Why Rita? Devotional Practice and Pilgrimage Intent Towards A Medieval Italian Saint In Central Dublin

Tony Kiely

Technological University Dublin, tony.m.kiely@tudublin.ie

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Introduction

‘Devotion’ is a complex relational conduit, which ranges from being deeply intense at one extreme, to being superficially tangential at the other. Accordingly, while it might be argued that unquestioned devotion to those listed among the Church’s ‘calendar of saints’ was pre-eminent in earlier centuries (Kasten, 2014; Bangley, 2009; Martin, 2006; Ellsberg, 2006; Hoever, 2005), devotional intensity appears to have been replaced in today’s world by populist alignment, opportunistic association, ephemeral contact, and quid-pro-quo relationships, associated with media imagery, societal fears, and who or what is currently topical (Coles & Harrison, 2012; Cotter, 2005). For example, the ‘most popular’ saints for 2014 were listed as St. Michael the Archangel (fear of terrorism), St. Patrick (being ‘Irish’), St. Francis of Assisi (media popularity...
of the current pope), and St. Valentine (articulations of love). Furthermore, opportunistic devotion is often characterised by transient association, wherein those experiencing challenging situations, become acutely ‘aware’ of saints who are directly, or indirectly connected with the assuagement of their ‘worries’. Conversely, more ‘ordinary’ saints, who are considered by their devotees to have suffered just like they have done, can become starkly relevant for traumatised, stigmatised souls, wherein devotional co-alignment with the ‘ordinary saint’, rather than with the ‘extraordinary icon’ happily occurs (Mayblin, 2014; Ganzevoort, 2008; Jansen & Kuhl, 2008; Ghezzi, 2007; Ellsberg, 2006).

Similarly, gender focussed co-identification, and the creation of modern fictitious saints, have opened contemporary devotional channels for those existing within challenging environments (Jansen & Kuhl, 2008; Tari & Vanni, 2008), where commonality is expressed in the articulation of a needs-driven dependency. Correspondingly, pilgrimage practice appears to have morphed from a need to visit a holy place for the primary purpose of offering thanksgiving or seeking cures (Bond & Falk, 2013; Belhassen et al., 2008), to an experientially exhilarating celebration of one’s self and one’s journey (Kresic et al., 2013; Olsen, 2013; Rizzelo & Trono, 2013). Indeed, much consideration has recently been afforded to the seamless blending of pilgrimage and spiritual tourism (Olsen, 2013; Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Frank, 2009; Voase, 2007), wherein the traditional definition of the pilgrim has been subsumed into ‘one size fits all’ spiritual tourism, which comfortably aligns with the utilitarian needs of both religious sites and tourism operators (Kiely, 2013; Frank, 2009; Jansen & Kuhl, 2008; Shackley, 2002). So, as religious pilgrimage appears to edge ever closer to spiritual Nirvana, and traditional devotion is incrementally replaced by ephemeral alignment, this paper will explore devotional and pilgrimage motivational triggers among a small congregation of attendees at a weekly novena mass to St.Rita of Cascia, a medieval Italian saint, which takes place in an Augustinian church located in central Dublin.

Known as ‘The Saint of the Impossible’, Rita of Cascia (Figures 1 & 2) was born in 1381 in Roccaporena, a tiny village in northeast Italy. Paraphrasing the complexity of her life, Heather & Heather, (2003:189) state that

while some saints enter into a cloistered life at an early age, and live in relative innocence of the world, others experience all the trials and tribulations of secular life before they are called to a life with God.

Accordingly, Rita’s life encompasses a compellingly identifiable mix of piety, perseverance, acceptance, tragedy, rejection and sanctity, beginning with her being promised into marriage at the age of twelve to a difficult and violent man, for whom she bore two sons. Eighteen years into her marriage, her husband was brutally murdered in an inter-family feud, which under the unwritten medieval law of ‘La Vendetta’, obligated her sons to avenge their father’s murder. Tortured by this prospect, Rita prayed that they would not be forced to do so, and her prayers were swiftly answered when both died suddenly before they could engage in vengeance (MacNiven-Johnston, 2009; Rotelle, 2000; Corcoran, 1985). Though heartbroken, but paradoxically, free to fulfil her long held desire to enter religious life, Rita tasted rejection when repeatedly refused entry into the Augustinian convent in nearby Cascia, due perhaps to being deemed ‘a widow and a woman of the world’ (Heather & Heather, 2003:190), or because relations of her husband’s murderers were nuns in the convent at the time (MacNiven-Johnston, 2009; Corcoran, 1985). When finally accepted, the concluding years of Rita’s life produced the most

