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Cover Page Footnote

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Pilgrimage During Covid-19: Impacts, Adaptations and Recovery

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Towards the end of 2020, this journal published an issue devoted to the impact of COVID-19. The novel coronavirus was having a devastating effect not only on public health but also on the global religious tourism industry. Places of worship closed, pilgrimage events and activities were cancelled, and travel restrictions limited mobility. A viable vaccination was predicted to be eighteen months away. One contributor even asked, ‘Is this the end of pilgrimage?’

This article re-examines and re-evaluates the impact of COVID-19, taking up some of the themes introduced in the 2020 issue. Focusing on western pilgrimage, with evidence from online English-language articles and social media commentaries, I examine how the global pandemic impacted pilgrimage destinations and their visitors between March 2020 and November 2021.

Online media sources documented the different ways pilgrim destinations and pilgrims adapted to the pandemic, revealing how restrictions imposed on religious sites and events led to alternative ways of experiencing pilgrimage. In highlighting four ‘pandemic trends’ which particularly caught the attention of the media, I show that these seemingly new pilgrimage modes are, in fact, not new at all, but reassert medieval precedents or promote trends already emerging in post-secular culture. After considering two case studies – Lough Derg in Ireland and the shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes in France – I offer some tentative conclusions about the relevance of these pandemic pilgrimage trends in a post-pandemic world.

Key Words: pilgrimage, COVID-19, Christianity, virtual pilgrimage, wellness

Introduction

In 2019 the prospects for pilgrimage and religious tourism were looking rosy. Record numbers of pilgrims were recorded at Roman Catholic shrines, including six million who visited Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal (Crux, 2020) and ten million who arrived at the shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico for the annual feast day on 12 December (Lui, 2019). Even the secularised West saw a growth in pilgrimage for spiritual, cultural or therapeutic reasons (Cusack, 2013; Jørgensen, 2020; Scriven, 2020).

In the early months of 2020, fortunes changed when all discretionary travel was embroiled in a global crisis. The novel SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus – commonly dubbed COVID-19 – was first identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. By 12 March 2020, it had made such devastating progress that the World Health Organisation declared it a global pandemic (Mosier *et al.*, 2020). Public health measures taken by governments to mitigate the spread of infection included the closure of religious

buildings, the banning of social gatherings, restrictions on travel, and a series of lockdowns which confined citizens to their homes and neighbourhoods, dealing a serious blow to religious travel and pilgrimage.

In the late summer of 2020, the marketing magazine, *Drum*, asked, ‘Can religious tourism rise from the dead?’ Shrines and their associated tourism industries endured a major financial shortfall. Donations to the shrine of Fatima in Portugal halved due to a drop in visitors (*Catholic News Agency*, 2020b), and in 2020 the shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes in France suffered an operating loss of four million euros (*FSSPX Spirituality*, 2021a).

By the end of 2020, and certainly by the summer of 2021, the pessimistic tone in the media was shifting to one of hope. In August 2021, commentators were joyfully celebrating the return of pilgrims to major Roman Catholic sites for Assumption Day celebrations (Gangl, 2021; Hird, 2021), and in October the *Fundación Jacobea*, which promotes the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route in northern Spain, was jubilantly proclaiming ‘The

way is reborn!’ after 37,465 pilgrims collected their *Compostelas* (certificates of completion) in the previous month (*Fundación Jacobea*, 2021). Pilgrimage was not only making a comeback, but it was even predicted to be a ‘post-COVID travel trend’ (Walker, 2021). Pilgrimage seemed to rise from the dead and set out for new heights.

This paper examines this extraordinary period in religious tourism, focusing primarily on Christian pilgrimage. It follows a humanities approach, contributing to the interdisciplinary nature of pilgrimage studies which has been promoted in recent years, for example by the University of York’s Centre for Pilgrimage Studies as exemplified in their Arts and Humanities Research Council Project, *Pilgrims and England’s Cathedrals: Past and Present* (2014-17) which culminated in the edited volume *Pilgrims and England’s Cathedrals: Past and Present* (Dyas & Jenkins, 2020).

