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Place Making and People Gathering at Rural Wayside Crosses

Hillary Kaell

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> I imagine that someone from another religion, in another country, who had never heard of the cross – after all, it's two pieces of wood that intersect – maybe it wouldn't make them feel anything. But for me, it has an emotional charge, a very great spiritual charge.
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> Raymonde Proulx, 62, Ste-Gertrude-Manneville

27 May 2014
Highway 117, near Saint-Jovite, Quebec

The town of Saint-Jovite is nestled in the Laurentian mountains near Mont-Tremblant ski resort. Beyond the tourist hub, there are rolling hills covered in pines, neatly kept bungalows and small family farms interconnected by *rangs* (rural roads). Jean-Marc, a retired teacher, and I head back to his house to share a quick dinner with his wife, Rollande, before we hurry to the car. We're due at the wayside cross by seven. A few minutes beyond town we pull up behind a line of parked cars along the highway and are greeted warmly

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FIGURE 5.1 The Saint-Jovite cross where Jean-Marc's group gathered to pray. The sign at its base has the Knights of Columbus logo and reads, "N'oubliez pas que je vous aime!" (Do not forget that I love you!). Photographed in May 2014 by Jacques Harvey.

by neighbours and friends clustered under umbrellas, hoods pulled against the drizzling rain. The ground squishes underfoot as we make our way to the cross.

Each Tuesday during May, the *mois de Marie* (month of Mary), the group assembles at one of the local crosses to pray. The St-Jovite crosses are just a few of more than 2,500 crosses in rural Quebec. The one we are gathered at tonight, like all wayside crosses, is about fifteen feet tall and planted along the side of the road. It is on private property; others are on public land. The only requirement, say cross caretakers, is that it must be visible to passersby. Some crosses are simple; others have elaborately carved instruments of the Passion. This one is adorned with a statue of Jesus, bloodied on the crucifix. The group is proud of this *corpus* – few wayside crosses have one, especially as lifelike as this. It was first made by a man a few towns

over who did plaster work with moulds made from rubber tires. “A real artist!” someone tells me appreciatively.

Once our group numbers about twenty-five – slightly more men than women, the average age about sixty-five – Jean-Marc calls us to order. We gather in a semicircle facing the cross, our backs to the cars whizzing by. Most participants are Chevaliers de Colomb (Knights of Columbus) and their wives. Members of this Catholic lay fraternity look after hundreds of wayside crosses around the province, including six in St-Jovite. This chapter also invited their *aumonier*, a jovial pastor from Bénin, who begins by leading us in a moment of silent prayer. Then one man starts, “Je vous salue, Marie, pleine de grâces …” We respond, “Sainte Marie, Mère de Dieu, priez pour nous pécheurs, maintenant et à l’heure de notre mort. Amen.” People hold rosary beads loosely between their fingers, eyes fixed on the cross or cast on the ground. For thirty minutes we pray the rosary, with different people taking the lead. The sonorous voices mix with the pitter-patter of rain on our umbrellas and the swoosh of tires speeding past. We end our prayers with a song:

C’est le mois de Marie	It’s the month of Mary
C’est le mois le plus beau	It’s the most beautiful month
À la Vierge chérie	To the dear Virgin
Disons un chant nouveau.	Let us sing a new song.[1]

The voices fall silent and there is a pause before our circle breaks up as people make a beeline out of the rain. Jean-Marc stops some men to talk about the cross they are meeting at next week, the last one of the season. It’s on a ridge by the highway, partially obscured by new trees. “It’s a shame,” says Jean-Marc for my benefit. “It’s a beautiful cross, illuminated with lights donated by a Chevalier who runs an electrical company.” Because it is on public land, they contacted the Ministry of Forestry for permission to cut them down. (“Sure, but don’t go crazy,” the ministry representative responded.) They agree to get it done tomorrow, and we wave good night, dispersing back to our cars as dusk descends.

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PLACE MAKING AND PEOPLE GATHERING

Wayside crosses originated in medieval Europe, where they lined roadways to pilgrimage sites and provided protection for travellers. In Quebec, similar crosses were erected in the 1740s along the Chemin du Roy between Montreal and Quebec. The handmade wooden crosses that typify *croix de chemin* today likely date to the mid-nineteenth century, with a construction high point from the 1880s to 1950s, a period marked more generally by Catholic devotionalism. Wayside crosses were built to mark or commemorate an event, by *rang* neighbours if the parish church was too far for regular visits, or in order to fulfill vows and ensure future protection against natural scourges and untimely death. Although priests sometimes encouraged their construction, creating wayside crosses has always been a voluntary lay practice.[2]

Despite scholars' dire predictions in the 1920s and again in the 1970s, the advent of modernity has not felled the crosses. Based on a survey I directed of nearly two hundred parishes across the province, about 80 per cent of crosses catalogued in the 1970s remain.[3] Most of their upkeep is provided privately by local people who reside in rural communities with populations of between 150 and 2,000. Following the broad survey, I conducted in-depth interviews and fieldwork with fifty caretakers. Of these, 98 per cent identified as "believing" Catholics; 86 per cent were practising, meaning they attend Mass at least once a month.[4] This level of practice is highly atypical for Quebec as a whole, even in their villages. However, Catholicism in rural Quebec does look different than its urban counterpart: nearly everyone attends church for Christmas, Easter, and life cycle rituals. Parish committees organize popular social events, like picnics and concerts. Most caretakers' grandchildren receive some Christian schooling, usually catechism class.[5]

