

# Sacred Journeys: Two Sisters' Pilgrimage

When her sibling needed healing half a world away, this woman living in central Italy chose to pray *a piedi*.

By Catherine Ann Lombard





It was a cold, brisk April dawn as I entered the church. This was to be my fifth pilgrimage to Monte Camera Sanctuary from the Church of Santa Maria Assunta in Cielo. Located in the hills, about five miles from the tiny Italian village of Pieve di Compresseto in Umbria, this sanctuary is devoted to Mary. Since 1647, the townspeople, full of faith and prayers, have been climbing to the tiny chapel to celebrate the Feast of the Madonna of Monte Camera every Tuesday after Easter.

The first pilgrimage took place 376 years ago when the bubonic plague was devastating the population. Those who were well enough went in procession to this sanctuary to pray to the Madonna, asking her to intercede on their behalf. When they returned, everyone who had been sick was miraculously cured. Since then, the villagers have returned every year in procession to this chapel to commemorate the miracle.

This year was going to be different for me, as I was planning to carry a special prayer. The previous year, I learned that my younger sister Marie had been diagnosed with a serious lung disease. No one knows exactly why anyone contracts systemic scleroderma and nobody knows how to cure it. Medication, oxygen therapy, and a healthy lifestyle can all help to reduce its symptoms, but it's a disease that will never go away.

My sister and I have a complex relationship. Being nearly nine years apart, we barely grew up together. When our father died, I was 15 and she was only 7. Marie hardly knew her father while I ended up mourning mine. I am the wild one who left home as soon as I could; she always had a deeper connection to our late mother. We are, quite simply, very different.

Since 1995, I have lived in Europe and Marie in California. Nevertheless, we always send each other holiday and birthday greetings. And one year, even more importantly, we did share a very intimate moment. When I learned Marie was pregnant with her second child, I asked if I might witness the birth. Since I was unable to become pregnant, this chance to experience a birth secondhand felt important for my own healing and spiritual growth. My sister and her husband were gracious enough to let my husband and me be present when their son Mark was born, 25 years ago.

After her diagnosis, I asked Marie if she wanted me to visit. “You are my sister,” I wrote. “And I love you.” She wrote back telling me how much she appreciated my willingness to travel for 24 hours but she felt too vulnerable. “Not now,” she wrote. “Not yet.”

## The Procession Begins

Many others have also entered the church now, and the procession is about to depart. We bow our heads to receive the priest’s blessing. The local marching band plays a processional hymn, the church bells clamor, and three riflemen shoot flares into the air. The banner of Mary is held high, a 17th century wooden cross is raised, and we all fall in line.

First come the riflemen, who in the past protected the pilgrims from bandits and wild animals. They are followed by the *Confraternita del Sacramento*, men dressed in white robes and short blue capes, carrying the cross and lanterns. Then the young, unmarried women, dressed entirely in white, carry the banner of Mary. Behind them come the young boys in blue sashes.

Men and women do not walk together but form two lines in single file, the women behind the men. In between the pilgrims are the priest, the marching band, and the men of the *Confraternita del Beato Marzio*, who are dressed in red capes and carry their own banner of the local village saint, Beato Marzio.

Altogether we are about 200 people. Many have been making this pilgrimage for years. For Fabio, it is his 68th time, having first climbed to Monte Camera when he was 6 years old. For 8-year-old Andrea, it is his third time, which he tells me with great pride.

We start climbing up the main road out of town but will eventually turn off into the woods onto a dirt path. In past years after a week of rain, this path has been slippery and heavy with mud, sticking to shoes and soiling white robes. But this year the path is mostly dry. The sun rises and the air becomes warmer. Spectacular views of the nearby snow-topped Apennine Mountains surround us, and the meadows are full of primrose and daisies. As we pass under blooming cherry trees, a delicate scent of spring envelopes us.

Prayers are dutifully said. Hymns are reverently sung.

