

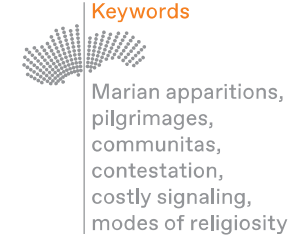
Exploring
the theoretical
perspectives on
Marian apparitions
and pilgrimages

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Abstract



Since the early 19th century, Marian's apparitions and devotion become a vital part of the religious life of modern Catholicism. Since then, there have been several thousand Marian apparitional events documented in what some call the 'Marian Age'. Each year, millions of people invest their time, resources, and efforts in a pilgrimage to one of the many sites of the Virgin Mary's alleged apparitions. Marian apparitions are diverse, global, and dynamic phenomena that offer opportunities for multi-disciplinary and cross-cultural analysis. Marian apparition sites integrate two distinct phenomena: the pilgrimage practice and the apparitions. Hence, their research is intricately embedded within two parallel fields: the study of Marian devotion and pilgrimage studies. This chapter synthesizes the theoretical perspectives developed in these two fields and tries to link them with relevant theories from so-called cognitive and evolutionary science or religion. I argue that pilgrimage and apparitional elements functionally intertwine to create a powerful source of religious enthusiasm and emotional experiences while, at the same time, creating arenas for the competition of diverse social, political, and religious discourses.

Over the past two centuries, Marian apparitions have surged in prominence, risen in frequency and visibility, and become focal points of popular devotion in Christian, especially Catholic, communities worldwide. These events have fostered emotional and spiritual connection among believers, who flock to pilgrimage sites seeking divine intervention, healing, and affirmation of faith. The popularity of Marian apparitions has also led to the development of infrastructure related to the associated pilgrimage practices, transforming small, rural locations into major religious centers. As a result, Marian shrines today stand as both spiritual and economic hubs, reflecting the enduring power of these phenomena to inspire collective religious experiences, devotion, and identity in an era marked by modernity and secularization. The study of Marian apparitions and associated pilgrimage became in the last decades of the 20th century a fruitful field of research (e.g., Tutner & Turner, 1978; Carroll, 1986; Eade & Sallnow, 1991), which continues to attract scholarly attention (e.g., Hermens, Jansen & Notermans, 2009; Zachar Podolinská, 2019a) and specific attention attracted the Marian apparitions in the socio-political settings of post-communist (e.g., Naumescu, 2007; Halemba, 2016; Zachar Podolinská, 2019b, 2021, Serdziuk 2024).

The research on Marian apparitions is intricately embedded within two interconnected yet parallel fields: the study of Marian devotion and the field of pilgrimage studies. Marian pilgrimage sites are usually studied from different theoretical perspectives, focusing either on pilgrimage or apparitions. This creates possible conflation between the two phenomena and obscures their complementary social and psychological consequences. This chapter will focus on the overlap of these two fields but treat them separately. It is far beyond the scope of this text to comprehensively map these fields, nor is it my goal; rather, I will try to outline some common elements and connect them to theories of religion anchored in cognitive sciences. I believe that cognitive approaches in anthropology are fruitful because they try to explain social and cultural phenomena through universal mental processes that shape perceptions and motivations, providing insight into why people engage in collective rituals. They supplement classical anthropological theories as they clarify the psychological drivers behind social practices, making the theoretical claims more robust.

Most of the theoretical debates about pilgrimage swirled around two theoretical paradigms: The Durkheimian integrative social function and the Marxist (but also Foucaultian) focus on power and conflict. Even theories that explicitly tried to overcome the limits of these perspectives or deconstruct them often leaned toward one of these perspectives. The first major approach to pilgrimage was anchored in Durkheimian functionalism, positing that religion acts as a vital cohesive force, or 'social glue', within human societies (Durkheim, 1912). Supporters of this model argue that pilgrimages and associated centers emerge and persist as they foster a sense of communal belonging and solidarity among participants and weld diverse local communities and social strata with supra-local identities (Eade & Sallnow, 1991; Rabinow, 1975; Spiro, 1970). Although Durkheim did not pay special attention to pilgrimage and mentioned it only in passing, his depiction of Intichiuma (a religious celebration of Indegioneus Australians that periodically gathers and socially integrates otherwise dispersed members of the group) embodied a general model of rituals associated with mobility and gathering. The first who explicitly applied this perspective to pilgrimage was Durkheim's student, Robert Hertz. Focusing on the pilgrimage practices surrounding the shrine of St. Besse in the Italian Alps, he argues that movements and ritual processions to the shrine on a sacred mount attract and bond the worshipers against the centrifugal forces that tend to break up their little community (Hertz, 2009). Apart from sporadic echoes in the 30s (Bálint, 1936; Czarnowski, 1938), the functionalist approach to pilgrimage only began to develop in the second half of the 20th century when a number of authors started to see participation in religious pilgrimages as a crucial mechanism that links individuals from different smaller communities and social strata into larger collectivities with more inclusive identities (Marx, 1977; Obeyesekere, 1966; Rabinow, 1975; Spiro, 1970; Wolf, 1958).

