

Pilgrim

by Phil Cummins

Worryingly high. Not a tad high, or just a teensy bit on the high side. But *worryingly* high, as if the adjective needed some extra punch. That's how my healthcare provider described my cholesterol levels during a call to discuss the results of bloodwork. Not surprisingly, my middle-aged heart gave a little wobble as my anxious mind promptly worried up a future filled with cardiovascular concerns. This call was a blunt reminder that ageing inexorably pushes one ever closer to the high mileage category, a time when the body often decides it no longer wishes to cooperate as slavishly as it once did. It loses pace and starts to grumble and creak, periodically sending out urgent reminders of the need for a regular overhaul in order to maintain its roadworthiness. This call was one such reminder, and to maintain drivability I needed to reduce saturated and trans fats in my diet, ramp up my intake of soluble fibre, and take considerably more exercise. In other words, an end to all gustatorial joy and time to get fitted for new trainers. It was goodbye to fried food and takeouts, and hello to fresh fruit and workouts. Driving home, I began to imagine my stomach straining against the seatbelt, reinforcing the need for action.

One week later, my wife and I booked ourselves in for a pilgrimage along the Camino de Santiago in Northern Spain.

These two events, it should be said, are only *partly* connected.

On the matter of pilgrimages first. I'd always understood one to be a journey of some kind, a break from normal life in order to travel on foot towards a distant, sacred destination. Walking is the engine of pilgrimage, the physical process of placing one foot in front of the other and moving forward through the long days supposedly empowering one to look inwards and find some higher meaning, some deeper sense of the spiritual—*solvitur ambulando* made flesh, as it were. Undeniably one of the great Christian pilgrimages dating back to the Middle Ages, countless feet have trodden the meandering routes of the Camino de Santiago, all leading inexorably towards the great Cathedral of

Santiago de Compostela where the remains of St James the Apostle are purported to be buried. By decree of Pope Calixtus II, walking the Camino during a 'Jacobean' or 'holy' year when St James' Day falls on a Sunday, as it did in 2021, brings the rather nifty bonus of absolving one of all sin. As consolation for Covid restrictions, however, this bonus was, providentially for us, extended into 2022 by Pope Francis.

I could lie and say that I wanted to cleanse my sinful soul through a 119-kilometer trek beneath the broiling Spanish sun, but the fact that I'm a card-carrying atheist would probably render any earned plenary indulgence null and void. And whilst it would undoubtedly improve my waning fitness and help to slay the aforementioned cholesterol gremlin, I'd be pretending if I said that I was doing this solely for the much-needed physical health benefits.

The reality was far more humbling. I had become overly cloistered within my home by Ireland's seemingly never-ending pandemic restrictions, perpetually plugged into the online world of work, leaving me increasingly disconnected from people and fearful of inessential emergence from my comfortingly aseptic domestic bud. In my mind foreign travel had embarrassingly morphed into something terrifying, the very thought of it leaving me weak-kneed. It was as if lockdown had thrown a switch in my head, rendering me petrified of an activity I'd happily enjoyed for many years. This trip was the push I needed to break free of the psychological rut I was in, but would I be a fretful tourist or a resolute pilgrim? Would I spend my days ducking and diving from Covid infection, or would I leave my worries behind and seek renewal from within? Time would tell.

Our plan was to rendezvous in Madrid with a larger group comprising family members from both sides of the Atlantic, some not seen by me since childhood; nothing like long-lost relations to inject some spirited reminiscence into our perambulations. As complete novices to this type of venture, F— and I sought guidance from friends, thrice veterans of the Camino. "Whatever the hell you do, look after your feet," they rather predictably advised. "Plenty of corn plasters and coconut oil. And get into the habit of taking regular extended walks with a little backpack as a way of preparing yourselves for the unbroken six-day trek in Spain." Having fallen out of the habit of regular exercise, our devotion to the latter was sadly limited to the occasional country stroll (*minus* backpack), pausing regularly to catch our breath and smell the cow parsley; in walking terms, the

gentlest nursery slopes of a typical Camino stage. We rationalized these lacklustre preparations by telling ourselves that if worse came to worse we could always just dial up an Uber at any point on the trail and taxi to the next town for an early pint.

