

Dear Friend,

I know you and I have talked some about my experience on the Camino, but I wanted to put down a bit more about my stay at the Marist-run albergue in Sahagun in the hopes that something in my experience might be of use to you in your work with The Marist Way at school. As I told you, those priests are doing it right at the albergue, and it's a wonderful extension of all things Marist. You should definitely go—just take me with you!

The city of Sahagun, Spain, is almost exactly the halfway point on the Camino Frances, and there's a wonderful monument just about 2 kilometers out on the way into town—see picture below. While not being a big city, Sahagun is one of the bigger towns on the Camino, and if I remember right, only Pamplona and Burgos were bigger to that point on my pilgrimage. I was on my 15th day on the Camino as I walked into Sahagun about 2 p.m. after a short day of only 17km. I'd been used to walking 30-35km a day, so I was looking forward to taking a rest day of sorts at the Marist albergue. I knew of the Marist albergue from Fr. Ellerman back in Atlanta sending me a note and from the article on the Marists priest running the albergue in the most recent *Marist Matters*. Also, Father Harhager in Rome had been following my Camino posts on Twitter and had a few days earlier sent me contact information. I didn't normally book my room ahead, but I wanted to be sure not to miss staying with the Marists so I sent a WhatsApp message introducing myself as a Marist teacher from Atlanta. I said I hoped to be there the following night. I got a prompt reply, "Great news! We've booked a bed for you and look forward to meeting you tomorrow. Buen Camino."

By that point in my pilgrimage, including stays in Pamplona and St. Jean Pied du Port before I began my walk, I'd stayed in 17 different albergue/hostels and thus had a good sense of the variety of housing that the Camino offered. Some were very cozy and welcoming, as if I were a guest in someone's home, and others were spartan and perfunctory. What I figured out by then was that the albergues run by religious orders were often the best fit for me because not only did they give some time, space, and structure to spirituality, but they also often had communal meals, which allowed me as a (mostly introverted) solo pilgrim to connect with other like-minded pilgrims. So, being a 20-year veteran teacher of Marist School and a Marist parent, I was looking for that at-home feeling and connection with the Marists and the other pilgrims. The Marist albergue in Sahagun delivered.

In the early afternoon, I walked in the door in my "Marist XC" shirt and stumbled in Spanish, "Hola, mi nombre es Michael. Soy americano y Marista." I was greeted like a friend by Michael (Note: I'm not positive that was his name—I thought I'd put it in my phone, but I can't find it now), a hospitalero from England: "Oh, you're the Marist professor from America! Welcome! We heard you were coming. So glad you made it."



Just outside Sahagun: Monument marking the halfway point of Camino Frances. Just 400K to go!



Outside the Albergue front door

Michael helped me unload my pack and take a seat outside the office as he asked me about my Camino, Marist School in Atlanta, and how I was feeling. There was a sense of bustle and busyness as people were to-ing and fro-ing since the albergue had just opened for the day. Several other pilgrims were unloading their packs in the foyer. But amidst the busyness and jumbled mix of English, French, and Spanish, Michael managed to stop each of the three Marist priests as they passed by to introduce me: "This is Michael. He's the Marist professor from Atlanta." I felt like a V.I.P.

There were a few pilgrims ahead of me to check in and get my sella (official Camino passport stamp), so I sat on the bench outside the small office. Even though I hadn't walked very long that day—most pilgrims walk for 6-8 hours a day and enjoy just sitting. I sure didn't mind. Michael came by again and saw I was still sitting



Sign in foyer

on the bench and motioned to me to get my stuff. He said that he'd already assigned me a room and I could go ahead to the room and check in later.

He gave me a quick tour of the place and pointed out the pilgrims' kitchen, a small chapel, a courtyard that led to a place to wash clothes and hang laundry, and a quiet reading room. Down a long corridor led to a small double room with its own bathroom. My place for the day (I'm guessing since the facility was formerly a monastery this would have been the cell for two monks. I wish I'd asked.) Though the room was very simply appointed, I thought it was amazing. No more overnight snorchestra! No more trying to sleep amongst the cacophony of 30-60 other pilgrims stacked in bunk beds in one big room. My own bathroom and shower! No more standing in line or worrying if there'd still be hot water by the time I got in the shower. A window that opened onto the street—no more stuffiness overnight, or as a German pilgrim and friend of mine called it: "Bad air." I'd been at the Marist albergue for only 15 minutes at the most and already I felt special. This was the best stay so far on my Camino.

