



## Local and Global Icons of Mary

### An Ethnographic Study of a Powerful Symbol

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**Abstract.** – This ethnographic study focuses on the relationship between ailing Dutch pilgrims going to Lourdes and their favorite Marian icons. Based on an iconographic elicitation method, it explores how and why people select from and respond to different Marian icons and what personal meanings they attach to them. Through studying people’s interaction with Marian imagery, the article aims to understand people’s personal relationship with Mary and how this relationship empowers the ailing old people to cope with the problems in their present life stage. [*France, Lourdes, Marian iconography, pilgrimage, Cultural Anthropology*]

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The Marian shrine of Lourdes, situated in the French Pyrenees, is probably the best-known modern Marian site in the world. In 1858, fourteen-year-old Bernadette Soubirous reported appearances of a young woman who, throughout a series of eighteen encounters, came to be seen as the Virgin Mary. Since then, the small village of Lourdes has developed into an international religious tourist center, receiving an estimated six million visitors each year. In the heart of this multifaceted ritual center is the grotto where Mary appeared to Bernadette and where a statue has been erected representing Mary as a young woman with lowered eyes, wearing a shiny white dress tightened up with a blue sash, holding a golden rosary, and joining her hands in prayer. This dominant image of the shrine

is multiplied in millions of copies and dispersed on a global scale. The worldwide network of visual reproductions makes Lourdes devotion reach far beyond this particular sacred place in France and joins people and their religious images in a modern transnational network of Marian devotion.

In his study “The Power of Images,” David Freedberg (1989: 100) states that the central focus of every pilgrimage journey is the shrine and the central image at the shrine that makes miracles happen. Consistent with Freedberg’s statement, it is generally thought that the popularity of Lourdes has to do with the Lourdes shrine and the world famous statue of the Lady in the grotto. To my surprise, the ailing Dutch pilgrims with whom I journeyed to Lourdes in 2004 were not unanimously attracted by the main icon of the shrine and even took their favorite local representations along. One pilgrim told me that the Lady of Lourdes had little appeal for her, “as she had not been raised with her,” but that she “intensely loved” the Lady in the chapel next to her home in the Netherlands. For many, it was only after the pilgrimage that the icon of Lourdes became meaningful. Though all the pilgrims were devoted to Mary and harbored profound feelings toward her, their motivation to go on pilgrimage was related not only to the dominant and globalized image of the Lourdes shrine but also to the images of Mary that were familiar to them at home, such as Mary of Genooy, Mary of Geloë, and Our Lady of Perpetual Help.

This article focuses on the relationship between pilgrims and their favorite icons. In it I explore how

and why people select from and respond to different Marian icons and what personal meanings they attach to them. From a dominant theological perspective, Mary is easily seen as always representing the Mother of God, irrespective of her visual appearance in art and popular culture. In daily devotional practice, people certainly differentiate between the numerous representations of Mary, attaching high emotional value to some and resolutely rejecting others. Through focusing on people's interaction with Marian imagery, this ethnographic study aims to understand people's personal relationship with Mary and how this relationship empowers them to cope with the problems in their present life stage. In a world of permanent change, one in which mobility has become the most powerful and most coveted stratifying factor, immobility is not a realistic option (Bauman 1998: 2). It will be argued that the old and sick pilgrims who are fixed in their localities relate to icons to situate themselves in the modern, moving, and globalizing world. While local images assist in constructing a localized belonging to home ground and family history, the global images simultaneously assist in going beyond the local level and constructing a nonlocalized belonging to a global community of ailing, marginalized Marian devotees worldwide.

This argument will be illustrated with qualitative data collected during a Dutch pilgrimage to Lourdes in 2004 and through in-depth interviews with pilgrims before, during, and after the pilgrimage. Unlike place-centered approaches to pilgrimage and religious images, such as Freedberg's study (1989), I have moved between the sacred site and everyday devotional practice to study the contextual meanings of local and global images. I followed the pilgrims to Lourdes and interviewed them in their homes in the southern province of Limburg in the Netherlands. During these interviews, I used an iconographic elicitation method that is based on different Marian icons and that enabled me to draw out speech about responses to different images and about people's intimate relationship with Mary. In the first section of this article, I will elaborate on this iconographic elicitation method and on the Dutch pilgrimage in which I took part in 2004. In the second section, I will describe the social context of the Dutch pilgrims I followed to Lourdes and the problems they face in their everyday life. Then I will present the stories of the pilgrims and illustrate how Mary is used in creating localized forms of belonging and in coping with limited possibilities in an unlimited world. For privacy reasons, pseudonyms are used for the pilgrims.

