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The Phenomenon of Virtual Pilgrimage and Its Prospects

L'ubomír Hlad ¹, Patrik Maturkanič ² , Katarína Slobodová Nováková ³, Jan Zimny ⁴ and Peter Kondrila ^{1,*} 

¹ Institute for Research of Constantine and Methodius' Cultural Heritage, Faculty of Arts, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, 94901 Nitra, Slovakia; lhlad@ukf.sk

² College of Applied Psychology, 41155 Terežín, Czech Republic; patrikmat@seznam.cz

³ Department of Ethnology and Non-European Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, 91701 Trnava, Slovakia; katarina.slobodova.novakova@ucm.sk

⁴ Wyższa Szkoła Społeczno-Gospodarcza w Przeworsku, Gimnazjalna 35, 37-200 Przeworsk, Poland; jzimny@przemysl.opoka.org.pl

* Correspondence: pkondrila@ukf.sk

Abstract

The not-yet-forgotten pandemic restrictions related to COVID-19, which affected the religious sector in an unprecedented manner, significantly contributed to the intimisation and virtualisation of spiritual expressions. Religiosity that had previously been experienced both internally and externally, two essential dimensions of any religious act, was transformed into a predominantly private and virtual phenomenon. This transformation affected not only the ordinary liturgical life intrinsically linked to ecclesial community and sacred space, but also extraordinary forms of religiosity, including pilgrimage. Although the phenomenon of virtual pilgrimage to online chapels and shrines was known prior to the pandemic, developments in recent years have substantially increased interest in this form of devotion. Since pilgrimage to a sacred site requires both spiritual engagement and bodily participation, this study examines the possibilities and prospects of this emerging form of a traditional religious practice. The question of whether virtual pilgrimage may, in the future, constitute an independent and, in a certain sense, autonomous form of spiritual expression, or whether it represents merely a temporary phenomenon, emerges from an analysis of faith in both its bodily (external) and spiritual (internal) dimensions. Since these two dimensions are inseparable components of faith, virtual pilgrimage can be considered as a distinct phenomenon only in relation, whether close or remote, to physical pilgrimage. Nevertheless, to adequately acknowledge that virtual pilgrimage bears the characteristics of the “signs of the times”, it should be evaluated in a new, more comprehensive, and open manner. It may thus be understood as a primary spiritual phenomenon with the potential to significantly influence the pilgrim's inner disposition and thereby substantially contribute to the attainment of the goals of pilgrimage, whether or not physical participation is possible.



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1. Introduction

Pilgrimage represents one of the fundamental and universal religious phenomena. Particularly within biblically grounded and shaped religiosity, it reflects divine and salvation-historical archetypes, such as the Trinitarian procession of the divine Persons, the Incarnation of the Logos and the Ascension (*exitus and reditus*), the Exodus, the Church's journey through history, and the human journey toward God. In doing so, pilgrimage integrally unites the physical—external and the spiritual—internal dimensions of religious

life (Krogmann et al. 2021). *Homo viator*—the pilgrim—sets out on a journey, moved and motivated by interior divine grace, in order to attain spiritual goods or to express gratitude for gifts already received (Hamarová et al. 2024a).

Pilgrimage encompasses eschatological, penitential, festive, cultic, apostolic, and communal dimensions, thereby fostering the development of these aspects of Christian life. The eschatological dimension directs the pilgrim toward the heavenly kingdom, revealing the meaning of human effort and offering a foretaste of the future joy of the patria, of vision, and of life without end. The penitential dimension presents pilgrimage as a path of conversion, an awareness of sin and the attachments that bind the person to transient realities, leading toward inner freedom and a deeper understanding of life's ultimate meaning. The festive dimension of pilgrimage cultivates the doxological aspect of Christian existence, interrupting daily monotony and alleviating the burdens of life. The cultic dimension facilitates encounter with God, the experience of divine presence, and the development of various forms of worship, including praise, adoration, thanksgiving, the fulfilment of vows, petitions for necessary graces, and supplication for the forgiveness of sins.

The apostolic dimension enhances the missionary orientation of Christian existence, since pilgrimage constitutes a proclamation of faith and the pilgrim becomes a travelling witness to Christ. Finally, the communal dimension deepens fellowship not only with the Lord but also with fellow believers—those of one's own community, the Church in heaven, the faithful praying at the shrine—as well as with suffering humanity and even the natural environment surrounding the sacred site. In summary, the spiritual aims of pilgrimage may be identified as follows: self-knowledge of one's spiritual condition and existential situation; the initiation, development, or completion of conversion (including satisfaction for sin or the fulfilment of vows); the formation of new ascetical and ethical habits; the experience of divine proximity and the reception of particular graces accompanied by gratitude; and the transition from a purely subjective and interiorized faith toward moral values shaped by psychological and social dimensions (Zielina et al. 2025; Hamarová et al. 2024b).

