

Article

The Therapeutic Dimension of Penance Revisited: Camino de Santiago as a Spiritual Practice of Healing

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Abstract

In contemporary scholarship, pilgrimage is increasingly analysed as a practice associated with personal transformation, spiritual reflection, and psychological well-being. Among the most popular contemporary pilgrimage routes, the Camino de Santiago attracts hundreds of thousands of participants each year, many of whom describe their journey in explicitly therapeutic terms. This article examines the Camino experience through the theological category of penance understood as a form of spiritual therapy within the Christian tradition. The main argument of the study is that the early Christian understanding of penance as *spiritual medicine* provides a meaningful interpretative framework for analysing the therapeutic experiences reported by contemporary pilgrims. Early Christian authors such as Hermas, Tertullian, and Cyprian described sin as a spiritual illness and penance as a process of healing and restoration. Within this perspective, practices involving physical effort, repentance, prayer, and moral transformation functioned as forms of spiritual therapy (gr. *θεραπεῖα*). The article combines theological and empirical approaches. Analyses the concept of penance as spiritual healing in early Christian sources and traces its historical connection with penitential pilgrimage. Presents qualitative research based on semi-structured interviews conducted with pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago. While the participants rarely framed their experiences explicitly in penitential terms, their testimonies reveal recurring themes of inner purification, emotional reconciliation, coping with illness or personal crisis, and the search for meaning. The findings suggest that these experiences can be meaningfully interpreted through the lens of the Christian understanding of penitential practice, particularly as a process of transformation and restoration. Rather than demonstrating a direct continuity, the study proposes an interpretative perspective that highlights structural similarities between historical theological models and contemporary experiential narratives. By integrating theological reflection with empirical data, the article contributes to debates on how historical religious concepts can illuminate contemporary experiences of healing, meaning, and well-being.



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1. Background

In recent decades, pilgrimage has increasingly attracted scholarly attention as a complex religious and cultural practice that intersects with questions of identity, spirituality,

and human well-being. Classic anthropological studies describe pilgrimage as a liminal process that enables personal transformation and the reconfiguration of social and symbolic structures (Turner and Turner 1978; Eade and Sallnow 1991). Interdisciplinary research has emphasized the experiential and existential dimensions of pilgrimage, highlighting its potential role in processes of self-reflection, coping with crisis, and the search for meaning (Coleman and Eade 2004; Amaro et al. 2018). Within this framework, the Camino de Santiago has become one of the most widely studied contemporary pilgrimage routes, attracting participants from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds who often describe their journey in therapeutic or transformative terms.

At the same time, the relationship between religion, spirituality, and health has become an important field of interdisciplinary research involving theology, psychology, medicine, and social sciences. Numerous studies suggest that religious beliefs and practices can contribute to psychological resilience, emotional integration, and coping with illness or life crises (Koenig 2012; Levin 2010; Seryczyńska 2025). Scholars increasingly recognize that health should be understood not only in biomedical terms but also as a multidimensional phenomenon involving spiritual and existential dimensions (Sulmasy 2002). Within this broader perspective, religious practices such as prayer, ritual, confession, and pilgrimage can be interpreted as forms of spiritual care that support human flourishing and holistic well-being.

Historical research indicates that such an understanding of religious practice as spiritually therapeutic has deep roots in the Christian tradition. Early Christian authors frequently employed medical metaphors to describe the moral and spiritual condition of the human person, interpreting sin as a form of illness and penitential practice as a process of healing and restoration (Porterfield 2005). In this context, penance was often understood as a form of *medicina animae*—a medicine for the soul—intended to restore spiritual health and reconcile the individual with God and the community (Sareló 1983). Medieval penitential literature further developed this therapeutic framework, particularly in the penitential handbooks used by confessors, where various penitential acts were prescribed as remedies proportionate to particular sins (Tentler 1977; Hamilton 2001; Meens 2014).

Within this penitential system, pilgrimage gradually emerged as one of the most significant forms of penitential practice. During the Middle Ages, particularly in the period of so-called composite or tariffed penances, penitential pilgrimages were frequently prescribed as acts of spiritual discipline and moral purification (Sumption 1975; Webb 2000). Pilgrimage functioned not merely as a devotional journey but as a structured form of ascetic practice involving physical hardship, reflection, prayer, and moral conversion. From this perspective, the journey itself could be interpreted as a therapeutic process aimed at restoring spiritual balance and promoting moral transformation.

