Jerusalem: The Via Dolorosa (1)

J. Gil

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In the footprints of our Faith

“Do you want to accompany Jesus closely, very closely?... Open the Holy Gospel and read the Passion of Our Lord. But don’t just read it: live it. There is a big difference. To read is to recall something that happened in the past; to live is to find oneself present at an event that is happening here and now, to be someone taking part in those scenes.

Then, allow your heart to open wide; let it place itself next to Our Lord. And when you notice it trying to slip away – when you see that you are a coward, like the others – ask forgiveness for your cowardice and mine” (The Way of the Cross, Ninth Station, no. 3).

Down through the centuries, that is how the saints, and many thousands of Christians with them, have contemplated the redemptive death of Jesus on the Cross and his Resurrection: the Paschal mystery, which is at the heart of our faith (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 571). With the passage of time the faithful’s meditation on those events has developed into various devotional practices, foremost among which is the Stations of the Cross.

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The purpose of following the Stations of the Cross is to contemplate, with a spirit of contrition and compassion, the last and most painful part of our Lord’s sufferings, accompanying him spiritually along the path he trod, carrying the Cross, from the praetorium to Calvary, and there, from his nailing to the Cross until his burial.

The practice of the Stations of the Cross is based on veneration of the Holy Places, where instead of trying to imagine the scenes of the Passion, they were
physically before one’s eyes. A pious legend contained in *De Transitu Mariae*, an apocryphal Syriac text from the fifth century, tells that the Blessed Virgin Mary walked daily along the route where her Son had suffered and shed his Blood (cf. *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, II, col. 2577). St Jerome transmits to us the account of the pilgrimage to Palestine made by the noble St Paula between the years 385 and 386. In Jerusalem, “she visited all the places with such fervour and intensity that if she had not urgently wanted to see the rest she could never have torn herself away from the first.

Prostrate before the cross, she adored the Lord as though she could see him hanging on it. She entered the Sepulchre of the Anastasis (Resurrection) and kissed the stone which the Angel had rolled away from it. Out of faith, she kissed the actual place where our Lord had lain, like a thirsty person who has reached water at last. What tears she shed there, what wails of sorrow she gave, the whole of Jerusalem can witness, as can the Lord himself to whom she prayed” (St Jerome, *Epitaphium Sanctae Paulae*, 9).

We also know quite a lot of details of some liturgical ceremonies held in Jerusalem at that time, thanks to the pilgrim Egeria (or Aetheria), who travelled to the Holy Land at the end of the fourth century. Many of these ceremonies consisted of reading the Gospel accounts relating to each place, praying one or more Psalms, and singing hymns. In addition, describing the sacred ceremonies on Holy Thursday and Good Friday, she says that the faithful went in procession from the Mount of Olives to Calvary: “They go towards the city on foot, with hymns, and arrive at the gate at the time when it is just light enough to distinguish between one man and another; then, in the city, all without exception, great and small, rich and poor, are present; nobody fails to take part in the vigil, especially on that day, until dawn. Thus the Bishop is accompanied from Gethsemane to the gate, and from there, crossing the whole city, to the Cross” (*Itinerarium Egeriae*, 36, 3; CCL 175, 80).

According to later accounts, it seems that the path Jesus followed through the streets of Jerusalem was defined little by little, while at the same time the “stations” were determined, in other words the spots where the faithful paused to contemplate each episode of the Passion. The Crusades of the eleventh and twelfth centuries and the Franciscans from the fourteenth century onwards contributed greatly to fixing these traditions. Accordingly, by the sixteenth century the route followed in the Holy City was the same as the one taken today, known as the Via Dolorosa (“Sorrowful Way”, or “Path of Sorrows”), with its fourteen stations.
Custom
From those times on, outside Jerusalem, the custom spread of setting up the Stations of the Cross so that the faithful could think about the scenes and events just like the pilgrims who actually went to the Holy Land. The custom was propagated first in Spain by the Dominican Blessed Alvaro of Cordoba, and from there it was taken to Sardinia and then to the rest of Europe. Among those who spread this devotion, St Leonard of Port Maurice stands out. Between 1731 and 1751, in the course of some missions in Italy, he set up more than 570 examples of a “Way of the Cross” and when Benedict XIV set up the Stations of the Cross in the Colosseum on 27 December 1750, he was the preacher at the ceremony. The Roman Pontiffs have also encouraged this devout practice by granting indulgences to those who do the Stations of the Cross.

