

Longings, Letters and Prayers: Visitor's Books at Hungarian Marian Shrines

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ARTICLES

- Mathew N. Schmalz / Overview & Acknowledgements
- Marc Roscoe Loustau / Introduction: Consumer Contexts and Divine Presences in Hungarian Catholicism
- Krisztina Frauhammer / Longings, Letters and Prayers: Visitor's Books at Hungarian Marian Shrines
- Kinga Povedák / Rockin' the Church: Vernacular Catholic Musical Practices
- Cecília Sándor / The Interwoven Existence of Official Catholicism and Magical Practice in the Lived Religiosity of a Transylvanian Hungarian Village

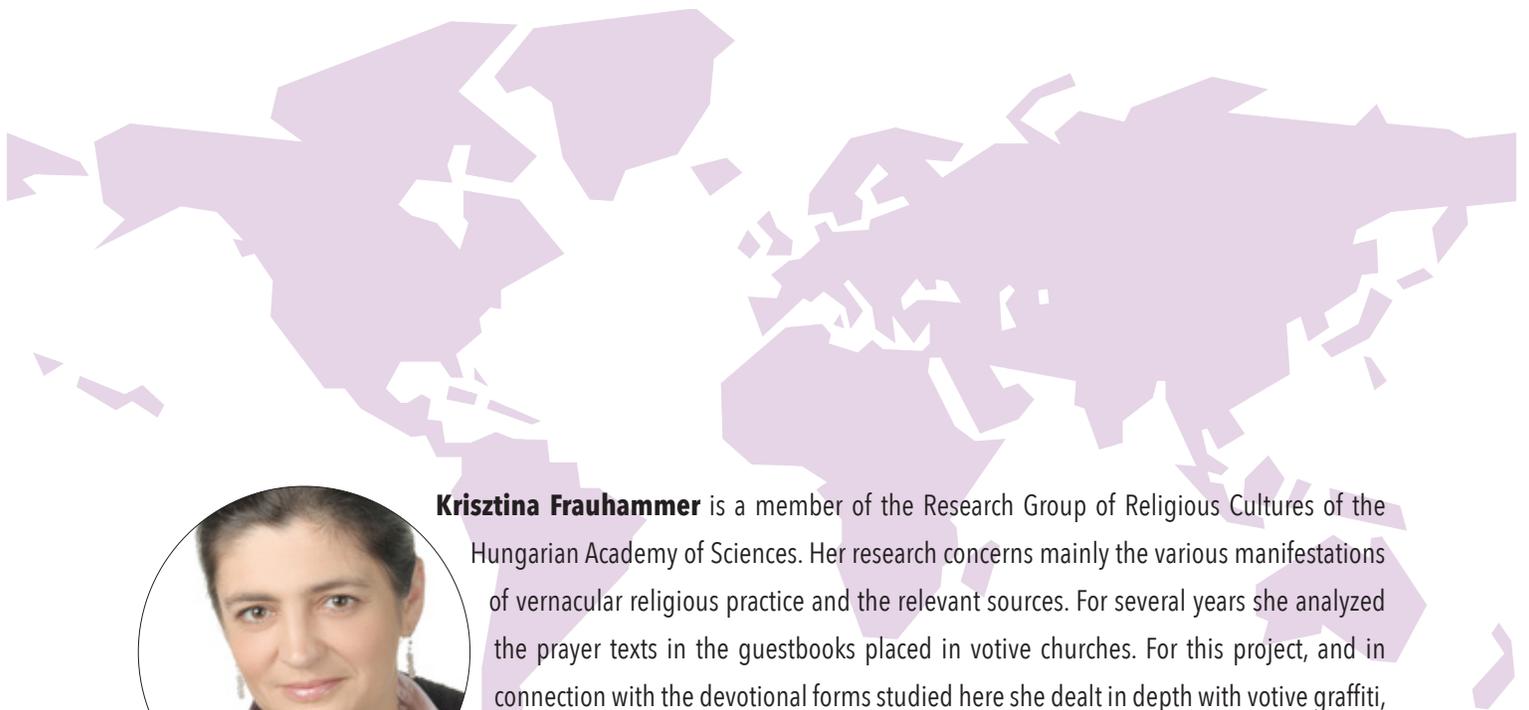


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Photo by Kinga Povedák

KRISZTINA FRAUHAMMER

Longings, Letters and Prayers: Visitor's Books at Hungarian Marian Shrines



Krisztina Frauhammer is a member of the Research Group of Religious Cultures of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Her research concerns mainly the various manifestations of vernacular religious practice and the relevant sources. For several years she analyzed the prayer texts in the guestbooks placed in votive churches. For this project, and in connection with the devotional forms studied here she dealt in depth with votive graffiti, 20th-century miracle texts and the prayer pages of internet virtual churches. She closed that research in 2009 and began a new investigation on 19th-20th century spiritual history in the light of contemporary prayerbooks. A prayerbook database was created and is accessible

to all, as this is a group of sources that has never been studied in Hungary. In the frame of this research she is currently studying the prayerbooks published in the 19th-20th centuries for women and girls, and the identification models for women transmitted in them by the church.



