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# Hospitality on the Camino de Santiago: Clues from Interviews with *Hospitaleros* During the Pandemic

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The practice of making the pilgrimage along the Camino de Santiago (the Way of Saint James), one of the three most important medieval pilgrimage routes in Europe, has undergone various transformations related to religious, cultural and political considerations. In 2019, the Pilgrim's Reception Office in Santiago de Compostela recorded 327,378 pilgrims from all over the world. The aim of this research was to understand the impact of the pandemic on *hospitaleros* – the individuals who host pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago – and perform a comparative analysis against the hotel industry. In particular, it was noted that in a majority of studies and papers on the tourism and hotel industry, the primary criteria of evaluation were economic issues and the impact of the pandemic on the economy in terms of supply–demand and seller–buyer relationships.

The study examined the characteristics of hospitality, which – in an etymological sense – is understood as cordiality and selfless kindness shown to strangers and is regarded in culture as one of the most valuable attitudes towards other human beings. In public discourse, the term most frequently appears in reference to travels, pilgrimages, tourism and other forms of intercultural contact, including diplomacy and migration policy.

**Key Words:** hospitality, pilgrimage, religious tourism, *hospitaleros*, Camino de Santiago

## Introduction

Throughout the centuries, the practice of making the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage has undergone various transformations related to religious, cultural and political considerations. In 2019, the Pilgrim's Reception Office in Santiago recorded 327,378 pilgrims from all over the world who walked at least 100 km or cycled at least 200 km. In 2020, the number of pilgrims on the Camino decreased by 84.49 percent compared to 2019 (Xunta de Galicia, 2020). While the beginning of 2020 was promising, the pandemic spread all across the world in March, causing the number of pilgrims embarking on the Camino de Santiago to drop to zero in April and May (Mróz, 2021). While a significant increase was observed in July and August, the numbers fell again from September onwards, which is a subject for further reflection (Xunta de Galicia, 2019; Xunta de Galicia, 2020; López & Lois González, 2021).

Observation of the situation associated with the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19 prompted us to plan a project that would enable us to understand the impact of the pandemic on the *hospitaleros* on the Camino de Santiago. The objective of the project was to investigate how the restrictions associated with the pandemic affected the Camino space, how pilgrims could continue to plan their Caminos under these circumstances and how the *hospitaleros* were coping with the situation. In addition, we also would like to reflect on the future of the Camino de Santiago after the coronavirus crisis. Is COVID radically changing the Camino? Does the community spirit still exist or is there an increasing trend towards isolation? Which customs have been most affected by the changes and, if so, does it entail changes in the spiritual style and perception towards individual 'resignation'? Is the value of the Camino subjectively increasing now in the face of new difficulties?

To collect the necessary data, we planned research that would be conducted using a qualitative methodology in the form of a series of interviews with *hospitaleros*. The research was originally scheduled to take place between February and April 2021, however, as early as January it became clear that the restrictions put in place would not permit the work to be completed in the traditional manner. Therefore, since it was not possible to travel from Poland to Santiago, the decision was made to conduct the survey in the form of telephone interviews.

To understand the situation of the *hospitaleros* correctly, the choice was made to conduct a comparative analysis against the hotel industry in the context of the pandemic. This made it possible to identify both certain similarities and fundamental differences between the two settings. In particular, it was noted that in a majority of studies and papers on the tourism and hotel industry, the primary criteria of evaluation are economic issues and the impact of the pandemic on the economy in terms of supply–demand and seller–buyer relationships. The study therefore is also a reference to George Ritzer’s idea of *macdonaldization*.

### Theoretical Background

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting decline in worldwide tourism, this study aims to analyse the possible scenarios for the Camino de Santiago and offer some reflections on the present situation and outlooks for the future. Steady increase in the number of pilgrims arriving in Santiago had been observed in the pre-pandemic years: from 99,436 in 1993 to 347,578 in 2019 (data from the Pilgrim’s Reception Office). In addition, the traditional Catholic pilgrimage route had become multi-denominational, with even non-believers finding joy in being close to nature and searching for spiritual peace along the way (Farias *et al.*, 2018; Roszak, 2019; Seryczyńska, 2019), as also evidenced by the fact that the Pilgrim’s Reception Office now issues two types of certificates: a religious certificate in Latin and a secular certificate in Spanish (Chemin, 2011). This would indicate that there are essentially two types of wayfarers making their way to Santiago: pilgrims and tourists (Roszak, 2020), which shows that as well on the Camino there is a transformation from traditional religiosity to various forms of spirituality and secular naturalism (Cañón-Loyes, 2015; Mróz, 2016; Mróz, 2019).

