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Towards a Christian Understanding of the Way of St. James

1. *The renewed vitality of the Way of St. James*

In recent years the Way of St. James has undergone an extraordinary development, once again becoming a living reality that strongly attracts attention.

Many attempt to explain it as a fashionable phenomenon arising in response to recreational, ecological, touristic and cultural concerns, the political promotion of economic interests, and so on. It may indeed owe something to all of these. Statistics tell us, none the less, that more than 50% of pilgrims claim to have gone to Santiago for some explicitly religious reason, and that roughly another 30% acknowledge motivations that are both cultural and religious.

Moreover, the increase in the number of pilgrims in recent years is very great, above all since the last visits of Pope John Paul II in 1982 and in 1989, the latter for World Youth Day when some 500,000 young people came together with the Pope on Monte del Gozo. In the year following the celebration of World Youth Day, there were 4918 pilgrims, a figure that reached 9764 in 1992. But the Holy Year 1993 saw the granting of some 99.463 'compostelas' - certificates recognising a journey of at least 100 kilometres to the tomb of the apostle St. James; in the Holy Year 1999, 154.613 were granted; in 2004 the figure reached 179.944, and in the Holy Year 2010 they were officially around 272.000 pilgrims – among whom, once again, was His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI. Visitors to Santiago now number in the millions.

The Way of St. James is thus a spiritual phenomenon of the first rank, both within the Church and in society at large: one that goes far beyond its touristic, economic and political uses, inevitable though these may be, although they are not always sufficiently respectful of the reality of the Way. These difficulties are probably no worse than those of other times, and should not deflect attention from the pilgrimage as a spiritual event, taking place before our eyes with renewed and surprising vigour.

1. *The origin of the Way*

The origin of the pilgrimage to Compostela lies in the 'invention' or discovery of the tomb of the apostle St. James the Great by the hermit Pelayo and Bishop Theodomir of Iria Flavia in 812-814, in the reign of Alfonso II the Chaste of Asturias, who was resisting the Moorish invasion that had occupied the rest of Spain and part of the Frankish kingdom.

The extraordinary resonance of this event, occurring in a far-off and little-known corner of Europe (the *Finis Terrae* of the time) and announced by individuals unheard-of in the rest of the Continent, still strikes us as surprising. There are those who have seen in it, and in the mobilisation of peoples it produced, the true miracle worked in Compostela, lasting

through the centuries to our own day. None the less, this would not have been possible without the existing general conviction about the preaching of St. James in the Roman province of Hispania and about his accepted role as 'Evangelist of the West'.

In both East and West there existed a commonly accepted tradition that spoke of the veneration of the first Apostle-Martyr in the north-west region of Hispania. References to this tradition are found in the writings of Didymus the Blind, St. Jerome, Theodoretus, St. Hilary of Poitiers, St. Ephriam, and Eusebius of Caesarea in the 4th century, which were echoed in the widely circulated 6th century *Breviarium apostolorum*, and in the later *De ortu et obitu patrum*, probably written by St. Isidore of Seville. In the same way it was mentioned by the Venerable Bede in 7th century England, and in Spain in the liturgical hymn *O Dei Verbum* and the *Commentary on the Apocalypse* by Beatus of Liébana, which were highly influential in the Middle Ages. News of the veneration of the tomb of St. James is borne out by its inclusion in the *Martyrologies* of Florus and of Adon de Lyon (840-860), demonstrating the ease and speed with which the announcement of the rediscovery of the *locus apostolicus* was accepted.

In the third decade of the 9th century the pilgrimage to the tomb of the Apostle to Hispania and the Western Settlements had already been set in motion. In 845 the Arab philosopher Algazel revealed the renown achieved by the phenomenon: "*Their Kaaba is an enormous idol which they have in the centre of the church; they swear by it and from the farthest places, from Rome as from other countries, they journey to it in pilgrimage and claim that the tomb that can be seen inside is that of St. James, one of the twelve apostles and the most beloved of Jesus...*". The ambassador Ali Ben Yusuf expressed the same astonishment: "*The multitude of those coming and going to the tomb of St. James is so vast that there is scarcely any space on the westward road.*"