## An Ethnographic Study of Marian Images

Art historian Freedberg argues that a detached iconographic reading of images, which speaks of images in terms of form, color, handling, and composition, does not explain why people can be so moved by them, "even kiss them, cry before them, or go on journeys to them" (1989: 1). Even when religious images are not considered high art, he states, they evoke emotional responses that must be taken into account and can best be studied with a close ethnographic method.

To study people's responses to Marian images in an ethnographic way, I used an iconographic elicitation method. For this method, I designed a box containing about thirty cards with different visual representations of Mary. I showed these icon cards to the pilgrims during the in-depth interviews in their homes. This method helped me in two different ways: first, to discover how pilgrims select from various icons and what reasons they have for loving particular ones "very much" and others "not at all"; and second, to overcome the problem of reticence encountered when asking about personal relationships with Mary. The icons helped both the pilgrims and me to elicit the stories that otherwise would probably not have been told.

Before I started working with the icon cards, the pilgrims often felt uncomfortable when I asked them to articulate their feelings towards Mary. They often fell silent or burst into tears, keeping me from asking further questions. Though the meanings of Mary were not disclosed in this way, the weeping pilgrims made me know that Mary moved them. Words, however, failed to express what they felt for her. These silent reactions to questions about the personal relationship with Mary can be clarified in three interrelated ways. One reason is that people's personal communication with Mary often also lacks the words. It is mainly a language of thought, and herewith an inner and silent communication. Another reason is that when people speak aloud with Mary, they often articulate standard prayer texts such as Hail Mary, and do not look for own words to express their relationship with her. A final and most relevant reason is that Marian devotion is an intensely emotional practice. Mary evokes thoughts that are tightly connected with emotions or troubles that are mostly silently kept as family secrets rather than publicly expressed in everyday life.

To get over this problem, I developed the iconographic elicitation method. The icons in the box represent Mary with different appearances (as an independent woman, a mother, and a queen), in

different kin relationships (with her child, Jesus; her mother, Anne; her husband, Joseph), and expressing different emotions (happiness, sadness, grief, self-confidence) and characteristics (humble, superior, reigning, protective, rich, simple, worrisome, contemplative). The iconographies represent among others Our Lady of Lourdes, the Pietá, Mater Dolorosa, the Holy Family, and Our Lady of Perpetual Help. When during the research one pilgrim stated decidedly that she did not like the Lady of Lourdes at all but intensely loved the local Lady of Geloë, I decided to add the local and most familiar icons of Mary to the box. These icons are housed in Limburg chapels, such as Our Lady of Genooy in Venlo, our Lady of Geloë in Belfeld, Stella Maris in Maastricht, and Our Lady in the Sands in Roermond. The most significant iconographic difference is that the Lourdes icon represents the Lady alone, whereas the local icons represent her as a mother holding a child. I presented all icons in sets of five and asked the interviewees to explain which particular icon pleased them, which not, and why. At the end I put all selected favorite icons together and asked the interviewees how they would describe Mary's characteristics on the basis of these images.

Before I interviewed the pilgrims with the elicitation method at home, we journeyed to Lourdes in June 2004. This six-day pilgrimage was organized by a Dutch medical insurance company for about 265 chronically ill pilgrims. Our group included both ailing pilgrims and many solicitous volunteers, among whom were managers and employees of the insurance company, priests, medical doctors, nurses, trainee nurses, and me, an anthropologist. All the sick pilgrims presented complex clinical pictures, combining different major and minor diseases with social isolation, limited mobility, and the prospect of continuing physical deterioration. All had gone through a pathological process of ten years or longer. The pilgrims came from all regions in the Netherlands, albeit mainly from the southern, predominantly Catholic provinces of Limburg and Brabant.

Although it was impossible to get to know all 265 pilgrims, I closely followed the ones with whom I shared the hotel and, as a result, the daily ritual program. This group consisted of 34 pilgrims and 14 volunteers. The pilgrims ranged in age from 50 to 86, the average age being 65, and most of them were women (28 women, 6 men). They all came from the city of Venlo and the surroundings villages in the midsouthern region of Limburg. Before going on pilgrimage I selected a group of 20 pilgrims with whom I had in-depth interviews

one week before and several times after the pilgrimage (from one week to two years afterward). Among them were 5 married couples, 2 mothers traveling with their daughters, 2 friends (women), and 4 women journeying alone. With only six exceptions, all of them were visiting Lourdes for the first time. Following the interview meetings at home, I accompanied some pilgrims on their visits to local Marian shrines in Limburg.

