I focused so hard on my steps. This was a timely reminder of the strangling life traps and to focus in the present, but not to forget the breathing in of Christ.

The journey to Alda began with a very muddy uphill trail. A detour to avoid mud had actually brought Joseph and me back to where we had started. Sometimes life (nice path or muddy trail) had to be faced head on and taken as it is. After all, it is no big deal to step into the mud, as I can always pull out and clean my boots. The uphill was rewarded by a surprising view of the lower plain and the top of the forest in spring green.

Disorder

We left the town of Laguardia behind on a nice sunny morning for Navarre in La Rioja. As I looked back, I marvelled at the gorgeous scene of thick clouds descending from the mountain range where I had come over. I seemed to identify myself with it, the journey behind, my past, regrets and disorder. The reflection continued over River Ebro, towns of Lapuebla de Labarca and Fuenmayor until I was completely moved by the spiritual ambience inside the Basilica of Santa Maria in Navarrete. I could only kneel and praise His presence in front of the overpowering golden façade of biblical figures. In the serene clarinet music, I gave up myself totally and begged for forgiveness; the sin, disordered tendencies, the abuse to satisfy my own need for security, money, comfort,… My eyes watered with shame, heartfelt regrets and gratitude.

Spare the Moor, leave the friend behind and bring two pebbles to Montserrat

In Luceni, God saved the Muslim traveller from the anger of Ignatius, but also saved him from committing an act that could have brought him serious consequence. A decision left to a mule was certainly not discernment. I reflected how often I had left decision to the circumstance instead of God.

Days after I sadly saw our pilgrim friend Michael off in Zaragoza rail station. I felt deeply the uncertainty of life and relationship. My faith returned after visiting the Basilica El Pilar. The Pilar symbolized that although the statue is not there, the pillar is still there. Even the pillar is not there, the Lord is always present. We had a very quiet dinner together, pilgrims in life.

The road was full of little stones and pebbles, most likely from River Ebro, and most likely the cause of my blisters. Very few of the pebbles are perfect. Men are so. I picked up two little pebbles on the way; one for my wounds - wounds of life and love, and the other for the wounds of my loved one. I would carry and
walk with them to Montserrat where I would offer to the Lady of Montserrat as St. Ignatius had offered his sword. Dry long walk and hot. Perhaps life is sometimes like this. Keep walking, keep living, Christ is with me.

When we stop, life comes

I like the walk from Pina de Ebro to Venta de Santa Lucia which and was mostly through the wilderness of non-growing fields under an unforgiving sun. I like the journey as it was very quiet and serene for meditation. We met not a single soul except a swift passing four-wheel-drive of local farmers. No other vehicle as it was far from the main expressways. I was walking with the pebbles in my rucksack. I was contemplating deeply the past wounds. There were many moments of temptation to eye for some better stones, but finally I decided to stop the search and walked head up appreciating the wilderness and some shepherd huts deserted on the way. It was a whole day in the wilderness. It was quiet, dry and hot. The land was barren and practically couldn’t grow anything. Nature still nurtures some beautiful lives. When we stop, life comes (quote from Joseph).

Me and my prayer in the wilderness

Who am I? Am I possessions or reputation? Am I God’s beloved creation? Why am I important? Is it because others know me, or because God has chosen me? Jesus is inviting me to lighten my load, so as to be able to follow Him freely. Though I thought I had taken less in this journey, still there were at least half of the stuffs which I could afford not to take. So is life.

“Lord Jesus, please accept me following you. You are the only one who can heal us. You have granted the Holy Blessing to both of us. We learned and grew, stumbled and rose, and stumbled. It was no easy journey in the past thirty years, but in your kindness and grace, we both are now following you. Please accept our following in togetherness to serve your desire and glory. O Lord, within thy wounds, hide me.”

Lesson of the blisters

Deal with it quickly. Never wait or turn a blind eye. Ignoring is not going to help except worsening. Enduring is not a solution either. The pain continues until it is unbearable and starts affecting normal life functions. Pin and drain the blisters as they develop. The longer the delay, the longer is the pain and the bigger the blister becomes. As life, when conflict develops and pain begins, this has to be treated immediately. Ignoring means worsening. After healing, the same weaker skin becomes tougher to resist the pressure at precisely the same spot. That is what I learn from pain — face it, embrace it and become tougher.

