SAINTS ABOVE & SINNERS BELOW

Mexican & Spanish Colonial Devotional Art

FROM THE COLLECTION OF BOB & MARYA WEIL

SAINTS ABOVE & SINNERS BELOW:

Mexican & Spanish Colonial Devotional Art

Edited by Bob Weil

WITH ESSAYS BY:
Dr. Jorge Durand
Dr. Kinga J. Novak
Dr. Maya Stanfield-Mazzi
Bob Weil

Cathedral Arts Project Press
Omaha, Nebraska
2025

Our Lady of Copacabana /
Nuestra Señora de Copacabana
on the St. Cecilia Cathedral Altar
at the 2025 Flower Festival
(see Figure 5)

Dedication

Bob and Marya Weil dedicate this book in humble gratitude for God's grace in our lives, to our parents Robert & Helen Weil and William & Edna Podhayny, and with much love to our children Elisabeth Keighley, Nicholas Weil and Jonathan Weil, and in loving memory of Daniel DmitriWeil.

Passing the 16th century church in Muna on the road to Chichén Itzá, and at dinner back in Merida, Central Mexico on our honeymoon in December 1980.


Juan cura á mis pobres y ayuda en todos

Welcome to The Sunderland Gallery

Saints Above & Sinners Below: Mexican & Spanish Colonial Devotional Art

Dear Visitors,

Marya and I have been collecting art since the first months of our marriage in December 1980, beginning with a large impressionist-style landscape painting that brought a splash of color and joy to our modest apartment living room. Our interest in Mexican culture and arts also dates from that same year, and our visits to Merida, Cancun and Mexico City on our honeymoon.

It was not until after our trip to San Miguel de Allende in Central Mexico for our 30th wedding anniversary that Marya gave me "permission" to begin collecting Spanish Colonial art after our acquisition of a contemporary life-size painting of the Archangel Gabriel in the Cuzco style. It's hard to say when my wife began to regret this invitation but she saw almost immediately (even before I did) that the collecting of Spanish Colonial and Mexican devotional art was a form of personal catechesis in an effort to further embrace my adoptive Catholic faith and understand the role of the saints as well as that of the miraculous in our lives.

In the process of assembling our collection (often from eBay and online auction houses), I found myself agreeing with Leonard Primiano in Catholiciana Unmoored*: "Perhaps I have been working to detach and unmoor these Catholic objects of devotion from their cold digital and commercial captivity and restore to them a version of their value and place as individual expressions of Catholic belief and practice." As our collection has reached its completion (we have run out of wall space), I realized that it was time to share it with others, and help advance the appreciation of this beautiful artistic heritage and its expression of faith and gratitude to God for all the gifts bestowed upon us.*

About twenty percent of the collection consists of Spanish Colonial devotional artwork (paintings on canvas and sculptures) that date from before 1820, with a few from the 1600s and 1700s. These are often large-scale pieces, and would have been commissioned by the aristocracy and well-to-do merchant and governmental classes for veneration in churches or private chapels. Also included in the exhibition are more contemporary Mexican pieces that echo and pay homage to the earlier art-forms.

Most of the collection you are about to experience consists of art created after Mexico declared its independence from Spain. After the collapse of the

artist guilds established and mandated by the Spanish authorities, anyone could work as an artist, whether formally trained or not, and a huge cottage industry sprang up in many villages throughout central and northern Mexico – local artisans began producing devotional art on demand for average folks at prices they could afford. Literally, art by and for the people. And it's important to remember that these are, first and foremost, devotional objects and were not intended to be appreciated primarily for their aesthetic value.

These small-scale commercial enterprises continue to flourish up until the present day as part of a living tradition of devotion and the giving of thanks for divine intervention in curing illness, averting disaster and guiding numerous earthly affairs tp an ideal result. Internationally-known artists such as Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo and many others have drawn inspiration from the aesthetic and devotional intent behind the ex-voto in Mexico for their own work. Many immigrants to the U.S. from Mexico have brought their passion for the ex-voto tradition with them. It's also safe to say that interest on the part of serious collectors emerged first in the U.S. before surfacing in Mexico.

Given the considerable Hispanic population in Omaha, and the history of colonial Spanish reach up through Nebraska as far as the Canadian border, the exhibition, essays and talks represent an earnest attempt to keep awareness and appreciation of this important cultural tradition alive in our communities.

We are grateful to Cathedral Arts Project, of which we are honored to be Board Members, for deciding to mount this exhibition for the first (and perhaps only) time, in our adoptive home of Omaha, Nebraska. This exhibition would not have been possible without their generous support, and the scholarship of the three exceptional experts who contributed essays to this catalog – Dr. Kinga Novak of Bard Early College, Dr. Stanfield-Mazzi of the University of Florida, and Dr. Jorge Durand of the University of Guadalajara. Also included are three eighteenth-century letters from Jesuit missionary Fr. Philipp Segesser during his tenure in Tecoripa, Sonora, Mexico to his family in Austria. These letters provide a rare glimpse of a priest's joys and hardships in Spanish Colonial Mexico.

Enjoy,

Bob & Marya Weil

Board President-Elect & Board Member
Cathedral Arts Project
Omaha, Nebraska
August 2025

View of La Parroquia de San Miguel Arcángel in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico (ca.1948)
Signed: M. Hall (oil on board) (See Figure 119)

TABLE OF CONTENTS.

The Art of Catholic Devotion in the Spanish Colonial Americas

by Dr. Maya Stanfield-Mazzi

The art collection of Bob and Marya Weil includes a broad sample of representative works of Spanish colonial devotional art. Most of the artworks correspond to the eighteenth century, the final full century of Spain's rule in the Americas. While some represent topics and styles that were new to that period, most have roots in the longer history of Spanish colonization. They speak to Spain's success in implanting the religion of Catholicism in the Americas and to transformations in the arts that accompanied that social and religious change. Meant for both churches and homes, they served devotees as visual motivation toward religious instruction, prayer, and penance. They offer modern viewers historical information, as they illustrate the unique features of Spanish American Catholicism, as well as the chance to evoke within themselves the sentiment of devotion.

Catholic imagery accompanied the very first Spanish incursions into the Americas in the late fifteenth century. Missionaries brought portable Christian artworks such as small paintings and sculptures, and perhaps works printed on paper. As Spain's colonial enterprise broadened, so did its use of such imagery to convert native peoples of the Americas to Catholicism. Allying with native groups to overthrow the Aztec and Inca empires, Spanish forces eventually came to control large portions of both North and South America. Colonial governments known as viceroyalties were established and ruled by representatives of the Spanish kings. The Viceroyalty of New Spain (founded in 1535) encompassed what is now Mexico and Central America, while the Viceroyalty of Peru (founded in 1542), comprised all of western South America as well as modern-day Argentina. The capital of New Spain, Mexico City, was built directly over the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, while in Peru Spaniards established the new capital city of Lima on the coast.

In both cities and the countryside new Catholic churches were built and imagery was needed to teach elements of the Catholic faith. The first religious establishments were led by friars of the mendicant orders, namely Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians. Sometimes these friars, hailing from Spain as well as Italy and Flanders, had artistic training that they imparted to young men they also worked to evangelize. Thus, the first generations of art producers, whether of European or Indigenous descent, were people working in monastic settings. While not many of the earliest Christian artworks created in the Americas survive, some remain in the form of mural paintings on the oldest churches, and as portable artworks that were sent to Europe and preserved for their uniqueness.[1] These works included objects such as Mexican "feather paintings," which contributed to a European image of arts of the Americas.[2] By the end of the sixteenth century more highly trained artists immigrated to the colonial territories, leading to further local art creation.

By the end of the sixteenth century the Spanish guild system was introduced in most major cities and included guilds of professional painters and sculptors. The major sites of art production were initially those cities built over the capitals of the Aztec and Inca empires: Mexico City in New Spain and Cuzco in Peru. But other cities, some newly founded, also became art centers. In New Spain this included Puebla and today's Antigua, Guatemala (then known as Santiago de los Caballeros), and in the Viceroyalty of Peru included Lima, Quito, and Potosí. (See the Spanish Colonial Americas map on page 48.)

Artworks created to adorn the scores of churches built throughout the viceroyalties had subjects meant to incite devotion as well as instruct viewers in the stories of the Bible and elements of church dogma. Art forms that had previously not existed in the Americas, such as oil painting and polychrome statuary, were introduced and used to create the most central Christian works. A painted wooden statue likely representing the Virgin Mary, the holiest saint in the Catholic pantheon, serves as a good example (Figure 6). The sculpture depicts Mary as the Virgin of Sorrows mourning her son Jesus' death, her brows furrowed in sadness and hands clasped over her chest. The statue's realism, seen still in terms of facial features and coloration, would have been enhanced with a wig of real human hair and carefully crafted clothing, presenting to viewers a lifelike and sympathetic image to which they could direct prayers.

Art forms already practiced in the Americas, such as silverwork and woodwork, were also adapted for the colonial environment. The silver crown in the Weil Collection (Figure 16) was likely used to adorn a different, smaller statue of the Virgin Mary, since Mary was often titled the Queen of Heaven. The leafy forms incised on its base reflect the Baroque style of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and suggest life and abundance, while curling feathers at the top under the cross evoke the Indigenous American setting. Woodwork was used widely for church furnishings including choir stalls, altarpieces, and pulpits. It was also used for smaller items such as the altar missal stand in the collection (Figure 15), meant to hold the Order of the Mass. The stand is painted white but has carved leafy details covered in gold leaf, seen often due to the widespread availability of gold from colonial mining operations. In religious contexts gold was used to evoke the magnificence of the divine and was often applied to the surface of paintings to highlight holy figures. While a work like this was most likely used in a church, private homes also came to house religious artworks including paintings and statuary, and wealthy haciendas often had their own chapels from which priests could conduct religious services.

Following patterns in Spain, as well as the central tenets of Catholicism, the primary foci of devotion and thus efforts of visualization were of Christ and the Virgin Mary. But especially for the Virgin, there were a multitude of advocations or versions of her that could be introduced and made visible. For example, images of the titular Virgin Mary of the Carmelite order became popular as that order established both monasteries and convents in the Americas. Two depictions in oil of Our Lady of Mount Carmel are in the collection (Figures 2 & 3), presenting just slight variations of the standard iconography derived from European sources. In both paintings Mary is shown in the brown habit of a Carmelite nun, the most famous of which was the Spanish Teresa of Ávila, covered by a floral mantle. Arising from the account that in 1251 the Virgin Mary appeared to the prior of the order, Simon Stock, and offered him a scapular (a monk's apron), the Virgin appears offering a reduced version of the scapular (now a small cloth medal) as a release to souls doing penance in purgatory. While differences in the position of Mary and the number of souls suggest varying visual sources, standardized elements remain the same and would have allowed viewers to identify each image and use it as a focus of devotion for prayers. Another example of an imported advocation of the Virgin Mary was the Virgin of Antigua, its original a long-venerated painting of Mary in the cathedral of Seville, Spain's port to the Americas. As one of the last European images that Spaniards might have seen before embarking for the Americas, it is not surprising that her image was replicated in the New World. The example in the Weil Collection (Figure 4) is a small replica of the Seville original, which features Mary holding the Christ Child and being crowned by two angels. It maintains those elements as well as the striped pattern of the lining of the Virgin's mantle, but offers different sorts of patterning in the gilt that represents the outer surfaces of Mary's robes and the wall

behind her. Columns painted to the sides seem to indicate the framing around the original painting in Seville, thus underscoring that this is a painting of a painting.

During the colonial era one of the main ways in which artists in Spanish America learned new subject matters and styles was through printed images that arrived from Europe.[3] Created first as engravings on metal plates and often meant to reproduce specific European paintings or sculptures, the images were printed in black ink onto paper, either as loose sheets or to form part of books. These cheap and portable items could be widely disseminated. Artists then took the small-scale works, multiplied their size, and interpreted them in color to create their own compositions, often mixing elements from more than one print. Such is the case with Our Lady of Begoña (Figure 7), a large painting created after prints in a book dedicated to a Virgin Mary from Bilbao, Spain and describing at length the miracles ascribed to her. The artist used the main printed image of the Virgin from the book as well as the coat of arms of the book's Basque sponsor that appears on the book's title page. The statue of the Virgin appears in the print surrounded by an arch, but the painter opted instead to dramatize her appearance in the painting by framing the statue with red curtains. The image of the statue itself nevertheless corresponds to the way it appears both in the print and today. Mary bears a tiny dressed statue of the Christ Child on her front and wears a conical gown with a wide vertical ribbon down the middle, as well as a mantle and veil. The painting was likely commissioned by an immigrant from Bilbao from a local artist, who may not have been familiar with the original devotion. The way the statue is dressed gives an idea of how the statue of the Virgin of Sorrows (Figure 6) would have appeared within a church or private chapel.

