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"This is a glimpse of Paradise": Encountering Lourdes Through Serial and Multisited Pilgrimage

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PILGRIMAGE PALIMPSESTS

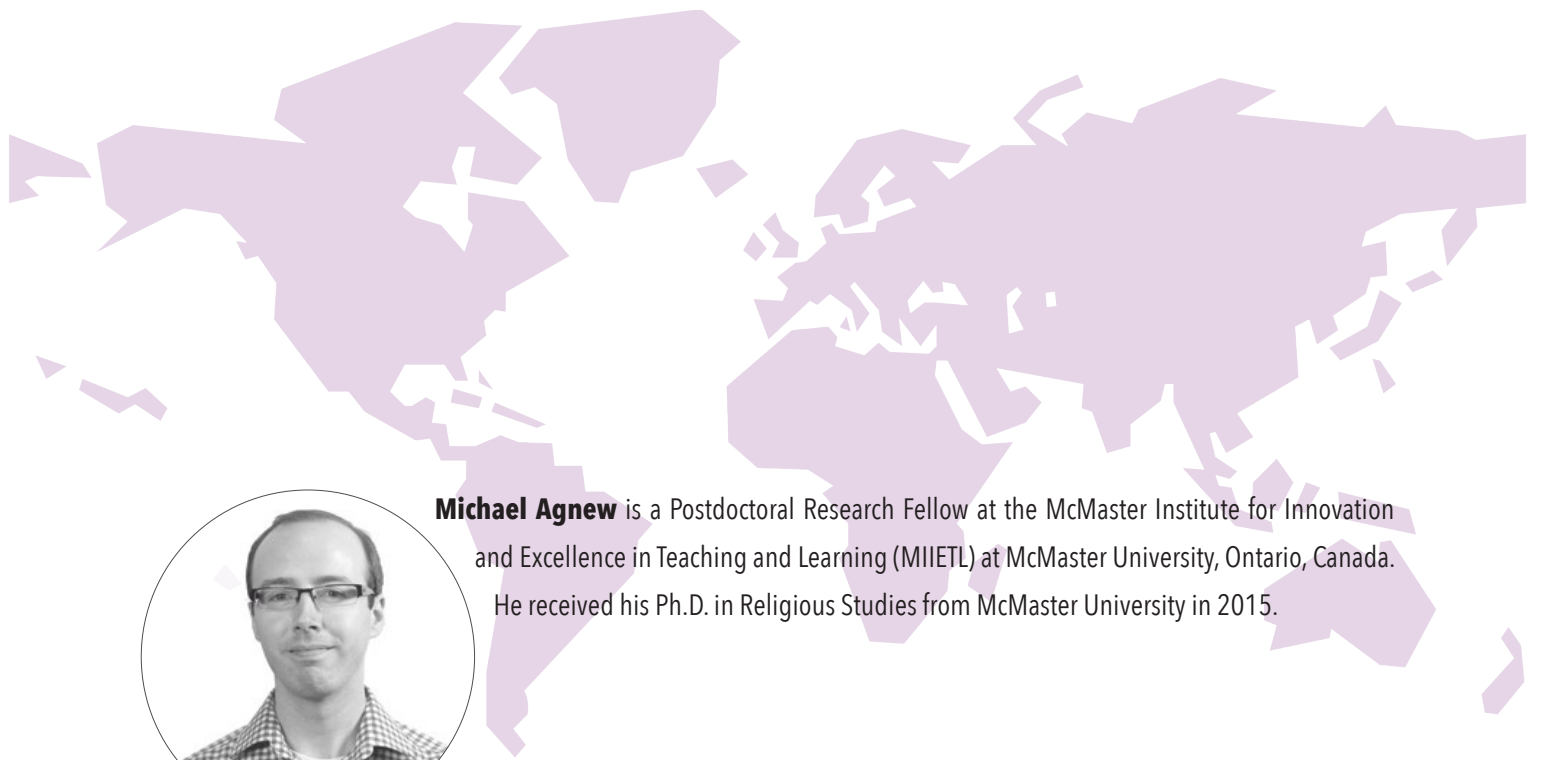
Storytelling and Intersubjectivity
Across Multiple Shrines, Sites, and Routes

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MICHAEL AGNEW

"This is a glimpse of Paradise":
Encountering Lourdes Through Serial
and Multisited Pilgrimage



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The Diocese of Westminster's annual pilgrimage to Lourdes in 2012 was not off to an auspicious start. Train delays, detours through central Paris as a result of the Tour de France, and a missed connection all extended an already long train journey by several hours. Some passengers became increasingly agitated, registering their complaints with representatives from the tour company as the day wore on. Yet once the train passed through Pau, the last station before arriving in Lourdes, the mood shift was palpable as pilgrims began organizing their belongings, excitedly chatting, and gazing out the window into the darkness in anticipation. When the train began to slow as we made our approach into Lourdes, everyone quickly rushed to the right side of the train car and pressed up against the glass. Seeming to appear out of the darkness, just visible beyond the trees and rooftops, was the glow of the shrine, illuminated by hundreds of candles. Some passengers had broad smiles, others appeared to wipe tears of joy from their faces, and others still quietly broke out into the Lourdes hymn. As we pulled into the station and began to disembark from the train, I quickly became disoriented trying to navigate the pressing sea of people and the chaos of trying to unload all the luggage of the less-able pilgrims as quickly as possible before the train began to move again

Our Lady of Lourdes
Sanctuary / Photo:
Thomas M. Landy

toward Tarbes. Others however had an established sense of how to proceed, and calmly directed me to the coaches that would take us to our respective hotels. I was still a relative newcomer compared to others, whom I would later learn had been going to Lourdes for decades and were deeply familiar with the rhythms of the shrine and town. It would become clear that for some of these pilgrims, Lourdes had become more than a place to journey to once a year to recharge the spiritual batteries; over the course of several pilgrimages, it was now home.

Based on participant observation fieldwork and interviews conducted in 2012 and 2013 with pilgrims travelling from the United Kingdom to the Marian apparition shrine of Lourdes,¹ this article focuses on the experience of serial pilgrims,² those who have made the journey to Lourdes repeatedly for several years, and in some

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- 1 I first visited Lourdes in August-September 2011 in order to conduct preliminary fieldwork. Subsequently, following scholarship which has drawn attention to the unbounded and mobile quality of pilgrimage sites, and has called for an increased focus on the lives of pilgrims outside the shrine and pilgrimage events, I decided to take a more comprehensive approach to my fieldwork (see Jill Dubisch, *In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender, and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), Nancy Louise Frey, *Pilgrim Stories: On and Off the Road to Santiago* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), and Ian Reader, *Making Pilgrimages: Meaning and Practice in Shikoku* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2006). I based myself in southern England which allowed for a comprehensive perspective on the experience of pilgrims to Lourdes, enabling me to meet with and interview pilgrims and pilgrimage organizers preparing to go to Lourdes prior to the pilgrimage, to accompany them on the journey to and from Lourdes, and to conduct follow-up interviews in the months following their return to England. Accordingly, during the 2012 and 2013 pilgrimage seasons I joined six pilgrimages to Lourdes (two with the Diocese of Westminster, two with the Catholic Association, and two with Tangney Tours, a pilgrimage tour operator based in Kent). All six of these pilgrimages consisted of men and women, youth groups, volunteer caregivers, assisted pilgrims, and families of all ages, and interviews with pilgrims ranged from fifteen minutes to over two hours in length. Interviews were recorded with a small digital recorder, and when it was not feasible to conduct a live interview, alternative arrangements were made using email and Skype. Over the course of my fieldwork, 82 interviews were conducted with pilgrimage organizers, volunteer caregivers, assisted pilgrims, and "hotel pilgrims," those who were not assisted pilgrims and who were not formally involved in volunteer caregiving (Volunteer Caregivers: 32, Hotel Pilgrims: 25, Assisted Pilgrims: 17, Pilgrimage Organizers: 8).
- 2 See Nancy Louise Frey's fine ethnography on serial pilgrimage to the Camino de Santiago in north-western Spain in *Pilgrim Stories*, as well as Nancy L. Frey, "Stories of the Return: Pilgrimage and its Aftermaths," in *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism*, ed. Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004). Ian Reader has also written extensively on serial pilgrimage as it relates to the Shikoku pilgrimage circuit in Japan. See Reader, *Making Pilgrimages* and Ian Reader, *Pilgrimage in the Marketplace* (New York: Routledge, 2014).



cases up to four or five times per year. Since the first organized pilgrimage from England to Lourdes in 1883,³ the Marian apparition site has been the premier destination for English Catholic pilgrims, with several diocesan pilgrimages, religious travel companies, and charitable organizations facilitating the journey each year. Serial pilgrimages to Lourdes are often a family affair, spanning multiple generations, and become compulsive for those who undertake them.