In literature, pilgrimage is often understood not only as a religious practice but also as a symbolic journey associated with processes of personal change and existential reflection (Gros 2023). Thomas Merton describes pilgrimage as a symbolic articulation of an inner journey (Merton 2008), suggesting a correspondence between physical movement and interior transformation. Such interpretations resonate with theological approaches that frame pilgrimage as a formative practice within Christian tradition, where it has historically been associated with notions of spiritual healing and moral renewal, particularly in patristic accounts of *medicina animae* and *penitentia*. Building on these conceptualisations, contemporary scholarship has also noted the emergence of institutional applications of pilgrimage beyond explicitly religious contexts. In several European countries, including Spain, France, Belgium, and Poland, sections of the Camino de Santiago have been incorporated into rehabilitative and social reintegration programmes for selected prisoners (Cordero et al. 2018; Mróz and Matuszczak 2019; Mróz et al. 2022). These initiatives indicate

that pilgrimage continues to function as a culturally recognised framework for structured life transition and personal reorientation, extending its relevance into secular domains of social practice.

Despite the growing body of research on pilgrimage (Ahedo et al. 2024) and the expanding literature on religion and health (Oviedo 2024; Seryczyńska et al. 2026), relatively little attention has been devoted to the theological concept of penance as a framework for interpreting the therapeutic dimension of contemporary pilgrimage experiences. Most existing studies analyze the Camino primarily through sociological, anthropological, or tourism-related perspectives, leaving the deeper theological and historical context of penitential practice largely unexplored. This article seeks to address this gap by examining contemporary experiences of the Camino de Santiago in light of the early Christian understanding of penance as spiritual therapy. It argues that the category of *medicina animae* provides a fruitful conceptual framework for interpreting the healing and transformative dimensions reported by modern pilgrims. This approach acknowledges the diversity of motivations and styles among today's pilgrims, which are often unrelated to any spiritual or religious interests (Oviedo et al. 2014; Antunes et al. 2017; Basil 2025; Roszak 2025). However, the proposed explores the possibilities and resources available to many pilgrims, together with the positive outcomes frequently reported in their narratives, such as emotional relief, renewed meaning, reconciliation, and personal transformation.

2. Methodology

The present study adopts an interdisciplinary qualitative approach situated at the intersection of philosophy of religion, theology, history of Christianity, and health humanities. Its primary aim is to investigate the therapeutic and transformative dimensions of penitential practices associated with pilgrimage, with particular attention to the Camino de Santiago. Rather than employing clinical or quantitative measurements of health outcomes, the study focuses on the conceptual, historical, and experiential dimensions of religious practices that have been interpreted as forms of moral, spiritual, and psychosocial healing. This approach allows for an exploration of how religious traditions historically framed practices of penance and pilgrimage in relation to restoration, reconciliation, and human flourishing. They provide a guide and inspiration for present practices.

The research design integrates several complementary methodological components, and the study conducts a historical-theological analysis of penitential traditions in medieval Christianity, focusing particularly on the development of penitential discipline, the role of pilgrimage as a form of imposed or voluntary penance, and the broader cultural understanding of pilgrimage as a form of spiritual therapy. Primary historical sources such as penitential books and canonical regulations are examined through the lens of existing historiography on medieval penance (Tentler 1977; Hamilton 2001; Meens 2014). These sources provide insight into how pilgrimage functioned not merely as a devotional practice but as a structured means of moral correction, spiritual purification, and social reintegration. The findings include a critical review of interdisciplinary scholarship on pilgrimage and health within contemporary religious and social sciences. Studies in the anthropology of pilgrimage (Turner and Turner 1978; Coleman and Eade 2004), together with research on religion, spirituality, and health (Koenig 2012; Levin 2010; Sulmasy 2002), are analysed in order to situate pilgrimage within broader theoretical discussions on human well-being. This literature review makes it possible to examine the extent to which religious practices such as pilgrimage may contribute to psychological resilience, narrative reconstruction of suffering, and processes of meaning-making.

