

Pilgrimage, the Assumptionists and Catholic Evangelisation in a Changing Europe: Lourdes and Plovdiv

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Abstract: The rapid development of academic research into pilgrimage in Europe has encouraged an exploration of the growing links which have emerged between west and east Europe after the collapse of the 'Iron Curtain' in 1989. This recent development has to be set within a longer historical perspective, however, and analysis must consider not only religious contexts but also the influence of political, economic and cultural processes at local, national and international levels. These related processes are examined here through an analysis of the development of a major Roman Catholic shrine in the south-west corner of France – Lourdes – and the ways in which the Assumptionist Order and the Vatican sought to link this shrine to an evangelising mission in south-eastern Europe during the late 19th and early twentieth century. This leads on to a discussion of the Bulgarian Catholic Church during the Communist period, Vatican policy and the revival of links between the Bulgarian church and Lourdes after 1989, focussing on the Assumptionist's role in Plovdiv, Bulgaria's second largest city. These links between Lourdes and Plovdiv are part of a wider process where the shrine's officials seek to respond to global forces, cultural diversity and geopolitical change.

Key words: pilgrimage, evangelisation, Europe, Lourdes, Bulgaria

Pilgrimage across Continental Europe

Between the 1960s and 1980s the anthropological study of pilgrimage in the English-speaking academic world was largely undertaken outside Western Europe. Highly skilful ethnographies were undertaken on non-Christian pilgrimage in the Indian sub-continent and N. Africa, for example, or on Christian pilgrimage in Latin America. The anthropological neglect of West European pilgrimage reflected perhaps the implicit assumption that post-Reformation secularisation was reducing the public significance of religion. Even though millions of Roman Catholics flocked to pilgrimage shrines across the West European region, most anthropologists ignored the pioneering, if brief, study by Robert Hertz of the St Besse pilgrimage in the Italian Alps (1913). We can see a link between Hertz's article and the explorations of the political dynamics and contested character of European Christian religion by Eric Wolf, William Christian Jr. and Mart Bax which

developed from the 1960s - see Christian's classic ethnography, *Person and God in a Spanish Valley* (1972). However, their work focussed on fairly secluded rural communities or, in the case of Mart Bax, beyond Western Europe in the Balkans. Scant attention was paid to large scale, well established pilgrimages and there was no anthropological equivalent of the wide vision shown by the geographer, Mary Lee Nolan, with her husband Sidney in their invaluable mapping of West European pilgrimage published in 1989. Furthermore, although an extensive literature by local scholars on pilgrimage in Eastern Europe was available, Anglophone anthropologists lacked the linguistic skills and disciplinary interest to access studies written in the Central and East European academic traditions of ethnology and folklore studies.

Yet, Anglophone studies are gradually appearing on pilgrimage in Eastern Europe and Russia. They focus on both Eastern Catholic and Russian Orthodox cults (see Buzalka 2006, Rock 2007, Kormina 2004, 2010), thus complementing work already published on Greek Orthodox pilgrimage (Dubisch 1995). Increasingly close ties between West and East Europe, associated partly with the expansion of the European Union, have encouraged scholars to contribute to these emerging networks, even if research is still constrained by stereotypes, and linguistic and disciplinary boundaries (see Hann 2011, Hann and Goltz 2010, Eade and Katic 2014).

As boundaries between disciplines and research regions have begun to weaken, so scholars have become more aware of the similarities in pilgrimage beliefs and practices around the world. In the European region, there has developed an awareness of the ways in which global migration has enabled non-Christian pilgrimages to emerge and the increasing cultural diversity of Christian congregations, particularly in Western Europe, has seen Old Christian shrines being revived and reinterpreted together with pilgrimage routes. (see Hermkens, Jansen and Notermans 2009, Jansen and Notermans 2012, Eade 2013).

However, we must be careful to avoid seeing these developments within a narrow religious context. This expansion was also driven by the diversification of tourism leading to the emergence of an interweaving of tourism and pilgrimage, i.e. heritage and ecotourism and religious tourism, linked to improvements in transport, the rapid expansion of virtual communication, the growth of leisure time and greater longevity (see, for example, Collins-Kreiner 2010, Stausberg 2011, Reader 2013).

Pilgrimages in the West were also influenced by the growth of more complex social and cultural identities, the encouragement of greater individualism bound up with reflexivity and a focus on self-development and fulfilment. An educated, literate middle class was keen to 'pick and mix' from different cultures: thus many are attracted to go on pilgrimage as a form of self-discovery, whilst also being suspicious of institutional forms of religion. These changes have encouraged major pilgrimage shrines to adapt if they are to remain attractive destinations. The rela-

tionship between pilgrimage, tourism and travel has become even more complicated and requires us to be sensitive to political and economic forces as well as to religion. To explore these changes more closely, I will focus on Europe's most popular shrine - Lourdes in the south-west corner of France. Although we start in this remote area, we very quickly are brought into national and international contexts and quite quickly - and surprisingly for me at least - to Bulgaria and its second largest city, Plovdiv.

