

# Postcard Pilgrimages: Accompanying Those Who Are Incarcerated – A Guide

By Fr. Steven Glenn Rindahl



## Author Preface

*A member of my parish is currently imprisoned. He will be for the next few years. He gets breaks, however, from prison every so often. At least once or twice per year, my imprisoned parishioner escapes from prison with my help. Andrew (first name used with permission) escapes by going on pilgrimage with me. The tools we use to break him out of prison are postcards. Andrew escapes prison without ever leaving the walls.*

*We walk the Camino together (and occasionally go to Lourdes). Every day, by sending a postcard, I include Andrew in the pilgrimage. When he receives his postcard, he reads them while walking in the exercise yard, replicating our walk together. Even when not in the yard, Andrew escapes. I will let him explain:*

*"You know, they tried throwing me in the hole. A little 10X10 cell by myself. They did not know that I was not there. We were out walking the Camino together. I had to make very small circles as I walked but I walked and read and escaped from the hole."*

*~ Andrew ~*

Over the following few pages, interspersed with a few postcard photos and quotes from Andrew, I pray you will be inspired to include others in your pilgrimage activities - those who cannot, for whatever reason, go on pilgrimage in person.

What follows in this guide is developed from how Andrew and I made the pilgrimage together, through exchanging postcards. The context is a pilgrimage of a priest and parishioner inclusive of the centrality of the Eucharist. It is, however, written in the spirit of "that 'spiritual ecumenism' of which *Unitatis redintegratio* and the *Directory on Ecumenism* speak, and which should be constantly remembered by the faithful in their prayers, in the celebration of the Eucharist and in their daily lives." [1]

Hi Andrew,

22 Sep 23

Today was our rough day. Remember last year when we climbed to O Cebreiro? We were so exhausted at the top but it is so worth it. Once again they let us celebrate the Mass where the miracle happened but this year two women started singing hymns

N.7434 O CEBREIRO (Lugo - España)  
Santuario, Monumento Jacobeo, siglos IX - X.  
Le Sanctuaire, Monument Jacobeo, IX - X<sup>e</sup> siècles.  
The Sanctuary, The Jacobeo monument IX - X century.  
E-mail: iglesiacebreiro@gmail.com  
<http://www.igreja.org/cebreiro>

and before we knew it 100 people or more joined us for the Mass. The worship was amazing.



Andrew

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O Cebreiro

The guide is intended to provide you with the information needed to be successful in your own proxy-by-postcard pilgrimage. There are basics, which may seem obvious, as well as lessons learned and mistakes to avoid.

**Please feel encouraged to take and adapt the materials to your theological tenets, setting, and needs. It is, after all, a guide - not a rule book.**

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## Introduction

The practice of proxy pilgrimage is nothing new. Professor Kerr Houston reports that proxy pilgrimages were well-known by the twelfth century. Furthermore, there was widespread use of proxy pilgrims by the fifteenth century, with some proxies making a career of the practice. [2] In the Middle Ages there was also the growth of the “spiritual pilgrimage” that “created the possibility of seeking an entirely stationary way of traveling to holy places. Such armchair pilgrimages required no physical exercise but could spiritually be just as effective.” [3]

Likewise, the Stations of the Cross, already in widespread use within Jerusalem by the early thirteenth-century, became a localized form of pilgrimage, a proxy of place, in home communities when freedom of travel to the Holy Land was restricted by the Crusades and later the closure of national boundaries during the Reformation. [4] In these proxy pilgrimages, by a proxy of person or by a proxy of place, the person benefitting from the proxy is capable of finding his or her “own experiences—misunderstandings, physical pain, rejection, feelings of being abandoned, and life’s little deaths beyond counting—are spiritualized through their being melded with those of Jesus.” [5]

People are no longer making careers out of making pilgrimages on behalf of others by proxy. There are, however, many would-be pilgrims who, for a multitude of reasons, cannot make pilgrimage in person. I believe that a reframing of proxy pilgrimage into our current point in history is due. How can those who are physically capable and financially free enough provide opportunities for pilgrimage to be experienced by those not blessed with the same privileges? This guide outlines the steps and considerations for those desiring to perform a proxy pilgrimage via postcards on the Camino de Santiago for the sake of another.