Michael explained that at 5 p.m. the Marists had a welcome coffee in the communal room for any pilgrims staying at the albergue and for anyone else who dropped in. After that, there would be Mass at 6:30 followed by a communal meal

around 8 p.m. Pilgrims were encouraged to contribute something to the dinner, which meant that some helped with dinner prep and some brought food to share from the supermarket across the street. (I set the tables, opened wine bottles and filled water glasses, and brought cookies for dessert.) Following dinner, there would be a short prayer service in the chapel and the priests would be available if one wanted to talk.

I followed my usual routine of taking a shower, doing a bit of laundry in the sink, and taking a nap. Though it was a double room and Michael said another pilgrim might share the space, no one ever joined me. So it was glorious having the whole room to myself for the first time on my Camino. I took full advantage and spread my stuff over the two beds, just 'cause I could!

Feeling clean and refreshed, I went back to the front to register and pay for my room. Again, there were a few pilgrims ahead of me, so I sat on the bench and observed other pilgrims arriving and checking in. What I soon saw was that even though I thought I got the VIP treatment, my welcome wasn't much different from the way the other pilgrims were greeted as they entered. It was no surprise to see that Marist hospitality in action.

At 5 p.m., about 12 other pilgrims and I filed into the large multipurpose front room, kind of a living room meets cantina. A long breakfast table was filled with coffee and tea kettles and all sorts of sweet and savory snacks as Father Daniel welcomed everyone and told us to get a drink and something to eat. We then sat together in a circle. When everyone was settled, he asked around the room to see what the lingua franca should be. Thankfully, it was English. Each pilgrim was asked to introduce themselves and say where they were from, where they started the Camino and how far they were going. We had pilgrims from Spain, Alaska, France, China, South Korea, Poland, and England. Father Daniel then explained that we would play an ice-breaker game of sort. He'd spread out a special deck of cards on a nearby table. Each cards had a unique symbol on it, and he asked us to choose a card with a symbol on it that somehow resonated with our Camino.

Everyone went over to the cards pored over the options before choosing a card and sitting back down. Michael the hospitalero started us off by explaining that he chose a tree because like a tree his Camino continues to grow and change with the seasons. In his time as a pilgrim and as a hospitalero, the Camino offers shelter and beauty to himself and to the other pilgrims he meets. We went around the circle sharing our stories. Some were heart-wrenching, such as the young Spanish woman who was walking the Camino in memory of her recently deceased father—a man who loved the Camino but had not again finished the whole way before his death. Others shared stories of just looking for adventure or the chance to get away from the craziness of normal life and enjoy the simplicity of Camino life. Some told stories of overcoming horrible pain and blisters yet remaining determined to make it to Santiago. One older Korean man told a touching story of being moved by the Holy Spirit to come to Spain to visit the important pilgrim stops on the way to Santiago, in particular he was looking forward to visiting the church of the Eucharistic miracle of O'Cebreiro. He spoke in broken English but with such passion and sense of purpose that we were all moved—I know I made note right then to stay

in O’Cebreiro to see what the church and maybe catch a bit of his passion. A young woman from China was the last to go and in a hesitant voice she told about being a Christian missionary in China, a place that’s not often hospitable to religion.

All the pilgrims were strangers to each other but there was an openness of spirit and a shared sense of camaraderie among us. As others spoke, I thought how wonderful it was to have this forum to share. These are stories that we need to tell. We need to say them out loud. We need to be heard.

I chose the card with a symbol of a hand and explained about how I was walking to help raise funds and awareness for Juvenile Arthritis because we first learned our children had arthritis due to the pain in my son’s hand. I also talked about how I was learning on the Camino that life is about being open to give a hand to others in need. To not be too proud to ask for a hand when I needed help. I’m not one to share feelings or intimate details of my life, but I felt safe and open in this setting. I’m also not one to cry, but the Camino was cracking open something in me, and I wasn’t able to finish because I was too emotional to keep speaking. I know I’m not the only pilgrim that was thankful for the catharsis that Pilgrim Coffee provided.



Hanging with the Marist priests in front of the wall map

It was about 6 p.m. when we all had finished, and Father Daniel wrapped up the conversation with a prayer and a reminder that Mass would be at 6:30 for anyone interested. Father Daniel caught my attention and asked if I would be willing to do a reading at Mass. He said that due to the Easter holidays they were celebrating St. Peter Chanel’s feast day at tonight’s mass and he thought it would be nice to have a Marist teacher do one of the readings. Of course, I said yes.