Yet the stories of several Lourdes pilgrims reveal that they do not feel this compulsive need to go to Lourdes alone. Many frequently navigate the European circuit of Marian pilgrimage shrines, including Walsingham in England, Knock in Ireland, Fatima in Portugal, Czestochowa in Poland, and Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina.⁴ Some pilgrims are self-described “pilgrimage junkies,” perpetual pilgrims always on the road toward a sacred center, and in their vivid stories about their experience at Lourdes, pilgrims often made direct comparisons between Lourdes

3 Although there is evidence that individual English pilgrims began making the trek to Lourdes in the years following Bernadette's visions in 1858, the first organized English national pilgrimage to the shrine did not occur until May 1883, in order to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the apparitions. This national pilgrimage was explicitly linked in the English Catholic publication *The Tablet* with aspirations by Catholics to re-establish England as the so-called Dowry of Mary, stemming from the belief that England had occupied a privileged place in the heart of the Virgin Mary due to its strong Marian devotion prior to the English Reformation, “The English Pilgrimage to Lourdes,” *The Tablet*, June 23, 1883, 24. See also Christopher Highley, *Catholics Writing the Nation in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), David Womersley, *Divinity and State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), and John Saward, John Morrill, and Michael Tomko, ed., *Firmly I Believe and Truly: The Spiritual Tradition of Catholic England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

4 The European Marian Network was established in 2003 with the encouragement of the Holy See, in order to support the work of the 21 best-known Catholic Marian shrines in Europe, with one shrine being selected to represent each country (ex: Lourdes for France, Fatima for Portugal, Knock for Ireland, etc.). Officials from each shrine meet annually to share best practices for shrine management, with the most recent meeting being held in Fatima in 2017 to mark the 100th anniversary of the Marian apparitions at the Portuguese town. See William H. Swatos, Jr., “Religious Pilgrimage, Pilgrimage Spirituality, and Everyday Life,” in *Religion, Spirituality, and Everyday Practice*, ed. Giuseppe Giordan and William H. Swatos, Jr. (New York: Springer, 2011), Catrien Notermans, “Interconnected and Gendered Mobilities: African Migrants on Pilgrimage to Our Lady of Lourdes in France,” in *Gender, Nation and Religion in European Pilgrimage*, ed. Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2016), and Chris Maunder, *Our Lady of the Nations: Apparitions of Mary in 20th Century Catholic Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). It should be noted that the shrine at Medjugorje, a Marian apparition site which has not been officially sanctioned by the Holy See, is not an official member of the European Marian Network.



Our Lady of Lourdes
Grotto / Photo:
Thomas M. Landy

and other shrines they had visited, from the climate, the food, the people, to the meanings they had drawn from each journey. Stories of their experience at Lourdes were inscribed with and mediated by memories from a lifetime of past pilgrimages, typically to Lourdes itself but also to other (mostly Marian) pilgrimage sites.

This article suggests that pilgrims' stories underscore that a key motivation for serial pilgrimage, to Lourdes and other sacred centers, is the desire on the part of pilgrims to access *thin spaces*,⁵ unique and privileged sites that vertically integrate the celestial and the mundane, where the transcendent is believed to have broken into time. By virtue of the Virgin Mary's reported apparitions to Bernadette at Lourdes in 1858,

5 In the course of conducting my fieldwork, I first heard the term "thin space" used by a pilgrim to describe Lourdes, who was quoting her parish priest as I explore later in this article. This idea is replete in pilgrims' own written accounts of pilgrimage and sacred sites, and the use of the term by Lourdes pilgrims is not unique, given the term's association with Celtic and New Age spirituality. What is different at Lourdes I would argue however, is its use in referring to idealized patterns of human relation that presage an encounter with the divine, approaching what Robert Orsi refers to as "abundant events," marked by radical presence or realness, "Abundant History: Marian Apparitions as Alternative Modernity," in *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World*, ed. Anna-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen, and Catrien Notermans (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 220. See also Ann Armbricht, *Thin Places: A Pilgrimage Home* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), and Avril Madrell, "Mobilising the Landscape and the Body in Search of the Spiritual: Journeying, Performance, and Community," in *Christian Pilgrimage, Landscape and Heritage: Journeying to the Sacred*, ed. Avril Madrell, Veronica della Dora, Alessandro Scafi, and Heather Walton (New York: Routledge, 2015).

the site has been set apart by Catholics as a place “where heaven touched earth,” where the sacred geography of Lourdes mediates engagement with the divine order for pilgrims. This understanding of Lourdes as a thin space is not only grounded in the physical space of the site of the apparitions, but perhaps more importantly, in pilgrims’ general assessment of the plane of human interactions occurring during a pilgrimage to Lourdes, distinguished by its valorization of the sick and suffering as well as of volunteer care work. Several pilgrims highlighted their witnessing of, and participation in, this idealized, inclusive moral vision as affording them a glimpse of Paradise. It was an opportunity to transcend the circumstances of their quotidian lives and touch the face of God, by enacting a Christic pattern of human relations which together point to the promise of the Kingdom of Heaven. From their perspective, they return to Lourdes on multiple pilgrimages as it provides them with a far more immediate, and perhaps more importantly, authentic engagement with the sacred than is possible at other shrines they have visited,⁶ which do not valorize the sick and suffering, or possess the same medical infrastructure to host the sick and support this emphasis on volunteer care work, to the extent that Lourdes does.

6 The motif of thin spaces is also useful as a heuristic lens for exploring the range of modes by which the trope of authenticity mediates pilgrims’ engagement both with sites such as the grotto that are understood as especially sacred, and also with other pilgrims, most notably through the act of caregiving. The trope of authenticity recurred frequently in the narratives and discourse of pilgrims I met on journeys to Lourdes. The term authenticity however is imperfect. Tourism studies in particular has struggled with the question of whether authenticity, as it was first proposed by Dean MacCannell, has become a tired, slippery, overworked trope no longer useful in understanding the tourist experience. Some have argued for its limited utility, others for its complete abandonment. However scholars in tourism studies such as Wang as well as Kim and Jamal have attempted to reinterpret authenticity and re-establish its status as an appropriate mode for understanding the motivations of tourists and their experience of the locales they visit. See Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), Erik Cohen, “Traditions on the Qualitative Sociology of Tourism,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 15 (1988). See also Simon Coleman and Mike Crang, “Grounded Tourists, Travelling Theory,” in *Tourism: Between Place and Performance*, ed. Simon Coleman and Mike Crang (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002); Yvette Reisinger and Carol Steiner, “Reconceptualizing Object Authenticity,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 33 (2005); and Yaniv Belhassen and Kellee Caton, “Authenticity Matters,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 33 (2006); Edward M. Bruner, “Abraham Lincoln as Authentic Reproduction: A Critique of Postmodernism,” *American Anthropologist* 96 (1994). See also Edward M. Bruner, “The Transformation of Self in Tourism,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 18 (1991); Edward M. Bruner, *Culture on Tour: Ethnographies of Travel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Ning Wang, “Rethinking Authenticity in Tourism Experience,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 26 (1999): 351; and Hyounggon Kim and Tazim Jamal, “Touristic Quest for Existential Authenticity,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 34 (2006): 181.

