

# Martin Sheen's faith vehicle

By [Debra Bendis](#)

October 7, 2011

When I walked into a screening of *The Way*, which opens today, I knew very little about the film; only that it stars Martin Sheen and is directed by his son, Emilio Estevez, and that it involves pilgrims hiking El Camino de Santiago, a 450-mile historical pilgrimage route across northern Spain.

I had three expectations: to enjoy the beautiful and rugged scenery of northern Spain, to laugh at episodes of comradery and humor among hikers traveling together, and to tolerate a familiar spirituality-light theme--an emotionally compromised and overworked or crisis-laden westerner finds friendship and inspiration in the challenge of a "spiritual" adventure.

Well, I was right about the first two. The scenery is stunning, with views of the French Pyrenees and the villages and plains of northern Spain. The shots make pilgrimage look inviting. The comradery brings good moments, some of them laugh-out-loud. I liked the congenial reverse stereotyping of American hikers by their European comrades.

Friendships develop over time and in spite of Tom, the main character played by Sheen. Tom is a competent, responsible and stubborn ophthalmologist in his 60s. His 40-year-old son Daniel, played by Estefan, has resisted all of Tom's attempts at shaping him into a responsible and successful professional. Instead, Daniel disappoints his dad once again by dropping out of a PhD program to hike the Santiago trail.

When Daniel is killed, Tom flies to southern France to retrieve the body and decides on impulse to take Daniel's hiking equipment and walk the trail himself, scattering his son's ashes along the way. As his grief settles in, he begins to see his son along the trail. Soon Daniel is a familiar ghost pilgrim, popping up along the trail or at a meal--a little too often once the point is made.

Tom travels with Joost (Yorick Van Wageningen), a boisterous Dutchman; Sarah (Deborah Kara Unger), a cynical 40-something Canadian; and Jack (James Nesbitt), a garrulous and sometimes annoying Irish writer. Tom tries to ignore all of them in his manic determination to walk off his grief, and Sheen gives the role a deep intensity that makes his moments of humor or anger or kindness stunning intrusions into the background of perpetual walking. When his comrades (and the fact of 450 miles together) begin to wear away Tom's crusty defenses, we understand that he's emerging from dark, private sorrows.

That takes us to my third expectation: the spirituality-light component. Let's just say that I'm the last to learn that Martin Sheen is not a spirituality-light guy but a committed Catholic who felt compelled to make this film. The film began to wear thin for me when it insisted on being a vehicle for Catholicism.

Catholic piety is inserted like the ghost of Tom's son--mechanically and without imagination. There are several examples, but by far the most problematic for this viewer was the casting of Sarah as a woman who is deeply tormented because she's chosen to have an abortion. It felt as if her character exists just to make this point. At the screening, Sheen commented that the filmmakers felt they "had to make a statement."

Another viewer asked why Tom scatters his son's ashes, a practice that's against Catholic teaching. Sheen seemed ready for the question. He said that Tom was a nonpracticing Catholic who would follow the cultural trend in scattering a loved one's ashes. But I believe he added

that he hadn't been aware of the guidelines. In any case, the motif of the box of ashes is a central thread of the film and would be hard to leave out.

I highly respect both Sheen's political activism and his faith, but I would have liked to see a few of his political views seep into this film. A few conversations might have added some depth and complexity to *The Way*. Instead Catholicism is on display as unimaginatively and obviously as the North Face jackets in the film. It's religious piety married with Hollywood.