

# THE MODERN CHURCH FESTIVAL OF THE ASSUMPTION (ŽOLINĖ) IN LITHUANIA. UNDERSTANDING AND MOTIVES FOR OBSERVATION

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*Based on information from ethnographic studies carried out during the Feast of the Assumption in Pivašiūnai on 15 August 2001 and literary material, this article seeks to determine how people understand this church festival, what aspects of the feast are important to them, and what the motives are for their participation. Information from the study showed that pilgrims understand the Assumption as a feast, and an opportunity to realize their religious needs and honour the Blessed Virgin Mary. A significant motive for participating in the church festival was seeking absolution and penance.*

Keywords: church festival, Assumption, Žolinė, Pivašiūnai, understanding and motives, pilgrim.

*Na osnovi informacij, zbranih pri etnografskih raziskavah v času praznika Marijinega vnebovzjetja v Pivašiūnai 15. avgusta 2001, in pisnega gradiva, skuša avtor ugotoviti, kako ljudje razumejo cerkveni praznik, kateri vidiki praznika so jim pomembni in kateri so najpomembnejši motivi za udeležbo. Zbrane informacije kažejo, da romarji razumejo Marijino vnebovzjetje kot praznik in priložnost, da uresničijo svoje religiozne potrebe in počastijo Blaženo Devico Marijo. Zelo pomemben motiv za udeležbo pri prazniku je iskanje odpuščanja in odveze.*

Ključne besede: cerkveni praznik, Marijino vnebovzjetje, Žolinė, Pivašiūnai, razumevanje, motivi, romanje.

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Church festivals, or feasts, are celebrated in honour of particular saints. Of great importance are the festivals held in shrines and churches with images or altars considered miraculous [Bartkus and Aleksa 1953: 459–460]. In such cases, the church festivals last several days and have regional or even international significance. In Lithuania, such lengthy church festivals have a common feature: they honour the Virgin Mary [Lietuvių Marijos mėnuo 1937: 97] as well as the miracles and images associated with her miraculous powers. Such shrines are considered important for the entire nation. The tradition of church festivals goes back several centuries. Lithuanian theologians connect this phenomenon to the revival of Catholicism in Lithuania at the beginning of the 17th century. It was then that the image of the Virgin Mary in Trakai, not far from Vilnius, started to be venerated [Vaišnora 1958: 140], and miraculous images of the Virgin Mary appeared at the Gate of Dawn Chapel (in Vilnius) and the churches in Šiluva and Žemaičių Kalvarija (in western Lithuania). Pivašiūnai – a small town known as a pilgrimage centre in southern Lithuania since the 19th century – also has an image of the Virgin Mary considered miraculous since the 17th century. On 15 August 1988 the image was officially proclaimed miraculous, and it was titled and crowned with a special wreath by Pope John Paul II. At the instructions of John Paul II, all the necessary rituals were performed on 14 August 1988 by His Eminence Cardinal Vincentas Sladkevičius [Vituskas 2000: 35]. Since then, the church festival in

Pivašiūnai, celebrated every year in the middle of August, lasts for an octave (the same duration as the Feast of the Assumption celebrated at other Lithuanian churches). The main day is August 15, the day of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, known as *Žolinė*<sup>1</sup> in Lithuanian. In today's Lithuania, this day is a national holiday.

Ethnographic studies carried out in Pivašiūnai show that the Assumption became known as a religious feast much earlier than the declaration of the church festival octave. To establish the relationship of this church festival with folk traditions as well as with the religious and secular life of the people, in 2001 (during the Pivašiūnai church festival octave of the Assumption) a study of its contemporary state was carried out [Mardosa 2004: 101–104]. On August 15, three groups of pilgrims representing different generations were interviewed (Group 1: 20–40 years old, Group 2: 41–60 years old, Group 3: over 60). Each group contained the same number of respondents, 158 altogether. In addition, a group of young pilgrims (8 persons) from southeast Lithuania (Kazlų Rūda) was asked to fill out questionnaires. This article only discusses data related to the following two aspects of the Pivašiūnai church festival: (a) understanding and importance of the church festival, and (b) motives for participating in it.



Fig. 1: Pivašiūnai. Feast of the Assumption, 15 Aug. 2001 [Photo by J. Mardosa].

