

Marian Devotion and Social Integration: The Pilgrimage to Our Lady of Olovo

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Marian pilgrimages in Bosnia and Herzegovina serve as a key mechanism for reinforcing community ties among local and diaspora Croatian Catholics. This study explores the Marian shrine in Olovo, focusing on how the annual pilgrimage around the Feast of the Assumption (15 August) serves as a ritual of communal renewal and social integration. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, media analysis, and historical sources, this research examines the pilgrimage as a platform for reconnecting Croatian Catholic communities within Bosnia and across the diaspora.

The study also investigates the complex interethnic and interreligious dynamics surrounding the shrine. Historically, the sanctuary has been a site of contestation and coexistence between local Catholic and Muslim populations, illustrating the multifaceted role of religion in both intra-community solidarity and intergroup relations. By situating this case within broader discussions, this research highlights the interplay of religious practice, migration, and collective memory. It demonstrates the ongoing relevance of Marian devotion in shaping cultural and social belonging and thus contributes to understanding how religious practices function as socio-political and identity-forming mechanisms.

Keywords: Marian pilgrimage, Bosnia and Herzegovina, interreligious relations, social integration

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Introduction

When one mentions Marian pilgrimage in Bosnia and Herzegovina, most people probably think of Međugorje – a well-known and, in many respects, controversial pilgrimage site associated with apparitions of the Virgin Mary since 1981. This phenomenon is characterised by its mass scale, strong transnational dimension, developed pilgrimage infrastructure, and significant media presence. Administered by the Franciscan Order, Međugorje has become a centre of religious tourism and a site of political symbolic struggles over the representation of Catholic identity in the post-socialist space.

In sharp contrast to this is the Marian shrine in Olovo, originally a mining town located about 50 km northeast of Sarajevo. Although the Shrine of Our Lady of Olovo (*Svetište Gospe Olovske*) is also administered by the Franciscans and credited with conversions and miraculous healings, it is, in many ways, the antithesis of Međugorje. Historically, it is one of the oldest Marian pilgrimage sites in the region, documented as early as the 14th century. Its current significance is primarily local or, at most, regional (Katić, 2018, p. 106), with little tourist traffic or developed tourist infrastructure. The political dimension of the shrine in Olovo is somewhat latent, encoded in the interethnic context of the everyday coexistence of Catholics and Muslims¹ in this locality. It is precisely this difference that makes Olovo an exceptionally suitable case for analysing religious practice as a mechanism of social integration, without being overshadowed by explicit political instrumentalisation.

Marian pilgrimage sites in Bosnia and Herzegovina are an essential phenomenon in which religious practices, collective memory, and ethnic-social relations intertwine. The Shrine of Our Lady of Olovo is currently visited mainly by Catholic pilgrims of Croatian nationality, not only from Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also from the diaspora in Croatia, Germany, and other countries. However, as we shall see, both historical and contemporary evidence also refer to this pilgrimage site as an essential place of interfaith encounter.

Research on shared sacred sites in the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean (e.g., Albera & Couroucli, 2012; Hayden, 2002; Hayden et al., 2016) shows that interconfessional interaction is often structured not by theological convergence but by pragmatic coexistence, spatial proximity, and shared understandings of blessing and protection. Olovo fits this pattern: Muslims engage with the shrine through selective ritual practices and material exchanges without adopting Catholic doctrine, while Catholics interpret Muslim respect as confirmation of the shrine's broader spiritual efficacy. Such patterns resonate with studies of post-conflict religiosity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where everyday interreligious encounters remain fragile

1 In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, national and religious identities usually overlap, so that Roman Catholic identity coincides with Bosnian Croat nation, and Muslim identity is blended with Bosniak national identity.

yet functional, sustained through routinised forms of cooperation, neighbourliness, and embodied presence in shared landscapes.

This study aims to analyse the pilgrimage to Olovo on the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (known in Croatian as *Velika Gospa*; 15 August every year) as a ritual of social integration that helps maintain and renew ties within a dispersed Catholic (Bosnian Croatian) community. At the same time, however, pilgrimage activities in Olovo illustrate the complex dynamics of interreligious coexistence, as the town of Olovo itself is now predominantly Muslim. Historically, members of other denominations, including Muslims and Orthodox Christians, have participated in the cult of Our Lady of Olovo alongside Catholics. In this context, the pilgrimage to Olovo appears to be a suitable case study for examining how religious practices can contribute to the formation of collective identity and to the overcoming or reinforcement of boundaries between groups.

