

Mary on the move – from the “to see-ask-thank” to the “to document & share”

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The twentieth century is sometimes referred to as the “*Marian century*” (see, e.g., Zachar Podolinská, 2019a, pp. 22–33). Out of approximately 918 apparitions documented since 41 A.D. (Hierzenberger & Nedomansky, 1993, p. 553), as many as 210 were reported between 1928 and 1971 (Scheer, 2006). The popularity of the Virgin Mary in the nineteenth century was nurtured particularly by the highly renowned apparition site of Lourdes in France (1858). At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the Portuguese site of Fatima (1917) was added to the list of Marian pilgrimage destinations. In addition to healing and “solar” miracles, Fatima also brought to public attention the Virgin’s messages, secrets, and prophecies. Fatima soon became not only the most prominent Marian apparition site of the twentieth century – *Our Lady of Fatima* also substantially contributed to the shaping of Marian theology and the Catholic Church. Official recognition of the apparition at Fatima in 1930 set in motion a previously unseen series of Marian apparitions across the world. According to O’Sullivan, Western European congregations reported thirteen to fourteen apparitions per year to Church officials between 1945 and 1957 (2018, pp. 174–210). Altogether, there were 386 cases of Marian apparitions during the twentieth century. Of all modern apparitions, the Church has approved the supernatural character of only eight: Fatima (Portugal), Beauraing (Belgium), Banneux (Belgium), Akita (Japan), Syracuse (Italy), Zeitoun (Egypt), Manila (Philippi-

nes), and Betania (Venezuela) (Hierzenberger & Nedomansky, 1993). The media and digital revolution in the second half of the twentieth century made information about local apparitions, the Virgin's messages, and reports of healings and other miracles global and easily accessible. The advent of the internet and mobile communications further contributed to the spread of Marian devotion and aesthetics, not only in religious but also in non-religious contexts and popular culture.

The Virgin Mary has become a religious phenomenon in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – the desire to “see–ask–thank” and pray to the Mother of God annually moves millions of people across Europe, whether in the West (e.g., *Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal*, *Our Lady of Lourdes* in France) or in Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe. Examples include *Međugorska Gospa* (*Our Lady of Medjugorje*) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Presveta Bogoroditsa/Bogorodica* (in Greek-Orthodox Christianity *Theotokos*, the Mother of God) in Bulgaria and Serbia, the *Czarna Madonna z Częstochowy* (*Black Madonna of Częstochowa*) in Poland, *Boldogasszony* (the Blessed Woman) in Máriagyűd in Hungary, *Sedembolestná Panna Mária* (*Our Lady of Seven Sorrows*) in Šaštín in Slovakia, and the *Blessed Mother of Hrushiv* in Ukraine. The Virgin Mary/Mother of God is thus not only the central pillar of recent postmodern Christianity but also a core figure in pilgrimage, tourism, and economic markets (see, e.g., Zachar Podolinská, 2021, pp. 21–23).

In the 1990s, Europe experienced a boom in the revitalization of older cult sites, accompanied by new places of apparitions that began attracting considerable numbers of modern pilgrims. In the region, she became a pivotal figure in nation-state building processes – for example, the *Black Madonna of Częstochowa* (Poland), the *Virgin Mary of Medjugorje*, or *Bogorodica Putevoditeljica* (Serbia). In connection with Marian devotion, intensive processes of ethnicization and nationalization have been documented, reflecting the need of nations, ethnic groups, and local communities to have their *own* Mother of God, their *own* Virgin Mary (see various studies in the edited volume *Traces of the Virgin Mary in Post-communist Europe*, Zachar Podolinská, 2019b).

