

Journeys of faith

The ancient tradition of pilgrimage as a fresh approach to spirituality

BY LENZA CARRERAO

A PILGRIMAGE is a metaphor for life: a journey towards a final destination. Whether the focus should be on the journey or on the destination itself depends on one's point of view. Professor Matthew Anderson, of the Theological Studies Department at Concordia University, is passionate about the topic, having produced a documentary and organized a conference on the subject. "The traditional concept of pilgrimage is a spiritual journey to a shrine and back home, in search of spiritual blessing," he says. "The contemporary concept is that of a transformative journey, putting the emphasis on the journey rather than on the destination." He explains this focus on the journey as an expression of contemporary spirituality, which turns away from institutions, authority and structure, turning instead to experience and existential questions. "Pilgrimages seem to be a good way to talk about faith with the newer generations," he affirms.

That might be one of the reasons why walking pilgrimages seem to be gaining popularity. In 2013,

almost 216,000 pilgrims received the Compostela certificate after traveling the different routes of The Way of St. James, one of the most popular pilgrimage routes in the world, ending at Santiago de Compostela, Spain. Its number of pilgrims has steadily increased since the '80s, when fewer than 5,000 people a year got the certificate. St. Edmund's parishioner Jean Mariet, a 51-year-old financial advisor, is one of the many who have traveled that path. After a frustrating experience in 2004, when his feet and legs prevented him from going any farther in the first week of his pilgrimage, he went back again in 2005, accompanied by his lather-in-law. "I wanted to be contemplative for a few hours a day and to see St. James' remains," he says. "I also wanted to walk that trail that has been walked upon by Christians for thousands of years." He traveled 200 km in nine days, overcoming his physical challenge. Spending time with other pilgrims was an unexpected highlight of his experience. "Twenty-five of us would sit for supper, representing maybe 13 or 15 countries."

A path to transformation

Ft. Peter Sabbath of the Holy Name of Jesus parish, in Laval, who has led pilgrimages to the Holy Land, Rome and Lourdes, says pilgrimages are meant to

deepen the faith, spend time with others and witness historical places. "Sometimes you make connections that could be a bit distant before." He believes the journey is important, but we should bear in mind that "there is also a destination in life for us, which is Heaven. When we are aware of a destination, it changes how we understand our journey."

He says some people spend their lives going on pilgrimages, visiting shrines, making retreats, but that those experiences are meant to be moments to give us strength and meaning for the rest of our year. "We can't live up in the mountain all the time."

Professor Anderson says the idea behind a pilgrimage is that, by taking a long time doing something we don't normally do — such as spending time with ourselves and with community, walking — it will transform us. "Walking helps you think." He points out that Nietzsche, Rousseau, Freud and other great thinkers were walkers.

Challenging body and mind

And how about the notion that a pilgrimage needs to have sacrifice? Anderson tells the story of his first pilgrimage, when he hurt his tendon and couldn't walk much, so he took a bus or a car on parts of the

Resources for pilgrims:

www.duquibecacompostelle.org

The website of the Association Québécoise des pèlerins et amis du Chemin de Saint-Jacques (in French) has plenty of information about The Way of St. James. They organize local information events and walks where aspiring pilgrims can get in shape for the Camino.

www.sandiego.ca

The Canadian Company of Pilgrims website also offers information for Camino pilgrims.

www.ticiacompostelle.com

The Centre La Tienda d'ici à Compostelle (in French) offers equipment, guidebooks, Spanish lessons, walking excursions, backpack preparation workshops, talks, a convivial space and much more for El Camino pilgrims.

www.spiritours.com

Spiritours is a Montreal-based tour operator specializing in tours focused on personal and spiritual development, as well as Christian pilgrimages. ☺



Professor Matthew Anderson during one of his pilgrimages, heading to the Holy Island of Lindisfarne, in the English coast, in 2013

Photo courtesy of Matthew Anderson



Photo courtesy of Jean Pothier

At the foot of the Cruz de Ferro (Iron Cross), along the French way of the Camino, pilgrims leave a small stone that they brought from home and other objects with personal meaning.



Photo courtesy of Jean Pothier

The daily Pilgrim's Mass welcomes tired and happy walkers to the Santiago Cathedral.

Pilgrimages in Canada

The following is a short list of some walking pilgrimage routes close to home. Check out parish bulletins and The Grapevine newsletter of the Diocese of Montreal for organized pilgrimages to local shrines.

Chemin des Navigateurs

Leaving from Pointe-au-Père towards Ste-Anne-de-Beaupré, this journey takes 21 days and 400 km across the regions of Bas St-Laurent, Chaudière-Appalaches and Bic National Park. www.chemindesnavigateurs.org

Chemin des Sanctuaires

Pilgrims who walk this 18-day, 375 km trail start in Montreal and pass by places such as St. Joseph's Oratory, the Mère d'Youville Shrine in Varennes, the Notre-Dame-du-Cap Shrine in Cap-de-la-Madeleine, and Notre-Dame Basilica in Quebec, before arriving at the Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré Basilica. www.chemindessanctuaires.org

Chemin des Outaouais

The 240 km from the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Ottawa to St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal is traveled in 12 days, including a stop at the Notre-Dame-de-Lourdes Shrine in Rigaud. www.chemindesoutaouais.ca

A Jesuit trail

This Ontario route takes pilgrims from the Ignatius Jesuit Centre in Guelph to the Jesuit Martyrs' Shrine in Midland on an 8-day, 160 km walking journey. www.ignatiusguelph.ca/pilgrimage

International walking pilgrimages

The Way of St. James

El Camino de Santiago actually has many different routes that converge in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, in Spain. There, pilgrims can visit the tomb of the apostle Saint James.

The most traditional routes to reach Santiago are the French route (approximately 800 km, leaving from Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, in France), the North route (823 km, leaving from the French border in Iran and following the North coast of Spain), the Portuguese route (616 km from Lisbon or 240 km from Porto), and the Via de La Plata (an old Roman way now starting at Seville, with approximately 1,000 km to Santiago).

On the website of the St. James's Cathedral (www.catedraldesantiago.es/es/el-camino) there is a link for an English booklet about this pilgrimage.

The Rock

The summit of Croagh Patrick, near Westport in Ireland, is where Saint Patrick fasted for 40 days in 441 AD. Today's pilgrims can attend Mass at a modern chapel on the top of the mountain. Pilgrims climb the mountain from the village of Murrisk, close by. www.croagh-patrick.com

Via Francigena

All roads lead to Rome at Via Francigena, whether you choose to start your journey at the Canterbury Cathedral, in England, or closer to the Holy See, in France, Switzerland or Italy. The official website is www.viafrancigena.org/en, but useful information can also be found on www.francigena-international.org.

Other popular routes and destinations

Any sacred place attracts pilgrims, whether they come by plane, train, car, bicycle or on foot. The internet has plenty of information for people interested in visiting places such as Jerusalem, Lourdes, Taizé, Fátima and many others. There are also walking pilgrimages related to non-Catholic Christian traditions, like St. Cuthbert's Way in Britain (<http://stcuthbertsway.info>), and St. Olav's Way in Norway (<http://pilegrimsleden.no/en/>).

In the Footsteps of Paul the Apostle

From October 15 to 25, Fr. Raymond Lafontaine of St. Monica parish will be leading a pilgrimage to Greece and Turkey, following the footsteps of St. Paul. More information at 514 489 5723. ☪



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POLI 313D: Tuesday, Thursday 11:45-13:00

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