

From Canterbury to Rome: Pilgrims rediscover ancient Francigena Way **By Carol Glatz Catholic News Service**

VATICAN CITY (CNS) -- Most of the ancient roads to Rome have become busy thoroughfares or superhighways swarming with speeding Fiats and Alfa Romeos.

But one route still remains largely unspoiled by today's traffic, instead dotted by an occasional cow or a moped.

This 2,000-year-old road, known as the Francigena Way, was once a crucial trading corridor and later a popular pilgrim's path starting from England's North Sea and leading to the eternal city of Rome.

Julius Caesar first established the Francigena's network of roads in 58 B.C.

"It was the backbone of Western Europe, linking the North with Rome," said Father Bernard Ardura, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Culture.

Later, the Francigena Way provided Europe's Christian pilgrims with the fastest and safest route to reach the tombs of Sts. Peter and Paul in Rome. Even Sigeric, the 10th-century archbishop of Canterbury, England, trekked the 1,100-miles to receive his pallium from Pope John XV.

But in the mid-17th century this "way of the Franks" died out. By the end of the 18th century, no one but Napoleon's troops were trudging its byways until some modern-day pilgrims rediscovered the Francigena Way's historical, artistic and religious riches and started working for its revival.

"An association was started up in 1997 to get people to know about (the Francigena Way) and re-establish its cultural" value, said Father Ardura, whose council supports the work of the International Francigena Way Association.

Father Ardura said the route -- which starts at the Canterbury cathedral in England and cuts across France, Switzerland and Italy -- helped spread different cultures and build Europe.

Revitalizing the route for modern pilgrims "would be a reawakening of our common Christian heritage," he told Catholic News Service.

The founder and president of the International Francigena Way Association, Adelaide Trezzini, agreed, saying, "The pilgrimage is a good way to unite Europe's people and to find and touch these (Christian) roots."

"By walking on these Roman roads, passing by convents and cathedrals, you feel and touch history with your feet," she said.

Though today's pilgrims do not have the same worries as medieval pilgrims -- like running into hungry wolves or bandits -- the first brave hikers of the Francigena Way in the 1990s faced severe logistical problems.

Proper maps were nonexistent, signs indicating the route were sporadic, and finding a place to stay was a real ordeal until Trezzini and her organization compiled a guide listing all the monasteries, convents, churches and private facilities along the route that would take in the wandering traveler for free or at low cost.

The association supplies pilgrims with the guide and an official "pilgrim's passport" so potential hosts know they are legitimate, Trezzini said.

Many hotels, bed-and-breakfasts and hostels offer passport holders 10 percent to 20 percent discounts "because they appreciate the idea of pilgrimage, and they want to help out," she said.

Trezzini said though most of the pilgrims tackling the Francigena Way are from northern Italy or France, the trail has attracted people from as far away as Australia and South Africa, "because they see Europe as being the base of Christianity and the development of the Christian faith."

One of the first Americans to cover the entire 1,100 miles was Brandon Wilson of Hawaii.

A pilgrimage is a "great way to get to know people and a different culture; it's traveling in a country one step at a time," he told CNS.

"I found it fascinating to stay in a 15th-century monastery or what once was a hospital of the Knights Templar, to have nuns serve me warm soup or sit with Capuchin monks in the evening, sipping wine," he said.

But the pleasures did not come without pain.

"There were some days I hurt so bad I didn't want to get out of bed," Wilson said.

What made him bear the blisters and the 18-21 miles a day -- including travel through the Alps -- was "tenacity. I felt I was carrying on a tradition. ... I had the feeling of past pilgrims with me along the way."

Trezzini said she wanted to make sure pilgrims traveling the Francigena Way received some official recognition for all their hardship when they reached their goal of St. Peter's Basilica.

She said she worked with the Vatican to create a certificate for all pilgrims who make it to the basilica after covering at least 81 miles on foot.

When the Francigena Way pilgrims present their special passports at the sacristy, they are greeted by a priest who takes them to the tomb of St. Peter in the grottoes below.

"He reads them a passage from the Bible in their own language, presents them with the signed parchment," and has them write their names and comments about their pilgrimage in a large registry kept in the basilica, she said.

"The people aren't always Catholic, but they are moved and appreciate it all the same," she added.

Though some people may start out to do the Francigena Way for the physical challenge or for a cultural adventure, Trezzini and Wilson said everyone will experience something spiritual at some point along the journey.

A pilgrimage "helps you readjust your priorities. There's all that silence and time for contemplation that it helps you re-prioritize, re-examine your life and see what's important," Wilson said.

Trezzini noted many pilgrims learned to "walk with the spirit of putting themselves in the hands of providence."

The lack of accurate signs and other difficulties along the still-fledgling trail have left many pilgrims "desperate, sitting on the curbside not knowing where to go," she said.

"But always something would happen, and someone would come by to point them the way," she said.

That fellowship found on the trail led Wilson to pray for bringing peace to the world, "because I could see (peace) was about the way we treat each other," he said, adding that if people's needs were taken care of "there would be less strife in the world."

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