

After 20 years at St. James, I've developed a keen sense for how we are known as a parish. I believe we have a warm and welcoming community and that we are very active in our outreach ministries. We also have a unique church architecture that requires study to fully understand. The scallop shell is our symbol, and it appears in our altar, the ambo, our baptismal font, and the shape of the building.

In time I have come to understand the significance of the scallop shell, and how the many lines all coming to the same point, represent the Camino de Santiago, also known as the Way of St James. You may be aware that the Camino starts in many European cities and ends at the tomb of St James inside the Cathedral. I've come to realize that this parallels the journey of Christian life, with each of us starting in our own place and hopefully, we are all led to our final resting place in heaven.

On Wednesday, my wife and I returned from a trip to Spain, where we experienced the Way of St James firsthand, through an abbreviated, two-day version. How many of you have walked the Camino? Today, I would like to share what I learned as a pilgrim, how it ties to our identity as a parish, and the insights it brings into today's readings. The main takeaway is that the Way of St James, the Christian Way, is a ONE-WAY street.

In our 1st reading, Moses tells the people, "You shall not add to what I command nor subtract from it." In other words, this "one way" of living is not to be modified based on personal preference. There's an implied discipline in following a code of living, which keeps us grounded and humble, and also unites us. This code of living makes us "Holy" which means, "To be set apart for a purpose." By setting ourselves apart, we aim to become in Moses's words, "A great nation that is truly a wise and intelligent people." Unity is only possible if we all follow the SAME way, the ONE way, a concept that quickly became clear on the Camino.

Early, last Sunday morning, my wife and I woke up in Caldas de Reis, 25 miles south of Santiago, a small town on the Portuguese Camino. This Camino starts in Porto, Portugal and runs north 160 miles to Santiago, Spain. As we headed down to the street with our backpacks and walking sticks, I was desperately checking my Camino app to see which direction we should start walking, and low and behold we see at least 30 people, all similar to us, with backpacks and hiking shoes, already making their way down the road, all walking in the same direction. This is the one-way street of the Camino. No one walks against the grain, they are all headed to see St James. We took comfort knowing everyone was trying to accomplish the same goal and we immediately were received into the community of pilgrims. This same scenario plays out when people visit St James for the first time and we, as a community, make them feel at home.

In our second reading, from the letter of James, he says, "Humbly welcome the word that has been planted in you and is able to save your souls." This is the updated code of conduct that came from Jesus and was handed down by St. James and the other apostles. We are asked to humbly receive it. That humility is evident on the Camino. At first it felt like a race, but it's not,

it's a time to slow down and let humility sink in. As a Camino-focused parish we are encouraged to reduce our possessions down to the essentials, because everything you take on the Camino, sometime walking 16 miles a day, weighs you down, so LESS is MORE. The Camino also gives us time to consider what the Apostles, like our very own St. James, took on as they walked the earth preaching the gospel, and thank them for their tremendous contribution to our faith.

Our second reading also describes religion as this, "To care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world." The Camino, as a theme for our parish, inspires us to experience poverty, as pilgrims put themselves in a homeless state, at least for a day walking from the shelter of one town to another. Camino life also helps us remain, "unstained by the world," relying on an ancient form of transportation and focusing on the beauty of nature and the kindness of the people around us.

Speaking of the people around us, THEY were a highlight of our journey. First of all, they all greeted us with the words, "Buen Camino!" A universal greeting of goodwill for all pilgrims. Secondly, they kept us on track. Once we veered off course and a group, 50 yards behind us, started to wave their hands and yell, "It's this way!!" We were amazed also how the Camino brought all God's people closer to Christ. We met a young man from Tel Aviv, and though he was not Christian, he left us with the words, "See you at the Pilgrim Mass!" The Camino is a place where a single question about a person's shoes can turn into a one-hour conversation about a person's life. Like our parish, it is a place of ever more intimate community-building.

Arriving at the Cathedral was incredible, seeing the majestic, 13th century structure and thousands of people from different Caminos. Like at St James, we were welcomed into the Mass for pilgrims, and even got to experience the giant thurible swinging from the ceiling. It was a slice of heaven, people converging, in a holy place, after helping each other through the challenges of the journey.

113 years ago, the St James parish was established in Del Mar. Our founders thoughtfully developed a design for our Church that would inspire us to grow as Christians. They chose the Way of St James, a more than 1000-year-old tradition of walking to visit the tomb of St James. This time-honored tradition had over 400,000 pilgrims walking the Camino in 2023.

The spiritual significance of the pilgrim journey is for us to accept the reality that we are seeking a home, not here on earth, but in heaven. Jesus says, "Follow me" 22 times in his gospels, yet He also says, "Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head." This implies that we are to keep seeking Him without rest.

A traditional pilgrimage would start at a person's home and end at the pilgrimage site. We are being drawn out of our comfort and into the Camino of Life, a journey of ups and downs that unites us as a Christian community, helps us grow, and builds up the Kingdom of God on earth. I hope our church and our community inspires you in your faith, keeps us known as a welcoming parish with strong outreach, and leads us to a pilgrimage that ends in heaven. Buen Camino!