

WHAT RAMADAN TAUGHT ME ABOUT LENT

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Why We Love
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The
Franciscan
Family:
Who's Who?

Lessons from
a Pilgrim

My Clumsy
Confession

Brother
Michael
Perry on the
Future of the
Franciscans



REFLECTION

CNS PHOTO OF SYRIAN MIGRANTS BY AGRON BEQI, REUTERS; BACKGROUND FROM iNCIMAGE/VALERY SHANNIN



The Church without frontiers,
Mother to all,
spreads throughout the world a culture
of acceptance and solidarity,
in which no one is seen as useless,
out of place, or disposable.

—Pope Francis

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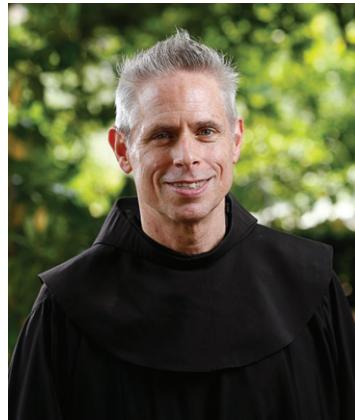
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By John Feister



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Michael Perry, OFM, general minister of the Order of Friars Minor, has a vision for his brothers that involves getting back to the basics, becoming reenergized, "moving again."

CNS photo by Paul Haring

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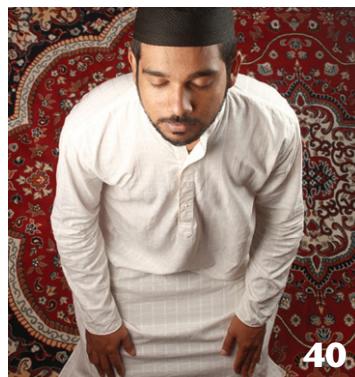


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Lessons from a Pilgrim

Travel is about getting from one place to another. Pilgrimage is about what happens along the way.

BY BOB KUNZINGER

IHAVE MADE PILGRIMAGES since I was a child, or so I believed. Every summer our family made its annual pilgrimage to a vacation spot; every fall during college I made my autumn pilgrimage back to the friars of St. Bonaventure University in western New York, and every Christmas I still make my expected pilgrimage to the family homestead to celebrate the holidays.

More lofty pilgrimages exist. Some set out to find a New World where they would be free to practice religion without persecution; thousands every year trace the apostle St. Paul's footsteps in Turkey; in Poland, the "Route of Saints" draws worshipers to the 18 chapels of Wawel Hill Cathedral; and Chaucer immortalized Canterbury with his tales of tribulations on the way to pay homage to Thomas Becket.

Then there is Spain, the Camino de Santiago—the way of St. James. It has been trodden by travelers for over a thousand years to serve penance, to seek cures, and to pray at the final resting place of the apostle St. James the Greater. These travelers include myself and my 21-year-old son, Michael. We started our *camino*, or *way*, in France and walked southwest toward Santiago de Compostela. Along the route we stopped in seemingly countless churches, said prayers with other pilgrims, and broke bread with strangers from around the world, all walking with a common goal—to make it to Santiago.

But halfway through the journey we stood on a hillside above the village of Villafranca next to the church of St. Francis of Assisi,

which the saint himself requested be built when he walked this same pilgrimage 800 years earlier. I put down my walking stick, leaned my backpack against a stone wall, and came to some conclusions about how pilgrimage fits in my life.

More than Just a Trip

It was St. Augustine of Hippo who first used the word *peregrino*, or "pilgrim," from the Latin *peregrinatio*, loosely meaning "traveler in a foreign land." Pilgrimages became a basic way of daily life in medieval Europe and an accepted way to do penance for sins, find healing, and seek salvation. It wasn't enough, though, to simply reach some destination; one had to prove worthiness by facing trials and making sacrifices along the way. Religious pilgrimages have the advantage of forcing one to think about the spiritual nature of the journey.

But in the 21st century it seems we can easily be guilty of viewing these sacred travels from a secular perspective. We have debased the concept of pilgrimage by labeling any trip at all a pilgrimage. We go on a pilgrimage to Graceland, to the ocean or some mountain lake, and even to casinos and the mall. Most of the time, however, those travels remain focused on the destination. In them, we seek the easiest path, the quickest route. In fact, we would, if possible, eliminate entirely any traveling involved and simply appear at the gates of our goal.

On the other hand, most spiritual journeys



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The picturesque landscape from southern France to Santiago de Compostela, Spain, rises up to greet pilgrims as they make their spiritually enriching and physically grueling journey.

have a very tangible goal, a unique destination. And all prospective pilgrims can look to previous travelers for proof their efforts will be rewarded; however, too many believe the reward is simply to complete the journey. In these days of GPS and up-to-date maps, that isn't too difficult to do. And should one stray from the trodden trail, any lack of a marker or assistance quickly warns travelers something is amiss and some reevaluation of the journey is necessary. All signs say, "You'll get there, don't worry." With the stricter definition of pilgrimage in mind then, it must be more than getting from Point A to Point B.

