Pilgrimage as Aletheia: The experiential unfolding of truth in a Sacred Journey

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Introduction

All of us who have been to Lourdes more than once will surely remember our first visit. Perhaps the group we were in, the people we met, the experience of the baths, processions, mass at the grotto and the rest. For me, my early visits were very much characterised by the many young people who joined us on what was a pilgrimage from an English Diocese. But in addition to the people we travel with, we also take ourselves as individuals: our own experience, including our jobs and professions, joys and hopes, fears and disappointments, all of which constitute a lens through which we understand Lourdes for ourselves. For example, I have been a teacher for many years, so part of the lens through which I view Lourdes is to notice its often profound impact on young people who have the privilege of visiting. Noticing young people transformed by their experiences – often through simply helping someone or spending time with someone they would never normally encounter – can lead them not only to lasting memories but also to genuine moments of wisdom.

> "I know that one of the reasons I became a doctor was because of what I saw in Lourdes. I just knew there was nothing better than being able to help people who are suffering" (Regular visitor, 28 years old).

Pilgrimage is one of humanity's most enduring religious practices, transcending specific faith traditions and cultural boundaries. From the Muslim *hajj* to Mecca, the Christian pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, the Hindu journey to Varanasi, or the Buddhist circumambulation of sacred mountains, the act of sacred travel occupies a central position in religious life. However, pilgrimage is more than a mere journey, whether over long distances or over a few days in a setting such as Lourdes or Fatima. A pilgrimage also represents a distinctive form of knowledge acquisition, a pedagogical encounter in which truth is revealed through lived experience rather than abstract propositions. The physical pilgrimage – just like a life lived fully - is bumpy, unpredictable, surprising, carries an element of risk, involves trial and error, includes the occasional twisted ankle, benefits from helpful guidance and yet opens up vistas and landscapes we could hardly imagine.

Listening to the sound of genuine pilgrims, both past and present, this chapter investigates the phenomenology of pilgrimage through the philosophical framework of *Aletheia*, the ancient Greek concept of truth as 'unconcealment' or 'disclosure.' Drawing on cross-cultural examples of pilgrimage traditions, we see how pilgrimage acts as an extraordinarily powerful 'teacher' - offering pedagogical practice wherein truth is revealed experientially rather than solely cognitively, which for many young people remains the dominant way they receive education in their normal lives. I suggest that, particularly for young people, pilgrimage can provide a transformative *educational* as well as spiritual experience that transcends propositional knowledge, bringing about the emergence of wisdom through the

embodied, relational, and affective dimensions of the sacred journey. This has implications for the understanding of religious education, youth development, and the ongoing relevance of pilgrimage in contemporary spiritual life.

I will suggest that the ancient Greek notion of *Aletheia*—truth as unconcealment or disclosure—offers a particularly illuminating framework for understanding the epistemological and formative dimensions of pilgrimage. Truth in this sense is an event of disclosure, a coming-to-light that requires the right conditions and an openness on the part of the person to whom the truth is disclosed. It is the coming to light experienced by the disciples who, walking to Emmaus following the crucifixion, meet a man who, via a slow process of revelation, discloses himself to be Jesus (Luke 24: 13-35). This process of revealing truth is deeply respectful of the recipient – no lectures or 'hard sell' – is patient and is effective precisely because it manifests itself through idioms that make sense to the person experiencing the revelation. In the context of Lourdes, for example, the experience of revealing the truth of unconditional love through unpretentious and unexpected acts of kindness is far richer than merely advocating the virtues of 'unconditional love'. The experience of receiving forgiveness in an environment where the sacrament of reconciliation is not something strange or intimidating but is quite normal, is also profoundly powerful. And for young people in particular, who may see religious people as hypocrites, or too 'holy', or even a little boring, there is the sheer power of having these stereotypes disrupted by the presence of humanity in all its forms – old, young, all ethnicities, men and women, rich and poor - at the grotto, in the baths, in procession and at Mass. Pilgrimage, I suggest, creates conditions for the emergence of truth, particularly for young people whose formation occurs as much through affective and embodied encounters as through knowledge transfer, educational assessment, and the architecture of structured schooling. I will also suggest that the development of the 'Pilgrim People' theology in the Second Vatican Council offers insights into the way that pilgrimage captures what it is to live out a life of faith authentically: recognising that we journey not alone, but with fellow travellers.