Although drawing on published ethnographic sources and historical evidence, the article’s main source base comprises English-language articles and social media posts which appeared online between March 2020 and the end of 2021. These sources were mostly accessed through the Microsoft search engine Bing using the sole search term ‘pilgrimage’. Reliance on internet algorithms and selective reportage means that what follows is not a comprehensive review. Nonetheless, these sources provide a valuable evolving snapshot of how the global pandemic, with the constraints on human movement and interaction, impacted pilgrimage destinations and their visitors.

Online media sources highlighted the different ways pilgrim destinations, and pilgrims, adapted to the new circumstances. The restrictions imposed on religious sites, events, and activities often led to alternative ways of experiencing pilgrimage. The paper considers examples which especially attracted media attention and demonstrates that these seemingly new approaches to pilgrimage are, in fact, not new at all. Finally, some tentative conclusions are made about the relevance of these pandemic pilgrimage trends in a post-pandemic world

What follows builds on research published towards the end of 2020 by this journal in an issue dedicated to the impact of COVID-19. At the time of the issue’s publication, the situation was looking dire. A viable vaccination was predicted to be eighteen months away

(Mosier *et al*, 2020), and many pilgrimages were still suspended (Dunn-Hensley, 2020; Ivona & Privitera, 2020; Zammit, 2020). In their opening article, Razaq Raj and Kevin Griffin grimly reflected how the pandemic was having ‘a devastating impact on religious tourism’ (2020:3), while another contributor spoke about a ‘climate of fear’ and asked whether this is ‘the end of pilgrimage?’ (Korstanje, 2020).

One year on, the present article re-examines and re-evaluates the ‘impact of COVID-19 on religious tourism and pilgrimage’ (Raj & Griffin, 2020), narrowing the focus to western pilgrimage and bringing into play updated evidence and sources. The pandemic is far from over (Claus, 2021; *News Northern Sound*, 2021). Nonetheless, the preliminary success of the vaccine rollout in western countries and the easing of social restrictions have led to a more optimistic mood than that which so often underpinned the articles written in the summer of 2020. The discussion which follows takes up, and further explores, some of the threads introduced in the 2020 journal issue. Particular emphasis is given to the ways in which innovation and creativity have reshaped pandemic pilgrimage activities and facilitated the continuation of pilgrimage in ‘challenging times’ (Raj and Griffin, 2020:3).

Pandemic Impacts: An Overview

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on religious travel and pilgrimage was swift, unexpected, and alarming. From the media’s perspective, the first six months were particularly bleak (Ali & Cobanoglu, 2020; Burger, 2020). The spring of 2020 saw the shocking sight of closed station churches in Rome during Holy Week and a halt to Holy Land pilgrimages in the Middle East (*Catholic News Agency*, 2020c; Gilad, 2021). In October 2020 the Israeli newspaper, *Haaretz*, bemoaned,

For the first time in 1,600 years, no pilgrims in the Holy Land ... the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem lies empty, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre stands desolate’ (Gilad, 2021).

The situation continued into September 2021 when the Israeli authorities allowed a limited number of foreign tourists across its borders (Budry, 2021), but only to reinforce a ban on Christian visitors three months later (Claus, 2021).

Other Christian destinations suffered a similar fate. In May 2020, for example, the shrine of Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal celebrated the anniversary of its Marian apparitions without pilgrims for the first time in its hundred-year history, and in December the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe, in Mexico, was closed for its annual festival (*Vatican News*, 2020; *Crux*, 2020b). Over the same period, the Irish press reported the cancellation of the country's three largest pilgrimages: the Assumption Day pilgrimage at Knock in County Mayo, the Reek Sunday pilgrimage to the summit of Croagh Patrick, also in County Mayo, and the entire summer season at Lough Derg in County Donegal (*The Tablet*, 2020; Harkin, 2020; McGarry, 2020; *Leitrim Observer*, 2021).

Organised walking pilgrimages were also cancelled, including the famous Paris to Chartres pilgrimage which, for two decades, had taken place over the Pentecost weekend (Shaw, 2020). Europe's most famous walking pilgrimage – the Camino de Santiago in northern Spain – was also affected as pilgrim hostels closed and, for a time, travel was prohibited across regional boundaries (*El Camino Con Correos*, 2021). In 2020 the tally of pilgrims collecting their *Compostelas* was 84.5% down on the previous year (Leonard, 2021).