Our study examined the characteristics of hospitality, which – in an etymological sense – is understood as cordiality and selfless kindness shown to strangers and is regarded in culture as one of the most valuable attitudes towards other human beings. Despite many similarities

and parallels, there is a fundamental difference between the situation of the *hospitaleros* surveyed and that of hotel owners and employees in the face of the pandemic.

The difference between a pilgrim hostel and a tourist hostel was very clear in the interviews. The respondents stressed the fact that in addition to the differences in price and the services offered, there was also – and above all – a difference in interpersonal relations. *Hospitaleros* typically treat pilgrims as guests in their homes rather than customers, because in the tourism sector visitors are usually treated as customers. This difference was further accentuated by the responses by these *hospitaleros* concerning the relationship between the pilgrim and the *hospitalero*, which is not a mere business transaction, but rather a multifaceted experience that enriches both parties. A majority of the *hospitaleros* have made the pilgrimage to Santiago and spoke of how important it was for them to have experienced, understood and fallen in love with the Camino to then be able to welcome their pilgrim guests. There were also cases where people who had hosted pilgrims became inspired by that experience to walk the Camino themselves. In addition, it was not uncommon for an entire family – husband and wife, parents and children or consecutive generations of hosts – to work in a converted part of their house.

For many hostel owners, the pandemic is a difficult time due to the need to reduce the number of guests they receive or close down entirely. *Hospitaleros*, however, look to the future with hope as they often value the spiritual aspect more than the material side of things. They also show great patience as they wait for pilgrims to return to the trail.

Furthermore, on account of the current Compostela Holy Year (Spanish: *Año Santo Compostelano*), *hospitaleros* are more optimistic about the current situation and hope that it will improve. In many cases, they have been using the time to make the necessary repairs.

#### *Situation of hotel industry professionals in the face of the pandemic*

To understand the current situation of *hospitaleros*, it is important to provide some insight into the situation of the hotel industry in the face of the pandemic. This will make it possible at a later stage to compare the two areas, identify certain similarities and differences between them, and present possible future scenarios.

The primary metrics in a majority of studies and papers on the tourism and hotel industry were economic issues and the impact of the pandemic on the economy, which means

that these studies rely on supply–demand and seller–buyer relationships (Bakar & Rosbi, 2020). However, in the previously mentioned idea of *macdonaldization*, Ritzer referring to a quote from the comic strip Zippy by Bill Griffith points out:

*Has it not occurred to them that the growth of tourism they so promote threatens to macdonaldize their culture? Are they not afraid of being seduced by its glamour?* (Ritzer, 2013:7)

Although the mechanisms of *macdonaldization* entail many positive changes, including the popularity and easier and faster access to various goods and services among people of lower social status or financial resources, Ritzer also shows the dangerous face of this phenomenon. He quotes Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman as an example:

*Railroad administrators are primarily interested in the amount of freight carried in tons per kilometer. It doesn't matter what the cargo is - people, fruit or barbed wire - they are interested in quantity, not quality. To most officials, however, even such a vague concept as cargo seems to be too loaded with qualitative characteristics. They are only interested in the financial outcome of activities. Money* (Ritzer, 2013:55).

At the same time, it is important to note that within studies on hospitality, the focus is put on the beneficial effects for companies that use innovations centered around guest experience to enhance interaction, personalisation and social spaces (Sipe, 2021). However, the core areas identified by the team led by Mohammad Reza Davahli, who conducted a review of all the recent papers and studies, were as follows: recovery of the industry, market demand, revenue losses, COVID-19 spreading patterns, job loss, safety and health, hospitality workers' issues, travel behaviours and social costs (Davahli *et al.*, 2020).

In one of the studies, the government was urged to discover a vaccine as soon as possible and establish policies that would prevent further decline in demand for hospitality services in the post-pandemic period (Bakar & Rosbi, 2020). The authors of another study analysed various solutions such as social distancing measures and mask mandates, ultimately coming to the conclusion that distancing-based measures entail significant economic losses (D'Orazio, Bernardini & Quagliarini, 2020). Several studies have also noted the impact of COVID-19

on specific critical aspects of the hotel industry, such as the issue of undocumented hotel workers and cleaners (Williams & Kayaoglu, 2020).

