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Pilgrimage in the Catholic Church Pastoral Care Structures

Pilgrimage holds an important place within the Catholic Church, this fact rests not only on two thousand years of Christian heritage but traces its origins back to biblical tradition. A long history, then, one that has known periods of greater and lesser intensity and that has given rise to varying practices. At the present time, pilgrimage still enjoys great vitality as an ever-increasing number of people participate. The motivations behind pilgrimage and the forms it takes have changed over time, not only because pilgrimage has taken root in societies with differing cultures, but also because of the many different lifestyles that coexist in a single society.

It is, then, a social phenomenon that merits, and has received, analytical attention from such human sciences as anthropology, sociology, geography and psychology.

Our reflections in the following pages will consider the subject from the point of view of pastoral theology.

The aim of pastoral theology is to study Church practice as it develops over any given moment. Its field of investigation extends to the goals it is intended to achieve by that practice, the means and strategies adopted to reach them and the structures that result from this process. In this particular case, we will dedicate most space to describing the pastoral care structures that currently exist in the Catholic Church.

Pilgrimage in the history of the Church

Three great periods of pilgrimage may be identified in the history of the Church: the early centuries of Christianity, the Middle Ages and the modern period. In each of these epochs, pilgrimage took on very different forms; although there was a common denominator in that it was always understood as being a religious act by which believers sought to perfect their faith.

The pilgrim starts from the conviction that in order to reach his aim (in other words, a growth in faith) it is important to journey towards a place possessing religious significance, not only for the memory that place holds but also for the succession of sacred events that have happened there. With this goal in view, the journey itself

acquires meaning for the pilgrim, and its very structure of successive stages already fulfils the aim he set himself, i.e. what we indicated above as an increase in faith.

From the pilgrim's standpoint, this growth in faith acquires concrete form in significant dimensions that are specific but that nonetheless have globalising force. In other words, the real circumstances of the pilgrim's religious life determine a standpoint that favours one of the various dimensions that constitute faith, such as thanksgiving, celebration, penitence or meditation. In each case, the favoured dimension is considered sufficiently fruitful as to animate the entire life of the believer. For this reason, within the diversity of motivations and expressions that may be encountered in pilgrimage, the common and ultimate reason is that of a growth in faith.

No explicit definition of pilgrimage is to be found in the official documents of the Church although it is indicated as being one form of expression for the piety of the faithful. For example, in the *Code of Canon Law*, the Shrine is indicated as the place to which the faithful go on pilgrimage "by reason of special devotion".¹ For its part, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* mentions pilgrimage as being one of the "forms of piety and popular devotions among the faithful"² while a similar interpretation is given in a recent, published by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of Sacraments.³

In the document, *Pilgrimage in the Great Jubilee 2000*, published by the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant Peoples, a slightly more advanced definition is given when it is affirmed: "Lived as a celebration of personal faith, for Christians pilgrimage is a cultural expression that must be undertaken in faithfulness to tradition, with intense religious feeling and as a realisation of their Paschal existence".⁴

This definition fundamentally covers the practice of the Church which, practically from the beginning of her history, has had special liturgical acts for pilgrimage. Even today, in the *Book of Blessings* published following the latest liturgical reform, provision is made for liturgical acts – with their corresponding readings and prayers – for the moment of departure and arrival of a pilgrimage.

The worshipful nature of pilgrimage is not always immediately evident in the actual practices of modern pilgrimages. Nonetheless, the people who take part have a fairly clear idea that they are doing something that has special characteristics and that is different from other forms of travel, especially tourism. Although, it has to be said, for an external observer it is at times difficult to tell the difference.

In order to identify the ritual and religious elements that define pilgrimage today we should, if possible, go back to the environment in which Christians ordinarily live their faith: in essence, in the parish. Indeed, it is in the parish that all aspects of the life of faith and all the various situations experienced by Christians, from the youngest to the oldest, come together. Hence, parish life must offer a wide a range of services, it must take various initiatives and render it possible for Christians to express all aspects of their faith, from instruction to celebration, from intimate personal life to

group experiences, embracing both everyday routine and the most radical commitment.

