

Paths Of Faith, More Than A Pilgrimage Route To Aparecida

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Abstract:

Background: Religious pilgrimages constitute one of the most significant expressions of Christian faith, encompassing spiritual, cultural, historical, and social dimensions. In Brazil, the city of Aparecida stands out as the country's foremost destination for religious tourism, attracting thousands of devotees who travel along diverse routes motivated by religious devotion, the fulfillment of vows, the search for blessings, and the strengthening of their spirituality. Within this context, the Faith Trail (Caminho da Fé) has emerged as a prominent pilgrimage route, offering pilgrims an experience that transcends mere physical displacement and becomes a journey of personal and spiritual transformation. This study aims to analyze the Faith Trail as a religious pilgrimage route to Aparecida, examining its origins, structure, operational dynamics, and significance for the spiritual experience of pilgrims, as well as the motivations that encourage participation in the pilgrimage and the infrastructure available throughout the route.

Materials and Methods: This study was developed using an ethnographic approach, grounded in the intersubjective relationship between the researcher and the object of study, namely the social group under investigation. Regarding research procedures, bibliographic and documentary research methods were employed to support and guide the analysis of data obtained through field research activities.

Results: The findings indicate that the Faith Trail is fundamentally more than a pilgrimage route. It represents a geographic and mystical space in which individuals establish a profound connection with nature, engage with local culture, and experience deep inner reflection and spiritual renewal. The route functions as a multidimensional environment that integrates religious devotion, cultural interaction, and personal transformation, thereby enhancing the overall pilgrimage experience.

Conclusion: The Faith Trail should be understood not merely as a physical route leading to Aparecida, but as a dynamic sacred territory continuously shaped by the experiences of thousands of pilgrims. Motivated by hope and devotion to the Patron Saint of Brazil, these individuals imbue the route with meaning, emotional significance, and transcendence. Consequently, the Faith Trail constitutes a living expression of religious tourism and spirituality, fostering personal growth, cultural engagement, and the strengthening of faith.

Key Word: Faith Trail; Religious Pilgrimage; Spirituality; Aparecida.

Date of Submission: 01-07-2026

Date of Acceptance: 10-07-2026

I. Introduction

The National Shrine of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception of Aparecida, located along the Presidente Dutra Highway in the municipality of Aparecida, in the state of São Paulo, receives approximately 12 million visitors annually.

Brazil is a country deeply characterized by the religiosity of its population. For this reason, it is not surprising that certain sacred spaces attract thousands of visitors guided by faith, seeking miracles or participation in religious rituals. The country is home to numerous pilgrimage centers, located both in small settlements situated in remote regions and in highly visible destinations. Among them, the Shrine of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception of Aparecida stands out as one of the most significant religious sites, attracting thousands of pilgrims every year who travel there to make petitions and fulfill vows, motivated by the belief that blessings and miracles may be attained in this sacred place.

Several religious celebrations mobilize large numbers of devotees throughout the country. Some are rooted in what has traditionally been referred to as popular Catholicism, while others have gradually been incorporated into the religious calendar throughout Brazilian history. Nevertheless, “in addition to constituting a long-lasting phenomenon, they are characterized by a profound reference to faith, even though the elements that compose them are influenced by the specific characteristics of the regions in which they are celebrated” (Jurkevics, 2005, p. 77). Walking, undertaking pilgrimages, and participating in religious processions are not new practices among Brazilian Catholics, as national, regional, and local shrines have existed throughout the country for centuries.

Aparecida is a municipality located in the state of São Paulo, within the Guaratinguetá microregion, with an estimated population of 32,569 inhabitants (IBGE, 2022), a territorial area of 120.890 km², and a population density of 269.41 inhabitants per square kilometer. In 1636, Aparecida was a settlement belonging to Guaratinguetá, inhabited by families with kinship ties to Santana do Parnaíba, São Paulo, Santo Amaro, and the state of Goiás. This was largely due to its strategic location along the Royal Road, which connected travelers to the mining regions of Minas Gerais, Mato Grosso, and Goiás. As a result, religious brotherhoods were formed, promoting popular celebrations in honor of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception. In 1928, the village that had developed around the chapel on Morro dos Coqueiros was officially elevated to the status of the municipality of Aparecida.

