

WHERE HEAVEN TOUCHED EARTH

WHERE HEAVEN TOUCHED EARTH:  
ENCOUNTERING PLACE AND PERSON AT LOURDES

By

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

McMaster University

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (2014)  
(Religious Studies)

McMaster University  
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: Where Heaven Touched Earth: Encountering Place and Person at Lourdes

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NUMBER OF PAGES: vi, 363

## ABSTRACT

Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted with pilgrims travelling from the United Kingdom to the Marian Catholic shrine of Lourdes in southwestern France, this study examines the experience of contemporary pilgrims to Lourdes and the motivations that inspire them to visit the shrine. As a pilgrimage site that now attracts an estimated six million visitors each year from a diverse range of geographical, social, and religious departure points, the motivations inspiring pilgrims to visit Lourdes can be elusive and disparate.

From volunteer caregivers striving to “be as Christ” through their assistance to sick pilgrims, to first-time visitors to Lourdes navigating the shrine through the camera lens of a Hollywood film, this study moves through a wide range of pilgrim experiences. While such experiences underscore the inherently multivalent nature of pilgrimage, I show how the trope of authenticity emerges as a rhetorical device that recurs frequently in the narratives and discourse of pilgrims who undertake the journey to Lourdes. Experiences described by pilgrims as “authentic” are critical in informing their engagement with the geography of the shrine and with fellow pilgrims, and often inspire return visits to Lourdes in subsequent years.

In dialogue with studies on pilgrimage and other forms of travel, I argue that despite its conceptual baggage authenticity still matters, and offers a useful heuristic lens for exploring those factors which shape and determine the experience of pilgrims to Lourdes. I suggest that from the perspective of pilgrims, Lourdes is a “thin space” where heaven touched earth and which affords the authentic possibility of transcendence, of collapsing the boundaries between self and other, human and divine.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Ellen Badone, whose guidance, expertise, and encouragement throughout my fieldwork and during the writing of this dissertation proved invaluable. Her careful reading of each draft and our long conversations aided in clarifying and refining the direction of my work. I will always be grateful for her constant support and encouragement throughout my time at McMaster.

I would also like to express my thanks to Dr. Celia Rothenberg and Dr. Travis Kroeker for serving on my supervisory committee, and for their support and thoughtful comments on my work. I also thank Dr. John Eade at the University of Roehampton, for sharing his own experience and insight on research at Lourdes.

This research would not have been possible without the support of several scholarship programs and research travel grants, including the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the Ontario Graduate Scholarship, the School of Graduate Studies Grant in Aid for Research Travel and Fieldwork, the Mary Margaret Scammell Travel Scholarship, the James F. Harvey and Helen S. Harvey Travel Scholarship, as well as research grants from the Department of Religious Studies and the Graduate Students Association at McMaster University.

This project also would not have been possible without the assistance and openness of the pilgrims to Lourdes I met and interviewed during the course of my fieldwork. I would like to thank the Catholic Association, the Archdiocese of Westminster, and Tangney Tours for allowing me to join their respective pilgrimages, for facilitating my research, and for always being eager to provide assistance when necessary. I would also like to thank the many pilgrims who shared their stories and were so generous with their time.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their love and support throughout the writing process. I would especially like to thank my parents, Kevin and Nancy Agnew, for everything.

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## I

## Introduction: “Come Here in Procession”

*“Go, tell the priests to have people come here in procession and to build a chapel here.”*

-Message of Our Lady to Bernadette, March 2, 1858<sup>1</sup>

On an unusually grey and cold July morning I am pulling my heavy suitcase at a brisk pace as I make my way toward St. Pancras International, a recently redeveloped rail station in central London that serves as the British terminus for the Eurostar line, connecting the island to continental Europe. With my yellow train voucher from Tangney Tours in hand, I am about to set out on a pilgrimage to the Marian shrine of Lourdes in southwestern France with the annual pilgrimage of the Archdiocese of Westminster. After obtaining my tickets from the train manager for Tangney Tours (a pilgrimage tour operator based in Kent), I pass through security and border control before searching for the familiar faces of pilgrims I had met in the weeks leading up to the pilgrimage. I soon find Fr. Colin, a parish priest from west London, and some of his parishioners who are also making the trek to Lourdes. As we wait for our 8:20am departure to Paris we excitedly chat about our expectations for the week, and those pilgrims with several years and even decades of experience travelling to Lourdes share their tips and insights with me. Eventually our conversation is interrupted by the boarding call, and we begin our ascent up the

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<sup>1</sup> *Sanctuary of Lourdes – Official Guide* (Lourdes, France: NDL Editions, 2010), 16.



escalators to the train platform. After assisting with the luggage of elderly pilgrims unable to lift their suitcases up and into the overhead compartments, I eventually find my assigned seat at a small plastic and metal table for four and settle in for the journey, looking forward to seeing the countryside of southeast England as the high-speed train whisks by on its way to the Channel Tunnel.

I am soon joined by my three seatmates for the journey from London to Paris: Eleanor and Philippa, a mother and daughter from outside the diocese but who prefer to come with this particular pilgrimage, and Stephen, a man in his early thirties considering a vocation to the priesthood. Since I am meeting them for the first time on the train journey, they quickly spot my unusual accent and make a sort of game out of guessing its origin. Eleanor and Stephen determine that I am American, while Philippa concludes that I am Irish, or perhaps more specifically from Northern Ireland. When I reveal that I am a graduate student from Canada doing a research project on the experience of pilgrims to Lourdes, all appear genuinely interested in my fieldwork, Eleanor and Philippa readily offering to be interviewed before I have even asked. Stephen however asks the question I have long anticipated with some apprehension before commencing my fieldwork: “So, if you’re coming on the pilgrimage and doing research, does that mean you’re a Catholic then?”<sup>2</sup> I nervously begin to struggle through my answer, unsure of how it will be received, as I explain that while I was raised as a Catholic and had attended

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<sup>2</sup> Field notes, July 22, 2012.

Catholic elementary and secondary schools, I no longer practice. Having been quite devout up until the age of 20, and still deeply familiar with the rites and rhythms of the Catholic faith, I could perhaps have taken an easier route, and provided a more ambiguous answer, something like “I was raised Catholic.” That option would have left pilgrims to make their own assumptions. Yet as I set out to engage in participant-observation research grounded in open-ended interviews with pilgrims, I thought it was vitally important to be as open, approachable, and straightforward as possible. After all, I hoped for the same openness from pilgrims as they recounted their stories. Somewhat to my surprise, while the question of my own religious background did come up occasionally during interviews and casual conversations, rarely if ever did it seem to be an impediment to the development of rapport with pilgrims or inclusion into the larger pilgrimage group. Instead, my identity as a lapsed Catholic was often met with responses such as: “Well we’ve all had struggles with our faith,” “You’re not the only one like that coming to Lourdes, some are atheists even!” and “Maybe going to Lourdes so many times and talking to those that do have faith will make an impact on you.” Although the vast majority of pilgrims, including pilgrimage organizers and priests, saw little issue with my religious identity, or lack thereof, and did not challenge my position as a lapsed Catholic studying pilgrimage to one of Catholicism’s most well-known shrines, one priest did offer several times to hear my confession, in the hope that starting from a clean slate would allow me to return fully into the embrace of the Church.

Reflecting on the ‘half-in, half-out’ status of scholars studying religious traditions they were immersed in during their youth but no longer actively practice or identify with, Robert Orsi describes the tensions that emerged within himself during the course of his research among Catholic devotees at the National Shrine of St. Jude in Chicago.<sup>3</sup> Orsi’s account strongly coheres with my own experience. He writes:

The fieldworker in one’s own tradition faces difference that is at once both too little and too much, and this paradox can be paralyzing. The people we are talking to are simultaneously and disconcertingly both other and not, and we cannot respect and use the distance between us because we cannot establish it securely – it is forever shrinking and expanding...In the end either the people among whom we have gone (themselves confused by our ambivalence and ambiguity) reject us, or we come to identify with them so closely that we lose the distance necessary for understanding and wind up defending and celebrating them.<sup>4</sup>

Here Orsi is primarily touching on his interactions with participants and also alluding to his sense that despite a shared Catholic upbringing, his status now as an outsider, marked by his identity both as a lapsed Catholic and a scholar of religion trained in the dispassionate halls of academia, was unavoidable. I subscribe to much of what Orsi describes, particularly the risk of identifying too closely with one’s respondents. I sometimes found myself defending Lourdes pilgrims to friends back in Canada who thought belief in visions of the Virgin Mary and the miraculous

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<sup>3</sup> See Robert Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude: Women’s Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 162.

healing potential of spring water to be utter nonsense. This paradox of difference between researcher and informant being simultaneously too little and too much, while challenging at times, was in many instances advantageous in allowing me to “speak the language” of those I was on pilgrimage with, while still attempting some form of distance (however feeble these attempts might have been). I felt the push and pull of being both half-in and half-out most acutely however not from my interactions with pilgrims on the journeys to and from Lourdes, but in my own private and complex negotiations with the shrine and its rituals. These negotiations emerged from identity as one who had been unusually devout in relation to my peer group as a child and young adult, but who had also ultimately rejected much of the religious faith I once treasured.

Indeed, my very interest in pilgrimage to Lourdes as a site for academic research springs from my own past devotion to Marian apparitions, particularly those in Lourdes and Fatima. When I was a child, the effort of climbing over fences and cutting across the lush green farmers’ fields of the Ottawa Valley on my way to visit my grandmother was often rewarded with homemade cookies and fresh milk, as well as the opportunity to play with a colouring book depicting the apparitions of the Virgin Mary to three children at Fatima, Portugal in 1917. There was also the special drawer in her kitchen which always fascinated me, containing rosaries, prayer cards, a relic from the shrine of Sainte Anne de Beaupré in Quebec, and several other religious articles. I would often sit on the floor of the living room

as my grandmother made lunch or spoke with someone on the phone, and I would thumb through the range of religious literature in her book case. It was always the accounts of miraculous divine interventions that attracted me most. Through these visits to my grandmother, the popular Catholic devotionism of many Lourdes pilgrims was ingrained in me from a very young age.

Much of my early awareness of the Lourdes apparitions and shrine were derived from the 1943 Hollywood film *The Song of Bernadette*, which is the subject of Chapter Five. Portraying the series of eighteen visions of the Virgin Mary reported by the fourteen year-old peasant girl Bernadette Soubirous at Lourdes in 1858, the film often featured in television schedules around Christmas and Easter when I was growing up. The beauty and determination of the young seer Bernadette and the incredible chain of events that lent her and the small Pyrénéan town of Lourdes global renown gripped me, no matter how many times I would see the film. We had our own small pilgrimage shrine in the Ottawa Valley in the village of Cormac, Ontario, dedicated to St. Anne. It attracted between five to ten thousand pilgrims each summer for the feast day of the saint, and I was actively involved with the pilgrimage as a teenager. Yet despite experiences with local forms of pilgrimage, Lourdes was always for me the pilgrimage centre *par excellence*, the “centre out there,”<sup>5</sup> distant and of a far greater order than our small local shrine. Even after I stopped practicing the faith of my childhood, I couldn’t shake the

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<sup>5</sup> Victor Turner, “The Center out There: Pilgrim’s Goal,” *History of Religions* 12 (1973).

compelling hold the Lourdes story had on me, and this came to inform my academic interest in Marian apparitions and Catholic pilgrimage.

For several years I felt I was able to quite safely compartmentalize my Catholic upbringing from my research, but these seemingly discrete realities would intersect over the course of my fieldwork and particularly while at the shrine in Lourdes, as I wrestled with decisions regarding the degree to which I should participate in masses, processions, and other religious services and rituals. Just six or seven years prior I would have participated in these same religious performances quite comfortably and even enthusiastically. Now, I was apprehensive about participating when I did not share what I thought (perhaps mistakenly) were the *proper* beliefs and meanings motivating other pilgrims. Something felt uneasy and at times dishonest about my active engagement.<sup>6</sup> This unease was not only something I observed within myself, but was also noticed by some of the other pilgrims. Near the end of one of the pilgrimages I joined in 2012 Diane, a pilgrim requiring the use of a wheelchair for longer distances, asked if I would accompany her and Keenan, another pilgrim, to the grotto. She wished to go through the shallow cave where the apparitions are believed to have occurred, offer up her prayer intentions, and light a candle. Keenan and I took turns pushing Diane's wheelchair

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<sup>6</sup> My struggle with feelings of dishonesty or of being a sort of imposter by participating in religious activities is certainly not unique to my own experience and has been encountered by other anthropologists of religion in the field. See Katharine L. Wiegman, "On Being a Participant and an Observer in Religious Ethnography: Silence, Betrayal, and Becoming," in *Missionary Impositions: Conversion, Resistance, and Other Challenges to Objectivity in Religious Ethnography*, ed. Hillary K. Crane and Deana L. Weibel (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013).

down to the grotto and back, and once we had safely returned Diane to her hotel where she joined some of her friends, we started to walk back to our own hotel. As we talked Keenan turned and said: “You know, I was just thinking that when we went through the grotto with Diane you never touched the rock, like nearly everyone else does. And earlier in the week during services I’ve noticed that you don’t take communion, but you clearly know all of the prayers. Sometimes you kneel, but sometimes you don’t.”<sup>7</sup> While Keenan didn’t press too hard in trying to determine the roots of my at times inconsistent participation, it was clear that I was not the only one doing the observing at Lourdes. Keenan perceptively witnessed my sometimes difficult situation of being half-in and half-out, of desiring to participate as fully as possible in the pilgrimage to get a sense of the experience of Lourdes pilgrims, yet at the same time often feeling somewhat removed and distant, recognizing that our motives for being in Lourdes were quite different.

Still, in spite of this at times awkward balancing act between being both distant and incredibly close, I found myself consistently and deeply moved, as most pilgrims are, by my experiences during pilgrimages to Lourdes. Whether it was a quiet hand on my shoulder during an especially difficult moment in the pilgrimage week, the simple acts of kindness I witnessed between sick pilgrims and their volunteer helpers, or the sight of thousands of pilgrims raising their candles as they processed in the darkness while passionately singing “Ave Maria,” many of my

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<sup>7</sup> Field notes, July 26, 2012.

encounters in Lourdes left a profound and lasting impression on me. These encounters also often gave rise to more questions than answers, both in regards to my research as well as my personal relationship to the once devout faith of my youth. Unsettled at times by the impression Lourdes and its pilgrims had on me and its potential influence on my research, I had to remind myself, as James Bielo observes, that “the idea of an unbiased, neutral, objective data-collecting ethnographer has largely become accepted as a never-existing, mostly useless myth. Establishers of objective scientific laws we are not.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, this position has now become common place, since the mid-1980s when James Clifford first suggested that ethnographic truths are “inherently partial – committed and incomplete.”<sup>9</sup> This recognition of the partiality of ethnographic accounts has been accompanied by the reflexive turn in anthropology which acknowledges that the ethnographer’s own background and worldview is unavoidably implicated in every aspect of the research process.<sup>10</sup> In the preceding pages I have shown, albeit briefly, that particularly for anthropologists of religion, and as in my own case, those who find themselves studying traditions they are deeply familiar with but no longer adherents of, attention to our own backgrounds and entanglements is critical. Understanding

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<sup>8</sup> James Bielo, “Introduction: Writing Religion,” in *Missionary Impositions: Conversion, Resistance, and Other Challenges to Objectivity in Religious Ethnography*, ed. Hillary K. Crane and Deana L. Weibel (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 7.

<sup>9</sup> James Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), 7.

<sup>10</sup> Bahira Sherif, “The Ambiguity of Boundaries in the Fieldwork Experience: Establishing Rapport and Negotiating Insider/Outsider Status,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 7 (2001): 437.



our subjective positioning can illuminate the complex and fluid identity of the participant-observer in relation to their field of research. Having acknowledged my own experience of being moved by my time with pilgrims on their journeys to Lourdes, it is now worth highlighting what moves millions of pilgrims in the direction of Lourdes each year: belief in a series of visions of the Virgin Mary at an improbable place and to an unlikely recipient.

*“I Saw a Lady Dressed in White”*

The general details of the story of Bernadette Soubirous and the eighteen visions of the Virgin Mary she is believed to have witnessed, as well as the early development of the shrine have been chronicled by several popular writers and academics. Bernadette’s visions serve as the natural starting point for an incredible range of devotional, apologetic, and historical treatments of Lourdes.<sup>11</sup> While it would be a futile endeavour to attempt to summarize all of this literature, it is nonetheless important here to provide a brief overview of the apparition narrative. This overview provides a context for understanding the motivations of pilgrims who

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<sup>11</sup> For a representative sample of early apologetic and devotional accounts of the Lourdes story, see Henri Lasserre, *Notre-Dame de Lourdes* (Paris: Victor Palmé, 1870); Léonard Cros, *Histoire de Notre-Dame de Lourdes* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1925), and J.K. Huysmans, *Les Foules de Lourdes* (Paris: Tresse & Stock, 1907). For English renderings see Robert Hugh Benson, *Lourdes* (London: Manresa Press, 1914); Rev. F. Woodstock, *The Miracles at Lourdes* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1922); Frances Parkinson Keyes, *The Sublime Shepherdess: The Life of Saint Bernadette of Lourdes* (New York: J. Messner, 1940); Ruth Cranston, *The Miracle of Lourdes* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1955); and Noel C. Hypher, *Lourdes* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1958).

travel to Lourdes and their engagement with the sacred geography of the shrine described in subsequent chapters.<sup>12</sup>

In 1858 on the edge of the small town of Lourdes, situated in the foothills of the Pyrénées in southwestern France near the border with Spain, a fourteen year-old girl named Bernadette Soubirous reported a series of eighteen visions of a figure who was quickly understood by several townspeople to be the Virgin Mary. Bernadette's visions began on February 11 when she joined her sister Toinette and a friend Jeanne Abadie to collect bones and dead wood along the riverbank of the Gave de Pau, at a site where there was a small cave or grotto called Massabielle by locals. As Toinette and Jeanne began crossing the river, Bernadette was told to stay behind due to her fragile health. Nevertheless, she began to take off her stockings in order to catch-up with her sister and friend who were already on the other side of the river. While Bernadette removed her stockings, she heard a sudden gust of wind. As she later wrote: "I went on taking off my stockings. I heard the same sound again. As I raised my head to look at the grotto, I saw a Lady dressed in white, wearing a white dress, a blue girdle and a yellow rose on each foot, the same color as the chain of her rosary; the beads of the rosary were white."<sup>13</sup> No words were

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<sup>12</sup> My brief overview of the apparitions is drawn from more recent historical accounts, namely the excellent work of Ruth Harris in her definitive text on the early development of the Lourdes shrine, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (New York: Viking, 1999). I also consulted Sandra Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary: Visions of Mary from La Salette to Medjugorje* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), and Therese Taylor, *Bernadette of Lourdes: Her Life, Death and Visions* (London: Continuum, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Patricia McEachern, *A Holy Life: The Writings of Saint Bernadette of Lourdes* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 20.

exchanged and the lady, who Bernadette initially referred to as *aquerò*, a term in the local dialect meaning “that one” or “that thing,” soon disappeared. Over the following days, Bernadette and a growing number of friends and townspeople returned to the grotto of Massabielle, but only Bernadette was able to witness the “thing” in the rock niche. It was not until the third apparition on February 18 that the lady first spoke to Bernadette. The lady asked Bernadette if she would do her the favour of going to the grotto each day for a fortnight, and told Bernadette that she did not promise to make her happy in this world, but in the next. For her next trek to the grotto the following day, Bernadette took with her a lighted candle, which became the precedent for the tradition of lighting candles at the grotto and holding them during the Marian torchlight procession which is continued by contemporary pilgrims to the shrine.

The sixth apparition during the early morning hours of February 21 was relatively uneventful, however as the crowds accompanying Bernadette to the grotto now numbered over one hundred, the local police were becoming increasingly alarmed by the excitement and controversy caused by the reported apparitions. Later that day Bernadette was summoned to meet with Dominique Jacomet, the Police Commissioner, who questioned her regarding the identity of the lady in the grotto. Jacomet also tried to dissuade Bernadette from ever going to the grotto again and disrupting the public order. Such attempts by secular and ecclesiastical authorities to threaten and intimidate Bernadette into recanting her

claims of visions at the grotto and her steely determination in the face of this pressure have become key features of the Lourdes narrative. Indeed, Bernadette was often cited by pilgrims I spoke to as an inspiring example of steadfastness and faith.



Figure 1. *Statue of Our Lady of Lourdes by Fabisch, placed in the rock niche of the grotto where Bernadette reported receiving her visions of the Virgin Mary.*

Image Credit: Author.

During what is often called the ‘fortnight of the apparitions,’ the visions on February 25 and March 2 were crucial in bringing Lourdes to national and later global prominence. This fortnight was also important in shaping the early development of the shrine, as well as inspiring over a century and a half of

pilgrimage to the small French town. When Bernadette arrived at the grotto on February 25, now joined by over three hundred witnesses, she was instructed by the lady to “Go drink from the spring and wash there.” Seeing no spring at the grotto, Bernadette began to move toward the river when the lady interrupted, telling her that the spring was not there, and instead pointing to the base of the rock wall at the back of the grotto. Bernadette crawled on her hands and knees into the grotto and found a small patch of mud, and began scraping at the earth with her hands. The water she was first able to extract was too dirty and she threw it away, but by her fourth attempt the water was still muddy but clear enough that she could drink some of it and smear it on her face. Bernadette was also directed to eat some of the plants growing near the grotto, and did so, without knowing why. She was ridiculed by many in the crowd who were shocked and repulsed by her actions and dishevelled appearance. Some onlookers now believed the series of apparitions to be a childish fabrication. Sensing a moment of opportunity, local state officials again summoned Bernadette for questioning, this time by the imposing Imperial Prosecutor Vital Dutour. Once again Bernadette did not bend under the pressure. The faith of many of the onlookers would be restored in the coming days however. The muddy patch at the base of the grotto soon developed into a clear, flowing spring, and several pious people began to bottle the water from the spring to take home with them. On March 1, the first recognized miracle cure at Lourdes occurred, when Catherine Latapie, a woman from the neighbouring village of Loubajac who was nine months

pregnant, walked the 9 km trail to Lourdes to dip her paralyzed arm in the spring. Healed immediately, she returned home to give birth to a son. Her cure was recognized four years later in 1862 as the first of sixty-nine miracles occurring at Lourdes officially approved by the Catholic Church. The most recent miracle involved the cure of an Italian pilgrim in the baths fed by the spring in 1989, which was confirmed by the Church in June 2013.<sup>14</sup>

The thirteenth apparition on March 2 would, in addition to the miraculous spring uncovered by Bernadette, provide further impetus for the pilgrimage cult that would soon develop at Lourdes. As crowds composed of the faithful, skeptics, and curious onlookers grew ever larger with the reports of miraculous healings at the grotto, the lady in the rock niche asked Bernadette: “Go, tell the priests to have people come here in procession and to build a chapel here.” Bernadette followed the lady’s instructions and immediately went to the Lourdes presbytery and relayed her message to Fr. Dominique Peyramale, the Curé of Lourdes, who gave Bernadette and her companions a rather hostile reception. When the request was repeated the following day by the lady and again relayed to Fr. Peyramale by

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<sup>14</sup> “Miraculous Cures in Lourdes,” Sanctuaires Notre-Dame de Lourdes, <http://en.lourdes-france.org/deepen/cures-and-miracles/miraculous-cures-in-lourdes>. For recent scholarship on Lourdes and healing see Jacalyn Duffin, “Religion and Medicine, Again: *JHMAS* Commentary on ‘The Lourdes Medical Cures Revisited,’” *Journal of the History of Medicine* 69 (2014); Alana Harris, “Lourdes and Holistic Spirituality: Contemporary Catholicism, The Therapeutic, and Religious Thermalism,” *Culture and Religion* 14 (2013); Bernard François, Esther M. Sternberg, and Elizabeth Fee, “The Lourdes Medical Cures Revisited,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 69 (2012); Jason Szabo, “Seeing is Believing?: The Form and Substance of French Medical Debates over Lourdes,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 76 (2002); and Wil Gesler, “Lourdes: Healing in a Place of Pilgrimage,” *Health & Place* 2 (1996).

Bernadette, he told her that if this lady wanted a chapel, she would first have to reveal who she was and make the wild rose bush beneath the rock niche bloom out of season, while still in the icy grip of winter. The next day, March 4, was expected by many to be a day of great wonders, as it would mark the end of the two-week period of visits to the grotto the lady had requested. Between six and eight thousand arrived for the much-anticipated apparition, however nothing especially noteworthy happened. The rose bush did not bloom, the lady did not reveal her identity, and not even a message of any significance was transmitted.

It would be another three weeks before Bernadette would see what she still referred to as the lady or *aquerò* again, having felt no need to visit the grotto in the interim. Eventually feeling the urge to return on March 25, Bernadette once again experienced an apparition of the lady. Determined to find out the identity of the vision, Bernadette asked the lady three times for a name, and three times the only response she received was a smile. Finally, on the fourth attempt, her persistence was rewarded. As Bernadette writes: “She stopped smiling. With her arms down, she raised her eyes to heaven and then, folding her hands over her breast she said, ‘I am the Immaculate Conception.’”<sup>15</sup> Despite the unusual and even awkward phrasing of the lady’s pronouncement, and questions of whether Bernadette had perhaps misheard the phrase, many including the initially reluctant Fr. Peyramale began to believe that this statement on the part of the lady was confirmation that the

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<sup>15</sup> McEachern, *A Holy Life*, 25.

figure Bernadette was communing with in the grotto was indeed the Virgin Mary. The Virgin's identification as the Immaculate Conception (*Que soy era Immaculada Concepciou* in the local dialect) was enthusiastically taken up by the Church hierarchy in subsequent years, understood as a divine imprimatur stamped on the Pope's promulgation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception only four years previously.<sup>16</sup> While this episode served as the dramatic climax of the apparition cycle with the lady having now identified herself, Bernadette would see the lady twice more, on April 7 and finally on July 16, this time across the river from the grotto which had been blocked from access by barricades erected by the town officials. This account provides, in a greatly condensed form, the general sequence of reported apparitions of the Virgin Mary to Bernadette that would together form the Lourdes story, inspiring the sick and disabled, the faithful, the skeptical, and the curious to travel to the grotto at Lourdes.

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<sup>16</sup> The dogma of the Immaculate Conception would be defined in an Apostolic Constitution of Pope Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, on December 8, 1854. The Pope proclaimed: "We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful." See Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1854). For further context on the importance of Lourdes for the Church in confirming the Pope's proclamation of the doctrine, see Thomas A. Kselman, *Miracles & Prophecies in Nineteenth-Century France* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 92-93.



*Lourdes Today*

The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes, referred to as the *Domaine*, that gradually developed around the Grotto of Massabielle in the decades following the apparitions continues to attract millions of pilgrims each year.<sup>17</sup> The large diocesan pilgrimages and those organized by various Catholic charitable organizations primarily travel to Lourdes during the height of the pilgrimage season from May-October, though significant numbers of pilgrims go to the shrine outside of this period for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception on December 8 and to mark the anniversary of the first apparition to Bernadette on February 11. The Sanctuary's most recent attendance estimates from the 2011 pilgrimage season place the total number of visitors to the shrine that year at nearly 6.3 million, an increase of 3.2% from 2010.<sup>18</sup> Breaking down these numbers, the Sanctuary officials refer to so-called "recorded pilgrims," those pilgrims that go to Lourdes with organized groups registered with the Sanctuary, representing approximately five hundred pilgrimages and some 4-500 other groups. Nearly 800 000 recorded pilgrims travelled to Lourdes in 2011, and this statistic includes approximately 116 000 young people, 87 500 hospitaliers (pilgrims that go to Lourdes to volunteer), 53 600 sick pilgrims,

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<sup>17</sup> It is often said that Lourdes is a city of three towns, consisting of the Old Town (the original town centre during the time of the apparitions), the New Town (where the hotels, shops, and cafés geared toward pilgrims are located), and the Sanctuary, which contains the grotto, basilicas, churches, and other forms of religious infrastructure. Here I provide an overview of the Sanctuary, with more detailed descriptions of the town of Lourdes in other sections of the dissertation, primarily in Chapters Three and Five.

<sup>18</sup> "2011 Attendance Statistics and the Position on Transport," Sanctuaires Notre-Dame de Lourdes, <http://fr.lourdes-france.org/sites/default/files/pdf/presse/FICHE%203%20statistiques%202011%20et%20point%20transport%20EN.pdf>.

13 500 priests, and 437 bishops and other dignitaries.<sup>19</sup> The number of recorded pilgrims to the shrine has been relatively stable over the past decade, with a sharp increase in 2008 for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the apparitions and the papal visit of Pope Benedict XVI to mark the occasion.

The geographic spread of these recorded pilgrims demonstrates an unsurprising predominance of western European pilgrimages, with pilgrims from France accounting for nearly 42% of visitors to the shrine, Italy – 25%, Spain – 7%, United Kingdom – 4%, and Ireland at 3%, with pilgrims from Germany, Poland, and Belgium hovering around 2% of the total. Outside of western Europe, North America represents the highest number of recorded pilgrims at Lourdes, coming in at 2.1%.<sup>20</sup> The Sanctuary has also observed an increasing preference for individual and family pilgrimages to Lourdes as opposed to larger group pilgrimages. While no underlying reason for this shift is provided in the document, it may be that some pilgrims prefer an individual or family pilgrimage that is completely self-organized and therefore potentially more cost-effective, flexible, and tailored to their own spiritual needs.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. It is worth noting that according to the statistics of the Lourdes Sanctuary, the number of young pilgrims to Lourdes represented a 45% increase over the previous year. This can likely be attributed to the fact that the 26<sup>th</sup> World Youth Day (a massive international Catholic youth event headlined by the Pope) was held in Madrid, Spain in August 2011. Indeed, I first visited Lourdes in late August-September 2011 and I observed several young pilgrims who had went to World Youth Day stopping in Lourdes on their return from the event.

<sup>20</sup> Rounding out the Sanctuary's attendance statistics, visitors from South East Asia represent 2% of the total number of visitors, South America – 0.7%, Africa – 0.2%, Far East Asia – 0.2%, and Oceania – 0.1%.

The sacred geography of the Sanctuary of Lourdes is indeed vast, consisting of grand basilicas, intimate chapels, Stations of the Cross, walking paths that run along the river bank, accommodations for the sick and disabled, first aid posts, administrative offices, an information centre, and a bookshop. Any description of the Lourdes *Domaine* would be incomplete however without mention of its physical and spiritual heart, the Grotto of Massabielle, where Bernadette's dramatic visionary episodes occurred. Although the several gates ringing the Sanctuary are locked at midnight and do not reopen until 5:00am, one small gate is left open 24/7 throughout the year, granting access to what pilgrims call the "zig-zag path" which leads down the hill directly to the grotto. This access is important for many pilgrims, who told me that their favourite time to visit the grotto was around two or three in the morning, when activity around the grotto was relatively still and quiet and when the grotto seemed to take on an especially numinous aura, the glistening rock walls illuminated by the large candelabra glowing before it. Access to the grotto is also provided at various times of the day, except when pilgrimages are holding their masses at its stone altar. Pilgrims may enter the shallow cave, and long lines of eager pilgrims quickly form to the left of the grotto, near the row of taps where one can fill bottles with water from the spring uncovered by Bernadette. Pilgrims occupying wheelchairs are granted special access and do not need to wait in line, entering through an opening staffed by a shrine volunteer acting as gatekeeper.

As pilgrims file through the grotto, most will touch, kiss, and run their hands along the stone surface, now worn smooth by the millions of pilgrims who have come before and physically engaged with the grotto in this way. Some will enter the grotto with rosaries, religious medals, and prayer cards in hand, pressing them to the rock wall and blessing them through this contact with the most auspicious site in Lourdes. As one proceeds through the grotto there is a container for depositing one's prayer petitions, followed by a glass portal on the floor of the grotto which allows pilgrims to see below to the original source of the miraculous spring revealed by Bernadette's scraping at the earth. The portal is often surrounded by flowers and notes left by pilgrims, in thanksgiving for a favour received by means of the spring water. As pilgrims begin to exit the grotto they will often turn around and gaze up toward the statue of Our Lady of Lourdes in the rock niche above, where Bernadette claimed the Virgin appeared, and cross themselves, genuflect, or say a quick prayer before they are moved along by the line of pilgrims following them through the grotto. Often there are light trickles of water flowing from the crevices of the rock just below the statue, and I have observed pilgrims scoop some small amounts into their hands and use it to quickly wash their face, or press their lips up to the wet rock. There are rows of metal benches in front of the grotto where one can choose to stay and continue their prayers and watch the seemingly endless flow of pilgrims move through the shallow cave. Alternatively, one may proceed down toward the area where it is possible to purchase a candle for

a nominal fee and place it into a slot among other candles held in two rows of wrought-iron racks.

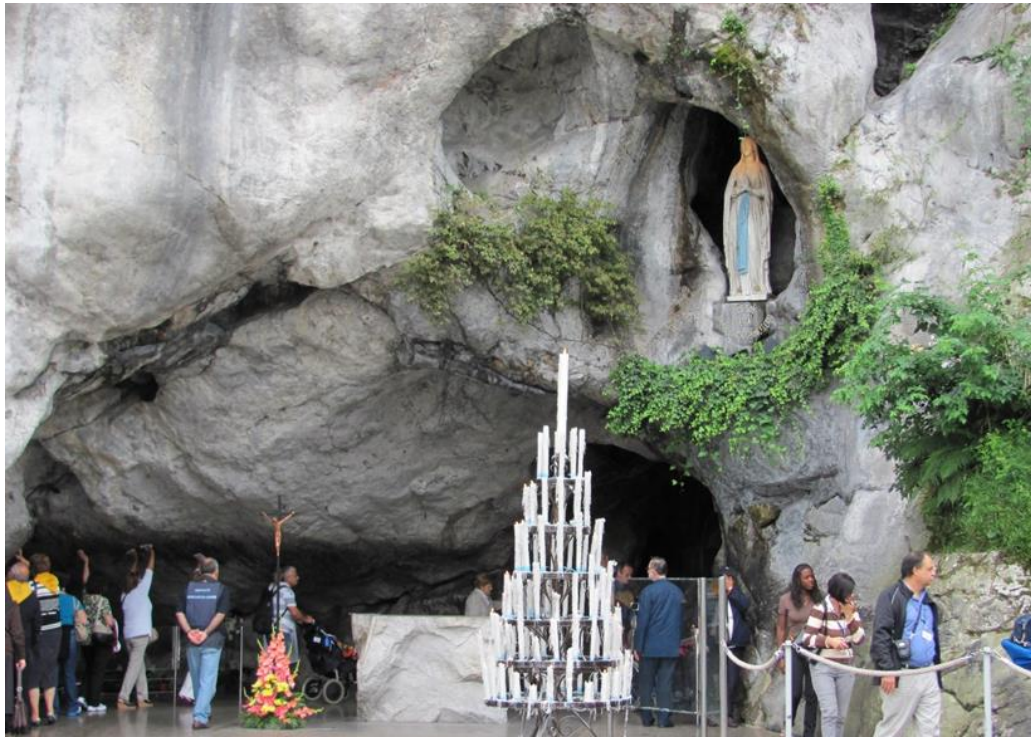


Figure 2. *The Grotto of Massabielle, site of the apparitions.* Image Credit: Author.

In addition to the grotto, pilgrims cite the *piscines* or baths as central to the Lourdes experience and as the most spiritually meaningful place at the shrine for them personally. The baths are open each day from 9:00-11:00am and again from 2:00-4:00pm, and are located in what from first glance is a rather inconspicuous grey stone building further down the river past the grotto and candle racks. There are seventeen separate baths: 11 for women (of which one is reserved for children) and 6 for men. Female pilgrims especially must arrive quite early during the pilgrimage season to ensure they are taken into the baths before the end of the

morning or afternoon session. The need for women to arrive early is due quite simply to the fact that more women than men go to Lourdes on pilgrimage, and far more women than men use the baths, at a ratio of 289 600 women to 130 200 men during the course of the pilgrimage season.<sup>21</sup> Like the taps, the baths are fed by the miraculous spring and allow pilgrims to honour the Virgin's request in the apparitions to not only drink the water issuing from the spring but also to wash there. The water is changed twice daily to ensure sufficient hygiene. When it is their turn to enter the baths, pilgrims are directed to a small cubicle to undress and are covered with a cloth or robe. They are then directed toward the grey stone bath, a shallow rectangular pool of water, where they are assisted by lay volunteers who ask the pilgrim if they would like to present their prayer petitions to Our Lady. The pilgrim is then slowly immersed into the water up to their neck, and asked by the volunteers whether they would like to make the sign of the cross and recall their baptism. They are then invited to kiss a statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, and together recite the invocation: "Our Lady of Lourdes, pray for us. St. Bernadette, pray for us. O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you." The pilgrim is then assisted out of the bath and returned to the cubicle to dress without drying themselves and they exit the bathing facility, often smiling widely or with tears in their eyes, overwhelmed by what is for many pilgrims an emotional and at times transformational experience.

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<sup>21</sup> "The Baths," Sanctuaires Notre-Dame de Lourdes, <http://fr.lourdes-france.org/sites/default/files/Fiche%202010%20les%20piscines.pdf>.

Other key rituals and services punctuating the liturgical calendar at Lourdes include the International Mass, the Blessed Sacrament Procession, and the Marian Torchlight procession. The International Mass is held each Sunday and Wednesday at 9:30am during the pilgrimage season, at the Underground Basilica of St. Pius X, a massive church seating over 25 000 pilgrims consecrated by Cardinal Angelo Roncalli in March 1958, seven months before he would be elected as the recently canonized Pope John XXIII. The service brings together all of the pilgrimages in Lourdes at a given time to celebrate mass together, with readings and prayers in several languages.

The Blessed Sacrament Procession is held each day at 5:00pm, as pilgrims march with the Eucharist (the bread or wafer believed by Catholics to be the literal body of Jesus) from the square in front of the Rosary Basilica, around the long esplanade, and ending inside the Underground Basilica. Here there are readings from the Gospels, hymns are sung, and incense is burned as pilgrims venerate the Eucharistic wafer representing the body of Christ displayed on the altar in a monstrance (an elaborate gold and jeweled vessel used in the Catholic Church for displaying the Eucharist, traditionally with a sunburst design). The service concludes with a Benediction or blessing of the pilgrims with the Eucharist, as priests slowly make their way around the basilica with special attention to sick pilgrims and hold the monstrance aloft, as pilgrims bow and make the sign of the cross. Several of the miraculous cures at Lourdes recognized by the Church, and

many more that have not received official sanction, have been reported as occurring not in the baths or at the grotto, but rather as sick pilgrims were blessed with the Eucharist during the Blessed Sacrament Procession.

The principal procession that Lourdes is renowned for, however, is the Marian Torchlight Procession, which begins at 9:00pm each night. Soon after dinner in the hotels, pilgrims begin making their way back to the shrine, purchasing candles for the procession at shops along the way. The candles are sheathed by a white and blue paper cone-shaped lantern to shelter the flame. Images of the Virgin Mary appearing to Bernadette are printed on the paper lantern, along with the lyrics to Ave Maria, which is sung during the procession. As the sunlight fades the glow of thousands of individual candles brightens while the line of pilgrims weaves its way from the grotto down the main esplanade of the Domaine and back as hymns are sung and decades of the rosary are recited. Many pilgrims choose not to participate in this ritual and instead angle for prime vantage points for viewing the procession along the massive archways and rooftop of the Rosary Basilica. The candlelight procession presents an impressive spectacle. As it slowly makes its way toward its destination point at the front steps of the Rosary Basilica, the pilgrims are directed to march in a zig-zag pattern towards the front. This pattern creates a stunning, almost serpentine effect when viewed from above. Once all pilgrims have come to a stop, with sick and disabled pilgrims at the front as they always are for processions and services, the Salve Regina hymn is sung and a final blessing is



given. Pilgrims then slowly begin splintering off from the square, some to the grotto, some to walk alone or in small groups along the river, and others back into the town to unwind in the many bars and cafés situated around the shrine.

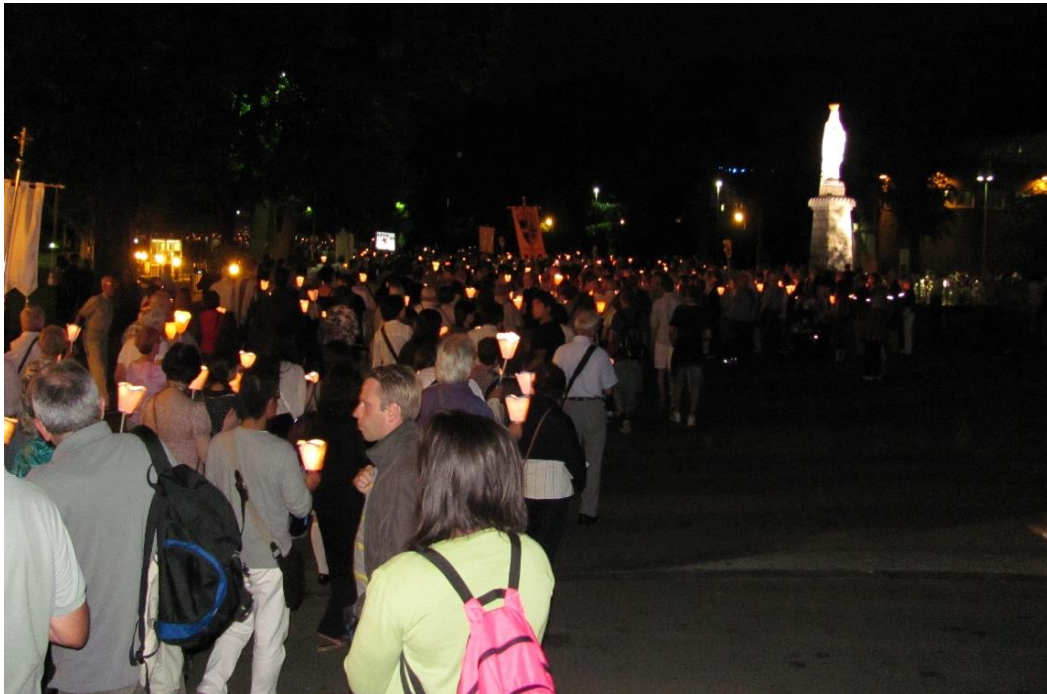


Figure 3. *The Marian Torchlight Procession*. Image Credit: Author.

### *The English Pilgrim's Path to Lourdes*

I first visited Lourdes in August-September 2011 in order to conduct preliminary fieldwork. During this introduction to the shrine I spoke informally with shrine officials and volunteers, collected materials such as pamphlets, pilgrimage timetables, and other devotional literature related to the apparitions and the shrine, and generally explored the town and Domaine in order to get a sense of what might be feasible for future, more sustained research. After this preliminary

fieldwork, and after reading studies of pilgrimage over the past twenty years which have drawn attention to the unbounded and mobile quality of pilgrimage sites, and have called for an increased focus on the lives of pilgrims outside the shrine and pilgrimage events,<sup>22</sup> I decided not to base myself at Lourdes itself. Rather, I chose to follow groups of pilgrims through the entire pilgrimage process, getting to know them in their home environment, travelling with them to and from Lourdes, and following up with them after they returned home. I discovered that the most feasible base for me to carry out a study of this nature was in the United Kingdom. Accordingly, during the 2012 and 2013 pilgrimage seasons I lived in southern England and from there joined six pilgrimages to Lourdes. England is an ideal vantage point for such an approach as it has a long history of pilgrimage to Lourdes and is the departure point for a range of established annual diocesan pilgrimages as well as those undertaken by schools, charitable organizations, and religious tour groups. Basing myself in southern England allowed for a comprehensive perspective on the experience of pilgrims to Lourdes, enabling me to meet with and interview pilgrims and pilgrimage organizers preparing to go to Lourdes prior to the pilgrimage, to accompany them on the journey to and from Lourdes, and to conduct follow-up interviews in the months following their return to England.

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<sup>22</sup> See Jill Dubisch, *In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender, and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), Nancy Louise Frey, *Pilgrim Stories: On and Off the Road to Santiago* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), and Ian Reader, *Making Pilgrimages: Meaning and Practice in Shikoku* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2006).

Interviews with pilgrims ranged from fifteen minutes to over two hours in length, following a set list of questions while still remaining flexible and open-ended. Interviews were recorded with a small digital recorder, and when it was not feasible to conduct a live interview, alternative arrangements were made using email and Skype.

I joined both the annual Westminster Diocesan Pilgrimage and the Catholic Association Pilgrimage to Lourdes during the 2012 and 2013 pilgrimage seasons. During these journeys I interviewed pilgrims as they experienced the week in Lourdes, participated in masses, processions, and other pilgrimage events, and served as a volunteer caregiver, providing assistance to sick and disabled pilgrims during their time in Lourdes. In addition, I joined two coach pilgrimages operated by Tangney Tours, the largest pilgrimage tour operator in the United Kingdom. One of these coach pilgrimages was for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception in December 2012.<sup>23</sup> During the course of my fieldwork I also consulted the archives of the Archdiocese of Westminster as well as those housed at the Catholic National Library located at St. Michael's Abbey in Farnborough, England.

Although individual English pilgrims began making the trek to Lourdes in the years following Bernadette's visions in 1858, the first organized English national pilgrimage to the shrine did not occur until May 1883, in order to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the apparitions. *The Tablet*, a British Catholic weekly journal

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<sup>23</sup> For a more detailed overview of Tangney Tours see Chapter Three.

launched in 1840 and still in active circulation, served as the primary vehicle for announcing the first national pilgrimage and for recruiting pilgrims as well as “associates,” those supporting the success of the pilgrimage with their prayers and financial contributions. The 1883 pilgrimage was organized by Fr. William Ring of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate at Tower Hill. Significantly, the pilgrims on the inaugural English national pilgrimage were not expected to travel to Lourdes together as one group, but rather to make their own arrangements regarding departure times, the route taken, and the provision of railway tickets and accommodations. The only requirement of the pilgrimage was that all should assemble at Lourdes on May 21, and together process to the grotto. This first pilgrimage then was composed of a rather disparate group of Catholic pilgrims from across England that would only be constituted as a cohesive body after having arrived in Lourdes.<sup>24</sup>

The first report back to readers of *The Tablet* came on May 26, 1883 from an unnamed “special correspondent.” The author described the English Pilgrimage as a most unexpected and wonderful success, numbering about three hundred pilgrims representing “all ranks, conditions, and positions in society in England,” headed by the Duke and Duchess of Norfolk and the Earl and Countess of Denbigh, Lord Herries and Lord Lovat, but also including pilgrims of more modest means.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> “English Pilgrimage to Lourdes,” *The Tablet*, March 31, 1883, 35.

<sup>25</sup> “The English Pilgrimage to Lourdes (From our Special Correspondent),” *The Tablet*, May 26, 1883, 15.

Once the English pilgrims had all arrived in Lourdes, they processed from the railway station to the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception built above the grotto, carrying several banners including the official banner for the English pilgrimage, which depicted St. George (the patron saint of England) slaying the Dragon on the front of the banner and “England’s Offering to Our Lady of Lourdes” inscribed on the obverse. As the English pilgrims processed through the streets of Lourdes toward the shrine, they prayed the rosary and sang hymns before arriving at the basilica, where they were welcomed by the French clergy operating the Sanctuary. Another report on the pilgrimage for *The Tablet* was published on June 2, where the unnamed correspondent described the final night of the English Pilgrimage: “On Wednesday evening we had a procession *aux flambeaux*, starting from the grotto about half-past eight. The night was very dark...we went round the grass enclosure below the church, returning as far as the large statue of Our Lady facing the basilica, chanting hymns and reciting the rosary. The effect was perfectly lovely.”<sup>26</sup> The next morning the pilgrimage would have one final mass and blessing at the grotto, and then pilgrims went their separate ways, most leaving Lourdes that afternoon.

This first organized English pilgrimage to Lourdes was understood by several writers as a key event in the process of re-establishing England as the so-called ‘Dowry of Mary.’ The gradual emancipation of English Catholics in the early nineteenth century culminated in the Roman Catholic Relief Act passed by the

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<sup>26</sup> “The Pilgrimage to Lourdes,” *The Tablet*, June 2, 1883, 10.

British Parliament in 1829, and the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in 1850. The title of England as the Dowry of Mary stemmed from the belief that England had occupied a privileged place in the heart of the Virgin Mary due to its strong Marian devotion prior to the English Reformation, and that she had therefore served as the country's patron and guardian, interceding on its behalf in times of trial. This privilege was understood to have been lost with the reforms ushered in by King Henry VIII's break with Rome.<sup>27</sup> A letter to the editor of *The Tablet*, the authorship of which was attributed only to "one of the pilgrims," referred to the English Pilgrimage to Lourdes as marking "an epoch in the annals of religion in England."<sup>28</sup> After a lengthy description of the great piety shown by English pilgrims at the shrine, the author in a rather passionate polemical style directly links the pilgrimage to the project of spiritually reclaiming England under the banner of Mary:

Great indeed is the debt of reparation England owes to the ever Immaculate Mother of God, for what insults and dishonour has not England done, and how is that reparation to be made, if not by English Catholics? Let them go to Lourdes, that chosen privileged shrine of Mary, not once, or twice, but oftentimes, and supplicate and pray there. The term of Mary's exile will soon run out, for "they who sought the life of the Child" have passed away, and may we not confidently hope that prayer and supplication will soon bring back the Divine Mother and the Child, not to dwell only, but to reign again on the Dowry of Mary?<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See Christopher Highley, *Catholics Writing the Nation in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), David Womersley, *Divinity and State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), and John Saward, John Morrill, and Michael Tomko, eds., *Firmly I Believe and Truly: The Spiritual Tradition of Catholic England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> "The English Pilgrimage to Lourdes," *The Tablet*, June 23, 1883, 24.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

This perception of the first English Pilgrimage to Lourdes as tied to a larger project of returning England to its rightful place in the Catholic Church is also reinforced in a pamphlet published later in 1883, which suggested that the reason it took twenty-five years for a pilgrimage from England to be organized was that, in the land which had once been the Dowry of Mary, “hearts were still too cold or too apathetic...attempts had been made to organize an English pilgrimage, but they had fallen through. God’s time was perhaps not yet ripe; or was it that our hearts were not yet ready?”<sup>30</sup> Apparently by May 1883 the hearts of English Catholics were indeed finally ready, with the inaugural pilgrimage to Lourdes understood as marking significant progress toward placing the island once more under the protection of Mary’s mantle.

Another successful national pilgrimage to Lourdes was organized by Fr. Ring in 1886, and five years later in June 1891 the Catholic Association was formed, holding the first meeting of supporters at the Craven Lecture Hall.<sup>31</sup> Upon its founding the Catholic Association, led by its chairman Edward Lucas and secretary Charles Munich, had two primary objectives:

1. To provide unity and good fellowship amongst Catholics by organising concerts, lectures, dances, and other gatherings of a social nature
2. To assist wherever possible in the Catholic organisations and in the protection and advancement of Catholic interests.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *The English Pilgrimage to Lourdes, May 1883* (London: Burns & Oates, 1883), 6.

<sup>31</sup> Charles J. Munich, “The Proposed Catholic Association,” *The Tablet*, June 6, 1891, 25.

<sup>32</sup> “Catholic Association History,” The Catholic Association, <http://www.catholicassociation.co.uk/pilgrimage/cahistory.shtml>.

The Catholic Association in its early years was both a social and political organization for English Catholics, and was especially active in lobbying politicians of all political stripes for action on the subject of Catholic education.<sup>33</sup> Over time the focus of the Association would shift toward facilitating social activities for Catholics, most notably pilgrimages. The first of these, to Rome, was organized in October 1898 with one hundred pilgrims. Pilgrimages would be organized with increasing frequency to other shrines and holy sites across western Europe and the Mediterranean, sending pilgrims to Antwerp, Bruges, the Holy Land, Spain, and Rome. The first Catholic Association pilgrimage to Lourdes took place in 1901 and became the de-facto English National Pilgrimage, held in September of each year. In a report from the Association's annual meeting in 1908, it is clear that pilgrimages to the Holy Land were the most popular on offer, with 106 pilgrims making the journey as opposed to the 80 pilgrims that travelled to Lourdes,<sup>34</sup> however the numbers of Lourdes pilgrims would grow rapidly in subsequent years, reaching nearly three hundred by the early 1920s.<sup>35</sup> In 1912 the Catholic Association formed the Society of Our Lady of Lourdes, which was tasked with the responsibility of organizing the medical attendants, stretcher-bearers and nurses

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<sup>33</sup> Edward Lucas, "The Catholic Association and the Education Question," *The Tablet*, February 27, 1892, 21. For a detailed overview of the debate around Catholic education in Victorian England, see Eric G. Tenbus, *English Catholics and the Education of the Poor, 1847-1902* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010).

<sup>34</sup> "The Catholic Association Annual Meeting," *The Tablet*, August 1, 1908, 15.

<sup>35</sup> "The Pilgrimage to Lourdes," *The Tablet*, June 12, 1920, 28.



needed to care for the sick during the pilgrimage. In 1922 the Society of Our Lady of Lourdes formed its own pilgrimage separate from the Catholic Association.

Both the Catholic Association and the Society of Our Lady of Lourdes were by this point dual national pilgrimages to Lourdes, with nearly all English diocesan groups travelling to Lourdes under the umbrella of one of these organizations each year, though both pilgrimages were temporarily brought to a halt by the Second World War.<sup>36</sup> However as several diocesan groups expanded and began to establish their own diocesan identity in the decades following the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy, some began to splinter off and form their own individual diocesan pilgrimages. The first to break off from either of these two organizations was the Archdiocese of Liverpool, separating from the Society of Our Lady of Lourdes and establishing its own pilgrimage in 1923. Since that time, other dioceses followed suit, and the majority of English diocesan pilgrimages to Lourdes now operate independently. The travel logistics for most of these diocesan pilgrimages are, however, facilitated by the pilgrimage tour operator Tangney Tours.

In addition to the individual diocesan pilgrimages, contemporary pilgrimages from England to Lourdes are also run by the Catholic Association. Having evolved from its origins as an English Catholic social club and political

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<sup>36</sup> In her recent study of English Catholicism in the decades following the Second World War, Alana Harris observes that in the interwar years, two recently canonized young French female saints, the Carmelite nun Thérèse of Lisieux and Bernadette Soubirous, were especially popular among Catholics in England. Harris suggests that Bernadette's popularity as a model of humble sanctity inspired thousands of English Catholics to go to Lourdes in the latter half of the twentieth century to serve as caregivers at the shrine. *Faith in the Family: A Lived Religious History of English Catholicism, 1945-82* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2013): 248.

action group, the Catholic Association exists today with the sole objective of organizing its annual pilgrimage to Lourdes held in the last weekend of August, with most pilgrims arriving on the Friday and returning to England the following Friday. The Catholic Association pilgrimage now consists of the diocesan pilgrimages of Clifton, East Anglia, Northampton, Portsmouth, and Southwark, the British Province of the Carmelite religious order, and Stonyhurst College, a private and co-ed Jesuit boarding school in Lancashire. There are also Catholics as well as non-Catholics who join the pilgrimage who are referred to as “CA Annual” pilgrims, who do not belong to one of the constituent diocesan groups. On average 700-800 pilgrims go to Lourdes with the Catholic Association each summer, departing from England by air from Stansted, Manchester, and Southampton airports, by the Eurostar high-speed train service from St. Pancras International rail station in London, as well as by coach. Each of the constituent groups is overseen by a Diocesan Director or Group Director, and the entire pilgrimage is coordinated by the Pilgrimage Director. The Catholic Association has a Board of Trustees which regulates the finances of the pilgrimage, as well as a Pilgrimage Management Committee, the members of which are appointed by the Board of Trustees. The Pilgrimage Management Committee includes a Chairman, Treasurer, Secretary, Chief Medical Officer, Chief Nurse, a Director or Co-ordinator for each of the diocesan groups, and a Chief Brancardier and Chief Handmaid (the terms used for male and female volunteer helpers at Lourdes, respectively). This body meets

regularly throughout the year and is responsible for the organization of the annual pilgrimage.



Figure 4. *The procession banners of the pilgrimage groups of the Catholic Association during the Mass at the Grotto, August 26, 2013. Image Credit: Author.*

In addition to the principal groups which together form the Catholic Association pilgrimage, there is also the Glanfield Children's Group, established in 1987 in memory of Fr. Frank Glanfield, a priest who was involved with the care of children with special needs. The Glanfield group takes children with learning difficulties as well as chronic and terminal illnesses to Lourdes as part of the CA pilgrimage, and it has its own chaplain, medical team, and volunteer helpers

assigned to care for the children.<sup>37</sup> The Glanfield group also organizes a children's mass on the Wednesday of the pilgrimage week which is one of the more light-hearted and enthusiastic religious services held in Lourdes, as the children dress up in costumes, don face paint, and lead the congregation in various children's hymns often accompanied with silly actions. Many CA pilgrims described the mass as one of the highlights of their week in Lourdes.

The Archdiocese of Westminster, where I was based in London, was one of the last of the English dioceses to establish its own pilgrimage, breaking off from the Society of Our Lady of Lourdes in 1989. The inaugural pilgrimage that summer was led by the highly regarded former Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Basil Hume, and took around 250 pilgrims to Lourdes. The Westminster pilgrimage grew rapidly throughout the 1990s, averaging 800-1000 pilgrims by the end of the decade. The number of pilgrims peaked with the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the apparitions in 2008, with over 1400 pilgrims from the diocese going to Lourdes, but has dramatically declined in the years since to 400 pilgrims in 2012, with a slight uptick to 560 pilgrims joining the 2013 pilgrimage. This rather sharp decline in numbers has been attributed by pilgrimage organizers to the financial pressures placed on pilgrims by the current economic climate in the UK, observing that numbers first began to trend downward after the "Great Recession" of 2008. Some pilgrims now choose to only go to Lourdes every two or three years instead of annually, or to wait

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<sup>37</sup> "The Glanfield Group," The Catholic Association, <http://www.catholicassociation.co.uk/groups/glanfield.shtml>.

until the financial situation improves. Organizers were optimistic however that there would be a significant increase in numbers for the 2014 pilgrimage, which will mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Westminster pilgrimage.

Like the Catholic Association, the Westminster pilgrimage travels from London to Lourdes by plane from Stansted Airport, by the Eurostar from St. Pancras, and by coach from Westminster Cathedral in the Victoria district of central London. The pilgrimage is typically held toward the end of July, departing on a Sunday and returning the following Saturday. The organizational structure of the pilgrimage is quite similar to that of the Catholic Association, with a Pilgrimage Director charged with overseeing the pilgrimage as well as a Chief Brancardier and Chief Handmaid, who together organize the teams of volunteer helpers and the logistics of caring for sick pilgrims while in Lourdes. The pilgrimage has several working groups that meet throughout the year, including the medical team of volunteer doctors and nurses as well as a working group in charge of the logistics behind what is called the “Jumbulance.” The Jumbulance is a specially designed coach ambulance fitted with beds, a lift, and a fully accessible toilet. It is used for transporting sick and disabled pilgrims to Lourdes who are unable to travel by plane or rail and who require special care. The diocesan youth ministry also meets independently, both in the months leading up to and during the pilgrimage, to organize youth liturgies and social activities for young people from parish groups and Catholic schools in the diocese who are going to Lourdes. The organizational

structure of the pilgrimage is more streamlined than that of the Catholic Association pilgrimage, however, as it consists only of the Archdiocese of Westminster.