Cults such as that to the Virgin of Begoña could be introduced from Spain and take on their own nature in the Americas, but localized devotions to the Virgin Mary also developed and became the most popular. Their fame was often based on local accounts of miracles, which were expressed visually in ex-voto paintings or in written accounts. Sometimes the beneficiaries of miracles were people living sinful lives, and they attributed their redemption to having received confirmation of divine power. A fragment of a painting (likely from Peru) demonstrates the penitential tone taken by such individuals, and the full work probably illustrated a miracle enacted by way of a local devotion (Figure 8).[4] The humble first-person statement is a precursor to the inscriptions found on ex-voto paintings in the post-colonial era.

Local devotions were established both in city centers and in outlying places to which people began to make pilgrimages. In Mexico City an image of the Woman of the Apocalypse, the female figure from the Book of Revelation long associated with the Virgin Mary, was painted on local cloth by the Indigenous painter Marcos Cipac de Aquino around 1550. It became associated with a series of Marian apparitions experienced by the peasant Juan Diego in 1531, and was ultimately enshrined at the place of the miracles, on the hill of Tepeyac outside the city. Although very different visually, the painting was named after the Spanish Virgin of Guadalupe, a statue in Extremadura, and ultimately became the most highly venerated and copied devotional image in Mexico (Figures 29 and 30).[5]

In what is modern-day Bolivia, the Andean man Francisco Tito Yupanqui learned to sculpt in the Spanish style and created a work that would inspire similarly intense devotion in that region: the Virgin of Copacabana. One of the first representations of the Virgin of Candlemas, which became a very popular advocation of the Virgin Mary in Bolivia, the statue presents Mary holding the Christ Child on her left arm and a candle in her right hand. Like in other statue paintings, the work in the Weil Collection shows the sculpture dressed and adorned with finery and flowers that were changeable and reflect devotees' donations to the original in its shrine (Figure 5).[6] Here the statue is shown with a halo of light around the Virgin's head, as the Virgin of

Candlemas in particular was understood as a miraculous beacon of light.[7] But the feature that best identifies the statue in this painting as the Virgin of Copacabana in particular is the right-leaning position of the Christ Child. One of the earliest published miracles of that Virgin (1621) was that the figure of the Child had leaned to the right in response to viewers' complaints that they could not see the Virgin's face.[8] Statue paintings tended to be displayed in private homes to serve as stand-ins for the statues in churches, and the relatively small size of this painting supports that it was an object for private devotion to Bolivia's patron Virgin Mary.

Two saints appear below the Virgin of Copacabana, directing their gazes upward and modeling devotion. In this case they are probably Augustinian saints, since that religious order maintained her shrine on the shores of Lake Titicaca in Bolivia. They may represent other statues that were on the altarpiece in Copacabana, or may reflect the owner of the painting's preferences.

While Mary was the holiest Catholic saint, many other saints were venerated in the Spanish Americas for their role as intermediaries between God and the faithful, and were thus depicted in art (Figure 12A). As was the case with advocations of Mary, many were devotions imported from the Old World and their representations were modeled through prints. But many also took on special significance in the Americas. Saint Joseph, for example, was presented as a model father by missionaries who strove to encourage Catholic moral standards (Figure 1).[9] Other saints such as John the Sinner were important in the Americas because their orders were active there. The Order of Hospitallers of Saint John of God founded hospitals throughout the Americas, and John the Sinner was one such founder, albeit in his native Spain (Figure 17). Some saints became popular because their stories resonated with certain lifeways. In the Andean highlands, where farming and herding were major modes of subsistence, paintings of the Spanish Saint Isidore the Laborer became prevalent in the nineteenth century (Figures 11, and 69 through 71). While showing vignettes related to Isidore's miracles, such as angels plowing or a spring emerging from the ground, the paintings also present charming real-life rural scenes. Other devotions were popular in other areas, such as Saint Charalambos, an early Christian saint and martyr who was venerated mainly in southern Mexico and in Central America (Figures 10 and 61).

A final set of sacred beings often represented for veneration was angels, especially archangels, who were believed to interact with humans and serve as their protectors. Chief among these was the Archangel Michael, who appears in a vibrant work painted on copper that is also the only signed colonial painting in the Weil Collection (Figure 9). The iconography of Michael was based on the textual descriptions of his defeating the devil in the Book of Revelation (12:7–12), and other paintings from New Spain usually show him actively in battle. In contrast, here he appears as a victorious prince in heaven surrounded by cherubs bearing his symbols, including a spear and scales and the inscription translating his Hebrew name, *Quis ut Deus?* (Who [is] like God?). He holds a banner with an image of the Woman of the Apocalypse, and since the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe was also an image of the Woman of the Apocalypse, this inclusion reflects a particularly Mexican Catholicism. The inscription at lower right, *Andreas Lopez Pinxit al 1785*, identifies the work as by the hand of one of New Spain's most prominent painters, Andrés José López (1727–1807). Evidently the painting was completed the same year as Mexico City's first art academy opened its doors, and López himself served as a painting teacher there and later one of its directors.[10] A prominent painter in Mexico (with 104 known paintings there), his works were also taken to Spain and the U.S., and this painting appears to have arrived in Tennessee in the nineteenth century.[11] While his larger compositions often feature angels, this may be his only work focused on Saint Michael Archangel. The stunning colors, loose brushwork, and delicate

human figures are representative of López's style as well as the art of New Spain in the eighteenth century.

Apart from images created to encourage devotion, paintings depicted important stories from the Bible and the lives of saints. For example, the Assumption of the Virgin Mary to heaven after her death is represented in a work on unstretched canvas, likely meant for a private home (Figure 13). This scene, originally modeled after European compositions, was so commonly depicted by painters that they could take liberties as to the placement of figures and their body positions.

The following sections of this book demonstrate the ways in which religious art shifted away from canonical themes and became more intimate, responding to the lives of individual believers. Yet some of the usual topics continued to be represented by painters such as those in Cuzco, whose works followed on the colonial tradition. A late twentieth century painting of the Holy Family features the holy figures with garments whose details are picked out in gold leaf (Figure 14). A painting with an inscription identifying its subject as the Archangel Gabriel represents the particularly Andean popularity of a series of paintings depicting individual archangels, seen since the seventeenth century (Figure 23).[12] It depicts an angel that in the colonial period was more commonly known as Barachiel, the archangel of blessings, spilling flowers out of a cornucopia in a mountainous Andean setting.

Religious art evolved and continued to serve the needs of devout Catholics after the end of Spanish colonial rule in the early nineteenth century. Non-religious themes that had become more popular in the eighteenth century also became more widespread. One of the more important genres of the independence era was portraiture.[13] While colonial portraits showed figures in ostentatious dress with long inscriptions stating their noble titles, the portrait of a woman in the Weil Collection represents a modern interpretation of the genre by focusing on the woman's face and showing her modestly dressed (Figure 18).[14] It is painted on tin, which became a popular alternative to canvas in the nineteenth century. The young woman's face is sensitively rendered, and she wears a simple red coral bead necklace and gold earrings. An inscription on the painting identifies her as the Countess Eugenia Ruiz de Castilla. Though more research would be needed to confirm this, she may have been a descendant of a Spanish official with a long career in the Andes, Manuel Ruiz Urriés de Castilla, who was killed in Quito in 1812 during the early stages of Ecuador's in-dependence movement.

The colonial-era works in the Weil Collection help us understand the larger contours of Catholic art in the colonial Americas. They feature unique interpretations of several of the most important and enduring themes in colonial art. They also point to various historical dynamics, including the enduring importance of religious art in the era of independence.

Maya Stanfield-Mazzi *is a professor of art history at the University of Florida, specializing in art of colonial Latin America. Her first book, "Object and Apparition: Envisioning the Christian Divine in the Colonial Andes" (University of Arizona Press, 2015), addresses the role of Indigenous Andean artists in establishing Catholicism in Peru. Her second book, "Clothing the New World Church: Liturgical Textiles of Spanish America, 1520–1820" focuses on Indigenous textile types that were adapted for the church. Her most recent book, co-edited with Margarita Vargas-Betancourt, is an anthology titled "Collective Creativity and Artistic Agency in Colonial Latin America" (University Press of Florida, 2023). It focuses on the ways in which artists acted as important agents in colonial society. Her current focus is the concept of the secular in Potosí, Bolivia.*

Endnotes

1 For mural paintings, see for example Samuel Y. Edgerton, *Theaters of Conversion: Religious Architecture and Indian Artisans in Colonial Mexico* (Albuquerque, N. Mex.: University of New Mexico Press, 2001); Amara Solari and Linda K. Williams, *Maya Christian Murals of Early Modern Yucatán* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2024).
2 Alessandra Russo, Gerhard Wolf, and Diana Fane, *Images Take Flight. Feather Art in Mexico and Europe (1400-1700)* (Florence; Munich: Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz - Max-Planck-Institut; Hirmer Verlag GmbH, 2015).
3 Aaron M. Hyman, Rubens in Repeat: *The Logic of the Copy in Colonial Latin America* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2021).
4 Rosario Inés Granados-Salinas, "Miraculous Narratives: Time and Space Collide in Spanish Colonial Painting," in *Circulación: Movement of Ideas, Art, and People in Spanish America* (Denver: Mayer Center for Pre-Columbian and Spanish Colonial Art at the Denver Art Museum, 2018), 122–43.
5 Jeanette Favrot Peterson, *Visualizing Guadalupe: From Black Madonna to Queen of the Americas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014).
6 Barbara Duncan, "Statue Paintings of the Virgin," in *Gloria in Excelsis: The Virgin and Angels in Viceregal Painting of Peru and Bolivia* (New York: Center for Inter-American Relations, 1986), 32–57; Maya Stanfield-Mazzi, *Object and Apparition: Envisioning the Christian Divine in the Colonial Andes* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013).
7 Stanfield-Mazzi, *Object and Apparition*, 164–66; Maya Stanfield-Mazzi, "Uniquely American Visions of the Virgin Mary," in *The Art of Painting in Colonial Bolivia*, ed. Suzanne L. Stratton-Pruitt (Philadelphia: St. Joseph's University Press, 2017), 254–55.
8 Stanfield-Mazzi, "Uniquely American Visions of the Virgin Mary," 254.
9 Charlene Villaseñor Black, *Creating the Cult of St. Joseph: Art and Gender in the Spanish Empire*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006).
10 Édgar Antonio Mejía Ortiz, "Andrés López y el Arte Maestra de la Nueva España, un discurso global en el proceso," in *Discursos globales, escenarios locales, expresiones artísticas en diversas regiones del virreinato novohispano* (Seville: Universidad Pablo de Olavide, 2023), 196.
11 Virginia Armella de Aspe, A*ndrés López: Pintor novohispano* (Mexico City: Pinacoteca Virreinal de San Diego-INBA; Lotería Nacional para la Asistencia Pública; Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1994); Clara Bargellini, "Frederick Edwin Church, Sor Pudenciana y Andrés López," *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* 16, no. 62 (1991): 123.
12 Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt, "The Painted Angels of Colonial Bolivia," in T*he Art of Painting in Colonial Bolivia*, ed. Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt (Philadelphia: St. Joseph's University Press, 2017), 455–67.
13 Emily A. Engel, "Simón Bolívar's Itinerant Portraits: Visual Conquest and the Production of an Icon," in *Simón Bolívar: Travels and Transformations of a Cultural Icon*, ed. Maureen Shanahan and Ana María Reyes (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2017).
14 On eighteenth-century portraiture of both Spaniards and Indigenous elites, see Ricardo Estabridis, "El retrato del siglo XVIII en Lima como símbolo del poder," in *El Barroco Peruano*, vol. 2, Colección Arte y Tesoros del Perú (Lima: Banco de Crédito, 2003), 134–71; and Thomas Cummins, "We Are the Other: Peruvian Portraits of Colonial Kurakakuna," in *Transatlantic Encounters: Europeans and Andeans in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Kenneth J. Andrien and Rolena Adorno (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 203–31.

Three Letters to My Noble Brother in Austria from My Mission in Tecoripa, Sonora in New Spain

Father Philipp Segesser, S.J. (Society of Jesus)

The mission of San Francisco Borja de Tecoripa was named after Saint Francis Borgia (1510–1572), a Spanish nobleman who joined the Society of Jesus in 1547 and has been called the second founder of the Society. As the third Father Superior General of the Jesuits from 1565 to 1572, he initiated Jesuit missionary activity in the New World in 1566. Tecoripa was founded in 1619 as the first Jesuit mission in Sonora. Fr. Philipp Segesser (1689–1762) of Austria was transferred there from an earlier assignment in Mexico to improve his health, only to be confronted with the defection of his Indians, a nativistic movement, the Yaqui Revolt of 1740, droughts, disastrous floods, and food shortages. Fr. Segesser was the third of the seventeen children. Only half of his siblings survived infancy and childhood, a sad statistic of the time. A member of his mother's family, Saint Nikolaus de Rusca (1565–1618), was an Italian martyr. Many members of Father Segesser's family were strong role models for his desired vocation within the church. Several of his aunts and uncles on both sides of the family were nuns, abbesses or priests.

