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Chapter 7

Sacrality Without Borders: Thoughts on Virtual Cult Sites[46]

Krisztina Frauhammer

Beyond everyday existence there is an area known as the transcendent or sometimes as the sacred.[47] It cannot be grasped, it falls beyond the borders of human perception. Nevertheless it shows itself in many ways and so it can be experienced, for example as it is manifested in this world. (Korpics-Szilczl 2007: 17-19) The manifestation of the transcendent also has another perspective. In this the focus is on the individual and his openness. It is this openness that makes the individual capable of noticing the divine presence manifested to him in everyday life. He perceives that he can name, for example, feelings and situations where the transcendent was able to influence him to perform actions with which it could reach him. This perception can be grasped, we have tools whereby we can describe it and show it. (Korpics-Szilczl 2007: 19-21) Such tools can be the rites, their prayer, song and liturgical texts, pilgrimage, etc. These mark the frames of the manifestation of the transcendent. The individual enters into contact with the transcendent within these frames, drawing on the experiences acquired in the community, that is, on his sacral preparedness.

Apart from occasions of individual prayer, until the recent past this sacral communication had a very concrete, definable place: the spaces of churches, chapels, monasteries and other sacral buildings. It is primarily these spaces that the believer, in possession of his preparedness, seeks when he longs to experience the transcendent. He believes that these places are special places for the presence of the transcendent and so for contact with it. He also believes that this transcendent

[47] Berger cited by Korpics-Szilczl: 2007: 17.
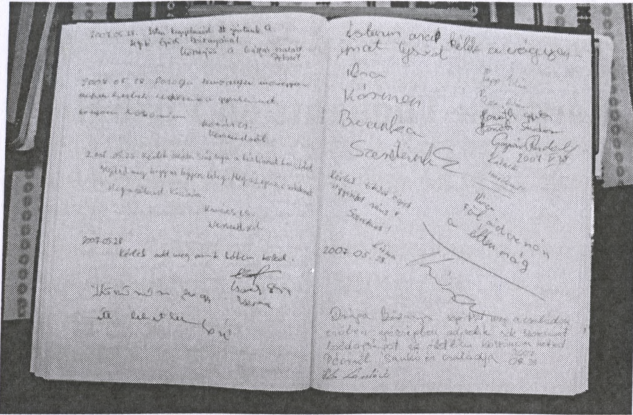
Prayer Book of the famous
Hungarian pilgrimage
Máriapócs.

is capable of intervening in human life and the natural world around him and for this reason he seeks opportunities for contact with it.

With the spread of the Internet the borders of these spaces for communication, including sacral communication, have extended far beyond the real frames listed above and the steady spread of virtual cult places can also be observed. The church itself also takes an active part in the creation of these places, indeed it can often be said that there is a church initiative behind them (in the form of a parish priest, parish community, parish spiritual group). However, there is no system of conditions regulated by the church to restrict the creation of such sites and forums, so the possibility of creating similar virtual sacral spaces is open to everyone.

So far I have found few websites offering such opportunities on the Hungarian-language Internet sites,[48] but in Western Europe these are now well known forums for making contact with the transcendent. In Germany alone the different churches operate more than 5000 websites. Perhaps the best known of these is the Saint Boniface church in the virtual Funama city that has been receiving visitors since 1998. This site alone registers 14,000 visitors a month. (Butler 2005: 18-19) Twice a week there are opportunities to chat with them and afterwards to pray by typing

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[48] Prayer intentions can be sent to Mátraverebély-Szentkút and the local Franciscans will pray for them. Currently the parish community of Mocsa, the parish community of Saint Imre in Kaposvár and the Homokkomárom community of Eight Joys pray for intentions sent to www.imaszandek.hu, but others can join them in their intercession. Another Internet portal offers the opportunity of lighting virtual candles and of writing a prayer in conjunction with the lighting of candles.
http://ima.lap.hu/, http://imaszandek.hu, accessed on October 31, 2013. http://www.szentkut.hu/matraverebely_szentkut_nemzeti_kegyhely, accessed on October 31, 2013.

Funama city – the virtual city.

the Lord's Prayer. (Afif 2003: 116-118) A real minister takes part in the work in the background. This example, and others to be shown later, indicate that real persons can always be found behind these virtual spaces.