Lourdes: The development of a modern Roman Catholic shrine

The 19th century saw a remarkable ebb and flow of Marian shrines in north-western Europe. Some already established shrines revived their fortunes, but the ones which caught the public eye for both religious and political reasons were new - La Salette 1846, Lourdes 1858, Pontmain 1871 in France, Oostakker 1873 in Belgium and Knock 1879 in Ireland. The Vatican approached these novel cults with typical caution, but through a centuries-old process of investigation and control it eventually approved those mentioned above, and employed them within its religious mission and its dealings with secular authorities. The creation of pilgrimage shrines, and pilgrimage in general, was inextricably involved in politics as an exercise of power therefore - both through political struggles within the Roman Catholic Church and between the Church and the state.

Lourdes developed not only as the most popular of these new shrines, but as one of the most visited places in Europe, rivalling such long established pilgrimage attractions as Rome, Assisi and Padua. Given the obscurity of this small Pyrenean town, such popularity was a formidable achievement and was the result of various factors - not just religious, but also more broadly cultural, as well as political and economic. As several fine analyses have shown (see Harris 1999, Kaufman 2005, Claverie 2008), Lourdes' popularity was driven by the public controversies concerning miraculous healing. Supporters of the shrine and its critics (within the Church as well as among secularist politicians, journalists, intellectuals and doctors) focussed on claims by pilgrims that they had been dramatically cured through the spring water which was central to the cult, or during the ritual celebrations held there.

Lourdes' fame was also established through its vigorous development as a thoroughly modern shrine whose religious and business leaders used the latest technology to promote the destination (see Kaufman 2005). The media has played a crucial role in maintaining the shrine's high profile with television, film and more recently the internet keeping Lourdes in the public eye. The shrine's developers have also looked beyond France to an international audience and so Lourdes' fortunes illustrate very clearly the cultural and politico-economic vicissitudes of Europe more generally.

The cult developed after 1858 when a local girl, Bernadette Soubirous, had a number of séances at a grotto by the river Gave outside the town with an apparition which was eventually established as St Mary; the Mother of Jesus Christ, popularly referred to as Our Lady. Among the several messages given by the apparition, the Vatican threw its weight behind one which Bernadette reported in her local Bigourdan dialect - 'Que soy era Immaculada Concepciou' ('I am the Immaculate Conception'). In 1854, Pope Pius IX had proclaimed the centuries-old controversial belief that St. Mary had been born immaculate, i.e. conceived without sin, one of the few dogmatic teachings of the Church. Hence, the message had immediate consequences for those promoting the dogma among Roman Catholics, as well as for the Church's relations with outsiders. Yet, what caught the popular imagination was another message concerning a spring she had uncovered during another séance. *Aquero* or 'that thing', as Bernadette initially referred to the apparition, told her to: 'Go and drink at the spring and wash yourself in it' (Laurentin 1979: 60). Claims that miraculous cures had occurred at the spring or through the use of ' Lourdes water' quickly spread and established the shrine's fame as a national and then an international centre of healing.

Lourdes was founded around two themes therefore – one referring to ecclesiastical authority and theology, while the other involved people's everyday concerns about health and healing. These themes have remained in tension with one another and reflect age-old entanglements between official and popular beliefs and practices, between the figures of Jesus Christ and his mother Mary and between worldly and spiritual concerns.

Claims concerning the healing powers of 'Lourdes water' led to intense debate between the religious and medical professionals associated with the shrine and their secular opponents (see Harris 1999, Kaufman 2005). The Lourdes' authorities moved swiftly to control access to the water by providing taps near the grotto and began to test healing claims through a rigorous process of medical scrutiny. Bathing in the spring water soon became organised and a bathing house for pilgrims was built next to the Medical Bureau where people's claims to be cured were assessed. Volunteers also provided assistance to pilgrims at the local station, within the shrine's precincts (*domaine*) and at the Notre Dame de Sept Douleurs hospital in the new town which had grown up between the *domaine* and the old town.

Lourdes and the Assumptionist Order

Lourdes' emergence as a leading Marian healing shrine was surrounded by political controversy involving the French state and internal divisions within the Catholic Church. Here I want to focus on the role of the Assumptionist Order since the history of this organisation provides a crucial link to the later discussion

of the connection which the order forged between Bulgaria and France, especially between Plovdiv and Lourdes.

The Augustinians of the Assumption – popularly known as Assumptionists – were founded in Nîmes, south-west France, by Fr. D'Alzon in 1845. He came from an aristocratic and deeply religious family and his early years as a priest were devoted to evangelisation, particularly with Protestants who constituted approximately a third of the local population.¹ Encouraged by his life-long collaborator, Mother Marie-Eugénie de Jésus, who had founded a female order, the Religious of the Assumption, he established his own order with the particular aim of 'education, publication of books, works of charity, retreats, and the foreign missions.'²

The organisation of pilgrimages neatly fitted Fr. D'Alzon's mission and he took a keen interest in the emergence of two Marian shrines in particular – La Salette, in the Alpine region near Grenoble, and Lourdes. However, La Salette was sidelined after the success of the first national pilgrimage to Lourdes in 1873, organised through a collaboration between the Assumptionists and a lay organisation of women, Notre Dame de Salut, based in Paris. A division of labour emerged between the two organisations with regard to Lourdes and pilgrimage more generally. The Assumptionists focussed on political campaigns and religious journalism as part of their national and international evangelisation strategy, encouraged the growth of organised pilgrimages to Lourdes and other French shrines and orchestrated the major public ceremony held at the shrine, while Notre Dame de Salut concentrated on organising the most important pilgrimage to Lourdes – the French national pilgrimage held in the middle of August around the Feast of the Assumption. A third organisation, the Little Sisters of the Assumption, was also set up to care for sick pilgrims during the train journey to and from Lourdes and at the shrine's hospitals and grotto.

