

To members of the Congregation of the Mission throughout the world

My very dear Brothers,

May the peace of Christ, crucified and risen, be with you!

Over the centuries pilgrimages have enjoyed immense popularity among Catholics. In the *Canterbury Tales* Chaucer writes of a housewife from Bath:

*Three times she'd journeyed to Jerusalem;
And many a foreign stream she'd had to stem;
At Rome she'd been and she'd been in Boulogne,
In Spain at Santiago, and Cologne.*

The allure of pilgrimages continues to this day. Many of us know people who have made their way to Fatima, Lourdes, Guadalupe, Luján, or Rue du Bac. Last summer I chatted with someone who had just completed a five-week journey to Compostela on foot. This year millions will walk through the Holy Door at St. Peter's or trace the Way of the Cross in Jerusalem. Of course, Catholics are not alone in fostering pilgrimages. Jews flock to the Holy Land. Moslems travel to Mecca. Hindus journey to the Ganges. One of the great classics in Protestant piety is John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, which at one time was second only to the Bible in popularity.

Pilgrimage is not simply a recurrent phenomenon in popular piety. It is, rather, a metaphor for the whole Christian life. Its biblical roots run deep. The authors of Exodus and Deuteronomy depict a pilgrim people whom Yahweh loves and forms as he leads them toward the promised land. Many of the psalms are pilgrim songs, ringing out God's praises as his people "go up to the house of the Lord" (Pss 42:5; 43:4; 122:1). Luke's gospel, beginning with 9:51, focuses on following Christ to Jerusalem, and Luke's second book, the Acts, describes Christianity as "the Way" (Acts 9:2; 18:25; 24:22).

Since as early as the second century, Christians have engaged in pilgrimages both literally and metaphorically. Literally, many set off courageously for unknown lands, facing perils and physical hardships, hoping that an exodus from the ordinary circumstances of daily life would sharpen their consciousness of what is central to being a Christian. By the middle ages there were hundreds of pilgrimage sites. As travelers visited shrines they hoped to grow in sensitivity to the mysteries celebrated

there. Of course a danger, then as now, is that such pilgrimages degenerate into tourism. Unfortunately, many a group that has passed through Rome or Jerusalem has pondered the scriptures little and has remained largely untouched by the death and resurrection of the Lord.

But whether we remain at home or travel abroad, all of us profess to be a pilgrim people. So, as we begin the first Lent of the new millennium, let me suggest to you three reflections about pilgrimage in its metaphorical sense.

1. Lent itself is a pilgrimage. It is a desert experience like that of the people of God in the Exodus or that of Jesus at the beginning of the synoptic gospels. Its goal is to immerse us more deeply into the mystery of the death and resurrection of the Lord as we journey toward the Kingdom of God. Since most of us will not be journeying literally during these 40 days, the question is: What will we do, metaphorically, to alter the humdrum circumstances of our everyday lives so that we might have a heightened consciousness of our baptismal commitment to follow Christ even to death, and thus share in the joy of his resurrection? Once, in the not-too-distant past, fasting altered our daily regime during Lent and focused our attention, even physically, on the deeper renunciations involved in the following of Christ. Now that fasting is rarer, what might we do to change our environment and sharpen our focus? Might we carve out more substantial periods of desert-like silence? Might we rise earlier to ponder the scriptures and turn them over in our hearts like Mary the Mother of Jesus? Might we engage in voluntary fasting, or quit smoking, or moderate our use of alcohol? Might we turn off the television or the radio or the video player in the evening in order to have time for *lectio divina*?
2. Of course, not just Lent but all of life is a pilgrimage. That is the principle meaning of the metaphor and it is precisely what Lent seeks to recall to us. Do we really sense that we are pilgrims in life? While deeply appreciating the beauty and value of created things, can we say with conviction, as did St. Paul (1 Cor 7:29-31): “From now on those with wives should live as though they had none; those who weep should live as though they were not weeping, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing; buyers should conduct themselves as though they owned nothing, and those who make use of the world as though they were not using it, for the world as we know it is passing away”? Are we eager, and at the same time patient, on the journey: eager to reach the goal, but patient because we trust that, though the desert is trackless, wide, and arid, the Lord accompanies us? St. Vincent states that patience is the “virtue of the perfect” (SV X, 181). If that is so, then it is surely also a virtue to be cultivated by all of us who are sinners, wayfarers, conscious of our limitations. Are we patient with ourselves as we come to understand better, on our pilgrim way, how imperfect we are?
3. In our Vincentian Family, we choose to make our pilgrimage in company with the poor. One of the privileges I have, in my present ministry, is to visit so

many Vincentians, Daughters of Charity and members of our lay groups, younger and older, precisely as they accompany the most abandoned. I want to encourage all the members of our family today, at the beginning of this new millennium, to listen ever more attentively to our neediest fellow travelers, to work beside those who experience helplessness in the face of violence, natural disasters, unemployment, or similar crises, to love them deeply as brothers and sisters, to stand with them in their struggle for justice, to support them in being agents of their own human promotion, to be their soul friends, evangelizing them and being evangelized by them. Our family now exists in more than 140 countries. Do the poor there perceive us not merely as aid-givers but as friends whom they have grown to love on the journey, as bearers of the genuinely good news of God's closeness?

Those are my thoughts this Lent. This season reminds us that our pilgrimage, like the Lord's, will surely involve suffering, especially as our journey becomes more closely entwined with that of the poor. I join with you in praying that suffering love may be an energizing force along the way and that as it develops into dying love it may burst into the joy of resurrection.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

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Superior General