

@Álvaro's Way

Thousands Follow One Teen's Pilgrimages

BY JUNNO AROCHO ESTEVES
OSV News

In 2020, young Álvaro Calvente couldn't contain his excitement. At 15, the disabled teen from Málaga, Spain, was ready to embark on a parish pilgrimage along 60 miles of the Camino to Santiago de Compostela, the famed pilgrim's path that leads to the tomb of one of the twelve apostles, St. James the Great.

Each year, he would look forward to the annual youth pilgrimages with his parents, Ildefonso and Raquel. By then, they had already gone on "four pilgrimages, and we always took Álvaro."

"Álvaro is very spiritual; he's always ready and happy about anything related to the Church," his father told OSV News in a July 3 phone interview.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 put a hold on all travel. Dismayed but not disheartened, the teen wasn't going to let a pandemic stop him. During the lockdown, Calvente went on daily walks that he used to "train in the afternoons in case we could go (on a pilgrimage)."

With travel restrictions easing up later in the year, pilgrimage plans resumed. However, people started falling sick, and the pilgrimage was suspended again.

Nevertheless, "Álvaro was already set on going; he was unstoppable," his father said.

Calvente spoke with a friend from his parish, Francisco (Paco) Millán, the bus driver for the then-suspended pilgrimage, and asked if he could accompany them to



(OSV News photo/courtesy Ildefonso Calvente)

Álvaro Calvente kisses the tomb of St. James the Great at the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, June 19, 2024. Along with his father, Ildefonso, the 19-year-old teen with an intellectual disability has walked to the shrine four times since 2020. That first pilgrimage is pictured above on his account.

Santiago de Compostela.

"He said, 'If it's for Álvaro, I'll go anywhere.' So we went," Calvente told OSV News.

The day before they were set to leave, Calvente's brother-in-law, Antonio Moreno, a journalist and spokesman for the Diocese of Málaga, had an idea.

"And he told me, 'Why don't you post updates on Twitter for the parish youth? Since they can't go, they can at least follow along,'" Calvente said. "I didn't understand all that, but he said, 'Well, I'll do it for you.'"

A greeting from Álvaro, as well as moments from a blessing they received from their parish priest, were posted to Twitter, and within two hours, the account racked up more than 700 followers.

With that, Álvaro, Ildefonso and Paco started on their

journey, not realizing that the pilgrimage was about to go viral on Catholic Twitter. "We offered the journey for the young people of the parish and the pandemic, which was happening at that moment," Calvente said. "Everything was guided by God; we just provided the legs."

That first pilgrimage started the ball rolling on social media. Currently, over 4,000 people follow @CaminodeAlvaro ("Álvaro's Way") on X (formerly Twitter).

But nothing prepared them for the news regarding one of Álvaro's most well-known followers: Pope Francis.

During that pilgrimage, "we received a call from the Vatican (informing us) that the pope was following Álvaro; his personal secretary called us!" Calvente said. He had the

secretary's email and would often send the pope well-wishes on behalf of Álvaro and his family for Easter, his birthday, and Christmas. Little did he know that the secretary would show Pope Francis his messages.

"You can't imagine what that meant to us," he said.

That same year, Pope Francis sent a letter to Álvaro. "Thank you, Álvaro, for being inspired to walk and inviting many others to walk with you," the pope wrote in the letter signed July 21, 2020.

"You went on pilgrimage and made many people go on pilgrimage, encouraging them not to be afraid and to recover their joy because, on the road, we never go alone. The Lord always walks beside us. Thank you for your testimony and prayers," he wrote.



YOUNG OBSERVER

The letter, Calvente told OSV News, was framed and hung prominently in their home.

Álvaro's pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela has now become an annual tradition. Calvente told OSV News he is amazed at the attention the yearly pilgrimage receives, not just online but from people along the road to Santiago de Compostela.

Embarking on their fourth pilgrimage to the shrine, this time joined by his wife, Raquel, Calvente recalled that "in every town we passed through," he said, "the bells would ring, the mayors would come out to greet us, and the whole town would be in the streets."

On their first stop at the Royal Monastery of Santa Maria de Guadalupe in Cáceres, Spain, the family was welcomed by Archbishop Francisco Cerro Chaves of Toledo.

Upon meeting the Spanish prelate, Calvente said, "Álvaro gave him a blessing which the archbishop allowed."

"I must say we're no one, nor are we important, yet God moves things for Álvaro. Even talking to an archbishop; it's not like I call him and meet him. But (God) moves everything; it's like: 'Álvaro wants to see the archbishop. Well, come on, you go see the archbishop.'"

The family hopes to go on a pilgrimage to Rome and finally meet Pope Francis. Calvente told OSV News that a private meeting was scheduled for the spring. However, "it was postponed due to the war and other issues."

"Well then, if God wants, we can do it next year. Let's see what can be done," he said.

Aurora CCHS Runner Sets National Record

PHILADELPHIA—"Records are meant to be broken" read the boys 800-meter banner at the finish line of the New Balance Nationals — a banner Aurora Central senior Patrick Hilby crossed just 1:47.55 minutes later, breaking this year's record for fastest high school time in the country.

Hilby's record at the nationals, held June 13-16, was his last hurrah as an Aurora Central Catholic High School Charger.

His time also set new records as the fastest high school time in Illinois history, and 6th fastest in US history.

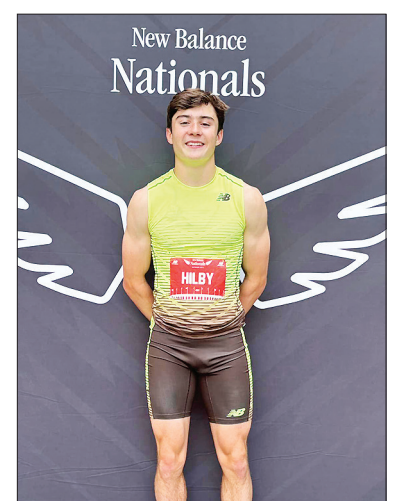
Hundreds in the Aurora CCHS community congratulated Hilby on his victory on social media and wished him well at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "Congratulations Patrick and best of luck at Wisconsin — go Badgers!"

—Information provided by Allan F. Benson and Aurora Central Catholic High School.



(Photos provided/Aurora Central Catholic High School)

Patrick Hilby nears the finish line, moments from setting a national record for the 800-meter.



Hilby poses at a New Balance Nationals sign during the June 13-16 weekend in Philadelphia.