1. A Way springing from faith

It may help to understand this response on the part of the Christians of that time to consider briefly the framework in which the discovery of the apostle's tomb took place. In the 8th century the East had been rocked by the Iconoclastic controversy, which despite the Incarnation, rejected any possible veneration of images of Christ; while in Hispania the Adoptionist position held by Elipandus of Toledo, which risked reducing Christianity to a sycretist ideology halfway between Islam and Judaism, aroused intense debate. It was, evidently, an era of great theological controversies which, given further importance by the proximity of Islam, brought forward for discussion the significance of the humanity of Jesus Christ, in which the Christian faith affirms that humankind has been permitted to see, hear and touch the Divine Person of the Son of God. The nascent West, which would acquire its own dimensions in relation to Byzantium with the creation of the Carolingian Empire and which resisted the great Muslim invasions, found the very foundations of its faith in the Incarnation brought into question. Perhaps the surprising energy and profound rejoicing with which the apostolic presence in the most remote part of the West would be accepted, as much by the Hispanic kings as by the Carolingian world and the fledgling nations of Europe, can thus be understood.

The medieval jacobean movement was born as an explicit way of faith. The pilgrim enacted it '*to serve God and honour the Saints, and by the desire to do this by separating themselves from their settlements and families, their homes and all they hold dear, they travel through far-off lands, chastising their bodies, giving away all they have, seeking the*

saints' (Alfonso X, Partida I, 24). In fact, an entire liturgy and a kind of 'order' of pilgrims gradually evolved, with prayers, blessings, distinctive clothing, emblems, etc. Little by little stages of the route also became recognised, taking in places where the presence of the bodies of other saints promoted veneration, where great churches had been built, as at the tombs of St. Martin at Tours, St. Martial at Limoges, or St. Sernin at Toulouse.

The profound interest which the tomb of the apostle St. James awakened would make the Way to it a factor in the creation of Christian Europe, not only because it would become a means for the communication of religious, intellectual, artistic and economic experience, but above all through the very significance of the pilgrimage for the faith. The person who took to the road, leaving his home and crossing the barriers of nationalities and languages, did so to find in other lands the same faith, the same historic root of his sense of identity, the same apostolic 'memory' as the origin of the basis of his way of life. On the Way what became essential was the search for personal meaning and dignity, for the capacity for encounter and communion, the affirmation of each one's eternal destiny (*ultra-eia*) in the glory depicted in the Portico in Santiago de Compostela. Without apostolic witness, without the Way and personal conversion, neither the evangelisation of the West nor the soul of the Europe that dawned in the 9th and 10th centuries can be satisfactorily explained.

The dimensions and ecclesial significance acquired by the pilgrimage to Santiago would be confirmed by the graces granted by the Roman Pontiffs, especially by the Jubilee of the Holy Year, the Year of the Great Pardon. This concession was made by Pope Alexander III in 1179, confirming earlier privileges granted by Calixtus II (1118-1124), uncle of king Alfonso VII and brother of count Raymond of Burgundy, who had been a great benefactor of the church at Compostela.

4. The Christian sense of pilgrimage

Pilgrimage is an experience common to all religions and cultures. In it, what is proper to human nature finds expression.

In contrast to animals, the human being is a creature open to all experience, all situations, and is endlessly questioning and seeking. The world does not constrain the human person, but rather like a waymark, opens it to transcendence, to God. Even in the face of death, the human being is seeking, and does not cease to search and to hope. Mankind has always known that the world is not its final destination, that here we are always travellers.

God's approach to humankind, the revelation in which God directs his Word to it, offered new certainties and hopes, but also emphasized this state of being on the move: "*Leave your country, your kinsfolk and your father's house, and come away into a land which I will show you*" (Gen. 12, 1). Faith clearly stirs a person's awareness of being a pilgrim, as the *Letter to the Hebrews* explains: "*Abraham...showed faith when he left his home, obediently, for the country which was to be his inheritance; left it without knowing where his journey would take him. Faith taught him to live as a stranger in the land he had been promised for his own, encamping there ..., looking forward all the while to that city which has true foundations, which is God's design and God's fashioning*" (Heb. 11, 8-10). The

flight from Egypt, the wanderings in the desert, would determine the very identity of Israel, which also experienced exile, coming to understand that the way to the promised time of rest was a way of liberation from oppression and slavery, but also of conversion from its own injustice and sin. Scripture refers to this in the institution of the "*Sabbatical year*" (Ex. 21, 2-6; 23, 10-12; Deut. 15, 1-5; Lev. 25, 1-7. 18-22), in which fraternal relationships were to be reestablished, overcoming occasions of sin and historical developments that led to poverty and want. More radically still, the "*Jubilee Year*" (Lev. 25, 8-16. 29-31; Num. 36, 4; Ez. 46, 17) announces a time of rest for the land, the re-ordering of mankind's relationship with God's creation.