The relevance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding the historical and cultural dimensions that constitute an integral part of the religious pilgrimage experience. The research problem concerns the cultural, historical, and natural heritage embedded within one of the principal pilgrimage routes leading to the Shrine of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception of Aparecida. To address this reality, the following research questions were formulated: How did pilgrimages to this shrine originate? How are these pilgrimages currently conducted? What does the Faith Trail (*Caminho da Fé*) offer to pilgrims undertaking this journey?

The general objective of this study is to analyze the Faith Trail as a religious pilgrimage route to Aparecida, examining its origin, structure, operation, and significance for the spiritual experiences of pilgrims, as well as the factors motivating participation in the pilgrimage and the infrastructure available throughout the route.

Accordingly, the specific objectives of this research are: to analyze the infrastructure provided by religious routes to pilgrims; to investigate the motivations that lead individuals to make religious vows; to understand the historical development of pilgrimage routes to Aparecida; and to identify how pilgrimages to Aparecida are undertaken, particularly regarding the route itself and its infrastructural conditions.

To facilitate the development of the proposed analysis, this article is organized into four sections. The first section presents the Introduction, outlining the research context, objectives, and guiding questions. The second section describes the Methodology adopted in the study, highlighting the procedures and techniques used for data collection and analysis. The third section provides the Theoretical Framework, discussing the principal concepts and scholarly contributions related to religious tourism, pilgrimage, and spirituality. Finally, the fourth section presents the Final Considerations, in which the main findings are synthesized and the study's contributions and implications are discussed.

II. Material And Methods

To conduct this study, an ethnographic approach was adopted, grounded in the intersubjective interaction between the researcher and the object of investigation, namely any social group selected for analytical examination. The foundation of ethnographic research lies in fieldwork and sustained engagement with individuals and social groups. This interaction typically occurs over an extended period, ranging from several months to more than a year, allowing for an in-depth understanding of cultural practices and social behaviors through systematic data collection and analysis. According to Fachin (2001, p. 29):

A method is an instrument of knowledge that provides researchers with a worldview regarding society and the object of investigation in any field of study, offering a general orientation that facilitates research planning, the formulation of questions, the coordination of investigations, the conduct of experiments, and the interpretation of results.

The ethnographic method is characterized by its descriptive nature, addressing phenomena in a comprehensive manner. It is naturalistic in orientation, as it examines individuals within their natural environments, and inductive in its analytical process, using empirical evidence to support the development of theories and concepts. Furthermore, it seeks to understand reality from the perspective of social actors and adopts a contextual approach in which observations are interpreted within a broader framework, free from value judgments. In this regard, researchers endeavor to avoid imposing personal evaluations on the phenomena being observed.

The ethnographic method enables researchers to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences, learn from their perspectives, and explore relevant concepts and social meanings (Bogdan; Taylor, 1975). Its primary purpose is to describe, characterize, and clearly explain the various elements associated with the investigated phenomenon through historically and contextually grounded narratives.

Unlike quantitative approaches, ethnographic research does not rely on predefined hypotheses. As a qualitative method, it emphasizes analysis and synthesis, employing processes of deduction and induction, comparison, and chronological interpretation of the different stages experienced throughout the research process. It focuses on sociocultural realities and ways of life, describing group beliefs and practices while highlighting the diversity and contributions of different social groups to broader cultural development.

Regarding its objectives, the study is classified as exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory, following the framework proposed by Gil (2008). Exploratory research is particularly appropriate for investigating issues

or research problems that have received limited or no prior scholarly attention. Based on the knowledge generated during this exploratory stage, the study advances toward a more comprehensive examination of the subject through systematic observation and documentation of phenomena related to the research objectives, seeking to describe them in detail. Subsequently, an explanatory analysis is undertaken to understand the relationships between the collected data and the observed phenomena, thereby contributing to the development of the study's findings.

