

# Living the Spiritual Exercises along the Ignatian Way

By Jenny and the help of Chris, from Australia, 30 days pilgrimage, 2015

In this paper I will write about my experience of making a pilgrimage from Loyola to Manresa following in the footsteps of St Ignatius of Loyola who made this journey in 1522, as part of his transformation from a Basque court noble to a man of God committed to the service of his Lord Jesus Christ. My journey (like Ignatius') was both an inner and an outer journey and as part of my writing I will endeavour to articulate how I believe that pilgrimage can deepen the graces of the spiritual exercises. Sometimes I will quote from my pilgrim's journal and these notes I will put in italics.

As an integral part of this pilgrimage, I completed an adapted version of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius under the guidance of Fr. Josep Lluís Iriberrí sj. (When I refer to notes from The Pilgrim's Book by Fr Josep, 'Walking with Ignatius.... in your Ignatian Way' I will use underline to indicate direct quotes.) Because the pilgrimage also included visits to many of the significant places along Ignatius' journey, I was also deeply moved and affected by the story of Ignatius' journey and conversion. I found myself both inspired by the life and work of Ignatius and drawn to knowing and understanding his journey and reflecting on my own in the light of it.

*"Today it was the reality of Ignatius the person that struck me. He was born in this room, baptised in this font, he lay in this room convalescing, he looked out of this window at the stars and visited and stayed in this hospital. He was real and ordinary and yet extraordinary in his influence." (Day 1)*

## **Background to my story of Pilgrimage**

The notion of pilgrimage has been rediscovered in modern times, (20th and 21st centuries) as we search for greater meaning and purpose in our lives. Currently there is widespread interest in completing a pilgrimage and each year over 200,000 currently complete the most well-known pilgrimage, the Camino de Santiago. Having read a number of books on this myself and completed several long walks, I was attracted to the idea of a pilgrimage which combined my love of walking and my faith or spirituality. I have been a member of a Christian Life Community (CLC or CVX) group for 30 years (based on Ignatian spirituality) and with a desire to deepen my spirituality, an oncoming transition time in my life and the energy to tackle such a venture, I and my husband enrolled in the Australian Pilgrims group of 2015.

As we learnt about and reflected on Ignatius' journey as a pilgrim, it became clear that his outer journey mirrored his inner journey. The real-life events became symbolic of the inner changes. For example, meeting the Moor, their discussion, his subsequent wrestling with himself over his inaction and his use of the mule to make his decision highlighted his complete lack of any tools with which to make a discerned decision at that point.

## **The Pilgrimage Experience for Me**

On pilgrimage I realised we leave behind our normal trappings - our good clothes, our work, our roles (wife, mother, worker, grandmother, sister) our houses and our network and within the group of pilgrims, we are simply ourselves.

I began by reflecting on key moments in my own life. *"I feel a deep sense of readiness for this experience - able to physically manage and to be present to myself and others." (Day 4)* That 'readiness' was a grace in itself. My own purpose and *raison d'être* came with great clarity *"to love and serve, to be loved and be served"*. (Day 5) *I have a sense of trust in the future whatever is ahead. On reflection, I see the grace of confidence in God's love and care for me. I am amazed at how the graces we are asking for are mirrored in the physical environment through which we are walking - the views, the bubbling streams; the forests are opportunities to experience the beauty of creation and to experience God's hand in this."*

*"I have felt a deepening of the love of God in my experiencing the beauty and wonder of creation.... I have seen beautiful places; I have smelt the fresh alpine air and delicious cooking smells as we walked through a village. I have felt the squelch of mud, the hard stones, and the shifting gravel beneath my feet. I have heard the bells of the animals in unison, the village bells and the chatter of Spanish speaking locals! I have experienced connection with others in our group as we get to know one another's stories."*

The provision of food by Emanuel was an experience of the abundance of God's love *"eventually we reached the town after following detours to our path which had been washed away in two places and there was Emanuel having set up a beautiful lunch for us. By now 3 pm we were starving!"*

My attachments to my self-image and sense of control are part of my sinfulness, evident to me in my interactions with Chris and the group. (Day 9) *"So the group, or communal aspect of the pilgrimage, enables me to deepen the experience of the graces as we engage together."* *"The tiredness as we move into the First Week of the exercises- the reality of our humanness mirrored in the experience of sharing accommodation in the albergues where we are staying and where we rub up against each other. Space is limited and we all share the one room and one toilet! The real events of Ignatius' life come to life as we stay in Navarette and hear of the events there.*

*"Pilgrimage (like any retreat) takes one away from the usual demands of daily life, so my elderly mother, our daughters and grandchildren and my pastoral work in the hospital all seem so far away and while I am sending emails and talking with them, I can do nothing, so I feel free."*

On pilgrimage one is constantly moving on...." *We all have our daily routines now to ensure nothing is forgotten or left undone. We move on daily, so the simpler things are, the better."* This constant 'moving on' and never going back seems an important aspect of pilgrimage. While it is not unlike real life in that we cannot undo our actions, this reality is heightened because we are walking and we cannot walk back to earlier locations, we must move on with our fellow pilgrims.

I experienced pilgrimage as a place of encounter, encounter with Jesus, especially in the silent morning meditations, encounter with myself and encounter with others. I felt inspired by the life of Ignatius as I learnt daily about his struggles and giftedness.

