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# Army style, we marched: War and peace in the cross-carrying pilgrimages to Vézelay and Walsingham, 1946–1948

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This article analyses the cross-carrying pilgrimages to Vézelay and Walsingham, staged between 1946 and 1948. These were aimed at achieving peace, penance, and reconciliation at a time when communism was on the rise, there were fears that war would return, and the nuclear threat was real. Encompassing several contingents (or Stations), these religious post-war Catholic pilgrimages stand in contrast to the ‘secular’ pilgrimages to battlefields and cemeteries after 1918. Yet they retained a strong military element because of the substantial involvement of veterans, and their organisation, leadership and articulation. This article argues that the pilgrimages gave veteran pilgrims a chance to continue their service in the form of direct spiritual action, utilising their wartime experiences in the context of pilgrimage in order to conduct these physically challenging journeys. It will also explore the wider aims of atoning for wartime actions, and the ways in which the pilgrims were received by the communities they passed through. Whilst ultimately unsustainable due to their novelty and complexity, they laid a foundation for military-penitential pilgrimages, provided an outlet for spiritual and worldly concerns, and presented Catholics (especially in Britain) in a positive light in the years immediately after the Second World War.

Keywords: Pilgrimage, Peace, Penance, Veterans, Second World War

In his radio address of Christmas 1942, Pope Pius XII asked the faithful to manifest their faith ‘like the crusaders of old,’ and restore it through action in the face of ‘the frightful catastrophe of these times.’<sup>1</sup> This was the start of the Vatican’s decision to take ownership of the message of peace conveyed by Our Lady of Fatima in 1917, which declared the faithful could be saved by making sacrifices and devoting themselves to the Immaculate Heart of Mary.<sup>2</sup> More broadly, the

\* I would like to thank Drs Mark Fenemore and Christoph Laucht for their comments on mid-twentieth century European matters, and Dr Sam Edwards for his comments on the draft of this article.

<sup>1</sup> The Rights of Man: The Feast of Christmas and Suffering Humanity (Broadcast of Pope Pius XII, Christmas 1942), [www.catholictradition.org/Encyclicals/1942.htm](http://www.catholictradition.org/Encyclicals/1942.htm) (accessed August 10, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Sister Mary Lucia of the Immaculate Heart, *Fatima in Lucia’s Own Words: Sister Lucia’s Memoirs*, L. Kondor, ed. (Fatima: Postulation Centre, 1976).

Pope's address echoed references to participants in the Second World War as crusaders, which were utilised both during and after the conflict.<sup>3</sup> In 1944, the pope acknowledged that people not only had opinions on war and peace but that they should be heard. In his Christmas Eve broadcast, *Benignitas et humanitas*, he told his listeners:

the peoples have, as it were, awakened from a long torpor. They have assumed, in relation to the state and those who govern, a new attitude — one that questions, criticizes, distrusts . . . [they] are today firmly convinced . . . that had there been the possibility of censuring and correcting the actions of public authority, the world would not have been dragged into the vortex of a disastrous war, and that to avoid for the future the repetition of such a catastrophe, we must vest efficient guarantees in the people itself . . . There is a duty, besides, imposed on all, a duty which brooks no delay, no procrastination, no hesitation, no subterfuge: it is the duty to do everything to ban once and for all wars of aggression.<sup>4</sup>

He was talking about democracy, but the content of the address also reflected contemporary discussions among Catholics about taking control and preventing another war. In the same year, British MP George Shuster argued that 'the question of what can be done by Catholics for peace when the war is over can be answered only in terms of probably survival and growth of the peace movement.'<sup>5</sup> Earlier attempts at forming a Catholic peace movement had made some headway, and as the war drew to a close a new French prayer group, *Pax Christi*, heavily influenced by veterans, grew quickly, showing the appetite for peace among the laity in the wake of the war.<sup>6</sup> Another manifestation of this desire for peace, and specifically Catholic responses to it, were the cross-carrying peace pilgrimages that took place to Vézelay (1946) and Walsingham (1947 and 1948) when hundreds of Catholic men carried heavy wooden crosses as an act of peace and penance.<sup>7</sup> The role of such religious pilgrimages in the aftermath of the Second World War is a comparatively neglected area of scholarship. There is a body of work on peace marches and pilgrimages to secular sites, for example, but none focus on the mid-to-late-1940s when

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, M.D. Horswell, *The Rise and Fall of British Crusader Medievalism, c. 1825-1945* (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2018), ch. 7, and D.D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe: A Personal Account of World War II* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1948).

<sup>4</sup> 'Democracy and a lasting peace,' [www.papalencyclicals.net/pius12/p12xmas.htm](http://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius12/p12xmas.htm) (date accessed September 7, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> George N. Shuster, 'Catholics and the Peace,' *World Affairs* 107 (1944): 4-7, 5.

<sup>6</sup> J. M. Todd, 'Catholics and International Peace,' *Life of the Spirit 1946-64*, 8 (1953): 253-58, 254; Etienne De Jonghe, 'Pax Christi International: The Role and Perspectives of an International Catholic Peace Movement,' *Cross Currents* 33 (1982): 323-29, 323. Jonghe, 'Pax Christi,' 323. V. Flessati, 'Justice, Peace and Dominicans 1216-1999: IX - STOP WAR PLEASE. Dominicans and the Peace Movement in England,' *New Blackfriars* 80 (1999): 484-90.

<sup>7</sup> H. Vilaça, 'From place of popular religiosity to a transnational space of multiple meanings and religious interactions,' in A. P. Poveda ed. *The Changing Faces of Catholicism* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 76; Kathryn Hurlock, 'Peace, Politics and Piety: Catholic Pilgrimage in Wartime Europe, 1939-1945,' *War & Society* 41 (2022): 36-52.

Catholic cross-carrying pilgrimages took place.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the connection between military service and pilgrimage has received little treatment. The role of ex-servicemen's pilgrimage to Lourdes has been studied by Christian Sorrel and the anthropologist John Eade, for example,<sup>9</sup> but there has been no comparative analysis of English and continental pilgrimage, or of multi-contingent pilgrimages of this kind. Existing historiography instead focuses on post-First World War pilgrimage to battlefields and cemeteries, or the near-contemporary veteran pilgrimages to places like the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in America.<sup>10</sup>

Focusing on the three years immediately after the end of the war, this article tackles this gap while highlighting the lack of attention paid to the importance of pilgrimage and its use by Catholics to address the challenge set out by the pope in *Benignitas et humanitas*. The article considers two key areas: the elements of peace, penance, and reconciliation embedded in the pilgrimages and their simultaneous connections to the wider peace movement; and the military and veteran identity of the pilgrimage and the pilgrims. It starts by explaining the organisation and execution of the pilgrimages to Vézelay and Walsingham between 1946 and 1948, before unpicking the importance of these pilgrimages to peace (and the broader peace movement), reconciliation, and repentance. Moving on, the article then focuses on the military elements of the pilgrimages to show how veteran identity was an important factor, not just in the origins and organisation of these pilgrimages, but in their motivation and interpretation. It argues that the pilgrimages were both a continuation of military service in that they 'fought' for peace, and a sign of shifting attitudes to Catholicism, especially in Britain. Moreover, though the complexity of these particular multi-contingent cross-carrying pilgrimages was not repeated, they played an important role in providing an outlet for the frustrations of men who felt powerless, but who turned to faith for a solution. By focusing on the Vézelay and Walsingham pilgrimages, this article provides the first comparative study of so-called 'military pilgrimages'.

<sup>8</sup> Marco Giugni, 'Peace Movements,' *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences* (Oxford: Elsevier, 2015), 644.

<sup>9</sup> Christian Sorrel, 'Politics of the Sacred: Lourdes, France, and Rome,' in Roberto de Stefano and Francisco Javier Ramón Solans, eds. *Marian Devotions, Political Mobilization & Nationalism in Europe & America* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016), 68–69; J. Eade, 'Healing Social and Physical Bodies: Lourdes and Military Pilgrimage,' in John Eade and Mario Katić, eds. *Military Pilgrimage and Battlefield Tourism: Commemorating the Dead* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 15–34.

