

Pilgrims of Hope

BY JOAN WATSON

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ONE OF THE HALLMARKS OF A JUBILEE YEAR is a pilgrimage to the tombs of Sts. Peter and Paul in Rome. But what is a pilgrimage? It is harder to define than one might think. Throughout history, men, women, and children have traveled for a variety of reasons, often for motivations other than simple relocation or practical needs. We can see a type of intentional, spiritual travel in the history of the Greeks, the Egyptians, and the Romans.

The term “pilgrim” comes from the Latin *peregrinus*, meaning “traveler” or “one from abroad.” Americans might initially think of the Mayflower before they think of Santiago de Compostela in

Spain or Chartres in France. A pilgrim, however, is not just any traveler. A pilgrim is one seeking God. Pilgrimages are spiritual journeys: tangible, outward signs of an inward desire to move toward conversion and growth in holiness. All major religions have an understanding of this interior need to physically move toward a sacred location.

History of Pilgrimage

Our Christian pilgrimages have deep Jewish roots. Three times a year, Jewish males were commanded to go to the temple in Jerusalem to celebrate the great pilgrimage feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Sukkot (see Dt 16:16). They would travel from



wherever they had settled to be near the holy place where God dwelt with his people. Soon after the time of Christ, Christians began traveling to Jerusalem to walk in the footsteps of Christ and to pray where he died and rose again. Some, like St. Jerome and St. Paula, went on pilgrimage and never returned home, settling in the Holy Land to be close to these places.

When the Holy Land later became too dangerous for travel, Christians began making pilgrimages closer to home, walking to the tomb of St. James in Spain or even constructing small shrines to the events of the Passion in their gardens and churches. The practice of the Stations of the Cross came from a desire to make pilgrimage even when it was impossible to travel to the Holy Land.

In a sense, pilgrimages to Rome began right after the death of Peter. Local Christians cared for his grave, building a small shrine over it, touching belongings to it, and asking his

intercession. Even if these people only came from across town, they were pilgrims—a pilgrimage depends not on distance but on disposition. After Constantine constructed his magnificent basilicas over the tomb of Peter on Vatican Hill and the tomb of Paul on the Via Ostiensis, Christians throughout the empire could flock to these sacred places in safety.

As modern pilgrims, we should remember that when we visit these holy sites, we are therefore walking not only in the footsteps of Jesus or Peter or Paul but also in those of Sts. Cyril and Methodius, St. Francis, St. Dominic, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Philip Neri, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, and countless other saints who have made these same journeys.

Modern-Day Pilgrimage

One might ask if it is still possible to make a pilgrimage like the great saints once did: risky and uncomfortable, perhaps even walking barefoot, and without modern conveniences. Those who have walked the Camino of St. James in Spain can answer a resounding *yes!* But those of us who travel by train to Lourdes or air-conditioned bus throughout Rome might still wonder . . . is this really a pilgrimage?

While the modern pilgrim might not take on the same risks as the medieval pilgrim traveling across Europe, there is still the opportunity for penance. Perhaps it requires a shift in our approach. It is easy to see how the barefooted pilgrim is sacrificing for the Lord. But what about the hiddenness of the sacrifice of a smile or biting one's tongue? Delayed flights or lost baggage are opportunities for sacrifice. Not complaining about last-minute schedule changes or offering up jet-lag? These might be more pleasing to the Lord in such circumstances than fasting. Often, the penances we choose are easier to endure than the ones given to us. Maybe God is asking us to smile and eat dinner with that annoying fellow pilgrim.

A Microcosm of Life

Pilgrimages are made for a variety of reasons, including doing penance for sins, making petition to God, or in thanksgiving for answered prayers and blessings. It is good and holy to make a physical pilgrimage, whether it involves international travel or a day trip to a local shrine. But one reason why pilgrimage is part of almost every major religion is that it is a reflection of what is at the deepest center of our entire lives. One of the lessons to be learned on a physical pilgrimage is the fact that we are all on a pilgrimage—away from home and seeking the Lord—every day.

When the word “pilgrim” was first used extensively in the early Church, it was used to speak of the pilgrimage of life. St. Augustine

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speaks of the Christian being a pilgrim in this world in his famous work *City of God*. While living here, we are away from our true home, heaven, and everything we do should be done with the aim of seeking God. We travel through this valley of tears, with all its struggles and

sufferings, striving to stay faithful to God amidst the temptations of the world. When you embark on a pilgrimage, you are manifesting outwardly the inward, spiritual disposition that we Christians have throughout our entire lives of conversion.

Life is a pilgrimage—and thank God it is! We all know that we have had some curves and speed bumps in the road. We sin. We may leave the Church for a time. Those experiences don't have to define our lives. Impact them? Absolutely. Change us? Yes. But we are not defined by our past. Maybe you or someone you know has been away from the Church. Maybe you or someone you know is in an irregular marriage. Maybe you feel stuck in a cycle of addiction or sin. These things don't have to be the end of the story. It is time to begin again on the path.

We also need to remember that everyone around us is on a pilgrimage, too. Are we willing to walk with our friends, family, and coworkers? Are we willing to accompany them, help them find the path, and help them turn around when they are headed the wrong direction?

Jubilee Pilgrims of Hope

The Christian tradition of Jubilee originally came from the pilgrimages of the laity, who came to Rome in great numbers for Christmas of 1299. As a new century began, there was a sense among the faithful to seek the forgiveness of their sins and the blessing of the Apostles. When Pope Boniface inquired about this sudden influx of pilgrims and saw their faith, he began a tradition that would continue until this day: a Jubilee Year.

These years are echoes of the Jewish tradition of the Jubilee, which were times of great mercy. Every 50 years, slaves were freed, debts were forgiven, and land was returned to its original owner. It was a time of rest, when even the land lay fallow (see Lev 25). But this was just a prefigurement of the rest and mercy the Lord really wanted to give his people. Announced by Jesus at the start of his public ministry, God wanted to give his people a spiritual Jubilee (see Lk 4:18–19).

These special years are times to receive grace, to open ourselves to God's mercy, and to show mercy to others. Even if we cannot travel to Rome, we can still participate in the Jubilee. We can still mark this year as "a year acceptable to the Lord" (Lk 4:19; Is 61:2) at home. Here are three possibilities:

1. **The Stations of the Cross:** Since this prayer arose as a way to make spiritual pilgrimage to the sites of the Passion even when one could not physically travel there, incorporating this practice into your prayer life is a perfect way to celebrate the Jubilee. As you meditate on Jesus' suffering, ask him to help you embrace the suffering that is given to you in this pilgrimage of life.

2. **A local pilgrimage:** A pilgrimage does not have to be long, expensive, or international. Mark this Jubilee Year by making an intentional, prayerful trip with a pilgrimage mindset to a local church or a shrine within your own country.

3. **More frequent reception of the sacraments:** A pilgrimage is a sacramental. This means that it does not bestow grace the same way the sacrament does, but it leads us to the sacraments and sanctifies our daily lives (see CCC 1667). The Jubilee year and pilgrimages are not good luck charms or hoops to jump through to win God's favor. What God really wants is a contrite heart. This year, seek him more often through reception of the sacraments of his Church.

During this Jubilee Year of Hope, let us walk forward together in the pilgrimage of life. Let us strive to be pilgrims of hope, trusting that the Lord wants to give comfort, mercy, and freedom (see Is 61:1–2).

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