The study is based on a combination of ethnographic research (field observations during the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary), analysis of historical documents and media outputs, and references to existing ethnographic literature (see, for example, Babić, 2011; Martić, 2016; Katić, 2016, 2018; Belaj & Martić, 2014). At the same time, I reflect on the specific nature of the Bosnian context, where religious identities are deeply intertwined with ethnic ones, and where the history of coexistence between Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Muslims creates a specific field of symbolic communication as well as potential tensions (cf. Hesová, 2019; Pehar & Mujabašić, 2022). In this sense, the Marian shrine in Olovo has the potential to function not only as a spiritual centre for the Catholic community but also as a platform for interaction and reciprocity between members of different religious groups.

This paper, therefore, does not seek to analyse the pilgrimage to Olovo solely as a liturgical event, but rather as a complex social and cultural phenomenon in which religious emotions, political representations, historical memory, and the everyday needs of both religious and secular actors intertwine. I observe how the meanings attributed to the pilgrimage change over time, how different groups interpret them, and how the pilgrimage is used to strengthen collective bonds and boundaries, whether ethnic, religious, or territorial.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This study approaches the pilgrimage to Olovo within a framework that combines the anthropology of pilgrimage, the phenomenology of embodied religious practice, and research on shared sacred sites in the Balkans. Following Turner's concept of liminality (Turner, 1969), pilgrimage is understood as a ritual process that temporarily restructures social relations and enables the renewal of communal ties. At the same time, the analysis draws on approaches that emphasise the bodily and sensory dimensions of religious action (Csordas, 1994; Coleman & Eade, 2004),

which are essential for understanding how movement, landscape and material practices shape religious experience in Olovo. Given the long history of interreligious interaction at the shrine, the study is also informed by scholarship on shared and mixed sacred spaces, where coexistence is sustained through pragmatic forms of respect, selective participation and everyday cooperation. Analytically, this study adopts an interpretive-phenomenological approach that emphasises embodiment, landscape, and memory as key mediators of religious meaning and social integration.

The ethnographic material presented here derives from repeated field visits to Olovo between 2016 and 2025. The pilgrimage to Olovo constitutes one thematic component of a broader, long-term field research project on the role of religion in shaping group solidarity, carried out through several-week stays each² summer. Fieldwork included participant observation, informal conversations with pilgrims and residents, and systematic documentation of ritual practices and spatial arrangements.

As a non-Catholic and non-Muslim external observer who participates only partially in the ritual life of the community, my access is shaped by both hospitality and certain structural limits. These conditions affect what can be directly observed and what must be interpreted through secondary accounts or long-standing relationships with interlocutors. This positionality also informs the analytical perspective, particularly regarding embodied ritual practices and interreligious interactions, which I approach with awareness of my own outsider status and interpretive distance. The aim, however, is not to approximate an insider viewpoint, but to analyse how religious practice, social structure and intercommunal relations intersect within the specific landscape of Olovo.

Historical background of the Marian pilgrimages to Olovo

The Marian shrine in Olovo is one of the oldest documented pilgrimage sites in what is now Bosnia and Herzegovina. The first written records of the church, later associated with a Franciscan monastery, date back to the end of the 14th century (1385–1390), specifically from a list of monasteries compiled by the Franciscan Bartholomew of Pisa (Oreč, 1984, p. 584; Mandić, 1982, p. 107). The cult of the Virgin Mary in Olovo gradually developed into an important regional pilgrimage centre, which survived even during Ottoman rule (1463–1908), and even during the period when the pilgrimage church itself was destroyed (1704–1930).

