



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Walking the Walk (of the Stations of the Cross)
(Lent, pp. 55-64)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

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Walking the Walk (of the Stations of the Cross)

Walking the stations of the cross—a devotional path of reflection and repentance based on events in the passion and resurrection of Christ—is being adapted in creative ways today. How did this form of spiritual pilgrimage originate and why is it important for our discipleship?

Prayer

My Lord, Jesus Christ, you have made this journey to die for me with unspeakable love; and I have so many times ungratefully abandoned you.

But now I love you with all my heart; and, because I love you, I am sincerely sorry for ever having offended you. Pardon me, my God, and permit me to accompany you on this journey. You go to die for love of me; I want, my beloved Redeemer, to die for love of you.

My Jesus, I will live and die always united to you. Amen.

Alphonsus Maria de Liguori (1696-1787)†

Scripture Reading: Luke 13:31-35

Reflection

The ancient devotional exercise of walking the stations of the cross (or “way of the cross” or “way of sorrow”) is a thoroughly embodied means of commemorating the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. As Carmen Butcher notes, “Its tableaux of Christ’s passion—painted, engraved, carved, or sculptured, using stone, wood, or metal—create a literal prayerful path that helps spiritual seekers put on Christ’s sandals as they move slowly from station to station, reflecting on his life.”

“As a spiritual exercise, the stations of the cross developed organically from the scripturally focused lives of medieval followers,” Butcher reports. She identifies some of the major contributors to its spread as an alternative to traveling to places in Jerusalem where Jesus walked. Nevertheless, she admits, since its “vibrant devotional sources developed with unsystematic abundance in response to the gospel of Jesus, a linear history of this practice remains unclear.” She emphasizes the practices’ continuity through centuries of change and innovation.

- ▶ “Various stations have existed over the centuries, including extra-biblical ones based on inferences from the gospel and on legend,” Butcher writes. Five to thirty stations existed before the number was set at fourteen in 1731. Pope John Paul II put the practice on a solely biblical foundation in 1991 when he replaced six non-scriptural stations with new ones based on the Gospels. “Today, a fifteenth station, ‘Jesus rises from the dead,’ honors the gospel’s ‘Good News,’” Butcher reports, “because, as John Paul II taught, Christ’s resurrection reveals ‘the entire Christian mystery in all its newness.’”
- ▶ *Walking the stations of the cross engages one’s body in worship.* Physically moving among the stations “reminds us that our *bodies* are temples of the Holy Spirit”; it counters our tendency to settle for disembodied relationships encouraged by our constant use of social media and communication technologies.



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Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

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► *Unrushed prayer and reflection at each station fosters communion with Christ and other believers. It mirrors lectio divina in this way. "We could call the stations of the cross ambulatio divina ('divine walking')," Butcher says, because it "is often practiced simultaneously with Bible rumination." Stopping at each station to focus on a moment in Christ's passion and wait expectantly for God, we join with millions of believers, past and present. "The exercise of the stations helps us develop empathy for others who are waiting beside us."*

The Spanish mystic John of the Cross (1542-1591) believed "Silence is God's first language." Butcher concludes, "Learning to listen to divine silence is the crux of walking the stations. Church leaders through the centuries have encouraged and adapted this practice for the simple reason that it attunes a sojourner's soul to the Word's loving wordlessness."

Study Questions

1. How have the stations of the cross been modified in recent years? What do you think about these changes?
2. Carmen Butcher compares celebrating the stations of the cross to pilgrimage and to *lectio divina*. How does each comparison illuminate the spiritual meaning of the practice?
3. Consider how Liguori's prayer can prepare our hearts and minds to celebrate the stations of the cross.
4. Which features of walking the stations of the cross most appeal to you? Which ones make it counter-cultural and difficult for you to practice?

Departing Hymn: "Come Near Today" (vv. 1, 3, and 4)

The holy Son of God descends
to human pain and need.
O Lord, to my assistance come.
Come quickly, Lord, to help me.

*With love assured, your healing Word,
the Spirit's flame, your holy Name.
Redeeming grace in this place –
come near today to help me.*

The holy Son of God walks on
to darkened Calvary.
To bear his cross is now our path.
Come quickly, Lord, to lead me.

Refrain

Now may our prayer be joined with his
through life's uncertainty.
O Lord, to my assistance come.
Come quickly, Lord, to save me.

Refrain

Eric Howell (2013)
Tune: COME NEAR TODAY

† *The Augustine Club*, "St. Alphonsus Liguori's Stations of the Cross," March 30, 1999, www.columbia.edu/cu/augustine/arch/liguori.html (accessed May 10, 2012).