Although pilgrimage is fundamentally an interior movement of the believer and thus may be understood metaphorically as denoting a multiplicity of spiritual dynamics (Coco 2015), biblical faith is essentially embodied. Both universal and personal salvation history necessarily possess a corporeal dimension (Ratzinger 2010; Adam and Trstenský 2024). The neglect, marginalization, or denial of this dimension, as well as a unilateral emphasis on pure interiority, whether in various historical forms of early Christian or contemporary gnosticism, medieval Cathar asceticism, or modern Protestant-influenced idealism (Ratzinger 2010; Menke 2015), has been regarded in the Church's magisterial teaching as suspect (DH 455–63; 790; 1333–36), potentially dangerous, and even threatening to the very essence of Catholicism, which is constituted by the so-called “sacramental principle.”

As Menke (2015, p. 46) emphasises, sacramentality expresses the intrinsic unity of visible and invisible reality, whereby material elements mediate divine presence. In this sense, corporeality is not accidental but constitutive of Christian faith. The sacramental principle—that is, the mediation of the spiritual through material and bodily reality—encompasses, in a hierarchical order of meaning, Christ's humanity, the visible Church, the sacraments of the Church, and human corporeality. Although the so-called “critique of the prophets” (Benedikt XVI 2020, pp. 22–23), which emphasizes the primacy of the heart, that is, the authenticity of interior worship, expressed in patristic thought by the axiom *prius corde quam corpore* (Rahner 2012, p. 75), remains permanently valid for the Church, faith cannot be reduced to interiority alone.

The prophetic critique, particularly directed against temple worship devoid of social sensitivity, does not authorise a limitation of faith to the inner sphere (heart, emotion, ethics,

subjective conscience, autonomous self), as if this interior dimension could legitimise a non-cultic, that is, purely ethical or emotional, non-ecclesial and thus disembodied form of Christianity (Ratzinger 1987). Even if “God permitted the destruction of the temple walls by human hands (...) and humanity now worships God in the risen Christ” (Benedikt XVI 2020, p. 23), thereby bringing the prophetic critique of cult to its culmination, the centre of Christianity nevertheless remains the death on the Cross as “an act of radical love in which the reconciliation of God with a world marked by sin is truly accomplished” (Benedikt XVI 2020, p. 24). The Church and indeed all humanity are drawn into this process in the celebration of the Eucharist—in the new form of worship, which, however, does not lack tangible bodily elements such as sacred space, natural elements, and the gathered community of believers. The bodily (external, communal) and spiritual (internal, personal) dimensions of faith thus constitute two equally indispensable aspects of Christian existence. Their equal significance has been articulated with particular clarity in the context of recent pandemic-related measures, during which there were attempts to privilege the personal dimension of faith at the expense of its communal and embodied expression:

“It is as if one were to ask which leg is more important—the left or the right. To move forward, we need both legs. Each must be healthy and strong. The same applies here. These two aspects mutually reinforce one another. My life within the community strengthens my faith, helps me to be firmly grounded in it, and enables me to live it even in difficult times and in moments of searching for my path toward God. At the same time, my personal life, my personal experience of God, leads me to share this experience within the community and thus to assist my brothers and sisters in living it as well. These are two entirely complementary principles. To deprive oneself of either of them over the long term would mean the end of the whole community”. (Vasil’ 2021)

The same reality is expressed with greater theological precision by Romano Guardini, who distinguishes between two forms of prayer—liturgical and personal (that is, communal/external and individual/internal)—and emphasises their “perichoretic” reciprocity and mutual conditioning. He underscores that authentic participation in the Church’s liturgy presupposes a living interior life, while personal prayer, in turn, remains essentially rooted in ecclesial communion (Guardini 1970, pp. 261–62).

If both dimensions of the life of faith are inseparable, it is legitimate to raise the question of the prospects of so-called “virtual pilgrimage” (which corresponds, at least *prima facie*, to the interior dimension of faith). More specifically, the question arises as to whether virtual pilgrimage, for example, to parish churches or pilgrimage shrines via television or internet broadcasts, or to online virtual chapels, can be granted the status of an autonomous and enduring phenomenon, or whether it should rather be understood as a provisional and temporally limited practice (e.g., restricted to periods in which traditional physical pilgrimage is rendered impossible for reasons such as pandemic restrictions), and therefore as spiritually limited in scope.