Whether your pilgrimage partner is imprisoned like Andrew, is homebound by physical limitations, or is otherwise incapable of traveling for pilgrimage, he or she can certainly make the pilgrimage through you and with you - as you are the proxy in person, the cards they receive allows them to engage the pilgrimage where they are as a proxy of place. As the *Directory on Popular Piety* reminds us, every pilgrim is accompanied by the community of faith.

The pilgrim who journeys to a shrine is in a communion of faith and charity not only with those who accompany him on the “sacred journey,” but with the Lord himself... He travels with his own community and through that community, he journeys with

the Church in heaven and on earth. He travels with all of the faithful who have prayed at that shrine down through the centuries... **The pilgrim journeys with mankind whose sufferings and hopes are so clearly evident.** [6]

By making a proxy pilgrimage, you are making that spiritual truth a tangible experience for those deprived of the freedom of travel. As Andrew explains to those with whom he is imprisoned, the letters and calls they receive from those outside of prison are the corporal acts of mercy commanded by Christ when He said we must visit the sick and imprisoned. How much greater an act of mercy it must be to bring the sick and imprisoned on a pilgrimage.

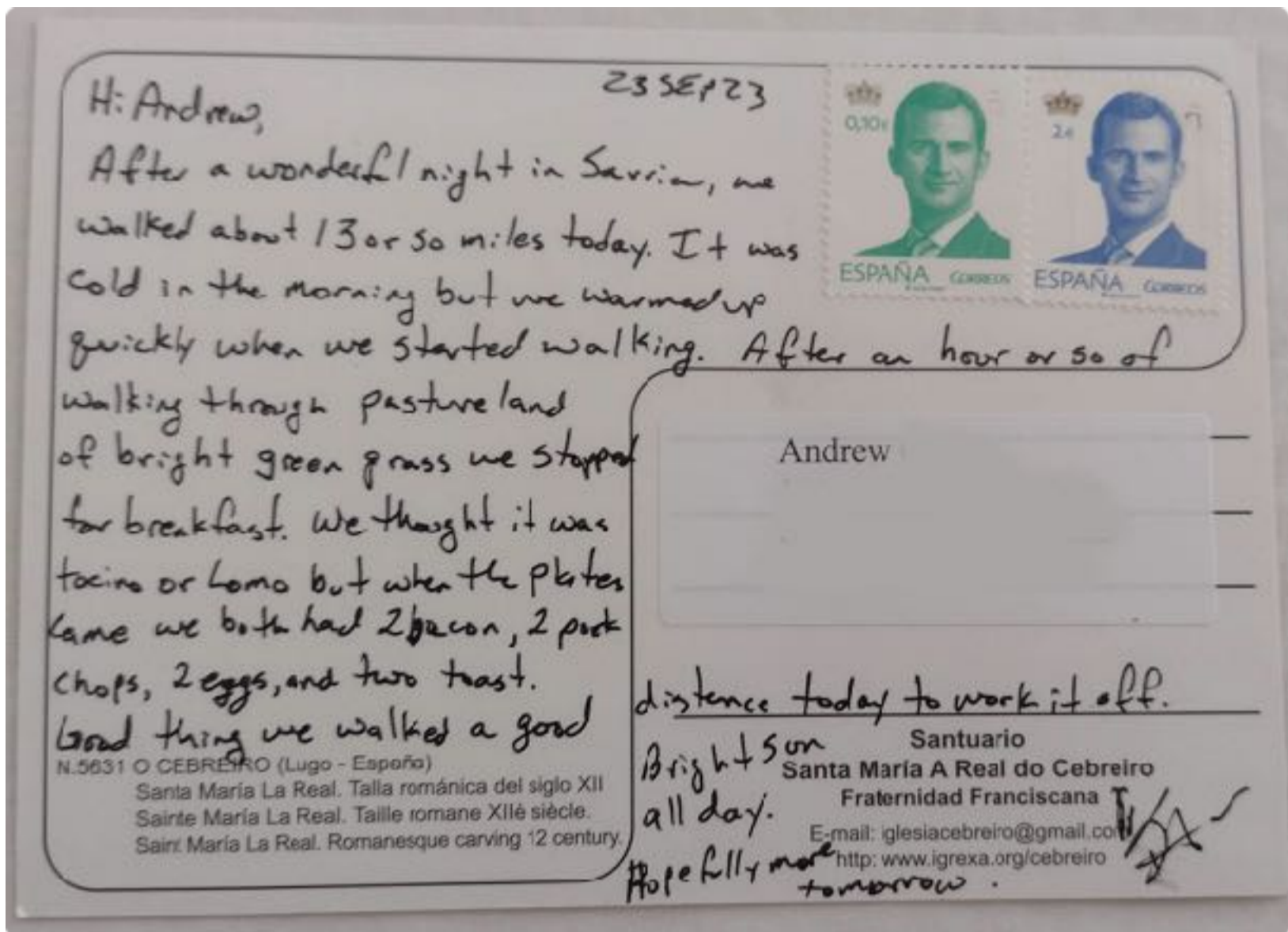
## The Basics of Being a Postcard Proxy Pilgrim