Some authors followed the Durkheimian legacy by focusing on the formation of collective identities, while others also elaborated on the idea that because of their social nature, sacred symbols and practices are by the believers essentialized as something 'set apart', super-individual and unquestionable. Going a step further, they argued that it drives conformity and subordination

and is potent for legitimizing power relations in society (Eickelman, 1976; Gross, 1971). This Marxist twist to the functionalist model argues that with the ritually induced sense of community and solidarity, pilgrimage (like religion in general) constructs a collective fiction that justifies domination, oppression, and social inequality (Eade & Sallnow, 1991, p. 4). Even though these Durkheimian and Marxist perspectives seem to be in some way in opposition (collective evanescence vs. dominance/oppression), they are both functionalists in the sense that they postulate that pilgrimage (as rituals and religion) has functional consequences on the emergence or maintenance of social order.

Victor and Edith Turner tried to overcome this dichotomy by postulating a third way, arguing that pilgrimage offers individuals a temporal release from their local social structures into a state of antistructure or *communitas*, a state of spontaneous sense of shared experience and egalitarian ethos between the pilgrims (Turner & Turner, 1978). Their argument is built from Victor Turner's earlier theory, according to which social life oscillates between two modes: structure (the formal, hierarchical organization of society) and *communitas* (moments of egalitarian, unstructured togetherness), which he elaborated from Van Gennep's idea of liminality. He argued that the liminal phase in rites of passage (which is preceded by separation and followed by reaggregation) produces an experience of 'antistructure' or *communitas* (Turner, 1969). Turners argued that, with the movement away from everyday social life, the experience of pilgrimage shares some features of liminality. Everyday norms, social statuses, hierarchies, and interactions are left behind and substituted by spontaneous association and shared experiences. But in contrast to initiation rituals, the liminality of pilgrimage (especially as they saw it in modern Christianity) is rather quasi-liminal or liminoid: more loose, voluntary, and optional (Turner & Turner, 1978). Even though the *communitas* model of pilgrimage has become very influential, many anthropological studies later showed that pilgrimage does not necessarily result in *communitas* and, in many cases, rather reinforces than attenuates social boundaries and hierarchies (Eickelman, 1976; Morinis, 1984; Sallnow, 1981; Werbner, 1977; Coleman, 2002b; Eade & Sallnow, 1991; Winkelman & Dubisch, 2005). Besides the fact that in many sites, the *communitas* model failed to be empirically supported, critiques also addressed its universalistic and idealistic nature, insensitive to social and historical complexities, being just another grand narrative on top of those it tried to overcome (Eade & Sallnow, 1991) or even almost romanticized liberation theology (Di Giovine, 2018, p. 3). The Turners tried to offer an alternative to straightforward Durkheimian and Marxist approaches, but they describe the concept of *communitas* very similarly to Durkheim's collective effervescence and Marx's utopian ideal communal society (Di Giovine, 2011).

As a direct response and in opposition to the *communitas* model (but also to Durkheimian and Marxist approaches in anthropology), John Eade and Michael Sallnow proposed what could be called a contestation model (Eade &

Sallnow, 1991). They argued against the idea that pilgrimages solely serve as integrative mechanisms or tools of oppression, and they also challenged the assumption that pilgrims necessarily reach a state of *communitas*. These are rather particular modalities; hence, none of them can withstand as a defining feature of the pilgrimage experience. They proposed a more dynamic model in which pilgrimages represent arenas of contestation, where diverse social, political, and religious discourses co-exist and compete with each other. In their view, a pilgrimage center or shrine acts as an 'empty vessel' that not only hosts but also amplifies discrepant and competing religious and secular discourses among varied groups of pilgrims. Besides the numerous empirical counter-evidence of the *communitas* paradigm, Eade and Sallnow also addressed its universalistic claims and aspiration to be ahistorical and acontextual, seeing it as yet another grand narrative and the cause for its failure to meet the historical and cultural idiosyncrasies that structure a concrete pilgrimage practice (Eade & Sallnow, 1991).

