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Saint Nicola's Feast in Bari: Before and After COVID-19. A Short Reflection

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Cover Page Footnote

While the paper is the result of a joint work, Sections 2 and 3 are attributed to Antonietta Ivona, Sections 1 and 4 to Donatella Privitera.

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This research note has three primary goals. First, it seeks to analyse the field of religious tourism in terms of the impact of the health emergency caused by Covid-19. Second, it offers knowledge of religious tourism in Bari with its Saint Nicola patron feast that reflects key areas of academic insight into the religion–tourism nexus. Third, it synthesises perceptions of devotees, locals, tourism professionals and spiritual guides using the method of photography as a research technique. As a result of this reflection, the paper will show that faith and the inner experiences of the pilgrims will remain while religious tourism will change post Covid-19.

Key Words: religious tourism, visual narrations, perceptions, local development

Introduction and Background¹

The health emergency triggered by the Coronavirus Covid-19 epidemic is producing new rules and sometimes innovative ways of carrying out activities in the world. To guarantee collective security and protect public health, states are reacting by severely limiting community meetings: among these, are meetings of religious groups - especially gatherings which are manifested by people in communion with others - which are strongly restricted.

In Italy in this emergency scenario, religious and civil ceremonies (including funeral ceremonies) have also been suspended and the re-opening of places of worship has been conditioned on the

adoption of organisational measures aimed at avoiding gatherings of people, taking into account the size and the features of the spaces, so as to guarantee to visitors the possibility of respecting the distance between them of at least one metre ... (Order of the Italian Prime Minister 8 March 2020).

On the occasion of the 2020 Easter celebrations, the participation in Catholic religious rites of a certain number of worshippers was considered to be acceptable. The possibility of celebrating religious marriages has

been clarified, provided only the celebrant, the married couple and the witnesses are present, and in all of these cases, celebrations must always be in compliance with the prescribed sanitary rules and the necessary social distance. The celebration of worship in open spaces is encouraged because such spaces are not required to comply with all the provisions adopted for entry into closed spaces, without prejudice to the need to ensure social distancing. Gatherings are actually forbidden, so religious feasts are certainly not encouraged because all forms of event in which larger groups of people meet are restricted, including events as diverse as concerts, meetings, sports, weddings and funerals.

In response to the questions of how much did large religious events with parades and significant tourism earnings lose during the Covid-19 crisis? or what was the impact of the missed religious feasts in the cities? This short essay will focus on the use of visual representations to reflect and demonstrate how the ancient cult of Saint Nicola in Bari during the pandemic was brought into the homes of the faithful, albeit in silence and through the online streaming of the Mass. It will also consider the economic impact at the time of Covid-19.

Bari is a well-known tourism destination in the south of Italy (Apulia), and the growth as well as the commercialisation of the Saint Nicola cult in Bari is notable and significant.

¹ While the paper is the result of a joint work, Sections 2 and 3 are attributed to Antonietta Ivona, Sections 1 and 4 to Donatella Privitera.

Tourism and photography have been intimately linked almost since the camera was invented. Tourism researchers have been slow, however, to make use of photographs and other visuals (such as videos, postcards and paintings) as data. However, volunteer-employed photography (VEP) has featured in studies on tourism destinations (Garrod, 2008) as a visual investigation research tool, with a particular emphasis on community impacts. Therefore, VEP techniques are able to give an indication of the image attributes that photographers feel have a positive or negative influence on the destination image (see Garrod, 2008: 386). In addition, photography has been extensively used to investigate local identity and place attachment (Ruggeri, 2014), and, above all, to promote critical consciousness (Carlson *et al.*, 2006; Hannam & Knox, 2010). Further studies utilise images gathered by participants and the use of visual methods for assessing local perceptions of proposed tourism development (Hillman *et al.*, 2018), and also in terms of the tourist gaze (Urry, 1990). One of the main reasons for this - as affirmed by Klingorová and Vojtíšek (2017) is that photography can be particularly important in the research of religion because it is sensitive, allows the capture of spiritual images which are essential to religion, and lets participants themselves define their religion and / or spirituality as well as their emotions. In this direction, Bourdieu (1996) and his research associates show that few cultural activities are more structural and systematic than photography.

