



*“Pilgrimages evoke our
earthly journey toward
heaven...”*

Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2691



What is a Pilgrimage?

A pilgrimage is a devotional journey that one undertakes to a holy or sacred site and which is often associated with a saint or religious artifact of local or international significance.

For Catholics, a pilgrimage is more than just traveling to a historic site or viewing religious artworks or relics. At its core, it is a journey that carries within it a deep spiritual meaning and an opportunity for personal growth and conversion of heart.

The word pilgrim comes from the Latin word peregrinum which conveys the idea of wandering over a distance. A pilgrimage is not purposeless wandering. It is a focused and intentional journey with a higher purpose and that purpose is, specifically, to honour God.

One of the earliest uses of the word can be found in the works of Saint Augustine of Hippo. In his text, *Peregrinatio*, he describes a Christian spiritual journey as the pilgrim's self-imposed exile in which he searches for God's truth.



A Transformative Inner Journey

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, nicely summarises the understanding of pilgrimage in this way: "Pilgrimages evoke our earthly journey toward heaven and are traditionally very special occasions for renewal in prayer. For pilgrims seeking living water, shrines are special places for living the forms of Christian prayer" (2691)

A pilgrimage will often carry personal, moral, and spiritual significance to the pilgrim. Generally, it involves embarking on a journey to a shrine or site that the pilgrim considers important in light of his or her cultural background, family connections and traditions, individual growth in the life of faith, religious convictions, as well as for the spirit of change and adventure. This is most understandable as there is often much to see, discover and learn from visits to these religious locations.

However, it is important to realise that in the strict sense of the pilgrimage experience, it is not a vacation or holiday trip. There is on offer, be it an afternoon's pilgrimage or one that lasts a few weeks to a month, an opportunity for rich, inner transformation that is brought about by the workings of God's grace and Spirit.



The Importance of Prayer

Intentional prayer over the pilgrimage experience fosters a keen sense of God's ever-abiding presence. Prayer is always the key that unlocks the space in our hearts wherein God can speak to us as our very best friend.

Pilgrimages are a beautiful opportunity for Catholic families to grow in their love of the faith and to see Jesus, Our Lady and the saints in a new light. In this sense they are always worth the effort required to prepare well for them. Preparing well means to prepare the heart. Let us ask the Lord for the grace of an open heart that is ready to receive the gifts that the Lord is ever desirous of bestowing on us all and especially during an intentional pilgrimage experience.



An Act of Sacrifice and Penitence

Pilgrimages are steeped in religious history. They can be traced back to the period 957 BC when the temple was first built in the holy city of Jerusalem. Subsequent Jewish Law stipulated that every adult male was obliged to present themselves at the temple for the three major feasts of the Jewish calendar such as the annual celebration of the Passover meal.

After the death and resurrection of Jesus and the spread of Christianity to what is now Asia and Europe, Christians were inspired to physically follow in the footsteps of Jesus, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the Apostles. Pilgrimages became a significant part of the Catholic tradition in the 4th century when Christians started to travel to the various holy sites that were associated with Jesus' life as well as to the tombs of the early martyrs and saints. Many devotees would visit these locations even during time of religious persecution. This act served as a deep expression of their reverence for God and his holy ones who had witnessed to their Christian faith in both their way of life and even in their mode of death.

Christian pilgrimages became very popular in the Middle Ages. Pilgrims in this period carried external 'symbols' with them which marked them out as pilgrims and included items such as the baptism oriented scallop shell, penitential rocks, or even the simple coloured scarf.

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The most sought after pilgrimages at this time were those that had as their destination the sacred sites in the Holy Land. For these pilgrims, embarking on a pilgrimage outside familiar areas in Europe was not only financially challenging, it was also potentially life threatening! Thieves aplenty waited to ambush travellers in order to steal their money and provisions and this was besides the dangerous terrain that often had to be crossed. Many pilgrims were injured or killed because of this.

From time to time, pilgrimages were required as an act of penance when someone committed a grave sin. Going on a pilgrimage involved great hardship because the sinners were asked to walk barefoot and in tattered clothing. A pilgrim also had to beg for his food throughout the journey. This is a stark contrast to what pilgrimages may look like in our own day. There were no luxury hotels and guided tours. In fact, a pilgrimage was every bit an act of great sacrifice.

A Catholic Understanding of Relics

“The religious sense of the Christian People has always found expression in various forms of piety... such as the veneration of relics...these expressions extend the liturgical life of the Church, but do not replace it.”

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1674-1675

The word relic comes from the Latin *relinquo*, literally meaning 'I leave' or 'I abandon'. A relic is a piece of the body of a Saint, an item owned or used by the Saint, or an object which has been touched to the tomb of a Saint. Traditionally, a piece of the body of a Saint, especially that of a Martyr, may be with the permission of the local ecclesiastical authority used in solemn processions recalling the specific holy person.

Veneration of Relics

Isn't the veneration of relics optional for Catholics? Must the Catholic faithful really esteem the bodies of the Saints? In the 16th Century, the Council of Trent responded to the claims of the reformers that both the veneration of the Saints and their relics is contrary to Sacred Scripture. The Council taught: "Also the holy bodies of the holy Martyrs and of the others who dwell with Christ . . . are to be honoured by the faithful."

Relics in Sacred Scripture

There are several scriptural passages that support the veneration of relics. For example, the Israelites took Joseph's bones when they departed Egypt (Ex. 13:19). The bones of Elisha came in contact with a dead person who then was raised to life (2 Kings 13:21). The same Elisha took the mantle of Elijah and fashioned a miracle with it (2 Kings 2:13). The Christians of Ephesus, by using handkerchiefs and cloths touched to St Paul's skin, affected the healing of the sick (Acts 19:12).