With respect to research procedures, bibliographic and documentary research methods were employed to guide the analysis of the results obtained through field investigations. Concepts such as religion, faith, the sacred, the profane, pilgrims, and religious devotees are discussed in the subsequent sections of this article, together with other relevant aspects that contribute to understanding the spaces experienced by those who undertake pilgrimages to Aparecida. According to Pimentel (2001), studies based primarily on documentary sources, including literature reviews and historiographical research, derive their analytical foundation from such materials by organizing and interpreting them in accordance with the objectives of the proposed investigation.

III. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework was structured around three complementary thematic axes, with the objective of providing a comprehensive understanding of the pilgrimage phenomenon associated with Aparecida. Initially, the section entitled **"Pilgrimages and Religious Processions to Aparecida"** examines the historical, cultural, and religious dimensions of pilgrimage practices, highlighting their significance in shaping expressions of faith and popular devotion. Subsequently, the section **"Faith Trail: The Driving Force Leading Pilgrims to Aparecida"** analyzes the pilgrimage route, its characteristics, motivations, and the meanings attributed to it by pilgrims, emphasizing the role of the journey as a space for spiritual experience and personal transformation. Finally, the section **"Devotion to Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception of Aparecida"** discusses the historical and religious foundations of devotion to the Patron Saint of Brazil, underscoring its importance in the construction of pilgrims' religious identity and in the consolidation of Aparecida as one of the country's foremost pilgrimage destinations. Collectively, these sections provide the theoretical foundation necessary for understanding the research object and the multiple dimensions that characterize the pilgrimage experience to Aparecida.

Pilgrimages and Religious Processions to Aparecida

Within Catholic tradition, pilgrimage is also commonly referred to as a religious procession or *romaria*, and both terms are often used interchangeably. However, some scholars, including Steil (2003) and Sanchis (2006), propose a conceptual distinction between them. Sanchis (2006) bases this distinction on the pastoral and political differentiation established by the Catholic Church in Portugal during the first half of the twentieth century regarding what should be considered a pilgrimage and what should be classified as a *romaria*. During this period, Portuguese *romarias* maintained a certain degree of autonomy from ecclesiastical control, preserving a complex interaction between sacred and secular elements, including rituals, festivities, social gatherings, and religious devotion. As Sanchis (2006, p. 88) observes, "*romarias* are typical instances of encounter and creative tension between popular religion and clerical religion." In this context, the Catholic Church came to regard *romarias* as practices containing elements of popular religiosity and established the concept of pilgrimage as a more formalized, officially sanctioned, and strictly religious journey toward sacred destinations.

Historically, however, the terms embodied distinct meanings and purposes. According to Steil (as cited in Abumanssur, 2003, p. 30), the term *pilgrim* derives etymologically from the notion of a foreigner, someone who does not belong to the established local community. Consequently, the concept is associated with individuals who travel through unfamiliar and often challenging territories, confronting uncertainty in pursuit of a sacred objective. Wernet (2000) argues that human beings do not choose sacred places and the paths leading to them; rather, they discover them. From an external perspective, pilgrimage involves an encounter with others, whereas from an internal perspective, it represents a journey of self-discovery and spiritual reflection. The term *pilgrimage* derives from the Latin expression *per agros*, meaning "through the fields." As travelers, pilgrims journey toward sacred destinations to fulfill vows, present petitions previously made to saints or divine figures, perform acts of penance, or express gratitude for blessings received. In this sense, pilgrimage represents both a physical and spiritual undertaking, motivated by deeply rooted religious convictions.

