

The most significant event in my life

St. James the Apostle, in all his majesty, welcomes pilgrims at the entrance of his cathedral.

By Mr. J. M. Gussoni

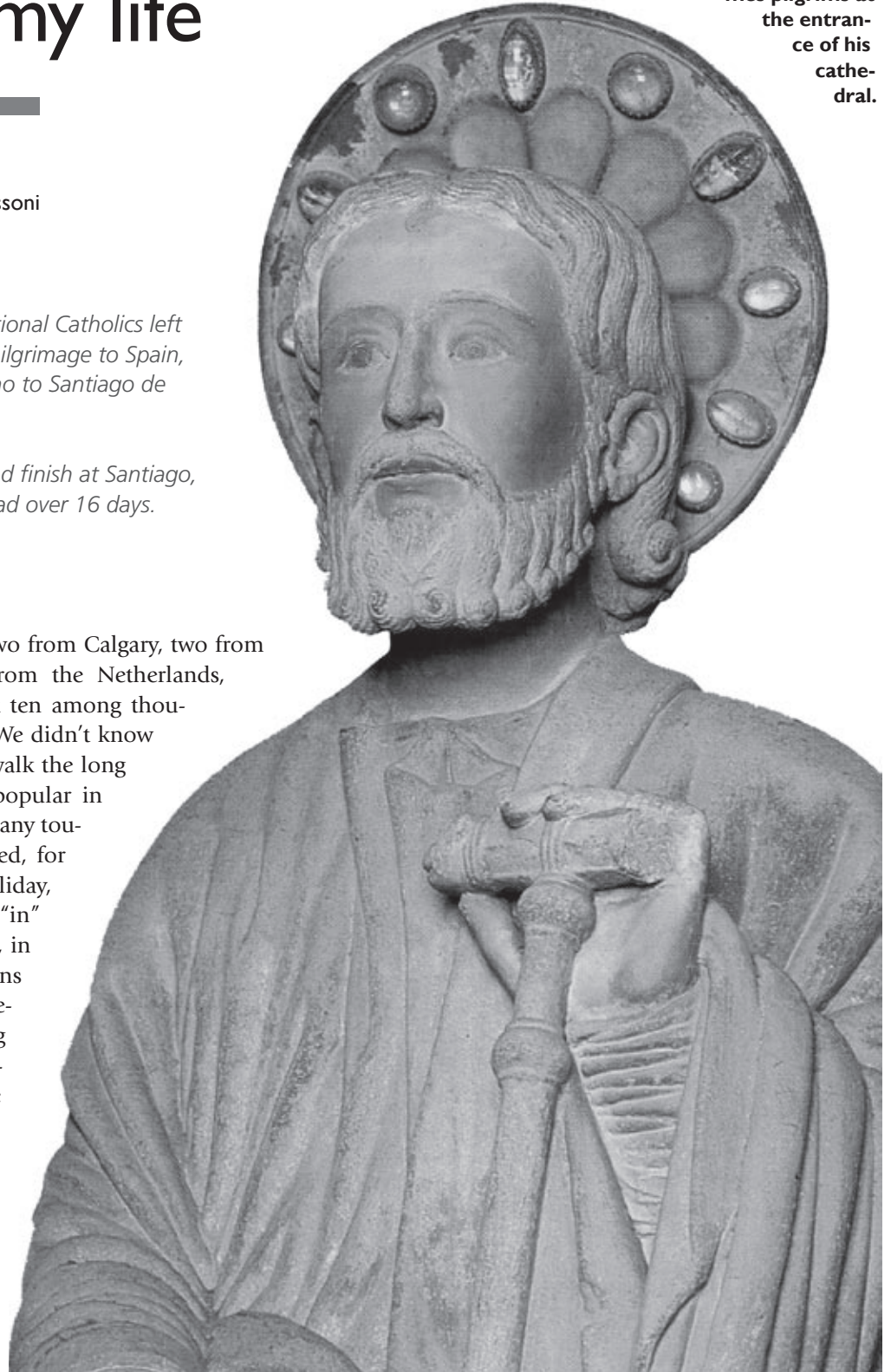
This past summer a group of traditional Catholics left their various homelands to go on pilgrimage to Spain, walking along the ancient Camino to Santiago de Compostela.

