

Charades and A Matthew Experience on the Portuguese Camino

We were weary and out of water when we arrived in the tiny village of Mala at one thirty in the afternoon. We had already hiked eleven miles on the Portuguese Camino since leaving Coimbra. We were eager to shed our heavy backpacks for an orange or banana and a coffee for lunch in a café that, according to our guidebook, should be near this intersection, but we didn't see a café from this junction.

Peter approached three women to ask for directions to the café, but none spoke English. When it eventually became clear that the café was closed, Peter showed them his empty water bottle. They immediately understood our predicament. One woman indicated we should follow her across the street to the Catholic Church where she reached through the wrought iron gate and unlatched it. She motioned us into the courtyard and pointed to a water spigot and hose. I filled my bottle and drank it dry, and filled it again, and drank half of that before topping it off. Holy Water! Who knows the next time there will be water or food before we get to our destination in Mealhada 3.5 miles from here?

With full water bottles, we closed the gate behind us. We crossed the street to where the three women had resumed their conversation. The only word in Portuguese I know is "Obrigado" and I used it repeatedly to thank those three ladies. So did Peter, who resumed the hike, but the women were talking to me. It seemed that they were upset that Peter had departed. I was baffled.

"No Portuguese," I said apologetically with upturned palms. "Only English." This resulted in them talking louder, practically shouting at me and Peter, who by now was on down the road. Unable to convey their message in words, they used arms and hands in wild gestures. They waved two hands toward their faces as if fanning themselves. They pointed to the road behind them as if to indicate that we were

heading in the wrong direction. They moved their hands up and down as if dribbling a basketball. None of this made sense to me.

I shouted ahead to Peter. “They seem to be annoyed with us. I don’t know why.” I turned to them again, brought my palms together in a prayerful pose of thanks and bowed, intending to show gratitude. I “obrigado-ed” them, turned, and walked away, feeling terribly rude. They yelled after me, but I kept walking, not knowing what else to do.

Not even a minute later, a small gray car zoomed past me and pulled off the road beside Peter. I saw the driver motion for Peter to come near. Out of the driver’s window came a serving platter with two espressos, several packages of sugar, two boxes of milk, and two packs of cookies. This banquet was served by two smiling Portuguese women who were speaking the universal language of hospitality. “Obrigado, obrigado, obrigado,” I said over and over but those words seemed insufficient, so before I considered whether I was authorized to do so, I blessed the driver and the passenger with the sign of the cross. I hoped the message of this gesture was unmistakable.

The saints drove away. Peter and I crossed the street where a column of bricks served as a surface where we could place our tiny plastic cups. We unshouldered our backpacks and stood there sipping espresso, marveling at what had just happened.

Just then, the meaning of those wild gestures came to me: The handwaving in front of the face meant, “Come back. Don’t leave.” The basketball dribbling meant “Stay here. Wait. Be patient.” The pointing in the opposite direction meant “Someone is bringing you refreshments from that direction.”

There we stood, reveling in this heaven-sent hospitality when a man with a small boy in his arms appeared on the balcony of the house whose

fence we were using as a café table. Peter smiled and waved to the boy, who was too shy to wave back, despite the man's encouragement.

We finished our espressos, stowed the extra cookies and boxes of milk, and hoisted our backpacks to resume The Camino. Just as we were walking away, a woman rushed out of the house and met us at the gate where she offered a plate filled with slices of home-made sweet bread. We each took a slice and "Obrigado-ed" several times. She pushed the plate toward us repetitively without speaking a word of English, insisting that we each take at least one more slice before leaving.

Thirty minutes earlier we had arrived in Mala, tired, hungry and thirsty. We leave Mala fully hydrated and sated. Those bodily sensations will persist for only a few hours, but our memory of this generosity will stay with us for the rest of our lives, especially when we recall Matthew 25:35: "For I was hungry and you have me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you took me in."

Why do I hurry past the beggars and homeless, even those who plead at church doors?

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