



Pilgrimage Never Ends

Conrad Rudolph calls his book on “The Road to Santiago de Compostela” *Pilgrimage to the End of the World*.¹ But just where is the end of the world, and how do you know when you’ve arrived?

I’ve stood at Cape Point, the tip of the Cape of Good Hope, admired its rugged grandeur and incredible beauty, and enjoyed the jackass penguins, but that’s not the southernmost point of Africa and therefore not the primary place “Where Two Oceans Meet,” despite the wording on my souvenir T-shirt. In the 2010 movie about the Compostela pilgrimage, “The Way,” Martin Sheen’s character (“Tom”) knows he isn’t finished even after arriving at Santiago de Compostela (and getting the certificate to prove it), because he has been told by a native that he must continue to Muxía for the even grander experience of standing at the furthest edge of the ocean. But Muxía is not, in fact, the westernmost point of Spain. That honor belongs to Cabo Touriñán, some fifteen to twenty kilometers to the southwest. Even after throwing the ashes of his son into the ocean at Muxía (the purpose of his trip), “Tom” is not done. He puts on his backpack and continues his journey. The pilgrimage never ends.

Thousands of “pilgrims” now do the Camino (“the way”) every year—few of them, however, interested in the plenary indulgence that so enraged Martin Luther. Today’s certificate (called the Compostela) seems to be the secular equivalent of the indulgence, providing the evidence that “I’ve done it!” The journey to Compostela, now a World Heritage Site, is easier these days, with more way stations, inns, watering sites, and the possibility even of travel by automobile, horse, or bicycle. Nevertheless, for many, the ardor, the travail, the pain remain an essential part of the experience, as they were in medieval days. Similarly, at the *Scala Sancta* (the holy stairs) in Rome, where the point is to share in the very suffering of Jesus who was supposed to have ascended the stairs to get to his trial before Pontius Pilate. (Tradition has it that the staircase was removed to Rome.) At the *Scala Sancta*, too, a plenary indulgence is still available for those enduring the pain of climbing the stairs on their knees. I’ve done that one, and though I don’t think it brought me closer to heaven, there was something moving about sharing the experience with other “pilgrims.”

That “moving” experience was evident in the Sheen movie, in Conrad Rudolph’s book, and in the countless “testimonies” of folks on the Internet. Certainly, not all bad. And part of this is related to having “stood the test,” as James

¹Conrad Rudolph, *Pilgrimage to the End of the World: The Road to Santiago de Compostela* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

puts it (1:12). The Letter of James is filled with the kind of biblical wisdom and prophetic urging that, if heeded, would make us better people and ours a better world. Luther had no quarrel with that, which is why he praised James as a fine preacher of God's law. But Luther wanted the gospel, a road to which there is an (eschatological) end, namely, salvation in Jesus Christ.² Luther wanted forgiveness, not indulgences, a merciful God, not a holy place (not even one supposedly featuring the tomb of St. James—though, most would say, not the James of the New Testament letter).

Luther often railed against pilgrimages, and he did so in his sermons on James, though in his 1531 Christmas Afternoon sermon, Luther did agree that Christ could be found at Compostela—but only because Christ's reign (or "government") is everywhere. You don't have to go somewhere to find it, since it's in Wittenberg, too—even Rome. To try to find Christ by sharing in his suffering is a road to nowhere. Playing off of Isa 9:6 ("and the government will be on his shoulders" NIV), Luther proclaims,

But only those are Christians who are on his shoulder, that is, those who firmly trust him and allow themselves to be carried by him like the lost sheep. . . . Thus, here you see the very definition of the Son, the one who carries his subjects on his shoulder.

If we try to carry Christ with our works and merits, continues Luther,

he will prove too heavy for [us]. The sheep must say [instead], "Dear Shepherd, you carry me, not I you!" It would be some crazy sheep that wanted to carry him! Would it ever get something to carry! But Christ says, "Hop on! I will carry you well—and all your sins are forgiven."³

As Conrad Rudolph points out, "The premise of the pilgrimage was that the holy could be localized, and the crowds expected its presence to be palpable at the great holy sites."⁴ Again, seeking the holy is not a bad thing, nor is Paul's (or our) striving to "press on toward the goal" (Phil 3:14)—whether that goal be sacred or secular. But to "localize" the holy seems inevitably to invite trouble. "Holy" sites often become so special and precious that people feel the need to own them, to fight over them, to "protect" them with rules, restrictions, laws, exclusions, gates, and requirements of all kinds. Far better, then, to hear that the "holy" has broken the bonds of place and now seeks us in Jesus Christ.

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²For the record, many commentators now find more eschatology and Christology in James than did Luther, a viewpoint with which I agree.

³Martin Luther, "To Us a Child Is Born": Sermon on Isaiah 6, Afternoon of Christmas Day (December 25, 1531)," trans. Frederick J. Gaiser, *Word & World* 16/4 (1996) 399–400.

⁴Rudolph, *Pilgrimage*, 14.