Catholic Sacred Places as Liminal and Living Cultural Heritage: A European Overview on Shrines

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Abstract

This article presents Catholic shrines as living and liminal sacred spaces possessing an intrinsic vitality that exerts a specific attraction not only for believers and visitors but also for the territory that surrounds them. As a place of devotion and pilgrimage destination, they are a complex system from the social, cultural, symbolic economic, and political perspectives. The essay aims to describe Catholic sacred places are a "detector" of the secular/religious contact in the field of cultural heritage. They are religious spaces that respond to the primary characteristics of heritage production but escape any single consideration in that area. Being sacred places, they get exposed to a continuous movement between immanence and transcendence which is the same movement that characterises the creation of heritage, responding to mechanisms of permanentisation of liminality.

Keywords; Catholic sacred places; cultural heritage; shrines; liminality; transcendence; Europe

1. Introduction

This article presents Catholic sacred places, especially shrines, as living and liminal religious places of cultural heritage in the Catholic tradition, inspired by the observation of European examples.

This study focuses on Catholic sacred places as cultural heritage (van den Hemel et al., 2022; Thouki, 2022) and combines secondary sociological, anthropological, and historical sources. It is thus grafted into the multidisciplinary prism of the "sense of place", exploring shrines as pilgrimage sites where lived religion and liminal experiences are intertwined. Liminality is understood here following Turner (1973), who considers the spatial aspects of liminal phenomena. Nevertheless, liminality is explored not only by considering the different attitudes towards religiosity of various publics, such as devotees or lay and curious visitors in worship places, but also by reflecting on sacred places as centres of negotiation of tangible and intangible values for religious communities and society at large.

In most religious phenomena, the experience of sacred space is inseparable from the experience of sacred time; therefore, liminality could be interpreted as a situation that produces an experience of *limen*—being in between two elements. It is a situation in which individuals are in a qualitatively different existential condition; particularly, when visiting shrines, one could experience exceptional moments or physical and visible evidence of the irruption of transcendence in immanence (Scotto, 2011) or their memories and traces (Halbwachs 2008).

The main research question connected to this overview is: What is the role of a Catholic shrine within and as a cultural heritage? After a brief literature review, the first section will consider shrines within their immanent characteristics as religious living places. The second section will highlight shrines as bearers of both tangible and intangible values. In the last section, transcendence will be the guiding concept for the comprehension of shrines as places where cultural heritage characteristics could converge with religious experience.

2. Literature Review

Shrines are sacred places that, literally and metaphorically, build and articulate the relationship between space, time, and the sacred (Turner, 1979; Eade & Sallnow, 1991; Coleman & Elsner, 1995; Coleman & Eade, 2004; Knott, 2005; Margry, 2008; Giacalone & Griffin, 2018; Eade, 2020). These places transmit values that make them dense spaces of social relations, both crystallised (in relics, altars, statues, votive offerings, and tombstones) and living ones (pilgrimages, visits, permanence and rediscovery of devotional practices, as well as in the presence of charismatic figures and historical events).

As religious spaces, they are visited for many purposes: for imploring grace, praying, or thanking the divinity, and for hedonistic and educative motivations, such as religious and heritage tourism. In this field, the literature is immense, and any tentative attempt to provide an exhaustive review would be incomplete and outside the scope of this article. Nonetheless, visitors to such places are a crucial part of their social construction (Aulet & Vidal, 2018), and they may be both pilgrims and tourists, and often, it is difficult to distinguish their inner motivations (Liutikas, 2020). For analytical purposes, visitors' attitudes could be distinguished between the search for an authentic religious experience in its transcendent dimension and the hedonistic search for pleasure (Knox et al., 2014), which refers to the immanent dimension of such places.

The secular/religious dichotomy in tourism motivated by religious interests has been interpreted in early tourism studies as a *continuum* (Smith, 1992), and religious and spiritual tourism always presents an expressive and transformative component (Norman, 2011; Olsen, 2015; Cheer et al., 2017), which could be then linked to the educative, pedagogic, and enlightening functions that cultural and heritage tourism continues to have (Olsen & Timothy, 2021; Timothy & Olsen, 2006). Sacred places, when they are also cultural heritage places, could combine the experience of liminality, as defined in the religious domain, in the same place. Liminality is considered not only in Van Gennep's (1981) first use with respect to rites of passage but also in terms of its rediscovery in the 1970s by Turner (1973) in the pilgrimage experiences of *communitas*. More recently, liminality was explored by Di Giovine for heritage-scapes (2011) and Chemin (2015) for the Camino de Santiago. Thomassen (2009) and Reader and Shultz (2021) explain the theoretical advantage of considering the permanentisation of liminality as an explanatory notion in religious phenomena. According to Thomassen (2009) the "'permanentization of liminality' is close to Weber's concept [of] 'routinization of charisma', which is again a deeply paradoxical but again real social process, lying at the very heart of practically any social or political or religious movement" (p. 22). More recently, Reader and Shultz (2021) studied the Shikoku perpetual lifetime pilgrimage in Japan as an example of the struggle for a "permanentisation of liminality".