In Britain, the pandemic was particularly untimely. The year 2020 had, ironically, been designated 'The Year of Cathedrals, The Year of Pilgrimage' by the Association of English Cathedrals. A range of celebratory and commemorative events had been planned, including the 'Becket 2020' festival marking 850 years since the death of Thomas Becket, the Archbishop murdered in Canterbury Cathedral. A British Museum exhibition, film screenings of TS Eliot's 'Murder in the Cathedral', children's workshops, a medieval pageant, and cathedral services were all cancelled or postponed (Kelly, 2020). New pilgrimage routes were also affected, such as the Northern Saints Trails which had been launched with great publicity a few days before the first English lockdown (Engelbrecht, 2020).

When restrictions began to lift, pilgrimage centres opened to visitors with substantially reduced numbers. At Lourdes in France, the Feast of the Assumption on 15 August was celebrated not with the usual 25,000 pilgrims, but with a mere 5,000 (*Yahoo News*, 2020). Health measures were also introduced. Physical distancing, mask wearing, and the cancellation of public processions were reported at the shrine of Our Lady of Fatima in October 2021

(Gangl, 2021), and for Assumption Day pilgrimages at Lourdes and at the Orthodox Marian shrine on the island of Tinos, in Greece (Hird, 2021; *Republic World*, 2020). The sanctuary at Lourdes, meanwhile, substituted full immersion in the baths with the 'gesture of water', whereby pilgrims received the famous therapeutic water 'a little in the palm of their hands to drink and wash' (*Hospitalité Notre-Dame de Lourdes*, 2020).

For pilgrims wishing to travel overseas, the regulations were much stricter resulting in, as we will see, the absence of foreigners at many major European pilgrim destinations. Mandatory COVID testing, vaccination certificates, enforced periods of quarantine, and the banning of travellers from 'red list' countries were among the regulations which have come into force at various times during the pandemic. One of the most restrictive countries was Israel, impacting Holy Land pilgrimages. As late as November 2021, all foreign pilgrims were prohibited from using public transport and directed to stay within their tour group (*Aleteia*, 2021), and a month later Christian visitors were again barred from entering Israel due to a spike in the 'Omicron' variant of the virus (Claus, 2021).

The Responses of Pilgrimage Centres and Pilgrims

Faced with cancelled events, closed churches, restrictive measures, and travel prohibitions, how did pilgrimage centres and their pilgrims respond? According to media reportage they responded in a number of different, and innovative, ways. Some religious sites took advantage of their empty premises, perhaps most notably many English cathedrals which were repurposed as vaccination centres (*BBC News*, 2021; Dunne, 2021; Milbank, 2021). Others benefited from the absence of visitors by undertaking renovations. The chapel on Croagh Patrick received some major repair work at this time (O'Riordan, 2021), and in Jerusalem 'important pilgrimage sites' were restored. These included the Church of the Transfiguration, the Church of the Flagellation, and sections of the Via Dolorosa (Gilad, 2021; Krali, 2021).

During the darkest times of the pandemic, the Catholic Church encouraged the faithful by offering new spiritual benefits. When the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe closed for its main feast day in December 2020, Pope Francis guaranteed plenary indulgences for those who prayed from home and fulfilled a series of devotional

requirements (Crux, 2020b). There were also deterrents to dissuade those tempted to circumvent the rules. At Des Plaines in Chicago, the statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe was temporarily removed from the shrine to ‘discourage’ devotees from visiting on the annual feast day (Placko, 2021). In Ireland, meanwhile, local police were deployed to prevent pilgrims climbing Croagh Patrick on Reek Sunday in July 2020 (Bourke, 2020).

As shrines reopened, Catholic pilgrimage was encouraged with the introduction of some spiritual incentives. The Reek Sunday pilgrimage at Croagh Patrick, cancelled in 2020, not only recommenced in 2021 but was also extended across the month of July, necessitating the employment of extra priests to provide masses and offer confession (McGarry, 2021; McDonald, 2021). A similar papal privilege was bestowed on the cathedral at Santiago de Compostela when the *Xacobeo*, or ‘Holy Year’ (occurring when the Feast of St James falls on a Sunday) was lengthened to incorporate 2022 as well as 2021.

