

2016: A PILGRIM'S JOURNEY



A few years ago, while on a bus tour of Spain, I had the opportunity of a four hour visit to Montserrat, the “serrated mountain” and home to Our lady of Montserrat, the Black Madonna, about an hour’s drive from Barcelona. I was so touched by the spirit of this place I remember commenting that I would love to return for a visit and, if possible, even spend some retreat time there.

Some six years later, in September 2016, I did have the opportunity to re-visit, and in fact was especially blessed to spend seven days in Montserrat, living in the Benedictine Monastery, participating in the beautiful liturgies provided by the monks and the world famous boys choir, walking the many mountain paths and generally soaking up the atmosphere of prayer, silence and spiritual enrichment, closely associated with the presence of the Black Madonna in the Basilica. This was a very special time, a precursor to an even more extraordinary spirit-filled experience.

I live and work in the Parish of Our Lady of the Way, the Jesuit parish of North Sydney, and have been associated with several Jesuit priests over some 11 years. I must admit though, I knew very little of the story of St Ignatius of Loyola. Then, early in 2015, I saw information of the Ignatian Camino advertised in the Parish Bulletin.

Who knows how the Spirit works in our lives or why we are drawn to some experiences and not others? My interest in this Camino was immediately piqued, a “*God moment*” I like to think, and especially when two friends, Madeleine and Dianne, also indicated a keen interest in undertaking the Walk. We settled on the 2016 September/October dates and were delighted when accepted as part of an international group of 15, with a Spanish Jesuit priest, Fr Joseph Iriberry sj as our guide. We later discovered that Fr Joseph had been instrumental in designing the Camino route, leading the first pilgrim group in September-October 2013.

The decision to walk the Camino also gave us the opportunity to return to Montserrat, and as it turned out, was the perfect preparation for our Camino, both physically and spiritually and more so when we realised the great significance this place held for Ignatius. It was here that he had laid down his sword and dagger, put aside his robes of nobility and taken up the simple garment and life of a pilgrim as he continued on his journey.



The Ignatian Way follows the route taken by St Ignatius of Loyola when he travelled from his birthplace of Loyola (Azpeita) in the Basque Country to Manresa in Catalonia in 1522, crossing the five regions - the Basque Country, La Rioja, Navarre, Aragon and Catalonia.

Following the unforgettable week in Montserrat, we joined our guide, Joseph, and other members of the group to commence our pilgrimage on 22 September at

the Sanctuary of Loyola, the birthplace of St Ignatius.

We spent the next 28 days traversing 575+ km of the beautiful and diverse aspects of the countryside, each day bringing its own surprises and varying degrees of difficulty as we crossed over mountains (I kid you not!). Words can’t describe the exhilaration (and exhausted relief!) one feels on reaching the top of a mist-covered mountain, sharing lunch with companions, to the sound of cattle and cow bells all around. Following “the orange arrow”, Joseph’s direction marker for our Camino, we walked through the lush green valleys as we



followed the great Ebro River, explored the beautiful cities and towns, walked through magnificent forests and across the dry and barren Monegros desert in Aragon before we reached the rich, fertile and culturally diverse region of Catalonia.

Many were the days we walked past and through vineyards and orchards, sampling the luscious grapes, pears, apples, and figs and picking the walnuts and almonds.

While one can't help but draw on the memories of the physical aspects of the Camino, each day with its particular demands and difficulties, joys, surprises and achievements, the deeper and more lasting experiences are those of spiritual significance; a deepening awareness of God in all aspects and encounters of each day; a growing awareness of what it means to be a "pilgrim"; to be attentive to those 'God moments', recognising the presence and action of God in all situations. I came to understand that being a pilgrim requires trust in God as one encounters new and unexpected experiences, new places, meets new people. In sharing the experiences of each day, we who began as strangers became companions who supported and encouraged each other.

