

Practice 14

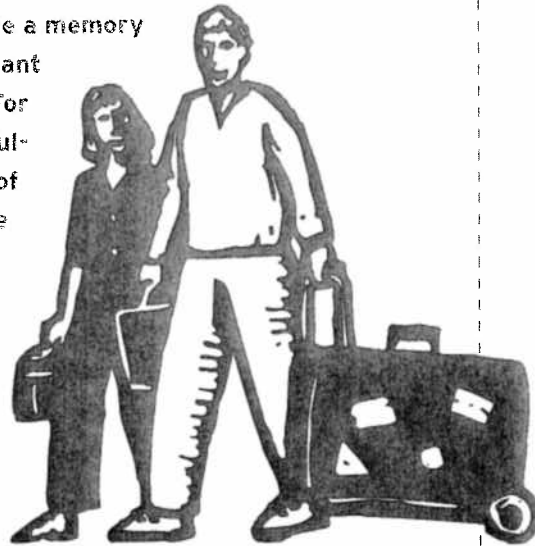
Make a Pilgrimage

Pilgrimages, a sign of the condition of the disciples of Christ in this world, have always held an important place in the life of Christians. In the course of history, Christians have always walked to celebrate their faith in places that indicate a memory of the Lord or in sites representing important moments in the history of the Church. For the Church, pilgrimages, in all their multiple aspects, have always been a gift of grace. (*The Pilgrimage in the Great Jubilee Year*, John Paul II, 1998)

Are We There Yet?

There are two kinds of vacations. In the first kind, we fly to our destination, tolerating airports and airplanes, so that we can arrive as quickly as possible and begin enjoying ourselves. In the second kind, we drive to our destination, stopping along the way and enjoying the ride. In the second kind, the traveling itself is part of the vacation experience. It is a journey with adventures along the way. This second kind of vacation is a metaphor for life: we are on a journey with a destination in mind, but the journey itself is part of the experience.

We are indeed on a journey to life with God in the fullness of his kingdom. However, our life on earth is not merely something to be tolerated as



we await our true destination. Rather, our life on earth is a journey, and we encounter God along the way. As Catholics, we symbolize this journey by making pilgrimages to holy places.

A pilgrimage is not merely a trip to a destination. The traveling itself is an experience that symbolizes life's journey, often filled with hardships, but also with great joys and wonderful relationships. Participants in a pilgrimage are not just travelers—they are pilgrims. To be a pilgrim is to be on a sacred journey in search of fulfillment in God. As a Church, we are a “pilgrim people,” traveling together toward our God. We do not simply endure this world, nor do we disdain this world and focus solely on the afterlife. In fact, in *Lumen Gentium*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, the bishops of the Second Vatican Council remind us that our destination sheds light on the meaning of our pilgrimage:

Christians, on pilgrimage toward the heavenly city, should seek and think of these things which are above. This duty in no way decreases, rather it increases, the importance of their obligation to work with all men in the building of a more human world. Indeed, the mystery of the Christian faith furnishes them with an excellent stimulant and aid to fulfill this duty more courageously and especially to uncover the full meaning of this activity, one which gives to human culture its eminent place in the integral vocation of man. (57)

For Christians, pilgrimages began in the centuries following the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. As Christianity spread, pil-

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grims sought to visit the sites connected with important moments in the life of Jesus. References to Christian pilgrimages date back to the fourth century. Church Fathers such as Saint Augustine of Hippo and Saint Jerome wrote about and

encouraged pilgrimages. As time went on and Christianity continued to spread, it became customary for people to make pilgrimages closer to home, visiting shrines and holy sites associated with the saints and martyrs and eventually, apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

At various points in life, Catholics make pilgrimages to sacred places: the Holy Land, the Vatican, birthplaces of saints, cathedrals, shrines,

basilicas, and other holy sites to recommit ourselves to the great journey of life and to remind ourselves of our true destination—fullness of life with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We do so to remind ourselves that we are not alone on this journey and that the journey itself is where we encounter God. We make pilgrimage to open our eyes to the presence of God on this earthly journey until that day when we shall see God face-to-face at our final destination.

