

June 2023

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Recommended Citation

Rozsak, Piotr and Tanco, Jesus (2023) "Family Pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago in Spain: Typology and Impact," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*: Vol. 11: Iss. 3, Article 3.

doi:<https://doi.org/10.21427/9JEK-N534>

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol11/iss3/3>

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Family Pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago in Spain: Typology and Impact

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This article presents an analysis of contemporary forms of family pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela and prospect for its development after the pandemic of 2021-2022. Based on information about family pilgrimages in Spain, we examine its therapeutic benefits, its challenges and difficulties, and its place within competing forms of pilgrimage. The 'family modality' extends to pilgrimage within any intentional family, such as one's academic and professional companions, recovering addicts traveling for mutual support, like-minded religious confraternities sharing a communal experience of the journey, and pilgrims trekking on behalf of family members left behind as a manifestation of voluntary surrogate pilgrimage.

Key Words: Camino de Santiago, therapeutic effects, hospitality, family, proxy pilgrimage, intentional families

Introduction

A variety of motivations guide pilgrims undertaking the Camino de Santiago as they set out on the final hundred kilometres on foot (Greenia, 2018). When receiving their *Compostelas*, however, they are not queried about which interpersonal configuration surrounded their trek, although it is well known that the Camino is a journey routinely made intentionally in small, emotionally intimate groups (Roszak, 2019; Frost, 2013). *Salvaconductos*¹ from medieval Aragón provide records of groups composed of two, ten, or more than a hundred people who requested safe-conduct (Rucquoi, 2018; Greenia, 2019). Among these clusters are families who have made the journey to Compostela over the centuries whether as spouses or families with children (Collis, 1983). This is clearly evidenced, for example, by the miracles described in the *Liber Miraculorum Iacobi*, part of the *Liber Sancti Iacobi*, in which there are accounts of the intervention of St James in defence of unjustly treated pilgrims, such as the German family whose son was falsely accused of theft in Santo Domingo de la Calzada (Sumption, 2003; Dunn,

& Davidson, 2000), or the dishonest behaviour of an innkeeper towards a pilgrim family in Pamplona. Added to this are the accounts of numerous journeys made by royal households and the small and large entourages of wealthy burghers (Pelaz Flores, 2022).

Nowadays there are many couples on the Camino who embark on this pilgrimage as preparation for marriage and building a family. Others see it as a way of rebuilding marital ties under strain, while still others see it as a way of spending time in a rewarding family venture. These are sometimes private initiatives by pilgrims who bring together amenable companions, and at other times groups assembled by diocesan ministries, parishes or secular organisations supporting some form of psychological healing. The tourism industry has been involved in recent years in developing specific ways to help ventures hoping for healing or to promote group bonding along the pilgrimage trail to Santiago (Lois González, 2013).

The current status of family pilgrimage in Spain is drawn here from the testimonies of pilgrims, data from organisations involved in offering family pilgrimages, and published accounts, especially travel narratives

1 *Salvaconductos* or letters of safe conduct assured a traveller both freedom to travel and safety to travel.

that demonstrate the expansion of intentional families as trekkers on the pilgrimage routes to Compostela. An important source is the documentation on family pilgrimages organised between 2003-2010 and 2012-2022 by the University of Navarra in the form of travel segments or 'stages' of the Camino - about 160 kms long - starting from Le Puy in France, in view of the celebration of Jacobean Holy Years, when the saint's feast day falls on a Sunday (2010 and 2021-2022).

The Typology of Family Pilgrimages and their Motivations

From a terminological point of view, it is worth observing that there are two basic types of pilgrimage that interest us here: pilgrimage within a kin group regardless of marital status, including spouses, nuclear families, grandparents, and the incorporation of more distant relatives. Also, pilgrimage 'as a family' because of emotional ties where the relationships linking individuals do not necessarily stem from a shared bloodline or legal relationship.