Eade and Sallnow also aimed more generally to deconstruct pilgrimage as a meaningful analytical category. They saw pilgrimage as a context for contestation rather than any particular embodied practice. Hence, there is no pilgrimage as a unitary cross-cultural phenomenon, only myriads of historically and culturally specific pilgrimages. However, such a strong deconstructivist position seemed to throw the baby out with the bathwater. As argued by Simon Coleman and others, nearly all social phenomena can encompass contestation and, at times, act as 'empty vessels', therefore, the emphasis on the idea that pilgrimage is void of intrinsic meaning says little about pilgrimages and tends to ignore the commonalities in pilgrimage practices within and between traditions and that some of these commonalities might cause or foster the confrontation of multiple discourses (Coleman, 2002a; Coleman & Elsner, 1995). Rodney Needham's concept of polythetic classification presents a compelling alternative to the critiques of universalistic analytical categories often associated with deconstructionism and postmodernism. In contrast, Needham's polythetic classes (inspired by Wittgenstein's idea of family resemblance) allow for a more nuanced understanding of social and cultural phenomena by recognizing that membership in a category does not require the presence of a single defining characteristic, but categories are defined by a constellation of properties that may vary among members, thus accommodating diversity while still allowing for comparative analysis (Needham, 1975)¹. By acknowledging that different pilgrimages may share certain attributes, a polythetic perspective may lead to a more coherent framework for analysis that respects both diversity and commonality.

¹ Polythetic classes are similar to the idea of fuzzy set. Each framework has a different analytical purposes, but both are valuable for understanding complex classifications. Polythetic classification focuses on overlapping characteristics to define categories, while fuzzy sets introduce the concept of varying degrees of membership. Fuzzy sets are for instance effectively used for biological taxonomies, that is to classify phenomena that are made up of populations of variants that change over time (Pinker, 1999, pp. 308–313).

At first, the contestation and *communitas* paradigms seemed to be in apparent opposition, but a later reception of these theories turned attention to various similarities (Coleman, 2002a, 2014; Eade, 2000). First, even though the Turners emphasized the spontaneous form of *communitas*, their theory assumes a more multilayered perspective where this existential form of *communitas* stripped of structure can gradually transform and systemize into 'normative' and 'ideological' forms, with emerging norms and ideologies through routinization and institutionalization (Turner & Turner, 1978, p. 252). They are also aware of the possibilities of dynamic tension between official and lay or popular views (Turner & Turner, 1978, p. 4). An even deeper similarity between the Turnerian and Contestation model becomes apparent when we look at Victor Turner's more general theory of ritual, on which the *communitas* model of pilgrimage was developed. Turner sees rituals as open-ended 'social dramas', a medium through which communities can express their values, negotiate identities and social conflicts, and enact social change. The experience of *communitas* and liminality in rituals underscores the potential for social transformation inherent in social dramas (Turner, 1974).

The most crucial similarity between the *communitas* and contestation model is that both attribute pilgrimage with "sociological vacuums in order then to fill these gaps with their respective views of what pilgrimage must essentially be about" (Coleman, 2002a, p. 361). For Turners, it is the pilgrim's detachment from everyday social roles and stripping of their identities, while Eade and Sallnow point to the pilgrimage center as an empty vessel or arena into which the diverse protagonists of pilgrimages pour their meanings and interpretations. I suggest an integrated view in which pilgrimage is a practice potent to create a void of social authority otherwise established by institutions and conventions and manifested in social hierarchies. Such a void then offers a possibility for spontaneous egalitarian bonding but also an opportunity for various social protagonists to reclaim authority.

Modes of pilgrimage

John Kantner and Kevin Vaught highlighted that the traditional models of pilgrimage and the theoretical debates around them "conflate the potential outcomes of pilgrimage with explanations for its emergence in specific circumstances" (Kantner & Vaughn, 2012, p. 67). I think that in this respect, the theory of divergent modes of religiosity, developed by Harvey Whitehouse, can be helpful even though it has not yet been directly applied to theorize pilgrimage.² It directly echoes various dichotomous models of religion from anthropology and sociology, including the Turnerian *communitas*-structure contrast, but focuses on the cognitive and emotional underpinnings of their social dynamics. Whitehouse argues that religiosity tends to gravitate towards two divergent modes, *imagistic* and *doctrinal*. The *doctrinal* mode is characterized by a dominance of routinized and formalized low-arousal religious practices linked with high levels of uniformity, hierarchical social structure and diffuse social cohesion. It is typical for inclusive, standardized, centralized, and impersonal religious forms. In contrast, the *imagistic* mode is characterized by low-frequency but highly emotional rituals that are subject to individual spontaneous exegetical reflections and are typical of egalitarian social organization and intense social cohesion (Whitehouse, 1995, 2000, 2004). The two modes are also distinguished by contrasting forms of social affiliation: identification vs fusion. Identification, typical of the *doctrinal* mode, is a form of depersonalized group alignment that relies on shared traits and semantic schemas, while the *imagistic* mode establishes a fusion with a group through emotionally intense collective experiences in which individual and group identity merge (Whitehouse, 2021). The main argument is that functionally different systems of human memory, the episodic memory and semantic, not only process different information (personal experiences and general knowledge) but are divergently dependent on emotional