Therefore, it is plausible to extend this interpretation to shrines as living religious heritage considering the issue of conserving the sacred, as was referred to by a former general director (Stanley-Price, 2004) of the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (the ICCROM). Cultural heritage places have many social uses: monumentality is the primary mode of helping societies remember essential facts, people, and events, as Riegl (1903) argued in his seminal work. Political claims pass from meaningful places, and politics turn to heritage to improve local development and reconcile with problematic pasts. As the archaeologist Thouki (2019) points out, an ontological plurality of interpretations of religious heritage copes with its materiality and spirituality but is not always well-balanced because of the frequent absence of religious references in religious tourism education.

Visits to religious and sacred places stimulate interdisciplinary questions, especially expressed among French scholars in anthropology, such as Dupront (1987), who preferred practising a controversial religious anthropology instead of an anthropology of religions (pp. 58–60). In his Christian religious anthropology, as noted by Fedele and Isnart (2015), "texts express his belief that pilgrimage involved both a 'sacred site', structuring the material elements of pilgrimage, and a spiritual effusion produced through the encounter with the divine" (p. 177). This is particularly apparent when these sacred spaces are deemed places because, as Bremer (2006) argued, when viewed through the lens of religious tourism, they are an intersection of spatiality and temporality.

For their political and social roles, shrines have been considered the *loci* of competitive, authorised, and contested discourses: seminal studies have been conducted by Smith (2006) and Eade and Sallnow (1991) on cultural heritage and pilgrimage sites, respectively. Shrines liminality, as intended here, recognises the importance of these social uses and focuses on the effective relationship between immanence and transcendence, which produces opposing interpretations of places.

In this article, catholic shrines will be presented as a detector of the secular/religious or secular/sacred dialectic as described by Knott (2013) but applied to the field of cultural heritage as in Isnart and Cerezales' arguments on "migration of the holy" (2020). I will argue that Turner's notion of liminality, first explored in rituals and religious studies, can be extended to this form of religious cultural heritage. This occurs because their cultic dimensions have merged with their role in cultural heritage: their origins and grounding in local history are often exposed to a continuous movement—the liminality from one state to another—and this is reflected through their simultaneous characters of immanence and transcendence. Both these notions of immanence and transcendence are fruitful for understanding the role of sacred spaces like shrines because the very nature of these places is suspended between the claims for transcendence and the possibility of experiencing their immanence. Transcendence, together with the theological sense, is a philosophical notion used here in a sociological sense following Luckmann's outline of levels of transcendence (1990): it might be experienced as little, intermediate, or great. For sacred places like shrines, immanence is expressed in the materiality of the place, such as in the building, restoration and renovation, and embellishment with sacred objects and furnishings, which are of primary interest to several actors involved in their management and presentation as cultural heritage and tourist spaces.

The interest in introducing the notion of liminality connected to the transcendence and immanence of sacred places like shrines recognises the role of heritage-making practices as primary forces for their social transmission and cultural enhancement. Recently, a group of scholars discussed and demonstrated the important role of the future for any heritage practice and discourse (Harrison et al., 2020; Holtorf & Högberg, 2021). The future is, in fact, always addressed in a "world-making" work of heritage (Harrison, 2021, p. 31), and it manifests in a peculiar way when sacred spaces are considered.

This is because the three Luckmann's levels of transcendence are always addressed in shrines according to two possible scenarios: in the first, the mystery of the manifestation of the divine is conveyed in the worshippers' hope or their religious experiences; in the second, the projection of past events, facts, and their cultural, social, political, and educational functions in the present could be productive of a life of transcendence, as pointed out by Simmel in his late philosophical writings (Krech, 2020).