## Method

Due to the prolonged epidemic situation, the telephone in-depth interview (TDI) / individual in-depth interview (IDI) method was used. First, an interview script was developed. Then, 20 interviews were conducted (*albergues municipales* – 4 interviews, *albergues religiosos* – 2 interviews, and *albergues privados* – 14 interviews), and visual material was collected. Sampling was dependent on the interviewers' ability to contact the interviewees. While an attempt was made to balance the number of respondents representing the above three types of *albergues*, this proved impossible to achieve in practice as many locations could not be contacted. Furthermore, the *hospitaleros* who agreed to be interviewed were typically very busy and asked for the interviews to be as brief as possible (there were even some who requested that the interview should not take more than 10 minutes), although some interviews lasted more than 30 minutes, two lasted 45 minutes, and one lasted approximately one hour. As part of the research, interviews were conducted with *hospitaleros* aged 23 to 84 who were hosts of *albergues* – hostels, dormitories, inns, taverns, lodgings, *refugios* (from the Latin *refugiūm*). On the basis of the transcripts, the results were analysed and presented at the IV Congreso Internacional de la Cátedra Institucional del Camino de Santiago y de las Peregrinaciones de la USC (July 21–22, 2021). In addition, a video was produced on the basis of the visual material collected.

The study examined the characteristics of hospitality, which is understood in an etymological sense as cordiality and selfless kindness shown to strangers and is regarded in culture as one of the most valuable attitudes towards other human beings. In public discourse, the term usually appears in reference to travels, pilgrimages, tourism and other forms of intercultural contact, including diplomacy and migration policy (Maier, 2009; Lynch *et al.*, 2011), and in the discourse of the Catholic Church, it is present as a metaphor for the relationship between the earthly world and the supernatural world (Pisarek, 2014:4). Being based on the law of loving one's neighbour (as it applies to those in need – *pauperes*), hospitality is also an important aspect in statutes of fraternities, monastic rules, medieval burgher rights and sermons (Caucci von Saucken, 2021:41). It is also present in Old Testament tradition in the story of the widow of Zarephath of Sidon who, during a prolonged drought, took in a stranger – the prophet Elijah (Frąckowska, 2016). The concept

**Table 1: Interview Questions**

1.	What is your age, nationality and occupation?
2.	What type of <i>albergue</i> do you run (i.e. state-owned, parish-owned, monastic, private)? What is the difference, if any, between your <i>albergue</i> and hostels or other kinds of typical tourist accommodation?
3.	How long have you been a <i>hospitalero</i> ? Why did you become one and why do you do what you do?
4.	What is your experience of the Camino? (How many times have you walked the route, from where, when?)
5.	How do you receive the pilgrims? What is the price of the accommodation? What do you offer the pilgrims (meals, massages or other medical treatments, prayers, other rituals such as <i>Queimada</i> , etc.)?
6.	How does the host–guest relationship work in practice? Is the pilgrim a ‘guest’ or a ‘stranger’? Do you feel that you are only giving, or are you also receiving something in return?
7.	Is running the <i>albergue</i> your main source of income, or rather an additional occupation?
8.	What are your thoughts and observations regarding the pandemic? What was your experience of the previous year (2020)? What are your current plans for the Compostela Holy Year? How is the pandemic affecting or changing the Camino (virtual pilgrim passports, virtual stamps, etc.)?
9.	Would you like to share some other thoughts? Have you had any special experiences or encountered any exceptional situations in connection with being a <i>hospitalero</i> ?

of hospitality is particularly well defined in French philosophy, especially in the works of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. Derrida introduced two models of hospitality: the first one, seen from the host’s point of view, where the conditions of the stay are defined so that the person hosting the other does not feel threatened in his or her home and identity, and the second, more interesting one that derives from Levinas’s approach to the idea of unconditional hospitality, which involves the concepts of visiting and of receiving – as is particularly important in Levinas’s philosophy of dialogue – the infinitely other: an unexpected visitor for whom everything needs to be done in order to accommodate his or her needs and make him or her feel at home. In that sense, hospitality is a limit-experience that takes place at the borderline between internality and externality (Derrida, 2004; Levinas, 2000; Markowska, 2016). Having this in mind, the methodological approach used the hermeneutic method that permits the researchers to make an analysis based on the theoretical framework suitable to the matter of investigation (Vaney & Aguinalde, 2021) and accordingly to engage in qualitative methods (Flick, 2009). Table 1 lists the questions that were asked in the interviews.