² Although Vlad Naumescu (2007) did directly apply Whitehouse's modes theory to Marian apparition sites in western Ukraine, which are subject to pilgrimage, he did not specifically address pilgrimage, the sacred journey per se but the particular ritual practices at these sites. I will come back to it in the later part of this chapter.

arousal and repetition, which has a direct relationship to the forms and contents of cultural transmission, and forms of social interaction. What is important is that the modes are not types of religion but rather principles of organization of religious experience and behavior. In most religious traditions, we can find features of both modes, but because of the divergence of their psychological underpinnings, one or the other usually dominates. In other words, the two modes represent something like attractors in socio-cultural variability towards which religious traditions gravitate (Whitehouse, 2004).

According to Whitehouse, the interplay between socio-political and psychological mechanisms does not only explain the divergence between modes but also the conditions under which particular forms of traditions become unstable and transform from one mode to the other. For instance, when imagistic forms of rituals reach a high frequency of repetition, they lose emotional charge and result in either the cessation of the practice or in routinization and gradual transformation into a doctrinal form. Vice versa, doctrinal forms often face a state of decreased motivation and religious enthusiasm, which Whitehouse calls the tedium effect. As a consequence, even in predominantly doctrinal religions, imagistic and emotionally intense practices emerge and revive interest and religious passion, which can follow various pathways: a full transition into the imagistic mode, separation of a splinter group, or a temporal and controlled imagistic outburst (Whitehouse, 2004, pp. 159–60).

Applying the modes of religiosity to pilgrimage, it is clear that there is no reason why a particular pilgrimage could not end up having mostly features typical for one or the other mode. This being true, the interesting question is what capacity or potential pilgrimages offer for the transitive zone between the modes. The majority of pilgrimage research focuses on pilgrimage practices embedded in big religious traditions that lean towards Whitehouse's doctrinal mode. The Turnerian view of pilgrimage as a temporal liminoid state of *communitas* fits the imagistic outburst (out of more doctrinal contexts) as pilgrimage participation might be an emotionally intense experience that creates egalitarian bonding between participants. However, it gets trickier with the low-frequency condition, not just because of the routinization over time but because different individuals and groups might differ in the frequency of their participation. At the same time, Whitehouse argues that imagistic experiences encourage spontaneous exegetical reflections, which might cause discrepancies between individuals and groups, supporting the contestation view. Doctrinal systems seek to absorb or suppress imagistic groups to maintain religious unity and coherence. Conversely, imagistic groups may challenge doctrinal authority, asserting their authenticity through emotionally charged, communal experiences. The two modes not only shape internal group dynamics but also influence how religious movements expand or conflict with each other, especially when competing for followers or dominance in the same cultural or geographic space.

Pilgrimage as a costly signal

Simon Coleman and John Eade, in one of the revisions of the contestation vs. *communitas* debate, highlighted that both models are largely place-centered and pay little attention to the various forms of movement as one of the constitutive elements of pilgrimage. They argue that movement can be discerned and understood at various levels: as performative action, as embodied action, as a semantic field (local cultural understanding of mobility), or as metaphor (Coleman & Eade, 2004). The attention on the journey, the pilgrimage itself, is a crucial meeting point between the pilgrimage and tourism research. Many scholars pointed to the similarities between the two practices. The Turners claimed that “pilgrim is half a tourist if a tourist is half a pilgrim” (Turner & Turner 1978, p. 20). Nelson Graburn viewed tourism as a sacred journey or a secular ritual (Graburn, 1977, 1983), while others explored how these two practices increasingly overlap in modern and postmodern contexts (Bauman, 1996, 2000). The differences between them often blur, particularly as tourism adopts elements of the pilgrimage's search for authenticity and transformation, while pilgrimage sites become part of the broader tourist economy (Di Giovine, 2011).

