

THE VIRGIN AND THE VILLAGE

Rural revival by means of religious revelation — there's no surer way to bring pious pilgrims to your stagnant rustic backwater. GILL BARRON investigates the economic phenomenon of Marian apparitions, and the benefits to the countryside of spiritual tourism.



Since earliest times, the lingering nomadic urge in the human genome has propelled us to travel — to get away from home and its domestic drudgery at every opportunity. Till recently, however, you needed an excuse and what better than the salvation of your soul and the cure of your gout? To question the miraculous powers of the Divine could quickly find you lashed to a burning pyre (or worse) (what could be worse?) and so Religion with a capital R has been, for centuries, the passport to escape that nobody questions.

“Pilgrimage” is the archetypal excuse. Journeys with extremely mixed motives, not least the need for anonymous fun and encounters with attractive strangers, that were borderline vagrancy, became eminently respectable once re-invented as Pilgrimage. Breaks in the summertime agricultural calendar created holiday opportunities, and the need to expiate whatever sins might have piled up (and perhaps to heal whatever diseases might have resulted) gave carte blanche to the aspiring traveller.

And the shrines were there, eager to lap them up. Hardly a cathedral or monastery lacked some picturesque relic of a local saint, or better still a chunk of a famous one. Finger-bones were especially popular. It's been estimated that at least 3,000 splinters of the True Cross (adding up to quite some tonnage) were on display in Western churches in the Middle Ages. Every pilgrim would spend money, on sustenance and souvenirs, and the top scam — indulgences. These were complex but flimsy mechanisms for getting “time off” from the sufferings (once you were dead) of Purgatory. Unimaginable wealth poured into the shrines and surrounding countryside as a result, giving rise to ever more glittering attractions.

This salvation industry was brought to an abrupt halt by Henry VIII, party pooper extraordinaire, who declared Pilgrimage illegal and Purgatory non-existent. A brief revival during the reign of his aptly-named daughter Bloody Mary soon fizzled out and over the next few centuries, waves of inoclastic Puritans ensured that there were no more shrines worth visiting (*but see box on page XX*). Catholicism, with its faith in miracles, its love of saints and statuary, its smells, bells and sumptuous holy bling, was effectively outlawed.

In Europe, however, the craze for pilgrimage was kept alive by a succession of flamboyant “apparitions”, that were a magnet for flocks of devotees, all spending their hard-earned cash not just on accomodation and life-support, but also on frivolous souvenirs, easily manufactured in the locality. A couple of examples: in Siluva, Lithuania, in 1608, some children tending sheep reported seeing a beautiful lady holding a baby on the spot where a church had stood, and she was weeping. She demanded (in Lithuanian) that the church be rebuilt

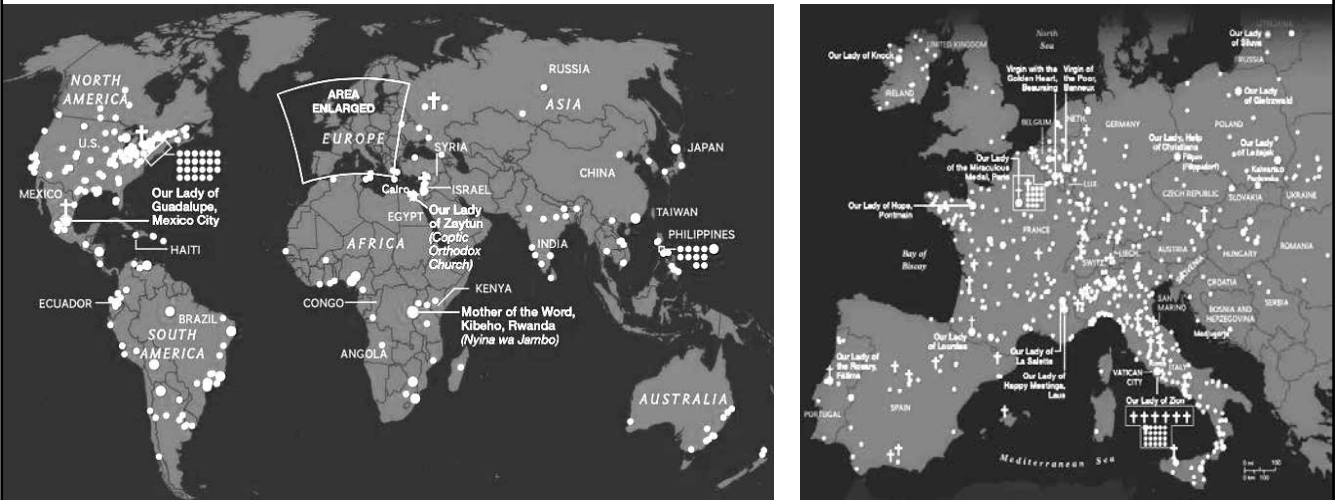
(it was), or else the potato harvest would fail (the apples crashed instead). It was replaced again, eventually, by a much larger Basilica to accommodate the multitudes of pilgrims. The Chapel of the Apparition, built over the rock where the Virgin appeared, has the tallest steeple in Lithuania.

