

Fr. Anthony has completed walking the ancient pilgrimage route of the Camino in Spain. Below is his sixth report of his journey.

Step by Step along The Way (Week 6)



The church bells rang four o'clock in the afternoon as we reached the major square of Santiago de Compostela on Friday, 19th May. It had been a long day and a long few weeks, and yet, it was over in a flash. All of my walking companions have said that this was an unrepeatable experience. Certainly, we all could walk the Camino again, but it wouldn't be the same. What is it that makes particular moments in time "unrepeatable"? I don't know. I simply give thanks for having had the experience with these companions at this moment of my life.

Santiago, and Spain in general, has been associated with the relics of the Apostle St. James, the brother of John, the sons of Zebedee. There is no historical basis for this, other than the power of tradition. This tradition is only recorded from the 9th century onwards (but appears to be earlier), which is far too greater time-frame to be connected with anything that we would understand as "history". But that is not the point.

A few days out from Santiago, my mind was directed towards the Apostle, St. James. In a telling sense, there weren't twelve Apostles – there were nine and there were three. St. James made up one of the three. James' calling, along with John, is recorded in the Gospels. We know his parents' names, Zebedee and Salome. James was there, along with John and Peter, at particular moments of healing, recorded as having had an ambitious conversation with Jesus and then being put in his place, he was on the mount of the Transfiguration, and, sleepily, in the garden of despair before the crucifixion. James, along with John and Peter, had a privileged relationship with Jesus. So, in turn, this centre that contains his relics has become a privileged place of pilgrimage.

Upon arriving in Santiago, we all made it to the pilgrims' Mass that evening in the Cathedral. A few of us made the pilgrimage to the statue of the Apostle behind the main altar, and then prayed at the place where his relics are said to be kept. Herein lies the end of the pilgrimage.

A couple of days later, our fine group of companions began to disperse. The initial six pilgrims with whom I started this adventure, made our way for a few days to Barcelona. My goal was to visit the grand minor basilica of La Sagrada Família. It is the life's work of famed Spanish architect, Antoni Gaudí, and is an amazing and splendid sculpture of the study of light and dark (some of my photos will be on the parish's website and Facebook page this week). It remains under-construction, but even so, the experience is difficult to describe. However, its grandeur is both inviting and off-putting. Your gaze is continually drawn upwards, towards glorious shards of light. It is a study of transcendence. However, is such overt grandeur really worship of the One, True God of Jesus Christ? I am left both drawn by its beauty and perplexed by its splendour.

There was, however, one final redemptive encounter. There is a Blessed Sacrament chapel there. My final act on the pilgrim trail was to make a visit. There was a guard at the entrance, who said to me, "This is for prayer. Do you want to pray?" "Yes," I said, in a rather offended tone.

I was delighted by the chapel's simplicity; a relatively small altar, dignified ambo, and, significantly, a simple tabernacle. Underneath the tabernacle was the Catalan (the local dialect) inscription: "Jo sóc la vida". In English, this translates as "I am the way." "The Way" is the common name for the Camino, the pilgrimage to Santiago. So all this walking came back to one point: Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. So what to do with such an insight? Keep walking along the way of truth and life.

I am now in Leuven, just outside Brussels, for a two week conference on "Catholic Identity" with 32 other people from all over Queensland. The Camino ends but the way ahead continues. And I am keeping in my prayers all the children and their families who are preparing for their First Communion. I look forward to celebrating with you soon.