

HUMILITY – 1



Caravaggio, Madonna di Loreto, 1605, Sant'Agostino, Rome

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According to a contemporary report the unveiling of this painting "caused the people to make a great cackle over it". Few could see beyond the dirty feet of the pilgrim, those that did were troubled that the painting seemed irreverent. For many years, literally centuries, doubts were raised – was this really a religious painting?

Let's take a fresh look. Firstly, we find that the colour palette is pulled back, to the extent that it seems unreal – almost monochrome. Then we discover that Mary is also barefoot. Only the merest halo sanctifies her and the Child. Although beautiful, Mary could be any woman, emerging from a shadowed doorway by a wall of flaking brick. This is unexpected and does indeed push at the boundaries of religious art.

In our world where we are saturated by imagery (salacious and otherwise), we are less perturbed but nonetheless this is rather unexpected; let's look further. Mary is presented in movement, her body twisted towards the pilgrims, the Child, toddler rather than new born, raises his hand in blessing. The visitors are earnest and prayerful, their clothing shows that they are simple folk carrying only the pilgrim's marker of a staff. The man seems to strain forwards, the old woman is adoring, quietly joyful.

So, what are we to see in this? The Basilica della Santa Casa ('The Church of the Holy House'), in the town of Loreto, on the Adriatic coast, remains a pilgrimage site with associations, in legend, to the home of the Holy Family. According to devotional literature from the early 17th century pilgrims journeying to Loreto were encouraged to embark in complete humility. It was important to forgo all earthly pleasures during the journey, to travel, as it were, in poverty and on arrival at the church to circle three times on your knees - that your heart might be open. The artist has carried all of this into his composition. This is a painting that presents before us a vision; the two pilgrims, who have travelled in meekness, are granted sight of their Child Saviour. It is a split-second revelation; the reality of which is their reality, their truth, their hope. Like many of Caravaggio's paintings, the scene is a moment, a camera-flash moment, where everyday folk encounters the divine.

Pilgrimage has, quite unexpectedly, enjoyed something of a revival in recent years. The Camino de Santiago, a pilgrimage leading to the shrine of the apostle Saint James the Great in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in north-western Spain has become so popular that the routes are becoming overrun; and many of us might travel vicariously through TV pilgrimages. What's more pilgrimage imagery has found its way into popular culture, how often do we hear media pundits talk of 'being on a journey,' or learning to 'travel light'?

Over these next days we are discovering another ancient tradition of devotion as we take a journey in prayer, a pilgrimage of the heart. This may not lead to a moment of total revelation but if we 'walk humbly' we may be changed. A true pilgrimage seeks and enquires. We should not try to prescribe what must happen. One of the lessons that anyone leading a retreat or pilgrimage must learn is not to tell people what they should feel or discover. It is the same when we worship and pray. We must wait with open hands and God the Giver of Life will place in them what we need.