As departure day approached, however, the growing reality of the trip became a torment to me. It loomed like an imminent root canal. I struggled to raise any sense of anticipation and began to catastrophize wildly about everything, my anxieties frequently manifesting as sleepless nights and panic attacks. “It’s okay, love,” said F—, gathering me into an embrace as I sat sobbing and wrung out on the edge of the bed one night. “We don’t have to do this if you don’t want to. But I’ll be with you.” Not only was I overthinking our less-than-perfect physical readiness, this had become an endeavour that was competing mercilessly with my by now well-conditioned impulse to remain enfolded within the four walls of our home.

I slept for most of the flight from Dublin. Upon waking I was greeted by a vile stench on the inside of the NK95 mask hermetically sealed around my mouth and nose. (Imagine spoiled cheese scraped out of a tramp’s shoe.) The final descent into Madrid revealed an endlessly hilly patchwork of parched olive greens and sandy browns delicately embroidered with pale winding roads, all so different from the verdant topography of the country we’d just left behind. The Spanish interior in June screamed HOT!

In the days that followed, the seeming strangeness of undertaking a pilgrimage despite lacking anything resembling a religious bone in my body would come to occupy my thoughts. Although reared as Roman Catholic, I knew from an early age that organised religion and I were destined to part company, the whole endeavour simply too inflexible and stultifying to my inquisitive mind. And so faith has always belonged to the realm of the intangible for me, the inimitable Jan Morris summing up my views to absolute perfection: *‘It is futile to think that religious faith is anything more than useful discipline and consolation, sustained by wishful thinking.’* And yet, I’ve always been inexplicably captivated by churches and cathedrals, a fact that may afford some tiny sliver of room to maneuver around this incongruence. I marvel at their visual pageantry and the eclectic jumble of humanity they draw in. Their echoing quietude also appeals to my introverted

nature and reminds me that they are still historical places of sanctuary worth experiencing.

A visit to the Church of San Jeronimo el Real during our brief Madrid stopover, a sixteenth century church a mere stone's throw from The Prado, brought this incongruence into focus. It being a Sunday, F— and I had only just begun pottering about the church to admire the glorious interior when a choir struck up to announce the arrival of the priest, a small wizened man in a flowing ruby surplice. Opting to stay, we took our seats as he strode towards the altar to commence mass. The key to surviving any ceremony one has zero spiritual investment in is to become an aficionado of observation, and so it should be said that there is surely nothing more graceful than Spanish women of a certain age attending Sunday mass. With their immaculately coiffed waterfalls of silvery-grey hair and exquisitely tailored outfits of loosely flowing silks and satins, they are the very essence of classy ageing, the silence between hymns occasionally broken by the well-practiced flick of a wrist and gentle bird's wing swish of a fan to cool their enigmatic looks. The priest gave a mesmerizing sermon demonstrating vocal dynamics that Placido Domingo would've been proud of, his voice oscillating between whispering soft and towering crescendo with an undiluted passion for his subject—although what that subject was I had utterly no idea on account of it all being in Spanish. But still, I found myself wholly entertained by the experience. What faith I still lacked in a deity, I had reinforced in religious pomp and people watching.

We departed Madrid, a motley crew of fourteen distributed between a car and minibus. Journeying northwest over 500 kilometers across the central Iberian plateau, the sudden ecological transition from baked landscape to temperate forest as one enters Galicia is something of a sensory jolt, the geographical equivalent of Platform 9¾ as one magically slides from one ecosystem into another. Clouds inexplicably appear out of nowhere to scud across the sky, the arid heat of the interior falls away, a gentle breeze strikes up, the eye begins to register an abundance of green, and a familiar sense of belonging takes hold. We arrived into Tui by early evening, a charming medieval town seemingly carved out of solid granite and located on the banks of the Minho looking across towards Portugal. Tired and thirsty, we descended en masse on one of the local

bars like migrating wildebeest at a watering hole to rehydrate for nearly two hours. Anticipating an eye-watering bar tab, you could've knocked me over with a feather when the entire bill only came to two figures. *Bienvenido a Galicia!* Afterwards, our Camino guide, José, insisted on a midnight tour of Tui and its magnificent cathedral perched on a hill like a gigantic stone sentinel overlooking the town. A native of the Spanish northwest, every atom of him resonated with pride and enthusiasm as he related his country's ancient heritage.