<sup>10</sup> T. Walter, 'War Grave Pilgrimage,' in I. Reader and T. Walter, eds. *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture*, (London: Macmillan, 1993), 63–91; J. W. Graham, *The Gold Star Mother Pilgrimages of the 1930s: overseas grave visitations by Mothers and Widows of Fallen U.S. World War I Soldiers* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005); Eade and Katić, eds. *Military Pilgrimage*; D.W. Lloyd, *Battlefield Tourism: Pilgrimage and the Commemoration of the Great War in Britain, Australia, and Canada* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998); R. J. Michalowski and J. Dubisch, *Run for the Wall: Remembering Vietnam on a Motorcycle Pilgrimage* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

It thus adds to a growing area of scholarship considering the 'international arena' of religion as it relates to post-war Britain and France, a field which has increased 'exponentially' since the start of the twenty-first century, and says something new about the role of the relationships between pilgrimage and warfare.<sup>11</sup>

### *The Pilgrimages to Vézelay and Walsingham*

The Vézelay pilgrimage (the 'Croisade de la Paix' or Crusade of Peace) of 1946 was instigated by the Benedictines of Pierre-qui-Vire Abbey (Burgundy, France) when they turned their eighth annual pilgrimage into a 'new crusade of prayer and penance for peace.'<sup>12</sup> This was a 'conscious response' to papal appeals for Christians to engage in mass acts of peace, and the first large-scale post-war pilgrimage in Europe.<sup>13</sup> The practicalities of the pilgrimage are hazy, but the Church provided an 'organizational framework' for all kinds of adjacent activities which could be utilised, and the Catholic press in France and Britain provided ready-made ways of advertising and organising the pilgrimage.<sup>14</sup> The numbers involved suggest it was a success: the pilgrimage attracted around 450 men walking in fourteen groups or contingents (the number chosen to reflect the Stations of the Cross). The pilgrims came primarily from towns and cities in France like Lourdes or Cherbourg, although some groups joined from Belgium, Luxembourg, and England.<sup>15</sup> Each group carried a 90lb wooden cross, and another 30,000 pilgrims converged on Vézelay to join them in prayer. However, some aspects were not well thought out: 'Only a few countries were represented,' complained one pilgrim, 'there had been difficulties with visas, there had not been time enough, there had been oversights and omissions.'<sup>16</sup> Others may have chosen not to engage in an act which implied their guilt. Alice Cooper noted that the German Catholic Church 'evaded its share of responsibility' for Nazi activities, while Frederic Spotts claimed German bishops showed 'not a trace of

<sup>11</sup> Dianne Kirby, 'Britain and the Origins of the Religious Cold War, 1944-47,' in John W. Young, Effie G. H. Pedaliu, and Michael D. Kandiah, eds. *Britain in Global Politics, Volume 2: From Churchill to Blair*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), 1-21, 1.

<sup>12</sup> O. P. 'Vézelay,' *Blackfriars*, 27 (1946): 328-335, 332; 'A Pilgrimage for Peace,' *The Catholic World* (1946), 271.

<sup>13</sup> Hurlock, 'Peace, Politics, and Piety', 36-37; Frank Atkin and Nicholas Tallett, *Priests, Prelates & People: A History of European Catholicism Since 1750* (London: IB Taurus, 2003), 262; 'Token Pilgrimage to Lourdes,' *The Advocate*, 5 June 1946, 7.

<sup>14</sup> 'Introduction: Towards a Global History of Social Movements,' in Stefan Berger and Holger Nehring, eds. *The History of Social Movements in Global Perspective: A Survey*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2017), 21.

<sup>15</sup> *Friends Intelligencer*, 105 (1948), 10; 'Vézelay inaugure le Croisade de la Paix,' *France-Soir*, 20 July 1946, 3.

<sup>16</sup> O. P. 'Vézelay,' 331.

regret' for their role in recent events.<sup>17</sup> Sabrina Ramet, however, has suggested that the Catholic Church in Germany did recognise its actions had enabled the rise of National Socialism, but that theologically speaking, Catholic individuals were not responsible for the actions of others. Bishop Clemens von Galen of Munster (*d.* 1946) declared accusation of collective guilt was 'unjust.' The pope concurred, laying the blame on the Nazis alone.<sup>18</sup>

When the English contingent returned home, the Dominican friar Fr. Vann delivered a sermon urging that there 'must be other pilgrimages like the first: similar pilgrimages in our own country.'<sup>19</sup> This prompted several small events the following year, most of which sought peace, and most of which involved veterans. One from the diocese of Nottingham went to Padley Chapel, Derbyshire, in July 1947, while members of the Leeds Catholic Legion of Ex-Servicemen visited Walsingham, hoping it would be the first of an annual National Pilgrimage for Veterans.<sup>20</sup> Another pilgrimage to Holywell was also touted by pilgrims from the Vézelay trip but appears to have come to nothing.<sup>21</sup> Other pilgrims also went to Walsingham to give thanks for avoiding bomb damage during the war itself.<sup>22</sup>

Inspired by his experiences at Vézelay, in 1947, Captain Charles Osborne arranged a single cross-carrying pilgrimage to the Marian shrine at Walsingham to test the waters.<sup>23</sup> When building on this success, in 1948 he gained parochial and episcopal support to organise a much larger pilgrimage, comparable to that of Vézelay, and recruited the required fourteen groups.<sup>24</sup> They departed from towns and cities in England and Wales which were the diocesan seats of large Catholic populations (such as Middlesbrough), home to thriving Catholic parishes (Glossop or Birkenhead), or where Osborne received strong parochial and diocesan support.<sup>25</sup> Osborne coordinated the groups by

<sup>17</sup> Alice Holmes Cooper, *Paradoxes of Peace: German Peace Movements Since 1945* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 65; Frederic Spotts, *The Churches and Politics in Germany* (Middletown, Mass.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 30.

<sup>18</sup> Sabrina P. Ramet, 'Religion and Politics in Germany since 1945: The Evangelical and Catholic Churches,' *Journal of Church and State*, 42 (2000): 115–145, 119.

<sup>19</sup> *Pilgrim Cross*, 25–31.

<sup>20</sup> Notts Ex-Servicemen's Pilgrims to Padley,' *Catholic Herald*, 11 July 1947, 7; 'Pilgrimage to Walsingham,' *Catholic Herald*, 21 November 1947, 7.

<sup>21</sup> "'Vézelay" Pilgrimages Inside Britain,' *Southern Cross*, 18 July 1947, 8.

<sup>22</sup> DPA/325/12, Manchester Central Library, Manchester.

<sup>23</sup> He planned for more, but support was not forthcoming from most bishops in 1947. AP S 15 (1) Letter of Charles Osborne to Right Rev. Humphrey Bright, 15 January 1948, f. 1, Catholic Diocese of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham (CDBA).

<sup>24</sup> That Easter, the first of the Student Cross pilgrimages also took place to Walsingham. J.A. Bryden, *Behold the Wood! A History of the Student Cross 1948–1988* (Oxford: Student Cross Association, 1998).

<sup>25</sup> The fourteen sites eventually chosen were Westminster, Canterbury, Guildford, East Grinstead (originally Basingstoke), Oxford, Malmesbury (originally Gloucester), Stourbridge (in preference to Worcester), Birmingham, Newcastle-under-Lyme (instead of Shrewsbury), Wrexham, Salford, Leeds, Birkenhead (instead of Liverpool), Glossop (instead

drawing up a timetable and sending instructions on how the pilgrims' departure ceremony should be conducted.<sup>26</sup> He obtained permission from individual bishops to pass through their dioceses, from the Archbishop of Birmingham to approach priests to help with parish promotion,<sup>27</sup> and he created a poster for advertising.<sup>28</sup> The pilgrimage was advertised in the communities through which it would pass to ensure local support; Eileen Lovas remembered being asked to walk out with her family to meet the Westminster pilgrims a few miles from Brentwood.<sup>29</sup> Basic accommodation, on floors or outdoors, both called on the generosity of communities already stretched through post-war shortages and added to the pilgrims' penitential experience. The pilgrims arrived at Walsingham foot-sore and tired, and in need of medical attention, if they completed the journey at all. They were met there by thousands of supporters, including a large contingent of women 'day-pilgrims' whose participation had been organised by the Union of Catholic Mothers; they came by rail and coach from all over England and Wales.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps most important in all this organisation, however, was Osborne's success in securing the public backing of Cardinal Griffin, Archbishop of Westminster (1899–1956). This was significant for post-war reconstruction and reconciliation, as when Griffin had been unexpectedly appointed (despite his youth), the Apostolic Delegate had argued that 'a young man should be placed at Westminster to grapple with the after-war problems.'<sup>31</sup> Griffin was receptive to Osborne's ideas and could capitalise on the wider interest his plans stirred up among the faithful about the role religion had to play in post-war recovery.

