



“This Is Just Water” The Aesthetic Formation of Ritual Participants at the Lourdes Shrine

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Abstract

Since its inception in 1858, the Lourdes Marian shrine in France has been distinguished by several defining characteristics, including religious practices, ritual performances, and narratives of healing. The global COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on religious culture at the Catholic Sanctuary of Lourdes in multiple ways. This article presents an ethnographic description of the impact of the pandemic on the shrine, based on fieldwork and the analysis of qualitative interviews conducted during the autumn of 2021 and throughout 2022. The article examines historical continuities and inconsistencies in the evaluations of religious practitioners’ ritual practices, with a particular focus on two aspects of Lourdes: first, ritual performances involving the renowned Lourdes water, which are thus framed as healing rituals; secondly, the in-/visibility of sick pilgrims at the sanctuary due to the pandemic. The article demonstrates that although these two aspects transform the sensational form of Lourdes to a considerable extent, as they become partially dysfunctional (at least temporarily), their evaluations by pilgrims and the shrine’s lay helpers are conducted within a stable framework.


1. Introduction: miraculous days under pandemic restrictions

The Catholic sanctuary of Lourdes in the south of France has gained a significant degree of its worldwide reputation from reported miracles and its potential to heal the mind and body. A multitude of literary works, biographical pamphlets, theological debates, and pop-cultural references engage with the iridescent narrative of miracles and healing at Lourdes. The sanctuary’s public self-presentation draws upon these narratives as a Lourdes brochure illustrates vividly, linking healing and the famous Lourdes water under the headline “Lourdes, place of miracles”. The brochure presents the sanctuary as a place of healing. What proliferated soon after the sanctuary’s founding events — reported Marian apparitions in the year 1858 — seems no less effective today: Lourdes pilgrims can expect a place of healing and divine intervention.

When I first accompanied a group of German pilgrims to the Marian apparition site in September 2021, approximately one and a half years after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic began, I learned quickly that the days in Lourdes are replete with masses, shrine tours, group meals, and various forms of processions. A Catholic pilgrimage office organizes this tight schedule with some events organized by officials of the Lourdes shrine. However, from my perspective, one aspect

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was notably absent from the official program: a visit to the baths where pilgrims are immersed in the Lourdes water, which is purported to have a healing effect. Moreover, a clear reference to healing was absent from the program and from various conversations I participated in throughout this initial field trip.

The brochure that drew my attention to Lourdes as a pilgrimage site of healing and miracles explicitly referred to the Lourdes water and its purported healing potential. Upon entering the field, however, my initial impression was not as prominent as I had anticipated. When I asked a pilgrim if she could tell me why the bathing ritual was not integrated into our schedule, her response was merely speculative with the suggestion that the organizers might not advise the pilgrims to visit the baths out of precaution against infection with COVID-19. She went on to tell me that another pilgrim from our group had informed her that the bathing ritual in its “original shape” had been somehow modified due to sanitation measures implemented during the pandemic. This was the first indication that ritual settings in Lourdes differed from those before the global pandemic. Nevertheless, she assured me that a visit to the baths and the performance of the ritual are essential components of her personal pilgrimage experience.

The performance of the bathing ritual had indeed changed, which I eventually learned when a shrine volunteer told me about the modifications during an interview.¹ As a volunteer helper in the *Hospitalité Notre Dame de Lourdes*, an international Catholic lay association recognized by the Catholic Church and led by lay people offering their support to the sanctuary, she elucidated how the ritual setting in the baths had transformed. Whereas pilgrims were previously completely immersed in the water in the spa complex that was designed specifically for this purpose, they may now only wet their faces and hands as well as drink the water while venerating the Virgin Mary.

Conversations I had with pilgrims revealed that the post-pandemic character of the ritual remained ambiguous and was a topic of discussion among the pilgrims of my group. One day during my first field trip, I accompanied a small group of pilgrims to the bathing complex. The waiting crowd, surely more than 100 people, was seated on long benches in front of the austere building. The entrances to the baths were covered with plastic sheets resembling shower curtains, and a large Lourdes Madonna was placed in the middle of the waiting area. While we waited to be admitted into the building in pairs, a brief dispute unfolded between two pilgrims of my group. An older woman vigorously advocated that the Lourdes water used in the baths has a healing effect if only one believes sincerely and is prepared to receive a miracle. Her seat neighbour was unconvinced and appeared somewhat overwhelmed by the woman’s vigour. Later that day, she told me with a hint of amusement that some pilgrims appear to be convinced by the fact that physical contact with the Lourdes water will cure their corporeal ailments.

¹ John Eade (2020) has also paid attention to ritual changes at Lourdes. See Ebertz (2023) for another analysis of ritual change within Christianity induced by COVID-19.

Although I expected a transparent and unilateral sentiment toward healing at Lourdes, as reflected in the brochures and other print and online media, this scene indicated that such shared positions were indeed rare among pilgrims. Through participant observation during several field trips to Lourdes, ethnographic interviews, and textual analysis of documents from the site and the Lourdes official websites, I learned that healing occurs in one way or another. For the time being, I will leave the phrase “in one way or another” intentionally vague, as what healing is or how it happens in Lourdes remains somewhat fuzzy, inconsistent, and even contested. The disagreement between the two pilgrims illustrates this ambiguity. Furthermore, in Lourdes, there is a distinction between the various ritual healing media based on both their location (for example water taps, grotto, baths, basilica) and the specific events associated with them (for example processions, mass, rituals).

I introduce these ethnographic observations in order to open a first approach, which is I observe ambiguities, inconsistencies, and divergent evaluations when it comes to healing as part of religious life in Lourdes. Despite these inconsistencies, the sanctuary’s ascribed potential to heal is omnipresent in the shrine’s religious rituals, practices, and public self-description, as evidenced by the previously described brochure. Healing as omnipresence encompasses shared theological and popular narratives about miracles, as well as the presence and visibility of sick pilgrims at Lourdes. At the same time, healing is distinguished by its fuzziness, in that it can occur through various practices and divergent channels, including the intercession of God or saints, to a prominent extent the Virgin Mary. The range of healing activities is exemplified by the veneration of Catholic mediators such as Mary, different collective practices such as pilgrimage, sacramental practices, prayer, a sense of community, or individual ritual washings in the shrine’s baths. Consequently, healing is open to a variety of interpretations and framings.