Verdu reflections

Verdu was hometown of the Catalan Saint - St. Peter Claver, who decided to leave without returning and dedicated his life serving black slaves in Colombia. For us, we took rest in the pilgrim refuge next to his sanctuary. I was burning to make a decision on unsolved crisis before departure as I might never return either.

I had this message: This is a time of waiting and transforming myself. Now it is a time to develop virtues and be led by the Holy Spirit. Keep growing in Christ and in His Kingdom. Accept the process and be grateful of the growth to the moment I am. Like Mary and the disciples, after the death of Jesus, they had nothing really to do or act, other than to be ready for God’s will. So, be ready for making a decision instead of making a decision now. Grow in serenity accepting myself and my life. Accept the future as it comes with the inner peace in Christ. Work through my insecurity; try to find security in Jesus. Work on myself to be the man God wants me to be. Become the healed man. Keep growing. Love God and love others.

Don’t make decision now, but prepare for the clarity of mind when the time comes. Take the arm of Jesus and be prepared for the growing serenity. Like St Ignatius, he had no decision before Manresa. Stop and
let life reach me. Even in the worst situation, God is working. Faith is the strength to overcome doubt. Faith is the surge of energy to overcome fear. It doesn’t mean fear doesn’t exist; it is still there.

“My dear God, I trust you will make something out of it. I am feeling death, but you are behind me. I know I am a sinner. I am a loved sinner.”

Wounds offered

We started from the village of Castelloli in an overcast morning and finally reached Montserrat – the intriguing mountain range, monastery, basilica, hymns of the Benedictine monks, and many tourists.

I returned three times to the dim Chapel with Christ in crucifixion and a huge picture of Mary with the dead Jesus. I was praying earnestly, reflecting on our wounds and pains, repenting on my sinfulness and begging for forgiveness. I could never have felt the same passion of the crucified Jesus, nor the immense pain and anguish of our Lady losing her only son. Tears and many tears in the sacred encounter. Here I offered my wounds to our Lady of Montserrat. I left the two pebbles that I had carried all the way.

The Evening Vigil praying the Way of the Cross was reinforcing my deep internal awareness of her pain and suffering. My pain was not the same.

Relief and gratitude

In the late afternoon, I walked mindfully to the Cross lookout in some lightness of being. I was savouring the relief after the offering. I enjoyed the quietness and tranquillity of the surrounding as most tourists had left, and immersed myself in the beautiful scenery of the setting sun. The mountains’ lateral erosions seemed like ‘wounds’, but were beautifully blending in the wholeness of the natural landscape. The statue of an angel was also wounded with a missing arm, but holding firmly a sword in the other. Wounds are part of life. I choose to stay with them until they become sacred wounds.

To my surprise I met Joseph on my way back. We chatted and I thanked him heartedly for being our guide. He was actually a ‘physical’ Spiritual Director of the Camino in the framework and essence of the Spiritual Exercise. He was doing spiritual direction by ‘deeds’ instead of ‘words’. I have felt deeply the care, compassion, considerateness and humility in the Ignatian Way.

I was much moved when I saw Joseph persistently spraying new orange arrows or reinforcing the old ones on the way, or even returning miles to correct the wrong ones. There were arrows on some lonely boulders, borrowed sign posts or desolated farm house walls. These signs would stay there for years to give assurance and direction to coming Ignatian pilgrims. The act means so much to serve and follow Christ and his Jesuit founder.

Reconciliation in Manresa

We left Montserrat in heavy rain and downhill journey. I looked back many times to bid farewell to the beautiful mountains and the holy place where I offered my wounds and pain.

Finally we arrived at our destination of the pilgrimage – Manresa. The panoramic view from a nearby mount was a perfect greeting to us from the town where St Ignatius got his enlightenment and wrote the Spiritual Exercise.

I did my ever-delayed reconciliation in heartfelt repentance, in earnest begging for God’s forgiveness. God is an ever-forgiving father waiting patiently for me. When I repented and ask truly for forgiveness, I was forgiven. I couldn’t change the past nor determine the future, but could act righteously and truthfully in the present. Be a new man to love and serve.