Figure 5. *Passage through the grotto and lighting of the diocesan candle during the Westminster pilgrimage, July 27, 2012. Image Credit: Author.*

Fundraising is also key to the Westminster pilgrimage's organizational efforts leading up to the journey to Lourdes each July. Approximately £70 000 is needed to operate the pilgrimage each summer. Several events are organized throughout the year to raise money for the pilgrimage, including quiz nights, balls, and concerts. Each November a large concert is organized for the feast of St. Cecelia (the Catholic patron saint of music) at St. Mary's Church in Chelsea, followed by a reception, and all proceeds are directed toward the next year's pilgrimage. Organizers also write to past pilgrims inviting them to donate and join the "Friends

of the Westminster Pilgrimage,” however the pilgrimage has seen a fall in donations in the past five years due to the economic climate in the UK and has depended on loans from the Archdiocese to cover its shortfall.

The pilgrimage timetables for both the Catholic Association and Westminster are generally similar and fixed from year to year, likely due in part to the fact that both pilgrimages are facilitated through Tangney Tours and that there is a significant degree of collaboration among the British pilgrimages to Lourdes.<sup>38</sup> Both begin with a “Welcoming Mass” or “Gathering Mass” to formally open the pilgrimage, held at the Church of St. Bernadette across the river from the grotto. During their respective pilgrimage weeks both the CA and Westminster pilgrimages will formally participate in and lead the Marian torchlight procession, the Blessed Sacrament Procession, and the International Mass on one specific day of the week, though pilgrims may participate in these services at any time on their own during their stay in Lourdes. Other key activities during both pilgrimages include a procession to the grotto where mass is held, a photo of the entire pilgrimage group on the steps of the Rosary Basilica, a penitential liturgy where pilgrims may go to clergy accompanying the pilgrimage for confession, and a special time slot for the pilgrimage to have privileged access to the baths and avoid the long line-ups. There is also the opportunity for pilgrims to process through the Stations of the Cross, a

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<sup>38</sup> Here I provide a very basic overview of the timetables for both the CA and Westminster pilgrimages. More detailed descriptions of their respective Lourdes itineraries are discussed throughout the dissertation.

series of sculptures depicting Christ's last moments, from Pontius Pilate sentencing Jesus to death through to his crucifixion and burial. There are two main sets of Stations in Lourdes, the original "High Stations" that lead pilgrims up a steep and uneven hill behind the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, and the flat, wheelchair-accessible "Low Stations" down the river from the grotto. The pilgrimage week is also punctuated with a variety of social events, including parties, sing-alongs, and youth meetings. The week for both pilgrimages concludes with a Closing Mass or Thanksgiving Mass, and all pilgrims process to the grotto for one final passage through the site of the apparitions. Most pilgrims depart Lourdes the following morning for the return journey home. Some leave with tears in their eyes, thankful for a successful and deeply meaningful pilgrimage week and distraught at the prospect, as one pilgrim put it, of "saying farewell to Our Lady till next year."

### *Chapter Overview*

From volunteer caregivers striving to "be as Christ" in their service of sick pilgrims, to first-time visitors to Lourdes navigating the shrine through the camera lens of a Hollywood film, pilgrims are drawn to Lourdes by complex and nuanced motivations. The chapters that follow explore these motivations and the experiences underlying a pilgrim's choice to set out on a journey to the grotto of Lourdes. Since it is a pilgrimage site that now attracts an estimated six million visitors each year from an incredible range of geographical, social, and religious departure points, the



motivations for journeys to Lourdes can be elusive phenomena to pin down. Conversations with pilgrims continuously elicited fresh and surprising perspectives on the shrine and often undermined my own preconceived notions of what moved them in the direction of Lourdes. An experience or encounter that for one pilgrim could be the defining hallmark of their time in Lourdes could be viewed as completely alien for another.

While the chapters that follow move through a wide and often disparate range of pilgrim experiences, underscoring the inherently multivalent nature of pilgrimage, nevertheless a common thread emerges, weaving its way through many of the pilgrims' stories reflecting on their time at the shrine. This thread is the trope of authenticity, a rhetorical device that recurs frequently in the narratives and discourse of the pilgrims I met who undertook the journey to Lourdes. Experiences described by pilgrims as "authentic" were critical in informing their engagement with the shrine and with fellow pilgrims, and often inspired return visits to Lourdes in subsequent years. Using the term "authenticity" is, however, fraught with conceptual baggage in anthropology, and particularly in studies of pilgrimage and touristic travel. Researchers have struggled with the question of whether authenticity, as it was first proposed by Dean MacCannell in his seminal text *The Tourist*,<sup>39</sup> has become a tired and imprecise concept no longer useful in understanding the traveller's experience. Some have argued that the term

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<sup>39</sup> Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976).

authenticity has limited utility, others have argued for its complete abandonment. Others still have attempted to rehabilitate the idea of authenticity as an appropriate mode for understanding the motivations of tourists and their experience of the locales they visit.<sup>40</sup> I suggest however that while the notion of authenticity may be elusive and imprecise, often having different meanings for different people, nevertheless the trope of authenticity remains a key element of the discourse and lived experience of pilgrimage. Pilgrims themselves use the term or others closely analogous to it in describing their engagement with the sites and people they encounter in Lourdes. Indeed, the very reason that Lourdes – an otherwise obscure town – has achieved such global renown, is the belief in a series of apparitions of the Virgin Mary to a fourteen year-old girl officially verified by the Church as authentic. Likewise, the miraculous cures for which Lourdes is known are understood to be authentic, and to occur precisely because the Virgin truly intervened, and continues to intervene, at this site. It is not my aim in this study to embark on a project of radically reconceptualising the term “authenticity.” Nonetheless, as I demonstrate in subsequent chapters, authenticity still offers a useful heuristic lens for exploring those factors which shape and determine the experience of pilgrims to Lourdes.

Chapter Two, “‘Let Me Be as Christ to You’: Pilgrimage and Faith-Motivated Volunteer Caregiving,” examines the experience of pilgrims to Lourdes who also

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<sup>40</sup> A more sustained engagement with the academic literature on authenticity and discussions of its application to the experience of Lourdes pilgrims can be found in Chapters Three, Five and Six.

volunteer to serve as caregivers to sick and disabled pilgrims during their week at the shrine. I begin with a brief survey of the early institutionalization of care at Lourdes, which was quickly necessitated by the hundreds and then thousands of seriously ill pilgrims drawn to the shrine in the late nineteenth century by the reports of miraculous healings that were attributed to the spring uncovered by Bernadette. I then describe how the care of contemporary sick pilgrims to Lourdes is organized by both the Westminster and Catholic Association pilgrimages, before transitioning to a review of the literature on the relationship between religious institutions and values and volunteering. Significantly, this literature lacks consensus on the issue of whether or to what degree religion is an important factor in motivating volunteer activity.

In dialogue with this research, I argue that for the vast majority of volunteer caregivers I encountered at Lourdes, the Christian love command and its emphasis on love of neighbour serves as a clear ethical imperative informing their care work at the shrine. Many volunteers describe their service during the pilgrimage as an opportunity to put their faith into action, realizing their full potential through service to others, and “doing what Jesus asked of us,” often citing specific passages from the Christian Gospels where this invocation is made. I also provide two case studies of a less prevalent motivation for volunteering at Lourdes: namely, care work as an act of thanksgiving for a favour or grace received by means of a visionary encounter or other form of divine intervention.

Although several caregivers highlighted the value they derive from their care work in terms of the immediate and authentic relationships forged with sick pilgrims and other helpers, as well as the new perspectives they gained on illness and on their own potential, I also draw attention to the incredibly challenging and contested nature of caregiving. Most volunteer helpers have little formal training or experience with this level of care work and may not feel prepared for the tasks they are charged with. Those they are caring for may resist the sense that they are being patronized, or experience some level of anxiety at the prospect of being cared for by relative amateurs. I conclude the chapter by employing the concept of *kenosis* in Christian thought as a lens through which to examine and encapsulate the range of encounters both positive and negative between caregivers and those cared for, as well as among caregivers. In so doing, I highlight the way in which theological and anthropological concepts can fruitfully be combined to show how several volunteer caregivers strive for an authentic experience of full human relationship and exchange within the frame of a pilgrimage to Lourdes.

Chapter Three, “Pray and Play: Pilgrims, Tourists, and the Commercial Geography of Lourdes,” looks at the perspectives of pilgrims on the connection between pilgrimage and tourism. After engaging with both classic and contemporary scholarship on the subject, which continues to be a source of debate in pilgrimage studies, I urge for the disruption of perceptions of pilgrim and tourist identities as discrete and fundamentally opposing binaries. In my experience, these

binaries readily dissolve in the face of the lived experience of pilgrims to Lourdes. Participants in the diocesan pilgrimages and pilgrimage tour groups I joined overwhelmingly self-identified as pilgrims. However this did not prevent them from visiting historical and commercial sites in Lourdes, leaving the town to go on recreational excursions into the mountains, or socializing raucously in the evenings. In fact many people viewed these activities as complementary if not necessary elements of the pilgrimage experience, providing balance and indeed release from the hectic and sometimes overwhelming physical and emotional pace of the pilgrimage week.

I proceed with an examination of the pilgrimage tour operator Tangney Tours based in southeast England, which coordinated all of the pilgrimages I joined during my research. I begin by describing its history of organizing pilgrimages to Lourdes from the UK and highlighting the ways in which it incorporates both traditional pilgrimage and touristic elements into its travel itineraries. I then provide a detailed exploration of the recreational excursions into the surrounding Pyrénées that many pilgrims join, their visits to historical sites in Lourdes unrelated to the apparitions or the shrine, as well as their use of the cafés, bars, and seemingly endless religious souvenir shops that together comprise the commercial geography of Lourdes. Throughout I elicit the perspectives of pilgrims on their own engagement with the more “touristic” facets of Lourdes. As I show, most pilgrims saw few problems with seamlessly incorporating activities outside the domain of

institutional religion into their pilgrimage week and refused to distinguish between themselves as “authentic” or real pilgrims with the proper set of motivations and behaviours, and fake or inauthentic pilgrims whose reasons for visiting the shrine were ambiguous or deemed suspect.

Chapter Four, “‘Spiritually, I’m Always in Lourdes’: Perceptions of Home and Away among Serial Pilgrims,” focuses on the experience of those pilgrims who have returned to Lourdes on pilgrimage for several years and even decades as a habitual and indeed compulsive element of their lived faith. Based on their testimonies, I suggest that for these people Lourdes cannot be characterized as a bounded space from which one neatly departs and returns. Despite the insistence in early pilgrimage scholarship on understanding shrines as extraordinary, far-removed sites, generally unfamiliar and opposed to the pilgrim’s everyday religious and social life, individual pilgrims can and do perceive and interact with places like Lourdes as a ‘home away from home,’ or a ‘second home.’ In some instances, pilgrims see the shrine as their one authentic home, the one place in the world where they are at peace with themselves, where they belong. Many pilgrims cited their return to Lourdes each year and sometimes several times a year as being motivated by the authentic sense of community and family that is established during their stay at the shrine. These pilgrims often juxtaposed this view of Lourdes with their perception of the UK as cold, distant, and isolating. Others described returning to Lourdes each year as an act of thanksgiving for a miraculous healing received

through the intercession of Our Lady of Lourdes, an ex-voto offering that had to be enacted each year through repeated pilgrimages to the shrine.

Not only is Lourdes considered a second or authentic home, but elements of Lourdes are incorporated into the daily religious lives of pilgrims after they return to England. Through their engagement with statues of Our Lady of Lourdes on their bookcase, small replicas of the grotto in their garden, or through the daily habitual use of Lourdes water, pilgrims attempt to extend their experience of the shrine into their routine religious practice back home. The boundaries once erected between the “home” of the pilgrim and the “away” of the religious shrine are indeed porous, with cross-currents flowing back and forth between the two. The centre may still indeed be out there in the geographical and cognitive margins, but particularly for serial pilgrims returning to Lourdes, the shrine is also intimately familiar, a storehouse for memories of pilgrimages past, and a site for continued spiritual refreshment.

Chapter Five, “Mediating Mediums: Encountering Lourdes through *The Song of Bernadette*,” looks at the 1943 Hollywood film *The Song of Bernadette*, a religious epic detailing the life of Bernadette Soubirous, and its role as an authenticating tool for pilgrims. *The Song of Bernadette* dramatizes and confirms the authenticity of pilgrims’ embodied experience of the sacred at Lourdes through a fluid interplay between the cinematic representation of the events and sites

associated with the apparitions of the Virgin Mary to Bernadette, and the physical exploration of those same sites in Lourdes by contemporary pilgrims.

I begin by exploring the historical background of the film as well as the novel of the same name by the Czech author Franz Werfel, which proved incredibly popular among both Catholic readers and the wider public during the Second World War. Werfel's novel occupied the number one spot on the New York Times bestsellers' list for several weeks. I show how critical responses to the novel and the film by both the secular and Catholic press were especially concerned with the degree to which these artistic renderings of the Lourdes story could be considered authentic and reliable accounts of the events at Lourdes and the person of Bernadette. I then move to a discussion of the responses of contemporary pilgrims to *The Song of Bernadette*. Several pilgrims cited the film as an authoritative source informing their own understanding of the Lourdes story, while others preferred a more recent French film which was screened several times daily in Lourdes, *Je m'appelle Bernadette*.

The chapter then follows pilgrims as they walk "In the Footsteps of Bernadette," a 1.7 km interpretive trail established in 2008 to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the apparitions. A blue painted line guides pilgrims from the shrine to several sites associated with the life of Bernadette, including her birthplace, the parish church, and what is referred to as Le Cachot, the dour one-room dwelling and former jail where Bernadette and her family lived during the period of the



apparitions and which is central to the action in *The Song of Bernadette*. I suggest that for some pilgrims this trail and other sites at Lourdes depicted in the film serve as the catalyst for a process by which contemporary pilgrims to Lourdes negotiate its sacred geography, the film serving as a colouring lens mediating and authenticating their encounter with those sites closely bound up in the story of Bernadette and the apparitions.

I conclude the chapter by arguing that while Lourdes is already deeply imbued with a transcendental aura for pilgrims, modern mass media forms, such as a visual representation of the sacred through film, can enhance this perception of transcendence. Objects, places, and paths associated with the apparitions and the life of Bernadette are already sacralised, yet an imaginative encounter with place and object filtered through cinematic representation can intensify their significance. Material objects can be a touchstone for the memory, bringing forth a scene from the film that assists in situating, visualizing, and further authenticating this sense of the transcendental at Lourdes.

Chapter Six, “Thin Spaces: Encounters with Place and Person,” concludes this study with a brief exploration of the idea, often articulated by pilgrims, that Lourdes constitutes what they describe as a “thin space.” By virtue of the apparitions of the Virgin Mary to Bernadette in 1858 and the ongoing miracles and blessings believed to flow from the shrine, pilgrims understand the area around the grotto especially as a place where heaven touched earth, where the gap between the

celestial and temporal narrowed and these two domains even intersected, however briefly. I return in this chapter to the concept of authenticity as it is perceived by pilgrims in relation to their experiences at Lourdes. I use the motif of thin spaces as a heuristic lens for exploring the range of modes by which the trope of authenticity mediates their engagement not only with those sites understood as especially sacred, but also with other pilgrims, most notably through the act of caregiving. Just as the gap between heaven and earth is narrowed or erased in the thin space of Lourdes, so too is the gap dividing otherwise isolated individuals – caregivers and those cared for – from one another. I maintain here that authenticity still matters, if for no other reason than that pilgrims themselves actively use the term or those closely analogous to it in describing their experience at Lourdes. From the perspective of pilgrims, Lourdes is the thin space which affords the authentic possibility of transcendence, of collapsing the boundaries between self and other, human and divine.

## II

“Let Me Be as Christ to You”: Pilgrimage and Faith-Motivated  
Volunteer Caregiving

*Rome is the head of the Church, but Lourdes is its heart.*

-A popular saying among Lourdes pilgrims<sup>41</sup>

I am on the Southern Rail train from East Croydon to Victoria station in central London, and I can't help but anxiously look at my watch. I am running late for the training day organized by the Westminster pilgrimage for first-time and returning helpers held at Vaughan House, the main office of the Archdiocese on Francis Street tucked behind Westminster Cathedral. Once the train comes to a stop at its final destination, I try to navigate the sheer blur of humanity that is one of the busiest rail stations in England during the height of the tourist season, as I make my way toward Vaughan House only a few blocks away. After signing in at the main entrance, I am directed toward the room where the training is being held, and quietly slink into a chair in the back row near the door. At the front of the room a PowerPoint presentation is being given by pilgrimage organizers to first-time helpers, covering topics such as general rules for volunteer caregivers while on the pilgrimage and appropriate dress to be worn during the week in Lourdes: modest white clothing for women and white polo shirts and slacks for men.

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<sup>41</sup> See also Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

Later that morning, first-time helpers are herded down several flights of stairs to another meeting room, where they are asked to pair up with another volunteer and practice a range of caring skills on one another, including feeding, dressing, and brushing one's teeth. Many of the helpers try to keep their composure, aware of the awkward and somewhat humorous nature of assisting a person with tasks they are fully capable of performing themselves. A nurse and experienced helper weave their way through the pairs, providing reassurance as well as correcting actions that may be inappropriate. The departure date for the pilgrimage only two weeks away, these volunteers now have at least a basic level of training in the art of caregiving.

Given that the majority of these volunteer helpers have very little if any professional or even informal experience providing intimate levels of care for another person, one might legitimately wonder what moves them to offer their assistance on a pilgrimage to Lourdes. This chapter aims to contribute to an understanding of faith as a significant motivating factor in volunteer caregiving by highlighting Lourdes as a privileged vantage point for exploring the role of pilgrimage in providing a context and indeed an ethos for volunteer care work. Since the first reports of visions of the Virgin Mary to Bernadette in 1858, the shrine that developed at the site has become renowned as a sacred place of potential healing, drawing millions of sick and disabled pilgrims each year. In order to best serve these pilgrims, an extensive spiritual and medical infrastructure has been

developed at the shrine. To assist pilgrims on the journey to and from Lourdes and during their stay in the town, professional medical staff are joined by hundreds of volunteer caregivers or helpers, tasked with pushing wheelchairs, assisting with bathing and dressing, and simply providing companionship.

I suggest that for many volunteer caregivers, it is not the apparitions or the reports of miraculous cures that are paradigmatic of Lourdes. Rather, it is the relationship formed with the sick and disabled through volunteer care work which these caregivers see as emblematic of the Lourdes experience. Moreover, they understand their caregiving work as enabling them to follow the example of Christ set out in the Gospels. Volunteers see caregiving at Lourdes as an occasion to put their faith into practice. Yet it is also important to attend to the ways in which this ideal of the Christian love command as a motive for caregiving becomes complicated in practice. Caregiving is not easy. It is physically and emotionally taxing and is capable of exposing fault lines just as it holds the potential to mend them. I argue then for a nuanced reading of volunteer caregiving at Lourdes, one which focuses on developing the ethic of Christian service that is quite evident at Lourdes, yet also highlights points of contestation which may limit the actual reach of this ethic.

*The Early Institutionalization of Care*

From the earliest claims of dramatic, miraculous cures by the first pilgrims who travelled to Lourdes, who visited the makeshift shrine and drank and washed in the water flowing from the spring uncovered by Bernadette, Lourdes has primarily been identified as a Marian Catholic healing shrine, attracting millions of sick and disabled pilgrims each year. Even for the casual day-tripper quickly passing through Lourdes as part of a larger itinerary, it becomes readily apparent that care and concern for the sick is *the* central animating ethos sustaining the activity of the shrine. This has been the case from the very outset, as shrine officials and pilgrimage organizers have tried to facilitate adequate travel arrangements, accommodations, and medical care for sick pilgrims during the journey to and while in Lourdes.

As Ruth Harris details in her seminal historical account of the early development of the Lourdes shrine, the first serious contingent of around fifty *malades*<sup>42</sup> joined the French national pilgrimage in 1875. Two years later, the ratio had reached 366 *malades* out of a total of 1 200 pilgrims, the numbers of both *malades* and total pilgrims rapidly increasing in subsequent years.<sup>43</sup> Several (and

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<sup>42</sup> The term *malades* has been the historical term used to refer to sick pilgrims at Lourdes, and it is still in use by the Westminster diocesan pilgrimage to describe those pilgrims staying in the Accueil St. Frai and requiring medical assistance and informal care provided by volunteer helpers. The Catholic Association alternatively uses the term ‘Assisted Pilgrims’ to describe this same category of pilgrim. It is defined in their Helpers Handbook as “The preferred term for those who are ill or disabled who are staying in the Accueil and hotels, needing assistance from our team of helpers.” I privilege this term ‘Assisted Pilgrim’ throughout this study.

<sup>43</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 258.

often competing) organizations were founded to provide medical and spiritual care to sick pilgrims, including the Association de Notre-Dame de Salut, a lay charitable organization that raised the funds required to transport the sick to Lourdes, and the Petites-Soeurs de l'Assomption, the nuns who nursed the sick with the society ladies of Notre-Dame de Salut, and who, according to Harris, “celebrated an ethos of selfless sacrifice and sisterly piety that would make them famous throughout Catholic France.”<sup>44</sup> Members of the Petites-Soeurs caring for the desperate cases arriving in Lourdes to place their petition for healing at the grotto were instructed by their superiors to “Think of the poor man suffering on his wretched litter as Jesus Christ, the divine leper.”<sup>45</sup> This injunction was clearly intended to trace a connection between service to others in their care work at Lourdes and service to Christ. This connection will be explored in more detail in the course of this chapter in relation to contemporary English helpers at Lourdes.

Harris relates that in the early years of the shrine the Petites-Soeurs were responsible for all the tasks that were later offloaded to more specialized groups, including nursing pilgrims at the hospitals, bathing the sick in the pools of spring water, offering meals to the needy, and providing general assistance to pilgrims as they milled about the shrine domain. With the foundation of the Hospitalité de Notre-Dame de Salut in 1880, many of the tasks performed by the Petites-Soeurs were taken over by volunteer members of the Hospitalité, and with this hand over

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<sup>44</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 212.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Harris, *Lourdes*, 266.

of responsibility came a shift in the gendered dynamic of the care of sick pilgrims at Lourdes. Harris observes that until this point Lourdes had idealized a vision of traditional feminine piety exhibited in acts of intimate, selfless care and compassion by society ladies and nuns. With the founding of the Hospitalité de Notre-Dame de Salut however, the role of men became amplified, and a military style now pervaded the organization, as the men that joined the organization marched in military fashion with banners and medals and an established chain of command in place.<sup>46</sup> These men offering their service to the sick at Lourdes would become known as *brancardiers*, which translates literally to ‘stretcher-bearers.’ They were tasked primarily with transporting sick pilgrims in wheelchairs and stretchers from the train station and hospitals to the grotto and the baths. The early *brancardiers* according to Harris were primarily composed of aristocratic gentlemen who saw their work at Lourdes as uniting the masculine qualities of chivalry, prowess, and manly faith.<sup>47</sup> With the further institutionalization of lay organizations or hospitalities providing care to infirm pilgrims at Lourdes, a marked, gendered division of labour became entrenched, with male helpers (*brancardiers*) tasked with more physical responsibilities such as physically carrying and transporting pilgrims, and female helpers (or handmaids) responsible for nursing care within the confines of the hospitals.

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<sup>46</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 268.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.



Early English pilgrimages to Lourdes followed suit and conformed to this gendered division of labour, assigning separate tasks to men and women and adopting the terms handmaids and *brancardiers* to refer to male and female helpers. A 1925 pamphlet from the Catholic Truth Society, a British organization founded in 1884 which publishes a range of Catholic literature from apologetics to prayerbooks, provides guidelines on how a typical English pilgrimage to Lourdes should structure the daily tasks of handmaids and *brancardiers*:

Time-table for Handmaids

7.15am	Tables to be set for breakfast.
7.45am	Breakfast served in refectory for walking cases; beside grotto for stretcher cases. After breakfast, tables must be cleared in refectory, oil-cloth wiped, and floor swept.
10.00am	Tables to be set for lunch.
11.00am	Lunch served in refectory for walking cases; outside Asile for helpless ones. Tables to be cleared and floors swept after lunch.
3.00pm	Tables to be set for dinner.
6.00pm	Dinner served in refectory for patients who are up. Tables to be cleared and floor swept afterwards.
N.B.	If the patients are punctual for meals, the helpers in the refectory ought not to be late for any meal at the hotels.

Time-table for Brancardiers

6.00am	Mass at the Asile
6.30am	Sick to be carried or wheeled to grotto for Mass.
7.45am	Brancs to help handmaids to carry breakfast to stretcher cases at the grotto.
9-11.00am	Brancs to be on duty at piscines [the baths] to aid in bathing of male pilgrims.
11.00am	Patients to be brought back to Asile for lunch.
2-4.00pm	Brancs to be on duty at piscines.
4.00pm	Brancs to transport patients into the Esplanade, and then join the procession in appointed place.

5.00pm	Patients to be taken back to Asile.
7-9.00pm	Brancs to help putting male patients to bed – to shave them, etc., if necessary, and generally to assist the nursing staff.
N.B. –	<p>(1) All brancs except the two on night duty must have left the Asile by 9.30pm.</p> <p>(2) On no account must a branc enter the wards without permission of a Matron or doctor.</p> <p>(3) One branc will be on duty always at the Asile gate and will admit only those persons who wear brassards, except during the hours set apart for the general visiting of the sick.<sup>48</sup></p>

It is worth highlighting a few notable elements of these respective timetables, dating from 1925, especially in contradistinction to contemporary practices. First, it would be striking for current female helpers at Lourdes to see that according to this guide for pilgrims, handmaids were almost exclusively tasked with playing the role of waitress: setting tables, serving meals, and cleaning up afterwards. There is little mention of more intimate acts of caregiving, such as washing, dressing, and toileting. It is mentioned elsewhere in this guide that these tasks were reserved for professional nurses as well as nuns resident in Lourdes, who would be experienced in this level of care work in an institutional setting. As I will describe in more detail shortly, contemporary handmaids on both the Westminster and Catholic Association pilgrimages are involved in nearly all aspects of care work in the Accueils Notre-Dame and St. Frai, the one glaring exception being that they and all volunteer caregivers are forbidden from dispensing medication or attempting more

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<sup>48</sup> Mary D. Sheridan, *Handbook for Lourdes Pilgrims* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1925), 29-30.

involved medical assistance they may not be trained for, such as operating a mechanical hoist or fitting a catheter. While the tasks of *brancardiers* detailed in the timetable are perhaps more in line with current practices, contemporary male helpers fully participate not only in transporting pilgrims, but also in more intimate caregiving acts, no different from the tasks historically assigned to female professional nurses and nuns. There is some suggestion in the 1925 pamphlet that *brancardiers* would assist nurses in providing limited care to male pilgrims, specifically in providing help with shaving. Their primary role historically however has been as pushers and carriers. While both the Westminster and Catholic Association pilgrimages still use these gendered terms of *brancardier* and handmaid, they are primarily used to refer to the heads of service, the Chief Brancardier and Chief Handmaid, with volunteer caregivers simply referred to as helpers or volunteer helpers regardless of gender. Although the terminology still indicates a gendered division of labour within care work at Lourdes, both the Westminster and the CA pilgrimage have male and female helpers working together performing similar tasks. It is important to now turn our attention to how the care of Assisted Pilgrims at Lourdes is organized and practiced today.

#### *Organizing Care: The Westminster Diocesan Pilgrimage*

For both the Westminster and Catholic Association pilgrimages, planning the logistics for next year's pilgrimage commences soon after the current one has

concluded, with a series of organizational meetings nearly every month which increase in frequency as the departure date draws near. Particularly for those arranging for the provision of care for Assisted Pilgrims, planning can be quite intensive. Organizers must ensure that there are adequate medical supplies, coordinate with shrine officials in Lourdes for sufficient space in the wards of the Accueils St. Frai and Notre-Dame, recruit medical doctors, nurses, and volunteer helpers, and draw up rotas for the teams of volunteer helpers outlining their duties.

In the lead-up to the pilgrimage week, both pilgrimages provide mandatory training for volunteer helpers. The Westminster pilgrimage includes both the formal training day described at the beginning of this chapter, as well as an online training module implemented for the first time during the 2013 pilgrimage, which I was told was mandated by the insurance company for the Archdiocese. In a series of video clips and interactive quizzes, volunteer helpers are provided with information on delivering basic care to Assisted Pilgrims while in Lourdes.

Once volunteer helpers arrive in Lourdes, it is “all hands on deck” as Assisted Pilgrims are settled into the Accueil Marie Saint-Frai (often referred to simply as the St. Frai by pilgrims). The Accueil St. Frai was the first hospital facility for sick pilgrims in Lourdes, established in 1874 by Marie Saint-Frai and Fr. Dominique Ribes, who also founded the Order of the Daughters of Our Lady of Sorrows that is still charged with operating the Accueil. Situated outside the shrine domain in the town of Lourdes, just up the street from one of the principal entrances

into the Sanctuary, it can accommodate up to 414 sick and disabled pilgrims and was significantly remodelled in 1998. It is not quite a hospital nor is it a hotel, but rather has been designed as accommodation with the sick, disabled, and elderly in mind, tailored to their needs. The design of each floor is akin to a hospital ward however, with rooms of six beds each and a nurses' station lining the halls, which open up onto a six-storey atrium where sunshine streams through the skylight above. The Accueil St. Frai also includes a chapel, meeting rooms, and a terrace which allows for impressive views of the Château Fort de Lourdes (and smoke breaks for Assisted Pilgrims). For the week that they are in Lourdes, the Accueil St. Frai is home base for the Assisted Pilgrims of the Westminster pilgrimage. Most of the Westminster volunteer helpers stay in the Hôtel Metropole adjacent to the St. Frai, providing quick access for helpers which was especially important for early morning shifts.

The 2013 Westminster pilgrimage had twenty-six Assisted Pilgrims staying in the Accueil St. Frai, who required a level of medical care and informal assistance that could not be easily facilitated in regular hotels. These pilgrims were assisted by fifty-five volunteer helpers, divided into four teams by letter (ex: Team A, Team B, etc.). Each team was headed by two team leaders who were more experienced helpers. There was also a Light Duty Team consisting of twenty-two more mature helpers, many of whom had been coming to Lourdes since the first Westminster pilgrimage in 1989. They have made the transition from being volunteer team

helpers actively engaged in the care of Assisted Pilgrims to performing less intensive tasks such as setting up and cleaning up before and after meals, offering assistance with feeding, and providing companionship outside of meal times. Formal medical care is provided by a team of three doctors and nineteen nurses, who all volunteer their time and often sacrifice a week of their summer holiday to provide for the medical needs of Assisted Pilgrims in Lourdes. In addition, several pilgrims are able to stay in the hotel of their choice, yet will indicate on their pilgrimage registration forms that they have limited mobility or perhaps tire easily. The ‘Red Caps,’ a group of nearly two hundred students from Catholic schools in London easily recognizable by the bright red tabards they wear while on duty, assist in pushing these pilgrims in wheelchairs from their hotel to the shrine, during processions, and on shopping excursions in the town. Red Caps will also distribute water during masses and other rather long events and services, and will provide cover for wheelchair-bound pilgrims with the pilgrimage’s own white and red umbrellas during outdoor services if the mid-day sun proves unbearable.<sup>49</sup>

The schedule of shift work given to volunteer helpers is designed by pilgrimage organizers to provide a degree of balance in the pace of one’s duties. Organizers are acutely aware of the potential for physical and emotional exhaustion as the week progresses. With four separate teams of helpers, the teams will alternate

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<sup>49</sup> For an account of the experience of young pilgrims at Lourdes, see Alana Harris, “‘A Place to Grow Spiritually and Socially’: The Experiences of Young Pilgrims to Lourdes,” in *Religion and Youth*, ed. Sylvia Collins-Mayo and Ben Pink Dandelion (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2010).

each day of the week in their start times and responsibilities. The timetable is helpfully colour-coded according to the level of commitment expected of the helper at a given time, arranged on a sliding scale from red to green. For example red blocks indicate that the helper is on duty and is fully expected to arrive on time ready to help, while green blocks indicate the best times for the helper to rest and recover their energy.



Figure 6. *The Accueil Marie Saint-Frai*. Image Credit: Author

A typical day for a volunteer helper on the Westminster pilgrimage will begin with a team meeting at 6:30am in the lobby of the St. Frai, where team leaders go over the itinerary for the day, the range of duties the team will be responsible for, and field any questions helpers might have. The meeting then concludes with a prayer led by the priest who has been assigned as chaplain to the Assisted Pilgrims

and the volunteer caregivers in the St. Frai. The team members then make their way up to the floor shared with the Order of Malta Volunteers (OMV) pilgrimage, a youth pilgrimage run by the Knights of Malta. Team members slowly enter the rooms of their assigned Assisted Pilgrims to gently wake them up, assist them in getting out of bed, and depending on their individual needs, assist with toileting, bathing, and dressing. This process could take from twenty minutes to well over an hour. Once the Assisted Pilgrims have been taken to breakfast where they are under the care of the Light Duty Team, volunteer helpers busily move about the ward with a long list of cleaning tasks, including disinfecting the bathrooms, making beds to the precise standards of the St. Frai nuns, sweeping and mopping the floors, changing garbage bins, and so on.

When breakfast is finished there is typically a pilgrimage event beginning around 9-10:00am which requires volunteer helpers to either assist in boarding Assisted Pilgrims onto coach buses, or pushing wheelchairs through the narrow streets of Lourdes down toward the shrine for a procession, mass, or other service. After returning to the Accueil St. Frai for lunch, there may be other pilgrimage events scheduled, there may be free time for shopping or to explore the shrine and town, or Assisted Pilgrims may decide to stay at the Accueil and rest. After dinner some pilgrims will request to be taken to the Marian torchlight procession, to one of the town's bars for a pint of beer, or may choose to stay in the Accueil and socialize with other helpers and fellow Assisted Pilgrims. Around 10:00pm



preparations will begin for bed. Again, depending on the needs of the individual pilgrim, volunteer caregivers will help the pilgrim undress, change into their pyjamas, assist them to the toilet, may help with brushing and flossing of teeth, and ensure the pilgrim is comfortable in bed before bidding good night. With the exception of those assigned to night duty, helpers are then free to leave the Accueil and spend the rest of the night as they choose. Some helpers opt to visit the grotto, others return to their hotels and sleep, and others socialize with fellow helpers and unwind at the Roi-Albert, the bar of choice for Westminster helpers while in Lourdes. Although as mentioned previously this schedule does alternate and ‘down time’ is provided, the vast majority of the week is spent either on active duty caring for Assisted Pilgrims, or attending the range of masses and services that form the itinerary of the pilgrimage week.

Volunteer helpers on the Westminster pilgrimage are expected to abide by a ‘Volunteer Agreement’ which declares their commitment to the pilgrimage and to the care of Assisted Pilgrims in the Accueil St. Frai. It is worth highlighting the Agreement here to illustrate the expectations placed on caregivers at Lourdes:

As part of the Diocesan Pilgrimage to Lourdes, I will be volunteering to help to provide care to the infirm, sick, and elderly. In order to ensure the safety, wellbeing, and enjoyment of the pilgrims, my team and myself, I agree to adhere to the following:

- That my main priority whilst on the pilgrimage is to support the *malades* who have been entrusted to me with the support and guidance of the team leaders, medical team and/or management team.
- That I will attend all meetings with my team, in order to help build community and friendships and receive notices

- That I will be reliable and punctual at all times
- That I will abide by any agreed curfews
- That any alcohol I may consume during the evenings shall be done moderately, responsibly, and within French laws.

I understand that by taking part in this pilgrimage, I am acting as a representative of Westminster Diocese. Any actions I carry out which may be deemed as inappropriate or disrespectful to the name of the Diocese may result in Diocesan disciplinary procedures and my being sent back home immediately. I understand that I am responsible for any costs incurred through this action.

The Volunteer Agreement, which is included in the timetable and information booklet given to volunteer helpers, underscores the seriousness of the responsibilities they have been charged with for the duration of the pilgrimage. Of particular note is the reference to the consumption of alcohol at the end of one's shift followed by a rather severe warning regarding the consequences of any embarrassment to the pilgrimage that may result from the improper comportment of caregivers. I briefly discuss the issue of evening socializing by helpers in the bars of Lourdes in Chapter Three. The information booklet for helpers also includes a more detailed Code of Conduct, instructions for wheelchair management, and a relatively lengthy section on safeguarding practices, that is, ensuring the safety and wellbeing of Assisted Pilgrims particularly as they relate to matters of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. I was told by pilgrimage organizers that while the pilgrimage has always placed an emphasis on best practices regarding the latter issue, it has become especially salient in the past decade as the archdiocese has attempted to respond to the series of sexual abuse scandals that have significantly undermined public confidence in the Roman Catholic Church, and specifically its

treatment of vulnerable adults and children entrusted to its care. Pilgrimages to Lourdes, a shrine which conforms to an ethos that privileges the vulnerable, are thus especially concerned with safeguarding practices related to vulnerable adults and children.

In addition to the Volunteer Agreement, Code of Conduct, and other instructions contained in the information booklet, caregivers are also provided with a set of Golden Rules which, in addition to *the* Golden Rule that I will explore in more detail shortly as a motivating factor for volunteer caregiving at Lourdes, guide their care work during the pilgrimage week. These Golden Rules are outlined in the following order:

1. Never attempt anything you are not confident and competent to do.
2. Take care of yourself so that you are fit and able to take care of others.
3. Ask for help when you need it and help others when they ask it of you.
4. Lifting is a skill that requires training and experience, always rely on the experts.
5. Do not administer or advise on medicines unless you are qualified to do so.
6. Follow the directions of your team leader.
7. Be on time, especially for pick-ups; it can be stressful sitting in a wheelchair thinking you have been forgotten.

These Golden Rules are highlighted as they indicate not simply the guiding tenets orienting caregivers during the week in their care of Assisted Pilgrims, and their relations with fellow team members and leaders, but they also emphasize the inherently voluntary, non-professional nature of most care work undertaken in Lourdes. Volunteer caregivers (and especially first-time helpers) are not likely to

be trained and competent in performing certain tasks. For example, they typically should not be involved in activities such as lifting and operating mechanical hoists without expert supervision, and they are prohibited from administering medication. Though often limited in their grasp of formal care-related skills, volunteers are nevertheless an essential cog in the pilgrimage machine, ensuring the smooth operation of the pilgrimage week as a whole and that adequate assistance and companionship is provided to Assisted Pilgrims. As I indicate towards the end of this chapter however, these cogs do indeed wear down at times, exposing the more fraught and complex side of the caregiving experience.

#### *Organizing Care: The Catholic Association Pilgrimage*

Many of the basic elements of care work described in relation to the Westminster pilgrimage, such as the manner in which volunteer caregivers assist in bathing, dressing, and toileting, pushing wheelchairs and simply providing general companionship to Assisted Pilgrims, as well as the expectations placed on volunteers, also hold for the Catholic Association (CA) pilgrimage. Yet there are key components of the way in which the Catholic Association organizes and structures the care of Assisted Pilgrims that are worth noting. The 2013 Catholic Association pilgrimage had approximately 130 adults in total who required some level of care or assistance. Like the Westminster pilgrimage, there were around eighty Assisted Pilgrims who chose to stay in a hotel in Lourdes, depending on their

needs and whether they had a relative, friend, or their own caregiver who had come with them from England to assist them during their week in Lourdes. Their primary requirement from volunteer helpers was assistance with pushing their wheelchair to and from pilgrimage events. All other Assisted Pilgrims, who required a more involved level of care not feasible in the hotels, stayed in the Accueil Notre-Dame.

The Notre-Dame, like the Accueil St. Frai, is a residential facility reserved for sick and disabled pilgrims that is not quite a hospital nor a hotel, but rather allows for Assisted Pilgrims to receive full-time care from teams of volunteer helpers. The Accueil Notre-Dame is a massive state-of-the-art facility, built in 1997 along the riverbank of the Gave de Pau, opposite the grotto. Containing 904 beds in rooms that can accommodate one to six pilgrims, it replaced the outdated building it once occupied, now renamed the Accueil Jean-Paul II which includes a first aid post, the Lourdes Medical Bureau, meeting rooms and chapels, and the headquarters of the Hospitalité Notre-Dame de Lourdes. Rooms in the Accueil Notre-Dame are fitted with accessible toilets and showers, are connected to an oxygen supply system, and have alarms at each bed for assistance during the night. Like the St. Frai, it has dining rooms and nurses' stations, as well as storage areas for wheelchairs and other equipment. Pope John Paul II stayed in the Accueil Notre-Dame during his visit to Lourdes in August 2004, to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the promulgation of the Roman Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. This final visit to Lourdes was less than a year prior to his death in April

2005, at a time when he was quite ill himself. In interviews with Assisted Pilgrims many would remark that it was quite meaningful to them that they were staying in the same facility where John Paul II had stayed when he was in Lourdes, and some would even joke that they had been granted the unique privilege of sleeping in the same bed he had used.



Figure 7. *The Accueil Notre-Dame*. Image Credit: Author

In order to provide for the needs of Assisted Pilgrims staying both in the Accueil Notre-Dame and in the hotels throughout Lourdes, the Catholic Association enlists close to 300 volunteer helpers in a wide range of capacities. There are twelve teams of 13-15 helpers each led by a team leader and a deputy, with responsibilities similar to the Westminster teams that were described above. There are also additional teams responsible for the organization of wheelchairs, the dining room

of the Accueil, the kitchen where drinks and snacks are served, the washing of laundry, as well as additional general support teams. One notable difference in the organization of teams between the Westminster and Catholic Association pilgrimages is the CA's use of what are referred to as 'Core Care' teams in the Accueil. Members of the Core Care teams are recognizable by the pins they wear which resemble the roundel of the Royal Air Force, but which have a red heart placed at the centre of the pin. Core Care team members are experienced volunteer helpers who have received specialized training especially in the operation of mechanical hoists. During the Catholic Association pilgrimage, no volunteer helper could attempt to hoist an Assisted Pilgrim without the supervision of a Core Care member. Although they do not receive formal medical training and certainly cannot perform those medical duties reserved for the volunteer doctors and nurses, Core Care volunteers are made available to assist less experienced helpers with more complex tasks and guide them through their care work.

The general daily routine for Catholic Association caregivers during the week is quite similar to the Westminster pilgrimage. One notable exception however is in how the timetable of duties is organized. During the Westminster pilgrimage, volunteer caregivers are in the Accueil St. Frai for the entire week and assigned to a specific Assisted Pilgrim, and the team of Red Caps is responsible for pushing the wheelchairs of pilgrims staying in the hotels. During the Catholic Association pilgrimage however, helpers spend one half of the week on so-called

‘rolling duty’, assisting pilgrims in the hotels with their wheelchairs. During the second half of the week, volunteers are on Accueil duty, providing more involved care to Assisted Pilgrims in the Accueil Notre-Dame. Assessments of volunteer helpers of this break-up of the week were quite mixed, with some happy to have the break from the more intense care work in the Accueil, while others preferred to be based in the Accueil for the entire week, where they felt a greater sense of community and teamwork.

Both pilgrimages also require volunteer helpers to go on night duty from 10:00pm to 6:00am, assisting two professional nurses with whatever issues might arise in the Accueil ward during the night, from helping pilgrims to the bathroom, bringing them a glass of water, or turning them over in order to prevent bed sores. The Catholic Association assigns experienced and committed helpers for night duty a month in advance of the pilgrimage in teams of five helpers per night, with at least one helper being a member of the Core Care team trained in using the mechanical hoist. For the 2013 Catholic Association pilgrimage I was assigned to night duty on the Wednesday of the pilgrimage week, given that I had worked as a volunteer helper the previous year and had apparently left a favourable impression. While the night duty shift was often relatively quiet and uneventful, it was a challenge for those not accustomed to this type of shift work to keep awake and stay alert in the event that a situation did arise.



In their Helpers Handbook which is made available to all volunteer caregivers via a PDF download on the Catholic Association website, the CA provides first-time helpers with information on Lourdes, what it means to be a pilgrim, and instructions on how best to interact with Assisted Pilgrims depending on their needs. The Handbook also explains the range of caregiving duties that volunteers will be responsible for in the Accueil, provides information on appropriate dress, and lists Lourdes vocabulary distinctive to the shrine and town. The Handbook also includes a brief reflection on one of the chief responsibilities of volunteer helpers, to be welcoming to Assisted Pilgrims and other helpers:

**To welcome** is to warmly greet the person you are receiving. It also demonstrates a wish to communicate, to connect, to develop the shared experience of Lourdes.

**To be welcoming, we must:**

1. Overcome our timidity and reticence;
2. Go beyond our fear, our mental blocks; and
3. Leave behind our pride, our preconceived ideas about someone else, and our fear of ridicule.

It is interesting to observe here that even before volunteer caregivers arrive in Lourdes there is a call to transformation, to shed the anxieties of their ‘former selves’ and fully immerse themselves in their care work in the Accueil. I will discuss later the process of transformation that some caregivers identified as having occurred as a result of their care work in Lourdes. Here it is important simply to note that in the Helpers Handbook produced by the Catholic Association, this transformation is portrayed at some level as an expectation, or even a prerequisite

for care work during the pilgrimage. Recognizing the challenges caregiving can pose strictly on a relational level, volunteer helpers are asked to overcome those challenges in order to be more welcoming to those they care for and those with whom they work.

Both the Westminster and Catholic Association pilgrimages have as part of their structural apparatus a *Hospitalité*, the organization responsible for planning and delivering the care of sick and disabled pilgrims during their time in Lourdes. Both organizations are under the umbrella of the *Hospitalité de Notre-Dame de Lourdes*, based at the Sanctuary in Lourdes and tasked with coordinating the various pilgrimages that go to Lourdes as well as planning the shrine's daily events and processions. Volunteers with the *Hospitalité* are distinct from the locally-based employed staff at the shrine, as well as the volunteers that go to Lourdes accompanying an organized diocesan pilgrimage. Instead, these volunteers often travel to Lourdes alone or in small, more informal groups to participate in a *stage* at various times during the pilgrimage season. A *stage* is a period of voluntary service with the shrine's own *Hospitalité* lasting a minimum of seven days and a maximum of fifteen days in duration. These volunteers, referred to as *stagiaires*, welcome Assisted Pilgrims and their helpers to the *Accueils St. Frai and Notre-Dame*, assist at the Tarbes-Lourdes-Pyrénées Airport and the Gare de Lourdes rail station with loading and unloading planes and trains carrying pilgrims, and are perhaps most visible in their work at the baths. *Stagiaires* must be between 18-75

years of age, and only after four years of service to the shrine on a *stage* can volunteers make their “engagement,” their commitment to the Hospitalité. Although many of the volunteer caregivers on the pilgrimages I joined preferred to accompany their diocesan pilgrimages, some also chose to participate in a *stage* at Lourdes outside the diocesan pilgrimage. In fact one helper I met during the Westminster pilgrimage was preparing to return to Lourdes as a *stagiaire* only weeks after our pilgrimage had concluded.

The Catholic Association Hospitalité of Our Lady of Lourdes appeared far more established than that of the Westminster pilgrimage, perhaps given the longevity of the pilgrimage from the early twentieth century on. The website of the Catholic Association outlines both the objects and the obligations of members of the Catholic Association Hospitalité:

## OBJECTS

1. To serve assisted pilgrims going to Lourdes on the CAPT [Catholic Association Pilgrimage Trust] pilgrimage and to help in the smooth running of religious and other activities involving assisted pilgrims on that pilgrimage under the direction of and in collaboration with the pilgrimage directors and heads of service.

This service consists especially of looking after the material needs of the assisted pilgrims although the obligation of a member of the Hospitalité is not limited to material work. Members will be expected to help all pilgrims to benefit fully from the religious and social benefits of a pilgrimage to Lourdes.

All this is to be undertaken in a spirit of friendship, charity and solidarity which are parts of the ministry of the Church and which must complement the work done while away from Lourdes, especially in

their own Diocese and Parishes in co-ordination with other members of the Hospitalité.

2. To strengthen the bonds of Catholic life between its members and to help them maintain their obligations as Christians, their responsibilities in the Church and their devotion to Our Lady.

#### OBLIGATIONS

1. Members will be expected to help all pilgrims to Lourdes especially the sick and handicapped.

2. They are encouraged to assist at Mass (especially on the Feasts of Our Lady), to receive Holy Communion and to recite the Rosary, as often as possible.

3. Members will be expected to uphold in their lives, and to encourage in the lives of others, the objects of the Hospitalité.<sup>50</sup>

There are two levels of membership within the Hospitalité, ‘ordinary’ and ‘full.’ As the CA website stresses, these distinct levels of membership are in place “not to encourage a hierarchy within the organization, but to allow experienced helpers to make a deeper commitment to serving pilgrims in Lourdes.”<sup>51</sup> The requirements for membership in the Hospitalité stipulate that any helper on the Catholic Association pilgrimage may apply for membership at the ‘ordinary’ level after their first pilgrimage. They may then apply for membership at the ‘full’ level after working as a volunteer helper on the pilgrimage for a further two years. Members of the Hospitalité are formally admitted to the organization during the Gathering Mass

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<sup>50</sup> “Objects and Obligations of the Catholic Association Hospitalité,” Catholic Association, <http://www.catholicassociation.co.uk/hospitalite/constitution.shtml>.

<sup>51</sup> “Hospitalité Membership,” Catholic Association, <http://www.catholicassociation.co.uk/hospitalite/membership.shtml>.

which opens the pilgrimage, held at the Church of St. Bernadette directly opposite the grotto. New members are invited up to the altar and presented with white and yellow pins bearing the insignia of the Catholic Association by the Bishop leading the pilgrimage and the President of the Hospitalité, and are then welcomed by their Head of Service (the Chief Brancardier, Chief Handmaid, Chief Medical Officer, Chief Nurse) as well as the Hospitalité Chaplain. Members wear their pins throughout the pilgrimage as a visible sign of their membership in the Hospitalité as well as their general long-term commitment to serve the sick and disabled at Lourdes.

*“Let Me Work with You”*

The objectives and obligations of members of the Catholic Association Hospitalité outlined in its constitution draw a direct line between members’ work as caregivers at Lourdes and what they believe to be the larger mission of the Church to serve the needy, stressing that “all this is to be undertaken in a spirit of friendship, charity and solidarity which are parts of the ministry of the Church.” Yet this connection between care work and a faith imperative, that is understood to deeply inform and imbue this work with meaning, is not only articulated in the official documents that govern the pilgrimages, but is constantly reinforced throughout the pilgrimage during large masses and processions as well as quiet, more informal services. The Catholic Association pilgrimage, in an effort to clearly

root the work of caregivers at Lourdes as an act of religious faith, also includes a Blessing of the Helpers' Hands ceremony as part of the aforementioned Gathering Mass which opens the annual pilgrimage. All volunteer caregivers in their blue polo shirts and dresses with white trim are invited to the front of the Church to have their hands ritually anointed with oil, to bless the care work they will undertake and spiritually enliven them for the challenges of the week ahead. During this ceremony, the hymn entitled "The Servant Song" is sung by the choir. It is worth citing the hymn in its entirety:

Brother, sister, let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you?  
Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.

We are pilgrims on a journey, we are travellers on the road;  
we are here to help each other, walk the mile and share the load.

I will hold the Christ-light for you, in the night-time of your fear;  
I will hold my hand out to you, speak the peace you long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping; when you laugh I'll laugh with you.  
I will share your joy and sorrow 'til we've seen this journey through.

When we sing to God in heaven, we shall find such harmony.  
Born of all we've known together of Christ's love and agony.

This hymn in particular becomes a sort of anthem for volunteer caregivers at Lourdes, sung not only during this particular anointing service, but also at the service for young helpers on the shore of the Lac de Lourdes just outside the town, as well as during night prayers and other services.



Figure 8. *Blessing of the Helpers' Hands Service, Church of St. Bernadette, August 24, 2013. Image Credit: Author.*

This ritual blessing is also accompanied by an Act of Consecration recited by the helpers, which reads in part: “Holy Mary Mother of God, Virgin Immaculate, you appeared eighteen times to Bernadette at the grotto in Lourdes, to remind Christians of what the truths in the Gospel require of them...To answer your call more fully, I consecrate myself through you, to your Son, Jesus. Make me willing to accept what He said. By the fervour of my faith, by the conduct of my life in all its aspects, by my devotion to the sick, let me work with you in the comforting of those who suffer, here in Lourdes and at home...” Both the act of consecration and the hymn, as discursive practices by pilgrimage organizers rooting volunteer caregiving at Lourdes within the sphere of religious faith, and specifically for our purposes here, the Christian love command and its emphasis on love of neighbour,

serve as a helpful lens for exploring the motivations of caregivers and the perspective from which they interpret their care work. In the act of consecration, emphasis is placed on caregiving as a calling, as a vocation, as something deeply imbued with religious meaning far beyond the apparent simplicity of menial tasks such as pushing a wheelchair or helping someone dress in the morning. It is understood as a sacred act. Perhaps most interesting is the request to Mary in the consecration to “...let me work with you in the comforting of those who suffer.” Here caregivers are framed as participants, as co-caregivers with the Virgin in their volunteer care work in the spiritual task of ameliorating the suffering of sick and disabled pilgrims. This perspective extends into “The Servant Song” hymn, with its clear gloss of service as “being Christ to one another,” and the explicit use of pilgrimage as metaphor for describing one’s journey through life with all its joys and hardships. Lourdes is therefore understood as an ideal site where this metaphor crosses into reality in the lived experience of pilgrim caregivers.

### *Religion, Volunteerism, and the Question of Motive*

I highlight the Blessing of the Helpers’ Hands service, the “Servant Song” hymn, and the Act of Consecration to indicate the degree to which the rhetoric surrounding volunteer caregiving at Lourdes as an ethical imperative rooted in religious faith is continually reinforced throughout the pilgrimage week. Significantly, however, much of the academic literature on religion and



volunteerism is widely inconsistent on a host of questions. These include whether religious faith is a significant motivating factor in the decision to volunteer, whether people who self-identify as religious are more likely to volunteer than those who are non-religious, if religious congregations are ideal incubators for pro-social behaviour given their maintenance of highly valued social networks, and whether there may even be a difference between rates of participation among various religious denominations.

Arguably one of the most influential scholars studying the link between religious faith and volunteerism is Robert Wuthnow. In his 1991 text *Acts of Compassion*, Wuthnow discusses at length the issue of ‘talking about motives’, how we might come to ascertain those factors which inform one’s decision to volunteer their services to soup kitchens, food banks, health-based charities, schools, and other public non-profit organizations. His conceptualization of motives for volunteering will aid in framing my own discussion of the motives underpinning the decision by pilgrims to engage in volunteer caregiving at Lourdes:

It is both necessary in our culture to acknowledge that motives are as complex as ourselves and valuable to deny that all motives are equally appropriate. Any number of motives for caring may be conceived, but only some are credited with importance in an account that emphasizes situational specifics... The accounts of our motives, when all is said, are basically stories – highly personalized stories, not assertions of high-flown values, but formulaic expressions of ourselves.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *Acts of Compassion: Caring for Others and Helping Ourselves* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 84.

When defining volunteerism, three criteria are generally accepted as inherent to volunteer work: it is not undertaken for financial gain; it is undertaken of one's own free will; it brings benefits to a third party as well as to those who volunteer.<sup>53</sup> Yet as Marc A. Musick and John Wilson note in their exhaustive study *Volunteers*, beyond these criteria volunteer work at its essence is perceived as hinging on motivation, or the concept that it is not simply 'unpaid labour' but unpaid labour that is appropriately motivated.<sup>54</sup> Musick and Wilson outline six different motivations which have emerged from the Volunteer Functions Inventory as consistently associated with volunteer work: values, enhancement, social, career, protective, and understanding. Motivations underpinned by *values* allow volunteers to remain true to an ideal conception of themselves, and can also mean that the volunteer act itself is a sort of values statement. Values are understood to be deeply rooted dispositions guiding people to act and behave in a certain way.<sup>55</sup> *Enhancement* as a volunteer motivation refers to the idea that volunteering offers learning experiences about different people, places, skills, or oneself. The *social* motivation is identified as an essential reason for volunteering, as it facilitates the ability to meet like-minded people and become actively engaged in the wider community. *Career* motivations seek to obtain career-related benefits such as work

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<sup>53</sup> Alan Dingle, *Measuring Volunteering: A Practical Toolkit* (Washington, D.C.: Independent Sector, 2001), 11.

<sup>54</sup> Marc A. Musick and John Wilson, *Volunteers: A Social Profile* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 16.

<sup>55</sup> Loek Halman and Ruud de Moor, "Comparative Research on Values," in *The Individualizing Society: Value Change in Europe and North America*, ed. Peter Ester, Loek Halman, and Ruud de Moor (Tilburg, Netherlands: Tilburg University Press, 1993).

skills or business contacts, and *protective* motivations refer to volunteer opportunities as enabling people to deal with inner conflicts, feelings of incompetence, uncertainties about social identity, etc. The final motivating factor, *understanding*, refers to volunteerism as a means of personal growth and ego-enhancement.<sup>56</sup>

Musick and Wilson then extend their discussion of volunteer motives beyond these six broad categories and explore more particularized motivations, one of the foremost examples being religion. They observe that “religious beliefs are often treated as a component of the values motivation, which is one reason for thinking that religious people attach more importance to the values motivation. But the main reason why this motivation would be rated as important is that churches preach the virtue of compassion.”<sup>57</sup> While the intent of this chapter is to highlight religious faith and its concomitant values of service and compassion captured in the Christian love command as explicitly underpinning the motivations for volunteer caregivers, I will also highlight other motivations which coincide with a strictly faith motivation, such as enhancement, social outreach, and understanding. As I will show by drawing on the testimonies of volunteer caregivers however, these other motivating factors are still often understood within the framework of a religious ethical imperative and not as entirely distinct from it.

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<sup>56</sup> Musick and Wilson, *Volunteers*, 57-63.

<sup>57</sup> Musick and Wilson, *Volunteers*, 77.