In addition to these conceptual and historical analyses, it is proposed to examine a qualitative empirical material originating from a broader research project conducted among

pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago. The data derive from a series of semi-structured interviews carried out with fifty Polish pilgrims in 2019 at Monte do Gozo, near Santiago de Compostela. The interviews were conducted as part of a larger doctoral research project examining the moral and existential dimensions of pilgrimage experiences among Camino participants. At the time of data collection, formal ethics committee approval was not required for non-interventional qualitative interview studies at the author's institution. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and gave their voluntary consent. The data were anonymised and handled in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Detailed aspects of the research design and sample characteristics have been described in earlier publications based on the same dataset (Seryczyńska and Duda 2021, 2023; Seryczyńska 2025). The fieldwork was conducted during a two-month research stay at the Centro Europeo de Peregrinación Juan Pablo II in Monte do Gozo, located approximately five kilometres from the centre of Santiago de Compostela. This location represents a significant symbolic point on the Camino Francés, as it is the first place from which pilgrims can see the towers of the cathedral of Santiago, often marking the emotional culmination of the pilgrimage journey. The setting proved conducive to qualitative research, as pilgrims arriving at this stage of the journey were often willing to reflect on their experiences and share personal narratives related to their pilgrimage. Participants were recruited through voluntary participation after being informed about the research by volunteers at a nearby pilgrim Albergue-hostel. The sample included 50 respondents (22 women and 28 men) representing a diverse range of ages, professions, and life situations. While the broader dataset contains a wide range of narratives, the present article uses selected excerpts from two interviews as illustrative case studies that exemplify patterns observed across the material. Although the empirical material was collected several years prior to the present analysis, the experiential dimensions described by the respondents remain relevant for understanding contemporary pilgrimage practices. The purpose of including these narratives is not to provide statistical generalisation but rather to illustrate how contemporary pilgrims interpret their experiences in ways that resonate with historical theological understandings of penance as a process of healing and restoration.

The study incorporates a comparative analysis of selected contemporary initiatives that use the Camino de Santiago as a tool for social rehabilitation, particularly programs involving incarcerated individuals. These initiatives, implemented in several European contexts—including Spain, France, Belgium, and Poland—are examined as case studies illustrating how pilgrimage may function as a transformative practice in modern settings (Cordero et al. 2018; Mróz and Matuszczak 2019; Mróz et al. 2022).

This methodological approaches make it possible to explore possible analogies and interpretative correspondences between historical penitential traditions and contemporary interpretations of pilgrimage as a practice conducive to healing and personal transformation. By integrating historical theology, philosophical reflection on health, and qualitative insights from pilgrim narratives, the study seeks to contribute to ongoing interdisciplinary discussions on the relationship between religion, spiritual practices, and human well-being.

3. Findings

The analysis of historical and contemporary sources indicates that pilgrimage has long been understood as a practice capable of fostering moral, spiritual, and existential transformation. Medieval penitential traditions frequently prescribed pilgrimage as a form of penance intended not merely as punishment but as a process of inner renewal and reconciliation. Penitential manuals and ecclesiastical regulations often recommended pilgrimage as a corrective practice aimed at restoring moral balance and reintegrating the penitent into the community (Tentler 1977; Hamilton 2001; Meens 2014). Within this framework,

the physical journey was interpreted as an embodied process of conversion, where hardship, distance, and perseverance played a role in reshaping the moral and spiritual life of the individual. Pilgrimage was therefore perceived as a kind of spiritual medicine, capable of addressing both sin and suffering.

3.1. Penitential Practice in Early Christian Theology

This therapeutic interpretation of penitential practice is deeply rooted in early Christian theology. From the earliest centuries of Christianity, repentance was frequently described using medical metaphors that portrayed sin as a form of spiritual illness and penance as its remedy. Patristic authors emphasized that the goal of penitential discipline was not merely juridical absolution but the restoration of the believer to spiritual health and communion with God (Hamilton 2001). This long tradition was describing penance and the anointing of the sick as “sacraments of healing,” through which Christ, “the physician of souls and bodies,” continues his work of restoration within the Church (Porterfield 2005).