I felt the warmth of his blessing hands over my head as my Heavenly Father was bestowing His grace and kindness into my heart and body. I returned to the La Cova Chapel where the pilgrims must have been waiting for me for a long time. My heart was filled with peace and gratitude during the last Eucharist at La Cova.
I don’t know whether my wounds are totally healed, but I feel the pain very differently. I don’t know whether I will live and love freely and fully, but for sure I know - I am ready for it.

5. The pilgrimage as a tool for transformation and personal growth
By Gillian McILwain

This chronicle of my walk along the Ignatian Way in May 2014, has been an ongoing venture since I returned to Australia. It has taken and changed shape several times, and I have written some pieces over and over, adding to it as time moved forward and the richness of the journey grew deeper and more stable. I realise, as I make myself finish this piece, that my transformation is still continuing, the healing still ongoing and that I will always be walking in the footsteps of St. Ignatius, knowing the love of Jesus and turning my being and tasks to the love of others.

This will be the last iteration, written to assist and encourage others by telling my story, to impart what an extraordinary spiritual experience that Spanish Ignatian month was and how it continues to reverberate in my life, ripening, evolving and maturing.

When contemplating how I would write about my Ignatian Camino journey I found that the simple describing of events did not truly convey what I had experienced. However, one image had stayed with me since the pilgrimage and it better lends itself to an explanation of my transformation, evolution, emergence, rebirth and growth experienced in the natural world of Spain. It helps to explain the external change, which was actually mirroring my inner healing journey. It is to do with the ripening harvest of wheat. When I was a young girl living on a farm in Australia, I remember my father walking me through ripening wheat fields, with the long stalks brushing up to my shoulders. My father would stop and take a handful of seed heads from the tip of the stalk and turn them over in his large, secure, work-hardened hands. Using these few simple seed heads he showed me how to tell when the crop was ripe and ready for harvest. He would rub the seed heads between his palms, rolling them back and forth, and then unwrap his hands to reveal whether the husks had fallen away easily to reveal a ripe seed. If it was freed, then we knew that this tiny seed was ready for harvest and to subsequently become either nurturing food, or the beginning of an eternal circle of life if it was re-sown in the ground to produce another crop.

I noticed the wheat fields on my pilgrimage and I was taken with this simple strong way of knowing when it was time to reap a harvest, to make hay, and to get the best from a little wheat plant which, in reality, had no human hand in its transformation. The sun, the earth, the soil, the rain had actually given rise to the wheat stalks, not mankind - and in its simplest and purest form this was one of the majesties of God – the sheer delight and wonder of growth and transformation.
The tiny seed must grow all along the inner walk

My journey along the Ignatian Camino can be likened to the ripening wheat harvest, starting with the fallow ground of my inner heart. I desired the presence of forgiveness and peace in my heart again. The daily myriad of pilgrimage events - the natural surroundings, sounds, silence, smells, breathing, feet crunching on roads - all acted as the essential nutrients so necessary for growth and maturity. And just as the nutrients in soil cannot be activated until nourishing sun and water give rise to a process of growth, so my thirst for Christ, for understanding and forgiveness pushed me to seek the quenching water of Ignatian teachings and the warmth of human companionship and love. And where very dark clouds of desolation and despair loomed, ponderous and threatening, I found that with silence and walking a transformation took place. The clouds always eventually broke, pouring out the refreshing, life giving water of Christ’s love and sacrifice – nourishing and cleansing.

And so it was with my pilgrimage, starting as a tiny hesitant seed placed trustingly in the hands of the Jesuits who could place me deep enough into the soil that I could take root again, find God again after having walked so far away from him, and then with the warmth and grace of forgiveness, become a strong growing plant that could ripen, evolve and be harvested to then do the same work in an eternal cycle of living the life of Jesus.

So where to start? On this extraordinary journey that was excruciating, delightful, challenging, painful, despairing, freeing, enlightening, sad, desolate, enriching, peaceful, agitated, tumultuous, at times chaotic, but which inevitably taught me to open and accept God's love and forgiveness, and to give love in return. The freedom that comes with the simplest of knowings - that regardless of who you are, the tiniest being in the universe – you are loved by the greatest power and love of all, is at one unbelievably daunting, and yet purely freeing.

