

Sport and Spiritual Life – Insights From Survey Research in the Mária Maraton Project

Melinda Nagy-Molnár¹, Tünde Bogárdi²

¹ Associate professor PhD Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences (MATE), Institute of Rural Development and Sustainable Economy, Department of Sustainable Tourism

² Senior lecturer PhD Eszterházy Károly Catholic University

Introduction

In Hungary, the Mária Maraton is an almost decade-long project. However, like many other community activities, it was non-operational during the COVID pandemic. This study aims to present pilgrimage tourism, primarily from the perspective of its participants. The investigation is facilitated by a comprehensive survey conducted by the Mária Út Association and its partners, who sought new tools to promote pilgrimage and Mary's Route. The survey examined two target groups. First, it focused on those engaged in community and/or personal development as their main occupation or as volunteers. Second, a questionnaire was administered to a target group interested in the topic, through whose opinions we can learn about their general views on the significance of pilgrimages and whether sports, which can appeal to both believers and non-believers, could be a new tool for promoting pilgrimages and sacred sites.

A brief overview of pilgrimage tourism

A pilgrimage is fundamentally a journey undertaken by participants to pray and/or pay homage to a place of special religious significance. The content of pilgrimages has since expanded. The literature on the study of spiritual missions and the tourism built upon them is quite extensive (Sharpley, 1994; Smith, 1992, Adler, 1989, Schlehe, 1999).

Religious sites can be significant players in the local economy (Szente, 2010). In addition to their sacred role, they can provide socio-economic benefits for their communities and regions (Raffay - Lőrincz - Clarke, 2013). Religious sites impact both religious and secular visitors and excellently complement other man-made and natural attractions of destinations. The effects and benefits they generate far exceed the religious purposes provided for congregations (Thurley - Wood, 2010). Religious tourism has long surpassed the strictly religious boundary by presenting religious elements on a commercial basis in many cases (Vukonic, 1998).

To distinguish between the tourist/pilgrim duality, it is useful to consider a motivational (reason for travel) and behavioral (visitor behavior) dimension (Adler, 1989; Smith, 1992), in which the traditional pilgrim is placed at one endpoint and the secular tourist at the other. Between these two endpoints, we can create nearly infinite combinations of pilgrim and tourist, all of which can be uniformly categorized under the term "religious traveler." Thus, in this context, the tourist and the pilgrim can be present simultaneously within an individual. The primary motivation for the journey

determines which of the two endpoints the participant is closer to. The table by Mártonné – Simonyi (2018) (Table 1) clearly illustrates the attitudes of the two endpoints (pilgrim and tourist) and the intermediate role (pilgrim-tourist).

Table 1: Attitudes of pilgrims, tourists, and pilgrim-tourists

pilgrim	pilgrim-tourist	tourist
<i>spiritual motivation</i>	intellectual motivation	physical motivation
<i>subjectivity</i>	religious motivation does not appear purely or directly	objectivity
<i>the end of the journey is the goal</i>	the entire process is the goal	the journey is the goal
<i>spiritual profit</i>	self-sustainability	material profit
<i>traditional travel</i>	postmodern tourism	modern tourism
<i>internal consumption stimulation</i>	internal-external consumption stimulation	external consumption stimulation
<i>feeling of not being a tourist</i>	feeling of being a traveler	feeling of being a tourist
<i>sharing with oneself</i>	personal sharing	sharing on social media
<i>parish</i>	thematic accommodation	hotels and other accommodations
<i>spiritual product</i>	mixed product	touristic product
<i>fashion plays no role</i>	fashion is defining	fashion is defining
<i>anyone</i>	mostly single women, married couples, middle-aged intellectuals	anyone
<i>does not spend</i>	spends little	spends
<i>no demand</i>	low demand	can be more demanding
<i>interprets spiritual rejuvenation as a gift</i>	interprets spiritual rejuvenation as a service	interprets spiritual rejuvenation as a service, but it arises from relaxation, not spirituality
<i>faith</i>	internal experience	external experience
<i>difficulties during the journey are important</i>	difficulties during the journey are acceptable	difficulties during the journey are not acceptable

Source: Compiled by the authors based on Mártonné M.K. – Simonyi N. (2018), pp. 48

According to the argument of STANCIULESCU and TÎRCA (2010), it is possible to create a balance in meeting the needs and expectations of stakeholders, but the fulfillment of the spiritual mission must be prioritized in religious tourism.