The medical analogy was already strongly present in early penitential literature. A striking example appears in the sixth-century *Penitential of Columbanus*, which compares the work of spiritual directors to that of physicians who prescribe different remedies depending on the nature of the illness. The text explains that just as physicians treat wounds, fractures, and diseases with different medicines, so “physicians of the soul must heal spiritual illnesses, faults, pains, and weaknesses with various methods” (*Penitential of Columbanus*, in Bieler 1963). Such penitential prescriptions were therefore intended not simply as punishments but as therapeutic practices designed to strengthen what was spiritually weak and restore moral equilibrium. It is worth noting that the language of healing should not be interpreted in a strictly medical sense but rather as a theological and anthropological metaphor describing processes of moral restoration and spiritual renewal.

A similar perspective appears in other early penitential texts. The *Penitential of Finnian* describes repentance as a process through which the sinner regains spiritual health, explaining that one who sincerely repents, prays, and performs appropriate acts of penance “will be healed” (Bieler 1963, *Penitential of Finnian*, c. 550). The recurrence of such medical language demonstrates that early Christian penitential practice was understood within a broader framework of spiritual therapy in which moral discipline functioned as a remedy for the wounds caused by sin.

Patristic theology reinforced this interpretation. In his treatise *De poenitentia*, Tertullian describes penance as a demanding process involving bodily humility, fasting, prayer, and public confession, all of which were intended to heal the soul and restore the believer to communion with God (Tertullian 1885, *De poenitentia*, 9–12). Similarly, Cyprian of Carthage, writing in the context of the third-century controversies concerning the *lapsi*—Christians who had renounced their faith during persecution—emphasized that penitential discipline served the purpose of restoring the spiritual life received in baptism. In his treatise *De lapsis*, Cyprian insisted that repentance and disciplined penitential practices were necessary in order to reintegrate the sinner into the Eucharistic community and restore the fullness of Christian life (Cyprian 1886, *De lapsis; Epistulae* 55).

These theological perspectives shaped the development of penitential practice in the early medieval Church. The emergence of penitential books (*libri poenitentiales*) provided confessors with detailed guidance for prescribing appropriate forms of penance. These manuals often instructed spiritual authorities to consider a variety of factors—including the gravity of the sin, the psychological disposition of the penitent, and the circumstances of the offence—before prescribing an appropriate remedy (Meens 2014). Within this framework the confessor functioned analogously to a physician who diagnosed the spiritual condition of the sinner and prescribed suitable forms of penitential therapy. Among the more

demanding remedies recommended in these sources was the undertaking of a penitential pilgrimage, which required both physical endurance and prolonged spiritual commitment.

Historical evidence suggests that by the early Middle Ages pilgrimage had become an established element of penitential discipline. In certain cases, ecclesiastical courts prescribed pilgrimage as a form of penance, particularly in response to serious offences. Over time such practices were also incorporated into secular legal systems, where courts occasionally imposed penitential journeys to major European shrines or even to the Holy Land as part of judicial sentences (Sumption 1975; Webb 2000). Within this historical context the physical hardship of the journey itself was understood as an integral part of the penitential process. Distance from everyday life, bodily exertion, and exposure to uncertainty created conditions conducive to reflection, repentance, and moral reorientation.

Historical studies therefore suggest that pilgrimage functioned within a broader religious anthropology in which healing and salvation were closely interconnected. The penitential journey was often embedded within systems of so-called penitential compositions that combined prayer, restitution, fasting, and travel in order to promote moral rehabilitation (Sumption 1975; Webb 2000). In this perspective, the physical act of walking toward a sacred destination symbolized a gradual process of inner transformation. Such interpretations resonate with contemporary interdisciplinary discussions on spirituality and health, which emphasize the role of meaning-making, ritual practice, and embodied experience in processes of psychological and existential healing (Koenig 2012; Levin 2010).

