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## Placing pilgrimage during Covid-19

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Covid-19 and its far-reaching effects will dominate the histories written about 2020. Amongst the litany of impacts, it will be noted that planned pilgrimages did not occur that year. Instead of crowds climbing Croagh Patrick or pilgrims fasting on Lough Derg, thousands of people are participating in online pilgrimages, through television and radio, and in their prayers. This significant disruption has brought the very nature of pilgrimage into focus as organisers and shrine staff arrange alternative facilities for believers to maintain personal and family traditions.

While the Covid-19 emergency presents many challenges, and indeed considerable sorrow for some families and communities, it also offers opportunities to re-consider many aspects of normal life. We have a new appreciation for nature, for the simple act of meeting family and friends, and for the importance of communal spaces. The same applies to pilgrimage locations. The people and places of the journey on *Tóchar Phádraig* or at Lourdes are valued even more when they are inaccessible. This article reflects on these lessons based on my research on pilgrimage in Ireland by considering the role of place, the characteristic of virtual pilgrimages, and a long history of spiritual pilgrimage in Christianity.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE

*Place* is central to pilgrimage. People travel on historic routes and to particular locations. These sacred spaces relate to the life of a holy individual, miraculous events, or special natural significance. In Hinduism, millions of people travel to the River Ganges to ritually purify themselves in the water, while the Shikoku pilgrimage in Japan involves visiting eighty-eight temples associated with the Buddhist monk Kūkai. The Irish landscape is dotted with sites linked with lives of saints, particularly the hundreds of surviving holy wells. Pilgrimages bring us to these places forging a connection between people, place, and God.

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This connection is especially prominent in Irish pilgrimages. The work of a fellow geographer, Mary Nolan, found that topographical and natural features are a clear focus of pilgrimage activity in Ireland, while on continental Europe objects and relics tend to be the primary subject of pilgrimage.<sup>1</sup> Physical characteristics define many of our main pilgrimage centres; for example, Lough Derg is an island, Croagh Patrick a mountain, and Lady's Island is a coastal lake. These places are embedded in the natural and cultural landscape with long histories of worship. Also, they tend to be located in more peripheral areas, reflecting trends in Judaeo-Christian tradition where remote and difficult to access locations are strongly associated with spiritual events and inner transformation.

Pilgrimages facilitate out-of-the ordinary experiences and consciousness of forces that cannot be accessed elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> The Holy Land vividly presents the life and mysteries of Christ, while Lourdes can make the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary seem more palpable and holy wells can bring locals closer to their patron saint. These places are considered sacred because of their history and associations with religious figures, but they are also the sites of personal spiritual encounters for people, adding to their significance. In Christian terms, it is important to clarify that God is as present in these spaces as elsewhere, but human awareness of this presence can become heightened through the practices and character of these places. Writing about Croagh Patrick, Rev. Garry Hastings, explains it well: 'mountain is just a way of thinking. A tool to help is get nearer to God. We are always close to God, but we forget...The mountain is a way to help us remember.'<sup>3</sup> Holy sites and their pilgrimages are instruments of faith encouraging journeys of reflection and spiritual renewal.

One of the ways pilgrimages enable this process is by removing us from the everyday world. Edith and Victor Turner, two prominent scholars of pilgrimages, define this as *liminality*: a transitional state where pilgrims are freed to consider the more important things in life and open themselves to spiritual encounters.<sup>4</sup> It is encapsulated in Lough Derg where pilgrims spend three days both physically and metaphorically disconnected from the world on a lake island. Discussing this aspect, one participant, Ann, explained

1 Mary Nolan, 'Irish Pilgrimage: The Different Tradition', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 73 (1983), 421–438.

2 Jill Dubisch, *In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1995), p.38.

3 Gary Hastings, *Going Up the Holy Mountain: a spiritual guidebook* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2015), p. 26.

4 Victor Turner & Edith Turner, *Image and pilgrimage in Christian culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

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to me that: “We’re all so busy. I find at work with email, and then I have an iPhone, so you never get off-line ... I think it’s good that we can cut off and just get back to basics, maybe listen to the silence for a while.” She describes being liberated from normal concerns enabling spiritual awareness crafted by the prayers and ceremonies of the three days.

*Communitas*, or fellowship, is the other primary feature identified by the Turners’ examination of pilgrimages. The shared journeys bring people together and encourage conversation and reflection. Fr Frank Fahey, the spiritual driving force behind the revived *Tóchar Phádraig* path and leader of countless pilgrimages, emphasises that pilgrims are inclusive, being open to others and the lessons we can learn from encounters with strangers.<sup>5</sup> Claire, who had walked the route several times, described to me this sense of community: “most of the people get it, that you don’t stick with your own gang and you try to mix around ... walking along the road, we’re all kind of together and people are minding each other.” Pilgrimage is a gathering of different people, who in sharing a common path can forge solidarities, tell stories, and learn truths through each other, as well as through God.