Our plan was to start at Burgos and finish at Santiago, a 500 kilometre journey spread over 16 days.

Ten pilgrims made up the group, two from Calgary, two from Kitchener, two from Toronto, two from the Netherlands, and two from Germany. We were but ten among thousands who were walking to Santiago. We didn't know whether all the other would actually walk the long road; the Camino has become very popular in these last few years and has attracted many tourists, tourists attached to luxury. Indeed, for some it was an inexpensive walking holiday, for others to walk the Camino was the "in" thing to do. What made the difference, in our case, were our prayerful intentions and daily Mass, celebrated in the cathedrals of Burgos and Leon, and among the numerous village churches scattered along the route. This involved some serious planning on Fr. Wegner's part. Just imagine a German priest contacting the local Spanish sacristan, requesting that he open the church!

The Camino

The Camino (or 'Trail' in Spanish) affected every pilgrim differently. Each step along the way





Bronze shell fixed in the stone of sidewalks in the town of León.

was part of a growth process. On the walk itself, while still living the experience, the lessons are often not clear; however, once you have left the journey and returned home, you are then able to look back and appreciate all the pilgrimage had to offer. The Camino is not so much about the destination of Santiago, nor the number of kilometres walked. It is about what happened to you on the way, what took place within you.

The Camino can serve as a metaphor for life itself. We are all on a journey toward a destination, and we experience the ups and downs of life like the hills and valleys of the Camino. We fall down and get up again, our eyes always fixed on our goal. We get lost, seek advice, and then return to the path. There are many signposts pointing out the way. We get tired and don't want to go on, but we must continue, otherwise we fall back and get lost, left behind along the way. It is the same for our pilgrimage through life. It is how we live, how we respond to what life brings us, which creates our own spiritual journey and determines its success. This journey has all the ingredients of a profound life experience. You are on a pathway carrying everything you will need on your back. You are out in nature, in a strange country, alone in the unknown, far from all that is familiar. As a pilgrim, you learn what really matters to you in your own life. All vanity is stripped away, all comfort and ease, and you come in contact with your true self. You are forced to focus on your final destination and must reflect on how you want to reach that place.

Our group of ten started at the magnificent gothic cathedral at Burgos where Fr Wegner said Mass at one of the many side altars. We were all very conscious that we were beginning an important journey and we prayed earnestly for a successful pilgrimage.

Arrows guide the pilgrim

Step by step, we left Burgos. The light was already fading as we followed the yellow arrows and scallop shells marking out the Camino. These arrows guide the pilgrim through all sorts of terrain: sprawling city streets, farmlands, rocky hillsides, gentle meadows, and tiny villages. They are painted on trees, stones, fence posts, and corners of buildings. You can find them engraved into the sidewalk or scrawled beneath a stop sign. Indeed, if there's room for paint the-

re is likely to be a yellow arrow! It would seem that, because the Camino is so well marked, it is impossible to lose the way. Think again! Many beautiful distractions can cause the pilgrim to miss a marker, as happened to this writer more than once while stopping to take pictures.

Torture of minds

Outside Burgos we entered the Meseta, a vast, featureless plain that tortures the minds and bodies of so many pilgrims. The Camino crosses land that resembles the steppes of Eastern Europe or the prairies of Canada. There is nothing but green vegetation and brown earth as far as the eye can see in all directions. Worst of all, there are no trees, thus little shade. Add to that the burning heat and you can see why some think this is the worst part of the journey. In our case, however, it really wasn't that bad. Along the trail, on the edges of the fields there were seas of flowers overflowing alternately with red poppies, yellow sun-flowers, purple thistles, and yellow daisies, just to name a few. This profusion of colour among the straw-laden fields brightened up the landscape like bright paint spread generously on a blank canvas. Many birds also inhabit the Meseta, and the skies above are filled with aerial hunters. You can see kestrels, falcons, and even the occasional eagle. It takes more patience to find birds that live low to the ground in the fields, but the song of the lark often accompanies you on that long, flat trek, lightening your burden. In every village there was a church, and every church had a belfry where storks tended their nests.