The present case study focuses initially on ritualized healing practices, with particular attention to the bathing ritual at Lourdes, which uses the apparitional spring and the Lourdes water as a central medium of devotion. This ritual setting is a defining feature of the French sanctuary that sets it apart from other large-scale Catholic shrines. Secondly, I focus on the presence of sick pilgrims at the shrine, i.e. the visibility and perception of sick pilgrims by other pilgrims and lay helpers of Lourdes. Investigating some aspects of this ritual performance and different evaluations of it sheds light on contested views on practices of healing that have a long and well-known history in Lourdes. However, the pandemic has also led to the emergence of new inconsistencies due to the considerable change in the ritual setting. In light of Suzanne Kaufman’s comprehensive historical analysis of Lourdes (2005; 2018), I delineate how my ethnographic data are evaluated. This entails identifying the intertwined nature of discontinuities and continuities, as elucidated by Birgit Meyer’s concept of a “sensational form” (Meyer 2008; 2013). The objective of this chapter is thus to examine the relationship between modifications of rituals and the publicity of the shrine, as well as the expectations and evaluations of healing in Lourdes. It also investigates whether the healing potential of Lourdes is evaluated differently or even negatively as “failed” when the sanctuary’s long-term key features associated with healing in the Catholic

imagination, the bathing ritual and the visibility and care for the sick, are disrupted due to the pandemic and consequently modified due to external conditions.

After briefly unfolding the story of the Marian shrine Lourdes, I reflect on the notion of “failure” concerning my case study, as the shrine is closely tied to the narration of healing. I then present the historical context of the Lourdes shrine and the reconfiguration of the sanctuary’s bathing ritual due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Subsequently, I discuss ethnographic accounts with different ritual participants to illustrate the multi-layered framings and engagements in healing at the sanctuary. Even if the ritual setting and its aesthetic and sensorial experience are rearranged, I argue that an unequivocal qualification of healing and failure is misleading. Rather, in exploring how ritual participants and evaluators delineate and contextualize religious expectations towards healing at Lourdes, the result can present possible conflicts and/or congruencies that are typical for the sensational form.

2. Failed Healing, or, in what way can we speak of failure?

The visibility of the sick and the bathing ritual are my two focal points for my analysis as they are closely linked to the shrine’s potential to heal, specifically via the shrine’s material media and sensorial characteristics. Lourdes pilgrims come in constant contact with the Lourdes water as they pour water into bottles or wash parts of their bodies at taps. The bathing ritual uses the same water as the taps, yet the water’s healing powers appear to be different when it is engaged in the specific ritual performance. In contrast to drinking and washing at the taps, different narratives and rules to interact, speech acts, and formalized gestures with the water (Bräunlein 2014) are established through the *hospitalier* staff during the ritual performance in the baths. Consequently, in Lourdes, there is a distinction and hierarchization between the various ritual healing media based on both their location and the specific events associated with them. This internal hierarchization of the water as a medium of healing and the practices it is involved in reveals what Birgit Meyer has coined the “sensational form” of religious experience.

“ Sensational forms [...] are relatively fixed, authorized modes of invoking and organizing access to the transcendental, thereby creating and sustaining links between religious practitioners in the context of particular religious organizations. Sensational forms are transmitted and shared; they involve religious practitioners in particular practices of worship and play a central role in forming religious subjects. Collective rituals are prime examples of sensational forms in that they address and involve participants in a specific manner and induce particular feelings. (Meyer 2008: 707–708)

Meyer’s definition of sensational forms speaks to the material media and sensorial norms and practices that the sanctuary and its representatives offer to pilgrims. A sensational form informs sensual activity like seeing and touching but also refers to religious narratives and creates appropriate expectations towards material religious media, bodily practices, and aesthetic evaluations. It arranges material media, the performances they are involved in, the potential

agency that is ascribed to these media, and it informs interpretations and evaluations of religious practitioners. Authorized sensational forms of religious practice and feeling neither create religious practitioners automatically nor do they produce religious experience such as healing in a mechanical manner. Sensational forms engage participants in sensorial and embodied ritual performance, thereby generating interpretations and evaluations of practices, rituals, media, and feelings within a framing. For my approach, I combine Meyer's sensational forms with what Ronald Grimes calls "ritual criticism" (Grimes 1990; Grimes/Hüsken 2013). Ritual criticism is the evaluation of a ritual in both a negative and/or a positive sense. In this way, the perspectives of the ritual participants can be related to each other. Respectively, it is a category superordinate to failure (Grimes/Hüsken 2013: 159).

The introduction to this special issue has already highlighted the necessity of an inductive reconstruction of failed healing or practitioners' expressions of irritation, and their potential nexus to expectations implicated in religious performance. Ute Hüsken reminds us that if ethnographers are confronted with negative evaluations in the field, failure can become a legitimate analytical category for them. "Only if such deviation from explicit or implicit rules, values, expectations, norms or models is judged negatively do we find ourselves in the field of 'distortion', 'mistake', 'flaw', 'error', 'slip', 'failure', etc." (Hüsken 2007: 338). In the rarest of cases, rituals either fail completely or are celebrated as a resounding success. Evaluations of ritual performance may be situated on a spectrum, encompassing both implicit and explicit expectations and values. These values are informed by a sensational form, which will be elaborated in subsequent chapters.

I approach the matter of failed ritual performance and the evaluation of healing as a source of ambiguity for the ethnographer. Failure is not a matter of fact but a "matter of concern" (Latour 2005: 87-120) to be determined through following the practices and voices of actors on site, how they engage within a sensational form, and how they are enabled to distribute agency. Consequently, I posit that a "complex and highly controversial set of mediators" (Latour 2005: 118) gives shape to the sensational form and criticism of the ritual performance of healing.