### *Peace, Penance, Reconciliation*

The overarching aim of the three pilgrimages was to secure peace, perform collective acts of penance and atonement, and foster reconciliation. Organisers and participants were concerned with maintaining and defending peace after years of war through direct spiritual action. Undertaking pilgrimage for these aims was not new, as

of Salford). The original list proposed by Osborne was set out in a letter to the Administrator of Birmingham Cathedral. AP S 15 (2), f. 2., CDBA; Margaret Turnham, *Catholic Faith and Practice in England, 1779-1992* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2005), 123, 127.

<sup>26</sup> AP S 15 (2), Letter to the Administrator of Birmingham Cathedral from Charles Osborne, 1948, CDBA; AP S 15 (11) Pamphlet on the Pilgrimage, Prayer & Penance, CDBA.

<sup>27</sup> AP S 15 (3), Letter from Osborne to the Right Rev. Msgr Joseph Masterton, Archbishop of Birmingham, January 29, 1948, f. 2, CDBA; AP S 15 (5), Letter from the Archbishop of Birmingham to Charles Osborne, February 1, 1948, f. 1, CDBA.

<sup>28</sup> AP S 15 (9), Poster of the Pilgrimage of Prayer & Penance, CDBA.

<sup>29</sup> John Lyons, *50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Cross-Carrying Pilgrimage, July 1948-July 1998*, 10.

<sup>30</sup> AP S 15 (8) List of trains for the Mother's Union; AP S 15 (6) Letter from Henrietta Bower. No date, CDBA.

<sup>31</sup> Kester Aspden, *Fortress Church* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2002), 262.



various kinds of peace and reconciliation pilgrimages had been widespread in the first half of the century, most notably the women's National Peacemaker's Pilgrimage (1926); the 'pilgrimage of peace' held by the Germans to areas invaded in the First World War in the same year; the 1929 Crusade of Youth; and the 1934 pilgrimage to Lourdes involving c.80,000 veterans from nineteen countries.<sup>32</sup> More specifically, the cross-carrying pilgrimages took place at a time when sizeable statue-carrying pilgrimages were organised as a way of fending off the threat of communism and bringing the faithful closer to God. The *Grand Retour*, a journey of a statue of Mary across France between 1943 and 1948, toured 12,000 parishes to 're-evangelise' and inspire devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Other post-war pilgrimages were 'led' by a statue of Mary, drawing on a long-standing tradition of Marian procession referred to as the *peregrinatio Mariae*, but specifically depicting her as the Virgin of Fatima to reflect current concerns about peace in Europe.<sup>33</sup> These took place across Europe, often on a diocesan level, and also reached the USA and Canada where a statue was sent on tour in 1947.<sup>34</sup>

The cross-carrying pilgrimages sought peace at a time when their organisers and participants considered the world was facing particular threats to that peace: atomic attack, danger to the Faith (especially the perceived threat of the Soviet Union), tensions in Palestine, Yugoslavia, and Italy, and the problems of the 'pretence that real recovery from war is being made.'<sup>35</sup> The 1946 pilgrimage was seen as an 'expression of the union of the Catholics of many nations in a single world-embracing aim.' One reporter even referred to the fourteen pilgrimage groups heading for Vézelay as a 'penitential League of Nations' with the hope it would help maintain peace.<sup>36</sup> The contrast of militant language with calls for peace through faith seen here and (as we shall see later) in the military language of the pilgrims themselves, appears contradictory. But it is a sign of what Appleby called the 'ambivalence of the sacred', whereby religious faith could as easily promote violence and conflict as peace and reconciliation.<sup>37</sup> This is

<sup>32</sup> Gearóid Barry, *The Disarmament of Hatred: Marc Sangier, French Catholicism, and the Legacy of the First World War, 1914-1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), 133, 137, 161.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Jan Margry, 'Envisioning and Experiencing Mary's Theater of War', in Peter Jan Margry, ed. *Cold War Mary: Ideologies, Politics, and Marian Devotional Culture* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020) pp. 44-45.

<sup>34</sup> Margry, 'Envisioning and Experiencing', 44-45.

<sup>35</sup> 'Foot-Pilgrims call in Staffs Town,' *Staffordshire Advertiser*, 10 July 1948, 7; 'The Pilgrims to Walsingham,' *Catholic Herald*, 9 July 1948, 4; 'Wanted: 400 men to carry Cross,' *Catholic Herald*, 16 April 1948, 1; 'From Paris to Vézelay,' *Catholic Herald*, 5 July 1946, 4.

<sup>36</sup> 'Cross-bearer crusade under way in France,' *Southern Colorado Register*, 19 July 1946, 5; 'Vézelay,' *Circulaire de la Ligue Féminine d'Action Catholique Française*, 2 October 1946, 2; 'International Crusade for Peace,' *The Advocate*, 31 July 1946, 27; DDX 1137, Lancashire Record Office.

<sup>37</sup> R Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).



particularly the case for uses of the Virgin Mary, often depicted as a figure of peace and the protector of Christians, but also playing a significant role in conflict as the defeater of the faithful's enemies.<sup>38</sup> This association probably directed Osborne's choice of Walsingham as his destination in 1947 and 1948 as it was the premier Marian shrine in England and the site of peace pilgrimages before, during, and immediately after the war.<sup>39</sup> The Virgin had been popular in wartime as a symbol of peace and protection, while some parts of the Catholic press attributed Allied victory to her assistance.<sup>40</sup> The pope believed prayers to Mary would help avoid the Third World War warned of in the Third Secret of Fatima in 1917.<sup>41</sup> Mary also became important to the spiritual fight against Communism during the Cold War (itself in its early stages at the time of the cross-carrying pilgrimages) when she came 'to the fore... as a militant saint... as the warrior against Satan par excellence.'<sup>42</sup>

There were also broader concerns about the challenge to peace from both communism and the nuclear threat following the use of nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. These dangers served to 'push along' the papal focus on peace and anti-war that had begun even before then.<sup>43</sup> Although the nuclear threat was not specifically mentioned as a motivator by either the organisers or participants in the cross-carrying pilgrimages, the regular references to threats to peace meant it was clearly a concern.<sup>44</sup> This broader fear reflected the worries expressed by contributors to Britain's Mass Observation project in Hammersmith and Shrewsbury, that another war was almost inevitable, and it would come sooner rather than later; most of those questioned believed that it would involve the use of atomic weapons.<sup>45</sup> Nuclear terror was something which exercised the minds of the public but it was not a priority for Cardinal Griffin or his bishops.<sup>46</sup> Griffin was more concerned about the threat of communism

<sup>38</sup> Nicholas Perry, *Under the Heel of Mary* (London: Routledge, 1988); Anna-Karina Hermkens, 'Religion in War and Peace: Unravelling Mary's Intervention in the Bounganville Crisis', *Culture and Religion* 8 (2007), 271–289.

<sup>39</sup> *Tablet*, 27 May 1939, 697. The peace-promoting hopes focused on Walsingham were seen in the same year when the pope covered the expenses of a third German prisoner who travelled there from Suffolk. 'The Pope Paid,' *Daily Mirror*, 9 September 1947, 4.

<sup>40</sup> 'In a few words,' *Catholic Herald*, 18 May 1945, 4; Martin Conway, *Catholic Politics in Europe, 1918-1945* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2008), 66.

<sup>41</sup> Atkin and Tallett *Priests, Prelates & People*, 261.