3.2. *Penitential Practice in Modern Pilgrimage Experiences*

Contemporary research on the Camino de Santiago confirms that many of these dynamics remain present in modern pilgrimage experiences. Anthropological and sociological studies indicate that pilgrims frequently interpret the journey as a transformative process involving reflection, emotional release, and narrative reconstruction of personal suffering (Coleman and Eade 2004; Egan 2010; Luik 2012). The repetitive physical activity of walking, combined with solitude, communal encounters, and the symbolic structure of the pilgrimage route, often creates conditions conducive to introspection and existential reorientation (Brumec 2025). Studies on the therapeutic dimension of pilgrimage further suggest that the Camino can function as a context in which individuals process grief, illness, or life crises, leading to a renewed sense of purpose and psychological resilience (Seryczyńska 2025). These findings are consistent with a broader body of empirical research that emphasises the role of pilgrimage in fostering processes of coping, meaning-making, and personal transformation, although such interpretations are typically framed in psychological or sociological rather than theological terms. The analysis presented in this article builds upon these insights while proposing a complementary interpretative perspective grounded in the theological category of penance. In methodological terms, this approach is consistent with recent developments in theology that employ theological concepts as interpretative resources for analysing ordinary human and social experience such as Knight (2007) or Yong (2007). In the present study, the category of penance is applied not to every positive pilgrim experience, but specifically to narratives structured around acknowledged brokenness, voluntary hardship, reconciliation, and transformative renewal. Within such a perspective, theological language does not replace psychological or sociological explanation but complements it by illuminating dimensions of meaning, reconciliation, moral reorientation, and transcendence that may otherwise remain under described. It is important to note that the contemporary experiences described by pilgrims do not necessarily correspond to the full theological meaning of penance in the Christian tradition, particularly in its sacramental and ecclesial dimensions. A further distinction should be made between pilgrimage motivation and experiential outcomes. While in historical contexts penance often

functioned as a primary motivation for undertaking pilgrimage, contemporary studies suggest that explicit penitential motives are relatively rare among modern Camino pilgrims (e.g., Oviedo et al. 2014). At the same time, empirical research indicates that pilgrims frequently report transformative effects—such as a renewed sense of meaning, reconciliation, or personal integration—regardless of their initial motivations (e.g., Schnell and Pali 2013). This suggests that such outcomes may be more closely related to the structure of the pilgrimage experience itself than to explicitly penitential intent. In this context, the category of penance is not treated as a motivating factor but rather as an interpretative framework that allows these experiences to be understood in terms of processes of transformation, reconciliation, and meaning-making.

The empirical material analysed in this section derives from a broader qualitative study conducted in 2019 among pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago (see Section 2 for details). The Interviews were subjected to thematic analysis in order to identify recurring patterns related to healing, reconciliation, and existential meaning-making. Selected excerpts are presented here as illustrative examples of these broader tendencies. One 53-year-old pilgrim described his decision to undertake the Camino as a penitential act. Although he initially intended to engage primarily in philosophical reflection and prayer, he reported that the physical demands of the journey gradually shifted his focus toward perseverance and endurance. Despite this unexpected shift, he interpreted the experience as spiritually transformative, concluding that the physical hardship itself became a path toward moral improvement. Significantly, the pilgrim perceived the Camino as having fulfilled a role comparable to psychotherapy, an interpretation reinforced by the assessment of his spouse, who works professionally as an addiction therapist. A similar narrative emerged in the testimony of a 59-year-old woman who undertook the Camino several years after recovering from cancer. Prior to the pilgrimage she reported experiencing emotional withdrawal, inner conflict, and a sense of spiritual distance from God. During the journey, however, she described a gradual process of interior reconciliation that unfolded through prayer, dialogue with God, and the physical exertion of walking. The pilgrimage experience allowed her to reinterpret her suffering and to regain psychological balance and renewed engagement with everyday life. Notably, she described the transformation not as a sudden event but as a gradual process occurring through fatigue, reflection, and repeated spiritual dialogue. According to her testimony, the effects of this experience remained stable for several years after completing the Camino, contributing to increased resilience, emotional stability, and renewed appreciation for life.

These findings suggest that pilgrimage—particularly in the context of penitential traditions—can be understood as a complex practice integrating physical effort, spiritual meaning, and narrative reconstruction of personal suffering. Both historical sources and contemporary testimonies point to the capacity of pilgrimage to function as a structured process of coping, resilience and transformation. While medieval theological language framed this process primarily in terms of penance and salvation, modern participants frequently interpret it in psychological or therapeutic categories. Nevertheless, certain structural similarities can be observed: pilgrimage provides a ritualized space in which individuals confront suffering, reinterpret their life narratives, and move toward reconciliation and renewed well-being.

