

# CrossCurrents

*A Catholic Reflects on Faith in Our Times*

# 276 Bernard F. Swain, Ph.D. [www.CrossCurrents.us](http://www.CrossCurrents.us)



## The Long and Winding Road

**One reason Advent is my favorite liturgical season:** the readings, especially the words of John the Baptist quoting Isaiah:

*A voice of one crying out in the desert: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."*

These words now mean more to me, in 2009, than ever before; their depiction of life's spiritual journey now stirs new echoes me -- echoes going back more than 40 years, to my junior year in Paris.

Each class day that year I stole at least one brief moment to slip out onto the sixth floor balcony of our school building to gaze across the street at the Tour Saint Jacques -- the gothic "Tower of Saint James" that remains my personal favorite among all Paris monuments. At the time, I knew nothing of its history, but was nonetheless seduced by its beauty (<http://images.google.com/images?hl=en&um=1&q=photo+%22tour+st+jacques%22&sa=N&start=0&ndsp=18>). I still make a point to visit it whenever I get to Paris.

I got there again this November, but immediately left Paris to spend my first week visiting an old friend in southwest France. He took me to the town of St. Jean Pied-de-Port. This small medieval town at the foot of the Pyrenees owes it centuries-old fame to one thing: it is a major stopping point on "El Camino," or "Le Chemin" -- "The Pathway" pilgrims take on their way to Santiago de Compostela in northwest Spain.

In fact, St. Jean Pied-de-Port is where pilgrims from three different starting points in France converge to rest one last time before beginning the daunting trek over the

mountains into Spain and their eventual destination. The steep cobbled lane leading up to the trailhead is lined with hostels for pilgrims spending their last night in France.

Halfway up the lane, we met the local head of "Les Amis du Chemin de St. Jacques ("Friends of the Pathway of St. James"), the volunteer group that offers support services to pilgrims. Since November is "off season," he had time to fill us in on the story of El Camino.

It turns out some people start the journey in St. Jean Pied-de-Port, while others start as far away as Paris -- 1500 kilometers (1000 miles) from Santiago de Compostela. Some make the pilgrimage on foot, others on bicycle or on horseback, or even by car. But they all have the same destination: the town on Spain's Atlantic coast where, legend holds, Saint James the Apostle (Santiago in Spanish, Saint Jacques in French) began his mission to convert Spain. Later killed by Herod in Palestine, his body (legend also says) was returned to Spain for burial at Compostela. Pilgrims have been tracking to his tomb since the tenth century, some singing this song of the Benedictine monks of abbey of Notre Dame de Belloc (see *CrossCurrents* #275):

*Walk*

*You have a rendezvous*

*Where, with whom?*

*You don't know yet,*

*Perhaps with yourself.*

*Walk*

*Alone, with others*

*But get outside yourself*

*You were fabricating rivals*

*You will find companions*

*You saw enemies everywhere*

*You will make brothers*

*Walk*

*Your head doesn't know*

*Where your feet*

*Are leading your heart.*

The universal symbol of El Camino is the scallop shell: pilgrims arriving at the coast would fashion a scallop shell pendant to certify reaching their destination. Hence the French name for scallops: coquilles St. Jacques! One cannot even order them in France without invoking El Camino.

What amazed me most is that each year El Camino sets new records. In 2008, 25,964 Pilgrims passed through St. Jean Pied-de-Port. In 2009, 26,901.

When registering to certify their trek, some pilgrims cite "religion" as their motive; some cite "spirituality," others "sport" or "tourism" or "culture." Some cite several motives.

For me, it begs this question: "Why is the pilgrim experience so popular—especially in a secular age like ours?" Many other activities, after all, could serve those same motives. Why is it that pilgrimage draws people? Why do growing numbers choose the pilgrim's path?

Perhaps pilgrimage touches on an inner desire much like John the Baptist's -- a desire to make paths straight? Maybe, by completing the trek and conquering its obstacles, pilgrims feel they have filled every valley, made low every mountain and hill, straightened the winding roads, smoothed out the rough ways?

