



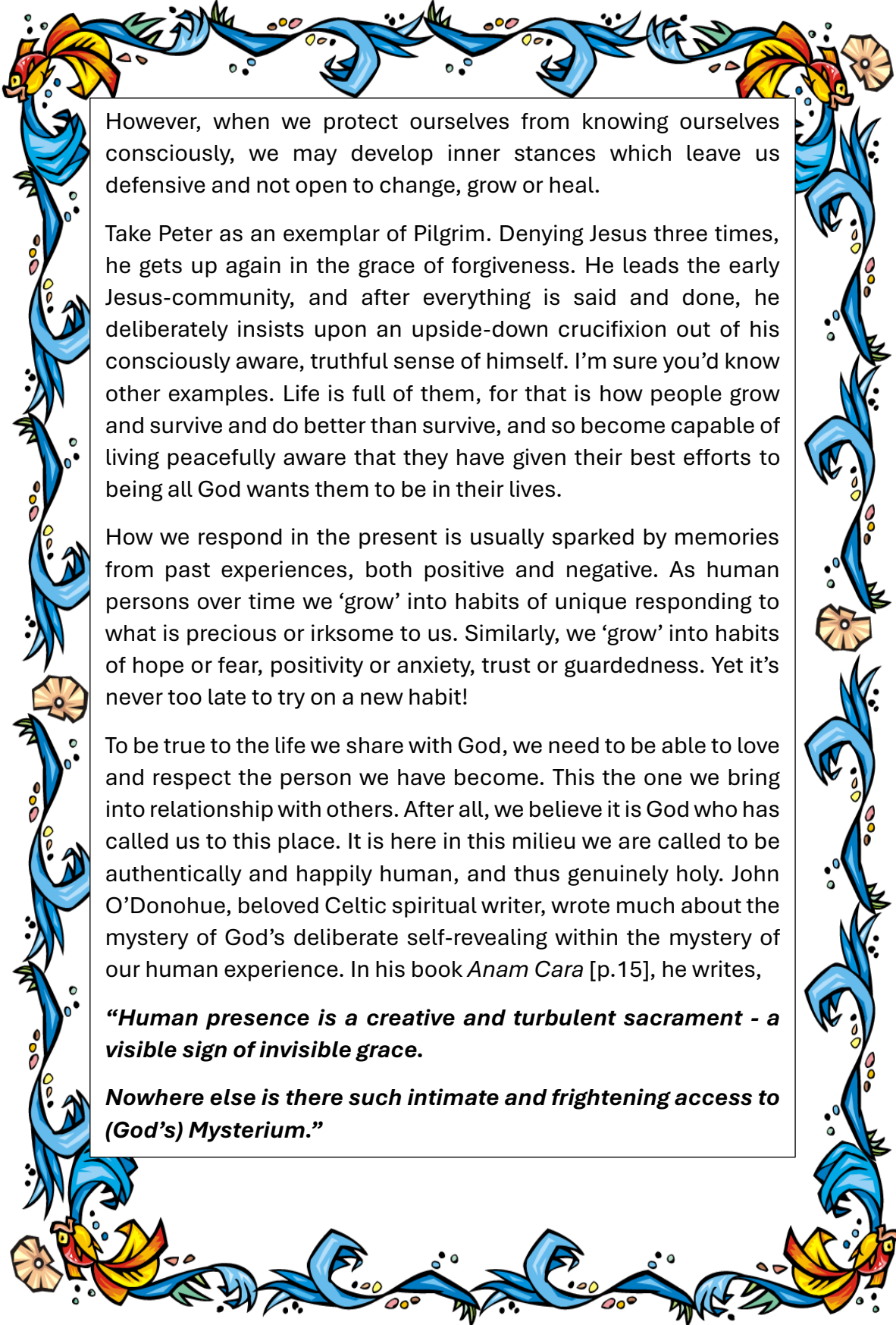
## Pilgrims with Presence

*[Italicised texts: Optional pause points for personal reflection, contemplative dialogue and praying]*

On Renewal in 2012 at All Hallows, Dublin, I met younger students among whom was a lad I'll call 'Rory' for he had what could only be described as a 'blaze' of russet-coloured hair. Often it was pulled back in a 'pony-tail'. One weekend with their chaplain, these students went on a pilgrimage to Auschwitz-Birkenau, it being relatively simple to fly from Ireland to Poland and back in one weekend! Upon their return I attended a post-pilgrimage reflection they hosted.

Not surprisingly, there were many moving reflections. Within the former Concentration Camp lay pieces of memorabilia such as large containers of reading glasses and shoes. The sight of these brought most pilgrims 'undone', but not Rory. Back at the College after others had shared, he confessed he had deliberately resisted the emotional reactions of others. He owned that he wasn't going to feel pushed into responding in ways he sensed others seemed to be expecting of him. This ended abruptly, however, when he came upon a vat of human hair, composed mainly of pony-tails. There and then, he could not help but break into tears.