On 19 September 1846, near the hamlet of La Sallette-Fallavaux in the Jura, (pop. about 800, mainly small farmers) two young cowherders, Maximin Giraud (11) and Mélanie Calvat (15), reported seeing a “beautiful lady” in the mountains, wearing a pearl-studded white robe and a gold apron. Her face buried in her hands, she was weeping bitterly. She spoke to them in the local language, Occitan. Curiously, in this and all other such visions, Her principal demand was again for the building of a church on the spot; a church being a tangible focus for devotees. Thereafter, two priests accused Constance Saint-Ferréol de La Merlière, a former nun, of having ‘dressed up’ as the Mother of God, inspiring the two credulous teenagers with her own religious agenda. Mlle. de La Merlière sued the priests for defamation — and lost. Nevertheless, a religious order was founded on the strength of this Apparition, which still sends missionaries around the world. The shrine remains popular with traditionalist believers and the Charismatic Movement within the Catholic church.

The bulging catalogue of apparitions from around this time is quite monotonous in its details. One striking finding is that (just as God is said to have an “inordinate fondness for beetles”) this Mary character is a quite remarkable linguist. Not just Lithuanian and Occitan, as noted above, but also, when appearing in the Phillipines, Tagalog; and on the Hill of Tepeyac near Mexico City, Nahuatl. She also weeps a lot and seldom changes Her clothes.

To take another French example, perhaps the best-known and most economically successful (though there is a lot of competition): Lourdes, where the BVM (Blessed Virgin Mary) appeared to 14-year-old shepherdess Bernadette Soubirous in 1858, was formerly an off-piste, rocky hamlet in the poverty-stricken Midi-Pyrénées, but now receives and hosts around six million pilgrims a year, with their attendants. The principal product of the region is no longer *petit chèvre* cheeses, but plaster statues and plastic bottles in the shape of the Virgin. Or should that be, the main product is the holy, healing water of Bernadette's spring, given away entirely free; but you must purchase an appropriately branded bottle to put it in, otherwise it would be indistinguishable from any old random tapwater. Souvenirs aside, Lourdes' annual income of around 300 million euros from tourism/hospitality (in addition to hospitals for the sick, there are 290 hotels, more than anywhere in France except Paris) is further augmented by a levy imposed by the Sanctuary Authorities of 15 euros per head, additional to the collections taken at all the many masses the faithful attend. For an industry

Marian Phenomena



Crosses show where the Virgin Mary appeared to a future saint. Other dots mark visitations related by tradition (but not attested by the Vatican); more recent, but as yet unconfirmed apparitions; visions approved as 'worthy of faith', but not deemed supernatural; and where a local bishop has 'approved' the apparition as genuine. Larger dots mark those that have also been recognized by the Vatican.

In Europe, the Virgin's favorite destinations appear to be Italy and France, followed by southern Germany (i.e. the Catholic half) and Belgium. Yet in Spain and Poland, the number of Marian apparitions is relatively small. Several in western Ukraine, but none in eastern Germany. A handful in Hungary, almost none in the Balkans (except Medjugorje). Ireland out-Marys England, and Scandinavia is entirely free of Holy Mothers. The U.S. leads the rest of the world in the number of apparitions, although most are unauthenticated. However, two apparitions in Africa and one in Mexico are officially recognized by the Vatican.

based entirely on intangible promises of miracles, that's quite a tidy profit.

Bernadette's vision has similarities to that of Angèle de Sagazan, another young shepherdess who in the 16th century saw the Virgin at a spring in nearby Garaison. Pilgrimages to Garaison were soon eclipsed by those to Lourdes. Fatima in Portugal likewise owes its fame and fortune to three (like Bernadette, illiterate) shepherding children and their vision of a Lady, who treated them to a traumatic and one might think quite gratuitous preview of Hell. She passed on some "secrets", which, when finally revealed in 1960, turned out to be banal. That hasn't stopped an estimated six million pilgrims a year from turning up and swelling the local coffers to bursting point.

