

The Camino as a model for the Church

Some readers will recall my article in the September 2016 edition of the Bulletin in which I recounted how we came to establish our little place of welcome and spirituality on the Camino in the French village of Arthez de Béarn. But just to recap, several years ago, walking along the Camino de Santiago in France just outside the small village of Fonteilles I came across a roadside memorial to, and photo of, Pepe Catusse, including a short inscription, translated as follows:

Friends, Pilgrims, Walkers over many years one of my greatest pleasures was to come to the *chemin* to meet you, say hello, offer encouragement, chat for a minute, recount some stories... I came very often to sit here but, since the 5th April 2008 I have gone to join the thousands of stars marking out your route, and from on high, I am accompanying you.

I later commented to my wife, Carol, that sitting by the road talking to passing pilgrims must be a good way to die, to which her response was: 'In that case you'd better get on with it!'

So, in 2014 we bought a second home directly on the Camino in Arthez de Béarn in South West France and in the front garden pitched the old family tent as a place of welcome for passing pilgrims. We reasoned that there was no lack of *gîtes* and *albergues* along the Camino, and plenty of places for pilgrims to eat an evening meal, but there were only limited opportunities just for rest and conversation - spiritual or otherwise - along the Way. Two years later the old tent blew down in a storm. So the following year, 2017, we replaced it with a small wooden shelter complete with a coffee corner and a small oratory.

The centrepiece of the oratory is a copy of Caravaggio's painting of the dinner at Emmaus which is in the National Gallery in London. The story of the two disciples walking the road to Emmaus and meeting up with the risen Jesus on the way seemed particularly appropriate. More importantly in this particular painting Caravaggio had imagined one of the disciples to be St James as indicated by the shell he is wearing, though of course this is not born out in the scripture story itself where Luke merely identifies one of them as Cleopas (LK24:18). Personally I like to believe that the other was Cleopas wife, Mary, who stood at the foot of the cross (Jn19:25). Anyway, the Emmaus story speaks of a surprise encounter along the road, which, as we shall later see, is a salient characteristic of the Camino experience.

Supported by a group of volunteers who stay in the house when we are not there, we now welcome about four hundred pilgrims who stop by each year. Some just stay a few minutes and perhaps take a coffee or use the toilet – very much appreciated by the ladies. Others stay longer and occasionally pray in the oratory. A few join us for morning prayer which we hold at 8.30 each morning. All have their own individual stories. Most pilgrims are French but some have set off from their homes across Europe - Germany, Austria, Switzerland, even as far away as the Czech Republic - and have already been walking for many weeks. Indeed it is a pity that few British pilgrims choose to walk along this stunningly beautiful Camino path in France.

Most of our visitors leave with a postcard of the Caravaggio painting (the National Gallery is now accustomed to our orders of several hundred postcards at a time!) Some like to leave a coin or two in our jar, though we make no charge for anything. Almost all let us take their photo which we put on the wall of the shelter, then they excitedly search for the photos of other pilgrims they've met on the Way. Some give us permission to share their photo and story on the blog of our website: <http://caminoaccueilarthez.org/blog/>. A few send us emails or postcards when they reach Santiago and complete their pilgrimage. All display on their rucksacks the precious shell, the symbol of their sense of belonging to this particular travelling community. And what is perhaps most pleasing and

unexpected is the gratitude that pilgrims show in our visitors' book for the tiny gesture of hospitality that we offer.

As the 2018 pilgrim season drew to a close, I found myself reflecting on the Camino as a model for a pilgrim Church. So if we think of the pilgrims as forming a kind of church, how might we identify the principal characteristics of this particular religious community?

In my experience only a minority of pilgrims are practising church-going Christians. But most, if not all, are looking for something, though few could articulate what that is. Many seem to start as walkers and end up as pilgrims. I remember one particular young lady who only began to feel like a pilgrim as she started walking back from Santiago. But the puzzle remains: if they are not practising Christians why do pilgrims choose to leave home and walk, sometimes for weeks at a time, along this ancient pilgrim route towards a destination which has a totally mythological history?

Those of us who are church-goers might think they are seeking 'salvation', but that is a word that has no meaning at all nowadays to people outside 'churchy' circles – a topic in my view for some serious theological reflection.

What the pilgrims do find, as those on the road to Emmaus, is support in their desolation and perplexities, incredible companionship from other pilgrims and sometimes from their hosts in the *gîtes* or *albergues*. And whether they are sleeping in church porches or graveyards – popular because they always have a water tap - or camping out in the countryside, or enjoying the relative luxury of a dormitory or B&B, they rediscover how few material possessions they really need. And, like poor people with few possessions, pilgrims are surprisingly generous with what they do have – notably sharing their food or their favourite foot balms and medicines. They experience the physical pain and exhilaration of getting up each morning and setting off again along the road, notwithstanding tired muscles, blisters or worse, and facing perhaps drenching rain or blazing sunshine.

Yet, as the pilgrims walk along, sharing their stories or their hopes and disappointments with each other, or simply enjoying silent companionship, there is no approved message or doctrine along the Way. I am tempted to write that the Holy Spirit is remarkably free along the Camino - except that the Holy Spirit is always free. Perhaps I should rather say that pilgrims are especially open to Her promptings whether through contact with Creation or through other people.

Many pilgrims, even those who are not practising Christians, drop into the frequent churches along the Way. They may pray silently, light a candle or just sit for a moment in contemplation. Somewhat surprisingly more of the Wayside churches seem to be open in France than in Spain. I believe the explanation for this is that in secular France the responsibility for keeping a church open falls to the local community, whereas in Spain the official Church authorities seems to have held onto this responsibility!

Stopping at churches is perhaps part of the necessary ritual of walking the Camino. But the greatest ritual is to be found at journey's end, with the midday Pilgrim Mass which fills the Cathedral at Santiago almost every day – at least in the pilgrim season. Often they will also have the good fortune to witness the swinging from high up in the nave of the *Botafumeiro*, which, or so it is said, was originally intended to disguise the smell of the newly arrived pilgrims. To this of course is added the ritual hugging of the statue of St James behind the altar, which can bring tears to the eyes of many pilgrims after their long ordeal.

Finally they will reflect on what they have ‘found’ on their journey, new insights perhaps, or some peace or reconciliation, or a new way of perceiving the world and their life. Very often, because of course this is the way the Holy Spirit works, what they find is not what they thought they were looking for. This is beautifully illustrated at the end of the fictional film *The Way*, when at least two of the principal characters find, not that they are changed persons, but that they have a greater acceptance of who they are.

Overall, what strikes me most in my reflection is that no one is in charge of the Camino; there is no overall authority. Sure, the religious authorities in Santiago, organise the pilgrim Masses and the issuing of certificates – the *Compostella* – to those pilgrims who wish to mark their achievement. And, sure, there are many organisations, such as the Confraternity of St James in the UK, which support and guide pilgrims. But they are not formally ‘in charge’.

So, although the Camino is undoubtedly Christian, it is not run by the Church, or indeed any ‘church’. Rather all along the Way it is the initiative of religious communities, or local village congregations, or even private individuals, like ourselves, who mould the Camino into a Christian institution.

The Camino, may not be the ‘field-hospital’ that Pope Francis would like the Church to become, but it offers a model for our future Church – without hierarchy, open to all-comers, undogmatic - though certainly bearing the mark of Christ’s teaching and also demanding of commitment in its own way. And all this is mixed with that dose of myth and ritual which all religions need.

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