## UNDERSTANDING AND IMPORTANCE OF THE CHURCH FESTIVAL

People's participation in the church festival is directly associated with how they understand the festival and how important it is to them. With the religious purposes of church

<sup>1</sup> Related names for this festival are Polish *Matka Boska Zielna* [Ганцкая 1978: 177], Slovak *Panna Mária zelená* [Грацианская 1978: 192], and Belarusian *Zelionaya* or *Zel'naya*: [Лозка 2002: 159; 163].

festivals in mind, the answers to these questions may seem entirely clear because, from the theological point of view, the most important result of participation in the church festival is absolution for sins [Liturginis 1968: 98]. However, analysis of the respondents' answers revealed that absolution is only one of the elements in people's understanding of the feast. Another element, indicated by some portion of the respondents in each of the groups interviewed, was prayer. Most of the respondents (43.8% on average) said that they understand this day as a feast; this answer was especially popular among the respondents in Groups 1 and 2 (cf. Table 1a, item 1). These people can be divided into two groups: for one group, the church festival is a religious feast, a day to commemorate the Virgin Mary, whereas for the other group this is something like a secular feast, where one can see something interesting, meet friends, travel, and get away from everyday life for a few days. The study data show that the second perspective is more characteristic of younger pilgrims. In the group of older people, the most popular answer to how they understand the church festival was "an expression of belief". This element is rather indeterminate, but at the same time has a clearer orientation in the internal experiences of man. It was most often indicated by all the respondents (Table 1b, item 5). They argued their answer with a statement that the senses of the believer are deeply touched by absolution and penance as well as the miraculous impact of the Mother of God of Pivašiūnai.

However, most of the people emphasized an external and even visual aspect in this event, and also they also spoke about it as a means to clarify the soul, to honour the Virgin Mary, or to experience divine grace – and all of this is indicative of deeper understanding. In part, some deeper understanding was clearly demonstrated by the young pilgrims, whose questionnaires revealed their emotional impressions born during the festival and the journey to it. For them, the church festival is *the feast that fills their soul with joy and goodness that they want to share with others* (M., 17 years old), or *a meeting of believers, praying to God for help in everything* (M., 16 years old). They emphasize the attraction of the journey, the joy of being together with old friends, and learning to sing religious hymns. The spirit of Pivašiūnai is extraordinary for them because *this is a moment when everybody lives for God, and devotes time to Him* (17 years old). Their answers also show a wish to approach God and find spiritual peace.

The respondents emphasized prayer as an essential element in understanding the church festival. Especially in Group 2, they also emphasized the realization of spiritual needs through belief (Table 1b, item 5), whereas they do not so clearly express the need for absolution. It is interesting that the aspect of absolution is indicated more often by younger people (Tables 1a and 1b, item 2). Compared to the older people, they were probably more oriented toward the concept of absolution or were more familiar with the theological definition of this church festival.

Understanding	Age group		
	21–40	41–60	over 60
1. Feast	42.8	53.4	35.3
2. Absolution, penance	22.4	18.9	9.8
3. Prayer	6.1	6.7	7.8
4. Honouring the Virgin Mary	2.1	3.4	13.7
5. Satisfaction of spiritual needs (belief)	6.1	15.9	31.5
6. Tradition	–	1.7	1.9
7. Communication	–	–	–
No response	20.5	–	–

Table 1a: Understanding of the church festival (% by age group).

Understanding	Age group		
	21–40	41–60	over 60
1. Feast	19.8	–	45.0
2. Absolution, penance	7.8	12.2	1.9
3. Prayer	9.8	7.0	5.8
4. Honouring the Virgin Mary	1.9	1.7	13.7
5. Satisfaction of spiritual needs (belief)	31.2	50.8	29.8
6. Tradition	3.9	7.0	1.9
7. Communication	5.8	8.7	1.9
No response	19.8	13.6	–

Table 1b: Importance of the church festival for man (% by age group).

The older people – for whom the church festival was an occasion to honour the Virgin Mary, to enjoy the grace provided by the Pivašiūnai shrine, and to perform a Christian mission – accentuated this aspect much less. On the other hand, among the younger respondents mentioned above, who are generally better educated, there is clear a tendency to view Catholicism as an ethnic and cultural phenomenon. The participation of various generations in the church festival, which is perceived as an event important to both the church and the believer, is considered an important factor for the transmission of religious tradition. However, the formation of a tradition requires steadiness of actions, frequency of participation in the church festival (in the case of Pivašiūnai), and even the existence of some system. According to the survey data, elderly people most frequently attended the church festivals. Young people do this rarely and irregularly. This is undoubtedly an inheritance from Soviet times, when religious education was eliminated from the socialization of the younger generation. Today the biggest share of these people are middle-aged respondents. In this generation, the chain of interpersonal transmission of a religion that was practiced for centuries was interrupted. Unprepared to provide religious instruction to their children, they entrust this job to religion teachers in schools or use the experience of older people; for example, their parents. Such a mechanism, in which the religious experience of grandparents

