

## Counting My Camino Blessings

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For first-time pilgrims, it's easy to get consumed with the planning, training, packing, weighing and repacking for the Camino. Newbie pilgrims ask the same burning questions I had just five years ago about backpacks, blisters and starting points. As I became more comfortable with my gear and physical abilities, I became increasingly drawn to more spiritual preparations. Now, I love to integrate blessings before, during and after the Camino.

Our chapter's shell-blessing ceremony usually takes place in early spring. A ritual offering of a Camino shell to the departing pilgrims and the reading of the traditional pilgrim blessing mark a rite of passage in a pilgrim's journey.



Stone cross at Finisterre. Photograph by the author.

### Memorable Churches & Masses



- ▶ **Iglesia de la Virgen Peregrina in Pontevedra**  
Shell-shaped and Camino-themed
- ▶ **Iglesia San Francisco in Ferrol**  
Mass honoring the Virgin Mary as "the Queen of May"
- ▶ **Pilgrim Mass in Grandas de Salime** – Kissing relics!
- ▶ **Cathedral in Lugo** – Perpetual Adoration of Eucharist
- ▶ **Parroquial Albergue Ponferrada** – Lord's Prayer in every language + meditation / reflection
- ▶ **Santa Eulalia de Arca O Pedrouza** – Shell altar
- ▶ **Santiago Cathedral** service in English daily
- ▶ **Pilgrim's Office Chapel** – Daily Camino reflections

Some of the author's favorite churches along different Camino routes.

At a regular Mass, I'm not shy about asking for a Camino blessing, as priests are usually happy to oblige. Before I started my second Camino, I was at a regular Mass at Iglesia San Francisco in Ferrol. I asked for a blessing and was invited to stay for a beautiful vespers service honoring the Virgin Mary as "the Queen of May." I attended a pilgrim Mass almost every night during my third Camino as I was with a group of Catholics from Malta who had planned for this. It was fun to see a different Camino family forming at these Masses, some of whom I never saw on the path.

Cruceiros, the stone crosses of Galicia, and stone waymarks can be prompts for us to pause for a moment of reflection. I stopped at many along my Caminos to take breaks, give thanks, pray or perhaps read a prayer card left by someone who walked before me.

After each Camino, I love to attend a Mass in English at the Cathedral. There have been priests from Ireland, Venezuela and the Philippines. Each service took place at smaller chapels within the Cathedral. After my fourth Camino, the Cathedral was closed, so I attended service at the chapel in the Pilgrim's Office. I stayed for the daily pilgrim reflection. We each had a chance to share our story—some were emotional (bring Kleenex!), and some were funny.

I respect that there are pilgrims at various points on the spirituality spectrum, from secular to devout. But all pilgrims, regardless of religious background, are welcome in the churches. From large gatherings with kindred spirits, to quiet moments to pray in solitude—don't miss the many wonderful opportunities for Camino blessings. ☪