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The Camino and a spiritual way of proceeding

Jocelyn A. Sideco | Jun. 27, 2013 Young Voices

When I did the Spiritual Exercises more than a decade ago, I had no clue that the two main fruits of that retreat would continue to sustain me and my life choices. During those 30 days of silence (with only one meeting with my spiritual director each day), I prayed through the life of Christ with the help of St. Ignatius' many meditations and exercises. I remember two powerful moments: one, Jesus' voice calling to me, "Come, follow me"; and two, a passage from the Book of James: "Humbly welcome the word that has been planted in your heart" (James 1:21b [1]).

Well, after stringing together a few odd jobs these past few years, I was able to save up enough cash for a flight to Spain and an experience of a lifetime. This week marks my second week on the Camino.

For many Spaniards, this is a physical exercise and communal time akin to the American camping experience. People pack their backpacks with enough water, toiletries and clothing to last a day or two. Cash in your pocket is handy and helps to settle your bill in restaurants, bars and albergues (hostels) for each day's expenses.

Martin Sheen dramatizes an experience of the Camino de Santiago in the movie "The Way [2]." In his raincoat, waterproof pants and hiking boots, carrying a map and his pilgrim credential (a passport of sorts that has spaces for local stamps to color the pages, proving where you have been received as a pilgrim), he is able to walk and seek refuge among many of the hospitaleros (hosts at the albergues) along the way.

For me, my Camino began in Loila, the birthplace of St. Ignatius. His life and contribution to Christianity and Christian education have shaped my life and how I have come to discern decisions toward a freedom that loves more. He talks about the importance of the "composition of place" in his Spiritual Exercises. Here, the retreatant is encouraged to enter into a particular passage of Scripture and use all of his or her senses to be there. Standing in Ignatius' bedroom, which is now a chapel, gave me a view he had of a wonderful countryside, a view he had during his convalescence. (A cannonball struck Ignatius' leg, and he spent many months recuperating. This time is popularly known to contribute greatly toward his own conversion toward a greater desire to do God's will.)

I continued through small countryside towns, listening to the strong and sharp language of País Vasco, or the Basque region of Spain. Ignatius' certainty, flair for the dramatic and enthusiastic acts of faith made sense as I met ambitiously confident people whose independence and identity were sources of pride, accomplishment and commitment. Here, Ignatius' gusto resonates loudly with the messages I heard throughout my years of education with the Jesuits: Magis (the "more"), "women and men for others," and Ad Majoriam de Gloriam ("for the greater glory of God"). So after climbing the second highest mountain (only by 10 feet) in plain view, my bones and muscles and heart began to understand what my head had already known about how impressive Ignatius really is and why many parts of me follows in his footsteps.

After six days on the Camino Ignaciano, I learned more deeply the value of confirmation. As Ignatius lays out in a discernment process for seekers, he invites the retreatant to seek confirmation through an experience with the Blessed Virgin Mary, with Jesus, with God, or with the Holy Spirit through positive emotions or consolations. After trying to decipher directions and minimal signage in Catalan*, the language spoken in Catalunya, a subtle

orange arrow would appear about 50 feet ahead confirming my decision. Whew! Thanks, Ignatius, for allowing me an opportunity to truly trust in your ways.

And now, I am writing after a few days on the Camino de Santiago, named after St. James. Centuries of relationship create the way that is both well marked and well worn. I join hundreds of thousands of past pilgrims in this quest for God, for truth, for meaning, for wholeness. In this moment, there are about 50 or so I have seen in the same town each night, occupying the same albergues, the same restaurants, praying in the same sacred spaces. Whereas the Camino Ignaciano was relatively isolated with only two other companions, this way toward Santiago includes companions from Spain, Ireland, Italy, Bulgaria, Australia, South Korea, Sweden, Canada, New Jersey, New York, Texas, New Orleans and Oregon. I am overwhelmed.

To my surprise, this ancient trek adjusts to the modern pilgrim whose cellphone now can get the most updated Camino app. As for me, I left my phone, computer and earbuds at home. Here I want to continue to hear how God is calling me with every sense of my body.

To be continued with a reflection on my journey to Santiago, Canterbury and Iona Abbey.

**An earlier version of this story incorrectly identified the language.*

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