

Good morning staff and students and to those members of our community who are joining us virtually today.

I feel privileged to share with you today some reflections on the lessons I learnt whilst on the Camino De Santiago.

I first learnt about the Camino through Sister Lia. Each day when I would enter her office, I would admire the beautiful images of the French and Spanish countryside that adorned her walls. When I would ask her about her experiences walking 770km from the French Pyrenees to Santiago De Compostela she would recall the magic of the Camino and reminisce about the pilgrims who inspired her along the way. Witnessing Sister Lia come alive as she talked about her Camino family and how the Camino provided for her appealed to my sense of adventure. I knew I absolutely had to do it, but I didn't think I would do it until later in life.

There was a loud round of applause when the pilot made a smooth landing on the tarmac at Santiago airport in Spain. This confirmed to me that I was where I was meant to be. That afternoon, I made my way to a refuge where I was greeted by some fellow pilgrims who had just completed the Camino. Luka, a 19-year-old student from Italy, spoke to me about his call to adventure and how on the 1st of April after a challenging first semester of university he had decided to walk out the door of his home in northern Italy and embark on the Camino. It was now Saturday 2nd July and he had walked 2200 kilometres and was thinking about turning around and walking home. I admired his sense of adventure and his willingness to take a break from his ordinary world and do something extraordinary.

Throughout our lifetime, each of us will receive a tug from the Holy Spirit and a call to adventure. Some of you may have experienced when auditioning for High School musical or when completing the rim walk at Kings Canyon or deciding to participate in the Indigenous Immersion camp or when contemplating taking a gap year in 2023. Our lives are littered with opportunities to take the road less travelled, to step out of our comfort zone and try something new. The challenge is whether we are open to these opportunities when they present.

Passport

After spending the night in Santiago, I made my way to the town of Sarria where I would commence the Camino. As I arrived in the town I was overcome with excitement as I caught a glimpse of the yellow arrows, clam shells and images of St James that would guide me on my journey. I was thrilled to receive my pilgrim passport which I was required to get stamped twice per day as proof that I had walked the last 120km into Santiago. This was necessary to obtain the Compostela certificate.

Day 1 of the Camino involved walking 23km from Sarria to Portomarin. *Hola* and *Buen Camino* were the catch cries of the morning as strangers greeted each other and offered encouragement along the way. The warm hospitality of strangers was something that I savoured and highlighted to me that despite ongoing conflicts around the world that people can co-exist peacefully.

The 25km trek from Portomarin to Palas De Rei was the most difficult part of the Camino for me. In preparing for the day, my guidebook had issued me a challenge to journey inwards and to ensure that take the road less travelled. This involved taking long detours to places of spiritual significance. For me, the worst thing that you can do is to issue me a challenge. So true to form I set out as a woman on a mission determined to visit every sacred site that existed in the vicinity of the track. This mindset did not serve me well as temperatures soared into the mid-30s I found myself out on a road searching for a church that was some 13km off the main path.

On this day, I walked alone consumed by the need to conquer all aspects of the trek in the fastest possible time. When I look back on the lessons that I learnt on this day, it was the importance of slowing down, and taking in the world around you.

Day 3 of the Camino is best summed up by the quote *"Happiness is not so much in having but sharing. We make a living by what we get but a life by what we give."* After the darkness of Day 2, Day 3 was full of light – joyous moments that touched my heart and soul.

Passport Stamp

Early in the morning on Day 3, I entered the small village of Ventas De Naron and the chapel of Saint Mary Magdalene to have my passport stamped. The taize chant 'Jesus remember me' was playing as I entered the chapel, triggering

memories of the Easter liturgies in my Parish. As I approached the man stamping the passports, I noticed that it appeared he was having difficulties knowing where to place the stamp. When my turn came to have my passport stamped, due to the language barrier, I didn't know what to do. Taking my hand, a young student directed me to place my hand on the man's hand and guide him to where I wanted the stamp to be placed. In her broken English she explained to me that the man was blind. As I walked on, I contemplated my interaction with the blind man and the faith that drove him to get up each day and stamp pilgrims' passports.

Rock

As I was processing my interaction with the blind man, I bumped into Charlotte, a pilgrim that I had met on Day 1. Charlotte was a French woman who lived in London who spoke fluent Spanish. She introduced me to a group of Spanish pilgrims who were completing the Camino together. Each had their own reasons for walking. Many were carrying crosses associated with grief and loss and searching for answers to the questions of life. However, each of them was people with fascinating stories, kind hearts and plenty of banter to offer. They quickly became my friends. These fellow pilgrims taught me to appreciate the simple things in life, such as the company of another, good food, laughter.

Wire Statues

As I walked from Arzua to Pedrouzo on Day 4 I pondered the interconnections that exist in our world. Everything and everyone are interconnected, interdependent and interrelated.

This was reinforced to me by a homeless man I encountered along the way. He was selling his wares out the front of a church. This consisted of making small colourful wire models of Camino pilgrims. Each time someone made a purchase he embraced them fully, insisting that they engage in a heart-to-heart hug, explaining that it has been shown to make people happier and calmer. When I reflect on this downtrodden man, freely embracing strangers, I think about how a warm smile and plenty of compassion can touch a heart and life.

The final stage of the Camino was full of joy. As I walked the last 4km to the Cathedral of Santiago to the sound of bagpipes, I felt so alive. I was overcome with happiness and felt a deep connection to the generations of pilgrims who had walked this path before me and to the Earth. As I sat outside the front of the cathedral and witnessed the sheer joy that was overflowing as pilgrims entered the square, I thought about the gift of humanity. That evening as I gathered to celebrate mass in the Cathedral of Santiago alongside my fellow pilgrims, the priest informed us that "Life starts when you arrive at Santiago."

Each day over the past month since completing the Camino I have pondered this statement along with a quote by Michael Leunig: *"Each day is a lifetime, in the morning we are born, the day lies before us vast, bright and new."* I am striving to live in the moment, to be fully present, to appreciate the simple things in life, to not dream my life but to live my dreams and to allow the Holy Spirit to work in and through me. I would encourage each of you to do the same.