A pilgrimage is not the same thing as a tour. A pilgrimage has a specific spiritual flavor to it; it is a spiritual quest to grow closer to God made manifest in a physical journey to a sacred space where we may encounter God in a special way. A Catholic pilgrimage forms community as pilgrims

travel together, get to know one another, and pray for one another along the way. Formal Catholic pilgrimages are escorted by a spiritual leader, usually a priest, who facilitates prayer and spiritual exercises as well as the celebration of the sacraments along the way. Pilgrims don't seek to visit tourist attractions, but to grow in faith, to practice prayer, to seek healing, to find direction, to pray for others, to accompany a loved one on a spiritual quest, to seek forgiveness of and practice penance for sins, or to express thanks and praise.

Catholics think of a pilgrimage as a calling. Some people say that you do not select a pilgrimage destination but that the pilgrimage destination selects you. What the pilgrim senses is a longing or yearning. When we pay attention, we recognize our own spiritual journey and a physical journey that externalizes it. Pilgrims often pack less than tourists do because a big

Most Popular Catholic Pilgrimage Destinations

Among the most popular destinations for Catholic pilgrimages are the following:

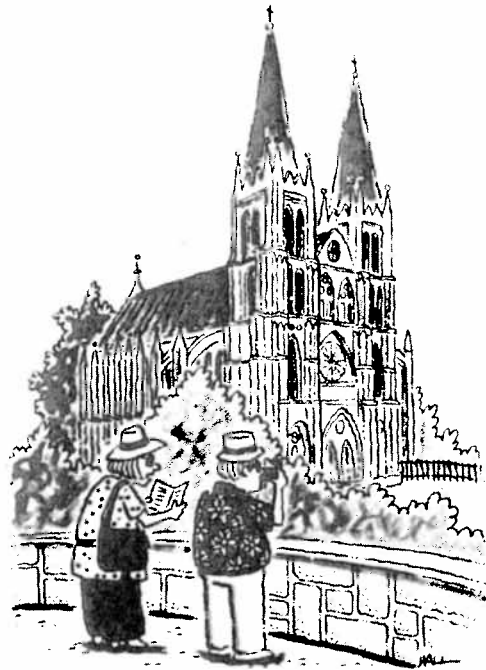
- > The Holy Land
- > The Vatican
- > Assisi, Italy
- > Lourdes, France
- > Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mexico
- > Fatima, Portugal
- > Montserrat, Spain
- > Santiago de Compostela, Galicia, Spain
- > Constantinople (Istanbul), Turkey
- > Knock, Ireland

A priest was waiting in a long line at the airport, on his way to participating in a pilgrimage over the Christmas holidays. After what seemed like forever, he finally made it to the security check point where the security agent said, "Sorry about the delay, Father. It seems as if everyone waits until the last minute to get ready for a long trip." The priest chuckled, "I know what you mean. It's the same in my business."



part of the pilgrimage experience is placing trust in God by leaving behind many of the securities of everyday living. This embracing of poverty captures the spirit of G. K. Chesterton's famous words, "The rich choose their adventures. The poor have their adventures chosen for them."

As a pilgrimage begins, attention is given to the departure, since many pilgrims seek to leave behind some undesirable part of their lives. Along the way, pilgrims participate in spiritual disciplines designed to raise awareness of the presence and movement of God in their lives and on the journey and to detach from everyday concerns. Some examples of pilgrimage disciplines: fasting, walking long distances, participating in processions, reading spiritual literature, praying devotions, and performing acts of penance. Arriving at a destination is, of course, important, because the goal of the pilgrimage is to arrive in the presence of God, a place where we are transformed.



"They spent two hundred years building and three hundred years on the capital funds drive."

One of the most popular Catholic pilgrimages in recent years has been World Youth Day, a practice begun by Pope John Paul II in 1986. This weeklong international event is held every two or three years and draws hundreds of thousands of Catholic youth from all over the world to the host city. The young pilgrims who attend often exchange flags, T-shirts, sacramentals, and other souvenirs with their fellow pilgrims from other countries. Throughout the week, youth participate in catechetical sessions with bishops, have opportunities for the sacrament of reconciliation, attend Christian rock concerts, participate in prayer, and visit sacred sites in the host city. In addition to making the pilgrimage to the host country, the young pilgrims often participate in walks of many miles to the various events, especially the papal Mass, which is the climax of the event. In 1995, the World Youth Day in Manila, Philippines, attracted over five million young pilgrims!

