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Editorial: The 13th Annual International Religious Tourism & Pilgrimage Conference in Vilnius

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The 13th Annual International Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Conference was held in Vilnius from 29th June to 2nd July 2022. The conference was attended by the leading researchers in religious tourism and pilgrimage from around the world. Researchers from the United Kingdom, Canada, Israel, Ireland, Portugal, Poland, Latvia, Japan, the United States, Australia, Italy, Slovakia and other countries delivered speeches at the Conference in person. More speakers connected virtually. More than 40 participants from around the world took part in total and more than 30 papers were delivered during the conference. The aim of the conference was to present the latest research and personal insights of researchers on the

changing nature of religion in society and to encourage the academic community to discuss how various new challenges affect the development of religious tourism and pilgrimage. Topics covered included the impact of COVID-19 on religious tourism and pilgrimages, the motives for pilgrimage, the holy places and routes of pilgrims, the relationship between religious tourism and cultural heritage, and the theoretical perspectives of religious tourism. Keynote speeches included the presentations of Archbishop of Vilnius, Metropolitan Gintaras Grušas, Vitor Ambrosio from Portugal and Jaeyeon Choe from the UK.

Figure 1: Hill of Crosses (near Šiauliai)
A unique symbol of freedom, faith, and hope



Photo by Kevin Griffin

The conference was organized by the Community of Lithuanian Pilgrims (www.piligrimai.lt) and the Institute of Sociology of the Lithuanian Centre for Social Sciences. Co-organisers of this Conference were Razaq Raj from Leeds Beckett University in the United Kingdom, Kevin Griffin from Technological University Dublin in Ireland and Carlos Fernandes from Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo in Portugal.

Lithuania has a lot of pilgrimage sites (Lithuania.travel, 2023). The most important pilgrimage places are the Hill of Crosses (near Šiauliai), a unique symbol of freedom, faith, and hope (Figure 1); Šiluva, the site of the apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Figure 2); Vilnius Gates of Dawn, the site of the miraculous crowned painting of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Figure 3), and the miraculous Image of Divine Mercy, venerated at the Shrine of Divine Mercy in Vilnius (Figure 4). The participants of the Conference had the opportunity to visit these places.

Vilnius is Lithuania's capital city and known for its baroque architecture, most noticeable in its medieval Old Town. The Old Town were declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1994. The city has a rich history in terms of religious and cultural heritage. There are more than 30 Catholic churches in Vilnius as well as more than 10 Orthodox churches, shrines of Protestants, Old Believers

and other Christian confessions, a Jewish Synagogue and a Karaite Kenesa. Vilnius is also the Catholic City of Divine Mercy. The main international pilgrimage sites of Catholic pilgrimage are: Vilnius Cathedral Basilica of Sts. Stanislaus and Vladislaus; Vilnius Gates of Dawn, famous for the miraculous icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of Mercy; the Divine Mercy Shrine where from 2005 there is a painting of Merciful Jesus based on visions of St. Faustina Kowalska; Vilnius Calvary and the Holy Cross Church - on the Way of the Cross - were established in 1662-1669. The conference venue was Domus Maria Hotel in Vilnius. Symbolically this hotel is located in a former 400-years-old Discalced Carmelites' convent, situated in the heart of Vilnius Old Town, close to the Gates of Dawn pilgrimage site and Saint Teresa Church – a masterpiece of 17th century baroque architecture.

The main organiser of the Conference was the Community of Lithuanian Pilgrims. This organisation was established in 2004 with the aim to consolidate Christian pilgrims in Lithuania, to take care of the natural and cultural heritage of the sacred sites of Lithuania and to organise pilgrim journeys. The Community of Lithuanian Pilgrims organises various projects associated with pilgrimage and sacred places of Lithuania and publishes various materials for pilgrims. The most significant projects include organisation of woodcarver contest-exhibitions 'Saints and Pilgrims' (4 events have been held since 2009), and various publications such as the monograph of D. Liutikas *Pilgrimage. Manifestation of Values and Identity in the Journeys* (2009); the four-disc album *Prayers and Hymns of Vilnius Verkiai Calvary* (2010); the documentary *Pilgrimage Sites in Lithuania* (2012); the map guide *Pilgrim Routes in Lithuania* (2014) and; development of the religious tourism route *The Way of Grace* (2021).

