

Processing to the Kingdom

By Darren M. Henson, STL



The first time I saw an icon of Saint Catherine of Siena I was struck by the ship she carried on her shoulder. I found it odd, until I learned of its meaning. The ship is the Church! After several painstaking attempts, Catherine convinced the exiled Pope to leave Avignon and return to his rightful place in Rome. Iconography has depicted the Church as a ship amid the seas of the world. The image jarred me. The Church is usually envisioned as strong, fortified, and immovable. Yet the icon ventures into a different truth. The Church is a vehicle to carry us beyond this world.

While the Church is a ship, pilgrims have long been identified by the mark of a scallop shell. Those making their way to the medieval shrine of Santiago de Compostella, Spain, followed the images of shells engraved in stones along the way. The signs were like precursors to modern-day mile markers. They reassured pilgrims, leading them to safe havens and finally to the striking cathedral facade. There, the pilgrims attended Mass and gave thanks to God for a safe journey.

We all are pilgrims making a holy journey from the womb to the grave. As Christians, it began in the womb of the font. Baptism put us on the path toward the heavenly kingdom. As we stumble along that journey, the Church gives us direction in this spiritual and physical pilgrimage. The liturgy and the sacraments are like markers along the way. Sacramental times mark transitions such as Baptism, Marriage, or Holy Orders. Eucharist regularly sustains us on the path of holiness. These are holy signs in life's journey to union with God.

The liturgical processions we enact are metaphors for our perpetual procession toward the gates of heaven. The entrance and communion processions are symbolic of our approach to the eternal banquet. More elaborate ones, such as on Palm Sunday or Holy Thursday, are like miniature versions of our lifelong journey. These liturgical processions include rich images of Christ: the Crucifix, the Paschal candle of Christ the Light, the Blessed Sacrament in a monstrance. Like Saint Catherine, these images carry us in our lifelong pilgrimage from the old into the new and from this world into the world to come.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What images of Christ strengthen you, and how do they lead you in daily living?
- Who has guided you and influenced your journey?
- What signs from God have helped you find your way in troubled times?

HOME ACTIVITIES

- Take a pilgrimage to a neighboring parish on a day other than Sunday. Observe the details inside. Pray in silence awhile.
- Plan a trip to a nearby monastery or convent. Attend prayer with the religious.
- Find a small, flat sea shell. Carry it for a week or keep it in your car. Be mindful that everywhere you go is part of a journey to the kingdom and everything is hidden with holiness. **R**

SCRIPTURE CORNER

John 14:1–6

Joshua 3:1–17

Acts 21:4–6

Read and reflect on these passages. How is the Spirit of God leading you closer to the Way?

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