As we climb, a woman behind me, unaccustomed to hiking, is breathing hard. I think of Marie, who must carry around a portable oxygen machine. She tries not to use it at work, wanting to maintain some semblance

of normalcy. But when she gets home, she drops into bed exhausted. This is my sister who used to teach aerobics, bicycle for miles, and jog along California beaches.

I hear the woman’s heavy breathing and imagine myself drinking in the cool morning air for her. I also imagine my deep breaths filling my sister’s scarred lungs 6,000 miles away.

We are now singing “*Resta con noi Signore*”: “Stay with us God in the night. Stay with us and we will be at peace. We will take you to our brothers and sisters. We will take you along the road.”

After about an hour, we cross a meadow of tall grass, enter the woods, and break formation to more easily maneuver the narrow path. Pilgrims quietly chat, pausing to encourage the children. The cross, lanterns, and banners are lowered and carried on tired shoulders. Cyclamens spill over the forest floor and blackbirds scold. We wind our way through the woods and eventually catch a glimpse of the sanctuary. We are almost there!

## Final Approach

Pilgrims unable to walk the entire trek soon join us in our final approach to the chapel. The procession becomes a long line of people—old and young, devoted and not so devoted, men and women, boys and girls. Babies are pushed in strollers, the band strikes up a lively hymn, and we march triumphantly toward the chapel. Awaiting us at the door is 85-year-old don Luigi, the priest who is responsible for the sanctuary. “Welcome!” he greets each of us. “Welcome to the Madonna of Monte Camera!”

Inside, candles are fluttering and the statue of Mary holding Jesus looks down at us. Tired but happy, I enter and say my prayers, asking for healing for myself, my sister, and all who are suffering.

The bishop is preparing to say the mass. I find a place among the 400 people standing outside. He starts by proclaiming, “Christ is risen.”

The crowd responds, “Christ is truly risen!”

Once the mass is over, we have 30 minutes to quickly eat a snack. Friends and family members find each other in the crowd to extend Easter greetings. Wine is generously poured and boiled eggs, cheese, salami, and bread are shared.

When 79-year-old Franca sees me, she asks if I have walked the entire way. “Brava, Caterina!” she says,



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tenderly caressing my cheek. I hug a friend I haven't seen for months and wish her a happy Easter. It's a place and time not only to connect with God but also with God's children.

Meanwhile, the flutists in the band have drawn together to play a Bach étude, children are excitedly buying sweets at the street food truck, and pilgrims are hurrying into the chapel for final prayers and confession.

## Coming Full Circle

Soon the chapel bell rings, marking the time to go. Those of us returning on foot realign ourselves in procession. We will walk back the same way that we have come, but this time, the journey is mostly downhill. When we reach the village of Poggio, there will be a short pause when we will stand and quickly eat blessed bread, fortify ourselves with farmer's wine, and quench our thirst with water. This is one of my favorite parts of the pilgrimage, as it signifies we are near the end of our physical and spiritual journey.

Finally, the pilgrims—some with a spring to

their step, others trudging along—circle their village and ultimately re-enter the church we started from seven hours before. The church bells are ringing, the riflemen shooting, our hymns singing out, and the marching band's music enlivens our last steps.

I enter the church with a full heart. It has carried my sister up the hillside, into the sanctuary, and back. It has wrapped itself around her in prayer. My heart is full, having held Marie close to me, full with the memories of our growing up. My 9-year-old self wondering at the tininess of her baby fingers. How we once shared a bedroom. I recall memories years later of visiting her in California, when we giggled our way through yoga classes and then treated ourselves to lunch at the nearby harbor. I remember our visit to Yosemite along with our mother. Of Marie's quiet strength while giving birth to her son. Of her humor and beauty.

The pilgrims are now singing: "Stay with us God in the night. Stay with us and we will be at peace. I want to give you these hands of mine. I want to give you this heart of mine."

I bow and give my hands, my heart to God, to Marie, to the world. 🌍

