Catholic Pilgrimage in Northern Michigan:
The National Shrine of the Cross in the Woods

Introduction

A number of Catholic sacred sites and pilgrimages have developed in northern Michigan because of the efforts of individual devotees and their ability to effectively gain community support for the construction and maintenance of these sacred sites and pilgrimages. These individuals do not develop generic Catholic pilgrimage sites; they develop shrines devoted to specific Catholic historic figures. This paper addresses why and how a certain place on the northern Michigan landscape became a Catholic pilgrimage site. I argue that the National Shrine of the Cross in the Woods in Indian River, Michigan was constructed and developed due to the efforts of Charles Brophy because of his personal devotion to Kateri Tekakwitha and his investment in the geographic space in which the pilgrimage site developed.

The National Shrine of the Cross in the Woods developed as a sacred site and pilgrimage location through the concerted construction efforts and commercial interests of Charles Brophy and the local Catholic community of Indian River. Prior to the development of the site there was no historical connection between the subject of devotion, Kateri Tekakwitha, and the local landscape. It was only through the physical alteration of the landscape that this isolated location in the woods of northern Michigan became imbued with sacred power.

By examining this site I intend to address Catholic pilgrimage in an American context. I hope to try to describe, define, or clarify what pilgrimage is, as well as problematize the term through the use of this case study. I will also look at the intersections between tourism and pilgrimage to demonstrate how the boundaries between pilgrimage and tourism can often be
blurred. Overall, my goal is to try to discover what characteristics or requirements determine the creation of a pilgrimage site. Through the use of my case study I hope to point out that there is no set formula for what makes a pilgrimage site. Numerous factors are involved in creating a pilgrimage site as well as maintaining its popularity.

I will utilize a historical methodology that will be useful for providing background information and context to help understand why this particular pilgrimage site developed where it did and when. Throughout this paper I will examine The National Shrine of the Cross in the Woods through a number of theoretical lenses. I will apply theories and definitions concerning pilgrimage, sacred space, place, memory, and tourism. I will also demonstrate how a number of these theories and definitions intersect or overlap in the case of The National Shrine of the Cross in the Woods. Overall, as Yi-Fu Tuan states in *Space and Place*, my “approach is descriptive, aiming more often to suggest than to conclude.”

**The Theoretical Lens: Pilgrimage Space and Place**

Pilgrimage is concerned with ritualizing geographic space. Pilgrimage is a useful term, but one should be aware of the limits of its usefulness as a category. For the purposes of this paper I define pilgrimage as a purposeful journey to a sacred space. A sacred space is where homogenous space is perceived to be punctured. As Mircea Eliade, a noted historian of religion, put it, “when the sacred manifests itself in any hierophany, there is not only a break in the homogeneity of space; there is also revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the normality of the vast surrounding expanse.”

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has the potential for a limitless number of hierophanies, which allows for the creation of new sacred spaces.

For Eliade space is homogenous unless it has been punctured by a hierophany, a manifestation or appearance of the sacred. A hierophany creates a point of reference as the center and is used for orientation. For Eliade “every sacred space implies a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different.” The hierophany, or center, “founds the world” by separating the sacred from the profane. Eliade saw the creation of a center as an ordering force that separates cosmos from chaos. He referred to this center as the “axis mundi” because it acts as a pillar connecting the heaven and the earth.

I want to distinguish between space and place in my definition of pilgrimage. I intentionally use the term “space” instead of “place” in my working definition of pilgrimage. According to Michel De Certeau place is stable and fixed, while space is mobile. De Certeau asserts that “space is a practiced place.” His understanding and differentiation of space and place are helpful in understanding that space is understood through action.

According to Yi-Fu Tuan “space’ is more abstract than ‘place.’” However, they are also very much related. They are both integral parts of lived experience. “Hence space can be variously experienced as the relative location of objects or places, as the

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3 Eliade, 21.
4 Eliade, 26.
5 Eliade, 30.
6 Eliade, 36-37.
8 De Certeau, 117.
9 Tuan, 6.
distances and expanses that separate or link places, and—more abstractly—as the area defined by a network of places.”

Narratives help us organize spaces and places. Narratives cannot be separated from the spaces and places. Pilgrimages incorporate the self into the narrative and the collective memory through place and space. Change of place is change of self (and vice versa). Places change, but the place connects us, through memory, to home. The places themselves are altered and indifferent to our memories. The places only reveal a fraction of the narrative.