As an about-to-be proxy pilgrim - what are you signing yourself up for? In short, you are about to be both you and your pilgrimage partner through a connection created through communication. A bit like going to the movies or the theatre is to intentionally enter a period of suspended disbelief, and it is the responsibility of the actors to maintain that suspension, you are the one capable of keeping the connection, the suspended disbelief, operating so that your fellow pilgrim is with you on pilgrimage rather than in his or her own true circumstances. More so, you are providing the opportunity for an escape from the unchosen liminal state that has restricted travel by allowing the entering of a chosen liminoid state of transformation and aggregation into a new community. [7]

The postcards are a means by which you accomplish the needed ongoing conversation as if physically together. Therefore, rather than writing "I walked 6 miles before BFast," write:

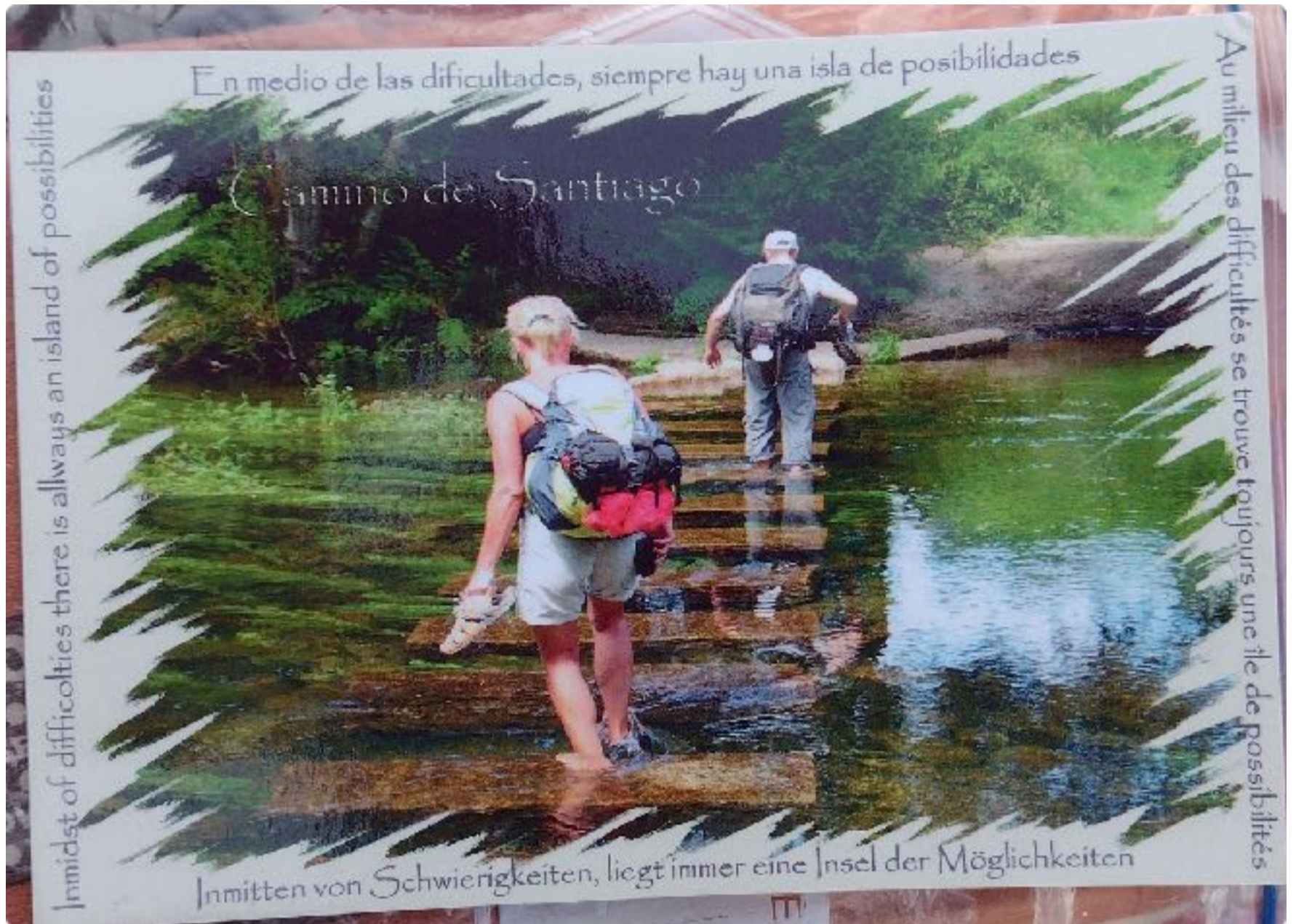
***"We walked 6 miles before BFast and thought we could eat everything on the menu when we arrived."***

