

Sheen, Estevez find 'The Way' to make a non-preachy religious film

by [Josef Kuhn](#)

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WASHINGTON (RNS) How does a modern filmmaker with qualms about religion make a movie about the power of an ancient Christian pilgrimage?

That's the dilemma that actor/director Emilio Estevez faced when making 'The Way,' a new film that opens Friday (Oct. 7) starring his own father, actor Martin Sheen.

Estevez opted to focus on the personal dimension of spirituality, avoiding questions of doctrine and dogma that are harder to answer -- and run the risk of turning off audiences.

"The Way" takes place on the Camino de Santiago, a thousand-year-old pilgrimage route across France and Spain. Sheen's character, Tom, is a doctor living a comfortable life in California who decides to make the trek after his son is killed in a freak storm while on the pilgrimage.

"I think that the film is a reflection of where I'm at on my spiritual path," said Estevez, who wrote, directed, and co-produced the film, and makes a few cameos as Tom's unlucky son, Daniel.

Sheen described himself as a "declared Catholic," but he and his wife did not raise their children Catholic, and have let Estevez take "his own personal quest."

Estevez said he grew up hearing arguments about religion, but never about spirituality. "It's religion that divides us," he said in an interview with his father, "and spirituality ultimately brings us closer together."

In the film, Tom starts out as a lapsed Catholic. Along the pilgrimage, he meets others who slowly draw him out of his tight-lipped

despair and help renew his sense of spirituality. None of these main characters is overtly religious and all have their own issues with God, but by the end each seems to have made some kind of pilgrim's progress.

Estevez said he intentionally avoided "bludgeoning the audience over the head" with a religious message, although the film is filled with shots of churches and crucifixes.

"You couldn't point a camera anywhere without seeing religious iconography, Catholic iconography," Estevez said. "We highlighted it when we needed to."

Co-producer David Alexanian said the film "echoes what the Camino represents, which is, 'We'll take all comers. We're not gonna tell you how to do it, and we're not gonna tell you what you're looking for, but you might find it.'"

The Camino de Santiago, also known as the Way of St. James, has no official route, but rather denotes any pilgrimage to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, said to be the final resting place of St. James the Apostle.

The path featured in the film is the most popular route, the Camino Frances, which starts in southwestern France and travels across northern Spain to Galicia, which Sheen's father (Francisco Estevez) left for America.

Some pilgrims on the Camino decide to continue beyond Santiago de Compostela to Cape Finisterre, which was once thought to be the end of the world.

At one point in the movie, a Gypsy man tells Tom that he must scatter his son's ashes in the ocean at Finisterre. "I'm not a very religious man," Tom says, and the Gypsy replies, "Religion has nothing to do with it."

"We have found that, if at any point the audience was feeling the movie was overly Catholic or overly Christian, that line helped them to get 'underneath' the movie and experience it in a much freer way,"

Estevez said.

"The idea behind that line was that this is something you can't categorize." Or, as Sheen put it, "It's the great mystery."

Although Sheen and Estevez have not walked the full pilgrimage themselves, making the movie became a pilgrimage of sorts. After driving part of the Camino on a trip with his grandson (Estevez's son, Taylor), Sheen suggested to Estevez that they make a movie about the pilgrimage.

The film was shot entirely on location with a small, "minimally invasive" crew so as not to disturb the pilgrims.

"Martin dressed like a pilgrim and walked the walk," Alexanian said. He estimates that the crew covered about half of the nearly 500-mile route.

Sheen, Estevez, and Alexanian are currently on tour promoting the film, which is being heavily marketed to religious audiences. They're also making a documentary out of the tour.

"This is a road trip about a road movie," quipped Estevez.

Sheen added, "We're still on pilgrimage."