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Of Gratitude and Sorrow:
A Visual History of Everyday Mexican Spirituality, 1700-2013

By
Kinga Judith Novak

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
History
in the
Graduate Division
of the
University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Margaret Chowning, Chair

Professor William B. Taylor

Professor Todd Olson

Professor Carolyn Dean

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Of Gratitude and Sorrow: A Visual History of Everyday Mexican Spirituality, 1700-2013

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Kinga Judith Novak

Abstract

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Kinga Judith Novak

Doctor of Philosophy in History

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Margaret Chowning, Chair

This dissertation is a study of Mexican devotional images and their importance in the society that produced them. I trace the changes and continuities in the ways that Mexicans experienced the sacred over a long arc of history, with a focus on the nineteenth century, a time when Mexico transitioned from a colonial society into a modern republic. The study encompasses devotional practices such as pilgrimages and processions, but focuses especially on the material culture of popular piety. Specifically, it examines two art forms—ex-votos and children’s funerary portraits—to show how devotional practice shaped relationships to the institutional church both before and after independence, as well as to the emergent liberal state in the nineteenth century. I use these images to explore the worldviews of people who left little in the way of written records, but whose visual output was both prolific and expressive of their perceptions about the relationship between humans and the divine.

Through the study of the material culture of devotion, I demonstrate not only the continued centrality of Catholic holy beings to Mexican mentalities after independence, but also explore a changing world, one that we can loosely characterize as “modernizing.” “Modernizing” was evident in several spheres: in the urban landscape, in transportation, in politics, the economy, in technology, and in the institutional church. In this context it is easy to imagine that forms of religious expression might also change, but traditional religiosity—with its processions, pilgrimages, and other saint-oriented devotional practices—not only survived but flourished in the nineteenth century. This particularly Catholic accommodation with modernity is most visible in an increase in ex-votos left at shrines, but also in the augmented negotiations over the proper role of religion in public life. I explore the reasons for these phenomena and conclude that despite the apparent paradox of continuing and increased “traditional” religious practices in a secularizing world, affirmations of traditional Catholicism were in fact a way of assimilating the modern world for both the institutional church and for laypeople.

Finally, I address the complex negotiations between the church and the state as political institutions from the colonial period to the mid-twentieth century, and the ways that their ideologies and actions both shaped and were shaped by popular culture. Using Mikhail Bakhtin’s model of circularity for describing the interactions between elite and popular cultures, I look beyond simple dichotomies and suggest how the transmission of culture and ideas is

multidirectional and multidimensional. I use visual cultural production—especially ex-voto paintings—as a barometer of religious mentalities, and, by extension, as a measure of the intersections between religion and politics in a period of important historical changes.

For my mother, Judith Némethy

In memory of George Némethy and Inés Sánchez Novak

Table of Contents

List of Figures	iii
List of Tables	viii
Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1
Chapter One	24
Colonial Ex-votos	
Chapter Two	62
The Persistence of Divine Intervention: Religious Culture in Mexico from Independence to the <i>Reforma</i>	
Chapter Three	98
“In These Impious Times”: The Aftermath of the <i>Reforma</i> and the Porfiriato, 1876-1912	
Chapter Four	138
Ex-votos and Popular Spirituality, 1880-2013	
Chapter Five	187
<i>Angelitos</i> : Posthumous Portraits of Children	
Conclusion	223
Bibliography	232

List of Figures

Figure 1.1	Ex-voto offered to the Señor de los Rayos	1
Figure 1.2	Offering to San Francisco de Asís, Church of San Francisco de Asís, San Luis Potosí, 1996	6
Figure 1.3	Wedding dresses, soccer jerseys, and other offerings at the Basílica de Nuestra Señora de San Juan de los Lagos, Jalisco	6
Figure 1.4	Shrine of Nuestra Señora de los Remedios, Naucalpan, 2001	7
Figure 1.5	Milagros from Colonia, Uruguay, Church of San Benito, 2008	8
Figure 1.6	Milagros Gallery, San Antonio, Texas	9
Figure 1.7	The Attack of Enrique Gallardo, Museum of the Order of Augustinians, Shrine of Chalma	11
Figure 2.1	The Spanish Galleon Nuestra Sra. del Guía's Journey from the Phillipines to Acapulco	24
Figure 2.2	Ex-voto Painting Honoring the Virgin of Tulantongo, 1651	34
Figure 2.3	Ex-voto to St. Michael Archangel	35
Figure 2.4	Ex-voto to the Virgin of Guadalupe, etching by Samuel Stradanus, 1615	38
Figure 2.5	Eighteenth Century Copy of Child Being Thrown From Horse	39
Figure 2.6	Man Escaping Injury	40
Figure 2.7	Miraculous Lighting of Candles	40
Figure 2.8	Promising of a Silver Milagro	41
Figure 2.9	Caught at Sea During a Storm	45
Figure 2.10	Countess and Count of Mora	46
Figure 2.11	Virgin of Solitude Ex-voto	47
Figure 2.12	Our Lady of Tulantongo Child Birth Ex-voto	49

Figure 2.13	Woman Lying on Her Deathbed	51
Figure 2.14	Jacinta Camacho's Deathbed, 1783	52
Figure 2.15	The Uncontrollable Hemorrhaging of the Administrator at the Convent of St. Clara de Jesús, 1711	53
Figure 2.16	Performative Ex-voto Painting	54
Figure 2.17	St. Michael of the Miracle Ex-voto	57
Figure 2.18	Cayetano Cabrera Quintero's Account of the Virgin of Guadalupe	59
Figure 3.1	Accident at the Procession Honoring the Virgin of Zapopan	71
Figure 3.2	Apprehension by dragons and the Invocation of the Virgin of Guadalupe	72
Figure 3.3	Ex-votos to Tepatitlán's Lord of Mercy	78
Figure 3.4	Religious Flyer Invoking the Virgin of Remedies	85
Figure 3.5	Ex-voto to Tepatitlán's Señor de la Misericordia	88
Figure 3.6	Ex-voto of Manuel Rajel	89
Figure 3.7	Ex-voto to Señor de la Misericordia of Tepatitlán	90
Figure 3.8	Firing Squad Scene, 1875	91
Figure 3.9	Giving Thanks to Our Lady of Sorrows after a Lightning Attack	93
Figure 3.10	Ex-voto Commissioned by José Agustín Domínguez, 1858	95
Figure 4.1	Justina López Aguado's Traffic Accident	98
Figure 4.2	Esteban Marchena's Appeal to the Lord of Chalma and the Virgin of the Remedies	99
Figure 4.3	Images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus	115
Figure 4.4	Posada Broadside, 1912	123
Figure 4.5	Religious Announcement of the Miraculous Celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe, 1894	128

Figure 5.1	Ramón Ramírez's Invocation of the Virgin of Guadalupe	138
Figure 5.2	Ex-voto to San Francisco de Asís, Real de Catorce, San Luis Potosí, 1990-91	143
Figure 5.3	Ex-voto to San Francisco de Asís, Real de Catorce, San Luis Potosí, 1986	144
Figure 5.4	Niño de los Atribulados #1, Guanajuato	148
Figure 5.5	Niño de los Atribulados #2, Guanajuato	148
Figure 5.6	Prayer Ribbons Dedicated to San Charbel, Cathedral of Veracruz	152
Figure 5.7	Niño Jesús Sculpture, side altar, Chalma	153
Figure 5.8	Félix Medina and María R.'s Donation to the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos, 1886	160
Figure 5.9	Tomás Cabrera's Gift to the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos	161
Figure 5.10	Ex-voto to the Niño de los Atribulados, Guanajuato	163
Figure 5.11	Doña Lucía Torres' Invocation to the Señor de los Rayos	165
Figure 5.12	Elías Medina's Medical Intervention	166
Figure 5.13	Ex-voto of Zenón Parra by Hermenegildo Bustos	169
Figure 5.14	Pedro de la Rosa's Promise, 1863	171
Figure 5.15	Ex-voto to the Señor de los Rayos, 1893	172
Figure 5.16	Ana María de Salado's Invocation to the Virgin of Soledad	176
Figure 5.17	Ex-voto to the Niño Salvador de Morelia	177
Figure 5.18	Ex-voto to the Virgin of Soledad, 1886	178
Figure 5.19	Ex-voto to the Señor de los Rayos	179
Figure 5.20	Sebastián Contreras's Invocation to the Señor de los Rayos	180
Figure 5.21	Anonymous ex-voto to the Señor de la Misericordia	181

Figure 5.22	Anonymous ex-voto to the Señor de la Humildad, Parroquia del Perpetuo Socorro, Guanajuato	182
Figure 5.23	Ex-voto to the Señor de la Humildad, Parroquia del Perpetuo Socorro, Guanajuato	183
Figure 5.24	Don Francisco Delgado's Ex-voto to the Señor de los Rayos	185
Figure 6.1	Posthumous Infant	187
Figure 6.2	<i>El Velorio</i> by Francisco Oller, 1893	193
Figure 6.3	<i>Retratos</i> by Romualdo García	195
Figure 6.4	Mexican Shrines	196
Figure 6.5	Infant Jesus Sculpture	197
Figure 6.6	El Señor del Santo Entierro, Santiago Papasquiario, Durango	197
Figure 6.7	<i>Santo Entierro</i>	198
Figure 6.8	Funerary Portrait of María Josefa de Aldaco y Fagoaga, 1746	199
Figure 6.9	Anonymous portrait of José Manuel Cervantes y Velasco, 1805	200
Figure 6.10	Anonymous portrait of Domingo Francisco Jabier Emigdio de Jesús Padilla, 1846	201
Figure 6.11	Romualdo García, from the series <i>Men Alone—Full-body</i> , c. 1910	208
Figure 6.12	Romualdo García Photographs, c. 1910	209
Figure 6.13	Romualdo García Photographs (angelitos), c.1910	210
Figure 6.14	Private Angelito Photograph	211
Figure 6.15	Juan de Dios Machain Photograph	212
Figure 6.16	Juan de Dios Machain Photograph, c. 1900	212
Figure 6.17	<i>Tránsito de angelitos</i> by Juan de Dios Machain	213
Figure 6.18	Anonymous Angelito	213

Figure 6.19	The Grave of Oscar Carrales	220
Figure 7.1	Ex-voto by Alfredo Vilchis Roque, 2004	224
Figure 7.2	Devotees Crowd the Church of San Hipólito in Mexico City, 2011	225
Figure 7.3	Santa Muerte Statue in a Market Stall in Guadalajara	230

List of Tables

Table 4.1	150
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Burke of the Hispanic Society of America was always supportive of my intellectual endeavors, whether these took the form of art historical, historical, or conservation projects.

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Introduction

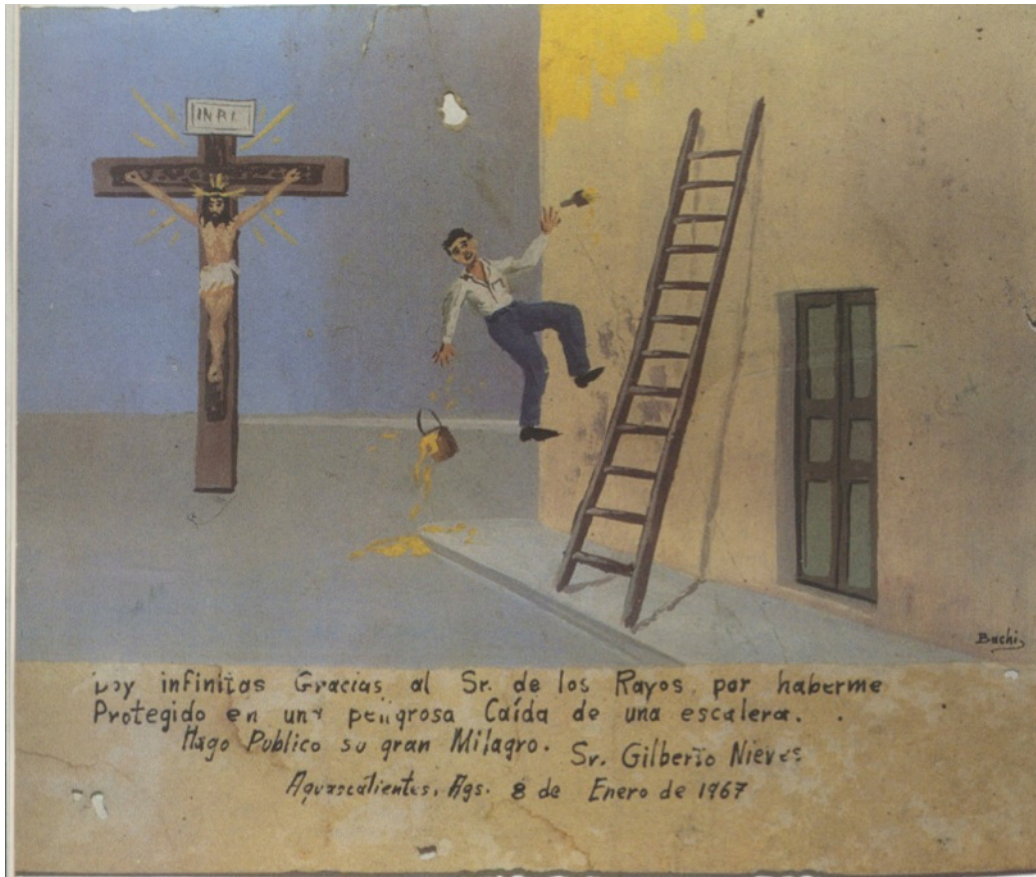


Figure 1.1: Ex-voto offered to the Señor de los Rayos by Gilberto Nieves, painted by Buchi (Source: Romero and Ramos, *Testimonios de fe en el arte popular*, frontispiece).

In January of 1967, Gilberto Nieves had a near-death experience. He was painting a house when he fell off the ladder, and as he was falling, he invoked the Lord of the Lightning Bolt, a Christ figure venerated in Aguascalientes, Mexico. The saint intervened on his behalf, and Gilberto survived the accident. In return, Gilberto commissioned a painting, both to commemorate the miracle and to publicize the special powers of the Cristo de los Rayos. In this lovely little picture, painted by a professional specialized in this kind of art, we see the drama of the situation as it unfolds. It appears that Gilberto had only just gotten started painting the wall of the house when the accident occurred; he is toppling off the precarious ladder as his paint can and brush fly out of his hands. The Cristo de los Rayos, a major devotion in Aguascalientes and other areas of central-western Mexico, looks on benignly, protecting him from serious harm. In the bottom register, a text explains the image: “I give infinite thanks to the Lord of the Lightning

Bolt for having protected me from a dangerous fall from a ladder. I make public His great miracle.”¹

I have seen many ex-votos—paintings left by devotees of saints to thank them for their miraculous healings and other rescues from dangerous situations—in the course of my research, but this one in particular speaks to me. What struck me was the victim’s statement that he was “making public” the “miracle.” It is a sentiment expressed in many other ex-votos, testifying to the divine benevolence of this or that saint. It is also one of the emotions that anchor this dissertation—the gratitude felt and expressed by ordinary people for divine intercession in dangerous situations. Why did Gilberto feel the need to make his gratitude to the Lord of the Lightning Bolt public? What was his rationale for having the painting made? In other words, 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 made clear their sincere 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 Europe and America, but Mexican painted ex-votos are particularly abundant and vibrant. Generally made by self-taught 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.

