

The long and winding road

Frances Murphy

In the days leading up to World Youth Day in Madrid, 3000 young people from all over the world gathered in Loyola to take part in MAGiS, a programme run by the Jesuits and other Ignatian orders. These days of preparation, reflection and celebration included a week-long 'experience', allowing each pilgrim to be 'With Christ at the Heart of the World'. Frances Murphy describes the challenges and joys of her pilgrimage: walking the Camino de Santiago.

136 kilometres travelled over 6 days in temperatures up to 35°C, by 27 people from 7 countries speaking 3 languages.

It's easier to start with the numbers because there is so much about my experience of walking the Navarre route of the Camino de Santiago that is difficult to measure: the number of blisters that plagued more or less everyone in the group I walked with; the quantity of sandwiches consumed hungrily after each day's walk; the volume of suncream applied to prevent sunburn from taking its toll; or the combined weight of the backpacks we each carried every step of the way. And there are the elements that I could never put a figure on: the number of people who had walked the same path before us over hundreds of years; the distance we could see across the north Spanish landscape as we took in the magnificent views; the speed at which the group became a family after beginning as a group of strangers; or the depth of joy and frustration felt at different points during our journey.

The story of our pilgrimage began in Loyola, in the Basque country, where 3000 young people from all over the world had gathered in the first weekend of August to participate in MAGiS, a programme organised by the Jesuits and other Ignatian orders over the ten days leading up to World Youth Day in Madrid. For three days, pilgrims prayed, celebrated,

Photo by Mark Tang



socialised and lived together as an international community in the home of the spirituality that had, in one way or another, brought all of us to take part in MAGiS. In amongst all of the workshops, times of reflection, games and exhibitions, we had the opportunity to visit the chapel in which St Ignatius was converted to follow Christ, a path which of course led him to found the Society of Jesus. This room has an important place not only in the history of

the Church but in the life of anyone whose faith has been informed by the Ignatian charism, and to be able to visit it was something special.

Father General, Adolfo Nicolás, joined us to celebrate Sunday Mass and in his homily, reflecting on the Gospel reading of Jesus walking on water, he said: 'Fear can often take the best of us.' The following day, pilgrims were due to depart to take part in one of 99 experiences that were taking place all over the Iberian peninsula and North Africa, and Father General's words no doubt spoke deeply to all of those who were feeling nervous about what the week ahead would hold – including me! The experiences differed widely in content – pilgrimages, social service, spirituality, ecology, faith/culture, and arts and performance – but all would demand a lot of everyone taking part in them; at this Mass we were sent forth to meet God in the challenges and opportunities of the following days.

We met the people who we would be joining in our experiences later that afternoon: dozens of circles of people filled the grounds of the Sanctuary of Loyola as we introduced ourselves to our companions for the first time and shared our expectations of the week ahead. Each group was made up of different language groups but had a designated common language and so one of the initial challenges for many was to adjust to speaking something other than their native language for a week. Group L11 was made up officially of pilgrims from the Spanish, Singaporean and German MAGiS contingents (although among us were pilgrims who had come to MAGiS with one of those groups but counted their home country as the Philippines, Austria or Sweden) – and me, the sole UK representative although I was taking part as a member of the MAGiS Communications Team. We spoke together in English and it impressed me that the non-native English speakers of the group still found the energy to speak in another language every day after a tiring walk. I know that they found this difficult and am so grateful to them that their English (which is infinitely better than my Spanish or German!) allowed us to form such close relationships.

Monday morning arrived and our 11am departure time seemed like a blessing, as other ‘experience groups’ had been departing at various points the previous night and in the early hours of the morning. We weren’t walking on Monday but rather travelling by coach to Roncesvalles, the departing point for our pilgrimage. I was grateful for the coach journey – I, along with the rest of the Communications Team and other MAGiS organising groups, had been in Loyola for six days already, and they had been busy and tiring days so the couple of hours on the coach were a much needed opportunity to rest and think properly about what lay ahead of me, something I had not really had a chance to do. When we arrived in Roncesvalles, we spent the afternoon playing games and getting to know one another. The cabins in which we were staying became a hub of activity and noise as we asked each questions: ‘Are you working or studying?’, ‘Why did you choose to come on a pilgrimage?’, ‘How heavy is your backpack?!’

We also began on that day a routine that would form the backbone of our week together. In the evening we divided into groups of eight or nine – our ‘MAGiS circles’ – and sat down in these groups to talk about

our hopes and expectations, and pray together using the readings, themes and questions for the day set out in our MAGiS Pilgrim’s Handbook. We met daily with our MAGiS circles; the chance to talk about our day – what we had enjoyed or found difficult, how we had struggled or succeeded in finding God, what we had been thinking or talking about as we walked – was a daily source of support and encouragement.

After MAGiS circles came dinner. We would take it in turns to cook and do the washing up in small groups, and then sit in a circle to eat. As the week progressed, it was at mealtimes that we saw how much of a family we were becoming. We could sit down together and enjoy the fruits of our companions’ labour: it didn’t matter where we sat or whose fork was whose, and we became less and less shy about going back for seconds or trying to get a piece of the last loaf of bread!

And just as we broke bread together daily at mealtimes, we broke bread together in the Eucharist. Some days, we would attend Mass in the church of whichever town we were staying in that night and would find many other pilgrims in the congregation; other days, we would find a quiet space near to wherever we were staying and celebrate Mass as a group, either in English or Spanish. The Sign of Peace was an event in itself every day – we would all make sure that we shared a hug and a kiss on each cheek with every other person in the group, so the circle in which we sat would become a jumble of people.

