

## A lesson from the road



Several years ago, Hollywood produced a film about the famous Camino walk in Spain. Entitled *The Way*, it chronicles the story of a father whose son was killed in an accident shortly after beginning this famous 500-mile pilgrimage. The father, played by Martin Sheen, had been largely estranged from his son, but when he goes to France (where the Camino begins) to collect the ashes of his dead son, he feels a compulsion to complete the walk for his son and sets out with his son's hiking equipment and backpack, carrying his ashes.

He is unsure as to exactly why he is doing this, except that he senses that somehow this is something he must do for his son, that this will somehow address his estrangement from him, and that this is something he must do to ease his own grief. Despite being in a rather depressed and anti-social state, he is befriended on the trail by three people, each on the trail for different reasons.

The first of these people is a man from the Netherlands who is walking the trail to lose weight, fearing that, if he doesn't, his wife will divorce him. The second of his new friends is a French-Canadian woman, ostensibly walking the Camino to give up her addiction to smoking, but clearly also trying to steady her life after the breakup of a relationship. The third person is an Irish writer, hoping to overcome 'writer's block.' And so the story focuses on four unlikely walking companions (right), each doing this pilgrimage with a certain goal in mind.

They persevere and complete the pilgrimage, enter the Cathedral of Santiago, observe the customs that have marked the end of the Camino for countless pilgrims for a thousand years, and then realise that what each of them had hoped to achieve hadn't happened. The man from the Netherlands hadn't lost any weight; the French-Canadian realised that she would not give up smoking; the Irish writer realised that his real issue was not writer's block, and the father who was doing this walk vicariously for his son realised that he had done it for other, more personal, reasons. None of them got what they wanted, but each of them got what he or she needed. The roads of life work like that, as the Camino de Santiago.

I learned that exact lesson, walking the Camino a year ago. I went there with a certain dream in mind. I

was six months beyond chemotherapy treatments, refreshed with new energy, on sabbatical, and looking forward to walking this ancient and famed road to stretch myself physically and spiritually. The physical stretch happened and fitted the fantasy I had had before leaving for the walk. But the spiritual stretch was a long, long way away from what I had fantasised about. My dream had been that I would use this walk to do some deeper inner work, to read some classical books on mysticism, blend the depth of the mystics with the mystique of this ancient trail, do some journaling, and return a deeper and more contemplative person. Such was my dream, but the trail had other ideas.

We were many long hours on the trail each day so there was basically no time to read or to journal. Evenings found me exhausted, without energy for much inner work. A shower and a hot meal were essentially the only thing I was up to. The major book that I'd taken along, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, lay unopened at the bottom of my suitcase. I managed some hours each day, walking alone on the trail, to pray, but it wasn't the kind of inner work I'd fantasised about. I'd had a fantasy about what I had wanted to achieve, but, just as for the characters in the film, apparently this wasn't what I needed.

The trail taught me something else, deeper, more needed, and more humbling: What I learned from walking the road in the company of three close friends was how spoiled and immature I'd become. Having lived as a celibate priest, outside of the constrictive demands of marriage, children, and family for more than 40 years, I realised how idiosyncratic and self-centered patterns and habits of my life had become. I was used to calling the shots for my own life, at least in its day-to-day rhythms. The Camino taught me that I need to address other issues in my life that are more pressing and more deeply needed than understanding *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The Camino taught me that in a number of important ways, I need to grow up!

Robert Funk once wrote that grace is a sneaking thing: It wounds from behind, where we think we are least vulnerable. It is harder than we think and we moralise in order to take the edge off it. And, it is more indulgent than we think; but it is never indulgent at the point where we think it ought to be indulgent. Such too is the Camino de Santiago.

*Fr Ronald Rolheiser is a Catholic priest and member of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. He is president of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, Texas. Email him at: [info@ronrolheiser.com](mailto:info@ronrolheiser.com) SCOTTISH CATHOLIC OBSERVER*

Fr Ronald Rolheiser