Let go and trust yourself in God

I cannot explain, despite all my training, the feeling of deep inner contentment and peace that comes to me every morning since my pilgrimage. It was not a complicated or complex process. I was astonished, in the end at the sheer simplicity of what I had to do. In a world where I am trained to analyze, critique, research, consider all options, develop the best strategies, I found that all I had to do was……………….. trust. Just simply to give over the control of my life to God and to accept that whatever happened would be OK. And it turned out to be better than that........... it was more than OK................. it was life changing and freed me from the shackles that I knew I had, but more importantly, from shackles that I had known nothing about.

I have spent over 30 years tending to the deep psychological wounds of others, loving and caring as best I could, but always avoiding my own, in the belief that my wounds, my sins were so terrible and so unforgivable, that they were best left where they were. I now know that my search for the physical journey of the Ignatian Camino in Spain, far from my home in Australia – a journey that would take me into the glory and magnificence of nature – was actually my way of finding the face of God again. I had grown up in the love of Jesus and joyously embraced him as a child and young teenager. Yet a tragic event left me turning far away from God and, I felt at the time, far away from his reach, and certainly from his gaze. In my eyes I was undeserving, unworthy… and in the words I remember so well iterating at church “...not worthy to gather up the crumbs under your table...”

Following that terrible event in my life, I spent many years, working hard to achieve enough value where I could at least feel marginally worthy of coming perhaps into God’s shadow. But, that was not enough, and with age and inevitably the weighing wound of my human heart, I sought the solace of a silent Jesuit retreat which brought me to Campion in Australia and to St Ignatius.

During the retreat I was drawn to the writings of St. Ignatius. I soaked up the his life story, I read about him as much as I could – books, Google, articles – and on those pages I could hear my own story – I was not worthy and I had lived a life turning away from God’s grace. I was tired and desired God in my life, but
had to find a way of doing that when I viewed myself as so undeserving. Like St Ignatius I knew I felt better when I felt God near, rather than the manmade satisfaction of achievement and accolades.

And so started my journey, which after a year of spiritual direction culminated in me deciding to undertake the Ignatian Camino – a pilgrimage that would take me to the one place I had always remembered God to be – out in the open space of nature – amongst the fields, the sky, the mountains ……………………. and as I had done as a child…………… I could walk and walk and walk amongst the wheat fields and an emerging harvest. I signed on, saved my money and arranged to have time off from work – not without some difficulty. I was apprehensive, at times ambivalent and at times afraid of what I would find in Spain. Yet the life and the journey of St Ignatius and his discernment in life continued to draw me.

Walking in synchronicity with the air feeling loved by Jesus

It would take me a treatise to write about my experience of the Camino Ignatiano in Spain. To explain what it felt like as I got up each morning to the beauty of the Spanish countryside, put on my boots, dealt with physical pain, or tried to get my psyche moving after a night of tormented dreams or tears, or injected myself, or looked out with peace to a serene sunrise……………… and then took a step and another step, and another step and another. The words would equal the 1,000’s of steps that I took as I got a rhythm and listened to the crunch of my boots on the road, or “felt” the companionship of another pilgrim 50-60 meters behind me, or the smile of Fr Josep as he gently passed by “just checking”. Walking moves your body in a synchronicity with the air and the waves you create in it as you pass through it. I would breathe in the air as my feet took another step…………breathe, step……breathe, step….. and I would marvel at this amazing body that God had given me, but which I had not cared well for, as it travelled and mobilized me through the majesty of Spanish mountains, fields, forests, rain, mud, grass and streams. How blessed I was to see, hear, smell, taste the beauty and to feel at one with the world. And it is absolutely impossible not to marvel at the majesty and miniature of the world, without becoming aware of the landscape of your own head and heart. And that is certainly what happened on my pilgrimage.

Each day we progressively worked through the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, challenging and stretching ourselves to reflect and contemplate. We took the Eucharist every day and with each evolution between night and the next day a tiny transformation took place. We were “exercising” our bodies as we grew stronger with walking each day, but we were equally “exercising” our souls and spirits each day as we read, contemplated and simply “felt” the word of God. We were transforming in many ways, some of which we were not aware until the end of the pilgrimage, and some which are still showing themselves for the first time even now.

As I said, many words would be needed to describe my profound experiences of the Camino, but two in particular stand out and continue to live strongly in me. They are mine, and I am constantly reminded of them.