One feature of the Meseta that really stood out was the steep hill beyond Castrojeretz. We had stopped for breakfast at about 9am (as was our custom) and made sure our water bottles were filled for the journey ahead. We chanced upon an Irish woman from Mayo also having a bite to eat. She explained that she was travelling the Camino on her own and, once finished, was heading to Australia for a further vacation. We parted quickly and instead focused our attention on mounting the massive hill – perhaps Small Mountain – that loomed ahead of us, the Alto de Mostelares. The only way to reach the top of this hill in good order is to take slow, easy steps. Halfway up this climb the woman from Ireland overtook us with giant strides! At the top weary pilgrims were rewarded with plenty of fresh-run-

**Burgos:
Spires of
Santa Maria
Cathedral.
Master piece of
gothic art.**



ning drinking water and a fantastic view of the plains below.

There are many legends attached to the Camino. The scallop shell which many pilgrims wear is said to have originated when followers of St James were carrying his body by boat and landed on the shore where a wedding party was taking place. This scene caused great fear among the merry-makers and the horse on which the groom was riding rushed into the sea, both being drowned. St James, however, worked a miracle. Horse and rider came out of the waters very much alive, decked, however, in scallop shells and seaweed! To this day, the scallop shells found on the shores of Galicia remain a symbol of the Camino. The scallop shell can also serve as a metaphor. The grooves in the shell, which come together at a single point, represent the various routes pilgrims traveled, eventually arriving at a single destination: the tomb of Saint James in Compostella.

St James spent time preaching in the Iberian Peninsula and after his death (c. 45 AD) was buried in Galicia. The most compelling of these stories refers to a hermit who is said to have seen a bright star with a glowing light that fell to earth amidst a field where the bones of St James were subsequently found. This "field of the star," in Latin *campus stellae*, became the Spanish toponym Compostella.

There are also traditions associated with the Camino like the custom of carrying stones from your homeland. These stones are a symbol of the burdens that you want to get rid of during the journey. At the Cruz de Ferro (literally the Iron Cross), in the mountains behind Astorga, you throw away your stones, for to reach this point in the journey is a major accomplishment. The mountain trail winds slowly upward to a height of 1505 meters, and you drop your stones along this arduous path as tokens of triumph, both over the Camino and over self. Today, the pile of rocks is so large that only the most daring pilgrims will climb to its summit and deposit their rocks directly at the foot of the large Cross erected on the mountaintop.

At the western end of the Meseta we reached the city of Leon. The Cathedral here is another masterpiece of Gothic architecture. It is famous

for its 125 medieval stained glass windows which spread colorful, rippling beams of light across the nave. At our Mass on one of the Cathedral's side-altars we were joined by other pilgrim-walkers who were on their way to Santiago.

Leon is where many begin their pilgrimage. By starting here many people avoid the so-called dull and boring Meseta. These new comers would overtake us and greet us with a loud and cheerful "Hola" or "Buen Camino". We weary ones, who had been on the Camino for over a week by this time, could only mutter a weak response.

Refugios

By the time we had reached Leon we were experienced walkers and campers. We camped at night rather than use the accommodations called 'refugios' or 'albergues'. There were a number of advantages to this choice. First, it was inexpensive, as all fields along the Camino are free for pilgrims to stay the night. You also have the freedom to stop where and whenever you want. Those using the refugios are under pressure to find accommodations before they are full, and the good ones have no vacancies by the early afternoon, limiting them in the distance they can travel each day. We fell asleep under the stars to the chirping of cicadas and woke to more sounds of nature: bird songs, rooster calls, the braying of a donkey, or the ringing bells around the necks of nearby cows.