3. A brief history of Lourdes with a focus on the aftermath of COVID-19

Marian apparitions, Catholic devotion, and the career of healing

Lourdes is the pre-eminent shrine of the so-called "Age of Mary" (Schneider 2013: 88–89), serving as a model for modern Marian healing sanctuaries (Zimdars-Swartz 1991: 20). The proliferation of Marian apparition sites during the 19th century represents a pivotal moment in the history of Catholicism, both in terms of its dogmatic and lived devotional traditions. From its inception, the Lourdes shrine has been a prominent focus of publicity and self-presentation by Catholic authorities. This is due to the shrine's reputation for healing, as well as the rituals and devotional media associated with it.

The establishment of the small town of Lourdes as a global centre of pilgrimage is inextricably linked to the story of the young Bernadette Soubirous, who reported a series of apparitions of the Virgin Mary in the Massabielle grotto of Lourdes in 1858. During these visionary encounters, the apparition issued a series of admonitions, promises, and orders to Bernadette. These included requests for penance and prayer for the conversion of sinners. According to the official narrative, the apparition instructed Bernadette to dig in the grotto, whereupon she discovered a water spring and used that water to wash herself and to drink.² The appearance of a spring in the landscape of the Pyrenees was not unusual, as the region was well known for its numerous springs and spas (Eade 2023: 49). However, in the context of the apparitions, Lourdes' spring was perceived as a channel of divine presence and used as a source of healing material, a framing that resonates with established popular Catholic ideas and imaginations. The spring was soon associated with miraculous healing, foremost by local lay people. Although the apparition's authenticity was approved by the Bishop of Tarbes in 1862, the efficacy of the spring's water in performing miraculous healing remained a topic of contention and debate. In response, Catholic authorities have sought to legitimate and subsequently disseminate an official narrative of the apparitions and the Virgin's messages, which has become a collectively shared and disseminated "Ur-story" (Garrigou-Kempton 2018) of the Lourdes events, foregrounding the orthodox dimensions. Among modern Catholic apparition shrines (e.g. Fatima, Guadalupe, Knock and others), only Lourdes is distinguished by the material feature of a spring that is ascribed to have the power to heal.

Torsten Cress (2019: 120) posits that Lourdes and its material features derive a significant part of its attraction from the idea of healing, a notion that persists to this day. A considerable number of Lourdes pilgrims and visitors suffer from various illnesses and disabilities, and they hope for healing or relief from their ailments through divine intervention. The conviction that the miraculous power of the Virgin Mary had been transferred to the place and, in particular, to the water from the spring led pilgrims to Lourdes expecting to be healed of their sufferings and illnesses. This idea was both reinforced and regulated by the recognition of healing miracles in Rome in collaboration with doctors and scientists. From its inception, Catholic authorities have established an extensive infrastructure with a primary focus on the accommodation and care for sick pilgrims. The spectacular devotional practices and the accommodation of the sick have contributed to Lourdes' reputation as a healing shrine. The infrastructure of the shrine, comprising hospitals and a volunteer system, has been designed to meet the needs of sick pilgrims. The Catholic Church actively promoted pilgrimages at the national and international levels. The number of annual visitors during the main pilgrimage season between May and October has reached up from about 2.5 to 9 million in recent years (Eade 2020: 651).

The aesthetical setup and material devotional media of Lourdes are of particular interest when investigating the site, as a multiplicity of sensational forms can be distinguished to render their

² Ruth Harris (2000: 23–82) and Suzanne Kaufman (2005: 1–15) offer a detailed reconstruction of these events.

charged balance visible. Two types of processions that are held at Lourdes on a daily basis – one in the afternoon and one in the evening – throughout the main pilgrimage season may be considered as illustrative examples: the torchlight rosary procession and the eucharistic procession. The rosary is typically regarded as an integral component of popular Catholic Marian devotion (see, for example, de la Cruz 2019: 637-638). In contrast, the sacramental character of the eucharistic procession, led by a priest, is closely linked to Catholic theologies and liturgy. Lourdes integrates both expressions of the Catholic tradition and organizes them into a framework of coexistence and mutual reference. Nevertheless, for the public display of the sanctuary's healing potential, Kaufman (2018: 522–523) emphasizes the importance of the Eucharistic processions in Lourdes, a point that has significant implications. The Eucharistic procession's most dramatic moment is the blessing of the sick with the Blessed Sacrament, carried under a canopy, an element that the Marian procession lacks. This is an element to which Edith and Victor Turner also drew attention in their book on Christian pilgrimage (Turner/Turner 1978: 228). Such an orchestrated and staged procession served as a visible means of creating a political Catholic Church in opposition to the secular forces of France around the turn of the 19th to 20th century. The apparitions and healing powers of Lourdes, in conjunction with the Catholic devotional culture, have served as significant identity markers during the so-called *Kulturkampf* in Europe (Borutta 2011). These have either functioned as a negative foil of demarcation against a political Catholicism that has been devalued as anti-modern or as a positive presence of the divine on earth through the intercessory role of the Virgin Mary or other mediating saints.