Another way this personal relationship with the supernatural is expressed in Mexico is through children’s nineteenth- and early twentieth-century funerary photography, although the ideas expressed in such images are based in grief, not gratitude. When a child died, its parents and godparents would have a photograph taken, commemorating a little life lost. The practice of visually commemorating a child’s death has a number of commonalities with ex-votos. Both practices are based on images, which, as we will see, is a hallmark of Mexican Catholicism. *Angelitos*, as these photographs (and the babies who are their subject) are known, make a clear association between deceased children and angels—heavenly beings like the saints to whom ex-votos are offered. Thus, both the devotional paintings and the postmortem photographs 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

¹ Aurora Díaz de León Romero and María Rosalina Gallegos Ramos, *Testimonios de fe en el arte popular. Los exvotos del Señor de los Rayos de Aguascalientes* (Municipio de Aguascalientes, Mexico, 2000), frontispiece. Text reads: “Doy infinitas gracias al Sr. de los Rayos por haberme Protegido en una peligrosa Caída de una escalera. Hago Publico su gran Milagro. Sr. Gilberto Nieves, Aguascalientes, Ags. 8 de enero de 1967.”

colonial period, and became “popularized” in the nineteenth century due to technological changes that allowed non-elites to access them. Finally, there is a shared impulse toward “making public” the event, whether it is a miracle or a death.

In this dissertation I make three interrelated arguments. The first, upon which the other two rest, is that Mexican popular devotion was neither the exclusive province of the elite nor of the poor, but rather was experienced in intertwining and mutually-dependent ways by members of different social classes. Second, I demonstrate the continued centrality of Catholic holy beings to all Mexicans after independence and into the twentieth century, exploring the changing context in which that continued focal point could operate, a world that we can loosely characterize as “modernizing.” “Modernizing” was evident in several spheres: in the urban landscape, in transportation, in politics, the economy, in technology, and in the institutional church; I deal with all of these as they relate to Catholic material culture. My third point is that one aspect of modernization, technological change, was especially important in the changing ways that people expressed their religiosity. The availability of industrially produced paints, inexpensive tinned metal sheets, and the invention of the photographic camera in the nineteenth century allowed for a “democratization” of the access people had to representations of the divine. Both of these artistic traditions, I argue, were appropriated by non-elites to form new, “popular” traditions. In other words, traditional religiosity—with its processions, pilgrimages, and other saint-oriented devotional practices—not only survived but actually flourished in the nineteenth century, making use of new technologies rather than being overwhelmed by them. This particularly Catholic accommodation with modernity is most visible in an increase in ex-votos left at shrines and in the creativity of turning the camera into a means of religious expression, but it is also seen in the augmented negotiations over the proper role of religion in public life. I explore the reasons for these phenomena and conclude that despite the apparent paradox of continuing and increased “traditional” religious practices in a secularizing world, affirmations of traditional Catholicism were in fact a way of assimilating the modern world for both the institutional church and for laypeople. I now turn to an overview of ex-votos in Mexico, the analysis of which is the center of gravity of the dissertation, before further expanding on these ideas.

Ex-votos in Mexico: An Overview

The word ex-voto is derived from the Latin term for a promise (voto) fulfilled/completed (ex). They are objects offered to divine beings when favors are sought or thanks are given for favors received. They 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. The pilgrimage itself can be the means by which the promise is fulfilled, but many pilgrims also take physical objects to leave as offerings; 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.²

Ex-votos can be pictorial representations, descriptive paintings such as the one in the opening example, or they can be more abstract, such as small metal figures depicting various parts of the body that the devotee offers in thanks for a saint having healed the body part in question. Other offerings vary from a braid of hair given by a daughter in thanks for a saint having cured her father of his vices, thus bringing harmony to the household (figure 1.2); crutches or plaster casts given by someone healed by a saint; wedding dresses offered by women who had almost lost hope of ever finding a husband, soccer jerseys offered as thanks for a favorite team's victory (figure 1.3); copies of hard-earned (or miraculously-begotten) documents such as high school diplomas, proofs of military service, or green cards, and, perhaps most poignantly, umbilical cords, baby clothes, and photographs left by tremendously relieved new parents (figure 1.4). In all cases they 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.³ "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].⁴

² Eli Bartra, "Fe y género. La imagería popular en los exvotos pintados," in *México en el imaginario*, coords. Carmen Nava and Mario Alejandro Carrillo (México, D.F.: 1995), Marianne Bélard and Philippe Verrier, *Los exvotos del Occidente de México* (El Colegio de Michoacán/Centre Français D'Études Mexicaines et Centreaméricaines, 1996), Jorge Durand and Douglas Massey, *Miracles on the Border: Retablos of Mexican Migrants to the United States*. (University of Arizona Press, 1995), Gloria Fraser Giffords, *Mexican Folk Retablos* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992 [1974]), Elin Luque Agraz, *El arte de dar gracias: Los exvotos pictóricos de la Virgen de la Soledad de Oaxaca* (México, D.F.: Centro de Cultura Casa Lamm, 2007), Elin Luque and Michele M. Beltrán. *El arte de dar gracias: Selección de exvotos pictóricos del Museo de la Basílica de Guadalupe/The Art of Giving Thanks: A Selection of Pictorial Exvotos in the Collection of the Museum of the Basílica of Guadalupe* (México, D.F.: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2003), Roberto Montenegro, *Retablos de México/Mexican Votive Paintings* (México, D.F.: Ediciones Mexicanas, 1950), María J. Rodríguez-Shadow, "Women's Prayers: The Aesthetics and Meaning of Female Votive Paintings in Chalma," in Eli Bartra, ed., *Crafting Gender: Women and Folk Art in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Duke University Press, 2003), Graciela Romandía Cantú, *Exvotos y milagros mexicanos* (México, D.F.: Compañía Cerillera La Central, S.A., 1978), and Rosa María Sánchez Lara, *Los retablos populares: Exvotos pintados* (México, DF: UNAM, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 1990) are some of the classic studies of the ex-voto phenomenon.

³ Thomas Calvo, "Milagros, milagrosos y retablos: introducción al estudio de los exvotos del occidente de México," in Bélard and Verrier, *Los exvotos del occidente de México*, p. 16.

⁴ 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 ternera del mismo color y un torete de trabajo pinto de amarillo y blanco. Con

This attitude of bartering, of negotiating with holy beings, echoes medieval and early modern practices such as coercing, humiliating and punishing intransigent saints.⁵ 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.

Retablos, as these ex-voto paintings are often known in Mexico,⁶ are usually composed of three elements: an image of the saint being thanked, a depiction of the dangerous situation in which the supplicant found him- or herself, and an explanatory text describing the situation. Stylistically, these paintings show wide range. Based on colonial prototypes painted by artists working on commission, ex-voto paintings became popularized in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when industrial paints and cheap tin-plated substrates became available and thus accesible to a wider consumer base. Most were painted by professional *retablo*-makers (who, while they were specialized artists, were generally not formally or academically trained) but many recent *retablos* evince a do-it-yourself aesthetic that incorporates photographs and even photocopies into hand-drawn images based on popular religious prints.

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.

⁵ 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.

⁶ A more accurate term is “pictorial ex-voto,” that is, an image that expresses thanks to a saint for a favor granted. The term *retablo* is more widely recognized as meaning the carved and gilded altarpieces seen in churches. Still further complicating the terminology is the use of *retablo* to refer to the small devotional paintings of saints placed on home altars in Mexico. For the sake of simplicity, I use the term *retablo* to refer only to the types of devotional images described above, and which are known as *retablos* only in Mexico.



Figure 1.2: Offering to San Francisco de Asís, Church of San Francisco de Asís, San Luis Potosí, 1996. (Source: Photo by the author).⁷



Figure 1.3: Wedding dresses, soccer jerseys, and other offerings at Basilica de Nuestra Señora de San Juan de los Lagos, Jalisco. (Source: Zarur and Lovell, *Art and Faith in Mexico*).

⁷ Inscription reads, “Octubre-4 de (illeg.) San Francisco de Acis te doy gracias por aber cambiado la suerte de mis padres yo te prometi mi trensa ci mi papa no tomaba ni fumaba y tu lo lograste por medio de este retablo te expreso mi agradecimiento vendicenos Adriana Lopez Martinez.”



Figure 1.4: Shrine of Nuestra Señora de los Remedios, Naucalpan, 2001. The umbilical cords are in plastic bags hanging among other offerings (Source: Photo by author)

A striking aspect of *retablo* production in Mexico is its longevity and its roots in multiple religious traditions. Over the course of more than 500 years of the Spanish presence in America, the societies that formed out of the meeting of various Amerindian, European and African groups took on characteristics specific to their unique combinations of cultural backgrounds. Political conquest and forced conversions to Christianity were part of the American story, as were the various ways in which immigrants from Europe and Africa, as well as Native Americans, responded to these imposed changes in their circumstances and integrated new ways of thinking into their respective outlooks. To be sure, the religious tradition with the most obvious influence in the physical appearance of Mexican *retablos* is a Mediterranean Catholic one, but the contributions of Native American and African sensibilities must not be discounted, since they, too, have impacted the development of Mexican religious culture in important ways. Mexican political and social structures have changed dramatically over time, but *retablos* have been produced since the colonial period, with an apparent increase in production throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and continue to be created to this day. Some of the physical aspects of *retablos* have changed, but the underlying ideas about the nature of the universe and of the connection between human and divine remain quite constant. The continued production of ex-votos at Mexican shrines to this day attests to evolving, yet stable themes in the religious and cultural traditions of this dynamic and diverse society.



Figure 1.5: Milagros from Colonia, Uruguay, Church of San Benito, 2008 (Source: Photo by author)

Archaeological findings show evidence that the practice of leaving wax or metal amulets at shrines became widespread among the Romans and Roman and Visigothic Iberia. Martha Egan writes, “It is thought that Iberian milagros were offered to a deity in solicitation of a favor; later, in the Christian era in Spain, the offering primarily was made in thanks for a favor granted.”⁸ However, my own research shows mixed findings about the practice of leaving milagros in Catholic Mexico; some seem to be left as offerings of thanks, while others, accompanied by handwritten notes, seem to fall into the category of a request. In either case, the central idea remains one of mutual reciprocation between human and divine; of showing the saint one’s devotion by leaving a small token in the hope that he or she will reciprocate.

⁸ Egan, pp. 9-10; citing Teodoro Vidal, *Los milagros en metal y cera en Puerto Rico*. San Juan: Ediciones Alba, 1972, p. 19.



Figure 1.6: Milagros Gallery, San Antonio, Texas (Source: Egan, *Milagros*, 47)

In Mexico, this kind of artifact is known as the *milagro*, or miracle.⁹ Milagros are a kind of charm or amulet in the shape of human body parts, animals, and various *accoutrements* of material life, including cars, wagons, and houses (figure 1.5). When something is wrong with a person or farm animal physically, or when a person lacks the cash needed for repairing or purchasing a vehicle or house, a milagro pinned to the robe of a saint's image expresses to that holy being the devotee's request for divine assistance to procure well-being. Milagros in Mexico are generally made of metal, but in other parts of Latin America, and historically in other parts of the world, wax and wood have also been used for their manufacture. They symbolize the person's wishes for respite from physical or financial hardship, and their public display communicates the devotee's faith in the power of that saint to restore the believer's well being. Widespread in Latin America since the early colonial period, as seen in this oil painting from seventeenth-century Puebla (figure 1.6), the practice of adorning an image of a holy being with a milagro continues to the present at many Mexican shrines and churches.¹⁰

Gloria Giffords, in her seminal work on Mexican tin-plate devotional art, presents a model of trickle-down artistic diffusion, in which ex-votos in the colonial period were created by and for elites, who had the means to afford these commissioned paintings on canvas, while "the poorer classes had to be content with small images painted on wooden panels or crude canvases by themselves or by artists of little or no training."¹¹ In the late eighteenth century, the metallurgical technology that applied a thin coat of tin to a leaf of iron was perfected, and by the

⁹ For a good overview of milagros in Latin America, see Martha Egan, *Milagros: Votive Offerings from the Americas* (Museum of New Mexico Press, 1991).

¹⁰ See Egan, p. 47. See also James Griffith, *Beliefs and Holy Places: A Spiritual Geography of the Pimería Alta* (University of Arizona Press, 1992).

¹¹ Gloria Fraser Giffords, *Mexican Folk Retablos* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992 [1974]), p. 3.

1830s these tin sheets were becoming the favored medium of *retablo* painters.¹² Both *retablo* painters and their customers were no doubt attracted by the price and suitability of the new medium for creating affordable devotional art, and many nineteenth- and twentieth-century ex-votos, in their pictorial and linguistic conventions, seem to support the argument that ex-voto art in Mexico changed from an elite to a popular form in the early 1800s. “By far the greatest numbers of ex-votos were produced for the masses, for after the custom became popular with the illiterate classes it was abandoned by the wealthy.”¹³

However, this kind of diffusionist model, in which elites invent a tradition only to recoil from it once the rabble adopts it, obscures the interplays between elite and popular forms of religiosity. At the shrine of Our Lord of Chalma, in the State of Mexico and an important pilgrimage site since pre-Hispanic times, for example, both rich and poor devotees have been leaving ex-votos testifying to the efficacy of this image of Christ on the cross for centuries. In addition to a small outdoor gallery housing recent painted or handwritten ex-votos, the church has a private museum holding an assortment of treasures, such as priests’ vestments embroidered in gold and a large collection of crowns of thorns made of gold or silver. These expensive crowns of thorns were given as ex-votos by pious devotees, mostly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁴ Generous gifts such as these objects made of precious metals were only one way in which elite devotional practices mirrored, or reflected, popular practices. The vestments in the museum were also donated by pious parishioners, hoping for a respite from Purgatory in light of their gifts to the church.

¹² Giffords (1992).

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

¹⁴ Interview with Padre Gregorio Ibarra, priest and curator of the museum at Chalma, on November 20, 2009.

Meanwhile, the museum, which is not open to the public, also houses three ex-voto paintings, from 1875, 1877, and 1884, that all attest to the devotion of the poor.



Figure 1.7: The Attack of Enrique Gallardo, Museum of the Order of Augustinians, Shrine of Chalma (Photo by Gerardo Cortina)

The painting above, for example, details the experience of a farmer who, upon leaving his field for the day, was shot by an unknown assailant.¹⁵ While the condition of the painting leaves much of the text illegible, what is clear is that the farmer attributed his survival of the attack to the Lord of Chalma, a favor he repaid by having the event commemorated in an ex-voto. In the depiction of the assault, the protagonist faces away from his attacker while approaching the image of his savior, a pictorial device that effectively communicates the farmer's perception that the Christ of Chalma is a being to whom he can turn in times of trouble.