Here, I want to focus on one specific feature of the pilgrimage movement, which is both embodied and performative action. Recent studies drew attention to the signaling function of pilgrimage behavior (Chvaja et al., 2023; Kantner & Vaughn, 2012; Nordin, 2011b). Long-distance traveling is costly in terms of time, effort, and resources and brings up the risk of potentially dangerous situations. While this was definitely true in premodern times, even today, when the physical hardship of traveling is reduced, it still represents economic costs. In Christian traditions, pilgrimage has often been linked with penance, where the hardship and danger of the very journey and other obligatory bodily torments were necessary to receive forgiveness (Eade & Sallnow, 1991, p. 21). Rituals often take up costly forms that from a practical point of view, appear wasteful. Evolutionary approaches in anthropology, psychology, or behavioral ecology have in recent decades sought to understand these elements of human behavior through costly signaling theory, which argues that such behaviors serve to reliably communicate features of actors that would otherwise be difficult to recognize reliably (For recent reviews see Chvaja & Řezníček, 2019; Lang & Kundt, 2023; Northover et al., 2024). One such hard-to-communicate quality

is individual piety, which may indirectly indicate group commitment through adherence to group norms and values. An individual's willingness to invest personal resources in a costly ritual becomes an observable manifestation of group-relevant qualities of individuals. In this view, collective rituals represent an arena where individuals intervene in favor of their social prestige (Shaver & Sosis, 2014; Xygalatas et al., 2021), but they also can serve as a social technology that a community uses to maintain group cohesion by discouraging its members from cheating or free riders to join. Hence, costly rituals function as honest signals of group commitment, which are essential for fostering in-group affiliation and commitment to communal goals (Sosis, 2003; Sosis & Ruffle, 2003; Bahna, 2022).³

It has been proposed that public displays of costs in religious contexts can have various forms: time-consuming effort, donations, sacrifice, hardship, and even self-inflicted pain. Kantner, Vaughn, and others pointed out that the inherent costs of travel to sacred sites can serve as another opportunity for cost signaling (Chvaja et al. 2023; Kantner & Vaughn, 2012; Nordin, 2011a). Even though the costly signaling theory of rituals explicitly draws from Durkheimian functionalism, focusing on the group beneficial or pro-social consequences of such rituals, it does not claim a monolithic function of the costly signals in a particular ritual. It allows for a multifaceted and multilayered view where, depending on the actual social structures, different individuals or groups pursue different and competing signaling goals (Xygalatas et al., 2021). The very same signaling practice can have different consequences in relation to who the signaler and receiver are, whether it is a voluntary or obligatory act, or whether it targets the reputation of the signaler or his or her group membership, etc.

For instance, an individual's participation in a pilgrimage might be a signal to his or her home community (or only to its particular members) that affects his or her reputation in that community. Still, it can have multiple functions, either as an individual prestigious act, confirmation to a local convention, or as a penance to regain trust, all of which are rather subordination to the local social structure. On the other hand, pilgrimage participation can serve as an honest and bidirectional signal towards the co-pilgrims, establishing mutual trust and a perception of group membership. At times, this can lead to authentic Turnerian *communitas*. However, the pilgrimage (sub)group that perceives and evaluates the signal can and often does not consist of strangers but of members of the pilgrims' home community. Last but not least, a pilgrimage might be a signal whose intended addressee is a divine figure. The motivation for religiously motivated costly behaviors is often based on bargaining-like logic, either as a promise or a thanksgiving to a supernatural entity for the fulfillment of wishes or the resolution of the struggles of life.

³ The issue of costly signaling is not only a matter of extreme forms of rituals that require extraordinary costs (Xygalatas et al., 2021), but also involves cases of low-cost high-frequency signals that are in many contexts more accurate indicators of group commitment, especially from the perspective of the receivers of the signal (Barker et al., 2019; Uhrin & Bužeková, 2022). However, individuals at a pilgrimage usually interact only for a short period of time, so their ability for long-term monitoring is significantly restricted.

The modern globalized world, characterized by rapid technological advancements and the convenience of mechanized travel, has reduced the costs of travel in terms of time and physical hardship. Still, in some pilgrimage traditions, like Santiago de Compostela, there is a revival of traveling long distances by foot with claims that the physical challenge embodies the essence of pilgrimage (Mróz et al., 2019). Nevertheless, pilgrimages often layer various opportunities for cost display apart from travel, like demanding ritual procedures at the pilgrimage site, extensive fasting, volunteerism, and financial donations etc. For instance, at the Marian pilgrimage site Živčák in northern Slovakia, a newly built church (2015) offers a unique opportunity to display donations to the site. The outer walls of the church are covered by hundreds of tiles installed by the site's administrators to commemorate the names of major individual donors (Bahna, 2025).

Kantner and Vaughn suggest yet another specific scenario of costly signaling in the context of pilgrimage that combines costly signaling of religious adherence with a sociopolitical dynamic, where religious (and political) leaders compete for adherents. In this case, the pilgrimage site itself, through investments in its development, becomes a costly signal of leaders to the pilgrims (Kantner & Vaughn, 2012).

