

# Pilgrimage and Devotion

We are all on a journey towards the heart of God. This is so whether we are baptised or are enquiring about the Catholic Faith, whether we belong to a faith or not. To be on a journey is an aspect of our human condition. We move ahead from day to day as we grow and mature, and the Jewish People of God found insight into this in their own experience of journeying from slavery to freedom, from Egypt into the land promised to them.

We might be tempted, recognising this, to 'place' ourselves on this journey: that those who are older are 'further ahead' (and so, perhaps, are entitled to more respect) than those who are young; that we, as Christians, are 'closer' to the One True God than people of other faiths or who have no faith.

This is wrong and it is **pilgrimage** which provides the corrective. On pilgrimage we travel together with one another, no-one is foremost, and where some struggle with the journey because of weakness, the others labour with them to help them along.

We see this reflected in our understanding of the saints who, though they have left this life, have not reached heaven but continue to yearn with us until the final day, which we call the Day of Judgment. This reflects Saint Paul's teaching on creation 'yearning' for its fulfilment which rests in our human destiny,<sup>1</sup> and also the Book of Revelation where we read about the saints and martyrs standing before God and pleading on our behalf. In the Catholic Faith we are all, truly, 'in this together'.

We travel on pilgrimage to remind ourselves of this 'greater journey' and, just as in life, we yearn to reach our destination which, when attained, gives us a foretaste of the joy of Heaven itself.

That the journey can often be hard is itself a witness to the trials of this world and of our own lives.

## The Holy Land and Rome

Foremost among places of pilgrimage for Catholics are the Holy Land and also Rome. By travelling on pilgrimage to the Holy Land we seek to truly 'walk in the footsteps of Jesus', visiting the places and seeing the sights that he himself will have seen. For many Catholics, a pilgrimage to the Holy Land is the high point of their lives, a time of deep reflection and prayer, a reminder of our vocation to follow Christ and the chance to re-focus on what really matters and on the centrality of our loving God in our lives.

In a similar way, on pilgrimage to Rome, visiting the places of martyrdom, including those of Saints Peter and Paul, and the many places of prayer both in the churches and the catacombs of the early Christians, we 'walk in the footsteps' of our Christian forebears.

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 8:19-25

Within the city itself we also find the Vatican, the home of the Popes, with its great basilica of Saint Peter, where so many pontiffs have been buried close to the location of Saint Peter's martyrdom. Here we rediscover the centre-point of the Catholic church with the Holy Father as its pastor.

## The Camino de Santiago

This ancient route of pilgrimage, or rather 'routes', since it has a number of starting points, stretches across northern Spain and ends at the shrine of Saint James the Apostle (Sant'Iago, in Spanish) in Santiago de Compostela.

James was one of the Twelve appointed by Jesus<sup>2</sup> who, together with his brother John, were nicknamed 'sons of thunder' (one imagines because of their short tempers!). It was they who asked for places to the right and left of Jesus in God's Kingdom,<sup>3</sup> but they were also among the most privileged of Jesus' disciples, being present along with Peter at the 'private' actions of Jesus: the Raising of Jairus' daughter,<sup>4</sup> the Transfiguration,<sup>5</sup> and Jesus' Agony in the garden of Gethsemane.<sup>6</sup>

The 'Way of Saint James' has been a pilgrimage route since the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, becoming firmly established in the century that followed. In 1492, Pope Alexander VI officially declared the Camino to be one of the three 'great pilgrimages of Christendom' along with Jerusalem and Rome.

Around 300,000 pilgrims walk the Camino each year, staying in hostels along the way and walking the route on foot.

## Lourdes

In 1858, in a small cave just outside the town of Lourdes in southern France, Mary, the mother of Jesus, appeared to a young girl named Bernadette Soubirous.

Bernadette described 'a Lady', who wore a white veil and a blue girdle, with a golden rose on each foot and holding a rosary of pearls. The Lady appeared to Bernadette eighteen times between 11 February and 16 July of that year. The clergy, who were initially sceptical, investigated the apparitions and, on 18 January 1862, the local Bishop declared, "The Virgin Mary did appear indeed to Bernadette Soubirous" and a basilica dedicated to the 'Immaculate Conception' was dedicated there in 1876, following the request made by the Lady who, on 25 March 1858, told Bernadette 'I am the Immaculate Conception', a title which the girl herself did not understand but which reflected the dogmatic teaching on Mary declared by Pope Pius IX in his bull *Ineffabilis Deus* only four years earlier.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 10

<sup>3</sup> Mark 10:35-45

<sup>4</sup> Mark 5:37

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 17:1

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 26:37

<sup>7</sup> 8 December 1854

Almost a century later, Pope Pius XII published the encyclical *Le pèlerinage de Lourdes*<sup>8</sup> (his only encyclical in French) welcoming the preparations being made to mark the centenary of the apparitions and reminding Catholics that, 'Every Christian land is a Marian land; there is not a nation redeemed in the blood of Christ which does not glory in proclaiming Mary its Mother and Patroness'<sup>9</sup> and affirming that Mary had indeed appeared to the young girl Bernadette who had later joined the Sisters of Charity and was declared a saint by Pope Pius XI on 8 December 1933.

Lourdes is, in particular, a place of pilgrimage for those who are sick and those living with disability. This is because a spring of water, to which Bernadette was guided by the Lady, and which began to flow on 26 February 1858, brought miraculous healing to some who were washed in its waters.

Yet the primary message of Lourdes remains the message given to Bernadette by which she lived the remainder of her life:

*"Penance! Penance! Penance! Pray to God for sinners! Kiss the ground as an act of penance for sinners!"<sup>10</sup>*

## Walsingham

Walsingham is one of England's principal places of pilgrimage.

