

A Comparative Analysis of Three Locations of Ritual Activity at Saint Joseph's Oratory in Montreal

Laurence Nixon, Dawson College, Montreal

Résumé

L'Oratoire St. Joseph est le centre de pèlerinage le plus populaire au Canada. A l'Oratoire il y a trois lieux principaux d'activités rituelles (la chapelle votive, la crypte et la basilique). Ces trois sites expriment trois types de religion (folklorique, populaire et élitiste). Un examen systématique de l'espace et des processus rituels nous montre qu'il y a une tension, sinon un conflit, entre l'expression folklorique et l'expression élitiste. A mon avis, cette tension est quelque peu diffusé par le cérémonial populaire de la crypte.

Abstract

St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal is the most popular centre of pilgrimage in Canada. At the Oratory there are three distinct locations of ritual activity, the votive chapel, the crypt church and the basilica, that are expressive of three different types of religion which can be interpreted along a continuum from folk to popular to elite Catholicism, respectively. A systematic examination of the ritual space and processes of these sites, as well as citations from the publications of the Oratory, make it clear that there is a tension between the elite and folk ritual expressions—a tension which I suggest is mediated, at least in part, by the locus of popular ritual activity, the crypt church.

[1] St. Joseph's Oratory, situated on the north side of the west mountain in the heart of Montreal, is an architectural landmark that is visible from outside the city. This pilgrimage centre attracts approximately two million visitors a year at a time when attendance at parish churches in Quebec is in marked decline. From a casual visit, the Oratory may seem to be home to a set of compatible, even if somewhat diverse, liturgical and devotional activities. However my thesis is that: (1) a systematic analysis of the three main locations of ritual activity reveals that the décor and ritual activity in two of the principal locations stand in opposition to each other; (2) this opposition is not merely implicit, but explicitly referred to in the Oratory publications; and (3) that the third location of ritual activity mediates between the two that are in opposition to one another.

[2] The primary sources of data for this study consist of literature published by St. Joseph's Oratory, such as the monthly magazine, the guide book, prayer books, hagiographies of Brother André; DVDs (sold in the Oratory shop) on the Oratory itself and on the life of Brother André; notes made on observations from over one hundred visits to the Oratory with students, colleagues and alone over the space of five decades; and unobtrusive measures (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz and Sechrest 1966), such as counting the number of statues of various

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saints in the shop and the number of vigil lamps lit over a given period of time in the votive hall. I have also made use of data from secondary sources such as the examination made by Jean-Marc Charron (1996) of a sample of 100 prayer request forms.

[3] The method of analysis used in this study is one of organizing parallel features of the three principal locations of ritual activity into a number of dimensions in order to facilitate a comparison of the ritual space and process in the three locations (see Figure 1). This analysis is supported by quotations from visitors to the Oratory and from the priests who manage the pilgrimage centre, and by data from secondary sources.

[4] My thesis, that the decoration, activities and texts associated with the principal ritual locations of the Oratory express competing discourses, is consistent with the theoretical perspectives taken in more recent studies of pilgrimage centres. The theoretical perspectives used by researchers of pilgrimage and pilgrimage centres have evolved over the second half of the 20th century. Eade and Sallnow (1991) identify three general approaches. One of these is a functionalist (or correspondence) approach in which a correspondence is shown between some aspect of the pilgrimage and the structure of the society in which the pilgrimage site is located. An example is a study undertaken by Wolf (1958) on the Virgin of Guadalupe. Wolf argues that the “miraculous” image of the Virgin of Guadalupe expresses the view that the Mexican mestizos will attain salvation (meaning that they are as human as their Spanish overlords), and that the image further expresses the messianic hope that one day the Spanish will be driven out of Mexico. Another example is that of Bhardwaj (1973) who placed Hindu pilgrimage centres on a spectrum of local, subregional, regional, supraregional and pan-Hindu and found that the more local a pilgrimage centre was, the fewer the number of Brahmins and the greater the number of unscheduled caste members it attracted. Researchers utilizing this approach see pilgrimage as an expression of (or in some cases, even legitimizing) the social order.

[5] In reaction to the correspondence perspective, Victor and Edith Turner (1978) articulated a model that describes pilgrimage as an experience of *communitas* and *antistructure*—pilgrims are outside their usual space-time experience in which they would normally have to meet responsibilities within a hierarchical social order, and instead find themselves in a community of equals and in an atmosphere in which the symbols of the religion exposed at the pilgrimage centre take on a heightened significance. The Turnerian paradigm became the prevailing one, although increasingly investigators found it was not applicable to the pilgrimages they were researching. According to Eade and Sallnow, both the correspondence and Turnerian approaches treat pilgrimages as a homogeneous process, whereas pilgrimage shrines are actually characterized by a variety of discourses. Eade and Sallnow therefore maintain that a study is more fruitful if it takes these diverse (and often competing) discourses into account:

The power of a shrine ... derives in large part from its character almost as a religious void, a ritual space capable of accommodating diverse meanings and practices— though of course the shrine staff might attempt, with varying degrees of success, to impose a single, official discourse. This, in the final

analysis, is what confers upon a major shrine its essential, universalistic character: its capacity to absorb and reflect a multiplicity of religious discourses, to be able to offer a variety of clients what each of them desires. Universalism is ultimately constituted not by a unification of discourses but rather by the capacity of a cult to entertain and respond to a plurality (Eade and Sallnow 1991, 15).

In fact, according to Eade and Sallnow, not only are there different, and competing, discourses, they are often in conflict with each other.

