

Minor Letnica: (Re)Locating the Tradition of Shared Worship in North Macedonia

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CATHOLIC PILGRIMAGE and the POLITICS and PRAGMATICS of PLACE-MAKING in EASTERN EUROPE

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Minor Letnica: (Re)Locating the Tradition of Shared Worship in North Macedonia



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Every year on August 14, a small courtyard of the Catholic chapel of St. Joseph in Skopje comes alive on the eve of a major feast day, the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. The wooden building of the chapel, or “the barrack” as it is commonly called among the locals, is situated at the periphery of the historical center of the Macedonian capital. It is separated from Skopje’s “heart”—the trade and craft quarter, and the largest city bazaar—by a wide avenue. Hidden behind an unsightly metal fence, the chapel of St. Joseph is visually lost against the background of the surrounding Ottoman mosques and Orthodox cathedrals that form the architectural landscape of this part of the city. Consequently, the chapel remains virtually invisible to thousands of citizens passing by during the day. Some parishioners gather in the chapel during Sunday morning services and for Sunday school classes that are held here along with occasional meetings.

Beginning in the early morning on August 14, the first pilgrims arrive at the entrance of the chapel. They come from Skopje and other places of North Macedonia as well as neighboring Serbia. The church feast and the pilgrimage associated with this day bring together pilgrims from various European countries. All of them left Skopje at some point in their lives in search of new opportunities and a better life. Each summer, they come back reuniting with their families for a while and performing annual vow rituals in front of the Virgin Mary statue. Thus, despite the wide geography of pilgrimage routes, the chapel of St. Joseph remains specifically a local object of veneration on the religious map of the Balkans. At the same time, during the celebration of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary this modest chapel attracts followers of different religious traditions. The vast majority of them nowadays are Muslims, mainly being representatives of Roma communities.

The chapel of St. Joseph has been historically and functionally connected with another major regional center of “joint” pilgrimage, the church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary located in the village of Letnica in Kosovo. For a long time, these sites of worship were administered by the same diocese and at certain points in time played a significant role in its development and politics. Moreover, they have been symbolically connected through the annual pilgrimage when the chapel of St. Joseph acts as an affiliated shrine. It becomes an improvised branch of the

Letnica church. That is why even nowadays, when these sites of worship are divided by geographic and institutional boundaries, the symbolic tie between them remains relevant. It is constantly reproduced during the pilgrimage when the chapel of St. Joseph turns into a “small Letnica” for a short period of time.

Local pilgrimage to the St. Joseph’s chapel is but one of multiple examples of sharing of holy sites by followers of different religious affiliations—a vernacular practice that has been historically widespread throughout the multi-confessional Balkan region and beyond.¹ Drawing upon regular fieldwork carried out between 2014 and 2019 in North Macedonia and Serbia among the Roma Muslim communities, this paper aims at reconstructing and generally depicting the making of the chapel of St. Joseph a site of joint worship.

Studies focused on the so-called “joint” worship and sharing of sacred spaces have created a special niche in the research on pilgrimage over the past few decades. In general, the historiography of the subject includes a group of studies intending to document those forms in which sites of worship are shared by various religious (and ethnic) communities, as well as outlining the set of socio-political and cultural mechanisms that underlie the emergence of traditions of joint veneration and regulate their further elaboration and transmission.² The recent wave of studies has

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- 1 For a survey and comparative data see, for example, Frederick William Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929); Dionigi Albera, “Combining Practices and Beliefs: Muslim Pilgrims at Marian Shrines,” in *Sharing the Sacra: The Politics and Pragmatics of Intercommunal Relations around Holy Places*, ed. Glenn Bowman (London: Berghann Books, 2012), 10-24; Dionigi Albera, “Crossing the Frontiers Between the Monotheistic Religions, an Anthropological Approach,” in *Sharing Sacred Spaces in the Mediterranean: Christians, Muslims, and Jews at Shrines and Sanctuaries*, ed. Dionigi Albera and Maria Couroucli (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 219-244.
 - 2 Robert M. Hayden, “Antagonistic Tolerance: Competitive Sharing of Religious Sites in South Asia and the Balkans,” *Current Anthropology* 43, no. 2 (2002): 205-231, <https://doi.org/10.1086/338303>; Elazar Barkan and Karen Barkey, “Introduction,” in *Choreographies of Shared Sacred Sites: Religion, Politics and Conflict Resolution*, ed. Elazar Barkan and Karen Barkey (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 1-31; Ger Duijzings, *Religion and the Politics of the Identity in Kosovo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Anna Bigelow, “Everybody’s Baba: Making Space for the Other,” in *Sharing the Sacra*, ed. Glenn Bowman (London: Berghann Books, 2012), 25-43; Marijana Belaj and Zvonko Martić, “Pilgrimage Site Beyond Politics: Experience of the Sacred and Inter-Religious Dialog in Bosnia,” in *Pilgrimage, Politics and Place-Making in Eastern Europe: Crossing the Borders*, ed. Mario Katić and John Eade (London: Routledge, 2014), 15-36, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315600505..>



paid special attention to contextual negotiations and processes of contestation over the sacred places. The importance of exploring the act of sharing through detailed observations of both inter-communal and intra-communal activities held on the grounds by divergent social actors is addressed in works by Glenn Bowman, Dionigi Albera, David Henig, and others.³ Such an approach reminds us that the practice of sharing a sacred space is inevitably a “localized” one: it takes both spontaneous and organized forms depending on a certain socio-political context; it is constructed in personal interactions of individual actors who are simultaneously influenced by shifts in power relations on a broad scale and by respective institutional policies and cultural legacies. The same research optics reveals the complexity of the process of setting the identity boundaries (across different scales, without reducing specifically to religious and ethnic ones) of both, individual pilgrims and communities in the framework of combined worship and devotional “overlappings.” Various studies of the issue of the outlining, adjusting, and manifestation of identity in sacred spaces emphasize the contextuality and ambiguity of this process in every single case under study. Context matters, and in order to construct generalizations, or trace and predict causations, one requires a meticulously and nuanced study of the bases of individual motivations and rationale of believers and other social actors, following discourses and policies of various institutions which impact the situational choice in the context of sharing.

Following this analytical insight, I consider the symbolic space of the pilgrimage as a space of expression (in a broad sense) that brings together diverse imageries and practices simultaneously reflecting and shaping a variety of discourses. In this respect, the place of visitation—and, accordingly, of presence—being the space where both personal and collective experiences unfold, essentially becomes a subject of the narrative which contributes to its multi-dimensional image; and the polyphony of

3 Glenn Bowman, “Orthodox-Muslim Interactions at ‘Mixed Shrines’ in Macedonia,” in *Eastern Christians in Anthropological Perspective*, ed. Chris Hann and Herman Goltz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 195-219; Dionigi Albera, “Why Are You Mixing What Cannot Be Mixed? Shared Devotions in the Monotheisms,” *History and Anthropology* 19, no. 1 (2008): 37-59, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02757200802150026>; David Henig, “Contested Choreographies of Sacred Spaces in Muslim Bosnia,” in *Choreographies of Shared Sacred Sites: Religion, Politics and Conflict Resolution*, ed. Elazar Barkan and Karen Barkey (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 130-162.

voices of the participants and spectators of the pilgrimage creates broad narratives framing the tradition of worshipping the site in each individual case specifically.⁴

This paper addresses one of the issues implied by research on shared sacred sites, namely, the historical and devotional continuity of the poly-confessional pilgrimage and its inscription into changing social realities. The symbolic tie maintained between St. Joseph's chapel and the Letnica church (not evident at first glance) becomes a focal point in my examination of the ways the tradition of sharing a sacred space is shaped, (re)located, and transmitted in various given social contexts. In what follows I examine situations and modes in which this symbolic tie is articulated by divergent social actors through narratives and practices of different kinds. Both historical and ethnographic accounts allow me to take a snapshot of current tendencies in the management of the St. Joseph's chapel as a site of "joint" worship. Exploring the tradition of sharing sacred space implies tracing both the trajectories of continuity and change in sacred choreography, that is the choreographic shifts⁵ that interfere with the established scenarios of the "joint" pilgrimage.

LOCAL PILGRIMAGE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC SKETCH

Although some individual visitors gather in front of the chapel in the early morning hours of August 14, the main influx is observed closer to noon and is not specifically tied to the schedule of church Masses. Starting from this moment, the relatively fragmented ritual actions of isolated visitors begin to take on a certain order and create a recognizable pattern that symbolically distinguishes different groups of visitors from each other.

