

that one of their party fired at him first) picked them off at distances of 40 to 70 yards away, betraying the fact that he had some military training. (He was in the U.S. Army.) People who argue that this incident shows that the Hmong have no respect for human life do not realize that Mr. Vang comes from a place where revenge killing and genocide against the Hmong people by the communist Pathet Lao were almost everyday occurrences. Regard for the lives of strangers is probably not on the top of the list of Hmong values, but ensuring the survival of oneself and one's family is.

St. Paul Mayor Randy Kelly has spent taxpayer dollars to travel to Hmong camps in Thailand to ask more Hmong to come to his city. Now, it is clear that more Hmong immigration will have costs that are not merely fiscal (more spending on social services and schools during tight times). Of course, the human cost was ignored when it involved Hmong killing one another in gang and domestic violence. Now that the violence has spilled over, people are finally asking why they should tolerate it. They should go to their church leaders who celebrate "diversity," their business leaders looking for cheap labor and docile employees, and their politicians seeking more tax revenue. They are the ones who have conducted social-engineering experiments on the Hmong as though they were lab rats. Get the answers from them.

*Sean Scallon is a reporter who lives in Arkansaw, Wisconsin.*

## Letter From Spain

by Michael McMahon

### Saints and Pilgrims



Marie's walk was an act of prayer for her brother, who had leukemia. Alessandro had recently endured a divorce and was walking to find peace. Klaus was taking time out to decide what to do with his life after losing his job. Sharon and Chris were on the Spanish leg of a three-month tour of Europe. Pierrot and Helene, in their late 60's, were making the pilgrimage to Compostela for the fourth time, because they loved it. And me? I was on the Camino de Santiago because I had been asked.

In the summer of 2003, the idea of walking the ancient pilgrims' way to the shrine of St. James the Great had presented itself to me three times in as many weeks—too often, I felt, to be accounted for by mere coincidence. The first providential prod came at a campsite in the French Pyrenees, when, in return for a small act of kindness, a stranger had given me a book about the Camino. I had long known that people still traveled the thousand-year-old network of footpaths to the tomb of the Apostle in northwestern Spain, and that knowledge had pleased my old-fashioned devotional temperament. I read and enjoyed the book, and it occurred to me that maybe one day I

might make the pilgrimage, too.

Back in England a few days later, I met in the street an ex-colleague whom I hadn't seen for a decade. "What have you been up to for the last ten years?" I asked him. "Quite a lot," he replied. "But one of the most interesting things I have done has been in the last ten weeks: I cycled to Compostela and back." The hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

The following week, I was staying at the Chateau de Plassac, north of Bordeaux. After dinner on my last night there, my host and I took our brandy glasses and cigars on a moonlit stumble around the estate. He pointed out many interesting details of the house and grounds, told me a little of its history, and concluded the tour at a small late-medieval tower with an arch under it. "And this," he said, "is the Tour des Pelerins."

"What pilgrims, Audoin?" I asked. "Why, the pilgrims of St. Jacques de Compostelle, of course!" he replied. "You are standing on the *chemin* at this very moment!" I resolved then and there to make the pilgrimage.

Eleven months later, I was sitting down to a predawn breakfast in the refuge in St. Jean Pied de Port, on the French side of the Pyrenees, listening to a little speech given to the gathered pilgrims by the laughter-creased, croaky-voiced, rolling-gaited "mère des pelerins."

"It would be madness to attempt the mountain route into Spain," announced Jeannine. "You must follow the main road. On the high path, there is snow, ice, and fog; you will get lost."

Well, she was right on all counts—but in my case, not in that order. I got lost before I even got out of town and ended up committed to the mountain route by mistake. There was indeed snow and ice; and the fog got so thick that, after a while, I couldn't see the signs that marked the path—or very much else, for that matter. My guidebook told me that the critical point of the journey (which should in no circumstances be undertaken in adverse weather conditions) was the cairn marking where the camino left the track and headed off over the grass. Miss it, I read, and you have had it.

