

# IGNATIAN PILGRIMAGE: THE INNER JOURNEY

## Loyola to Manresa on Foot

*Brendan McManus*

*As a Jesuit novice, Brendan McManus walked across Spain for a month with a fellow novice as part of their formation. Walking up to twenty miles a day and with very little money, they were reliant on people's goodwill for food and shelter for the night. It was a true pilgrimage in which they sought to retrace the footsteps of St Ignatius from his birthplace to the place where he experienced his conversion and wrote the Spiritual Exercises.*

THE WOMAN UNLEASHED A TORRENT of Spanish at me as I made a hasty retreat from her door, hurt and angry at the strength of her reaction. I rejoined my companion, Tony, on the road and, subdued by the third rejection of our requests for food, we had no choice but to start walking again. Having already gone some twelve miles we were hot, sweaty and more than a little hungry. A little further down the road we stopped to eat the bar of chocolate we had saved. In our desperation we were not too bothered that it had melted in the thirty-degree heat. Our situation would have been almost comical, as we licked the chocolate off the wrapper, covering our hands and faces in the process, were it not so serious.

In talking about religion and God I have often heard the phrase 'the inner journey' used and never fully understood it. Now, as I reflect back on our pilgrimage experience in Spain, I feel I have a better understanding of that phrase and how it is seemingly paradoxically linked to coming to know God. Somehow the 375-mile walk from Loyola to Manresa, west to east across the neck of Spain, became more of an interior journey, a process of coming to know the landscape of my own fears and feelings. Like Ignatius, who had made the same journey



before me, I came to know more of this mysterious God, who provides and protects while continually challenging and drawing me on, as I was wrestling with the pain of my own terribly human limitations. I was continually haunted by a phrase that I read in St Ignatius' autobiography: 'at this time God was dealing with him as a school-teacher deals with a child'.<sup>1</sup> All the way

along the road I felt that I was being gently guided and taught; God was reaching out to me even when I was making mistakes or just being plain stupid! In the stories of the places where we went and the people we met, I offer you these things that I feel I have been taught.

### ***Recognising the Need to Learn***

The first step in any teaching situation is for the pupil to realise that he or she is lacking in some respects and is in need of the wisdom that the teacher provides. I have great difficulty with this because I like to pride myself on how much I already know and how self-sufficient I am. The pilgrimage became an experience of dependence and reliance on others—this was an important lesson.

The initial days of travelling to and staying at Loyola, the birthplace of St Ignatius, were quite euphoric. Excited and full of great hopes for our journey, we were congratulating ourselves on our fitness training, preparation and route planning. In the room where Ignatius had been transformed from soldier to pilgrim as he recovered from a cannon-ball injury that shattered his leg, I wondered what surprises awaited us and about the unmapped journey that lay ahead.

The first day, walking to Tolosa through the fertile Basque countryside, was a delight. Shady forests, winding mountain roads and endless green valleys enchanted us and the miles melted away. Our first

<sup>1</sup> *Autobiography*, 27.

request for accommodation in the town brought us to a Franciscan community of priests where we had rooms, beds and showers. That night, relaxing in front of the television after a lovely meal and sipping our liqueurs, I was thinking 'this pilgrimage stuff ain't so difficult after all!' In fact, the first few days, travelling to Pamplona, were very smooth: we slept in our first church hall (there would be many more); our first request for food, from a family on a picnic, resulted in their giving us everything they had and offering us some money; and our policy of taking the back roads brought us unexpectedly to the fantastic Gorge of Lumbier with sheer cliffs, deep green water and soaring eagles.

These were days of tranquil walking, of savouring the richness of the golden corn, peppered with red poppies, set against blue skies. We watched the wind swell through cornfields and noted the ever-present eagle keeping watch above. The first note of disharmony came with the exhaustion and dehydration we suffered in walking through the afternoon to get to Castle Xavier, the birthplace of that other Jesuit traveller, Francis Xavier. We almost collapsed inside the door with the heat and the pain of many blisters. This was the first of many lessons we had to learn, as we reflected in the cool of the castle on the wisdom of the continental siesta.