Tui to Porriño (sixteen kilometers): We set off out of Tui to the clickity-clack symphony of scores of walking poles striking the pavement like tinny maracas, unmissable in our matching fluorescent 'Celtic Camino Cousins' vests. Occasionally the locals would send a "*Buen Camino!*" in our direction, something which never failed to hearten me. Leaving town we passed the first of many stone markers displaying a yellow scallop shell, the traditional symbol of pilgrimage, the shell's diagonal lines emanating outwards from a single point supposedly signifying the various routes drawing pilgrims towards Santiago. I felt invincible, all thoughts of the pandemic fading to triviality as I soaked up the glorious rural panorama. This was a landscape that seemed to be greeting us with open arms. I convinced myself that I could actually feel those poxy cholesterol levels plummeting through the very soles of my trail boots.

By the eight kilometer mark I felt as if I'd been kicked senseless by a demented donkey. Sweating profusely, my back and shoulders aching against my overfull backpack, I folded into a café chair gasping for coffee and carbs. Having only applied sunblock to my face and neck before setting off, a nasty dose of sunburn had already taken hold on my right arm and leg—essentially, the east-facing plane of my body as I trekked northwards—and by day's end I'd look like I'd been toasted on one side. I sloped out of the café, annoyed with myself for such lack of self care, the stone marker gaily proclaiming *only* another 111 kilometers to go. Tottering into a sun-baked Porriño by mid-afternoon, the bones and muscles of my back and shoulders at war with one another, I made straight for the bar and a waiting beer to coax out the endorphins and ease me into blissfulness.

Porriño to Redondela (fourteen kilometers): When you walk through Galician forests, as we did en route to Redondela, everything is shadowy, woody, leafy, rustling and uneven. Occasionally, the plaintive sound of a lone Galician bagpiper unfurls from somewhere amongst the trees like a will o' the wisp to draw you onwards and distract you from your aches. Great lumps of granite abound and arboreal invaders hide in plain sight. The invaders, of course, are the eucalypts. What was it AA Gill said about eucalypts? *'Those antipodean trees that drink like Australians and are good for nothing much more than admiring and burning.'* The damn things were absolutely everywhere! Eucalyptus seeds first brought back from Australia in the eighteenth century, most likely by Sir Joseph Banks, are believed to be responsible for the introduction of the species into Europe. For decades the Spanish government encouraged the planting of these incredibly fast growing trees as a way of boosting the timber and pulp industries. A highly invasive species, this inevitably disrupted the natural biosphere of the Galician forests, skewing the normal balance of flora and fauna, parching the soil and displacing traditional Atlantic woodland species like oak, chestnut, and birch, not to mention increasing the risk of forest fires and causing pollution of natural waterways. Not surprisingly, local conservation groups now want them eradicated, and in this mission I wish them well although the expression 'pissing up a rope' seems appropriate; judging from the sheer numbers of eucalypts I observed, I suspect they'll still be hogging the bed and making baby eucalypts long after I've returned to the soil.

Redondela to Pontevedra (twenty-one kilometers): Setting out after breakfast I was delighted to discover that the aches and pains which had risen up in me like damp over the past couple of days had all but evaporated. My calves felt tighter, my arms and shoulders stronger, my back virtually pain free, my backpack weightless. I felt as if my entire body was pliantly remodelling itself to meet the challenge. Which was just as well because the trek to Pontevedra entailed some sharp elevation and rocky ground. Our route took us into the beautiful maritime town of Arcade straddling the Verdugo River just before it pours into the Bay of Vigo—the nautical purlieu of one of Verne's great fictional adventurers, Captain Nemo—and onwards through countless hamlets all testifying to the horticultural wizardry of Galician homeowners who seem able to conjure virtually anything

from the soil. The entire region dripped with rural charm—from the cruciform-capped stone granaries raised up on stilts to protect the harvested grain from rats, to the disused stone basins or ‘lavaderos’ where locals traditionally did their laundry, long since given over to water weeds and grackling alive with frogs and insects. In many places the parallel indentations of ancient wagon wheels scored into the path from centuries of trundling goods to market served as a sort of primitive GPS.