Ireland, however, really takes the (sacred) biscuit. Knock, in Co. Mayo, is a classic example of the genre. It is too corny to bother describing: a story involving a vision of Mary & Co. in the pouring rain; the miraculous aspect being enhanced by the ground under their ectoplasmic feet remaining dry. Suffice to say that Knock now has its own airport, bringing in several million pilgrims a year, mainly from the USA.

From Want to Wealth

If it were possible to overlay the maps above (see box) with others showing areas of extreme rural deprivation in recent centuries, there would undoubtedly be some correlation. What is certain is that any apparition, and consequent shrine, of the BVM has brought an instant, and startling, economic boom to whatever obscure village or arid backwater She has graced with her presence.

Of the 386 claims of Marian apparitions in the 20th century, eight were approved and 79 rejected by the Catholic church,

with no definitive verdict on the rest. The number of apparitions peaked in 1954 but has been on a steady decline since the mid-1980s, perhaps due to a lack of underage shepherds roaming the countryside.

Of course, it's mainly in the West that the upsurge of Marian emotions has occurred. Part of a general quest to put the Female back on the pedestal usurped by patriarchy, perhaps. Certainly the non-violent (or. frankly, feeble) image of the Virgin as a submissive, non-sexual role model continues to manipulate gullible girls into obedience. But her gentleness is certainly preferable to the bloody, tortured iconography associated with her son. Quite why Christianity chooses to promulgate the image of the Crucifixion, that supreme human nastiness, as its trademark, God only knows.

Of the CofE/Anglican dwindling congregations (now down to five percent of the population), it has been said that “Much of the decline in attendance is due to nominal attendees realising you don’t have to go to church any more to look respectable. In the past church attendance has often been more down to social norms than a living faith. In a secularised society that’s not the case. The church is shedding nominal attenders.” Nevertheless, mutant forms of Christianity continue to proliferate, satisfying some primal urge for belonging to a cosy group immune to the confusion and fracturing of society at large. In an attempt to keep up with these evangelical enthusiasms, the pre-reformation shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham in Norfolk (demolished by Henry VIII) has seen a spectacular revival since the 1920s, has been renamed “The National Pilgrimage” since 1959, and now attracts 250,000 pilgrims a year, despite being hotly contested between the CofE and the Catholics. Ulster protestants show up regularly, almost an alternative pilgrimage, to protest against Marian idolatry. The Greek

Orthodox also have a toehold, and the railway station has been converted into a chapel. The shop stocks a wide range of *objets de piété*. A twin room, full board, in the adjacent facilities is £168 a night. The charity running the shrine (Regd Charity No. 215863) made £3.3 million in 2022.

In Foreign Footsteps

Other religions, and pilgrimage traditions, continue to thrive, more in an atmosphere of reconciliation than tribalism. The Sufi Dargahs of India, Pakistan and Turkey, mostly in desert locations, although ostensibly Islamic, bring together Muslims and Hindus indiscriminately, all in search of blessings and spiritual refreshment. It's a shame that still, in general "the ladies are not permitted to enter" the inner sanctum shrine where lies the Saint, covered in innumerable silken eiderdowns. However, all mingle in the cool courtyards, uplifted and rewarded for the hardships of the journey by the soaring music of Qawwali. Needless to say, the lanes around the Mosque are jam-packed with souvenir and fast-food stalls, but this just adds to the festive atmosphere. Much the same can be said of Hindu temples, except that they offer the added attraction of a (not very expensive) blessing from an elephant.

This spirit contrasts with that of other major pilgrimages which are the opposite of inclusive. The Hajj to Mecca is strictly reserved for Muslims, a once-in-a-lifetime minimum obligation; around 1.8 million pilgrims a year make the arduous journey. Notoriously, the death rate from heat exposure and contagious disease means that fewer go home than arrived. Saudi Arabia, the host country, gains around twelve million dollars a year from the various spin-offs, including sale of permits: recently the Ministry in charge determined that any person who comes to Mecca during the Hajj season without a permit must pay a fine of 10,000 Saudi Riyal (about US\$ 2,666). As the Mecca pilgrimage is largely a state-controlled enterprise, rather less of the profits accrue to the local population than in, for example, the still fairly anarchic West of Ireland.