The Camino pilgrimage reminds us that our walk through this world needs to be bolstered by faith if we are to weather life's great difficulties.



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Therein lies the difference. They are all trips. A pilgrimage is separate in that it forces the traveler to focus on the way. Pilgrims think about each leg of the journey, usually each step. Pilgrims deal with daily sacrifices in order to reach their goal; often it is only through sacrifice that they can reach that goal, for it isn't unusual for choices to lead us away from our destination. When that happens, too many people simply change their goals to accommodate their new direction instead of working through the difficult climbs and staying the course.

On a religious pilgrimage, these decisions are not only often murky, but also necessary, or you'll never get where you are going and will remain lost in a foreign land.

A Question of Faith

In this Spanish village, I took my shoes off to give my feet some relief and thought about the homilies at the churches along the way. They continually discussed pilgrimage as a way of life, with Santiago simply an earthly destination to bring us closer to God. The metaphor was obvious and welcome. The priests reminded us that blisters and rainy days are part of the journey. And so it is in life, they said. When this Camino is complete, all insisted, the pilgrimage of life must continue with equal attention to each step of the way.

Of course! Shouldn't we always be conscious of each step and where each effort brings us? Shouldn't we always have enough faith in our final reward that during difficult times when

we lose the right way we know we will find our way back? I wish it were as easy in life as on the Camino. Life has no arrows or guidebooks. Life often finds us with fewer people with whom to pray and even fewer willing to help us back in the right direction on those occasions we stray. It seems these days that unless we don a backpack and carry a guidebook, we forget we are always on a pilgrimage.

Michael sat next to me and pulled out his maps. We had traveled roughly 350 miles and had about 150 left. We had taken breaks before, such as when we passed through an old church visited by St. Teresa of Avila, who herself made the journey, and who once wrote, "To have courage for whatever comes in life, everything lies in that." I wondered more than a few times before leaving for Spain if I had the courage to make the trip, to suffer the physical demands at 54 years old. Could I keep up with my athletic and youthful son, whose feet suffered far less abuse than mine had so far?

But in comparison to the courage it takes to keep faith in an increasingly faithless world, the questions I asked on the Camino seemed relatively simplistic. I looked at the church and realized Francis himself had rested in this very village headed to the very relics I journeyed to witness. At 30 years old he took time out to walk from Assisi to Santiago. He did so the same way we did—one step at a time, adjusting when he made wrong decisions, learning right from wrong through experience and time. Who could possibly miss the metaphor?

Unfortunately, most of us. Our eyes are fixed on the destination, and that's good. But how we get there will determine whether the pilgrimage was successful.

One Step at a Time

I put my backpack on and picked up my walking stick. St. Francis said, "It is of no use walking anywhere to preach unless the walking is the preaching." The sermons of a true pilgrimage are in the steps, the homilies lie in the breathing in and out on long climbs, and communion comes in the form of the scarce respite with the necessities.

Life is the same, and we must not forget this essential element of the religious pilgrimage upon return to our secular journeys. When I was my son's age, I often went on retreat with Franciscan friars and a dozen or so students. We spent three or four days in a cabin in the hills, praying, talking, and sharing stories with laughter and tears. We became close and



CNS PHOTO/COURTESY CAMINODOCUMENTARY.ORG

spoke often of our "pilgrimage" through life. We learned valuable lessons we promised to carry with us forever. But weeks passed, and the spirit of those retreats waned; life diluted them with a deluge of decisions and relationships, responsibilities and career paths.

Five weeks in Spain is not very different from a weekend in the mountains: unless we make a decided effort to live the life of a pilgrim in our daily lives, the Camino becomes little more than a great trip we once took. We left those retreats with the valuable advice of St. Thomas Aquinas: "If, then, you are looking for the way by which you should go, take Christ, because He Himself is the way." But at that age, or at any age, we believe life's daily dealings don't often make allowances for religious doctrine. It is a responsibility easy to forget even for those who complete a spiritual pilgrimage.

But if we don't consciously consider our steps as well as our destination, we aren't on a pilgrimage at all but just another long trip, and we will be quite disappointed when we get to the end. To contemplate the obvious: if our lives are pilgrimages from birth to death, then our desired destination of heaven can only be reached based upon how we get there. Salvation is to be earned at each turn. Since bad decisions and detours are a constant part of life, it isn't enough that we simply "get to the gates."

We enter the kingdom of heaven not at the

These two pilgrims are destined for Santiago de Compostela, a holy destination visited by St. Francis of Assisi and St. Teresa of Avila, as well as many thousands of faithful every year.

Click here for more on pilgrimage.

Digital Extras

“You will find something more in woods than in books. Trees and stones will teach you that which you can never learn from masters.”

