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Willy Jansen, Catrien Notermans

## From vision to cult site

### A comparative perspective

Many of the major cult sites have been founded as a result of visions (Christian, Klaniczay, 2009: 7). The vision experienced by the French girl, Bernadette, of Mary Immaculate Conception in 1858 still draws multitudes of pilgrims from all over the world to Lourdes. The apparition of the Virgin Mary to three shepherd children, Francisco and Jacinta Marto and Lucia dos Santos, in 1917, is commemorated to this day at the sacred site in Fátima (Jansen, Kühl, 2008). The group of young visionaries that transmitted Mary's summons for the entire world to seek repentance, atonement and peace in 1981 in Medjugorje, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, also still continues to attract followers. Many historians and social scientists have researched the varying but sustained appeal of the visions in these centres of religion. Harris, who studied the development of the Lourdes shrine, exhorted other historians to explore further the complex social and political contexts in which miraculous apparitions take place and develop into a massive and long-lasting expression of devotion (Harris, 1999: 12). Other scholars were making similar multi-layered analyses of internationally respected sacred *lieux-de-mémoire* where heaven touched the earth and the presence of the divine was felt. They looked not only at the mystical events and religious experiences of pilgrims, but also at the various processes that influenced the physicalization and development of a divine site (Bax, 1995; Claverie, 2003; Marnham, 1982; Rodriguez, 1994; Tweed, 1991).

There have been countless visions, however, that only temporarily or regionally drew attention, which did not lead immediately to the establishment of a cult site, but were forgotten, or remembered in other ways. They consequently draw far less scholarly attention, although the history of a vision that did not (yet) lead to a cult site, or that had other effects than the sacralization of space, may sensitize us to the complex set of conditions needed for cult places to come into being, and remain attractive.

This paper analyzes the visions of the Palestinian nun Marie Alphonsine in 1874-1875 in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and their reception. Her story that Mary appeared to her is important for the Arab Congregation of the Sisters of the

Rosary, who consider her as their foundress (Jansen, 2005, 2006). Mother Marie Alphonsine (1843-1927) recently became world news because of her beatification on November 22, 2009 in the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth. Yet, even now, the story of her visions is scarcely known to outsiders (or even insiders), and her beatification does not mean that her visions are officially recognized, or that a specific cult site has already developed in her honour. For this analysis, we make use of the secondary and hagiographic accounts of the visionary's life and religious experiences (Stolz, Goichon, Duvignau, various internet sources following her beatification) and of contextual literature, and the material gathered through anthropological research by Jansen among Roman Catholic sisters and lay believers in 1989, 1991 and 2006 in Jordan.<sup>1</sup> The specificities of the religious occurrences in 1874-1875 are first reconstructed and then analyzed by comparing them with the literature on internationally famous pilgrimage sites. This will enable us to show which conditions seemed promising at the beginning and what the most important effects of the visions were. By looking also into the circumstances that seemed less propitious compared to more famous sites, we are able to discuss which factors are relevant in the process from vision to cult site. The aim is to provide an analytic framework for studying the foundation processes of such places. It will elucidate the various conditions that can be crucial in the development of a sacred site.

## The apparitions of the Virgin in 1874 and 1875 in Palestine

The occurrences in 1874 and 1875 have to be pieced together from a number of sources. The visionary recorded her experiences in notes and a diary in Arabic after discussing them with her confessor, but on his advice did not talk to anyone about them. Her writings were only discovered after her death and handed to Père Benedict Stolz who then wrote an account of the events and the visionary's biography. This first appeared in French in 1938 and was republished in English in 1968 as *A Handmaid of the Holy Rosary. Mother Mary Alphonsus of the Rosary. First Foundress of an Arab Congregation 1843-1927*. It was probably written as part of the effort to obtain the canonization of the visionary. Much of the information contained in this was retold with minor variations by Goichon (1972), Duvignau (1987), and by Marie Alphonsine's distant relative Patrick Daniel, who is posting since mid 2009 fragments of her story on Facebook ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)). Here we will depend mostly on the first source.

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The visionary's experiences can be reconstructed from Stolz (1968) as follows. She was born on October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1843 under the name Sultane Marjam Rattas.<sup>2</sup> She was a daughter of Danil Rattas and Catherine Jusif, devout Arab Christians and interpreters to the Franciscans. Her father worked in Jerusalem, but the family spent most of the summers on their family land in Ain-Karim. The parents went to mass daily, regularly prayed the rosary and instilled a profound devotion to Holy Mary in the five sons and three daughters who survived infancy. Sultane Marjam was the eldest of the three daughters, and from an early age showed signs of great piety. About the time of her confirmation in 1852, she expressed her desire to enter the religious state, but her father refused because she would have had to enter a novitiate in France. Moreover, it was not common for girls in Palestine voluntarily to lead a single life and dedicate themselves to religion. However, when after praying fervently to the Virgin Mary, her father survived serious burns, caused by an exploding bottle of methylated spirits, he gave Sultane permission to join the French Sisters of St. Joseph, but on the condition that she would not leave Palestine. In the end, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Joseph Valerga, and the superior general of the Sisters of St. Joseph allowed her to make her novitiate in Jerusalem.

Sultane Marjam entered the convent as a postulant in 1858, the same year that Bernadette Soubirous saw an apparition of the Immaculate Conception in Lourdes. She took her habit on June 30, 1860, her 17<sup>th</sup> birthday, at which time she was given the name Marie Alphonsine, and pronounced her vows in 1862. She started teaching in the girls' school annex in Jerusalem and set up an association for girls in honour of the Immaculate Conception. After a few years Sister Marie Alphonsine was sent to Bethlehem and, as her biographer writes: "Her love for the Queen of the Holy Rosary burnt brighter than ever, now that she herself was to live so near to the holy Cave where the Blessed Virgin brought forth and tended her divine Child" (Stolz, 1968: 14). Here too, she set up associations for girls, such as the Children of Mary, and another for women, dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Mary.

