Welcoming Catholics Home

Catholic Devotions ~ The Way of the Cross

February 17, 2015

Tonight we will consider the Catholic devotion known as The Way of the Cross or Stations of the Cross or the Via Dolorosa. This Catholic devotion dates back to the Fourth Century. After Constantine legalized Christianity in the Roman Empire in 313, his mother, St. Helena, traveled to the Holy Land to identify and reclaim the sites of the major events in Christ’s life, including the places and route of Jesus’ Passion, Crucifixion and Resurrection. Frequently a shrine or church was erected over such sites. For example, even today you can visit the Byzantine Church built over the place of Christ’s birth in Bethlehem. (It escaped destruction from the 8th Century Muslim takeover of the Holy Lands because on the exterior was an image of three Persian looking kings.)Thereafter, pilgrims would travel to the Holy Land to see the places where Our Lord was born, lived, preached and suffered His Passion, including especially the final events of His life. Following the path of these final events usually began at the place where Jesus was condemned by Pilate to die and given His cross that he carried through the streets of Jerusalem to Mount Calvary where he was crucified. This is known as the Via Dolorosa or the “way of grief” or “way of sorrows.” St. Jerome, who lived in the 4th Century, wrote of the many pilgrims from all over the known world who would visit the scenes of Christ’s life and Passion.

Since not all Christians could make this long and arduous trip to the Holy Lands and, after the 8th Century, when Jerusalem was overtaken by the Muslims and it became too dangerous to go there on pilgrimage, Christians since the earliest times desired to have the experience of a Holy Land pilgrimage in their own lands by replicating the holy sites. Sometimes this took the form of replicating an entire Byzantine Church built over a holy site or the shrines in Jerusalem or some smaller means like little chapels or carved scenes that evoked the events or places in Jesus’ life. There developed a practice of visiting these series of sites and meditating on the events depicted.

By the 12th, 13th and 14th Centuries after the Crusades had retaken Jerusalem for a period, there was a settled route in Jerusalem that pilgrims walked and prayed to follow Christ’s final journey to his Crucifixion. By 1342, after the Muslims had retaken the Holy Lands, the Franciscans were granted guardianship of all the Christian Holy Sites and pilgrims began to return. By the middle of the 15th Century, an English pilgrim named William Wey, used the word “Stations” to describe the customary stopping places along the “via Sacra” followed by pilgrims. Starting in the 15th and 16th Centuries, reproductions of these “Stations” were set up all over Europe. In 1731, Pope Clement XII determined there to be 14 “official” Stations identifying the events for our meditation on the Passion of Christ from his condemnation to his burial. These Stations are the same 14 Stations present today along the interior walls of most Catholic Churches throughout the world, each topped with a wooden cross:

1. Jesus is condemned to death
2. Jesus accepts His cross
3. Jesus falls the first time
4. Jesus meets His Blessed Mother
5. Simon of Cyrene is made to bear the cross
6. Jesus’ face is wiped by Veronica’s veil
7. Jesus falls the second time
8. Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem
9. Jesus falls the third time
10. Jesus is stripped of His garments
11. Jesus is nailed to the cross
12. Jesus dies upon the cross
13. Jesus’ body is taken down from the cross
14. Jesus is buried in the tomb

The customary devotion can be done in private or in a public liturgy. The devotion itself is the same and goes as follows:

* Make the sign of the cross
* Make an act of contrition
* The name of the Station is announced
* There is a statement of praise (“We adore the O Christ and we bless thee”
* There is a response (“because by Thy holy cross Thou hast redeemed the world”
* There is a meditation where the devout consider Christ’s suffering, thank God for His sacrifice and unite themselves with that sacrifice and remember the Virgin Mary
* Pray the “Our Father”
* Pray the “Hail Mary”
* Pray the “Glory Be”
* Between Stations, sing stanzas of the *Stabat Mater* (a hymn from the 14th Century about the Virgin Mary’s suffering during Christ’s Passion and Death)

The most popular set of meditations (and the ones used at St. John the Beloved) were composed by St. Alphonsus Liguori in the 18th Century. The text of this meditation is very beautiful, haunting, and challenging to pray deeply. Here are some lines from the meditation which reflect this deep sorrowful dialogue we can have with Our Lord through the meditations at each Station as He moves towards His death:

* *It was not Pilate, no, it was my sins that condemned You to die.*
* *Grant that I may love You always and then do with me as You will.*
* *I embrace all of the suffering You have destined for me until death.*
* *I repent of ever having offended you. Never let me to offend You again.*
* *My soul was once beautiful when it received Your grace at Baptism, but I have since then disfigured it with my sins. You alone, my Redeemer, can restore it to its former beauty.*
* *Nail my heart to the cross that it may always remain there to love You and never leave You again.*

From these excerpts we can begin to sense why Holy Mother Church encourages us to pray this devotion during Lent, either privately or with our parish community, as it is a doorway for us to spiritually place ourselves in the midst of the Lord’s Passion. As these events are all Divine Mysteries, they remain present and efficacious to us as His children today. We can imagine ourselves as someone in the crowded streets of Jerusalem watching Him pass us by, meet his Mother, fall again and again under the weight of the Cross, be consoled by Veronica, warning the women of Jerusalem, being humiliated as He was stripped of His garments and the final tortures of nails being driven in His hands and feet and then hung on the Cross to die in torment. Or we can imagine ourselves as one Simon of Cyrene, being pulled from the crowd and asked to help Him shoulder the heavy Cross as the Roman soldiers feared He would expire before reaching Mount Calvary. In both cases, we can unite our tears and sorrow over the role our own sins have played in His suffering and seek to console His Heart and the Heart of His Mother. As we walk along, we can enter into a dialogue of our heart with His, inspired by the words of the meditations.

As you can see, the Stations of the Cross devotion is a very powerful and transforming Lenten practice drawing us very close to the Suffering Servant.