<sup>42</sup> Margry, 'Envisioning and Experiencing', 13.

<sup>43</sup> Christopher Hrynkow, 'Nothing but a false sense of security: mapping and critically assessing papal support for a world freed from nuclear weapons,' *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 2 (2019): 51–81, 53.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 53–55.

<sup>45</sup> Mass Observation, *Peace and the Public: A Study by Mass Observation* (London: Longmans, 1947), 15, 18. See also Claire Langhamer, 'Mass Observing the Atom Bomb: the Emotion Politics of August 1945,' *Contemporary British History* 33.2 (2019): 208–225.

<sup>46</sup> K. Willis, 'God and the Atom: British Churchmen and the Challenge of Nuclear Power, 1945-50,' *Albion* (1997): 422–57, 424.

to Catholicism, a fear which had already induced his travel to Poland and to Lourdes to pray for peace.<sup>47</sup> This may have been a significant factor in his support for the 1948 pilgrimage, as perhaps was the wider view (here expressed by the Foreign Office), that Catholicism was 'one of the most powerful anti-communist influences' at the time.<sup>48</sup> Writing 50 years later, the *Catholic Herald* noted that the pilgrimage had taken place when:

The Berlin Airlift had just started to relieve Soviet besieged Berlin [and] 60 Super fortress bombers were flying from the United States to RAF stations in Britain, including that at Marham, about 20 miles from Walsingham. *The Herald* front page on July 9 gave equal prominence to PPP [Pilgrimage of Prayer and Penance] 1948 and an interview with Cardinal Mindszenty, Primate of Hungary, on communist persecution of the Church in his country (which was to develop into his own persecution).<sup>49</sup>

The Soviet blockade of West Berlin, preventing the delivery of food and supplies, had begun in late June 1948.<sup>50</sup> In response, a relief effort, the Berlin Airlift, was staged by, amongst others, the United States, Britain, and France.<sup>51</sup> Most planes sent from England were transporters, but they were accompanied by bombers crewed by the RAF and by American airmen stationed in England and Germany under the auspices of the newly-created Strategic Air Command.<sup>52</sup> For Catholics, the Soviet threat exemplified by the blockade was a particular concern because of the perceived danger of communism to everything Catholicism stood for, and the threat of the spread of its militant atheism across Europe.<sup>53</sup> This was seen most explicitly in the treatment of Cardinal Mindszenty (1892–1975) whose 'anticommunism' was the

<sup>47</sup> 'A Great Roman Catholic Leader,' *The Times*, 21 August 1958, 11; Keith R. Sword, 'The Cardinal and the Commissars: views of the English Catholic Primate on the Communist Takeover of Poland, 1944–47,' *The Polish Review*, 31 (1986): 49–59, 50; Walsh, *Westminster Cardinals*, 148–49.

<sup>48</sup> Quote from FO371/56885, Minute, 14 May 1946, The National Archives, London (TNA) in Kirby, 'Britain and the Origins,' 13.

<sup>49</sup> 'Commemorating Walsingham 1948,' *Catholic Herald*, 31 July 1998, 2.

<sup>50</sup> J. Tusa and A. Tusa, *The Berlin Airlift: The Cold War Mission to Save a City* (New York, 2019); R.G. Miller, *To Save a City: The Berlin Airlift, 1948–1949* (College Station, 2008), 21–3.

<sup>51</sup> Emma Peplow, 'The Role of Britain in the Berlin Airlift', *History* 95 (2010): 207–24.

<sup>52</sup> W.W.E. Samuel, *I Always Wanted to Fly: America's Cold War Airmen* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 69–70; B.S. Gunderson, 'Strategic Air Command's B-29s during the Berlin Airlift,' *Air Power History* 54 (2007): 38–42, 40.

<sup>53</sup> F.J. Coppa, 'Pope Pius XII and the Cold War: The Post-War Confrontation Between Catholicism and Communism,' in *Religion and the Cold War*, ed. Dianne Kirby (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), 50–66. Peter J. Barris, *Silent Churches: Persecution of Religions in the Soviet-dominated areas* (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Research Publishers, 1978); 'Divini Redemptoris,' March 19, 1937. [www.catholicism.com/documents/pius\\_xi\\_encyclicals/Divini\\_redemptoris.pdf](http://www.catholicism.com/documents/pius_xi_encyclicals/Divini_redemptoris.pdf) (accessed February 7, 2022). For the development of papal anti-communism, see Paul Higginson, 'The Vatican and Communism from 'Divini Redemptoris' to Pope Paul VI,' *New Blackfriars* 61 (1980): 158–71.

very reason for his appointment in 1945.<sup>54</sup> He clashed with the Hungarian Working People's Party over the treatment of non-communists and the loss of Church lands to its communist aims, leading to his arrest at the end of 1948.<sup>55</sup>

It was against this background that Osborne labelled the 1948 Walsingham event as a 'Pilgrimage of Peace and Penance' (though it was also called a 'Pilgrimage of Prayer and Penance'). An 'official' brochure distributed *en route* explained the pilgrimage was conducted 'in a spirit of very humble repentance for our sins, and dominated by ardent, constant prayer.'<sup>56</sup> Pilgrims were keenly aware of these twin aims: Vincent Harrison remembered how he 'reflected with much contentment that I had personally contributed with prayer and penance for world peace' by taking part.<sup>57</sup> Support from Wales, via the women's day pilgrimage, may have been directly stimulated by these goals, as the Welsh appear to have had a particular interest in promoting peace: the Welsh League of Nations had active branches across the country, and the 1935 Peace Ballot had a 24% higher response in Wales than the British average due in large part to community activism, broader Welsh support for internationalisation, and non-conformist pacifism.<sup>58</sup> The involvement of an extra contingent from France also underlined the idea of peace across Europe. A group of young Frenchmen brought over the statue of Our Lady of Boulogne to Lowestoft, which had already been processed through France as part of the *Grand Retour* that began in the summer of 1943.<sup>59</sup> To underscore their reasons for participating, when the French pilgrims congregated at Walsingham, they sang 'Sauvez, sauvez la France' [Save, save France].<sup>60</sup>

Another perceived threat to peace was sin (and its consequences) as a result of which these pilgrimages focused on the need to do penance, a goal aided by the requirement to carry heavy wooden crosses for

<sup>54</sup> Eric Roman, *Hungary and the Victor Powers, 1945-1950* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1996), 214. See also Martin Mevius, *Agents of Moscow: The Hungarian Communist Party and the Origins of Socialist Patriotism, 1941-1953* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), esp. 237-40; Atkin and Tallett, *Priests, Prelates & People*, 271.

<sup>55</sup> Péter Miklós, 'Cardinal József Mindszenty: Protecting the Persecuted (1945-48),' *Prague Papers on the History of International Relations* 1 (2017): 129-34.

<sup>56</sup> As quoted in 'Catholic Pilgrims will carry Cross for 210 miles,' *Crawley and District Observer*, 11 June 1948, 10.

<sup>57</sup> Recollection of Vincent Harrison, as quoted in Turnham, *Catholic Faith*, 147. Turnham refers to Harrison's memoir, since deposited in Middlesbrough Diocesan Archives, but neither the current nor former archivist have any record of it.

<sup>58</sup> J. A. Thompson, 'The Peace Ballot of 1935: the Welsh Campaign,' *Welsh History Review*, 11 (1983): 388-399, 395-96.; 'Wales Tops the Polls!,' *1935 Peace Ballot Bulletin*, 6, June 7 (1935): 1, <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/1247091> (accessed September 9, 2021).

<sup>59</sup> Robet Gildea, *Marianne in Chains: In Search of the German Occupation of France 1940-45*, (London: MacMillan, 2011), 180-82; L. Pérouas, 'Le Grand Retour de Notre-Dame de Boulogne a travers la France (1943-1948): Essai d'Interpretation,' *Annales de Bretagne et des pays de l'Ouest* (1983): 171-83.