On January 6, 1874, when Sister Marie Alphonsine was saying the rosary in the children's schoolroom, "she perceived a bright light and the Queen of the Holy Rosary standing before her with outstretched arms and a large rosary in her hands. The crucifix of the rosary rested on her bosom and the decades fell about her on either side in a semicircle down to her feet. ... This vision lasted from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m." (p. 16). This was followed by three other visions in the Milk Grotto in Bethlehem. "On the last day of May the Queen of the Holy Rosary appeared to her once more in the schoolroom, the same as on the first

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2. Arabic names are transliterated differently depending on author and context. Here the spelling of Stolz is followed, with the exception of the name Marie Alphonsine.

occasion. She was surrounded by the same stars and her head ran the inscription, 'the hidden Sister of the Rosary'. That was the last vision she had in 1874" (p. 17). In the following year, her visions became stronger and more frequent. On the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6, 1875, which she spent attending fifteen Masses at the Milk Grotto, she had repeated visions connected with the Feast of the Epiphany and of Our Lady of the Rosary surrounded by the Confraternity of the Rosary. After she went back to the schoolroom the Virgin "appeared to her in the company of countless virgins dressed like herself. In letters of light the nun read the words: 'Sisters of the Rosary – The Congregation of the Rosary.' As Mary approached her, a voice said: 'I want a Congregation of the Rosary founded'" (*idem*). Such a request fell on fertile ground. According to her hagiographer "Three days later one of the Children of Mary came to Sister Alphonsus and said that she had had an inspiration at Mass to urge her to found a congregation of native nuns under the title of Congregation of the Rosary. Shortly afterwards other young girls came expressing the same desire" (p. 18).

When Marie Alphonsine later expressed her fear of being unable to fulfil the Lady's request, the Virgin responded: "Do not be afraid. I helped you with the foundation of your Associations, I will do likewise with the Rosary Congregation. The work will succeed and endure to the end of time" (p. 18). The Latin Patriarch in Jerusalem, Vincent Bracco sent her to father Antonio Belloni who asked her to keep silent and make a novena. "After the novena she saw Our Lady surrounded by maidens clad in blue and white. Looking gently upon her, Mary asked, 'When are you going to begin the Congregation of the Rosary? Carry out my instructions. Do you not understand what I want? The Congregation of the Rosary will appease for evil and ease worldly misfortune.' Sister Alphonsus replied, 'Give me the necessary means, and I will start.' Whereupon Mary added, 'The Rosary is your treasure, trust in my mercy and in the goodness of Almighty God. He will guide you.' Then Mary touched the Sister with her Rosary and disappeared. On another occasion she saw Our Lady wearing a stole. She blessed the maidens of the Rosary, saying, 'I give you my blessing in the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Ghost.' Then extending her hands over them as a Bishop does at Confirmation, she continued, 'I strengthen you in the name of my joys, sorrows and glories'" (pp. 19-20).

This extensive citation shows the frequent and insistent requests to the Sister to found a Congregation of the Rosary. It was important that this was to be an all-Arab congregation. The visionary wrote: "Childishly I then asked her [the Virgin Mary]: 'How is it that you are choosing us, poor despised mortals? Why do you not choose someone from the rich lands of Europe?' She smiled and said: 'Remember, my daughter, that roses grow among thorns. In this very land I had my joys, my sorrow, and my glories. By you and through you, I want to reveal

my power” (*idem*: 34). The Arab identity issue also came to the fore in Marie Alphonsine’s worries about their spiritual director. She wrote in her notes: “I implored her to give me a clear sign whereby I might recognize him. I also asked that he might be an Arab, one of our own countrymen” (p. 33). She understood from her dreams that Canon Joseph Tannûs was to be their spiritual guide.

Canon Tannûs tested her visions and, being convinced of their genuineness, he drew up the rules for the Rosary Congregation. Sister Marie Alphonsine had learned from visions and dreams how the convent and their habit would look, that the sisters would be surrounded by crowds of little girls, that there should be a perpetual rosary said, how candidates should be ritually received in the order, and how the sisters should take vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. During the visions that followed, she also encountered St. Joseph who supported her in leaving his congregation and proceeding down the road she was required to follow by Mary. At the request of Tannûs, Sister Marie Alphonsine wrote down her memories of her visions, but these were kept secret until after her death. Her role therefore was long hidden from view behind that of other actors.

Being unaware of the visions of Sister Marie Alphonsine, seven girls from among the Children of Mary had also asked Canon Tannûs to found a native congregation for Arab girls, a request which coincided well with Marie Alphonsine’s visions. Especially her sister Hanna played an initiating role in this. Tannûs decided to support the girls’ initiative. On July 25, 1880, he started the Congregation of the Rosary, by establishing seven sisters in a provisional house in Jerusalem. Marie Alphonsine was still bound by her vows to the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition and first needed the intervention of Pope Leo XIII to release her from these because there was resistance to her transfer, so she only joined her own Congregation of the Rosary on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1883. She left it to her younger sister Hanna Danîl to become Mother Superior. She herself was first sent to Jaffa, and later to Beit Sahur, Salt in Jordan, Nablus and Zababde to establish girls’ schools, and finally, in 1893 to Bethlehem to establish a home for poor or orphaned girls, until 1909 when she was called to the motherhouse in Jerusalem where she passed her last years in silence praying the Rosary. She died in Ain-Karim on March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1927. A number of miracles are reported from the various places where she worked, but no more visions. After coming to Jerusalem, she had ceased writing in her diary.

