

# A life changing encounter with Ignatius!

30 days walking with Ignatius in 2015,

By Brendan

Words feel inadequate when it comes to describing the Ignacio pilgrimage – achievement, success, pride, being grounded, life giving, challenging, all seem to fall short – something within has happened and words fail to completely capture the depth of the change. Ignatius' relationship with God developed gradually through reflection on his experiences. Wisdom and insight gained through his reflection brought significant transformation to his life. Years beyond his choice to follow God, I find myself reflecting on my own personal choice to be a disciple. My life choice is gradually leading me on an ever-deeper search within.



Looking back now weeks after arriving at Manresa, our final destination, I can confidently say it was a life changing encounter with Ignatius, the road, our walking group, the Spanish countryside and its people. Being a pilgrim is now something I feel deep within. The encounter with the Ignatian Way has helped me to see more clearly that my journey is about learning to love and being loved. My inner life was profoundly shaken during 2015. I was sensing that I needed space and time to allow myself to acknowledge my feelings. On May the 11<sup>th</sup> after eight days in palliative care, my Mum entered eternal life. Mum had been ready for this journey for

some time. She had been preparing our family during the years she had been ill. I can still hear Mum saying, "Aren't you ready to let me go?" Mum died after a long battle with many illnesses, beginning with breast cancer in 1995 and finally dementia. I recall receiving the news of her breast cancer when I was 3<sup>rd</sup> year in the seminary. It led me to ask deep questions about my life. Years previously, my youngest brother died of a cot death. I was 20 years old, and I was considering my life choices. My brother Peter's death, at only 6 months old, brought me closer to my truth. Priesthood was a distant option for me; however, I lacked confidence and belief that I could actually be a fulfilled priest. I doubted that God was calling me to priesthood. How could I love and be loved and still be a priest? I had many unanswered questions. After a long period of discernment I took a leap of faith and entered the seminary. Being a priest has been about making the inner journey and not allowing a busy life to prevent it from happening. The inner journey, however, is frightening. It is pathed with mountains, sharp edges, gravel. There are vast open plains and dry patches - can I travel through these difficult places? Will I have the courage to endure? I need God's grace. I need to trust that

grace is enough for me. The death of my brother to cot death has awakened me to the importance and shortness of life. From this time, I have taken every opportunity that will help me search within. I was invited to consider the Ignacio's Pilgrimage and I could sense that it was right for me.

On September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015, I left Australia exhausted and unwell. Parish life and the death of my Mum was taking its toll. I had been to my doctor on two occasions to overcome a virus, however my efforts were not successful. I wondered whether this virus would be the thorn in my side as I walked the Camino Ignaciano.

I arrived in Loyola about Midday on the 25<sup>th</sup> of September 2015. I was tired and somewhat anxious. Could I survive this walk? Was I taking on too much? Perhaps my health was telling me something. My anxiety got the better of me and I decided to visit a local doctor who confirmed that I had a virus and not a bacterial infection. She prescribed anti-inflammatory medication to assist my swallowing and the relief was enormous. The encounter with the doctor was life giving despite the language barrier.

The walk began early on the 26<sup>th</sup> of September 2015. The group was together, but we were not a community. I wanted the experience to be everything I needed. I was hoping to find God's love in a new way. How would that be possible? Ignatius had such a radical change in his life as he journeyed along the way, the depth of love he felt must have been extraordinary. Could that same love enfold me? As I think of the unfolding days of walking in silence, shared meals and restful sleeps, many memories stay with me, however it is the simple and almost missed events that have taught me much about my life.



On the first day I found a broken branch about one metre long, a perfect staff for the journey. What it became was a reminder of the many things I carry with me in my pilgrimage through life. Further along the way I found a piece of rope which I attached to my staff, however, unable to attach it securely I spent days tying and retying the rope. I even thought if I found some matches, I would burn and melt the rope onto the staff. About ten days after attaching the rope I

discovered that it had fallen off my staff. Surprisingly the experience was one of relief. I no longer had to remember to keep the rope attached. It made me think how often in life I spend energy trying to hang onto things that I need to let go of. Perhaps my fears or possibly my unmet needs prevent me from being the free disciple I am being called to be.



Walking soon became a mantra, pondering, listening, slow walking in silence, celebrating the gift that life is. A gift I was mostly walking past and not recognising. Life had been too fast paced. There had been too many things to attend to. I was fast realising that my priorities were out of sync with who I felt I am called to be. I felt I was being asked to take a stronger stand to honour my own time and space.

As we passed through villages and cities, I came to appreciate the deep devotion that people have with the Virgin Mary. I could sense myself feeling her call to allow her Son to love me, to accept his love and to trust his love. Ignatius had encounters with Mary that inspired his faith. He was searching for Christ, and he was not disappointed. Ignatius also endured long periods of penance and suffering, but I wonder how did this contribute to his growth in faith? Did this penance contribute to his being open to his encounter with Christ? Was this a necessary time of humiliation and stripping away of his ego? From a place of injury and brokenness Ignatius could see God, he could finally get it! He knew that he was loved and from this place of love he could respond with an open heart.



As I walked the pilgrim path there were moments of enlightenment that came through the simplest aspects of life, whether it be ordering a cup of tea and the struggle to actually convey what I wanted with language limitations or visiting a hospital and trying to explain the illness that I had and then receiving medication for the illness. Conversations with my fellow pilgrims touched places within that needed reassuring and healing. It seems that Gerard Manley

Hopkins sj. is right. The world is indeed charged with the grandeur of God.

I need time to keep learning from the experience which was the Ignacio Pilgrimage. So much of life's lessons are gained by slowly sifting through the experiences that we have. It is not about finishing first or completing all the kilometres, but it is about love, our deepest desire is to love and be loved.

The weeks since returning have given me a sense of peace and strength for the journey. It seems the grace of the walk has been the deeper insight into life as a journey to be lived to the full. I now contemplate taking a parish group through the Ignatian way in 2017. Could I manage the trip? Would the language be too much for me? I wait with open heart to hear the call. I sense that our parish is interested, and I believe an encounter with Ignatius along the way will inspire a great sense of mission in our parish.