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The Challenging Future of Pilgrimage after the Pandemic: New Trends in Pilgrimage to Compostela

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Abstract: During the COVID-19 period, many authors observed changes occurring in pilgrimage along the Way of Saint James. Pandemics have appeared many times in the history of this route, causing changes in the behavior of pilgrims and their environment, such as improvements in health-care. In this paper, we begin by examining the new contributions that the pandemic has made to the contemporary religious experience of the Camino. The pandemic can be read in a twofold manner: as an attempt to “verify” the motives and as an “opportunity” to preserve the essence of pilgrimage; it also seems to be capable of changing the attitudes of the residents living along the Camino towards the pilgrims. Next, we point to several phenomena that appear on the horizon of the post-pandemic Camino, such as the isolationism of pilgrims, the dominance of individualism, the medicalization of pilgrimage and the restrictions on access to religious practices. This opens up the question of new forms of asceticism with which the Camino has been associated and new trends in pilgrimage to Compostela.

Keywords: Camino de Santiago; COVID-19; pilgrimage; religious tourism



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1. Introduction

In this paper, we investigate the directions in which pilgrimage evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic by using the main (Spanish and Portuguese) and local (Polish) Camino de Santiago routes as our point of reference. The most interesting thing is to identify the new phenomena and changes to existing phenomena that resulted from the health regulations put in place and from the psychological effects of the pandemic. Our qualitative analysis is based on existing research conducted during the pandemic and on direct interviews with agents working with pilgrims (i.e., representatives of state and church institutions and NGOs). Having identified the most important challenges associated with the pandemic—both physical and spiritual—that affect the Camino pilgrims, we outline the “new post-pandemic piety” that emerged in the context of the pilgrimage to Compostela.

2. Has the Camino Always Been the Same?

To answer the question of whether the pandemic has changed the Camino, it is important to note that there has never been a single prevailing form of the Camino that would be mechanically reenacted (Mróz 2017) and that there is still an ongoing dispute as to which Camino is true (*de vera peregrinatione*, to paraphrase the old treatises that sought true religion). The Camino has rather acted as a “nucleus”, accumulating around itself various cultural manifestations specific to each consecutive period. The central idea of pilgrimage—to attain salvation by visiting a sacred place—has remained the same; what has changed over time are such aspects as the manner in which one reaches the destination, the means of transport and the relationships that exist between pilgrims.

This semantic stability and, at the same time, openness to new expressions are aptly reflected by the distinction between matter and form that stems from Aristotelian philosophy and has, as a matter of fact, been used in sacramental theology. This theory, known

as hylomorphism, recognizes that there exists a fundamental compounding in beings that gives order to matter and, at the same time, makes it possible to explain many phenomena. In other words, it discerns empirically verifiable elements which are common to multiple phenomena (“matter”) as well as distinctive features of a spiritual nature (“form”). For example, pouring water onto a child’s head (as part of baptism) would be meaningless in and of itself without the formal component. Similarly, when the formal component is removed, pilgrimage loses its identity and becomes akin in material terms to trekking and other forms of outdoor activity. The use of the explicative potential of hylomorphism has been particularly prevalent in the science–religion debate (DeHaan 2018; Oleksowicz 2019), and it appears that this concept may contribute much valuable insight to a reflection on pilgrimage in terms of, for example, the responsibilities of religious communities, especially Catholic ones (Seryczyńska et al. 2021b). It demonstrates that the material concurrence of many phenomena need not lead to the hasty conclusion that they are, in fact, the same; instead, it prompts one to search for the factor that differentiates one being from another without falling into reductionism (Slagle 2022; Roldan 2021).

This hylomorphic understanding of pilgrimage may prove useful in debates on what it means to be a true pilgrim (Mróz et al. 2022). For some, staying at a hotel is no longer a genuine experience, and the same applies to having one’s backpacks transported—which is one of the tourist services offered by the local communities. This exclusivist trend seems to surface when attention is focused entirely on the “material” or external aspects and runs contrary to the original concept of pilgrimage as a journey undertaken by reason of piety (*pietatis causa*) or with the purpose of prayer (*orationis causa*).