Jacques Gaillot, bishop of the virtual French diocese Partenia justified the growing participation of the church in the Internet with the following argument: "Today, when the churches are ever more empty, we must preach the gospel wherever people meet. The Internet is such a place." (Butler 2005: 18) The Pope himself stressed the pastoral significance of the Internet in his message issued for World Communications Day. In it he stresses that thanks to modern means of communications priests can introduce people to the life of the church and help our contemporaries to discover the face of Christ. He also urges priests to use blogs and online videos in evangelisation. In the message he says that use of the Internet must be made part of the training of priests. In the words of the Pope, the priest "must give a soul to the fabric of communications that makes up the 'Web'. Priests should devote special attention to non-believers, to seekers, to those who long for absolute, lasting values (...) and God's loving care in Christ must be expressed in the digital world".[49] The handbooks that provide an

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[49] The Pope published his message for World Communications day (May 16) on January 23, 2010, the Feast of Saint Francis of Sales, patron saint of journalists. See the article on the message at: http://infonaplo.blogspot.com/2010/01/papa-az-internet-hasznalat-ara-buzditja.html accessed on February 24, accessed on November 11, 2013.
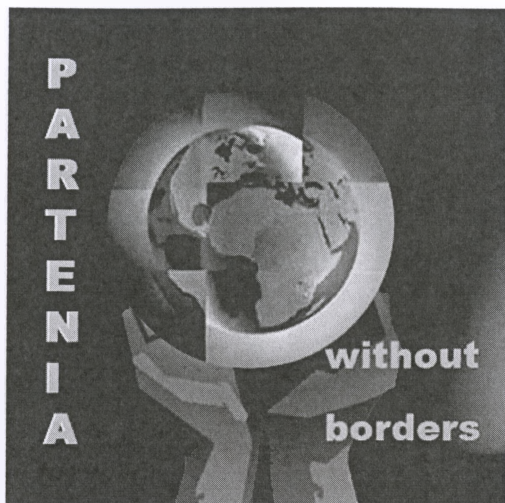
Partenia – virtual diocese.

expert guide to Internet pastoral work are also evidence of the church's conscious missionary activity in this area.[50] All these aspirations of the church indicate that it regards the web as a real space and missionary field.

It is thus primarily the church that is the main multiplicator of these modern religious manifestations. However, they emphasise that they regard the Internet only as a living field of pastoral care in which the Internet acts as a medium. They wish to make use of it to extend help in the difficulties of self-reflection, self-evaluation and becoming more human, bringing web surfers face to face with the gospel and offering Christian lifestyle guidance. (Butler 2005: 18)The real aim is to lead those addressed in this way into real churches.

In my study I wish to present such virtual cult places and the forms of modern devotion that are spreading here. In this way too I would like to draw attention to the part this special "net existence"[51] plays in individual religiosity and its characteristics, signalling the need for research on this theme.

In my research on the web I focused on a special form of devotional practice, that of posting prayers of intercession and thanksgiving in a public place. Prayers recorded in such a written form often appear in traditional Catholic places of pilgrimage, in their guestbooks and on prayer slips placed on the votive altars, as well as in the parish churches of other Christian denominations.[52] It is also known that the custom of recording of individual prayers and displaying them publicly is found

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[50] Michael Belzer: InternetsselsorgeVerlag Katholisches Bibelwerk GmbH, Stuttgart 2004; Rainer Gelhot, Norbert Lübke, Gabi Weinz: Per Mausklick in die Kirche. Reale Seelsorge in der virtuellen Welt. Verlag Haus Altenberg 2008.

[51] László Ropolyi introduced the concept of net existence and defined it as "a form of being based on open, virtual communities". For more details, see: Ropolyi 2006: 67.

[52] For more detail on the practice of recording individual prayers in writing and making them public, see: Frauhammer, Krisztina: Írásba foglalt vágyak és imák. [Hes and prayers communicate in writing], Szeged, Néprajzi Tanszék, 2012.

among Jews,[53] the Orthodox,[54] Coptic Christians and even Muslims[55] as well as among Japanese Shintoists.[56]

Research on these special sources among Catholics showed that the sacral space is also of significance when writing such prayers. This is principally because of the votive statues and images found there and the objects confirming miraculous events associated with them. These can be regarded as giving legitimacy to the place and show the special force of the transcendent present there.

But it would appear that the fact that the spaces have become virtual has not weakened this devotional practice, indeed it is constantly opening up new dimensions for it.

Despite their access from the Internet, these cult places and the message books

Written prayers in traditional Catholic places of pilgrimage.