### ***I Am Not in Control***

I was jolted out of my self-sufficient complacency for the first time by the incident with the angry woman who would not give us food. Two days out of Xavier, this was our first serious day's walking without much food. I think it was my first real experience of going without food involuntarily. The sensation of being really hungry and having no food available is a daunting reality. After the experience of requests for food being repeatedly rejected, I found it quite frightening. It was very unfamiliar territory compared with our normal world of easily satiated needs and desires. That night, despite the unprecedented kindness of a local priest in giving us a hall, tins of stew, cheese and water, I still had an overwhelming sense of fear and doom. 'This is crazy stuff', I thought, 'it's dangerous, unpredictable and there is no way that I will be able to do this for another three weeks'. I told my companion, Tony, that I was thinking of pulling out, that I was having a crisis about why I was doing this and that I needed some space to work things out. I remember clearly that there was a poster of Jesus on the wall.

The turning point, as I prayed during that 'dark night' for inspiration, came from reading Ignatius' autobiography. I realised that his scruples or times of great bewilderment were caused by being in the grip of fear and letting anxiety dominate. Likewise I realised that my own fears, of going hungry and of being rejected by people, were being given full reign. In reflecting on the situation a little more calmly, I saw that it was possible to go without food (my fear of it was the problem) and that the angry woman herself was probably more afraid than anything else, as I had intruded into her house in my desperation. It was then that I came to the realisation that it was not 'my show'—that I could not make it to Manresa through my own efforts. It would be a miracle if I did get there; and if God wanted me to get there God would help me achieve it. Having come to some sort of peace about accepting my own limits and dependence on God I was ready to begin the learning process.

### ***Seeing Everything as Gift***

One of the key elements in seeing God as provider and teacher is to recognise that God seeks continually to communicate with us and generously provides gifts and signposts along the way. I found this difficult to grasp, given that we normally feel as though we are the centre of our own world, and are encouraged to seek for our own comfort and satisfaction. This paradox of the struggle to see things as gift is illustrated in the following story.

We arrived in a fairly large town, called Jaca, where we had been told that the bishop was friendly towards Jesuits. We discovered that he ran a secondary school and decided to ask there for accommodation for the night. The porter was reluctant, but on inspecting our documentation he asked us to come back that evening when he would give us a classroom for the night. Although we had found somewhere to sleep, we were unhappy about the fact that he insisted on locking us in for the night. We would not get out until 8.30 a.m., precluding an early start to avoid the afternoon heat. We voiced our problems with this arrangement but the porter was immovable. Disconsolate, we had our sandwiches and siesta in the park, and finally hit upon the idea of approaching the bishop directly. On finding his offices in the centre of town, we spoke to a secretary explaining our desire for more suitable accommodation. Unfortunately nothing else was available and we were directed back to the school.

Reflecting on the incident that night we both had a sense of unease in having made that approach to the bishop. Somehow this sense of trying to improve our lot brought us no joy, and we came to realise we were being invited to accept what we had been given as a great gift. Sitting that night, locked into the French classroom and eating our bread and cheese, it was difficult to see it that way. The problem was to let go of our expectations and our pride and to see the situation for what it truly was: we were lucky to have somewhere to sleep. This was an important lesson for us in seeing the real nature of a gift and, as it turned out, our accommodation was to get much worse than this!

### ***Living in the Present Moment***

One of the biggest obstacles to the learning process is simply not being present to the learning experience. I think of myself and of all the classes that I have daydreamed through, how I have sought to distract myself from what was really going on. I suspect for a lot of us this distraction is often a matter either of living in the past, and regretting things we did or did not do, or of living in the future, and dreaming about what will be. Yet God is present in the truth of the reality of everything that surrounds us. God continually calls us to appreciate a world 'charged with the grandeur of God' and, through other people, we are invited to realise God's plan for our care. This was to be our next lesson in the ragged beauty of the Pyrenees.

At this stage we had decided to turn off the main roads and head for the mountains, where there would be less traffic and more interesting scenery. We also decided to forgo the security of staying in Jesuit houses by choosing a more remote route and trusting that God would provide for us. We were slowly becoming more open and accepting of the goodness of God's plan.