The first type involves excursions by those connected by blood ties, while in the second case the ties are merely social in nature. Among the latter, several types can be distinguished depending on the characteristics of the group: academic, cultural, diocesan, religious, people from the same corporate environment or congruent professions (bands of doctors, lawyers, etc.).² Organisational management and logistics are often carried out by semi-professional tour facilitators, especially those working at universities or colleges, including families members.

The family modality of pilgrimage is not always full-blown: sometimes it starts with a pilgrimage of fathers and mothers with their children, or a pilgrimage shared by the spouses alone. These may be short, 'one-day' pilgrimages on Saturdays or Sundays, sometimes longer, several-day pilgrimages with overnight stays and luggage logistics rather than the discipline of carrying a backpack with all personal supplies for an extended period. In this paper we will also utilise a broad meaning of family as related to bigger groups that are bonded by the same values, like religious congregations, but always when the family in its extended sense is present.

² <https://salesianos.info/blog/la-familia-salesiana-peregrina-a-santiago-de-compostela/>

As for preferred routes for families, there are some easy stretches more suitable for children. The Sarriá to Santiago stretch boasts excellent infrastructure and less demanding terrain. The choice of route may alternatively be linked to nostalgia for a particular place a family has visited before (Mínguez, 2022).

The phenomenon of family pilgrimage is becoming increasingly popular. Motivations can be self-consciously religious, a traditional expression of folk or cultural religiosity, or as a form of eco-tourism without strictly religious elements such as prayer, participation in services or even entering historic churches passed along the way. Some members of the party may be religious and others not, even adherents of other belief systems, yet bonds of affection or companionability validate membership in the loosely define group.

The reasons for undertaking these journeys are often anniversaries of various kinds: weddings, birthdays, family events, etc..³ In addition to single family trips on the Camino, the formation of clusters of families are also common, including those with children of a similar age. They may choose to use the pilgrimage trails as an opportunity for creative leisure during which cultural and environmental features are explored and character formed.

An example of one-day family pilgrimages are the so-called Sunday family marches. Organised since 1987 by the Association of Friends of the Camino de Santiago in Navarra, they serve to strengthen the bonds of friendship among participants. The family aspect adds a certain collective personality, something distinctive for each participant. This redefined community expands membership of family as monad into a dynamic structure, open to intimate conversations and solidarity. Group dinners, shared songs, religious celebrations, and various kinds of practical mutual aid reinforce bonds of affection. In group outings, using pilgrimage trails with their profounder associations demonstrates a desire to work together, to participate in a common endeavour to achieve a heartening coexistence. The sacrifices imposed by coordinating getting up in the morning, enduring

³ https://www.cope.es/religion/hoy-en-dia/iglesia-espanola/noticias/familia-seis-hijos-realiza-camino-santiago-descubre-algo-asombroso-20200814_856367

unpredictable weather and terrain, and sacrificing to accommodate disparate tastes, interests and personal foibles transcends merely putting up with each other and elevates the experience (Burnett, 2021).

Overview of Forms of Extended Family Pilgrimage

Families which organise their own stages of pilgrimage, almost always associate their pilgrimage with holiday. Their logistics are adapted to the needs of participants ages. The intermediate sanctuaries along the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela can be used as milestones on the Camino for those undertaking more local or nearby pilgrimages. Such walkers may use a weekend or a whole week of vacation to take advantage of these partial routes comprised of intermediate sanctuaries, without undercutting the value of the greater pilgrimage toward the overarching goal.

The project *Familia en Marcha* (Family on the Move), inaugurated on 26 June 2021 in Pamplona, Spain was launched for like-minded families with children of different ages, amenable to a 'day's holiday that would serve not only to get to know the Camino de Santiago, but also to strengthen bonds of fraternity. The group was led by the priest of the San Francisco Javier and Cristo Rey parishes in Pamplona, Don José María Aicua taking advantage of the route of the Way of St. James through the city of Pamplona. Because 2021 was a Jubilee Holy Year of St. James, they spent the first hours on a route full of attractions: the medieval bridge of La Magdalena; the sixteenth-century fortified walls of one of the best preserved enclosures in Europe, accessed by a drawbridge through the French Gate; the Paseo del Redín; and the approach to Pamplona Cathedral through the Plaza de San José. Once inside they enjoyed an organ recital by Maestro Julián Ayesa, and a tour given by Carlos Ayerra, dean of the cathedral. From there they moved on through the ancient Roman city, later the city quarter of the Navarrería with a visit to the patron church of San Fermín.

