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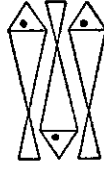
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The Wisdom of the Desert

Thomas Merton

MYSTICS AND ZEN MASTERS



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the history of heroic men and their acts of wisdom or of daring. It is the story of Christ in China: a kind of brief epiphany of the Son of Man as a Chinese scholar. All too brief, alas. But the old tradition of the wise men from the East has always obscurely called for this epiphany. Why was it never fully realized? There are no simple answers to this question. One of the chief merits of Father Dunne's book is that the delicate problem of the Chinese rites controversy is treated with exceptional tact. The contesting policies of various religious orders were of course a factor in the dispute. But Father Dunne makes quite clear that this was not the real explanation for the animosity with which the struggle was carried on. Certainly the Jesuits and the Mendicants favored different approaches to the Asian apostolate. But we must not oversimplify. A Dominican, Father de Azevedo, was discussing Oriental philosophy with the scholars of Cambodia when the Jesuits were doing the same in China. Unfortunately, de Azevedo did not get much encouragement for his efforts. He was excommunicated. (The Jesuits in Japan helped him to get back on his feet after this tragic rebuff.)

Father Dunne's book has the merit of making clear the fact that national and imperialist rivalries had a much more decisive influence in the controversy than emulation between missionary orders.

FROM PILGRIMAGE TO CRUSADE

The "sacred journey" has origins in prehistoric religious cultures and myths. Man instinctively regards himself as a wanderer and wayfarer, and it is second nature for him to go on pilgrimage in search of a privileged and holy place, a center and source of indefectible life. This hope is built into his psychology, and whether he acts it out or simply dreams it, his heart seeks to return to a mythical source, a place of "origin," the "home" where the ancestors came from, the mountain where the ancient fathers were in direct communication with heaven, the place of the creation of the world, paradise itself, with its sacred tree of life.¹

In the traditions of all the great religions, pilgrimage takes the faithful back to the source and center of the religion itself, the place of theophany, of cleansing, renewal, and salvation. For the Christian there is, of course, Jerusalem, the Holy Sepulchre, where the definitive victory of life over death, good over evil, was won. And there is Rome, the center of the Catholic Church, the See of Peter, the place of indulgence

and forgiveness. There are also grottoes and springs blessed by visitations of the merciful Mother, sites of repentance and of healing. There are countless tombs of saints, places of hierophany and of joy.

Christian pilgrimages to Jerusalem, which simply followed the example and pattern of much older Jewish pilgrimages, began in the fourth century A.D. St. Helena's pilgrimage and the finding of the True Cross took place in 326. Less than ten years later, the splendid Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre was dedicated. It would attract thousands of pilgrims from the West. Already, in 333, a pilgrim from Bordeaux, in France, was writing about his visit to the Holy Places. One of the liveliest and most interesting of all written pilgrimages is that of the nun Aetheria,² who probably came from Spain and visited not only the Holy Places in Jerusalem but the monks of the Egyptian desert and of Palestine, even going through the Arabian desert to Mount Sinai, where there was as yet no monastery, but where there were colonies of hermits living in huts and caves. Large numbers of these anchorites escorted her enthusiastically to the summit of the mountain, where appropriate texts from the Bible were read, Mass was sung, *eulogiae* or spiritual gifts (consisting of fruits from the monks' orchard) were passed around, and the joys of the Christian life were generally celebrated in the very place where God had given the Law to Moses. Note that at this same time St. Gregory of Nyssa was writing his life of Moses,³ which is in fact a description of the mystical itinerary and ascent of the monk to God in "dark contemplation." The geographical pilgrimage is the symbolic acting out of an inner journey. The inner journey is the interpolation of the meanings and signs of the outer pilgrimage. One can have one without the other. It is best to have both. History would show the fatality and doom that would attend on the external pilgrimage with no interior spiritual integration, a divisive and disintegrated wandering, without understanding and without the fulfillment of any humble inner quest. In such pilgrimage no bless-

integral + external

ing is found within, and so the outward journey is cursed with alienation. Historically, we find a progressive "interiorization" of the pilgrimage theme, until in monastic literature the "peregrinatio" of the monk is entirely spiritual and is in fact synonymous with monastic stability.⁴