[6] While accepting the basic position of Eade and Sallnow that pilgrimage sites express a multiplicity of discourses, Coleman and Elsner (1994, 1995 and Coleman 2002) reject the notion that a pilgrimage shrine is no more than a “religious void” to which pilgrims bring their competing discourses. Instead they argue that the pilgrimage landscape (understood broadly to include architecture, images, texts and rituals) plays a role in actively orchestrating the experience of pilgrims. They further maintain that such sites serve to absorb some of the differences between competing discourses. Maniura (2004) feels that the description of Coleman and Elsner makes pilgrims seem too passive, when in fact pilgrims can and do play an active role in crafting their own experience and their own identity as pilgrims. And, in addition, pilgrims even exert some influence over the pilgrimage landscape itself.

[7] Certainly St. Joseph’s Oratory reflects to some degree the Quebec social order, but that is not the primary focus of this study. It is also possible that groups of pilgrims arriving on a bus together to visit the Oratory may experience something of the *communitas* and antistructure described by the Turners, but I have seen no evidence of this in, for example, the testimonials of pilgrims. And pilgrims visiting the votive chapel do so as individuals or in small groups. Even when visitors are with others, they pray by themselves. And I have seen no evidence that there is much of an experience of *communitas* in the liturgies conducted in either the crypt church or the basilica.

[8] On the other hand, I have noted that there are two competing discourses. One of these is that of folk Catholicism. This is expressed primarily in the votive chapel and the religious items shop. It includes the presence of *ex-votos* (such as crutches, braces and canes), the boxes in which written prayer requests can be deposited, the veneration of a relic of St. Joseph, the tomb of Brother André, the sale of bottles of St. Joseph’s oil (used for healing), and the sale of statues of Brother André and St. Joseph. The other discourse, the theologically correct discourse, is that of the clerical custodians of the Oratory (the priests of the Congregation of the Holy Cross) and it is expressed verbally in fixed prayers made available for visitors, in articles in the publications of the Oratory, and in sermons. It is also expressed in the architecture and images of the basilica.

[9] One might expect that there would be an active effort on the part of the representatives of elite Catholicism to educate a group of passive practitioners of folk Catholicism. But Maniura’s

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insight applies in the case of the Oratory. The pilgrims who visit the Oratory for temporal benefits play an active role in shaping at least part of the pilgrimage landscape. It is because of their necessary presence and financial support that the Oratory continues to exist. It is because of them that there is a votive hall and that it contains ex-votos and boxes into which written prayer requests can be placed. It is because of them that the Oratory shop sells bottles of St. Joseph's oil and statues of St. Joseph and Brother André. Coleman and Elsner note that pilgrimage shrines are not just empty spaces in which competing discourses contend. Pilgrimage shrines can actually absorb or deflect attention away from the potential conflict of discrepant discourses. This is particularly noticeable in the crypt church, as I will explain below.

[10] In my schematization of three locations, and types, of ritual activity at the Oratory, I contrast the ritual performances of *elite* Catholicism with those of *folk* Catholicism. By *folk* Catholicism I mean what Meslin (1972) describes as *popular* religion, a form of religion that looks for immediate material benefits, such as healing, wealth, success in love, by manipulating the supernatural through the use of such devices as charms, amulets, holy medals, and relics. The term *folk religion* is so used by a number of researchers (Bhardwaj 1973, Hufford 1985, Kaelber 2002). By *elite* ritual activity I am referring to the performance of a relatively long mass that is accompanied by complex liturgical and classical music. Such a mass is conducted by a number of ritual specialists in an architecturally impressive setting. The sermon in such a mass tends to be theologically informed and completely devoid of any suggestion that material needs can be met by recourse to the means identified by Meslin. I use the term *popular* religion to refer to the type of religious practice that is typical of most parish churches. The relevance of these types of religion to an analysis of the ritual locations of the Oratory will be shown below, but first a brief description of the ritual locations and of the Oratory's founder will provide a useful background.

[11] The founder of St. Joseph's Oratory was a miracle-working lay brother of the Congregation of the Holy Cross, born in 1845, at St. Grégoire d'Iberville, as Alfred Bessette. On joining the Congregation of the Holy Cross Alfred took the name of André. His work in the Congregation, which operated a boy's school, consisted of various domestic chores and the duties of a porter. Brother André was devoted to St. Joseph, and encouraged the many lay persons with whom he was in contact to pray to the saint for their material and spiritual needs. In addition he personally attended to those who were ill by commiserating with them and then either rubbing them with oil that had been placed in front of a statue of St. Joseph or else touching them with a St. Joseph medal. His reputation as a healer grew and in 1904 his admirers helped him build a small shrine to St. Joseph on the north side of the west mountain, opposite the school of the Holy Cross Brothers. Over the next several years extensions were made to the original structure and then in 1914, plans were drawn up for an imposing complex that would eventually include a basilica, a somewhat smaller church, known as the crypt church, and a votive chapel in which private prayers can be made to St. Joseph and to the deceased founder of the Oratory, Brother André.¹

The Crypt Church

[12] Visitors to the Oratory worship in three major locations. The first of these, encountered immediately upon mounting the stairs, is the crypt church, with a low barrel-shaped ceiling that creates an atmosphere of warmth and security. The architectural style is Renaissance Revival, one of the styles used for older Quebec churches, and hence connotes a feeling of familiarity and comfort for traditional Catholics. The crypt church, with a seating capacity of 1000, was begun in 1915 and completed in 1922. It contains a rich variety of visually accessible images in the form of sculpture and stained glass windows. One of the sculpted images is a crucifix, in front of which at any time of day can be observed a line of pilgrims, waiting their turn to pray while resting their hands on the feet of the crucified Christ. The central image, behind the altar, is that of St. Joseph holding the infant Jesus in his arms. Among the stained glass windows are several of events in the life of Jesus at which, according to the gospels, his father Joseph was present.