Do not be afraid of using numbers "6" rather than "six" or abbreviations "BFast" instead of "breakfast" as examples. You only have a postcard and need to economize your use of space as much as possible to include as many details as possible. Your partner in the pilgrimage will be relying on you to supply the details about what he or she is experiencing.



Selecting a good photo postcard and providing details such as “the rocky path was uncomfortable under our feet” or “when we crested the mountaintop, we could see the clouds that settled during the night into the valley below like a blanket” help them feel and see the pilgrimage as you walk together. As Andrew explained his own experience (in a letter he wrote while he was “in the hole”):

“Throughout the day I am trying to continuously walk, even if in small circles, considering certain spaces I am in... I am definitely feeling the pain in my legs!... The landmarks are breathtaking. I so do love the history, the buildings, + the open land... The hikes up + down mountains, walking above the clouds.”



The next thing to remember is that you are committed to this daily activity. You and your fellow pilgrim would be with each other as you walk if you were both physically on the pilgrimage together. Likewise, you must be with your fellow pilgrim daily in your writing. Breaking from sending postcards has the potential to break the suspension of disbelief. A simple way of keeping the postcards current is to write the postcard as an extension of your pilgrimage journaling each day. Writing postcards with your journaling anticipates that you are journaling your pilgrimage experience. If you are not - consider it. It is a tremendously valuable experience.



## The Technical Considerations

If your pilgrimage partner is imprisoned, as mine is, there is a list of details that you must know. Even if not, many will apply to making your postcard pilgrimage a more straightforward process to accomplish. I do not understand the motivation behind some of these rules, but they exist nonetheless. As the postcard pilgrimage proxy, it is up to you to know the rules to maximize the experience for your pilgrimage partner.

