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## Pilgrimage leads priest, deacon to 'live in the moment'



BY SUE SCHULZETENBERG - THE VISITOR  
THURSDAY, 03 DECEMBER 2009

Pilgrims, especially around Thanksgiving time, are often thought of as English colonists who founded Plymouth Colony in the "New World" in 1620.

Another definition of pilgrim tells of a slightly different type of person: one who journeys to a place of religious significance. In Spain, tens of thousands of pilgrims arrive in Santiago de Compostela each year after walking the Camino de Santiago, a series of routes to the cathedral where legend holds St. James the Great is laid to rest. Pilgrims have traveled the Camino de Santiago for more than 1,000 years in the pursuit of holiness.



At right, Father Ron Schmelzer and Deacon Vern Schmitz are all smiles on the first day of their pilgrimage Sept. 29 in the French Pyrennes. They trekked from St. Jean-Pied-du-Port in France to Santiago, Spain. Photo courtesy of Deacon Vern Schmitz

This fall, Father Ron Schmelzer, a priest of the Diocese of St. Cloud and Deacon Vern Schmitz, director of diaconate for the Diocese of St. Cloud, were among those pilgrims.

Traveling to Santiago via the Camino Francés route, Father Schmelzer and Deacon Schmitz began their pilgrimage Sept. 29 at St. Jean-Pied-du-Port in France. They then traveled, almost entirely on foot, to Santiago in northwestern Spain, arriving on Oct. 29.

"I wanted to go on an adventure as well as transition from the busy life of being the only priest for the Army Garrison in Kaiserslautern back to the Diocese [of St. Cloud]," said Father Schmelzer.

Father Schmelzer, who began ministering in Germany in 2007, returned to the Diocese of St. Cloud this month. Father Schmelzer invited Deacon Schmitz to go along the Camino de Santiago with him.

Deacon Schmitz wanted a break from his day-to-day routine and time to reflect upon what he will do after retiring from his position as director of the diaconate in December.

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Their route, Camino Francés, is 780 kilometers long and runs through the northern part of Spain. They began their days by setting out by 8 a.m. and then walking until 3 to 6 p.m. when they would reach a hostel to spend the night.



Deacon Schmitz said it was a very tough walk and took no effort to fall asleep one minute after going to bed.

After walking 325 kilometers of the Camino, Deacon Schmitz reported their cardiopulmonary systems were getting stronger although their muscular skeletal systems were very sore. At that point he had been through 50 some villages and cities. Like Stearns County, he noted, every village and city had a Catholic church or a cathedral. The churches are older than in Stearns County, however, dating back to the 12th or 13th century or earlier, he said.

They faced many uncertainties along the way, as they were not able to plan everything. Deacon Schmitz said they would never know what type of hostel they would find. Hostels could be somewhat primitive with 20 to 50 people in a room with limited toilets and showers, but gave them a place to sleep at night. In addition, when walking, they would not know where the next open eating establishment would be, but they eventually always came to a place that would provide.

"Eating is hit or miss during the day, but one can always count on a restaurant serving a pilgrim meal at 7 or 7:30 p.m.," he said.

Deacon Schmitz learned more about living in the present and not dwelling on the future, he said. He found he even stopped taking photographs.

"This time on the Camino gave me an opportunity to start to live in the present moment — to relax into the holy moment given to me by God," Deacon Schmitz said.

Highlights for Father Schmelzer included meeting people along the path and offering Mass, especially at the tomb of St. James in Santiago early in the morning.

They met some surprises. Father Schmelzer was surprised at the lack of Christian faith he experienced among most of the people on the pilgrimage. He said that Europe is very secular and estimated that less than 5 percent of people on the walk were taking it for traditional religious reasons. Some of the other reasons for undergoing the journey included the physical challenge or enjoying an inexpensive vacation.

However, Father Schmelzer noted the incredibly strong faith of those who were doing the walk as a religious pilgrimage. Seeing their strong faith helped bolster his, he said.

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Deacon Schmitz also learned how to be more prayerful and now spends more time in prayer, he said.

Overall, Father Schmelzer said the journey helped strengthen his desire to teach the importance of the Catholic faith in Christ and his reality in the world.

If one is not able to walk across Spain to seek holiness, Father Schmelzer says not to worry. People can be pilgrims wherever they are.

"We are all on pilgrimage, and while going to certain places, such as Santiago, can be interesting, they are only symbolic of the real journey each of us is taking to the new Jerusalem. Christ Jesus is our true and faithful companion and helper on the way," he said.

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