

Our Camino group met in the evening of 8 May 2018 at Hotel Arrupe in **Loyola**, birthplace of Inigo. There were 14 of us - 11 women and 3 men including Father Josep Iriberry, sj, our Spiritual Director and guide. It turned out that this is a Camino group of many 'first's' for Father Josep. For example, it is the first time he has led such a culturally and age diverse group, and any Singaporean, on the Camino.

We got down to serious stuff that same evening with our reflecting on and sharing on the following grounding questions:

Why am I here?

What are my expectations?

What are my fears?



We had the opportunity to tour Loyola on foot the next day.



[Above] Path of respect

Among the many places of interest and significance that we visited, we toured the local Magdalena hospital [Centre and Right] where Inigo chose to stay after his conversion and return to Loyola, in order to be with the poor and the lepers. Many lepers walked the Way in Inigo's time, in the hope of being healed. It occurred to me that perhaps, even now, we are all 'lepers' in varying degrees, seeking God's healing of our human brokenness along the Way?



We celebrated our first Mass together that evening at the Chapel of Conversion, in the Sanctuary of Loyola [Left]. I was a bit overwhelmed by the privilege of being in the same place as Inigo when he started his conversion journey. Like Inigo, I felt unworthy.

"We are pilgrims on a journey...."

We sang the Pilgrim Song as we left Loyola for **Legazpi** the next morning. Such meaningful lyrics! Singing this song every morning, as we start on our day's journey, became one of the highlights of my day. My fellow pilgrims certainly lived out the lyrics of the song, in the help that each in their own way rendered to others. More often than not, I was a beneficiary of the love that they witnessed in their words and actions.

There were bridges, bridges and more bridges en route to Legazpi! [Below]



I called to mind that Jesus is my bridge from darkness into light, and that Pope Francis said, “build bridges not walls”. I reflected on the bridge that I am called to be to others and people who have been bridges in my life.



[Left] The route to **Arantzazu** was uphill and long, hard and painful for me. I was a bit disheartened as I had trained for the Camino and yet struggled to get ahead. Kind fellow pilgrims walked with me and kept me company as I tried to keep pace with the group.

I was totally focused on not missing a step as we walked along the rocky terrain.



That evening, we celebrated Mass at the Chapel of Reconciliation in Arantzazu [Left]. I realised then and with utmost remorse, that I had focused so much on the obstacles and the pain and suffering, that I’d missed seeing God who was with me every step of the Way. To think that I would have had a more enjoyable time walking in the beautiful surroundings if only I had been more conscious of His presence and trusted more in Him and in myself!

We were a joyful and noisy bunch of pilgrims and thoroughly enjoyed the camaraderie along the Way. So much so that Father Josep had to ‘crack the whip’ on us on many occasions with “C’mon you lazy pilgrims!” to hurry us up. We found humour and affection in his expression and that made us joyful! We would laugh, walk a bit faster for a distance and then the cycle repeats itself. Our dear Father awarded us the dubious prize for being the noisiest and slowest adult Camino group he has ever led (another ‘first’)! Possibly also the ‘first’ with the most wiefies?



We had opportunities to share our outer and inner journeys from time to time. Our group shared quite openly and that really helped to bring us closer together as a community.



[Left] The smiling Resurrected Christ with dancing souls at **Javier** Castle, home to St Francis Xavier. What a great reminder that to be Christian is to be joyful at all times!

[Right] **Verdu**, home to St Peter Claver. I really like this stained glass as it reminds me that Christ came to set us free. St Peter Claver imitated his Lord and Master beautifully, by breaking the chains of the slaves he served.



I often found it difficult to meditate on the daily theme during our 2 hours of silence while walking. After feeling slightly peeved with myself, it dawned upon me that it's all in God's time when He wants to speak with me, and that I should not limit God's workings to the 2 hours of silence. So I learnt to chill; to be in the moment and open to find God in all things. I was sure of one thing: I was truly in the moment at meal times (and I believe, many of my fellow pilgrims were too)!



At **Cervera**, the Sisters at the Pilgrim's Hostel Sagrada Familia showed us much love in their hospitality. The food was delicious (their paella was out of this world), their smiles and attention to our needs warmed our hearts and, as we took our leave early next morning, their loving farewell put the spring in our steps for the longest walk of our Camino - 32km to Jorba!

We made it!!! Step by step, with each other's companionship, friendship and encouragement. We shared our lives, sang songs and laughed a lot along the way. The food and drinks at every stop helped too! The Lord made known His loving presence by sending us cloud cover after lunch on a very hot afternoon, and a rainbow in the sky after we arrived at **Jorba**.

Later, as we went round the table sharing our feelings of that day, a fellow pilgrim shared about missing signs along the way. How true, I thought, that the paths in our



lives can be well marked, and yet, we may not see or may choose to ignore the signs and go in a different direction. A good reminder for me to be attentive to signs, and to quote Father Josep, keep walking, orientating all my thinking, my life, towards the Light, every day.

The race to **Montserrat** to attend Pilgrim's Mass at 11am was an exciting one! We had lingered a bit longer at breakfast at **Sant Pau de la Guardia** as it was so good, and now that we were well fed and happy, we 'ran' like the wind! Our desire to meet the Lord in the celebration of the Eucharist was amply rewarded. We arrived in good time, dumped our bags in the hostel and managed to get into the Basilica just when Mass was starting. During the Mass, I was overwhelmed by tears of gratitude, to be there in time for Mass (and personally to be there a second time at the Shrine of Our Lady of Montserrat) and for God's providence and graces in the past year and throughout our Camino. I wasn't alone; many of my fellow pilgrims were also touched during the Mass.



We bid goodbye to Our Lady of Montserrat [Left] early next morning, and set out for **Manresa**. The day was full of surprises, beginning with our picnic breakfast where every one's contribution was received with much delight. Further along on our journey, we encountered more of the unexpected as we traversed a river bed that had overflowed, a wheat field, and an overgrown footpath full of poison ivy.



We rode the surprises like a roller coaster with much excitement and a huge sense of fun. It was surely a grand finale to our walking pilgrimage as we entered Manresa [Right]!



This Camino holds beautiful memories for me. It has been life giving in so many different ways - the fresh air that we breathed, the beauty of nature that we beheld, the sumptuous food that nourished our bodies... God was with us, not only in the celebration of the Eucharist but in all of the above and more! He was present in the love and companionship of my fellow pilgrims, the conversations, laughter, joy and pain we shared, and finally, the family in Christ that we became!



The slugs that we saw along the Way also taught me invaluable lessons, such as perseverance and courage. They were so naked and vulnerable to being squashed by unseeing pilgrims; yet, they braved their journey, slow as they may be! Life isn't about scoring a series of 'first's'. Rather, it's about building authentic relationships and finding joy in the giving and receiving of each other in our journey, with humility and respect. The trails that the slugs leave behind in their paths also reminds me to be

sensitive to the impact (positive or negative, inadvertently or not) that we have on others in our interactions with them.

I have to keep walking in the Light, step by step, every day...