## Results

Despite the many similarities and analogies, there is a fundamental difference between the situation of the *hospitaleros* under study and the data available from studies on hotel owners and employees in the face of the pandemic, and the key to understanding that difference turns out to be the motivation to undertake the activity in support of the pilgrims, the relationship between the *hospitalero* and the pilgrim, and the approach to economic issues.

Although the respondents did mention issues associated with the economic sphere of their business, such information was typically brought up in connection with other matters in the context of the entire conversation. When one of the respondents admitted that the pandemic prompted him to invest all his savings in opening an *albergue*, he emphasised that even in that situation, his main motivation was not economic, and that he considered this decision to be the best one he had ever made.

### *Motivation to undertake the activity in support of the pilgrims*

It is worth noting that today, as in the past, the beginning of one’s activity as a *hospitalero* often coincides with the taking off of one’s pilgrim’s robe. Between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in response to the growing demands that could not be met by the old monastic institutions, a network of private *albergues* was built as a manifestation of a new sensitivity towards pilgrims. The origins of this activity can be traced to the history of the city of Santo Domingo de la Calzada in the eleventh century and to those men and women who undertook works to support the pilgrims – a notable example being Saint Julian the Hospitaller, who lived in the twelfth century and chose to devote his entire life to helping the poor and the needy as a penance.<sup>1</sup>

A majority of those surveyed declared a very strong personal connection with the Camino de Santiago. They emphasised the importance of the fact that they

<sup>1</sup> This very old legend with an exceptionally complex narrative was described by M. Donini in the book *Il Grande Libro dei Santi*, 2, Milan 1998, pp. 972–974.

themselves had previously experienced, understood and fallen in love with the Camino so that they could then welcome their pilgrims guests. One of the interviewees said that he had himself embarked on the Camino 'to identify with the pilgrims who pass through this place.' Others said that after having walked the Camino, they wanted to give back what they had received along the way by working as volunteers. One of the respondents had done the Camino more than 20 times and said that to him, being a *hospitalero* was an experience similar to being on the Way once again. Another person said that for him, the Camino was not only about walking to Santiago, but also – and above all – about making a journey into his own self:

*The Camino does not merely lead to Santiago; perhaps it does so physically, but it also goes into the depths of every person. In addition, the Camino is an encounter with culture and art. So, the spiritual Camino does not end when you arrive in Santiago.*

There were also cases where individuals who had hosted pilgrims developed the desire to embark on the Camino as a result of that experience. In addition, it is not uncommon for an entire family to run an *albergue* – with husband and wife, parents and children or consecutive generations welcoming pilgrims in a part of the house converted for that purpose. One person highlighted the fact that their village has a small church and a hospital for pilgrims that date back to the time of Queen Elizabeth (1271–1336), which makes their *albergue* part of a centuries-old tradition of welcoming pilgrims heading for Santiago de Compostela.

It is also important to distinguish between *hospitaleros* who own their *albergues*, those who are employed as workers, and *hospitaleros voluntarios*, who do the work without receiving financial remuneration. In the case of one of the *albergues*, it was emphasised very clearly that the generous contribution of the *hospitaleros* is an act of volunteering.

Many respondents stressed the fact that being a *hospitalero* was an opportunity for them to continue experiencing the Camino. One of those surveyed had previously taken lost pilgrims to a nearby *albergue*, and when the *hospitalero* who was running it at the time fell ill, he decided to temporarily take over his responsibilities and take care of the abandoned *albergue*. When the former owner died, he replaced him permanently.

### ***The relationship between the hospitalero and the pilgrim***

Originally, three separate questions had been planned in the interviews, that is:

- What does the *hospitalero* offer to pilgrims in their *albergue*?
- What is the difference between the *albergue* and typical tourist accommodation? and
- What is the relationship between the *hospitalero* and the pilgrim?

In reality, however, these questions became merged in the responses and formed a consistent image of the relationship between the hosts and the pilgrims they receive. The responses point to many elements of hospitality as defined in the classical sense that seem to be gradually disappearing from the hotel industry due to being outweighed by the economic aspects.