Ex-voto art in Mexico reflects the particular historical circumstances of the time in which the paintings were produced. The number of ex-votos produced in Mexico seems to have increased significantly during the colonial period, and then exploded sometime in the mid-nineteenth century. In part this apparent increase can be explained by their physical deterioration

¹⁵ El día 6 de Enero de 1777 acaia..el que saliendo de la milpa Enrique Gallardo recibio un balazo de una pistola. de...de un malhechor...(illeg.). Museum of the Order of Augustinians, Shrine of Chalma, Edo. de México, 2008. Photograph by Gerardo Cortina.

and their periodic removal from the churches where they were displayed, but the other factor involved in the surge is the democratization of 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, ex-votos were now accessible to average people, whether they painted them themselves or hired a professional ex-voto painter to make them.¹⁶

The upsurge in ex-voto production in the late nineteenth century 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 apparent secularization of the modern world. Following a forty-year period of 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 in what is known as the War of the Reform. One of the *Reforma*'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 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. 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 a personal 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.

Paralleling the upsurge in ex-voto production, advances in technology in the nineteenth century allowed for a democratization of *angelitos* imagery. Moreover, the state's ever-increasing pressure on the church facilitated the development of the tradition of postmortem photography in that the church's priorities were not focused on shaping or controlling popular religious expression (at least not to the degree that they had been at the height of its power), but rather institutional survival. These plaintive expressions of sorrow, heavily influenced by Catholic theology, were the people's—not the clergy's—way of coming to terms with death and the afterlife. As with ex-votos, their commemorative function hints at a growing sense of individuality in Mexican society; ex-votos celebrate a miracle, while photographs of *angelitos*, in a sense, immortalize a dead child. Both art forms are based on the perception that no matter how humble the individual who commissioned the image, that individual's story matters, and is worth

¹⁶ 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.

making public. In the following section, I explore the rationale for expressing personal stories through visual media, and for Mexicans' particular proclivities for sacred images.

An Image-Based Religious Tradition

In order to understand the importance of visual expressions of faith such as ex-votos and photographs of *angelitos*, it must be stressed that Mexican Catholicism is a fundamentally image-based religious tradition.¹⁷ Images of holy figures—in churches and on private home altars—have long been a central focus of Mexican Catholics, a manifestation of the Council of Trent's directives to revitalize the Roman Church in the face of the Protestant Reformation. Images were a highly useful tool for fomenting religious devotion among European Catholics as well as new converts in the Americas, and in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies they quickly became focal points of Catholic devotional practices. The faithful of all social classes wept at the sight of Christ's agony and the Virgin Mary's grief, images that were reproduced and recreated in myriad forms over the course of Spanish rule in Mexico and shaped the colonial society's mentalities.

The reasons for this proclivity to images in the Catholic mentality are manifold. Since the early days of the institutional church, theologians had argued for the usefulness of images in spreading the faith among the largely illiterate populations of Europe.¹⁸ 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, 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* 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰

¹⁷ This line of thinking has informed Clara García Ayuardo, "A World of Images: Cult, Ritual, and Society in Colonial Mexico City," in *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico*, ed. William Beezley, Cheryl English Martin, and William E. French (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1994); and Serge Gruzinski, *Images at War: Mexico from Columbus to Blade Runner (1492-2019)*. Translated by Heather MacLean (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001).

¹⁸ David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (University of Chicago Press, 1989); David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (University of California Press, 1998).

¹⁹ William Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton, 1981).

²⁰ 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

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.²¹ The Council of Trent, which convened three times, in 1545-47, 1551-52, and 1562-63, represented the Catholic church's response to the Protestant threat, whose purveyors could no longer be stopped by the waning power of the accusation of heresy. 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.²² 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.²³ Images of Catholic saints were useful tools in the sixteenth-century conversion projects in the Americas, as missionaries introduced the Indians 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. Images of the Virgin of Guadalupe came to be associated with a specifically creole/Mexican identity in the eighteenth century.²⁴

Ex-votos and *angelitos* form a part of this history of culturally and even politically important images. While Mexican retablo painters show considerable creativity in creating scenes tailored to a specific story, one constant in ex-votos is the inclusion of instantly recognizable images of the holy figures to whom the devotees dedicate their salvation and their votive offerings. Whether an ex-voto is dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe, The Holy Child of Atocha, or the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos, the viewer is able to identify the source of the devotee's salvation from its iconography (and usually the inclusion of the saint's name in the text). These iconographic models were made possible by the extensive production and

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).

²¹ J. H. Elliott, *Imperial Spain 1469-1716* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1990 [1963]): 212-216. Erasmianism, so popular with Spanish intellectuals in the mid-sixteenth century, became a major point of contention for more narrowly orthodox circles in Castile. While there was nothing heretical about the doctrines of Erasmus, the stress on "the inward aspects of religion at the expense of forms and ceremonies" linked it with Lutheranism (215). That link was coupled with xenophobic currents which made both philosophies suspect.

²² Elliott 1990: 216-224, and Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art* (New York: Knopf, 1959). Elliott discusses at length "the imposition of orthodoxy," not directly regarding Tridentine views on art, but more with respect to the mentality of the Inquisition, based as it was on fear, mistrust, and an unbending insistence on conformity.

²³ Hauser, pp. 120-21.

²⁴ On this phenomenon, see Solange Alberro, *El águila y la cruz. Orígenes religiosos de la conciencia criolla. México, siglos XVI-XVII* (México: El Colegio de México, 1999); D.A. Brading, *Mexican Phoenix. Our Lady of Guadalupe: Image and Tradition Across Five Centuries* (Cambridge University Press, 2001); and William B. Taylor, "The Virgin of Guadalupe in New Spain: An Inquiry into the Social History of Marian Devotion," *American Ethnologist* 14: 1 (February, 1987): 9-33.

dissemination of prints in both New Spain and independent Mexico. From an aesthetic perspective, one way in which established visual paradigms make their way from one segment of society to another is through the medium of prints and engravings.²⁵ Prints were useful in the conversion of Indians to Christianity in the earliest period of the Spanish presence in America; they continued to be useful in the later colony as a way to unify creoles 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 an image tacked up in a corner of his workshop long ago. In this same way, the devotee who commissioned an ex-voto knew what to look for upon receipt of the finished product, and could immediately ascertain whether his or her retablo was “correct.” Thus prints made use of elements and themes already familiar—“popular”—in the cultural repertoire, and further popularized them.

Ex-votos thus made use of imagery already familiar in the cultural repertoire and further entrenched it in the collective mentality. The more ex-votos dedicated to the Lord of Chalma that adorned the walls of his sanctuary, the more powerful he came to be seen and known throughout the land. The first images and certain local cults introduced by missionaries or priests took on a life of their own, growing apparently organically, without active promotion by the church hierarchy. This is not to say that active promotion by the institutional church was absent; rather that for its own public relations reasons, the church did not advertise the promotion of devotions to saints as such.²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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.²⁸

²⁵ 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*, ed. Elizabeth Netto Calil Zarur and Charles Muir Lovell (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001).

²⁶ 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).

²⁷ 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, 1981a); and William B. Taylor, *Magistrates of the Sacred: Priests and Parishioners in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (Stanford University Press, 1996).

²⁸ The literature on this reciprocal relationship between people and their gods is seemingly endless, both in anthropological and historical works on Native Americans’ responses to Christianity and in the European context. See, to begin with, Caroline Brettell, “The Priest and His People: The Contractual Basis for Religious Practice in Rural Portugal,” in Ellen Badone, ed., *Religious Orthodoxy and Popular Faith in European Society* (Princeton, 1990); Nancy Farriss, *Maya Society under Colonial Rule: the Collective Enterprise of Survival* (Princeton, 1984); Elsa Cecilia Frost, “Indians and Theologians: Sixteenth-Century Spanish Theologians and Their Concept of the Indigenous Soul,” in *South and Meso-American Native Spirituality*, ed. Gary Gossen, with Miguel León-Portilla (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983); Manuel Marzal, “Transplanted Spanish Catholicism,” in *South and Meso-American Native Spirituality*; James Lockhart, *Los Nahuas después de la Conquista. Historia*

The Power of Images: Some Theoretical Influences

Visual culture is not created in a vacuum. From Paleolithic cave paintings to the images of late twentieth-century mass media, the images produced by painters, sculptors, illustrators, and graphic designers are in large part a reflection of the culture and society in which the artists live. The cultural values that surround the artist—whether he or she subscribes to them or opposes them—inevitably influence the images he or she produces. But this understanding of how images are created is only part of the story. What are people's reactions, or, as the art historian David Freedberg puts it, their responses to an image?²⁹ How are images “seen,” received, processed, and considered? Freedberg analyzes a wide range of works of art created by people living in highly varied societies and asks about the relationship between images and their beholders. He considers

the active, outwardly markable responses of beholders, as well as the beliefs (insofar as they are capable of being recorded) that motivate them to specific actions and behavior....we must consider not only beholders' symptoms and behavior, but also the effectiveness, efficacy, and vitality of images themselves....not only what people do as a result of their relationship with image[s], but also what they expect image[s] to achieve, and why they have such expectations at all.³⁰

What *do* people “expect” from images? Are pictures merely decorative, or are they, as Freedberg suggests, loaded with symbols that trigger personal and societal reactions? In the case of Catholic Mexico, religious images are endowed with some sort of hold over the collective mentality of a society. The art historian David Morgan, writing about the religious imagery of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Protestant and Catholic North America, ponders the capacity of images to make “real” what they depict.³¹ In a discussion of mass-produced religious images, such as Warner Sallmann's iconic *Head of Christ*, he asserts that such images “were not simply about the private sentiments of those who admired them; they were the very means of making concrete, uniform, and universal the memories and feelings that define the individual.”³² Colonial Mexican paintings and statues of saints were created before the age of industrial mass-

social y cultural de la población indígena del México central, siglos XVI-XVIII, trad. Roberto Reyes Mazzoni (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999); Serge Gruzinski, “Normas cristianas y respuestas indígenas: apuntes para el estudio del proceso de occidentalización entre los indios de Nueva España,” *Historias* 15 (1986): 31-41; Gruzinski, *The Conquest of Mexico: The Incorporation of Indian Societies into the Western World, 16th-18th Centuries*, trans. Eileen Corrigan (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993); William B. Taylor, *Magistrates*.

²⁹ David Freedberg, *The Power of Images*.

³⁰ Freedberg, xxii.

³¹ David Morgan, *Visual Piety*.

³² Morgan, p. 17.

production, but they too were reproduced on a large scale, and cheap religious prints and wood, clay, or papier mâché sculptures of saints—the preindustrial equivalent of the kind of mass-produced religious images Morgan discusses—were widely circulated. In the nineteenth century, mass-production became possible, yet people continued to commission individual portraits commemorating their miracles and their children.

Freedberg, too, addresses this issue of how images express, and thereby make concrete, certain collectively held ideas in various societies. In his discussion of what he calls “making images work,” he raises a number of questions about how images’ power is manifested.³³ Particularly with religious images, he argues, viewers’ responses to images are “predicated on the perception that what is represented in an image is actually present, or present in it.”³⁴ Freedberg, Morgan, and others address the social construction of reality and how images contribute to that construction. Along these lines, Freedberg considers the implications of the physical (but also psychological) treatment of holy images. One avenue into this query is what he labels the consecration of images: that washing, anointing, adorning, and dedicating images seems somehow to contribute to their efficacy. “People do not garland, wash, or crown images just out of habit; they do so because all such acts are symptoms of a relationship between image and respondent that is clearly predicated on the attribution of powers which transcend the purely material aspect of the object.”³⁵ This association of some sort of efficaciousness is particularly strong in the case of miraculous images, which are known by all to have the power to grant wishes, heal the sick, and otherwise intervene in human affairs. But what, exactly, that which is “known by all”? Does a miraculous image “work” because of some aspect of its appearance, or because of a relic that is associated with it, or does this distinction even matter? Freedberg argues that perhaps an image works because everyone knows that it had always worked, effectively defining that which is “known by all” as a societal collective memory, one that is passed down from generation to generation and that transcends any distinction between oral culture and written culture—while both oral and written memories reinforce each other, this collective memory could almost be said to be innate, something that exists independently of an “official” story. A “popular” miracle story may have many elements of “official” religion, extrapolated perhaps from the Bible, but also has elements of the “local” culture, and indeed, “local” culture has influenced theological writings to a great degree.³⁶ As Freedberg points out, “images work *because* they are consecrated, but at the same time they work *before* they are consecrated,” a contention that supports the overarching idea that a societal collective memory dictates, to a large extent, people’s response to images.³⁷

Serge Gruzinski has argued that images were one of the principal tools of the conquest and the subsequent shaping of a colonial society.³⁸ Echoing, but going further than either

³³ Freedberg, pp. 82-98.

³⁴ Freedberg, 30.

³⁵ Freedberg, p. 91.

³⁶ William Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton University Press, 1981).

³⁷ Freedberg, p. 98.

³⁸ Serge Gruzinski, *Images at War: Mexico from Columbus to Blade Runner* (Duke University Press, 2001).

Freedberg or Morgan, Gruzinski argues that images create and govern reality. His is a vision of one society imposing its images, and thus its world-view, on another, with little consideration of the kinds of negotiations between colonizers and colonized that informed the creation of religious imagery. However, his book is useful for the study of the effects of images on their viewers, albeit it is one that addresses the politics of image-making more than it does Freedberg's ideas about response or Morgan's conceptions of interactivity and reception.

Cultural Production: More Theoretical Influences

If religious images were important to Mexican Catholics, so, too, was the conception of the Virgin Mary, Christ, and the saints as beneficent intercessory figures before a remote and judging God. It was a belief that crossed class and racial boundaries in colonial and independent Mexico, and one that has endured to the present. An older tradition of scholarship viewed the elite and the popular as two separate realms of culture, but more recently scholars have emphasized the extent to which it is somewhat misleading to draw too-sharp distinctions between elite and popular forms of piety, or any form of cultural expression, for that matter. In my work, I have found this scholarship that has tended to blur the lines between "high" and "low" culture to be very helpful, especially to thinking of that relationship as changing over time.³⁹

Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of the pre-Lenten festivities of Carnival in Europe offers an intriguing model of circularity in the cultural expressions of elites and the poor.⁴⁰ In his formulation, what may have begun as an elite form of cultural expression is appropriated and adapted by the lower classes, to create a new, dynamic, and fluid form. The pendulum may then shift back to elite interpretations of the popular tradition. To cite a relevant example, Mexican folk traditions (as part of a generalized interest in *indigenismo* by Mexico's intelligentsia) were eagerly appropriated by fine artists with revolutionary leanings in the 1920s and 30s as a way of redefining national identity; Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo are two notable examples. Rivera and his contemporaries championed Mexican folk traditions, and a number of Kahlo's paintings recall some of the stylistic conventions seen in "popular" retablos.⁴¹ As I discuss in the previous section, engravings or prints were key to the circulation, familiarization, and popularization of

³⁹ The literature on popular culture is extensive. Some of the works I have drawn on include Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 1978); Natalie Zemon Davis, "Toward Mixtures and Margins," *The American Historical Review* 97, no. 5: 1409-1416, 1992; Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982); Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error* (New York: G. Braziller, 1978); and Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Harvard University Press, 1990), and "The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and its Audiences" *The American Historical Review* 97, no. 5: 1369-1399.

⁴⁰ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968).

