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ON THE ROAD TO SANTIAGO

A Pilgrimage to the Relics of St. James

Over two decades ago, Spanish native Jorge Luque Martin resolved to find faith by walking the Camino or “Way of St. James” to Santiago de Compostela. His 1000-kilometer trek through the mountains and plains of northern Spain is a revelation of what it means to take the Kingdom of Heaven by force.

RTE: Jorge, can you tell us about your background and how you set out on this marvelous pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela?

JORGE: I was born in Malaga, Spain, where my mother still lives. Like most Spanish children, I was baptized Roman Catholic and made my first Holy Communion, but otherwise my family were not church-goers and Catholicism was only a cultural background to my childhood. However, at twelve I read *The Lord of the Rings*, which awoke a very deep love for everything that was old, noble, and beautiful. I began to study the Spanish medieval historical chronicles, such as the thirteenth-century *First General Chronicle*, along with epics like the twelfth-century poem *Mio Cid* and medieval Spanish ballads. The history and literature of other countries soon followed. In studying my country’s history, I understood that Spain was deeply Catholic, and that for these writers their faith was foremost. Their unvarying motto was, “For God, for the king, and for Spain!”

In order to get the full impact of these wonderful texts in the original language, I learned Medieval Spanish, as well as Latin and Italian. By the time I

Opposite: Jorge Luque Martin.

was sixteen or seventeen, this love of tradition made me want to experience the depth of faith that I saw in these great classic texts. So, although an atheist, I began to pray to God, “Please, grant me to believe in You.”

I had come across old accounts of pilgrimage along the *Camino de Santiago* (The Way of Saint James) which leads to the tomb of the apostle in the town of Santiago de Compostela. “God, grant me to believe in You,” soon changed to, “If You grant me to believe, I will go on pilgrimage to Compostela to venerate the relics of the Apostle James.”

Now, I began to read Scripture for the first time, especially the Gospels and Epistles, and I read them in beautiful old bilingual Spanish/Latin editions. One day as I sat with a nineteenth-century edition of the Gospel with Dore’s engravings, I came to John I: “*In principio erat Verbum et Verbum erat apud Deum et Deus erat Verbum,*”¹ and I thought, “I do believe this.” I closed the book and walked to a local Catholic Church to confess, but there was no priest there that day, so I went downtown to the cathedral. I began going to mass and trying to live a more pious life.

Setting Out

At eighteen, I was ready to set out on my pilgrimage to Compostela, and the first decision was where to start from. Medieval pilgrims came from all over Europe, and you could walk these ancient pilgrimage trails from France, Italy, Germany, or even from England. I decided to start from Roncesvalles, a small village at the foot of the Pyrenees Mountains in the north of Spain, close to the French border and not far from the Atlantic. I chose this starting point not only because it was the farthest traditional pilgrimage route from eastern Spain, but because the setting is extremely beautiful. Roncevalles is surrounded by deep forests of fir and oak, with mountains rising up on every side.

Historically, Roncevalles is known for the defeat of Charlemagne in 778 by Basque tribes and for the death of Roland, who commanded the Frankish rearguard in Roncevaux Pass and was later immortalized in the *Chanson de Roland*. There is a basilica and a monastery there from the tenth or eleventh

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. John 1:1.

Opposite: Church of Santa Maria Orreaga-Roncesvalles, Navarra, Spain where Jorge set out from to Santiago de Compostela.



century, and this was the first place that pilgrims from France could stop to rest after descending from the Pyrenees. The monks of the monastery still care for pilgrims, and if you start your pilgrimage from Roncevalles, you can receive the blessing that they have given pilgrims for over a thousand years; this long tradition was very attractive to me.

Once I arrived, I was shocked that many of the pilgrims were not there for a religious pilgrimage, or even on a walking tour to admire the natural beauty. Many were just tourists, dressed as if they were going to the beach. Some do the *Camino* in stages, so many miles each year until they finish; others do the whole route. Some people walk, while others are on bicycles. Before you depart from Roncevalles, you are given a “passport” for the pilgrimage, which you have stamped at each station so that you can stay in the hostels, and later receive the certificate when you finish in Santiago de Compostela. When they give you the passport, they ask your name and the reason you are making this pilgrimage, and I found it depressing to hear people say, “Just to see the country,” or “For cultural reasons.”

Once I set out, I sometimes walked for a while with such people, and was usually the only one to say, “I’m doing this for religious reasons. I want to venerate the apostle’s relics.” If they told me that they were walking just to see the beautiful churches (which really are astonishing) or to get to know local people, I would respond, “You may have begun because of this, but actually, God called you to make this pilgrimage and sooner or later you will recognize the spiritual benefit.”

In our times, Christians are often the target of critics who see you as a fool, or a fanatic, or both: “You need correction, and I’m going to correct you.” Although these people give secular reasons, in fact they are doing something that is absolutely religious. They are pilgrims making a pilgrimage, but they have to hide this truth even from themselves. It’s like going to church, but saying, “I’m going to church, but only to sing because I enjoy singing.” In fact, you *are* going to church. It took some time, but in the end, I enjoyed talking with these people.