Pilgrimage in world religious traditions

The practice of pilgrimage is found across a range of religious traditions, with remarkable consistency of purpose, notwithstanding the different theological understandings that underpin it (Coleman & Eade, 2004). We will examine several well-known examples to elucidate the similarities and differences.

2.1. Islamic Pilgrimage: Hajj and Umrah

In Islam, the *Hajj* to Mecca constitutes one of the Five Pillars, obligatory for all Muslims who possess the physical and financial capability to undertake it at least once in their lifetime. Performed annually during the Islamic month of Dhu al-Hijjah, the *Hajj* encompasses a series

of ritual acts including circumambulation of the Ka'bah (*tawaf*), walking between the hills of Safa and Marwah (*sa'i*), standing in vigil at Mount Arafat, and the symbolic stoning of pillars representing Satan. The lesser pilgrimage, *Umrah*, may be undertaken at any time of year.

The *Hajj* carries profound theological significance: the unity of the *ummah* (global Muslim community), equality before Allah that transcends all social distinctions, the commemoration of prophetic history (notably Abraham's trials), as well as spiritual purification. To symbolise both the sacred nature of pilgrimage, as well as the equality of all before God, pilgrims wear simple white garments (*ihram*). This coming together of millions with a common purpose represents one of the largest religious assemblies in humanity, serving as a demonstration of Islamic unity as well as submission to divine will.

As an educator, I know well how important pilgrimage is for many young Muslim children, and how this is tied up with their sense of family and identity.

2.2. Christian Pilgrimage: Jerusalem, Rome, and Santiago

Pilgrimage appears early in the history of the Church, with Jerusalem as the foremost destination due to its connection with Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, constructed over the traditional site of Calvary and Christ's tomb, has been a focal point for pilgrims since the fourth century. Later, Rome became a significant pilgrimage centre, notably for the tombs of Saints Peter and Paul, while numerous other sites, including Fatima, Canterbury, Walsingham and Lourdes itself, have drawn pilgrims attracted by specific saints or other events where, in a sense, heaven and earth appear to have touched in a particular way.

A pilgrimage which has transcended the 'believer' community to encompass a good number of sceptics, atheists and others, becoming ever more fashionable as a counternarrative to the high-octane stresses of modern-day life, is the Camino de Santiago, the pilgrimage route to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, said to be the last resting place of St James the Apostle. Medieval pilgrims would utilise a range of established routes (*caminos*), mindful of their need for penance and healing, as well as the more worldly enjoyment of adventure (Sumption, 2002; Webb, 2002) and despite declining after the Reformation, it has experienced a remarkable revival in recent decades (Frey, 1998), with many pilgrims now walking the *Camino* annually. This notion of pilgrimage attracts a genuinely eclectic mix of people, with a blend of motivations including the 'formally spiritual', as well as those looking for an enjoyable new experience. In this sense, a pilgrimage can be one of the most inclusive formats of religious witness, where the common experience of walking together – sharing experiences- to an extent removes the sense of the person needing to 'qualify' to be within a religious group. All are welcome, and this is so often one of the striking elements of pilgrimage to Lourdes for young people:

> "I have met some really great people that I would never have met without coming here to Lourdes. We are all different and yet we can kind of learn from each other and have a great time. They are now really good friends" (Young helper, 17 years old).

Christian pilgrimage emphasises themes of spiritual journey, penance, encounter with the sacred through holy places and relics, communal witness, and transformation through hardship and grace. The medieval conception of life itself as pilgrimage (*homo viator*, 'man the traveller') expressed deep theological anthropology: human existence as a journey toward a heavenly homeland, the Church as a pilgrim community, and earthly life as a passage through a 'vale of tears' toward eschatological fulfilment.

