

The history of Marian shrines worldwide and the significance of Lourdes as a centre of pilgrimage facing challenges with faith and hope.

A Comprehensive Historical and Theological Analysis for the interested visitor or volunteer in Lourdes



Occasional Paper No. 2

Simon Uttley

HNDL – Service Saint Joseph

Preface

I can remember my first time in Lourdes over a quarter of a century ago. There was much to understand! As a first-time visitor to Lourdes, or as a regular visitor, or volunteer, you will undoubtedly be aware of the apparitions of Our Lady attributed to a number of global settings over many years. This paper looks at the historical development of Marian shrines across the world, but with particular focus on the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes in France. The paper analyses the development of Lourdes as an international pilgrimage destination, the challenges it has faced in recent decades and how it is recovering, its role in contemporary Catholic spirituality, and its unique position amongst Marian shrines worldwide. Looking at primary and secondary sources, this research shows how Lourdes captures the enduring significance of Marian devotion and also reflecting broader patterns in Catholic pilgrimage culture.

Table of Contents

Preface 2

Table of Contents 3

Introduction 5

1. Theological and historical foundations of Marian devotion 5

1.1 Biblical and patristic origins 5

1.2 Development of Marian shrines in the Medieval Period 6

1.3 Post-Reformation Developments 6

2. Global distribution of major Marian shrines 7

2.1 European shrines 7

Ancient shrines 7

Medieval pilgrimage centres 7

Apparition sites 7

2.2 Shrines in the Americas 8

2.3 Asian and African Shrines 8

3. The historical context of Lourdes 9

3.1 Nineteenth-century France: social and religious background 9

3.2 Lourdes before the apparitions 9

4. The Development of Lourdes as a pilgrimage centre 10

4.1 Official recognition and early development 10

4.2 The question of healing 10

4.3 Bernadette's later life and canonisation 11

5.1 Physical and liturgical development 11

5.2 Lourdes and Catholic social teaching 11

5.3 Challenges and controversies 12

6.1 Common patterns in Marian apparitions 13

6.2 What makes Lourdes distinctive?	13
Timing and theological confirmation	13
The Medical Dimension	13
Accessibility and infrastructure	13
International Character	13
6.3 Lourdes and Fátima: A Comparison	14
7.1 Lourdes in an age of secularisation	14
7.2 Environmental and Ecological Dimensions	15
7.3 Challenges for the Future	15
Conclusion	16
References	18
Appendix – Pilgrimage data	21

Introduction

Marian shrines represent one of the most enduring and widespread expressions of Catholic devotion. From the ancient basilicas of the Eastern Mediterranean to contemporary apparition sites in Latin America and Asia, these sacred spaces have acted as focal points for prayer, healing, and meeting with the divine. The veneration of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, has deep scriptural and theological roots, and the establishment of shrines dedicated to her honour reflects the organic development of this devotion across two millennia of Christian history (Carroll, 1986).

Amongst the constellation of Marian shrines worldwide, Lourdes occupies a position of singular importance. Since 1858, when a young peasant girl named Bernadette Soubirous reported seeing the Virgin Mary in a rough and unattractive part of Lourdes in southwestern France, the site has evolved into one of the world's most visited pilgrimage destinations with pilgrims travelling to Lourdes seeking spiritual renewal, physical healing, and deeper communion with God through the intercession of Mary (Harris, 1999).

This paper looks closely at Marian shrines in their historical context, exploring their theological foundations, geographical distribution, and cultural significance. The focus on Lourdes as a modern-day shrine will include understanding the challenges it faces (see Appendix) as well as how it aligns with modern-day sensibilities, including around ecology.

1. Theological and historical foundations of Marian devotion

1.1 Biblical and patristic origins

The place of Mary, the mother of Jesus, is particularly foregrounded in the Gospels of Luke and John. Luke's account presents Mary as the first disciple, whose "fiat" — "let it be done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38)— establishes her as the exemplar of faithful obedience (Brown et al., 1978). In Luke's Gospel, 1:46-55) this further emphasises her prophetic role and her identification with the poor and marginalised.

The Church Fathers, developed a rich theology of Mary. Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35-108 CE) emphasised Mary's virginity and her role in the Incarnation. Justin Martyr (c. 100-165 CE) developed the Eve-Mary typology, presenting Mary as the "New Eve" whose obedience reversed the disobedience of the first woman (Gambero, 1999). This typological approach became central to Patristic Mariology.

The Council of Ephesus in 431 CE represented a watershed moment in the development of Marian doctrine and devotion. By affirming Mary as Theotokos (God-bearer or Mother of God), the Council not only clarified Christological doctrine but also elevated Mary's theological status, and so providing impetus for increased devotional attention (Pelikan, 1996).

1.2 Development of Marian shrines in the Medieval period

The medieval period saw an extraordinary flourishing of Marian devotion, shown in the proliferation of shrines, the composition of prayers and hymns, and the integration of Mary into the fabric of daily Christian life. The development of shrines during this period followed several distinct patterns (Christian, 1981).

Cathedral shrines emerged in major European cities, often housing relics believed to be associated with Mary. Notre-Dame de Paris, consecrated in 1163, is a good example of this category. These urban shrines became centres not only of devotion but also of ecclesiastical power and cultural production. The construction of grand Gothic cathedrals dedicated to "Our Lady" across Europe — from Chartres to Cologne, from Canterbury to Santiago de Compostela — shows the centrality of Marian devotion to medieval religious culture (Koslofsky, 2011).

Miracle shrines developed around reported Marian interventions. Walsingham in my own country of England, where visions of Mary were reported in 1061, became one of northern Europe's most important pilgrimage sites. Similarly, Mariazell in Austria, set up in 1157, grew from accounts of miraculous healings attributed to a wooden statue of Mary (Gittos & Daniell, 2008).

