

WALKING TO SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

From the end of April to the end of May 2015, twelve parishioners from Mildura and two from Merbein were accompanied by five other family members and friends along the Camino Portuguese, from Lisbon to Santiago de Compostela Spain. Four of the travellers left from Lisbon to be joined later by four more at Tomar, near Fatima. Another eight commenced at Porto, with three more starting at the final leg at Tui on the border of Spain and Portugal. Those who left from Lisbon walked about 620 kilometres, and from Porto the journey to Santiago was a bit over 200 kilometres.

Pilgrims spoke of the incredible sense of achievement upon completing the walk, as well as the deepening of friendships and the profound sense of solidarity that grew among the group as the journey progressed.

There was plenty of laughter shared along the way, and no lack of sympathy afforded those who suffered blisters, sore toes, shin splints, and aching calves and feet at the end of each day's walk. Although the catch-cry, "the hills are our friends" was chanted frequently enough, there were some muttered curses that escaped from lips when the challenge proved overly steep. There was also frustration at times when the odd yellow arrow was overlooked and a few extra kilometres were added to an already lengthy day's itinerary. But even these experiences were transformed into moments of gratitude when one of the kind locals would point out the mistake that was made. At one stage, even St Anthony himself, whose carved image was perched near the entrance of an impressive winery, revealed the phone number of a taxi service that proved a welcome relief for a couple of wayward pilgrims.

However, the assurance of adequately comfortable accommodation, a hot shower, a chance to wash and dry clothes and hearty food complemented by cheerful local wine, were enough to sweep away any preoccupations that may have accompanied the determined efforts of the daily journey. The company of trusted companions and the wonderful hospitality of the locals was an unforgettable experience.

As the pilgrimage unfolded, those who journeyed fell into the enchanting rhythm of the Camino, no longer conscious of any great desire to reach the final destination. Each day became an invitation to centre one's self and to experience something of the divine which accompanied each muffled footfall, to share something of life's personal experiences with whoever the closest companion might be at a given moment, or to silently appreciate the many blessings that are part of being alive under the inspiration of such beautiful countryside. Some memorable Eucharistic celebrations were shared – simplicity prevailed.

One of the great highlights for the pilgrims at Santiago was securing front row seats for the special Mass on Sunday morning, the day after arriving. Witnessing at such close range the "botafumeiro" (probably the largest thurible in the world) swinging from the rafters of the Cathedral as it incensed pilgrims and visitors, was an awesome experience.

Upon reaching Santiago we were fortunate to have reserved our sleeping accommodation at the Hospederia San Martin Pinario, the partially transformed Major Seminary which provides accommodation for pilgrims and other travellers, very close to the Cathedral.

And arrived....not a moment too soon

Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory. (The Journey of the Magi: T.S. Elliot)

Fr Mick McKInnon