is used to form the religious beliefs of the younger generation, is helpful.<sup>2</sup> However, the process is rather complicated because grandchildren and grandparents differ in their hierarchy of values and worldview. Fortunately, among the participants in church festivals we still can see not only grandparents with grandchildren, but parents with their children as well, this being a sign of the existence of variety in religious memory transmission and the formation of a tradition of participation in church festivals in younger generations.

The holiday factor is also of great significance when studying the importance of church festivals for man. This was especially emphasized by the oldest pilgrims (Table 1b, item 1). The Feast of the Assumption in Pivašiūnai has a great visual effect on the emotions of the participants, first of all due to its scope. The church festival is oriented toward believers and their religious emotions. One can assume that the element of the feast itself plays a very important role in attracting pilgrims to Pivašiūnai (the argument of absolution and penance was mentioned by 2 to 3 times fewer people). The opportunity to honour the Virgin Mary is quite often indicated as a very important motive among the oldest respondents. (Tables 1a and 1b, item 4). When summarized, the interview data show that the Feast of the Assumption in Pivašiūnai especially attracts pilgrims that know what they are seeking and have concrete religious aims.



Fig. 2: Believers pray at the cross, 15. 08. 2001  
[Photo by J. Mardosa].

## MOTIVES FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE CHURCH HOLIDAY

When watching the crowd of thousands of people – on the day of the Assumption, their number reached about ten thousand – the question of why they came to this church festival naturally arose. Motives for participation were partially revealed when discussing how people understand this feast and how important it is for them. The study data showed that

<sup>2</sup> Carole Lemée-Gonçalves calls this means of transmitting culture *transmission by jumping over a generation* [Lemée-Gonçalves 2001: 75].



Fig. 3: Believers group at the church, 15. 08. 2001 [Photo by J. Mardosa].



Fig 4: The group of pilgrims in Pivašiūnai, 15. 08. 2001 [Photo by J. Mardosa].

the focus of the church festival octave is the day of the Assumption, 15 August, which was indicated as the most important by the majority of pilgrims, including those for whom a religious factor was not most important motive for attending. Religious motives were most seldom indicated among the youngest respondents; 14.2% of these did not indicate any motives for participation at all (in fact, even more persons in this group were unable to describe what the meaning of the church festival is and how important it is for man), and as many as one third emphasized the factor of interest. If we add the portion of those seeking communication, for half of the young people the Assumption is only a formal reason for the journey. Young pilgrims for whom the Assumption was the most important motive for participation indicated tradition and belief as the most important aspects. Almost equal shares of participants (8.4 and 8.3%) attend for prayer or due to the festival itself (Table



Fig. 5: Traditional meal,  
15. 08. 2001 [Photo by J.  
Mardosa].

2, items 1 and 2). Among these are those that accentuate the beauty of the event and of the church, and a desire to see a miraculous image. Therefore, among younger pilgrims, not a few associate the church festival with cognitive needs, and religious needs are less expressed. On the other hand, the motives of the young pilgrims agree with how they perceive this church festival:

*The church festival is a pretext to go to confession (doing this is very difficult); This is the fourth time I have come to this church festival. Here, in the church, I pray to God for health for those close to me and for myself. I ask the Virgin Mary to help me in my studies. When I came here for the first time, I wanted to see the church very much because everybody used to say that it was beautiful. I wanted to see the miraculous image too. [M., 16 years old]*

Some emphasized the opportunity to approach God. One woman indicated many motives for attending:

*I am here with the youth of my parish for the sixth time already. It has almost become a tradition to go to this church festival every year, which is famous throughout Lithuania. The principal aim is to spend time together, get to know each other better, communicate and make acquaintances, pray, honour the Virgin Mary, and feel how God acts in our lives.*

The data from the questionnaire provide very valuable information by revealing some additional motives for attending the feast, such as seeking serenity, or meditation and prayer in an environment that helps people break free from ordinary life. On the other hand, people seeking such transcendental goals should stay in Pivašiūnai for the entire octave, or at least for the majority of it. Today, however, such pilgrims are rare.