Returning to some of the questions referred to earlier, there is a notable lack of consensus on the issue of whether or to what degree religious values and institutions influence one's decision to volunteer. Wuthnow reports that in a survey he conducted on volunteering, participants were asked to respond to a number of possible reasons for trying to be a person who is kind and caring. 57% agreed with the statement "My religious beliefs teach me to be kind and caring," citing these beliefs as a major reason for them to volunteer, with another 26% citing religious beliefs as a minor reason and 14% not considering religious beliefs to be a factor for them at all.<sup>58</sup> Wuthnow also notes that among teenagers in the United States there is evidence that those who are active in religious congregations are more likely to participate in and value volunteering than peers who are not church members.<sup>59</sup> In later work Wuthnow returns to the question of how we are to determine motives for volunteering, this time specifically as these motives pertain to religious beliefs and the role of faith-based organizations. He argues that "religious organizations do not simply serve as a staging ground from which to mobilize volunteers. Religion is also a source of values, including...values about caring for the needy. These values are part of all the major religious traditions and are regularly communicated through sermons, classes, small-group discussions...At the core of these efforts is the idea that values provide potential volunteers with motives to become actively

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<sup>58</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *Acts of Compassion*, 51.

<sup>59</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *Learning to Care: Elementary Kindness in an Age of Indifference* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 87.

involved in helping the needy.”<sup>60</sup> Wuthnow then proceeds to caution the reader, as he did in his previous work, that motivation is no simple matter, and even apparently straightforward religious motivations for volunteering may still be bound up in a series of entanglements. Motivation is “not so much a predisposing attribute of an individual’s personality or value system, as it was once regarded, but a more dynamic constellation of scripts, narratives, and cultural tools that a person uses to make sense of his or her behavior.”<sup>61</sup> Religion may play an important role in shaping people’s self-narratives about volunteering, argues Wuthnow, however the line between religion and volunteering is not always straight and is in fact often complicated by a number of factors that together inform one’s own understanding of their volunteer behaviour.

Although Wuthnow advances the position that religious organizations do not simply serve as a staging ground for volunteer care work but also supply the values that underpin it, much of the recent scholarship over the past two decades consists of functionalist, quantitative studies concerned with testing out these links between participation in religious congregations and volunteer activity. This is the focus of Ram A. Cnaan et al.’s research on religious congregations and volunteerism. Here they suggest that links between religious motivation and volunteer activity in public

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<sup>60</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *Saving America? Faith-based Services and the Future of Civil Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 121.

<sup>61</sup> Wuthnow, *Saving America?* 129.

human services appear to be tenuous at best.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, exploration of the link between involvement in religious congregations and volunteer activity is followed by Penny Edgell Becker and Pawan Dhingra in their research on volunteers in upstate New York. They found support for the idea that much of the ‘church effect’ on volunteer participation rates comes down to social networks, and that a higher degree of self-proclaimed religiosity does not predict volunteering. While religious beliefs gave people a rationale for volunteer service, they do not reliably predict volunteering, even for the most religiously involved.<sup>63</sup>

In their survey research on the link between religion and volunteering, John Wilson and Thomas Janoski point to several predictions that can be made about the influence of religion on volunteering. These include the contention that people raised by religious parents will be more likely to volunteer than those raised by non-religious parents, members of denominations that emphasize ‘this-worldly’ concerns will be more likely to volunteer than those denominations concerned with ‘other-worldly’ matters, and that the more church members are active in their congregations, the more likely they are to volunteer.<sup>64</sup> Yet Wilson and Janoski conclude their study by stating that these predictions are not all fully borne out and that, following Wuthnow, the relation between religion and volunteering is much

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<sup>62</sup> Ram A. Cnaan, Amy Kasternakis, and Robert J. Wineburg, “Religious People, Religious Congregations, and Volunteerism in Human Services,” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 22 (1993): 46.

<sup>63</sup> Penny Edgell Becker and Pawan H. Dhingra, “Religious Involvement and Volunteering: Implications for Civil Society,” *Sociology of Religion* 62 (2001): 332.

<sup>64</sup> John Wilson and Thomas Janoski, “The Contribution of Religion to Volunteer Work,” *Sociology of Religion* 56 (1995): 139.

more complex than previously believed. It is not always true that those raised in religious households are more likely to volunteer than those who were raised in a non-religious environment, and there is evidence that even very frequent church attenders are as unlikely to volunteer as those who never attend religious services.<sup>65</sup>

However more recent studies have detected a less ambiguous, direct link between religious belief and practice and volunteer work that may be attributed not only to congregational membership but specifically to religious denomination. In their research on rates of volunteer activity among Mormons in Utah, Van Evans et al. found that the average active Mormon volunteer provides 37 hours of volunteer service per month, as opposed to the four hours a month of the average American volunteer. After omitting those serving as missionaries the rate of volunteering among Mormons is reduced to 28 hours per month, still far above the national average. Van Evans et al. do note however that more than half of these volunteer hours were devoted to work within the church.<sup>66</sup> And in their study of the links between religious affiliation, attendance at religious services, and participating in volunteer activities, Chao Guo et al. contend that religious affiliation and attendance influence not only the participation rates of volunteer involvement but also the *types* of activities these volunteers engage in, dependent on the inflection of their

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<sup>65</sup> Wilson and Janoski, "Contribution of Religion," 148-149.

<sup>66</sup> Van Evans, Ram A. Cnaan, and Daniel W. Curtis, "Volunteering Among Latter-Day Saints," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52 (2013): 838.

religious values.<sup>67</sup> I draw out these brief samples from the literature on religion and volunteering in order to point to the range of perspectives on the connection between the two variables. While some researchers advance the position that religious values are inherent in the decision to volunteer by many engaged in such work, others claim that there is little concrete connection between the two. Still another body of research points to the difficulty of pin-pointing the motives of volunteer work, motives that can be complex, multiple, and highly individualized.<sup>68</sup>

Yet regardless of where these studies fall on the question of religious motivation and volunteering, their specific approach to the issue has been subject to criticism. The sociologist Christopher Einolf observes, as I have, that the scholarship on links between religiosity and volunteering is dominated by survey research, which seeks statistical correlations between quantitative measures of religiosity and measures of volunteering and charitable giving. He argues that with the exception of Wuthnow, sociologists of religion have tended to give little attention to the role of language and narrative and have oversimplified the analysis

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<sup>67</sup> Chao Guo, Natalie J. Webb, Rikki Abzug, and Laura R. Peck, “Religious Affiliation, Religious Attendance, and Participation in Social Change Organizations,” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 42 (2013): 51.

<sup>68</sup> For additional recent research on religious congregations and volunteerism see Kevin F. Forbes and Ernest M. Zampelli, “Volunteerism: The Influences of Social, Religious, and Human Capital,” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 43 (2014), Ipek Gocmen, “The Role of Faith-Based Organizations in Social Welfare Organizations,” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 42 (2013), Andrea Muehlebach, *The Moral Neoliberal: Welfare and Citizenship in Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), Monica Hwang, Edward Grabb, and James Curtis, “Why Get Involved? Reasons for Voluntary-Association Activity Among Americans and Canadians,” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 34 (2005), and Pui-Yan Lam, “As the Flocks Gather: How Religion Affects Voluntary Association Participation,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41 (2002).



of the association between religion and volunteering. This association is broken down into a “quantification of social networks” argues Einholf, which only serves to neglect the role of ideas, values, and identity. To rectify what he sees as the thin description of quantitative measures of religious involvement and volunteer activity, he calls for researchers to shift their gaze toward the language and narratives articulated by volunteers and the possibilities this approach presents:

A focus on language allows us to understand how people acquire ideas about helping others from religious texts, sermons, and conversations, internalize these ideas and make them their own, express them through helping behaviours, and explain their behaviours to others through narrative accounts. This presents a much richer and complex understanding of religious groups, ideas, and behaviour than one that focuses exclusively on quantitative measures of subjective religiosity and religious attendance.<sup>69</sup>

Einholf points to his own research as evidence of the different outcomes produced by his more qualitative, narrative-based approach to the question of religion and its association with volunteering. While quantitative studies such as some cited here found that subjective religiosity was not as strong a predictor as religious attendance, Einholf argues that his own research suggests that these earlier findings may be the result of inadequate measures, such as only asking questions about religious attendance and failing to ask respondents whether they consider helping others to be a central teaching of their religion, or whether religion is central to their identity. Delving into these deeper questions, suggests Einholf, allows researchers

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<sup>69</sup> Christopher Einholf, “The Link Between Religion and Helping Others: The Role of Values, Ideas, and Language,” *Sociology of Religion* 72 (2011): 439.

to examine how “language connects the public discourse of religion with individuals’ internal values, feelings, and ideas, and helps them explain how these internal states influence their behaviour.”<sup>70</sup> Following Einhorn and his emphasis on the public discourse of religion found in religious texts, sermons, and hymns, I have shown how elements of pilgrimages to Lourdes such as the Act of Consecration and the “Servant Song” hymn serve as discursive practices rooting volunteer caregiving as an act of religious faith. Now I turn to the language and life stories employed by volunteer caregivers in describing their desire to undertake care work at Lourdes. On the basis of these materials, I argue that care work at Lourdes is overwhelmingly and explicitly informed by a faith motive.

*“Doing What Jesus Asked of Us”*

On the first morning of the Catholic Association pilgrimage, I had to walk briskly through the still dark streets of Lourdes from my hotel to the Accueil Notre-Dame, fifteen minutes away on the opposite side of the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes. My only company at this early hour were street cleaners collecting garbage and clearing up debris from the previous night’s parties, as well as two elderly women softly speaking to one another in Italian, presumably on their way to the grotto or to queue up for the baths, which do not open until 9:00am but which quickly reach capacity. I made my way up to the fourth floor of the Accueil,

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<sup>70</sup> Einhorn, “Religion and Helping Others,” 453.

dedicated to St. Francis, just in time for the start of our 7:00 am shift. All of the helpers gathered in the foyer near the nurses' station for an opening prayer led by Fr. Graham, the chaplain whose role it was to ensure the spiritual needs of caregivers were met during the pilgrimage. Once the prayer had concluded with "Our Lady of Lourdes pray for us, St. Bernadette, pray for us," we moved in groups of two or three to the rooms of the assisted pilgrims we were tasked with gently waking up, assisting to the toilet, as well as helping with washing and dressing and in some cases feeding. During this first morning I met Paul, a twenty-two year old who had just completed his studies at the University of Southampton. For Paul, as for me, this was the first experience with this level of caregiving. While overwhelmed initially by the tasks he was asked to carry out, Paul viewed his experience as one which enabled him to follow the example of Christ:

In Lourdes there are plenty of people to help and work to do, and I feel like all this is almost taken straight from the Bible. For example, you know when Jesus said 'give water to those who are thirsty, clothe those who are naked,' and here we are helping in the dining room, feeding people, and taking them to the baths and the taps, where they can wash in the spring water and drink it, so I feel like, you know, that there's no greyness about it. It's pretty black and white that you're doing the right thing; that you're doing what Jesus asked of us. So I feel that it's an extension of my faith, that this is an opportunity to do what we should be doing every day. And that's the nice thing about coming to Lourdes, you get to be who you...*should* be, you know what I mean? Everyone here is called to do something different, in our normal environments anyway, but it's nice that we all work together here with the assisted pilgrims and live the Gospels, quite literally.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Interview, August 28, 2012.

When Paul mentions Jesus' call to 'give water to those who are thirsty, clothe those who are naked,' he is referring to the story of the sheep and the goats from the Gospel of Matthew,<sup>72</sup> where Christ privileges those who serve and care for the neediest among them, telling them "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."<sup>73</sup> This passage from the Gospels was cited by several helpers at Lourdes, in explaining the impetus for their care work during the pilgrimage. Rose, a nurse at St. Mary's Hospital in London, also cited this passage from Matthew, as informing her calling both as a professional nurse and as a volunteer at Lourdes:

It helps me spiritually that I go to Lourdes and volunteer, in my simple way. It's quite rewarding actually, you just make use of who you are in service to God and to the less fortunate. I probably give more of myself to others in Lourdes than I normally would. Jesus said 'whatever you do to the least of my brothers, you do it to me.' I feel that the Lord is calling me, and that's why I go. Actually it's God's providence. It's a conviction I have, that this is all part of God's plan, that I was meant to help others at Lourdes.<sup>74</sup>

In addition to this particular passage from the Gospel of Matthew, some helpers would also cite the parable of the Good Samaritan from the Gospel of Luke as informing their care work at Lourdes. This parable is preceded by one of the several articulations of the Christian love command in the Gospels, where Christ, in response to the question of what must be done to inherit eternal life, responds: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all

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<sup>72</sup> Matthew 25: 31-46.

<sup>73</sup> Matthew 25: 40. New International Version.

<sup>74</sup> Interview, August 11, 2013.

your strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>75</sup> When a further question is posed regarding who we should consider as our neighbour, Christ responds with the parable of the Good Samaritan. Perhaps this parable is best described by Alyssa, a helper with the Westminster pilgrimage as she relates it to her care work in the Accueil St. Frai:

When I come here I’m always reminded of the story of the Good Samaritan from the Bible. It was absolutely drilled into us at school and at church. I’m sure you know it. Jesus tells how there is this man who was left beaten and nearly naked on the side of the road, and how a priest and another man just passed by, taking no notice whatsoever. Then the Samaritan comes along, bandages up his wounds, and cares for him. And at the end Jesus says, ‘Go and do the same thing.’ You know, I think too many times I’m the first two. I sometimes try to avoid people on the street back home, you know, not making eye contact, walking past quickly. I even do that here sometimes I’m sorry to say, with the beggars on the bridge. But at least when I’m here working with the *malades*, it’s different. I like helping them. It’s tough going, but I really like it. And at least for the week I’m trying to be the Samaritan I guess, coming here and doing the same thing as Jesus said to do. But it’s hard to do that all the time.<sup>76</sup>

Beyond Alyssa’s remarkable identification with the Good Samaritan from the Gospel of Luke and her affirmation of care work with Assisted Pilgrims as a faith imperative to follow Jesus’ call to love one’s neighbour, what is perhaps most interesting here is the idea that this call is not necessarily something that animates Alyssa’s relations with others in her daily life back home in the UK. Alyssa is surprisingly honest in her assessment of her interactions with those less fortunate, whom she associates with the man bleeding and broken on the side of the road in

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<sup>75</sup> Luke 10: 27. NIV.

<sup>76</sup> Interview, July 25, 2013.

the parable. She is clear that she sometimes avoids people that make her uncomfortable, that she does not always live up to the Christian love command as she understands it. What seems to be underscored in Alyssa's comments, though it is perhaps not articulated explicitly, is that Lourdes, with its central organizing principle of care for the sick and disabled which suffuses the shrine with meaning, becomes an acceptable, safe, supportive environment where she may transcend her limitations, her reluctance to engage with those outside her social circle, and follow Christ's Gospel call to neighbourly love fully, if only temporarily.

To be fair to Alyssa, she was not alone in this respect. When I would ask volunteer caregivers whether they regularly participated in volunteer activities back home, I was admittedly surprised by the number of caregivers who responded in the negative. While some certainly did report helping especially with parish or diocesan-based activities such as soup kitchens, shelters, food banks, clothing drives, extra-curricular activities at the local school and the like, many others reserved their engagement in volunteer activities to their week in Lourdes. It should be noted that for some however, particularly the pilgrimage organizers charged with coordinating the care of the Assisted Pilgrims and drawing up the team schedules and responsibilities, the amount of time devoted to the pilgrimage in the months leading up to the week in Lourdes can be quite demanding. Given other time constraints this category of caregivers simply did not have time for other forms of volunteer work at home.

Whether or not helpers were active in volunteer work in their daily lives back home, nearly all that I spoke to, veteran helpers in particular, expressed the conviction that they simply could not go to Lourdes without serving in some way, be it as a helper in the Accueil involved in more intimate forms of caregiving, pushing wheelchairs through the streets of Lourdes, helping to serve meals, or simply sitting down and ‘having a laugh’ with Assisted Pilgrims. Their caregiving duties were absolutely integral to their identity as Lourdes pilgrims. It was their whole reason for being there. Cherie, an older helper who was on the Light Duty Team with the Westminster pilgrimage explained why she is still active as a helper at Lourdes:

You get a lot more out of the whole experience by doing service. I wouldn’t want to come as a tourist, or even as a hotel pilgrim you know, just staying in the hotel and going to and from all the different services you know? I have to help. I can’t do much now, but I do what I can. I’m more limited now, I’m almost twenty years older than when I first came and started helping, and I have some back problems and can no longer help with things like lifting or moving the *malades*. But I can serve tea, I can help wash up, and I can just talk to them. I felt a bit useless at first when I made the move to lighter jobs, but this way I can still take some active part. Lourdes is all about service, and it’s about loving your neighbour. You see little moments of love every day that you’re here. And I can’t imagine coming and not helping. What would be the point?<sup>77</sup>

Although Cherie was careful to stress later in our conversation that she did not judge those that came to Lourdes as “regular pilgrims” and not as pilgrim-caregivers, for her personally at least, going to Lourdes without being active in some helping

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<sup>77</sup> Interview, July 23, 2013.

capacity would be a waste of effort and expense. As she notes, for her Lourdes is all about service, and love, and her reason for going to Lourdes is to enact this ethic of loving service in her care work.

Similar sentiments were echoed by other helpers as well, including Danielle, a member of the Core Care Team for the Catholic Association pilgrimage who also provided sign language interpretation for hearing impaired pilgrims during masses and other pilgrimage events:

I've always come as a helper with the CA pilgrimages. When I come with work it's a little bit different because that's part of my job, but you're still very much in a care role. Not care like we're doing here in the Accueil, like personal care, it's more akin to like the hotel rolling side of care. A lot of the people are in wheelchairs, as well as being profoundly deaf. And so obviously I'm helping with communication for them.

I wouldn't want to come not as a helper. I've always been as a helper. And I think once you get it into your blood you just come back and come back and come back. And I've made a lot of good friends here. And every time that I come to Lourdes, on the last day I go to the Crowned Virgin statue in the square and just say 'Ok, if you want me to come back next year and help, bring me back again.' I never say 'Yes! I'm definitely coming back,' but it's always been 'Into your hands Mary. If you want me back, if I can be of service here, then bring me back.'<sup>78</sup>

Like Rose, Danielle feels an acute sense of being called, of being moved by a force beyond herself to volunteer as a caregiver at Lourdes. Regarding the question of motivation for volunteer work, here Danielle perceives the matter as largely beyond her control. If she is to come back and help, Mary will call her and make it happen. Danielle also refers to the addictive nature of pilgrimage generally and helping

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<sup>78</sup> Interview, August 29, 2013.



specifically, that comes with the friendships that are forged and the meaning that is derived from care work. This addictive quality of pilgrimage is explored in more detail in Chapter Four.

Central to the conviction that one *must* go to Lourdes as a helper is the sense that it is an active living out of one's faith, that it is incumbent on helpers to put their faith into practice. This perspective has certainly been underlined in some of the testimonies cited so far. Yet not all helpers are involved in formal church-based religious activities. Josh, an organizer with the Westminster diocese who, though raised Catholic, does not regularly attend mass and does not consider himself to be particularly religious, nonetheless stresses his care work at Lourdes as an ideal opportunity to translate the Christian love command, which he fully subscribes to, from the pages of Scripture into praxis:

I've always been as a helper, and personally I think I would find it quite difficult just to be a normal pilgrim and not come as a helper. I feel the need for purpose in Lourdes, and what I have with the faith that I do have wouldn't be enough for me to find Lourdes enriching, without having a job to do and without having a purpose. I've been to Medjugorje as a pilgrim, and I found that enormously unsatisfying. Even when my rosary turned gold I didn't feel very moved by that, and not long afterwards I gave it away to somebody who I felt would get a lot more out of it than I would. But Lourdes is different. It has a million little miracles that you see every day, and there are stories of the times that I made a small difference for someone that I can't even tell you because they just move me so intensely.

Compared to many people here I'm not a terribly religious person. I was brought up Catholic and I accompany my parents to mass when I visit them, but I don't have a church where I go to regularly at home. It doesn't really play a huge role in my life. But what I do know is that in a place like Lourdes you find good people. Kind, altruistic people, that you never really find anywhere else, unless it's crazy over-the-top

people who are kind of aggressive givers, like social workers and some charity workers. They're wonderful, but you know, it's a bit forced, and it's their job. Here it's the almost casual, quiet love that everybody has for everyone around them, that I think is wonderful. In a way I think it would almost work without the religion, but then we'd have nothing to motivate and no excuse for being here. And even though I'm not all that religious, it's that side of it, the natural experiences of Christian love that Lourdes can offer, that makes me come back to help.<sup>79</sup>

To this point I have highlighted the Christian love command, the example of the Good Samaritan, and a general sense of calling or faith motivation that inspire pilgrims to work as volunteer caregivers at Lourdes. As Josh notes himself, most helpers are quite devout in their faith, and cite it explicitly as a prime animating factor in how they perceive their care work. Yet Josh is an exception to this rule. He does not go to help in Lourdes out of a clear sense of calling or duty. His experience of the Catholic faith is not necessarily one of deeply held beliefs in what might appear to be abstract dogmas, or rituals which have little resonance for him. Rather, it is the simple act of caring, of helping where he can, that gives Josh a sense of purpose. His experience of religious faith is, from his telling, almost exclusively bound up in his care work. While his helping work is not underpinned by a clear faith motive *per se*, at the same time his understanding of the Christian ethical imperative is less theological than it is inherently tangible and grounded in praxis. It is purpose driven, it is acted upon, it is not pronounced from the pulpit but accomplished. Josh very clearly distinguishes between the 'aggressive givers' back home and the casual, almost easy love that he witnesses in Lourdes as well as

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<sup>79</sup> Interview, July 26, 2013.

highlighting the unsatisfactory nature of his visit to Medjugorje. For Josh, pilgrimage to Lourdes serves as an ideal access point for tapping into the religious values of love and compassion for one's neighbour which he holds, but which are in some sense divorced from the dogmas and rituals of the Catholic faith.

*"I Wasn't Helping, But Being Helped"*

In addition to the faith imperative as a motivation for serving as a caregiver at Lourdes, many helpers also referred to the reciprocal nature of their relationship with the Assisted Pilgrims assigned to their care. Indeed, Lourdes has been described as having at its heart an "economy of caring exchange."<sup>80</sup> During formal interviews I would ask volunteer caregivers whether or in what way they found their work in the Accueil with sick and disabled pilgrims rewarding. Some resisted my framing of their work as potentially rewarding, attempting to make it clear to me that they did not choose to work in Lourdes for themselves, with some form of benefit in mind. They wanted to emphasize the selfless nature of the act, or would refer to more general benefits such as the sense of community and fellowship established in the Accueil, preferring to extend these rewards to the pilgrimage as a whole, rather than as a direct individual benefit drawn from interaction with the Assisted Pilgrims. Yet several helpers did perceive their work as not only

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<sup>80</sup> Sarah Goldingay, Paul Dieppe, and Miguel Farias, "'And the Pain Just Disappeared into Insignificance:' The Healing Response in Lourdes - Performance, Psychology, and Caring," *International Review of Psychiatry* 26 (2014): 316.

gratifying, but deeply meaningful in the exchange that occurs between those providing care and those receiving it. As Joanna, a helper with Westminster told me: “To serve others is a privilege. I get far more from the people I serve than I give. I truly believe that. I learn so much from them: their patience, their understanding, their sense of humour. It’s wonderful. And the Assisted Pilgrims are suffering, physically, and some others it’s more emotional or mental I guess. But they’re still smiling and still saying ‘Can I help you?’ when they should be the ones asking for help, and everybody just helps everybody else. Even though we’re the ones in the uniforms, we’re all helpers.”<sup>81</sup> Here the boundaries of caring and helping are extended, understood not as a unidirectional process with the formal volunteer helper in uniform lifting, bathing, and dressing, as opposed to the Assisted Pilgrim passively receiving care with little to offer as thanks. Rather the process is understood as a bi-directional and active one involving engagement and reciprocity, with the care recipient often serving as a moral exemplar through their patience, positive attitude, and sheer force of will in the face of adversity. As Ann Burack-Weiss observes, this reciprocity and learning process is inherent to the act of caregiving.<sup>82</sup> These sentiments were echoed by several other volunteer caregivers including Dana, a helper in her early thirties with the CA pilgrimage who described her first day in the Accueil Notre-Dame:

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<sup>81</sup> Interview, July 24, 2013.

<sup>82</sup> Ann Burack-Weiss, *The Caregiver's Tale: Loss and Renewal in Memoirs of Family Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 46.

The first day I was based in the Accueil and I was with an older lady who had quite a lot of disability, and needed help washing and dressing, getting to the table for breakfast, getting her to some of the services. But then her daughter came and she was fine and then I helped with somebody else for two services pushing more than anything, in the wheelchair. And there's been a lot of listening and support. People come here with an awful lot of burdens and distress and I think just to sit and listen without feeling you need to fill in the gaps is important. Just as Jesus and Mary quietly accompany us throughout our life, it's important to just sit and be with someone. You don't need to say anything. You just need to be present. So that's been both a challenge and a gift this week. I think at the beginning of the week I could see that I would be offering a service of some sort, and be more in touch with a sense of service within myself, but I've received far more than I've given.<sup>83</sup>

The phrase "I wasn't helping, but being helped," or variations of it as shown in these interview extracts, became a sort of mantra for volunteer helpers during both the Westminster and Catholic Association pilgrimages. Many helpers, like Dana, were surprised at how reciprocal this helping relationship was, recognizing their own limitations and mental blocks and learning to overcome them through the example of those assigned to their care. Dana observes that many people, Assisted Pilgrims as well as helpers and other pilgrims, arrive in Lourdes with burdens and distress that go far beyond strictly physical ailments. Their care needs require more than pushing, bathing, and dressing, but also companionship and solidarity. As Catrien Notermans observes in her ethnographic studies of elderly Dutch pilgrims to Lourdes, the impetus of their travel to the shrine is not the hope that the Virgin Mary may intercede on their behalf for a miraculous physical cure, but rather to

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<sup>83</sup> Interview, August 29, 2012.

communicate and attempt to resolve the pain of being ignored and disrespected in society, and of private family traumas.<sup>84</sup> Following this line of reasoning, Dana recognizes the need to be in solidarity with those who also suffer in ways that are not overtly physical, by simply being with them whether or not words are exchanged. Moreover, Dana links this form of accompaniment with the notion that Jesus and Mary quietly accompany us through our struggles.

Reading Joanna and Dana's responses to the question of rewards derived from care work together, one idea is reinforced: their volunteer work is understood as a form of Christian service. While volunteer caregivers would use terms such as helping, assisting, and serving interchangeably, both Joanna and Dana stress this notion of service as a way of explaining their activities at Lourdes. Indeed, much of the literature on Christian voluntarism, caregiving, and nursing from a confessional perspective highlights service as the appropriate lens through which to understand these acts of helping one's neighbour.<sup>85</sup> Perhaps most useful in explicating the distinction that might be implied in privileging a language of service over that of helping or assisting is the work of Jacqueline Butcher, who helpfully delineates

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<sup>84</sup> Catrien Notermans, "Loss and Healing: A Marian Pilgrimage in Secular Dutch Society," *Ethnology* 46 (2007). See also Catrien Notermans, "Connecting the Living and the Dead: Remembering the Family through Marian Devotion," in *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World*, ed. Anna-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009).

<sup>85</sup> See Mary Elizabeth O'Brien, *Servant Leadership in Nursing: Spirituality and Practice in Contemporary Health Care* (Sudbury, MA: Jones & Bartlett, 2011), Mary Elizabeth O'Brien, *Spirituality in Nursing: Standing on Holy Ground* (Sudbury, MA: Jones & Bartlett, 2008), Kenneth C. Haugk and William J. McKay, *Christian Caregiving: A Way of Life* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), and Jerry K. Robbins, *Carevision: The Why and How of Christian Caregiving* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1993).

between the two, particularly as they relate to the concept of reciprocity. In the process of ‘helping,’ argues Butcher:

...there is an exchange of goods and/or services. There is a giver and a receiver, but not necessarily an opportunity for reciprocity. In ‘serving,’ the quality of the exchange is different. It goes beyond helping by presenting an opportunity for both reciprocity and equality. Helping implies a form of a gift to someone else, sharing a part of what is owned. Serving amplifies the spectrum of the gift into sharing and offering not only what we have, but as part of what we are.<sup>86</sup>

From this distinction made between helping and serving, Butcher explores further what she identifies as ‘service relationships,’ describing them as horizontal in nature, providing dialogue and opportunities for encounter. Typically both participants benefit from the experience, an experience of equal and dignified exchange which allows shared human values to emerge.<sup>87</sup> While I certainly did not attempt to measure whether various volunteer helper-Assisted Pilgrim care relationships met the test of constituting a service relationship as Butcher theoretically conceptualizes it, certainly caregivers such as Joanna and Dana felt that their engagement with Assisted Pilgrims approached this ideal. However, I will soon draw attention to the ways in which the idealized bonds of the ‘caregiver-cared for’ relationship may be untangled and contested in practice, from the perspective of both caregivers and Assisted Pilgrims.

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<sup>86</sup> Jacqueline Butcher, “A Humanistic Perspective on the Volunteer-Recipient Relationship,” in *The Values of Volunteering: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Paul Dekker and Loek Halman (New York: Kluwer, 2003), 116.

<sup>87</sup> Butcher, “Volunteer-Recipient Relationship,” 118-120.



Figure 9. *Helpers and Assisted Pilgrims dancing during the Accueil farewell party, July 26, 2013. Image Credit: Author.*

While I point to all of these testimonies by pilgrim-caregivers as representative of general perspectives of volunteers on their own motivations for working as caregivers at Lourdes, emphasizing themes of being called, of following the example of Christ, of putting their faith into practice, I should be clear that such themes do not capture the complex amalgam of factors which together animate the decision by volunteers to serve at Lourdes. As Wuthnow argues, motives are as complex as ourselves. In addition to being motivated by the Christian love command, volunteers may also go to Lourdes because friends from their school or their diocese are going, and they are simply along for the ride, for a week in another country experiencing something strange and novel. For some it may be the social



element that is most attractive, since volunteers often enjoy working to exhaustion during the day then letting loose in the evenings in one of the cafés or bars which line the streets of Lourdes leading to the Sanctuary. Or volunteers may, as Alyssa did, value the sense of agency, of self-worth, of making a contribution, which is provided through their care work in Lourdes in ways they might not typically experience back home. Yet I suggest that care work as an extension or enactment of their faith still remains overwhelmingly the prime motive for volunteer helpers at Lourdes. I would next like to explore what is often a hidden motivation for faith-inspired caregiving; namely, care work as an act of thanksgiving for a favour or grace received by means of a visionary encounter or other form of divine intervention.

*“Our Lady Did This for Me”*

The term “divine intervention” and what it might entail is a slippery and widely varied concept that is not easily defined. For our purposes here, I am not concerned with testing the veracity of accounts of divine interventions or explaining them away. Rather I focus on pilgrims’ retelling of their encounters with the divine and their interpretations of such encounters. In the words of Galia Valtchinova, I am concerned with the ways that pilgrims “imagine, interact with, and locate divine agency in their lives and worlds from their own perspective.”<sup>88</sup> However in order

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<sup>88</sup> Galia Valtchinova, “Introduction: Ethno-Graphing ‘Divine Intervention,’” *History and Anthropology* 20 (2009): 203.

to provide some frame of reference, Sandra Zimdars-Swartz's description of apparitions might be helpful: "An apparition is best understood as a specific kind of vision in which a person or being not normally within the visionary's perceptual range appears to that person, not in a world apart as in a dream, and not as a modification of a concrete object as is the case of a weeping icon or moving statue, but as part of the environment, without apparent connection to verifiable visual stimuli."<sup>89</sup> Elaborating from this description of apparitions, visionary encounters or other forms of divine intervention might also vary from the appearance of a person or being, and instead be signalled by seemingly celestial voices, bright lights, waves of energy, and a wide range of supra-human phenomena.

Much of the literature on Marian apparitions or other religious visions in Western Europe has understandably focused on public and often performative apparition events which quickly attracted a cult of devotion among the local community and wider faithful, such as those at Lourdes. Limited attention has been accorded to private reports of apparitions or divine interventions which do not become widely disseminated or attract the attention of Church officials or the popular press. As William A. Christian observes: "There are many visions that are never recounted. That is, the first line of censorship, the first filter, is that of the seer. And what happens with the visions that are recounted depends a lot on the first

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<sup>89</sup> Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary*, 5.

reaction, whether it is a parent, a spouse, a schoolteacher, or priest.”<sup>90</sup> Christian elaborates to describe how many seers may perceive their experience as a highly personal event, a sort of secret encounter never to be divulged to anyone. Others may be embarrassed, unsure themselves of the veracity of what had occurred, or they may fear reprisals from religious and secular officials. The issue of divine intervention then is often a touchy subject, for anthropologist and informant alike. When I would ask pilgrims, given their devotion to Lourdes as a site renowned for hosting a dramatic series of Marian apparitions, whether they had themselves ever experienced a vision or divine encounter, I was often met with surprise, an uneasy laugh, and on rare occasions suspicion as to the motives of my research. To my own surprise however, affirmative responses to this question came during discussions of the rationale behind a pilgrim’s choice to volunteer as a caregiver at Lourdes.

Toward the end of the Westminster Pilgrimage, each team of helpers was given a set time in the afternoon when they could gather as a group, pray, reflect on their experiences over the past week, and simply relax and socialize. After silent prayer in the chapel of the Accueil St. Frai, we were asked to pair up with another team member and wander about the town for approximately half an hour, sharing our experience of the week. I was paired with Megan, a first time helper from west London. She spoke of her initial apprehension coming to Lourdes, unsure of

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<sup>90</sup> William A. Christian, “Islands in the Sea: The Public and Private Distribution of Knowledge of Religious Visions,” *Visual Resources* 25 (2009): 161.

whether she would be up to the task of caring for others. I asked her what inspired her to go to Lourdes despite her reservations:

Three years ago, I was pregnant with my little girl, you've met her, and I was having a lot of difficulty with the pregnancy. The doctors were worried that I would miscarry. I went to Medjugorje, where Our Lady is still appearing in Bosnia, even though I probably shouldn't have been on a plane. And I was walking up the Apparition Hill, and when I reached the top, I felt dizzy and light-headed. It's a hard path up. And then I felt this strange feeling come over me, I wasn't sure what was happening. Like a tingling all through my body. And then I felt my baby kick! I knew then everything would be alright. I went back to London, and had a healthy baby girl. Our Lady did this for me, so the least I can do is come here and try to give back, to repay what I owe her.<sup>91</sup>

It is notable that here Megan makes a direct association between Medjugorje, a pilgrimage shrine devoted to a series of still ongoing Marian apparitions that have not received official approval as authentic by the Catholic Church, and Lourdes, a long-established Church-sanctioned apparition shrine which rivals the Vatican itself in terms of numbers of annual pilgrims. Megan's desire to reciprocate for a dramatic divine intervention at Medjugorje is transposed to Lourdes and enacted there as an expression of thanksgiving through her service to others. The miraculous intervention she believes she experienced at Medjugorje seems to be confirmed and extended, as an ongoing facet of her faith journey through her care work at Lourdes.

Lina, a woman in her early sixties with an infectious smile and easy laugh, had seven years of experience working at Lourdes, mostly helping to prepare and serve meals as well as visiting Assisted Pilgrims in the Accueil. When I asked her

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<sup>91</sup> Field notes, July 25, 2013.

what drew her to volunteer with the sick at a pilgrimage shrine such as Lourdes, her answer was quite unexpected:

To be honest, I wasn't a churchgoer very much, but about twelve years ago, my daughter confessed to me that she was gay. And for me it was a shock. One day I considered to take my life. I couldn't tell anybody what I was going through. I was driving my car, and I said to myself: 'Well, if I see a tree and drive towards the tree and... maybe I get killed that way.' Suddenly it was like lightning for me. I saw a picture of Our Blessed Lady before me and she told me 'You are selfish by doing that, because you've got your husband... your child is loved by God just the same, and you've got all your friends. There are other ways. God loves you and your daughter. Don't do this.' That changed my life Michael, it did! I thought I must get involved with the Church, so I did. And since then for me Our Blessed Lady is like... my own mother. She is. And I'm so happy if I can help in some way. In my little church I take communion to the sick, I do readings at mass, I clean the church, I help with the old people, and that's why I also help here at Lourdes too, in whatever way I can. All these things bring me great joy! And I love my daughter to bits. Not only her, even her friends. The good Lord has chosen me to be the mother of her. I'm so grateful for everything I've been given by the Lord.<sup>92</sup>

Both Megan and Lina describe sudden, transformative divine interventions which they believe saved lives: their own or that of a child. Significantly, much of the research on Marian apparitions and other public religious visions points to a strong correlation between periods of great political and economic crisis, such as the Cold War, and a proliferation of reports of Marian apparitions.<sup>93</sup> While such events are

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<sup>92</sup> Interview, August 29, 2012.

<sup>93</sup> See David Blackbourn, *Marpingen: Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Bismarckian Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Mart Bax, *Medjugorje: Religion, Politics, and Violence in Rural Bosnia* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1995); William A. Christian, *Visionaries: The Spanish Republic and the Reign of Christ* (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley University Press, 1996); Paolo Apolito, *Apparitions of the Madonna at Oliveto Citra: Local Visions and Cosmic Drama* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998); Peter Jan Margry, "Marian Intervention in the Wars of Ideology: The Elastic Politics of the Roman Catholic Church on Modern Apparitions," *History and Anthropology* 20 (2009); and Chris Maunder, "Mapping the

of a far wider historical and social order, Megan and Lina's experiences of a Marian intervention emerge from serious and deeply personal crises. For Megan, it is the risk of a miscarriage; for Lina, the contemplation of ending her own life due to her struggle to come to terms with her daughter's sexual orientation. Coincidentally, for both Megan and Lina, the experiences of divine intervention have mother-daughter relationships as their focus.<sup>94</sup> These relationships to some degree parallel and inform their relationship to the Virgin Mary, with Lina especially referring to Mary as "my own mother."

Lina attributes her encounter with the Virgin Mary as the impetus for her now active involvement in the Church, both at home and in her volunteer care work at Lourdes. Valtchinova observes that at the very heart of any visionary experience or divine intervention narrative is the question of agency, which can illuminate the fluid interplay of human practice, social structure, and symbolic mediation. She defines agency as "the structural capacity, enshrined as social relations, of human beings to embark on autonomous self-realization."<sup>95</sup> This understanding of agency

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Presence of Mary: Germany's Modern Apparition Shrines," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 28 (2013).

<sup>94</sup> In his arguably more psychological analysis of Marian apparitions, Michael P. Carroll argues that the apparitions of the Virgin Mary to Bernadette in Lourdes and to the children at LaSalette, France twelve years earlier, were in fact modeled on a parental figure in the child's background, and that each seer's apparition was "an attempt to gratify an unconscious desire associated with that parental figure." I do not attempt such a psychological reading of the factors informing divine interventions in this study. Michael P. Carroll, "The Virgin Mary at LaSalette and Lourdes: Whom Did the Children See?" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 24 (1985): 56. See also "Visions of the Virgin Mary: The Effect of Family Structures on Marian Apparitions," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 22 (1983).

<sup>95</sup> Valtchinova, "Ethno-Graphing 'Divine Intervention,'" 208.

extends to her description of divine intervention, as a “*symbolic means* by which social actors, the powerful as well as the disempowered or the marginal ones, assess or earn some measure of authority or power and create or underpin a sense of community.”<sup>96</sup> While I would refrain from suggesting that this definition of divine intervention adequately describes the experiences of Megan and Lina, Valtchinova’s focus on agency draws attention to the role of caregiving at Lourdes as a means of self-realization. For those inspired to help at Lourdes out of a felt need to ‘be as Christ’ to others, helping is a means for putting their faith into action, a realization of themselves as they are truly called to be. For those like Megan and Lina, going to Lourdes in large part as an act of thanksgiving for a favour received through a divine intervention, working as a volunteer helper allows for a sort of ex-voto offering, physically enacted, to be rendered. For Megan and Lina, it is of vital importance that their experience does not abruptly end with what they believe to be a miraculous blessing or wake-up call, but that it animate their faith life into the future. Passive in the experience of a divine intervention, they actively respond to it in their work at Lourdes, carrying the encounter forward as a motivation for helping others.

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<sup>96</sup> Valtchinova, “Ethno-Graphing ‘Divine Intervention,’” 204.

*Contested Care*

As the medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman observes in his recent work on the moral contours of caregiving, which has significantly influenced my own thinking on the subject, caregiving “can enhance our compassion, solicit solidarity, and elicit a fuller, more human presence than we ever realized we possessed.”<sup>97</sup> This transformative effect of caregiving has been indicated in the perspectives of some of the volunteer caregivers cited thus far and I will return to Kleinman’s understanding of caregiving as a humanizing process toward the end of this chapter. Yet, in another article published in *The Lancet*, Kleinman stresses that on the subject of caregiving he is no naïve moralist: “I’ve had far too much experience of the demands, tensions, and downright failures of caregiving to fall into sentimentality and utopianism. Caregiving is not easy. It consumes time, energy, and financial resources. It sucks out strength and determination. It turns simple ideas of efficacy and hope into big question marks.”<sup>98</sup> Much of the literature on caregiving of the seriously sick and disabled emphasizes the potential for caregiver burnout and the severe strains that can be placed on relationships between caregiver and care-receiver.<sup>99</sup> These studies have been primarily concerned with caregiving

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<sup>97</sup> Arthur Kleinman, “Caregiving: The Divided Meaning of Being Human and the Divided Self of the Caregiver,” in *Rethinking the Human*, ed. J. Michelle Molina and Donald K. Swearer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 17.

<sup>98</sup> Arthur Kleinman, “Caregiving: The Odyssey of Becoming More Human,” *The Lancet* 373, January 24, 2009, 293.

<sup>99</sup> See Rajeev N. Ramchand, ed., *Hidden Heroes: America’s Military Caregivers* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2014), Karen A. Roberto and Shannon E. Jarrott, “Family Caregivers of Older Adults: A Life Span Perspective,” *Family Relations* 57 (2008), Anne Martin-Matthew and Judith Phillips, *Aging and Caring at the Intersection of Work and Home Life: Blurring the Boundaries* (New



as it is undertaken by nurses, family members, friends and neighbours. Limited attention has been accorded to the challenges of volunteer care in an informal, intimate environment where there are no direct kinship ties motivating the care or where there is a lack of significant professional experience in an institutional setting. The inherently volunteer nature of most care work undertaken at Lourdes especially can be a source of anxiety, tension, and frustration, both for helpers and for Assisted Pilgrims.

Here it is now appropriate to resume where I left off earlier, in describing my arrival at the Accueil Notre-Dame on the first morning of the Catholic Association pilgrimage. As the group of helpers broke off into pairs and began moving in different directions down the dim, quiet halls of the 4<sup>th</sup> floor ward, I entered the room of Gordon, Roger, and Ted. Gordon was nearest the door and he was already awake, two Core Care Team members with him standing on each side of the bed, establishing the plan of action for bathing, dressing, and any other morning routines that might be needed. Gordon required the use of a hoist, and Jeremy and Louis, the two Core Care helpers who were trained in its operation, discussed their options. Assuming things were covered, I began to leave for another room when Jeremy stopped me: “Could you please stay for a bit, we could really use a third helper with the hoist.” Both Jeremy and Louis as well as Gordon guided me as we began to undress Gordon, carefully slid the harness underneath him, and

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York: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2008) and Suzanne M. Robertson et al., “Family Caregivers’ Patterns of Positive and Negative Affect,” *Family Relations* 56 (2007).

began fixing the straps of the harness onto the hoist. Although I was expertly guided throughout by all three, I was desperately trying to conceal my sheer terror at the prospect of making one wrong move and placing Gordon in serious risk. We were able to move him successfully to the shower however, and I was asked to help wash Gordon as Louis stepped into another room to help other Assisted Pilgrims.

Having never washed another person in this way before, let alone a complete stranger, I was incredibly apprehensive about pressing the soapy sponge too hard on Gordon's skin, or the risk of invading his privacy. Completely accustomed to being cared for in this manner however, Gordon piped up: "Come on now Michael, don't worry about scrubbing harder, I'm not a China doll!" Later, he added: "And don't be afraid to get down near my gibbly bits, they haven't worked in years!" I laughed nervously, aware that Gordon was trying to put me at ease, but still anxious about the entire situation. After I patted him dry and we lifted him back into his bed, I was left alone with Gordon as Jeremy and Louis took the hoist to be used by other Assisted Pilgrims. I helped dress Gordon as he selected the shirt and slacks he wanted to wear that day, directing me to their location in his suitcase and closet. He then asked if I could help him shave, using the electric razor charging beside his bed. We chatted about the journey down to Lourdes and our expectations for the week to come as I rolled the razor in slow, circular motions over his light stubble, both of us more relaxed now after having survived the more stressful elements of the morning routine. Jeremy and Louis returned and Gordon was then hoisted again

into his motorized wheelchair and went off on his own for breakfast, where he was looked after by the kitchen staff.<sup>100</sup>

Later that day as I assessed how this first morning working in the Accueil had went I was, perhaps foolishly, pleased with myself for having tested my limits and survived this trial by fire in spite of my deep apprehension. Yet with further introspection I recognized how woefully unprepared I was for such an involved and intimate level of care, both in terms of whatever amateur nursing skills I might have previously had at my disposal, as well as my own emotional readiness. As I would soon learn however, I was far from alone in encountering and struggling to negotiate the challenges of caregiving, particularly those that come with very little professional or even informal care experience.

Several volunteer caregivers, particularly those on their first pilgrimage to Lourdes and having never served in such a capacity, related to my own feelings about the difficult and at times highly fraught nature of their care work in the Accueil. As Jess, a first-time helper with the Westminster pilgrimage described it:

I do enjoy the Accueil work. I have a lot of elderly people in my family so I guess I do have some background in this sort of thing, so it wasn't really...scary as such. I know they're not out to get me, they're here because of their faith and they need the help, and so I wasn't too nervous. However my very first lady on my first day here shouted at me, a lot, and no one's done it since. And that did put me really on edge, and someone else had to take over, because we just weren't working. I guess there was just some sort of miscommunication or barrier, and we couldn't get around it. But apart from that it's been fine really, but there

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<sup>100</sup> Field notes, August 25, 2012.

are times when I second guess my decision to come, but they don't last long.<sup>101</sup>

Most volunteer caregivers, like Jess, stressed that they did enjoy the Accueil work and did the best they could with the limited caring skills they had, but often conceded that it was at times stressful and difficult for them to work with the Assisted Pilgrims. This was not only true for first-time helpers, but relative veterans as well: "I don't usually last Lourdes without crying at some point. I think as well you just get very tired and overwhelmed and the rest of it. But I'm aware of my own limitations, and being a bit older you're aware of what you can do and what you can't do. And then when someone says 'Actually I really need you to help with this,' and it's way out of your comfort zone, I think 'Well I'm still going to go and do it' but can it can be very, very challenging."<sup>102</sup> Many caregivers referred simply to the physical and emotional exhaustion brought on by their care work as the primary challenge of their responsibilities at Lourdes. They would also cite not only the pace of their duties as a source of exhaustion, but also the toll of the pilgrimage week as a whole, with its rigorous itinerary of masses, processions, meetings, and other religious services and social events. The nature of pilgrimage to Lourdes itself then could be both an ideal environment for enacting the Christian love command through one's care work, but also a highly charged environment with the potential to expose the fault lines that can underlie caregiver and care-receiver relationships.

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<sup>101</sup> Interview, July 25, 2013.

<sup>102</sup> Interview, August 29, 2012.

As I described in the vignette from my own direct experience as a volunteer caregiver, part of the challenge can be the shock that might come from the intimate and involved level of care that is required, responsibilities such as bathing, dressing, and toileting, which most helpers have very little prior experience undertaking. In discussing the challenges they faced during their work in the Accueil, several helpers would begin by describing their initial apprehension derived from walking into a room early in the morning and having to begin to undress and bathe someone, or wipe up after them if there was an incident in the bathroom. Yet most would quickly transition from such accounts to what they perceived as one of the most precarious acts of caregiving at Lourdes: simply providing companionship. As Dana mentioned in our conversation, this companionship, this quiet dwelling with one another, was one of the most striking and spiritually meaningful elements of her care work in Lourdes. Yet for others, this same facet of the experience proved the most difficult. As Neil, a young helper with the Catholic Association puts it: “Sometimes I can’t think of any conversation to strike up, and that can be a little awkward sometimes. Like if someone is sitting by themselves, I think I should probably go over and keep them company. But sometimes for the life of me I just can’t think of anything to say. And that’s...I feel bad because they would probably like someone to talk to as well, they might not have anyone back home, but then

you're just kind of stuck in an awkward position, and it's nerve-wracking."<sup>103</sup> This

was also echoed by Brent, a helper with Westminster:

The difficulty of it for me is not the naked people or the disabled or the ones that require some horribly intimate trips to the loo or whatever, but sometimes it's just the people that are hard to talk to who are the most intimidating. I find it much easier just to leap in and be lifting people all the time and all that, but what I had to overcome was almost...the embarrassment of sitting down and talking with someone, most of all when I'm trying to connect with someone and it might be hard to work out what they're saying or they're not very responsive.<sup>104</sup>

Although some caregivers reported feeling relatively at ease with both facets of the caregiving experience (the more involved physical responsibilities as well as those that were more relational in nature), several reported being far more comfortable with one or the other. Some, like Neil, were almost eager to throw themselves into the more active elements of care work, but were intimidated by the prospect of sitting down and having a casual conversation. Others were self-proclaimed 'social butterflies,' able to chat effortlessly for hours with Assisted Pilgrims, but trembled as they began to assist with morning routines. Through my own experience and conversations with volunteer caregivers, it was clear that the range of caregiving responsibilities and helpers' comfort level with those duties appeared to exist on a sliding scale that was entirely subjective, dependent on one's background and prior familiarity with caregiving.

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<sup>103</sup> Interview, August 28, 2012.

<sup>104</sup> Interview, July 26, 2013.

To this point I have largely examined the perspectives of volunteer caregivers as they relate to their motivations for helping at Lourdes and the challenges of their duties in the Accueil. Yet particularly when discussing the complex and sometimes fraught nature of caregiving, it is vitally important to acknowledge and value the perspective of those receiving care. I have touched on caregivers' anxieties around both the physical and relational aspects of caregiving, but this element of the experience is far from being one-dimensional. Without exception, Assisted Pilgrims stressed how grateful they were for the care they received from volunteer helpers in the Accueil, and how they placed great value on the friendships that were developed over the course of the pilgrimage week. Indeed, as one Assisted Pilgrim put it: "These young helpers are angels of the Lord, truly they are. So often today young people back home get a bad press, and we're supposed to be almost frightened of them. But you get such a different impression here. They couldn't have been kinder to me, and I'm so thankful for their help."<sup>105</sup> Some Assisted Pilgrims were perhaps more pragmatic in their assessment, observing that without the assistance of the teams of volunteer caregivers it simply would not be feasible for them to go to Lourdes.

Yet a few Assisted Pilgrims did express certain misgivings in assessing their experience of being cared for during the pilgrimage. Some reported that they were anxious about being away from home and, if they were going to Lourdes for the

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<sup>105</sup> Interview, July 26, 2013.

first time as an Assisted Pilgrim, being among strangers. Others drew attention to the fact that despite their best efforts, the volunteer caregivers on the pilgrimage were just that, volunteers. Assisted Pilgrims were concerned about volunteers' level of training and competence, especially as it related to skills such as operating the hoists or helping someone to the toilet, where they might be at risk of slipping or falling. At Lourdes, Assisted Pilgrims may feel a strong sense of community and even love in their interactions with caregivers and other pilgrims, however they also reported feeling an amplified sense of vulnerability, which was less likely in more familiar and routinized settings back home. While I never heard an Assisted Pilgrim report any serious accident that had occurred, some did mention smaller issues. Sometimes helpers forgot to test the temperature of the water before bathing someone and it was too hot or too cold. On other occasions, a helper might struggle to dress someone without asking the Assisted Pilgrim which arm might need to go in a sleeve first. While these were relatively minor incidents, they nevertheless reinforced the reality that most helpers had no formal experience in care work.

Other Assisted Pilgrims reported feeling patronized by the caregivers, observing that they sometimes felt a loss of agency and even dignity in helpers' efforts to care for them, despite their recognition that the helpers were likely trying to make the best of what could be a stressful and challenging situation for everyone. As Allan, an Assisted Pilgrim who required the use of a wheelchair but otherwise was quite self-sufficient explained to me: "You know, just because I'm a few feet



below them in a wheelchair doesn't mean they have to look down and take pity on me. I know they want to help, and they probably have nothing but good intentions, but I don't think they realize what it does when some of them treat me like I'm a child. Unlike some of the others I'm completely together mentally, but a few of them still insist on talking to me like I'm an idiot."<sup>106</sup> But unlike Allan, who granted that the helpers likely had good intentions in their efforts to help, Helena was perhaps a bit more cynical in assessing the motives of caregivers: "Sometimes you can just pick them out...the do-gooders. The ones that always have a big smile no matter what and speak to you in these high-pitched voices. They're busy-bodies, always having to run about doing something. I don't really wish to be someone's good deed or little project. I'm probably being a bit unfair, there are a lot of wonderful people here, but as I said, you can sort of pick out the really good ones from the do-gooders, the ones that have to find a way to make themselves useful."<sup>107</sup>

Of all the Assisted Pilgrims I encountered, Sophia was perhaps the most explicit in describing what she referred to as "the downsides of the pilgrimage." This part of our conversation came about quite unexpectedly. Cognizant of the fact that my fixed set of interview questions might be limited in eliciting the incredible range of highly individual experiences that pilgrims might select from and privilege most, the final question I would ask in all of my interviews was simple: "Is there anything you would like to add about your experience here at Lourdes?" I noticed

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<sup>106</sup> Interview, August 28, 2013.

<sup>107</sup> Interview, July 24, 2013.

that Sophia, who had been quite lively and animated throughout our interview as she shared her passion for Lourdes and the Virgin Mary, suddenly began to speak in a more hushed, almost somber tone, careful not to be heard as she responded to the question:

Well I've talked about my great sense of gratitude to the people that look after us, but I do find it very hard to be cared for here, because...and I'm very sensitive talking about this...the care couldn't be kinder, but in practical terms, most people doing the caring here aren't trained. So, when people are not trained, there's a lot of loud chatter when people are trying to rest, there's a lot of sentimentality, there are mistakes made. And they're all doing their darndest to keep people cheerful and happy, but it's all just a little too put on, if you understand what I mean. I want to be friendly with everyone, and there are just some lovely people here helping, but I don't necessarily want to become *best friends* you see, to the degree that some of the caregivers seem to want to become. That's why I mentioned the word sentimental because some of them...you catch them stroking the patients hair or they've always got their arm around their shoulder patting them going 'there there.' I don't think they're respecting these people's dignity, and they're treating them, how do I put it, as members of their own families when they're not. They should allow them some dignity and some privacy, and ask their permission before they do certain things, instead of leaping into a sort of intimacy that they haven't yet made or invited. Do you see what I mean? And some patients like that, who have felt very lonely all year and don't get much affection back home, but I feel like my space is being invaded when they do that to me, but I know the caregivers are just doing their best.<sup>108</sup>

Pilgrimage organizers for both Westminster and the Catholic Association were quite aware of the potential issues expressed by Assisted Pilgrims such as Allan, Helena, and Sophia. In fact in the Helpers Handbook the CA provides they try to head off the possibility of compromising the dignity of Assisted Pilgrims, stressing:

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<sup>108</sup> Interview, July 23, 2013.

“Disability may disrupt an entire life. In facing their disability, many wish to stay as independent as possible, and fuss can upset or humiliate them. So before you try to help, ask ‘Would you like...how should this be done...can I do this?’ etc. If they say no, do not insist.” In the training that was provided by both pilgrimages, practices that attempted to ensure the dignity of Assisted Pilgrims were reinforced, including sitting down with those in beds or wheelchairs at the same level, speaking to them at a clear and steady pace, but otherwise normally, and always asking for their permission or input when beginning to assist them or pushing their wheelchair. These instructions weren’t always followed through in practice however, and some Assisted Pilgrims could be quite frustrated by this. In the perspectives I cited above from Assisted Pilgrims, all were deliberate in clearly stressing their gratitude to the helpers for their work in Lourdes, and that overall their relationship with them was positive and meaningful, yet some did take strong exception to the more problematic elements of the pilgrimage that they experienced. While the volunteer caregivers I highlighted earlier in this chapter saw their care work in Lourdes as an attempt to adhere to the Christian love command, being the subject of this ethical imperative was not always welcome on the part of some Assisted Pilgrims.

I’ve touched on the challenges of caregiving as they relate to the interactions between volunteer caregivers and care-receivers. There is another facet however of what I’ve described as contested care: the interpersonal dynamics within the teams of helpers. In his early research on Lourdes based on his own experience of serving

over twenty years as a *brancardier* with the Hospitalité Notre-Dame de Lourdes, John Eade points to the power dynamics at play within the hierarchical structure of the Hospitalité and particularly in the interactions between *brancardiers* and pilgrims to the shrine, where volunteers serve as gatekeepers to the baths and processions and enforcers of proper dress and general comportment.<sup>109</sup> Here Eade is primarily examining the experience of the *stagiaires* described earlier, that go to Lourdes independently for a period of service at the shrine. They do not typically work in the Accueils directly with Assisted Pilgrims, who instead are accompanied and cared for by volunteer caregivers from their own parish or diocese. I wish to build on Eade's helpful efforts to draw out the contested nature of interactions between these *stagiaires* and pilgrims founded in large part upon mechanisms of power and control, and bring focus to the interpersonal dynamics between volunteer caregivers from diocesan pilgrimages working in the Accueils.

Like Eade, some pilgrimage organizers and veteran caregivers drew attention to the hierarchical structures and relationships of control and power which can underpin volunteer work at Lourdes. However all stressed that this was an issue now residing in the distant past. As a pilgrimage organizer for the Catholic Association described it:

I go back twenty years and that hierarchical structure was quite negative. This idea that 'I'm in a position of authority as a *brancardier*. I can let you in, I can keep you out.' And I found that quite horrific.

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<sup>109</sup> John Eade, "Order and Power at Lourdes: Lay Helpers and the Organization of a Pilgrimage Shrine," in *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*, ed. John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow (London: Routledge, 1991).

And I would say in the last twenty years all of that has changed, that the majority of *brancardiers* and handmaids and even clergy see themselves at the service of the pilgrimage, and try to avoid that officious sensibility that I'm in a position of power. I myself am in a position of responsibility that I have to exercise, and that means saying no, but I will do it nicely. Twenty or thirty years ago they wouldn't do it nicely, and I remember some of us complaining to the authorities about it. But all that's changed. It's much more inclusive. And if we have this badge or that title it's not really for me, but for the pilgrimage, and the pilgrims. And things have become so much healthier in Lourdes, so much healthier.<sup>110</sup>

Indeed, when I would ask helpers about their experience working in cooperation with a team of volunteer caregivers, I rarely heard complaints about the negative power dynamics running through the hierarchical structure of the volunteer corps at Lourdes, highlighted in both Eade's research and raised in the interview. Most recognized that some form of organizational apparatus and leadership needed to be in place to ensure the smooth operation of the pilgrimage week, and generally held the chief organizers in rather high regard. The power plays identified by Eade had in fact seemed to improve over time. Where volunteer caregivers did take issue with the organization of helpers was not so much in experiences of top-down leadership or gatekeeping by pilgrimage officials, but rather in the interpersonal dynamics within the teams of helpers, where some felt an acute sense of isolation, of not being supported in the sometimes difficult nature of their care work. As a result some found their work in the Accueil not to be a deeply meaningful extension of the

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<sup>110</sup> Interview, August 9, 2012.