In general, the ritual complex performed by all pilgrims during the feast includes several stages. Each respective stage includes particular scenarios of ritual actions, and variation between them implies belonging and adherence to different religious and cultural traditions. In contrast to the liturgical part, which divides pilgrims from one another, some vernacular practices are performed jointly by Catholics

4 Setha M. Low and Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga, "Locating Culture," in *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*, ed. Setha M. Low and Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga (Blackwell, 2003), 16-18.

5 Indeed, such changes, as David Henig points out, "generate power shifts, discontents, or resistance in sacred sites." Henig, "Contested Choreographies," 135.

and visitors who define themselves as Muslims. In this process the number of rites draws a symbolic line between the pilgrims. However, the symbolic boundary does not strictly separate the attendees according to their confession. The boundary is fluid, and instances of overlapping are often evident.

Moreover, each stage of the pilgrimage—within a broad scenario that is shared by all participants—unfolds in its respective specific locus. These geographic points are set by organizers of the pilgrimage or follow certain ritual traditions, and they create a temporary sacred map in the territory of the chapel.

The main element of the ritual complex takes place directly inside the chapel. Pilgrims symbolically cross the border of the sacred space. Those who enter it—mainly Muslims—touch the doors that lead to the chapel with their palm, forehead, and lips; Catholic parishioners, as well as some Muslims, make a sign of the cross. Once inside the chapel, the pilgrims head for the key goal of their worship—the statue of the Virgin Mary and Child—and the path to it is created along the wall where images of the Passion of Jesus Christ are placed at some distance from each other. The entire series of 14 images, sequentially placed around the perimeter of the chapel (not in the altar), forms a separate route for performing the Way of the Cross (*Via Crucis*). Each respective image refers to a certain stage in this practice that corresponds to particular topics for recalling the events of the Passion, reflection, and prayer.

The images of the Passion of Jesus Christ are involved in practices shared by nearly all pilgrims, regardless of their religious self-identification. However, different styles of engagement with the images define the divergent patterns of devotional actions for each case. For those belonging to Catholic tradition, these images symbolically mark special loci—the “stations”—where devotees linger while immersing themselves in thoughts and prayers. For those who follow different religious traditions, the images are like other objects imbued with special powers, according to their beliefs. While moving toward the statue of the Virgin Mary and Child in the continuous flow, many of them try to touch the images or to bring their children closer to the pictures. Children are raised as high as possible by adults so that they can kiss or touch the image with their hand or forehead. In fact, such



Statue of the Virgin Mary and Child from the St. Joseph's chapel. Photo by Ksenia Trofimova, 2019.

vernacular actions are traditionally shared also by Catholic parishioners. The differences between devotional practices at this stage are visually manifested in the discontinuity between dynamic movement and static rest during the performance, as well as in the recited formulas and prayers.

Approaching the statue of the Virgin Mary is the culmination of the rite performed in the chapel. It is at this stage that different ritual scenarios intersect and intertwine. Devotees constantly cover the statue with headscarves, towels, and articles of clothing that the shrine's helpers—clerics and parishioners—later carefully put aside in the basket reserved for votive offerings. In some cases, pieces of clothing brought to the chapel do not act

as *ex-votos*, but remain with the pilgrims after touching the statue, transferring a particle of grace to their homes; they use these objects in various healing and protective practices. Visitors take turns approaching the statue of the Virgin Mary and Child, touching the feet and hands of the sculptures and bringing children to kiss them. They thank “Mother” (*Majka*) and God for performed miracles or ask for help in brief personal prayers that are most often pronounced silently or in a whisper. The pilgrims touch the statue with wallets and banknotes or even with personal documents or mobile phones as well as with candles. Then they leave these objects as gifts to the church, or light candles on pedestals in the courtyard of the chapel. Some other offerings, brought here as part of vows, are left on a specially set high table. Typical gifts are oil, candles, towels, clothes (socks or T-shirts) and money. In the stream of pilgrims who attend this chapel annually throughout their lives or for a certain period of time, and who routinely perform a single set of actions, individual believers stand out. They remain near the statue, addressing the Mother or God with a long prayer and sharing their personal story. In doing so the pilgrims can take or renew vows (*zavet*) as a way of opening or continuing a personal or familial tradition of worshiping at this place. Many pilgrims spend some more time in the chapel, greeting neighbors and friends, immersing themselves in prayers, or



consulting with clergy and other volunteers.

Both Catholic and Muslim visitors complete their circuit inside the chapel, passing by the statues of St. Joseph and St. Anthony of Padua and symbolically “tracking” the way to the doors along the opposite wall. They proceed from one image of the Passion of Jesus Christ to another. Some of the images (as for example the one that corresponds to the 11th Station—“Jesus is nailed to the cross”) along with the statues are also involved in the ritual, although to a lesser extent: pilgrims leave some offerings here, touch and pray in front of them. During my last visit in 2019 I noticed that the statue of Jesus Christ was moved by the clergy from the altar part of the chapel to its main part so that pilgrims could venerate it as well. Others, mainly Muslim visitors, leave the chapel through the central passage that starts in the altar area and do not dare to turn their backs on the statue of the Virgin Mary. They cross the threshold of the shrine and complete this stage of the ceremony and the ritual cycle by touching and kissing the doors of the chapel.

Patterns of the ritual that various pilgrims perform here are occasionally shaped by liturgic practice. For two days, the Rosary prayer is recited several times by the clergy and a few Catholic parishioners who attend the pilgrimage or help in organization. On the Assumption day a morning festive Mass is held in the chapel. I have learned that the reading of the Rosary prayer is usually initiated by parishioners or priests and is not specifically planned during the day. Therefore, in one year the soundscape of the chapel was repeatedly filled up with voices reciting the Rosary. Another year, I recorded just a familiar acoustic background: steps, whispering, children’s play, broken at times by individual emotional exclamations both in native languages (Romani, Macedonian and Croatian) and Arabic.

Regarding the “joint” nature of pilgrimage to the chapel of St. Joseph, the participation of Muslim visitors in church rituals is limited to presence and observation. Recitations of the Rosary do not interrupt the performance of vernacular practices, but visually slows down its pace and shapes partly chaotic actions that occur in the crowd. Unwilling to interfere with the practices of Catholic devotees, Muslims coming here try to calm down their children and thus make the whole ritual more organized.

As mentioned above, the following stages of the ritual complex are associated with certain locations around the chapel. The sequence of the steps may vary, while the practices that form the ritual scenario involve lighting candles, going around the chapel and visiting springs with blessed and healing water. The space and the ritual performance at these sites are also organized and regulated to some extent by representatives of the parish and individual helpers, who tend to be regular visitors to the chapel from Roma Muslim communities.

Pedestals for lighting candles are located along the fence in the courtyard of the chapel. When the clergy expects a large influx of pilgrims, pedestals fill the entire area of the courtyard in front of the entrance to the chapel. Candles can be bought at several sales points that appear in front of the entrance gates and along the busy main street. Lighting of candles itself can precede or complete a visit to the chapel and the veneration of the statue of the Virgin Mary and Child. It is accompanied by a personal prayer and the utterance of religious formulas such as the *basmla* formula (*In the name of Allah, the Gracious, the Merciful*).

Almost all pilgrims perform ritual ablutions using water from a spring—in fact, an urban street water source located behind the chapel. Ritual ablutions are quite common in local pilgrimage practice, and springs (natural or artificial) are believed to have healing powers. Visitors line up for water and fill plastic bottles with it. One can bring bottles from home or buy them from parish helpers or numerous traders. They also wash their faces and hands, as well as putting water on the wounds of their bodies. Children's faces are washed with particular care. I noticed that some pilgrims perform certain parts of the ritual ablution complex that precedes the salah (namaz) prayer. At the same time, holy water is offered to everybody. It is poured by the clergy or helpers from special containers that are separated from the pilgrims by a small fence. This measure is reasonable since the amount of water is limited while the demand is quite high. Some pilgrims return frequently to fill more and more bottles with holy water. I have learned that holy water could be used during the entire year in healing practices. My interviewees mentioned that holy water is meant to be used by each member of their large families and especially by those who are sick. Some of the visitors make this pilgrimage not only



for their personal vow, but also with the purpose of making a vow for their weak relatives or neighbors.

Waiting for pilgrims.
Photo by Ksenia
Trofimova, 2019.