Media attitudes towards pilgrims travelling during the pandemic were mixed. In the first year, when fatalities were high, the press could be scathing about those who broke COVID rules. Condemnation was heaped on a Spanish woman who continued walking the Camino de Santiago in the summer of 2020 with COVID symptoms. The Euro Weekly News reporter described how the ‘COVID-ridden pilgrim’ had ‘no sense of moral duty’ and took no notice of others’ health or safety (Taylor, 2020). COVID outbreaks on the Camino continued, but by the following summer seemed to attract less horror and censure (*Alicante Today*, 2021; *Eldiario*, 2021).

As time went on, there was a sense that the resumption of pilgrimage was a triumph of Christian faith over the virus. The Brazilian pilgrims who travelled to the shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida in October 2021 did so ‘in defiance of the coronavirus’ (Pollastri & Jeantet, 2021), and the eagerness of crowds to climb Croagh Patrick was interpreted as a symbol of ‘enduring faith’ (Passmore, 2021). The resilience of Irish faith was the subject of another headline which claimed ‘COVID Can’t Silence Lough Derg’s Spirit’ (*The Irish News*, 2021). From a secular perspective, the return of pilgrimages was often seen as ‘a sign of hope’ that ‘normality’ was returning (Adams, 2021).

Four Pandemic Pilgrimage Trends

During the first year of the pandemic, online media stories highlighted some of the strategies adopted to create ‘COVID-safe’ pilgrimage experiences. With long-distance travel to traditional Christian sites prohibited, alternative pilgrimages tended to relocate pilgrims closer to home, or in some cases, even at home. The four pandemic pilgrimage trends discussed below appeared most frequently in online press reports and social media commentary. Although often hailed as innovations by commentators, none were without earlier precedents.

Virtual Pilgrimage

The most widely publicised alternative to traditional on-site pilgrimage during COVID was its ‘virtual’ substitute (McFarlan Miller, 2020). In its pandemic form, virtual pilgrimage typically involved pilgrimage undertaken from the comfort of home via the medium of the internet (Raj & Griffin, 2020:6). One popular format was the livestream event where, using digital platforms such as Zoom, YouTube, and Facebook, a pilgrimage was streamed directly to viewers. Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal and Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico were among the major Catholic pilgrimages to go online (*Catholic News Agency*, 2020a, 2021a; *Reuters*, 2020). One of the largest livestream pilgrimages in 2020 was the fifteen-hour event at Lourdes, dubbed an ‘E-Pilgrimage’ by its organisers. It included services in English and Spanish, the recitation of the rosary in ten languages, communion, and lectures. Participants were also taken on a virtual tour of the sanctuary and treated to live music (Luxmoore, 2020). Having attracted an astounding eighty million viewers, the event was repeated in 2021 (Bockman, 2021).

Another virtual approach was the pre-recorded compilation of hymns, prayers, sermons, spiritual reflections, poems, and other religious content. This tended to be the preference of smaller, local pilgrimages. The ‘online pilgrimage’ recorded on YouTube by the Bradwell Pilgrimage in Essex, England, for example, comprised photographs from past pilgrimages, recorded hymns and prayers, and video clips of the clergy performing the liturgy at the pilgrimage site (*Bradwell Pilgrimage*, 2021).

Virtual pilgrimage was not a new phenomenon, as historians have pointed out (Barush, 2020; Boyle, 2021). In the Middle Ages, interior journeys to the Holy Land

were often performed as a form of meditative devotion with texts, images, and maps as spiritual travel aids (Beebe, 2015; Donkin & Vorholt, 2012; Hillman & Tingle, 2019). Furthermore, virtual travel in its modern, digital variation was already employed at many pilgrimage destinations before COVID (Hill-Smith, 2011; MacWilliams, 2002; Williams, 2013). ‘Lourdes TV’, for example, uses webcam technology to take viewers directly to the Marian grotto. The Lourdes website is also interactive, allowing pilgrims to post prayers and light candles electronically at the shrine by means of a computer or another digital device. While ‘cyberpilgrimage’ was not unknown before 2020, it particularly came into its own during the pandemic, making pilgrimage accessible to global audiences in unprecedented numbers.