2.2.1 Pilgrimage and the Second Vatical Council

The idea of pilgrimage lies at the heart of our understanding of living an authentic faith. One of the most significant ecclesiological shifts brought about by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) was the recovery of the image of the Church as a pilgrim people. Moving beyond a predominantly institutional self-understanding, the Council Fathers drew upon scriptural and patristic sources to present the Church as a community on the move – journeying through history towards its eschatological fulfilment.

For example, the decision to place Chapter II of the important document 'Light of the Nations', or *Lumen Gentium*, entitled 'The People of God', before the chapter on the hierarchy was itself a theological statement of considerable importance. By foregrounding the common baptismal dignity shared by all the faithful, the Council signalled that the Church is first and foremost a community called together by God, rather than a juridical structure defined by its offices (Sullivan, 2001). As Ratzinger (1966) observed, this ordering reflected a return to the ecclesiology of the early Church, in which the whole *populus Dei* was understood as the primary subject of the Church's mission. The Council taught that the Church 'will receive its perfection only in the glory of heaven' (*Lumen Gentium*: 48), thereby acknowledging that the ecclesial community exists in a state of 'already but not yet'. The Church is holy, yet always in need of purification; it is the Body of Christ, yet still marked by the frailties and failings of its members (Dulles, 2002). This pilgrim identity introduces a necessary humility into how the Church should see itself: the Church does not possess the fullness of the Kingdom but rather journeys towards it (O'Collins, 2011).

> "I remember how it felt to be walking together in the evening torchlight procession. We all felt like a community. I did not feel different or as if I was intruding. I felt like I belonged because we were all simply walking together in procession" (Helper 18 years old).

Elsewhere at the same Council, the pilgrim metaphor also carried implications for the Church's engagement with the world. *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, complemented *Lumen Gentium* by insisting that the Church 'travels the same journey as all of humanity and shares the same earthly lot with the world' (*Gaudium et Spes* : 40). A pilgrim Church, by definition, moves through the particularities of history and culture, reading the 'signs of the times' in the light of the Gospel (Lamb & Levering, 2008). Here again is this idea of truth 'unfolding' along a journey, as against being akin to a 'treasure trove' which, once discovered, renders the end of the journey. While this approach opened the way for a more pastoral approach that characterised the era after the Council (Faggioli, 2012), it also disrupts the binary of Catholics 'who have arrived' versus those 'as yet still on the journey' – most notably, young people. The reality of the Pilgrim Church model, as well as pilgrimage more generally, is that we are all walkers – all fellow travellers – which, at its best offers a genuinely inclusive and welcoming model for young people. The only challenge that this can bring is that the pilgrimage experience can sometimes feel far superior to the experience of church at home:

> "Sometimes church at home to be honest can get a bit boring. Here in Lourdes it is just the opposite. People are smiling, sat with people they don't know and yet not feeling out of place. I wish I could bottle what this is like here and take it back home with me" (Helper, aged 18).

The pilgrim ecclesiology of Vatican II is inseparable from the Council's emphasis on communion (*communio*) and mission (*missio*). The Church does not travel alone but as a communion of diverse members, united in baptism, sharing the Eucharist, and sent forth in service. The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, further underscored that all members of the pilgrim people – not only the ordained – share in the Church's apostolic mission (Lakeland, 2003). The pilgrim motif thus reinforced the universal call to holiness articulated in Chapter V of *Lumen Gentium*, reminding all the faithful that sanctity is not the preserve of the religious life but the vocation of every baptised person (Mannion, 2007).

