

Twenty Second Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 3, 2017
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Reflection

I did the Camino in Spain back in 2004. I walked 300 km from Leon to Santiago de Compostela. Tradition holds that the remains of St. James are at the cathedral. They're housed in a reliquary that pilgrims can view during a holy year, which is when the feast day of St. James falls on a Sunday. The number of people doing the Camino has risen sharply over the last thirty years, with people going for different reasons: cultural enrichment, physical exercise, adventure; and they go for religious reasons too. Pilgrims might be yearning for spiritual answers, searching for peace, seeking forgiveness. You labor under a heavy pack through the quiet of cool morning, with your footsteps pacing progress through unfamiliar terrain. Your eyes take in the scenery but focus on the trail markers; losing your way means backtracking and frustration. Detached from daily concerns, your mind wanders through memories and dreams. But your feet hurt and the pack keeps getting heavier.

In today's gospel, Jesus says, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." As the Son of God, only Jesus could offer a sacrifice that would atone for the infinite distance between man and God, which was a consequence of sin. And the only sacrifice that was acceptable was himself; given freely, a mission voluntarily accepted, a task willingly performed.

Jer 20:7-9
Ps 63
Rom 12:1-2
Mt 16:21-27

He was both the priest offering the sacrifice, and the sacrifice that was offered. But as the Son of Man, Jesus took on flesh. He shared our limitations, sufferings and growth. This united him to us, and allows us to share in his cross. And his suffering wasn't pointless; it was for us. It freed us from sin, and gave us an example to follow. When pilgrims carry their loads, either across the mountains of Spain, or even from a tour bus to the hotel, they are carrying their cross; opening themselves to the graces that Jesus wants to give.

Somebody asked me about the highlight of my trip. I remember some scenes and people that I met, but mostly recall a sense of loss and sadness. I thought I was homesick, but that wasn't quite it. "O God, thou art my God, I seek thee, my soul thirsts for thee; my flesh faints for thee, as in a dry and weary land where no water is." I was experiencing desolation from a keener awareness of my own sin. It tinged all the memories and dreams that came to my mind; was sharpened by the pain in my body; it haunted the solitude and quiet that surrounded me. I looked for answers and found none. I wanted peace but it wasn't there. I only missed the trail markers once, but my spirit had gone off track and I was trying to find my way back. "For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long." So the highlight was once I came home and went to confession.

This accomplished the plenary indulgence that I sought. The pilgrimage didn't end at the beach at Finisterre, watching the sun sink into the Atlantic. Nor did it end when I walked through the doors of my house after the flight. It ended when I received absolution and said my penance; when I accepted the cross that Jesus gave, and let him carry it for me. Not only did the pilgrimage end, but my real pilgrimage began. Jesus took that pack off my shoulders and let me follow him; a certain guide who is never lost and never tired.

For this Eucharist, "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God," picking up the cross that will bring you to freedom.