The testimonies collected during the field interviews may be interpreted through the theoretical framework of *meaning-making in illness and suffering*. According to Crystal Park team (Park et al. 2013), individuals confronted with existential crises—such as illness, loss, or moral conflict—often seek to reinterpret their experiences in ways that restore coherence between their lived reality and their broader systems of meaning. Religious narratives and ritual practices frequently provide symbolic resources for such reinterpret-

tation. The experiences described by the interviewed pilgrims suggest a similar dynamic. In both cases, the Camino pilgrimage functioned as a structured context in which suffering, uncertainty, and existential questioning could be reinterpreted through religious meaning-making. The physical journey toward Santiago provided not only spatial movement but also a symbolic framework for reconstructing personal narratives of crisis and recovery. Rather than eliminating suffering, the pilgrimage allowed participants to integrate difficult experiences—such as illness, spiritual doubt, or psychological distress—into a broader narrative of growth and transformation. This process corresponds closely to what contemporary psychology describes as narrative reconstruction after trauma, in which individuals reframe disruptive life events in ways that restore continuity, agency, and meaning within their life stories (Kaminer 2006).

The accounts provided by the pilgrims illustrate mechanisms commonly described in the literature on *religious coping* (Pargament 1997). Religious coping refers to the use of religious beliefs, practices, and relationships as resources for dealing with stress, crisis, and existential uncertainty. In the interviews, prayer, dialogue with God, and the intentional framing of the journey as a penitential act played a central role in how participants interpreted their experiences. The repetitive and physically demanding act of walking, combined with daily rhythms of prayer and reflection, also points toward the importance of *embodied spirituality*, understood as a form of religious practice in which bodily experience becomes a medium of spiritual transformation. In this sense, the Camino pilgrimage may be interpreted as a ritualized environment that integrates physical exertion, symbolic movement, and spiritual reflection. Such integration creates conditions conducive to psychological reorganization and emotional regulation, allowing pilgrims to process suffering through both bodily experience and religious interpretation. The interview material therefore supports the broader hypothesis that pilgrimage can function as a multidimensional practice in which spiritual meaning-making, embodied experience, and narrative reinterpretation converge to foster forms of resilience and existential healing.

It is worth mentioning that the spontaneous emergence of penitential language in the empirical material. Although the interview protocol did not include direct questions about penance, references to penitential practices appeared 25 times across 7 interviews, indicating that this category remains implicitly significant in contemporary pilgrimage narratives. The analysis of these excerpts reveals that pilgrims refer to penance in several distinct, yet overlapping, contexts.

Penance appears in the form of intentional ascetic practices, consciously undertaken as part of the pilgrimage. One respondent explicitly described introducing additional fasting during the Camino, despite the already demanding physical conditions: “*all Fridays were on bread alone [...] one can practice limiting one’s desires or comforts*”. This example demonstrates that, for some pilgrims, the Camino not only contains elements of hardship but also becomes a space for deliberate intensification of ascetic discipline, interpreted as spiritually meaningful and potentially efficacious. Penitential meaning is often attributed to the material conditions of the journey itself, even when not originally intended as such. As one participant noted, “*the journey itself is a certain difficulty [...] the endurance of these inconveniences can be transformed into something good, into a spiritual experience*”. Here, penance is not framed as a separate practice but emerges through the reinterpretation of physical hardship, aligning closely with the concept of embodied spirituality discussed above. A third context involves the reinterpretation of deprivation and suffering as participation in a penitential model of pilgrimage. One interviewee described adhering to what he called “*the principle of penitential pilgrims*,” limiting food intake to bread and water even under extreme conditions: “*there were days when we did not eat enough [...] only bread and water [...] and yet we had strength to walk*”. In this case, penance is linked to radical trust and religious meaning-making,

where physical deprivation is integrated into a narrative of divine support and shared suffering. Penance functions as a cognitive and interpretative framework that enables pilgrims to cope with discomfort and psychological strain. A particularly illustrative case is a respondent who explicitly defined his pilgrimage as penitential and used this category to reframe difficult experiences: *“this is your penance [...] you come here for a penitential purpose”*. By applying this interpretative label, he transformed otherwise negative experiences—such as exhaustion or lack of sleep—into meaningful and acceptable elements of the journey. This mechanism closely corresponds to psychological processes described as cognitive reframing or “relabeling,” which facilitate emotional regulation and resilience.