The medieval period also saw the establishment of shrines associated with "Black Madonnas" — dark-skinned representations of Mary found particularly in France, Spain, and Poland. Sites such as Montserrat in Catalonia and Czestochowa in Poland became major pilgrimage destinations, with devotees attributing particular power and efficacy to these images (Begg, 1985).

1.3 Post-Reformation developments

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century posed fundamental challenges to Marian devotion. Reformers such as Martin Luther, whilst maintaining respect for Mary as the mother of Jesus, rejected what they perceived as excesses in Catholic Marian piety. The veneration of Mary, prayers to Mary, and pilgrimage to Marian shrines became contested practices that helped define confessional boundaries (Heal, 2014).

The Catholic response, articulated through the Council of Trent (1545-1563) and subsequent developments, involved both defence and refinement of Marian devotion. Whilst affirming the legitimacy of Marian veneration, the Church tried to distinguish between the worship due to God alone (*latria*) and the veneration appropriate to Mary and the saints (*dulia* and *hyperdulia*). This theological clarification provided a framework for the continued development of Marian shrines and practices in Catholic regions (O'Malley, 2013).

2. Global distribution of major Marian shrines

2.1 European shrines

Europe hosts the greatest concentration and diversity of Marian shrines, reflecting both the continent's long Christian history and the central role of Marian devotion in Catholic tradition. Several categories of European shrines deserve particular attention.

Ancient shrines

The House of the Virgin Mary near Ephesus in modern Turkey is one of Christianity's most ancient Marian sites. Based on the visions of Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich and archaeological evidence, this humble stone dwelling is venerated as Mary's final earthly residence. The site has been visited by several popes and continues to attract pilgrims from Christian and Muslim traditions alike, as Mary (Maryam) holds an honoured place in Islamic tradition (Maunder, 2008).

The Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, set up in the fifth century, tries to possess relics of the manger from Bethlehem. Its history intertwines with legendary accounts of a miraculous snowfall in August that marked the site for church construction. As one of the four major papal basilicas, it has maintained its significance across nearly sixteen centuries (Zanker, 2010).

Medieval pilgrimage centres

Chartres cathedral in France, with its labyrinth and magnificent stained glass, became renowned for the Sancta Camisa, a relic believed to be the tunic Mary wore at Christ's birth. The cathedral's royal portal and sculptural programme present a comprehensive visual theology of Mary's role in salvation history. Medieval pilgrims walked great distances to venerate this relic, and the site continues to draw visitors today (Adams, 2006).

Walsingham in England, known as "England's Nazareth," emerged from visions reported by the Saxon noblewoman Richeldis de Faverches in 1061. She claimed that Mary seemed to her and requested that a replica of the Holy House of Nazareth be constructed. Despite destruction during the English Reformation, the shrine was re-set up in the twentieth century and now serves both Anglican and Catholic pilgrims (Janes, 2011).

Apparition sites

Fátima in Portugal ranks amongst the most significant twentieth-century apparition sites. In 1917, three shepherd children — Lúcia dos Santos and her cousins Francisco and Jacinta Marto — reported six apparitions of Mary. The messages emphasised prayer (particularly the Rosary), penance, and devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. The "Miracle of the Sun," witnessed by approximately 70,000 people on 13 October 1917, was regarded by believers as divine confirmation of the apparitions (Zimdars-Swartz, 1991).

Knock in Ireland presents an interesting case of a silent apparition. On 21 August 1879, fifteen people reported seeing Mary, Saint Joseph, and Saint John the Evangelist in a tableau at the gable wall of the parish church. Unlike other apparition sites, no words were reported, no

messages given. However, Knock developed into Ireland's national Marian shrine, visited by over 1.5 million pilgrims annually (Hynes, 2008).

From September 2024, the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of Faith issued a note granting '*Nihil Obstat*' to allow public acts of devotion at Medjugorje. This reflects the Church's position that while the spiritual fruits (conversions, vocations and sacramental life) are recognised as positive, with official pilgrimages authorised since 2019, the Vatican remains neutral on the authenticity of the visions themselves.

2.2 Shrines in the Americas

The Americas present a distinct pattern of Marian devotion, shaped by the meet between indigenous peoples, European colonisers, and African slaves. The most significant American Marian shrine, Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, emerged from this complex cultural matrix.

In December 1531, a recently converted Aztec named Juan Diego reported four apparitions of Mary on Tepeyac Hill, a site previously associated with the Aztec goddess Tonantzin. Mary, appearing as a mestiza (of mixed race), requested that a church be built on the site. When the sceptical bishop demanded proof, Juan Diego's tilma (cloak) miraculously bore an image of Mary. This image, with its synthesis of indigenous and European iconographic elements, became central to Mexican national identity and Latin American Catholicism (Poole, 1995).

The Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe now receives approximately twenty million visitors annually, making it the world's most visited Catholic shrine. Pope John Paul II's canonisation of Juan Diego in 2002 and Benedict XVI's visit in 2012 have reinforced Guadalupe's significance in contemporary Catholicism (Peterson & Vásquez, 2008).

Other significant American shrines include Our Lady of Aparecida in Brazil, associated with a statue found by fishermen in 1717, which has become a symbol of Brazilian national identity. The National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., whilst not an apparition site, represents the largest Catholic church in North America and acts as a centre for Marian devotion in the United States (Orsi, 2005).

2.3 Asian and African Shrines

Marian devotion has deep roots in Asian Christianity, particularly in regions evangelised by Portuguese, Spanish, and French missionaries. The Philippines, with its long Catholic history, hosts numerous Marian shrines, most notably Our Lady of Peñafrancia in Naga City, which attracts millions of devotees to its annual fluvial procession (Lacar, 2001).

In India, the Shrine of Our Lady of Good Health in Velankanni, Tamil Nadu, is a synthesis of Catholic devotion and local culture. The shrine's origins trace to seventeenth-century apparitions, and it has become a pilgrimage destination not only for Catholics but also for Hindus and Muslims seeking healing and divine assistance (Bayly, 1989).