The Institute of Sociology (LCSS IS) is a branch of the State Research Institute – the Lithuanian Centre for Social Sciences – a public legal entity operating as a state budget institution and carrying out long-term research and experimental (social, cultural) development, important to the State, society, international cooperation or economic operators. It is a venue for the training of doctoral students in Sociology. The Department of Regional and Urban Studies research includes the main

Table 1. Previous IRTP Conferences

2003 – Fátima, Portugal
2009 – Nazaré, Portugal
2011 – New Norcia, Australia
2012 – Maynooth, Ireland
2013 – Malta
2014 – Veszprém, Hungary
2015 – Girona, Spain
2016 – Konya, Turkey
2017 – Armeno, Italy
2018 – Santiago de Compostela, Spain
2019 – Belgrade, Serbia
2021 – Braga, Portugal
2022 – Vilnius, Lithuania

Figure 2: Šiluva, Site of the apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Photo by Kevin Griffin

trends and specific characteristics of regional and urban development. Current research in the field of tourism is being carried out through the project *Transformations and Perspectives of the Tourism Sector after the COVID-19 Pandemic* (2021-2023). This project has received funding from the European Regional Development Fund under grant agreement with the Research Council of Lithuania.

The conference organisers have an impressive track record of successfully publishing papers from their events. This special issue of the International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage (IJRTP) presents selected papers from the 13th Annual International Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Conference. An important role of this Special Issue is to present research which was conducted before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. These articles in particular have shown that religious tourism and pilgrimage are not only the most adapted form of tourism when it comes to various challenges (Liutikas, 2021), but also the sector is rapidly evolving in terms of choosing pilgrim destinations and taking into account the changing characteristics of travel features.

Overview of Papers

Stephen F. Haller analyses personal changes and identity transformations during a pilgrim journey. The author raised such questions as how radical is the change? and how reversible? After analysis of various paradigms, he describes a change, as ‘not an irreversible one, yet not easily reversible either.’ Change relates to the rearrangement of commitments. This transformational change is constrained by the pilgrim’s own experience and character. Our choices can only be made from within a paradigm of our lived history and commitments. However, constant recommitments are deeper than choices. The author suggests, that

choices can be tried out to see what they are like, whereas commitments involve integrating them holistically into one’s self-identity.

Peter Ivanič, Hilda Kramáreková, Alfred Krogmann, Henrich Grežo, and Lucia Petrikovičová describe the potential of the European Cultural Route of Saints Cyril and Methodius for the development of cultural tourism. This is a new Cultural Route established in 2021. The

Figure 3: Vilnius Gates of Dawn
Site of the miraculous crowned painting of the Blessed Virgin Mary



Photo by Kevin Griffin

route is envisaged to stretch from the Czech Republic to Slovakia and later to other countries including Bulgaria, Greece, and Italy.

M^a Carmen Pardo López, Mónica Cortés García, and Goretti Silva present a ‘tool kit’, inspired by the lessons learned from the Camino de Santiago strategies and policies and aimed to support the development and operation of pilgrimage routes in Latin America. They identified such good practises in Camino Ways as rehabilitation and adaptation of the physical path, signage, a vast network of shelters, relevant governance model - including participation of the Church, collaboration of both residents and visitors, involvement of institutional departments, and marketing and commercialisation.

Marc-Marie Mutangala and Lorenzo Cantoni analyse the lessons of COVID-19 in Italy. Their focus is on the use of Mobile Information and Communication

Technologies (MICTs). They analyse the management of communication during the pandemic period in some sanctuaries of the Lazio Region in Italy. The authors noticed that there was a great difference in using technologies during the pandemic period. However, the pandemic was a favourable time

for the integration of ICTs and MICTs into church practices, a time that invites deeper reflections about church, faith and technologies.

A new digital ecclesiology and a digital theology is an opportunity to think about the place of technological innovation in the life of Church and the chance to open innovative dimensions of the relationship between Church and believers.

Antonietta Ivona and Donatella Privitera focus on food and religion. They present two case studies from the South of Italy. These authors claim that the combination of religion and food was a successful scenario in attracting tourists in the new environment created by the pandemic. The findings of the research suggest that food is an important aspect of religious events, and plays a role in the expression of cultural identity, and supports local economies. This research offers a new insight into the complex relationships between food, faith, and tourism.

