

# The testimonies of 21st-century pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela on Instagram: an expression of sacredness?

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## **By way of introduction:**

Even before speech, what characterises humans is first and foremost bipedalism, which appeared around 2 million years ago. Our species, *Homo sapiens*, conquered the terrestrial horizon through a desire, an urge to explore. Thus, "the human species begins with the feet" (Leroi-Gourhan, 1982:168). Humans are physiologically structured to walk long distances and are one of the most enduring species. Their deeply rooted desire to project themselves into geographical space makes them migrants! Walking is linked to their very being, their development and their spirituality. For some, it is a vehicle for emancipation. "Walking is openness to the world" (Le Breton, 2000:11). It is also a means for humans to appropriate, or at least to reappropriate, the universe around us. "(It) introduces us to the sensation of the world, it is a full experience that leaves the initiative to man... walking is a peaceful method of re-enchanting time and space" (Le Breton, 2000:18-19). This distancing then produces a journey. It should be noted that walking questions our relationship to time and space. Ultimately, it challenges immediacy, an iconic characteristic of our digital and connected society. It is in this context that the pilgrimage to Compostela, where the tomb of Saint James the Greater is located, a thousand-year-old reality (Rucquoi, 2014), has been experiencing a revival for 35 years that shows no sign of abating. Approximately 15,000 pilgrims were recorded in Santiago de Compostela in 1992, while 499,186 were officially counted by the Santiago pilgrims' office in 2024<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://oficinadelperegrino.com>

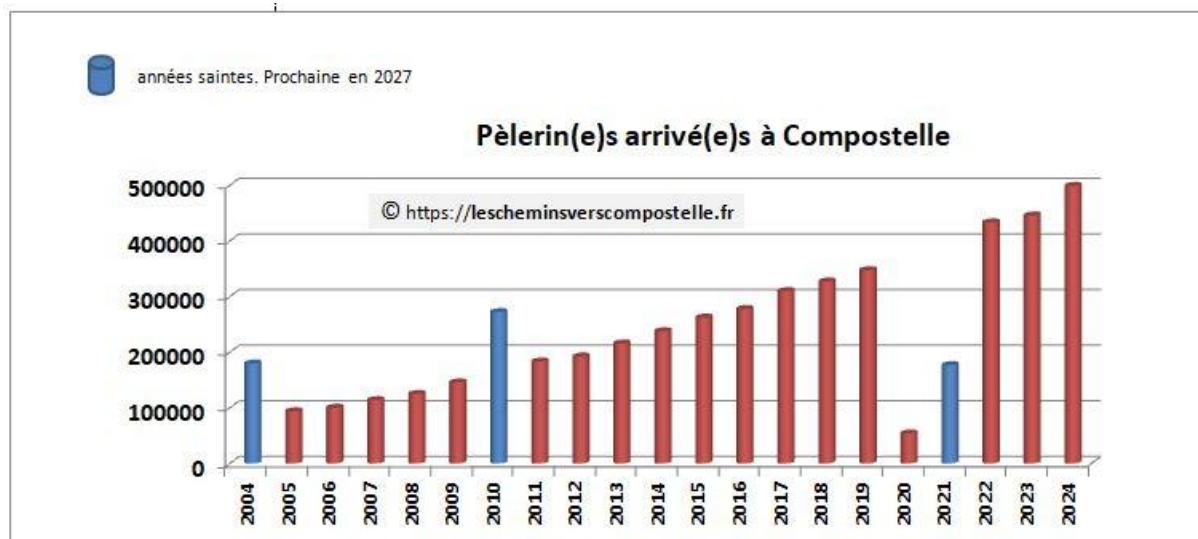


Figure 1: Evolution of visitor numbers on the Camino de Santiago 2004-2024. Source: <https://lescheminsverscompostelle.fr/statistiques/statistiques-pelerinage-compostelle>

This craze is also visible on social media, particularly on Instagram. In fact, there are 22,000 posts on Instagram with the hashtag `#saintjacquesdecompostelle`, 26,000 posts with the hashtag `#chemindesaintjacques`, 740,000 posts with the hashtag `#santiagodecompostela`, and 22,000 posts with the hashtag `#cheminidecompostelle`<sup>2</sup>. We conducted a lengthy study (Alcantara, 2020) combining the analysis of a photographic corpus of 3,950 photos from 15 Instagram accounts of people who had made the pilgrimage to Compostela with comprehensive in-depth interviews, enabling us to produce sociological portraits of these walkers, pilgrims and authors on Instagram. The aim of this study is to examine the act of communicating on Instagram by walkers-pilgrims. Is this a disruption in the pilgrim's journey? Why use this photography-focused social network in this long walking experience? With such digital communication practices, are there continuities and/or breaks with the history of this pilgrimage? To answer these questions, we will focus on the contemporary reality of the Camino de Santiago, which has led to the paths being designated as heritage sites, and then we will address the reality of walking to Santiago as communicated by the pilgrims in our study to examine the expression of sacredness online.

