

RETURNING FOR SECONDS

~ Camino Ignaciano, Part 2 ~

1 – 17 May 2023

In life, we sometimes have painful experiences that we say we don't want to repeat, but then do so anyway. My mother told me that when she gave birth to my elder sister (her first child), it was so painful that she said to herself, "Never again!". But then she had me anyway, just over a year later. I'd like to believe that she did not live to regret it.

I enjoy hiking, and fondly remember my Camino de Santiago and my first outing of the Camino Ignaciano. But after a tough hiking tour in the Alps in 2022, where the altitude and inclines so quickly and repeatedly drained my energy reserves despite my best efforts at refuelling, that I resolved that my days of long hikes were over. No more being stuck in the wilderness for hours. "I'll only do the kinds of hikes in the Cotswolds," I said, "where I can drive to a place, walk for an hour or two, and then drive off when I'm tired." Of course, this resolve did not last long – perhaps the human mind is made to forget some kinds of pain, or is foolish enough to think that the second time around will be easier.

I blame the seed that had been planted at the end of my first Camino Ignaciano in 2019. We officially ended the pilgrimage in Manresa, but Ignatius' journey did not end there; he went on to Barcelona, and eventually died in Rome. The Jesuits' plan was to further develop that second leg of the Camino Ignaciano, to be ready by 2023, the 500th anniversary of Ignatius' journey to the Holy Land. Fr Josep told us that all who had done the first leg of the pilgrimage with him would be invited to the second leg.

Then COVID-19 struck in 2020, and the world was house-bound for a time. In January 2021, Fr Josep wrote to us all that he was planning that second leg of the pilgrimage which would end in Rome. It would be for three weeks in May 2023. In pandemic-years, that seemed so far away, and who knew if air travel would be permitted yet? In the throes of cabin fever, I asked to be short-listed. Then came 2022 and my alleged resolution about long hikes. Then of course, shortly after I returned from the Alps, what appeared in my inbox? An email from Fr Josep – it was time to decide whether I would do the Camino Ignaciano, Part 2! The itinerary looked long, as did the daily walking distances. The total distance was an intimidating 300-plus km. But you already know. I said yes. I hoped that I would not live to regret it.

I had not been to Rome since the 1990s and was looking forward to visiting again. Yet, I did not dare to anticipate this trip too much, in case I wasn't able to go and for some reason and would suffer disappointment. My eyesight had been worsening, and I avoided getting it checked before the trip, for fear that it would be a brain tumour or something that might prevent me from going. (It turned out to be early cataracts! Shouldn't have worried so much.)

The months leading up to my departure were unexpectedly eventful and in retrospect, presaged the challenges of "Part 2". I had been posted back to do work in an area I had started out in some twenty years ago – I greatly enjoyed it then, but had not such work done full-time for more than ten years. I looked forward to it, but did not expect the challenges that it brought. Twenty years ago, I did that work without the burden of seniority. Now, I had a managerial workload on top dealing with more complex matters. All this made for some challenging months.

So I carried this weight of whether I was up to the new challenge at work, and the challenge of this long pilgrimage, to Spain. The busy-ness of work also meant that I hadn't had much time to train. I would have to see what strength I could find when I needed it.

Barcelona again!

I arrived in Barcelona on a beautiful Sunday morning, returning for an unexpected fourth time. This time, our lodgings were in a convent in the Sarria district, a hideaway lovingly run by a handful of nuns who spoke no English, but who did not need to – their kind actions and smiles were all that was needed. I was the first to arrive, and caught a clean-shaven Fr Josep – this was the first pilgrimage for 2023, and he would not shave again until the end of the season. My room faced a quiet inner courtyard, conducive for reflection. Burglary in Barcelona was presumably a real risk, because we were literally behind bars there – but well, it felt safe!



*Religiosas Maria Inmaculada
– Claretianas, “behind bars”*



*The serene view from my
room*



*Fr Josep – clean-
shaven at the start of
his hiking season*

I got in many steps in that afternoon, walking down to the touristy centre of Barcelona to soak in those sights and sounds before I started being a pilgrim again.



By evening, all the pilgrims had arrived at the convent, and we gathered to be briefed by Fr Josep and to meet each other. All were “repeat pilgrims” except for two, and this was once again a mixed group. There were many retirees including a former accountant, doctor, and geologist, there were stay-at-home Mums, and even an Anglican vicar. Two of the pilgrims were from my group the first time. Fr Josep ominously said that there would be many things about this pilgrimage that would be different from our first, but it was too late to back out now! We were ready, open, and excited to experience the next three weeks together.

Spanish steps

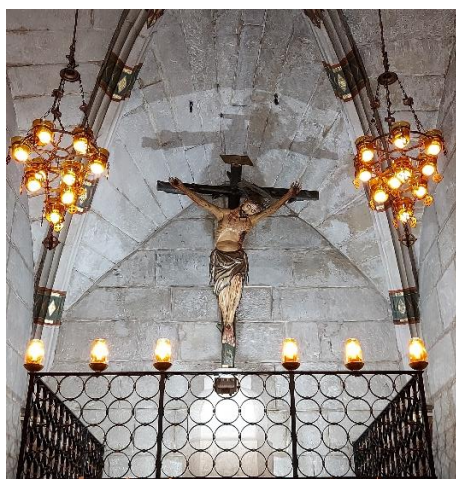
Stage 1: The Gift of our Life; the Grace of Happiness; the Joy of the Spirit

The first week of Part 2 involved us re-treading steps that we had taken and re-visiting places that we had encountered during Part 1. Due to that familiarity, we walked with some confidence and lightness – we had done this before, we can do it again. Right?

We were eased into the rhythm of walking in the first two days – Day 1 was 12 km from Bellpuig to Verdú, the home of St Peter Claver, while Day 2 was 18 km from Verdú to Cervera, a former university town. As before, we spent the first two hours of walking each day in silent meditation. The Spanish sun was hot. The country was suffering a drought. The earthen paths were caked hard, any breeze was brief, and shade was seldom seen. A hint of a blister began to bug me. But my hiking boots saw me through the Alps! Surely they could see me through Spain, to Italy? I would soon find out.



Baking in the sun



A church that Fr Josep brought us to in Verdú had a large crucifix from the time of St Peter Claver (ie, the 16th century). I did not remember this church from our first visit. It was said that during the Spanish Civil War, when religious artefacts were routinely being destroyed, the people of this town protected this crucifix by hiding it in a cart full of manure. Not surprisingly, no-one who came to destroy the church went near that cart, and the crucifix was unscathed. So quite literally then, Jesus had to suffer some shit to survive the war! I was quite taken with this story, as its message surely is about the adversities we may be buried under and which we need to suffer as we get through life.



En route to Cervera, we passed through Tarrega, home of the church with the beautiful ceiling frescoes that so caught my imagination during Part 1. This time, I realised that while admiring the ceiling the last time, I had failed to notice the central altarpiece, which was a quite exquisite rendition of Madonna and Child. I was enjoying this re-treading of old paths and noticing things I had missed the first time.

The meditations for these first two days were on the gift of being able to spend this time with the Lord, to recognise His presence in our lives, and to think about our moments of happiness and grace, especially what we recognised as turning points in our life. I saw how blessed I was, how I got to experience past pilgrimages, and thought of the movements in my work life and career that had brought me to this place. Fresh in my mind were the farewell messages that my previous team had written to me before I started my new posting – all were affirming, and some were surprising, as I did not expect that what I regarded as normal actions were seen by them as acts of kindness. It was a reminder to just do what we think is right, without needing to be too concerned about the consequences, as the positive effects will invariably flow. I also

realised that the gifts in my life were, to a large extent, the *people* in my life. I also felt that God's presence in my life was the people around me. This was a change, as it was normally when I was admiring the splendour of nature like magnificent mountains, that I most felt His presence.

Another key difference in this journey was that when we arrived at Verdú and Cervera during Part 1, we were halfway through the pilgrimage and had begun to reflect on our sinful state. Thus, the lodgings were more spartan, and the paths became more arduous. This time, we were *starting* with these spartan lodgings and long shadeless stretches of road. It meant that what were then the tough stretches which were conducive for pondering one's sins, were now the stretches meant for pondering God's gifts to us! Did this mean that paths that were difficult the first time are meant to be easier the second time around? Or that what's difficult can also be a gift, and we should try to find blessings even in adversity?



These were the thoughts that I carried into Cervera, where we had the last of our short hiking days for some time. We stayed in the same building as we did on our first visit, but the convent (with the great wifi) was no more. It had closed as there were too few nuns to keep it going. We also did not get the single rooms which we did the last time – our lodgings now resembled partitioned quarantine cells: a narrow bunk, a basin, and a small lamp, all enclosed behind a thin curtain. The pipe beneath the basin in my cell was faulty, and the water drained right through onto the floor. I spent some minutes that night mopping my cell. But at least that was the first and last malfunctioning plumbing I would encounter this trip.

Day 3 was our second-longest one-day distance, 33 km from Cervera to Jorba. We set off just as the sun was coming up, enjoying the cool morning for a time.



This day's reflection was to seek gratitude, understanding and acceptance of oneself, and to realise that we are accepted by God. What came to mind was something I often hear people say before they confide in me, which is, "Don't laugh at me, but ...". This seemed to be very odd, because it suggests that I laugh a lot at other people (which is not very nice), but at the same time, this does not stop them from taking me into their confidence (which is very nice). In a way, I suppose that this is an example of my friends taking the good with the bad, and accepting me for who I am.