Eleanor O’Keeffe presents an analysis of a so called ‘pandemic pilgrimage boom’ in the United Kingdom. The pandemic has generated greater social traction for pilgrimage according to data from the British Pilgrimage Trust (BPT), a heritage and wellbeing charity that advocates for pilgrimage in the UK. This article highlights the challenges facing pilgrimage practitioners in this context and encourages research in longitudinal, data-driven approaches to study the individual and social satisfaction that pilgrimage offers in view of its modern adaptations.

Isilda Leitão and Carlos Fernandes present a study on the conceptualisation of heritage-based routes. The aim of their paper is to provide an orientation for the conceptualisation of a route between Central Europe and the Iberian Peninsula related to the historical and mythical legacies of Elisabeth of Hungary (XIII century), and Isabel (Elisabeth), princess of Aragon (1270?-1336) and Queen of Portugal. Linear routes are linked to historical events and connect diverse territories influencing their

Figure 4: The Miraculous Image of Divine Mercy, venerated at the Shrine of Divine Mercy in Vilnius

Photo by Kevin Griffin

development and evolution. The authors conclude that the route named *The Miracle of the Roses* can be adjusted to include several supplementary cultural and religious itineraries.

Janis Bikse and Mahendar Reddy Gavinolla analyse the religious significance of holy springs in India and the Baltic Countries (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia). The use of springs has changed for religious purposes and health reasons. Springs are considered as a resource for religious tourism and tourism attraction. Visitors to holy springs are motivated by religious and mystical reasons followed by leisure, recreation, landscape, and health in the Baltic Countries, and mostly by religious reasons followed by health or medical and recreation in India. The authors provide suggestions for promoting spring tourism at religious sites (e.g. to develop infrastructure as areas for bathing, and drinking spring water) in order to reduce the negative environmental impacts.

Michael Strmiska presents a cultural tourism route in Latvia and Lithuania – *The Balts' Road*. This article

examines the manner in which the pre-Christian Baltic religion is represented on the current tourism route. The author claims, that *The Balts' Road*, displays a certain ambivalence related to religious history and the current religious situation in the region. The author concludes that *The Balts' Road* allows space for different perspectives and identities, while also catering for those with no particular religious interest or orientation of any sort. Cultural travellers could focus on the ancient Baltic lifestyle and culture, while followers of pagan traditions can find interesting things about ancient pagan beliefs and practices.

Pierre Fournié looks at the phenomenon of religious tourism from the wider Strategic Intelligence conception. This author seeks to draw attention to such warning signs as water scarcity, fires, heat bubbles and conflict. Strategic Intelligence could be connected to territorial development, and this instrument could help to support economic development and planning activities in the regions. The main idea is to prepare local economies and people for more resilient actions.

Rev. Ruth Dowson and Daniel H. Olsen point out a revitalised role for religion in the public square. Their paper aims to examine and typologise the ways in which Christian faith communities (mainly in the United Kingdom) engage in the public square, through the medium of events. This paper, related to the concept of the *Eventization of Faith*, draws attention to such issues as contestation of secular spaces for faith-related purposes, as well as the potential for contestation of sacred spaces used for non-faith events. After examining literature on the eventization of faith and the use of public space by faith communities, the authors present a diverse range of ways in which faith communities choose to engage in the public sphere. Their model includes such key groupings as state and political events; cultural and community celebrations; spiritual church activities; and venuefication of sacred and non-sacred spaces. Many examples are taken from the Church of England.

The final paper by Pascal von Beuningen presents an analysis of Shinto within travel guidebooks in Japan. This research which employs content analysis, shows how Shinto is presented to foreign tourists. The framework of analysis is based on Aike Rots' six Shinto paradigms. The results show that most of the travel guidebooks present Shinto in the context of an 'Ethnic Paradigm'. The 'Environmental Paradigm' and the 'Local Paradigm' also have implications for marketing Shinto shrines for tourism. However, as the author notices 'Shinto in its interpretation is always evolving.'

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Figure 5: Some Participants at the Vilnius Conference



Photo by Kevin Griffin