[13] Several times a day, masses are performed by either one of the Holy Cross Fathers, who are responsible for the maintenance of the Oratory, or else by a priest accompanying a group of pilgrims. These masses are relatively short and simple—there is usually only one priest, accompanied by, at most, one or two lay assistants. The mass may be followed by prayers for the sick. Between masses, there are usually several persons present in the church praying in the pews, or in front of one of the images, or in front of the tabernacle which contains consecrated bread.

The Votive Chapel

[14] Immediately behind the crypt church is the votive chapel, a dimly lit narrow room with a high ceiling, built between 1946 and 1949. The architectural style of the votive chapel is reminiscent of some Art Deco movie theatres and restaurants of the 1930s. Located in the centre of the votive chapel is a large statue of St. Joseph by himself (without the infant Jesus), in front of which is an ascending bank of votive candles. On the kneeler in front of the votive candles is a relic of St. Joseph, which pilgrims can be seen kissing. In addition to this statue there are eight tableaux in relief depicting St. Joseph in various activities and in front of each of these are banks of votive candles (10,000 in total), in front of which are kneelers. On each of the kneelers is a prayer petitioning St. Joseph for a specific material or spiritual blessing. On the walls are crutches, braces and canes donated to the Oratory as votive offerings of thanks for healings received.

[15] The atmosphere in the votive chapel is one that has a multi-sensory appeal. The overall lighting is dim, making the flickering votive candles in their red and green glass holders all the more noticeable. The relatively narrow space is filled with pilgrims who light votive lamps and pray at one or another altar. In front of the large elevated statue of St. Joseph is a fountain, the sound of which mingles with the whispered voices of the pilgrims. Behind the large statue of St. Joseph is a small chamber with a low ceiling, containing the tomb of Brother André, upon

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which most visitors place their hands while praying. Worshippers choose their own pattern of devotion in the votive chapel; there are no priests to conduct a pre-established liturgy. For example, one worshipper may pray at one of the eight tableaux, e.g., that of St. Joseph the Worker, for a specific intention, e.g., to find work, then light a candle, and then leave. Another may say a prayer in front of the appropriate altar for a healing and then pay a visit to the tomb of Brother André before exiting the votive chapel. And yet another may light a votive lamp in front of the statue of St. Joseph after kneeling and kissing a relic of the saint, and then visit any one of the eight altars to pray for a specific intention.

The Basilica

[16] Above the crypt church and the votive chapel are the Oratory's museums, and towering above these is the basilica. The building, begun in 1922, was completed in 1937, the year Brother André died, and the decorating of the interior was finished in 1966. The basilica is the largest of the principal worship locations at the Oratory—it has a relatively high ceiling and a seating capacity of 2,200, or room for 10,000 people standing. The mood is cool, detached and somewhat awe-inspiring, rather than warm or devotional. The figurative art works (stained glass windows and sculpture) are dwarfed by the plain concrete walls rising in angular lines to a height of 60 metres at the transept. The figures in the barely perceptible stained glass windows tend to the abstract, as do the sculpted images of the twelve apostles and of the Stations of the Cross. Rarely is anyone seen praying in front of these images. The dominant image behind the altar is a large crucifix in front of a screen with an abstract design. The Oratory's home page refers to the basilica as an “architectural wonder,” comparable to St. Peter's in Rome and Sacré Coeur in Paris.

[17] Unlike the crypt church, and especially the votive chapel, when the basilica is not in use for Sunday morning mass and on special occasions, it is usually empty, except for a few curious tourists. When it is used, the emphasis is not on the favours obtainable through the intercession of St. Joseph, but rather on a lengthy, elaborate performance of the official ritual of the church, a mass with concelebrating priests (or perhaps one or more bishops), several assistants and a boys' choir (Les Petits Chanteurs du Mont-Royal). Here is where special religious events that lend status to the Oratory occur, such as the visit of Pope John Paul II (in 1984) or Mother Teresa (in 1988). It is in this location that high-status dignitaries of other faiths, such as the Dalai Lama (in 1993), are received. The basilica is also used for cultural performances such as organ concerts. In other words, the basilica is where sophisticated, culturally-informed and open-minded, progressive Catholics are at home. Figure 1 indicates some of the significant differences between the three major locations of ritual activity in a systematic way.

Ritual Space and Process at Three Locations in Saint Joseph's Oratory								
	Ritual location	Architectural style	Primary sculpture	Ritual space	Ritual type	Ritual time	Ritual specialists	Literature
Elite tradition	Basilica— at the top of the whole pilgrimage complex.	Dombellotism (named after Dom Paul Bellot)— a modern architectural style originating in France among clerics and lay professionals	The high god (Jesus) crucified.	Expansive and overwhelming: wide, long and high. Use of natural light. Minimal sensory input, mostly abstract visual.	High mass. Elaborate ritual. Directed participation— movement restricted. Practically no extralitururgical devotions.	Scheduled and infrequent. Long mass (at least one hour). Long sermon— i.e., emphasis on instruction.	Bishops and many priests con- celebrating. Altar servers. Readers. Large choir.	Standard missalette.
Popular tradition	Crypt church— at the bottom and front.	Renaissance revival style—i.e., a familiar and comfortable style for traditional Catholics.	St. Joseph holding the infant Jesus—i.e., a legendary saint plus the high god at an approachable age.	Moderately wide and long, but low ceiling. Both natural and artificial light. Rich visual input.	Low mass. Ritual trimmed down to bare essentials. Directed participation during mass. Some extralitururgical devotions.	Scheduled and frequent. Short mass (half an hour). Sermon is short.	Usually a single priest with one or two lay assistants.	Prayer book containing the order of the mass, and, in addition, prayers to St. Joseph.
Folk tradition	Votive chapel and tomb chamber— at bottom and behind.	Modern style reminiscent of some Art Deco movie theatres and restaurants.	St. Joseph, without the infant Jesus, and the tomb of Brother André—i.e., a universal, legendary saint plus a local saint.	Confined: Votive Chapel is narrow and tomb chamber is cramped. Artificial light. Rich multisensory input: sounds, flickering red light, many textures, heat, smell, touch, etc.	Extralitururgical devotions: Private prayers (often for material needs) to St. Joseph, at eight altars, and at tomb of Brother André. Active participation —free movement.	Unscheduled and continuous. Short private prayers (a few minutes long). No sermon.	No religious specialists required.	Prayers to St. Joseph at each of the eight altars. Hagio- graphical accounts of Brother André's life & miracles (in the west lobby of the votive chapel).