The first few days in the foothills of the Pyrenees provided us with fantastic glimpses of the snow-capped peaks, forested valleys and swift rivers. Our requests for food were a lot more low-key and personable. In a mountain village called Yesero we met a local family, introducing ourselves first and spending time getting to know them before building up to the request for bread. The key we discovered was simply to focus on what we needed at that particular time, whether that was food, water or accommodation, and trust that it would be provided for us. It was unhelpful to think too far ahead or to worry about what might happen.



Asking for somewhere to stay in a mountain village called Broto, with typical Irish self-effacement I asked the local priest for a place to sleep—a garage, anything. To my surprise I was led around to the back of the church to a lean-to garage. Our initial disconsolateness with the falling standard of our accommodation turned to delight to find that there were partitions that we could use to keep the wind out and that we had a great view of the mountains from our new bedroom! Hunting around the garage we managed to find a few benches to sleep on, a table to eat at, and an outside tap to wash our feet and bandage the many blisters. Eating our tins of stew with pieces of cardboard in the alpine twilight, we were enfolded by a rare joy and peace.

The following day was mainly downhill along a river to a place called Fiscal. Here we could find no church but instead, walking along the bank of the river, we discovered a disused stable which was perfect for our purposes. We even had a mountain river for bathing, washing our clothes, and contemplation. That evening we did one of Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises, a contemplation on the nativity when God takes on humanity in Jesus. Doing this exercise in our newly acquired stable really brought it alive. We had a growing sense that there was some sort of plan or guidance for us, that things seemed to be provided just at the time that we needed them. Later that night we managed to see an epic World Cup football match in which Ireland beat Italy. Coming back to our stable by torchlight we felt a growing sense of joy in what

the Lord could provide. It seemed that being truly present to the moment in order to read the signs that the Lord provided would always lead us into God's providential care.

### ***The Pain Involved in Learning***

In any learning situation we may reach a point of chaos or uncertainty which, though painful, is crucial in the learning process. This type of liminal experience is almost always marked by a feeling of insecurity or vulnerability. But it is in this place of insecurity that real learning takes place. We have to make a choice to go forward or to 'hang in there': the temptation is to give up because the challenge is too difficult. God teaches us through these liminal experiences, and it is at such painful transition points that we learn what words such as 'trust' and 'belief' really mean.

Arriving at a touristy town called Ainsa with a cobbled square and expensive restaurants, we headed for the old church to ask for accommodation. Churches are always built on the highest point in the village so, footsore and tired, we enquired as to where the priest lived. We were disappointed to find that the priest did not live in the town but only came to say mass. Having found the adjoined cloister locked and therefore unavailable as a place to sleep, we were miserably sitting on a wall outside. This was our moment of great uncertainty and vulnerability. I found my fears and anxieties about food and shelter beginning to gain momentum. Yet, somewhere and somehow, I had an inner sense of holding on or trusting that something would happen.

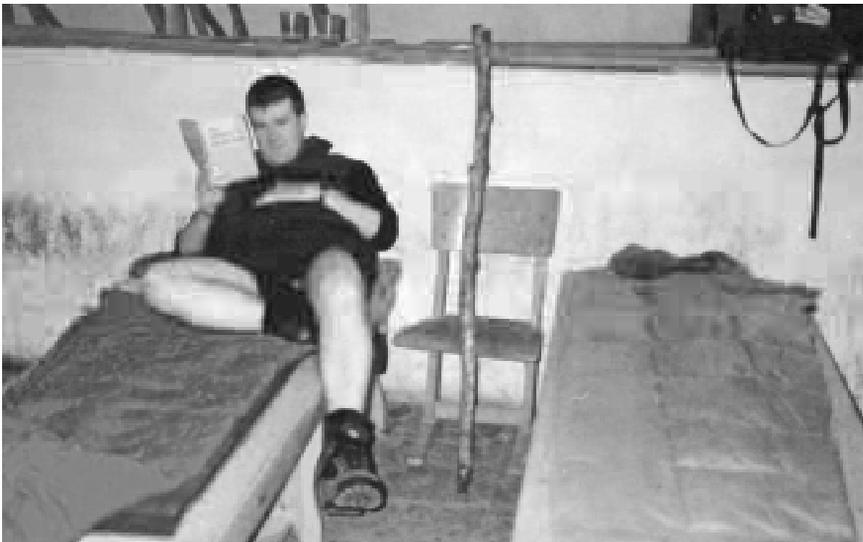
A few minutes later we saw a man with a briefcase get out of a car and go into the church. I said to Tony that he looked fairly official, so we approached him as he came out. By coincidence (or providence) he was the parish priest, Angel, who was replenishing the tourist leaflets. He asked us to meet him in an hour after he had said mass elsewhere. On his return he took us for a beer, showed us to the parish hall where we could sleep, and then treated us to a three-course meal along with the curate! It is hard to put into words the joy with which we received all his generosity and friendship towards us as total strangers. He even gave us a lift in his car the following day, replenishing our stocks of Red Cross processed cheese, which was our main diet. Reflecting that night on our great riches, we realised that it was 'hanging in there' through a