Christian love command into practice, but rather as an unsatisfying and even demoralizing experience.

Andrea, a first-time helper, described how she returned from her pilgrimage to Lourdes on a sort of ‘Lourdes high,’ having gained so much during her week at the shrine. When I met with Andrea in London after the pilgrimage, she told me that she placed special value on the relationship she had developed with Julia, the Assisted Pilgrim assigned to her care. After our interview, Andrea was in fact on her way to visit Julia, the two having become “fast friends” during the pilgrimage and in the weeks following their return to England. However Andrea was quite explicit in her negative assessment of her experience working with some of the other caregivers from her diocese in Lourdes, observing that it significantly detracted from what was otherwise a wonderful pilgrimage:

I found that some of the people who had been in Lourdes for many, many years, some of those helpers were not so forthcoming in their help towards the new people. But it didn’t really matter I guess because the Chief Brancardier and Chief Handmaid were very open and approachable, and all of us that were new could compare together what we were doing so that was ok. But some of the more experienced helpers, who oddly enough weren’t even team leaders, could be quite snippy. I got told off quite a few times for doing things that were wrong, but I didn’t know. And they were usually just simple things, like mopping the floors. And I learned after the first couple days just not to approach those people, and instead just went to those I knew I could rely on, or I would compare notes with the first-timers, like Lindsay and yourself, and get advice that way. I think they need to learn a few manners actually, because they could be sharp. We’re actually there to help, and they should be helping us because it’s our first time doing it. Maybe I shouldn’t say this, but I did end up questioning why some of them were on the pilgrimage. Is it a power thing? They’re in charge and they like being in charge for a week? Or is it about *helping*, but not just

the sick pilgrims but people who are new, who are coming to help. It should be an all-round sort of experience, shouldn't it?<sup>111</sup>

Andrea's continual reference to the cleavage she observed between first-time helpers and veteran caregivers that had been coming together to Lourdes on diocesan pilgrimages for several years was also evoked by other first-time helpers. Veronica shared her experience of feeling unwelcome during the pilgrimage: "I did go on my own to Lourdes, and I didn't feel particularly welcomed by some of the other helpers, especially on the first morning. I was kind of standing around and I wanted to help in some way. I could have made beds, I could have washed up. But I felt that the more experienced helpers working there preferred to be together on their own and didn't need or want anyone else there. So I just left the Accueil before my shift had even ended, because I didn't feel welcome or needed at all."<sup>112</sup>

Perhaps the most salient example of this sense of being unwelcome on the part of first-time helpers was articulated by Greg, who had also come not with a parish or school group but independently, without having met any of the other helpers prior to the pilgrimage. Around the mid-point of the week we were sitting together in the Accueil, during a lull in our shift as the Assisted Pilgrims were either resting or out exploring the shrine and the town. Greg asked me, knowing by this point that I had been to Lourdes several times, what options were available for travelling to and from Lourdes outside those offered by the pilgrimage. I began

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<sup>111</sup> Interview, September 2, 2013.

<sup>112</sup> Interview, August 29, 2012.

explaining how I had heard that some pilgrims who made their own travel arrangements would fly with EasyJet from London-Gatwick to Toulouse, and from there take the train west to Lourdes. There were also scheduled flights with RyanAir from London-Stansted airport direct to Lourdes, however these were far less frequent. There was also of course the route we had taken ourselves, travelling by the Eurostar train from London to Paris, and from there proceeding to Lourdes on the TGV high-speed train. It took some time however before I began to realize why Greg had even posed this question: he was seriously considering ending his pilgrimage and returning home early. When I asked why, he explained that he felt that there was no reason for him to be there. Although he enjoyed the processions and masses and had a particular fondness for the grotto, he had come to regret his decision to work as a volunteer caregiver in the Accueil. It was not the involved levels of care work that were the issue, but his sense of being an outsider, of being excluded, and like Veronica, not being needed. He detailed how sometimes when he would approach another helper, either to request assistance, ask what needed to be done, or simply just to make conversation, he would be quickly dismissed. Greg pointed to one particular episode where he observed another helper who was incredibly generous and kind with the Assisted Pilgrims, but when he would try to speak with her she would only respond with “yes, no, I don’t know.” Greg also felt that there were perhaps too many helpers, and while he wanted to try and help out in whatever way he could, he often felt left on the sidelines and rendered useless.



Instead of feeling empowered and gaining a sense of agency through the act of caregiving, he felt isolated, and had come to regret his decision to go to Lourdes. Greg did ‘stick it out’ for the remainder of the week however, but when I spoke to him on the final day of the pilgrimage he told me that he would like to go to Lourdes again, but certainly not as a helper.

These extracts from conversations specifically with first-time helpers point to the challenge of negotiating the social minefield that can be inherent in the act of caregiving. For these volunteer caregivers, it is not an issue of strained relationships with sick and elderly family members, or the sometimes uncomfortable, messy nature of bathing and dressing a complete stranger, but of simply being in relation with others in an unfamiliar, highly charged and tense environment. Just like Assisted Pilgrims, first-time volunteer caregivers can experience a significant degree of vulnerability during their work in Lourdes, as they attempt to meet the physical, emotional, and spiritual challenges a week of pilgrimage can present. When joined with a sense of being unwelcome and unneeded by fellow helpers, this vulnerability can become compounded and amplified. The majority of volunteer caregivers, including most first-time helpers, reported having a positive experience caregiving at Lourdes, and expressed the hope of returning to help again in the future. My own experience serving as a caregiver at Lourdes was generally quite positive and at times moving, though not without its challenges. Some caregivers develop lasting friendships with other helpers that are fortified each summer

through their care work in Lourdes. Indeed, a significant motive for returning to Lourdes, as alluded to earlier and explored in greater detail in Chapter Four, is the friendship and community one can experience while on pilgrimage. Yet it is important to draw attention to the potential for the “downsides of pilgrimage” to emerge, and acknowledge that the ideals articulated within the discursive elements of the pilgrimage which entrench the Christian love command as the inspiration for care work at Lourdes may be limited in their reach, and not always encountered in practice.

### *Caregiving as Kenosis*

Moving experiences of ‘becoming like Christ’ and acts of reciprocal giving between volunteer caregivers and care-receivers may appear completely at odds with feelings of being patronized, of losing one’s dignity, or of feeling unwelcome and excluded, all occurring within the frame of a Catholic pilgrimage to Lourdes. Is it possible then to marry these apparently dichotomous experiences together into a comprehensive vision of caregiving that is nevertheless still grounded in the Christian love command and other faith-based motivations that inspire care work in Lourdes? I suggest employing the concept of kenosis in Christian thought as a theological lens through which to examine and encapsulate the range of encounters between caregivers and those cared for, as well as among caregivers.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> For a more general analysis of pilgrimage groups themselves as a form of kenotic community, see Inna Naletova, “Pilgrimages as Kenotic Communities beyond the Walls of the Church,” in

The concept of kenosis is derived from a reading of Paul's letter to the Philippians:

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.*<sup>114</sup>

I have italicized what is the crux of the kenotic hymn composed by Paul in Philippians, with its emphasis on an understanding of kenosis as a form of self-emptying, self-giving, and self-sacrifice. It is also important however to include the verses immediately preceding this passage, as they clearly articulate an ethical imperative grounded in the Christian love command which will ultimately be reinforced by Paul's Christological pronouncement. Christ's salvific act of submitting to death on a cross is very clearly tied to an ethical imperative of self-giving love and servanthood which is not only embodied in the life and death of Christ, but becomes for Paul a model incumbent upon all Christians. Paul's claims that Christ 'emptied himself' or 'made himself nothing' by assuming the nature of a servant and becoming human often figures in theological debates around the

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*Eastern Christians in Anthropological Perspective*, ed. Chris Hann and Hermann Goltz (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010).

<sup>114</sup> Philippians 2: 1-8. RSV.

Incarnation, the Redemption, and the nature of Christ as both fully human and fully divine. Importantly for our purposes here however, kenosis, according to Ruth Groenhout, also “holds up for us the example of a self-sacrificing saviour whom we are to emulate by giving up our claims to power and authority, and by sacrificing ourselves for the sake of others.”<sup>115</sup>



Figure 10. “*The Twelfth Station: Jesus Dies on the Cross,*” *Low Stations of the Cross, Lourdes*. Image Credit: Author.

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<sup>115</sup> Ruth Groenhout, “Kenosis and Feminist Theory,” in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-emptying of God*, ed. C. Stephen Evans (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), 291.

In much of the recent theological literature on kenosis the ethical imperative underlined in kenosis as well as the Christological themes of servanthood, self-giving love, humility, and sacrifice are reinforced. As Teresa Kuo-Yu Tsui writes on the ethical model stemming from Christ's kenotic self-emptying: "Kenosis has indeed much to say to humanity. For God's voluntary self-emptying in coming into the human world signifies His self-giving love and self-weakening humility that reveal God's true nature. Moreover, the kenotic Christ is the new image that God intends to recreate in humanity in the salvific Christ event."<sup>116</sup> Paul's description of Christ having "emptied himself" has led some theologians to argue that what is entailed in this act of self-emptying is a limited divestment of Christ's divinity so that he may take on full humanity.<sup>117</sup> Yet other scholars such as Michael J. Gorman wish to be clear that Christ's self-emptying is not a shedding of some divine attributes, but rather "a robust metaphor for total self-abandonment and self-giving...that is, he 'poured himself out,' probably an echo of the suffering servant."<sup>118</sup> Gorman later expands on this, arguing that not only does Christ's self-emptying and servanthood act as a model for humanity, but "that divinity has kenotic servanthood as its essential attribute."<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Teresa Kuo-Yu Tsui, "Kenosis in the Letter of Paul to the Philippians: The Way of the Suffering Philippian Community to Salvation," in *Godhead Here in Hiding: Incarnation and the History of Human Suffering*, ed. Terrence Merrigan and Frederik Glorieux (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2012), 237.

<sup>117</sup> John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 61.

<sup>118</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 21.

<sup>119</sup> Gorman, *Cruciform God*, 31.

As the prelude to Paul's kenotic hymn and much of the recent scholarship suggests, kenosis, with its emphasis on love, humility, and self-deference, is the "Christic pattern for human relationships."<sup>120</sup> By its association with Christ's fully taking on human form in the Incarnation, and subjecting himself to suffering in the Crucifixion, the concept of kenosis is deeply bound up in the full spectrum of what it means to be human. This is where I would like to return to Arthur Kleinman's work on caregiving. He points to caregiving as a defining moral practice, one that holds the potential to allow us to become more fully human:

It is a moral practice that makes caregivers, and at times even the care-receivers, more present and thereby fully human... Caregiving is one of those relationships and practices of self-cultivation that make us, even as we experience our limits and failures, more human. It completes (not absolutely, but as a kind of burnishing of what we really are—warts and all) our humanity. And if that Chinese perspective is also right (as I believe it is), when it claims that by building our humanity, we humanise the world, then our own ethical cultivation at the very least fosters that of others and holds the potential, through those relationships, of deepening meaning, beauty, and goodness in our experience of the world.<sup>121</sup>

When I referred earlier to the benefits or rewards volunteer caregivers received through the ideal of a reciprocal giving relationship established with Assisted Pilgrims, many would cite ideas of learning more about themselves, their potential and their limits. Others would describe the experience of simply connecting and being in relation with another person, and the meaning and value that was drawn

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<sup>120</sup> Thomas R. Thompson, "Nineteenth-Century Kenotic Christology: The Waxing, Waning, and Weighing of a Quest for a Coherent Orthodoxy," in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-emptying of God*, ed. C. Stephen Evans (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), 291.

<sup>121</sup> Kleinman, "Caregiving: The Odyssey of Becoming More Human," 293.

from that encounter. Transformations of perspectives of illness were also cited, with one young pilgrim observing: “I think coming here I expected all the APs to be sad and pessimistic and maybe even depressing to be around. But I was surprised by how happy most of them were, how brave they were in travelling that far when some of them are so sick, and how patient they were with me. I think the way I see things has really changed, and they helped me with that.”<sup>122</sup> Indeed, the potential for this transformation and a greater consciousness of one’s humanity is articulated in a Lourdes novena, a series of prayers said during the nine days prior to the pilgrimage, which was emailed by the Catholic Association to volunteer caregivers in the weeks leading up to the departure date. It is strikingly evocative both of the idea of self-emptying, humbling service that kenosis represents, as well as Kleinman’s gloss on caregiving as a practice of humanizing self-cultivation. Each day of the novena has a particular theme, with the third day of the series devoted to Service. The prayer begins with a reflection:

One standard irritation that strikes us when we return from Lourdes, or announce our intention of going, is Aunt Jane saying “aren’t you good!” A very few days’ service in Lourdes teaches us that we are nothing of the kind, that it is an inestimable privilege to be permitted to serve the sick (in whatever way we are able), and that in doing so we come to feel very small indeed, since the sick pilgrims are, by and large, such heroic moral giants. One of the things Jesus tried to teach was the joy of serving others, not because it’s unpleasant, but because, quite unexpectedly, there is something absolutely right about it. Human beings, we discover in Lourdes (and do we manage to remember it at

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<sup>122</sup> Interview, August 27, 2012.

home?) are designed for service, and, though we might not notice it, it is in serving others at Lourdes that we are most nearly ourselves.<sup>123</sup>

A remarkable correlation with a kenotic understanding of service is elicited here in the description that in performing acts of service for Assisted Pilgrims in Lourdes, one comes “to feel very small indeed.” It is worth noting that in addition to translations of kenosis from the original Greek of Christ “emptying himself” or “humbling himself,” the New International Version translation instead renders the kenosis verse from Philippians as “made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.” Inherent in an understanding of service then, both in the kenotic hymn as well as in the orienting language that suffuses the discursive practices of the Catholic Association pilgrimage, is the strong association between service and self-humility, of checking one’s pride and sense of authority in the service of others. We also see here Kleinman’s thinking on caregiving clearly reflected, in the belief that human beings are designed for service, and that through serving others at Lourdes “we are most nearly ourselves.” While it is unclear how precisely this might be accomplished, it appears almost as a given, as naturally assumed that care work at Lourdes holds the potential to allow caregivers to be who they truly are, to experience a full sense of humanity in their engagement with another person in the caregiving relationship. As the reflections of a helper on his own caregiving

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<sup>123</sup> Fr. Nicholas King, S.J., *A Lourdes Novena* (Cambridge, UK: The Catholic Association Pilgrimage Trust, 1996), 5.



experience cited earlier in this chapter emphasized: “And that’s the nice thing about coming to Lourdes, you get to be who you...*should* be.”

Following the reflection in the Lourdes novena, pilgrims are provided with two excerpts from the Gospels. The first is a passage from Mark 10: 35-45, where Christ tells his disciples that he came not to be served but to serve. The second passage, John 13: 1-16, is the well-known account of Christ’s Last Supper before his crucifixion, where he washes the feet of his disciples. Once he finishes and resumes his place, he tells them: “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”<sup>124</sup> Again, in the selection of this passage for inclusion in the novena, a clear association is drawn between the humble service exemplified by Christ and service toward Assisted Pilgrims by volunteer caregivers at Lourdes.

The Incarnation and crucifixion of Jesus are often mostly closely identified with a kenotic understanding of Christ’s self-emptying humanity. Yet the account of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples in the Gospel of John has been described by Stephen T. Davis and C. Stephen Evans as a kind of “mini-kenosis:”

We call this act of foot washing a mini-kenosis because Jesus, so to speak, temporarily emptied himself of his Lord-like and Master-like prerogatives and dignity. He dressed like a servant and then did a servant’s job...What we see in John 13 is a kind of moral kenosis,

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<sup>124</sup> John 13: 12-15. RSV.

namely, a master voluntarily taking on the role of a slave. Still, centuries of Christians have been gripped by this simple story.<sup>125</sup>

As Davis and Evans observe, this Gospel story continues to resonate strongly with Christians. Given this resonance, it was perhaps surprising that in all of my interviews and more informal interactions with caregivers, only once was this story cited as an inspiration or a lens for perceiving one's own service at Lourdes. During my interview with Danielle, who was introduced earlier in this chapter, I asked her whether during her care work at Lourdes she had ever had an encounter with an Assisted Pilgrim that was (for better or worse) quite memorable for her. She responded:

I was very lucky the second year I was here. The lady I was spending a lot of time with...I took her down to the taps, rather than to the baths, because of various medical issues she had. And I knelt down and washed her feet, using the spring water from the taps. And partly I thought 'Oh my goodness! Should I be doing this?' But at the same time it being just such a powerful thing to think that Christ did that to the disciples, and I'm sitting here with a bucket of water and someone's feet. And just the whole analogy of it, it was really a very emotional feeling that came from doing something like that.<sup>126</sup>

Unlike some of the caregivers described earlier, who referred to being called or commanded to serve at Lourdes from a general Christian ethic of love of one's neighbour, here Danielle describes being engaged in what I would suggest is an act of mimetic kenosis, a fully embodied enactment of what Davis and Evans referred

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<sup>125</sup> Stephen T. Davis and C. Stephen Evans, "Conclusion: The Promise of Kenosis," in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-emptying of God*, ed. C. Stephen Evans (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), 315.

<sup>126</sup> Interview, August 29, 2013.

to as Christ's "mini-kenosis" in the washing of the disciples' feet. Danielle does not use the theological term kenosis, but it is clear in her account that what is most meaningful or memorable in this encounter is her awareness of its analogy to Christ's own model of the "humble servant."<sup>127</sup>

I have drawn out some of the ways in which caregiving undertaken by volunteers at Lourdes can be understood as an embodied form of kenosis, most notably as it relates to notions of humility, self-giving, and servanthood. Another related facet of kenosis which I have referred to but have yet to explore in some detail is the element of sacrifice and vulnerability that can be involved in an act of self-giving kenotic love. Certainly in Paul's Letter to the Philippians, he observes that for Christ this service grounded in humility and obedience extends as far as death on the cross. Junius Johnson writes that generally however kenosis "does not consist in suffering *per se*, but in the act of emptying oneself of one's rights in loving obedience...kenosis will necessarily entail the giving up of invulnerability, the opening of oneself to the possibility of suffering."<sup>128</sup> I have shown in the section on "contested care" how both volunteer caregivers and Assisted Pilgrims can be exposed and made vulnerable in their encounters with one another at Lourdes. Caregivers may be overwhelmed by the intimate and physical nature of their care duties, or may feel unwelcome and excluded. Some Assisted Pilgrims may feel a

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<sup>127</sup> David Noel Power, *Love Without Calculation: A Reflection on Divine Kenosis* (New York: Crossroad, 2005), 17.

<sup>128</sup> Junius Johnson, *Christ and Analogy: The Christocentric Metaphysics of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 177.

loss of dignity or a sense of risk when they are entrusted to the care of non-professional volunteer caregivers in an unfamiliar environment.

In her research on English pilgrimages to Lourdes during the mid-1980s, Andrea Dahlberg distinguishes between two discourses that she observed among pilgrims: a miracle discourse and a sacrificial discourse. The miracle discourse, according to Dahlberg, is directed toward the miraculous transcendence of bodily suffering in the here and now, through the hoped-for vehicle of a sudden and dramatic cure. The sacrificial discourse is more concerned with the ‘long game,’ redefining bodily suffering as a form of sacrifice, with complete transcendence of this suffering accomplished in the afterlife.<sup>129</sup> Although the sacrificial discourse identified by Dahlberg relates primarily to the physical suffering of sick and disabled pilgrims, I also observed it being employed during the course of my own research not only by or in relation to Assisted Pilgrims, but also volunteer caregivers. To be clear, caregivers resisted ever associating their own challenges with those of the Assisted Pilgrims, however several helpers did describe the challenges of their care work as a form of sacrifice. When speaking of the difficulties they faced in volunteering at Lourdes, caregivers would at times refer to these struggles as “their cross to carry,” “offering it up to God,” “sharing the

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<sup>129</sup> Andrea Dahlberg, “The Body as a Principle of Holism: Three Pilgrimages to Lourdes,” in *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*, ed. John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow (London: Routledge, 1991). See also Dahlberg, “Transcendence of Bodily Suffering: An Anthropological Study of English Catholics at Lourdes” (PhD diss., London School of Economics, 1987).

burden,” and so on. Some envisioned simply being in Lourdes as a helper at all as a sacrifice, noting that they had given up a week’s holiday to be in Lourdes when they might have been with their family or friends in England’s Lake District or tanning on some Greek island. Others also cited the monetary cost of volunteering, remarking that the price of the pilgrimage had put a strain on their budget, but that they were willing to find a way to make it work. While some clearly struggled with the challenges of caregiving and the team dynamics that might accompany it as Greg had, others, if they did not relish the opportunity, at least saw their self-giving and sacrifice as having a positive outcome. As Brian described it: “It’s hard going being a helper. I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t. It’s hard to be cheery all the time and put a brave face on. But you do the best you can because you know what a difference it can make to the APs...And it’s also a bit like Lent I think, where you’re sort of giving something up. But it’s more than just sweets or TV, you’re giving something of yourself. So yes it’s hard, but I guess it can be a good thing in the end.”<sup>130</sup> As Brian alludes to here, the struggles of caregiving and the humbling of oneself in service to others entails a giving up of something, and his reference to Lent specifically suggests a degree of corporeal and spiritual discipline that may come out of the denial and challenges of care work. The Lenten emphasis on sacrifice as a form of penance may also apply to volunteer helpers’ perceptions of their work in Lourdes, however in none of my interviews was this issue raised. At times helpers

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<sup>130</sup> Interview, August 29, 2012.

like Alyssa referred to feeling a bit guilty for not helping others back home in the way that she does in Lourdes, but a sense of penance or sacrifice as an attempt at absolution was not apparent as a motive for care work.

Although Lourdes is commonly and often correctly perceived to be a Marian shrine, where the Catholic cult of devotion to the Virgin Mary is, in its sensual and perhaps medieval forms most acutely expressed, for volunteer caregivers pushing wheelchairs and working in the Accueils, their experience at Lourdes can be deeply Christocentric in their effort to adhere to the Christian ethic of love for one's neighbour. Reflected in the hymns and scripture readings selected during the course of the pilgrimage, emphasis is placed on the Christian love command realized through service to others. For many volunteer caregivers, it is not the apparitions or the reports of miraculous cures that are paradigmatic of Lourdes; rather, what is most important about the shrine is the relationship formed with the sick and disabled through volunteer care work. Volunteers understand their caregiving as enabling them to follow the example of Christ and put their faith into practice. Yet as I have shown, this is the ideal frame within which caregivers and Assisted Pilgrims work, and it is not always borne out in practice. Examining the wide range of caregiving experiences as examples of mimetic kenosis helps us to understand both the beautiful and deeply moving elements of caregiving as well as those that are for more challenging and even deeply troubling, together within a theological frame that pilgrims themselves would recognize. The invitation that is sometimes

extended at Lourdes, the offer to “Let me be as Christ to you,” can be awkward, messy and complex, yet for many volunteer caregivers, the potential for an authentic experience of Christian love and service draws them to Lourdes and informs their practice.

## III

## Pray and Play: Pilgrims, Tourists, and the Commercial Geography of Lourdes

*A tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist.*<sup>131</sup>

-Victor and Edith Turner

It's Excursion Day during the 2012 Westminster pilgrimage to Lourdes, and pilgrims are gathering in the lobbies of their respective hotels, waiting to board coaches that will transport them to Gavarnie, the Pont d'Espagne, and other destinations in the nearby Pyrénées. Most pilgrims are excitedly chatting to one another, looking forward to the short holiday in the mountains scheduled for the mid-point of the pilgrimage week. But Carol is relatively quiet, and nervous. A civil servant from west London on her fifth pilgrimage to Lourdes, she is apprehensive about the journey to Gavarnie, having heard during previous pilgrimages that the route through the mountains is not for the faint of heart. The coach, she's been told, is required to navigate narrow roads and sharp turns, all while gazing over the edge of the road down several hundred metres to the valley below. These stories had completely turned Carol off the idea of going, preferring instead to stay in the relative comfort and safety of Lourdes. This particular year however, with the gentle prodding of friends from her parish, she finally mustered the courage to board the coach and go to Gavarnie.

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<sup>131</sup> Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 20.



As we made our way through the Pyrénées I would occasionally glance over at Carol, to see how she was coping with the journey. She spent most of the coach ride with her curtain drawn, peeking out intermittently when someone drew attention to a point of interest, though she did seem more at ease as the trip progressed. Once we arrived in the village of Gavarnie, we toured a small twelfth century church, browsed the simple merchant stalls selling clothing, souvenirs, wine, and local foodstuffs, and walked along the hiking trail as far as it was feasible before turning back toward the village for a drink at one of the cafés. Carol's decision to join the excursion was rewarded as this particular café served sangria, which Carol had been on an elusive quest for since the pilgrimage began. On the return to Lourdes, I asked her whether she was glad she had finally decided to go on the trip: "You know what? If anything I now regret not having gone before. It really wasn't that bad in the end. My fear of heights hasn't changed, but it was tolerable. And Gavarnie was absolutely beautiful and a nice change of pace. I really needed that."<sup>132</sup>

This chapter explores the various ways in which English pilgrims, in the course of their week in Lourdes, bring to life Turner's oft-quoted declaration that a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist. Disrupting artificial binaries between pilgrimage-tourism, sacred-profane, austerity-consumption, among others, pilgrims seamlessly blend what are traditionally conceived to be discrete pilgrim

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<sup>132</sup> Field notes, July 25, 2012.

and tourist activities into their itineraries while in and around Lourdes. I argue that, as Carol suggests in her statement “I really needed that,” many pilgrims embrace the more touristic elements of their pilgrimage, particularly excursions into the mountains such as the one to Gavarnie, seeing no radical disjuncture with their spiritual objectives at the shrine. Rather, such trips can serve as a welcome balancing mechanism, tempering the physical and emotional exhaustion that can come with the sometimes chaotic and highly charged environment of the shrine and surrounding town. Additionally, the social and commercial elements of Lourdes – the raucous late-night bar-hopping, the seemingly endless rows of religious storefronts – also serve their purpose, not as profane distractions, but as integral to the pilgrimage experience. While explicitly self-identifying as pilgrims, Carol and many others effortlessly blend traditional touristic and pilgrimage activities together, undermining presumed dichotomies between serious pilgrims and frivolous tourists.

### *Tourism and Authenticity*

In his seminal text on tourism, Dean MacCannell advances the thesis that the desire to travel, to go forth from one’s quotidian life and take on the identity of a tourist, is bound up in what is often an unconscious quest for authenticity. Linking this to what he sees as the generalized anxiety around developing meaningful interpersonal relationships in modern society, MacCannell suggests that the

increasing popularity of tourism is a corollary of a felt need to go out and experience authentic sites and peoples, however “authentic” might be determined. The rhetoric of tourism, writes MacCannell, “is full of manifestations of the importance of the authenticity of the relationship between tourists and what they see: this is a *typical* native house; this is the *very* place the leader fell; this is the *actual* pen used to sign the law...”<sup>133</sup> This grounding of experience in sites perceived as authentic, original, really real, makes a place for unattached individuals in a modern world where there can be a growing sense of anomie. In a rather grand and totalizing statement on the implicit motives of travel, MacCannell declares: “Modern man has been condemned to look elsewhere, everywhere, for his authenticity, to see if he can catch a glimpse of it reflected in the simplicity, poverty, chastity, or purity of others.”<sup>134</sup> For MacCannell then, the technological and social advances of modernity do not only facilitate travel, rendering it more convenient and affordable through contemporary modes of transit and package tours. They also necessitate it, as an opportunity to escape from what is viewed as the superficial trappings of one’s social world and to experience encounters with the authentic.

MacCannell’s observations on tourism as a quest for the authentic still hold some resonance in current debates within the scholarship on tourism and mobility. Indeed, I have suggested throughout that the notion of an authentic encounter is a

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<sup>133</sup> MacCannell, *The Tourist*, 14.

<sup>134</sup> MacCannell, *The Tourist*, 41.

hallmark of pilgrims' experiences at Lourdes.<sup>135</sup> Nevertheless, in the decades subsequent to the publication of MacCannell's *The Tourist*, his thesis has come under increasing scrutiny. Perhaps the most notable rebuttal has been voiced by Edward Bruner, who writes against MacCannell's thesis on the anomie of modern society, noting: "most tourists are quite satisfied with their own society, most are not alienated, and they are not necessarily seeking an authentic experience elsewhere."<sup>136</sup> His criticism of authenticity as a lens through which to examine the motives and experiences of tourists is further elaborated in his more recent work, where he describes theories around authenticity as a red herring, worth consideration only when tourists, locals, or those in the tourism industry explicitly use the term. He views as his personal project the task of moving beyond what he sees as limiting binaries between authentic-inauthentic, true-false, real-show, back-front.<sup>137</sup> I will soon highlight however that in some ethnographies on pilgrimage, these binaries are shown to be still deeply entrenched in the attitudes of some pilgrims as well as organizers or shrine officials.

Authenticity as a key trope in tourism studies remains hotly contested, yet has its defenders. Foremost among them are Yaniv Belhassen and Kellee Caton, who argue against calls even more pointed than Bruner's that authenticity as an

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<sup>135</sup> See Chapter Five for a discussion of film tourism and authenticity in relation to pilgrims who have viewed the film *The Song of Bernadette* and their engagement with various sites in and around Lourdes.

<sup>136</sup> Edward M. Bruner, "The Transformation of Self in Tourism," *Annals of Tourism Research* 18 (1991): 240.

<sup>137</sup> Edward M. Bruner, *Culture on Tour: Ethnographies of Travel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5.

organizing principle be abandoned or significantly revised.<sup>138</sup> While they concede that past conceptualizations of authenticity have been problematic, they highlight that nevertheless such notions are alive and well in the minds of many tourists, and scholars cannot simply abandon a concept that figures prominently in tourist discourses due to its imprecise and slippery theoretical nature. Rather, in calling scholars to renew attention to authenticity, they argue:

One of the primary purposes of social research is to understand why humans act and believe as they do, as well as to explore the consequences of their actions and beliefs for others and the natural world. If travel agents use the word “authenticity” in their brochures, then it is apparently still relevant for brokers and for potential tourists. Indeed, it is not denied that the word “authenticity” means different things to different tourists and brokers – that even in common parlance it is conceptualized in myriad ways...as long as the many notions of object authenticity are still “out there” in the minds and lives of individuals acting in the “tourism world,” it is for academia to study them. Such notions play a significant role in the tourism industry; they are quite real in their consequences, and thus cannot be ignored if scholars are to understand society.<sup>139</sup>

As I have noted elsewhere, following Belhassen and Caton I contend that regardless of the debate around the term, authenticity still holds as a key element of the discourse and lived experience of tourism. The same can be said of pilgrimage, if for no other reason than that pilgrims themselves use the term or others closely analogous to it in describing their engagement with the sites and people they encounter in Lourdes. In the previous chapter I drew attention to one of the key

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<sup>138</sup> See Yvette Reisinger and Carol Steiner, “Reconceptualizing Object Authenticity,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 33 (2005).

<sup>139</sup> Yaniv Belhassen and Kellee Caton, “Authenticity Matters,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 33 (2006): 855.

motives for volunteer helpers to undertake care work in Lourdes, namely the value derived from the intimate and highly emotive interpersonal engagement that emerges from their work in the Accueil. Later in Chapter Five, I will highlight the visits made by pilgrims to the village where Bernadette worked for a time, the small one-room dwelling where she and her family lived during the apparitions, and visits to the grotto itself, as evidence of the importance placed on the authenticity of these sites. Echoing the earlier quotation from MacCannell, pilgrims invariably describe these sites as “the place where Our Lady truly appeared to Bernadette,” “the fireplace where Bernadette’s mother cooked their meals,” and so on. The integrity of the grotto in particular is crucial in maintaining the authenticity of the entire apparition narrative. Though I would refrain from going as far as MacCannell to suggest that travel universally entails a quest for authenticity, it still remains an important determining factor in the experience of pilgrims to Lourdes. I subscribe to the argument advanced by Ellen Badone that “although authenticity may dissolve into a chimera of simulacra from some analytical vantage points in anthropology, sociology and cultural studies, the quest for authenticity can remain a powerful motivating force for on-the-ground behaviour, including travel.”<sup>140</sup> As I show in the remainder of this study, encounters with place and person perceived by pilgrims as authentic are highly valued elements of the pilgrimage experience.

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<sup>140</sup> Ellen Badone, “Crossing Boundaries: Exploring the Borderlands of Ethnography, Tourism, and Pilgrimage,” in *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism*, ed. Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 182.

*Pilgrimage and Tourism: Continuums and Binaries*

The quote by Victor and Edith Turner that prefaced this chapter, that “a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist,” precipitated a series of theoretical reflections on the theme of tourism and its correspondence (or lack thereof) to pilgrimage. Formative in these early attempts to extend the reach of tourism studies to pilgrimage was Erik Cohen. In his “phenomenology of tourist experiences,” Cohen distinguishes between five principal modes of tourist experience: (1) The Recreational Mode, (2) The Diversionary Mode, (3) The Experiential Mode, (4) The Experimental Mode, and (5) The Existential Mode. For our purposes here, the existential mode of tourist experience is most pertinent, as it is most closely analogous to pilgrimage for Cohen. In fact, he makes it clear that these various modes have been arrayed, such as they are, on a sliding continuum in order to draw attention to the span between “the experience of the tourist as the traveller in pursuit of ‘mere’ pleasure in the strange and the novel, to that of the modern pilgrim in quest of meaning at somebody else’s centre.”<sup>141</sup> Regarding the existential mode specifically, Cohen elaborates on the distinction between pilgrims and tourists regarding this existential travel. For pilgrims, traditional religious pilgrimage is a sacred journey to a place that, while geographically “ex-centric” is still the centre of the pilgrim’s faith community. This centre is a given for the pilgrim, it is not a matter of whim or choice. For the existential tourist however, the

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<sup>141</sup> Erik Cohen, “A Phenomenology of Tourist Experiences,” *Sociology* 13 (1979): 183.

centre is elective, not only ex-centric to their daily life but completely on the periphery of all that is known.<sup>142</sup> While the capacity of travel to foster this existential state links tourism and pilgrimage for Cohen, the location of and travel to centres is a clear dividing line between the two identities. This is elaborated by Cohen in a later work, where he observes that: “Pilgrimage then often becomes indistinguishable from tourism, so that the analytical distinction between pilgrim-tourists, who travel toward the religious, political, or cultural centres of their cultural world, and traveler-tourists, who travel away from them into the periphery of that world, tends to become empirically blurred.”<sup>143</sup>

Distinctions can indeed be made between pilgrim and tourist, however the motives, habits, and experiences of the two continuously intersect and are difficult to separate and identify. While Cohen maintains that some distinctions do exist, Nelson Graburn goes further in drawing a direct line between pilgrimage and tourism, describing tourism as a form of sacred journey<sup>144</sup> and drawing the conclusion that there is no hard and fast dividing line between pilgrimage and tourism. Although he does not claim that all forms of tourism bear a resemblance to the hallmarks of the pilgrimage experience, the possibility of overlap for the individual dependent on the conditions they find themselves in cannot be ruled

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<sup>142</sup> Cohen, “Tourist Experiences,” 191.

<sup>143</sup> Erik Cohen, “Pilgrimage and Tourism: Convergence and Divergence,” in *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, ed. Alan Morinis (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 59.

<sup>144</sup> Nelson Graburn, “Tourism: The Sacred Journey,” in *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism*, ed. Valene L. Smith (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).



out.<sup>145</sup> In the same issue of *Annals of Tourism Research*, Bryan Pfaffenberger reinforces Graburn's observation based on his own fieldwork at Buddhist and Hindu pilgrimage sites in Sri Lanka. Acknowledging the anxieties caused by the apparent rupture of these categories of pilgrim and tourist at these sites, where some engage in raucous, unsanctioned behaviour, Pfaffenberger concludes that "the difference between tourism and pilgrimage lies not so much in any radical phenomenological difference between them...but rather in the culturally supplied language of symbols in which travelers are obliged to express their perigrinations."<sup>146</sup> Even in this distinction between the symbolic language of pilgrims and tourists, where pilgrims might employ a language of miracles, faith, and encounters with the divine, and tourists a language of recreation, relaxation, and play, there may still be overlap according to Pfaffenberger.

As the study of pilgrimage developed into a sub-discipline in its own right, debates around the correlation between pilgrimage and tourism continued, with an increasing recognition that the boundaries between the categories of pilgrim and tourist are highly malleable at best. Moving beyond earlier scholarship which was often exclusively theoretical in nature, more recent fieldwork driven studies have explored the relationship between pilgrimage and tourism grounded in the experience of travellers. One such example of this movement is Ellen Badone and

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<sup>145</sup> Nelson Graburn, "The Anthropology of Tourism," *Annals of Tourism Research* 10 (1983): 16.

<sup>146</sup> Bryan Pfaffenberger, "Serious Pilgrims and Frivolous Tourists: The Chimera of Tourism in the Pilgrimages of Sri Lanka," *Annals of Tourism Research* 10 (1983): 72.

Sharon Roseman's anthology *Intersecting Journeys*, consisting of a series of field-based chapters exploring this theme. Badone and Roseman, following Graburn and others, contend that "rigid dichotomies between pilgrimage and tourism, or pilgrims and tourists, no longer seem tenable in the shifting world of postmodern travel... we seek to highlight the similarities between two categories of travel, pilgrimage and tourism, that have been frequently regarded as conceptual opposites."<sup>147</sup> Badone expands on this in her epilogue to the text, where she helpfully deconstructs the aforementioned binary between pilgrimage and tourism, which she attributes in part to "a set of implicit oppositions in Western thinking that are themselves the product of the Judeo-Christian and classical heritage."<sup>148</sup>

Badone outlines this binary as follows:

money	asceticism
consumption	poverty
evil	good
low	high
material	spiritual
tourism	pilgrimage

Underpinning this binary for Badone is the prevalence of Western characterizations of tourism as frivolous or hedonistic. This observation is also highlighted by Pfaffenberger. Yet while such a juxtaposition between the perceived frivolous nature of tourism and the serious, sacrificial characteristics of pilgrimage are

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<sup>147</sup> Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman, "Approaches to the Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism," in *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism*, ed. Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 2.

<sup>148</sup> Badone, "Crossing Boundaries," 185.

perhaps still idealized in the minds of some scholars and pilgrims alike, ethnographies on pilgrimage over the past two decades have predominantly stressed the blurring of these lines, finding that tourists can in fact experience a sense of the numinous, and pilgrims too can cross over to the other side of the binary outlined by Badone and revel in activities traditionally ascribed to hedonistic tourism.

### *Blurred Lines in the Field*

Several scholars point to the challenge posed by attempts to determine the travel motives of their interlocutors. A pivotal ethnography in the literature on pilgrimage and tourism is Nancy Louise Frey's *Pilgrim Stories*, on the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route across northern Spain. Based on her fieldwork over the course of several pilgrimages, she observes that there is no simple way to mark the difference between pilgrimage and tourism from a theoretical standpoint, and that "rather than simply claim pilgrimage as faith and tourism as frivolous, it is important to look more deeply into the life-worlds and values that shape travelers' journeys."<sup>149</sup> Several recent ethnographies have followed Frey's call. In her work on the Kumbh Mela, a series of festivals that rotate between the Indian holy cities of Haridwar, Ujjain, Nasik, and Allahabad (Prayag), Kama Maclean observes that pilgrims along the Kumbh Mela have always incorporated an element of tourism into their religious journeys. Pilgrim guides from the early twentieth century offer

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<sup>149</sup> Frey, *Pilgrim Stories*, 228.

religious and ritual advice, but also recommend including nearby tourist attractions into their itinerary.<sup>150</sup> Lee Cahaner and Yoel Mansfeld, in their research on what they refer to as “Haredi tourists,” contend that these travellers freely mix secular and religious elements into their journeys to various sites in Israel. Perhaps surprisingly, they suggest that the experience of Haredi tourists leans so heavily on the touristic or secular side of the traditional pilgrimage-tourism binary that their behaviour is best described as “tourism made by religious people rather than what has been defined as religious tourism.”<sup>151</sup> In a similar vein, Veronica della Dora observes that for visitors to the peninsula of Mount Athos and Meteora in Greece, some self-identify as tourists, some as pilgrims, and some even as a sort of pilgrim-tourist hybrid. While della Dora distinguishes between pilgrims who are after an encounter with the holy and tourists who seek out cultural otherness or pristine nature, these boundaries blur in what is the common attractor for tourist and pilgrim alike, the unique landscape of the region.<sup>152</sup> The landscape then, as the common ground for both pilgrim and tourist, allows for the dissolution or intersecting of these categories to occur.

The difficulty at times in distinguishing pilgrim and tourist on the ground is also acknowledged by Robert Shepherd in his research on Wutai Shan, a Chinese

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<sup>150</sup> Kama Maclean, “Seeing, Being Seen, and Not Being Seen: Pilgrimage, Tourism, and Layers of Looking at the Kumbh Mela,” *CrossCurrents* 59 (2009): 333.

<sup>151</sup> Lee Cahaner and Yoel Mansfeld, “A Voyage from Religiousness to Secularity and Back: A Glimpse into Haredi Tourists,” *Journal of Heritage Tourism* 7 (2012): 317.

<sup>152</sup> Veronica della Dora, “Setting and Blurring Boundaries: Pilgrims, Tourists, and Landscape in Mount Athos and Meteora,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 39 (2012): 971.

site visited primarily by Buddhist pilgrims which has recently been designated as both a UNESCO World Heritage site and a national park. From his fieldwork, Shepherd notes that “people travel for a multitude of reasons, and even at a religious site, ostensibly faith-driven visitors engage in a range of behaviours. They may pray, travel along a predetermined route, visit a set number of shrine-like destinations, and yet also eat well, shop for souvenirs, and broadly speaking, ‘have fun.’”<sup>153</sup> This observation is also borne out in Badone’s research on the annual Romany pilgrimage to Les-Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer on the Mediterranean coast of France, where she describes North American “pilgrim-tourists” to the region, who join tours organized by a company that specializes in sacred journeys to sites in France associated with Mary Magdalene, the Holy Grail, Cathars, Templars, and the like.<sup>154</sup> Shepherd’s reference to the ludic elements of pilgrimage, the eating, shopping, recreation, and general carnival atmosphere will be explored in more detail regarding the experiences of Lourdes pilgrims.

It should be stressed however that despite the preponderance of studies emphasizing the blurred lines between pilgrimage and tourism, rigid distinctions do exist in the minds of some pilgrims and tourists. Returning to Frey’s research on

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<sup>153</sup> Robert Shepherd, *Faith in Heritage: Displacement, Development, and Religious Tourism in Contemporary China* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013), 122. On the blurring between pilgrimage and tourism at Asian religious sites see also Philip Taylor, *Goddess on the Rise: Pilgrimage and Popular Religion in Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004).

<sup>154</sup> Ellen Badone, “Pilgrimage, Tourism and *The da Vinci Code* at Les-Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, France,” *Culture and Religion* 9 (2008): 37. See also Eric Wiley, “Romani Performance and Heritage Tourism: The Pilgrimage of the Gypsies at Les-Saintes-Marie-de-la-Mer,” *The Drama Review* 49 (2005).

the Camino, although she notes that parsing out the distinctions between tourist and pilgrim motives and behaviour is challenging and perhaps foolhardy, she does highlight the ways in which several pilgrims and shrine officials self-identify and elevate their status as faith-motivated pilgrims in rigid contradistinction to others on the Camino who are dismissed as tourists. She writes how one particular French gatekeeper, who stamps the credentials of pilgrims as they begin the Camino, may refuse to do so if they are determined by her not to be “authentic” pilgrims, due to such factors as wearing casual street clothing or lacking accreditation from their parish priest.<sup>155</sup> The language of authenticity also informs judgments of one’s motives and mode of transit, where those that cycle or travel by bus instead of walk, or travel the Camino as a form of recreation are viewed as fake or watered down pilgrims.<sup>156</sup> These attitudes on the part of some pilgrims and officials is also evident in John Eade’s research at Lourdes, in which he describes sharp disagreement among pilgrims on the value of the souvenir shops which line the streets. As Eade documents, those pilgrims who buy souvenirs are considered by fellow pilgrims to be behaving “just like tourists” and are therefore categorized as fake pilgrims.<sup>157</sup> The language of authenticity then does indeed factor into pilgrims assessments of their experiences. Unlike MacCannell’s thesis on tourism as a quest for authenticity however, these examples highlight authenticity as a lens for determining real and

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<sup>155</sup> Frey, *Pilgrim Stories*, 69.

<sup>156</sup> Frey, *Pilgrim Stories*, 129.

<sup>157</sup> John Eade, “Pilgrimage and Tourism at Lourdes, France,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 19 (1992): 28.

fake pilgrims, those with religious motivations and those visiting pilgrimage sites out of simple curiosity or cultural interest. I will show that in the course of my research at Lourdes, I found very little evidence of such language of authenticity used in this way, as a tool for separating out real and fake pilgrims. In fact, those that joined diocesan pilgrimages to Lourdes, while certainly acknowledging a difference between their travel to Lourdes and holidays in the Greek islands for example, saw little distinction between their activities in the shrine domain and in the areas surrounding Lourdes. Both elements comprised the totality of the pilgrimage experience for them.

### *Unconventional Pilgrimage*

To this point I have provided a brief overview of attempts made in tourism studies and in anthropological approaches to pilgrimage to understand the points of convergence and divergence between the two. Beyond determinations of what characteristics identify travellers as pilgrim or tourist, recent scholarship has also extended this discussion further to touch on particular sites, events, and journeys which appear to be completely secular with no explicit religious components, yet are perceived to bear the hallmarks of more ‘conventional’ religious pilgrimages. Peter Jan Margry notes that due to its frequent use in the media since the 1980s, “the concept of pilgrimage has become embedded in common parlance, all the more because the massive ‘subjective turn’ in Western society meant that basically

everyone could decide for themselves what they regarded as a pilgrimage destination, and sanctity or sacrality could be attributed to anyone or anything.”<sup>158</sup> And Ian Reader suggests that pilgrimage as a concept or phenomenon should not be restricted within religious boundaries.<sup>159</sup>

Multiple large events, historical sites, celebrity graves, and forms of travel then have been analysed as an unconventional form of pilgrimage. One arguably obvious example is travel to battlefield commemoration sites and war graves. I say obvious as historically these journeys were explicitly labelled as a pilgrimage by organizers and participants. David Lloyd in his research on tours of battlefields of the First World War cites a number of factors which contributed to perceptions of battlefields as a place imbued with the sacred, turning what might typically be a site for tourists into a pilgrimage destination. These include the massive loss of life that required some resolution for bereavement, as well as the spiritual nature of the struggle articulated in sermons and wartime propaganda.<sup>160</sup> Other sites associated with tragic world events have also become places of unconventional pilgrimage, including more recently Ground Zero, the location of the terrorist attacks on the

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<sup>158</sup> Peter Jan Margry, “Secular Pilgrimage: A Contradiction in Terms?” in *Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World: New Itineraries into the Sacred*, ed. Peter Jan Margry (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 17.

<sup>159</sup> Ian Reader, “Introduction,” in *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture*, ed. Ian Reader and Tony Walter (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 1993), 9.

<sup>160</sup> David W. Lloyd, *Battlefield Tourism: Pilgrimage and the Commemoration of the Great War in Britain, Australia and Canada, 1919-1939* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 1998), 26. For additional studies on battlefield pilgrimages see Tony Walter, “War Grave Pilgrimage,” in *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture*, ed. Ian Reader and Tony Walter (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 1993), and Catherine M. Cameron and John B. Gatewood, “Battlefield Pilgrims at Gettysburg National Military Park,” *Ethnology* 43 (2004).



World Trade Center towers in New York on September 11, 2001. The sacrality of Ground Zero, according to Jennifer Selby, is best understood within the frame of Robert Bellah and others' conception of American civil religion, where religious rhetoric is utilized to promote a shared nationalism in response to the trauma of the attacks.<sup>161</sup> Outside of sites associated with loss and death, scholars have argued for visits to San Francisco by the gay community, hiking trips through American national parks, and cross-country motorcycle treks by veterans of the Vietnam War to be understood as forms of pilgrimage not associated with institutional religion.<sup>162</sup> This is only a representative sample of the wide range of phenomena now falling within the purview of those studying unconventional forms of pilgrimage.

Although this study is concerned with what is a relatively clear-cut example of a Roman Catholic Marian pilgrimage shrine *par excellence*, nevertheless attending to the elasticity of pilgrimage both conceptually and in practice is helpful when exploring the diverse range of behaviours and activities engaged in by contemporary pilgrims to Lourdes. Anything is capable of being shot through with flashes of the sacred. Even 'traditional' pilgrimage can include quiet reflection in

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<sup>161</sup> Jennifer Selby, "The Politics of Pilgrimage: The Social Construction of Ground Zero," in *On the Road to Being There: Studies in Pilgrimage and Tourism in Late Modernity*, ed. William H. Swatos (Boston: Brill, 2006), 162. See also Marita Sturken, "The Aesthetics of Absence: Rebuilding Ground Zero," *American Ethnologist* 31 (2004).

<sup>162</sup> Alyssa Howe, "Queer Pilgrimage: The San Francisco Homeland and Identity Tourism," *Cultural Anthropology* 16 (2001); Lynn Ross-Bryant, *Pilgrimage to the National Parks: Religion and Nature in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Jill Dubisch, "Sites of Memory, Sites of Sorrow: An American Veterans' Motorcycle Pilgrimage," in *Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World: New Itineraries into the Sacred*, ed. Peter Jan Margry (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008).

the shadow of the grotto, hikes through the foothills of the Pyrénées, or drunken bar-hopping through the streets of Lourdes. In the pages that follow, I contend that participants in the diocesan pilgrimages and pilgrimage tour groups I joined overwhelmingly self-identified as pilgrims. Not once can I recall meeting someone in Lourdes who considered themselves a tourist.<sup>163</sup> However their self-identification as pilgrims did not prevent them from visiting historical and commercial sites in Lourdes, leaving the town to go on recreational excursions into the mountains, or raucously socializing in the evenings. In fact many viewed these activities as complimentary if not necessary elements of the pilgrimage experience, providing balance and indeed release from the hectic and sometimes overwhelming physical and emotional pace of the pilgrimage week.

### *Facilitating Pilgrimage*

With the exception of my first visit to Lourdes in August-September 2011, all of the pilgrimages I joined from England to Lourdes were facilitated by Tangney Tours, a family-owned Catholic pilgrimage tour company based in Borough Green, Kent in southeast England. It is the largest operator in this category in the United Kingdom, sending up to sixteen thousand pilgrims to Lourdes alone each

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<sup>163</sup> I should caution however that given these were diocesan pilgrimages drawing from the congregations of local parishes, and the pilgrimage tour company was explicitly Catholic in its focus and advertised heavily in British Catholic publications, my research was perhaps limited to those visitors to Lourdes who were more likely to identify themselves as practicing Catholics with a faith motive for visiting Lourdes. It should be noted however that even when self-identified atheists or agnostics were interviewed (most of whom worked as caregivers in the Accueil), they often identified strictly as “helpers” as an alternative to pilgrims or tourists.

summer.<sup>164</sup> It coordinates the majority of British diocesan pilgrimages to Lourdes, including Plymouth, Birmingham and Lancaster, in addition to Westminster and the Catholic Association. Celebrating their 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2014, Tangney Tours was founded by John Tangney, the son of a London GP who began serving as a doctor on pilgrimages to Lourdes in 1954. Twenty years later, coincidentally on February 11, 1974 (the anniversary of the first reported apparitions of the Virgin Mary to Bernadette Soubirous), Tangney Tours was established initially not as a pilgrimage tour company but as a general group tour operator. It only began to offer pilgrimages to continental Europe two years later, and quickly evolved exclusively into a pilgrimage tour company. John Tangney still plays a key role in its management, but it is now majority owned by John's sons, Nicholas and William.<sup>165</sup> It employs seven full-time staff in its office in Borough Green, with additional full and part-time staff on the ground in some of the more high traffic pilgrimage locations Tangney Tours serves, such as Lourdes and Fatima. Most recently in March 2013, Tangney Tours assumed the operations of one of their main competitors in the British pilgrimage tour industry, Mancunia Travel, opening an office in Manchester and now directly serving pilgrims in the north of England.

Since the founding of the company, and especially given the Tangney family's own personal connection to the shrine, facilitating pilgrimages to Lourdes has been the primary focus of the tour company. It coordinates the only direct

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<sup>164</sup> "Bright News from Lourdes," *Catholic Herald*, August 8, 2008, 11.

<sup>165</sup> "History," Tangney Tours, <http://www.tangney-tours.com/about/history>.

chartered flights from the south of England to Lourdes, operated by Titan Airways and flying direct from Stansted Airport northeast of London to Tarbes-Lourdes-Pyrénées Airport each Monday and Friday during the main pilgrimage season from April-October. Before chartering flights with Titan Airways, Tangney Tours took advantage of the very first direct air service to Lourdes from London provided by Dan Air, Britain's largest independent airline at the time, in June 1985, flying from Gatwick to Lourdes. These early flights were equipped to accommodate twenty disabled pilgrims, reserving nearly a quarter of the plane's seats for their use. This enabled pilgrims, especially those with limited mobility, to make the journey to Lourdes seamlessly without need for coach or rail connections in Paris, Toulouse, or Pau.<sup>166</sup> Depending on the needs and size of the pilgrimages it is coordinating, Tangney Tours will also organize coach trips in cooperation with Brookline, a coach hire company also based in Kent, as well as scheduled train journeys to Lourdes via Eurostar and the TGV service operated by France's national rail company SNCF. Further demonstrating its focus on servicing Lourdes as a pilgrimage destination, in 1999 Tangney Tours and another British Catholic travel company, Spes Travel, combined forces with the Hôtel Le Méditerranée and Hôtel Alba to purchase the sixty-three room, three star Hôtel Beau Site on the opposite bank of the river.<sup>167</sup> Tangney Tours now has their Lourdes 'field office' in the hotel, and Spes Travel was later absorbed into the company.

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<sup>166</sup> "Airborne Pilgrim Progress," *Catholic Herald*, July 12, 1985, 10.

<sup>167</sup> "Better Deals for Pilgrims," *Catholic Herald*, September 24, 1999, 3.

Tangney Tours advertises heavily in British Catholic publications such as *The Tablet*, *Catholic Herald*, and *The Universe*, and their literature makes it explicitly clear that they are a pilgrimage tour company owned and operated by a practicing Catholic family offering journeys to established Catholic pilgrimage sites. In addition to Lourdes, their most recent brochure for the 2014 season includes package tours to such pilgrimage centres as Rome, San Giovanni Rotondo, Fatima, Poland, The Holy Land, Santiago de Compostela, Medjugorje, and Lisieux. Their brochure lists the reasons why pilgrims choose to travel with Tangney Tours for their pilgrimages:

1. All our destinations have been visited by Tangney Tours staff.
2. A courier service and/or local representatives will accompany you throughout your pilgrimage.
3. Full spiritual itinerary for all destinations.
4. Knowledgeable, courteous, and dedicated staff.
5. Wheelchair users and pilgrims requiring special care and their helpers are welcome as are individuals, families, groups, and Diocesan Pilgrimages.

In their list Tangney Tours articulates some of the reasons why any potential tourist would decide to opt to travel with a particular tour company, noting familiarity with the destination served, the feeling of security that might come from having “handlers” during the course of the trip, and friendly, committed staff. Reasons 3 and 5 however are quite clearly unique to a pilgrimage tour company, and perhaps even more so to travel to Lourdes, referring specifically to their capacity to make suitable arrangements for the sick and disabled. In fact, during the rather chaotic boarding of the plane at the conclusion of the Westminster pilgrimage which was

described in the previous chapter, Nicholas Tangney himself actively assisted in manoeuvring quite heavy wheelchairs and pilgrims onto the plane.

Although the Westminster and Catholic Association pilgrimages have their own itineraries which Tangney Tours only assists in facilitating, and these remain relatively fixed year after year,<sup>168</sup> pilgrimage tours organized solely by Tangney Tours all have their own “spiritual itineraries” which punctuate participants’ private devotions during their time in Lourdes. When I joined a Tangney Tours pilgrimage by coach and ferry to Lourdes for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception in December 2012, our whirlwind two-day trip was packed with masses and other religious services. It was in essence a “Coles Notes” version of the larger week-long pilgrimages. Arriving late, we just missed our breakfast at the hotel and the International Mass in the St. Pius X Basilica. As it was the Feast of the Immaculate Conception pilgrims were desperate to attend mass, and since Tangney Tours ensures that a priest accompanies each pilgrimage to serve as the spiritual director, a private mass was hastily arranged in a small, frigid chapel just off the main Basilica of the Immaculate Conception which stands over top of the grotto. Following the mass pilgrims were given the opportunity to either go to the baths or have their confession heard at the Chapel of Reconciliation adjacent to the main procession square, and this was followed by Eucharistic Adoration, the praying of the rosary at the grotto, and the torchlight Marian procession in the evening. Still

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<sup>168</sup> See Chapter One for an outline of the respective pilgrimage itineraries of Westminster and the Catholic Association.

exhausted from the coach journey, pilgrims then had an early start the following morning for Sunday Mass at the grotto at 7:30am. After breakfast, pilgrims were led in the Way of the Cross, at the “Low” Stations of the Cross strikingly carved from slabs of white marble, which are accessible to all pilgrims just down the river from the grotto. The remainder of the afternoon was left open for private devotions or a walking tour of Lourdes, before boarding the coach again for the return to London.

I briefly sketch out the itinerary for this particular pilgrimage to Lourdes to highlight the emphasis Tangney Tours places on ensuring the spiritual needs of pilgrims are met during their time in Lourdes. Since Tangney Tours self-identifies as a Catholic pilgrimage tour company after all, it is natural that pilgrims would expect a comprehensive spiritual itinerary. Each participant on pilgrimages organized by Tangney Tours is given a prayerbook and guide to Lourdes, and the information pack which is mailed out to pilgrims two weeks before the pilgrimage includes prayers as well as a description of the Immaculate Conception, understandable given that it is often misunderstood and confused with the Catholic belief in the virgin birth of Jesus. Perhaps most interestingly for the purposes of this chapter, it also includes a definition of pilgrimage, which reads in part:

For over a thousand years pilgrimage has been an important part of our Christian tradition. This tradition continues today in Lourdes where Mary the Mother of God invites us to extricate ourselves from our daily routine, distractions and pressures to undertake this journey of discovery. A journey where we are asked to listen as She echoes Her Son’s call, the call of the prophets, to conversion of the heart.