Together these different strands illustrate the role of place in pilgrimages. It is the physical and social setting that enables people to become closer to God and each other. However, what happens when we can no longer travel to these places?

### ONLINE PILGRIMAGES: A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS?

The Covid-19 restrictions have seen Irish pilgrimage sites respond creatively to enable people participate remotely. This builds on pre-existing infrastructure which have become more common recently, such as live streaming masses or devotional websites dedicated to shrines. Virtual or cyber pilgrimage has been in existence for some time with different groups and shrines using the new connectivity of the internet. The limited research in the area has shown that these pilgrimages can still be spiritually nurturing and meaningful for participants.<sup>6</sup>

Technology and good online services (where available) enable more immersive experiences where places can be vividly represented through detailed photographs and audio-visual recordings. I have used video in my own research on pilgrimage

5 Frank Fahey, ‘Pilgrims or Tourists?’, *The Furrow*, 53:4, (2002), 213-218 (p.215).

6 Connie Hill-Smith, ‘Cyberpilgrimage: The (Virtual) Reality of Online Pilgrimage Experience’, *Religion Compass*, 5:6, 236-246, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2011.00277.x>

in Ireland to record events and show them to different audiences.<sup>7</sup> Although these representations cannot do justice to the reality of being there, and fail to fully capture the sense of the place and the crowds, these tools can nonetheless help people feel closer to sacred places.

Lough Derg, best known for its three-day pilgrimage running throughout the summer, has a series of online resources, including messages from the pastoral team and the initiative to ‘Do Lough Derg from wherever you are’.<sup>8</sup> Also, in place of day retreats run during the early summer, the staff have assembled videos and prayers forging new connections with the shrine and its long spiritual history. Feedback from pilgrims illustrate the value of these facilities: “So grateful to be able to tune in online and be in a prayerful space”, “A beautiful prayerful online retreat, I enjoyed every moment of it. It really touched my heart.”<sup>9</sup> Participants gain from these online pilgrimages. Photos and prayers from Lough Derg help prompt memories of previous visits creating spiritual and emotional resonances. While these are obviously different from the experiences on the lake-island, they still offer believers comfort and a means to feel closer to God during a challenging time.

Online pilgrimages can also help generate a sense of connection with others. The Covid-19 restrictions have encouraged families and friends to interact using live chats and messaging apps much more. Social media groups are being used to help communities mobilise and for people to reach out to each other. Sharing time in the same virtual space can forge solidarities and help people feel part of a group. Knock has transferred its busy summer schedule online with diocese, religious communities, and lay organisations participating virtually.<sup>10</sup> They are facilitating people in connecting with the shrine and with each other. Likewise, the Facebook page for the annual Lourdes pilgrimage for the Diocese of Cloyne assembled a programme of events and shared items across the week when the pilgrimage was due to occur.<sup>11</sup> Comments from members of this community highlight the value of this temporary replacement. Different forms of fellowship arise through social media channels, which provide a space for groups to share and explore faith together.

7 For example, Croagh Patrick <https://vimeo.com/88449841> or Lough Derg <https://vimeo.com/88745693>

8 Lough Derg June 2020 Notice: <https://www.loughderg.org/>

9 Lough Derg, Online Day Retreats May 2020: <https://www.loughderg.org/online-day-retreats-may-2020/>

10 Knock Shrine, Online Pilgrimages For May & June 2020: <https://www.knockshrine.ie/online-pilgrimages-for-may-june-2020/?v=d2cb7bbc0d23>

11 See <https://www.facebook.com/cloynelourdes>

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While pilgrimages are described in terms of the physical journey, the accompanying spiritual and emotional journeys are the more significant parts. Paths, churches, fellow travellers, and encounters along the way are the infrastructure. Personal development, reflection, and learning in faith are the hallmarks of pilgrimage. As Fr Frank Fahey, wrote ‘the essential journey of the pilgrim is the journey inwards to that sacred space within the heart where the Holy Spirit dwells.’<sup>12</sup> By this measure, online pilgrimages can have comparable impacts to real-life ones.

## SPIRITUAL PILGRIMAGE

While online pilgrimages are a recent innovation, they succeed a long tradition of different forms of spiritual or contemplative pilgrimage. Writings from the early church in Ireland and Britain show that prayerful reflection on sacred sites has been a Christian practice for centuries. Following the official acceptance of Christianity in the Roman Empire, the sites in Palestine associated with the life of Christ began to be developed, especially through the patronage of Emperor Constantine’s mother, Helena. Structures, such as the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem or the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, enabled a form of spatial theology whereby these locations served as witnesses to the major events in the Christian story.<sup>13</sup> These sites could be studied and reflected upon to enhance understanding of scripture. The physical locations of the incarnated God assisted believers in achieving the salvation he promised.