Written testimonies from the 17th century document several dimensions of the pilgrimage tradition in Olovo. For example, Atanazij Jurjević's report from 1626³

2 With the exception of 2020, when international travel was restricted due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

3 *Relatione data all'Imperatore dal Sign. Athanasio Georgiceo del viaggio fatto in Bosna l'Anno 1626; L'Originale della Relatione trovasi nel Cod. 218 p. 480 dell' Archivio de propaganda Fide. For a transcription of the text, see Batinić (1885).*

(Batinić, 1885, pp. 116–122) records an important element of Marian pilgrimage: the collective movement of people in the countryside. During the annual processions on the feast days of the Assumption (*Velika Gospa*) and the Nativity of the Virgin Mary (*Mala Gospa*), pilgrims carried a miraculous image of the Virgin Mary from the church in Olovo to the church of St. Roch on the edge of the Klisa hill near the village of Donji Bakići, about seven kilometres from Olovo, returning it the next day (Babić, 2011, p. 365). A large part of the pilgrims took part in this procession barefoot (Batinić, 1885). According to Zvonko Martić, this element of the pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady of Olovo disappeared at the end of the 1930s (Martić, 2016, p. 154). The tradition of processions was first interrupted due to the outbreak of World War II. It was not resumed after the war for reasons that seem more like excuses than genuine ones (namely, that the authorities were unable to ensure the safety of pilgrims crossing the main road; Martić, 2016, p. 155). At the time this procession took place, the route followed a distinct vertical trajectory from the valley where the Olovo monastery stood to the higher-lying church. This physically demanding form of piety, framed by prayer and communal singing, was part of a religious practice in which spiritual experience was closely linked to physical effort.

The physicality of the pilgrimage experience can be viewed as a special mode of religious practice, where the sensory and physical dimensions together create conditions for symbolic and emotional transformation. This aspect is highlighted (albeit in the context of healing in Christian charismatic communities) by Thomas Csordas (1994) in his concept of embodied knowledge, according to which religious meaning is generated to a significant extent through bodily actions in ritualised practices. Ethnographic studies of pilgrimage sites (e.g., Coleman & Eade, 2004) show how prayer, pain, fatigue, and collective movement in landscape are part of a profound affective experience that cannot be separated from the physical component. In the case of Bosnian Marian pilgrimages, these experiences take on even more pronounced contours due to the mountainous terrain and the historical practice of walking barefoot as a form of penance.

Similar ceremonies of carrying an image of the Madonna to an elevated place (typically to the top of a hill where a church once stood⁴) are also documented in other parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Examples include the Madonna of Lipnica (*Gospa Lipnička*), whose chapel is in the village of Lipnica Srednja near Tuzla, and the Madonna of Kondžilo (*Gospa Kondžilska*) in the Usora region (Hadžijahić, 1980, p. 305).

The centuries-old tradition of venerating the Virgin Mary in connection with the Olovo sanctuary is mentioned by authors who use it to argue in favour of Croatian ethnic and religious dominance in Bosnia and Herzegovina. If we disregard the explicitly biased texts following the (post-)Ustaše nationalist-chauvinist line, a representative author here is, for example, the Franciscan historian Dominik

4 For more on the findings in the vicinity of the village of Bakići, see Halilović (2019).

Mandić (1982 [orig. 1967]). Despite his national-romantic methodology, which sparked a polemic with the leading Croatian medievalist Nada Klaić (1968/1969), his work had a significant impact on intellectual life in post-socialist Yugoslavia. Although an important reason for his influence was undoubtedly the Croatian political effort to negotiate the maximum possible autonomy within Yugoslavia, an equally important factor was Mandić's detailed knowledge of archival materials, especially in medieval church history in what is now Bosnia and Herzegovina. In connection with the shrine in Olovo, this historian states that "for centuries, people from all Croatian lands and the entire Balkans gathered at this church for the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (*Assumptio Beatae Mariae Virginis*) [...] It survived the Turkish occupation until it was set on fire in 1704 on the orders of the Bosnian vali Sefer Pasha" (Mandić, 1982, p. 107).

The latter fact points to an important aspect of Marian devotion associated with the shrine in Olovo, namely its interdenominational character. In 1679, Franciscan friar Vranjo Varadinac recorded that pilgrims (not only Catholics, but also Orthodox Christians and Muslims) came to Olovo from all over the Balkans and that the Ottoman administration respected this tradition: Franciscans were required to report the date of the feast to the authorities and request the assignment of a Janissary guard (Matić, 1980, pp. 33–34). Another Franciscan witness, Pavao Pellizer, wrote in 1640 that Muslim women requested access to the church to pray in front of the image of the Virgin Mary late in the evening (Zlatović, 1890; Oreč, 1984, p. 585). An important motivation for seeking out the shrine was the belief in healing that would result from prayers directed to the miraculous image. Jurjević mentions testimonies of miraculous healings in this context (explicitly mentioning mental illness; Batinić, 1885, p. 120) that were said to have occurred among believers of different faiths – Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Muslims.

