

Walk in Spirit - The 2009 Gathering in Review

American Pilgrims on the Camino held its 2009 Hospitalero Training, Gathering and Retreat this year in Albuquerque, New Mexico from March 11 to March 17. Over 100 pilgrims from the USA and Canada were present, and we were pleased once again to welcome José Suarez Otero and Xavier Valiño from the Galician Xunta.

In response to suggestions made at other Gatherings, our theme this year was the spirituality of the Camino, and all presentation topics were chosen with that theme in mind. This made for a coherent program that focused our attention on the many kinds of spiritual expression that pilgrimage and the Camino hold.



Our Galician guests – photo by Grant Spangler

The Hospitalero Training was a type of pilgrimage in itself. Originally planned for the South Valley Development Center in Albuquerque, the Training was moved to the Santa Fe International Hostel for better logistics in late February. But just as some refugios have their limitations for group activities, so did the Hostel. Enter Kate Lopez, longtime resident of Santa Fe and active American Pilgrim member, who performed one of those Camino miracles familiar to seasoned pilgrims. Kate opened her beautiful home to the hospitaleros-in-training, and all sessions and meals were held there, while the Hostel was used as a refugio for sleep. The Training by all accounts was a great success. Our abundant thanks go out to Daniel De Kay and Lin Galea for welcoming the trainees and guiding them through all the nuances of hospitalero life, including meal preparation, first aid and spiritual support for pilgrims, and of course to Kate for providing the perfect venue.



Our new hospitaleros and their trainers – photo by Grant Spangler

Pilgrims coming to the Gathering began to appear at the Rio Grande Inn in Albuquerque on Thursday March 12. An evening reception for these early arrivers was held next door at the St. Clair Winery and Bistro. Our private meeting rooms, with their dark pink walls and intimate Spanish décor, came alive as old pilgrim friends met, newcomers were welcomed, and everyone enjoyed wine and hors d'oeuvres.

On Friday, more pilgrims began to arrive and the sleepy front lobby of the Rio Grande Inn was transformed into a bustling meeting place as van after van pulled up from the Albuquerque airport. The Gathering registration desk never lacked for volunteers, and we thank all those, including Denise Bleakly and Board member Bill Matthews, who welcomed arriving pilgrims. One pleasant offshoot of our enthusiastic lobby crowd was the attention we got from others staying at the hotel who had never heard of the Camino or American Pilgrims on the Camino. A good many of our brochures on the Camino sent to us by the Spanish Tourist Board went to these curious onlookers.

The Friday morning presentation was Daniel De Kay's *Blisters and Other Sore Points: Camino First Aid*. Always a success, Daniel's session drew a large crowd to the Aztec Room, where people could be seen bandaging imaginary blisters and wrapping sprained ankles.

After a lunch buffet held in the Ballroom, two concurrent sessions were offered. Sue Kenney and Luana Duggan spoke with first-time and returning pilgrims about the practicalities of Camino travel. While the take-home point was "pack as light as possible," their message was much wider: *exchange anxiety about what to take with a pilgrim's trust in the Camino*.

Meanwhile in the Aztec Room, Kathy Gower, one of the founders of American Pilgrims, presented a slide show of sacred sites along, and sometimes further off *El Camino de las Estrellas*. Kathy showed us favorite familiar sites, often from a new angle, as well as many other places that hold the mystique of a pre-Camino world. Thanks to Grant Spangler who held Kathy's laptop on high for all to see, in the face of an unforeseen technical glitch. Kathy's presentation was extremely well received, so much so that she showed her slides again on Saturday for those who didn't see enough on Friday. *Look in the announcements at the end of the newsletter for information on another presentation of Kathy's talk with slides in San Francisco*.

Phil Cousineau, documentary filmmaker, world traveler, and author of *The Art of Pilgrimage*, gave a brilliant 2-hour workshop on Friday afternoon, entitled *Transforming Travel into Pilgrimage*. Over 60 people were in Phil's audience. For once, said Phil, he was speaking to a group who didn't need to have pilgrimage defined for them. Phil outlined with stories, video excerpts and slides, his concept of pilgrimage as comprised of seven stages. Later, using crayons and paper, each of us got busy drawing an image of our Camino pilgrimage, applying Phil's stages to our own experience.