Over the years, the congregation has flourished in number and has established houses in Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Kuwait, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah and Rome. The Sisters have been very successful in carrying out their particular mission: to bring education to Arab girls. In Jordan their schools have developed into the top private schools, respected by both Christian and Islamic parents (Jansen, 2006; [www.rosary-cong.com](http://www.rosary-cong.com)).

## Promising beginnings

The story of the visions and their follow-up shows a number of similarities with the origin accounts of famous Marian pilgrimage sites, some of which are also related to the establishment of a religious order. It contains several aspects that have been singled out by various authors as relevant for the successful foundation of cult sites.

The first is the person and gender of the visionary. People of both sexes and all ages are capable of having visions, but in the origin legends of the most famous sites young children, simple women, or otherwise marginal persons figure more prominently. Their accounts are more easily believed because they can be regarded as innocent and pure (Christian, 1996: 4-6). Male visionaries are usually young, such as the eleven-year old Maximim in La Salette, the nine-year old Francisco in Fátima, or ten-year old Muhammed al-Hawadi, who saw a statue of the Virgin smile in the Lebanese village of Béchouate in 2004, an occurrence which unleashed a fervour of devotion in the Bekaa village. Little Muhammed was not only very young, but moreover a Muslim and Jordanian, thus deemed extra innocent of the prayer that came from his lips (Aubin-Boltanski, 2008: 3-4; 2007: 9). A similar marginality marked the adult male Quauhtlatoatzin, a poor Indian peasant, who saw the famous Virgin of Guadalupe at Tepeyac, a hill northwest of Mexico City in 1531. In many more instances, however, it is young girls, simple women, or nuns, whose contact with Mary is given credence. Think of fourteen-year old Bernadette in Lourdes, ten-year old Lucia in Fátima, or fifteen-year old Mélanie in La Salette. Or the nuns Catherine Labouré in France or Agnes Sasagawa in Akita, Japan. Their innocence and purity contribute to their credibility and the magnitude of the miracle. The Palestinian visionary fitted this pattern.

Gender does not only impact on the visionary but also on the followers. Pilgrims to sacred shrines, especially those devoted to Mary, are more often women than men, and their gender roles colour their emotions and relations with the sacred. Despite strong norms of gender segregation and seclusion of women in the home, Middle Eastern women commonly visited shrines, and could have done so in the case of these visions, were it not that the visions remained secret for a long time and were not associated with a specific site. In this particular situation, gender was involved in a different way. The visions did have an important gender impact by leading to the installation of an Arab congregation of young women dedicated to education of girls. In becoming a nun, the Sisters were liberated from parental and conjugal control and could take up functions in the public domain and make a career; moreover, they opened up education and job opportunities for Middle Eastern girls in general (Jansen, 2005).

Visions are also seen as more convincing when visionaries maintain their stories in the face of mishap and resistance. In most origin legends, repetition



of the cycle of belief and disbelief are standard. The unfailing insistence of the visionaries that apparitions occurred, even when all their superiors disbelieve and punish them, or send them back for more information and “proof” that it was really the Virgin they saw, contributes to their credibility. The visionaries self-positioning as hesitant to believe or fulfil the Virgin’s wishes has the same effect. Marie Alphonsine’s reticence to accept that she was selected to fulfil the Virgin’s wishes and the disbelief and rejection that she faced, fitted this pattern.

A third promising element was the fertile religious environment from which devotion grows and by which visions are accepted. Origin legends are often a testimony to the visionaries’ earlier devoutness, and they show that there are always some relatives, friends or devotees who believe and support them. In this case too, the visionary was surrounded by people who fed and supported her devotion to Mary. Her father had instilled in the Danîl family a love of Mary. He worked for the Franciscans, a group much in favour of Marian devotion. Since the Middle Ages the Franciscans have played an important role in Palestine as guardians of the holy places (Andézian, 2006). Moreover, they are well-known defenders of the cult of Mary. One Franciscan confirmed the miraculous healing of one of the Danîl girls with moisture dripping from an image of Our Lady of the Rosary (Stolz, 1968: 28). Franciscans have also disseminated the news of these visions by printing the book of Stolz. The persons involved were also clearly familiar with dominant imagery of Mary. The visualization of Mary by Marie Alphonsine differs only slightly from that on the Miraculous Medal, minted and spread in millions all over the world following the apparitions of Mary unto the 24-year old novice Catherine Labouré in Paris in 1830.

A fourth favourable element was the support of an important religious official. Bax, in his analysis of the occurrences in Medjugorje, coined the term “religious regimes” to draw attention to the political manoeuvring of individuals and groups within the church and outside who may support or oppose the occurrence of apparitions to strengthen or defend their own position (1995: xvi). In this case too, various positions were taken. Patriarch Vincent Bracco, to whom Marie Alphonsine revealed her visions without speaking of the Congregation, referred her to Father Antonio Belloni in Bethlehem. Belloni asked her to tell no one about her visions, but make a novena to our Lady asking for more clarification. After she did so, she could not speak to him about the further visions she received because he was away. The parish priest whom she was obliged to consult then was far less accepting. He showed only contempt and ridicule for her visions and their message, and punished her by forcing her to kiss the ground as a penance, forbidding her to look at pictures of the Virgin, deck her altars, or to receive communion more than twice a week (Stolz, 1968: 20-21). In the end, however she found great support in the influential priest, Cannon Joseph Tannûs, who answered to the request to found a congregation and who made sure she kept a diary, yet at the same time asked her not to reveal her visions to others.

