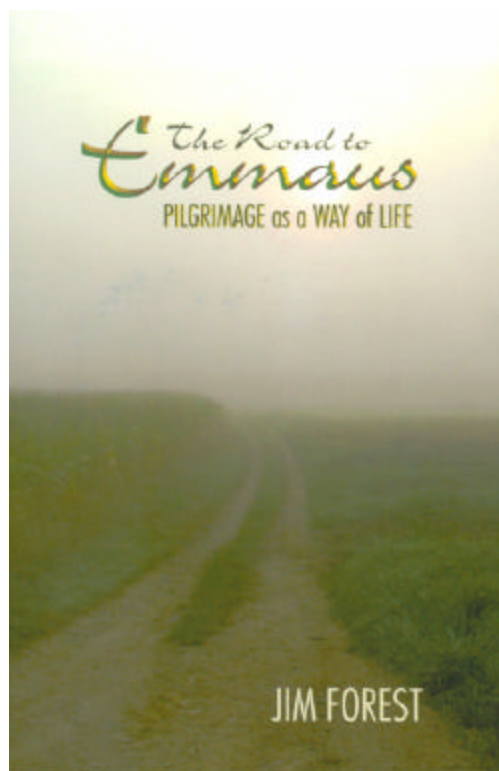


Jim Forest, *The Road to Emmaus: Pilgrimage As A Way of Life*, Maryknol, NY: Orbis Books, 2007. 190 pp.

By Dn. Lasha Tchantouridze



Evangelist Luke tells us a story of two disciples of Christ escaping from Jerusalem to Emmaus after His crucifixion. The men are troubled as they believe all is lost for them. However, Christ joins them and enters their conversation without disclosing His identity. The disciples only recognize Him in Emmaus, as they sit down to eat, and Christ takes bread, blesses and breaks it, and gives it to them. Their eyes open up and they recognize the Saviour, and they remember that their hearts were burning even as they walked together to Emmaus, and listened to His encouraging words. The friends immediately decide to return to Jerusalem and tell their amazing story to the apostles.

This is the story of the first Christian pilgrimage. It is also the core of the book by Jim Forest, who does his best at exploring the very deep of the phenomenon of pilgrimage. *The Road to Emmaus* is about many facets and incarnations of pilgrimage, but the book also makes it obvious that human life in this world itself is a form of pilgrimage.

The author of the book, Jim Forest, is an Orthodox Christian from the United States, who currently resides in the Netherlands. Before joining the Orthodox Church, Forest was a Roman Catholic, and he was active in groups that ministered to the poor and destitute in the United States. He identifies Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton, saintly 20th Century Roman Catholics, as major influences in his life. After joining Orthodoxy, Jim Forest, with his wife Nancy, has been active in the Orthodox Peace Fellowship of the Protection of the Mother of God. He is also Editor of the journal *In Communion* published by this organization <www.incommunion.org>.

The first Christian pilgrims in Luke's Gospel start their journey to Emmaus in desperation, and end it with joy and good news. They start in fear, but at the end of their pilgrimage fear is gone, and is replaced with great surprise and gladness. The road they take to Emmaus is probably very familiar to them, but the most unexpected thing happens on it. The two friends are very kind and hospitable to the stranger they meet on the road, and only after prayer they recognize the stranger, in fact, to be the risen Christ. The pilgrims start their trip with their hearts burdened by darkness, and end it in light, and on their way from one state to the other they brush shoulders with eternity.

Accordingly, *The Road to Emmaus* explores such crucial aspects of pilgrimage as "The Road," "Walking," "Praying," "The Other Side of Silence," "Saints of Pilgrimage," "Leaving Fear Behind," "Interruptions and Surprises." Forest also addresses topics of "Maps," "Mazes," "Relics," without which no pilgrimage could take place, especially in modern times. "Dark Places, Dark Paths," although often not attractive and uninviting, frequently open pilgrim's eyes and reveal unexpected. The final destination of a pilgrimage suddenly may change, and a pilgrim may come to a realization that the place "Right Where I'm Standing" acquired, for whatever reason, the most transcendental and profound meaning.

Forest introduces a rather unusual and novel reading of Christian, and more general human experiences as forms of pilgrimage. Two of such general experiences are given their own chapters: "The Pilgrimage of Illness," and "The Pilgrimage to the Front Door." It is true that personal

sickness and suffering could teach a person great deal more than the longest trip imaginable. Illness could be a blessing, as it could help one to awake and experience the world, whether seen or unseen, quite differently. Illness is also a mystery – we often do not know why people get sick and suffer. First and foremost, serious illness is a tough journey, sometimes to recovery and sometimes to the next world.

"The Pilgrimage to the Front Door" is probably the shortest of all pilgrimages, but very important nevertheless. The author starts the chapter with Jesus' words from Matthew 25:35: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." He talks about personal experiences at hospitality, both with his family, and as a member of Dorothy Day's family in New York. The pilgrimage to the front door is something many desire and all could accomplish, but very few actually do.

The central chapter of the book is "Thin Places." This is the concept used by the Celts to describe encounters very similar to those experienced by the friends on their journey to Emmaus. Forest reminds us that, indeed, "pilgrimage is the quest for... thin places." Thin places are those destinations well known from biblical or subsequent Christian experiences, the places where the most profound events of the last two millennia have taken place. However, thin places also have a habit showing in rather surprising locations – the two pilgrims from Luke's Gospel probably never thought that they would encounter God in Emmaus, of all places.

The book is lively and engaging. It has seventeen chapters (including an introduction), and a prayer for pilgrims. The chapters are short, but at the same time they are long enough for provoking thought and desire for further studies. The content is not focused exclusively on Orthodoxy, but includes examples from Roman Catholic experience, as well as wider Christian, secular, and literary examples. The book is highly recommended to those who are looking for an interesting book on the subject of pilgrimage. *The Road to Emmaus* will help those who are exploring possibilities and potentials of lay vocation within the Christian context.

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