### **Being Old, Ill, and Fixed in Place in a Global and Secular World**

Historically, the province of Limburg has been dominated by the Catholic Church, in contrast to the rest of the Netherlands, where Protestantism has prevailed. By the 1950s, the Catholic Church in Limburg pervaded all aspects of people's lives, but a decline in church attendance and membership set in during the sixties and has not stopped since (Knibbe 2007: 42). The same process of secularization occurred in the other Dutch provinces (De Graaf, Need, and Ultee 2004). Despite secularization theories, which often consider religion incompatible with modernity, religion in Limburg has persisted outside the church. For the people involved in this study, the meanings of religion outside the domain of the official churches and of Marian devotion in particular have to do with social inequalities based on (old) age, (poor) health, and, as a result, being fixed in place.

The pilgrims I traveled with claim to be religious and even Catholic, but not churchgoers. Many say that they cannot attend church regularly since there are insufficient priests available to celebrate Mass every week. What priests there are, are said to be so old that they often fall ill and consequently do not show up for services. It has become common, moreover, for just one priest to minister to several parishes concurrently and to celebrate Mass in each church only once every few weeks. Other pilgrims, who have to submit to young conservative priests who occasionally succeed their older colleagues, describe their nonattendance as criticism of practices and ideologies prevalent in the church. They often claim to have problems with the authority and pressure exercised by young conservative Dutch priests celebrating Mass, belittling the elderly people, and expressing arrogance rather than respect toward them. Despite this attitude toward the churches, the pilgrims deplore losing the church. They feel very much at home in Catholic liturgy and ceremonies and recall longingly the time when churches were full and plentiful and able

to meet their needs. When describing their everyday religious practice today, they cite as the main features occasional pilgrimages to Marian sites, frequent visits to local Marian chapels and to the graves of deceased loved ones in churchyards, the many candles they light in both local chapels and their own homes, and regular prayers to Mary.

Discontinuity is felt not only in the churches but also in the domains of physical health, employment, and the social network of family and friends. Because of health problems, all the pilgrims have had to give up their jobs, and as a result they share the feeling of finding themselves disconnected from society. They complain that employers have let them down and have never shown interest in how they have managed to live on in a world that has become more and more restricted. For the pilgrims, illness is the most radical form of spatial confinement. Their mobility is limited to regular visits to hospitals and medical practices, where they have to deal with arrogant medical authorities who, although much younger than they are, are in a position to dictate what is best for them. Moreover, at their age, loss of health goes together with the loss of loved ones. When needed most, relatives are often no longer available because of ill health or death. These losses confront the pilgrims with their own finitude and reinforce their feeling that everything and everyone falls away and that they are all on their own.

Besides having no access to global mobility, since 2003 the pilgrims have encountered large-scale infrastructural changes in their environment that facilitate the ongoing movement of others. The pilgrims' small villages are now traversed by two national roads, a railway – which has nearly swept away the local chapel of Mary – and a highway within a stone's throw. The modern world has produced not only increased speed but also increased polarization, dividing the globally mobile and the locality-bound (Bauman 1998). As Bauman aptly says (1998: 18): “Some can now move out of the locality, others watch helplessly the sole locality they inhabit moving away from under their feet.” In the same way one of the pilgrims lamented: “They rob us of our home ground, but we cannot profit from what they give us in return.”

Since 2001 the pilgrims have also gone through a political reorganization in which their small villages have been merged with the city of Venlo. The end of the villages' political independence has been politically “celebrated” with an official goodbye to local history and cultural characteristics. In this fast-changing society, the localized old and sick pilgrims no longer feel themselves to be on

solid ground. Being tied to their locality, they are barred from moving and thus bound to bear passively whatever change may be visited on their environment. “Everything changes so quickly,” one pilgrim says; “nothing is like it was before. Everything we are familiar with and that gives us something to hold on to changes or disappears. The only hold I have is Mary, but I'm afraid that one day people will also take her away by saying that she doesn't exist anymore. With all our certainties disappearing, I don't know any longer how the world will turn.”

While globalization extends horizons for some, for others the horizons become increasingly limited. Bauman states that “globalization divides as much as it unites,” because not all people equally benefit from globalization. “Some of us become fully and truly ‘global,’” he states; “some are fixed in their ‘locality’” (Bauman 1998: 2). For the pilgrims I studied, being local in a globalized and secularized world is a sign of social deprivation, degradation, and cultural disempowerment. The pilgrims who, due to old age and poor health, are barred from becoming “truly global” try to make their own local space meaningful in a religious way. Rather than eliminating the meaning of religion, modernity actually produces the need for religion (Vásquez and Marquardt 2003). “It is time,” Levitt (2004: 16) also states, “we put religion front and center in our attempts to understand how identity and belonging are redefined in this increasingly global world.” Globalization and localization are mutually complementary processes. The immobile pilgrims, whose life-worlds have been restricted to home ground and the family, enter the religious domain to root themselves in locality. Being old, ill, and sidelined in the constantly changing and faster moving world, they relate to Mary to get a grip on the modern world and to create continuity with the familiar world of the past.