Therefore, Bourdieu (1996) argues that the practice of photography is primarily a tool of preserving the present and reproducing moments of collective celebration, but it is also the occasion of an aesthetic judgment in which photographs are endowed with the dignity of works of art. As such, there is now a much greater acceptance of the use of visuals as data. As a literature review on the subject emphasises, the use of visual methodologies in fact increases the possibilities offered by conventional empirical research, producing information of a different type compared to normal methods of investigation (Harper, 2002). Scholars capture and represent in an immediate way the reality of daily life; in fact photographs and their social impact are experience capturing (Sontag, 1977), as well as representing the relationship between subjects of study and places investigated through images (e.g., video or photography; Miles & Kaplan, 2005; Wang,

2006) that are often hard to grasp in words. However, debates abound on the topic of visual images and the conception of the tourist gaze (Korstanje, 2018) where use and interpretation are not impersonal. In fact, Rose (2001) affirms a critical visual methodology in which she explores the visual in terms of cultural significance, social practices and power relations. Photographs or other kinds of image are not 'transparent windows' but rather they interpret the world. Here, this research note seeks to provide another dimension to the looking feast of what has remained out of sight and out of mindfulness.

The Feast of Saint Nicholas and Bari (Italy)

Saint Nicholas is one of the most popular and beloved saints due to the tradition that views him as Patron Saint of children and young people. The myth of St. Nicholas and the city of Bari have been an inseparable combination for over a thousand years, ever since the relics of the Bishop of Myra were moved in 1087 from the territory of present-day Turkey to the Apulian capital. Over time, a deeper bond has been established between the city and its patron, as if they were one, a symbiotic identity. For almost a millennium, the city has been the destination of a continuous, growing pilgrimage to the Basilica dedicated to St. Nicholas and in which his relics are kept (Figure 1).

At certain times of the year, Bari becomes a stage for the crossing of many cultures, nationalities and religious denominations. The Basilica, in particular, has thus become a place of meeting and dialogue, almost an outpost of communion in view of the desired reconciliation of all the churches (Cioffari, 2020).

After the death of St. Nicholas of Myra (the Bishop of Myra - in Southern Turkey) on 6 December 343, his relics were immediately considered miraculous because a mysterious liquid, called the manna of St. Nicholas, came out of them, and his tomb in Myra soon became a pilgrimage destination. When the Lycians, in the 11th century, were occupied by the Turks, the Venetians tried to seize the relics but were preceded by the people of Bari who took them to Apulia in 1087. Two years later, the crypt of the new church was completed. This was commissioned by the people of Bari on the place where the palace of the Byzantine governor once stood. Pope

Figure 1: Icons of Saint Nicholas inside the Basilica of Bari (Italy)

Ivona, Privitera, 2019

Urban II, escorted by the Norman knight lords of Apulia, placed the relics of the saint under the altar where they are still found today. The arrival of the relics of St. Nicholas had an extraordinary echo throughout Europe, and, in the Middle Ages, the Apulian sanctuary became an important pilgrimage destination, resulting in the spread of the cult of St. Nicholas of Bari (not Myra).

What is most striking about the Nicolaian cult is the exceptional relationship between its location in Bari and its vast diffusion in the East and West. This is explained by the historical development of the cult, although the moment that is marked by the transfer of the relics is certainly not the beginning (in the East, the cult of St. Nicholas was already intense at the beginning of the 6th century). Nor is the movement of the relics the start of the cult in the West where, especially in Italy since the time of Leone IV (9th century), churches were dedicated to the already venerated Bishop of Mira (Bronzini, 2002).

Twice a year, the city celebrates its patron saint. December 6 is the typical religious holiday according to the traditional Christian calendar that organises the liturgical year day by day. In addition, from 6 to 9 May, the city of Bari celebrates its patron saint by recalling the transfer of the relics of the saint from Myra to the Apulian capital by 62 sailors on 9 May 1087. The people of Bari and pilgrims from all over the world participate in the solemn religious celebrations and cultural events in honour of St. Nicholas.

On 7 May, the historical procession commemorates the life of the saint, his miracles and the epic undertaking of the sailors. Usually on 8 May, the Saint is carried in procession through the streets of the Old town until he reaches the sea (Figure 2) with numerous pilgrims and tourists, local people. On 8 May 2020 during the pandemic, the Saint remained inside the Basilica. The square in front was absolutely empty (Figure 3). Every

Figure 2: The Basilica square with statue of St. Nicholas during the feast



Photo: Ivona, Privitera, 2019

Figure 3: The Basilica square without the statue of St. Nicholas during the pandemic



Photo: Ivona, Privitera, 2020

year but not this year, 2020, the pilgrims with their boats pay homage to the saint, the protector of sailors, who came from the sea. In the afternoon, to greet the Patron of Bari there is also a spectacular show of the 'Frece Tricolori', the planes of the national aerobatic team of the Italian Air Force. On 9 May, the celebrations continue with the solemn Eucharistic celebration in which the pastor of the diocese invokes the Holy Spirit to renew 'the prodigy of Manna' which exudes from the bones of Saint Nicola.

