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“SEEKING THE SACRED THROUGH PILGRIMAGE”: A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

DRAGOS HERESCU

ABSTRACT: This paper aims to offer a theological taxonomy vis-à-vis the practice of pilgrimage. The taxonomy is constructed around three theological imperatives: that of Revelation, of the Incarnation, and the Sacramental. Acknowledging the polymorphic nature of pilgrimages, as religious, social, and ethno-cultural events which invite multi-layered investigation, this paper proposes an interdisciplinary bridging exercise by translating these theological imperatives into language that can be related to the sociological, anthropological, or ethnographic approach to pilgrimage, in order to highlight some interdisciplinary points of correspondence. The paper also touches on issues of secularization, the negotiation of public space by the religious event, and queries the role of the Church—particularly in the Eastern Orthodox context—in translating or inhibiting the translation of said theological imperatives in the wider social milieu.

KEYWORDS: pilgrimage, revelation, sacramental, secularization, Romania, Eastern Orthodox

A theological view of pilgrimage must be predicated on three fundamental issues or imperatives. The first is *the imperative of Revelation*—it is the *sine qua non* condition of all theology. It informs relationships in the ecclesial society and beyond and challenges the status quo through a prophetic social outlook. The second is *the imperative of the Incarnation*—because it is the ultimate revelatory action of God in history and society. It links divine transcendence with social context and makes the imperative of the Revelation hermeneutically relevant in social milieu. Moreover, the hermeneutical relevance of all subsequent religious actions is informed by the extent to which they maintain a rapport with the imperative of the Incarnation. The third imperative is *the sacramental imperative*—all religious action exists as sanctifying action *for* and *toward* the world, as a means to bring the world, humanity, and human society back to God—to show the complementarity and the

synergic possibilities between God and Man. In that sense, the sacramental imperative is ultimately revelatory.

Facets of these imperatives are discernible in pilgrimage events, but they usually overlap because of their organic connection. It is my intention, for the purposes of this article as an inter-disciplinary bridging exercise, to translate these theological imperatives into language that makes sense for a sociological, anthropological or ethnographic approach to pilgrimage—and by doing so, to highlight the interdisciplinary points of correspondence.

Two caveats are required from the onset. The first is that although the “view from theology” proposed here is informed by the theological vantage point of the Orthodox Church, to which I belong, it is presented without any claims to exclusivity, rather in the hope that it is a view that theologians from other Christian traditions may share—or perhaps contest.

The second caveat is that although meant as a “view from theology,” my remarks are informed by an interdisciplinary approach rooted in my interest in the process of secularisation and in my own experience of pilgrimage. In this model, I am drawing from both sociological deliberation about the process of secularization and from ethnography, harnessing my own experience as a pilgrim-participant at the pilgrimage to the relics of St Parascheva in Iasi, Romania, in 2015 (feast day October 14).¹ I grew up in Iasi, and the pilgrimage was an organic part of my upbringing, both as a local resident and as a Christian. It became the focal point of my doctoral project. Therefore, my “view from theology” is both intrinsically interdisciplinary and deeply rooted in my own rapport with this pilgrimage event in Iasi.

Without insight from the social sciences, any “view from theology” runs the risk of being “disembodied,” abstract, and inward looking—lacking a degree of critical reflectivity. Too often, in the absence of an informed socio-ethnographic voice, pilgrimage events are perceived and treated (especially in the Eastern Orthodox context) as opportunities to create a contemporary hagiography to reinforce devotional attitudes and the existent institutional religious framework, rather than being engaged in as the multi-layered socio-religious and cultural events that they are. Moreover, this type of contemporary hagiography is constructed virtually in “real time” thanks to its ubiquitous dissemination via social media—whether Church curated or not.

In this context, contributions from the wider field of the sociology of religion are immensely relevant for theology and indeed for the Church in its institutional or organizational manifestation. This relevance is particularly pertinent where public religiosity or the religiosity of public space is concerned, as is eminently the case in pilgrimages.

As several of the papers in this volume demonstrate, a pilgrimage is never solely a “religious event”; it never takes place in a religious bubble, as it were. Both established and up-and-coming pilgrimages are, logistically, a religious-secular co-production,

1. www.Basilica.ro is the official website of the Romanian Patriarchate's news agency. <https://basilica.ro/en/25000-prayerfully-process-with-relics-of-st-parascheva-in-iasi/> (accessed 21 Nov. 2019)

and they are never without cultural, ethnic, or political cross-pollination—whether from above, that is, Church authorities, local or state political structures, or from below, that is, from the individuals who participate, facilitate, or instigate a pilgrimage—and who bring their own idiosyncratic worldviews along with them in pilgrimage.

THE IMPERATIVE OF THE REVELATION

Even for the interdisciplinary theologian, the place to start is inevitably with *the imperative of the Revelation*. Anyone seeking the theological meaning or perspective of an event is fundamentally engaging in an “epiphanic methodology.” One of the fundamental questions in this methodology asks the following: *Does a particular (religious) event create an epiphanic opportunity—and in what way?*

In the case of a pilgrimage, other necessary questions follow from it: *Does a pilgrimage create space for an encounter with the sacred, with the numinous, with God, which would otherwise be inaccessible outside of it? Is this encounter uniquely accessible during that event or in that space?* If so, then, *What makes this opportunity for Revelation more likely in the context of the pilgrimage?* Equally, *What is likely to obscure it?* Finally, *What is the tangible impact of participation?*—that is, does the pilgrimage elicit *metanoia* (repentive change) in the participants or is it likely to produce a *Weberian disenchantment*—a consequence of the poor negotiation of the inevitable religious materiality and sacred consumerism of its external forms?

What seems to me evident, within the Eastern Orthodox theological framework, is that the Revelation imperative and its associated experiences exist between these two checkpoints: *the epiphanic opportunity* and *the metanoic outcome*. This consequence of transformation is vital, not only because it is a visible, quantifiable sign (which is sociologically mappable), but because (theologically) the unmistakable mark of God’s Revelation is that it changes people—albeit if at first the change is shrouded in bewilderment and not readily discernible.

I understand Revelation as both a personal and a corporate event and process. To fulfill the imperative of the Revelation, a pilgrimage ought to create space for God’s revelation both in the life of the individual (in one’s personal life narrative), in the relationships that that person (or persons) develop socially, and in the relationships that the community of participating believers develops with the wider societal order.