Within the tourism sector, pilgrimage tourism is typically treated as a sub-product of cultural tourism, a kind of "niche" product. It is less documented what the demand and/or supply elements and needs are. In the case of pilgrimage tourism, the journey is often as important, if not more important, than reaching the destination. Considering the time factor, the journey can take up about half to two-thirds of the total time dedicated to the pilgrimage. The time spent at the sacred site is often only a third of the total time allocated for the trip. The pilgrimage tourist has specific motivations.

Sport and Pilgrimage

Our starting point can be that sport in many aspects shows affinity with the religious spirit. Both value perseverance, goal-orientation, and a sense of belonging. It is worth asking why sport is particularly suitable for promoting pilgrimage events. Sport can be a new tool for promoting pilgrimages and sacred sites, capable of attracting both believers and non-believers (Rinschede, 1992). Sport transcends identification problems. Consequently, it is suitable for the socialization of pilgrimage events, regardless of religious or social affiliation.

The fact that the Vatican and Pope Francis himself initiated close collaborations with sports figures in 2015, based on the mutually reinforcing roles of faith and sport, indicates that even the higher hierarchical levels of this sacred institutional system are partners in this effort. The great potential in the possibilities of cooperation between faith and sport is well demonstrated by the fact that in 2016, the Pontifical Council for Culture held an international conference on this topic (http://mariamaron.mariaut.hu/cikk/32182/Szakmai_kiadvany).

The Mária Maraton

In 2014, the Mary's Route Association and its partners decided to seek new tools to promote pilgrimage and Mary's Route. In Hungary, the Mária Maraton was introduced as a new tool to promote pilgrimage by connecting it with sport. The Mária Maraton set off on its journey in July 2017 (Galgócziné Szabó Zsófia, 2024). From the beginning, it was capable of mobilizing large crowds both within and beyond the borders. The cross-border partners of the Mária Maraton projects include the Transylvanian Mary's Route Association, "Természet Szíve" Association, the village of Karva, and Magnus 2008 GmbH, forming an extensively organized network both geographically and socially.

Unfortunately, multi-day large events did not return after the COVID years, but the Mária Maraton still operates today as a one-day program at several locations across the country with shorter distances (Zsombor Kápolnai, 2024). It is worth asking what made the Mária Maraton truly successful in promoting pilgrimage events in Hungary. The Mary's Route Association and its partners engaged in genuine project planning. The initiative's starting point was that a pilgrimage could simultaneously be a faith and sports event, effectively utilizing individual and community development tools. The program organizers ensured that cultural value preservation and spiritual renewal were emphasized in the pilgrimage. One of the unique specialities of pilgrimages based on the connection between faith and sport is that they can have a preventive effect by mutually reinforcing body and soul.

Materials and Methods

To ensure the success of the project, the organizers examined the legitimacy of building on the mutually reinforcing power of physical performance and spiritual practice. A questionnaire survey was conducted to explore this, which took place between January 2017 and the end of June 2017, prior to the first Mária Maraton event. The survey was conducted by the HÉTFA Research Institute and Analytical Center (Galgócziné Szabó Zsófia 2024). The survey examined respondents' views on the relationship between faith and sport, the place and role of pilgrimages, and their motivations.

Two questionnaires were prepared. The first was open to anyone, but some questions could only be answered by those who had participated in such an event before. It was an online survey, with the database provided by the pre-registration for the Mária Maraton (Galgócziné Szabó Zsófia 2024). The general questionnaire was conducted in two sequences. In the first phase, 260 responses were received from Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia in the first quarter of 2017. In the second round, during the second quarter of 2017, the questionnaire was slightly modified due to emerging new aspects and correction suggestions (Kápolnai Zsombor 2024). An additional 58 responses were collected in this second phase, successfully concluding the planned 300 responses. By the end of June 2017, a total of 315 evaluable questionnaires had been completed.