Kaufman further demonstrates the historical importance of the female *miraculées*, miraculously healed Lourdes pilgrims, and their visibility and presentation to the public for the self-promotion of the shrine:

“ Bringing hundreds of previously cured pilgrims back to Lourdes to march together in an elaborate procession would serve as the ultimate symbol of God's power on earth. For the faithful, this collective body of cured pilgrims was intended to reaffirm faith and provide hope that they, too, might become recipients of divine blessings. (Kaufman 2005: 135)

In contrast to previous eras, contemporary Lourdes does not feature any distinctive rituals or grand processions designed to showcase the healed pilgrims to the public. However, scholar John Eade, who has been involved with the site for many years as a volunteer, suggests that the optical structure of the Lourdes site has undergone a significant transformation: “The esplanade is now treated less like a parade ground to be kept clear of all but a select few.” (Eade 1991: 70) Nevertheless, my ethnographic observations and interviews indicate that the visibility of sick pilgrims seeking care and healing is an integral aspect of maintaining the reputation of Lourdes. The visibility of the sick at the sanctuary is highly valued by pilgrims and staff alike. Furthermore, it is a widely held belief among officials at the shrine and among pilgrims alike that sick pilgrims enjoy heightened awareness, receive greater care and support, and can find religious strength,

affirmation of faith, and healing. A pilgrimage pastor I interviewed at Lourdes articulated this sentiment as follows:³

“ A sick person, for example, who comes here, not only receives the attention of his fellow human beings, he is the centre of attention. Usually, they are always on the margins, but here we say: Priority for the sick! So, we have internalized this here. That is also the trademark, which is also part of the message of Lourdes: the sick person. (Interview C, p. 5, line 195–199)

The term “trademark” is of particular importance in this passage, as it enables the pastor to emphasize the essence of Lourdes. The generalized phrasing indicates that this is intended to be a normative standard. It is evident that the care and attention to those, who are ill, should be at the heart of the sanctuary’s purpose. Consequently, the pastor’s contemporary perspective expands upon Kaufman’s historical findings. In addition to the miraculously cured women, whom Kaufman (2018) refers to as “sacred celebrities”, the pastor considers all the sick and disabled pilgrims, who gather at Lourdes, to be the flagship of the sanctuary. These pilgrims seek care and healing for their ailments. Miraculous healings constitute a pivotal aspect of the Lourdes narrative. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the expectation of miraculous healing is not actively promoted by shrine officials, particularly in the context of face-to-face pastoral care. Rather, healing at Lourdes is connected to traditional Catholic devotional practices such as prayer and contemplation, strengthening and renewal of faith. However, to some degree, it is also connected to local practices that are specific to Lourdes, such as bathing in the Lourdes water. This attitude is not confined to the officials and representatives of the sanctuary. A further discussion will be presented below on how these official semantics and self-descriptions seeped into the pilgrims’ evaluations. To a certain extent, they represent the formal aspect of the sensational form, namely, instructed and directed interactions with materiality and pre-structured patterns of interpretation. It brings together people around an established and shared Catholic sensation and imagination (Greeley 2000), with the Marian apparitions serving as a manifestation of the sacred within the world, thereby creating pilgrimage as a highly mediated practice (Bräunlein 2004: 327). It is important to note that the Lourdes-typical practices, such as the bathing ritual, are often difficult to regulate dogmatically or by the shrine’s efforts to police devotional practices and rituals. Without succumbing to the simplistic dichotomy of orthodoxy and heresy, the performance and the materiality of Marian devotion always possess a compelling appeal for pilgrims and laypeople alike. This appeal is a key aspect of Robert Orsi’s analysis of Catholicism, which he refers to by the image of excess (Orsi 2016). In this way, Orsi illuminates the multifaceted ways in which believers approach a sanctuary and its devotional media (Orsi 2005). Consequently, the authorities of the shrine seek to relativize and balance the practices and desires of pilgrims within the theological framework of doctrine. Accordingly, the Lourdes shrine

³ All interview passages as well as citations from French are my own translations.

has always been the object of internal tensions and inconsistencies, but this has not prevented it from continuing to attract pilgrims.

Pandemic disruptions and ritual reorganizations

As it is the case with numerous other pilgrimage sites, the imposition of travel restrictions due to the global pandemic in 2020 had a profound impact on group pilgrimages to Lourdes. The global pandemic resulted in the cancellation of organized pilgrimages and mass gatherings, as well as the temporary closure of the shrine. Mróz's article (2021) provides a detailed account of the impact of national restrictions and safety measures on Lourdes. Although shrines and pilgrimage sites worldwide were significantly impacted by assembly bans and hygiene requirements, he states: "It would be hard to find another pilgrimage town in Europe equally affected by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus pandemic than Lourdes" (Mróz 2021: 635). In March 2020, the shrine officials were compelled to close the sanctuary for the first time in its history. The shrine remained closed for two months until 16 May 2020. The vast majority of pilgrimages to Lourdes were cancelled throughout the entirety of 2020, as were the accommodations. From late May to late September 2020, the end of the main pilgrimage season, an estimated 700'000 visitors and pilgrims entered the shrine once more (Mróz 2021: 636–637). This represents a stark contrast to the bustling atmosphere that prevailed prior to the pandemic. Furthermore, pilgrims observed a notable decline in the number of sick pilgrims at Lourdes, which they attributed to a change in their experience of the pilgrimage.

Lourdes' closure did not only isolate the sanctuary from expected pilgrimages. National hygienic protocols forced shrine officials to rearrange traditional religious rituals at the apparition site. In this section, I illustrate the changes in the bathing ritual in Lourdes. For the discussion of religious healing, this is of special interest, due to the widely shared conviction that healing in Lourdes can happen by bathing in the Lourdes water while praying to the Holy Virgin Mary. According to John Eade (1991: 56), the baths were expanded to accommodate more pilgrims until eventually, sick pilgrims received privileged access without long waiting times. This reveals the high status of ritualized healing in a specific framing established through the bathing ritual since the water from the spring is accessible in many other places at the shrine.

Since Lourdes has existed as a pilgrimage site, the baths are considered a special feature. Pilgrims performing the bathing ritual have to undress in a small changing room together with other pilgrims, then, wrapped in a sheet they are accompanied by two *hospitaliers* of their gender in small cabins in which a pool of water lies in a low stone basin. After entering the cabin pilgrims address the Virgin Mary who is presented to the pilgrims in the form of a small statue. Covered with just a cloth, their bodies are immersed completely in the cold water of the Lourdes grotto. For several moments, with the support of the *hospitaliers*, they bathe in the water. Once they exit the basin their bodies are not dried with towels so that the water rests on their skin. Above the entrance to the cabin, which is protected from the gaze of others with a kind of curtain, there are prayer aids in different languages, suggesting a script to the participant: Before the bath, it is

suggested to contemplate briefly and to remember one's intentions; during the bath, the sign of the cross should be made ("In the name of the Father, the Son, and of the Holy Spirit"); as a prayer, the Lord's Prayer is suggested; the ritual is concluded with the phrases: "Our Lady of Lourdes, pray for us; Saint Bernadette, pray for us." This framing, visibly placed at the entrance, does not deal with water as a medium of ritual performance, but rather with the practice of prayer and the establishment of an appropriate attitude of ritual participation.