This question is not merely theoretical. Invitations to undertake pilgrimage within digitally constructed sacred spaces, created through graphic visualisations of revered pilgrimage sites, have become an established component of the pastoral administration of certain shrines. One illustrative example, neither unique nor marginal, but comparatively successful, is the Chapel of St. Arnold Janssen administered by the missionaries of the Society of the Divine Word (*Societas Verbi Divini*). During the coronavirus pandemic, the website inviting visitors to “Become a virtual pilgrim” presented the following information:

The Online Chapel of St. Arnold celebrated the tenth anniversary of its establishment this year. It was launched on 1 January 2011. It received a positive response and has become a frequently visited place for all those who wish to undertake a pilgrimage to the tomb of

St. Arnold and to implore God's help and graces through the intercession of this saint. At a time when travel is not possible due to the coronavirus, this online chapel may also serve as a place to visit on a virtual pilgrimage and to offer petitions for ourselves, our loved ones, and the needs of the Church and the world. What can one do in the chapel? One may light a candle for a person one wishes to pray for, or enter a prayer intention in the intention book.

The local religious community includes these intentions in its prayers. On Wednesday evenings, the book of intentions is brought to the altar for Holy Mass. The entry may express not only a petition but also thanksgiving. Visitors may obtain information about the artistic design of our founder's tomb and his spirituality; read a brief biography of St. Arnold Janssen and St. Joseph Freinademetz; or access the official website of the House of St. Michael the Archangel in Steyl. To date, 720,000 candles have been lit (approximately 200 per day), and nearly 23,000 petitions and prayers have been recorded in the intention book. Why not make use of this opportunity and join the ranks of those who have expressed their love for their neighbours, whether by lighting a candle or by recording a petition, and who have found in this chapel consolation and spiritual strength?" (Dušička 2022). In order to address the question of the legitimacy and possible prospects of virtual pilgrimage, it is necessary to examine separately the external and internal dimensions of pilgrimage, that is, the corporeal and the interior aspects of faith.

The contemporary understanding of pilgrimage is also shaped by broader European cultural initiatives, such as the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe (e.g., the Camino de Santiago), which integrate spiritual, cultural, and social dimensions of pilgrimage. These developments provide an important interpretative framework for understanding both traditional and emerging forms of pilgrimage, including their possible digital extensions.

In recent years, the phenomenon of digital religion and online spirituality has attracted increasing scholarly attention across various disciplines. Authors such as Heidi Campbell and others have highlighted the transformation of religious practice in digital environments, pointing to the emergence of new forms of mediated presence, ritual participation, and community building. This study contributes to this international discussion by offering a specifically theological and sacramental interpretation of virtual pilgrimage within the Catholic tradition.

The aim of this study is to analyse the phenomenon of virtual pilgrimage from a theological and pastoral perspective, with particular attention to the relationship between the corporeal and the interior dimensions of faith. The original contribution of this article lies in a systematic theological interpretation of virtual pilgrimage as a "sign of the times," together with a proposal of its pastoral integration within the framework of sacramental and ecclesial theology. The study seeks to clarify whether virtual pilgrimage can be understood as a legitimate complementary form of religious practice within contemporary Christianity or whether it should be interpreted primarily as a temporary substitute for physical pilgrimage. The study adopts a theological–conceptual and systematic approach, drawing on magisterial documents, theological sources, and contemporary reflections in order to interpret the phenomenon of virtual pilgrimage within the framework of Catholic theology.

2. Corporeality of Faith

The term "corporeality of faith," according to J. Ratzinger, signifies that "faith is not merely purely spiritual; rather, it possesses and indeed establishes community, incorporates the earth and creation into itself, and thus becomes intelligible through their elements" (Ratzinger 2000, pp. 322–23). One of the most prominent expressions of the corporeality of faith is found in the sacraments (sacramental liturgy), in which the interpenetration of the

senses and the spirit becomes evident. The sacraments constitute “a continuation of the fact that God became flesh and entrusts himself to us through the realities of this world,” and are therefore “a form of contact with God himself” (Ratzinger 2000, p. 323). From this it follows that the material world, as well as the human body, the senses, and community, possesses a sacramental structure and therefore cannot be excluded from Christian life if that life is to remain authentically Christian (Hospodár 2025).

