

The Place We Call Home

Spiritual Pilgrimage as a Path to God

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PART ONE

The Pilgrim's Map

*Mainly it's the stories we carry with us,
the tales of those who've gone before,
those who've made their own map,
as we will make ours.*

*The stories and rituals passed down
from generation to generation.
They will help us make our map.*

*The stories, rituals, the Spirit of God.
Of these shall we be created anew.*

*Of these three is pilgrimage: story, ritual, Spirit.
How we listen and do and pray
becomes the map we make.*

Setting Forth

The bus rumbled and loomed above me like an ocean liner as it idled beside the small Greyhound bus depot next to the *Elite Laundry* where Mother worked. With door open and the driver standing beside it checking tickets, the bus seemed to me then like Alice's "Looking Glass," which, once I passed through it, would open a whole new world to me—a world so fantastic and removed from Gallup, New Mexico, that I would be transformed into one of the saints or heroes of the books that brought me to this moment of departure.

It was the end of August, 1951. I was fourteen years old—a boy about to leave home for a Franciscan seminary 1500 miles away in Cincinnati, Ohio. An only child, I stood by my mother and father who were helpless to deter me from what must have seemed to them a premature, foolhardy decision to leave home and begin my studies for the Franciscan priesthood.

Pius XII was Pope and had been since the year after I was born. Eisenhower was President of the United States. It was the height of the Cold War, and Senator Joe McCarthy was beginning to ferret out the Communists and their sympathizers that he saw hidden everywhere in America.

The world was different then—a different Church with a Latin liturgy (a Latin I was about to begin learning). Priests wore Roman collars and cassocks, and Sisters wore full religious habits. Catholic schools bulged with students taught largely by Sisters, Brothers, and priests. Seminaries, too, were filled to capacity with young men straight out of the eighth grade who had a future that looked to me full of adventure and travel, while striving for holiness and saving souls.

All I needed to do was climb aboard the Greyhound bus and begin a pilgrimage that would take me to Ohio where thirteen years of study, prayer and religious discipline would end in ordination to the priesthood. This trip promised to be both a geographical and a temporal journey consisting of four years of high school seminary, followed by a year-long novitiate, after which I would profess temporary vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience as a Franciscan Friar. After the third year of college seminary, I would profess solemn vows for life, and then five years later be ordained a Franciscan priest. I hoped then, to return to the Southwest as a Navajo missionary like the priests and Sisters who inspired me.

The bus continued to rumble—idling; my mother and father and I waited. Pete, another seminarian-to-be, older than I, waited with his parents—till it was time. Then we kissed our mothers, shook hands with our fathers, and climbed the brief stairs into a life that would change us forever. The Church and the world, though we did not know it then, were also about to change in ways we never could have imagined. Pete, whose name is now Friar Diego, was ordained in 1960, and I was ordained in 1964, one year after the closing of the Second Vatican Council. I had studied Latin for thirteen years, read philosophy and theology in Latin, and my first Mass was partially in English. The vernacular languages were beginning to replace Latin as the liturgical language of the Catholic Church. Within a short time, priests would no longer face the altar with their backs to the people. The altar now resembled a table around which priest and people gathered for the Eucharistic meal.

These very simple gestures created seismic changes in the relationship between priest and lay people. The priest was now seen as one chosen from among the people to lead them in their communal Eucharistic celebration. No longer was he elevated above the rest, set apart, distanced by a sanctuary whose Communion rail was the boundary beyond which the people were not to enter. Priest and lay people together became more visibly a pilgrim church, traveling and worshipping together.

The world, too, had changed. President John F. Kennedy was assassinated the year before I was ordained, and America was in the midst of the Vietnam War. Far from abating the Cold War had become hot, at least in Southeast Asia. Things seemed to be falling apart, and the Church was changing the rituals and practices that the boy waiting to board the bus thought were immutable.

In fact, when I first stepped onto the Greyhound bus bound for Cincinnati, via Amarillo, St. Louis, and Indianapolis, I believed my own life and the life of the world was experiencing a spiritual rebirth signaled by the popularity of national figures like TV personality Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, and social activists like Catholic Worker founder, Dorothy Day.

Nor was this simply adolescent naiveté. There was in the 1950's, in the Catholic Church, a tangible renaissance of spirituality and devotion, of practical concern and care for the poor. There was a uniformity of faith and practice articulated with grace and clarity in the pronouncements and encyclical letters of Pope Pius XII; in the “unchangeable” Latin liturgy, the exact rituals of the seven sacraments, para-liturgical devotions like the rosary, the way of the cross, the novena,

and the rigid rules of fast and abstinence. We were all connected in faith and practice spelled out in the formulas of the Baltimore Catechism.

How consoling that was to me as an only child living in a border town between New Mexico and Arizona! The Church and its doctrines and practices gave me a sense of being connected to others, to a mystical body larger than my own small body—a community and communion of believers with Christ as its head and the Holy Spirit as its soul.

The bus stopped in Cincinnati. What this journey began, however, did not end with ordination, but continued on into a sense that life itself is a pilgrimage. Forty years after the Second Vatican Council, the brave new world and the renewed Church that the Council envisioned, is again unraveling. The Cold War has been replaced by rampant terrorism and the threat of interreligious hatred erupting into a nuclear holocaust. The Catholic Church is racked with sexual scandal and cover-ups. New vocations to the priesthood and to religious life are minimal, and the laity still struggle to win their place in the Church, a place promised them by Vatican II. The pilgrimage continues, for we are all—people and institutions—on the pilgrim way.