Those who have experienced the Spanish Camino pilgrimage say they come to realise that life itself is a pilgrimage and we are all pilgrims. We trek from experience to experience, making or missing meanings. We deepen our faith sometimes, we make life-companions sometimes, and we discover our identity better when we find ourselves able to acknowledge our gifts and vulnerabilities. We usually discover also that we can rise from challenges, because we find we have an inner urge driving us to get up again after set-backs.



However, when we protect ourselves from knowing ourselves consciously, we may develop inner stances which leave us defensive and not open to change, grow or heal.

Take Peter as an exemplar of Pilgrim. Denying Jesus three times, he gets up again in the grace of forgiveness. He leads the early Jesus-community, and after everything is said and done, he deliberately insists upon an upside-down crucifixion out of his consciously aware, truthful sense of himself. I'm sure you'd know other examples. Life is full of them, for that is how people grow and survive and do better than survive, and so become capable of living peacefully aware that they have given their best efforts to being all God wants them to be in their lives.

How we respond in the present is usually sparked by memories from past experiences, both positive and negative. As human persons over time we 'grow' into habits of unique responding to what is precious or irksome to us. Similarly, we 'grow' into habits of hope or fear, positivity or anxiety, trust or guardedness. Yet it's never too late to try on a new habit!

To be true to the life we share with God, we need to be able to love and respect the person we have become. This the one we bring into relationship with others. After all, we believe it is God who has called us to this place. It is here in this milieu we are called to be authentically and happily human, and thus genuinely holy. John O'Donohue, beloved Celtic spiritual writer, wrote much about the mystery of God's deliberate self-revealing within the mystery of our human experience. In his book *Anam Cara* [p.15], he writes,

***"Human presence is a creative and turbulent sacrament - a visible sign of invisible grace.***

***Nowhere else is there such intimate and frightening access to (God's) Mysterium."***

***Possibilities for personal reflection, contemplative dialogue and prayer:***

- *Consider the story of Rory, the words of John O'Donoghue and other thoughts above.*
- *Share your responses with others in a couple of rounds of contemplative – dialogue, allowing others to share without response. In a third round you might choose to name how others' sharing has affected you.*
- *You might conclude, each with a simple intercessory Prayer in the light of what has been raised among you.*



***A personal option for later.***

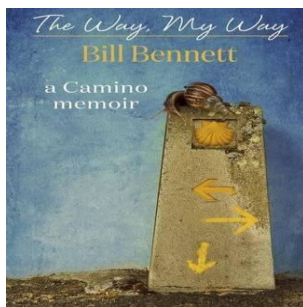
*Along the Way of the Camino there is a Cruz de Ferro [Iron Cross]. Here some pilgrims choose to ritualise a 'moving on' from something not life-giving in themselves they have become conscious of in their journey. They place a rock near the Iron Cross signifying their intent to 'leave this behind'*

*Perhaps you could offer each other some suggestions on some action in the same spirit, perhaps in association with the Sacraments of Anointing and / or Reconciliation.*