This supra-confessional and supra-regional dimension of the pilgrimage in Olovo may contrast with later developments, where pilgrimage practices became increasingly associated mainly with Catholic (or Croatian) religious and ethnic identity. In 1704, the original sanctuary was destroyed, but the pilgrimage tradition persisted; believers gathered at the remains of the sanctuary, especially at the so-called Black Stone (*Crni kamen*), the only remaining part of the original church (Oreč, 1984, p. 586). The modern period saw the restoration of the stone church in 1936 (Fig. 1) and the continuation of pilgrimage traditions, albeit in a much more modest form than before. During the socialist era, the pilgrimage was tolerated but marginalised. The largest known pilgrimage during this period took place in May 1971 at the Marian congresses in Croatia (ibid.). Today, pilgrimages still take place during major Marian holidays, when groups of believers from various regions travel to Olovo, mainly by bus or private transport.



Figure 1: Current view of the Marian shrine in Olovo; to the right, below the hill with the shrine, a mosque can be seen in the neighbourhood of Gornje Olovo. Photo: Andrej Mentel.

Contemporary forms of pilgrimage to Olovo

Currently, the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (15 August) is the most important moment in the annual pilgrimage calendar in Olovo. During this holiday, Marian shrines in Bosnia and Herzegovina become the scene of gatherings of believers from across the country and abroad, and the pilgrimage to Olovo is one of those that have retained their special character even after centuries.

According to ethnographic research (Belaj & Martić, 2014; Martić, 2016) and my observations over the past 7 years (from 2018 to the present), the pilgrimage to Olovo combines several levels of piety. It is an intense liturgical and sacramental practice, including mass confession, public devotions, and the celebration of Holy Mass with the participation of high-ranking clergy, such as the local bishop or, as in the summer of 2018, the Apostolic Nuncio to Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the pilgrimage also includes (or in the past included) rituals and physical practices that go beyond the official framework of church liturgy. The most typical ritual at the shrine of Our Lady of Olovo is the burning of votive candles at the Black Stone, which also serves as a reminder of the times when the pilgrimage church was destroyed. Another ritual manifestation is processions, sometimes involving long distances and rugged terrain. Although this type of costly religious signal (e.g., Sosis, 2005) is not currently dominant

in the pilgrimage to Olovo, the physical aspect of participating in religious rituals remains very important and multifaceted.

Belaj and Martić (2014) point out that the pilgrimage site in Olovo functions as a space outside politics, i.e., a place where, in a historically tense and ethnically and religiously fragmented country, interaction between different religious communities, especially Catholics and Muslims, takes place. While during the communist era, religious expression was publicly suppressed and religion was relegated to the periphery of social life, pilgrimages are once again becoming a publicly visible act of faith, which, however, cannot be seen merely as a return to tradition, but also as a new form of religious experience in a pluralistic and post-conflict society (Martić, 2016; Belaj & Martić, 2014). Emphasising that the shrine of Our Lady of Olovo has been a shared sacred space for Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Muslims since time immemorial is one of the essential traditions associated with this place. It should be emphasised that in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Olovo is by no means the only case of such a shared place of worship. As Elvir Duranović points out, several Muslim places of prayer located in open countryside (*dovište*) have a similar function but are also visited by Christians. These sacred places are often associated with natural elements (e.g., water springs believed to have healing powers; Hadžijahić, 1980, pp. 305–307) and with the place of activity of pious Muslims considered to be ‘God’s friends’⁵ (*evlija, dobri ljudi*); one example being the springs of Dobre vode by the village of Kolun near Foča (Duranović, 2019, p. 180).

The transnational dimension of the pilgrimage, which has been analysed in detail by Mario Katić (2016, 2018), is also noteworthy. Pilgrims come not only from different regions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also from Croatia, Germany, and Austria. The Bosnian-Croatian diaspora is particularly well represented, for whom the pilgrimage to Olovo is also a return home, combined with visits to relatives and summer holidays. This combination of religious motivation with everyday and family aspects makes the pilgrimage a complex social phenomenon that transcends a narrow religious framework and is closely linked to issues of identity, home, and collective memory.