We would come together again for night prayer before we went to bed. Instead of a candle, which would have been vulnerable in the wind, Father General had presented each group at the Mass in Loyola with a light-emitting ‘MAGiS ball’; our excited chatter would die down to silence as we gathered around it for an Examen, looking back over our day and sharing whatever we wanted to with the group. We sang in English, Spanish, German and Latin, closing the day, ready to rest and begin again the next morning.

It might seem, amidst all of that, that the walking dimension of our pilgrimage was the smallest part! Well, in some senses it was – putting one foot in front of the other every day (in some cases a very blistered foot!) was a means for us to build relationships with God and with one another; it was not an end in itself.

After fuelling up with bread and cereal at breakfast each morning, we would put on our backpacks and begin the day's stretch of between 18 and 23 km. We tended to walk for a couple of kilometres and then stop to have morning prayer, another part of our daily routine. We would read the daily readings and questions from our Pilgrim's Handbook, encouraging us to think about what the day ahead held for us. Prayer would often be followed by a period of walking in silence, after which we would resume the conversations and singing that kept us going (the singing sometimes accompanied by a guitar thanks to our enthusiastic and energetic group leader!). On a couple of days we walked in pairs for a period of time to discuss the daily readings and our reactions to them – it was a chance for us to share more deeply about our faith and our reasons for coming on pilgrimage.

There is no denying that at times it was hard. To walk such a distance, day after day, and to motivate yourself to do the same again the next day, is a huge challenge, especially if you are not used to walking. The Singaporeans in the group pointed out that the distance of our route (from Roncesvalles to Viana) was three times the length of their country! The terrain, while undoubtedly beautiful, was tough. The first couple of days included some stretches through woodland which provided shade, but the majority of the walk was through arid, bare land, much of which in the northern Spanish summer is burned from the heat, and so the relief from the sun that we so desperately craved was sparse. Aside from a little rain on the first morning of our walk, it was hot and dry every day – not ideal walking conditions. Some days brought flatter walks than others; some a fair amount of road walking; some magnificent views – on any given day there were challenges and easier times, but the group encouraged one another through conversation, silent companionship and even physical support. Our backpacks were heavy and one of the most common reflections shared among the group was that the weight we were carrying was symbolic – of the problems in our lives, of how much we owned but did not need, of Christ's cross. They were a constant burden, but no doubt the experience would have been hugely different without them.

The whole pilgrimage experience was new to me and for the first couple of days I struggled to adjust to it, let alone enjoy it. There was a constant feeling of

tiredness, not only due to the physical effort of the walk but because we were sleeping somewhere different every night. It was unnerving to wonder each day where we would be sleeping that night. In some towns we would find a place in one of the pilgrims' hostels; in some we slept in sports halls that opened their doors to pilgrims; we spent one night on the floor of the Jesuit school in Pamplona; and our penultimate night was spent under the stars, on gravel, in the grounds of a hostel that was full. The night after our first walk was particularly difficult as the sports hall that was hosting us was invaded at 4am by some locals who had been celebrating at the village festival all night long – it was a disruptive experience for us, but one that served to bring us together as a group as we reflected on it later.

Aside from these visitors, the hospitality shown to us by the people in the towns where we stayed (Zubiri, Pamplona, Punta la Reina, Estrella, Los Arcos and Viana) was heart-warming. The locals are no doubt familiar with the sight of pilgrims struggling into town at the end of a day's walk, but we were greeted constantly by calls of '*Buen camino!*' from them and other pilgrims. There was a real sense of fellowship which never failed to bring a smile to our weary faces.

We tried to begin our walks earlier and earlier each day, not only to get the majority of our walk out of the way before the worst of the heat kicked in but also so that we could enjoy spending time in the towns where we stayed. One of the highlights for me was our time in Pamplona, where we continued our venture into Ignatian history of the previous weekend by seeing the place where Ignatius was hit by the cannonball. In Estrella, we were rewarded for our day's walking effort with a trip to the local swimming pool, where we played games and relaxed together, by now definitely as a group of friends rather than just walking companions.

I can't deny that I was relieved when our final destination, Viana, came into view on Sunday – I had found the experience to be a physical challenge and although my feet were thankfully blister-free, I was certainly ready to stop walking. I find it difficult to express in words my admiration for anyone who has completed the entire route of the Camino. I was also looking forward to our week ahead in Madrid for World Youth Day and to catching up with those

friends I had worked closely with during the preceding week and left in Loyola. On our last night together, we enjoyed a meal in a restaurant in a celebratory atmosphere, all immensely proud of what we had achieved, and the following day afforded us a morning to spend together, not walking, but with each national group giving a performance to represent their country – rather than going it alone for the UK, I had a guest role (to my surprise!) in the German group's rendition of a popular game show, *Wetten, das..?* There was much laughter, which continued as we piled onto the coach to begin our journey to Madrid, singing all the way.

As I look back now, while I remember the times when I found it tough, my overwhelming feeling is one of deep joy and affection for the 26 friends that I made over that week. While geography might mean that our friendships cannot all continue by spending time together, the trials, journey and most of all laughter that we shared together will I hope unite us in memories and in prayer for a long time to come. We all wanted, in some way, to find God in this pilgrimage – some questions may be left unanswered, some new questions may have arisen, but without doubt God was present in the spirit that united us a small community, a family.

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