Contrast between the Votive Chapel and the Basilica

[18] Location, architectural style, lighting, art work, as well as other features distinguish the basilica from the votive chapel. To begin with, the votive chapel is located at the lowest level of the Oratory complex and behind the crypt church and is the least spacious of the ritual locations under consideration, whereas the basilica, the most spacious of the three locations, is at the summit of the entire complex. From the street, the votive chapel is invisible; the basilica dominates the skyline. The style of the votive chapel interior is one that was popular at the time of its construction, a style reminiscent of some Art Deco movie theatres and restaurants. On the other hand, the exterior of the basilica is in a stately Renaissance style with a modernist dome and interior designed by Dom Paul Bellot. The interior of the votive chapel is dark; that of the basilica light. Illumination in the basilica is provided by windows. No outside light reaches the votive chapel. On the other hand, the votive chapel is lit by hundreds of red and green vigil lamps. The dominant images in the votive chapel are a large statue of St. Joseph (in front of which is a fountain), and eight relief panels representing the needs that the saint can meet through his prayers to God. In the basilica the principal image is that of Christ on the cross. At the altar in front of the statue of Joseph in the votive chapel is a relic of the saint which pilgrims venerate. Behind the statue of St. Joseph is a small chamber containing the tomb of Brother André where pilgrims pray, often while placing their hands on top of the sarcophagus. Behind the main altar in the basilica is a chapel where the consecrated bread (or host) is reserved—the equivalent of a “relic” of Jesus. In the votive chapel the circulation of pilgrims is up to the participants themselves. Most pray and light a vigil lamp at one of the eight altars dedicated to St. Joseph, and many pray and light a lamp in front of the large statue of St. Joseph, and visit the tomb of Brother André. But there is no fixed order; each pilgrim constructs his or her own sequence of pious activities. Except for Sunday mass, the basilica is rarely visited, except by tourists. At the Sunday mass in the basilica, the entire ritual process is orchestrated, as it is at any parish mass. What is distinctive about the mass in the basilica as opposed to masses in most parishes (and in the crypt church) is its length, the music performed, and the many ritual specialists involved. Whereas the votive chapel contains the body of a local holy man along with images of a patron saint, the images in the basilica are more representative of the universal church and its teachings. The basilica, in addition to the image of Christ crucified, has the Stations of the Cross and sculpted images of the twelve apostles. In sum, the votive chapel is a shrine frequented by persons seeking immediate answers to prayers for material needs. The ritual space and process of the basilica, on the other hand, expresses the teaching of the universal church. This teaching is one of delayed gratification, of accepting suffering, and of making the effort to see a higher purpose in it. And part of the teaching is that the church hierarchy plays a critical role, through word and sacrament, in helping believers attain their goals. That there are, in effect, competing discourses at the Oratory has not gone unrecognized by the Holy Cross fathers who manage the pilgrimage site.

Ambivalence of the Custodians of the Oratory

[19] The fundamental contrast between the official liturgy of the church and the cult of St. Joseph (and of Brother André) is a topic of concern for the clerical custodians of the shrine. To say the least, many of the priests of the Congregation of the Holy Cross, as can be seen from articles in the Oratory's monthly magazine, *L'Oratoire*, and its English language equivalent, *The Oratory*, have ambivalent feelings regarding the expressions of popular religion. On the one hand, the shrine's founder was renowned for his miracle-working, and one of the primary attractions of the Oratory is the votive chapel, with the tomb of Brother André and the eight altars to St. Joseph between which are visual reminders of past miracles (i.e., the crutches, braces, canes and votive plaques given, as tokens of gratitude, over the years). On the other hand, the priests would like to see the visitors to the Oratory focus their attention on the doctrines which they articulate in their sermons and on the sacraments which the priests alone can dispense.²

[20] At the time the interior of the basilica was being completed, a regular feature of the *L'Oratoire* and *The Oratory* was a column of testimonials to favours received by devotees of St. Joseph. Of the 55 reported from January 1959 to February 1960, for example, three described successful conversions of people about whom they were concerned. But all of the remaining testimonials were of material benefits obtained. One correspondent reported the recovery of a man from alcoholism, two testified to successful examinations, two to finding a new habitation, and two to the peaceful death of someone. Seven relate that employment was found or that their work situation improved, seven reported finding money, and no less than 28 told of healings. One of my favourites is a case of what I would call spiritual euthanasia:

My uncle was ill with cancer of the liver and pancreas for four months. As he came to suffer intense pain almost constantly, we were told by the doctors that his would be a long illness with continued suffering ... I told the members of my family to pray through the intercession to St. Joseph and Brother André for his immediate death ... The next morning we received word from the hospital that my uncle was dying ... My uncle died in a coma and without pain at eleven o'clock that night (Mrs. John F. Kruse, *The Oratory*, January 1959, 21).