3. Shrines as religious living places of immanence: the religious materiality

In the Catholic Church (onwards: the Church), there are several types of worship places: churches, shrines, chapels, votive niches, crucifixes and crosses. Each of these expresses a particular reference to the territory and to the people's ordinary and devotional life. Among these, only a few sections are by now assigned to the parish community, while the main area is a religious place where devotional practices and rituals are offered to the "People of God", as the Church traditionally names the baptised people.

In the history of religions, shrines are living and localised religious places: they are frequented for devotional or cultural motives. A shrine might be a reference for communities living very far away from it: this is evident in the reproduction of shrines or holy places. From grottos of Lourdes to the reproduction of shrines such as the French *La Salette,* from the pictorial representations of the Virgin Mary of Caravaggio (in Northern Italy) or the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe till the typical Italian Sacred Mounts (Afferini & Ferrario, 2016). The fame of a shrine spreads through its architectural and iconographic representations (Dupront, 1987).

In 2002, the Congregation for divine worship and the discipline of the sacraments displayed the *Directory on popular piety and the liturgy* which presents the Vatican hierarchy's attempts to understand all the sensitive, corporal and visible elements that characterise popular piety as a sign of the faithful's desire to express adherence to Christ, devotion to the Virgin Mary and to restore the invocation of the Saints. In the Directory, there is evident a defensive position with regard to popular piety which therefore as a lived religion of the body constitutes a religious phenomenon to be observed and sometimes governed. The preservation of the centrality and authority of the Church is a challenge that portrays the multi-thousand-year tension between the discovery and promotion of devotional places or practices and the need to channel them.

Catholic authorities are aware that religion is a matter of material culture: shrines are not only important from an artistic perspective, but they witness the people's devotion. Through the deposition of spontaneous (or "induced") ex-voto such as safeguarding or producing relics, the signification of a shrine and its devotional claim could expand and change (Grimaldi, 2020). For instance, the periodic exposition of the mortal remains of a saint constitutes a moment of renewal of the entire cult. The examples of San Pio of Pietrelcina (McKevitt, 1991; Di Giovine, 2009) and Saint Anthony of Padua (Castegnaro & Sartorio, 2012) represent the latent conflicts of the modernisation and rationalisation of devotions.

The ex-voto object, although presented as a gesture of gratitude for a commitment taken or a grace received, also witnesses an irruption of the sacred in the beneficiary's existence, a manifestation that he/she feels obliged to make public. Following this double line of interpretation, religious heritage could be considered a unity of tangible and intangible features. The material elements of the religious experience might only pass through the human: the sign of the presence of men and women in a territory is undeniable. However, interventions on the natural landscape, housing or public buildings are scattered in a variety of materials and forms.

Religious objects – from liturgical apparatus to ex-voto items – possess a symbolic power which comes from their association with the experience of the sacred. In cultural heritage places, this power has to be managed in practices of protection and conservation museumification (Paine, 2013; Lautman, 1987). This is the last option according to religious authorities, but to some extent, this stance is also shared by museography which questions the sacred and its relationship with aesthetics.

4. Tangible and intangible values of shrines

According to a French anthropologist, nowadays it can be observed that history narrated (to be inculcated and taught through educative institutions) is replaced by an "immediate sharing of the physical enjoyment of the past, conceived as an a-chronic reserve of 'temporal exoticism'" (Fabre, 2010, p. 24). Moreover, cultural heritage places are also spaces where emotions and ritual actions motivate attachment and mobilisation for heritage conservation and communication (Fabre, 2013). Among these emotions, aesthetics is perhaps the most common and the easiest to be utilised to facilitate a dialogue between the religious normative regime of Truth and the modern interest in artistic heritage, and this does not exclude the difficult to distinguish believers and art lovers (Bourdieu, 1994). Generally, in referring to a sacred place, the dimension of sensory experience is privileged as apparent from examples of evangelisation through arts (Rech, 2016). The role acquired by the religious cultural heritage allows us to illustrate this sort of mediation between form and sense (Ponnau, 1997) in the renewed interest that aesthetic and emotional experience has acquired with respect to the current religiosity in/of the sanctuaries.

The Church accords an "enormous symbolic value" to shrines and churches. They are places of beauty and pastoral care. The Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization was established by Benedict XVI in 2010, and since 2017, it has also been dealing with shrines. The Pope Francis (2017) explains that "A hidden desire gives rise, in many people, to nostalgia for God; and Shrines can be a true refuge for rediscovering oneself and to find anew the necessary strength for conversion" (n. 3).