Aetheria's account of her pilgrimage tells us much about the liturgy of fourth-century Jerusalem, where the Holy Sepulchre was regarded as the normal station for daily celebration of the Eucharist, and where the True Cross was set up under the roof of the same basilica, on what remained of the rock of Calvary (Aetheria calls it simply the *martyrium*—the place, of martyrdom or of witness). Note that even though Calvary was there, the Eucharist was celebrated specifically at the Holy Sepulchre, not on Calvary. The sacred events of the New Testament were reenacted liturgically at the place where they actually happened. The liturgy of other places in the Christian world was simply intended to reproduce and remind the pilgrim of what he could see in its perfection at Jerusalem. Jerusalem was in every sense the "center of the world," not only in terms of ancient geography, but in the more important and sacred sense. It was the center par excellence of *Truth*, the place of the *True Cross*, of which all other crosses would be mementos and representations; the place of the true Holy Sepulchre, which would be recalled by the sepulchres of the martyrs in each altar of sacrifice: the place where the Saviour had truly walked, spoken, preached, healed, suffered, risen, ascended. The places themselves in their reality bore witness to that truth: but they were, far more than that, sacraments of truth and of a special life-giving presence.⁵ If Jerusalem was the place of the *anastasis*, the resurrection, the regions around it were filled with the *martyria*, where the apostles and saints had borne witness to the power of the resurrection. Finally, there were the monks in all the deserts of Syria, Palestine, Arabia, and Egypt who were living witnesses of the resurrection. The pilgrimage of Aetheria was, then, a sacred journey to the center from which

the whole Christian world was charged with the true presence of the resurrection and glory of the Saviour.

I I

The fall of Rome to the Barbarians in the beginning of the sixth century and the invasions that poured down over the East as well as over Western Europe temporarily cut off the Holy Land from the West. Though Jerusalem was then practically inaccessible to most European Christians, pilgrimages continued unabated elsewhere. But now they received a new character, imprinted upon them by the Celtic monks of Ireland.

Peregrinatio, or "going forth into strange countries," was a characteristically Irish form of asceticism. The Irish *peregrinus*, or pilgrim, set out on his journey, not in order to visit a sacred shrine, but in search of solitude and exile. His pilgrimage was an exercise in ascetic homelessness and wandering.⁶ He entrusted himself to Providence, setting out with no definite aim, abandoning himself to the Lord of the universe. Since Ireland is an island, this meant entrusting oneself to the hazards of sea travel, and there are records of Irish *peregrini* who simply floated off aimlessly into the sea, abandoning themselves to wind and current, in the hope of being led to the place of solitude which God Himself would pick for them. In this way, some came to Wales or Cornwall or to the isles of western Scotland. Others, doubtless the majority, made use of their considerable skill in navigation and followed indications that had perhaps come to them down years of seafaring tradition. Such were St. Columba, founder of the great monastic center at Iona,⁷ and St. Brendan, whose legendary voyages⁸ are thought, by some, to have brought him even to America. This has still to be convincingly proved. But there is historical evidence that Irish monks were in Iceland⁹ before the coming of the Danes in the eighth century, and they had also visited the Faroe Islands, as well as the Shetlands and the

Orkneys, not to mention Brittany, which was entirely populated by Welsh and Irish colonists, mostly monks, in the sixth century.

It is true, of course, that many of these pilgrimages brought Irish monks into inhabited places where the natives were willing and ready to receive the Christian message. The monks then became missionaries. The main reason for their journeys was not the missionary apostolate but the desire of voluntary exile.¹⁰

An *Old Irish Life of St. Columba* (a panegyric, not to be confused with the essentially historical life by Adomnan) describes the pilgrim spirit as belonging to the very essence of Christianity:

God counselled Abraham to leave his own country and go in pilgrimage into the land which God had shown him, to wit the "Land of Promise." . . . Now the good counsel which God enjoined here on the father of the faithful is incumbent on all the faithful; that is to leave their country and their land, their wealth and their worldly delight for the sake of the Lord of the Elements, and go in perfect pilgrimage in imitation of him.¹¹

The example of Abraham inspired many other Irish pilgrims, including Saint Cadroe, and his companions, who went forth to seek the land which the Lord "would show them."¹²

It was, of course, the vision of the "Land Promised to the Saints" that inspired the fabulous voyage of Brendan and his monks. In Celtic pilgrimages there is a reawakening of the archaic mythical theme of the "return to paradise"¹³ under the guidance of God or of His angels. But this is something more than "mere myth." The mystic spirituality of the Celtic monks is built on a charism of pilgrimage and navigation.

The objective of the monk's pilgrimage on earth may be imaginatively described as the quest of the "promised land" and "paradise," but more theologically this goal was described as the "place of resurrection"¹⁴—the place divinely

appointed, in which the monk is to settle down, spend the rest of his days in solitude, doing penance, praying, waiting for the day of his death. To leave Ireland in search of this privileged place was to "go on pilgrimage for the love of God" (*peregrinari pro Dei amore*) or "in the name of God." If the pilgrimage were a "navigation," then the monk was seeking for a "desert in the sea."¹⁵ The Irish had a predilection for lonely islands.¹⁶ In the voyage of St. Brendan, one of the Faroe Islands covered with wild sea birds becomes transformed into a monastic and liturgical paradise, the place par excellence for the celebration of the Easter mystery.¹⁷ The Holy Sepulchre has been replaced by the Desert Island. In any event, the object of pilgrimage is to take the monk to his peculiar and appointed place on the face of the earth, a place not determined by nature, race, and society, but by the free choice of God. Here he was to live, praise God, and finally die. His body would then be buried in this spot, and would there await the resurrection. The pilgrimage of the Celtic monk was not then just endless and aimless wandering for its own sake. It was a journey to a mysterious, unknown, but divinely appointed place, which was to be the place of the monk's ultimate meeting with God.