—St. John of the Cross

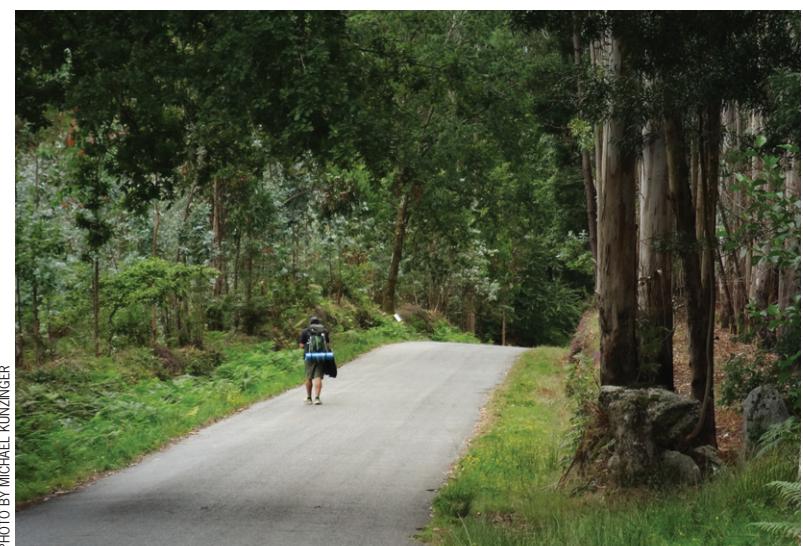


PHOTO BY MICHAEL KUNZINGER

Bob Kunzinger’s trek of over 500 miles brings him near Santiago. “We are always on a pilgrimage, and we are always learning along the way,” he says.

[Click the button below to hear an interview about the Holy Land Franciscan Pilgrimages.](#)

end of the path but at each step along the way. We are always on a pilgrimage and we are always learning the way, even during our trespasses. St. John of the Cross wrote, “You will find something more in woods than in books. Trees and stones will teach you that which you can never learn from masters.” And I discovered one more thing on my way to Santiago: when I paid attention to every step, I traveled well. It was only when I became cocky and overconfident, when I wasn’t paying attention to where I walked, that I stumbled. I had to keep my eyes on Santiago, but to do so I had to also focus on every single turn on

the way, often helping or seeking help from other pilgrims.

Earning the Reward

One other roadblock creates unwanted delays in any journey—judgment. When we reached Sarria, just 70 miles or so from the great Cathedral of Santiago, the crowds of pilgrims mushroomed. The Spanish vacation week started and thousands flocked to Sarria to begin their pilgrimage. Those who trek at least that last 100 kilometers receive a *compostela*—a certificate of sorts—in Santiago. Graces and indulgences are received for such an accomplishment on this third-most-visited pilgrimage site in the Catholic world, after the Holy Land and Rome. So the “one-weekers” take buses to Sarria and walk all day—while a driver brings their belongings to the next destination, checks them into places to stay, and then drives back to set up lunch for them. Many *peregrinos* like us wrongly question whether theirs is a true pilgrimage.

And too often we do that in our own lives. We see people who have an easier time or take

shortcuts for reasons unknown to us, and decide their worthiness, or lack thereof. We pass judgment by comparing their journey to ours and how much they “earn” rewards through struggle and sacrifice based on our own attempts.

But to do so is misguided. The man from Madrid who bused into Sarria on Saturday—a full four weeks after Michael and I began walking—will stroll into Santiago the following Friday to pick up his *compostela*. He will receive Communion at the Pilgrim’s Mass, standing right next to me. He must make his pilgrimage the best he can, as must I, as did Francis and Teresa, Queen Isabella, and countless saints and sinners for a thousand years.

Always on the Road

Francis of Assisi didn’t feel worthy of entering his kingdom when he was 30 and knelt before the silver reliquary of St. James. He knew he still had a long journey ahead, laced with sufferings and challenges long after his Camino was through, and he knew he must constantly remind himself of the lessons learned in Spain lest he become lazy in spiritual matters.

In fact, completing this Camino didn’t make me feel worthier than anyone else of anything at all. It simply made me more aware of how every single decision along my way leads to or away from God. It is a lesson I wish I had learned when I was Michael’s age, but that’s the point—we are always learning lessons and trying to find the right way.

We headed up a hillside on a secondary route toward the ancient monastery of Samos. We hadn’t walked long when Michael reminded me that St. Francis of Assisi completed his pilgrimage in times more rugged and difficult than ours. But I’m not so sure that is true. He lived a spiritual life and surrounded himself with brothers and sisters who reminded him constantly of God’s work here on earth.

But our contemporary world is saturated with evil and distraction, secular responsibilities and demands, most often contrary to the lessons of a religious pilgrimage. That is why we must remind ourselves every chance we can that our destination is clear, but the way there is not. We have to pay attention to where we are going. □

Bob Kunzinger is a freelance author from Virginia Beach, Virginia. He has traveled extensively, and says the aim of his work is to explore our own journey in life and how we are giving back to others and ourselves.