These developments are encapsulated in the text *De Locis Sanctis* (*Concerning sacred places*) by Saint Adomnán (c.627/8-704), the ninth abbot of the Iona monastery. He was a spiritual leader of some significance whose writings still inform our understanding of theology in the early Irish and British church, or the Insular church as it called. *De Locis Sanctis* provides a description of the seventh century Holy Land which was to be used as an exegetical aid to help monastics understand the mysteries of the bible.<sup>14</sup> Considerable details are included to enable contemplative pilgrimage for an audience who knew they would never be able to visit Palestine. The book reduced the physical distance between Jerusalem, understood as the centre of the world, and Iona, or other monasteries in Ireland and Britain, the islands at the end of the earth.

12 Fahey, *Pilgrims or Tourists?*, p.215.

13 John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place*. (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2003).

14 Jennifer O’Reilly, ‘Reading the Scriptures in the Life of Columba’, in Cormac Bourke (ed.), *Studies in the Cult of Saint Columba* (Dublin 1997), p.80-106.

In his chapters on Jerusalem, for example, Adomnán blends the physical description and biblical tropes to highlight it as the heavenly city (e.g. Ezekiel 40-48; Revelation 3:12; 21:1). Writing on the church marking where Jesus ascended, he tells of how the light pours out and ‘mount Olivet seems not alone to be illuminated, but even on fire, and the whole city...seems to be lit up.’<sup>15</sup> This vision merges the earthly metropolis and the new Jerusalem to come, while also being a hopeful symbol calling to mind Matthew 5:14 - ‘You are a light for the world. A city built on a hill-top cannot be hidden’. Throughout the text, he crafts a geography that combines scripture, the writings of the Church Fathers and monastic saints, and religious motifs to create a vivid atlas leading people through the mysteries of Christianity. In *De Locis Sanctis*, Adomnán created a rich meta-tool: a text on the Christian holy places in and around Jerusalem which aimed to help the faithful reach the heavenly Jerusalem.

*De Locis Sanctis* is one of the clearest early examples of a device facilitating spiritual pilgrimage. It used the mechanisms of the time to overcome the barriers faced by Christians far from the Holy Land. In essence, this is the same principle at play in the online pilgrimages of this summer. Times of hardship and restrictions can foster creativity. The labyrinths in medieval cathedrals, most prominently in Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Chartres, were used as a substitute for pilgrimage to Jerusalem, which was inaccessible at the time. Or, more locally, people have told me about those who are sick or housebound using a book illustrating the prayer pattern at St Gobnait’s holy well in Ballvourney, Cork to spiritually complete the stations. On different scales, across different times, each of these cases illustrate the role of virtual pilgrimages.

The tradition of spiritual pilgrimage in different forms illustrates that the recent online pilgrimages follow a well-trodden path. Technology and connectivity render them in new ways but underlying each of these innovations is a desire to assist people in journeying closer to God. There is insight and strength to be gained from considering how these diverse instruments align towards a common goal – many roads to the same destination.

#### CONCLUDING THOUGHT

In early June, the beginning of the Lough Derg pilgrimage session, I was thinking about the island lying empty, when usually there would be hundreds of people going barefoot on the prayer beds, in the basilica, and keeping the twenty-four-hour vigil. Through

15 Adomnán, *De Locis Sanctis* i.24, ed. and tr. Denis Meehan (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies: 1983), p.69.

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social media, Fr La Flynn, the prior, explained how he was keeping on the spirit of the pilgrimage through daily mass and performing prayer stations on behalf of everyone. It was a simple yet poignant message emphasising the power of this place and the attempts to help people connect with it remotely.

The Covid-19 emergency has prompted us all to reflect on different parts of our lives and society more generally. It has highlighted the importance of family and community over economy and materiality. This reflective time has also underscored the significance of pilgrimage, and the role of places such as Lourdes, Croagh Patrick, and Knock in the spiritual lives of the faithful. Perhaps, when we can return to these places, we will do so with a new appreciation for them and those we encounter along the way.

Fr Frank Fahey defined pilgrimage as ‘essentially a journey in faith or at least with an element of faith expectancy in it.’<sup>16</sup> These journeys are understood to be physical ones on the Camino de Santiago, in rituals of Hajj, or circling Mount Kailash in Tibet. However, traditions within Christianity and other faiths show us that the spiritual journeys – the crucial part - can take different forms. St Adomnán assembled a rich text to lead his community and others towards the benefits of exploring the Holy Land over thirteen-hundred years ago. Today websites and apps are doing the same thing. They help people deal with the challenges of their lives or assist in their spiritual progression. Place remains central to pilgrimages, but *how* we get to those places is just as significant. Each pilgrim walks the trail in their own way, praying for their own intentions. Books, computers, and labyrinths have their place alongside mountains, paths, and churches.

16 Fahey, *Pilgrims or Tourists?*, p.213.

**True Worship.** Worship we must, but worship whom? Worship is only demeaning if one worships anyone or anything other than God. Twice when the seer of the apocalypse bends down to worship an angel, he is rebuked. ‘Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God!”’ (Rev. 19,10 c f 22.8-9.

– TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE, *Alive in God*, (London: Bloomsbury Continuum) p. 345.