

The Eucharistic miracle along the Camino de Santiago

The whole of the Christian life can be likened to a pilgrimage, and our food for the journey is the nourishment we receive in Holy Communion.

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Camino de Santiago, Spain [Image: Les routes sans fin(s) / Unsplash.com]

As I prepare to lead pilgrims in a few weeks along a portion of the “*Camino de Santiago*, the Way of St. James,” I discovered in my research the story of a Eucharist miracle that took place along this famed pilgrimage route. The connection between the Eucharist and pilgrimage is worth pondering on this feast of *Corpus Christi*. The whole of the Christian life itself, can be likened to a pilgrimage, and our food for the journey is the nourishment we receive in Holy Communion.

Looking to the Old Testament, we can see how the wandering of the Israelites through the wilderness on their way to the promised land, is symbolic of man’s earthly pilgrimage toward Heaven.

Just as the Israelites crossed the waters of the Red Sea to be freed from slavery, by the waters of baptism we are freed from the dominion of demons and reborn as adopted children of God. After our liberation at baptism, like the Israelites, we still have a long

journey to reach our destination which is the eternal promised land of Heaven. The Israelites grew weary with hunger along the way and God strengthened them with the nourishment of manna from Heaven. We too can grow weary on our earthly pilgrimage and throughout our lives can often succumb to sin and discouragement. God continues to nourish His adopted children, however, by feeding us with Bread from Heaven—His body and blood in the Sacrament of Communion. This is the “spiritual food” that strengthens us on our journey.

The miracle that took place along the pilgrim road to *Santiago de Compostela* was a mercy God bestowed upon a struggling priest filled with doubt. It occurred seven centuries ago, high in the mountains of Galicia in the remote hamlet of O Cebreiro. When the *Camino* became a phenomenon after the discovery of the relics of St. James in 813, O Cebreiro became a much-needed stop for shelter in the tempestuous mountain area. Pilgrims taking the most popular route along the “*Camino Frances*, French Way,” will have journeyed for about a month by the time they arrive at this village. Their arrival marks the beginning of the final downhill stretch toward the tomb of the apostle.

A pilgrim’s hospice was established in O Cebreiro by the middle of the ninth century. In 1072, King Alfonso VI of León and Castile, elevated the hospice to the rank of a hospital and entrusted it to the care of the Benedictine monks of St. Geraud d’Aurillac in France. The church at the little monastery was known at the time as the Church of St. Benedict.

The most famous account of the miracle that occurred there comes from the *General Chronicle of the Order of St. Benedict* penned by the Spanish monk, Antonio de Yepes, who lived in the late 15th and early 16th centuries.

As the story goes, sometime around the year 1300, there was a monk at the little Benedictine monastery of O Cebreiro who lost his faith. The fulfillment of his duties, even the offering of Holy Mass, had long been rote and without devotion. When this struggling priest was tasked with offering Mass one miserable winter morning, he thought no one would dare show up through the snow and freezing wind. Much to his surprise, and even consternation, he saw a man in prayer waiting for Mass to begin as he arrived at the church. The man was a farmer named Juan Santín, who made his way from the nearby hamlet of Barxamaior. He must have been uncomfortable in his wet clothes as he knelt in prayer in the cold stone church. His spirits certainly weren’t lifted when he received a harsh scolding for being foolish enough to travel so far in a snowstorm for only, what the frustrated priest called, “a bit of bread and wine.”

The humble farmer must have been shocked and scandalized by having his faith belittled in this way. And by a priest of all people! He offered no response, however, and persevered in his intention by staying for the Mass. The priest, with all his doubts, was game enough at least, to begrudgingly take to the altar to begin celebrating Mass. He did so in the hurried and careless manner that had become usual for him.

When he came to the moment of consecration, a miracle took place that would cure his disbelief and reward the faith of the humble farmer.

The transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ at Mass is a mystery, as this change is not perceptible to our senses. Though the substance of the

bread and wine truly becomes the body and blood of Christ, the Lord's presence in the Eucharist is hidden under the species, or appearances, of the bread and wine. The mystery of the Eucharist becomes a miracle when this transformation is discernable to the senses.

Eucharistic miracles have been reported in different times and places throughout history. These occurrences can be considered a mercy of God to strengthen the faith of His people.

As the disbelieving priest pronounced the words of consecration, he was amazed to see the host in his hands physically change into a piece of flesh with droplets of blood falling upon the altar linens below. The wine in the chalice too, was visibly changed into blood. The farmer shared the priest's wonder and awe at the sight.

The priest and farmer told all who had an ear to hear about the remarkable occurrence. The locals were convinced not only because of the relics of the miracle they were able to see with their own eyes, the flesh on the paten and the blood in the chalice but also because they noticed something different about the statue of the Mother of God that adorned the village church. Unlike before, the Holy Virgin now appeared slightly inclined towards the altar. The explanation they reasoned, was so she might have a better view of the miracle.