difficult moment that brought us into contact with him and made all his great generosity possible.

### ***The Meaning of Poverty***

One of the greatest forces operating in our world today is that of resistance to change. As human beings we are gifted with great flexibility and the capacity to readjust, but these are often only possible through pain. The avoidance of such pain is a major barrier to development and self-growth; often we become fixated on or attached to things that we hope will bring us a sense of security. But God continually invites us to let go of our material securities, to trust more and to experience the joy that detachment brings.

Our standard of accommodation had been becoming more and more basic, as had our level of personal hygiene. I had been secretly dreading the inevitable moment when we would actually have to sleep outside—the most desperate option, as it seemed to me. Having reached the half-way point of our walk, we planned to take a rest day in a large town coming up. We decided to try to walk to it in two days: the first day involved a hefty seventeen-mile walk. Even with our siesta under a shady bridge we were exhausted from the heat and fatigue. Arriving at a tiny village called Viacamp, we found no church or any likely place to stay. Continuing on through the village we came to a steep hill with a ruined church and a huge tower that was merely a



shell. After inspecting the tower and taking in the incredible panoramic view that our little plateau provided, I realised that the moment had come in terms of sleeping rough.

In some ways my worst fears were realised that night. The local dogs got wind of us and kept up a terrible barking that made them seem almost on top of us. The little fire that we had lit in the tower turned into choking fumes as the wind changed and swept into the tower with great force. Even my sleeping bag was not an adequate protection against the wind, and I had to resort to using the plastic survival bag that I had kept for such occasions. Unfortunately the wind whipping off the plastic made such a noise that neither of us got much sleep. I gave up worrying about the tower falling down around us and concentrated on keeping my head buried away from the dust! I know that this sounds strange, but paradoxically I had the most consoling feeling of being protected that night. I knew that nothing would go wrong and that it did not matter too much about losing a night's sleep or sleeping in a pile of rubble. All that mattered was God's love and God's care. For me it was the most profound experience of poverty, of great riches and rejoicing in the truth of God in this terrible situation. It was as if I was being asked to let go of expectations and securities so that I could experience God's love more directly.

### ***God Continually Reaches out***

One of the most helpful attitudes in teaching is that of patience and tolerance of mistakes. What is most damaging or inhibiting to learning is the sense of not being able to make a mistake or fearing the consequences if one is made. As humans we generally all fear making mistakes and almost half-believe in the image of a wrathful, intolerant God who demands an impossibly high level of perfection. It is difficult to believe in a God who is interested in each one of us and continually reaches out to us, despite the mistakes we make.

The day after our night in the tower we set off with very little food for Tremp, sixteen miles away. Towards midday the road began to go up and up, rising to over a thousand metres at a pass in the mountains. Getting exhausted and weak from lack of food I started to slow down. Watching Tony pulling away from me up the hill I became angry with my own limits and the apparent ease with which he walked. Still irate, I caught up with him at a rest point and explained to him what it was like

to walk behind someone when you were suffering. He very graciously agreed to walk at my reduced pace and we had a profound conversation on what it actually meant to ‘walk with’ someone and the implications it had for both.

