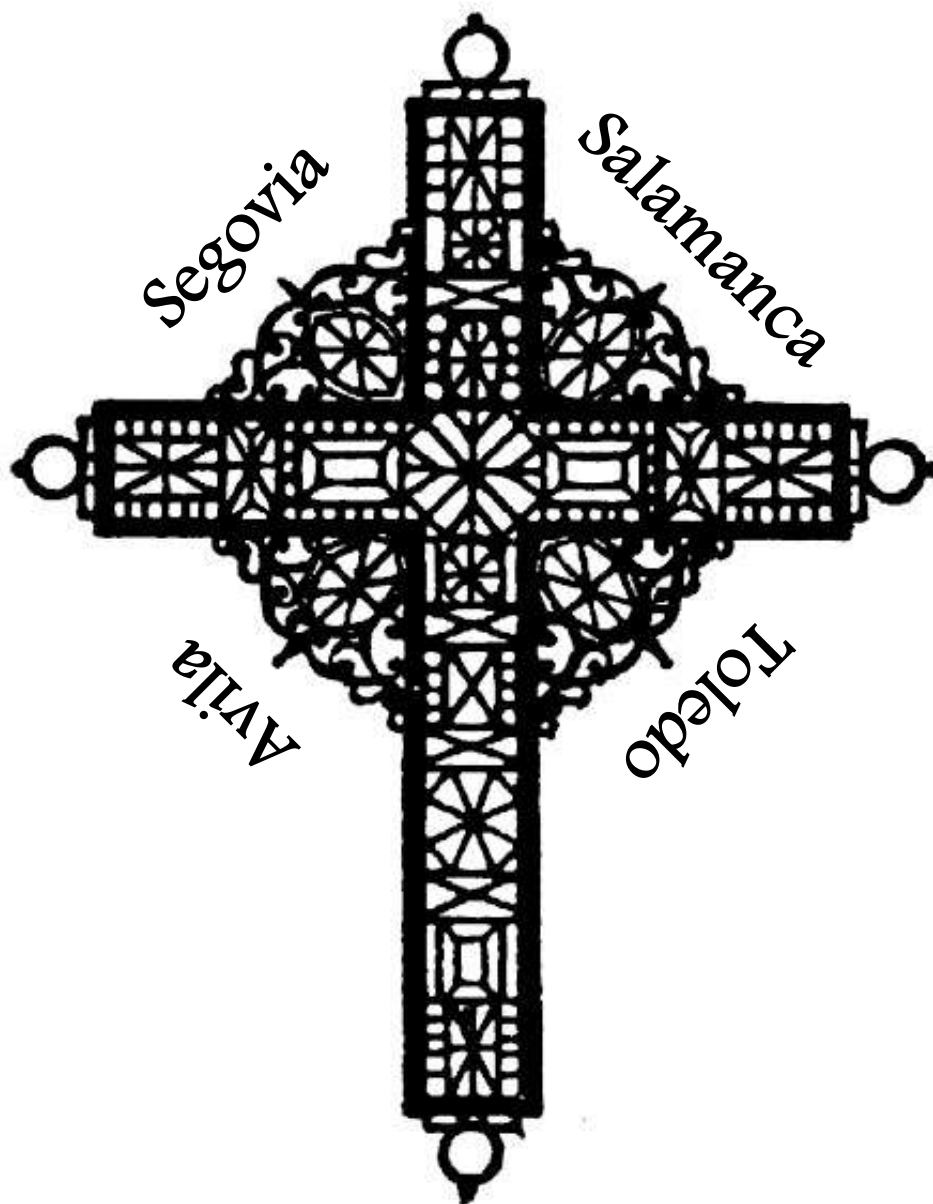




EASTER PILGRIMAGE TO SPAIN
– APRIL 2013 –

Easter Pilgrimage to Spain

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A pilgrimage is a physical, mental and spiritual journey, and we certainly did our share of travelling as we toured some important religious sites in the highlands of central Spain. A pilgrimage is always best shared, and our group of 30 represented at least four Churches in North London, with other friends and relations (whose homes span from Exeter to Canada) meaning we were a diverse band of travellers.