Many times, I also walked by myself. I had long stretches of road just to think and to fight with my own demons. You have to struggle.

RTE: How did you begin the pilgrimage, and did you feel spiritual support from the monks' blessing?

JORGE: This was in the summer of 1996, a jubilee year of the Catholic Church, so the Camino was especially crowded.² It was summer, and the day I began there were probably about 200 other people also setting out.

After the pilgrim's mass in the Church of Santa María de Orreaga, they called us to come close to the altar steps. Because it was twenty years ago, I don't remember the words of the prayer, but I do remember how I felt. I felt blessed, I felt clean, and I felt I was with the Apostle James. From this point on, it was not my will, but rather, it was something that I was called to do. And because I was sent to do this, I came to understand that the rest was just given. If I needed a place to stay, it was given; if I needed something to eat, it was given. If I met someone on the way, I felt that we met because it was in God's plan.

However, the night before I set out (even after the blessing) I was pretty down. Not only was I disappointed in the other pilgrims, but I had just learned that, unlike earlier centuries, you sometimes now have to pay a small fee for a hostel bed, and I had very little money. Nothing was exactly the way I'd imagined. The feeling of being close to the saint, of being sent out, of having a purpose in life, just vanished. Later it returned, but that night it was completely gone and I struggled with wanting to go home. Finally, I decided to see it through.

Walking the Camino

RTE: Physically, what was it like to walk the Camino?

JORGE: In July the temperature was between 32 to 42 C. (about 90 to 107 F). I remember that when the sun beat down, I felt that my head would explode. You didn't want to walk on the asphalt road because the intense heat hurt your feet, but unfortunately, most of the Way of St. James is asphalt. Over the past decade they've tried to divert some trails through neighboring fields to make it more beautiful, but the majority of the way is still asphalt. Also,

2 Jubilee Year: Also called a Holy Year in the Catholic Church, when every twenty-five years a special year of repentance and forgiveness of sins is celebrated. Many pilgrimages take place to Rome and other holy sites, and special prayers and alms are offered. An extraordinary Jubilee Year may also be proclaimed for a special purpose outside of the twenty-five-year cycle.



the roadway is not only for pilgrims but also for bicyclists and for cars. It is a large road with trucks speeding past and, for short distances, the Camino joins the highway.

One of the hardest parts of the pilgrimage is that it can be as many as thirty kilometers (eighteen miles) at a stretch without water. This was not on one occasion, but on many, so you had to carry all of the water you needed. Sometimes you think you have enough with three liters – which is already three kilos of extra weight, almost seven pounds. But three liters was never enough, and when you don't have water for a very long stretch, it also means that you don't have shade. Once my throat was so parched that when I finally did find water, it was as if I was swallowing nails.

In winter, it is a completely different story. The same roads can be covered with a few feet of snow, in some places up to your waist, and you can find yourself stuck in hostels for days until they clear the road. Then, you have to avoid the side trails and just stay on the road. The autumn and spring are good if you don't get a lot of rain, especially on the Meseta Central, which is one vast flat plateau. If you start in the Pyrenees Mountains, heavy rains can be dangerous because there is often flooding and rockslides.

RTE: What did you wear?

JORGE: My first mistake was to buy boots. I thought, "I'm starting in the Pyrenees and going all the way to Compostela, so I need boots." But when you walk over hot asphalt with boots, you suffer terribly. Boots with socks don't allow your feet to breathe, and boots heat up immediately on asphalt; it's like hell. So, the first thing I did, a few days out, was to get rid of the boots and buy some Nikes, which were very good.

RTE: How about sandals with good soles? We think of the early Spanish and Italian monks as wearing sandals.

JORGE: Sandals are good if you are walking over a flat surface, but if you are walking uphill or downhill, your ankles will begin to hurt, and then your shins and your knees. With a sandal you don't have traction, so your foot slips inside the sandal, causing the muscles in your leg to work too hard. Athletic shoes are the best. One of my first discoveries was blisters, and you

Opposite: Walking the Camino.

get blisters immediately. I didn't have anything to put on them, so I just suffered, but after a couple of weeks the skin on my feet was so tough that I wasn't bothered anymore.

Another thing you must have is a sun hat. I learned this the hard way, when a few days into the walk my head was so hot that I thought I was losing my reason. I caught myself thinking, "Just a small piece of shade for my head." (*Laughter*) After that I wore any hat I could find. I didn't care if it was ugly or beautiful, as long as it covered my head.

RTE: Being from southern Spain, aren't you used to very hot summers?

JORGE: Yes, 43 C [110 F] was a weekly event, but we don't walk long distances in it.

RTE: How many kilometers did you walk each day?

JORGE: I tried to walk thirty kilometers a day, though some people walked forty or forty-five kilometers. The first thing I learned was that, with books and other gear, I was carrying far too much weight. I had to get rid of most of it.

