

Learners, Teachers, Pilgrims: Singers

Pilgrimage used to be a major part of Christian life. There was a time when a pilgrimage to one or another holy place—Jerusalem, Rome, Assisi, the shrine of St. Thomas à Becket at Canterbury, the tomb of St. James at Santiago de Compostela—affected many families and even whole villages in Western Europe. Somewhat later, in Central Europe, the Gnadenskapelle (Chapel of the Miraculous Image) in Altötting, Bavaria, became a major pilgrimage center, and in Eastern Europe pilgrims traveled to places such as the village of Częstochowa to pray before the image of the Black Madonna at the Jasna Gora Monastery.

If someone in the immediate family wasn't on a pilgrimage or hadn't just returned from one (or had died while on the road), then there were relatives who were pilgrims, or members of the local community who had picked up the pilgrim staff, or changes in the parish because the priest had become a pilgrim. Other families had homes on or near pilgrimage routes, so at particular seasons of the year they found themselves offering hospitality to strangers from distant lands. For example, Book V of the *Codex Calixtinus*, a copy of the *Liber Sancti Jacobi*, a late-twelfth century pilgrim guide to Santiago de Compostela, lists the towns in France through which the major pilgrim routes passed:

There are four roads leading to Santiago, which converge to form a single road at Puente la Reina in Spanish territory. One crosses Saint-Gilles, Montpellier, Toulouse, and the pass of Somport, another goes through Notre-Dame of Le Puy, Sainte-Foy of Conques, and Saint-Pierre of Moissac; another traverses Sainte-Marie-Madeleine of Vézelay, Saint-Léonard in the Limousin as well as the city of Périgueux, still another cuts through Saint-Martin of Tours, Saint-Hilaire of Poitiers, Saint-Jean-d'Angély, Saint-Eutrope of Saintes, and the city of Bordeaux.

The pilgrims left home as learners, seeking to find out more about the place to which they were traveling, but along the way they became teachers as well, struggling to teach their language, ways, and beliefs to other pilgrims and to those who offered hospitality. Upon their return home, they became the master teachers about the pilgrim route and the goal of the pilgrimage.

They Walked with Song

One thing that was common to all these pilgrimages was song. The *Codex Calixtinus* includes texts and music

for pilgrims' songs, as does the *Llibre Vermell*, a compilation made in about 1399 for pilgrims going to visit the statue of the Black Madonna at Montserrat in Spain. The introduction to this collection explains the purpose behind the inclusion of new and old texts and tunes:

Because the pilgrims wish to sing and dance while they keep their watch at night in the church of the Blessed Mary of Montserrat, and also in the light of day; and in the church no songs should be sung unless they are chaste and pious, for that reason these songs that appear here have been written. And these should be used modestly, and take care that no one who keeps watch in prayer and contemplation is disturbed.

Along the road, pilgrims stopped for Mass and other liturgies in churches and chapels and heard familiar chant and polyphony. Sometimes they heard the old tunes sung in new ways, or they heard new compositions sung by choirs with strange accents. At wayside shrines, they sang their vernacular hymns to Christ, Mary, and the saints and learned new hymns to sing at the next shrine. They taught their own songs (some religious, some not) to other pilgrims and sang them in taverns and hostels. They learned new songs to enrich their own repertoire and those of their villages when they returned home.

Our Pilgrimage Song

Here on earth, the Letter to the Hebrews tells us, "we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (Hebrews 13:14). The very structure of our liturgy suggests that Christian life is a pilgrimage: We enter the space in procession in order to perform certain actions, but we don't linger once those actions are done. We move in procession to the next action, and then we process out of church and back into the rest of life. Outside our buildings, our tradition has called us to walk together through the community with palms or with the Blessed Sacrament. All of this reminds us that baptism is a call to pilgrimage, moving together toward that time when, with "Christ who was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). Like medieval pilgrims, we move toward the fullness of risen life singing. And like them, we sing a mix of texts and tunes and melodies and rhythms that we learn from one another and teach to each other. After all, as the poet Maryanne Quinlivan, OSU, helps us to sing: "We are a pilgrim people, we are the Church of God."