Another favourite is the story of the removal of a noisy neighbour:

I would like to tell the world that St. Joseph and Brother André granted me several favours, particularly one that we asked for while visiting your lovely city and Mount Royal [i.e., the location of the Oratory].

We, my husband and I, prayed for a peaceful solution to be granted in view of an annoyance caused by a new neighbor having set up a very noisy workshop in our quiet middle-class neighborhood ...

Soon after we had finished our pilgrimage and returned safely home we found that our neighbor had moved his trucks and was also on the point of

moving his workshop to a business zone (Mrs. John A. King, *The Oratory*, January 1959, 21).

St. Joseph may be the patron of workers, but he apparently disapproves of their opening up shops in respectable middle-class neighbourhoods.

[21] The decision to publish these testimonials was clearly a fully conscious and deliberate one, done to attract pilgrims to the Oratory, and yet just as clearly, the Holy Cross fathers are not entirely at ease with these manifestations of folk Catholicism. For example, in an article, from *The Oratory* (October 1959, p.15) entitled “Qu’est-ce que ‘l’huile de Saint-Joseph?’” (What is “St. Joseph’s oil?”), the Holy Cross priest, Henri Bernard, states that numerous cures have been reported by those who had recourse to the oil of St. Joseph, but he insists that the oil has no natural healing properties. And while the Oratory’s religious items shop contributes to the funding of the pilgrimage complex,³ the same author, in the pages of *The Oratory*, implicitly condemns the use of religious kitsch by contrasting it with *real art*, even while ostensibly defending a worshipper’s right to make use of an “ugly statuette:”

[In no way] do I wished to be ranked with the connoisseurs [of art] who take to task those whose piety thrives on ... multi-coloured plaster or plastic statues, plaques and medallions, the polychrome pictures of the Lord and the saints ...

Commercial religious goods are ugly? ... True enough in most cases!

But then, what of it? ...

To my mind, both ... are legitimate because ... that which real art tends to demonstrate about God through affirmation, commercial figurines and imagery prove in a negative manner ...

And thus it follows that even the literally ugly statuette pays a limited tribute to God ... (Henri Bernard, Devotional Confetti, *The Oratory*, January, 1960, p.3)

[22] Not only is the popular religion, which is the source of a great deal of the Oratory's income, qualified and implicitly devalued; but even to the extent it is tolerated, it is clearly subordinated to the soteriological (or salvational) dimension of religion with which the Oratory priests are more comfortable, as can be seen from the following paragraph in a photo essay in the September, 1959 (8-9) issue of *The Oratory*:

The individual pilgrim who is in the least aware of the continual blessings of divine grace will find at the Shrine many an opportunity to strengthen faith. Many have come whose faith has been remarkably rewarded with temporal favors. To be sure, thousands have claimed physical relief through the intercession of St. Joseph at the Oratory. But greater still are the wonders of grace wrought in hearts.

As a further indication of clerical ambivalence regarding miraculous healing, by the late 1980s

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the testimonial column was no longer a regular feature of the Oratory's magazines (although testimonial articles have appeared since, from time to time). Clerical discomfort with undue emphasis on the miraculous can also be seen in interviews, conducted by *the Montreal Gazette* religion reporter, Harvey Shepherd, with three priests associated with the Oratory.

Brother André's faith and that of his admirers today contain elements some might decry as superstitious, [Dominican father Benoît] Lacroix acknowledged.

“Any phenomenon that comes from ordinary people will always have a side that is exaggerated. People are like that.”

But he thinks that Brother André's admirers today may be less intent on immediate, concrete miracles than those of fifty years ago.

[Holy Cross father Marcel] Lalonde agreed. He recalled, for instance, a man whose jaw had already been half destroyed by cancer who asked Lalonde to pray to Brother André with him “so I may have the courage to bear this.”

“The Oratory has always been connected with the sick, and those in need of physical help,” [Holy Cross father Bernard] Lafrenière said, “but that does not mean they will necessarily be disappointed if they are not healed. Often the sick come here to pray for other people” (*The Gazette*, Montreal, Saturday, August 1, 1987, J-10).

At least some of the priests associated with the Oratory would like to believe that the search for temporal blessings is on the decline.

[23] When there are healings and other answers to prayer for material benefits, readers of the Oratory's publications are told that whatever miracles occur, their cause is not to be found in the body (i.e., the relics) of the Oratory's founder, as many of the hundreds of visitors who pray in front of his tomb appear to believe. Thérèse Roy, in a two-page photo-essay in *L'Oratoire* (Juillet 1992, 81,4: 8-9), provides the following outline for a picture of a woman in a wheelchair praying at the tomb of Brother André, “Un jeune a demandé si le Frère André était dans le tombeau. Sans hésiter, Mathieu, 7 ans, a répondu: ‘Il est vivant dans le coeur de Dieu’” (“A young boy asked if Brother André was in his tomb. Without any hesitation Mathieu, 7 years old, answered: ‘He is living in the heart of God.’”). Even a child of seven years knows that Brother André is not really in his tomb!

[24] However, the reality is that visitors to the Oratory do believe that prayers at Brother André's tomb are efficacious. Furthermore, in spite of the pious hopes of the priests interviewed by Harvey Shepherd, the primary reason why the faithful visit the votive chapel is precisely to receive temporal favours. There are various indications that this is the case. One of these is the testimonies published in *The Oratory* referred to above. Another indicator is the types of petitions made by visitors on prayer request forms provided by the Oratory. At one end of the votive chapel there are available prayer request forms and two boxes into which they can be deposited. In 1993, 90,000 such prayer request forms were deposited. Jean-Marc Charron (1996) analyzed a random sample of 100 of these forms and reported that of the 100 forms 97

contained one or more requests for a total of 123 requests for supernatural help. Eighty-six percent of these were requests for material benefits of one kind or another, such as help in overcoming family problems, in recovering health, or in finding work or money; 14% were requests for psycho-spiritual benefits, such as help in better self-understanding, in making the right life choices, in discerning good from evil, or in attaining inner healing.