Here one may also get a tiny flap of fabric: these are put inside wallets and renewed every year on the Feast Day of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. According to some of the ritual assistants, this fabric is consecrated by priests and then cut up into small pieces. Other helpers assured me, as did most of the devotees, that this fabric was brought from Kosovo, namely from the church of Letnica village, one of the well-known pilgrimage centers in the region. It is believed that the fabric had been part of the robe that covered the venerated statue of the Virgin Mary.

The water source designed for ablutions is located within the external circuit that is followed mainly by Muslim visitors, usually in a clockwise direction. As I have learned, the visitors determine the direction of the circuit independently, following either tradition or their own intuition. The content of actions within this circuit is sometimes discussed with the clergy, the initiatives suggested by the parish being the only exception. Parish initiatives are focused on the practice of sacrificing animals and their presence on chapel's territory. According to the ritual scenario, one should process the animal around the chapel three times.



Tiny flaps of fabric.
Photo by Ksenia
Trofimova, 2019.

As a rule, the clergy are present on the territory of the chapel throughout the two days when it is open for pilgrims. It is worth pointing that some of the lay assistants, who are engaged by the clergy and regularly help in organizing the pilgrimage, come from Roma Muslim community. The priests and helpers are involved in all initiatives: services and collective recitations of prayers, sharing flaps of the fabric and holy water, as well as in communication with visitors. The clergy give personal permission or restrict the performance of a certain devotional action if it seems to him ambiguous or contradicts the official position of the parish or personal attitude of a priest. It is important to note that some of the helpers, since they are members of the parishes belonging to this or neighboring

dioceses, also take an active part in direct communication with the pilgrims. One parishioner from Croatia told me that she has been coming to Skopje for several years and helping the parish organize various celebrations and pilgrimages. During an interview, she reported believes that guiding and supporting pilgrims constitute her personal devotional mission.

ST. JOSEPH'S CHAPEL ON THE SACRED MAP OF SKOPJE

St. Joseph's chapel appears on the sacred map of Skopje along with the foundation of the diocesan orphanage of the same name. The orphanage occupied the house that had previously belonged to a local Muslim religious leader, and the chapel in turn was built nearby to serve various religious purposes. Both the orphanage and the chapel were founded and sanctified in 1935 by the bishop of Skopje, Dr. Ivan Franjo Gnidovec.⁶ At that time, the orphanage hosted and educated nearly two dozen children. Some came from poor families while others lost parents in

⁶ Ivan Franjo Gnidovec / Janez Frančišek Gnidovec (1873-1939), <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/bishop/bgnid.html>.

war.⁷ The next bishop of Skopje, Smiljan Franjo Čekada, followed in Gnidovec's footsteps with a focus on social ministry that later formed his image and local "hagiography."⁸

St. Joseph's orphanage was closed in 1947, but its buildings were assigned to the diocese and continued to meet the administrative needs of the parish. According to an oral account made by one of the oldest priests of the parish, the chapel was engaged as a religious space in the post-war period, along with the city cathedral, the Sacred Heart of Jesus.⁹ The chapel acquired a new status after the devastating earthquake of 1963, which destroyed the city and its cathedral, and also damaged the bishop's residence. Since the cathedral was seriously damaged, local authorities refused to restore it and to keep it under the diocese of Skopje. They suggested as an alternative erecting a new cathedral on a different site outside of the city's old center.¹⁰ As my interlocutors put it, over the next 20 years while the construction of the cathedral took place, the chapel of St. Joseph served as a central place of worship. The chapel united the parish throughout the year and hosted believers from neighboring Catholic parishes. Followers of different religious traditions also visited the site during church celebrations such as the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, worshipping the statue of the Virgin Mary—which according to their beliefs is endowed with miraculous powers (namely, healing properties). As some of the priests and assistants suggest, the statues that are venerated now in St. Joseph chapel are likely to have previously decorated both the chapel and the cathedral. Those which survived the earthquake were brought together in the renovated chapel after the disaster.¹¹

According to recollections shared by the clergy and pilgrims, it can be assumed

7 "Sirotište Sv. Josipa," *Blagovijest* XIV, no. 1-2 (1941): 53-55.

8 Smiljan Franjo Čekada (1902-1976), <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/bishop/bcekada.html>; Alojz Turk, Letnica. Marijansko Hodočasničko Svetište – Ekumenski Centar na Kosovu. Majka Božja Crnogorska. Letnička Gospa – Zoja Černagore (Beograd: Blagovest, 1973), 76

9 Mac.: Катедра́ла Пресвето́ Срце́ Исусово / Serb.-Croat.: Katedrala Presvetog Srca Isusova; Personal interviews with a Catholic priest from the Diocese of Skopje conducted in Skopje in 2018.

10 Turk, Letnica, 68; Opći Šematizam Katoličke Crkve u Jugoslaviji. Crkev u Jugoslaviji 1974, ed. Krunoslav Draganović (Zagreb: Biskupska Konferencija Jugoslavije, 1975), 414.

11 Personal interviews with a Catholic priest from the Diocese of Skopje conducted in Skopje in 2014 and 2018.

that the transformation of St. Joseph's chapel into a new site of poly-confessional ("joint") pilgrimage took place during the second part of the 20th century. In the same period the region experienced a growth in pilgrimage centers, which were already popular and open to visitors who represented different religious communities. This was also true for the above-mentioned church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary located in Letnica village. Every year, tens of thousands of pilgrims—Catholics, Orthodox Christians and Muslims—moved through this church. According to available observations, Roma made up a significant number among the Muslim visitors.¹²

LETNICA AS A SITE OF WORSHIP

The village of Letnica is one of a few Catholic settlements founded in the north part of the historical and geographical area of Skopska Crna Gora (Montenegro of Skopje) and integrated in a separate parish.¹³ It is mentioned in Church documents as early as the 16th century.¹⁴ As the center of a parish that was under the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Skopje (or Skopje-Prizren) for a long time, the Letnica village gradually acquired a special position among the religious bodies that helped to build and maintain the religious life of local Catholic communities in the region.¹⁵ There, the parish church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary was built and occasionally renovated. And it is there that a venerated statue of the Virgin Mary, made of dark wood, has been kept for several centuries, attracting numerous devotees from surrounding areas.¹⁶ The statue, commonly referred to as Letnica, is renowned for its healing properties. Its image is widely represented in local folklore, as well as in individual narratives corresponding to lay believers' personal experiences, usually narrated in the discourse of a miracle (for example, visions and healings).

12 Anto Baković, "Zoja Crna Gora," *Glas Koncila* 18 (1968): 8; Ante Katalinić, "Ekumensko značenje štovanja Marije u Hrvata," *Obnovljeni život: časopis za filozofiju i religijske znanosti* 35, no. 5-6 (1980): 476; Atanasije Urošević, "Katolička župa Crna Gora u Južnoj Srbiji (Letnička župa)," *Glasnik Skopskog Naučnog Društva*. XIII, no. 7 (1934): 161.

13 At the moment Letnica belongs to Kosovo, and is located in the south-east part of the republic, close to the border with Macedonia.

14 Urošević, "Katolička župa," 11.

15 Currently Letnica is run by the Diocese Prizren-Prishtina.

16 Vernacular religious vocabulary contains several names associated with Letnica: *Majka, Majka Letnica, Letnička Gospa, Majka Božja Letnička*.



It is widely believed that this statue of the Virgin Mary appeared in the village miraculously: she “moved,” “flew over” or even escaped from Skopje, and was found by the locals on the hill that overlooks the Letnica river valley.¹⁷ The miraculous relocation of the statue was interpreted by lay believers as a form of expression, a message in which the Virgin Mary manifests her presence and specifies the place of the epiphany as a locus of veneration.¹⁸ Such an understanding, strengthened by the evidence of numerous miraculous events that are associated with the statue of the Virgin Mary of Montenegro, fuels the tradition of pilgrimage to Letnica.¹⁹

We can learn about Letnica as a pilgrimage center, and in particular as a focus of “joint” veneration, from sources that date back to the second half of the 19th and early 20th century. Archbishop Buccarelli of Skopje and the Jesuit missionary Genovizzi refer to the traditional nature of worship of the Virgin Mary statue and the church, where it was placed many years after being made “homeless.” They also confirm that together with Catholics, “Muslims and Orthodox Christians, as well as Muslim and Orthodox gypsies [Roma], are protected by the Virgin Mary.”²⁰ Both historical references also include a brief testimony of the favors received by non-Catholic devotees from the Blessed Virgin Mary.²¹

According to the data available, the diocese launched its Letnica “project” in the 19th century by starting construction on a parish church in the village, coronation of the statue of the Lady of Letnica and initiating the annual pilgrimage there. Ger Duijzings reasonably suggests that the pilgrimage to Letnica was an “organized religious event,” which was “meant to recover some of the church’s influence after a long period of Ottoman domination.”²² Church historians and parishioners

17 Marija Ilić, “Kultna mesta Kosova i Metohije,” *Baština* 15 (2003): 162. Urošević, “Katolička župa,” 2. Frok Zefi, *Župa Letnica* (Zajednica Kosovskih Hrvata “Letnica”), 50, 171, <http://www.hkm.lu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Zupa-Letnica.pdf>; Krunoslav Draganović, *Opći Šematizam Katoličke crkve u Jugoslaviji* (Sarajevo: Regina Apostolorum, 1939), 370.