The other questionnaire was an expert survey, which was completed by those who were involved in either volunteer or professional roles related to community cohesion or individual personal development, and who participated in the organization of the Mária Maraton (Table 2). By interviewing the organizers, the aim was not only to understand how these specialized professionals and volunteers perceive the interaction between physical performance and spiritual practice, but also to gain a deeper insight into their knowledge regarding the personality development effects of pilgrimages and their overall social usefulness. A total of 32 expert questionnaires were completed by June 2017. The expert and general questionnaires overlapped in terms of content (Table 2).

Table 2: Comparison of the general and expert questionnaires

	general questionnaire	expert questionnaire
<i>individual sporting characteristics</i>	X (detailed)	X
<i>relationship between faith and sports - opinions, insights, usefulness</i>	X	X
<i>the impact of pilgrimages on individual personality development and daily life</i>	X	X (detailed)
<i>the social impact and societal usefulness of pilgrimages</i>	X	X (detailed)
<i>the impact of pilgrimages compared to various group activities</i>		X
<i>knowledge about the events of the Mary's Route</i>	X	
<i>recruitment methods, outreach strategies, motivations</i>	X	
<i>motivations of pilgrims</i>	X	

Source: [http://mariamaron.mariaut.hu/cikk/32182/Szakmai_kiadvany pp. 17](http://mariamaron.mariaut.hu/cikk/32182/Szakmai_kiadvany_pp_17).

Findings from the general questionnaire

As for the respondents, slightly more were women (54%) than men (46%). The most typical respondent profile was around 40 years old, living in urban areas, and married with children. On average, 90% of respondents identified themselves as religious, with the proportion notably higher among respondents from across the border in Romania, where this figure reached 96%. The majority identified as Catholic in denomination. The distribution of denominations among respondents reflected the societal positions of the historical churches, with Protestantism being the second most commonly reported denomination.

Respondents provided relatively incomplete responses regarding their involvement in sports activities, particularly noticeable among those from across the border. Only a quarter as many respondents from beyond the border provided answers about their involvement in sports compared to Hungarian respondents. Overall, the majority of respondents engage in sports at least weekly (66%). Approximately 21% exercise on a monthly or less frequent basis, while 13% do not exercise at all. Interestingly, among respondents from across the border, there were no respondents who interpreted exercising on a monthly or less frequent basis, but a higher proportion exercised weekly.

Among those who exercise weekly, cycling, running, and hiking were equally popular activities. Regarding performance, the majority of weekly runners (45%) have not yet completed distances longer than 10 km. For 40% of them, the half marathon was their greatest achievement. Cyclists showed a wide range of performance levels. In the case of hiking, the most significant information pertained not to distance but to the number of hiking days. When discussing preferred lengths of hiking trips in days rather than peak performances, older respondents preferred single-day trips, while the younger preferred two-day trips.

Respondents had the opportunity to provide responses regarding the effects of pilgrimages through both closed and open-ended questions. The majority highlighted physical and spiritual rejuvenation as the most significant impact. This was closely followed by the sense of community experience and the testing nature of pilgrimage. Interestingly, only a fifth of open ended responses contained religious content. According to respondents, spirituality requires three factors: spiritual guidance, testimony, and contemplation. Events that combine faith and sports were considered important by a remarkably high percentage of respondents (90%). Many cited the idea of "a sound mind in a sound body" to explain this perspective. Additionally, they emphasized that such events foster genuine human connections and enable a more meaningful form of physical activity through communal experiences.

84% of respondents reported experiencing their faith while engaging in sports activities. This may manifest in various ways: some pray, recite the rosary, or simply feel the presence of God. However, only 25% of respondents considered sports to be a potential tool for evangelization, meaning that non-believers could be led to faith through the testimony of their peers during these activities. The survey also examined the social impacts of pilgrimages. Responses frequently mentioned community development, youth collaboration, and health preservation. Strengthening connections between Hungarians within and beyond the borders also proved to be significant (Table 3).