### **Mary as a Powerful Reminder of Localized Belonging to Home Ground and Family History**

Both during our pilgrimage to Lourdes and in the elicitation interviews at home, the pilgrims neither communicate their bodily pain to Mary nor expect from her a miracle that heals them. What they communicate to Mary is the pain of being disconnected and being sidelined and disrespected in society. What they expect from her is to be reconnected to home ground, to living and dead relatives, and to private family history. Keeping the family together,

both in space and in time, is a powerful strategy to construct a localized belonging and to keep afloat in the modern, secular, and globalizing world. For the pilgrims, the most powerful Marian icons appear to be those that elicit kinship memories. People's responses to the images show that Mary exists in kin relationships in various interconnected ways: in the relationship with the home ground, the relationship between adults and their mothers, the relationship between husbands and wives, and the relationship between mothers and children.

### Home Ground

Of the various images of Mary, the *primus inter pares* for all pilgrims is the icon closest to them in space: the icon venerated in the chapel next door. People in Belfeld, a village now connected to the city of Venlo, may passionately love Our Lady of Geloë, who is housed in the local chapel, and not even recognize the icon of Our Lady of Genooy, who roughly looks the same but is housed fifteen kilometers away in Venlo. When a pilgrim from Belfeld was shown the urban icon, she resolutely said, "I don't recognize her; if you say that it is Our Lady of Genooy, I understand that I don't know her, her chapel is too far from here."

Because of her central role in several related family houses, the local Lady is involved in the joys and sorrows of a family. This gives her the power to connect the family in a "chain of memories" (Hervieu-Léger 1993). Janna, thirty-four years old and the youngest pilgrim in my research group, weekly visits the chapel of Our Lady of Geloë, where she feels at home, arranges the flowers, and lights a candle. When looking at her favorite Lady, she tells me,

I feel safe because I have grown up with her. She knows me from childhood. This is where I came with my parents and my grandparents. Our Lady has listened to all our sorrows and prayers, that's why I feel at home with her. The chapel gives me rest. In a world where everything is changing quickly, this place enables me to dwell on the past and to cherish the happy memories of my childhood. In the chapel, I remember my grandparents, who visited the chapel together. They came by tandem bike because my grandmother was blind. My grandfather was always in front. I feel no need to travel a thousand kilometers to see the Lady in Lourdes when my own, familiar Lady is housed next door.

Janna's bond with the Lady of Belfeld illustrates how a sense of place is interwoven with kinship and memory. The local Marian icon places kinship

memories in their own geography, connecting past and present, different generations, and familiar localities of chapel and home. At home, Janna has put a small copy of the Geloë icon on a wooden shelf over the dining table. Right next to the icon, two photographs hang on the wall: one of her grandparents and one of her grandparents' house. The latter photograph shows the house, Janna explains, in its original and unaffected state. "It reminds me," she says, "of the past, when everything was still peaceful and untroubled."

Another pilgrim, Tiene, seventy-six years old, lost her husband just before the Lourdes pilgrimage. In former days, she used to go for a walk with him to the chapel of Our Lady of Geloë once a week. There, they lit a candle and just took some time to be together. "To this day, I love to go there," Tiene says; "the Lady makes me think of my husband and his caring and protective company. After the cremation, we brought all his flowers to the chapel and offered them to her. Nowadays, when I come to greet the Lady, it is to remember my husband." For all pilgrims, the local Lady is connected with happy memories of kin, ranging from grandparents, parents, and children to grandchildren. "I regularly take my grandchildren along to the chapel of Geloë," Arno, seventy-five years old, says. "When I pass the chapel just to do some shopping, the children ask me why we do not enter the chapel. That's how much they already associate their visit to me with a visit to the Lady."

Global icons such as Our Lady of Lourdes may also be connected with home ground and family history in situations where they are appropriated in domestic space and passed on between generations. Then they become localized and have the same power to evoke kinship memories as the icons in the local chapels do. Whereas Tiene and her husband had a special relationship with Our Lady of Geloë, it was Our Lady of Lourdes who was worshiped in her husband's family. Her husband and his sisters inherited their passion for this Lady from their mother and grandmother. Because Tiene was suffering from serious illness and finally had a leg amputated, her husband had been running the household while caring for her. On behalf of the family, he went several times on pilgrimage to Lourdes. During his first pilgrimage he brought back home a statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, which got a central place on the television in the dining room. Since then, the Lourdes icon reminds her of him and his loving care. "Every time I look at her, I think of him," Tiene says. She loves the Lourdes icon as much as the local icon of Geloë, because both are powerful reminders. Just after his death,

she journeyed to Lourdes with her daughter, and they took his photograph along to share the experience with him and to remember him.