Before we embark on an analysis of these various aspects of the Marian pilgrimage in Olovo, let us look at its typical course on the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. The liturgical program of the pilgrimage usually begins with evening Mass on the eve of the feast at 6:00 p.m.; however, it is mainly attended by those who come on foot from Vareš, about 30 km away (exceptionally, pilgrimages on foot are also organised from much more distant locations, even from Bulgaria; see Lovrić, 2016).

The pilgrimage on foot is organised every year on 14 August, a day before the feast itself, by the parish in Vareš. Pilgrims gather at the early-morning hours at the Church of St. Michael in Vareš, where the priest gives them his blessing. They then walk across

5 The Muslim concept of ‘friends of God’ (*walī*, pl. *auliyā*’, Bosnian *evlija* or *dobri ljudi* – good people) differs from the Christian concept of saint; for more information, see, for example, Radtke et al. (2012).

the Zvijezda mountain range to Olovo, where they usually arrive in the afternoon⁶. During the journey, pilgrims alternate between praying the rosary and singing Marian hymns. Since people of all ages and physical abilities take part in the pilgrimage, especially in the summer heat, they alternate walking with rest in the shade. Upon arriving at their destination, the shrine in Olovo, the pilgrims usually descend into the valley of the Bioštica River to the source of Our Lady's Water (*Gospina voda*), where they refresh themselves and collect the water, which is said to be healing. The spring is about a 900-meter walk from the sanctuary through the streets of the Gornje Olovo neighbourhood, with an elevation difference of about 90 meters. It is therefore a relatively steep descent and subsequent ascent back to the church.

At the shrine, the following activities include a procession with the miraculous image of the Madonna, accompanied by the recitation of the rosary; the opportunity to go to confession; and, finally, the evening mass with prayers for the ill. Overnight accommodation for pilgrims is available directly in the church, on their sleeping mats in the choir loft or attic, or in the pews in the nave. Besides this, some people take advantage of the hospitality of local Muslim families living near the shrine. Belaj and Martić (2014, p. 70) state that during the main Marian holidays, there is almost no Muslim house that does not accommodate Catholic pilgrims. As a rule, pilgrims have known their hosts for many years, as they constantly seek accommodation with the same hosts. They are sometimes accommodated not only in modest attic rooms but also in the locals' rooms.

However, many pilgrims arrive during the morning of the following day, i.e., on the feast day itself, by bus or car from near and far. Some of them arrive earlier in the morning to attend the 8:00 a.m. mass in the church. In addition to a few small official parking lots, virtually any available space is used for parking. The location of cars along the main road M18 (Sarajevo – Olovo – Tuzla) is a consequence of inadequate infrastructure. Although a short walk of approximately 700 meters cannot be considered significant physical exertion, the transition from the motor vehicle to walking serves as a brief liminal moment that introduces pilgrims to the ritual space. In the context of a religious pilgrimage, even minimal physical activities such as walking uphill, adjusting one's pace, or joining the flow of other pilgrims can signify a transition from everyday mobility to ritual participation. In Olovo, this effect is partly due to limited infrastructure, which forces pilgrims to park farther away. However, many perceive the final ascent on foot to the shrine as the moment when the pilgrimage "begins", even though its physical demands are modest compared to those who walk from Vareš, for example.

People gather mainly in front of the sanctuary and on the surrounding slopes, where narrow grassy platforms have been created. Before the start of the central Holy Mass, most pilgrims go to confession, usually in niches in the outer wall of the church.

⁶ On 14 August 2025, pilgrims gathered in Vareš at 4:00 a.m. and arrived at the shrine in Olovo at around 4:30 p.m.



Figure 2: Procession carrying the image of Our Lady of Olovo around the church. Photo: Andrej Mentel.

The church's complex layout provides sufficient privacy for spiritual reflection, even outside the traditional confessionals, despite the mass nature of the pilgrimage. As the sanctuary of Our Lady of Olovo is administered by the Franciscan Order, the confessors are almost exclusively priests from this order.