When I look back now, after nearly fifty years, at the young boy riding the Greyhound bus from Gallup to Cincinnati, I see how individualistic my pilgrimage was then. *I* was going to the seminary; *I* was going to be a missionary, and saint. *I* was aware of and interested in Pete and other people on the bus, in my teachers and fellow seminarians, and later in my confreres in the novitiate and clericate, but it was only gradually, through a long period of humbling spiritual aridity, that the *I* lost its self-preoccupation and moved toward an *I-thou*, that led to a *we*. I gradually began to see that all of us on the bus, *we*, were on the same journey. *We* were one body on that bus, and at the seminary, so that by the time of ordination, *we* had replaced *I* as my dominant vision; *we* were all on the same pilgrimage.

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council puts it better than I can.

In the liturgy on earth *we* are given a foretaste and share of the liturgy of heaven, celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem, the goal of *our* pilgrimage, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God, as minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle.

With the whole company of heaven *we* sing a hymn of praise to the Lord; as *we* reverence the memory of the saints, *we* hope to have some part with them, and to share in their *fellowship*; *we* wait for the Savior, *our* Lord Jesus Christ, until he, who is *our* life, appears, and *we* appear with him in glory. . . . (Italics mine)

The pilgrim way is communal, and in the shared journey the *I* finds its true identity. That is the work of pilgrimage, the transformation that is effected by and on the pilgrim way. That realization gives hope, no matter what is happening around *us*.

The Longing

I reach down inside to that place to which I've been journeying my whole life, the place all the outer journeys have ultimately led to, and I try to understand the pilgrim heart in me and why it leads me ever away and back again.

I have always loved the pilgrim narratives of the Bible and of other literature. Exile and wandering, return and setting out again—the heart moving toward its final goal—the heart finding God within, who then sends one forth again. This is the dynamic, not only of the individual pilgrim heart, but of the people of God, all the people who live on this earth as sojourners longing for an eternal home.

Pilgrimages are not about one place being more holy than another, for God is everywhere. Making pilgrimages involves a response to something inside us that longs to move *toward*, that seeks the holy *beyond*.

Nor is this longing for something “out there” merely escapism; for what the pilgrim soon learns is that there is no mythical land of Oz “where troubles melt like lemon drops.” If anything, the pilgrim way only focuses and intensifies our experience, which, when we were home, was diffused by distraction, responsibility, and busyness.

Unless we are persons of prayer and uncommon contemplation, our daily lives routinely detour deeper thoughts and a quiet looking at the world around us. But as soon as we set out on a journey, as I did as a young boy traveling east to the seminary, the world begins to unfold in a more enticing way, and we start to notice and anticipate that something grand might happen. Here is how the young boy Pip describes leaving home in Charles Dickens' coming-of-age novel, *Great Expectations*.

I deliberated with an aching heart whether I would not get down when we changed horses and walk back, and have another evening at home, and a better parting. We changed, and I had not made up my mind, and still reflected for my comfort that it would be quite practicable to get down and walk back, when we changed again. . . .

We changed again, and yet again, and it was now too late and too far to go back, and I went on. And the mists had all solemnly risen now, and the world lay spread before me.

There's something almost breathless in Pip's last sentence, something we've all experienced at some time in our life. To go on a pilgrimage, or to perceive one's life as a pilgrimage, is more often than not at least partially motivated by everything implied in “the mists had all solemnly risen now, and the world lay spread before me.” It is what one experiences in a deeply religious conversion. Like the Apostle Paul, when the scales of blindness fall from his eyes, the convert begins to see the world in a whole new and exciting way. It is redeemed—shining with God's presence.

How many times have we as adults still asked ourselves one way or another, “I wonder what I'm going to be when I grow up?” The childhood question is still there, smoldering in our hearts, and it is possible that the embers will break into flame, lighting the way for a change in our lives. This is another dimension of pilgrimage: the possibility that I will somehow be changed and return renewed, alive again to my own world with its wonders and graces.

Sometimes, of course, the progress of that change is itself more intense and painful than what we thought we were fleeing from. Here, for example, is the beginning of Herman Melville's, *Moby Dick*.

Call me Ishmael. . . . Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can.

And so Ishmael goes to sea on a whaling ship, but there he encounters Captain Ahab and the white whale whom Captain Ahab's own dark heart and need for vengeance sees as evil and dark—something to be destroyed. And that is the irony of the book and of every pilgrimage: we bring with us on the journey who we are. We are quite capable of projecting our own evil on the world around us, instead of seeing the good that is there, and discerning good from evil both in the world and in our own hearts.

How powerful, then, for our own pilgrimages are Ishmael's words at the end of his dark journey aboard the whaling vessel, the *Pequod*.

The drama's done. Why then does anyone step forth?—Because one did survive the wreck. . . . For almost one whole day and night I floated on a soft and dirge-like main. On the second day, a sail drew near, nearer, and picked me up at last. It was the devious-cruising Rachel, that in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan.

How poignantly anti-climactic! After the death of Ahab roped to Moby Dick as he plunged into the sea; and after the sinking of the ship and the drowning of the crew, all Ishmael can say with Job is, "And I only am escaped to tell thee," a quote from the book of Job that Melville puts at the beginning of the Epilogue. This makes the book a cautionary tale for any pilgrim who is naive about the dangers and pitfalls of the quest.