

Of Pilgrims and Pilgrimages

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"By the grace of God I am a Christian, by my deeds a great sinner, and by my calling a homeless wanderer of humblest origin, roaming from place to place" (*The Way of the Pilgrim*). So begins the pilgrimage account of an anonymous 19th century Russian peasant, a wanderer, a traveler from afar (*peregrinus*) searching, questing for something, whether it be spiritual, virtuous, or intellectual—a pilgrim.

The pilgrimage concept however, pre-dates Christianity. In fact, it is almost primal. It is unique to neither one religion nor one culture; it is universal. Its origins can be linked to the earliest human ideas of local deities. Among the ancients, it was believed that gods ruled specific locales or within certain boundaries of nature. Within their domains, these deities could affect—for good or bad—the movements of humans and of nature. In order to receive the favor of the gods, one had to be within their domain. An example of this belief is recorded in the Old Testament account of the war between the Arameans and the Israelites: "Meanwhile the servants of the king of Aram said to him: 'Their gods are mountain gods. That is why they defeated us. But if we fight them on level ground, we shall be sure to defeat them'" (1 Kings 20: 23). For the Aramean army to be victorious, they had to do battle on the plains or "level ground," they had to travel or "pilgrimage"—and bring their foes with them—to the place of their gods. Fortunately for the Israelites, their "mountain god" knew no boundaries: "A man of God approached the king of Israel: 'The LORD says, Because Aram has said the LORD is a god of mountains, not a god of plains, I will give all this vast army into your power so that you may know I am the LORD'" (1 Kings 20: 28).

Unlike the religions and religious practices of pagan antiquity, Judaism was unique in its belief in only one God. Accordingly, the pilgrimage command given by God to Moses at Sinai was also a first: "Three times a year, then, all your males shall appear before the LORD, your God, in the place which he will choose: at the feast of Unleavened Bread, at the feast of Weeks, and at the feast of Booths" (Deut 16:16). It was prescribed that during these three great pilgrimage festivals, all work was to cease and all the males were to journey to the place chosen by the LORD and make a freewill offering. (NB the pilgrimage feasts of Unleavened Bread and

Passover were merged into one celebration during a period of reform under King Josiah.)

In A.D. 33, the celebration of Passover brought pilgrims from every part of the known world to Jerusalem to fulfill this obligation. Among them were Jesus of Nazareth and his disciples. This event and those that occurred in the days that followed would bring a new perspective to an ancient practice.

In the first centuries of Christianity, the followers of the Christ were eager to visit the "holy land," the places Jesus knew and visited and the paths that he walked. Christians saw the pilgrimage as a means of spiritually entering into the saving acts of Jesus, into the mysteries of salvation and its history. By the time the nun known as Egeria (Etheria), said to be from the western part of Spain, made her pilgrimage to Jerusalem (A.D. 385), most of the places associated with the Messiah were marked by churches and basilicas where Holy Week liturgies were celebrated.

As Christianity spread and the Church grew so did the practice of the pilgrimage. These acts of religious devotion no longer focused exclusively on the Holy Land, they now included the shrines of martyred saints and those in honor of the Blessed Mother. This shift occurred not only because Christianity was spreading but also persecution. The lives of Christian men and women were exemplary and the manner in which they died was in keeping with the teachings of Jesus.

The devotion of the early Church for the Blessed Mother was first seen in light of the New Testament. Mary was the symbol of the Church. In the 4th century Pope Liberius I established the Basilica of Saint Mary Major in Rome. The name itself implies somewhat of an elevation in rank and dignity. From this point onward, devotions multiplied based on episodes in the life of Mary, Church doctrine, miraculous images, apparitions, and sacramentals (rosary, scapular, medals). Shrines dedicated to the Blessed Mother became the major pilgrimage sites and remain so even today.

The Basilica of the National Shrine is a votive church of pilgrimage and hosts close to eighty chapels and oratories (at the National Shrine, the latter is a place of prayer without an altar) in honor of the Blessed Mother. The chapels and oratories are filial in that each relates to the mother shrine in the country of its origin.

Each chapel or oratory in this great House of Mary is adorned with either a certified exact copy, or an heirloom replica, or an original work of art depicting the Blessed Mother. When crossing the threshold into one of the chapels or oratories, the pilgrim enters not only a new space but also a different ethos by virtue of culture, ethnicity, and spirituality. The journey into each chapel or oratory is a pilgrimage unto itself, a pilgrimage within a pilgrimage.

In the west narthex of the Upper Church is the oratory *Mary, Queen of Ireland*. Incised on the north wall is a map of Ireland dominated by a figure of Saint Patrick. The Irish “pilgrims for the love of Christ” who left kith and kin and went forth into the unknown to spread the gospel, are shown sailing in coracles; the crosses designate their home monasteries.

These Irish missionaries would set out on pilgrimage in coracles or small “basket boats.” (Think of the “basket made of bulrushes” that carried the infant Moses in the river Nile but on a larger scale.) Although these coracles were usually built for one person, *The Voyage of Saint Brendan* tells of larger ocean-going coracles that carried several monks. The larger coracles most likely had a rudder, possibly a sail, and hulls covered with ox hides. The ability to steer these

vessels, both large and small, was poor at best. Yet, this was part of the appeal, the allure, and the spiritual exercise: those in the boat entrusted themselves completely to the currents of God for a destination unknown, journeying wherever the winds and waters would carry them, surrendering totally to the will of God. The most zealous among them would set out on the waters surrendering even their oars. The itinerant Irish monks were, as Saint Columba said, *peregrinari pro Christi amore* (pilgrims for the love of Christ) and their evangelizing and catechizing was the white or dry martyrdom (without the shedding of blood), although blood was shed by some.



In the center of this oratory is a statue, *Our Lady and the Holy Child* by Miss Jimilu Mason (1980). The Virgin and Child are seated upon a hexagonal rock formation, like the basalt rocks in the Giant’s Causeway in Ireland. Mary, the “singular vessel of devotion” (Litany of the Blessed Mother), was also a pilgrim in a coracle, surrendering herself to the will of God, journeying wherever the currents of the love of God would take her: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1: 38). Amid the solitude and meditations of the *peregrinari* of this oratory, the spiritual aspirant can immerse him or herself in the life of Mary and her role in salvation history.

In the end, whether one is a disciple on his way to Jerusalem, or a 4th century nun, an Irish missionary monk, a 19th century peasant, or even a pilgrim to Mary’s Shrine in Washington, D.C., each discovers the same basic truth: being a Christian is a way of life, a pilgrimage. ❧

