

Pilgriming and Post-modernism: Connecting with the Camino Within

What is it about the Camino de Santiago that has attracted so many people in recent years? In 1985 when Paolo Coehlio walked the Camino, only 400 pilgrims per year arrived in Santiago. Now, the number is over 400 per day and rising. In part, we have Pope John Paul II to thank for his famous pilgrimage to Santiago for World Youth Day 1989. Also, a growing tourism industry along the Way has attracted more travelers than stereotypical religiously-motivated pilgrims. That said, many pilgrims these days have never heard of JP II's pilgrimage and embark on the journey for more than simply leisure travel. There is something unique about the Camino experience. It touches the peregrino with a deep sense of personal fulfillment that is not so easily accessible to the modern lifestyle. In this essay, I would like to reflect on my own experience as a pilgrim on the Camino and contrast it with my experience as a first-year medical student in New York City to consider why so many people in contemporary Western society are leaving the comforts of (typically) urban lives to live on whatever they can carry in their mochilas, sleep in often meager albergues and eat what simple meals they are served in *cena comunitarias* or *menus de peregrino*, all to pilgrim to Santiago de Compostela. I will show that the Camino culture has retained a certain connectedness of mind and body and of personhood and ontological order characteristic of medieval times that has been largely abandoned in post-modern society where such reconnection is no longer so easily accessible in our typical urbanized Western lifestyle.

To start, my own experience. My wife and I first set foot with our packs on our backs heading west from Lourdes just 14 days after our marriage in Houston, TX. It was a journey we had wanted to take together since we first met, those days when I was a Hispanic studies major at Rice University studying Spain's history and she was taking Spanish language classes. Also at this time, my wife (then girlfriend) and I were in the process of conversion to the Catholic faith, a conversion that would not just bring us together in our shared devotion to the Church but also in our love for one another. The Camino represented to us—early Catholic converts and students with considerable contact with European history—an opportunity for encounter, with the history of Christianity, other pilgrims who share in this age-old tradition and the Divine who is present in many forms along the Way. Before embarking on the Camino, however, we had a considerable trial ahead of us: our year long waiting period of engagement and of geographical separation as she finished her studies in Houston while I began medical school in New York. Medical school came as a shock to my social and psychological equilibrium. It is ironic that in one of the world's most populated cities,

with some 90,000 people per square mile, I could never have felt more alone. My mornings were spent with my eyes glued to Power Point screens as lecturers rattled off their expertise in scientific subject matter. Meals were spent alone in my room. Evenings were spent in the library basement studying for our weekly tests. With the added stress, I was sleeping poorly and often had to resort to medications.

In comes the contrast with the Camino. With the company of my wife and the continued personal contact with fellow peregrinos, I could not have felt more in solidarity with my fellow brethren than in the tiny, sparsely populated pueblos in Northern Spain that line the Way. What's more, the beauty of creation was much more apparent in our first-hand views of the Pyrenees, the plains of Castilla or the Hills of Galicia, and other natural beauties one sees while hiking. Meals were no longer alone but in *cena comunitarias*. Evenings were spent in personal reflection. Best of all, I had never slept better in my life. The stark contrast in experience (between living in New York for the first time and hiking on the Camino) has prompted me to investigate what is it about the Camino that is so conducive towards such a sense of wholeness and well-being?

According to an article in *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*, several social trends in post-modern society have been implicated with increasing mental instability,¹ which on the Camino, in my experience, have not permeated its distinct medieval character. The first is that in post-modern society people "are becoming increasingly detached and disembedded from traditional institutions, including the extended family, religious congregations, trade unions and local communities" that formerly provided "fellowship, meaning and identity to life." Now, the de-coupling of the individual from these structures is posited to destabilize "ontological security" that "is considered a precursor to generic psychological well-being." Pilgrimming serves as a sort of re-coupling of this broken connection, as pilgrims' encounters with each other are bound by a deep solidarity in their joint purpose to reach Santiago.

Second, and closely linked to the individualization of post-modern society is the destabilization of fixed social roles. It has been argued that in post-modern society, self-identity "no longer predefined by traditional cultural, familial and religious roles" many people feel "an overwhelming imperative to actively search for, find and cultivate meaningful social roles and unique self-identities out of the protean mass of post-modern society, all using

¹ Whitley R. "Postmodernity & Mental Health" *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* (2008) 16(6): 352-64.

their own initiative." Such a conflict has been postulated to underlie today's "pseudoculture of consumerism" that is "considered a maladaptive antidote to existential alienation and loss of community" because it does not provide true meaning of purpose that it seeks to recover. The identity of the pilgrim, on the other hand, does not typically demand such intense psychological effort to cultivate when their only tasks are to walk, sleep and eat. We are generally unencumbered by the myriad of often anxiety-producing options that we must face in post-modern society, a reality made clear to me when the barrage of decisions we had to make on our "descanso" in León—what restaurant to eat at, museums to visit and where to sleep—came as a shock to my peaceful equilibrium of the daily pilgrim routine.

Third, it has been noted that the extreme future orientation of post-modern society which views ancestral tradition as "Promethian fetters rather than guiding lights" may "lead to an increase in despair and anxiety." Psychological studies have shown that "communities with a strong sense of cultural continuity spanning, past, present and future have low or absent rates of serious mental illness." Such continuity is deeply part of the Camino experience. I am reminded of a homily during Mass at la Ermita de Nuestra Señora de la Peña in Tosantos where the Priest compared the experience of El Camino the parable of the treasure chest in Matthew where just as Jesus compared the Kingdom of God to that which is valuable in an old treasure chest, so too the pilgrim is immersed in a path of millenary churches and hospitals and artifacts from which to learn and draw relevance to their lives today.

Fourth and finally, whereas the stress and pressure of working life in Western society often is conducive towards a sedentary lifestyle believed to underlie many rising chronic diseases, the work of a pilgrim is inextricably linked to the physical labor the journey entails. This necessity makes daily exercise essential, conferring the many health benefits that come with it (except of course with the added cost of ampollas and occasional ankle injuries). Also, the physical labor of such an endeavor fosters a certain sense of completeness, for having not simply walked but walked with a purpose. A certain connection of mind and body pervades the culture of the Way, one which has remained from medieval culture. Even the Hotel de Los Reyes Catolicos in Santiago did not only serve as a hostel for pilgrims seeking spiritual healing but also as a medical hospital for those with physical ailments.

Now four months post-Camino as I settle back into life in New York City, the contrast with modern life has become more apparent. The leather bracelet I brought from Santiago is weathering, and the pictures we took and scrapbook we made

have found a comfortable place on the shelf above my computer desk. I'm back to studying for most of the afternoons. Social contact with my friends is not as regular. And I'm not able to exercise like we did every day along the Way. Yet the "flecha" emblem on my bracelet reminds me each day that life is different after the Camino. The physical Camino has brought renewed light in my life to the "Camino a dentro," or Camino within, that the Pastor of la Iglesia de Santiago Real reminded the pilgrims of on the Feast Day of Santiago. That is "El Camino" within that guides us even now in our hectic modern lives to true peace and healing within, until we are pilgrims in this life no more.

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