<sup>2</sup> Accessed May 2024.

## ***1/ The routes to Santiago: Political appropriation of a thousand-year-old history and geography:***

Welcoming two popes in twenty years, being the first route to be labelled a "European cultural asset", benefiting from UNESCO World Heritage status: all these actions, beyond their diversity, are evidence of a desire to instrumentalise the routes to Santiago so that they serve very current European interests. Indeed, whether it be the conventions produced by UNESCO or the Council of Europe, "these texts, undoubtedly intended to provide a framework for action, contribute at the same time to constructing a metatheory—a philosophy—of heritage as an ideological, legal and political fact" (Davallón, 2006:21).

### **11/ The affirmation of the Catholic faith and the Christian roots of Europe.**

Pope John Paul II visited Santiago de Compostela twice. The first time, in 1982, the pontiff delivered a message in which he expressed his desire to anchor the Church in the European project without forgetting its history and Christian roots: "I cry out to you, O ancient Europe, with a cry of love: find yourself, be yourself. Discover your origins. Revive your roots. Revive those authentic values that have made your history glorious and your presence on other continents beneficial. Rebuild your spiritual unity, in a climate of full respect for other religions and authentic freedoms. Spain's entry into Europe that year and the Pope's presence at the shrine of Spain's patron saint were a way for the Church to draw on the symbolic power of Compostela to affirm the roots of Europe. This pilgrim and cathodic pope created World Youth Day, the famous WYD, which is a global pilgrimage organised every two to three years. The stop in Compostela in 1987 was a way for John Paul II to reach out to young people, to show them their roots in the faith, the missionary and apostolic dimension of Catholicism, and the importance of pilgrimage, since the theme chosen by John Paul II for these days was taken from the Gospel of John: "I am the way, the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6). Jean-Paul II's ambition was to anchor European integration without renouncing its Christian roots. Following in the footsteps of his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI also visited Compostela, where he gave a homily on 6 November 2010. He spoke of the roots of European history in the Gospel. With three visits by two different popes in less than three decades, Santiago de Compostela is a powerful symbolic location affirming the role of the Church as a historical player in the pilgrimage routes to Compostela.

### **12/ Certification by the Council of Europe, an expression of the mythology of European history:**

In 1987, the Council of Europe created a label entitled "European Cultural Route". The aim was to highlight routes or cultural ensembles recognised as significant in their relationship with , promoting the history, heritage and common memory of Europe, within the field of cultural tourism. At that time and in that context, the aim was to create artefacts of the European imagination at a time when the removal of borders was a medium-term objective. However, the first route to be certified by the Council

of Europe in 1987 was the Way of St James, with a promoted route covering Germany, Belgium, Spain, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal and Switzerland. It is easy to see how the routes to Compostela were used to serve the major political project of European integration that was underway at the time. Legitimacy also comes from history and precedence, and the routes offer this image of a latent European consciousness through the pilgrims' journeys across different eras. They broke down borders and cultural barriers to create unity and community in their collective quest. Political appropriation through culture gives meaning to a route that has been a destination for Christian pilgrims for centuries, thus defining an *ad hoc* European identity.