<sup>60</sup> *Tablet*, 24 July 1948, 56; 'Catholics Meet the Pilgrims,' *Northampton Mercury*, 9 July 1948, 7; 'Pilgrims Pass Through Eye and Scole,' *Diss Express*, 16 July 1948, 2.

hundreds of miles. On the Walsingham pilgrimage, the crosses weighed 95lb and were carried by three pilgrims at a time, in shifts, while the others prayed.<sup>61</sup> Devotion and penitence were emphasised in their pilgrim handbook which reminded them of the solemnity of their undertaking, and its importance for peace. Acts of penance were also encouraged among non-participants by Fr Vann, who called for 'penitence' in their lives by way of support for the pilgrims.<sup>62</sup> Such language situated this pilgrimage in a wider European movement of walking as an act of contrition and piety that was noted by the Dominican Fr. Esmond Klimeck (1895–1983), who published an account of his pilgrimage,:

Everywhere in Europe, men are turning to our Lady; and are taking to the road... The idea comes late, if anything, to England. They go in prayer and penance on foot to Fatima in Portugal; to La Salette and Chartres in France; to shrines in Poland and Belgium, in Italy and Germany.<sup>63</sup>

En route, the Vézelay pilgrims also prayed and expressed 'reparation for the sins' which caused, or now threatened to cause, renewed conflict.<sup>64</sup> For them, there was also a clear desire to engage in an act of reconciliation and to bring together former enemies, though this did not extend to inviting a German contingent of pilgrims to take part.<sup>65</sup> Despite this, several German prisoners of war from the surrounding region brought a fifteenth cross to Vézelay. It was larger and heavier than the others, allegedly made from the timbers of a bombed-out building.<sup>66</sup> Whether this was intended to be symbolic of Germany's weight of guilt is not clear, but it was commented on in a way that suggests it was taken as a sign of German shame. When the pilgrims arrived at Vézelay and processed their crosses, that of 'defeated Germany was girt about by all the other crosses as if sustained by them' and one eyewitness referred to the entire enterprise as an 'astonishing experience of fraternity'.<sup>67</sup> The German pilgrims were not, however, treated with parity as they were forbidden from carrying their cross into the church; that 'honour' instead fell to three members of the British group.<sup>68</sup> A smaller cross was also made and carried by a German prisoner.

Though the British pilgrims appear to have been open to acts of reconciliation, the same was not true of the French who had of course

<sup>61</sup> James Collins, *Soft Blows the Wind (on foot to Walsingham)* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2003), 70.

<sup>62</sup> *Tablet*, 22 May 1948, 326.

<sup>63</sup> E.L. Klimeck O.P., *A Modern Crusader* (London: Blackfriars, 1956), 24.

<sup>64</sup> *Pilgrim Cross*, 18.

<sup>65</sup> 'British Railway Coach in Portugal,' *The Advocate*, 10 September 1947.

<sup>66</sup> *Pilgrim Cross*, 20; '1946, symbole de la réconciliation lors de la croisade de la Paix à Vézelay,' <https://bit.ly/0il6c> (petit-patrimoine.com) (accessed March 9, 2022).

<sup>67</sup> *Pilgrim Cross*, 20.

<sup>68</sup> 'Great Vézelay Peace Pilgrimage Ends,' *The Advocate*, 7 August 1946, 7.

suffered through the Occupation.<sup>69</sup> The French later attacked the German cross (on display at Vézelay) ‘in a spirit of revenge’, so it was hidden for protection.<sup>70</sup> Formally omitting Germans from the pilgrimage was, perhaps, a wasted opportunity. The Catholic Church was one of the few pre-war institutions to survive intact through the war and, being a transnational institution, collaboration among Catholics was a logical route to reconciliation.<sup>71</sup> The language of reconciliation was an interesting choice in the context of post-war reconstruction and relations with Germany. Ulrich Pfeil has argued that it was a word that was rarely used, at least in Franco-German relations, in the decade after the war because the language of reconciliation had failed to stop the rise of Nazis or the outbreak of war.<sup>72</sup> Yet the pilgrimage was seen as an act and process of reconciliation. Reconciliation is sometimes considered the psychological mirror to peace-making’s more structural side,<sup>73</sup> and perhaps a natural sphere for religious expression that made the use of the term particular to this context.

### *War and Peace: Veteran Identity and Military Language*

Although being conceived of as acts of peace, the pilgrimages themselves could be militarised in their language, organisation, and (through the language of combatting threats to the faith), their aims. In part this was due to the referential framing of the pilgrims as so many had been involved in the recent war, and their terms of reference for hardship, marching, or rough accommodation and plain food were easily likened to their military service. But the militarized language of their efforts to both bring peace, atone for sin, and protect the Catholic Church echoed a long tradition of military language in the Church which drew on the New Testament’s ideas of the Church militant and combatting sin. It was most obviously seen in the crusading movement when participants were described as ‘knights of Christ,’ but it was also used to describe the spiritual struggles of the faithful and the trials of the Christian life more broadly.<sup>74</sup> The pilgrimage to Vézelay was initially presented as a non-military crusade, a ‘crusade of prayer for

<sup>69</sup> ‘Franciscan losses in War,’ *The Advocate*, 16 October 1946, 18.

<sup>70</sup> *The Friends Intelligencer*, 105 (1948), 410.

<sup>71</sup> Thomas Grossbölting, *Losing Heaven: Religion in Germany Since 1945* (New York: Berghahn, 2016), 15, 17.

<sup>72</sup> Ulrich Pfeil, ‘Reconciliation: A Definitory Approach,’ in Nicole Colin and Claire Dempsey eds. *Franco-German Relations Seen From Abroad: Post-War Reconciliation in International Perspectives* (Cham: Springer, 2021), 9-21.

<sup>73</sup> Daniel Bar-Tal and Gemma H. Bennink, ‘The nature of reconciliation as an outcome and as a process,’ in Yaakov Bar-Siman-Tov, ed. *From conflict resolution to reconciliation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 16-19.

<sup>74</sup> Ephesians, 6: 12; see, for example, the chapter on ‘The Language of War’ in J. D. Hosler, *John of Salisbury: Military Authority of the Twelfth Century Renaissance* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 119-48.

penance and an act of reparation to God for the world's infidelity.<sup>75</sup> However, *militant* crusading imagery permeated promotional material: a commemorative stamp depicted pilgrims before the Cistercian leader St Bernard (*d.* 1153), preacher of the Second Crusade, at Vézelay (1146); a postcard showed medieval crusaders to Jerusalem; and a report in the French newspaper *L'Aurore* called pilgrims 'modern knights' in fighting for faith.<sup>76</sup> Vézelay pilgrims wore a 'crusader's cross' and the English contingent was preceded by the flag of St George 'flown as it was by the crusaders of old'.<sup>77</sup> These crusading references were also intensified by the fact that 1946 was the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St Bernard's preaching at Vézelay: in celebration, a pageant depicting the history of the crusades was staged when the pilgrims reached Vézelay.<sup>78</sup>

Coming so soon after the end of the war, it is little surprise that many of the pilgrims were veterans. General Juin (1888-1967) commander of the French forces in the Italian campaign, took part in the Vézelay pilgrimage in his capacity as Chief of French Defence Staff, and former deportees, slave labourers, and prisoners of war came 'to give thanks for their deliverance after years of almost hopeless confinement'.<sup>79</sup> The veteran identities of the Walsingham pilgrims were also pronounced. Most had served in the forces during the war and had only recently been demobilised. Geoffrey Lynch (Wrexham) was a member of the RAF Voluntary Reserve, while Peter Hastings (Oxford) served in the Royal Navy. Fr Klimeck noted that all members of his group (Wrexham) were ex-servicemen.<sup>80</sup> Their status as veterans was repeatedly noted in press coverage and the pilgrims often explained their actions with reference to military service.<sup>81</sup> When a reporter asked why they were taking part, the Scottish leader of one contingent explained: 'We're trying to make sure the job we did in the Forces (we're all ex-Service men) won't be all washed up'.<sup>82</sup> This suggests veterans were concerned that the peace they had fought for would break down, largely because of the failure of what they called the 'big noises'. Another pilgrim suggested it was almost a continuation of their war service:

<sup>75</sup> 'Great International Pilgrimage Revived,' *The Advocate*, June 5, 1946, 7.