One of the respondents emphasised in very forceful words that for him, a pilgrim is not a stranger, since his work for the pilgrims requires a lot of effort and involves a round-the-clock commitment: getting up early to prepare a breakfast for the pilgrims, then cleaning the *albergue* (which takes 3 to 4 hours), welcoming new pilgrims, cooking a dinner and staying with the pilgrims until late at night. According to him, running the *albergue* is not economically viable, therefore the only reason for him to be involved in this activity is the value that he finds in his relationships with the pilgrims; the reward for his hard work is not measured in the money he earns, but rather in the value he sees in the pilgrims who stay at his place and in what the relationships bring into his life. Often, the pilgrims support him by helping with cleaning and garden work. Another respondent noted that when 'pilgrims need a longer break, they stay with us as volunteers and help with the work which they are able to do'. A further respondent emphasised the value that he gains from his relationships with pilgrims in the following words:

*Certainly, I learn a lot, and I think that being in this environment makes us better; we have a slightly different outlook and gain a lot of experience. We opened the albergue six years ago and have since received more than thirty thousand pilgrims. Every person teaches us something: we talk to them, and they tell us why they have embarked on the Camino. Of course, they do the Camino for different reasons, but the recurrent theme is that the Camino changes people.*

In his book, *Society of Others: Kinship and Mourning in a West Papuan Place*, Rupert Stasch offers an important interpretive proposal with regard to the relationship between the host and the guest, expanding upon Georg Simmel's reflection on the fact that human relationships can be analysed in terms of the union of closeness and remoteness. In the context of the main subject, the passages of the American anthropologist's work that seem to be the most relevant are those in which he draws attention to the temporal and spatial patterns which underlie the organisation of the practices and the use of the meanings that constitute the unique host/owner-guest dyad in the Korowai culture where the practices of hospitality are a way of coping with the initial mismatch between individuals belonging to two different households and territories and a means of building committed relationships despite (or rather thanks to) the differences that exist. Since the Camino brings together people of diverse cultures, this understanding of hospitality appears to be particularly pertinent.

There is a reason why a majority of the literature on the subject of hospitality has been written from the perspective of the experiences of tourists, travellers, wanderers or pilgrims – 'people of the road.' Travel diaries, trip accounts and reports from the exploration of new worlds and from encounters with their inhabitants have long been a source of scientific passion. They have become the starting point of countless research papers which, to a greater or lesser extent, also touch upon the problem of the reception of historical and modern 'nomads' by the settled population. It is mainly thanks to travellers' accounts and studies that we know about the institutions that have formed over the centuries in various regions of Europe and the world to solve the problem of caring for and controlling newcomers. The reception customs and characteristic of these institutions have been diverse.

It is important to make the distinction between different types of *albergues*. In general, there are three types - private *albergues*, state-owned *albergues* and *albergues* run by parishes or monastic communities; they are staffed by owners, employees and volunteers. Prices at the different *albergues* also vary considerably: from a voluntary donation (*donativo*) to amounts comparable with those charged by hostels. According to the respondents, the amenities and additional activities offered (as well as their prices) are also quite varied. However, a certain analogy can be observed. While the standard of services offered increases with price, one can also sense a greater distance and a certain kind of strangeness in the relationship between the *hospitalero* and the pilgrim. Conversely, the *hospitaleros* who emphasise the values associated with

the Camino and cherish their interactions with pilgrims try to adjust their 'offer' so that every pilgrim, regardless of his or her wealth, is able to take advantage of that offer, feel at home and recuperate before continuing the journey. For example, in response to the pandemic, one of the *albergues municipales* added a washing machine to its amenities without increasing the price per night.

