

PILGRIMAGES—YESTERDAY AND TO-DAY

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MILTON, in his majestic "Paradise Lost," bears us along in high realms with thoughts sublime and a melody that reaches the soul and thrills it. Then, in his Third Book, Icarus-like, he soars too close to the hot sun of his own Puritan prejudice and with melting wings falls to earth. Catholic institutions (pilgrimages, monks, indulgences) are his prey and we look on with pity as the blind bard stoops to rend them:

"Here (in the Fool's Paradise) pilgrims roam, that strayed
so far to see
In Golgotha him dead, who lives in Heaven;
And they who to be sure of Paradise
Dying put on the weeds of Dominic,
Or in Franciscan think to pass disguised;
They pass the planets seven, and pass the fixed,
And that crystalline sphere whose balance weighs
The trepidation talked, and that first moved;
And now Saint Peter at Heaven's wicket seems
To wait them with his keys, and now at foot
Of Heaven's ascent they lift their feet, when lo!
A violent cross-wind from either coast
Blows them transverse ten thousand leagues awry
Into devious air; then might ye see
Cows, hoods, and habits with their wearers tost
And fluttered into rags; then relics, beads,
Indulgences, dispenses, pardons, bulls,
The sport of winds: all these upwhirled aloft,
Fly o'er the backside of the world far off
Into a limbo large and broad, since called
The Paradise of Fools, to few unknown
Long after, now unpeopled, and untrod. . . .

Milton would not have penned these lines had he known the true spirit of the Christian pilgrim, the heroism of friars, the consolations of indulgences and the Rosary; had the mote of prejudice been removed from the blind eye of his soul, he would have seen as with the clear vision of the eagle a vast army of noble pilgrims, of sainted friars, and not, vulture-like, peered through hungry eyes at the carrion, the corrupt in the ranks. One target of his satire he completely misunderstood—the Christian Pilgrimage. Had he made a sympa-

thetic study of history, of the Church's doctrine on prayer, penance, relics and shrines, he would have consigned the devout pilgrim to the heaven of the blessed and not, as he does, to the "paradise of fools." Coming to sneer, he would have stayed to admire; coming to strike dead with his venomous pen, he would have stayed to immortalize in animated verse and epic.

"Here (in the Fool's Paradise) pilgrims roam, that strayed so far to see
In Golgotha him dead, who lives in Heaven."

Is it unnatural to stray far to see and venerate the sepulcher made glorious by the Resurrection of our Redeemer, to kiss the ground His blessed feet trod, to pray with tender affection at the spot where "the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us"; where the pink, smiling Infant lay Who brought "peace on earth to men of good will" and the joy of heaven to those who loved Him? It is no more unnatural than to ride far to cover the graves of our dear ones with flowers or to venerate our nation's heroes, Lincoln or Washington, by a visit to their shrines. Not entirely true is the Latin adage: "*Coelum non animum mutant qui trans mare currunt.*" (They who cross the sea, change, indeed, their place under heaven but not their spirit). For experience bears witness that we are deeply moved and often permanently impressed by the places and wonders we "strayed so far to see." Cicero himself confesses to the inspiring influence of places made sacred by the lives of the noble: "*Movemur enim,*" he says, "*nescio quo pacto locis ipsis in quibus eorum, quos diligimus aut admiramur, adsunt vestigia.*" (We are inwardly stirred—I know not why—by the very spots where the traces exist of those whom we love and admire). Such a natural and not unpraiseworthy element played its part in the Christian Pilgrimage. A Catholic writer tersely expresses it in this manner: "So certain is it that religious impressions, blunted and weakened by the daily business of the marketplace and the street, require in most minds to be often graven afresh (and that by means of impulses coming from without, for it would be vain to trust to the sufficiency of those coming from within), that the Church has from the first—while admitting the danger of abuses, and taking measures to prevent them—approved the use of pilgrimages to holy places as a very potent help and incentive to a devout life. She also favors the practice because she recognizes the undoubted fact that God has granted, and still grants, interior and exterior favors, graces and miracles, at particular places and shrines, to honor certain mysteries, saints, etc."