RTE: Did you have a staff and wear the scallop-shell pilgrim's badge?

JORGE: I wore a scallop shell almost the whole way; it hung from my neck like a cross. Everyone recognized it, and even when there were no hostels, people knew what I was looking for.

The staff I bought at the pilgrim's store in Roncevalles was made of aspen with a metal tip – very light, very straight, and very useful. It is much easier to walk with a staff, especially uphill, and I loved the sound of the metal tip hitting the cobblestones. I still have my staff.

Many northern Europeans used ski poles, but I found this heavier staff more useful for the steep hills and mountains. You could put all of your weight on it, and even use both hands to pull yourself up. It was old and beautiful, and you could also use it as a weapon. Twenty years ago, when I first walked the Camino, there were packs of stray dogs who had gone a little wild – even village dogs tried to bite you – so you had to be able to protect yourself. You didn't have to hurt the dog, just threaten it with the staff. It was extremely useful.

Opposite: Pilgrim hostel dining room on the Camino.



RTE: What else should pilgrims watch out for?

JORGE: Thieves. But I didn't have anything that anyone wanted except my shoes. Some people had their shoes stolen, but I was alright.

RTE: What was it like to stop for the night and how were the pilgrim hostels?

JORGE: It depends on what part of the pilgrimage road you are on, but usually you can find a hostel when you need it. They might have two in the same town, and perhaps even a third, say five kilometers further. When you get into Galicia where there is a long mountainous stretch, you aren't going to find any on the mountainsides. You must either go all the way to the top, or stay at the bottom.

Sometimes, if you get to a hostel and find it closed, you feel terrible because you are absolutely hungry and exhausted. Or if it is open, there may be a long line of people waiting to get in. In small villages, you often have to go find the person who is in charge of the hostel, although if you can pay, you can always just go to a local hotel.

Once the hostel opens, the person checking the line will ask for your pilgrim's passport, which is a folded meter-long sheet that you open up for him to stamp at the right page, and then fold it up again. You show your stamped passport so that hostel workers know that you are a real pilgrim, and not just trying to get an inexpensive bed. They can see the stamps and the dates, and know how long it takes to get from place to place, so it is easy for them to verify that you are walking and that you didn't just take a car or jump on a bus. Not that they are going to refuse you a bed if you did, but they give preference to those who are walking. The beds go first to the walkers, then to the bicyclists, then to those with cars.

RTE: And there are separate dorms for men and women?

JORGE: No, the hostels are completely mixed. It is almost always just a single large room, or perhaps a few smaller rooms with many bunks. I remember sleeping once on top of a four-tier bunk. Men and women are in the same room, so this is like sleeping next to strangers on a train. Sometimes there were monks or priests on the *Camino*, and I felt bad for them. I didn't think this was right.

RTE: Do the hostels offer food as well?

JORGE: No, and that was another surprise for me, because in past centuries they did feed the pilgrims. I bought food in villages along the way, but this was a problem if the village was so small that it didn't have a grocery store. You might get a drink in a bar, but often not food, and in a small village, a bakery truck only comes through selling bread once a day. So, you learn quickly to buy bread in a larger village before your stop. Usually this is the Spanish *barra de pan*, which is like a wider version of a French baguette, and you also buy meat or cheese to put inside the bread. Then you put it into your pack, so that you have something when you stop for the night. Some walkers just went to restaurants where you can order pork, goat, whatever you want, but they told me that, even with all of the walking, they had gained weight because the food was so good.

Inspiration and Accidie

RTE: What was your day like?

JORGE: Walking in such hot weather means that you start before sunrise and keep on until noon. The point is to avoid walking between 12:00 pm and 5:00 pm when the sun is high and hot. From my few experiments of trying to walk after noon, I found that I ended up in a kind of a comatose state, neither inspiring nor enjoyable. You stop thinking and just walk and walk and walk.

At first, I just walked by myself, but my thoughts were deeply depressing, so that didn't last long. (*Laughter*). Over time, I found that it was really great to talk to people. There were many from Spain, of course, but also from Germany, France, and Italy. It was a good chance to practice my Italian and my English. I think that your mood is more related to whether you are walking alone or not, than to what kind of person you are walking with.

After a few days, you discover that those who continue to walk by themselves without any company are often clearly unstable, and that walking the Camino alone does not help them. I met a few of these people who were usually lost in their thoughts, often about some sadness in their lives, and they didn't want to talk to anyone. It's as if they were unable to stop looking at a very sad picture. Usually they quit after a few days or a week.

Amadis de gaula. . .



Dos q̄tro libros de Ama
dis de gaula nueuamēte imp̄s
sos z hystoriados ē Sevilla.



The truth is that the pilgrimage is mentally challenging, not only because of the heat, but also because of the long periods of solitude. Frankly, when you walk alone, even in the cool of the morning, the demons play with you. They bring up memories, they bring up images and thoughts, and tell you how stupid, useless, and purposeless your life is. If you put that together with the afternoon heat, I would even say that it's a dangerous state.