The contemplation of our Lord’s sufferings induces repentance for our sins and moves us to atonement and reparation. Reliving these scenes on the Via Dolorosa itself can help set our souls still more on fire with God’s love, because of the immediacy of the experience. It is true that we cannot know whether the Via Dolorosa we follow in Jerusalem today reproduces the exact route taken by our Lord, because Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70, and the current street-plan dates roughly from the Roman rebuilding of the city in the time of the Emperor Hadrian in the year 135. Entire accuracy would require archaeological research at the level of the city in the first half of the first century, and even then, many questions would still remain unanswered. Setting aside this necessary uncertainty, the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem is the supreme “Stations of the Cross”, followed by Christians for centuries. As for the events depicted in the fourteen Stations, most of them are taken straight from the Gospel, and others have come down to us through devout Christian tradition. We can follow them hand-in-hand with St Josemaria, who meditated on them with extraordinary intensity.

The First Station: Jesus is condemned to death
Every Friday, at three in the afternoon, there is a procession down the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem. It is led by the Custody of the Holy Land or a representative, accompanied by large numbers of pilgrims, of the faithful living in Jerusalem, and Franciscan friars. The starting point is the terrace of the El-Omariye Islamic School, situated in the northwest corner of the Temple courtyard. In the first century, it was here that the Antonia Fortress stood, where the Roman garrison was quartered; it is traditionally considered to be the praetorium where Jesus was judged by the governor Pontius Pilate.

“Sentence is about to be passed. Mockingly, Pilate says: ‘Ecce rex vester! Behold
your king!' (John 19:14). Infuriated, the chief priests reply: ‘We have no king but Caesar’ (John 19:15). Lord, where are your friends? Your subjects, where are they? They have left you. This running away has been going on for twenty centuries... We, all of us, flee from the Cross, from your Holy Cross. Blood, anguish, loneliness and an insatiable hunger for souls... these are the courtiers around your royal throne.” (The Way of the Cross, First Station, no. 4)

Second Station: Jesus takes up his Cross
Leaving the school and crossing the Via Dolorosa, we come to the Franciscan Monastery of the Flagellation. It is a complex of buildings around a large cloister, with the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum at the front and a church on each side: on the right, the Church of the Flagellation, rebuilt in 1927 on the ruins of an earlier 12-century church; and on the left, the Church of the Condemnation, which was built in 1903. On the outer wall of this church, facing the street, is the sign of the Second Station. And he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called Calvary, the place of a skull, which is called Golgotha in Hebrew (Jn 19:17).

“As if it were a festival, they have prepared an escort, a long procession. The judges want to savour their victory with a slow and pitiless torture. Jesus is not to meet a quick death... He is given time in which to prolong the identification of his pain and love with the most lovable Will of the Father.” (The Way of the Cross, Second Station, no. 2).

A little further on, the Via Dolorosa is crossed by a semi-circular arch, which carries a passage over the road. It is popularly known as the Ecce Homo arch, to recall the place where Pilate showed Jesus to the crowd after the scourging at the pillar and the crowning with thorns. In fact, it is the central span of a triumphal arch, whose northern gateway is preserved inside the Convent of Our Lady of Sion: it takes the place of an altar-piece in the Ecce Homo Basilica, completed in the 19th century.

Just as people imagined that the arch belonged to the Antonia Fortress, several stone slabs in the same area are supposed to be those of the place called Lithostrotos (see Jn 19:13); especially the ones to be seen in the Church of the Condemnation and the Convent of Our Lady of Sion. Both the arch and the stone slabs are in fact of Roman origin, but they date to a slightly later period, in the time of the Emperor Hadrian.

As one reaches this point, following the Via Dolorosa, one cannot help thinking of how much Christ had already suffered even before taking up his Cross. Pilate, wanting to please the people, had released Barabbas to them and ordered Jesus
to be scourged.