INTRODUCTION

Since the dawn of the 1960s, great emphasis has been placed on an ever increasing linguistic practice of prayer, one that is deeply rooted in the pragmatic field of the written word.¹ Registry, Visitor and Guest books, as well as prayer slips have served as the locus of such writings, which have become very popular at Catholic shrines. These writings primarily focus on requests, petitions, supplications as well as professions of gratitude. The pages in these books, as well as the little notes left by pilgrims are refreshingly honest and self-reflective. The prayers reflect personal worlds in a way that is visible in both writing and practice. I happened upon this topic whilst researching the north western village of Máriakálnok. This tiny settlement was where I began to encounter the practice of writing personal prayers to the Divine. While analyzing and surveying the records of the shrine in Máriakálnok I became privy to a hefty book, which was utilized between 1947 and 1952 as a guest book of sorts. The book contains 402 pages filled with 3,746 personally handwritten messages and prayers: stories of fate and faith, mixed emotions, hope, gratitude, fears, betrayal and desperation. From this point

1 Jasna Čapo Žmegač, "Mother help me get a good mark in history. Ethnological Analysis of Wall Inscriptions in the Church of St. Peter and Paul in Osijek (Croatia)," *Ethnologia Europaea* 24 no. 1 (1994): 67-76. Helmut Eberhardt, "Von Lassing bis Kosovo. Aktuelle Ereignisse in Anliegenbüchern," *Ritualisierung, Zeit, Kommunikation*, ed. Gábor Barna (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2003), 31-43, <https://doi.org/10.1556/aethn.47.2002.3-4.4>. Helmut Eberhardt and Gabriele Ponisch, "Hallo lieber Gott! Aspekte zu schriftlichen Devotionsformen in der Gegenwart," in *Konvergenzen und Divergenzen. Gegenwärtige volkskundliche Forschungsansätze in Österreich und Ungarn*, eds. Kuti Klára and Béla Rásky (Budapest: Österreichischen Ost- und Südosteuropa-Institut - Institut für Ethnologie der Ungarischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2000), 11-27. Walter Heim, *Briefe zum Himmel, Die Grabbriefe an Mutter M. Theresia Scherer in Ingenbohl. Ein Beitrag zur religiösen Volkskunde der Gegenwart* (Basel: Krebs Verlag, 1961), 40. Geneviève Herberich-Marx, *Évolution d'une sensibilité religieuse. Témoignages scripturaires et iconographiques de pèlerinages alsaciens* (Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 1991). Gray Tristan Hulse, "A Modern Votive Deposit at a North Welsh Holy Well," *Folklore* no. 106 (1995): 31-42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587x.1995.9715890>. Gerhard Schmied, "Lieber Gott, gütigste Frau ...". *Eine empirische Untersuchung von Fürbittbüchern. Passagen & Transendenzen. Studien zur materialen Religions- und Kultursoziologie* 4 (Konstanz: Universitätsverlag, 1997). It is important to note that writing prayers in sacred spaces is anthropological in nature. Examples include the Jewish *kvittli*, which Jews place in the crevasses of the Wailing Wall and the tombs of the Tzadik's. Norbert Gleszer, "Kvitli. Írott szakrális kommunikáció a magyarországi cadik sírjainál," in "Szent ez a föld...". *Néprajzi írások az Alföldről*, eds. Gábor Barna, László Mód, and András Simon (Szeged: Néprajzi Tanszék, 2005), 146-159. Variants of similar practices can be found within the Muslim and Coptic Christian traditions.

onwards, I began to search for other such books, booklets and prayer slips at similar shrines. I soon realized that the written prayer tradition was quite prevalent. From these, I chose five Hungarian shrines where I documented and analyzed close to 8,000 messages, notes and letters. Firstly, I examined the case of the aforementioned Máriakálnok, a village which was previously inhabited by Germans. The shrine there served as more of a regional locus. The visitor's book at the shrine was placed out on display to be engaged with after the end of the Second World War. This particular book was utilized until 1952. The tumultuous push of the historical circumstances renders these passages particularly interesting in their formation and frequency. They speak of re-building and renewal. The trials and tribulations following the war, as well the relocation of the Germans and the settlement of new inhabitants all contributed to the idiosyncrasy of the passages from this period.²

My second location of interest is a Hungarian settlement in what now constitutes Slovakia called Egyházabást-Vecseklő (in Slovakian, Večelkov). This is also a lesser known site, one that does not have the direct ecclesiastical approval of the Roman Catholic Church.³ In order to prevent pilgrims from writing on the walls of the wooden chapel, notebooks were placed in the space by those responsible for the upkeep of the building from the 1970s and onwards. Mátraverebély-Szentkút, which operates as one of the most prestigious pilgrimage sites in Hungary, served as my third location of interest. Here, the practice of writing in visitor's books came about without the prior approval or suggestions of the priests that serve at this particular site. This process evolved spontaneously. At first, prayer slips were placed in the cave for hermits which was located near the church. This cave was relatively far from the miracle working statue. From the 2010s onwards, and perhaps due to my interest in said prayer slips, a notebook was placed in the church so that pilgrims could write their prayers in a more structured manner. In choosing this site, I was mindful of the fact that this shrine is one that retains a host of practices, rituals and customs that are traditional in nature. Finally, I chose to work on the

2 Until 1946, Máriakálnok was a German settlement. Following the Second World War and the Treaty of Trianon, 95% of the German population was relocated. Hungarians from nearby villages and other settlements further away took their place.

3 This settlement belonged to Hungary until the end of the First World War. Following the Treaty of Trianon on June 4 1920, it came under Slovak rule.



shrines of Máriagyűd and Máriapócs. In concert with the aforementioned site of Mátraverebély-Szentkút, these shrines are of outstanding significance within the Hungarian context. In Máriagyűd, visitor's books have been utilized since 1970. Initially, the visitor's books at this site merely documented the names of pilgrims and the sum they offered to the shrine, but unique supplications and prayers soon took the place of this data. The famous Greek Catholic shrine of Máriapócs is also of note. A similar book was placed on display at this site in 1900, which is a particularly early date in considering comparable practices at other shrines in Hungary. For quite some time, only those who were specifically asked to write in the book were allowed to do so, and so, the book was only placed on display in the church when such exceptional guests arrived. However, since 2001 this practice has altered. The visitor's book is now on display beside the statue on a separate pedestal so that everyone can have access to this text.