The rituals introduced by the Assumptionists at Lourdes had both a religious and political function. A crucial change was made in 1888 when the daily Blessed Sacrament procession was introduced. Attention shifted away from the grotto, the baths and the intimate relationship between Our Lady, St Bernadette and the pilgrim towards the miraculous potential of the Host as the Body of Christ held before the serried ranks of *malades* in the Esplanade, a kind of religious parade-ground set apart from the grotto and the baths. Here the ceremony could build towards a crescendo where there was a potential for very dramatic and public claims of healing. When *malades* came forward with such claims, it bolstered the Assumptionists' defence of miracle – in alliance with the medical bureau which examined these claims - against their anti-clerical and republican opponents.

1 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emmanuel_d'Alzon [Accessed 20 April 2013.]

2 Ibid.

Differences within the Catholic Church concerning Marian devotion and the central position of Jesus Christ overlapped, therefore, with tensions between the Assumptionists' religious mission and secular republicanism. The conflict with the state reached a climax during the 'Dreyfus Affair' where a Jewish officer was falsely accused of treason. The Assumptionists engaged in bitter, anti-Semitic attacks and dissident activities against the Third Republic, which led to the order being expelled from France in 1905.

Lourdes after the First World War: The expansion of its international role

As the shrine became more organised it began to build, around the highly visible French National Pilgrimage in August, a calendar of regular diocesan pilgrimages extending far beyond France's borders. Although the shrine remained open throughout the year, the pilgrimage season began in earnest during May and lasted until October. The Hospitality of Notre Dame de Lourdes emerged as the principal lay organisation which looked after the bookings made by these large pilgrimages and controlled the shrine's key areas (the grotto, baths, esplanade, station and, much more recently, the airport). The large pilgrimages were supplemented by a host of smaller groups raised, for example, through parishes, while those arriving to discover more about the shrine were catered for through the Hospitality's 'Pilgrimage for a Day' service.

Lourdes' expansion as a pilgrimage destination between the First World War and the 1960s was partly driven by the close relationship between the shrine and the town. This relationship was marked by ambivalences reflecting local and national social and cultural tensions. Initially, the shrine was seen as the town's possession – Bernadette was, after all, a local girl and the local parish priest, Fr. Peyremale, played a key role in the validation of the apparitions. However, the shrine's rapidly expanding fame, the arrival of outsiders, such as the Assumptionist Order and the Garaison Fathers, and Bernadette's departure to a convent in Nevers, in central France, broke down these local boundaries. A new town emerged between the shrine and the old town which serviced the growing throng of visitors. The creation of the Hospitality organisations promoted this process, since the helpers ensured the rapid transfer of pilgrims from the station to the shrine, by-passing the old town.

The 1905 laws separating Church and state – the foundation of France's contemporary *laïcité* policy – in the aftermath of the Dreyfus Affair not only hit the Assumptionists hard, but also led to the shrine's property being transferred to the town in 1910 (Harris 1999: 365). This move further deepened the divisions between the anti-republican sympathisers associated with Lourdes and their secularist antagonists. Yet attempts to make Lourdes a conservative, bordering on fascist, bastion were weakened by political forces outside France, especially the

Vatican. Hence, while the far right Action Française probably had many admirers among conservative Catholics at Lourdes, the organisation was condemned in 1926 by Pope Pius XI who, ironically, had declared Bernadette blessed a year earlier and then went on to canonise her as a saint in 1933.

As the Vatican sought to respond to the rise of Communism and Fascism during the 1920s and 1930s, pilgrimage shrines like Lourdes were firmly tied to papal policies, which from the late 19th century onwards built pragmatically on papal responses to industrial capitalism, urbanisation and political and military conflict. Lourdes was to be celebrated as a place of healing – in physical, spiritual and social terms – where visitors could be reminded in a variety of ways about the Church's teachings concerning faith in an increasingly secular world. Among the various messages Bernadette received during her apparitions, the one referring to Our Lady's immaculate conception greeted all those who visited the grotto, while Catholic teaching concerning transubstantiation and Jesus Christ's redeeming sacrifice through His crucifixion was acted out daily through the Blessed Sacrament procession and the 'blessing of the sick' in the esplanade. Despite Bernadette's complex personality and ambivalences – or perhaps because of them – the Church chose to emphasise her humility, obedience and patient suffering (see Laurentin 1979). Significantly, the only figurative representation of her in the *domaine* is a statue of her as a simple young shepherdess on the procession route to the esplanade – a site easily missed.

The play of ambiguities, tensions and contradictions inherent in a site such as Lourdes, where so many religious, political, economic and social interests are at play, have been noted by several commentators (Harris 1999, Kaufman 2005, Claverie 2008, Harris 2010, 2013, Eade 2013). They were reflected at the grotto through the sticks and other paraphernalia which were proudly hung up in rows opposite the statue of Our Lady in the niche where the apparition had appeared. These mementoes expressed the fame of Lourdes as a healing shrine and people's hopes and desires, rather than papal dogmatic teachings. Their disappearance during the 1970s indicated the Church's desire to emphasise the incarnational/experiential character of bathing rather than miracles, while changing beliefs and practices concerning health and illness were encouraging visitors to adopt a more everyday and less spectacular interpretation of miracle (see Harris 2013). These changes were also reflected in the re-asserted stress on penance and healing through the priestly laying of hands on the afflicted.³

From the 1980s, the development of the meadow across the river from the grotto enabled the authorities to emphasise once again devotion to the Blessed Sacrament by erecting a tent for the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. Increasing attention to youth activities also led to the construction of a more permanent

³ I am grateful to Alana Harris for pointing out these changes in a personal communication.

building on the meadow, in turn leading to the more recent Stations of the Cross site.