*"Day 15. At the moment the inner and outer journey parallel each other- it is hard and dry (Los Monegros)." I found the two Standards a difficult meditation with words and images that I struggled to relate to. I find my own motivation is quite complex and there are often threads of both the good spirit and the bad spirit at work in my actions. I did' find much fruit in this meditation- maybe I just don't like facing my own sinfulness."*

Manresa

*"I am struggling to get my mind around the experience of pilgrimage and my own sense of gratitude and blessing - it is huge, and I don't think I can force it, but just allow it to emerge.*

Barcelona

*"We are beginning the process of saying goodbye to one another - I feel ready to say goodbye and yet sad that a unique and special experience is ending."*

### **Pilgrimage as a Group and as an Individual**

My experience of pilgrimage has the unique aspect of being part of a group. To some extent we each walk as individuals (no one can walk for another), yet the experience is also very much a group experience, so from time to time I reflected on my place in the group, how I was relating to others and how this was affecting me. Group processes are another reality of the experience (struggles for power, who is in and who is out, divisions between men and women, couples and singles, priests and lay).

*"I have experienced myself in the group - the ins and outs, the wanting to be known/ accepted, the wanting to contribute and be valued. (Day 7) "Pilgrimage is about our journey in life ultimately being a sole journey. No one else can walk for me, no one else can step one foot after the other. They can offer to carry my bag, give me something to eat or drink or suggest I rest, but I have to have the will to do it." " There is something very real about pilgrimage - I can't hide or take short cuts, I have to face the daily walk and the ground or track as it is - be it soft and dusty or hard and stony, wet and muddy or gravelly and slippery, be it flat and monotonous or up and down over rolling hills. There are no short cuts on pilgrimage; each step must be taken one after the other. Like the Spiritual Exercises themselves, they cannot be hurried.*

There were many times that I felt deeply moved by the sheer grit, determination and commitment of others as they struggled physically with pain and illness. The physical challenges of pilgrimage lead us to know ourselves in a new way. I experienced greater confidence in myself and my capacity to deal with such a challenge. I was conscious of my husband Chris, also on the pilgrimage and with whom I shared on a daily basis. I was conscious that others looked at

us and noticed how we related and treated one another. I found I gradually let go of being concerned about that. *"I now feel accepted and part of the group."* (Day 16)

Being a pilgrim and going on pilgrimage are metaphors for the spiritual journey that each person makes during his or her life. As human beings we travel an internal path towards Christ and an external one that leads us each day towards others. P.3 There were times I reached out to others and there were times I was just too tired to do so. There were many times I relied on Chris to help me in different ways and the whole experience was a deeply bonding one for us.

### **Conclusions**

Pilgrimage is a journey of trust in which the experience of mystery is real. For me this pilgrimage was an opportunity to deepen my faith commitment, to reflect on where I/we are called and to ask for the grace *"to love and to serve and to be loved and served"*. *"It has been an opportunity to hear Jesus calling me to a deeper and more passionate commitment and to be open to the more"*. On a daily basis we were invited to trust in Fr. Joseph's leadership and the process of pilgrimage to sustain and nurture our inner and outer beings. *"For me it was a profound experience. I felt a deepening of my faith commitment. I no longer need specific answers as to when I will retire and what I will do then. It will emerge out of the mist. I am simply called to love and serve and to be loved and be served today."* This is the grace of feeling called by God. At the beginning we read that pilgrims must stay attentive for the signs, on the watch to recognise the presence and guidance of God in countless small details along the way. p3 This is the grace of finding God in all things.

I experienced the weather as a gift from God. Hardly a drop of rain and rarely too warm for walking, we enjoyed the coolness and the wind at our backs so often. Also, there were the moments of awe and wonder: *"We sat in the early morning darkness waiting for the remainder of the group to arrive. The sky began changing to hues of pink, silver and blue and a golden sun peeped over the horizon as we began walking in silence!"*

Pilgrimage to me now is also about attitude - an open and life- giving attitude, a readiness to be available and to go where I/we are called, trying to remain aware of our attachments and the extent that they are disordered. Integrating the Experience of the Spiritual Exercises with the experience of pilgrimage has been a life-giving experience for me.

I was touched by Ignatius' connection with women: Ignatius was very close to his sister (farewelled her personally) and his sister-in-law who looked after him when convalescing; early on his journey to Rome he rescued two women who he had travelled with part of the way (women had gone into a hostel and some men tried to rape them); Ignatius finds men going into a convent near Arc de Triumph in Barcelona, and when he stops them he is beaten up and takes 6 months to recover cared for by women/families in Barcelona (cotton traders) and helped to take Latin lessons; at the "little hospital" in Manresa he was cared for by the Amigant family. In Manresa several women became devoted to him: known as the "Iñigues" they were Ignatius' first followers and included Angela Segui, wife of Andreu Amigant, and Inés Pascual and Jeronima Claver.

Lastly, I must thank Fr. Josep Lluís Iriberrí SJ for his leadership of the pilgrimage and the Spiritual Exercises, for his teaching and sharing of his understanding of Ignatius and his life, Spanish history generally, especially around the time that Ignatius lived, Spanish customs and culture generally. I also wish to thank the other 14 pilgrims (including my husband) with whom I shared the journey and who were an integral part of my experience. They played an important part in my experience of God's grace during the time that we walked together.