This made Eastertide an appropriate time to go as we got to know each other well in our newly founded community over the week. Of course, we had also hoped April would be a warmer time of year too, but had to make do with the sun and a chilly wind.

Here are just a few of the things we found and learned as we made our pilgrimage around the Iberian Peninsula.

Pilgrimage: the Destination

Where did our journey take us? It took us to the highlands of central Spain, where we flew into Madrid and were certainly exhausted by the time we had worked our way around six different cities in six days. These cities between them demonstrated the full range of Spain's exciting history, and their six different cathedrals (we visited one in each) showed how the religious narrative was tied into the country's political storyline.

Segovia

Our first stop was in the hillside city of Segovia. This was also a good place to begin the historical narrative, as the most imposing building, visible from on approach to the city, is an original Roman aqueduct. Spain was an important province for the Romans, and many Roman élite had a 'second home' here away from the domesticised Italian lifestyle. But once the Romans had taken control from Hannibal and his Carthaginian Empire, the local population adopted many aspects of Roman culture, including their engineering feats and their language (both of which are in evidence today, as we all stammered our way through improvised Spanish in conversation).

Salamanca

Our base for the first half of the week, Salamanca is the Cambridge or Oxford of Spain. Its biggest export is knowledge, both from the historical university founded by the Catholic Church, and from the modern institution. Much of the architecture is still in the Romanesque style with its slender bricks, wide porticos and squat towers, including the impressive Plaza Mayor (with its portraits of kings, queens and other historical figures around the walls) and the old and new cathedrals.

Ciudad Rodrigo

This small city on the Spanish-Portuguese border has often throughout Iberian history been a site of conflict, and the typical city walls were especially evident even today. We were able to walk around the circumference of the city on the walls, and look out across the Spanish and Portuguese plains with the dramatic mountainscapes in the background.

Avila

Again, the walls are the most dramatic feature of the city on approach, the full extent of which is well preserved. The cathedral had typically beautiful features and we were constantly reminded at how unashamed the Spanish Catholic Church was at showing of the splendour and glory of God. The cathedral seemed disappointingly underused when we visited, and the very Spanish quires in the

centre of the church, enclosed on three sides so that only the chapter of the cathedral could use them and watch the Eucharist celebrated at the high altar, are certainly redundant in the modern day.

Toledo

We entered this city across the same bridge used by many an assailant including the Duke of Wellington, and General Franco on his tour of the country; because of the narrow and steep streets, coaches were not allowed in the city centre. Many historical intrigues are preserved in this city, with its royal Gothic chapel and monastery (commissioned by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella) and ornate Gothic cathedral. The cathedral offers Mass daily celebrated according to the Mozarabic Rite, and Rite with striking similarities to the Book of Common Prayer, developed at around the same time, when Spain was under Moorish control and Christianity was practised in a Muslim country.

Also preserved in the city are two old synagogues, later converted into Churches, which are still centres for work in Jewish-Christian relations. We were sorry not to have been in Toledo for the annual procession at Corpus Christi, though we saw the elaborate Gold monstrance used to carry the Blessed Sacrament through the streets and this important religious and civic festival.

Madrid

With its skyscrapers and cityscape, Madrid is very obviously the capital of the modern country, and although we chose to take in some of the important religious art at the Prado rather than see some of the many other sight in the city, we did make a stop in the Anglican cathedral, where the Spanish Episcopal Church (founded in the late nineteenth century by the Church of Ireland) has its headquarters. We were also able to visit the royal residences and monastery at El Escorial, which overlooks the plains and the city, where there are still royal rooms, a boarding school and active monastery.