According to Santos (2006), pilgrimage constitutes a movement through physical space characterized by long-distance travel, whose motivations are intrinsically linked to spirituality and profound religious commitment. Santos (2010) further emphasizes the complexity of the pilgrimage experience, noting that it brings together individuals with diverse intentions while simultaneously fostering mystical experiences associated with the search for solutions to human needs and existential concerns. For pilgrims, the lived experience of the journey is often more significant than the intellectual understanding of the religious symbols encountered along the way. Pilgrimages generally occur spontaneously and are not necessarily organized as formal processions. Pilgrims

travel toward a predetermined sacred destination, where they may remain for as long as they desire. Participation in processions dedicated to saints is typically motivated by devotion, and the homage offered through such practices represents an act of veneration and praise. Respect shown toward sacred images and relics reflects recognition of the exemplary lives and virtues attributed to the saints they represent.

Rosendahl (2010) notes that pilgrimage practices are found among adherents of the majority of world religions and are embedded within diverse regional and cultural contexts. Expanding upon this perspective, Santos (2010) argues that pilgrimages constitute one of the most characteristic ways through which individuals express their religiosity, both personally and collectively. As such, pilgrimage serves as an important manifestation of religious identity and communal belonging. Pilgrims from different cultural backgrounds who seek an encounter with the sacred are, in many respects, also seeking a deeper encounter with themselves. By temporarily distancing themselves from their everyday environments, they create opportunities for prayer, contemplation, introspection, and spiritual renewal. Pilgrimage, therefore, should not be understood merely as the act of walking or completing a route. Rather, it involves traveling with a specific spiritual purpose and motivation, directed “toward” or inspired “by” something transcendent.

Pilgrimage thus possesses a meaning and significance that each individual must discover through personal experience. More than a journey, it represents an opportunity for encounter with the divine. This encounter is not merely a symbolic expression but a lived reality for many individuals who embark upon the pilgrimage route and experience a profound personal connection with Christ and the saints. When pilgrims and religious devotees travel toward a sacred destination, such as the Shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida, they demonstrate remarkable commitment to their faith. Adverse conditions such as heat, hunger, thirst, physical exhaustion, and fatigue rarely deter them from completing their journey. Their perseverance reflects the strength of their devotion and the importance attributed to the spiritual objectives associated with the pilgrimage.

Duarte (1958, as cited in Santos, 2014) defines pilgrimage as the act of setting oneself in motion, embarking upon a road marked by the willingness to leave behind what one already possesses in search of something not yet attained but deeply hoped for. In this perspective, the pilgrim is an individual who translates the inner restlessness of the soul into movement, transforming spiritual longing into a tangible journey. The principal routes leading pilgrims to the Shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida constitute the central focus of this investigation. Accordingly, particular attention is given to the structural, environmental, and social characteristics of the alternative routes (Figure 1) used by pilgrims to reach this important center of devotion. Recognized as the largest Marian shrine in the world and the second-largest Catholic shrine after St. Peter’s Basilica in Vatican City, the Shrine of Aparecida attracts thousands of faithful visitors each year, motivated by diverse expressions of faith, devotion, and religious commitment.

Figure 1. Location Map of Aparecida (São Paulo State), the Principal Destination of the Pilgrimage Examined in This Study.



Source: Google Maps

A *romaria* is a religious pilgrimage activity and a popular manifestation of faith generally associated with the relationship between devotees and the saint to whom they are devoted. It is characterized by individual or group journeys to sacred destinations, particularly those associated with revered relics or sites of religious significance. Such pilgrimages are commonly undertaken to fulfill a vow or promise, express gratitude for blessings received, or seek divine favors and spiritual assistance. Upon arriving at their pilgrimage destination, such as Aparecida, devotees typically engage in a variety of religious practices, including attending Mass, lighting candles, visiting sacred sites, and participating in other devotional rituals. These activities reinforce the spiritual meaning of the pilgrimage and strengthen the pilgrims’ connection with their faith and religious traditions.