“Bound to the pillar. Covered with wounds.
The blows of the lash sound upon His torn flesh, upon His undefiled flesh, that
suffers for your sinful flesh. More blows. More fury. Still more... It is the last
extreme of human cruelty.
Finally, exhausted, they unbind Jesus. And the body of Christ yields to pain and
falls limp, broken and half dead.
You and I are unable to speak. Words are not needed. Look at Him, look at Him...
slowly. After this... can you ever fear penance?” (Holy Rosary, Second Sorrowful
Mystery)

“They lead Our Lord to the courtyard of the palace, and there they call together
their whole band (Mark 15:16). The brutal soldiers strip His most pure body. They
drape a dirty purple rag about Jesus. A reed, as a sceptre, in His right hand...
The crown of thorns, driven in by blows, makes Him a mock king... ‘Ave Rex
Judeorum! Hail, King of the Jews’ (Mark 15:18). And with their blows they wound
His head. And they strike Him... and they spit on Him.
Crowned with thorns and clothed in rags of purple, Jesus is shown to the Jewish
mob: Ecce Homo! Behold the Man!” (Holy Rosary, Third Sorrowful Mystery)

“Our heart shudders when it contemplates the Sacred Humanity of Our Lord
become an open wound. (...) Look at Jesus. Each laceration is a reproach; each
lash of the whip, a reason for sorrow for your offences and mine.” (The Way of the
Cross, First Station, no. 5)

Third Station: Jesus falls the first time
The Via Dolorosa continues, sloping slightly downwards, to cross a road leading in
from the Damascus Gate. It is called El-Wad, (“The Valley”), or the Tyropoeon
Valley. Turning to the left, almost on the corner, is a small chapel belonging to the
Armenian Catholic Patriarchate, with the Third Station.

“The worn-out body of Jesus staggers now beneath the huge Cross. His most
loving Heart can barely summon up another breath of life for his poor wounded
limbs.
To right and left, Our Lord sees the multitude moving around like sheep without a
shepherd. He could call them one by one by their names, by our names. There
they are, those who were fed at the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, those
who were cured of their ailments, those he taught by the lakeside, on the
mountain and in the porticoes of the Temple.
A sharp pain pierces the soul of Jesus; Our Lord falls to the ground exhausted. You and I can say nothing: now we know why the Cross of Jesus weighs so much. We weep over our wretched failings and also for the terrible ingratitude of the human heart. From the depths of our soul there comes an act of real contrition, that lifts us up from the prostration of sin. Jesus has fallen that we might get up: once and for all.” (The Way of the Cross, Third Station)

Fourth Station: Jesus meets his Blessed Mother Mary
Going a few yards further we reach the fourth station, where there is a church, also belonging to the Armenians, in whose crypt there is perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Our Lady did not desert her Son during his Passion; we will see her again after this, on Golgotha.

“No sooner has Jesus risen from his first fall than he meets his Blessed Mother, standing by the wayside where He is passing. With immense love Mary looks at Jesus, and Jesus at his Mother. Their eyes meet, and each heart pours into the other its own deep sorrow. (...) In the dark loneliness of the Passion, Our Lady offers her Son a comforting balm of tenderness, of union, of faithfulness; a ‘yes’ to the divine will. Hand in hand with Mary, you and I also want to console Jesus, by accepting always and in everything the Will of his Father, of our Father.” (The Way of the Cross, Fourth Station)

Fifth Station: Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus to carry the Cross
Immediately after this we leave El-Wad street and turn right to take up the Via Dolorosa again. This part of it is very characteristic of the Old City: narrow, steep, with steps every few yards, and many arches connecting the buildings on each side of the street. Just at the beginning of it, on the left, there is a chapel which has belonged to the Franciscans since the thirteenth century, where the Fifth Station of the Cross is recalled: “And they compelled a passer-by, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross” (Mk 15:21).

“In the whole context of the Passion, this help does not add up to very much. But for Jesus a smile, a word, a gesture, a little bit of love, is enough for him to pour out his grace bountifully on the soul of his friend. (...) At times the Cross appears without our looking for it: it is Christ who is seeking us out. And if by chance, before this unexpected Cross – which, perhaps, is therefore more difficult to understand –, your heart were to show repugnance… don’t give it consolations. And, filled with a noble compassion, when it asks for them, say to it slowly, as one speaking in confidence: ‘Heart: heart on the Cross! Heart on the
Sixth Station: the face of Jesus is wiped by Veronica
We know little about this woman. A tradition based on apocryphal writings says that she was the same as the woman with the haemorrhage whom Jesus cured at Capernaum, and that her name was Berenice, which in Latin is Veronica. In the Middle Ages her house was reputed to be here, at about the mid-point of the Via Dolorosa. On this spot there stands today a small chapel whose door gives directly onto the street, with a Greek Catholic church above it.