[25] Yet another indicator that the favours sought at the Oratory are of a temporal nature comes from an examination of the rate at which votive candles are lit at the various altars in the votive chapel. The votive chapel contains eight altars before which worshippers pray for specific intentions. These include altars for prayers for temporal benefits such as support in the midst of difficult circumstances, finding employment, and healing, on the one hand, and altars for prayers for spiritual blessings such as the practice of chastity, protection for the church, a death that leads to eternal happiness and help in practising Christian virtues within the family context. In front of these altars are placed kneelers and behind them are stands with a large number of votive lamps which, for a small donation, worshippers can light, either before or after offering up their prayers.

[26] One way to determine the relative importance of these intentions is to count the number of votive lamps that are lit over a given period of time. I have done this on various occasions. Let me give the results of one of these. On May 26, 1995, at 2:30 p.m., I counted the number of lamps at the various altars and then returned at 5:00 p.m. to make a second count. I then subtracted the first count from the second for each altar in order to have a rough estimate of the popularity of the various intentions. The estimate is rough because during the two and a half hour period some of the lamps had burnt out, hence affecting the totals. What I found was that the number lamps at the altar of relief from difficult circumstances had increased by 20, at the altar for employment by 27, and at the altar of the sick also by 27.

[27] At the altar for aid in living a chaste life there was an increase of eight lamps, at the altar for the protection of the church an increase of two lamps, at the altar for eternal salvation following death there was a *decrease* of one lamp and at the altar for help in practising Christian virtues within the family a *decrease* of 13 lamps! It may be that those who are more concerned with spiritual goods come to pray earlier than those who seek temporal goals. But I have noticed on other occasions that when the Oratory is first open in the morning there are already a number of lit vigil lamps at many of the altars. So at the altars where prayers are made for this-worldly benefits the number of lamps lit increases, whereas at the altars where prayers are made for other-worldly blessings few lamps are lit and so the number of lit lamps increases very little or actually declines throughout the day.

[28] In spite of the fact that seeking material rewards is discouraged by the Holy Cross fathers, testimonials to healings and other material benefits were once again, in 1998-1999, and subsequently, part of the Oratory's publicity. These were found by accessing the Oratory's home page. In fact one of these accounts not only tells of a physical healing but also of a punishment received for failing to provide a testimonial to the Oratory.

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I have been suffering from back problems for 10 years; I constantly need to take medication and visit a chiropractor regularly. Last August 18, I undertook a pilgrimage. After a two-day trip and a 12-hour bus ride, I was unable to stand up straight and I was in great pain. I went to Brother André's tomb and I prayed. A while later, I walked the Way of the Cross in the mountain and I was able to go up and down stairs painlessly. Maybe you do not call that a miracle, but I know that my prayers were answered.

I have been intending to write this letter for a long time but I kept postponing it. The other day, my back pain returned for a few days. I then told Brother André that if he answered my prayers once again, that I would bear witness to this fact. It is now done. My prayers were answered once again. I pray to Saint Joseph and to Brother André every day (W.T. Bloomfield, MI).

The not-so-subtle message to those who access the Oratory's home page is that should one be so fortunate as to receive a physical blessing from heaven, one had better send a testimony into the Oratory or run the risk of losing divine favour.⁴

[29] While, on the one hand, the priests of the Congregation of the Holy Cross have encouraged the practices of folk Catholicism, they also wish to redirect the practitioners to what they see as a more authentic form of spiritual life—i.e., the teachings and sacraments of the Catholic Church. Father Henri Bernard, in his book on the role of pilgrimage in pastoral ministry (Bernard 1966), wrote that urban pilgrimage centres attract marginal believers, and as an example he mentions domestics working in Westmount, a residential neighbourhood adjacent to St. Joseph's Oratory, and in nearby Outremont. According to Father Bernard, while pilgrimage centres may do a disservice to marginal believers by encouraging them to think only of their immediate personal needs and thereby foster a purely magical kind of religion, a pilgrimage centre can be a vehicle for socializing marginal believers and integrating them into the life of the universal church. One of the means envisioned for socializing and integrating believers into theologically correct Catholicism was the basilica. At least some of the Holy Cross priests saw the basilica as the venue for this preferred type of religion.

The Superiority of the Basilica

[30] As the interior decoration of the basilica was nearing completion, an article appeared in *L'Oratoire* (April, 1959, 31-35) which suggested that the time for miracles had come to a close and that the new basilica would be the preferred environment for the operation of the Holy Spirit—an operation that would inspire faith in Christ and implicitly a desire to imitate Christ in accepting suffering (rather than expecting a miraculous deliverance from the ills of this world).

Toute soumission gardée à l'Eglise, je crois que le Frère André, c.s.c., a fait des miracles hallucinants. Il "tirait" sur saint Joseph et saint Joseph entrainé dans le

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complot. C'est aussi simple que ça. La période des miracles à la chaîne est révolue à l'Oratoire. Il y en aura encore. Ils seront plus rare. Je parle de guérisons physiques: de boiteux qui marchent, de sourds qui entendent

La crypte de l'Oratoire est honnête, architecturalement parlant; rien de plus. La basilique, quand on en aura terminé la décoration intérieure, donnera une ambiance exceptionnelle ... NOUS SOMMES EN LIEU OU L'ESPRIT A CHOISI DE SOUFFLER, A LA MANIERE PREFERENTIELLE ... je ne suis pas si distrait que de désavouer le courant de piété populaire ...