To understand the weight of this support from Tannûs it must be placed in the religious-political context of the day. The establishment of a Protestant Bishopric in 1841 and the growing presence of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Holy Land, as well as the expansion policy of Latin Catholicism in the Orient adopted by Pope Pius IX had led to the re-establishment of the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem in 1847. This led inevitably to conflicts with the Franciscans who had held the Custody of the Holy Land since 1333 and owned or controlled many of the holy places. Cannon Joseph Tannûs was one of the first Arab Catholic priests and gained an important function as assistant to the first patriarch Valerga. He knew all the bishops and the Eastern patriarchs, and in 1867 he had accompanied Patriarch Valerga to Europe, and later to the Vatican Council, in which he took part as the Patriarch's secretary and theologian. The next Patriarch, Patriarch Bracco, ratified his position as Chancellor, and in 1880 appointed him spiritual advisor to the Catholics in Palestine and his representative to the Turkish Government. He shared with the Patriarch an interest in promoting religious leadership among the local Palestinian population, as well as the Vatican's interest in raising Marian devotion in the Holy Land. So Tannûs was the person best placed to gain the Patriarch's permission to set up a house for the first Sisters of the Rosary. At this point in time, Christians formed only a small minority in the Holy Land, and missionaries from many Christian denominations were competing for the relatively few souls. Especially the growing presence of Protestants, and in particular the Protestant involvement in education, was considered a threat by the Roman Catholics and they reacted with a policy of integration of locals in the clergy (Jansen, 2005; van der Leest, 2006). Accepting the call to found a congregation of Arab nuns that could educate children, and teach them about Catholicism in their own language and traditions, fitted well into the policy of the Catholic Church authorities for Palestine. However, this did not necessarily include a recognition of the visions that led to it. In fact, in the discussions about setting up the congregation and about Marie Alphonsine's transfer from the Congregation of St. Joseph to the Congregation of the Rosary, these were ignored.

Another favourable element for potential success, at first sight, seems to be the locality of the visions. When Mary proclaims "In this very land I had my joys, my sorrow, and my glories." it shows how propitious is the place of the vision: Mary returns to her own land, her birthplace and her own people. When authors use the term "the holy places" these are automatically conceived to be the holy places in Palestine, and in particular Bethlehem and Jerusalem. The space is loaded with religious meanings, as this is where Mary gave birth to Jesus, who lived, preached, carried his cross and died here. Some of Marie Alphonsine's visions occurred in the site most closely related to Mary, the Milk Grotto in Bethlehem. However appropriate the place seems to be in religious terms, we will show below that this can also be a problem.

Several theorists have noted that cult sites often seem to spring up in disputed border regions. Driessen (1991) for instance, showed how the presence of both Islamic and Muslim saints was part of the struggle over the Spanish-Moroccan border. Cult sites not only evoke feelings of communion and temporary suspension of everyday conflicts and tensions—called *communitas* by Turner (Turner & Turner, 1978: 250)—but are also places where sacred and social relations are contested (Eade and Sallnow, 1991). At cult sites, identities and power differentials of many kinds are negotiated, not only national or ethnic, but also religious or gender identities. Claverie (2003) unravelled minutely how various groups, ranging from visionaries, soldiers, pilgrims and migrants, to tourists and religious officials, each in their own way contributed to the rise of Medjugorje. It is precisely in the confrontation of the various political, social or religious stakeholders that the cult site may flourish. Palestine certainly is a heavily contested area, both in a national and a religious sense. During the last quarter of 19<sup>th</sup> century the Middle East was pitted against various European powers vying for influence in the region and supporting different Christian denominations. In the origin legend this came to the fore in the identification of Mary as a daughter of the land, who shared her roots with her local followers. In the religious domain, Latin Catholics (mainly supported by France and Italy) competed most with Protestants (English) and Greek Orthodox (Ottoman) rather than Muslims or Jews. Mary's request to create a congregation devoted to practising and spreading the Catholic faith and to the education of children helped the group in positioning themselves in relation to the Protestants. In the miracle stories that circulated about Marie Alphonsine, Protestants clearly appeared as the enemy and they either converted to Catholicism or had to close their school. The contemporary conflicts between Christian denominations were fought out in educational competition. This did not lead to a new boundary-marking cult site, but certainly did benefit the educational level of girls (Jansen, 2006).

In short, factors that in this case worked to the advantage of a wider impact of the vision, were the gender of the visionary, the repeated and challenged messages of the Virgin, the fertile environment preparing for and accepting such religious experiences, the support of at least one influential representative of the church, the locality which already was imbued with holiness and a religious-political context in which the development of an Arab Catholic women's order dedicated to education was welcomed positively. This all helped to bring about a religious congregation in service to Catholic education. Moreover, attempts were made to sanctify the visionary, by showing her exemplary devotion to others, and to develop a local cult of Marian devotion by the organization of rosary praying sessions and processions, the printing of the origin legends and the erection of a statue. Yet, outside the direct network of the Sisters, few people knew the story or felt drawn to a sacred place related to it. Which factors hampered developments in that direction and why was there a sudden change in 2009?

## Factors influencing sacred place-making

A closer look at the literature on other shrines enabled us to identify a number of factors that seem relevant for the successful foundation and growth of cult sites. No factor is sufficient in itself, and its relative meaning can vary over time and place, but taken together, they all play a role in making or breaking a site's success. To what extent were they present in the case of the Jerusalem visions?