18 Ilić, “Kultna mesta,” 162.

19 Zefi, *Župa Letnica*, 171.

20 Zefi, *Župa Letnica*, 38, 50, 170.

21 Zefi, *Župa Letnica*, 175.

22 Duijzings, *Religion*, 88-89. Duijzings reasonably links the growing pilgrimage to Letnica on the Assumption day—a part of local ecclesiastic policies, with the wider process—“the officially endorsed popular resurgence of Marian devotion” in the Catholic world.

generally represent the efforts undertaken by the diocese to give an impetus to the renewal of religious life in small parishes scattered across the region as personal initiatives of certain spiritual leaders.²³ As Genovizzi recalls, it was the archbishop Carev who initiated the annual organized pilgrimage to Letnica, and each time he participated himself by organizing pilgrimages of priests and lay believers from other parishes. This established path was followed by Bishop Gnidovec who during his service renovated the church in Letnica, the main object of pilgrimage in the diocese, and put much of his energy into creating the minimum necessary religious infrastructure in his parishes including educational establishments, media and social service institutions. The bishop's focus on social ministry activities, most often addressed in memoirs in terms of holiness, significantly contributes to the current image of Letnica. Due to his efforts, a charitable house of providing medical care for those in need regardless to their social status, ethnic and religious belonging was set up in the village.²⁴ Regarding the issue of Crypto-Catholicism (i.e. the laramans), conversion and other challenges the religious community had faced during dramatic social transformations of the 19th-20th centuries, Letnica, a remote Catholic enclave, which like other Catholic settlements in the region is "one in a sea of non-believers,"²⁵ was introduced in ecclesiastical media as a role model for the diocesan Catholic community that at that time was made up of "dormant and half-dead Catholic consciences."²⁶ In the missionary imaginary, Letnica is a symbol of safety, commitment, and reunion for local Catholics, whose "positions in Macedonia have never been particularly strong, even though the Vatican has been expressing its interest and taking measures to strengthen them since the middle of the past century."²⁷

The special status the parish gained due to Marian devotions is stressed by Atanasij Urošević in his ethnographic study. He points out that during the celebration

23 Zefi, *Župa Letnica*, 172-173.

24 Turk, *Letnica*, 76; Zefi, *Župa Letnica*, 154.

25 Smiljan Franjo Čekada, "Smiljan Franjo. Okružnica" *Blagovijest* XIV, no. 3 (1941): 42.

26 "Bogatstvo srca I ljubavi (Uz Blagdan sv. Obitelji)," *Blagovijest* XIV, no. 1-2 (1941): 23.

27 Turk, *Letnica*, 18; Zefi, *Župa Letnica*, 171. Rimokatolička crkva u NR Makedoniji, 1955, 31, 12, 144 Savezna komisija za verska pitanja [Federal Commission for Religious Affairs], The State Archives of the SFRY, 1

of the Ascension of the Virgin Mary, the sanctuary is surrounded not only by Catholic but also Eastern Orthodox devotees as well as “Muslims, most of whom are gypsies [Roma].”²⁸ The importance of this parish for maintaining the Catholic presence in the area can be affirmed by the fact that the First Eucharistic Congress of the Diocese was held in the newly consecrated church during the celebration of the Assumption (Ascension) of the Virgin Mary in 1931.²⁹

According to memories shared by the clergy and pilgrims, neither the First nor the Second World Wars broke the tradition of worshiping Letnica. However, these wars adjusted geographical and socio-political boundaries and realities in the region, undoubtedly offering new contexts to which the pilgrimage tradition adapted. During the Second World War, with new borders being drawn in the occupied territory, some of the pilgrims were no longer able to make regular visits to the Letnica church.³⁰ Because the devotees were cut off from their sanctuary, they started to reproduce the traditional pilgrimage, keeping their vow by traveling to the Catholic church in the nearest parish of Uroševac.³¹ This case traces one of the models enabling continuity of pilgrimage practice, namely “delegation” of the functions of a “central” holy site to “peripheral” sites of worship.

As a result of the new state borders established after the war, Letnica received pilgrims from different parts of Socialist Yugoslavia, turning into a region-wide devotional center.³² In particular, Dr. Smiljan Čekada continued his predecessor’s (Dr. Gnidovec’s) policy in supporting vulnerable groups who faced poverty and discrimination.³³ His strategy and activities on the grounds, as I would assume, marked the transformation of Letnica into a regional center of the *organized*

28 Urošević, “Katolička župa,” 11.

29 Urošević, “Katolička župa,” 11.

30 On the territorial division of Kosovo lands during the WWII, see Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 289-313. Alojz Turk depicts the case of Muslim Roma who found themselves within the borders of the Great Bulgaria.

31 Turk, *Letnica*, 71-72; Mijo Gabrić, “Izvor života i pojas plodnosti,” *Glas Koncila* 17 (1974): 8.

32 “The whole Yugoslavia had been coming here,” Biljana Sikimić, “Sveta putovanja: Letnica na Kosovu,” *Glasnik Etnografskog Instituta SANU* LXII, no. 1 (2014): 25, <https://doi.org/10.2298/GEI14010155>.

33 This strategy in social ministries is still relevant. The Caritas regional office in Skopje works on providing preschool education for needy families coming from the Roma communities.

multi-confessional pilgrimage. Bishop Čekada, according to diocesan priests of his time, took a number of important steps to construct a model of the local tradition of “joint” pilgrimage to Letnica. As Alojz Turk puts it, with the end of WWII, Bishop Čekada responded to requests from Roma devotees and “gave them permission” to perform “their own” rituals in the church when there are fewer pilgrims (probably Catholics) inside.³⁴ And although it remains unclear from this text in which way the ritual actions made by the Roma visitors were special and what kind of limitations they faced in practice, the bishop’s permission might have set and legitimated the following broad scenario of the “joint” pilgrimage to Letnica.³⁵ The Diocese responded to religious heterogeneity by organizing pilgrimage activities and introducing followers of different traditions to the general pattern of performing festive rituals. It is critical to note that this pattern entailed direct communication between lay believers of various religious or confessional traditions and the Catholic clergy about ritual matters. For example, as part of the festive schedule, special services—including communion—were organized for Orthodox pilgrims.³⁶ Muslims, in turn, could participate in meetings with the bishop as well as attend sermons that were held in the Romani language, even though the traditional languages of the sermon (Croatian and Albanian) were known to Muslim pilgrims and were used in daily communication.³⁷

Military conflicts escalated in the region throughout the 1990s. Accompanied by various identity building processes, these events significantly shaped pilgrimage routes and led to a rewriting of established scenarios of ritual performance.³⁸

Nevertheless, the pilgrimage to Letnica persisted despite the dramatic events that occurred at the turn of the 21st century, which included various border shifts and on-going latent confrontations between social actors. At the same time,

34 Turk, *Letnica*, 72.

35 Turk, *Letnica*, 72; Zefi, *Župa Letnica*, 178; Gabrić, “Izvor života,” 8.

36 Gabrić, “Izvor života,” 9; Baković, “Zoja Crna Gora,” 8.

37 Baković, “Zoja Crna Gora,” 9; Gabrić, “Letnica,” 11; Zefi, *Župa Letnica*, 174;

38 Duijzings, *Religion*, 87. Ger Duijzings depicts practices of exclusion regarding the pilgrimage to the Orthodox monastery of Gračanica and the end of “joint” veneration in other holy sites located in Kosovo. Duijzings, *Religion*, 66-78; Sanja Zlatanović, “Letnica: slika prevazilaženja granica i njeni ostaci,” *Slike kulture i sad. Zbornik Etnografskog Instituta SANU* 24 (2008): 179-191.



although Letnica has remained at the heart of worship, the pilgrimage has been reinterpreted and gained additional meanings in both narrative and practice, reflecting changes in the respective wider social and political context.³⁹ Many of the internally displaced persons as well as old-timers living on the border area with Kosovo refuse to return to Letnica, even if the annual veneration of the Letnica church and the statue of the Virgin Mary are part of a long-term vow; they fear spontaneous outbreaks of violence in the area. However, nowadays, some believers—accompanied by the clergy from the Skopje Diocese—attend the annual celebrations in Letnica, which currently belongs to the Prizren-Prishtina Diocese. Until last year (2019) an annual one-day pilgrimage was organized by the parish for any person wishing to attend, on the 15th of August; this has now been put on hold. My interlocutors admitted that organizing such a trip did not pay off, since many devotees preferred to travel independently with their families.