The refugios are another story. They may be small or large, old or new, spotless or dirty; most have bunk-bed, and men lounge indiscriminately in the same rooms as women. I have been told there is little silence in these dorms. Throughout the night you hear the sounds of wheezing, coughing, or the clearing of a throat; you hear the puffers and snorters, whistlers and grunters, snorers of all kinds. It's a veritable symphony of dissonance!

After a few days of walking we had learned never to be caught without water. Along the Camino you will come across public fountains where you can fill up your water bottle. Most fountains are helpfully labeled "potable" or "non-potable". It was essential to keep an adequate supply of water on hand because keeping well hydrated was essential to success. You learned never to

Cross on the side of the road leading to Compostela.





drink water from an unsigned fountain. Those fountains were useful, however, for doing your laundry, or better yet, cooling your feet.

Food

Food was less of a problem. Cafes and bars along the Camino would offer breakfast of café con leche or freshly squeezed orange juice along with toast, croissants, or a choice of 'bocadilla' (sandwiches). Everyone eventually tried the bocadilla. A crusty baguette is cut in half, and then each half sliced lengthwise and filled with ham, cheese, chorizo, salami or a combination them all. You could also substitute a tortilla, which in Spain is not a flour or corn product but an egg omelet or quiche. At lunch time you would be offered menu 'del dia' or menu 'de peregrinos'. This substantial meal would cost about €10 and would consist of 2 to 3 courses, including wine. Getting food on the Camino is an exercise in patience. If ten people are ahead of you ordering a coffee and sandwich, the server makes the coffee, then the sandwich for that first person. No money exchanges hands. She then deals with the second person, and so on, each order being individually made. When you have finished eating you join the line-up to pay, often having to remind the server what you bought, as she had forgotten.

Hobbling stage of the journey

At Leon some of us entered the hobbling stage of our journey and needed to find medication for blisters. We all suffered from blisters, and it didn't seem to matter whether you wore boots or shoes. Some of our blisters were the size of a dime, others as large as or larger than a loonie. We learned how to treat blisters with moleskin, and discussed the efficacy of other remedies. We also learned how to walk with blisters. After 30 minutes of walking, once your feet have warmed up, you feel no pain until you again stop walking. What a great incentive to keep going! I say we all suffered from blisters. Perhaps the only exception was Fr. Wegner, who seemed rather to be walking on water throughout the pilgrimage!

A day and a half out of Leon we reached Astorga. Our backpacks were becoming too heavy and we needed to lighten the load. We debated what to ditch, keeping only the essentials. Groundsheets, books, and certain articles of clo-

thing were removed from our backpacks. At the main Post Office in Astorga we handed over a parcel containing 9kg of non-essential dead weight. The clerk knew without prompting which address in Santiago we should mail the parcel.

Astorga marks the beginning of mountain country. The Camino becomes a stony path heavily used by local farmers and cattle. The surrounding country is filled with heather, broom, and wild thyme. There are steep hills and even steeper descents through sleepy hamlets and river valleys. It is all very attractive and probably the most scenic part of the Camino. At one point the Camino becomes a stone track where the ascent is very steep, a 25-30% gradient over a distance of 900 meters. The view at the top gives the impression of walking along the roof of the world!

At O Cebreiro we were able to rest for a few hours. This is a most attractive village, high in the mountains, with stone houses that have thatched roofs. Fr Wegner said Mass at the ninth-century Iglesia de Santa María Real. This is the oldest fully intact church on the Camino. A number of other pilgrims were also able to attend. It is said that the Holy Grail was once hidden here in the Middle Ages. There is also a legend that in the fourteenth century a local farmer is said to have fought his way through a snowstorm to get to Mass in the church. The priest exclaimed his disbelief that the farmer would go to such lengths just to get a bit of bread. At his Mass the priest noticed that the bread and wine had turned into flesh and blood.

