

The Fourteen Stations of the Cross

Fr Seán O'Dowd

As gospel people we are familiar with the Stations of the Cross. All four evangelists describe the road to Calvary like journalists or media reporters today. They describe the journey as it unfolds. Their accounts emphasise the different aspects of the journey they wish to share with their readers.

Today in our churches we pray and reflect upon each station. Each picture on the wall in the church or oratory speaks to us, either as a painting, wood carving or an icon. There are fourteen different stations which portray the events of Good Friday which took place over a period of five or six hours.

Some forty or fifty years ago I wondered why we had fourteen stations. We are not as familiar with the number fourteen as we are with the number twelve. Twelve is a much more rounded number. Jesus called twelve disciples. That number fitted in nicely with the twelve tribes of Israel. And our calendar each year covers twelve months. And often too we count by the dozen.

Some years ago, I used to think that twelve stations would fit more comfortably in our liturgy. By reducing the stations from fourteen to twelve we would arrive at a more familiar number. This would eliminate what I thought was unnecessary repetition. The third station is repeated twice more, in the seventh and ninth stations. The stations describe Jesus falling a first, second and third time.

At the fifth station we find that Jesus needed help to carry his cross. It was the only time in his ministry that he needed help. Not once did he fail to perform a miracle when needed. No request was beyond his reach. And it is interesting too where the help came from on the road to Calvary. The person who came to the rescue was a man from Cyrene named Simon. This man was a stranger. You begin to wonder where the able-bodied men were who had partaken of the food on the occasion of the multiplication of the loaves and



Jesus falls the third time. The Way of the Cross, Multyfarnham, Co Westmeath. (Photo: S. Deegan SPS)

fishes some months earlier. It is possible that some of those men were among the five thousand crowd on that day. Were they now afraid to get involved? We just don't know.

It is strange too that the day is now called Good Friday. As we follow the Way of the Cross, I don't think the word "good" describes events of that day. It was a day of shame and sadness. On that day the condemned person was obliged to carry his cross which was not the normal procedure. Was the crown of thorns necessary? The physical hurt and pain were only part of the story. There is also the betrayal by a friend as well as the denial by another friend. Jesus is jeered and ridiculed by the passers-by.

After several hours of pain, verbal and physical abuse, abandonment and much more, Jesus is about to die. But he addressed his Father in prayer for the last time. "Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing." I have often reflected on that petition. Those people did know what they were doing. They had spent months setting it up. A certain sum of money had changed hands. Various witnesses had been lined up. A mob had been recruited to shout, "Crucify him, crucify him" and so on. But Jesus was right. He had come to save people and to pardon sinners. Jesus was the victim of the greatest injustice of all time. His response was to issue the greatest act of forgiveness ever recorded.

As I pray the stations now, I feel fourteen stations is the correct number. I feel the repetition of those three stations is in order in our places of worship today. Life is an uphill journey. Jesus told his followers "Take up your cross every day..." A fall is part of the journey, even a third fall. Hopefully there is somebody nearby to help us to begin again. And we hope that we in turn will help others to cope with their cross. ■

The late Fr Seán O'Dowd was ordained in 1963. He first wrote for *Africa Magazine* in March 1976. He wrote this article in early 2024. May he rest in peace.