Camino Ignaciano – The Ignatian Way:

Walking with Ignatius from Loyola to Manresa

The Camino Ignaciano is a 645 km pilgrim route which retraces the footsteps of St Ignatius when he walked from his home in Loyola to the cave in Manresa in 1522. During his convalescence, following his injury in Pamplona in 1521, Ignatius experienced a profound conversion and decided to go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land via the shrine of Our Lady in Montserrat.

In 2010 a small group of Jesuits set about establishing a pilgrimage with a difference. Most pilgrimages focus on a destination associated with relics or religious events eg Santiago, Rome, Holy Land whereas the Camino Ignaciano recreates the actual pilgrimage of Ignatius as he travelled through five regions in Northern Spain – the Basque Country/Euskadi, La Rioja, Navarra, Aragon and Catalunya. Another distinctive feature of this pilgrimage is that the pilgrim is invited to follow the Spiritual Exercises over the four weeks or 27 stages. The website www.caminoignaciano.org offers Ignatian Tips providing reflections and Scripture readings and prayer for each of the stages. The Camino Ignaciano has also been called “The Way of the Rising Sun” as each morning the pilgrim walks east towards the rising sun.

Having finished the Via Francigena through Italy in 2015 I felt very attracted to this Camino with a difference. I had read Brian Grogan’s “Alone and on Foot – Ignatius of Loyola” and wanted to learn more about this “Pilgrim Saint”. The first Jubilee Year dedicated to the pilgrims of Camino Ignaciano opened on 31st July 2015 and ends on 31st July 2016. The Holy Doors in Loyola and Manresa will close until the next Jubilee Year in 2021 – leading up to the 500th anniversary of Ignatius’ journey in 2022.

My cousin, a Nazareth Sister, and I decided that we would walk the first 12 stages from Loyola to Tudela and then we would bus it to Igualada and walk the last two stages to Montserrat and Manresa. We sensed the Camino Ignaciano would be a reflective transforming pilgrimage – an inner journey as well as the physical one.

Our Camino began with Mass in the Chapel of Conversion in Loyola on a beautiful morning in early June 2016. The first week involved steep climbs and descents in the Basque Mountains traversing Sierra de Aizkorri, Sierra de Urkilla, the Arana Valley and Sierra de Cantabria with its “Sleeping Lion” that seemed to be keeping watch over us for three days.
It was an idyllic experience enjoying the wonders of creation in beautiful weather. The high meadows were ablaze with wild flowers. Ponies and cows grazed peacefully and playfully to the music of their bells. Bird song accompanied our every step and the fragrance of the broom wafted through the air. Down in the valleys we walked through fields of wheat and barley of varying hues of green and gold impregnated with bursts of red poppies. It was so easy “to find God in all things” and to “savour” the beauty of nature. The poetry of another Jesuit, Gerard M Hopkins, kept ringing in our ears: “The world is charged with the grandeur of God ……There lives the dearest freshness deep down things”……“Glory be to God for dappled things – For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow…..Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow and plough”.

On day 7 we crossed the Ebro River in Labarca and moved into the flatlands and vineyards of La Rioja. The terrain for the second week was much easier for walking and also very different in every way. Once we reached Logroño we were walking parallel to the Ebro and also the railway track all the way to Tudela in Navarra. We had moved out of the isolation of the mountains. Having met no pilgrims in seven days once we reached Navarette there was a veritable procession of pilgrims coming against us on the French Camino de Santiago. In fact, we crossed four different Caminos de Santiago - the Basque Camino, the French Camino (the popular one), the Ebro Camino and the Catalan Camino – the yellow arrows of the Camino de Santiago pointing towards the west and our orange arrows of the Camino Ignaciano pointing east! One sign approaching Logroño had a huge yellow arrow and a tiny orange arrow - this just about summed up our experience of swimming against the tide or rather walking against the current!
From Navarette to Tudela we were stopped a few times each day by concerned well-meaning Spanish people telling us we were going in the wrong direction! We got to know Calahorra, Alfara and Tudela - old Moorish towns where Christians, Jews and Muslims all live peacefully. Alfara happens to be home to the biggest colony of storks in the world – on the roof of the Church of San Miguel!