It is also worth mentioning that the term *hospitalero* was first used, defined and etymologised by Saint Isidore of Sevilla (González, 1992:39-40). His writings lay the foundation for monastic charity and hospitality by giving an account of the first hospital for pilgrims in the context of the Jewish pilgrimage movement in ancient times. Another important reference is the classic work by Marcel Mauss. In the section on reception of guests, the author of *The Gift* wrote the following:

*If this is conceded, the line would allude to the state of mind of the visitor and his host. Everyone is supposed to offer hospitality, or his presents, as if they were never to be reciprocated (Mauss, 2002:108).*

A subject closely related to hospitality is communal dining, which in many cultures is the basic manner of manifesting interpersonal bonds and establishing cultural boundaries as well as a way of showing generosity (Franck, 2021). This is confirmed by the interviewees' responses:

*Usually, the pilgrims prepare meals together, with everyone making some sort of contribution. There is often someone in the group who can cook, and others help with slicing, setting the table ... and the result is a communal dinner. Sometimes people have not done their shopping, and there are no stores near the albergue, so we offer some food as we would at home.'*

It comes as no surprise, then, that the form, course and menu of banquets, feasts, symposia and everyday meals have been the subject of countless ethnographical studies and historical reconstructions. Meals have been the starting point of comprehensive semiotic analyses revealing the meanings inscribed in both the different foodstuffs and the manner in which they are cooked, served and consumed. Furthermore, the issue of food – but in essence of strategies for the selection and treatment of guests – has often been linked to questions of social stratification and the ways in which it is reinforced. Another matter closely related to anthropology of food, problems of boundaries in culture and issues of hospitality is that of etiquette conventions, 'good practices' and

good manners, which entail specific patterns of feasting, gestural language, bodily and verbal communication techniques, meaningful sequences of behaviour and, in a broader perspective, the notions of dignity, honour and shame as important regulators of behaviour and social structure, and which are a reflection of the axiological order. In this context, hospitality is also an important point of reference for a reflection on how we construe and imagine what is 'ours' and how we perceive, treat and classify phenomena which are considered exogenous. In that respect, it is connected with ideas concerning cultural patterns of openness and closedness, xenophilia and xenophobia.

Speaking about the preparation of meals for the pilgrims, one of the respondents said that he was not in the business to achieve greater profit and that the biggest motivation for him was the desire to spend time together over a meal. As he explained, he invites pilgrims to his own table for a shared meal because he treats them as family members. In fact, he referred to them as his 'Camino family.' So, once everyone is seated at the table, the ritual is that each guest makes a brief self-introduction. The shared dinner is also a joyful celebration. As the people sitting at the table often come from different parts of the world and speak different languages, the conversations tend to take place in English. The person who told the story said that to him, the fact that people coming from different countries and speaking different languages are able to communicate is part of the special value of the Camino.

Another subject which provides one of the most important contexts for a reflection on hospitality and, at the same time, is covered by a vast and diverse body of literature concerns the observances that have developed in a given culture: those accompanying different stages of life, those of an annual nature and those associated with events of value to that culture, often linked directly to the ways of receiving and welcoming specific groups or individuals. In this regard, many researchers have noted a relationship between hospitality and the character of festive and carnival events. Furthermore, in the context of a study dealing with the ways in which guests are received, it is difficult to avoid drawing inspiration from theories that reveal the temporal structures of rituals and ceremonies and point to the associated workings of symbols. In fact, hospitality has been examined from that perspective since the time of Arnold van Gennep, and today, this approach is most commonly invoked in research on social dramas, cultural performances and performance art. One might argue that this category also includes ceremonial ways of receiving guests. The question is whether this attitude is a value and a virtue or rather an imperative that points to general guidelines of behaviour.

In many *albergues*, the *hospitaleros* prepare meals for the pilgrims, and some also perform a fire ritual that has Celtic origins (*Queimada*). Furthermore, *albergues* run by parishes and monastic orders organise musical gatherings, Holy Masses for pilgrims and Pilgrim Blessing ceremonies. One of the respondents emphasised that people embark on the Camino for different reasons: some are driven by religious motivation, others are trying to give up various addictions such as alcohol or drugs, and then there are those who want to meet new friends or treat the Camino as a tourist endeavour. However, at the shared dinner, there is a sense of communion and brotherhood among people from all countries (such as Korea, Poland, Germany, France, United States or Argentina).

#### *Approach to economic issues*

One of the respondents pointed out that the most obvious difference between an *albergue* and a hostel is the fact that pilgrims approach their journey in a religious manner and ask if they can attend Holy Mass as soon as they check in. He recalled groups of Polish pilgrims who were accompanied by a priest, underlining the 'spirit of the Camino' and 'spirit of pilgrimage' that was present in the *albergue*. In addition, he said that to him and to many of the pilgrims, the destination of the Camino was not Santiago, but rather their own hearts. In his view, even the pilgrims who have no religious motivation still possess a spiritual sense (*sentido spiritual*), which distinguishes the Camino from other activities of a typically tourism-oriented nature. In that manner, by spending (*compartir*) 24 hours a day together, sharing the joys and concerns of the journey, and sleeping, eating and snoring together, the pilgrims in an *albergue* learn mutual tolerance and patience and establish very close relationships which can sometimes be compared to those within a family.

