

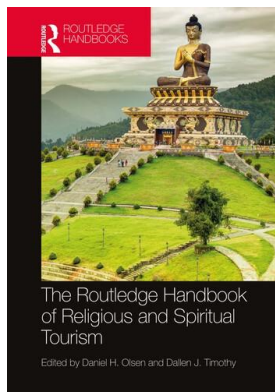
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EXPERIENCES ALONG THE CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

Sharenda H. Barlar

Introduction

Historically, Protestants and Evangelicals have rejected the notion of pilgrimage to visit a saint or holy site, in part because of their “rejection of images as harbingers of divine presence” (Meyer 2017: 315n34). However, there has recently been an increasing acceptance of pilgrimage by Protestants and Evangelicals to both Protestant and non-Protestant destinations (Tweed 2000; Coleman 2014; Zimmer 2018). Indeed, there is a growing market for Protestant pilgrimage to different locations, particularly the Holy Land (Bajc 2007; Ron & Feldman 2009; Kaell 2014). Another popular Protestant pilgrimage is walking along the Camino de Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage trail in Spain for those who seek a prolonged period of meditation, retreat, and prayer.

Since one of the traditional motivations for pilgrimage is to pay penance for one’s sins, how does the Protestant idea of grace and not works affect the Evangelical pilgrim? How do the experiences of Evangelical pilgrims differ from pilgrims from other religious faiths? What language do they use to describe their journey along the Camino? What biases do the students bring with them as Evangelicals, and are they willing to embrace other perspectives and views of the transformative nature of pilgrimage? How does the idea and actuality of pain and suffering affect the Evangelical pilgrim? Since suffering is not emphasized in Protestant traditions like it is in other religions, will students see pilgrimage as an opportunity for spiritual growth or something else?

The purpose of this chapter is to address these questions through examining how Evangelical students from Wheaton College, an Evangelical Protestant liberal arts school in Wheaton, Illinois, interpreted their experiences of walking the French Way of the Camino after walking it in the summer of 2019. As a part of a study abroad course, students were required to keep a reflective journal and invite pilgrims they met on the Camino to participate in an online Qualtrics survey. The author draws upon these student journals and some of the results of the survey to answer the questions above. Before doing so, a discussion on the evolution of Evangelical views toward pilgrimage is presented, followed by a brief history of pilgrimage along the Camino de Santiago de Compostela. Attention is then turned to discussing pilgrim’s reflections on the transformative process of the Camino once they have returned to their homes.

Evolving evangelical pilgrimage

The idea of someone traveling for religious purposes—commonly referred to as a “pilgrim”—is not a uniquely Christian or medieval European idea. Indeed, people from all religious communities and faith traditions engage in travel to sacred sites for a myriad of purposes, including initiation, penance, worship, to petition for blessings, and curiosity (Morinis 1992). In fact, the word “pilgrimage” is a seventeenth-century reductionist, catch-all, and comparative term created by Western scholars and theologians to describe “all journeys motivated by religion to sacred locations” (Olsen 2019: 274; see Eade & Albera 2016).

From a Christian perspective, pilgrimage is as old as the Old and New Testaments, where Jews traveled to Jerusalem for specific festive holidays, such as the Feast of Tabernacles (Exodus 23:14–17; Deuteronomy 16:1–17) (see Janin 2002; Carr 2010). The Hebrew word for pilgrimage (magor/magur: מגור) meant to wander (Josan 2009), as in being “the land of your sojournings” (see Genesis 17:8). The Greek words *paroikoi* (παροικοι) and *paroikia* (παροικία) are also used in the Bible to identify those who are strangers, exiled, or sojourning or staying somewhere temporarily, and Christians, as pilgrims who are striving to complete the journey of life and return to their eternal home (Romans 13:14; Colossians 3:9–10), are encouraged to finish the journey in spite of “discouragement, distraction, desire, inattention, pride or other causes” (Laansma 2017: 243). St. Augustine seconded this notion, referring to Christians as “pilgrims through time” who are on a journey to the ultimate destination of heaven (Bourke 1958). Webb–Mitchell (2007: p. 1) also argued that “the length and breadth of the Christian life is a pilgrimage and that it is through the actual practice of pilgrimage that we may best understand the experience of growth and change in the Christian life”.