Lest there be any risk of confusion, the language employed by Tangney Tours is unambiguously clear in identifying this travel as faith-motivated pilgrimage, framing it as the latest manifestation of a long-held Christian tradition. The modes of travel and destinations may have changed, but this impulse to embark on a journey of discovery and spiritual self-realization remains. The task of Tangney Tours then is to assist in satisfying it.



Figure 11. *Pilgrims being led through the Low Stations of the Cross, December 9, 2012. Image Credit: Author.*



Although the emphasis is very clearly on the spiritual element of their pilgrimages, Tangney Tours also offers recreational and cultural tourism opportunities as part of their programme. During the pilgrimage described above, we detoured briefly from the return journey to London and swung through Paris, where we stopped at the Chapel of the Miraculous Medal on the Rue du Bac, and were also given a panoramic tour of the most well-known landmarks such as the Louvre, Eiffel Tower, and Notre-Dame. We were also provided some time to browse through Le Bon Marché, an upscale department store just around the corner from the Chapel. This blend of sightseeing and shopping is also integrated into pilgrims' itineraries at Lourdes. The aforementioned prayer and guidebook that was given to pilgrims by Tangney Tours, in addition to providing the story of Bernadette and the apparitions, information on the services held at Lourdes and prayers for various stages of the pilgrimage, also includes a detailed section on excursions into the Pyrénées as well as sites around Lourdes outside the shrine domain. The guidebook observes that:

Many pilgrims to Lourdes become so preoccupied with the central pilgrimage area that they never venture out of the hotels and shops district, and consequently miss out on a completely different side to Lourdes: the old town...Why not spend a few hours looking round the upper town? Here you will see a provincial town as pretty as any other, with its variety of shops, its colourful set of street-traders, its halles (covered markets), as well as a whole series of good restaurants.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Oliver Todd, *The Lourdes Pilgrim: A Prayerbook & Guide* (Chelmsford, UK: Matthew James Publishing, 2003), 59.

Pilgrims are also reminded that Lourdes, situated in the foothills of the Pyrénées, is a perfect launching pad for going out and seeing some of the mountain range's most well-known landmarks, including the Pont d'Espagne, Cauterets, and Gavarnie. In the past Tangney Tours has even advertised pilgrimages to Lourdes in the winter months as a chance to both pray at the grotto during Christmas and also go skiing in the surrounding mountains. In a brief article in the *Catholic Herald* on this opportunity entitled "Skiing Down the Spiritual Slopes," it is noted that a combined skiing and pilgrimage package will cost something between £300-500 per person, and is especially being targeted toward Catholic schools during their Christmas break. In an interview with John Tangney cited in the article, he stresses: "As a skiing area the Pyrénées are unsurpassed. It's 2300 metres high and to get there from Lourdes is one of the shortest transfer times of any area in Europe. It's very, very near – only 35 minutes away – and there's snow there already."<sup>170</sup>

While Tangney Tours is unambiguously a pilgrimage tour company, catering to the needs of what are by and large self-identified Catholic pilgrims, nevertheless it serves as an ideal case study for highlighting the blurred lines between what are traditionally juxtaposed categories of pilgrimage and tourism. One day participants may be led through the grotto and baths at the shrine, the next they are relaxing and having an ice cream on the shores of the Lac de Lourdes outside the town. As the remainder of this chapter will indicate, the porous

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<sup>170</sup> "Skiing Down the Spiritual Slopes," *Catholic Herald*, October 13, 1995, 3.

boundaries between pilgrimage and tourism suggested by the activities organized by Tangney Tours is reflected not only in the behaviours of pilgrims participating in these activities, but also in their perceptions of what the spectrum of pilgrim experience consists of.

### *Trekking Out into the Mountains*

As I just noted, pilgrims are reminded by tour operators that Lourdes is ideally situated for excursions into the Pyrénées, and many participants on the pilgrimages I joined took advantage of this opportunity. Both the Westminster and Catholic Association pilgrimages included as part of their itineraries an “Excursion Day” around the mid-point of their week in Lourdes. While the remainder of their time is filled with masses and other sacraments, processions, as well as visits to the grotto and the baths, the Excursion Day is left relatively open for pilgrims to decide how to spend their “day off” from the usual liturgical calendar of the pilgrimage week. For an additional fee typically ranging from €15-25, pilgrims can choose between various destinations ranging from thirty minutes to a one and a half hour drive from the centre of Lourdes.

Two of the most popular sites pilgrims visit are Gavarnie and the Pont d’Espagne. The Cirque de Gavarnie, adjacent to the border with Spain, was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1997 for its natural and cultural significance, and consists of an immense rock wall rising to a height of more than 1 700 metres,

cut out of the landscape by a glacier over twenty thousand years ago. It also features what is according to some promotional brochures the tallest waterfall in France. This waterfall is the source of the Gave de Pau which wends its way through the Pyrénées and flows past the grotto in Lourdes. Visitors to Gavarnie have the opportunity to rent out donkeys and ride to the base of the falls, although given our tight schedule most did not have time to do this. The village of Gavarnie, though small, primarily caters to tourists, with the main street where coaches drop off visitors lined with cafés and bars as well as shops selling local wine, clothing and other textiles made out of sheep's wool, and chocolates and other confections. The village also features a small twelfth century church, which served as a medieval stage on the Camino de Santiago. The highlight of the church is a fifteenth century wooden statue of Our Lady of Good Passage, depicted holding out and offering a water flask to thirsty pilgrims as they journey along the Camino.



Figure 12. *The Cirque de Gavarnie, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.* Image Credit: Author

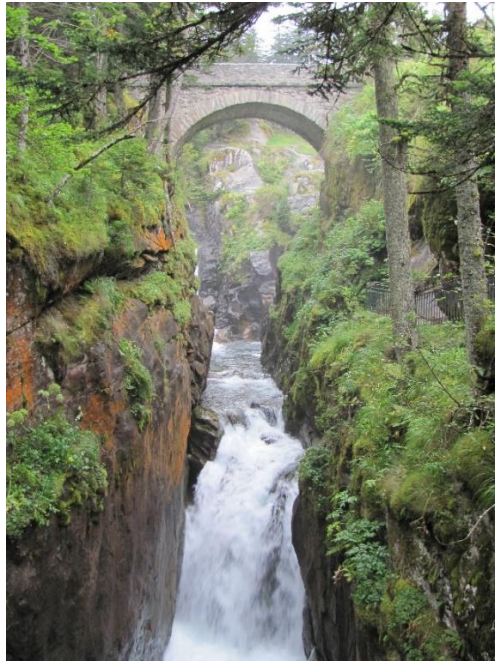


Figure 13. *The Pont d'Espagne, located at the entrance to Pyrénées National Park. Image Credit: Author*

The Pont d'Espagne is along the route between Lourdes and Gavarnie, though given time constraints excursions there are offered as a stand-alone trip. At the entrance of the Pyrénées National Park, the Pont d'Espagne features a series of stunning cascading waterfalls and an old arch bridge which spans the rushing water. Marked pathways run through the forests along the riverbank, leading to the departure point for a chair-lift to the Lac de Gaube, a glacial lake at one of the highest points in the Pyrénées. As part of a protected natural conservation area, the Pont d'Espagne offers little in the way of amenities beyond a small gift shop and washroom facilities. Not far from the site however is Cauterets, which became renowned in the nineteenth century as a spa town where those suffering from

rheumatism and respiratory complications would seek relief, though it is now more popular as a skiing destination.

Unlike Carol at the beginning of this chapter, who delayed her first foray into the Pyrénées as she was quite nervous about going on an excursion along the winding, narrow route that takes coaches from Lourdes to Gavarnie, most pilgrims were indeed quite eager to take advantage of the Excursion Day and get out of Lourdes. As I've alluded to, beyond the sheer natural beauty of sites such as the Cirque and Pont d'Espagne, the attraction for many pilgrims to go on coach trips into the surrounding mountains is just that: an opportunity to escape from the often hectic and overwhelming nature of the shrine and town. Many pilgrims complained that the grotto in particular wasn't nearly as tranquil as it used to be. As one pilgrim explained to me:

You can't go to the grotto now. You can maybe go around four in the morning, when it's quiet. After five o'clock in the morning forget it, and before midnight just forget it. It's the noise. The people chatting away to each other as if they were in a shopping centre, or on their mobiles. People aren't respectful of the place like they once were. I guess it's fantastic in a way, that more and more people are coming. But it takes away from me being there on my own to reflect and meditate.<sup>171</sup>

The Italian pilgrimages in particular were the subject of criticism by English pilgrims on this issue, perceived as far too boisterous and loud for more subdued English tastes. They would often describe being appalled at how Italian pilgrims would openly converse throughout the International Mass (an event, it should be

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<sup>171</sup> Interview, July 26, 2012.

noted, that is meant to reinforce the diverse and universal nature of the Church). English pilgrims also criticized the Italians' tendency to hijack the limited number of elevators in the Accueil Notre-Dame as well as the Accueil St. Frai for their own use. Even Italian nuns were painted in broad strokes by some English pilgrims as selfish women with pointy elbows, forcing their way through processions and queues at the grotto and the water taps. Given the difficulties of interacting with crowds of other pilgrims with different mores, some English pilgrims found that time spent in Lourdes itself was exhausting. The narrow streets in the town leading toward the grotto were simply too chaotic and often stressful to navigate for some, as they constantly tried to dodge cars, coaches, and other pilgrims. An excursion into the mountains then was an opportunity, at least for an afternoon, to catch one's breath before diving back into the busy liturgical and social rhythm of the shrine and town.

Alexandra, a helper in her early thirties with the Westminster pilgrimage, was able to take the afternoon off from her duties in the Accueil to join her mother, who was staying in one of the hotels rather than in the Accueil, on an excursion to Gavarnie. She spoke of the need to get out of Lourdes for a time, and especially as a helper, to have a break from the demands of Accueil work:

My mother is with me on pilgrimage as well, and she's not elderly or infirm. She's quite happy getting on with her pilgrimage as it is without me. But I did feel like it was important to spend some time with her going on a leisurely activity, because my mother is very good at finding a balance between... I think sometimes there is a sense of there being an over-religious place like this and actually not looking after some of the

other needs that we have as human beings. So it's wonderful that there is such participation in all of the different services, but there needs to be a sense of fun with it as well. And I need that right about now! [laughs] We need to take care of the relational side too, not just relationships in the religious sense but the ones that come from just going out and being with people.<sup>172</sup>

In the previous chapter I discussed how important the relationships forged between volunteer helpers and Assisted Pilgrims, as well as among helpers, is in shaping the experience pilgrims have in Lourdes. Alexandra observes that in addition to the formation of relationships such as those in the Accueil, which as I have suggested are typically informed by a religious motivation, it is also important to be with people in more natural, less clinical and sterile settings. She also interestingly refers to the “over-religious” character of Lourdes, and although she went to Lourdes as a pilgrim and a helper, she feels the need to find some form of release or balance from the spiritual pressure cooker that the shrine town can be. Many pilgrims will describe going on pilgrimage as an opportunity to “recharge the spiritual batteries,” yet some like Alexandra acknowledge that a degree of risk may accompany this recharging if it is overdone.

This idea that excursions into the Pyrénées served to strike a fine balance between the high ceremonial and emotional power of the shrine and the more relaxed, leisurely pace of nature tours in the mountains was echoed by other pilgrims as well. Craig and Lucy, a couple from Kent on their second pilgrimage to Lourdes, went to Gavarnie with a coach facilitated by Tangney Tours. Later in the

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<sup>172</sup> Interview, July 27, 2013.



week they arranged to go to the Pont d'Espagne with one of the local excursion operators, Caralliance ACTL, which has a kiosk just outside St. Joseph's Gate, one of the main entrances into the shrine domain. In terms similar to those used by Alexandra, Lucy described the need for balance in their pilgrimage week: "We went up to the waterfall, at Gavarnie, and we also went to the bridge there in the Pyrénées. They were both lovely, and I felt it was timed right. It took you out of Lourdes just at the point where you're getting tired and starting to wear a bit thin. It's a complete break, for half a day, which I think you need. It gets you away from it, and then you can reflect on what you've come across and then come back into it. But you do need to get out."<sup>173</sup> Trips into the mountains then can serve as highly valued environments for not only relaxation in the midst of an otherwise hectic travel schedule, but also for reflection as Lucy indicates. Other pilgrims would also mention the ability to gather one's thoughts and meditate on the meaning of what had transpired during the pilgrimage thus far, something they felt was impossible while being immersed in the electric atmosphere of Lourdes. Others still just simply enjoyed the fresh air and scenery, and did not invest any particular sense of meaning or worth into the excursion experience.

In addition to this sense of balance that mountain excursions provided, some pilgrims also articulated the idea that these excursions were not only a sort of temporary ludic release valve before returning to Lourdes, but that they were in fact

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<sup>173</sup> Interview, August 29, 2013.

a fully integrated, complementary component of the pilgrimage experience, cohering with their objectives at the shrine. When I asked Reg, another pilgrim whom I first met at the Hôtel Arcades during the Catholic Association pilgrimage, whether he saw any distinction between the formal pilgrimage activities and those that might be described as more recreational or touristic in nature, he quickly dismissed the premise of my question: “There is so much to explore around here that it would be a shame to miss out on it. I went on a trip yesterday to the Pyrénées, to Gavarnie, and it was just wonderful. Actually it was quite quiet as well. And it was really nice to just be in that place. And I thought to myself, you know, God is just as much in that place as he is here [in Lourdes]. Mary appeared here in the grotto, but God touched that place too when he created it. So no, I don’t see any difference really, it’s all part of the whole package.”<sup>174</sup> This understanding of the mountain excursion was articulated less frequently by pilgrims than the need for balance, yet it points to the ways in which the boundaries of the shrine are indeed fluid and may extend to the surrounding region outside Lourdes. For Reg, going to Gavarnie was not simply a matter of balance or escape, but an activity that was seamlessly subsumed into the totality of his pilgrimage experience. Although he might to some degree still privilege the sense of the numinous felt at the grotto over his trip to Gavarnie (Lourdes and not Gavarnie is after all the ultimate destination of his pilgrimage), nevertheless he maintains that it is also possible to encounter

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<sup>174</sup> Interview, August 29, 2012.

God in such a wondrous natural setting as the Cirque. For Reg there seems to be no such disjuncture between his traditional pilgrimage activities at the grotto and his trip into the mountains. Both coincide in providing him with a memorable and spiritually fulfilling week in and around Lourdes.

While Reg and others in some sense ‘read’ what otherwise might be considered nature tourism activities as an extension of their time in Lourdes, one event in the itinerary of the Westminster pilgrimage quite clearly brings the pilgrimage, and the sense of community that might be established in the Accueil St. Frai, into the mountains. On the Wednesday of the pilgrimage week, while pilgrims staying in the hotels went on their excursions into the Pyrénées, Assisted Pilgrims in the St. Frai were taken on an excursion of their own to Saint-Savin, a twelfth century abbey church sixteen kilometres outside of Lourdes near Argelès-Gazost. As the coach journey to Gavarnie is far too long for most Assisted Pilgrims, and its location is quite remote if a medical emergency were to occur, a trip to Saint-Savin enables Assisted Pilgrims, many of whom are not accustomed to staying with other people in hospital ward-style rooms, to spend an afternoon in a less clinical environment. Unlike excursions further into the mountains, the itinerary for the trip by Assisted Pilgrims to Saint-Savin was far more structured. It began with a relaxed social gathering in the garden of the abbey, which affords stunning views of the valley below and, if one is lucky, a chance to glimpse the majestic eagles the region is known for. Cake and ice cream were served, before we made our way into the

abbey church for the celebration of mass followed by confession for those who wished. We were then instructed to make our way to a café/bar across the square opposite the church, where we drank and chatted before boarding the coaches again for the return to Lourdes. In the course of my interviews with helpers and Assisted Pilgrims from the Westminster pilgrimage, many cited the excursion to Saint-Savin as a much-anticipated event and highlight of their pilgrimage week. It provided the opportunity to visit with one another in a more informal setting outside of the Accueil, and to be together as a closed group, just Assisted Pilgrims and their helpers. The outing blended both the sacramental and the social elements of pilgrimage quite seamlessly. As one pilgrimage organizer for Westminster described the trip to Saint-Savin:

This is something we try to arrange every year. Because you're combining both aspects of the journey out to the Pyrénées and seeing the countryside, but also still sharing the mass together. I think pilgrimage is all about community, it's about the community of pilgrims that are here, and sharing that together even when you're not in Lourdes. And most people are quite happy to have the break and still consider that as part of their pilgrimage.<sup>175</sup>

This sense of community that is forged in Lourdes, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter Four, is mobile and can be maintained regardless of whether one is in the Accueil or outside the town. Again, this sense that most pilgrims are quite happy to have the break and do not view touristic excursions as a departure point from their pilgrimage is reinforced.

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<sup>175</sup> Interview, December 5, 2012.

Yet some pilgrims do take exception to the Excursion Day as antithetical to what a traditional pilgrimage entails for them. A very small minority would have nothing to do with these outings, and preferred to stay in Lourdes for the duration of the pilgrimage. Gertrude, a pilgrim from Kensington in her late seventies, felt there had been a shift in the pilgrimage calendar over the years from more reverential services and activities to the more superficial and frivolous:

I came with the very first Westminster pilgrimage to Lourdes nearly twenty-five years ago. Did you know that I was personally invited by Cardinal Hume? [the Archbishop of Westminster at the time] He rang me up and said ‘We’re planning on going to Lourdes this summer as a diocese, and I would like you to come.’ He was a wonderful, holy man, and I miss him dearly. Every day I still think of him. And those first years coming to Lourdes were just lovely...It’s different now. There is too much free time, and an entire day is left empty, with nothing to do! I would rather go back home early if we’re just going to waste a day like that. It used to be more solemn, but it’s changed. People walk around and talk during the masses, and it’s very distracting.<sup>176</sup>

I asked Gertrude whether she had ever been tempted to take advantage of the Excursion Day, that ‘waste of a day’ from her perspective, and travel into the mountains. “Never,” she replied, “I don’t understand the point of it. We’ve come all this way to be here in Lourdes, not to be going about snapping pictures of mountains.” I should note however that when I first met Gertrude during the 2012 pilgrimage, she was staying with other “hotel pilgrims” in the Hôtel Le Méditerranée, though she was quite frail and occasionally became disoriented. When I returned the following summer as a helper, she had been placed in the

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<sup>176</sup> Interview, July 24, 2012.

Accueil St. Frai as an Assisted Pilgrim, and as a result joined the other St. Frai pilgrims and helpers on their trip to Saint-Savin. When I asked if she had enjoyed the trip (bearing in the back of my mind her response from the previous year), she was quite positive in her assessment of the excursion, although she did emphasize the mass in the abbey church as the highlight.

Gertrude's initial antipathy toward nature tourism excursions into the mountains was very much in the minority among responses from fellow pilgrims, yet some studies do echo the sentiments she expressed. In Marina Svensson's research on the Ciyun Temple near Wuzhen, China, visitors to the shrine, mostly elderly women, were reported as having no interest in visiting tourist sites in the surrounding area, generally preferred pilgrimage above leisure travel, and clearly differentiated between the two. They were, according to Svensson, "more likely and willing to spend their money on merit making than on personal consumption and leisure."<sup>177</sup> Additional research however draws attention to the ways pilgrims happily blend the sort of excursions undertaken by Lourdes pilgrims into their own pilgrimages. In her fascinating recent study of alternative pilgrimages to French shrines honouring Mary Magdalene, Anna Fedele observes being surprised at learning that for many of her respondents, "journeys described as pilgrimages or sacred journeys and trips made for recreational purposes were not perceived as

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<sup>177</sup> Marina Svensson, "Tourist Itineraries, Spatial Management, and Hidden Temples: The Revival of Religious Sites in a Water Town," in *Faiths on Display: Religion, Tourism, and the Chinese State*, ed. Tim Oakes and Donald S. Sutton (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 228.

essentially different; both kinds of trips offered the opportunity to contact with the energy of the visited places and to receive spiritual insights.”<sup>178</sup> I myself was admittedly surprised to learn of the degree to which the pilgrims I encountered seemed to easily integrate recreational excursions into the mountains not only into their pilgrimage itinerary, but into their understanding of what a pilgrimage essentially entails. Whether they are simply enjoying the scenery, taking a break to balance out the risk of spiritual excess at Lourdes, or perhaps at a deeper level, finding God in the mountains, for most pilgrims recreational excursions beyond the confines of the shrine and town are an important, functional aspect of their pilgrimage week.

### *Pilgrims Just Want to Have Fun*

Pilgrims’ participation in what might traditionally be considered as ‘tourist’ activities is not limited to these coach trips into the Pyrénées. If these trips can be categorized as nature or ecotourism, their travel within Lourdes is often to heritage tourist sites, the most notable and popular example being the Château Fort de Lourdes. Standing atop a high rocky outcrop in the centre of Lourdes, the castle’s origins date back to the Roman era, although most of the existing structure dates to the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when it served as the residence of the Count of Bigorre. Strategically located at the entrance to the seven valleys of the Lavedan, it

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<sup>178</sup> Anna Fedele, *Looking for Mary Magdalene: Alternative Pilgrimages and Ritual Creativity at Catholic Shrines in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 252.

was reinforced and extended in the fourteenth century with a system of interlinking curtain walls and the construction of the remaining castle keep. In the subsequent centuries it served as a royal residence, a prison, and a military barracks, before being converted into a museum and tourist attraction in 1921.

Nearly all pilgrims I met, either during the pilgrimage that year or when they first went to Lourdes several years prior, had gone on a tour of the Château Fort. One couple in their early forties, originally from Ireland and both first-time pilgrims to Lourdes, described their visit:

It kinda takes you back in time, to when it was a fortress. They have all sorts of artifacts and reconstructions, and the gardens there outside the château are beautiful as well. My favourite thing about it though is probably the bird's-eye view of the shrine. It's really something else. We went just before closing and could see the Blessed Sacrament Procession going through the main square. That was great.<sup>179</sup>

The view is indeed quite striking, and the fact that this couple refers to the view of the shrine from the castle as their favourite thing about their visit there suggests that even while touring historical/cultural sites within the town of Lourdes, pilgrims still make conscious connections to the shrine and apparition narrative. Indeed, others cited visits to the Château Fort and other locations in Lourdes as opportunities to get away from the hotel and commercial district immediately bordering the shrine and see the “real Lourdes.” In addition to the ‘In the Footsteps of Bernadette Path’ that will be discussed in Chapter Five, which guides pilgrims to sites linked to Bernadette’s life in Lourdes, pilgrims also visit the Château Fort, Les Halles de

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<sup>179</sup> Interview, August 29, 2013.



Lourdes (the covered market), as well as shops and restaurants adjacent to the town's central square, some distance from the shrine. Regarding the Château Fort in particular, some pilgrims observe that it is likely one of the only structures still standing in Lourdes that Bernadette would recognize today, with the New Town and nearly all of the shrine domain (with the exception of the crypt church) being constructed some time after Bernadette departed Lourdes. Even the grotto where Bernadette received her apparitions has been altered significantly over the years. For these pilgrims then, it is important to visit sites Bernadette herself might recognize.



Figure 14. *The Château Fort de Lourdes*. Image Credit: Author.

Beyond recreational and heritage tours, pilgrims also occupy their free time particularly in the evenings socializing with others in the group, and depending on the time of day and age, this can range from rather sedate chat over tea in the

afternoon, or raucous bar-hopping through the streets of Lourdes late at night. Regarding the latter, among young helpers especially it often appeared that a test of one's mettle was to work hard while on Accueil duty or pushing wheelchairs during the day, party hard (usually to the point of a hangover) late into the night, and then repeat the cycle for the duration of the pilgrimage. While most seemed to have impressive levels of endurance and managed to perform their duties ably throughout the week, others sometimes missed their early morning shifts in the Accueil or were threatened with being sent back to England. It is worth noting that just as trips into the Pyrénées served as a sort of release valve for pilgrims generally, for volunteer caregivers and young helpers specifically, this late-night partying allowed them to let off some steam from what could at times be a stressful and emotionally exhausting day. On duty during the day with an expectation to comport themselves accordingly, once Assisted Pilgrims were in bed by 10:00pm helpers could unwind, assess how the day unfolded, and simply just have fun. This transition or "rite of reversal"<sup>180</sup> is perhaps best represented symbolically through the uniforms helpers wear. Before going out to the bars and cafés, helpers quickly go up to their hotel rooms and swap their Accueil badges and uniforms (white polos for Westminster, blue for the Catholic Association) for 'civilian' or casual dress.<sup>181</sup> Westminster helpers were specifically instructed to remove their identification badges when they

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<sup>180</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1969).

<sup>181</sup> This practice of changing clothes at the end of the helpers' work day is also observed by John Eade in his research on the Lourdes Hospitalité. See "Pilgrimage and Tourism," 29.

were not formally on duty, and especially when they might be out at night, as they were viewed as representatives of the diocesan pilgrimage as a whole.

Team leaders and pilgrimage organizers would acknowledge that at times some helpers might get out of hand with their drinking and rowdy behaviour, but they were generally quite understanding, given that for many young helpers in particular, it was often their first time outside of the UK without their parents or other family members, and they perhaps couldn't help but take advantage of the free licence a pilgrimage to Lourdes provided. They also noted the stress that accompanied caring for Assisted Pilgrims in the Accueil and the toll it could take, especially on those engaged in that level of care work for the first time. They all stressed however that these instances were quite rare, and indeed, over the course of my research, I never witnessed a situation at one of the bars where things would escalate to the point that the police were required, or where a helper was seriously reprimanded by team leaders or other organizers. While loud and a bit chaotic at times, much of the partying that occurred 'after hours' in Lourdes was generally innocent fun. The local police were often out in full force in the streets of Lourdes late at night however, particularly during the Catholic Association pilgrimage, which coincides with the final few days of a large Romani pilgrimage to Lourdes at the end of August.

First-time visitors to Lourdes can be quite taken aback by the boisterous socializing that occurs once the Marian torchlight procession has concluded, and

some do see it as antithetical to their objectives in the shrine town. But as Ian Reader reminds us, here referring to his research on pilgrimage on the Japanese island of Shikoku: “Praying and playing are activities that frequently operate hand in hand.”<sup>182</sup> In an earlier article, he observes that pilgrims to Shikoku enjoy themselves immensely, buying lots of souvenirs, eating good food, and drinking and carousing in the evenings.<sup>183</sup> As Lillian, a helper in her late twenties explained her experience going back to Lourdes each year: “It’s just a bunch of people that I really like, going away together and having a good time, but having a good time with God. My friends back home who haven’t been here think it’s all very serious and depressing, but I tell them ‘No, no, it’s a right laugh, really it is!’ You need to have fun here too I think, otherwise you miss the point.”<sup>184</sup> Again, while there has traditionally been a juxtaposition set up between, as Pfaffenberger framed it, ‘serious pilgrims’ and ‘frivolous tourists’, Lillian sees no substantial opposition between the two and indeed undermines it as an artificial construct not borne out in the lived experience of most pilgrims. Certainly many pilgrims and helpers would insist that one must comport themselves appropriately while within the gates of the shrine domain and most importantly at the grotto, but in the town during one’s free time, most have no issue integrating acts of both praying and playing into their pilgrimage.

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<sup>182</sup> Reader, *Making Pilgrimages*, 37. See also Nelson Graburn, *To Pray, Pay and Play: The Cultural Structure of Japanese Domestic Tourism* (Aix-en-Provence, France: Centre des Hautes Etudes Touristiques, 1983).

<sup>183</sup> Ian Reader, “Dead to the World: Pilgrims to Shikoku,” in *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture*, ed. Ian Reader and Tony Walter (New York: Palgrave, 1993), 127.

<sup>184</sup> Interview, August 28, 2013.

*Consuming Lourdes*

In addition to the ludic characteristics of pilgrimage, another hallmark of the Lourdes experience which is often pejoratively linked to the most problematic elements of tourist culture is the commercial geography of the town, marked by the literally hundreds of religious souvenir shops which line the streets of Lourdes. Most are concentrated along the two principal thoroughfares leading toward the main entrances of the shrine, the Boulevard de la Grotte and the Avenue Bernadette Soubirous, though they may be found almost anywhere in the New Town, becoming less noticeable as one moves a further distance from the shrine and toward the town centre. The commercial culture of Lourdes is so deeply ingrained in popular perceptions of the place that in conversations with family, friends, and casual acquaintances about my research, two things they knew about Lourdes were typically raised: the claims of miraculous cures and the incredible number of souvenir shops. Religious commerce is deeply intertwined with the identity of Lourdes as a Catholic pilgrimage shrine, and it is commonly cited as an example of the excesses that can come with the sale of pious objects. Yet Lourdes is far from unique as a pilgrimage site where one might drop to their knees in prayerful supplication, and then some hours later make their way into the streets surrounding the shrine and shop till they drop again. Across the spectrum of world religions, wherever one goes on pilgrimage, one finds a bustling religious marketplace.

Mary Crain relates that at the Catholic shrine of the Virgin of El Rocio in southwestern Andalusia, makeshift stands selling both regional food and drink as well as religious souvenirs dominate the squares and streets around the shrine, and that more recently various infrastructure projects have been undertaken to further monetize the shrine.<sup>185</sup> And at Glastonbury, an increasingly syncretic Christian-New Age pilgrimage site, the Abbey shop sells a variety of books about Glastonbury, as well as souvenirs including reproductions of thirteenth and fourteenth century seals of the Abbey, brooches, and candles.<sup>186</sup> The vibrant religious commerce of Buddhist pilgrimage shrines is referred to by Shepherd, who describes the handful of elderly residents from the nearby village who sell religious objects such as prayer beads and wooden statues of the Buddha, along with dried fruits, set out on rocks along the path leading to the shrine.<sup>187</sup> Such practices have often been criticized for preying on the piety of devout pilgrims, and for detracting from the sacred aura of the shrine with merchants hawking their wares. As Judith Adler contends, these attitudes toward religious commerce are far from a recent development, noting that as early as the fourth century CE, complaints were raised

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<sup>185</sup> Mary M. Crain, "Contested Territories: The Politics of Touristic Development at the Shrine of El Rocio in Southwestern Andalusia," in *Coping with Tourists: European Reactions to Mass Tourism*, ed. Jeremy Boissevain (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1996), 42.

<sup>186</sup> Marion Bowman, "Drawn to Glastonbury," in *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture*, ed. Ian Reader and Tony Walter (New York: Palgrave, 1993), 52.

<sup>187</sup> Shepherd, *Faith in Heritage*, 105.

about the ubiquity of religious markets around Christian pilgrimage shrines and their association with corruption.<sup>188</sup>

As mentioned previously, these attitudes toward religious commerce are often especially amplified in relation to Lourdes. Suzanne Kaufman points out in her research on the consumer culture of Lourdes that for many believers and nonbelievers alike, the sale of t-shirts, hats, glow-in-the-dark statues of the Virgin Mary, and holographic images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus are signs not of profound faith but of religious debasement. Yet Kaufman's aim in her text *Consuming Visions* is not to confirm this impression of the commercial elements of the shrine but to destabilize it. Arguing that the spiritual and material have always been intertwined at pilgrimage sites, she writes: "By framing Lourdes in this fashion, it becomes possible to move beyond certain self-limiting assumptions – that, for example, the intermingling of religion and commerce somehow signifies debasement – in order to understand how commercialized worship offered rich possibilities for expressing faith and connecting with the sacred in the modern world."<sup>189</sup> While Kaufman exhaustively explores this issue from a historical perspective, examining the critical role the commercial culture of Lourdes played in the development of the shrine as a popular western European and then global

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<sup>188</sup> Judith Adler, "The Holy Man as Traveler and Travel Attraction: Early Christian Asceticism and the Moral Problematic of Modernity," in *From Medieval Pilgrimage to Secular Tourism: The Social and Cultural Economics of Piety*, ed. William H. Swatos and Luigi Tomasi (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), 27.

<sup>189</sup> Suzanne Kaufman, *Consuming Visions: Mass Culture and the Lourdes Shrine* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 4.

Catholic shrine, I intend to highlight the evaluations of contemporary pilgrims to Lourdes regarding the influence of the religious marketplace on their pilgrimage experience.

During the course of my fieldwork, particularly when I was on duty as a helper, I often accompanied Assisted Pilgrims as they browsed through the series of religious souvenir shops in search of postcards to send back home to family and friends, rosaries for themselves and for others, as well as bottles to fill with the spring water from the grotto. In the team schedules we were given as helpers, time was specifically allotted for this purpose, and we were expected to offer our assistance in taking pilgrims to the shops. We would often go for a coffee or a cold drink after our shopping excursion, and it was not uncommon for Assisted Pilgrims to purchase small inexpensive gifts for their helpers. I personally received four rosaries and a prayer card from Assisted Pilgrims during or after these outings, and others also received medals, thank you cards, small statues, and the like. Religious souvenirs in this instance served not only as a tangible reminder of one's pilgrimage, but also as a meaningful token of thanks for the help volunteer caregivers and wheelchair pushers or 'rollers' provided throughout the week.

Perhaps the most memorable shopping excursion I participated in was not to the endless blur of religious shops around the shrine but rather to an upscale perfume shop some distance away from the commercial district of the New Town, closer to the town centre. On the last full day of the 2013 Westminster pilgrimage,



Assisted Pilgrims and their helpers were organized in rows of two outside the Accueil St. Frai for one final procession down to the grotto to say farewell to Our Lady. As we slowly made our way along the rock wall, the cool temperature of the grotto was a welcome relief from the afternoon sun, the high that day topping 36 degrees Celsius. Once the procession concluded, and I was about to take James back to the Accueil St. Frai to rest, I was asked by one of the team leaders if I would be able to accompany Audrey, a pilgrim also staying in the St. Frai, and her helper on their shopping excursion. Audrey wanted to go to this particular perfume shop, some distance from the shrine. Her helper Jane did not feel up to the challenge and asked if I could help. I agreed, unaware of the extent of what I was getting myself into. After briefly browsing the religious souvenir shops and purchasing a few postcards, Audrey indicated she was ready to go to the perfume shop, and we began our ascent.

To get to the store required pushing Audrey's wheelchair up a rather steep and uneven hill, and the hot afternoon sun made the task all the more exhausting, my white helpers' polo shirt drenched with sweat. Once we arrived at the shop, and I was offered a bottle of water from the shop owner, we spent the next hour and a half carefully browsing through the crowded aisles of men's and women's fragrances. I became increasingly concerned as Audrey pointed to one bottle after another which were then taken up to the cash register. The final total came to over €1 100, Audrey using a Post Office envelope stuffed with Euros to make the

purchase. The array of perfume and cologne bottles were packed into a large black duffle bag, which Jane carried as we descended back down the hill toward the St. Frai, my moist palms anxiously gripping onto the handles of the wheelchair. Later in the afternoon as Audrey was resting, I admitted to Jane that I was quite taken aback by the amount of money Audrey had spent at the perfume shop. But Jane was quite accustomed to this, having been assigned to care for Audrey while in Lourdes for the past six years. I asked her what she thought of it: “Well, I can understand why you would be surprised, it is a lot of money, and it is unusual I guess. But it’s just something she does almost every year. I don’t see any harm in it, she’s quite well off actually. And most of the bottles aren’t even for her, but for her family, and she likes doing it. It’s probably a lot cheaper here too than in the shops in London.”<sup>190</sup>

Audrey’s trip to the perfume shop further emphasizes the disruption of the problematic binaries of pilgrim and tourist. Here Audrey is not even shopping for religious articles, but at a strictly secular storefront some distance from the shrine. Yet Jane sees little issue with this, viewing it as a pragmatic exercise, as getting a relatively good deal on luxury goods regardless of whether one is on holiday or pilgrimage. Pertaining to the sale of religious souvenirs specifically, most pilgrims share this rather tolerant attitude, most notably when speaking of souvenirs that they might see as kitsch or distasteful, but that others might find some meaning in as a

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<sup>190</sup> Field notes, July 26, 2013.

memento of their time in Lourdes. Pilgrims are aware of the potentially problematic nature of the religious souvenir shops, but generally view them as an inevitable if not necessary facet of the pilgrimage experience.



Figure 15. *Vending machine located on the Boulevard de la Grotte, selling religious candles and miniature statues of Our Lady of Lourdes.* Image Credit: Author.

This sentiment is evoked by Shirley, who discusses her evolution from being initially repulsed at the sheer number of religious shops, to then having her perspective on the commercialism of the shrine changed over several pilgrimages:

The problem was that I was irritated not so much with the religious objects as such, though some of them are in pretty poor taste. But I suppose I was more intolerant of people who would like that sort of *thing*. And I would see little nuns say: ‘Oh, isn’t that beautiful’, and I’d think to myself ‘No! That’s hideous!’ And I’m not like that about people anymore. I’m not like that. If that’s what they like, then God bless them, you know? Because before I didn’t like some of the tawdry stuff, or the people that bought them, and I thought they had no taste. But you shouldn’t judge, and I learned not to judge anymore. I love the shops now, and for the first few years after I became ok with them I just bought everything for everyone I knew back home. I bought statues and rosaries and medals. I don’t do so much anymore, but I do buy candles for people and take a few little bottles of Lourdes water back with me.<sup>191</sup>

Other pilgrims also referred to being put off by the souvenir shops during their first pilgrimage to Lourdes, but coming to accept and indeed embrace them over subsequent visits. For Kevin, much of his perception of the shops came down to economics: “I like to call them the ‘holy hardware shops.’ Yes, they can be a bit garish with their blinking neon lights, and I find it strange that many of them are named after saints. They are in your face, but not...annoyingly. I can think of a lot worse things, like the McDonald’s in the town. But I think they serve a very good purpose, and they provide a living for people.”<sup>192</sup> Kevin’s reference to the shops as necessary because they provide an income for the people of Lourdes was affirmed by others, particularly when Lourdes was struck by severe flooding in June 2013, which nearly derailed the Westminster pilgrimage. In addition to donations made during the masses to help finance the flood relief efforts, some felt that patronizing the shops and restaurants hit by the floods was their small way of giving back. When

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<sup>191</sup> Interview, August 30, 2012.

<sup>192</sup> Interview, August 28, 2013.

speaking of souvenir religious objects specifically, many recognized their potential spiritual significance. As Roger explained, they can serve a very useful purpose:

I feel that the shops are necessary because people want to bring back souvenirs, and the souvenirs reflect their experience in Lourdes. They want to pass on that experience to others as well, and I think people feel the souvenirs help them to do that, to share that experience and the good feelings they had in Lourdes with someone else. It helps you to let them know that you were thinking about them and prayed for them at Lourdes. Yeah...there are a lot of shops, maybe too many in some places, but they are necessary.<sup>193</sup>

Again, most pilgrims would acknowledge the embarrassingly kitsch nature of some souvenir objects, but also recognized their capacity as vehicles for commemorating their visit to Lourdes and extending it into their home life back in the UK.<sup>194</sup> Roger's reference to passing on and sharing his experience in Lourdes with those who were unable to make the journey through postcards, statues, and medals emphasizes the role of souvenirs, religious or otherwise, as a means for diffusing one's travel experiences, providing an access point for others to share in the experience.

This attitude toward religious souvenirs as critical repositories for remembrance and meaning is borne out in other studies of pilgrimage, tourism, and commerce. As Shaul Kelner observes in his ethnography of trips to Israel by the Jewish diaspora, these tours "create an environment for expressing and developing

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<sup>193</sup> August 25, 2013.

<sup>194</sup> See Chapter Four for a discussion of how some pilgrims use mementos of Lourdes as a means for bridging the physical gap between home and shrine. The potential for souvenirs and other mementos to encourage a "mobilisation of places through objects" is discussed by Simon Coleman and Mike Crang, "Grounded Tourists, Travelling Theory," in *Tourism: Between Place and Performance*, ed. Simon Coleman and Mike Crang (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002), 11.

an identification with the Jewish homeland and with Jewish culture through consumer acts like purchasing souvenirs, eating foods, viewing films, visiting museums, shooting photographs, and so on.”<sup>195</sup> In the case of Lourdes pilgrims, the purchasing of souvenirs may not be entangled in processes of identity formation at quite the same level as Kelner suggests, but rather serves as a testimonial of one’s faith, of devotion to the Virgin Mary, and as an *aide-mémoire*, enabling the pilgrim to recall and tangibly connect with past pilgrimages. Despite the distasteful and poor quality of some of the mass-produced pious objects on offer, I suggest it is critically important for most Lourdes pilgrims to be able to consume and ‘take Lourdes back’ with them into their routine daily lives.



Figure 16. *The religious souvenir shop “Tourisme et Religion,” situated on the Boulevard de la Grotte.* Image Credit: Author

<sup>195</sup> Shaul Kelner, *Tours that Bind: Diaspora, Pilgrimage, and Israeli Birthright Tourism* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 107.

In his recent study on pilgrimage and commerce, Ian Reader draws attention to the necessity of commercial activity in and around pilgrimage shrines. As Kevin suggested earlier, it comes down to simple economics. Religious authorities, writes Reader, “commodify their religion not because to do otherwise would be simply to invite others to do it for them, but because...they have pragmatic understandings of, rather than artificially idealised visions about, the sacred, which they recognise cannot be set apart from the everyday human world.”<sup>196</sup> The traditional binaries constructed between pilgrimage and tourism, cited earlier, readily dissolve in the face of the lived experience of pilgrims to Lourdes. These pilgrims too, by and large, resist artificially idealised visions of the sacred and have pragmatic understandings of their activities in and around the shrine. While I have drawn attention to some examples where pilgrims did make a clear distinction between their activities as pilgrims as opposed to those of leisure tourists, these voices were in the minority. As the shop sign in the above photograph indicates, a fluid interplay of religious and touristic elements together inform and shape pilgrims’ experiences at Lourdes. This interplay is not only necessary then, but is indeed for many a welcome and complimentary facet of their pilgrimage week.

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<sup>196</sup> Ian Reader, *Pilgrimage in the Marketplace* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 81.

## IV

## “Spiritually, I’m Always in Lourdes”: Perceptions of Home and Away among Serial Pilgrims

*For pilgrims through time, the truth is elsewhere; the true place is always some distance, some time away. Wherever the pilgrim may be now, it is not where he ought to be, and not where he dreams of being.*<sup>197</sup>

-Zygmunt Bauman, “From Pilgrim to Tourist”

During my first pilgrimage with the Westminster diocesan pilgrimage in July 2012, the journey by train from Paris to Lourdes was especially long. After an uneventful ride from London on the Eurostar, we were required to transfer by coach from Gare du Nord (the French terminus for the Eurostar) to Montparnasse station, from where we were to depart on a direct TGV train to Lourdes. Approximately twenty minutes into the coach trip pilgrims, especially those who had made the trek to Lourdes in the past, began to notice that we were going in circles, passing the same landmarks over and over again. While the impromptu panoramic tour of central Paris was welcome, we became increasingly concerned as the clock advanced toward our departure time. Our coach connection through Paris happened to coincide with the final ceremonial stage of that year’s Tour de France, and while pilgrims were thrilled at the prospect of Bradley Wiggins becoming the first Briton to win the Tour, frustration with the series of road closures and detours mounted.

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<sup>197</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, “From Pilgrim to Tourist – or a Short History of Identity,” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage, 1996), 20.



We ultimately missed our train connection, and were forced to wait five hours for the next train.

The remainder of our journey was comfortable, yet tiring. Some passengers became increasingly agitated. Yet once the train passed through Pau, the last station before arriving in Lourdes, the mood shift was palpable as pilgrims started organizing their belongings, excitedly chatting, and gazing out the window into the darkness. When the train began to slow as we made our approach into Lourdes, everyone quickly rushed to the right side of the train car and pressed up against the glass, and waved at me to come over and do the same. Seeming to appear out of the darkness, just visible between the trees and rooftops, was the glow of the grotto, illuminated by hundreds of candles. Some passengers had broad smiles, others appeared to wipe tears of joy from their faces, and others still quietly broke out into the Lourdes hymn. As we pulled into the station and began to disembark from the train, I quickly became disoriented with the rush of people and the chaos of trying to unload all the luggage of the less-able pilgrims as quickly as possible before the train began to move again toward Tarbes. Others however knew our plan of action exactly, and directed me to the coaches that would take us to our respective hotels. I soon got the sense that despite having been to Lourdes once before, I was still a relative newcomer compared to others whom I would later learn had been going to Lourdes for decades and were deeply familiar with the rhythms of the shrine and town. For some of these pilgrims, Lourdes had become more than a place to come

once a year to recharge the spiritual batteries; over the course of several pilgrimages, it was now home.

This chapter examines the experience of serial pilgrims to Lourdes, that is, pilgrims who return to Lourdes each summer and in some cases several times a year as a habitual and indeed compulsive element of their lived faith. Based on their testimonies, I suggest that for these pilgrims, Lourdes cannot be characterized as a bounded space from which one neatly departs and returns. Despite the insistence in early pilgrimage scholarship on understanding shrines as extraordinary, far-removed sites, generally unfamiliar and opposed to the pilgrim's everyday religious and social life, individual pilgrims can and do perceive and interact with shrines as a 'home away from home,' a 'second home,' or in some instances their one *true* home, the one place in the world where they are at peace with themselves, where they belong.

### *Dwelling-in-Travel*

As James Clifford has observed in his influential essay "Traveling Cultures," ethnography, as it has been conducted according to the normative practices of twentieth-century anthropology, has "privileged relations of dwelling over relations of travel."<sup>198</sup> While the traditional fieldwork practice of intensive participant-observation in a bounded site can yield nuanced theoretical insights and

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<sup>198</sup> James Clifford, "Traveling Cultures," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 99.

thick description, such an approach in an increasingly interconnected world may be problematic. For Clifford, “localizations of the anthropologist’s objects of study in terms of a ‘field’ tend to marginalize or erase several blurred boundary areas, historical realities that slip out of the ethnographic frame.”<sup>199</sup> This includes means of transport, which suggest ongoing contact and engagement with places and forces outside the field or object of study. The discourse of ethnography is too sharply separated from travel for Clifford.<sup>200</sup>

His attempt to redirect the gaze of anthropology to unbounded processes of movement is continued in his later work *Routes*. Here Clifford calls attention to a notion that will serve as a key gloss on my own interpretation of pilgrims and their home-making at Lourdes: that is, of dwelling-in-travel, an understanding of location as “constituted by displacement as much as by stasis.”<sup>201</sup> Troubling the localism of many common assumptions about culture, where “roots always precede routes,”<sup>202</sup> Clifford argues for an understanding of practices of movement and displacement as holding the potential to be constitutive of cultural meanings in and of themselves, and not simply a supplement, a transfer or an extension of these cultural meanings. He is clear however that his new project for anthropology does not set out to replace the cultural figure ‘native’ with the intercultural figure

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<sup>199</sup> Clifford, “Traveling Cultures,” 99.

<sup>200</sup> Clifford, “Traveling Cultures,” 100.

<sup>201</sup> James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 2.

<sup>202</sup> Clifford, *Routes*, 3.

‘traveler.’ Rather, he focuses on mediations between the two, and recommends not that we make margins and travel to them the new centre, but that dynamics of dwelling/travelling be taken up together where they might intersect. This point regarding the intersection of dwelling and travelling is key, as Clifford observes that: “once traveling is foregrounded as a cultural practice, then dwelling, too, needs to be reconceived – no longer simply the ground from which traveling departs and to which it returns.”<sup>203</sup> I will suggest, following Clifford, that in the case of many Lourdes pilgrims dwelling is not only no longer the fixed, bounded space from which one departs and returns, it is also carried with the traveller to their destination, and the destination itself may also be a secondary if not primary idealized site of dwelling in its truest, most authentic sense.

Clifford’s reorientation of ethnography from static fields to processes of movement is taken up by scholars in globalization and migration. In his landmark work on the cultural study of globalization *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai proposes a framework which looks at the relationship between five dimensions of global cultural flows, which he categorizes as (1) *ethnoscapes*, (2) *mediascapes*, (3) *technoscapes*, (4) *financescapes*, and (5) *ideoscapes*. The suffix –scape for Appadurai allows us “to point to the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes... [that] are the building blocks of what I would like to call *imagined worlds*, that is, the multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of

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<sup>203</sup> Clifford, *Routes*, 44.

persons and groups spread around the globe.”<sup>204</sup> For our purposes here, Appadurai’s conceptualization of *ethnoscapes* is most pertinent, understood as “the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals who constitute an essential feature of the world...”<sup>205</sup> Like Clifford, Appadurai is careful to note that this attention to movement, dispersion, and globalization should not be at the expense of a sustained treatment of discrete, stable communities. Yet it cannot be denied that these relatively stable networks are always shot through with human motion, as more persons or groups are faced with having to or desiring to move and travel.<sup>206</sup> For Appadurai, the task of producing locality, described as “a structure of feeling, a property of social life, and an ideology of situated community,” is increasingly a struggle against globalizing forces.<sup>207</sup> Connecting the issue of the difficulty of producing locality to his earlier discussion of landscapes as the building blocks of our imagined worlds, he writes that “the work of the imagination through which local subjectivity is produced and nurtured is a bewildering palimpsest of highly local and highly translocal considerations.”<sup>208</sup>

Among the various phenomena that together inform Appadurai’s considerations on the subject of global movements is migration, which is given a

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<sup>204</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 33.

<sup>205</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 33.

<sup>206</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 34.

<sup>207</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 189.

<sup>208</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 198.

more sustained theoretical treatment in Nigel Rapport and Andrew Dawson's edited anthology *Migrants of Identity*. While Clifford and Appadurai write on the need to attend to processes of movement and travel that cut across notions of dwelling and locality, Rapport and Dawson attend specifically to perceptions of home in a world of movement, a concept that is increasingly subject to a great deal of flux yet nevertheless still holds a significant store of nostalgic resonance in an otherwise dispersed and fragmented world. Beginning by arguing that identity should be viewed in relation to, and even inextricably linked with fluidity or movement across time and space, they follow Clifford by suggesting that until the mid-1990s traditional anthropological classifications failed to convey the role of movement in identity formation.<sup>209</sup> For Rapport and Dawson, as for Clifford, a shift is required, "from an ideology of totalizing 'places,' to an actuality of individuals and groups entering and leaving spaces."<sup>210</sup> On perceptions of 'home' specifically, Rapport and Dawson observe that traditionally, homes were understood as communities in microcosm, giving structure to time and embodying a capacity for memory. To be at home was to be environmentally fixed. Yet they view this model as anachronistic, as not reflecting a world of contemporary movement, and advance a more "mobile conception of home," as something that can be taken along wherever one goes.<sup>211</sup> Increasingly, one is seen as moving between homes, or between multiple homes, or

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<sup>209</sup> Nigel Rapport and Andrew Dawson, *Migrants of Identity: Perceptions of Home in a World of Movement* (Oxford: Berg, 1998), 4.

<sup>210</sup> Rapport and Dawson, *Migrants of Identity*, 6.

<sup>211</sup> Rapport and Dawson, *Migrants of Identity*, 7.

as being at home in continuous movement.<sup>212</sup> Against the thesis of modern homelessness advanced by Peter Berger, which suggests that the modern world, by virtue of its constant motion and change has uprooted any sense of home,<sup>213</sup> Rapport and Dawson contend that “the evidence points to a successful resilience of ‘home,’ however this may come to be defined, and an inexorability of home-making – even as individuals and groups lead their lives in and through movement (cognitive and physical) and refrain from finally and essentially affixing their identities to places.”<sup>214</sup>

The relationship between home and movement also figures prominently in the research on tourism. For John Urry, at the very heart of the appeal of leisure travel is to *leave* home, to get away from it all and revel in an unfamiliar locale. The tourist moves from a familiar place to a far place and then ultimately returns to the familiar place. What is sought for in a vacation or holiday is inversion of the everyday, and for Urry, a crucial feature of tourism is “the clear distinction between the familiar and the faraway and that such differences produce distinct kinds of liminal zones.”<sup>215</sup> This feature of tourism is the hallmark of Urry’s understanding of a distinctive ‘tourist gaze,’ which requires that the place being visited by the tourist be in some way distinguished from those places they inhabit and move

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<sup>212</sup> Rapport and Dawson, *Migrants of Identity*, 27.

<sup>213</sup> See Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Random House, 1973).

<sup>214</sup> Rapport and Dawson, *Migrants of Identity*, 32.

<sup>215</sup> John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage, 1990), 11.

around in their everyday life. Holidays for Urry are less about reinforcing collective memories and experiences and instead find their basis in the pleasure that comes from out-of-the-ordinary experiences.<sup>216</sup> Tourism then, as Urry conceives it, is fundamentally this binary between the quotidian and the extraordinary.

Yet Edward Bruner points to several examples which problematize this binary between the ordinary and extraordinary/home and away that Urry sees as a hallmark of the appeal of tourism. He observes that on package tours, tourists are housed in a hotel or similar accommodation in the evening, and during the day they go out and sightsee. Depending on the duration of the tour, the hotel or resort may soon become a temporary home away from their usual residence, somewhere safe, comfortable, and increasingly familiar. He cites a specific example of group tours to Africa, which usually recruit strangers from similar socioeconomic backgrounds and regions, to ensure group cohesion. From this example, Bruner argues that tourists, then, “experience home while away, a home created by the tourism industry in the accommodations and modes of travel, and a home constructed by the tourists themselves in their conversations. Home consists of the familiar, of expected comforts, and of interactions with persons like oneself.”<sup>217</sup> In migration, tourism, and other forms of global movement, the lines between home and away are increasingly blurred.

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<sup>216</sup> Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, 102.

<sup>217</sup> Bruner, *Culture on Tour*, 17.



How then does religion figure in these global flows of movement across landscapes which are being negotiated, engaged with, and transformed? An attempt to respond to this is made by Thomas Tweed in his text *Crossing and Dwelling*. Building on Appadurai's theoretical framework of global –scapes, Tweed identifies a missing piece in Appadurai's list which he deems to be crucial in any understanding of the cultural underpinnings of globalizing movement; namely, religion. Tweed suggests a parallel image that points to religious flows, by understanding religions as *sacroscapes*, identified as:

...religious confluences, which are not static. They are not fixed, built environments – as the allusion to landscape in the term might imply – although religions do transform the built environment. I have in mind much more dynamic images...Whatever else religions do, they move across time and space. They are not static. And they have effects. They leave traces. They leave trails...So this term, sacroscapes, invites scholars to attend to the multiple ways that religious flows have left traces, transforming peoples and places, the social arena and the natural terrain.<sup>218</sup>

Tweed's idea of sacroscapes forms a key part of what is the main goal of his project in the text, arriving at a theory of religion which reflects contemporary experience in a globalized world. While he concedes that attempting to arrive at a unified theory of religion may be a vain and foolhardy prospect, he nevertheless maintains that the effort is worthwhile. Integrating notions of crossing and dwelling, Tweed defines religions as: “confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes

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<sup>218</sup> Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 61-62.

and cross boundaries.”<sup>219</sup> Religions, then, involve finding one’s place in the world and moving through space. Tweed’s emphasis on making homes and crossing boundaries will serve as a helpful lens for exploring pilgrimage as one of the most prominent and arguably purest forms of religious experience, an experience both of crossing and dwelling.

*The Pilgrim’s Journey: Leaving Home for Home, then Home Again*

Perhaps surprisingly, given the ubiquity of pilgrimage across various world religions, the phenomenon received little anthropological consideration until Victor Turner’s work in the 1970s, which remains influential at the very least as a starting point for any theoretical consideration of pilgrimage. In light of the subject of this chapter, it is best to limit our attention to two key and complementary observations from Turner’s research: the act of pilgrimage as a liminal experience and pilgrimage shrines as the “centre out there.”<sup>220</sup> For Turner, pilgrimage functions as a mode of liminality for the laity, a journey to a sacred site or shrine located some distance from the pilgrim’s typical place of residence.<sup>221</sup> The point of the whole exercise, writes Turner, is “to get out, go forth, to a far holy place approved by all.”<sup>222</sup> This emphasis on going forth to a far and unfamiliar place threads its way through Victor and Edith Turner’s seminal work on pilgrimage, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian*

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<sup>219</sup> Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 54.

<sup>220</sup> See Victor Turner, “The Center out There: Pilgrim’s Goal,” *History of Religions* 12 (1973).

<sup>221</sup> Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*, 4.

<sup>222</sup> Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*, 7.

*Culture*. Going out and being separated from the quotidian is not only a facet of the journey, but is deeply engrained in the identity of the pilgrim. Turner and Turner define a pilgrim as one who "...divests himself of the mundane concomitants of religion – which become entangled with its practice in the local situation – to confront, in a special 'far' milieu, the basic elements and structures of his faith in their unshielded, virgin radiance."<sup>223</sup> Turner and Turner view this deliberate travel to a far place as a cultural universal,<sup>224</sup> and observe that the most prominent pilgrimage shrines in any major religion tend to be located on the periphery of cities, towns, and in territorial borderlands.<sup>225</sup> In the vignettes I will provide based on my interviews with contemporary pilgrims to Lourdes, Turner and Turner's insistence on the appeal of pilgrimage being derived in large part from its liminal character, as distant, novel, and far removed from any linkage to one's usual day-to-day existence, does not capture the full range of pilgrim experience, particularly that of serial pilgrims habitually returning to Lourdes time and time again. Yet elements of the Turners' observations are still useful in understanding the draw of Lourdes as a 'centre out there.'

As pilgrimage studies developed into a sub-discipline in its own right, the theoretical conceptualizations of pilgrimage advanced by the Turners were subject to increasing scrutiny. Foremost among these were Victor Turner's notion of

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<sup>223</sup> Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*, 15.

<sup>224</sup> Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*, 241.

<sup>225</sup> See Victor Turner, "Pilgrimages as Social Processes," in *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974).

pilgrimage as fostering *communitas*, which was summarily deconstructed and countered in John Eade and Michael Sallnow's *Contesting the Sacred*. Yet at the same time in the early 1990s, Turner's depiction of pilgrimage as a linear journey to a distant, unfamiliar sacred centre was likewise increasingly questioned. Erik Cohen argues against Turner's "centre out there" thesis in relation to pilgrimage, noting that "Turner's preoccupation with Christian pilgrimages led him to disregard situations in which the principal religious and political centres will be fused, and, hence, the main pilgrimage centre will be concentric rather than excentric."<sup>226</sup> Opposed to Turner's conception of the "center out there," Cohen privileges Eliade's "Center of the World" thesis, which he sees as more adequately reflective of contemporary pilgrimage. Within Eliade's framework, suggests Cohen, a pilgrimage could be understood as a journey to the centre of the world itself. That centre may be remote, in that the individual pilgrim is far removed from it, but this is merely a geographical circumstance and not theoretically significant.<sup>227</sup>

Bajc, Coleman, and Eade's more recent article on "Mobility and Centring in Pilgrimage" notes that while subsequent scholarship on tourism and pilgrimage has given primacy to processes of movement at the expense of a static centre, reflected in my earlier review of the literature on general conceptions of crossing and dwelling, nevertheless centres still exist, and they possess a deep resonance as

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<sup>226</sup> Erik Cohen, "Pilgrimage Centers: Concentric and Excentric," *Annals of Tourism Research* 19 (1992): 47.