Africa's Marian shrines often reflect the continent's colonial history and also demonstrating the indigenisation of Catholic devotion. Our Lady of Africa Basilica in Algiers and Our Lady of Peace Basilica in Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire (one of the world's largest churches), capture this pattern. More recently, reported apparitions at Kibeho in Rwanda (1981-1989) have attracted significant attention, particularly given their apocalyptic warnings that some interpret as prefiguring the 1994 genocide (Mamdani, 2020).

3. The historical context of Lourdes

3.1 Nineteenth-century France: social and religious background

The apparitions at Lourdes occurred within a specific historical context that shaped both their reception and significance. Mid-nineteenth-century France was a nation wrestling with profound tensions between religious tradition and secular modernity, between rural and urban cultures, between conservative and progressive political forces (Kselman, 1983).

The French Revolution of 1789 and its aftermath had dramatically altered the relationship between the Catholic Church and French society. The Church had lost its privileged position, seen its property confiscated, and saw the execution of clergy during the Terror. Although Napoleon's Concordat of 1801 re-established diplomatic relations with Rome and normalised religious practice, the Church never recovered its pre-Revolutionary status or influence (Burleigh, 2005).

By the 1850s, France was undergoing rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, processes that seemed to threaten traditional religious practices. Positivism, with its emphasis on scientific rationality, attracted many intellectuals. Socialist and anarchist movements challenged both political authority and religious orthodoxy. Within this context, the Catholic Church tried to reassert its relevance and authority (Zeldin, 1973).

Significantly, just four years before the Lourdes apparitions, Pope Pius IX had proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception (1854), declaring that Mary had been preserved from original sin from the moment of her conception. This doctrinal development, whilst rooted in longstanding theological tradition, represented an assertion of papal authority and Marian theology in an increasingly secular age (Saward, 2008).

3.2 Lourdes before the apparitions

Lourdes in 1858 was an unremarkable market town in the département of Hautes-Pyrénées in southwestern France, with a population of approximately 4,000. The town's economy depended on agriculture, sheep farming, and modest trade. A medieval fortress overlooked the town, testimony to its strategic importance in earlier centuries, but by the mid-nineteenth century, Lourdes had become a provincial backwater, bypassed by the main currents of French economic and cultural life (Harris, 1999).

The Soubirous family, into which Bernadette was born on 7 January 1844, exemplified the poverty that affected much of rural France. François Soubirous, Bernadette's father, was a miller who had fallen on hard times. By 1858, the family lived in the *cachot* (literally, "dungeon"), a former prison cell that they rented because they could afford nothing better. Bernadette herself was illiterate, suffered from chronic asthma and tuberculosis, and had received minimal religious instruction. She knew her prayers in the local Gascon dialect rather than in French (Laurentin, 1979). For an account of the apparitions, see Uttley (2025).

4. The Development of Lourdes as a pilgrimage centre

4.1 Official recognition and early development

On 18 January 1862, after four years of investigation, Bishop Bertrand-Sévère Laurence of Tarbes issued a pastoral letter declaring:

"We judge that Mary Immaculate, Mother of God, did really appear to Bernadette Soubirous on February 11, 1858, and on subsequent days, eighteen times in all, in the Grotto of Massabielle... we permit the cult of Our Lady of the Grotto" (quoted in Harris, 1999, p. 89).

This official recognition started a period of rapid development. The first chapel, dedicated to the Immaculate Conception, was blessed in 1864. A larger underground basilica was consecrated in 1866, followed by the upper Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in 1871. These churches transformed the physical landscape of Lourdes, creating architectural focal points for pilgrimage (Kaufman, 2005).

The arrival of the railway in 1866 proved crucial to Lourdes' development as a mass pilgrimage destination. Whereas early pilgrims had endured arduous journeys on foot or by cart, trains made Lourdes accessible to pilgrims from across Europe. The *Pèlerinage National*, the French National Pilgrimage, first organised in 1873, established the pattern of large-scale, organised pilgrimages that would define Lourdes (Blackbourn, 1993).

4.2 The question of healing

From the earliest days, reports of miraculous healings at Lourdes attracted attention and controversy. The first officially recognised cure occurred on 1 March 1858, when Catherine Latapie, suffering from paralysis of two fingers, plunged her hand into the spring water and regained mobility. Hundreds more cures were soon claimed (Cranston, 1988).

In response to scepticism from the medical community and the need for rigorous verification, Church authorities established the Lourdes Medical Bureau (*Bureau des Constatations Médicales*) in 1883. This body, composed of physicians of various religious beliefs (including

non-believers), examines claimed cures according to strict scientific criteria. For a cure to be declared miraculous, it must be instantaneous or extraordinarily rapid; complete, with no residual effects; permanent, lasting many years; independent of any medical treatment; and inexplicable according to current medical knowledge.

Of thousands of reported cures, only 72 have been officially recognised as miraculous by the Church. This stringent verification process reflects the Church's careful approach to supernatural claims and its respect for scientific inquiry (Carrel, 1950; Rogo, 1982).

However, the significance of Lourdes as a healing shrine extends beyond medically verified miracles. Many pilgrims report spiritual healings, emotional peace, renewed faith, and the grace to accept suffering. In this way, Lourdes offers healing in a holistic sense that includes but is not limited to physical cure (Turner & Turner, 1978).

4.3 Bernadette's later life and canonisation

Bernadette's life after the apparitions shows the Church's careful stewardship of visionaries and the distinction between apparitions and the person to whom they occur. In 1866, seeking to escape the constant attention of pilgrims and curious visitors, Bernadette entered the Convent of the Sisters of Charity at Nevers, some 800 kilometres from Lourdes. She would never return to her hometown.

At Nevers, Bernadette lived a life of humble service, working in the infirmary and sacristy. She maintained that the apparitions were a private matter between herself and the "Beautiful Lady," and she refused to capitalise on her fame. She suffered from tuberculosis and bone cancer, enduring her final illness with remarkable patience. She died on 16 April 1879 at the age of 35, her final words reportedly: "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for me, a poor sinner"(Laurentin, 1979, p. 215).