⁴¹ Kahlo was an avid collector of Mexican ex-votos, many of which can be seen in the Casa Azul, her childhood home and now a museum, in Mexico City.

the iconographies of various saints and motifs in both colonial and independent Mexico. The promotion by these and other artists of Mexican folk traditions in the post-revolutionary period, as part of a national discourse on *lo mexicano*, helped foment an acceptance of art forms and folklore that had previously been disdained by upper-class Mexicans as backwards and anti-modern. Perhaps unwittingly, the aesthetics of Mexico's heavily ornamented and gilded Baroque churches, with their expressive, dramatic altars and decorations, were re-worked in the popular mentality to become *de rigueur* elements of sacred art; by the time that nineteenth-century elites began to favor the starker Neoclassical look in art and architecture, the lower classes had enthusiastically made the exuberant Baroque their own. The process came full circle with the aforementioned revolutionary artists and their Mexican and French intellectual influences, and the subsequent increase in the collection and academic study of Mexico's rich folk artistic heritage.⁴² In Bakhtin's formulation, then, it is not a question of a "top-down" imposition of culture or a "bottom-up" diffusion, but instead a dynamic and ever-changing interplay between the various members of society, all of whom contribute to the creation of culture.

Another body of scholarship that has been helpful to me concerns a rethinking of modernity as a linear project or occurrence. The nineteenth century saw a continuation of efforts at modernization by both the church and the state in the late eighteenth century, and these efforts became more pronounced in the nineteenth as Mexico became an independent nation. The mid-century *Reforma* effectively instilled a liberal vision of what a modern nation should look like: secular and free of church interference in politics. In Mexico, however, evidence of secularization is found only at the official, institutional, level. While both state and church made concerted efforts to "modernize," Mexican Catholicism was in many ways a resilient and tradition-bound belief system, whose practices showed a continued strong attachment to the saints and the rituals of colonial times. What Solange Alberro described as the "permanent imprint of archaic worldviews," expressed in nineteenth-century ex-votos, is another way of saying that Mexican folk religion was tradition-bound and resistant to change, even in the face of modernization.⁴³

Religious practices that shed an alternative light on popular mentalities of the time include an upsurge in reported apparitions in the second half of the nineteenth century, those in Mexico echoing and paralleling similar incidents in France, both phenomenologically and politically. Well-known apparitions in France, such as Lourdes, were embraced by the institutional church, which used them to galvanize the pious against secularizing trends that

⁴² The French surrealist Jean Charlot was an early advocate of Mexican folk art; his writings were a major influence on Rivera and the Mexican artist-ethnologist Gerardo Murillo, better known as Dr. Atl. See *Artes de México* v. 53, 2000. See also Diego Rivera, "Los retablos: verdadera, actual y única expresión pictórica del pueblo mexicano," *Mexican Folkways* no. 3, Oct.-Nov. 1925.

⁴³ Solange Alberro, "Retablos and Popular Religion in Nineteenth-Century Mexico," in *Art and Faith in Mexico: The Nineteenth-Century Retablo Tradition*, ed. Elizabeth Netto Calil Zarur and Charles Muir Lovell (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), p. 60. See also Benjamin T. Smith, *The Roots of Conservatism in Mexico: Catholicism, Society, and Politics in the Mixteca Baja, 1750-1962* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012).

began with the French Revolution and, in Europe, culminated in the Revolutions of 1848.⁴⁴ This strategy was also employed in Mexico. Once the Mexican church began to recover from the blow of the Reforma, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, it too promoted mass pilgrimages to established shrines, such as the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the church of the Holy Child of Atocha.⁴⁵ Such pilgrimages were seen as an antidote to the “poisonous” liberal legislation that sought to remove religion not only from politics, but also from public life. Meanwhile, many ordinary Mexicans ignored the liberal rhetoric calling for the removal of religion from public life and continued to honor and worship the *santos* as their holy status required.⁴⁶

Edward Wright-Rios, in his work on religious modernity in Porfirian Oaxaca, argues that the church was modernizing in tandem with popular religiosity; the purveyors of the apparitions he cites were “modern” in some ways, even as they were traditional.⁴⁷ In visual culture, this continued commitment to traditional Catholicism was seen in a veritable flood of ex-votos (many of which alluded or responded to political, social, technological, or economic “modernizations”) being deposited at shrines as material testimonies of *mandas* fulfilled, of the personal relationships between humans and their saints made public. Modernity came to Mexico in fits and starts, and never precluded the continuation of traditional beliefs and practices. Rather, much like the “divide” between official and popular, tradition and modernity intertwined and interacted in a kind of yin-and-yang relationship: one was an essential component of the other, and depended on the other’s existence for its own.

A Note on Sources, and an Overview of Chapters

In the course of researching this dissertation, I encountered a great deal of difficulty in finding written sources pertaining to ex-votos. These material testimonies of the power of a particular saint to work miracles are a rich source for documenting religious devotions, but due

⁴⁴ See Ralph Gibson, *A Social History of French Catholicism 1789-1914* (Routledge, 1989); Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (New York: Penguin Compass, 2000 [1999]); and Raymond Jonas, *France and the Cult of the Sacred Heart: An Epic Tale for Modern Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

⁴⁵ AHAM, Base de Pelagio Antonio de Labastida y Dávalos, Caja 88, exp. 41. Sección: Secretaría Arzobispal, Serie: Circulares. 1874. Peregrinaciones en espíritu á los mas celebres santuarios del orbe catolico. For more on the 1874 call for *peregrinaciones en espíritu* see also AHAM, Base de Pelagio Antonio de Labastida y Dávalos, Caja 86, exp. 7, Sección: Secretaría Arzobispal, Serie: Conventos; Caja 86, exp. 14, Sección: Secretaría Arzobispal, Serie: Parroquias, Tepotzotlán; Caja 86, exp. 54. Sección: Secretaría Arzobispal, Serie: Parroquias, Acambay; Caja 86, exp. 65. Sección: Secretaría Arzobispal, Serie: Parroquias, Tultepec; and Pedro Loza, *Carta Pastoral del Ilustrísimo Señor, Arzobispo de Guadalajara, sobre Peregrinaciones*. Guadalajara: Tip. de N. Parga, 1874. Universidad de Nuevo León, digital collection. See also Juan Javier Pescador, *Crossing Borders with the Santo Niño de Atocha*. University of New Mexico Press, 2009.

⁴⁶ Terry Rugeley, *Of Wonders and Wise Men* (University of Texas, 2001).

⁴⁷ Edward Wright-Rios, *Revolutions in Mexican Catholicism: Reform and Revelation in Oaxaca, 1887-1934* (Duke University Press, 2009).

to the “popular” nature of these objects I was unable to find written documentation in church or governmental archives. The church archives I consulted in Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Nativitas, Tlaxcala, contained no mention of ex-voto paintings; I found exactly one document at the Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado de México that referred to a silver object given as an offering, and it was from 1927.⁴⁸ With this one exception, they are never listed in church inventories of art, although there are occasional references to the objects left as offerings to various saints. Adapting to this dearth of written documentation, I amplified my investigation of Mexican spirituality by researching other devotional practices such as pilgrimages, processions, and those images which do receive mention in archival sources—statues of Virgins, Christs, and patron saints that were the objects of official and popular piety. Much of this work was done in the Historic Archive of the Archbishopric of Mexico (AHAM), the Historic Archive of the Federal District (AHDF), the National Library (BN), the National Newspaper Archive (HN), and, to a lesser extent, the National General Archive (AGN). At the core of my research, however, are the visual images themselves, and I was much more successful locating these than locating contemporary commentary on them. I drew on both published and unpublished sources for images. The collections of the Museo de la Basílica de Guadalupe, La Casa Azul, and the Museo Nacional de Arte in Mexico City; the Museum of the Basilica of Our Lady of Solitude (Oaxaca); and the shrines of the Virgin of the Remedies (Naucalpan, Edo. de México), Our Lord of Chalma (Edo. de México), the Lord of Villaseca (Mineral de Cata, Guanajuato), and St. Michael Archangel of the Miracles (Nativitas, Tlaxcala) were especially useful in the course of researching these images. I was not able to locate any private sources of photographs of *angelitos* in any of the collections of photographs I examined. For the *angelitos*, therefore, I relied exclusively on published sources, except for some of the demographic data on child mortality.

In Chapter 1, I trace the development of ex-voto art in colonial Mexico. Due to the scarcity of examples that have survived from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, I focus on the eighteenth, with an emphasis on the kinds of mentalities that are expressed in these paintings. I note that the commissioning of devotional art in this period was limited to people of at least some wealth. Poor people could and did experience miracles, of course, and almost certainly left offerings to their saints, but these offerings were of a more ephemeral nature and have not been conserved. At the same time, I consider the ways in which both elites and non-elites participated in “popular” religious culture; despite sharply drawn class distinctions in colonial society, religious culture was in many ways more democratic—in the sense of who participated in and experienced religious culture—than it would become in the nineteenth century, though for the poor, actively commissioning their own art (to give thanks or to express grief) was financially impossible.

In Chapter 2, I look at the political changes that came with Mexico’s independence from Spain, and explore the ways in which the transition from “colonial” to “modern” mentalities and

⁴⁸ AHAM, Base Luis María Martínez, Caja 41, Exp. 1, 1927. María de Jesús Villagran sobre un ex voto ofrecido al patriarca San José. The offering seems to have been a little house made of silver, which the donor requested be placed by the statue of St. Joseph in the Seminary College of Mexico City. The donor mentions that the funds for the manufacture of the ex-voto were collected from “various pious persons, devotees of the most chaste (*castísimo*) Saint Joseph.”

forms of cultural expression were not as sharp as the political break from the former imperial power. Key features of colonial religious life, such as processions organized to ask for divine intercession in some calamity or other, continued well into the nineteenth century, only to be abandoned with the restrictions imposed on the church by the Reforma. In this chapter, I also explore how technological changes contributed to the increased access to forms of religious expression formerly restricted to elites. This democratization came about slowly, but by mid-century, even the poor could afford to have a small, cheap painting made to honor their intercessory saints.

Chapter 3 focuses on the kinds of religious and cultural changes that came about during the rule of the dictator Porfirio Díaz, 1876-1910. The regime's motto was "Order and Progress," and economic modernization was its central aim. Modernization was also an important goal of the post-Reforma church, as the institution fought to survive in the face of the myriad attacks launched on it by liberals. However, despite these institutional efforts at modernization, popular religiosity remained fairly traditional in its expressions of faith. It is during this period that ex-voto production in Mexico skyrocketed, as did the custom of photographing dead babies.

Chapter 4 offers a more in-depth analysis of the ex-votos produced during the Porfiriato and later into the twentieth century. Not only did the number of paintings increase, but there was a discernable shift in the demographics of the people commissioning or making them. Judging by the clothing and surroundings, as well as by the frequent orthographic and grammatical errors in the text, many late nineteenth-century ex-votos seem to have been created by an economically disadvantaged and less educated clientele. In addition, more women than men seem to have been commissioning them. The increase in apparently lower class and female donors of ex-votos ties in with Mexico's urbanization and the proletarianization of the peasantry that was part and parcel of Díaz's project to modernize the country: wages may have been miserable and exploitative, but if necessary, they could be devoted to important acts of gratitude and the commemoration of grief. Just as the proletarianization of the Porfirian working class created a mass market for "luxury" goods for the masses such as cigarettes and beer, it also created a mass market for religious images.

In Chapter 5, I focus on the posthumous portraits of children. I trace the parallels this art form had with ex-votos, including the gradual changes in their commissioners' demographics that were made possible by advances in technology. Specifically, I examine the widening access to commemorative portraiture, the direct result of the invention of the photographic process. As the technology developed, it became more affordable, and allowed for even very poor people to have their portraits taken. As with ex-votos, an elite custom became a popular tradition, and elites increasingly abandoned these now "vulgar" expressions of mourning.

In an essay on retablos and popular religion in nineteenth-century Mexico, historian Solange Alberro touches on several key aspects of the religious mentality driving the ex-voto phenomenon in Mexico.⁴⁹ The perception that negative events occur for reasons beyond a

⁴⁹ Solange Alberro, "Retablos and Popular Religion in Nineteenth-Century Mexico," in *Art and Faith in Mexico: The Nineteenth-Century Retablo Tradition*, ed. Elizabeth Netto Calil Zarur and Charles Muir Lovell (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001).

person's control, that things just happen to people, is one: "...the 'accident' was not related to human causation and always emanated from fate or destiny (*fatalidad*), as it had during antiquity, indicating the permanent imprint of archaic worldviews...Human responsibility and autonomy practically disappear in this view of the world."⁵⁰ The diseases, violence, and accidents suffered by the givers of ex-votos or the parents of dead babies were inexplicable events that required a similarly inexplicable divine intervention for their remedy. The world was a dangerous and hostile place; to survive in it one needed the protection of supernatural beings.⁵¹ This attitude is not at all surprising, given the political instability and violence, the poor economic conditions, and the dismal state of health care throughout most of Mexican history. This dissertation explores both that dangerous world, and the way Catholics responded to it.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁵¹ This line of thinking appears also in Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*; Christian, *Apparitions and Local Religion*; and Larkin, *The Very Nature of God*.

Chapter 1

Colonial Ex-votos



Figure 2.1: The Spanish Galleon Nuestra Sra. del Guia's Journey from the Phillipines to Acapulco (Source: *Dones y promesas*, 1996, cat. 76, p. 48)

This eighteenth-century ex-voto painting (figure 2.1) recounts the ordeals of the crew of a Spanish galleon sailing from the Philippines to Acapulco, the first leg of the trade route that connected Asia, America, and Europe in the heyday of the Spanish empire.¹ A frightful storm

¹ The text reads, “Biniendo navegando delas Yslas Filipinas aeste Reyno el año de 1730 el Galeo nombrado Ntã. Sra. del Guia, acargo del Gr’ D. Fran.co Abarca y Baldes; enlos recios tiepos q.s.tuvo, fue uno vispera de S. Andrés, q faltando a la caña oeltimo q ya venia hecho pedaz.s; y estando entendiendo en su compostura, undevoto ofresió esta pintura a la SS. Virg.n de la Soledad de Oaxaca, silotraya apuerto de salvam.to. lo qual consiguio por su intercecion, después de seis meses ybeinte dias de navegacion; yen accion de gracias detal beneficio, cumplio supromessa, para mayor gloria de Dios. yhonrra de SS. Madre.” In English, “Sailing from the Philippine Isles to this Kingdom in the year 1730 the galleon named Our Lady of the Guide, commanded by General Don Francisco Abarca y Valdéz; in the harsh weather, it was the eve of St. Andrew, and having lost the last oar, which was smashed to pieces, and understanding his situation, a devotee offered this painting to the Most Holy Virgin of Solitude of Oaxaca, if she would bring him to port safely. Which (wish) he obtained by her intercession, after six months and twenty days of sailing; and in thanksgiving for this benefit, he fulfilled his promise, for the greater glory

knocked the ship off course and destroyed some of its equipment, leaving the crew adrift and completely at the mercy of the elements—or, in their conception, of Divine Will. Many no doubt prayed and pleaded for divine intervention, but one passenger, we know, not only struck a bargain with the Virgin of Solitude, patron saint of Oaxaca, but carried through on it: if she would steer the ship safely to shore, he would in turn bring her a painting to thank her for the miracle of delivering the galleon and its crew to safety. The Virgin heard him and took compassion on their plight, delivering them to shore after a harrowing journey that lasted nearly seven months. The anonymous passenger, meanwhile, kept his promise to make known the divine rescue, leaving the Virgin Mary, and us, a gorgeous visual testimonial of a miraculous event. More than a testimonial, however, this and other paintings like it indicate a particular mentality, in which fortune and misfortune are dictated by supernatural beings with real powers to influence human affairs. In this mentality, the natural and supernatural worlds are commingled, with the living and the dead interacting on a daily basis; this belief in the power of divine intervention, and of humans' contractual obligation to repay divine favor, is manifested in visually powerful ways in Mexican ex-votos.