In this context, and without lapsing into rhetorical interrogations, one must consider factually questions like the following: *What changes in the life of a pilgrim because of a pilgrimage?* and *Is the change reflected in one’s life choices?* Often pilgrimages will be promoted or perceived as either something “semi-obligatory,”² as

2. Jill Dubisch, “Anthropology as Pilgrimage,” *Etnofoor Jaarg* 9, no. 2, (1996): 66–77, 72.

“quick-fix opportunities,” or as “panacea events” rather than as integral parts of a life-long process of change, a process of learning about oneself, about one’s Christian identity, and about one’s connection with the ecclesial community. Without this framing, the epiphanic opportunity discreetly available at every pilgrimage is obscured behind external forms, custom, attraction towards “the miraculous,” and superstition. Without this wider framing, any sustainable medium-to-long term effect of the pilgrimage in the life of the individual suffers the fate of the seed fallen between thorns or on rocky ground. The imperative of the Revelation casually becomes “the accident of the Revelation,” which is “overcome” on one’s return to the rhythms of secular life.

Although there is a growing body of work attempting to provide research-based answers to questions focused on religious practice related to pilgrimages in the Eastern Orthodox context, especially in Western Europe³ and the US,⁴ research taking place in Eastern Europe is often hindered by linguistic barriers (with not enough studies published in English, for example). Also, I have not identified research that aims to cross-reference, for instance, Sunday service attendance, or the frequency of receiving Communion, or fasting practices, or social attitudes with sociological data from follow-up surveys on pilgrimage.⁵ These medium- to long-term research projects would add much-needed insight into the transformational narrative associated with pilgrimages. Moreover, such data would provide markedly different opportunities for theological reflection and would help the Church map out the wider socio-ecclesial footprint of these major events.

Research in this vein has been conducted in relation to Western European pilgrimages, on the “Camino” by the American anthropologist Nancy L. Frey⁶ and on the Lourdes and Witten pilgrimages by the Dutch researchers Paul Post, Jos Pieper, and Marinus van Uden.⁷ However, even these investigations focus more on the personal processes of readjustment post-pilgrimage, that is, with the negotiation of the pilgrimage memory and of the return from pilgrimage itself vis-à-vis family, friends, and workplace rather than following up the ripples of that pilgrimage experience on the socio-ecclesial body. In this sense, the question *What changes in the life of a*

3. M. P. Carroll, *Irish Pilgrimage: Holy Wells and Popular Catholic Devotion* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

4. J. Klimova, “‘As if the Road There is Covered with Honey’: Inquiries into the Seductiveness of a Greek Orthodox Monastery in Arizona for Russian Orthodox Parish Pilgrims,” in *The Seductions of Pilgrimage: Sacred Journeys Afar and Astray in the Western Religious Tradition*, ed. M. A. Di Giovine and D. Picard (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 99–120.

5. There are surveys mapping pilgrimage attendance and destinations, for example the 2015 IRES survey in Romania, but they do not go further. <https://ires.ro/articol/302/romania-credincioasa—percep%C8%9Bii-%C8%99i-comportament-religios> (26% have attended a pilgrimage at least once). Accessed Jan. 15, 2021.

6. Nancy L. Frey, “Stories of the Return: Pilgrimage and its Aftermaths,” in *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism*, ed. E. Badone and S. R. Roseman (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 89–109.

7. Paul Post, Jos Pieper, and Marinus van Uden, *The Modern Pilgrim: Multidisciplinary Explorations of Christian Pilgrimage* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), chap. 5.

particular faith community or Church because of a pilgrimage? remains only partially answered.

The thing to look for, in my opinion, is that in conjunction with a pilgrimage there must exist a link, a transfer of (the) experience from the monadic individual to the corporate body of the faithful. This exchange is a decisive prerequisite for the wider transfer from the faith community to the (secular) society.

As long as pilgrimages continue to be promoted (or perceived) not as opportunities for the revelation of the corporate ecclesial event, but mainly as opportunities for "corporate individualism," where private prayer and devotion are endorsed as the mark of authenticity, without a clear corporate-liturgical dimension, they will operate on a limited scale as time-bound events, as seasonal occurrences, rather than prophetic events which impact the very fabric of society. This seems to me to be part of a wider process of "sacramental individualization," a kind of privatization of the revelatory event that has occurred in the Orthodox Church during the twentieth century and which Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, for instance, bemoaned. He offered the example of the Eucharist to highlight the pattern:

. . . the experience of worship has long ago ceased to be that of a corporate liturgical act. It is an aggregation of individuals coming to church, attending worship in order to satisfy individually their individual religious needs, not in order to constitute and to fulfil the Church. The best proof of this is the complete disintegration of Communion as a corporate act. Where the early Church saw her real fulfilment as a communion into one body (" . . . and unite all of us who partake of the one Bread and the one Cup, one to another . . ." Liturgy of St. Basil), we today consider Communion as the most individual and private of all religious acts, depending entirely on one's personal desire, piety and preparation.⁸

While Fr Schmemmann's rather pessimistic broad view of Communion practice can arguably be challenged by contextual evidence, it does speak to the apparent inability of coagulating and transferring individual(istic) experience into an integrated communal witnessing experience, which is discernible in the case of pilgrimages in Orthodoxy. The theological paradox of contemporary pilgrimages, especially in an Orthodox context, is that despite being very public events, their function and impact is, all but in name, internal—intra-ecclesial. Their impact in the wider society registers symbolically as a vicarious religious activity at best, without a sustainable and transformative societal impact, other than as opportunities to graft economic and cultural agendas on a seasonal religious occurrence.

The fact that this transition from "an aggregation of individuals" and from "personal sanctification, not at the edification of the Church," to quote Schmemmann from

8. Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann, "Theology and Eucharist," *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly* 5, no. 4, (Winter 1961): pp. 10–23. Accessed Nov. 20, 2019, <https://www.schmemmann.org/byhim/theologyandeucharist.html> in section 3.)

the same article,⁹ is not seen more clearly or actively fostered is significant from the standpoint of the Revelation imperative and should prompt more theological self-searching by the Church. It certainly hinders a transition beyond the confines of the Church and is, arguably, linked with both societal secularization and a type of internal ecclesial secularization which perceives of pilgrimages in a functional sense, rather than as epiphanic events.

Another aspect connected to the imperative of Revelation is the obvious remark that every pilgrimage reveals the degree of cultural and social relevance of religion in a society and it provides, in one way or another—as several of the papers in this volume show—a cross-section of the identity and psyche of a community or of an ethnic group. Religion, history, ethnicity, heritage, identity are all tethered to and contextually surface during pilgrimages. In this sense, pilgrimages can be opportunities for revelation about the social and historical condition (and conditioning) of a community or nation.

Inasmuch as pilgrimages epitomize the lived-out encounter between the religious and the societal order, they affirm the possibility of accessing opportunities for Revelation beyond denominational boundaries or institutionally sanctioned ecclesial structures. Two of the papers in this volume make a compelling argument in this sense—see Buyskykh's article.

