

## Camino Companions: Had the Experience? Want to Deepen the Meaning?

Scegli una città, Spain

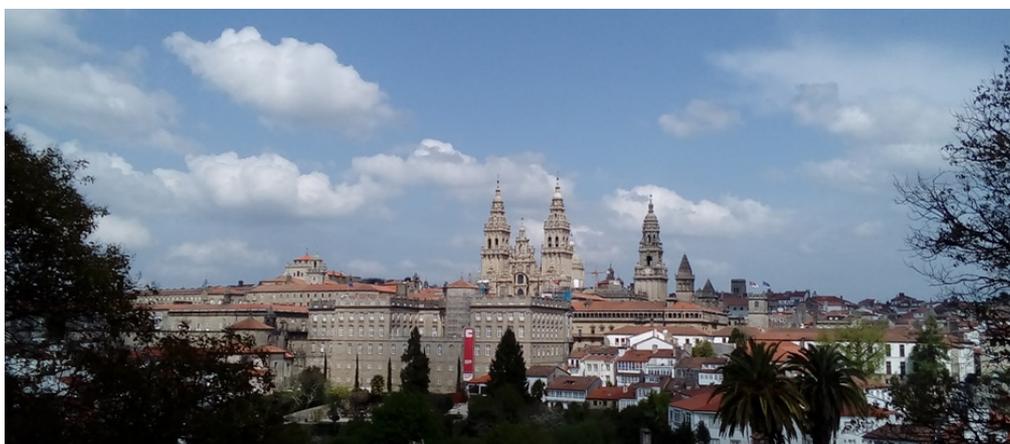
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*A reflection by Sr Els, fcJ on her ministry in the [Camino Companions](#) project, first appeared in the [Weaving One Heart: Contemporary FCJ Voices](#) blog.*

One of the newer projects of the Area of Europe is [Camino Companions](#): a place where sisters FCJs and collaborators welcome pilgrims as they arrive in Santiago de Compostela. We organise the Mass in English in a side chapel of the Cathedral, but mostly, we are in the [Pilgrim's Office](#) offering reflection sessions for individuals or groups, or we hang around and chat to the pilgrims as they arrive and are queuing to get their [compostela](#)— the certificate that proves they have walked at least 100 kms or cycled 200 kms to Santiago de Compostela.

There is something magical about the name itself: 'Santiago de Compostela'. For, however long pilgrims have been on their way, reaching Santiago was their focus, their destination, their purpose. Even before actually setting off on pilgrimage, just thinking about it, dreaming about it and planning, is loaded with anticipation, hopes and dreams for pilgrims. It's what gets them up in the morning, what makes them put one foot in front of the other. But what happens then when they finally arrive in Santiago? Often there's the initial excitement, pride in what they've achieved, gratitude for the unforgettable journey, and for the main sites they visited. They go to Mass in the cathedral, experience confession, hug the statue of St James, queue to receive the [compostela](#), have a drink with fellow pilgrims to celebrate...



*Santiago de Compostela*

But then... it's over really, isn't it? Back to normal, back to life as it was before setting off! Is this still possible now because one has changed so much? And then there are some who have left their old life and are planning to make some drastic changes and hoping that the pilgrimage would give them some ideas. Now they find that there isn't anything to go back to, so what now? As long as the pilgrim was on the way, life was easy and afterwards reality looms darkly. Many realise quickly: the journey is more important than the destination!

Something else that hits pilgrims, especially those who have met a number of pilgrims and then have set off alone on a longer pilgrimage, is a sudden sense of loneliness. Many have felt themselves supported by the companionship along the way, bonding with people who walk similar distances and running into the same people in the *albergues*. All of a sudden these friendships get lost in the masses, people go home, while others continue to walk further to Muxia and or Fisterra.

Camino Companions offers pilgrims some companionship right in the middle of all this turmoil: a listening ear and the opportunity to think about what it all meant.



*Camino Companions: Coffee after the Mass in English*

T.S. Elliot's famous phrase: *We had the experience, but missed the meaning*, gives us food for thought. Looking back on my own journey, it took me quite some time to get the experience in perspective and to get a certain grip on it. Upon arrival I felt it was a bit of an anti-climax and thought, "Well was that worth it now? It was hardly a life changing experience".

And yet, often since my experience, I have found myself going back to my Camino: pondering about the moments of surprising grace, particularly after a time of difficulty. Likewise I have come to the realisation that the more difficult or longer the periods of uncertainty or despair last, the greater the joy when suddenly God's grace breaks through and lifts the clouds. As St. John of the Cross says so beautifully:

*To come to the pleasure you have not  
You must go by a way in which you enjoy not.  
To come to the knowledge you have not  
You must go by a way in which you know not.  
To come to the possession you have not  
You must go by a way in which you possess not.  
To come to be what you are not  
You must go by a way in which you are not.*

(John of the Cross, *The Ascent*, Book 1, Chapter 13, 10).

Several times I have wondered: would I be here, where I am now, if it hadn't been for my Camino? Of course only God knows!



*Marker: km 0.00 to Muxia*



“ Chiediamo a Nostro Signore di darci lo spirito della Compagnia di Gesù. Siccome abbiamo le Costituzioni, è volontà di Dio che noi abbiamo il suo spirito. ”

*Marie Madeleine d'Houët*

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## Fedeli Compagne di Gesù

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