

- ◆ Why Stations of the Cross? Because not everyone could become a pilgrim and go to the Holy Land* and walk in the footsteps of Jesus. The route that was walked in Jerusalem was called in Latin variously the Via Sacra (The Sacred Way), Via Dolorosa (“The Way of Sorrow”) but eventually most often Via Crucis (“The Way of the Cross”). There were no set number of stopping points, but stopping at various points along this “way” and praying became a common practice for all Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem from the early 4th c. on. Beginning in the 5th c. some places in Europe began to erect chapels that commemorated various moments of this “way of the cross” so that people could walk from one to another and experience a similar sharing in the footsteps of Jesus. These outdoor chapels and woodcarvings of scenes from Jesus in Jerusalem became more common after the Holy Land was conquered by the Ottoman empire, making it more difficult for Christian pilgrims to get to Jerusalem.

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SOME CATHOLIC INSIGHTS

March
2007

- ◆ Stations invite us into a “mini-pilgrimage” each time we pray them. When possible, even today, Stations are meant to be walked, at least by the leader of the prayer and the acolytes.* That is one reason we have spread the Stations of the Cross throughout the church so that they can be prayed in a walking manner.
- ◆ The Stations of the Cross as we know them today have a special connection to the Franciscans*. The Franciscan Order was given “guardianship” of the Catholic sites in the Holy Land in 1342 (which they hold to this day). As a result they often erected Stations in the towns they were sent to throughout Europe, so that people could connect to what pilgrims did in Jerusalem. When the pope granted the same indulgence* for praying the Stations at their local Franciscan Church as to those who traveled to the Holy Land, the practice of praying the Stations of the Cross increased greatly. At first only Franciscans had the permission to erect Stations of the Cross inside a Church (18th century), but soon that permission was granted to all parish churches.
 - ◆ Traditionally, each Station had to have a cross made of wood attached to it in order for it to be considered authentic. The focus was on how we share in the cross of Christ in our lives. Eventually permission was extended to other types of stations as well as to individuals who used a crucifix* and prayed the stations holding a crucifix.
 - ◆ The number of stations is not fixed. Different portrayals of Jesus’ “way of the cross” had different scenes ranging in number from 5 to over 30. The reason we have Jesus falling three times is due to the popularity of the scenes carved at Nuremberg around 1500. Each of the seven scenes there depicted Jesus along the way as having fallen and meeting someone. The scenes that became part of our traditional fourteen under other names (meeting his mother, Veronica, the women of Jerusalem, the help of Simon of Cyrene) no longer show him as fallen at those moments. The other three have retained the image of a fallen Jesus, but with no other information given as to who else was in that scene.
- ◆ By custom the Stations begin on the left or gospel side* of the Church (as one faces the altar). But other arrangements of the Stations are allowed. At Ss. John and Paul we end on the left side of the Church in order to tie the last station--the placing of the body in the tomb--with the icon of the risen Jesus and martyred brothers John and Paul that is on our east wall.
- ◆ Pope John Paul II issued an alternative set of 14 “Scriptural Stations” so that each Station scene was from one of the gospels narratives about Jesus’ passion and death. Scenes like Veronica* wiping the face of Jesus (Station #6) and Jesus’ falling down three times (Stations #3, #7, #9) were removed, because there is no Scriptural story about these. He added Stations connected to other events such as the Agony in the Garden, Betrayal by Judas, Denial by Peter, and Jesus’ Blessing of the Good Thief.
- ◆ Some prayer booklets on the Stations now add a fifteenth station--the Resurrection of Jesus--so that we end our prayer with the reality for today. Jesus is risen. Even our meditations on the sorrows of Jesus are

* An explanation of this term is given in the “Catholic vocabulary” section on the other side

to lead to a greater appreciation of the resurrection, not simply of his suffering.

