

# FEARLESS STEPS INTO A NEW BEGINNING

~ Camino Ignaciano ~

13 – 27 May 2019

I chanced upon Loyola. On a drive from San Sebastian to Bilbao, we saw “Loiola” on the map. After finding out that this was the Loiola of St Ignatius, we stopped by out of curiosity. As it turned out, we stayed the whole morning, leaving with a greater knowledge as well as appreciation of St Ignatius and the Jesuits. I also picked up a bookmark showing the Camino Ignaciano, which was something new at the time. It looked frighteningly long, but tempting.



Over the next few years, perhaps by divine design, I learnt more about St Ignatius and Ignatian Spirituality. A friend who became a nun introduced me to James Martin SJ’s books, while another did a 30-day Ignatian silent retreat. I also realised that heroic priests portrayed in films I had enjoyed (*The Mission; The Scarlet and the Black*) were Jesuits. With a friend’s encouragement, I signed up for the 2-week Ignatian Camino with Fr Josep Lluís Iriberrí. This would be a truncated version of the 650 km Camino – we would start in Loyola, trek through Basque country, then take a bus to fast forward hundreds of kilometres into Catalonia, where we would walk to the official end-point of the pilgrimage, Manresa.

So a motley crew of us pilgrims met one evening in May 2019 – nuns, teachers, retirees, a pharmacist, “recovering lawyers”, stay-at-home mothers, and economists. We would spend the next 15 days together on the road – praying, laughing, crying, feasting, hurting.

We started easy in Loyola, visiting the former fortress in which Ignatius was born and grew up, the Basilica complex that has now been built around it, and the nearby town of Azpeitia where he was baptised as a baby, which he returned to in later life to minister to the sick. The outlines began to form of the man whose journey we sought to follow – a vain man who craved earthly pleasures and glory, only to be struck down in battle by a cannonball. In convalescence, he encountered Christ, and realised that contemplating a life in Christ’s service brought him far more joy than dreaming of worldly conquests.



Thus began Ignatius’ journey as a pilgrim, as did ours: the evening before leaving Loyola, we celebrated mass in the very room in which he rested and recovered. It is now a chapel adorned

with a statue of Ignatius gazing heavenward, looking both mystified and joyous.

### *Gifts from God*

The spiritual reflections during the pilgrimage were divided into several phases – the first being to reflect on the gifts and graces that we had been given in life. We moved through the lush green of the Basque country during these days, enjoying shaded walks through old mining rail tracks to Legazpi, and spectacular mountaintop scenery *en route* to Arantzazu.



The going wasn't easy, though, as it was during this stretch one day that we experienced the worst weather of the pilgrimage – unrelenting rain, bitter cold, ridiculous wind and briefly, even hail. Our path was flooded at one point, and Fr Josep, who had mostly hiked at the back of the group thus far, suddenly went up front and signalled for us to follow him. We back-tracked and forded a fast-flowing stream, squished in mud and water over a hill, then walked along a ridge with a steep drop to one side. The conditions were miserable, and I felt immensely grateful for having a fearless leader to trust, for if I was hiking alone, I would have simply wanted to give up and cry. As with all trials in life, the adversity passed. We eventually arrived at Araia, where we gratefully drank hot coffee in a bar and gobbled down our by-now cold packed sandwiches.



With socks and shoes soaked to a degree few of us had ever experienced, we then boarded a bus to Navarette and stayed the night in Posada Ignatius, a beautifully-restored 15<sup>th</sup> century house that Ignatius stayed in while he was a knight in the service of the Duke of Najara.

### *The Meaning of Life*

The next phase was to contemplate wider issues such as the purpose of our human lives, and how to achieve “indifference” – freedom from attachments that prevent us from living according to our purpose. Two experiences provided the settings for this.

The first was the walk from Navarette to Logroño, which was in the opposite direction from pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago. Many surmised that we had taken the wrong route; few asked where we were going. In life, we may need to walk our own path, and not be afraid of what others are saying. We should not be too quick to judge another who is different, and should have the curiosity to find out why that person is on a different path.



The second was Javier – where St Francis Xavier was born. Some 15 years younger than Ignatius, Francis Xavier threw himself into missionary work and spreading the Gospel to Asian lands. Identified as a possible successor to Ignatius, this did not come to pass as he died in China. He was a man of fire who knew his purpose in life, and pursued it to the end.

### *Sin and Forgiveness*

We then moved to consider our sinful and fallen state. With this, our lodgings became spartan. We spent a night in Verdú, and learnt about the life of St Peter Claver. He was not dynamic like Francis Xavier, but had compassion for slaves and ministered to them. In him is the example of using any simple virtues that God has given to you, for the good of humankind.

Ironically, during these days, the Way was smoother, and the large blister which I incurred on our first long walk miraculously healed. I was certainly less distracted than in the initial days, and my mind was thus freer to contemplate sin, than it had been to contemplate God's gifts!

Of course, our God loves us even though we do not deserve it, and we also contemplated His mercy in forgiving us. The longest walk (32 km) came during this period, as did the most persistent uphill push towards Montserrat. Fittingly, a scripture reflection for one of those days was from St Paul's letter to the Romans, which says, "... *we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope ...*" The "suffering" turned out to be bearable, for we took it one hour at a time, waiting for each other and encouraging each other. Beautiful scenes of the Catalan countryside also presented themselves, providing welcome distraction.



## Accepting God's Invitation

The final days of the pilgrimage had us reflecting on the marvel of being called by God to journey with him, and how we would respond to that call.



Montserrat beckoned, and it was thrilling to see the mountain range suddenly appear.

It was at this shrine that Ignatius laid down his sword at the altar of Our Lady, and resolved to devote himself to the spiritual life. We arrived on a cold and misty day, which lent itself to indoor activities such as mass, vespers and prayer.

The journey out of Montserrat to Manresa was surprisingly long, and seemed to me interminable. We all knew that this pilgrimage was coming to an end, and one of the pilgrims from Germany repeatedly sang one line (apparently the only line she knew!) of an Adele song, which went, “*This is the end ...*” We searched for the song (it was *Skyfall*) on YouTube to find out the rest of the lyrics, but this one line somehow had us in stitches everytime we heard it.



Manresa is home to the cave in which Ignatius spent some ten months, meditating and writing what came to be known as the Spiritual Exercises. We celebrated our final mass in that cave, which of course no longer looks anything like a cave. It is now a prayer space within a Jesuit retreat house, exuding peace and calm. It also boasts an incomparable view of the Montserrat mountain range – a scene of staggering beauty and majesty.

Each of us had our reasons for embarking on this journey, and all of us were challenged along the way: be it physically,



emotionally or spiritually. All of us came out the better for it, and returned home to find that we missed the quiet of the open road, and our daily time with God.

Fr Josep reminded us that this pilgrimage should mark the beginning of the rest of our lives – our changed lives. Perhaps it was appropriate, then, that the lyrics, “*This is the end...*” that we had sung, turned out to be the beginning of the song.