

Five hundred years ago, the radical Protestant theologian and monk Martin Luther questioned the place of pilgrimage in Christian faith. 'All pilgrimages should be stopped', he wrote, 'There is no good in them'. The Bible, Luther argued, did not insist on physical travel as a duty and sign of faith. Too many believers were picking up their pilgrim staffs on a whim, driven by 'false delusion' and 'a wrong understanding' of what Scripture says. The social consequences, on families and communities, also worried him. For as he saw it, the long journey of the pilgrim way, and the rites performed at sacred spots, though intended as a form of spiritual cleansing, in reality provided opportunity for sin. Had these pilgrims not understood the words of St Paul in the Scriptures? Good Christians should read the idea of *peregrinatio* metaphorically and spiritually. They should stay put, look after their families and neighbours, not spend time and money journeying to faraway places, leaving wife and children wanting.

Luther's polemic against pilgrimage would be followed by yet more violent attacks on the practice, and most particularly on the marketing of relics, witheringly ridiculed by that other vocal Protestant polemicist, Jean Calvin. His 1543 *Treatise on Relics* attacks the contradictions of the relic culture that was central to pilgrimage through the middle ages and into the 16th century: how could the table of the Last Supper, supposedly now in Rome, have survived the destruction of Jerusalem? How can it be that three different places, Rome, Charroux, and Hildesheim, each claims to host the foreskin of Jesus? If the many body parts of the myriad saints venerated across Europe were pieced together, the result would be very much more than the sum of their holy bodies!

Calvin and Luther characterize pilgrims as unenlightened masses duped into their journeys by a combination of unthinking custom and misplaced instruction from a decadent Catholic Church. And yet the desire to visit holy sites that housed famed relics, and the wish to leave a personalized ex-voto as a mark of your Christian faith, crossed social boundaries. Pilgrim sites were also visited by those celebrated, in the past and today, as sophisticated thinkers. One example is the author Michel de Montaigne. Montaigne is most famous now for his 1580 *Essays*, in which he explores the limits of the human mind and defamiliarizes and relativizes customs, including those of Christianity. This did not, however, stop him from practising pilgrimage. His *Journal de Voyage* relates how in his voyage across France, Germany, and Italy he included a stopover at the holy site of Loreto, in the Marche region of Italy, to which the home of the Virgin Mary had, so the story went, been transported from Jerusalem by angels. Nor is this an account of an interested bystander, watching others take part in a curious custom and reporting what he sees. Montaigne describes the shrine as 'so covered with magnificent ex-votos, the offerings of princes and their subjects in all parts of Christendom, that there is hardly an inch of wall discernible, hardly a spot that does not glitter with gold and silver and precious stones.' But his observation is then followed by an admission: he talks or buys his way into having a space on the crowded walls of the shrine for his expensively commissioned ex-voto tablet, depicting the Virgin Mary, him, and his wife and daughter.

Would Luther and Calvin have been as scathing about the educated nobleman Montaigne's visit to Loreto as they were of the guileless peasant pilgrims setting off from their villages? What is too easily overlooked is that Luther's stern warnings against pilgrimage are followed by a pause, a concession, a step towards rather than away from the pilgrim trail. He is railing against pilgrimages, he admits, 'not because pilgrimages are bad in themselves, but because at the present time they lead to mischief'. What, then, would make, for Luther, an acceptable form of pilgrimage? Is it too much to think that he might have been more approving of the believers whose acts of faith are recorded in the photos that follow?

The ex-votos left by the pilgrims whose experiences Alys records, and honours, in this book, are rather more humble than the expensive jewels that Montaigne tells us filled the walls

of the house at Loreto. Ballyvourney, Mount Grabarka, and Lourdes are pilgrim sites whose histories vary in origins, taking us back to the 6th, the 13th, and the 19th century. The compelling narratives that draw the faithful to them are distinct and distinctive: they include an early Christian woman's hunt for nine white deer, a young girl's visions of Mary in a grotto, and the removal of an icon of Jesus from a church for safekeeping in a hilltop forest, a community's pilgrimage to which four centuries later leads to the miraculous curing of a cholera outbreak. What unites the images, however, is a purity in intention and a simplicity in action. For Luther and Calvin, pilgrimage is corruption, misunderstanding, and commercial exploitation. But the images of ex-voto here are not of garish trinkets hastily bought at hoiked-up prices but of the home-made, the rough-cut, the extemporized, the naïve in the non-judgemental sense of the word.

For these modern-day believers, pilgrimage is a freely undertaken ritual that at once signals their belonging to a community and allows them to make an individual and personalized act of faith. Unlike Montaigne, Alys's pilgrims do not need to buy their way to a space on a jewel-encrusted wall. They can leave a message written onto torn-out pages of a notebook, scratch a sign on to a stone abutting the path, or hang a rudimentary paper cross on the branch of a tree. The practices particular to each of the sites we visit in the book – in Ireland, Poland, and France – are informed by distinct moments in the histories of Christian communities in those countries. Yet the paring down of accoutrements, and the democracy of the ex-votos, intriguingly lifts both them and their creators – who are captured with stillness and resonance in Alys's portraits – out of time. It raises them above the denominations of Christianity and calls to mind the simplicity and purity of the earliest days of the Christian faith, the very period, that is, to which those scornful critics of pilgrimage, Luther and Calvin, were seeking to return.