The total number of visitor's books is ever increasing on a national level. Terminology regarding such texts is by no means unanimous: Remembrance or Memory book, Guest book, Visitor's book.⁴ Regardless of the markers these books signify, they are more than just a place for recorded data and dates. Perhaps more importantly, they serve as a vehicle to the Divine; a bridge between the pilgrim and Mary, Jesus and other saints.

In what follows, I will attempt to analyze the lexical relationships formed when pilgrims personally encounter the Transcendent by means of sacred communication—communication that is actualized through the written word. Firstly, I am curious as to what kind of habitus pilgrims engage with at such pilgrimage shrines. Knowing similar books placed in museums, hotels and hospitals and the entries made in them, the question arises: in what way are the visitor's books in shrines different? In writing such reflections, does the profane or the sacred realm prevail? What I mean by this, is the following: do pilgrims write of when and how they got to the site, or indeed, why they are there? Furthermore, what prompts a pilgrim to write down their deepest and perhaps darkest problems onto a public platform? How

4 In the analysis that follows, I will continue to use the term "visitor's book," in keeping with the forms I have utilized in my previous publications.

does writing in a guestbook help people feel they get the benefits of both organized religion and individual choice? Why would they willingly open themselves up to the Divine in such an unbarred manner? Why is it then important that pilgrims write down their innermost thoughts? Indeed, does writing influence one's state of mind or one's spiritual state? As we rarely encounter such speculations in the relevant literature it is the aim of this present study to follow these trails and find their route. Specifically, my aim is not merely to account for the content of such written prayers, but rather to provide an insight into the milieu of these prayers and the bodies (both temporal and other-worldly) that are associated with them.

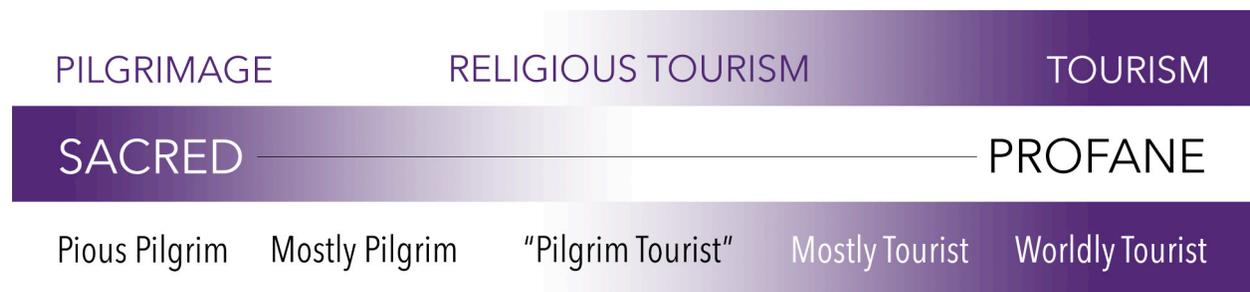
THE PROFANE FUNCTION OF VISITOR'S BOOKS

You know, non-believers write in it too, because you can say that about the church, even now those from Berettyóújfalu did not come in the spirit of the pilgrimage, but as tourists, after they visited the village museum in Nyíregyháza, and then halfway to Nyírbátor they came in here. There are entries like this. Sometimes they even congratulate the priest, who welcomes them in the church. (K.I.)

The remark made by the parish priest of Máriapócs (K.I.), as well as an analysis of the content of the books examined throw light on an important aspect. Many people use these books to record their name, the date of their visit, or to express a favorable opinion on the shrine as a tourist attraction. Often this is the case because the person writing the entry is a tourist rather than a pilgrim and so tends to use the book in that capacity. Approximately, one fourth of all entries follow this general pattern (other non-Hungarian pilgrimage shrines have similar statistics). The touristic appeal of such pilgrimage shrines has rendered these meeting places as exotic spaces of the past. Moreover, the "revival" nature of these sites has fed their popularity. Traditional walking pilgrimages are becoming increasingly widespread, often spreading over the course of several days, covering a wide range of topics as starting points. These pilgrimages are often directed at a specific group. For example, pilgrimages will be organized for a certain age group, men, women, bikers, scouts, teachers etc. In concert with parish, monastic, or spiritual communities, formal travel agencies operate to fuel pilgrimage sites with more tourists. Thus,



shrines encompass a great portion of the ever increasing tourism sector. Due to this fact such pilgrimage sites have become hot-beds for tourists seeking aesthetic (or perhaps even ascetic) experiences, while still continuing to serve the religious public. These tourists journey to pilgrimage sites in vast numbers. In fact, so do pilgrim tourists and tourist pilgrims. It is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between these boundary lines, most especially as one cannot segregate different groups into “just” sacred or “just” profane realms.⁵ Valene Smith, an American anthropologist of tourism describes those who frequent pilgrimage shrines in the modern period in the following way:⁶



The markers we use to define each category are ambiguous. However, in terms of personal motivations and actions, pilgrims can most definitely be distinguished from one another. The pilgrim seeks the essence of the shrine, while the tourist is merely curious about it. Pilgrims are oftentimes motivated by an urge to maintain a sense of body-mind-spirit equilibrium. This cycle is perpetuated by recurring or new health concerns. Pilgrims seek out the site in order to re-gain their health and keep it. Pilgrims are also motivated to meet and talk with God in a way that is different from their everyday experiences. On the contrary, the tourist will seek out the shrine in order to satisfy their touristic tendencies, and delight in the artistic, historical wonders that emanate and thrive at such sites.⁷ They record their impressions of this situation and sight, entering also their name, place of residence

5 Márta Korpics, “Zarándok és turista. Gondolatok a szent helyekről a turizmus kontextusában,” in *Turizmus és kommunikáció*, eds. Fejős Zoltán and Szijártó Zsolt (Budapest-Pécs: Néprajzi Múzeum, PTE Kommunikációs Tanszék, 2000), 172.

