

Footsteps on the journey of faith

Pilgrimage in the Great Jubilee

The practice of pilgrimage, of undertaking a prayerful journey to a shrine or other holy place, has a time-honored place in the devotional traditions of the Christian Church.

A pilgrimage is a physical journey but, more importantly, it gives symbolic expression to the spiritual journey of faith. The fundamental goal of every pilgrimage is conversion of heart, a deeper commitment to Christ, the 'way' to the Father.

Pilgrimages can be carried out at any time, however they are often associated with particular liturgical feasts and other important celebratory occasions in the life of the Church.

A document called *The Pilgrimage in the Great Jubilee* was produced with the year 2000 in view by the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People in 1998. Key themes from that document are presented in this edition of *Landmarks*.

So much of life is spent 'getting somewhere'! We set out to drop off the children at school, do the shopping, catch a train to work, come home from work, visit the relatives, and so on. If you would like a refreshing perspective on those everyday trips (and some special trips too), read on!

Introduction

Life is a journey. It is not an event that happens all at once. Life is a process that unfolds, step by step, day by day, year by year. It is a process of entrance and exit, leaving and coming, descent and ascent, travelling and resting. From their very beginnings, human beings have walked in search of new goals and horizons. Finding the 'way' is integral to human existence.

From a Christian perspective life's journey has added significance. It is the path that comes from and leads to God. It is a passage we undertake by placing our trust in Christ who is 'the way, the truth and the life.' Our Jewish and Christian ancestors walked dusty roads, climbed mountains and navigated rivers and seas as part of their journey to God. They marked their travels through time and space with sacred dates, symbols and geographical measures. The physical journey was inseparable from the inner journey of faith in their hearts and souls.

Pilgrimages, then, take their meaning from this experience of life as the journey of God's people with their God, to their God. When we Christians make our way to shrines and other sacred sites, we celebrate important

moments in salvation history and the saving action of God which continues in the world today. We acknowledge the movement of history towards the infinite, and we identify ourselves as a pilgrim people of the 'way'.

Pilgrimages, then, are essentially an encounter of faith, the transformation of our lives in the spirit of Jesus Christ.

Veritatis Splendor is significant in that it is the first time the teaching authority of the Church has made such a comprehensive statement on the fundamental principles of Christian morality. At this time in our history, the Church feels a responsibility to give strong guidance. It cannot remain silent when people's lives are being harmed by the confusion of value systems. Of course, as a Church community we cannot 'make' anyone accept Catholic teachings. But we can clearly state the gospel principles by which we stand and invite people to make a choice.

From a pilgrim's diary

My time in Lourdes has been the most enriching part of my travels. I have had the opportunity to spend time with a group of Irish children with disabilities. In their company I have been awakened to the challenges faced by those who live with a disability and the dedication of those who support them.

The comment of a Scottish woman with whom I shared breakfast one morning still rings in my ears: "There are always miracles at Lourdes; not necessarily cures, but miracles." (Ken)

A **physical** sojourn

Israel's pilgrimage

From an Old Testament perspective, we can view our lives today as following in the footsteps of our ancestors in faith:

- **Adam's pilgrimage.** Like Adam and Eve we are born into the world through God's creative, loving hands.
- **Abraham's pilgrimage.** Like Abraham and Sarah we set out in a life of faith and identify ourselves with a people of faith.
- **The pilgrimage of the Exodus.** Leaving the bonds of sin, wandering in the wilderness, enduring trials and entering the promised land: the great signposts in our biblical tradition find contemporary expression in our lives today.

Now, as then, God watches over the chosen people, sustaining them and calling them forward.

At home with my history

Each time I visit Brisbane I make a pilgrimage to our old family home. It holds my earliest memories: my first day at school, my eighth birthday party, being taken to the playground down the road, an emergency trip to the hospital the day I put my arm through the glass of a window... The list is endless. It is hard to imagine myself as that little boy, but it was me, is me, and the pilgrimage puts me in touch again (sometimes with a tear) with the people and events that have fashioned me into the man I am today. (VC)

Faith tip: Organize your own mini-pilgrimage. Identify a number of sacred sites to stop, visit, reflect and pray. For example, your pilgrimage might include the parish church, your mother's grave, the park where your husband proposed to you, and so on.

Christ's pilgrimage

In the New Testament Jesus enters human history as God-made-flesh. He identifies fully with the human journey—the agony, the ecstasy and the mundane. As a child he travels with Mary and Joseph to the Temple. As an adult he walks from town to town proclaiming the Good News. His journey ultimately takes him to Jerusalem and along the road to Calvary. But the path does not end at the cross. Where the earthly pilgrimage ceases, the journey continues beyond death and into the infinite mystery of God. Through his resurrection and ascension into God's glory Christ has blazed a trail for all to follow. Every person is invited to make the journey with Christ, through suffering and death into the new life that God promises, now and eternally.

Some 'universal pilgrimages' in the world today

The Christian's pilgrimage accompanies the journey of humankind towards justice, peace and human fulfilment. For example:

- **The journey of refugees who flee the threat of starvation, war and natural disaster.**
- **Those who set out to foreign lands for scientific exploration, trade and tourism.**
- **The informatic and virtual pilgrimage through ways of telecommunications.**
- **Cultural and sport itineraries; e.g., the Olympics.**

Pilgrimage of humankind

In today's world, which often seems like a whirlwind of constant activity and change, people experience fatigue and long for a place to rest and refresh their relationship with self, others and God.