These dimensions make possible the encounter with God, the reception of the offer of salvation, and cooperation in the salvific process. When this fundamental theological premise is applied to religious and spiritual expressions (among which pilgrimage occupies a significant place), it becomes evident that a purely individual, private, interior, and non-liturgical experience of faith is not fully adequate or integral. At most, it may be tolerated in particularly complex and painful circumstances, such as the global pandemic, when a physical and moral impossibility prevents the proper expression of faith’s corporeal dimension. Faith is inherently relational and social, and thus corporeal in character. This relationality is grounded in the communion of the three divine Persons, continues in the relationship between man and woman, unfolds in the relationship between Jesus and his disciples, and finds further expression in the life of the ecclesial community. The Church becomes manifest as a holy assembly gathered for sacramental liturgy in the sacred space of the temple—that is, at the source of all her strength and at the summit of her life and activity (Second Vatican Council 1963).

The communal dimension of faith possesses profound theological significance. God himself is characterised by the relationality of the Persons of the Most Holy Trinity. He created the human person as male and female in mutual complementarity, for “it is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen 2:18). God enters into a relationship with man and woman, calling them into communion with Himself. The Lord Jesus inaugurated his public ministry by calling a group of disciples to share in his life and to proclaim the Kingdom. From this “little flock”, the Church was born. To describe eternal life, Sacred Scripture employs the image of a city, the heavenly Jerusalem (cf. Rev 21). A city signifies a community of persons who share common values, fundamental human and spiritual realities, common places and times, and an ordered activity directed toward the building up of the common good. As soon as Christians enjoyed freedom of worship, they erected places that became *domus Dei* et *domus ecclesiae*, the house of God and the house of the Church, where believers could recognise themselves as God’s community, a people called together for worship and constituting a holy assembly (. . .). The house of the Lord presupposes the presence of the family of God’s children. Nevertheless, as soon as circumstances permit, it is both necessary and urgent to return to the normal practice of Christian life, whose proper home is the church building and the celebration of the liturgy (. . .) (Sarah 2020).

From the foregoing, it may be clearly deduced that an isolated form of Christian life contradicts its fundamental characteristic, namely, to be gathered in the name of Jesus (Mt 18:20) as a fraternal community (Sarah 2020). It follows, therefore, that other expressive forms of Christian spirituality, including pilgrimage, cannot be permanently accepted in a disembodied (that is, purely virtual) mode. This position is articulated with particular urgency in the aforementioned letter, *Let Us Return to the Eucharist with Joy* (Sarah 2020), in which the virtual form of encounter with the incarnate God is regarded not merely as insufficient, but above all as potentially detrimental to the development of a personal, intimate, and thus authentic communion with Him:

“Although the media render a valuable service for the sick and for those who are unable to come to church, and have provided significant assistance by broadcasting Holy Mass during times when it could not be celebrated in the presence of the assembly, no broadcast can equal personal participation, nor can it replace

it. Such transmissions, in fact, carry the risk of distancing us from the personal and intimate encounter with the incarnate God, who gives himself to us not in a virtual but in a real manner, as he himself said: ‘Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him’ (Jn 6:56). This physical contact with the Lord is vital, necessary, and irreplaceable. Once the specific measures introduced to prevent the spread of the coronavirus have ceased, it is necessary for all to return to their places within the assembly of brothers and sisters, in order to rediscover the irreplaceable value and beauty of the celebration, and to call back, drawing them with contagious enthusiasm, those brothers and sisters who have become discouraged or fearful and who have not participated for a long time or have withdrawn entirely”. (Sarah 2020)

On the other hand, if the phenomenon of virtual pilgrimage attracts a high level of interest and is thus relatively widely accepted and appreciated among the Christian public, it is legitimate to ask whether this development might also represent a certain “sign of the times,” which would call the Church to seek “new paths” and new forms of pastoral activity (František 2021; Maturkanič et al. 2023). What possibilities, then, does virtual pilgrimage offer while preserving the fundamental characteristic of Christian faith, namely, its sacramentality, that is, its embodied nature? How should this new phenomenon be interpreted theologically, what place should it occupy within the life of the Church, and how might it be developed appropriately so that it does not contribute to the emergence of isolated, over-spiritualized, dematerialised, and therefore distorted forms of Christian life? (Lenovský and Slobodová Nováková 2021; Plašienková 2016). In recent decades, the field of digital religion has developed significantly, examining how digital technologies reshape religious experience, practice, and community. Scholars have pointed to the emergence of new forms of mediated presence, ritual participation, and online spirituality. This study engages with this broader discussion while offering a specifically theological perspective rooted in Catholic tradition (Campbell and Tsuria 2021).