![Figure 1 St. Rita in La Rochelle](image-url)
iconic images in her fascinating hagiography. On Good Friday 1442, following intense prayer before an image of the crucified Christ, (Fig. 3), Rita received a partial stigmata, when a loosened thorn, in penetrating her forehead, created a putrefied wound, which never healed, resulting in her being confined to her cell for the final fifteen years of her life (MacNiven-Johnston, 2009). Finally, nearing death during the bitter winter of 1457, Rita requested a rose to be brought to her from her family garden in Roccaporena. Believing, as the nuns did, that Rita had lost possession of her senses, visiting relative nonetheless acquiesced with her request, only to find to her astonishment, a rose bush fully in bloom in the snow covered garden (MacNiven-Johnston, 2009; Corcoran, 1985). Even after her death (May 22\textsuperscript{nd} 1457), Rita experienced continued rejection, when, despite her acknowledged saintliness, (albeit at a local level), and the contemporaneous evidence of many miracles being attributed to her, calls for her beatification and canonisation were ignored by the Papacy for approximately four hundred and fifty years, a fact perhaps influenced by a medieval reluctance to canonise women, who in being perceived as Mystics, might undermine male authority within The Church (Bynum, 1987). Nevertheless, on May 24\textsuperscript{th} 1900, following years of patient exhortation by devotees, notably Blessed Maria Teresa Fasce, (Papalini, 1997), Rita of Cascia, an extraordinarily ordinary woman, associated with heroic stoicism through her patient
acceptance of tragedy and rejection, was the first woman to be canonised in the twentieth century.

**Evolving Devotional Intent**

Since the coming of Christianity, religious devotion has been enacted along a continuum ranging from prescribed adoration of saints and martyrs who lived to an impossibly high standard (Kasten, 2014; Bangley, 2009; Martin, 2006), to alignments with ordinary saints whose lives resemble that of the devotee (Mayblin, 2014; Ganzevoort, 2008; Ghezzi, 2007). Accordingly, for generations of Irish Catholics, devotional routine was hardwired into their DNA, making escape or avoidance almost impossible, wherein devotional practice was facilitated by way of organised novenas, feast day commemorations, and parental / school influences on captive audiences, which embedded the life stories of particular saints into daily life (Winstead, 2011; Ellsberg, 2006). In Dublin, for example, a strong inter-generational devotion to St. Anthony of Padua still exists, where on his Feast Day (June 13th), parents bring their children to a Franciscan church in central Dublin at 4 pm for the Saint’s blessing. This practice is bound up in an embedded hagiography which posits that at exactly 4pm on June 13th 1231, the children of Padua ran into the streets shouting ‘Il Santo é Morto’ (the saint is dead), proclaiming in the process a ‘santo subito’ (an immediate saint). What is interesting here is that the adults, who themselves were brought as children for a blessing, now bring their own children, and in doing so, nourish the ancient hagiography. Furthermore, many of those educated in Ireland’s Holy Faith Convents, of whom, St. Brigid (Ireland’s second most important saint) is the patron, believe that when she asked for a plot of land on which to build a monastery, the landowner suggested that that he would grant her the amount of land covered by the spreading of her cloak, which when spread, covered more than enough land for the monastery. Similarly, St. Patrick, Ireland’s premier national saint was believed to have driven the snakes from Ireland, despite there being little evidence to support this contention. And while such ‘blind devotion’ may today be considered old fashioned or naïve, in that such unquestioning loyalty was associated with the holiness of saints, equally, modern devotional alignment might be characterised as opportunistic, evidenced in a broadly held perception that a ‘chosen one’ has the power to deliver on ephemeral requests (Coles & Harrison, 2012; Cotter, 2005).

Moreover, such transient association often arises, without the ‘devotee’ having any devotion to the targeted saint. Worried students for example will be encouraged by their parents or grandparents to pray to St. Joseph of Cupertino on the eve of their examinations to help them answer questions that they have not sufficiently prepared for, while others will casually promise St. Anthony a ‘reward’ to find lost items for them. Similarly, habitual recourse to St. Blaise is evident on February 3rd when significant numbers ‘invest’ in his protection from throat infections for the following twelve months. And yet, while differing in their motivational depth, each of these devotional interactions creates brand identification with a saint of choice (Kasten, 2014; Coles & Harrison, 2012; Ghezzi, 2007; Carroll Cruz, 2006; Cotter, 2005).

But, while saints increasingly ‘appear’, or ‘re-appear’ for opportunistic reasons, (typically associated with revenue generation or tourism development), devotion may also be motivated by a sense of hopelessness or desperation (Trueb, 2009; Tari & Vanni, 2008). Accordingly, since February 2004, San Precario, of Milan has been ‘imagined’ by a group of Milanese activists, and appropriated as patron saint of casualised, temporary, flexible, and freelance workers. The creation of this fictitious ‘saint’ acknowledges the fact that those in difficult or traumatic circumstances...
(not being able to gain full time employment in Italy, France and Spain), are no different to other traumatised devotees, in that they need someone to pray to (Tari & Vanni, 2008). Furthermore, populist representations of attributed ‘ordinariness’, notably St. Therese of Lisieux, St. Pio, St. Angela Merici, St. Jane de Chantal, St. John Paul II, St. Joan of Arc, St. Mary McKillop, and Bd. Pier Giorgio Frassati, (Coles & Harrison, 2012; Ghezzi, 2007; Ellsberg, 2006), have injected new conduits for deeply rewarding, and co-identifiable devotion to religious figures associated with persecution, social justice, feminism, rejection, and unbridled joy. Referencing the popularity of Bd. Pier Giorgio Frassati (1901-1925), Ghezzi illustrates how he has become the joyous hero of contemporary young Catholics, because