Caretakers view wayside crosses as a tangible connection to the past. This is increasingly the case. Before the 1970s, 27 per cent of crosses replaced older ones on the same site; today it is 79 per cent.[6] Yet caretakers also view their crosses as changing with the times. They readily use new materials, such as aluminum, steel, or car paint. Builders tend to favour simple designs over the ornate aesthetics of

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FIGURE 5.2 Today the most common cross is white with a stylized heart, like this one in Saint-Frédéric village. It also has a niche containing a devotional statue of Mary and child. Photographed in 2014 by Jacques Harvey.

the past.[7] They echo Catholic clergy during the Quiet Revolution, dismissing earlier vows for protection as "peasants' superstitions." Communal prayers are also viewed with some ambivalence, since they seem to typify the obligatory social practices that characterized pre-1960s Québécois Catholicism.[8]

This chapter explores these religious entanglements by focusing on two components of contemporary wayside cross devotionalism: the production of sacred space and the role of communal rituals. Both aspects speak to what philosopher Edward Casey, based on Heidegger, suggests is an essential trait of place: namely, *places gather*. To be "emplaced" is to be in a configurative complex of things, including natural elements, objects, people, histories, memories, and even words

or prayers. The power of place, writes Casey, "consists in gathering these lives and things, each with its own space and time, into one arena of common engagement."[9] Paying close attention to the dynamic interaction across this landscape, I ask how wayside crosses carve out certain kinds of social intimacy and collective memory in the context of political, religious, economic, and physical changes in rural Quebec.

RETELLING RELIGION IN RURAL QUEBEC

Studies of religion in North America largely focus on urban or suburban places.[10] In Quebec, the assumed model reflects many urbanites' experience of sudden religious dislocation in the 1960s. Cross caretakers, on the other hand, describe a series of incremental changes beginning in the 1970s and 1980s that became more fully apparent to them only in the 1990s. Further, the major themes in Québécois scholarship on religion, such as immigrant assimilation, pluralism, atheism, and new religious movements, rarely reflect key issues in caretakers' lives. Assuming an urban subject, even those studies that critique the secularization thesis tend to do so by highlighting "ethnic" religion among urban immigrants, while asserting that, "ethnic French-Canadian Catholicism disappeared a number of decades ago."[11]

By contrast, ethnographies of North America's rural landscape, though they rarely track religion per se, still teem with the things of faith: in church placards on the road and the Sacred Heart on living room walls, in the last words of the dying or the glow of a forest fire that (say onlookers) is just like hell.[12] In Quebec, too, religion is inescapable in the countryside. Caretakers live in villages defined by parishes, each bearing a saint's name. *Rangs* spread outwards from a towering church at the center of town. Its steeple punctures the horizon, the most visible landmark for miles. Crosses are scattered throughout this landscape: large ones on mountains, small ones at roadside accidents, medium ones at each cemetery and church.

Caretakers, and likely many rural Québécois more generally, view Catholic identity in ways that reflect what sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger calls "Church-type religious spatiality," referring to how all people born under Catholic jurisdiction are considered ipso facto

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members or potential members of the Church, sealed through infant baptism.[13] As a result, when caretakers describe their neighbours and extended families, the main distinction they draw is between "practising" and "believing" Catholics; the former go to Mass, the latter do not. But nearly everyone believes in God, Jesus, and a Christian afterlife. The separation between Catholic things and "secular" ones is further obscured because the same individuals head important founding families, serve on the parish *fabrique*, and are elected to the municipal council, as described in Parent's chapter (this volume). In short, the kinds of distinctions salient to studies of institutional processes, such as educational policy or legal codes, fail to account for the piecemeal, collective, and negotiated ways that religion happens in rural places.

Of course, such rural places are neither immutable nor homogeneous, though they are often portrayed that way.[14] Depending on where their villages are located – for example, near tourist attractions like Saint-Jovite – caretakers live amongst populations that include summering vacationers, Québécois urbanites or Western Europeans in search of country life, and historic anglo-Protestant towns.[15] Further, although all caretakers are Québécois "de souche" (of French ancestry), at least half of the people I surveyed grew up in other villages, moving to their current parish when they married (if a woman) or to find work (if a man). Cross caretakers are also aware of broader religious changes in Quebec and in the Church. They might be categorized as ritual traditionalists (they attend Mass, maintain wayside crosses) and to some extent theological liberals.[16] They applaud most "modernizations" since Vatican II, though they lament how the defection of thousands of priests and nuns left a major gap in the kinds of services the Church can provide (Parent, this volume). Caretakers often blame the shortage partly on what they view as outdated restrictions – women should be ordained, priests should be allowed to marry. They also blame institutional failures, especially sex abuse scandals, for the ambivalence many people feel about the Church. Fundamentally, however, they pinpoint other societal changes, which they group broadly as "materialism," for the decline in church going.