Attending to the nature of serial and multisited pilgrimage underscores that pilgrimage shrines are not fixed, bounded sites. Despite the insistence in early pilgrimage scholarship on understanding shrines as extraordinary, far-removed sites,⁷ generally unfamiliar and opposed to the pilgrim's everyday religious and social life, they indeed become porous as pilgrims travel between them, with cross-currents flowing back and forth. They become intimately familiar, a storehouse for memories of pilgrimages past, and sites for continued spiritual refreshment. Pilgrimages to multiple shrines punctuate the spiritual journey of the serial pilgrim, and as this article will show, also provide a means by which some shrines are contrasted and privileged over others, revealing the values and motivations underlying serial pilgrimage.

"IF I CAN BE OF SERVICE HERE, THEN BRING ME BACK"

In the years following the reported apparitions of the Virgin Mary to Bernadette Soubirous in the Pyrenean town of Lourdes in 1858, the geographical footprint of the small shrine that had developed quickly expanded, in order to meet the needs of ever-growing numbers of pilgrims attracted to the site by the promise of miraculous healings.⁸ From the grotto of Massabielle where the series of visions occurred grew a network of grand basilicas, intimate chapels, stations of the cross, baths fed by the miraculous spring uncovered by Bernadette, accommodations for sick pilgrims, and paths that run along the river bank.⁹ The shrine now attracts over

7 For a representative selection of early pilgrimage scholarship that emphasized this conception of pilgrimage sites, see most notably the work of Victor and Edith Turner, including Victor Turner, "The Center out There: Pilgrim's Goal," *History of Religions* 12 (1973); Victor Turner, "Pilgrimages as Social Processes," in *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974); Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

8 For recent scholarship on Lourdes and healing see Jacalyn Duffin, "Religion and Medicine, Again: JHMAS Commentary on 'The Lourdes Medical Cures Revisited,'" *Journal of the History of Medicine* 69 (2014); Alana Harris, "Lourdes and Holistic Spirituality: Contemporary Catholicism, The Therapeutic, and Religious Thermalism," *Culture and Religion* 14 (2013); Bernard François, Esther M. Sternberg, and Elizabeth Fee, "The Lourdes Medical Cures Revisited," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 69 (2012); Jason Szabo, "Seeing is Believing?: The Form and Substance of French Medical Debates over Lourdes," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 76 (2002); and Wil Gesler, "Lourdes: Healing in a Place of Pilgrimage," *Health & Place* 2 (1996).

9 The early development of the Lourdes shrine in the decades immediately following the apparitions is chronicled by Ruth Harris in her definitive text *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (New York: Viking, 1999). Situating the apparitions at Lourdes within the context of other, similar



six million pilgrims per year, primarily between the months of April and October, and included in these numbers are thousands of pilgrims from the United Kingdom,¹⁰ who go to Lourdes individually, with package tours organized by religious travel companies such as Tangney Tours, Mancunia Travel, and Pax Travel, as well as individual diocesan and parish pilgrimages. During the course of my research I joined the Westminster diocesan pilgrimage, which includes most of London north of the Thames, and the Catholic Association (CA) annual pilgrimage, which consists of diocesan groups from across southern England as well as the British Province of the Carmelite religious order and students from Stonyhurst, a private Jesuit coeducational college. Given the reputation of Lourdes as a healing shrine where dramatic miraculous cures have been reported, both the Westminster and Catholic Association have a particular focus on the sick, elderly, and disabled. To assist pilgrims on the journey to and from Lourdes and during their stay in the town, professional medical staff are joined by hundreds of volunteer caregivers or helpers, tasked with pushing wheelchairs, assisting with bathing and dressing, and simply providing companionship.

Helpers go to Lourdes to volunteer as caregivers to sick pilgrims inspired by a variety of motivating factors. This also holds for serial pilgrims, both volunteer helpers

apparitions in the late 19th and early 20th century is Sandra Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary: Visions of Mary from La Salette to Medjugorje* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

- 10 The Sanctuary's most recent attendance estimates from the 2011 pilgrimage season place the total number of visitors to the shrine that year at nearly 6.3 million, an increase of 3.2% from 2010. Breaking down these numbers, the Sanctuary officials refer to so-called "recorded pilgrims," those pilgrims that go to Lourdes with organized groups registered with the Sanctuary, representing approximately five hundred pilgrimages and some 4-500 other groups. Nearly 800,000 recorded pilgrims travelled to Lourdes in 2011, and this statistic includes approximately 116,000 young people, 87,500 hospitaliers (pilgrims that go to Lourdes to volunteer), 53,600 sick pilgrims, 13,500 priests, and 437 bishops and other dignitaries. The geographic spread of these recorded pilgrims demonstrates an unsurprising predominance of western European pilgrimages, with pilgrims from France accounting for nearly 42% of visitors to the shrine, Italy - 25%, Spain - 7%, United Kingdom - 4%, and Ireland at 3%, with pilgrims from Germany, Poland, and Belgium hovering around 2% of the total. Outside of western Europe, North America represents the highest number of recorded pilgrims at Lourdes, coming in at 2.1%. The Sanctuary has also observed an increasing preference for individual and family pilgrimages to Lourdes as opposed to larger group pilgrimages. "2011 Attendance Statistics and the Position on Transport," *Sanctuaire Notre-Dame de Lourdes*, <http://fr.lourdes-france.org/sites/default/files/pdf/presse/FICHE%203%20statistiques%202011%20et%20point%20transport%20EN.pdf>

as well as general lay pilgrims, who return to Lourdes year after year, and in some cases as many as four to five times a year. While I point to the testimonies below by pilgrim-caregivers as representative of general perspectives of volunteers on their own motivations for working as caregivers at Lourdes, I should be clear that such themes do not capture the complex amalgam of factors which together animate the decision by volunteers to serve at Lourdes. As Robert Wuthnow argues, "Any number of motives for caring may be conceived, but only some are credited with importance in an account that emphasizes situational specifics...The accounts of our motives, when all is said, are basically stories – highly personalized stories, not assertions of high-flown values, but formulaic expressions of ourselves."¹¹ In addition to being motivated by the Christian command to love and serve one's neighbor, volunteers may also go to Lourdes because friends from their school or their diocese are going, and they are simply along for the ride, for a week in another country experiencing something strange and novel. For some it may be the social element that is most attractive, since volunteers often enjoy working to exhaustion during the day then letting loose in the evenings in one of the cafés or bars which line the streets of Lourdes leading to the Sanctuary.¹²

In addition to a faith imperative being one of the key motivations for serving as a caregiver at Lourdes, the desire to "be as Christ" in service to one's neighbor in fulfillment of the scriptural command, many helpers also referred to the

11 Robert Wuthnow, *Acts of Compassion: Caring for Others and Helping Ourselves* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 84. For a representative sample of the spectrum of research on religion and volunteerism see Marc A. Musick and John Wilson, *Volunteers: A Social Profile* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008); Robert Wuthnow, *Learning to Care: Elementary Kindness in an Age of Indifference* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Ram A. Cnaan, et al., "Religious People, Religious Congregations, and Volunteerism in Human Services," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 22 (1993); John Wilson and Thomas Janoski, "The Contribution of Religion to Volunteer Work," *Sociology of Religion* 56 (1995); and Christopher Einolf, "The Link Between Religion and Helping Others: The Role of Values, Ideas, and Language," *Sociology of Religion* 72 (2011).