RTE: As a spiritually inexperienced eighteen-year-old, how did you fight these thoughts and feelings?

JORGE: Back then, I knew almost nothing about prayer. I knew the "Our Father," and that was all. I didn't like long prayers, but I did like to build stories in my mind that imitated the old, beautiful, and noble medieval tales. They also needed to be heroic.

RTE: Were these stories ever about the area you were walking through?

JORGE: (*Laughing*) It was almost always a portrayal of myself as the central figure: I was the hero. I kept my mind entertained with this as I walked, not by just conjuring up pictures but actually creating a story with the best possible choice of words to describe this or that tree, or church, or action. For instance, I would create a phrase to describe an architectural detail, or I would see something beautiful in nature and think, "How can I describe this in words?" That was how I kept my mind in good shape. I also knew a lot of Spanish poetry by heart, such as the short poems of Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer from the nineteenth-century Romantic period.

RTE: Can you give us one in Spanish and then in English?

JORGE: This is Bécquer's "Rima I":

RIMA I

Yo sé un himno gigante y extraño
que anuncia en la noche
del alma una aurora,
y estas páginas son de ese
himno

RHYME I

I know a strange gigantic hymn
that announces dawn in the night
of the soul,
and these pages are cadences of this
hymn

Opposite: Page from a nineteenth-century reprint of the Amadis de Gaula.

cadencias que el aire dilata en las sombras. Yo quisiera escribirle, del hombre domando el rebelde, mezquino idioma, con palabras que fuesen a un tiempo suspiros y risas, colores y notas.	that the air diffuses into shadows. I wanted to capture it, taming the rebellious, stingy language of men, with words that were at the same time sighs and laughter, colors and notes.
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Pero en vano es luchar, que no hay cifra capaz de encerrarle; y apenas, ¡oh, hermosa!, si, teniendo en mis manos las tuyas, pudiera, al oído, cantártelo a solas.	But the struggle is in vain; there is no code able to confine it, and barely, oh my beauty!, if holding your hands in mine, could I sing it softly to you alone.
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RTE: That was lovely. Were you also inspired by Cervantes?

JORGE: I felt obliged to read him, of course. He is a really good writer, a genius, but I don't like what he wrote. I loved the knights errant, but to write satirically and to mock chivalry as Cervantes did in *Don Quixote* was against my idea of nobility. A better example is the anonymous fourteenth-century *Amadís de Gaula*, a famous late-medieval novel about knights and chivalry. This I owe to Cervantes, because I first came across it mentioned in *Don Quixote*.

RTE: Do you have a favorite passage?

JORGE: I don't have a favorite passage, but there are a few that inspired many of my stories. Here are a few verses translated from a poem in the *Amadis de Gaula* that will give you an idea of its exquisite language and high fantasy:

There stands a castle on a magic height
Whose spell-beset pathways ye may climb
If that ye love fair chivalry sublime.
Come, its enchanted turrets yield the sight,

Opposite: Church of Santiago de Compostelo.



As long ago to demoiselle and knight,
Of many a satrapy of ancient rhyme,
And in its carven corridors shall Time
Display us trophies of a dead delight.
The damascene of armour in the dusk,
Shadows of banners torn from infidels,
The fragments of an unremembered glory,
Fragrant with faint, imperishable musk
Of Moorish fantasy. Dissolve ye spells.
Open, ye portals of Castilian story!

Fortuitous Meetings

RTE: Such rich imagery. Along with this traditional poetry, did you meet anyone along the way who inspired you, or set you off on a new train of thought?

JORGE: I spent a few days with a Roman Catholic priest-monk from Canada, who walked with his Alaskan Husky eagerly pulling a small sled on wheels with their food and water. After a few days I told him, "I'm thinking about going to a monastery because I've never had any real religious formation." I hadn't yet found the way to live a pious Christian life, and I thought, "Maybe a monastery. Perhaps I should just go and find out if this path is good for me." He listened quite seriously, and then told me, "Just do it." He was a great influence, and I very much identified with him.

We walked together for several days, but then one night he wasn't in the hostel and the following day I didn't see him on the road, but that was the way it sometimes happened. It was fortuitous when you met people, and as I said, I believe that nothing happens by chance. There is always a reason.

Later, when I was not far from Compostela, I walked for a few miles with a girl who told me about a Cistercian Trappist monastery that her family had visited 100 kilometers north of Santiago de Compostela. Everything she said about that monastery stuck in my head. (*Smiling*) It was a very beautiful monastery, a very old monastery, and a very noble one.

RTE: Do you have any pictures of yourself on pilgrimage?

JORGE: No, I never allowed it, even after I'd walked with someone who wanted one for "remembrance".

RTE: Why is that?

JORGE: (*smiling*) Because I was only eighteen, and I felt that, unlike my texts, I was neither old, noble, nor beautiful.

