

An Excerpt from *From Glory to Glory: A Pilgrim's Notes From the Badlands of Grace* by Patrick Hannon, CSC (One Subject Press, 2025)

It was around noon on Tuesday, October 8—an overcast day with intermittent bursts of “sunbreaks” as we Oregonians like to call them. A storm had recently passed and everything around us was dappled in rainwater. My sisters Sally, Margaret and Julie, and Sally’s husband David and I were making our way down a somewhat dangerous path, having spent an hour or so visiting the hilltop Palácio da Pena, a medieval castle-turned-monastery-turned-tourist-destination tucked into the Sintra Mountains of southern Portugal. On a clear day you can see Lisbon twenty miles away. Getting there by foot was easy: we simply followed the paved road cars and buses take to get to the top, but one of us (okay, it was me) suggested we take what looked to be a shortcut back down, one that might cut our travel time in half. I had seen a few tourists taking the path earlier and made a mental note of it. The others hemmed and hawed a bit (“Let’s just go down the way we came up?” “You can’t really see where the path is going, right?” “I can’t make it out on my phone map...”) but eventually my sibs came around to my way of thinking, and we were off. It was a path, I realized perhaps five minutes into our trek downward, in only the broadest sense of the word: if you looked hard enough you could see ground—jagged, slippery, loose-rocked ground; the occasional scrap of litter that hinted of a human presence at some point in the recent past; you would occasionally come upon a slight clearing which revealed a fork in the path—which meant you had to stop and decide which path to take. (“Why don’t we just go back up?” “I think we should go left.” “I think we should go right.” “Downward, ho!”) We ran into a Polish family—a mom and dad and two small kids—who were making their way back to the top. “We got lost!” the man said, as they hurried past us. They appeared relieved to have found civilization. Another group followed us for awhile but decided to turn back. We were on our own.

I figured as long as we continued going *down* we would eventually reach some outskirts road of Sintra, whose downtown district in the far distance kept coming in and out of view beyond the tall pine, oak, and laurel trees that surrounded us. So we zigged and we zagged, stopped a few times to scratch our heads and for my sibs to shoot a subtly accusing glance my way. What turned out to be the last hundred or so yards of the path were beyond treacherous. They were nigh impassable: No guardrails, of course; thick tree branches blocking our way; steep steps of wet rock which required each of us to help someone else successfully plant their feet on something that resembled solid ground. One slip and you would surely go tumbling down and get seriously injured. If we spoke at all, it was to mostly cheerlead. (“You can do it!” “Wooooah, that was close!” “Way to go!” “Whose idea was it to go this way?”) But we made it.

For the hiker who may have been tempted to *ascend* the hill by way of the trail we had just *descended*, a rusty, graffitied sign would have dissuaded all but the most thrill-seeking of them to begin the climb. “*Perigo—Danger*” it proclaimed in large block letters. Next to it was a

universal symbol denoting said danger which, frankly, I couldn't decipher, but it looked ominous.

In retrospect that first hike my sibs and I took in Portugal, down the scrubby and heavily wooded slope of that steep Sintra hill, was a kind of tutorial for successfully navigating the Camino de Santiago de Compostela on which we were in a few days ready to embark, and a helpful lesson in pilgrimaging in general. Spiritual journeys—the ones we take to the center of our wounded hearts and the ones we lace up our boots and strap on our backpacks for—require a kind of daring that borders on the reckless. For such journeys ask of us to spelunk into dark caverns, to jump—like the Quebrada cliff divers of Acapulco—into choppy waters, to set off for the badlands where grace and beauty and truth and, yes, redemption are hiding in plain sight. It means to trust that whatever sweat and tears (born of laughter and loss) we shed along the way will have softened us (and toughened us but in a good way) and made us more human, which is, we know, the first and perhaps most important vocation any of us are called to live out.