Pilgrimage and evangelisation in South-East Europe: The Assumptionists' international mission and Bulgaria

Roman Catholic interest in the evangelisation of South-East Europe has a very long history, of course, extending both before and after the break with the Orthodox Church in 1054 C.E. Emissaries had been sent to the territories which became part of contemporary Bulgaria as early as the 9th century with scant success. The Vatican renewed its evangelisation efforts during the 17th century through the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith founded in 1622 as part of Rome's response to the Protestant Reformation. One of their first successes involved the conversion of some members of a heretical sect, the Paulicians or Paulini, who lived in the northern area of the Ottoman Empire near the towns of Plovdiv in what is now central Bulgaria and Nikopol on the Danube. As Perkowski notes:

The Orthodox considered them apostate and excommunicated. The Paulini felt themselves to be true Christians and when they came in contact with an 'apostolic visitor', Bishop Pietro Cedolini, in 1580 some of them requested affiliation with the Vatican. Thereafter, and especially during the second half of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries, there was intense Catholic missionary effort among these latter-day Paulicians (Perkowski 1994: 104).

This evangelisation of areas, which were later incorporated within an independent Bulgaria, reflected important changes in the regional balance of power as the Ottoman Empire weakened. In the Treaty of Karlowitz of 1699, Austria and Venice acquired control of Ottoman territory in the Western Balkans and 'granted freedom of religious practice to all Christians in the remaining portions of the Ottoman Empire, thus ending a 300-year Greek Orthodox monopoly' (Ibid: 103). Rome sent Franciscan and Passionist missionaries 'first to care for established Ragusan [Croatian] trading colonies, then to proselytise wherever possible' (Ibid.: 104).

By the mid-19th century, Rome's development of an 'Eastern mission' had become embroiled in France's aspirations as the protector of Christian congregations and pilgrims in a weakening Ottoman Empire. In 1848, Louis Napoleon revived an agreement made in 1525 where France had been acknowledged as the formal protector of all Christians there, including those belonging to Orthodox communities. This claim was contested by other European powers and played a role in the conflicts leading up to the 1853-1856 Crimean War. However, the 1856 Treaty of Paris confirmed France's historic rights and Russia formally abandoned its claim to protect Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire.

This was the geopolitical context in which the Assumptionists sought to contribute to the Vatican's 'Eastern mission'. Fr. D'Alzon was eager to use pilgrimage and schooling as two prime weapons in the Catholic Church's evangelising mission and in 1862, during one of several visits to Rome, he was encouraged by Pope Pius IX to concentrate on the conversion of Orthodox communities within the Ottoman empire. Fr. D'Alzon's 1862 visit to Rome was also highly significant in terms of where the Assumptionist mission was to begin, since various Bulgarian activists had taken their grievances to the Vatican between 1859 and 1861. These activists were inspired by both religious and political considerations. They chafed at Orthodox controls wielded by the Greek Orthodox officials in Constantinople, especially the refusal to permit the use of Bulgarian in church ritual and education. One of its leading figures, Dragan Tsankov, was closely allied to France and he joined the delegation of Bulgarian religious and secular leaders which resulted in Pope Pius IX recognising the formation of the Bulgarian Uniat Church in 1861. Although Joseph Sokolsky was appointed as the first Archbishop, his abduction by Russian agents meant that the Assumptionist mission had to wait until Raphael Popov, his successor, arrived in 1863 and established his base at Adrianople, where the first Bulgarian Uniat gymnasium was built.

The Eastern Catholic churches were natural, albeit controversial, allies in the Vatican's strategy. They were in full communion with Rome and were represented at the Holy See through the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, but followed their own non-Latin rites. In Bulgaria and other East European countries where the Orthodox Church held sway, their hybrid character made them subject to suspicion and hostility. They were often seen as the Vatican's Trojan Horse for the conversion of Orthodox congregations to Catholicism – a perception encouraged by periodical migrations of Orthodox groups or individuals into Eastern Catholic churches or Roman Catholicism. These religious boundaries and the movements across them became more urgent during the growth of nationalism in the 19th century Ottoman Empire.

The emergence of the Bulgarian Eastern Catholic Church grew out of the discontent with the growing Hellenisation of schools and church ritual during the early 19th century. By the 1860s, this discontent was expressed in two different ways – through moves towards autonomy from the Patriarchate at Constantinople and through alliance with Rome. The second development leads us back to the Assumptionists and their international mission and to how a French shrine □ Lourdes □ could become linked (surprisingly perhaps) to Bulgaria.