Among the ritual participants, the lay helpers of the confraternity *Hospitalité Notre Dame de Lourdes* referred to as *hospitaliers*, play a significant role in the Lourdes baths. Although *hospitaliers* are no religious professionals according to Catholic orthodoxy, nor are they the authors of the ritual script to follow, they nevertheless embody the role of ritual experts as they undergo training and religious instruction before offering their service to the sanctuary and henceforth perform the ritual in direct interaction with pilgrims. This gradual professionalization indicates a complex imagination of laity, as from the Church's perspective, *hospitaliers* are merely trained laypeople or second-class ritual experts, inferior to priests. Nevertheless, it is precisely in these interactions between lay people that miracles and divine interventions can occur in connection with the religious medium from the Lourdes spring. In the Lourdes baths *hospitaliers* instruct pilgrims and provide information about the order and meaning of the ritual procedures. During the ritual performance, *hospitaliers* are in close proximity to the ailing bodies, offering assistance to pilgrims through a series of ritualized gestures and immersing them in the water.

As a reaction to the global pandemic, the performance needed to be rearranged to match hygienic protocols. A Lourdes press-kit from 2021 advertises the "water gesture" as a required adjustment of the ritual performance, which additionally results in a purification of the ritual:

“ The water gesture: water is a symbol of purification. Emblematic of the pilgrimage, the baths traditionally welcome pilgrims for an immersion rich in meaning and a spiritual experience. For sanitary reasons and out of respect for the physical and social distance, this immersion in the baths is not possible at the moment; it is replaced by the water gesture: Accompanied by the *hospitaliers* de Notre-Dame de Lourdes, the spiritual process of the gesture of water consists of drinking the water of Lourdes and washing the face in this symbolic place full of stories and prayers. (Office de Tourisme de Lourdes 2021: 11)

Notable here is the narrative of ritual re-arrangement and the new framing that accompanies it. In particular, the kit emphasizes the religious practices associated with the spring water of Lourdes. Due to the pandemic disruption at the shrine and sanitary protocols, pilgrims are not allowed to immerse themselves fully in the water, nor do they undress to perform the ritual. This affects the material organization and forms of ritual performance of the pilgrims in the baths. The "water gesture" replaces the bathing ritual, at least during the pandemic. It uses the same place but requires different performances and gestures from the ritual participants. The Lourdes water remains an integral material part of the new ritual performance, as pilgrims drink it and wash their hands and faces with it. However, immersion into the water is no longer performed

which also means that the pilgrims' bodies remain veiled. Pilgrims step into the cabins to pray and drink the water of Lourdes or wash their hands and face with it. Physical contact with the *hospitaliers*, who formerly assisted the pilgrims in their submersion, is replaced by a contactless interaction. The culture of ritual intimacy has become dysfunctional due to the pandemic and the potential risk of infection.

During my fieldwork, I noticed that pilgrims are not only received individually in the baths but also in groups, which marks another difference in the performance of the ritual compared to its traditional form. The *hospitaliers* now emphasize the social dimension of the collectively performed ritual. In this way, the ritual is narratively reframed. The pre-pandemic ritual performance created an atmosphere of intimacy and vulnerability, as pilgrims were asked to undress in front of the staff, wearing only a thin sheet around their hips. However, conversations with pilgrims suggest that this nakedness and physical closeness between participants' bodies can be valued as an intimate and extraordinary interaction. The "water gesture" is now praised as an opportunity for a collective experience with family members, partners, or fellow pilgrims. The "water gesture" is also linked to a purification of the ritual performance itself since the total immersion of sick and ailing bodies into the water was *de facto* practiced, but also always regarded critically, especially by clergy and shrine officials. They suspected that the immersive, sensational character of the bathing ritual might undermine the orthodox aspects of the ritual, such as prayer and devotion. The ritual re-arrangement is thus encompassed by a narrative shift. This transports a normative framing by suggesting that its performance describes the return to a purer essence or origin, now closely linked to the interaction between the apparition and the visionary Bernadette. This becomes clear as a member of the *Hospitalité* evaluates it as follows:

“ Because Bernadette did not say — and here everyone always has to laugh — do wellness, which is praised so much nowadays, but come, pray for sinners, wash your hands, wash your face, and drink from the spring. And make your requests. (Interview E, p. 5, line 195–198)

The quotation illuminates a pervasive interpretive strategy: the attempt to align religious practice with the origin story of the Marian apparition and the messages disseminated by the visionary Bernadette. Religious practice in Lourdes today is considered legitimate if it adheres to the origin story: the modification of the ritual to what is now called the "water gesture" appears to be more authentic, as the ritual performance is intended to imitate the gestures of the visionary.

4. The sensational formation of ritual participants

The healing practices at Lourdes are accompanied by tensions and inconsistencies in the performance and expression of these practices by different actors at the site. In the following section, I present evaluations that have been prevalent throughout my ethnographic study of the shrine that I have conducted so far. They serve as a more concrete description of the sensational form of the bathing ritual. In the different perspectives of two groups of participants of the ritual

— namely, those of ordinary pilgrims and trained members of the *Lourdes Hospitalité* — distinctive framings and tensions can be identified, which also partially overlap and provide insight into how healing practices, their media, and the re-arrangement of the ritual are interpreted. The first perspective is that of the pilgrims, who discuss matters of faith, ritual, and the media’s role in the experience of God. The second perspective is that of a *hospitalier*, who discusses the sensory aspects of the new ritual form and how the framing by an official narrative of the “Ur-story” ties into the previous mediatization. I explore both of these lay perspectives and the ways they may be intertwined or reveal conflicting matters of concern.

