

# The Way of the Cross

---

**BY THE REVEREND CHARLES E. SINGLER, D.MIN.**

*Rector of Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary Cathedral  
Director of the Office of Worship, Diocese of Toledo*

© 2008

While the Roman Catholic prayer tradition over the centuries has been marked by rich liturgical rites, devotional customs and prayers also have a place of prominence. One such devotional prayer is the Way of the Cross. Often, but not totally excluded to the penitential season of Lent, the Way of the Cross spiritually assists those who follow the way of our Lord's passion and death to look more closely and deliberately at this mystery of the faith. In the ritual of blessing newly installed Stations of the Cross erected in our churches, the priest-celebrant asks that those who "devoutly recall the mysteries of Christ's passion" would "bear their cross patiently and receive as their reward the vision of Christ in his glory."

Varying regions and periods in history lay claim to the emergence of this devotional prayer. The reason is simple. In many faith communities recalling the events of the life of Christ and the saints was accomplished by traveling to the holy shrines where the events took place. As early as the fourth century, for instance, a Spanish nun named Egeria traveled to Jerusalem for the "great week" (Holy Week) as she called it. She kept a diary of this pilgrimage and records the visits of others who came to the holy sites to recall our Lord's last days. In the fifth century, the desire to bring the holy shrines to Jerusalem prompted Saint Petronius, the Bishop of Bologna (Italy), to erect a facility with connecting chapels representing the special sites for private prayer and reflection. It was not until the later Middle Ages and the period of the Renaissance that we begin to see a devotional prayer emerging on the last moments of Christ's earthly life. Since they were the custodians of the Holy Shrines in Jerusalem, it should be no surprise that it would be the Franciscan communities that promoted the Way of the Cross devotion.

In U.S. Catholic parishes today, the Way of the Cross devotion is often prayed on Fridays during the Lenten season, or recalled anytime or any day of the week by individuals who walk their way of the cross from station to station praying and reflecting on the meaning of our Lord's passion and death.

The longer standing custom of praying the Way of the Cross has traditionally included 14 stations, the last being the laying of the Lord's body in the tomb. During the 1975 Holy Year, Pope Paul VI authorized the introduction of a new series of Stations which are based specifically on the Gospels. This scriptural Way of the Cross starts with a reflection on the Last Supper and concludes with the Resurrection. Again in 1991, Pope John Paul II authorized the publication of a scriptural Way of the Cross.

These additional papal promotions and authorizations are not to confuse the Catholic faithful, but simply to enhance the spirit and willing heart in broadening our acceptance of God's grace. Devotional prayers often do that and develop in time from the customs and traditions emerging from God's faithful people.