

## Walking with Ignatius: The Ignatian Camino October 2015

### A Pilgrim's Reflection by Geraldine Naismith

In 2013, a group of 20 Australians from the Campion Centre of Ignatian Spirituality: Victoria walked the Ignatian Way: a new Camino being established and promoted by Father Josep Iriberry SJ (Spain) in commemoration of the founder (Saint Ignatius) of the Society of Jesus. The 2013 Camino proved to be physically challenging having walked more than 685kms. There was little time available for quiet reflection and journaling outside the 2 hours of silence at the beginning of each day's walk. Much of our energy went into surviving the very long days, the high temperatures and walking between 25 and 35 kms a day, one day being 42 kms (a walking marathon). At the end of this Camino we met Father Josep in Barcelona and it was then that I realised how much more there was to learn and experience on the Ignatian Camino.

Consequently when the opportunity arose for repeating the Ignatian Camino with Fr. Josep as our Leader, there was no hesitation in my mind and heart that I simply had to go back. I am especially grateful for Fr. Josep's skilled leadership – juggling many aspects that are involved with leading a group while at the same time guiding us through a workshop on Saint Ignatius's Full Spiritual Exercises. We visited many sites where Saint Ignatius would have passed or had spent some time - it was a true experience of walking in Saint Ignatius's shoes, both physically and spiritually. Fr. Josep's generosity and willingness to share his knowledge of Spanish history, culture and the lifestyle that Saint Ignatius would have lived (1491-1556) certainly assisted my understanding and ability to more closely appreciate, so long ago, Saint Ignatius's spiritual transformation.

The Camino enabled me to gain a deeper sense of God's Calling or His Desire for myself, as I reflected on Ignatius's journey. I believe there are degrees of knowing and understanding as I discovered at a much deeper level, how I am being called to Love and Serve my God in whatever I am doing and wherever I may find myself. It may sound very simple but this was not possible until I allowed myself to more fully and freely, feel & know the extent of how much I am loved and valued in my sinful state by my Creator.

We each received a copy of The Pilgrim's book at our first meeting in Loyola which I found to be an excellent resource to guide daily prayer and personal reflections. In our daily prayer we were invited to ask for a deeper knowledge of ourselves, so 'that in this self-knowledge we may be more oriented towards that happiness which



comes from living solely in the presence of God'. A verse from the Pilgrim's Song was sung each morning as we headed off, to remind us of our commitment to one another.

*We are pilgrims on the journey  
We're companions on the road  
We are here to help each other  
Walk the mile and bear the load*



The first week of the exercises found us walking through the Basque high country. My heart leapt with Joy at the wonders of creation. At one point I found myself skipping along, so happy to be back in the mountains. The mountain views, forests and autumn leaves were spectacular. Gratefully it did not rain which would have certainly made the walk less pleasant. We later learnt that within days after leaving the high country of the Basque region, they experienced torrential rains and flooding – a true blessing that we were spared the rain experience.

We were invited to reflect on our own life story noting those turning points in our lives where we either felt or did not feel the presence of our God. In our Pilgrims' book the following sentence drew my attention – 'The one that leads us in our lives is the one who has brought us here'; hence I was meant to be here again, but why?

We walked with day packs as our luggage was always transported to our next accommodation, which was often much more comfortable than I was led to expect. However some of the other pilgrims did find sleeping in shared rooms and the few dormitories in Albergues/hostels a little challenging, having never slept with strangers and often listening to others snoring throughout the night. Instead of grumbles there developed a light heartedness within the group in accepting the many aspects of ourselves and the good and the more challenging aspects of others that can take us out of our comfort zone.



The 2013 Camino of 20 pilgrims had the accommodation arranged by a travel agent and we often had to be bussed from small villages to larger towns with hotel accommodation. The second Camino of 16 pilgrims had the accommodation arranged by Fr Josep and a travel agent (Imanol) which meant that we stayed in smaller villages, in convents and in some albergues (hostels). The smaller group caught public busses and trains on a number of days; to reduce the length of the day's walk and/or to avoid higher trafficked roads or long monotonous sections.

Some of the other pilgrims at first found the walking particularly tough, but waiting and walking with one another enabled us to keep pushing through the fatigue and effort in climbing the mountains. As we moved down into the valleys and the lower country side we reflected on "What is the purpose of our pilgrimage through this world?" How do we respond to all that our

Creator has given to us as we walked through the many vineyards, orchards, the fields of tomatoes, corn and so on.

As the days past and we travelled along, we were then invited to consider our own sinfulness in comparison to all that Our God continues to give us through all of creation. "Today...on our walk is that of a repentant sinner, but above all of a sinner who is immensely loved" (Pilgrim's Book). This touched me to the depths of my heart and knowing. Once we were asked to maintain a 'sad mood' throughout the day in order to help us better understand the evil in life, both around us and within ourselves. I recalled some moments thinking about the other pilgrims and becoming upset whenever the group became too spread out – perceiving those ahead as having a lack of consideration for those who may be struggling behind. For some days I struggled with this until I decided that every time I became upset I would pray for patience, tolerance and understanding - this worked as I was no longer as troubled.

It was also during this time that I became more aware of being a 'sinner who is loved' with the emphasis being on 'is loved' and redeemed. I was being invited to begin a new life but remembering above all of being a sinner who is immensely loved. Only then am I more able to accept what God offers so freely: Forgiveness. I became especially aware of an internal shift from seeking unattainable spiritual perfectionism to more fully embracing my sinfulness as my reality and knowing that, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9) 'This is the point' as our Leader would often comment.