Besides the signaling function of costly ritual behaviors, they also seem to facilitate social bonding through emotional coordination. Contemporary research suggests that collective gatherings, like rituals, incite emotional states that induce affective, cognitive, and behavioral changes that transform individuals into groups. It is argued that their emotional synchrony plays a crucial psychological mechanism in this type of social bonding (Xygalatas et al., 2024). Physically demanding behaviors often create emotional states, like exhaustion and pain, which are both externally observable and hard to pretend. As such, they can be utilized in a ritual context to induce emotional synchrony. Much of the research in this context focused on so-called extreme rituals, that is, rituals that involve exceptional effort or risk, significant levels of pain, stress, physical risk, or trauma (Xygalatas, 2022; Xygalatas et al., 2013), but the effect is not necessarily restricted for extreme and particular instances of pilgrimage practices can offer similar effects.

The costs embedded into various ritual practices also affect the success of the social transmission of associated beliefs and practices. Joe Henrich argues that costly behaviors often function as so-called credibility-enhancing displays. When adopting beliefs, people are sensitive to cues that indicate whether the individual they consider learning from is genuinely committed to what he/she propagates. With the logic of 'deeds are better than words', costly behaviors support the spread of associated beliefs. In other words, when people evaluate what to learn, they relate to cues that indicate an individual's commitment to what he/she propagates (Henrich, 2009).

The religious devotion that has surrounded Marian's apparitions for the last two centuries constitutes a very specific phenomenon. While there is great variability, there is also great similarity. Messages conveyed in these apparitions often share common themes like the critiques of materialism and secularism, support for traditional nuclear families, and promotion of politically conservative views and apocalyptic worldviews (Zimdars-Swartz, 1991). Apart from the similarities in the content of apparitions, also the surrounding apparitional cultures exhibit common features: social and political conflict, struggles to negotiate modernity, and conflict with the Church (Krebs, 2017) in an interplay of nationalism, vernacular religious movements, and ecclesiastical authority. The Church often finds itself in a position where it must assert its authority to define the legitimacy of such phenomena. Apparitions are at their core always personal experiences which, however, do not always translate into broader social phenomena (Zachar Podolinská, 2019b). Thus, against the background of socially recognized apparitions, there is a much larger field of apparitions with their idiosyncratic, contextual, and psychological specificities that go beyond the problem I am addressing here, but it should be kept in mind that the boundary between the individual and the social dimensions of supernatural experiences is anything but sharp (Bahna, 2019).

It is a common observation of Marian's apparitions that the Church naturally seeks to regulate these reoccurring events and related grassroots social phenomena (Eade & Sallnow, 1991; Turner & Turner, 1978; Zimdars-Swartz, 1991). An attempt to stop the very apparitions, public attention, and the emerging pilgrimage praxis when it collides with the catholic doctrine is one possible way. However, the negative stance of the Church might not be adopted by the public, and an emerging movement of devoted believers can act against it. For instance, in Garabandal, the ecstatic states of the seers were self-authorizing to the extent that the thousands of pilgrims rallied to witness these miraculous signs and stood in defense of the seers against the Church's accusations of falsity (Bromley & Bobbitt, 2011). Visionaries and mystics, through their contact with the divine, possess an inherent sanctity—an authority that creates limits for ecclesiastical control. Full control is established only after the death of the living saint or after he or she withdraws from public life, and the sanctity of the saint is transformed “into a mute, hieratic, domesticated shrine” (Eade & Sallnow, 1991, p. 7).

The Church often plays an active role in this withdrawal. For instance, in Lourdes and Fatima, the seers Bernadette Soubirous and Lucia dos Santos, respectively, were navigated into convents where they spent the rest of their lives (Zimdars-Swartz 1991).

On the other hand, acceptance is not the most common alternative when the apparition does not meet the conditions for immediate rejection. The Church's attempts to manage these movements often involve a delicate balancing act, as seen in Barbato's analysis of Marian messages and pilgrim masses at Fatima. He notes that the Church has engaged with the faithful through Marian apparitions to strengthen piety while simultaneously projecting its power of mass mobilization (Barbato, 2021). This reflects a strategic approach where the Church seeks to harness the emotional and spiritual energy generated by these apparitions to reinforce its authority and maintain a connection with the laity.

