

# Why a Holy Year **PILGRIMAGE?**

BY FATHER ROBERT F. McNAMARA

Our readers already know that Pope Paul VI has proclaimed 1975 as a Holy Year in Rome, and 1974 as an "advance" holy year in every Catholic diocese.

The theme of Holy Year 1974-1975 is: **Pilgrimage of the People of God in renewal and reconciliation.**

"All right," some of you may say. "Renewal I understand, reconciliation I understand. But why tie them in with a pilgrimage?"

A fair question. Pilgrimages do not have as high a priority today as in some other ages. (At least religious pilgrimages; we do have our popular patriotic pilgrimages to historic spots such as the grave of President Kennedy.) However, pilgrimages of piety have figured in probably all the religions of men. They have ranked with prayer, self-denial, and sacrifices as human expressions of divine worship.

For example, the ancient Olympic Games were held by the ancient Greeks in connection with a pilgrimage to the temple of Zeus at Olympia in Elis. Again, St. Paul, when preaching at Ephesus in Asia Minor, incurred the wrath of the keepers of the local pilgrim shrine of the goddess Diana. Their Diana (said they) was "venerated all over Asia, yes, and everywhere in the civilized world." (Acts, 19:27). The ancient Egyptians flocked to the temples of Isis and Sekket; the Ancient Romans to the temples of Jupiter Latiaris and Juno Lanuvina; the Incas of ancient Peru went in throngs to the temple of Inti — the "court of the sun" — at Cuzco.

Buddhists today still make journeys of devotion to sites in India, Ceylon, China, Tibet, Mongolia and so forth, where Gautama Buddha once tarried, or where his relics or special images are venerated. Pious Hindus seek peace of soul at a number of mountain sanctuaries, or travel the dusty ways to the seven rivers of India, especially to the Ganges at Benares, to purify their hearts by bathing in the river waters. Mohammedanism is even more insistent on pilgrimage. One of the five basic duties of every male Mohammedan is to make a pilgrimage once in his lifetime to the world center of Islam — Mecca in Arabia.

The Jewish faith and the Christian faith also have encouraged pilgrimages — not in imitation of other religions but inspired by a similar reverence for the Holy

Land. As a practicing Jew, Christ often "went up to Jerusalem" to take part in the three-great annual pilgrim festivals, Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. For all the inconvenience and

sacrifice these journeys entailed, they were sociable and joyful in spirit. A number of "Pilgrim" psalms give evidence of this mood. For instance, Psalm 122: "I rejoiced when I heard them say, 'Let us go to God's house.' And now our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem." When a Jewish pilgrim reached Jerusalem, he had the additional joy of finding there countless other pilgrims, come from the Jewish communities scattered among the cities of Asia and along the Mediterranean: "Parthians, Medes and Elamites — people — from Egypt, and the parts of Libya around Cyrene; as well as visitors from Rome." (Acts, 2:9-10). Today Jerusalem, though without its Temple for 1900 years, still remains for the Jews in every nation the land of their hearts desire.

At least from around 212 A.D. — that is, even during the age of the persecutions — the followers of Christ also began to "go up to Jerusalem" as pilgrims and to the other cities of Judah and Israel. This time it was not primarily to see the sacred sites of the Old Testament, but the holy places connected with the life, death and resurrection of the Savior. Once the Holy Land pilgrimages had been inaugurated, pilgrims came from every land in ever-increasing numbers. In the 11th Century, the invading Seljuk Turks began to interfere with Christian pilgrims. To rescue the Palestinian shrines and vindicate free access to them, Pope Urban II launched what was to be the greatest mass pilgrimage of all — the Crusades.

