

Devoting with the Feet: Motivations and Trajectory of the Pilgrims towards the Sanctuary of Fátima

Pedro Pereira

Abstract – Since the *apparitions of the Virgin Mary* at Fátima, in 1917, until the present day, thousands of people have been walking the path that leads them to what is called, in Catholic circles, the «Altar of the World». Much has been written about Fátima, but very little about the current practices of the pilgrims from the moment they leave their homes and walk the distance that separates them from the Sanctuary of Fátima. However, the act of walking to Fátima is strongly conditioned by the motivations that underlie it, which is often a promise. This paper starts by contextualizing the pilgrims' journey to Fátima within the historical and cultural landscape of the peregrination to sacred places. Then, based on anthropological fieldwork—which has consisted on the accompaniment of pilgrims from Porto to Fátima—it is sustained here, on the one hand, that the pilgrims who walk to Fátima, far from being part of a *communitas*, reveal deeply individualized practices to carry out this pilgrimage; and, on the other hand, that these pilgrims try to pay their promised great sacrifice with the *least* possible suffering. Thus, in this behaviour of «devoting with their feet», in which the road assumes a greater value than the Sanctuary itself, the encounter of the pilgrim with the image of the Lady of Fátima, in the Chapel of the Apparitions, marks not only the end of the fatigue and journey, but also the re-establishment of the balance in the believer's relationship with the Lady of Fátima.

Onehundred years ago a little shepherdess was the main protagonist¹ of an event that transformed a small village in what is now often des-

In the statement «devoting with the feet», referred here and throughout the text, the *feet* should be understood as a metonymic expression of the whole body. Although there is a clear involvement of the whole body, it is in the feet that the wounds of the course manifest in a more evident way. This article summarizes the topic developed in my master's degree thesis entitled *Peregrinos: Um estudo antropológico das peregrinações a pé a Fátima*, Lisboa 2003 and an earlier version of this text has been published in Portuguese with the title *Devotando com os pés*, in «Revista Academia - Revista do Instituto Politécnico de Viana do Castelo», 2005, 2. I thank Professor José Sobral for the critical reading of the text, as well as the presented suggestions. I am also grateful to my colleague Mário João Braga for the revision of the text.

¹ Her prominent role is due, on the one hand, to her long life, on the other hand, and far more important, to the role played during the various Apparitions. Throughout all the Apparitions, she

ignated, in Catholic circles, the «Altar of the World»: The Apparitions of Our Lady at Fátima. Since 1917, millions and millions of pilgrims have travelled in many ways to the Sanctuary of Fátima, fulfilling an everlasting behaviour that will surely survive the recent death of Sister Lúcia. In fact, the pilgrimages to Fátima are part of what is commonly called «Christian pilgrimages» and within these, Marian pilgrimages.

Regarding the Christian pilgrimages, these began to be more relevant in the fourth century, when Christianity became a state religion, and were focused essentially on two cities: Jerusalem and Rome². Throughout the Middle Ages, the pilgrimages in question certainly had their apogee with the remarkable success of sanctuaries already known and with the unstoppable creation of new centres of pilgrimage. According to Roussel, «wonders, apparitions, relics, ashes, or the uplifting life of the saints elicit a whole procession of repeated legends, amplified miracles, the building of chapels or churches that stimulate the piety of marvelled crowds»³. Thus, the relics of Christ, Mary, and the saints were used by clergymen to increase the profit of the institutions that received the relics, since they enabled a greater influx of pilgrims who also wanted indulgences. Although the great number of relics propitiated a proliferation of pilgrimage places throughout the Middle Ages, a very large number of pilgrims converged on Jerusalem, Rome and Compostela⁴. Concerning Compostela, the pilgrimage to the tomb of St. James began in the ninth century, gathering pilgrims in a growing way until the sixteenth century, when it lost some brilliance, although it continues to be a great Christian centre of pilgrimage.

was the only one who saw, heard and spoke to the Lady of Fátima. Although the seers see and hear (Francisco only sees), in most of the Apparitions Lúcia was the only one who spoke to the Lady, as she addresses to Lúcia in particular. In addition, Sister Lúcia was present in two complementary apparitions that enabled her to reveal two-thirds of the secret; And she published her *memoirs*, reporting also to the *Apparitions*.