Catholic shrines have always been cultural heritage in Italy, at least from modern times. There are multiple reasons for this which rely, first, on specific functions that shrines have historically and actually performed for local communities and religious institutions. Second, they could be considered an interior mechanism of cultural heritage creation because of their fusion of artistic works, historical facts, collective memory and shared narratives both tangible and intangible. Third, they are recently being re-vitalised in the pastoral care and are being linked to the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization (Francis, 2017) that in layman's terms promotes their image as places of future hope.

A Catholic shrine is a living place similar to how heritage places often are: it possesses an intrinsic vitality that exudes a specific appeal for the believers and visitors as well as for the territory surrounding it. As a place of devotion and pilgrimage destination, it is a complex system, from symbolic, economic and political perspectives (Di Giovine & Garcia-Fuentes, 2016).

In public opinion and recently at the highest level of Catholic hierarchy, the future of built heritage is discussed (Francis, 2018), even fearing a cultural or ordinary reuse which might be more or less respectful of their original meaning. Places of worship and religious signs, increasingly identified as cultural heritage or bound and protected as cultural assets, continue to constitute the fundamental symbolic referents in many cities, territories and landscapes precisely because they represent values in the richest sense of this term.

Some of their characteristics make them places where the religious sense and civil society meet on intersubjective values. The encounter between ethical thrust and aesthetic evidence have determined the success of some of them at both the national and international levels.

The history of art thereby constitutes the background within which proposals for religious and cultural tourism are developed, but also for disputes that oppose the protection requirements and initiatives for the enhancement of the religious cultural heritage. This corresponds to the attempt to stem an extensive phenomenon of the drastic reduction of religious communities and of disinterest in churches which in many Western countries is leading to the closure of many places of worship.

Furthermore, there are places of worship that retain considerable significance for the symbolic universe they evoke. They are also, like all others, susceptible to being abandoned or degraded. It is known how is sometimes repugnant to see a place of worship and heritage plundered. From the Buddha statues in Afghanistan (Harrison, 2009) to Palmyra in Syria, military conflicts have targeted cultural property (Brosché et al., 2016), while recent episodes in European churches have reintroduced an old French debate on conservation and vandalism. Indeed, in the late 1970s, de Certeau and Hameline discussed the inner sense of churches' conservation, pointing that "This yesterday is ours, and the arrangement of our churches and our "historic" spaces constantly confronts us with those objects which were the mediators of the religious (and Christian) life of those who transmitted us the faith" (de Certeau & Hameline, 1978, p. 10). Therefore, the issue regarding this destructive attitude seems also to intersect the breaking of a memory chain as reported by the French sociologist Hervieu-Léger (1993) in her study on religion. The risk is a collective amnesia which attempts to remove any sacred reference in the profane realm but finally involves a migration of the holy (Isnart & Cerezales, 2020). Furthermore, this also happens in the spaces of sacredness that heritage has established as places of outstanding value (Di Giovine & Garcia-Fuentes, 2016, pp. 8-11).

Due to the shrines' characteristic of also being cultural heritage places, devotional needs quarrel with conservative recommendations: a simple example is the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela where the main portal column has been touched by millions of pilgrims throughout centuries before being protected. From ethnographic experiences, In worship places without certain sources, historians of art have an empirical method to identify a site of pilgrimage: they look at the steps and the floors for visible signs of wear. This raises questions about conservative Euro-centrism and the attachment to authenticity and materiality. Furthermore, a modern attitude to safeguard all the churches' elements has allowed the enjoyment of floors of extraordinary beauty such as the medieval mosaic of the Cathedral of Otranto in Puglia or the floor of the Cathedral of Siena in Tuscany.

Shrines as a cultural heritage in recent Italian history could be linked to the aesthetic gaze on the past and especially on religious places of worship. Many Italian shrines, after the first war destructions, have experienced a phase of renewal through the restructuring of the buildings elevated to a national monument. They have also started being essential to the artistic and cultural interest that is recognised in them. The national organisation which has managed tourism since the early 1920s, the Ente Nazionale delle Industrie Turistiche (ENIT), published for the first time in 1923 an illustrated guide entitled The Shrines of Italy.

This is an important hint of the awareness of having a cultural heritage as well as a devotional one. Distinguished scholars (historians and archaeologists) introduced different editions of this guide. Shrines are enumerated as

"monuments of great artistic value, and perennial witness of unalterable faith and public recognition of sovereign princes and peoples and of the glorious Italian Middle Ages Republics" (ENIT, 1923, pp. 3-4). This shows that the relationship between the civil society and religious representations of the history of art is not only in the period successive the Second Vatican Council. In Italy, the roots of the awareness of having a cultural heritage in the churches probably go back to the post-unification period that united the affirmation of modernity as industrialisation with the modern state.

