



A Thousand Steps to Renewal

Text by **Astra C. Alegre**
 Photos courtesy of Father Bienvenido "Ben" Nebres, SJ

Father Ben Nebres concelebrating the mass at the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela



"I discovered parts of my feet I never knew existed," chuckled Father Bienvenido "Ben" Nebres. "I did not expect I would experience pain in my feet from the third to the tenth day. I was preparing for blisters, which I did not get. It took me a week to discover that the problem was that my feet had expanded and my toes were cramped inside my shoe."

In 2011, at age 71 years old, Father Ben became a *peregrino* (pilgrim) of the *El Camino de Santiago* or the Way of Saint James in Galicia, Spain. This pilgrimage, which has the scallop shell as its symbol, is said to be one of the most important, along with Rome and Jerusalem. Legend has it that St. James the apostle was buried here.

Pilgrims can choose from several routes. Father Ben chose the French Way, which starts from the Saint Jean Pied De Port in France then proceeds to Roncesvalles in Spain. It then passes through the cities of Pamplona, Logrono, Burgos and Leon.

It had always been in Father Ben's bucket list to go on the pilgrimage. In his travels through Europe he found that so many cities like Limoges, Goettingen, Miltenberg, Paris, etc. were part of the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage routes. Father Ben shares, "I found that people had been making the pilgrimage for over a thousand years. I was very attracted to the thought of walking a pilgrimage route with people coming from so many far off places and along roads and towns where others had passed over a thousand years."

He adds, "It was particularly attractive to do it right after stepping down from the presidency of Ateneo after 18 years—not so much to forget, as to create a break from a mission and responsibility I had held for so long. I felt that doing something physically challenging like walking the 800-km Camino route was a perfect way to create the break."

Walking an average of 24 kilometers a day, Father Ben shares that walking through the *mesetas* (plateaus) gets boring. Some people in groups sing while for Father Ben, he just kept going. "So long as you can keep putting one foot in front of the other, you will eventually get to your destination. So I just kept putting one foot in front of the other!"

Reasonable health is a plus though Father Ben said he met many people who were not in good physical shape. For Father Ben what is important is to have "determination to finish (whatever length they choose). If one does the full 800 km, after the first week one's body has adjusted and the main challenge is mental and emotional."

Father Ben has some practical tips. Bring the following items: quick drying clothes, good mountain walking shoes, woolly socks and liners, raincoat or poncho, a light-weight backpack, walking poles. "Medicines, etc., you can get along the way—except your own prescription medicines."

Among all the people Father Ben met during his pilgrimage, he singled out Pepe, the self-proclaimed guardian of the Camino Capital. "I was fascinated by his dedication to protecting the spirit of the Camino from the onslaughts of modernity."

Father Ben believes we can preserve a tradition such as the Camino de Santiago. "So long as people (present statistics say 100,000 to 150,000 people make the pilgrimage every year) walk the Camino, the traditions will endure. We will also discover the wonders of slowing down and simplifying our lives."

On the 37th day, Father Ben finally reached the Cathedral at Santiago de Compostela, together with his niece Maria, which marked the end of his journey. He concelebrated the noon mass for the pilgrims.

Pilgrims can expect both a personal and spiritual renewal at the end of their journey. Father Ben shares, "Walking is a great way to meditate and pray. There are also the daily 8 p.m. Pilgrim's masses at each of the stopping places. And, of course, (there is) a great sense of accomplishment and fulfillment. Aside from losing pounds and being in better physical shape."

What makes the Camino de Santiago different from any other ordinary path? "There is no other walking pilgrimage that is so ancient, that passes through so many ancient towns and magnificent churches and cathedrals, beautiful and challenging mountains and rivers," Father Ben says. "You really find yourself walking back in time." ☒



(top left to right) At the 790 kilometers signpost, Father Ben has his photo taken; Father Ben with one of the many pilgrims he met during his walk. (above) Each *peregrino* gets a passport and collects stamps along the way which shows his or her progress