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# The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop  
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## TAKE TO THE HIGHWAY

|  |                               |
|--|-------------------------------|
| Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote        | <i>showers; sweet</i>         |
| The droghte of March hath perced to the roote, |                               |
| And bathed every veyne in swich licour         | <i>sap-vessel; moisture</i>   |
| Of which vertu engendred is the flour;         | <i>flower</i>                 |
| Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth       | <i>also</i>                   |
| Inspired hath in every holt and heeth          | <i>quickenet; wood</i>        |
| The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne        | <i>shoots</i>                 |
| Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne,         | <i>run</i>                    |
| And smale foweles maken melodye,               | <i>birds</i>                  |
| That slepen al the nyght with open ye          | <i>sleep; eye</i>             |
| (So priketh hem nature in hir corages);        | <i>incites; desires</i>       |
| Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,     |                               |
| And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,   | <i>pilgrims; shores</i>       |
| To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;      | <i>distant shrines; known</i> |
| And specially from every shires ende           |                               |
| Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,         | <i>go</i>                     |
| The hooly blisful martir for to seke,          | <i>blessed; visit</i>         |
| That hem hath holpen whan that they were       | <i>helped</i>                 |
| seeke.   | <i>sick</i>                   |

—Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*  
General Prologue, lines 1-18

**P**ilgrims and pilgrimages all have their routes and their reasons, and in Chaucer they also have a supremely gifted poet. The opening lines of his great poem are known to all those who had even a mediocre English literature class over the course of their high school careers. No pilgrimage is more famous than the one that set out from the Tabard Inn in Southwark, across the Thames River from London, “in that season on a day,” bound for Canterbury and the shrine of the tomb of St. Thomas à Becket, bishop and martyr. By the late 1300’s, Canterbury had long since become an international pilgrimage destination, and it drew pilgrims from all over the world, as did Rome, Jerusalem, Bari in Italy (for the tomb of St. Nicholas), and Santiago de Compostella in Spain. Indeed, Chaucer’s age was at the center of the centuries-long heyday of the great pilgrimage, and at any given moment the highways of Europe were likely to be awash in pilgrims making their way to or from their goal.

Chaucer’s own “merry company” of pilgrims was about average for the journey, twenty-nine

people, drawn mostly from the broad range of the late mediaeval English middle classes; the very poor could not afford such a trip, and the very rich had other, more comfortable ways of getting where they wanted to go. And they also seem to have been about average in their reasons for making the trip. Had each been queried as to his or her motive for embarking on this particular pilgrimage, no doubt all would have given some version of the standard, expected religious answer. Yet Chaucer's opening lines clearly indicate that more is in play here than the purely religious. In the first eleven lines there is nothing of the sacred, unless one wishes to name as holy the annual springtime awakening of nature after a long, hard English winter. It is April, and the sweet rains have ended the March drought, bringing plants back to life and into flower. The warm west wind, Zephyr, blows his quickening breath throughout wood and heath, and the tender shoots spring up. The little birds sing, and hardly sleep at night, so keen are they to



mate. This, he says, is the very time when people are eager to go on pilgrimages and to visit foreign shores. Oh yes, they want to visit holy places, and especially here in England they want to go to Becket's tomb, to thank the martyr for the help he gave them when they were ill. Yet given the riot of nature's coming back to life in April with which the poem begins, we can't help but think that this swarm of pilgrims is out and about for many reasons, some of which have little to do with a hunger and thirst for holiness. It's been a long and lonely winter, but now the sun has come back to the north country, and the long awaited cure for cabin fever is finally here. Who could stay at home when the highway beckons and spring's glory is all around?

As Chaucer introduces us to the pilgrims one by one, we quickly see that there are about as many reasons for making this pilgrimage as there are pilgrims in the company, and the reason for each is not always the obvious one, the one we might have predicted once the identity of the pilgrim is made known. Thus, the highest ranking pilgrim from the secular world, the Knight, is actually more otherworldly, more humble and given to self-denial than nearly anyone else, and so perhaps the mostly likely to have a singularly religious motive for his participation in the pilgrimage. The Monk, on the other hand, is rich and up to his hips in business deals, and the prioress seems to spend most of her energy in affecting courtly dress and manners. The most experienced pilgrim is the Wife of Bath, who had made three pilgrimages to Jerusalem, and one each to Rome, to Boulogne (to the image of the virgin), to Santiago de Compostella, and to Cologne (to the shrine of the Magi). None of these seems to have done her much good, as we learn first from the story of her life and then from the tale that she tells. Easily the most fascinating person on the route (except, perhaps, for the thoroughly creepy Pardoner), she has gone through five husbands and appears to be on the prowl for a sixth, and although her life has taught her much, she seems to be quite unaware of the true nature of those lessons. It's hard to believe that many of these pilgrims spent any more time in church than they absolutely had to. And God forgive us, we're glad for it, since by the time Chaucer has described them all, we know that we're in for a rollicking good time of it as we read our way with them on their road to Canterbury.