“The risks of a disembodied, that is, purely spiritualized form of Christianity were already highlighted in 1939 by the kerygmatic theologian Hugo Rahner (1900–1968). This tendency manifests itself particularly in what he describes as the ‘pneumatization of the concept of the sacraments.’ It represents an attempt, first theological and then practical, to ‘break the bond’ that ties us to the supposedly detested materialisation of devotion associated with grace and the sacraments, in order to ascend into the airy and spiritual heights of pre-scholastic, or even pre-mysterical conceptions of sacramentality”. (Rahner 2015, p. 165)

3. Interior Dimension of Faith

Possible answers can be discerned in several magisterial documents that address faith in its specifically interior dimension. The first of these is the already cited letter of the former Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, R. Sarah, Let Us Return to the Eucharist with Joy (Sarah 2020). Although the text of the letter strongly emphasises the irreplaceability, vital importance, and necessity of physical contact with the Lord, it also contains several significant spiritual and theological reflections on faith lived virtually during a time of severe trial, namely, the pandemic restrictions, which it describes as a “time of Eucharistic fasting.” Such a period of “severe trial” may contain within itself the potential to bear manifold fruits of grace. Above all, these include the rediscovery of the existential significance, beauty, and preciousness of the Eucharist, as well as the purification of the heart, the renewal of wonder, and the growth of desire for an encounter with the Lord, both for the spiritual good of the one who receives and for the good of brothers and sisters, to whom the Lord is brought through faith, hope, and charity:

As R. Sarah (2020) emphasizes, the period of pandemic restrictions may be understood as a “time of Eucharistic fasting,” capable of renewing the believer’s awareness of the meaning and value of sacramental participation. At the same time, he underlines the necessity of returning to embodied liturgical life as soon as circumstances permit. In this context, virtual pilgrimage may be interpreted not merely as a substitute, but as a form of intensified interior participation shaped by conditions of impossibility.

Ultimately, the grace of the time of Eucharistic fasting lies in a deeper understanding and lived appropriation of the attitude of the early Christian brethren, the Abitinian martyrs (from the beginning of the fourth century), captured in the calm, trusting, yet resolutely pronounced statement *Sine Dominico non possumus* (“Without the Lord we cannot”). This brief expression, rich in meaning and nuance, invites meditation on the goals of interior pilgrimage, which give this form of pilgrimage its legitimacy. In the spirit of Cardinal R. Sarah’s theological reflection, these goals may be understood as several fundamental spiritual movements: the orientation of interior desires toward the authentic human flourishing, goodness and happiness, revealed in the Word of God (that is, the opening of the heart to listen to the Word); the disposition toward co-redemptive participation in the salvation of the human person from the death of sin, whose highest expression is the embrace of the Cross, human suffering, which brings light and consolation; the deepening of a filial desire to receive the Risen Christ, present with his body, blood, soul, and divinity, as strength for the earthly pilgrimage; the overcoming of psychologically conditioned tendencies toward a closed and non-ecclesial form of Christian life through the rediscovery of the significance of the Lord’s family and the brotherhood in Christ, thereby fostering the fulfilment of the vocation to holiness; and the recognition of the centrality of the Lord’s house and other sacred places in the personal life of faith, together with a deepening appreciation of what has been received there as a gift, birth into faith, the presence of the Lord, the merciful embrace of God, consecration (whether marital or religious), consolation, and hope (Sarah 2020).

Another document in which useful impulses for a proper evaluation of virtual pilgrimage may be identified is the Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy, likewise issued by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. Particular attention should be given to its final, eighth chapter (Shrines and Pilgrimages), which, within the spirituality of pilgrimage, addresses the spiritual aims of pilgrimage, directing the pilgrim toward heaven, leading to the awareness of sin and the discovery of life’s meaning, providing relief from the monotony of everyday life, enabling authentic worship and encounter with God, creating space for the proclamation of faith, and mediating a renewed experience of the Church, humanity, and creation. The Directory emphasises that these goals can be achieved only through careful spiritual preparation. The purpose of such preparation is to animate, illuminate, guide, and strengthen the course of the actual pilgrimage in all its stages (Kongregácia pre Boží kult a disciplínu sviatostí 2005). It is precisely in the context of spiritual preparation for pilgrimage, as well as in its conclusion, that the practice of virtual pilgrimage to an online shrine appears most appropriate, beneficial, and practical. These two temporal points defining the duration of pilgrimage, its beginning and its conclusion, are, according to the Directory, particularly suited to specific forms of spiritual activity: “The beginning of the pilgrimage should appropriately be characterized by a moment of prayer (. . .). The conclusion of the pilgrimage should likewise be fittingly marked by a moment of prayer” (Kongregácia pre Boží kult a disciplínu sviatostí, p. 286).