According to another interview,

*in a hotel, there is privacy: you lock yourself in your room where you cannot smell other people's feet. However, the atmosphere of an albergue is different: sharing communal dinners, talking in the lounge, meeting other people, engaging in discussions and making new acquaintances and friendships that last forever.*

Another respondent said that as an owner of both an *albergue* and a hostel, he believed that all guests should be treated the same, which is why he welcomes both pilgrims and tourists as his guests rather than as customers. He tries to keep a close relationship with the guests and treats them as acquaintances, not as strangers.



The price of accommodation in an *albergue* also differs significantly from that in a hostel. While an *albergue municipal* typically charges 8 to 10 euros, a stay in a hostel during the tourist season may cost up to 60 or 70 euros. When staying at an *albergue*, pilgrims also have the option to do their own shopping in a local store and prepare meals by themselves, whereas guests staying in a hostel must eat in restaurants, which entails further expenses. As a result, for a pilgrim walking the Camino Portugues for 10 days or the Camino Frances or Camino Norte for 30 days, the economic aspect often plays a very important role.

One of the respondents noted that

*in recent years, pilgrims have also complained about inflated prices along the Camino; they felt cheated and exploited when they had to pay 6 euros for a bottle of water. I think this should be regulated in some way, there must be some institutions to oversee and control it, otherwise the entire Camino will lose its spirituality and value.'*

### **The pandemic**

According to the data provided by FEAACS (Federación Española de Asociaciones de Amigos del Camino de Santiago) for 2020, *albergues* had to implement a variety of additional safety measures: bags to store pilgrims' shoes, backpacks and walking sticks, hydroalcoholic gels, paper towels, disinfectant mats, disposable bed sheets, thermometers to take pilgrims' temperature, and other measures to keep the arriving visitors safe. Interestingly, pilgrims who post on social media say that due to social distancing, more people will walk alone and thus have more time for introspection and reflection.

Although two separate questions had been planned as regards the experience of the pandemic and the expectations for the Compostela Holy Year, the answers to these questions merged to one coherent picture.

In their responses, *hospitaleros* emphasised how difficult the current pandemic experience has been for them. For many of them, the *albergue* is the only source of income. However, they also expressed their longing for interaction with pilgrims and the sadness that they felt when the Camino became completely deserted. Only those *hospitaleros* who had never walked the Camino and claimed that becoming too close to pilgrims was inappropriate ('I try to keep the relationship close, but I always remember that they are my customers and that we must remain respectful towards one another. I think

there is no need to approach them as if they were family or friends') described the current pandemic as a 'true tragedy.'

Many *albergue* owners have been using the time to make the necessary repairs and do other work that could not be completed due to time constraints. As one of the respondents recounted,

*during that time, we did other things, such as exhibitions. We have also been collecting stories of the pilgrims who visited our facility and describing our experiences to show what our fight against the pandemic was like. We did not receive pilgrims, but we did other things to feel useful. If you feel that way, it is a reward from life.*

Another respondent said that after many years, the day-to-day interactions with people had taken a toll on him:

*The visitors are not always true pilgrims, we often come across entitled or demanding individuals. The five euros they pay here aren't enough to cover the water and electricity bills, and they demand a lot. I often ask such people: what have you contributed to demand so much.*

This valuable comment highlights the fact that nurturing the unique value of the Camino is a task for both parties to this relationship: the *hospitaleros* and the pilgrims. The owners of another *albergue* made an insightful presentation in which they labelled the pandemic as follows:

*2020 a broken but not lost year ... positive experiences of a tragedy*

*COVID-19 2020-2021: strength, creativity, filling spaces with life, reflection, UTOPIA: another way of life - less consumption more solidarity is possible'.*

It is expected that once pilgrims return to the trail, they will be able to escape the crowds and take advantage of the different assets available along the way. Staying outdoors helps avoid mass gatherings and develop a greater appreciation of the natural environment (Galvani, Lew & Sotelo Perez, 2020). As regards matters of accommodation, however, those responsible should be trained and equipped with the necessary knowledge and tools to ensure compliance with health requirements and controls.