Another ritual act before the central Holy Mass is a procession that circles the church several times (Fig. 2). The procession carries an image of the Madonna of Olovo. Participants pray the rosary while pairs of bearers take turns carrying the image. The image represents the physical dimension of pilgrimage practices; it is not only adored but also physically carried, and some believers touch it individually while praying for help with their problems. The procession around the church, combined with the recitation of the rosary and singing of Marian hymns, is a ritual that revives memories of ancient customs and strengthens the community of pilgrims by evoking collective emotion and enabling an embodied connection between religious emotion and movement in space. The image carried during the procession and eventually touched by praying pilgrims is a replica of a historical but lost image of Our Lady of Olovo, created in 1954 by Gabrijel Jurkić based on an oral description of the original. Today, this image fulfils the ritual function of a miraculous icon and is the object of processions and religious worship. Following Martić (2016), the image is a medium of blessing, and its effect is actualised within the collective ritual.



Figure 3: Current appearance of the Gospina Voda thermal spring in Gornje Olovo near the Bioštica River. Due to prolonged drought, the spring's capacity is low, and due to water extraction in the thermal baths, the well sometimes dries up completely, as on 15 August 2025. Photo: Andrej Men-

Another medium of blessing that concerns not only Catholic Marian pilgrimages but also visits by Muslims and members of other faiths is a thermal spring called Our Lady's Water; see Martić (2016, p. 186 ff.). As mentioned above, Marian shrines and Muslim places of prayer in the open countryside are often located near springs that are believed to have healing powers (Hadžijahić, 1980, pp. 305–307; Duranović, 2019). The spring near the Marian shrine is also mentioned by the Yugoslav writer Ivo Andrić in his short story *The Miracle at Olovo* (*Čudo u Olovu*), which describes it as a thermal spring that fills a stone pool near the remains of a monastery. In the story, people longing for healing bathed in the pool without looking at each other (Andrić, 1963, p. 207). In the story, the author portrays the healing of the sick girl as merely a pious illusion, the result of superstitious expectation of a miracle, and the realisation that it was all just self-deception further confirms the mother's despair as she begs the Madonna to take her daughter to heaven (ibid., p. 210). Although the author uses literary imagination in the story, he also refers to real folk healing practices associated with a healing spring. As mentioned above, the thermal spring called *Gospina voda* is in the valley of the Bioštica River, at the foot of the slope on which the sanctuary stands. Currently, most of the healing water is diverted for the thermal baths in Olovo, with only a small well (Fig. 3) remaining at the original site



Figure 4: A pilgrim lights a votive candle at the Black Stone. Photo: Andrej Mentel.

next to the grounds of a former public swimming pool. According to a legend recorded by Marijana Belaj and Zvonko Martić among the Muslim inhabitants of Olovo, there is an underground spring in a cave located below the monastery “under Mary’s feet”; Catholic pilgrims are familiar with this legend, but they claim to have heard it from Muslim residents (Belaj & Martić, 2014, p. 69).

Another striking object of worship in the sanctuary of Our Lady of Olovo is the so-called Black Stone (Fig. 4). This probable remnant of the original Franciscan church has acquired the significance of a contact relic and a mediator between the past and the present. The ritual of lighting a votive candle and placing it in a circle around the stone also expresses individual supplication, repentance, or gratitude, with the candle serving as a medium between the pilgrim and the transcendent. Martić (2024) records several traditional stories about this stone, which say it is the one on which the Virgin Mary sat while breastfeeding the baby Jesus. Another story tells how Satan and his fallen angels rejoiced at the destruction of the sanctuary. The Virgin Mary and God’s angels drove away the demons. Since the devil could not take anything, he touched the stone with his tail, which is why it is black. Although not all pilgrims are familiar with such legends about this stone, the ceremonial lighting of candles is a standard part of the pilgrimage.

The central point of the celebration of the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary is the central Holy Mass, which is often celebrated by Franciscan priests



Figure 5: After the central Holy Mass, pilgrims entertain themselves with a traditional chain dance called *kolo*. Photo: Andrej Mentel.

together with an invited church dignitary⁷. The liturgy takes place before entering the church, so that pilgrims gathered there can participate.

The religious program of the pilgrimage ends with the Holy Mass, but most pilgrims remain in the sanctuary area. Equally important are the meetings with loved ones, whom many pilgrims have not seen for a long time. Although most visitors now come from the relatively nearby area around Olovo (mainly from surrounding municipalities such as Vareš, Kiseljak, Tuzla, etc.), many of them currently live in the diaspora. They return to Bosnia and Herzegovina mainly during the summer holidays. Religious celebrations are a welcome opportunity to meet friends. These gatherings also include taking photos in front of the church portal or with the Madonna image. This act has not only a family documentary character, but also, in a sense, a votive character; the photograph often becomes part of the home religious space, like an icon, thus extending the spiritual reach of the pilgrimage site into the everyday environment.

