

Ask Fr. James

What is the Origin of the Stations of the Cross and are indulgences attached to this Devotion?

The Stations of the Cross (also known as the *Via Crucis*, [Way of the Cross], *Via Dolorosa*, [Way of Sorrows], and *Via Sacra* [Sacred Way]) is an imitative devotional practice based on the final hours of the life of Jesus, the Christ in a series of 14 images. It originated shortly after the death of Jesus when many early Christians would travel to Jerusalem to go walk the way of Jesus to the Cross on Golgotha at Calvary.

When eventually, Christianity became the state religion under Emperors Constantine and Theodosius I, the desire to walk the path Jesus walked from the Garden of Gethsemane to the place where Pilate washed his hands, to where Jesus was crucified, ending up where he was buried and later rose from the grave led bishops and monks to construct a series of chapels and connected them together. Each of these chapels commemorated a different place during the final hours of Jesus' life. They duplicated the distances and geography of the Holy Land and the people came to walk through these connected chapels in a spiritual pilgrimage and travelled across distance and back in time to Jerusalem during Holy Week. Through these Stations, worshipers imaginatively undertook a pilgrimage back to the week our salvation was won.

Through the use of imagination, art, and liturgy, the participants devotionally crosses time and distance to follow our Lord on the way to his cross. With the support of the Popes who also started doing the Stations of the Cross, it gained popular piety. The spiritual benefit of it is that with the Stations in our imagination we travel back to when Jesus bore our sins. We walk with him in those last hours. We stand with the horrified crowds as he carried his cross. We watch with the women of Jerusalem as Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus bury Jesus and we wait, like those early disciples, for Easter.

Early bishops and Popes granted partial and plenary indulgences for this popular piety for anyone who devoutly did the Stations of the Cross. Indulgences are remissions of temporal penalty for sin dispensed through the authority of the Catholic Church in exchange for a prescribed good work. Partial indulgences remitted a fraction of the total penalty owed for sin; plenary indulgences remitted all penalty for sin. While bishops granted partial indulgences, plenary indulgences remained under the exclusive purview of the pope.

The stations of the Cross is encouraged to be done either privately by individuals seeking time for personal meditation, reflection and prayer inspired by the final hours of our Lord's life or corporately in a worship service where the congregants move as a group from station to station. At each station, the congregation participates in a brief liturgical response, which incorporates a moment of silence for meditation, reflection, or prayer on the passion, suffering and death of Jesus.

St. Peter reminds us; "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21). The Stations of the Cross is simply an extension of our Lord's teaching when he told his disciples that, in order to follow Jesus, one must deny himself and take up our Lord's cross (Matthew 16:24).

You may email/send your faith questions to Fr. James and he will answer them in our Sunday Bulletins.