The Catholic Church has long defined materialism as a philosophical system that denies the existence of God, such as Communism.

When caretakers use the term, they draw a more colloquial association. In some cases, they say, rural people lust after unnecessary consumer goods and waste time on frivolous (even dangerous) leisure pursuits, like video games and getting drunk. They define materialism differently in the context of hardworking young parents, including many of their children. To afford the modern conveniences now considered necessary, both parents work full time at (low paying) wage labour jobs. Work was hard on the farm, recall caretakers, but it was of a different sort, with seasons of rest and Sundays off. Now parents work on Sundays and enroll their children in endless extracurricular activities, which teachers tell them is necessary for future success. Caretakers never blame young families, but they note that religious participation suffers when parents are tired and distracted, and children are overbooked.

A further issue, about which most caretakers feel very strongly, is the incremental loss of religion in public places and, especially, schools. In 1964, the Lesage government created a Ministry of Education to nationalize the school system formerly under Church control. By the early 1970s, *rang* schools were closed and children bussed into town centers. However, most rural Catholics pinpoint the feeling of loss to much later: Pauline Marois' program to deconfessionalize schools in 1997, followed by the introduction of a mandatory "Ethics and Culture" course in 2008.[17] One caretaker, François Germain, fifty-eight, speaks for many when he says, "The *croix de chemin* shows that there is still belief and faith in the community. We know that they aren't teaching [Catholicism] in schools … We are trying to preserve an example and a lesson [*un enseignement*] of religion in the community." Caretakers are not sure who to blame – they imagine that such changes are driven by a small group Québécois atheists or by recent immigrants (implicitly, Muslims). Either way, it seems that faraway urbanites are supressing religion in places that are "totally Catholic and believing," as another caretaker put it.[18] Such reactions do not, of course, mean that we should essentialize rural places as sites of resistance to modern ideas emanating from urban centers.[19] Undeniably, caretakers may feel (and often are) relatively powerless politically, at least at a provincial level. However,

change occurs in ways that are specific to the countryside, as wayside crosses show. Like all people, caretakers sometimes welcome it and other times do not.

PLACE-MAKING I: ROADWAYS

For half a century, scholars have debated whether sacred space is situated at the *axis mundi* or liminal boundaries of people's religious and physical worlds.[20] Wayside crosses are a bit of both. Most are centrally planted on a village square, front yard, or the road leading into town. Yet they are also situated on the peripheral outskirts of fields or a few kilometres from human habitation. The single requirement is that the cross be visible from a road.[21]

In the mid-1970s, Quebec's rural roads changed dramatically. Construction crews widened and paved the *rangs* as part of a major provincial infrastructure project. They also built a comprehensive highway system that circumvented many of the old roads altogether. As they went, they knocked down wayside crosses in their way. Other times, people abandoned crosses on *rangs* that were no longer travelled. Though caretakers acknowledge that many crosses were destroyed, they are unreservedly enthusiastic about the modernizations that improved life immeasurably for farm families. People even prayed at wayside crosses, asking God to bring them government roads.[22]

As the roads came, people bought new cars or trucks and drove much faster than before. Rapidity of travel is more than just a hallmark of modernity – it greatly changes experiences of place.[23] Rural people began to choose straight highways over small roads and they no longer paused at the crosses. Other times, they drove so fast (and sometimes drunk) that they crashed into them. "I saw it happen more than once," a caretaker named Daniel Richard recalls, "and it was a sad thing. A big, new cross could come down like that – pah! – in the night. You never saw that happen with horses. It would have been impossible to [hit it] with so much force." Wayside crosses also lost their function as gathering places for prayers if the parish church was far away. The new roads collapsed distances: a church fifteen

FIGURES 5.3 and 5.4 A cross in Saint-Ferdinand village, near a curve in the road with space for cars to pull over. Its niche contains a statue of the Sacred Heart. Photographed in October 2014 by Gérald Arbour.

kilometers away could now be reached in minutes. While this history reinforces how religious change is never unmoored from other spheres of society, including shifts in economy and infrastructure, in Quebec the link was also explicit. The government's rural development plans were conterminous with the Church's pastoral development programs in the same areas – indeed, they often relied on the same consultative methods and even personnel.[24]

Despite the changes, many crosses survived and by the 1990s there was a wave of restorations, which took into account the changes new roads had wrought.[25] Builders shifted the location of crosses to protect them from speeding cars, moving them higher onto ridges. If a road was no longer travelled, they sometimes picked up a cross

and moved it, a difficult operation requiring construction equipment. Caretakers also began to think carefully about the geography of the road, which had been less necessary when people plodded by on foot or by horse. Henri-Paul Gagné, seventy-three, from Saint-Ferdinand village is a good example. As a child in the 1950s, he walked to school past a bright white wayside cross with purple bleeding hearts flowering at its base. "I found it so beautiful. It stayed etched in my mind," he recalls. In 1993, he and his wife bought some land outside

the village near a hill at a bend in the road. As soon as he saw it he knew it was "a good place for a cross." On modern roads, this means a place where the road is large enough to have through traffic but small enough so that drivers can pull over.