Because of the hardships of wandering during Biblical times, specific codes of hospitality were given. According to Jipp (2017: p. 2), hospitality is

...the act or process whereby the identity of the stranger is transformed into that of guest. While hospitality often uses the basic necessities of life such as the protection of one’s home and the offer of food, drink conversation, and clothing, the primary impulse of hospitality is to create a safe and welcoming place where a stranger can be converted into a friend.

Historically, hospitality was viewed in many cultures and religious communities as a sacred duty (see Olsen 2011). In Islam, “guests [were considered] guests of God, and hospitality ceased to be a choice and became a [religious] duty” (Aziz 2001: 152–153; see Din 1989: 552), while in the Old Testament, hospitality toward strangers demonstrated a person’s practical commitment to God (Fields 1995: 459). In the early Christian church, hospitality (*philoxenia*) was meant to be an offering of kinship, brotherly love, and faith (*phileo*) to strangers (*xenos*). Hospitality was to include providing for all of the needs of a stranger regarding “food, shelter, and protection”, thus providing “a recognition of their worth and common humanity” (Pohl 1999: 6), leading to the establishment of the Knights Templar and monasteries that doubled as pilgrim hospitals along pilgrimage routes throughout Europe (Howarth 1982; O’Gorman 2006; Brodman 2009).

The Protestant reformation brought about changes in the ways pilgrimage was viewed in Europe. Martin Luther was a major opponent of pilgrimages, especially as they were performed in the Catholic Church. Largely due to the association with the practice of

indulgences, Luther believed that “all pilgrimages should be stopped. There is no good in them: no commandment enjoins them, no obedience attached to them. Rather do these pilgrimages give countless occasions to commit sin and to despise God’s commandments” (Davies 1988: 98). Following Luther, other medieval and early modern literature, such as *The Canterbury Tales* (Chaucer 1985), *Don Quixote* (de Cervantes Saavedra 1998), and picaresque novels like *Lazarillo de Tormes* (Fiore 1984) and *La pícaro Justina* (de Úbeda 1968), also sought to shed critical light on pilgrimage. These post-Reformation views of pilgrimage have led Evangelical Protestants to traditionally reject the notion of pilgrimage to visit a saint or a holy site.

To better understand the evolving definitions of pilgrimage from an Evangelical perspective, it is important to understanding the theological tenets of Evangelicalism. Larsen (2007) outlines five distinguishing characteristics of an Evangelical Christian. First, an evangelical is an Orthodox Protestant who believes in the Trinity. While some evangelicals align with the Apostle’s Creed and the Nicene Creed, others reject these creeds and follow the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, or that there should be “no creed but the Bible” (p. 4). Second, an Evangelical is a part of a Global Christian network that arose from eighteenth-century revival movements tied to reformers such as John Wesley and George Whitefield. Third, the Bible is the final authority on matters of faith and practice, and as such has a prominent place in the daily life of an Evangelical. As Larsen notes, “Devotional Bible reading is more foundational to evangelical piety than the rosary is to Roman Catholic piety” and “often see the sermon as the high point of corporate worship” (p. 7). Fourth, and perhaps most important characteristic of an evangelical, is the insistence that humans reconcile with God through the work of Jesus Christ alone on the cross. Fifth, evangelical Christians stress the importance of the Holy Spirit in the individual conversion process to Christ, which process can be a dramatic event that “leads to an on-going life of fellowship with God” (p. 11). As a part of this conversion process, it is the responsibility of an evangelical to share the gospel with others.

