

THE AUSSIE CAMINO by Paul Castley MSC



On December 11th, I was one of a group of about 20 people who began their Aussie Camino. The Aussie Camino is the dream and brain child of Luke Mills and you can google for information about it. It was a 7day 220 k walk or, rather, a pilgrimage, celebrating the wonderful lives and work of St Mary Mackillop and Fr. Julian Tennison Woods. We started at All Saints Portland, in South Western Victoria, and walked to Penola in South East South Australia.

Mary began her teaching career in 1863 at the catholic School in Portland. Then she rented Bay View House and, assisted by her sisters, Maggie and Lexie, set up a boarding school for young ladies there next to All Saints parish church in Portland. It was called 'Bayview Seminary for Young Ladies.' Apparently Seminary had a wider meaning then than it does today – or was Mary ahead of her time?

Bayview House will be well known to priests at Monivae in the 60s when it was a Loreto Convent and we used to preside at the Eucharist there from time to time.

Julian Tennison Woods invited her to come to Penola in 1866, where they started their work for the education of disadvantaged children.

It truly was a pilgrimage. Before starting out each day Luke led us in a specially prepared reflection set out in the guide book he provided for each of us. Each day we celebrated Eucharist, usually in the morning. That meant an earlier rising time than expected



as we then needed to have breakfast. For me, anyhow, Napoleon's dictum holds true. An army marches on its stomach.

Here we are gathered on day five for the daily reflection. It is being led by Luke. After each reflection we raised our walking poles, touched them together and wished each other 'Buen Camino.'

Here most of us are at the entrance to All Saints' Church, Portland on Thursday morning 11th December. This was the beginning of our trek. I was going to do some serious preparation for tackling, next year, the Original Camino to Santiago di Compostella. I had resolved to carry all my belongings in my backpack. My heart sank at the thought of it. Yuk and ugh were the gentler words that came to mind. So I decided just quietly to ask for God's inspiration. It came almost immediately in a gentle, peaceful movement of heart and soul and spirit. 'Don't take it.' I'll use this as an example if I have to run any future courses on discernment. The fruits were to become evident later that morning.

Being a tortoise and not a hare, I was at the back of the group that morning. I was accompanied by a fellow some nine years younger than I, but not quite as experienced and serious a walker. He also kept breaking one of my cardinal rules for a contemplative walk. He loved just chattering away. I uttered my motto to a few people 'breath is for walking, not talking.' As we were climbing up off a small stretch of beach I noticed he was



leaning over. Then he scared the living daylights out of me. He was faint, hot and perspiry. He needed to rest for quite a while. Fortunately Luke was behind us and came upon the scene. The same thought occurred to him. I hope we haven't got a cardiac arrest here. We were kilometres from anywhere and it would have been quite an addition to the expending of our energies to go back and seek help. Yet there was still a long way to go to finish our day which was 32 ks long, from Portland to Cape Bridgewater. Why on such an occasion did my mind turn to Macbeth Act 3 scene 4 where he says, 'I am in blood stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er.'? We sat and waited. The causes seemed to be a slight tummy upset from the night before and an overheating to the head caused by a heavy felt hat. Whatever the cause, our companion eventually rose and bravely walked several hours to finish the day. He had been carrying a small back pack with water and some food and other essentials. I asserted myself strongly and said that he certainly wasn't going to carry his pack any further. I had a very makeshift bag that dangled from my shoulder so it was OK for me to put his bag on my back. The discernment of the gentle movement of the morning had been vindicated.

I won't go into a detailed account of each day. We travelled through coastal scrub. We climbed capes and walked along cliff faces staring down into the waves crashing against the coastline.



On three occasions, once, as we headed for Cape Bridgewater on day 1, and then, as we headed for Nelson on day 3, and finally as we headed to Port Macdonnell on day 4, before heading inland, we walked along kilometres of glorious beach. Walking in the water was soothing as well as sensible as trying to avoid the incoming waves while walking in one's boots was often futile.

We came across fascinating natural features such as the petrified forest, shown above. How many millions of years had this been here as nature slowly worked her amazing and wonderful miracles?

Later on we travelled some ordinary bitumen roads. I took a slightly wrong turn on the way to Mt Gambier and added a couple of kilometres to the trip by heading for the highway. Unfortunately I led one of my companions into 'temptation' as he was following on behind me. I had let the fast group, the veritable hares amongst us, go on well ahead but was also determined not to allow myself to be caught by the tail end group as most of them could walk a little faster than I. It may have been pride but I think, too, it was an instinct for survival. If all these youngsters get ahead my spirits might droop too much; I'd really drag the chain and come in pretty late and dispirited. We both missed a dirt road that led most of the way from Mt Schank to Mt Gambier. Dirt roads are gentler to the feet and on them one is far less troubled and molested by passing traffic. However, I struggled into Mount Gambier and there, on the outskirts, my spirits were nourished by the beauty of the natural feature for which Mt Gambier is famous: The Blue Lake.



I run ahead a little. The previous day we came into Port Macdonnell. It was Sunday and that evening we were led in the Eucharist by Bishop Vincent Long, the Melbourne Auxiliary. Many years ago when I was at Monivae I had spent a couple of weeks supplying in Mt Gambier over the summer holidays. I had presided at the Sunday Eucharist in St Augustine's, Port Macdonnell. As in Portland I was back in territory I'd entered so

many years ago. The memories were happy.