Faith Trail: The Driving Force Leading Pilgrims to Aparecida

Interest in pilgrimage routes has grown steadily in recent decades, contributing to the emergence of Brazil as an increasingly prominent destination for long-distance walking and religious journeys. Inspired by the model of the renowned Camino de Santiago in Spain, several officially recognized pilgrimage routes have been established throughout Brazil, supported by local governments, private organizations, and the hospitality of communities located along the routes. Beyond providing opportunities for adventure and immersion in the history and culture of the regions visited, these trails often become profound journeys of self-discovery and personal transformation.

Since the eighteenth century, when devotion to Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception of Aparecida first emerged, large numbers of devotees and pilgrims have traveled to the city of Aparecida. These movements of pilgrimage and religious procession have expanded continuously over time. In 2018 alone, the city welcomed more than 12 million visitors. For many participants, the journey to the shrine serves as an expression of gratitude for blessings received or as an act of penance intended to foster spiritual growth and renewal. Numerous pilgrims maintain this tradition annually, contributing to the constant flow of faithful visitors who arrive in Aparecida after traveling hundreds of kilometers from different regions of Brazil.

Among the officially recognized routes leading pilgrims to Aparecida, the Faith Trail (*Caminho da Fé*) was the first to be established and formally recognized. Inspired by the routes that lead pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela, it was conceived by three friends who had personally completed the Spanish pilgrimage and subsequently decided to create a similar structure for those traveling to Aparecida. Their objective was to provide pilgrims with support points and essential infrastructure designed to enhance comfort and safety throughout the journey. To achieve this goal, they collaborated with municipal governments and local parishes in the cities through which the route would pass.

The Faith Trail was officially inaugurated in 2003 in the municipality of Águas da Prata. Currently, the route extends for approximately 990 kilometers, of which nearly 500 kilometers traverse the Mantiqueira Mountain Range through forest roads, trails, and paved sections. This environment offers pilgrims opportunities for reflection, spiritual contemplation, and a deeper connection with nature. The route (Figure 2) is marked by yellow directional arrows placed at regular intervals of approximately two kilometers, while the image of Our Lady of Aparecida serves as its official symbol and identifying emblem.

Figure 2. Faith Trail (*Caminho da Fé*).



Source: <https://www.viajali.com.br/caminho-da-fe>

Over the years, the need to maintain and improve the infrastructure of the Faith Trail became increasingly evident. Given its extensive length of more than 900 kilometers, initiatives were developed to secure financial resources dedicated to the enhancement and preservation of the route. In 2004, the organizers obtained their first grant from the Banco do Brasil Foundation, a contribution that proved essential for the renovation and revitalization of the trail's infrastructure.

As the project evolved, new initiatives and development strategies were implemented. In 2015, the Banco do Brasil Foundation approved additional projects aimed at further strengthening the route's structure and operational capacity. The association responsible for managing the Faith Trail acts as an intermediary among rural landowners, municipal authorities, religious institutions, and pilgrims, seeking to ensure that the route remains safe, attractive, environmentally preserved, and economically sustainable. The economic impact generated by the trail is particularly evident in local communities, where restaurants, guesthouses, and other service providers benefit directly from pilgrimage-related activities.

The route offers pilgrims a profound spiritual experience through prayer, contemplation of nature, periods of silence, detachment from everyday concerns, and meaningful encounters with local residents. Throughout the journey, community members consistently demonstrate a willingness to welcome, assist, and share their experiences with pilgrims, reinforcing the sense of hospitality that characterizes the Faith Trail.

Observations conducted among pilgrims indicate that choosing a pilgrimage route represents more than a physical undertaking; it provides an opportunity to embark on a journey toward a deeper understanding of faith

and personal purpose. For many participants, the pilgrimage becomes a transformative experience that encourages reflection on fundamental spiritual values and life goals.

A significant portion of the route traverses the mountainous region located in northeastern São Paulo State and southern Minas Gerais State, passing through renowned tourist destinations and areas characterized by considerable altitudinal variation. Along this segment, pilgrims travel through several municipalities, including Andradas, Inconfidentes, Estiva, Paraisópolis, and Campos do Jordão.