Not all Christians in western Europe could make the long trek to the Holy Land. But by that time many sanctuaries in the West had become popular for pilgrim journeys. In medieval and renaissance times, the following places were much frequented, usually because of their connection with saints or miracles: Santiago in Spain; Assisi in Italy; Mont St. Michel in France; Bruges in Belgium; Fulda in Germany; Canterbury in England; Downpatrick in Ireland; Czestochowa in Poland; Goa in India; St. Anne's in Canada; Guadalupe in Mexico. In modern times new shrines have attracted the devout. Of these the Marian shrines at Knock, Fatima and Lourdes are among the best known.

But Rome has been the Christian center of pilgrimage from earliest times. Christ may not have trodden its soil, but that soil was sanctified by the blood of St. Peter and Paul and hundreds of martyrs. It was at Rome, furthermore, that St. Peter established the diocese which was to become the central see of the popes, his successors as the chief shepherds of Christendom.

When we see how important a place pilgrimage has occupied in the history of man's piety, we can appreciate why Pope Boniface VIII, in proclaiming the first Holy Year for 1300 A.D., made it a year not only of pardon but of Roman pilgrimage.

In more recent Holy Years, the popes, after the official year is over, have extended its benefits to the wide world. Thus those who were unable to travel to Rome can make a lesser pilgrimage to the cathedral of their own diocese. They can also merit the plenary indulgence hitherto available only to those who went to Rome.

In the Holy Year 1974-1975, Pope Paul VI has turned this all around. He has appointed the year before the Holy Year for the local pilgrimages. In doing so, he has acted on the enthralling vision of a grassroots movement of the faithful to the center of their faith. In 1974, each pilgrim will move from his own parish church to the diocesan cathedral as the local mother-church (or to another "substitute" church designated by the Bishop). Then in 1975, the diocese will send a pilgrim delegation to Rome. There they will meet Catholics from every other diocese under the sun, "Medes and Elamites and Persians." What a wonderful symbol of the unity of the People of God: the "Pilgrim Church," led by its local bishops, coming to greet the Holy Father, successor of St. Peter as visible head of the Church.

One question remains unanswered. What is it that prompts men of good will to undertake pilgrimages?

I think St. Augustine suggested the basic answer when he said to God, "You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You." (Conf., 1:1). As he put it elsewhere, man "during his pilgrimage in this wilderness, thirsts and sighs after the fount of that eternal fatherland" (In Joan., 26:4).

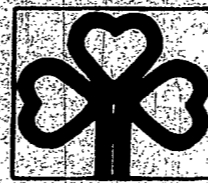
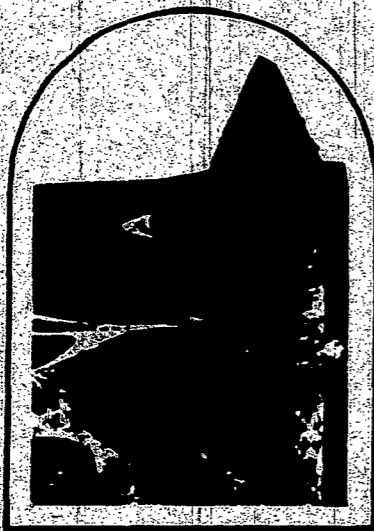
At times the world pales on us, and divinely discontent we hope to gain reassurance and new strength by visiting a place made sacred by the touch of God's hand or the sojourn of his saints. We become as engrossed in reaching that goal as were the knights of King Arthur in their quest for the Holy Grail. In view of our high aim, hardships along the way are accepted with good grace, for as Shakespeare says, "A true devoted pilgrim is not weary. To measure kingdoms with his feeble steps." (Two Gentlemen of Verona, 117:9-10).

It is true that whether we make a devotional journey to a great shrine far away or a lesser shrine nearby, we still do not find there our "eternal fatherland," "Jerusalem, our happy home." But if we have prayed there in deep recollection, we have at least stood for a moment on the threshold of eternity. And we turn back home from that threshold, refreshed for life by the grateful remembrance: "I have gone into His tabernacle; I have adored in the place where His feet stood" (Ps. 132:7).

Father McNamara is the diocesan historian and author of several books, including *The Diocese of Rochester*.

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