In the Christian West few pious practices are as loved as the Way of the Cross, a devotion which recalls with mindful affection the last stage of the journey that Jesus walked in his earthly life: from when he and his disciples, « after psalms had been sung, left for the Mount of Olives» (Mk 14, 26), until the Lord was taken to the « place called Golgotha, The Skull » (Mk 15, 22), to be crucified and then buried in a garden nearby, in a new tomb hewn out of the rock.

A way traced by the Spirit

The life of Jesus is a journey traced by the Spirit: at the beginning of the mission the Spirit leads him into the desert (cf. Lk 4, 1); and then, as a divine fire burning in his breast, drives him to walk the way to Calvary (cf. Lk 12, 49-50).

The last stage of the journey is unspeakably hard and painful. The evangelists lingered, although with moderation, over the description of the Way of the Cross which the Son of God and Son of man walked out of love for the Father and for humanity. Each step of Jesus is one step closer to the accomplishment of the plan of salvation: to the hour of universal forgiveness (cf. Lk 23, 34), the pierced Heart – the opening of an inextinguishable fountain of grace - (cf. Jn 19, 34), the immolation of the true Paschal Lamb, of whom not one bone will be broken (cf. Jn 19, 36), the gift of the Mother (cf. Jn 19, 26-27) and of the Spirit (cf. Mt 27, 50). Every new suffering of Jesus is a seed of future joy for humanity, every jeer, a premise of glory. Along that way of suffering Jesus' every meeting - with friends, with enemies, with the indifferent - is a chance for one final lesson, one last look, one supreme offer of reconciliation and peace.

A Way loved by the Church

The Church has always kept alive the memory of the words and the events of the last days of her Spouse and Lord, a loving although painful memory of the path Jesus walked from the Mount of Olives to the Mount of Calvary. The Church knows in fact that in every episode which happened on that Way lies hidden a mystery of grace, a gesture of his love for her. The Church is aware that in the Eucharist her Lord left her the objective, sacramental memory of the Body broken and the Blood shed on the hill of Golgotha. However she also loves the historical memory of the places where Christ suffered, the streets and the stones bathed in his sweat and in his blood.

The Church in Jerusalem showed her love for the « holy places » very early on. Archaeological findings prove the existence of expressions of Christian worship in the burial grounds where the tomb used for Christ had been hewn out of the rock, as early as the second century. At the end of the fourth century a pilgrim woman named Aetheria tells us of
three holy buildings on the hill of Golgotha: the *Anastasis*, the little church *ad Crucem*, and the great church – the *Martyrium* (cf. *Peregrinatio Etheriae* 30). And she describes a procession from the *Anastasis* to the *Martyrium* which took place on certain days. This was certainly not a *Way of the Cross* or a *Via Dolorosa*, nor was the *via sacra*, a sort of walking tour of the shrines in Jerusalem, alluded to in various chronicles written by pilgrims of the fifth and sixth centuries. However that procession, with its chanting of psalms and close connection with the places of the Passion, is considered by some scholars an embryonic form of the future *Way of the Cross*.

Jerusalem is the city of the historical *Way of the Cross*. It is the only city with this great, tragic privilege. In the Middle Ages the attraction of the « holy places » gave rise to a desire to reproduce them locally: some pilgrims on returning from Jerusalem reproduced them in their own city. The Seven Churches of the Santo Stefano complex in Bologna are considered the most remarkable example of these « reproductions ».

**A medieval devotion**

The *Way of the Cross*, as we understand the term today, dates to the late Middle Ages. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (+ 1153), Saint Francis of Assisi (+ 1226) and Saint Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (+ 1274), with their loving, contemplative devotion, prepared the ground on which the devout practice was to develop.

To a spirit of compassionate devotion for the mystery of the Passion we must add the enthusiasm aroused by the Crusades launched to regain possession of the Holy Sepulchre, a new flourishing of pilgrimages from the twelfth century onwards, and, from 1233, the stable presence of the Franciscan Friars minor in the Holy Places.

Towards the end of the thirteenth century we find mention of the Stations of the Cross, not yet as a pious practice, but as the path which Jesus walked on his way up to Mount Calvary marked by a series of « stations ».

Around 1294 the Dominican friar Rinaldo de Monte Crucis, in his *Liber peregrinationis*, tells how he went up to the Holy Sepulchre «per viam, per quam ascendit Christus, baiulans sibi crucem », describing the different *stations*: Herod's Palace, the Lithostratos, where Jesus was condemned to death, the place where Jesus met the women of Jerusalem, the place where Simon of Cyrene shouldered the Lord's cross, and so forth.