In the twenty-first century, the Virgin Mary has achieved the status of a generally respected icon, penetrating the realms of both popular and mass culture (*Figure 1*). She fluently absorbs modern elements and narratives, responding to new societal challenges and needs. She became an emblematic figure in the fight against the coronavirus disease (*Figure 2*) and was “called to action” in connection with the war in Ukraine (*Figure 3*). The Virgin Mary has also become part of modern ezo-cosmologies, invoked as the neopagan Mother Earth (Gaia) and spiritual healer in Hungary (Kis-Halas, 2019). She has been positioned as a key figure in conspiracy theories spread by Marian charismatic movements predicting ecological disasters in Czechia (Tutr, 2019). Moreover, she has been used to advocate LGBTQ+ issues, as exemplified by the *Black Madonna of Częstochowa* in Poland (*Figure 4*), etc.



Figure 1: Popular singer Madonna pictured as Our Lady of Seven Sorrows. Instagram/Caafashion, cover of Vanity Fair, The Icon Issue (photographed by Luigi and Iango). Post from January 18, 2023 (visited on December 8, 2025).



Figure 2: SLOVAKIA – Special Postmark (May 29, 2020). The special postmark depicts Our Lady of Seven Sorrows in the background, with a large COVID-19 coronavirus and the text: “Our Lady of Seven Sorrows, protect us from the coronavirus” (available at: <https://www.postoveznamky.sk/hold-bojovníkom-v-prvých-liniach-pandemia-koronavirusu-covid-19-a-filatelie>, visited on December 08, 2025).



Figure 4: The cover of a mobile phone featuring the Black Madonna of Częstochowa. Author of the photograph: Tatiana Zachar Podolinská, 2022.

The Marian theme has been addressed by a robust corpus of scientific literature in Western Europe. Key works include Christian (1981, 1996), Perry & Echeverría (1988), van de Veer (1988), Zimdars-Schwartz (1991), Carroll (1992), Blackburn (1994), Coleman & Elsner (1995), Dubisch (1995), Pelikan (1998), Horsfall (2000), Eade & Sallnow (2000), Coleman & Eade (2004), Margry (2009), Matter (2011), Heal (2014), Scheer (2015), Schoemaker (2016), Larsen & Rubenstein (2019), Davis (2024), among others. The special phenomenon of Marian pilgrimages has been described in works such as Wolf (1958), Turner (1974), Turner & Turner (1978), Marnham (1982), Stirrat (1982), Dahlberg (1991), Eade (1991), Davis & Boles (2003), Apolito (2005), etc.

In this context, the post-Communist region witnessed not only a religious rupture but also a break in scientific research. More than thirty years after the fall of Communism, systematic research on Marian topics remains absent, and knowledge is largely limited to national surveys in the form of case studies: Poland (de Busser & Niedźwiedź, 2009; Niedźwiedź, 2008, 2016); Lithuania (Yla, 1970; Liutikas, 2019); Ukraine (Halemba, 2016); Serbia (Jurišić, 1997; Kuburović, 1997; Skrbish, 2005; Tatić, 2007); Bulgaria (Baeva, 2012; Lubanska, 2017); Romania (Pócs, 2008; Povedák, 2014; Peti, 2019); Hungary (Kis-Halas, 2019). Most studies focus on *Our Lady of Medjugorje* (Bosnia and Herzegovina), e.g., Hill (1987), Zimdars-Swartz (1991), Connel (1992), Jurkovich & Gesler (1997), Berryman (2001), Aleksov (2004, 2014). Studies offering wider multinational comparisons are rare, such as, e.g., Christian (1984), Halemba (2011), and Troeva & Hristov (2017).



Figure 3: The pictures depict a particular religious icon known as the Pokrova, in which Mary's veil – a Pokrova or “cover” in Ukrainian – serves as a sign of protection (Ukrainian Marian Collection, The Marian Library, University of Dayton, CC BY-ND). In February 2022, Ukrainian clergy demonstrating against the war in their country appeared in media coverage holding an image of the Virgin Mary Pokrova (the Virgin Mary with outstretched hands lifting up the edges of a cloak) (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022-feb/24/ukrainians-protest-at-downing-street-gates-over-russian-invasion-uk-military-sanctions>, visited on December 08, 2025).