Unfortunately for walkers, the Camino Way is also infested with cyclists. I say ‘infested’ because they swarmed past us like locusts consuming the pathway, often exuding a vastly overinflated sense of entitlement to the trail. Radiating rude health poured into skin tight lycra, they’d whiz by us in packs on tricked-up mountain bikes. Word of their speedy approach would periodically filter up the trail warning everyone to promptly step aside to avoid getting flattened. Occasionally one of them had a boom box strapped to his back belting out what sounded like naff re-runs of the Eurovision Song Contest. Once or twice I seriously considered jamming one of my walking poles through the spokes of a passing bike wheel just for the thrill of sending one of the selfish gits over his handlebars, but I restrained myself; this was a pilgrimage after all, plus I didn’t fancy getting the shite kicked out of me.

As water typically follows the path of least resistance, so too does respite. Locating a fast flowing stream upon reaching the outskirts of Pontevedra, we took off our boots and soaked our feet in the icy cold water, gasping with pleasure. Had a blind man walked by at that exact moment he probably would’ve heard what sounded for all the world like an alfresco orgy. To atone for such prurience, I added Pontevedra’s exquisite Church of the Pilgrim Virgin to my list of visited ancient havens later that evening.

Pontevedra to Caldas de Reis (twenty-two kilometers): We seemed to rise earlier and with one less person each new day, three of our troupe having pulled up lame and requiring taxi service. Sunrise had just started to rinse the sky a pale shade of aquamarine as we set out, our exodus observed by youthful Spanish revellers fresh from a night on the tiles and queuing up for kebabs.

Pilgrimage can be an insular endeavour, much of it spent locked up inside one’s own head. This Camino, however, seemed to have knocked all the rough edges off me,

made me less standoffish. As the day wore on I came to recognize the now familiar faces of other pilgrims on the trail and fell easily into conversations. One woman I spoke to, a retired teacher from Montreal, had walked all the way up from Seville, a journey of over 1000 kilometers and forty-four days! Looking as fresh as a daisy, she probably could've strolled all the way back without breaking a sweat. And then there was the middle-aged American couple who had walked all the way up from Porto: she, plump and jolly; he, vast and belligerent looking. Shuffling along on tree trunk-sized legs that supported an XXXL frame and pendulous stomach, a comically dainty little backpack strapped across his bear-like back, his face wore a chronically aggrieved expression as if regretting ever having heard the word 'Camino' in the first place. Every ounce of his resolve was being channelled into propelling himself forward, his every step a live exhibition of ache and agitation. "You're doin' great honey!" his wife would regularly call after him as she followed thirty feet or so behind, chivvying him along. "This was actually all *his* idea," she grinned wickedly, keeping her voice lowered so as to avoid aggravating him further.

We reached Caldas de Reis by early afternoon, the final stretch taking us through a local vineyard, the overhanging vines sagging with Galicia's famous Albariño grape. Ignoring the sign that said 'Please Do Not Pick The Grapes', I picked a grape to sample it and winced at what tasted like a sour gooseberry. That this little pea-sized thing would eventually become the divinely agreeable grog that flowed freely from the many jugs ordered to our dinner table that evening never ceases to amaze me. We ended the day visiting the town's famed healing geothermal springs or 'caldas' to allow Mother Nature to kiss our sore feet.

Caldas de Reis to Padrón (twenty-one kilometers): Yet another dawn start as the cock crowed us on our way out of town, harmonizing with the percussion of dozens of walking poles striking roads and footpaths. Before setting off I had to take a brass pin to lance the assorted blisters now angrily bubbling up on my poor wife's feet before strapping up her heels and toes with corn plasters so that she could carefully squeeze into her boots.

"Will you be alright?" I asked. "Are you still able for this?"

"Sure, I'll be grand," F— winced. "Once I get a coffee and pastry into me, I'll be good to go."

Every time I thought she was going to throw in the towel and just hail a cab, she dug a little deeper and soldiered on.