Stories of a place are always told anew because they are based on changing places and memories. A lack of places to remember makes the act of disremembering easier. Memorials give us a place to remember. Monuments mark the presence of the sacred. In Monuments and Memory Martha Norkunas examines monuments, their connections to gender, ethnicity, power, space, and narrative, and their relationship to memory and history. The book investigates issues of memory and history through local and vernacular monuments. She argues that personal memory sets the context for understanding the monuments. The story is part of the memory and history through the connection to place. There is a significant relationship between history, memory, and monuments. Monuments are an expression of memory. As places change so does our contemporary understanding of the past.

Pilgrimage requires one to break away from the normal routines of daily life. Pilgrimages can alter normal social roles, but do not have to. Victor Turner described pilgrimage as a liminal state or a rite of passage in which the individual makes a break from their habitual daily life. The pilgrim enters sacred time. The pilgrimage site, then, becomes the “threshold”

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10 Tuan, 12.
between the sacred and the profane.\textsuperscript{12} Normally a return home is part of pilgrimage, but it is not necessary. Pilgrimages are both individual and collective experiences.

Similar language is used when Nelson Graburn describes tourism activities as “ritualized breaks in routine that define and relieve the ordinary.”\textsuperscript{13} The incorporation of the sacred appears to be the only missing element in differentiating between tourism and pilgrimage in Graburn’s description. Paul Cohen recognizes these similarities and difference between tourism and pilgrimage when he states that “though conceptually distinct, they are not completely discrete, as each possesses some qualities of the other.”\textsuperscript{14} Luigi Tomasi identifies the difference between pilgrims and tourists as one of “inner disposition.”\textsuperscript{15} For Tomasi, motivation is the determining factor between a pilgrim and a tourist.

Tomasi’s distinction between pilgrimage and tourism is challenged by the work of Martha Norkunas in another book, \textit{The Politics of Public Memory}. Norkunas looks at tourism and museums as a construction of a past, culture, and identity that is shaped by the present but tells a particular version of history. She examines the reconstruction of the past and the reinterpretation of the present found in museums, monuments and public culture. She examines “tourism as a journey from the profane into the sacred.”\textsuperscript{16} And in some cases “tourism had absorbed some of the social functions of religion as it became an essentially religious quest for authenticity.”\textsuperscript{17} For Norkunas tourism has an inherent religious motivation to it.

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{12} Turner, 214.
\bibitem{17} Nortkunas, \textit{The Politics of Public Memory}, 2.
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The National Shrine of the Cross in the Woods

The construction of The National Shrine of the Cross in the Woods in Indian River began in 1946. The main focus is a 55 foot crucifix that rises from the property. The shrine also contains a number of smaller sculptures and shrines devoted to Catholic saints and saintly figures. There is also a large indoor worship space and a gift shop. Over the years the shrine has attracted millions of visitors.

The site at Indian River is a place that blurs the distinction between pilgrimage and tourism. The opening statement of the shrine’s promotional brochure demonstrates Norkunas’s assertion that the link between religion and tourism can often be found in monuments. “The Cross in the Woods Shrine/Parish has attracted millions of visitors from around the world. It is one of Michigan’s best known and loved monuments.”

The brochure highlights the site’s touristic aspects by emphasizing the number of visitors and by referring to the site as a “monument.” Furthermore, the brochure goes on to show that the shrine is an entirely built or constructed space, as well as demonstrating the original motivation behind the construction of the site:

The Cross in the Woods had its origin in 1946. Inspired by Kateri Tekakwitha, founding Pastor Msgr. Charles D. Brophy envisioned the huge wooden cross as the center piece for an outdoor sanctuary. In 1954 the Cross, made from a Redwood tree was erected. Renowned Michigan sculptor, Marshall M. Fredericks created a bronze image of the crucified Jesus which was raised into place in 1959 to complete the Crucifix.

Although the shrine was inspired by Kateri Tekakwitha a statue to her was not erected until 2001 and is dedicated to the shrine’s founder.

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18 National Shrine of the Cross in the Woods, Brochure.
19 National Shrine of the Cross in the Woods.
20 National Shrine of the Cross in the Woods.
However, Kateri’s shrine is not the only one on the property. There is a walkway through the property that takes the visitor past each shrine. Pilgrims are expected to use their time walking the path for reflection. In addition to the outdoor shrines an indoor sanctuary was erected with funding from donations on June 29, 1997. This site also houses the country’s largest doll museum; a further demonstration of the intersection of religion and tourism.