In the eighth and ninth centuries, when communication with the East was once again open, Irish monks went on pilgrimages to Egypt and the Holy Land, and in many cases their desire was either to settle at a Holy Place and die there, or else to find "the place of their resurrection" on the way back, and remain there, often as recluses, or solitaries living in completely enclosed cells built against the wall of a Church.¹⁸ Thus, the ninth and tenth centuries record the presence of scores of Irish monks living in cities of Germany, Burgundy, Lorraine, etc., either as scholars teaching in schools or as recluses.¹⁹

Soon there were many secondary aims in the pilgrimage. Monks went to spend a time in *peregrinatio* with other monks and in monastic centers where they could find instruc-

tion and example. Or else they went to obtain liturgical and other books,²⁰ which they copied in their own monasteries. The five pilgrimages of St. Benedict Biscop to Rome are famous examples of this. Others went to Rome to obtain relics needed in the dedication of monastic churches or altars.²¹ Some even went on pilgrimages in the hope of martyrdom;²² others to escape death at the hands of invading Vikings.

Whatever one may think about some of the special forms taken by the Celtic *peregrinatio*, the records, historical as well as literary, bear witness to a profound spiritual integration in the culture from which this practice emerged. The external and geographic pilgrimage was evidently, in most cases, something more than the acting out of psychic obsessions and instabilities. It was in profound relationship with an inner experience of *continuity* between the natural and the supernatural, between the sacred and the profane, between this world and the next: a continuity both in time and in space.²³ For the Celt, as for archaic and primitive man, the true reality is that which is manifested obscurely and sacramentally in symbol, sacrament, and myth. The deepest and most mysterious potentialities of the physical and bodily world, potentialities essentially sacred, demanded to be worked out on a spiritual and human level.

The pilgrimage of the Irish monk was therefore not merely the restless search of an unsatisfied romantic heart. It was a profound and existential tribute to realities perceived in the very structure of the world, and of man, and of their being: a sense of ontological and spiritual dialogue between man and creation in which spiritual and bodily realities interweave and interlace themselves like manuscript illuminations in the Book of Kells. This resulted in an astounding spiritual creativity which made it impossible for the Celtic monk merely to accept his existence as something static and "given," or his monastic vocation as a juridically stabilized and sedentary existence. His vocation was to mystery and growth, to liberty and abandonment to God, in self-commitment to the appar-

ent irrationality of the winds and the seas, in witness to the wisdom of God the Father and Lord of the elements. Better perhaps than the Greeks, some of the Celtic monks arrived at the purity of that *theoria physike* which sees God not in the essences or *logoi* of things, but in a hierophanic cosmos; hence the marvelous vernacular nature poetry of the sixth and seventh century Celtic hermits.²⁴

As Dom Jean Leclercq points out,²⁵ pilgrimage was to remain a "form of hermit life" and a logical though exceptional, constituent of the monastic vocation.

III

In the meantime, quite a different concept of "pilgrimage" was growing up in Irish circles.

The penitential systems of Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England in the sixth to the tenth centuries completely transformed the old concept of ecclesiastical penance.²⁶ In primitive Christianity, the only formal penance imposed by the Church was public penance, and in the earliest times this could be performed only once. The transition to private and indefinitely repeatable penance was made under Celtic influence. One of the most important forms of penance was *peregrinatio*, pilgrimage, or exile, especially to an island, *relegatio in insulam*.²⁷ Instead of doing public penance in full view of the local church (for instance, by remaining outside the church in penitential garb, fasting and performing other prescribed works until reconciled), the penitent was sent off into exile, either perpetual or temporary. He might be sent to a lonely island, or simply turned out into the alien world to wander without a specified goal. The penitent just "peregrinated." Only after the eighth century is the penitent sent to a specific place, or perhaps to a distant bishop to *receive* a penance, and then when he returned to his own church, after giving proof that his penance was completed, he was absolved. We must always remember that at this time absolution was

given only after the penance had been completed. After the ninth century, the goal of the penitent pilgrim was most often Rome, where he was sent to have the Pope decide his case and impose a suitable penance and send him back to his own bishop for absolution. Some penitents preferred to go direct to Rome, over the head of their own bishop, but this was reprobated.²⁸