How would the imperative of Revelation translate into socio-ethnographic language? One way to translate it is to consider the relation between pilgrimage and Revelation as the practical manifestation of *structures of plausibility*. To go on a pilgrimage is to admit and proclaim that something “works.” That “something” is faith, and faith is rooted in a Revelation event. Pilgrimage is one of the activities that people of faith engage in, either wanting to make sense of that initial revelation event or to try to elicit it again.

One way in which pilgrimages work as revelatory events is by creating (or rather recreating) a sacred copy of meaning that transcends religious boundaries and connects communities and individuals from diverse and even historically conflicting backgrounds. This sacred canopy of meaning emerging during pilgrimages is *liminal*. Because of its threshold character and innate potentiality, liminality is one of the fundamental qualities of a Revelation event. Theologically speaking, this is manifested in an incarnational sense during a pilgrimage by the creation of what the celebrated anthropologist Victor Turner called *communitas*.¹⁰

During my immersive investigation of the Iasi pilgrimage in 2015, I have experienced the “generalized social bond”¹¹ manifested in pilgrimages (which is central to Turner's *communitas*)—the bond where “secular distinctions of rank and status

9. Schmemmann, “Theology,” sec. 3 and sec. 5.

10. V. Turner, “Liminality and Communitas,” in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), 94–113, 125–30.

11. Turner, “Liminality,” 96.

disappear or are homogenized,"¹² although it "is yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties."¹³ The Iasi pilgrimage is a pilgrimage defined by two actions: the practice of queueing for miles on a designated route in the city and the influx of "bussed pilgrims" ferried from remote parts of Romania, both rural and urban. As I stood in line to reach the relics for the better part of one of the pilgrimage days, I interacted with doctors, teachers, cleaners, poor pensioners, Roma, married and unmarried couples (some joined by their children), or students on their own. Some were locals or had traveled from neighboring localities, others had crossed the country to be there. I myself was "a common pilgrim" and not a clergyman—having made the conscious choice of not wearing my clerical garb on this occasion. I can testify to the reality of the de-structuring *communitas* present there.

It is clear to me that the elusive experience of *communitas* occurring in (this) pilgrimage represents the revelation-based structure of plausibility which the Church, or more generally the religious milieu, fundamentally aims to make palpable in the socio-secular space. The revelation is *both* that a different way of social life is possible (as a consequence of a revelation-event supported by a sacred, rather than functional, orientation to the world) *and* that this way of life is not utopian. The limits of its social sustainability are set by the hegemony of secular structures of plausibility in the societal milieu and by the failure of the Church to integrate and expand this *communitas* within the structures of plausibility of the ecclesial society.

Therefore, what was equally apparent to me in Iasi was that the *communitas* of this pilgrimage, as Turner postulates, indeed serves as the anti-structure that maintains the structure. This is related to the crisis of "corporate individualism" mentioned before. In the context of the Revelation imperative of a pilgrimage, this corporate individualism holds the anti-structure aspect of *communitas* captive in the "walled-garden" of the pilgrimage event instead of freeing it into the wider ecclesial (if not societal) structures.

The space where that failure of transition happens in Iasi is between the commercial stands selling religious paraphernalia (which pilgrims encounter as they exit the compound housing the relics) and the buses that will take many of them home. In Iasi, this is the space of the "ritual of reintegration" into secular society. As the pilgrims literally return to take their coach seats, they also return to their assigned social "seats" while the sight of the vending stands "reminds" them not of heaven but of earth, and so the bond of *communitas* is gradually dispersed. People will turn their cell phones back on and start chatting or texting with friends and family, light up a cigarette and join others by the side of a bus, or complain about this or that issue with their peers. This transition "back into the secular order" is rather abrupt in Iasi (arguably a common feature of modern-day urban pilgrimages).

12. Turner, "Liminality," 95.

13. Turner, "Liminality," 96.

In 2015, I have also experienced the Iasi pilgrimage site as a “contested space,”¹⁴ one which entertains competing discourses or narratives, overtly or discreetly. For example, the pilgrimage is an opportunity for the ecclesial authorities to reinforce ethno-religious narratives, and for the local or national political figures who join in, the festal celebrations represent a means of legitimation and soft endorsement by the Church. In this sense, the pilgrimage serves to reinforce the socio-political and cultural-historical meta-structures that dominate Romanian society. The pilgrims themselves, by and large, adhere to (if they don’t actively support) these meta-structures. Therefore, as Ede and Sallnow argue, the Iasi pilgrimage manifests a plural character with the “capacity to absorb and reflect a multiplicity of religious discourses, to be able to offer a variety of clients what each of them desires.”¹⁵ *However, this plurality goes contrary to the ability of a pilgrimage to crystallize its epiphanic dimension, that is, the imperative of the Revelation as a structure of relevance, a modus vivendi, to the participants.* What would probably help the translation into the wider societal structures of the epiphanic aspect would be the abandonment of the associated socio-political and cultural message in favor of a more metanoic and revelatory emphasis.

This dimension of competing (or accompanying) narratives, at least on the Church’s side, has been reconfirmed to me in 2019, when I followed the Iasi pilgrimage online. I was able to do this quite closely thanks to the extensive and excellent coverage provided by the Iasi Archdiocese’s online media centre, Doxologia.¹⁶ As I watched several videos where pilgrims were asked (by Doxologia media personnel) typical questions, such as: their reasons for attending the pilgrimage, the things that impressed them most, the place where they came from, and so on, one question stood out as having a very functional and utilitarian character: “*Was it worth it?*” (in Romanian: “*A meritat efortul?*”)¹⁷—that is, worth coming from a great distance or queueing for several hours, or queueing overnight, and so on. Invariably, the pilgrims would answer, “Yes!”—which is not entirely surprising in curated material for online consumption. However, “Was it worth it?” is a very narrowly individualistic and mercantile way of approaching the event of the pilgrimage—and frames the pilgrimage not in the imperative of the Revelation, but in the transactional imperative of a return on an investment. In this sense, then, the favoring of “sacramental individualism” in pilgrimages hints at the fact that this pilgrimage is approached by the Church not so much as an opportunity for Revelation but as an opportunity to reassert its religious leverage in society—to argue that religion “is worth it.”

14. J. Eade and M. J. Sallnow, eds., *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*, orig. ed. 1991 (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

15. Eade and Sallnow, eds., *Contesting the Sacred*, 15.

16. www.doxologia.ro.