Letter of Monday, June 27, 1735 [No, 53]

Fr. Philipp Segesser, S.J.

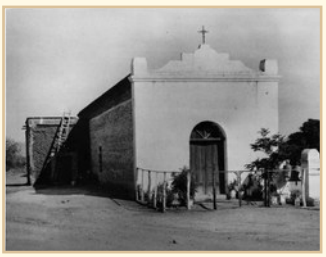
Noble and most stalwart brother, *it should not be doubted that the eagerly awaited letter from my noble brother with its joyous news has brought me special comfort. May it please the good Lord that this present letter may likewise find the honorable mother, the noble brother, and all his beloved family in the best of health. I send them all my dutiful respects and inform them that I am presently, thank God, somewhat better, although being constantly soaked in perspiration tires me. This letter is the answer to the one that my noble brother sent on 25 April of last year, before he was supposed to travel as administrator to Canton Thurgau. I hope that in the meantime two further letters from me, if not more, will have arrived. The last one I wrote from the Fronteras presidio, where I was laid up for three months because of illness and was only brought back to health through the special care of the wife of Captain Juan Bautista de Anza, at no little expense. It will, I hope, have given you the details on how I spent my time up to the date of that letter and will have explained the reason why I was severely ill for two successive years and had little hope of living. Because of these two periods of illness, the Father Visitor transferred me from the Pimería Alta in the north to the Pimería Baja in the south, to the mission called Tecoripa de San Francisco Borja, a little more than forty miles from his mission.*

I am reasonably comfortable now, although this area is not to be compared with the Pimería Alta or San Xavier del Bac and Guevavi. This is already an old mission, although no priest has lived here for a period of years due to the lack of missionaries, and so the mission may be considered a new one. Where I had been before I was able to arrange things as I thought best, but here I have to put up with what I find. The Indians, too, present a problem, and it is difficult to eradicate their deep-rooted customs, for they have been instructed in Spanish rather than in German ways. Furthermore, the work of administration here is far more tiresome and more spread out

than in the first mission, partly because my villages are located in all four directions and partly on account of the rugged mountains and the rocky, untended trails on which even the sleeves on one's arms are not spared, because at times one has to force one's way through thorns and bushes. I cannot understand how the Indians slip through without injuring themselves. In addition, because there are many silver mines in this country, there are many Spaniards in the region, all of whom I serve out of good will, because their pastor, a secular priest, by which I mean he is not an Order priest (the missionaries are responsible only for the Indians), is already an old man who can no longer fulfill his duties at distant places. Beyond that, I have some native groups who live in the Black Mountain, which extends so far that we have found no end to it. I have already visited there once during this half year (and this is considered frequent), called them together to a meeting, and started building a church and housing. If God wills it, I will soon go there again to reinforce these activities. At present, I am busy with the harvest, and things are not going well. The area and the soil are so hot and burned by the sun (for all day long it seems as though we are in an oven) that the hot winds have completely dried up the brook. Since it does not usually rain in this country before July, everything in the fields and in my garden, which cost me so much bitter sweat, is withered. Nonetheless, although there is no moisture in the mountains, only cliffs and rocks, there is at this time of year a fruit the size of an apple, blood red inside and so sweet and good tasting that I have hardly ever tasted a better fruit. The Spaniards call it pitahaya, *the Indians* tatat. *The skin is full of little spines, and one must be careful when eating it.*

San Xavier del Bac

Just at this moment a courier has arrived from Mexico [City], who had been sent from this mission several months ago and has now brought me a letter from Father Johann Anton Balthasar. In it, he reports to me that the little chest that had been safely delivered to Mexico through the former Spanish resident, Don Félix Cornejo, has been lost because the merchant who was supposed to hand it over to me went bankrupt and, after selling the wares, fled to a place called Wadalachára [Guadalajara]. So, I have little hope of still receiving it. I might be able to find out where on earth it suffered loss at sea. I will not cease trying to get to the bottom of the matter. In the meantime, it is as though I had received it. I acknowledge indeed the special loving care of my dearest honorable mother, siblings, and especially of my noble brother. God reward them all a thousandfold. They should not regret the loss, for I am as grateful as though it had been received. This loss may remind a diligent sender to be more careful next time.



San Francisco de Borja de Tecoripa, October 1959
Attribution: Paul M. Roca (Special Collections, University of Arizona)

I have had great misfortune this year with my herd of sheep. All the young ones, as well many of the old ones, died without my knowing what ailed them. Evil is mixed with the good and good is mixed with the evil. And there is always more evil than good. And the greatest evil is that the missionary Father has to spend more time on worldly things, so to speak, than on spiritual ones. And this is so absolutely necessary because without this supervision not a soul would be saved, for when the Indians, who worry about nothing, find nothing to eat or wear, they seek it in the mountains by hunting wild animals and collecting fruits and roots, which taste better to them than

the well-cooked meals they receive in the house of the missionary Father, etc., etc.

This sheet of paper is coming to an end and so, against my will, I must, after sending greetings to all my acquaintances and also those in the Society of Jesus, submit myself to the mother's and brother's affections.
—Philipp Segesser, S.J.

Letter of Tuesday, May 1, 1736 [No. 54]

MOST NOBLE AND STALWART BROTHER JOSEPH, *inasmuch as a special courier is being dispatched from this place to Mexico [City], I cannot fail, although I am very busy, to use the opportunity to provide news of my health (God be praised for it), because nothing is more necessary in these lands. I doubt not that in the meantime some letters will have arrived in which I have given news of my goings and comings, unless the painful events of the war [The War of the Polish Succession, 1733–1738] have withheld them from you. This fear arises because of the long and complete silence of my dearest noble brother, for I have received no other letter than the one in which I received the news that your shipment had been delivered to Don Felipe de Anza and that he was awaiting the departure of the fleet. Until now we have no news of the fleet here, and the whole land fears that the fleet might have been struck with misfortune by being lost in a shipwreck or falling into the hands of the enemy. Be that as it may, in any case, it has not arrived as one has hoped. I would not want my hopes to sink into the water with the same ships. In these lands we live with both fortune and misfortune, and nothing is certain.*

San Antonio de Padua (see Figure 71A)

In the last letter I reported that the shipment that had been sent here through Don Félix Cornejo had been lost. Now I report that I believe the opposite. It seems that Saint Antony has not forgotten me, for a few days later I received news that another merchant had brought a like object with him from exactly the same place where it was supposed to have been lost. The merchant has, to date, not arrived, but I have written him and expect the answer daily. To judge from all reports, the lost sheep will be found. I will report any news immediately.

Here we also have continuous warfare, which, although not as bloody, is still very detrimental to our needs. The more holy time our spiritual exercises require, the more we have to fear hostile attacks. That the Indians in California have killed two missionary Fathers I believe I already wrote in another letter. The soldiers, with their captain or general, have been sent there but have as yet not been able to do anything against the renegades because they have fled into the mountains. The land is impassable, and there were so many thorns and spiny bushes that the soldiers could not reach the renegades but rather were forced to see and hear how they were being taunted by them.

Those missionaries live very wretchedly. I recently sent them some sacks of flour with my mules. They are similarly provided with maize from various places, because the land is so barren that outside of a little wine for the sacrifice of the Mass, some sugarcane, and very little rice, nothing is found there except fish, of which enough are caught in the sea.

In fact, between California (which is separated from this land by an arm of the sea about a twenty-four-hour journey wide) and my missions there are other missions through which I must travel against midnight [south] when I want to send them something. These are the missions of the Yaqui, a people already long converted. Nevertheless, during Holy Week devotions they killed and consumed six of my horses and a mule and more than twenty horses or mares of a neighbor, because a cold wind had frozen their crops and they now suffer great hunger. Some come daily with salt to trade for maize or wheat. Their land is actually very fruitful because a river [Río Yaqui], which for just that reason could be called the Nile, waters the land every year when it rains in this area, from June to August, so abundantly that they can sow and reap the whole rest of the year even if it rains no more. Their crops are maize, peas, common beans, and lentils. They feed many sheep and goats, which they use for trade.

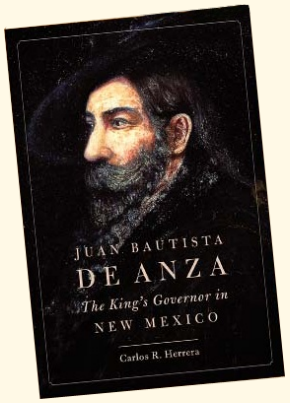
Because [in Baja, Mexico] they can plant no grain, it is necessary that we, who live in other places, come to their aid, although I myself have a very limited area for growing wheat. My fields are watered by a little brook from which I and my Indians drink, and I also water my garden, and if it does not rain enough in the month of August I have hardly any hope of reaping a kernel of maize. That, together with the long-horned cattle, which also must make their contribution, are the only things with which we support our missions. All this demands much supervision so that not everything is eaten up in one day. These people live like the birds in the air. What they have or find they consume in one day, and they do not think of the next one. When they find nothing to eat on the plain, they seek it in the mountains, even if it need be snakes.

At the mission where I was previously [San Xavier], everything is in bad and rebellious condition. Captain Juan Bautista de Anza wrote me a very unhappy letter saying that he could find no way to calm the Indians. He would like me to go back there, as would Father Kaspar Stiger, who has written to me that the Indians want me back as their first missionary. (Father Kaspar is still sick and incapacitated; he fell sick at the same mission [Guevavi] where I was previously and where another Father, Johann Baptist Gratzhofer from the Austrian province, died, as I have written before.) However, I am presently in a mission where there is much work and am just assembling three or four new groups. So I am not sure where I am needed more. Nonetheless, everything depends on the will of the superiors—when they command, I obey. The unrest of the people in the Pimería Alta, where I have been, stems from a person whom I need not name. It is to be regretted that such a person causes such situations.

Things are far worse with our priests in Mexico City, because the chapter and the archbishop demand a tenth of our goods, which up to now has never been given. Because our superiors have claimed the privileges and the signs of favor that the king had given us heretofore, the chapter has excommunicated our administrators, who are brothers belonging to our Society, and this has caused people to have very bad opinions of us. The worst is that the archbishop is also the Viceroy, and so we lose out in both material and spiritual justice. I actually have all the court proceedings at

Baja, Mexico, seen opposite Sonora

San Juan Bautista de Anza



hand and find them very disturbing. Two priests have set off for Madrid with little hope, because the Viceroy has a great deal of influence at court.

There are plenty of conflicts in the whole world, and may God graciously settle them! I also have here a whole pile of news and reports from Europe, but do not know if I will have enough time to read them all. Besides, such things are usually prejudiced, so I am waiting for a shorter but more reliable report about European events from my noble brother.

I do not doubt that the honorable mother and all my dear family are in good health, and hearing that will be my only comfort. I request the noble brother to give my filial greetings to the honorable mother and to give my most humble respects to the venerable cousins who are canons together with my brother. They should regard this letter as directed to them. He should also assure my aunt [abbess] at Our Lady of Perpetual Help and the others there of my constant remembrance. He should give my aunts in Bruch and Fahr my brotherly love, and the same to my spiritual and secular sisters and to whom else my obligations require it. And at the last, I recommend to the noble brother that he write immediately to all my dear acquaintances in the college, or wherever they may be, assure them of my constant remembrance, and request they not forget me in their zealous prayers so that, lest preaching to others, I myself become a castaway.

San Antonio de Padua
(see Figure 70)

As I write this, some Spanish people are calling me to come to a mine about two days distant, make arrangements for Easter, and visit some sick. As a result, I have no more time to write. Just as I am ending this letter, they are delivering the little chest to me. (Praise God and thanks to Saint Antony.) Because my curiosity is great, my paper is running out, and the courier is already mounted. He will safely deliver this letter in my stead, God willing. In the meantime, humbly requesting the prayers of all and writing from Tecoripa in the Pimería Baja or the Lower Pimería, Tecoripa, 1 May 1736, I remain the most devoted brother,
—Philipp Segesser, S.J.

Letter of Tuesday, July 31, 1737 [No, 58]

I have often promised to send you *a description of the people and customs of the so-called Pimería Alta and Pimería Baja, that is the Upper and Lower Pimería. The mission of Tecoripa, in addition to the village of Tecoripa itself, administers five other villages and four places inhabited by Spaniards. These sites are silver mines, where those who are involved with mining are settled. These usually numerous miners are actually in the care of a secular priest, but because he was aged and lived far from here, he requested me to administer the holy sacraments to the needy, which I do with permission of the superiors. My pastoral duties extend in a circuit of 150 miles (2 miles being reckoned for one hour). The trails are very rough and rocky with many thorny plants, and they are without water for long stretches. While traveling through these mountains to help those in need, poor Father Philipp suffers many saddle sores. This is the reason that I was delayed writing this report for so long. Even now, because of the intense heat, the sweat flows down my face from every pore, and I do not have a dry thread on my body. While I am trying to keep my neck dry and dipping my pen into carbon and water, I am*

not certain that I can achieve my goal.

