

## PILGRIMAGE A UNIVERSAL PHENOMENON: A SEARCH FOR GOD AND A 'GEOGRAPHY OF SALVATION'



'Pilgrim' - by  
Marion Honors

**Introduction:** The Jubilee Year 2025 has the theme “Pilgrims of Hope”, chosen by Pope Francis. *Peregrine* is a Latin word, which also means pilgrim. In the Bible, Pilgrim (Heb. 11:14) implies a journey-travelling home. A pilgrim is a person who embarks on a journey, often a long and arduous one, to a sacred or holy place for religious/spiritual or moral reasons. A person may also travel to a place that holds special significance for them; even if it is not strictly religious. A Pilgrim goes on a long and difficult journey because a true pilgrim

desires to challenge her/himself, to connect with nature, to learn about other cultures or to find meaning in their own lives. The more difficult the journey, the greater is the satisfaction or the “cathartic effect” or emotional release i.e., a cleansing or purging of pent-up or “bottled up” emotions that have been suppressed or avoided. This is beneficial, as it gives one a feeling of relief and lightness, thus acting as a safety-value, a useful mechanism, enabling one to cope with challenging feelings and difficulties in life.

**Pilgrimage A Universal Phenomenon:** Pilgrimage is a fundamental human experience that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries reflecting our inherent human need to connect with something larger than ourselves. It is an anthropological phenomenon that has been present in all civilizations over a course of history due to its geographical and chronological dispersion and its importance and repercussions for culture and society. Pilgrimage is the process of opening one’s heart and mind to learn and discover that one can encounter God’s wonder i.e., experience healing, miracles etc. It also offers the opportunity to disconnect from our daily routines and distractions, find a sense of community and belonging, gain clarity and direction in our lives, be inspired and renewed, and deepen our spiritual practices and beliefs. As such, Pilgrimage which is spiritual and transformative, is a universal phenomenon, ubiquitous across religions, beyond religious contexts, with social and cultural significance and can be undertaken individually or collectively. They have a cultural landscape, and today Pilgrimage practices have evolved and adapted to the changing social and cultural contexts, resulting in Pilgrimage tourism thus significantly impacting economies, providing revenues and creating jobs.

**A Search for God:** Pilgrimage or ‘*Tirthayatra*’ is a search for God, a symbol in action and an age-old phenomenon. It is an essential part of life and living. For Christians life itself is a journey. We come from God and return to God. In the Catholic tradition, a pilgrimage is more than a journey to a sacred place. It is a spiritual act of devotion and a response to God’s call. One goes with the intention of growing closer to Christ, seeking deeper understanding, connection, enlightenment, spiritual renewal, forgiveness, fulfilment of a vow, to express devotion or guidance to find answers to life’s profound questions.

With the fast pace of life today religious practices increase and multiply every day. From ‘Womb to Tomb’, the life for a Christian is one long celebration of “Great and Little Traditions”. Novenas, Pilgrimages, Cross Feasts, Parish Feasts, Feasts of Saints etc. are generally unstructured or rudimentarily structured and belong to the “Little traditions.” Shrines and Pilgrim Centers are sites of liminal experiences where *Communitas* takes place and they have within them the emancipatory potential or the potential for anti-structure.

**A ‘Geography of Salvation’:** According to belief, the pilgrimage sites or tirthas are places where moksha or liberation could be achieved. Shrines represent a ‘geography of salvation’ where devotees seek spiritual transformation and connection with the divine. These sites, whether natural or built, serve as tangible spaces where the sacred intersects with the everyday, offering opportunities for pilgrimages, ritual, and cultural expression. They are intersections of faith, culture, environment and geography, marked by physical boundaries or symbols, and are considered holy within a particular

religion or culture. They often function as liminal spaces, places between the ordinary and the extraordinary, where individuals can transcend the mundane and connect with the divine, often reflecting the unique spiritual, historical, and cultural essence of a place.

Shrines often become destinations for pilgrimages, where individuals journey to seek spiritual healing, blessings or enlightenment. They provide a setting for religious rituals, prayers and other practices that reinforce faith and community identity. Shrines can represent cosmological perfection or embody aspects of a deity, offering a tangible connection to the divine. Pilgrimages and ritual within a shrine can lead to personal transformation, a sense of spiritual renewal and a deeper understanding of one's faith. It represents a site of profound spiritual significance. Shrines are not just religious landmarks, but are also integral parts of cultural heritage, requiring protection and respect. Recognizing the importance of sacred spaces globally, fosters appreciation and respect for diverse religious traditions. Sacred shrines are geographical expressions of faith that serve as focal points for spiritual practice, cultural identity, and the pursuit of salvation.

**Conclusion:** Pilgrimages and Novenas are popular today, because of the Freedom, Flexibility and Creativity it provides, the Egalitarian Atmosphere, the Personal Involvement and Active Participation, the Use of the Vernacular, the Feminine Dimension of Religion, the Fear Complex and the fact that it acts as a Safety-Valve to Maintain Sanity. The Play or Ludic Element and Friendships too are an important element in all pilgrimages and Novenas. Those who pray together also play together during the secular interludes in between religious activities.

Novenas or Pilgrimages are usually undertaken at a time of crisis in one's life and slowly becomes a routine and a part of one's life-style. Human beings are complex. Over a period of time novenas and pilgrimages become monotonous and seem to lose their fervour and magic and get routinized. Every year this monotony is broken during the preparation for the celebration of the feast. The fervour picks up again during the preparation for the feast, reaching its climax during the Feast and Fair and continues over a period of time, till it ebbs away slowly and gets routinized again. It is for this reason that feasts and festivals are celebrated each year, bringing back the zeal and fervour into devotion, renewing and transforming the individual. Birthdays, anniversaries, jubilees and the like, also serve the same purpose i.e., they break the monotony of everyday living adding zest and *joie d vivre*.

Pope Francis consistently championed the concept of synodality, which itself combines the Greek words for 'journey' and 'together', and in practice involves gathering Catholics from every nation and walk of life to share their faith, listen deeply and pray with one another as they address the challenges facing the Church today. Let listening, prayer and presence weave a **COMMUNAL PILGRIMAGE**, opening new ways to accompany and serve one another in faith, thus **ENSURING THAT SYNODALITY IS NOT ONLY DISCUSSED BUT ACTIVELY LIVED.**

*Mudita Menona Sodder RSCJ*

*Sophia College Campus,*

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