**"Life itself is a pilgrimage.
Every day is different, every day
can have a magic moment."**

PAULO COELHO

Visiting Churches on Holy Thursday

Many Catholics participate in a local mini-pilgrimage on the evening of Holy Thursday, following the Mass of the Lord's Supper. This liturgy ends with a procession of the Blessed Sacrament, which is then placed in reposition (on a special altar) so that the faithful may remain in vigil until 11 p.m. or midnight. As a result, Catholic churches are unlocked on this evening, providing Catholics with an opportunity to visit a variety of parishes, especially in urban areas where a cluster of churches may be within just a few miles of one another. Traditionally, Catholics visit seven parishes on this night (symbolic of the ancient practice of visiting the seven basilicas of Rome as an act of penance), ideally ending up at the cathedral of the diocese. However, this mini-pilgrimage can take any shape or form depending on your circumstances. The goal is to spend a few minutes in each church, praying before the Blessed Sacrament, and keeping vigil on the night that Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest, asking his disciples to stay awake with him.

Relics

Because Catholics are sacramental, we do not drive a wedge between spirit and matter. Thus, we encounter grace through physical things. One such example is relics—the bones, clothing, ashes, or possessions of the saints we hold in reverence. Many people undertake pilgrimages to visit sites where such relics are held. We don't believe relics have magical powers that we can use to compel God to work in a certain way. But we do believe that God uses the physical realities of this world to touch our lives. Just as Jesus' lifeless body was treated with reverence by Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, Mary the mother of Jesus, and the women who came to the tomb following his death, we show reverence for the bodies of the saints. In the fourth century, St. Jerome described the Catholic understanding of relics: "We do not worship, we do not adore, for fear that we should bow down to the creature rather than to the creator, but we venerate the relics of the martyrs in order the better to adore him whose martyrs they are" (*Ad Riparium*, i, P.L., XXII, 907).

Practical suggestions for practicing pilgrimages:

- > Visit the Catholic parishes in your area. Learn about their history and architecture.
- > Walk to church instead of driving as a reminder of the spiritual journey on which you are a participant.
- > Make arrangements to celebrate the Eucharist at your diocese's cathedral. Visit your diocesan website for background information on the history of the diocese, the cathedral, and the bishops.
- > Visit a local monastery and learn about the monastic way of life that has been part of Church life for more than fifteen hundred years.
- > Identify locations of shrines and basilicas in your area and make arrangements to visit them.
- > On vacations, stop at various cathedrals and shrines along the way. For a list of shrines in the United States, visit www.catholicshrines.net.
- > Consider participating, at least once in your lifetime, in a full-fledged pilgrimage to a holy site such as the Holy Land, the Vatican, Fatima,

Lourdes, Assisi, Manresa (St. Ignatius of Loyola), or Mexico City (Our Lady of Guadalupe).

- > On Holy Thursday, participate in a mini-pilgrimage, visiting churches in your area after the evening Mass of the Lord's Supper.
 - > Remind yourself each day that you are a pilgrim on a journey, with God as your starting point *and* your destination.
 - > Establish sacred sites of your own: locations in your life where you have had an experience of God's presence. This can include visiting cemeteries where our belief in the communion of saints is expressed in a tangible manner. Visit these sites often.
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Scripture

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. (LUKE 2:41-42)

Prayer

Loving God, you called Abram and Sarai to set out on a journey of faith. You led your people Israel on a journey of faith through the desert for forty years. You call me to embark on a journey of faith with your son Jesus, guided by the Holy Spirit. Help me recognize this life as an earthly pilgrimage, keeping my eyes open for signs of your presence, and savoring the moments of grace that surround me, until that day when I arrive at my destination, in your divine presence. Amen.

To share and learn more in a spiritual mentoring relationship about practicing pilgrimage, visit www.loyolapress.com/practice-makes-catholic.