The first stretch of this day's walk was somehow not as bad as I remembered, and we arrived at our lunch stop in fairly good time. However, the second stretch on a long unshaded highway was every bit as tough as it was in Part 1, worsened this time by the large blisters which were undeniably forming on the soles of **both** my feet. I was somehow unable to get the lacing of my boots right – too tight, the feet would be too hot in the boots; too loose, there would be unnecessary friction. The saving grace was that we were again at the hostel run by the parish priest who loves to cook, and Fr Henrique again cooked up a storm for us. That night, as we squeezed into tiny bunks in crowded quarters for the third night in a row, I wondered what I had gotten myself into. I thought that Part 2 would be easier because I was experienced in walking pilgrimages. But this was not proving to be the case!

Day 4 would bring us to Montserrat, which journey was thankfully shortened by a bus ride from Jorba through Igualada to Castelloli, before we walked 18 km to Montserrat. This turned out to be quite a blessing, because my mother had sent me a message that morning that she needed to make a doctor's appointment urgently, and wanted me to contact the doctor (my friend) on her behalf. Why she could not do so herself but needed me as intermediary all the way from Spain, I did not know, but was just grateful that I had the time to do that during our bus ride. And my friend, who realised that I was in a different time zone, kindly offered to speak directly to my mother and fix up the appointment. The little mercies!

Today's reflection was on our purpose in life – not just our personal lives, but the larger purpose of human beings. The Church teaches us that God created us to praise, reverence and serve Him. But this was a difficult thought to hold this day. Instead, I pondered our stages in life: When we are young, we have few responsibilities and worries, but have limited resources with which to enjoy ourselves. When we are older, we have better financial resources and can enjoy better holidays, but we also have more responsibilities of work and family, including worries about aging parents that make it more difficult to enjoy the experiences that we can now afford.

Is there ever a time in our lives when we can enjoy everything? Perhaps not, and it always needs to be a balance.

When I did try to bring my thoughts to my purpose in life, I tried not to think in terms of my job, but my vocation. I thought of the teens whom I teach Catechism to, and how it is ultimately a rewarding task even though there are so many naughty ones. I thought of my role as a carer for my parents. My thoughts then turned to work. Unexpectedly, I wondered if I was in the right job, and what might happen if I went home and tendered my resignation. The last thought was frightening and fleeting. I put it aside.



First peek of the peaks of Montserrat

A large blister on the sole of my left foot was not improving, and I tried hard not to fall behind, clenching my toes while walking to try to create some distance between the soles of my feet and the insoles of my boots. Not a good idea, as my normally veiny feet ended up so swollen that I could not see the protruding veins for days! Later that day, I also drained more water from the blister than I had ever done for any blister my life.

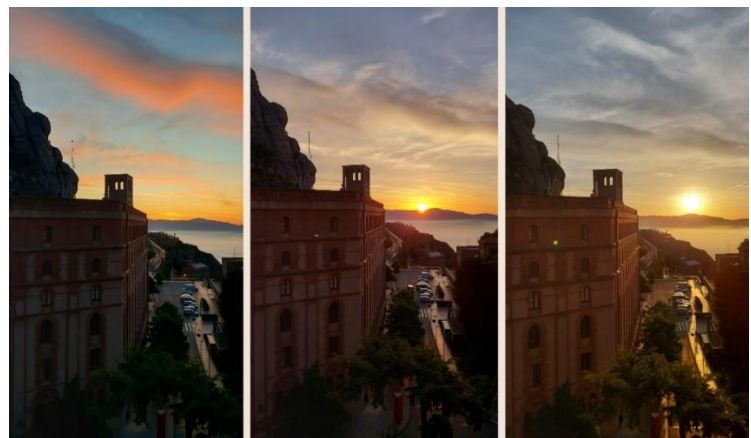
But I could not complain: Igualada was where Ignatius traded his nice clothes for his “pilgrim garb” – a poorly woven piece of sackcloth filled with prickly wooden fibres, and a pair of shoes of coarse material often used to make brooms! I’ll take hiking boots over broom-shoes any day.

Before getting to Montserrat, we passed Sant Pau de la Guardia, where we stayed for a night during Part 1. I remembered it for being very cold, and for the “major blister surgery” that Fr Josep performed for a pilgrim. That pilgrim has since become a friend – we did the Alps hike together. She was not here this time, but was definitely with us in spirit.

We only stopped by on this occasion for coffee, cake and conversation. Too soon, we had to start moving again. Onwards to Montserrat!



We arrived fairly early and were housed in a clean new hostel – my roommate and I were in a room meant for four, and after the “quarantine cell” and bunks of the past three nights, this room with beds, writing tables and large *en suite* shower was luxury! The room also had a great view of the sunrise, which we had the opportunity to admire over the next two mornings.



The rest of the day was quiet and reflective – we attended vespers sung by the Benedictine monks, which was closed with a hymn sung by the L'Escolania, the boys' choir that sings in the Abbey of Montserrat. What a way to start an evening of prayer!



Montserrat becomes a ghost-town after dark, when all the day trippers have left and the queues disappear. We had the Basilica all to ourselves, and for the first time in my many visits there, a side chapel containing a concave carving of Jesus made an impression on me. The carving results in a visual trick – the eyes of Jesus seem to follow you wherever you move within the chapel. What that also means is that if many people are standing in the chapel, it will appear to every one of them at the same time that Jesus is looking at them. This, then, was a real-world manifestation of the religious concept that God can be watching over us all at the same time.

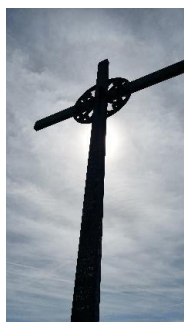


We of course got to greet the Black Madonna again, after our evening Stations of the Cross session – to me, she is somehow always a calming sight and a soothing presence.



Day 5 was a day of rest, which my blisters were very grateful for. We were to have attended a mass in the morning with Fr Josep as concelebrant. Unfortunately, when I tried to enter the Basilica for the mass (and hence outside of “tourist” visiting hours and without a ticket), an over-zealous security lady refused me entry, no matter how many times I said I was going there to attend mass. She insisted that I return an hour later. When I did, she again tried to refuse me entry until I reminded her of what she told me an hour before. With a roll of her eyes, she let me in. Still, it was too late by then and mass was over. Amazingly, none of my fellow-pilgrims had the same problem getting in! As the non-white person in the group, the only explanation I could think of was that this was casual racism – I had to be a tourist, and not a worshipper. I was seething for the rest of the morning, an ugly mood quite contrary to my status as a pilgrim.

Aptly, the day's reflection was about “indifference” – that we need not become so obsessed with living a successful earthly life that it becomes about serving ourselves instead of God and following his plan. But I was finding it difficult not to be insulted by the treatment given to me by that lady! Ah well. A good number of pilgrims hiked with Fr Josep to the summit of Montserrat. As I had hiked up there on a previous visit, I took a couple of short walks instead to sights that I did not have the time to take in previously – finally seeing the Cross of St Michael, and the Via Crucis – larger-than-life depictions of the Way of the Cross. My mood improved, and I steeled myself for another long stage the next day.

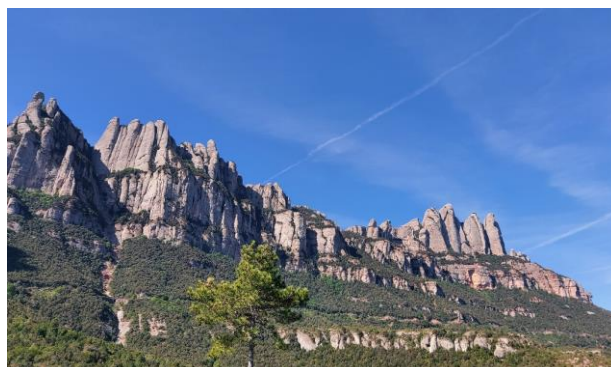


The Cross of St Michael



View of the Abbey complex and Montserrat from the Cross

Day 6 would bring us from Montserrat to Manresa – on paper, “only” about 25 km, but I recalled from Part 1 that this stage seemed far longer than that. The exertions of the previous days had begun to take their toll – three from our group chose not to walk on this day, following our luggage instead in a vehicle to Manresa. I decided to soldier on, though I was in enough pain during our descent from Montserrat not to make much sense when a fellow-pilgrim asked me why I didn’t just take some pain-killers. The reason was that I needed to be able to tell if the blisters were worsening (bleeding? infection? gangrene?), instead of being unaware because the pain had been masked. However, it was too many words to string together when I needed to conserve energy, so I simply answered, “Because I need to feel the pain.” She rightly looked at me like I had lost my mind.



A welcome distraction for many pilgrims that day (much to Fr Josep’s chagrin) was that it was Coronation Day for King Charles III. Since we had one Englishman and many Aussie ladies in the group, they occasionally stopped to watch a live stream of the ceremony. Thus, questions about when the chariot was arriving and what Princess Catherine was wearing became the questions on some of our minds, rather than the day’s actual reflection.