I have in my house, among others, many boys who are actually orphans with no father or mother, and others who came here last winter. Among other Indian boys I have one who calls himself Nicolaus, and because he learns well I brought him with me from Guevavi to be my altar boy. He is very intelligent, and I am certain that he does not forget much. Thus I can use him for my instructions to the choirmaster.

The Pima are very generous, sharing everything and owning everything in common, even their clothing. When one is having a meal and does not have enough even for himself and another comes along, the visitor nevertheless gets half of what is there. While I was away from mission San Xavier del Bac for some weeks to nurse the sick Father Agustín, a Pima harvested thirty bushels of wheat. After my return I wished to buy part of the harvest from him, but he explained that he had none left. I asked him, how can that be? He answered, that is the way it is, Father; my friends and neighbors helped with my troubles, and so tomorrow I plan to gather mountain fruits. That which they have they eat in a day, and they observe very closely not to concern themselves about tomorrow. They share everything, even their clothes. Apart from this, they have an uplifting spirit but are easily vexed if they are not given praise. Notwithstanding all this, there are those among the Pima who are very skillful and who fabricate things from roots, fibers, straw, cotton, and other material with very well-defined figures, in a way that moves Europeans to wonderment. So, for example, they make black and white baskets covered with all kinds of figures and woven as tightly as Capuchin bottles. They are watertight, and water can be stored in them for at least an hour.

Pima basket weaver (Etta Morgan), Arizona, ca. 1900. Photographer: C. C. Pierce (California Historical Society)

In Pimería there are two types of houses, especially where I am now. Some are earthen, like mine, and I maintain that a better type of house cannot be found in all Sonora. The absence of houses made of stone and lime mortar is not due to a lack of these materials—lime is plentiful and there is no lack of stone because we live in the mountains—but to a shortage of masons in these distant lands. In Puebla de los Angeles, in Mexico, Durango, and Chihuahua, one certainly sees nicely built houses as in Europe.

"Two Houses, Barranquilla, Colombia" by Frederic Edwin Church (Wikimedia Commons)

The wax, the wine for the Mass, and other materials used by the church are very expensive in these lands. Candles from yellow wax cost one Spanish thaler. Furthermore, it is desired that we do not neglect to do what is done in Europe in the service of God. For example, one of my neighboring missionaries has burned 125 poundsworth of these wax candles. I strive for the same, and the lights in my church are no less than those used on the high altar during Mass on Easter Sunday at the Society church in Lucerne. To cover such costs it is necessary for the Pima and Indians to work. The missionary also needs this income for his own household.

Nothing pleases the Pima more than tobacco and sweets. In my opinion, one could convert all the Indies with tobacco. A Pima will work gladly all day for a pipeful of tobacco. This year I used more than one hundred-weight, and for this I spent 140 Spanish thalers. I wished to buy the same quantity for next year, but the merchants brought none, which will cause us many problems. In these regions everyone uses tobacco and, because

they see that I do not, they say that I am a saint, which would certainly be an easily attained state of holiness. The Pima must be controlled through both fear and love. Neither great severity nor too many gifts are effective. The prudent take the middle road.

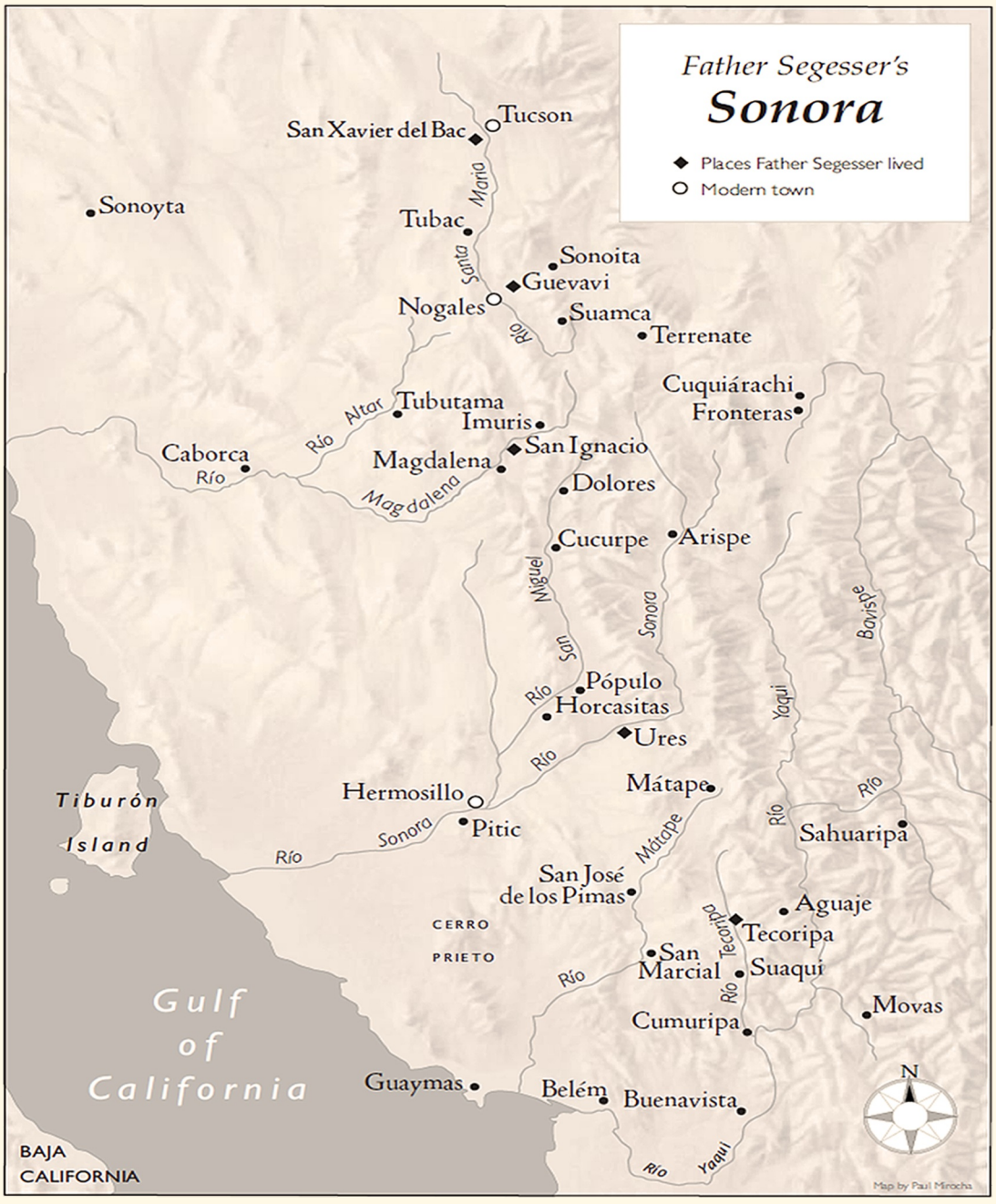
A recent affair in the current year, 1737, caused me much trouble and extensive damage. It is the custom of the missionary to visit all his villages during Lent, so that according to Church law his people can make their confessions. At that time I received news that there was much agitation among them and that I should be patient about hearing confessions, which convinced me that it was imperative to do my duty. So I visited all my villages without fear and heard all confessions. At that time, everything seemed quiet. I also used this occasion to make a detour and travel to a mining community more than a hundred miles distant to hear confessions from Spaniards living there. When I returned to my house in Tecoripa I found the village almost totally deserted. I only found the official with his family and the old choirmaster still there. They could only explain to me that the people had fled, some on foot, some on horseback. Their tracks pointed to another of my villages called San Marcial. The Pima had not left their villages to flee or to rebel but had been called to a distant village to observe the resurrection of a former leader who had died (who had been a magician and juggler). In addition, a Father Bayerca, who was from the Belém mission in the province of the Yaqui and who had also died some years ago and was now resurrected, was to preach to them and tell them wondrous tales of the other world. This was the deception carried out by a healer to estrange the Pima from the missionaries. Once this fraud was explained and they were told that it was a way for the Evil One to fool them, they returned to their old residences in their villages. We explained the error of their ways to them and told them that, this time, there would be no punishment, but that they would have to avoid such errors in the future. If such an event were to recur they must avoid it, or at least immediately notify the missionary or the official. They all fell to their knees then and asked God for forgiveness with the promise not to give credence to such lies again. I then exorcised the place where all this evil happened with the usual church rites and returned home with great expectations. The ritual was watched by many in that village, and many fainted at the experience.

Tecoripa, 31 July 1737, your most unworthy servant and missionary at this mission.

—Philipp Segesser, S.J.

San Francisco de Borja de Tecoripa, 2015

Places Fr. Segesser lived (noted with solid black dot)



Excerpted from Fr. Philipp Segesser, S.J., A Jesuit Missionary in Eighteenth-Century Sonora: The Family Correspondence of Philipp Segesser, *edited by Raymond H. Thompson and translated by Werner S. Zimmt and Robert E. Dahlquist, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque (2014), pp. 169-177 and pp. 186-255.*

"Two Houses, Barranquilla, Colombia" by Frederic Edwin Church (Wikimedia Commons)


F. CHURCH APRIL
-53

Life in the Spanish Colonial Americas

Spanish Colonial caste system (class divisions)
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Spanish Colonial plaza scene in the 17th or 18th century, with parish church in background.

> *The mission may have been a vehicle for religious conversion, instruction, and worship, but it could not function successfully as a religious institution if it were not largely self-sufficient. When a group of Indians was settled around a church to form a mission, a complex economic and social institution was created. The labor of the Indians was needed for the building of churches as well as for the farming and ranching activities that provided the food for the missionary and his staff; for his Indian wards; for the many visitors; for less fortunate and less productive missions such as those in Baja California; and for exchange with miners and other local groups.*
>
> — Raymond H. Thompson

Semana Santa en Cuauhtitlán /
Easter Week in Cuauhtitlán, Mexico
Oil on canvas by Primitivo Miranda (1858)

(Source: Museo Nacional de Historia, Castillo de Chapultepec)

Subject Matter: *The painting captures a vivid scene of a Holy Week procession in the town of Cuautitlán, State of Mexico, offering a glimpse into religious and social life during the mid-19th century in Mexico.*

Artistic Style: *Primitivo Miranda was known as a costumbrista artist, meaning his work focused on depicting local customs, traditions, and daily life.*

Historical Significance: *This work serves as a valuable historical document, illustrating the religious fervor and communal participation in traditional celebrations during the Mexican Independence era.*

Private Devotions, Public Testimonials of faith: Mexican Retablos and Ex-Votos in the Weil Collection

by Dr. Kinga Novak

"Retablos: the true and unique pictorial expression of the Mexican people" – Diego Rivera

Ex-voto offered to the Virgin of Lourdes by María Leonides Barajas (see Figure 90)

In August of 1885, María Leonides Barajas, despairing of her ability to feed her newborn child, appealed to the Virgin of Lourdes to start the flow of milk for her baby. The Virgin intervened on her behalf, and the mother's situation was remedied. In return, María Leonides commissioned a painting, both to commemorate the miracle and to publicize the special powers of the Virgin of Lourdes. In this lovely little picture, likely painted by a professional specialized in this kind of art, the drama of the situation is expressed in the text accompanying the otherwise static images of a mother holding her baby as she kneels before the saint. The Virgin of Lourdes, a French devotion whose miracle-working reputation spread internationally in the late nineteenth century, looks on benignly, listening to her devotee's petition and granting her life-giving nourishment for her child. This Virgin Mary is recognizable to her devotees by her attributes of a blue and white tunic and a golden crown, her hands raised in an attitude of prayer, her eyes gazing up at heaven; her body is inclined protectively toward María Leonides. In the bottom register, a text explains the image: "On the 6th of August of 1885 María Leonides Barajas, finding herself without breast milk to feed her child, invoked Our Lady of Lourdes and her need was met, and *as compensation* (emphasis mine) she dedicates this [painting], today the second of July 1886."[1]

I have seen many ex-votos – paintings left at churches or shrines by devotees of saints to thank them for their miraculous healings and other rescues from dangerous situations – but this one in particular speaks to me. Most striking is María Leonides's statement that she was "repaying" the Virgin for the "miracle." It is a sentiment expressed in many other ex-votos, testifying to the divine benevolence of this or that saint. The gratitude felt and expressed by ordinary people for divine intercession in dangerous situations is one of the emotions that drove the painted ex-voto tradition in Mexico. Why did María Leonides feel the need to make her gratitude to the Virgin of Lourdes public? Why did she feel she owed the Virgin repayment for her divine intercession, in the form of a painting? What is the power of the saints, and of images, to foster deep-seated emotional responses in Catholics?