Jerusalem, considered the centre of the world in medieval times, also sadly lacks religious unity, being a crucial pilgrimage destination for all the Abrahamic religions "of the book": Judaism, Islam and Christianity, all striving for possession. Needless to say the situation has now got horrendously out of hand (Christianity here forcibly represented by the USA) and so beyond the scope of this article. Until recently, however, some four million pilgrims from abroad would visit the 50 Christian churches, 33 Muslim mosques, and 300 Jewish synagogues in the city, contributing \$4.85 billion US dollars to Israel's economy.³

Finding a Path with Heart

The pilgrimage industry is now booming as never before, thanks to the newly-rediscovered charismatic glamour of the Camino de Santiago (over seven million pilgrims last year) and the efforts of such as The British Pilgrimage Trust (motto: Bring Your Own Beliefs). There is nothing wrong with this: each to their own quest, spiritual or recreational, or nicely combining both. It is certainly a "greener" form of tourism, being mostly on foot, even when mini-buses carry the

The Moving Virgin Mary Of Ballinspittle

There are many Virgin Mary statues that are said to have mysterious properties. However, most of them are limited to crying or bleeding. In 1985, a particular Irish statue of the



Holy Mother showed another ability: It (she?) started moving. This was first witnessed by a retired police sergeant who saw it begin levitating in the grotto of the church. At first, he didn't believe his own eyes—after all, the statue was solid concrete—but after inspecting it the following day and realizing there was no chance of foul play, he became convinced that he had witnessed a miraculous event. The legend of the statue began spreading, and others started claiming they

had also seen it move. In August, the country went "a bit crazy" when a Marian statue was reported moving at the grotto in Mount Melleray, Co. Waterford. The papers got on to the story and connected it with Ballinspittle and almost immediately, competing Marian statues started shifting at thirty other grottos around the country. The phenomenon was—and still is—widely disputed. Scientists have written the statue's abilities off as an optical illusion and even the Irish Catholic Church doubts the story. Despite all this, believers stand by their claims.

As the grip of Rome on the Republic slowly loosens, due to historic scandals and a certain modern irrelevance, it is notable that its appeal to the credulous still holds firm. Culture, habit, upbringing (plus the respectable excuse for a holiday) continue to fuel the Pilgrimage industry. It has often been said that if enough people believe in something then it becomes, it must be, true. This would explain not only the prevalence of "conspiracy theories" but also the contrary: the rather dispiriting willingness of the general public to believe anything they're told, by any "authority", be that the church, the government, or the newspapers.

More alarming is the innate guilt that drives the faithful, aka Sinners, up the misty nightmare of Croagh Patrick on their knees over razor-sharp rocks. This is not a Marian pilgrimage, but a sternly patriarchal affair, repentance for who-knows-what wickednesses. Since rural Ireland offers few opportunities for debauchery most of these "sins" can only be imaginary. Just so with Purgatory Island, also called Our Lady's Island, in Lough Derg, Co. Donegal—but the least said about that the better.

This photo by Martin Parr, from his 1984 West of Ireland collection *A Fair Day*, sums up the power of social pressures and inbuilt conformity: whenever, wherever the Angelus rings it's praying time. There can be no escape.



Martin Parr

Saint Wite: A Story of Survival

Saint Wite (pronounced Weeta, as in Bix), later latinised as St Candida, is still available to be visited, entirely for free, in Whitchurch Canonico, West Dorset. This is remarkable because during the explosion of violence against “idolatry” that marked the Puritans-in-charge years of the English Civil War, Cromwell’s fanatical New Model Army managed to smash every single other pilgrim shrine in England, (apart from St Edward the Confessor’s in Westminster Abbey). Whether St Wite was spared because of the strength of local devotion, or because Whitchurch is an obscure and straggly village well off any beaten track, is not known.



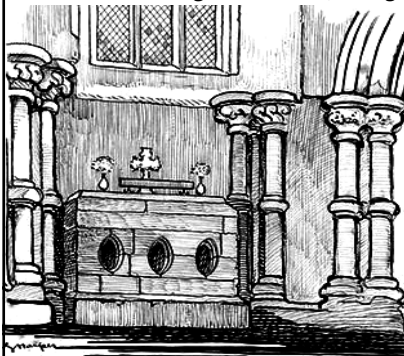
Her story is one of blazing courage: an anchoress, or lady hermit, living quietly in the countryside and practicing the usual peaceful arts of herbalism, she was roused to action when news came of an invasion of Danes (or maybe Saxons, no-one remembers) spotted in their ships approaching the mighty cliffs of what is now known as The Jurassic Coast, but then simply Golden Cap (because it lights up marvellously in the sunset).

