Chapter 44

Pilgrimages: Fruitful sources of faith formation for Catholic student teachers?

Fr Stephen Reilly
University of Glasgow, Scotland stephen.reilly@glasgow.ac.uk

Dr Hazel Crichton
University of Glasgow, Scotland

Mary Lappin
University of Glasgow Scotland

Introduction

The School of Education at the University of Glasgow has a mission to Catholic education in Scotland, and is sole provider of teachers for the large Catholic state school sector. As an element of the faith formation of Catholic initial teacher education (ITE) students, several pilgrimages took place in academic session 2016-2017: two to Rome, and three to Lourdes (with HCPT – The Pilgrimage Trust), involving forty-five students, accompanied by the Co-ordinator of Spiritual and Pastoral Formation and other staff.

The pilgrimages were considered a success by all who took part, but deeper questions remained. What is the aim of faith formation for ITE students, and how does pilgrimage contribute to it? Is pilgrimage the most effective use of limited resources, and should it be given pastoral priority? This small-scale study aimed to answer these questions by exploring student participants' perceptions of their experiences on the pilgrimages. The results will shape future formational approaches in the University of Glasgow, and contribute to the international literature on the impact of pilgrimage upon young Catholics.

What is Pilgrimage?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church speaks of pilgrimage within its teaching on prayer, whereby "Pilgrimages evoke our earthly journey toward heaven and are traditionally very special occasions for renewal in prayer. For pilgrims seeking living water, shrines are special places for living the forms of Christian prayer in Church." (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1993, para. 2691).

The New Testament presents believers as metaphorical pilgrims who are wanderers through an alien and foreign land (1 Peter 1:1) as they travel their earthly journey towards the 'heavenly Jerusalem' (Hebrews 12:22-24). The concept, and indeed the practice of pilgrimage, are deep in the psyche of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Once the temple was built at Jerusalem (ca. 957 B.C.), all Jewish men were obliged to present themselves for the three major feasts: Pesach (the Feast of Unleavened Bread, or Passover), Shavu'ot (the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost), and Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles), as requested in Deuteronomy 16:16-17.

In medieval literature, Chaucer's famous literary classic The Canterbury Tales (c. 1387) is set within the cultural and social phenomenon of pilgrimages. The narrative depicts a varied group of people assembling to journey to the shrine of St Thomas Becket at Canterbury. The

pilgrims are presented as a representative group of people exhibiting all humanity's virtues and vices. Augustine's Peregrinatio is a description of as a self-imposed exile of the pilgrim in which he searched for truth and encounter with God. Emilio Estevez's well known contemporary screenplay 'The Way' starring Martin Sheen depicts a father on his pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago, who encounters fellow pilgrims in search of meaning, purpose and spiritual guidance.

Reasons to make a pilgrimage generally focus on the spiritual. For many, it is like a retreat, a time away from the regular routine to concentrate on the spiritual life — a time for prayer and meditation, learning and enrichment. For others, it is a time of intercession, an opportunity to pray for a special intention or an occasion to offer thanksgiving for blessings received. Centuries ago, a pilgrimage was commonly assigned as a penance to make satisfaction for sins committed. It is steeped in religious history and literature, and in the devotional life of generations from the early Christians of the 4th century who traveled to different places that were part of Jesus' life, or in the tombs of martyrs and saints. Visiting these sites and tombs serve today, as in the past, as a deep expression of reverence and honour for God, as well as immersing the self in the cultural, historical and spiritual aspects of the life of Jesus and the saints.

What is faith formation for ITE students?

Pope Paul VI's lapidary statement in Evangelii Nuntiandi, "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses (para. 41)," has occasioned much attention in official church documents since (Congregation for Catholic Education 1982; 1988; 2007), shining a light upon Catholic teachers as faith witnesses as well as educators (indeed educators because witnesses). How can they equip themselves for this privileged but daunting task?