<sup>227</sup> Cohen, "Pilgrimage Centers," 34.

‘attractors.’<sup>228</sup> Turner’s “centre out there” cannot be taken for granted they contend. Rather, “the ‘centre’ must be seen as constantly translated to new places, at different scales, and with often unanticipated social consequences.”<sup>229</sup> While it is important to attend to the ‘moving centre,’ as fluid and malleable in an ever more mobile world, it is still worth considering how relatively stable and fixed centres, in this case established pilgrimage shrines, are themselves highly malleable. While grounded geographically and temporally in a specific fixed space and time, they may still function as empty vessels within which pilgrims may pour their hopes and expectations, their goals for the journey to the sacred centre.<sup>230</sup>

It has increasingly been observed that despite the insistence in early pilgrimage scholarship on seeing shrines as extraordinary, far-removed sites, generally unfamiliar and opposed to the pilgrim’s everyday religious and social life, there is the potential for them to be perceived by individual pilgrims as a ‘home away from home’ or a ‘second home.’ Simon Coleman, in an article which has informed my own thinking regarding Lourdes pilgrims and their perceptions of home and processes of home-making, argues for an understanding of the English pilgrimage shrine of Walsingham as a sort of second home for habitual pilgrims. According to Coleman, pilgrimage groups adopt specific ‘localising strategies’ in

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<sup>228</sup> Vida Bajc, Simon Coleman and John Eade, “Mobility and Centring in Pilgrimage,” *Mobilities* 2 (2007): 321.

<sup>229</sup> Bajc et al., “Mobility and Centring,” 328.

<sup>230</sup> John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow, “Introduction,” in *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*, ed. John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow (London: Routledge, 1991), 15.

their engagement with the social and material elements of the village in Norfolk, finding elements of home in the pilgrimage site.<sup>231</sup> For both Anglo- and Roman Catholics, writes Coleman, “there is a very real sense in which Walsingham derives its meaning from being both ‘exceptional’ *and* the embodiment of the familiar. Pilgrimage becomes a means of linking two bases for potential spiritual and social dwelling – one’s parish and the ‘amplified’ but apparently highly traditional Catholicism of a rural Norfolk village.”<sup>232</sup> There is a sense of ownership of Walsingham expressed by repeat pilgrims who explicitly refer to the shrine as a second home,<sup>233</sup> and accompanying that ownership a privileged, expert knowledge of the shrine, its sacred landscape as well as its inner workings and institutional memory. Most salient for my own attempts to understand the home-making processes of serial pilgrims to Lourdes is Coleman’s perspective, based on interviews with his informants, that pilgrims to Walsingham are:

not strictly ‘locals,’ but on the other hand they are not transient passers-through either...Those ‘people who know’ are relative insiders to the workings of the shrine, and include pilgrims as well as officiating priests. An auratic sense of the numinous is produced through the ability to proceed along well-established pathways that are marked by embodied and habitual practices as much as by material signs or borders.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> Simon Coleman, “Meanings of Movement, Place and Home at Walsingham,” *Culture and Religion* 1 (2000): 156. See also Simon Coleman, “Pilgrimage to ‘England’s Nazareth’: Landscapes of Myth and Memory at Walsingham,” in *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism*, ed. Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

<sup>232</sup> Coleman, “Meanings of Movement,” 156.

<sup>233</sup> Coleman, “Meanings of Movement,” 163.

<sup>234</sup> Coleman, “Meanings of Movement,” 165.

The liminal, betwixt and between status of Walsingham pilgrims described by Coleman is not of the sort articulated by Turner, where the ‘liminar’ (the ritual subject) experiences and undergoes a state and process of mid-transition in a rite of passage.<sup>235</sup> Yet the ambiguity of the liminal state remains, as returning serial pilgrims are not quite locals, yet nor are they alien to the sacred landscape of the shrine and its sacramental life.

Coleman’s observations regarding Walsingham as a second home for pilgrims are borne out in other recent studies of pilgrimage both in its Christian and East Asian contexts. In Thomas Tweed’s *Our Lady of the Exile*, an ethnography of Cuban-American Catholics and their relationship with the shrine of Our Lady of Charity in Miami, the home-making process is not one of simply becoming intimately familiar with or attached to the shrine, but rather, serves as a site for re-mapping the homeland (Cuba) onto the landscape of their new home. He contends that for almost all Cuban-American visitors to the shrine, it is perceived as “a place to express diasporic nationalism, to make sense of themselves as a displaced people...through transtemporal and translocative symbols at the shrine the diaspora imaginatively constructs its collective identity and transports itself to the Cuba of memory and desire.”<sup>236</sup> Here then, while the shrine itself may not be a true home or

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<sup>235</sup> Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*, 249.

<sup>236</sup> Thomas Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 10. See also Tweed’s more recent study on the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. and its incorporation of several representations of the Virgin Mary associated with particular immigrant Catholic groups, *America’s Church: The National Shrine and Catholic Presence in the Nation’s Capital* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

even a second home in the way that Coleman envisions shrines as potentially being, nevertheless it functions as a crucial touchstone for engagement with the natal homeland. Tweed's mention in the above selection of *transtemporal* and *translocative* symbols is particularly useful for the purposes of this chapter, and I will return to and consider the ways in which such symbols are used by pilgrims to "bring Lourdes back" with them to their homes in England.

The relationship between diasporic communities, pilgrimage, and perceptions of home is also fleshed out in Zlatko Skrbis' research on how Croatian migrants in Australia relate to the Marian apparition shrine at Medjugorje. Those that undertook a pilgrimage to Medjugorje emphasized that it "both affirmed the faith aspect, but also went beyond it, linking to a sense of emotional reaffirmation of ethnic identity and meaningful connectedness with the place of apparitions. In short, the function of Medjugorje in the Croatian diasporic imaginary is not simply to assert religious identity, but also to support their diasporic imagination and to negotiate home as an ever-shifting and elusive point of diasporic identity."<sup>237</sup> As Tweed observed in Miami, these pilgrims to Medjugorje are motivated by an opportunity to engage with the natal homeland, yet in this case, rather than re-mapping the homeland onto the landscape of their current community, they travel to Medjugorje as a stand-in for their original homes and villages, many of which Skrbis notes were destroyed during the ethnic conflicts of the 1990s. For those who

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<sup>237</sup> Zlatko Skrbis, "From Migrants to Pilgrim Tourists: Diasporic Imagining and Visits to Medjugorje," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33 (2007): 314.



have no home to go to then, “Medjugorje becomes a surrogate and symbolic home, which epitomises what amounts to quintessentially diasporic yearning for the home and homeland.”<sup>238</sup> While the pilgrimages I joined to Lourdes did not have a clear diasporic quality to them as in the case of the research by Tweed and Skrbis, nevertheless I highlight these examples as pointing to the critical role a pilgrimage site, understood as a second home or a return to one’s true home, can play in processes of identity formation and affirmation for the pilgrim. Beginning by examining the range of motives inspiring pilgrims to return to Lourdes time and time again, I focus the remainder of this chapter on pilgrims’ own understandings of Lourdes as home based on their recurring visits to the shrine and town.

*“I Didn’t Have a Choice, I Had to Come Back!”*

As I noted in Chapter Two, helpers who go to Lourdes to volunteer as caregivers to Assisted Pilgrims are inspired by a wide range of motivating factors. This also holds for serial pilgrims, both volunteer helpers as well as general lay pilgrims, who return to Lourdes year after year. For many veteran caregivers, it is those benefits or rewards they derive from their care work: the deeply meaningful relationships they establish with the Assisted Pilgrims as well as their fellow team members during the course of the pilgrimage week, the general sense of community that is established, the opportunity to act on their faith, the new perspectives formed

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<sup>238</sup> Skrbis, “From Migrants to Pilgrim Tourists,” 315.

on illness and their own challenges, which draw them back to Lourdes each year, in some cases as many as four to five times a year. Don, a pilgrimage organizer with the Catholic Association, who no longer works directly as a volunteer helper in the Accueil Notre-Dame but rather is more engaged with the initial planning and ongoing day-to-day operational needs of the pilgrimage while in Lourdes, spoke of how his initial experience as a helper with the Handicapped Children's Pilgrimage Trust<sup>239</sup> pilgrimage still informs his perception of Lourdes and continually draws him back, despite reservations that occasionally arise:

I must have been on about thirty pilgrimages over the years...I would think so, if I had to guess. I've done the diocesan pilgrimage, which you will be coming on, but I also used to go with the HCPT, that takes disabled youngsters at Easter. So at one stage I was doing two a year, but as I got busier with other responsibilities it just became too much...I return to Lourdes because at one level I have to go, it's my role as an organizer, but I do sometimes think to myself "Oh God, here we go again." It's a sort of love-hate relationship really, because of course there are a lot of people who go to Lourdes who have mental issues for instance, and that can be quite tiring. But once you've been in Lourdes a couple of days, and you see how people are pulling together, how they're supporting each other, how people's almost...brokenness is sometimes not healed, but they're considered ok, you're ok as you are, you're ok as you are. Whereas here [in England], you might be considered a bit of an odd bod. But you're ok as you are, and people will surround and support you. And then I begin to realize why I've gone back, it's that sort of sense that it doesn't matter what our faults or disabilities are, we're all the same, we're on the same footing. We're all equal here, in a way you just can't find anywhere else. And I feel

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<sup>239</sup> The Handicapped Children's Pilgrimage Trust (HCPT) is an English charitable organization founded in May 1956 by Dr. Michael Strode and Peter Keevney. It helps over one thousand disabled and disadvantaged children and young people visit Lourdes each year over the Easter weekend, and hundreds more disabled people of all ages visit Lourdes at different times over the summer. For more information on the HCPT, see: <http://www.hcpt.org.uk>.

this need to continually tap into that, however briefly, to sustain me, to refresh my faith and what it's all about.<sup>240</sup>

Here Don reflects on elements of the Lourdes experience which, as it will become clear, are paradigmatic of the pull Lourdes has for returning pilgrims and most notably their conceptions of Lourdes as a place set apart from quotidian life as the ideal, yet still remaining intimately familiar and safe. He is perhaps more straightforward than most in describing some of the frustrations one can encounter in Lourdes. While the potentially fraught nature of caregiving was explored in some detail in Chapter Two, here Don points to the challenges pilgrims might face in negotiating their relations with people they might typically avoid or simply not encounter in their hometowns. Yet he is drawn back by the force of Lourdes as a place where these divisions and tensions can at least briefly melt away, where there is a true sense of equality and community, juxtaposed against the perceived marginalization of people with mental illness in the UK.<sup>241</sup>

This view is echoed by Caroline, a woman in her early thirties who was making her third pilgrimage to Lourdes: “With both the Assisted Pilgrims and the fellow helpers, there is a general sense of community. I think my experience in the UK often with even how the Church is structured, there is often a feeling of a lack of community, even in the Church. I think the draw for me is this is a place where

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<sup>240</sup> Interview, August 9, 2012.

<sup>241</sup> Such comparisons made by pilgrims between their home culture and that of the pilgrimage shrine is identified by Simon Coleman and John Elsner as implicit in the pilgrimage experience. *Pilgrimage: Past and Present in the World Religions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 206.

people are really coming with all sorts of different intentions, and a lot of difference between cultures and ages and disabilities, there is a real sense that Our Lady is bringing and meeting people here in Lourdes. She's meeting us here and allowing us to meet each other."<sup>242</sup> This emphasis on Lourdes as a heightened and particularly efficacious field for relation-making is key in drawing caregivers to return to Lourdes time and time again. This point is stressed again by another caregiver, who has been volunteering with the CA pilgrimage as well as others from southern England for over thirteen years. Perhaps more explicitly than other helpers, she makes the association between the sense of community that develops from her care work at Lourdes and a sense of the shrine and the people she encounters there as constituting a second home and family: "I think the first year I came back...I came back the second year because the first time I was here I was ill, and missed quite a few things that I wanted to do myself, to sort of understand the place. I kinda feel at home here, it's the closest to what...Christ calls us to love God and to love our neighbour as our self, and to me this is the place where you see that happening the most. Everyone is treated with respect, and we as helpers learn from those we're caring for as well."<sup>243</sup> The apparent mantra of Lourdes helpers as they understand their relationship to sick pilgrims referred to in Chapter Two, the idea that "I wasn't helping, but being helped," is echoed again here. Moreover, it is very clearly linked to a sense of community for this woman, and most importantly for

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<sup>242</sup> Interview, August 28, 2012.

<sup>243</sup> Interview, August 27, 2013.

the purposes of this chapter, a sense of feeling at home in Lourdes, informed by a deep familiarity with the place established over thirteen years of pilgrimages as well as her experience of the Christian love command, fully realized in a unique and highly charged environment. Her faith and its embodied enactment is grounded in Lourdes, and for this reason she considers the shrine to be akin to a second home.

Beyond the specific experience of helpers, Lourdes pilgrims more generally place a high value on the sense of community that is established in Lourdes, citing it directly as an attractive and deeply meaningful element of the pilgrimage that inspires them to return. During a break in the timetable from my responsibilities as a helper, I visited with Martha, an Assisted Pilgrim with the CA pilgrimage who had been coming to Lourdes for the past eight years consecutively. In her room in the Accueil Notre Dame offering incredible views of the Immaculate Conception basilica and the area around the grotto, I asked her what inspired her to return with the same pilgrimage each year:

Well I love pilgrimages generally, going to places like Lisieux and Nevers, where you can see Bernadette's body...It's beautiful, it's lovely, but you wouldn't really need to go a second time. But this place is addictive. It's because of the sick. It's the sick pilgrims like me and people like me. Here the able-bodied helpers and others aren't afraid of us. We're not shuffled off and hidden in some corner. Here we're VIPs! We're in the front for every service, we're spoiled rotten. We are looked after, and we're made to feel valued, and not like we're a nuisance. We are part of the group and not left out.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Interview, August 30, 2012.

Following the other pilgrims cited earlier, Martha highlights the importance of feeling welcomed at Lourdes, as part of a larger faith community, setting this experience up against the neglect or marginalization she sometimes feels back home in Portsmouth. Returning to Lourdes each August allows her to experience, however briefly, a full sense of inclusion not offered to her in England. Victor and Edith Turner's suggestion that inherent in the pilgrimage experience is the formation of *communitas*, an idealized state produced by the dissolution of social structures and boundaries and the formation of spontaneous and egalitarian interpersonal relations,<sup>245</sup> certainly seems to be evoked in many of the testimonies I have elicited from pilgrims.

While it has been acknowledged throughout that pilgrims will often initially go to Lourdes either seeking some form of healing respite, or go in thanksgiving for a favour received, it should be noted that this desire to belong is also a strong motive for pilgrims to make return journeys to Lourdes. Beyond a general sense of

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<sup>245</sup> Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*, 39. As I touched on briefly earlier in this chapter, Turner and Turner's classic understanding of pilgrimage sites as an ideal ritual space for fostering *communitas* has received considerable scrutiny in the subsequent pilgrimage scholarship. Eade and Sallnow critiqued Turner's notion of *communitas* as an idealizing discourse about pilgrimage rather than an empirical description of it, and as a theory that "prejudges the complex character of the phenomenon but also imposes a spurious homogeneity on the practice of pilgrimage..." *Contesting the Sacred*, 5. Yet Coleman suggests that the now classic binary in pilgrimage studies between *communitas* and Eade and Sallnow's theory of contestation has served as a theoretical strait-jacket stifling development in the field. He writes: "Neither *communitas* nor contestation should themselves become fetishized in order to produce neatly symmetrical anthropological theory, made up of views that appear to constitute a simple binary opposition," "Do You Believe in Pilgrimage?: *Communitas*, Contestation and Beyond," *Anthropological Theory* 2 (2002): 361. While in this study I highlight instances of both *communitas* and contestation (see Chapter Two), following Coleman I suggest that it is important to expand our gaze beyond this now classic theoretical tension.

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

This characteristic of serial pilgrims is powerfully reflected in the story of Shirley, a retired schoolteacher from East Anglia. When she was four, she had a very serious ear and streptococcal throat infection. She had mastoiditis, and could not speak or swallow. The painful infection was accompanied by a very high temperature. There were no antibiotics available for her at the time of her illness in 1943, and as a result, according to her account, one either died or somehow got better without treatment. After being collected by the local doctor in his own car and taken to the hospital, she was due for an operation the following morning. Shirley's father went to their parish church, which housed a life-sized statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, and asked the priest if he could stay there through the night and pray for the Virgin's intercession, so that Shirley's procedure might be successful. Her parents had always had a special devotion to Our Lady of Lourdes, so it was natural for him to pray to her in times of need. In fact, Shirley notes that if it had not been during the war and if someone had been able to lend her father the money, he likely would have picked her up, taken her across the Channel and down on the train to Lourdes itself. The next morning, after her father's all-night prayer vigil in front of the statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, Shirley recalls:

The nurse came around with the trolley, I sat up, and asked why everyone else was having breakfast except me. She looked at me and replied “Because you can’t have any, you’re going to have an operation” and I said “Why?” and the nurse said “She’s talking!” And they took my temperature and it was normal. They sent for the surgeon who looked at my throat and looked in my ears, and he said, and I remember him saying it, he said to the nurse “Give her some breakfast.” And later on, when I knew the Bible I thought of Jesus saying “Give her something to eat.” And I wolfed down this porridge, and they phoned my father’s office and told him they would keep me for another day but then he could take me home. And my father said “Well we know who did it,” and he told me “When you’re older, please go to Lourdes to say thank you, because it must have been her intercession. You were going to die, there was almost nothing they could do.” So I think it was a miracle, truly I do. If it wasn’t for Our Lady I wouldn’t have met my husband, raised a wonderful family, or had a career as a schoolteacher. And when I come now, I don’t ask for anything here, I just come to say thank you, again and again, for as long as I’m able. I could never say thank you enough.<sup>246</sup>

Throughout our conversation Shirley checked off a host of reasons why Lourdes is an important part of her faith life, but it is the repeated fulfillment of her father’s request based on his own vow which ultimately inspires her to return.

While Shirley’s serial pilgrimages several times a year to Lourdes began in 1992, for Dennis his status as a returning pilgrim to Lourdes is far more recently acquired. Yet he too feels compelled to return, in an act of thanksgiving and for continued spiritual refreshment. I first met Dennis in the atrium of the Accueil St-Frai when I volunteered with the Westminster pilgrimage in July 2013. While most of the group of helpers and sick pilgrims were out either exploring the shrine and browsing the shops, or relaxing with a café au lait or pint at one of the many

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<sup>246</sup> Interview, August 30, 2012.



restaurants and bars that line the streets leading to the shrine, I was asked to stay with the five Assisted Pilgrims who had decided to rest up in the Accueil for the Marian torchlight procession later that evening. While I sat near the nurses' station, taking advantage of the rare quiet time during the pilgrimage to flesh out my field notes, Dennis shuffled out of his room gripping his walker and asked if he could join me. As we struck up a conversation and I told him about my research interest in Lourdes, he responded: "Well then I have a story for you! I sometimes still can't believe it myself!" He elaborated to tell me that he had first come to Lourdes with the Westminster pilgrimage two years earlier, not knowing what to expect. In fact, from what he had heard about the shrine prior to going he doubted he would like it, as he no longer mixed with people very much due to his illness, and the prospect of being thrown into a ward with six complete strangers in a foreign country for a week was to say the least daunting. Yet at a time when he was especially ill, it was the prodding of a support worker who suggested the possibility of going to Lourdes, who even offered to arrange for the Diocese of Westminster to cover the costs of the trip as Dennis could not afford it. Not being a Roman Catholic, Dennis was doubtful that such an arrangement would come through, but when the Pilgrimage Director for Westminster gladly agreed, he realized there must be something bigger working behind the scenes, and that he now had no excuse but to go to Lourdes.

When he arrived he was at first put off by what his Anglican upbringing considered to be Marian idolatry, viscerally opposed to it in any shape or form.

When the Hail Mary was recited at various pilgrimage services and functions, he was reluctant to participate, and the glow-in-the-dark statues of Our Lady of Lourdes in the display windows of the religious article shops were repugnant to him. By the conclusion of the pilgrimage however, he found himself utterly transformed in his understanding of Marian devotion, giving full-throated renditions of Ave Maria. This shift for Dennis would underscore a more dramatic transformation to come. As Dennis explains:

By the time I came here the first time, I had lost more than fifty percent of my kidney function, I'd lost some liver function, my blood sugar was high, my cholesterol was high...I was in a mess. I'd reached the stage where I needed monthly blood tests to make sure I wasn't about to die that month. And after Lourdes I went for my monthly blood test, had it, went back a week later to see the doctor to find out what the results were, and she sat and looked at the computer with absolute astonishment written on her face. And she said "Your kidney function is normal! Your creatinine levels are normal, your blood sugar is absolutely perfect." She went on and on like this, and I thought... "Wow!" And it was for me an indication of how Mary works. Quietly, behind the scenes, unostentatiously. She gets you to go, helps you, and doesn't mind whether you want to be here or not, she *wants* you, here with her. And the doctor said "You better go back to Lourdes next year!" and I thought, I must go next year as a pilgrimage of thanks for what was done for me in the first year. And that's why I came this year. But now I like Lourdes so much, God willing I will come here every year until I die.<sup>247</sup>

Both Dennis and Martha allude to an element of the pilgrimage experience I quickly noticed was being continually referenced in both my interviews with informants and casual conversations, as well as something I admittedly began to gradually sense within myself: that is, the highly addictive nature of pilgrimage to

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<sup>247</sup> Interview, July 27, 2013.

the shrine. As Martha noted in my earlier extract from our interview, unlike other pilgrimage sites like Lisieux and Nevers, something about Lourdes is inherently addictive. For her, it was the value and dignity she was offered in a way that was highly gratifying for her. For many of the caregivers, it is those relationships formed with the sick pilgrims whom they serve as well as their fellow helpers that require renewal each summer and which drive their desire to return. Others describe being called back, being pulled back, or a burning need within them that is inexplicable. One helper, who after four years working in Lourdes was unsure whether she would go again but ultimately decided to return, described experiencing a “niggling sensation where I felt that maybe I do need to come back. And why not? Because it is an incredible experience all around. I really enjoy it and I get a lot out of it.”<sup>248</sup> Several pilgrims described their desire to return to Lourdes annually as an itch needing to be scratched, or being bit by the ‘Lourdes bug.’ As Fr. Luke, a priest from west London and a former pilgrimage organizer with the Westminster diocese put it: “Lourdes should carry a health warning because it does seriously get under your skin. It’s not a bad thing, it can never harm you. But it does give you this insatiable urge to go back as often as you can. You’re always looking forward to the next pilgrimage, and planning your summer around it. It’s the highlight of the year for many that go, and they can’t fathom missing out on it.”<sup>249</sup> Suggested in his assessment of the addictive quality of pilgrimage to Lourdes is an analogy with

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<sup>248</sup> Interview, August 29, 2013.

<sup>249</sup> Interview, December 12, 2012.

addiction to a drug, and other pilgrims are in fact more explicit in referring to their relationship to Lourdes in this way, describing “coming off a Lourdes high” in the weeks following their return to England, and returning to the shrine for “another hit” the following year. Beyond the attraction of community and the relationships formed at Lourdes, as well as the need to return in repeated ritual acts of thanksgiving, serial pilgrimages to Lourdes in a sense become almost inexplicably compulsive for those who undertake them.

Perhaps surprisingly given its ubiquity in pilgrim testimonies and even my own personal sense of it, the addictive nature of the pilgrimage experience appears to be glossed over in much of the pilgrimage literature. The addiction of serial pilgrims is explored in some detail however in the work of Nancy Louise Frey and Ian Reader. In *Pilgrim Stories*, based on her research on the Camino de Santiago in the early 1990s, Frey observes that for pilgrims who return to traverse The Way, many describe themselves in very similar fashion to contemporary serial pilgrims to Lourdes, as “hooked” or “addicted” to pilgrimage, in a sense akin to dependence on a drug. Regarding this drug analogy however, Frey eloquently cautions: “The danger is that as a drug its impact becomes soporific and the pilgrimage a habit (familiar, well-known, and safe) rather than a stimulant for self-exploration.”<sup>250</sup>

While this may indeed be a risk for some (Don mentioned at times having a love-

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<sup>250</sup> Frey, *Pilgrim Stories*, 211-212. For an extended discussion by Frey of ‘pilgrimage addicts,’ see Nancy L. Frey, “Stories of the Return: Pilgrimage and its Aftermaths,” in *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism*, ed. Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

hate relationship with Lourdes), I am not convinced this risk is borne out in the self-reflexive descriptions of pilgrims. When I would ask serial pilgrims whether their repeated visits to Lourdes opened up a possibility for the shrine to become stale, routine, and even counter-productive to their faith life, my question was often very quickly dismissed. John, an Assisted Pilgrim with the Westminster diocese, was insistent that if he developed any such feelings, he would stop going to Lourdes: “Every year, every experience is a new one, and you’ve got memories of the old ones to rely on as well. I do tend to nearly still cry in the baths, and at the Blessed Sacrament Procession I am still just so overwhelmed with how much God loves me. And it’s never spoilt for me, the fact that I keep on coming. And I don’t just come once a year. Every time it’s...what’s the word...it’s magic, but it isn’t magic, you know what I mean? It’s wonderful! And each time you experience things afresh, or the same as before, and it’s just as good as it was last time and maybe even a little better.”<sup>251</sup> While Lourdes has indeed become familiar and well-known for John, there is always something new to be discovered at the shrine and in his meetings with first-time pilgrims and helpers. With his existing store of memories from past pilgrimages in place, John is still able to find meaning and new ways of engagement in his serial treks to Lourdes.

The addictive nature of pilgrimage which drives return visits to a specific shrine or sacred place is a recurring theme in Ian Reader’s *Making Pilgrimages*,

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<sup>251</sup> Interview, July 24, 2013.

which explores the 1400km long pilgrimage circuit around the Japanese island of Shikoku, dotted by eighty-eight Buddhist temples that comprise the route. While Frey's work and my own research reveals pilgrims becoming hooked or addicted to the practice, even associating it with drug use, Reader found that several of his informants referred to their tendency to go on serial pilgrimages using the term "*Shikoku byō*" (Shikoku sickness/disease). This term captures the all-consuming nature of pilgrimage addiction. As Reader observes, this Shikoku disease seems to be readily transmitted and indeed contagious, as by the end of many of the pilgrimages he joined, most pilgrims were eagerly talking of going again at some point,<sup>252</sup> thus making it "not a transient activity that takes place just 'out there' at pilgrimage sites, but a continuing, often obsessive, engagement and unending process."<sup>253</sup> There is an irony, writes Reader, "in the idea of a pilgrim – often considered a transient, in a liminal state away from home – being or becoming permanently 'at home' as a pilgrim."<sup>254</sup> While the extracts from my conversations with pilgrims up to this point have touched on this irony, the remainder of this chapter will now explore this irony in greater detail, examining the blurred lines between the residential homes of pilgrims in England and their spiritual home in Lourdes.

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<sup>252</sup> Reader, *Making Pilgrimages*, 91.

<sup>253</sup> Reader, *Making Pilgrimages*, 255.

<sup>254</sup> Reader, *Making Pilgrimages*, 266.

*Finding Your Way Home at Lourdes*

As Reader observes, like Simon Coleman in his research on pilgrimage to Walsingham, pilgrimage shrines, over the course of a series of annual or even quarterly journeys, become for the serial pilgrim intimately familiar terrain through recurrent embodied practice. I suggest that not only for individual repeat pilgrims, but also for the organized group pilgrimage writ large, efforts are made to establish familiar and traditional ‘stomping grounds’ at various sites in Lourdes, both within the shrine domain as well as the wider town. Both the Westminster and the Catholic Association pilgrimages include in their itineraries a host of religious services and social events which remain relatively rigid in their liturgical sequence year after year, often held at the same basilicas, chapels, bars, and hotels. A few examples serve to illustrate this process of repetition.

Both the Westminster and CA teams of helpers have their chosen bars, established over several years, where they congregate each night of the pilgrimage once their shifts have ended at 10:00pm, where they unwind from what is often a stressful and tiring day of care work and where they have an opportunity to get to know one another more informally outside of the Accueil. For Westminster, it is Le Roi Albert, a long narrow bar covering three floors and a patio, tucked alongside a gelato shop and clothing store near the Pont Vieux which connects the Old Town of Lourdes to the shrine and hotels on the opposite side of the river. It is never formally announced but rather assumed, inherited knowledge that this is the

preferred bar where Westminster helpers meet and socialize each night. For first-time helpers, Le Roi Albert might not have any particular significance whatsoever, other than being a place to gather and drink. But for repeat pilgrims, who have worked in the Accueil St-Frai for several years, changing back into their ‘civilian’ clothes and going down to the Roi Albert for a pint becomes a habitual practice, an established tradition and a touchstone for recalling past pilgrimages. When I asked one of the team leaders whether there was any special meaning or particular backstory as to why the Westminster helpers chose the Roi Albert as their watering hole of choice, he replied “Not as far as I’m aware. It’s convenient really, it’s just down the street from the St-Frai and Metropole [the hotel where the majority of Westminster helpers stay while in Lourdes]. But we get on well with the owner, and it’s ours for the week. We reserve the downstairs and the patio, and we know it’s waiting for us at the end of the day.”<sup>255</sup> He noted that the bar is *ours*, underscoring a sense of ownership or affinity with the place that has developed over subsequent pilgrimages. It seems that Le Roi Albert has no inherent attraction to it other than it being the subject of habitual practice and nostalgia for repeat pilgrims.

Another element of the Westminster itinerary that is repeated each July and which is tied to a specific location is the mass with the theme of the family. This service is always held on the Tuesday of the pilgrimage week at the Cathedral of the Trees, part of the Cité Saint-Pierre. The Cité Saint-Pierre is situated in the hills

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<sup>255</sup> Interview, July 26, 2013.



overlooking Lourdes, about a fifteen minute walk from the shrine, and is tasked with providing accommodations and support for pilgrims with a demonstrated financial need, who come to Lourdes and who are unable to afford a room in more conventional lodging. The Cité is managed and staffed by twenty-four paid workers, five priests, and over one hundred volunteer helpers who come and spend three weeks during the summer working at the Cité.<sup>256</sup>

From the open area where coaches drop off the pilgrims, it is a steep and winding path between small field stone buildings to the Cathedral of the Trees, a space for holding masses in the forest with rows and rows of benches sculpted into the hillside (see Figure 17). For many returning Westminster pilgrims, the mass in the Cathedral of the Trees has become an established tradition and a much anticipated service in the liturgical calendar of the week-long pilgrimage. Several of those who are physically able prefer to walk from their hotels to the Cité Saint-Pierre rather than take a coach up the hill. While the route is not well-marked and can be easily confusing for a first-time pilgrim (I nearly got lost myself during my first pilgrimage with Westminster in 2012), for those that have come to Lourdes over several years with the diocesan pilgrimage, it is a familiar and well-worn path up through the hills, affording wonderful panoramic views of the shrine and the town. When I would ask pilgrims whether they had a favourite or most meaningful religious service or site in Lourdes, I was surprised that for many Westminster

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<sup>256</sup> “Cité Saint-Pierre (Secours Catholique),” Sanctuaires Notre-Dame de Lourdes, <http://en.lourdes-france.org/partners/cite-saint-pierre>.

pilgrims, it was not always the grotto or the Marian torchlight procession that were chosen, but rather the mass in the Cathedral of the Trees. Debbie, a teacher from Twickenham in west London, had become deeply attached to the place over the course of several pilgrimages: “If I was forced to choose my favourite place, it would have to be the Cathedral of the Trees. I just love it. It’s so rare that we get to have mass outdoors like that. The Church tends to frown upon such things, but I think it’s wonderful. Of course the grotto is special to me for obvious reasons, but the mass in the trees is what I always look forward to most. It gives us a chance to get away from the clamour of Lourdes, and be together on our own as a group.”<sup>257</sup> For Debbie, the Cathedral of the Trees was the highlight of the week, and its importance to her was explicitly tied to the natural beauty of the place, the peace it provided, and the sense of diocesan identity that was formed by being together “on our own” in a familiar place that over several years has become established as one of Westminster’s “stomping grounds” for the week.

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<sup>257</sup> Interview, July 28, 2012.



Figure 17. *Mass with the theme of the family at the Cathedral of the Trees, held during the Westminster diocesan pilgrimage, July 23, 2013. Image Credit: Author.*

As Debbie suggested in her description of the Cathedral of the Trees, pilgrims often complained to me that the grotto specifically and even Lourdes generally was often far too chaotic for their tastes. Serial pilgrims who had been going to Lourdes for many years often noted anecdotally that the shrine seemed to be much more crowded than it had been in the past, and that it was increasingly challenging to find a quiet place for prayer and reflection during the pilgrimage.<sup>258</sup> Yet although pilgrims like Debbie and others would often cite other locations both

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<sup>258</sup> For a more sustained discussion of attempts to escape or offset the disquiet of Lourdes and the shrine through excursions into the Pyrénées, see Chapter Three.

within Lourdes and outside the town as meaningful places for them, invariably the conversation would steer toward the importance and “spiritual magnetism”<sup>259</sup> of the grotto. The importance of the grotto is rather self-evident given its place in the Lourdes apparition narrative, as the site where the Virgin Mary is believed to have appeared in the rock niche eighteen times to Bernadette over several months. Pilgrims would speak generally about its importance as the central site of action in the Lourdes story, but would also at times use terms such as “place of repose,” “safe space,” and quite explicitly, “home,” to describe their perceptions of the grotto. For return pilgrims specifically, the grotto possessed a sometimes inexplicable attractive power which drew them back again and again.

Before I first joined the Westminster diocesan pilgrimage in late July, I had the opportunity to meet parishioners at St. Lawrence Catholic Church in Feltham, a neighbourhood in west London near Heathrow Airport, who were also taking the train down to Lourdes in two weeks’ time. Jonathan, who worked at Heathrow for Air Canada and who had gone to Lourdes in past years as a Red Cap, stressed to me: “The first thing you have to do, as soon as you can, is go to the grotto. It will be dark when you arrive, but that’s fine. My favourite time to go there is at night, when it’s lit and the candles are glowing. Every year I have to make my way to the grotto, as soon as I arrive in Lourdes.”<sup>260</sup> On each pilgrimage I joined, pilgrims

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<sup>259</sup> James Preston, “Spiritual Magnetism: An Organizing Principle for the Study of Pilgrimage,” in *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, ed. Alan Morinis (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1992).

<sup>260</sup> Field notes, July 8, 2012.

would do just this. Often tired from the train journey, they would arrive at their hotels, drop off their bags, have dinner depending on the arrival time, and as soon as it was feasible, make their way straight for the grotto with a laser-like focus, hurrying past the shops and restaurants and weaving through the crowds. Aisling described the need to go quickly to the grotto this way: “On arrival, it’s like you’re coming home to see Mother. Of course you want to go there straight away. You can’t say ‘Oh no, I’ll just come tomorrow.’ No, we have arrived, we’ve come to see you, to be with you. And that visit is always very special for me. It’s like I’ve come to say to her ‘I’ve arrived, I’m here, bless me Mother.’”<sup>261</sup> For Aisling, the analogy between the grotto and ideas of home is quite explicit. Perhaps most interesting here is that not only does she describe the need to go to the grotto as ‘arriving home,’ but refers to the Virgin Mary in this context not as Mary or Our Lady, but simply as ‘Mother.’ From Aisling’s perspective, over several pilgrimages to Lourdes the grotto has become a highly domesticized space, a place graced by the presence of the Virgin Mary, where she dwells still. Like any good son or daughter, going home to visit their parents, Aisling goes to Lourdes and to the grotto specifically out of a desire or obligation to visit her Mother in her home, where her presence is most acutely felt.

While not all pilgrims spoke about the grotto in quite the same terms, certainly many pointed to its importance in drawing them back to Lourdes. Lise, a young

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<sup>261</sup> Interview, August 23, 2013.

helper and university student with the Westminster pilgrimage, reaffirmed to me as others did why the grotto was the most meaningful place to them in Lourdes and why they felt the need to go there soon after arriving: “It has to be the grotto. It has to. None of it makes sense without it. There Bernadette knelt and prayed. This is where heaven touched earth! I mean the basilicas are lovely, and I love the Rosary Basilica with all the mosaics and everything. But for me the place I go to as soon as I get here has to be the grotto. I have to go there, that’s what draws me back. And I almost don’t even think anything, I hardly even pray. I’m just there. And I try not to look at the statue sometimes, but I just try and imagine that Our Lady stood there, and there must be a reason. There has to be something special about the place.”<sup>262</sup>

Roger, a retiree from Catford in south London, discussed how his attitudes toward the grotto and pilgrims’ engagement with it have evolved over the years:

I often go down to the grotto. It’s a bit more difficult now to get it quiet, but when I first went I would see people walking through the grotto, and they would touch the rock. And I would sit there thinking ‘What the hell are they doing?’ And then later when I went into the grotto, I just had to touch the rock. And then I was wondering what I was doing, why I was touching the rock. And I think what it is is that the rock is solid. It’s where our faith is rooted. Our faith is rooted solidly. It’s not something airy fairy, there’s something very rooted about our Catholic faith. And touching the rock was part of that for me. Touching the rock I think was also part of the millions who have done exactly the same and how I’m connected to them, not just through this rock, but through the faith that we share. So now when I go to Lourdes, I may not spend as much time in the grotto, because it now gets quite noisy and they’re trying all sorts of things to make it a quiet space. But I do want to go in, and touch it. It’s sort of now part of my DNA. It’s an impulse, and it’s always with me now. It’s funny really when I think of it.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> Interview, July 26, 2013.

<sup>263</sup> Interview, December 12, 2012.

The tactile experience the grotto provides is for Roger one of its most important draws.<sup>264</sup> It can be felt, it can be touched. Most importantly, it is *grounded*. Given my prior review of some of the scholarship on conceptions of travel and dwelling, and specifically Clifford's notion of dwelling-in-travel, it is worth observing that in Roger's case, his attachment to the grotto is very much premised on its fixity. While I have tried to build on Clifford to highlight the ways in which travel and movement inform processes of home-making for Lourdes pilgrims, nevertheless the appeal of fixed, grounded places clearly still holds. Indeed, it is the conception of these spaces as established and rigid that likely inspires movement to them in the first place. Turner's 'centre out there' thesis then cannot be easily dismissed. Yet what is perhaps most notable in Roger's description is his sense that his urge to touch the rock of the grotto, and the deeply meaningful experience of that encounter, is in his DNA, bound up within him and carried with him wherever he goes.

*"Taking Lourdes Back With You"*

Roger's description of the grotto and Lourdes generally as being 'in his DNA' touches on an element of Lourdes home-making I will explore in more detail now; that is, the reciprocal, back-and-forth loop of this process, where not only is Lourdes conceived of as akin to a second home or one's true home, but the

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<sup>264</sup> For additional examples of how pilgrims engage with the grotto as part of their Lourdes experience see Chapter Five.

boundaries of the shrine and town are quite permeable indeed; they are stretched and extended to pilgrims' permanent homes in the UK. Continuing with the theme of the spiritual magnetism that the grotto seems to possess for pilgrims, for some it wasn't enough to go to Lourdes and behold the massive rock wall and run their hands along the cool, damp surface. Some element of the experience, some reminder, some touchstone had to be brought back home with them to England. In the years after the initial apparitions and as the grotto became renowned as a source of miracles and a place where, as Lise described it, "heaven touched earth," a metal grille was installed to protect the grotto from being destroyed by pilgrims chipping away at the stone wall, so that they might have a piece of rock blessed by the Virgin Mary's presence to take home with them.<sup>265</sup> The grille has long since been removed and free access to the interior of the grotto is now granted, with the hope that contemporary pilgrims will respect the physical integrity of the site.

With the option of taking fragments of the grotto back home unavailable to them, pilgrims innovate with other modes for re-engaging with the sacred geography of Lourdes between their serial pilgrimages. The clearest example of this is in the proliferation of replicas of the Lourdes grotto. As Colleen McDannell observes, the construction of replicas of the Lourdes grotto in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries allowed Americans to experience some semblance of the French shrine while still in their parish

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<sup>265</sup> Kaufman, *Consuming Visions*, 21.



communities thousands of kilometres away. At a time when the Catholic population of the United States was flourishing due to increased immigration from predominantly Catholic European countries such as Ireland and Italy, replicas of the Lourdes grotto allowed Catholics to extend their piety from the confines of the church edifice or private homes to the outside space of the community. Lourdes grottoes were outward physical representations of an interior faith, a faith that at the time was still subject to strains of anti-Catholicism among the larger society. Facsimiles of the grotto, McDannell suggests, “were translations: they permitted the sacred to be de-localized and moved about.”<sup>266</sup> This description is certainly evocative of Bajc et al.’s contention that pilgrimage centres may be marked by mobility, that they hold the capacity to be constantly decentred and translated to new places. Facsimiles of the Lourdes grotto were one especially effective way of accomplishing this translation. They are not mere copies of a specific place however, but rather “in an act of mimesis gain their own special meaning and can make the presence of Mary felt just as with the original...This reproduced space evokes devotions and reactions similar to those in the original place.”<sup>267</sup> When I would visit pilgrims I had met during the course of the pilgrimage in their homes after returning from Lourdes, I was struck by how many had statues of Our Lady of

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<sup>266</sup> Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 155.

<sup>267</sup> Anna-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen, and Catrien Notermans, “Introduction: The Power of Marian Pilgrimage,” in *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World*, ed. Anna-Karina Hermkens et al. (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 10.

Lourdes somewhere within their home, easily recognizable by the figure's hallmarks as Bernadette described them to the investigators: a white dress and veil, a pale blue girdle around the waist, and a golden rose on each foot. As one woman proudly showed me around her small townhouse in east London, pointing to the several statues of Our Lady of Lourdes distributed throughout the house, she said: "I love Mary so much, and seeing her smiling face, that I want to be able to see her, whatever I'm doing, all day. I like to always be reminded of her warmth and protection."<sup>268</sup> Her statues, some large, some small, made of plastic as well as wood and alabaster, were all unique yet still bore some resemblance to the statue of the Virgin Mary placed in the rock niche of the grotto in 1864. The image of Mary in the grotto at Lourdes was loosely translated to the homes of several pilgrims, as an outward sign of their devotion to Our Lady of Lourdes, and as a visual reminder of their past pilgrimages. The images might be placed on bookshelves, bedside tables, spice racks, or incorporated into small home altars. Another pilgrim I visited at home included a small statue of Our Lady of Lourdes among other religious images, including prayer cards of primarily female Catholic saints such as Bernadette, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, and St. Faustina Kowalska, the Polish nun who reported having visions of Jesus and long conversations with him over several years, and who was canonized by Pope John Paul II in 2000. Home altars are common in Catholic homes, and aid in mutually domesticizing religious practice as well as marking the

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<sup>268</sup> Field notes, August 12, 2013.

home or at least some small part of it as sacred space. In these examples, the figure of the Virgin at Lourdes, the original gazing down from its perch in the rock niche of the grotto far away in southern France, is claimed and brought home by pilgrims, and incorporated into their usual domestic space and practice.

One especially poignant example of this process was brought to my attention following the Catholic Association pilgrimage. Maureen, a pilgrim in her early seventies who was recently widowed, invited me to her home for lunch near Brixton in south London, not far from where I was staying in Croydon. Afterwards, while we had tea and I conducted my interview, she interrupted our conversation and said: “Oh! I must show you something.” Maureen took me out to a small garden behind the house and pointed toward what appeared to be a home-made replica of the Lourdes grotto. She noted that the statues of the Virgin Mary and of Bernadette (depicted as kneeling and gazing up at the apparition) were purchased in Lourdes several years prior, and the stone canopy built by her husband with left-over bricks from a home renovation project. Maureen explained that she probably went out to the grotto two or three times a week, depending on the weather, sometimes to pray, and sometimes just to simply look at it. Perhaps most interestingly, when our interview later continued and I asked about her relationship with the grotto at Lourdes, she replied “Whenever I go to Lourdes, one of the things I look forward to most is not simply being in the grotto, arriving there and praying there, but the *grotte* trot. That walk from my hotel to the grotto. I think it’s the anticipation, the

need to get there and it keeps me moving...And I guess I have my own little *grotte* trot, when I go out to the garden [laughs]. It's not the same really, but it's a reminder, it allows me to keep the whole thing going."<sup>269</sup> Maureen's description of the "*grotte* trot," using the French term for grotto, further exemplifies the urgent need felt by pilgrims to make their way toward the grotto soon after arriving in Lourdes, though I only ever heard her and one other pilgrim from Westminster describe the walk using this exact phrase. While Maureen acknowledges that her walks from the back door of her home to the replica of the grotto in her garden are not the same, they are nevertheless still an effective vehicle for a mimetic, embodied process of incorporating her experience in Lourdes into her home life in the UK. Maureen's statement that these walks "allow me to keep the whole thing going" suggests that her walk through the narrow, bustling streets of Lourdes from her hotel to the shrine never really ends with her return home. In this sense, perhaps she is not even a serial pilgrim, but a perpetual pilgrim, continuously tapping into her experience in Lourdes and re-enacting it (though perhaps without the numinous aura of the original site) in her garden in south London.

Although this was the only example I personally saw of a replica Lourdes grotto being constructed at the home of one of the pilgrims, another way of maintaining a physical connection to the shrine while back home is the use of Lourdes water. Nearly every pilgrim I encountered brought Lourdes water home

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<sup>269</sup> Interview, September 3, 2013.

from the shrine. Lining up and waiting their turn at the taps just down from the grotto, pilgrims fill whatever bottles they have with water drawn from the spring uncovered by Bernadette during the apparitions, which is believed by pilgrims to have the potential to effect miraculous cures. During the course of my research, over several pilgrimages, I observed small bottles in the shape of Our Lady of Lourdes with her crown as the twist cap, more conventional water bottles and flasks, large soda bottles, and even gasoline cans being filled with the spring water. Pilgrims often take the water back to the UK with them and drink it or use it as a sort of topical medicine, and some also use it to bless their homes with when they return.

Here, I want to focus on the use of Lourdes water as a means for maintaining physical ties with Lourdes throughout the year while one is in their usual place of residence. Pauline, a pilgrim with the Catholic Association from the Diocese of Southwark, who by her estimation had been to Lourdes eight to ten times consecutively, immigrated to London from Jamaica in the early 1980s. We first met at the very end of the CA pilgrimage in August 2012, as we were transferring by coach between Montparnasse and the Gare du Nord train stations in Paris, and struck up a brief conversation. As luck would have it, the following summer we were assigned seats next to one another on the TGV from Montparnasse to Lourdes, and quickly picked up where we had left off. As I told Pauline about the orders for Lourdes water from family and friends back in Canada that I was required to fill by

the end of the pilgrimage, she shared with me her own use of the water she collected from the spring flowing at the base of the Grotto:

I will usually take about a two litre bottle that I can just barely fit into my case. And I find that when I go home I can't keep it all for myself, and I give a little to friends. But not too much, because I use a lot of it myself. When I wake in the mornings I splash some on my face, that's the first thing I do. And I always do it because it's like a rock, you know it's there. You've got the Lourdes water there, it's blessed, it's holy. It immerses me in the spirit of Lourdes. You know, physically I might be in London, but spiritually I'm always in Lourdes...But I have known people, friends, who will use it for anything that they want, or they pray for healing while using the Lourdes water. I have a friend who uses it on her daughter, who has psoriasis, and it just clears the skin, that water heals the skin. People will say that you have to believe for things to happen, but not necessarily. Lourdes water *works*, even without your belief. You use it, and it works. And I wake up in the mornings, splash my face with the water, and I'm happy all day. I really feel happy, because of the water. We all have problems, I have problems, but the water from Lourdes washes it all away. I use it as a sort of daily moisturizer, it's a habit. I don't know, I just feel good using it.<sup>270</sup>

The use of Lourdes water both as a sort of morning cleanser and as a spiritual aid is critical to Pauline's daily religious practice. At one level, she describes it as simply something that feels good, a habit without a particular intention in mind. But behind this practice she acknowledges is a deeper meaning, the idea that the daily use of Lourdes water on her face immerses her in the spirit of Lourdes. While physically she may be in London or elsewhere, her daily habitual use of the water spiritually refreshes her attachment to the shrine and the happiness she experiences there. Perhaps more than most serial pilgrims I met, who either had a sense of Lourdes as home or who incorporated elements of Lourdes into their lives back in

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<sup>270</sup> Interview, August 23, 2013.

England, Pauline makes it explicit that her ideal spiritual state is directly connected to her experience in Lourdes, which she tries to extend through her daily religious routine. Recalling Tweed's discussion of translocative symbols at the Cuban Catholic shrine in Miami, it might be said that for Pauline, Lourdes water is a translocative symbol, yet one not housed in a shrine that one can visit, but one that is deeply personal, that can be possessed within the home, easily transported, a translocative symbol that is physically engaged with and directly applied to the body. Through her daily use of the Lourdes water, Pauline transcends the bounds of her own home and existence in England, and physically comes into contact with an especially potent element of Lourdes, the water from the spring and the miraculous potential it holds.

Earlier, in my discussion of the particular motives or factors that draw serial pilgrims back to Lourdes year after year, I highlighted the sense of community that was established, between the helpers and Assisted Pilgrims, among the teams of helpers, and generally with the entire pilgrimage and shrine writ large. This sense of community was cited as a draw by many pilgrims, and was often juxtaposed with a perceived lack of community in Britain. For those that made such a distinction, it appeared as though Lourdes was home, and Britain was away, cold and unfamiliar. Yet in another gloss on this notion of pilgrims 'bringing Lourdes back' with them to their daily lives, it should be noted that serious efforts are made to maintain the sense of community forged in Lourdes after pilgrims return to their quotidian

existence. The relationships that develop in the highly charged atmosphere of a pilgrimage are not simply severed or put on hold until next summer's return journey. A few examples serve to illustrate this process. Beginning in September of each year, just over a month after the conclusion of its pilgrimage, the Westminster diocese holds a Reunion Mass on the first Tuesday of each month at 6:35pm in the crypt of Westminster Cathedral, near Victoria station in central London. Email reminders are sent out one week in advance, inviting all past pilgrims to attend. Although only a fraction of the larger pilgrimage group does attend, the mass affords an opportunity for pilgrims to gather together for mass beyond the confines of the shrine at Lourdes, and to pray during the intentions for pilgrims who might be ill or recently deceased. The mass is then followed by drinks at a nearby pub, such as the Windsor Castle on Francis Street, tucked behind the Cathedral. Here in a more relaxed atmosphere, past pilgrims can exchange stories from past pilgrimages and anticipate the next one to come. Such reunions are more difficult for the Catholic Association to organize, given the fact that it is comprised of diocesan groups dispersed across southern England, yet the Catholic Association Hospitalité does hold a retreat for members every two years at Walsingham during the first weekend of April. Both Westminster and the CA maintain websites and Facebook pages for keeping pilgrims informed of activities throughout the year and preparations for the next pilgrimage, and the CA also has a newsletter for the Hospitalité typically published twice a year. These examples of course do not



include what are likely numerous informal meetings between friends, introduced to one another during a pilgrimage to Lourdes. The formal meetings organized by the Westminster diocese and the CA do, however, highlight the need expressed by many pilgrims to maintain contacts with fellow pilgrims once they have returned to their usual daily life back in England.

It was noted at the beginning of this chapter that early pilgrimage studies, following Turner, emphasized the liminal, “centre out there” nature of pilgrimage. Pilgrimage sites were viewed as distant, remote, in the borderlands. Travel to them was an extraordinary and likely once-in-a-lifetime event. Yet I have aimed to show that the binary divide between home and pilgrimage site begins to dissolve when one examines the motives and perceptions of contemporary pilgrims to Lourdes, who by virtue of relatively close proximity, ease of modern modes of travel, and simple addiction to the Lourdes experience, embark on what become serial pilgrimages to Lourdes year after year. As they become increasingly familiar with the shrine and its environs, and are drawn back by the sense of community the pilgrimage provides, Lourdes becomes a central element in the faith lives of serial pilgrims, for whom the pilgrimage site becomes a home away from home or is perceived as their true, authentic home. This movement is reciprocal however, as not only is Lourdes considered a second or ideal home, but elements of Lourdes are incorporated into the daily religious lives of pilgrims after they return to England. The boundaries once erected between the home of the pilgrim and the away of the

religious shrine are indeed porous, with cross-currents flowing back and forth between the two. The centre may still indeed be out there in the geographical and cognitive margins, as Turner posits, but particularly for serial pilgrims returning to Lourdes, it is also intimately familiar, a storehouse for memories of pilgrimages past, and a site for continued spiritual refreshment.

## V

Mediating Mediums: Encountering Lourdes through *The Song of Bernadette*

*For those who believe in God, no explanation is necessary. For those who do not believe in God, no explanation is possible.*

-Foreword to the film *The Song of Bernadette* (1943)

It's nearing eleven o'clock on the night of December 7th, and somewhere on a dark motorway in the west of France thirty-two pilgrims from across southeast England are on their way to Lourdes. The coach journey that left earlier in the day from the side entrance of Westminster Cathedral in central London will ultimately take well over eighteen hours to arrive in Lourdes, delayed by a cargo backlog at the Port of Dover and punctuated by several rest stops along the way. Facilitated by Tangney Tours, this particular group of pilgrims are making their way to Lourdes to mark the Roman Catholic Feast of the Immaculate Conception. The feast day on December 8<sup>th</sup> holds a special resonance for those Catholics devoted to Lourdes. One of the singular highlights of the series of apparitions of the Virgin Mary at Lourdes was her simple and to many puzzling statement in the regional dialect: "Que soy era Immaculada Concepciou" ("*I am the Immaculate Conception*"). By identifying herself as the Immaculate Conception, the lady in the grotto not only seemed to confirm to believers and doubters alike that she was indeed the Virgin Mary, but also seemed to give direct divine approval to the doctrine promulgated by the Pope only four years prior. Pilgrims to Lourdes today will often point to this moment in

the series of apparitions as unassailable proof that it was indeed the Virgin that appeared to Bernadette.

After stopping briefly at a rest station, the coach continues south down the A10 autoroute toward the Pyrénées, and Heather, our tour representative from Tangney Tours, carefully makes her way to the front of the coach with an announcement:

I know some of you are beginning to get tired, especially from the long wait to board the ferry at Dover, but we still have a long way to go, and since many of you likely won't be able to sleep, I thought it might be nice to put some movies on to help pass the time. We have three options: *Sister Act*, *The Priests: In Concert at Armagh Cathedral*, or *The Song of Bernadette*. Now I know many of you have probably already seen *The Song of Bernadette* and have had enough of it, but especially for those that haven't seen it, or who happen to be first-timers to Lourdes, it might be worth seeing before we get there. But it's up to you.<sup>271</sup>

I turn to Martha, a woman in her early thirties originally from Poland, and ask her if she had already seen any of the films Heather mentioned:

I have, yes. Whoopi Goldberg is so funny in *Sister Act*, and I like to sing along to the songs. And I can't count how many times I've seen *The Song of Bernadette*, but I never get tired of it. I saw it for the first time a couple years after I came to London with my family. I had heard the story about Bernadette and Our Lady appearing to her before, but after I saw the movie I really wanted to go to Lourdes myself... This will be my third time in Lourdes. I went as a helper with the HCPT last April, and I watched the movie before going. It's good to remind yourself of the story.<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Field notes, December 7, 2012.

<sup>272</sup> Field notes, December 7, 2012.

After some deliberation among the pilgrims, it's decided that *The Priests* will be screened first, followed by *The Song of Bernadette*. The stage is now set for the remainder of our weekend pilgrimage.

Over the past fifteen years, academics engaged in tourism research have become increasingly attuned to the relationship between film and tourism. Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and the film-induced tourism it has spurred in the "Middle-Earth" of New Zealand is perhaps one of the more recent and most salient examples of this phenomenon.<sup>273</sup> Angelina Karpovich observes that this field of research is both still relatively new and multidisciplinary, yet unconsciously so, since "...the disciplines involved are not only not communicating with each other, but are actually using different terms to describe the same phenomena."<sup>274</sup> One concept that is commonly employed in film tourism across disciplines, however, is that of authenticity. Taking their cue from broader discussions in tourism research, scholars in film tourism have wrestled with the notion of tourism as a quest for authenticity and the degree to which authenticity still serves as an adequate descriptor corresponding to the motives of film-induced tourists, given its ambiguity and perceived limitations.

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<sup>273</sup> See Daniela Carl, Sara Kindon and Karen Smith, "Tourists' Experiences of Film Locations: New Zealand as 'Middle-Earth,'" *Tourism Geographies* 9 (2007), Anne Buchmann, Kevin Moore and David Fisher, "Experiencing Film Tourism: Authenticity and Fellowship," *Annals of Tourism Research* 37 (2010), and Alfio Leotta, *Touring the Screen: Tourism and New Zealand Film Geographies* (Chicago: Intellect, 2011).

<sup>274</sup> Angelina I. Karpovich, "Theoretical Approaches to Film-Motivated Tourism," *Tourism and Hospitality Planning & Development* 7 (2010): 10.

This chapter aims to contribute to this debate on the continuing relevance of authenticity in tourism studies and film tourism specifically by arguing for the usefulness of the concept in understanding Lourdes as an intersection of media representation and embodied encounter with narrative and place. Specifically, I explore the 1943 Hollywood film *The Song of Bernadette*, a religious epic detailing the life of Bernadette Soubirous, and its role as an authenticating tool for pilgrims. Through the fluid interplay between the cinematic representation of the series of apparitions of the Virgin Mary to Bernadette, and the physical exploration of those sites in Lourdes associated with the apparitions by contemporary pilgrims, *The Song of Bernadette* dramatizes and confirms the authenticity of pilgrims' embodied experience of the sacred at Lourdes. Rather than using Lourdes as an example of film-induced or motivated tourism, I intend to highlight Lourdes as a sacred site which alternatively allows for film-mediated pilgrimage and possesses the capacity to induce an experience of existential authenticity dependent on place and object.