12 The quote by Victor and Edith Turner that "a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist," precipitated a series of theoretical reflections on the theme of tourism and its correspondence (or lack thereof) to pilgrimage. For literature on the "touristic" elements of pilgrimage to Lourdes, see namely John Eade, "Pilgrimage and Tourism at Lourdes, France," *Annals of Tourism Research* 19 (1992); and Suzanne Kaufman, *Consuming Visions: Mass Culture and the Lourdes Shrine* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).



reciprocal nature of their relationship with the Assisted Pilgrims¹³ assigned to their care. Indeed, Lourdes has been described as having at its heart an “economy of caring exchange.”¹⁴ During formal interviews I would ask volunteer caregivers whether or in what way they found their work in the Accueil with sick and disabled pilgrims rewarding. Some resisted my framing of their work as potentially rewarding, attempting to make it clear to me that they did not choose to work in Lourdes for themselves, with some form of benefit in mind. They wanted to emphasize the selfless nature of the act, or would refer to more general benefits such as the sense of community and fellowship established in the Accueil,¹⁵ preferring to extend these rewards to the pilgrimage as a whole, rather than as a direct individual benefit drawn from interaction with the Assisted Pilgrims. Yet several helpers did perceive their work as not only gratifying, but deeply meaningful in the exchange that occurs between those providing care and those receiving it. This view is evoked by Caroline, a woman in her early thirties who was making her third pilgrimage to Lourdes as a helper:

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- 13 *Malades* has been the historical term used to refer to sick pilgrims at Lourdes, and it is still in use by the Westminster diocesan pilgrimage to describe those pilgrims staying in the Accueil Marie Saint-Frai and requiring medical assistance and informal care, provided by volunteer helpers. The Catholic Association alternatively uses the term “assisted pilgrims” to describe this same category of pilgrim. It is defined in their handbook for helpers as “the preferred term for those who are ill or disabled who are staying in the Accueil and hotels, needing assistance from our team of helpers.” I privilege the term “assisted pilgrim” throughout this chapter. Catholic Association, “Helpers Handbook,” http://www.catholicassociation.co.uk/hospitalite/documents/CAHelpersHandbook_final.pdf.
- 14 Sarah Goldingay, Paul Dieppe, and Miguel Farias, “And the Pain Just Disappeared into Insignificance: The Healing Response in Lourdes - Performance, Psychology, and Caring,” *International Review of Psychiatry* 26 (2014): 316.
- 15 An *accueil* is a facility at Lourdes that is neither a hotel nor a hospital, but rather serves as special accommodations adapted to the needs of sick and disabled pilgrims. There are two *accueil* at Lourdes, the Accueil St. Frai and the Accueil Notre-Dame. The Accueil St. Frai was the first hospital facility for sick pilgrims in Lourdes, established in 1874 by Marie Saint-Frai and Father Dominique Ribes, who also founded the Order of the Daughters of Our Lady of Sorrows, still charged with operating the St. Frai. Situated outside the shrine domain in the town of Lourdes, the St. Frai can accommodate up to 414 sick and disabled pilgrims. It was significantly remodeled in 1998. The Accueil Notre-Dame is a massive state-of-the-art facility, built in 1997 along the riverbank of the Gave de Pau, opposite the grotto. Containing 904 beds in rooms that can accommodate one to six pilgrims, the Notre-Dame is fitted with accessible toilets and showers, is connected to an oxygen-supply system, and has alarms at each bed for assistance during the night. Like the St. Frai, it has dining rooms and nurses’ stations, as well as storage areas for wheelchairs and other equipment.

With both the Assisted Pilgrims and the fellow helpers, there is a general sense of community. I think my experience in the UK often with even how the Church is structured, there is often a feeling of a lack of community, even in the Church. I think the draw for me is this is a place where people are really coming with all sorts of different intentions, and a lot of difference between cultures and ages and disabilities, there is a real sense that Our Lady is bringing and meeting people here in Lourdes. She's meeting us here and allowing us to meet each other.¹⁶

This emphasis on Lourdes as a heightened and particularly efficacious field for relation-making is key for serial pilgrims, in drawing caregivers to return to Lourdes time and time again in order to enter into an idealized Christian community. Victor and Edith Turner's suggestion that inherent in the pilgrimage experience is the formation of *communitas*, an idealized state produced by the dissolution of social structures and boundaries and the formation of spontaneous and egalitarian interpersonal relations,¹⁷ was frequently evoked in many of the testimonies I elicited from pilgrims. This point is stressed again by another caregiver, who has been volunteering with the Catholic Association pilgrimage as well as others from southern England for over thirteen years. Perhaps more explicitly than other helpers, she makes the association between the sense of community that develops from her care work at Lourdes and a sense of the shrine and the people she encounters

¹⁶ Interview, August 28, 2012.

¹⁷ Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*, 39. Turner and Turner's classic understanding of pilgrimage sites as an ideal ritual space for fostering *communitas* has received considerable scrutiny in the subsequent pilgrimage scholarship. Eade and Sallnow critiqued Turner's notion of *communitas* as an idealizing discourse about pilgrimage rather than an empirical description of it, and as a theory that "prejudges the complex character of the phenomenon but also imposes a spurious homogeneity on the practice of pilgrimage..." John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow, "Introduction," in *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*, ed. John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow (London: Routledge, 1991), 5. Yet Simon Coleman suggests that the now classic binary in pilgrimage studies between *communitas* and Eade and Sallnow's theory of contestation has served as a theoretical strait-jacket stifling development in the field. He writes: "Neither *communitas* nor contestation should themselves become fetishized in order to produce neatly symmetrical anthropological theory, made up of views that appear to constitute a simple binary opposition." "Do You Believe in Pilgrimage?: *Communitas*, Contestation and Beyond," *Anthropological Theory* 2 (2002): 361. I follow Coleman in suggesting that it is important to expand our gaze beyond this now classic theoretical tension.



there as constituting a second home and family:

I think the first year I came back...I came back the second year because the first time I was here I was ill, and missed quite a few things that I wanted to do myself, to sort of understand the place. I kinda feel at home here, it's the closest to what...Christ calls us to love God and to love our neighbor as our self, and to me this is the place where you see that happening the most. Everyone is treated with respect, and we as helpers learn from those we're caring for as well.¹⁸

The apparent mantra that I heard continuously repeated by Lourdes helpers as they understand their relationship to sick pilgrims, the idea that "I wasn't helping, but being helped," is evoked here. Moreover, it is very clearly linked to a sense of community for this woman, and most importantly for the purposes of this article, a sense of feeling at home in Lourdes, informed by a deep familiarity with the place established over thirteen years of pilgrimages as well as her experience of the Christian love command, fully realized in a unique and highly charged environment. Her faith and its embodied enactment is grounded in Lourdes through recurrent practice, and for this reason she considers the shrine to be akin to a second home.¹⁹

Similar sentiments were echoed by other helpers as well, including Danielle,

18 Interview, August 27, 2013.

19 Indeed, as pilgrimage studies moved beyond Turner's conceptualization of pilgrimage sites as the distant and remote "centre out there," subsequent ethnographic treatments of pilgrimage have recognized the resonance of this concept of pilgrim sites as second homes or true homes. This is particularly true for serial pilgrims, where familiarity with the sacred landscape grows over several pilgrimages to the same site. See Simon Coleman, "Meanings of Movement, Place and Home at Walsingham," *Culture and Religion* 1 (2000); Simon Coleman, "Pilgrimage to 'England's Nazareth': Landscapes of Myth and Memory at Walsingham," in *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism*, ed. Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Thomas Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Thomas Tweed, *America's Church: The National Shrine and Catholic Presence in the Nation's Capital* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Zlatko Skrbis, "From Migrants to Pilgrim Tourists: Diasporic Imagining and Visits to Medjugorje," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33 (2007); and John Eade and Joanna Krotofil, "Home and Away in an Increasingly Multicultural Britain: Pilgrimage, Parish, and Polish Migration," in *Gender, Nation and Religion in European Pilgrimage*, ed. Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans (London: Routledge, 2013).

