

DOMENICO SCIALLA



# Walking towards the Ocean



Domenico Scialla

# WALKING TOWARDS THE OCEAN

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*With immense affection to Gabriella,  
great friend and travel companion*

*Many of the facts recounted here 'really' happened;  
others, however, are the fruit of my imagination*

*“Go and follow your rhythm,  
without ever detaching from it.  
This is the right thing,  
in my humble opinion!”*

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1.

«It was the devil», says Father Xavier, turning to me, after a few moments spent in silence staring at the window. «He always tries to spoil good things, just like your Path to the Atlantic Ocean, Richardo.»

I remember that tree with a demonic shape I saw between Saint Jean Pied de Port and the Orisson refuge: even if for a short time, it had upset me.

Father Xavier sits next to me, takes my hands in his, and continues: «He is envious. Envious of that enthusiasm, of that faith that, even if I dare to call it secular, I read in your eyes and in Stefania's when you arrived here in Roncesvalles some time ago. I remember well, it was your second day on the Way. Ah! Stefania, Stefania, that poor and unfortunate girl, who knows where she is now; until a few days ago you were together and now...». He gets up and goes back to the window. «Now more than ever, your faith is the only way to overcome these terrible moments, son.»

He sighs while keeping a humble and loving gaze towards me. «Embrace her intensely and hold her close to you, it is the only thing you can do now; I hope with all my soul that peace and serenity will flourish in you.»

We hear footsteps in the next room and Father Xavier, opening a small wooden door, peeps out and calls Ahim, who joins us after a few seconds. He asks me and the Arab boy to have a few minutes of meditation with him, and then kneels at the feet of the Holy Virgin. He hears the song of the shepherds who go to the cave in the magical night and begins to pray: «Holy Virgin help our lives...». Slowly the tone of his voice is lowered until it turns into silence. Alas, on the other hand, he hears the call of the Muezzin and kneels towards Mecca, with his face on the ground and his arms forward; he recites some verses of the Koran in Arabic, among which I discern only the word *Allah* and, little by little, his voice also fades. I take the yoga position of the lotus by breathing deeply and, by pronouncing the Om, I soon feel enveloped in a feeling of well-being; I see myself floating in the Universe among a thousand colors and a harp sings a celestial melody, in which I recognize Albinoni's *Adagio*.



Thus I perceive the embrace of Life and I recite some verses written by me a few years ago: «And now that the shadows in the soul are thinning out, a serene Light makes room in me and I live.» And I am quiet too.

A sky dotted with stars has recently replaced a sunny and splendid day in mid-October, when I take leave of Father Xavier. I have to admit that our meeting made me feel better and gave me some peace. I take a tour, then sit on a bench in the square adjacent to the pilgrim's hostel, where I will sleep tonight, and then leave for Rome in the morning.

I remember the afternoon when Stefania and I, for me St, arrived here and, in particular, the Spaniard from Seville, met at the Orisson refuge the previous day, together with a group of French people, a Dutchman with his wife and a Belgian girl, the only one whose name I remember: Marin. Right in this square, the Spaniard called us aloud «Italians!» and smiled saying that he had already arrived a long time ago; then he showed us his blistered feet. We chatted about the first two days of the Way and he invited us to participate in the pilgrim function, indicating the place where it would take place shortly thereafter. We had already heard of it, it is renowned among walkers, but only he knew how to instill in us curiosity and desire such as to induce us to take part in it.

I stare at the sky for a moment, then I sigh and take my mobile phone from my backpack in which I have the photos and notes of the Way to the Ocean with St. I start to consult them and relive every moment.