### *The Battle of the Books and Franz Werfel's Song*

The Twentieth Century Fox film starring Jennifer Jones, Charles Bickford and Vincent Price was based on Franz Werfel's 1942 novel of the same name. Described as a masterpiece of realistic hagiography,<sup>275</sup> this popular rendering of the Lourdes story was only one in a long list of literary treatments of the life of the

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<sup>275</sup> Ann W. Astell, "Artful Dogma: The Immaculate Conception and Franz Werfel's *Song of Bernadette*," *Christianity and Literature* 62 (2012): 5.

young seer Bernadette and the events at Lourdes that would bring her such great renown. Indeed, shortly after the series of eighteen apparitions concluded in July 1858, a concerted effort was made by several influential figures to lay claim to *the* authoritative and authentic account of the Lourdes apparitions. This literary tug-of-war is described by historian Ruth Harris as “the battle of the books,”<sup>276</sup> occurring simultaneously with the initial development of the built environment of the shrine. Both the construction of churches and the writing of various treatises on Lourdes, writes Harris, “...were concerned with which traditions and images of events would be commemorated, both were major features of the shrine for the rest of the country, and both were critical for the reputation that Lourdes attained in the outside world.”<sup>277</sup>

Perhaps the most influential polemicist tasked with giving voice to an authoritative narrative of the apparitions was the journalist Henri Lasserre. Millions read his *Notre-Dame de Lourdes*, which took the Catholic world by storm with its publication ten years after the apparitions. Written in part as a votive offering in thanksgiving to the Virgin Mary for regaining his eyesight five years prior, Lasserre’s work was arguably the greatest bestseller of the nineteenth century, going into 142 French editions in the first seven years after its publication, translated into over eighty languages by 1900, and apparently selling over a million

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<sup>276</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 177.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

copies.<sup>278</sup> With its florid novelistic style and its many factual errors, Lasserre's text came under severe criticism by several church officials and competing Lourdes apologists, most notably the Bishop of Tarbes, Monsignor Laurence. Yet in a remarkable open letter to Laurence, Lasserre pointed to the success of his book as a form of divine imprimatur confirming its unimpeachable authority in faithfully detailing the events at Lourdes as they happened:

The good that this book has done, and the conversions it has already effected: the innumerable pilgrims and donations it has attracted to the Grotto...all this has helped to convince me that, despite my unworthiness and perhaps even because of it, the noble Virgin who appeared to Bernadette deigned to choose me to tell this sublime story, and make it heard by mankind.<sup>279</sup>

For several decades following the apparitions, several more accounts would be published, both those seeking to promote the shrine and its message, attesting to its authenticity, and those relaying the events through a more cynical lens, namely Emile Zola's *Lourdes*.

Nearly seventy-five years later, following Lasserre, Franz Werfel would also sing the song of Bernadette on the written page, in fulfillment of a vow made in thanksgiving to Our Lady of Lourdes. Werfel, a Czech-born Jewish poet, playwright and novelist, would be brought to Lourdes with his wife Alma through an accident of history, as they fled Nazi forces increasingly advancing further west into France. After arriving in Pau, the gateway to the Pyrénées and a forty-minute

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<sup>278</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 180.

<sup>279</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 189.



drive from Lourdes, they learned that the renowned shrine town was the only place in the area where they might be able to find safe lodgings amid the chaos. They arrived in Lourdes on June 27, 1940, and after some initial difficulty, were able to negotiate accommodations at the Hôtel Vatican, which still stands on the Rue de la Grotte near the Pont Vieux. According to Peter Stephan Jungk in his biography of Werfel, during the five weeks of his stay in Lourdes as he waited for safe passage to Marseilles where he could finally obtain a visa to travel to the United States, Werfel returned time and again to the grotto where the visions had occurred.<sup>280</sup> His wife Alma obtained books about the Lourdes miracles from the local shops which line the main boulevards leading into the sanctuary, and from these Werfel learned the story of Bernadette, the series of visions, and the struggle with clerical and governmental authorities which later ensued over the sincerity of her reports. Prior to his time in Lourdes, Werfel only had a superficial knowledge of the shrine and apparitions. Unlike the millions of pilgrims who arrive in Lourdes each year and drink and bathe in the water of the spring praying for the possibility of a cure for a physical ailment, Werfel often drank from the spring hoping for a miracle of another sort: the ability to escape from Nazi persecution and reach the promised land of the United States. When the Werfel's were finally given safe passage to Marseilles in August 1940, he visited the Grotto one final time before departing, and according to his brief personal preface to *The Song of Bernadette*, Werfel vowed that "...if I

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<sup>280</sup> Peter Stephan Jungk, *A Life Torn By History: Franz Werfel 1890-1945* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1990), 185.

escaped from this desperate situation and reached the saving shores of America, I would put off all other tasks before me and sing, as best I could, the song of Bernadette.”<sup>281</sup>

The Werfel’s arrived at the Port of New York on October 13, 1940, and after several weeks in the city, ultimately travelled to the west coast and settled in Beverly Hills, California. Although he vowed to immediately set about the task of writing Bernadette’s story, his notebook indicates he was far less certain of the project than his preface to the novel suggests.<sup>282</sup> Yet he ultimately pressed on, briskly writing the thick novel in a short five months, and it was ultimately published by Viking Press on May 11, 1942. To the observant reader, it becomes readily apparent that the spiritual subject matter of the novel has seeped into the very structure of the book itself, where Werfel has organized the sequence of chapters as a rosary. Its fifty chapters are subdivided into five sets of ten each, with its final chapter entitled “The Fiftieth Ave.” The saintly seer Bernadette is presented by Werfel as the ideal candidate to be graced by an apparition of the Virgin Mary. She is a normal young girl who lives with her family in poverty, due to the haplessness of her father François, an unemployed former miller. She is a poor student, slow to learn, with barely the faintest knowledge of religious teachings. Despite her background, the novel stresses throughout her unwavering honesty and

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<sup>281</sup> Franz Werfel, “A Personal Preface,” in *The Song of Bernadette* (New York: Viking, 1942), xiv.

<sup>282</sup> Hans Wagener, *Understanding Franz Werfel* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 150.

her ability to win over even the most skeptical critics with her quick wit, charming demeanour, and her tenacity in the face of opposition. She refuses to use the renown she quickly gains from the spreading reports of her visions for her own social and financial advantage, aspiring to nothing more than to become a maid to a member of the local aristocracy, and to marry and have children.

Perhaps surprisingly, the defining action of the novel is not the apparitions (they in fact receive relatively little attention), but Bernadette's resolute consistency and strength under the questioning and threats of reprisals rained down on her by various secular and clerical officials, as well as neighbours and family members. Her parents are initially embarrassed, viewing Bernadette's claims about the apparitions as just one more burden on top of a life already riddled with misfortune. The townspeople of Lourdes have a range of reactions, from quick support to shunning Bernadette as a social pariah. There are the enlightened elites of the town, who brush off Bernadette as hysterical and as a relic of a medieval religious sensibility, and the Church officials, including Father Peyramale, the Curé of Lourdes, and Monsignor Laurence, the local Bishop of Tarbes, who are initially wary of the embarrassment and damage that could be done to the Church if it endorses the veracity of the visions, only to have them later proven to be mere illusions or an elaborate planned hoax. Werfel highlights throughout the novel that not only is the integrity of Bernadette proven time and again, but nearly all her critics are shown the errors of their ways and converted. Yet as Wagener argues,

Werfel is not concerned about proving the validity of the miracles, demonstrating or convincing the reader that they really happened. At its essence, what is at stake for Werfel is the truthfulness of Bernadette, the authenticity of her faith and belief.<sup>283</sup>

Werfel however was careful to stress in his preface to *The Song of Bernadette* that despite not being particularly concerned with convincing readers of the veracity of Bernadette's story, or the more artful rendering of the sequence of events in his *Song*, this nevertheless did not diminish its value as an authentic accounting of the person of Bernadette and the historical sequence of the apparitions:

*The Song of Bernadette* is a novel but not a fictive work. In face of the events here delineated, the sceptical reader will ask with better right than in the case of most historical epic narratives: "What is true? What is invented?" My answer is: All the memorable happenings that constitute the substance of this book took place in the world of reality. Since their beginning dates back no longer than eighty years, there beats upon them the bright light of modern history and their truth has been confirmed by friend and foe and by cool observers through faithful testimonies. My story makes no changes in this body of truth. I exercised my right of creative freedom only where the work, as a work of art, demanded certain chronological condensations or where there was need of striking the spark of life from the hardened substance.<sup>284</sup>

Reviews of the book upon the release of its English translation from the original German were overwhelmingly glowing, both in the secular and religious press, and many focused on the degree to which Werfel's rendering of the Lourdes narrative

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<sup>283</sup> Wagener, 154.

<sup>284</sup> Werfel, xv.

was faithful to events as they happened. In her absolutely effusive review of the book, Katherine Woods of the *New York Times* writes of Werfel:

In his creative treatment of the events at Lourdes he has vivified historic fact with a force greater than that of literal statement, and far beyond controversy. “The Song of Bernadette” is a matter of record in its important happenings; it is no less a novel of compelling artistry, as its characters grow, its plot develops, its conflicts crystallize, its incandescent light shines clear.<sup>285</sup>

John T. Appleby of *The Washington Post* agreed, praising Werfel for a sensitive reconstruction of the person of Bernadette and the events at Lourdes, one pervaded with tender beauty and fresh poetic writing.<sup>286</sup>

The critical response to the book by both the Catholic hierarchy and religious publications was no less enthusiastic, and similarly hinged on Werfel’s faithful retelling of Bernadette’s story. At the Critic’s Forum hosted at the Mayflower Hotel in October 1942, the editor of *The Catholic World*, Rev. James M. Gillis, told listeners that *The Song of Bernadette* represents “the most reverential and genuine religious story produced by any contemporary writer regardless of church or creed.”<sup>287</sup> In the two standard-bearers for the British Catholic press, *The Tablet* and *The Catholic Herald*, both responses to the novel note that despite Werfel being a Jew,<sup>288</sup> he had composed perhaps the most beautifully written

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<sup>285</sup> Katherine Woods, “Mr. Werfel’s Stirring Novel About the Saint of Lourdes: *The Song of Bernadette* is Filled with Faith in Human Goodness,” *New York Times*, May 10, 1942, BR3.

<sup>286</sup> John T. Appleby, “Lady of the Grotto,” *The Washington Post*, May 17, 1942, L9.

<sup>287</sup> “Catholic Editor Hails Novel by Franz Werfel as Classic,” *The Washington Post*, October 2, 1942, B1.

<sup>288</sup> For further insight regarding Werfel’s religious beliefs, see Franz Werfel, *Between Heaven and Earth* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), and Lionel B. Steiman, *Franz Werfel – The*

treatment of a modern saint. Hamish Hamilton of *The Tablet* was especially concerned with a sympathetic and genuine representation of Bernadette and her visions. He observes in his review of *The Song of Bernadette* that clearly Werfel has read both Emile Zola's highly sceptical *Lourdes* as well as L. M. Cros' *Histoire de Notre-Dame de Lourdes*, yet unlike the former Werfel champions Bernadette's simple religious sensibility, and departing from Cros, takes a rather mundane presentation of chronological events and breathes life into them. While noting that Werfel does employ artistic licence at points in the text, Hamilton ultimately concludes that "...when it comes to the big things, to the conduct and character of Bernadette, to the attitude of the clergy and municipal authorities, to the miracles, to the changing moods of the crowds, Herr Werfel is not only true to the documents, but brings them to tingling, exciting resurrection."<sup>289</sup> While Werfel may put many of his own words on Bernadette's lips, Hamilton feels that they are inspired words, words she easily might have spoken. For Hamilton and other Catholic reviewers, the accurate retelling of the events at Lourdes in *The Song of Bernadette* is central to its success as a novel and to its potential for converting popular success on the bestseller lists to a renewed Catholic zeal.

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*Faith of an Exile: From Prague to Beverly Hills* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1985).

<sup>289</sup> Hamish Hamilton, "Books of the Week: Our Lady of Lourdes," *The Tablet*, November 14, 1942, 240.

*From Page to Screen*

The attention accorded to whether Werfel's hagiography of Bernadette accurately reflected the events of 1858 extended to its film adaptation. Once Twentieth Century Fox had purchased the film rights to *The Song of Bernadette* for a reported \$75 000,<sup>290</sup> energies turned to the all-important task of casting Bernadette. Of foremost concern was the principal that the actress cast must be believable as Bernadette; she must appear to audiences as the very living embodiment of the visionary saint, both on screen and in her life outside the frame. It was decided that she must be a completely unknown actress, an empty vessel into which audiences, and most importantly Catholic filmgoers, could inscribe and confirm their own vision of Bernadette in appearance and character. Louella Parsons, the syndicated Hollywood gossip columnist, devoted a column in July 1942 (at the very height of the popularity of Werfel's novel) to the dilemma producer William Perlberg was facing in casting Bernadette. In an interview with Parsons, Perlberg laments:

Dorothy Lamour and Gene Tierney would not be suitable because they could not be convincing as religious after having worn scanty South Sea Island attire. Irene Dunne, whose life off screen has always been above reproach and who is a devout Catholic, has appeared in too many sophisticated comedies and matrimonial satires. A young Irene yet to be discovered would be perfect...we would be criticized for casting a married woman in the role of St. Bernadette. I would have to find out how the Church, which is vitally interested in this book, would react....I feel we should find an unknown girl who has never been associated with any other characterization.<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> "Screen News Here and in Hollywood," *New York Times*, June 2, 1942, 19.

<sup>291</sup> Louella Parsons, *Washington Post*, July 26, 1942, L4.

Approximately three hundred actresses were reduced to the final seven who tested for the role, including Lillian Gish, Anne Baxter, and Linda Darnell, who would instead be cast in the role of the Virgin Mary. Jennifer Jones, a 22 year-old actress from Tulsa, Oklahoma, was ultimately chosen for the role. Her physical presence on screen was first tested by filming Jones walking on stones as she crossed an imaginary stream, as Bernadette did when she received her first vision while collecting firewood. The screen test of Jones reacting and talking to the apparition of the Virgin served to determine her acting ability, with a prop man carrying a stick substituting for the figure of Mary. After viewing the footage, the director Henry King was convinced that the relative newcomer Jones was the only actress they had tested who could convince an audience that Bernadette was truly seeing an apparition of the Virgin in the Grotto of Massabielle.<sup>292</sup>

Despite being significantly older than the peasant visionary Bernadette, Jones' portrayal received wide acclaim upon the film premiere of *The Song of Bernadette* in December 1943, the positive momentum carrying her to an Oscar win months later. Bosley Crowther, film reviewer for *The New York Times*, looked past what he saw as the numerous limitations of the film and lauded Jones' performance as the young seer: "Her large, sad eyes, and soft face, her wistful mouth and luminous smile are a thoroughly appealing exterior for the innocence which shines from within. And her manner, both dignified and humble, modest yet confident, is

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<sup>292</sup> Paul Green, *Jennifer Jones: The Life and Films* (London: McFarland, 2011), 28.



a wonderful contrast to the shadings of lay and clerical personalities.”<sup>293</sup> Another article in the *Times* on the subject of the recent release of films relating to the miraculous remarked positively on Jones giving vibrant life to the Bernadette of history and the page: “A splendid new actress, Jennifer Jones, plays the role of Bernadette, and she imparts a glowing strength and beauty to the peasant maid of Lourdes. One is able to believe implicitly in the mystical experience of this girl and in her simple exaltation after she has seen ‘the Lady’...Miss Jones, in a beautiful performance, has made Bernadette a living girl.”<sup>294</sup> She was especially praised by the Catholic press for the way in which she inhabited the role of Bernadette, one reviewer in the UK’s *Catholic Herald* noting: “Jennifer Jones brings a rare intelligence, understanding and technique to the part of Bernadette – her utter conviction, her strength born of simplicity, and her exaltation.”<sup>295</sup> The sense of Jennifer Jones as not merely an actress portraying a role but as an authentic reproduction of Bernadette herself developed to such an extent that on her celebratory return to Tulsa after her Oscar win, a statue of herself in the role of Bernadette was unveiled on the grounds of her former Catholic school, in a replica of the grotto where the original Bernadette had her visions.<sup>296</sup> Yet the tendency to cast unknown virginal young women in the roles of notable female religious figures

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<sup>293</sup> Bosley Crowther, “*The Song of Bernadette*, a Devout Film Version of the Werfel Story, With Jennifer Jones, Opens Here at Rivoli,” *New York Times*, January 27, 1944, 15.

<sup>294</sup> “Sacred and Profane: Comment on the Miraculous Nature of Two of the Current New Films,” *New York Times*, January 30, 1944, X3.

<sup>295</sup> “Sanctity Screened: *The Song of Bernadette*,” *Catholic Herald*, March 31, 1944.

<sup>296</sup> Green, *Jennifer Jones*, 37.

did not go without criticism, particularly regarding the casting of Jennifer Jones as Bernadette. One Hollywood reporter was especially sceptical: “It seems that girls who star in religious pictures just suddenly materialize. They come from the holy nowhere into the uncertain here, and they haven’t lived before. They have no past. They have only a glowing, sanctified present. This seems to be part of an unwritten code of Hollywood.”<sup>297</sup>

Taking into consideration the long range of Hollywood adaptations of wildly popular novels, Henry King’s cinematic interpretation of *The Song of Bernadette* is remarkably faithful to Werfel’s treatment. The opening scenes emphasize the deplorable living conditions of the Soubirous family, as we see the entire family sleeping in a damp, cold, small stone room that once served as a jail before being closed for health and safety concerns. Her father François, unable to secure respectable employment with an income sufficient to provide for his growing family, is forced to earn some money disposing of diseased bandages from the town hospital. The disposal site, beside a cave on the outskirts of Lourdes, will be the focus point of the drama to come as the site of the apparitions, contrasting its history as a profane dumping ground for the town’s refuse, to its new status as a space imbued with the sacred.

The film quickly conveys the fact that Bernadette is quite prone to illness, often suffering from violent asthma attacks. While on an outing with her sister and

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<sup>297</sup> Robbin Coons, “Hollywood Sights and Sounds,” *Prescott Evening Courier*, December 28, 1942, 7.

cousin to collect firewood from a commons, Bernadette is forced to stay behind near a small cave due to her health, and it is at this moment that Bernadette is graced with her first vision of “a lady.” Despite the protestations of her parents, as well as church and secular officials, Bernadette continues to return to the Grotto of Massabielle, followed by ever larger crowds of townspeople and eventually visitors from further afield, drawn by reports of the curious phenomenon and claims by various figures, though never Bernadette herself, that it is the Virgin Mary appearing in the rock niche. Throughout the series of visions, Bernadette sees and communicates with the Lady in white, yet the throngs of curious and devout spectators are never granted the same privilege.

Bernadette is soon the subject of a concerted attack by the Imperial Prosecutor Dutour, played by Vincent Price, who regards Bernadette as a hysterical religious fanatic out of place in the enlightened France of the mid-nineteenth century. Both he and the Police Commissioner attempt alternatively to frighten and gently persuade her to admit the entire episode was a childish hallucination, or an elaborate plot put to her by her parents or by the Church. The Curé of Lourdes, Father Peyramale, likewise does not accept the possibility that there may be some truth in Bernadette’s story, and is first and foremost concerned with upholding the integrity of the Church, protecting it from superstitious folk beliefs that could threaten orthodoxy.

Two events during the series of apparitions are perhaps marked with the most significance during the film. The first is the uncovering of a spring, as Bernadette eats weeds and digs through mud and smears it across her face following the instruction of the Lady, to the jeers of the crowd as they call her a pig. Later that day however, when water begins to flow continuously from where Bernadette scraped the ground, various people return to drink and bathe in it, claiming the water has brought about miraculous healings. Later in the film, as Bernadette is being pressed to ask the Lady her name, Bernadette finally provides the answer, claiming that the Lady refers to herself as “The Immaculate Conception.” Swearing to have never heard of the term before despite it being a key facet of Catholic Marian dogma, Bernadette convinces many to believe the veracity of her claims. This detail of the apparition also convinces many onlookers that the apparition is indeed the Virgin Mary, despite Bernadette’s refusal to confirm “the lady’s” identity one way or the other.

With Bernadette’s fame becoming increasingly widespread and Lourdes now quickly being established as a pilgrimage centre, it is decided that it would be best for Bernadette to enter the convent of Saint Gildard at Nevers, several hundred kilometres from the curious crowds now congregating at the Grotto. However Bernadette is confronted by Sister Marie Thérèse, the spiteful nun who once headed the convent school in Lourdes, and who is now the head of the novices at Nevers. Regarding Bernadette as an attention seeking fraud unworthy to be graced by a

vision of the Virgin Mary, Sister Marie Thérèse only comes to believe Bernadette when it is revealed that she suffers from the incredible pain of tuberculosis of the bone. As the terminally ill Bernadette falls in and out of consciousness, she receives one final vision of the Lady, and dies in a state of ecstasy. The film ends showing an image of St. Peter's Basilica during the canonization ceremony of St. Bernadette ten years prior to the film's production, in 1933, on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception.

*The Song of Bernadette* gained widespread popularity among both Catholic filmgoers and the general theatre audience, due in large part to Jennifer Jones' convincing portrayal of Bernadette and the epic struggle between a peasant girl's simple faith and the doubts and snares of hostile secular and clerical authorities that plays out across the screen. Such binary oppositions between good and evil, faith and doubt, often feature in religious films and appeal to the audience as a result of their straightforward and easily navigable storyline. However, the box office and critical success of *The Song of Bernadette* cannot be understood outside its historical context, since both Werfel's novel and the film were released at the height of the Second World War. Indeed Werfel himself explicitly understood his *Song* as a direct response to the spiritual malaise of western culture at that time, which he perceived as intrinsically bound up with the advance of both fascism and communism. In an essay for the American Catholic publication *Commonweal*,

providing some background insight into the development of the novel, Werfel is clear in situating his treatment of the Lourdes story within the contemporary milieu:

Not a material but a spiritual principle is at stake in this, the only genuine world war. On the one side stands radical nihilism which no longer regards the human being as the image of God but as an amoral machine in a completely meaningless world. On the other side, on our side, stands the metaphysical, the religious concept of life... "The Song of Bernadette" is a jubilant hymn to the spiritual meaning of the universe. Through the medium of this charming and simple personality, we see how, even in our age of skepticism, divine powers are at work.<sup>298</sup>

Although Werfel is perhaps generously indulging in overblown rhetoric here, nevertheless, both the novel and subsequent film were often understood in reviews and commentary as especially suited to the period. Around the time of the film's release, it was noted that since the beginning of the war, several novels with religious themes or subjects had been published, including Werfel's as well as Lloyd C. Douglas' novel *The Robe*, and that many were being translated from page to screen. Fred Stanley of *The New York Times* counted eight dramas with religious themes which were either in production or near release as of December 1943, with Twentieth Century Fox's *Bernadette* chief among them. Stanley credits this phenomenon to what he observes as the film industry's acceptance of the tradition that during times of war there is a more general tolerance of and indeed significant appetite for spiritual subject matter.<sup>299</sup> In an earlier article on the same theme of a spiritual resurgence in Hollywood, Stanley writes that *The Song of Bernadette*

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<sup>298</sup> Franz Werfel, "Writing Bernadette," *The Commonweal*, May 29, 1942, 125.

<sup>299</sup> Fred Stanley, "Hollywood Turns to Inspirational Films," *New York Times*, December 19, 1943, X5.

should have little difficulty becoming a runaway success given the current wartime climate: “The country is going through a great spiritual awakening, due to the war, and they are certain that a picture dealing with miracles and religious faith will now be welcomed. Exhibitors are reporting a much kindlier regard on the part of patrons to scenes in features and newsreels which touch on spiritual subjects.”<sup>300</sup> Not only would the general theatre audience be receptive to a film with a religious subject during wartime, but in fact American soldiers stationed in western Europe were reported to have been quite eager to pass through Lourdes during their tour, as they awaited their return to the United States after the war had concluded in May 1945. Many soldiers had read the novel or viewed the film while serving, and travelled to Lourdes to experience the shrine for themselves, visiting the house where Bernadette was born and where she grew up, as well as taking part in the Blessed Sacrament procession.<sup>301</sup>

While many of the examples given of response to the film have been primarily American, it is important to note that *The Song of Bernadette* also quickly became a fixture for Catholic audiences in the United Kingdom. The archives of *The Tablet* and the *Catholic Herald* are particularly helpful in examining the response of British Catholics. Leading up to the film’s release, some letters to the editor expressed anxiety regarding how the story of Bernadette so sensitively

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<sup>300</sup> Fred Stanley, “A New Spiritual Resurgence in Hollywood: Studios Now Look Favourably on Religious Themes,” *New York Times*, March 7, 1943, X3.

<sup>301</sup> “Soldier Pilgrims to the Shrine of Bernadette,” *New York Times*, September 23, 1945, 104.

rendered in Werfel's novel would be translated onto the screen: "I await with great nervousness what Hollywood will make of *The Song of Bernadette*; for I hear the film rights have been acquired. Franz Werfel is on the spot, in Beverly Hills, and he will, I trust, put up a strong fight for a due reverence in approaching a record which means so much to Catholics."<sup>302</sup> Yet once the film was released in Britain it was generally enthusiastically received, and there were hopes that the viewing of the film particularly by non-Catholics and those that had lapsed in the practice of their faith would convert or return viewers to the Church. One letter to the *Catholic Herald* entitled "A Film and a Harvest" implored readers to pray earnestly for their non-Catholic fellow citizens, that as a result of seeing the film many may be so impressed that the seeds of faith may be sown, and that a harvest of conversions such as the Catholic hierarchy had hoped for with the wide release of the film may finally materialize.<sup>303</sup>

As part of their promotional efforts for the film in Britain, representatives of Twentieth Century Fox held a special private screening of the film for the Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Griffin, joined by over sixty diocesan clergy. In his personal reaction to the film, Cardinal Griffin is quoted as saying: "Excellent! I have read the book; it follows it very well. I recommend all Catholics to see it. Non-Catholics too, for that matter, for it portrays the supernatural very

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<sup>302</sup> "Talking at Random," *The Tablet*, January 9, 1943, 22.

<sup>303</sup> E.A. Edmunds, "A Film and a Harvest," *Catholic Herald*, October 27, 1944, 2.



gratifyingly.”<sup>304</sup> Bishop Ellis of the Diocese of Nottingham was also quite favourably disposed toward the film, even treating nuns from four convents in the city to a special showing of the film at the Hippodrome. Some of the nuns remarked that if they were as severe and bitter as some of those depicted on the screen, they wouldn’t consider themselves to be very good nuns.<sup>305</sup> The film was criticized however by some London priests, most notably for the romantic storyline between Bernadette and an older boy Antoine, which they maintained had only been introduced in the film and was not sourced either from Werfel’s book or any other narrative relating to Bernadette and the apparitions, believing that it could do much harm to the sensibilities of Catholic filmgoers. Yet in the years following the film’s release, it would continue to be a mainstay in Catholic schools and organizations. Even ten years later, special screenings of the film primarily for Catholic audiences were still being held at local cinemas, and in one instance at the Grand Cinema on the Isle of Wight, over two hundred people had to be turned away when *The Song of Bernadette* was shown by the local council of the Knights of St. Columba.<sup>306</sup>

I have sketched out anecdotes from the development of Franz Werfel’s novel and the subsequent film in order to point to the significance of authenticity in crafting Marian apparition narratives, be it at the polemical level of writers such as Henri Lasserre, or later popular renderings of the Lourdes story in novel and film.

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<sup>304</sup> “The Archbishop Sees *Bernadette*,” *Catholic Herald*, March 31, 1944, 1.

<sup>305</sup> “Bishop Treats Nuns to *Bernadette*,” *Catholic Herald*, November 10, 1944, 5.

<sup>306</sup> “200 Too Many,” *Catholic Herald*, November 5, 1954, 7.

The high-stakes development of authoritative apparition narratives is key in the fostering of a shrine and pilgrimage apparatus as they quite evidently “...provide proof for the authenticity of the miraculous events associated with these locales.”<sup>307</sup>

For contemporary pilgrims to Lourdes, over 150 years after Bernadette’s series of eighteen visions and with a range of apologetic literature claiming to be the definitive accounting of them well-established, this need for an authentic encounter with a sacred past is still no less crucial.

### *Screening the Sacred*

Yet how does the sacred translate from historical event, theological treatise, or literary narrative to the flickering images projected onto the cinema screen? How do religious audiences engage with the explicitly religious film, or those films employing more subtle religious tropes in an attempt to infuse the cinematic narrative with an otherworldly glow? Colleen McDannell argues that as much as movies are about collective experiences, entertainment, and escapism, they also communicate ideas. Most significantly for our purposes here, movies in all their forms hold the capacity to produce, maintain, critique, and transform our perception of reality. They can reinforce our understanding and our vision of things as they really are, just as they can unsettle it.<sup>308</sup> Religious film, or film that hints at the

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<sup>307</sup> Ellen Badone, “Echoes from Kerizinen: Pilgrimage, Narrative, and the Construction of Sacred History at a Marian Shrine in Northwestern France,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13 (2007): 468.

<sup>308</sup> Colleen McDannell, *Catholics in the Movies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

religious, is perhaps especially suited to this task. It was noted previously that the Second World War coincided with or indeed fuelled a resurgence in interest in things religious or spiritual, and that this interest was reflected and satisfied by a significant uptick in Hollywood films with religious subjects or themes. Interestingly, despite being a predominantly Protestant Christian country, with increasing numbers of immigrants flowing into the United States from majority Catholic countries such as Italy, Ireland, and Eastern Europe, American audiences became increasingly interested in films portraying elements of Roman Catholic life. McDannell notes that as “an intensely visual religion with a well-defined ritual and authority system, Catholicism lends itself to the drama and pageantry – the iconography – of film.”<sup>309</sup> Popular films of the era such as *Going My Way*, *The Bells of St. Mary’s*, and *The Song of Bernadette* reflect this trend. Cinema audiences were as likely to see French peasant girls being graced with a Marian apparition, and kindly priests and nuns serving the needy, as they were the latest Western shootout. Rather than being marginal to American popular culture, “Catholic people, places and rituals are central. At the movies, Catholicism – rather than Protestantism – is the American religion.”<sup>310</sup>

Within this intersection of film and the sacred with their complementary modes of mediation and engagement, where might we situate *The Song of Bernadette*? Focused as it is on telling the story of a young French saint privileged

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<sup>309</sup> McDannell, *Catholics in the Movies*, 14.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid.

with visions of the Virgin Mary, as well as depicting claims of sudden miraculous healings, it does not fit as neatly into the more predictable Hollywood Catholic film mould of priests, nuns, and often lower class immigrants in the Catholic ghettos of urban America. While such people and places might constitute an Other for the general viewing public, at the same time they might represent a familiar image of the European immigrant just landed on America's shores, clinging to the culture of the old country yet with the promise of a new life in the United States. Alternatively, a film such as *Bernadette* might have appeared as utterly foreign even to American Catholics.

The film may be best understood as a *hagiopic*. The term, coined by Pamela Grace and clearly recalling the written biographies of saints and other notable religious figures that constitute hagiography, points to films that represent the life of a recognized religious hero. It is closely related to the biopic (the biographical film), but Grace highlights several key differences. Unlike the biopic, the hagiopic is concerned with its protagonist's relationship to the divine first and foremost. The vision of the world the conventional hagiopic portrays is rarely found in any other film genre, a world where miracles occur, celestial beings descend to earth and commune with humans, and events are controlled by an omnipotent and benevolent God. Also, in a more direct way than any other genre, the hagiopic wrestles with basic questions about suffering, injustice, a sense of meaninglessness, and a longing

for something beyond the here and now.<sup>311</sup> Following Mikhail Bakhtin and his theory of chronotopes (time-space realms evoked by particular literary genres), Grace understands the time-space configuration of the hagiopic as “miracle-time.” In miracle-time, “the blind and the lame can be cured; lowly peasants can be honoured with divine visitors; the relentless march of chronological time can be stopped; and there is a sense that the fullness of time will eventually arrive.”<sup>312</sup>

Perhaps one of the most significant themes depicted in hagiopics, which is particularly useful in the context of this study, is their discourse on pain and humiliation that puts our ordinary suffering in perspective. Recalling *The Song of Bernadette* and its emphasis on the portrayal of Bernadette’s suffering, her struggles with asthma and the excruciating tuberculosis of the bone that ultimately ends her life, traditional hagiopics claim that this world, with its suffering and injustice, is not all there is to reality. Moreover, they stress that the worst aspects of life can be the most valuable and rewarding. The hagiopic for Grace, “...like Christianity itself, attempts to turn worldly values upside down, providing comfort for those who are lowly and miserable and a bit of warning to the powerful...they center on a hero who suffers greatly, works miracles that relieve the sufferings of others, dies a painful death, and then ascends to heaven.”<sup>313</sup> The representation of the young saint in *The Song of Bernadette* conforms quite closely to this model. Indeed, this

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<sup>311</sup> Pamela Grace, *The Religious Film: Christianity and the Hagiopic* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 3.

<sup>312</sup> Grace, *The Religious Film*, 5.

<sup>313</sup> Grace, *The Religious Film*, 8.

model extends to the entire message of Lourdes and contemporary pilgrimage to its shrine to Our Lady, which is deeply bound up in this discourse of the redemptive nature of suffering. It is readily apparent then why current pilgrims, even over seventy-five years after the film's release, still identify with the film and incorporate it into their respective corpus of knowledge of the events at Lourdes and the person of Bernadette.

Regardless of whether a film is explicitly religious in the sense of the hagiopic genre exemplified by *The Song of Bernadette*, S. Brent Plate contends that in fact media and the sacred are entirely interdependent and indeed interchangeable:

...myths, rituals, and symbols are only existent *as* media. A myth must be transmitted, whether by "word of mouth" or through the technologies of television; a ritual must be enacted...a symbol must be shared... We thus must presume that religion – however oriented toward the "invisible," the "spiritual," the "wholly other," it may be – is nonetheless always material and mediated. Through, and *as*, media, religion builds worlds.<sup>314</sup>

This link between media and the sacred, what Sheila Nayar refers to as "mediated transcendence,"<sup>315</sup> is a recurring theme in studies on film and religion, and is often tied to film as narrative, as the visual constitution of stories and characters typically reserved to oral accounts and the written page. As Martin and Ostwalt note, imaginative participation in film narrative is a means of experiencing

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<sup>314</sup> S. Brent Plate, "Filmmaking and World Making: Re-Creating Time and Space in Myth and Film," in *Teaching Religion and Film*, ed. G.J. Watkins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 223. See also in this volume Richard M. Carp, "Seeing is Believing, But Touching's the Truth: Religion, Film, and the Anthropology of the Senses."

<sup>315</sup> Sheila J. Nayar, *The Sacred and the Cinema: Reconfiguring the Genuinely Religious Film* (New York: Continuum, 2012).

transcendence: “Even if the content of the specific story seems secular, the key form of the story as narrative can mediate an awareness of otherness, of transcendence, and hence can serve a religious function by providing access to the sacred.”<sup>316</sup> Yet Robert Pope cautions that while it is assumed that cinema promotes an experience of transcendence through enabling a journey into the imagination, it is important to remember that this transcendence “...is simply a recognition, and overcoming, of human restrictions rather than the response to contact with the divine.”<sup>317</sup>

This experience of transcendence through enabling a journey into the imagination brought on by film is complicated at Lourdes. In place of passively viewing a film, as receptors of audio/visual narrative which then inspires a journey into the imagination and an experience of transcendence, alternatively, pilgrims at Lourdes are quite active in bridging the film narrative from *The Song of Bernadette* with the sites and objects they encounter in Lourdes. This allows for a journey into the imagination that is arguably more complex and perhaps erratic, relying on recollections of film narratives consumed in the past, with the navigation of sacred space tied to those narratives in the here and now.

Recent scholarship on the relationship between film and the sacred has called for a more sustained treatment of viewer engagement with relevant films and the extent to which the audience responds, reinforcing or challenging their pre-

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<sup>316</sup> Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt, *Religion, Myth and Ideology in Popular American Films* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 16.

<sup>317</sup> Robert Pope, *Salvation in Celluloid: Theology, Imagination and Film* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 65.

existing worldview. Andrew Quicke argues that “a motion picture is not simply a roll of celluloid or a machine whose parts can be analyzed; instead, cinema exists only as experienced by viewers interacting in complex ways based on their own predilections and predispositions to such an art object.”<sup>318</sup> Others have in similar fashion called for the field of religion and film to emerge from the theoretical thickets of interpretations of film and measures of their religious nature solely grounded in theology, and provide a more sustained gauge of audience reactions to film and connections to their own religious understandings. In this way, suggests Clive Marsh, “...the personal lens through which viewers watch films, or the cognitive world/schema within which they process what happens to them, becomes important...Elements of viewer response that may too easily be overlooked in film studies may thus prove to be of great interest in religious studies.”<sup>319</sup> Both Plate and Melanie J. Wright have also followed this line, attempting to counter criticisms by scholars of Hollywood religious epics as advancing an inauthentic spiritual experience, and instead highlighting the ways in which audiences make meaning from them, the ways in which it becomes authentic *to them*.<sup>320</sup> In another article, Plate makes his case more pointedly in relation to audience reactions to Mel

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<sup>318</sup> Andrew Quicke, “Phenomenology and Film: An Examination of a Religious Approach to Film Theory by Henri Agel and Amédée Ayfre,” *Journal of Media and Religion* 4 (2005): 239.

<sup>319</sup> Clive Marsh, “On Dealing with What Films Actually Do to People: The Practice and Theory of Film Watching in Theology/Religion and Film Discussion,” in *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 145.

<sup>320</sup> See Brent S. Plate, *Religion and Film* (London: Wallflower Press, 2008), and Melanie J. Wright, *Religion and Film: An Introduction* (London: IB Tauris, 2007).



Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, urging fellow scholars that, "instead of starting from on high, from solely laying out the historical context, the history of the inter-religious dialogue...we might also turn to the person next to us, to ask why they are weeping and what they saw."<sup>321</sup> It is into this still relatively nascent space of religion and film studies that I wish to take the remainder of this chapter, drawing on the perceptions of *The Song of Bernadette* by contemporary pilgrims to Lourdes, and how these perceptions serve to inform their active engagement with the spaces and objects associated with the Lourdes apparitions and represented in the film.

### *Touring the Screen*

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, academics engaged in tourism research have become increasingly aware of the phenomenon of film-induced pilgrimage over the past fifteen years, reflected especially in the proliferation of articles published in *Annals of Tourism Research* on the subject. Many of these studies are concerned foremost with film tourism as an industry, in terms of advertising dollars spent on film promotions, increases in tourism to film locations, and the development of tour itineraries specifically catering to those interested in visiting sites tied to particular films of interest.<sup>322</sup> As with the scholarship on film

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<sup>321</sup> Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate, "Viewing and Writing on *The Passion of the Christ*," in *The Religion and Film Reader*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate (New York: Routledge, 2007), 347.

<sup>322</sup> For examples of this line of research see Lisa Law, Tim Bunnell, and Chin-Ee Ong, "The Beach, the Gaze and Film Tourism," *Tourist Studies* 7 (2007), Rodanthi Tzanelli, "Reel Western Fantasies: Portrait of a Tourist Imagination in *The Beach*," *Mobilities* 1 (2006), and Warwick

and the sacred however, there has been a growing focus on the perspectives of film tourists themselves: their motivations for travel, their attachments to the films, and the nature of their interaction with the film site.

Niki Macionis has attempted to chart film-induced tourism motivation as a continuum of increasing interest in film and increasing self-actualisation motivations. There is the serendipitous film tourist, who may or may not participate in film tourist activities, but their presence in a film destination is unrelated to the film. At the center of this continuum is the general film tourist, who may not specifically be attracted to a travel destination due to a film, but whose limited motivations are based on novelty, education, and nostalgia. Finally, Macionis identifies the specific film tourist, who actively visits a destination to seek locations associated with a particular film. Motivations might include nostalgia, romance, fantasy, self-identity, and even a sense of film-based travel as a form of pilgrimage.<sup>323</sup> It is this latter category of film tourist which has been the primary focus of academic research, however the pilgrims to Lourdes who are the subject of this chapter, those who have viewed *The Song of Bernadette* and actively use it as a template for navigating the sacred landscape and narrative of Lourdes, might best fit within Macionis' spectrum as general film tourists, those that likely did not

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Frost, "Life Changing Experiences: Film and Tourists in the Australian Outback," *Annals of Tourism Research* 37 (2010).

<sup>323</sup> Niki Macionis, "Understanding the Film-Induced Tourist," in *Proceedings of the International Tourism and Media Conference*, ed. Warwick Frost, Glen Croy and Sue Beeton (Melbourne: Monash University Tourism Research Unit, 2004), 89.

embark on the journey to Lourdes as a direct result of the film, yet actively use the film as a nostalgic and pedagogical lens mediating their encounter with the shrine and town. It must be cautioned however that while such a classification system might be useful, it may also limit our understanding of the range of motivations that inspire people to travel. In the case of pilgrimage to Catholic shrines such as Lourdes, it may indeed be only one factor among many.

This association between pilgrimage and film tourism is also reflected in Sue Beeton's influential work on film-induced tourism: "Most of the world's great pilgrimage and tourist sites were established through the written media, well before the coming of film, and this limits the effect that film had on actually establishing the iconic status of such sites"<sup>324</sup> According to Beeton, only the relatively "new" tourist sites, such as Australia and New Zealand, contain the possibility of having been impacted by film representations of those locations. Film-motivated tourism is best understood as building upon the characteristics of literary tourism: "Film is to literary tourism what the Boeing 747 was to mainstream tourism – a major booster for mass tourism. We have moved from small, niche-based personal pilgrimage literary tours to the mass (and at times over-full) visitation of film sites."<sup>325</sup> Film for Beeton is a new technology, akin to air travel, which may increase the convenience and popularity of tourism, but does not re-shape the fundamentals of the tourist experience. This is certainly the case with Lourdes. As noted in my

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<sup>324</sup> Sue Beeton, *Film-induced Tourism* (Clevedon, UK: Channel View Publications, 2005), 4.

<sup>325</sup> Beeton, *Film-induced Tourism*, 53.

brief discussion previously of the “Battle of the Books,” during which various Lourdes apologists sought to establish their rendering of the Lourdes narrative as *the* authentic retelling of the events, these literary accounts were crucial in establishing the renown of the shrine, as they were widely disseminated throughout France and beyond, drawing ever greater numbers on pilgrimage to Lourdes. Following Beeton, while it is certainly correct to suggest that in the majority of instances written media was far more influential than the cinema in establishing a tourist site, nevertheless I would maintain that for contemporary pilgrims, cinematic representations of site and story may not have established the shrine, but they can still greatly influence their engagement with it.

Arguably the most significant recurring theme in film tourism studies, as scholars attempt to ascertain the motivations for travel and the types of experiences tourists have at film locations, is the question of authenticity. Chapter Three has explored how recent scholarship on the concept of authenticity and its utility as a descriptor for tourism, and for our purposes here film-motivated tourism and film-mediated pilgrimage, has struggled with the question of whether authenticity, as it was first proposed by MacCannell, has become a tired, slippery, overworked trope no longer useful in understanding the tourist experience. Some have argued for its limited utility,<sup>326</sup> others for its complete abandonment.<sup>327</sup> However scholars in

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<sup>326</sup> Erik Cohen, “Traditions on the Qualitative Sociology of Tourism,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 15 (1988).

<sup>327</sup> Edward M. Bruner, “Abraham Lincoln as Authentic Reproduction: A Critique of Postmodernism,” *American Anthropologist* 96 (1994).

tourism studies such as Wang as well as Kim and Jamal have attempted to reinterpret authenticity and re-establish its status as an appropriate mode for understanding the motivations of tourists and their experience of the locales they visit. Wang argues that the issue of authenticity in tourism can be differentiated into two separate issues: that of tourist experiences (or authentic experiences), and that of toured objects.<sup>328</sup> Objective authenticity for Wang involves a museum-linked usage of the authenticity of the originals that are also the toured objects to be perceived by tourists. It follows that the authentic experience is caused by the recognition of the toured objects as authentic.<sup>329</sup> Existential authenticity, which he ultimately privileges, “refers to a potential existential state of Being that is to be activated by tourist activities. Correspondingly, authentic experiences in tourism are to achieve this existential state of Being within the liminal process of tourism. Existential authenticity can have nothing to do with the authenticity of toured objects.”<sup>330</sup> Kim and Jamal, to a significant extent building on the work of Wang, highlight the importance of object authenticity in their research on Renaissance festivals, but likewise privilege existential authenticity as a mode of understanding the motivations of participants. For them the notion of existential authenticity “...is central to understanding the experience of regular, repeat festival-goers who take their participation seriously. This committed action is a means of attaining

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<sup>328</sup> Ning Wang, “Rethinking Authenticity in Tourism Experience,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 26 (1999): 351.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid.

<sup>330</sup> Wang, “Rethinking Authenticity,” 353.

heightened bodily feelings, expressing, regaining, or reconstructing a sense of desired self, and developing authentic intersubjective relationships.”<sup>331</sup>

Yet is the binary opposition between objective and existential authenticity established by Wang regarding tourism in general made manifest in the particular experience of film tourists?<sup>332</sup> Much of the literature on film tourism in the past decade has been consumed by this question. As Leshu Torchin notes in his research on tours of the Manhattan shooting locations for TV shows, the blurring of reality and fiction, “authenticity and artificiality” in the film tourism experience, is particularly highlighted in the film tour of real locations. He observed that the real landscape is covered with several new layers of meaning for the consumption of film tourists, and that it may not be as crucial to parse out the distinctions between objective and existential forms of authenticity<sup>333</sup> Similarly, Amy Sargent examines the BBC’s 1995 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* and its impact on UK heritage sites featured in the series. She highlights the active blurring of the distinctions between film-motivated tourism and heritage tourism, fiction and history, artifice and authenticity. This culminated in the exhibition of the BBC production’s costumes alongside original historical artefacts in National Trust properties around

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<sup>331</sup> Hyounggon Kim and Tazim Jamal, “Touristic Quest for Existential Authenticity,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 34 (2006): 181.

<sup>332</sup> Stephen F. Mills suggests that “the authenticated artefact still lies at the heart of the modern museum experience.” I found this to be the case particularly with the Musée Sainte-Bernadette in Lourdes. “Open-Air Museums and the Tourist Gaze,” in *Visual Culture and Tourism*, ed. David Crouch and Nina Lubben (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 77.

<sup>333</sup> Leshu Torchin, “Location, Location, Location: The Destination of the Manhattan TV Tour,” *Tourist Studies* 2 (2002): 247.

England, leading to a significant spike in visitor numbers directly tied to interest in the program.<sup>334</sup>

And as Carl, Kinson, and Smith observe, tour guides and markers are key in this process of determining authenticity and artificiality. They observed in their study of *Lord of the Rings* based tourism in New Zealand that the degree of satisfaction when visiting a former film set in an organized tour depends on the ability of the guides to interpret the landscapes for tourists. This might include explaining the locations and angles of the film shots, or providing behind-the-scenes' information which further enhance tourists' reading of the 'real' landscapes. The better these explanations and the re-awakening of memories of the films, the higher the satisfaction of film tourists, and the greater their desire to watch the films again to see them all from a new perspective.<sup>335</sup>

Another examination of *Lord of the Rings* film-motivated tourism in New Zealand is perhaps most helpful for our present discussion. Based on their observations of fans of the film trilogy series and their interactions with sites that either served as the inspiration or shooting location for settings in the films, Buchmann, Moore and Fisher argue for an elaborated and extended version of authenticity that incorporates aspects of object and existential authenticity, sincerity of relationships, and embodied experiences of place. Challenging those who seek

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<sup>334</sup> Amy Sargent, "The Darcy Effect: Regional Tourism and Costume Drama," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 4 (1998).

<sup>335</sup> Carl et al., "New Zealand as 'Middle-Earth,'" 59.

to discount authenticity discourse as a meaningful mode of understanding tourist motivations generally and the experience of film tourists specifically, they write: “Authenticity remains relevant for film tourism in one important aspect: Tourists themselves attribute high value to their judgments of authenticity...film tourists seek authentic experiences, and any such authentic experiences depend on place as well as upon the wider processes in which any interpretations of the experience take place.”<sup>336</sup> It is this understanding of authenticity and its application to film tourism and in this instance film-mediated pilgrimage, as something articulated by pilgrims themselves as vitally important, which will ultimately guide the remainder of this chapter.

### *Learning Lourdes*

As much as they are mass media forms of entertainment or pure escapism, films also evidently hold the capacity to serve as pedagogical tools. Whether in the classroom or the darkened theatre, films may open our eyes to the world, allow us to imagine new realities, or teach us something about ourselves. In addition to such grand existential expectations, they may also teach us about the series of events that gave rise to one of the most prominent shrines in Roman Catholicism. I first became attuned to the ways in which *The Song of Bernadette* is inscribed within pilgrims’ knowledge of the person of Bernadette and the story of the apparitions during my

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<sup>336</sup> Buchmann et al., “Experiencing Film Tourism,” 243.



first pilgrimage to Lourdes with the Archdiocese of Westminster. Sitting with Rhiannon, Liz, and Geoff on the TGV from Montparnasse to Lourdes, we played trivia games on Liz's iPad, passing the time as the train sped past seemingly endless sunflower fields. Once we had all grown tired of being stumped by the challenging questions, our conversation turned to expectations for the days ahead. While it was my first time in Lourdes with the Westminster pilgrimage, all three had gone in previous years, and filled me in on some of the more obscure trivia and gossip of the town. When I asked them what they knew of the Lourdes story, Rhonda and Liz had a basic knowledge of the biography of Bernadette and the events. As colleagues, teaching at a Catholic primary school in west London, they had discussed the apparitions with their students. Geoff however was intimately familiar with the narrative, enthusiastically telling the story and entertaining any questions we might have had. After a few minutes, I began to recognize several elements of the story as having been directly derived from *The Song of Bernadette*. I myself had viewed the film several times as a child, and had in fact watched it again before leaving for the field, in order to refresh my own memory of the basic contours of the Lourdes story. Specifically, his retelling of Bernadette's life in the convent at Nevers after the apparitions, and the harsh treatment she endured from some of the nuns there, seemed inspired from the film. When I finally asked him whether he had seen the film, he exclaimed: "Of course! Who hasn't? It's a fine film, and it gets at the heart of what Lourdes is all about. It's a bit long, but it goes

through everything that happened in the greatest detail.”<sup>337</sup> When I asked him whether he had read any books on Lourdes, he confirmed that he had read a few pamphlets, but otherwise the film was his primary source of information on the apparitions. Here, a 1940s Hollywood film had become an authoritative source relaying what was believed to be a full and accurate accounting of the Lourdes story.

When I would ask pilgrims, “What do you know about the story of Lourdes? Is there something about the story of Lourdes or Bernadette that most appeals to you?” invariably *The Song of Bernadette* was mentioned as a source of knowledge. Ted and Eva, a couple in their mid-sixties, responded saying:

**Eva:** I didn’t actually know the number of apparitions, I didn’t know the details at first, but I knew the story. I saw the film *The Song of Bernadette* (it’s probably one of my old favourites), and that helped a lot.

**Ted:** I think we knew broadly the thrust of Bernadette’s life and what happened with the apparitions and so forth from the film. I mean that’s where it comes from isn’t it? The emotion about the thing is that you know about that and you believe in that and so that’s what is driving you to be here anyway.<sup>338</sup>

This is perhaps not a clear example of film-motivated pilgrimage in the sense inferred by film tourism scholars. For Eva and Ted, the prime motivation for going to Lourdes was to take their son, who was suffering from Multiple Sclerosis, in quiet hope that a miracle would be effected, although Ted was less convinced this outcome was within the realm of possibility than Eva. Certainly however it is clear

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<sup>337</sup> Field notes, July 22, 2012.

<sup>338</sup> Interview, July 25, 2012.

that an awareness of the story of Lourdes informed by *The Song of Bernadette* was a factor in Ted and Eva's decision to go to Lourdes.

Similarly for Sharon, a soft-spoken retiree who navigated Lourdes in a high-end motorized wheelchair, learning about Bernadette through the film's depiction deeply resonated with her own experience:

I'm very touched by Saint Bernadette, because she was illiterate, she was poor. I can imagine how some of the snobby ladies in the town looked down on her because I was brought up in a council house and wasn't very well-spoken as a child. Yet this extraordinary thing happened to her and she had to speak about it, and even when people laughed at her or disbelieved her or when Vincent Price's character called her a liar, and even when her whole family had to suffer through it, she just stood there and repeated the story and did what the Lady said, whatever the cost. That is always a picture of Christian saintliness, and it touches my heart that that girl did it. She was told by Our Lady that she wouldn't be happy in this world but only in the next, in heaven, and that is always a consolation for me.<sup>339</sup>

The pedagogical nature of the film, as an educational tool acquainting pilgrims with the story of Lourdes, was often reinforced, and similar connections between the life of Bernadette and the apparition narratives and the personal story of the pilgrim was a consistent theme:

In our modern world, where would you find someone with such simplicity, that had the kind of lifestyle that Bernadette had been brought up with? Where you would find that sense of simplicity and way of life, in that somebody would be able to so receive in their heart because of such simplicity, having an apparition of Our Lady and such a sense of purity inside. I didn't grow up particularly well off either, though not near as bad as that. But I was raised by a single mum, and it's the simplicity of the thing that's really meaningful I think.<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> Interview, July 23, 2013.

<sup>340</sup> Interview, August 27, 2012.

For several pilgrims, it was the remarkable simplicity of Bernadette, her innocence, her family's lack of means, which made an impression. Perhaps surprisingly, in pilgrims' response to the film it was the personality of Bernadette, not the series of apparitions, nor the miracles, which held the most resonance. The film's depiction of the relative squalor of her family's one-room dwelling, and of her straightforward approach to interactions with the secular and religious authorities that doubted her, established and confirmed the understanding of Bernadette many pilgrims had. The film's particular quality as belonging to the hagiopic genre, with its focus on a religious hero victorious against all foes despite her suffering, is what appealed most to pilgrims.

Although I aim to illustrate the role *The Song of Bernadette* has in introducing pilgrims to the story and confirming or bringing to life their previous knowledge, it is important to note that not all pilgrims I encountered had such a positive response to the film. Peter, a helper with the Catholic Association pilgrimage, echoed some of the criticisms first articulated by some of the aforementioned London priests who viewed the film during a special screening with Cardinal Griffin: "I have seen it three or four times, years ago. It's a very beautiful film, but I don't think it's...it's been romanticized. You know, I don't think Bernadette was like Jennifer Jones. Jennifer Jones was a sort of idealized version of the poor girl, of a sort of storybook fairy tale, and not in real life, as she really was. It's beautifully done, but she's not

as I would have imagined Bernadette to be.”<sup>341</sup> This comment provides an interesting juxtaposition to initial reaction to the film upon its release in December 1943, when reviews by professional film columnists, Hollywood gossip maven, and Catholic audiences lauded the way in which Jennifer Jones seemed to inhabit the personality of Bernadette at its deepest essence. Here Jones’ portrayal of the young saint is deemed to be a good, yet still unsatisfactory and inauthentic facsimile of Bernadette “as she really was.”

Perhaps the most scathing criticism of the film came from another helper on the CA pilgrimage, a member of the Core Care Team who also provided sign language interpretation for hearing impaired pilgrims during masses and other pilgrimage events. Perhaps some of her animosity toward the film related to the fact that, in the planning meetings for a special pilgrimage to Lourdes with the hearing impaired, she was informed that *The Song of Bernadette* would be shown on the coach trip down to Lourdes, and as the film did not have English subtitles, she would be tasked with signing the film for its entire duration. Fortunately for her she was ultimately relieved of this responsibility, as most of the pilgrims had been to Lourdes previously and were at least familiar enough with the basic details of the story to follow the action developing on the screen unaided. Not having seen the film before herself, she borrowed a DVD copy from a friend in order to practice before the coach journey. Suffice it to say it wasn’t to her taste: “So I’ve seen that

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<sup>341</sup> Interview, July 27, 2013.

horrendous Bernadette film, but I only saw it after I had already come to Lourdes for five or six years, to prepare for that coach trip. And immediately I was like ‘Oh my goodness!’ It’s hysterically naff. I had already read the story, I read the *proper* story, so it was the opposite of helpful. The blisteringly loud choral music, the strange accents (what are they supposed to be? Some English-French hybrid?), the syrupy romantic storyline between Bernadette and that boy, not a word of I’ve seen anywhere else. The actress playing Bernadette was quite pretty, but it was all too sentimental.”<sup>342</sup> Her intensely negative response to the film points to a stylistic and generational gap, with the film perhaps appealing more to an audience who grew up with the film or even saw it during its initial release, as some pilgrims I encountered indeed had during the Second World War. There is, however, a more recent film which has received positive attention from younger, as well as older pilgrims.

### *My Name is Bernadette*

Exploring the town of Lourdes by foot, one can’t help but be confronted in cafés, hotel lobbies, or gift shops by the poster image of the glowing, veiled face of Katia Miran, in the role of Bernadette in the 2011 film *Je m’appelle Bernadette* (My Name is Bernadette). Directed by Jean Sagols, the French film was very much an evangelical project on the part of the Sanctuary in cooperation with various

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<sup>342</sup> Interview, August 29, 2013.

religious and secular players in Lourdes. Its production was sponsored by TV Lourdes, the media branch of the Sanctuary responsible for streaming live content of events at the shrine online, as well as the 24/7 “grotto cam”; Hôtels Vinuales, a chain of seven hotels all within short walking distance to the Sanctuary; *Pèlerin*, a French Catholic weekly journal founded by the Assumptionist order, which was a crucial organizing force in the early establishment of Lourdes as a pilgrimage centre; and finally two religious radio stations broadcasting in Tarbes and Lourdes, radioPrésence and RCF. A pamphlet found in Hôtel Sainte-Rose, one of the seven hotels owned by Hôtels Vinuales, contains reviews from religious and secular publications as well as the Bishop of Tarbes and Lourdes himself, Monsignor Nicolas Brouwet: “This is a beautiful film starring Katia Miran. It allows us to discover a fully authentic Bernadette, in all the truth of what she saw and heard; a girl who was intimidated neither by threats nor by derision; a girl who remains herself, faithful to God, to Our Lady, to the message entrusted to her. A girl who, faced with doubt and scepticism, only witnessed to the joy that filled her soul while in the presence of Mary. In brief, this film presents a fine figure of holiness for our time!” The French daily newspaper *Le Monde* is quoted in the same pamphlet as saying: “Katia Miran embodies with great strength the ecstasy of Bernadette,”<sup>343</sup> echoing similar reviews of Jennifer Jones’ performance nearly seventy years prior.

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<sup>343</sup> Translations my own.

The film largely follows the template set by the novel and film versions of *The Song of Bernadette* quite closely. In fact several scenes, for example one in which the Police Commissioner Jacomet is seen mischievously pressing his ear to the door of the office of the Imperial Prosecutor Dutour, attempting to overhear his interrogation of Bernadette, is a near carbon copy of the earlier film. Yet *Je m'appelle Bernadette* does deviate in ways that have led some contemporary pilgrims to Lourdes to privilege it over the 1943 version. Unlike *The Song of Bernadette*, the more recent film does not include clear, sustained shots of the Virgin Mary as she appears to Bernadette. Only the briefest glimpse is offered to the viewer, and even then, only the faintest silhouette of a veiled female figure is discernible. The underlying romantic tension between Bernadette and her neighbour Antoine from the earlier film, which has no substantial basis in any previous account of Bernadette's story, is completely removed, replaced by a subplot involving a young attractive journalist Jean Prevot, who has just arrived from Paris to cover the apparitions and gradually becomes quite sympathetic to Bernadette and the possibility of miraculous cures at the shrine despite the protestations of a cynical colleague. However there is never a suggestion of romance between the two, and they in fact never formally meet. The inherent goodness of Bernadette, particularly her random acts of kindness to people she encounters on the streets of Lourdes, is constantly reinforced to an extent not seen in the earlier film.



