

Invited by God to walk along el Camino Real and gain some spiritual capital... that will last forever!

My Experience of El Camino Ignaciano by Oscar Momanyi, SJ

An old Spanish royal road connects the twenty-one Franciscan missions in California stretching from Mission San Diego de Alcalá in San Diego in the South to Mission San Francisco Solano in Sonoma in the north. The road had a unique, if not interesting name: El Camino Real. El camino real can be translated loosely into English as “the real way.” This way has become for me a symbol of the pilgrimage I continue to “walk” in my daily life. After having the experience of walking on El Camino Ignaciano, I felt invited to live out the fruits of that pilgrimage in “real life.” In other words, I was invited by God to walk along el camino real.

I often hear people say, after an experience such as a pilgrimage to holy sites, that when they come back home, life continues as usual. They seem to imply that life remains the same as before they embarked on the journey. I tend to think that even though the feeling of sameness can be there, God continually works the pilgrim as he or she lives his or her daily life after the spiritual experiences of pilgrimage. When one comes back to “real life” God continues to work in his mysterious ways as the pilgrim walks on el camino real. The pilgrimage continues in the depths of the pilgrim consciously (in reliving memories and the graces received in the pilgrimage) or unconsciously. God works in the heart of the pilgrim calling him or her to a continued conversion. Only God can say what new spirit is gradually forming in the depths of the pilgrim.

The first question that came to my mind as I embarked on the Camino in the summer of 2015 was: what is the point of going on pilgrimage? My main reason for going on pilgrimage along El Camino Ignaciano was to gain what St. Ignatius of Loyola calls, in the Constitutions, “spiritual capital” which would enable me to grow in the love of God. With this spiritual capital, I would be able to be of service to other people. I found the Camino to be a way of emptying myself to be available to others. It was a healing walk that would enable me to be free to serve.

I brought to the Camino some issues in my life that I wanted to be in conversation with God and others as I walked. I felt supported and heard by God and my fellow pilgrims as we journeyed together. I felt empowered and loved just the way I am, an imperfect human being yet called to be a Christian.

At the end of the Camino, I felt a sense of healing and God’s love pervading my consciousness. The Camino was not just a touristic adventure, but it was an outward journey that led to inner transformation that is ongoing throughout my life. Spiritual transformation was taking place slowly, sometimes even in undiscernible ways in my heart and the hearts of the other pilgrims. As I walked in the Spanish summer heat, I was continually reminded to trust that God was the one working in me even when I did not feel his presence.

The Camino deepened my love for St. Ignatius because of the firsthand experiences of the places where the Saint lived his formative years. As I walked in Loyola, Montserrat, and Manresa, I was permeated by the spirit of the St. Ignatius in a radical way. At the end of the pilgrimage, I felt a deep desire for intimacy with God just as St. Ignatius experienced as he walked that way centuries before. I learned many things about myself, St. Ignatius, and God as I walked. I felt that God always walks with me in the company of my fellow Christian pilgrims. The Christian journey, just like the walking pilgrimage, is not easy; there are ups and downs but what is important is to keep going.

The pilgrimage helped me to deepen my trust in God’s providence. Each morning, we would wake up not knowing what we were going to find ahead of us, but we were always hopeful that we were moving closer to God as we went along the way. The orange arrows and the green plates were our guide. The arrows pointed towards where we were to go, and we trusted that these arrows would lead us in the right direction. These arrows were a symbol of the people in my life who have journeyed with me helping me to discover God’s will in my life. Our guide Fr. José Lluís Iriberry, was such a person. His availability to his mission as a guide to the pilgrims, his love and kindness to us pointed us to God. As I reflected on this experience, I felt challenged to be an arrow that points others to the right direction: towards what God wants them to be. I gave thanks to God for sending into my life people, who by their lives of faith, have helped me to follow the Christian path.

During the pilgrimage, there were times that we missed the arrows, and we were lost for a while. In such situations, Fr. Iriberry would follow a person or a group who had lost their way and brought them back on track. This too was a powerful image of our Christian life. Sometimes we can lose sight of our Christian way, but God still seeks us out and brings us back to the right direction. As I reflect on this, I am reminded of the parable of the lost sheep in Luke chapter 15, where the shepherd leaves the large flock of sheep and goes out of his way to look for a lost sheep and brings it back perhaps carrying it on his shoulder.

The frugal life that we were leading throughout the pilgrimage also led me to value God’s providence and be in solidarity with the poor. In the hostels that we stayed along the Camino Ignaciano, we had to share the minimum amenities that were available. That frugal life brought to my attention how individualistic I had become. The need to

share the things that I have received from God was an invitation that I received as I walked the Camino. Being in solidarity with the poor and sharing what I have was a lesson that I learned as I walked. I do not have to give anything big to the poor, sometimes my presence among them is what God desires rather than material goods.