6 Valene Smith, “The Quest in Guest,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 19 (1992): 4.

7 Korpics, “Zarándok és turista,” 175-176.

and date of the visit. "I really like this church. It is the most beautiful church I have ever seen. I hope it stays like this!"⁸ We primarily come across such declarations at the three largest Hungarian pilgrimage shrines of Máriapócs, Máriagyűd as well as Mátraverebély-Szentkút. At times, these pilgrims will also record the name of the travel agency, school, pensioners' club or retirement home, workplace, or foundation they are associated with. These markers identify which groups organize trips to pilgrimage shrines.

Naturally, these tendencies meet, mix and collide. Most especially, in the case of individuals who sign up for group/mass pilgrimages who practice their "own" religion.⁹ These are the pilgrim-tourists or tourist-pilgrims who will choose a site based on its touristic appeal, while still holding on to what they themselves define as the Divine or some semblance of it, while journeying to a site that is tied to some manner of organized religion. As they are somewhat versed as to what religion means and does for those at the shrine, these pilgrims—though initially divorced from the masses—have the ability to temporarily blend into the zone of the site and take part in rituals accordingly.

Furthermore, the actions of these pilgrim tourists or tourist pilgrims also differ slightly in terms of how they treat the visitor's books on site. Individuals who arrive at the shrine as "tourists" will tend to use these books as they would at other similar sites such as museums, galleries, hotels and restaurants.¹⁰ In a number of cases visitors said: "We write in it the way we do in a museum visitor's book." (M.Z.) The parish priest at the Máriapócs shrine (K.I.) also gave as a reason why he

8 Visitor's book in Máriagyűd 2007/1. 186/1.

9 I borrow this term from anthropologist of religion, Miklós Tomka. He defines such individuals as those who do not practice their religion on a regular basis, but do claim some association with a Higher Power, or at the very least, consider themselves to be agnostic. Miklós Tomka, "Vallás és vallásosság," in *Társadalmi riport*, eds. Andorka Rudolf, Tamás Kolosi, and György Vukovich (Budapest: TÁRKI-Századvég, 1996), 594, 604–607.

10 Visitor's books of this kind have also been accounted for in the relevant anthropological literature: Imre Gráfik, "A vendégkönyv mint üzenőfal," *Néprajzi Értésítő* 96 (2015): 115–132. Krisztina Frauhammer, "'Every Hungarian should see this ...' Cultural Memory and National Identity in the Mirror of the Visitor's Books," in *Nemzeti identitás, kulturális örökség, emlékezet és az Ópusztaszeri Nemzeti Történelmi Emlékpark [National Identity, Cultural Heritage, Memory and the Ópusztaszer National Heritage Park]*, eds. László Mód and András Simon (Szeged: SZTE Néprajzi és Kulturális Antropológiai Tanszék, 2011), 103–109.



supported having a visitor's book: "I found it to be a good thing. Just as it is a very good thing when you go to a museum to be able to put down your opinion in writing, express thanks, criticism, or anything else. But this has since grown into something entirely different." (K.I.) Indeed, guest books placed in shrines have since become something quite special, but they still have many features in common with visitor's books of a profane nature. They all serve the same purpose of enabling people who write entries to step out of their accustomed, everyday context and express their feelings, impressions and observations. Even so, the context in which the entries are made determine the character of the whole visitor's book, giving it distinctive features. For example, the entries in hospital visitor's books often express thanks and gratitude for a recovery, and for the attentive care and expert treatment.¹¹ In wedding visitor's books the emphasis is on documenting guests' presence and expressing best wishes to the young couple.¹² In the case of museums too, most entries record the visit, while some also comment on what they have seen and express thanks to the curators of the exhibition. Besides such intentions, the books in shrines and churches are mainly used to make requests to the "heavenly powers." The faithful use such entries to enter into contact with the invisible Transcendent, in the hope of receiving help in their crises or everyday lives.

In the case of Egyházasköte-Vecseklő, another profane function comes to mind. Remarkably, there is an astonishing number of names and dates visited recorded. Everyone living in the settlement near the chapel knows about the notebook at the shrine, why it is on display and what function it serves. Evidently, everyone records their data accordingly. Those responsible for tracking this data claimed that recording one's name and the date of one's visit are an integral part of the rituals at this site:

If someone comes from further away, they know that I was here, they know that I am also able to embark on this journey, let them see that I was here. I am

11 In the 2001–2002 academic year students at University of Szeged, under the guidance of Dr. Gábor Barna carried out research on the many forms in which visitor's books appear. Documentation archived in the University of Szeged Department of Ethnology provides information on the result of a semester of collecting work.

12 I saw such wedding guest books in Germany in 1998 and among my relatives in Hungary in 2008.

sure that you also, though you came here to do your research, will surely go up; you won't leave without writing your name in it. And if someone will go up and read it, they will say, look how far this person has travelled to get here! (M.K.)

Or as another lady exclaimed: "Let them see, let them know that people come here." (V.J.) One of my older interlocutors remembers her time at the shrine in the following way:

So that they will see that I, Mede Zita, was here in 1998 and in 2000, then you must know it also, that people go there. My husband and I, wherever we went, we would sign our names in the big book, in these thick books. (...) It is an eternal memory, when I see my name in the book with my husband. (M.Z.)