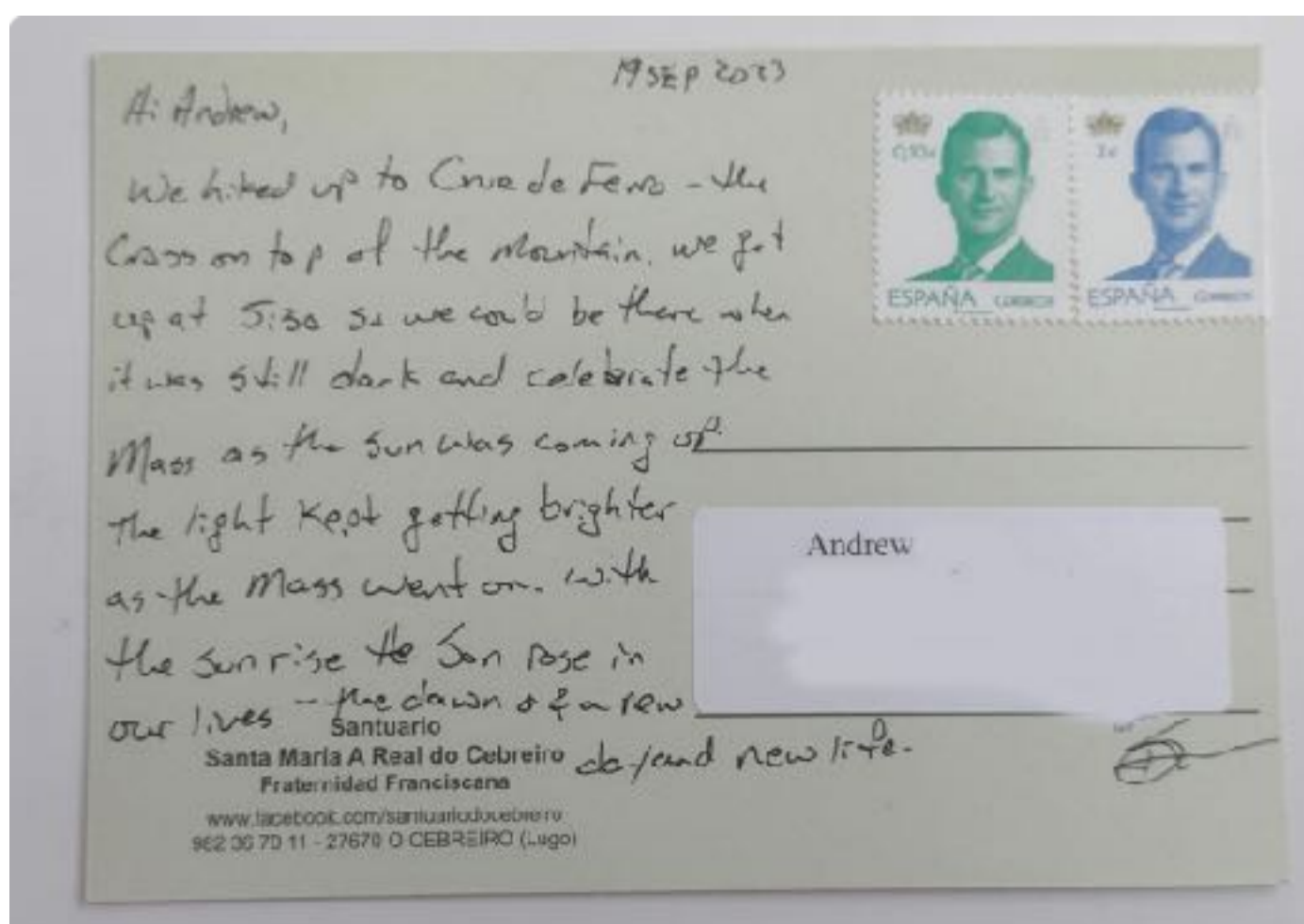
1. How many photos is your pilgrimage partner allowed to have? Some confinement facilities limit the number of photos/pictures the imprisoned may have in their possession at any one time.
2. Will the confinement facility allow colored paper? In one of the facilities Andrew has been in since his imprisonment, he was not allowed colored paper of any kind. That included picture postcards. As a result, the mail clerk at the prison made black and white photocopies of the postcard to give to Andrew and destroyed the originals.
3. Will the confinement facility allow cardstock? This is important for the sake of sending postcards. If the answer is no, not only will the card not be delivered, there is no return address to send it to. The cards will end up in the trash, and your pilgrimage partner will never see them.
4. Will the confinement facility allow mailing labels? If so, you can have as many mailing labels as you might need printed in advance and then peel and stick to the postcard. It is a super handy process if mailing labels are allowed. If they are not, you will experience the same result as prohibited cardstock – the postcards will be thrown away and never seen by your pilgrimage partner. If you need to handwrite the address to get the card delivered – then you must handwrite the address.
5. Does the confinement facility have a photos app? A relatively new option for sending photos to the imprisoned are apps that allow photos to be sent to the imprisoned through a screened app. Similar to censored mail, assuming there is nothing objectionable, the photo is then released to the recipient, who can print a copy. If this is an option, there are two points of importance. The first is that the app is probably the only method the imprisoned can receive photos at that facility. The second is that it means your pilgrim partner can get the postcard in near real-

time. Take a photo of the front and back of the card before dropping it in the mail (more on that in a minute), and once you get to some wifi upload the pictures to the app. If you use this method, you will want a safe address to mail the original cards to so your pilgrimage partner can have them upon release. I now mail cards to Andrew's mom. You might find another trusted family member or mail them to yourself and hold onto them until release.