The aim of such a family pilgrimage is to take ownership of the Camino route close to where the families live in the form of a weekend Camino. As pilgrims they embraced a programme of visiting sacred monuments

and participating in cultural events. This was not a spontaneous hike open to unexpected events but a planned event.

Diocesan Family Pilgrimages

Many Spanish dioceses organise pilgrimages of families and young people to Santiago de Compostela, mainly on the occasion of Holy Years. An example is the diocese of Orihuela-Alicante, which in 2022 offered a pilgrimage for families from 31 July to 8 August, 2022.⁴ This was linked to the participation of young people in the European Youth Meeting in Santiago, encouraging families to be in Compostela during this time.

There is a growing desire for smaller scale family pilgrimages such as this from smaller communities, including parishes, with these being mainly one-day pilgrimages.

Other dioceses, such as Ourense, have proposed the *Camino de Santiago en Familia* project, which carries out the pilgrimage to Santiago in six stages, each performed on a Saturday. The concept of the family is seen more broadly, as a diocesan family, a parish family, a school family etc. Families prepare their own meal while organisers take care of logistics and safety. At the end of the pilgrimage, a Eucharist is celebrated for families.⁵ The 2022 edition managed to gather so many families that five buses were needed to transport them.

The organised family pilgrimages to Santiago may be part of diocesan pastoral plans, such as in the Diocese of Jaén, whose *Delegación de Familia y Vida* wanted to offer incentives for the development of family life. Organised in August 2019, this was a form of economic tourism geared towards spiritual fruit, and flowed from an awareness of the mission of families in the world. According to the organisers, the aim was:

to experience community life, to walk as members of the same Church, to be able to do so with those we love the most, and also the value of sacrifice, effort, and a simple lifestyle

⁴ <https://famiyayvidaoa.org/2022/02/21/camino-en-familia/>

⁵ <https://www.lavozdeg Galicia.es/noticia/ourense/ourense/2022/04/04/seis-etapas-peregrinar-santiago-seis-sabados/00031649071518577999756.htm>

*that will make us discover and prioritise what is essential from what is secondary.*⁶

There is also the practice of pilgrimages for the intention of families, in which all those voluntarily taking part are united by a single intention. Alongside this, some cultivate pilgrimage in the traditional spirit of vicarious pilgrimage when a given individual represents others, making them spiritually present. In the past, this kind of delegated or surrogate pilgrimage was commissioned by cities or professional (guild) groups who hired morally qualified pilgrims to carry the intentions of those who underwrote their travel (Frost *et al.*, 2022).

Tourist Support: Growing Economic Impact

Collective pilgrimage requires an organisation to manage the group's schedules with elasticity for special needs. Individual and small group pilgrimages allow greater flexibility in the consecutive completion of stages. Going in a group and with children and youngsters of a similar age promotes peer socialisation and fun while walking. There may be drawing competitions, jokes, songs, athletic games during rest intervals, or even the participation in service tasks such as meal preparation and cooking. These enrich children's social skills and encourage them to take responsibility for one another.

Existing associations specialising in family support, such as *Proyecto Ulysses*⁷ or *El Camino en Familia*,⁸ see their role as helping families with logistics. They perceive the pilgrimage with family as an opportunity for personal development, a kind of life coaching, volunteer management and occasion for being immersed in local history and geography. Routes are proposed with Camino Portugués (from O Porriño, in Spain) or Camino Francés (from Sarria), with an average daily distance of 20 kms in order to reach Santiago in five stages totalling 100 kms, the distance required to achieve the *Compostela* certificate from the Pilgrim Office. Accommodation, meals and childcare are arranged for little ones who only join their parents for the concluding day's walk.