For the locals that frequent the site on a regular basis, it is in their best interest to confirm their allegiance with the shrine. The Virgin Mary speaks to both locals and pilgrims from afar, thus demonstrating her power. Many of my interlocutors were interested in who visited the little chapel and where they came from. They fill with pride every time they see a name they do not recognize from a far off destination. The little notebooks thus fulfill two main purposes: to confirm one's presence at the site, and also, to ensure that others are made aware of it. This confirms the validity of the site, and serves as a means of propagation or propaganda. In the case of Vecseklő, this is particularly important as it has not received approval from the church.

It must also be noted that documenting a pilgrimage, registering valued guests and donations is not a new practice. There is a centuries-old tradition of drawing up procession lists in places of pilgrimage. We know for example, that in Czestochowa, the famous Polish shrine, the names of visitors have been recorded in a manuscript since the Middle Ages.¹³ In Máriapócs too, the first visitor's books were introduced in 1900 for the same purpose. The situation was similar in Máriagyűd in the 1970s; at that time only lists of names and the donations made by pilgrims were entered into these books.

¹³ Zoltán Szilárdfy, *Ikonográfia-Kultusz történet: Képes tanulmányok* (Budapest: Balassi, 2003), 117-123.

The experiences of conversations with the parish priests of shrines and of monks living there can add interesting new aspects to such use of visitor's books in places of pilgrimage. The priests and monks that I spoke with informed me that reading these books is like taking an inventory of how many pilgrims frequent the site, who arrives to the site, at what time and which group they are affiliated with. Knowing these everyday facts is just as important, if not more important than knowing the prayers of the pilgrims. These aspects are evidently integral to the adequate functioning of a site. Knowing these details, estimates and rough statistics allows those responsible for the shrine to maintain the site, and to build appropriate infrastructure for the pilgrims that arrive. Here, the visitor's book is directly linked with how the site functions as a site of tourism that also relies on economic progress. The rector at Máriagyűd (CS.I.) explains this phenomenon in the following way:

Surely, this is an interesting study of our times. For example, when you read the entry of a socialist group from the '80s, it's definitely very interesting, because naturally socialist groups don't just go to Marian pilgrimage shrines (...) I think that this is a case study of our times and of the life of the shrine. Of course, we can see where pilgrims come from. We also record who are visiting priests who perform the mass here; this helps us keep track of things. We can also think about the fact that tourism plays a factor in all of this, as tourists come here too. They bring their little thoughts with them, and indeed, they come from all over the world; even from Spain, or Germany or Ukraine. They also come from North America. We've even seen entries from North Africa. (CS.I.)

The young rector at Máriapócs also highlights the morsels of information gathered from such books:

These entries give me feedback on what my tours are like, what kind of experience the pilgrims had. They usually record their entries after the tour (the young local priests lead the tours of the shrine—my words); they record their thoughts 1–2 minutes after the tour, and then I see what effects my tour had on them. This is a good way for me to know how they felt and how I did as a tour leader. (B.M.)

Another priest at the site said: “Yes, this is a prime feedback (...) you don’t really see memory books in churches (...) I just thought of how we could have a protocol one, if there’s a notable guest, we’ll take it out and they can write in it. And then we’ll have another one in the church.” (K. I.) This priest got this idea from the past, as the first visitor’s book at Máriapócs was used in a similar manner. The first book set out on display was signed by the well-known Cardinal Mindszenty as well as Justinian Serédi Principle Archbishop¹⁴ and famous Hungarian actor Imre Sinkovits.¹⁵ The locals and authorities are incredibly proud of these entries. In fact, they even published copies of these entries in the Greek Catholic section of a 2005 yearbook. Exhibiting these entries is similar to how votive tablets and miracle proclamations were handled in previous centuries; all of which contribute to the peculiar force which surrounds Mary of Máriapócs.

It is then evident that the visitor’s books examined serve a completely profane role in addition to their spiritual function. This profane role can, as noted above, be linked with similar books in museums, or other cultural spheres. The visitors are divorced from their everyday communities when they enter this sacred space; a space that is specific and particular. Their respective entries are then able to immortalize their feelings and impressions of the site. Many pilgrims will treat the visitor’s books in this manner, keeping this thought of immortalization in their mind while they write their entries. For the attendants of the chapel, this projection of sentiments is vital to the upkeep of the space. The visitor’s book contains information about who journeys to the site and how the site is perceived. In a way, these entries serve as a kind of advertisement, further acknowledging and validating the space. There were shrines that specifically placed visitor’s books on display in order to serve this purpose. Moreover, those spaces in which books, notebooks, or slips of paper were used spontaneously and organically, were left out on display for the reason outlined above.

14 Justinian Serédi (1884–1945) was a cardinal, and the archbishop of Esztergom. This is the highest ranking in the Hungarian ecclesiastical church. József Mindszenty (1892–1975) was his successor, who was the most renowned Hungarian member of the church in the 20th century.

15 Imre Sinkovits (1928–2001) was a famous actor in the latter half of the 20th century.



THE SACRED FUNCTION OF VISITOR'S BOOKS

An examination of visitor's books of a profane nature shows that they all reflect a distinctive, one-sided communication. The person writing an entry in the book sends a message to those who placed the book there but does not expect a reply. Perhaps it is here that a distinction can be made between visitor's books in churches and those in profane environments. Texts written in books placed in churches are generally addressed not to the persons who maintain the shrine, that is, not to those who placed the book there, but to a third person: the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, or a saint. The person making the entry also expects a "reply": the solution of their problems, spiritual consolation or strengthening of their faith. In this way the visitor's books in shrines also have a strong sacral function: they provide a space for visitors' spontaneous, individual prayers. And visitors make use of this possibility: such prayer texts account for more than three-quarters of the entries.