Bernadette was beatified by Pope Pius XI in 1925 and canonised by the same pope in 1933. Notably, she was canonised not because of the apparitions themselves, but for her virtuous life, humility, and patient endurance of suffering. Her incorrupt body, preserved in a glass reliquary at Nevers, continues to attract pilgrims (Trochu, 1957).

5. Lourdes in the modern era

5.1 Physical and liturgical development

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Lourdes has continued to develop as a pilgrimage destination, balancing preservation of its essential character with accommodation of modern needs and sensibilities.

The Basilica of St. Pius X, consecrated in 1958 for the centenary of the apparitions, is a dramatic architectural addition. This vast underground church can accommodate 25,000 people, making it one of the largest churches in the world by capacity. Its brutalist concrete design, whilst controversial aesthetically, provides practical space for the massive pilgrimages that define Lourdes (Nolan & Nolan, 1989).

The Rosary Basilica (1883-1889), positioned between the upper and lower basilicas, features fifteen mosaics depicting the mysteries of the Rosary. Its Romano-Byzantine style and elaborate decoration contrast with the simplicity of the grotto itself, creating a visual dialogue between splendour and humility (Dahlberg, 1991).

The liturgical life of Lourdes centres on several distinctive practices. The blessing of the sick, held daily in front of the Blessed Sacrament in the Basilica of St. Pius X, dramatises the shrine's healing mission. The torchlight Marian procession, featuring thousands of pilgrims carrying candles whilst singing the Ave Maria in multiple languages, creates a powerful communal experience of faith and solidarity (Eade & Sallnow, 2000).

5.2 Lourdes and Catholic social teaching

Lourdes has become closely associated with the Catholic Church's ministry to the sick and disabled. The maladies (sick pilgrims) occupy a position of honour at Lourdes, given priority in processions and ceremonies. The shrine's hospitals and medical facilities, staffed by volunteers from various medical professions, provide care reflecting the Gospel imperative to serve the suffering (Kaufman, 2005).

The Hospitalité Notre-Dame de Lourdes, an organisation of volunteer helpers to which I have been privileged to belong for many years, captures the shrine's commitment to practical charity. These volunteers — numbering in the thousands during peak pilgrimage season — assist sick and disabled pilgrims with bathing in the baths, attending services, and participating fully in the pilgrimage experience. This emphasis on service embodies Catholic Social Teaching's preferential option for the poor and vulnerable (Harris, 1999).

Pope John Paul II, who visited Lourdes twice (1983 and 2004), particularly emphasised this dimension of the shrine. In his 1983 address, he stated:

"Lourdes is truly a privileged place for evangelisation. Here the Good News is proclaimed to the poor, to those who are suffering. Here the Church shows its true face as a community of love and service" (John Paul II, 1983).

5.3 Challenges and controversies

Like all major pilgrimage sites, Lourdes has faced criticism and met challenges. The commercialisation surrounding the shrine — hotels, souvenir shops selling religious kitsch, and the general tourist infrastructure — has long troubled critics who see it as incompatible with

authentic spirituality. Émile Zola's novel *Lourdes* (1894) offered a scathing critique of what he perceived as superstition and exploitation (Zola, 1894/2015).

However, defenders of Lourdes argue that the commercial dimension, whilst regrettable in some show-nations, reflects the genuine needs of pilgrims for accommodation, food, and religious articles, and that it need not negate the authentic spiritual experiences that occur at the shrine. They point to the fact that access to the grotto, baths, and churches remains free, and that the shrine's core mission remains pastoral rather than commercial (Turner & Turner, 1978). For many frequent visitors to Lourdes, as pilgrims or as volunteer-pilgrims, we are probably barely aware of the shops. Equally, as visitors, we are always guests of Lourdes and its population, and many of us who visit regularly value our friendships and association with the local people we get to know.

In recent decades, Lourdes has faced the challenge of declining numbers of traditional pilgrims from Europe, even as it has attracted new pilgrims from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. This shift reflects wider demographic and cultural changes within global Catholicism. The shrine has adapted by providing materials and services in multiple languages and by engaging with new forms of media and communication (Hermkens et al., 2009). For an analysis of the numbers of Lourdes in the last two decades, see the Appendix at the end of this paper.

6. Comparative analysis: Lourdes amongst Marian shrines

6.1 Common patterns in Marian apparitions

Examination of Marian apparitions across history reveals several recurring patterns. Most frequently, the visionaries are children or young people, often from poor or marginalised backgrounds. This pattern, evident at Lourdes, Fátima, Guadalupe, and elsewhere, suggests divine preference for the humble and powerless, echoing Mary's own Magnificat: "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly" (Luke 1:52) (Zimdars-Swartz, 1991).

The messages typically emphasise prayer (particularly the Rosary), penance, conversion, and devotion to Mary. Warnings about sin, calls to repentance, and apocalyptic elements appear frequently. These themes align with traditional Catholic theology whilst often carrying particular relevance to the historical moment of the apparition (Christian, 1981).

Physical signs — springs, healings, miraculous images — commonly accompany apparitions, providing tangible evidence that reinforces belief. At Lourdes, the spring serves this function; at Guadalupe, the tilma with its mysterious image; at Fátima, the "Miracle of the Sun." These

material showings make abstract spiritual realities accessible and credible to ordinary believers (Carroll, 1986).

6.2 What makes Lourdes distinctive?

Whilst sharing common features with other apparition sites, Lourdes possesses several distinctive characteristics that explain its extraordinary prominence.

Timing and theological confirmation

The apparition's timing — just four years after the definition of the Immaculate Conception — and Mary's self-identification using precisely that theological term created an unprecedented theological resonance. This seemed to many Catholics a direct divine confirmation of papal teaching, strengthening both the specific dogma and papal authority more generally in an age when both were being challenged (Saward, 2008).