From all these situations, contained within the life of the parish, the pilgrimage can commence; this is the reason for its great diversity. At times it will involve groups already formed within the parish, such as a group of young people or a group of individuals all dedicated to the same parish activity. At other times, a pilgrimage acquires its cohesion from the reason that gave rise to it, for example something associated with a particular date, like Lent.

In a certain sense, all this can also be applied to pilgrimages promoted by groups or communities not associated with a particular parish, including those promoted by agencies that are not, strictly speaking, ecclesial at all. In short, pilgrimages are not defined by who organises them so much as by the experience, expressed through signs and acts, of those who take part.

Furthermore, we must extend the definition to include the pilgrimage of small groups (for example families) or individuals.

The pastoral care structures of pilgrimage

The permanent presence of pilgrimage in the Church is reflected in ecclesiastical pastoral care structures that have changed over time as the motivations and forms of pilgrimage itself have changed.

Yet it must be noted that the existence of pilgrimage does not seem to have given rise to a need to create specific structures. Rather, parishes, religious orders concerned with pastoral care, apostolic movements, associations of faithful, and even the shrines themselves have promoted and directed pilgrimages as an integral part of their general pastoral activities.

In the same way ecclesial documents, both in the universal Church and in the local Churches, contain abundant references to pilgrimage (guidelines for the necessary pastoral care, liturgical norms to be observed) but only rarely make indications concerning the structures that promote and organise it. One might then imagine that pilgrimage as a religious expression is considered to be part of the activity of ordinary pastoral care structures: parish, associations of faithful, pastoral work of religious orders etc.

In a few cases it is noticeable how the specific identity of a pilgrimage has given rise to a special organisation. For example, the pilgrimage of sick people to the Shrine of Lourdes gave rise to the formation of teams of helpers and, later, to a co-ordinating structure among them.

In a similar fashion, the intention of co-ordinating different initiatives within a diocese led to the creation of the diocesan Delegate or Director of pilgrimages. This figure comes into the framework of the provisions that the Vatican Council II Decree *Christus Dominus* lays down concerning the mission of bishops: "The closer collaborators of the bishop are those priests who are charged with a pastoral office

or apostolic organisations of a supra-parochial nature, whether in a certain area of the diocese or among special groups of the faithful or with respect to a specific kind of activity”.⁵

In practice, the diocesan Delegate or Director of pilgrimages is not a figure that has become generally or effectively established. The initiative still remains in the hands of its traditional holders, ever increasingly assisted by specialised travel agencies, many of which have been founded by the promoters of pilgrimage themselves, especially the religious orders.

As regards the universal Church it may be affirmed that, in general, no specific attention has been given to structures for the pastoral care of pilgrimages, although the question has been included in two other important areas: the pastoral care of shrines and the pastoral care of tourism.

Regarding the first of these two aspects, we have already mentioned the recent Directive of the Congregation for the Clergy.

It could be said that, in this first aspect, pilgrimage has predominantly been considered from the point of view of the goal (the shrine); while the most recent evolutions in the practice of pilgrimages have contributed to bringing it close to the pastoral care of tourism, to the extent that, in some cases, they converge into a single pastoral care structure.

One of the primary motives for approximating the pastoral care of pilgrimages and the pastoral care of tourism is based on a traditional principle of pastoral care, the dynamics of which have been shown to have great importance for the Church's activity in the modern world. We are referring to the pastoral principle of attention for those faithful who, for a more or less prolonged period, remain far from home. In traditional pastoral care – that based on territory, or domicile of the faithful – the case of people without a home was the exception, although not one that exceeded the possibilities of pastoral care. Practically the entire history of the Church, including her most noteworthy undertakings such as conciliar provisions, is marked with examples of responses to this situation. This tradition was taken up by Vatican Council II and was catered for in the various pastoral care figures envisaged by the current *Code of Canon Law*.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the principle of giving pastoral care to the homeless provided the foundation for a vigorous growth in pastoral care to emigrants. This activity became profoundly structured at the level both of local Churches and of the universal Church.

