

**Fr. Keith Boisvert**

**5 November 2017**

**31<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

As you know, in mid-October I journeyed to northern Spain to walk 110 miles on the medieval pilgrimage route Camino de Santiago. Since returning, many people have asked when I was going to talk about the experience. So I thought this weekend I would share some information about the Camino and some reflections.

The destination of our pilgrimage was Santiago, the burial place of Saint James. The day after reaching Santiago, I visited a new museum dedicated to the history of pilgrimages, called “The Pilgrims Museum.” The display offers a very insightful reflection on the idea of “pilgrimage” as being both a human and religious experience. Near the entrance there is a great explanation of the term “pilgrimage” used allegorically to express the similarity between a journey to a holy place and the journey of life itself. The physical effort required to reach the pilgrim’s goal over many miles is interpreted as a metaphor for the human journey of life-- full of sacrifices, difficulties and heartache. The concept of pilgrimage exists in many religious traditions. Depending on the particular belief system one adheres to, the objective of pilgrimage is to reach the highest level of knowledge, or spiritual renewal, or glory, or paradise or eternal salvation.

In the Christian faith, three main pilgrimages developed in the medieval period: to Jerusalem (the burial place of Jesus), to Rome (the burial place of St. Peter), and to Santiago. The pilgrimage to Santiago took on significance in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. At this time, and even before, thousands of pilgrims from all over Europe walked to Santiago, where tradition has it that the apostle, St. James the Great, is buried. In 813 the first church was constructed over the remains of St. James. So along with pilgrimages to the Holy Land and Rome, Santiago is a pilgrimage of historic significance. I couldn’t help think of this as I was walking the same path as generations and generations of pilgrims have been doing for over 1,000 years. For example, it is documented that Saint Francis of Assisi walked the Camino in the year 1213. Being part of that long history

touched my spirit deeply. It is estimated today that between 250,000 to 300,000 make the pilgrimage to Santiago each year.

Each day we would walk from 10-15 miles. The Camino de Santiago traverses northern Spain and is 500 miles long, beginning in the Pyrenees mountains at the border with France. I have friends in Baltimore who recently completed this entire route and it took them 37 days. They are obviously retired! I walked with four other priests, and we chose to do the last 110 miles of the Camino over nine days. It's amazing how your body adapts. After doing this day after day, you get up in the morning and just say, "OK let's go!" without thinking about it. I can say that because I didn't get any blisters. People who did had to think about it a little more.

On the first day of our pilgrimage, we walked up-hill close to 9 miles to what is known as the Iron Cross. This simple iron cross stands atop of a weathered pole and has become one of the abiding symbols of the pilgrim way of St. James. Traditionally, pilgrims bring a stone from home, and then leave the stone at the base of the cross-- a symbolic gesture of both unloading the burdens and the sins we carry. I brought with me a stone from the Potomac River where I often go kayaking. As I left it at the cross, I remembered my father. The pile of stones that are piled at the base of the cross is at least twelve feet high, and you are overcome thinking of all the burdens that were left there by pilgrims over the years, and how many special prayers were offered.

Pilgrims walking the Camino are diverse, coming from many parts of the world. All ages, races, nationalities, and religions (including no religion) makes up the community of pilgrims. The words of the first reading from Malachai come to mind in this regard: "*Have we not all the one father? Has not the one God created us? Why then do we break faith with one another...?*"

There are pilgrims I met that have left a lasting impression on me by their spirit and their perseverance. One pilgrim is Sharon, from Alberta, Canada walking the Camino since September 11<sup>th</sup> when I met her in October. She was walking slowly with two walking sticks and her left knee, ankle, and foot were swollen. But this did not deter her. She walked with a smile and was singing her way to Santiago. Almost each day I would pass her on the way, and I would listen for what she was singing that day. What perseverance! Then there was a man, whose name I do not know, who became an inspiration because he was walking with crutches. I first

saw him days before reaching Santiago....and he did make it, because I saw him at the entrance of the cathedral. Then there was a family from St. Louis, parents walking with their two young daughters the whole five hundred miles. Then there was Lulu, a 73-year-old woman from Ireland, also doing the five hundred mile pilgrimage by herself! These are just a few....

On the Camino, I experienced a real sense of community with those walking. As you walk past fellow pilgrims (or they pass you), greetings are exchanged such as “hola”, or “buenos dias”, or more traditionally “Buen Camino”---“ Good Camino” . People sometimes walk alone, or at times with others, but it is often said that “everyone walks their own Camino”. Especially as we neared Santiago, you became part of a continuous river of people with backpacks and walking sticks, all with the focus to reaching the tomb of Saint James in the cathedral there. It was a very humbling experience to realize you are one tiny part of a very ancient tradition, reflecting the words of Jesus in the gospel today suggesting that: “...*whoever humbles himself will be exalted.*”

One way of summarizing is to say that the nine days of walking were truly a mystical experience. An important aspect of spirituality is to live in the present moment. We all have occasions to experience this, but on the Camino it was more prevalent. As I walked for hours each day-- through cow pastures and through woods and through small towns and over steep hills and between farm fields-- there was a deep sense of the present moment, and the very presence of God. God was clearly a companion on my pilgrimage.

Another insight is to realize that we are all pilgrims in this life and in our faith. In fact, we speak of ourselves as a “pilgrim” church.... called to bring the gospel to all nations, and to journey through life with God. I did reach Santiago, along with my fellow pilgrims, but it was not the end. The pilgrimage of life and the pilgrimage faith continues. But this experience it has given me a new vigor to follow the way of Christ, and to continue sharing with others (as St. Paul says in the second reading) “*the word of God, which is now at work in (all) who believe.*”