6 <http://diocesisdejaen.es/camino-de-santiago-en-familia/>

7 <https://proyectoulises.com/camino-de-santiago-en-familia/>

8 <https://www.elcaminoenfamilia.es/Testimonios-de-familias-en-El-Camino-de-Santiago.html>

The Effects of Family Pilgrimage

In reports provided by participants of family pilgrimage three types of fruits can be distinguished, which can be classed as therapeutic, axiological and ascetic dimensions.

Therapeutic Dimension: Healing and Strengthening Relationships

When the motive for making a pilgrimage is to overcome certain personal or interpersonal difficulties, then one can speak of therapeutic benefits. The restoration of broken relationships unfolds in the context of discovering truths about one's own limitations and caring for oneself meaningfully during pilgrimage. The effect is to reconfigure existing relationships, styles of communal living, and get to know one another better without the interference of social media or outsiders to the family unit. The content opens one up to others' needs, their experience of discomfort, and how they negotiate common obstacles.

Research shows positive effects on mental health of families undertaking activities together (Delfini, 2017). Many publications point to the psychosocial benefits of this style of shared travel, which are obtained through managing practical needs like shelter while enhancing bonding, trust and accountability. Furthermore, the beneficial effects of long-distance walking on mental health are confirmed in psychological research (Mau, *et al.*, 2023) and may clarify participants' existential framework. The therapeutic effects in this case play out not in traditional conversation and exteriorisation, but through inner dialogue, which is why one can propose family pilgrimages that include intervals of silence. This sort of pilgrimage incorporates the 'walking cure' and the 'talking cure' (Edensor, 2000:86), demonstrating that for enhanced effectiveness, walking is strengthened by a series of accompanying circularities (Roszak & Huzarek, 2022).

Another type of family pilgrimage arises from residual trauma such as when a loved one dies and others feel a call to continue their journey, literalised in the plot of the film 'The Way' where the father of a son who died at the outset of his Camino trek carries the boy's ashes on to Compostela. Other times the illness of a family member

prompts those who love them to undertake a pilgrimage in emotional solidarity with the sick person (Mróz *et al.*, 2022); distant relatives,⁹ multiple generations of family, friends and acquaintances may join in and to express their support, perhaps to aid in their own coping with this loss or another (Oviedo, 2022).

The Camino experienced as a family is a way to overcome the accretion of prejudices and misunderstandings and to heal relationships between spouses and with their children. Participants undergo a ‘positive disintegration’ that allows for integration of a new stance (Tykarski, 2019). In Camino relationships, both historical and contemporary, this is an important fruit of the pilgrimage: the restoration of life order in its emotional, spiritual and physical dimensions.

The search for salvation in the Camino is not a simple escapism, but a building of resilience (Seryczyńska, 2019; Chimenti, 2006). In this sense, slow tourism (Howard, 2012), which can include manifestations of family pilgrimage, brings clinically measurable improvements in quality of life even when the therapeutic processes are non-verbal. At the centre of this experience is personal integration.

Consolidation of Values

The experience of a shared journey, which verifies a perception of one’s life and professed (but declarative) skills, leads to the creation and consolidation of an axiological world. This takes place both in the individual aspect (fatherhood, motherhood) and in the community aspect of a family (Tykarski, 2017). Consolidation at the axiological level involves a shift from ‘declared’ to ‘realised’ or embodied values lived out in visible ways. During family pilgrimage, children are inculcated with fundamental values for day-to-day life such as constancy, teamwork and solidarity, all of which are integral to the Camino de Santiago. Expressions of spirituality are reinforced at the same time.