In addition to the main route, several secondary branches provide alternative access to the Faith Trail. The landscapes encountered along the journey are both diverse and visually striking, offering distinct experiences to pilgrims. Some sections are relatively flat and pass through large agricultural estates, while others feature more rugged terrain and cross smaller rural properties. Most of the route follows unpaved rural roads, although certain segments are paved. Portions of the trail run alongside highways with limited vehicle traffic; however, some sections experience considerable traffic flow, including heavy trucks, requiring heightened caution from pilgrims. For those wishing to avoid busier roadways, an alternative known as the Pedrinhas Route (*Caminho das Pedrinhas*) is available after the municipality of Campos do Jordão. This option is characterized by quiet dirt roads surrounded by natural landscapes, providing a more peaceful pilgrimage experience. Beyond their scenic appeal, many of the municipalities crossed by the route possess significant historical and cultural heritage. Andradas, for example, is distinguished by the strong influence of Italian immigration and by its rich natural and cultural assets.

Devotion to Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception of Aparecida

Historical documents preserved by the Shrine of Aparecida recount the origins of devotion to Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception of Aparecida and document the presence of devotees arriving from different regions to express gratitude or seek divine blessings. Additional sources, such as the Administrative Council Records of the Shrine, also provide evidence of the significant flow of pilgrims visiting Aparecida throughout its history. According to these records, the number of visitors increased substantially following the expansion of coffee cultivation in the Paraíba Valley during the 1840s and the inauguration of the Central Railway of Brazil in 1877.

During the early stages of organized pilgrimages, devotees traveled primarily by horseback, mule, or donkey, while many others undertook the journey on foot. With the advent of the railway system in 1877, the “Aparecida do Norte” Railway Station was inaugurated and became the principal gateway for pilgrims traveling to the shrine. As noted by Brustoloni (1998, p. 89), “later, in the early 1990s, special trains were provided during major organized pilgrimages to transport the large number of people traveling daily to the Shrine.” During the 1920s, automobiles and buses gradually became common means of transportation for pilgrims. Nevertheless, walking long distances remains one of the most significant forms of pilgrimage today, either as the fulfillment of a religious vow or as a means of experiencing a profound spiritual journey.

Accounts of blessings and miracles attributed to sacred figures have spread among Catholic believers across different regions of the world, inspiring countless individuals to make petitions and vows in their names. Devotion possesses a strong symbolic dimension (Figure 3), while simultaneously embodying a tangible form of materiality. This materiality is often represented through sacred objects or places associated with religious devotion. Consequently, the image of a saint is frequently linked to a physical representation, whether crafted from clay, wood, plaster, or other materials. The visual and tangible nature of these representations facilitates the connection between the physical and metaphysical realms, serving as a bridge between the sacred and the secular dimensions of human experience.

Figure 3. Devotees at the Shrine of Aparecida.



Source: Fábio França/ G1 (2020).

The practice of making vows to saints has been deeply embedded in Brazilian religiosity since the colonial period. During times of hardship and uncertainty, devotees often turn to their protective saints, seeking urgent assistance through a wide variety of vows and devotional commitments. These may include praying the rosary, participating in processions and pilgrimages, offering *ex-votos*, observing periods of fasting, or engaging in other forms of religious devotion.

Seeking spiritual renewal and reaffirming one's faith are among the principal motivations that lead thousands of pilgrims to converge upon the Shrine of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception of Aparecida. Each year, particularly during significant religious celebrations, pilgrims assume the role of active agents in shaping the sacred landscape, generating distinctive social dynamics and spatial arrangements within this important center of devotion. In this respect, the spatial organization observed in Aparecida during sacred periods reflects patterns commonly found in other major pilgrimage destinations.

