Catholic Pilgrimage Centers in Québec, Canada

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The Canadian province Québec has among all cultural regions of North America the largest concentration of Catholic pilgrimage places because of the strong cultural influence of French immigrants.

Three pilgrimage centers are of significant international and national importance: Notre-Dame-du-Cap in Cap-de-la-Madeleine, Oratoire-St.-Joseph in Montréal, Ste.-Anne-de-Beaupré near Québec City, as well as eight other centers of national significance (Figure 1), and other sites are of regional and local importance.

This investigation of pilgrimage centers in Québec asks the question of how pilgrims affect pilgrimage sites and influence building pattern and functions by their religious and touristic activities. The description and analysis of site patterns is primarily focused on the three major pilgrimage places and especially on Ste.-Anne-de-Beaupré where the effects of pilgrim activities can best be distinguished.

Pilgrims as an Action Group

Approximately 5.5 million pilgrims annually (1988) visit the 11 largest pilgrimage centers in Québec, of whom 5 million visit the three largest centers: Oratoire-St.-Joseph, 2.5 million visitors; Ste.-Anne-de-Beaupré, 1.5 million visitors; and Notre-Dame-du-Cap, 1.0 million visitors. The remaining eight sites receive only 500,000 pilgrims, with 50,000 to 120,000 visitors each.

Pilgrims from overseas represent the French-speaking countries of France, Belgium, Haiti, and Martinique as well as European countries—Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Austria, Luxembourg, and Great Britain. Somewhat less frequently represented are Brazil, Australia, and New Zealand. The most important country of origin outside Canada is the United States (Figure 2). Most strongly represented regions are the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, and Midwest. A few pilgrim groups also come from states in the Southwest where the concentration of Catholics is especially large. Besides Québec, the western and eastern bordering provinces of Ontario and New Brunswick form the largest contingent of pilgrims from within Canada. Aside from geographical proximity, a noteworthy share of French speakers characterizes Québec, its neighboring provinces, and the bordering U.S. states. Within Québec, the catchment areas of the three largest pilgrimage centers correspond to population distribution along the Saint Lawrence Seaway.

As a rule, the visitors of the pilgrimage sites from Québec are indeed pilgrims who come for religious reasons. Should the pilgrimage site also be of historical and cultural interest (Oratoire-St.-Joseph and Ste.-Anne-de-Beaupré) or should it be characterized by special festivals throughout the year (Notre-Dame-de-Lourdes), then tourists come as well. According to a survey in Ste.-Anne-de-Beaupré, the motive for 76.7 percent of the visitors was religious, for 23.7 percent touristic, and for 6 percent religious and touristic (Baillargeon 1988). A special type of pilgrim participates in the varied spiritual exercises, religious holidays, and conferences, that take place on pilgrimage grounds. These activities are most significant at Lac Bouchette and Sillery.

Most pilgrims remain only one day—eight hours or less—on the pilgrimage grounds. Because the distance between hometown and pilgrimage site is often considerable, the pilgrims visit other religious sites in the vicinity, if possible. Pilgrim groups from the northeastern United States and from the eastern and western provinces of Canada arrive after a several-day journey. Often they visit purely touristic attractions as well, which are accessible either along the way or in the vicinity of the pilgrimage site. For example, in the...
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Figure 1. Catholic pilgrimage places in Québec of national and international importance, 1990.

As to socio-professional status, Canadian and American pilgrims differ (Doran-Jacques 1979). At Ste.-Anne-de-Beaupré approximately 64 percent of the Canadian pilgrims, compared with 73 percent of the U.S. pilgrims, were active in the service sector. We can partially explain this fact in that Canadian pilgrims tend to have rural origins, while their American counterparts are largely urban. Small numbers of sick and disabled pilgrims visit the three largest pilgrimage centers exclusively.

Not only English- and French-speaking Canadians take part on pilgrimage journeys to the religious centers of Québec, but other North American ethnic groups as well. The Indians pray to Saint Anne, whom they regard as their patron saint ever since their conversion to Catholicism. Annually, some 2,000 Indians of the tribes Huron, Mohawk, Micmac, Attikamêques, Montagnais, Abenaki, Algonquin, and Maliseet from Québec, Ontario, New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Labrador, and Maine take part in a common pilgrimage journey on the occasion of the birthday of Saint Anne and to the big Novena in late July. At this time, gypsies meet as well. Italian pilgrims come from the large metropolitain centers of Montréal, Ottawa, and New York. In recent years, first-generation immigrants have also made the pilgrimage—mostly in small groups by car, but also in larger groups. These include Haitians, Mexicans, Filipinos, and Vietnamese from the north-eastern U.S. and Ontario.

The climate imparts a seasonality to pilgrims in Québec (Figure 3). Remote pilgrimage sites with predominantly regional catchment areas close during the winter season (September or October until Easter or late May). At most year-round sites the pilgrimage stream has its high season from May to September.

Figure 2. Origin of organized pilgrim groups (French and English speaking) to Ste.-Anne-de-Beaupré, 1988. Source: Information of the Shrine Office (1989).

Figure 3. Number of cars on a parking lot at Ste.-Anne-de-Beaupré in the season of 1988. Source: Information of the Shrine Office (1989).
its peak in June and August, and its off-season from October to mid or late April. The vacation month of July is less significant for organized pilgrim groups, whereas the number of pilgrims who travel by private means increases at this time.