² In the first city, the areas that attract more pilgrims are the basilicas of Anastasis (Church of the Holy Sepulchre), Martyrium (Calvary), Eleona (Plateau of Ascension) and Zion (Memory of Pentecost). In the second city, the pilgrims are attracted by the tombs of St. Peter and St. Paul, and by the indulgences provided by the Popes. In fact, there are numerous pilgrimages to tombs or relics of martyrs.

³ R. Roussel, *Les Pèlerinages*, Paris 1956, p. 99.

⁴ In the case of the first two cities for the reasons already mentioned, although another motivation should be added in the case of pilgrimages to Rome, which in the jubilee year of 1.300 received many pilgrims due to the plenary indulgence that Pope Boniface VII granted to those who have made the trip. See M. Longa Perez, *El viaje como experiencia e símbolo. Consideraciones en torno a la peregrinación y al turismo religioso*, in «Compostellanum - Revista de la Archidiócesis de Santiago de Compostela - Sección de Estudios Jacobeos», Santiago de Compostela, Julio-Diciembre, 38, 1993, 3-4, pp. 505-544.

As for the Marian pilgrimages, they began to gain visibility throughout the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries and were attracting a growing number of believers who worshiped a statue of the Virgin, promoting the revival of the existing sanctuaries, as for example, Chartres, Puy, Boulogne, in France and Montserrat, in Catalonia. From the fifteenth century, onwards, there was a decline in pilgrimages, due in the first place to the Protestant Reformation, which, as Christendom split, diminished the number of all those involved in pilgrimages and much later because of the impact of the French Revolution. Since the second half of the nineteenth century, the marked flourishing of the Marian pilgrimage shrines⁵, such as Fátima, has contributed, with its nearly four million pilgrims a year⁶, to obscure other places of pilgrimage.

But the pilgrimage phenomenon, defined as a journey made by devotion to a sacred place, presents a sustained comprehension that goes far beyond the Christian religious universe. In ancient Egypt, with pilgrimages to holy cities, particularly to Abydos, but also to Busiris, Thebes, Luxor and Karnak; The Hittites, as well as the Babylonians, made several pilgrimages, standing out, in this last town, the pilgrimage to the city of the most important god: Marduk. Among the Hebrews, with the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, in the three feasts related to the Nature Cycle; In India, pilgrimage to places of nature are frequent, such as, for example, mountains, caves, rivers, woods, sea or lakes; Before his death, Buddha defined four important places of pilgrimage,

«The park of Lumbini, where he was born; Bodh-Gaya, with the *bodhi* tree, where his awakening took place; The park of Benares, where he pronounced the first sermon after his awakening; The small forest of the Complete Extinction in Kusinagara»⁷.

In Classical Antiquity, the Greeks and the Romans made several pilgrimages to several shrines, in the first we can point out the sanctuary of Epidaurus with Asclepius and in the second Mithra. In Islam there are two particular types of pilgrimages: the *ziyarat* and the *hajj*. The *ziyarat* are the local pilgrimages in honour of saints and the *hajj* is the pilgrimage to Mecca, being obligatory to all the Muslims.

⁵ Also worthy of mention are the pilgrimages to Czestochowa, Loreto and Maria Zell, and other more recent ones such as Bac Street (1830), Lourdes (1858) and Pontmain (1871), in France.

⁶ Marian sanctuaries are not only numerous, but also receive many pilgrims per year, for example: Guadeloupe (7 million), Lourdes (4.5 million) and Aparecida (6 million).

⁷ See M. Delahoutre, *Peregrinaciones búdicas*, in P. Poupard (ed), *Diccionario de las Religiones*, Barcelona 1987, pp. 1406-1407.

