

Walking in His way (July 2016), Stephen's experience (USA)



"I think the phrase that best summarized today was "good tired." Breaking open what that means really gets at the pilgrim mindset and the heart of Christianity: that out of suffering, God draws goodness. We're all on the same page as to how our feet feel - along with our backs, legs, knees, etc. As the guy who brought up the rear on the way up the mountain, it is certainly a humbling experience to be a pilgrim. We truly are broken creatures, but there is a simple joy - not like going to see Star Wars or Jurassic Park in theaters - in putting on the new men and women of Christ with good companions. From the silence of the morning hike to the awe at lunch and relieved chuckles at dinner, I do not think it would be a stretch to find traces of God throughout. Without a doubt, He constantly reminded us of how much He loves everyone here. This morning, we finally filled the group (and the bus) with the presence of the Hoyts. After the long bus ride, a silence fell over our group as we looked up at the Santa Maria de Arantzazu in her beautiful vaulted church. There is something unifying about such sacred moments. Walking uphill in silence, I felt much more a part of something and not as lonely as the same experience felt in Dublin just days before. Perhaps some of us found God in the richly

alive forest sounds or earthy smells or spirit-filling nights. We may have been surprised to be reminded of God's love for us in the taste of a sandwich or an orange, the refreshment of a beer, or the sigh of relief at removing our shoes.

But I wonder how well I responded to God's recurring question: "Do you love *Me*, too?" Did I miss a moment of meaningful eye-contact with a companion? Did I let hunger, thirst, lack of sleep, or tiredness become an excuse for not seeing Christ in all of you? What things did I let get between myself and God, leading me away from Him? As I walked in silence this morning, I thought of the fears that limit me. Fear of failure, of disappointing my friends and loved ones, of loneliness, of mistakes. I thought about the people I confide in: those with whom I feel comfortable, safe, beloved. If Jesus were walking with me, what would I have told Him and what would I have wished I could hold back? And while there were moments of perhaps-too-caustic remarks, of an inner discomfort at another's presence, or trying to find a new walking companion out of frustration with a conversation, an uncomfortable silence, or a mismatched pace - feeling spurned or left behind - these were not all. I imagine the disciples grew closer on long walks like these, and our group did, too.



There were great moments of gratitude and of sharing. Perhaps you helped another carry his or her burden. Perhaps you were able to be thankful to someone else for their help. As the journey progressed, moments of living life as a gift broke through. For we are not just taken, blessed and broken, but given away, too. When I am afraid, I cling or grasp to what is safe and secure. Rather than letting go and living life as a gift, feeling secure at how much God loves me - how blessed I am to be here, I recoil. But the ardor of the pilgrimage helps me to break that barrier and learn to affirm those around me, to listen to them, and give to them what I am. I imagine all of us felt similar moments of bonding.

Tomorrow, we can all be grateful for a lighter day - a day of healing. But God is still there, reminding us how blessed we are to be here. By a castle in Spain, with water to shower, friends to enjoy, a full meal and breakfast waiting, loving parents, working legs. I suspect it will be easier now that we are more deeply in the pilgrim mindset, but we are still on the way, conforming ourselves to the humble and loving, joyful and peaceful image of Christ through the helpful role model of St. Ignatius. Let us join hands and pray in His way."

Stephen Ferguson, Ignatian pilgrim