The year 2019 was a golden year for tourism in the city of Bari. Bari was the only Italian city chosen by *Lonely Planet* in 2019 to be among the best destinations in Europe and among the top ten 'unmissable' cities and attractions 'to be visited' within the year. Among the Apulian cities by number of tourists, Bari was the top for arrivals (480,763 visitors - 4,258,308 for the whole of Apulia) and in second place for the number of nights spent in tourist accommodation (916,937 stays - overall 15,440,297). Compared to the previous year, the increase in tourists was 11.5% (Agenzia Puglia Promozione, 2020). The greatest concentration of tourists is found in the spring and summer months and during the Christmas holidays. In May, as distinguished from June, July and August, the number of arrivals in Apulia is remarkable (with 353,515 arrivals and 860,846 stays in 2019), due to the favourable climate and events with strong appeal, such as Patronal Feasts, including that of Saint Nicola, that serve to inaugurate the summer tourist season.

Reflections on the Lost Economic Impact of the Feast of Saint Nicholas

Every year, the May festival of Saint Nicola in Bari generates a multiplier effect on the local economy that is of considerable importance. The data collected by the municipal administration for the 2019 festival (the most recent edition) is very relevant. A total of around 200,000 pilgrims arriving from all parts of Apulia and from all of southern peninsular Italy were calculated, as well as numerous Orthodox pilgrims coming mainly from Russia who recognise St. Nicholas as the most powerful intercessor to God². The number of pilgrims is presumed to be based on historical data of the buses that arrive

² An interesting analysis of flows of Catholic and Orthodox Christian pilgrims by area of origin can be found in Rizzello and Trono (2013).

Figure 4: Lights during the Feast of St. Nicholas



Photo: Ivona, Privitera, 2019

and the data provided by the associations that organise pilgrimages in honour of Saint Nicola, in addition to the number of presences officially detected in the accommodation facilities for the days of the celebration.

Overall, the turnover was around two million euros from the multiplicity and a heterogeneity of economic activities directly and indirectly connected to the event. The religious celebrations and the various cultural events that take place during the three days of the festival are strong tourist attractions; especially on the day of the re-enactment of the transfer of Saint Nicola, large numbers of tourists arrive to the city to attend the Historical Procession. This large movement of people generates significant economies for the city so, every year, the organisers plan different events compared to the previous year. At the same time, a considerable organisational and economic commitment is required from the Municipal Administration. In 2019, the Municipal Administration of Bari allocated 122,000 euros of funds for the historical procession, animated by 50 artists, 200 figures, flag-wavers and musicians, and for the purchase of costumes and props. In addition, € 30,000 were added to the funds

allocated by the Municipality for ancillary security services, including barriers and various dissuasive structures; and another 40,000 euros as a contribution paid to the Committee of Saint Nicola Basilica which, with other private donations to finance the fireworks that illuminate the three evenings of the festival, the decorations along the streets (the so-called illuminations) and all the services of reception for pilgrims (see Figure 4). The sector of illuminations and patronal feasts is particularly active in the region considering the strong cultural and religious identity that usually leads to the celebration of the patron saint of the city (and the other numerous religious figures present in local history). These events also become, in many cases, tourist attractants. During lockdown (but also in the following months), we entered into full crisis considering that in the short term, the patronal feasts and other events that foresee crowds and uncontrollable gatherings, cannot be authorised by the Italian State.

As a very attractive three-day event, the Fair of Saint Nicola has been established over the years as a place where numerous street vendors display their goods in the days before and after the party. In previous years, the Fair took place in a rather spontaneous form, but since 2017, the municipal administration has organised it on the waterfront in order to facilitate its accessibility and usability. In 2019, there were 50 microenterprises with a total of 304 street vendors from all over Italy. Added to these small businesses were 70 small attractions (rides of various types) with 300 additional employees. Given the commitment of the exhibitors and the strong attraction generated, the set-up of the Fair in 2019 lasted 12 days and the municipality estimated that it was visited by at least 30,000 people. To these already important numbers, we must add the turnover of the related industries, including bars, restaurants, shops and hotels in the Old Town and in the city centre, where the festival mainly takes place. On 8 May when the statue of the saint is placed in a fishing boat (selected a few weeks before the event) and the boat remains at anchor from late morning until sunset, dozens of boats are engaged in ferrying the faithful from the shore to be close to the statue of Saint Nicola to affirm participants' devotion.

A further point of interest is that the tourist movement generated by the Saint Nicola event also involves another peripheral city district, Carrassi, where the Russian Church of Saint Nicola is located. The Russian faithful, in addition to admiring the Christian basilica in the heart of the city, also go on pilgrimage to the Carrassi district to pay homage to the Saint according to their cult and religion.