It is thus quite clear that the visitor's books in shrines are most commonly used to record individual prayers. Because, when a pious pilgrim seeks out a shrine, they are motivated to interact with that which is Transcendent. Forming a relationship with the Eternal then becomes a deep yearning on the part of the pilgrim. Pilgrims believe that the location of the shrines designates the presence of the Divine. This is precisely why they seek out such sites—in order to jumpstart conversations with God. The pilgrim will call out to God, they will talk to Him, prepare and enact rituals for Him, and bring gifts for Him (or Mary and the host of saints). For this to occur, the pilgrim has to believe that the Transcendent exists (in singular or plural forms) and that the divine has the power to influence one's everyday life in a very potent way if a relationship is maintained.¹⁶ Communication is at the center of this exchange. Communicating with the divine is idiosyncratic to each and every denomination, thus uniting those under one canopy who communicate in similar ways.¹⁷ We define this phenomenon as sacred communication; communication which differs from everyday interactions on account of the circumstances in

16 Irén Lovász, *Szagrális kommunikáció* (Budapest: Európai Folklór Intézet, 2002), 11.

17 Márta Korpics and P. Szilczl Dóra, *Szagrális kommunikáció – a transzcendens mutatkozása* (Budapest: Typotex, 2007), 17.

which it occurs and the rules that surround it.¹⁸ Prayer is perhaps the most known means of initiating this sacred communication system. While scripted prayers that are mostly formulaic, repetitive and static in nature¹⁹ often characterize one's first definition of prayer, visitor's books contain hardly any such prayers. Here, prayers directed to God or Mary are written in a somewhat spontaneous manner, and are freer in form:

Mary of Pócs!

I often prayed to you in my desolation, in my great sorrow... You listened to me, you helped me, and that's when I made an inner vow, that I would give you our wedding rings as an offering. As a symbol. While the flow of my life went another way—ever still, in happiness, it developed nonetheless. These rings symbolize a period of my life. These rings belong with you; the best place for these rings to be, is with you. I turn to you in prayer, please continue to help me Dear Virgin Mary. Please do not leave us, fallible weak people. Thank you, that you have stayed by me, stay on, help my loved ones, our loved ones, give them health.

PS. I ask the reverend father to place these rings in the church, and if it is possible, to place them on the garments of Mary.

With Thanksgiving: [Name]²⁰

Karl Rahner's "discourse prayer" comes to mind in light of these discussion type prayers. In these prayers, the faithful will form their thoughts without formal constraints in order to open their hearts to God.²¹ One of my interlocutors reacted to this notion in the following way:

Do you pray at home?

18 Lovász, *Szakrális kommunikáció*, 7.

19 Lovász, *Szakrális kommunikáció*, 25.

20 This prayer was found in a letter in an offertory box at Máriapócs, beside the visitor's book.

21 Karl Rahner, *Von der Not und dem Segen des Gebetes* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1965), 9. Karl Rahner, *Hit, remény, szeretet: a lelki élet olvasókönyve* (Budapest – Luzern: Egyházfórum, 1991), 183.

-Praise be to God, yes.

And how? With your own words?

-Yes, with my own words, and I have shared prayers with my children. But most of the time I ask for things with my own words. Me and my family. They are completely different, because when I pray them, I feel totally close to Jesus Christ. Those prayers are completely different; they are different from the heart. (...) I feel like the words are nicer, they come from a deeper place (...) I feel like soul is speaking with soul. (P. Zs.)

In the case of the visitor's books, this style and act of speaking, is translated into the written word. Regardless of their verbal quality, these entries are still prayers. Most especially because those writing them, regard them as such:

I pray at home often, but this is different. I pray a great deal here as well. Firstly, I pray in my own words, just to myself, but I know that I had to write it down, I had to give thanks, that I can be here, and to ask for help, that I can come back next year (...) Everyone has emotions. I believe in prayer, I attest to it. I am a God fearing person, and I enjoy praying. (É.B.Zs.)

Writing down the prayer is a possibility that can also benefit the individual. When they decide to record the prayer in writing, it loses its momentariness. Such prayers are able to be looked at and retrieved at any time, even perhaps re-read, they become re-usable. They function like little notes used for remembering things.²²

I really would have loved to write in it. I assume that the reason everyone comes to shrines like this, is to ask for something (...) that's mostly why people come here, that's why we came here as well, for a very concrete thing this time, and that's why I think that not only spiritually, but there should be a trace left, that it remains in writing. (R.)

22 Jack Goody, "Funktionen der Schrift in traditionellen Gesellschaften," in *Entstehung und Folgen der Schriftkultur*, ed. Jack Goody, Ian Watt, and Kathleen Gough (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986), 20.

Similarly, the priest at the shrine of Máriagyűd also places high value on the act of writing:

I tell you, sometimes it's impossible to chase them away, so you can definitely see that they are set on writing things down. So sometimes non-verbal communication says more than words. (...) And yes, this is right in front of the statue of Mary and they absolutely feel that they wrote their message to the Virgin Mary. (CS.I.)

The priest at the shrine of Máriapócs stresses the manifestation of one's faith in this act that relies on requests and sentiments of thanksgiving:

The idea of prayer in of itself is limiting for them, as it has the ability to break. This is like when we love someone, we draw them something, if it is applicable (...) I think that that's the anthropological meaning of tattooing. (...) I really feel that this is an anthropological urge or compulsion; one which is separate from religion. Like when I love someone, then I want to touch them after a while. This *virtus*²³ is also found at Máriapócs. And if I have an opportunity to write it, and sometimes the believer's soul, especially when they don't necessarily operate on a spiritually intelligent level, then, kind of by nature, they will surely try to manifest their faith. (K.I.)

