



The Ethics of Pilgrimage

Over the centuries many writers have compared our earthly lives to a pilgrimage with heaven as our destination. Clearly the great ethical command of the natural law to do good and avoid evil is a key component of this journey. Having experienced the blessings of going on many Catholic pilgrimages and working as a bioethicist, I think it worthwhile to reflect on ethics for pilgrims.

Christianity inherited the tradition of pilgrimage from Judaism, and many world religions practice or even require pilgrimages. Becoming a pilgrim should involve stark changes in our ordinary way of living. It requires a particular disposition of the soul. I like to think of it as a moving retreat. It should emphatically not be a vacation trip but rather a spiritual and even penitential practice. In the Middle Ages a frequent penance for serious sins was to make a pilgrimage to a holy place. Fundamentally, pilgrims are persons who desire to grow closer to God and realize they have a long distance to travel on their quest for holiness.

Ethics is about justice, doing what is right. For a pilgrim there are many ways to live up to the ethical demands of their spiritual journey and quite a few moral pitfalls to avoid. The first requirements are faith and humility. Becoming a pilgrim is about seeking God and an admission that we are not yet saints. A good pilgrim cannot be puffed up with pride. Fortunately, there are many things about pilgrimages that can foster humility, such as being in a foreign country where we do not speak the language, or walking loaded down with a pack on one's back. Like the practice of ethics, pilgrimages exist to perfect our souls and actions.

A pilgrimage can be undertaken alone, but traditionally it is done in groups. There is usually greater safety in travelling together, and pilgrims definitely need protection. More importantly, going with others gives pilgrims myriad opportunities to assist their brothers and sisters along the path. The longest pilgrimage I walked was over 500 kilometers to the shrine of Santiago de Compostela. I did it with a companion, my friend Bill Williams, and many others I met while on the *Camino*, the way to the tomb of the apostle St. James the Greater in Galicia. Bill later went on to found [MEDSEAS Catholic Journeys](#) and loves to organize pilgrimages. In the beginning, I needed help with blisters and feelings of discouragement but later I was able to aid and encourage my fellow pilgrims in many providential ways.

Pilgrims rely on the ethical principles of benevolence—that others will come to their aid or, at the very least, non-maleficence, that strangers will not take advantage of their vulnerability to harm or exploit them. As our world becomes less ethical, the lot of the pilgrim becomes more difficult. A pilgrim should seek not to be a burden but rather a blessing to all those met on the way. An angry pilgrim, or one who uses nasty or hurtful words, is betraying the ethos of his journey. It can be a real challenge to surrender control of our day to day lives to the weather and even to accept the physical limitations of our bodies while on pilgrimage. Nevertheless, this is the attitude to which God calls us. Jesus said that we must become humble like trusting little children as a condition of entering the kingdom of heaven. (MT 18:3-4)

I found the words of a spiritual director about the benefits of a walking pilgrimage very wise. He said sometimes an excellent way for grace to enter us is through the *soles* of our feet. The physical effort and solitude involved in hiking through the countryside on a pilgrimage can greatly contribute to our spiritual well-being. Offering up sacrifices and keeping silence are two very straight pathways to the divine. A pilgrim listening to loud music has clearly lost the plot, although bursting out in songs of praise or adoration is something that is very natural for a pilgrim. It is spiritually toxic to be constantly exposed to a noisy environment, which is why monasteries and seminaries are generally built in peaceful quiet places.

When pilgrims start their spiritual journey, they take on a new way of being. Traditionally they indicate their special status with certain distinctive signs, such as wearing a scallop shell. Pilgrims should prepare both physically and spiritually for the trip they will make. The sacrament of Confession or Penance is a key part of that preparation. Once on the way, the pilgrims have a special responsibility to pray more than they normally do. It is usual for pilgrims to “carry” the prayer intentions of many people to their destination. This solidarity of prayer is also exercised by their loved ones who accompany them spiritually with their prayers.

To sum up, pilgrims must be morally upright on their journey. Pilgrimage calls forth a generosity of spirit towards fellow pilgrims and others in need. I met several persons on the *Camino* who walked for someone else. Laziness, lying, stealing, etc., are even more out of place on a pilgrimage than in ordinary life. Rather, faith, hope, charity, humility, etc., are the virtues of a person on the way to God. A good pilgrimage can be transformative. Soul-searching on a pilgrimage, especially among the young, can help them to discern their vocations in life.

A very positive sign is that the practice of pilgrimage is increasing all over the world. I experienced this while living in Europe. The National Catholic Register published a great [article](#) about three American bishops who regularly take time out to walk the *Camino* together. Even in the United States, which does not have ancient pilgrim routes, new pilgrimages are attracting growing numbers, such as the [Three Hearts Pilgrimage](#) in Oklahoma.

In the end, becoming a pilgrim is simply a fact of life as we make our way through this earthly journey that will inevitably include sorrows and difficulties but holds out the promise of a marvelous destination for those who persevere in faithfulness. If we intentionally take time out of our busy lives to walk with God peacefully and sacrificially on a spiritual pilgrimage, the fruitfulness for us and those we love can be astonishing.