## 2.

### *Together towards the Ocean*

Full of curiosity and eager for nature, St and I arrive at Saint Jean Pied de Port, by bus from Bayonne, coinciding with the tgv from Paris Montparnasse. Many gather here to start the Way to the Atlantic Ocean on foot or by bicycle. The path is quite simple, almost within everyone's reach. This Way, a UNESCO heritage site, although it was born in ancient times as a religious pilgrimage, has long been undertaken by most people out of simple curiosity, for sport, for the love of nature, for cultural reasons and, who knows, also for reasons known only by the unconscious. Many people decide to walk it all or in part, in one or more times and someone repeats it over time. There are those who do it alone - a strong experience from a meditative point of view - but the ideal would be to walk in two, maximum in three. You can always join others when you feel like it and detach from them at any time, without feeling connected to anyone. The bus stops in a parking lot not far from a medieval gate. We enter the town together with the other passengers, as if we were part of the same group and then, gradually, we split between the streets. St reads, in front of the houses and taverns, the prices of rooms and dinner menus, almost always written with colored chalk on slates. Usually you stay in rooms in private houses or *albergues*, they are the cheapest solutions. The *albergue* are hostels, there are private and municipal ones, the latter usually have only dormitories. In medium-sized centers and in cities such as Pamplona, the capital of Navarre, Burgos, León and in the capital of Galicia, Santiago, there are also *hostales* and *pensiones*, ie modest hotels, and even luxury hotels. We knock on one of these houses and a middle-aged guy opens the door, then smiling and inviting us to follow him, tells us in French: «Welcome. I was waiting for you and your room is ready».

We are surprised, he probably behaves like this with everyone, but we like his behaviour. The house extends over three small floors, which are accessed by a wooden spiral staircase that starts from the entrance: on the first floor there is the master apartment, on the second there are the guest rooms and on the third a living room and a breakfast room. The owner writes down our names in a notebook saying: «In order to get to Roncesvalles you have two alternatives: the valley-bottom route and the mountain route. The first route is

less tiring, but also more monotonous; the other is more challenging, especially the first eight kilometers to the Orisson refuge, but it is the most beautiful. You go up to about 1400 meters and you can admire breathtaking views, in some places you may still find some snow».

«I really think we'll opt for the mountain route, what do you think, Rich?»

«Ok St, you have to grasp all the beauty around us.»

«Wise decision. You could arrive in two days, stopping at the refuge; even if it were full, they will always find a place to sleep there, if anything you would sleep together with thirty other people, on the ground» he smiles «but this is also the Way, fantastic and adventurous. The next morning you could then travel the other seventeen kilometers to Roncesvalles.»

### 3.

At breakfast, two oriental girls prepare us biscuits with jam and pour hot milk for us; we cut some fresh fruit for them. We can only communicate with gestures and big smiles.

Before leaving, I stumble and risk falling down the ladder but St, who is behind me, luckily manages to hold me by the backpack. And after the narrow escape, the owner puts the *sello* on our credentials, to certify the beginning of this wonderful experience; he then takes two large shells from a bag, symbol of the Way, ties them tightly to our backpacks and, placing one hand on my shoulder and the other on St's, he wishes us: «¡Buen camino!». From this moment we will hear this exclamation many more times. A strong emotion pervades our soul and immediately we set out.

Having decided to go slow, St and I are often alone: many join us, almost always exchange a few words with us, pass us and in a few minutes disappear on the horizon.

We meet two Italians, the younger one has fuchsia glasses that certainly don't go unnoticed.

«Is it still good?!» With Glasses tells us in a joking tone, repeating a phrase from St.

St smiles at him.

«Where do you come from?» Without Glasses asks us.

«Me from Sicily, he from Campania» replies St.

«We are from Tuscany and I'm taking this brat to Salvation» continues With Glasses, laughing and staring at Without Glasses.

«Let's hope so, then» I intervene.

«Assuming we get to Santiago, given his age» With Glasses says, patting his companion.

«You laugh! For sure it wasn't me to do one year in the gym to prepare for this Way» defends himself Without Glasses.

All four of us burst into a loud laugh, then the two funny guys go on greeting us in unison.