RTE: Did you find yourself thinking about St. James?

JORGE: You feel his presence all along the way. It doesn't matter if you think about him, it doesn't matter if you are a pilgrim or a tourist – when you are on the Camino you stop at many churches, each with its paintings and statues of St. James. From village to village and church to church, he is always there. You say good-bye to him and then you find him again in the next church. And the person who shows you the church will tell local stories about him, such as how he appeared on a white horse to fight the Muslim Moors. So, you are imbued with these stories, and no matter who you are, you receive spiritual benefit. He was present centuries ago and he is still present now.

You see it on people's faces. I remember one Irishman who prayed so deeply that, after twenty years, I haven't forgotten him. I wanted to speak to him, but there wasn't an opportunity.

RTE: Once you reached half-way, did you feel that you had really accomplished something, and that now it was downhill?

JORGE: At the beginning, I just felt depressed and horrible from the continual walking, the blisters, and the heat, but once I'd gone 400 kilometers, I knew that I'd done the right thing. I could see the changes that were happening mentally and spiritually. I knew that I had a long way to go, but that this was right.

Entering Compostela

RTE: Was there a rising anticipation towards the end?

JORGE: It felt like when you finish school. Of course, I was a little proud of what I had accomplished. Many people at this point had started at the



border of Galicia, and were walking 200 kilometers to Compostela. I had already walked 700, and looked at them as newcomers. I heard them complaining about the pain in their knees, the pain in their ankles, that they were carrying too much weight. At one point I was walking uphill and realized that I hadn't even noticed whether it was uphill or downhill – by now it was the same for me. They were panting, and I was breathing normally, because my lungs and my legs were completely used to the exertion. As I approached the end, I felt that I had accomplished what I'd been asked to do, and I was also excited because I felt there was something more coming.

RTE: Were you able to encourage people?

JORGE: Yes. I tried not only to encourage, but to help and to give them advice to make their way easier. By this time, I was fascinated with meeting people and I was able to quickly spot the good things that exist in everyone. Each person was interesting and I enjoyed talking with them. At one point I spent three days just speaking Italian. I had learned Italian from grammar books so that I could read Dante's *Divine Comedy* and the amazingly beautiful fourteenth-century poems of Petrarch, so I tried speaking my literary Italian with these pilgrims, and it worked. After three or four days, I was more or less fluent, and they told me that I was so dark skinned that I could pass as a Sicilian.

The last few kilometers before Santiago de Compostela, I was completely overwhelmed, and not by emotion. I would call it grace. In these moments you feel that there is nothing that can't happen or change, and that at the end of the day everything is going to be alright. I felt all of this. About seven kilometers from Santiago you reach the top of a hill from which you can look down on the city. From that hilltop, I just flew. I was overpowered by a feeling of grace acting in me.

When I arrived, there was a two-hour line of people waiting to get into the cathedral, and I thought, "I can't believe it. I've walked 800 kilometers to get to the cathedral, and these people I just passed getting off their tour bus are ahead of me." I was frustrated, and that was the first thing I had to confess.

RTE: Yes, you would expect a special pilgrims' door. Can you describe the cathedral?

Opposite: Entrance to Santiago Cathedral.

JORGE: There are successive centuries of churches on this site. The original was built in the ninth century, and today only the crypt remains of that first church. Above the crypt is an eleventh-century Romanesque church with later additions such as Baroque doors. They also built large towers, so as you approach the church you only see the Baroque, but once inside you find the Romanesque. Behind the choir is the main altar, with a beautiful thirteenth-century statue-like bust of St. James. Around the back of the altar is a half-circular hallway called an ambulatory, which connects the two main aisles of the church. When you follow the ambulatory, you come to a small room with a window that looks onto the back of the statue of St. James on the main altar. The tradition is that pilgrims go up and hug the image from the back and say a prayer of thanksgiving or ask the saint for something they need. It is intense. As you lean over to embrace the saint, you can see the entire church stretching out before you in front of the altar.

Near this room and down a flight of stairs is the crypt, the remains of the ninth-century church where the relics of the apostle and his two disciples are enshrined in a beautiful silver reliquary behind a large grille. You can kneel there to pray.

RTE: Wonderful. So, after you venerated the relics and prayed in the crypt, what did you do?

JORGE: I went to find a bed. You are allowed to stay in the main *Hostal dos Reis Católicos* pilgrims' hostel for up to three days. This beautiful hostel was built near the cathedral by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella after they made their own pilgrimage to Santiago. There is also a second hostel located in a minor seminary for high school students who want to become priests. This is where I stayed.

The buildings around the cathedral and the hostel are all beautiful. Most have arched galleries made of stone with columns among the arches. Each column is topped with an engraved pedestal and each pedestal is different. There are many medieval buildings, and you can spend days just looking at them. Also, the roads in downtown Santiago are not asphalt but beautiful paved stones from medieval times.

Opposite: Interior, Santiago de Compostelo.