How do these five characteristics of evangelicals relate to the historical anathema toward pilgrimage travel? First, in contrast to the Medieval pilgrim who makes a pilgrimage to a sacred site as a penance for sins, Evangelicals are encouraged to instead seek God internally and rely on the Bible for guidance and to seek God’s grace, as forgiveness of sin does not come through ritual travel. Second, because Evangelicals identify strongly with revival events, it is in these types of events and accompanying sermons that evangelicals feel an intensification of theological practice, faith development, and a continuation of religious tradition. This can be contrasted with pilgrims who travel to sacred sites that act as markers of tradition. Third, iconography, physical relics, and sites of miracles are often dismissed or minimized by evangelicals because *sola scriptura* is all that is needed to follow Christ. As well, the New Testament does not command evangelicals to visit sacred sites because the individual believer is a temple in which the Holy Spirit dwells (see I Cor. 6:19). Also, unlike the pilgrim who travels to sacred sites to increase their spirituality and access to God, Evangelicals instead identify specific seasons or times in their lives as opportunities for increased consecration and devotion. Fourth, since evangelical Christians are saved by grace and not works, they question why a person needs to suffer and offer penance when the price for their sins has already been paid by Christ. Fifth, although conversion to Christ comes through experiences with the Holy Spirit, this emotionalism does not fully depict the depth of an evangelical’s faith. Instead of participating in pilgrimages, time is better spent sharing the Gospel with others.

Even though the above discussion clarifies why evangelical Christians have traditionally been adverse toward pilgrimage practices and rituals, in recent decades there has been an

increased interest and acceptance of pilgrimage by Protestants and Evangelicals to both sites based on Protestant/Evangelical heritage (Tweed 2000; Goh 2021) and, more recently, sites based on the religious heritage of other faith traditions. For many Evangelicals, travel to religious heritage sites is seen as more of an educational experience, engaging with culture through immersion, language learning, and seeing how other religious communities attempt to transform the world around them.

The Camino de Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage in Spain has grown in popularity among Protestants and Evangelicals who seek a prolonged period of meditation, retreat, and prayer as well as forming new ways of interpreting and contributing to ongoing stories of the world. The Camino becomes a path where Evangelicals develop a new awareness of themselves and the world around them, with pilgrimage becoming a growth opportunity for the Evangelical. In many ways, participating in a pilgrimage along the Camino by Evangelicals makes them structurally akin to pilgrims of old. As Turner and Turner (1978) note, both medieval and modern pilgrims travel toward places where miracles have and continue to happen. In doing so, they leave their home environment and travel into the unknown, during which time they may encounter physical suffering. While a pilgrim may choose to travel alone, they will encounter others along the way who are seeking similar experiences and destinations, and while the pilgrim does not know what to expect in the course of their journey, in the end they will be “irrevocably changed” (Webb-Mitchell 2007: 19).

The History of the Camino de Santiago de Compostela

The Camino de Santiago is an ancient Christian pilgrimage in Spain. The Camino is comprised of several routes starting in different regions of Europe that eventually converge at Santiago de Compostela, the site of what are believed to be the remains of St. James. Before ascending into heaven, Jesus left instructions for his disciples to share the Gospel to every nation—to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19). This “Great Commission” led his disciples to travel long distances to preach the word. The apostle James was believed to be the first Christian missionary to the Iberian Peninsula, and later became the first apostolic martyr after being sentenced to die in 44 AD by Herod Agrippa.

At some point during the ninth century, tradition holds, the body of St. James was miraculously transported in a marble boat from Galilee to the region of Galicia (modern Spain). This was historically a very important event, as Spain was in the middle of the Reconquista (“reconquest”) between the Moors and Christians, which had begun in 711 AD when the Umayyad empire began their conquest of Hispania. Under Alfonso II, king of Asturias and Galicia (792–842 AD), and Bishop Theodemir of Iria Flavia, the long-forgotten tomb of St. James was miraculously re-discovered in the northwest corner of the Iberian Peninsula, and a church was built on the tomb site in Santiago de Compostela in 899 AD. Soon people began to have visions of St. James (or Santiago as he was referred to in Spain), and he appeared in several battles to enable the Christian armies to eventually defeat the Umayyad empire. Santiago’s assistance in the Holy Wars gave him the name “Matamoros” or “Moor-slayer”. As the fame of St. James grew, the number of legends and stories about him multiplied, and pilgrims visit Santiago de Compostela to pay homage to his relics. Devoted medieval Christian pilgrims, facing increasing dangers during the Crusades, shifted their destination from Jerusalem to Santiago de Compostela. Schmidt