Often, we can see the maintenance of a status quo or ambivalence while engaging in a gradual process of gaining control over the events without approving the apparitions themselves (Bromley & Bobbitt, 2011; Haar, 2003; Park, 2012). In Kibeho, Rwanda, immediately after the start of apparitions and years before the official approval of the apparitions, the local priests took control of the ongoing apparitions and moderated when, where, and under what conditions the visionaries received their messages while also encouraging public devotion at the site (Haar 2003). As noted by Agnieszka Halemba, without official approval of the apparitions, these sites are used for experimentation with religious revitalization without jeopardizing the Church structures. The Church can be very skeptical about the apparitions while still actively exploring them as a source of religious devotion (Halemba, 2017). The Church's response to Marian apparitions is not solely about control but also involves negotiation and adaptation. Halemba argues that interpreting Marian apparitional movements as mere acquiescence to conservative Church authority is overly simplistic. Instead, these movements often arise in response to crises and conflicts, providing a voice for those who may be critical of modern changes within the Church. The interaction between the Church, visionaries, and the lay movements is not unidirectional but rather reciprocal and negotiating (Halemba, 2015, 2017). Moreover, the protagonists of this negotiation are not just the Church and lay movements. As has been recognized by many authors, Marian apparitions are both a response and a catalyst to broader social and political tensions, and the policies of the Church are sensitive to the political landscapes (Christian, 1984, 1996; Manuel, 2001; Zimdars-Schwartz, 1991). The negotiation perspective of Marian apparition movements is, in many respects, very similar to the contestation model of pilgrimages. The more diplomatic dynamics here can be seen as a relatively modern strategy of the Catholic Church to mitigate conflict escalation and effectively harvest religious enthusiasm. But still, as Bromley and Bobbitt argue, the interaction usually leads to one of two major types of outcomes: “Some movements were rapidly domesticated by the Catholic Church while others resisted and faced much more difficult and problematic futures” (Bromley & Bobbitt, 2011: 5). Besides the competition of discourses that can

be seen around Marian's apparitions, there is also an apparent motivational force that integrates Marian devotees into movements that challenge the official Church.⁴ This force cannot be inferred solely from the pilgrimage experience but rests, as I want to argue, in the specific belief in apparitions. Turner built their *communitas* model of pilgrimage to a large extent on examples of Catholic pilgrimages associated with Marian apparitions (Turner & Turner, 1978); hence, their arguments apply more specifically to this subset than to pilgrimages in general.

4 The fact that religious protagonists (clerics and lay believers) face the coexistence and interaction of Church doctrine and folk beliefs, institutionalized religious praxis, and grassroots lived religion, all embedded in specific socio-political landscapes also represents significant methodological and ethical challenges (Serdziuk, 2024).

The role of apparitions

As with other saints, the official cult of the Virgin Mary is derived from the doctrine of the Communion of the Saints. The Catholic interpretation of this doctrine suggests that souls can help each other by praying to God and that the saints dwelling in heaven near God are the best helpers to the souls of the living. The efficacy of prayers can thus be increased by praying to saints, including the Virgin Mary. One of the motivations for visiting pilgrimage sites—places associated with saints (their lives, graves, relics, miracles, and places of apparition) is the belief that the requests made at these places have a better chance of being heard (Turner & Turner, 1978).

During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the apparitions of the Virgin Mary usually happened in private, and the message delivered was generally addressed to the individuals who experienced them (primarily members of convents, priests, clerics, or pious women) (Christian, 1981; Zimdars-Swartz, 1991). However, since the 19th century, this pattern has changed, and Mary is no longer perceived just as a mediator of requests to God. The emphasis shifted to Mary herself as an autonomous figure who takes over the initiative, expresses her own will, and acts in the name of humanity by entering into contact with the believers (Turner & Turner, 1978, p. 6).

Compared to the previous period, the apparitions often take place in front of other witnesses or are experienced collectively. Common people, often children, have become the visionaries, and through them, Mary delivers messages for the entire humanity. Importantly, the apparitions start to have an instant impact on the dynamics of religious communities. Apart from the explicit content of the messages, Mary's urge on humanity to refrain from sins to avoid an apocalyptic future, the crucial feature of these events is the belief that the Virgin actively interacts with believers—talks to them, delivers visions and induces various physiological and psychological states when the seers fall into a trance like states or when is Mary speaking through their mouths. Hence, apparition sites become not only sacralized places suitable for an effective prayer to Mary but also, conversely, places where Mary expresses herself in action. As Sandra Zimdars-Swartz notes, most pilgrims visit these places to be able to meet the figure whose presence and benevolence are manifested there: to see seers in ecstasy when

Mary appears and speaks to them, to see signs confirming the presence of Mary, or to get Mary to appear or speak to themselves (Zimdars-Swartz, 1991, p. 3). This opens ecclesiastically non-mediated access to the divine. Marian apparitions “point to the hidden, non-hierarchical domain of the Church, with its stress on the power of the weak, on *communitas* and liminal phenomena, on the rare and unprecedented, as against the regular, ordained, and normative” (Turner & Turner, 1978, p. 213). They give the devotees tangible evidence of the divine and an opportunity for the lay to gain control of their faith and interact with the supernatural on an intimate and personal level without the need for clergy (Cunneen, 1996). As these lay movements easily depart from the official Church's views and interests, some authors argue that Marian apparition movements show many features typical of new religious movements (Bromley & Bobbitt, 2011; Krebs & Laycock 2017). Their activities often bring innovations, experimentation, and non-standard cult forms that force the attention and reaction of the Church. On one side, the vigor of religious devotion and enthusiasm, triggered by apparitions, is something the Catholic Church hopes for; on the other side, it also opens a possibility for departure from the official doctrine and ritual practice and the emergence of non-ecclesial authority.