Caretakers also often erect crosses at corners, intersections, and crossroads. Though at one point this preference may have been related to protection against wandering souls drawn to such places, today these spots retain value because they defy the logic of modern highways by forcing drivers to slow down or stop. Henri-Paul's location is especially good, he notes, because bends in the road make cars slow down but also obscure the view ahead; his cross is situated at a bend *and* a hill, making it visible for miles in each direction. However once he planted it he realized that shoulder was too narrow to pull over. So he added a parking spot. "Now people can park their cars and go pray," he says. "At least two or three times a month I see people stop to pray."

PLACE-MAKING II: NATURE

Wayside crosses are never planted in urban or wilderness places, even the "constructed" wilderness of national parks.[26] They belong to the in-between places of the countryside, where nature is abundant but tamed. Earlier scholarship on wayside crosses portrayed this natural landscape as largely antagonistic. In 1981, Paul Carpentier's magisterial study of the crosses argued that builders sought to placate the wrath of an angry "Judaic" God who smote them with droughts, fires, and pestilence. According to Carpentier, wayside crosses sacralized the land, while also signifying French-Canadian ambivalence towards (even fear of) the natural elements around them.[27] His interpretation drew heavily on Émile Durkheim's and Arnold Van Gennep's definition of the sacred as separate from the profane, as applied by Mircea Eliade to sacred places where "an irruption of the sacred ... results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different."[28] For Carpentier, the crosses delimited French-Canadian villages as separate Catholic space. This process was repeated in the crosses' more immediate milieu, where caretakers erected circular fences and groomed shrubs

or flowers in order to draw a separation from profane nature.[29] This rather rigid definition of sacred space as an inviolable, heterotopic "other" still inflects many Québécois studies of religious places.[30]

Viewing the crosses as emplaced objects offers a more nuanced perspective. Caretakers can (and do) leave their villages, moving into cities or across provincial lines often to find work in the logging camps and oil fields of western Canada. The crosses' movement is admittedly more circumscribed. They are rarely found beyond the territory of francophone Quebec, apart from the Acadian and Franco-Ontarian "borderlands." Moreover, at the microlevel each cross is associated with a particular family or rang, from whence it gets its name (the "Mercier" or "Rang 5" cross). Take, for example, the restoration of the crosses in Saint-François-Xavier-de-Brompton, spearheaded in 2013 by Manon Jolin and Denyse Morin in the context of the village's one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary. Inspired by their families' crosses, they encouraged renewals of a number of others including one on Rang 6, erected in the 1920s by Délima Racine and Polydore Lapierre to ward off a grasshopper epidemic. The family that owned the land in 2013 was letting the cross rot. The two women began by asking a descendent, Léo Lapierre, to undertake the reconstruction. Then they asked Karine Jolin, the great-granddaughter of Délima, for assent to move it to her land. At the end, they installed a plaque recounting the role of these direct family members and specifying that the cross was still "on land that was part of the family land."

Admittedly, this case does not represent most renewals since it was orchestrated by amateur historians with a particular interest in each cross' lineage. Other people renew and then care for crosses whether or not they know who constructed them. However, Manon and Denyse's work is helpful in how it magnifies the pattern I want to highlight: they (re)produced symbolic connections between founding families, the land, and their crosses. Importantly though, the particular site upon which the cross stood was never considered inherently sacred, as the Eliadean model suggests. A cross can always be picked up and moved, generally to facilitate its care or enhance its visibility. In Rang 6, notes the plaque rather tersely, "the new owners [of the property] no longer wanted it on their land."[31]

FIGURE 5.5 A simple cross with an impressive garden along a road in St-Ignace-de-Stanbridge village. Photographed in 2010.

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Unlike more rigid definitions, then, the "sacred space" associated with crosses is always in flux and the putative sacred/profane divide is porous. Natural elements groomed near the cross continue imperceptibly into overlapping spaces – grass spreads into nearby fields, seeds from bushes blow away and take root.[32] Further, while cultivating plants at the cross does distinguish the space from its surroundings, as Carpentier noted, caretakers describe such interventions as serving not to *separate* the site from nature but to *enhance* the beauty of the cross as an outdoor object. Henri-Paul Gagné, who planted colourful flowers at his cross on the ridge, says: "The cross goes with nature. It's God who creates nature. The cross is found in nature. It's forested and it's beautiful ... It's a place of peace. And being Catholic, for me it represents faith." Like many caretakers, Henri-Paul goes to Mass and likes his local priest – but is ambivalent about institutional Catholicism writ large. The wayside cross is effective in part because it powerfully joins man to nature and thus directly to God. As such, it speaks to a major ontological shift: Catholics like Henri-Paul no longer view natural disasters or disease as "God's work." Instead, nearly all caretakers describe Christianity as predicated on God's love for his creations.

Any lingering ambivalence about nature focuses squarely on the effort it takes to protect objects from deterioration in the harsh Canadian winter: replacing wood and rusting nails, finding less porous paint, or replanting hardy perennials. Wayside cross care follows the rhythm of the agricultural seasons. Cleaning a cross in the springtime mirrors the repairs done to houses, farms, or gardens. Many caretakers use leftover plant clippings and materials from home construction for cross renovations. Throughout the summer, they return to trim the grass and touch up the paint. Cross care ends with the first frost and begins with the first thaw.