The saint must be thanked. The divine is all around us—it acts upon our behalf, if we speak to it the right way. This belief is at the crux of the ex-voto tradition: a reciprocal arrangement that involves veneration and supplication from the humans, and a much-hoped-for benevolent response from the deity. In this chapter, we will look at ex-voto paintings from the colonial period from the perspective of the mentalities that drove their creation. While extant colonial ex-votos are few in comparison to the multitude that have survived from the nineteenth century and later, it was during the colonial period that the practice and the prototypes for this form of devotional art developed in Mexico. Moreover, popular Catholicism in the nineteenth and later centuries has been shaped in important ways by the religious culture of colonial Mexico. Thus, by examining ex-votos produced in the colonial period, we will be able to see what changed and what remained the same in post-independence religious culture in Mexico.

I make three central points in this chapter. First, based solely on visual evidence, the people commissioning ex-votos in the colonial period were better off financially than the majority of people who commissioned them in later years. The visual evidence for this classification is the portrayals of the donors wearing expensive-looking clothes and domestic scenes showcasing luxurious surroundings, as well as the frequent inclusion of the donors' titles of nobility and their compound, indicating elite, surnames. For a number of reasons, ranging from issues of physical preservation to aesthetic (and perhaps moral) judgments on the part of the priests who “curated” the collections of ex-votos in their churches, colonial ex-votos show the miracle stories and heavenly favors bestowed upon wealthy devotees. In a sense, then, the story of colonial-period ex-votos is an elite one. Later in this dissertation I show how the practice of commissioning ex-votos and *angelitos* became more “democratic,” in that more people could afford to create or sponsor them, and thus to participate in the religious culture in new ways.

of God, and the honor of his Holy Mother.” *Dones y promesas. 500 años de arte ofrenda (exvotos mexicanos)* (México: Centro Cultural Arte Contemporáneo, Fundación Cultural Televisa, 1996, cat. 76, p. 48).

My second point, which at first glance seems to directly contradict the first, is that religious culture in colonial Mexico was in some ways far more democratic than it became later, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What I mean by democratic in this context is that even while the only people able to afford to commission an ex-voto were “elites” in an economic sense, there was less of a distinction between elite and popular cultures in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries than there was later. While colonial Mexican society was highly stratified, people of all social classes participated in the same religious culture, which was centered on devotion to the images of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. Peter Burke has noted that the term “folk” culture is a fully modern invention in its adamant separation of the culture of the educated and that of everyone else; but, in fact, what we today term as “folk” songs or “folk” tales were not perceived as belonging exclusively to one social group in pre-industrial Europe.² The nobility and the common people mixed to a much greater extent than is now imagined; they frequented the same taverns, the same marketplaces, and they all participated in the same Carnival. In much the same way, colonial Mexicans of all social classes participated in a larger Novohispanic culture, which was largely defined by a Spanish Catholic religiosity. They attended the same Masses, in the same churches; they felt the same fervor toward particular saints, as evidenced by their attendance and participation in religious processions and in their personal possessions of religious images, whether these be dazzling, gilded paintings or cheap prints (*estampas*). They also held similar ideas regarding the attributes of holy beings: a cloistered nun was not necessarily any more fervent in her devotions to the Virgin Mary than a ragged servant; the wealthy count and the beggar both prayed to St. Anthony for help in finding a lost item. In effect, colonial non-elites were equal consumers, but not equal producers of religious art; it was not until the nineteenth century that non-elites began to outpace elites in the production of painted ex-votos.

My third main point in this chapter concerns the idea of a collective religious culture in the earlier colonial period—roughly the mid-sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries—setting up the argument that the late eighteenth century saw increasingly individualized expressions of religious devotion, which continued on into the nineteenth century and beyond. A number of scholars have noted the beginnings of a more austere and individualized religious culture in late colonial Mexico,³ and in fact, ex-votos lend themselves very well to a more individualized art, since their subject matter is so very personal. While it is safe to assume that ex-voto paintings were produced since the earliest period of Hispanic presence in the Americas, the material evidence from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries points to far more instances of communal, “performative” expressions of devotion, such as religious processions organized around an image

² Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge 1978 [1994]).

³ See especially the essays in *Local Religion in Colonial Mexico*, ed. Martin Nesvig (University of New Mexico Press, 1996); Brian Larkin, *The Very Nature of God: Baroque Catholicism and Religious Reform in Bourbon Mexico City* (University of New Mexico Press, 2010); Pamela Voekel, *Alone Before God: The Religious Origins of Modernity in Mexico* (Duke University Press, 2002); Matthew O’Hara, *A Flock Divided: Race, Religion, and Politics in Mexico, 1749-1857* (Duke University Press, 2010); David Brading, *Church and State in Bourbon Mexico: The Diocese of Michoacán, 1749-1810* (Cambridge University Press, 1994); and William B. Taylor, *Magistrates of the Sacred: Priests and Parishioners in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (Stanford University Press, 1996).

of a saint, than to a culture of individualized devotional art, as exemplified by ex-voto paintings. Thus, this chapter sets up the circumstances of an important change in Mexican religious culture: from a shared culture in a hierarchical society that favored collective action with regard to the saints, to a more individualized piety that produced ex-votos detailing personal stories and relationships with the saints. The contrast between communal or collective religion and the more individualized piety expressed in ex-votos became especially pronounced after the passing of the anticlerical Reform Laws of the mid-nineteenth century, the subject of Chapter 3, but the changes began a century earlier, with the Bourbon reforms that similarly aimed to strengthen the state vis-à-vis the church.

During the colonial period, when the practice of commissioning a painting to thank and honor a saint came to Mexico, a culture of image-based devotional practices was coalescing. Images were powerful communication devices not only in the context of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century evangelization projects, in which European monks brought the message of Christianity to people with no basis in European languages and traditions, but also in the context of a largely illiterate Spanish population, and even among the highly learned. As described by Nancy Farriss,

Although Dominicans and Franciscans in New Spain believed that pictures were the best way to convey the gospel message to the prospective converts, it was not only the Indians who might be said to ‘learn better through their eyes than through their ears.’ The rich and powerful, ecclesiastical and secular, filled their spaces with images of sacred beings and sacred scenes of every sort and by all accounts extended devotion to them with as much fervor as their social inferiors.⁴

This observation draws on a wealth of scholarship on European popular culture that posits that up until the beginnings of industrialization in the late eighteenth century, the distinction between “elite” and “popular” cultures was much less pronounced than might be commonly assumed.⁵ Farriss goes on to say that

⁴ Nancy Farriss, “Introductory Essay: The Power of Images,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 19:1, April 2010, pp. 5-28. Her citation on p. 5 references Burgoa (1989a [1674], II, 130). On pictures as the best way to teach the gospel, see Dávila Padilla (1955 [1596], lib. 1, cap. 81; lib. 2, cap. 87). See also Dean (1989) and Mujica Pinilla (2006) on pictorial catechisms and preaching, and Valadés (1989 [1579], 94–95, 235–37) on the Indians’ ingenuity in remembering by ‘signos y figuras.’

⁵ See Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Scolar Press/Ashgate, 1994); Natalie Zemon Davis, “Toward Mixtures and Margins,” *The American Historical Review* 97:5 (Dec. 1992): 1409-1416; Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms. The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (New York: Penguin Books, 1982 (1976); Lawrence W. Levine, “The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and its Audiences,” *The American Historical Review* 97 (5): Dec. 1992: 1369-1399; and William Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton, 1981).

Images played an especially prominent role in colonial Spanish America, where an extreme degree of ethnic, cultural, and social diversity, combined with an equally extreme degree of social intimacy, inspired—indeed required—a corresponding degree of cultural creativity. The ability of images to bear different meanings to different people at the same time enabled them to forge and sustain social bonds at all levels and across great distances. An all-purpose image, such as the Blessed Virgin, could unite an entire empire.⁶

Uniting the Spanish empire across the oceans and continents was a vast array of regal and religious imagery. Spain's imperial ambitions in the sixteenth century were motivated by a two-fold project of political conquest and the imposition of Spanish cultural and religious values. These cultural and religious values were well-represented in the cross-section of the earliest European travelers and settlers of the New World; Bernal Díaz del Castillo, who participated in Hernán Cortés's conquest of Mexico-Tenochtitlan in 1519-21, and other chroniclers of the early Spanish expeditions make innumerable references to commending themselves to Christ or the Virgin Mary in perilous situations, such as battles with Indians or shipwrecks.⁷ The conquistadors, missionaries, and settlers who arrived in the Caribbean, Mexico, and Peru in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries brought with them a religious culture that was very much influenced by Spain's recent victory over the Muslim occupiers of the Iberian Peninsula, an event that coincided with Columbus's first voyage to the New World in 1492. The Christians felt vindicated in having recaptured their lands from the Muslims, and were buoyed by the prospect of conquering new lands in the name of the King and of God.⁸ But the particular brand of Christianity that these early interlopers brought to America was one in which Christ, Mary and the saints were seen as intercessors in human affairs; where supplicants could petition these holy beings for divine favors, and in which a sense of mutual obligation and reciprocity between humans and the divine dictated that a favor granted by a saint be repaid with recognition and devotion by the supplicant. This religious tradition dovetailed in many ways with indigenous conceptions of the sacred, which, like popular Spanish Catholicism, made little distinction between the natural and the supernatural worlds.⁹

⁶ Farriss, "Introductory Essay," p. 6.

⁷ Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico*, trans. A.P. Maudslay, intro. Hugh Thomas. New York: Da Capo Press, 1996. See also Cabeza de Vaca, as related in Andrés Reséndez, *A Land So Strange: The Epic Journey of Cabeza de Vaca* (New York: Basic Books, 2009).

⁸ J.H. Elliott, *Imperial Spain 1469-1713* (Penguin 2nd ed., 2002); Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France c. 1500-1800* (Yale University Press, 1998); Patricia Seed, *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe's Conquest of the New World, 1492-1640* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁹ See William Taylor, *Magistrates*, p. 49: "Precolonial religion, in fact, was not so much transformed by Spanish folk beliefs and practices as it was potentially congruent with them. Much of what the Spaniards dismissed as superstition or worried about as animistic and idolatrous in colonial Indian practices had to do with a strong sense of the sacred penetrating every aspect of the material world and daily life, overpowering people but possibly responsive to their entreaties and their efforts to harmonize with cosmic order. There was effectively no distinction between the sacred and the material." See also James Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest: A Social and*

Medieval Spanish notions of honor played strongly into this sense of obligation toward a saint to whom one had made a promise; to break a vow was to invite the wrath of the divinity, and also made the promise-maker look bad in the eyes of his fellows.¹⁰ Many of the conquistadors who signed up for the trans-Atlantic voyages of the early sixteenth century were motivated by their aspirations to ascend the social ladder; so rigid was Spain's social class structure that poor nobility and commoner alike hoped for a land grant or *encomienda* from the king as a reward for their efforts in the New World. There they could enjoy a new status as landowners, and rise accordingly in social position. The ideal of the chivalrous knight in medieval European thinking was well-entrenched even among the lower classes, as exemplified by the character of Don Quixote de la Mancha, as brought to life a century later by Miguel Cervantes. Honor was considered a principal virtue for Spanish men, whose very essence depended on protecting this trait in themselves and their women.

While honor played an important role in the negotiations between humans and the divine, in which each side was bound to uphold the terms of a "spiritual contract," it is telling that the supernatural end of the agreement featured intercessory beings such as Christ, Mary and the saints, and not God. Ex-votos and holy images in churches are dedicated to intermediaries, and people address these figures in their dealings with the Supreme Power. What was the rationale for this reliance on go-betweens? William B. Taylor sees the hierarchical nature of colonial Mexican society as defining the ways that people related to the divine, as well:

In principle, social and religious unity was achieved through hierarchy. At the pinnacle of all order, God sat in judgment, remote from the everyday affairs of lay people. He had to be approached through those who themselves had a measure of divinity or special access to the divine. Priests were intercessors, to be sure, but few claimed to speak directly to God. The principal intercessors were the many saints of the church—some mainly two-way translators of messages, others advocates engaged in protecting the interests of believers.¹¹

In a hierarchical society such as New Spain's, political, financial, and spiritual dealings were all channeled through intermediaries between the lowly and the mighty. Hierarchies aside, the saints and especially the Virgin Mary were promoted by the institutional church as approachable, benevolent beings with whom devotees could forge personal relationships. In popular speech and

Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth-Eighteenth Centuries (Stanford University Press, 1994).

¹⁰ See Michele Mansour and Elin Luque, "Algunas consideraciones sobre los exvotos pictóricos de tema guadalupano siglos XIX y XX de la colección del Museo de la Basílica de Guadalupe," M.A. thesis, Universidad Iberoamericana, 2001, pp. 10-11.

¹¹ William B. Taylor, *Magistrates of the Sacred: Priests and Parishioners in Eighteenth-Century Mexico*, pp. 270-71.

imagery Santa María was invoked far more often, and thus was more of a real presence in people's consciousness, than God himself.¹²

The mentality driving the creation of painted ex-votos, then, was informed by a perception that the sacred was intertwined with the here-and-now; that the saints could intercede on a person's behalf, if approached correctly. Within the rubric of Spanish conceptions of honor and hierarchy, this "correct" approach would involve humble entreaty, appropriate expressions of thanks, and above all, fervent belief. Giving thanks to a holy being who was thought to have interceded on someone's behalf in a difficult or dangerous situation was part of a general Novohispanic mentality that was characterized by both the hierarchical nature of society and the patron-client relationships that sustained it. The saints were middlemen to the ultimate divine force, whose power was so great that He could not be approached directly. This view of the supernatural pantheon developed alongside Iberian society, with Spain's political and military history inextricably linked to its religious traditions. It is worthwhile to consider the roots of the relationships that early modern Spaniards had with holy beings, in order to better understand their cultural ramifications in colonial Mexico.

In the colonial period, "competition for beatification and then canonization played an important part in a strategy used by a given order to show pre-eminence over another, by the clergy to control lay people and, finally, by the American Church to be recognized as an equal by its Spanish counterpart."¹³ Devotion to particular saints signified membership in a particular *cofradía* (confraternity), religious order, or ecclesiastical rank, uniting people around a common devotional image.