Perhaps the most significant departure from *The Song of Bernadette* comes with Bernadette's move to the convent at Nevers after the apparitions have been approved by the Church and as the shrine at Lourdes only grows in renown. In the former film, Bernadette is primarily shown praying and doing grunt work, overseen by the cruel Sister Marie Thérèse who doubts her sincerity and is envious that the Virgin would not grace a more deserving candidate such as herself with a vision. In *Je m'appelle Bernadette*, the nuns are still stern, but far more sympathetic to Bernadette. Also, Bernadette's work caring for others is emphasized to a greater extent, and this especially resonated with contemporary volunteer caregivers at Lourdes, who saw themselves as following not only Christ's call to "love thy neighbour," but Bernadette's example of quiet, humble service to the sick and disabled. In one particular scene in the convent, Bernadette is deemed to be useless, given her frail health and her bouts of disobedience. But Bernadette finds her calling in life, to help others, supported by the Bishop overseeing her convent who reminds her: "The greatest experience in life comes not from what you do, but what you give out of love." This quote was meaningful for several caregivers, believing, as was explored in Chapter Two, that it encapsulated the entire impetus for their time spent volunteering in Lourdes. Inspired by Bernadette's service to others in the infirmary, one helper told me:

For me it's very much about service, that Bernadette gave her complete life. It wasn't just a half-yes, she really gave her full yes following the example of Our Lady. I think it's easy to have in your mind "I'd really like to give my yes to God in whatever He has planned for my life," but

the actual giving of a yes fully, like Bernadette, is a rarity. And yet it's inspiring that one person's yes can utterly transform a place, so that it has five million visitors a year. And I like to think that's what I'm doing in my own small way, giving my yes to God by serving the needs of others here in the Accueil.<sup>344</sup>

For this pilgrim, the depiction of Bernadette's care work in the infirmary brought everything about Lourdes together, providing her with a meaningful template from which she could understand her own role as a caregiver in the Accueil Notre-Dame. Based in large part on this resonance with her own experience, this woman generally viewed *Je m'appelle Bernadette* as a more accurate account of the happenings at Lourdes: "This newer film is more realistic. It's a beautiful film, and the most authentic I think. You can see it yourself if you've got the time. The young French girl playing Bernadette is just lovely, and it's not a long drawn out overdramatized affair. It simply retells the story just as it happened."<sup>345</sup> While the focus of this chapter is on *The Song of Bernadette*, it is worth attending to the ways in which contemporary pilgrims navigate and privilege various cinematic glosses on Bernadette and the Lourdes story. Beyond the direction, performances, or musical score of the film, a discourse of authenticity is central to the judgments pilgrims make in preferring one film over another. This relationship between cinematic representation and authenticity not only informs film preference, but also extends into the pilgrims' exploration of the sacred geography of Lourdes.

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<sup>344</sup> Interview, August 28, 2013.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.



Figure 18. Film poster for the film “*Je m’appelle Bernadette*” (2011) on the side of the *Hôtel La Solitude*, one of the hotels which sponsored the film’s production.  
Image Credit: Author.

### *Touring Lourdes with Bernadette*

The sacred geography of Lourdes is indeed vast, consisting of the grotto of Massabielle where the series of visions occurred as the epicentre of the shrine, and extending from it to a network of grand basilicas, intimate chapels, stations of the cross, baths fed by the miraculous spring uncovered by Bernadette, accommodations for sick pilgrims, and paths that run along the river bank. The sacred landscape also extends far beyond the gates of the Sanctuary and into the Old Town of Lourdes, and further still to the small village of Bartrès. Bernadette first lived here as an infant, from November 1844 until April 1846, staying with the

wife of a client of her father's mill, who served as a wet nurse to Bernadette after her own mother Louise was no longer able to nurse. Bernadette would briefly return to Bartrès from the fall of 1857 until January 1858, one month before the first apparition, in order to work as a domestic servant and shepherdess for her former wet nurse, after the Soubirous family had fallen into especially hard times. The path Bernadette had trekked on her way to and from Lourdes and Bartrès quickly became a popular attraction for pilgrims to Lourdes, known as 'The Path of Bernadette,' however the trail was not well-marked or adequately maintained. To celebrate the Catholic Church's Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, the pathway was reopened with several improvements. At a distance of four kilometres from the centre of Lourdes, the village of Bartrès allows pilgrims the possibility of getting away from the hustle and bustle of the town and shrine, offering a quiet place for prayer and reflection while still remaining close to buildings and landscapes associated with the life of Bernadette. According to an information sheet produced by *Lourdes Magazine* available at the Sanctuary's main information centre, "This village and its surrounding area is one of the places where we feel the closest to Bernadette. Little has changed since she was here and we can see the place where she lived: the Burg house, the farm belonging to the nanny Marie Lagues, the parish church of Saint John the Baptist where she went to mass, and the sheepfold where she looked after her sheep." Still maintaining a quaint aura of rural simplicity, the discourse around The Path of Bernadette evokes notions of authenticity, of the really real, of a true

reflection of a nostalgic past, to highlight the significance of the path and the village of Bartrès in the life of Bernadette.

Established later in 2008 to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the apparitions was a 1.7 km interpretive trail through the town of Lourdes itself called ‘In the Footsteps of Bernadette,’ that “...invites pilgrims and visitors to discover the most important places and events in the life of Bernadette Soubirous.”<sup>346</sup> While it is intended as a self-guided tour with a blue painted line guiding the way from the shrine onward through the Old Town’s narrow streets, all of the pilgrimages I joined from the south of England to Lourdes, which were operated by the pilgrimage tour company Tangney Tours, included the route as an optional guided tour by one of their local representatives as part of the standard itinerary. Beginning at the Crowned Virgin statue in the main esplanade of the sanctuary (a common meeting point for walking tours as well as pilgrimage groups simply trying to organize themselves for the day), the tour then moves to the Musée Sainte-Bernadette, an inconspicuous one-story building just across from the sanctuary gates offering visitors a “catechetical pilgrimage.”<sup>347</sup> As visitors walk from the entrance hall into the museum proper, they are met with a large board hanging over the doors, detailing the chronology of the eighteen apparitions and the messages relayed to Bernadette by Mary, translated into several languages. Here pilgrims are told the

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<sup>346</sup> “In the Footsteps of Bernadette,” Lourdes Tourism Office, <http://www.lourdes-infotourisme.com/web/EN/353-in-the-footsteps-of-bernadette.php>.

<sup>347</sup> Wojciech Kowalewski, *In The Footsteps of Bernadette* (Lourdes: Sanctuaires Notre-Dame de Lourdes, 2009), 19.

story of the saint's life, the message of Lourdes and the development of the shrine, through a vast array of photographs, preserved newspaper clippings of some of the earliest published reports of the apparitions, and various objects that belonged to Bernadette including her veil, her shoes, her rosary, and her prayer book.

From here pilgrims are directed towards the Moulin de Boly, the mill Bernadette's father once owned where she was born and lived as a child for ten years. In the reception area, typically staffed by a single French nun, one can see photos on display depicting notable people in Lourdes in the 1850s, including the civil, military and religious figures of the time, as well as lower class millers, stonemasons, peasants, and common labourers. An elaborate family tree is mounted on the wall opposite the entrance, detailing Bernadette's lineage from her parents' families (Casterot and Soubirous), down through current descendants of Bernadette, some still living in Lourdes today. Here in the reception room and throughout the mill, the love between Bernadette's parents and the strong bonds of family are emphasized. As a short green handout given by the nun at the entrance attests: "It was a Christian family united in prayer, open to others, and full of charity towards those less fortunate than themselves." Directed by blue arrows, the visitor is then guided toward the first room, where Bernadette was born on January 7, 1844. The furniture in the room is not original to the house and was never used by the Soubirous family, many of their own possessions having been sold in order to provide an additional form of income when the family was especially financially

squeezed. On the ground floor is the mill with its two large grain grinders, once powered by the Lapacca stream, though it has now been buried and incorporated into the Lourdes sewer system.

Next is the parish church, L'Église du Sacré-Coeur standing just off the central public square in the Upper Town of Lourdes. This church was never visited by Bernadette and her family, as construction began in 1875 after Bernadette had left Lourdes for Nevers, replacing the parish church Bernadette would have attended, L'Église Ste-Pierre. It had been damaged by fire and proved too small to accommodate the growing population of Lourdes as a result of the expansion of the shrine. It was demolished in 1904. Although Bernadette would not have recognized the church, it does contain two important elements linking it to the life of Bernadette. The first is the large stone font from the original church used during her baptism, alongside which is a medieval statue of St. John the Baptist. In the crypt of the church is the tomb of Father Peyramale, the Curé of Lourdes at the time of the apparitions and a central protagonist in *The Song of Bernadette*.

Not far from the church are the remains of the presbytery where Bernadette first met with Father Peyramale and told him of her apparitions. The building is no longer used as a presbytery, but its outside appearance generally remains the same. Part of the original wall which surrounded the courtyard has been preserved, together with the doorway through which Bernadette would have passed a number of times on her way from the Grotto to relay the Lady's latest message to Father

Peyramale. In the courtyard there is a small weathered statue of Bernadette sitting on a bench, appearing as though she is waiting to be called into the presbytery for her meeting.

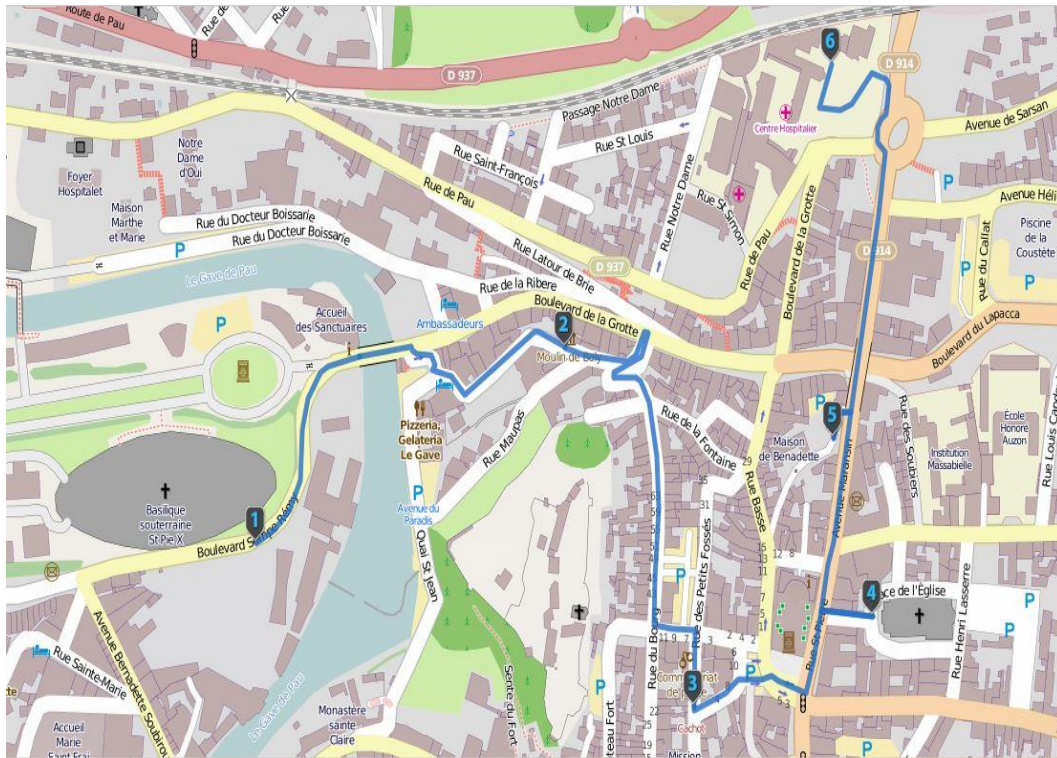


Figure 19. Map of 'In the Footsteps of Bernadette' Interpretive Trail. 1. Musée Ste-Bernadette 2. Moulin de Boly 3. Le Cachot 4. Église du Sacré-Coeur 5. Ancien Presbytère 6. Hospice Ste-Bernadette. Image Credit: Lourdes Tourism Office.

The tour concludes with a visit to the hospice administered by the Sisters of Nevers where Bernadette began attending school just prior to the first apparition in February 1858, where she made her First Communion while the apparitions were still ongoing, and where she lived for six years under the protection of the nuns before leaving for Nevers in 1866. The central building of what is today the Lourdes



hospital has retained intact the façade of the original hospice where Bernadette lived, with the wings of a more modern medical facility added later. Walking through the main visitor entrance, a long corridor leads to the hospital chapel where Bernadette received her First Communion. There is a commemorative plaque on the wall marking this milestone, but otherwise the chapel would be barely recognizable to Bernadette today, having undergone extensive renovations and now resembling any modern post-Second Vatican Council church.

Of the several sites visited while pilgrims trace the footsteps of Bernadette, the singular highlight is Le Cachot, the small, dark room where Bernadette and her family stayed from June 1856 until the fall of 1858, several months after the first apparition. It derives its prominence in the sacred geography of Lourdes by virtue of its place in the story of Bernadette and the apparitions, as the location from which she set out toward the grotto of Massabielle for her meeting with the Virgin at the appointed hour. As described earlier, it is a central site of action throughout the film *The Song of Bernadette*, where the opening scene depicts the entire Soubirous family sleeping in the same dismal one-room dwelling, introducing the family by emphasizing their poverty. Le Cachot is tucked away on the rue des Petits Fossés in the Old Town, beneath the shadow of the imposing Château Fort. It had been the prison for the town until 1824 when it was declared unsafe to house prisoners. It was for the most part uninhabited until the Soubirous family moved there from the Moulin de Boly, no longer able to afford the rent of the more spacious

accommodations. After passing through a small doorway which requires taller visitors to duck, one enters a short dimly lit corridor featuring illuminated glass display cases containing items once belonging to Bernadette similar to those found in the musée. There are also photographs of Bernadette and her family, of Le Cachot at the time of the apparitions, as well as information panels. Entering Le Cachot itself, one is immediately struck by the size of the room, measuring 16 square metres, yet serving as kitchen, dining room, and bedroom concurrently for a family of six. The furnishing of the room is remarkably sparse, in part so that groups of pilgrims can be shepherded through the small space with relative ease. It has changed little since Bernadette's stay there, featuring the original fire place where her mother Louise would have cooked their meals, and a stone basin where the washing would have been done.

As noted previously, pilgrims' own narratives about Bernadette stress more than anything else the harsh poverty of her upbringing, and Le Cachot is often valorized as a memorial, a testament to this lifestyle. The person of Bernadette is also often conflated with the Virgin Mary, both being young girls, graced with a singular divine privilege, saying yes to God's will, and emerging from humble beginnings so that they might become a model of holiness. This linkage, often made in interviews with pilgrims, is reiterated in a prayer card given to pilgrims as they enter Le Cachot:

Lord, you looked upon the humility of your servant, Mary, and you chose her to give your Son to the World. The unknown girl from

Nazareth became the Mother of God, Our Lady. To remind us of the Gospel message, here in this Cachot you chose Bernadette, miserable in the eyes of the world. May the message which comes forth from the Cachot renew the way in which we look upon the poor and bring us to enter into the spirit of the Beatitudes. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Pilgrims often felt that Bernadette's own life story resonated with some aspect of their own. The film's depiction of her simplicity, the doubts and challenges she faced, appealed to pilgrims, and this understanding was confirmed in Le Cachot. Together with the grotto where the series of apparitions to Bernadette occurred, Le Cachot serves as a crucial nexus point for pilgrims in authenticating their embodied encounter with the sacred landscape of Lourdes, and the film's representation of this simple dwelling is a key determining factor in this process.

### *Embodied Encounters, Cinematic Visions*

I would like to highlight one particular episode from my fieldwork at length, which strikingly illuminates this process by which contemporary pilgrims to Lourdes negotiate its sacred geography, the film serving as a colouring lens mediating and affirming their encounter with those sites closely bound up in the story of Bernadette and the apparitions. Meredith, a retired nurse originally from Wexford on the southeast coast of Ireland, travelled to Lourdes for the first time with the pilgrimage by coach referred to at the beginning of this chapter, for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception on December 8. *The Song of Bernadette* was shown during the long coach journey, serving as a spiritual preparation piece setting

the historical context for the sites pilgrims would visit and the rituals they would participate in. Perhaps unlike some of my informants highlighted earlier, who viewed the film either just before or sometimes several years prior to the pilgrimage, the confluence of having viewed the film on the pilgrimage journey itself and of being a first-time pilgrim made this form of film-mediated pilgrimage especially profound for Meredith:

Seeing the same river Bernadette crossed in that movie with her sister and her cousin, where she picked up the wood, where Our Lady appeared, that little niche. I suppose really, the striking bit was actually being present and walking in the steps of what happened. Then we went up to the house, and saw where they lived and how hard their life was. And just putting your hand on that basin, where her mother would have done her washing, and seeing the mill where her father ground the flour, just makes it very realistic. It made me realize when I went that it's not just something I read about or saw in a movie, being there made it truly real for me. It deepens my faith because you know that these things happened, you believe that these things happened. Walking in the footsteps you're sometimes thinking (laughs)... is something going to happen now? Of course you know it's not going to happen, but it feels so real! And that mass, on Sunday morning, just made it so vibrant. Having that mass in the grotto where Our Lady appeared and seeing all those priests celebrating mass, and it made it sort of...it was more a feeling, than a thinking, you could actually feel being part of the experience I suppose, like I was there, waiting in the crowd, waiting for Our Lady to appear.<sup>348</sup>

It is important to stress that although Meredith had viewed the film on several occasions prior to the pilgrimage, the film itself was not her motivation for joining the coach trip to Lourdes. Rather it was the prodding of a friend and Meredith's desire for a special place of prayer in the presence of Our Lady. Yet the viewing of

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<sup>348</sup> Interview, December 10, 2012.

the film on the coach just hours before arriving in the actual setting of the events lent it primacy as an authoritative representation of Bernadette, the geography of the town, and the events that transpired there.



Figure 20. *Le Cachot, the one-room home of Bernadette and her family during the apparitions.* Image Credit: Author.

While Meredith perhaps represents the most salient example of this form of witness: of viewing, touching, experiencing, and interpreting the sacred geography of Lourdes and the biographical landscape of Bernadette through the flickering screen of *The Song of Bernadette*, she was certainly not alone in this. The Grotto of Massabielle, the sacred epicentre of the shrine, was another site where the boundaries between cinematic representation and embodied encounter with the subject of that representation seemed almost to disintegrate. Ecaterina, a middle-

aged woman originally from Romania who was visiting Lourdes for the first time with her Irish husband, was left deeply moved by her experience in Lourdes. Tears softly trickled down her cheeks as she recalled her visit to the grotto: “When I walked up to it for the first time there was a long queue, and I didn’t think I had the patience to wait, because it was so hot. But I stayed anyway, and as I got closer to where the cave begins, I became very emotional. I wasn’t sure what was happening to me, I really had tears in my eyes. I walked through the cave, and I could touch the rock, and it was cold and wet, and I would touch the rock then touch my face, or press my cheek up against the rock. And this is the rock where Our Lady really appeared, and I felt [crying]...I felt like I could really see her, just like Bernadette saw her!”<sup>349</sup> After allowing her some time to compose herself, I asked Ecaterina if she had in fact seen a vision while in the grotto, and she was quick to dispel any misunderstanding I might have had. She had only felt as though she could see Our Lady, given the potent emotive environment of the place, where film scenes depicting the apparitions appeared almost to be projected on the rock face of the grotto where these events are believed to have originally occurred.<sup>350</sup>

The grotto was not only a screen appearing to receive projections of scenes from the film, but it was also the site of conscious re-enactments of moments from the apparition narrative depicted in *The Song of Bernadette*. Sam, a young helper

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<sup>349</sup> Interview, August 30, 2013.

<sup>350</sup> I should note here that Ecaterina had viewed both *The Song of Bernadette* prior to coming to Lourdes, and *Je m'appelle Bernadette* with her husband during their pilgrimage. It was sometimes unclear which film she was referring to in describing her experience.

in his first year at Royal Holloway, was also in Lourdes for the first time. He struck me as especially devout relative to the other young helpers working in the Accueil Notre-Dame, and as genuinely euphoric to be in Lourdes after having dreamed of going on pilgrimage for several years. At one point during the week, while both Sam and I were on duty in the Accueil, most of the Assisted Pilgrims (APs) in our section of the 4<sup>th</sup> floor were either out exploring the town or resting, and Sam received permission to briefly go outside for a break. When he returned, I asked if he had gone up to the roof, as both helpers and APs often do to catch some fresh air, get away from the sometimes chaotic environment of the Accueil, or simply to have a smoke. “No actually, I went to the grotto for a bit. I’ve only been briefly since we’ve arrived, because of our schedule, so I wanted to go back and drink some water from the taps and go through the grotto...Maybe I shouldn’t be telling you this, but I also ate some of the moss growing between the cracks of the rocks.”<sup>351</sup> He stopped there and glanced at me awkwardly. I asked him, sensitive to his slight embarrassment at revealing what he had done at the grotto, what inspired him to do this. “Well during the apparitions Our Lady asked Bernadette to go drink the water from the spring and to wash herself there, but she also asked her to eat some of the grass as well. Everyone seems to forget that part for obvious reasons (laughs), but I did it. I wanted to do it because Bernadette did it, without questioning why such a request was being asked of her, but just doing it out of obedience and

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<sup>351</sup> Field notes, August 27, 2012.

trust of Our Lady. It really made an impression on me.” When I pressed a bit further and asked where he had heard this part of the apparition narrative, he responded: “I had already heard the basic plot of the story growing up at church and at school. I’ve also watched *The Song of Bernadette*. There is a part in the movie that shows where Our Lady asks Bernadette to drink the water and eat the grass, and she is completely ridiculed for it, but she does it anyway. That’s a true sign of faith I think...I also did some research online before coming, just to refresh my memory so I could get the most out of my pilgrimage.”<sup>352</sup> Despite the somewhat unusual nature of consuming moss growing on the rock walls of the grotto, Sam so highly valued participating in the drama of the apparitions in his own way that he thought it fully appropriate to do so. In an act of mimetic performance, Sam saw himself as fully embodying and re-enacting Bernadette’s own gestures at the grotto, so that he, like her, might demonstrate a true sign of faith. While he sourced his understanding of the Lourdes story from various accounts, including oral and online testimonies, the film’s visual representation of Bernadette’s actions clearly informed his own performance.

#### *A New Re-enchantment of the World*

Widely disseminated mass media forms possess the capacity to both penetrate our closed social worlds and foster immediacy, yet they may also create

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<sup>352</sup> Ibid.



a sense of detachment. As Samuel Weber notes regarding the function of the screen: “First, it serves as a *screen* which allows distant vision to be *watched*. Second, it *screens*, in the sense of *selecting* or *filtering*, the vision that is watched. And finally, it serves as a screen in the sense of standing between the viewer and the viewed.”<sup>353</sup>

The first two of Weber’s three facets of the screen reflect the experience of Lourdes pilgrims and their response to *The Song of Bernadette*. It renders a visual representation of the Lourdes apparitions and the personality of Bernadette accessible to the viewing audience. Notably in the discourse of authenticity that enveloped both the crafting of the film and the response to it by critics and Catholic filmgoers, and even the earlier apologetic literature, a process of selecting or filtering the vision that was watched or the written word that was read was of utmost concern to several stakeholders in the success of the Lourdes shrine and the spreading of its message. But I have attempted to show in the last half of this chapter how Weber’s third facet of the screen, that it is a technological divider between the viewer and the viewed is, if not shattered, at least cracked at Lourdes. Meredith, Ecaterina, Sam, and others show how rather than marking a division between the audience and the filtered images, the screen can also enhance and bring to life a world one hundred and fifty years in the past, mediated by the visual and tangible markers one encounters, associated with the drama unfolding on the screen. These

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<sup>353</sup> Samuel Weber, *Mass Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 122.

objects, believed to be authentic, bridge the gulf between the viewer and the image behind the screen.

This view finds support in recent literature on the role of modern technology and mass media forms in visionary culture. In Paolo Apolito's study of the use of the Internet and other innovations by Marian apparition cults, he makes the claim, seemingly counterintuitive to the tech-savvy among us, that the spiritual and modern technology are innately bound to one another:

You should not think that technology imposes a cold and disenchanting regime, despoiling and stripping of legitimacy all aspects of the sacred. There is no opposition between the sacred and technological disenchantment. On the contrary, this technology is seen by the visionary culture as a powerful and unique resource for a new re-enchantment of the world, which produces unprecedented practices of sacralising in relation to places and instruments, objects and persons...<sup>354</sup>

This line of argument is followed by Amira Mittermaier in her recent research on the practice of dreaming in contemporary Cairo. She points out that “the affinity between mass media and religious experiences may not be surprising because the latter themselves quite often involve practices of mediation, which attempt to render present the transcendental.”<sup>355</sup> It is this understanding of the relationship between mass media and religious experiences which best reflects the experience of Lourdes pilgrims as I have observed it. In the case of pilgrims following the footsteps of

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<sup>354</sup> Paolo Apolito, *The Internet and the Madonna: Religious Visionary Experience on the Web* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>355</sup> Amira Mittermaier, *Dreams That Matter: Egyptian Landscapes of the Imagination* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 226.

Bernadette through Lourdes or running their hands along the rock walls of the grotto, not only does the practice of mediation on the part of mass media and religious experience attempt to render present the transcendental, but, I would argue, the present is also rendered as transcendental. Lourdes, by virtue of its status as a thin space where heaven and earth seem to touch, is already deeply imbued with a transcendental aura for pilgrims. The air is almost thick with it. Yet modern mass media forms, such as a visual representation of the sacred through film, can enhance it. Objects, places, paths associated with the apparitions and the life of Bernadette are already sacralised, yet an imaginative encounter with place and object filtered through cinematic representation can pique their poignancy. They can be a touchstone for the memory, bringing forth a scene from the film that assists in situating it, visualizing it, authenticating it. As Laura Marks observes: “Things may, indeed, be enlivened by their forms, uses and trajectories without recourse to materiality, through memory, written representation, or other forms of symbolic action...”<sup>356</sup> A film such as *The Song of Bernadette*, as I have shown, might also be included in this process.

I would suggest however that this seemingly linear process of authentication is indeed cyclical. Film and site are mutually affirming in developing what Walter Benjamin called the aura of authenticity, of the really real, for the pilgrim. For Benjamin, aura is an experience, it is a “...strange tissue of space and time: the

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<sup>356</sup> Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 121.

unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be.”<sup>357</sup> More specifically the authenticity of a thing is “...the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origins on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it.”<sup>358</sup> The external encounter with the object, with a particular site, is understood to correspond with an interior encounter with the past. The example I have given of Meredith’s encounter with the grotto and the Footsteps of Bernadette interpretive trail is perhaps best understood within Benjamin’s conceptualization of authenticity and its aura. Negotiating the sacred space of the sanctuary and the town of Lourdes, pilgrims move within this strange tissue of space and time, and while certainly not the case for all but indeed for many, they touch the basin in Le Cachot and the moist rock walls of the grotto, and visualize what it must have been like in the time of the apparitions in 1858. Unlike sites associated with film-induced tourism however, at Lourdes film and site do not serve only to legitimate and confirm the authenticity of one another, but most importantly for the pilgrim, bear witness to the life and testimony of a 14 year old French girl who claimed to have been graced with a vision of the Virgin Mary. As Sam demonstrated, they serve to justify one’s faith. Another pilgrim confirms this, first citing directly the foreword to the film:

*For those who believe in God, no explanation is necessary. For those who do not believe in God, no explanation is possible. But that’s what being there actually kind of does, you know? It actually gives you the evidence, it really gives you the evidence. Sitting there in that room*

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<sup>357</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008), 23.

<sup>358</sup> Benjamin, *The Work of Art*, 22.

where Bernadette sat, where she slept, where she ate. And we all say we don't need evidence, but it really does give us the evidence!<sup>359</sup>

Returning to my earlier question of whether the binary opposition of objective and existential authenticity set out by Wang is reflected in the lived experience of pilgrims, I have aimed to illustrate that it is not quite so clear-cut. For pilgrims and tourists alike, their experience of existential authenticity is still to a significant degree dependent on the authenticity of place and object. For pilgrims to Lourdes, their reified encounter with the apparition narrative mediated by a cinematic representation of it is dependent on a complex amalgam of factors to be sure, yet nevertheless hinges primarily on the belief that 'this really is the rock where Our Lady appeared,' 'this really is the basin where Bernadette's mother did her washing.' *The Song of Bernadette* then is one key popular historical testimony relating to the places and events in Lourdes, which enhances and illuminates the embodied encounter of the pilgrim through place and object, striking the spark of life from the hardened substance.

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<sup>359</sup> Interview, December 9, 2012.

## VI

## Thin Spaces: Encounters with Place and Person

*“Here, the transcendent broke into time.”*

-A gas station attendant in Knock, Ireland<sup>360</sup>

Three days after the coach pilgrimage described at the beginning of the previous chapter departed for Lourdes, the group of thirty-two pilgrims began their return to England. Exhausted from what was a whirl-wind visit to the shrine to celebrate the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, the pilgrims tried to catch whatever sleep they could manage as the coach sped up the Autoroute north towards Paris. After a brief stop in the city for breakfast, the pilgrims were given a panoramic tour of the landmarks of the capital. One of the sites we visited was the Chapel of the Miraculous Medal on the Rue du Bac, where a series of apparitions of the Virgin Mary were reported by the French nun Catherine Labouré in 1830. The pilgrims then continued onward toward Calais, where we would board the ferry back to England. Once our coach was safely parked in the cargo hold of the ferry, we began our ascent up the several flights of stairs to the main concourse to relax after the uncomfortable coach journey, to socialize with other pilgrims, or have something to eat.

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<sup>360</sup> Quoted in Robert Orsi, “Abundant History: Marian Apparitions as Alternative Modernity,” in *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World*, ed. Anna-Karina Hermkens et al. (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 215.

The return trip was especially rough as the ferry navigated the choppy waters of the English Channel, and I had to grip the hand railings as I made my way down the moving corridor toward the cafeteria. When I arrived I was waved over by Sean and Sophie, a couple in their mid-thirties from south London, to join them for dinner. It had been their first visit to Lourdes, and both were still practically euphoric about their time at the shrine and were already planning their next pilgrimage the following summer. When I asked what had inspired their decision to join a pilgrimage to Lourdes, Sophie responded:

Our parish priest is a bit of a Lourdes fanatic and has really been pushing several of us from the church to go to Lourdes, but the diocesan pilgrimage in August is a week and that's too long for us to be away right now, and it's too expensive. So this one is perfect, because it's shorter and cheaper...But our priest said something that has really stayed with me. He said that Lourdes is a *thin space*, and what he means is that it is a place where the difference between heaven and earth is just so small. And I've just always liked that way of thinking about it, that Mary went to Lourdes and appeared there to Bernadette, and that her presence is still there. So I wanted to be there and experience that myself.<sup>361</sup>

Sophie's reference to her parish priest's description of Lourdes as a *thin space*, as a unique and privileged site where the line between heaven and earth dissolves and the sacred can be accessed and tapped into, was echoed by other pilgrims, most often in reference to the grotto, the site of the apparitions. By virtue of the Virgin Mary's apparitions to Bernadette in the rock niche in 1858, the area around the

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<sup>361</sup> Interview, December 10, 2012.

grotto has been set apart as a place “where heaven touched earth,” where the sacred geography of Lourdes mediates engagement with the divine order for pilgrims.

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

The faith is everywhere in Lourdes, it just surrounds you, this tremendous surge of faith. Everybody catches it off everybody else, so that by the end of the week you’re all like it, and it’s very hard to leave it. Because you know when you go back home it’s not going to be like that and it *should* be, but it isn’t. And there is so much kindness and even love in Lourdes that is missing back home, and it’s a shame that the rest of the world isn’t like this. Because this is a glimpse of Paradise, it really is. It’s a glimpse of the face of God in everyone you meet, and of how life really should be.<sup>362</sup>

Many of the sentiments expressed by Abigail were discussed in Chapter Four regarding pilgrims’ perceptions of the shrine as a second home or their true, authentic home. Yet Lourdes not only provides pilgrims with a template for enacting an idealized pattern of human relations. Here Abigail emphasizes that the experiences of kindness and love during a pilgrimage to Lourdes afford the pilgrim a glimpse of Paradise, an opportunity to transcend the circumstances of their quotidian lives and touch the face of God through their relationships with fellow

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<sup>362</sup> Interview, August 28, 2013.



pilgrims. For many pilgrims, there is a far more immediate engagement with the divine provided in Lourdes than is possible anywhere else.

This understanding of the human dynamics at Lourdes as enabling a foretaste of heaven is underscored by Fr. Luke, a priest with the Westminster diocese: “We don’t live in the Kingdom of Heaven yet. The world is very far from what it could be and should be, and very far from the Garden of Eden and how it all started. But you know, we need places to remind us of how life really, truly is, and really could be. Lourdes is a visionary place. It gives us the clarity we need to see the world as God intended it, and to walk in that Kingdom even just for a moment.”<sup>363</sup> Both Abigail and Fr. Luke distinguish between life as it is and life as it should be, echoing the pilgrims we encountered in Chapter Four. Abigail and Fr. Luke go further however in linking this idea directly with the promise Lourdes holds for pilgrims as a preview of what Paradise or the Kingdom of Heaven is truly like. This notion of Lourdes as a thin space, where heaven and earth appear to be indistinguishable, is derived not only from the belief that here the Virgin Mary broke through the mundane in her visions to Bernadette, but also that Lourdes fosters sets of ideal human relations and experiences pointing to the promise of the Kingdom of Heaven.

I suggest that for pilgrims like Abigail and Fr. Luke, the notion of Lourdes as a thin space and its ability to herald the coming Kingdom of Heaven points to

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<sup>363</sup> Interview, December 12, 2012.

the *transtemporal* potential of pilgrimage sites such as Lourdes. Earlier I referred to Thomas Tweed's discussion of translocative symbols at a Cuban Catholic shrine in Miami which enable the Cuban diaspora to be imaginatively transported back to their natal homeland. I extended his observations to my own discussion of how pilgrims "bring Lourdes back" with them to the UK through religious souvenirs, bottles of Lourdes water, and even through replicas of the grotto. Yet throughout this thesis, I have aimed to show that precisely through their nature as thin spaces, pilgrimage sites such as Lourdes also hold the potential to be transtemporal, empowering pilgrims to transcend the mundane and touch or glimpse the sacred, to move through time and cast their gaze upon the world to come. This movement is perhaps best described by Tweed as he elaborates on his definition of religion as a process of crossing and dwelling: "Religions bring the distant close...but they are flows that also propel adherents back and forth between the close and the distant. Religions move between what is imagined as the most distant horizon and what is imagined as the most intimate domain...As itinerants, the religious never remain anywhere or anytime for long. It is in this sense, I suggest, that religions are flows, translocative and transtemporal crossings."<sup>364</sup> Although here Tweed is formulating a theory of religion as a broader human phenomenon, it is quite clear that his definition could be adapted and applied more specifically to the pilgrimage experience. As I have shown by beginning each chapter with a story from my

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<sup>364</sup> Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 158.

fieldwork occurring on a train, coach, or ferry, pilgrimage is clearly bound up with notions of movement, be it the more obvious modes of transport that move pilgrims to and from Lourdes or the interior movement and transformation that a pilgrimage might inspire. Pilgrimage, like religion generally, consists of a series of flows, these translocative and transtemporal crossings which point to the porous and malleable boundaries of the pilgrimage shrine. The perception of sites such as Lourdes as thin spaces allows for the distant to be rendered more immediate and accessible, and for highly subjective experiences to be extended and to take on a greater significance beyond the self. Many of the pilgrim stories I have recounted in the previous chapters highlight this reciprocal back-and-forth movement observed by Tweed, and suggest that a significant factor in the pilgrimage experience is the ability to collapse the boundaries between the celestial and the mundane, to “bring the gods to earth and transport the faithful to the heavens.”<sup>365</sup>

### *Encountering Authenticity in Thin Spaces*

I have reflected briefly here on the idea that Lourdes constitutes a thin space between heaven and earth for pilgrims in order to draw attention to the immediacy that is sought in encounters with the sacred at the shrine. This immediacy is particularly meaningful for many pilgrims because they feel that it is unavailable to them outside their journey to Lourdes. Building on this notion, I suggest that the

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

motif of thin spaces is also useful as a heuristic lens for exploring the range of modes by which the trope of authenticity mediates pilgrims' engagement both with sites such as the grotto that are understood as especially sacred, and also with other pilgrims, most notably through the act of caregiving. As I have tried to show throughout this study, the trope of authenticity recurred frequently in the narratives and discourse of pilgrims I met on journeys to Lourdes. Experiences described by pilgrims as "authentic" were critical in informing their engagement with the shrine and with fellow pilgrims, and often inspired return visits to Lourdes in subsequent years. While the notion of authenticity may continue to be elusive and imprecise, often having different meanings for different people, pilgrims still use the term or others closely analogous to it in describing their experience in Lourdes. It is important then for scholars of religion and pilgrimage specifically to attend to the ways in which authenticity as a rhetorical device is articulated and encountered by pilgrims on the ground. Conceptualizing experiences perceived by pilgrims to be authentic as a series of thin spaces can illuminate the ways in which providing care for another pilgrim, or touching the stone basin where Bernadette's mother would have done her washing, are highly valued elements of a pilgrim's visit to Lourdes.

In Chapter Two I examined the experience of pilgrims to Lourdes who also volunteer to serve as caregivers to sick and disabled pilgrims during their week at the shrine, and the relationships that develop between volunteer helpers as well as with the Assisted Pilgrims they are tasked with caring for. As Abigail and Fr. Luke

indicate in referring to the idealized pattern of human relationships at the shrine as foreshadowing the coming Kingdom of Heaven, the intimate sense of relation that can quickly form between caregivers and care-receivers represents perhaps the most profound interpersonal example of a thin space. It is a thin space that is developed within the context of pilgrimage and that informs pilgrims' perceptions of authenticity and its value. In my discussion of caregiving at Lourdes I drew attention to instances where this care work may be challenged and resisted. Volunteer caregivers may be overwhelmed by their duties or feel a lack of support or inclusion within their team of helpers. Assisted Pilgrims may sense a loss of agency and dignity in the process of receiving care, or become anxious regarding the lack of professional experience on the part of most caregivers at Lourdes. While it is indeed important to explore what one pilgrim described as the "downsides of the pilgrimage," I maintain that for many caregivers and Assisted Pilgrims, what remains critical to their experience at Lourdes and what often inspires return visits to the shrine is not necessarily the story of the apparitions to Bernadette or the reports of miraculous cures stemming from the spring flowing at the base of the grotto. Rather, it is these idealized intimate connections formed between caregivers and Assisted Pilgrims within the frame of pilgrimage that are most profound. The sense of isolation that both caregivers and Assisted Pilgrims reported experiencing in the UK, as well as the individual's own personal boundaries and inhibitions, are

dissolved in the thin space of the caregiving experience. The physical and emotional distance between relative strangers is narrowed, however briefly.

The thin space that is forged in the act of caregiving opens up a wide range of opportunities for pilgrims to encounter authenticity or to even become “authentic” as they perceive it. Fr. Luke described Lourdes as a visionary place, a place that serves to remind us of “how life really, truly is, and really could be.” Indeed, for several caregivers, Lourdes is not only a place to witness this model of life idealized in its truest, most authentic form, as God intended it, but also to inhabit this authentic life fully themselves through their care work at the shrine. Recall that for several caregivers, going to Lourdes and helping sick and disabled pilgrims was understood to be an opportunity to become who they *should* be, both as Christians striving to live in accordance with the command to love one’s neighbour, and quite simply as contributing members of society. Alyssa, the helper with the Westminster pilgrimage who referred to the parable of the Good Samaritan from the Gospels in describing her own experience, noted that she often ignored and quickly walked past those in need whom she encountered on the streets of London. However she saw Lourdes, where the central organizing principle of care for the sick and disabled suffuses the shrine with meaning, as an ideal environment where she could transcend her limitations, her reluctance to engage with those outside her social circle, and authentically follow Christ’s ethical imperative.

The thin space developed in the act of caregiving also reveals what some pilgrims saw as the true essence of their faith. Josh, a pilgrimage organizer for the Westminster pilgrimage, described how he had difficulty accepting many of the dogmas and rituals of the Catholic faith, but found purpose and meaning in care work at Lourdes. His experience of religious faith was almost exclusively bound up in his care work. Pilgrimage to Lourdes served as an ideal access point for tapping into the religious values of love and compassion for one's neighbour which he holds, but which are in some sense divorced from the dogmas and rituals of the Catholic faith. The thin space of care work enabled Josh to enter into what he understands as the true essence of the original Gospel message, and to extend it into practice at its most fundamental, authentic level.

I concluded my chapter on caregiving by employing the concept of kenosis in Christian thought as a lens through which to examine and encapsulate the range of encounters both positive and negative between caregivers and Assisted Pilgrims, as well as among caregivers. This marrying of theological and anthropological concepts allows for the possibility of further examining care work as a thin space producing authentic and profound human relationships as well as the potential for caregivers to become "as Christ" in their volunteer service at the shrine. Arthur Kleinman's analysis of caregiving based upon his own experience caring for his wife is especially salient in underscoring the discourse of authenticity that can surround the act of caregiving. He observes that it is a moral practice that can make

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

By examining caregiving as a form of kenosis, patterned on the example held up by pilgrims of Christ's own love and self-sacrifice, not one but two instances of the development of thin space as a mark of authenticity emerge. Stemming from the intimate connection that can be created in the process of caregiving, volunteer helpers, in a most ideal sense, may also strive to narrow the gap between themselves and Jesus, following the invitation expressed in the "Servant Song" hymn to "let me be as Christ to you." Attempting to conform to a Christic pattern of human relations through their care work, pilgrims may narrow the space between themselves and Christ through a series of mimetic performances. Danielle's reflection on washing the feet of an Assisted Pilgrim, and her clear awareness of its connection to the account of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples in the Gospels, is most evocative of this mimesis. The practice of caregiving at Lourdes not only allows pilgrims to dissolve the typical boundaries between themselves and others and enter into immediate relationships with those they are



caring for, but also promises the possibility of becoming like Christ through fully and authentically enacting the Christian love command.

Chapter Three looked at the perspectives of pilgrims on the connection between pilgrimage and tourism. Here the application of the motif of thin spaces as sites for encountering the authentic is rather distinct from other examples provided throughout the study. Instead of emerging from intimate and profound human relationships or through the act of touching the rock wall of the grotto, here the thin space mediating perceptions of authenticity is more conceptual than experiential, found by narrowing the gap between pilgrimage and tourism which are often portrayed as distinct and even diametrically opposed. I referred to Nancy Frey's observation that on the Camino de Santiago several pilgrims and shrine officials self-identify and elevate their status as faith-motivated pilgrims in rigid contradistinction to others on the Camino who are dismissed as tourists. The credentials of pilgrims may not be stamped if they are determined not to be "authentic" pilgrims, due to such factors as wearing casual street clothing or lacking accreditation from their parish priest. The language of authenticity also informs judgments of one's motives and mode of transit, where those that cycle or travel by bus instead of walking, or travel the Camino as a form of recreation are viewed as "fake" or watered down pilgrims. I also discussed John Eade's research at Lourdes in the early 1990s, in which he describes sharp disagreement among pilgrims about the value of the souvenir shops which line the streets, where those pilgrims who do

buy souvenirs are considered to be behaving “just like tourists” and are therefore fake pilgrims.

Over the course of my own fieldwork however, I rarely heard such distinctions being made by those on the pilgrimages I joined. Few of my fellow pilgrims distinguished between “authentic,” real pilgrims with the correct motivations and comportment, and “inauthentic” or fake pilgrims behaving just like tourists and whose motivations for being in Lourdes were deemed suspect. Participants in the diocesan pilgrimages and pilgrimage tour groups I joined overwhelmingly self-identified as pilgrims. Not once can I recall meeting someone in Lourdes who considered themselves a tourist. However this self-identification did not prevent them from visiting historical and commercial sites in Lourdes, leaving the town to go on recreational excursions into the mountains, or socializing in the evenings. In fact many pilgrims viewed these activities as complementary if not necessary elements of the pilgrimage experience, providing balance and indeed release from the hectic and sometimes overwhelming physical and emotional pace of the pilgrimage week. The people I met were able to seamlessly blend activities traditionally perceived to belong to the distinct realms of pilgrimage and tourism together into their itinerary. While participants almost exclusively identified themselves as pilgrims, most refused to elevate themselves as pilgrims in contradistinction to those with more touristic or ambiguous motivations and behaviours. Rather, those who might be tourists or non-Catholics were often viewed

not with suspicion but as potentially open to being converted or changed in some way by their visit to Lourdes. Indeed, as I noted in the Introduction, a typical response to my own revelation that I was a lapsed Catholic was that perhaps listening to so many stories of what Lourdes means to pilgrims might inspire a return to the Church. In one particular interview, a pilgrim gently challenged me: “Don’t say you’ve been going to Lourdes so many times only to do your research. There’s something going on there, and I saw it when we were there a couple months ago. You might not realize what it is yet, but when you do you have to be open to it.”<sup>366</sup> Most pilgrims express similar sentiments when asked about the presence of tourists or non-Catholics at the shrine, challenging the notion that pilgrimage and tourism represent discrete and opposing categories of travel. Rather, the traditional binaries constructed between the two readily dissolve in the face of the lived experience of pilgrims to Lourdes. These pilgrims, by and large, resist artificially idealised visions of the sacred and have pragmatic understandings of their activities in and around the shrine, and refuse to distinguish and privilege themselves as true or authentic pilgrims against those deemed as fake or inauthentic visitors to the shrine. In an interesting inversion of my argument that the series of thin spaces produced by a pilgrimage to Lourdes create opportunities for pilgrims to have experiences of authenticity, here the thin space between the traditionally dichotomous categories of pilgrimage and tourism in fact removes notions of

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<sup>366</sup> Interview, October 28, 2012.

authenticity from the equation, as a rhetorical device for parsing out supposed differences between “real” and “fake” pilgrims.

Chapter Four examined the experience of serial pilgrims, those that have returned to Lourdes on pilgrimage for several years and even decades as a habitual and indeed compulsive element of their lived faith. Despite the insistence in early pilgrimage scholarship on understanding shrines as extraordinary, far-removed sites, generally unfamiliar and opposed to the pilgrim’s everyday religious and social life, individual pilgrims can and do perceive and interact with pilgrimage centres as a ‘home away from home,’ or in some instances their one authentic home. The idea of Lourdes as the pilgrims’ true home is grounded in a series of thin spaces which together inform the belief that Lourdes represents an authentic place where heaven and earth intersected and which facilitates meaningful relationships among pilgrims and with the divine. I first looked at the Turnerian sense of *communitas* that is developed at the shrine, with many pilgrims describing the sense of family and solidarity with like-minded individuals that they experience in Lourdes and that is unavailable to them at quite the same level anywhere else. Lourdes seemed almost to be suffused with an aura of natural intimacy unique to the site, establishing it as a sort of home. Indeed, the quotations from Abigail and Fr. Luke cited earlier in this chapter underline this idea that Lourdes represents an authentic glimpse of the world as it really should be in opposition to their social relations back home in England, which some pilgrims described as cold and distant. In this instance at least, there

may indeed be a strong distinction made between home and away, where the sense of fellowship found in Lourdes is privileged and juxtaposed against life in England.

Next I moved to what might be referred to as the geographical thin space *par excellence* for several pilgrims at Lourdes, the Grotto of Massabielle, which served as the stage for the Virgin Mary's apparitions to Bernadette. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, pilgrims believe that this is the place where the extraordinary broke through into the ordinary, where, in the words of one pilgrim describing the grotto, "heaven touched earth." With the conviction that Bernadette's account of the apparition is true and authentic, supported by the official verification of the Church, pilgrims described the grotto as a safe space, a place of tranquility, and quite explicitly, as their true home. As Aisling put it, her return visits to the grotto are like "going home to see Mother," to a place where the Virgin intervened in human history, and is believed to still do so. The ability to touch the rock of the grotto, drink the water from the spring which the Virgin directed Bernadette to uncover, and simply sit and reflect in the shadow of the dark rock face, allows pilgrims an authentic and more immediate sense of presence and relationship with the Virgin Mary that may not be as acute in their day-to-day lives back home in England.

This thinning of space not only occurs at the grotto, but also in the conceptual narrowing of the gap between one's own home and Lourdes, as pilgrims seek out ways in which they can extend and incorporate their experience of the

sacred at Lourdes into their religious lives in the UK. Two examples that I provided were especially poignant in highlighting this blurring of the boundaries between home and away: Maureen's replica of the Lourdes grotto in her garden, and Pauline's highly routinized use of Lourdes water as part of her morning regimen. While Maureen acknowledged that her walks from the back door of her home to the replica of the grotto in her garden are not the same as walking to the original grotto in Lourdes, they are nevertheless still an effective vehicle for a mimetic, embodied process of incorporating her experience in Lourdes into her home life in the UK. I would suggest that her ritual engagement with a replica of the grotto does not undermine typical popular conceptions of the authenticity of the original but in fact points to its attraction, as Maureen continuously attempts to tap into her experience in Lourdes and re-enacts it (though perhaps with less of the numinous aura of the original site) in her garden in south London.

I also suggested that in the case of Pauline the use of Lourdes water as part of her daily morning routine is for her a translocative symbol, one that is deeply personal, that can be possessed within the home and easily transported. Through her daily use of Lourdes water, she transcends the boundaries of her own home and existence in England, and physically comes into contact with an especially potent element of Lourdes, the water from the spring and the miraculous potential it holds. For both Maureen and Pauline, incorporating elements of the sacred landscape of Lourdes into their own homes, one through a facsimile and the other through water

from the original source, serves as a means for extending the efficacy of the authentic site of the apparitions at Lourdes into their domestic lives in England. The thin spaces forged at the shrine are then extended beyond it, narrowing the gap between the “home” of England and the “away” of Lourdes, granting constant access to the original source, to the pilgrim’s true home.

Chapter Five explored the 1943 Hollywood film *The Song of Bernadette*, and its role as an authenticating tool for pilgrims. Through the fluid interplay between the cinematic representation of the series of apparitions of the Virgin Mary to Bernadette, and the physical exploration of those sites in Lourdes associated with the apparitions by contemporary pilgrims, *The Song of Bernadette* dramatizes and confirms the authenticity of pilgrims’ embodied experience of the sacred at Lourdes. As I showed, from Werfel’s composition of the original novel as an act of thanksgiving for his safe passage to the United States during the Second World War, to Hollywood’s cinematic adaptation of his literary work, concerns around the authenticity of these popular works were predominant in the critical reviews of both the novel and film. Indeed, Werfel specifically maintained that his treatment of the Lourdes story was a novel but not a fictive work, that wherever possible he strived to thin the space between the historical chain of events in Lourdes as they happened and his more artful rendering eighty years later. The idea that representations of the apparition narrative should be as true to the original accounts as possible also informed critical responses to the portrayal of Bernadette by Jennifer Jones in the

film, where she was judged by the degree to which she fully and authentically inhabited the spirit and persona of the young seer.

The discourse around the perceived authenticity of the novel and film by both the secular and Catholic press in the United States and in the United Kingdom was echoed by contemporary pilgrims to Lourdes who had viewed the film before the pilgrimage. In their assessment of the film several believed that it was a relatively accurate portrayal of Bernadette and the chain of events at Lourdes as they had happened, and cited the film as a key source informing their own knowledge of the apparition narrative. Some pilgrims preferred a more recent French film, *Je m'appelle Bernadette*, with one pilgrim explicitly describing it as more realistic than the earlier Hollywood movie and as the most authentic artistic rendering of the Lourdes story she had seen. Whether pilgrims prefer one film or another, cinematic representations nonetheless serve as authoritative pedagogical tools informing some pilgrims' knowledge of the apparition narrative.

I then described the various places and objects at the shrine and in the town connected to the life of Bernadette and the apparitions that together comprise the sacred geography of Lourdes. Pilgrims typically visit these places as part of their pilgrimage itinerary. I argued that for some pilgrims who have seen *The Song of Bernadette*, the film renders a visual representation of the Lourdes apparitions and the personality of Bernadette accessible to the viewing audience. Visiting sites such as Le Cachot where Bernadette and her family lived during the period of the



apparitions, or touching and engaging with the grotto where the Virgin Mary is believed to have truly appeared, pilgrims such as Meredith, Ecaterina, and Sam show that the film screen does not always mark a division between the audience and the filtered images. Rather, the screen can also enhance and bring to life a world one hundred and fifty years in the past, mediated by the visual and tangible markers one encounters, associated with the drama unfolding on the screen. These objects and places, believed to be authentic, thin the space between the viewer and the image behind the screen. Not only does the practice of mediation on the part of mass media and religious experience attempt to render present the transcendental, the present is also rendered as transcendental. Lourdes, by virtue of its status as a thin space where heaven and earth seem to touch, is already deeply imbued with a transcendental aura for pilgrims. Yet modern mass media forms, such as a visual representation of the sacred through film, can enhance this aura. Objects, places, paths associated with the apparitions and the life of Bernadette are already sacralised, yet an imaginative encounter with place and object filtered through cinematic representation can enhance their poignancy. They can be a touchstone for the memory, bringing forth a scene from the film and further authenticating this sense of the transcendental at Lourdes.

As I noted at the beginning of this study, pilgrims are drawn to Lourdes by complex and nuanced motivations. The preceding chapters explored these motivations and the experiences underlying a pilgrim's choice to set out on a

journey to the grotto of Lourdes, while recognizing that pilgrimage is inherently multivalent, with pilgrims moving to and from multiple social, geographical, and religious departure and destination points. Pilgrimage can be an elusive phenomenon to pin down, and any attempt to proclaim a definitive or universal theory of this form of travel would be a challenging if not completely futile exercise. I have identified one element of the pilgrimage experience here, the trope of authenticity, as a rhetorical device employed by pilgrims to describe their motivations for going on pilgrimage and their engagement with the shrine and fellow pilgrims during their time in Lourdes. Focusing on authenticity illuminates the underlying threads binding together otherwise disparate pilgrim experiences and perspectives.

Although I have tried in this study to sketch out a comprehensive portrait of pilgrimage to Lourdes, certainly a shrine that attracts an estimated six million pilgrims each year offers up endless possibilities for future research. A significant body of existing literature on Lourdes has explored the hallmarks of the pilgrimage site, such as the apparitions and the experience of sick and disabled pilgrims going to Lourdes with the quiet hope of a miraculous cure. An element of both the Westminster and Catholic Association pilgrimages that is worth future study however is their increasingly multicultural nature. The Westminster pilgrimage in particular draws its participants from one of the most cosmopolitan and multicultural cities in the world, and this reality is reflected in the composition of

the pilgrimage group. Many are first and second generation Britons, and anecdotal evidence suggests that their participation in pilgrimages to Lourdes departing from the English dioceses they now call home has increased dramatically in recent years. As a pilgrimage organizer with the Westminster diocese described it to me: “If you look at the pilgrimage photograph from 1989 and you look at one from today, you can see it straight away. There is now just an enormous range of people from around the world, from Asia, from Africa, from the Caribbean, that have settled in London and come on our pilgrimage...The pilgrimage picture tells the story of a changing diocese, so that now the Diocese of Westminster itself reflects the universal Church.”<sup>367</sup> While several of the pilgrims cited in this study were indeed first and second-generation Britons, the multicultural composition of the pilgrimages was not a focus of my research, nor was the role a pilgrimage to Lourdes might have in enabling recent immigrants to the UK to integrate into English Catholic society. The question of the link between Lourdes and the maintenance of faith in the diaspora is worth exploring however, and the Westminster pilgrimage in particular provides a fruitful site for such study.

Another avenue for future research extends from my chapter on serial pilgrims who have returned to Lourdes for several years and even decades. Some pilgrims described their return visits to Lourdes as satisfying a profound need akin to a drug addiction, saying that they were “coming off a Lourdes high” in the weeks

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<sup>367</sup> Interview, August 13, 2013.

following their return to England, and returning to the shrine for “another hit” the following year. Serial pilgrimages to Lourdes in a sense become almost inexplicably compulsive for those who undertake them. Yet as the stories of several pilgrims elicited in this study make clear, they do not feel this compulsive need to go only to Lourdes. Many frequently navigate the European circuit of Marian pilgrimage shrines, including Walsingham in England, Knock in Ireland, Fatima in Portugal, the Rue de Bac in Paris, Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Czestochowa in Poland. Many of these shrines were founded by virtue of an apparition of the Virgin Mary. In rare instances, pilgrims will even venture as far as the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. Some of those I encountered were self-described “pilgrimage junkies,” perpetual pilgrims always on the road toward a sacred centre. In interviews pilgrims often made comparisons between their experience at Lourdes and at other shrines they had visited, privileging one shrine over the others. Josh, the pilgrimage organizer described in the chapter on caregiving, reported “getting nothing” out of his visit to Medjugorje, but highly valued his pilgrimages to Lourdes as an opportunity to witness and experience profound and authentic instances of Christian love in practice. Although I elicit some of these comparisons made by pilgrims in this study, additional research could explore further the ways in which habitual pilgrims move across the Marian pilgrimage circuit in Europe and draw out various meanings from each stop along the way. Anna Fedele’s work on alternative pilgrimages to French shrines

dedicated to Mary Magdalene is one notable example of potential approaches to this form of circuit pilgrimage. While this approach might have its logistical and methodological challenges, attending to the ways in which pilgrims compare and privilege their experiences at different pilgrimage sites through multi-sited fieldwork may bring forth fresh insights on the attraction of this continental Marian network of thin spaces.

This chapter and indeed this thesis has explored the development of a network of thin spaces. Rather than being dispersed over an entire continent, the thin spaces this study is concerned with emanate from a shallow cave where a fourteen year-old girl reported witnessing visions of the Virgin Mary over one hundred and fifty years ago. Millions of pilgrims have been drawn to the grotto of Lourdes since that time, with the conviction that this is an extraordinary place set apart from the mundane, a site “where heaven touched earth.” The thin space of the grotto, where heaven and earth touch and intersect, grants pilgrims the possibility of an authentic engagement with the divine at a site where it is believed that the Virgin Mary intervened. This creates additional thin spaces and encounters that peel away the distractions and entanglements of the mundane world and open up a wide range of opportunities for pilgrims to experience what they perceive to be authentic encounters with the divine or even to become “authentic” themselves by emulating Christ.

In spite of its conceptual baggage, authenticity still matters, if for no other reason than that pilgrims themselves actively use the term or others closely analogous to it in describing their experience at Lourdes. From the perspective of pilgrims, Lourdes is the thin space which affords the authentic possibility of transcendence, of collapsing the boundaries between self and other, human and divine.

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