A pilgrim’s perspective

The following interview provides insight into the concerns and engagements of a female Lourdes pilgrim regarding the healing potential of the bathing ritual. We met on my first pilgrimage to Lourdes in the fall of 2021 and got into conversation on several occasions. She explained that the bathing ritual plays a crucial role in Lourdes, as the care for the sick by the *hospitaliers* becomes particularly evident for her. In our interview, she evaluates various aspects of the ritual, distinguishing its different elements and distributing agency to heal among them. To retrace her point of view and matters of concern, I will quote two passages from the interview:

“ [T]he water is basically only a medium, right? The water itself, flowing there, comes from the earth, is not holy [...] This obedience, mainly, you know, that God can change that, that is the most important thing. And the water here, um, in principle doesn’t have this healing effect, it’s not the water, you know, but it’s in the end, what Mary said, that the water —, what people should do with it to be healed with it. That, in the end, it is a healing from God, then uh, that’s why one person drinks the water, and it doesn’t do anything to him, and it triggers something in the other person, right [...] The water is not, um, not holy, it’s just water as usual, right? It is good water [...] but there is nothing in the water that would heal us somehow, you know. The healing comes from Him, and I have to believe in it, you know, and I have to let that happen to me. For this, I must be ready! (Interview A, p. 21, line 823–848)

The pilgrim asserts that healing cannot be brought about by a medium or a ritual. Instead, it is a matter of faith. It is only through faith that one becomes receptive to God’s healing. She describes this as an act of receiving (“I have to let this happen to me”) and emphasizes “obedience”. The pilgrim presents the water as a medium but in a derogatory manner. Nevertheless, the act of receiving healing is not contingent on this medium and it is not a passive process. Her statement implies that one can gradually collaborate in the reception of healing, as one must be contingent on one’s readiness. Although healing may only originate in an act of God, the requisite faith is a *conditio sine qua non*, establishing an internal-external relationship. While she acknowledges that healing can only originate from a divine source, the pilgrim simultaneously engages in the process of developing her religious subjectivity. This enables her to become receptive to divine action and the recognized mediations associated with it, both in terms of her subjectivity and her physical body. The references to the internal and external factors that influence the subject’s actions,

namely the preparation of the subject and the external influence of “God’s grace”, serve to organize and distribute agency within this context.

Consequently, the water is unequivocally denied agency. It is rendered invisible as a healing medium because agency can only come from God, as she describes it as an “act of grace.” In contrast, participation in the ritual appears to gradually facilitate the opening of oneself to God, thereby enabling the reception of grace and healing. This is consistent with Matthew Engelke’s observations in his study of Christian healing practices in Africa. Engelke observes that believers often render religious matters invisible, while simultaneously devaluing the material world in favour of the immaterial. In particular, Engelke identifies instances where materiality becomes immaterial and *vice versa*. He notes that it is relatively simple to transition from the immaterial to the material (Engelke 2005: 121). A comparable tension is observed in the example presented. Nevertheless, I propose a reframing of the issue. I suggest that the transition from the material to the immaterial is accompanied by a distinctive communicative effort. The ritual performance treats water as a material medium of practice, whereas the communicative description in the interview denies the agency of materiality. This tension is not perceived as a contradiction by the pilgrim and a significant number of other participants in the ritual. The Lourdes water is not only omnipresent in the context of the bathing ritual, but also in the cartography of the shrine in general. The medium is present in the shrine’s self-staging, the religious imagination, the paraphernalia shops, and the lived religious practices more generally. Nevertheless, throughout the ritual performance in the baths and subsequent evaluations, participants are eager to downplay the significance of the water.

Moreover, the ritual’s materiality operates on another level. Following the idea of Jon Mitchell (2017), which posits a specific Catholic porosity of devotional media and the religious body, the pilgrim must, in a sense, make herself the recipient and medium for the experience of God’s work by framing the various components of the ritual, particularly devout bodily gestures, ritualized prayers, addressing Mary as divine intercessor, in a meaningful manner. She characterizes her role to open the right channels for a connection to the divine. In this context, obedience to God can be understood as the normative religious label of the proactive receptivity of the body and mind to God. My interlocutor then proceeds as follows:

“ I was in the bath in 2017 and 2018, and um, I found that very, very nice. So, I was just amazed at how lovingly these people deal with the sick, how they accompany people into the bath, you know, how the whole thing runs, so that impressed me tremendously, you know, as I was there for the first time. The second time, it was not quite as intense, but that was also because —, the first time there was a German helper in the bath. When I was there now, the helper was German again and he was also very nice. Of course, it’s more useful to be able to talk a bit than if there are two people there who don’t understand your language. Yes, that is a bit more difficult. Nevertheless, on the whole, I have to say, well, how lovingly they deal with the people, that’s, uh, that’s great, I think that’s fabulous. (Interview A, p. 20, lines 799–808)

The pilgrim attributes the varying degrees of intensity she experienced during several bathing rituals to the fact that she was unable to communicate adequately with the helpers involved in the language available to her. Thus, it appears essential to facilitate communicative and intersubjective understanding of the ritual among its participants. There is a dimension of bodily-ritual feeling in this arrangement that does not seem to be accessible through pure orthopraxy. Consequently, it should be communicated and discussed among ritual participants. At the very least, a differentiation into varying intensities is contingent upon the communicative comprehension of the bodily and gestural manifestations of the ritual.