The statue of the Mother of God inclined towards the altar known as the
“*Virgen del Milagro*, Virgin of the Miracle.”

(Image: Seán Connolly)

Word quickly spread throughout Europe as pilgrims passing through O Cebreiro learned of the miracle and shared news of it upon their return home. The village became a much-anticipated stop along the *Camino* for the many eager to behold with their own eyes the “*vestigium miracoli*, traces of the miracle.”

A legend even developed that the chalice of the miracle was actually the same Holy Grail used by Christ at the Last Supper. This is likely due to linguistic confusion around the name St. Geraud—the spiritual father of the community of monks at O Cebreiro. In the Galician language of the time, he would have been called *Sant Gral*, which would sound very familiar to “Holy Grail.” It is also believed by some that German pilgrims spreading word of the miracle of O Cebreiro upon their return home, inspired German iterations of the Arthurian legend about the character Percival’s quest for the Holy Grail, such as Wagner’s 1882 opera *Parsifal*.

So revered was the miracle throughout Galicia that it is believed it also inspired the image of the host and chalice on the region’s coat of arms.

A second miracle is said to have occurred when Queen Isabella, like so many others before her, came to the village in 1486 as a pilgrim on her way to venerate the tomb of St. James. She was deeply moved by the story and wished to give greater honor to the precious relics of the miracle by moving them to a more accessible location than the little monastery high up in the mountains. When the royal entourage tried to depart the village, however, the horses refused to budge. Seeing this as a sign from God, they returned the relics to the monastery. The paten and chalice were displayed beside a silver reliquary donated by the queen that encased the piece of flesh and bloodied altar linens. In addition to this, the royals orchestrated the transfer of the monastery to the care of the Benedictines of Valladolid, in Castile, so it could be under their royal protection. For this reason and along with the veneration given to the image of the inclined Holy Virgin, the church came to be known as “*Santa María la Real*, Royal St. Mary’s.”



The author in prayer before the “*vestigium miracoli*, traces of the miracle.”
(Image: Seán Connolly)

A year later in 1487, the truth of the miracle was certified by a papal bull of Innocent VIII.

In addition to the miracle, the village is known in more recent times for its parish priest, Fr. Elías Valiña Sampredo (1929-1989), who is credited for being the principal catalyst for the revival of the *Camino de Santiago* in the last half-century.



A memorial of Fr. Elías outside of the *Santa María la Real*.
(Image: Seán Connolly)

After many years of studying and publishing on the history of the pilgrimage, he worked tirelessly to revive the practice, even personally traveling along the route and painting the now iconic “*fleche amarilla*, yellow arrows” indicating the way to *Santiago de Compostela*.



The now iconic “*fleche amarilla*, yellow arrows” indicating the way to *Santiago de Compostela*.
(Image: Seán Connolly)

Don Elías did much for his village too. He restored nine *pallozas* in O Cebreiro that harken back to the ancient Celtic history of the region. Galicia is a historic nationality in northwestern Spain that takes its name from the Latin *Galleaci*—an ancient Celtic tribe that populated the region before being conquered by the Romans. The Galician language split off from Latin in the early Middle Ages and is still spoken in the region. The *pallozas* are traditional homes built in a circular shape with granite or slate walls and thatched roofs from ancient Celtic times. One of them serves as a local anthropology museum for pilgrims to visit.



Two of the restored pallozas in O Cebreiro.

(Image: Seán Connolly)

Don Elías also restored the ninth-century church of *Santa María La Real* where the miracle took place. Don Elías and the excavators found the meager foundations of the original church which fell into ruin after the monks were expelled in 1853 by an anticlerical government. The church was rebuilt from the ground up between 1965 and 1971. What remains of the original is only the baptismal font and of course, the relics of the miracle.



Santa María La Real as it appears today.

(Image: Seán Connolly)

The stone church has a sober interior of three naves and a bell tower. Don Elías is buried in a grave at the foot of the altar in the chapel to the left of the main sanctuary.



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(Image: Seán Connolly)

The chapel to the right of the sanctuary contains the relic of the miracle enshrined above the tabernacle. The paten and the chalice can be seen next to the silver reliquaries containing the piece of flesh and bloodied altar linens. To the right are two tombs that according to local tradition, are where the bodies of the priest and farmer who feature in the story of the miracle are laid to rest. Next to these tombs is the statue of the Virgin inclined towards the altar known as the “*Virgen del Milagro*, Virgin of the Miracle.”



A view of the Virgin of the Miracle along with the chalice, paten, and reliquaries.

(Image: Seán Connolly)

Like the pilgrims along the *Camino* spurred on by the uplifting story of this Eucharistic miracle, we too should receive encouragement from its message for our own earthly

pilgrimage towards the heavenly homeland. The relics contained in O Cebreiro's church are a visible sign of what we know by faith to be contained within the tabernacle below them. Through all the challenges of life, Christ's promise to remain with us always is kept in the Holy Eucharist.

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