### **1.3/ The inclusion of the routes in UNESCO's World Heritage List:**

This concerns Spain and France in succession. In 1993, the main Spanish route to Compostela, known as the Camino Frances, was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site as "a continuous linear cultural passageway from the Pyrenean passes to the city of Santiago de Compostela"<sup>3</sup> . In addition to 166 towns and villages and more than 1,800 buildings, a 30-metre strip on either side of the route was also listed. Without pun intended, the route was thus sanctified by culture. France, for its part, is initiating proceedings for the recognition of a group of properties of various kinds located on the four historic routes recognised by the *Codex Calixtinus*, highlighted in France in the pilgrim's guide translated by Jeanne Vielliard in 1938. Thus, in 1998, the World Heritage Committee approved the site proposed by France, stating in its final decision that: "Throughout the Middle Ages, Santiago de Compostela was the most important destination for countless pilgrims from all over Europe. To reach Spain, pilgrims had to cross France, and the notable historical monuments that make up this World Heritage listing were landmarks on the four routes they took"<sup>4</sup> . A unique cultural property has been created, comprising seventy-eight elements consisting of seven sections of trails and seventy-one monuments, including seven bridges, a dolmen, twenty-two churches, twenty-one cathedrals or basilicas, etc. At the time of their inscription, the routes to Santiago, whether property 868, i.e. the French route, or the Spanish route, were "new" objects. Indeed, tangible heritage is associated with sections of trails to qualify and perpetuate landscapes, i.e. intangible heritage. The ensemble inscribed on the UNESCO list is therefore a construction designed to offer meaning and coherence of memory in the service of a contemporary vision of the world, namely a shift from the religious sphere to the cultural sphere in these times of secularisation.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://fr.unesco.org>

<sup>4</sup> <https://fr.unesco.org>



Figure 2 - The UNESCO label for property 868, the Routes of Santiago de Compostela in France (1998) and properties 669 and 669 bis, namely the Routes of Santiago de Compostela: Camino Francès (1993) and Routes of Northern Spain (2015).

UNESCO World Heritage status is a powerful vehicle for raising awareness and attractiveness, thereby increasing the number of visitors to the routes. It is a catalyst for the communicational dimension of heritage preservation (Davallon, 2006). It is difficult to distinguish precisely how much of the steady and continuous growth in visitor numbers to the routes is due to World Heritage status. However, it is clear that this represents a significant lever in the development of this new form of spiritual tourism, which is being organised and developed along the route, reaching a record number of 318,000 pilgrims recognised by the Compostela office in 2018. Very different political forces have converged to appropriate the routes in very different ways and participate, at least in part, in their revival. At best, politics accompanies pilgrimages; it does not create them *ex nihilo*.

We can therefore see that successive certifications contribute to what Jean Davallon calls a regime of heritage preservation for the routes to Compostela (Davallon, 2024). The heritage of the routes consists of monuments and landmarks listed by UNESCO, but the route itself becomes an integral and complex heritage object, and the practices observed there, namely pilgrimage, also form part of a heritage dynamic. It is now up to us to examine the practices of 21st-century pilgrims, as we have observed and analysed them.

## 2/ Pilgrims in the 21st century on the routes to Santiago

### 21/ Towards a definition of the historical figure of the pilgrim:

It should be remembered that the word "pilgrim", used to designate someone who travels to a sanctuary on a spiritual journey, was originally the name given exclusively to those who travelled to Compostela. The term has since expanded beyond this single destination to refer to all those who take part in a pilgrimage. It is therefore a testament to the popularity and success of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in its day. Even today, walking is the preferred means of travelling to Santiago de Compostela. Pilgrimage is a collective event, yet at the same time the pilgrim is alone in the midst of the crowd, facing themselves and focused on their inner self. The popular nature of the pilgrimage to Santiago means that both the powerful and the common people have made the journey. It is a phenomenon that has embraced all social classes from the beginning to the present day. Pilgrims physically commit themselves to a destination, since "pilgrimage is a material manifestation of a spiritual journey" (Chélini and Branthomme, 2004: 439). The question then arises as to what motivates pilgrims to set out on the road. Why leave? Historically, pilgrims set out for several possible reasons: to pray to the apostles, to fulfil a vow, to repent, or to atone for their sins through penance. It should be remembered that in the Middle Ages, "pilgrimage was part of people's lives" (Rucquoi, 2014: 27). In completing their journey, pilgrims were not wandering aimlessly, but were striving towards a destination, towards a goal that was the purpose of their journey. The purpose of this motivation was a personal one. In line with the work of Dupront (Dupront, 1987), we believe that pilgrims were seeking sacredness. Sacredness goes beyond the realm of the sacred. Indeed, the latter may appear too restrictive when we say that the sacred is the insertion of the divine into the earthly. Moreover, the relationship to the sacred is so polymorphous, intimate and sensory that it is difficult to describe it without altering it. " Sacredness is indeed the voice of silence. It is neither encountered nor displayed, content to be culturally or cognitively signs, cultually sources. In the dual approach that proves essential, that of places and that of titles, a world system and a collective life experience come together that only the vocabularies of signs they give us can allow us to glimpse. The sacredness of the path is therefore potential and is expressed through the interpretation, appropriation and personal understanding that the pilgrim gives to the signs that make up the path and that he experiences in his own flesh through the accomplishment of the walk. This has been the case since the advent of the Camino de Santiago in a religious context (we will see later that sacredness can be separated from religion). The pilgrim sets out in search of sacredness, and this experience is a necessity for the human species according to the anthropology of pilgrimage developed by Dupront. The pilgrim's walk releases these sacralising signs, which are unique to each individual on the way but also upon arrival at the sanctuary of Saint James. We can therefore see that sacralisation is a personal, individual relationship