Phil Cousineau Photo by Grant Spangler

The other concurrent session on Friday afternoon was offered by Dolly Sanchez de Riviera in the Rio Grande Bar: *Yoga for the Pilgrim*. This was probably a first for the bar. Dolly runs the exercise program at Barelas Community Center in Albuquerque and has been a community leader in Albuquerque for many years. Dolly provided an excellent session, thoroughly enjoyed by all who attended.

There was ample time between the afternoon sessions and dinner for people to rest, mingle, or explore Old Town Albuquerque. Kate Lopez displayed a large number of her lovely Camino watercolors. Kate's paintings provided the illustrations for Elyn Aviva's new book, which was among other books for sale and other items of interest. These tables and the registration desk were constantly looked after by volunteers, of whom Debbie Sanchez stands out for her ready assistance in everything from desk sitting to printing some extra copies of handouts. Thank you to Debbie and all of you who kept the desk and tables in order! Thanks also to those who sold every *last* raffle ticket we had printed! Good job!

Our Friday dinner buffet was held in the Ballroom, which had been beautifully decorated by Rio Grande staff. We put the Gathering's only known clergyman, Arthur Boers, on the spot to say grace, not only on this night but on Saturday as well, and we thank him for graciously agreeing and offering a lovely blessing each night.

After Friday dinner, Jim Eychaner, current chair of the APOC Board, offered welcoming words and kicked off the first stage of our raffle. We pulled tickets for our first evening of prizes, including two beautiful scarves hand crafted by Denise Bleakly. Phil Cousineau, our evening speaker, spoke at length, using his dazzling slides to build on ideas from his afternoon workshop, and showing how, in so many different contexts, from baseball to the Buddhist shrine at Ankhor Wat, the conscious attempt

to ritualize our travel turns it into a pilgrimage and allows us to connect with the essence of the places where we travel. Phil suggested a five-minute morning practice for the traveler, such as read and reflecting on the art, literature, or spiritual expression of the place, to help make this connection.

Our Saturday morning program began with Arthur Boers' excellent talk entitled *Centering and Illuminating Life: Pilgrimage as Focal Practice for Meaning and Wonder*. Arthur teaches pastoral theology and spiritual disciplines at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. One theme of his talk was how modern technological conveniences distract us from the world of nature and the people around us. Arthur shifted our attention to the pilgrim's practice of cultivating focal awareness to connect with the numinous quality that in the everyday world. As Arthur spoke, a slide show ran of his own Camino walk, with wonderful shots of smiling pilgrim faces. One of these pilgrims happened to be the father of someone in the audience, which gave rise to an unexpected and lovely discussion.

After Arthur's talk came Steve Raulston's presentation, *Spiritual Meaning in Church Architecture*. Here we began to focus more specifically on the tangible expressions of the spiritual life on the Camino. Steve showed with great clarity how medieval church design, including iconography such as we see at Fromista, told the story of Christian redemption to instruct and encourage pilgrims journeying to Santiago. Steve teaches medieval Spanish literature at Sewanee: The University of the South and has traveled the Camino eight times since 1981.

The morning concluded with an active session; Dug Corpolongo, founder and leader of the Albuquerque Buddhist Fellowship, provided beginner's instruction in the meditative practice of Tai Chi. This was a very enjoyable session, attended by approximately 80 people, only a few of whom were familiar with Tai Chi. Dug gave us excellent and entertaining instruction as we floated our arms mindfully and walked as gracefully as we could (as if we could feel a speck of dust on the floor) counterclockwise around the Aztec Room. The process reminded us that pilgrimage begins in the body and in the connection of the body with the air and earth.



Basque fellow in the Pyrenees
Photo by Thomas Meredith, Austin, TX

Throughout these sessions in the Aztec Room we were surrounded by the beautifully rich Camino images captured by Thomas Meredith, photojournalist and fellow pilgrim.