6. Regardless of where the cards are being sent or how, place the date on the cards. Make it easy for your fellow pilgrim to know the sequence of your travel. You cannot rely on the post office to deliver the cards in order.

You might be asking yourself at this point - **This sounds like a nice idea, but does it honestly make a difference? Does it work?** Again, I will let Andrew answer (written in response to the card I sent at the end of our first Camino together, which was a postcard of the Catedral de Santiago lit up at night and the comment on how we would be leaving in the morning, so we went out at night and took one last look).

Hope you do not mind, I am staying in Spain another month!  
~ Andrew ~



## Pilgrim's Prayer

### PILGRIM'S PRAYER

Although i may have traveled all the roads,  
crossed mountains and valleys from East to West,  
if i have not discovered the freedom to be my self,  
i have arived nowhere.

Although i may have shared all of my possessions  
with people of other languages and cultures;  
made friends with Pilgrims of a thousand paths,  
or shared albergue with saints and princes,  
if i am not capable of forgiving my neighbor tomorrow,  
i have arrived nowhere.

Although i may have carried my pack from beginning to end  
and waited for every Pilgrim in need of encouragement,  
or given my bed to one who arrived later than i,  
given my bottle of water in exchange for nothing;  
if upon returning to my home and work,  
i am not able to create brotherhood  
or to make happiness, peace and unity,  
i have arrived nowhere.

Although i may have had food and water each day,  
and enjoyed a roof and shower every night;  
or may have had my injuries well attended,  
if i have not discovered in all that the love of God,  
i have arrived nowhere.

Although i may have seen all the monuments  
and contemplated the best sunsets;  
although i may have learned a greeting in every language  
or tasted the clean water from every fountain;  
if i have not discovered who is the author  
of so much free beauty and so much peace,  
i have arrived nowhere.

If from today i do not continue walking on your path,  
searching and living according to what i have learned;  
in from today i do not see in every person, friend or foe  
a companion on the Camino;  
if from today i cannot recognize God,  
the God of Jesus of Nazareth  
as the one God of my life,  
i have arrived nowhere.

Fraydino

Buen Camino to you, and those for whom you proxy.

## Author Information

Fr. Steve is a retired US Army Chaplain with a combined 31 years of service between his early years as a paratrooper and his return to the Army as a chaplain.

His culminating assignment was on faculty at the US Army Medical Center of Excellence/Center and School where he developed and taught the US Army Chaplain Corps curriculum for providing a ministerial response to Moral Injury.

Upon retirement, Fr. Steve took the knowledge gained developing that course and used it to develop a purpose-designed PTSD and Moral Injury healing pilgrimage conducted on the Camino de Santiago under the auspices of the 501c3 Warriors on the Way.

When not on pilgrimage, Fr Steve guides directees through the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola and serves as adjunct faculty for Park University.

He holds the Master of Theology from the University of Wales, the Doctor of Ministry from the University of Chester, the Master of Sacred Theology from Nashotah House, and a Certificate in Spiritual Direction from Oblate School of Theology.

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- <sup>3</sup> Lutz Kaelber, "Paradigms of Travel," in *Tourism, Religion & Spiritual Journeys*, ed. Dallen J. Timothy and Daniel H. Olsen, Contemporary Geographies of Leisure, Tourism, and Mobility (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 50.
- <sup>4</sup> Jonathan Sumption, *The Age of Pilgrimage: The Medieval Journey to God* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2003), 128; James Harpur, *The Pilgrim Journey: A History of Pilgrimage in the Western World* (Katonah, NY: BlueBridge, 2016), 131.
- <sup>5</sup> Eugene C. Kennedy, *Cardinal Bernardin's Stations of the Cross: Transforming Our Grief and Loss Into New Life* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2003), 12-13.
- <sup>6</sup> Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Directory*, 286.
- <sup>7</sup> Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures / 1966 (Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), 94-96; Victor W. Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 253-254.