But the spread of miracle stories in New Spain went beyond politics. William Christian has delved into medieval and early modern Spanish attitudes toward the divine, with many of his findings closely paralleling Novohispanic ideas.¹⁴ Christian cautions the reader against excessive skepticism in approaching the subject of miracles; the saints that peopled the universe of sixteenth-century Spain were important benefactors in a world of high insecurity, where droughts, epidemics, and bad harvests affected everyone, and everyone, at least in a particular geographical area, appealed to the same divinities for relief from these natural events. While separated temporally and geographically, this attitude—the collective mentality—can be detected in colonial Mexico, as well. The earnest thanks and plaintive pleas expressed in ex-votos, along with the well-established practice of *romerías*, the often arduous pilgrimages to shrines (where small offerings, such as *milagritos*, were left as evidence of the pilgrim's journey and faith),

¹² To name just one example of the ubiquity of calling out to heavenly figures in distressing situations, see Bernal Díaz, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico*, p. 288. Díaz describes the battle between Cortés's forces and those of Pánfilo Narvaez, sent to reign in the traitorous Cortés, who had embarked for Mexico against orders from the governor of Cuba, Diego Velázquez. Amidst fierce fighting, Narvaez was wounded and blinded, at which point he cried out, "Holy Mary protect me, they have killed me and destroyed my eye."

¹³ Solange Alberro, "Retablos and Popular Religion in Nineteenth-Century Mexico." In *Art and Faith in Mexico: The Nineteenth-Century Retablo Tradition*, ed. Elizabeth Netto Calil Zarur and Charles Muir Lovell. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001, p. 73.

¹⁴ William Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton, 1981a), and *Apparitions in Late Medieval and Renaissance Spain* (Princeton, 1981b).

point to a firm belief in the power of saints to help humans in their daily struggles for survival, as well as in their pursuit of a ticket to heaven in the afterlife. Christian points out that orthodox theology and modern psychology would share the view that sincerely believing in miracles and saints makes them, on some level, real,¹⁵ and this faith is evident in Mexican ex-votos. He points to elite devotion to saints and shrines as proof that there was little social differentiation in religious matters: the local Virgin Mary was venerated by humble peasant and wealthy aristocrat alike. The distinction, in his view, should not be drawn along the lines of socioeconomic status or education, nor presented as an oppositional paradigm of urban vs. rural, but rather in a conceptualization of the church as possessing two threads that defined and directed its mission: the theological and the local. Elites and commoners participated in both threads; Catholicism was neither imposed in a top-down fashion by the Papacy (despite the Inquisition's attempts to do so), nor was the fervent devotion to the saints the result of grass-roots activism on the part of the lower classes. *All* of Novohispanic society received and contributed to the religious culture; the very real differences in social and economic status in this hierarchical society played a central role in the formation of a certain kind of religiosity, in which the quotidian social interactions on the streets and the churches, the home and the chapel, were reflected in the social interactions between the myriad intercessory heavenly beings and their pious devotees.

This lack of distinction between the religious and the social/political spheres in colonial Mexico also contributed to a partial equalizing of social relations, at least vis-à-vis the saints. Whether a supplicant was a poor Indian or a socially respectable cleric, a wealthy count or an African slave, he or she was the product of a culture that created a dynamic fluid religious imaginary based on a close familiarity with the Virgin Mary, Jesus, and the saints, all of whom inspired an equally rich visual culture. No matter their social status, colonial Mexicans knew that in times of trouble, they could always turn to their local advocacy of Mary or Christ, or their saints. Moreover, they all knew the proper protocol and rituals to observe and follow. Just as supplicants needed to show their humility before the divine, they were also required to express their thanks for divine intercession in the appropriate ways. From the sixteenth through much of the nineteenth century, however, the propitiation of and communication with the saints was a phenomenon shared by all of Mexican society. Elite and popular participated in a shared religious culture, erasing or reworking many of the hierarchical divisions of Novohispanic society. William Christian writes that in sixteenth-century Toledo, "women who wished to be cured of *çiçiones* (probably malaria) would sweep the church of Santiago on Saturdays. When Charles V had malaria, he too swept the church..."¹⁶ This blurring of social station in people's dealings with the holy, where kings and commoners performed the same rituals in order to obtain

¹⁵ Christian, *Local Religion*, p. 102.

¹⁶ Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain*, p. 157. See also Paul Ramírez, "Isolating Disease: Cayetano Cabrera y Quintero's *Escudo de Armas de México* and the *Matlazahuatl* Epidemic of Mexico City, 1736-1737," unpublished paper, University of California, Berkeley, 2005. He discusses the limitations of Eric Van Young's formulation of binary oppositions in elite and popular worldviews; see E. Van Young, "The Raw and the Cooked: Elite and Popular Ideology in Mexico, 1800-1821," in *The Indian Community of Colonial Mexico*, ed. Arij Ouweneel and Simon Miller (Amsterdam: CEDLA, 1990), 309. Ramírez p. 5n10. Peter Guardino makes a similar point, although not from a religious perspective, in *Peasants, Politics, and the Formation of Mexico's National State: Guerrero, 1800-1857* (Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 58-59.

the same ends, was a hallmark of preindustrial societies on both sides of the Atlantic; it would take “modernity” to change attitudes toward the divine, and to reify social differences to the point where ex-votos would come to be seen as a “popular” art form.

The overarching concept behind all these beliefs is that religion unified Novohispanic society in ways that overcame its internal class divisions. Religion was not thought of as a separate sphere of Novohispanic culture—the political, the social, and the religious were all intertwined.¹⁷ Ex-voto paintings express this collective mentality beautifully, in both an aesthetic and in a historical sense. In the following section, we will look at a number of ex-votos produced in Mexico between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, with some attention to their formal aspects, but with the main emphasis upon how these devotional paintings manifested the ideas discussed above.

Giving Thanks: Communicating with the Holy in Colonial Mexico

Ex-voto paintings in colonial Mexico were based on Spanish and Italian prototypes, and followed Tridentine directives to make artwork didactic and narrative.¹⁸ Responding to the loss of the Catholic church’s power in the face of the Protestant Reformation, the Council of Trent codified a call for instructive imagery in which the story was clearly illustrated.¹⁹ Despite Protestant attacks on the Catholic predilection for images, which the more iconoclastic of the reformers viewed as tantamount to idolatry, the Roman church was steadfast in its position that images celebrating the central figures of the Christian pantheon were fundamental to the propagation of the faith, both in Europe and especially in the New World. The Council of Trent was careful not to ascribe an intrinsic sacredness to religious objects; instead it decreed, in Nancy Farriss’s words, that

All sacred images are only material objects fabricated by human hands in the likeness of divine or holy beings. They serve to remind us of those beings and to focus our attention and reverence on the ‘heavenly originals.’ [T]hey possess no power or sacrality of their own...[b]ut, as David Brading observed..., ‘conciliar decrees are one thing, popular devotion quite another’;... In popular Roman Catholic image theory, which though uncoded possesses its own orthodoxy, likeness and presence are not mutually exclusive but part of a duality that enables divine beings to both inspire and inhabit their images and through them to intervene in earthly affairs.²⁰

¹⁷ Alberro, “Retablos and Popular Religion,” p. 57.

¹⁸ Elliott, *Imperial Spain*, pp. 216-224, and Arnold Hauser, *The Philosophy of Art History* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1959, pp. 120-21).

¹⁹ Hauser, pp. 120-21.

²⁰ Nancy Farriss, “The Power of Images,” p. 15.

Few ex-votos from the sixteenth century survive, but a good number from the seventeenth and especially the eighteenth centuries have been preserved. These paintings are often large format, done in oil on canvas or wood, and they echo the styles of contemporary colonial portrait- and domestic-scene painting. In both the pictorial and textual narratives, they provide a window onto the spiritual and material realities of the people who contracted with trained artists to paint them. As would be true in a general way of the later ex-votos that are the main object of study in this dissertation, they were commissioned by pious people looking to publicly acknowledge a miraculous recovery from an illness, or some other near-catastrophe.²¹ But they were usually expensive to commission. The clothing and domestic scenes, the language, and the fact that they were painted by professional artists all point to the conclusion that the devotees were well-to-do. In the following examples, we see these markers of wealth clearly, but this is not to say that less affluent members of colonial Mexican society did not make ex-votos to thank their saints for divine favors received, only that the materials available to them were more ephemeral and poorly preserved.

²¹ Sherry Fields, *Pestilence and Headcolds: Encountering Illness in Colonial Mexico*. Ch. 5, pp. 11-28, Columbia University Press, Gutenberg e-book, 2008. <http://www.gutenberg-e.org/fields/chapter5.html>



Figure 2.2: Ex-voto Painting Honoring the Virgin of Tulantongo, 1651 (Source: Elin Luque Agraz, *El arte de dar gracias*, ref. 1, p. 13)

One of the earliest documented Mexican ex-voto paintings (figure 2.2), from 1651, honors the Virgin of Tulantongo, whose cult was first established twenty years earlier in Texcoco.²² A medium-sized painting at 65.5 x 76 cm, it depicts an ill and bedridden girl named María, daughter of Pedro. Not only is it a prime example of the one of the ways in which ex-votos were made in the mid-seventeenth century, bearing strong resemblance to medieval European prototypes, it also stands out for the way it illustrates Novohispanic social organization, with the sick girl surrounded by her praying relatives, a black servant, and an Indian woman dressed in a beautifully embroidered *huipil*. The donor, María's father, reappears in the lower right corner with two boys, perhaps his sons; one of the boys carries a pile of wax tapers, echoing the candles on the scale painted directly above the three males. According to Elin Luque, the tapers recall the old custom of "requesting candles," in which a nun's weight was

²² In Elin Luque Agraz, *El arte de dar gracias: Los exvotos pictóricos de la Virgen de la Soledad de Oaxaca* (México: Centro de Cultura Casa Lamm, 2007), ref. 1, p. 13. The painting is still housed in the Church of the Purification of Mary (Iglesia de la Purificación de María), Santa María Tulantongo, Texcoco, Edo. De México. The text reads: "María hija de Pedro de la [] estando de una enfermedad ya sin posibilidad su padre la encomendo a la virgen maria nuestra señora y peso [ve] la y luego mejoro año 1651."

donated in candles in thanks for a favor received or to make a special request to the object of devotion.²³ Clearly, the lighting of candles to a holy image is another kind of ex-voto, a material offering given in the spirit of a two-way conversation between humans and the divine.



Figure 2.3: Ex-voto to St. Michael Archangel (Source: Luque, *El arte de dar gracias*, pp. 13-14)

A slightly later painting (figure 2.3), from 1690, might be called the prototype for the Mexican ex-voto as it came to exist in the nineteenth century. The format is small, measuring 29 x 63.3 cm. To date, it is the oldest small-format ex-voto painting documented in Mexico. As with nearly all extant colonial ex-votos, it is painted on canvas. It depicts an accident in which a woman is thrown from her horse and is commended to St. Michael Archangel, who appears in the upper right-hand corner of the painting. The text is difficult to read, but it mentions a “fiancée” who fell from her horse on the road to San Martín and was heard by San Miguel.²⁴ The people are shown dressed in the luxurious clothing worn by elites; note the long, red frock coats, knee-breeches, and knee-high white stockings of the men and the long-sleeved, corseted blouse and full, crimson skirt of the woman.

Other early references to ex-votos in Europe and America indicate that while the material evidence is somewhat limited, the practice of offering paintings, candles, and body parts molded

²³ Elin Luque, *El arte de dar gracias (Virgen de la Soledad de Oaxaca)*, pp. 12-13, ref. 1. “Esto último recuerda la costumbre de que cuando alguien ‘pedía vela’ se pesaba a una monja y se donaba su peso en velas para agradecer de esta forma un favor recibido o hacer una petición especial al culto de devoción.”

²⁴ Elin Luque, *El arte de dar gracias*, pp. 13-14. The text, transcribed by the paleographer Baltasar Brito Guadarrama, reads, “El milagro que iso s[an] Miguel, yendo por el camino de San Marti[n] a una nobia la der[r]ibo el cabaio [...] oye San Mig[u]el desde suseso a q[u]ien s[e] encomendo con...la [...] nasion – 1690.”

out of wax, wood, or metal is indeed ancient and widespread.²⁵ The earliest written references to Guadalupan ex-votos in Mexico City, meanwhile, would come over a century later from Father Miguel Sánchez, author of the first account of Guadalupe's apparitions in Mexico. Possessing only oral and visual sources to reconstruct the history of Guadalupe, Sánchez, who was eager to promote the devotion for both religious and political reasons, refers to the many—he does not give a number—ex-votos in her church left as testimonials of her efficacy.²⁶ Sánchez's treatise was published in 1648 and is dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe, so neither of these two seventeenth-century ex-votos could have been among the paintings he mentions, but it is reasonable to assume that a good number of visually similar ex-votos would have adorned the walls of Guadalupe's sanctuary.

The above examples nicely illustrate a mentality, discussed in detail above, that saw little separation between the heavenly and the earthly realms. A few earlier prints and paintings from the seventeenth century corroborate this attitude. An etching by the Belgian engraver Samuel Stradanus is of singular value for its depiction of the formal aspects of ex-voto paintings of the time (see figure 2.4). The print was commissioned by Mexico's Archbishop, Juan de la Serna, in 1615, in a fund-raising effort for the Virgin of Guadalupe's new church and sanctuary. While the print itself is not an ex-voto but rather an homage to the Virgin of Guadalupe, with the text promising forty days of indulgences to devotees who prayed—and gave alms—to the Guadalupan image, the eight small pictures that surround the central image and text make explicit the perception of the Virgin Mary as an intercessor in human affairs, who deserves to be acknowledged and thanked appropriately.²⁷ Both the ex-votos in the margins and the central

²⁵ In the church of SS. Annunziata in Florence, such was the number and weight of the life-sized wax ex-votos (the precursors to the metal *milagritos* still in use in Latin America today) hanging from the altar that there was a danger that the structure would collapse. Richard Trexler, "Florentine Religious Experience: The Sacred Image," *Studies in the Renaissance* v. 19 (1972), 7-41. On p. 8, he cites Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Leipzig, 1932), I, pp. 116-119.

²⁶ D.A. Brading, *Mexican Phoenix*, pp. 55-60. Miguel Sánchez, *Imagen de la Virgen María, Madre de Dios de Guadalupe, milagrosamente aparecida en la ciudad de México* (1648).

²⁷ Main text: el Illmo S.or Don Juan de la Serna Por la Gracia de dios Y de la Sancta Sede Apostolica, Archobispo del Mex del consejo del Rey nro Señor Concede los Quarenta dias de Indulgencias que le son Concedidos por la Sancta Sede apostolica Y derecho a Qualquier Persona que Reciviere y tomare para si un Transumpto desta Imagen de la Virgen Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe y le diere la Limosna Aplicada Para la obra que se Va haziendo de la Yglesia nueva en su Sta casa y ermita a que todos los Fieles deven Ayudar por no tener con que se pueda Acabar y ser la obra tan Piadosa Y de la Virgen.

The ex-voto texts read as follows, in clockwise order:

1. Tulancingo. D. Antonio de Carbela: Alcalde Mayor de Tulancingo, llevó un niño a cavallo; arrastróle el cavallo por unas barrancas, y dixo el niño q N.S. había aparecido y guardal. de todo mal.

2. Rezando estava un hombre de rodillas; se le cayó una lámpara muy pesada en la cabeça y no lo lastimo ni la lampara se abollo ni se derramo el aceyte, ni tampoco se quebro el vidrio.

3. La Gran Ciudad de México. Juan Pavón, sacristan de N.S. tenia un niño malo de una apostema en la garganta y Iuntóle con aceite de la lámpara de N.S. y se [...] y sanó [...] remedio.