In other geographic and cultural spaces, as in the American continent, some civilizations already missing, such as the Maya, Aztec and Inca, had pilgrimage among their religious practices. Similarly, it is possible to find pilgrimage in peoples such as the Huichol (Mexico), the Lunda (Angola, Congo and Zambia), the Shona (Zimbabwe) or the Maori (New Zealand).

In all forms of pilgrimage towards the most diverse sacred places it is evident the approach to the sacred using the body itself. But what is specific about the pilgrimage on foot to Fátima? The purpose of this article is precisely to contribute to the understanding of the religious beliefs and practices of the pilgrims who walk from home towards the Shrine of Fátima, more specifically their motivations and behaviour along the way.

One of the difficulties in the study of this kind of pilgrimage to Fátima is its classification. The criteria proposed by different authors to classify the pilgrimages are diverse. On a religious criterion, the mentioned pilgrimage would be Christian, or attending to the entity that is worshiped, it should be Marian. Using a geographical criterion, as Jackowski⁸ and V. Turner⁹ do, the pilgrimage to Fátima would fall into the international category, since it attracts pilgrims from different parts of the world. Following a historical criterion, and considering the categorization of Edith and Victor Turner¹⁰ the pilgrimage to Fátima would be modern. This is because it had arisen in the twentieth century, originated by an apparition or vision and characterized «by a strong tone of devotion and fervent personal piety of their adherents, and constitute an important part of the system of repentance spread against the increasing secularization of the Post-Darwinian world»¹¹.

However, these classifications, as well as other classifications defended by other authors¹², refer particularly to the places of pilgrimage or to the religion associated with the cult and do not value the motivations to undertake such a journey. As the generality of the pilgrims who walk to Fátima are motivated by a promise previously made, this implies that

⁸ A. Jackowski, *Geography of pilgrimage in Poland*, in «The National Geographic Journal of India», 1987, 33, pp. 422-429.

⁹ V. Turner, *The Center out There: Pilgrim's Goal*, in «History of Religions», 12, 1973, 3, pp. 191-230.

¹⁰ V. Turner - E. Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture – Anthropological Perspectives*, Oxford 1978.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

¹² Such as S.M. Bhardwaj, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India: A Study in Cultural Geography*, Berkeley CA 1973 or J.J. Preston, *Sacred Places: Schemes of Classification*, «Paper at Conference on Pilgrimage, The Human Quest», University of Pittsburgh, 1980.

the motivations must be obligatorily studied, under the risk of making the understanding of this phenomenon unfeasible. In this way, and based on the typology proposed by A. Morinis¹³ to classify the different types of journeys according to the motive, it is possible to affirm that, in general, the pilgrimage on foot to Fátima is part of the instrumental pilgrimage, that is, «Instrumental pilgrimages are made to accomplish finite and worldly goals»¹⁴. Although Morinis points out that in all religious traditions it is possible to find people who travel to a sanctuary with the hope of obtaining a cure for some illness, this is not the case among the pilgrims who walk towards Fátima, at least this is not the most frequent, because the generality of these pilgrims will thank a cure (or other *grace*) that they have already received. Nevertheless, as it has already been pointed out by Pereira¹⁵, it may be useful to subdivide the pilgrimages that Morinis classifies as instrumental in two types: those that are done to obtain something; and those that are made as a fulfilment of a promise (it is specifically here that the generality of the pilgrimages on foot to Fátima fit). This division is very important, because in the first case pilgrimage is a means to an end, in the second pilgrimage is a fulfilment of a contract already made and with an end already achieved. Naturally, this intention at the beginning of the pilgrimage is reflected in the way the pilgrimage itself is made. In addition, although the motives are fundamental to understand the pilgrimages, these are not limited to the reasons, because before the same instrumental reason, we can find pilgrims who make the trip by car and others who make the trip on foot. In both cases, the physical, emotional and social consequences will be quite different for the pilgrims. Thus, the typology proposed by Morinis is insufficient to understand the pilgrimage because it does not contemplate the way the journey is made, which is essential to understand the pilgrimages on foot to Fátima.