From what has been said so far, the suspension of the Nicolaian celebrations in 2020 due to the pandemic represents enormous damage for the entire city and its surroundings. In previous years, a considerable number of tourists who visited Bari during the Feast of Saint Nicola decided to extend their stay to move to other places in the region. According to the visual methodology, the photos manage to reflect and arouse emotions and meanings that go beyond the boundaries imposed by a 'verbal' representation of the places; specifically, Figure 2 offers a glance at the Basilica square with the crowd who, at dawn, witness the exit of the statue of Saint Nicola for the start of the procession. Figure 3 is the same place on any other day of the year, and this can induce negative feelings in readers, although it highlights the large space of the festivities.

The economic damage caused by the failure to hold patronal feasts due to the pandemic is truly enormous for the whole region. These celebrations take place almost every day from April to September; each municipality of Apulia (common to all of the southern Italian regions) has its own saint to celebrate or religious event to recall. In addition to the prevailing religious motivation, these events are an opportunity for the various municipalities to be visited by tourists and, consequently, are important in the economic flows generated. It should be noted that not all religious events have the scope of the Saint Nicola celebrations in Bari. However, while they vary in size, the patronal festivals, which take place in the six months mentioned above, all involve many economic activities directly and indirectly. These range from the typically cultural ones (impacts related to those who organise the events) to the essential ones (merchants, carousels, photographers, illuminators and many others). Therefore, this year, some associations have submitted to the Apulia Region Administration a bill to keep patronal

festivals alive in Apulia, carrying them out safely and in compliance with the Coronavirus emergency measures, taking into account the lost earnings for all economic activities related to them.

According to a monitoring carried out at the end of March 2020 by the Apulia Creative Production District (a body recognized by the Apulia Region), due to the Covid-19 emergency, about 4,000 events were cancelled in Apulia, including 440 between patronal feasts and historical re-enactments. The other cancelled events were:

- 347 concerts;
- 1,275 theatrical and dance performances,
- 349 conferences, presentations and inaugurations,
- 447 workshops,
- 651 guided tours,
- 349 supply contracts,
- 207 sets and cinema releases;

This comprises a total of almost 40 thousand hours of work lost since the beginning of the health emergency. The most affected sector (37%), is the live show. Among the six Apulian provinces, those of Lecce and Bari suffered the greatest damage (respectively 36.4% Lecce, 31.6% Bari). Considering that the provinces of Bari and Lecce comprise the largest number of municipalities (138) compared to the other four (120) and the highest population number (respectively the first two altogether contain 2,047,128 inhabitants and the other four 1,985,925), it is evident how much the cancellation of the events represents a huge economic and social damage. Of the 440 religious events throughout Apulia, 70 are also considered as major tourist attractors (according to the 2016-2025 Strategic Tourism Plan of the Apulia Region). 44 of the 70 events take place in the provinces of Lecce and Bari. In short, the hope is that all economic activity linked to important religious events such as the Feast of Saint Nicola and all the others can start again.

It's important to state that the reactions of the religious communities of Bari (but in general, the Italian ones) have been to accept the measures of containment of the Covid-19 virus adopted by the government, in particular those limiting the freedom of worship, reunion and circulation.

Short Conclusions

In general, the main experiential motivations of pilgrims are to deepen their religious faith and belief, explore the historic roots of their religion on a faith-based vacation, experience a unique culture, visit the world's inspiring places and simply have fun on their journey (Wang, Chen & Huang, 2016). This year, all of this was lost because of Covid-19.

This short note provides insightful suggestions about events and implications that are valuable to researchers and practitioners in the field of tourism events, and extends our understanding of traditional religious festivals attendees' support for tourism development. However, there is much evidence that Covid-19 will be different and transformative for the tourism sector; it is also an opportunity to reconsider a transformation of the global tourism system that is more aligned to the SDGs and is thus more economically equitable, more socially just and more environmentally sustainable (Gössling *et al.*, 2020; Niewiadomski, 2020).

Forecasting the future of tourism and, specifically, religious tourism in a post-Covid-19 world is quite a challenge. We don't know if the virus will still be abundant and permanent in the world in the coming months and years. We imagine that the perception of social distance as a source of risk will be impacted, but the devotion and faith of pilgrims is strong, making them realise how important and valuable is the freedom of mobility and of community when it is suddenly taken away. We think that the role of religious tourism and sacred places is always a tool for socio-economic and cultural development of destinations, but the motivations and the loyalty that lead millions of people to travel to sacred places is an essential condition of the pilgrims' lives. Religious sites are not simple tourist products but places of faith and spirit, which will result in a change to religious tourism post Covid-19. Religious rites and individual inner experiences will remain.

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