THE PRESENCE OF LETNICA IN THE ST. JOSEPH'S CHAPEL

While one might assume that St. Joseph's chapel would play a small role in local religious life, since the main pilgrimage routes led to Letnica, in fact St. Joseph's chapel, following the earthquake of 1963, became one of the central functioning sites in the parish of Skopje. As my interlocutors recalled, "those who could not make the pilgrimage to Kosovo, attended on the same dates to the church of Skopje."⁴⁰ As a newly-built cathedral in Skopje opened its doors for believers, the chapel found itself in the shadow of the cathedral, while simultaneously developing as a pilgrimage site of local importance. The significance of the chapel as a pilgrimage center grew during the outbreaks of military hostilities and corresponding tensions between different ethnic communities on the grounds within the former Yugoslavia (1991–2001). During the post-conflict period, the chapel gained religious importance when popular holy sites such as Letnica were symbolically relocated by locals and refugees, that were subsequently cut off from their object of veneration,

39 Sikimić, "Sveta putovanja," 22; Personal interviews with a Muslim woman conducted in Skopje in 2012; with a Muslim woman conducted in Niš (Serbia) in 2014.

40 Personal interviews with a Catholic priest from Skopje in 2014; with a Muslim spiritual leader from Niš (Serbia) in 2014; with a Muslim pilgrim from Niš in 2014.

and continued receiving pilgrims in different spaces.⁴¹ St. Joseph's chapel became one of the improvised branches of the Letnica church. The ritual repertoire of the "joint" pilgrimage that had been typical for Letnica and other sites was reproduced here – albeit with some changes – while in other Catholic or Orthodox parishes the established scenario was either rejected by church officials or significantly transformed, creating a barrier to Muslim visitors and marginalizing this tradition.⁴²

Majka (Serb.: mother)—this is how the pilgrims and some outsiders refer to both the statue of the Virgin Mary and the chapel of St. Joseph where it is located. This name also applies to the period of the annual devotional visitation. Pilgrims also give the same title to the statue of the Virgin Mary and the church in Letnica.⁴³ Such a designation associatively refers to Letnica, and marks a symbolic tie between these two sites of worship.⁴⁴ Importantly, none of my interlocutors among the visitors who defined themselves as Muslims could clearly and intelligibly explain the meaning of the Assumption day as a religious feast. In their cosmology, this day is the Lady's day and simultaneously the day of a particular site (the Letnica church or the St. Joseph's chapel). This interpretation is shaped by the idea of special powers, that are embedded in a certain place and reveal itself in a particular period, providing a "channel" for effective communication with the unseen. This symbolic tie with Letnica and the continuity of the "joint" pilgrimage can be traced in different ways. The "sacral presence" of the Lady of Letnica is constituted in and through certain ritual actions initiated by clergy and pilgrims alike, as well as through the transmission of various narratives that represent both the position of the church

41 Dragana Radisavljevic Ciparizovic, *Hodočašća u XXI veku: studije slučaja tri svetišta u Srbiji: Kalemegdanska Sv. Petka, Bogorodica Đuniska i Majka Božja Tekijska* (Belgrade: Univerzitet u Beogradu, Filozofski fakultet, 2016), 155; Dragan Todorović, "Roma Cult Places: The Roman Catholic Church in Niš," in *Roma Religious Culture*, ed. Dragoljub B. Đorđević (Niš: Punta, 2003), 131-140; Ksenia Trofimova, "Constructing Holy Spaces in a Multicultural Milieu: The Case of Zajde Bašće Shrine in Niš (Serbia)," *State, Religion and Church* 3, no. 2 (2016): 93-95.

42 Radisavljević-Čiparizović, *Hodočašća u XXI veku*, 156; Todorović, *Roma Cult Places*, 131-140.

43 Илић М., и др. Култна места Косова и Метохије // Баштина 15 (2003): 161. Personal interviews with a Muslim man conducted in Skopje in 2017; with a Muslim woman conducted in Skopje in 2017; with a Catholic woman, a volunteer in the diocese of Skopje, conducted in Skopje in 2017.

44 Katalinić, "Ekumensko značenje," 476.



and the personal experiences and attitudes of the organizers and devotees.⁴⁵ It is in St. Joseph's chapel where the pilgrims receive the tiny flaps of fabric that are associated with the robe covering the Lady of Letnica. As I have learned, some pilgrims refer to the statue of the Virgin Mary venerated in St. Joseph's chapel as *the sister* of the respected statue of the Lady of Letnica.⁴⁶ The presence of Letnica is also manifested in the symbolic space of the chapel through frequent references, memories, and testimonies of divine interventions that pilgrims share among each other and with the clergy, as well as in their prayers.

Moreover, in some cases the symbolic tie in question is explicitly articulated, for instance when a volunteer from the parish joins the pilgrim in their personal prayer (be the pilgrim Muslim or Catholic). The pilgrim's barely audible prayer is pronounced then jointly and aloud, standing out against the homogeneous acoustic background. In her desire to support an elderly woman praying to God (*Allah*) for the protection of her son, one of the volunteers called upon the Lady of Letnica, "May the Virgin of Letnica grace him health!"⁴⁷

At the same time, the annual pilgrimage to St. Joseph's chapel is distinctive, since it is nowadays *predominantly Roma Muslims* who participate. Whereas the main festive celebrations are held in the cathedral, the space of the chapel is designated for, as some of the priests put it, "specific" traditions of worship, in which "particular perceptions" and "particular religiosities" are expressed.⁴⁸

As Setha Low points out when focusing on the "phenomenological and symbolic experience of space," space is socially constructed "through people's social exchanges, memories, images and daily use of the material setting—into scenes and actions

45 Robert Orsi uses the concept of "sacral presence" to refer to "the literal presence of the holy in things and places" as related to the "imaginings and experiences of religious practitioners" and as being negotiated by various social actors. Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 10.

46 Personal interviews with a Catholic priest from the Diocese of Skopje conducted in Skopje in 2014 and 2018; with a cathedral dean of the Diocese of Skopje conducted in Skopje in 2017 and 2019; and with a woman, a Muslim visitor of the chapel, Skopje 2019.

47 Personal interview with a Catholic woman, a volunteer from the parish, conducted in Skopje in 2017.

48 Personal interviews with a Catholic priest from the Diocese of Skopje conducted in Skopje in 2014, and with a cathedral dean of the Diocese of Skopje conducted in Skopje in 2017 and 2019.



“May the Virgin of Letnica grace him health!” Photo by Ksenia Trofimova, 2017.

that convey symbolic meaning.”⁴⁹ Following this approach, the space of pilgrimage may be represented as mediated by variable ritual actions, pragmatics, and interpretations, shared by both lay believers and the clergy. The image of the holy place that frames the pilgrimage is created and transmitted via open sources: mainly, via oral accounts, journalistic reporting, notes from diocesan media, sermons or public comments made by religious authorities.

As I have mentioned above, the enduring symbolic tie between two sites of worship works for me as a starting point to trace how the local tradition of “joint” pilgrimage is located, transmitted, and reproduced. Addressing the way this symbolic tie, embedded within ritual scenarios and shared narratives, plays out during the pilgrimage to St. Joseph’s chapel enables us to discuss what is specific about the on-going process of localization and transmission in a given social and cultural context.