17. The video itself is entitled: “*A perennial question: is it worth the effort to wait for so many hours to venerate the relics of St Parascheva?*” (in Romanian: *O veșnică întrebare: merită efortul de a aștepta atâtea ore la închinare la Sfânta Parascheva?*), Doxologia.ro, “*O veșnică întrebare: merită efortul de a aștepta atâtea ore la închinare la Sfânta Parascheva?*”, October 12, 2019, video, 3:24, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=52&v=ntyztT_yohA

What seems to happen in Iasi is that the competing discourses aspect does not necessarily annul the *communitas* aspect. In fact, they coexist, in a symbiotic—if unmanaged—dynamic.

Another sense in which the imperative of Revelation can be expounded in an interdisciplinary way is to conceive of pilgrimages as *heterotopic events*—to borrow a concept used by the French social theorist Michel Foucault.¹⁸ Heterotopic space can be conceived of as liminal space and thus as fulfilling a revelatory role.

Foucault's definition of heterotopias is germane to the meaning of what is a pilgrimage:

Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications. To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures.¹⁹

For the duration of a pilgrimage, the related space—whether the actual church or an adjacent shrine, even radiating to a variable radius in their proximity—it all becomes heterotopic space. It is both isolated, restricted and penetrable, accessible. In relation to that space, any procession—whether inside the radius of the shrine or outside it—becomes a “portable heterotopia.”

Lining up to reach the shrine or the relics, waiting or journeying for several hours, the very choice of engaging and persisting in these actions—all of these are not just a rite of passage or purification, but essential elements of the heterotopic system of opening and closing. In the absence of these actions, the heterotopic site of the pilgrimage is inaccessible—both physically and spiritually. Every minute spent in the pilgrim space and every associated action brings one closer to where the sacred is located and removes one from the secular world. Equally, although this is difficult to test empirically, one could argue theologically that this gradual progression into the heterotopic space of the pilgrimage imbues the participants with the qualities of “the sacred” towards which they are gravitating. This is consistent with the deification paradigm—the synergic and gradual process by which human beings can grow into a deep and real union with God—a concept which the Orthodox East holds as a core theological fiat. There is an incarnational aspect to this participation in God, as it is achieved through Jesus Christ, and I will revisit this idea in the following section.

Foucault makes another relevant point:

[H]eterotopias . . . have a function in relation to all the space that remains. [. . .]. Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the

18. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” in *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité*, (October, 1984), <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf>.

19. Foucault, “Other Spaces,” 7.

sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory . . . Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled. This latter type would be the heterotopia, not of illusion, but of compensation. . . .”²⁰

In this context, the main function of a pilgrimage is to exist as a space or a time of Revelation. It stakes a claim about what is real—not in an abstract, metaphysical sense, but in a very perceptible social sense. It makes a claim about the “real-ness” of religious faith and behavior. This is why, as heterotopic space, a pilgrimage makes a statement about sacred encounter, and about the role, place, and vitality of religious/consecrated space in relation to secular space—that is, all the space that remains. For those outside the heterotopic space of the pilgrimage, the space that is claimed for religion during a pilgrimage is a “space of illusion that exposes secular real space.” What is interesting to consider is that, in this paradigm, the “real-ness” of the pilgrimage space is intrinsic to its voluntary character—it cannot be expressed except by action, by participation, whereas the claim from the secular side of it as being a space of illusion suffices a mere passive observation.

My own experience as a pilgrim in Iasi has its moment of revelation that is connected to this heterotopic quality. It occurred while taking part in the procession with the saint’s relics through the city center, which is one of the main features of this pilgrimage. Very quickly after joining the procession, I experienced the distinct feeling that the crowd both traps and liberates one. As part of the crowd, I had very little, if any, power or choice but to go where it took me. Although if I wanted to, I could have broken away from it, it would have taken not an inconsiderable amount of effort. At the same time, being part of the relentlessly forward moving mass was liberating. I did not have to do anything but entrust myself to the process, to the event, to its dynamic. I felt cocooned and safe, and I recall that for a good fifteen to twenty minutes (or more?), I lost any awareness of what was happening outside of the procession—as if time had stopped in some sense, or as if the procession became a time capsule with its own internal time and space, journeying in or through another space-time continuum. The revelation I had was that the procession triggered (or required) a sense of abandonment of one’s sense of self to the group identity. Despite a fleeting initial impulse for resistance, it felt like a conversion, that is, I am who I am because of the group I am in, because of our shared, in-sync actions and beliefs. That sense of revelation (belonging to a group—to which the saint also belongs—yet not losing one’s identity, rather having it amplified) has not left me several years after the event itself.

Pilgrimages have experienced a resurgence in recent times all over the world, and they attract people from all walks of life.²¹ There are areas like Eastern Europe, or

20. Foucault, “Other Spaces,” 8.

21. See I. Reader, “Pilgrimage Growth in the Modern World: Meanings and Implications,” *Religion* 37, no. 3 (2007): 210–29. Also see Joseph G. Pickard and G. T. Aitch, *Pilgrimage, Spirituality, and*

countries like Romania, where pilgrimages have come to dominate public religious patterns of engagement. This recent growth makes a strong case to reconsider pilgrimages in connection to the imperative of the Revelation, even as their resurgence often focuses the attention towards the thin line between pilgrimage and religious tourism.²² Nevertheless, their popularity is bolstered by the fact that pilgrims of all persuasions associate religion with the creation of and participation in "sacred revelatory space." This is an important feature in the functioning of society in these contexts.

THE IMPERATIVE OF THE INCARNATION

The imperative of the Incarnation in pilgrimage stands in relation to the notions of *the accessibility of the sacred* and *the locus of the sacred*.

Theology pronounces the Incarnation as the ultimate act of divine accessibility and participation. It is a radical divine action that shifts the accessibility of the sacred from the level of ritual and observance of commandments to the level of the person. It does not do away with ritual and commandments, but it shifts the point of contact, it changes the gateway. Through the Incarnation, the gateway and locus of the sacred becomes Jesus Christ—that is to say the personal God—who has to be engaged on the level of the personal relationship.

Pilgrimages are reminders that in certain places, certain individuals have accessed the sacred in a very personal way: the sacred as embodied in Jesus Christ, fully God and fully Man. Usually, a consequence or a manifestation of that embodied experience of the sacred is framed in the language of miracles. Because of the proximity that they bring to a saint, their relics, dwelling place, or the place of their repose, pilgrimages are means of channeling this possibility in the here and now. Through the mediation of pilgrimages, the imperative of the Incarnation is reaffirmed along the lines of the theophanic ontology summed up in Athanasius' famous decree: "God became man so that man might become God." A pilgrimage place is, in that sense, the Q.E.D of the Incarnation imperative, that is, the fulfilment of the possibility of man participating in divinity. When pilgrimages lose sight of this imperative, they usually do it under the guise of enabling the "proficient processing of participants" in their search for a "personalized and authentic experience of the sacred." *The test of the*

Personal Transformation (St. Louis: University of Missouri, 2018), accessed Nov. 22 2019, <https://www.umsl.edu/socialwork/files/pdfs/CVs/pilgrimage,-spirituality,-and-personal-transformation-pickard.pdf>; and A. Irimias, A. Mitev, and G. Michalko, "Demographic Characteristics Influencing Religious Tourism Behaviour: Evidence from a Central-Eastern-European Country," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, no. 4, article 3 (2016), accessed Nov. 22, 2019, <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol4/iss4/3>.