Suddenly a car pulled up and offered us a lift. Tony, who was closer, waved him on, telling him that we would prefer to walk. I was astounded and told Tony that I would have taken the lift as I was getting progressively weaker. We continued on at a very reduced pace, went over the pass in the mountains and descended to the first village that we had passed that day. We were fairly desperate, we had no food and we had run out of water, without mentioning my exhausted state. We knocked on every door in the village and, to our dismay, there was no one in.

Walking back up the steep path out of the village we unexpectedly met a man sweeping the cobbles. He turned out to be exceedingly friendly and chatty, but unfortunately could not spare us any bread as he only had enough for his family. He was so pleasant that we continued chatting to him and, in telling us about the village, he said that there was an Irishman living nearby. He delighted in telling us all sorts of things, but we kept trying to bring him back to where this Irishman lived to try there for food. Eventually he saw the seriousness of our situation and, going into his house, he came back with what probably was his only loaf. He cut it in half with his penknife and gave it to us. This meant a great deal to us at that time—it really was the ‘bread of life’. We ate it with the remainder of our cheese and jam and got water from a tap that he showed us. We had a short siesta under the tree where we met him while he watched over us from his balcony.

The last few miles into Tremp that evening were long and hot but, fortified by the amazing events of the day, we made it to the town church. The local priest, taking one look at us and laughing at our unkempt appearance, booked us into a local boarding house where we had beds and our first shower in many days. It was a real deliverance and an answer to our prayers. It had been an incredible day of human weakness and frailty, and of experiencing how God works most powerfully through them. We had a strong sense of God being with us along the way, of God continually providing for us—whether it was the lift that we had turned down, the man who had given us the bread, or the priest in Tremp. This was a God who would never abandon us, who

was patient with our limitedness and in whom we could trust for everything.

### ***Rejoicing in God's Goodness***

Having come a long way in terms of understanding the nature of God and learning to trust God, we were ready for the next phase—that of simply delighting in what the Lord could provide. We had learnt to trust, to wait, to pray, to be able to let go of things, and now we were realising the fruits of what we had learnt.

The first day out of Tremp we managed to catch the Ireland–Mexico football game in a mountain-top restaurant. The game being over late, we approached the owner to let us stay on his floor. He said it was impossible because he did not live there, but directed us down the road to the only house in this deserted region. Reaching it, we were met at the door by two brothers who made us very welcome, set us up to sleep in the garage and then invited us in to join the family for a meal. It proved to be the most delightful evening, dining with three families on holiday from Barcelona. The good food, the wine, the chat and their interest in us all contributed to a great sense of joy and sharing among us. They even offered us a huge bag of bread, fruit and cheese to take with us, along with the use of their shower. They took us in without knowing who we were or wanting to see any documentation. Their hospitality was complete and unconditional, just like God's love—in contrast to an earlier, unpleasant experience when a priest took us in purely because we were Jesuits and not out of genuine hospitality.

Unable to find a shady bridge under which to have our daily siesta the following afternoon, we had to settle for an old Benedictine monastery partly ruined by the civil war. We slept under the only roofed part and, waking up, we were greeted with the inquisitive faces of a mother and children who owned the adjoining house. They were very interested in us and had been in Ireland on holiday three years before. They took us in to look at their slides of Dingle, Kerry and Dublin, and it was strange to see our own country through someone else's eyes. We spent the whole evening with them, watching television with the kids, getting fed and setting up our sleeping bags in the cloister outside their door. Drinking wine and sharing stories in the glow of the gas-lamp that night, I could only marvel at the goodness of God shown to us through these people.



On our penultimate night on the road before reaching Manresa we reached a small village called Tora, where the local priest maintained that there was nowhere for us to stay. Instead he directed us to a Benedictine monastery, six miles out of town. We were in no mood to walk such a distance at that hour of the night, so we set out on the main road, having been refused accommodation by several families. Several miles later the same priest pulled up beside us in his car. We explained to him that it had been too far to walk so he offered to take us there in his car. He took us up this narrow, winding country lane right up into the heart of the forest. The monastery, which we had presumed to be inhabited, was completely deserted but still intact. It was almost spooky exploring the Romanesque chapel and huge crypt, thinking of all the monks who had gone before us.