It is not quite exact to regard this *peregrinatio* as a purely private and face-saving form of penance. On the contrary, it had a semi-public character²⁹ and was imposed for scandalous faults. The penitent pilgrim was driven forth as an outcast, dressed in rags or sackcloth, barefoot, perhaps even wearing a chain.³⁰ He was under strict obligation to keep moving, for he was a "wanderer" ("Let him not spend the night twice in the same place," said one of the Penitentials).³¹ He was not allowed to bear arms, and was therefore sent totally defenseless among strangers who might be barbarians and pagans (for instance, the Picts in Scotland or many of the inhabitants of lands east of the Rhine). The pilgrim who was carrying out a canonical penance wore a distinctive garb and badge. The pilgrim thus became a familiar figure in the Europe of the Dark Ages, and he was easily recognizable as a sacred person. If he were a canonical penitent, he was, like Cain, one on whom the curse of God rested, one who was being punished and healed, whom *man might not touch* (Gen. 4:13-15). He was, so to speak, a holy outcast, a consecrated tramp, living under a mystery of execration and protection, overshadowed by inscrutable love, a mystery and portent to every man. It was a sacred duty to protect him, feed him, give him shelter, and show him his way. Failure to shelter and protect pilgrims was declared to be the reason for punishment by an invasion of Lombards in southern France.³² Since one could not count even on the faithful to respect the pilgrim and penitent, these travelers were sometimes provided with official letters of identification.³³ Special hostelries for the pumerous Irish and Anglo-Saxon pilgrims were provided both at the chief places

of pilgrimage and on the way there, and the Anglo-Saxon hostility in Rome was supported by taxation in England.³⁴ Thus the penitent pilgrim, though cast out, had a very definite and indeed privileged place in the Church.

Pilgrimage or perpetual exile was usually given as penances for the worst crimes:³⁵ murder, incest, sacrilegious sins of violence or lust; and if the penitent was convinced of his need for penance and forgiveness, there is no question that he would take his penance seriously. Unfortunately, when it became common to send the worst offenders on pilgrimage as penance for grave crimes, large numbers of criminals were in effect turned loose, to live an irresponsible and wandering existence in common.³⁶ They naturally tended to band together, and when they did, their influence on each other was perhaps not much help in carrying forward their repentance and conversion.

Alcuin complained, in a letter,³⁷ of the dangers that came from associating with the riffraff of the roads, the jugglers, the thieves, and the pilgrims of various shades and dispositions who were met everywhere. Even genuine pilgrims who fell in with these others tended to suffer grave damage from their contact, and St. Boniface lamented that there was hardly a city on the way from England to Rome that did not have a few fallen Anglo-Saxon women living there as whores.³⁸ They were among the many for whom pilgrimage, on the Continent, was hardly a spiritual success. Note that on the Continent especially, pilgrimage was imposed as penance on clerics and monks who were considered scandalous and even incorrigible, doubtless as a last resort.³⁹ In fact, since the monk was already living in a public state of penance, he was not able to perform the ordinary public penance according to the ancient and solemn discipline. The paradoxical result of the penitential pilgrimage in the Middle Ages was to *increase* scandal by turning loose clerics and monks of disordered life to wander in public in situations that invited them to further sins that could hardly be kept hidden.⁴⁰ There was consequently a

strong reaction on the part of the eleventh-century reformers against the "gyrovagues" or wandering monks.⁴¹

We have seen that pilgrimages were originally intended as expiation, by a defenseless and nonviolent, wandering existence, of the worst crimes of violence. Now in the ninth and tenth centuries, even killing in war was regarded as a sin requiring expiation.⁴² In the Anglo-Saxon penitential of Theodore of Canterbury, a soldier who killed a man in war was obliged to a forty-day fast even though he might have killed his enemy in the "ordinary line of duty," under obedience to his officer. Later penitentials distinguished between offensive and defensive killing. One who attacked an enemy and killed him was obliged to do penance. One who killed another in self-defense was not obliged to do penance, but was *counseled* to do so for the good of his soul. Burchard of Worms, in the eleventh century, equated killing in war with ordinary homicide and assigned seven years of penance, without distinction as to offense or defense.⁴³

Pilgrimage was not usually given as a penance for killing in war. But persons who had accumulated many penances for various sins might find themselves faced with a staggering burden of penitential "tariffs" to pay off. In order not to have to fast and do penance for scores of years, they had their multiple penance commuted to a single pilgrimage, which took care of everything.

