

Here I walk: On the road with Luther

by [Sarah Hinlicky Wilson](#) in the [April 5, 2011](#) issue



ON THE ROAD: "Our physical goal was Rome, but our real goal was a church healed of its divisions." © [ANDREW WILSON](#). ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Martin Luther was not a fan of pilgrimages. I mean *really* not a fan. Peruse the references in the index to *Luther's Works* in English and you will find, one after another, the reformer's tirades against pilgrimages and a whole host of other evils attributed to the papacy and its deformed theology: indulgences, invocations of saints, monastic vows, feast days and fast days—the whole shebang. On rare occasions, Luther acknowledges that the pilgrimages of the patriarchs were blessed acts because they were done "with obedience to God." But apparently there was no such thing as an obedient-to-God pilgrimage by the early 16th century. As Luther poses it: "What are we to give to God in return for this love? Nothing. You shall not go to Rome on pilgrimages."

I'm Lutheran, and I went to Rome on pilgrimage.

Does this shocking defiance of the beloved reformer suggest first steps toward conversion Tiber-wise or profound doubt about the state of my soul? None of the above. Luther concludes the above quote by saying: "Only believe in Christ, cast off your old nature, and cleave to Him. Your faith, however, must be of the sort that abounds in good works." It is under the rubric of "good works" that my husband, Andrew, and I hoped the pilgrimage might qualify.

The idea started to germinate five or six years ago. Andrew and I were in graduate school and noticed that 2010 would mark the 500th anniversary of Luther's 1,000-mile pilgrimage (undertaken in his pre-reformer days) from his Augustinian priory in Erfurt to Rome. Being keen hikers and Lutherans, we thought it would be fun to recreate his trip. Fun didn't get us very far, however, in either inspiration or funding. It would take a few more years to find a reason and a sponsor.

Both emerged when I came to work at the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg, France—an almost 50-year-old outfit devoted to the scholarly side of the Lutheran World Federation's ecumenical task. I admit I had little interest in ecumenism, scholarly or otherwise, before I took the job. It wasn't that I had any doubts about the true Christianness of non-Lutheran Christians. Ecumenism just seemed to be either a zero-sum competition between theological traditions played out like a polite game of manners, a milquetoast dissolution into lowest-common-denominator theology or politically impressive pulpit-and-altar agreements that had little purchase on the ground. But I also had to face the troubling fact that antiecumenical Christians need the rejected other, parasitically, to vindicate their own claims. One way or another, I had no idea how rich, varied, complicated and sophisticated the past hundred years of ecumenical work and thought have been.

With other Luther anniversaries looming ahead, most significantly 2017 as the 500th anniversary of the Reformation itself, the question of what it might mean to celebrate or commemorate Luther began to press on this newborn ecumenist more urgently. Even the choice of 2017 is complicated: it's Luther's posting of the 95 theses that took place 500 years earlier, an event often used ideologically to undergird an image of Luther as the first great challenger of authority. While Luther did object to indulgences on theological grounds, the choice of this event focuses on his negative criticisms, not the positive content of his joyful teaching on justification by faith. This focus also conveniently turns a blind eye to the devastating set of events that followed—devastating no matter which side of the theological divide one falls on. How might we "celebrate" the division of the church that occurred half a

millennium ago, especially after 50 years of progressive bilateral dialogues between Catholics and the whole range of Protestants?

Out of this complex set of questions, our project "Here I Walk: An Ecumenical Pilgrimage" was born. It can be facile to compare one era to another, but there is at least one genuine commonality between Luther's early 16th century and our early 21st century: we're both in the midst of a dramatic communications revolution. So with a nod to the printing press, Andrew and I decided to combine the oldest form of transportation—feet—with the newest form of communication—social media on the Internet.

Other pious fans of Luther have re-created his pilgrimage in recent years, but we did it "plugged in," by recording our progress on a blog (hereiwalk.org), collecting fans on Facebook and updating via Twitter. We invited a virtual community of pilgrims to follow along with us in the quest for reconciliation between Lutherans and Catholics. Alongside photos and a daily report, we interspersed our blog feed with snippets from texts of Luther, bilateral dialogues, Catholic theology, interviews and minicourses in church history and ecumenism. In the end we had over 800 Facebook followers, more than a thousand visitors to the site and some beautiful words of thanks from people to whom the project meant something, married Catholic-Lutheran couples in particular.

In Protestant Europe these days there's a general revival of interest in pilgrimage. Three pastors of the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland are called not to parish ministry but to "pilgrim ministry," and the Church of Norway is busy redeveloping the ancient pilgrim route between Oslo and Trondheim. This could be a preference for "spirituality" over "religion" and longing for "practices" without any "doctrine" to interfere. It could be a betrayal of Luther's strong words against pilgrimage. But for Luther, of course, pilgrimages were inextricable from the quest for indulgences, which is obviously not a feature of contemporary Protestant pilgrimage. He wanted to see Christians serving their neighbors at home, not going off to exotic locales in evasion of their callings.