Cognitive scientists Neil van Leeuwen and Michiel van Elk (2019) argue that while studying supernatural beliefs, we should make a distinction between two types of supernatural beliefs that are cognitively differently processed: general religious beliefs (i.e., God exists) and personal religious beliefs (i.e., God spoke to me). The importance of this distinction can also be seen in the dichotomy of the Marian cult, marked by beliefs that stem either from the doctrine of the communion of the saints or from apparitional testimonies. Elsewhere, I have argued that while the authority and trustworthiness of what Van Leeuwen and Van Elk call ‘general religious belief’ relies on social conventions, institutions, and socially recognized experts, in the case of ‘personal religious beliefs’ it is rooted in the testimonial nature of personal experience narratives (Bahna, 2019). Personal experience narratives have different social dynamics underpinned by cognitive mechanisms that differ from expert knowledge, like religious doctrines. First, with their emotional urgency, they easily propagate through society without any institutional support (or even against it) and help to establish relations of trust and intimacy among those involved in their transmission. Second, they often function as experience models and affect the emergence of new experiences and their interpretations (Bahna, 2025, 2015, 2019; Honko, 1964). One of the defining features of the Marian apparitions in the last two centuries is that they are not independent, solitary events but interconnected and validated through their overlaps, continuities, and congruencies (Krebs 2017, p. 3). In many cases, previous apparitions serve as models for new ones, and sometimes, even apparitions emerge in waves in specific regional and time frames. Especially in coincidence with periods of crisis or societal change (Christian, 1984; van Olessar, 2012).

Marian's apparitions and related social movements show various similarities with the issues raised in the contestation vs. community debate about pilgrimages. I suggest that the belief that a divine figure, the Virgin Mary, actively and autonomously interacts with people without the need for an ecclesial mediator creates a void of social authority—an egalitarian access to the divine. Similar to pilgrimages, but at a different level, it can lead to spontaneous and emotionally bound Marian movements, but at the same time, it represents an arena for claiming, reestablishing, or competing for the vacant social authority among various social protagonists. The dichotomous nature of Marian apparitions, which integrates devotees into an emotionally bonded community but, at the same time, offers an opportunity for a clash of competing discourses, fits with Whitehouse's theory of divergent modes of religiosity. Although Whitehouse's modes theory is primarily concerned with the dichotomy of ritual forms in relation to their frequency and emotional arousal, the original ethnographic material from the Pomio Kivung movement in Papua New Guinea on which he built his theory shows that apparitions are an essential trigger of imagistic forms of religiosity. Since apparitions bring direct messages and instruction from key divine entities, they claim non-mediated authenticity, challenge or bypass the existing doctrinal tradition by spontaneous exegesis, and create excitement and motivational urgency (Whitehouse, 1995, 2000). Similarly, Marian's apparitions and subsequent religious practices can be seen as a candidate source for imagistic, emotionally charged outbursts from a predominantly doctrinal Catholic tradition. In his study on apparitions in western Ukraine, Vlad Naumescu showed that even when the imagistic practices represented only a tiny fragment of overall religious life, they had a significant functional role in religious revival. From a longer perspective and to function continuously, apparition sites must be dominated by the mechanisms of one of the two modes: imagistic when they are kept updated by permanent visionary activity, or doctrinal when the Church institutionalizes the apparition site and standardizes the ritual practice and devotion (Naumescu, 2007).

Conclusion

Marian apparitional sites combine two religious phenomena: first, a pilgrimage practice, a journey to a sacred destination, and second, apparitions, which are a very specific reason for a sacred journey, a belief in an active intervention of divine figures upon believers. My goal was to show that although they operate on different levels—the collective social experience of a journey and an experience or expected experience of active divine presence—they potentially achieve similar and congruent effects: intense emotional arousal and a temporal void of social authority otherwise manifested in social conventions and institutions. These effects make the apparition sites potent for temporarily bonding participants into cohesive and egalitarian groups and boosting religious enthusiasm and motivation while at the same time creating space and motivation to compete for vacant social authority between various religious and political actors.

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