

The Pilgrim Shell



The Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem has always been a pilgrim Order. Foremost in the mind of the first crusaders was a determination to pray at the Holy Places and thereby obtain forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation. For nine hundred years, members of the Order have traced the route from their homes to the Holy Land to marvel at the places where Our Lord was born, preached, died and was resurrected.

Lieutenancies are committed to promoting pilgrimages to the Holy Land as the best means of evidencing the Order's commitment to the Christian Community there. The Pilgrim Shell is the choicest decoration of the Order, and is awarded by the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem to any Equestrian Order Knight or Lady in good standing who makes a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and prays at the site of the Holy Sepulchre of our Risen Lord. It testifies that the Knight or Lady of the Order has seen the results of his or her charity and knows the importance of the mission of the Order and the fulfillment of the apostolate.

The identification of a seashell with a pilgrim is of ancient origin. In the beginning, the shell was never awarded or conferred on the recipient as it is today. Instead, it was a self-chosen decoration that the pilgrim proudly pinned on his own cloak, so that as he returned homeward other pilgrims would know that the wearer had made it to the place of pilgrimage. The Pilgrim Shell is a scalloped shell, the ancient badge of a pilgrim, oxidized in silver and overlaid with the Cross of Godfrey of Bouillon enabled in red and bordered in gold. It is worn on the outside of the cape, scalloped edge down, centered on the red cross of the Order.

Legend has it that Saint James the apostle had been the apostle of the Iberian Peninsula and had first brought the Good News of salvation to the people of that part of the world. He subsequently

made his way back to Palestine to die and after his death his body was returned to Spain to be buried in his own mission land in the city now called Santiago de Compostela in honor of the apostle. In the 9th century the place of his burial was rediscovered and gradually became a place of pilgrimage.

Before the first Crusade in the 11th century Christians were not allowed by the Seljuk Turks to visit the Holy Land and Jerusalem. As a result, the faithful started to flow from all parts of Europe by different routes and streams to pay homage to Our Lord at the spot where one of His apostles lay buried - Santiago de Compostela. Each year thousands of pilgrims visited and prayed at the tomb of St. James. Since Santiago de Compostela is so close to the sea, seashells were abundant and they became the badge of one who had traveled there. As they started the long walk home, the shell on their garment was a symbol of encouragement to those they passed who were on their way to visit the Tomb of St. James.

As history changed, Pilgrims once again began the arduous trips to Palestine and the land of Jesus, but the Sea Shell of Santiago de Compostela had become the sign of a successful pilgrimage, and out of faith and tradition it remained the badge of pilgrims. To this day the Pilgrim Shell is the most coveted award to be earned by a member of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem who has made a prayerful pilgrimage to the Holy Land.



Photo above is part of a mosaic representing the country of Portugal, adorning a wall at the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth. (Taken by C. Monahan during 2015 Lieutenancy Pilgrimage.)