But the promised land, the overcoming of sins and injustices, was a prophecy and situation that would be fulfilled with the coming of Christ. He is the pilgrim who fulfils completely the way of truth and of life, who comes from the Father (leaving the comforts of his home) and returns to the Father, announcing the Lord's "*Year of Grace*" (Luke 4, 18-19), the salvation that redeems from the immense weight of sin and death.

Jesus, in his humanity - born in Bethlehem and filled with glory after the Passion - is the place of forgiveness, the deepest root of the Jubilee. In Him, the far-off country is made real and possible, the certainties and the faith of humankind are awakened and hope notably strengthened, the human person embraces the Way that leads to life and is radically good. Since Jesus is the Way, people can follow Him in their lives in a state of peace and confidence.

The Christian acknowledges from the outset that he or she is not here in a definitive home (*oikía*), but rather in a parish (*para-oikía*). The *Discourse of Diognetus* puts it well: "*(the Christians) inhabit their own countries, but as if they were strangers, they take part in everything as citizens and bear everything as foreigners, any foreign land is to them their country and any country of their own a foreign one*" (V, 5).

Christians enact the pilgrimage in faith. The very Church defines itself in this world as the pilgrim Church, in search of the heavenly homeland.

The profound meaning of a pilgrimage for Christians can thus be understood. They do not go in search of the divine to some far off or unknown source, but rather return to the depths of their own faith, find the experience of the truth in their own lives, renew their own existence, while reaffirming the need and the possibility of forgiveness, of the compassionate embrace, of the grace of the jubilee. The saints whom they visit show forth the work of God's glory in mankind and proclaim its true destiny, redeemed by Christ, the Lord of anyone who is on earthly pilgrimage towards the glorious homeland.

5. Criticism of the phenomenon of Christian pilgrimage

The Protestant reformation implied a profound criticism of the whole phenomenon of pilgrimage, including the one to Santiago. Luther emphasised that the only way to salvation was through the mediation of Christ, and the centrality of the Word and the Sacrament for the reception of grace, with a harsh criticism of all that seemed to him commercial, such as the favours and indulgences that could be received at the various shrines. As early as 1520, in a work directed to the German nobility, Luther made the abolition of pilgrimages a prime objective.

In doing so, he was radicalizing reasonable criticisms that had been made in the Middle Ages concerning the abuses of pilgrimage; for example, Berthold von Regensburg had already observed centuries earlier that it was possible to gain more grace through attending a Mass than through the long journey to and from Compostela.

The rejection of pilgrimages would have an impact on the Catholic world in the era of the Enlightenment, in which a rationalist-ethical understanding of Christianity held sway. If Jesus Christ had told the Samaritan woman that there was no need to worship either on the mountain or in Jerusalem, but rather in spirit and in truth (Jn. 4, 21-23), of what use was a pilgrimage? The emperor Joseph II of Austria went so far as to forbid them.

It raised the question: why go on pilgrimage to a specific place if God is no more present in one place than another, and transmits His grace to us through the sacraments? The ascetic dimension – today much diminished, given modern means of transport – would not in itself alone justify the Camino de Santiago, in the same way that neither ecological or touristic-cultural motivations are enough to justify it.

This question only finds an adequate response in Jesus Christ himself, in the faith in Him as Saviour and Redeemer: that is to say, as the One in whom the grace of God is given to humankind, together with His mercy and the full truth of life and destiny. The key is the humanity of the Son of God, acknowledged as a specific, historical person and not some mythical person. The pilgrim acts within this intensely personal framework of belief. Within it his personal history takes place and is understood, made up of people who are significant and indispensable in the apparent roles they fulfil because they are witnesses sent by God; this quality sets them apart and makes them unique in an individual's life. This is the case with regard to many people who are important in each person's way of faith, saints both great and small – as, for example, Mother Teresa could have been for the dying person for whom she was caring. And this is fulfilled in the most radical fashion in the Apostle St. James, evangelizer of Spain and the West.