After lunch, and another round of raffling, the American Pilgrims' Members Meeting was held. Each of the Board members spoke about their particular area, highlighting special areas of progress in the last year. Three items of note were introduced: the beautiful new American Pilgrims credential; a new initiative, the Camino Grant Program; and recent American Pilgrims donations to Camino support activities in Spain, particularly to the albergue in Fuentes de Salvierra on the Via de la Plata.

Later, we were back in the Aztec Room for a presentation by Tony Cardenas, Professor of Spanish at University of New Mexico. Tony spoke about Alfonso and the Cantigas of Santa Maria, and favored us with several amusing Alfonso, his court and his attitude to the Camino frances.

Tony's talk was complemented by that of Mike Hammer, Professor of Spanish and Coordinator of the Spanish Program at San Francisco State University. Taking as his starting point the medieval pilgrims' positive views of themselves and their pilgrimage, Mike then described some of the negative ways in which medieval pilgrims were seen. These darker images, of pilgrims as sinners and criminals, are found in a number of medieval texts, and provide an intriguing counterpoint to our usual idea of the 'good' or 'virtuous' pilgrim.

Our annual Gathering group photo took place, outside in the late afternoon sun, with flowering trees in the background. Tom Meredith was our photographer, who expertly corralled one hundred rather unruly pilgrims into some semblance of order for shots from eye level and from the balcony above.



For our Saturday banquet, we shared a lovely buffet in the Ballroom. The room was humming with the lively sound of conversation. After dinner, our final raffle event was held, amid much hilarity. The grand prize was free registration to next year's Gathering. The raffle this year raised \$1400, all of which goes to Camino support.

Sue Kenney was our guest speaker on this night. The story of her Camino, lovingly and sensitively told without props or slides, captivated us. Sue's story had a universal quality; she was Everyone, reminding us that the daily experience of any pilgrim on the Camino can be a source of meaning and lasting transformation. Her tale spoke to the trust, openness and willingness to be changed that we can all take to the Camino.



Sunday morning Mass was attended by a few pilgrims next morning, at San Felipe de Neri Church; then two groups set out for a walk with Wanda Roach along the Rio Grande. It was a lovely morning and the walk recalled us to the core act of pilgrimage itself, walking, alone or with companions, on this earth.

On Sunday afternoon, pilgrims began to leave the Rio Grande Inn and gradually our numbers dwindled until the lobby held only those who were going to the Retreat at the Spiritual Renewal Center just outside Albuquerque. This tranquil place, run by Dominican nuns, is located right beside the Rio Grande with the bosque extending away on

the far side. The staff welcomed us so kindly and served us throughout the Retreat with simple and delicious meals. We settled in right away in our single rooms then met for the first of five sessions in the large, comfortable room with tall windows. The Retreat title this year was *Backpack to Escarcela: Reflections on What We Carry*. The *escarcela* was the little purse carried by devout medieval pilgrims to Santiago, often flimsy and short on contents. It was normally left unfastened as an expression of both generosity and vulnerability. In our five group sessions, we explored how we pack, thinking back to Sue Kenney's comments during the Gathering about trusting the Camino. We talked over our relationship to the material things we carry, what kind of goals we carry with us, the burdens of our personal history that we take along, some willingly, some not. Using the two-fold symbolism of the *escarcela*, we explored how to express generosity in our pilgrimage, and our willingness to let ourselves be vulnerable to the lessons of the Camino. All the while, we recalled many ideas we had heard at the Gathering: Arthur's focal practices, Phil's emphasis on ritual, Steve's thoughts on symbolism in the churches. We did a number of exercises such as drawing or bead work, to help us integrate the insights we gleaned from our discussions. On our last night together, we gathered around a bonfire, and we had a wonderful time under the stars, sipping wine (that just happened to be there), and chatting. In the morning, we gave one another hand drawn farewell wishes, and parted reluctantly under the bright New Mexico spring sun.