

## **The Stations of the Cross**

### **The History – Where did the Stations of the Cross come from?**

After Jesus died and rose from the dead, many people reflected upon his passion and death. They began to make visits to Jerusalem and walk in Jesus' footsteps. The street Jesus walked is still called Via Dolorosa, the way of pain. People would stop along the way and remember what had happened to Jesus. It is likely that they marked the places for those who came after them to follow as well. These people became known as "pilgrims."

As Christianity spread throughout the known world, distance made it nearly impossible for people to make the trip to Jerusalem. That didn't stop their need to know and remember. By the twelfth century the fervor of the Crusades and a heightened devotion to the Passion of Jesus created a demand in Europe for representations of the last events in Jesus' life.

When the Franciscans took over the custody of the shrines in the Holy Land in 1342, they saw it as their mission to encourage devotion to these places. In Western Europe a series of shrines erected to help the faithful remember Christ's passion became commonplace. They were erected outside Churches and monasteries and in other places as well. For many years there was a considerable variety in the number and title of these "stations." The current number of fourteen first appeared in the Low Countries in the sixteenth century and became standard in the eighteenth century with a series of papal pronouncements.

The Season of Lent is a natural time for this devotion. As the years passed, many Catholic Churches had the Stations of the Cross along the walls of their worship space. "Pilgrims" can come to Church any time, pray and move from station to station. We tell our children that the Stations of the Cross are like railroad stations because we stop at every one. The Church may have books available too, to help us reflect on these Stations. Sometimes parishes schedule a time for people to gather and pray the stations together.

### **Meaning – Why do the Stations of the Cross?**

The Stations of the Cross, as we know it today is one of the truest and purest of popular devotions: uniting picture and thought, outward action and inward disposition, historical truth and creative action of the believing imagination. More than any other devotion it is fitted for approaching Our Lord's suffering in a powerfully contemplative, reverential and at the same time familiar, unconstrained way. And yet, the devotion is not without its proper form. It is, in its form and content, a powerful way to enter the mystery of Jesus' gift of himself to us. It takes the reflection on the passion out of my head, and makes it an imaginative exercise. It involves my senses, my experience and my emotions.

With regard to the intuition, witness, especially, those stations whose subjects are not directly taken from Holy Scripture, as, for example, Our Lord's falling beneath the cross. Here the popular mind has been freely at work, and it has found the right thing. For is it not the leading idea of the whole: that again and again Our Lord sinks down under a cross too heavy for Him, and in the strength of His Love rises again and again? And to the contemplative understanding

the meeting of Our Lord with Veronica reveals itself as a miracle of religious tenderness. This is an *imaginative* exercise. Its purpose is not a historical examination of "what really happened" on that day in history. It's about something far more profound. This is an opportunity to use this long standing Christian prayer to let Jesus touch my heart deeply by showing me the depth of his love for me. The context is the historical fact that he was made to carry the instrument of his death, from the place where he was condemned to die, to Calvary where he died, and that he was taken down and laid in a tomb. The religious context is that today Jesus wants to use any means available to move my heart to know his love for me. These exercises can allow me to imaginatively visualize the "meaning" of his passion and death.

This is *prayer* in the context of my relationship with God. I could read through the text of each of the stations, and look at the pictures, but that wouldn't necessarily be prayer. The praying soul never fails to find something new in the Stations of the Cross. It becomes prayer when I open my heart to be touched, and it leads me to express my response in prayer. Now this station speaks the more persuasively, and on another occasion something quite different makes a significant impact. Many times, a station remains "without voice" for a long time. Awakened by some spiritual experience it suddenly begins to speak to the soul. Other particular stations with their radiant significance accompany us unaltered in their transformative power over the course of many years. And, more especially, anyone who accustoms himself to take his personal anxieties, struggles, questions and perplexities with him on the Way of the Cross, often receives undreamt of light and un hoped for consolation.

A fundamental goal of the devotion is to lead us to gratitude. To the extent I come to experience the love of Jesus for me, to that extent the gratitude I feel will be deep. Deep gratitude leads to real generosity and a desire to love as I have been loved. The Stations of the Cross can lead us into a sense of solidarity with all our brothers and sisters. In our busy, high tech lives we can easily get out of touch with the terrible suffering of real people in our world. Journeying with Jesus in the Stations, allows us to imagine his entry into the experience of those who are tortured, unjustly accused or victimized, sitting on death row, carrying impossible burdens, facing terminal illnesses, or simply fatigued with life.

Two things, above all, this devotion has to say to us. First, it teaches us to feel with our very hearts what Our Lord suffered. We walk with Him and bear the load with Him. Thus it is revealed to us how great is the Redeemer's love and how great our sin and need for His work of atonement. We learn to repent and to pray for the grace of a deep inward turning to God. Then secondly: the Way of the Cross is the school where we are taught how to overcome. We see how Our Lord goes through most bitter suffering of soul and body, but also how through His love for the Father and for us He overcomes. We learn to bring something similar to pass in regard to our own life as we identify with Our Lord Jesus in His passion.

In the devotion of the Stations of the Cross both of these aspects are held in creative tension. In this way the Stations of the Cross help us, no matter what condition of life we bring to them to recognize that our Lord has experienced in His own life what we are experiencing in our own. We are able to see our daily struggles in union with those of Our Lord, and, thus gather insight and strength not only to bear our suffering, but also to conquer it.

## Form and Conduct – How to do the Stations of the Cross

Journeying the Stations is easy. It is a pilgrimage of increasing identification. There is no time limit. The Stations of the Cross can be prayed over the period of about an hour without rushing. Just go from one station to another. When “arriving” at a station, begin by looking carefully at the image itself. See who is in the scene. Look at how they are arranged and what the artist who created this image is trying to tell us about the drama there.

Each station is divided into *four* parts:

- The first part is a simple description of the scene. It helps us be conscious of what the "meaning" of this station is for us.
- The second part is the traditional prayer at each station. Its words become more and more meaningful as we repeat them throughout the journey.
- The third part is the contemplation of the scene. This is a guided reflection on the power of the scene for me, to enter it more deeply and to lead to some experience of it personally.
- The fourth part is our response. This is expressed in a prayer or in our own words by using a journal or taking time near the conclusion of the devotion to share as a group. It is the place where the sorrow and gratitude flow from my heart and ascend to the throne of the Father. As it ascends, I ascend as well, climbing up the hill of crucifixion toward resurrection and new life.

### **The First Station:**

Jesus is Condemned to Die.

### **The Eighth Station:**

Jesus Meets the Women of Jerusalem.

### **The Second Station:**

Jesus Carries His Cross.

### **The Ninth Station:**

Jesus Falls the Third Time.

### **The Third Station:**

Jesus Falls the First Time.

### **The Tenth Station:**

Jesus is Stripped.

### **The Fourth Station:**

Jesus Meets His Mother.

### **The Eleventh Station:**

Jesus is Nailed to the Cross.

### **The Fifth Station:**

Simon Helps Jesus Carry His Cross.

### **The Twelfth Station:**

Jesus Dies on the Cross.

### **The Sixth Station:**

Veronica Wipes Jesus' Face.

### **The Thirteenth Station:**

Jesus is Taken Down from the Cross.

### **The Seventh Station:**

Jesus Falls the Second Time.

### **The Fourteenth Station:**

Jesus is Laid in the Tomb.