I began going to the cathedral in the morning when there were no lines. It was wonderful to be out early when the city was just waking up. One morning I was already in church when a priest came who wanted to celebrate mass in the crypt. He asked for a blessing and I was allowed to go downstairs with him. The church wardens opened the grille, and I stood close to the relics while he celebrated liturgy on top of the sepulcher.

RTE: When you are ordained, perhaps you can go and serve there yourself. It also must have been interesting for you to watch the other pilgrims.

JORGE: Yes, it was great sharing stories with them. Once you arrive, though, the question is what you do after this amazing experience is over.

Finisterre – Land’s End

In earlier centuries, after arriving in Compostela, there was a tradition for pilgrims to walk an additional one hundred kilometers to the Atlantic Ocean, where they burned their pilgrim’s staff and their shoes. I also did this traditional walk from Santiago to Finisterre, which means “Land’s End.” The way to Santiago is filled with churches, but the road to Finisterre is through a beautiful, ancient forest of oak and chestnuts. One day, from the top of a hill, I saw a very thin line on the horizon, and I wondered, “Is it mountains or forest?” It was the sea. As I came closer, I could smell the salt air. I had grown up by the sea and missed it on the pilgrimage, so it was a great joy to literally step out of the forest into the water.

By the end of the pilgrimage I must have been a sight. Physically, I had lost twenty kilos (forty-four pounds), and when I went into a bakery the clerk looked at me strangely before asking what I wanted. When I said, “I’d like some bread,” she went to the back of the shop and brought out some hard ends of leftover loaves. I was surprised, and only then understood that she thought I was a beggar. I felt bad, but because I was young, I was too shy to say anything. The bread was terrible.

The most difficult part of the walk to Finisterre was that there were no pilgrims’ hostels, and at the end of the first day, I was so tired, I couldn’t go on. I went into a bar to call home, and when the woman who worked there found out that I didn’t know where to stay, she gave me a place. After the

second day of walking, I slept in the village cemetery. On the third afternoon, I arrived at Finisterre. I was a little worried, but I thought, "It's alright, I can sleep anywhere now," but then I discovered that pilgrims were allowed to stay in the sports hall. There were a few others there, including a German fellow who came to the bluffs with me, where we spent the whole day talking by the sea. Later, the pilgrims asked if I knew any poetry, so I recited Bécquer's rhymes for them. With the final walk to Finisterre, I had walked 900 kilometers.

The Trappist Monastery of Santa Maria of Oseira

RTE: That was a fitting end. What did you do after Finisterre? Was coming to the end of the pilgrimage a letdown, or did you feel there was more to be accomplished?

JORGE: After Finisterre, I took a bus back to Santiago de Compostela where I spent three more days at the seminary hostel. In their library, I discovered the location of the Cistercian Trappist monastery that the young Spanish woman had told me about: *Santa Maria de Oseira*, about 100 kilometers away. The word *oseira* means a bear's den, and in earlier centuries there were bears in this area. I took a bus to the nearest village and then walked to the monastery, which is deep in the forest. The monastery was founded in the tenth century, with the monastery's three cloisters built later. Each cloister is a quadrangle of buildings with a garden and fountain in the center and beautiful galleries with covered walkways around the inside walls. There were around twenty monks, including novices.

RTE: How were you received?

JORGE: I approached the huge wooden doors and when I worked the bell pull you could hear it sound deep within the building. After some time, a monk appeared and I naively told him that I was there to become a monastic. They had a few rooms in the guest house, so they put me there the first night. The next morning, I was called for breakfast with the other guests, who were all interesting people. They were believing Catholics, and one was a black policeman from New York who spoke a little Spanish. After meeting so few religious people on the Camino, these laymen in the guesthouse were a relief.



That morning the monk told me that before I could stay at the monastery they would have to check my background, as I looked much older than the age I claimed. They returned to say that it had all checked out. When I told them that I had just made the pilgrimage to St. James and wanted to try to become a monk, they asked me to go home for a while and come back when I'd thought it over. I told them that I didn't want to do that, so they went away to confer, and I'm not sure why, but they decided to let me try without the usual series of visits in the guesthouse.

After a week in the guesthouse they allowed me to pass into the monks' dormitory as a postulant. A postulant is a full-time resident of the monastery who is thinking about becoming a monk. You remain a postulant for two years before you become a novice, and after five years as a novice, you can take temporary vows.

The first thing they did was to ask me if they could cut my long hair and shave off my beard. I said, "Of course," because I knew that was how their novices looked. When they finished, I could tell they were surprised because I looked completely different – no longer a beggar and ten years younger. They said, "You do look eighteen years old!" Then I was given the beautiful Trappist postulant's garb with its own white woolen cape. When I swept through the corridors in my cape, I finally felt myself to be traditional, noble, and beautiful. (*Laughing*) I still miss that cape.

RTE: Most Trappist monasteries support themselves through agriculture. Was that the case here, and did you work in the fields?