with the sacred that is built up along the way. This sacralisation is also expressed through the surpassing of oneself that is achieved by each pilgrim on the way to Santiago. The necessity, the need to encounter the sacred, the sacredness sought by man is the driving force behind this initial impulse to set out. It is in setting out for elsewhere, with the desire to encounter the other, the Absolute, that the very essence of the pilgrim's gesture is expressed. The pilgrim to Santiago de Compostela is in search of the sacred. And their impulse to set out is based on a free act, at least in most cases throughout history and even more so today. Sacralisation is embodied by the constant, daily attention of the pilgrim who sets out on the journey towards the goal of reaching the end of the road, the sanctuary. The pilgrim thus begins a break with the past in the sense that they renounce their daily life to experience the uncertain, the distant, the other. This sacred adventure was historically fraught with potential dangers, but today it is a test. Pilgrims accept a temporary identity and social marginalisation along the way. These are the factors that contribute to placing pilgrims on a quest, a search for sacredness.

## **22/ Testimonials on Instagram: An expression of self?**

### **221/ Images of walking:**

This is one of the most recurring themes in our corpus. It should be noted that all of the pilgrims studied are walkers on the roads to Compostela, as are 93% of the pilgrims who come to collect their *Compostela* at the pilgrims' office in Santiago. The images presented are very quickly identifiable with the Camino de Santiago. Indeed, *the pecten maximus* is most often attached to the backpack. The backpack is packed as if for a long walk. Very often, the walk takes place over vast expanses of wilderness and sometimes even arid landscapes, which are the most visually distinctive features of the Camino Frances. Pilgrims are regularly photographed by others, outsiders, which gives the image the illusion of solitude often associated with the pilgrim's imagination. The photos are also often taken from behind, in motion.



Figure 3 - Photographs taken from the "Images of Walking" corpus

The walk is thus captured as closely as possible to reality, from dawn to dusk. The pilgrim is thus a subject in the service of the walk, which is really the heart of this subset. The pilgrim is captured in motion and we perceive the tension of this walk towards the destination, which is Compostela. These photographs, often taken from behind, do not express an escape but rather an effort towards the same direction, the same meaning! This walk is therefore embodied. Reality is then translated by focusing on points of the body that show effort, commitment and action towards the destination. The walk is illustrated by one or more people, and the photographs alternate to capture solitary moments and collective dynamics.

## 222/ Images of the body:

Walking is a way for city dwellers who take to the trails to reclaim their bodies. Endurance is often a potential that surprises those who take to the trails for the first time. But walking has an effect on the body. This is then shown. Always in the same way: direct, without staging to illustrate the experience. Pilgrims photograph their legs and feet, the vehicles of walking that they must stimulate, preserve, care for and maintain. Long walks leave their mark on the body. The feet bear witness to endurance and sometimes suffering. There are very few places on the web where people expose their bruised feet to talk about themselves! Photos of this nature can be found in most of the Instagram accounts studied. Paradoxically, this highlighting of the feet at the end of the walk is a modest way of evoking endurance, which can hurt the body, weaken it and also affect the soul. This modesty is also expressed through the publication of photographs of the shadows cast by the sun on the pilgrims' path. Beyond an aesthetic pursuit, we detect another way of evoking the body, fatigue and the day's walk through the shadow of

one's own body. This is a metaphor for a negative reading of a body that is evoked in relief. It is not the subject, but the vehicle for this ambition and daily commitment.