The pandemic also popularised virtual religious package tours. The closure of Rome’s churches during Lent and Easter 2020 prompted religious and commercial virtual tour operators to offer online substitutes (for example, Bandini, 2021). The Holy Land was another favourite virtual destination (*Catholic News Agency*, 2021b). Online specialists were especially eager to help people walk the Camino virtually. The commercial market saw an upsurge in Camino fitness ‘apps’ (digital applications), such as the ‘Camino de Santiago Virtual Challenge’ which mapped an individual’s lockdown walk onto the real Camino Frances (*The Conqueror*). Virtual guided tours of the Camino were also popular. One example, led by a Baptist minister, promised a ten-day virtual experience of the route for the not inconsequential sum of £70 (*Pilgrimage Online*).

Localised Pilgrimages

One predictable consequence of the pandemic was the absence of foreign visitors at pilgrimage sites, largely owing to international travel restrictions. The shrine of Fatima in Portugal, for example, had welcomed 559 foreign pilgrim groups in October 2019. A year later, not one came from outside the country (*Catholic News Agency*, 2020b).

While many pilgrims were swapping physical travel for the virtual option, there was also an emerging trend for local pilgrimages. In the US, books and articles appeared encouraging Catholics to explore the religious heritage of their own country instead of travelling overseas (*The World of Spirituality*, 2020; Yoder, 2021). A similar phenomenon could be seen in Australia with *The Catholic Weekly* recommending seven ‘top’ domestic pilgrimage

sites (Cramsie, 2021). In France, the cancellation of the long-haul Chartres pilgrimage, mentioned above, encouraged local groups to downscale and visit regional shrines instead (*FSSPX News*, 2021b).

The Camino was often reported as going local. In one example, a retired doctor from Northern Ireland spent five days walking up and down his driveway until he had achieved the equivalent distance of the last section of the Spanish route (Archer, 2020). In another, an Australian couple, unable to travel to Spain, created their own Camino in their hometown, inventing the ‘Camino de Sydney’ in the process (Dennis, 2020).

In an increasingly globalised world, localised forms of pilgrimage may seem to be bucking contemporary trends. However, the localisation of pilgrimage by those unable to journey further afield is not particularly new. A similar phenomenon occurred in wartime Europe, for example, when overseas travel was difficult (Hurlock, forthcoming, 2022). More generally, the creation of local variations of well-loved pilgrimage shrines has been a feature of Roman Catholicism since the Middle Ages. Destinations in the Holy Land were those most frequently copied for local use, such as the Temple Church in London modelled on the Holy Sepulchre, or the outdoor calvaries and Italian *sacri monti* designed to re-create the Jerusalem pilgrimage experience (Gelfand, 2014). In England, the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham in Norfolk was styled ‘Little Nazareth’ on account of its claim to possess a replica of the House of the Annunciation (Gillett, 1946). Today, the shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes is perhaps the most copied of all pilgrimage sites after Jerusalem with local reproductions all over the world.

The pandemic relocation of pilgrimages to venues closer to home has always been an option for Catholics. However, in recent years, focusing on the ‘local’ has also been a mainstay of ‘green’, sustainable pilgrimage (for example, *European Green Pilgrimage Network*; Ivakhiv 2013). The new emphasis given to ‘staying local’ (Mills, 2021) will no doubt have a greater relevance in post-pandemic times (Olsen & Timothy, 2020:176-7).

The Mini Pilgrimage

In Britain during the COVID pandemic, the most popular form of local pilgrimage grew out of what was coined the ‘lockdown walk’. Prompted by a combination of the stay-local rule and a concern for the population’s mental and physical health, a daily stroll in nature – or simply a

walk to engage with the outside world – was advised as a way of relieving lockdown stress and anxiety (Duncan, 2021).

The wellness appeal of the short, countryside walk with its physical, mental, and spiritual benefits fed into a pilgrimage trend which was taking shape before COVID. This was the ‘micro’ or ‘mini’ pilgrimage (Voysey). Described by Alison Smith (2020:215) as a pilgrimage ‘of short duration in which one removes oneself from the demands of day-to-day life’, the micro pilgrimage was based on the popular assumption that pilgrimages were usually long, arduous journeys.