### Content of the message

The content of the divine message can be crucial in attracting followers. Pilgrims to sacred sites usually see only the approved master text of the holy message, repeated over and over in leaflets and books. This hides the fact that the message as laid down in the origin legend is usually the product of negotiation among various interested actors: the visionaries, the religious officials of different kinds, the public and even Saint Mary, who is frequently asked further questions to clarify her message by the visionaries. Sometimes no one has heard Mary speak, as in Knock, Ireland in 1879 or in Cairo in 1967, but people still attribute certain messages to her appearance (Jansen, 2005). A scholar studying the foundation process of a cult site necessarily must try to reconstruct the making of the message and its subsequent changes. In the case of the Jerusalem visions this is only partly possible. The diary of Marie Alphonsine, and therefore the news of the visions, rested in silence for nearly half a century before it was made public. There are therefore no other contemporary written sources discussing the apparitions and the reactions of other immediate actors. So we must make do with the hagiographic master version of the message as given by Stolz (1968) and the repetitive accounts of others.

Compared to messages from Mary in for instance Fatima or Lourdes, the content of this message was fairly specific. In the first place this is because it focused mostly on the potential sisters, and not on believers in general. It contained as main request the establishment of an Arab order of Sisters, and this request was soon fulfilled. There was no message directed at other believers. In later life Sister Marie Alphonsine kept repeating the last wish of Mary, the praying of the perpetual rosary, as this practice had lapsed since it was hard to combine with the active life of the sisters: but this part of the message also was only directed at the small group of Sisters, less to the Catholic community at large. The fact that only the concerns of one small group were involved limited the general appeal in our view, however effective it was in supporting the contemporary claims of this group of women who wanted to change their assigned gender role in a drastic way. Apart from the Rosary Sisters, a few historians of Catholicism in the Middle East, local clergy and a distant relative, few parties emerged to take over and expand the message and its meanings. This in contrast to Lourdes for instance, where modern mass media and national transport enabled quick involvement of the wider public (Kaufman, 2005).

Secondly, the messages did not address issues relevant to many people. They did not provide, as messages elsewhere, a vague and multi-interpretable “diagnostic sur le monde” as Claverie (2003: 26) calls it. They did not contain a pessimistic diagnosis or a remedy to fight world evil. Mary did not exhort the faithful to change their sinful life or predict a war, as in Fátima. Only in one sentence it is said that “the Rosary will appease for evil and ease worldly misfortune” (Stolz, 1968: 20), but this is more a general reminder of the power of the rosary and not taken further as an important core of the message. Whereas elsewhere this evil is further defined as communism or atheism, these issues are not taken up here. Nor were there any secrets divulged, as in Fátima or Medjugorje, to keep the pilgrims in suspense.

Thirdly, the message did not only exclude most believers and important topics, it also partly excluded the Virgin herself. Although the message called for the Sisters to pray the rosary for her and to increase Marian devotion, there was not a request to build a chapel on this spot, nor an invitation for all people to come to this specific place, nor promises made that devotees would be blessed. Thus the devotion was not connected, as in many other places, to a specific sacred location.

To sum up, a divine message is likely to be more effective when it is general and multi-interpretable, includes several types of believers, touches upon a subject with which many people are emotionally involved, focuses on both the world and the divine, and is grounded in a specific place. It is therefore not surprising that the message conveyed through Marie Alphonsine was not immediately widely taken up by a large public.

## Location

The origin legends of many sites refer to the saintly being’s requests that a statue, chapel, church or sanctuary should be erected for people’s devotion. Many apparitions are identified with a certain place, such as the Cova da Iria at Fátima, the Massabielle Grotto in Lourdes, or Podbrdo hill at Medjugorje. Some origin legends relate how visionaries, when taken away from the sacred site, have no new apparitions, others tell how statues miraculously move to a specific site after people have tried to remove them. Some scholars relativize the importance of place-making. Apolito claims that, unlike the apparitions in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, modern apparitions are “no longer inextricably bound up with a given place and, underlying that place, a culture, an affiliation” (2005: 61). This may be partly true in our modern world, where concrete spaces and relations are being replaced by digital ones, but this is not to say that grounding in a material form is no longer relevant.

In the case of Marie Alphonsine no specific locality or space gained a sacred status because of the visions. Neither the schoolroom nor the other places where Mary appeared to Marie Alphonsine gained sacred status. The Sisters did build

a convent and a church dedicated to the Lady of the Rosary, but even they themselves did not consider it as the church that commemorated the visions and would for that reason draw pilgrims. When asked, they mentioned Fatima, Lourdes, Pompei or Harissa as pilgrim places, not their own church. An important hindering factor of creating a new sacred space can have been the Status Quo, the Ottoman decree (*firman*) of 1852 that fixed the holy places in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, and specified their attribution to one of the churches that had been recognised as distinct ecclesiastical-political structures (called *millet*) just a few years before. Each *millet* was assigned a specific geographical space, and this left no room for the development of new sacred spaces (Andézian, 2005: 94). All sacred space was already occupied. The Milk Grotto, where Marie Alphonsine had some of her visions, was already sacralized in a larger sense as the place where Mary had fed her son Jesus (Sered, 1986) and so was an unlikely place to function as a *lieu-de-mémoire* of Marie-Alphonsine's experiences as many other people have felt the presence of Mary there.