Mulling these thoughts, I had no idea what awaited me back in Paris. But a week later, with an hour to kill, I finally returned to visit my beloved Tour Saint Jacques. Admiring it from a cafe across the street, I noticed a placard posted on the cafe window:

Friends of the Pathway of  
Saint James of Compostela  
Gathering and Sharing  
Information on the Itinerary  
Option of Dinner while Meeting  
Second Friday of each month, 6:30 PM

I asked the waiter if the meetings were large. "They sure are," he replied. "Every month the place is sold out."

Was it mere coincidence these meetings—of the Paris chapter of the same group I had met with in St. Jean—happened across from the Tour Saint Jacques? Was it the same St. James, the Apostle? Did the tower's history touch on El Camino?

"I know nothing about that," my waiter admitted. "Sorry."  
This left me needing to find out for myself.

A short internet search revealed that the tower had once graced the Church of Saint James. When the church was destroyed during the French Revolution, the tower survived. And yes, the church *was* also named after Saint James the Apostle, whose statue projects prominently from one corner atop the tower.

Next day I visited for a closer look, and discovered a plaque on the tower's base -- a plaque I had never seen before, which read as follows :

FROM THIS PLACE  
Where stood the Church of Saint Jacques  
Thousands of pilgrims of all nationalities  
Have departed  
Since the tenth century for the tomb of  
The Apostle Saint James at Compostela.  
To commemorate this history  
M. Albert Chevenac, president of  
The Municipal Council of Paris  
On June 13, 1965  
Unveiled this plaque  
Offered at the initiative of  
The Friends of Saint James of Compostela  
By Spain to the city of Paris.

As I read and photographed the tower and its plaque, I realized two things.

First, I was standing exactly where those pilgrims began (and still begin) their trek -- a trek across France to St. Jean Pied-de-Port and then into Spain. In other words, my week's travels had, with no awareness or intent of my own, brought me to both ends of El Camino's route in France -- even if I did it by train, and even if going the wrong way.

Second, I felt this reflecting my own journey. We are all pilgrims, of course, all on our way to some destination, however distant or vague. My own life is so altered now from the 19-year-old who first fell in love with this Tour Saint Jacques. That year in Paris began changes that led me down many long and winding roads. Yet 40 years later I found myself back before the same tower only to find it was no longer the same. It took returning, from the end of the

pathway to its start, to finally find out not only why this tower moves me, but also why it matters.

From now on I will always see it, not merely as a gorgeous artifact of medieval architecture, but as the place where pilgrims start their journey -- and, in some sense, the place from which I started my own.

Advent reminds us that life is indeed a long and winding road. Our paths are seldom straight smooth or flat, and we may often feel like a voice crying in the wilderness. Yet, sometimes we find our way to a place (or a moment) where the pathway stretches before us clear and bright, with a new beginning at the end -- the beginning we Catholics celebrate as Christmas.

© Bernard F. Swain PhD 2009

***NEW BLOG!*** Your Feedback, Comments and Questions are welcome at <http://swaincrosscurrents.blogspot.com/>

***Dr. Swain's opinions do not represent the views of this parish or any other official body.***

A lifelong layperson, Bernie Swain has devoted more than 35 years to adult spiritual formation in dioceses in the US, Canada, and France. Since 1991 he has had a private practice as trainer, teacher, and consultant to leaders in parishes and other religious organizations.

He holds degrees in political science from Holy Cross & The University of Paris, and in theology from Harvard & The University of Chicago. His writings include *Liberating Leadership* (Harper & Row, 1986) and more than 200 articles in periodicals such as *The National Catholic Reporter*, *Commonweal*, *The Miami Herald*, *The Catholic Free Press*, *The Pilot*, *Harvard Theological Review*, and *Liturgy*.

Visit his website at: <http://www.CrossCurrents.us>

**CrossCurrents** Is a weekly subscription service for parish websites.

Individual Subscriptions are also available. For Information, contact [bfswain@juno.com](mailto:bfswain@juno.com)