Had I missed it already? If I hadn't, how would I be able to spot it in the fog? These two questions were quickly subsumed in a third: If Providence had put me on the pilgrimage in the first place, was it really likely to abandon me on the first day? A little gust of cold wind brought the answer. The fog swirled for



Michael McMahon

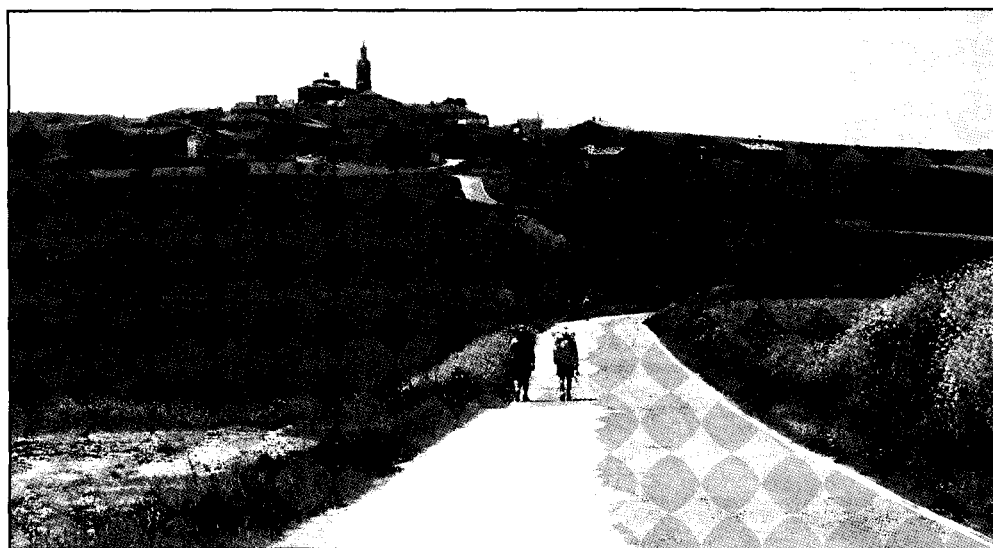
Michael McMahon (left) with Luigi, a pilgrim from Rome.

a moment, and I found myself in a 20-yard pocket of visibility. At the other side of it, a dozen or so people were standing at the foot of a fingerpost set by a pile of stones, listening to instructions addressed to them by a man who was obviously a guide. They were all wearing winter mountain clothing, including gloves, heavy waterproofs, and balaclavas. In my straw hat and lightweight walking trousers, I had been feeling cold all morning; now, I also felt foolish. As I walked over to the waymarker, the group set off along a path that appeared through the mist. The sign said "Camino de Santiago."

I followed that sign and signs like it for 500 miles over the next three-and-a-half weeks. All sorts of things went wrong, of course, and I had to put up with a fair amount of pain. But somehow, the suffering didn't seem to matter. Pilgrims quickly learn to accept it, and, once accepted, it becomes insignificant. Yes, there were times when my blisters were so bad that each step felt like putting a bare foot on red-hot shards of glass, and when the tips of my toes felt as if matches were being struck on them. My back and (more) my neck ached under the weight of my rucksack pretty constantly, and my shirt was always wet through with sweat. And yet, all these discomforts were not merely diminished but displaced by the pilgrim's most immediate reward: an irrepressible sense of Joy.

There are many human explanations for the happiness that pilgrims experience. Grace, as the Angelic Doctor says, works through Nature. Walking balances the activity of the brain and the body, establishing a rhythm that generates a sense of peace. Stepping aside from the cares and routines of everyday life liberates the spirit and allows a sensation of detachment. Discovering that one can cover great distances carrying a heavy pack inspires self-confidence and promotes a sense of achievement. Even when added together, however, these pleasures do not amount to Joy, which (as C.S. Lewis found to his Surprise) is a thoroughly transcendent experience. To the Christian, to know Joy is to know one is in the presence of God. I had set off with the idea that I was in some way walking to Him but quickly realized that He was with me on the road.

