

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

Step by Step along The Way (Week 5)



I write this two days out from completing our journey at Santiago de Compostela. By the time that you read this, we will have crossed the finishing line and celebrated the Pilgrims Mass at the Cathedral. I will leave the experience of crossing the finishing line until next week, but for now, here are some more reflections which have emerged along the way.

A few days ago, a few of us were walking through one of the many villages that you come across along the way. One of the dilapidated houses which litter the path had been remodelled into a hospitality space by an Australian (a Spanish Qantas lounge of sorts). I don't know the story of how this came to be, but outside was a series of inspirational messages. It is not unusual to be greeted by the thoughts of previous pilgrims along the way, but these "Leunigesque" words caught my eye. (The photo was taken by one of my walking companions). The quote simply says, "Let the wisdom of uncertainty guide you." This quote has become something of a discussion point among the group; for some the quote resonated with their spirituality, and for others, it made no sense.

For me, it brought to mind two quotes: one from St. Augustine and the other from Anne Lamott. Firstly, St. Augustine: "We are talking about God. What wonder is it that you do not understand? If you do understand, then it is not God." And then, some centuries later, Anne Lamott added, "The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty." The point is not that we are all drifting along in a great sea of spiritual opaqueness, but that all of us, in one form or another, are involved in this great pilgrimage of faith. Faith is not starting out with all the answers and plodding your way through. Faith is simply life one step at a time. We can't know, and we don't know, all lies ahead with any certainty. This is true of the Camino – all the maps are wrong! But this is also true of life.

One of the great lessons of the Camino for me has been letting go of any thought of control. The Camino is foreign territory in almost every way. I wouldn't know if I were lost or not, and if I were lost, I wouldn't be able to explain to someone where I was so that I could be found. In the real world, we like to have our days – our lives – "mapped out" under the illusion that we are in control. We are not, and the disappearance of the illusion of control is a humbling experience.

This final week has seen an explosion of pilgrims. The path is packed with a grand collection of humanity, walking the Way for various reasons, at their own pace and style. I have witnessed a blind person being led through sharp hilltops, toddlers toddling, fathers pushing strollers, the young striding out, the old keeping a steady speed, all amid an increasing sea of pilgrims ranging from believers to people whose motivations remain obscure even to them. I can't clearly remember the scene from the movie, "The Way," in which Martin Sheen undertakes the journey with his son's ashes, but at one point, he is asked why he is walking the Camino. Martin Sheen's character replies something along these lines, "I am not doing this because I am religious, but because I am a human being." Every face I see, I think of that line. I hope that the most religious of us, are also the most uncertain of us; not in a sense of dizzying confusion, but with a steadiness of step that is open to the way ahead in all its glorious uncertainty.

Fr Anthony