More drama was to come – one pilgrim stepped on a loose stone and fell over, hitting her brow on the ground. Fr Josep tended to her and cleaned the wound. It was a bad cut over her eye that made it look like she had been in a bar brawl. We told her that if anyone asked her what happened, as the joke goes, she should say, “You shoulda seen the other guy.”



“What is Kate wearing?”

The day’s reflection was how the Holy Spirit has worked within us, and how we feel the joy of the Spirit. I reckoned that the Spirit had launched me into this Camino, though beyond that, I

could not see where it would lead me. I certainly did feel joy as we approached Manresa, as I chatted with one of the pilgrims who was doing this Camino for the first time, and we provided mutual encouragement to each other to complete the day's stage.

We were back in bunk beds in somewhat dingy rooms in Manresa – a vast difference from the single rooms we had here in Part 1. Back to Spartan settings, but I was just grateful that the next day was another day of rest. My blister throbbed the entire night, and its edges began to darken, as though blood was clotting around it. I slept badly, waking up frequently to wriggle my toes and make sure that blood was still flowing in my feet.

Stage 2: Sin and evil

La Cova is a Jesuit retreat house in Manresa, filled with spaces for meditation and reflection. It is a beautiful setting, a place in which it is difficult to reflect on sin and ugliness. But that was the task for the days ahead. On Day 7, we were to reflect on our state as sinners, but at the same time to know that we are nevertheless blessed: God still loves us sinners, so much so that he sent his Son as our Saviour to die for our sins. I spent the morning in a new meditation room – it is a serene space with prayer stools and a huge window looking out towards Montserrat, so quiet that you can hear every rustle of your own movements. It was a much-needed day of rest for my blisters, and this was my blessing for today, instead of having to suffer for my sins!

Another new feature at La Cova was in its connecting church, which used to be poorly lit. Shiny new mosaics had been installed, with figures telling stories from the Bible and of Ignatius' life. A cross which had been in the meditation garden was now also adorned with mosaics. I sat and enjoyed these new spaces, just being grateful for my many blessings.



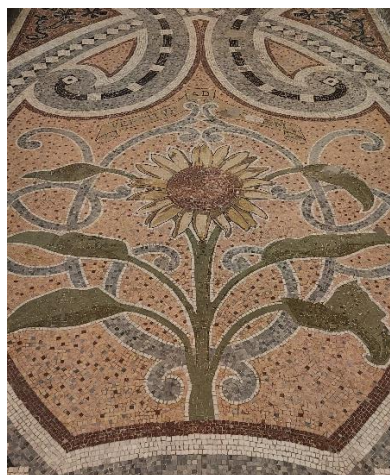
Above: St Ignatius, bearing Jesus' cross with him. Note that they "share" one eye – the allegory is that they see as one.

Left: Pentecost, with the Hand of God



Above: The Cross, now decorated with colourful mosaics.

It was a Sunday, and about an hour before mass in St Ignatius' cave, Fr Josep kindly tended to my blisters and those of another pilgrim. Such a thankless task, looking at pilgrims' feet – but as usual, he did so uncomplainingly. He gave me a "Moleskin" padding to stick over the large blistered portion of my left foot – I hoped it would survive the next day's walk!



Above: The Cave

Left: Fr Josep's part-time job

*Right: The sunflower – remember to turn to
the sun / the Son*

Day 8 was a new day – for the first time this Camino, we would be walking an unfamiliar path, one that we had not tread during Part 1.

We first stopped at the Well of Light, a place near the Cardoner River where Ignatius received enlightenment on many matters spiritual and intellectual, henceforth becoming a new man.

While praying in thanksgiving for this enlightenment, a further realisation dawned on Ignatius: during his time in Manresa, he often saw a beautiful glittering object which gave him great consolation when he saw it and sorrow when it disappeared. This object now appeared again during his prayer, but with less lustre. He then realised that in fact not a holy apparition, but an evil one. He thereafter dispelled it every time he saw it.



We also visited a little church in Viladordis, the Church of Our Lady of Good Health, where Ignatius left his belt, the last of his worldly belongings, after previously leaving his clothes at Igualada and sword at Montserrat. The church was next to an estate of a wealthy family that gave Ignatius some hospitality. Legend has it that Ignatius told that family that as long as they kept the belt and continued to help the poor, they would want for nothing. The house, sizeable even by today's standards, still stands in the large field next to the church.

We walked by a natural bridge and train tracks, then came to a bridge, the Pont de Vilomara, that marked the "border" between Manresa and Barcelona, where Ignatius bade a fond farewell to his friends. Overcome with emotion, he could not find any words, but merely put one hand over his heart with the other pointing to the sky, as if to say, "*As long as I live, I will take you in my heart. When I am in heaven, I will always pray for you.*" He then headed for Barcelona, where he hoped to catch a ship at the port to get to Rome.



*Left and right:
Bridges – natural
and man-made.*



*Bottom right: At
the Pont de
Vilomara, where
only one pilgrim
fully realised the
significance of
this bridge and
imitated Ignatius’
arm actions!*



For the rest of that morning, Montserrat kept sneaking back into view. This was puzzling, as we were supposedly headed towards Barcelona and leaving the mountain behind, but it seemed not to be so.

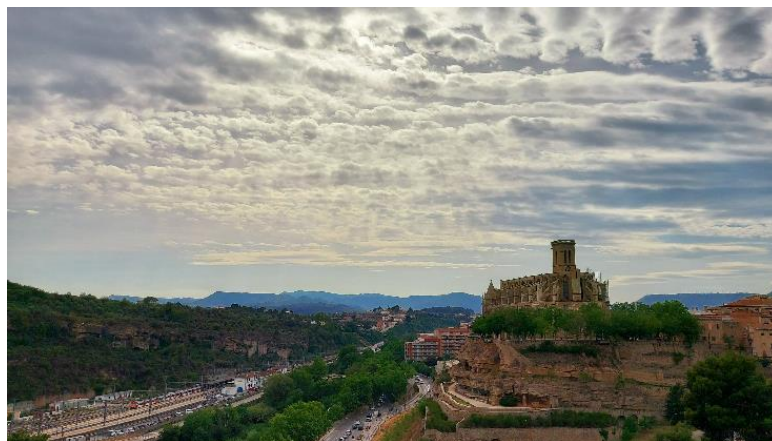
We eventually arrived at the confluence of the Llobregat and Cardener Rivers, where we stopped for a picnic lunch.



The day’s reflection was still on sin – not so much our personal sins, but on the reality that it exists in the world. Taking a leaf from Ignatius’ sudden clarity that his “beautiful vision” was in fact something evil, we were to pray for the ability to clearly see sin at work.

I did not think much about this that day, as my thoughts were instead on Ignatius’ sad farewell to his friends at the bridge, and all the new surroundings. Of course, I also kept wondering whether my blisters were getting better. (They were not.)

This day’s trek ended rather suddenly, as Fr Josep probably took pity on us, and decided to cut short the day’s walk at 15 km, allowing us to take a local train back to La Cova, saying that we needed to save our energy for the next two days. Oh how right he was.



A final view of Manresa cathedral

Day 9 was unusual because for the only time this pilgrimage, our luggage would not be coming with us. We thus needed to walk with a day's change of clothing, and something for the night. It made our packs heavier of course – quite in keeping with the idea of carrying our sins like burdens around. Like in that old Enid Blyton story, “The Land of Far Beyond”. We took a train to Castellbell y Vilar (where we were to have ended the day before, but for the “discount” we received from Fr Josep), and started a 25 km trek. I recorded this in my journal as the “first brutal day” of this pilgrimage.

The morning started pleasantly enough, as we walked past men fishing by a river, and shaded railroad tracks. We again kept seeing Montserrat, and seemed to be closer to it than previously! Two pilgrims “abandoned” midway, and took a train to our destination. The afternoon then went by in a blur of trails and brutal uphill, including one that was so difficult that a pilgrim with a bad knee burst into tears, and could not continue until some stronger pilgrims helped her with her backpack. She later said that she thought she would die on that uphill. It did not seem like hyperbole. We also walked past small housing estates in the Montserrat national park area, and I was convinced at one point that a brightly-painted house was one that we had passed on our way to Montserrat five days before. I asked Fr Josep if this was so, and he laughed, saying that I must be so tired as to be hallucinating!



Montserrat AGAIN!



Uphill, uphill, all day long

We walked through a “tunnel” of what seemed like a bamboo grove at one point, and came out into a road where we passed a large house in the middle of nowhere called Nhoa, which Fr Josep told us was a house of ill-repute. It was certainly apt that we passed this place on a day we were contemplating sin.

As the afternoon wore on, my feet hurt quite badly from the blisters, but yet it was somehow bearable. I spoke minimally to my fellow-pilgrims, saving my energy to get through the day, and to our destination, Terrassa. I wondered if I was being anti-social, but didn't quite have enough energy to care. The day's reflection was to accept our sinfulness and repent for bringing disharmony and disorder to the world. Since every step was difficult and painful, I quite easily imagined that this was big-time penance for perhaps some big-time sins. I certainly thought that if this was paying for my sins, then I had paid the debt, and then some!

After thinking about the destructive quality of sin, we were to speak to Jesus about the forgiveness we had received. I would have liked to believe that after the hardship of the day, I should have received forgiveness!



Terrassa!