The experience of praying together each morning and evening during the Mass was significant. Each morning, we walked two hours in silence, meditating on a theme from the *Spiritual Exercises* that was introduced to us earlier in the day. In that silence, I experienced that I was deeply united with God and my fellow pilgrims as we went along. One evening, we decided to walk in silence each praying the Examination of Consciousness. As I walked alongside a fellow pilgrim, I felt the presence of Jesus in my companion. That experience led me to reflect on the walk of Jesus with the disciples to Emmaus in Luke 24:13-35. Sometimes it is difficult to recognize Jesus's presence in our ordinary life experiences until our eyes are opened by reflection and prayer. I felt called to deeper intimacy with Jesus through prayer as I walked that night. Jesus always walks with us even in difficult times when we do not sense his presence.

There was a good community atmosphere among the pilgrims. Although we were from different cultural backgrounds, people took care of one another and reached out to those in the group who needed support. We were indeed "friends in the Lord" as the first Jesuit companions called themselves. This is the same friendship that one can see in Samwise Gamgee and Frodo Baggins in their pilgrimage in the trilogy by J.R.R. Tolkien *The Lord of the Rings*. Through thick and thin Sam and Frodo stayed together. The Christian journey is a journey of friendship; you make as many friends as you can along the way.

Although there were different perspectives raised by the people in our pilgrimage group which could easily divide the group, there was still a sense of understanding and forging ahead with a common mission as Christians. We all need a community to flourish. I imagine walking as a lone pilgrim would have been a more difficult. The community is a milieu in which I find joy and fulfillment. It is in the context of my pilgrimage community that I experienced God's love and care for me. That community taught me how to be available and caring to others too.

Eating together was another powerful symbol during the Camino. I remember one day we had walked for many kilometers without finding a shade where we could rest and eat. Then all of a sudden, we stumbled upon a little animal shed in a farm. That animal shed became a blessing to us. We just went under it and started eating there our lunch not thinking about how dirty the place looked. What was important for us was that we were united in God and that we were all moving in the same direction. Eating together made us to bond together in love. As the pilgrimage continued, I realized that we grew more and more at home with each other especially during mealtimes. The Eucharist also was another "eating moment" that brought us together in a profound way. There are several African proverbs that emphasize the importance of eating together as a way of building communion. For example, there is one which says, "those who eat together never eat one another"!

The diversity of cultural perspectives in our pilgrimage group also helped me to appreciate our humanity. Our group was composed of pilgrims from Spain, Vietnam, Philippines, Mexico, Kenya, and the United States of America. We were all brought together as children of God in a common journey. In spite of diversity in the world, all humans are created in the image of God. Our dignity is bestowed to us by God, and that is why we are all in the Christian journey together. We are all God's people no matter our race or gender. This does not mean that our diversity is to be forgotten; we celebrated one another's cultural perspectives as we shared the stories of our lives on the way. Hospitality to one another even when we were different was a hallmark of our pilgrimage, and this helped me to discern how to be hospitable to others especially strangers and the poor.

The pilgrimage also involved suffering: walking in high temperatures, long distances that I was not accustomed to, blisters, painful knees, stealing of some of our luggage, etc. Most of the walking we did in the Camino was through desert-like environments. This reminded me of the temptations of Jesus in the desert in Mathew 4:1-11. It was an experience of struggle for my soul out of which a new identity would emerge, through the grace of God. This desert experience was necessary for my slow conversion to the person God wants me to become. The Camino reminded me that even when I am tempted to give up on my Christian pilgrimage, I should not give in to the temptation but keep going along the path towards God.

Through the experience of suffering the pain of walking in the desert, I identified with the crucified Jesus hanging on the cross. The misery and pain reminded me that I am only human and that suffering is part of my human life. My attitude toward suffering changed during the Camino. I had a sense that even as I underwent that suffering, I was still feeling united with Jesus and my other companions with whom I was walking with. I do not suffer alone; I suffer with others. I was in pain but also had a deep sense of joy.

The suffering that I was undergoing was a kind of purification that was to make me a better person in life. It was an invitation to go into the desert, away from the comforts of everyday, where I could encounter God in a radical way. Suffering is not necessarily a negative thing: good things can come out of the suffering we experience. After death, there is always hope for resurrection.

The wounds that I had sustained in the suffering that I had gone through in my life up to the time I went on pilgrimage were continually healed as I walked in the presence of others and with God. I felt a sense of being called to be a "wounded healer," an instrument of reconciliation and service to those in need, the *anawim*. As Christians, we

are all wounded in one way or another, but by walking together and supporting one another on the way, we can be able to heal one another's wounds.

The theme of suffering remained with me as I contemplated the Passion façade of the Sagrada Família Basilica in Barcelona with its gruesome images of Jesus's passion, I felt united with Jesus as he suffered there on the cross. This reminded me the third week of the *Spiritual Exercises* where the retreatant contemplates the passion of Christ by asking "[...] for sorrow with Christ's sorrow, anguish with Christ in anguish, tears and deep grief because of the great affliction Christ endures for me" (*Spiritual Exercises* no. 203). As I remembered the difficult paths of the Camino where I almost gave up because of the physical pain involved, I can now see how God continued to give me hope and strength to continue the same way he does in my Christian life. These were times when I was being purified by the suffering that would lead to resurrection.

