

The Second Vatican Council reminded the church that we are a pilgrim people, exiled from the Lord and labouring to reach the heavenly homeland which Christ promises us. To be a Christian, then, is to be a pilgrim whether we are participating in a formal pilgrimage or not. We are called constantly to recognise that we are not at home, that the goal of our heart lies elsewhere, that our eyes are fixed on a homeland which is not here. Pilgrimages to such centres as Rome, the Holy Land, or even Avila, are a reminder of this truth, an opportunity to deepen our spiritual life, and a time to journey (even for just a few days) a little more closely with the Lord.

Pilgrimage is in fact a common feature of all the world's major religions, testimony again to the universal human sense of journeying through life. In Christian history, the practice of making pilgrimages emerged in the fourth century AD with the conversion of the Emperor Constantine and as the decreasing threat of persecution made it possible for Christians to engage in public activities. To begin with, pilgrimages were often simply to the tomb of the local martyrs, but the practice of visiting the Holy Land was popularised after the Empress Helena visited Palestine in 326 AD and identified many of the sites associated with Christ's life on earth. As Christianity spread, the Eastern and Western churches developed slightly different understandings of the meaning of pilgrimage. The Celtic and Eastern churches tended to focus on the aspect of exile and the intrinsic homelessness of the Christian, while Western Christians understood pilgrimage more as the journey to a specific goal, with the intention of doing penance, offering thanks or requesting help such as the cure of an illness. Both these aspects are represented in the Carmelite tradition. Having fled Mount Carmel sometime during the thirteenth century, the early Carmelite hermits found themselves exiles in the West, often regarded as spiritual misfits from a strange country; while St Thérèse made the journey to Rome at the age of fourteen to request the Pope's assistance in her desire to enter Carmel.

The practice of pilgrimage reached the height of its popularity in the Middle Ages with destinations such as Rome, Jerusalem, Compostela de Santiago and Walsingham attracting thousands of visitors each year. Although the practice of pilgrimage was to decline during the sixteenth century, we know that St Teresa herself made at least two pilgrimages during her life time. In her early thirties, and while a sister at the Monastery of the Incarnation, she visited the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Cáceres in Spain, and in chapter 31 of the *Book of Foundations* she describes making a detour on the way to Burgos in 1582 to pray at the famous crucifix located outside the town. It is not surprising then that within Teresa's spiritual writings the theme of journeying and pilgrimage appears regularly. As the title of the *Way of Perfection* indicates, Teresa understands the whole of the spiritual life as a journey or 'camino', a way of walking both with and towards the Lord. Similarly, the central motif of the *Interior*

Castle is the soul's journey to the centre of the mansions, where it finds, and is united with, the God who dwells at its heart. As Teresa says in the book of her *Life*, the many revelations she received from the Lord gave her a glimpse of her heavenly homeland and impressed on her the pilgrim nature of our earthy life:

These revelations helped me very much, I think, in coming to know our true country and realising that we are pilgrims here below; it is a wonderful thing to see what is there and know where we shall live. (*Life* 38.6)

Today, our Teresa 500 pilgrims begin their journey to Avila and the places most associated with her life and work. We ask Teresa's intercession for them, and for us all, that this will be a time of grace for each pilgrim, actual and virtual alike. May it also be a time of thanksgiving for all that we have received from Teresa, especially in this centenary year. St Teresa of Avila, pray for us!

Pilgrims' liturgy

May God give his blessing to the family which has gathered here.

God bless this house from roof to floor, from wall to wall,
from its foundation to its covering.

In the strong name of the Triune God,
may all evil and worry be banished from our hearts and minds,
may all disturbance cease, may captive spirits be freed,
and may God's Spirit alone dwell among us in these days together.

We pray for all who travel in God's name, seeking his will and fulfilling his purpose, may they be richly blessed.

We pray for all those who travel through need or desperation. We remember those exiled from their homeland, those fleeing violence and persecution, all seeking welcome and hospitality in a strange land. May they know the mercy of God through us.

We ask God's blessing on our time of pilgrimage. May St Teresa lead us to deeper love of God and closer friendship with his Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ. May the blessings of our pilgrimage extend to all those we know and love.

Loving God, by your Spirit you raised up Saint Teresa of Jesus to show your Church the way to perfection. May her inspired teaching awaken in us a longing for true holiness. May our pilgrimage in her footsteps lead us closer to you. Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your son who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.