When we finally arrived in Terrassa, we voted to stop first at a bar for a much-needed cold drink, before heading to our hostel. And were we grateful that we did so, because the hostel was a further 4 km away, on the other side of town! Though we were 12-to-a-room, it was a clean and new hostel. It had been a long day, and I unusually finished everything on my plate for dinner (including a DIY crème brulee!), then fell asleep quickly. A good thing too, because a few hours later, I was awakened by a surround-sound orchestra of snoring from a number of other pilgrims. Another pilgrim and I got out of our beds and prodded the snorers, to no avail. I couldn't help but laugh, though I would pay for the lack of sleep the next day.

Stage 3: Getting to know Jesus; following Him closely

Day 10 would bring us to Barcelona, and back to the lovely convent we stayed at on our first night. I was looking forward to that, but first had to get through our longest day on the road – 34 km. It turned out to be unforgettable, though perhaps not for the reasons one would like.

With this day, we started the “second week” of St Ignatius’ spiritual exercises, in which we were asked to deepen our personal relationship with Jesus Christ, by seeing Him clearly, loving Him and following Him.

We had a pleasant morning spell again – walking through shaded grassy parks out of Terrassa. The rest of the morning passed in a blur, and we arrived at the outskirts of Sant Cugat for lunch – a fairly new and built-up area, with many industrial and office blocks. We stopped at a faux-poshly-named fast food joint (Viena), where I was hungry enough to eat a large burger and then have a mango dessert – a good thing, too, because I would need all that fuel later.

We got fairly quickly to the Parc Natural de Collserola, which was on the edge of Barcelona. This gave me the (wrong) impression that we were near our destination.





As the afternoon wore on, my blistered feet began to complain again. One of the graces we were supposed to pray for this day was to feel personally called to journey alongside Jesus as his companion and co-labourer. I wasn't quite in the spiritual space to think in such esoteric terms.

However, I realised that internalising my pain, trying to conserve energy by being quiet, and seeking strength from within was perhaps not quite working. I thus decided to chat to my fellow pilgrims, in the hope that the conversation would distract me from the pain of my feet. And so it proved. I chatted with the vicar as we descended the Collserola mountain range, singing our favourite hymns and pop songs, as well as telling each other about good science fiction stories we had read.

The time passed quickly, and before long, we came to an opening from which we could see Barcelona! We whooped and cheered, not realising that we had some distance to go.

On the way down, the pilgrim who had been battling the knee issue suddenly had something snap in her knee. Another had forgotten his gout medication and was thus in pain as well. As was Fr Josep's rule, we had to wait for each other. We thus stood for long periods waiting for them during their slow descent. It was during those minutes that I began to feel the blood pool in my feet, which began to swell. As I had laced my boots tightly to prevent slipping and more friction for the blister, the discomfort built up quickly. However, I didn't dare to loosen my laces for fear that it might worsen the blisters.

We finally made it to the bottom of the mountain, and were along a road which I recognised led to the convent. We were near! However, as the pilgrim with the busted knee could no longer walk, Fr Josep tried to hail her a taxi. Oddly, taxis do not pick up passengers by the roadside in Barcelona; one must go to a cab rank. It thus took ages before a taxi stopped. Evening was falling, and a cool breeze began blowing. Standing by the roadside, I felt like I was catching a chill. When a taxi finally stopped and we all looked longingly at it, Fr Josep said, "Only one!" (Meaning that only the pilgrim with the busted knee would be going in the taxi). However, once she boarded the taxi, she was swiftly followed by the pilgrim with the gout, and then suddenly a third pilgrim who had been suffering from bad allergies slipped into the taxi as well! Powerlessly, I thought, "Hey, you're not supposed to do that!" I looked in horror as Fr Josep shut the door and the taxi pulled away, for my exact thought then was, "Ohhh shit," because I knew in that instant that I was the "weakest link" left in the group, and would be the slowest.

It turned out that we were not *that* near the convent, for we still had to trudge along the road for a further 7 km, or another hour. I brought up the rear, and the group had to stop often to wait for me, although I was moving as quickly as my body would allow. I again walked alone, feeling utterly bad for slowing the group down. It dawned on me that we had been on the road for nearly 10 hours that day, and I had never been on my feet for that long before. In addition to my blisters, the top of my left foot began to hurt. Every step was a mini burst of pain, I had run out of water, and had never felt so tired. I had also never had to continue moving through that much pain before – normally, one stops the pain-inflicting activity when one gets injured or feels pain. But not this time. We needed to get to our destination, so I gritted my teeth and

fought the battle of mind over body. I did not know where the strength came from, but I actually made it.

It was past 7 pm when we finally arrived at the convent. I stumbled into my room, filled up my bottle with water, sat on the bed, and drank nearly a litre of water at one go. I was wiped out. It was probably at least 10 minutes before I could muster any energy to move again to take a shower. I felt very cold, and feared that I had caught a chill. I did not dare to inspect the blisters which I knew had worsened, and decided that I would deal with my feet when I had re-fuelled after dinner. I limped to the basement meal hall, but hardly ate, then shuffled slowly back to my room. The Polish nun-in-charge saw my suffering, and in “sign language”, told me not to take the stairs but the lift instead, pressed the lift button for me, then shooed me to my room to rest. Perhaps the exertions of the day had gotten to me by then, but her simple act of kindness brought a tear to my eye.

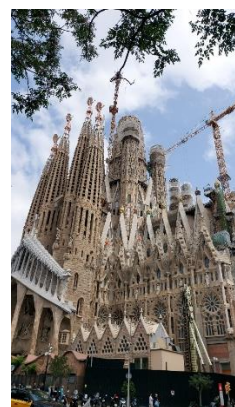
Back in my room, I finally plucked up the courage to inspect my feet, and saw that my left foot was so bruised and swollen that the skin was shiny. And on the other foot, the blisters had spread from the ball of my feet to between my toes! Totally gross. By the grace of God, a friend was walking the Camino de Santiago at the time, so we were in the same time zone and had been exchanging messages. I told him about my blister problem, and said it was puzzling because these boots served me so well in the Alps. He noted that boots that were suitable for the Alps might not be suitable for the hot weather of Spain – and then the penny dropped. Were the blister problems because I was in the wrong type of hiking boots all along?? Then and there, I resolved that I would buy a new pair of shoes the next day.

One of that day’s reflections, as it turned out, was St Ignatius’ observation that those who wish to throw in their lot with Jesus Christ must labour with Him, “so that following Him in pain, they may also follow Him in the glory of His Kingdom.” Another reflection was to notice that we were in a large city, or “worldly kingdom”, and to compare it to God’s kingdom. When thinking of whether my life was oriented to an earthly kingdom or an eternal one, I thought about what I could give up from this world, and oddly, my thoughts went again to my job! Is it the most “worldly possession” that my life is oriented towards, then, that keeps me from embracing God’s kingdom? Who knows. I did wonder, though, if my pain for that day represented a kind of suffering for Christ – if so, is the path to God’s Kingdom that difficult?

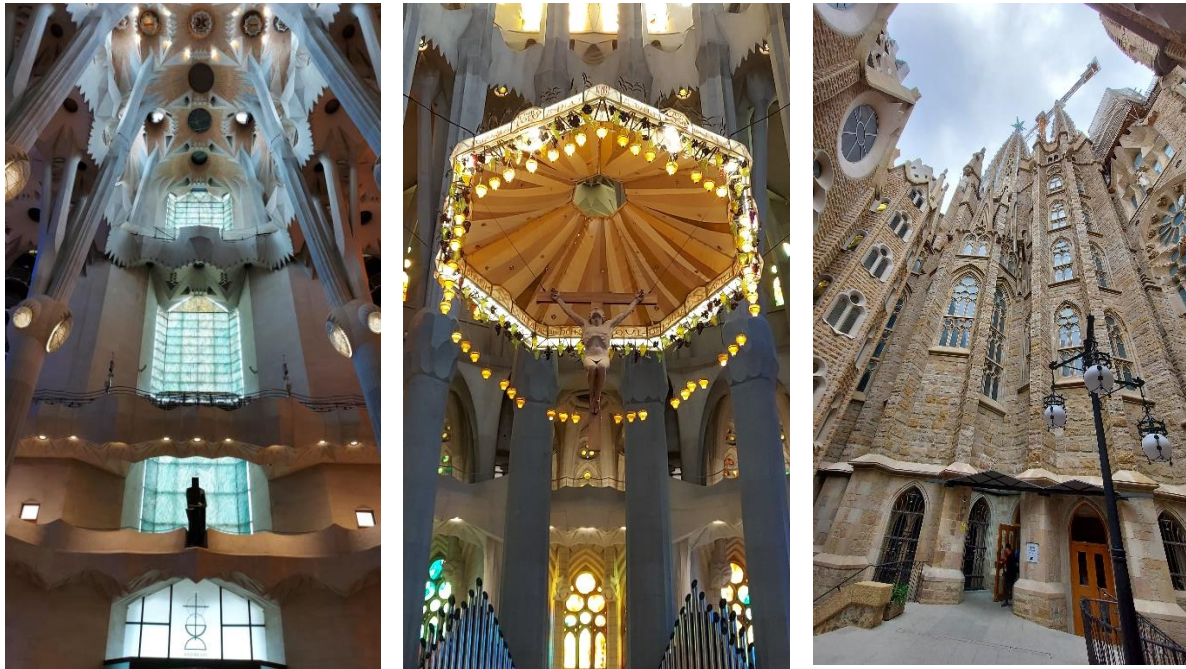
Thus ended the physically toughest day of my life, and one of the most memorable ones, though not for the reasons one would normally expect.