- ◆ For the millennial holy year in 2000 a *Via Lucis* (“Way of Light”) was developed to complement the way of the cross. Also known as the Stations of the Resurrection, an example of such stations was discovered in the Catacombs of St. Callistus in Rome. Just as the Stations of the Cross are particularly suited for Lent, the Stations of Light are suited for Easter Sunday, for the weekdays of the Easter Octave* (known as "Bright Week" among the Eastern churches), and throughout the Fifty Days of the Easter Season. The Way of Light takes scenes from the four gospels, which narrate the appearances of the Risen Lord from Easter to Pentecost. Here in the Archdiocese of Detroit you can walk such Stations of Light (as well as the traditional stations of the Cross in the “Via Garden” at St. John's Center for Youth and Family, Plymouth, Michigan, developed by Fr. John West (John grew up in the Romeo area and died in April, 2005).

- ◆ **ACOLYTE:** The name given to those who serve at the altar and help a bishop, priest or deacon by carrying candles/cross, holding the book and so on. In 1972 Pope Paul VI created a formal “Ministry of Acolyte.” No longer is an acolyte to be seen only as a step toward ordination, although all who become deacons must first serve as official acolytes for a period of time.
- ◆ **CRUCIFIX:** The name given to a cross that has on it the image of the crucified/suffering Christ. For many centuries the simple cross with no image was common. In the Middle Ages, as artwork became more realistic, greater attention was given to the physical details of Christ’s suffering and crucifixes became common on the altar, in churches and as an object for personal devotion.
- ◆ **FRANCISCAN:** A way to refer to the order established by St. Francis in the 13th century, as well as to the rule of life and spirituality adopted by various offshoots of that order, male and female. It was called a “mendicant order” because, unlike Benedictines and other monastic orders, they did not believe, originally, in receiving endowments of land, but existed through the ongoing charity of others. This allowed them to not be tied to one place but engage in pastoral work throughout the world. To distinguish them from monks and secular priests, they were called “friars.”
- ◆ **GOSPEL SIDE:** The left side of the Church. In the old Latin Mass the priest had his back to the people and read the epistle reading with the book on his right side, then transferred the book to the left side for the gospel. Since church architecture traditionally had the altar facing east, the left side was then to the north. In Europe that pointed in the direction of many who had not yet become Christian and so symbolized a preaching of the gospel to the nations (and to all people) in need of conversion.
 - ◆ **HOLY LAND:** The common Catholic way of talking about the area of Israel where the events of the Bible, especially the New Testament ones connected to Jesus, take place.
 - ◆ **INDULGENCE:** The Catholic understanding is that sin is forgiven through contrition and the sacrament of Reconciliation, but the effects of sin continue to cause hurt in the world. No one can make up for all the effects of their sins and so practices of prayer, penance and charity developed to encourage Christians to share in repairing the harm caused by sin in the world. Because many Catholics misunderstood and some Catholics abused the practice of indulgences (turning them into automatic guarantees or even trying to sell them), Luther and the Reformers protested the practice strongly. Today the Church still uses the language of indulgences but makes it very clear that a true reform of one’s life is required in order for an indulgence to help repair the effects of sin in the world.
 - ◆ **OCTAVE:** A period of eight consecutive days, used in connection with major Christian feasts like Christmas and Easter in order to extend the celebrations for a longer period. Since there are seven days in the week, the eighth day (when counting from Sunday) is again a Sunday and came to symbolize the fullness of life with the Lord in eternity or all that transcends time.
 - ◆ **VERONICA:** The name given to the women in the sixth Station of the Cross who wiped the face of Jesus out of compassion and discovered the face of Jesus on the veil. This is not an historical occurrence, nor is it in any of the gospels. Rather, it was a popular legend that tried to help Christians appreciate what compassion means. The name Veronica comes from the Latin meaning ‘true image.’ To act with courage and compassion as Veronica did is to be a ‘true image of Christ.’

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**SOME
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VOCABULARY**

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