Table 3. Contribution of cycling, walking, or running pilgrimages to certain social phenomena

	does not affect		promotes						total	does not know/did not answer	grand total	S average
			to a small extent		to a medium extent		to a large extent					
	frequency	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	N	N		
<i>community development</i>	0	0	3	6	12	24	35	70	50	8	58	2,64
<i>youth collaboration</i>	1	2	1	2	12	28	29	67	43	15	58	2,60
<i>health preservation</i>	2	4	2	4	12	24	34	68	50	8	58	2,56
<i>cooperation between Hungarians within and beyond the borders</i>	0	0	3	6	18	37	28	57	49	9	58	2,51
<i>meaningful collaborations</i>	1	2	1	2	19	40	27	56	48	10	58	2,50
<i>civil cooperation</i>	1	2	2	4	19	42	23	51	45	13	58	2,42
<i>family cohesion</i>	2	4	2	4	18	38	25	53	47	11	58	2,40

Source: http://mariamaron.hu/cikk/32182/Szakmai_kiadvany_pp_28.

Expert Questionnaires

The aim of filling out the so-called expert questionnaires was to gain insights into the opinions of those who, as their main occupation or as volunteers, are involved in community and/or personality development. The 32 completed questionnaires were equally divided between volunteers and full-time professionals. Approximately 60% of them were members of a pilgrimage community in some form. Out of the 32 respondents, only one had no program organizing experience. The majority, roughly 2/3 of the respondents, had specific experience in organizing pilgrimages. Most of the expert respondents had previously participated in organizing group work programs and walking pilgrimages (66%), more than a third had organized spiritual events, and a quarter had organized cycling pilgrimages.

The number of programs organized by the respondents averaged 14, with an average group size of 14 participants. This latter is an extremely important question, as the ideal group size for spiritual and traditional sports events is not the same. In spiritual formation, a smaller number of participants is ideal. For therapeutic sessions, even less than 10 participants is appropriate (Table 4).

Table 4: Optimal group size according to the expert questionnaires

	average	minimum	maximum	median	valid response
<i>walking pilgrimage</i>	41	10	300	30	29
<i>running pilgrimage</i>	25	3	100	20	19
<i>cycling pilgrimage</i>	21	8	100	15	22
<i>sports events (without spiritual content)</i>	102	15	300	100	17
<i>spiritual events (without sports content)</i>	45	20	100	50	18
<i>group work programs, group sessions</i>	21	10	60	18	24
<i>competence development sessions</i>	18	5	60	12	17
<i>social group sessions</i>	16	5	40	12	19
<i>therapeutic sessions</i>	9	1	20	10	18

Source: http://mariamaron.mariaut.hu/cikk/32182/Szakmai_kiadvany_pp.30

In the surveys, based on the open-ended responses, it can be concluded that respondents believe pilgrimages have a personality development effect by helping with self-awareness and discovering solutions to problems. In closed response options, it was highlighted that pilgrimages heal mental issues, aid in finding friends, promote health preservation, and facilitate social integration. In terms of skills and abilities, respondents emphasized the development of team spirit, acceptance of others, flexibility, and problem-solving skills as highly important outcomes.

As for the community impacts based on the open-ended questions, it emerges that deeper trust relationships develop within the community during pilgrimages. Tools for this include attentive listening, turning towards each other, and patience. Pilgrimages aid in engaging youth, networking small rural communities, and on a broader territorial scale, they foster collaboration among Hungarians within Hungary and across borders. Overall, they effectively serve to strengthen Christian culture and facilitate authentic, experiential transmission. (Table 5.)

In the last section of the questionnaire, the editors examined how respondents perceive the effects of pilgrimages compared to their main or volunteer activities in various aspects. In terms of societal impacts, the overall result often indicated that pilgrimages contribute more significantly to these aspects compared to the impacts of respondents' primary occupations or volunteer work alone. This was also evident in areas such as networking small communities, youth collaboration, international relations, multiculturalism, and family cohesion.

