

The Camino de Santiago IV

In 1491, Finisterre was thought to be the end of the earth. During the Middle Ages, many pilgrims who completed their pilgrimage at the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela would continue their walk, an additional 40 miles or so, to arrive here at the northernmost tip of Spain to look out over the Atlantic, nothing but endless ocean. This was as far as they could walk in this direction; this was their end of the earth. They must have wondered.

In 2000, after completing my own pilgrimage, I took a bus to the base of those very same ocean-side bluffs and hiked up their sides so that I, too, could look at what they saw. I sat there for hours, looking. I also wondered.

I don't know what a religious experience is, and for this reason, I cannot say I have ever had such an experience, but I do know that those hours spent looking over the ocean from the end of the earth were memorable ones, hours that will never be erased until I am gone. Perhaps it was the afterglow of accomplishment of having walked 450 miles, perhaps it was the relief I felt because I no longer had to force myself to strap on a backpack and undertake yet another nine-hour walk, or perhaps I was simply on holiday. I do not know. Perhaps it was the stillness of the day or the rustle of the waves below, the touch of salt in the air, or the joyful shriek of the gull. I don't know.

How many pilgrims, do you think, sat here on these bluffs looking and wondering? Hundreds? Thousands? Multitudes? One? Did these early pilgrims, my cultural religious ancestors, wonder about the same things I did? I expect so.

One of the primary reasons I undertook the Camino de Santiago was to make some sort of connection to those pilgrims who had walked before me for a 1,000 years or more. I felt this connection the most during the afternoon I spent at the end of the earth, several days after the pilgrimage was completed. Why was that, do you think? Was the walk itself too frenzied, too exhausting? Did my lack of fluency prevent me from finding and making connections? Because I was in a foreign culture, had I been too apprehensive, too fearful, having to contend with too many variables? I believe this to be so.

I did not find this connection at the end of the pilgrimage in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, where a pilgrim might expect it. Instead, I found there a circus act, the swinging of the *botafumeiro*.

Strapped in our backpacks, we arrived at the cathedral during the course of the daily noontime liturgy of the mass that celebrates the completion of the pilgrimage for those pilgrims who arrived that day. Walking up the main aisle of this cathedral, built in the 12th century as a burial place for St. James the Apostle, we participated in the communion service. The cathedral was not packed, but many hundreds of people were present. If one could judge by the presence of backpacks, walking sticks, or modern-day hiking clothes, not many walkers were present.

After the mass was finished, the performance circus act began. I could sense the crowd's anticipation. A huge censer (*botafumeiro* in Spanish) was lowered by means of ropes and pulleys from the ceiling of the cathedral. It looked to me to be 5 feet tall, but perhaps not quite. It was a large compartment made of silver, large enough, I estimated, to hold a small child. The charcoal had been lit earlier, probably well before the mass even began, and was now white hot. Scoops of fragrant incense were shoveled on top of the charcoal, creating clouds of smoke that poured out from every opening in the censer.

The eight men assigned to the day's performance began to pull on the ropes to raise the censer toward the 150-foot-high ceiling, while at the same time pulling other ropes causing the *botafumeiro* to swing from side to side. It was hard to judge, but I think it was raised to a height of at least 50 feet and swung side to side in the huge cathedral for a distance of at least 75 feet in each direction. Higher and higher swung the censer, to the ooh's and aah's of the worshipers until, at the highest point of the swing, it was parallel to the cathedral floor. The more it swung, the more incense smoke poured out in all directions. From start to finish, this circus act lasted no more than 10 minutes. The censer was lowered to the altar floor. There was a smattering of applause, murmurs of approval, and an audible collective sigh of relief.

During one 16-year period of my life, I had been a daily participant in Catholic religious services marking every event in the church's annual liturgical calendar, and never had I witnessed anything as bizarre as the swinging of a *botafumeiro*. But that's exactly the point of a circus act, especially

one performed inside a 12th century Cathedral tent – daring, death-defying, something never seen before.

The historical explanation for the censer swing is that the clouds of sweet-smelling incense were needed to mask the stink of the pilgrims who crowded into the cathedral to mark the end of their pilgrimages. With all due respect, if Church Fathers had truly been concerned about the human stink, they would have provided suitable bathing facilities for pilgrims to use long before they arrived at the cathedral. (Church Fathers have been accused of many things, but to my knowledge, they have never been accused of being visionary or magnanimous about extending the open hand of hospitality to foreigners, strangers, or even their own pilgrims.)

As much as I was put off by this act of liturgical corruption, I had to admit it was a fitting end to the pilgrimage. Aside from an ounce of religious tradition, isn't the Camino de Santiago simply a form of tourism, a desire for adventure, an excuse to visit foreign lands to see strange and unusual sights, an excuse to satisfy wanderlust, a desire to meet new people, taste new foods and beverages, sample new customs, and above all, break the mold of your life?

In the days following the end of the pilgrimage, I scoured the tourist gift shops, including the large one in the cathedral. I wanted to take home a memento of the pilgrimage, perhaps something with a religious undertone, or even a small work of art that might symbolize the meaning the pilgrimage held for me. Would you be surprised to learn that the only pilgrimage symbols available were T-shirts made by Disney? T-shirts with grotesque cartoon characters whose humor centered on mocking pilgrims, and by extension, the pilgrimage itself. I thought about tourist T-shirts I had seen in different parts of the world, which might be applicable to the pilgrimage: "My parents made the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela and all I got was this lousy T-shirt."

I can best sum up my experience of the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage with this thanksgiving prayer, "Thank God for giving me that day at the end of the earth, and for those hours overlooking the Atlantic, and the experience of being present with my cultural religious ancestors as we wondered together about life, love, work, and death."

Thank God for the Camino de Santiago.