One of the most vivid expressions of Mexican piety comes in the form of ex-votos like this one. In hundreds of thousands of paintings and other objects left as offerings to the Virgin Mary, Christ, and the saints, the devout have historically testified to, and expressed their gratitude for, divine intervention in their daily lives. This lively tradition of making a visual, public testimonial of a saint's efficacy has ancient roots and is widespread throughout Catholic

Plate 1: *Retablo painting of San Antonio de Padua displaying his various miracles (see Figure 74)*

Plate 4: *Retablos to Our Lady of Sorrows (see Figures 36a - 36d)*

Plate 2: *Retablos dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe (see Figures 29 and 30)*

Plate 3: *Retablo to Our Lady of Light (right); modeled after the engraving on the left (see Figure 40)*

Plate 5: *Ex-voto to the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos (see Figure 101)*

Europe and America, but Mexican painted ex-votos are particularly abundant and vibrant. Generally made by self-taught or locally trained artists, they are colorful and dramatic, with strong visual and narrative components. Perhaps their most striking feature is the visual conceptualization of humans' relationships with divine beings as mutual and reciprocal. Holy figures are perceived as having immediate and direct influence over earthly affairs, but even more importantly, they are seen as having a personal relationship with their devotees. They intervene on people's behalf in matters ranging from life-and-death situations to more mundane concerns about their jobs or their families. While many ex-votos take the form of paintings, any material offering left at a shrine or saint's altar expresses this idea of a reciprocal and personal relationship with the divine.

In contrast to the public nature of ex-voto paintings, another way this personal relationship with the supernatural is expressed in Mexico is through small devotional paintings intended for home altars, variously known as *retablos*, *láminas*, or *santos sobre hoja lata* (see Plate 1).[2] These retablos function somewhat like icon paintings in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, as focal points for worshippers praying at home; while the sacraments can only be received in church, an icon or retablo painting on a home altar can connect the devout with their saints throughout their everyday activities. Somewhat more common than ex-voto paintings, which explicitly thank a saint for a miracle and are almost always intended for public display in churches or shrines, retablos are essentially portraits of holy beings intended for private devotion. Following well-established Spanish and pre-conquest Indigenous traditions of home altars, in both New Spain and independent Mexico nearly all homes had altars with at least one image as well as a crucifix, irrespective of the social class of their inhabitants; wealthy people might have a private chapel built inside or attached to their house, adorned with multiple paintings and sculptures and featuring gilded surfaces that caught the light of the flickering candles, while even the rudest hut of an impoverished Indigenous family would have at least a cheap print of the Virgin of Guadalupe or other intercessory figure to watch over its inhabitants. (See examples on pages 117 and 335).

This last point is key; as with ex-voto paintings, the idea of having Christ or the Virgin Mary protect and nurture a devotee speaks to the conceptualization of a personal relationship between humans and the divine, and a blurring of the boundaries between the earthly and the spiritual realms. These images, while usually somewhat more static than the often action-packed stories told by ex-votos, have a similar pedagogical function; they tell the story of the saint depicted, with his or her usual accoutrements or attributes. Catholics of all social classes would be able to identity the image by its attributes, contributing to and perpetuating a shared visual language that was widely understood, even among sectors of the population who were not literate or lived in rural locales served by itinerant priests who would only rarely be on hand to serve the community's faith needs. Yet religious images abounded in cities, towns, and even in the countryside, accompanying people going about their daily business as the regular ringing of church bells punctuated their days. In Plate 1, St. Anthony of Padua is shown, as he always is, holding the Christ child and a white lily, benevolently gazing at the viewer. Small vignettes from some of the miracles he performed surround the central figures, which devotees might reflect on as they say their prayers and converse with the saint.

Plate 2 (see Figures 28 and 29 for greater detail) depicts Mexico's most important patron saint, Our Lady of Guadalupe.[3] Both adhere to the Virgin of Guadalupe's iconographic depiction as emerging from Juan Diego's *tilma* (cloak) on a bed of roses, held up by a cherubic *putto*, with the rays from her halo, her downcast eyes, and her attitude of prayer among the most recognizable attributes of this all-important saint. The Virgin on the right is a fairly accurate copy of the original image, with the addition of the roses so

central to the miracle story. The Virgin on the left goes even further, with four rosettes (framed in roses) depicting the four apparitions and angels holding crowns and other regalia further adorning the picture. These pictorial devices go beyond mere adornment, however; they are essential to the lesson being taught. The rosettes depicting the Virgin's revelations to Juan Diego, the roses, and the angels with royal regalia all form part of the didactic function of this miracle story and were an important part of the circulation and later increased devotion to this saint.

Both private icon paintings that adorn home altars and serve as a focal point to the faithful in their prayers and the practice of leaving a physical expression of thanks in a public space are based on "matrix" or original images, which, as we will see, are a hallmark of Mexican Catholicism. In other words, a shared visual vocabulary of iconographies and attributes of the various advocations of Christ, Mary, and other holy beings began to circulate in the early sixteenth century via paintings and sculptures, but most importantly, prints and engravings, which were indispensable to circulating images to far-flung and areas of the nascent Spanish empire.[4] Both *retablos santos* and *retablos ex-votos* approach the supernatural through an understanding of divinities as "people" to whom they can relate, another emblem of popular Catholicism. Both traditions developed out of elite practices in the colonial period and became "popularized" in the nineteenth century due to technological developments that allowed non-elites to access them, especially the invention of a cheap substrate, tin-plated iron sheets, and to a lesser degree, the increasing availability of commercial oil paint sold in tubes.[5] Finally, political instability and church-state relations in nineteenth-century Mexico affected popular religious culture in ways seldom acknowledged in standard histories, yet these interplays of "official" and popular cultures are crucial to understanding the retablo/ex-voto phenomenon and are discussed briefly.

Retablos and Ex-votos in Mexico: An Overview

The word retablo is derived from the Latin *retro tabula*, behind the (altar) table.[6] Medieval churches featured two- and three-dimensional altarpieces that referenced the mysteries of the faith and complemented the central figure of Christ crucified as a focal point for worshippers. Painted and sculpted images of saints were copied and disseminated to new churches as they were built, and a repertory of familiar images, with closely observed allegiance to each holy being's signature attributes or accoutrements, circulated widely. Mexican retablo paintings, the heirs of this tradition of copying original or archetypical images, adhere to the iconographic representations of Catholic holy beings and are intended for private consumption on home altars, watching over the inhabitants of the household.

A good example of the ways that images circulated and became popularized throughout New Spain and in independent Mexico is seen in Plate 3. This retablo painting of Our Lady of the Light, with its rich palette of blues and reds, shows the Virgin Mary holding the Christ child, surrounded by angels. The two angels at the top hover over the Virgin's head, about to place a golden crown on it, while another angel (kneeling, at right) offers a basket of hearts to the child. The iconography is clearly based on a model such as that in the engraving on the frontispiece of a book published in Puebla in 1835 (shown on the left), written in Spanish and Nahuatl, for teaching Indigenous people the precepts of the Catholic faith. The retablo painter certainly referenced this engraving or another one very much like it, but this is no rote copy. The numerous deviations from the printed example, particularly the direction in which both the Virgin and the kneeling angel gaze – in the painting, both look directly at the viewer, as opposed to the downcast gaze of the Virgin and the angel facing and looking up at her in the engraving – show the artist's unique take on the model image.

Similarly, the four retablos dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrows (*Mater dolorosa*) in Plate 4 exemplify how individual artists could represent

the grieving Virgin Mary in slightly distinct ways while remaining true to the constraints of the traditional iconography. The frontal pose, the hands clasped in prayer, the blue veil, and the dagger piercing the Virgin's heart seem to be *de rigueur*, obligatory attributes. But the inclusion or omission of other iconographic attributes depicting the Passion of Christ – the column to which he was tied, the rooster that crowed when he was betrayed, the sacred heart with the nails used in the crucifixion, his crucified feet – show the range and expression and style possible in retablo paintings.

The term ex-voto, meanwhile, comes from the Latin term for a promise (voto) fulfilled/completed (ex). They are objects offered to divine beings when favors are sought (votos), or thanks are given for favors received (ex-votos). Ex-votos are closely associated with the popular practice of pilgrimage, in which the devout make promises to specific Catholic saints in times of need and fulfill them by making sometimes-arduous journeys to the shrines of these saints (see pages 249 and 250-251 for two typical shrines). The pilgrimage itself can be the way by which the promise is fulfilled, but many pilgrims also take physical objects to leave as offerings as appeals or thanks; for those who leave paintings detailing a saint's role in saving a life or livelihood, these objects also function as testimonials to the efficacy of that saint. In an ancient, organic, and decidedly non-market-oriented form of public relations, devotees make known to other potential "consumers" the beneficial powers of a particular holy being. The saint's reputation for miracle-working grows exponentially as more ex-votos are heaped on and around its altar, which in turn invites more requests or *mandas* from hopeful devotees, who then add their own offerings and testimonials upon receiving the saint's favors.

In Plate 5, an ex-voto offered to the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos, a major devotion that originated in western Mexico, illustrates this process quite nicely. The painting, dated 1909, shows a terrifying scene of a boy about to be trampled by a horse. His father tries desperately to restrain the animal as it tosses its head wildly; the boy holds up his hand defensively, or perhaps in supplication to the Virgin, who, appearing next to a pretty, white-domed church, hovers over the dangerous situation unfolding below. The sharply diagonal *contrapposto* of the horse and the shadows cast by the human and animal figures underscore the tension in the scene. That the Virgin came to their rescue is evident in the existence of this painting, left at her shrine in the state of Jalisco. People visiting the shrine, perhaps bringing their own tokens of gratitude to her, would see this and countless other examples of the powerful miracle-working properties of *La Sanjuanita*, confirming their belief and perhaps inspiring them to tell their friends and neighbors of what they had seen in order that they may see for themselves.

Ex-votos are *physical* expressions of a kind of spiritual contract between human and supernatural beings, in which there is an exchange of favors granted by the saints and the requisite recognition of those favors by their human devotees. As Thomas Calvo puts it, ex-votos are conceived and executed within a framework of reciprocity: the supplicant asks the divinity for help, *in exchange for* making the miracle known.[7] "One can even perceive a conditional tone," he writes, for example: "On the 8th day of June of 1918, Aurelio Ramírez lost by theft a yellow cow, a little calf of the same color and a young working bull, yellow and white. With that…he proceeded to look for them offering Our Lady of San Juan this retablo, if he found them which the Holy Lady made happen, dedicating to her in gratitude the present [retablo]."[8] This attitude of bartering, of negotiating with holy beings, echoes medieval and early modern practices such as coercing, humiliating and remonstrating intransigent saints.[9] Aurelio Ramírez needed his animals back, and he made a deal with the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos, promising her a gift of an ex-voto conditional upon their return. In ex-votos, then, there is an implicit "spiritual contract" principle at work: You help me out in a bad situation, and I

repay the favor by making a public offering.

An Image-Based Religious Tradition

To understand the importance of visual expressions of faith such as retablos and ex-votos, it must be stressed that Mexican Catholicism is a fundamentally image-based religious tradition. Christian theologians had long debated the merits of using images for instruction in the tenets of the faith, with Saint Thomas Aquinas arguing in the thirteenth century that there was "a threefold reason for the institution of images in the church: first, for the instruction of the unlettered, who might learn from them as if from books; second, so that the mystery of the Incarnation and the examples of the saints might remain more firmly in our memory by being daily represented to our eyes; and third, to excite the emotions which are more effectively aroused by things seen rather than by things heard."[10]

Aquinas's argument echoed Pope Gregory the Great's late-sixth-century admonition to Serenus, bishop of Marseilles, when the latter removed religious images from the churches in his diocese: "Images are to be employed in churches, so that those who are illiterate might at least read by seeing on the walls what they cannot read in books."[11]

The Christian calendar of feast days for the saints developed according to long established agricultural festivals and ancient pagan holidays. These saints' days were important sources of economic activity and social diversion, in addition to their religious function. The image of the saint or statue (see Figure 6), if a town possessed one, was taken out in procession with much pomp and circumstance, becoming anthropomorphized in the process. In Spain and Portugal during Holy Week, members of *cofradías*[12] dedicated to various advocations of Christ or Mary would compete amongst one another for the honor of having the best-dressed image. Local devotions developed around particular images; people attributed good fortune to the benevolence of the saint, while ill fortune was taken as a sign that the saint was angry and punishing bad human behavior.[13] This belief that holy beings have direct influence over human affairs is ancient and universal, but in medieval Europe it manifested in the idea that the *images* of Christ, Mary, and the saints were quite alive.[14] The didactic paintings and sculptures adorning altarpieces and naves in Catholic churches found a welcome reception in Spanish America, as missionaries and priests attempted to bridge the numerous linguistic and cosmological divides between European and Indigenous American populations.

