

STATIONS OF THE CROSS

LENT I

From the earliest times Christians flocked to the Holy Land to visit the places sanctified by the events in our Lord's earthly life. Especially popular was the pilgrimage along the path our Lord took on the first Good Friday. This pilgrimage was made with great devotion, the procession stopping (or making "stations") for prayer and meditation at the various traditional points where special events took place.

For those who were unable to visit the Holy Land, the custom arose throughout Europe of setting up replicas of the different incidents along the Way of Sorrows, so that the faithful could make spiritual pilgrimages. After a long development, these little shrines became restricted to fourteen and it is now customary to set them up along the walls of Christian churches.

St. Augustine's Prayer Book, p. 160

As we begin the Stations of the Cross, we begin a pilgrimage. Like other events in Lent, Holy Week, and the rest of the church's calendar, we travel together with our Lord Jesus Christ along his way. At the Nativity, we meet the Lord in the Creche. On the last Sunday after the Epiphany, we journey with him up the Mount of Transfiguration. And in this devotion, we enter the Passion of Our Lord and the way that he trod under the weight of the cross.

For you see, pilgrimage is more than just recollection or acknowledgment. Pilgrimage is an entering into the journey, walking the way, pausing from time to time, conversing through prayer and Scripture, until at last we arrive at the end. And as we will see, there is no one way in which to make this pilgrimage.

The usual format contains fourteen stations, though historically the range was anywhere from 5 to 30. Of the normative 14, eight come directly from the Gospel accounts.

- Station 1 - Christ condemned to death;
- Station 2 - The cross is laid upon him;
- Station 5 - Simon of Cyrene is made to bear the cross;
- Station 8 - He meets the women of Jerusalem;
- Station 10 - He is stripped of His garments;
- Station 11 - His crucifixion;
- Station 12 - His death on the cross;
- Station 14 - He is laid in the tomb.

The other six stations come from various traditions and pious customs associated with the events of that day, expanding on the account not for the purposes of changing the Gospel or setting up doctrine, but contributing to the devotional aspect.

- Station 3 - His first fall;
- Station 4 - He meets His Blessed Mother;
- Station 6 - Christ's face is wiped by Veronica;
- Station 7 - His second fall;
- Station 9 - His third fall;
- Station 13 - His body is placed in the arms of his mother.

In these 14 stations, we practice making a pilgrimage, walking for ourselves a special journey of devotion and discipline. Like so many throughout the history of the church, those who have gone on pilgrimage to traverse the way of great saints and historic places, we walk this way in the hope of growing in knowledge and in faith by the journey.

So let us pause here at the beginning to consider how we might be mindful as we walk the way ahead. One way in which we may immerse ourselves is to contemplate the 5 senses.

Beginning with the most obvious, we listen, but what do we hear beyond the words spoken aloud? Do we hear the crowd, shouting, murmuring, crying out? Can we hear the footsteps of Jesus and his labored breathing? Can we feel a hush as Jesus greets his mother? Do we truly hear the silence, not only when the paper tells us to, but when our Lord hands over his spirit or when the tomb is shut?

Likewise, we may let our other senses help us to be enveloped by the devotion we are about to offer. As we move from station to station, look at the figures upon the wall, but also to the story as it unfolds in our minds. Imagine the smells which would have accompanied a walk through 1st century Jerusalem. Taste the vinegar, wormwood, and gall. Feel the impact of each fall, of each blow of the hammer, of the stone which settles over the tomb.

Our physical participation helps us to embody the devotion as well. The faithful are encouraged to physically make their way from one station to the next, whether by joining the procession or simply standing to face each station along the way. At the acclamation which begins each station a genuflection or bow shows our reverence and humility. And at the death of our Lord, we kneel in silent prayer, contemplating that which was laid down for us.

These Stations serve as a means of walking here in our local church the way of salvation even though we are thousands of miles away from Jerusalem. With each step the Lord takes, we walk with him. We undergo the Way of Sorrows, truly sorry for our sins which contribute to its necessity.

In it, we also celebrate that, while we were yet sinners, the way was paved for us. The cross was born for us. Death was trampled down by death for us. Though it is a somber and potentially painful or uncomfortable devotion, it is a powerful reminder of the completed work of salvation by Jesus Christ, and him alone.

So as walk the Way of the Cross this Lent, whether in our gathering together or in private meditation, let us take this pilgrimage of faith and so make the Stations of the Cross in our hearts, that we may in both sorrow and joy hear these powerful words anew at journey's end: "It is finished."

+ + +

We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you:
Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.