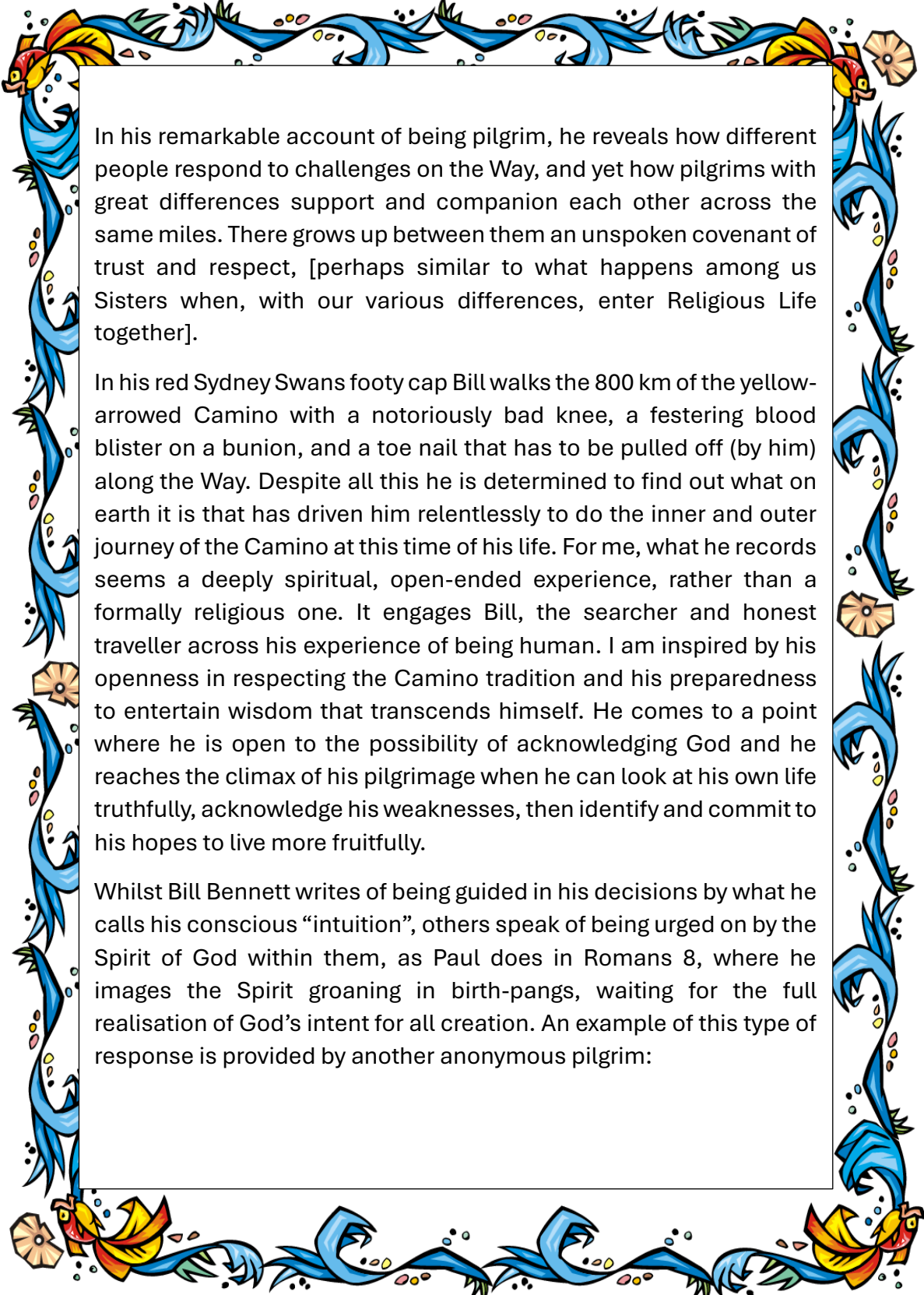
***An Invitation to pause for those who wish to go even further:***

- *Recall the judgement that befell a grieving Lindy Chamberlain in 1980, when she was judged, condemned and jailed because she was deemed not to have responded to the disappearance of her child as others would have.*
- *When are you aware that you respond in ways unique to yourself, different from others?*
- *Were you accepted positively at these times, or were you judged adversely for not fitting a stereotype?*
- *In your own self-awareness, to what are you resistant, and do you have any sense of why?*
- *How have you tended to treat others who respond differently from you?*

Before concluding, I want to mention some thoughts by a couple of Camino de Santiago pilgrims. Firstly, I'll comment on a recent film I've seen and follow-up book I've read, both titled "The Way / My Way". They feature the Australian Bill Bennett who is writer, actor, film producer and director of the whole project.