JORGE: As one of the largest monasteries in Spain, Santa Maria of Osiera has a huge garden with tomatoes and all sorts of vegetables, as well as orchards with apple, plum, and pear trees. It was great to be assigned to harvest the vegetables from the garden and to pick the fruit. There were also amazing forests where we were allowed to walk, and I have fond memories of just losing myself in those forests.

RTE: Were you able to learn Gregorian chant? And how did you deal with the Trappist practice of silence?

Opposite: The day after arriving at Santa Maria de Osera. Jorge (second from right) with other guests and monk in charge of monastery guest house.

JORGE: The services were in Latin and Spanish, but we did the Gregorian chant in Latin, and I was very glad because I thought that the translation of the psalms into Spanish was horrid. (*Laughing*) Unfortunately, later at another monastery, I mentioned to a sympathetic guest how terrible I thought the translation was, and it turned out that he was the translator. I felt awful.

As in all Trappist monasteries, outside of the services the monks do not speak aloud, and even as postulants we learned sign language. The signs themselves were very interesting. For example, to move your finger over your forehead is the sign for a woman, because women usually wear scarves. But there were signs for absolutely everything, including things you would never expect, like moving your finger from the bottom of your throat up was the sign for wine vinegar. We were allowed to speak to the monk in charge of the postulants, or to the abbot if need be.

RTE: This is fascinating. Did you find what you came for?

JORGE: I had come for a really thorough catechism, and that was what I received. We started the day at 4:30 am with Midnight Office, and then went back to the novitiate where we had time to do personal reading before morning classes with the *Pater Magister* (Father Teacher), who taught us Scripture, Latin, and so on. Because I already knew Latin, the New Testament lectures were more interesting for me; the Old Testament would have come later, if I'd stayed. The Father Teacher also assigned us books based on what he thought was important for us to read individually. Two that stood out for me were *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, and *The Way of a Pilgrim*. This monk knew what I needed, and these books were my first contact with the Church fathers and Holy Tradition. I already had this love for human tradition; now I was learning to love Holy Tradition. The Trappists gave me an extremely valuable religious formation and I am very thankful to them.

RTE: How marvelous to be looking for truth and God at eighteen, and to find yourself in such a remarkable place. How long did you stay?

JORGE: I stayed for over a year, and left when I was nineteen. After reading *The Way of a Pilgrim*, I used to walk around the cloister saying the Jesus

Opposite: Trappist postulants in white, with Cistercian-Trappist monk Fr. Luis in black, and Jorge on far right.



Prayer on my rosary, and the thought kept coming to me: “You are here, but you don’t really have this vocation. What you really want is to just live a Christian life to have a family and children, to raise them as good Christians.”

Now, I think that when I entered the monastery I was feeling a call to the priesthood, although I didn’t know that until later. As a Catholic priest I would have been celibate, and because I felt strongly that I wanted to have a family, I knew that I would have to leave. But it was life in the monastery that helped me to realize that it was possible to live a Christian life in the world. I liked the monastery very much, and I knew that it would have been a very fulfilling and well-ordered life.

Most of the people I knew growing up were not only not Christian, they were anti-Christian, and when I had begun reading Spanish and European literature and glimpsing those lives of faith, I thought that there must be a place where people were still Christian. Now that I had seen people who were real Christians, I knew that I could be Christian in the world, so I left. Many years later, I began to inquire into the Orthodox Church.

RTE: That must not have been easy. The Catholic Christian roots of Spain and of your own family have to have been a strong influence; you lived and breathed those historical traditions, and if you pull them apart, the integrity of this cultural fabric is broken.

JORGE: Yes, it was like that. We have been Roman Catholic, Christians under Rome, since the beginning of Christianity, and our faith was everything to us. We were the first defenders of the popes: when they needed help to defend the papal estates, the Spaniards were there. When we fought the Moslem Moorish invasion of Spain, our faith was our identity, and if you were not Catholic, you were not a Spaniard. When I first read my country’s stories, chronicles, and poems, I thought, “If I don’t believe, if I am not Catholic, I cannot be the son of my forefathers. I cannot abandon this beautiful heritage, my own past.”

RTE: American converts are often unaware of this struggle because we are usually separated by several generations from our own cultural roots. It is hard for us to imagine what it means to grow up in a living Christian culture that has come down intact for centuries.

JORGE: Yes, in Spain the hills, the stones, and even the earth, speak of the Catholic faith.

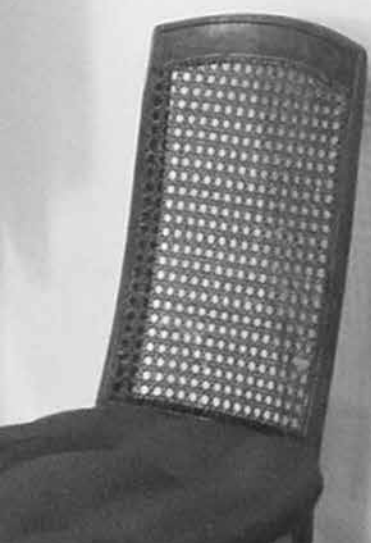
RTE: What did you do after you left the monastery?