Sacred images became a point of contention during the Protestant Reformation. The Catholic church needed to decide on a strategy for dealing with the ever-growing loss of its power and influence in a fragmented Europe as northern rulers began to entertain the subversive, heterodox ideas of Luther, Calvin, and Erasmus. The Council of Trent, convened in the mid-sixteenth century, represented the Catholic church's response to the Protestant threat. A chief concern of the church was to establish, or confirm, its dogma, liturgy, and imagery as the standard against which all derivations or departures were to be measured. Responding to a need to appeal to the ambivalent souls of monarchs, whose loyalty could no longer be taken for granted, the Council of Trent codified a call for instructive imagery in which the story was clearly illustrated. Images of Catholic saints were useful tools in the sixteenth-century conversion projects in the Americas, as missionaries introduced Indigenous people to a new pantheon of sacred beings, and image production (statuary, paintings, and altarpieces) occupied hundreds of artisans in colonial Mexico whose work filled the churches of expanding Catholicism.

Painted and sculpted images of Christ, Mary, and the saints thus came to exemplify the newly developing visual cultures of Spanish America. The elaborate altarpieces of colonial churches conveyed to the newly converted Indigenous populations Spanish preoccupations with the salvation of souls in the afterlife, but also the role of the divine in everyday life. Meanwhile,

etchings and lithographs imported from Europe and later replicated in the Viceroyalties of New Spain and Peru allowed the distribution of Catholic imagery throughout Spanish America on a scale far greater than individual paintings or sculptures commissioned for churches ever could. These inexpensive mediums led the way to an emergence of affordable devotional art and helped circulate Catholic precepts as well as easily recognizable intercessory figures to whom one could pray even when not in church. Retablos – easily differentiated portraits of saints – and ex-votos (expressions of gratitude for a miracle granted, with the portrait of the saint featuring prominently) – are heirs to these early Christian, medieval, and early modern theological directives.

If prints were useful in the conversion of Indigenous Americans to Christianity in the earliest period of the Spanish presence in America, they continued to be useful in the later colonial period as a way of unifying creoles (people of Spanish origin, born in America) in their growing sense of a separate political identity. In retablos, the effect of prints is evident in that, while the subject matter and level of artistic skill vary widely, the images of the Virgin Mary and other holy beings remain recognizable. Often a retablo maker painted his saints from memory, as he had internalized its attributes, seen in a print tacked up in a corner of his workshop long ago. In this same way, the devotee who commissioned an ex-voto painting knew what to look for upon receipt of the finished product and could immediately ascertain whether his or her painting was "correct." Thus, prints made use of elements and themes already familiar – "popular" – in the cultural repertoire and further popularized them. The more ex-votos dedicated to the Lord of Chalma that adorned the walls of his sanctuary, for example, the more powerful he came to be seen and known throughout the land (see pages 250-251). The first images and certain local cults introduced by missionaries and parish priests took on a life of their own, growing apparently organically, without direct imposition by the church hierarchy. This is not to say that active promotion by the institutional church was absent; rather that for its own reasons, the church did not advertise the promotion of devotions to saints as such.[15] Miracle stories associated with particular images were extremely important factors in the growth of a devotion, and once a saint came to be known for helping people in times of need, more people began to come forward with their own stories of how that saint had come to their aid.[16] In a complex interplay between institutional directives and popular culture, then, Catholic holy beings and their attendant attributes were not simply top-down impositions, but rather organic in their expansion.

Naturally, the proper expression of thanks was required. The saints had to be appeased and appreciated if the faithful wanted to assure themselves of continued divine benevolence. Earlier I discussed the framework of reciprocity that ex-votos entail, in which there is a "spiritual contract" to publicly thank a miracle-performing saint for the favors bestowed. We can see another instance of this "deal-making" in the ex-votos commissioned by C. (*ciudadano*, or citizen) Ygnacio Cordova, who fell ill with typhus in 1867 and again in 1870 [Plates 6 and 7]. The first time, he was ill in bed for three months and prayed to his local patron saint, The Lord of the Three Falls of Atzala, Puebla. He beseeched the Christ figure to grant him either death or his health, and when the Lord restored him to health, he thanked Him by commissioning a painted offering for his shrine.

Unfortunately, Ygnacio experienced a second bout of typhus three years later, suffering even longer, bedridden, for four months. This time, he appealed to Santiago Matamoros (Saint James the Moor-slayer) to intercede on his behalf with God. When Ygnacio recovered, he again "repaid" the favor and commissioned a new painting as an "act of thanksgiving." Perhaps the appeals to two different holy figures in the two paintings reflect Ygnacio's devotion to them both, though he might have chosen to ask for a miracle from a different saint in 1870 because his 1867 appeal to the Lord of the Three Falls did not

prevent him from being struck by the same disease a few years later. Is it possible that by spreading his requests out to a coterie of holy beings, he could avoid "overburdening" one over the other? Let us remember that in pre-industrial times, there was less of a separation between the sacred and the profane; to devout Catholics, celestial beings were very much alive and involved in earthly affairs.

The Nineteenth Century: The Golden Age of Retablo and Ex-voto Production in Mexico

Retablo art in Mexico reflects the particular historical circumstances of the time in which the paintings were produced. The number of retablos and ex-votos produced in Mexico seems to have increased significantly during the colonial period and then exploded in the mid-nineteenth century. In part this apparent increase can be explained by their physical deterioration and their periodic removal from the churches where they were displayed, but another factor involved in the surge is the "democratization" of retablo and ex-voto production, aided by the new availability of cheap industrial paints and sheet metal to members of the lower classes. No longer restricted to wealthy patrons, retablos and ex-votos were now accessible to average people, whether they painted them themselves or hired a semi-professional ex-voto painter to make them.[17]

Another important factor in the dramatic increase of retablo art in the nineteenth century was politics. This was a time when Mexico experienced fundamental political changes, going from crown jewel of the Spanish empire to independent nation, whose first forty years were marked by foreign interventions by the United States and France and a protracted civil war between Liberal and Conservative forces. That war, known as the War of the Reform, set Mexico on a path to become a liberal, secular state. On the heels of the *Reforma* came a more stable government, headed by the autocratic General Porfirio Díaz, who pushed for economic modernization in Mexico, which he achieved by forging ties with the same imperialist powers that had invaded his country only fifty years prior. These connections to the United States and Europe made possible a great influx of foreign investment in Mexico, which allowed its economy to grow but created conditions of ever greater economic and social inequality. To consolidate his grip on power Díaz resorted to ever-increasing repression, which boiled over in 1910 with calls from an opposition figure, Francisco I. Madero, to hold free and fair elections for the first time in thirty-five years. Madero won the election but was soon assassinated, and a bloody, decade-long revolution broke out, condemning ordinary citizens to more suffering and deprivation. During these unstable times of war, competing political ideologies, frequent droughts and hunger, and small- and medium-scale epidemics, ordinary people could take comfort in their protector saints who watched over them and worked miracles to save their lives and livelihoods.

The upsurge in retablo and ex-voto production in the late nineteenth century also coincides with a period of reorganization within the Catholic Church as it responded to attacks on its autonomy within Mexican society, and its concomitant fear of its own decline amid the creeping secularization of the modern world. Following the political instability after independence, in which a key point of debate was the proper role of the church in civil society, the state finally triumphed. One of the *Reforma*'s (and later, the post-revolutionary government's), most serious consequences for Mexican Catholicism was the proscription of religious ritual from public, non-ecclesiastical spaces. The liberal state's new restrictions on traditional Catholic devotional practices banned any religious activity outside of church walls. The abrupt change from a society in which religious processions and other outward displays of devotion were embraced as a major focus of civic life, to a rationalist, secular, state-oriented model in which spirituality had no place in spaces not specifically designed for it, was a wrenching one for Catholics. Although the state's attempts to relegate devotion – and its attendant visual culture – to inside churches or private

Plate 6: *Ygnacio Cordova's first brush with typhus and his appeal to Jesus of the Three Falls (see Figure 88a)*

Plate 7: *Ygnacio Cordova's second brush with typhus and his appeal to St James the Moor-slayer (see Figure 88b)*

spaces was often unsuccessful, the outlets for religious expression were more limited than ever, and while the images of the saints that had long been a focal point for the faithful were still accessible inside churches and home altars, the perceived attack on Catholicism may have cemented people's relationship with their saints into an increasingly personal one. This was an intimate relationship that could be expressed quite well in small, portable, and discreet paintings that people took to churches as testimony of a saint's efficacy or simply kept on a home altar for private devotion.

Conclusion

In the preceding pages we have seen examples of both portraits of holy figures intended for private devotion and painted testimonials of miracles displayed publicly in churches and shrines. We have seen how both retablos santos and retablos ex-votos exemplify a personal relationship with Catholic beings, in which the saint has a protective function over the faithful. We have seen the ways in which this personal relationship could express a range of human emotions, from desperation to gratitude to quiet reflection, and we have seen the ways that images circulating in colonial and independent Mexico contributed to a shared visual culture among people of varying backgrounds and stations in life. We have also considered the roles of technology and politics in the dissemination of religious artifacts. An extended quote by Margarita de Orellana captures the spirit that animates these unforgettable offerings of faith:

"It is impossible not to feel moved when visiting a church or shrine and encountering those gifts that popular Catholicism offers its favorite saints. In Guadalajara, the Christ Child at the Church of la Merced is set inside a glass case full of small rectangular metal plates with paintings, metal milagros, *braids, children's clothing, handcrafted or plastic toys and even prostheses. The sensation that this image provokes remains in the memory forever, and its force never ceases to prey on our minds. It is of utmost importance to mention that this is not a spontaneous art form, as it is subject to a popular and codified language, which means it must follow certain rules. In this sense, it may be considered a kind of pictorial and verbal narrative. The content of each of these pieces stems from two human universes: daily life in terms of illnesses, accidents, natural disasters, injustice and other calamities on the one hand, and on the other, religious imagery which represents the distinct aspects of Christ, the Virgin or the saints, to whom artists or donors show themselves to be highly devoted and to whom they pay frequent visits in their churches.*

More than an expressive painting, the ex-voto is an effective object, a kind of agent that both modifies and carries out an action. The ex-voto establishes a sort of interchange and a certain complicity between humanity and divinity. Though it may appear naïve

to our eyes, it is a pragmatic act. It could even be considered as a kind of currency with which one pays for favors received. Without it, there's no deal. The ex-voto is charged with power – religious power. It is like the relics or holy water which are endowed with some force. Even the words chosen to express love and gratitude toward the divine being are effective. They reaffirm the love story involving a human being and his or her benefactor, and reinforce the gratitude felt by the former.

But once this love story and this gratitude are rendered in paint on wood or metal, they become not only permanent, but public. The world where this kind of worship is carried out is one where people live as a community. And it is through ex-votos that the community learns that something important and extra-ordinary has occurred between the Virgin or Christ and one of its members, but this occurrence is assimilated into the life of the community as if it were just another everyday event. A deistic religiosity would have little faith in such an act and would reject it in the end. On the other hand, we are aware that by taking ex-votos out of context – the sanctuary – we have in a way disarmed them. Their removal makes them lose power and converts them into stolen goods. Nevertheless, whether or not they are seen in their natural environment, these pieces are an endless source of information for understanding the history of human anguish."[18]

Plate 8: *Ex-voto given "In action of Thanks to the Most Holy Virgin of Guadalupe, who saved me from a dangerous Operation on the 14th of June 1959. Socorro Gonzales." (see Figure 106)*

Kinga J. Novak *is an historian of Latin America specializing in Mexican religious and visual cultures. After a transformative experience working on the restoration of a sixteenth-century altar-piece at the former monastery of Santo Domingo Yanhuitlán in rural Oaxaca, she embarked on graduate studies at the University of California, Berkeley and wrote her doctoral dissertation on ex-votos and popular piety in Mexico. She currently teaches Spanish and Latin American Studies at Bard Early College – Manhattan in New York City.*

Endnotes

1 "El día 6 de Agosto de 1885 se hallava (sic.) Ma. Leonides Barajas escasa de alimento de pechos para crear [?] un niño inbocó (sic.) ha (sic.) Na. Sa. de Lourdes y quedó remedeada (sic.) su necesidad; ienrrecompensa (sic.) le dedica este, hoy 2 de Julio de 1886." (On the 6th of August 1885 Ma. Leonides Barajas found herself without breast milk to (nurture?) a child [and] invoked Our Lady of Lourdes and her need was met; and in compensation she dedicates this, today 2nd of July of 1886.)