The same principle directed the Church's action when faced with the phenomenon of tourism, especially as it underwent the spectacular development that began in the second half of last century. Tourism thus came to be added to other forms of mobility, favoured by advancements in the means of communication and a greater facility of movement between countries. For this reason, other bodies came into being in the Roman Curia alongside the Commissions for Emigrants: an

International Secretariat for the Apostolate of the Sea, a Secretariat for Nomads and a Commission for the Pastoral Care of Tourism.

In 1969, the Congregation for the Clergy, of which the Commission for the Pastoral Care of Tourism was a part, published the *General Directive for the Pastoral Care of Tourism*.⁶ This document does mention pilgrimage, though only in a fleeting reference; in fact, the term is used to define and clarify the concept of “religious tourism”. Subsequently, there is also a reference to the role of shrines in the sacramental life of the faithful as well as to their importance with respect to “non-practising tourists”.

For the rest, the document makes no other allusion to the subject of pilgrimage. In our opinion, nonetheless, it would be incorrect to hold that the text considers pilgrimage to be a form of religious tourism. It is our belief that the document seeks to face a new situation: visits to religious sites undertaken for reasons that cannot simply be reduced to cultural or artistic interest. During these visits, the tourists show feelings of faith and piety, expressed in acts and, especially, in their behaviour during the visit.

This reading of the *General Directive* is confirmed by a document of the following year; the Apostolic Letter *motu proprio Apostolicae Caritatis*⁷ which brought together the various pastoral departments concerned with mobility, creating the “Pontifical Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant Peoples”. The Letter contains two passages of interest to our subject. The first is a historical mention where reference is made to the Commission for Tourism which already existed, and tourism is defined by specifying the motivations for travel; among them, “piety”.⁸ The second passage, in outlining the duties of the Pontifical Commission being created, takes the Latin term “peregrinus” as a translation of the French term “touristes”.⁹

There is no doubt that there is an interesting shade of meaning here, although any progress made is limited. In the context of pastoral care, in which these documents circulate, the definition of tourism on the basis of the motivation for a journey indicates a precise conception of tourism and introduces the commitment to diversified pastoral activity. It could be argued that, from the beginning, ecclesial documents concerning tourism have always defined it in relation to free time. For Catholic theology, this concept is nothing new. Certainly free time, as conceived in the modern world, is not equivalent to the traditional concept of sacred time – indeed it might even be seen as its negation or secularisation – yet theology recognises in this new phenomenon of free time an opportunity that may even favour the experience of sacred time and provide room for other religious dimensions related to the values of rest and celebration, elements also present in the experience of sacred time. For this reason one may note an almost enthusiastic reception for some forms of tourism that have arisen recently. Cultural tourism, social tourism, ecological tourism, to mention just a few, have been seen as openings for the experiencing of such religious aspects as contemplation of nature as the work of God, knowledge of humanity’s religious and cultural past, promotion of solidarity etc.¹⁰ With a view to these diverse

possibilities, pastoral care activity has had to equip itself with specific means, thus giving rise to various diocesan and community structures.

At a later date than the documents quoted above, mention must also be made of the Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus* (1988) by which the present Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant Peoples was established. The Constitution envisages the restructuring of the entire Roman Curia and can give only summary attention to the functions of the various Dicasteries. It is no surprise, then, that the reference to tourism is extremely brief. However, it should be stressed that neither the term “tourists” or “pilgrims” is used, and only the reference to the motives for travel remains: [The Pontifical Council] “works to ensure that journeys which Christians undertake for reasons of piety, study, or recreation, contribute to their moral and religious formation, and it is available to the particular Churches in order that all who are away from home receive suitable spiritual care”.¹¹

In the light of what has been said above, the expression “for reasons of piety” is clearly inclusive; it comprehends both religious tourism, which is still in want of a precise practical definition, and pilgrimage which, as we saw at the start, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* includes among “forms of piety”.

The Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant Peoples

We have already alluded to the text by which this Dicastery of the Roman Curia was founded – a text indicating its competence in matters relating to “journeys undertaken for reasons of piety...” – and to the general pastoral objective: “in order that those far from home may enjoy adequate pastoral care”.