The motives indicated by the respondents in Group 2 varied greatly, but were more closely associated satisfying religious needs, with Christian goals dominating. The main motive indicated was prayer, followed by a feast, and, in third place, satisfaction of spir-



Fig. 6: Traditional and modern form of arrival, 15. 08. 2001 [Photo by J. Mardosa].

itual needs (i.e., belief). This last motive was most clearly expressed here when compared with the other age groups studied (Table 2, items 1–3). It should be emphasized that this group as well as the first age group does not indicate the need to honour the Virgin Mary as a motive for participation at all, despite the fact that it is one of the essential reasons for organizing the festival at the church in Pivašiūnai. Only the oldest group (23.5%) associated their participation with the miraculous image of the Virgin Mary. In this group, belief as a motive for participation was indicated by 17.6% of respondents, and the wish to pray by a full 43.15%.

Understanding	Age group		
	21–40	41–60	over 60
1. Prayer	8.4	25.9	43.1
2. Feast	8.3	24.1	11.8
3. Spiritual needs (belief)	14.6	20.7	17.6
4. Tradition	16.7	12.1	1.9
5. Honouring the Virgin Mary	–	–	23.5
6. Communication	6.3	3.4	–
7. Interest	31.5	6.8	–
No response	14.2	7.0	2.1

Table 2: Motives for participation in the church festival (% by age group).

Although the church festival lasts the full octave, most respondents (90%) related their participation only to the day of the Assumption, which has the status of a national holiday and therefore provides additional incentive for the journey. The fact that the majority of the respondents associated the Pivašiūnai church festival with the Assumption means that such persons perceive the event as a religious and ethnic cultural festival. A sign of the cultural tradition in the Assumption is the custom of consecrating greenery and honouring the fruits

of farmers' labour, which was especially popular in church festivals during the first half of the 20th century [Vyšniauskaitė 1993: 106–107]. In today's church festivals, the consecration of greenery is more popular among older pilgrims.

Although the opportunity to satisfy spiritual needs is an important element of the internal structure of the church festival, this event also has clear features of a social phenomenon. In addition to the cognitive priorities that have appeared recently, the motives for participating in the church festival as indicated by the respondents in the study include a need for communication. The Soviet experience had a negative influence on people's communication. According to the respondents, before the Second World War people communicated more freely and more joyfully, and they themselves were freer, more sincere and pious, and their belief was deeper. At those times pilgrims that arrived at church festivals – on foot or by cart – would eat together with their relatives. This relaxed manner of communication while eating together – so popular during church festivals in the past – still occurs to some extent at the Pivašiūnai event (at cafes set up for the event, during solemn worship in the church, or for some brief period after worship). This is mainly affected by new means of transportation – today people go home fairly soon after the ceremony. People that go home the same day comprise 81.5% (in Group 2 this indicator was the lowest, at

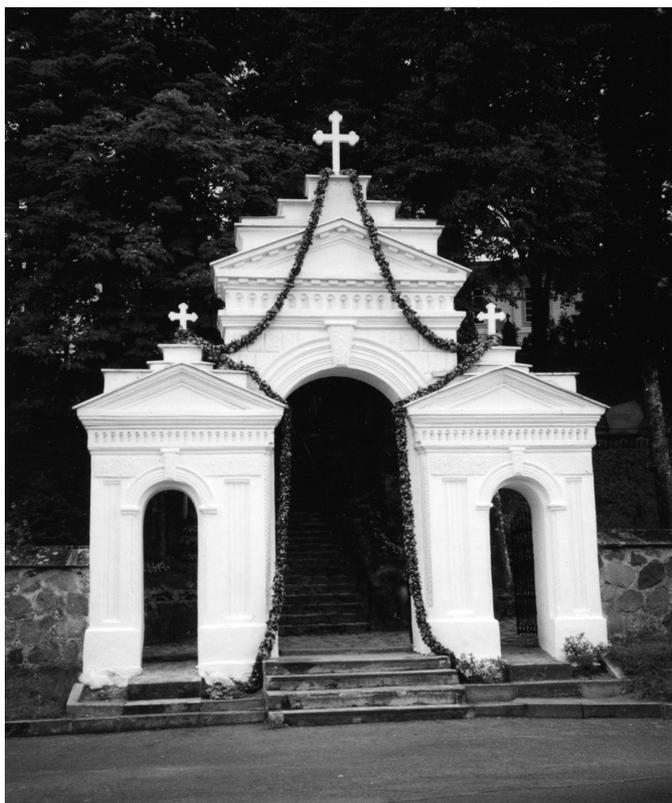


Fig. 7: Entry to the churchyard [Photo by J. Mardosa].