The evening Mass was in a small but beautifully and ornately decorated church connected to the monastery. There were probably 25 people in attendance. That’s slightly a bigger crowd than most of the other pilgrim masses I’d been to—make



Church where we had Pilgrims’ Mass

of that what you will about the state of the Catholic Church in Spain or on the Camino. Those in attendance were a mix of pilgrims, older locals, and a few of the Benedictine sisters who still lived on the site. The service was simple and mostly in Spanish, though I did my reading in English and Father Daniel gave his homily in both Spanish and English. After Mass, Father asked for the pilgrims to come forward and he and the Benedictine abbess came around and asked each pilgrim to choose small piece of paper with a Pilgrim’s prayer in their native language. They went around to each pilgrim one-by-one and laid hands on each for a blessing. Once again, I felt special. We all did.

Spaniards like to eat late and by the time we gathered for dinner it was close to 8:30, which is actually very early for most Spaniards, We had 16 pilgrims and 3 priests seated around a long table. We had a blessing and then we feasted. The food was plentiful and eclectic, based on what others had brought or prepared. We had various cheeses and cured meats, a few quiches, a casserole, home fries, baked carrots and broccoli, a salad, and, of course, bread and some wonderful Spanish red wine. For dessert, the typical cup of yogurt. The variety of food and constant passing of dishes made for an active and happy dinner. Some were speaking in English, some in Spanish, some in French and some in Korean, but we all left the table with smiles and full bellies.

Everyone helped to clear the tables, wrap up the leftovers, and do the dishes. Father Daniel said he'd talk a bit about the Marists and their work at albergue for those who wanted to stick around to learn more after cleaning up.

Father Daniel told a bit about how he'd walked the Camino himself and about how the Marists took over the operation of the albergue in the early spring of 2018 with the goal of offering a place of rest and refuge for Camino pilgrims. He also spoke about the Marist order and how he hoped the albergue was a way for the Marists to put their values in action and serve the pilgrims as Mary would. He then asked each of us to get a pin and put it on our hometown on the large wall map of the world. Ringed around the map



Relaxing after dinner

were pictures of pilgrims in front of the cathedral in Santiago, and he told us all that he hoped we'd take our our blessings from Marist albergue with us to Santiago and like the pilgrims before us send back a picture when we got there so they could add us to the wall.

By this time, it was a few minutes past 10 p.m. which is the normal lights-out time for most albergues. The priests were headed to the chapel, but most pilgrims, like me, headed to bed so we could rest, recharge, and do it all again.

I slept great and woke up before dawn so I could catch the always-beautiful Spanish sunrise as I headed west. The Spanish aren't big on breakfast, but the room where we'd had our Pilgrims' Coffee was spread out with a wide variety of serve-yourself breakfast options. The breakfast was "donativo," which in Camino lingo means leave as much money as you see as fair. Three other pilgrims were there before me eating and looking over their phones or guidebooks planning their days. I had some coffee and toast with jam made from the bread leftover from dinner and talked quietly about cycling with a Pilgrim who was biking his way west on the Camino.

I rose to go and put some money in the donativo tin and I thought about what a wonderful stay this had been. I felt welcomed when I arrived, and now I felt recharged as I was leaving. The Marist albergue had been good for my body, my mind, and my spirit and soul. I shouldered my pack and gave a quiet "Buen Camino!" to the others in the room and started to head out, I thought to myself, "These guys are doing it right. I can't wait to tell the other Marists and people back home about it."



Si quieres contactar con nosotros para contarnos tu experiencia en el Camino o si deseas colaborar como hospitalero, puedes hacerlo en esta dirección de correo:

If you want to contact us to tell us your experience in the Camino or if you want to volunteer with us write to this email:

Alberguesantacruzahagun@gmail.com

Website: www.alberguesensahagun.es

Para cualquier emergencia / *Emergency number:*

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My stay at the Marist albergue was only maybe a bit over 16 hours in total, but the memory of that place and my visit will stay with me forever. It was absolutely one of the best experiences on my Camino, but in a way that is just so Marist. Nothing was ostentatious or dramatic; instead it was simple, kind, and humble. I know the Marists are relatively new to the Camino and that Marists aim to be "hidden and unknown," but I also know that word travels quickly on the Camino, and because these Marists do such a great job this albergue will not be hidden and unknown for long. The Camino, and the world, need more places like the Marist albergue.