unlike other saints who appear to them to be otherworldly, they regard him as normal, [epitomised in their perception of his having pursued the same pleasures that they enjoy, notably] mountain climbing, organising parties for his friends, enjoying sport, and having a zest for life (2007:127-128).

Stigmatism and Solace

Differing from induced appropriations, longitudinal devotion often tends to align with acute medical or psychological traumas, which in turn instigates a comforting co-alignment with saints who experienced similar sufferings (Mayblin, 2014; Kunz et al., 2009; Trueb, 2009). Accordingly, in championing a case for the appointment of St. Agnes of Rome, (a virgin martyr of the Roman Catholic Church), as the patron of women suffering from the trauma of hair loss, Kunz et al. (2009) suggest that her powerful hagiography could well facilitate a therapeutic co-identification bond for women suffering from the traumatic experience of hair loss. This hagiography suggests that on January 21st 304, following her refusal to marry the son of a local Roman prefect, Agnes was dragged naked through the streets before being publicly beheaded at a stake, where legend has it that her hair copiously grew to cover her body, thus protecting her from the prurient gaze of onlookers. Similarly, in contextualising the significance of devotional co-dependency among Catholics in northeast Brazil, Mayblin (2014:272) argues that when saints are perceived by devotees to have ‘suffered like them’, they ‘become like them’ which acts to produce an intimacy, wherein devotees ‘enjoy regular conversations’ with particular saints. This intimacy is instanced in their portrayal of a local ‘folk saint’ Frei Damiao (1898-1997), as ‘snoring loudly’, ‘cracking jokes’, and being ‘fond of stewed pumpkin’, which for his devotees, heightens the probability of his understanding the daily sufferings of ordinary people. Furthermore, their referring to St. Rita as ‘the married saint’, or ‘just an ordinary woman like any other’, or that ‘her husband was a drunkard and a gambler, and so were her sons’ (Mayblin, 2014:274), testifies to their ability and willingness to associate with saints whom they view as a like sufferer. Ganzvoort (2008:19) also communes with the attractiveness of ordinariness when suggesting that stigmata (physical manifestations of divine grace), can become ‘powerful metaphors for exploring the interaction between scarring, trauma, and identity’ in the lives of ordinary people, which facilitates ‘a narrative construction of ones woes with respect to those of a respected other’.

Portraying the life of St. Rita in a modern context, wherein a combination of her life’s experiences, (violence rejection and devotion), culminated in her partial stigmata, Ganzvoort (2008) argues that ordinary people often feel stigmatised through not being accepted or heard within the confines of what they perceive as normal society. Thus, the sufferer will often seek and find solace in being one of many who have travelled this road. Furthermore, in addressing gender biased exclusion within the context of scarring, identity and bonding, Ellsberg (2006:15) argues that while historically, the church venerated women saints, in that they provided the perfect framework for religious devotion, such women have been blatantly underrepresented in the Canon of Saints, have waited longer for canonisation than men, and have been overtly characterised in terms of their ‘feminine virtues of purity, humble service, obedience, or patient endurance’, while being under-acknowledged in terms of their ‘questioning of authority, defying restrictive codes, or their audacity, and wit in surmounting the obstacles put in their path’.

Similarly, in exploring devotion to the Virgin Mary among Muslim women, Jansen & Kuhl, (2008:295) found that in their pursuit of ‘shared womanhood’, they viewed Mary not as virginal and pure, but more as ‘a mother, who suffered herself’. Accordingly, in perceiving Mary as a mediator between themselves and a distant and judging God, they were particularly attracted to her femininity, which made her ‘nearer and more approachable, especially during intimate moments such as childbirth’, to her ‘understanding their need to feel responsible for the direct physical, moral, and social wellbeing of their family’, and to one
who will help to ‘overrule parental power, escape from a violent partner’, or ‘assist sick family members to face loneliness, and a hostile society’ (Jansen & Kuhl, 2008:295).