With this, the systematization of pilgrimage began, and pilgrimages were imposed by the Inquisition as afflictive punishments.⁴⁴ The Church recognized places of major pilgrimage, such as Jerusalem and Rome, Canterbury and Compostela. There were also minor places of pilgrimage such as Le Puy, St. Gilles, Rocamadour, in France.⁴⁵ Ponce de Léras, a twelfth-century brigand in the central mountains of France, abandoned his life of brigandage, made restitution, went on pilgrimage to Compostela, and returned to settle down in a Cistercian monastery he had founded.⁴⁶ This was a standard medieval pattern for a successful conversion of life. As a matter

of fact, it introduces us to a new pattern, in which "wandering eremitism" is no longer favored as an ascetic ideal, and in which the *peregrinatio* of Abraham is imitated by the monk who leaves "the world" for the cloister and stability of the monastery. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries we find frequent attacks upon "false hermits" who wander about. The monk who has entered the cloister will no longer leave to wander further afield. His perfection will consist in his stability.⁴⁷ However, as Dom Leclercq points out,⁴⁸ the monk in the cloister will read the narratives of saintly pilgrims as his "adventure stories." He will also take a passionate interest in the Crusades. As a matter of fact, in the case of the Crusades, an exception will be made. Many Cistercians accompanied the Crusades as chaplains, and Cistercian foundations were made in the Near East. In any case, the same spiritual crisis which led to monastic reforms in the eleventh and twelfth centuries led at the same time to a revival of itinerant eremitism and also, above all, to the great mass-*peregrinatio* of the Crusade.⁴⁹

I V

It is often thought that the sole or chief reason for the Crusades was the fact that Christian pilgrims suffered harassment from the Moslems who were masters of Jerusalem.⁵⁰ It is certain that the popular enthusiasm that drove thousands of knights and common soldiers to the East in 1095 was an eruption of zeal for the liberation of the Holy Sepulchre. But it must be remembered that the first idea of the Crusade, which goes back to Gregory VII in 1074, was a project for the defense of Constantinople, an essentially "ecumenical" venture, by which it was hoped that the union of Greek and Latin against the Turk would heal the schism that had begun in 1054. Actually Constantinople was a holy city and a place of pilgrimage. The First Crusade was itself an enormous pilgrimage, a holy war preached and organized by the Church, led by an armed bishop, Adhemar, ordinary of Le Puy, one

of the "minor" places of pilgrimage in France. The various armies converged on Constantinople, and then went on to take Jerusalem.

Pilgrimages to Jerusalem had opened a familiar way to the armies of the Cross. In the first half of the eleventh century, Robert II, Duke of Normandy, had to make a barefoot pilgrimage to Jerusalem to expiate the murder of his brother, Duke Richard III.⁵¹ In 1073, Count Theodore, murderer of Conrad, Archbishop of Trier, went to Jerusalem. These two examples among many⁵² show that the Crusaders were not all launching out into the unknown. Noblemen who had done penance and visited the Holy Sepulchre were now also attracted by the prospect of settling in this most sacred of lands, and having castles of their own in Judea or Galilee, there to await the second coming of Christ and the resurrection.

In the mind of Pope Urban II, the Holy Crusade was to be not only a great unification of Christendom against the Turk, but a magnificent and general act of repentant faith that would culminate in the moral reform and total renewal of Christendom. The "land of promise" which the Holy Father envisioned was a general state of holiness, unity, and perfection in the whole Church, East and West, a Christendom united and renewed in peace at the Holy Sepulchre.

Since the ninth century, very serious and sustained efforts had been made to limit wars among Christians. While promulgating the Crusade, the Council of Clermont (1095) also made the "Truce of God" of general obligation. This prohibition of fighting, from Septuagesima to Trinity Sunday and from Wednesday to Monday all year, had previously been imposed by local councils. Pope Urban was seeking a paradise of peace in Christendom, united in defense of the Holy Land, which symbolized the peace promised to all men of good will. As a Catholic historian observes,⁵³ "he commanded Christians to make a truce to all hostility that sprang from private interests. Thus the very notion of war was altered under the influence of the Roman Pontiff." War was now to be waged only

in obedience to the Church, which was intent upon restricting the use of violence to what was absolutely necessary for the defense of Christendom. In the sense that the Crusade was expected to unify Christendom and consolidate Christian power in a way that would permanently subdue Islam and hold off all future aggression from without, it was explicitly considered a "war to end wars." This eschatological hope accounted in part for the tremendous expectation and enthusiasm of the first Crusaders.⁵⁴ War against the infidel now became a sacred duty for all because it was the pledge of unity and peace within Christendom as well as of permanent peace for the Christian world. Hence, the Crusade was considered one of the greatest and most meritorious good works. There was no "Truce of God" in killing Turks, because the sooner the great work was accomplished, the better it would be for all.