Thus, the primary object of the Pontifical Council’s activity is to promote pastoral care in specific circumstances wherein difficulties are likely to be encountered in providing adequate pastoral assistance. In the case of tourism, the situation became urgent in the period when it was a growing phenomenon among countries with a Christian tradition; and it is still an issue today when tourism, to a large extent, continues to involve movements of people from countries with a Christian tradition to countries where other religions are in the majority.

This is not, of course, the case with pilgrimage which, in principle, is supported by full pastoral assistance both before and during the time it lasts. Moreover, this pastoral assistance, as we have noted, is itself supported by parish, community and diocesan structures.

For this reason, the activity of the Pontifical Council in the field of the pastoral care of pilgrimages is principally focused on promoting an exchange of experiences between different countries, the aim being to maintain permanent observation over the circumstances in which pilgrimages are undertaken. These circumstances may depend on changes in society, or on developments in tourist structures or in the pilgrimage sites themselves.

As a result of following this policy, the Pontifical Council has supported or promoted the creation of fixed assemblies in different fields. Of these, mention may be made of the “European Congresses of Rectors of Shrines and Directors of Pilgrimage”, held in Mariapocs (Hungary), Pompei (Italy), Montserrat (Spain), and to be held in Kevelaer (Germany); and the “Congresses of City Shrines and Sites of Pilgrimage”, held in Loreto (Italy), Altötting (Germany), Częstochowa (Poland), Fatima (Portugal), and to be held in Lourdes (France).

The Pontifical Council also actively participates in meetings at a national and regional level, among which special mention may be made of the “Congresses of the Shrines of America”, held in Quito (Ecuador), Toluca (Mexico), and to be held in Santiago (Chile). In February 2003, the first Congress in the Philippines for the continent of Asia is to be held.

In 1998, The Pontifical Council published the document, *Pilgrimage in the Great Jubilee 2000*, presenting the basic doctrinal indications and pastoral guidelines for pilgrimage.

Conclusion

Pilgrimage represents a great tradition of the Church and continues to be a dynamic and living expression of the piety of the faithful. Adapted to new ecclesial circumstances, it is still a part of ordinary pastoral care in parishes, communities and dioceses in the universal Church as a whole. Supported by the ordinary framework of pastoral care, it has slowly been supplying itself with other structures as the infrastructures it uses have required it to do so (especially with specialised travel agencies), upholding the fundamental aim of always preserving the religious nature of pilgrimage.

At the present time, pilgrimage has also been stimulated by the intense mobility that characterises modern society. In some aspects, it can overlap with other activities that may be defined as religious tourism, and even with some forms of cultural tourism. These are situations that call for the necessary study and discernment by those responsible for the pastoral care of pilgrimage.

In this area, the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant Peoples, whose general field of activity is human mobility, takes priority action to support reflection on the new situations pilgrimage must face, and to promote the appropriate pastoral activity.

Notes:

¹ *Codex Iuris Canonici*, cn. 1230.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1674.

³ Congregazione per il Culto Divino e la Disciplina dei Sacramenti, *Direttorio su Pieta Popolare e Liturgia. Principi e orientamenti*, Citta del Vaticano 2002, pp. 279-287.

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- ⁴ Pontificio Consiglio della Pastorale per i Migranti e gli Itineranti, *Il Pellegrinaggio nel Grande Giubileo del 2000*, 32, Citta del Vaticano 1998, p. 39.
- ⁵ Vatican Council II, *Christus Dominus*, 29.
- ⁶ *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 61 (1969) 361-384.
- ⁷ *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 62 (1970) 193-197.
- ⁸ "... religionis subsidis ad eos perferre, qui ob rusticationem, curationes, pietatem, ingenii cultum, ludicras corporum exercitationes, animi oblectationem aliasque his similes causas iter faciunt. Quae quidem multiplex res, nomine vulgato 'touristes' comprehensa, permagnas hominum turbas respicit atque in sociali regione novum quiddam efficit ac singulare".
- ⁹ "... curam peregrinatorum, qui "touristes" vulgo dicuntur".
- ¹⁰ Cf. Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant Peoples, *Guidelines for the Pastoral Care of Tourism* (2001).
- ¹¹ Apostolic Constitution, *Pastor Bonus*, 152.

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