This could be related to actual strategies of local development and marketing: historical and religious legacies play a crucial role if one considers the overarching presence of religious buildings and the growing number of cultural routes or touristic itineraries inspired by religious and historical figures and facts. From local paths to international ways, spiritual values are brought to international recognition through projects of cultural routes as defined by international institutions like the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) with a specific Charter on Cultural Routes (2008) or the program Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe (2015) and the latest PRERICO, the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Places of Religion and Ritual established in 2017.

At the international level, scholars' interest covers both the human and social sciences that move between the history of religions, anthropology and sociology and tourism studies that analyse the potentialities of management for the marketing of a tourist product. This often focuses on a rhetoric of emotions in search of authenticity not only in religious destinations such as the Holy Land (Belhassen et al., 2008) but in all religious cultural heritage that can be visited in historical and artistic destinations. In fact, shrines are not visited only for devotional motives but also because they belong to the monumental, historical and artistic heritage. Nevertheless, this aspect cannot omit the religious datum of the presence of the living God and of the sacredness revealed that makes such places lively for believers and religious institutions.

5. Shrines as places of transcendence and liminality

According to Luckmann (1990) religious experience of transcendence has shrunk in modern times because some religious themes which involve individual autonomy and self-expression have become dominant (p. 138). It is argued for the consideration of shrines as places where all three levels of transcendence (little, intermediate and great) could still be experienced. As illustrated in the previous section, shrines are also places of cultural heritage: these levels of transcendence will be explored in parallel between the religious and heritage places because the memory of such experiences was established through artistic or traditional narrations of apparitions, visions and other supernatural phenomena.

In shrines, there are all signs of devotion: attendance, visits and pilgrimages not only represent the memory of a presence but also historical facts which could be narrated and re-narrated. Rituals, pilgrimages, liturgy, visits and embodied practices of touching, offering and lighting candles constitute the living and sometimes the liminal practices of any place of worship. In this sense, a certain level of transcendence is always acting in these places. A little transcendence is therefore that of the historical aspect which associates each shrine with the Catholic tradition of periodic procession or pilgrimage to places important for local identities of Alpine communities (Albera et al., 2016).

From a religious perspective, the shrine always appears as the place where a *hierophany* originated, where the sacred manifests or has manifested itself, thus affirming that the divine might materialise or appear because it has already previously happened at least once. In the words, as reported by a historian of religions, this holy place is "the centre of the encounter with the mystery, with the divine, capable of helping [the devotee] in his daily life, in his behaviour, in his relationships, in his fault-laden past, in the daily vision of the future, in the health of the body and the soul" (Ries, 1999, p. 22). The sacred that manifested or has been manifesting (in the case of recurring apparitions such as the well-known Medjugorje) to shrine visitors is also a sort of contradiction with respect to the natural order. That is, the prodigious event could open a breach in terms of the fight against sufferings and death, corresponding to the eternal issue of theodicy.

Hope and openness to transcendence capture the typical vocation of some shrines where people go on pilgrimage to ask for graces. There, in the time of hope which follows the act of pilgrimage and visiting and encountering the divine, the eventuality of the miracle is awaited. A miracle for the believer could also be the concrete and perceptible improvement of his situation, a renewal of his/her faith.

This explains that shrines as places of intermediate transcendence are easily observable, especially if one considers material signs of other people's beliefs: prayers, candles, and ex-voto objects; visitors' books confirm many passages and wait for the next. Even though they might be imitation gestures as Bourdieu describes in his visit to Santa Maria Novella in Florence (Bourdieu, 1994, pp. 72-73), this initiates a mechanism of symbolical subscription of a religious world-view in that space. Irrespective of whether someone is Catholic, they could behave in that way: this corresponds to a classical matter about the gap and connection between believing in and belonging to Catholicism, more recently discussed within the arena of religion expressed as a lifestyle (Genova, 2012).

The notion of transcendence not only fits in religious experience but also in the field of heritage. In the case of cultural heritage sites, the presence of great transcendence is debatable. It points to "something that not only cannot be experienced directly (as long as the experiencing self remains in everyday life) but in addition is definitively not part of the reality in which things can be seen, touched, handled by ordinary people" (Luckmann, 1990, p. 129). Although Luckmann contended that the great transcendence was not applicable, today's augmented reality technologies or immersive exhibition and reconstruction in the field of heritage introduce the possibilities of multisensorial enjoyment sites, monuments or artistic masterpieces. This kind of edutainment permits a breach of great transcendence on heritage sites and materials: constructions and reconstructions of historic sites allow to visit a city or monuments in their ancient shape.