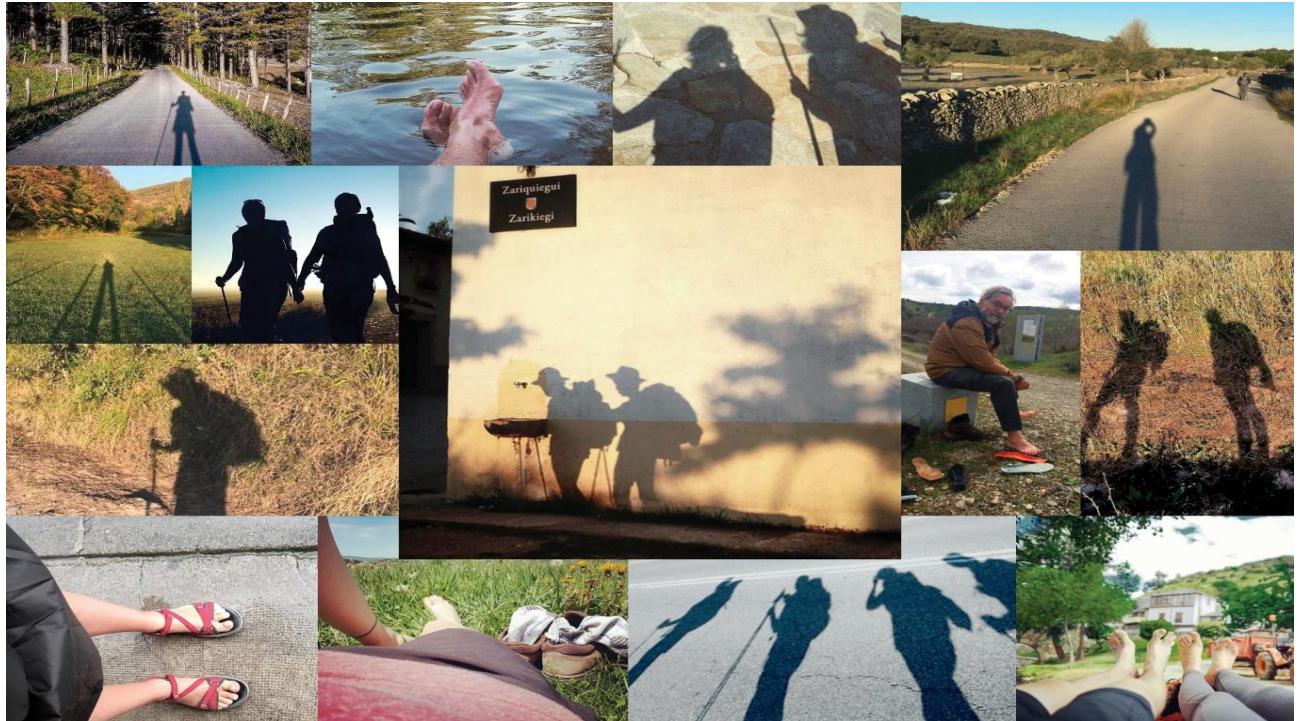


Figure 4 - Photographs taken from the corpus "Images of the body"

## 223/ The symbolic markers of Santiago de Compostela

Before discussing the specific markers of the routes to Compostela, let us briefly mention the symbols of the modern pilgrim. As in the past, their clothing and equipment are the first signs of this. Nowadays, pilgrims often carry a well-filled rucksack. They also wear a hat, carry a walking stick and wear hiking boots. They are thus identified as "long-distance" walkers, to use the expression coined by Emile, a pilgrim whose sociological profile has been outlined above. In short, pilgrims are identified by their attire, which, as in the past, is a marker of the temporary identity they assume, namely that of pilgrim. The photographs also show that the walk continues regardless of the weather; rain gear is de rigueur. The photographs reveal something more than a simple tourist walk.



Figure 5 - Photographs taken from the corpus "The symbolic markers of Saint James"

The stylised representation of the yellow scallop shell on a blue background is another symbol that is often present. It was created by the Council of Europe when the Compostela routes were granted the status of European Cultural Route in 1994. This symbolic marking, which identifies the routes and guides pilgrims, is regularly photographed by them. It is a way of acknowledging, or even claiming, the fact of being on a particular route, which has its own uniqueness and strong identity, with the recent signposting serving as a marker that each walker recognises in order to find their way. We therefore see an appropriation of an institutional symbolic marker.

