

Origin of the Stations of the Cross

Most Catholics, in their experience of Lent, generally think of fasting and praying the Stations of the Cross in church on Friday evenings. But the current pandemic restrictions on this method of praying during Lent provide an opportunity for us to gain a better understanding of this form of prayer. Like many of our Catholic devotions, the Stations of the Cross as a form of worship, particularly during Lent, has a long history of development.

Way of the Cross

Many legends exist about the origins of this devotion including one asserting that Mary used to visit daily the scenes of Christ's passion. Stories from the early Church also tell of pilgrims making trips to Jerusalem to visit the sites. But no written record describes which sites, how many, or in what particular order. Later, some attempts were made to stress the importance of the specific sites in Jerusalem by granting indulgences to those who visited them, but when this practice began is unknown. The earliest resemblance to a defined "way of the cross" (or "via crucis") was during the 5th century. In Bologna, Italy, a series of connected chapels representing some of the important shrines in Jerusalem was constructed.

Holy Sites as "Stations"

Beginning in the 1400, church writings describe specific groupings of images in various European locations. These groups were supposed to represent the geographical sites of the Passion. In some cases, these routes were designed to measure the exact distance between each of the holy sites in Jerusalem. English historical writings describe a pilgrim, William Wey, as the first to use the word "station" when he visited the Jerusalem sites in 1458 and 1462.

Indoor Stations and Numbering

The first evidence of a particular demarcation of stations was in 1520 when Pope Leo X granted indulgences with respect to a set of sculptures in an Antwerp cemetery that represented the seven sorrows of Mary. If seven was the number marked by Pope Leo for the stations in Antwerp, how did the number 14 come to be? William Wey, mentioned above, referred to 14 particular sites or stations during his journey in Jerusalem. But, for at least 200 years, the number varied from 19 to as high as 37.

Determining a more precise number of stations and their identities developed during the 16th century. Up to this point, stations, such as they existed, were outdoors in some form. But then, church officials began to include image representations of the outdoor stations inside parish churches and cathedrals. Then in 1731, Clement XII assigned indulgences to these interior stations and, in so doing, set the number at 14. Shortly thereafter in 1742, including the stations inside every church became essentially a mandate from Benedict XIV. Even so, many parishes continued to provide a set of outdoor stations as a more vivid reminder of Christ's last journey. (Many of these outdoor stations continue to exist in some parishes of the Washington archdiocese.)

Private Devotion Becomes Public

It should also be noted that the special indulgence assigned to the Stations was later extended by Clement XIV to a uniquely designed crucifix crafted to depict the 14 stations. These special crucifixes were provided for the benefit of the sick, the imprisoned and those at sea who could not visit a church to pray the stations. In recent times, one can even find the fourteen stations fabricated in the form of a rosary.

Because stations had primarily been a form of private devotion, the Church did not prescribe a specific format for praying or meditating on the Stations. But, in the 19th century, booklets began to be published to assist one in praying or meditating on the Stations in a particular way.

Then in more recent times, the private devotion of Stations began to be prayed in a public and somewhat formal way, especially during Lent. In most cases, this public worship service was held on Friday, in recognition of the day on

which the Passion occurred. As noted earlier, much has been made about the public form praying the Stations in Jerusalem. An equally famous public rendition of the Stations is that prayed by the Pope at the Colosseum in Rome.

Other than the papal decision to prescribe that there would be fourteen stations, the Church has never prescribed a specific format or ritual for praying the stations in public. Generally, the format was dictated by whichever printed booklet was provided to those praying the stations. Consequently, this service can take many different forms, depending on the creativity of the parish. Moreover, in recent times, the standard form of praying 14 stations has been expanded to include a 15th station to commemorate Christ's triumph over his passion and death.

Many virtual forms of the stations allow us to pray them privately or as part of the worshipping community, regardless of liturgical season.

During this period of Lent, especially in this time of human crisis and pain, all are encouraged to pray or meditate on the Stations of the Cross, whether privately or publicly when scheduled. Praying them anytime, especially during Lent, is a vivid reminder of what Christ did for us.

With this as background, you are encouraged to watch and pray along with our [Virtual Stations of the Cross](#) on Fridays of Lent, or whenever you wish to make this devotion.

- Deacon Bartholomew J. Merella, M.T.S.

References:

A.G. Martimort: *The Church at Prayer*; Thomas Talley: *Liturgy and Time*; Anne Ball: *Catholic Encyclopedia of Catholic Devotions and Practices*; Herbert Thurston, SJ: *The Stations of the Cross: An Account of their History and Devotional Purpose*