The pilgrim's reference to the helpers in the Lourdes baths communicating in different languages indicates that the providers anticipate an international audience. The ritual offering has been subjected to a process of professionalization. One consequence of the pilgrims' practice is that the ritual performance cannot be carried out as expected. For instance, if the anticipated verbal exchange is perceived as a common interpretation of the performance, and the ritual participants do not share a common language, the evaluation will be affected. As the pilgrim asserts, conversation-based practices confer a benefit, thereby integrating the discourse among the assembled into the ritual. Furthermore, the arrangement of media also contributes to this interaction. This includes the Lourdes water, interior design, bodily interaction such as dressing and undressing, emotional state and intimate atmosphere, religious consummations such as communal prayer, and symbols such as the statue of Mary. A lack of coordination between the various elements of the arrangement may result in the desired outcome not being achieved or the experience not materializing as hoped. Certain factors are beyond the control of the pilgrim, such as the difficulty of finding helpers in the baths who speak the same language. This indicates that the bathing ritual is imbued with a high degree of religious and intimate significance, yet, is also subject to professionalization. This can result in disturbances to the practical performance and articulated experiences.

To indicate the idea of a contrary opinion, a very different evaluation is presented by another pilgrim I spoke to. The pilgrim previously cited emphasizes the necessity of individual spiritual effort as a prerequisite for divine intervention. This perspective, however, tends to obscure the potential efficacy of material means of healing. Conversely, the pilgrim cited in the following passage acknowledges the value of love and care for the sick, yet, raises concerns about other matters. Here, the materiality of the ritual and the level of interaction with the involved participants are evaluated in a markedly different manner. She is only vaguely informed about the ritual changes that have been made, which indicates that this information is not provided during the briefing that pilgrims receive from the organization with whom they are traveling to the sanctuary. Furthermore, the conversation indicates that the visit to the Lourdes bath is an optional component of the prearranged schedule. Our discussion revealed that the pilgrim had previously found the bathing ritual disagreeable. The pilgrim now offers her account of the ritual.

“ Umh, there were numerous helpers, then [you are: D.E.] stripped completely naked [...] And then I go in there, into the changing room, and in no time at all you are undressed, in no time at all you are immersed. And that’s what I found so awful, this — this plastic sheet that is then thrown on you. That was the first thing that went through my mind: Oh my God, the whole world has been under here, the bacteria, the viruses, disgusting! (Interview D, p. 12, line 557–567)

Two points of criticism are worthy of mention and stand in direct contrast to the evaluation presented above. Firstly, the interaction is not experienced as affection or warmth; rather, the critic addresses social coldness, overexposure, and mechanical interaction. Secondly, the material objects involved induce a dysfunctional sensual experience, which ultimately impedes a positive performance and experience. The pilgrim utters not only irritation but also reluctance and even disgust. This experience suggests an inversion of a potential healing experience into its opposite. Instead of communal security, overexposure is experienced. Instead of healing and purification, contagion is encountered.

The Catholic tradition espouses the notion of “privileging the exterior senses” (de la Cruz 2019: 636). Although the bathing ritual was changed (with the outer sensual dimension becoming less prominent), the interviewed pilgrims did not express any concern. It can be argued that complete submersion into the water provides a stronger sensual experience than a gesture. The narrative includes the pilgrims’ concerns about potential healing locations, the evaluation of divine power, and the role of the Lourdes water. These evaluations are situated within the sensational form of the bathing ritual and engage with the expectations of healing within this form.

Members of the *Hospitalité*: an insider’s perspective

Rituals, speech acts, and formalized gestures are performed by members of the Lourdes *Hospitalité* in interaction with pilgrims at the Lourdes baths. For this reason, I will now present statements and evaluations of a *hospitalier* as a ritual participant, a German woman in her fifties and a longstanding member of the *Hospitalité*.

When asked about the modification of the ritual, one interlocutor, who has been a member of the *hospitalier* staff and volunteers in the Lourdes baths for a few years, offered the following insight:

“ What is perhaps different at the moment, we have almost no sick people here at the moment, you also have to know that and we don’t really notice how sick people are, because if someone doesn’t take off their scarf, which you don’t normally do — we had it yesterday or the day before yesterday a couple of times — and there was a woman there, for example, who had a tracheostomy, you don’t normally see that at all. And um, so we don’t notice that they are so sick and it is already noticeable that — when they do it alone, that the emotions are different again, that is, more people are very affected, who also cry, who also tell what’s going on with them or they ask us to pray for them, that is more when the bath takes place. (Interview B, p. 2, line 92–102)

The interlocutor addresses a visible change at the sanctuary caused by the severity of the pandemic and the associated sanitary measures. According to her description, inviting and caring for sick pilgrims is the shrine's integral purpose. Therefore, the visibility of the sick and their ailments is crucial. The pandemic disrupts this image in a twofold sense. First, going on a pilgrimage means a high risk for sick pilgrims, especially during the pandemic, as a consequence most do not come at all. Second, and this applies particularly to the context of the ritual setting where the interviewed *hospitalier* provides her service, pilgrims do not undress to perform the "water gesture", meaning their bodies are not visible to *hospitaliers* or other pilgrims. This indicates a distinct approach to illness and ailment and, consequently, to healing. As I concluded with reference to Kaufman's historical analysis, the visibility of ailing religious subjects, and the presence of sick bodies have been a key element of Lourdes' sensational form since its inception. With visibly sick bodies being veiled or even not being present at all, particularly during the performance of the "water gesture" in the baths, gestures of acknowledging bodily ailments and sickness now only work to a limited extent for *hospitaliers*. Additionally, she posits that these alterations to the ritual have implications for its emotionality. Emotions play a pivotal role in what to expect from the ritual, a fact that was confirmed to me time and again in conversations on site with other ritual participants. In the form of the new ritual, the element of established emotionality is less intense for my interlocutor. Monique Scheer has drawn our attention to the fact that "[e]motional practices [...] are frequently embedded in social settings. Other people's bodies are implicated in practice because viewing them induces feelings" (Scheer 2012: 211). In the context of Lourdes, especially sick and ailing bodies induce empathy and care. Once the sick pilgrim's body is veiled during the ritual, it becomes less recognizable as a sick body to the *hospitalier*. Consequently, not viewing sick bodies and ailing pilgrims appears to disrupt the traditional emotional characteristics of the ritual settings, both within the Lourdes baths and in relation to the sensorial appearance of the entire shrine.