In Slovakia, Marian devotion has been studied primarily through historiographic methods (e.g., Letz, 2014). Analyses include Marian motifs in legend songs (Urbanová, 2007, 2008), glass painting (Pišútová, 1969, 1979), and contemporary plastic art (Žáry, Pišútová & Hrabušický, 1991). Selected aspects of Marian devotion in Slovakia are also addressed in studies by Z. Novodvorská (2007), M. Bocánová (2007), and N. Gancarz (2007), published in *Slovenský národopis/Slovak Ethnology*, 56(2), edited by T. Podolinská (2007). Marian devotion in Central Europe was further explored in another issue of *Slovenský národopis/Slovak Ethnology*, 56(4), edited by T. Podolinská (2008). In addition, Marian devotion in Slovakia has been selectively mapped in the publication *Traces of the Virgin Mary in Post-Communist Europe* (Zachar Podolinská, 2019b). The chapter by T. Zachar Podolinská (2019a) offers a comparative perspective on general patterns of Marian devotion in the post-Communist region; R. Kečka (2019) analyzes the divergent development of Marian discourse in Western and post-Communist countries; and J. Majo (2019) reflects on the distribution of Marian patronage in Slovakia in the context of post-Communist religious revivalism. The publications of T. Zachar Podolinská (2007, 2014, 2018, 2019a, 2021) map the ethnicized and acculturated forms (visual expressions, Marian cult, and narratives) of the postmodern Virgin Mary among the Roma in Slovakia.

The current issue of *Slovenský národopis/Slovak Ethnology* 4/2025 (vol. 73) is one of the outputs of the scientific project VEGA 2/0104/23, which focuses on Marian devotion (not only in Slovakia) in the context of postmodern societies in post-communist Europe.

The goal of the ongoing project is to offer both national and transnational perspectives on preliminarily formulated patterns of Marian religiosity and spirituality characteristics of the post-socialist region. Data collected within the project provide an illustrative national picture of Marian devotion, allowing researchers to define the specific features of its development in Slovakia. At the same time, the project aims to enable transnational comparison and to better outline the patterns typical of the post-communist region as a whole. Part of the research focuses on ethnically and religiously mixed environments, offering a unique opportunity for internal national comparison of current forms of Marian devotion in majority and minority communities. Another part of the project examines Marian devotion within marginalized Roma communities.

A significant benefit of the project will be the systematically created scientific collection Digi-MARY, open to both experts and the general public. This collection will map the visual, narrative, and musical forms of Marian devotion in Slovakia in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with the possibility of searching through the existing digital repository system of the IESA SAS. In line with the Open Science National Strategy, the project will make ethically treated data and metadata (FAIR data approach) from both older and current Marian research in Slovakia available to the public.

Based on the project's findings and drawing from the premises of cognitive anthropology, V. Bahna (2024) concluded that pilgrimage and Marian apparitions

functionally intertwine, representing both “religious enthusiasm and emotional experiences” while simultaneously leaving space for “the competition of diverse social, political, and religious discourses” (p. 99). In 2025, V. Bahna published his findings from fieldwork conducted at the Marian apparition and pilgrimage site of Mount Živčák, located near Turzovka in northwest Slovakia. Providing an in-depth analysis of both historical evidence as well current ethnographic findings concerning the Marian apparition in 1958, he focused on the process of the “domestication” of the local apparition by the Catholic Church. This process – initially rejecting the individual/ private apparition and later moving toward (unofficial) recognition – represents a general pattern found at many apparition and pilgrimage sites. His study is therefore a valuable contribution to comparative research on Marian apparitions and pilgrimage sites.

Another member of the VEGA project team, B. Serdziuk, contributed to the project through a study on Marian devotion in post-communist Belarus, focusing on ethical issues in field and desk research (Serdziuk, 2024).