These declarations of faith might be compared to ex voto objects: "Look, the way I am with this, is that words fly away, while writing remains, I can't say more than that." (Anonymous) Another woman spoke of this idea in the following manner:

Well, I don't know...I know that here is my writing, it is written down, here in this gorgeous, wonderfully beautiful church, and then this is better for me, if I write it down. I repeat all of this in words, and I give thanks, and I ask for

23 *Virtus* is the touching of first- or second-class relics by hand or by another object later used for prayer. The main incentive of this practice is to imbue the object or the hand with the sacrality present in the relic or sacred statue. Not all shrines offer such services, however there is a staircase at Máriapócs that leads up to the sacred icon of Mary. Going up to Mary and touching the icon is still an ever-present practice on pilgrimage feast days, and at other times. See Sándor Bálint and Gábor Barna, *Búcsújáró magyarok. A magyarországi búcsújárás története és néprajza* (Budapest: Szent István Társulat, 1994), 196.

things, if I want something from Him, from the Virgin Mary, but if I write it down like this, it is safer. (E.)

The interviews showed that pilgrims who leave notes are comforted by the fact that their prayers leave a mark. The request or thanks becomes visible when they are written down, thus ensuring that they have more chance of being heard.

We can cite here Jack Goody. In his opinion the reason why we write is because it offers a novel medium of exchange and communication. The main task of writing is to objectify language. Moreover, it is meant to create a system of signs that are visible to the material world. Through this, it is able to surpass both temporal and time-constrained barriers, where the vocalized word becomes immortalized.²⁴ According to Jan Assmann, this brings memory to the fore, whereby writing becomes one of the forms memory makes itself known in.²⁵ Capturing the word or the thought is central to Assman's conjectures on cultural memory. Capturing the situations in which writing occurs, and expanding those parameters is also part and parcel of his analysis. In this case, the cultural memory of a site expands with every miracle that is tied to the pages of the visitor's books. Viewed from the standpoint of profane history, these shrines re-create the mythos of the past, which is, according to Mircea Eliade's notions of time, directly tied to sacred history.²⁶ Thus, if the believer seeks out the shrine, the mythos of the shrine becomes normative. In other words, it becomes reality. It has the capacity to formulate power. The pilgrim is faced with the concerns and joys of their everyday life, coupled with those things they specifically want to bring with themselves on the pilgrimage—spiritually speaking. They think of the intercessory power of Mary and how they are surrounded by her presence in the form of votive tablets, tablets of thanksgiving, songs, the prayers of other pilgrims and the gestures performed at the shrine; all

24 Goody, "Funktionen der Schrift in traditionellen Gesellschaften," 26.

25 Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (München: C. H. Beck Verlag, 2005), 21-25.

26 Mircea Eliade's notion of sacred history, in which the sacred, mythical past is distinguished from ordinary time (in which non-sacred events occur) is especially relevant here. All contemporary religious feasts, or liturgical time spans harken back to, and resurrect—so to speak—this mythical past, in which sacred events occurred. Mircea Eliade, *Le sacré et la profane* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), 63-66.

of which motivate the pilgrim to write their request down. In this way, the shrine, and the objects it contains and holds, as well as the rituals and the visitor's book all have the capacity to make a place memorable.²⁷ In the present case this practice of writing down the prayers of pilgrims helps and inspires institutionalized forms of organized religion. This is the cultural context that gives meaning to writing an entry in the visitor's book.

Another characteristic of prayer texts entered in the visitor's books of shrines is their autocommunicative nature. Jurij Lotman's theory on communication dissects these themes. Lotman attests that art historical and religious texts have the profound capability of becoming auto communicative. These texts, such as diaries, prayers or mantras focus on quality, rather than quantity in that they fill and raise the individual or the spirit of the community to a higher level. Thus, the text in the entries serves as a code, rather than merely as a message. It transforms the identity of the speaker.²⁸ Whoever prays, steps out of the profane world, and attempts to traverse to the sacred world, spiritually speaking. For this to occur, they must get in contact with their innermost selves. Lotman defines this phenomenon as an "I-I" form of communication.²⁹ Lotman's conjectures on communication are similar to theologian Karl Rahner's viewpoints. Rahner emphasizes that in prayer, the speaker realizes and validates not only who God is, but also, who he himself is.³⁰ The theologian claims that in prayer conversations—where the believer is convinced that he/she does indeed hear the voice (or message) of God—it is really (merely) a reflection of his/her thoughts and mood. A conversation with the self, if you will.

27 Pierre Nora's *Les lieux de mémoire* [*Spaces of Memory*] pioneered this thought. Personally felt experiences and the way they spontaneously affect our memories (tradition) and history (the reconstructed past) meet at a nexus, if an urge to remember exists. If this desire to remember does not exist, only the places of history will remain. The spaces of memory are more than just places imbued with histories; they are living memories that become richer with every time they re-surface. This is precisely how the past is resurrected on to the living web of current civilizations. Pierre Nora, "Emlékezet és történelem között. A helyek problematikája," *Aetas* 14 no. 3. (1999): 142–158.

28 Jurij Lotman, "A kommunikáció kétféle modellje a kultúra rendszerében," in *Kultúra, szöveg, narráció. Orosz elméletirók tanulmányai*, eds. Árpád Kovács and Edit Gilbert (Pécs: Jannus Pannonius Egyetemi Kiadó, 1994), 17–43.