Another marker is present on all the profiles analysed: *the pecten maximus*, or scallop shell. It is the icon of the path, the symbolic reference point for the path. Sylvain, a pilgrim interviewed, tells us that the shell is "a visa, a pass" for smiles and kindness on the paths. The appropriation of this marker is very viral. It is worn by most pilgrims very quickly. It is a symbolic vector of temporary membership in an ephemeral society of pilgrims, whose main marker guides the gaze of others and facilitates dialogue and contact with third parties. One could say that this marker is a formidable brand logo, if we were to use a commercial metaphor.

Another type of marker that regularly appears online among our pilgrims is the photograph of the *Compostela*, i.e. the parchment issued by the pilgrims' office in Santiago de Compostela when the pilgrim can prove that they have walked more than 100 kilometres on foot thanks to their *credencial*.

The symbolic value of this document, which is issued by the Catholic Church, is shared by all the pilgrims observed, regardless of their religious beliefs. The symbol transcends and goes beyond personal histories and beliefs; it is an additional support for this ephemeral pilgrim society.

Finally, the religious symbols that regularly dot the paths, whether crosses, representations of the Virgin Mary or Saint James, are also reminders of its historical nature.

### **23/ From the sacredness of the sanctuary to the sacralisation of the path:**

The path is the other component of the pilgrimage. It is the most photographed and shared subject on Instagram. In our study, it represents 1,170 photos out of a total of 3,950. The path is embodied. Pilgrims often identify it with a character. It is a "travelling companion" for Antoine, it is "THE Camino" for Sylvain. The path associated with walking is at the heart of the pilgrim's journey. It occupies a large part of the pilgrim's imagination and is a moment of truth. For our pilgrims, the path is imprinted on the body. Antoine says: "At the end of the day, the path is in our legs. " The path is also treated photographically as a character. It is central. Sometimes it is close, tangible, at ground level, within reach; and in other photos, it is infinite and inaccessible. The path is indeed the place of the pilgrim experience. Each pilgrim is focused on the destination, namely Compostela, but many things happen along the way, especially encounters. The path thus becomes the centre of gravity of the pilgrimage, to the detriment of the sanctuary, which no longer necessarily has the same importance in the imagination of today's pilgrims. Antoine tells us that 'the path is both a means and an end in itself'. Emile notes that 'Saint James is fading into the background in favour of the paths to Compostela'. There is therefore a sacredness to the journey that comes from the unique and individual experience that each pilgrim has along the way. It is a third party mediator that allows the spiritual experience to be fulfilled. Walking, which is accessible to all, allows you to invest in the journey, which is imbued with imagination and a wealth of symbols that also contribute to its sacredness. For Perrine, "the places vibrate because they are steeped in history, in the pilgrims who have been converging on the same destination for a thousand years". This antiquity, this thousand-year history, contributes to the development of a mythology that feeds the imagination of the Camino de Santiago and pilgrimage. It is an accessible vehicle that does not require knowledge of religious rites. The paths are open and embody the sacred encounter because it is endured to the end by the pilgrim. Thus, "both the depth of the past and that of space have a sacralising value" (Dupront, 1985:202). The paths are therefore rites of passage that change the lives of pilgrims. Emile tells us that what he experienced on the paths was an earthquake that continues to have an effect. This sacralisation of space through the paths is in fact based on a commitment, an extraordinary act of putting oneself into action, in total rupture with

the life lived until then. The experience of the paths is sensitive, affects the pilgrim, and the pilgrim wishes to bear witness to this sacredness. This is why the path is the main subject of the photographs in our corpus. Whether in close-up or panoramic view, the path occupies the space; it is the heart of the pilgrim's journey as experienced by the pilgrims themselves.