(Fürbittenbücher) available here are often located on the borderline between the real and the virtual world. Behind most of them there is a real parish community or monastic community. They also have many other features that appear realistic: their message books have the appearance of a real book, religious works of art and photos of church interiors can be seen on the screen, and a candle can be lit for the

[53] For more details on the Jewish prayer slips (*kvitli*) see: Gleszer, Norbert, 2005, "*Kvitli*", in: Barna, Gábor-Mód, László-Simon, András (eds.): Szent ez a föld. Néprajzi írások az Alföldről, [This land is sacred. Ethnological writings on the Great Plain], Szeged, Néprajzi Tanszék, 146-159.

[54] For the Orthodox practice of writing prayer slips (*zapiski*) I have drawn on the data of Éva Pócs and Dr. Péter Tóth. For more detail on the *zapiski*, see: Tobias Köllner–Komáromi, Tünde-Agata Ładykowska-Detelina Tocheva-Jarret Zigon-Milena Benovska-Sabkova: "Spreading grace in post-Soviet Russia", in: Anthropology Today 2009: 16-21.

[55] My thanks to Irén Lovász for the information.

[56] For more details on the Shintoist prayer slips (*ema*) see: Gerhard Schmied, 1997, Lieber Gott, gütigste Frau. Eine empirische Untersuchung von Fürbitterbüchern. Konstanz, Universitätsverlag, 99-101.
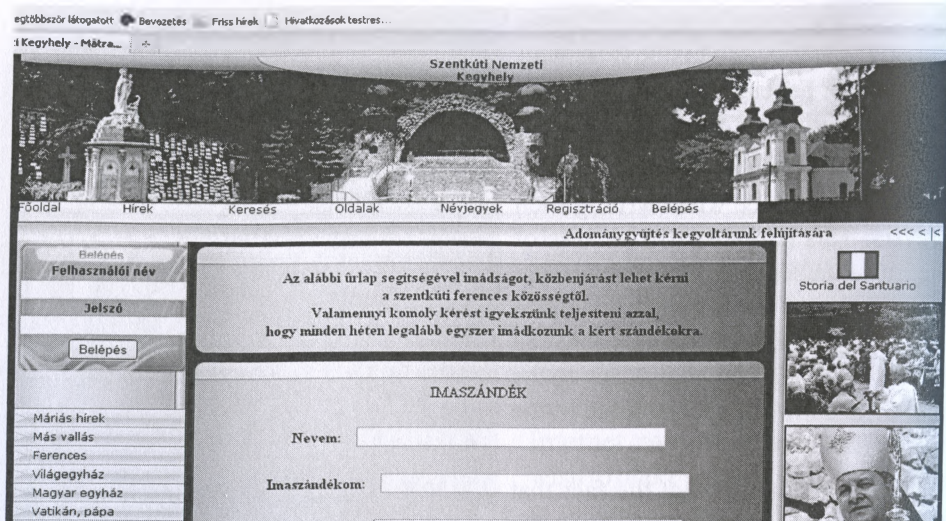
The website of the place of pilgrimage at Mátraverebély-Szentkút (Hungary).

prayers written in the book.[57] In this way efforts are made to give the virtual reality a real atmosphere and the image of a real custom (the candle can be interpreted as a virtual votive gift). The result is the creation of trust in the virtual space. (Lingens 2003-2004: 227) The website of the place of pilgrimage at Mátraverebély-Szentkút informs visitors that prayers entered on the site are displayed in the chapel by the monks so that all members of the community can pray for them. This represents a leap back into the real world and is a signal that the virtual world is not always satisfactory. (Lingens 2003-2004: 235) However, it can be a useful tool and vehicle for seeking the transcendent.

The guestbooks accessible at the major places of pilgrimage are also popular and much visited.[58] This is an indication that in many cases the pilgrimage is also becoming virtual. There is no need in future for someone to make a real journey for a pilgrimage to a sacred place, it can also be done with a click of the mouse. The Swiss ethnologist Walter Heim notes that at times people had letters sent to the tombs or altars of saints in place of pilgrimages; he calls such pilgrims wish

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[57] For a few Internet church guestbooks, see: http://www.benedikterinnen-osnabrueck.de/page8.html; http://www.sankt-petrus-heede.de; http://sankt-gertrud.de; http://www.erzbistum-freiburg.de/gebetsanliegen, accessed on October 31, 2013.

[58] http://www.kapuziner-bayern.de; http://altoetting-wallfahrt.de/pages/index3.html, 2009.09.25. http://www.szentkut.hu/matraverebely_szentkut_nemzeti_kegyhely, accessed on October 31, 2013.