Mais il faut bien reconnaître *la jalousie de Dieu* ... les sentiers des hommes doivent toujours déboucher sur le Christ ...

Les "miracles" qu'il [Frère André] a semés impressionnaient; mais plus encore sa ferveur pour la Passion de Jésus ...

(While the final judgment must be left to the Church, I believe that Brother André has made amazing miracles. He relied on Saint Joseph and Saint Joseph went along with him. It is as simple as that. But the period of miracles has come to an end at the Oratory. There are still some. But they are few and apart. I am referring to physical healings: the lame walking, the deaf hearing. ...

The crypt of the Oratory is, architecturally speaking, decent enough; but nothing more. The basilica, on the other hand, once the interior decoration is finished, will provide an exceptional ambiance ... WE WILL BE IN THE PLACE WHERE THE HOLY SPIRIT HAS CHOSEN TO BE IN A SPECIAL WAY... I am not the kind of person who rejects popular piety ...

But it is good to keep in mind that *God is a jealous God* ... the journeys of human beings must always end in Christ ...

The legacy of miracles which Brother André has left behind is impressive; but even more impressive was his commitment to the Passion of Christ ...)

[31] In the September, 1959 issue of *The Oratory* (pages 8-9 or 10-11) there appeared a photo-essay in which it was stated that the value of the basilica was its capacity to hold large gatherings that would inspire faith:

Collective manifestations of faith seldom fail to bolster the faith of the individual. Where huge throngs of worshippers congregate to express their common belief in God, the compelling force of faith is better brought home to the believers. In such circumstances we no longer feel isolated; the universal brotherhood of men and the enthusing truth of the Communion of Saints take on a deeper significance.

[32] In an article in *The Oratory* of May, 1960 (pp.24-26), Father E.M. Brassard (of the Congregation of the Holy Cross) elaborates upon the above point by contrasting what he sees as the architectural limitations of the crypt church and the votive chapel in comparison with the

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architectural majesty of the basilica:

... the faithful [person] who comes to church to pray must integrate himself in the gathering constituted by the Christian community.

This spiritual reality must be exemplified in an external form. You wouldn't expect to congregate thousands of worshippers in a low ceiling hall [such as is the case in the votive chapel and crypt church]: they would feel they are being stifled ...

It is therefore essential that the nave where they assemble for devotions serve as a invitation to expand their soul in the presence of God; the very architectural design of the arches and pillars should prove a silent and irresistible invitation to the soul's flight heavenward.

Thus, a high ceiling and vault ... are ... indispensable to an atmosphere of communal prayer.

[33] The architecture of the basilica, the author hopes, will be conducive to soteriological Catholicism because a large space can contain a large crowd and thereby make possible the enthusiastic atmosphere that should occur in such gatherings. The height of the vault further contributes to the exalted mood of the worshippers by orienting them toward a transcendent perspective. In such an atmosphere, there should be an increased likelihood that worshippers will perceive greater depth and reality to the contents of the sermons—a content which encourages identification with Jesus Christ crucified (the central image of the basilica) than by a preoccupation with material benefits.

The Mediating Function of the Crypt Church

[34] The verbal descriptions by the Holy Cross priests regarding the superior nature of the basilica, and the religious approach it represents, stand in apparent opposition to the testimonials regarding the various material benefits that can be attained by visiting the votive chapel and praying to St. Joseph and to Brother André. This particular type of binary opposition between folk and elite religion is found in almost every religious tradition in the world (see Spiro 1970, and Bhardwaj 1973, for two non-Christian examples). But as Coleman and Elsner claim, what is expressed at pilgrimage sites are not just competing discourses. The conflict between these discourses can also be absorbed or defused at those sites. Sometimes the mere juxtaposing of the two can dissipate some of the tension between them, by making possible a form of exchange—i.e., the folk tradition gains legitimacy by having the locus of its activities placed in close proximity to the locus of the elite ritual celebrations, and the elite tradition acquires an increased constituency by virtue of the same proximity. But in other cases a more multifaceted structure functions as a mediator between folk and elite religious expressions.

[35] At St. Joseph's Oratory, I suggest, the crypt church functions as a locus of mediation between the folk tradition of the votive chapel and the elite tradition of the basilica. The

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architectural structure of the Oratory makes the supremacy of the elite tradition vividly clear. The elite tradition (represented by the basilica) is at the top of the Oratory complex, while the folk tradition (represented by the votive chapel) is below in the rear. While not at the top, the crypt church is not at the back either. The crypt church is in fact the first ritual location that a pilgrim, ascending the stairs to the Oratory, will encounter. While the crypt church is not nearly as spacious as is the basilica, it is not cramped like the votive chapel. While the central image in the crypt church is not Christ on the cross, as it is in the basilica, it is not the image of Joseph alone, found in the votive chapel. Instead the central image in the crypt church is of Joseph with Jesus, albeit an infant Christ. While some extra-liturgical devotions occur in the crypt church, it is not dedicated exclusively to these as is the case in the votive chapel. The primary ritual in the crypt church is the mass, as it is in the basilica, although in the crypt church the masses are usually far simpler, of shorter duration and more frequent. Mass in the crypt church is usually conducted by one priest with perhaps one or two lay assistants, whereas the less frequent celebrations in the basilica feature several priests along with many laypersons and a choir. Such celebrations in the basilica take at least twice as long as the masses in the crypt church, although the latter obviously take longer than the few minutes it takes to say a prayer in front of one of the many altars in the votive chapel. In the votive chapel, at each of the altars are prayers in French and English for the use of visitors. The standard mass book, or missalette, is what is used in the basilica. This is also used in the crypt church, but appended to the order of the mass are prayers to St. Joseph.