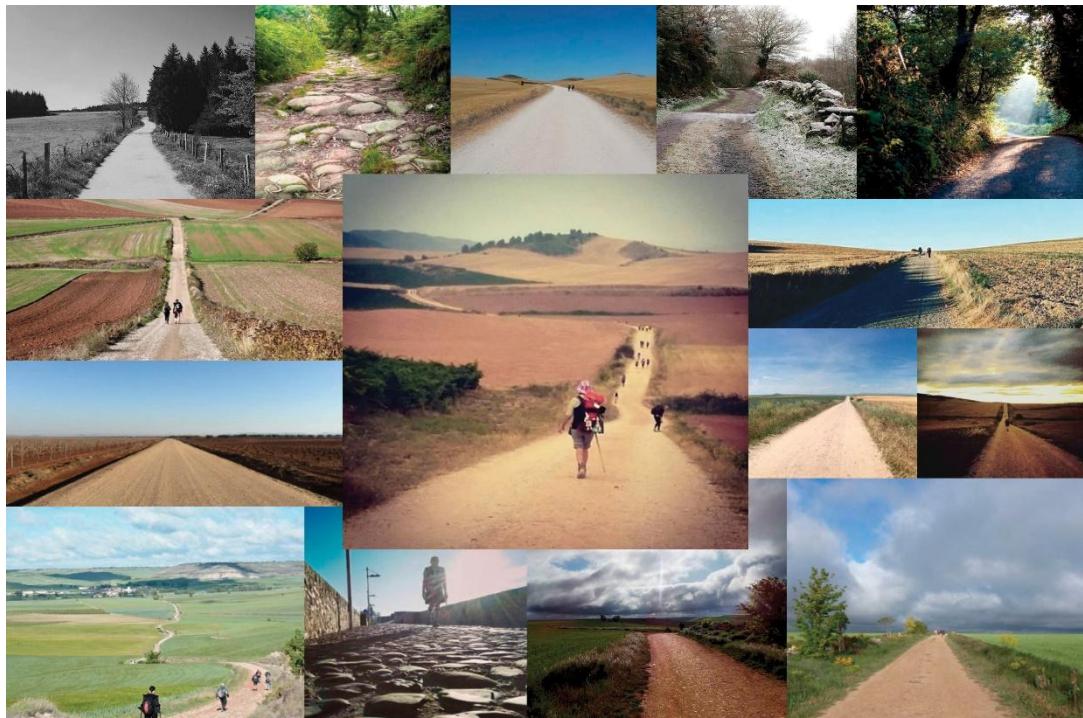


Figure 6 - Photographs from the "The Path" collection

We can therefore perceive a sense of sacredness in the photographs of the path. This is conveyed, for example, through silence. It may seem surprising to photograph silence, but this is indeed the intention expressed by some of our pilgrims, as we perceived it. Silence is an implicit theme that can be sensed in the immensity of the paths and encounters, as paradoxical as that may seem. "On the way, the walker listens and hears the silence, a place where inner words blossom" (Nieuvierts, 2018:256). Furthermore, the sacredness of the paths is conveyed through the placement of markers, signs and landmarks that serve as reminders for the pilgrim on their journey. These markers, in the form of cairns, graffiti or rosaries placed on crosses, perfectly illustrate what is sometimes a secular sacralisation and at other times a religious sacralisation. They are essentially personal markers left by pilgrims, which spread and multiply as they walk on a pilgrimage that transcends them. This large photographic corpus, in which the path is the main subject, clearly shows the current shift taking place on the pilgrimage to Compostela. **Previously, the sanctuary was the goal of the pilgrimage and the path was the means of reaching it. Now, in our secularised society, the path is the goal, to the detriment of the sanctuary!**

It is in this sense that the path becomes a subject imbued with a secular sacredness for many of today's pilgrims.

### **Conclusion: the 21st-century pilgrim, producer of acts of remembrance on the web**

In the long term, the act of communicating on Instagram becomes an act of transmission in the mediological sense of the term, i.e. a transport through time of the force that is specific to pilgrimage and the spiritual quest expressed by the walkers-pilgrims interviewed. The form of pilgrimage is evolving along with society because pilgrimage is deeply rooted in society. There is a desire to follow in the footsteps of those who preceded the pilgrims of the 21st century. The media is evolving; Instagram is by definition a very recent social network focused on photo sharing, but the act of communicating one's pilgrimage online is a continuation of the stories of the journey to Compostela that have been told for a thousand years (Rucquoi, Michaud-Fréjaville, Picone, 2018). There is a desire to create a link, a bridge between the rich past of Compostela, the present embodied in the pilgrim's experience in the field, this act of memory, and the future through the expression of an act of transmission. A modest link in the dynamic of pilgrimage to Compostela, which is now a social phenomenon. The Instagram accounts studied are therefore no longer really about online identity, but rather a digital presence for transmission and dissemination over time. Indeed, "digital presence cannot be reduced to a status or a sum: it unfolds over time, not in a score. The memory it evokes is therefore not that of statistics but that of encounters and adoptions that weave individual stories together to produce a collective. " (Merzeau, 2013:104). The collective observed is a "community of letting go" (Bertin, 2014) that seeks a spiritual quest, a reflective approach, an existential pause in our modern lives.

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