Within the VEGA project, we also organized the panel *Veneration of the Virgin Mary among the Roma – Global Challenges and Local Diversities* at the World Anthropological Union Congress *Unearthing Humanity: Critical and Urgent Epistemic Redefinitions in World Anthropologies*, held from November 3 to 8, 2025, in Antigua, Guatemala. The panel explored manifestations of both church-based and non-institutional religiosity among the Roma through the example of the cult of the Virgin Mary. Special emphasis was placed on contemporary and postmodern spiritualities, previously unexplored phenomena of religious experimentation, conversion and de-conversion, and the widespread syncretism typical of Roma religiosity (for more see: <https://www.waucongress2025.org/panel/?id=347>).

Based on data collected within the research VEGA project, as well as research papers published in the volume *Traces of the Virgin Mary in Post-Communist Europe* (Zachar Podolinská, 2019b), it appears that Slovakia followed the general patterns of other post-communist countries: (a) a large-scale religious revival as a direct response to the former period of forced atheization; (b) the return of reinvented tradition as a religious response to westernization, globalization, and the liberal value system (the “*coming to the roots*” phenomenon); (c) a postmodern response to secularization and modernization, seeking spirituality and authentic religiosity among both elites and the folk masses (Zachar Podolinská, 2019a, p. 37).

Part of the current issue of *Slovenský národopis/Slovak Ethnology* 4/2025 is dedicated to contributions addressing questions explored within the aforementioned scientific project VEGA 2/0104/23 and the APVV-22-0389 RELIROMA project, which focused on *Research of religiosity, spirituality, and non-religiosity among the Roma in Slovakia*.

As editors of this monothematic issue of *Slovenský národopis/Slovak Ethnology* – Tatiana Zachar Podolinská, Agáta Šústová Drelová, and Kinga Povedák – we deliberately defined the scope broadly, tracing various forms of Marian devotion in Europe.

Topics ranged from historical to contemporary forms of Marian devotion, with particular interest in the morphology of miracles and sacred narratives, material culture and iconography (including artistic representations, relics, and sacred spaces associated with the Virgin Mary), as well as depictions of the Virgin Mary in music, film, literature, and digital media, and their influence on societal perceptions. In addition to more traditional themes in Mariological literature, we sought to attract contributions on less researched topics, such as spirituality, conspiratoriality, and conspiracy theories in Marian research (including reinterpretations of Marian apparitions and symbols in the context of alternative spiritualities and conspiratorial thought), and the non-religious or secular “Virgin Mary” (i.e., cultural and contextual reinterpretations of the Virgin Mary beyond direct religious semantics). This issue was consciously interdisciplinary, open to studies from theological, sociological, and psychological perspectives on Marian devotion (see call <https://uesa.sav.sk/sloven-sky-narodopis/>).

From this point of view, it was a kind of experiment for us to observe which topics resonated within the authorial community. The preliminary pool of potential contributors originally included abstracts reflecting the historical aspects of Marian devotion, such as the formation of official theological and ecclesiastical views and attitudes in confrontation with the boom of Marian apparitions at the end of the nineteenth and during the twentieth century. In this regard, there is no doubt that Mary played a central role in shaping Catholic dogmatic theology in the twentieth century. When Pope Pius XI officially recognized the authenticity of the apparition of *Our Lady of Fatima*, in October 1930, the situation was twofold: on the one hand, the growing pressure from below by the lay faithful to recognize a pilgrimage site that had remained unacknowledged for several decades was calmed; on the other hand, a precedent was created for theologically and dogmatically justified engagement with the phenomenon of the Fatima secrets. An equally significant problem has been the “verification of the authenticity of apparitions”. From this perspective, it is extremely interesting to examine how the *morphology of a miracle* is defined by church dogmatists – on the basis of what arguments one miracle is recognized as true, while elsewhere the evidence is deemed insufficient, leaving other miracles and revelations at the level of those awaiting recognition. This ecclesiastical “work with miracles”, which in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the Catholic Church is primarily associated with the Virgin Mary, is a fascinating topic. We therefore believe that in one of the next issues we will encounter a study dedicated specifically to this subject.