Grace (2002, 2010) advocates the need for faith formation of Catholic teachers, helping them to witness to their faith and the values of Catholic education, regarding this as urgent priority two generations on from the widespread withdrawal of religious orders from leadership roles in Catholic schools. Building on Bourdieu's writings on the forms of capital (economic, social and cultural), he has long advocated the influential idea of the 'spiritual capital' possessed by Catholic educators. In 2010 he enunciated the characteristics of spiritual capital most clearly:

> resources of faith and values derived from a vocational commitment to a religious tradition…; a source of vocational empowerment…; a form of spirituality in which the whole of human life is viewed in terms of a conscious relationship to God…which has been the animating, inspirational and dynamic spirit which has empowered the mission of Catholic education…and which needs to be reconstituted in lay school leaders and teachers by formation programmes which help them to be Catholic witnesses for Christ… (2010, p. 125)

In the Scottish context, Coll's (2009, 2015) studies of newly-qualified teachers demonstrates their expressed need of confidence in the teaching of religious education, and the increased faith knowledge required to build this confidence. The studies also, however, highlight the personal faith journey and commitment of the teacher, a central emphasis of This is Our Faith, the national Scottish religious education syllabus: "[This is Our Faith] highlights the

requirement [of teachers] to take time to reflect upon their own faith journey and seek opportunities to recognise the Holy Spirit at work in them" (2015, p. 181).Coll also recognises the time limitations of the mainly classroom-based ITE Catholic teacher formation programme, which can only begin to address the broader formational journey required. Furthermore, Franchi and Rymarz (2017) recognise that the loss of a 'thickly Catholic culture' which underpinned faith commitment in past decades, and is now severely weakened, can be expected to have affected the faith commitment of young aspiring Scottish Catholic teachers too. They agree with Coll that a stronger theological formation is needed, but similarly widen the focus to the affective, drawing upon the recent church document Educating for Cultural Dialogue, "Catholic teachers need pastoral and spiritual care to offer their own heart to the school." (2017, p. 9).

This latter emphasis accords with the teaching of Pope Francis:

> It would not be right to see this call to growth [as evangelisers] exclusively or primarily in terms of doctrinal formation. It has to do with "observing" all that the Lord has shown us as the way of responding to his love. (2013, para. 161)

Thus, a working outline of faith formation of Catholic ITE students could be summarised in the following way. Faith formation is that which contributes to the strengthening of spiritual capital, understood as a vocational commitment to Christ and the Catholic teaching vocation which empowers and inspires. It is an intensive reflective process which invites to a faith journey and a builds confidence in one's ability to be a witness to the faith. Faith formation is a process which, ideally, stretches beyond formal classroom input. It is an aid to theological growth which increases faith knowledge. Finally, it is a pastoral process which allows students to give their heart to the schools in which they will serve.

Methodology

As mentioned above, the study aimed to explore students' perceptions of the effect of pilgrimages on their faith formation. On-line questionnaires were used to obtain students' initial perceptions of the pilgrimages and any impact they had experienced. Forty-five students from years 1-4 of study in their undergraduate degree, or one-year post-graduate teaching certificate, who had taken part in one or more pilgrimages were contacted by email and provided with a link to the on-line survey. Details of the purpose of the research were provided in the email and consent was implied by the completion of the survey. All responses could remain anonymous, as there was no need to log into the survey site using a user name or password and there was nothing on the survey website which could identify respondents' email addresses.

While there are a number of benefits to the use of on-line surveys, such as reducing the cost of contacting potential participants (Kaplowitz, Hadlock, Levine, 2004), speed and ease of response (Evans, Mathur, 2005) and convenience for respondents (Hogg, 2003), there are also disadvantages. Given the volume of mails arriving in students' in-boxes, it was possible that the request would be ignored or a response postponed until out of mind (Doherty et al., 2015). Although sent to 45 students, participants were inevitably self-selecting and may have had a particular bias (Khazaal et al, 2014). Thirteen students completed the questionnaires, a response rate of 29%, slightly lower than the average rate for online surveys (Watt et al., 2002). The limitation of number of characters to 100 for each answer within the survey

instrument (SoGo surveys https://www.sogosurvey.com/) meant that responses had to be short. Nonetheless, this could be seen as an advantage as it allowed the participants to highlight what they felt was most important and did not place a burden on the respondent to write full answers.