a member of the Core Care Team for the Catholic Association pilgrimage who also provided sign language interpretation for hearing impaired pilgrims during masses and other pilgrimage events:

I wouldn't want to come not as a helper. I've always been as a helper. And I think once you get it into your blood you just come back and come back and come back. And I've made a lot of good friends here. And every time that I come to Lourdes, on the last day I go to the Crowned Virgin statue in the square and just say, 'Ok, if you want me to come back next year and help, bring me back again.' I never say, 'Yes! I'm definitely coming back,' but it's always been, 'Into your hands, Mary. If you want me back, if I can be of service here, then bring me back.'²⁰

Danielle too feels an acute sense of being called, of being moved by a force beyond herself to volunteer as a caregiver at Lourdes. Regarding the question of motivation for volunteer work, here Danielle perceives the matter as largely beyond her control. If she is to come back and help, Mary will call her and make it happen. Danielle also refers to the addictive nature of pilgrimage generally and helping specifically which I will return to shortly, that comes with the friendships that are forged and the meaning that is derived from care work.

"I WILL GO HERE EVERY YEAR UNTIL I DIE"

Beyond a general sense of community that is understood to be established during the pilgrimage, highly individualized factors external to group dynamics contribute to pilgrims' decisions whether or not to return, including a felt sense of obligation, that out of devotion to Mary and most especially in their requests for help or acts of thanksgiving, they must go to Lourdes continually.

This characteristic of serial pilgrims is powerfully reflected in the story of Dennis. I first met Dennis in the atrium of the Accueil St-Frai when I volunteered with the Westminster pilgrimage in July 2013. While most of the group of helpers and sick pilgrims were out either exploring the shrine and browsing the shops, or relaxing

²⁰ Interview, August 29, 2013.



Photo:
Thomas M. Landy

with a café au lait or pint at one of the many restaurants and bars that line the streets leading to the shrine, I was asked to stay with the five Assisted Pilgrims who had decided to rest up in the Accueil for the Marian torchlight procession later that evening. While I sat near the nurses' station, taking advantage of the rare quiet time during the pilgrimage to flesh out my field notes, Dennis shuffled out of his room gripping his walker and asked if he could join me. As we struck up a conversation and I told him about my research interest in Lourdes, he responded: "Well then I have a story for you! I sometimes still can't believe it myself!" He elaborated to tell me that he had first come to Lourdes with the Westminster pilgrimage two years earlier, not knowing what to expect. When he arrived he was at first put off by what his Anglican upbringing considered to be Marian idolatry, viscerally opposed to it in any shape or form. When the Hail Mary was recited at various pilgrimage services and functions, he was reluctant to participate, and the glow-in-the-dark statues of Our Lady of Lourdes in the display windows of the religious article shops were repugnant to him. By the conclusion of the pilgrimage however, he found himself utterly transformed in his understanding of Marian devotion, giving full-throated renditions of Ave Maria. This shift for Dennis would underscore a more dramatic transformation to come. As Dennis explains:

By the time I came here the first time, I had lost more than fifty percent of my kidney function, I'd lost some liver function, my blood sugar was high, my cholesterol was high...I was in a mess. I'd reached the stage where I needed

monthly blood tests to make sure I wasn't about to die that month. And after Lourdes I went for my monthly blood test, had it, went back a week later to see the doctor to find out what the results were, and she sat and looked at the computer with absolute astonishment written on her face. And she said, "Your kidney function is normal! Your creatinine levels are normal, your blood sugar is absolutely perfect." She went on and on like this, and I thought... "Wow!" And it was for me an indication of how Mary works. Quietly, behind the scenes, unostentatiously. She gets you to go, helps you, and doesn't mind whether you want to be here or not, she wants you, here with her. And the doctor said, "You better go back to Lourdes next year!" and I thought, I must go next year as a pilgrimage of thanks for what was done for me in the first year. And that's why I came this year. But now I like Lourdes so much, God willing I will come here every year until I die.²¹

Dennis alludes to an element of the pilgrimage experience I quickly noticed was being continually referenced in both my interviews with informants and casual conversations, as well as something I admittedly began to gradually sense within myself: that is, the highly addictive nature of pilgrimage to the shrine. For many of the caregivers, it is those relationships formed with the sick pilgrims whom they serve as well as their fellow helpers that require renewal each summer and which drive their desire to return. Others describe being called back, being pulled back, or a burning need within them that is inexplicable. Beyond the attraction of community and the relationships formed at Lourdes, as well as the need to return in repeated ritual acts of thanksgiving, serial pilgrimages to Lourdes in a sense become almost inexplicably compulsive for those who undertake them.

In *Pilgrim Stories*, based on her research on the Camino de Santiago in the early 1990s, Nancy Frey observes that for pilgrims who return to traverse The Way, many describe themselves in very similar fashion to contemporary serial pilgrims to Lourdes, as "hooked" or "addicted" to pilgrimage, in a sense akin to dependence on a drug. Regarding this drug analogy however, Frey cautions: "The danger is that as a drug its impact becomes soporific and the pilgrimage a habit (familiar, well-

²¹ Interview, July 27, 2013.



known, and safe) rather than a stimulant for self-exploration.”²² While this may indeed be a risk for some, I am not convinced this risk is borne out in the self-reflexive descriptions of pilgrims. When I would ask serial pilgrims whether their repeated visits to Lourdes opened up a possibility for the shrine to become stale, routine, and even counter-productive to their faith life, my question was often very quickly dismissed. John, an Assisted Pilgrim with the Westminster diocese, was insistent that if he developed any such feelings, he would stop going to Lourdes: “Every year, every experience is a new one, and you’ve got memories of the old ones to rely on as well. I do tend to nearly still cry in the baths, and at the Blessed Sacrament Procession I am still just so overwhelmed with how much God loves me. And it’s never spoilt for me, the fact that I keep on coming. And I don’t just come once a year. Every time it’s...what’s the word...it’s magic, but it isn’t magic, you know what I mean? It’s wonderful! And each time you experience things afresh, or the same as before, and it’s just as good as it was last time and maybe even a little better.”²³ While Lourdes has indeed become familiar and well-known for John, there is always something new to be discovered at the shrine and in his meetings with first-time pilgrims and helpers. With his existing store of memories from past pilgrimages in place, John is still able to find meaning and new ways of engagement in his serial treks to Lourdes.

"LOURDES OFFERS MORE THAN JUST A PILGRIMAGE"

Yet the stories of several Lourdes pilgrims reveal that they do not feel this compulsive need to go to Lourdes alone. As I noted at the beginning of this article, the vast majority of pilgrims I encountered in Lourdes reported frequently navigating the European circuit of Marian pilgrimage shrines, most notably Walsingham in England, Fatima in Portugal, and Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Some reported travelling even as far as the Marian shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, as well as the Oratory dedicated to St. Joseph in Montreal, Canada. In fact, every pilgrim I interviewed over the course of my fieldwork had visited at least one other Catholic shrine, and often more than once. Some pilgrims have

²² Frey, *Pilgrim Stories*, 211-212.

²³ Interview, July 24, 2013.

become self-described “pilgrimage junkies,” perpetual pilgrims always on the road toward a sacred center, and in their vivid stories about their experience at Lourdes, pilgrims often made direct comparisons between Lourdes and other shrines they had visited, and in some cases an experience at one shrine served as the catalyst for a visit to another. Pilgrimages to multiple shrines punctuated the spiritual journeys of several serial pilgrims, and also provided a means by which some shrines are contrasted and privileged over others.