*"At its heart, the journey of each life is a pilgrimage,
through unforeseen sacred places that enlarge and enrich the soul."*

Joyce Rupp



The 28 days of the Camino are based on the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius and from that perspective provided the opportunity for a very reflective experience. Fr Joseph had compiled a spiritual workshop resource booklet for each of us, packed with reflections, prayers, readings and information from the Ignatian story, as a rich guide for our journey.

We gathered prior to beginning each day's walk for brief prayer and reflection, setting the theme for personal prayer and spiritual focus for the day, the words generally inspired by the life of Ignatius.

This was followed by two hours of silence as we walked and was a very precious time, in a way setting the tone for the experiences of the day to follow. "OK pilgrims, let's go!" was the catchcry of our guide when it was time to move on after we'd enjoyed a coffee break, lunch or our stop each hour or so to have a rest and gather the group together. The sense of

companionship was a great experience amongst our group, with the stronger, more experienced walkers often staying back to support those who were finding the going tough. To have one of the men offer to carry someone else's backpack was not uncommon.

We had comfortable accommodation along the way, with only four nights in pilgrim's hostels – bunk- type sharing. I hadn't been looking forward to this but it certainly gave us the opportunity for respectful tolerance, patience and utmost gratitude for a shower and bed at the end of each day!

We were encouraged to stay alert for God's presence in all our experiences along the way, the people we met, the hospitality we shared, the cultural and religious opportunities we encountered. These included the magnificent churches and numerous shrines to Our Lady, the Eucharistic celebrations we enjoyed along the way, both with the worshipping communities (in Spanish) or with Fr Joseph celebrating Mass for our group.

One memorable moment for me (and there were many) was when we were walking through a small village after we left Cervera on our way to Jorba. A very friendly dog, Rufo, decided to join us and faithfully accompanied us for many kilometres, despite our efforts to ignore him and send him back. He would run on

ahead, disappear from sight and we'd find him waiting for us around the next corner. Joseph told us Rufo joins



each Camino group for this section and then somehow makes his way back home. We stopped for lunch and Rufo had disappeared when we resumed our walk. Another of those “*God moments...*”

We knew when we left Montserrat that first week we would have to walk back up that mountain ...1,000 metres! Joseph kindly broke this climb into two sections – the first night at 900 metres in Sant Pau de la Guardia, and then the short steep walk the following day back into Montserrat. We arrived as the 11.00 am Mass was underway in the Basilica. I found this return to be quite emotional, more so when

we were able to meet up again with one of the monks who had become significant to us during our earlier stay. Before we left for Manresa early the next morning we visited, for the last time, Our Lady of Montserrat, hearts full of gratitude for the many gifts received, and pondering the questions: “*What am I prepared to ‘leave aside’ here in Montserrat? What am I going to take back home as I continue my pilgrim journey?*”



Our time in Manresa enabled us to visit many of the places of significance in the Ignatius story, staying in the Jesuit Spirituality Centre and Retreat House built over the cave (now a beautiful chapel) where we are told Ignatius spent many months in prayer and penance, recording his experiences and insights and writing what we now know as his Spiritual Exercises. Our Ignatian pilgrimage officially finished in Manresa and it was with a great sense of achievement and gratitude that we received our Certificate and had the final stamp applied to our Credential, a record of the many churches and townships we had visited.

The final three days in Barcelona gave us further opportunities to visit the “Ignatian Barcelona” and then to spend time exploring the most incredible basilica, Gaudi’s Sagrada Familia. The completion date for this

magnificent structure is expected to be 2026, the construction of which began in 1882! It was with a sense of sadness that we celebrated our final meal together and bade farewell to Fr. Joseph and our pilgrim companions as we left to return to our various homes, in a way, our Camino just beginning.....

*“We ask for what we hope to achieve:
to gain inner knowledge of everything we have experienced,
fully recognising that we are thereby empowered
to love and serve with thankfulness.”*

It’s been a special privilege to share a little of what was a graced experience for me though these reflections have barely touched the surface of this most wonderful time....and the pilgrimage continues.....



‘I want to choose what better leads to the deepening of God’s life in me.’

Bev Neill

26 January 2017