Kinship memory is passed on through Marian devotion and especially through the local and familiar images of Mary. Joint visits of spouses and of grandparents and grandchildren to the shrine facilitate the transmission of memory between generations. In this process of passing on kinship memory a sense of place is important: people express their links to the past in commemorative practices that bind them to the places where they live (Carsten 2007). At the center of a network of family houses and watching over a chain of family members from different generations, the local image supplies the worshippers with a feeling of belonging, security, and continuity of life.

### The Mother

People's favorite icon is often also the icon that has been venerated and passed on by their mother and consequently has the power to evoke memories of her. Roos, fifty-nine years old, states that the icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help is her favorite and most powerful one because of her mother, who venerated this icon:

Every time I pray, I pray to Mary. I never see God when I pray, I have never had that experience. I always see Our Lady of Perpetual Help. My mother also prayed to this Lady. She had a very hard life. She became an orphan when she was four years old. She had one brother and one sister. Her brother had a heart condition and died at the age of eight. My mother grew up in an orphanage. From the age of twelve onward, she lived with outsiders. Formerly, you could hire yourself out and do the house-keeping or some farm work, just to have some small payment. Sometimes, my mother was lucky to find a nice family but she also lived with families who only wanted her to work. My mother often told me about these hard times, but only afterward did I really understand her suffering. When I was small, I couldn't really imagine what it was to suffer like that, but when I grew old and became a mother myself, I actually understood what her stories were about. When my mother married, her life became better. In the beginning everything was fine. But then the war took everything away from them and my father got depressed. He was always sitting under the pear tree. My mother had to handle it alone and suffered with so many children. She had many miscarriages and finally even lost an adult child. My brother died in an accident when he was twenty-four years old. When I also lost my adult son, my mother could hardly handle it. She warned me that the pain would never leave, that it would hurt me forever. My mother never went to bed before praying to Our Lady of

Perpetual Help. When I was in Lourdes, I bought a small souvenir of this Lady. I have put it on my bedside table because my mother also prayed to her before going to sleep.

Roos's story illustrates how the worship of Mary by one's mother influences one's own visualization of Mary. Mary, representing the mother, bridges the worlds of daughters and mothers, the living and the dead, and links memories of suffering and pain between generations. Roos and her mother share the experience of having an unsupportive husband and losing an adult son by accident. This shared experience converges in the image of Our Lady of Perpetual Help and makes the image emotionally strong.

Arno intensely loves our Lady of Lourdes "I received my affection for her," he states, "from my mother. From childhood onward, I have seen her praying to this icon, asking her to make us well when we were ill. That is why I still present my trouble to her when I am ill. When I speak to her, it is like I am speaking to my mother." When looking at the image, he is moved to tears and says:

When my mother was ill, she looked at her. Now, being ill myself, I also look at her and feel moved. I think about my mother and I think about the many people who are lost in the family and I miss them so much. My mother, my father, my parents-in-law, my three sisters who died at a young age, and my brothers who died recently. It's only my younger brother and I who are left. Mary helps me to remember the deceased loved ones. I feel in need of this because we lost so many people. They still belong to the family, they are one of us, but in church, their names are lost. The priest no longer remembers them in Mass like in former days, when he mentioned their names on All Souls' Day. Then, we remembered all beloved people and we felt that they were present with us. The church has done away with all these rituals, but I do not accept that my dead relatives also disappear. When I pray to Mary, I think of them, I remember them, and I keep their presence alive.

Arno's story illustrates how looking at Mary and the commemoration of the dead converge in Marian devotion. The mourning aspect of memorialization has profound religious connotations (Winter 1995). Secularization and the feeling of being disconnected from the church threaten people's connections with deceased kin. For the people involved, this is a life stage in which memories of ancestors become excessive and overwhelming. The old people in ill health who feel uncertain about the present and the future develop a vivid concern with the past. Now that the churches no longer connect people to their past and their deceased relatives, Mary provides continuity in the church's stead. Being in con-

tact with Mary is being in contact with a cherished past to which the deceased family members belong. Through remembering the family, people connect past, present, and future and create continuity in their own life, too. Arno's story reveals this mutual dependence between the living and the dead: the dead need to be remembered by the living, and the living need the dead in order to feel wholeness and continuity in life.

### Husband and Wife

Mother Mary is also present in the conjugal relationship. For three out of five couples the pilgrimage to Lourdes was meant to commemorate their many years of marriage, to thank Mary for still being together, and to ask her "keep the family together." The conjugal relationship of the pilgrims can be characterized as the relationship between a strong, caring wife and a sick, dependent husband. Although the caring wife often has serious illnesses or complaints, too, it is the husband who comes first. This division of roles causes problems for both husband and wife. When looking at the icon card of the Holy Family, Arno becomes angry, stamps his foot, and says: "That is how I have to be, a strong man who is responsible for his family and cares for his wife and children. But here I am, like a child and totally at the mercy of my caring wife." When looking at the Pietá, showing Mary holding the suffering body of an adult man, Arno takes this card as his favorite one and says:

This is how I feel. I feel like him, like a powerless person, leaning on the lap of my wife. My wife suffers for me. When I need help, she is there to help me. Mother Mary, she is my mother and my wife, the two caring women in my life.