The Medical Dimension

Lourdes' association with healing, and the establishment of rigorous medical verification procedures, distinguishes it from most other Marian shrines. The Medical Bureau's scientific approach has enabled Lourdes to engage with modern medical culture in ways that other shrines have not, lending credibility in a sceptical age whilst maintaining the possibility of the miraculous (Carrel, 1950).

Accessibility and infrastructure

The early arrival of rail transport and Lourdes' subsequent development of extensive infrastructure for receiving and caring for pilgrims — particularly sick and disabled pilgrims — has no parallel at most other shrines. This practical dimension reflects theological commitments but also creates a self-reinforcing cycle: better facilities attract more pilgrims, generating resources for further development (Blackbourn, 1993).

International Character

Whilst sites like Guadalupe have immense regional significance, Lourdes has achieved truly global reach. Pilgrims come from every continent, and the shrine consciously cultivates its international character through multilingual services, international pilgrimage organisations, and papal visits. This universality aligns with Catholic ecclesiology's emphasis on the Church as a global communion (Eade & Sallnow, 2000).

6.3 Lourdes and Fátima: A Comparison

Many pilgrims to Lourdes will have visited, or plan to visit, the shrine at Fatima. In 'comparing' the two, we are not saying either is 'better' but just reflecting how their stories differ. Both sites emerged in the modern period, both featured child visionaries from poor backgrounds, and both emphasise prayer and penance.

However, significant differences exist. Fátima's messages contained explicit political dimensions — warnings about Russia, calls for the consecration of Russia to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and apocalyptic visions of hell and global catastrophe. These elements connected Fátima closely

to Cold War geopolitics and anti-communist movements. Lourdes, by contrast, avoided explicit political content, focusing on individual conversion and healing (Zimdars-Swartz, 1991).

Fátima's "secrets," especially the contested "Third Secret," created an aura of mystery and apocalyptic urgency absent from Lourdes. Lourdes' message was simpler, perhaps explaining its broader appeal across the ideological spectrum of Catholicism (Apolito, 2005).

Fátima's association with physical healing is less pronounced than Lourdes'. Whilst healings have been reported at Fátima, they do not define the site's identity as they do at Lourdes. Instead, Fátima emphasises its prophetic role and its connection to world-historical events, particularly the collapse of Soviet communism, which some interpret as a fulfilment of Mary's promises (Vásquez & Marquardt, 2003).

7. Contemporary significance and future prospects

7.1 Lourdes in an age of secularisation

The persistence and even growth of Lourdes as a pilgrimage destination challenges secularisation theories that predicted the inevitable decline of religious practice in modern societies. The number of annual pilgrims suggest that enchantment, wonder, and the search for healing and meaning retain powerful appeal even in an age of scientific rationalism (Bruce, 2002).

Scholars have offered various explanations for this phenomenon. Some argue that Lourdes provides what Grace Davie (2007) calls "vicarious religion" — a form of religious engagement that allows even non-practising or marginally affiliated believers to connect with the sacred on special occasions. The pilgrimage to Lourdes becomes a discrete religious act that requires no sustained commitment or regular practice. Indeed, the number of helpers I have worked with over the years who would describe their relationship with the Church and spirituality as 'complicated', notwithstanding their annual commitment to serve in Lourdes, has vindicated this for me.

Others emphasise Lourdes' therapeutic dimension, suggesting that in an age of chronic illness, disability, and medical uncertainty, the shrine offers hope, community, and meaning that conventional healthcare cannot provide. The integration of medical verification with spiritual interpretation allows pilgrims to hold together scientific and religious worldviews in productive tension (Gesler, 1996).

As a teacher, one of the most striking phenomena for me is the impact serving in Lourdes so often has on the young. I began my service in Lourdes as a helper with my own Diocese (Arundel and Brighton, England) and I have seen first hand how transformational this can be, both in the short and long term. In the short term, I have witnessed young people who were initially

apprehensive and perhaps not closely aligned with the Church (or perhaps not in fact Christian) being asked to serve others for a few days or a week. We see the terror give way to joy and to deep wisdom, as they realise both what they can learn from the sick or elderly person, and that they, as young people, can make a difference. They have agency. In the long term, we often see young people whose experience in Lourdes leads directly to a career or vocation devoted to others. Priesthood, religious life, a medical career, social work, teacher, paramedic...The list is endless.

7.2 Environmental and Ecological Dimensions

Recent theological reflection has highlighted the ecological significance of Lourdes and similar sites. The grotto, with its spring water and natural setting, embodies the sacramentality of creation. Water — the source of life, used in baptism, flowing from the grotto — becomes a symbol of God's gracious provision and the interconnection of spiritual and material realities (Pope Francis, 2015).

Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* (2015), with its emphasis on integral ecology and care for our common home, provides a framework for understanding Marian shrines like Lourdes as sites where humanity encounters not just the divine but also creation as a revelation of divine love. The spring at Lourdes, preserved and venerated for over 160 years, models a relationship with natural resources defined by reverence rather than exploitation.

7.3 Challenges for the Future

Lourdes faces several challenges as it moves deeper into the twenty-first century. Declining religious practice in Western Europe, the traditional source of most pilgrims, poses long-term demographic challenges. Whilst pilgrims from the Global South increasingly visit Lourdes, economic constraints and visa difficulties may limit this growth (Hermkens et al., 2009).

Climate change and environmental degradation present both practical and theological challenges. The Gave de Pau's water quality, affected by upstream agriculture and industry, requires ongoing monitoring. More broadly, the carbon footprint of millions of pilgrims travelling by air and coach raises sustainability questions that the shrine must address (Raj & Griffin, 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on pilgrimage highlighted both vulnerability and adaptability. During lockdowns, Lourdes pioneered virtual pilgrimage experiences, live-streaming services and creating online prayer resources. This digital engagement may become an enduring complement to physical pilgrimage, reaching those unable to travel whilst raising questions about the nature of pilgrimage and sacred space in a digital age (Eade, 2020).