JORGE: I went back to Malaga, my city in Southern Spain. I tried to resume my studies but the secular subculture of my fellow students and teachers was unbearable. I was yearning for spiritual food and friends who shared my faith, but I found a desert. I was alone and suffered deeply because I couldn't find what I was looking for in the people around me, in the places where I worked, and even in the Catholic Church. All of this changed when I finally examined the Catholic beliefs that I was unsure of: the Immaculate Conception and the idea of papal supremacy and infallibility. I had not questioned them earlier because I feared losing my faith, but, glory to God, although these beliefs were shaken, my faith remained firm. When I discovered that these and other doctrines had developed over centuries, a fact readily admitted by Catholic popes and theologians, I found that I couldn't accept the doctrine of the evolution of dogma that, according to the Catholic Church, has been passed down by Christ to the apostles, and to us.

Then I remembered the Orthodox books I had been given to read in the monastery: *The Way of the Pilgrim*, the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, and a journalist's account of his travels to the Holy Land, Greece, and Mount Athos. It was a great blessing that, in my pain, I decided to inquire about the Orthodox Church. It was a month after I recanted these divergent beliefs that I became certain that the Orthodox Church was the true Church of Christ, the Church of the Holy Fathers and Synods.

RTE: How did you finally end up in the United States?

JORGE: I had a strong desire to be baptized Orthodox, but when I understood that the Orthodox priests in Spain accepted my Catholic baptism and would only chrismate me, I found an Orthodox internet chat room to ask if anyone knew of a priest in southern Europe who would baptize me. A priest's wife wrote from the United States saying, "Come visit us. My husband is a priest and he will baptize you in our church." So, at their invitation I came to the United States, and she is now my godmother. After I was baptized, my calling to the priesthood became very clear, but I was sure that it would be



impossible for me to go to seminary because there were so many obstacles. I had neither a student visa, money for tuition, nor had I been accepted into an Orthodox seminary. My godmother only said, “Things are going to work out; everything will come together. This is the Orthodox Church. They are not going to turn you away because you don’t have money.” She was right, of course. Everything did work out. I returned to Spain to get my student visa, and I am now enrolled in Holy Trinity Orthodox Seminary in Jordanville, New York.

RTE: Do you find it hard to fit into the Russian milieu? You were already in America, and now you face yet another culture.

JORGE: All of this is very positive and I think that I am adapting well. I love learning languages and for me, Jordanville is a holy place and a wonderful opportunity to learn Russian and Slavonic. Some of the American seminarians complain about the language issue, “This seminary is in the United States, why do you use Slavonic instead of English in services? Why isn’t it more American?” This issue can be hard for them and I understand their claims, but for me, the chance to learn Russian and to explore the beauty of Russian culture and its wonderful traditions is a treasure. I do not feel strongly about the language of the services, although sometimes I miss understanding what is sung and read. After I finish seminary, I would like to be a priest here in the United States.

RTE: Would you consider going back to Spain to serve?

JORGE: I haven’t discarded the idea, but I’m torn, because I have a life here that I don’t want to leave behind. I have a great desire to learn more, and it is here in Jordanville that I can learn and grow into a better person. I would like to serve the Church in so many ways. If it is God’s will that I can do this, I will be very glad.

RTE: What did the pilgrimage leave you with as a whole?

JORGE: This pilgrimage was not just good for me; it was life changing. In fact, ten years later when I was twenty-eight, I repeated the pilgrimage, the same 800 kilometers. The way was the same, but the experience was com-

Opposite: Jorge Luque in Holy Trinity Orthodox Seminary (Jordanville) garb.

pletely different. While the first time was life changing, the second was a welcome affirmation.

RTE: What advice would you give to readers who might be thinking about walking the Camino de Santiago, or about the spiritual life in general?

JORGE: For both the Camino and the spiritual life, you have to struggle. I would say to look for the good and the beauty that is within everything and everyone around you. Pray, even if there is a host of demons declaring what a horrid person you are and that you don't deserve to find peace or happiness. Behave as if you are a noble knight errant looking for a princess to rescue and orphans to save. Learn about our Christian past and about the old traditions passed down to us by our Christian forefathers from the time of the apostles. In one sentence, look for what is old, noble, and beautiful. ✦

A Note to Readers: Two months after enrolling in the Holy Trinity Orthodox Seminary in Jordanville, NY, Jorge Luque was discovered to have a benign pituitary tumor in his head, and a year later a cancer on his face that quickly spread to his nose and neck. After radiation and several harrowing surgeries, Jorge and his new bride, Stephanida, are counting on our prayers and assistance to see them through this difficult time. To read about their ongoing journey, go to: <https://www.gofundme.com/JorgeLuqueCancer>

Opposite: Statue of St. James as a Pilgrim, Cathedral of Santiago de Compostelo.