In this interview, the *hospitalier* also addressed the materiality of the Lourdes water. When commenting on the significance of the water in Lourdes, my interview partner draws attention to the link between the Lourdes apparitions and the site's "Ur-story":

“ Yes, because you can derive it, we derive it from — from the message [of Mary: D.E.] and, I mean, that's true and that's right and many people know that. Whoever has dealt a bit with Lourdes, knows that this is so [DE: Mhm]. Of course, some young people go along because they have to, with their parents and so on, they just stand there, but ok. You don't know what you trigger, right? [...] Yeah, you answer of course, but actually, there is not much coming up. There is little. So, nobody doubts the water [DE: Mhm], I haven't experienced that yet. Not here in fact [...], you know, if I don't believe, then a lot of things seem strange. (Interview B, p. 9, line 424–445)

Her evaluation is noteworthy for its reiteration of a frequent interpretive mechanism at Lourdes. The ritual and its religious media, namely the water, derive their authorized meaning from the series of apparitions. The reported interaction between the Blessed Virgin and the later

canonized visionary Bernadette during the apparitions serves as a model and generator of meaning for many religious rituals and practices at Lourdes. For instance, the invocation of the apparitions also serves to contextualize the introduction of the daily Marian torchlight procession. My ethnographic observation in the Lourdes baths revealed that in the new ritual context, this narrative is explicitly evoked and ritualized gestures are framed with it. The significance of ritual elements such as water is contingent upon their contextualisation within the hegemonic apparition narrative of Lourdes and the proclaimed messages of the Virgin Mary.

The domestic Catholic discourse on Lourdes demonstrates that the new form of the ritual as a “water gesture” is not regarded as a permanent change. “Will it be possible to bathe in Lourdes again?” was the headline in the Catholic magazine *La Croix* (de Lasa 2023). This indicates that the Lourdes authorities must address the question of whether the pandemic will permanently alter the sensational form of the ritual or whether Lourdes will revert to the pre-pandemic ritual. The ritualized bathing in the water has been associated with numerous miraculous healings at Lourdes, which has contributed to the shrine’s worldwide reputation and its associated rituals. Nevertheless, according to the sanctuary authorities, the new “water gesture” offers an authentic re-enactment of Mary’s messages and, in this respect, a different added value. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that the ambiguities and contradictions will be resolved soon.

5. Conclusion

Against the backdrop of the ongoing global pandemic, this article sought to examine the impact of the crisis on the spiritual and physical environments of Lourdes, the rituals performed there, and the evaluations of healing by religious actors. The initial question was how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the existing ambiguities, inconsistencies, and sensational forms of Lourdes. Two specific elements of the Lourdes shrine were presented and subjected to scrutiny: the presence and visibility of sick pilgrims’ bodies on the site and the bathing ritual, which was transformed into the “water gesture”.

The article has exposed elements of the underlying logic of Lourdes and the various inconsistencies that pilgrims and members of the *Lourdes Hospitalité* contend with. This operation is facilitated by broader Catholic narratives and different understandings of what healing entails. The pandemic did not significantly impact the belief in Lourdes’ overall healing potential. Nevertheless, my ethnographic encounters and interviews with pilgrims and *hospitaliers* revealed a complex negotiation and a gradient of ritual criticism concerning healing, its material, and sensorial aspects.

Kaufman’s historical findings align with my ethnographic findings that Lourdes is a complex phenomenon, encompassing a multitude of healing practices and experiences. Healing becomes experienceable and relatable in ritual settings through sensational forms of religious media, which Meyer et al. (2010: 209) describe as a “shared material event”. Lourdes’ rituals become materialized practices (Grimes 2011) that include authorized sensational forms of religious experience. The global pandemic in 2020 led to significant alterations in the manner in which

pilgrims could approach the shrine for prayers, devotion, and healing. Nevertheless, an examination of the material evidence suggests that it did not result in a failure of healing. Rather, specific elements of ritual performance are evaluated negatively. However, this must be taken into account for the situation both before and during the pandemic.

The evaluations of the pilgrims demonstrate that not all ritual participants utilize the bathing ritual or the “water gesture” identically. My investigation of the practices and utterances of ritual participants and pilgrims indicates that their ritual experiences vary considerably. In addition to these variations, ritual critiques occur, which refer to situational performances and individual aesthetic and sensory irritations. The religious power of Lourdes to heal, the potential of its emotional capacity, its sensual effect, and its ability to generate a religious community are not subject to critique or considered to fail. Each contributes to the variability of healing. The power of Lourdes lies in its grand, yet ambiguous promise of healing, as well as its enveloping Marian narrative. Rather than our title “when healing fails”, a more appropriate frame for this case study may be “when ritual fails”. Lourdes’ healing discourse appears robust among Catholic believers, and the margin, within which a ritual change with its function remains intact, is considerable, at least within the ethnographic sample under consideration. Among the groups that I joined on their travel to Lourdes the pandemic was not a dominant factor in their evaluations of ritual healing. Moreover, significant changes to a traditional ritual performance have only a limited impact on the criticism and negotiations concerning Lourdes’ potential to heal. These negotiations are evident throughout the shrine’s history. Adaptations of institutionalized interpretations are a dominant feature within my sample. Nevertheless, the ritual’s material performance continues to hold a certain allure for pilgrims, even in its rearranged form as a “water gesture”. It remains to be seen whether the ritual forms will revert to their pre-pandemic state, or whether the crisis interpretation of the ritual adaptation catalysed by the pandemic will be maintained as a “purification” in the future.

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Sources

Interview A: conducted 25/09/2021 in Lourdes, own translation.

Interview B: conducted 16/04/2022 in Lourdes, own translation.

Interview C: conducted 19/04/2022 in Lourdes, own translation.

Interview D: conducted 08/06/2022 in Lourdes, own translation.

Interview E: conducted 20/11/2022 in Konnersreuth, own translation.

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