April 14, Good Friday

John 18:1–19:42

by Eileen D. Crowley in the March 29, 2017 issue

“So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha.”

As a child, I gathered with my entire grammar school in our parish church every Friday from the beginning of Lent through Good Friday. We were there for the Stations of the Cross, the devotion that involves 14 images depicting moments from the day of Jesus’ death, from Jesus being condemned to being laid in the tomb. They were hung at regular intervals on our church’s brick walls.

As I remember it, a priest would work his way around the church’s perimeter aisles, joined by acolytes with cross and candles. At each of the 14 stations we stopped, prayed, and sang a verse of the “Stabat Mater,” a 13th-century hymn to Mary that tells the Passion story from the perspective of the Sorrowful Mother of Jesus. We joined in Mary’s lament. Eight years of participating in this Lenten practice left the melody of that mournful song seared in my memory.

On Good Friday, Jesus’ walk to Calvary—carrying his own cross—comes to life in cities and villages around the world. Public processions take place in Spain and Italy and Mexico, in Central and South America, in the Philippines. People process down asphalt streets and along dirt pathways, reenacting and prayerfully remembering the Passion of Our Lord.

In Chicago, a major *Via Crucis* (Way of the Cross) procession goes through the streets of the Pilsen neighborhood, where there is a large Mexican-American population. People come from around the city to participate in this devotional walk. Adults, teens, and children dress up and take on the roles of characters involved in the story, while empathizing with Jesus’ pain and joining their sufferings with his. This year, at a time of great fear among immigrant communities, many, many are suffering.

For 30 years, New York members of the Pax Christi USA organization have taken to the streets on Good Friday for a Way of the Cross procession that winds its way through Manhattan. Typically the route involves stopping and praying at sites of power—political, financial, and military. The organization's website explains that they take this communal action for the purpose of "connecting the sufferings of Christ during his passion with the suffering of our brothers and sisters at the hands of violence, greed, poverty, sickness and war." The site also lists walks planned in more than a dozen states, and it provides resources such as "Stations in a Time of Terror," "Eco Stations of the Cross," and "The Stations of Justice."

Because the Stations of the Cross is a devotional practice—a popular custom rather than an official Catholic liturgical rite—creativity is encouraged in many parishes. (I recall my nephew and his grammar school classmates presenting the stations through mime.) For church leaders and worship teams in churches both Protestant and Catholic, the Stations of the Cross on Good Friday—whether done inside a church or outdoors—presents an unparalleled opportunity for creativity and innovation.

A church in Roseburg, Oregon, calls upon different groups within the parish to create a set of media images for each of the stations. Teens from the youth ministry, members of the social justice committee, a men's group, a women's group, and others take turns selecting and projecting photographs from contemporary situations around the world—situations that parallel the moments the ritual recalls.

This sort of practice offers great spiritual benefit. When children, teens, and adults create their own media art, they end up contemplating the biblical stories of the Passion more intently than they have before. They engage in theological reflection; they make connections between those stories and their own stories. They can prepare a version of the Stations of the Cross that reimagines the story visually and verbally from different perspectives: that of immigrants struggling on circuitous routes toward a new country safer than theirs, of refugees risking leaky and overfilled boats to try to cross the seas to land anywhere other than their war-torn country, of prisoners reflecting on their own *Via Crucis*, of women who have suffered domestic violence and sexual abuse, of people who have lost their jobs and now live on the street, or of those who struggle with addictions.

Media art and Web technology also make it easier for people to prayerfully celebrate the Stations of the Cross even if they can't physically walk from station to station. Communities of people living with chronic pain or debilitating illness could connect

via video conference. Together they could create and pray their own virtual stations, crafted from the moments of their lives. Veterans, too, could join together in person or online to script stations that speak to the sorrows they have seen and lived. Within the broad framework of the Way of the Cross, the possibilities are only limited by a faith community’s collective imagination.