



# The Challenge of Being Mary's Presence on the Camino de Santiago

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In the Church's long history pilgrimages have played a central role in Christian spirituality. As the Roman persecutions subsided, many sought to follow Christ (the "*sequela Christi*") by fleeing to the desert, while others sought penance and purification on a pilgrimage to a special place, such as Rome or Jerusalem. In Europe, a very special place captured the imagination of God's poor: Santiago de Compostela, the Shrine of St. James the Apostle in northwest Spain.

Last year, more than 300,000 people took up their staff (horse or bicycle in some cases) and made their way to the Shrine. Many are known as "seekers;" e.g., they seek meaning in life, often after a loss, a breakup, an important change in their life. The Way of St. James (The Camino of Santiago) has become an expression of one's search for meaning, as seen in the recent films "The Way" and "Saint Jacques la Mecque."

The Society of Mary in Europe has taken up the challenge of being Mary's presence on the Camino. We want to help seekers find God's love on their journey. In collaboration with the Benedictine Sisters of the Santa Cruz Monastery, we run the "Pilgrims' Hostel of the Holy Cross" at Sahagún, in Northern Spain ([www.alberguesensahagun.es](http://www.alberguesensahagun.es)).

As soon as you enter, you know you are in the right place. This is no hotel, and even if you come as a tourist, you will leave as a pilgrim. Maybe it's the light of the tabernacle in the chapel, or the light in people's faces. Maybe it's the chance to share a cup of coffee, a meal, a hearty laugh, or a story. Maybe it's listening or being listened to. There is definitely a Presence, and you definitely feel welcome.

The house itself is an older building, having welcomed pilgrims already for more than a century. Pilgrims here find a place

to rest, to quench their thirst, to leave aside the journey's burdens, and to drink from Mary's well at Nazareth. It is Christ Himself who urges us: "I was a pilgrim and you took me in." (Matthew 25:35)

Three Marist priests, Dani, Toño, and Andrea, take turns cooking, welcoming, making beds, and doing all sorts of other things to extend a warm, personal welcome to everyone. They also take time for personal prayer and their own spiritual growth. And they take time for listening. Many come here, like the woman at the well, seeking Life-giving water. So, they sit by the well and offer what they can.

Admittedly, not everyone is a pilgrim. Many are tourists, doing the Camino for relaxation or physical fitness. Others are homeless people, living off charity in the different hostels. Others are not even sure why they're here! However, all are welcome. Welcoming any visitor is a way for us to "go to the peripheries," as Pope Francis has asked. We, too, are pilgrims and seekers leaving our comfort zone to find Christ in all people, even in the so-called "unchurched."

And therein lies the challenge: How to help people find Christ's love on their journey? The Marists offer a *café del peregrino* ("a pilgrim's coffee"), a time for gathering around a pot of coffee to share and reflect upon Camino experiences and to seek ways to apply them. There is a supper, where all food is shared (the funny thing is, no one goes hungry!). These suppers are quite joyful, and the great diversity of languages and nationalities found on the Camino de Santiago is more an opportunity than an obstacle. The United Nations could take a page from our book! And in the morning the Marists offer the multilingual Pilgrims' Mass, followed by a Blessing of the Pilgrims on their Journey.





Three thousand pilgrims have already visited and shared a few hours of their life here. They have often expressed their gratitude for a warm bed, a warmer meal, and an even warmer welcome. Many have seen the Church's Marian face here before they continue their journey. Will they ultimately find what they're looking for? Meaning, peace, comfort...God? Ours is not to say. We are but 'useless' servants, seeking only to serve the Lord as Mary did. From the Shrine itself, some 260 miles away, the Marists sometimes receive a selfie, an email, a WhatsApp saying, "I made it!" or "Hello from Compostela!" and the best of all, "Thank you!"

In today's postmodern society so full of worries, stress, and empty pursuits, the Camino de Santiago has become a meeting point, a place for searching, a mirror to look at oneself. This is also true for us, as we Marists have become seekers. We seek ways to bring Christ to the world as it comes to us, but we also seek a deeper meaning to our religious vocation. We can no longer stay in our comfort zone and live in a "business as usual" mode because these people, who have become our brothers and sisters, challenge us: "Why are you here? Only to make money? Are you better than us? What gives you the right to tell us what is right and what is wrong?" Old answers will no longer do. Any sense in life must come from a deep, personal experience of being loved: by God, by Mary, by the Church. We offer nothing else except perhaps a light on their journey.

Maybe the hardest part is letting go: Morning comes, and the pilgrims go on their way. They must travel their own journey. Our paths might never cross again. They are free, as God's children should be. A smile, a hug, a blessing, and they're gone. Our hearts have met for too short a time, and yet we hope and believe that God is with them on their Camino.

So, if you want to visit as a pilgrim, if you would like to volunteer, or come to share a meal or a cup of coffee, "nuestra casa es tu casa" (our home is your home).



Left: Hostel entrance sign  
 Top left: Shared supper with pilgrims  
 Top right: John McAllister, SM and lay Marist Ana Sanchez outside hostel entrance  
 Bottom: Blessing of the pilgrims