Against the background of devotion to the Passion of Christ, and recalling the path Jesus walked on his ascent to Mount Calvary, *The Stations of the Cross* as a pious practice was born directly from a sort of fusion of three devotions which spread mainly in Germany and in the Netherlands from the fifteenth century onwards:

- devotion to «Christ's falls » beneath the cross; as many as seven were numbered;

- devotion to « Christ's way of sorrow», which involved making a procession from one church to the next in memory of the way of sorrow - seven, nine and even more -, which Christ walked during his passion: from Gethsemane to the house of Annas (cf. *Jn* 18, 13), from the latter to the house of Caiphas (cf. *Jn* 18, 24; *Mt* 26, 56), then on to the Praetorium of Pilate (cf. *Jn* 18, 28; *Mt* 27, 2), to the palace of King Herod (cf. *Lk* 23, 7) ...;
- devotion to the «the stations of Christ», to the moments when Jesus stops on his journey to the hill of Calvary either because he is forced to do so by his executioners or because he is exhausted from fatigue, or because, moved by love, he is still anxious to establish a dialogue with the men and the women who participate in his passion; often «sorrowful ways» and «stations» correspond in number and subject (each «way» concludes with a «station») and the latter are marked with a column or a cross on which the scene, the subject of meditation, is at times depicted.

**Variety of the Stations**

In the long formation process of *The Way of the Cross* two elements should be noted: the fluctuation of the «First Station» and the variety of Stations.

With regard to the earliest *Stations of the Cross*, historians record at least four episodes chosen as the «First Station»:

- *Jesus takes leave of his Mother*; this «First Station» would appear to have been less popular, probably due to its difficult biblical grounding;

- *The Washing of the Feet*; this «First Station», set in the event of the Last Supper and the institution of the Eucharist, is found in some *Stations of the Cross* of the second half of the seventeenth century, which were very popular;

- *The Agony in Gethsemane*, the Garden of Olives, where in last loving obedience to the Father Jesus chooses to drink the chalice of his Passion to the last drop, was the initial Station of a brief seventeenth century set of *Stations of the Cross* - consisting of only seven -, noteworthy for its biblical rigour, and popularised principally by members of the Society of Jesus;

- The condemnation of *Jesus in the Praetorium of Pilate*, a rather early «First Station» which effectively marks the beginning of the final stage of Jesus’ sorrowful way: from the Praetorium to the Hill of Calvary.

The subject of the stations also varied. In the fifteenth century great diversity in the choice, number and order of stations still prevailed. Some schemas of *Way of the Cross* include stations such as the capture of Jesus, Peter’s denial, the scourging at the pillar, the defamatory accusations at the house of Caiaphas, the mockery of the white robe at Herod’s palace, none of which are found in what was to become the *textus receptus* of the pious practice.

**The traditional form**

The *Way of the Cross* or *Via Crucis*, in its present form, with the same fourteen stations placed in the same order, is recorded in Spain in the first half of the seventeenth century especially in Franciscan communities. From the Iberian peninsula it spread first to Sardinia, at that time under the dominion of the Spanish crown and then to Italy. Here it found a convinced and effective apostle in Saint Leonard of Port Maurice (+ 1751), a friar minor and a tireless missionary; he personally erected more than 572 *Via Crucis*, including the famous one erected inside the Colosseum at the request of Benedict XIV on 27 December 1750 to commemorate the Holy Year.
The biblical form

Every year on the evening of Good Friday, the Holy Father goes to the Colosseum for the pious practice of the Way of the Cross, joined by thousands of pilgrims from all over the world.

Compared with the traditional text, the biblical Way of the Cross celebrated by the Holy Father at the Colosseum for the first time in 1991 presented certain variants in the «subjects» of the stations. In the light of history, these variants, rather than new, are - if anything - simply rediscovered.

The biblical Way of the Cross omits stations which lack precise biblical reference such as the Lord’s three falls (III, V, VII), Jesus' encounter with his Mother (IV) and with Veronica (VI). Instead we have stations such as Jesus' agony in the Garden of Olives (I), the unjust sentence passed by Pilate (V), the promise of paradise to the Good Thief (XI), the presence of the Mother and the Disciple at the foot of the Cross (XIII). Clearly these episodes are of great salvific import and theological significance for the drama of Christ's passion: an ever-present drama in which every man and woman, knowingly or unknowingly, plays a part.

The proposal is not entirely new. Pilgrims arriving in Rome for the Jubilee of 1975 received a small handbook, Libro del pellegrino, prepared by the Central Committee for the Holy Year, which included an alternative version of the Stations of the Cross, with which in part, the 1991 biblical Via Crucis takes up.

Likewise, the Congregation for Divine Worship on various occasions in recent years authorised the use of formulas alternative to the traditional text of the Way of the Cross.

With the biblical Way of the Cross the intention was not to change the traditional text, which remains fully valid, but quite simply to highlight a few «important stations» which in the textus receptus are either absent or in the background. And indeed this only emphasises the extraordinary richness of the Way of the Cross which no schema can ever fully express.

The biblical Way of the Cross sheds light on the tragic role of the various characters involved, and the struggle between light and darkness, between truth and falsehood, which they embody. They all participate in the mystery of the Passion, taking a stance for or against Jesus, the «sign of contradiction» (Lk 2, 34), and thus revealing their hidden thoughts with regard to Christ.

Making the Way of the Cross, we, the followers of Jesus, must declare once more our discipleship: weeping like Peter for sins committed; opening our hearts to faith in Jesus the suffering Messiah, like the Good Thief; remaining there at the foot of the Cross of Christ like the Mother and the Disciple, and there with them receiving the Word which redeems, the Blood which purifies, the Spirit which gives life.

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