

The Spiritual Pilgrimage: Walking Toward Heaven



By Will Peterson

Thomas Merton, a man who lived half his life in rural Kentucky as a Trappist monk, wrote, “The geographic pilgrimage is the symbolic acting out of an inner journey. ... One can have the one without the other. It is best to have both.” As the founder and president of a Catholic nonprofit organization dedicated to walked pilgrimage here in the United States, I could not agree more.

Catholics live in a world where our God became man and gave us his body and blood to eat and drink. We encounter our Creator in the tangible, including in an awareness of our own bodies as “wonderfully made” (Ps 139:14) by that Creator. The soul is not separate from the body; therefore Merton makes the point that we should not separate the spiritual pilgrimage of life toward the

heavenly Jerusalem away from the ways in which we physically move across this earth.

At Modern Catholic Pilgrim, we use the words of the German priest and theologian Iso Baumer to say “walked pilgrimage” is when “an individual, or, more often, a group, sets forth on a journey to a chosen place in order to ask God and the saints—at that particular place—for aid in a variety of concerns. Afterward, one returns to one’s everyday world.” Walked pilgrimage is the opportunity to practice our faith concretely and to develop and deepen our understanding of the spiritual journey to heaven.

Pilgrimage in this way becomes a crucial part of the spiritual life. The holy site that is set as the object of the journey becomes a nearer heaven, a goal to be reached, a place at which we en-

counter Christ in his risen glory through the intercession of Mary and all of the saints. Leaving our homes and everyday lives to simply walk day after day gives us a better sense of the call of the Christian life as a call to remain a stranger in this world and provides a time of interior silence that can be nearly impossible to experience in this day and age. Giving the entire journey over to God and his saints, the pilgrim’s eyes are refreshingly opened to creation. The aches and pains of walking cannot be ignored or avoided, yet those pains are accompanied by the joy of the encounter with Christ, so the pilgrim becomes more deeply aware of the role redemptive suffering plays throughout our spiritual pilgrimage to heaven. Not quite knowing what the next turn in the road will bring, the pilgrim trusts

in God with an abandon hard to replicate in the controlled environments of daily life.

Further, it resonates with a rural spirituality that already embraces the land as the “first Bible” and that truly grasps the words of the Mass: “Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have received the bread we offer you: fruit of the earth and work of human hands, it will become for us the bread of life.” Those who work the land, who experience God in the vagaries of agriculture, who toil physically, understand these things.

Pilgrimage in the Catholic tradition “began” in the 300s with St. Helen, the mother of Emperor Constantine. Constantine proclaimed the Edict of Milan in 313, establishing Christianity as a state-sponsored religion. His mother almost immediately set out for the Holy Land on pilgrimage. She visited numerous sites associated with the life, death, and resurrection of Christ and returned to Rome with items such as the True Cross, which became objects of pilgrimage in their own right.

More involved research leads to a dating of Catholic pilgrimage in



the Holy Land as starting within 100 years of the resurrection of Christ, highlighting the importance to Christians of Christ’s lived presence in this world. Mere decades later, we have evidence through graffiti in the catacombs of Rome that pilgrims were visiting the tombs of Sts. Peter and Paul, highlighting the devotion Christians have to venerating the faithful who have come before us. When we consider Christian pilgrimage, we have to acknowledge it as one of the earliest forms of Christian worship.

This particular form of worship grows from Jewish roots. The Book of Deuteronomy called for ancient Israelites to make annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem to praise God. That tradition carried forth to the days of Christ when

pilgrims sang have been codified in Scripture within the Book of Psalms: “I rejoiced when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’ And now our feet are standing within your gates, Jerusalem” (Ps 122). When we make a pilgrimage, we pray as Jesus and the Holy Family prayed.

Modern Catholic Pilgrim aims to deepen faith and build community across the United States through walked pilgrimage in the Catholic tradition. We do that through hosting multi-day walked pilgrimages for young adults who stay with members of our Hospitality Network along the way; hosting one-day pilgrimages in partnership with religious orders, dioceses, parishes, schools, etc.; and the month-long projects “Pilgrims for Mary” in May and “Walking with the Saints” in October.

There are ample opportunities to get involved, including making a walked pilgrimage, hosting a pilgrim for a night, praying for the organization and our pilgrims and hosts, donating, or simply spreading the word. All of these opportunities can be pursued on our website: www.modern-catholicpilgrim.com.

St. Augustine, one of our greatest theologians, said it best when he wrote, “Solvitur ambulando,” which translates to “Walking, it is solved.”