It is a really stressful period for me, due to the gallbladder surgery that I will have to undergo shortly and above all because of the mobbing I have been undergoing for some time at Lacondary s.r.l., the farm for which I work; in fact they want to force me to resign, because for them I am a dry branch - I am resisting long and hard, I have no alternative to get away from here; but I

hope to find a solution as soon as possible: another job, a lottery win or that the books I have written will soon be successful-. This unique experience may be good for me. St suggests that I detach myself from my life and live only this situation.

It is cold and the weather is not good at all when we get to Orisson. It just stopped drizzling. While we consume our lunch, ham and rusks with honey, we evaluate whether to continue to Roncesvalles or stop and start again in the morning. A courteous and charming walker in her fifties warned us that from here it will take about five hours to walk and, apart from a fountain and a lot of beautiful nature, we won't find anything. It is almost three in the afternoon and, considering the clouds and our pace, which will take us at least six hours, we decide to leave tomorrow with more tranquility.

Dinner is served in a stone dining room with a large dark wooden table in the center, surrounded by others of the same type for four people. At the back, in a large extinct fireplace, a copper pot hangs; coins are placed on the ledges and recesses of the walls, while the white ceiling is lined with beams of the same wood as the tables. I feel like I've gone back in time. The owner tells us that we can sit at one of the small tables or, if we want, the large one, together with other walkers.

The idea of meeting other people who have the same experience fascinates us, so St and I take our seats, facing each other, at the large table. On my left is the Spaniard from Seville, on my right Marin, the Dutchman with his wife, and the French who occupy the rest of the table. The latter, retired workers and old friends, enliven the evening with folk songs, some of which we also know in Italian. They would like me and St to sing *Bella ciao*, but they can't convince us, even though we like this popular song. They intend to walk a little bit each year until they complete it. The Spaniard dedicates the Way to his daughter and hopes to arrive to Santo Domingo de la Calzada in about fifteen days. We plan to walk for about a week and then continue by train or bus to Finisterre. Marin, like the Spaniard, travels the Way alone and hopes to arrive to Compostela in about a month. An understanding immediately blossoms between her and me, and we exchange e-mails with the promise to meet again both in Italy and in Belgium. We do not understand anything about the Dutchman and his wife, not even why they are here.

We soon return to our room: a laundry room, with washing machine, ironing table, clothes to be ironed, and two folding cots leaning against the wall; this is the only way to sleep here tonight. St falls asleep in a jiffy, while I start

thinking about Marin, how beautiful she is in body and soul, then I take my phone and listen to her voice which I recorded without her knowledge.

“I live with my sister for a maximum of six months a year, the time to work a little, in a house inherited from an aunt, then I wander around the world. I love people, nature and everything around me. Eh eh, I am a butterfly. I have occasional activities, earning just enough for a modest but emotional life. You think I am a wanderer, don't you?”

“No, I don't think so at all, in fact I appreciate you very much; I'm almost like that too!” my voice answers her.

“Well, you're at a good point, but it's that ‘almost’ that's not good, ha ha!”

“You're right, Marin, you're right.”

“You are ‘almost’ on the right path, you don't look so bad. Where I live they consider me a wanderer, no good. But I don't care. I could care less! I do what I want and go straight on my way.”

“You are right, you have to do it, but not everyone is capable of it.”

“Unfortunately, there are still many people who are scandalized by the fact that I live my life in this way, thinking of everything rather than finding a serious job and starting a family but I don't care. Many fail to understand that I am happy and much more than them. It is so annoying when they tell you that you do this because you don't want to take your responsibilities and that you want to do things that are no longer done at your age, because everything has to be done in its time. I am convinced that most of those who speak in this way do not really take their responsibilities, living the opposite of how they would like, because they do not have the courage to face the judgment of others and risks such as running out of a penny or the fear to stay alone. But when is it that you are truly alone, if not when you ignore your soul? Who determines and how do you decide when to take responsibility and what is the right time to do something? I think they are relative concepts: only by listening to the voice of one's soul, we do the right things for ourselves. Suppose someone like me takes on the responsibilities of a steady job and a family, can you imagine what would happen, what would I lose? What sadness, really what sadness!”