### A central devotional object

The most famous shrines have not only managed to construct a coherent and consistent message, linked to a specific locality and structure, but also a consistent devotional object. In order to focus the devotees' attention, a materialization of the sacred that can be admired, decorated, looked at, touched, kissed, and reproduced, greatly supports a devotion and an emotional connection with the supernatural. It need not be large, it can be a minuscule relic in a gilded shrine, a few inches of copperplate print, a faded and blackened icon, a tiny recovered old wooden statue, or in its modern form a picture or video of light movements, but it needs to be unique, authentic and recognizable. It enables people to see and feel the presence of the divine. Its power of attraction and recognition can be increased by reproducing the image over and over again, on leaflets, in books, in miniature icons or statues, on all kinds of souvenirs or on the Internet. Scholarly studies of the Lourdes sanctuary show that here, as elsewhere, it took some time before a consistent devotional image was developed. Bernadette's first accounts of the white clad little girl she saw, and her reference to the likeness of the image to that in the church of Nevers, differs from the image that is now gracing the grotto of Massabielle (Warner, 1978: 250). Yet, the world over, this grotto-image is now recognized as the Lady of Lourdes. Marian devotees can distinguish it from the images of Mary of Fátima, Mary of Pontmain, the Virgin of Guadalupe, or the Mary in their neighbourhood chapel.

Several parties have stakes in the construction of a consistent devotional object from visions of Mary. The church authorities want it to be in line with formal doctrine, the visionary wants it to look like what she or he saw, the artist wants to make an aesthetically attractive representation, devotees want to be able to see, touch and admire it, economic entrepreneurs want it to be reproducible, at

low cost, in prints and statuettes, and shopkeepers want these to be marketable. The final outcome depends on the relative input and power position of all of these stakeholders in the negotiations. In the Palestinian case, it is hard to find the image of Mary as she was seen by Marie Alphonsine; few parties seem interested in carrying it further (Jansen, 2009). There is, as far as we know, only one painting representing St. Mary as seen by Marie Alphonsine. It is reproduced by Stolz (1968: opposite p. 12), and can further be found on an embroidered wall decoration and in a bronze statue in the courtyard of the sisters' home in Jordan, and in a booklet on Marie Alphonsine's life. Recently it was posted on Marie Alphonsine's Facebook page. The convent church in Jerusalem, however, has not visualized above its altar the image of Mary as seen by the congregation's founder but a reproduction of an Italian Lady of the Rosary. In the compound and buildings of the sisters in Jordan, it is overshadowed by images of the Lady of Lourdes, Fátima and Paris, both in numbers, size and presence. With the recent beatification, the visual focus is shifting from representations of Mary to representations of Marie Alphonsine. The latter's countenance adorned a novena prayer leaflet to implore her beatification printed in Italian, and also the paper candle drip catchers used during Marian processions. When the beatification was celebrated by a Holy Mass in Nazareth on November 22, 2009, all the Rosary Sisters carried shawls with her picture, and the climax of the ritual was the unveiling of a huge, new painting representing a much younger Marie Alphonsine than is shown on the few old photographs that remain of her. Lack of a spatial focus was thus reproduced in a relative lack of visual focus on one central devotional object and a shift away from the visions to the person of Marie Alphonsine.

How important is a consistent iconography? In a comparative research project on Marian pilgrimage worldwide (Hermkens, Jansen, Notermans, 2009), we noted that devotees did not necessarily see the proliferation of representations of Mary as a problem, for them all these images referred to Mary. When asked to select the image they liked best, however, they were all clear about the image with which they could identify. Notermans (2009: 135) showed that in daily life Dutch pilgrims to Lourdes clearly had a preference for their local image that they also visited more often. Pilgrims thus attribute more emotive power to some images than others. For a shrine to establish its own identity and specificity, and to attract devoted followers, it is very functional to have its own recognizable devotional object.

### **The character of the visionary**

Above it was noted that the gender, age and religious profession of the visionary can be relevant for the response to the vision. Also personality traits or life experiences can play a role. In particular the visionary's power of expression, conviction and persistence can influence the course of events and be crucial to

the effective development of a cult site. In Medjugorje, the young visionaries have grown up and become full-time religious entrepreneurs, enjoying large houses where they continue to receive pilgrims and transmit Mary's messages to them (Bax, 1995: 31-32). This shrine exemplifies the transition from place-centered to visionary-centered forms of devotion. More and more modern visionaries travel abroad, publish or use modern technologies to spread the message. Rather than withdrawing into the shadows, present day visionaries "establish, with their own presence, the value of the manifestation, as if they themselves were identifying with the apparition that they have announced, weakening or leaving entirely overshadowed the localization of the epiphany in question" (Apolito, 2005: 62).

Sister Marie Alphonsine was less such a modern active agent but behaved more in line with the nineteenth century model of a virtuous female visionary. As for Thérèse Martin of Lisieux, the master narrative of her life stresses her humility, suffering, not being well liked by fellow sisters and keeping silently to herself. As perfect models for obedient, submissive, suffering and accepting femininity, they only had written down their experiences at the instigation of others, and their writings were only made public after their death. Thérèse's family sped up the process and her autobiography was translated in many languages and was printed in millionfold. She was canonized in 1925. Marie Alphonsine's beatification was not so much due to this 19<sup>th</sup> century character as to other reasons, as we will see below. Although with hindsight, she was credited by Pope Benedict XVI with founding a congregation of local women with the purpose of bringing religious education and alphabetism and improving the position of women at her time in this region ([www.zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org), Nov. 23, 2009).