Fig. 8: Miraculous image of St. Mary in church of Pivašiūnai (17th century).

60.3%). Only 2.5% of respondents said they were planning to stay for a longer time, and the rest said nothing about their plans.

Thus, the Assumption – when people gather en masse on 15 August from the most remote corners of Lithuania – is noted for narrower social functions. The octave (i.e., the week after the first day of the feast) has not acquired broader significance in the church festival structure, and is confined to religious purposes only. This period is marked by the arrival of delegations of dioceses and dean's offices, as well as solitary pilgrims.

Before the sovietization of Lithuania, various cultural programmes, especially for young people, used to be organized in the town during the church festival. These traditions were interrupted in Soviet times, when the main events of the church festival took place in the church. As a result, a real divide appeared between prayer and communication. Today the social functions of church festivals are becoming stronger again, but this is mostly observed in cases when the feast does not extend beyond the borders of the parish [Mardosa 2003: 274–276]. The church festival of the Assumption in Pivašiūnai, despite the abundance of pilgrims and the fact that 15 August has been declared as a national holiday, has not yet become a feast of the town and the parish.<sup>3</sup> Undoubtedly this is a relic of Soviet times, when

<sup>3</sup> This feature is typical for neighbouring countries. One author that studied church festivals in Poland (in Upper Silesia) has referred to various distractions, lotteries, attractions, and dances organized during church festivals as *odpust-rozpust* [Świtała-Trybek 2000: 77; 123–145].

the social features of church festivals were suppressed and various bans were imposed. Many believers, because of their jobs or membership in ideology-related social strata, could neither go to church festivals nor openly declare a positive attitude towards religion (especially great efforts were made to isolate young people from the Church). Therefore during these times only the religious motives for attending the church festival existed. After the restoration of independence in Lithuania, together with the ability to freely confess one's faith, there appeared a more liberal (even approaching secular) approach to religion, in which participation in the feast is considered a formal expression of personal religious culture, a tourism motive. Due to this complex of reasons, today pilgrims associate their journey with the church in Pivašiūnai, but not with the town. The modern pilgrimage differs from the journeys of pilgrims popular in the first half of the 20th century. For pilgrims of that time, deep contemplation was characteristic: people used to travel on foot for some days in large processions, bearing church flags and small altars [Vitunskas 2000: 35]. Isolation from everyday troubles and marching for some days in such a procession would become a real transition from *profanum* to *sacrum*. During this study only a few small groups of pilgrims were observed arriving on foot (with religious attributes, prayers, and songs). The majority of today's pilgrims arrive by car. Those that come on foot do not have any system; their journeys are most often single events, with the aim of combining religious purposes with cognitive ones. Therefore, they usually arrive for one day: the Assumption. At the end of the 20th century, pilgrims from Western Europe and America started to come to Pivašiūnai, this being a new feature of the church festival. For them, as for pilgrims from remote places in Lithuania, especially younger ones, the Pivašiūnai church festival became an object of religious tourism.

## CONCLUSIONS

As the study data show, an essential accent in the Pivašiūnai church festival octave is the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary on 15 August. On this day pilgrims seek to realize their religious aspirations and, to a lesser degree, social functions: to meet acquaintances and communicate with them.

The religious meaning of the church festival is perceived and interpreted differently by various groups. In general, the pilgrims coming to the Pivašiūnai church festival primarily understand this feast as a reflection of believers' religious senses. According to the survey, older pilgrims emphasize the opportunity to satisfy spiritual needs, honour the miraculous image of the Virgin Mary, and enjoy the emotions of celebrating a lengthy traditional religious feast. Questionnaires filled out by young pilgrims revealed their emotional impressions inspired by the journey to the church festival and the opportunity to approach God.

Regarding the church festival's importance to believers, nearly all of them value this event greatly due to the opportunity to satisfy their spiritual needs and religious aspira-

tions, but only the oldest ones value it much as a religious feast. For younger pilgrims, the Pivašiūnai church festival is not so important as a religious feast, but more important as an opportunity for absolution and penance. The pilgrims in this age group also indicated the possibility of satisfying cognitive needs as important.