Padrón to Santiago de Compostela (twenty-five kilometers): Dawn at a tiny café in Padrón and the owner, a giant swarthy Galician who reminded me of Brutus from those early Popeye cartoons, having served us all coffee and croissants then demonstrated his famed reputation for hugging and kissing pilgrims before sending them on the final leg of their journey. He gave me a rib-cracking bear hug and almost ruptured my eardrum with a raucous “*BUEN CAMINO!*” His beard prickled the side of my face like a nail brush, his breath warm with the potent scent of espresso.

We took this long final leg at our own trudging pace, José and the others regularly casting out WhatsApp fishing lines from far ahead to pinpoint us and continually reel us in towards Santiago. A proper sizzler of a day, the air clung to us like a warm sheet as we pushed on through the morning and afternoon, taking advantage of any freshwater streams and outdoor taps to allow F— to soak and rest her poor feet. We eventually reached the sprawling outer suburbs of the city just as a primary school tour group comprising several dozen pupils materialised ahead of us to swarm exuberantly down the Camino Way like army ants. Literally combusting with joy, they hooted and skipped and piggy-backed, chattering and squawking and high-fiving one another—all the things adorably innocent young kids should be doing. And in that precise moment I hated every last one of them. I was tired, hot, cranky, footsore, and desperately impatient to reach the finish line as I pictured the rest of our group already slurping their first round of cocktails and ordering starters. I needed this to end. What business did these deliriously happy little brats have blocking *our* pilgrim trail and delaying *our* tortuous pilgrim progress? Surely they should’ve all been in school. I breathed a sigh of relief when they finally disappeared down the trail ahead of us, leaving us in peace again.

It was only as we rounded a corner several minutes later, however, that we unexpectedly encountered them all quietly lined up along either side of the road poised to give us an extended round of applause and to loudly cheer us on our way. “*BUEN CAMINO! BUEN CAMINO! BRAVO!*” In that instant I thought my heart would burst, blasting asunder any crabbiness and bringing me out in smiles. I decided then and there

that I adored each and every one of them, would have adopted them if possible. To have these wonderful children celebrating our hard efforts like this was to be engulfed in a cloud of contentment, a tangible feeling of accomplishment that swept us up and buoyed us along until our final valedictory walk into the great square of the Praza do Obradoiro to stand wearily before Santiago de Compostela's mighty Cathedral. This, for me, was the moment of 'peak' Camino. If pilgrimage is a journey that leads you to know yourself a bit better and dispel your fears, to appreciate the precious gift that is good health, then I felt every inch the pilgrim in that moment as I gaped contentedly at the majestic sight before me.

"You know, I did this for you," said F—, as we took a moment away from the group.

"G'way out of that," I replied. But in my head I was really thinking, *...and thank goodness for me you did, girl.*

Two days later, much rested and several pounds lighter, we were rambling contentedly about Santiago's old town with its warren of narrow streets and cobbled laneways when a pigeon perched on an overhead sign took a shit on my head. Not having any tissue paper to hand, I rooted in my backpack and pulled out my spare face mask, smiling inwardly at the realisation that I'd all but forgotten about it since landing in Spain nearly a fortnight earlier. *So much for being a fretful tourist*, I thought. I used it to wipe the shit out of my hair and scalp before chucking it into the rubbish bin.

"They say that a bird shitting on your head is a sign of good luck to come," F — cheerfully informed me.

"That's just an old wives' tale," I replied. Like faith, luck was for me another of life's intangibles.

Our return flight to Dublin was uneventful. Loading up our car, we got on the road for home. Somewhere along the M50 an SUV sidled up next to us, its passenger urgently pointing upwards to the roof of our car as we sped along. Pulling over onto the hard shoulder, I got out to take a look. There was my wallet, unthinkingly placed there as I was fiddling with the car keys, weighed down with coins and stuffed to the gills with cash, credit cards and various forms of ID. Getting back into the car, I tossed it up onto the dashboard in amazement. "That was some stroke of luck," I said, chuffed with myself.

“Would’ve been an absolute pain in the arse to have to replace everything in there.” My wife very wisely kept her own counsel and I drove on, grinning like an idiot behind the wheel.



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