2 Gloria Fraser Giffords, "The Art of Private Devotion: Retablo Painting of Mexico," in *The Art of Private Devotion: Retablo Painting of Mexico* (Fort Worth: Intercultura and Dallas: The Meadows Museum, Southern Methodist University, 1991), p. 33. Giffords details the various and sometimes confusing terms used to refer to both the public and private devotional paintings and lands on *retablos santo*s and *retablos ex-votos* to distinguish between them. *Retablo* is a colloquial term used in Mexico to refer to both kinds of devotional art. To add further confusion to the matter, the term *retablo* can also mean the carved and gilded altarpieces seen in churches. For the sake of simplicity, in this essay I use the term *retablo* to refer to the icon-like paintings of saints used in home altars and *ex-voto* to refer to the public offerings.

3 The original or archetypal image of the Virgin of Guadalupe resides in the Basilica dedicated to her in the northern outskirts of Mexico City. It is the most visited Catholic pilgrimage destination in the world, and the world's third-most visited holy site. While the original devotion to a Virgin of Guadalupe was a Spanish import, a so-called Black Madonna representing the Virgin of the Apocalypse, this image is one of the first "autochthonous," that is, native Mexican, Christian images to capture the imaginations of a broad cross-section of people living in New Spain. The popular origin story tells us that not long after the Spanish conquest of Tenochtitlan, the Mexica (Aztec) capital, in 1521, an Indigenous convert to Christianity, Juan Diego, came upon an apparition of a beautiful young woman identifying herself as the Virgin of Guadalupe in Nahuatl, the language spoken in central Mexico. The encounter took place in December of 1531 on a hill known as Tepayac(ac), and the Virgin Mary asked for a chapel to be built in her honor in that spot. In a hurry, he tried to avoid her, but the next day she appeared again in the same place; this time, she asked him to go tell the Bishop about her apparition, and said she would send a sign of her existence. She told him to return the following day to pick Castilian roses, which were neither native to Mexico nor would they be blooming in December, but Juan Diego was trying to visit a sick uncle and couldn't fulfill her request. Not to be dissuaded, the Virgin appeared a fourth time and helped Juan pick the roses, which, despite the time of year, were plentiful on Tepeyac. The Bishop, like Juan Diego, was initially skeptical, but when he asked for the sign, Juan Diego opened his *tilma*, a native cloak made of agave fiber, dozens of roses fell out, and the image of the Virgin Mary was miraculously imprinted on the inside of his cape. This image "not painted by human hands," as the inscription says, hangs today in the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe in a northern neighborhood of Mexico City, drawing crowds of pilgrims from all over Mexico and dozens of other countries on a daily basis.

4 Yvonne Lange, "The Impact of European Prints on the Devotional Tin Paintings of Mexico: A Transferral Hypothesis," in *The Art of Private Devotion: Retablo Painting of Mexico*. Fort Worth: Intercultura and Dallas: The Meadows Museum, Southern Methodist University, 1991; Claire Farago, "Prints and the Pauper: Artifice, Religion, and Free Enterprise in Popular Sacred Art." In *Art and Faith in Mexico: The Nineteenth-Century Retablo Tradition*, eds. Elizabeth Netto Calil Zarur and Charles Muir Lovell (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001).

5 In the late eighteenth century a new method of pressing and cutting sheets of iron, over which a thin coat of tin was applied, was invented in England; while the material's original use was for the manufacture of household items, pipes, and gutters, retablo painters took to the new medium as soon as independence opened Mexico up to new trading partners. The newly available tin plate greatly facilitated access to the materials necessary for retablo production. No longer were the more expensive copper or linen substrates required for the pictorial expression of devotion and gratitude to holy beings; now people of more humble means could afford them too. See Gloria Fraser Giffords, *Mexican Folk Retablos* (1974), p. 3; Giffords (2006): 197.

6 Gloria Fraser Giffords, "The Art of Private Devotion: Retablo Painting of Mexico," in *The Art of Private Devotion: Retablo Painting of Mexico* (Fort Worth: Intercultura and Dallas: The Meadows Museum, Southern Methodist University, 1991), pp. 33-34.

7 Thomas Calvo, "Milagros, milagreros y retablos: introducción al estudio de los exvotos del occidente de México," in Bélard and Verrier, *Los exvotos del occidente de México* (El Colegio de Michoacán/Centre Français D'Études Mexicaines et Centreaméricaines, 1996), p. 16.

8 Calvo, p. 16. "Hasta se percibe una tonalidad condicional: "El día 8 de junio de 1918, Aurelio Ramírez perdió por robo una vaca amarilla, una ternerita del mismo color y un torete de trabajo pinto de amarillo y blanco. Con tal…procedió a buscarlos ofreciendo a Nra Sra de San Juan este retablo, si los hallaba como lo aconteció la Sma Sra, dedicándole en gratitud el presente." CEMCA (Centro de Estudios Mexicanos y Centroamericanos), ex-voto A-14.

9 Patrick Geary, "Humiliation of Saints," in *Saints and their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore, and History*, ed. Stephen Wilson (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 123-140; Patrick Geary, "Coercion of Saints in Medieval Religious Practice," in *Living*

with the Dead in the Middle Ages (Cornell 1994), pp. 116-124; Richard Trexler, "Florentine Religious Experience: The Sacred Image," *Studies in the Renaissance* 19 (1972), pp. 7-41.

10 St. Thomas Aquinas, Commentarium super libros sententiatum: Commentum in librum III, dist. 9, art. 2, qu. 2, quoted and translated by David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 162.

11 Quoted in Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, p. 163.

12 *Cofradías* or religious brotherhoods were centered around an image of a saint and functioned as a kind of mutual-aid society, tending especially to their members' spiritual needs at the time of and following death. A cofradía would pay for a Mass or Masses to be said in honor and remembrance of a deceased member and might even contribute to a fund of the deceased's dependents.

13 William Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton, 1981).

14 See Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Penguin Books, 1973 [1971]); Richard Trexler, "Florentine Religious Experience: The Sacred Image," *Studies in the Renaissance* v. 19 (1972); 7-41; and David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (University of Chicago Press, 1989). For Mexico, the argument has been made particularly compellingly by Brian Larkin, *The Very Nature of God: Baroque Catholicism and Religious Reform in Bourbon Mexico City* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2011).

15 For an example of this kind of promotional literature masquerading as a catalogue, see Francisco de Florencia, *Zodiaco Mariano* (México: Colegio de San Ildefonso, 1755).

16 On miracles and the dissemination of miracle stories, see Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (University of Chicago Press, 1981); William Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton University press, 1981); William B. Taylor, *Theater of a Thousand Wonders: A History of Miraculous Images and Shrines in New Spain* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

17 Although ex-voto paintings are famous for being anonymous creations, the majority were not painted by the devout themselves. Most are the work of professional *retableros* or retablo-makers. An artisan who specialized in religious painting could become known for his skill in re-creating scenes told to him by a person who had experienced the miracle of divine intervention. Some of these artisans were mainly farmers who supplemented their activities and incomes with a bit of painting on the side; others made a career out of making ex-votos and other devotional images. Two artists who became especially well known for their ex-votos in the nineteenth century were Hermenegildo Bustos, active in Guanajuato from 1850 to 1906, and Gerónimo de León, active in Jalisco from 1885 to 1915. A lesser-known *retablero* who signed his ex-voto paintings is represented in the Weil collection by Don Vicente Barajas, who practiced his art from the late 1940s through the 1990s (see Figures 101A and 101B). He is profiled in the essay by Dr. Jorge Durand on page 42). A third retablo painter has been identified by his particular stylistic approach to figures and facial features as "the Bee-Stung Lip Painter" by author Gloria Fraser Giffords (see Figures 24 and 114) in "The Art of Private Devotion," p. 53.

18 Margarita de Orellana, "Ex-votos," translated by Michele Suderman, in *Exvotos: Artes de Mexico Número 53*, (Mexico City, 2001), page 81.

The Virgin of Guadalupe in an ex-voto (See Figure 86)

Monico Cortéz and one of his sons in 1901 in an ex-voto. (See Figure 94).

Don Vicente Barajas: Retablo Painter

by Dr. Jorge Durand

As testimonies of personal experiences, retablos [ex-votos] capture the most significant moments in a votary's life. Once placed on the walls of churches, they become public records that provide a unique glimpse at the dreams, thoughts, and fears of their creators. Yet retablos are seldom prepared by the votaries themselves. These paintings are generally the commissioned works of untrained local artists who offer their skills to capture the most deep-seated feelings of their clients.

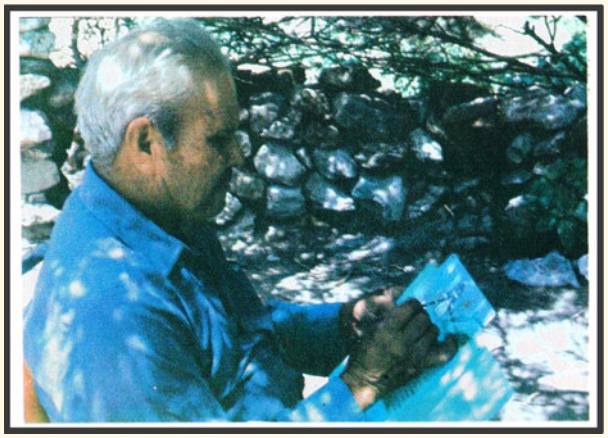
To this date, little is known about the lives of retablo painters. Anonymity is a main characteristic of rural artists like the *retablistas*. Luckily, a few *retablistas* do sign their work, even fewer include an address next to their signature or on the back of the retablo. This was the case with Don Vicente Barajas, who lives, works, and paints on the ranch of San José de la Calera, Guanajuato. A retablo from 1969 found at the Sanctuary of the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos, contained on the back an address in the city of León, Guanajuato that helped track Don Vicente back to his hometown.

Born during the Revolutionary period in 1916, Don Vicente left his native rancho when he was very young. Migrating to the state of Veracruz, he found work at the Río Blanco textile factory. Although he was first employed in the pressing department, it was later in the electrical plant that he met Don Joaquín Arreola who, in addition to his factory work, painted and decorated fabrics in his spare time.

The two men began working together and Don Vicente gradually learned the intricacies of painting. Together they cut pieces of fabric into one-meter squares and sewed them together to form cushions and tablecloths. On these items they painted floral designs and sold them in the market each Sunday. After a while, Don Vicente became assistant to another painter and joined him in decorating churches, painting miniatures, and adorning small religious images. Later he worked painting leaves, plants, and flowers on cardboard sheets for a "pharmacist" who used them as advertisements for herbal medicines he hawked in the market.

Although Don Vicente was quite content in Veracruz, bad news from home eventually forced his return. Back on his native rancho in Guanajuato, his liking for drawing and his artistic abilities soon became known, and he began to attract commissions for votive works. Don Guadalupe Rangel, from the nearby rancho of Mezquitillo, was the first to request a retablo – a votive of thanks to the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos.

It seems that Don Lupe had been assaulted by bandits on the highway and his horse was wounded. The animal fell several times, and in desperation Don Lupe invoked the holy name of the Virgin. At the last moment, the horse succeeded in standing up and galloping away from the robbers, who were on foot, thereby saving his life. Don Vicente listened carefully to the story and painted a rendition of the miraculous event accompanied by an explanatory



Don Vicente Barajas, age 70+ (1989, Leon, Mexico)

text. That day in 1942 when Don Vicente delivered his first painting, he earned three pesos (less than a dollar at the time) and began his career as a *retablista*.

In 1942, the United States organized the Bracero Program to recruit Mexican laborers for temporary agricultural work north of the border; and like thousands of others from the state of Guanajuato, Don Vicente joined the wave of men moving northward. On March 22, 1945, he obtained a Bracero Contract and set out for *el norte* for the first time. Over the years, he traveled back and forth to the United States a total of 26 times, performing farm work in the states of Arizona, Michigan, Texas, New Mexico, California, and Nevada.

As a bracero, he combined his talent for art with his new vocation of migrant worker. Art provided a good way of earning extra money on his trips away from home, because during the long train journeys to and from the United States, he could occupy himself by drawing pictures of fellow travelers and selling them for modest fees.

Two Barajas ex-votos from 1971
(See Figures 107A and 107B)

He also continued to paint retablos from migrants who wished to fulfill some vow of thanks to a holy image upon their return. The votive topics typically dealt with work accidents or worries about family members so far away. At this stage in his career, Don Vicente charged $10 per retablo. On his trips to the United States, he always bought new tin sheets, paints, and brushes, because he preferred American supplies and materials, especially the brushes.

On one of his return trips to Mexico, he found work as a painter in a hat factory in San Francisco del Rincón. At that time Mexican cowboy hats with painted decorations were in fashion, and there were not enough people able to paint the intricate designs. After showing the factory owner some samples of his artwork, Don Vicente was hired to paint 60,000 hats stored in a warehouse at 35 cents per hat. He settled in town for a year or two to work for the factory, reserving Sundays to paint religious objects that he sold in the market and at regional fairs.