The sacred as an experience of great transcendence is typical in the religious domain. Psychologists and philosophers of religion relate the experience of the sacred to a set of subjective experiences which connect the person in those states to supersensitive realities (Wunenburger, 2001). A priori, this experience should not need the mediation of religious institutions or clergy, although presently, the shrine is a perfectly integrated space in the structure of the local Church. On the other hand, the late introduction of the legal figure of the shrine into ecclesiastical jurisprudence signifies the consideration assumed before the second half of the twentieth century. The shrine was considered by the ecclesiastical institution (parish or diocese) as a charismatic expression and therefore was always susceptible to control such that the manifestations of piety held by them could be inappropriate to orthodoxy.

If we examine the shrine from the point of view of the faithful and the pilgrims, we find a form of mediation but one which concerns the religious practice and the liturgy. These are obviously functions that belong exclusively to religious people (priests, monks or brothers). On the contrary, the crucial experience that one wishes to undergo in a shrine has no mediation: the reason for the visit to a place of worship (which is not ordinary in relation to the Church of the parish) is an encounter with the sacredness of the place, the kept relics, and its holy image. In many cases, the sacredness is provided by the inner sense of such places.

Therefore, the example of Catholic shrines first reveals the liminality of such places where their foundation comes from the institutionalisation of a charismatic event; and second, they highlight the issues related to the conservation and interpretation of the material and intangible value of heritage. The interest and concern for the conservation of religious heritage is strictly restricted to the legal status it possesses, while the question of its understanding lies in the ability of the Catholic religion to express itself as a collective heritage. In fact, the Church's will to continue dialogue with society, established during the Second Vatican Council, profoundly depicted the relationship between faith and culture first formalised in an Italian Cultural Project of the Catholic Church by the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI, 1997) and subsequently in specific training courses offered by theological faculties and institutes of religious sciences approved by the Italian Episcopal Conference. The dual cultural and religious identity of the religious heritage necessarily portrays a complex interpretation from both parties that considers the living and lived heritage to ensure both its current understanding and its sustainability from an economic and social perspective. On the other hand, the specificity is derived from the opening of these places to the mystery of revelation which translates into the possibility of perceiving and experiencing a liminal encounter between immanence and transcendence.

6. Conclusion

The Catholic Church as an institution of salvation, placed in the horizon of eschatological time, is extremely attentive to the religious symbolisms linked to space and time. Space and time allow the capture of both the synchronic and the diachronic dimensions of shrines as living and liminal cultural heritage places. These two constitutive categories describing every form of devotion that materialises in religious buildings, rites and practices could be concretised in the liturgy, but it is mostly interpreted through the manifestations of piety such as pilgrimages, processions, deposition of ex-voto or other small private devotions. Devotions are even more significant the more we consider them in relation to a society, such as the contemporary one, that is ambivalent towards the sacred. On the one hand, it is not necessary for a social scientist is not necessary to the manifestation of the sacred according to judgements of reality. On the other hand, the sacred with its mysterious manifestations is increasingly becoming a media topic and an indirect product to be sold on the media market, while continuing to enliven the religious experience of believers.

A sociological interpretation of the shrines affirms that they exist and are living places, to the extent that they are able to guide a social action undertaken by the actors involved and for the shrine. Secular and religious institutions, groups of pilgrims and more or less organised visitors (or tourists) and individuals, all occupy and utilise these places for their own purposes and in their own ways. Each actor has their own perspective on a polyvalent system that interprets meanings and needs which are in continuous change. Shrines, similar to cultural heritage sites, allow the appropriation and re-appropriation of their sense in the present, and this will continue to generate religious and cultural representations.

The existence of shrines in which great, intermediate and little transcendence could be experienced by believers and visitors questions the credibility and consistency of the idea of the religious productions of modernity. This, therefore, responds to how social reproduction implies social change through places which detect blurred boundaries between civil and religious uses of places. Intertwined with the modern notion of heritage and its related social practices which are addressed to collective future needs and requests, sacred spaces as shrines continue to be devoted to a use which is ultimately social because it is in a permanent unbalancing thanks to their characteristic of liminality.

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