2.3. Hindu Pilgrimage: Tirtha-yatra

Hindu pilgrimage (*tirtha-yatra*) to sacred sites (*tirthas*, literally 'fords' or crossing places) constitutes an ancient and ongoing practice of considerable diversity. Prominent pilgrimage centres include Varanasi (Benares) on the River Ganges, regarded as particularly auspicious for death and cremation; Hardwar, where the Ganges transitions into the plains; the temple complexes of Southern India; and the Himalayan shrines (Eck, 2012). The *Kumbh Mela*,

convened every twelve years at four designated locations, attracts millions of pilgrims for ritual bathing at the confluence of sacred rivers.

Hindu pilgrimage emphasises purification, the accumulation of spiritual merit (*punya*), encounters with divine presence manifested in specific locations and icons, and the journey itself as a form of spiritual discipline. The concept of *darshan*—seeing and being seen by the deity—encapsulates the reciprocal nature of the pilgrimage experience. Unlike traditions that emphasise textual revelation, Hinduism identifies the divine presence within natural features such as mountains, rivers, and trees, as well as consecrated spaces, thereby making pilgrimage a principal means of accessing sacred reality.

2.4. Buddhist Pilgrimage: Following the Buddha's Footsteps

Buddhist pilgrimage centres focus on locations associated with the life of the Buddha: Lumbini (his birthplace), Bodh Gaya (where enlightenment occurred), Sarnath (site of the first sermon), and Kushinagar (the place of death and *parinirvana*). The Buddha himself is reported to have encouraged pilgrimages to these sites to inspire faith and mindfulness of impermanence (Reader, 2005). In addition to these primary sites, other pilgrimage practices have developed, including circumambulation (*kora*) of sacred mountains such as Mount Kailash in Tibet; pilgrimages to monasteries housing significant relics or connected with renowned teachers; and journeys to emerging sites of importance such as the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa.

Buddhist pilgrimage emphasises mindfulness, the generation of merit through arduous practice, veneration of relics and sacred sites as supports for meditation and following the Buddha's footsteps literally as a means of connecting with his teachings. The journey itself becomes practice: walking meditation, prostration pilgrimages (as practised in Tibetan Buddhism), and cultivating awareness amid difficulty all serve as vehicles for insight and transformation.

2.5. Comparative observations

Despite considerable theological and ritual distinctions, recurring themes are evident across various pilgrimage traditions: the sanctification of specific locations through their association with divine manifestations or holy individuals; the journey serving as a metaphor for spiritual existence; physical hardships regarded as purificatory or meritorious; communal aspects that transcend typical social divisions; and pilgrimage viewed as a transformative encounter rather than mere tourism or travel. These shared elements imply something fundamental about human religious consciousness and the significance of sacred space and movement in spiritual development.

3. Aletheia and insights from the Greeks: Truth as unconcealment

The ancient Greek term *Aletheia* (ἀλήθεια), conventionally translated as 'truth', carries etymological and phenomenological implications that distinguish it sharply from modern Western conceptions of truth as correspondence, coherence, or pragmatic utility. Understanding *Aletheia* proves essential for grasping pilgrimage's distinctive epistemological character. The word *Aletheia* derives from the privative alpha (α-) combined with *lethe* (λήθη), meaning 'forgetting', 'concealment', or 'hiddenness'. Thus, *Aletheia* literally means 'unconcealment', 'disclosedness', or 'unhiddenness'. This etymology suggests that truth's primary character lies not in propositional correctness but in manifestation: truth as the coming-to-presence of what was hidden, the emergence into the light of what was concealed in darkness.

In Pre-Socratic philosophy, especially in the works of Heraclitus and Parmenides, *'Aletheia*' primarily signifies the revelation of Being itself rather than the veracity of assertions. For Parmenides, the deity who guides the philosopher discloses the 'well-rounded truth' (*aletheia*), differentiating it from transient human opinions (*doxa*). This truth is not attainable solely through sensory perception; rather, it necessitates philosophical *nous* (intellectual intuition), correctly directed toward the disclosure of Being.

