

France, Spain Unite to Protect Ancient Pilgrim Path

Way of St. James Still Seen as Evangelization Opportunity

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Prelates of Spain and France are committing themselves to protect the ancient Camino de Santiago, a network of pilgrim routes that wind across Europe and lead to the tomb of St. James.

Bishops of the Spanish and French dioceses that contain parts of the Camino de Santiago ("Way of St. James" -- James is rendered Santiago in Spanish) hail the route as a privileged place for evangelization.

The bishops gathered in Santiago this week for their second meeting about preserving the route.

In a communiqué, the Archdiocese of Santiago noted that the prelates affirmed the importance of a shared pastoral program for this endeavor, "in order to invigorate the spiritual dimension of these roads of pilgrimage, which sink their roots into the very history of Europe and are the object of a progressive frequentation."

The bishops addressed a series of questions such as the meaning of pilgrimage, its spiritual preparation, spiritual care, the topics of meditation along the Way, and care of non-pilgrims.

They debated on the religious and cultural patrimony of the roads and the dialogue between faith and culture, hospitality, the inns and volunteer workers, the role of monasteries and the opening of churches and chapels.

Road to Emmaus

The prelates covered both spiritual and practical matters, such as the readability of the signs and markers along the routes. It was suggested that the Road to Emmaus could be a graphic icon for the route, since often pilgrims along the Camino de Santiago -- like the discouraged disciples headed to Emmaus -- begin their journey without a faith motivation.

However, they added, Jesus continues to make himself present because the pilgrims live the experience of encounter among themselves, with others and with God.

The archbishop of Pamplona and Tudela, Francisco Pérez González, highlighted the enthusiasm of the seven French bishops and the seven Spanish bishops participating in the meeting.

"We have studied how to evangelize, how to take the Word of God, the sacramental life, a joint pastoral program so that in the various places where there are meetings -- Bordeaux, Toulouse, Pamplona, Palencia, Lugo, Santiago -- hospitality is offered to the pilgrims," he told Vatican Radio. "The Church must continue to be missionary, especially at this time in which Europe has lost its identity. May Europe not lose its roots, as John Paul II exhorted in Santiago de Compostela."

Apostolic experience

Archbishop Julián Barrio Barrio of Santiago organized the meeting, which came in the midst of the Jacobeo Holy Year. These jubilee years are held whenever the July 25 feast of St. James falls on a Sunday, as it does this weekend.

At the end of the meeting on Tuesday afternoon, the novena to St. James began in the cathedral of Compostela, presided over by Archbishop Barrio Barrio and by the archbishop of Bordeaux, Cardinal Jean-Pierre Ricard.

Cardinal Ricard thanked Santiago's council for its hospitality and prayed for all the pilgrims who met one another during their pilgrimage.

"At the moment in which we come to pray over his tomb, the grace we can ask of the Apostle James is that he renew in our innermost being the apostolic dynamism, the original experience of those whose lives were transformed by their encounter with Christ Jesus," he said. "The experience of Santiago is above all a getting under way. With John, his brother, Peter, Andrew and the other apostles, James understood this calling to leave everything and follow Christ.

"They left their families, people, profession, the shores of the lake, their plans, their dreams, to follow Jesus Christ.

"Only this stripping away let them get started and discover a new life, the experience of personal conversion, the discovery of the hitherto unknown face of God, through the face of the prophet of Nazareth."

Austerity

Cardinal Ricard proposed that the experience of walking as a pilgrim brings participants to "live this apostolic experience."

However, "there is no apostolic experience if we are not capable of starting, if there is no austerity," he said. "Let us ask St. James that we also may remain always united to the Lord, that we may feel his tenderness and discover the ever new strength of his fidelity.

"Let us not be afraid to be met with vexation, derision or frontal opposition to the evangelical message. May our prayer over the tomb of the Apostle James renew in us the courage and ardor of the first apostles."