Spiritual Pilgrimage: History and Sainthood

One of the reasons for choosing this destination was the fact that these places tell the story of a very important time for the Catholic Church in Spain. While the rest of the continent was engaged in controversies surrounding the Reformation, the Political interference and the Spanish Inquisition ensured that Spain remained largely uninvolved in these events. But there was a proliferation of both literary and religious activity, much (though by no means all) of which overlapped. There were thriving monastic orders and an interest in different forms of prayer and mystic discipline.

Worship formed an integral part of our pilgrimage, and we were particularly pleased to have one Mass, on the Feast of the Annunciation, in the church at the top of the Peña de Francia. At 1727m, we reckoned this was probably the highest Mass any of us had ever attended, and the Dominican monastery at the top maintains, amongst other buildings, a beautiful church with a famous statue of a black Madonna behind the high altar – most appropriate for our celebration of the Annunciation.

S Teresa of Avila

Although S Teresa at first sought martyrdom by fighting for the Christian faith in Moorish Africa, she was persuaded to remain in Spain and entered a Carmelite Monastery and became a great practitioner of the mystic method of prayer. She wrote about how she disciplined herself to allow God to speak to her in vivid experiences and visions, and she eventually came to reform the Carmelite order, founding her own branch of Discalced ('Shoeless') Carmelites.

We were pleased to pray in the chapel of the monastery where S Teresa lived, worked and studied in Avila, and to see some of the many relics and artefacts there and in other churches and museums in the city. It was very easy to see where her idea of the soul as an 'interior house' or castle came, when we saw the magnificent walls of the city.



The group of pilgrims in the courtyard of the Monastery of the Incarnation, where S Teresa lived and studied. The numerals on the floor represent the rooms of a castle, which for S Teresa represented a journey of prayer in which the faithful person comes closer into contact with God, who lives at the centre of the house.

S Teresa's hymn, important to her if not written by her herself, *nada te turbe*, became something of a theme tune for the pilgrimage, and we sang it during our worship many times to a well known Taizé tune. The poem speaks of her faith in God despite the difficult times she faced.



*Nada te turbe,
nada te espante,
todo se pasa;
Dios no se muda.
La paciencia
todo lo alcanza;
Quien a Dios tiene,
nada le falta;
Solo Dios basta.*

Let nothing disturb thee,
Nothing affright thee;
All things are passing;
God never changeth;
Patient endurance
Attaineth to all things;
Who God possesseth
In nothing is wanting;
Alone God sufficeth.

S John of the Cross

In her journey of reform, S Teresa enlisted the help of S John. Although her outgoing character was complementary to his quiet and humble manner, he was supportive of her as her confessor and himself suffered at the hands of other Carmelites when he tried to help in the reforms of the male side of the order. His writings are important in the wider corpus of Mediaeval Spanish literature, but also expound his experiences of mystic prayer in some of the most beautiful poetry of the age.

We were able to pray at the tomb of S John in a small church just outside Segovia (next to the Disneyesque castle), a florid display of the Church's reverence for him, which we were not sure

accorded with his teachings on austerity and humility, but was a moving experience for us nonetheless.

S Ildefonso of Toledo

At the cathedral in Toledo we were shown a stone where – so the story goes – S Ildefonso, in recognition of his work in promoting the Catholic faith, received a vision of the Virgin Mary. She was purported to have stood on this stone and given S Ildefonso an embroidered chasuble, and there were certainly some beautiful illustrations in Toledo and in the Prado gallery of the event. The story is at the very least a demonstration of the importance of intercessory prayer and of how religion can very really touch the hearts and lives of people.



Our thanks go to all who made the pilgrimage such an enjoyable, instructive and memorable occasion: to Roy, not only for doing much of the organisation, but also for sharing some of his knowledge of the history of the places and saints we saw with us; to Markus, Juan and the other tour guides and drivers who cared for us while we were in Spain; and to Fr Patrick, Fr Tim, Fr Henry and Fr Bruce who led the worship for us while we were there.