The material also includes narratives in which pilgrims explicitly reject or distance themselves from penitential interpretations. One participant stated: *“I did not treat anything in a specifically penitential sense”*, while another emphasized that his physically demanding practice (walking barefoot) was *“not penance [...] I simply like it”*. These accounts suggest that, although the category of penance remains culturally available, it is negotiated and sometimes deliberately reinterpreted or avoided by contemporary pilgrims. Penance also appears in a more implicit and relational dimension, particularly in the context of interpersonal difficulties. One respondent pointed to the challenge of dealing with others as a form of “cross to bear,” suggesting that everyday tensions—such as irritation with fellow pilgrims—can function as a subtle form of ascetic experience. This reflects a shift from formal penitential acts toward a more situational and relational understanding of penance, embedded in the social dynamics of pilgrimage.

These findings indicate that penitential themes persist in contemporary Camino experiences, but they are expressed in diverse and often implicit ways. Rather than being limited to formal religious practices, penance emerges as a multidimensional interpretative framework encompassing ascetic discipline, embodied hardship, cognitive reframing, and interpersonal challenges. This diversity reflects a broader transformation in the understanding of penance: while its traditional theological meaning remains present, it is frequently translated into psychological, experiential, and individualized categories. Nevertheless, the underlying structure—linking suffering, meaning-making, and transformation—remains consistent with both historical traditions and contemporary theories of religious coping and narrative reconstruction.

3.3. Pilgrimage, Penance and Restorative Justice

Contemporary applications of the Camino de Santiago increasingly highlight its potential not only as a site of personal and spiritual transformation but also as a framework for restorative justice. Recent initiatives have explored the pilgrimage as a rehabilitative practice for offenders, framing the journey in terms of moral responsibility, ethical reflection, and social reintegration (Knospe and Koenig 2021). The structured demands of the Camino—its physical challenges, communal interactions, and reflective spaces—provide a context in which participants confront past actions, assume responsibility, and engage in self-repair, echoing the early Christian conception of penance as a therapeutic and restorative process (Seryczyńska and Duda 2023). The Camino functions as a “learning walk,” in which the physical and spiritual labour of pilgrimage facilitates both personal insight and ethical formation (Knospe and Koenig 2021). Pilgrims, including those with histories of offending, encounter opportunities to acknowledge harm caused, cultivate empathy for others, and integrate moral lessons into future behaviour. Empirical evidence from surveys and qualitative studies suggests that such experiences foster a renewed sense of justice and communal responsibility, demonstrating how pilgrimage can operate as a mechanism of restorative practice even beyond strictly religious contexts (Seryczyńska and Duda 2023).

Contemporary Camino-based rehabilitative initiatives gain additional explanatory power when situated within a developmental and socio-psychological framework of youth offending. Adolescence is marked by a “maturation gap” between heightened sensation-seeking and still-developing capacities for impulse control and moral reasoning, linked to the ongoing maturation of the prefrontal cortex (Moffitt 1993; Steinberg et al. 2015). In this context, delinquent behaviour is often shaped not only by individual traits but also by intersecting risk factors, including family instability, low educational attainment, impulsivity, and criminogenic environments (Jessor 2016; Jolliffe et al. 2017). Pilgrimage-based interventions such as the Camino respond to these conditions through a structured yet non-carceral pedagogical environment: the physical continuity of walking, strict but simple rules, shared responsibility, and limited resources create a mobile “micro-society” in which pro-social behaviour is continuously practiced and reinforced (Knospe and Koenig 2021). At the same time, the temporary removal from adverse social environments—conceptualised in projects such as *Marche de Rupture* or *Uprooting*—enables a symbolic and practical “reset”, fostering reflection, identity reconfiguration, and the development of alternative life trajectories (Knospe and Koenig 2021). Importantly, the value of such initiatives extends beyond moral or spiritual transformation to measurable, long-term reintegration outcomes. Empirical studies indicate that educational and community-based interventions are more effective in reducing recidivism than custodial sentences (Weichold and Blumenthal 2018), while provides indicative evidence of their tangible impact. For instance, the Polish programme *Nowa Droga* demonstrates that participation in structured rehabilitative pathways can lead to the acquisition of formal qualifications, with 102 participants (61 women and 41 men) obtaining certified competencies upon completion, as verified through systematic evaluation procedures (Challenge Europe Foundation 2025). Such findings reinforce the argument that pilgrimage, when embedded in a socio-pedagogical framework, can function not only as a symbolic act of penance but also as an empirically grounded mechanism of restorative justice and sustainable social reintegration.