The mention of Bishop Vincent leads me to give some details of the composition of our group. Bishop Vincent stayed with us for 5 days till he returned to Melbourne for the ordination of Melbourne's two recently appointed auxiliary bishops: Terry Curtin and Mark Edwards OMI. There were two priests from the diocese of Ballarat: Peter Sherman and John Monaghan, both having several times walked the Camino in Spain. Greg Bourke, whose portfolio in the Melbourne Archdiocese has been Ministry to Priests was also with us. Along with Luke, he had planned this pilgrimage as one of his offerings to priests of the Archdiocese. Along with him from Melbourne was another inveterate Spanish camino walker, Noel Brady. Noel has done the Spanish camino about 9 times taking many a different route. Dave Ryan SJ was with us till Mt Gambier, too. I don't know how many walks he's done but so often I'd be amazed to see him glide past me on the track. He's obviously an experienced campaigner. Joining us at Port Macdonnell was Rob Egar. I'd known and admired Rob many years ago when I was in Adelaide and here he took from me the honorific of being the eldest of our company. He is 82 and he didn't let the years hold him back. He bravely pushed on to Penola. With Rob came his nephew, Phil O'Donnell, whose father, Basil, had been a well-known Henley Beach parishioner and who had written a history of that parish.

There were several members of Brisbane's Catholic Bushwalking clubs, two retired men from Canberra and Andy who had met Peter Sherman and John Monaghan as they walked, last year, the Camino Portugues from Lisbon to Compostella. How could I forget Ti Ping from Adelaide?



We went through grazing and crop land, through the pine forests of South Eastern South Australia and down some lovely tracks fringed by our own Australian gum trees. The quiet bitumen roads were a joy to walk down, too. Luke brought along a portable style for climbing over the fences. He'd made it himself and called it MMPS: Millsy's



Marvellous Mobile Stile. Wherever one walked, though, an important companion was Sunscreen. The author used it lavishly at the start of the day.

The toughest day was day 6 to Kalangadoo. It was 37 ks. God was good. It was cold and, at times, wet and the wind from the south west was almost gale force. The very consoling thought was it was not a hot, dehydrating northerly that would take the temperatures into the high 30s or even 40s. Dogged perseverance gets one there and, though the feet might have been a little more sore and the energies slightly more depleted, we arrived at the Kalngadoo Hilton. What a majestic pub!



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And on day 7 we arrived

I hadn't seen the biblical connection till this but on the afternoon of Day 7, like the Creator we took a well-earned rest. That afternoon and the following morning we explored the Mary Mackillop Interpretative Centre in which the Sisters of St Joseph beautifully display

the life, work and achievement of both St Mary Mackillop and Julian Tennison Woods. It's inspiring. In this time when God's Church is receiving a battering from the betrayals of the innocent by some of our shepherds it came upon me that God will not be thwarted. God will keep on raising up souls who long to enter into the lives of the poor and the outcast and raise them up, just as Jesus did. In them God hears the cry of the poor. Some do immerse themselves in the flock and take on the smell of the sheep, to paraphrase Pope Francis. (Evangelii Gaudium #24)

I meditated and reflected in Mary's class room. I saw the stable where she started – again the biblical connection. Did Jesus, too, start in a stable? I walked round the first school she built.



Mary's spirit seems to pervade Penola. It seems to me, I think, to be another of Australia's Sacred Sites. The whole journey was very contemplative. Walking quietly and silently I was able to repeat several mantras. One I often say on such walks is, 'Lord, have mercy, Christ

Have mercy, Lord have mercy.’ As I repeat it I can call down on the world and on sick and suffering and sorrowing friends the mercy of God. I was prompted to draw near to my own founder, too: Jules Chevalier. As I thought of Mary and Julian I turned my mind to him. Mary, after all, founded the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart.

Perhaps, now, I descend from the sublime to the ridiculous. Perhaps it’s just from the sublime to the very human; but isn’t the very human something sublime. At the end of a long and strenuous day, it was wonderful to quench one’s thirst with lots of lemon squashes and cold, cold beers. We celebrated each evening with a meal together in the various pubs we stayed in. it was the complementary side to the table fellowship we shared each day at the Eucharistic table. Christ has taught us he was present in a saving way also as he ate with publicans and sinners. We remembered also in the daily Eucharist he was bringing salvation as he lay down his life on the cross and rose again to bring us the fullness of life. We caught a glimpse of this life in the joy and the love we shared each evening as we celebrated the day we had just completed. The same spirit descends on both Eucharistic meal and evening meal and consecrates each of them.

It was demanding and challenging, but well worth the effort. It taught me a couple of things: that to be contemplative I need to spend a lot of the day walking quietly and silently; one can yap and swap yarns and have fun at night; I need, too, to walk at my own pace. I must be true to the fact I am a tortoise not a hare, and also 79. I have slowed just a little since I completed the Via Francigena. And most of all I know that I cannot walk too many days of 30 ks or more. Next year a realistic target would be about 25. I can do that comfortably in three sessions of 2 hours each.



Our leaders, Luke Mills and Greg Bourke at the Mackillop Interpretative Centre as we finished the journey. Greg provided some beautiful commentaries along the way on the lives of Mary and Julian.

Two men to whom also we owe a great deal are Michael Cain and Peter Burke. They provided valuable logistical support by carting our luggage

from place to place, enabling us to walk unencumbered over the 7 days. By placing my large backpack in the trailer that was provided I was then free on the first day to carry the small day pack of our faint fellow traveller.