**Ever Evolving Pilgrimage Landscapes**

While it would appear that religiously motivated travel has existed since the time of Christ (Kaebler, 2006; Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005; Rinchede, 1992), so too has the secular practice of using innovative strategies to attract overtly curious pilgrims to designated sacred sites, in order to create burgeoning pilgrimage marketplaces (Ruu & Jones, 2009; Croft et al., 2008). Indeed, Tilson (2005) cites strong evidence of a booming souvenir trade in religious artefacts and reliquary during the early days of Christian travel, suggesting that proof of ‘being there’ was a significant constituent of the pilgrimage package. Interestingly, such historically innovative promotional practices are mirrored in the modern strategies of pilgrimage promoters, who increasingly target the personal and social values of de-differentiated tourist audiences, whereby the traditional motivations for visiting sacred sites, (asking forgiveness, seeking cures, and offering thanksgiving), are functionally expanded to suit the sensory, emotional, and affective motives of the modern traveller (Marine-Roig, 2015; Rizello & Trono, 2013; Olsen, 2013; Kiely, 2013; Hughes et al., 2013; Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Frank, 2009; Williams et al., 2007; Voase, 2007; Tilson, 2005; Shackley, 2002; Kong, 2001).

Outlining such behavioural trade-offs, Frank (2009:157) documents experiential duality in the acceptable coexistence of ‘pleasant experiences’ (admiring the Alpine flora and fauna), and ‘useful experiences’ (contemplating the majesty and forgiveness of God), at an Austrian alpine shrine in the early years of the nineteenth century, which local residents, whose livelihood depended on attracting a constant flow of outsiders, duly exploited. Such experiential diversity appears to be increasingly facilitated for the modern ‘pilgrim’ wherein the ‘traditional pilgrimage’ is propelled, by way of inexpensive flights, specialised tour operators, modern hotels, and choreographed cultural itineraries, from being a hardship focussed act of thanksgiving or repentance, to an event managed cultural / leisure format, exemplified in the ‘mixed message’ packaging of pilgrimages to traditional shrines such as Santiago de Compostella, Lourdes, Fatima, Bari, and Medjugorje (Rizzello & Trono, 2013; Olsen, 2013; Doi, 2011; Simone-Charteris & Boyd, 2010; Graham & Murray, 1997; Tilson, 2005). Similarly, in characterising the urge to satisfy social and cultural needs within a holiday environment at the holy site of Mount Athos, Androtis states that while visitors were overwhelmed with the spirituality of the place, they were equally inspired by tangential influences, namely, cultural experiences (architecture, heritage, and the Byzantine monastic life), secular experiences (material manifestations of Orthodox religiosity), environmental experiences (the beauty of the natural landscape), and educational experiences (learning, personal growth and development) (2009:79).

This would suggest that modern pilgrims willingly embrace existential authenticity, where what is ‘real’ resonates with their motivational need to satisfy social and cultural needs, and where retelling one’s personal experience of a pilgrimage trumps religious fulfilment, illustrated in the popularisation of personalised themes such as ‘wellness’, ‘personal identity’, ‘personal satisfaction’ and ‘inner peace’, in what is euphemistically termed ‘spiritual tourism’ (Olsen, 2013; Kim & Jamal, 2007; Smith, 1992; Nolan & Nolan, 1992). Evidencing this perspective, Marine-Roig argues that:

> in recent decades, the number of tourists visiting religious buildings designated as cultural attractions, mainly due to their exceptional architecture, has significantly increased (2015:25).

Analysing a representative sample of the over 3.26 million tourists who annually visited the Basilica of La Sagrada Familia in Barcelona under the conflictingly motivational headings of ‘cultural curiosity’ and ‘religious belief’, the author (2015:25) concludes that while religious visitor motivation was less than 4%, more than 40% of visitors were motivated by their interest in art and architecture (2015:25).

This is despite an overt attempt by the Catholic Hierarchy to market the religiosity of the world famous cathedral. Similarly, Hughes et al., (2013), in their study of visitor motivation at Canterbury Cathedral, found little evidence of a desire for a religious experience, but rather that the majority of visitors consisted of those either imbued with a passion for the cathedral’s architecture, or those who derived satisfaction from ticking the ‘being there’ box. So, while tourism agencies have undoubtedly tapped into
the large volume of travellers, for whom spiritual / secular tourism is a significant motivator (Simone-Charteris & Boyd, 2010), worryingly, it would also seem that depending on one’s credulity threshold, almost anything can be promoted as ‘a shrine’, and therefore ‘worth visiting’. This ranges from the ‘traditional’, to the ‘imagination stretching’, where Abraham Lincoln’s home in Springfield Illinois is now deemed an historical shrine, Elvis Presley’s grave in Graceland, a musical Mecca, and Alta, on Utah’s ski slopes, a snow shrine (Tilson, 2005).

Traditional Pilgrimage Formats

Alternatively, for traditional pilgrims, both cognitive and emotional attachments to sacred places are more rooted in core concepts such as faith, values, identity, and the perceived authenticity of the destination, than those attached to the herd driven, box ticking exercises of populist pilgrimages (Bond & Falk, 2013; Rizzelo & Trono, 2013; Belhassen et al., 2008; Jansen & Kuhl, 2008; Heather & Heather, 2003), wherein the inter-relationships between the individual and their core identities, critically impact on the production and consumption of satisfactory experiences (Uriely, 2005; Poria et al., 2003).