Even though we met very few pilgrims on the Camino Ignaciano we were blessed with guardian angels every single day – local people who were so kind and helpful and generous in countless ways. From the first day on the bus from Bilbao to Loyola when a woman got off in the town where we had to get a connection and walked with us to the connecting bus-stop to people going out of their way to show us directions, walking through towns with us, driving us to accommodation when our Casa Rural was a few kilometres outside the village, gifting us with a free breakfast etc. On day 3 we left Arantzazu in the mist at 6.30am and had climbed up to Uriha (1,200m/4,000ft approx.) by 8.45am to find the only café on the whole day’s journey closed until 10.00am – Aritz, a young man in the café, came out to get logs for the fire and, seeing us looking at the opening times, immediately offered to get breakfast for us. It really felt like manna from heaven! Each and every day was graced by such kindnesses for which we will be forever grateful.

This Camino was a real retreat experience. We walked in silence most of the time, rested on rocks or logs or by the river to share Morning Prayer, and each evening we diligently prepared the reflections and readings which provided “food for the journey” for the following day. Having the Bible and IBreviary/Universalis on the phone proved most helpful and we had printed the pages with the Ignatian Tips for each stage. These reflections seemed so in tune with our experiences and the Mass readings of the day. During the first week in the mountains we had very few opportunities for Mass but from Navarette onwards we were blessed with Mass each night – being the month of June we had the Novena to the Sacred Heart every night after Mass – a devotion very dear to Ignatius and subsequently to the Jesuits.
Another aspect of Spanish and Ignatian spirituality is devotion to Our Lady and this was also a hallmark of our pilgrimage. The three main centres of Marian devotion in Spain are actually on the Camino Ignaciano – Arantzazu - Our Lady on the Hawthorn Bush (Day 2), Zaragoza – Our Lady of the Pillar (Day 15 ) and Montserrat – the Black Madonna (Day 26). Apart from these three special centres each church we visited had so many varied images of Our Lady – ones I particularly liked were Our Lady of Hope in Iglesia Santiago in Logroño and a sculpture of the “Pilgrim Virgin” in San Miguel in Alfaro. Mary was our constant companion as we entrusted all our families, friends, congregations and the wider world to her each day.

Most people visiting the Benedictine Monastery in the “Magic Mountain” of Montserrat arrive by bus, funicular train or cable car so walking/climbing up was a unique experience - a beautiful walk up to the mountain pass of Can Massana and then a challenging narrow path along the rock face right up to the monastery. A short respite in Santa Cecilia, where the chapel has been beautifully redesigned by Irish artist Sean Scully, gave us the necessary strength to continue upwards and onwards! We had left Igualada at 6.45am and finally reached our destination at 4.45pm – our longest day but so worthwhile. It was special to celebrate Vespers and Mass with the Benedictine community. We were able to stay overnight in the Hostal just by the monastery so, when all the crowds had disappeared, we had the chapel behind the shrine of the Black Madonna to ourselves. We really appreciated this quiet time in such a hallowed place where Ignatius had divested himself of all his worldly goods and where we were also being asked to decide on what we wanted to leave behind us.
Our time in Manresa was even more special. Passing by the shrine of Our Lady of the Guide we crossed the Old Bridge over the Cardoner river which leads to the Cave of St Ignatius – we discovered that the Cave is closed on Mondays but at the Pilgrims’ Office we were warmly welcomed by Francesca who presented us with our Testimonials and took us to visit the Chapel of Raptures and the Chapel of Santa Lucia site of the old hospital where Ignatius used to tend the sick. Manresa is certainly the city of Ignatius with twenty-two sites associated with him. We had Mass in Basílica La Seu on Monday evening – Ignatius used to come here daily for Vespers and Mass. On Tuesday morning we were down early for the 7.30am mass in the Cave – the perfect ending to our pilgrimage. The cave is small and narrow and has room for only 10 people approx. It was such a privilege to celebrate Eucharist here in the very place where Ignatius had spent eleven months reflecting on his journey from Loyola and began writing the Spiritual Exercises. It also happened to be the feast of the Jesuit St Aloysius and the Gospel reading about entering by the narrow door seemed so appropriate in this narrow cave. We decided to spend the morning here “savouring” what we had lived through along the way.

Like Ignatius we felt we had experienced so much in two short weeks that we needed our own “Manresa” to process and “savour” the blessings of our pilgrimage. As we left the Cave through the Holy Door of the first ever Jubilee Year of the Camino Ignaciano it felt more like a beginning than an end but a beginning from a very new place. Our “Manresa” – our journey towards interiority, awareness and service continues. May we always “find God in all things” as we continue to “savour” and share our Camino Ignaciano.

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