Importantly, pandemics and infectious diseases occurred before in the history of the Camino de Santiago (Gómez and Verdú 2017). It is perhaps due to the fact that it took longer to return home in the past that infectious diseases did not spread: as the pilgrims spent more time on the way to their homelands, the journey acted as a form of quarantine, so they had a chance to recover by the time they reached their homes. Thus, pandemics are nothing new on the Camino: as Rucquoi (2014, pp. 81–82) notes, they have been mentioned in the accounts of many pilgrims, and it is known that in the fourteenth century, the king of France forbade pilgrimages to Rome and Santiago due to the outbreak of the Black Death. Interestingly, pandemics could also give rise to opposite responses: in 1456, the authorities of Barcelona dispatched two men religious to Compostela to beg for an end to the plague (and did so again in the following years), and so did the authorities of Manresa, Girona and Perpignan (Rucquoi 2014, p. 24). Furthermore, hospitals are known to have been established outside cities to care for pilgrims, and accounts exist of people who went on pilgrimages to escape epidemics, as was the case with Hieronymus Münzer, a physician from Nuremberg, who learned about the tragic situation in his hometown while walking the Camino (Rucquoi 2014, p. 101; Herbers 2020, p. 216).

3. The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Camino de Santiago

The disruption in the movement of pilgrims during the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in the spring of 2020, was not a uniform process. On the contrary, it varied in intensity, with periods of complete prohibition of pilgrimage followed by periods (especially in the summer) when pilgrims were permitted to travel to Santiago subject to certain restrictions. Were the changes in the manner of accommodation and interaction between pilgrims (especially in the context of social distancing) a short-term effect, or will they leave a mark on the pilgrimage in the coming years?

During the pandemic, many pointed to the importance of the Camino in terms of well-being, arguing that it can significantly improve the quality of one’s life by making it possible to escape hardship and mandatory isolation (Seryczyńska et al. 2021a; Oviedo 2022). At the same time, the Camino was seen as a new form of pilgrimage that appropriately responded to the COVID-19 reality due to its individual nature. Now, with the COVID-19-related restrictions slowly becoming a thing of the past, we believe that the time has come to take stock of what happened during that period (Mróz and Roszak 2022). Did the pandemic

change anything about the manner in which pilgrims experienced the Camino? How significant was the pandemic in the context of the more than 1200-year-long history of pilgrimage to Compostela? What did the pandemic uncover, and what new trends did it bring with it?

3.1. What Has the Pandemic Changed in the Camino de Santiago?

According to pilgrims' accounts, the changes caused by the pandemic primarily affected the external circumstances of the pilgrimage (Mróz 2021; Santos 2020). This included, above all, restrictions concerning accommodation at *albergues*, where it was no longer possible to host the same number of guests as before and do so in the same conditions (i.e., in large rooms) or to have the same extended interaction during the stay, for example when preparing meals. The registration procedure also contributed to the distancing since the *hospitales* were placed behind transparent screens that prevented direct interaction with pilgrims, whereas in the past, this initial encounter—a welcoming ceremony of sorts—had always been a unique feature of the Camino, a reminder of the Camino's core value of providing shelter to wayfarers (Spanish: *acogida*). As a result, *albergues* became ordinary hostels full of restrictions and prohibitions rather than bustling places of conversation, collaboration and exchange—as had been the case before the pandemic. The reduction of the role of such places in providing accommodation and the isolation of the pilgrims from one another are examples of the changes that resulted from health recommendations. Other changes included the requirement for pilgrims to book accommodation in advance, which was in part due to the shortage of available beds as a result of many public pilgrim hostels being closed for business (<https://www.businessinsider.es/como-pandemia-cambio-camino-santiago-peregrinos-937381>, accessed on 3 June 2022).