But above all, in the intentions of the Popes, the Crusade remained essentially a pilgrimage, but a mass pilgrimage of all Christians united in the expectation of the imminent return of Christ. The eschatological hope was expressed in the hymns and marching songs of the Crusaders.⁵⁵ Just as pilgrimage had been the commutation of all other penances, so now the Crusade, the super-pilgrimage, amply satisfied for the sins of a whole lifetime, even a lifetime of brigandage, lechery, murder, blasphemy, impiety, anything. The Crusade became the *epitome of all penance*. In fact, there was a great deal of penitential ardor among the first Crusaders. They fasted and prayed before battles and multiplied processions and acts of devotion. They were in general dedicated to a true spirit of poverty and austerity befitting pilgrims. The proof of one's profound and sincere conversion and loyalty to Christ and His Church was one's readiness to undergo hardship and privation, and do battle against an enemy who, quite naturally, came to be regarded as the incarnation of all the forces of evil. St. Bernard emphasized that the presence of infidels at the Holy Sepulchre was an outrage and insult to the Saviour.⁵⁶

Urban II at Clermont urged the faithful to take up arms against an "abominable . . . impure people . . . [who had] ravaged and stained the holy places."⁵⁷ He had barely uttered his call when the cry went up everywhere: *Deus vult!* "God wills it!" The same cry, "It is written!" had launched the Moslems, a people of pilgrimage, upon the holy war.

It has been noted about St. Bernard (who preached the Second Crusade) that a deep vein of Augustinian pessimism about fallen man in a world of sin colored his ideas.⁵⁸ For St. Bernard, salvation outside a monastery was, to say the least, extremely difficult and doubtful. Though he was himself not friendly to pilgrimages for monks, he felt that the Crusade offered a unique opportunity for penance and salvation for multitudes of Christians who would otherwise most certainly be damned. "I call blessed the generation that can seize an opportunity of such rich indulgence as this blessed, to be alive in this year of God's choice. The blessing is spread throughout the whole world and all the world is called to receive the badge of immortality."⁵⁹ But if this is the case, then the Crusade is a Jubilee open to everyone—not only to an elite but to all sinners. It is not merely a question of a challenge to noble knights: there is a terrible moral risk for anyone who refuses to take this unique opportunity.⁶⁰

St. Bernard even more than Urban II believed that the Crusade was a providential opportunity for the total renewal of feudal society.

With exaltation and immense relief, the first great army of repentant sinners started for the East, assured by Pope Urban himself that if they died on the expedition they would possess eternal life without further delay. "The robbers and pirates," said Oderic Vital, "criminals of every sort, moved by grace, came forth from the abyss of their wretchedness, disavowed their crimes and forsook them, and departed for the far-off country."⁶¹

Thus we see that in the course of time the peaceful and defenseless pilgrimage, the humble and meek "return to the

source" of all life and grace, became the organized martial expedition to liberate the land promised to Abraham and his sons. It is surely significant that in the Middle Ages this conception of the Christian life became deeply embedded in European man: the "center," the "source," the "holy place," the "promised land," the "place of resurrection" becomes something to be attained, conquered, and preserved by politics and by force of arms. The whole Christian life and all Christian virtue then takes on a certain martial and embattled character. The true life of Christian virtue now becomes a struggle to death with pagan adversaries who are wickedly standing in the way of one's divinely appointed goal and perversely preventing fulfillment of a "manifest destiny."

Meanwhile, of course, certain ambiguities appeared in this conception of the Christian life as a mystique of martial and political organization. In the Second Crusade these ambiguities made themselves decisively felt: if the Crusade is a war to annihilate the enemy, then strategy comes first and the army should besiege Aleppo. If it is primarily a pilgrimage, then the crusading pilgrims should go up to Jerusalem. Yet the king had not made a vow to conquer Aleppo, only to go to Jerusalem.⁶² Thus, the concept of an essentially embattled Christian society tended to become inseparable from the Christian outlook, one might almost say the Christian faith. Christian eschatology in the West took on a very precise historical and social coloring in centuries of combat against the Turk. It was defense of Western Christendom against Eastern and pagan autocracy and power.

It would be naïve to underestimate the sincerity and the deep spiritual motivation of the Crusades, just as it would be naïve to ignore the fact that the violence, the greed, the lust, and the continued depravity of the worst elements continued unchanged. In point of fact, the Crusades had an immense effect on European and Christian society in the West. They certainly opened the way to renaissance and modern Christendom. But the paradise of spiritual benefits that had been

hoped for was never attained. On the contrary, from the point of view of East-West relations in Christendom, the Crusades were a disaster. They certainly made all reunion between Rome and Constantinople unthinkable.

Above all, the Crusades introduced a note of fatal ambiguity into the concept of pilgrimage and penance. What was intended as a remedy for sins of violence, particularly murder, now became a consecration of violence. There is, of course, a distinction between war and murder, and the sacrifice entailed by warfare can certainly be regarded as "penitential." But a man prone to violence and passion, a potential or actual murderer and sadist, is not likely to make too many fine distinctions when he discovers that he can now not only kill people legitimately, but even offer his acts to God as "good works" and as "penance," provided he concentrates on infidels, regarded as the embodiment of all evil.