<sup>76</sup> 'chevaliers modern,' in 'A Vézelay, 40,000 personnes ont assisté à la clôture du pèlerinage de la Paix,' *L'Aurore*, 23 July 1946, 2.

<sup>77</sup> *Pilgrim Cross: an illustrated account of the Pilgrim Cross: Vézelay Peace Pilgrimage, 1946*, (Oxford: Blackfriars, 1946), 2, 8; 'British Pilgrims Leave on Great Crusade,' *The Advocate*, 10 July 1946, 7.

<sup>78</sup> *Pilgrim Cross*, 20.

<sup>79</sup> 'Pilgrims of 14 Lands Hear Appeal for Unity'; Flessati, 'Justice, Peace and Dominicans,' 486; *Pilgrim Cross*, 4.

<sup>80</sup> Klimeck, *Modern Crusader*, 44.

<sup>81</sup> Collins, *Soft Blows the Wind*, 70; *Pilgrim Cross*, 4-5; 'Pilgrims Arrive in Market Square,' *Buckingham Advertiser and Free Press*, 10 July 1948, 5.

<sup>82</sup> 'Working for Peace 'The Tough Way',' *Peterborough Standard*, 16 July 1948, 3.



So *WHY* did we feel the need to walk for two weeks, winding around the English countryside, laden with gear and cross and setting it up wherever we stopped? Probably a majority were ex-servicemen like me, demobilised less than a year. The Russian threat loomed large; it seemed that hardly out of uniform, we might soon be back in.<sup>83</sup>

Some pilgrims were fulfilling vows made as a consequence of the war, or to address the legacy of conflict.<sup>84</sup> The English contingent to Vézelay incorporated prayers for the war dead at roadside memorials into their activities, perhaps because of the lack of post-war pilgrimages to battlefields or cemeteries, as there had been after 1918.<sup>85</sup> Such activities reflected wider 'collective mourning' initiatives, whereby religious groups brought together those who had suffered during the war as a way to address their common grief.<sup>86</sup> Other motives were individual. Alfred Hall, a member of the Westminster station in 1948, went to pray for a reunion with his wife and child who were then in Russia, refused permission to leave by the Kremlin.<sup>87</sup> One unnamed member of the Middlesbrough group was giving thanks for a cure received at Lourdes for a spinal injury sustained during the war.<sup>88</sup> The naval reservist Peter Hastings' (1922–2012) reasons for participating were not recorded, but his obituary of 2012 claimed he dropped out of university in 1946 'to recover from his war experience, hitch-hiking around Europe,' so his participation could have been a continuation of his attempts to come to terms with his naval service.<sup>89</sup>

The language and actions of the pilgrims drew heavily on their recent military experiences. The Vézelay pilgrims had an unnamed ex-paratrooper as leader 'responsible for their march discipline', and the food they took with them was referred to as the 'iron ration,' a nickname for soldier's ration issue from the First World War.<sup>90</sup> At Vézelay, they climbed to the Bois de la Madeleine and looked down on the church: having ascended in silence, one member of the English contingent commented: 'It's like going into action.'<sup>91</sup> When the groups from East Grinstead and Basingstoke converged at Ballingdon Bridge

<sup>83</sup> 'Taking Up Our Crosses,' *Catholic Herald*, 3 July 1998, 10.

<sup>84</sup> 'Soldiers promise Walsingham Pilgrimage, if spared,' *Catholic Herald*, April 10, 1941, 7.

<sup>85</sup> Sam Edwards, *Allies in Memory: World War II and the Politics of Transatlantic Commemoration, c. 1941-2001* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 122; 'Great Pilgrimage Marches Through France,' *The Advocate*, 17 July 1946, 7; 'Pilgrims Converge in Great Peace Crusade,' *The Advocate*, 24 July 1946, 7.

<sup>86</sup> Alice Ackermann, 'Reconciliation as Peace-Building Process in Postwar Europe,' *Peace & Change* (1994), 242.

<sup>87</sup> 'Notebook,' *Daily Herald*, 30 June 1948, 2.

<sup>88</sup> *Catholic Herald*, 9 July 1948, 6, 'Road to Walsingham.'

<sup>89</sup> J. Guy, 'Obituary: Peter Hastings, 1922-2012,' *Times Education Supplement*, 27 July 2012, [www.tes.com/news/obituary-peter-hastings-1922-2012](http://www.tes.com/news/obituary-peter-hastings-1922-2012) (accessed 12 August 2022).

<sup>90</sup> *Pilgrims Cross*, 7; 'Great Peace Pilgrimage Nearing Its End,' *The Advocate*, 31 Jul 1946, 7; 'Great International Pilgrimage Revived,' *The Advocate*, 5 June 1946, 7.

<sup>91</sup> *Pilgrim Cross*, 21.



they were met by trumpeters from the 4<sup>th</sup> Hussars, stationed at nearby Colchester, who sounded a fanfare in honour of the Cross.<sup>92</sup> Fr Klimeck claimed the pilgrims in his group (from Wrexham) looked to him 'for example and inspiration in the spiritual adventure as they would to an officer in a military operation', perhaps because he had served as a military chaplain.<sup>93</sup> Many pilgrims still looked like soldiers too: in 1946 they wore the uniform of the prisoner of war, the green of Canadian forces, and a mixture of 'battledress of every type'.<sup>94</sup> This was not uncommon, as for many people it was their only suitable clothing (not least because clothes rationing did not end until 1949), but it nonetheless reminded pilgrims and observers of their common status as veterans.

The language and structures of war also spilled over into the organisation of the pilgrimages. According to French reports, when they gathered in Vézelay the number of pilgrims was so vast that the 'army of peaceful crusaders' had to be subject to 'military organisation' so that they could be accommodated and fed. Coordination was established in a 'command post, set up under a tent of the American army, [who] had a campaign telephone,' and German prisoners of war were pressed into providing mass catering.<sup>95</sup> Similar militarised language was used about the Walsingham pilgrims in 1947, who walked 'like a victorious army with firm and joyous step'.<sup>96</sup> One pilgrim recalled how the journey to Walsingham was 'a physically tougher, more unremitting 14 days than anything I'd done in the army', as they 'bore a heavy wooden cross, which was carried in turns by teams of three. Army-style, we marched in threes and the teams relieved from the cross went to the rear rank'.<sup>97</sup>

Military experience was considered particularly useful for the pilgrims because they were already 'inured to hardships and shortages' and 'had experience of long periods of marching'.<sup>98</sup> One hopeful volunteer for the Vézelay pilgrimage recommended himself as an 'ex-Scots guardsman...[who had] done many a route march, but never with such a good objective'.<sup>99</sup> Even then, the distances covered could be wearying. The veteran Fr Klimeck complained that 'Thirty miles a day is a forced march even by trained soldiers'.<sup>100</sup> His age and experience were to his benefit though, as periods marching in the New

<sup>92</sup> *Tablet*, 24 July 1948, 56; 'Pilgrims Reach Sudbury,' *Suffolk and Essex Free Press*, 15 July 1948, 6.

<sup>93</sup> Klimeck, *A Modern Crusader*, 33.

<sup>94</sup> 'The Cross Arrives in France,' *Catholic Herald*, 5 July 1946, 1.

<sup>95</sup> 'A Vézelay, 40,000 personnes ont assisté à la clôture du pèlerinage de la Paix,' *L'Aurore*, 23 July 1946, 2.

<sup>96</sup> A. Pilgrim, 'The Walsingham Cross,' *Life of the Spirit*, 16 (1947), 168.

<sup>97</sup> 'Taking Up Our Crosses,' *Catholic Herald*, 3 July 1998, 10.

<sup>98</sup> 'Pilgrim's Arrive at Margaret Square,' *Buckingham Advertiser and Free Press*, 10 July 1948, 5; Collins, *Soft Blows the Wind*, 70.

<sup>99</sup> 'Vézelay,' *Catholic Herald*, 7 June 1946, 1.

<sup>100</sup> Klimeck, *Modern Crusader*, 32.

