

They say that at some point, everyone cries on the Camino. Always an over-achiever, I got a jump start by being the first to cry at our very first group meeting in Loyola. After seriously aggravating a spinal injury which caused severe nerve pain with every step, I worried for weeks leading up to the trip. Brought on by Padre Josep's challenge to name our biggest fear, seated in a circle facing these strangers from all over the world who would very quickly become family, I shared my fear that the pain would keep me from walking and learned that I was not alone in my fear. Little did I know that even when I was very much by myself, sometimes for long hours at a time and in strange places, I would never be "alone" on our journey.

Although the details of my first day of walking are now a funny anecdote shared with friends and family, suffice it to say that my trepidation was not unfounded. The first few hours leaving Loyola behind us were cold and wet but fine. But as we went on, I realized that each time I slowed to a stop, my back, feet and legs immediately cramped up. I told Padre that I couldn't stop; I needed to keep walking.

When we finally got to our lunch stop several hours later and I sat down, my entire body turned into one big, painful spasm! Trying to be discreet, I went outside around the corner and out of sight of our group. Intending to stretch, I ended up on the sidewalk writhing in pain! Thankfully, one of my fellow pilgrims had seen me walk around the side of the building and he called for help. An angel sent from heaven (by way of Singapore) came to my rescue. There on the sidewalk with passersby inquiring about my condition and my entire group surrounding me, this angel – a physiotherapist – worked on my worst pain (in the bum, of course) and after several minutes, I was able to relax a little and stretch myself. Her dad, another angel and (very conveniently) an anesthesiologist, gave me something blessedly strong and the pain began to subside. With a beer in hand, I sat on the ground for a while, laughing at the absurdity of the whole thing now that it was over. Eternally grateful to my angels, I was relieved to get in a taxi to our overnight accommodations just a few kilometers from where "the incident" occurred!

Warm and comfortable in our room, however, I began to think that my fears had been justified and I texted my family that I was probably coming home. If I could not walk, I would not stay. My husband started looking at planes, trains and automobiles in the event I needed to get to Barcelona. Of course, my companions on the journey had other ideas and they conspired with Padre to make a plan for my next few days. As if by design, that was where the Way took a turn for me.

For the next several days, I spent part of the day walking, often in silent prayer, and at least part of the day by myself while the rest of my group continued. Having grown up an only child, being by myself was not new or uncomfortable for me. But as the time went by, I began to reflect upon the reasons I had needed to make this pilgrimage. The previous several years had been filled with some very challenging, often frighteningly difficult times with my aging, ill parents and my children. I had been forced to prioritize my time and attention, often choosing between caring for my dearly loved parents or my beloved children and almost always feeling as if I had failed everyone. At first, I was deeply sad, turning again and again to God and to His Blessed Mother for comfort and healing. But as the years went by and things continued to get

worse and worse, my faith was challenged and I was angry: angry that my beautiful, good, wonderful child was plagued by the unrelenting darkness of depression; angry that I was neglecting my husband, my other children and my friends; angry at my mother for getting sick and dying and leaving me alone to deal with my dad's advanced dementia; angry at my dad for making her death all about him losing her, leaving no room for me to grieve the loss of my mother; angry at myself for breaking my promise to my mom not to put my dad in a facility; angry at all of the doctors who had failed all of us; and, angry at God for letting all of it happen with no relief. The anger and the guilt I was carrying was weighing me down. Alone with my thoughts and prayers, I began a conversation that would continue through the rest of my journey.

Each day, either alone in one of the many beautiful churches we visited or in silent prayer along the Way, I spoke to my parents. I told them that I was angry. I asked for their forgiveness and for their blessing on my journey. At times, I laughed to myself at my mom's reaction to the idea that I was walking across Spain on a pilgrimage! She was definitely laughing in heaven! My dad, he was cheering, coaching, being the dad I lost first to his dementia and then to heaven. I spent time praying the Rosary as I had in the past, asking Notre Dame, Our Mother, to help me take each step and to watch over my family as I continued on my journey. I sang psalms in my head praising God from whom all blessings flow and my help in times of trouble, asking Him to forgive my sins, my doubts and my lack of faith.

Some days were harder than others. The pain was lessened by strong medications, but the emotions that had been building made Mothers' Day and missing my children and missing my mom very difficult. It reached a crescendo a few days later when I realized it was almost my mom's birthday. Between them, Padre and my friends came up with a plan to add a special mass. They gave me a candle upon which I inscribed both of my parents' names and their birthdays and the days they were born into eternal life. I carried that candle in my pack to our next stop and that evening, before dinner, we sat around one of the tables in the dining room and passed freshly baked bread and simple table wine and celebrated the Eucharist and my mom's birthday together. I have never participated in a more meaningful or personal mass in my life. It was beautiful and healing and so deeply appreciated.

I carried the candle again the next day on our hike to Montserrat. I would leave it along with my guilt and regrets, just like Ignatius left his guilt and sorrow with Our Lady of Montserrat on the night he spent in vigil with her. I was hardly aware of the small weight of the candle as I struggled for several hours climbing to the Basilica; it was nothing compared with the guilt I had been carrying for so long. Overcome with the realization that I had made it to this point in spite of my injury and with the help and support of God, Our Lady, my parents, and my fellow pilgrims, I found myself weeping several times during the day. When I left the candle with the thousands of others, I truly felt my worries and my guilt leave me. I had made things right with my parents and with my God through the struggle. I had sought forgiveness and had been forgiven.

As the days went by, I realized that whether they were walking and praying in silence by my side or continuing on when my day's walk was over, my Pilgrim Family was with me on my Way and they are with me still. While my Camino differed a bit from the rest of the group's, we had all come away from the journey having grown in faith and love, for God and for each other. There is no "right" way to do the Camino, there is only your Way. Go well and safely Pilgrims and until we meet again, may the Good Lord, His Blessed Mother and Saint Ignatius hold you in the palms of their hands and you will never be alone.