The Christian practice of pilgrimage touches this basic human need. It allows the person 'time out' to reflect on life's deeper meaning. It points to the ultimate goal of all human activity which is to be found in unity with Christ.

A spiritual journey

Some Christian pilgrimages in the world today.

- **International gatherings (e.g., World Youth Day).**
- **Pilgrimages to ecumenical and interreligious meetings.**
- **Pilgrimages to traditional shrines like Lourdes and Fatima.**
- **The cities of Rome and Jerusalem have special significance (not only for Christians) and are destinations for many pilgrims.**
- **Even places desecrated by sin (e.g., Auschwitz) can become destinations of pilgrimage. Expressions of sorrow and reparation can transform them into signs of the human resolve to say 'never again' to such evil.**

Pilgrimage of the Church

Down through the centuries the life of the Church has continued to find expression in terms of a journey made in faith.

The fact that Christianity has spread across the globe gives this journey a clear geographic dimension.

The monastic tradition has highlighted Christianity as a movement towards inner enlightenment. Through detachment from earthly things one attains divine intimacy.

In each generation of Christians, different cultures have attributed sacred significance to local sites of martyrdom, the dwellings of saintly people and the places where visions and miracles were witnessed. Such sites become focal points for pilgrimages.

Although at times the spiritual ideal was clouded by abuses of power and superstition, as a whole pilgrimages have played a sustaining role in the faith of generations of believers. From Guadalupe to Lourdes, from Aparecida to Fatima, from Santo Nino of Cebu to St Joseph of Montreal, there is a rich variety of testimony to the movement of conversion associated with pilgrimages.

By the 1960s the idea of the Church as a pilgrim people of God had found its way into the language and documentation of the Second Vatican Council. During the years of the Council the image of a 'pilgrim people' was powerfully symbolized by the pilgrimage of Pope John XXIII to Loreto (1962) and Pope Paul VI in the Holy Land (1964).

Subsequent papal pilgrimages and papal pastoral visits around the world have continued to underline the Church's Spirit-led journey through history, in dialogue with the nations of the world.

Pilgrimage to the heart of a nation

A uniquely Australian pilgrimage in the Great Jubilee Year: From 4-11 June 2000 the leaders of Christian churches, each accompanied by a young person, will journey 3600 km from Canberra to Uluru (Ayer's Rock), arriving on Pentecost Sunday for a celebration of the Holy Spirit. The ecumenical pilgrimage, which includes gatherings with representatives of Aboriginal and other local communities along the way, will be a dramatic Jubilee gesture of healing, calling people to a journey of reconciliation between the churches and between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

A pilgrimage echoes the life of faith

Departure. The pilgrims make the decision to go forward, conscious of their baptismal vocation.

Walking. The pilgrims travel in solidarity with their brothers and sisters. They prepare well for their meetings with the Lord.

Visit to the shrine. The pilgrims listen to the word of God and take part in sacramental celebrations.

Return. The pilgrims are reminded of their mission in the world as witnesses to the Good News.

As John Henry Newman put it: "Conscience has rights because it has duties."

A great **meeting** with God

Pilgrimage of the Christian today

All believers are called to join in the great pilgrimage through history towards the fullness of God's presence.

Here a *fundamental meeting* takes place, the 'tent of meeting' as the Old Testament calls it (e.g., Exodus 27:21).

This meeting is:

With God. The pilgrim comes into the presence of God. This God is not a remote, impersonal force but a loving person who knows each of us intimately.

With the word of God. The pilgrim adopts a fundamental orientation of *listening* to the word of God.

With the Church. Christians travelling together on pilgrimage are not just any social group of travellers; they enter into a communal experience of being the body of Christ.

In reconciliation. Pilgrimages are an opportunity to experience the infinite depths of God's forgiveness.

With Christ's eucharistic presence. The Eucharist is the 'bread of life' that sustains pilgrims on their journey to God.

With charity. The compassion of God should be expressed on the pilgrim's journey, especially when travelling with those who are ill. The sick, on their part, have a special role to be agents of the gospel.

With humankind. Pilgrimages can bring people into contact with different cultural customs, languages and religions. They are an opportunity to express solidarity with one another as brothers and sisters in the one human family.

With God and with oneself. In the silence of the prayerful heart, the Lord's voice can speak to each person and bring about interior transformation. Many a pilgrim has returned home changed forever.

With God's cosmic presence. Pilgrims often travel to places of extraordinary natural, artistic and cultural beauty. Contemplation of such timeless magnificence leads the human spirit to praise the author of all creation.

With Mary. Mary's journey with Christ—through his life, death, resurrection and glorification—has the fullness for which every pilgrim longs. Mary goes before us, and calls us forward as disciples of Jesus.

Talk it over

- **What important journeys have you made during your lifetime?**
- **Share memories of the experience of pilgrimage to a shrine or other holy place.**
- **Is there a pilgrimage you would like to make one day:**
 - To where and why?
 - Why whom?
 - With what spiritual goals?

This week

- **By focusing your mind and heart, turn an ordinary trip (e.g., to work, home, the store) into a journey with the Lord.**

A car trip with the Lord

I was due at a funeral one afternoon and the hours leading up to it were hectic. I felt hassled and dislocated. The half hour car trip to the church, however, turned out to be a blessing as I was able to calm down and gather my thoughts. It allowed me some much needed 'space' to pray for the person who had died and to connect with the great mystery of God's love which was about to be celebrated. (Chris)