Twelve of the questions were open and related to participants' perceptions of their own faith and experiences before, during and after the pilgrimage. The last question asked for volunteers to take part in a follow up focus group interview. 10 students volunteered and were interviewed in two groups of five.

The questionnaire responses were analysed individually by each researcher, before coming together to discuss and agree the main themes and issues arising. In qualitative research, inter-coder reliability is seen as an important aspect of data analysis (Cavenagh, 1997). Since three researchers were involved, it seemed unlikely that any potential themes would be missed. Also, the three-way discussion reduced chances of the influence of one view on another, thus increasing trustworthiness of the findings (Potter and Levine-Donnerstein, 1999).

The focus groups allowed the researchers to probe more deeply into issues which had been identified in the surveys. Students were asked to reflect on their experiences and describe specific events or situations that seemed significant during the pilgrimage(s). Care was taken to ensure that no one person dominated the discussion so that all views could be heard (Krueger, Casey, 2015). As most of the participants had been on the same pilgrimage(s), the prevailing atmosphere appeared similar to a reunion, with participants sharing experiences which stimulated further perspectives. The focus groups were recorded and, as with the questionnaire data, each researcher noted any recurring themes which could be considered relevant. The researchers then agreed the final codes. There was a great deal of congruence between the questionnaire and focus group data in the findings, which are discussed below.

Findings

Several themes emerged from the questionnaires and interviews, of which the following six inter-related themes featured most prominently.

1. A strengthening of faith

Across the group as a whole, a widespread strengthening of faith commitment was reported as a result of the pilgrimage. Words such as develop, strengthen, reaffirm and enlighten featured. One typical comment summed up the responses well, "I discovered that I am still catholic at heart and my belief is stronger than I first thought." Another comment highlighted the influence of community: "strengthened it [faith] due to having shared faith with others."

2. Community as the locus of pilgrim faith formation

A large majority of students expressed a very strong and positive experience of community on pilgrimage, which can be described as both a micro- and macro-community experience.

The former regards the pilgrim groups in which they travelled, which are described variously as inclusive, open, and like a family. As well as sharing a common teaching vocation, many noted the importance of a common purpose: as one pilgrim said, "we were a group of students, training to teach in Catholic schools, travelling to the heart of the church." One

student noted the practical importance of communal meals in the formation of the group. These findings echo the work of Edith and Victor Turner (1978), in their much-quoted notion of pilgrim communitas. Their influential writings describe communitas as a temporary liminoid experience of community born of stepping outside everyday life, allowing an equality across class, gender, and age as pilgrims travel to a sacred centre, and in which normal hierarchies are broken down (pp. 29-39). Indeed, of particular importance to the student pilgrims was the breaking down of barriers between them, which they perceived by virtue of the diversity of programmes/year groups in which they study. The newly-found sense of community positively impacted their sense of belonging to the Catholic teaching formation pathway and to the School of Education beyond their immediate friendship or classmate groups.

The macro-community was expressed as a feeling of belonging, "being connected," to a universal church, "being part of something so much bigger". Powerful events such as the Torchlight Procession at Lourdes and the Papal audience in St Peter's Square were highlighted: the singing, flags, and languages, but also the individual conversations with fellow pilgrims from other nations. Such findings confirm Coleman and Elsner's (1995) emphasis on the ability of pilgrimage sites to, "link geographically dispersed peoples by giving travellers the possibility to perceive a common religious identity which transcends parochial assumptions and concerns" (p. 205).

Community as a positive influence on faith development is attested to consistently in faith formation literature. Franchi and Rymarz (2017), in their discussion of a 'thickly Catholic culture' noted above, list communal solidarity, socialisation into faith, and a sense of communal identity among its characteristics (p. 3). In his study of World Youth Day participants, Singleton (2011) notes the importance of an intense and supportive social environment to young people's faith. Both Rymarz (2009) and Singleton (2011) discuss the centrality of a supportive social network for the plausibility structures which support faith, so essential to young people in an era of widespread apathy or hostility to faith. Rymarz summarises, "Legitimisation arises from strong plausibility structures which are rooted in supportive communities" (2009, p. 250).

