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How Did the Stations of the Cross Begin?

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One of the devotions in our parish every Lent is the Stations of the Cross. Could you please tell me the origins of this devotion?

Since Lent is a penitential season of preparation for Easter, the Stations of the Cross, which follow the path of Christ from Pontius Pilate's praetorium to Christ's tomb have been a popular devotion in parishes. In the 16th century, this pathway was officially entitled the "Via Dolorosa" (Sorrowful Way) or simply Way of the Cross or Stations of the Cross.

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This devotion has evolved over time. Tradition holds that our Blessed Mother visited daily the scenes of our Lord's passion. After Constantine legalized Christianity in the year 312, this pathway was marked with its important stations. St. Jerome (342-420), living in Bethlehem during the later part of his life, attested to the crowds of pilgrims from various countries who visited those holy places and followed the Way of the Cross.

Interestingly, St. Sylvia, in her "Peregrination ad loca sancta" (380), in which she described in great detail various religious practices, did not mention a particular practice or set of prayers for following the stations; however, this omission does not entail that pilgrims did not in fact follow the Way of the Cross.

Actually, the devotion continued to grow in popularity. In the fifth century, an interest developed in the Church to "reproduce" the holy places in other areas so pilgrims who could not actually travel to the Holy Land could do so in a devotional, spiritual way in their hearts. For instance, St. Petronius, Bishop of Bologna, constructed a group of chapels at the monastery of San Stefano, which depicted the more important shrines of the Holy Land, including several of the stations. (The same notion inspired the building of the Franciscan Monastery in Washington, where one can visit and see reproductions of the Bethlehem Chapel, the tomb of our Lord, and other important shrines of the Holy Land.)

In 1342, the Franciscans were appointed as guardians of the shrines of the Holy Land. The faithful received indulgences for praying at the following stations: At Pilate's house, where Christ met His mother, where He spoke to the women, where He met Simon of Cyrene, where the soldiers stripped Him of His garments, where He was nailed to the cross, and at His tomb.

William Wey, an English pilgrim, visited the Holy Land in 1462, and is credited with the term "stations." He described the manner in which a pilgrim followed the steps of Christ. Prior to this time, the path usually followed the reverse course of ours today--moving from Mount Calvary to Pilate's house. At this time, the reverse — going from Pilate's house to Calvary — seems to have taken hold.

When the Moslem Turks blocked the access to the Holy Land, reproductions of the stations were erected at

popular spiritual centers, including the Dominican Friary at Cordova and Poor Clare Convent of Messina (early 1400s); Nuremberg (1468); Louvain (1505); Bamberg, Fribourg and Rhodes (1507); and Antwerp 1520). Many of these stations were reproduced by renowned artists and are considered masterpieces today. By 1587, Zuallardo reported that the Moslems forbade anyone "to make any halt, nor to pay veneration to [the stations] with uncovered head, nor to make any other demonstration," basically suppressing this devotion in the Holy Land. Nevertheless, the devotion continued to grow in popularity in Europe.

At this time, the number of the stations varied. William Wey's account has 14 stations, but only five correspond to our own. Some versions included the house of Dives (the rich man in the Lazarus story), the city gate through which Christ passed, and the houses of Herod and Simon the Pharisee. In 1584 a book written by Adrichomius entitled, Jerusalem "sicut Christi Tempore floruit," gives 12 stations which match those in our present version. This book was translated into several languages and circulated widely. In the 16th century, devotional books appeared especially in the Low Countries, which had 14 stations with prayers for each one.

At the end of the 17th century, the erection of stations in churches became more popular. In 1686, Pope Innocent XI, realizing that few people could travel to the Holy Land due to the Moslem oppression, granted the right to erect stations in all of their churches and that the same indulgences would be given to the Franciscans and those affiliated with them for practicing the devotion as if on an actual pilgrimage. Pope Benedict XIII extended these indulgences to all of the faithful in 1726.

Five years later, Pope Clement XII permitted stations to be created in all churches and fixed the number at 14. In 1742, Pope Benedict XIV exhorted all priests to enrich their churches with the Way of the Cross, which must include 14 crosses and are usually accompanied with pictures or images of each particular station. The popularity of the devotion was also encouraged by preachers like St. Leonard Casanova (1676-1751) of Porto Maurizio, Italy, who reportedly erected over 600 sets of stations throughout Italy.

To date, there are 14 traditional stations: Pilate condemns Christ to death; Jesus carries the cross; the first fall; Jesus meets His Blessed Mother; Simon of Cyrene helps to carry the cross; Veronica wipes the face of Jesus; the second fall; Jesus speaks to the women of Jerusalem; the third fall; Jesus is stripped of His garments; Jesus is nailed to the cross; Jesus dies on the cross; Jesus is taken down from the cross; and Jesus is laid in the tomb.

Because of the intrinsic relationship between the passion and death of our Lord with His resurrection, several of the devotional booklets now include a 15th station, which commemorates the Resurrection. A plenary indulgence is granted for those who piously exercise the Way of the Cross, actually moving from station to station where they are legitimately erected and while meditating on the passion and death of our Lord ("Enchiridion of Indulgences," No. 63).

Those who are impeded from visiting a church may gain the same indulgence by piously reading and meditating on the passion and death of our Lord for one-half hour. The continued importance of the stations in the devotional life of Catholics is attested by both Pope Paul VI, who approved a Gospel-based version of the stations in 1975, and Pope John Paul II, who has also written his own version.

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