We could not understand why he had gone to all the trouble of dropping us out there, but the walk to the main road the following morning was absolutely stunning. The rising sun poured through the gaps in the trees as the little lane wound its way through forests and meadows. At one stage we came to a height and what seemed to be a huge lake lay in front of us. Unable to find it on the map, we realised that it was a mist-filled valley. Walking on to the next village we met a farmer on his tractor emerging from the mist. Asking him for directions as I stood

on the running board of his tractor, I felt as though I had met Jesus himself in his well-worn, welcoming face. It was just a perfect morning.

### **God's Love Cannot Be Earned: It Is a Gift**

In our success-orientated work we are very accustomed to the idea of recognition for our learning achievements, whether they be passing exams, getting a certificate or graduating. It seems as the expression of what we have achieved and the mark that we are now competent to practise or to teach others. But it is here that the analogy with teaching breaks down in terms of how God relates to us. There is no limit to what God can teach us, and there is nothing that we have done for which we can get merit or claim rewards. This is the true meaning of God's love as gift.

Our final night was spent in a ruined hilltop castle that afforded us a tremendous view of the Catalan landscape. I found the next day, walking to Manresa, arduous and difficult on our meagre rations. I had to stop at one point and Tony bought me a bar of chocolate just to keep me going. I do not think anything would have stopped me that day, though, even if I had had to crawl on my hands and knees, such was the motivation to get to our destination. Back in the beginning I thought I would only make it by a miracle, and now, after three weeks on the road, I could hardly believe that I was going to succeed.

The last few miles into Manresa we walked abreast, acknowledging the level of companionship that had built up between us. We paused at the outskirts to photograph ourselves beside the sign for Manresa, the town where Ignatius had spent long years wrestling with himself and his desires. Finding the Jesuit house, we were overjoyed and relieved to have made it to journey's end. We had a very special mass that evening in the 'Chapel of the Cave' where Ignatius wrote the *Spiritual Exercises*. We placed our well-worn boots at the altar for the offertory procession. Watching the Ireland–Norway match that night was like the icing on the cake.

After the initial euphoria of finishing, however, I began to experience a great anticlimax and sense of desolation. Here I was, having walked across Spain, enduring great heat, hunger and exhaustion, having made it against all the odds and done this great thing for God and now, nothing! This feeling stayed with me for all three days in Manresa and nothing could shift it. The last day before we left for the mountain

retreat of Montserrat, I was praying by the banks of the Cardoner river, as Ignatius had done many times. I had the slowly dawning enlightenment that I was being taught yet another lesson. I came to understand that despite this great pilgrimage done in God's name, my standing with God had not changed. I was thinking in a narrow way that this had 'earned' me something or that I deserved some reward or acknowledgement because of it. And then I saw it: God's love is pure gift, it is free and cannot be earned or deserved. Jesus came as a man to show how someone can die for love, so that I might realise that, though I am human and flawed, I am loved. Everything else seemed unimportant: the whole pilgrimage was worthwhile solely so that I might come to appreciate just how undeserving and humble I really was, and to see the mystery of God's love for me through Jesus.

### ***The End of the Journey***

It was then that I felt I understood the phrase 'inner journey'. In some ways the outer physical journey was only an analogy for the inner journey to discover my own true nature. I came to know myself as I really am: human, limited, weak, emotional and dependent. Through that experience I also came to know God. It has changed my notion of prayer, for walking reminds me of how I truly am before God: not in control, naked, unadorned and in need of help. To be on the road is to be vulnerable. Only through being open and trusting in this way am I free to receive God's gifts.

It crystallized my Jesuit vocation for me: all that matters is being a companion of Jesus, that I am invited to walk with him and also to walk with others. I am invited to be truly present to people, not to walk in front or behind but alongside them, with all that that implies.

I believe that pilgrimage is a model for our lives, that we are a 'pilgrim people', always on the move into God. It teaches us the lesson of what is really important and what is superfluous, that there are many things with which we surround ourselves that we simply do not need. It reminds us of our own limitations and our need for God.

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