Milton must have been aware that the pilgrimage, as an expression of religious devotion, was not peculiar to Christianity. Persia, Egypt, India, China and Japan had their pilgrimages. In the pages of the Old Testament we find accounts of the pilgrimages to Dan, Bethel, and above all, Jerusalem. Christ Himself, when twelve years old, made the long journey to the Holy City accompanied by Mary and Joseph. Lost in the great concourse of pilgrims, He was found in the midst of the Doctors in the Temple. Later in life He preached to the pilgrim crowds and accompanied them to Jerusalem. As He approached that magnificent city for the last time, and as He wept over it, He was drawing down the curtain before the Jerusalem of the Old Dispensation, the center of the Jewish pilgrimage; the veil of the Temple was to be rent and the Jews dispersed. Soon the curtain rose on the Jerusalem of the New Dispensation, the center of the Christian pilgrimage because it was sanctified by Christ's sufferings and redeeming Blood. What a religious drama of color, of action, of worship, followed—a subject sublime enough for Milton's pen—the pen that so spurned it. Its central figure was the Christ, the God-Man, Who, when He was lifted up on Golgotha, drew all hearts to Himself. He was the Heart of the world; and the warm blood of love flowed to Him from the members of His Mystical Body. Palestine—Bethlehem, Nazareth, Jerusalem—all these had been sanctified by His presence, hallowed by His footsteps. The eyes of the Catholic world looked to the narrow strip of land where rested His Sepulcher, His Cross, His Crown of Thorns, His Crib; feet became restless to visit these relics of the Master; hearts beat faster at the thought of rejoicing—of weeping over them. Soon after He died Whom to know was to love, the pilgrimages began. Soon after the Easter morn when the kindly women came to the Sepulcher, when the Angels said, "He is risen; He is not here," when the penitent Magdalen knelt at His feet and sobbed, "Master!", when Peter and John ran the race of love to the Master's tomb—soon after that the dusty roads of Europe, the blue Mediterranean and Palestine's hills were traversed by love-urged and faith-guided pilgrims in ever increasing numbers. At home, indeed, the pilgrim had his church, his Mass, his Master wondrously present in the Blessed Eucharist; but he would go, too, to where the Master trod for thirty-three years; he would perform the penance of the long journey, binding himself by a vow of chastity; he would renew his faith, his hope, his charity, at these hallowed spots and return home, where, fired by holy memories of the Master, he would pass his remaining days with a more living devotion. For ten centuries Palestine, as a magnet, drew

Christians to its shore; on its hills and its plains, in its Holy Places, as on a stage, we watch with reverence the religious drama whose characters, ever changing from generation to generation—princes, peasants, the learned, the saint, the sinner—were all lovers of Him Who has been called "The Tremendous Lover." With Napoleon, that leader of men—for whom countless died—we exclaim: "What a Conqueror Who controls humanity at will, and wins to Himself not only one nation but the whole human race. What a Marvel! He attaches to Himself the human soul with all its energies. How? By a miracle which surpasses all others. He claims the love of men—that is to say, the most difficult thing in the world to obtain; that which the wisest of men cannot force from his truest friend, that which no father can compel from his children, no wife from her husband, no brother from his brother—the heart. He claims it; He requires it absolutely and undividedly, and He obtains it instantly. Alexander, Caesar, Hannibal, Louis XIV, strove in vain to secure this. They conquered the world, yet they had not a single friend, or at all events, they have none any more. Christ speaks, however, and from that moment all generations belong to Him; and they are joined to Him much more closely than by any ties of blood and by a much more intimate, sacred and powerful communion. He kindles the flame of a love which causes one's self-love to die, and triumphs over every other love."¹

We have detailed accounts of the more famous pilgrimages such as that of St. Helena in 325, the Bordeaux Pilgrimage of 333 and the *Peregrinatio S. Silviae*. St. Jerome had a special affection for the Holy Places. For many years he studied the Scriptures at Bethlehem. Art pictures him commenting on the holy books and drawing inspiration from Bethlehem's cave where the Light of the World shone out in the darkness. On his return to Rome, his naïve enthusiasm for the Holy Places became contagious and a group of Romans joined him on the next journey. It was on this pilgrimage that he founded a monastery, convents and a Latin colony.