St and I wake up for a few moments at dawn and, before going back to sleep, we notice that the sky is cloudless and full of stars, and it's quite hot.

After breakfast, not knowing if we will see each other again, we warmly say goodbye to the Spaniard and Dutch, and set off.

Nature expresses itself magically: the valleys, the vegetation, the birdsong, a few pieces of snow still not melted, the hum of insects, the scent brought by a sweet and fresh spring breeze. From time to time some eaglets fly over us, while we observe worms that, tied together, form long sticks similar to licorice. The songs of some walkers added to it; as they get closer to us they become more and more defined until they fade to the horizon; these are songs of joy and of all kinds, from *Albachiara* to *My way*, from *La vie en rose* to *Time*, in Arabic, French, English, Spanish and in other languages incomprehensible to us. In this paradise, however, I am also afraid from time to time, imagining large birds swooping down towards us and poisonous snakes crawling at our feet. I talk about it with St who minimizes by making fun of me: «They are quirks, Rich. And what male human being doesn't have at least a couple?».

In the distance we see, standing under a tree, three girls dressed in white who, with great passion, chant in English: «Let's go, let's go, let's walk along the streets of existence, towards Puchiluchio, to reach you!».

Not everyone respects those who walk these paths, whatever the reasons: some religious sing very loudly, in a coarse way, with an attitude that seems to say “here there must be only me and those like me, your motivations do not count, mine instead take me far”. Maybe in heaven, who knows. We comment on these unbecoming behaviors in English with a French marathoner and a group of Swiss hikers; we agree that the only solution, to prevent this atmosphere of peace and brotherhood from being disturbed, is to keep them far enough away: St and I stop and let them go on, the others go on quickly in order to leave them behind. Among the hikers there is also a blind person: we only became aware of his condition when he took some sheets written in Braille from his backpack and started reading with his fingers. We were struck by his autonomy, especially when he continued, hand in hand, with his girlfriend: he seemed to lead her.

We have been walking for a while when the Spaniard reaches us; he smiles, looks at us for a few seconds with his powerful gaze and then goes on. We feel him very close, especially St, and we believe he is really a special person.

Marin, on the other hand, joins us at the point where we need to take a path to continue. We have been standing here for a while and we just can't find any signs that indicate the Way: a yellow arrow, sometimes a red and white stripe. Marin points to one right in front of our eyes, but we haven't noticed. We burst out laughing because sometimes the apparently more complex things are actually the simplest, we have them at hand but we don't see them, distracted

by other things. In this circumstance the other is probably also the paradise that surrounds us and the horses that, not far from us, gallop free in the meadows. Marin approaches one of them and caresses it, hugs it, whispers words in French. Seeing how naturally and sweetly this girl does it, St and me too want to imitate her.

We keep walking together. My gaze still meets Marin's, with great complicity, just as it happened at the refuge. We smile at each other, slowly my hand starts to caress her hair and then for a while we remain hand in hand.

We part at the fountain: she resumes her pace, while we, instead, stop: St wants to treat the blister that has sprung up under her right foot a few hours ago. She washes her hands carefully and sits down; she starts dabbing the *blister* with cotton wool soaked in iodine, then disinfects a cotton thread tied to a needle. She pierces one end of the blister by letting some semitransparent liquid escape and pushes the needle until it comes out from the opposite end. I shudder to witness this scene, although I know that there is no pain, since the skin is dead. A little bird alights not far from us and begins to observe St carefully. My travel companion detaches the needle from the thread and ties the two ends to keep it from slipping off; she smiles and tells the little bird that that thread must remain like this for a while, until the blister has dried. Two walkers, a boy and a man in his seventies, both from Carpi, ask St for permission to take photos of her to document that operation and she doesn't feel like saying no; I have a lot of fun observing the scene, under her threatening gazes. While they are tinkering with their mobile phones, we realize that the elderly man has an inscription on his backpack.

