



Origins of the *Stations of the Cross*

This particular devotion is called by several names, *Stations of the Cross*, *Way of the Cross*, *Via Crucis*, and *Via Dolorosa*. These names signify either a series of pictures or tableaux representing certain scenes from the Passion of Christ, each corresponding to a particular incident; or the special form of devotion connected with such representations.

During the time of the crusades (1095-1270), it became popular for pilgrims in the Holy Land to walk in the footsteps of Jesus to Calvary. It is speculated that the *Stations of the Cross* became a popular substitute pilgrimage throughout Europe after the Moslems recaptured the Holy Land (making pilgrimages there too dangerous).

Devotional manuals about the *Stations* date from the 16th century although the actual origin of the devotion is uncertain. The popularity of the *Stations of the Cross* was fostered by the Franciscans, who obtained a special indulgence from Pope Innocent XI, in 1686, for those who performed the devotion. The *Stations* represented critical events from Scripture or tradition of Jesus' journey to Calvary.

Originally done only outdoors, the *Stations* were allowed inside churches in the mid-18th century. Eventually fixed at fourteen, (by Pope Clement XII in 1731) the *Stations* soon became a familiar feature in all Catholic churches.

The object of the *Stations* is to help the faithful to make in spirit, as it were, a pilgrimage to the chief scenes of Christ's sufferings and death, and this has become one of the most popular of Catholic devotions. It is carried out by passing from Station to Station, with certain prayers at each and devout meditation on the various incidents in turn. It is very usual, when the devotion is performed publicly, to sing a stanza of the "*Stabat Mater*" while passing from one Station to the next.

Inasmuch as the *Way of the Cross*, made in this way, constitutes a miniature pilgrimage to the holy places at Jerusalem, the origin of the devotion may be traced to the Holy Land. The *Via Dolorosa* at Jerusalem (though not called by that name before the sixteenth century) was reverently marked out from the earliest times and has been the goal of pious pilgrims ever since the days of Constantine (ca. 315 A.D.). Tradition asserts that the Blessed Virgin used to visit daily the scenes of Christ's Passion and St. Jerome speaks of the crowds of pilgrims from all countries who used to visit the holy places in his day.

At the monastery of San Stefano at Bologna, a group of connected chapels were constructed as early as the fifth century by St. Petronius, Bishop of Bologna, which were intended to represent the more important shrines of Jerusalem, and in consequence, this monastery became familiarly known as "Hierusalem." These may perhaps be regarded as the seed from which the *Stations* afterwards developed, though it is tolerably certain that nothing that we have before about the fifteenth century can strictly be called a *Way of the Cross* in the modern sense.

The earliest use of the word *Stations*, as applied to the accustomed halting-places in the *Via Sacra* at Jerusalem, occurs in the narrative of an English pilgrim, William Wey, who visited the Holy Land in 1458 and again in 1462, and who describes the manner in which it was then usual to follow the footsteps of Christ in His sorrowful journey. It seems that up to that time it had been the general practice to commence at Mount Calvary, and proceeding thence, in the opposite direction to Christ, to work back to Pilate's house. By the early part of the sixteenth century, however, the more reasonable way of traversing the route, by beginning at Pilate's house and ending at Mount Calvary, had come to be regarded as more correct, and it became a special exercise of devotion complete in itself.

With regard to the number of *Stations* it is not at all easy to determine how this came to be fixed at fourteen, for it seems to have varied considerably at different times and places. And, naturally, with varying numbers the incidents of the Passion commemorated also varied greatly. Wey's account, written in the middle of the fifteenth century, gives fourteen, but only five of these correspond with ours, and of the others, seven are only remotely connected with our *Via Crucis*: The house of Dives, the city gate through which Christ passed, the probatic pool, the Ecce Homo arch, the Blessed Virgin's school, and the houses of Herod and Simon the Pharisee.

A book entitled "*Jerusalem sicut Christi tempore floruit*", written by one Adrichomius and published in 1584, gives twelve Stations which correspond exactly with the first twelve of ours, and this fact is thought by some to point conclusively to the origin of the particular selection afterwards authorized by the Church, especially as this book had a wide circulation and was translated into several European languages. It may be conjectured, with extreme probability, that our present series of Stations, together with the accustomed series of prayers for them, comes to us, not from Jerusalem, but from some of the imitation *Ways of the Cross* in different parts of Europe, and that we owe the propagation of the devotion, as well as the number and selection of our *Stations*, much more to the pious ingenuity of certain sixteenth-century devotional writers than to the actual practice of pilgrims to the holy places.

Realizing that few persons, comparatively, were able to gain [indulgences] by means of a personal pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Innocent XI, in 1686, granted to the **Franciscans**, in answer to their petition, the right to erect the *Stations* in all their churches, and declared that all the indulgences that had ever been given for devoutly visiting the actual scenes of Christ's Passion, could thenceforth be gained by Franciscans and all others affiliated to their order if they made the *Way of the Cross* in their own churches in the accustomed manner. Innocent XII confirmed the privilege in 1694 and Benedict XIII in 1726 extended it to all the faithful.

In 1731, Clement XII still further extended it by permitting the indulgenced Stations to all churches, provided that they were erected by a Franciscan father with the sanction of the ordinary. At the same time, he definitely fixed the number of Stations at fourteen. Benedict XIV in 1742 exhorted all priests to enrich their churches with so great a treasure, and there are few churches now without the Stations. In 1857 the bishops of England received faculties from the Holy See to erect Stations themselves, with the indulgences attached, wherever there were no Franciscans available, and in 1862 this last restriction was removed and the bishops were empowered to erect the Stations themselves, either personally or by delegate, anywhere within their jurisdiction.

Though many saints were devoted to the *Way [or Stations] of the Cross*, perhaps no one did more to promote it than St. Leonard of Port Maurice, Italy (1676-1751). As a Franciscan priest, St. Leonard preached the *Way of the Cross* at missions for forty-three years and reportedly set up stations in 571 locations throughout Italy, including the Colosseum in Rome.

In conclusion, it may be safely asserted that there is no devotion more richly endowed with indulgences than the *Way of the Cross*, and none which enables us more literally to obey Christ's injunction to take up our cross and follow Him. A perusal of the prayers usually given for this devotion in any manual will show what abundant spiritual graces, apart from the indulgences, may be obtained through a right use of them, and the fact that the *Stations* may be made either publicly or privately in any church renders the devotion specially suitable for all.

It is a powerful way to help people contemplate the journey of Jesus to the cross and its significance for our lives. The *Stations of the Cross* is a mini-pilgrimage allowing us to engage all of our senses, heart, mind and body.

[Compiled by Deacon Dave & Thérèse Ream, O.F.S., Revised July 2017]