4. El padre Iuan Básquez de acuña, Vicario de la Virgen estando aguardando para dezir misa en el altar, vido q las candelas para encenderse encenderon milagrosamente por N.S.

image, flanked by votive lamps and milagros, tell us about some of the religious behavior and paraphernalia of early seventeenth-century Mexicans. It is worthwhile to dissect the texts that detail these eight miracle stories in order to get a sense of the religious practices of the time, which in turn shed light on the religious mentalities of their practitioners, and how these mentalities were expressed in art.

Guadalupe.

5. Don luis de Castilla estando malo en la cama de una pierna, no halló remedio hasta q' prometió a N.S. una pierna de plata, q' está colgando en su Iglesia de Guadalupe, y quedó luego sano [...]

6. Pachuca. Fray Pedro de Valderama, descalço, tenía un dedo del pie...sano luego y fue a pie hasta Pachuca donde Guadalupe.

7. México-Tenochtitlan. Catharina de Niehta Sina Ydrópica de once años, sin esperanzas de salud, vino a novenas Y bevio el agua de la fuente donde aparesio N.S. de Guadalupe y luego Sano.

8. Bartolomé Granado, tenía gran dolor de la cabeza y de oydos; no halló remedio; fue a novenas; llevó una cabeza de plata q' está colgando en su Yglesia de Guadalupe y sanó milagrosamente.



Figure 2.4: Ex-voto to the Virgin of Guadalupe, etching by Samuel Stradanus, 1615 (Source: *Dones y promesas*)

The picture on the top right shows a child being thrown from a horse (figure 2.4). The father of the boy, Alcalde Mayor of Tulancingo Don Antonio de Carbela (*sic*; Carbajal), commissioned an ex-voto (now lost, but thought to exist in an eighteenth-century copy, figure 2.5²⁸) to testify that as the boy was hurtling off a cliff, the Virgin Mary appeared and saved him from harm.

²⁸ *Dones y promesas*, cat. 110, p. 79. The original ex-voto commissioned by Carbajal was actually comprised of two paintings, one intended for the parish church of Tulancingo, the other for the recently established sanctuary of Guadalupe. The date of the accident the paintings commemorated was 1555, and the miracle they referred to is thought to have helped augment the devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe; these now-lost paintings were possibly the first Guadalupean ex-votos in Mexico.



Figure 2.5: Eighteenth Century Copy of Child Being Thrown From Horse (Source: *Dones y promesas*, cat. 110, p. 79)

Below this image, the second miracle describes how a man praying at the Virgin's altar was hit in the head by a heavy lamp, escaping without injury (figure 2.6, left). But equally as important, the lamp also survived undamaged—indeed, it crashed to the floor without so much as spilling a drop of oil, or breaking the glass.



Figure 2.6: Man Escaping Injury (Source: *Dones y promesas*)

Further down, the sacristan of the Basilica of Guadalupe testifies that he anointed his sick child with oil from the Virgin Mary's lamp, and this alone cured the boy (figure 2.6, center).

Next, Father Juan Vázquez observed that as he was preparing to say Mass, the candles on the altar miraculously lit themselves; or rather, were lit by the Virgin (figure 2.6, right).



Figure 2.7: Miraculous Lighting of Candles (Source: *Dones y promesas*)

On the top left, the picture describes how Bartolomé Granado was suffering from a terrible head- and earache, and there was no relief despite having attended novenas in honor of the Virgin. In desperation, he brought a silver *milagro* in the shape of a head to hang in the church of Guadalupe, “and was miraculously cured” of his ailment (figure 2.7, left).

Following this is the story of an eleven-year-old girl named Catarina de Nieto who suffered from dropsy but was cured after attending novenas and drinking the water from the sacred spring at Tepeyac (figure 2.7, center).

Next, the Discalced Carmelite Fray Pedro de Valderrama, who as part of his order’s vows walked about barefoot, suffered an injury to his toe. When the wound healed he walked from Pachuca to the shrine at Guadalupe, a distance of roughly sixty miles (figure 2.7, right).

Finally, Don Luis de Castilla was bed-ridden with a leg wound and nothing he did to alleviate it helped, until he promised the Virgin of Guadalupe a silver *milagro* in the shape of a leg. Once the *milagro* was hung in her church, he was healed.



Figure 2.8: Promising of a Silver Milagro (Source: *Dones y promesas*)

What sorts of themes emerge in these short descriptions of miracles, and what do they say about Novohispanic religious ideals? First, there is the ubiquitous exchange between humans and the divine. All of the protagonists credit the Virgin of Guadalupe with performing some sort of miracle, whether a cure for a physical ailment or an inexplicable event like lighting candles or preventing a lamp from breaking. Six of the eight vignettes describe illness or potential injury, while the other two involve inanimate objects that perform actions without human intervention. Two ascribe their recoveries from painful conditions to the gift of a *milagro*, while two more testify to the efficacy of substances made holy by their association with the Virgin—whether by virtue of existing in the church or by emerging from a spring in the hillside of a sacred place. Touching this oil or imbibing this water was believed to cure the sick, part of a phenomenon

known as *brandea*²⁹ (it is interesting to note that both of these instances of *brandea* involved children). Finally, the monk with the infected toe made a lengthy pilgrimage to the Virgin of Guadalupe's shrine in thanks for her having healed it. All of these practices—rogative measures like the placing of *milagros* and transference of sacredness through touching or drinking holy substances, or expressions of gratitude such as going on pilgrimage and of course, the publication, in the form of testimonials or proto-ex-votos, of the miracles—were well-entrenched in Mexico by the beginning of the seventeenth century, and signify a hierarchical, patronage-based society, in which the supernatural and natural worlds existed in close proximity.

While our visual evidence is limited to those paintings and other votive offerings that have withstood the ravages of time, in colonial ex-votos we can clearly see a strong sense of a mutual obligation between human and holy beings. When an illness, accident, or natural disaster threatened lives and livelihoods, early modern Europeans and Americans put their faith in God and holy beings associated with him. This belief that the holy figures of the Christian pantheon had supernatural powers that could affect human lives was a holdover from medieval Christian thinking (which was itself influenced by pagan religious traditions) and found fertile ground in the Americas. Additionally, the thinking that the saints could work miracles for ordinary human beings if they were properly venerated, or conversely could withhold their favors if they were treated disrespectfully, held much weight in colonial Mexico.³⁰ Here the emphasis on reciprocity between humans and the divine is essential. The saints could and would grant divine favors to mortals, but the proper formalities had to be observed.

The meanings of religious images in other contexts—temporal and spatial—can shed light on how colonial Mexicans experienced, approached and thought about their saints.³¹ Richard Trexler's analysis of a fifteenth-century Italian sculpted image of Our Lady of Impruneta brings to mind certain parallels in mentalities with New Spain. As in colonial Mexico, the inhabitants of fifteenth-century Florence saw their saints as powerful beings to be respected

²⁹ *Brandea* can involve touching or otherwise coming into physical contact with just about any object that had come into contact with a saint or other holy figure: cloth, hair, and personal possessions of saints were highly sought-after in medieval and early modern Europe. To touch an object imbued with the memory of a person considered holy was to receive some of the spiritual force of that holy being. The phenomenon is closely associated with the European cult of relics, which was heavily promoted by Mendicant friars on both sides of the Atlantic.

³⁰ Caroline Brettell, "The Priest and His People: The Contractual Basis for Religious Practice in Rural Portugal," in Ellen Badone, ed., *Religious Orthodoxy and Popular Faith in European Society* (Princeton, 1990); ; Nancy Farriss, *Maya Society under Colonial Rule: the Collective Enterprise of Survival* (Princeton, 1984); Elsa Cecilia Frost, "Indians and Theologians: Sixteenth-Century Spanish Theologians and Their Concept of the Indigenous Soul," in *South and Meso-American Native Spirituality*, ed. Gary Gossen, with Miguel León-Portilla (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983); Manuel Marzal, "Transplanted Spanish Catholicism," in *South and Meso-American Native Spirituality*; James Lockhart, *Los Nahuas después de la Conquista. Historia social y cultural de la población indígena del México central, siglos XVI-XVIII*, trad. Roberto Reyes Mazzoni (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999); Serge Gruzinski, "Normas cristianas y respuestas indígenas: apuntes para el estudio del proceso de occidentalización entre los indios de Nueva España," *Historias* 15 (1986): 31-41; Gruzinski, *The Conquest of Mexico: The Incorporation of Indian Societies into the Western World, 16th-18th Centuries*. trans. Eileen Corrigan (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993); William B. Taylor, *Magistrates*.

³¹ See Richard Trexler, "Florentine Religious Experience: The Sacred Image," *Studies in the Renaissance* v. 19 (1972), 7-41.

and properly venerated; the images had been imbued with the aura of sacredness by virtue of their benediction by priests, and from there the Florentines imbued them with life. The behavior of the city's Signoria when they took out the image of Our Lady of Impruneta in procession to pray—either for rain or an end to it—shows that this was a goal-oriented religious behavior, where proper supplicatory action could be expected to be met with a desired result.³² Indeed, there was no real separation between image and essence, despite long-running theological debates concerning idolatry. “The belief in power-laden natural objects was general in that age. It stretched from the host, through the image, to the relic, from the body of the dead to that of the living saint. The spirit wasn't everywhere: it was found in objects with some association, pictorial or narrative, to a demonstrably powerful person, living or dead.”³³ In exchange for their veneration or adoration of religious images, people expected their saints to calm their collective fears in situations of stress, such as war, plague, drought, flood, or famine. By adoring the images, expressed in actions such as adorning and clothing them, lighting candles, and leaving ex-votos, people in turn expected the image to inspire devotion, but also to protect them in their daily lives.³⁴ The supplicant for divine intercession had to observe protocol when dealing with the image, and give thanks when his wish was granted. Furthermore, private expressions of devotion such as prayer or confession were not enough: the expression of thanks had to be physical and public, as testimony of that saint's power and efficacy. Pious works commissioned in honor of an image could range from a new chapel, altar, or garment to ex-votos, candles, or flowers. These various expressions of deferential, propitiatory attitudes toward the holy are all found in colonial Mexico; a rich European tradition of sacred art was transplanted to, and transformed in, America.³⁵

With the exception of Cayetano Cabrera's “collective ex-voto” (see figure 2.18), the vast majority of ex-votos chronicle the personal experiences of people affected by natural disasters and, as noted above, especially illness. Coastal areas naturally produced maritime-themed ex-votos; figure 2.9, like the one in the opening example from the eighteenth century, details the terrifying experiences of being caught at sea during a storm.³⁶ Sailing, the entirely wind-powered

³² Trexler, p. 39.

³³ Trexler, p. 9.

³⁴ Trexler, pp. 15-16.

³⁵ Manuel Marzal, “Transplanted Spanish Catholicism,” in *South and Meso-American Native Spirituality*, ed. Gary Gossen, with Miguel León-Portilla. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983.

³⁶ Este Año D 1711 AbyenDo Salido Del puertode Sn. Juan deUlua enla Nueva Vera Cruz la Almiranta de la Armada Rl, de bar lo bento del Cargo delalmirante Dn. diego dealarCon que Yba Para españa Diendo Cn Su Conserva el Aviso de Dn, VGenio Martinez dela [Yiba] Y la fragata nonbrada Na. Sa. de Begoña del Cargo de Dn. Migel Manzano y 5 Mas en Su Con Sexua al fue Su Salida de dicho puerto A 29 de Nobienbre y el Dia 18 de diciembre Alas 2 de la mañana con Ungran temporal Seperdieron 5 dellos en la Costa de la Havana. 5 leg.as a Sota bento de dicho puerto Diendoen bar Cado ala fragata Nonbrada S. Sa. de begoña Migel basquez Natural de los reinos de Castilla quien Seen Comendo Mui de Veras ala Virgen de la Soleda Visto A Sus Compañeros laynboCasen Y milagrosa mente al AmaneSer los Saco atiera aviendo estado Perdidos desde las 2 de la Mañana el nabio [Sn Sobrado Sobrelolossare]..en fin aben peligrado del referido navio Mas de Uno Y los Otros Muchos Demos Ynfinitas Gracias aesta Gran Sa. Ytengamoslatodos por Na. Abogada como lo yso el dicho Migel Basquez Debocion dequien Puso este Milagro por que Dios sealoadO Y Su bendita Madre por—sienpre (Jamás) Amen. Collection of the Basilica of Nuestra Señora de la Soledad, Oaxaca, Oax. In *Dones y promesas*, p. 69, cat. 75.

mode of transportation of pre-industrial times, was a treacherous undertaking even in good weather, and few occupations were so utterly left to the mercy of the elements as that of the sailor. Even a relatively short jaunt from the port of Veracruz in the Gulf of Mexico to Havana was fraught with danger; the Gulf stream is the most powerful current on earth.³⁷ For Catholics coming from a saint- and image-based religious tradition, it was only natural that they would seek divine help in perilous situations over which they had no control. So it was with the Spaniard Miguel Vázquez, who was traveling on the frigate Our Lady of the Begonia when a terrible storm hit at 2 a.m. on December 18, 1711, after nearly three weeks of sailing. Five men were thrown overboard and it seemed that the others would meet the same fate, but the pious Vázquez called on his shipmates to entrust themselves to the Virgin of Solitude, and by morning the seas had calmed and they made it to shore safely. As pictured, the mast was nearly toppled, and the artist used a number of pictorial devices to convey a sense of total chaos—the tilting mast, the roiling, enormous waves, and the desperate gestures of the men trying to stabilize the boat. It must have been with immense gratitude and an equally immense respect for and love of the Virgin of Solitude that this painting was commissioned.

³⁷ Andrés Reséndez, *A Land So Strange: The Epic Journey of Cabeza de Vaca* (Basic Books, 2009).



Figure 2.9: Caught at Sea During a Storm (Source: *Dones y promesas*, p. 69, cat. 75)

As mentioned in a number of examples above, the genre of ex-voto painting in New Spain must have been accessible only to the relatively well off; surviving examples from the colonial period are almost always commissioned by titled patrons, and their wealth shows in their clothes and domestic environments.³⁸ This painting (figure 2.10), commissioned by the Spanish noblewoman María Teresa de Roxas in 1738, reflects eighteenth-century elite tastes in clothing and portraiture; despite the inscription “Ex Voto,” this painting seems to be more about the Countess and Count of Mora than the heavenly figures to whom it is supposedly dedicated.³⁹ The medallion depicting the intercessors Saint Anthony and Saint Ignatius seems to be merely a decorative element, no more central to the picture than the drapery; meanwhile, the text below

³⁸ *Dones y promesas*, p. 37, cat. 77. “La S.ra D.a Maria Teresa de Roxas Toledo. Ibarra. i Cepeda hija- de los S.res D.n Joseph Antonio de Roxas. i D.a Isabel Ana Bargas Manrique Condes de Mora Patrono deeste Rl. Hosp. El S.r D.n Joseph Antonio de roxas Toledo Cepeda Bargas Conde de Mora. Sr de las Casas de aguileria Busto Cepeda i Aldrete Patrono Rl. Hospital de Mater Dei.” Inscription above text reads: Ex Voto.