Conclusion

Marian shrines, extending from the earliest Christian centuries to the present day, represent one of Catholicism's most enduring and geographically diverse expressions of devotion. These sacred sites embody the intersection of theology, popular piety, culture, and politics, serving as focal points for prayer, healing, community, and meet with the divine.

Within this global constellation of Marian shrines, Lourdes occupies a unique position. The apparitions to Bernadette Soubirous in 1858 occurred at a pivotal moment in Catholic history, providing what believers understood as divine confirmation of recently defined dogma. The spring discovered during the apparitions became the foundation for Lourdes' identity as a healing shrine, whilst the establishment of rigorous medical verification procedures enabled productive engagement with modern scientific culture.

Lourdes' development from a remote grotto in the Pyrenees to one of the world's most visited pilgrimage destinations reflects wider patterns in modern Catholicism: the democratisation of religious experience, the tension between institutional control and popular devotion, the integration of medical and spiritual healing, and the global character of contemporary Catholicism.

The shrine's particular emphasis on serving the sick and disabled embodies Catholic Social Teaching's preferential option for the vulnerable. The thousands of volunteers who annually assist maladies show faith expressed through practical charity, creating a community where the suffering occupy positions of honour.

As Lourdes enters its second century after official recognition, it faces both challenges and opportunities. Demographic shifts, environmental concerns, and technological change will shape its future development. Yet the fundamental human needs that draw pilgrims to Lourdes — the search for healing, meaning, hope, and meet with the transcendent — seem unlikely to disappear. In an age of chronic illness, existential anxiety, and fractured community, Lourdes offers tangible experiences of grace, solidarity, and the possibility of transformation.

The messages of Lourdes — prayer, penance, service to the suffering, hope in God's mercy — whilst rooted in nineteenth-century France, retain contemporary relevance. The simplicity of these messages, free from complex theological argumentation or political entanglement, contributes to their accessibility and enduring appeal.

Ultimately, Lourdes captures the challenge at the heart of Marian devotion: a focus on Mary that leads beyond her to Christ, and through Christ to the Father. The shrine's enduring significance lies not merely in its history, its healings, or its infrastructure, but in its capacity to mediate encounters with divine love — encounters that transform individual lives and bear witness to realities that transcend the merely material. In this way, Lourdes, along with the broader network of Marian shrines worldwide, continues to fulfil its essential purpose: pointing pilgrims toward the kingdom of God.

References

- Adams, H. (2006). *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*. Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1904)
- Apolito, P. (2005). *The internet and the Madonna: Religious visionary experience on the web*. University of Chicago Press.
- Bayly, S. (1989). *Saints, goddesses and kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian society, 1700-1900*. Cambridge University Press.
- Begg, E. (1985). *The cult of the Black Virgin*. Arkana.
- Bertrin, G. (1908). *The history of Lourdes*. Catholic Truth Society.
- Blackbourn, D. (1993). *Marpingen: Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Bismarckian Germany*. Clarendon Press.
- Brown, R. E., Donfried, K. P., Fitzmyer, J. A., & Reumann, J. (Eds.). (1978). *Mary in the New Testament*. Paulist Press.
- Bruce, S. (2002). *God is dead: Secularization in the West*. Blackwell.
- Burleigh, M. (2005). *Earthly powers: The clash of religion and politics in Europe from the French Revolution to the Great War*. HarperCollins.
- Carrel, A. (1950). *The voyage to Lourdes*. Harper & Brothers.
- Carroll, M. P. (1986). *The cult of the Virgin Mary: Psychological origins*. Princeton University Press.
- Christian, W. A. (1981). *Apparitions in late medieval and renaissance Spain*. Princeton University Press.
- Claude.ai for d=sifting and sorting literature reviews.
- Cranston, R. (1988). *The miracle of Lourdes*. Image Books.
- Dahlberg, A. (1991). The body as a principle of holism: Three pilgrimages to Lourdes. In J. Eade & M. J. Sallnow (Eds.), *Contesting the sacred: The anthropology of Christian pilgrimage* (pp. 30-50). Routledge.
- Davie, G. (2007). *The sociology of religion*. SAGE Publications.
- Eade, J. (2020). Pilgrimage and the COVID-19 pandemic: Future perspectives. *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 8(7), 1-8.

- Eade, J., & Sallnow, M. J. (Eds.). (2000). *Contesting the sacred: The anthropology of Christian pilgrimage* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Gambero, L. (1999). *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic thought*. Ignatius Press.
- Gesler, W. M. (1996). Lourdes: Healing in a place of pilgrimage. *Health & Place*, 2(2), 95-105.
- Gittos, B., & Daniell, M. (2008). *Walsingham: Pilgrims and pilgrimage*. Canterbury Press.
- Harris, R. (1999). *Lourdes: Body and spirit in the secular age*. Viking.
- Heal, B. (2014). *The cult of the Virgin Mary in early modern Germany: Protestant and Catholic piety, 1500-1648*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hermkens, A. K., Jansen, W., & Notermans, C. (Eds.). (2009). *Moved by Mary: The power of pilgrimage in the modern world*. Ashgate.
- Hynes, E. (2008). *Knock: The Virgin's apparition in nineteenth-century Ireland*. Cork University Press.
- Janes, D. (2011). *Medieval art and architecture at Walsingham Priory*. British Archaeological Association.
- John Paul II. (1983, August 15). *Homily at Lourdes*. Vatican.
- Kaufman, S. (2005). *Consuming visions: Mass culture and the Lourdes shrine*. Cornell University Press.
- Koslofsky, C. (2011). *The Reformation of the dead: Death and ritual in early modern Germany*. Macmillan.
- Kselman, T. A. (1983). *Miracles and prophecies in nineteenth-century France*. Rutgers University Press.
- Lacar, L. Q. (2001). Barrios and barangays: Philippine communities in the Philippines. In A. C. Mejia (Ed.), *Philippine culture and society* (pp. 45-72). University of the Philippines Press.
- Laurentin, R. (1979). *Bernadette of Lourdes: A life based on authenticated documents*. Darton, Longman & Todd.
- Laurentin, R., & Billet, B. (1991). *Lourdes: Documents authentiques (Vols. 1-7)*. Lethielleux.
- Mamdani, M. (2020). *Neither settler nor native: The making and unmaking of permanent minorities*. Harvard University Press.
- Maunder, C. (2008). *Origins of the cult of the Virgin Mary*. Burns & Oates.