Virtual chapel.

pilgrims. (Heim 1961: 90-91) Using this pattern we can create a new term to describe those who use the Internet to visit places of pilgrimage: they can be called virtual pilgrims.

There are also virtual chapels that represent themselves with photos of real chapels but are not linked to them in any other way. One such chapel was built on the Internet by a young priest, Raimund Alker as a project for his diploma work in theology at Augsburg.[59] He writes the following about the virtual chapel he built and the book placed in it: "My motivation in building the virtual chapel was my experience that there are many searchers on the Internet seeking luck, love or sex. I believe it is only in God that such desires can find fulfilment. The virtual chapel is intended as a place where people can encounter God."[60]

The basic function is thus the same as it is for real churches and their guestbooks and prayer slips: to enter into contact with the heavenly powers, with a tran-

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[59] The site can be accessed at: www.gebetsanliegen.de. (The virtual chapel is and will remain closed until further notice.)

[60] The full text is not available, because the virtual chapel is and will remain closed until further notice.

scendent being. Another very important function is added to this: in addition to the saint, God and the Virgin Mary, the person who reads the entry will have a major role. Why? The Internet provides the opportunity to respond to the other person's prayer, to give encouragement or consolation. As a result a substantive discourse often arises among the persons making entries. People registering in Raimund Alke's chapel can indicate whether they would like to receive a reply to their prayer. It is quite clear from this that the other fellow human being appears as an addressee equivalent in status to the saint, God and the Virgin Mary. This naturally gives these churches and the books placed in them quite different, entirely profane functions: they become a forum for conversations, spiritual guides, lifestyle counselling. (Lingens 2003-2004: 233-235) But this shift of emphasis also raises the desacralisation of this written form of devotion. However, it must be noted that the requests and prayer intentions written here very often have no specifically named addressee. In real pilgrimage churches the faithful generally turn to the Virgin Mary or saints who are represented there in the form of images and statues. The way they are addressed often indicates a very confidential, deep and personal relationship. Those who visit cult places on the web often speak to an unspecified, very abstract transcendent being. Perhaps this is precisely one of the reasons why people on very different levels of religiosity can also join in this devotional practice, naturally only as far as their preparedness allows.

In their subject matter these books and their entries are characterised by the same diversity extending to all areas of life as the texts in the real books. They are full of problems and questions reflecting the social and economic situation of our time. Their formal features are also very similar. However, it seems to me that there is one essential difference between them: most frequently the focal point of the prayers is not another person but the person praying. In this way, in my opinion, the self-reflection and self-portrayal of these people becomes a central element.

It is also a circumstance worth noting that the entries are not stored indefinitely; after a certain quantity they are deleted. In my earlier research I found that an important motivating factor in prayers written down in real churches is the manifestation of the object of the prayer. For many people this objectification and eternalisation of the prayer makes what is written down and its realisation more effective and certain. Here this motivation does not have the same significance. Despite the fact that they are written the prayers can be considered as more closely related to oral texts. These features reminiscent of orality are reinforced by the lightness and provisional nature often found in the formulation.

It can also be observed that not all the stored prayers are accessible, only the most recent entries. Almost all pages offer the option for the person making the entry to forbid disclosure of his or her prayer. This offers greater intimacy than real books

that can be leafed through and is perhaps a factor contributing to the great popularity of these portals. This intimacy is further increased by the absence of status and any other indications of the life situation. Closely related to this is the special emphasis in these books on anonymity or the often fictive user name that is a common practice on the Internet and is perhaps one of the principal characteristics of this virtual world. As a consequence, even less can be known about those who enter into contact with the heavenly powers in this way. (Lingens 2003-2004: 240-241)

The prayers of petition and thanksgiving presented briefly above represent only a small slice of the religiosity experienced in the virtual cult sites. It is important to see that this is a very individual rite that also is physically very far from the cult practices (such as pilgrimages) that are based on a common conviction and common knowledge. At the same time the frames of popular religiosity based on narrow, centuries-old traditions had also broken down. The result of all these circumstances has been the emergence of very individual, very eclectic devotional techniques. (Kromer 1997: 101) As the prayers entered in the Internet portals clearly show, it is becoming increasingly common to mingle elements taken from traditional religious practice with modern themes such as self-portrayal and self-realisation and even to place the main emphasis on the latter. The desire for a miracle has given way to sharing individual emotions with others.

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