

EVOLUTION AND HISTORY OF THE STATIONS OF THE CROSS

Though the exact origin and date of the Stations of the Cross practice is unclear, it is thought to have started as early as the 4th century when Emperor Constantine, through the Edict of Milan legalized Christianity in 313. Then, construction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre started around 326 at the site where Jesus' tomb was believed to have been and was completed in 335 AD. The Stations of the Cross, also known as the "Way of the Cross" or "Via Crucis," originated from early Christian pilgrimages to holy sites like the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the route Jesus might have taken to the Calvary during his Passion. St. Jerome (342–420), doctor of the Church, who first translated the Bible into the common language Latin (the Vulgate), lived in Jerusalem and Bethlehem from around 386 until his death in 420. According to Catholic Straight Answers (2025), St. Jerome witnessed crowds of pilgrims from various countries visiting these holy sites and following the Way of the Cross.

One important account recorded in the fourth century (c381/384) was the journal entry by a woman named Egeria from current day Spain or France. Egeria, Etheria, or Aetheria (Wikipedia) describes "the Bishop of Jerusalem leading about 200 pilgrims, beginning "at the first cockcrow" at the site of Jesus' agony on Holy Thursday night. They prayed, sang hymns, and read Gospel passages before proceeding to the Garden of Gethsemane and then into Jerusalem, continuing their devotions until morning." (Wikipedia)

According to Deacon Hooper of Baton Rouge and other sources, not everyone could visit the Holy Land due to cost or danger, especially during the Crusades. As a result, efforts began to "reproduce" the holy sites in Europe, allowing more people to experience a spiritual pilgrimage locally.

Within the Franciscan tradition, the Stations of the Cross became a Lenten devotion soon after St. Francis' return from the Holy Land in 1221. The Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land in America alludes to the two Bulls by Pope Clement VI, *Gratias agimus* and *Nuper carissimae* on November 21 1342 which granted Franciscan friars custody of Christian holy sites in Holy Land. This authorization enabled them to establish blessed stations in churches, hence popularizing the devotion. However, the term "stations" was first used by English pilgrim William Wey, who visited Jerusalem in 1458 and 1462, according to Catholic Straight Answers. Depictions of the Stations became more common in churches after Pope Innocent XI permitted the Franciscans in 1686 to display them. He also granted indulgences for visiting these stations, similar to those for visiting the Holy Land. In 1726, Pope Benedict XIII extended this indulgence to all the faithful. In 1731, Pope Clement XII fixed the number of stations at 14, as the count had previously varied from five to thirty-seven.

Pope Benedict XIV encouraged churches to install stations, and St. Leonard of Port Maurice (1676–1751) erected stations in over 570 churches in Italy including the famous one at the Colosseum in Rome. In 1761, St. Alphonsus Liguori (1696–1787) wrote the traditional Stations prayers based on Scriptures and traditions. His meditations, widely translated, are used in most churches from the late 18th to the 20th century. Though newer versions reflecting contemporary situations had emerged, St Liguori's stations remain the standard reference for The Stations of the Cross.

In addition to 4th century pilgrim, Egeria (c. early 380s CE), aforementioned St. Jerome, St. Leonard of Port Maurice and St. Alphonsus Liguori, other saints and doctors of the Church contributed to the popularization of the Stations through their devotions and their prayers to the crucified Christ, meditations, poetry, and hymns related to the Passion. These include St. Francis of Assisi (c. 1181–1226), St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), St Bonaventure O.F.M. (1221–1274) and Blessed Jacopone da Todi, O.F.M (c.1230–1306).

In 1964, St. Pope Paul VI returned to the tradition of doing the Stations at the Colosseum, In 1991, Pope John Paul II introduced a Scriptural Way of the Cross, aligning more closely with biblical events, and celebrated it annually at the Colosseum in Rome. In 2000, he added a 15th station, the Resurrection. Pope Benedict XVI approved this Scriptural Way of the Cross for public use in 2007. The Stations continue to be in the 21st century a fervent devotion that Catholics pray the crucified Christ during Lent and other times of the year by some.

Sources: Web articles from many sites including: Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land in America Oct 24, 2018; Sacred Heart, Tampa, Florida History of the Stations of the Cross; articles by Deacon George Hooper Hooper from the diocese of Baton Rouge, March 24, 2022; New Advent/The Catholic Encyclopedia, 2023; Catholic Straight Answers 2025, Catholic News agency, March 11, 2009 ; Custodia Terrae Sanctae 2024; XIV Ministries - Retrieved March 3 2025 ; The Way of the Cross Presentation, Archbishop Piero Marinivaticanova/newsservices/liturgy/documents, Retrieved March 3, 2025

Nekita Lamour, M.Ed, MTS, March 2025