Communion of Saints

To venerate the relics of the Saints is a profession of belief in several doctrines of the Catholic faith:

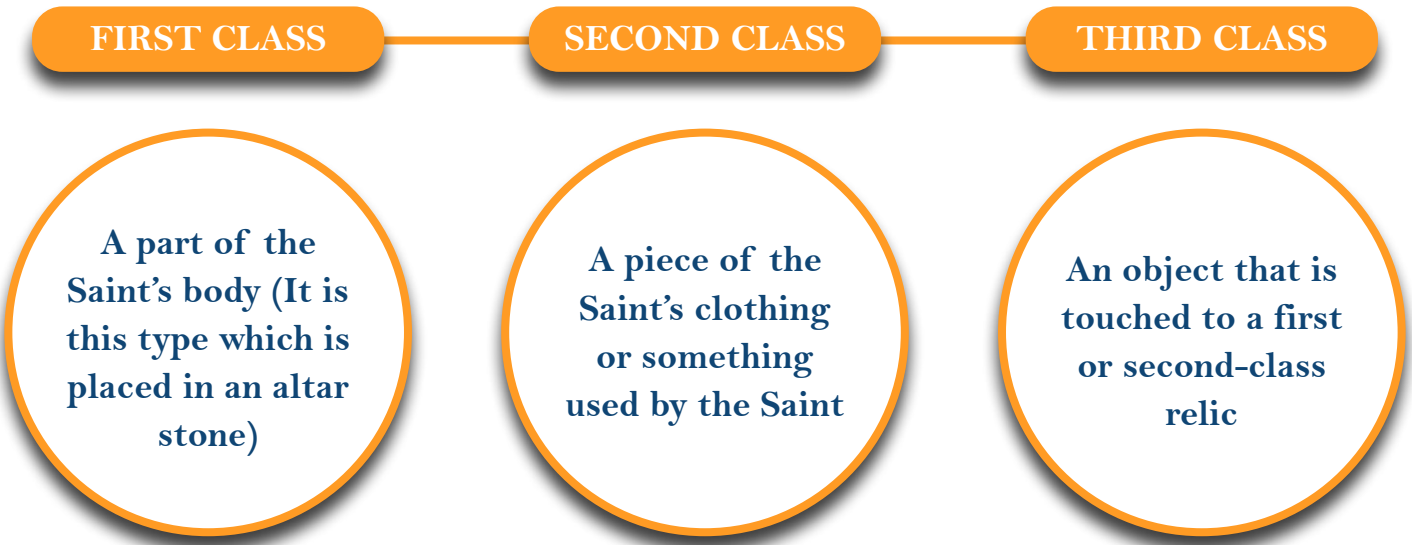
- 1** The belief in everlasting life for those who have obediently witnessed to Christ and His Holy Gospel here on earth.
- 2** The truth of the resurrection of the body for all persons on the last day.
- 3** The doctrine of the splendour of the human body and the respect which all should show toward the bodies of both the living and the deceased.
- 4** The belief in the special intercessory power which the Saints enjoy in heaven because of their intimate relationship with Christ the King.
- 5** Because of our connection in the communion of Saints: we as members of the Church militant or pilgrim Church, they as members of the Church triumphant.

The relics of the Saints and their veneration is another in the long line of treasures which Jesus Christ has given to His chaste bride, the Church. These relics summon us to appreciate more profoundly not only the heroic men and

women, boys and girls who have served the Master so selflessly and generously, but especially the love and mercy of the Almighty who called these His followers to the bliss of unending life in His eternal kingdom.

Classification of Relics

There are three classes of sacred relics:



How do we venerate relics as a family?

To venerate a relic your family may simply spend a few moments in quite devotion, standing or kneeling to honour the relic. Through the intercession of the saint you may bring to the Lord any intention of you may have in heart. You may choose to touch a prayer card or other object e.g. a rosary to the relic.

However, a person should not genuflect before the relic in a way similar to genuflecting before the Blessed Sacrament. Christ alone is reserved that type of veneration. Whatever gesture a person chooses to use to venerate a relic, it must not be done out of superstition, but out of love for the saint and for God.

Think of the practice in a similar way to someone who takes out a photograph of a beloved family member and kisses it every time he or she puts it back. The gesture is a sign of love for that person and contains no hint of superstition.

Venerating the relics of saints is a beautiful practice that brings us close to those who walked before us in the sign of faith. They "ran the race" and reached the end goal of Heaven. Seeing their relics and touching them can incite in us a greater urgency to strive for sanctity so that we can meet these holy men and women at the end our time on earth.



Sources used

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OFFICIAL PRAYER FOR THE WORLD MEETING OF FAMILIES 2022

Heavenly Father,
We come before You to praise You
and to thank You for the great gift of the family.
We pray to You for all families
consecrated by the Sacrament of Matrimony.
May they rediscover each day the grace they have received,
and as small domestic Churches,
may they know how to witness to Your presence
and to the love with which Christ loves the Church.
We pray to You for all families faced with difficulty and suffering
caused by illness or circumstances of which only You know.
Sustain them and make them aware
of the path to holiness upon which You call them,
so that they might experience Your infinite mercy
and find new ways to grow in love.
We pray to You for children and young people:
may they encounter You and respond joyfully
to the vocation You have in mind for them;
We pray for parents and grandparents: may they be aware
that they are signs of the fatherhood and motherhood of God
in caring for the children who, in body and spirit, You entrust to them;
and for the experience of fraternity that the family can give to the world
Lord, grant that each family
might live their specific vocation to holiness in the Church
as a call to become missionary disciples,
in the service of life and peace,
in communion with our priests, religious,
and all vocations in the Church.
Bless the World Meeting of Families.
Amen.



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