3. Peer influence on faith formation

One intriguing feature of the study was the relatively small mention of the role of leaders in the faith development on pilgrimage, which instead focussed largely on the students' peers. This seems at odds with Rymarz (2009) and Singleton (2011), who both highlight the importance of mentors and role models in faith formation. Is there a hint here of the disruption of hierarchy within pilgrimage described by Turner and Turner (1978)? Indeed, one student described the staff as being at the students' level: "it wasn't a 31+3" (a reference to the number of students and staff on the Rome pilgrimage in May 2017).

In any case, the students clearly had an influence on each other, in the witness which they gave and the informal discussions which took place among them, with one commenting, "Being with other people of high level faith helped me develop my faith completely." The faith witness of fellow pilgrims, reported another, "gave me an extremely positive impact, made me want to be the same." The unique opportunities afforded by pilgrimage allow unexpected forms of peer-to-peer formation, echoed in many responses and summed up in two quotes, "It was inspiring to see friends practice their faith as it is a side of them I don't

normally see," and, "I enjoyed speaking about faith with friends as it usually doesn't come up in conversation."

It would seem that on a successful formational pilgrimage, the creation of conditions in which peer formation can take place is key, as much as the official or formal pilgrimage content organised by leaders. Are the leaders more like midwives of faith formation, at the service of the, "unruly freedom of the word [of God], which accomplishes what it wills in ways that surpass our calculations and ways of thinking" (Pope Francis 2013, para. 17).

As an old Welsh saying puts it, 'He who leads must become a bridge': this would be a fitting discovery in the city of the Pontifex Maximus.

4. Catalysts for peer formation

The optimal conditions for religious experience, peer witness, and discussion to flourish on pilgrimage are not controllable, as attested to in multiple key studies on pilgrimage. In their seminal work, Eade and Sallnow (1991) warned us that the meaning constructed by pilgrims is often at odds with the officially-imposed description of the sacred sites (p. 2), while a more recent study of the pilgrimage to Chimayo in New Mexico (Holmes-Rodman 2004) demonstrated how the pilgrims entirely ignored its official diocesan designation as a pilgrimage for vocations to priesthood and religious life. Leaders, while providing essential structure, should be open to the unexpected: "the spontaneity of interrelatedness, the spirit which bloweth where it listeth." (Turner, Turner 1978, p. 32).

The students in this study talked of unexpected and unscripted moments of personal religious experience, reflection and discussion, which seem tangential to the organised pilgrimage. For some, it was a particular event, such as a Mass which focussed on mothers, after which one student was able to share about her own mother's illness and be reassured of the support of her peers. For many, the Papal audience featuring many nationalities and ages, led to reflection that, "so many people have this [faith] in their life." For others the experience of beauty (a 'via pulchritudinis'. Pope Francis especially in the churches which, "provoke people to think in kind of a spiritual way" (2013, para. 167). One student, when talking about a church visit which inspired deeper discussion with her peers, said, "the actual chapel kinda brought it out of you." Others highlighted places and moments of silence, especially at night-time, such as the torchlight procession or candle stands in Lourdes, or the Spanish Steps in Rome, which invited them naturally to individual prayer, reflection or shared silence. Perhaps what these experiences have in common is the ability to touch a pilgrim on the emotional level, even more than the intellectual. Pilgrimage organisers, in their wise and discerning choice of activities, can optimise the conditions in which the grace-filled unexpected can take place.