Day 11 brought some sweet respite, as it was a rest day in Barcelona before we moved on to Italy. A handful of us pilgrims visited the Sagrada Familia church again, which must have “grown” more towers since we last visited in 2019. I have lost count. We took an audio tour of the church this time, and I noticed aspects of the interior which I had not before.

How far this had come since my first visit more than ten years ago, when one could still see the sky upon entering the complex, and I recall being horrified at the thought that I had paid €8 to see a construction site. The church is supposed to be completed in 2026, and they do seem to be making good progress, but who knows if it will be done on schedule.



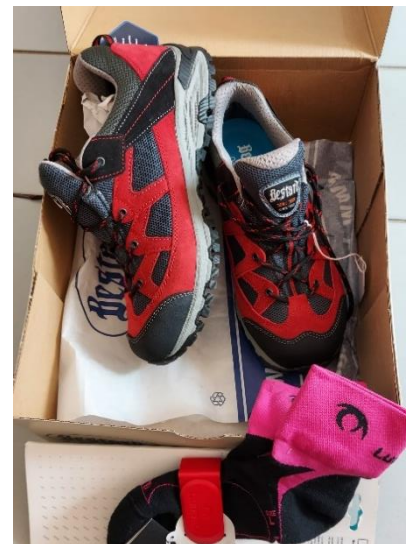
After our tour, we found the quiet inner courtyard that housed the office which dispensed “stamps” for our pilgrims’ passports – one of the few places in that complex that one can get entry into without a ticket. All one had to do was say, “Peregrino” to the security guards and wave our pilgrim’s “passports” as the password to entry. We would get to use that password again for “special entry” before the end of this pilgrimage.



As my fellow pilgrims went on to visit other Gaudí sights, I headed to my most important destination for the day – a hiking shoe store! I selected a pair of Bestard shoes, a Spanish brand. Amazingly, my feet immediately felt happy when I tried them on. I was cautiously optimistic that this was the beginning of the end of my blister problems.

I realised later that evening that the bruising and pain on my foot had a familiar sensation: it was the feeling of a sprain. That somehow calmed me – the knowledge that I had survived sprains before and that this, too, would pass.

Lunch that day was a veritable feast – with tapas, a sangria, and a dessert that unbeknownst to me had alcohol in it. I was very stuffed and slightly intoxicated after lunch, but after the travails of the previous day, I deserved it!



Deserving of a photo – the shoes that saved my pilgrimage

Back at the convent, it was time for the day’s reflection. It was about recognising the image of Jesus that stands out most to many of us – as a healer of bodies, spirits and broken relationships with God, by means of forgiveness. This mercy in forgiveness is given out of His grace, and we have done nothing to earn it. We were asked to think of the scenes of healing from Jesus’ ministry, and to ask what we wanted Jesus to do to heal us. In the story of Jesus healing Bartimaeus, Jesus asks him, “*What do you want me to do for you?*” Bartimaeus answers,

“Rabbuni, let me see again.” One might think that it is an odd question for Jesus to ask, since He surely knows what healing we need or want. One interpretation is that we must own our problems and articulate our desires, even to Jesus. Most aptly, a line in our reflection book read, “I present myself to Jesus as one in need of healing in body, mind and spirit.” This day, I gratefully accepted the time of rest and acknowledged my need for healing in body!

Italian Odyssey

On Day 12, we flew to Italy. Ignatius went by sea, in a voyage lasting five days and five nights, which must be arduous. We could not replicate this because although Fr Josep had tried to plan a ferry crossing, he found that it would take too long (one day!) and would be too difficult. As he joked, “This is a pilgrimage, not torture!” In fact, Ignatius’ troubles did not end upon his arrival on Italian shores – he landed in the coastal town of Gaeta, but it shut out travellers due to the plague, and he had no strength to go to the next town. He was saved by a duchess, who happened to be leaving the town in a procession, and granted him entry. Mercifully, we had no such travails. At the Barcelona airport, we said goodbye to a pilgrim who had to cut short her trip and return home due to family issues. She had come with four friends, and they bade each other a teary farewell. I suppose that unexpected goodbyes are often the most difficult. We boarded our budget flight and before long, arrived in Lazio, Italy.

A mini-bus took us to Sutri, an ancient town some 60 km northwest of Rome. Sutri was a small town with steep, narrow cobblestoned streets, and we made an almighty din as we dragged our suitcases up to our AirBnB quarters. As there were no lodgings large enough to take all of us, we were split into three different apartments. The one that I was in was the furthest uphill, but it was a lovely three-bedroom apartment with a kitchen and a dining room, and we felt like tourists for the day.

We visited a nearby medieval cave which had been used as a Mithraeum (a temple to the Roman god Mithras), but was later converted to a Christian church. It has paintings on its walls and ceilings, and is so precious to the locals that a custodian came specially to unlock the door for us, turn on the lights briefly, then shut everything again after we left.



Behind the cave was a Roman amphitheatre which had been rediscovered only in the past 100 years. We asked a pilgrim whom we knew had a good singing voice to stand in the middle of the arena and sing a song. The acoustics carried her voice to us in the stands, and it was quite

stunning that the design maintained its function despite being ancient, mossy and overgrown. Funnily, it was here, while listening to the audioguide for the amphitheatre, that I learnt the word “vomitorium”, which to our modern ears sounds awful, but is not. It is the passageway below the amphitheatre, which allows the crowds to leave the venue rapidly after an event. I wondered how the word “vomit” evolved such that it is used in a completely different context today. But my etymology lesson would have to wait for some other time.



The town of Sutri looked frozen in time, perhaps from the 1960s. There were few cars, and the locals spoke very little English. Even the owner of the local tobacco shop had the air of an old Don Corleone-type. Best not to mess with him.

That evening, we had dinner at the local restaurant, which had red and white checked tablecloths, a kitchen presided over by an imperious Nonna whom I felt obliged to greet as we entered and left the restaurant, and a boss with a white beard who looked like George Lucas.

We had *al dente* mushroom pasta for starters (though the portion size was large enough to be a main course in most other places), chicken and chips for the main course, and sweet breads for our dessert.



The clientele (apart from us), the Nonna, the location and the ambience of the restaurant created a mood that made it undeniably *the* most Italian place I had ever been in in my life. A rowdy election rally with a tinny sound system that was being held in the town square when we left the restaurant added to that mood, and I sensed that I would never be this deep in the heart of Italy again.

That day's reflection was a continuation of the exercise in getting to know Jesus and seeing Him clearly – this time, it was to think about Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted; blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth ...* a series of counter-intuitive and counter-cultural teachings to challenge us. Truth be told, amidst all the touristy activities we enjoyed this day, it was difficult to think in these terms. I stored these up for another day.

The doctor was one of the pilgrims living in our apartment and had decided that he would cook breakfast for us. We thus had an absolute treat the next morning – bacon with scrambled eggs, asparagus, and good coffee.

So we began a happy morning on Day 13, as we said goodbye to Sutri and walked past some caves (which were used as tombs) on our way out.

Clockwise from bottom left: Helen, Jim, Ade, Elaine, Helen, Jeanne and Anna

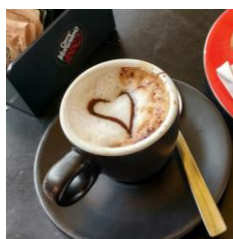


Above: All roads lead to Rome

Left: Caves

We would be on the Via Francigena these few days, a medieval route that brought visitors from northern Europe to the Eternal City. Our route took us alongside some roads, some mud paths (softened by the rain but not yet soggy), and even past a country club.

My blister issues (surely you didn't think they had ended!) had vastly improved since we did not walk much the past two days, but were not completely resolved. As they had begun to emit a liquid with a strange odour, I was concerned that it might mean infection, so I had gotten some antibiotic cream from the doctor. (I know, too much information ... but this story comes to a happy end, and soon.) The new shoes were definitely right for me, and my feet finally began to feel happy. For the first time since perhaps Day 2, I realised that I was walking without discomfort, and actually began to enjoy the time walking again. Seemed rather ridiculous in retrospect. I'm sure there are those who would ask, "How is this your idea of a holiday? Or a pilgrimage?" Well, suffering builds endurance, and endurance builds character!



Lunch was in a little town called Monterosi, and the local café's barista was every inch the stereotypical charming flirtatious Italian man, who made a heart design over my cappuccino foam and said, "For you." Here, I also discovered that Italy's version of "Twisties" is called "Fonzies"! Learn something new every day.

As it often happens when on holiday, we lose track of the days of the week. Thus it was only at this lunch stop, when I checked my phone and saw numerous messages from the parents of the teenagers in my Catechism class asking me which classroom today's class was in, that I realised it was Saturday! Is this an example of leaving your other life behind while on pilgrimage? We had been on the road for two weeks, and I wondered where the time had gone.



Later that afternoon, some of us who walked too slowly fell behind and were briefly lost. Reception was patchy and we could not get a proper geolocation on Google maps. However, one pilgrim had an Apple AirTag in his suitcase (which we guessed would have reached our destination by now), and when we tried to navigate by AirTag, it showed us the direction we should go! Would one say that Apple is amazing, or has it insidiously permeated into every aspect of our lives?