And so we are. A fair number of the tales are of men and women behaving badly – very badly. For every lovely, morally uplifting tale there is one that moves in just the opposite way. The Knight's tale is full of virtue, wisdom and nobility, and it is immediately followed by the Miller's tale, one that

has us laughing all the way through it in spite of (or because of) a plot that involves deception, sexual humiliation, adultery, deception and broken limbs. If Chaucer's Canterbury is meant to be a symbol of the celestial city, the heavenly Jerusalem – and it is – and if his pilgrimage is intended as a metaphor for our journey through life – and it is – then what does it say about us that Chaucer (who has perfect pitch for metaphors and symbols) places the Miller with his bagpipe at the head of the company? The Miller doesn't tell the raunchiest tale, but it's not far from it, and the bagpipe is a curious emblem for a religious venture. For this is not the highland bagpipe that we know, with its multiple pipe drones and its impressive appearance. This is a simple, tanned leather bag with one lone pipe emerging from it, whose appearance (depending on one's perspective) resembled that of either a full stomach or the male genitalia, and which thus worked pretty well as a symbol for both gluttony and lechery. What on earth is going on here? Are we all just out for a good time, and that's all there is to it?

Certainly there is a lot of fun in the tales, even as there is in life, and this can pose a danger, as Chaucer well knew. No man enjoyed a joke more than he, and no poet was ever saner or freer from the ponderous seriousness that seems to afflict so much of modern poetry, and yet he chose to end his greatest work with the parson's tale, which most readers find anything but entertaining and are sorely tempted to skip over. This long "tale" is really more of a treatise on the sacrament and the life of penance. It is divided into three parts, one on contrition, one on confession, and one on satisfaction. The second part is the longest, and consists largely of a discussion of the seven deadly sins and the virtues that must be employed to fight against them. It is, in brief, a manual for the Christian life, which is weighty not just for its content but also for its being told by the parson (an admirable parish priest as Chaucer draws him, and one who has the respect of all the pilgrims) and for its placement at the end, as the climax and crown of the whole work. Thus, for all the fun that Chaucer has given us along the way, in the end he affirms that the point of the pilgrimage is not the journey in itself and its joys – the point is the arrival at the goal. The destination of this earthly pilgrimage is heaven, union with God, and the life of faith and penance is the one sure way. This is, for a Christian, an utterly ordinary thought, and we have every reason to believe that Chaucer was a thoroughly ordinary Christian of the late 14<sup>th</sup> century in this respect, however extraordinary he may have been as a poet.

Human beings do not have roots – we have legs, and being on the move is our normal state of being. We are always taking to the highway, and often enough it is for reasons of religion. Most religions, including ours, have pilgrimages and journeys to sacred shrines and places. St. John of the Cross knew that a devout heart was the best place for prayer, but he also believed that God could and did grant special favors through certain statues, images and churches. God did this not so that these things would be more highly regarded than others of their type, "but so he may awaken the dormant devotion and affection of the faithful through his wonderful works." John noticed that most of these "favored places" were "situated in remote and solitary places. The reason for this is that the effort required in journeying to these places makes the affection increase and the act of prayer more intense. Another motive is that a person may withdraw from people and noise in order to pray, as our Lord did." Although John commends this practice, he does have some reservations about it. It's much better for the pilgrim to be a solitary pilgrim, he says, than to be a part of a large crowd, since in making a pilgrimage with a group, "one ordinarily returns more distracted than before." Perhaps he had Chaucer's "merry company" on his mind when he wrote, "Many who go on pilgrimage do so more for the sake of recreation than devotion."

Both poet and mystic knew that we are pilgrims, far from home and on the move towards the land where we have our true citizenship. Our legs and our constantly being in motion are but the physiological and physical expression of this far deeper truth. Since we tend to forget precisely that which is most important, reminders, both in reading and in journeying, are never amiss.

—Fr. Bob Sprott, O.F.M.