22. Bogdan C. Ibănescu, A. Munteanu, Oana M. Stoleriu, "Territorial and Marketing Strategies Related to Religious Tourism in Northern Moldavia, Romania," *CES Working Papers X*, no. 1 (2018): 129–48.

imperative of the Incarnation is to succeed in affirming first and foremost the theocentric character of human nature and of human relations. The promotion of theocentric human relations ought to be the social agenda of the Church—which pilgrimages can crystalize in a unique way.

Being inherently rooted in the Incarnation imperative, pilgrimages possess a constant spiritual appeal because they fundamentally offer opportunities for replicating some of the embodied experience of the divine manifested in the person of a saint or in the place where a miracle occurred. Theologically speaking, pilgrimages invite individuals to partake in the experience of *deification*, of participation in Jesus Christ, especially when their focus is a shrine or the relics of a saint. This is realized in pilgrimage by “the action of ritual and the transformation of vision”²³ that occurs as a result of it. In theological terms, this transformation of vision, potentially available during a pilgrimage, is consistent with the spiritual process of *metanoia*, of the changing of one’s life, of one’s outlook. In Romans 12:1–2, Paul provides a snapshot of this process which can be discerned in relation to participation in a pilgrimage: “. . . brothers and sisters, I urge you . . . to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (NIV).

This offering of one’s body as a “living sacrifice” is the cornerstone of the Incarnation imperative in the context of a pilgrimage. It relates to both the sacrifice made by the saint (whether the “red martyrdom” of death or the “white martyrdom” of life-long asceticism) and the sacrifice made by pilgrims (of time, of patience, endurance, and so on.). This pattern is certainly present in Iasi.

This sacrificial dimension enables the possibility (or capacity) of *accessing the sacred*, especially in the context of pilgrimage. The sacrificial dimension also physically conditions *the locus* where the sacred can (best) be accessed, that is, in a place of sacrifice, or a place that emulates the characteristics of one. In that sense, I want to unpack further the imperative of the Incarnation (with the Iasi pilgrimage as an example) in relation to two aspects: (a) the sacrificial dimension expressed through ritualistic behaviour and its potential for “transforming the vision,” and (b) the way the “choreographed sacred geography” of a pilgrimage site aids the accessibility of the sacred.

A) The Imperative of the Incarnation and Accessing the Sacred Sacrificially

Although the lines between pilgrim motivations and the impetuses of religious tourists are increasingly imprecise²⁴ (the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage is a classic

23. Cynthia Hahn, “Seeing and Believing: The Construction of Sanctity in Early-Medieval Saints’ Shrines,” *Speculum* 72, no. 4 (1997): 1079–1106, 1079.

24. A. Antunes, S. Amaro, and C. Henriques, “A Closer Look at Santiago de Compostela’s Pilgrims through the Lens of Motivations,” *Tourism Management* 64 (2018): 271–80, accessed Nov. 23, 2019, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/4d5c/bef1cfa293150e6ec4f791bf6e694e5aa7c.pdf>.

example in this sense), and also despite evidence that this trend is replicated in other parts of the world, including Eastern Europe,²⁵ research has shown that distinct religious or devotional motivations continue to rank highly in what drives people to engage in pilgrimage.²⁶

In that sense, for example, one benchmark for differentiating pilgrims from tourists has been to associate participation in pilgrimage with the idea of sacrifice.²⁷ The pilgrim is making an "embodied offering"—an offering of their time, devotion, and energy by not shying away from the physically-demanding nature of a pilgrimage. This seems to be a common thread for pilgrimages in both East²⁸ and West.²⁹ This has certainly been my experience of the Iasi pilgrimage. In Iasi, where queueing for many hours at a time (ranging from twelve to twenty-four), is arguably the defining experience of the pilgrimage; pilgrims are clearly identifiable and their behavior is openly sacrificial. As a pilgrim in Iasi, one will exercise the full range of gestures and practices: standing for long stretches of time, facing intemperate weather, kneeling, bowing, kissing, eating together, making the sign of the cross, praying on the way, and other practices. All this is very much felt (although not necessarily openly acknowledged) by the pilgrims as a sacrifice, as an offering.³⁰

In keeping with the Incarnational Imperative, one of the marks of transformative pilgrimages is that they are rooted in and typify what I like to call "religion of the bone-aching variety." Several of the papers in this volume underline the hardship element of pilgrimage, with its penitential undertones and redemptive aspect, which seems almost impossible to separate from the sacrificial dynamic of "pilgrim input—godly output." Religion of the "bone-aching variety" is the most powerful because it looks understated and it often feels weak—or is perceived by the secular world as weak, delusional, or nonsensical. There is a Christ-like aspect to this, which takes the conversation about the locus and accessibility of the sacred and frames it in the language of relational ontology.

Sacrificial behavior on the way to the pilgrimage site or shrine is complemented by (or leads to) pilgrim conduct that aims to make the most of the unfettered access

25. M. Banica, "Coach Pilgrimage: Religion, Pilgrimage, and Tourism in Contemporary Romania," *Tourist Studies* 16, no. 1 (2016): 74–87.

26. Justyna Liro, Izabela Soljan, and Elzbieta Bilska-Wodecka, "Visitors' Diversified Motivations and Behavior: The Case of the Pilgrimage Center in Krakow (Poland)," *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 16, no. 4 (2018): 416–35.

27. C. T. Palmer, R. O. Begley, and K. Coe, "In Defence of Differentiating Pilgrimage from Tourism," *Int. J. Tourism Anthropology* 2, no. 1 (2012): 71–85.

28. Finish researcher Chris Chulos argued that physical sacrifice or exertion was "the particularly Russian contribution to Orthodox Christian pilgrimage." See Chris Chulos, *Converging worlds. Religion and community in peasant Russia, 1861–1917* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003), 67.

29. See S. Rock, "Pilgrimage," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Studying Christians*, ed. G. D. Chrystides and S. E. Gregg (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 196–99, 198.