Plans are also in motion to develop an application that provides information on the availability of *albergues* and allows bookings to be made, as well as to introduce ‘social distance management bracelets’ – as described in the *Plan de reactivación dos sectores cultural e turístico fronte aos efectos derivados da COVID-19* (Xunta de Galicia, 2020). At any rate, interviews with *hospitaleros* show that they are very optimistic about the current situation and consider the economic aspect to be less important. They are also less specific about the different restrictions or proposed technical solutions, instead emphasising the hope that when the pandemic ends, pilgrims will return to the trail, and they themselves will be able to share once again in the positive emotions associated with the Camino experience.

Thus, the pandemic seems to be more of an opportunity to rediscover such values as justice, ethics, inclusivity, sustainability, responsibility, social and environmental equity and, in particular, resilience (López & Lois González, 2021; Benjamin, Dillette & Alderman, 2020; Fletcher *et al.*, 2020; Gössling, Scott & Hall, 2020).

## Conclusions and Discussion

The analysis of the current situation undertaken in this study has provided an insight into the realities of the Camino during the pandemic from the perspective of *hospitaleros* – individuals who provide shelter to pilgrims. In the control group of the study, the situation of hotel industry professionals in the face of the pandemic has also been considered. A comparison of the two groups has revealed certain similarities and fundamental differences, thus making it possible to identify the reasons why the enormous difficulties associated with the pandemic have not discouraged *hospitaleros* from persisting in their efforts to support the pilgrims and how the values that stem from the Camino have given the respondents the strength and energy needed to wait patiently for the pandemic to end while enjoying the opportunity to meet every single pilgrim who visits their *albergue*. The study also indicates that, paradoxically, fewer pilgrims generate greater joy and a greater sense of community, because – despite the need to comply with epidemiological restrictions – it is now possible to experience greater closeness (García-Alandete, 2020).

Thanks to the fact that most of them have been pilgrims themselves, *hospitaleros* can understand the needs of their guests and support them in their difficulties, since the relationship between a *hospitalero* and a pilgrim is often very personal. Probably this feature in particular has contributed to the extraordinary popularity of the medieval pilgrimage for so many representatives of

secularised society, as noted by the Archbishop of Santiago de Compostela Julian Barrio Barrio: Without a doubt, the Way of St James helps us to meet ourselves. The key will always be the meeting with oneself, as a certain beginning, because it is a condition to meet with another person, and above all with God (Mróz, 2016, p. 190).’

For that reason, it can be expected that the current crisis will not put an end to this form of activity, because it is based on entirely different foundations than the hotel industry, which relies on supply–demand, seller–buyer economic relationships. Even if *hospitaleros* need to analyse the business aspects of their activity, for a vast majority of them, economic factors are not the main motivation to undertake their activity in support of the pilgrims. Therefore, the current pandemic is also an opportunity to examine the degree of commercialisation in this sector and to counter in many ways, the dangerous trend toward *macdonaldization*. Considering the fact that despite the pandemic, the *donativo* continues to be accepted as payment by many *albergues*, it can be expected that after the pandemic, pilgrims will still be able to rely on the assistance, care and support of the *hospitaleros* – their friends on the Camino.

Studies indicate that hotel industry professionals have a weaker connection with the tradition of hospitality, which makes them less resilient and thus more fragile and vulnerable in the face of a crisis – as has been demonstrated by the current COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast, our survey of Camino de Santiago *hospitaleros* confirms that stronger attachment to the traditions of hospitality translates into greater resilience to crises, which is consistent with the findings of other studies which investigated various strategies of coping with the pandemic (Seryczyńska *et al.*, 2021); theology has often discovered religious faith as a ‘source of meaning’ against a background of ‘meaninglessness’ (Oviedo, 2019). One might even venture to say that the attitudes of many *hospitaleros* comes close to the ideal of unconditional hospitality as defined by Derrida and Levinas (Markowska, 2016).

Therefore, it is likely that when the pandemic ends, those *hospitaleros* who are more attached to the medieval traditions of hospitality will emerge stronger from the present crisis than those who are less grounded in such traditions – a prediction which also applies to hotel industry professionals. However, it should also be noted that nurturing the unique value of the Camino is a task for both parties to this relationship: the *hospitaleros* and the pilgrims.

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