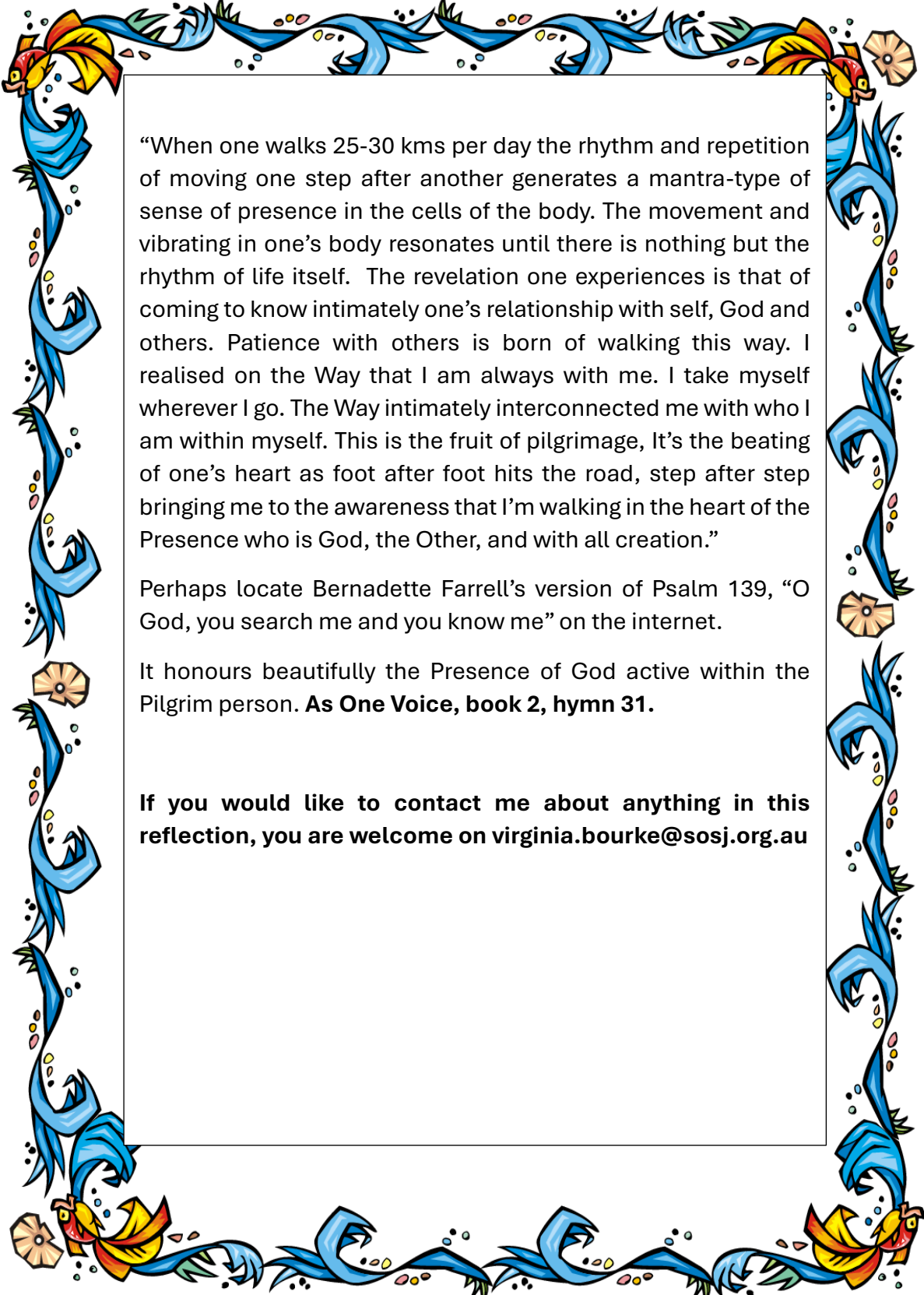




In his remarkable account of being pilgrim, he reveals how different people respond to challenges on the Way, and yet how pilgrims with great differences support and companion each other across the same miles. There grows up between them an unspoken covenant of trust and respect, [perhaps similar to what happens among us Sisters when, with our various differences, enter Religious Life together].

In his red Sydney Swans footy cap Bill walks the 800 km of the yellow-arrowed Camino with a notoriously bad knee, a festering blood blister on a bunion, and a toe nail that has to be pulled off (by him) along the Way. Despite all this he is determined to find out what on earth it is that has driven him relentlessly to do the inner and outer journey of the Camino at this time of his life. For me, what he records seems a deeply spiritual, open-ended experience, rather than a formally religious one. It engages Bill, the searcher and honest traveller across his experience of being human. I am inspired by his openness in respecting the Camino tradition and his preparedness to entertain wisdom that transcends himself. He comes to a point where he is open to the possibility of acknowledging God and he reaches the climax of his pilgrimage when he can look at his own life truthfully, acknowledge his weaknesses, then identify and commit to his hopes to live more fruitfully.

Whilst Bill Bennett writes of being guided in his decisions by what he calls his conscious “intuition”, others speak of being urged on by the Spirit of God within them, as Paul does in Romans 8, where he images the Spirit groaning in birth-pangs, waiting for the full realisation of God’s intent for all creation. An example of this type of response is provided by another anonymous pilgrim:



“When one walks 25-30 kms per day the rhythm and repetition of moving one step after another generates a mantra-type of sense of presence in the cells of the body. The movement and vibrating in one’s body resonates until there is nothing but the rhythm of life itself. The revelation one experiences is that of coming to know intimately one’s relationship with self, God and others. Patience with others is born of walking this way. I realised on the Way that I am always with me. I take myself wherever I go. The Way intimately interconnected me with who I am within myself. This is the fruit of pilgrimage, It’s the beating of one’s heart as foot after foot hits the road, step after step bringing me to the awareness that I’m walking in the heart of the Presence who is God, the Other, and with all creation.”

Perhaps locate Bernadette Farrell’s version of Psalm 139, “O God, you search me and you know me” on the internet.

It honours beautifully the Presence of God active within the Pilgrim person. **As One Voice, book 2, hymn 31.**

**If you would like to contact me about anything in this reflection, you are welcome on [virginia.bourke@sosj.org.au](mailto:virginia.bourke@sosj.org.au)**