

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

■ March 2006

¡ULTREYA!

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The rain was falling in sheets from the cold and darkened sky; my mud-slathered boots were sliding on the dirt pathway, making progress slow; my raincoat was whipping in the wind and didn't begin to cover my backpack which was becoming wetter by the mile; and I had to walk with my head down so that my foggy glasses would not also become covered with the heavy raindrops. Further, I had miles more to go with my companions before the day was over. Yet, for some reason, I was smiling and incredibly happy. This is what I had come to experience!!

This was a walking trip in northern Spain along the Camino de Santiago. And I must have been the only person in Christendom who had not heard of this pilgrimage when I began planning for it in the Spring of 2005. Fact and myth are mingled in the romantic history of the Camino. Legend claims St. James had traveled to Christianize Spain in the early years after Jesus' death, then returned to Jerusalem where he was beheaded by Herod as one of the earliest martyrs. His body was placed in a rudderless stone boat (yes, *stone*) by his disciples and put out to sea. In a seven day journey, the boat, piloted by no human hand, miraculously traveled across the Mediterranean Sea, through the Straits of Gibraltar, and landed in what is now Spain. For years, the location of his bones was unknown, but in the early 800's, they were "found" in a field by a hermit and moved to a new holy city — Santiago de Compostela.

By the ninth century, pilgrims were traveling the 500 miles from the Pyrenees to visit these miraculous relics in northwestern Spain. In a stream of humanity that has extended over ten centuries and continues to this day, many millions of the devout have completed this arduous route to demonstrate their piety and to seek eternal blessings. The earliest of these Christians were clad in simple wool capes and hats, wore heavy sandals, and carried walking sticks and gourds for water. Many sold all they owned and left their homes with scant expectation of returning. Life expectancies were short. They faced the possibilities of ill health, thieves, wild animals, and inclement weather. This was to be the ultimate journey of their lives.

So what led me to this venture? Are we always certain of our motives? I knew I wanted to find a walking trip somewhere in Europe and was fascinated with Spain and its history. The thought of walking in the footsteps of clerics, bishops, St. Francis of Assisi, El Cid, kings and queens, knights, popes, and generations of committed common men and women led me unexpectedly to the Camino de Santiago. I, too, became a *peregrino* — a pilgrim! — following the crude yellow arrows that marked this historical and spiritual path across the beautiful countryside of northern Spain. I was traveling with my compatriots on an ancient route primarily unchanged since the Middle Ages. My footsteps were added to millions of others who had harbored a life-long quest to find their own personal Holy Grail.

What defines a pilgrimage? I have sought answers to that question for the many months leading up to and following my travel. Perhaps it is an intentional journey undertaken and driven with passion to find the longing of our heart's desire — an attempt to find the source of the most important thing in our lives. It is, thus, not taken lightly, since it will consume us and lead us through difficult and unexpected places. Yes, this describes my time along the Camino. Pilgrims are frequently greeted by others with the Spanish term of encouragement, “*¡Ultreya!*” — translated “Onward” or “Go Beyond” — as they progress toward their destination on the Way of St. James. It is an accurate description of my own journey inward as I sought for new and creative ways to respond to God in my life.

Why did I need to travel as far away as Spain to undertake this pilgrimage? Perhaps I did not, but it is difficult to concentrate on these thoughts in our everyday surroundings. There are so many ways to escape from one's self. The interference comes from the chatter of television, movies, endless noise on the radio, and the bustle of mundane daily activities and socializing. On a trip such as this, there was an abundance of time to think and pray.

To be honest, I did not walk the entire 500 miles of the Camino de Santiago. I traveled with a group of 25 who were guided along approximately 60 miles of the path. It was sometimes difficult to separate myself from the others in order to find the solitude I needed to contemplate the meaning of my pilgrimage experience. When we arrived at our destination, the cathedral in Santiago, we had an opportunity to talk with two travelers who had just completed the entire route all the way from France. One person was a 75-year-old Australian woman who had made the pilgrimage in several segments; the other was a 23-year-old Italian “lad” who had, he said, been seeking the “meaning of life” and had made the entire trek in 20 days (walking approximately 25 miles each day.) Together, they were an incredible inspiration and have encouraged me to plan a future trip back to the Camino and perhaps embark on the full 500 miles. After all, is this a pilgrimage that is ever completed?

“O Lord...we thank you for setting us at tasks which demand our best efforts, and for leading us to accomplishments which satisfy and delight us.” (Book of Common Prayer)



Judith walks three miles each day in the Northern Neck of eastern Virginia where she moved after her husband David's death, six months prior to his retirement, in 2002. Her personal journey includes discovering new things about herself in this unplanned chapter of her life. To that end, she has learned to play mah jongg (much more difficult than it appears!), has taken several unaccompanied walking trips, volunteers in her community, and has purchased a car and a house unassisted! She attends Grace Church in Kilmarnock. She notes that she has found unexpected joy in her new life.