Zealand Territorial Army both before and during the First World War had taught him the importance of the right kind of boots.<sup>101</sup> This stoic approach to the pilgrimage reflected a wider mood of the time of 'postwar moral rearmament', at a time where Christian culture in Britain emphasised duty and 'moral austerity'.<sup>102</sup>

Their status as veterans was considered by Fr. Klimeck an important part of his particular group's identity and something which should be made known to curious onlookers to help explain and justify their actions.<sup>103</sup> This was particularly the case where pilgrims met with criticism or mockery; they explained that they had already endured military service, and found this pilgrimage a hardship but an important one 'for the sake of peace,' and in doing so won sceptics to their point of view.<sup>104</sup> At one stop, a man in a pub asked them why they were on such a pilgrimage, and Fr. Klimeck explained: 'If we really believe we were fighting for Christian principles in the last war – we said so often enough – Christian justice, freedom, truth and peace, shouldn't we be prepared to live by them now?'<sup>105</sup> The *Winsford Chronicle* printed a short account that summed up the view many had of the military-religious identity of the pilgrims: 'They are the Commandos of Christ: the shock-troops of the modern church.'<sup>106</sup>

### *Catholicism in Post-War Britain*

In the wake of the Second World War, criticism of the role the Catholic Church had played in supporting Nazi aims was widespread. Consequently, the Vézelay pilgrimage contributed to the Church's 'cleansing strategy', something particularly important in France where Catholics were criticised for their support for the Vichy regime.<sup>107</sup> In Britain, the pilgrimages fulfilled a similar, if less explicit, role. During the early years of the war, the Catholic Hierarchy in Britain had been cautious about expressing views, supporting the five peace points advanced by the pope (in which they were supported by Britain's Anglican leaders). They had also been concerned to demonstrate loyalty to avoid accusations that they were a potential 'Fifth Column' for the enemy, a fear inspired in part by their support for fascism in the decade before the war.<sup>108</sup> With the end of the war, large-scale pilgrimages presented British Catholics with a way to demonstrate

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>102</sup> Callum G. Brown, *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London: Routledge, 2006), 177-179.

<sup>103</sup> Klimeck, *Modern Crusader*, 44.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-6.

<sup>106</sup> 'Notes and Comments,' *Winsford Chronicle*, 3 July 1948, 8.

<sup>107</sup> F. le Moigne, 'L'Épiscopat Français Contre Maurras et la Résistance,' *Revue Histoire Politique* 18 (2012):79-96, 30.

<sup>108</sup> Keith Robbins, *England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales: The Christian Church, 1900-2000* (Oxford, 2008), 287; Joan Keating, 'Discrediting the 'Catholic State': British Catholics and

their faith but also their dedication to peace, their desire to repent, and their wish to reconcile. These were hardly aims anyone could object to. Moreover, though clearly Catholic events, long-distance walking as a form of protest appealed across the confessional divide, and peace pilgrimages were an idea readily acceptable to Catholic and non-Catholics alike.<sup>109</sup>

The pilgrimages also reflect the respective support for Catholicism in France and England in the mid-1940s, and tell us something about the attitudes of the general public to Catholics. The reception that the Vézelay and Walsingham pilgrims received varied. In France, there was a warm welcome for the pilgrims, and the English contingent enjoyed ‘amazing hospitality.’<sup>110</sup> They were marching through a landscape which was generally more Catholic, and so found wayside shrines and welcoming committees of their co-religionists as they travelled. In some places, velvet-clad plinths awaited the arrival of their crosses, and parishioners would ‘vie for the honour of being cross-bearers.’<sup>111</sup> Comparing their experiences in France in 1946 to those in England the following year, the pilgrims lamented how they missed the warm welcome on the road, and as a result, more often walked alone and sang fewer hymns. In other places, they found curiosity or indifference, or cautious uncertainty.<sup>112</sup> In predominantly Anglican England, the reception could be unwelcoming. One parish priest believed that the pilgrimage ‘did more harm than good,’ though quite how is not clear.<sup>113</sup> On the whole, however, the response was very good. Catholics turned out in large numbers to pray when the cross approached. At Peterborough, contributions towards hospitality were received from non-Catholic voluntary bodies and the local authorities, and their celebration of mass in front of the cathedral met with no objection. Indeed, the cathedral’s Church of England Chancellor Canon E. C. Rich watched, and ‘stated

the Fall of France,’ in Frank Tallett and Nicholas Atkin, eds. *Catholicism in Britain and France Since 1789* (London: Hambledon, 1996), 27–28.

<sup>109</sup> See also G. Barry, *The Disarmament of Hatred: Marc Sangnier, French Catholicism, and the Legacy of the First World War 1914–45* (London: Palgrave, 2012); S. A. Williams, ‘Law Not War – Hedd Nid Cled: Women and the Peace Movement in North Wales, 1926–1945,’ *Welsh History Review* 18 (1996): 63–92; M. Reiss, ‘Marching on the Capital: National Protest Marches of the British Unemployed in the 1920s and 1930s,’ in M. Reiss, ed. *The Street as Stage: Protest Marches and Public Rallies since the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 147–68; M. Reiss, ‘Not all were Apathetic: National Hunger Marches as Political Rituals in Interwar Britain,’ in M. Neuheiser, ed. *Political Ritual in the United Kingdom, 1700–2000* (Augsburg: Wissner-Verlag, 2006), 93–121; H. Nehring, ‘Demonstrating for ‘Peace’ in the Cold War: The British and West German Easter Marches, 1958–1964,’ in Reiss, ed., *The Street as Stage*, 275–94.

<sup>110</sup> O.P., ‘Vézelay,’ *Blackfriars*, 380.

<sup>111</sup> ‘Great Pilgrimage Marches Through France,’ *The Advocate*, 17 July 1946, 7.

<sup>112</sup> ‘21 Pilgrims Carry Cross to Walsingham,’ *The Advocate*, 20 August 1947, 5; A Pilgrim, ‘The Walsingham Cross,’ *Life of the Spirit*, (1947), 170.

<sup>113</sup> Kilmeck, *A Modern Crusader*, 69.

that he was in sympathy with what the pilgrims intended to do.’<sup>114</sup> The widespread press coverage of the 1948 pilgrimage, not least through the BBC and the Vatican Radio Station, and the subsequent tour of a short film of the pilgrims, ‘Crucifiers to Walsingham’ conducted by one of the participants, was seen as indicative of the ‘wonderful change’ in the country towards Catholics in England.<sup>115</sup>

Despite these differences, the Walsingham pilgrimages were a sign of confidence in the post-war Catholic community. The 1948 pilgrimage culminated in a large celebration at Walsingham, attended by thousands of other pilgrims and coordinated to dramatic effect. Cardinal Griffin took part, reflecting Church approval for the pilgrimage. He celebrated mass and chose the event to dedicate England to Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception. This act was an important indication of Catholic unity in Britain and harked back to the country’s Catholic past when England had been designated Our Lady’s Dowry. It marked a ‘new blossoming of the Catholic spirit’,<sup>116</sup> and associated England both with the 1917 messages of Fatima where the Virgin told Lucia that Jesus wanted ‘to establish in the world the devotion to my Immaculate Heart,’ and with the pope’s 1942 Christmas message.<sup>117</sup> The acts of the cross-carrying pilgrims responded to the messages of both Fatima and the pope’s Christmas address: committing Catholics to the care of Mary, uniting Catholics against external threats, and encouraging peace amongst them.

Another facet of this confidence was the renewed emphasis on conversion. According to one of its priest-pilgrims, the 1948 pilgrimage to Walsingham was also working ‘for the conversion of everyone in England by prayer, penitence, pilgrimage and love.’<sup>118</sup> This was not a widely stated aim, but the intention fit with wider post-war efforts at conversion. These efforts could be seen in the reanimation of the Catholic Missionary Society by its new superior John Carmel Heenan (1905–1975) in June 1947, and the decision of the English bishops in October 1948 for Catholics to make ‘a sustained public profession of their Faith’, to pray for peace, and conversion.<sup>119</sup> There was also

<sup>114</sup> ‘Working for Peace The Tough Way’, *Peterborough Standard*, 16 July 1948, 3; ‘Pilgrims Kneel to Pray,’ *Peterborough Standard*, 16 July 1948, 1.