We must exercise caution with *Aletheia*, as, from a Christian perspective, truth is neither relative nor subjective in the sense that it is not merely something that *we* decide upon as individuals. The term as used here indicates that truth can be revealed to us through various means, which do not necessarily include books, lectures, or sermons. Therefore, if truth is understood as unconcealment rather than merely statements of knowledge, education should not be limited to the transmission of correct information or the inculcation of proper beliefs. Instead, education should focus on cultivating the conditions in which truth can disclose itself, fostering capacities for receptivity and attention, and developing existential orientations that enable authentic encounters with reality. All educators, for instance, understand the impact of adventure activities on young people, where they can learn so much more about themselves, their interdependence, as well as their personal agency. Another example is community service, where a young person must show reliability and common sense, while also experiencing the power to help someone else, perhaps a much older person or someone facing particular challenges. Without diminishing the essential spirituality of a pilgrimage to Lourdes, it remains legitimate to understand, at the very human level, how powerful it is to allow younger people not just to visit Lourdes, but to travel there ‘in service’ to others.

> “I was asked to look after an old lady for the week in Lourdes. I have to be honest; I was terrified at first. After a day, I realised she was interested in lots of the things I was interested in. She was funny, and we always went for an ice cream in the afternoon. By the end of the week, I cried when I had to say goodbye to her and when she told me how I had made her week so special” (Helper, age 19).

Plato's allegory of the cave in *Republic* Book VII (Plato, trans. 2000) dramatises education not merely as the transfer of information but as *periagoge*—a process of 'turning around' the entire soul from shadows towards the enlightenment of Being. The liberation of the prisoner entails a gradual, often arduous progression through successive stages of perception, each requiring time, habituation, and appropriate guidance. The Truth gradually unveils itself as the soul ascends to a state capable of withstanding progressively more intense illumination.

In Christian pedagogy, this understanding informed patristic and medieval educational philosophy. Gregory of Nyssa's concept of *epektasis*—perpetual progress into divine mystery—suggests that truth is an inexhaustible disclosure rather than an attained possession. Augustine's *De Magistro* posits that Christ is the interior Teacher who illuminates the mind from within, whereas human teachers merely provide external signs. Thomas Aquinas distinguishes between the *habitus* of wisdom (*sapientia*) and mere knowledge (*scientia*), the former involving connatural knowledge through affective union with the divine (cf. Maritain, 1943).

Contemporary educational theorists have similarly emphasised dimensions of learning that are irreducible to mere information acquisition. Michael Polanyi's (1966) concept of 'tacit knowledge,' Hans-Georg Gadamer's (2004) hermeneutical pedagogy, and phenomenological approaches to education all acknowledge that genuine understanding entails more than propositional knowledge; it necessitates immersion within practices, participation in traditions, embodied engagement, and the gradual maturation of judgment and wisdom. Such learning cannot be expedited; it unfolds according to its intrinsic temporality as capacities evolve and horizons broaden.

> "I would sum up Lourdes as encountering, accompanying and experiencing you meet people in such different circumstances compared with back home; you spend time with them without constantly rushing to the next thing or constantly looking at your phone, and you experience something that you have never experienced before" (Helper, age 29).

For young individuals, particularly those whose cognitive development is ongoing and whose existential inquiries are heightened, education as *Aletheia* emerges as particularly appropriate. Adolescents seek not merely information but also meaning, identity, belonging, and purpose. They require formative experiences that engage the entire person—affective, volitional, somatic, and relational—rather than solely cognitive instruction. Such individuals need environments in which truth may reveal itself through lived experience rather than

abstract propositions, environments that honour the gradual development of understanding without imposing premature certainty.

> "Lourdes was the start of my vocation to the priesthood. For the first time, I felt a call that was really clear. I wanted to ignore it but it would not go away. It was an invitation but more like a magnet – I was drawn in" (Priest – former helper at Lourdes).