This otherwise sage insight had its downside. Among other things, pilgrimages were one of the few ways that women could legitimately travel and expand their own horizons. Maybe in Luther's day the sheerly local perspective was a legitimate corrective to social irresponsibility, but nowadays in the global village it's the refusal to see the rest of the world that is the irresponsible act.

In a technical sense, our pilgrimage wasn't really a pilgrimage anyway. The point of a pilgrimage is to reach a holy destination, usually in a state of repentance, in order to gain the benefit conferred by the site. Our physical goal was Rome, but our real goal was more ethereal: a church healed of its divisions. But the means was the same, and by the end it was clear to me why pilgrimage has been such an important spiritual practice in the history of the church.

At home you can usually fool yourself into thinking you're master of your own destiny, safe and in control. Dodging distracted drivers on an Italian superstrada without a lane or shoulder for pedestrians dispels that illusion quickly. At home you can medicate the least discomfort with pillows and TV; not so in three weeks of German rain. At home you can wait for the good weather before going for an outing at your leisure, but when you get caught in the first snowstorm of the year in the Alps, you have to find a way to compromise. Pilgrimage is not about getting your own way, being comfortable or staying in control.

But it is about prayer. I prayed more in those 70 days than I ever have in my life. I recognized that I needed to be praying that much all the time, even at home; but it's the vulnerability of life on foot that exposes the need. Alongside our frequent and fervent prayers for sheer preservation, we found ourselves praying more for other people too. The sister of a friend diagnosed with ovarian cancer at the beginning of our pilgrimage—for whom we prayed daily—was completely healed of it by the end; that was a joyous spiritual victory. On countless occasions a bad start to the day was transformed by our reciting of morning prayer.

Given the intensity of the pilgrimage experience itself, we thought it odd at first that Luther said so little about it. Here and there he describes the places he visited, but the effort of walking a thousand miles each way in a friar's robes and sandals during a particularly harsh winter goes unmentioned. Our theory now is that his life as an Augustinian hermit was already so uncomfortable and so much in search of the mercy of God that life on the road wasn't substantially different.

What Andrew and I found is that you *can* serve and be served by your neighbor while on the pilgrim trail. I came to realize that in ordinary life, people filter through your day and are incidental if not annoying; but in pilgrimage life, every meeting is infused with meaning. The people in our path were visitations, not coincidences.

Some of them needed something from us. Certainly many of the pilgrims on Europe's ancient paths are secular or doubtful post-Christians, perhaps seeking faith and perhaps not even capable of admitting that they are. An American visitor went out of his way to join our walk and honored us by talking through his vocational questions with us during the course of our day together. Once we shared a beer with an elderly mute Italian who passed the slow and lonely hours of the day leaning against his garage. We couldn't offer anything but our physical company—and that was enough. Our virtual companions for the journey made our blog distinctive among the millions on the Internet by their unfailingly positive, constructive and respectful comments—in part, I like to think, because of the positive, constructive and respectful tone in which our own offerings were made. A civilized Internet conversation on theology is a rare bird indeed.

As we served others, others served us, refreshing and strengthening us when we started to droop. Once we failed to make a reservation for a Sunday night that was the first night of a town's local concert series. We couldn't find a room at any of the inns. Having little choice but lots of prayer, we presented ourselves in church that morning and asked for mercy. A congregant took us home, talked to his wife and then offered their spare room—complete with a live Bach piano concert, a genuine Bavarian *Brotzeit* supper and a hiking map for the next day.

Another time we had a comedy of errors trying to find the right route through the Alps, which might have become a tragedy as we prepared at four in the afternoon to plunge down a trail that, as it turns out, was high and remote—as well as a dead end. The wonderfully named Trudi and Gaudenzio, just returning from a day of mushroom picking, refused to let us go on alone and finally gave us a ride to our destination. That was the point at which the unbroken chain of steps from Erfurt to Rome snapped, but when God sends angels to rescue you from certain harm, you don't refuse their help.

Even if we hadn't broken the chain then, we would have two days later, when the first snowstorm of the year struck, burying Septimer Pass in piles of snow and reducing visibility to zero. We took a bus—how unromantic, how unexciting, how un-Luther—across the border to the Italian city of Chiavenna. The family whose bed-and-breakfast we stayed at was so delighted with our project, despite being the most pious Catholics we met in all of Italy, that they invited us to dinner that night and shared an abundance of local specialties.

The funny thing about our technologically interconnected, social-media world is that it is still full of strangers. We are nervous about those unaccounted for by bureaucratic means, fearful of what might be lurking behind that face, unable to comprehend the universe of emotion and experience in every person. Between our expectations of a comprehensive social network and our suspicion of terrorists around every corner, real hospitality to the true stranger and sojourner is risky business. As it turns out, the chance to serve us was a gift that we as pilgrims could offer to others. Pilgrims are good strangers. They break down the barriers of an identity-card society. Nobody asked to see our passports: our sunburns and backpacks were credentials enough, and the generosity showed to us was great. As one of our readers put it, we were entertained by angels unawares.

As pilgrims we partook in the joyful exchange that, as Luther himself said, characterizes the Christian life. Who knows? Maybe our dear reformer was praying for us as we followed in his footsteps.