At the end of this day, we arrived in Campagnano di Roma, a little town with quite a pretty centre, but which would be remembered as the place that housed our worst lodgings for this pilgrimage. Some parts of the run-down building that we were in looked like a former kindergarten, but it now had a recreation room on the ground floor with a pool table which seemed to be a community space for teenagers.

The mattresses in our dormitory were so thin and the pillows so laughably lumpy that somewhat morbid jokes were cracked ... "Don't kick me in the face in the middle of the night, or I'll suffocate you." "If you do that, please, not with this pillow. I have standards!" Never had I been so glad to be enveloped in my 20-year-old sleeping bag, as grungy as it had become after all these years.



I think this was the town hall

Unsurprisingly, my blisters had become slightly squishy again by day's end. The moment of truth had come for a decision I had been wrestling with all afternoon. Should I walk the next day, or rest the blisters? Skipping a day of walking seemed like cheating, since this was a walking pilgrimage after all. But a chief reason for coming on this pilgrimage was so that I could walk into Rome, and also do the Pilgrimage of the Seven Churches (more on that later). I decided that these goals were more important than to be purist about how I got to my destination, and I decided I would not walk the next day. Once I told Fr Josep about this, a great sense of relief washed over me, and I knew it was the right decision.

One of today's reflections was to ponder the fact that Jesus, though sinless, chose to place himself amidst sinners as part of his ministry. In doing this, he left his mother in Nazareth and went to the Jordan to be baptised and thereafter began his ministry. Part of Ignatian contemplation is to place yourself within a Gospel story and imagine reacting to what is said and done in those scenes. Though this was not a story in the Gospels, I imagined the scene when Jesus told his mother that he was leaving her, to do what he needed to. She would surely have been a little sad, but at the same time understanding of his decision. I likened this to my decision to "leave" my fellow-pilgrims, if only for a day. Many expressed some sadness that I would not be joining them the next day, and that they'd miss me (which surprised me, since I

wasn't very talkative most of the time!). But I was at peace, and I knew I had made the right decision. And so, despite the awful bed and lumpy pillow, I slept very well that night.

Day 14, then, was a Sunday, and I would be bussing to our next destination! Two other pilgrims had also decided not to walk, and so we bought our bus tickets at a café-bar (yes, cafés in Italy sell bus tickets), then had our morning espresso there, as it was by the bus stop. It was a Feast Day, and the lady who sold us the bus tickets told us that the bus would be late. When we asked what time the bus would arrive, she replied with an insouciance unsurprising for an Italian, "It will come."

While we waited, our fellow-pilgrims walked past and waved goodbye, after which a procession came down the road, and we realised why traffic could not pass.



It turned out that there was a First Holy Communion mass that day, and it was a big deal in this little town.

The children, all dressed up for the occasion, walked in procession through the town with the priest (holding a loud-hailer and reciting prayers), followed by their parents and godparents. It did seem like the whole town was in this procession.

They headed into a church down the road, and I was tempted to join in the mass, if not for the bus we needed to catch.

While walking to the café earlier, we had seen a distinguished-looking man walking in the opposite direction, whom one of the pilgrims and I agreed was very handsome. Since she had Italian heritage, she declared herself most compatible with him. We named him Giovanni, and in quite a coincidence, he was in the procession – hopefully just a godparent, said my fellow-pilgrim, so that he would not be a married man. We snapped paparazzi shots of him so that we could tell this story later, in our rather unbecoming entertainment on a Sunday morning.

It was probably another hour before the bus arrived, during which time we wondered what progress our fellow-pilgrims were making. I was so grateful to have two others to share this adventure with, for if I had been waiting for the bus alone, my stress level would definitely have shot up as the minutes passed with no sign of the bus. When we finally boarded the bus and were on our way, I was delighted (perhaps too much so!) that we would reach our destination in perhaps half an hour, instead of six hours. I was so guilt-free that I realised this meant that I needed (or deserved!) the rest. My blisters and toes said a big thank you.

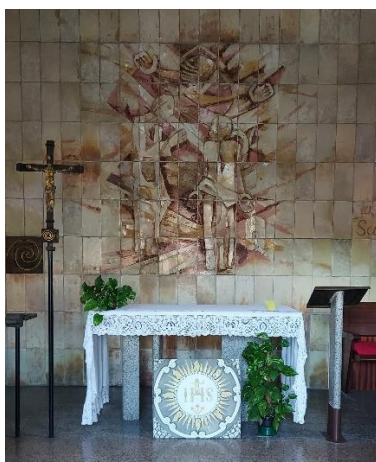


We arrived at our destination by 11 am, and checked in to our pilgrim lodgings whose name translated to Lady of the Sacred Heart. It was run by Indian nuns, and served an Indian community. We were in double rooms this time – no more dormitories! And after a decidedly un-pilgrim-like lunch of a salmon poke bowl, I settled in to catch up on my readings and reflections.



Today's reflection was on the war between the "Two Standards" (in Ignatius' military-speak). Jesus' way, which was one of simplicity, or the worldly way, which was of riches, honour and pride. It is easy of course to say that we want to walk with Jesus and go by his "way", but how many of us actually act on this and give up our worldly ways to do so?

We were in the city of La Storta today, which houses a little church that was the site of a major spiritual event in Ignatius' life. Ignatius had long prayed to be "placed with Jesus", and had asked Mary, "Place me with your son." Even after becoming a priest, he had put off saying his first mass until he felt adequately near to Jesus and better prepared. On his way to Rome, he came across a small and abandoned chapel on its outskirts, and stopped to pray. Here, he heard God saying to him, "*I will be with you*," and then saying to Jesus, "*I want you to receive this as your servant*," to which Jesus responded by saying to Ignatius, "*I want you to serve us*." This was the clearest sign to Ignatius that his vocation was to be a companion of Jesus, and that he had been accepted by the Trinity as a servant of Jesus. His prayer had been answered. Thus was the foundation of the Society of Jesus laid.



Above: Pictorial representation of Ignatius' vision

Left: La Storta, exterior and interior

This assurance, "*I will be with you*," was an echo of a promise found throughout the Bible – to Gideon, the prophets, Mary, and Paul. It was also the message underlying the famous "Footprints in the Sand" poem: that a man dreamt that he was walking on the beach with the Lord, and as scenes from his life flashed before him, he saw two sets of footprints – one his, and the other the Lord's. However, he then noticed that there were many times when there was only one set of footprints. He also noticed that these were the lowest times of his life. He asked why the Lord would leave him alone when he most needed the Lord. The Lord answered, "*My precious child, I love you and would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.*"

That evening, after the rest of the group had arrived at La Storta, Fr Josep said mass in the chapel in our pilgrim lodgings. He told us that on a previous reconnaissance trip here, he had stopped at a nearby church, and a lady there gave him a piece of paper as he was leaving. He did not want to take it, but she insisted. He put it in his bag and left, then forgot all about it. He only opened it when he got home, and realised that it was the "Footprints" poem. He included it in our reflection booklet, as this was also the theme for La Storta and the theme for the day – that God walks with us, and if He is with us, then who can defeat us?

Suddenly, it hit me – that during the excruciating Day 10, when I did not know how I had the strength to walk all that way in all that pain to reach the convent in Barcelona, there must have been only one explanation for it – not that it was my strength, or even that Christ was walking *with* me, but that ***He was carrying me***. Tears welled in my eyes, and I knew then that all the pain, the foot issues, would be fine. I would make it to Rome. In adversity, we can find blessings. For I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Everyone was exhausted by the end of that day, including me, even though I did not walk a fraction of what the rest did! My blisters had also finally begun to dry up – I could see three layers of drying skin, which meant blister upon blister upon blister?? Anyway, they gave me no more trouble.

Stage 4: Walk with Jesus, become like Him, and attain the love of God

I was excited to start Day 15, because this was the day we would enter Rome. I had last visited Rome as an impressionable undergraduate travelling with my sister, and although I had not thrown a coin into Trevi Fountain, I was finally returning!

As Ignatius' little chapel in La Storta was closed the previous evening when we tried to visit, we dropped by again on our way out of town – unfortunately, a mass was being said at the time. It being a tiny space, Fr Josep said it would not be appropriate for us to enter, as we would cause too much disruption. The pilgrim with the busted knee (which had been damaged enough to warrant a CT scan in Barcelona after that unforgettable day down the Collserola) had been determined to press on because she wanted to come to La Storta to visit this chapel again, after being extremely moved the first time she was here. So she alone went in and sat for a minute, while the rest of us waited outside. A heavy velvet curtain covered the doorway, and I could not resist peeking in. It truly was a tiny chapel, which seats perhaps no more than 15 or 20 people. The time was insufficient to get a sense of the magnitude of Ignatius' revelation there. I suppose there are some opportunities in life that we need to let pass. It was time to move on.



We passed a variety of scenes this morning – a Carabinieri building with such a weedy exterior that I wondered if it was a functioning police station; farms with cows; meadows with poppies; paths lined with tall trees; mud paths; thorny bushes ... and much of this time, we heard birdsong. It was a beautiful day.





We walked through a National Park, and saw a police car parked inside, but with no policemen in sight. I wondered if they were investigating some crime involving a missing person and a body buried in the park ... but this was not the time for such thoughts. We fought our way through some thorny brush, and had to pay close attention while walking, concentrating on the task at hand, lest we get nicked by the thorns.