Personal consolidation in the case of children is linked to the distinct cognitive content which pilgrimage provides. Geographical, historical, economic and environmental

factors forge experiences difficult to erase. Getting to know and share travel and conversation with people of different places and cultures yet with convergent values advances maturation. To educate is to teach how to discover the world and its intimate mechanisms. Learning unfamiliar languages, exchanging addresses and souvenirs all help make pilgrimage travel more attractive. The appreciation that it is possible to set aside digital devices, that conversations unmediated by technology enrich interpersonal knowledge, open the eyes to curiosities that present themselves along the trails, and foreground sensations difficult to perceive in the daily maelstrom, such as the music of birds, the fragrance of flowers, early morning sunrises are all potentials of pilgrimage. Sensitivities learned step-by-step in real time permeate the walker. On the social side, the value of letting oneself be helped in times of need is highlighted in one’s appreciation for a timely glass of water, a word of encouragement, helpful information. Residents in a community that welcomes the traveller help internalise the values of pilgrimage.

There is also another aspect to highlight: friendship within Jacobean associations and brotherhoods creates bonds of affection similar to that in families, a sort of greater family of the Way. The return home does not mean the loss of bonds acquired which may continue over time and be renewed through reunion encounters.

New friendships also occur in treks undertaken among two or three generations of relatives (Hlavsa, 2015). Another way of sharing experiences and fostering dialogue, of discovering new horizons in the human, cultural and spiritual spheres, is to ‘make family’. Among those who want a solitary venture, or in the company of groups with professional, educational or social relationships, family pilgrimage of an extended sort is increasingly valued. An adventurous nature and the need for some adapting to unforeseen circumstances provide another reason for children and families to throw themselves into the experience. Those whose school and work demands forestall extended together time get to listen to each other. By exchanging intimacies and carrying one’s pain through family members (Egan, 2011:5), even a fresh exposure to silence, may all lead to personal growth and agency (Calsius *et al.*, 2019). One gains a relationship to the environment without losing identity. The experience

⁹ <https://www.vidanuevadigital.com/2012/08/03/cuando-el-camino-hace-familia/>

of relationality (towards others, God, nature, culture, etc.) is undoubtedly one of the effects of the Camino, which leads to a new brotherhood.

Family ‘Asceticism’

Family pilgrimage as reported by the participants, as Jenkins (2021) notes in *Walking the Way Together*, from analysing the testimonies of families, brings with it a measure of freedom from digital media. This is often a source of tension that requires a coherent decision about the hours / places of social media use. This opens up the experience of moving from ‘freedom from’ certain restrictions, habits, prejudices, to ‘freedom to’, empowering new relationships.

Establishing consensus for accessing social media so that it does not divert from relationships is one of the challenges reported by parents. Moderation balances the ‘golden mean’ between need and pleasure.

Perhaps the separations that characterise pilgrimage can also be seen from this perspective. Leaving one’s home environment, city and local community used to be associated with symbolic gestures of departure like blessing a pilgrim’s gear (Greenia, 2021). It signified the traveller’s exit from a managed, familiar environment and entry into the unknown, new experiences and areas that

foster the development of new competences. It marked the beginning of something new, a break from duties and a daily schedule in favour of a freedom conducive to seeing others differently. In the case of family pilgrimage, there is also the experience of a state of liminality, bridging limitations that foster a therapeutic experience for relationships in need of change (Thomassen, 2009).

Conclusions

This review of the forms and proposals of family pilgrimage shows the increasing importance of this form of activity. Its short and long term modalities demonstrate how religious perspectives are present alongside tourism and leisure. It is an inclusive activity on a generational level, among those with disabilities and open to those so disposed on a religious level while managing travel to take care of infrastructure demands and provide for cultural activities. Family pilgrimage encompasses multiple dimensions, among which the relational aspect comes to the fore: the Camino allows one to see the world in a new way, becomes a laboratory for improved behaviour and character, redefines ‘virtue’ and restores harmony and resilience. All this coincides with what earlier narratives called *pietatis causa*, as one of the identifiers of the pilgrimage to Santiago: the restoration of the hierarchy of life’s affairs by reference to central values.

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