Under the heading of ‘Theoplacity’ (from the Greek ‘Theos’ or God, and the Medieval Latin ‘Placea’ or place), Belhassen et al. (2008) explore the powerful influence of physical places on pilgrims through the intersection of three centrally related motivators namely: the ideology underlying the pilgrimage; the places visited, and; activities undertaken while on pilgrimage. Additionally, in arguing that pilgrims bring with them ‘preconceived understandings of the sacred spaces they visit’, the authors (2008:684) posit that the notion of pilgrims having ‘shared, collectively authored meanings of these spaces cannot be ignored’. Similarly, in suggesting that visitors ‘do not get to know an area, but get to re-know it’, Gali Espelt & Donaire Benito (2005) highlight the motivational significance of subjective and social constructs on place identity through amalgams of ‘a priori’, ‘in situ’ and ‘a posteriori’ place imagery.

It would seem therefore, that reciprocal relatedness between place and pilgrimage intent, may well characterise how ‘invested meaning’ in seemingly inanimate places, translates into a significant attractiveness for devotees (Harrison-Buck, 2012; Sillar, 2009; Alberti & Marshall, 2009; Bird-David, 1999). Citing the symbiotic relationship between the ancient Mayan communities and their circular shrine architecture, Harrison-Buck, (2012:67) describes how these shrines ‘became socially meaningful places, invoking real agency, through reciprocal engagement and mutual responsiveness’. Expanding on the motivational significance of such behaviour, Sillar (2009:370) terms it ‘an empathetic concern for places and things that are considered to have social identities’, adding (2009:376), that ‘everyone invests some things and places with more emotional engagement than others’. Agreeing, Shanahan, (2009) addresses the importance of intentional agency, where being seen to be part of a community of practice, internalises the motivation for identity related behaviour, while Alberti & Marshall, (2009:346), in proposing that inert places, (and by extension shrines), provoke human action, succinctly states that ‘things do, after all, make us do things’. But, while place alignment constitutes a significant pull factor for traditional pilgrims, gendered attachments to pilgrimage sites also illustrate emotionally powerful motivational intent (Jansen & Kuhl, 2008; Mernissi, 1989).

In acknowledging that churches in Western Europe are witnessing a sharp decline in attendance, Jansen & Kuhl (2008:295) argue that ‘pilgrimages to Christian sacred sites continue to flourish’. Furthermore, they contend that the majority of those visiting Christian shrines are women, and that this has much to do with the dynamics of women’s lives. Focussing on Muslim women who visit Marian shrines in Portugal and Turkey, the authors conclude that pilgrimage to these sites embraces gendered practice, firstly in their stated preference for a female figure, and secondly in their search for the healing of feminine worries about relatives, childbirth, or domestic violence.

Similarly, in articulating the gendered significance for Moroccan women visiting shrines dedicated to female saints, Mernissi stresses that involvement with the saint and the sanctuary of the shrine, are

> two of the rare options left to these women to actively shape their world, stimulate energies against their discontent, and allow them to bathe in the intrinsically female community of soothers, supporters and advisors (1989:146/147).

Equally, for these women, public petitioning is a significant element of their pilgrimage activity. This is starkly documented in illustrating how:

> The newly arrived woman will put her hand on the tomb or on the drape over it, and will explain her problem either in a loud voice or silently. She might go into great detail about
her son who failed his examination, or was driven away from her by his bride. When describing an intimate fight with her husband, the woman will mimic what happened, and name the actors. After she has expressed her needs, she will come to sit among the other women. Eventually, they will gather around her, ask her more details, and offer her the only expertise these women have; expertise in suffering (Mernissi 1989:147).

Methodology

Devotion to St. Rita of Cascia commenced in what is affectionately known as ‘John’s Lane Church’ (Fig. 5), following the erection of a shrine dedicated to her in 1936 (Fig. 6). Situated in the heart of medieval Dublin (Fig. 7), and dedicated to St. Augustine, and St. John the Baptist, this church was chosen as the research site due to the fact that a perpetual novena mass honouring St. Rita, attended by up to 250 people, is held there every Saturday at 11am, where deeply personal requests for favours are publicly read, often with the name of the devotee being attached. Furthermore, the annual pilgrimage from Dublin to Cascia is organised from within this church. To say that the 2015 pilgrimage itinerary was ‘religiously themed’ would be an understatement. Apart from visits to Cascia (where the incorrupt body of St. Rita lying in a glass casket, is available for all to see), and rural Roccaporena, (St. Rita’s birthplace, where her family home, and the garden associated with the miracle of the rose are still intact), other pilgrimage highlights included visits to
Loreto (the house where The Blessed Virgin lived at the time of the Annunciation), Tolentino (birthplace of St. Nicholas, Patron Saint of the souls in Purgatory), the house of St. Benedict (founder of the Benedictine monks), Montefalco (birthplace of St. Clare of the Cross), Assisi (to visit the tomb of the founder of the Poor Clares), and Porziuncola (the cradle of the Franciscan order).