A theme which emerged across the pilgrimages was the key role played by the various children encountered. As the pilgrims are student teachers, this is heartening. We have already mentioned the fruitful outcome of the Mass focussed on mothers, which was partly occasioned by one of the student pilgrims being seven-months pregnant herself. An emotional response in students was occasioned by Pope Francis taking a baby in his arms at the Papal audience. In Lourdes the pilgrims' experience was transformed by working with children and seeing the sacred sites as a shared helpers/children experience, with the baths proving especially powerful. As one said, "There's something completely different when

there's children involved: seeing their reactions and the experience they're having affects you, your own faith as well." In Rome, younger students appreciated discussions with older students about their own children and the way in which they are seeking to pass on their faith to them.

It is no surprise, then, that several respondents mentioned a growth in their sense of vocation as Catholic teachers as a result of the pilgrimages. Typical comments include, "I now feel more excited at being part of Catholic Teaching Community than I did before," and "Affirmed that Catholic teaching is my vocation in life." It seems that growing into the role of the Catholic teacher and embracing one's vocation is a fruit of the confidence which is gained in multiple ways on pilgrimage.

5. The return home

Frey (2004) analysed returning pilgrims from the Camino de Santiago, arguing that the return home of the pilgrim is often neglected, especially in Christianity. She contrasts this with Islam, where a pilgrim returning from the hajj has an enhanced status in the community, and a new title: hajji. By contrast, "in the Christian context there are few rites of return or reincorporation that greet a returning pilgrim" (p. 96).

In addition, pilgrims often return straight to work, and can experience the isolation of being surrounded by incomprehension. Even the Judeo-Christian notion of time as linear, and pilgrimage as being a journey to a holy site (as opposed to e.g. traditions of circumambulation), mitigate against the idea of a cyclical return home. Coleman and Elsner (1995) are more optimistic: "In returning home, the pilgrim can act as the agent of change, by spreading new ideas gleaned on the journey" (p. 206).

Many students reported a generally increased awareness of their faith, or openness to reflection: "I [now] make time to kind of reflect on things" while for others the awareness was more specific, e.g. an appreciation of religious art studied in class, or an awareness of the detail and symbolism of their own parish church.

A common theme revolved around what they had brought back, and how this affected their confidence in the classroom. McCluskey (2006) has argued that 19th-century Scottish pilgrimages to Rome were deeply educational, occasioning much adult formation led by returning pilgrims is this borne out today by contemporary Scottish educators?

All shared stories of sacrifice and discomfort, whether an unscheduled twenty one-hour trip to Lourdes via Gatwick, very early rises, or a climb up St Peter's Dome (although most, in keeping with modern packaged pilgrimage, had lived a degree of comfort quite unlike the medieval pilgrim experience). The storytelling allowed them to grow in confidence in their ability to share their faith, giving them the tools to do so. This mirrors Aziz's (1987) findings about Indian pilgrims, who gained confidence from the immediacy of their owned experience: "Pilgrimage seems to be an experience which generates an extraordinary drive to give personal testimony. It is different from other religious matters where I found my enquiries invariably referred to a specialist. The pilgrim, however, does not shy away" (p. 58).

Students who soon afterwards took part in school practicum experience quickly incorporated the songs, dances, stories and photos from their experience into their classroom practice.

With a strong sense of immediacy, they reported that they were no longer, "standing up there blind," to explain a pilgrimage site that they had seen before only on a screen. Others looked forward to showing their pupils photos of themselves at the pilgrimage sites, in order to share their experience with the pupils. As Coleman and Elsner (1995) write, "as the pilgrim encounters a holy place, he or she experiences physically what had previously been known only through sacred narrative or its visual illustrations" (p. 204).

The storytelling to family, friends and pupils was also facilitated by souvenirs, which were often bought for classroom display. Ward (1982) informs us that pilgrims to Rome, in particular, have always brought back souvenirs, originally pieces of cloth lowered onto St Peter's tomb, or vials of oil from the lamps of the martyrs' tombs, and the student pilgrims continued this souvenir tradition in updated form.