Like Arno, the other ailing husbands also identify with Christ as the suffering child. They do not identify with a powerful or authoritarian Christ but with a deathly ill, suffering Christ who has been totally beaten and is in the hands of his mother, who looks after him. In their interpretation of Mary's image, it is not Mary who reminds us of the power of Christ but Christ who reminds us of the power of the mother.

The wives, for their part, also identify with the icon of the Pietá. Each admits that she cares for her husband as for a helpless child. Leen, fifty-nine years old, worries about her husband, who has difficulties breathing, is losing weight, and sometimes even faints. "In the hospital," she says, "they do not

allow him to be ill, they send him back home, and then it's up to me to keep him alive. My concern is to feed him, to give him food, good food that makes him strong. I am always scared that something will go wrong with him." Leen also has her physical pains. Rheumatism, tiredness, and stomach trouble make her constantly feel bad, but being her husband's only nurse, she does not give her own physical condition much attention. "You have to be strong," she says. "I am not in a position to complain and show my weakness. The doctors leave it all to me." Like the other couples, Leen and her husband vigorously complain about the doctors' authoritarian attitude, their arrogance and disinterest. When looking at the icon cards, Leen takes the icon of Lourdes as her favorite one because of her austerity. She says:

Mary is simple. She doesn't take a superior position but stands next to us. I tell her my trouble and show her my weakness. She is the only person to whom I say what I feel inside, who knows that I do not always feel strong enough to keep my husband alive, that I am not the strong person I seem to be in everyday life. I ask Mary to help me and she accepts me as I am. She takes me seriously and listens to me.

Women like Leen, who are self-effacing in the daily care of their husbands, feel relieved to relate as a needy person to Mary in their turn. Mary for them means the strong mother who gives them a shoulder to cry on and who accepts their vulnerability. Seeing Mary as a strong woman, even stronger than they are, these women do not appreciate the icon of Mater Dolorosa, showing Mary with tears or in a depressive posture. The women do not interpret Mary's sadness as their own sadness, because in everyday life, they deliberately do not cry about their trouble but hide their tears in order to be strong. Mary then also has to be strong and not cry. "When both of us cry," one woman said, "who peps us up?"

Hanneke, fifty-eight years old, also seeks support from the strong Mother Mary when she has to be stronger than she really is in the daily care of her husband. She has serious physical problems but dedicates herself to her husband and her marriage, which became problematic when her husband fell ill and had to stay at home:

Sometimes I am very angry at him and even want to leave him. But we had a very good time together, we have a son and a grandchild – how can I leave him now when he is seriously ill and only has a few years to live? I have put a mask on and now totally efface myself and my pain in order to care for him. Mary allows me to have a good cry, to feel my own pain, and she consoles me. By showing her my own pain, Mary enables me to be

myself. Before her, I take off my mask and give in to my own feelings and emotions. Mary makes me recognize that I am seriously ill, too, that it is not only my husband who is suffering. She recognizes my suffering.

While women's husbands relate to their strong wives as the dying Christ relates to Mary, the women relate to Mary as her child, seeking comfort and relief with their strong mother. In this way, Mary also bridges the worlds of husbands and wives who often try to make the best of their marriage but separately suffer their own weaknesses. Mary consoles and helps to support the restrictions and impositions of conjugal life.

### Mothers and Children

The pilgrims also identify with Mother Mary themselves. Looking at the image of the local Lady of Geloë, Tiene tells me: "When I pray I always turn to Mary because she knows how it is to be a mother. When I pray to her, I am sure she understands me." This mutual understanding is explained as the shared experience of caring for and worrying about a suffering child. The mothers, often suffering because of a sick child or mourning a lost child, place themselves on an equal footing with Mary, saying that "as one woman to another, they understand each other, as they know how it is to lose a child." "That suffering," sixty-nine-year-old Andrea says when looking at the image of the Pietá, "is drawn from real life," and she starts to tell the illness narrative of her sick adult daughter, who lives with her. The image evokes her narrative of pain from beginning to end. Because the loss of a child defies the imagination of people who have not suffered it, both men and women feel relieved to share their pain with Mary, who experienced the same loss and knows how deeply it hurts. Fifty-nine-year-old Roos lost her twenty-six-year-old son in an industrial accident five years before the Lourdes pilgrimage. "When I gave my name and physical condition to the pilgrimage coordinator, I wrote down my rheumatism and the difficulties I have with walking, but once in Lourdes, I didn't even think of it anymore. I was there to remember my son." Besides her special relationship with our Lady of Perpetual Help resulting from her mother's bond with this Lady, Roos also relates to the icon of Lourdes as it calls to mind a special memory:

It was just after I gave birth to my son that I went to Lourdes for the first time. When I was in pain, just before delivery, a friend from the women's movement had come

to see me and told me that I had won a pilgrimage to Lourdes. Five years after my son's death, I wanted to go back to Lourdes, to let him go and to find acceptance and peace. The people surrounding me do not allow me to express my pain, but in my head, I constantly remember my son's death. I think of him from morning till evening and I miss him so much. My husband and my oldest son never express their mourning, as they have come to terms with their sorrow in a totally different manner. Because they mourn in silence, they also tell me to silence my pain and to forget it. But how can I forget? The first thing my mother told me when I informed her of my son's death was, "One never forgets the death of a child." When I came back to Lourdes and I saw the statue of Mary in the grotto, I felt the pain, it came up, I felt it coming, from my toes through my belly, to my head. I immediately realized that the pain that was occupying my body was Pieter, my dear son. Before Mary, I cried without shame or reprimands from others.

Like Roos, many other mothers went to Lourdes to cope with the invisible wounds of having lost a child. The Lady of Lourdes enabled them to remember these children and to reexperience the pain of this loss. Just as Roos and her mother share the experience of having lost an adult son in an accident, mother Tiene and daughter Joske, forty-three years old, share the experience of having lost a child during pregnancy. They journeyed together to Lourdes because of their husband and father, who brought the Lourdes icon into the family and died just a few weeks before the pilgrimage.

Tiene still keeps the Lourdes statue on top of the television and regularly talks with the image of Mary about her deceased husband and about the precious moments she had in Lourdes. As her chain-smoking makes things dirty, she regularly bathes the Lady to restore her fresh and radiant look. From the bottom of her heart she says: "This Lady is the most beautiful Lady I know. She is so simple and so tremendously fine, she is the one and only for me." For both mother and daughter, it is the Lourdes icon card that evokes the painful memories of their stillborn children. While looking at her beloved Lady, Tiene says:

I was eight months pregnant when I felt that the baby was not moving anymore. I went to the doctor who said it was nothing, that I had no reason to complain. But it hurt so much. During the next visit he discovered that the child had already died, but he sent me back home. I had to take the bus, and I told it to the bus driver who talked with me and calmed me down. The doctor hadn't said a word, he only obliged me to hold the baby for one more month. He wanted me to have contractions before helping me to get the baby out. It hurt so much. I knew the baby was dead, and it felt like I was carrying a stone in my womb.

For three weeks, I was in terrible pain, from morning till evening, but the pain didn't cause contractions. When I visited the doctor again, I told him that I would not leave the hospital anymore because of the pain. That day, nine minutes after eight in the evening, my child was born. It was July 20, 1964. I never saw my baby. They took him away immediately after delivery. They brought him to the cemetery, where he was buried at an unknown spot. That's what they did in former times; children who had not been baptized did not receive a recognized grave. He got no name, no monument. I knew that he was buried at the cemetery of Tegelen and I often went there to look for him, but there was no grave, no remembrance. My husband and me, we called him Rob. We have never had another child again, there seemed to be something wrong with my womb. When remembering this pain, I always turn to Mary because she knows how it is to be a mother and to lose a child. When I pray to her, I am sure she understands me.

The stories of Roos and Tiene illustrate how the image of Mary brings back memories of pain over the loss of a child. While in daily life this pain has to be concealed and the child seemingly forgotten, the mothers want to have their pain recognized and their children remembered. Mary offers them the possibility to mourn, to remember, and to keep the children present in the family.

### **Marian Devotion Is All about the Family**

The narrated memories elicited by the icon cards during the interviews show that the religious act itself has a memorial aspect (Stier and Landres 2006). People's responses to images of Mary can be seen as remembering, and Mary's image, as visualized family memory. The closer an icon comes to family history and home ground, the more easily people identify with it. This identification gives Mary the power to stir up family memories and to connect, within families, the living and the dead, the past and the present. Photographs of living kin and ancestors hanging right next to Marian statues in the homes I visited make visible the convergence of Marian devotion and kinship memory. Both the house and its central Marian image act as keepers of memories.

Marian devotion, in my argument, is all about the family. Mary draws on the intimate histories of relationships within family worlds. Ancestor veneration is at the very heart of Marian devotion, as people approach Mary to remember and to mourn deceased loved ones and to create intergenerational continuity in times of discontinuity, multiple losses, and social and physical disempowerment. Mary's

images function as mediators or "points of encounter" (Orsi 2005: 49) between generations who make sure that, as long as the link between the living and the dead continues to exist, the family lives on. Marian devotion as a mourning ritual is particularly meaningful in the context of people's late life stage because it reconnects past and present and renews their view on the future.