For many visitors to St. Joseph’s chapel, the pilgrimage to Letnica represents a personal experience that is inscribed in individual as well as in social (particularly familial) memory. The memory of the Letnica pilgrimage—through its essentially composite image—is integrated into, and fabricates the lived tradition of the veneration of St. Joseph’s chapel. In other words, the image of Letnica and related narratives serve as both the background and a key parallel to current practices and narratives associated with St. Joseph’s chapel and the annual “joint” pilgrimage.

49 Setha M. Low, “Towards an Anthropological Theory of Space and Place,” *Semiotica* 175, no. 1/4 (2009): 24, <https://doi.org/10.1515/semi.2009.041>.

However, localizing tradition is undoubtedly a discursive process. Regarding the making of St. Joseph's chapel, official church narratives created around Letnica are supplemented and continuously refined by participants' vernacular narratives.

(RE)LOCATING THE TRADITION OF THE JOINT PILGRIMAGE

Letnica "Project" and the Official Church Narrative

The broad repertoire of vernacular practices, observed in Letnica, unfold the narratives of the *"lived" faith, cohesion* and *"lived ecumenism"* of various religious communities and traditions during the pilgrimage. The official narratives, produced at the various stages of the Letnica "project" promoted messages shared by local religious authorities, and pursued the trajectories of diocesan policies: a timely, but temporary and contextual language was created for this purpose on the pages of ecclesiastical bulletins. Addressing the issue of the multi-faith pilgrimage, the reports published in the 1960s-1980s were primarily focused on the issue of "sharing" and its management by different social actors engaged during the pilgrimage and therefore on the issue of identity boundaries and their articulations. While highlighting the *communitas* that broke down social barriers to foster unity in devotion to the Lady of Letnica, Catholic pieces also underlined those symbolic boundaries that were defined by ritual prescriptions/limitations or by the discursive process of religious identity construction.⁵⁰ The narrative about Letnica portraying

50 The official position of the church authorities regarding the involvement of the Orthodox pilgrims, who were denied the sacraments of confession and communion, clarified the issue of sharing: "It never occurs to anyone to use this for proselytism or propaganda. For the Orthodox believer, this does not serve as an excuse to betray his Church, but only for spiritual strengthening, to become stronger in faith as an Orthodox Christian." Baković, "Zoja Crna Gora," 8. The author's clarification regarding the official attitude toward the Orthodox pilgrims and the policy in the field of propagation of faith and conversion is particularly meaningful, given that for a long period of time, there had been tension developing between the Diocese of Skopje and the Yugoslav authorities affecting the issue of religious and social activities among the Catholics of the Latin and Eastern rites. The authorities believed that the proactive and successful missionary work on the grounds at a time when the issue of the status of the Orthodox Church in Macedonia had not yet been resolved would not only allow local Catholic dioceses to strengthen ties with the Vatican, but would also give impetus to the development of the reactionary movement. Borče Ilievski, "The Attitude of the Authorities of the People's Republic of Macedonia Toward the Roman Catholic Church in the 1950s," *Radovi - Zavod za hrvatsku povijest* 46 (2014): 401-419, <https://doi.org/10.17234/RadoviZHP.46.12>.

it as simultaneously a space of frontiers and *communitas*, division and cohesion corresponded to the relevant intra-confessional discussions raised at that time. Those included the issue of “lived” faith, ecumenism, and communication to non-believers—issues that were of special importance to Catholics in the wake of the Second Vatican Council.⁵¹

The concept of ecumenism was used in the local Catholic publications of that period (1960s–1980s) in a broader sense to describe this particular local context. The official church narrative clarifies social and cultural significance of the pilgrimage to Letnica for the territory with a complex and often painful history of inter-communal relations: “Ecumenism here is not a matter of debate, but a way of life. The Lady of Letnica is here an ambassador of ecumenism, love and harmony. The Catholic church, though the most modest in number of followers, is carrying out a great social mission in these parts.”⁵²

As both the reports from the 1950s–1970s and contemporary memoirs show, Letnica as a site of pilgrimage was shaped by a wide repertoire of rituals performed by followers of various religious traditions with the permission and assistance of the clergy. The popular narrative of Letnica as *a space of the “lived” faith* has been elaborated thanks, in large part, to the corpus of stories about miraculous interventions that circulated among pilgrims and priests. The Other, specifically the Muslim Roma, and the Other’s experience played a crucial role in creating a respectful public discourse. Because they were portrayed as true (sincere) believers standing firm in their faith, the Other was portrayed as the main addressee and the guarantor of the Lady’s grace, i.e. the image of the pivotal Other was *instrumentalized*: “Muslims more than others receive the Lady’s answers to their prayers, then go Orthodox believers, and lastly – our Catholics.”⁵³

51 Ante Katalinić, a well-known theologian from Croatia, referred directly to the decrees of the Second Vatican Council when speaking about local daily relations of various religious and ethnic communities in terms of ecumenism. Katalinić, “Ekumensko značenje,” 469–471.

52 Katalinić, “Ekumensko značenje,”

53 Katalinić, “Ekumensko značenje,” 477; Baković, “Zoja Crna Gora,” 8–9.



Contested practices, current negotiations and choreographic shifts in the St. Joseph's chapel

The discourse defined above, except for the ecumenical perspective, remains relevant and is repeatedly articulated during festive days in the St. Joseph's chapel. However, the devotional lexicon shared by the pilgrims there has been constantly revised by the clergy and the visitors alike through exclusion, restriction, and other kinds of transformations that affected practices embedded within the "specific" tradition of veneration of the Lady of Letnica. What makes up the "specificity" of the continued worship of Letnica and, respectively, the St. Joseph's chapel by the Roma pilgrims (regardless of their religious belonging)? In the discourse followed by the diocesan clergy, it is the emphasis on and the prevalence of the "material economy of the sacred" that explicitly distinguishes the religiosity of the Roma people, be they Muslims or Christians.⁵⁴ Their way of building relations with the unseen is frequently defined as a phenomenon *sui generis*, which has been to some extent influenced by Islamic tradition but does not fully correspond with it. It is rather simply classified in terms of ethnicity, and rarely situated in relation to theological or social scientific approaches that explore "lived" religion in its various manifestations.

To illustrate the position described above, one of the diocesan priests recalled how at some point before the Assumption Day, the clergy had decided to replace the statue of the Virgin Mary with a Child with a new one. The Roma pilgrims coming on the first day of the pilgrimage were very affected by the changes and they "demanded that we return their Mother to them."⁵⁵ Given the significance the devotees attached to the physical sense of connection (*direktnost*) with the statue as an embodied sanctity, the clergymen decided to put the old statue in its original place. Generally, addressing negotiations with material objects as a marker to define the "specific" tradition established in Letnica and replicated in the St. Joseph's chapel involves divergent speculations regarding a set of vernacular practices that shapes a

54 David Morgan, "Material Culture of Lived Religion," in *Mind and Matter: Selected Papers of the Nordik 2009 Conference for Art Historians*, ed. Johanna Vakkari (Helsinki: Helsingfors, 2010), 25.

55 Personal interviews conducted in Skopje in 2019.

symbolic tie between these two sites of worship.

For instance, the differences in the color and shape of the candles lit on the pedestals can counter the multivocality as a vital feature of the pilgrimage.⁵⁶ As one of the helpers from the parish put it, yellow candles are mainly used in the Orthodox tradition while white candles commonly refer to the Latin one. At the same time, according to my observations of other local shrines, including both Muslim sites and loci of “joint” worship, Muslims associate yellow candles with Orthodox practice for Muslim pilgrims, while white candles are linked to veneration of mausoleums of saints (*awliya*). The latter association could emerge from the practice of creating shrines dedicated to “anonymous saints” in the private houses and streets of local Romani urban neighborhoods.⁵⁷ Such candles are called “Muslim,” and in many mausoleums the caretakers strictly ask to light them only. Thus, the use of a certain type of candle during the ritual often serves to articulate religious affiliation of the sanctuary and the dominance of one or another confessional discourse. Apparently, in this way the sanctuary is distinguished from the surrounding *religioscape*. Likewise, the identity boundaries of those present in the church are actualized within the framework of the “joint” pilgrimage, symbolically drawn every time devotional candles are used.⁵⁸ Indeed, although in practice the above prescriptions can remain nominal, actions associated with ritual objects (candles) in many cases continue to embody and objectify boundaries, at least within individual practices. Although many Muslim visitors do not attach much symbolic importance to the choice of the candle, in private conversations some of them complain that they would rather light white (i.e. Muslim) candles. However, as they report, “White candles are not offered. We are Muslims, but they sell only yellow ones. They do

56 John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow, “Introduction,” in *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*, ed. John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 15.