To affirm the significance of the Apostle, of he who, of the Twelve, came to our western region, is to affirm the meaning of the history from which Jesus came, and that of all the witnesses who have made possible each individual's life of faith. To deny the importance of the Apostle is to deny that of the whole chain of witnesses, that of those who have a part in one's personal history – and is thus to deny faith itself.

The impulse that leads someone to venerate the tomb of St. James reflects in the purest sense the way of being a Christian, and affirms it at a decisive moment of the pilgrim's existence, so that it may become the framework of his or her life, giving historical and personal weight to membership of the Church, to the hearing of the Gospel and to Holy Mass celebrated in the parish community.

One goes to Santiago in order to renew and confirm the mystery of mercy that has made possible one's personal history, or in search of this faith, this profoundly good personal presence, that allows the lives of sinners to be reconfigured.

6. Pilgrimage as a time of verification of faith

The experience of pilgrimage, the time along the way, contributes to giving certainty and clarity to the faith of the person who travels to Santiago.

The pilgrim sets out to enact an authentic *camino*, trusting deeply in God. He or she leaves behind home and belongings, and finds that everything can be superfluous, that the important thing is what one is, the true self. The pilgrim's experience is that of one who leaves behind cares and desires in order to discover the sole thing that matters, and who carries only one thing: his or her own being. After all, what does it profit a man to own the whole world if he loses his own soul?

The relationship with nature and with others likewise become more authentic for the person who walks with a spiritual outlook.

"The pilgrim has an authentic experience of time: rising before the sun is up; keeping silence through the morning so as to raise his sights to the Presence of God while beginning his life anew; noting how the colour of things changes as the day advances; living every moment intensely; resting in a church, in some shade; living without a watch, without calculating the time. What is important is not what is fleeting, but what is eternal. Each day passes, but time receives the imprint of eternity. Alive in him is the hope of reaching his goal, moved by the longing for Ultimate Truth. He comes to understand that what is important is to discover the sense of his existence, in the face of which the need for conversion is constantly renewed" (Eugenio Romero Pose).

The pilgrim may also have the experience of encounter with fellow-pilgrims, other believers and witnesses to the same Lord, who have given form throughout history to a way of charity and culture, in which the Christian way of life is expressed: building hospitals and *albergues*, bridges, churches and monasteries; a way in which a participation in a common dignity of the children of God and in a common destiny is acknowledged.

Perceptions – of the world, of one's span of life, of another person as a brother – are renewed during the experience of pilgrimage. It is a way carried out in faith and in hope, in the desire for mercy and for life eternal, so as to give a true and lasting Christian configuration to a person's life. The joy of seeing the cathedral of Santiago and of passing through the *Pórtico de la Gloria*, seeing in it the history of salvation and of one's own life, leads to a profound desire: that what has been lived - the renewed relationship with God and with all things, together with what has been experienced – continues to live on in daily life, and that it not become mired once more in routine, in the constraints of a world without solidarity, without God or hope.

In this way Santiago can again be a divine instrument for the evangelisation of the West; first, by generating a profoundly personal movement such as that of millions of pilgrims, given that recognising the value of the human person, of the individual, of the freedom, dignity and conscience of each person, is indispensable for any possible renewal of faith among the citizens of Europe. The same can be said of rediscovering the historical form of what is Christian, established in the very person of Jesus of Nazareth, who founded the community of the faithful upon the Twelve, making meaningful and unique to the lives of individuals those whom He has sent, giving shape to a profound fraternal communion that transmits from one to another what is most personal and intimate in life: a heartfelt faith.

Upon this rests the future of Europe, for which the memory of the Apostle St. James will continue to be important as the symbol of those who evangelised her, and of the Christian roots of her history. The words of Pope John Paul II in the Plaza del Obradoiro,

which in a sense also recall the meaning of the great jacobean phenomenon, can thus be understood:

"I, Bishop of Rome and Pastor of the Universal Church, from Santiago, send out to you, Europe, a cry full of love: be yourself again! Reveal your origins. Stir the roots of your being. Revive those authentic values that made glorious and beneficial your presence among the other continents (...) [which] look to you, and similarly await from you the same response that St. James gave to Christ: 'I can'."

+ Alfonso Carrasco Rouco

Bishop of Lugo