The pandemic also affected relationships with the residents of the towns and villages located along the Camino de Santiago. While spontaneous conversations and offers of assistance to pilgrims (e.g., in terms of transportation) had been commonplace before, there was a noticeable change in the first few months of the restrictions. The pilgrims did not interact with the local residents and felt that they were perceived by the latter as an infection hazard, so there was a perceptible feeling of aversion to strangers. In a sense, this was an experience of asceticism since it removed the traditional circumstances accompanying the Camino and helped the pilgrims focus on the core purpose: the journey to the tomb of Saint James. The increased distance between pilgrims, the atmosphere of distrust, the absence of relationships and the health restrictions in place made the Camino more demanding in terms of spiritual focus. From the pilgrims' perspective, the pandemic also prompted some of them to choose different accommodation to protect themselves against possible infection from other travelers. In addition, conversations and meetings during stopovers—which had been a hallmark of pilgrims walking to Compostela in the past—were avoided.

These external changes in the “manner” in which the pilgrimage to the tomb of Saint James was made also had certain internal consequences. In some cases, they introduced a sense of threat, making each encounter a manifestation of the ability to overcome one's prejudices. At the same time, however, the pandemic also brought with it an experience of communion. It is worth noting that pilgrims did not give up on their attempts to complete the Camino and used all available opportunities to do so. If, as shown by the research done by Brumec et al. (2022), interconnectedness is one of the effects of the Camino experienced in the psychological dimension, then there has been a significant shift in that respect.

The challenges associated with embarking on the Camino during the pandemic have been addressed in an appendix to the letter in which the Archbishop of Santiago de Compostela, Julian Barrio (2020), introduces pilgrims to the context of their journey. Archbishop Barrio points out that epidemics have occurred in the history of the Camino de Santiago and that they are proof of the fragility of existence. From the perspective of the experience of pilgrimage, he also observes that it is necessary to abandon the logic of the pandemic, which entails “suspending” and “postponing”, in favor of “transforming” the world in the spirit of the Book of Revelation. This attitude may manifest itself in the opportunities

that the post-pandemic pilgrimage provides—as summarized by Archbishop Barrio in a number of aspects. First, there is the opportunity to *see* signs of good where one does not expect them. Then, there is also the opportunity to *strengthen the roots*, thanks to which one can yield good fruit. Finally, there is the opportunity to *believe* that light will appear in the darkness (Roszak and Huzarek 2019), as expressed by overcoming one's limitations and leaving one's comfort zone. As Archbishop Barrio further notes, "faith is not a kind of individual lifeguard [. . .] reserved for moments of difficulty; on the contrary, it makes us leave our personal and institutional refuges to make this Yes of God present in all the painful corners [left by] the pandemic."

It appears that having a spiritual experience of the Camino after the pandemic will require saying a firm "yes" to the unexpected events that one needs to interpret as a call for love despite difficulties. For the Archbishop of Santiago, this means moving away from "nice-sounding words" of consolation toward concrete attitudes. In other words, pilgrims may be threatened by both the distance created by the pandemic and the inability to promptly read and respond to signs. Therefore, Archbishop Barrio believes that it will be a great challenge to build a "culture of care" so that pilgrims are not focused so heavily on themselves that they fail to notice those walking alongside them. The threat that comes with the pandemic is, therefore, a preoccupation with individual needs, a *carpe diem* mentality that leads to the escalation of the types of behavior that harm our common home. What is needed instead is creativity and active collaboration between all people that will help discover a certain obligation in pilgrimage: for Archbishop Barrio, this is a call to "not miss the opportunity" offered by the present time of grace. Pilgrims may be affected by the post-pandemic trend to look for comfort zones, which is why he reinforces the theological truth behind pilgrimage: that it always involves "leaving one's land." In the realities of the pandemic, this means breaking free from the mental patterns, concerns and fears left behind by COVID-19 in order to regain hope (Tułodziecki 2021).