(2012) suggests that “with the accessibility of Santiago for persons from all over Europe, it became a destination for tens of thousands of pilgrims annually for literally centuries and hence a profound cultural and spiritual unifier for all of Europe” (p. xiii). Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela became so popular that the Roman Catholic Church eventually recognized via Papal decree the authenticity of the remains of St. James in the twelfth century, with Santiago de Compostela becoming the third Holy City of the Western Christian world after Rome and Jerusalem. The *Codex Calixtinus*, attributed to Pope Callixtus II and written to coincide with this Papal decree, became an important guidebook to the Way of St. James (see Melzer 1993).

While the Camino saw centuries of neglect and eventual declines in the number of pilgrims traveling the Camino—in part because of the Protestant Reformation—in recent decades there has been a resurgence of pilgrimage along the Way, particularly when Santiago de Compostela was declared a World Heritage Site in 1985. This resurgence in pilgrimage travel has also coincided with what has been called the secularization of the Camino (Challenger 2014). While many of the pilgrims that walk the Camino today are Catholic, traveling the Way for penance, asking for otherworldly favors, or to express faith and thanks, a growing number of pilgrims are either from other faith traditions or claim no religion (Frey 1998). For these pilgrims, walking the Camino “provides a way to rediscover a sense of spirituality, global camaraderie, and general well-being otherwise difficult to encounter in our postmodern consumer society” (Gardner, Mentley & Signori 2016: 58–59). However, regardless of faith or non-faith tradition, traveling the Camino leads to a feeling of *communitas* or a oneness that comes with engaging in shared pilgrimage rituals (Turner 1969).

Preparing for the Camino

As noted earlier, during the summer of 2019, six Spanish-speaking students and two faculty members from Wheaton College (including the author) walked portions of the French Camino de Santiago. Since students were receiving academic credit for this study abroad course, they participated in a history, art, and culture class the Spring semester before their departure. During the semester, students were asked how a traditionally Catholic pilgrimage could be a transformative experience for Evangelical Christians based on Larsen’s (2007) five characteristics of evangelicals. Interestingly, students argued that *sola scriptura* was a key reason they used to justify the value of going on a pilgrimage. This was because, as noted above, the faithful in the Old and New Testaments are referred to as sojourners and pilgrims in this world, and as such, sacred spaces, iconography in the form of art and images created over the last several centuries by different cultures grappling with Christianity, spiritual formation, a search for God, and the fact that Jesus walked from town to town during his ministry, all made their potential pilgrimage along the Camino a real and tangible act of humility and discipleship. During the pre-field course, students also created a set of devotionals that included topics like suffering, joy, solitude, patience, and community that would be shared while traveling the Camino to reflect on the group’s daily experiences. These themes were grounded in the scriptures and were meant to help students to reflect on the experiences they would be having each day along the Way.

The students who decided to spend their summer semester walking the Camino did so for a variety of reasons. While they did not consider penance to be a primary motivator, traveling along the Camino would allow them a time and space to devote to prayer, devotion,

and spiritual reflection. In addition, the students stated that they were looking forward to the physical challenge that the Camino would provide. Because walking the Camino can be an arduous and physically demanding journey, each weekend the students would walk with their pre-prepared backpacks and footgear in preparation for walking long distances along the Camino, strengthening their bodies so as to reduce any injuries they may receive along the Way. Although students walked an average of 10 kilometers along well-groomed suburban paths during these weekend excursions in preparation for their Camino pilgrimage, these walks did not really give them an accurate picture of the reality of walking the Camino on a variety of terrains and elevations for 20 or more kilometers a day. As well, this physical preparation was not adequate to help them avoid injury and pain during their pilgrimage. Putting an Evangelical spin on the idea of injury and pain, it was discussed how as in life, preparation cannot eliminate all forms of future suffering, and how the scriptures teach that suffering produces a maturity that comes from experience and perseverance, and in the process turning developing disciples into mature Christians.

