



Introduction: A life still burning

Among the sacred stones of Christianity, there are names that never fade. Peter, the rock. John, the beloved. And James the Greater: the lightning. An intrepid apostle, son of thunder, witness of the glory of Tabor, and martyr of the faith. In these times of spiritual confusion, of diffuse identities and lukewarm religions, turning our gaze toward James the Greater is to rediscover the fire of the Gospel lived to the extreme. He is not just a distant figure from the New Testament but the first martyred apostle, the evangelizer of Hispania, the Patron of Spain, and the soul that still burns in the cathedral of Compostela. In this article, we will delve into his story, his theological relevance, his pastoral impact, and how he can guide our spiritual life today.

1. Who Was James the Greater? The Son of Thunder

James the Greater, son of Zebedee and brother of John, was one of the Twelve Apostles chosen by Jesus Christ. His title “the Greater” does not indicate spiritual superiority but likely refers to his age or to his precedence in following the Lord. Together with his brother John, Jesus called them **Boanerges**, meaning “**sons of thunder**” (cf. Mk 3:17), because of their zeal, fervor, and strong character.

From the very beginning, James is presented as a determined man. Along with Peter and John, he was a privileged witness of the most intimate moments of the Lord: the **resurrection of Jairus’ daughter**, the **Transfiguration on Mount Tabor**, and the **agony in Gethsemane**. He belonged to Jesus’ inner circle. As Saint Mark writes:

“And He allowed no one to accompany Him except Peter, James, and John” (Mk 5:37).

The fact that Christ entrusted His suffering humanity and His anticipated glory to this trio is theologically significant. Peter represents the firmness of faith; John, perfect charity; and James, fortitude and missionary ardor.



2. The Mission: James and the Evangelization of Hispania

Although the Acts of the Apostles do not provide extensive details about his missionary activities, the Church's Tradition — solid, constant, and millennia-old — holds that James preached the Gospel in Hispania, specifically in the northern part of the Iberian Peninsula among the Celtiberian peoples. This mission was particularly difficult and initially bore little fruit, and it was precisely during this time that one of the most beautiful and significant Marian episodes in Christian history occurred: the **apparition of Our Lady of the Pillar**.

3. Our Lady of the Pillar: Comfort in Difficulty

Around the year A.D. 40, James, discouraged by the hardness of the mission field and the few conversions, was in Caesaraugusta (modern-day Zaragoza). According to ancient tradition, the Virgin Mary, **still alive in her mortal body**, appeared to him **on a jasper pillar**, carried by angels, and encouraged him with these words:

"This place will remain until the end of time so that through my intercession, wonders and marvels may be worked here."

The apparition of the Pillar is unique: **the only historically recorded Marian apparition while the Virgin was still alive on Earth**, highlighting the transcendental importance of James' mission and of Spain in God's salvific plan. Mary not only comforted her apostle but prophesied a place of worship that would become a **pillar of faith** for generations to come.

4. Martyrdom: James, First Among the Apostles

After returning to Jerusalem, James was arrested and martyred by order of Herod Agrippa I around A.D. 44. The Book of Acts narrates this as follows:

*"He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword"
(Acts 12:2).*



He was the **first apostle to be martyred**, placing him theologically as the pioneer of supreme witness. In a world where faith is often marginal or superficial, the martyrdom of James reminds us that following Christ involves total commitment—even to the point of giving one's life.

5. The Remains of James: From Jerusalem to Compostela

The subsequent story—shrouded in the veil of providential mystery—tells how James' disciples collected his body and transported it by boat to Galicia, disembarking in Iria Flavia and burying him in a nearby forest.

For centuries, the tomb remained hidden... until the 9th century, when a hermit named **Pelayo** and the bishop **Theodomir** found his grave thanks to mysterious lights in the sky, which were called "**Campus Stellae**" (field of the star), from which the name **Compostela** is derived.

There arose one of the most glorious shrines of Christianity: **the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela**, which houses his remains and has become, for over a thousand years, a **universal destination of pilgrimage**.

6. James, Patron of Spain: Symbol of Unity and Faith

The figure of James the Greater has been inseparable from Spain's history. He was proclaimed **Patron of Spain** by Pope Leo XIII in 1886, though his veneration dates back to much earlier centuries, especially during the **Reconquista**, when he was invoked as "**Matamoros**" (Moor-slayer): not out of hatred, but as a spiritual symbol of resistance against those who sought to erase the Catholic faith from the peninsula.

His figure has also served as a symbol of unity amid regional divisions—a sign that **Spain is more than a nation: it is a spiritual vocation** within God's divine plan.



7. The Camino de Santiago: A Road to the Heart

Throughout the Middle Ages, the **Way of Saint James (Camino de Santiago)** became Europe's spiritual artery. Kings, monks, peasants, sinners, saints, and seekers of meaning have, for centuries, walked the paths leading to the apostle's tomb. Today, in the 21st century, the Camino has not lost its strength: it is a **living metaphor of the inner pilgrimage** every Christian must undertake.

Every step, every blister, every silence among hills and valleys is transformed into prayer, purification, and encounter. Going to Santiago is not just visiting a city—it is being transformed by the witness of an apostle who lived and died for Christ.

8. What Does James Say to Us Today? A Theological-Pastoral Application

What does James say to us in this postmodern world?

- **He tells us that the Gospel is preached with fire, not with lukewarmness.** His zeal, fervor, and directness are an antidote to the soft relativism that corrodes so many souls.
 - **He reminds us that the mission is difficult, but Mary is near.** When the world closes its heart to God, the Virgin does not abandon her missionary children.
 - **He invites us to die to ourselves.** The sword of Herod that ended his life was not defeat—it was coronation.
 - **He teaches us that witness leaves a mark.** His tomb transformed an entire region, and his figure continues to draw millions.
 - **He calls us to walk.** Christianity is movement, not stagnation. The Camino de Santiago is an image of discipleship: each day advancing a bit more toward Christ.
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9. Conclusion: Spain and the Apostle of Glory

James the Greater is not a figure of the past. He is a companion on the journey, a heavenly protector, a mirror of the soul that seeks God. He teaches us that **faith is not an accessory but a fire that burns the soul—even to martyrdom, if necessary.** He reminds us that **Spain has a Catholic vocation**, not as a privilege but as a responsibility.



In these times when Spain seems to be losing its soul, James cries out from his cathedral:
“Recover the faith, return to the Way, become apostles of the 21st century!”

And, as that popular phrase so theologically rich says:

“Jesus had three close friends: Peter, James, and John. To them He left what He loved most: to John He left His Mother, to Peter He left the Church, and to James He left Spain.”