30. "Thousands of pilgrims queue in Iasi, Romania, to pray at relics of St. Parascheva," *Romanian Insider* (October 14, 2013), accessed May 18, 2021, <https://www.romania-insider.com/index.php/thousands-of-pilgrims-queue-in-iasi-romania-to-pray-at-relics-of-st-parascheva>

to the sacred once the shrine has been reached. In Iasi, besides the predictable actions like the blessing of clothes, the touching of garments against relics or icons, repeated anointings, and so on, I also witnessed an unexpected development. A woman, having reached the relics of St Parascheva, took out her mobile phone and (in what was clearly an ongoing video call) was streaming her experience with her interlocutor. What was even more surprising for me was that, as she was pointing and panning the camera to the saint's coffin, she kept saying, "Here, take it in!," prompting the person on the other side of the call to "take it all in," that is, the experience of seeing and being (albeit virtually) so close to the saint's relics.

This example highlights the tension between the Incarnation imperative, understood as "ritual action and the transformation of vision" and vicarious embodiment. There is an unequivocal tension at play here, because this type of behavior aims to seize the sacred in a very direct and personal way, while at the same time it exposes structures of meaning that blend idiosyncratic private religiosity with Church-endorsed conduct, all in a very public way. Nevertheless, biblical parallels could be drawn between the tactile behavior of pilgrims looking to access the sacred in person or remotely as replicating the gesture of the woman with the flow of blood touching the garment of Christ (Mk. 5:24–34), or of the sick who would place themselves so that Peter's shadow would fall on them to heal them (Acts 5:15).

In Iasi, a recurring statement among the pilgrims I spoke with (particularly the women), a kind of leitmotif of the pilgrimage, was that they come to the pilgrimage of St Parascheva because "the saint is our friend. She calls us. We come on her birthday." The Incarnation has made the sacred personal and accessible. Saints perpetuate this personal dimension which invites familiarity. This personal dimension challenges the transactional inclination in pilgrimage, but the way that the balance is tilted often rests with the way a pilgrimage is managed or promoted.

B) The "Choreographed Sacred Geography" of a Pilgrimage Site

The Iasi pilgrimage site, especially during the days of the event, largely fits the template outlined by Cynthia Hahn,³¹ who aptly argues that pilgrimage sites in both East and West have taken cues from the example of Jerusalem. In Iasi, one of the ways in which this "structural incarnational geography" is manifested is, as Hahn also argues, in the "visual rhetoric" of the holy at the site. The relics of Saint Parascheva are housed throughout the year in the metropolitan cathedral and only taken out in procession and placed outside, in an ornately decorated ciborium, on the cathedral esplanade during the pilgrimage days. The presence of decoration, ornamentation, and the circulation of intermediary materials (small paper icons, cotton swabs, oil vials, etc.) contribute here as well (in a repatterning of the original Holy Sepulchre Jerusalem

31. Hahn, *Seeing and Believing*, p. 1086.

site) to the shaping of an incarnate vision of the beauty and glory of heaven where the saint dwells spiritually.

One effect of this is, arguably, the generation of an "incarnate peripatetic koinonia canopy" between both the saint and the pilgrims and between the pilgrims themselves. It relates to the visualization of the assembly of faithful as the Church, as the Body of Christ, and as a locus of the sacred. This perspective is present from the early days of the Christian church, with Clement of Alexandria arguing this incarnational dimension in the second century, stating that the true holy place is the assembly of the Christian people.³² He echoes a similar statement by Jerome that "the true temple of Christ is the believer's soul."³³

As the Church in general (and also in the case of the Iasi pilgrimage) has become increasingly proficient at managing the "choreographed sacred geography" of pilgrimage sites, there seems to be insufficient internal scrutiny of its role in the pilgrim/tourist dynamic and the risk of obscuring the imperative of the Incarnation in the process.

A very good example in this sense is the brief encounter I had in Iasi with a woman returning home after the pilgrimage. This lady was walking hurriedly back to her coach but had stopped briefly to catch her breath. It was evident from her demeanor that she was distraught, so I ventured to ask her if she was all right. Very curtly she told me that she "will never make the mistake of returning to this pilgrimage." She had queued since the night before and was utterly disappointed by the whole experience. She had been on other pilgrimages in Romania, but this was the first time she had come to Iasi. Her other pilgrimage experiences had been better, but not here, as it was very crowded. "There are just too many people!" she exclaimed as she left.

The question here, with the Incarnational imperative in mind, is as follows: *As the Church becomes more proficient at organizing, managing, and promoting pilgrimages, does it propagate the virtues of socially-desirable religious identification, that is, of a type of civic religion, and demote the theological imperative of developing socially-applicable theocentric human relations to a secondary agenda?* In other words, is the Church managing pilgrimages as a religious tourism business, or as part of a wider, concerted incarnational drive for societal co-participation in God's societal conjoining with humanity in the unique event of the Incarnation?

A side effect of the Church's ignorance or complacency about religious tourism—particularly in the Orthodox Church—can, among other effects, potentially lead to an exacerbation of the tendency to associate religious participation or affiliation with making a rational choice as part of a religious market worldview, an approach germane to the secularization process. In that sense, a lackadaisical approach to the

32. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 7.5, accessed Jan. 21, 2021, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/02107.htm>.

33. Jerome, *Letter* 58, 7, accessed Jan. 21, 2021, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001058.htm>.

Incarnational imperative on the part of the Church could also become a factor or catalyst to the wider societal secularization process.

A degree of “choreographed sacred geography” is inevitable during pilgrimages—and indeed it can be argued that it takes shape organically—but held against the imperative of the Incarnation this space of the sacred must be conducive, first and foremost, to the rediscovery of the theocentric character of human nature and of human relations.

Pilgrimage is connected to “spiritual muscle memory,” and part of that spiritual memory is the experience of theocentric human relations. The imperative of the Incarnation is the basis for a sustainable scaling of that experience beyond the boundaries of one event. Connecting pilgrimage more directly with the Incarnation is a continual challenge—a challenge of a transformation of (personal and corporate) identity and vision. Gregory of Nyssa made this argument a long time ago: “Change of place does not effect any drawing nearer unto God, but wherever you may be, God will come to you, if the chambers of your soul be found of such a sort that He can dwell in you and walk in you.”³⁴

The physicality of pilgrimages, as part of their incarnational aspect, shapes religious expression in society. Spirituality or religion that is not held together by muscle memory is (a) easily at risk of becoming “imagined religion,” syncretic religion—religion that is hard to reconcile with the received and tested experience of the Church; and (b) a hotbed for secularization. This muscle memory is personal and communal at the same time. The fitness of this religious muscle memory impacts the level of cognitive and behavioral religiosity both of the individual and of societally-manifested religious structures.