At the heart of devotion to Our Lady of Aparecida lies the interconnected logic of vows and miracles. Devotees honor the saint primarily as an expression of gratitude for blessings and favors received. This exchange of gifts and graces can be understood through the principle of reciprocity discussed by Mauss (2003, p. 243), which is based on the cycle of "giving, receiving, and reciprocating." Such reciprocity plays a fundamental role in maintaining the bonds of dependence, trust, and affection established between the devotee and the sacred figure believed to have interceded on their behalf. As Montes (1998, p. 103) observes, saints are often perceived as sources of miracles that remain perpetually possible in the diverse circumstances of everyday life.

To understand the significance of vows, it is important to recognize that they are commitments made during moments of supplication. However, within Christian teaching, vows do not compel God to grant a specific request, nor should faith be diminished if a petition remains unanswered. According to Father Maciel, a Redemptorist missionary serving in Aparecida, a vow should not be interpreted as a negotiation with God. Rather, it represents an acknowledgment of the blessings, kindness, and miracles received from the divine, accompanied by a commitment to perform an act of gratitude that is pleasing to God.

From a Christian perspective, vows do not obligate God to fulfill human desires. Instead, believers understand that divine wisdom ultimately determines what is best for each individual, regardless of whether a specific request is granted. Furthermore, the Catholic Church teaches that when a person is unable to fulfill a vow made to God or to a saint, a priest may be consulted to modify the nature of the commitment. This practice is supported by biblical tradition, which recognizes the possibility of adjusting vows under particular circumstances. As recorded in Scripture:

"If the person making the vow cannot afford the valuation, they shall be brought before the priest, who shall determine the value according to the resources of the one who made the vow" (Leviticus 27:8; cf. Leviticus 27:13, 18, 23).

Faith is regarded as a force capable of transcending adversity, which explains the profound spiritual significance associated with journeys to the Shrine of Aparecida. Although some pilgrims seek physical healing, the primary motivations are typically devotion to Our Lady and the fulfillment of vows, expressed through a variety of symbolic actions and ritual practices.

One notable example is the penitential journey between the Old Basilica and the New Basilica, a route measuring approximately 392.2 meters. During weekends and major religious celebrations, thousands of devotees cross the Faith Walkway on their knees as an act of gratitude for blessings attributed to the intercession of the saint. Among these pilgrims was Jesus Antônio Lisboa, a painter from Itaúna, Minas Gerais, who completed the route as part of a vow. For four consecutive years, he traveled to the Shrine on October 12 to give thanks for the recovery of his son, who had been diagnosed with leukemia in 2016 at the age of twenty-four. Reflecting on his experience, he stated:

I was never going to stop coming here to give thanks and fulfill my promise. I have always been devoted to Our Lady and have consecrated my life to her. Being here, even in difficult times, is deeply moving. Faith is stronger.

The Catholic Church encourages believers to make commitments that are not only reasonable but also beneficial to personal sanctification and the well-being of others. In this context, *ex-votos* such as wax, wooden, or plaster representations of body parts offered at certain shrines may hold important religious significance. According to Dom Estevão Bettencourt, these offerings serve as tangible testimonies to God's mercy manifested in the lives of those who have received blessings.

Another important expression of gratitude involves the offering of *ex-votos*, a term derived from the Latin expression *ex voto suscepto*, meaning "for a vow fulfilled." These offerings may include objects, photographs, letters, and written testimonies that symbolize gratitude and devotion to Our Lady of Aparecida. Lighting candles is another widespread devotional practice. At Aparecida, it is common to observe candles of various shapes and sizes, including representations of specific body parts or candles corresponding to the height of the individual who received the blessing.

The abundance of devotional offerings displayed in the Hall of Promises illustrates the magnitude of popular devotion associated with the shrine. The volume of materials is so extensive that the shrine administration must periodically rotate the exhibits. The collection includes approximately 87,000 photographs attached to the ceiling, alongside hundreds of objects displayed in exhibition cases. Wedding mannequins, military uniforms, firearms, and scale models of houses and churches are among the many items that testify to the blessings and miracles attributed to the intercession of Our Lady of Aparecida.

Figure 4. Faith Walkway (*Passarela da Fé*).