Thus, the understanding of religious beliefs and practices concerning pilgrimage must inexorably pass through the study of the three fundamental features: the motives for commencing the journey, the route, and the sacred place¹⁶. Most of the pilgrims who go to Fátima on foot do so within the framework of a promise. This fact is of great importance,

¹³ A. Morinis, *Introduction: The Territory of the Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, in A. Morinis (ed), *Sacred Journeys – The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, London 1992, pp. 1-28.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

¹⁵ P. Pereira, *Peregrinos: Um estudo antropológico das peregrinações a pé a Fátima*.

¹⁶ For a more detailed approach on the practices of the walking pilgrims while in the Sanctuary of Fátima, see *ibidem*, pp. 152-171.

since it will condition the entire journey, from home to the Sanctuary and even the behaviour in the Sanctuary itself¹⁷. Consequently, in the case of the pilgrims who walk to Fátima, they only begin their journey after their wish is fulfilled.

The motives that lead believers to commit themselves to walk towards Fátima are the most diverse: finding employment, children completing a college course, ending the wandering life of a child or husband, family conflicts, the birth of a healthy child, surgery, drug addiction, cancer, illness, among others. However, among the problems that believers consider serious, the predominance is the disease, particularly the one which has a marked severity for believers. Indeed, as W. Christian points out, the most important promises are made to more distant supernatural beings¹⁸. Thus, the believers promise to make long kilometres on foot until arriving at the Sanctuary where the Lady of Fátima is. In this way, it may be noticed that the Lady of Fátima, like other supernatural beings, is not a purely metaphysical being, but is embodied in a statue¹⁹, which favours the phenomenological relationship with this same body²⁰, allowing a human treatment²¹. It should also be noted that in this process of «affective sacramentalization of the sacred image»²² the image is not, for the believers, a symbol of another power, but the supernatural power of the Virgin who is intimately connected with the image²³.

As already written by Pereira²⁴, the promises have three phases: the declaration of commitment, the gift of the Supernatural Being and the counter-gift. Regarding the declaration of commitment, the promiser enunciates the contract with the Lady of Fátima in the following way: «If you give me what I'm asking for I promise to go to Fátima on foot».

¹⁷ In a simple way, and according to M. Meslin, a promise is a vow that «was the most usual and legal way for the Roman to establish relations with his gods», M. Meslin, *Votum*, in P. Poupard (ed), *Diccionario de las Religiones*, Barcelona 1987, p. 1829. The same author also points out that the *votum* «consisted in the promise of an offering made to a deity, on the condition that man could obtain a special favor from it. Only if the wish was fulfilled is that the man would accomplish what he had promised», *ibidem*, p. 1829.

¹⁸ W.A. Christian, *Person and God in Spanish Valley*, New York 1972.

¹⁹ It should be noted that the promisers, the people who make promises, present some diversity regarding academic background and age. As for gender, the women predominate.

²⁰ E. Leach, *Cultura e comunicação*, Lisboa 1992.

²¹ P. Sanchis, *Arraial: Festa de um povo – as romarias portuguesas*. Lisboa 1992; M. Weber, *La aparición de las religiones*, in «Sociología de la religión», Madrid 1997.

²² M. Meslin, *L'Expérience humaine du divin*, Paris 1988, p. 272.

²³ V. Turner - E. Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture – Anthropological Perspectives*.

²⁴ P. Pereira, *Peregrinos: Um estudo antropológico das peregrinações a pé a Fátima*, pp. 94-101.

As it is clear in this statement, only when the first condition is fulfilled is that the promiser feels in the obligation to fulfil its part. Concerning promises imploring health, the promisers pay with the sacrifice of their body's health – pilgrimage on foot – the health that the Lady of Fátima allowed them to recover, thus noticing a symbolically balanced reciprocity.

The gift of the Supernatural Being corresponds to what the believers commonly call a 'miracle'. However, for the promisers, this concept of miracle does not correspond necessarily to an event contrary to the *Laws of Nature*, but, as Pina Cabral²⁵ maintains, «any event that corresponds to a previously expressed desire of the individual, and particularly if this desire has been manifested through prayers, promises, or vows»²⁶. In fact, the definition of 'miracle' proposed by Pina Cabral is entirely in keeping with the generality of the promises, especially those of pilgrimage on foot to Fátima, since in the case of the materialization of what the prompter had requested to Our Lady of Fátima, the promiser considers that she fulfilled her part and therefore he should reciprocate with what he had previously defined.