Pain

As students found out firsthand, pain and suffering is one of the constants that is found along the Camino. Historically, the Camino de Santiago was often fraught with hardships and even death during the medieval and early modern periods. As Eade and Sallnow (1991) note,

In the Catholic tradition, pilgrimage has always been seen as a form of penance, and indeed was imposed as a punishment for secular offences in the Middle Ages. The hardships and dangers of the journey and the bodily privations which pilgrims were obliged to undergo were thought to win the penitential pilgrim God's forgiveness and grace.... By voluntarily undergoing pain, the devotee hopes that his or her request for a material favour, for the devotee personally or for one of his or her family, will be granted by the shrine divinity.

(p. 22)

Most, if not all the Wheaton students, developed blisters on their feet that ranged from mildly irritating to excruciating because of their size and/or location. Some students also struggled with calf, knee, Achilles heel, and back pain. The author, as faculty director, was responsible to remedy or reduce the suffering of the students during these trying times, efforts that included having the students mail home all the items in their backpacks that they had not used a week into their pilgrimage, thus lightening their backpacks; stretching and doing yoga in the morning before continuing the pilgrimage; inspecting, rubbing, taping, putting a special protective pad called "Compeed" on each other's blisters; and making a massage assembly line to work out the knots that formed from carrying backpacks for 8–10 hours a day.

As part of their academic credit, the students were required to keep a reflective journal in Spanish based on both free writing and pre-assigned topics. Some of the pre-assigned topics or reflections included open-ended prompts related to writing poetry, drawing, or writing songs describing their day. Several other prompts asked specific questions about pain and suffering. Being vulnerable and embracing a theology of suffering can be a new experience for Evangelical pilgrims. By reflecting on their personal struggles on the Camino, they were able to open themselves up for hospitality and deepen

their personal faith. Below are two entries from students regarding the topic of pain and suffering while being a pilgrim:

Blisters! What is rubbing you the wrong way? Where are you experiencing conflicts? How much is internal, and how much involves other people? What are you learning about how you interpret and handle difficulties? Is there anything you wish were different? What might you do to address the persistent blisters in your life?

Baggage, burdens, necessities, and travelling light: Today is an invitation to reflect on your own background (what you bring with you). What are you glad or grateful you have with you? What has given you strength? Are there things that you brought that you wish to leave behind as your journey continues after the Camino?

The Wheaton students, however, were not the only people along the Camino had gone through physical pain and suffering. Many pilgrims who walk the Camino are dismayed to find out how physically challenging the Camino can be. This may be in part because twentieth-century books and films on the Camino, such as Coelho's (1998) *The Pilgrimage*, MacLaine's (2000) *The Camino*, and the film *The Way* (Estevez 2010) gloss over the physical hardships of the pilgrimage, instead focusing on the potential spiritual and therapeutic benefits of walking the Camino. As Norman (2009) found in his research on Camino pilgrims that many pilgrims contemplate quitting the Camino soon after they start because their expectations about having mystical experiences are not immediately met. One American that Norman interviewed had read MacLaine's (2000) book and wanted to have a similar spiritual awakening as the author had had. However, her experience quickly became blisters and aching legs, leading to an overall frustration with the journey. As Norman observed,

Pain, although mentioned in both [Coelho and MacLean's] books, is also found to be much harsher and consuming in reality. Knees suffer under the weight of a pack and the many kilometers, and the blisters people often develop are nearly crippling. Dealing with the visceral reality of the body takes some getting used to and at first seems to take up almost all of the pilgrims' free time.

(p. 58)

In contrast to the medieval pilgrimage who embraced the hardships of the pilgrimage journey, modern pilgrims seek to avoid injury and pain by any means necessary. Most pilgrims who plan on walking the Camino de Santiago begin to prepare for their journey months or even years in advance. There has in recent years been a proliferation of blogs and Facebook pages like the American Pilgrims Along the Camino that give advice to would-be Camino pilgrims regarding what gear, shoes, bag, and clothing should be purchased and worn; suggestions for proper footwear to eliminate blisters and orthopedic issues and dry wicking clothing to prevent chafing; and the best bags to alleviate back pain. While opinions can be diverse and subjective regarding the best shoes or footwear, one thing that everyone can agree upon is that pain is expected, no matter how prepared a person is.