A visit to a virtual shrine, especially during the preparatory phase, can help the pilgrim attune to the spiritual meaning and key dimensions of pilgrimage (the journey to the Promised Land, the holy pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the pilgrim journey of Jesus, and the

Paschal mystery as Jesus' passage to the Father), as well as to the Christian tradition that has developed around these themes.

The already mentioned spiritual aspects of pilgrimage, eschatological, penitential, festive-doxological, cultic, apostolic, communal, and social, may, however, be further complemented by additional perspectives. These are particularly those documented and described in detail by the historian and specialist in ancient Greek and Latin Christian literature, Lucio Coco, in his work *In viaggio. Per andare verso se stessi* (On the Journey: Going Toward Oneself). Drawing on the writings of prominent pre-Christian and Christian authors (Augustine, Benedict, Egeria, Jerome, John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, Isaiah the Scetote, Melania, Horace, B. Pascal, F. Petrararch, L. A. Seneca, Thérèse of Lisieux), Coco offers a nuanced account of the spiritual dimensions of pilgrimage.

In a study grounded in this extensive spiritual tradition, the author interprets the journey, pilgrimage, as a great archetype present across cultures, through which humanity expresses its relationship to the world, to God, and to life itself (Řebíková 2025a; Slobodová Nováková et al. 2021). All cultures are familiar with both physical and spiritual forms of pilgrimage. In the section entitled *The Spiritual Journey*, the author describes pilgrimage as:

“The journey toward interiority, toward God, is a path of conversion that may in a certain sense be understood as a return to faith. It concerns primarily movements of the spirit, which do not necessarily require an actual change of place; at times, such a change is not even recommended (. . .). The ascent to God does not demand a change of location but rather a deepening: more than moving toward something, it is a return to something”. (Coco 2015, pp. 5–6)

The indicated line of interpretation, pilgrimage as an interior movement of the spirit, is further developed in the section entitled *The Direction of the Journey*. Here, the author warns against the possible illusion inherent in certain mystical ascents, since they may lead to the sin of pride, which seeks to make us like God but does not lead us to God:

“The journey toward God is an ascent only insofar as we are capable of humbling ourselves, of making ourselves small, and of entering into the very substance of the realities of our life and of our brothers and sisters (. . .). The true ascent, marked by the example of Christ, must presuppose humiliation. Only then does the journey become authentic and concrete; only then does it take form and cease to be an empty and superficial wandering within vain appearances, which can leave the person merely dissatisfied”. (Coco 2015, pp. 6–7)

All this is significant insofar as “a person loses oneself in order to become oneself,” as the author writes, inspired by the tradition of the Desert Fathers, in the section entitled *Stages*. In the section *The Journey of Faith*, the reflections on the spiritual meaning of pilgrimage are further enriched by the dimension of faith: “The spiritual journey is not only a journey toward God, toward interiority, but also a journey of faith.” In its mature form, such faith is capable of bearing the “cloud of God,” moments of obscurity, the experience of abandonment by God, anxiety, and the cross; yet it ultimately leads toward the promised future and toward resurrection. This idea is subsequently developed in the section *Philosophy of the Journey*, where the uncertain landscape and the changing horizon lead the traveller toward balance and wisdom. It is further elaborated in the section *Etymologies*, where pilgrimage is interpreted through the term “vacation” in the sense of becoming empty for God:

“The journey (. . .) is never merely a vacation, a form of distraction or entertainment in the etymological sense of *de-vertère*, that is, a turning away from the path that has been undertaken. Or perhaps it may be understood in an even more precise sense attributed by the etymology of the term ‘vacation’. The Latin verb

vacare derives from vacuum and means ‘to be empty.’ Vacare Deo is one of the most well-known expressions describing Christian spirituality, and it signifies precisely ‘to empty oneself for God,’ ‘to preserve one’s freedom for God,’ ‘to create space for God,’ that is, to make room, an emptiness, for Him. Such ‘vacation,’ or emptying, means ‘going toward oneself in order to find contact with God’” (Coco 2015, pp. 9–10)

The final section of the study, entitled *In interiore homine*, further emphasises the spiritual dimension of pilgrimage by developing the already suggested idea of the potential risk associated with physical pilgrimage—namely, the danger of falling into the sin of pride. The author expresses this in the following words:

“It is not necessary to travel far, as Petrarch once said while holding in his hand the Confessions of St. Augustine; rather, it is sufficient to seek and to look within, for the search for God can take place precisely within our own consciousness. At its core, this is the one true path (. . .). Movement is often only an illusion and may sometimes even become an obstacle (. . .). For all of us, what matters is to set out on the journey that leads inward, so that we may listen more clearly to the voice of God speaking in the conscience of every human person”. (Coco 2015, pp. 10–11)

In summary, the spiritual goal of the journey may be understood as the discovery of oneself through God in the act of conversion, the attainment of mature faith, and the emptying of oneself for God, processes that take place primarily on the level of interior life. These aims can be cultivated and supported effectively through virtual pilgrimage, particularly during the preparatory phase, as outlined above, but also throughout the pilgrimage itself and in its concluding phase. With regard to the final stage of pilgrimage, its completion, it is worth recalling that a virtual return to the visited shrine may serve as a means of recalling the graced moments of the pilgrimage, the spiritual and prophetic impulses experienced along the way, and reflecting on their embodiment in Christian orthopraxy (Jiříš'ová and Medzihorský 2023; Dědová and Baník 2021), in the spirit of the Directory’s exhortation:

“The conclusion of the pilgrimage should appropriately be marked by a moment of prayer (. . .) in which the faithful give thanks to God for the gift of the pilgrimage and ask the Lord for the help necessary to live their Christian vocation with greater generosity (. . .)”. (Kongregácia pre Boží kult a disciplínu sviatostí 2005, p. 287)

A particular context in which the phenomenon of virtual pilgrimage can be evaluated in an unequivocally positive manner is the situation of so-called “impossibility.” A typical example is the already-mentioned situation of the global pandemic, accompanied by a wide range of restrictions on the external expression of faith. Within its tradition, whether theological, juridical, liturgical, spiritual, or magisterial, the Church recognises various situations of impossibility (physical or moral) in which a certain external religious act cannot be performed without the believer being deprived of the spiritual good ordinarily mediated from the treasury of the merits of Christ, the saints, and the Church. In such circumstances, the Church as mother supplies (supplet) what cannot be carried out in the ordinary manner. Examples include the reception of the traditional blessing *Urbi et Orbi* (without the necessity, although even under normal circumstances, of being physically present at the assembly in St. Peter’s Square); obtaining the grace of forgiveness of sins through an act of perfect contrition (in situations when the sacrament of reconciliation cannot be received, such as during quarantine or other forms of impossibility, accompanied by the intention to receive the sacrament when possible); receiving the grace of Holy Communion through an

act of spiritual communion (again due to physical or moral impossibility of sacramental reception); or receiving certain sacraments in emergency circumstances, in situations where it is impossible to summon the ordinary minister, through an extraordinary or substitute form (for example: emergency baptism administered by a layperson, baptism of desire and of blood, absolution granted by a laicized priest in danger of death, lay confession, or the celebration of the sacrament of marriage without the removal of a canonical impediment in danger of death). It is evident that the reception of grace presupposes the intention and desire to attain that grace, thereby shifting the emphasis toward the interior authenticity of the religious act. The authenticity of intention and desire, often directly stimulated and deepened by situations of impossibility, is what makes not only the ordinary but also the extraordinary expressions of the life of faith a genuine act of worship: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom 12:1). Thus, situations of impossibility can stimulate the purification and growth of a holy desire for the pilgrimage toward God, a desire expressed both by the Old Testament pilgrim journeying to the Temple in Jerusalem and by the New Testament priest ascending to the altar while reciting the prayers at the foot of the altar, the so-called “prayer of desire” (Kajprt 2017, p. 55).

In this context, reference may also be made to the teaching of the Council of Trent, which, among other things, speaks of spiritual communion in relation to three forms of receiving Holy Communion:

“Regarding the reception of this most admirable sacrament, our Fathers rightly and wisely distinguished three ways of receiving this holy sacrament. They taught that some, namely sinners, receive it only sacramentally. Others receive it only spiritually—those, namely, who, desiring to partake of that heavenly bread set before them, experience its fruits and benefits through a living faith that works through charity. Finally, there are those who receive it both sacramentally and spiritually; these are the ones who, having examined and prepared themselves beforehand, approach this divine table clothed in the wedding garment”. (Dekréty a kánony Tridentského koncilu 1545–1563, p. 77)