Toward the end of the eleventh century the curtain was lowered on the First Act of the pilgrim drama; it had been characterized by peaceful prayer, an undisturbed veneration of the Master's Sepulcher, His Cross, His Crown of Thorns and His Crib. The Second Act was to portray a more warlike, more colorful pilgrimage, the Crusades. In 1070 the Fatimite Caliphs in Jerusalem—who had been friendly to the pilgrims—were defeated by the Seljukian Turks. In

¹ Migne: *Dictionnaire Apologetique* I.

1091, Diogenes, the Greek Emperor, was defeated, and all of Asia Minor and Syria was in the hands of the heathen. Thousands of native and visiting Christians were enslaved or put to the sword and the Holy Places were profaned. All Christendom looked on with a helpless horror. But it was electrified and set in motion when, in 1095, the rallying voice of Pope Urban II was heard at the Council of Clermont; a Crusade of Christian soldiers must check these profanations and rescue the treasured relics from pagan hands! "God wills it!" cried the vast throng; and they bound themselves by vow to accomplish it. A Cross of cloth was worn on their garments (thus the term "Crusade"). All who so took the cross "from motives of earnest and sincere devotion" Urban freed from canonical penalties; he also granted an indulgence to every crusader who "died truly penitent." There sprang as it were from the earth vast armies of Christian fighting men to drive the marauding infidel from the Saviour's tomb and to make the Holy Places safe for those who would venerate them. Plows, pens, hunting whips were dropped; swords were drawn to efface the blot on the Christian escutcheon. Armor was welded and lances fashioned to defend the honor of that eternally lovable Leader of men, the Christ, around Whom, as around the sun, Christendom revolved. As the Cross-signed, glittering ranks—chanting, shouting—thunder toward the Holy Land, there echo within us Napoleon's praises of the Divine Captain: "Why should we not recognize in this miracle of love the Eternal Word which created the world? The other founders of religions had not the least conception of this mystic love which forms the essence of Christianity. I have filled multitudes with such passionate devotion that they went to death for me. But God forbid that I should compare the enthusiasm of my soldiers with Christian love. . . . What an abyss exists between my profound misery and the eternal reign of Christ, Who is preached, loved and worshiped, and lives throughout the entire world. Is this to die? Is it not rather to live eternally?" The Crusades swept toward Palestine in four great armies under the leadership of Hugh of Vermandois, brother of King Philip I of France, Godfrey of Bouillon, Tancred, and Raymond of Saint-Giles. In 1098-99, Antioch, Ascalon and Jerusalem were captured and Godfrey of Bouillon crowned king and "Defender of the Holy Sepulcher." During the fifty years that followed, Jerusalem, Tripoli, Antioch and Edessa were organized Christian States, and pilgrims venerated the Holy Places in peace. However, with the fall of Edessa into Moslem hands, the zealous Benedictine, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, whose love-charged hymns and writings still delight the