We know that the Crusaders did not confine their warlike activities to what was juridically "holy." The sack of Christian Constantinople and the internecine battles among the Crusaders themselves are there to prove it.

Finally, a very interesting development took place in the Crusades. The mystique of sacred love was, in the twelfth century, very close to the courtly love of the troubadours. But we find, curiously enough, that a typical troubadour, Jaufré Rudel, who took part in the Second Crusade, could sing in the same breath of the love for little Jesus in Bethlehem and of a more secular love for the "distant lady" in whose "service" the loyal knight will risk death and imprisonment. The Crusade becomes merged with the romance of courtly love. At the same time the sacred element tends to be neglected by those who, like Bertrand de Born, are engrossed in the martial glory and exploits of the knights.⁶³

So much for the East. There remained the fabulous paradise of the West. It is curious that in the folklore tradition of Spain, the "Lost Island" of the West, identified with the Brendan legend to the point that it was given Brendan's own name, remained the paradisiacal refuge to which the kings of Spain and Portugal might flee from Moorish invasions,⁶⁴ just as in the Celtic legend the "land of promise" in the western ocean was evidently regarded as a place of refuge from the Norsemen.

Christopher Columbus was most probably aware of the Brendan legend⁶⁵ as well as of such classic medieval descriptions of the "Lost Island," or Perdita, as that of Honorius of Autun (or more exactly, William of Conches):

There is a certain island of the Ocean called Perdita, and it excels all the lands of the earth in the beauty and fertility of all things. Found once by chance, it was later sought again and not found, whence it is called Perdita. To this isle, Brendan is said to have come.⁶⁶

The description has all the mythical qualities of the lost paradise, and Columbus's idyllic description of his landfall on Hispaniola showed that the new land appeared to him to be in every way an earthly paradise. He did not believe he had discovered Perdita, however, and Spanish expeditions in search of the "Lost Island" continued even after the discovery of the American mainland.

Brendan's Island was marked ("tentatively") on maps as late as the eighteenth century.⁶⁷ It was even formally renounced by Portugal in the Treaty of Evora (1519), so that if it ever were found it was already assigned in advance (by the Apostolic See) to his Catholic majesty of Spain.

In one word, the Renaissance explorers, the conquistadores, the Puritans, the missionaries, the colonizers, and doubtless also the slave traders and pirates, were in their own

way deeply influenced by the mythical paradisiacal aspect of the Americas. But it was a paradise into which they could not penetrate without the most profound ambiguities.

They came, in a way, as "penitents" or as men seeking renewal, deliverance from the past, the gift to begin again. But at the same time the pattern of this renewal forbade neither self-enrichment nor the free enjoyment of the opportunities which the "paradise" so generously offered (native women). And it prescribed, above all, as a sort of vestige of crusading ardor and as an earnest of absolution, an uncompromising zeal in the subjection of the infidel—and, of course, in his conversion. It was also a good thing to build churches at home with Inca gold. While St. Theresa of Avila was following her interior and mystic itinerary (not without some very energetic peregrination about Spain, founding Carmels⁶⁸), her brother was in the Kingdom of Quito getting rich. When he returned to Spain, he financed the Carmel of Seville (where St. Theresa enjoyed the view of the river with the gallant ships of the Armada back from the Indies). And there is no reason to doubt the depth and sincerity of his inner life, troubled only by certain violent reactions, which his sister, though she had never experienced such things, did not find surprising.

There was in the Indies the lush and tempting beauty and fantastic opulence of nature. There were the true and legendary riches, from the mines of San Luis Potosí to the lake of Eldorado and the fountain of eternal youth. There were the Indians and their cities, appearing now as idyllic "noble savages" in utopian communities, now as treacherous devils indulging in infernal tricks and sunk in the worst forms of heathenism.

Thus, the European white man set foot on the shores of America with the conflicting feelings of an Adam newly restored to paradise and of a Crusader about to scale the walls of Acre.

The mentality of the pilgrim and that of the Crusader had

fused together to create a singular form of alienation: that of the Puritan "pilgrim father" and that of the conquistador. Centuries of ardent, unconscious desire for the Lost Island had established a kind of right to paradise once it was found. It never occurred to the sixteenth-century Spaniard or Englishman to doubt for a moment that the new world was entirely and rightly his. It had been promised and given to him by God. It was the end of centuries of pilgrimage. It was the long-sought land of promise and renewal, where the old deficiencies and limitations no longer existed: the land of the new beginning not only for the individual but for society itself. The land of refuge from persecution. The land of peace and plenty, where all the iniquities and oppressions of the old world were forgotten. Here peace and unity were bought at the price of Christian courage in battling with the wilderness and with the infidel. To conquer and subjugate the native population was not regarded as an unjust aggression, as usurpation or as robbery and tyranny but on the contrary as proof of one's loyalty to all the values dear to the European and Christian heart since Charlemagne.