Walking the Walk (of the Stations of the Cross)

Lesson Plans

| <i>Abridged Plan</i> | <i>Standard Plan</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Prayer | Prayer |
| Scripture Reading | Scripture Reading |
| Reflection (skim all) | Reflection (all sections) |
| Questions 2 and 3 | Questions (selected) |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching Goals

1. To appreciate how the practice of walking the stations of the cross originated and how it can enrich our discipleship today.
2. To understand how the stations of the cross have been modified in recent years to place them on a solely scriptural foundation.
3. To compare the stations of the cross with some other Christian practices such as pilgrimage and *lectio divina*.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Lent (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Comment

Carmen Butcher believes that walking from station to station of the cross enables us to “connect in a profoundly transformative way with the stages of Christ’s earthly journey.” This exercise has an important communal dimension, even when we do it alone as a personal meditation. She explains, “*Station* is a term often credited to fifteenth-century British pilgrim William Wey and is rooted in the Latin for ‘to stand.’ Stations are places where we stop and be still, waiting for a bus, taxi, or train, in transit to somewhere else. Similarly, in this life, we are always waiting on God, en route to heaven. The exercise of the stations helps us develop empathy for others who are waiting beside us.” (*Lent*, 58)

Perhaps members have experienced going from station to station, focusing on particular moments in Christ’s passion, and waiting there expectantly for God. What does it mean for us to do this with millions of other believers – stopping our lives exactly where they stop, waiting where they wait?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading together the prayer by Alphonsus Ligouri.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 13:31-35 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This study guide – like the previous one, “Responsive Fasting,” and the following one, “Keeping Vigil” – explores a central discipline of Lent in both its traditional form and its creative adaptations today. Though walking the stations of the cross is often emphasized during Holy Week, this practice is appropriate throughout the Church year. Carmen Butcher notes that the practice “is increasingly embraced by Christians of all denominations seeking an ‘interior Jerusalem’ where we can know God as ‘more inward than [our] most inward part,’ as Augustine wrote.” She indicates in her footnotes some excellent resources to help congregations creatively celebrate the stations of the cross.

Study Questions

1. “Pope John Paul II shifted the makeup of the stations away from legend and toward a solely scriptural foundation, dropping from this traditional list those six non-scriptural stations and adding ones from Gospel accounts of Christ’s life,” Carmen Butcher explains. What thematic differences do members notice in these changes?

Traditional Stations of the Cross

Jesus is condemned to death.

Jesus is handed his cross.

Jesus falls for the first time.

Jesus meets his mother.

Simon of Cyrene is required to carry Jesus' cross.

Veronica wipes the face of Jesus.

Jesus falls a second time.

Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem.

Jesus falls a third time.

Jesus is stripped of his clothes.

Jesus is crucified.

Jesus dies on the cross.

Jesus' body is taken down from the cross.

The body of Jesus is placed in the tomb.

Scriptural Stations of the Cross

Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Jesus is betrayed by Judas.

Jesus is condemned to death by the Sanhedrin.

Jesus is denied by Peter.

Jesus is judged by Pilate.

Jesus is scourged and crowned with thorns.

Jesus carries his cross.

Jesus is helped by Simon of Cyrene.

Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem.

Jesus is crucified.

Jesus promises to share his reign with the good thief.

Jesus is on the cross, with his mother and disciple below.

Jesus dies on the cross.

Jesus is placed in the tomb.

2. Butcher explains how the practice emerged from the desire to pilgrimage to Jerusalem, visit the holy sites, and prayerfully retrace the route of Christ's crucifixion. The practice retains the physical elements of moving through the stations, using visual and tactile experiences to focus on an element of Christ's passion, and prayerfully sharing his suffering. It is similar to *lectio divina* because participants often meditate on a scripture passage at each station.
3. Liguori's prayer introduces his meditations on the stations that were popular in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Addressed to Christ, the prayer expresses repentance in striking language of personal relationship: though one previously has "ungratefully abandoned you," one now seeks Christ's forgiveness and asks permission "to accompany you on this journey." The prayer identifies with Christ's death and promises to "live and die always united to you." Walking the stations of the cross becomes emblematic of repentance from sin and renewed commitment to spiritual friendship with Christ.
4. Encourage members to share their experiences in walking the stations of the cross. If they have not celebrated the stations, they may describe their response to Butcher's description of the practice. The stations themselves – fourteen permanently or temporarily installed tableaux of Christ's passion – often involve great artistry. A congregation might commission the creation of the stations, or artists and worship designers among the membership may share their interpretations of the events. Participants can learn the historic iconography of the stations and deepen their appreciation for faithful Christian artistry.

Celebrating the stations is very participatory. One must move around to each station (though full access should be provided to those who cannot walk or stand for long periods), focus one's thoughts through the provided scripture passage and art, and quiet one's heart through silence. Communion with others living and dead is very real, but indirect in that one usually walks the stations alone or in small groups. This may be difficult for members who are accustomed to louder, other-directed worship experiences.

Departing Hymn

"Come Near Today" is on pp. 45-47 of *Lent*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.