According to legend, in 1061 a noblewoman, Richeldis de Faverches, had a vision of the Virgin Mary in which she was instructed to build in Norfolk a replica of the house of the Holy Family at Nazareth in honour of the Annunciation. When it was built, the Holy House in Walsingham was panelled with wood and contained a wooden statue of an enthroned Virgin Mary with the child Jesus seated on her lap.

In 1150 an Augustinian Priory was built on the site to enclose the Holy House and the site became a major place of pilgrimage for the next four centuries.

In 1538 this ended with the closure and destruction of the Priory church and the Shrine under King Henry VIII, although some still continued to visit the ruins. The statue is thought to have been burnt.

Catholics generally visit the Slipper Chapel, which was built in 1340 as the last pilgrim chapel on the way to Walsingham. This was declared the Roman Catholic National Shrine of Our Lady in 1934.

The feast of Our Lady of Walsingham is celebrated each year on 24 September.

There are many other places of pilgrimage around the world of which you may have heard, among them:

- Canterbury Cathedral – the site of the murder of Thomas Becket in 1170

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<sup>8</sup> 2 July 1957

<sup>9</sup> n.5

<sup>10</sup> 8<sup>th</sup> appearance of the Lady, 24 February 1858

- Chęstochowa – where the icon of the Black Madonna is venerated
- Fátima – where the Virgin Mary was said to have appeared to three shepherd children
- Glastonbury – associated (apocryphally) with Joseph of Arimathea
- Knock – the site of an apparition of the Virgin Mary in 1879
- Medjugorje – where the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared to six local children since 1981
- Chartres – a beautiful cathedral and pilgrimage site since the late 12<sup>th</sup> century
- Lindisfarne, also known as Holy Island – associated with the saints Aidan and Cuthbert

## Devotions

*The spiritual life... is not limited solely to participation in the liturgy.<sup>11</sup>*

*The Christian people's devotions, provided they conform to the laws and norms of the church, are to be highly recommended, especially when they are authorised by the Holy See.<sup>12</sup>*

Catholic devotions are practices associated with honouring God and the saints. They are distinct from prayer in that they are 'expressions of love and fidelity that arise from the intersection of one's own faith, culture and the Gospel of Jesus Christ'<sup>13</sup>

Pope Saint John Paul II taught:

*Genuine forms of popular piety, expressed in a multitude of different ways, derive from the faith and, therefore, must be valued and promoted. Such authentic expressions of popular piety are not at odds with the centrality of the Sacred Liturgy. Rather, in promoting the faith of the people, who regard popular piety as a natural religious expression, they predispose the people for the celebration of the Sacred Mysteries.*

*The correct relationship between these two expressions of faith (Liturgy and Devotions) must be based on certain firm principles, the first of which recognises that the Liturgy is the centre of the Church's life and cannot be substituted by, or placed on a par with, any other form of religious expression. Moreover, it is important to reaffirm that popular religiosity, even if not always evident, naturally culminates in the celebration of the Liturgy towards which it should ideally be oriented. This should be made clear through suitable catechesis.<sup>14</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy Sacrosanctum Concilium n.12, 4 December 1963

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* n.13

<sup>13</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (<https://www.usccb.org/catholic-prayers>)

<sup>14</sup> Pope John Paul II, Address to the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments nn.4-5, September 21, 2001

There are many forms of devotion, among which we might name:

- **Eucharistic Adoration** – the act of devotion to Jesus truly present in the Eucharist
- **The Stations of the Cross** – recalling the final steps of Jesus in his life on earth
- **Sacred Heart of Jesus** – recalling the deep love of Christ for humanity
- **Divine Mercy** – associated with a vision of Jesus given to Faustina Kowalska in 1931. The feast is celebrated on the first Sunday after Easter
- **The Rosary** – recalling the deep mystery of Mary’s love for her Son
- **The Angelus** – recalling the moment when Mary learned that she was to be Mother of God
- **Immaculate Heart of Mary** – recalling her pure love and her sufferings
- **Our Lady of Perpetual Help** – associated with the Byzantine icon kept in Rome since 1499

Many Catholics have a particular devotion to a particular saint and the example of their life and faith.

## Suggested Points for Discussion

- What, do you think, is the value and meaning of journeying on pilgrimage for our modern lives? Are you able to share experiences of places you have visited and what they have meant for you?
- Explore how Devotions, as something we do together, are different from our personal prayer. You can reflect on Matthew 6:6, *‘But whenever you pray, go to your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you’*

## Suggested Activities

- Explore the stories of one or more places of pilgrimage. What are your thoughts about these places and their meaning?
- Explore together one or more devotions, sharing your own experience and considering how they matter in our modern world
- Visit your church and walk the Stations of the Cross, reflecting together on the images and what they say to you

## Further Reading

*Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines*, Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, 17 December 2001, Catholic Truth Society, 2002

*Pilgrim Ways: Catholic Pilgrimage Sites in Britain and Ireland*, by David Alton, St. Paul's Publishing, 2001

*Beyond the Place We Call Home: Spiritual Pilgrimage as a Path to God*, by Murray Bodo OFM, Paraclete Press, 2004

*Devotion to the Sacred Heart*, Catholic Truth Society, 1999

*Devotions to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour*, Catholic Truth Society, 2014

*Stations of the Cross*, by Timothy Radcliffe OFM, Bloomsbury, 2015

*A Simple Rosary Book*, Catholic Truth Society, 2014

*Eucharistic Adoration*, Catholic Truth Society, 2012