Pilgrimage journey on foot, which has a long tradition in the Old World, also developed in Québec. But today pilgrims journey on foot over shorter distances, such as from Beauvoir to Sherbrooke (15 kilometers) as well as over greater distances from St.-Theele (80 kilometers) or Montréal (150 kilometers) to Notre-Dame-du-Cap. Because of the pilgrimage centers' locations on the Saint Lawrence Seaway, the journey by boat played an essential role in their 300-year history.

Today Ste.-Anne-de-Beaupré is still accessible by boat for pilgrims from neighboring Québec City. Near the end of the 19th century, the larger centers became accessible by train. For decades, train travel remained the most important means of transport. Today the pilgrimage journey by train has completely ended. Only after the turn of the century did the first automobiles transport pilgrims. Autos now transport most of the pilgrims (65 to 75 percent). Buses transport 25 to 35 percent. Few pilgrim groups, mostly ill pilgrims, arrive by plane.

Pilgrimage Sites

The pilgrimage sites of Québec originate from entirely different periods. The oldest pilgrimage site, Ste.-Anne-de-Beaupré, owes its founding to French settlers, who brought their devotion to Saint Anne to the region in the early 17th century. In the second half of the 19th century numerous new pilgrimage sites came into being, following the European model or imported from the religious orders. In Montréal, pilgrimage journeys to Frère André, a simple brother of the order who with the help of Saint Joseph performed numerous miracles, began in 1877. The founding of the pilgrimage site Notre-Dame-du-Cap (1878 to 1888) is also related to miracles. Other pilgrimage sites, founded in the beginning and middle of this century, owe their existence less to miraculous events, and more to the founding activities of individual orders.

The immediate location on the Saint Lawrence Seaway or the elevated location on a hill or mountainside is characteristic of Québec's large pilgrimage sites. The sanctuary is at the center of the religious sites (Figure 4). The shrine church usually constitutes this sanctuary. There are sometimes smaller old shrine churches, remnants of the original holy centers, and a series of chapels. In the mid-sized pilgrimage centers, there are outdoor churches with open-air altars. Replicas of the Lourdes-grottos constitute a part of the religious site. Almost all pilgrimage sites have Outdoor Ways of the Cross, Rosary Ways, Holy Stairs, Calvary Scenes, the Holy Sepulchre, or Gospel Walks. Monasteries are also located in the immediate neighborhood of the Shrine grounds, as religious orders founded many of the pilgrimage sites in Québec and administer them to this day. In the two largest pilgrimage centers,
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Oratoire-St.-Joseph and Ste.-Anne-de-Beaupré, various information facilities are available. At every pilgrimage site shops sell religious articles, religious literature, and souvenirs with symbols of the shrine. These shops represent an important source of income for the pilgrimage site. Almost every pilgrimage site has boarding and accommodation facilities. The religious orders also operate these. If there is enough space on the grounds, picnic tables are set up. Closely tied to the other facilities are the educational facilities on the grounds, such as the renewal, retreat, and spiritual centers at Lac Bouchette and Sillery. The large pilgrimage centers of Québec do not have the religious radio stations at their disposal as do corresponding sites in the United States (Rinschede 1990), but do publish their own magazines several times a year for intensifying their contact to the pilgrims.

The most important representatives and administrators of the Catholic pilgrimage sites in Québec are the religious orders, whose organizational skills appear especially suited to this task. However, approximately half of the pilgrimage sites were not, at their time of founding, under the administration of religious orders. The orders took them over much later in order to secure their continued existence. While 3 to 15 priests in addition to several mostly voluntary assistants run the mid-sized pilgrimage sites in Rigaud, Beauvoir, and Lac Bouchette, the three larger sites are according to seasonal demand under the auspices of 40 to 70 priests and members of the order as well as 100 to 400 secular assistants.

Pilgrimage sites emerged as an answer to the religious needs of the pilgrims. The shrine personnel have the task of fulfilling these needs, whether for personal prayer and meditation or for common participation in liturgical festivals. The pilgrimage journey has a therapeutic function, seen in the pilgrims’ prayers of supplication. With their greater financial resources, the larger pilgrimage sites also have the task of supporting their respective orders in their social, pastoral, and missionary activities.

Pilgrimage sites and their surrounding areas are subject to the mutual influences of one another. In general, the pilgrimage site and its pilgrims affect the growth of population, settlement, and economic structures in its rural or urban surroundings. However, at the mid-sized and smaller pilgrimage sites in Québec, as in the United States, such an influence is hardly noticeable. The oldest pilgrimage site, Ste.-Anne-de-Beaupré, has in this regard the greatest similarity with the larger European pilgrimage centers (Figure 4). The influence of the pilgrimage stream makes itself clearly visible outside the religious center, which consists of cathedral, monastery, way of the cross, scala santa, and other religious components. The settlements directly neighboring the religious center have several shops that see religious article, restaurants, and private guesthouses. Yet more obvious is the influence of the pilgrimage stream along the highway to Québec City, which is lined with numerous new motels.

Conclusion: Future Development

Pilgrims of various countries in the Old and New World visit pilgrimage places in Québec, and influence their economic structure, and the distribution of buildings such as places of worship, hotels, restaurants, and shops. Factors such as spare time and touristic activities, shift of religious activities from daily or weekly services to more periodical and episodical activities, forecast the further increase of pilgrim numbers. The development and expansion of pilgrimage centers will mainly occur in areas with favorable travel connections, near large agglomerations and major tourist centers.

References