“A woman, Veronica by name, makes her way through the crowd, with a white linen cloth folded in her hands, and with this she reverently wipes the face of Jesus. Our Lord leaves the impression of his Holy Face on the three parts of that veil.

The beloved face of Jesus, which had smiled upon children and was transfigured in glory on Mount Thabor, is now, as it were, concealed by suffering. But this suffering is our purification; the sweat and the blood, which disfigure and tarnish his features, serve to cleanse us. Lord, help me decide to tear off, through penance, this pitiful mask I have fashioned with my wretched doings… Then, and only then, by following the path of contemplation and atonement, will my life begin to copy faithfully the features of your live. We will find ourselves becoming more and more like you. We will be other Christs, Christ himself, ipse Christus”. (The Way of the Cross, Sixth Station)

Seventh Station: Jesus falls the second time
At the end of the upward slope, the Via Dolorosa joins the Khan ez-Zait, or oil market, a bustling souk (street lined with market stalls) running down from the Damascus Gate. It divides the Muslim and Christian quarters of the Old City, and is on the site of the ancient Cardo Maximus or main street of Jerusalem in Roman and Byzantine times. The Seventh Station of the Cross is at the crossroads, where there is a small chapel belonging to the Franciscans.

“Jesus is brought down by the weight of the Cross. We are brought down by the attraction of the things of this world. He prefers to fall rather than let go of the Cross. That is how Christ heals the lack of love that casts us down.” (The Way of the Cross, Seventh Station, no. 1)

Eighth Station: Jesus consoles the women of Jerusalem
Just a few yards on from the place of his second fall, along St Francis’s street which runs up westwards and is a prolongation of the Via Dolorosa, we come to the Eighth Station of the Cross.
“Among the people watching our Lord as he passes by are a number of women who are unable to restrain their compassion and burst into tears (…)
But our Lord (…) invites them to weep for sins, which are the cause of the Passion and which will draw down the rigour of divine justice:
‘Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children… For if they do these things to the green wood, what shall be done to the dry?’ (Lk 23:28, 31) Your sins, my sins, the sins of all men, rise up. All the evil we have done, and the good that we have neglected to do. The desolate panorama of the countless crimes and iniquities we would have committed if Jesus had not strengthened us with the light of his most loving glance. How little a life is for making atonement!” (The Way of the Cross, Eighth Station)

Ninth Station: Jesus falls for the third time
In former times there may have been a more direct way to the Ninth Station of the Cross, but today one has to retrace one’s steps to the souk, follow it southwards for a few yards, and then take some steps that open off the right side of the street. At the end of an alleyway a pillar marks the place of Jesus’ third fall. It is set on a corner, between a gateway leading to the courtyard of the Ethiopian Monastery and the door of the Coptic Church of St Anthony.

“Our Lord falls for the third time, on the slope leading up to Calvary, with only forty of fifty paces between him and the summit. Jesus can no longer stay on his feet: his strength has failed him, and he lies on the ground in utter exhaustion.” (The Way of the Cross, Ninth Station).

“Now you realize how much you have made Jesus suffer, and you are filled with sorrow. How easy it is to ask his pardon and weep for your past betrayals! Such is your longing for atonement that you cannot contain it in your breast!
Fine. But don’t forget that the spirit of penance consists mainly in the fulfilment of the duty of each moment, however costly it may be.” (The Way of the Cross, Ninth Station, no. 5)

The place that recalls our Lord’s third fall is just a few yards from the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre. The last five Stations of the Via Dolorosa are inside this Basilica. To get there, one can either go back to the souk again and go along a few streets to the small square in front of its main entrance, on the south side; this is the normal route for the Friday processions. Or one can take a short cut across the courtyard of the Ethiopian Monastery, which is situated on top of some of the Basilica’s lower chapels, and go down through the building, which has a direct exit onto the square, next to the site of Calvary. We will be visiting it to meditate on the
next scenes of our Lord’s Passion, in the next article.

Useful links:
Custody of the Holy Land: video about the Via Dolorosa