In discussing their visits to other Marian shrines, some pilgrims were careful to illustrate how all of these pilgrimage centers were connected to one another as sites of encounter with the Virgin Mary. In fact, some pilgrims were at times defensive in arguing that despite their status as sites where the Catholic cult of devotion to the Virgin Mary is, in its sensual and perhaps medieval forms, most acutely expressed, that these shrines ultimately are pathways to Christ and are inherently Christocentric in their focus. Isabelle, an Assisted Pilgrim with the Westminster pilgrimage, framed her visits to multiple European Marian shrines this way:

Whatever title of Our Lady that we find ourselves devoted to, for me, whatever shrine in the world I end up going to, you can find her there. I would go to visit any of her shrines because it’s like going to visit your own mother in all the different holiday homes that she has, and going to have a cup of tea with her, or have a chat with her. And I think because my upbringing as an evangelical, before I converted to Catholicism in 2005, was so Christocentric, Christ has always been at the center of my life. But there’s still an aspect that to get closer to Christ, it absolutely makes sense to get Our Lady, who was his first disciple, on your side, and to follow her to Christ because she knows the way.²⁴

Here Isabelle interestingly describes Marian shrines as a network of “holiday homes” dispersed throughout the world, and her language of having tea with the Virgin, or chatting with her, is reflective of other pilgrim discourses that render the Virgin Mary familiar and approachable, to be engaged with in a way akin to how one would conduct their relationship with their own mother. Over several

²⁴ Interview, July 24, 2012.

pilgrimages then, a variety of Marian shrines have become highly domesticized spaces for Isabelle, all places graced by the presence of the Virgin Mary, where she dwells still, and where she can point the way toward Christ in a way that reconciles Isabelle's evangelical Christian upbringing with her more recent conversion to Catholicism.

Like Isabelle, Don, an organizer with the Catholic Association pilgrimage, also conceptually linked all of the Marian shrines he had visited over the years together as vehicles for entering into relation with Christ:

I've been to so many shrines I can barely count them. You've probably heard of most of them, like Fatima, Lourdes of course, the Rue de Bac in Paris, Knock, mostly shrines where Our Lady appeared in some form. Certainly many of the shrines to Our Lady appear just to do with Our Lady, you know, standing on her own. And initially I found that off-putting. But that's not really true is it? When you go to Lourdes, you realize the whole thing is Christocentric. The whole thing revolves around Christ, and she's just the sort of agent, together with Bernadette, to bring people to Christ and through Christ to the Father. But if you don't dig into that, you don't see it. And the number of people saying, "Oh, you worship the Virgin Mary!" and I say, "Well no we don't, no we don't." You see Christ everywhere at Lourdes, in the sick, and in the helpers. You see him here in a truly special way, but people don't always see it.²⁵

Like other pilgrims I interviewed about their experiences at Lourdes, Don was quick to dispel any perception that the devotions he engaged at the shrine amounted to "Mariolatry." In his reflection on his experience visiting some of the more well-known European Marian apparition shrines, he describes all, as Isabelle did, as pointing the way toward Christ. Yet he then proceeds to single out Lourdes in particular as Christocentric for its focus on the sick and those who care for them, for the "Christic pattern of human relations"²⁶ enacted at the shrine.

25 Interview, August 9, 2012.

26 Thomas R. Thompson, "Nineteenth-Century Kenotic Christology: The Waxing, Waning, and Weighing of a Quest for a Coherent Orthodoxy," in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-emptying of God*, ed. C. Stephen Evans (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), 291.

Indeed, when discussing their experience at Lourdes and at other Marian shrines, this Christic pattern of human relations, this valorization of the sick and of suffering at Lourdes,²⁷ was often the justification pilgrims provided for privileging Lourdes over the other shrines they had visited. Of course, it is perhaps unremarkable to observe that pilgrims to Lourdes, who have invested considerable funds, time, and effort to visit the shrine, would have a particular devotion to the site, and would privilege it over others they had frequented over the years. What is remarkable however is the way the valorization of the sick, and perhaps even more importantly the nature of the relationships between caregivers and care receivers at the shrine in their most idealized forms, become a point of demarcation for pilgrims between Lourdes and other sites.

This is made clear in the accounts of two volunteer caregivers in particular, Lina and Josh. Lina, a woman in her early sixties with an infectious smile and easy laugh, had seven years of experience working at Lourdes, mostly helping to prepare and serve meals as well as visiting Assisted Pilgrims in the Accueil. For her, service to the sick was at the very heart of the mission of Lourdes, and distinguished it from other shrines she had visited:

Lourdes was the perfect place to come. I've been to Fatima, I've been to Czestochowa, where there's the Black Madonna in Poland, I've been to the Holy Land, but I've always been a pilgrim. But Lourdes is the perfect place to be, because you can be more than just a pilgrim. You can be a handmaid, and it's very rewarding in a way you don't get in other places. They're not designed in the same way for people in wheelchairs, or stretchers or whatever. They're

27 In her research on English pilgrimages to Lourdes during the mid-1980s, Andrea Dahlberg distinguishes between two discourses that she observed among pilgrims: a miracle discourse and a sacrificial discourse. The miracle discourse, according to Dahlberg, is directed toward the miraculous transcendence of bodily suffering in the here and now, through the hoped-for vehicle of a sudden and dramatic cure. The sacrificial discourse is more concerned with the "long game," redefining bodily suffering as a form of sacrifice, with complete transcendence of this suffering accomplished in the afterlife. Although the sacrificial discourse identified by Dahlberg related primarily to the physical suffering of sick and disabled pilgrims, I also observed it being employed during the course of my own research not only by or in relation to Assisted Pilgrims, but also volunteer caregivers. Andrea Dahlberg, "The Body as a Principle of Holism: Three Pilgrimages to Lourdes," in *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*, ed. John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow (London: Routledge, 1991).





not designed for that. And here, the fact that Our Blessed Lady told Bernadette: “You dip yourself in these waters and you’ll be healed,” everyone expects some kind of healing experience, and for me I get great pleasure, and healing too, when I see people not as well as we are being happy. I’ve been several years as a helper now, and I get great joy from it. Lourdes offers more than just a pilgrimage. For me it does. It’s the privilege to help others.²⁸

Photo:
Thomas M. Landy

The language employed by Lina, describing Lourdes as enabling one to “be more than just a pilgrim” recurred in the testimonies of other caregivers when reflecting on the motivations underlying their care work. Josh, an organizer with the Westminster diocese who, though raised Catholic, does not regularly attend Mass and does not consider himself to be particularly religious, nonetheless stresses his care work at Lourdes as an ideal opportunity to translate the Christian command of love for one’s neighbor, which he fully subscribes to, from the pages of Scripture into practice:

I’ve always been as a helper, and personally I think I would find it quite difficult just to be a normal pilgrim and not come as a helper. I feel the need for

²⁸ Interview, August 29, 2012.

purpose in Lourdes, and what I have with the faith that I do have wouldn't be enough for me to find Lourdes enriching, without having a job to do and without having a purpose. I've been to Medjugorje as a pilgrim, and I found that enormously unsatisfying. Even when my Rosary turned gold I didn't feel very moved by that, and not long afterwards I gave it away to somebody who I felt would get a lot more out of it than I would. But Lourdes is different... Here it's the almost casual, quiet love that everybody has for everyone around them, that I think is wonderful. In a way I think it would almost work without the religion, but then we'd have nothing to motivate and no excuse for being here. And even though I'm not all that religious, it's that side of it, the natural experiences of Christian love that Lourdes can offer, that makes me come back to help.²⁹

To this point I have highlighted a general sense of calling and the opportunity to enter into uniquely intimate and reciprocal human relationships that inspire pilgrims to work as volunteer caregivers at Lourdes. As Josh notes himself, most helpers are quite devout in their faith, and cite it explicitly as a prime animating factor in how they perceive their care work. Yet Josh is an exception to this rule. He does not go to help in Lourdes out of a clear sense of calling or duty. His experience of the Catholic faith is not necessarily one of deeply held beliefs in what might appear to be abstract dogmas, or rituals which have little resonance for him. Rather, it is the simple act of caring, of helping where he can, that gives Josh a sense of purpose. His experience of religious faith is, from his telling, almost exclusively bound up in his care work. While his helping work is not underpinned by a clear faith motive per se, at the same time his understanding of the Christian ethical imperative is less theological than it is inherently tangible and grounded in praxis. It is purpose driven, it is acted upon, it is not pronounced from the pulpit but accomplished. For Josh, pilgrimage to Lourdes serves as an ideal access point for tapping into the religious values of love and compassion for one's neighbor which he holds, which from his telling are unavailable to him at a site like Medjugorje, which he found "enormously unsatisfying."