3.2. Different Faces of the Pandemic on the Camino de Santiago

In addition to the obvious external and internal changes that it caused, the pandemic also provided an opportunity to grasp the essence of the Camino (Doburzyński 2021). The experience of the restrictions gave rise to a different outlook, making it possible to shift attention from the superficial to the profound. In many cases, the pandemic proved to be a chance to purify one's motivation and make the journey to Santiago without the attractions that would often turn out to be distracting. In this context, it is worth recalling the deliberations of Bernhard Welte, who diagnosed the progressing non-essencing or de-essentialization (German: *Unwesen*) that had affected various manifestations of religious life in the twentieth century. According to the philosopher, the focus on external circumstances at the cultural level becomes so strong that the essence is forgotten: people celebrate, but they no longer know why and for whom they do so, and what remains is the social background rather than the things which are truly essential to identity (Zagórski and Horvat 2018). Perhaps the pandemic has triggered a certain form of "non-essencing" as a process that counterbalances the semantic inflation of the Camino in recent years.

The pandemic also provided an opportunity to rethink some of the existing habits and see whether they truly reflected the spirit of the Camino de Santiago or whether they were interference by phenomena alien to the Camino. In the face of the physical inability to follow certain customs, which in a way forced one to choose what was most important, it became apparent that the time of the pandemic was an opportunity to establish a hierarchy of goals (Barush 2021). Figuratively speaking, the "narrowing down" caused by the restrictions brought the most important issues to the foreground.

At the same time, it is clear that the pandemic proved to be not only an "opportunity" but also a "verification." The physical constraints tested the pilgrims' motivations and the essence of their piety, showing whether they would still embark on the journey if they could not spend time with others or visit historical monuments. Paradoxically, the pandemic seems to have confirmed that the Camino is more than simply a form of religious

tourism, as had often been argued before. It is still a kind of popular piety that shows the religious sense of Christian life as defined in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (section 1674) (Platovnjak 2018). In the absence of what was allegedly their main motivation (cultural, sports or social pursuits, etc.), pilgrims suddenly began to show their focus on the religious aspect: they were willing to walk the Camino despite the lack of the above cultural gratification.

The pandemic also revealed yet another important aspect of the pilgrimage to Santiago, which can be described as a “slow pilgrimage”: fostering mindfulness that encompasses culture and day-to-day manifestations of kindness that perhaps go unnoticed in a mass pilgrimage movement such as the pre-pandemic Camino (Walker 2021; Yasin et al. 2020). With the smaller number of pilgrims, sensitivity becomes more acute, and small gestures of goodwill begin to be noticed.

4. Mapping the Post-Pandemic Challenges

Considering the transformation that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is worth addressing the changes that may affect the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage in the future. While the essential aspects will remain the same, there are certain phenomena that may modify the existing forms of pilgrimage. While we make no claim as to the completeness of this list, we would like to identify a number of issues that could be observed during the pandemic.

4.1. Medicalization

The health restrictions imposed on the Camino de Santiago, especially at pilgrim hostels (*albergues*), put a greater focus on medical issues: from vaccination certificates to pilgrims’ current state of health. While these issues were not widely discussed in the past, they are now becoming important. As a result, some places of accommodation may be judged on the basis of safety and compliance with health guidelines and measures, which may, in turn, draw more attention to questions of physical health and result in the exclusion of a certain class of pilgrims as a hazard to others.

This “medicalization” of the Camino is a process where people begin to treat and judge other pilgrims on the basis of their health-related behaviors, that is, whether they comply with health standards, whether they are vaccinated or whether their overall conduct may pose a health hazard. Before the pandemic, medical issues had never been taken into account in the context of accommodation (not only on the Camino de Santiago but also in daily life), as evidenced by the quality of the hostels, the number of guests per room, the accessibility of toilets, etc. The pandemic drew attention to the health aspect of pilgrimage and, in a way, brought it to the foreground.

4.2. Isolationism

It seems that another consequence of the pandemic is an attitude of isolationism adopted by pilgrims due to external circumstances. By following the applicable guidelines, some pilgrims try to avoid encounters with others where possible, organizing their time at the hostels in a way that does not require or foresee meeting other people. For many, the fellow pilgrim encountered on the road can simply become a health hazard.