4. Pilgrimage as Aletheia: The Experiential Unfolding of Truth

We suggest that pilgrimage creates conditions in which truth reveals itself experientially, engaging facets of human existence that propositional knowledge cannot encompass. Pilgrimage is essentially an embodied practice. The pilgrim walks—occasionally for weeks or months—bearing physical burdens and enduring weather conditions, fatigue, blisters, and hunger. Others, in their journey to and through a place such as Lourdes or Fatima. This physical embodiment is fundamental rather than incidental to the significance of pilgrimage. Truth unveils itself *through* the body's interaction with the terrain, rhythm, alien landscape and our limitations.

Contemporary pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago frequently report that the body becomes a teacher (Frey, 1998). As individuals traverse the path day after day, devoid of usual distractions and comforts, physical sensations attain greater clarity: the weight of the pack, the rhythm of breathing, and the body's signals of need and capacity. Pilgrims develop the ability to distinguish genuine needs from false ones, to recognise their limitations and unexpected strengths, and to appreciate simplicity. Such knowledge cannot be conveyed merely through propositional communication; it must be experienced and internalised through sustained bodily practice.

For young individuals, whose relationship with embodiment is often complex—shaped by consumer culture, digital mediation, and developmental changes—pilgrimage provides an opportunity to encounter the body as a vessel of wisdom rather than an object of judgment or manipulation. The practice of walking pilgrimage demonstrates that the body possesses intrinsic intelligence, that endurance is cultivated gradually, and that strength arises from patient practice rather than mere willpower. This somatic truth manifests as *Aletheia*: a revelation through sustained attention to embodied existence.

4.1. Temporal Unfolding and the Pedagogy of Patience

A pilgrimage such as the Camino, or even a day or a week in Lourdes, resists acceleration. One cannot compress a month-long walk into a weekend without fundamentally altering its character. Rather like a rapid visit to Lourdes fails to convey its meaning. This temporal structure proves pedagogically essential. Truth-as-*Aletheia* unfolds according to its own rhythm; it cannot be forced or rushed. Pilgrimage teaches patience, endurance, trust in process—virtues increasingly countercultural in an age of instant gratification and algorithmic immediacy.

The deceleration of activity fosters an environment conducive to reflection that is often inaccessible in daily life. Thoughts emerge, evolve, and transform over days and weeks. Pilgrims frequently report insights arising unexpectedly—while walking through a forest, observing a sunrise, or resting at the end of the day—instead of through conscious deliberation. This exemplifies *the* nature of Aletheia as a gift rather than an achievement: truth reveals itself when conditions are appropriate, not solely through deliberate effort.

> "Some of my most amazing conversations have taken place in Lourdes. Sometimes in the Sanctuary, sometimes in a café. To be able to pause and speak to people who understand what you mean and why it matters to you – it is such a privilege" (Helper, 25).

For young individuals navigating a culture characterised by continuous stimulation and performance anxiety, the concept of pilgrimage's temporality provides a sense of liberation. There is no final destination to reach *but only* the next step; no achievement is required beyond persistence. The destination becomes less significant than the journey itself. This perspective emancipates young people from the tyranny of productivity, fostering a different mode of being-in-time: attentive presence rather than anxious striving.

> "Before I went to Lourdes, I struggled to understand it. I can see why they say that you have to go there to understand it. But I am glad I did not understand it. So often, we want to understand in the same way we consume fast food. But Lourdes is not fast food. It takes its time to show you what it is. I am glad about that" (Helper, age 31).

4.3. Communal encounter and relational truth

Pilgrimage is fundamentally communal. Pilgrims walk alongside others, on the Camino, they may share *albergues* (hostels), exchange stories, attend shared liturgies, travel together, eat together and offer mutual aid. The traditional greeting on the Camino—*Buen Camino*—acknowledges shared participation in a common journey transcending individual purpose.

This communitas, as described by anthropologist Victor Turner (Turner & Turner, 1978), establishes a liminal social space that is distinct from conventional hierarchies and roles. During pilgrimage, medical professionals walk alongside labourers, professors alongside students, and the affluent alongside the impoverished. The shared experience of vulnerability and common purpose fosters genuine encounters that are challenging to attain within stratified everyday life. Such encounters reveal truth: the acknowledgement of our shared humanity, the dissolution of prejudices through personal relationships, and the realisation that strangers can become friends through shared adversity.