The alignment of penitential pilgrimage with restorative principles reflects a continuity between medieval penitential theology and contemporary rehabilitative programs. Just as historical penances were designed to repair spiritual and social disorder through acts of discipline, reflection, and restitution, modern Camino-based programs encourage participants to enact forms of moral and relational repair, thus bridging individual transformation with broader societal reintegration (Knospe and Koenig 2021). This approach underscores the Camino’s dual role as both a therapeutic journey and a practical instrument for fostering justice, suggesting that pilgrimage can serve simultaneously as a site of spiritual healing and an avenue for restorative engagement.

4. Conclusions

The analysis presented in this study suggests that pilgrimage, particularly in the form of the Camino de Santiago, can be meaningfully interpreted as a practice that integrates spiritual, psychological, and embodied dimensions of human well-being. Both historical sources and contemporary testimonies point to a long-standing perception of pilgrimage as a transformative journey that engages the whole person—body, mind, and spirit. Medieval penitential traditions already recognised pilgrimage as a practice associated with moral and spiritual restoration, framing the physical journey as a process of interior conversion and reconciliation within a distinct theological framework. Although the language of medieval penitential culture differs from contemporary psychological terminology, certain structural parallels in patterns of transformation can be observed: the pilgrim confronts suffering, undertakes a demanding journey, and reinterprets personal experience within a broader horizon of meaning.

The qualitative material analysed further illustrates how modern pilgrims continue to experience the Camino as a space of existential reflection and personal reorientation. The narratives presented in the interviews reveal processes consistent with mechanisms identified in contemporary research on religion and health, including religious coping, meaning-making in the context of suffering, and narrative reconstruction after crisis. Pilgrimage provides a structured environment in which individuals can engage simultaneously in physical effort, spiritual practice, and reflective interpretation of life events. In this sense, the Camino functions not merely as a cultural or religious tradition but as a lived practice capable of fostering psychological resilience, emotional integration, and renewed orientation toward life.

These observations highlight the importance of adopting an interdisciplinary perspective when studying pilgrimage and its potential implications for health and well-being. The phenomenon cannot be adequately understood within the boundaries of a single discipline. Historical theology reveals the long-standing religious interpretations of pilgrimage as a path of penance and renewal; anthropology and sociology illuminate the social and ritual dynamics of pilgrimage communities; psychology and health studies help explain the processes of coping, meaning-making, and resilience experienced by pilgrims. When these perspectives are brought into dialogue, pilgrimage emerges as a complex human practice situated at the intersection of religious tradition, embodied experience, and existential transformation.

From this interdisciplinary perspective, the Camino de Santiago may be understood as a form of *spiritual therapy*—not in the clinical sense of a formally structured medical intervention, but as a ritualized practice that facilitates processes commonly associated with healing and personal integration. The physical act of walking, the symbolic orientation toward a sacred destination, and the reflective space created by the pilgrimage journey together form a context in which individuals can reinterpret suffering, reconfigure personal narratives, and regain a sense of coherence and purpose. Such experiences correspond closely to contemporary holistic understandings of health that emphasize the interconnectedness of physical, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions of human flourishing. Contemporary interpretations of pilgrimage also suggest an increasing emphasis on self-reconciliation as a dimension of transformative experience, reflecting broader shifts in late modern religiosity towards internalised and individualised forms of spiritual practice. In this context, penitential dynamics may be understood not only as institutionally mediated but also as self-directed processes of moral reflection and personal reorientation.

The findings therefore suggest that pilgrimage deserves greater attention within interdisciplinary research on health and well-being. It should be acknowledged that the empirical basis of this study is limited and interpretative in nature, and therefore the findings should not be understood as broadly generalisable but rather as offering a context-sensitive analytical perspective on selected pilgrimage experiences. While further empirical studies are necessary to explore these processes in greater depth, the historical continuity and contemporary testimonies analysed here indicate that pilgrimage can function as a meaningful resource for individuals seeking healing, reconciliation, and existential renewal. In a cultural context increasingly attentive to holistic models of care, the study of pilgrimage may contribute to a richer understanding of how religious practices continue to shape human experiences of suffering, recovery, and flourishing.

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