*The World Cup will start shortly. I will put the earplugs not to hear the commentary. Football is too corrupt and we have never had an Italy, let alone in sport. The unification was an excuse for the Piedmontese to commit a great robbery in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and one of the most heinous genocides in history.*

St and I stare at each other for a moment, then the two greet us, they set off and the voice of Angelo Magliacano of TerroMnia resounds in me singing *La Tammurriata del Povero Brigante*:

*Mother of heaven, earth and sea,  
a stranger dressed in red appears to me.  
These are glorious and pure lands,  
people die, old and young.*



*What are they looking for, who called them?  
They are false, other than brothers!  
They come from outside, they command the rescue  
Without knowing that they throw us into the pit.*

We sit for a few more minutes in silence and then St covers with sterile gauze what she has cured; she puts on her socks and shoes again, and stands up. The bird soars into flight just as we take off for Roncesvalles.

#### 4.

Just a little more from the beginning of the pilgrim function. Those present are absorbed in their thoughts; a faint smell of incense hangs in the air and a silence full of respect reigns. I see the Spaniard, the group of French and Marin. From a wooden door to my left, four priests dressed in white enter singing, until they reach the altar. One of them is Father Xavier whom we met a little while ago on the street. We exchanged a few words and he asked me for the Facebook contact.

A badly dressed old man throws himself on the ground and yells in English: «Thank God, thank you for all you've done for me!». The priests remain silent for a few moments, then one of them resumes the celebration. The old man gets up and takes his place not far from the Spaniard. In the end, the blessing is granted in different languages to all those present who, during the service, have increased little by little, to fill the entire church.

## 5.

Before resuming the Way, a group of boys, with unreliable faces, with a «*peregrinos*» laden with contempt, attracts our attention. They tell us to continue in a direction that we immediately realize is opposite to that indicated by the signs. We consider annoyed that they are just idiots and continue along the right path.

On the other hand, the indications of a farmer who, having stopped the tractor with which he has recently left his cottage, suggest the direction to take with an outstretched arm.

We walk along the pretty little houses for a few minutes and then take a country path that continues among tall trees with a thin and greenish trunk. From time to time some rudimentary wooden gates interrupt the path, but they open easily.

A guy in his sixties joins us and tells us that he reached Lourdes by motorbike from Brescia and started the Way from Saint Jean. He carries an eighteen-pound backpack, ours together don't exceed twenty, and he complains about his wife who forced him into useless stuff, but seems relieved when we suggest to ship something back. He intends to complete the Way in twenty days. He claims to be a sportsman and his physique, his pace, and his way of holding trekking poles confirm this.

In Zubiri we take a tour of the center to look for accommodation and we immediately realize that it is a town, larger than the towns we have crossed previously, and it is not difficult to find large shops, banks, vending machines for drinks, cigarettes and DVDs.

For dinner we stop at the Dux, a nice restaurant-pub; a big screen at the entrance shows a football match and many fans cheer for a great action that has just ended. A girl comes to meet us and asks us if we want to have dinner or something at the bar. She then takes us to the back room. There are some tables set for four and one for ten, where the guy from Brescia sits with nine other walkers we've never met before. We are sorry we cannot join them, but we still manage to have a chat before taking a seat at our table.

Strolling, while we are crossing a small square, we are met by a guy who is a little excited, perhaps he is drunk or perhaps he is not right in his head; he has a compact disc in his hand and, staring at it from time to time, claims to be the local CD player.

We smile at him amused and continue to see a worker from Berlin, known in Roncesvalles, further on. Alone and thoughtful he is leaning against a low wall. We exchange some impressions about the day, then we say goodbye and we go to our hotel.

Lying on my back, staring at the ceiling, I think of Marin; we haven't met her all day and I worry I won't see her again until Finisterre.

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