Fr. D'Alzon visited Constantinople in 1862 – six years after the Treaty of Paris – and sent one of his trusted Assumptionist colleagues, Fr. Galabert, there to pursue his missionary strategy. Fr. Galabert acted as an important link between the emerging Bulgarian Eastern Catholic Church, Rome and the Assumptionist Order. He became the theological adviser to Archbishop Raphael Popov but also es-

established schools across the region, including the primary school of St. Andrew in Plovdiv during 1864. His efforts were supported by an order of female helpers – the Congregation of the Oblates of the Assumption – which Fr. D’Alzon created in 1865.

The Plovdiv mission was a key node within the expanding network of Assumptionist centres across Bulgaria, Romania, Russia, Yugoslavia, Turkey and the ‘Holy Land’. The primary school was followed by the creation of the celebrated St. Augustine College in 1884. This French medium college played an important role in the strong links which the Assumptionists developed between Bulgaria and Western Europe. The career of Fr. Kamen Vichev, one of their leading members and a beatified martyr, clearly illustrates these connections. He was born into an Orthodox family but converted. After training at a seminary in Karagatch and Pharanaki in what is now Turkey, he spent two periods of study in Belgium ‘interrupted by periods of teaching at St. Augustine College in Plovdiv and at the aluminate (minor seminary) at Kum Kapu (Turkey)’.⁴ He was ordained a priest in Constantinople on December 22, 1921 in the Oriental rite and then proceeded to study for a doctorate in theology at Strasbourg and Rome. From 1930, he was based at St. Augustine College and when the latter was closed by the new Communist regime in 1948, he was appointed provincial vicar of the Assumptionists with responsibility for five Eastern Rite and four Latin Rite parishes in the Plovdiv area.

His links with France and other West European countries helped to make him an object of suspicion for the regime and he was arrested in 1952, tried and executed, together with two other Bulgarian Assumptionist colleagues (Burns 2005: 262: a Capuchin priest and Vincent Bossilkov, the Catholic bishop of the Nicopolis diocese in northern Bulgaria. While Roman Catholic congregations and their clergy bore the brunt of the new regime’s hostility, the Eastern Catholic Church was less harshly treated. Although one of the three Assumptionists was an Eastern Catholic, the Communist regime preferred to impose strict controls on Eastern Catholics rather than abolish the Church altogether.

The Roman and Eastern Catholic Churches began the Communist period as very small, but well organised institutions. Between 1888 and 1944 Catholic numbers had increased from 18,505 to 48,000 (Assenov 1998: 130 and Bokova 1998: 262), but they still constituted less than 1% of the total population. Despite the high aspirations of the 19th century western missionaries, very few local inhabitants were converted after the creation of an independent Bulgaria. The parishes that did convert were centred around the descendants of the Paulicians and Croatian traders, as well as settlers from the Banat region in the Habsburg Empire, Eastern Catholics from Western Thrace displaced during the 1912-1913 Balkan Wars and those who migrated from Macedonia between 1912 and 1918. De-

4 <http://assumption.us/about-us/cassadaga-seminary/34-assumptionists?start=5>. [Accessed 30 August 2013.]

spite the minute size of the Catholic population by the beginning of the Second World War:

[T]here were approximately one hundred and fifty churches and two hundred priests (fifty of them Eastern-rite), a few dozen teaching brothers and several hundred nuns belonging to ten congregations. Through its schools and libraries, its two large hospitals in Sofia and Plovdiv, and its orphanages and old people’s homes, the Catholic Church of Bulgaria was making a social, educational and cultural contribution out of all proportion to its size, less than one percent of the population (Broun 1983: 311-312).

Rebuilding Catholicism in Bulgaria after 1989: The Institutional Level

Despite the Communist regime’s attempts to eliminate religion in Bulgaria as part of a general secularisation strategy across eastern Europe, Catholicism only weakened rather than faded away completely. Church attendance declined in common with religious observance generally and by 1983 church life was described by Broun as generally stagnant, while the community was ‘paralysed by fear and depressed by ghetto conditions and poverty’ (1983: 314). At the same time, churches in the Catholic villages near Plovdiv remained active and the development of Black Sea tourism ensured full congregations in the seaside towns of Varna and Burgas during the summer at least (Ibid). Links were also maintained at a formal level between the Bulgarian government and the Vatican. In 1975 - the year that the Communist Party had set for the final elimination of religion in Bulgaria - the Prime Minister, Todor Zhivkov, visited Rome and in 1981 a Bulgarian Catholic delegation also arrived at the Vatican to celebrate the anniversary of the ‘Apostles of the Slavs’, Cyril and Methodius. A delegation was even allowed to attend the Eucharistic Congress at Lourdes in the same year.

So, after the collapse of the ‘Iron Curtain’ in 1989 the Roman and Eastern Catholic Churches emerged much weakened but able to pick up the institutional pieces. The numbers of religious functionaries had declined, those still active had aged, properties had been lost, the seminaries had closed and recovery was hampered by the severe economic disruption of the 1990s. Yet, because Catholics were disproportionately represented in Bulgaria’s cities and towns or the neighbouring countryside, they were less severely hit by the de-collectivisation of Bulgaria’s farms and the resultant rise in rural unemployment. Their religious leaders could also call on institutional and financial support from Western Europe, even if this led secular and religious opponents to revive the stereotype of the Catholic Church as ‘foreign’. However, local hostility was largely directed at Protestant and Muslim missionaries, associated with various forms of religious revivalism and ‘fundamentalism’ (see Ghodsee 2010).