[36] Another text that can be seen as absorbing the conflict of religious orientations is a book of prayers (*Recueil de prières*) provided for the use of worshippers in the crypt church. It contains the prayers for confession, and for doing the Stations of the Cross, as well as various sets of prayers addressed to Jesus, to St. Joseph and Brother André. The ideas and attitudes expressed correspond to the type of theologically correct orientation that the Oratory priests wish to encourage in pilgrims. In the June 2008 version of the prayer book, there are prayers to Jesus, to St. Joseph and to Brother André in which can be found a petition for healing. But in all three cases, the petition is embedded in praise for the addressee and requests for help in being more attentive to the needs of others. In fact, in the prayers for healing addressed to Jesus and to Brother André, the petitioners do not specifically pray for themselves but for sick people in general. Only in the prayer to St. Joseph do petitioners ask, “dis une parole pour notre guérison” (“say a word [to God] for *our* healing”).

[37] Therefore in a number of different ways the ritual space and ritual process in the crypt church serves as a mid-point between the extremes of either the basilica or the votive chapel. In doing so, the crypt church legitimizes the private devotions that take place in the votive chapel by uniting them to the act of worship over which the church hierarchy has control. At the same time, in the crypt church, the worship presided over by the clergy is made accessible, both by the location of the crypt church and by the frequency of its services, to the large number of pilgrims whose primary motive for making a visit to the Oratory in the first place is to seek a material blessing from St. Joseph and Brother André.

[38] Although a casual visitor to St. Joseph's Oratory might think that the various ritual locations and the activity that occurs within them are compatible religious expressions, a more systematic analysis reveals two fundamental religious orientations in competition, if not in conflict, with one another. This set of observations is consistent with the claim Eade and Sallnow (1991) make about pilgrimage centres in general that "what confers upon a major shrine its essential, universalistic character [is] its capacity to absorb and reflect a multiplicity of religious discourses." On the other hand, St. Joseph's oratory is not merely a single location to which pilgrims bring their divergent views. The Oratory is not, as Eade and Sallnow argue, simply a "religious void, a ritual space capable of accommodating diverse meanings and practices." Coleman and Elsner (1994) have shown that pilgrimage locations play a far more directive role in shaping the divergent discourses of pilgrims. Certainly this is true of the Oratory. The art, architecture, texts and ritual activities expected and modelled in the votive chapel, the crypt church and the basilica encourage and reinforce specific religious approaches. While Coleman and Elsner are right in emphasizing the influence of the pilgrimage *landscape*, Maniura (2004) offers an important qualification. Pilgrims are not merely passive participants, but are rather active agents in shaping the pilgrimage landscape. This is especially the case if one includes, as Maniura does, under the term *pilgrimage landscape*, the ritual activities of pilgrims. For example, at St. Joseph's Oratory, it is the pilgrims who model the ritual activity in the votive chapel and who choose the altars at which to light candles. It is the pilgrims who determine by their purchases, at least to some extent, what religious statues will be displayed in the religious items store. Thus, systematic observation and analysis of the principal ritual locations at St. Joseph's Oratory are consistent with the insights of more recent research on pilgrimage centres. This does not mean that earlier approaches to pilgrimage are irrelevant to a better understanding of the Oratory. At least one aspect of the Oratory, especially in the 1930s, begs for a functionalist analysis—the role Brother André and the Oratory played in discouraging Quebec workers from joining international labour unions. And I suspect that Turner's concept of liminality might very well apply to busloads of pilgrims coming from individual parishes in the United States and Canada. But these are themes for other studies.

Notes

1. Information on Brother André, the life of the founder of St. Joseph's Oratory; on the history of the construction of the Oratory; and on the dimensions and seating capacities of the various ritual locations in the Oratory can be found in a variety of sources: *The Oratory's Arrow Guide—Saint Joseph's Oratory*, Garigue (1955), and Billick (1965).

2. It should be pointed out that the Congregation of the Holy Cross is an order of teachers—an order of relatively well educated men, many of them with graduate degrees. The search for miraculous solutions by visitors to the Oratory has been regarded by them with some considerable degree of ambivalence.

3. Garigue (1955) reports that in 1955, 23% of the Oratory's gross income of \$2,100,000 came

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from the sale of religious items in the souvenir shop. Included among those religious items are statues of Jesus, the Virgin Mary and a wide range of saints. On June 9, 2008, I counted the number of statues for sale of the Virgin Mary (182), Brother André (169), St. Joseph (120), St. Anne (56), and Jesus (52). The numbers of statues of other saints (e.g., St. Francis, St. Thérèse of Lisieux) were far fewer than the number of statues of Jesus. These figures give some idea of the devotional orientation of the customers of the religious items shop, and of the willingness of the custodians of the Oratory to cater to this orientation.

4. In January 2008, the Oratory web site contained no testimonies to miracles (an indication of the ambivalence of the Oratory's custodians regarding the goal of seeking magical solutions to the problems of life), although visitors to the web site were invited to share their memories of their visit to the Oratory, and two photos of such visits were posted—one of these was of a group of French pilgrims posing outside the Oratory, and the other was a photo of the basilica submitted by a visitor from New Brunswick. On the other hand, the web site advertised St. Joseph's oil, for sale in the religious items shop and online, explaining that, "Brother André often suggested to the sick who came in search of relief that they rub a bit of oil on the part of their body that was hurting, while invoking Saint Joseph for assistance." However the same announcement was quick to point out that,

He [Brother André] made it clear that the oil itself had no miraculous curative powers, and that only God had the power to heal. He emphasized that prayer combined with this gesture symbolizing the strength of one's belief were ways of expressing one's inner faith in God's power. [Available online January 8, 2008 at: http://www.saint-joseph.org/en_1145_index.asp].

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