57 Ksenia Trofimova, “Transforming Islam among Roma communities in the Balkans: a case of popular religiosity,” *Nationalities Papers* 45, no. 4 (July 2017): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2017.1302925>.

58 Robert Hayden, “Religioscape: concept, indicators and scales of competitive sharing through time,” in *Antagonistic Tolerance: Competitive Sharing: Competitive Sharing of Religious Sites and Spaces* (London: Routledge, 2016), 25-49.



not sell white candles. Just yellow ones, for them (for Christian pilgrims).”⁵⁹

Some visitors take “proper” candles from home or buy them from enterprising merchants coming from their community. For a number of Muslim pilgrims, the use of yellow (i.e. Christian) candles serves as a kind of “tribute to” the rules that are set by the “owners” of the place. For others, the choice does not matter since this holy place unites all devotees in their conversation with God and the Virgin Mother, and implies blurring of the boundaries and devaluing of their visual markers. So, the choice of candles to use in ritual practice demonstrates how pilgrims situationally negotiate the issue of religious frontiers and affiliations. This specific case that remains mostly invisible to the observer sheds light on a variety of situations regarding power relations and hierarchies, their manifestation and articulations within the pilgrimage. Various choreographies set by both the organizers and the pilgrims are more clearly seen in the case of other vernacular practices when the issue of prohibitions and prescriptions is more acute.

Some devotional habits were “legitimated,” while others were denounced, condemned as “inappropriate,” and prohibited.⁶⁰

The ritual circuit made inside the chapel with a sacrificial animal—a practice popular in Letnica and beyond—had been repeatedly criticized and finally forbidden, while the offering of the animal to the church as well as the practice of walking the animal around the building must be occasionally permitted by the clergy. Another popular practice observed in Letnica, the ritual of wrapping a thread around the building of a chapel, was banned several years ago. Wrapping a religious building or another ritual object with a thread is a common vernacular practice aimed



Lighting candles in the courtyard of St. Joseph's chapel. Photo by Ksenia Trofimova, 2017.

59 Personal interviews with a Muslim woman conducted in Skopje in 2017.

60 Priests avoided referring to them as magic.



Offering a sacrificial animal (lamb) at the chapel doors. Photo by Ksenia Trofimova, 2017.

at overcoming problems associated with childbearing and fertility.⁶¹ Even though the belt woven from the threads was defined in one of the church reports from the 1970s as a “holy” belt of “fertility,”⁶² the practice was forbidden since it “implies commercial component” and therefore “comes into conflict with norms of the Church.”⁶³

Since “the structure of worship is often elastic enough to allow ‘others’ to join in,” the limits of what is permitted during the pilgrimage to the St. Joseph’s chapel retain a certain degree of flexibility on a practical level.⁶⁴ Worship at a holy site is commonly preceded or accompanied by making a vow/intention (*zavet/nijet*), that sets up the list of practices carried out at the shrine.⁶⁵ Whereas *zavet* implies establishing reciprocal

relations and serves as a structural resource of the pilgrimage (in terms of efficacy), visitors use various *tactics*⁶⁶ to perform their devotional acts “properly.” Even if this performance is incompatible sometimes with the Church’s guidelines, it is in accordance with the “established tradition” and pilgrims’ vows. Currently, almost every pilgrim seeks the clergy’s permission to offer the church a sacrificial animal (a lamb). If a priest or an assistant agree, the pilgrims quietly look through the open front doors of the chapel with the lamb or make a step inside the chapel in order to demonstrate the Lady her gift, the fulfillment of their vow. As far as I could observe, some visitors touched the statue with the threads and then left them among other offerings for a while so that they could be filled with grace. Threads

61 Biljana Sikimić, “Dynamic Continuity of a Sacred Place: Transformation of Pilgrim’s Experiences of Letnica in Kosovo,” *Southeastern Europe* 41, no. 1 (2017), 51-52, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763332-04101003>; Ilić, “Kulna mesta”, 159-160; Tatomir Vukanović, “Gypsy Pilgrimages to the Monastery of Gračanica in Serbia,” *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* 45 (1966), 19-20.

62 Gabrić, “Izvor života”, 9.

63 Personal interviews conducted in Skopje in 2014.

64 Albera, “Crossing the Frontiers,” 238.

65 Tanas Vrazhinovski, *Narodna traditsija. Religija. Kultura* (Skopje: Matica Makedonska, 1999), 149-156.

66 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (London: University of California Press, 1984).



can be also found tied on window bars. The priests serving during the pilgrimage, as well as the lay-helpers, tend to notice those tactics and try to keep a fragile balance in these cases. During my last visit in 2019 a woman—a Muslim Roma in her 40s—entered the chapel. She came with her daughter-in-law and her mother, both non-Roma German citizens. After visiting the chapel, she approached a group of lay helpers and asked which of the priests could help in carrying out the ritual with the threads since her daughter-in-law cannot get pregnant. In a brief conversation held in three languages (Macedonian, English, and German) the priest and his assistant gently explained to them that this devotional action is not welcomed by the Church. The priest witnessed that this place is indeed famous for healings, and since he learned that the daughter-in-law and her mother were Catholic, he suggested they pray together for the grace of the Lady and that he give them a blessing. The Roma woman had left Skopje before the shrine’s organizers had imposed the most recent restrictions, and was confused with the clergyman’s reaction to her request. Her expectations that had been established in Letnica were not fulfilled and she kept looking in vain for someone who could help in performing the ritual.

This case along with other descriptions illustrates a choreographic shift that clearly indicates changes in the Diocese’s policy and an intention to unilaterally standardize pilgrimage practices within the contextualized framework of norms and appropriate scenarios.⁶⁷ The context in which normative frames are adjusted and the dominance of the church institution over the pilgrimage is demonstrated, including contested practices, might be set by localization of the present tradition in the multi-confessional space of the capital city. Skopje had served as a platform for socio-political transformations and a testing ground for competing nation- and identity-building policies.⁶⁸ In light of these dramatically shifting socio-political realities, the religiouscape of Skopje might reflect current power negotiations, especially the desire of various ethnic and religious communities to establish and mark their presence within the shared urban space through visualization of

67 Henig, "Contested Choreographies," 135.

68 Goran Janev, "Narrating the Nation, Narrating the City," *Cultural Analysis* 10 (2011): 3-21; Ljupco Risteski, "Monuments and Urban Nationalism: The Skopje 2014 Project," *Antropologija* 16, no. 3 (2016): 49-70.

symbolic boundaries. Noteworthy, the narrative of the “lived” faith transmitted by the Church officials in their descriptions and interpretations of the pilgrimage tradition in question does not merge into the narrative of ecumenism and social mission of the Catholic Church, as it has before, but opens discussion focused on frontiers and disunity of the local (urban) ethnic and religious communities.

St. Joseph’s chapel as compared to its prototype, the Letnica church, is currently not only spatially closer to the institutional center of the diocese, but to other religious institutions. It is also nearer to the homes of the majority of its Muslim Roma visitors. Spatial proximity, because it provides frequent routine interactions, results in increased awareness about the processes of building religious identity that have been played out in the Roma Muslim communities over the last decades. I think it’s safe to assume that the current Church policies on the grounds reflect greater sensitivity to those negotiations that refer to intra-religious and intra-communal polyphony present among the local Roma Muslims, namely, the ongoing debates on authenticity, purity of faith, and its “proper” practice. Generally, the religious identity frontiers being a matter of discursive processes are shaped across multiple scales and are affected by individual occasional pragmatics, broad narratives and contextual institutional policies adjusting the idea and the sense of belonging. Even if most of the pilgrims define themselves as Muslims and their identity is strong, their understanding of Muslimness is, as it is typical for the “lived”⁶⁹ religiosity, quite flexible, occasionally controversial and implies a variety of discursive maneuvers.

