

# The Virgin Mary strikes back

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Bolivian pilgrims ask the Virgin Mary for money and revenge. Bolivian pilgrims come to her in huge numbers to complain about their poor financial position and the neoliberal system which they blame for this. Women also grab the chance to vent their frustrations about their dominant husbands. The Virgin Mary of Urkupiña not only provides a listening ear, but according to the believers she can also issue harsh punishments. Dutch researcher Sanne Derks established this after 14 months of research in Bolivia.

According to Derks a pilgrimage is far more than an expression of religiosity; it is an arena where people with diverse interests come together and where different people try to exert power in their own way. The pilgrimage is strongly related to daily life because the pilgrims take their everyday problems with them to the pilgrimage site.

Many of the pilgrims explicitly visit the Virgin Mary with requests for economic improvement. They buy miniatures of cars and houses which they allow to be blessed in the name of the Virgin Mary. The miniatures are taken home and serve as a reminder - for both the Virgin Mary and for themselves - to work on their objectives.

Pilgrims also hew pieces of stone from rocks that serve as a symbol for wealth. They see and refer to the stones as 'money' and talk about 'capital' that must be paid back with 'interest'. With their pilgrim's rituals the Bolivians are resisting the neoliberal system, yet at the same time they are reproducing the same system in their economic behaviour and the rituals at the pilgrimage site. Consequently, on the one hand the

pilgrimage is a means of exerting power and changing everyday situations by means of resistance, yet at the same time the pilgrims subject themselves to the strict regime of the Virgin Mary.

## **Marianismo**

Bolivian women also visit the Virgin Mary for other reasons. Many of them are subjected to domestic violence. Studies have revealed that this is associated with the gender concept 'marianismo', often defined as the opposite of 'machismo'. Women ought to embrace the Virgin Mary as a passive and submissive role model. Yet with her study Derks shows that many women view the Virgin Mary very differently. The Virgin Mary of Urkupiña is venerated for her vindictive character. The women hand over their anger to the Virgin Mary to ensure that she takes vengeance on their husbands.

How Bolivians honour the Virgin Mary often differs strongly from the wishes of the Catholic Church. The believers try to improve their own lives and use the Virgin Mary for this purpose. Pilgrimage appears to be a source of 'empowerment'. However, this does not solve the social inequalities in society. The Virgin Mary is even a part of the structural inequality because she demands that the pilgrims submit to her rules.

During her research, Sanne Derks spoke to about 200 Bolivians, took part in the pilgrimage and held in-depth interviews with 25 people, 5 of whom she followed in their daily lives. Her research is part of the study 'The Power of Pilgrimage', one of the projects in the NWO programme 'The Future of the Religious Past'. Within this long-term research programme many scientists are investigating new aspects of religion.

Source: NWO

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