Table 5: The Social utility of pilgrimages according to expert questionnaires

	does not contribute		contributes to a small extent		contributes to a moderate extent		contributes to a large extent		cannot judge		Total	
	N	S average	N	S average	N	S average	N	S average	N	S average	N	S average
<i>community development</i>	0	0%	0	0%	3	11%	25	89%	0	0%	28	2,89
<i>strengthening Christian culture, authentic and experiential transmission</i>	0	0%	0	0%	5	18%	22	79%	1	4%	28	2,81
<i>cooperation between Hungarians from across the border and Hungary</i>	0	0%	0	0%	7	25%	20	71%	1	4%	28	2,74
<i>spread of physical and mental health in society</i>	0	0%	1	4%	6	21%	21	75%	0	0%	28	2,71
<i>networking of small villages</i>	0	0%	1	4%	6	21%	18	64%	3	11%	28	2,68
<i>youth collaborations</i>	0	0%	1	4%	7	25%	19	68%	1	4%	28	2,67
<i>meaningful collaborations</i>	0	0%	1	4%	7	26%	19	70%	0	0%	27	2,67
<i>hospitality, openness to understanding people from different social backgrounds</i>	0	0%	1	4%	8	29%	19	68%	0	0%	28	2,64
<i>civil collaborations</i>	0	0%	0	0%	11	41%	15	56%	1	4%	27	2,58
<i>family cohesion</i>	0	0%	1	4%	11	39%	14	50%	2	7%	28	2,50
<i>other international collaborations</i>	0	0%	1	4%	12	44%	9	33%	5	19%	27	2,36
<i>increasing the sustaining power of small villages</i>	0	0%	3	11%	10	36%	12	43%	3	11%	28	2,36
<i>integration of Roma communities</i>	0	0%	6	22%	8	31%	10	37%	3	11%	27	2,17
<i>social integration, opportunity creation</i>	1	4%	6	22%	10	37%	7	26%	3	11%	27	1,96
<i>preservation of multicultural diversity</i>	0	0%	6	23%	13	50%	4	15%	3	12%	26	1,91

Source: http://mariamaron.mariaut.hu/cikk/32182/Szakmai_kiadvany_pp.39

Conclusions

The introduction of the Mária Maraton as a new initiative to promote religious life was preceded by a deliberate expert study. A questionnaire survey was conducted among those who are professionally or voluntarily involved in community and/or personality development, along with another publicly accessible survey. One of the aims of the questionnaire survey was to explore the opinions of these two target groups regarding the personality and community development effects of pilgrimages. Comparing the responses of the two target groups emphasizes that both consider pilgrimages as important tools for personality development, helping to discover problems and their solutions. Regarding community impacts, a notably important effect highlighted was the development of team spirit and the ability to accept others, which can be attributed to the formation of deeper trust relationships within pilgrimage communities.

Respondents overwhelmingly (90%) indicated that events combining faith and sports are important. This was often explained by the concept of "a sound mind in a sound body." Although a significant proportion of athletic respondents expressed experiencing their faith while exercising,

overall, respondents were relatively less optimistic about whether sports could effectively serve as an evangelization tool—that is, whether it could lead non-believers to faith through the testimony of their peers during the journey. However, no one disputed that physical performance and spiritual practice have a mutually reinforcing effect, and that such events can mobilize target groups who are not religious. Thus, a pilgrimage connected with sports indeed transcends the identification issues that create a barrier between believers and non-believers. Consequently, the Mária Maraton is also suitable for the socialization of pilgrimage events. As Rinschede (1992) stated, this could be a new tool for promoting pilgrimages and holy places, capable of attracting both believers and non-believers (Rinschede, 1992).

Summary

The attractiveness of pilgrimages and pilgrimage sites today naturally lies in their spiritual appeal. However, there are also means through which these can pique the interest of groups who, while valuing community, identity, and faith, do not interpret these concepts on a strictly sacred basis.

The success of the Mária Maraton was significantly aided by the fact that both potential target groups and those involved in community and/or personality development as a primary occupation or as volunteers were surveyed to understand their views on the relationship between faith and sports. This contributed to ensuring that the priorities articulated by the two examined target groups were implemented during the realization of the Mária Maraton. The research not only supported the organization of services provided to participants of the Mária Maraton but also facilitated the production of more targeted communication materials (Galgócziné Szabó Zsófia 2024).

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Interview:

Kápolnai Zsombor (Mary's Route executive director) May-July 2024

Dr. Zsófia Galgócziné Szabó, Mary's Route Coordinator, July 2024



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