Snatching up a burning torch (the thing that looks a bit like an ice-cream cone in the statue) she rushed to the clifftop and all alone frightened the invaders into retreating, thus saving the locals’ farmsteads from plunder and becoming a heroine for ever.

It may be that her survival also owes a good deal to the rejection of the BVM (Blessed Virgin Mary) by protestantism: the need for a protective female quasi-Deity nonetheless continuing as strongly as ever. Domination by a work-ethic-driven male God “the father” lacks appeal when said Father is so keen on punishment (plagues and so forth). For that reason pilgrimage to Weeta’s shrine may be included with the Marian kind; fulfilling the quest for a motherly Goddess who will heal and comfort all woes.

Her shrine, and tomb, in the North-West corner of a beautiful church, is a limestone box sitting above a sort of cupboard with open niches in it. Here supplicants may (and do) deliver their letters to her, requesting help of many sorts: return of a lost cat or errant boyfriend, for example. Minor miracles are certainly within her powers: once, suffering from a hideously swollen nose (caused by a toxic blackthorn splinter, if you must know) I visited, and pressing the hotly throbbing said nose against the coolness of her stone tomb I felt a rush of sweet relief: the nose shrank: I went to the Five Bells, the only hostelry in the village, to celebrate. It was shut, as usual. This is the other remarkable thing about Weeta, and Whitchurch: she and it are unmarred by any concessions to tourism whatsoever.

However, the British Pilgrimage Trust has now organised some coastal walks taking in the shrine, a long-ruined chapel of St



Gabriel, and other holy delights. They recommend bringing stout footwear and a packed lunch. This is something like a return to traditional pilgrimage customs and so to be applauded. But you will need to buy a ticket. Plus ça change.

collective luggage. Why not? This is the 21st. century, after all. The transient, random communities that were always a product of walking The Way are socially nourishing, even when the conversation mostly revolves around blisters, and so the rediscovery of a common humanity helps to weld our sadly divided species back together.

As St Augustine (of Hippo, I think, or maybe the other one) said 1500 years ago, “*solvitur ambulando*”. “It is solved by walking”. Now that we have a choice: the train, the plane, the minibus instead of a donkey, it’s a telling rejection of modernity that so many have returned to simply walking, specifically for relaxation, even when we don’t have to. Call it rambling, call it hiking — perhaps it was the 1930s trespassers of Kinder Scout who turned it into a radical activity. But in a fecklessly secular age, it’s the return of religion into the mix that is truly surprising.

Clearly, tourism and pilgrimage overlap in the everyday. The traveller may be a pilgrim when praying, and a tourist when dining. But all travellers away from home must pay for their subsistence (unless they are proper nomads with flocks, of course) and so for the settled population stuck in an area lacking natural resources, they are eminently milk-able. People-farming might be another name for tourism. Myriad small local firms and families gain a living providing services and hospitality to pilgrims: however, in most instances, God prevails over Mammon, and relations are more cordial than corporate.

The great lesson of pilgrimage is undoubtedly that the journey is more important than the destination. As the (possibly mythical) Mexican *brujo*, Don Juan Matus, put it in Carlos Castaneda’s *A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*:

“Before you embark on any path ask the question: Does this path have a heart? If the answer is no, you will know it, and then you must choose another path. ... A path without a heart is never enjoyable. You have to work hard even to take it. On the other hand, a path with heart is easy; it does not make you work at liking it. ... Any path is only a path and there is no affront, to oneself or to others, in dropping it if that is what your heart tells you to do. ... For me there is only the traveling on paths that have heart, on any path that may have heart, and the only worthwhile challenge is to traverse its full length — and there I travel, looking, looking ceaselessly.”

There are indeed a multitude of destinations, not by any means all connected to long-dead religious personages. Just make sure you take some quality socks along, lots of socks. It is hard to fix your eyes on Heaven if your feet are giving you Hell. Choose your own route, and pay your way in all the impoverished wayside hamlets you pass through. Whether or not your soul benefits, at least the countryside and its struggling inhabitants will.

1. <https://www.hexhamandnewcastlelourdespilgrimage.co.uk/pilgrimage/prices/contribution-to-the-sanctuary-at-lourdes/>
2. https://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/pdf/case-studies/Vannesa_J_Panaligan_-_Pilgrims_Prayers_and_Profits_Assesing_the_Cultural_Significance_and_Economic_Value_of_Lourdes.pdf
3. <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-781396>

This article draws on research for a forthcoming Wooden Book on Pilgrimage co-authored by Gill Barron and SM Parsons.