

Emmaüs – A centre for pilgrim hospitality on the Camino de Santiago

As a former *Camino* pilgrim I have often been struck that, while plenty of places provided accommodation and physical sustenance along the way, rather few offered spiritual sustenance – spiritual conversation if you like. This is all the more surprising since, as I believe, many if not most pilgrims are ‘seekers’ of some sort or another, even if they are not religious in any conventional sense.



So, with a view to offering spiritual hospitality to passing pilgrims, last year (2014) my wife, Carol, and I bought a property in the village of Arthez de Béarn, in SW France. This village lies on the *Camino* path from Le Puy en Velay, the busiest of the routes that pass through France. The house itself is at the far end of the village with the *Camino* going right past the front gate before heading into the woods a few hundred metres further on. It sits at the top of a ridge with open views to the north and glimpses of the Pyrenees to the south. I estimate that between May and September 50-100 pilgrims walk past our front gate each day.

In the meantime I have been gathering a group of interested people together to form a weekly or fortnightly relay over the *Camino* season, staying in the house and offering coffee and conversation with passing pilgrims – not to mention shelter (from the sun or the rain) in the large front garden. In due course we hope that this venture can be integrated with the local parish. The parish priest seems keen to do so, but with more than seventeen churches in his care he is extremely busy and so it all may take a little time.



Our little centre is called *Emmaüs* (notice the French spelling), a name that is inspired by Caravaggio's painting in the National Gallery. You will see, from the shell that one of the travellers is wearing, that Caravaggio imagined him to be St James – though of course there is no scriptural confirmation of this.

Emmaüs ‘opened’ at the beginning of May this year (2015). ‘Opened’ means that we have a large tent



in the garden where passing pilgrims can shelter, have a coffee or eat their lunch, or just sit and talk or pray in the little ‘chapel’ at the back of the tent (see photo). We also have a short prayer service each morning, but so far this has not been very popular and perhaps in the future needs to be replaced by some evening event in the village itself. So all this is work in progress; we are still finding our way.