Many of my interlocutors shared the vision that holy sites (such as Christian and Muslim shrines) are open to any believer. The manner in which relations between different groups of pilgrims set the scene for combined worship is usually seen by my interlocutors from a different perspective. One’s experience of coexistence with the Other within the space of the pilgrimage was seamlessly inscribed in day-to-day patterns of routinized neighborly relations and was mostly interpreted without referring to the policies of religious institutions and their mediation. As a

⁶⁹ Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 185-213.



local Muslim (Sufi) religious leader put it, mutual non-interference is a principal way that pilgrims and the clergy in Letnica treated each other's boundaries: "They understood *what kind of place it was!*"⁷⁰ Their vernacular hermeneutics operates with categories and hierarchies of a different order. Pilgrims' and the clergy's shared sense of presence in the same space of grace, communication with transcendental powers, recognition of similar existential conditions, and expectations related to the *efficacy* of devotional practices that mediates relations between them and shapes horizontal and vertical ties during the pilgrimage. As I have learned from one of the priests, one could hardly recall the cases of conversion to Catholicism in the context of the pilgrimage to Letnica, when it comes to Muslim Roma.

At the same time, those devotions that have been traditionally carried out at the Christian sites are nowadays a matter of *contestation*: they become a sticking point in discussions revolving around the issue of Islamic tradition and are often devalued and stigmatized by a "new generation" of local religious leaders.⁷¹

I have become accustomed to many Muslims' ambivalent attitude toward worship at Christian holy sites: even members of the same religious group (a Sunni jamaat or a Sufi fellowship) regardless of their age and social background expressed opposed views on the topic. One of the Sufi sheikhs I interviewed several times in Niš (Serbia) nostalgically recalled his annual family pilgrimage to the Orthodox monastery of Gračanica and, moreover outlined basic principles a Muslim should adhere to in worshipping such a place:

The monastery is a place designed for everyone. A Muslim can spell 'amen,' but cannot make the sign of the cross. And one can also recite Surah Al-Fatiha.

[Interviewer: *Right in the church?*] You need to enter the church.

[Interviewer: *Standing in front of the icon?*] No, right here. A Muslim will not approach the icon; there is no one present there. A Muslim completes his own

70 Personal interview conducted in Skopje in 2019.

71 Those religious activists that insist on rethinking traditional forms of piety, even from divergent and competing perspectives, are often generically called as "new generation" (*nova generacija*) or just with an adjective "new" (*novi*).

job; the priest completes his own.⁷²

Another spiritual leader, a Sufi sheikh from Skopje depicted his visitations to Letnica in a different way. He recalled festive atmosphere of the pilgrimage: the fair that had been regularly organized there attracted many young men. He stressed that his experience there had no religious connotations. In his view, approaching such an experience from the position of worship turns such a profane visitation into the practice of idolatry (*širk*) and therefore, is automatically condemned.

Some of my interlocutors among the Catholic clergy and parishioners noted the lack of initiatives in religious dialogue and the indifference and ignorance among the lay believers in relation to the religious culture of the Other. These observations accentuate the social and cultural distance rather than cohesion at the grassroots level. In this context, the Other, whose image is being shaped in the emerging narrative of social and cultural fragmentation, is portrayed as the one that rather maintains the distance and keeps away from traditional devotional visitations of the St. Joseph's chapel than provides a basis for continued "lived" ecumenism.

The annual decrease in the number of Roma devotees visiting the St. Joseph's chapel—in general and in relation to the situations familiar to my interlocutors—was interpreted by a lay-helper as deriving from exclusivist tendencies of the "new religious leaders" among the Muslim Roma. The clergy recognize the lack of organized missionary activities (as part of social ministry projects) and explain it in similar rhetoric, i.e. by unwillingness to provoke potential religion-based tensions.

In this context, I would assume that prohibition of a distinctive devotional act, such as tying a red thread around the building, is rather targeted at outsiders and aimed at making the contested nature of the pilgrimage less visible.

At present, there are no sermons or meetings with the bishop for the Muslim pilgrims specifically, while communication between the pilgrims and the clergy usually comes down to either obtaining permission to perform a particular devotional act or having brief personal conversations. It seems to me that in the absence

72 Personal interviews conducted in Niš in 2014.

of organized mass interaction between the clergy and the non-Catholic pilgrims, their communication is individualized. Interactions are more situational and both parties distance themselves from each other. Noteworthy, at this stage, only a few visitors seek priests' blessing.

While the overwhelming majority of pilgrims to the St. Joseph's chapel are Muslim Roma who follow their "specific tradition" there, their religious affiliations are rarely displayed within the repertoire of demonstrative piety. In general, the vernacular devotional lexicon is rather "neutral" and usually lacks those visual markers that would clearly distinguish one religious tradition from another, and define one of them as Muslim. Even though the Muslim pilgrims present in the chapel are concerned about the issue of religious identity and express a distinct attitude toward the question of "proper" practice of faith, they usually do not manifest their religious affiliation explicitly. This applies in particular to gestural practices and vestimentary coding. Only a few pilgrims raise their hands in a Muslim way and recite the Islamic formulas out loud, and only a few of them introduce vestimentary markers associated with Islamic tradition in the symbolic space of the chapel. At the same time, one image stands out in the familiar year-round decoration of the chapel—a photo of the statue of the Virgin Mary of Rivald, a Catholic church known as a popular site of worship of Roma devotees in Poland. The caption under the photo is written in Macedonian and reads: *Majka na ciganite*, "The Mother (the Lady) of the Roma people." This image and the text accompanying it tend to highlight an ethnic dimension of the pilgrimage site (and subsequently the tradition of worship of Letnica and the St. Joseph's chapel) and inscribe Roma pilgrims into the broad Marian cult and Catholic discourse. As one of the lay helpers put it, the image was offered by one of the pilgrims and, by initiative of the clergy, is annually placed in the chapel next to the statue of the Virgin Mary with a Child on the days of pilgrimage.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The St. Joseph's chapel as a site of worship has been constructed mainly by inertia, in hand with the pilgrimage to Letnica and based on a symbolic tie established between them. This is manifested in different ways—through devotional scenarios

offered and followed by all the actors involved, and mediated by the vow, as well as through the narrative memory that recreates episodes of the traditional pilgrimage and (re)constructs the image of a holy site. Meanwhile, as joint veneration “seem to react quickly to their sociopolitical context,” I have documented that the narratives shaped around the pilgrimage to Letnica along with the traditional repertoire of demonstrative piety are being “revised” in case of the St. Joseph’s chapel.⁷³ The revisions I traced were made according to the respective changing social realities. Thus, the ecumenical line has been erased from the public discourse as being contextually irrelevant. The focus has shifted to and fixed on the universal narrative of the “lived” faith that allows multiple interpretations and legitimations portraying a holy site as an inclusive place that tends to bring together distinct traditions while simultaneously allowing individuals to keep their religious identities. Despite the “from above” tendency to standardize the devotional scenario for all the pilgrims and the corresponding trend, observed at the grassroots, to neutralize demonstration (visualization) of religious differences, symbolic discreetness is manifested through individual actions, tactic compromises and creative decisions.

As I have already observed, the official narrative of the “lived” faith and cultural/social cohesions continues to be referred to in the interpretations shared by all parties involved in the worship of the St. Joseph’s chapel. Meanwhile, unlike Letnica, the St. Joseph’s chapel seems to be of less strategic value for the Diocese and, being “specific” and contested, is put “in the shadows”: it doesn’t become a subject of rich reporting by the local or regional church media and it is not mentioned in public discussions about the trajectories of development of the Catholic Church in the region. The territory of the church feast is discrete: the main parish activities are organized in the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Mother Teresa Memorial House, while the St. Joseph’s chapel is designed for continuity sui generis unfolding “specific” tradition of the joint veneration.

At the same time, while being entangled in a broader socio-political field and subsequently overshadowed, the St. Joseph’s chapel remains a significant point in local imageries and cosmologies. It serves as a platform for reciprocal relations cutting

⁷³ Albera, “Crossing the Frontiers,” 241.

across multiple scales. The symbolic capital of this Catholic site, its reputation of a holy place is being maintained by narrations of miraculous healings that took place after annual religious activities at the chapel. I have also shown that the broad scenario of the pilgrimage is being written and revised by all parties: the clergy and the pilgrims alike are involved in replicating and adjusting the repertoire of vernacular practices associated with pilgrimage to Letnica and similar shrines. The St. Joseph's chapel as a site of worship is constructed through a subtle and interactive management process in which the strategy to standardize the devotional lexicon meets tactics to bypass the restrictions, and the limits of what is permitted remain occasionally flexible to avoid potential tensions. At the same time, without the ideologically oriented narrative able to back up the "specific" tradition played out in the St. Joseph's chapel, its symbolic space is created rather through private narrations shared by the devotees and the clergy, while currently the chapel as a holy site remains in the shadow of the main stage, the Letnica.

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