Church, preached the Second Crusade. Though supported by King Louis VII of France, his wife, the famous Eleanor of Aquitaine, and the Emperor Conrad III of Germany, it was unsuccessful. Not quite a hundred years since the recovery of Jerusalem in the First Crusade, the Turkish army of Saladin closed in on the Kingdom of Jerusalem and soon had the Holy City writhing in its fiendish clutches. The True Cross and Holy Places were once again profaned; Christendom again arose and the Third Crusade was launched. Under the leadership of the Emperor, Frederick Barbarossa, Philip Augustus of France and Richard Cœur de Lion of England, the fortified city of Acre was captured. This afforded the crusaders a strategic point from which they could protect the Christian pilgrims. "Richard," writes Father Bede Jarrett, O.P., "obtained from Saladin the cession of Jaffa and free entry for all Christians into Jerusalem, and then turned home. He would not, like his companions, climb the hills to see the far view of the Holy City he had been unable to recapture."² Five Crusades followed this one in an attempt to win back the whole of Palestine; but the grip of the Turk was satanic in its tenacity. As a result of the Sixth Crusade, however, a treaty was made whereby Jerusalem was restored to the Christians. The Seventh Crusade, though led by the brave and chivalrous St. Louis IX, King of France, was a failure. A like fate awaited the Eighth Crusade and the two subsequent expeditions of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries. Failure was due in part to the avarice of the leaders and a lack of unity of command. Though glory and gain were the motives of some of the combatants, these four centuries of battling will be described by impartial historians as a courageous effort of chivalrous men to rescue the relics of the Redeemer from unholy hands and to obtain for pilgrims the joy of venerating them in peace. The Crusades protected Europe from the dreaded Moslems by keeping them busy at home. They contributed to the growth of the national spirit, fostered commerce with the East and prevented many petty wars at home. These beneficent effects were counterbalanced by evil ones born of pride and avarice. But the unbiased writer of history will approve the statement of Father Jarrett that the Crusades—that four-centuried pilgrimage—"gave to Europe the undying memory of a spiritual romance."³

In our churches to-day we have a striking memorial of those early pilgrimages to Jerusalem, the Stations of the Cross. Due to the

² Bede Jarrett, O.P., *A History of Europe*, p. 170.

³ *ibid.*, p. 175.

ravages of the fanatical Turks, pilgrimages to the Holy Land were temporarily checked. "In various parts of Europe," writes one historian, "the custom arose of placing pictures in Churches, representing the journey to Calvary. Probably the first to do this was the Blessed Alvarez, a Dominican, at Cordova, in Spain."⁴ The saintly scholar and former Master General of the Dominicans, Father Cormier, gives us this account of the origin of the "Stations": "Bl. Alvarez made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and, having the souvenirs of the Passion vividly imprinted on his heart, desired, on his return, to have them always present before his eyes as food for pious thought for himself and others. He had representations of the scenes of the Passion set up in the monastery and thus he is considered to have been one of the pioneers of that devotion of the Stations of the Cross, which, later on, cast into a definite form and enriched with many indulgences by the Church, has become, together with the Holy Rosary, a great source of sanctification for the souls of both learned and simple, great and lowly."⁵

Nor are we without a souvenir of the days of the "armed pilgrimage," the Crusades, the days when Turk and Christian, Crescent and Cross, fought for mastery in Palestine. In Dominican Missals we find the "Mass against the Turks and Heretics." The Oratio reads: "O Almighty and Everlasting God, in Whose hands are all powers and the rights of all kingdoms, regard and help Christians, that the nations of Turks and heretics that trust their own fierceness and strength, may be crushed by the power of Thy right hand. Through Our Lord Jesus Christ." And the Response: "Let the Gentiles know that God is Thy name. Thou alone art the Most High over all the earth. O my God, make them like a wheel and as stubble before the face of the wind." Then the Secret Prayer: "Regard, O Lord, the sacrifice we offer, that thy soldiers be kept from all the wickedness of the Turks and heretics, and set within the shielding of safe defence. Through Our Lord Jesus Christ."

So we close the first two acts of the Pilgrim Play; its scenes were laid in Palestine; its central figure, the Eternal Christ, surrounded by devout pilgrims and armed defenders. The scenes of the last act will be laid in Europe and America; their central figures: Christ, His Mother, and His Friends, the Martyrs and Saints.

⁴The New Catholic Dictionary, Art. *Way of the Cross*.

⁵Fr. Cormier, O.P. *Saints and Sainly Dominicans*. Edited by Fr. Thomas à Kempis Reilly, O.P. Page 93.

(To be Continued.)