In the context of pilgrimages, the ultimate outcome of the Incarnation imperative is the affirmation that the locus of the sacred is in the human person—both in the saint with whom the pilgrimage is related and in the person of every individual engaging in pilgrimage. In the former case, it was actualized; in the latter, it is waiting to be actualized, in resonance with Christ’s statements in Luke 17:21: “the kingdom of God is within you,” and John 10:34: “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I have said you are “gods”’?”

Does a pilgrimage facilitate the Incarnational imperative, that is, the renewal of the core Gospel message that God “became what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself”?³⁵ Or rather does it scatter this imperative in external religious practices and ritualized performances that promote an ersatz incarnational environment and divert the energy and attention of the practitioner from the internal pilgrimage of one’s life to external forms? I contend that not enough

34. Gregory of Nyssa’s 379 or 380 “Letter 2. To Kensor, On Those Who Make Pilgrimages to Jerusalem (Gr. *Περὶ τῶν ἀπιόντων εἰς Ἱεροσόλυμα, Κηνσίτορι*),” in *Gregory of Nyssa: The Letters*, trans. Anna M. Silvas (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), 117–22.

35. Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against Heresies*, Book 5, preface. Accessed Nov. 23, 2019, <http://gnosis.org/library/advh5.htm>.

attention is dedicated today in the Church to how these external forms eventually overshadow the imperative of the Incarnation and corrode its sustainable appropriation by the ecclesial body, both at the level of public discourse and that of internal ecclesial orientation.

THE SACRAMENTAL IMPERATIVE

To discuss the Sacramental Imperative in relation to pilgrimage one must first say something theological about the sacraments themselves. In the Orthodox Church, the sacraments are the bridge that connects the Church with the world. In that sense, they are the means by which the Church, on the one hand, makes sense of itself as a human-divine entity, as the "Body of Christ." On the other hand, the sacraments are also the means by which the Church makes sense of itself in relation to the world—on the sociocultural and historic plane. Therefore, the sacraments are both part of the Church's orientation to the Kingdom of God and its orientation to the world. They are a hermeneutical tool related to both "identity" and "action."

In the words of Metropolitan John Zizioulas, one of the most prolific Orthodox theologians of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries:

The identity of the Church has to be set out by examining the mysteries and sacraments that make the Church present within our historical experience. The sacraments are images of the truth arriving from the end times so that they become the experienced reality of the Church. [. . .] The sacraments witness to the indivisible and inexhaustible mystery of Christ, and cannot therefore be regarded as an individual topic, but rather as the hermeneutic by which we can approach ecclesiology as a whole.³⁶

In Zizioulas's perception, the sacraments are rooted not in the past, but in the future, in the *eschaton*. They connect the present with the realized reality of the Kingdom of God, and thus they are the "knowledge of God and the signs in which our faith is rooted."³⁷

How does all this relate to pilgrimages? If pilgrimages are understood, primarily, as acts of faith, then it means that they are inevitably related to the sacramental life and ethos of the Church. They, too, have to participate in the same sacramental hermeneutic and they, too, have to exist, in some measure, as "images of truth arriving from the end times." They, too, have to make available a degree of knowledge about God. They have to function authentically as signs in which faith is rooted.

36. John D. Zizioulas, *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Douglas Knight (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 137.

37. Zizioulas, *Lectures*, 38.

The growing tendency of the commercialization of pilgrimages worldwide risks transforming pilgrimages from “images of truth arriving from the end times” into “images of the miserable truth of this world” at the mercy of money, power, profit, and the entropic fragmentation of societal bonds. The Sacramental Imperative challenges the Church, or the church communities that promote and sustain pilgrimages, to engage prophetically with pilgrimages—not as signs of a successful ecclesial strategy hailing the social relevance of religion, but as opportunities to extend the sacred canopy of meaning, the sacramental participatory outlook from the confines of the Church to the wider society and world. The prophetic engagement with pilgrimages is a movement from the “denominational-izing of the sacred” to the rediscovery of the Church’s sacramental vocation as being in the world “for the life of the world.”

In connection with the Sacramental Imperative, pilgrimages have to be reclaimed from being commercial opportunities or “brownie points” in the religious-secular tug of war as prophetic events in which the gathering of believers is a witness about the sacramental nature of the world, that is to say, as responses to and as signs of a real communion with God, who is present in the world and can be revealed through it. In the words of Fr Alexander Schmemmann:

The Church is the sacrament of the Kingdom—not because she possesses divinely instituted acts called “sacraments,” but because first of all she is the possibility given to man to see in and through this world the “world to come,” to see and to “live” it in Christ.³⁸

Therefore, pilgrimages make a statement about space. They make a statement about the geography of this world, about the way we conceive of the societal landscape not merely in its secular guise but in its sacramental dimension. Pilgrimages claim social space in a non-secular way. But I am not convinced that the Church’s handling of pilgrimages helps claims this space in a sacramental way.

The American urban theorist Edward Soja argues that “space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology.”³⁹ Particularly in Eastern Europe where the dust has not settled over the secularization process, pilgrimages are casually used these days by the Church (both Orthodox and Roman Catholic)⁴⁰ at the level of public discourse, as proxies for a political and ethno-religious ideology. A case in point is the statement made in 2013 by the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Eger (Hungary), Dr.

38. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: SVP, 1998), 113.

39. E. W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), 6.

40. <https://www.gandul.info/stiri/arhiepiscopul-din-eger-catre-pelerinii-veniti-la-služba-de-pesumuleul-mic-staruinta-langa-biserica-da-forta-secuilor-sa-reziste-10886649>, accessed November 28, 2019 (article published originally online on 2013.05.18 and updated on 2019.04.01).

Csaba Ternyák to the 100,000-strong pilgrim gathering (largely made up of Hungarian-descent participants, known in Romania as 'secui'), at Șumuleul Mic, Harghita County, Romania, for the feast of Pentecost. In addressing the pilgrims, the archbishop said that: "*holding on to the Roman Catholic Church gives strength to the secui people to resist, even today*". No clear indication is made as to what this resistance is against but, despite this ambiguity, the language is overtly politically and ethno-religiously charged.

As the Romanian sociologist Mirel Banica argues,

pilgrimage places have always been "political places" (*lieux de la politique*) [. . .] i.e. perimeters where the image of the national and local political leaders is displayed and negotiated publicly, where the existing links between the local public authorities (including law enforcement like the Gendarmerie and Police) and the Church authorities are verified, as a functioning reflex of the notorious "Byzantine symphony". . . .⁴¹

If a pilgrimage space or context fails the Sacramental Imperative test, it does so because its apparent innocent spatiality is used to hide human geographies of power, politics, and ideology, rather than to reveal the Church as the sacrament of the Kingdom and allow both participants and external observers to see in and through this world, the world to come. If a glimpse of this future world is visible in the pilgrimage, it seems to emerge from the pilgrims themselves because of their commitment and devotion. When pilgrimages do fulfil the Sacramental Imperative, they do so in a very particular way—they translate the sacramental hermeneutic of the Church to the plane of a "societal sacred geography of space." This opens them up to a socio-theological interdisciplinary approach.