From the foregoing considerations, a new task emerges for the Church: in continually changing conditions, today particularly in the post-pandemic context, to discern and appropriately take into account the diverse, and at times even new, forms of physical or moral impossibility (Medzihorský et al. 2023) that may prevent the faithful from performing acts of faith in their full, that is, spiritual and bodily form. Such situations may include forms of impossibility of an economic, temporal, psychological, or other nature. In cases of genuine (not merely presumed) impossibility of undertaking a physical pilgrimage, the Church is called to make available, from the treasury of her spiritual goods, the graces associated with sacred pilgrimage sites to the greatest extent possible for properly disposed virtual pilgrims who experience various forms of such impossibility (including the newly emerging ones), so that they too may participate in the spiritual benefits connected with these holy places.

4. Conclusions

This study contributes to current discussions on digital religion by offering a theological interpretation of virtual pilgrimage that takes seriously both the sacramental nature of Christian faith and the contemporary digital context. It shows that virtual pilgrimage can function as a meaningful complementary form of religious practice, particularly in situations of impossibility, while remaining intrinsically oriented toward embodied and communal expressions of faith. From the spiritual significance of virtual pilgrimage, as briefly outlined above, several pastoral and practical impulses emerge for the “manage-

ment” of virtual shrines and for the reconsideration of pastoral initiatives connected with them. Among the most important and pressing tasks are the following:

The theological reflection presented in this study suggests that virtual pilgrimage, while not replacing physical pilgrimage, may represent a meaningful development within contemporary forms of lived religiosity. Its proper integration requires a careful balance between innovation and fidelity to the sacramental nature of Christian faith.

To ensure the most vital possible connection between the virtual pilgrim and the shrine, as well as its real pastoral and spiritual life, through direct interaction with a priest or a properly trained volunteer, with the aim of accompanying the pilgrim and fostering appropriate spiritual sensitivity. Such accompaniment should also include assistance in discerning the form of physical impossibility that prevents the pilgrim from visiting the shrine in person and thus receiving the graces associated with such a visit. Depending on the type of impossibility (temporary or permanent), a pastoral–spiritual pilgrimage itinerary could be developed for the interested participant.

To create a community of virtual pilgrims and encourage their spiritual participation in obtaining graces for pilgrims of both types (physical and virtual). This participation may take place through various forms of spiritual mediation characteristic of the Catholic spiritual tradition, particularly through the offering of personal suffering (which may itself arise from the inability to undertake a physical pilgrimage).

To enrich the websites of virtual shrines and pilgrimage sites with information not only of a practical nature but also of historical, spiritual, and theological significance, in order to support the proper preparation for pilgrimage as well as its lived experience in all the dimensions envisioned by the Church and in accordance with her contemporary prophetic challenges. In practical terms, this means presenting the pilgrimage shrine in a factually precise and catechetically engaging manner: describing its sacred history, the specific spiritual character of the place, for example through a well-developed biography and teaching of the shrine’s patron saint, the messages of any apparitions associated with the site (including the Church’s position and interpretation of them), and the principal spiritual fruits of pilgrimage as lived in the *sensus fidelium* and legitimately expected at the sacred site (Krupa 2023, 2024).

To motivate virtual pilgrims whose impossibility is not permanent, but rather conditioned by the reception of paradigms of postmodern culture, particularly the paradigm of the intimisation of faith (Kehl 2000), associated with its virtualisation (Kubíková 2019) and with the predominance of image-based culture, to undertake an actual pilgrimage. Pilgrimage may serve as an effective spiritual means for overcoming the hedonistic and consumerist mentality that often leads to superficiality and egocentrism (Zdechovský and Fialová 2023; Řebíková 2025b).

To recognise that the characteristic features of a secular understanding of life shape the everyday behaviour of many Christians, which is frequently influenced—if not directly conditioned—by visual culture with its models and contrasting stimuli (Biskupská synoda 2011; Judák et al. 2023). This cultural context should therefore be taken into account in pastoral initiatives connected with pilgrimage and virtual participation in it.

In a spirit of solidarity and closeness to those in need (Kehl 2000), to develop assistance schemes and economic instruments that would enable pilgrimage for those who experience a long-term or even permanent “impossibility” of undertaking it, primarily for reasons of economic hardship (Kučera et al. 2008; Viglaský and Tóthová 2024). This approach responds to the call for the Church to give greater attention to the “voice of the poor,” thereby increasing both sensitivity to these issues and the implementation of concrete initiatives to address them (Murgáš et al. 2022; Fil’a et al. 2024).

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