‘When a full-on pilgrimage is difficult, pilgrim spirituality is still possible, even for the time-pressed’, said the Anglican vicar, Sally Welch, in a Church Times article (Welch, 2020). She was promoting a project called Pilgrim Paths, involving day-long, circular walks between churches in her Oxfordshire deanery (*Centre for Christian Pilgrimage*). Pilgrim Paths was inspired by the Association of English Cathedrals which, in conjunction with the British Pilgrimage Trust, had created one-day pilgrim routes centred on each of England’s fifty-two Anglican cathedrals (*English Cathedrals*1). Both were planned before the COVID pandemic.

As with local pilgrimages, short ‘day’ pilgrimages with their ‘getaway’ appeal had a long precedent in the Catholic Church. Many medieval pilgrimages, for example, were those which could be completed in a day (Duffy, 2002:165-6), and the pattern has continued in Britain with annual day pilgrimages to places like Walsingham in Norfolk, Glastonbury in Somerset, and St Winefride’s Well in north Wales. In their 1989 book, *Christian Pilgrimage in Modern Western Europe*, Mary Lee Nolan and Sidney Nolan described the ‘day pilgrimage’ as one ‘valued in its own right as a temporary escape from the stress of urban life’ (Nolan & Nolan, 1989:65). While this has echoes of the contemporary ‘wellbeing’ understanding of mini pilgrimages, those described by the Nolans involved travel by car or bus, not on foot. In today’s post-Christian culture, walking is usually considered essential for those seeking stress-relief through pilgrimage.

The mini pilgrimage usually implied staying local and, like virtual pilgrimages, was envisaged as an ideal pandemic activity (*English Cathedrals*2). While not completely novel, COVID-era mini pilgrimages were infused with elements which reflected the prevailing

mood and contemporary health trends. One, as we have seen, was the assumption that pilgrims should walk to gain optimum benefits. Another was the attraction of seeking wellbeing and spiritual solace in the natural environment (Carrington, 2021; Sherwood, 2019).

Absorbing these influences, local lockdown walks often took on a meditative quality, and even countryside rambles came to be viewed by some as a kind of pilgrimage (Rogers, 2021; Webb, 2021). So prominent had the link between wellbeing and pilgrimage walking become during the pandemic, that when Gloucester Cathedral organised its ‘first contemporary pilgrimage’ – a local walk between Tewkesbury Abbey and Gloucester Cathedral – it was advertised as a ‘walk for wellbeing’ (*Four Gates of Gloucester*, 2021). As we will see, pilgrimage was frequently viewed as a way ‘to heal wounds left by the coronavirus’ (Wilson & Sullivan 2021).

New Pilgrimages

The final pandemic pilgrimage trend discussed here is the occasional tendency of individuals to create their own pilgrimages and pilgrimage routes. Some of the most ambitious attracted the attention of the local press. When the Englishman, Andrew Durling, recognised that lockdown walking had become popular, he set up the Eastbourne Pilgrimage Project to promote local pilgrimage walks. He told the Eastbourne Herald, ‘It’s one of the only forms of outdoor exercise you can do that is COVID-safe’ (Panons, 2021). As we have seen, the ‘Camino de Sydney’ was developed by an Australian couple across the other side of the world after COVID thwarted their plans to walk the Spanish Camino (Dennis, 2020).

Some new pilgrimages were a direct response to the medical impact of the virus, as was that undertaken by the Bishop of Norwich, Graham Usher, in July 2020 (Morris, 2020). He completed a three-day pilgrimage from Norwich Cathedral to the shrine of Our Lady at Walsingham, praying along the way for victims of the pandemic. ‘I’m intent on using this time to seek God’s heart and healing for all those affected by coronavirus’ he told a local newspaper (Briggs, 2020).

With formal places of devotion closed during the first months of the pandemic, some people set up informal prayer stations which became places of pilgrimage. A ‘prayer fence’ outside a church in Enfield, north London,

Figure 1: National COVID Memorial Wall, London

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:National_Covid_Memorial_Wall_plaque.jpg

was spotted by the Folklore Society, who posted an image on social media of the colourful array of ribbons. The caption read, ‘the pandemic has led to new, creative, and informal rituals or practices’ (Folklore Society, 2021). A similar picture of a ribbon-festooned prayer station, this time in the churchyard of St Peter’s at Barton, near Cambridge, was posted by another social media user (Gaskill, 2021).