The morale of the two Bulgarian Catholic Churches was also strengthened by the much publicised visit by Pope John Paul II in 2002. His arrival in Bulgaria provided an opportunity to publicise the healing of both historical and personal wounds. In 1999, he had made the first papal visit to a majority Orthodox country since the schism of 1054 when he arrived in Romania and in 2001 he visited Greece and Ukraine. Historical divisions were confronted through meetings with the Patriarch of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and a visit to the Rila monastery, for example. Much attention was given to the pope's own wounds suffered in the attempt on his life by Mehmet Ali Agca in 1981 and claims that the Bulgarian secret service had been involved. According to Solomon Passy, who was Foreign Minister at that time, John Paul II assured the Bulgarian Prime Minister at a private meeting that he did not believe the claim.⁵

The visit was also an opportunity to honour the Assumptionists who had been executed fifty years before. However, in a ceremony at Plovdiv, attended by Orthodox and Muslim representatives, John Paul II took care to mention those 'who were *sons and daughters of the Orthodox Church* and who suffered martyrdom under the same Communist regime.'⁶ In this inclusive vein he also referred to the ways in which the three Assumptionists had reached across religious and social boundaries by describing how their courage had been acknowledged by 'their former students - Catholics, Orthodox, Jews and Muslims - by their parishioners, the members of their religious communities, and their fellow prisoners.'⁷ At the same time John Paul II was mindful of the separate institutional structures of the Roman and Eastern Catholic congregations. Hence, during his stay in Sofia he visited the headquarters of the Eastern Catholic Exarchy, but also laid the foundation stone of a new Roman Catholic cathedral.

In terms of ecumenical relations, John Paul II's visit appears to have followed three key principles – demonstrate respect for local traditions, involve representatives from other faiths and heal historic wounds. Although this strategy was welcomed by most commentators, putting the principles into practice was not easy. Involving representatives from other faiths encountered the general problem evident in West European secular multicultural policies – how representative were those invited? The attempt to heal historic wounds was also constrained by long established antipathies and suspicion. Russian Orthodox leaders, in particular, remained suspicious of his overtures and may have lobbied against John Paul's expressed wish to visit Russia. His successors, Benedict XVI and Francis I, have con-

tinued his strategy, albeit at a less hectic pace.

Renewing networks across Europe at the local level – Plovdiv and Lourdes

John Paul II's visit highlighted the growing institutional ties between East and West Europe after 1989. These ties were strengthened by Bulgaria's refusal to get embroiled in the conflict across the border in the former Yugoslavia during the early 1990s, entry into NATO during the late 1990s, and its application to join the European Union, which led to membership in conjunction with its northern neighbour, Romania, in 2007. By 2013, Bulgaria's political and economic fortunes had become even more closely tied to the 'European project,' as it sought to recover from the 2008 economic recession and align its political and legal institutions more closely to regulations devised in Brussels and to policies pursued by the dominant European players, especially Germany.

At the local level these closer ties between East and West Europe were illustrated by the ways in which the Assumptionists sought to foster pilgrimage to Lourdes. As we have already seen, Plovdiv and its neighbouring villages constituted one of the few centres of long established Catholic life. The town contained a Baroque Roman Catholic cathedral, which had been built between 1858 and 1861, was dedicated to St. Louis of France and made a clear physical statement of its congregation's ties to western Catholicism. The Church had lost such prominent centres as the St. Augustine College (now Plovdiv University, named after the Orthodox monk, Paisii Hilendarski, who wrote the first history of Bulgaria) and its hospital. However, the Eastern Catholics had retained the church next to the university and it was here that the Assumptionists publicly took up their mission after 1989, crucially assisted by its sister organisation, the Oblates of the Assumption, and later by the Missionaries of Charity founded by Mother Teresa in Kolkata.

As mentioned above, links between Bulgarian Catholics and Lourdes had not been completely broken by the Communist regime, as evidenced by the delegation being allowed to attend the Eucharistic Congress in 1981. Nevertheless, the revival of the Assumptionist mission in Plovdiv enabled its male and female members (recruited largely from outside Bulgaria) to plan a more grassroots pilgrimage. Hence, in 2006 – a year before Bulgaria became a full member of the European Union – the Assumptionists helped to organise an ecumenical group to attend the August French National Pilgrimage. Two Assumptionist clerics and two Oblate sisters joined 50 Catholic pilgrims, while two Bulgarian Orthodox priests and their wives accompanied the same number of Orthodox pilgrims.⁸ The ten-day trip was made by coach and financial support was provided by various benefactors including German-speaking pilgrims.

5 <http://www.fjp2.com/en/news/world/19585-bulgaria-marks-10th-anniversary-of-historic-pope-visit>. [Accessed 4 September 2013.]

6 http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/2002/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20020526_beatification-plovdiv_en.html. [Accessed 4 September 2013.]

7 http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/2002/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20020526_beatification-plovdiv_en.html. [Accessed 4 September 2013.]

8 http://assomption-orient.org/actualites/archivio/francia06/lurd_06_fr.htm. [Accessed 2 November 2013.]