Inter-dependance

A walking pilgrimage of such great length gives you opportunities to face many challenges. You walk kilometer after kilometer over rough stones, dusty roads, rutted farm tracks, normally under a blazing sun. Then add to that a 15 kilogram backpack. After a while your shoulders and back become stiff and painful. You try to reduce the pain by shifting the pack as you walk along. You pull straps together here, make them looser there; you stop to move the weight around inside; you adjust the hip belt, or put your hands under the pack to relieve the pressure. You try to adjust every strap that can be adjusted. By this stage of the journey you have become an experienced backpacker.

Mount Cebreiro, detail of the basis of the calvary showing St. James as a pilgrim.



A pilgrimage also forces you to think about another challenge – your independence, or rather your inter-dependence. None of us can live without the help of the others. Situations arise when we have to allow others to do what we cannot do for ourselves. This writer was often helped along by the others, and he is grateful.

We were a group of ten, and became twelve when a couple from Belgium joined us mid-way. The kindness of everyone was a constant lesson. Every gesture of goodness stood out as a lesson of love and encouragement. Kindness was also extended to us by strangers. For example, our parcel of excess stuff presented a problem. When we reached the Santiago Post Office, we were not able to collect the package because the name on the parcel (Fr Wegner) did not match the name on the passport of the person picking it up. We explained the situation to the clerk, who then talked to her supervisor. The answer was, “The rules cannot be changed and that’s it!” No discussion! The clerk was embarrassed and apologetic. We said a silent prayer to St James. Minutes later this clerk asks us to describe the parcel. We are able to give the exact dimensions and colour, including the kind of cord used to wrap the parcel, plus its contents. She handed it to us and we were on our way. We thanked her and told her that we would say a pray for her at the tomb of St James.

On another occasion I had to spend a night in one of the refugios because the pain in my left foot was too intense. On leaving the next morning I saw two German women, mother and daughter, rubbing balsam wax into their feet, and then covering their feet with powder. The daughter said to her mother, referring to me, “He’s an Englishman,” so the mother explained in broken English what she was doing. She kept rubbing her chest. The daughter (in better English) explained that it was the custom to rub this wax into your chest when you have a cold. They also had been treating their feet daily with the same ointment since they started out at Burgos and had not experienced one blister! Looking at my blistered feet she then gave me a tube of this wax.

Plenary Indulgence

At Santiago Cathedral the custom is to embrace the statue of St James. You have to wait

in a long line, but after some weeks on the Camino you have cultivated the virtue of patience. Most then venerate the relics and then offer up prayers and petitions, hopes and wishes which have travelled all that long distance from home. I had written about 9 petitions in an envelope, but there was no receptacle for my plea, a coincidence which I initially found odd. On further thought, however, this made sense. With thousands filing through the Cathedral each day where would all this paper go? Fr Wegner then said Mass on the relics of St James. All the altars along the route had relics, but this altar was certainly the best endowed of the Camino.

Outside the Cathedral in the city itself there were throngs of people milling about, not just pilgrims or tourists, but all those associated with the commercial activities of the big city. In contrast to this hustle and bustle, Galician musicians, dressed in costumes of another era, played an ancient form of bagpipe, accompanied by women, similarly dressed, who performed old folk dances. This provided a pleasant diversion to the noisy city activities. The thought occurred to me that perhaps the bagpipe might not be a Scottish instrument. God forbid!

What happens next? We all parted ways. As some said their good-byes, there is a hint of a sorrow because everything has come to an end. Yet this element of sadness was overshadowed by the great joy springing from the knowledge that you finally reached Santiago. The journey was over. The prayer that was started at Burgos has been answered, and you give thanks. St James has not let you down. You finally return to your regular life, your daily routines, telephone calls, answering letters and e-mails, hearing the latest news on the radio or TV, and, worst of all, paying bills! The interior silence and quiet reflection of 16 days walking is broken. It is hard to return home without being a changed person, one who somehow misses the Camino.

Conclusion

If a retreat is important for spiritual growth, so too is a pilgrimage, especially a long, arduous one. No pilgrimage, however, is over until you assimilate what has happened along the way, and this leaves an indelible impression on the mind. In my case, the Camino pilgrimage was one of the most significant events in my life.



**Cathedral of León.
Detail of the southern
entrance.**