Part of the informal gatherings and a continuation of the social dimension of the pilgrimage after its liturgical core is the traditional chain dance – *kolo* (Fig. 5). Participants hold hands and dance together to popular songs performed by musicians from the region. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the chain dance can be perceived as

⁷ For example, on 15 August 2018, the High Mass was celebrated by the Apostolic Nuncio to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mons. Luigi Pezzuto.

a performative expression of embodied *communitas* (Turner, 1969), in which bodily movement becomes an instrument of emotional resonance and anchoring of collective identity. This is also underscored by the music accompanying the dance (the so-called newly composed folk music; Mentel, 2020). These elements, i.e., dance immediately following the liturgy or devotional items for sale at stalls, open up the possibility of understanding pilgrimages as a holistic experience that transcends the binary division between “religious” and “secular”. They combine the sacred meaning of the pilgrimage with profane exchange, both economic and symbolic. Devotional items, along with photographs from the meeting and posts on social networks, serve as a medium of memory, prolonging the spiritual experience into the everyday lives of pilgrims.

Interfaith relations and everyday neighbourliness

As mentioned above, Olovo is one of the few Marian shrines in Bosnia and Herzegovina, located in a predominantly Muslim population. This fact is not only a demographic peculiarity but also creates a unique framework for observing everyday coexistence and symbolic communication between members of different religious communities. As Hesová (2019) shows, the historical long-standing coexistence of Catholics and Muslims in many places in Bosnia and Herzegovina is characterised by layers of fragile balance, mutual dependence, and cultural separation. In these conditions, the presence of a Marian shrine, restored mainly after the 1990s war by the Catholic community and foreign donors, creates a potentially tense yet meaningful space for everyday interactions.

Local stories about the past suggest that the Marian shrine was perceived as a place of blessing (*mubarek mjesto*) even among some Muslim residents. Historical sources (especially from the 17th century, i.e. before the destruction of the church and monastery) and eyewitness accounts recall the shared use of the healing spring and the reverence that many Muslims had for the image of the Virgin Mary (see Babić, 2011, p. 365; Martić, 2016; Ratkovčić, 2024). The Franciscan friars present here play an important role as mediators, enjoying the trust of both the Christian and Muslim populations. In ethnographic interviews conducted by Zvonko Martić with Muslim informants, there are references to various ways Muslims relate to the Marian shrine (Martić, 2016, pp. 214–216). Typical examples include certain Christian holidays that involve the blessing of objects or substances. Even if Muslims do not participate in the liturgy in these cases, they usually ask their Catholic acquaintances to bring them the blessed objects. For example, on Palm Sunday, they go with Catholics to the sanctuary in Olovo to have yew branches (*grančice*) blessed, which they then take home – or at least ask acquaintances to bring them a blessed branch. Similarly, on Epiphany, they have water and salt blessed⁸ (Martić, 2016, p. 214).

8 According to my observations, the blessing of salt also appears in Bosnia in a Muslim environment,

Although such expressions of shared religious interest are less common today, mainly due to a stronger confessional identity and the consequences of the 1990s war, a particular form of respect, distanced curiosity, and practical coexistence persists. In addition to seeking the material mediums of blessing, spiritual conversations with Franciscan friars are also opportunities for members of different religious communities to meet. Muslims and, in some places, Orthodox Christians seek out friars for conversations about existential questions, appreciating that they do not try to proselytise (Martić, 2016, p. 157; cf. also Pehar & Mujabašić, 2022, p. 382).

The sharing of space does not occur only in a religious sense, but also in everyday practices, such as regular visits between neighbours and mutual invitations to coffee. In addition, as already mentioned, local Muslim residents provide pilgrims with various services, such as selling refreshments and accommodation, helping with cleaning the sanctuary, and assisting with event logistics, while trying, as far as possible, not to enter the sacred space. Such interactions do not disrupt the ritual separation between Catholics and non-believers but create a delicately balanced framework of togetherness, mediated by the environment, nature, and physical experience.