The first was when I felt that I was truly loved by Jesus. It was not big epiphany, not a startling realization………………. it crept in very early one morning while I was lying in bed, looking at the dawn sky through the window of a pilgrim’s hostel. The words of a children’s song I had learnt as a child in Sunday school came back to me after 55 years – long since forgotten, but now clear, true and uplifting – “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong, they are weak but he is strong”. Where had these words come from after all these years? And they were so sweet and so consoling and comforting that in that moment I knew and felt deeply that I was loved, utterly loved……… regardless of what I had done or been in the past and that any strength I needed was in the Lord. The day before, along our journey we had visited the beautiful church at Navarette. I had prayed for forgiveness (as I had along the road the days preceding)……… and there it was………. in the simplest of gentlest forms… in a long forgotten child’s song which had been planted in my heart at a time in my life when Jesus was my friend, my companion through my childish day of skipping and laughing and growing. Graceful and wonderful. Forgiveness and pure love. How blessed I was. I got up that morning in the Spanish hostel, far from the
fields I had run happily through at home on our farm in Australia as a child, put on my adult boots and without breakfast, took that little girl out onto the ancient stones of the street, and set her feet down again on the Ignatius path to commune with God’s world and with my new found love.

It is probably worthy to note here that the church at Navarette was one of the most beautiful I had ever been in. From the moment I stepped into its interior I felt the presence of Our Lady. Although there were many wondrous and peaceful shrines along the Ignatian way, all of them places which provoked strong emotion, this church at Navarette mattered to me more than the others.

To endure the pain that life brings to us but with the God of Surprises in us

Something else also happened at this same time. I had developed a very painful knee after injuring it coming down the steep descent after the Arantzazu mountain, and now it was getting worse. But I did NOT want to stop walking, I didn’t want to miss the companionship of walking with my fellow pilgrims and I didn’t want to miss the wonderful union with nature. All the things that I had planned for and desired were not going to elude me. I had my plans all set out…………… yet God had other ideas…………… and a surprise for me! As I endured the physical and emotional debilitation that constant pain brings into your life, I was actually being transformed to a place of compassion. My eyes and heart were being opened to the experiences many years before, that my own father had as cancer developed in his lower leg – a disease that would eventually see his leg amputated. My understanding of him, (the man who had shown me the simple way of knowing when to harvest a ripened seed) and of his daily battle with pain while remaining a loving father, deepened my love and gratitude for him and the life I was given. Truly, I was on a journey of relationships and wounds, physically, emotionally and spiritually.

But God was not finished with my leg……. he still had another surprise in store for me……. eventually by Lleida, I could not walk, pain overwhelmed me and I retired to travelling in the van until I was able to purchase and master walking on crutches. During this period while I was recovering, I had a day quietly to myself and that is when I had the second of my wonderful experiences.

I had asked to wait at a place on the Way where the other pilgrims would arrive in the afternoon. I was to trial my crutches for the first time on the road. The wheat fields were beautiful – and we were just outside Verdu, the home of the Jesuit St Peter Claver. I loved the wheat farms in that area of Spain and the memories they evoked of my freedom roaming our family farm. So I rested on the road side preparing to write in my journal. I had spent much time in contemplation and thought along the Way, but had little time to write in my journal, so I was looking forward to quiet time to write. But the God of Surprises was about to change things again……. I could not think of anything to write at all! Instead I found myself staring out across the wheatfields, wanting to simply walk into them and lie down. So I did! I walked gently amongst the hip-high stalks, and lay down on the ground with the wheat husks gently swaying above me like a frame around a painting and looked up at the sky. In silence, and slowly, the Spiritual exercise reading from the previous evening came into my mind. It was about Jesus’ crucifixion at Calvary and the agony and sacrifice he suffered. I contemplated Jesus on the Cross dying for me, and what that really meant in reality. What if this was happening right now, just down the road? The clarity was extraordinary. I became acutely aware of the wounds that Jesus as a man bore. Wounds so painful and deep they were unimaginable, all so I and others could see and believe that it was possible to sin, to despair, yet be forgiven and to live beyond them, to reach something more fulfilling and wonderful. That there was no end – to life or to love. I was overcome with such a deep gratitude (and even as I write this word it does not seem enough) for what Jesus had done – this enormous act of love, the sacrifice of his life, the betrayal of his friends, the anguish of his mother – I understood the sacrifice and grief of Mary giving up her son – I felt the enormity of what had been done for me and what I had been given… little me…… and I loved Jesus in return for it. I actually found the words of spontaneous gratitude and appreciation, without me mobilizing them going through my mind – “I love you Jesus”.