Old and chronically ill people are liminals par excellence, facing unsure futures and existential uncertainty. Although ritual attention is commonly given to the different stages in the life cycle, rituals are generally lacking in old age (Meyerhoff 1984: 308). Discontinuity between adulthood and old age is especially severe in Western society and has the degrading effect of reducing old people to non-people (311). Rituals for elderly people, especially when they are sick, would diminish existential uncertainty and anxiety by giving them a foothold and a sense of continuity and predictability. As church rituals are also lacking, many older people who are overwhelmed by memories of past kinship create their own private rituals of re-remembering. Meyerhoff hyphenates "re-remembering" to distinguish it from ordinary recollection. "Re-remembering," she states, "is the reaggregation of one's members, the figures who properly belong to one's life story" (320). Without re-remembering, people lose their history and themselves, and for this reason, reminiscence is an appropriate and healthy activity for the elderly.

Memory not only offers the opportunity to recall the past but also to rearrange and relive it. Integration through memory with earlier states of life provides a sense of continuity and completeness that is needed most when one is old, sick, and disconnected from society. Memory work can then be seen as a regenerative practice, restoring the disjunctures of the past (Carsten 2007). Following Carsten's work on the place of memory in kinship, the localization of kinship memories in Marian images can be seen as "an attempt to anchor a precarious existence" (18). Loss is a prominent theme in the pilgrims' lives, and these losses concern the private field of the body and the family as well as the public field of the secular and global society. Having no church, no job, no health, no village, and hardly any family anymore, they try to face up to modernity with the help of Mary, who has become a symbol of resistance and continuity in a life stage of excessive losses and discontinuities.

Although not all pilgrims were moved by the icon of Lourdes before the pilgrimage, the image received new meanings afterward. Our Lady of Lourdes enabled the sick, elderly people to move

through Europe, to cross a thousand kilometers from Limburg to southern France, and to break out of their limited world and the sickroom atmosphere at home. This traveling, which was thought to be impossible given the pilgrims' poor health and old age, temporarily permitted them to be part of the flow of people in the modern world. For a few days, the Lady made the locals global. The journey to Lourdes gave them the physical, sensory, and ritual experience of a living church and spectacular Marian devotion that put the ailing and marginalized pilgrims center stage. This sharing in the global world, along with participation in a transnational community of ailing Marian devotees, has become visible in the global images and souvenirs that the pilgrims brought along from the site. After the journey, almost all pilgrims felt good when looking at the icon of the Lady, as this simple modern medium elicited happy memories of journeying, of being part of a transnational community and the achievements of the global world.

## Conclusion

Through focusing on the relationship between Mary, memory, and the family, I have argued that the power of Marian images is the power to evoke family memories and to connect living and dead family members. An image or statue of Mary can be seen as a "realm of memory" (Nora 1989) in which kin-related memories may be elicited, reinforced, and produced. Connected with the home ground, Mary keeps the family together across different generations, from grandparents to children and grandchildren. Her presence in the family makes her a first witness of both joys and sorrows of intimate family life. This is why feelings of belonging, continuity, warmth, and closeness, as well as pain, suffering, rupture, and loss, come together in Mary's devotion. As a venerated mother who cares for the family but lost her child, Mary's image is drawn from life and hence is powerful and fitting in many people's lives.

People's need to re-member the family has been interpreted in the context of the unequal effects of the modern globalizing world and in the context of elderly people's life stage. Globalization and localization are two sides of the same coin, but for the elderly sick for whom mobility is not a realistic option, localization becomes their main focus of action. While gradually losing ground under their feet, they try to become firmly rooted in space through recollecting family history and re-membering the living and the dead. This re-membering

can simultaneously be understood as ritual action giving meaning to the liminal life stage of the sick and old people.

In the process of re-membering, the icon of Our Lady of Lourdes has emerged as a particularly powerful one, linking the local and the global world of the pilgrims. In a secular context of disappearing or changing churches, the localized image of the Lady of Lourdes assists in constructing a belonging to home ground and family history. As a global image the Lady assists in going beyond the local level, in broadening one's horizons, and in constructing a nonlocalized belonging to the modern moving world, in which Marian devotion appears to be very much alive. "I discovered during my pilgrimage to Lourdes," one pilgrim explained to me, "that on a worldwide level she is still there, carefully watching over me. And as long as she is not lost, neither will my family and I be lost."

I gratefully acknowledge the support of NWO (the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research) and NORFACE (New Opportunities for Research Funding Co-operation in Europe) for subsidizing part of this research.

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