Don Vicente estimates that over the course of his life he has painted some 5,000 retablos. He still keeps a sign in the Aldama Market and goes into León each day to pick up new requests and deliver the retablos he has completed. His clients are ordinary men and women from the west-central states who seek votives dedicated to the principal icons of the region: El Señor de Villaseca in Guanajuato, La Virgen de Zapopan near Guadalajara, La Virgen de Talpa in Jalisco, El Niño de Atocha in Zacatecas, and El Señor del Saucito in San Luis Potosí. By far the largest number, however, are dedicated to La Virgen de San Juan de los Lagos.

Jorge G. Durand *is a research professor of Anthropology at the University of Guadalajara and the Center for Economic Research & Teaching (CIDE). He is co-director with Douglas S. Massey of the Mexican Migration Project (since 1987) and the Latin American Migration Project (since 1996).* *This 1989 essay is reprinted with his kind permission.*

On Our Gratitude Deficit and Gratitude as Expressed in Mexican Devotional Ex-Votos

by Bob Weil, M.A.

"Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others." – Cicero

"Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High. Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me." – Psalm 50:14-15

Two events over the last several years have caused me to suspect that, as a culture, we are experiencing a profound deficit of gratitude. That is not to suggest that we don't individually say "thank you" to those who show us a kindness, or that we don't feel grateful when things go well. Even those without faith are quick to say "Thank God" when a disaster is averted (or, conversely, "Oh, my God!" when it is not). But in our times, when medical science is ascendent, food is abundant and our ability to mitigate (or at least predict) natural cataclysms is historically unprecedented, we tend to think that we either deserve our good fortune, or that we have somehow earned it. Our gratitude, such as it is, is generally lacking an awareness of our utter dependence on divine grace. And for that reason, just as importantly, it must be said that any gratitude we express is often misdirected.

As with many such generalizations, this assessment came as something of a personal revelation. In the summer of 2023, while we were traveling with a good friend to several cities in Austria, Hungary and Slovakia, my wife and I encountered a phenomenon we had never seen before: Plague Columns (also known as Holy Trinity columns). One of the most impressive of these monumental edifices can be found in the main square in Vienna, opposite St. Stephens Cathedral. In 1679, between 75,000 and 150,000 citizens of Vienna fell victim to the devastating epidemic of the Bubonic plague, also known as the Black Death. Once the crisis had passed (no sanitary or medical interventions became available until centuries later), Emperor Leopold I commissioned a memorial to remember those who were lost and gratitude for those who had survived. The gilded sculpture group at the top of the *Pestsaule* represents the Holy Trinity, seated on a cloud (see Plate 9). Many more such plague columns were built throughout Europe before and after this date and placed in central city squares for all to see, often in response to requests to city fathers by the surviving citizens. Tongue firmly planted in cheek, I asked our guide (a family friend and Eastern Catholic priest from Slovakia), where we would find the Plague Columns commemorating the passing of the COVID pandemic. I did not have to wait for his answer to know what he would say.

A second experience during our European trip involved a visit to the Mariazell Basilica in Austria. There, enshrined in a semi-circular series of galleries on the upper floor above the sanctuary can be found more than 2500 ex-votos and countless other votive offerings of silver, gold and precious stones, and many from baser materials. My wife and I were stunned by the extent of the collection, both in terms of the span of centuries represented, but also the range of the catalog of human travail, divine intervention and gratitude that they recorded. The placard at the entry to the *Treasure Chambers and Galleries* described the exhibit with commendable Germanic concision: "Neither the material nor artistic worth of these offerings, but rather the personal fates behind these witnesses of faith, are decisive for their qualification as 'treasures.'"

Upon returning home, I found my interest in Mexican ex-votos of the 19th and 20th centuries rekindled – here was a similar tradition

of the expression of gratitude to the divine for blessings bestowed that did not end in the mid-twentieth century, but one that continues to this day. My wife and I already had a collection of Spanish Colonial devotional art, as well as a number of post-colonial Mexican retablos representing the saints. But since I have a bias toward aesthetically appealing art, and many ex-votos were created by self-taught artists whose work was often of middling artistic quality at best, I had previously hesitated to expand the collection in that direction. Suddenly alive to the idea of gratitude and how it continues to be materially manifested in our times, I began to look for Mexican ex-votos that combined a compelling message with native talent, if not formal artistic training. (The placard at the entrance to the Marizell collection brought home to me that my collection criteria were mistaken, in the sense that the presence of aesthetic charm and correct perspective were beside the point of the ex-voto). One of our earliest ex-votos (see Plate 10) expressed public gratitude – on a more personal level than that represented by Plague Columns – for the votary's own recovery from serious illness. The inscription on the ex-voto notes that on March 10, 1875, Pilar Mena of San Miguel de Allende, Mexico prayed to the Lord of Health for relief from severe colic pain, and she commissioned the ex-voto in gratitude for the beneficent answer to her prayer. She would have placed this in the Lord's sanctuary in a prominent place.

At that point in time, I realized with considerable clarity that we as a culture are experiencing a deficit of true and meaningful gratitude. This is true despite the fact that we have been in the midst of a wholesale outpouring of what I would call anonymous and generic gratitude for at least a decade. The non-religious manifest this gratitude toward the rise of the sun each morning, for fair weather, and for the availability of fresh produce at the market. Yet G.K. Chesterton wrote that "The worst moment for an atheist is when he is really thankful and has no one to thank."[1] The secular society's answer to this dilemma is to be grateful – indiscriminately and "omnidirectionally," if you will – for all things at all times. But for someone lacking faith, the call in Ephesians to give "thanks always and for everything" makes no sense, if there is no God to whom gratitude is due.

Fr. Romano Guardini reminds us of the appropriate object of gratitude: "We can be grateful only to a person. Gratitude and petition are possible only between an 'I' and a 'Thou.' We cannot thank a law, a board, or a company. We may do so out of mere politeness when the proper sum is handed to us, in order to keep everything in the domain of good manners, but real gratitude does not enter into the matter, for gratitude is the expression of a personal encounter in human need."[2]

So, if gratitude is an appropriate response to a "personal encounter in human need" at a particular point in time, it is a need that we neither have the ability nor the resources to satisfy on our own. There is a certain paradox here that Balduin Schwarz has identified: "Gratitude as a response follows receiving, yet as a disposition, it precedes and intermingles with receiving."[3] In other words, in the disposition of the believer, faith precedes (and we can say, motivates) the plea for assistance and grace, and when the gift is received, imbues the expression of gratitude. And not just religious faith per se, but faith in the efficacy of prayer and supplication specifically. Of course, the plea and subsequent gratitude is directed to the divine "Thou," not to some nebulous concept of fate or to an imagined spirit of the universe.

I came to understand this more clearly and personally in October, 2023. I woke up on the last day of our visit to Quebec City, Canada and found myself unable to walk. As my wife and I made our way home, I lost the ability to stand altogether, and required wheelchair assistance through each connecting airport, and to our car in the parking structure at our destination in When we arrived at the hospital in Omaha, Nebraska, around midnight, I was immediately admitted for treatment of a life-threatening sepsis infection to both knees, and remained hospitalized for five

weeks. Our dear friend and Deacon Patrick Simons brought photographic reproductions of several of our Spanish Colonial paintings and hung them in my hospital room, including my favorite – a Bolivian Virgin of the Candlemas. During the many lonely nights in the hospital, plagued by fear and self-doubt, I found myself praying to her for grace and recovery. After overcoming the infection through medication and two surgeries, I began a course of physical therapy that continued for seven months. For the first five months, I was largely confined to a wheelchair when not in physical therapy. Throughout this period, I was blessed with prayers from family, friends and fellow parishioners. Steadily, but gradually, I regained the ability to walk unassisted. With recovery, gratitude toward the saints to whom I had prayed, and the friends and family who joined in prayer, seemed right and natural.

Returning to the subject of Mexican ex-votos, Sherry Fields tells us that "*Novohispanos* in the grip of affliction felt that divine help was an option to them, particularly when 'earthly' help had failed to produce results. Given the efficacy of contemporary medicine to prevent and cure the devastating diseases of [that earlier] time, it is no surprise that healing saints stood firmly alongside domestic remedies and local medical practitioners in the marketplace of relief."[4] In Mexico up until the mid-nineteenth century, there was a definite matrix of resort – which included the doctor, the *curandera* (faith healer) and, finally (and often, concurrently) the locally-venerated saint or advocation of Mary. This view is very much in keeping with the Angelic Doctor's assertion that "Divine Providence works through intermediaries. For God governs the lower through the higher, not from any impotence on his part, but from the abundance of his goodness imparting to creatures the dignity of causing."[5] All miracles can be understood as a collaboration, first and foremost because the venerated image's power is contingent on the plea of the votary. Collaboration with human agency may take the form of medical intervention, prayers, or by way of secondary factors. As an example of the latter, even the presence and providential use of seat belts in averting an otherwise fatal crash should be viewed as a miraculous event worthy of gratitude to the divine.

Frank Graziano, in *Miraculous Images and Votive Offerings in Mexico*, describes a sign he found on the votive wall in the Remedios courtyard of the Lord of Chalma sanctuary: "Let's keep writing the history of salvation. Keep making retablos [ex-votos]. If you want them to remain exhibited here, make them with durable materials."[6] I took this as a challenge to have an ex-voto made in gratitude for my own recovery, dedicated to the Virgin of Copacabana, and commissioned two experienced *retableros* in Mexico to paint them (see Plates 11 & 12 and Figures 104a and 104b for more details and artist contact information).

Another way to restore and model true gratitude is to see it as an obligation to make that grace visible to the world in some fashion. Having an ex-voto painted is only one possibility. A tangible expression of gratitude might take the form of a written testimony to the miracle (a "durable material"), good works in the name of the saint to which one appealed, a donation to the church commemorating the miraculous event, or active witness to others in our community who are interested in recovering an appreciation for the essential and under-celebrated role of the miraculous in our lives. Whatever we choose to do to materially express gratitude, it should represent a "sacrifice," *pace* the Psalmist.

Bob Weil *has a Masters in European History and taught evening courses at USC and UCLA in Los Angeles for several years. He has written two books, numerous essays, reviews and interviews on cultural, art technique, marketing, and Internet technology topics for "The New Oxford Review," "The Salisbury Review," "Dr. Dobb's Journal," "Digital Artist" and other journals. His artwork has been published in "Frames Magazine" and "Digital Studio," and has been exhibited and awarded internationally. After a 30-year career in marketing, he joined the Board of Directors of the Cathedral Arts Project as part of the Programming Committee. With the passing of Brother William Woeger in late 2024, Bob was invited to assume the interim curatorship of the Saint Cecilia Cathedral Spanish Colonial Art collection, which Brother had assembled over the last thirty years. Bob and his wife Marya have been collecting devotional art for nearly 15 years.*

Endnotes

1 Chesterton, G.K., *St. Francis of Assisi* (London: Tavistock, 1957), 88.
2 Romano Guardini, as quoted in "The Virtue of Gratitude," accessed at this web address on 1/20/2025: https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2022/11/24/the-virtue-of-gratitude-2/
3 Schwarz, Balduin, "The Healing Power of Gratitude," *Values and Human Experience* from American University Studies, Series V, Philosophy, Vol. 188 (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 15.
4 Fields, Sherry, *Pestilence and Headcolds*, (Columbia University Press, New York 2008), 162
5 Aquinas, St. Thomas, *The Summa Theologica* (1a.22.3)
6 Graziano, Frank, *Miraculous Images and Votive Offerings in Mexico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 209.
7 Credits - photos below left: Jebulon (photo on left) and Dr. Bernd Gross (photo on right), both from Wikimedia Commons.

Plate 9: *The Vienna, Austria Plague Column (Pestsaule), completed in 1693 by Leopold I.*[7]

Plate 10: *An 1875 ex-voto in gratitude by Pilar Mena of San Miguel de Allende for curing her from a serious bout of colic. (see Figure 96).*

Plate 11: *Ex-voto commissioned in 2024 in gratitude for the full recovery of Bob Weil. (see Figure 110A).*

Plate 12: *A second ex-voto commissioned in 2024 in gratitude for the full recovery of Bob Weil. (see Figure 110B).*

The Spanish Colonies in the Americas

17th - 18th Centuries

Grandeza Mexicana

Fiestas, regalos, pasatiempos, gustos,
contento, recreación, gozo, alegría,
sosiego, paz, quietud de ánimos justos,

hermosura, altiveces, gallardía,
nobleza, discreción, primor, aseo,
virtud, lealtad, riquezas, hidalguía,

y cuanto la cudicia y el deseo
añidir pueden y alcanzar el arte,
aquí se hallará y aquí lo veo,
y aquí, como en su esfera, tienen parte.

Año de 1604.

CATHEDRAL ARTS PROJECT

40-YEAR ANNIVERSARY