In terms of this paper, defining the appropriate paradigm to help resolve the research question was particularly imperative. To that end, a combination of questionnaires and phenomenological interviews were utilised (Crotty, 2004; Hussey & Hussey, 2003; Polkingstone, 1999; Cresswell, 1998), to elicit the innermost perspectives of devotees and prospective pilgrims on their identification with St. Rita, and their reasons for travelling on pilgrimage to Cascia. According to Hussey & Hussy (2003), the phenomenological paradigm is concerned with understanding human behaviour from the participants' own frame of reference, which consequently enables the articulation of experiences and inner meaning. Additionally, interviews were carried out with a representative of the travel agency which organised the pilgrimage, and who are heavily involved in promoting and delivering religious tourism in Dublin, and a further interview with the priest who has acted as the spiritual leader of the pilgrimage.

Findings and Discussion

Regarding devotional inclination, evidence of a strong alignment with St. Rita emerged during the interview process, wherein, respondents attributed significant motivational importance to their devotion both in terms of its longevity and its regularity. Asked how long they were devoted to St. Rita, periods ranged from ‘three years’ to ‘fifty six years’, with the majority of those interviewed committed for over twenty years. A related question enquired about the regularity of their attendance at the weekly novena mass. Again, enthusiastic responses testified to both devotional determination, and the importance of its regularity. Comments included:

Every Saturday.
It’s part of my week.
I would be lost without it.

In endeavouring to rationalise the ubiquitous articulation of such devotional commitment, interviewees were asked if the ritual of weekly devotion ever drifted into being merely habitual. All respondents strongly disagreed with this suggestion, with one becoming quite unsettled, stressing that their weekly attendance was purposeful rather than habitual, when insisting,

I definitely don’t see it like that. You see I have specific reasons for coming here every week, so no, it’s definitely not just a habit that I have grown into.

Furthermore, interviewees spoke openly of how well they knew the life story of St. Rita. Here a strong unanimity was ubiquitous, illustrated in responses such as:

Of course we know her story.
and:
Some of us have been coming here for years, and know the story off by heart because Fr. Frank told it to us every week, and now Fr. Pat is doing the same.

However, while extensive knowledge of Rita’s back story appeared to be a given, alignment with particular hagiographical highlights was selective, with one woman commenting:

I know her life story, but I mostly identify with her devotion to the cross, and the thorn in her poor forehead,

while another communed with the story of Rita being a renowned peacemaker when stating:

I come here every week to pray to her for another week’s peace in my family,

with yet another, associating with the miracle of the rose, answering:

I bring roses from my own garden to Cascia to have them blessed, and I distribute them to anyone who is sick when I get home.

The legend of Rita overcoming obstacles and rejection also appeared to confer a special status on her, with one woman being quite direct in commenting:

Look, she was forced into a marriage by selfish parents who just wanted to be looked after in their old age, and she just got on with things

and another:

I like the way she accepted life as it unfolded [while pausing to admit] I try to emulate her in accepting what comes my way, but it’s never easy.

Exploring what initially triggered devotion to St. Rita elicited a tapestry of responses. But for most, devotion
was intergenerational, in that they were brought as children by their own mothers or grandmothers. However, for others, devotion grew out of a chance, almost casual interaction illustrated through comments such as:

I wandered into John’s Lane church one Saturday, and I liked what I heard; things like petitions and thanksgivings;

Another commented:

I picked up a prayer card of St. Rita in a church in Armagh during a down time in my life, and after saying the novena prayer, all seemed well again;

while another recalled:

I was recovering from cancer, and I met a woman on a bus who told me about St. Rita. When I went to John’s Lane, I just knew that she would look after me.

When pursuing how devotees interacted with St. Rita at the weekly novena mass, petitioning for the easing of acute and temporal worries emerged as common devotional conduits, with one lady stating:

My niece was very ill in hospital, and I prayed for her to get better. St. Rita answered my prayers, so I have been devoted to her ever since.

Another humorously commented:

Years ago I was worried about passing my examinations, when I met a woman who told me about St. Rita, and said that she was the Patron Saint of the Impossible, and that was music to my ears.

Devotion to St. Rita also appeared to fuse with interviewee perceptions of her ability to understand and resolve more intimate feminine worries and concerns, with one lady commenting:

My mother had a difficult first pregnancy, and prayed that my birth would be easier and it was, thanks to St. Rita’s help, and when I became a mother, she helped me too.

But, by far the most popular devotional driver related to alignment with what devotees saw as the similarity between St. Rita’s life and their own, with comments such as:

I had a difficult marriage, and things seemed to be getting worse.

and again

A lot of women won’t deal with her, because they say that she can also give you a thorn, but I don’t mind, because, that’s what our lives are about; good days and bad days.