My Camino experiences have highlighted the generosity and friendliness of the Spanish people. We were very grateful to Imanol who prepared and setup tables for our lunches almost at the end of our day's walk. The food was plentiful and delicious. The only down side is that we had to walk more continuously to reach our lunch stop in time. This meant for some that they were unable to take longer breaks if struggling with sore feet and tiredness.



On a number of mornings we started walking before sunrise. I loved watching the beauty of the sunrise over the countryside and reflected on my own new beginnings in life. The rest of the Camino revolved around these reflections and resulted in coming to a deeper commitment of Love and Service with no expectations. The 'no expectations' evolved after revisiting the Church of Saint Peter Claver - 'Slave of the Black Slaves forever' was his commitment. I was especially struck by the fact that he died alone, deserted and betrayed by the very people he worked for. After much reflection I came to feel a real sense of freedom as I resolved that it

was time for me to let go of any expectations or desired outcomes in all matters – all is to be done out of Love & Service – as simple as that and nothing more. ‘This is the point ‘

Re-walking the desert section was much easier than the 2013 Camino. Firstly the distances were shorter, and secondly the weather was kinder – no burning, bright sun; instead a cool breeze and much appreciated cloud cover. During this time I reflected on my first Ignatian Camino both the good and bad experiences and pondered how to understand my reactions especially to the negative experiences. I recalled suffering badly with sore feet and I was walking alone while others tended to another struggling pilgrim. I recalled how hurt, upset and rejected I had felt during the walk through the desert. This Camino experience enabled me



to let go of that hurt as I reflected on how ‘healing only comes through forgiveness’, of myself and the other pilgrims for my own negative responses and their perceived lack of care for myself – having no expectations – ‘It is what it is’.

| In summary I am being called to continually lighten my load interiorly and externally, so as to walk beside Jesus more freely on my spiritual pilgrimage through life. How I lighten my load was learnt predominantly during my first Ignatian Camino; and the knowledge and understanding as to how to walk beside him was gained during this second Camino. This knowledge continues to evolve and grow. However we were reminded that ‘Yet we also experience quite strongly that good resolves are never easy, even when they are made with best intentions of the heart’. Perseverance became a key word – there is sin within myself and all around me. Key phrases were and still are “God calls us to work close to him while he knows us fully yet loves us as we are...” “loved sinners”... My grace is enough for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”... “The Call of the King is the call to become his Companion”. (Pilgrim’s Book)

Of all the beautiful old churches we visited my favourite was the Church in Tarrega? The magnificent paintings on the walls and ceiling depict the Creation story with Our Lady centred over the main Altar. In other churches there were many statues that drew my attention and aided my reflections. Some of the most poignant ones were one of Our crucified Lord kneeling beneath his cross depicting deep sadness on his face; another was our Lady holding Jesus’s body beneath the cross with 7 swords piercing her heart. In the many churches we visited, there were numerous, varied images of Our Lady usually holding baby Jesus in her arms. Our Lady appears to be very central and essential in faith of the Spanish People.



During our time at Montserrat we prayed the Vigil of Our Lady with Ignacio - following Jesus on his way of the Cross. It is a beautiful prayer prayed through the eyes of Mary that highlights the Love of Jesus for each one of us as sinners, but also for our own sufferings as a result of the sin in the world around us, ‘he takes up the weight

of all our crosses, all of our senseless suffering, and the weight of all the sin in the world'. I found this to be a very healing aspect of the prayer as it includes our own suffering inflicted by others.

To walk the Camino as a group has its own unique challenges. Fr. Josep commented early in our journey that to walk too fast, or too far ahead or too slow or too far behind is not being a good companion. It does require a willingness to alter your preferred way of walking i.e. being able to modify your speed of walking to the speed of the group as a whole, a willingness to forgo some personal needs for the need of others and to take direction from a group Leader/Guide. This can be challenging with personality conflicts especially when feeling physically challenged, tired etc. Added to this is a willingness to embrace the Guided Prayer associated with walking this Camino. It is a very different experience to walking alone at one's own pace and in one's own time. However to walk alone is not necessarily any less spiritual or less life changing, but simply a different experience with its own challenges. I learnt this when my husband, our daughter and myself walked part of the Camino Frances from Leon to Santiago de Compostella in 2011.



I especially enjoyed the companionship of the other pilgrims, the shared laughter, the physical fatigue, the bountiful meals and the general willingness to support one another and always respectful of the varied needs of each other. The sharing of the Camino experiences enables the fostering of friendships and often the mutual sharing of our life stories. Much can be gained walking as a member of a group with the added bonus of a Spiritual guide.



I am deeply grateful for having had the opportunity to complete the Ignatian Camino, twice with 2 different groups. As I now reflect on my 2 experiences I have come to know that the gifts of the first Camino included a real awareness of the need for permanent changes in my daily life. One could describe it as a form of a 'Spiritual Spring Cleaning' in order to make room for the new experiences and many blessings of the second Camino (October 2015) resulting in a renewed commitment to 'Love & Serve without seeking anything but the love of Jesus'. My Camino experiences can be best expressed through the words of the following hymn: 'Come As You Are'.

Come as you are, that's how I want you  
Come as you are, feel quite at home  
Close to my heart, loved and forgiven  
Come as you are, why stand alone?

No need to fear, love sets no limits  
No need to fear, love never ends  
Don't run away, shamed and disheartened  
Rest in my love, trust me again

I came to call sinners, not just the virtuous  
I came to bring peace, not to condemn  
Each time you fail, to live by my promise  
Why do you think, I'd love you the less?

Come as you are, that's how I love you  
Come as you are, trust me again  
Nothing can change, the love that I bear you  
All will be well, just come as you are.