A more powerful version of the independently created pilgrimage site is the COVID Memorial Wall (Figure 1) in London, which appeared in March 2021. Initiated by the political campaign group *Led by Donkeys*, and made by volunteers, it runs a third of a mile along the Albert Embankment. In March it comprised over 150,000 hearts, each one representing a life lost to the pandemic. What attracted press attention to the Wall was, in the words of one commentator, the fact that it was ‘established by the bereaved themselves, without official permission’ (Lynskey, 2021).

Despite being described as ‘perhaps unique’ by a *Guardian* reporter (Lynskey, 2021), the Memorial Wall is not without pre-COVID precedents. Indeed, it can be seen as part of a wider cultural phenomenon in post-secular societies where spontaneous, personalised forms

of memorialisation are becoming common (Pettersson, 2009; Rindskopt, 2021; *Yahoo News*, 2021). The flowers and tributes left at roadside shrines, at the graves of celebrities, and at other informal sacred locations, mark them out as sites of pilgrimage and speak of the enduring human need to collectively reflect, and express individual heartfelt emotion, at meaningful places (Davich, 2021).

Case Study: The Lough Derg Pilgrimage

One holy site which exemplifies the resilience of pilgrimage under some of the toughest of pandemic restrictions is St Patrick’s Purgatory on Station Island in Lough Derg, Ireland. The pilgrimage to Lough Derg has a history stretching back into the Middle Ages when intrepid pilgrims were rowed across to an island in the lake and enclosed in a cave for twenty-four hours. Here, it was said, they experienced the terrors of purgatory (Haren & de Pontfarcy, 1988).

Today, Lough Derg is still renowned as one of Christianity’s harshest penitential pilgrimages. Under normal circumstances the pilgrimage is undertaken over three days and its ascetic routine includes fasting, a twenty-four-hour vigil, and repeated barefoot rounds (Figure 2) of the penitential ‘beds’ (Harkin, 2020). Despite

Figure 2: Pilgrims Completing ‘Stations’ on Lough Derg



<https://www.loughderg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Penitential-Prayer-Beds.jpg>

its rigours, the pilgrimage typically hosts between 10,000 and 11,000 visitors over the course of its usual summer pilgrimage season from June to August (Harkin, 2020; *Leitrim Observer*, 2021).

With the arrival of COVID-19, pilgrimages to Lough Derg ceased; during 2020 and 2021 no visitors were allowed on the island. Nonetheless, the site’s Prior and custodian, Fr Laurence Flynn, was determined to ‘keep the centuries-old tradition of prayer alive’ (Magnier, 2020). The ways he achieved this are striking because, for a ‘traditional’ Catholic pilgrimage site, Lough Derg quickly acquired some very non-traditional innovations.

Fr Flynn’s first innovation was the (re)introduction of the daily Station Prayer. Living on the island from June to August in 2020–2021, he offered himself as a vicarious pilgrim, saying prayers on behalf of those unable to be there in person. ‘The voice of prayer will not be silenced’ he is reported to have declared (*The Irish News*, 2021). The second pandemic adaptation was ‘Pilgrimage from Afar’, a virtual three-day pilgrimage which pilgrims undertook from home. It involved a livestream link

enabling pilgrims to join the Prior on Station Island virtually, fasting and praying as they would have, had they been there in person. In 2020 the ‘Pilgrimage from Afar’ attracted Catholics from Beijing to Vancouver (*Leitrim Observer*, 2021).

The third pilgrimage modification was the ‘Lakeside Pilgrimage’. Since pilgrims were unable to visit Station Island, Fr Flynn relocated to the mainland and personally led mini pilgrimages along a recently renovated shoreside Pilgrim Path which included prayer stations linked to the traditional pilgrimage (*Lough Derg*). Notably, there was a new emphasis on personalised prayer and walking in nature. ‘We propose that as they walk, pilgrims might pray in their own way and also take some quiet time to be in touch with nature and to talk with God’ Fr Flynn told the *Donegal News* (*Donegal News*, 2021).