29 Lovász, "A kommunikáció kétféle modellje a kultúra rendszerében," 51.

30 Rahner, *Hit, remény, szeretet: a lelki élet olvasókönyve*, 143.



This is naturally not easily dismissed, and naiveté aside, it is useful to consider this idea when thinking about prayer. In prayer, the individual—when speaking about God with themselves or in placing themselves in the presence of God—sinks into their own soul.³¹ Speaking the prayer, or in this case, writing it down, heightens the emotions that are directly tied to it. It also builds hope and gives the pilgrim strength to carry on.³² Psychologists who have studied this phenomenon have observed that the performative ritualistic function of prayer has the capability to overwrite the narrative of a sickness. If the Christian believer is able to accept the teachings of the Church as valid, which we observe in the gospel of Mark—“I tell you, therefore, everything you ask and pray for, believe that you have it already, and it will be yours.”³³—then they have a way out.³⁴

My interlocutors often informed me about how much relief they felt in writing their prayers down:

It just came to me. I think this is a good practice because one calms down from it. I just read a book, that if someone goes to church, they live longer. Some-way-somehow. I don't know, but there must be some truth to it, because when I go to church, I feel calm after. I know today is a holy day, today is Sunday, I went to church, I prayed for my family, and for everything, and this calms me and in my own way, it makes me happy. (D.J.-né)

A Franciscan hermit monk (K.D.) at the shrine of Mátraverebély-Szentkút compared his own diary entries to the slips of papers with prayers found at such sites:

I really don't like writing a diary, but when I went to Mátraverebély-Szentkút

31 Rahner, *Hit, remény, szeretet: a lelki élet olvasókönyve*. 148.

32 Lovász “A kommunikáció kétféle modellje a kultúra rendszerében,”. 32-33.

33 Mk. 11. 24.

34 See Adrian Andreescu, “Rethinking Prayer and Health Research: An Exploratory Inquiry on Prayer’s Psychological Dimension,” *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* 30, no. 1-2 (2001): 23-47. A study on prayer slips at a chapel in a hospital covers similar themes. According to the study, the children in the hospital, as well as their parents, turned to religious or spiritual sources as a result of the situation they were placed in. The study mentions the Holy Child chapel at the Hospital of Cincinnati, where many will leave written prayers for the children at the hospital. Some of the prayers ask God to intervene with the illness; others focus on patients receiving the gentle consolation of God.

as a hermit, my superiors instructed me to write a diary. I have to write an entry every day. Initially, this was very difficult for me, but then I realized, that this has a very important psychological function. You have to arrange your thoughts. You have to look yourself in the eye, and write it down etc. I think this might be a factor in why people leave slips of paper, filled with personal problems. (K.D.)

Walter Heim's research on diary writing also draws parallels between the act of writing and the psychological rewards associated with this task. According to Heim, writing these prayers down serves a certain purpose, which is to restore the pilgrim to a state where they finally calm down.³⁵ It is inevitably a route to inner peace. This feeling is oftentimes also documented in the pages of the visitor's books:

Dear blessed Virgin Mary!

I am so grateful that I can be here in front of your colors. My experience here was so beautiful. My whole soul is so light. I calmed down, and I came with such great joy once again...

[Name]

2005. 03. 14.³⁶

Here, we must keep in mind that religion has a type of psychological function, as the hand of God is available even when all else fails.³⁷ Realizing that one is not alone takes a remarkable weight off one's shoulders. Experiencing this transcendent means of help can offer ease and relief.³⁸ Visitor's books also contribute to this feeling: primarily in the construction of phrases that concentrate on problems and issues, which are then alleviated through the task of writing.

35 Walter Heim, *Briefe zum Himmel. Die Grabbriefe an Mutter M. Theresia Scherer in Ingenbohl. Ein Beitrag zur religiösen Volkskunde der Gegenwart.* (Basel: Krebs Verlag, 1961), 86.

36 Visitor's book in Máriapócs 2005/1. 72/1.

37 Frida Balázs, "A vallás és a szupernaturális. Valláskutatás és antropológia: meghatározások és alapfogalmak," *Világosság* no. 7-8 (2005): 198.

38 Balázs, "A vallás és a szupernaturális," 198.



CONCLUDING REMARKS

Peter Berger's work on religious practice and tradition points to how the human condition is oftentimes broken and re-considered when one's everyday life is interrupted; ruptures which oftentimes do not have a physiological basis.³⁹ Pilgrimages, and the rituals that are tied to them, are akin to these ruptures. An opportunity arises for everyone to create a relationship between the earthly and heavenly realms and even just to step out of their usual everyday experiences. Despite the ever-changing outward signs and symbols of such sites, this is where I see consistency. The pilgrim seeks the Divine, the pilgrim yearns to meet the Transcendent, to embark on a religious adventure where they hope to find rejuvenation for their body-mind-soul. For those that arrive as lay tourists, finding curiosities on site overrides the prospect of these spiritual discoveries.⁴⁰ The entries in visitor's books primarily focus on the search for God, and a solution for imminent health problems. These entries are usually conducted in an honest, personal manner. Aside from these pilgrims, and in fewer numbers, we encounter tourists. In my reflections above I aimed to show how these differential actions, motifs, and motivations contribute to the multifaceted function of such pilgrimage sites. This freedom, a freedom that is both formal and informal, creates pockets of opportunities for pilgrims to create and immortalize their exchange with the Divine and to manifest their prayers in ways that are specific to them. For many, written prayers are acts of thanksgiving; rituals of giving back. The auto communicative manner and form is prevalent in these exchanges between the divine realm and that of the pilgrim. This lends to the relief that surrounds pilgrims upon journeying to and participating in such pilgrimages. Perhaps it is this widespread, comprehensive span of functions which explains why such visitor's books have become so popular in recent decades. In them, each pilgrim finds the building blocks of their religion, and how they want to interact and what they actually want to share with God.

39 Peter Berger, *Heretical Imperative. Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (New York: Doubleday, 1979), 39.

40 Bertalan Pusttai, Donach Myers, and the American Belleville study delves into the three functions of allocating pilgrimage shrines. Bertalan Pusttai, "Vallás és turizmus," in *A turizmus, mint kulturális rendszer*, ed. Fejős Zoltán (Budapest: Néprajzi Múzeum, 1998), 17.

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