We eventually came out into an open field, but after crossing it, we had to climb such a steep hill that there was a rope by the side of the path to pull yourself up with! Thank goodness, this slope was no more than 50 metres long. Over the hill, we were suddenly back in “civilisation”, on the outskirts of Rome.



After a quick coffee stop, we continued through a pleasant shared track for pedestrians and cyclists, behind a housing estate. The paved flat ground was a refreshing change from having to watch out for protruding roots, muddy spots and overhanging branches. The change of scene was completed by graffitied buildings and the sound of children playing.

We moved at a good clip, and I enjoyed every pain-free step I took in my new shoes.

Today's meditation was to pray to know Jesus better, and to have deeper insight into the attractiveness of His call. One of the scripture passages we were to reflect on was the story of Mary and Martha during Jesus' visit to their home – Mary sat and listened to Jesus while Martha busied herself with all the preparations that needed to be made. When Martha complained to Jesus that Mary was not helping her, Jesus said, “*Martha, Martha, you worry and fret about so many things, and yet few are needed, indeed only one. It is Mary who has chosen the better part, and it is not to be taken from her.*” Many of us end up being a “Martha”, trying to do a lot and being resentful, instead of being a “Mary”. However, today's reflection asked if we could be both – a “contemplative-in-action”. I thought of us moving steadily through the thorny brush during our second hour of silent meditation – moving deliberately and meaningfully while contemplating – is that the “contemplative-in-action”? How do we transfer such action into our daily lives? Work steadily and uncomplainingly as a demonstration of our love for God?

During our walk along the paved path behind the housing estate, I got to talking with the pilgrim who had been my designated roommate whenever we had double rooms. Earlier in the pilgrimage, when other pilgrims were ailing and she worried that something might happen to her, she told me the number of the combination lock to her suitcase, in case we had to open it in an emergency. I greatly appreciated the trust she placed in me. This day, as I was in a far chattier mood since I was not walking in pain, we spoke about the challenges to our faith. She told me about a crisis of faith that she went through, and asked me why I believed there was a God. I did my best spiel, and she concluded at the end it that I simply had the gift of faith. Is it that simple, or is faith something we must work at and build up? Since we were walking at the front of the group and just behind Fr Josep, he heard most of our conversation, and only interrupted once on a point of doctrine that I was unsure of. I daresay that this meant that most or all of what I said about Catholicism during the conversation was accurate! If faith was a gift, then I was grateful for it, and that it allowed me to accept Jesus' call.

Suddenly, our path ended and we arrived at an outcrop. We were in Parco de Monte Cocci, which overlooked the Vatican City, and from here, we could see the Dome of St Peter's Basilica and the Vatican Gardens! The sight truly lifted my spirits, and I was elated that I had saved my feet for this. I daresay everyone in the group was similarly delighted to set eyes on St Peter's.



Lunch was in a lovely pizzeria that sold pizza by the "size" – rectangular pizzas with all manner of toppings, and you told the server when to "stop" as she moved the pair of scissors down the length of the pizza. You then paid for the pizza by its weight. I had a "Carbonara" slice and a salmon mozzarella slice, plus focaccia and cappuccino. I felt almost Italian!



Re-fuelled, we took a quick walk through Rome's busy streets to the walls of the Vatican City, then queued up for our final stamps in our pilgrim's passports, and to receive our certificates of completion of the pilgrimage. I felt unusually thrilled to receive mine!



It was a delightful moment, and the hordes of tourists did not put me off. We happily took our souvenir photos in St Peter's Square, and celebrated the technical completion of the pilgrimage.

I say "technical", because yes, there was more walking and reflection to come.



In Rome, our lodgings were split again – I was blessed to have been assigned to a Jesuit retreat house just a ten-minute walk from the walls of the Vatican, in a hospital-room-like set-up and *en suite* bathroom with grab-bars clearly meant for an elderly person. But it also had a writing desk and shelves. I wondered if this used to be a centre for palliative or long-term care, which had been converted into a retreat house. No matter – I was grateful for this residence for the next few nights, especially since the other group was in a house a further 45 minutes’ walk away, and one pilgrim who had been struggling with a back problem was in tears by the time they arrived at their lodgings.

Fr Josep told us that after unpacking and resting, we could head straight to St Peter’s Basilica for evening mass and skip all queues by simply wearing our grungy pilgrim’s garb, go to a side gate by Bernini’s Colonnade, wave our pilgrim’s passport, and say, “Peregrino.” And so it proved!

A bonus we had was front-row seats at mass. What a blessing, what a day!



Just a two-minute walk from our Jesuit retreat house was a little café/restaurant, Wine Bar de Penitenzieri (so named for the road it was on, not so much because of its customers) and us few pilgrims who were housed there made this our dinner and breakfast haunt over the next few days. It was frequented by many priests, and became a place for my fellow-pilgrims to spot priests and cardinals of renown. I just enjoyed the coffee, pastries, Carbonara, Amatriciana, and all-round great food there.



On Day 16, our reflection carried the complex title of the “Contemplation to attain the love of God”. It was about contemplating God’s Divine Love – to be aware of God’s gracious and abundant love, and to respond in kind with love, generosity and freedom. To start, we had to bear in mind that love is expressed more in actions than words, and that love is a communication between two persons. We were then to pray in four steps: First, to call to mind our blessings from God and to consider what to give of ourselves in return as an offering. Second, to notice how God is present and alive in all our experiences around us. Third, to consider how God has laboured for us in all created things and persons we have met on this pilgrimage. Fourth, to notice how every good gift descends from above, and our strength comes only from God’s power. We were then to contemplate what we would return to God for all the gifts we received this pilgrimage. So many thoughts to hold! I recognised all the gifts I had received so far, and had no doubt that these as well as the strength I had to walk all this way came from above. But did not yet know what I would give back.

To add to the weight of our spiritual inputs, we would be doing a walking pilgrimage-within-a-pilgrimage today, the Pilgrimage of the Seven Churches. The roots of this pilgrimage are unclear, but St Philip Neri made it famous in the 1500s, and Ignatius undertook it as well. Seven is a number often found in the bible, and this day, at each of the seven churches, we were asked to contemplate a gift of the Holy Spirit, and seek liberation from a deadly sin.

St Peter's Basilica

We began in St Peter's Basilica, where we were asked to remember that Peter was a humble fisherman, called by Jesus to serve. Could we be similarly God-fearing, and answer that call to service?

Here, the vice we contemplated was gluttony, and the virtue, temperance. Gluttony is excess, so I found it ironic that here in the marble-clad and bronze-hued splendour of St Peter's, we were asked to contemplate temperance, for where was the restraint in building this monument? Or could we excuse this by saying that while a Pope of days gone by built this as a monument to glorify himself, it has come to stand for something greater – to honour St Peter, and a stunning place for worship?



St Paul's Outside-the-Walls

We then trudged a fairly long way to get outside the walls of Rome, to the Basilica of St Paul's Outside-the-Walls (to be distinguished from St Paul's Within-the-Walls, which is an Episcopal church). Its austere exterior and interior formed a stark contrast to St Peter's, and the larger-than-life statue out front of St Paul with his sword cut a heroically impressive figure.



Here, we were to pray for the grace to live the faith courageously – to be warriors for the faith as Paul was, and to live lives of piety. The vice we contemplated was anger (or wrath), and the virtue, patience. I thought it was quite apt to think about this sin here, since Paul is known to have been an angry man, and did everything with passion. First, it was persecuting Christians, but after his conversion, it was spreading Christianity. I suppose that in him we learn that it is fine to be fiery, but it must be for the right cause?

St Sebastian at the Catacombs

Our next stop was still outside the walls of Rome, near the Catacombs of St Callixtus – the church of St Sebastian, who was martyred as he was shot to death with arrows. We were reminded of the martyrs' lack of fear of death – in giving up their lives due to their belief in Jesus and His resurrection, they became witnesses to life. The vice we were asked to think about here was lust, and the virtue, chastity, which frees us to love everyone without objectifying them.



A short distance from St Sebastian's was a small church known as the "*Quo vadis*" church. As the story goes, Peter was fleeing from Rome to avoid persecution, when Jesus appeared to him along the way. Peter asked him, "Domine, quo vadis?" ("Lord, where are you going?") And Jesus replied that he was returning to Rome to be crucified a second time. It was then that Peter understood that he needed to turn around and return to Rome. There, he was martyred. So in this small church is a pair of footprints in stone, symbolising Jesus' feet, stopping along the road to Rome at that moment Peter posed the question to Him.



Given the questions lurking in my mind earlier on in the pilgrimage about the purpose and direction of my life, I was quite taken with this story. In my mind, though, the roles were reversed. I imagined Jesus asking *me*, "*Quo vadis?*" Well, I wasn't sure if I knew the answer.

Perhaps, like Peter, my feet were pointing the wrong way and I needed to turn around?