For young individuals, the pilgrimage community provides a remedy to digital pseudo-connection and demographic segregation. They engage with persons of various ages, nationalities, and backgrounds who are united by a common purpose rather than by consumer identity or algorithmic curation. They encounter sincere dialogue, mutual reliance, and solidarity stemming from shared challenges. Such relational authenticity manifests as *Aletheia*: the revelation of genuine human connection, distinguished from its commodified simulacra.

4.4. Affective transformation and Wisdom through suffering

Certain forms of pilgrimage encompass experiences of suffering, including blisters, fatigue, discomfort, loneliness, and fear. Nonetheless, this suffering can be pedagogically beneficial when it is voluntarily undertaken and purposefully contextualised. By enduring hardship, pilgrims uncover inner reserves of strength, foster resilience, and undergo emotional transformation that cannot be achieved through mere information.

The medieval conception of pilgrimage as an act of penance acknowledged the formative significance of suffering. Physical adversity was regarded as an external manifestation of inner remorse and as a method of spiritual cleansing. Although modern pilgrims may not explicitly pursue penance, the underlying principle persists: voluntarily embracing hardship leads to transformations that comfort alone cannot provide. One gains insight into what is genuinely important only when deprived of excess, discovers gratitude through necessity, and finds contentment in simplicity. For young people inhabiting cultures of therapeutic self-care and risk aversion, pilgrimage offers encounter with difficulty as potentially meaningful rather than merely to be avoided. They learn that discomfort need not be catastrophic, that they possess greater capacity than imagined, that suffering voluntarily accepted for worthy purpose differs profoundly from meaningless pain. This wisdom unfolds through lived experience as *Aletheia*—truth disclosed through ordeal.

> “You do not go to Lourdes as a helper for a holiday. It is hard work because you are there to help the sick. You sacrifice some of your time, and quite a lot of money, to go there and to spend much of the day, and sometimes the night, for the benefit of others. It was only after I did this for a week that I realised that I had received far more from the experience than I had given. I was very tired, but a different kind of tiredness. Happy tiredness” (Helper, 28).

4.5. Encounter with Sacred Space and Transcendence

Pilgrimage destinations constitute sacred space: sites marked by divine manifestation, miraculous occurrence, or association with holy persons. Even pilgrims lacking orthodox belief report encountering 'something more' in such places—a sense of meaning, mystery, or presence exceeding ordinary experience. Rudolf Otto’s (1958) concept of the *numinous*—the holy as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*—captures this dimension.

Sacred spaces establish environments conducive to transcendent encounters. The cathedral in Santiago, the Ganges River at Varanasi, and the Ka'bah in Mecca are locations charged with centuries of prayer, devotion, and religious significance. Pilgrims often describe experiences of intense emotion, deep peace, or existential re-evaluation within such settings. Whether these are understood theologically as authentic divine presence or psychologically as projections is of lesser importance than the phenomenological reality: an aspect of experience that reveals itself uniquely within sacred spaces.

For young people navigating questions of meaning, identity, and transcendence in increasingly secular contexts, pilgrimage offers legitimate encounter with the sacred outside institutional religion's usual boundaries. They may experience wonder, awe, and mystery without requiring assent to particular doctrines. Truth discloses itself as *aletheia*: the unconcealment of reality's depth, meaning's possibility, and transcendence's availability.

> “For me, serving in Lourdes each year is the highlight of my year. I never laugh and cry as much as I do when I am in Lourdes. My friends back home find this strange as they know me as basically an atheist. I cannot fully explain it, but I know it means so much to me. (Helper 51).