When heritage professionals evaluate a cross, they view flower gardens and other natural elements as superfluous to the object itself.[33]

For most caretakers, however, plants are essential, even participatory, in their work. Suzanne Parmentier, eighty-one, heads the Société de Patrimoine in Contrecoeur and maintains a cross. "Usually I tend to the flowers in the spring, and I say my prayers at the same time,"

she says. "But they aren't major prayers. It's planting the flowers that serves as my prayer. And I ask the flowers to pray for me too since they are there all the time." Other times, flowers "work" because they draw the human eye. Rollande Allard-Charron, sixty-eight, in Ste-Théodosie, built a cross in 2001 following a personal tragedy during which she was helped by Saint Joseph. She placed his statue in the cross' niche. "Every morning, when I go outside to [feed] the chickens," she says, "I go say hello to my Saint Joseph and entrust my day to him." This sense of love and protection is extended to others if they notice the cross as they pass. They stop most often, Rollande notes, when the garden is in bloom. "Often they say, 'It's beautiful around your cross!' They are thinking maybe more of the flowers than the cross but it makes a whole ... So I put the flowers and then they stop and take notice."

When gardening around the cross is viewed as a type of devotion (a "little prayer" according to Suzanne), it can also effectively involve children who are believing but not practising Catholics. Charlotte Mercier, seventy-eight, constructed and maintains an elaborate set of three crosses in Shipshaw. Once a year she brings her teenage grandsons. "I make them work at the cross [with me]," she says, "Cutting the grass, cutting the trees, transporting things, something like that. We do it in May once the snow has melted. I want them to be involved in it a bit ... I tell them that this is a prayer too. It's making it beautiful in honor of Him." A clean, well-groomed cross is a way to honour God and serves as a testament for passersby of caretakers' active spiritual commitment. For this reason, many wayside cross miracles are seemingly insignificant ones involving plants: cedars sprouted right after the cross was erected, recounted a woman in Île Bizard, following years of failed attempts to grow them on that site; in a single night, recalled another woman in Rouyn-Noranda, a magnificent garden grew up around the cross. The neighbours asked everyone but no one had planted it.[34]

Gardens also highlight women's contributions most clearly. While Catholic devotional practices are often associated with women, wayside crosses are firmly tied to men as the initial builders.[35] Locally, men are considered the "owners" of crosses, a bias that colours scholarly

work. In Jean Simard's seminal ethnological survey, women were identified as cross "creators" (the person who built or solicited construction) in a mere 2 per cent of cases, though my surveys indicate that women do (perhaps often) initiate constructions undertaken by their male kin. Overall, the Simard team also spoke with women only 22.7 per cent of the time.[36] In my own work, too, I have often been directed to speak to a man, while his wife busies herself nearby. When I address her directly she replies, "Oh, I just do a bit of painting and gardening." Scholars have noted similar phenomena elsewhere: when patriarchal families collaborate to achieve a common end (such as erecting a wayside cross), the man is viewed as the primary worker and women's labour is considered "help."[37] Focusing on weekly cross care, women suddenly shift into view. They are equal partners in these regular tasks, though not in the initial labour of construction.

PEOPLE GATHERING I: MONTH OF MARY

Through wayside crosses, humans transform undifferentiated spaces into known places. Events are especially effective in this regard since they connect experience to a particular time and location ("There is no such thing as a sheer occurrence that occurs nowhere," Edward Casey notes). Religious ritual, as a particularly powerful type of event, often elicits these kinds of connections.[38] Month of Mary prayers, like those described in Saint-Jovite, are a good example.

In the mid-twentieth century, month of Mary prayers often took the form of collective novenas (nine days of prayer) or other group prayers. Women, including the local schoolteacher, generally organized these events since men were busy in the fields. In the 1970s and 1980s, many rangs abandoned such prayers for various reasons: cars meant that people could get to the local church and no longer needed to meet outside; speeding vehicles posed a danger to groups gathered along the road; rural school closures resulted in the loss of the headmistress who had often organized them; and most importantly, novenas and other collective prayers lost favour in the Church after Vatican II.[39] Today, if month of Mary gatherings persist they are no longer deemed integral and take the pared-down form evident in

Saint-Jovite – once weekly prayers by a group of older people. Such prayer groups pop up here and there across the province, reviving usually for a few years at time following the construction of a new cross or through the exertions of a local organizer.[40]

Engaging in group prayers seems counterintuitive at first. Contemporary rural Catholics associate the crosses with facilitating and expressing personal relationships with the Divine. In fact, they find problematic earlier Catholic communalism, which they associate with a "group mentality" that led people to attend church because of social pressure. Second, May prayers – at least officially – are dedicated to Mary. While Catholics never use the derogatory (Protestant) term "Mariolatry" to describe the Church's relationship to Mary and she is still recognized as Co-Redemptrix, the Second Vatican Council ended the "Marian Century," which gave rise to devotions like the month of Mary.[41] And while wayside cross care still follows the agricultural calendar, as noted above, the once-deep connection between Catholic rituals and agricultural rhythms is hardly relevant. The rural people who attend are no longer subsistence farmers, and, since the advent of new farming technologies, they no longer pray for agricultural abundance and fertility, once connected to Mary as the vessel of God. It is illustrative that before the 1960s 80 per cent of prayers were concerned with agriculture and 20 per cent with other humans.[42] It is the inverse today. At the May prayers I joined in different locations, we prayed variously for the health of a group member's grandchild, the recovery of an elderly villager in the hospital, the safe return of a baby kidnapped in a nearby city, and an end to the war in Syria. Participants tend to brush aside questions about the connection between the cross, May, and Mary. "Prayers are always powerful," they respond. Other times, the link they draw is physical, a ritualized mimesis of Mary's role during the crucifixion: "When we gather at the foot of the cross, we do as she did. We look up, we concentrate our attention on Jesus, his suffering."[43]

