

## Catholic 101

### Stations of the Cross

Our Catholic tradition is rich with devotions. Perhaps one of most beloved is the Stations of the Cross; walking with Christ recalling the events, or stations, of his Passion, especially during Lent. This desire to intentionally walk with the Lord and meditate on his suffering, to try and reach out and help carry his cross and walk with his mother Mary seems to have started very early on in our history. Long before there was any actual ritual structure to this type of devotion, Christians made pilgrimages to Jerusalem just to be near the very ground the Lord walked on and try to recreate the way of his Passion. As early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century the monastery of Santo Stefano in Bologna built several small chapels that represented a specific station of the way, for example, a chapel for when Jesus falls the first time, another for Jesus being stripped of his clothes, and so forth. The idea was, as in Jerusalem, the faithful would walk from one chapel to the next so as to walk the way with the Lord. However this particular way of praying or devotion of walking the way of the Passion was mostly done in the Holy Land. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century a group of Franciscan friars decided to build a string of outdoor shrines in various cities to bring the Jerusalem experience to people who would most likely never have the means to make such an expensive pilgrimage. Depending on which historical source you read, these stations numbered anywhere from eleven to thirty. In 1686 the Franciscans petitioned Pope Innocent XI for permission to put stations inside their churches rather than outside so the devotion could be prayed year round and not be hampered by the weather. The pope agreed to their request. Then in 1731, after several bishops asked the pope to put the Stations of the Cross in their diocesan parishes, Pope Clement XII agreed, but, the stations had to be designed and installed by a Franciscan. And the number of stations was set at fourteen, the same as we have today. In 1857 the English bishops decided that their parishes could design and install their stations without the assistance of a Franciscan, and five years later after the flood gates were opened the Pope “decided” to allow all bishops everywhere to develop and install stations as they saw fit without the assistance of a Franciscan. So that in a nut shell is the history of the devotion’s development. The experience of the Stations of the Cross, or the devotion itself, has always remained the same. It is a way for the faithful, either personally or communally, to walk with Christ on the way of his passion. The devotional expression is facilitated by moving, literally, from one station to the next. For quite some time, our stations here at St. Pat’s have been clustered together in a sublime fashion with nine stations on one side of the church with the other five on the other. (Just as an aside, the Resurrection is actually not officially a station, the fourteen stations are meant to end with the crucified Christ in the tomb, remember this is an emersion into Christ’s passion, it is meant to be unsettling.) Pope John Paul II understood the stations as the unceasing effort to stand beside the endless crosses on which the Son of God continues to be crucified.<sup>1</sup>) Now our stations are spread out evenly at eye level across the entire length of the church. As we pray the stations, we can literally walk some distance from one to another, making a spiritual pilgrimage of prayer, uniting ourselves to the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ empowering us to undo the suffering that continues to exist all around us.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II spoken on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Benedictine Sisters of the Reparation of the Holy Face, 9/27/2000