4.6. Pilgrimage as a comprehensive pedagogy

Pilgrimage involves the comprehensive engagement of the entire individual—encompassing the body, mind, emotions, will, and relational aspects—in a manner rarely observed in the compartmentalized nature of modern life. It synthesizes physical discipline, intellectual reflection, emotional processing, volitional commitment, and communal participation. This holistic approach facilitates the simultaneous revelation of truth across various dimensions, resulting in a transformation that cannot be reduced to any single aspect.

For young people whose formation typically occurs in fragmented contexts—academic instruction here, athletic training there, social life elsewhere, spiritual seeking (if any) relegated to privatised space—pilgrimage offers holistic integration. The pilgrim learns through walking (embodiment), reflecting (cognition), feeling (affect), choosing (volition), and relating (community) in a unified experience. Truth unfolds comprehensively rather than partially, engaging capacities that segregated instruction cannot touch.

This aligns with the classical *paideia*'s vision of education as the holistic development of the individual rather than simple information dissemination. Pilgrimage functions as a privileged venue for such *paideia*: an encompassing pedagogy wherein wisdom emerges through lived experience as *Aletheia*—truth revealed to those properly disposed through practice, patience, and presence.

5. Conclusion: Recovering Pilgrimage's Pedagogical Significance

This chapter has argued that pilgrimage represents more than religious tourism or devotional practice; it constitutes a privileged pedagogical site wherein truth discloses itself as *Aletheia*—unconcealment rather than mere proposition. Through embodied practice, temporal unfolding, communal encounter, affective transformation, and engagement with sacred space, pilgrimage creates conditions for the emergence of wisdom that are irreducible to cognitive instruction.

For young individuals, pilgrimage provides a formative experience that addresses facets of development often overlooked by contemporary educational approaches. In societies emphasizing information acquisition, standardized assessments, and instrumental rationality, pilgrimage restores education's holistic nature: fostering the development of individuals capable of wisdom rather than mere knowledge; inclined toward wonder rather than solely toward mastery; and directed toward meaning rather than solely toward success.

The current revival of pilgrimage—particularly the Camino de Santiago, as well as signs of a return to sites such as Lourdes among young people, following the impact of Covid—suggests hunger for precisely such formative experience. They recognise, perhaps implicitly, that certain truths cannot be taught but must be walked into, that wisdom unfolds through

experience rather than instruction, that authentic formation requires engagement of the whole person in integrated practice.

This underscores the necessity of reestablishing the pedagogical importance of pilgrimage within educational and religious institutions. Youth ministry, catechesis, and character development could, and in many cases already do, effectively integrate pilgrimage—whether as literal journeys to traditional sites or through adapted practices that facilitate similar experiential learning conditions. Educational institutions might implement programmes that allow students to engage in extended walking pilgrimages as formative experiences equivalent to academic study. Universities may also acknowledge pilgrimage as a legitimate educational activity rather than solely a recreational pursuit. But what is clear from all those who contributed their experience to this chapter is that what makes the pilgrimage to Lourdes truly transformative is the opportunity to serve.

Such recovery necessitates resisting the reductionist tendencies of contemporary education: the fixation on measurable outcomes, the privileging of propositional knowledge over practical wisdom, and the fragmentation of learning into separate subjects and skills. It requires patience with processes that develop gradually, trust in dimensions of formation that are not easily quantifiable, and a willingness to create space for *the* occurrence of Aletheia rather than merely transmitting truth.

Ultimately, understanding pilgrimage as *Aletheia* illuminates both pilgrimage's continuing significance and education's proper character. Truth is not possessed but participated in, not achieved through effort alone but disclosed through proper disposition, not transmitted informationally but encountered existentially. Pilgrimage creates conditions for such encounter, offering young people especially the possibility of formation adequate to human existence's depth and complexity. In recovering pilgrimage's pedagogical significance, we recover education itself as comprehensive *paideia*: the cultivation of persons capable of dwelling authentically within truth's unconcealment.

> “**30** When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. **31** Then their eyes were opened, and they recognised him, and he disappeared from their sight. **32** They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” (Luke 24: 30-32

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