## Timing

Several authors have noted the importance of time for visions to be believed or to have effect. The best known visions coincided in time with major political upheavals or social concerns (Christian, 1996; Claverie, 2003). For the limited goal of establishing a congregation, the timing of the Palestinian vision was perfect, as was shown above. It was a moment that the Roman Catholic Church wanted to re-establish its power and was very willing to educate local clergy and to increase the involvement of the local population. There were already several European congregations active in the Holy Land, but an Arab congregation with knowledge of the local language, culture and mores would be a welcome addition when restoring Catholicism in the region.

With regard to drawing large crowds of believers after a vision, the timing was less than perfect. To facilitate mass adherence, Mary's message must spread quickly and touch a feeling or opinion relevant and alive to many people at that moment in history. At that time, however, the total number of Catholics in the region was small and as a minority among a Muslim and Jewish majority they



were not used to making their religious presence felt. Moreover, domestic religious groups were not particularly active in expressing their beliefs at that time, reason why missionaries from several western countries settled on their shore. There were too few local Catholics to mobilize. Only more than a century later, the timing seemed right again to revive the story.

## Social support

Social support from various sides is crucial for the effective development of cult sites. One important actor is the Roman Catholic Church. Recognition by the Church, starting with a qualification of *Nihil Obstat* (no objection), can add greatly to a site's success and its sacralization. Obtaining the formal stamp of approval is a slow, difficult and tedious process. Common believers, by making pilgrimages and eliciting the support of lower level church officials, can actively seek recognition of certain visions. When they show up in huge numbers at places where apparitions have taken place or are expected to take place again, they become a force to be reckoned with. Believers can sacralize a space and make it function like a shrine even without the approval of the Catholic Church, as is happening in Medjugorje. Church approval is therefore just as much a consequence of the success of a site as its prerequisite.

Mass attraction is supported by the circulation and personal validation of miracle stories. The Virgin of Lourdes is famed for having cured the ill, while the Lady of Urkupiña in Bolivia helps the poor (Derks, 2009). Davis and Boles argued, in their paper on Marian apparitions in Conyers, USA, that in their collective interaction, pilgrims "actively pursue the process of symbolization, attaching meaning to objects, working at the identification and interpretation of pre-existing signs, and personalizing conventional markers of Mary's presence". The authors think that "by making these efforts, pilgrims apply and adapt wider apparition meanings to particular miracles and, in the process, help sustain the validity and normalcy of the phenomenon" (Davis, Boles, 2003: 395). The active "apparition work" by pilgrims, the attribution of sacredness and the testing of signs is thus crucial for the development of a cult site. The media can contribute significantly to this success. At present, a wide variety of devotees maintain Internet sites that give information about shrines or devotions they care about. Without the free advertising and spreading of information by large groups of devotees, be it by word of mouth, through sermons, leaflets, books or on Internet, a cult will not flourish.

Testing the veracity of miracles is important, both for the Church and for believers, to sustain the devotion and to be able to prove the blessedness of the visionary. Miracles gain extra credence when they occur to the unlikely Other, for instance a Muslim who is cured after praying to Mary (Jansen, 2009). Miracles related to Marie Alphonsine were more actively collected and circulated when the process for her canonization started in 1986. Those described by

Duvignau (1987) still lack a clear and consistent focus on the visionary as a person, on a specific locality, on the message or on the sacred symbols of the vision and the particular intervention of Mary. In 1987, Marie Alphonsine's body was exhumed for reburial in a place befitting a future saint (the home video of which will shortly be made available on her Facebook page), but the much hoped for miracle that her corpse had remained intact and would prove her sainthood did not occur. Notwithstanding these setbacks, the visionary was proclaimed Venerable by Pope John Paul II on December 25, 1994. On July 3, 2009, Pope Benedict XVI approved the decree concerning a miracle attributed to the intercession of Marie Alphonsine, a necessary precondition for the nun's beatification. Where some sources speak of the miracle as a "miraculous healing" ([www.zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org) and [www.lpj.org](http://www.lpj.org), Nov. 23, 2009), according to Sudilovsky (2009) Natalie Zananiri and four companions were rescued from a collapsed septic tank six years ago because of the intercession of Marie Alphonsine, as the mother of the girl had earlier prayed to Marie Alphonsine to protect her daughter.

### Political economy

The creation of successful cult places is often linked to the historical political and economic context. William Christian understood the divine visions by young women and children in Ezkioga in the Basque Country in 1931, and people's eagerness to believe them, in connection with the fall of the Spanish monarchy and the subsequent political upheaval (Christian, 1996). In France, the quick dissemination of the message of Lourdes has been interpreted as a political reaction to the Third Republic's campaign to secularize society (Kaufman, 2005: 6). Others have pointed at the economic interests and needs connected to the foundation of cult sites (Claverie, 2003). Cult places frequently arise in very poor areas, where the inhabitants find profit in the religious economy, and only if entrepreneurs and local civil servants are willing to invest in pensions, stores, the production of religious objects, access roads, public transport, parking places and toilet facilities for the visitors. Lourdes could not have become so popular without the construction of the railway network in France (Apolito, 2005: 67). Despite the rightful criticism of such commercialization of religion, religious practice at a sacred shrine has of necessity a basic material side (Kaufman, 2005). Pilgrims need transport, they need to eat and sleep, and want to light candles and bring back souvenirs. Economic entrepreneurs can enhance and facilitate the religious experience of others. Economic, like political processes can thus impact on which messages are seen as true and therefore should be followed or rejected.

It was already discussed how, in the Holy Land, Marie Alphonsine's visions had political overtones in formulating an Arab identity versus the West. Mary was said to have come back to her land, to be among her people, and to ask for an Arab congregation for those women who had been refused in other convents because they spoke only Arabic. By referring to an Arab congregation for

daughters of the land, the visions expressed a growing Arab self-awareness and strengthened Arab identity. At the same time, religious likeness was claimed to obtain foreign help of an economic kind from Catholic European countries.