Source: Portal A12 (2020)

At the Shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida, religious rituals represent important expressions and manifestations of faith, devotion, and worship (Figure 5). Upon arriving at the shrine, devotees typically visit its various sacred spaces in order to honor the divine while also engaging in contemplative observation of the surrounding landscape. These spaces are marked by gestures, symbols, and devotional practices that give tangible form to the deepest aspirations, hopes, and spiritual needs of individuals. Such manifestations of religiosity contribute to the creation of an environment in which pilgrims experience comfort, renewal, and a strengthened sense of faith. According to Durkheim (1996), participation in sacred rituals enables individuals to reconnect with transcendent values and, through this experience of spiritual reassurance, return to everyday secular life with renewed courage, purpose, and emotional resilience.

Figure 5. Expressions of Faith and Worship.



Source: <https://g1.globo.com/sp/vale-do-paraiba-regiao/festa-da-padroeira/2018>. Acesso em: 08 abr. 2020.

The image depicts an expression of faith and devotion within the National Shrine of Aparecida, where pilgrims demonstrate their religiosity through symbolic acts of penance, gratitude, and the fulfillment of vows. These practices constitute characteristic elements of the devotional traditions associated with religious pilgrimage and reflect the deep spiritual commitment of devotees who travel to the shrine in search of religious fulfillment, thanksgiving, and spiritual renewal.

IV. Final Considerations

This study sought to analyze the Faith Trail (*Caminho da Fé*) not merely as a route of physical displacement, but as a territory profoundly embedded with historical, cultural, socioeconomic, and spiritual meanings. Throughout the investigation, it became evident that pilgrimages and religious processions directed toward the National Shrine of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception of Aparecida constitute one of the most significant manifestations of Brazilian popular Catholicism. Rooted in the colonial period, these practices have continuously evolved and acquired new meanings within contemporary society.

In addressing the guiding research questions, the study demonstrated that the practice of making vows and expressing devotion through acts of sacrifice, such as long-distance walking or crossing the Faith Walkway on one's knees, is grounded in the principles of reciprocity and gratitude. The material expressions of faith, manifested through *ex-votos*, candles, photographs, and other offerings displayed in the Hall of Promises, function as visible links between the sacred and secular realms. These symbolic practices provide believers with spiritual comfort, renewed hope, and emotional strength to confront the challenges of everyday life.

Regarding the development and infrastructure of pilgrimage routes, the findings revealed that the Faith Trail, inaugurated in 2003 and inspired by the historic Camino de Santiago de Compostela, has become the principal alternative route leading to Aparecida. The evidence indicates that the route has transcended its exclusively religious function, emerging as a catalyst for sustainable development and environmental preservation throughout its approximately 990-kilometer extension. Collaboration among the managing association, public authorities, and local communities, supported by funding initiatives from organizations such as the Banco do Brasil Foundation, has facilitated the establishment of a network of guesthouses, restaurants, and support facilities that contribute significantly to the economic vitality of the mountainous regions of São Paulo and southern Minas Gerais.

Furthermore, the study demonstrated that the route offers pilgrims a rich immersion in the natural landscapes of the Mantiqueira Mountain Range and the historical heritage of numerous municipalities in São Paulo and Minas Gerais. As a result, the pilgrimage extends beyond a religious journey, becoming an experience of self-discovery, contemplation, silence, and detachment from the demands of everyday life.

Finally, it can be concluded that the Faith Trail is fundamentally **more than a pilgrimage route**. It represents a geographical and spiritual space where individuals establish meaningful connections with nature, engage with local culture, and experience profound inner reflection. Far from being a static phenomenon, the route is continually renewed through the footsteps of thousands of pilgrims who, motivated by hope and devotion to the Patron Saint of Brazil, imbue this sacred territory with dynamism, emotional significance, and transcendence. Consequently, the Faith Trail stands as a living expression of faith, cultural heritage, and religious tourism, preserving its relevance as one of Brazil's most important pilgrimage experiences.

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