Pilgrimages relate to the Sacramental Imperative by reclaiming and repurposing all possible space for the sacred. This repurposing may occur in a variety of ways: through the presence of relics, which may be taken into procession through a city, or because a "sacred via" takes shape in an area, affirming churches or certain places as set apart, or as revelatory of the divine in a way that otherwise (or in other periods) they would not be. In Eastern Europe, this is often related to the drive for the re-sanctification of holy places and/or of social space after communism, or after events and periods of suffering, loss of meaning, or loss of purpose.

Pilgrimages (with all that they set in motion) can and will transform social and public space into religious space on multiple levels. On the one hand a pilgrimage refreshes the participatory element of the ritual, that of the participation in *the sacred*, and engages anew the people taking part. It also creates a much larger and

41. M. Banica, "Practica Pelerinajului in România Contemporană (cu un Studiu de Caz)—The Practice of Pilgrimage in the Contemporary Romania: A Study Case," *Buletin Științific, Fascicula Filologie*, ser. A, vol. 20 (2011): 289–304, accessed Nov. 28, 2019, <http://bslr.ubm.ro/files/2011/24.BSLR-XX-Banica.pdf> / ., Banica, "Practica Pelerinajului," p. 291, translation from Romanian my own.

harder to ignore societal footprint for “religion in the secular.” On the other hand, the open-air service setup repurposes structures and symbols of a secular pedigree (like the concert-style stage arrangement), for “the religious”—and they are an extension of the consecrated church space.

In Iasi, for example, it is pertinent to conceive of the pilgrimage, and of its component elements, particularly the procession with the relics of St Parascheva through the historic city centre, as a *rite*—a modern-day urban manifestation of a “rite of consecration,” to use Durkheimian language. The procession with the saint’s relics through the city center, together with the festal outdoor Liturgy, and the pilgrimage activity represents a large-scale “rite of consecration” of the city. Furthermore, pilgrimages communicate the Sacramental Imperative in the way they extrapolate “sacred time” from the confines of the sanctuary and ritual into streets, roads, and the otherwise secular social space.

Sacramentally-imbued pilgrimage is in itself, and is experienced, as an *atemporal* activity. It operates in the order of the “transformation of time.” On the one hand, in pilgrimage, time is liberated from the “sacred/profane” dichotomy because being on pilgrimage challenges that very fragmentation. A sign of sacramental immersion in a pilgrimage may well be that the participant is not concerned about “being late” (for something else). On the other hand, in pilgrimage, individuals have the opportunity to rediscover time as “redeemed time,” as participation in the New Day of the Lord, the day and time of redemption and salvation. So, pilgrimages can be conceived of as an eschatological foretaste of that time “as the end of this world, as the beginning of the world to come.”⁴²

One of the most striking realizations of my experience of the Iasi pilgrimage, as a pilgrim, was that I had “all the time in the world,” that I was not pressed for time. Yet, it did not feel as if I was wasting any of this time. Pilgrimage, in relation to the Sacramental Imperative, ought to feel, in the words of Fr Alexander Schmemmann, as “salvation from time.”⁴³ A similar argument has been put forth more recently by the Italian cultural geographer Veronica della Dora. In research conducted at monasteries in Meteora, Greece, della Dora highlights the liturgical valences of pilgrimage as experienced by pilgrims or visitors who are invited by the monks to participate in their liturgical life.⁴⁴

The atemporal character of pilgrimage is one of its transcendent traits. It is linked with the sense of abandonment—the sense of “letting go”—to a higher power, to the group identity, or so on. It is an experience that sits outside of normal, secular, efficiency-driven time and it demands the surrender to these terms of engagement by the one who engages in it. This is not about the efficient use of time as understood in the secular world but about a “divine, higher temporal efficiency.” Engaging in

42. Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 52

43. Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 48

44. Veronica della Dora, “Setting and Blurring Boundaries: Pilgrims, Tourists, and Landscape in Mount Athos and Meteora,” in *Annals of Tourism Research* 39, no. 2 (April 2012): 951–74.

pilgrimage is not about *chronos* but about *kairos*. A sign of the fulfilment of the Sacramental Imperative is how much a pilgrimage event or space is geared towards creating a disconnect from secular *chronos*-time and the entry into sacred *kairos*-time. In *kairos*-time, it is God who acts, who has the initiative, rather than humans.

In countries like Russia, Romania, Serbia, and the like, the Orthodox Church seems to have entered into a sort of "pilgrimage frenzy" and is helping to drive a type of competition in relation of the access to the sacred with more secular operators. I am concerned about the "marketization of the sacred" and its commercial outcome, that is, of "merchandising superstition," which is related to a form of privatizing access to the sacred. This merchandising can also create the narrative that pilgrimages are a sort of "silver bullet" for dealing with or affirming one's religious/faith identity. This creates the issue of going as a pilgrim and returning as a tourist, rather than the reverse.

Nevertheless, I share the theological optimism of Inna Naletova (a Russian-born practical theologian based in Austria) who argues convincingly that pilgrimages can and often do lead to the formation of "kenotic communities" that can theologically and positively impact how people see one another, thus transforming the taxonomy of social relations in the broader sense from secular to religious:

If a person is viewed as made in the image or "likeness of God," then meeting up with people can also serve as a means to encounter the Holy in a broader social context. Through kenosis, liturgy becomes extended in time and space, and church teaching is experientially applied to life.⁴⁵

However, at least in the context of the Orthodox Church and of post-communist Eastern Europe, a deficiency seems to exist in finding a way to translate the *communitas* element, the Eucharistic, sacramental, *metanoic* dimension of pilgrimage into the wider society. This difficulty relates to the fundamental issues of "witness" and of ecclesial institutionalism. It leaves wide open the question of how does the Church, both as a community of faithful and social actor, recognize and deal with the failure to witness? There is a danger of vicariously "sermonizing" society (secular society) via pilgrimage, and perhaps by reassessing the "why" and the "how" of pilgrimage in relation to the three Imperatives addressed in this article, the Church could offer anew a prophetic, revelatory, and sacramental view from theology to contemporary society.

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45. Inna Naletova, "Pilgrimages as kenotic communities," in *Eastern Christians in Anthropological Perspective*, ed. C. Hann and H. Goltz (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010), 240–66, 241.