The Ignatian Way: A healing walk to freedom
In a stunningly simple moment I was overwhelmed with the strongest feeling of the presence of God, of peace and gentleness and utter contentment. I bathed under the sun in a wheatfield as the wind whispered across the seeds. I had found love and I could love gratefully and with gratitude, in return. I stayed there, not moving for two hours, in joyful simplicity until I saw a jetliner streak across the sky above. I took out my camera and slowly filmed the little world I had nested amongst the wheatfield in a place in Spain where I found God again.

I watch that little movie piece often – it could be anywhere in the world, in any country, in any field, just as God is, yet to me it was a tiny place that went with me in my heart and remains there still today.

**Keep going and move along**

I walked out of the field, back onto the road as the other pilgrims came towards me. I was walking for the first time on crutches, with the weight off my injured knee and without pain. I walked slowly at first and then with more confidence as I found the space inside me again to contemplate and to reflect without the constant reminder of pain. Although the crutches were man made, they allowed me to walk with my fellow pilgrims again and to travel the path of St Ignatius again. The crunch of my feet was now joined with the rhythmic sound of the tapping of my crutches and I walked and walked and walked. And my body moved through time and space again, mobilizing my inner journey. I would not have been able to find the same feeling in a therapist’s room or entirely in church praying. In order to mobilize my inner journey, I had to move and mobilize my outer body.

There were many other experiences I had along the Ignatian Camino, some of them deeply personal and anguishing, some of great joy and fun, some about my professional life, each of them mobilizing me along an inner journey of transformation. As my wounds were revealed in the face of God and bathed in love and forgiveness, I found myself growing in understanding and knowing. Some days were still littered with moments of confusion and anger, but each day also had a new revitalized rhythm:

> The silence in the morning allowed me to lay out in front of me the reflection and prayers from the previous day, and as I walked and breathed, they worked themselves into a place of knowing and clarity.

> Lunch brought with it the relief and companionship of fellow pilgrims, grace and laughter and water... beautiful, nourishing water.

> Then the afternoon of the last hours of walking, the challenging tiredness, the growing desire to stop, coupled with the determination to keep going to reach rest and the simple physical deliciousness of a shower, bootless feet and clean clothes.

> Then, at day’s end, the gentleness of the Eucharist where, despite our individual journeying and thinking, we talked and reflected as a pilgrim group, healing and bridging any human antagonisms and reaching out to, and for, each other in sharing our wounds. Each day our routine took us deeper and deeper into our transformation, both as individuals and as a group. Our stories evolved as we learnt of each other and supported or loved our fellow pilgrims. At times we were very separate, at others very close, but always heading in the same direction every morning, praying together at the start of another day, and in silence setting out to the rhythm of our feet touching the path of St Ignatius and our eyes greeting the silence and glory of God in the majesty and miracles of nature.

**Going back home feeling freedom**

By the time I reached Manresa I was exhausted but changed – physically, emotionally and spiritually. But it had been at Montserrat that the full realization of my change was most apparent. At Montserrat I knew my spiritual and emotional wounds were healing well. I immersed myself in the mountainous surrounds and could see the transformation that was taking place in my writings and my thoughts. I felt that the seed, held in the strong hand of God and separated from the husk, was ready for the harvest, to reap the
benefits of my pilgrimage, to change my life personally and professionally (which I have instigated since arriving back in Australia) to relate differently to those new to me, to open to my family and to love as Jesus did and to walk as a pilgrim through life, giving to others as Jesus did on earth.

Truly the Ignatian pilgrimage had been a healing walk to freedom for me.

I have returned to Australia, undergone surgery that has rectified my damaged knee, but the transformation and the grace of God stays with me. At times I still lose my way, at times I am desolate, but I always know that it will pass, and that trust and acceptance of God in my life is enough. I know that I am still following those footsteps of St Ignatius which I have no doubt will one day return me to Spain to walk again. My wounds have not all healed, but the transformation of the healing walking and the physical challenges guided by the hand of God all led me to a peace and contentment that I have not previously experienced. In my trust in God I have found a bravery and courage to face my fears and to know that I am free.