

One Pilgrimage can Change your Life!



Why did I decide to walk the Ignatian Camino?

I was completing my Masters of Art (Spiritual Direction) at Sentir in Melbourne which is located on the same premises as Campion. There were several people from Campion who did the Camino previously and my interest developed on hearing about the walk on their return. When I received an email to say that there was going to be a presentation by Fr. Josep for a pilgrimage in September/October 2015, I replied that I would attend. What I remember from Fr. Josep's presentation was profound for me; although it is, of course, a different experience for everyone. Josep spoke about finding the:

- Desire in your life (what is missing)
- Hope – to hope for something better; that God will be with you and God will find you
- Journey – that your life is a journey and a pilgrimage is its metaphor – the magic happens along the way.

After listening to Joseph I was totally inspired and I knew that it was a journey I needed to do. It was still early 2015 and so I convinced myself that I had plenty of time to train before the departure.

Before I left for the Camino, I sent in my final paper for my Masters and I had already completed the requirements for the Arrupe Program (to be a giver of the Exercises) and so this was perfect timing.

I left Melbourne and flew via Doha to Madrid then trained it to San Sebastian to bus it to Loyola. When I walked out of the train station at San Sebastian and thought "I wonder where the bus station is?" I heard a voice say, "I wonder if there are any Australians here". I yelled out, "Yes, I'm an Aussie!" It happened to be two of the companions who were also joining the Camino. I have to say they were a welcome sight.

After signing in at the Arrupe Hotel in Loyola, I went to my room where I met my roommate. I knew instantly that this was going to be a fun time, she was such a warm and friendly person and I quickly felt at ease. The first night in Loyola before the Camino began, we all met for dinner. There was a total of sixteen people; thirteen from Australia – one person who was living in Scotland and the other from Canada and of course Joseph from Spain.

During sharing time that evening, I spoke about my desire to discern four important decisions. This was to be a healing experience for me and a time to discover who I really was, where was my life heading, who did I want to share my life with and how could I serve God; pretty powerful decisions to make all in four weeks! During this time, Joseph handed out a booklet "Walking with Ignatius In your Ignatian Way: A walking spiritual workshop" which was our prayer guide for the Ignatian Way. I found this very helpful as a guide for meditation and reflection and a way of focussing on the Weeks of the Exercises.

Each day we started with a prayer and spent the first two hours in silence; a wonderful way to enjoy the beginning of the day, often with spectacular views and beautiful sunrises. After the two hours we would stop and end the silence with prayer and the Pilgrim's song. Our voices fortunately improved along the way, although some of my companions may not agree.

On the first day of the walk I was off walking at full pace. I think I felt I needed to prove that I was really fit and ready for this whole experience. Little did I know that God would show me that it was not about getting to the finishing line first, but it was about what happened along the way.

One of the days during the first week, I remember looking at the mountain that Josep said we would climb that day. I could not believe that I would be walking over that! It was high, stony and straight up. As I was climbing it reminded me of my life. Sometimes I have massive mountains to climb, sometimes I stumble over rocks which cause pain and sometimes I wonder whether I will reach the top. Walking with others (my companions) made the difficulties easier to bear, we all supported each other and no-one gave up. Then all of a sudden, I had reached the top and the views

were spectacular and I had a thrilling sensation that I made it. It was almost a moment when I felt that I would love to do that again (but that thought was short lived!).

The accommodation was mixed. Sometimes I shared with my roommate, sometimes in bunk beds (communal living) and sometimes in single room accommodation in hostels, hotels or convents. This mixture of accommodation was challenging for me in the beginning but I soon realised that this was a pilgrimage, it was not a five star holiday and I appreciated stretching myself out of my comfort zone to experience truly the mystery of the journey. Communal living brought with it many innovative ways of hanging our washing and organising sleeping and bathroom arrangements. This all added to the experience with much laughter and discussion on how we were preparing our feet for the day's walk.

Josep took us into many of the beautiful churches, chapels and Basilica's along the way; every one took my breath away. It was not only the beauty of the surroundings, the paintings, the icons, the building, but the feeling I received by being there. It was overwhelming emotionally and spiritually and I sensed such a wonderful closeness to God. Most evenings we had Mass and this was a time where we came together to celebrate our day and to give thanks to God. The towns and cities we walked through are too numerous to mention but each one was unique, some houses had gorgeous brightly coloured flowers on their balconies, the buildings were old but beautiful, the stone roads meandered around the town and the town square were sources to refill our water bottles with their ancient water fountains.

The terrain varied day after day, from the "Hobbit" like forests, through the vineyards, the mountains and the arid plains. Every day was like turning the page of a picture book. Uncertain and excited what the next page would be reveal, and when the page was turned a gasp at the new vision.

I mentioned earlier that God would show me how to slow down and not to focus on the end result. Well, by the second week I started to suffer with pain in my feet which continued for the remainder of the journey. The pain was so severe that at times I wondered how I could put one foot in front of the other. So from someone who started in the front of the group focussed on the end result I was now walking at the back of the group. The gifts I received from this experience, was how the other companions showed concern for me, some walking with me at the back of the group; one person at one stage constantly talking to me to take my mind off the pain, while someone else kindly massaged my feet at the end of the day. If I had not experienced this pain I would never have been humbled to appreciate the journey and my companions. God taught me a lesson that life was about the journey, not the end result.

Did I come to any decision about my discernments? Yes, I did. I came home with a different perspective of who I am – and I like who I am; what I wanted to be doing in my life and that I wanted to continue my relationship with my husband albeit perhaps on a different level.

I learnt how strong my love for God is, how I was loved by God and that I could now love myself. The healing process for me was undeniably life changing. It brought to me a tangible and practical experience of understanding the Exercises which cemented my academic knowledge.

As I have written, this is truly a personal journey. Fr. Josep (our leader) was an amazing guide who looked after us with great care, dressing our blisters and at one stage listening to my frustration and tears over my feet. He was humorous, challenged us and kept some of the journey a mystery. I am grateful to God for his leadership, his organisation of the journey, his insight, his compassion and care.

Would I recommend this journey? Absolutely, it CAN change your life!

The pilgrim's blessing.

*"May the Lord bless and keep you,
May His face shine upon you and be gracious to you;
May the Lord look kindly upon you and grant you peace.
May He enlighten the eyes of your heart,
So that you may understand the hope to which He calls you,
And the treasure that awaits you.
May He help you to overcome all obstacles in this Way and through life,
And may He accept you to His loving service"*

Robyn Smith
Pilgrim (for always)