²⁹ Interview, July 26, 2013.



“BECAUSE THIS IS A GLIMPSE OF PARADISE”

Josh and others have highlighted and indeed valorized their witnessing of and participation in what they view as a rare and authentic Christic pattern of human relations writ large, enacted at one of the largest shrines in European Catholicism. This highly idealized vision of the Lourdes shrine, and the way in which it is privileged in pilgrim discourses of their spiritual journeys marked by visits to several other Marian apparition sites, is indicated in a conversation I had during the return trip home from Lourdes with Sean and Sophie, a couple in their mid-thirties from south London. It had been their first visit to Lourdes, and both were still practically euphoric about their time at the shrine and were already planning their next pilgrimage the following summer. When I asked what had inspired their decision to join a pilgrimage to Lourdes, Sophie responded:

Our parish priest is a bit of a Lourdes fanatic and has really been pushing several of us from the church to go to Lourdes, but the diocesan pilgrimage in August is a week and that's too long for us to be away right now, and it's too expensive. So this one is perfect, because it's shorter and cheaper...But our priest said something that has really stayed with me. He said that Lourdes is a *thin space*, and what he means is that it is a place where the difference between heaven and earth is just so small. And I've just always liked that way of thinking about it, that Mary went to Lourdes and appeared there to Bernadette, and that her presence is still there. So I wanted to be there and experience that myself.³⁰

Sophie's reference to her parish priest's description of Lourdes as a thin space, as a unique and privileged site where the line between heaven and earth dissolves and the sacred can be accessed and tapped into, was echoed by other pilgrims, most often in reference to the grotto, the site of the apparitions. By virtue of the Virgin Mary's apparitions to Bernadette in the rock niche in 1858, they believed that the area around the grotto has been set apart as a place “where heaven touched earth,” where the sacred geography of Lourdes mediates engagement with the divine order for pilgrims.

³⁰ Interview, December 10, 2012.



Photo:
Thomas M. Landy

This understanding of Lourdes as a thin space that vertically integrates the celestial and the mundane, where the transcendent is believed to have broken into time, is not only grounded in the grotto as the site of the apparition cycle, but also in pilgrims' general assessment of the plane of human interactions occurring during a pilgrimage to Lourdes that have been described up to this point. As Abigail, a serial pilgrim described it:

The faith is everywhere in Lourdes, it just surrounds you, this tremendous surge of faith. Everybody catches it off everybody else, so that by the end of the week you're all like it, and it's very hard to leave it. Because you know when you go back home it's not going to be like that and it should be, but it isn't. And there is so much kindness and even love in Lourdes that is missing back home, and it's a shame that the rest of the world isn't like this. Because this is a glimpse of Paradise, it really is. It's a glimpse of the face of God in everyone you meet, and of how life really should be.³¹

Yet Lourdes not only provides pilgrims with a template for enacting an idealized pattern of human relations. Here Abigail emphasizes that the experiences of kindness and love during a pilgrimage to Lourdes afford the pilgrim a glimpse of

³¹ Interview, August 28, 2013.

Paradise, an opportunity to transcend the circumstances of their quotidian lives and touch the face of God through their relationships with fellow pilgrims. For many pilgrims, there is a far more immediate engagement with the divine provided in Lourdes than is possible anywhere else.

This understanding of the human dynamics at Lourdes as enabling a foretaste of heaven is underscored by Fr. Luke, a priest with the Westminster diocese:

We don't live in the Kingdom of Heaven yet. The world is very far from what it could be and should be, and very far from the Garden of Eden and how it all started. But you know, we need places to remind us of how life really, truly is, and really could be. Lourdes is a visionary place. It gives us the clarity we need to see the world as God intended it, and to walk in that Kingdom even just for a moment."³²

Both Abigail and Fr. Luke distinguish between life as it is and life as it should be. Abigail and Fr. Luke go further however in linking this idea directly with the promise Lourdes holds for pilgrims as a preview of what Paradise or the Kingdom of Heaven is truly like. This notion of Lourdes as a thin space, where heaven and earth appear to be indistinguishable, is derived not only from the belief that here the Virgin Mary broke through the mundane in her visions to Bernadette, but also that Lourdes fosters sets of ideal human relations and experiences pointing to the promise of the Kingdom of Heaven.

I suggest that for pilgrims like Abigail and Fr. Luke, the notion of Lourdes as a thin space and its ability to herald the coming Kingdom of Heaven points to the transtemporal potential of pilgrimage sites such as Lourdes. Given the pilgrims' perception of them as thin spaces, pilgrimage sites such as Lourdes also hold the potential to be transtemporal, empowering pilgrims to transcend the mundane and touch or glimpse the sacred, to move through time and cast their gaze upon the world to come. This movement is perhaps best described by Thomas Tweed as he elaborates on his definition of religion as a process of crossing and dwelling: "Religions bring the distant close...but they are flows that also propel adherents

³² Interview, December 12, 2012.

back and forth between the close and the distant. Religions move between what is imagined as the most distant horizon and what is imagined as the most intimate domain...As itinerants, the religious never remain anywhere or anytime for long. It is in this sense, I suggest, that religions are flows, translocative and transtemporal crossings."³³ Although here Tweed is formulating a theory of religion as a broader human phenomenon, it is quite clear that his definition could be adapted and applied more specifically to the pilgrimage experience. Pilgrimage is clearly bound up with notions of movement and flow,³⁴ be it the more obvious modes of transport that move pilgrims to and from Lourdes or the interior movement and transformation that a pilgrimage might inspire. Pilgrimage, like religion generally, consists of a series of flows, these translocative and transtemporal crossings which point to the porous and malleable boundaries of the pilgrimage shrine. The perception of sites such as Lourdes as thin spaces allows for the distant to be rendered more immediate and accessible, and for highly subjective experiences to be extended and to take on a greater significance beyond the self. Many of the pilgrim stories I have recounted highlight this reciprocal back-and-forth movement observed by Tweed, and suggest that a significant factor in the pilgrimage experience is the ability to collapse the boundaries between the celestial and the mundane, to "bring the gods to earth and transport the faithful to the heavens."³⁵

I have reflected briefly here on the idea that Lourdes constitutes a thin space between heaven and earth for pilgrims in order to draw attention to the immediacy that is sought in encounters with the sacred at the shrine. This immediacy is particularly meaningful for many pilgrims because they feel that it is unavailable to them outside their journey to Lourdes, neither in their quotidian lives or even at other, somewhat similar Marian pilgrimage shrines. As Abigail and Fr. Luke indicate in referring to the idealized pattern of human relationships at the shrine as foreshadowing the coming Kingdom of Heaven, the intimate sense of relation

33 Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 158.

