

Welcoming Catholics Home  
Tuesday, January 30, 2018  
Presentation Topic: Pilgrimage

A pilgrimage is a term primarily used in religion and spirituality of a long journey or search of great moral significance. Sometimes, it is a journey to a sacred place or shrine of importance to a person's beliefs and faith. Members of every religion participate in pilgrimages. A person who makes such a journey is called a pilgrim.

The word "pilgrim, derived from the Latin *peregrinum*, conveys the idea of wandering over a distance, but it is not just aimless wandering. It is a journey with a purpose, and that purpose is to honor God.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church notes that "Pilgrimages evoke our earthly journey toward heaven and are traditionally very special occasions for renewal in prayer. For pilgrims seeking living water, shrines are special places for living the forms of Christian prayer "in Church." (CCC 2691).

Pilgrimage has a long history in religion. Once the temple was built at Jerusalem (ca. 957 B.C.), all Jewish men were obliged to present themselves at it for the three major feasts: *Pesach* (the Feast of Unleavened Bread, or Passover), *Shavu 'ot* (the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost), and *Sukkot* (Feast of Tabernacles, or Festival of Ingathering), as per God's ordinance in Deuteronomy 16:16-17. On their way to the Temple, they would sing the "pilgrim songs" (also called "songs of assent" or "gradual canticles" ), namely, Psalms 119-133. To this day, these feasts are called, "Pilgrimage Festivals" by the Jews.

Christian pilgrimages were first made to sites connected with the life, birth and crucifixion of Jesus. Surviving descriptions of Christian pilgrimages to the Holy Land date from the 4th century, when pilgrimage was encouraged by church fathers such as Saint Jerome. Pilgrimages also began to be made to Rome and other sites associated with the Apostles, Saints and Christian martyrs, like Santiago de Compostela, as well as to places where there have been apparitions of the Virgin Mary.

Even in the early centuries, when millions of Christians were martyred for their Faith, the faithful flocked to the tombs of favorite saints to venerate their remains, sometimes at the risk of being martyred themselves. The pilgrims knew that in honoring His saints, they were honoring God Himself. Some pilgrimages were done in penance for sin; some were done in petition for a special blessing or favor; and some were undertaken simply out of devotion.

One of the earliest usages of the word is found in the writings of Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430). His work, *Peregrinatio*, described a Christian spiritual journey as a kind of self-

Welcoming Catholics Home  
Tuesday, January 30, 2018  
Presentation Topic: Pilgrimage

imposed exile of the pilgrim in which he searched for God's Truth in his wanderings while visiting the holy shrines of the Faith.

During the Middle Ages, Christian pilgrimages became a very common thing, especially for those who could afford to leave their daily lives behind for a period of time. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, studied by every high school student of English literature, tells the story of pilgrims on their way to venerate the relics of Saint Thomas a Becket, who was murdered in the act of singing Holy Mass by agents of the English king in 1170. Following the dissolution of the monasteries and the taking over of the Catholic churches and shrines after the Anglican defection in 1535, the practice of pilgrimage was considered "too Catholic" and disappeared from England. This is the case, even though Henry VIII, only a few years before he broke with the Catholic Church, made a pilgrimage to the Shrine of [Our Lady of Walsingham](#) in 1511 to give thanks for the birth of a son. Sadly, both for Henry and his wife Catherine, and for English Catholics, that son died shortly after his birth.

Pilgrimage has a rich history in Christianity. The Bible, even from its beginning in Hebrew scripture, speaks of a people on the move, wandering through the desert being led by and provided for by God. Abraham, the father of monotheism, set out from his native land allowing God to lead him. Some say the Magi who traveled from the east to visit baby Jesus were the first Christian pilgrims. Others in the New Testament made journeys to see Jesus for healing or to hear him teach. Early Christians traveled to the Sea of Galilee and other sites from the life of Jesus. In the 4th century, the Roman emperor Constantine promoted tolerance for Christianity and eventually was baptized. His mother, Helena, traveled the Middle East searching for the exact locations of events from the life of Jesus so that they could be remembered. Today many of the traditional Christian sites in the Middle East are built on the places found by Helena.

During Byzantine times, pilgrimage to the Holy Land became popular and many pilgrims left records of their journeys. In the Crusader era, many places of pilgrimage became battlefields as European warriors fought violently to keep them under Christian control. When pilgrimage became too dangerous for European Christians, other "surrogate" pilgrimage locations were identified in Europe so that the practice of pilgrimage could continue. Overall, it is estimated that over one million medieval pilgrims underwent the journey to Santiago, with millions of others traveling other pilgrimage routes in Europe and the Middle East.

Welcoming Catholics Home  
Tuesday, January 30, 2018  
Presentation Topic: Pilgrimage

Other religions conduct their own pilgrimages — Muslims are expected to complete the Haj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, at least once in their lives, and Hindus bathe in the sacred waters of the Ganges on certain holy days. One of the most interesting pilgrimage sites is in Ceylon, which, curiously, is revered by Muslims, Brahmins, Buddhists, and Chinese Confucianists, as well as Christian Indians. There, on the summit of Adam Peak, is found a footprint. Each religion reveres that footprint as that of a saint. For the Muslims it is Adam; for the Brahmins, Rama; for the Buddhists, Buddha; for the Chinese, Fu; and for the Christians, Saint Thomas the Apostle.

The ancient practice of pilgrimage has made a surprising comeback in the 21st century. Thousands of people have chosen to forego the tour bus for an experience of walking between historical, religious and spiritual sites all over the world. The Camino de Santiago has become the hallmark of the resurgence and now hosts well over 150,000 walkers per year.

The Camino; my personal reflections:

1. God's Creation
2. "Spirit of the Camino"
3. Opportunity for reflection and disengagement from technology
4. Simplicity of life
5. Detachment
6. Evidence of God's love for us
7. The right companion
8. Food is fuel!