For caretakers, focusing on Mary can problematically divert attention from the central importance of Jesus and God. They also know that group prayers may seem retrograde and even symbolic of the failings of Québécois Catholicism. So why hold them at all? One

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reason, not surprisingly, has to do with community. Caretakers are aware that their neighbours – including some who donate money to maintain the local cross – may value it for historical continuity, rather than religion. Month of Mary prayers produce a moment of collective clarity: it is the one time a Catholic "core" performs religiosity, publicly marking the cross as a place of devotion. In this sense, while May prayers do not produce feelings as all-encompassing as Victor Turner's notion of *communitas* or Durkheim's collective effervescence, they still share qualities with pilgrimage. People gather at the cross to embody an intensified version of collective ideals. The group in prayer becomes an "image of perfection"[44] – a community of Catholic believers supporting each other, in synchronicity with the nonvisible beings who populate their world, including Mary, God, Jesus, and the deceased kin who once prayed at the cross with them.

May prayers also appeal because few locals stop regularly at the cross during year, even those who pray briefly as they drive by. During the gatherings, participants finally pause and feel the movement of nature. They describe exceptional moments – the flight of birds, a gust of wind, a shaft of sun – when nature, sensation, and collective prayer combine to create an overwhelming feeling of divine presence.[45] Nature often produces such cosmological affects, as Merleau-Ponty poetically remarked: "As I contemplate the blue of the sky I am not set over against it as a cosmic subject ... I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it 'thinks itself within me,' I am the sky itself ... my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue."[46] It was a passage that echoed in my mind in Cap-Santé, a village on the Saint Lawrence River, when I met with a local group one May to pray. We stood at the edge of the parish cemetery on a bluff above the water in a semicircle facing a white crucifix with a statue of Mary at its base; one woman placed a bouquet of yellow tulips at her feet. The cross was blindingly bright, framed by dark green leaves, and reflecting the glow of the evening sun. The sky stretched pink overhead; water glinted through the foliage; birds were audible in the pauses between prayers, our voices carried away by the breeze. It produced a feeling of utter expansiveness, in Merleau-Ponty's sense, that differed immeasurably from standing on Highway 117 near Saint-Jovite, where the setting and the rain

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created a stronger sense of human closeness and pathos. One begins to comprehend why rural people are so often drawn to particular crosses at particular times of the day or year.

Caretakers also describe May prayers as reinforcing a wayside cross's raison d'être: gathering at its base makes it visible to passersby. This final reason for engaging in group prayers casts people, like natural elements, as extensions of the cross. A group of people and a lineup of cars are noticeable aberrations in the rural landscape that attest to human care and devotion. For this reason, too, the prayers may draw anti-Catholic sentiment. One time, a local man called the Cap-Santé group a "herd of cows" as he sped by them, later repeating this charge in the local newspaper, adding that they were "from another era."[47] Yet however successful the prayers may be at drawing outsiders' attention (negative or otherwise), participants never view them as necessary. Like spring cleaning or gardening, the ritualized act of gathering is subordinate to the main project: ensuring that a cross is visible and well maintained. Thus if the prayer group disbands, caretakers are rarely concerned. Sometimes they barely notice.

PEOPLE GATHERING II: BENEDICTIONS

Benedictions, on the other hand, are indispensable: there must be a public ceremony at which each new (or reconstructed) cross is blessed by a priest. It is so integral that caretakers are sometimes confused if I ask them why they opted to have one. "Well, of course you can't have a cross if there's no benediction," responded Mario Bourbonnais, fifty-two, from Sainte-Marthe-de-Rigaud. "We made it for God [and] certainly that goes with it. It's surely not even a question to ask. It *requires* the benediction."

Though most caretakers profess to have no idea how other villages and parishes bless their crosses, there are certain constants that define the ritual. It accompanies any new construction or a reconstruction that uses mostly new materials – even if it is an exact replica of an earlier cross on the same site. Blessings take place within a year of construction, although they may be delayed if the caretaker clearly intends to have one or the priest is unusually busy. The priest officiates

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FIGURE 5.6 Gathering to bless a renovated cross in Saint-Come-de-Linière. The priest sprinkles holy water and places his hand upon it as he intones the blessing. Photographed in September 2013.

