

Buen camino! Buena fe!

(Good way, Good faith)

TEXT & PHOTO BY / THE REVEREND AMOS POON



Backpack reminds you what are the essentials of your life.

Last summer, my wife and I travelled to Northern Spain, and walked the Camino de Santiago, the pilgrimage route of St James. After the martyrdom of St James, his bones were found in Santiago in the 9th century, according to Church tradition. A Cathedral was built there for believers around the world to come and pray. The name, Santiago, is actually the Galician dialect of St James. The Latin form of St James is Sancti Iacobi, and putting them together it sounds like Santiago.

There is no specific starting location for the pilgrimage route. In the Middle Ages, pilgrims would start their journey from their homes, going toward the Santiago Cathedral. Therefore, there are many paths for pilgrimage. Today there are three famous ones: one is from Portugal heading north to Santiago, the second is close to the north side of the Iberian Peninsula, and the third one is the most famous one, the French Way, starting from Saint-Jean-Pier-de-Pole in France, a journey of around 800km. This time we were travelling along this French Way, but due to time limitations and physical conditions, my wife started at Leon in Spain, and walked 310km, (a 13-day journey), while I met her in the last five days and set off from Sarria for 117km.

In fact, there is a reason for choosing Sarria as the starting point. In 1993, the French Way was designated as an intangible Cultural Heritage by the United Nations. It is one of the world's



Our first meal at Sarria

two pilgrimage routes honoured with this award. The other one is the Kumano Koto, in Wakayama, Japan. The government then started to promote the development of this route, and issued certificates to all those, who walking 100km on it, arrived in Santiago on foot. For this reason, I began my trip in Sarria.

To begin a pilgrimage journey, the first thing is ask yourself is; 'What should I bring along the road?' The pilgrims in the Middle Ages carried only three things: a scallop shell, a gourd and a walking stick. On the one hand the shell is a symbol of St James; on the other hand, it is used as a dish to hold food for eating. The gourd is a water container, and the wooden stick is your most faithful companion during the journey. The symbol of St James is a scallop shell, as the tradition has it that after he was martyred in Jerusalem, his body was transported back to Santiago. During the transportation a disaster struck, but his body was miraculously protected by the scallop shell and didn't suffer any damage. There is a mark on the pilgrimage road, drawn by different yellow lines pointing to the same destination. This mark reminds the pilgrims that they are going on the right way, and also reminds them that even if they start from different locations and take different paths, they will eventually reach the same destination.

Back to the question on what to bring along the path. Of course, modern people cannot just take three things on the road. As we needed to carry our own back pack, and were advised that the weight of it should not exceed one-tenth of our weight, we could only bring some basic needs. I brought three sets of clothes, a sleeping bag, an extra pair of shoes, two water bottles, my mobile phone, (with charger and extra battery), and two walking sticks. Looking at my backpack, I found out that actually there are not many things that we really need. Many things we possess only satisfy our wants, but not our needs. The psalmist teaches us that 'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.' It does not mean that after we believe in the Lord, God can make us rich, but rather it means that we shall live a life that is satisfying with the accompany of our Lord.

The journey continues in the next issue...

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Let's continue the journey with Fr Amos

Text & photos by The Reverend Amos Poon

Every day we set off very early. For a journey of more than 100km, we had to finish at least 20-30km each day, which is 5-7 hours of walking. As we didn't book any rooms at our next destination, arriving late might mean that there would be no place in the albergues.

My journey started at Sarria, walking 22km, and arrived at Portomarin; then another 25km from Portomarin to Palas de Rei. On the second day of the journey, the sky was still very dim in the morning and when we walked on the mountain road, our surroundings were covered by a thick fog. All I could see was the faint silhouettes of people ahead and the road at my feet. Then, when we reached the top of the hill, an amazing moment happened. In the blink of an eye, as the sunlight shone across the earth, the thick fog dissipated, and the earth was filled with lively colours again! Seeing this scene, I remembered the lyrics: 'Yet saints their watch are keeping, their cry goes up, "How long?" And soon the night of weeping shall be the morn of song.' It turned out that the morning light did not come gradually, but it came in an instant. This also to me signified the will of God, which will come in His time, beyond our expectation.

There were also many volunteers along the road serving the pilgrims, especially during summer vacation. One day, when we were filling up our bottles with water, we met a



family. The father came up and asked us where we were from. We said we were from Hong Kong. When we were casually chatting about our journey, he suddenly asked us if we would like him to pray for us and Hong Kong. As you might remember, Hong Kong was going through a very chaotic time in summer 2019. We nodded, and then the three of us put our shoulders together and prayed. I cannot remember the exact wording, but I do remember that someone did pray with us, and I still remember there was a person who was willing to pray for us. Indeed, I believe that the Lord used that experience to tell us that 'He is always here, accompanying us, through our journey of life.'

After five days of walking, 117km and 30 hours on the road, we finally arrived at Santiago Cathedral. The full name for Santiago is Santiago de Compostela, which means St James on a starry field. There are three things a person must do when they reach Santiago Cathedral. The first is to enter the cathedral and hug the statue of St James. The second thing to do is to pray to the bones of St James, entrusting him with your petition and letting him intercede with the Lord on your behalf. The third thing is to go to the 'end of the earth' to have a look.

According to legend, the final destination of St James' evangelical journey was a place called Finisterra. It is located at the most northwestern part of Spain. *Terra* means 'earth' and *Finis* means 'the end'. Together, it means 'the end of the earth'. At the time of Jesus it was the most western place in the known world. In fact, in the Acts of Apostles, Jesus commanded His disciples to be his witnesses to the end of the earth. In the end it was St James who fulfilled this commandment and arrived at Finisterra. When I reached Finisterra, I looked out at the Atlantic Ocean. In my mind I thought that the coastline had not changed much in two thousand years, so what I was looking at then must be the same as what St James had been seeing during his time. In the past, pilgrims would burn their clothes there, which meant that the old self was dead and they were to clothe ourselves with the new self and become a new creation in the Lord. Burning is now prohibited, so we prepared an item we brought with us through the journey, and put it there as the last prayer of our pilgrimage.

Because of this meaningful journey in my life, I highly recommend the pilgrimage way of Santiago. Through everyday journeys, we experience a meditation towards the depth of our heart and mind. 'Pilgrimage' in Chinese means 'willing to face towards God' (朝聖). In fact, it is true that the Lord is not elsewhere; the Lord is always by your side and standing in front of you. However, our eyes are looking in the wrong direction. As long as we are willing to take the path of pilgrimage, and as long as we are willing turn our life and face Him, the Lord is always there.