It is true, however, that some of the missionaries had a different and more mystical view of paradise. But their solution was only more logically and consistently paradisiacal; as in the primitive and religious Jesuit utopias in Paraguay, or the communities of Vasco de Quiroga in Mexico.

These were, indeed, admirable and virtuous efforts. But for the greater part, the pilgrims were rushing upon the Lost Island with a combative ferocity and a wasteful irresponsibility that have tainted the fruits of the paradise tree with bitterness ever since.

Somehow it has been forgotten that a paradise that can be conquered and acquired by force is not paradise at all.

So the story of man's pilgrimage and search has reached the end of a cycle and is starting on another: now that it is clear that there is no paradise on earth that is not defiled as well as

limited, now that there are no lost islands, there is perhaps some dry existentialist paradise of clean ashes to be discovered and colonized in outer space: a "new beginning" that initiates nothing and is little more than a sign of our irreversible decision to be disgusted with the paradises and pilgrimages of earth. Disgust with paradise, but not with crusades! The new planet is apparently to be the base for a more definitive extermination of infidels, together with the mass of less agile pilgrims so occupied in keeping body and soul together that they cannot be singled out as pilgrims to a promised land.

And yet the pilgrimage must continue, because it is an inescapable part of man's structure and program. The problem is for his pilgrimage to make sense—it must represent a complete integration of his inner and outer life, of his relation to himself and to other men.

The Bible has always taken man in the concrete, never in the abstract. The world has been given by God not to a theoretical man but to the actual beings that we are. If we instinctively seek a paradisiacal and special place on earth, it is because we know in our inmost hearts that the earth was given us in order that we might find meaning, order, truth, and salvation in it. The world is not only a vale of tears. There is joy in it somewhere. Joy is to be sought, for the glory of God.

But the joy is not for mere tourists. Our pilgrimage is more than the synthetic happy-making of a vacation cruise. Our journey is from the limitations and routines of "the given"—the *Dasein* which confronts us as we are born into it without choice—to the creative freedom of that love which is personal choice and commitment. Paradise symbolizes this freedom and creativity, but in reality this must be worked out in the human and personal encounter with the stranger seen as our other self.

As long as the Inca, the Maya, the Mestizo, the Negro, the Jew, or what have you, confronts us as *Dasein*, as a lump of limited and nonnegotiable *en-soi*, he will seem to stand in the

way of our fulfillment. "*L'enfer, c'est les autres,*"⁶⁹ and we will seek paradise by combating his presence, subduing him, enslaving him, eliminating him.

Our task now is to learn that if we can voyage to the ends of the earth and there find *ourselves* in the aborigine who most differs from ourselves, we will have made a fruitful pilgrimage. That is why pilgrimage is necessary, in some shape or other. Mere sitting at home and meditating on the divine presence is not enough for our time. We have to come to the end of a long journey and see that the stranger we meet there is ~~no other than ourselves—which is the same as saying that we find Christ in him.~~

For if the Lord is risen, as He said, He is actually or potentially alive in every man. Our pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulchre is our pilgrimage to the stranger who is Christ our fellow-pilgrim and our brother. There ~~is no lost island merely for the individual.~~ We are all pieces of the paradise isle, and we can find our Brendan's island only when we all realize ourselves together as the paradise which is Christ and His Bride, God; man, and Church.

It was in this spirit that St. Francis went on pilgrimage—on his own original kind of "crusade"—to meet the Soldan: as a messenger not of violence, not of arrogant power, but of humility, simplicity, and love.⁷⁰

And it was in this spirit that Pope John XXIII wrote *Pacem in Terris*.

VIRGINITY AND HUMANISM IN THE WESTERN FATHERS

A scholar with a profound understanding of both antiquity and the Middle Ages has said that "every true humanism delights spontaneously in the world and in the book."¹ But if this statement is true, how can we seriously assert that there was ever any such thing as a "patristic humanism," or worse still, a "monastic humanism"?

The age of the Fathers, the age of the first monks, was, of course, an age in which "the world" was rejected with uncompromising and single-minded intensity of purpose. Also the monks were, it is often thought, hostile to study: if not to the study of Scripture, then at least to the study of the classics and the grammarians. Besides this, the term "humanism" is often associated in the popular mind with an anti-Christian humanism which summarily rejects the Church or even God, on the grounds that religious faith keeps man alienated, suppressing his deepest and most vital energies, and preventing his full human development as an individual and as a member of so-