

Learning from God: live the present moment
and walk just one step after the other.
Don't rush! I will be with you!



By Elena Suarez

I knew I needed a spiritual retreat. I had been running my business for the last ten years without one, so my soul was yearning for it. The Santiago Camino had been on my “bucket list” and I always thought I would do it when I ended my career to help me figure out what to do in my retirement years. While planning my Santiago Camino, the Lord stepped in and redirected me to go on the Ignatian Camino instead. And I am so glad He did.

My father was educated by the Jesuits in Cuba, and I was baptized by a Jesuit priest there, but this pilgrimage was my first exposure to Ignatian Spirituality. How blessed I was to have Fr. Jose Iriberri be the one to introduce me to St. Ignatius. To have this introduction while following the same path and being in some of the same places that St. Ignatius lived, prayed, struggled, and rejoiced in is a gift that I will forever be grateful for and never forget.

The outer journey is much easier to describe than the inner journey, but I will try to relate some of the insights and graces that I received on this Camino:

- “Life is like a pilgrimage, sometimes beautiful and sometimes painful”. “A quiet and simple life is the mood of the pilgrimage”. These were some of the words I heard from Fr. Jose at our first meeting. They set the stage for what was coming. The daily routine without needing to worry about what we would eat, where we would stay, what we would wear, etc. and the ability to just be in the moment to enjoy the surprises and experience the struggles were exactly what my spirit needed.
- On Day 3 (our first long walk, which turned out to be nothing compared to some of the later ones!), I was brought to tears a couple of times. At the beginning of our walk, I was so moved by the beauty of where we walked and with the gratitude I felt for just being able to be there, to have the time to experience this journey, and to meet and walk with these amazing people. Later, when it became very difficult going up the mountain we were on that day, the tears flowed again. This physical struggle put me in touch with all the struggles of my life. One of my fellow pilgrims was quietly walking about ten feet behind me and through him I felt the presence of Jesus and was reminded of how He has always been walking quietly behind me watching to make sure I don't struggle



more than I need to. How He is always ready to catch me if I fall. How many times He has been there saving me from myself.



- Day 4 was also physically demanding, but it was a joyful ending. The Sisters at the convent in Eguino were so happy to see us, our clothes were being washed (one of many surprises) and we had time to reflect. I came on this pilgrimage with the question “What does the Lord want me to do next in my life?” During last night’s homily, Fr. Jose suggested that there might not be a specific answer to that question. Maybe my answer is to just go step by step (as in our walk) and trust Him. To have faith in Him and to always focus on what I can do “for the greater glory of God”.

- Day 6: In my journal entry for today, I wrote that I noticed that I react too much to people’s opinions and that I need to let that go. I don’t remember the specifics, but this is definitely something for me to continue to work on.

• Days 7 and 8: Father is having us focus on our sins from the perspective of the distance between God’s great love for us and the way we respond to that love. One of the most valuable lessons I received on this trip came to me in a dream the night of Day 7, I think as a result of my focusing on how I complain too much. The developing blister on the bottom of one of my toes and the soreness in my thighs, calves, actually in most of my body, had reached a level that I really didn’t know how I was going to walk another 10.6 miles (17 km) the next day and 19.9 miles (32 km) the day after that and I was complaining internally about that quite a bit. Betty, my lifelong friend, showed up in my dream that night. Betty died last year from a very rare disease that slowly deteriorates all the muscles of your body over time. At the end of her life, she was unable to lift her arms or her legs. I realized when I woke up that she came to remind me to be thankful that I had muscles that hurt. I don’t remember feeling the pain that was there after that. I also got the message that the Lord wants me to stop



complaining.

- Taking one of the longest steps of the Camino provided us with one of the happiest surprises sent by God to help us on this longest walk day: Rufo the dog! Rufo led us for half of the walk to Jorba, the 35km day. He brought a sense of fun and joy to the walk I had been most afraid of by anticipating how long it would be. This was another reminder to just trust the Lord and to not anticipate. He will always be there to help us along our way, one step at a time.

- On our way to Monserrat on Day 11, Fr. Jose had us reflect on what we would symbolically leave at the altar of the Black Madonna, our Lady of Monserrat and what we would put on, as Ignatius had done with the

sword he left and the pilgrim's robe he had put on. After changing my mind several times throughout our walk that day and reflecting on how attached I am to my creature comforts and to always doing things my way, I decided to leave my selfish desires and put on the robe of humility. It won't be easy, but I will strive for it with God's grace.

- Reaching Manresa was a bittersweet experience. I was happy that we made it. The physical challenge was over, and the sense of accomplishment was great. However, I knew we were nearing the end of our time together and feeling sad about that. Truth be told, I didn't want to leave Manresa. I was perfectly willing to stay at the Cave of St. Ignatius forever.

Since getting back home, I have gone through many feelings. I have felt sad being separated from the group. That eleven random people from around the world could converge in a specific time and place to share this physical and spiritual journey, become like a family (sleeping, eating, walking, laughing, crying, and sharing our lives together) and then go our separate ways and maybe not ever see each other again has been difficult for me to process. It finally came to me that each person I experienced this Camino with was a gift from God, much like all the other gifts He showed me on the Camino. They were to be enjoyed in the moment without attachment. God wants me to be attached only to Him and He wants me to be open and available to the new gifts He wants to give me today.



So, what's next for me? I definitely want to continue to learn about and dive deeper into St. Ignatius' spirituality. I will be looking for books, local retreats, and am hoping to find a Jesuit priest that can provide direction along the way. I may even return and walk the 30-day pilgrimage two or three years from now.

And in the meantime, I will focus on the following:

- Just put one foot in front of the other, remembering that I am a pilgrim in my life.
- Trust God and have faith in Him.
- Reflect on the best and worst of each day and what God is trying to tell me through them, being grateful for His surprises and my struggles.
- Remember to help others "walk the mile and bear the load".

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