This typifies their need, and their ability to identify with the ‘femininity’ of St. Rita for their support.

In accentuating her ‘ordinariness’, some women spoke of pressing, real life issues such as praying for family members suffering from cancer, for sons who were appearing before the courts, for a suitable life-partner, for employment for family members, or to be able to conceive, as if St. Rita in particular would really understand their problems. Interestingly, in depicting Rita in such ordinary terms, one woman visualised her as being:

Just like a woman who would go shopping with you.

Another concluded:

She could write the life story for everyone here in one way or another because she is just like us.
Attendees were also asked if they turned to other ‘more significant’ saints who are represented inside John’s Lane, notably St. Augustine, founder of The Augustinians (Fig. 8), St. Monica, his long suffering mother (Fig. 9), and St. Nicholas of Tolentine, Patron Saint of the Souls in Purgatory (Fig. 10). But while there was an acute awareness of these saints, there was little devotional interest in them, encapsulated in one respondent commenting:

*I don’t know much about any of the others here.
I just go straight to St. Rita.*

Corresponding with their longitudinal devotion, the determination to visit Cascia was both strong and single-minded, with most who could afford to, or were not impaired by poor health, having travelled there between one and four times. Asked what motivated them to embark on pilgrimage, most gave ‘offering thanksgiving’ as their primary reason, illustrated through statements such as:

*I just wanted to say a big thank you for the many times she listened and helped me.*

However, more considered responses related to the importance of Cascia as a place imbued with significant spiritual meaning for devotees, with one lady commenting:

*I just wanted to see where she grew up, and for me that was important because it is the place where the saint I love the most lived.*

Interestingly, while one couple testified to travelling on twenty occasions, some who had made just one pilgrimage, did not have a wish to return, not because of a bad experience, but rather as one respondent put it:

*Because the experience was so perfect, I would be afraid that it would not be so good the second time around.*

Another pragmatically commented:

*Sometimes at our age it gets hard.*

Addressing the fervour of those who have travelled to Cascia, the tour operator who organised and delivered the pilgrimage commented:

*Unlike San Giovanni Rotondo, Lourdes, or Fatima, Cascia would not be a primary destination for us. In fact we normally have just a one hour stopover there on our way to Assisi, but the John’s Lane group are different, and so committed, because they want to stay there for at least four days.*
Indeed, such gritty determination was poignantly expressed by one eighty year old interviewee, who spoke of going to her doctor a few years ago for a ‘check-up’. Following examination, she was referred to hospital where she had stents inserted in her heart. On informing the hospital that she was booked to go on pilgrimage to Cascia, the doctor strongly advised that she should cancel her plans. However, she boldly recalled that:

Not alone did I take the four hour flight, but I climbed the 400 steps to the church, because St. Rita knew that I would do it, and I plan to go back again.

Enquiring whether the Cascia pilgrimage should incorporate leisure time, views were somewhat divided. Asked if it might be considered a holiday, one woman enthused:

Most definitely a holiday. St. Rita would love that

This seems to suggest that Rita, being just like the interviewee, would undoubtedly validate this perspective, while another, in taking a similar stance, described her experience as:

A lovely blend of reverence to St. Rita and a relaxing time with new experiences of sights and tastes.

However, a more representative alternative was also articulated, with one respondent commenting:

I tend to go on holiday with my family, but going to Cascia, now that’s a totally different matter.

Agreeing, another stated:

I would rather it be a pilgrimage, that’s why I went there. [adding . . . ] I broke down and cried there because I was so overwhelmed by the holiness of the place.

While yet another described the simplicity of:

sitting in the church in close proximity to her body, and enjoying the peace and serenity of Cascia [as the perfect way to recharge the batteries].

Interestingly, when Fr. Pat, (the spiritual leader of the pilgrimage), was asked what he felt was the highlight for those who had travelled with him to Cascia, he instantly responded:

the daily mass in the small chapel next to the cathedral where St. Rita’s body in enclosed in the glass coffin, knowing that this small church was her original resting place,

adding:

I have been so impressed seeing women who would stay in that small church for much of the day, even when coaches were available to bring them to see other places.

Addressing perspectives on the rurality of Cascia, Fr. Pat laughingly recounted an encounter with a fellow Augustinian who was based there and who commented:

I can’t understand why you would want to stay in this place for more than one night.

Interestingly, this author also recalls, when having expressed an intention to go on pilgrimage to Cascia, an Augustinian brother replied:

You wouldn’t like it, because there is nothing to see there.

Contextualising the importance of this peripherality, one interviewee commented:

I have gone to Lourdes and Santiago de Compostella, and I found them too busy, but Cascia is different, you feel that you know everybody there, and everybody there knows the holiness of Rita.