- Nolan, M. L., & Nolan, S. (1989). *Christian pilgrimage in modern Western Europe*. University of North Carolina Press.
- O'Malley, J. W. (2013). *Trent: What happened at the Council*. Harvard University Press.
- Orsi, R. A. (2005). *Between heaven and earth: The religious worlds people make and the scholars who study them*. Princeton University Press.
- Pelikan, J. (1996). *Mary through the centuries: Her place in the history of culture*. Yale University Press.
- Peterson, A. L., & Vásquez, M. A. (Eds.). (2008). *Latin American religions: Histories and documents in context*. New York University Press.
- Pope Francis. (2015). *Laudato Si': On care for our common home*. Vatican.
- Poole, S. (1995). *Our Lady of Guadalupe: The origins and sources of a Mexican national symbol*. University of Arizona Press.
- Raj, R., & Griffin, K. (Eds.). (2015). *Religious tourism and pilgrimage management: An international perspective (2nd ed.)*. CAB International.
- Rogo, D. S. (1982). *Miracles: A parascientific inquiry into wondrous phenomena*. Dial Press.
- Saward, J. (2008). *The mysteries of Mary: Growing in faith, hope, and love with the Mother of God*. Ignatius Press.
- Trochu, F. (1957). *Saint Bernadette Soubirous*. Tan Books.
- Turner, V., & Turner, E. (1978). *Image and pilgrimage in Christian culture*. Columbia University Press.
- Uttley, S. (2025) 'Lourdes, the apparitions and what this teaches us'. London: Koinonia Educational, <https://www.koinonia-educational.com/2025/12/29/lourdes-the-apparitions-and-what-this-teaches-us-simon-uttley/> and in French Uttley, S. (2025) 'Les Apparitions de Lourdes'. London: Koinonia Educational <https://www.koinonia-educational.com/2025/12/29/les-apparitions-de-lourdes/>
- Vásquez, M. A., & Marquardt, M. F. (2003). *Globalizing the sacred: Religion across the Americas*. Rutgers University Press.
- Zanker, P. (2010). *Roman art*. Getty Publications.
- Zeldin, T. (1973). *France 1848-1945: Ambition, love and politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Zimdars-Swartz, S. L. (1991). *Encountering Mary: From La Salette to Medjugorje*. Princeton University Press.

Appendix

Visitor numbers and data¹

Peak Visitor Year: 2008 with 4.2 million visitors (150th Jubilee)

Pandemic Impact: 77% decline to 800,000 visitors in 2020

2025 Recovery Level: 94.3% of pre-COVID levels (3.3 million estimated)

Total Visitors 2005-2025: Approximately 61 million pilgrims

Key findings

- Peak visitor numbers reached 4.2 million in 2008 during the 150th anniversary jubilee celebration attended by Pope Benedict XVI
- A steady decline occurred from 2008-2019, with visitor numbers dropping from 4.2M to 3.5M (approximately 17% reduction)
- The COVID-19 pandemic caused a dramatic 77% collapse in 2020, with only 800,000 visitors
- Recovery has been steady since 2021, reaching 3.2 million visitors in 2024 (91.4% of pre-COVID levels)
- Total estimated visitors 2005-2025: 61 million pilgrims and visitors

¹ Data Sources and Methodology. This report synthesises data from multiple authoritative sources: Official Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes attendance records (lourdes-france.org)

Statista tourism statistics INSEE (French National Institute of Statistics) hotel occupancy data. Academic studies from tourism geography journals. Contemporary reporting from National Geographic and religious news sources. For years where precise figures were unavailable (particularly 2005-2007, 2009-2018), estimates were calculated based on documented trends, hotel occupancy rates, and comparative analysis with confirmed data points.

- Since the apparitions to Saint Bernadette Soubirous in 1858, an estimated 200 million people have visited the shrine.
- The sanctuary attracts pilgrims from approximately 80 nationalities annually, making it a truly international destination for faith, healing, and spiritual renewal.

Annual visitor statistics (2005-2025)

The following table presents annual visitor data with notable events highlighted.

Year	Visitors (millions)	Notable Events
2005	3.2	
2006	3.4	
2007	3.6	
2008	4.2	<i>150th Jubilee - Pope Benedict XVI visit</i>
2009	3.8	
2010	3.5	
2011	3.3	
2012	3.0	
2013	2.8	
2014	2.6	
2015	2.5	
2016	2.4	
2017	2.3	
2018	2.2	

Year	Visitors (millions)	Notable Events
2019	3.5	
2020	0.8	<i>COVID-19 Pandemic</i>
2021	1.6	<i>Virtual pilgrimages introduced</i>
2022	2.7	
2023	3.1	
2024	3.2	
2025	c. 3.3	<i>Estimated recovery to 94% of pre-COVID</i>

Detailed analysis

Pre-Pandemic Era (2005-2019)

The Jubilee effect (2007-2008)

The 150th anniversary of the apparitions in 2008 created a significant spike in pilgrim numbers, reaching 4.2 million visitors. This jubilee year, which included a visit from Pope Benedict XVI, represented a 16.7% increase over 2007 and remains the highest recorded annual visitation in the 21st century.