(often in his vestments), saying a prayer and sprinkling the cross with holy water. There is no proscriptive prayer so priests tend to draw on standard blessings for household objects and crosses:

> Let this water call to mind our baptism into Christ ...
> By the power of his Cross,
> free us from sin and let us live each day for you.
> We bless and praise you for this sign of glory.
> Let this cross remind us
> that Jesus died and rose for us all.[48]

Benedictions draw about fifty people in most villages. Organizers decorate with flowers, may designate areas for parking, and set up tents in case of rain. After the blessing, the group says a series of

collective prayers, normally a decade of the rosary and "Our Father." The ceremony may also include a short homily, speeches, and be followed by a lunch or picnic. If they can be reached, the descendants of the original builder normally play an important part in the proceedings. At the "Mercier" cross, for example, Mercier children and grandchildren are invited, whether or not they participated in the reconstruction (or are actively practising Catholics). These important individuals, the caretakers, the priest (and the visiting anthropologist) are grouped in front of the cross and photographed, a souvenir that is reproduced in memorial albums, the parish newsletter, and local papers.[49] If there are other crosses to bless, the group drives in caravan from site to site. At each one, the ceremony repeats.

Writing in the 1930s, anthropologist Horace Miner interpreted these benedictions in light of functionalist theories, describing them as a ritual that reinstated societal equilibrium and group cohesion. Writing a generation later, Paul Carpentier disagreed, arguing that the cross is an object offered to God, understood to belong to Him. Thus the benediction's purpose is to include the priest, who knows the secret rites of liturgy and thereby connects the people and their cross to God.[50] Drawing on early anthropology, Carpentier compared popular Catholicism to "primitive" religion in tribal societies. He felt that caretakers' inability to discursively explain the reason for benedictions – for example, in Mario's answer above – confirmed that the practice was indeed viewed as a sort of magic, whereby the fetish becomes an object of power.[51]

Another generation later, I interpret the benedictions differently again. Contemporary caretakers do not view the priest as a keeper of ritual secrets nor as the gatekeeper of their relationship with God. They orchestrate the entire celebration and may even specify which prayers he should say. Yet the priest's presence is crucial partly because it reiterates the format of the Mass, which remains the signal ritual in Catholicism. It also important because "that's how it's always been done." This stasis (or attempted stasis) is not a sign of pathological irrationality or traditionalism, as Carpentier might have it. Rather, a key attribute of crosses is that they link generations of living and dead humans together, as noted above. To organize a ben-

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ediction is to engage in a self-consciously mimetic act that connects participants now to participants then, as well as lay people to the Church. Through the benediction ritual, then, the cross becomes what Mikhail Bakhtin calls a chronotope – "points in the geography of a community where time and space intersect and fuse."[52] This fusion is encapsulated in each benediction portrait, which groups contemporary builders, descendants of the original family to embody the ancestral past, and the priest in his vestments.

At another level, however, I concur with Carpentier: the benediction transfers possession of the cross to God. Crosses come about through human creativity and labour, the "corporeal intentionality" that determines a body's relationship to places and objects.[53] Caretakers know this viscerally since they are the ones who designed the cross, soldered, sawed, or nailed together each piece, planted it on a site of their choosing, and landscaped the area around it. To bless a cross is thus to secure God's collaboration and "approval." Diane Imbeault, in her seventies, from Notre-Dame de Lorette says it is "like getting Jesus on board with the work that was done. Having Jesus be aware of what we're doing and our prayers."[54] Mario adds to his response above, saying: "We made [the cross] for God. And the benediction it means to be in accord with God ... And that accord shows that we are protected, that He is watching over the cross, and the people who go there will have good thoughts (*bonnes pensées*) ... When God blesses [an object], it's a way for Him to show us His love, His attention."

While caretakers are sure that God will approve of the cross, a benediction ceremony articulates their prayers clearly and allows God to contribute, through his blessing, in the work being done. Through benediction their experience of the cross shifts from a physical one – the separate pieces of lumber and screws, the sweat of hauling, digging, nailing – to a cosmic one: it becomes a unified whole that belongs to God and an instrument through which God can be present and attend to their prayers. Normand Fréchette, fifty-eight, analogizes, "If you bless a rosary that you buy, it seems to me that it's stronger ... We made [the cross or rosary] with human hands but now there's something extra that's added from God." The something extra

is often associated with protection – both "good thoughts" and protection from physical harm. While Carpentier viewed this association as a fetish-like quality indicative of a primitive religious "other," caretakers emphasize that it corresponds with accepted Catholic modes of object use, such as blessing a rosary before hanging it in the car or by a child's bed.

Caretakers know that blessed objects "work," though they are rarely able (or willing) to disentangle why. They may imply that protection emanates from the physical object, yet they underline that its source is the relationship with God that is mediated through it. Some caretakers conclude that object itself is effective merely in its capacity to remind passersby to pray. Regardless, they emphasize that blessed objects are increasingly important in rural Quebec, now that most people believe in God but no longer practise. Dedicated Catholics, like themselves, can place an object in proximity to others so that its power extends to them – the rosary next to a sleeping grandchild, for example, or the wayside cross that protects drivers though they may be unaware of its presence. Whether or not they highlight protection per se, all caretakers concur that the crosses signal and promote a relationship with God that is essential to human flourishing. Thousands of blessed crosses, each having absorbed holy water, create a patchwork of prayer places across Quebec. While there is no literal contestation over a definable place, a theme central to many studies of sacred spaces since the 1990s,[55] caretakers often imagine a type of contest that pits a small group of practising Catholics (themselves) against a small(er) group of atheists (politicians and pundits) vying for control of religious artifacts in public places. In this contest, Catholics build and nurture things, while atheists destroy them. Caretakers see themselves as working on behalf of the French-Canadian majority, believing-not-practising Catholics who "would really notice and feel an emptiness"[56] if public signs of Christianity disappeared altogether, eliminating key nodes of communication with God.