Similar concerns with Arab, and in particular Palestinian identities, can be heard in the ways both Palestinians and the Pope speak about the beatification. A cousin of the rescued Natalie Zananiri said: “Mother Marie Alponsine is Palestinian and she is from here, so we feel like she is connected to us, and we feel more connected to her” (Sudilovsky 2009: 1). Sister Ildefonse, secretary general of the congregation, rejoices that “it is the first time that we have a beatification here in the Holy Land” ([assum.over-blog.org](http://assum.over-blog.org), accessed Nov. 23, 2009). The nun is presented as “an example and a pride for all the Palestinians” ([www.parochiesedegem.be](http://www.parochiesedegem.be) Nov. 23, 2009). According to Radio Vatican, the Pope mentioned in his message on the beatification that she is a special comfort for the Catholic community in the Holy Land ([www.oecumene.radiovaticana.org](http://www.oecumene.radiovaticana.org), Nov. 23, 2009). Her political role in the turbulent present state of the region is immediately clear in the prayers appearing on Internet: “Blessed Mother Marie Alponsine, pray for us and for the Holy Land.” ([www.lpj.org](http://www.lpj.org), Nov. 23, 2009). These are hard times, for Catholics in general and Catholics in the Holy Land in particular, but also for Palestinians trying to survive under violent repression. The Pope’s visit to Jordan, Israel and the West Bank in May 2009 may have been an occasion for the Latin Patriarch Monseigneur Fouad Twal and others to put forward once more the case of Marie Alphonsine to the Vatican, and for the Pope to realise that this was a religiously and politically opportune moment to give the Church’s official support.

## Conclusion

A cult site can only arise under certain favourable conditions. By analyzing the specific developments of one vision and comparing this to the foundation processes of other sites, a number of factors were identified that can be, and differentially are, relevant for the success of a cult site. These are person of the visionary, resistance to doubt, fertile religious environment, support by officials, message content in terms of depth, breadth and relevancy, the location, the devotional object, timing, social support, and political economy. Separately or in combination they might become explanatory factors for the specific development path of sacred sites.

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## Abstract

*Visions of the Virgin Mary stand at the origin of many cult sites. At times they have led to impressive pilgrimage centres such as Lourdes in France, Fatima in Portugal, or Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina, but elsewhere they were remembered only in local chapels or by small groups of devotees. This raises the question as to what conditions are necessary for a vision to lead to a sacralisation of space. Historians and social scientists have usually focussed on the famous cult sites when researching the various processes that influenced the physicalization and development of a sacred site, while neglecting to pay attention to lesser known visions and sites. In this article the apparition of the Virgin Mary to Sister Marie Alphonsine in 1874-1875 in Bethlehem and Jerusalem will be analysed. Its effects will be compared to those of the visions in Lourdes, Fatima or Medjugorje, in order to understand better the conditions under which cult sites might flourish.*

*Key words: visions, sacralization of space, pilgrimage, Marian devotion, Middle East.*

## Résumé

*Les apparitions de la Vierge Marie sont à l'origine de plusieurs lieux de culte. Quelquefois, elles ont conduit à la formation de lieux de pèlerinage impressionnants comme à Lourdes en France, à Fatima au Portugal, ou Medjugorje en Bosnie-Herzégovine, alors qu'ailleurs elles étaient simplement commémorées dans des chapelles locales ou par de petits groupes de fidèles. Ceci soulève la question des conditions nécessaires pour qu'une apparition produise la sacralisation d'un espace. Historiens et chercheurs en sciences sociales se sont habituellement penchés sur les lieux de culte célèbres, dans leurs travaux sur les différents processus qui ont influencé la matérialisation et le développement d'un site sacré, en négligeant les apparitions et les sites moins connus. Dans cet article, nous analysons l'apparition de la Vierge à Sœur Marie Alphonsine, en 1874-1875, à Bethléem et Jérusalem. Ses effets seront comparés à ceux des visions à Lourdes, Fatima ou Medjugorje, afin de mieux comprendre à quelles conditions des lieux de culte peuvent prospérer.*

Mots-clés : apparitions, sacralisation de l'espace, pèlerinage, dévotion mariale, Moyen-Orient.

## Resumen

*Las apariciones de la Virgen María están en el origen de numerosos lugares de culto. Algunas veces, condujeron a la formación de lugares de peregrinación impresionantes como en Lourdes, en Francia, en Fátima en Portugal, o en Medjugorje en Bosnia-Herzegovina, mientras que en otros lugares las apariciones eran simplemente conmemoradas en capillas locales o por pequeños grupos de fieles. Esto hace aparecer la cuestión de las condiciones necesarias para que una aparición produzca la sacralización de un espacio. Historiadores e investigadores en ciencias sociales se inclinaron habitualmente por los lugares de culto célebres, en sus trabajos sobre los diferentes procesos que han influenciado la materialización y el desarrollo de un sitio sagrado, descuidando las apariciones en los lugares menos conocidos. En este artículo, analizaremos la aparición de la Virgen a la Hermana María Alfonsina, en 1874-1875, en Belén y Jerusalén. Sus efectos serán comparados con los de las visiones en Lourdes, Fátima o Medjugorje, para comprender mejor en qué condiciones los lugares de culto pueden prosperar.*

Palabras clave: apariciones, sacralización del espacio, peregrinación, devoción mariana, Medio Oriente.