Gradual decline (2008-2019)

Following the jubilee peak, visitor numbers experienced a consistent downward trend throughout the 2010s. By 2018, numbers had fallen to 2.2 million (nearly 50% below the 2008 peak). This decline reflected broader challenges facing religious tourism in Europe, including demographic shifts, declining religious practice, and changing patterns of pilgrimage participation.

The COVID-19 pandemic impact (2020-2021)

The pandemic brought unprecedented disruption to Lourdes. For the first time in its 162-year history, the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes closed to pilgrims during France's lockdown from March to May 2020. Annual visitor numbers collapsed to just 800,000 - representing only 23% of pre-pandemic levels. The organised pilgrimages with sick and disabled pilgrims fell from 445,000 in 2019 to just 35,000 in 2020.

However, the crisis prompted innovation. In July 2020, Lourdes held the world's first virtual pilgrimage, 'Lourdes United,' which was broadcast in 10 languages and attracted 80 million viewers globally. This technological pivot demonstrated the shrine's adaptability and opened new pathways for spiritual engagement.

Recovery and Renewal (2021-2025)

The recovery trajectory has been steady and encouraging.

Visual Data Analysis

The following visualisations provide comprehensive analysis of visitor trends, period comparisons, cumulative growth, and post-COVID recovery patterns.

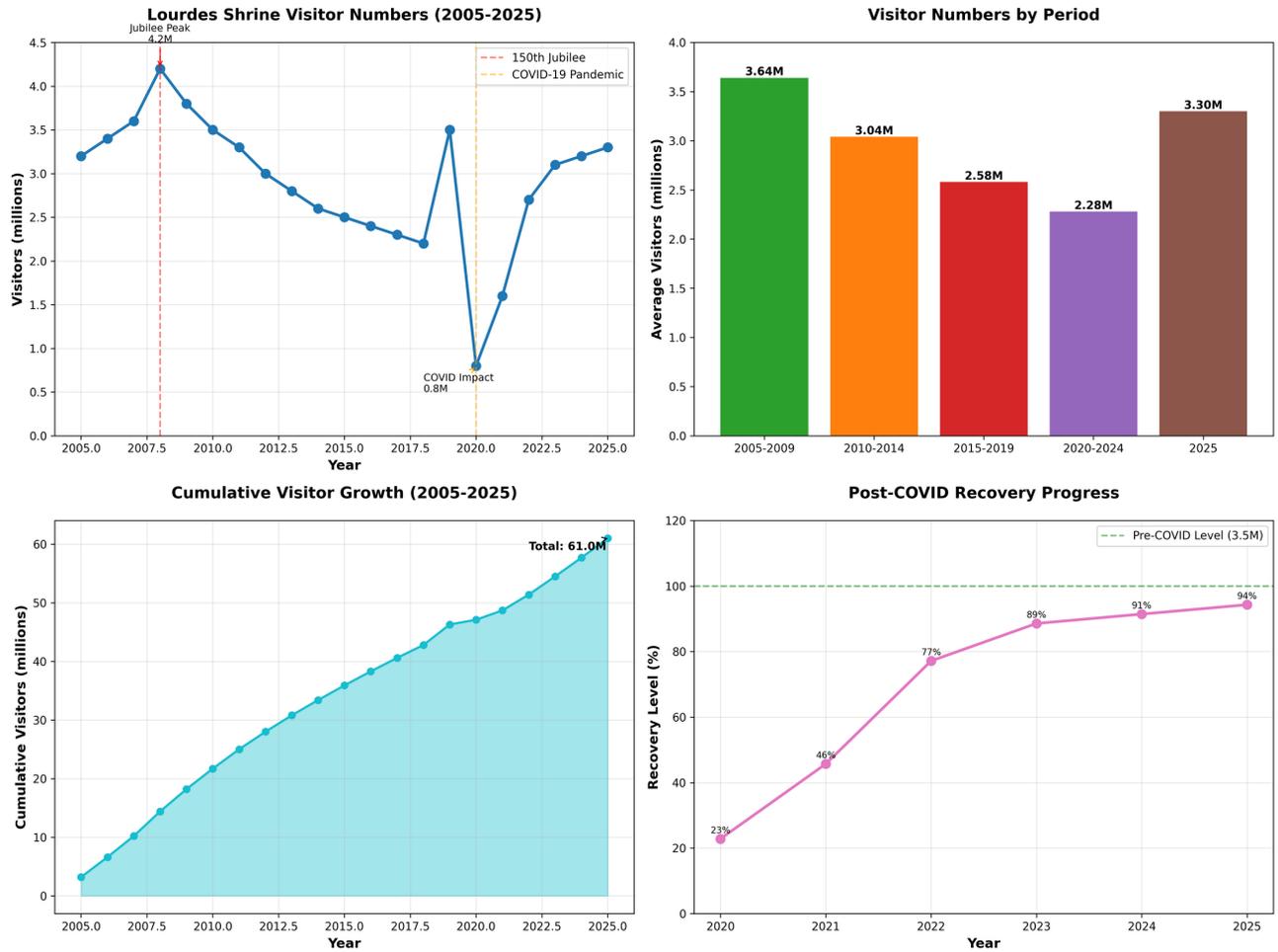


Figure 1: Comprehensive Visitor Analysis (2005-2025)

Chart Interpretation

Top Left - Overall Visitor Trend: Shows the complete 20-year trajectory with the 2008 jubilee peak and 2020 pandemic trough clearly visible.

Top Right - Period Comparison: Demonstrates the average visitor numbers by five-year periods, highlighting the pre-pandemic decline and post-pandemic recovery challenges.

Bottom Left - Cumulative Growth: Illustrates the total of 61 million visitors over the 20-year period, showing the slowdown during pandemic years.

Bottom Right - Recovery Progress: Tracks the post-COVID recovery as a percentage of the 2019 baseline (3.5 million), showing steady improvement from 23% in 2020 to an estimated 94% in 2025.