An important element of the shared symbolic universe here is the sanctuary's natural features, such as its location beneath forests and rocks and near healing springs, which, in the folk imagination and practice, transcend confessional boundaries (Hadžijahić, 1980). As Pehar and Mujabašić (2022) show, Marian pilgrimage sites in Bosnia are sometimes perceived by Muslims as places where they seek not only spiritual strengthening but also help with health problems. In the case of the shrine in Olovo, help with infertility or conception problems is often mentioned (Pehar & Mujabašić, 2022, p. 382). Although these interpretations are not linked to Mariology in the Christian sense, they provide space for alternative forms of spirituality.

Conclusion

The pilgrimage site in Olovo is a unique example of Marian devotion in the post-socialist, post-conflict context of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Unlike more famous sites such as Međugorje, which have gained supra-regional significance and undergone significant commercialisation, Olovo has retained the character of a “quiet sanctuary”, closely linked to the local Catholic community and regional memory, but

as part of ceremonies in dervish lodges (*tekija*). For example, before the *iftar* dinner, breaking the fast in honour of the tragic death of the Prophet's grandson, Hussein, in the battle of Karbala, the head of the order (*sheikh*) blesses salt, which is then passed around among the dervishes. They use it to salt the modest meal served on this occasion (e.g., *posni grah* – a meatless soup made from beans and other vegetables). In addition to its practical use (seasoning food), salt is understood as a medium that brings blessings (*bereket*) to those present at the gathering.

at the cost of its significance being increasingly limited to the local context (Katić, 2018, p. 106).

The notion of Olovo as a “quiet sanctuary” requires further contextualisation. Its “quietness” is not an inherent devotional quality but emerges from several historical and socio-political factors: the marginal demographic position of Catholics in the region, the absence of large-scale commercialisation typical of Međugorje, the limited infrastructure that constrains mass pilgrimage flows, and the prolonged post-war sensitivity surrounding public religious expression in a Muslim-majority town. These conditions contribute to a form of pilgrimage that is simultaneously intimate, locally rooted, and transnational through the participation of diaspora communities, yet remains invisible mainly within national or international religious tourism circuits. Understanding this “quietness” as a socially produced phenomenon rather than a descriptive label helps explain why Olovo functions as a site of interpersonal trust, low-intensity interreligious coexistence, and community reconnection.

Analysis has shown that the pilgrimage to Olovo fulfils several parallel functions. For the Catholic community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially in areas where Catholic Croats are a minority, it represents a mechanism of (re-)integration. It helps to renew and strengthen social ties and collective consciousness. It provides a framework for the manifestation of faith in a space where this faith is often experienced in a domestic or dispersed mode. At the same time, the pilgrimage creates a space for symbolic communication with the Muslim majority. Given that this interaction is mediated mainly by non-verbal forms (respect for space, sharing natural elements, practical cooperation), it creates the conditions for mutual recognition and peaceful coexistence. In this respect, Olovo contrasts with places where pilgrimages have taken on an ethno-confessional or political character.

On a theoretical level, pilgrimage to Olovo can be interpreted in the spirit of Turner’s concept of liminality as a space for the temporary rearrangement of social ties, in which the possibility of community renewal opens for a short time. Unlike those pilgrimage sites, where religiosity becomes an instrument of political representation, in Olovo, Marian devotion primarily serves to maintain informal networks of belonging – whether within the local community, the wider diocese, or the Bosnian Croatian diaspora.

Marian devotion in Olovo thus does not serve as a tool for sharply defining group identity, but rather as an inclusive framework that connects scattered Catholic communities and, at the same time, opens space for interreligious contact. In this way, the case of Olovo broadens the anthropological understanding of pilgrimage in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, where Marian devotion is often interpreted in the context of ethnic mobilisation, nationalism, or religious tourism. In Olovo, instead, we encounter a model of “quiet pilgrimage” that emphasises personal piety, community renewal, and everyday forms of belonging.

The findings of this study suggest that, even in the context of post-socialist transformation and post-conflict tensions, Marian pilgrimage sites can serve as

religious and cultural hubs that foster horizontal ties and memory continuities. They also show that Marian devotion is not necessarily bound to homogenising or exclusive frameworks – its universalist symbolism, associated with motifs of nature, water, and healing power, can facilitate the sharing of space even between religiously or ethnically diverse groups. In this perspective, it is important not to reduce analytical attention to spectacular, mass, or politicised forms of pilgrimage, but also to focus on those that take place “in silence”, outside the media’s and national politics.

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