Many of the pilgrims I met told me that they felt the same. Maurice, a retired schoolmaster from near Dublin, told me that the word that summed up for him the sense of God's guiding and protecting



*Pilgrims on the Camino in Navarre.*

presence on the camino was *held*—and when he extended his joined and cupped hands to express the idea, his three companions nodded, saying they knew exactly what he meant. Stuart and Pamela, from Melbourne, told me in Santiago that they had thought through what had been remarkable about their walk and had concluded that it was that they had spent a month of their lives living in the present—and in the Presence. Luigi, from Rome, told me that he was inexpressibly grateful to God for the love that He had shown him on every day of his pilgrimage. The most dramatic expression of it had been after a problem with his bank-card had left him without cash for over a week. Fellow pilgrims, *hospitaleros*, and complete strangers had overwhelmed him with their generosity, buying him meals, paying for his accommodation, and giving him cash.

I received many kindnesses myself. When my knee became so swollen that I could hardly walk, a pilgrim gave me his fancy telescopic walking stick ("Keep it! It's the spirit of the camino!") and another gave me a roadside physio session without which I wouldn't have been able to carry on. When I limped into the monastery of San Juan de Ortega, a French woman saw my difficulties and sent her husband off to fetch her medical kit. "Take your boots off!" she said, announcing herself to be a chiropodist. She lanced and dressed my blisters and then disappeared with a smile and a wave. An old man hobbled after me in Villafranca, took me by the arm and led me back to a turning that I had missed half a mile earlier. When I got to Melide, I was so tired that I couldn't see a sign for accommodation for looking, and I asked a stranger if he knew of anywhere

I might stay. It turned out that he was a German pilgrim, and he told me that he had found a wonderful—and wonderfully cheap—little hotel in a back street on the other side of town. "But it is too difficult to explain how to find it," he said. So he took me there. In San Miguel del Camino, I rested on a bench outside the house of a man who had put out a box of biscuits under a sign saying "Help yourself, pilgrim!" Beside it was a little pile of handwritten cards. I have one before me now: "May the Apostle grant you all your wishes." It is signed "Agapito" and dated "27-05-04."

Buoyed up by so much good will and encouragement, I finally reached Santiago on June 3, as the cathedral bells were clanging, clattering, and clanking for six o'clock Mass. I showed my credential at the pilgrims' bureau and was issued a signed and sealed certificate announcing "*Dnum. Michaellem McMahon hoc sacratissimum Templum pietatis causa devote visitasse.*" I entered the cathedral by the Puerta Santa, which was open, for I had made my pilgrimage during a Jacobean Holy Year. When I queued to pray before the casket that is said to contain the Saint's mortal remains, I was not troubled by the thought that it might not: Either way, I had walked my way close to a man who, 2,000 years ago, had walked with Our Savior. And, when I climbed the stairs to give the great silvered and gilded statue of the Apostle the customary embrace, I heard myself address it and him in a single, spontaneous word that formed itself without the intervention of thought: "Thanks."

*Michael McMahon writes from Norfolk, England.*

by David A. Hartman

# Diagnosing the Diminishing Dollar

Holding a green piece of paper decorated with patriotic symbols as a proxy for economic value is an act of faith. To do so with the currency of your own country is a necessary act of faith, since daily life requires it in order to make economic transactions. But to hold sizable amounts of the currency, or the currency-denominated assets, of a *foreign* country is carrying faith beyond any warrant provided by human experience. History clearly reveals that the eventual debasement of currency is as predictable as night following day. Why, then, are our foreign-trade partners so eager to hold huge hoards of U.S. greenbacks?

