

Visiting the Holy City

At the time of Christ, pious Jews often made pilgrimages to Jerusalem, especially upon major holidays, to worship in the Temple of their forefathers or in fulfillment of some vow.¹ The first Christians, many of whom were themselves Jews, naturally continued this custom, as they continued so many other Jewish observances, adapting them to the circumstances of the new faith. Of course, they particularly wished to visit the city that was the site of the final dramatic and profound events of Our Lord's ministry here on earth, of His Passion, and of the founding of the post-Resurrection Church.

Probably from the very beginning, but certainly from a very early date, many of these Christian pilgrims traced out and personally walked the traditional route of Christ's last journey from Pilate's house to Calvary. This is called the Via Dolorosa or "Way of Sorrows". As they walked those streets, they stopped and reflected at each location believed to be associated with some incident in Christ's final journey, just as religious travelers still do today. When these travelers returned home they naturally regaled their families, friends and neighbors with the special closeness to Our Lord they felt and the deeper understanding of His sacrifice they gained from literally walking in His footsteps.

Most people could never make the long, slow, and expensive trip to Jerusalem; even the few who did could make it only once in a lifetime. Thus both those who had to stay at home and those who wished to repeat their great journey welcomed the idea of making a

spiritual pilgrimage by symbolically reenacting the pilgrims' walk down the route of the Passion.

The Devotion Spreads

The Franciscans were particularly concerned to foster personal acts of devotion, both private and communal. By the later Middle Ages, they had successfully promoted the spiritual pilgrimage to the Holy Places through meditating upon the events of Christ's journey to Calvary. Thus before the Reformation this spiritual "walk with Christ" had already become common practice in Western Europe, although details of it varied from place to place. The specific selection of incidents to be commemorated was finalized by the 18th and 19th Centuries. As do so many other Catholic devotions, this final form owes much to the work of St. Alphonsse Ligouri.

The Form of the Stations

As now usually practiced, the Stations of the Cross are fourteen commemorations or events, represented by pictures or bas reliefs. These are fixed to the church walls in chronological order.

They begin on the "Gospel Side" of the nave (the worshipper's left when seated in the pews), next to the chancel (the altar area). The first seven continue in order on that wall from front to back (the "West end") of the congregation's part of the building. The eighth Station begins at the "West end" (rear) of the opposite wall, on the "Epistle Side" (the worshipper's right when seated in the pews). The remaining six then continue

up the nave to its front, ending at the chancel.

The framework of the devotion is eight incidents that are either expressly reported in the Gospel accounts of Christ's Passion or are clearly implied by other details of those accounts. Two others, His meetings with His Mother and with the women of Jerusalem, are consistent with the reported presence of Our Lady and of other women at the scene of His execution.

His three falls during His journey are not reported in Scripture but would be only expected of a man who had been viciously flogged and then forced to carry a weight down an uneven, and perhaps unpaved, street. Only His encounter with St. Veronica is due to a comparatively late tradition but it is one that has been sanctified by the acceptance and prayers of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of the faithful.

The incidents now generally accepted and commemorated are:

1. Christ is condemned to death.²
2. Christ receives the cross.³
3. His first fall.⁴
4. He meets His Mother
5. Simon of Cyrene is made to bear the cross.⁶
6. Christ's face is wiped by Veronica.⁷
7. His second fall.⁸
8. He meets the women of Jerusalem.⁹
9. His third fall.¹⁰

10. He is stripped of His garments.¹¹
11. He is nailed to the cross.¹²
12. Christ dies on the cross.¹³
13. His body is taken down from the cross.¹⁴
14. His body is laid in the tomb.¹⁵

The Stations as a Devotion

“Doing the Stations” is still primarily a personal act of devotion, although many congregations use it corporately during Lent and Advent. It is also often included in parishes’ Good Friday observances.

There are many ways of making this spiritual pilgrimage while reflecting upon Our Lord’s Passion. Often these include kneeling at each Station, reading a meditation on that event’s meaning, saying certain prayers such as an Act of Contrition, and saying or singing a short hymn or anthem. Usually this is a verse of the Medieval “Stabat Mater”, which begins “By the Cross her station keeping....”

Many Anglicans are familiar with the format in St. Augustine’s Prayer Book, an old publication of the Order of the Holy Cross. As with so many other traditional manuals of devotion, this personal prayer book has been abandoned by the Episcopal Church but it has been reprinted for the Continuing Anglican Churches by the Anglican Parishes Association in Athens, Georgia.

See, especially, F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press 1983), s.v. “Stations of the Cross” and

Michael Glazier and Monica K. Hellwig, eds., *The Modern Catholic Encyclopedia* (The Liturgical Press 1994), s.v. “Stations of the Cross”.

-
1. See, e.g., Acts 2 and 21.
 2. St. Matthew 27:11-26; St. Mark 15:15; St. Luke 23:24; St. John 19:16.
 3. St. John 19:17.
 4. This is part of the long-standing but unwritten tradition.
 5. This, too, is part of the unwritten tradition but it is reasonable that Our Lady would have seen her son during His journey for she was present at its end. See St. John 19:25.
 6. St. Matthew 27:32; St. Mark 15:21; St. Luke 23:26.
 7. This tradition is found in its present form by the 14th Century in France.
 8. This is part of the unwritten tradition.
 9. This is part of the unwritten tradition but, as with Station No. 4, see St. John 19:25.
 10. This is part of the unwritten tradition.
 11. St. Matthew 27:35; St. Mark 15:24; St. Luke 23:34b; St. John 19:23 where several women accompanied Our Lady at the foot of the Cross.
 12. St. Matthew 27:35; St. Mark 15:24; St. Luke 23:33; St. John 19:18.
 13. St. Matthew 27:50; St. Mark 15:37; St. Luke 23:46; St. John 19:30.
 14. St. Luke 23:53a; St. John 19:38.
 15. St. Matthew 27:59; St. Mark 15:46; St. Luke 23:53b; St. John 19:41-42.

The Question Series Tracts were originated by
 The Venerable Donald B. Rice,
 Archdeacon, Dean, and Rector,
 Christ Anglican Catholic Church
 4316 North Woodlawn Avenue
 Metairie, Louisiana 70006
 (504) 456-7170

**This Question Series Tract was written by
 The Reverend Canon John A. Hollister,
 Priest Associate,
 Christ Anglican Catholic Church**

What

Are

Who

The

How

Stations

Where

Of The

When

Cross

Why