One significant feature of Fr Flynn’s pandemic strategy was his fusion of ‘tradition’ with contemporary elements. Vicarious pilgrimage, digital livestreaming, and mini lakeside walks may have been new to Lough Derg, but they were presented as belonging to a long-established pattern of devotion. Like virtual pilgrimage, vicarious pilgrimage was practised in the Middle Ages (Bartlett, 2013:422-3; Finucane, 1977:46-7) and, as Fr Flynn was quick to explain, the ‘ancient pilgrim path’ along the lakeside linked past and present pilgrims since it was used in Penal times when access to the island was also forbidden (Magnier, 2020).

The Future Shape of Pilgrimage?

The pandemic novelties introduced at Lough Derg during 2020 and 2021 demonstrate how creative solutions were applied by destination managers to mitigate the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Those implemented by Fr Flynn, for example, allowed pilgrimages to continue, albeit in very different ways from those usually experienced at the site.

The question is whether the new forms of pilgrimage at Lough Derg and elsewhere will continue once the immediate crisis has passed. An answer to this may lie in the argument made throughout this article that none of the four pandemic approaches highlighted are wholly new. They were already established, or were fast emerging, before the advent of COVID. Many, such as virtual pilgrimage, local pilgrimage, and mini pilgrimage were already present in Catholic practice. Some, such

as local pilgrimage, mini pilgrimage, and personalised pilgrimages were clearly driven by contemporary cultural factors such as the association of walking with health and wellbeing, the popularity of local heritage trails, the valorisation of slow tourism, the promotion of sustainable 'green pilgrimage', and the individualised approach to spirituality. What the pandemic has added, if anything, is to accelerate the pace of these developments making them more widespread and familiar.

Post-pandemic Lourdes

The future of pilgrimage might be glimpsed in the post-pandemic strategies of one of Europe's most popular shrines: Our Lady of Lourdes in France. Here, plans to 'modernise' the site have been described as 'an unexpected reinvention of a place so firmly rooted in conservative tradition' (Nicklin, 2021). The impetus for change came from the observation that, during the pandemic, the sanctuary's usual clientele of tour groups was largely replaced by independent travellers who only paid short visits. A decision was made to cater for these non-traditional visitors by diversifying the sanctuary's activities. With financial help from the government under its *Avenir Lourdes* scheme, the sanctuary has developed a 'Pilgrim for the Day' programme which offers short-stay visitors a guided tour and tourist information, 'among other things'. Also planned is a 'medieval' walking path taking visitors to the town's ancient castle currently undergoing restoration (Nicklin, 2021).

A major incentive behind the changes at Lourdes was a desire to strengthen its business model against future pandemics and other global economic threats. How many other traditional Catholic shrines will follow this example and 'modernise' it is still too early to say. Nonetheless, as the popularity of pilgrimage continues to grow both within and beyond traditional Christian circles, it seems likely that, in the years to come, we will see more of the forms of pilgrimage which have so proved attractive and practical during the difficult years of 2020 and 2021.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic officially began on 12 March 2020. Since this date, public health measures and travel limitations have halted, curtailed, and disrupted many pilgrimage plans. However, and as predicted by Daniel Olsen and Dallen Timothy, religious tourism – 'the largest tourism market in the world' – has not taken long

in beginning its recovery (Olsen & Timothy, 2021).

Pilgrimage in western culture has proved not only resilient to the difficulties imposed during the pandemic, but also flexible. Online media from March 2020 to November 2021 suggest that pilgrimages survived by undergoing a change of focus, shifting from on-site events to virtual ones, from international destinations to local ones, from long journeys to shorter ones, and from institutional religious activities to independently created ones. While none of these modifications were unprecedented, they held a particular resonance in 2020-21 when virtual technology, wellness walking, and personalised forms of spirituality were already an accepted part of society.

As pilgrimage becomes increasingly associated with heritage, with nature, with wellness, with walking, and with secular spirituality, it seems likely that the kind of novelties adopted by destination managers and pilgrims during the pandemic may well have a lasting influence. Pilgrimage during the COVID-19 pandemic has found useful outlets through the prevailing values of our time, and I suspect that it is these wider cultural forces – as much as the pandemic itself – which will shape the future of pilgrimage in a post-pandemic world.

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