6. From periphery to centre

As we have seen, pilgrimage involves the journey of geographically dispersed peoples to a sacred centre, accompanied by a renewed spiritual centring and wholeness for the pilgrim him/herself. Arguably for Scottish people the sense of being on the geographical margins is particularly strong in relation to Rome and Europe generally, perched as we once were on the wild edge of the Roman Empire, and still located at the geographical edge of Europe. Indeed, McCluskey (2006) informs us that late 19th-century Scots pilgrims visiting Rome referred to themselves, perhaps for dramatic effect, as having travelled from "Far-off Scotland, the ultima Tule" (p. 185) i.e. the edge of the medieval known world, usually a reference to Greenland.

The geographical movement from periphery to sacred centre mirrors a final surprising and interlinked theme. Firstly, the movement from margin to centre was experienced by individuals, and small friendship groups, within each pilgrimage, since they were gradually integrated into the wider group, as we have seen. One student commented in relation to other pilgrims, "they would never leave you out, if you were on your own they would come over and talk to you."

Secondly, students studying in small cohorts and courses felt a sense of being brought into the mainstream of the School of Education, dominated (in their perception) by primary school colleagues in the postgraduate (PGDE) and undergraduate Masters (MEduc) courses. As one said, "we're like the wee lost sheep at the side, it was good to come in from the outside," indicating they had discovered a new sense of respect and belonging.

Thirdly, one student reflected on the effect of seeing the worldwide Catholic church showcased at an event like the papal audience on themselves as Scots Catholics who have grown up as a religious minority. Having heard much about the reality of anti-Catholic sectarianism in Scotland (he did not mention it having affected them personally), he now felt part of the mainstream, "not part of some wee minority group," in which Catholicism is normal, popular and able to be freely expressed."

Lastly, as young people living in a highly secularised society in which a majority of their peers are apathetic to faith and its practice, the pilgrims valued being with other young people practising their faith. This too was expressed as a movement out of the shadows, in which faith practice is hidden, "the generation that we're in, having a faith can be more of an unpopular thing…going somewhere with people your age reaffirms your faith and

strengthens it as well." The ability to celebrate their faith in a public way, and being reassured that faith is a vital and normal part of the lives of people of all ages, was reported as an inspiration. This accords with the findings of Rymarz (2007) in relation to World Youth Day, the experience of which, "makes strong religious expression more plausible…Many pilgrims commented on the peer support they received at the event…often in contrast to the situation at home (p. 394)."

The fact that many of the events took place in outdoor spaces, literally in the public square, appears to have added to this sense.

Conclusions

The present study aimed to gauge the value of pilgrimage as an element of faith formation of Catholic ITE students. The introduction outlined a list of the key elements of faith formation: have these been reflected in the experience of the student pilgrim participants?

The study uncovered a growth of a sense of vocation - both as a disciple and as a Catholic teacher - as a fruit of pilgrimage, strengthened by a renewed sense of belonging. It has highlighted the ability of pilgrimage to provide opportunities for silence and personal reflection, as well as deep discussion among peers, which can be inspired by events, beautiful places and unexpected moments of quiet on pilgrimage. The findings demonstrated the growth in confidence which comes from the personal experience associated with pilgrimage, buttressed by tools for the transmission of faith to family, peers and pupils. Student pilgrims, further, experienced an affective, emotional and experiential immersion which can complement the knowledge necessary for teaching and witness to the faith.

However, while the study has uncovered a greater appreciation of some elements of faith and the related culture among students, there was no apparent appreciable growth in specifically theological competence. We recommend that future pilgrimages incorporate a follow-up itinerary which includes spiritual and theological reflection upon the experience, allowing a deeper engagement and a more rounded formational process.

We are well aware of the limitations of the present small-scale study, and its tentative findings. A comparative study of other student pilgrimages would allow fruitful comparison, while a longitudinal study of the students would test the longer-term impact on both faith commitment and teaching. However, we are confident that the pilgrimage experience does have a significant positive formational impact on the students, worthy of the resources necessary for its implementation in the wider Catholic teacher formation programme. We therefore aim to continue with an intensive focus on pilgrimage as an element of faith formation at the School of Education, and encourage others engaged in faith formation of student teachers to consider doing the same.

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