Therefore the main motive for going to the Feast of the Assumption today is the opportunity to satisfy religious needs. The opportunity to realize spiritual needs, enjoy a feast, perform penance, pray, and maintain long tradition – although valued differently in the age groups studied – are the main motives for attending the church festival. Therefore the majority of the respondents planned to stay only as long as the solemn ceremonies took place. Pilgrims from other countries as well as people coming from remote regions of Lithuania, especially younger ones, consider the Feast of the Assumption in Pivašiūnai to be an object of religious tourism as well.

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## SODOBNI CERKVENI PRAZNIK VNEBOVZETJA (ŽOLINĖ) V LITVI.

### DOJEMANJE IN MOTIVI ZA OPAZOVANJE

*Z verskega vidika so zelo pomembna cerkvena praznovanja v krajih, kjer hranijo čudežne podobe ali relikvije svetnikov. V 17. stoletju je postala privlačno romarsko središče romarjev cerkev Marijinega vnebovzetja v Pivašiūnai (južna Litva), ki hrani čudežno Marijino podobo. 15. avgusta 1988 je papež Janez Pavel II. to podobo uradno razglasil za čudežno. Od takrat traja cerkveno praznovanje, v litovskem jeziku poimenovano Žolinė, osem dni, z glavnim dogodkom 15. avgusta, tj. na praznik vnebovzetja Blažene device Marije.*

*Razprava je nastala na podlagi študije sodobnega cerkvenega praznovanja Žolinė v Pivašiūnai, kakor je potekalo 15. avgusta 2001. Povprašali smo tri generacije romarjev (mlajšo: 20–40 let; srednjo: 41–60 let; starejšo: nad 60 let), skupno 159. Poleg tega je osem mlajših romarjev z jugovzhodne Litve (Kazlų Rūda) izpolnilo vprašalnik. V tej razpravi sta obravnavana le dva vidika cerkvenega praznovanja v Pivašiūnai: dojetanje/razumevanje in pomen praznovanja ter motivi za udeležbo.*

*Verski pomen praznovanja je za vsako skupino nekoliko drugačen, čeprav je za vse cerkveno praznovanje možnost, da se uresničijo njihova verska iskanja. V generaciji starejših je pomemben predvsem verski vidik praznika, pa tudi želja, da počastijo Blaženo devico Marijo; za mlajše je poleg verskega pomembna tudi družabni, spoznavni vidik.*

*Praznovanje romarjem omogoča, da zadovoljijo, uresničijo svoje duhovne potrebe. Izpolnjeni vprašalniki odkrivajo vrednost čustvenega doživljanja med samim popotovanjem in kot posebno vrednoto možnost, da se približajo Bogu. Občutja miru in transcendence kakor tudi globoka molitev v okoliščinah, ki so daleč od vsakdanjega sveta, so pomembni za mlade, najbolj pa to doživijo tisti, ki preživijo tam večino osmih dni. Za večino vprašanih romarjev je glavni vidik cerkvenega praznovanja v Pivašiūnai sam praznik Žolinė.*

*Eden glavnih motivov za romanje v sodobnosti ostaja religiozne narave. Podatki kažejo, da si vprašani želijo odpuščenja in odveze. Religiozne motive mladi manj poudarjajo: za nekatere je pomembno, da se ohranja dolgoletna tradicija, na splošno pa mladi romarji povezujejo cerkveno praznovanje z medsebojnim spoznavanjem in tako je religiozni moment manj izrazit.*

*Za srednjo generacijo je značilno, da postanejo prevladujoči religiozni motivi in želje. Zelo pomembna je molitev, sam praznik pa nekoliko manj. Verniki iz te skupine poudarjajo željo po zadovoljitvi duhovnih potreb. Medtem ko romarji srednje generacije ne poudarjajo želje počastiti Blaženo devico Marijo in njeno čudežno podobo – kar je pravzaprav glavni razlog za organizacijo samega praznovanja – pa v generaciji starejših prevladuje prav ta motiv, ko se odločijo za romanje v Pivašiūnai. Poleg tega motiva je odločilna možnost, da v tem romarskem središču molijo, pomembna dejavnika pa sta tudi vera in krščanska dolžnost.*

*Nekdaj popularna skupinska peš romanja so danes redka in neorganizirana. Večina romarjev pride z lastnim vozilom na sam dan Žolinė. Med njimi so ljudje iz daljnjih litovskih mest in okrajev, iz tujih držav, vendar večina priroma z južne Litve in sosednjih pokrajin.*

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