Hospitality

Along with pain, hospitality is constant along the Camino. The *Codex Calixtinus* mentioned several hospices that were built at certain points of the Camino to provide shelter and to

help pilgrims recover from sickness and suffering. The *Codex*, however, cautioned that these hospices were meant to only be used for one night except under extreme conditions (Melczer 1993). In addition, the *Codex* admonishes true pilgrims to only take what is on their backs as did the apostles who were sent out without money or footwear:

What will become of those who go there with large and plump horses and mules with saddle bags of pleasing objects? If Blessed Peter went to Rome without footwear or money and, being crucified, finally went to the Lord, why do many pilgrims go to him, riding with much money and a second set of vestments, eating delicious foods, drinking very strong wine, and sharing nothing with their needy brethren?

(Coffey, Davidson & Dunn 1996: 29)

This hospitality is important because of the dangers along the Camino. As the *Codex* warns, some false pilgrims will try to take advantage of the true and repentant sojourner through cunning means. Early modern Spain's picaresque literature is full of characters who use trickery to take advantage of naïve and unsuspecting travelers. For example, in *La pícaro Justina* (de Úbeda 1968), the mischievous Justina spends her time walking the Camino participating in feast days and pilfering from intoxicated guests. Religious piety is certainly not the reason she walked the Camino! While there are still dangers along the Way, including occasional violent acts against pilgrims, most of the dangers have to do with health-related issues. Much of the Camino provides pilgrims a sense of isolation. Hospitality in the guise of a pilgrim's peer group, from amenity providers but more often from strangers along the Way, encourages weary pilgrims to continue along their journey.

As the students traveled the Camino, fellow pilgrims would offer advice about how to cope with the difficulties of the journey, and the students would share their essential oils with those who were experiencing physical ailments. Through this exchange of hospitable actions, not only did a form of *communitas* quickly take hold at the formed at the "albergues" or shelters in which the students stayed, as evenings were spent sharing mutual aches and pains with complete strangers, but the Wheaton students were inspired by the generosity and openness of the other pilgrims regarding their pain, often commenting on the kindness of strangers who had quickly become friends. In light of Christian theologies of hospitality, students had begun to model and were witnesses to true reflections of what Jesus meant when he declared in Matthew 25:34–46 that those who are welcoming and hospitable to strangers will inherit the kingdom of God. Sharing lodging, meals, and traveling together are mentioned frequently as hospitable acts in the New Testament (Luke 9: Acts 10:35). Similarly, pilgrims on the Camino share meals and lodging and walk with a community with strangers. In doing so, people change.

Resilience

The Qualtrics survey the students developed prior to their Camino pilgrimage focused on assessing the resilience of pilgrims as they were confronted with unexpected suffering, whether physical or emotional, while on their pilgrimage. The Qualtrics survey included 40 questions ranging from religious affiliation, age, amount of suffering, and distance walked. The survey was translated into Spanish, French, German, Italian, and Portuguese. Of the pilgrims that were invited to complete the survey, 281 pilgrims did so. During times of socialization along the Camino and after the three-week Camino journey through online platforms like the American Pilgrims on the Camino, we surveyed pilgrims to gauge their

suffering, both physically and emotionally. For the purpose of this paper, a focus is placed on the last ten questions in the survey in which we asked pilgrims to describe the level and type of pain they encountered on the Camino and whether or not the pain increased their openness and compassion for others.

Researchers have found that physical or bodily stress can be a healthy way to regenerate the body and create resilience in the brain so humans can adapt better to society. McEwen, Gray and Nasca (2015) define resilience in this sense as

...achieving a positive outcome in the face of adversity. Even when the healthy brain and associated behavior appears to have recovered from a stressful challenge, studies of gene expression have revealed that the brain is not the same, just as the morphology after recovery appears to be somewhat different from what it was before stress.