The pilgrimage made me grow closer to Our Lady. We visited many chapels of Our Lady and saw many portraits and statues of her along the way. She was a constant companion to us along the way. Her companionship helped to increase my devotion and love for the mother of Our Lord Jesus Christ. I felt her protection and guidance as we walked. We prayed the rosary and sang Marian hymns on several occasions.

Two incidences, which illustrate Christian charity, have stuck in my mind in a profound way. As we were on our way from Montserrat to Manresa under very high temperature, one pilgrim could not keep up with the difficult hike. His companion offered to carry the weary pilgrim. That was for me an image of how God helps us along the Christian way as we undergo trials and temptations. At another point in the journey, some other pilgrims had lagged behind for a long time. The group ahead wondered what was going on, but they kept waiting. Two pilgrims volunteered to run back and check what was happening to the other pilgrims. They offered to help them carry their luggage to lighten the burdens of those weary pilgrims. God cares for us in the same way. He carries for us the heavy luggage that we carry so that we can walk easily. This reminded of Mathew 11:28 where Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

The above incidences of generosity of pilgrims towards other suffering pilgrims were a challenge to me. I kept asking: how do I care for those who need my help? Do I go out of my way to help those in need? These are questions that I will continue to reflect on as I continue with my Christian life. Hospitality to others is one theme that I learned in the pilgrimage. Our *hospitaleros* at the hostels where we lodged taught me first-hand how to care for others even if I do not know them. The word *hospitalero*, which describes any hospitable person or anyone entrusted to care for another, captivated me because it implies *Cura Personalis*, that personal care of individuals who we get in contact with. During the pilgrimage, I felt that God was calling me to be a true *hospitalero* to the people I meet along my pilgrim journey.

The pilgrimage also taught me about care for the environment. The high temperature that we experienced as we walked were partly because of global warming caused by human activities that cause environmental degradation. Water was another environmental issue that was brought to my consciousness in a new way as I walked the Camino. My appreciation for the value of water was brought to a new level as we walked along the way of St. Ignatius. We had to carry enough water to get us through the day. I had previously taken for granted how lucky I was to have water at my disposal all the time. As I walked with limited amounts of water, I felt in solidarity with the people who live their lives with little or no water.

As I walked in the heat with minimum water supply, I felt challenged to be a steward of the environmental resources that God has bestowed on us as Pope Francis encourages all people of good will in his encyclical *Laudato si*. The environment is a God-given gift that needs human protection in order to support human life. Everything that God created on earth is good (I Timothy 4:4) and as God's children, it is our duty to preserve that goodness. I felt that the preservation of the environment begins with me. It is through my example of good environmental practices that I may be able to influence others to do the same. It is a personal call that God invited me to in a radical way as I walked under that heat and feeling thirsty.

As we walked along the Way of St. Ignatius, we continually met yellow arrows pointing toward Santiago de Compostela while orange arrows that we were following were pointing towards Manresa. This became for me the image of the saints, in this case Saint James the Apostle and Saint Ignatius of Loyola. The Saints point us to God, but in different ways. They lived their vocations in different places and time. They took different paths toward God but, in the end, they were united with God through their different paths. This reminded me that even when there are manifold vocations, all Christians are pointed in the same direction toward God.

The ways that we take while following our different vocational paths does not matter as long as we are all on our way to God. This led me to reflect about relations between the laity and the clergy in the Church. The temptation of clericalism and abuse of power to the detriment of the Church is real. I prayed that I may continue to appreciate the role of the laity in the Church and to avoid the temptations of clericalism since both lay and clerical vocations are two sides of the same coin. Both clerics and the laity belong to one people of God who called them to their corresponding vocational paths.

As we walked on pilgrimage, we came across many churches with diverse architecture and other pieces of art. Those Baroque, Romanesque, Gothic, and Modern artistic representations were symbols through which God communicates to finite human minds his presence and love for us. Through these manmade representations, we were able to get a glimpse of God and his love for humankind. Art became a conduit through which our hearts were stirred and lifted up towards God whose beauty surpasses all that human beings can conceive. As we continued our pilgrimage, we were also learning European history and culture apart from the spiritual fruit that we gained from the pilgrimage.

Three months after El Camino Ignaciano, some pilgrims came together to share how God had continued to walk with them in their daily lives or how God had continued to walk with them in “the real Camino” (el camino real). I was filled with joy and awe at how God continued to manifest his presence in the lives of my fellow pilgrims. We were continuing to walk together, in our different vocations, but with the same vision: towards God. We were still in solidarity with one another even after months of our pilgrimage. Our companionship on the road, guided by St. Ignatius and Christ, continues throughout our lives. As I sat there listening to others share their journeys, I noticed that what we had embarked on three months earlier was a lifetime journey together. We will forever grow in the love of God together wherever God sends us on our daily mission of evangelization.