<sup>115</sup> ‘Catholic Mothers,’ *Rugby Advertiser*, 17 December 1948, 6; ‘14 Pilgrims rest in Coventry,’ *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, July 6, 1948, 2; *Hastings and St Leonard Observer*, 7 August 1948, 1; Robert Wilberforce, ‘Walsingham,’ *The Catholic World* (1948), 142; ‘Crucifiers to Walsingham: An Introduction to Our Lady of Walsingham. The Story of the Cross Pilgrimage,’ Andrew Buchanan Catholic Film Society (1948).

<sup>116</sup> Paul Haffner, ‘Consecration to the Blessed Virgin Mary in the English Tradition and the Title of ‘Our Lady’s Dowry’,’ *Alpha Omega*, xiii (2010): 429–52.

<sup>117</sup> R.M.D. Wainwright, ‘The Immaculate Heart of Mary and Fatima,’ *Life of the Spirit* (1946-1964), 3 (1948): 125.

<sup>118</sup> ‘Walsingham Pilgrims,’ *Rugby Advertiser*, 9 July 1948, 5.

<sup>119</sup> James Hagerty, ‘The Conversion of England: John Carmel Heenan and the Catholic Missionary Society,’ *Recusant History* 31 (2013): 461–81; Turnham, *Catholic Faith*, 143.

speculation among non-Catholics that the Walsingham pilgrimages were intended to 'evangelise lapsed Catholics' rather than anything to do with peace as was widely claimed.<sup>120</sup> Certainly several of the Walsingham pilgrims were Catholic converts, including Osborne himself, and some of their enthusiasm could have come from a desire to inspire faith in others.<sup>121</sup> Others saw it as a more general atonement for various sins, such as Rev. Canon A. P. Henry, who told the *Courier and Guardian* that the pilgrims were working for 'the reparation to God for the wide-spread gross materialism of today.'<sup>122</sup>

Unsurprisingly, none of the pilgrimages were effective in achieving the aims of bringing world peace, but they did have an enduring legacy.<sup>123</sup> In 2003, Fr. Jimmy Collin recalled that the 1948 pilgrimage 'was an inspiration for the whole country, and its effects have been lasting.'<sup>124</sup> The cross-carrying pilgrimages to and from England created a sense of unity, a community, among those who took part, something which was arguably of greater importance for Catholics in England. The recreation of the community forged during wartime has often been observed in the secular pilgrimages which took place after the First World War to battlefields and military cemeteries because these acts brought men together again,<sup>125</sup> but for the Catholics who took part, they were also about the unity of a community of the faithful. As Fr Columba Ryan OP put it:

Men who might never think of making a retreat, men whose Catholic lives were led in the isolation of the average English parish (but who have learned something of the excellence of community life during the war) . . . would find an opportunity of living, learning, suffering a little, together under the presidency of the cross.<sup>126</sup>

The Walsingham pilgrimage, though insular compared to that to Vézelay, also brought together representatives from Europe in an act of peace: in addition to the contingent of students from France and a few foreign pilgrims, when the groups reached Walsingham they were joined by priests from America, France, and Italy.<sup>127</sup>

<sup>120</sup> Chris Maunder, 'Marian Shrines in Yorkshire and Roman Catholic Identity,' in S.C.H. Kim and P. Kollontai, eds. *Community Identity: Dynamics of Pilgrimage in Context*, (London: A&C Black, 2007), 128.

<sup>121</sup> Lyons, *50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary*, 13; Our Lady of Perpetual Succour Confirmation Book, findmypast.com ref: MP84/1/3/1 (accessed 2 March 2022).

<sup>122</sup> 'People knelt in prayer on pavement,' *Halifax Evening Chronicle*, 5 July 1948, 2.

<sup>123</sup> In 2020, Walsingham's own website claimed that the 1948 pilgrimage 'must surely have played a part in dissipating the Soviet threat.' <https://www.walsingham.org.uk/2020/07/16/anniversary-of-the-1948-cross-carrying-pilgrimage/> (accessed 19 July 2022).

<sup>124</sup> Collins, *Soft Blows the Wind*, 71.

<sup>125</sup> Lloyd, *Battlefield Tourism*, 220.

<sup>126</sup> 'Carrying the Cross to Walsingham,' *Catholic Herald*, 12 September 1947, 3.

<sup>127</sup> 'Pilgrims Pray for Peace,' *The Manchester Guardian*, 17 July 1948, 6.

Other cross-carrying pilgrimages were organised by Osborne, who was inspired to continue participating in them in Europe and North America. In 1949, he established the Jerusalem Cross pilgrimage which set out from a Palestinian refugee camp and travelled through Europe and America to collect funds for the refugees.<sup>128</sup> He also organised the *Pax Christi* pilgrimages to Walsingham to encourage international contact between Catholics, and participated in the Jerusalem Cross pilgrimage to Fatima in 1950.<sup>129</sup> Other participants also organised or took part in pilgrimages, some of them involving cross-carrying, over the following years, as an act of reparation.<sup>130</sup> The cross-carrying pilgrimage to Walsingham, drawing together fourteen separate contingents as it did in 1948, was however never repeated, despite the suggestion made by Osborne that a pilgrimage of 'English Speaking Peoples' from across the world, travelling in groups from each English diocese, should be organised for 1949. Though the bishop of Northampton was broadly supportive, he did not back this sort of pilgrimage: 'the carrying of the crosses should be something exceptional', he wrote to Osborne, 'and if done again too soon would tend to cheapen the effort and bring ridicule rather than reverence.'<sup>131</sup>

The multi-station Vézelay and Walsingham cross-carrying pilgrimages of 1946-1948 were thus one-offs. In France, pilgrimages with a similar aim — peace, defence from communism, revival of faith — were instead those *peregrination Mariae* involving the statues of the Virgin of Fatima, while pilgrimages with a military and veteran focus built on earlier traditions at Lourdes where the International Military Pilgrimage was formally established after 1958.<sup>132</sup> The Student Cross pilgrimage to Walsingham did continue, probably because it was smaller (for many years involving only one party), and drew on a clear group of Catholic students instead of appealing for participants from the wider public. This pilgrimage itself had comparatively little coverage in the press, as ecclesiastical permission for it was only given on the condition that it was not advertised and so was less well-known at first.<sup>133</sup> Interestingly, although its original organiser Wilfred Maundcote-Carter was a navy veteran who took part in Osborne's 1947 pilgrimage, and many of its participants were ex-servicemen, it never appears to have had the military identity that was present in the other pilgrimages.

<sup>128</sup> *Tablet*, 13 October 2001, 1457.

<sup>129</sup> 'Pax Christi Pilgrimage,' *Catholic Herald*, 23 July 1954, 2; *Tablet*, 24 July 1954, 91; 'Jerusalem Cross in Portugal,' *Catholic Standard*, 5 May 1950, 7.

<sup>130</sup> Henrietta Bower, *Challenge to Godlessness, with vigil, prayers & penance: the story of the All Night Vigil Movement* (London: Britons, 1973), 163.

<sup>131</sup> AP S (15) Letter from Charles Osborne to Rev. Joseph Masterton, Archbishop of Birmingham, January 3, 1949, 1-2, CDBA.

<sup>132</sup> Eade, 'Healing Social and Physical Bodies', 20.

<sup>133</sup> Bryden, *Behold the Wood!*, 9. It was briefly covered in *The Universe*, and in an American publication: 'Student Cross', *The Catholic World in Pictures*, 26 March 1948, 1.

The cross-carrying pilgrimages to Vézelay and Walsingham between 1946 and 1948 were acts of peace, penance, and reconciliation driven by the faith of their participants, the politics of the mid-1940s, and their recent experiences in war. The pilgrimages were a way to make a contribution to the maintenance of peace, something they had fought for but were concerned was under threat. Many felt that they were uniquely qualified for the hardships of a cross-carrying pilgrimage, used to marching and sleeping rough, with few rations and sore feet. The bonds forged by the pilgrim groups also echoed the fellowship many had found in war service, and they appeared sad to give that up: various expressions of loss at giving up their crosses when they reached their final destinations were no doubt as much about religious devotion as the end of the comradeship of the road for men used to serving together in war.