(p. 8)

Both in the survey and in speaking to pilgrims directly during the Camino, this idea of resilience was mentioned numerous times. Several pilgrims told us that would reach their chosen destination for a particular day, they would often feel that they could not continue their pilgrimage the following day. However, miraculously, the next day they would wake up feeling refreshed and ready to face another grueling day walking the Camino. In the survey results, two-thirds of respondents said that they suffered either physically or mentally. However, when asked to rank their level of physical and/or suffering on a scale from 1 to 10, there seemed to be no clear indication that one form of suffering was greater than another. Rather, respondents stated that both types of suffering equally encouraged them to increased spiritual contemplation during their pilgrimage. Respondents also mentioned that the hospitality that was given to them as they walked helped them to maintain their resilience—that sharing their personal tales of suffering with the broader Camino pilgrim community helped them to break down mental and pride-based barriers that were stopping them from experiencing true transformation. Indeed, prolonged time spent thinking and talking with others throughout the day while enduring pain often opened pilgrims' thoughts to prayer and mindful or contemplative practices. Some pilgrims commented:

It taught me to lean on God and on my group. I had to ask for help, make me slow down, and took down my pride a few notches. It reminded me of how Jesus suffered and also reminded me of the holistic elements of the physical along with the emotional and spiritual.

The suffering kept me grounded during the pilgrimage and allowed me to keep real with myself. I understood the toll this experience was taking on me, and I allowed myself to find the pain to help my self-discovery. I found out how I react to these situations I have never experienced before.

I left on the Camino to help recover from traumas I'd faced but had never dealt with. The Camino forced me to process and taught me how to process my own suffering on my own, sans medication. As for when I had a bum ankle for a week, it helped give me confidence that I can honestly do anything I set my mind to. I climbed a mountain on a terribly swollen and bruised ankle, I can do all.

It enabled me to grow and to finally look at the parts of myself that I had been ignoring for so long. It made me proud of parts of me that I'm typically ashamed of. It made me more confident, and it shaped my pilgrimage. I did not embark on this journey because I thought it would be a vacation. I knew I would suffer. But it all attributed (eventually) to the beauty of the Camino.

This suffering and resulting hospitality and resilience led again to a sense of *communitas*—the development of a spontaneous community that transcends markers of social structure (Di Giovine 2011). Indeed, as Schmidt (2012) notes, there is a “leveling action” that the Camino provides pilgrims, in that “we all end up hurting, aching, and limping, and seeking something...[The Camino] does away with so many of the role, class, religious, and other distinctions we place on our common humanity” (p. 135).

From an Evangelical perspective, Nouwen (1979) describes Christ as the “wounded healer,” and that through suffering the wounds that people carry are truly revealed. As a person engages with and opens up to a Christian community these wounds can be healed, “not because wounds are cured and pains are alleviated, but because wounds and pains become openings or occasions for a new vision” (94). As Wheaton students learned, it is through the sharing of suffering and the giving of compassionate service that the experiences of the Camino begin to overcome the physical and emotional pain that pilgrims often experience during their journey.

Conclusion

For the Wheaton students who walked the Camino, their pilgrimage still continues. They continue to frequently eat together, speak of their shared Camino experiences, and continue to write in their reflective journals. While the present COVID-19 pandemic has led to an upsurge in online groups participating in virtual pilgrimages of the Camino de Santiago, with many forum sites actively encouraging pilgrims to seek the Camino spirit in their local spaces, the students know that there is no real substitute for being on the Camino, for it is through true physical sacrifice and experience that true reflection and *communitas* can take place. Indeed, for the students, the Camino journey afforded them a special opportunity to face physical and mental opposition while sojourning as strangers in a foreign land, and in doing so helped them to (1) develop strategies of resilience as they face pain and suffering in their own lives in the future, (2) understand that sacrifice provides growth and honesty about one’s self that cannot be gained otherwise, and (3) acquire more sympathy and empathy for the struggles of strangers or others. In reality, by completing the Camino these evangelical students truly understand what it takes to “what is real, what is of God” (Cousineau 1998: xxx), and in doing so are better prepared to continue their life pilgrimage toward their eternal home.

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