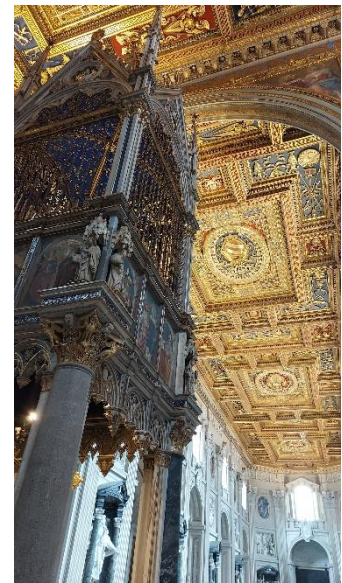


An unusual tapestry hangs in this church – a picture of Mary carrying the baby Jesus. But unlike standard renditions where Jesus is often pictured looking at the viewer of the painting, this one was of a mother cradling her baby in her arms and looking lovingly at him. You could only see a part of the baby's face, so instead of trying to show Jesus as a baby-king, as we commonly

see, the point of the painting seemed to be to depict the love of a mother. Why don't more paintings show this?

St John Lateran

The fourth of our seven churches was back within the walls of Rome. The Basilica of St John Lateran is the seat of the bishop of Rome, who is of course the Pope. Colossal statues of the 12 apostles (with St Paul replacing Judas) line either side of the main nave of this church.



Left: St Matthew

While these marble sculptures were impressive, they felt too large for this space, rendering the sight of them quite overwhelming and almost oppressive. The scale of the statues made them fit for St Peter's, but they were stuck in a space less than half its size. Still, two statues in particular struck me – St Matthew, with extremely muscular forearms, and St John, looking extraordinarily youthful and refined.

This being the “cathedral” of Rome, we were asked to think about those who guide or counsel us in our faith. The virtue to reflect on in this church was gratitude, and the vice, greed. Greed, especially in a desire to gain something for oneself or in the refusal to give something up, is selfishness. In this way, it forms an apt opposition to gratitude and the disposition that allows us to be generous and give without expectations. I felt gratitude towards the apostles for carrying on and spreading Jesus' teachings, much to the benefit of us all today.

Holy Cross in Jerusalem

After a short break for a quick bite, we were on our way again, to the Basilica of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem. I recalled that during my first visit to Rome, my sister and I referred to this as the “three big pieces church”.

This church is known for possessing the three largest fragments of Jesus' crucifix that exist today, along with a nail, and two thorns from His crown of thorns. These were supposedly brought here by Empress Helena, Emperor Constantine's mother.

I could not help but think that during her journeys back in the day to search for relics of Jesus, the Empress must have been



conned at least once ... who knew, then, whether these items were authentic?

But I suppose that this was not the point.

Here, we were asked to pray for the grace to understand the extent of Jesus' expression of His love for us by dying on the cross, and for the fortitude to follow Him. The virtue we were asked to reflect on was diligence, and its opposing vice, sloth.

However, I found myself puzzling instead over the notion that God loved us so much that He sent His Son to save us from our sins. Yet, this "saving" involved dying a horrible death.

Did this mean that God loved us more than His Son?



St Lawrence Outside-the-Walls

Well, the expression "dying a horrible death" was totally apt for the penultimate stop, the Basilica of St Lawrence Outside-the-Walls. Lawrence was a deacon of a community of poor people, and when the soldiers of the Emperor Valerian came along and demanded that the treasures of the church be handed over to them, Lawrence pointed to the poor, crippled and blind around him, and said, "These are the true treasures of the Church." Needless to say, the soldiers were unimpressed, and Lawrence was ordered to be put to death by grilling on a hot rack. The story goes that while being barbecued alive, he quipped, "I'm well done. Turn me over!" To this day, that rack on which he was supposedly grilled remains on display in this church. What a grim tale!



The reflection here was to ask for the grace to sincerely love all those around us, be they rich or poor. We needed to understand the dignity of everyone around us. The vice we were asked to think about was envy, and the virtue, gratitude that allows us to be charitable to everyone. On this, my insight was that we must stop keeping score – then we can just be grateful for what comes our way, and not be envious of others. Life will be much simpler and happier that way!

St Mary Major

In the late afternoon, we reached our last stop, the Basilica of St Mary Major. The interior of this large church was grand and full of gold leaf decorations, but as we had walked at least 27 km this day, and my ankles were so sore that I spent much of the time here just sitting and reflecting.

In Rome, Ignatius and his companions were initially persecuted for heresy. Determined to fight this false claim, he convinced the Pope to set up a court to ascertain his guilt. After the court considered his teachings, doctrines and way of living, it declared Ignatius and his companions innocent.

It was after this exoneration that Ignatius celebrated his first mass on Christmas night, 1538, in this church. Ignatius had wanted to celebrate his first mass in the Holy Land, but did so here instead as he was unable to make the journey.

A monstrous structure now sits over the little altar where he celebrated this first mass, almost completely obscuring it. They should really have left it as-is, unadorned! What does remain, however, are the main figurines of what used to be the altarpiece with a nativity scene, which is said to be the first-known nativity scene.



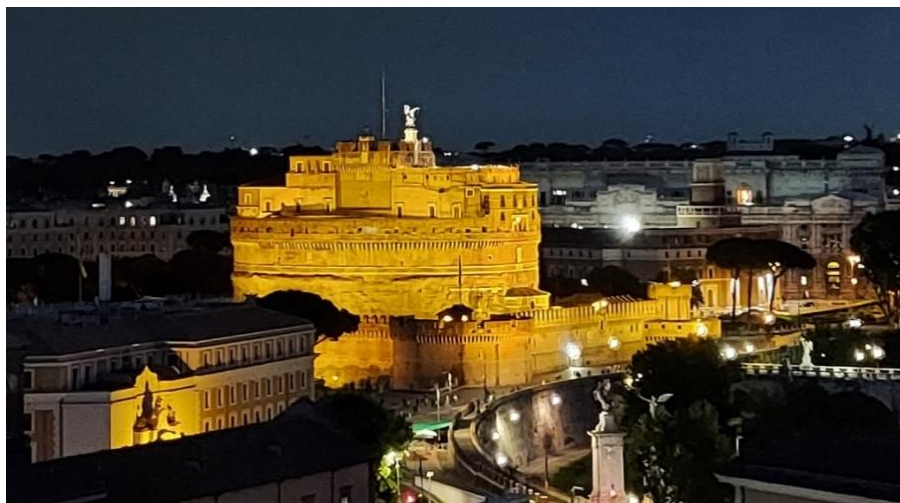
Presumably, Ignatius chose this altar as the next-closest thing he could do to actually celebrating his first mass in Bethlehem.



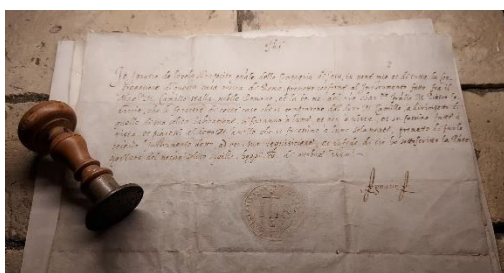
See the original altar in that little dark space?

Mary kept the many mysteries of her life with Jesus in her heart, and here, we were to pray that like Mary, we would have the wisdom to keep in our hearts everything that we came to understand during this pilgrimage. The virtue we were asked to reflect on here was humility, which disposes us to follow Christ's humble path. The opposing vice was pride. It had been a long day, and I was not quite in the mental or spiritual space to properly complete this reflection. Instead, I thought about Ignatius' ability for improvisation and acceptance of variations to his plans. Mary also had to undergo major life shocks and changes of plans. The message for us must be that we should accept whatever life throws our way with openness, and do our best in the circumstances.

I was basilica-ed out by the end of this day – exhausted with the walking, spiritual reflections, and visual overload. I nevertheless sneaked to the rooftop of our retreat house after dinner, to take in the lovely view of Castel Sant’Angelo. Breathtaking!



So we made it to Day 17, the last day of our pilgrimage. We visited the Gesù, a cosy Jesuit church with adjoining quarters that showed Ignatius’ life in pictures, and which also contained some of his papers, his slippers, and a bronze mould of his head. Here also was the room where Ignatius spent his last days, looking out of the little window at the stars, and pondering his life.



Fr Josep celebrated our final mass in this room, and I was oddly moved to be in the very place where Ignatius breathed his last. Casting my mind back to the house in Loyola where he had been born and experienced his conversion, tracing his footsteps through Arantzazu, Igualada, Montserrat, Manresa, Barcelona, La Storta and Rome, I thought, “What an awesome journey!”

Today’s reflection was, “Go back to Galilee!” Since Jesus was from Galilee, I interpreted this as an instruction for us to return home, but to bring with us our transformed selves and a positive spirit. Perhaps this was the answer to the question, “*Quo vadis?*”

As Jesus said, “I will be with you always, until the end of time.” This is so even if we do not yet feel worthy – we have become accustomed to walking with Jesus, and He will stay with us.

At the end of this pilgrimage, I was full of thoughts which would take me months to process. I was caught up in work upon returning home, and did not complete these writings till a year later. Revisiting these reflections and re-living the pilgrimage did allow me to walk with Jesus again, which, in the words of Psalm 23, revived my drooping spirit.

Looking back, I realised that one should never under-estimate a “repeat journey”, as it is never the same. It is in a different time, the companions in the journey are different, and even we are different people. We have past experience and knowledge to call on, but will encounter new challenges, and so must learn anew. We need to embrace a fresh mindset every time.

Thankfully, we will always have our constant: Jesus.



*Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding,
and my entire will – all I have and call my own.*

You have given everything to me.

To You, Lord, I return it to do with as You will.

Give me only Your love and grace.

This is enough for me.

~ the Suscipe, by St Ignatius of Loyola ~

*Pilgrim J
July 2024*