On the counter-gift, that is, the payment of the promise, the promiser must comply with what he had promised to the Lady of Fátima: to go on foot to Fátima²⁷. Thus, starting from a spiritual journey that is the promise, the believers assume the condition of pilgrims and begin a physical journey, carrying out the journey from their home to the Sanctuary of Fátima. Indeed, the similitude of the promise made by the pilgrims – going to Fátima on foot – could, on a more superficial approach, lead one to suppose that there would be a marked homogeneity of behaviour resulting from a similar practice – *walking*. Eventually, one could even glimpse, in Turner's *view*²⁸ (1978), the passage from *societas* to *communitas*. However, the pilgrimage on foot is not homogeneous, there being no pilgrimage on foot to Fátima, but pilgrimages on foot to Fátima.

²⁵ J. de Pina Cabral, *O Pagamento do Santo – Uma tipologia interpretativa dos ex-votos no contexto sócio-cultural do noroeste português*, in «Studium Generale: Estudos Contemporâneos», 1984, 6, pp. 97-112.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 105.

²⁷ However, the exchanges that take place with Our Lady of Fátima are gifts and counter-gifts, in the Maussian sense of the term, that is, each part gives part of itself in what it offers. See M. Mauss, *Ensaio sobre a Dádiva*, Lisboa 1988, pp. 114-115. Most of the time, the Lady of Fátima gives health and is responsible for that individual's health, and he repays with the sacrifice of his body, a sacrifice that can never be separated from the body, that is, from the individual; So much so that some individuals remain with their body marked for life.

²⁸ V. Turner - E. Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture – Anthropological Perspectives*.

In fact, the diversity of ways of devoting with one's feet is so great that it becomes impossible to categorize them, being more appropriate to consider a continuum of possibilities to fulfil the promise of walking to Fátima. One way of elucidating the referred continuum is to exemplify the two poles which support it. At one extreme, there is the less common case of pilgrims leaving their homes with only the clothes they had on their bodies and asking for food and shelter along the way. At the other extreme comes what is possible to designate as pilgrimages in share. In this case, the pilgrims divide the entire journey in several stages that go in a fragmented way, as is evident from what some pilgrims have told me: on a Sunday they walked about twenty kilometres, then returned home in the car of relatives; On the following Sunday they drove to the place where they had stopped the previous Sunday and travelled another twenty kilometres, returning home again in the car of relatives; Repeating this performance continuously they quietly and lingeringly finally arrive to Fátima.

Between the two poles, there are many ways of doing the course, becoming clear that the socio-economic conditions of the pilgrims influence their status as pilgrims, for example, allowing them to sleep on a mattress on the floor of a gym together with dozens of other pilgrims, or sleep peacefully in a hotel or residential bed, after a soothing bath. However, there seems to be a concern that is infecting more and more pilgrims: the logistics of travel. This is particularly evident in the growing use of a support car²⁹, which contributes to make the pilgrimage less harsh.

In fact, as has already been argued, «what is common to the various types of pilgrimage on the way to Fátima is the search to reduce to the maximum some of the elements that characterized and still characterize some pilgrimages: the uncertainty of the trip, the dangers on the way, being apart from home and family, among others. This is perhaps due essentially to the motive of the pilgrimage in question, for what is fundamental for the pilgrims is the fulfilment of a promise that goes by pilgrimage on foot»³⁰. Thus, even if there is cooperation, particularly among people in smaller groups who share food, housing,

²⁹ The support *car* should be understood as the cars or vans that carry the belongings of the pilgrims and all the stuff that can aid them directly or indirectly, namely the bags with the clothes and personal objects of the pilgrims. These vehicles are often driven by a family member or a friend of a member of the group which stops cyclically and provides the pilgrims with all kinds of goods they need, such as a bottle of water, an umbrella or a jacket.