The journey was hard since they had to sleep in the coaches with only one stop at a town near Milan, where an Italian member of the Plovdiv Assumptionist community had been raised. On arriving at Lourdes, they checked into the capacious hostel overlooking the Domaine run by the Italian pilgrimage organisation, UNITALSI, and joined the large crowds attracted by this annual French celebration. The highlights of their own celebrations included, not surprisingly perhaps, the Stations of the Cross, the torchlight procession and the afternoon Blessed Sacrament procession where the father of one of the Assumptionist priests received divine unction. These traditional Roman Catholic rituals were also accompanied by an Orthodox ceremony held in one of the Domaine's new churches named after St Bernadette.

The group then left for Nevers in central France, where Bernadette's preserved body has also made her convent a place of pilgrimage. The description of the journey comments:

The celebration of Mass in the Byzantine rite, the visit to the monastery (sic) where the saint's body is to be found, and a walk through the town filled our day right up to the time for our departure in the afternoon. A new overnight journey awaited us.⁹

Their next stop was Padua and the shrine of St. Anthony – a day where spiritual and tourist activities were nicely blended.¹⁰ The pilgrimage ended with another journey through the night, but the commentator ends by looking forward to the next adventure:

The frontiers, the waiting, the border controls, the tiredness, the languages closer and closer to Bulgarian, accompanied us almost to Plovdiv ... Tired, yes ... But we only needed a little bit of rest before dreaming, the next day, about a new pilgrimage.¹¹

The dream was indeed realised, since pilgrimages have continued to be made to Lourdes. In 2009, the Assumptionist website was pleased to announce that the three Assumptionists executed in 1952 were to be commemorated in the massive underground basilica at Lourdes. Large banners of the Church's saints were to be accompanied by portraits of the martyrs who had been beatified by John Paul II during his 2002 visit. This time there were no Orthodox companions and as the coach could not take all the 70 pilgrims, some were going to fly to France and then take the train to Lourdes. The organising committee consisted of two Assumptionists (one of whom was a young Bulgarian recruit, Brother Martin Dulchev), an Oblate nun, a Slovak missionary from the Salesian order and a young French-

9 Ibid, translated from the French (J. Eade).

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

man training for the priesthood.¹²

Br. Martin Dulchev followed the Assumptionist tradition by leaving Bulgaria to study at Lille and by 2011 was well equipped to lead an international group of young people to Madrid for the 2011 World Youth Day, visiting Lourdes on the way. Like the 2006 pilgrims, he chose to arrive at the shrine during the annual French National pilgrimage and he was fully aware of the historical significance of Lourdes for his order:

The Assumptionists are the ones who initiated modern, large-scale pilgrimages to Lourdes some 135 years ago and this holy site is somehow part of the fabric of our spiritual make-up. We are part of Lourdes' history and Lourdes is part of ours. Faithful to our tradition, we thought it would be a good idea to include this pilgrimage as part of our overall journey of faith this summer — walking with Christ, helped by Mary.¹³

He also sought to link his band of pilgrims to the changing, multicultural character of both the Assumptionist order and the Catholic Church as a result of the 'positive dimension of globalization':

Just look at the make-up of our planning team: a Vietnamese brother, a Romanian, and me, a Bulgarian..... This very fact demonstrates that the Church and the Assumptionists today reflect human diversity and the positive dimension of globalization, i.e. openness to the Other. This is what we had in mind when we made this decision. The group that will join us are coming from: the Philippines, Chile, Argentina, Bulgaria, Vietnam, Africa, and the USA.¹⁴

Although the organised shrines continued to be located predominantly in Western Europe, the Bulgarian case shows how the collapse of the 'Iron Curtain' has enabled East European Catholics to visit Lourdes much more easily. Not surprisingly, visitors from East European countries with strong Catholic traditions have come in much larger numbers. By 2013, pilgrimage groups from Poland and Slovakia had become a part of the regular Lourdes calendar, but perhaps the most politically significant pilgrimage from the former Communist Europe was the Croatian military and police pilgrimage, which began in 1992 during the bloody break-up of Yugoslavia. The date was significant because Croatia's break-away from Yugoslavia had begun only a year before and the fight for independence lasted until 1995. However, the European Economic Community (now the European Union) recognised Croatia in 1992 as did the United Nations so the arrival of this pilgrimage

12 http://www.assomption-orient.org/actualites/archivio/inglese_09/plovdiv_july_09.htm. [Accessed 2 November 2013.]

13 http://www.assumption.us/news/394-assumptionists-organize-lourdesworld-youth-day-event_ [Accessed 9 September 2013.]

14 Ibid.

was both a religious and a political statement. By 2007, the pilgrimage had grown to around 1,800 members and the Croatian government was represented by the Vice-Premier and three ministers.¹⁵ The Croatians sought to cement their relationship not only to the shrine, but also to the secular authorities, formally presenting to the Mayor of Lourdes in 2007 a bust of Aloysius Stepinac, Archbishop of Zagreb between 1937 and 1960, who had been beatified by John Paul II in 1998 as another victim of a Communist regime.