Thus the benediction is an event that encompasses the people actually present, the ancestors, and the future-potential people who will pass by. Rollande, sixty-eight, who built the cross dedicated to Saint

Joseph, describes this ripple effect: "The cross is a blessing for all the people who were there [at the benediction]. It's also a blessing for the people in rang because they, when they come home, they see it too. And also for the people who drive by. Seeing the cross reminds us of our salvation." Her neighbours tell her that it reminds them that, "there's Someone there [in Heaven]." Strangers ask to photograph the cross, which she takes to mean "that it signifies something for them too. Maybe not as profoundly as it does for me, but fine. They still feel a reminder [of God]."

RURAL CATHOLICISM ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD

"Rural life is grounded in the experience of place," writes sociologist Mary Jo Neitz in her study of rural US churches. Attending to the local and the particular is thus both crucial in studies of rural religion and also potentially problematic. "For us as researchers," Neitz adds, "… the danger of looking at the place-basedness of rural churches is that of lapsing into nostalgia."[57] In both anglo-America and Quebec, the rural can be seen as immutable and timeless, a place where traditional religion is unconsciously absorbed and preserved.[58] Québécois intellectuals have often championed this idea. Influential ethnologist and Dominican priest Benoît Lacroix's popular memoir is just one example, where he portrays French-Canadians as a people who, in the mid-twentieth century, "found ourselves with a 'medieval' religion with startling continuity [to the past]."[59] In Lacroix's writing, and more broadly, the "startling" immutability of Québécois Catholicism is a double-edged sword: there is nostalgia for an imagined tight-knit communal family life (inseparable from parish life); there is also embarrassment, or anger, that French-Canadians were less "modern," less economically successful than their anglo counterparts. At a conceptual level, then, "rural Catholicism" became symbolic of fraught questions about francophone continuity in the post-1960s propulsion towards, and repulsion from, English-speaking North America's vision of capitalist success.

The strong symbolic quality with which "the rural" is infused not surprisingly obscures the actual people and places that make up this landscape, as well as the challenges and possibilities therein.[60]

Rural places, and the Catholicism practiced there, are not a static reproduction of the past nor do their inhabitants inevitably experience "modernity" as do their urban counterparts. Yet patterns of rural religiosity are routinely ignored or, worse yet, consigned to the dustbin of history and the glass cases of folklore museums.[61] The major point this chapter makes, then, is that religious practices characterized by others (including scholars) as marked by loss or decline may also be perceived quite differently, depending on the lens through which we view them. As work on North American immigrants has shown, for example, although objectively people may move from places where their religion is the majority to those where it is marginal, it is not necessarily experienced as a loss. "There and then" and "here and now" are co-constituitive of a tensile religious practice.[62]

By focusing on one particular site of rural Catholicism – prayer places on the side of roads – I aim to disrupt urban-centered narratives that fail to see the kind of practice and belief operating in the countryside. In this particular context, there are a few important points to note. First, for Québécois caretakers there is no easy distinction between "culture" and "religion" or "popular" and "institutional" Catholicism. The point is worth emphasizing since caretakers build and bless crosses in order to maintain strong affective ties between land, family, and God. It is complementary to the work of maintaining parishes and, indeed, the Quebec Catholic Church itself. However, it is not quite the same thing. For most caretakers, the only "nonnegotiable" is belief in God, who protects and loves human beings. For them, the depth of this ongoing relationship between God and the Québécois people is evidenced by the very fact of generations of previous cross builders, whom they honour with their labour.

Second, cross caretaking illustrates how histories of religious change are never fully separable from "secular" ones. The shifts described here are various: infrastructure changes as roads are built and rerouted, continual interactions with the natural environment at the cross, theological changes after Vatican II, and a host of other economic, political, and demographic realities that colour rural people's lives. This, then, is the "arena of common engagement" that,

as per Edward Casey, brings things, lives, and words into a configurative complex, including "secular" government development and changing "religious" norms regarding, say, the celebration of Mass or the amalgamation of parishes (Parent, this volume). Third, and most importantly perhaps, from caretakers' perspective history is not a progressive march to secularization. It is better characterized as a series of cyclical waves that led to periods of increased wayside cross care, for example in the 1980s and 1990s. The crosses *connect* to the past but are not *of* it since the methods of and reasons for cross care changes with each generation. Further, if we turn our gaze from institutional changes and take people's own histories into account, caretakers' experience suddenly belies easy generalizations about post-1960s secularization since at a personal level their faith has actually deepened over time. "The main thing you should note down," concluded Mario Bourbonnais as our conversation drew to a close, "is that my faith has gotten bigger as I age. I'm certain that fact will surprise your readers ... But it's the most important thing to know about me."