However, one of the first structures on the property was the gift shop. The gift shop features religious inspired souvenirs for visitors. According to the shrine’s promotional materials “the Shrine has had a gift shop on the grounds of the Shrine almost since its beginning. Travelers and pilgrims who visit the Shrine look forward to visiting the Shop.” It is important to note that the author(s) of this passage clearly distinguish between travelers, presumably tourists; and pilgrims, presumably religious visitors.

The shrine is located on former state park land. The land was sold to the parish for $1.00 and a box of candy. The parish had previously been denied the property, but continually pushed for it, arguing that it would bring tourist dollars to the area. Since interstate 75 was constructed in 1962 the shrine has attracted millions of tourists from around the world. Those promoting the site point out that their “catchment area” is global. The promoters of The Cross in the Woods have created a pilgrimage site out of nothing. The Cross in the Woods is an entirely constructed space; a transformation of nature or wilderness into human space. Therefore, I take a “Field of Dreams” approach to this site. “If you build it they will come.”

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21 National Shrine of the Cross in the Woods.
22 National Shrine of the Cross in the Woods.
24 “The National Shrine of the Cross in the Woods.”
25 Turner, 222.
Eliade’s notion of hierophany is relevant here. Homogeneous profane space has been punctured by the manifestation or appearance of the sacred. In this case the manifestation of the sacred is a human physical construction. The created hierophany at The Cross in the Woods is using the cross like a crow bar to pry up the sacred out of otherwise undifferentiated forest.

The Cross in the Woods differs from many pilgrimage sites because it lacks a historical connection or continuity between a sacred event or sacred historical figure and the geographic space. The initial creator of the site, Charles Brophy, was devoted to the memory and image of Kateri Tekakwitha. In addition, he was also invested in the geographic space where the shrine was constructed. However, there is no historical or geographical connection between Kateri Tekakwitha and Indian River. Kateri Tekakwitha was a Mohawk woman from the present day area along the St. Lawrence River on the border between New York State and Quebec. She lived during a tumultuous time in the seventeenth century in which colonial pressures from the French and British were profoundly impacting the lives of her people. She converted to Catholicism at a young age and moved to a French Catholic mission site in Canada. She died young and had numerous miracles attributed to her.

Her influence and memory have reached the ears of the Vatican. She was beatified by Pope John Paul II and is currently being considered for canonization by Pope Benedict XVI, which would make her the first Native American saint. There are popular devotions to her influence and memory across the Great Lakes region and beyond. Numerous Catholic churches, especially Native American Catholic churches, are either named for her or contain devotional shrines to her memory.
Conclusions

For many, pilgrimage is about “feeling the call.” Part of what makes a pilgrimage site work is that others have been there and left some of their emotions behind. People come because they believe there is power in certain places. This power can be described in terms of miraculous occurrences, the supernatural, or the extraordinary. Ian Reader calls this the emotional landscape of pilgrimage—a term that incorporates not just the geographical features and structures that provide a setting for the pilgrimage, but also nonphysical matters that shape the emotional terrain in which pilgrims voyage, such as the pilgrimage’s various legends, symbolic meanings, and miraculous tales, all of which help create the mental landscape framing the pilgrimage and influencing its participants.26

A person going there legitimizes the space. “As pilgrimages are made, so too are meanings in the eyes of pilgrims and other participants in the pilgrimage process.”27

The National Shrine of the Cross in the Woods is a case study which demonstrates that a site’s development and popularity is often the result of the actions of an individual or a group of individuals who have a vested interest in the place for the pilgrimage site and have a personal devotion to the individual for whom the site is dedicated. But a pilgrimage site does not have to develop this way. There are a number of other Catholic pilgrimage sites in northern Michigan that developed along a different path and for very different reasons. The implication is that because there is so much variation in pilgrimage in such a small geographic space a general definition or model of pilgrimage would be difficult to produce in order to encompass them all. Therefore, Victor Turner’s groundbreaking work on pilgrimage simply does not hold up when there are too many exceptions to his guidelines and definitions.

27 Reader, 4-5.
Figures

Fig. 1. Source: Author’s private collection (National Shrine of the Cross in the Woods, Indian River, Michigan).

*The Cross*
Fig. 2. Source: Author’s private collection (National Shrine of the Cross in the Woods, Indian River, Michigan).

Statue of Kateri Tekakwitha
Bibliography


National Shrine of the Cross in the Woods. Brochure.


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