Asked about the relevance of hotel accommodation, one lady described it as ‘very basic’, while another commented that it was ‘nothing to write home about’. However, both clearly stated that this was not important as they were ‘there for Rita’. Similarly, another poignantly commented

I remember the first time I went to Cascia. It was with my mother, and we stayed in accommodation run by the nuns. When we opened the door, it was a simple room with white walls and white bedlinen and only a cross on the wall. My mother felt that she was in Heaven.

Conclusion

In asking ‘Why Rita?’ this paper attempted to explicate the motivational factors impacting on the devotional practice of a relatively small, predominately female congregation, who attend a weekly novena mass in Dublin’s John’s Lane Church, to seek favours and consolation from an Italian saint. Ironically, the title of this paper portrays Rita as a medieval Italian saint, and by doing so, implies that she has been perceived as such since the Middle Ages. However, in devotional terms, the findings suggest something entirely different, in that they characterise her as a remarkably
modern saint, with a complex hagiography, who, despite being forgotten for centuries, has grown to become an inspirational figure for today’s troubled and marginalised women (Mayblin, 2014; Janssen & Kuhl, 2008; Ganzevoort, 2008). Accordingly, devotion to St. Rita was found to be strong and traditional among many of those interviewed, wherein gritty devotion to their ‘own St. Rita’, created a powerful and almost unshakable alignment with their ‘Saint of the Impossible’. And while a minority of interviewees stated that they had accidentally discovered St. Rita, by straying into John’s Lane, or picking up a prayer to her on a church seat in a different part of the country, the findings suggest that devotional alignment was primarily intergenerational, (as is the case with most saints for devotees of a particular age), exemplified in how most spoke of being introduced to St. Rita by their own mothers or grandmothers. Interestingly, none of those interviewed alluded to being influenced by their father or grandfather, which would suggest that the intergenerational devotion was predominantly gender based. Furthermore, as this devotion became embedded in their psyche, through reliving Rita’s iconic hagiography over many years attendance at the weekly novena mass and annual triduum held in her honour, they became the carriers of the devotional flame. However, the main impetus for devotional intent was encapsulated in the motivational power of communing with the ordinary (Mayblin, 2014; Ganzevoort, 2008; Ghezzi, 2007), wherein these women co-identified with Rita’s life and suffering, which resulted in their perception that she would be ideally positioned to listen to their petitions and worries.

Indeed, the fact that Rita appears to have been beset by everyday problems that are as relevant today as in her time, in that she was disproportionately put upon with the expectations of the material world, suffered much rejection and physical pain, had a wayward husband and troubled sons, and experienced bereavement and widowhood, appeared to distil a cohesive identification with her among a number of her devotees.

Furthermore, this paper also attempted to ascertain if there was a symbiotic relationship between devotional alignment, and a motivation to travel on pilgrimage to St. Rita’s lifelong abodes of Roccaporena and Cascia. Accordingly, as might be expected, the desire to travel was undoubtedly influenced by devotee entanglement with the story of Rita’s life, which appeared to translate into a once in a lifetime opportunity to visit scenes associated with her hagiography. However, many also travelled on pilgrimage because of their emotional identification with this devotionally significant location, namely, the place of Rita’s birth and her life experiences (Belhassen et al., 2008), and with the pull of Agency (Harrison-Buck, 2012; Sillar, 2009; Alberti & Marshall, 2009; Bird-David, 1999), suggesting that while the weekly novena mass to St. Rita has created a community of practice, where the core identity-related motivation is devotion to St. Rita, the dynamic identity-related activity is exemplified in the Agency driven motivation to go to an emotionally meaningful location at least once. And while in pilgrimage terms, some felt that a blended format was more appropriate to their needs, the majority demanded a more traditional format.

Consequently, as the pilgrimage focussed on where Rita lived and died, and on religiously themed sites proximate to Cascia, it facilitated a form of identity construction for pilgrims imbued with a devotional intent. Equally, gender contributed to the overall pilgrimage experience, with most respondents agreeing that viewing St. Rita as a woman who would understand them as women, coalesced with their reasons for going to Cascia (Jansen & Kuhl, 2008; Mernissi, 1989). However, this motivation appeared to go beyond gendered identification, to become more of a community of devotees who were in the habit of sharing their suffering, and offering support to like sufferers. Thus, the authenticity of Roccaporena and Cascia were significant determinants in their motivation to embrace the pilgrimage.

In conclusion, devotion to Saint Rita in an Augustinian church in Dublin, and the inclination to engage with the attendant pilgrimage to Cascia, are inextricably linked, through aspects of Rita’s hagiography being absorbed on a weekly basis, which has become seamlessly embedded into the DNA of the weekly devotees. Indeed, for most of those interviewed, the pilgrimage site itself was, in cohesive terms, critically significant, suggesting perhaps that the concept of ‘Theoplaceity’ (Belhassen et al., 2008), in encompassing both object and constructive authenticity, may well have become the perfect endgame of this longitudinal devotion to a favourite ‘extraordinarily ordinary’ saint.
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