Isolationism can take a mental form where a person strives not to put himself or herself in a position that would require interaction with others, thus creating a filter that does not permit certain ideas to pass through, either (Platovnjak 2020). In addition, there is a physical form of such isolationism that consists in avoiding meetings with other people. As a result, pilgrimage is reduced—as in *devotio moderna*—to individual spiritual experiences and thus abstracted from its external circumstances. This stands in contrast to the centuries-old tradition of the Camino as a “way of encounter”, both in the context of relationships between individuals from different cultures and in the context of the circulation of ideas that the Camino has long supported.

4.3. Restrictions on Worship

The pandemic also brought with it certain restrictions on access to places of worship, the most important one being the Santiago de Compostela Cathedral. During the pandemic, queues before the Holy Mass for the pilgrims (*misa de peregrinos*) became a frequent sight, as did the despair of those who could not participate in the liturgy due to the limits put in place. Many were disappointed by the absence of even outdoor video displays that would permit at least some form of participation, while others made efforts to arrive at the cathedral well in advance of others. This reaffirms the importance of the liturgy to the pilgrims and to other people who were deprived of access to worship during the pandemic (Kotecki 2020; Aulet and Duda 2020).

The number of pilgrims participating in the liturgy was greatly reduced in comparison with the pre-pandemic time. As a result, the Holy Mass became virtually inaccessible for many Camino pilgrims. What is more, a number of measures were put in place to “segregate” Christians on the basis of their compliance (or non-compliance) with the health regulations in effect.

There are noticeable restrictions on certain traditional manifestations of piety, such as the reduced number of services at the Compostela Cathedral and pastoral offerings in the churches along the route, the temporary prohibition on embracing the figure of St. James and “touching” the relics or the mandatory distancing during the pilgrim blessing—a ritual during which, in the pre-pandemic time, pilgrims would approach the altar together to display their sense of *communitas*.

4.4. Awareness of Mutual Responsibility

In the face of the pandemic, many pilgrims were confronted with the dilemma of having to decide whether coming into contact with other pilgrims or residents of the towns and villages along the route was beneficial to these people, too. For some, refraining from contact was a manifestation of “brotherly love”, whereas others opposed the idea as a form of “segregation of pilgrims.” In the spirit of that brotherly love, suggestions were also made to require booking accommodation at *albergues* in advance—a practice that had rarely existed on the Camino before.

During the pandemic, new expressions of brotherly love became apparent, such as concern for the fellow traveler’s health—including a heightened sensitivity to certain signs of infection and a responsibility to create appropriate conditions for rest and recuperation. At the same time, however, there was noticeable resistance to any forms of “segregation” of pilgrims on the basis of their vaccination status. Furthermore, the appearance of places of accommodation (mainly state-run) that required advance booking contributed to reduced interaction between participants and eliminated the element of spontaneity that had made the Camino an experience of freedom—for instance, in the sense that one never fully knew where the next stage of one’s individual pilgrimage would end. While making management easier during the pandemic, the predictability of accommodation also entailed the need to plan each stage of the journey in more detail than before.

Some authors have suggested that the pandemic will cause a decline in hospitality on pilgrimage routes (Korstanje 2020) as it exacerbates the moral crisis in Western societies. The argument is that if the other person is likely to be treated as a potential source of viral infection, the communal and ritual component may become weakened.

4.5. “Risk” Areas

The post-pandemic Camino appears to involve an experience of uncertainty (Horvat et al. 2021) since some of the things that were taken for granted in the past—such as the way in which pilgrims used to find accommodation or interact with one another—no longer exist. Today, one cannot be sure whether their desired hostel will be closed or not. Another challenge is the relationship between the Camino and “public health”, which has become an overriding value. This has given rise to a certain axiological conflict in which health is juxtaposed with participation in religious practices. During COVID-19, there was some

criticism from different circles who claimed that it was not worth engaging in such practices due to the risk of diseases being transmitted. It is clear, however, that such risk is present with all public gatherings, whether they take place in churches or elsewhere, which means that any measures that restrict the availability of worship imply an ideologically motivated attempt to reduce the importance of religiousness.