New pilgrimages from Eastern Europe were very welcome since, although Lourdes enjoyed the image of a thriving international shrine, like any other destination it was also susceptible to wider economic currents. The flow of visitors fluctuated with the changing fortunes of the West European countries which still provided the majority of its visitors – France, Belgium, Italy, Spain, Britain, Ireland, The Netherlands, Germany and Austria. To offset declines in the traditional sources of visitors, the shrine's promoters had to be as inclusive as possible. Besides attracting East European Catholics, Lourdes also sought to reflect the increasingly multicultural character of West European Catholicism shaped by global migration (see Notermans 2009). As the Plovdiv group demonstrated, visitors from non-Catholic traditions were also welcomed. As early as 1982, a Ukrainian Greek Catholic church had been built near the railway station to serve the growing numbers of migrant workers in Western Europe, i.e. a year before John Paul II visited the shrine for the first time. In July 2013, when I returned after a twenty-one year absence, Hindu and Buddhist visitors with origins in Sri Lanka were much in evidence and came to the baths in substantial numbers. This strategy of inclusiveness has also engaged with the global expansion of tourism as visitors arrive from India, South Korea and Japan on package tours.

Conclusion

This article has sought to contribute to the anthropological study of pilgrimage by analysing the role which Roman Catholic pilgrimage has played in a changing Europe, through an exploration both of the development of Lourdes from the mid-19th century and the little known relationship between this French Marian shrine and Bulgaria, especially Plovdiv. It is the Assumptionist Order that provided the key link in the chain between Lourdes and Plovdiv since its members helped to develop the shrine and forge links between Catholic Europe and Bulgaria throughout the turbulence of political conflict and radical transformations. The Assumptionists were instruments of a papal evangelisation strategy which has been pursued over many centuries. They sought to deliver the Vatican's 'Eastern mission' through schools, colleges, hospitals, publishing and scholarship, along

15 <http://dalje.com/en-croatia/some-1800-pilgrims-leave-for-lourdes/41997>. [Accessed 2 November 2013.]

with other Roman Catholic organisations – such as the Passionists, Franciscans, Capuchins and Salesians.

The strategy has also involved pilgrimage as both a journey and an engagement with a particular place. Marian shrines like Lourdes have been places where popes can remind vast numbers of visitors about the traditional teachings of the Church and obedience to papal authority. At Lourdes, two key dogmatic pronouncements – the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption – could be reaffirmed throughout its ritual calendar which involved spectacular events, everyday religious celebrations and a wide array of material symbols. The Assumptionists were vigorous advocates of these papal teachings as they sought to spread the faith in Bulgaria and other emerging nations across South Eastern Europe.

This missionary activity made the Church many enemies. In Bulgaria, the Orthodox Church shared the hostility of Orthodox communities across Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, as well as Russia, towards these Roman Catholic missionaries. Secular politicians, especially socialists, were also alarmed by the Assumptionists' activities, their links to the Bulgarian monarchy and their confrontation with the Third French Republic. This was a history which came to haunt the Order after the Second World War and the establishment of the Communist regime.

The Roman Catholic mission in Bulgaria was also complicated by the emergence of the Eastern Catholic Church during the 1860s and the triangular relationship which developed between the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the Eastern Catholic Church and the Roman Catholic missionaries. The Assumptionists sought to resolve any tensions between Eastern Catholic and Roman Catholic communities by providing missionaries to both. Hence, while two of the three Assumptionists executed in 1952 worked within the Roman Catholic tradition, the third was a member of the Eastern Catholic Church. After the 1950s, the balance between Eastern and Roman Catholic communities tilted in the former's favour. It was less fiercely repressed during the Communist regime and has benefitted from the Vatican's encouragement of Eastern Catholic traditions after the Second Vatican Council.

The Vatican's strategy has encountered a range of local resistances, contradictions and ambiguities. In Eastern Europe and other areas of the globe, the papal strategy has encountered the inherent problems of multicultural representation, deeply rooted suspicions and contradictions between the centralising and decentralising forces which have operated within the Catholic Church for centuries. However, after the Second Vatican Council this strategy has attempted to be more sensitive to local traditions within the Church and to build ecumenical alliances with those outside the Church. John Paul II pursued this strategy with particular vigour, but his successors have continued in the same vein.

Despite its determined efforts at evangelisation and its well organised structure, the Bulgarian Catholic community was minute even before Communist repres-

sion. Bulgaria has remained a predominantly Orthodox country where interest in formal teachings is low and the observance of sometimes contradictory or heterodox practices far more significant. After 1989, both the Roman and Eastern Catholic communities have restored many of their institutional structures and the Assumptionists have played a key role at the local level, as we have seen in the Plovdiv case study. Links with West Europe have been revived and pilgrimage to Lourdes has become one way in which those links can be regularly maintained. The international ties, which the Assumptionists had established from the beginnings of the order, enabled the Plovdiv parish to operate at both local and more global levels as visitors passed through and parishioners went on pilgrimage.

At Lourdes this opening up to more global forces had developed at a far grander scale as the shrine sought to maintain its position as one of the Catholic Church's most important locations. Here the process of evangelisation could embrace a world beyond Western Europe, where even non-Catholics could find spaces to express their own beliefs and desires. Yet, Lourdes remained more than just a religious centre. From the early disputes over miracle healing to the arrival of the Croatian military and police pilgrimage in 1992 and its growth into a large, officially sponsored group, Lourdes has been embroiled in political contestation. For many millions of visitors this contestation is irrelevant, but if we are to understand Lourdes 'in the round' we need to examine the political developments which link it to the Vatican's global mission and to secular nation-states. As we have seen, the Assumptionists have played an important role in these religious and political developments, seeking to contribute to Rome's 'Eastern mission' even if in Bulgaria their efforts have failed to achieve the high hopes of their founder, Fr. D'Alzon.

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