

Fr. Anthony is away walking the ancient pilgrimage route of the Camino in Spain.
Below is his third report of his journeys.

Step by Step along The Way (Week 3)

The city of León, in north-western Spain, has become our base, as we steady ourselves for the next two or so weeks of almost continuous walking. Being spring time, the weather is variable and we have faced a gamut of conditions: cold, the remnants of snow, fog, gales, rain and sun. We were concerned that we might be blown off the Pyrenees by the withering force of the chilling wind but we crossed safely – but I was badly in need of moisturiser to repair my otherwise glowing skin! We did hear that the next day, they (whoever “they” are) closed the crossing because someone nearly coming to grief due to the high winds.

The winds were followed by rain: constant, steady and drenching. It is actually quite freeing to walk in the rain. It is something that you can get away with as a child, but as an adult, it seems slightly absurd. Absurd or not, and certainly no more absurd than walking across the mountains in the face of the Arctic winds, there was nowhere to escape. All that it was possible to do was to water-proof our belongings as best you could and walk on. The rain in Spain falls mostly on everything. The wet made for an interesting descent on the slippery, rocky track. Most of the group felt that this was the most difficult day so far, but I didn’t mind it so much. Perhaps it is the child within me.

The wet day was followed by a delightful stay at a country farmhouse in Akerreta and which, apparently, was featured in the movie, “The Way”. Warm food and warm company were an excellent remedy for a trying day. The next day’s trip into Pamplona was a pleasant relief – a steady walk and warm, sunny weather.

Pamplona is famous for the *encierro* (“the running of the bulls”). The *encierro* is part of the week long St. Fermin festival. It is fascinating how, in this part of the world, religious and civic festivals have common roots, with the result that prayer and party combine to form a cultural marriage of sorts – and “the party” becomes the bread-winner. As an example, I came across this description of the *Sanfermin* festival: “On feast day of *Sanfermin* (the patron of Pamplona), 7th July, there is an important procession in his honour around the old part of the city. It is to this saint that the runners in the morning of the “Running of the Bulls” sing a hymn to implore his protection just before the bulls are released onto the streets. However, the partying and other events in fiestas do not have any religious character.” I wouldn’t doubt that the fiestas have no religious character, but it is a vivid example of how religion and culture are blended in the European imagination. One wonders how Europe can turn away from Christianity without losing its cultural bearings, as well as its spiritual ones.

The first week of the Camino has been an excellent experience. The changes in scenery and conditions have been more constant than I imagined – the next corner can reveal changing styles of walking tracks (rocky, gravel, sealed, leaf-covered) and different terrain (wooded areas, mountaintop views, river walks). The Camino is intended to be a spiritual journey and the rhythm of walking can be meditative and reflective. At this stage, my greatest spiritual response is gratitude. I hope that I will continue to be grateful in the days ahead, when I am standing in more rain, staring at the walking track ahead as it ascends towards a high peak, and find myself asking, “Remind me again, why am I doing this?”

Fr Anthony