

Christ Leads the Way

Guidance for praying the Stations of the Cross in your parish



By Father Paul Turner

The Stations of the Cross form a mainstay of Catholic piety during Lent. Images of the 14 stations adorn the walls of the church year-round — whether in bas-relief, sculpture or paint. People may avail themselves of this prayer whenever they wish, and many exercise this private devotion when visiting a church. But during Lent — and especially on Fridays — Catholics feel especially drawn to meditate step by step on the passion of Jesus Christ.

To pray the Stations with others requires its own pilgrimage. People leave their “station” at home and go to the “station” at church, where they join others in prayer. Inside that holy space, pausing one by one at the 14 images that people so frequently hurry past without a glance, a procession steps forward. The movement creates a visual stimulus for worshippers today, as they

place themselves in the moment of the past when Jesus made his debilitating ascent to Calvary.

Hope amid Suffering

Praying the Stations of the Cross was born out of devotion to the passion and

churches for the celebration of Mass.

This focus prompted the bishops of the Second Vatican Council to encourage a more expansive expression: the paschal mystery. Devotion to the cross of Christ is fine as far as it goes, but Christianity does not end its allegiance to Christ at Calvary.

True devotion includes the Resurrection.

As believers experience suffering, they derive supportive reassurance from images of the crucifixion of Jesus and the sorrows of his mother. People can profitably focus on their suffering, knowing that suffer-

ing led to glory. Indeed, the suffering of Jesus would have been meaningless without his resurrection.

To this end, some churches have added a 15th station — the Resurrection. This completes the paschal mystery and lifts believers from the temptation to dwell overmuch on loss and not enough on

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death of Christ. Those who could not make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land observed a model of the journey in a more accessible, yet still meaningful location, following the stations at their parish church. A focus on the suffering of Christ has long been characteristic of Catholic piety: Crucifixes, not crosses empty of Jesus’ image, grace our

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RESOURCES

Our Sunday Visitor publishes a number of guides to praying the Stations of the Cross, including “OSV Kids Stations of the Cross” (\$5.95) by Colleen Pressprich, “Behold Your Mother: Marian Stations of the Cross” (\$6.95) by Marge Steinhage Fenelon, “Given for You: Eucharistic Stations of the Cross” (\$8.95) by Father Patrick Mary Briscoe, O.P., and “The Way of the Cross with the Saints” (\$3.95) by John Collins. Visit orderosv.com for more information and to order copies.

salvation. Yet the Stations of the Cross developed without number 15. Their impending sense of loss connected with worshipers who had experienced something similar. They fully believe that the death of Christ does not end in sorrow even though the traditional stations do not represent the Resurrection. That hope fills those who suffer even when a joyful resolution is hard to see.

The Fridays of Lent especially invite meditation on this suffering. The Church requires Catholics to abstain from meat on those days. Even the most secular of restaurants may add a seasonal fish sandwich to their menu on those days. Some Catholic organizations offer fish fries where people can enjoy each other’s company, support a charitable organization and observe Lenten penance together. Some parishes combine their fish fries with the Stations of the Cross.

Optional Routes

To celebrate the Stations, a parish usually purchases one or more sets of booklets that people pick up for communal prayer. Many of these refract the devotion in the light of some theme. The variety of options reveals the depth of this devotion and the manifold ways it can be offered to the faithful.

Although the 14 traditional stations

are well known and observed, some parishes have successfully used an alternate version based more directly on biblical passages. For example, the Bible says nothing about Jesus falling three times, nor about the appearance of a woman named Veronica. Other episodes from the Gospels may replace those stations, such as Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus betrayed by Judas, and Jesus denied by Peter. “Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers,” published by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, offers a fine example of a Scripture-based Stations of the Cross.

In a typical parish sacristy, some of these booklets have been around for a generation or more. They may still serve the community, but each Lent offers an occasion to review their contents and make sure that they express the concerns of the local church today. If the booklets are few in number, worn by overuse or damaged by bad storage, it may be time to replace them.

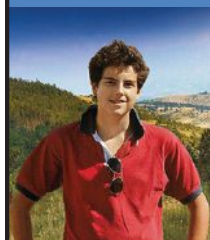
Some youth groups have enjoyed success dividing the preparation of stations among 14 individuals or small groups. If they have the energy and the vision, young people may write and perform a version of the Stations of the Cross derived from their own work. This activity can energize youths as well as the rest of the parish.



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Planning the Journey

Once the decision has been made about what version of the Stations to celebrate, those preparing the devotion are in a better position to determine other requirements. Is there more than one speaking role? For example, is the presider different from a reader of Scripture? What vestments will the presider wear? Will three servers carry a cross and two candles? (This is not required, but their presence can lend focus to the procession.) Will music be included? If so, then what is to be sung? Who will lead the singing?

In many parishes, the priest or deacon will preside at the service. His leadership lends cohesion between his ministry and prayer. However, the Stations of the Cross could be led by a lay minister who has been properly trained. In some ways, having a lay presider puts into proper relief the unique requirement for a priest to preside at Mass. If someone else can lead the Stations, then perhaps someone else should — at least on certain occasions of Lent. Diversifying the ministries demonstrates a diversity of gifts.

The procession is part of the devotion's design, and indeed explains its name: It moves from one place to the next. Some members of the congregation, if they are able, may find it meaningful to walk the stations with the ministers. Instead of staying in their pew and genuflecting at an

appointed time, they take their booklets in hand and physically walk from one spot to the next. This may enhance their remembrance of the suffering and death of Christ.

Music often accompanies this procession. Traditionally a translation of the hymn "Stabat Mater" is sung, but other selections may be made. "Stabat Mater" is the optional sequence for Our Lady of Sorrows; it is found in the Lectionary for Mass and continues to inspire new ages of believers. A verse may be sung after each station or at other intervals.

Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament

Some parishes offer exposition of the Blessed Sacrament with Benediction at the conclusion of the Stations of the Cross. Or they incorporate the Stations into the period of adoration by exposing the Blessed Sacrament, incensing it, conducting the Stations, and then concluding with Benediction. However, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops frowns on blending the two rites. Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament is its own liturgy with various elements that cohere to make a whole. Ideally, devotional exercises do not intervene with exposition.

Some people may think that such liturgical multitasking is a way of using prayer time to its fullest, but it probably results in paying attention to neither exposition nor the Stations very well. The point of

Eucharistic adoration is Eucharistic adoration. It deserves full attention. As to offering a brief period of exposition after the Stations of the Cross, the Church does not permit exposition solely for the purpose of imparting benediction (cf. Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery Outside Mass, No. 89.)

In most Catholic church buildings, the tabernacle is visible to the people who have come to worship. The presence of Christ fills the space and constantly invites worshipers to prayer. The tabernacle itself more fittingly provides the backdrop for devotional exercises such as Stations of the Cross. The best practice is to offer worshipers separate opportunities: a period of adoration during exposition on one occasion, and Stations of the Cross on another.

The Stations of the Cross form a sturdy framework within which a parish community may express its faith in a variety of ways. Many decisions lie open to those who plan the devotion: which booklet to use, who the ministers will be, and how much music to sing. Those decisions will integrate the Stations of the Cross into a healthy piety that will prepare the faithful for Easter, especially by observing the Fridays of Lent. **TP**

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