A survey of the current economic landscape abounds with evidence of the debasement of the dollar. Gold, the hedge of last resort for financial liquidity, has returned to its former price of \$450 per ounce. Oil prices that hovered around \$20 per barrel in the 1990's have more than doubled, while housing prices are growing at double-digit rates.

The typical American homeowner is attempting to profit from this debasement by borrowing as much as mortgage lenders will lend to buy the largest home that he can(not) afford. Household debt as a percentage of Gross National Product has continually set records for the past two decades. When interest levels return to normal and join soaring energy costs, these households will have a painful financial hangover from their current libations.

The federal deficit (now approaching \$400 billion per year) is the principal source of the dollars that fuel the inflation of the price of commodities and other real assets. Financed primarily by foreigners and foreign central banks, with the balance bought by the Federal Reserve Banks, the deficit roughly correlates to the international current-account deficit generated by the negative balance of trade in goods.

The excessive growth of the money supply since the mid-90's has driven after-tax and risk-adjusted interest rates to negative real returns on fixed-rate investments. Stock-market returns, augmented by foreign earnings restated in depreciated dollars, and outsourcing of goods and services to cheaper foreign suppliers—

plus the valuation of earnings at unrealistically low interest rates—barely support otherwise unjustifiable common-stock prices. Both stocks and bonds provide unattractive real returns to U.S. investors, discouraging savings and encouraging excessive investment in cheap imports and an overpriced residential-housing market paid for with unsustainably cheap mortgage debt.

The Bush administration has been playing a game of chicken with our foreign competitors by devaluing the dollar as much as possible in an attempt to close the trade deficit. The European Union and, to some extent, Japan have allowed the relative appreciation of their currencies, but the remainder of the Asian countries have kept their currencies pegged to the dollar. The United States has been their most profitable market, providing the lowered costs that go along with access to the world's largest homogenous market—the only principal market that offers them relief from border-adjusted value-added taxes. U.S. manufacturers' exports are likewise priced out of foreign markets by those countries' value-added taxes, with no compensating relief offered by the U.S. Tax Code.

As the dollar depreciates, the rising prices of raw materials are soon followed by cost-of-living increases in wages and salaries, and that is on top of the cost-push of lower operating rates. So the devaluation of the dollar has had the effect of a dog chasing its tail. Compared with a basket of seven major currencies, the dollar has declined an average of 15 percent—and all to no avail; an equal decline is predicted during 2005. As the *Wall Street Journal* recently observed:

[T]he Bush Treasury, and perhaps Mr. Bush himself, seem to have fallen for the notion that a country can devalue its way to prosperity. . . . Britain tried this in the 1970's, and had to call in Margaret Thatcher to save the country from sinking to Third World status. The Carter administration also tried talking down the dollar and ended up inspiring a global run on U.S. assets.



*BusinessWeek* asks, in the same vein:

Will trade imbalances topple the greenback? . . . [F]or more than a decade the global economy has become more dependent on foreign capital to finance its (U.S.) demand. . . . Foreign money now finances three-fourths of U.S. net investment.

Neither of these astute observers, however, diagnoses the real source of the problem and, thus, cannot offer a remedy.

The declining dollar is the product of three deficits: The federal deficit, the difference between excessive federal spending and ill-advised tax cuts; the personal-savings deficit, characterized by "consume today, and worry about tomorrow later"; and the manufacturing trade deficit, which clearly indicates the desperate need to level the taxation playing field for our disappearing manufacturing sector. Ideological internationalists without concern for their nation, multinational corporations who profit from the hollowing out of the U.S. economy, and economists who do not understand the power of price mechanisms have used the media to mislead the public regarding the source of the problem and its obvious solution: border-adjusted (consumption-based) tax reform.

A country that manipulates her own currency to demean it as a store of value for the wealth of her citizens and as a respected medium of exchange; that borrows to encourage consumption at the expense of savings for investment (to be billed to future generations); and that provides foreign competitors with tax advantages that are insurmountable for her national industries' survival is not being governed in the interests of her citizens.