

A sabbatical? I returned to the parish personally renewed... What more could I ask for?

David, one Anglican British priest on the September 2016 pilgrimage.



After ten years in the parish I knew it was time to take a break. I'd told myself for a long time, 'I'll do ten years and then have a think about what to do next.' If I'd really been listening to myself I would have heard myself saying, 'It's time for a sabbatical.'

I've heard some funny ideas for Clergy Sabbaticals in my time. Often they involve a spot of research into something very obscure coupled with visits to art galleries and lots of coffee-drinking. I've got nothing against any of those things but it occurred to me that they could quite easily be done in the ordinary run of life. On the other hand, I was of the opinion that a sabbatical was actually an opportunity to do something bigger, something that couldn't be done every day, something potentially life-

changing. It was with that in mind that I enrolled on the Ignatian Camino.

There were two main reasons for me doing this. The first was that I've always enjoyed walking and find it an ideal opportunity to mull over things, have new ideas and be inspired by the world around me. I think it's good in every way that Christians have gone on pilgrimage down the ages. The second is that I've long been interested in St Ignatius of Loyola. He's been my favourite saint ever since college. The idea of walking in his footsteps while thinking his thoughts seemed heaven-sent to me.

The Ignatian Camino is a long-distance walk in Northern Spain. It stretches 500 miles from Loyola where Ignatius was born (and where he converted) to Manresa, quite near Barcelona. It covers a wide range of countryside, varying between mountains, farm land and desert. The route is punctuated with medieval towns, dusty cafes, convents and churches.

I began my Camino at the end of September 2016. I made my way to Loyola from Bilbao airport on a route that involved two bus journeys. At the time I was fresh faced and ready to go though perhaps a little challenged by the intensity of the sun. On the evening of my arrival I met the people with whom I was to travel, a largely female group of Roman Catholics (though there were two men), drawn from Australia and America. I was the youngest and the only Brit. I also met Father Joseph who was to be our guide.

Despite being Anglican and British (and mocking my country's decision to leave the EU!) the group welcomed me with open arms and together we made our journey, bonding together through bad times and good. One thing that we had in common was our frailty; despite the difference in ages we all needed to have our feet seen to, and there was a great camaraderie in bearing each other's burdens. We affirmed this every morning as we sang our pilgrimage song: 'We are pilgrims on a journey, fellow travellers on the road; we are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.' The truth of that became ever evident as we journeyed on.





The great joy for me about this Camino was that it was patterned on the Spiritual Exercises written by Ignatius. So as we walked through the mountains we considered God the Creator whilst through the farmland and desert we pondered the happy ministry of Jesus followed by his barrenness of his death. By the time we arrived in vibrant Barcelona at the end of our journey we were very much living in the joy of the Resurrection. All of it was an opportunity to compare my life with the life of Jesus and to ask myself, 'Given what the Lord has done for me, what can I do for him? What generous response can I make to his generosity?'

The upshot of it all was that I returned to the parish personally renewed and with a renewed sense of commitment. I know as well as I can that God wants to me to continue serving the people where I am. I am also more hopeful about the future and optimistic that some things that were broken may be mended. What more could I ask for?