A further consideration is a concept of “sustainable pilgrimage”, a recently coined term that describes the “reset” in tourism that has taken place as a result of the pandemic and stopped many negative phenomena, including those that stress the natural environment. In that respect, it has been noted that the popularity of pilgrimage will not be negatively affected by its natural relationship with religion, although there may still be much tension in areas where health regulations encroach on the interests of religious communities that foster the custom of pilgrimage (Olsen and Timothy 2020). However, in the time of the “new normal”, pilgrimage may be threatened by an excessive focus on external aspects and by the emergence of an ever-larger number of “digitized” substitutes. Moreover, at the level of theological reflection, there will be challenges concerning the issue of the sacredness of place and time (Roszak 2020; Grassi 2021).

4.6. Development of “Surrogate Pilgrimage”

Another trend that emerged during the pandemic and may continue after it has ended is the increased interest in pilgrimages along Camino routes within one’s homeland. When it was not possible to travel to Spain or Portugal, many began to search for their local ways of Saint James, discovering the historical heritage of the Compostela pilgrimage in the process. On a subconscious level, this brings one back to the original tradition of beginning the pilgrimage on the threshold of one’s own home. The strength of this trend has been confirmed by the development of pilgrimage initiatives—both individual and group-based—in Poland and elsewhere. The challenge in this respect will be to maintain the relevance and perspective of the journey to Santiago so that the Camino does not simply become one of many local routes.

Of the many possible ways of “surrogation” (Mróz et al. 2022), the substitution of place (rather than of the person) appears to be the most suitable option in the new post-pandemic reality. It permits a pilgrim who is unable to make his or her way to a given destination to choose a different one—for example, instead of following the Spanish routes, the pilgrim may walk his or her local trails. In this context, there is an important role to be played by fraternities and clubs that offer alternative forms of pilgrimage in small groups. It seems unlikely, however, that pilgrims will give up on walking the Spanish sections of the Camino altogether; instead, the above trend will offer an opportunity to discover local routes in preparation for embarking on the next stages of the journey.

Another potential challenge is the emergence of “cyber pilgrimages”, which—in the face of future pandemics—may become a “substitute” for the traditional, physical journey on foot (Walker 2010; Williams 2013). While this kind of virtual pilgrimage has been increasing in importance, it does not bring the same benefits as a physical, bodily presence on the Camino.

5. Conclusions

It appears that post-pandemic pilgrims will continue to carry the burden of the tensions described above. Perhaps they will need to be more convinced about their decision to walk to Compostela, and the decision itself will not be spontaneous as it will require planning for a number of factors. Still, it can be argued that instead of weakening the desire to make pilgrimages to sacred places such as Compostela, the pandemic has, in fact, strengthened it. The challenges mentioned in this paper provide an opportunity to reconfigure the elements which are important to that spiritual journey so that the external circumstances do not obscure the essence of the Camino de Santiago. While the experience of the pandemic has left its mark, it has also given rise to a new kind of asceticism in the history of the

Camino, and the removal of cultural or ethnological components does not mean the end of pilgrimage.

For centuries, the motivation behind the pilgrimage to Compostela has been described with a phrase found in the medieval document that continues to be issued to pilgrims who have walked the last 100 km today, which says that the wayfarer has *pietatis causa devotè visitasse* [by reason of piety, devoutly visited] the tomb of Saint James (Mróz 2016). Thus, the notion of piety will remain key to understanding the post-pandemic Camino. Piety is not so much an emotional experience of the essence of faith as it is a virtue associated with justice that expresses reverence towards those to whom a person owes his or her existence: from parents to God. According to Aquinas, piety is a virtue that binds a human being to his or her ultimate goal, which means that since its very beginning, the purpose of the Camino has been to bring order into a Christian person's life so that nothing can stand in that person's way to salvation.

The post-pandemic Camino de Santiago will not differ in its essence from the earlier versions. Perhaps pilgrims will need to expend more effort to regain the sense of *communitas* and the relationships with others that are formed during the journey, to break free from the memories of the time of isolation and overcome the temptation of individualism (Conesa 2021). But are these not the challenges that have always, to a varying extent, accompanied the pilgrimage to Compostela?

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