Course Outline

Walking, Thinking and Discernment
The Tradition and Experience of Pilgrimage

Academic instructor:
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Solvitur ambulando, “It is resolved by walking.” Let us suppose that what is “resolved” in the acceptance of this medieval adage is not merely a practical hindrance or an elusive puzzle, but a deeply personal question or problem. We know the manner in which taking a walk can clear our heads, prompt the emergence of previously unexpected solutions, or set a rhythm for stimulating conversation. Walking sometimes goes together with thinking in a way that opens the mind while exercising the body. Could this also be the case for our attempts to know who we are, what we ought to do with our lives, and the challenges that stand in our way? Could the very urge to take a long walk signal a deeper urge to be alone with oneself, so as to ponder one’s condition and one’s calling? Could it be that a consideration of walking is in itself an exercise in exploring the human condition? A range of perspectives on these questions can be found in the western intellectual tradition. Among them is the spirituality of pilgrimage, in which walking becomes the model for living in response to God’s call. As the pilgrim tells us, when one walks one does so in the presence of God, and the resolving that is done along the way is illumined by a personal sense of one’s relation with God (Solvitur ambulando cum Deo).

I. Spiritual / formational dimension of course

Summary of components: journaling, opportunity for spiritual direction and daily Mass, two-day retreat, practice of the Jesuit Examen.

A. Journal and discussion. Students will keep a journal in which they reflect on their experiences in light of course readings, ongoing discussion and discernment. Each student will sometimes share a portion of his/her journal that she/he is comfortable discussing with the group. The journal will not be graded, and will not be read by anyone else unless at the request of the student.

B. Liturgy and prayer. The group will include a priest who will celebrate Mass on a daily basis, as well as offer spiritual direction. These components are not mandatory, but some personal form / version of reflection is strongly encouraged.
C. Retreat and contemplation. There will be a two-night retreat in late April. Students will be taught a simple form of the Examen and encouraged to develop that practice. While on the Camino, there will be four central (evening) exercises concentrated on self-knowledge and discernment. Participation in this retreat and in all classroom meetings is mandatory for all students; those who cannot be present will not be making the trip to Spain.

II. Physical dimension of course

Summary of components: Students will need to be in good health, and ready to adapt to rudimentary conditions. It would be a very good idea to do some extensive walking prior to leaving for Spain. We will sometimes undertake practice of walking and thinking while still on campus and undertake one lengthy hike while on retreat, but these exercises will not approach the length and exertion required for the Camino.

A. Walking with a small pack on one’s back, for an average of 15-17 miles per day (depending on the terrain). We will cover some uneven (though never severe) terrain, and sometimes encounter rain and/or hot sun. On all but one occasion, we will be staying in hostels reserved for pilgrims. The exception will be a large Benedictine monastery. According to the rules of all hostels and the monastery, we will have to be awake and on our way by 7.30 am each day. We will carry on, with breaks along the way, until approximately 4 pm.

B. Eating good, simple food, though in reasonable abundance, and drinking a great deal of water each day.

C. Sleeping and bathing in simple accommodations. The hostels are adequate to a pilgrim’s needs, but seldom more than that.

A packing list and sample daily schedule will be provided. This will include strong advice to avoid over-packing. You will be carrying your own pack for the entire pilgrimage.

III. Intellectual dimension of course

Summary of components: extensive reading, classroom lectures on campus, seminar-style discussion while on Camino, two 5-page papers and one paper of at least 12-pages, integrating academic work and personal experience.
A. Required Reading

Readings will address three areas: (1) the history and culture of northern Spain, with particular attention to the emergence of Jesuit thought and spirituality; (2) the history and current conditions of the Camino to Santiago de Compostella; (3) the relationship between walking, thinking, and discernment. The third portion of readings will be much more extensive than the first two. They are intended to support reflection on the presence of nature, the presence of others, and the relation with God; diverse viewpoints on walking will be presented.

The Camino guide and map, and the books by Forest and Gros will be ordered by the BC bookstore. A “reader” containing all other readings, and perhaps a few more, will be provided.

1. Set of brief readings on the history of northern Spain, with attention to Ignatius and the Jesuits.

2. Camino to Santiago de Compostella: history, guide, map; most likely choice will be J. Brierly, *Camino de Santiago* (Fores, Scotland: Findhorn Press 2012).

3. Walking, reflection, discernment

   a. Frederic Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking* (slim chapters on everyone from the Cynics to Wordsworth and Thoreau; we will use it with supplements from original author)

   b. Chatwin, Bruce, “The Anatomy of Restlessness” (essay): walking as travel driven by need to avoid static complacency.

   c. de Certeau, Michel, “Walking in the City” (book chapter): walking as an urban experience--and not only, as other readings may imply, a rural experience; supplemented by passages from Baudelaire and Pessoa, on the figure of the flaneur.

   d. Forest, Jim, *The Road to Emmaus. Pilgrimage as a Way of Life*: chapters from a narrative account of pilgrimage as a distinctive practice.

   e. Biblical passages: prophets and Jesus are often walking, alone and in company; Paul’s notions of flesh and spirit seem to suggest life as pilgrimage, etc.


h. Thoreau, Henry David, “Walking” (essay / lecture): going for a walk as a quintessentially human activity, and as a privileged experience of nature; this experience is also expressed in some of the poetry of Wordsworth and by W. Whitman, “Song of an Open Road.”

i. Walser, Robert, “The Walk” (fiction): nervous, compulsive walking; may add some passages from Pessoa here, too.

**B. Course schedule**

*A detailed academic syllabus will be made available some weeks before the course begins.*

1. Prior to departure for Spain

   a. Eight two-hour classroom / seminar meetings, three of which while on retreat and the others on campus:
      One on the history of northern Spain and the life of Ignatius.
      Five on walking as a distinctive practice often linked to reflection, self-knowledge and discernment.
      One on the practice of pilgrimage.
      One specifically on the pilgrimage to Camino to Santiago de Compostella.

   b. Students should have completed all reading before departing for Spain, and submitted to Prof. Bloechl a 5-page summary each of (1) Merton, Day, biblical passages; and (2) and selected philosophical passages approved in advance by Prof. Bloechl.

   The texts specifically on walking, thinking and discernment will be part of our material for regular discussions along the Camino. Students are therefore required to record key or favorite passages from these texts in their journal before leaving for Spain (Prof. Bloechl will expect to see them before we leave for Spain). While on the Camino, each student is encouraged to refer her/his experiences to these passages, and to bring them into discussion.

2. In Spain

   a. May 19: Flight into Bilbao, via Madrid; one night Bilbao; bus from Bilbao to Leon; one night in Leon. Leon is roughly 12 day’s walk from Santiago.
b. Twelve days walking from Leon until arrival in Santiago de Compostella.


d. June 3: departure from Santiago according to individual arrangements. A group will no doubt return directly to Boston, but students are of course free to extend their time in Europe with travel to other locations.

3. Upon return

a. Submission of 12-page final paper by July 31. Papers should integrate experiences along the Camino, as material aiding critical reflection on two distinct views of the relationship between walking, thinking, and discernment found in the required readings. Students should explore the basis and context for the views taken in the texts that they select, and support claims with careful research. This is an academic paper.

b. Reunion meeting in the fall; date and time to be decided later.