34 Simon Coleman and John Eade, "Introduction," in *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion* (London: Routledge, 2004). See also Vida Bajc, Simon Coleman and John Eade, "Mobility and Centring in Pilgrimage," *Mobilities* 2 (2007).

35 Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 158.





Photo:
Thomas M. Landy

that can quickly form between caregivers and care-receivers represents perhaps the most profound interpersonal example of a thin space. It is a thin space that is developed within the context of pilgrimage and that informs pilgrims' perceptions of authenticity and its value. Yet it is also important to attend to the ways in which this Christian ideal as a motive for caregiving becomes complicated in practice. Caregiving is not easy. It is physically and emotionally taxing and is capable of exposing fault lines just as it holds the potential to mend them. There are instances where this care work may be challenged and resisted. Volunteer caregivers may be overwhelmed by their duties or feel a lack of support or inclusion within their team of helpers. Assisted Pilgrims may sense a loss of agency and dignity in the process of receiving care, or become anxious regarding the lack of professional experience on the part of most caregivers at Lourdes. I argue then for a nuanced reading of volunteer caregiving at Lourdes, one which focuses on developing the ethic of Christian service that is quite evident at Lourdes, yet also highlights points of contestation which may limit the actual reach of this ethic.³⁶

While it is indeed important to explore what one pilgrim described as the “downsides of the pilgrimage,” I maintain that for many caregivers and Assisted Pilgrims,

36 I have written more extensively elsewhere on the often complex and contested nature of care work at Lourdes, which in some cases may limit or undermine the idealized discourse regarding caregiving that pilgrims often espouse. See Michael Agnew, “Let Me Be as Christ to You: Pilgrimage and Volunteer Caregiving at Lourdes,” in *Religious Diversity Today: Experiencing Religion in the Contemporary World*, ed. Anastasia Panagakos (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2016): 65-88.

what remains critical to their experience at Lourdes and what often inspires return visits to the shrine is not necessarily the story of the apparitions to Bernadette or the reports of miraculous cures stemming from the spring flowing at the base of the grotto. Rather, it is these idealized intimate connections formed between caregivers and Assisted Pilgrims within the frame of pilgrimage that are most profound.³⁷ The sense of isolation that both caregivers and Assisted Pilgrims reported experiencing in the UK, as well as the individual's own personal boundaries and inhibitions, are dissolved in the thin space of the caregiving experience. The physical and emotional distance between relative strangers is narrowed, however briefly.

The thin space that is forged in the act of caregiving opens up a wide range of opportunities for pilgrims to encounter authenticity or to even become "authentic" as they perceive it. Fr. Luke described Lourdes as a visionary place, a place that serves to remind us of "how life really, truly is, and really could be." Indeed, for several caregivers, Lourdes is not only a place to witness this model of life idealized in its truest, most authentic form, as they believe God intended it, but also to inhabit this authentic life fully themselves through their care work at the shrine. Recall that for several caregivers, going to Lourdes and helping sick and disabled pilgrims was understood to be an opportunity to become who they should be, both as Christians striving to live in accordance with the command to love one's neighbor, and quite simply as contributing members of society. This is reminiscent of Arthur Kleinman's analysis of caregiving based upon his own experience caring for his wife is especially salient in underscoring the discourse of authenticity that can surround the act of caregiving and pilgrimage more broadly. He observes that it is a moral practice that can make caregivers and even those receiving care more

37 See also John Eade, "Order and Power at Lourdes: Lay Helpers and the Organization of a Pilgrimage Shrine," in *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*, ed. John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow (London: Routledge, 1991); Alana Harris, "A Place to Grow Spiritually and Socially: The Experiences of Young Pilgrims to Lourdes," in *Religion and Youth*, ed. Sylvia Collins-Mayo and Ben Pink Dandelion (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2010); Catrien Notermans, "Loss and Healing: A Marian Pilgrimage in Secular Dutch Society," *Ethnology* 46 (2007); Catrien Notermans, Maya Turolla, and Willy Jansen, "Caring and Connecting: Reworking Religion, Gender and Families in Post-Migration Life," in *Contemporary Encounters in Gender and Religion*, ed. Lena Gemzoe, Marja-Liisa Keinänen, and Avril Madrell (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); and Michael Agnew, "'Spiritually, I'm Always in Lourdes: Perceptions of Home and Away among Serial Pilgrims,'" *Studies in Religion* 44:4 (2015).



present and thereby fully human.³⁸ This understanding of caregiving as being capable of completing our humanity, of allowing us to enter into the profound dynamic of a reciprocal encounter, is reinforced in the pilgrimages' own official discourse, with descriptions of service at Lourdes as an opportunity to become "most nearly ourselves,"³⁹ cultivating and realizing our authentic subjective self in dialogue with others.

As I noted earlier in this article, pilgrims are drawn to Lourdes by complex and nuanced motivations. It is important to explore these motivations and the experiences underlying a pilgrim's choice to set out on a journey to the grotto of Lourdes or to any other sacred center, while recognizing that pilgrimage is inherently multivalent, with pilgrims moving to and from multiple social, geographical, and religious departure and destination points. Although I elicit comparisons made by pilgrims while at one particular Marian shrine, recalling past pilgrimages at other sites, additional research could explore further the ways in which habitual pilgrims move across the Marian pilgrimage circuit in Europe and draw out various meanings from each stop along the way. Anna Fedele's work on alternative pilgrimages to French shrines dedicated to Mary Magdalene is one notable example of potential approaches to this form of circuit pilgrimage.⁴⁰ While this approach might have its logistical and methodological challenges, attending to the ways in which pilgrims compare and privilege their experiences at different pilgrimage sites through multisited fieldwork may bring forth fresh insights.⁴¹

Pilgrimage can be an elusive phenomenon to pin down, and any attempt to proclaim a definitive or universal theory of this form of travel would be a challenging

38 Arthur Kleinman, "Caregiving: The Odyssey of Becoming More Human," *The Lancet* 373, January 24, 2009, 293.

39 Fr. Nicholas King, S.J., *A Lourdes Novena* (Cambridge, UK: The Catholic Association Pilgrimage Trust, 1996), 5.

40 Anna Fedele, *Looking for Mary Magdalene: Alternative Pilgrimages and Ritual Creativity at Catholic Shrines in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

41 Other recent examples of circuit or multisited pilgrimage research, particularly in the Holy Land, include Jackie Feldman, "Constructing a Shared Bible Land: Jewish Israeli Guiding Performances for Protestant Pilgrims," *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 2 (2007): 351-374; Shaul Kelner, *Tours that Bind: Diaspora, Pilgrimage, and Israeli Birthright Tourism* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); and Hillary Kaell, *Walking Where Jesus Walked: American Christians and Holy Land Pilgrimage* (New York: NYU Press, 2014).



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Thomas M. Landy

if not completely futile exercise. This is made all the more complicated when we attend to the nature of serial and multisited pilgrimage, which inevitably underscores the fact that pilgrimage shrines are not static, bounded sites. Yet I have identified one element of the pilgrimage experience here, the trope of authenticity, as a rhetorical device employed by pilgrims to describe their motivations for going on pilgrimage and their engagement with the shrine and fellow pilgrims during their time in Lourdes. Focusing on authenticity holds the potential to illuminate the underlying threads binding together otherwise disparate pilgrim experiences and perspectives, and can also provide a means by which some shrines are contrasted and privileged over others, revealing the values and motivations underlying serial pilgrimage and multisited pilgrimage. In spite of its conceptual baggage, authenticity still matters, if for no other reason than that pilgrims themselves actively use the term or others closely analogous to it in describing their experience at Lourdes. From the perspective of pilgrims then, Lourdes is the thin space which affords the authentic possibility of transcendence, of collapsing the boundaries between self and other, human and divine.

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