³⁰ P. Pereira, *Peregrinos: Um estudo antropológico das peregrinações a pé a Fátima*, p. 104. Unlike the pilgrimage on foot to Fátima because of a promise, in other religious beliefs the harshness of

medicine and health advices, individual interest in paying the pledge overrides the interests of the group and in some cases, even the family. In the group where I joined to do the fieldwork there were two relatives (brother and sister). He walked without great difficulty and was among the first to reach the end of the daily journey. She was in a lot of trouble, having stopped on her first day of travel with her feet in a deeply debilitated state.

In the pilgrimages on foot to Fátima are present what A. Morinis designates as *highly individual practices*³¹, where people may travel in a group not for the pleasure of travel or cooperation, but as a privileged strategy to fulfil the promise to walk to Fátima, reducing the suffering, the discomfort and the insecurity as much as possible. I often could hear from members of my group and other pilgrims the expression, «each one walks at his own pace». This assertion is naturally expressed in individual walking practices, reducing cooperation. In fact, I often saw people walking alone for several kilometres, even those belonging to some group.

In a conclusive way, it can be affirmed that the pilgrims who walk to Fátima find in that place what A. Morinis designates as collective ideals of the culture³², that is, places where religious ideals are intensely present, in this case where the power of the Lady of Fátima can be invoked for the resolution of crucial problems of the believers. However, as the pilgrims have already deeply internalized the ideal that involves the Lady of Fátima, they spiritually invoke the power of the Lady of Fátima to solve their problems, secured by the promise to walk to her Shrine.

Consequently, and as has already been argued, «the commitment to *devote with the feet* while going to the Shrine of Our Lady of Fátima is sufficient for a believer to be able to invoke the collective ideal that is present in the Shrine, or more precisely, that involves Our Lady of Fátima. The key is that the believer restores the balance in the relationship with the Lady of Fátima, balance that was broken when the believer called upon this entity to solve a problem. The search for balance manifests

the journey may be particularly important. See, for example, the Hindu and Buddhist pilgrimages. The spiritual merit of the Hindu pilgrim will be all the greater the more austere the journey. See A.R. Choudhury, *O Hinduísmo*, in J. Holm - J. Bower (edd), *Lugares Sagrados*, Lisboa 1999, pp. 69-91. In Buddhism, spiritual merit rises with the harshness of the journey, and it is important that the body, discourse and spirit are involved in an arduous and disciplined way. See M. Boord, *O Budismo*, in J. Holm - J. Bower (edd), *Lugares Sagrados*, pp. 21-42.

³¹ A. Marinis, *Introduction: The Territory of the Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, p. 8.

³² *Ibidem*, pp. 4-5.

itself in the passage from a strictly private space to a deeply public space, having the grace of the Lady of Fátima as an intermediate point.

The promiser accomplishes the promise in a private space, invoking Our Lady of Fátima within himself. When the promiser recognizes the grace of the Lady of Fátima, then he responds to this gift with an explicitly public counter-gift, which is the pilgrimage on foot to the Sanctuary»³³. This search for balance in the exchange between the walking pilgrims of Fátima and the Lady of Fátima is of such importance that there were innumerable cases told to me by pilgrims who, disrespecting the advices or orders of priests and doctors, continued to walk, often placing their health at risk.

In this behaviour of devoting with the feet, in which the road assumes a greater value than the Shrine³⁴, the encounter of the walking pilgrim with the image of the Lady of Fátima in the Chapel of Apparitions, a place with great spiritual magnetism³⁵, and exacerbated by the difficulties of the walk, marks not only the end of fatigue and travel, but also the fulfilment of a promise and the restoration of balance in the believer's relationship with the Lady of Fátima.

³³ *Peregrinos: Um estudo antropológico das peregrinações a pé a Fátima*, pp. 186-187.

³⁴ The pilgrims from my group have spent sixty hours walking and stayed an hour in the sanctuary.

³⁵ J. Eade - M. J. Sallnow, *Introduction*, J. Eade - M. J. Sallnow (edd), *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*, London 1991, pp. 1-29.