Similarly, we anticipate that future issues will systematically address unoccupied yet immensely topical themes, such as Marian motifs in alternative religious movements and spiritual discourses, or Marian themes in popular culture and entirely secular contexts.

In this sense, we are pleased to present to the readers of the monothematically tuned part of the issue a corpus of studies devoted to the peripheralization of the Virgin Mary within evangelical denominations of the Roma in Slovakia and in

Bulgaria (Magdalena Slavkova), an article in the field of material religion, examining the processes of multiplication of the sacred through the production of copies of “sacred prototype” (Vihra Baeva), and an article analyzing the horizontal and interconfessional ties of social and community cohesion in the case of the “quiet” pilgrimage site of Olovo in Bosnia and Hercegovina (Andrej Mentel).

Magdalena Slavkova’s article, *God’s Chosen People or God’s Nation? Exploring Evangelical Roma Religious Experience through Bulgarian and Slovak Romani Studies*, offers a comparative perspective on the creation of collective identities on a religious basis. The author observes how the structure of social networks changes through evangelical faith and how traditional religious symbols are reinterpreted within evangelical discourse – particularly in Roma environments, where veneration of the Virgin Mary remains deeply embedded.

Vihra Baeva’s article, *Mary Multiplied: The Devotion to Mary Three-Handed in Bulgaria and the Mechanism of Sacred Multiplication*, is an ethnographic contribution on the veneration of *Bogoroditsa Troeruchitsa* (Mary Three-Handed) in the Orthodox tradition in Bulgaria. The study examines the process of material transfer of miraculous ability from the original medium (image, icon) – which the author calls the “prototype” – to replicas across historical and contemporary forms. Baeva defines this process as a reaffirmation of bonding with the Divine Mother. In this respect, the paper represents an important case study in the field of material religion studies (cf. Meyer, 2008; Notermans & Jansen, 2015; Scheer, 2015).

Andrej Mentel’s article, *Marian Devotion and Social Integration: The Pilgrimage to Our Lady of Olovo*, is an ethnographic probe into the Marian pilgrimage site located 50 km from Sarajevo (Bosnia and Hercegovina). The author describes how the shrine of *Our Lady of Olovo* (*Svetište Gospe Olovske*) serves as a platform for research into interethnic and interreligious dynamics (Muslims and Catholics) and the construction of local networks and ties. He also illustrates how this “quiet sanctuary” (in comparison with the Marian “top” pilgrimage site in Bosnia and Hercegovina – Medjugorje) fosters reconnection among Croatian Catholic communities within Bosnia and across the diaspora. The article contributes to the study of post-conflict religiosity in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In line with the findings of both scientific projects (VEGA and APVV RELIROMA), all thematically focused articles in this issue document the need of communities in the post-communist region for authentic spirituality – either directly tied to Marian devotion or functioning as a substitute that seeks to replicate its role in a comprehensive and functional way.

When visiting pilgrimage sites, the scientific participant cannot fail to notice that relational bonding (individual, group, ethnic, national, etc.) is intensively cultivated through specific expressions of faith. Beyond the often-described “see–ask–thank”, practices such as “sacrifice”, “touch”, and “experience” are joined by instant and almost compulsive need to “document”, “share”, and “transfer.” These actions not only serve as evidence of presence (“I was here!”) but also transmit emotions and spiritual

experiences to geographically distant places, shared not only with close acquaintances but also with strangers. This phenomenon closely parallels Evangelical, Pentecostal and charismatic assemblies, where religious content, emotional relief, and miracles of healing (linked to the action of the Holy Spirit) are instantly documented on mobile phones and streamed on the web platforms of specific churches, movements, and congregations as well as via private social media platforms and channels.

We believe that the creation of contemporary religious and spiritual artefacts, devotionals, and manifestations of Marian postmodern aesthetics in both religious and non-religious contexts – as well as the phenomenon of Mary “going digital” – will attract the attention of authors and readers in future issues of the *Slovak Ethnology* journal.

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