³⁹ Thomas Calvo, “El exvoto: antecedentes y permanencias,” in *Dones y Promesas*.

the portrait details the titles of the central figures but makes no mention of the saints or any divine favor received from them.⁴⁰



Figure 2.10: Countess and Count of Mora (Source: *Dones y promesas*, p. 37, cat. 77)

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

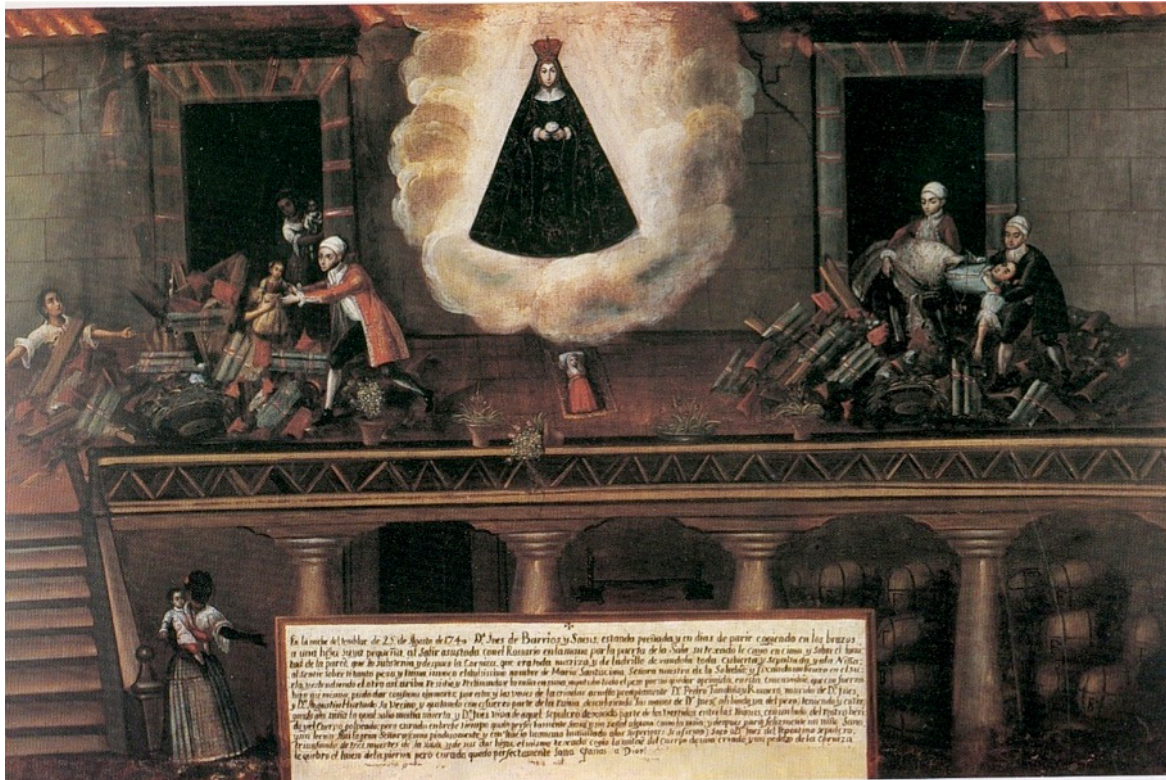


Figure 2.11: Virgin of Solitude Ex-voto (Source: *Dones y promesas*, p. 49, cat. 78)

Meanwhile, this example from 1740 (figure 2.11), dedicated to the Virgin of Solitude, possesses the pious spirit of ex-voto painting far more than the contemporaneous portrait discussed above.⁴¹ It depicts a chaotic scene in which a pregnant Doña Inés de Barrios de Saens is buried in the rubble of her home during an earthquake while holding her young daughter. Commending herself to the Virgin of Solitude, she called for help, and her cries were heard by

⁴¹ *Dones y promesas*, p. 49, cat. 78. “En la noche del temblor de 25 de Agosto de 1740 Da. Inés de Barrios y Saens, estando preñada y en dias de parir cogiendo en los brazos a una hija suya pequeña al Salir asustada con el Rosario en la mano por la puerta de la Sala su texado le cayó encima y Sobre el la mitad de la pared que lo substenia y despues la Corniza que era toda maziza y del ladrillo de xandola toda cubierta y Sepultada y ala Niña; al sentir sobre Si tanto pezo y Ruina invoco eldulssimo nombre de Maria Sanctissima Señora nuestra de la Soledad; y fixando un brazo en el suelo y estendiendo el otro asi arriba resistio y reclinandose la niña ensima mantubo todo el peso por no quedar oprimida en esa concavidad, que con fuerza hizo asi misma pudo dar confusos clamores por estos y las voses de la criadas acusió promptamente Dn. Pedro Tardiño y Romero, marido de Da. Inés, Y Dn. Augustin Hurtado su vecino y quitando con esfuerzo parte de la ruina descubriendo las manos de Da. Ines (alibiada ya del pezo) teniendo y entregando a la niña la qual salio media muerta y Da. Ines viva de aquel sepulcro dexando parte de los vestidos entre las ruinas, con un lado del rostro herido y el cuerpo golpeado; pero curada en brebe tiempo quedo perfectamente Sana y sin señal alguna como la niña; y despues pario felizmente un niño Sano, y sin lecion Assi la gran Señora (como piadosamente y con Juicio humano humillado a los superiores Se afirma) saco a Da. Ines del repentino Sepulcro, triunfando de tres muertes de la suya yde sus dos hijos, el mismo texado cogio la mitad del Cuerpo de una criada y un pedazo de la corniza le quiebro el hueso de la pierna pero curada quedo perfectamente sana gracias a Dios.”

her husband and a neighbor. They dug out Doña Inés and her injured toddler, and shortly thereafter Inés gave birth to a healthy baby boy. A servant was also crushed under the rubble and suffered a broken leg, but healed. Doña Inés, like most other commissioners of ex-votos, attributes her rescue and delivery of a healthy baby to the Virgin Mary, *not* her husband and neighbor, who physically dug her out. She also credits the Virgin for her “triumph over three deaths, her own and those of her two children,” a phrase that sheds light on colonial Mexican mentalities toward death, to be discussed in a later chapter. Doña Inés de Barrios de Sáenz indicates her elite status by giving her full, compound surname, by mentioning the injured servant, and by showing us the accoutrements of a wealthy household, complete with a large, two-storied, stone-built house featuring marble pillars and a tile roof, several well-dressed men, and two dark-skinned servants—one black, one probably an Indian—as well as one possible source of her family’s wealth, the wine casks in the lower register.

Surviving colonial Mexican ex-voto paintings often have illness as their subject matter, as the examples on the following pages show.⁴² Sickness and health were major concerns in a society whose capital city was constructed on a partially filled lakebed, making it especially prone to flooding.⁴³ Diseases spread easily in the fetid waters of the undrained streets, onto which people were accustomed to throwing wastewater from their second-story windows, calling out *jaguas!* as a warning cry. At the same time, the magnitude of earthquakes, common in Mexico, tended to intensify due to the shifting, unstable ground of the capital city, causing more deaths and injuries than would have occurred had it been constructed on more solid land. The ports of Veracruz and Acapulco, meanwhile, were situated in tropical climates given to mosquito-borne diseases and hurricanes, and irregular rainfall in the semi-arid agricultural central highland regions periodically resulted in drought and famine, also contributing to epidemics and human misery.⁴⁴ Not least important, poor sanitation and nutrition led to illness that hit the very young disproportionately, reflected in a high rate of mortality for children of all social classes. Childbirth, too, was a dangerous undertaking, with substantial risks to both mother and child. But colonial Mexicans did not take these dangers lying down. Sherry Fields notes that in ex-votos and in written correspondence,

These brief fragments in which people recorded their encounters with sickness, injury, and death immediately reveal two things: that the maintenance of health and relief of anxiety about health were constant themes in the daily lives of

⁴² For more on the theme of illness in the colonial period, see Sherry Fields, *Pestilence and Headcolds: Encountering Illness in Colonial Mexico*. Columbia University Press, Gutenberg e-book, 2008. <http://www.gutenberg-e.org/fields/index.html>

⁴³ Vera Candiani, “Draining the Basin of Mexico: Science, Technology, and Society, 1608-1808.” Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2004.

⁴⁴ Paul F. Ramírez, “Minerva’s Mexico: Science, Religion, and the Art of Healing in Late Colonial Epidemics, 1736-1821.” Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2010.

premodern people; and that the high incidence of sickness did not produce a state of passiveness or fatalism toward disease.⁴⁵

On the contrary, ex-votos quite nicely show how hard people fought to maintain or regain their health and well-being. The painting below illustrates this theme, as well as the importance, for colonial Mexican women, of having a divine force to guide and watch over them during labor.



Figure 2.12: Our Lady of Tulantongo Child Birth Ex-voto (Source: *Dones y promesas*, cat. 107, p. 78)

Figure 2.12, commissioned in the late eighteenth century, describes María Naranjo's difficult childbirth.⁴⁶ Her labor pains began on the night of January 17th, 1774, and she suffered through the birth alone, finally removing her infant by hand in the dawn of the following day.

⁴⁵ Sherry Fields, *Pestilence and Headcolds*, ch. 5, p. 13.

⁴⁶ In *Dones y promesas*, cat. 107, p. 78. Text reads: "En el ã. de 74 Dia lunes 17 dhen.o Como a las 9 d. la Noche Comenso Maria Naranjo Con dolores de Parto Ya el Amanecer. SaCo la Criatura a mano, Y Siguio la Parturienta Con Grabe Riesgo de su Bida. asta el dia martes 18 que ymbocado AN.a S.a de Tulantongo Ya Rolló la Comadrona. la toballa libre del peligro todo debido a la madre de Dios."

Even after delivering the baby, she suffered “grave risk to her life,” possibly due to uncontrolled bleeding. Desperate, she invoked Our Lady of Tulantongo of Texcoco, who heard her pleas for help and responded by sending the *comadrona* (midwife). The midwife is shown wringing out a towel, and María and her relatives kneel in prayer before the Virgin Mary. Aside from the bed shown on the left, the room is bare. The sole man in the painting wears breeches and a frilly shirt reminiscent of upper-class men’s fashions in the late eighteenth century; the women’s clothing similarly evokes a well-to-do, or at least not poor, social class, with sumptuous, tailored blouses, full skirts, and embroidered shawls. The portrayals of both the people and the setting suggest some wealth, but a few details contradict this assessment. While the clothing and the furniture show a family of means, it is odd that the bed is made and unused; everyone is on the floor, on the woven straw mat (*petate*) that served as bedding for more humble people. Perhaps the inclusion of the bed and nice clothes indicate the donor’s desire to present her family as rich, when in fact they were of more modest means; this was both a common practice and understandable in light of the religious nature of the ex-voto. By showing off her wealth, whether real or merely desired, María Naranjo was heaping honors upon Our Lady of Tulantongo. In any case, she had money enough to commission this painting.

Some similar markers of the patient’s economic status can be seen in figure 2.13.⁴⁷ The text is essentially illegible, but the image is of a woman lying on what may be her deathbed. Her eyes turn up toward the heavens, and the three other figures surrounding her stand anxiously. Whatever her condition, it is serious enough to warrant a priest; he stands by the patient’s head, apparently hearing her confession and performing the last rites. The woman on the other side of the bed wipes her eyes with her *rebozo*, and the man opposite her proffers a bowl of liquid, possibly holy water. The few legible words are “Mexico,” “Jesus,” “Presbitero,” and “Mayordomo de la cofradía de la Señora...” As one of the functions of cofradías was to help cover members’ burial costs, it is possible that the subject of this ex-voto was not thanks given to the Virgin Mary for saving the woman’s life, but for presiding over a good death, a key concern among Novohispanic elites.⁴⁸ The interior scene suggests wealth; the carved and canopied bed is draped with red velvet, and the floor appears to be parquet. The crying woman is dressed in a richly brocaded gown, and the whole scene is sumptuous and solemn. The artist has effectively rendered the lighting to add to the dramatic quality of the impending death.

⁴⁷ *Dones y promesas*, cat. 108, p. 78.

⁴⁸ On the idea of the “good death,” see Carlos Eire, *From Madrid to Purgatory The Art and Craft of Dying in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); Gisela von Wobeser, *Vida eterna y preocupaciones terrenales. Las capellanías de misas en la Nueva España* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1999); Antonio Rubial García, *La santidad controvertida. Hagiografía y conciencia criolla alrededor de los venerables no canonizados de Nueva España* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México/Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999); Brian Larkin, *The Very Nature of God: Baroque Catholicism and Religious Reform in Bourbon Mexico* (University of New Mexico Press, 2010); Martina Will de Chaparro, *Death and Dying in New Mexico* (University of New Mexico Press, 2007); and Martina Will de Chaparro and Miruna Achim, eds., *Death and Dying in Colonial Spanish America* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011). See also Chapter 5.



Figure 2.13: Woman Lying on Her Deathbed (Source: *Dones y promesas*, cat. 108, p. 78)

A third example, from 1783, portrays doña Jacinta Camacho lying in agony, all human interventions having failed (figure 2.14). She turns to San Miguel del Milagro and drinks from the holy water that flows from the well at his shrine, and is instantly cured.⁴⁹ She lies upon a real bed with an elaborately carved, painted headboard, sheets, pillows, and a blanket. The tile floor is partly covered with a woven rug, and there is a large altar, covered in an embroidered cloth and adorned by a large statue of St. Michael the Archangel crushing some demons underfoot. Two metal candlesticks frame the saint. Her attendants wear lace-covered brocade dresses; one holds a glass of the holy water; the other brings her chocolate or tea in a ceramic cup and saucer. A heavy wooden door studded with iron rivets opens into another room at the far left. This domestic interior is not the most ostentatious seen among colonial Mexican ex-voto paintings, but it holds a number of material comforts.

⁴⁹ *Dones y promesas*, cat. 92, p. 56. “En el mes de Junio, de 1783 as. Adolecio Da. Jasinta Ca.hacho, y desaucida de Todo Remedio, Umano Ocurio ala Intercesion, d Sr. S. Miguel, y toma. Agua d su Po(z) al punto tomo alibio Gracias Dios Para Siempre.”



Figure 2.14: Jacinta Camacho's Death Bed, 1783 (Source: *Dones y promesas*, cat. 92, p. 56)

The ex-voto in figure 2.15, commissioned by Diego de la Parra in 1711, shows the idea, seen in so many other paintings, that heavenly favors required reciprocation through heartfelt and tangible expressions of thanksgiving, and it is also an excellent illustration of the extent to which different social classes shared a common religious culture in colonial Mexico. It depicts the administrator (*alférez*) of the convent of St. Clara de Jesús in Querétaro, who experienced uncontrollable hemorrhaging through his mouth while at work one day.⁵⁰ He is slumped over in his chair and attended to by another man, while the cloistered nuns, who would ordinarily not be seen by male eyes, pray for him on the other side of the screen. They invoke the Virgin of the Exile (*Destierro*), shown above as a figure holding a baby Jesus, riding a mule, and the text indicates that with this divine intervention, Ensign de la Parra came to within two hours and stopped bleeding. In this image, secular and religious personages commingle, all of them united in their fervent devotion to the Virgin Mary and in their belief that this holy figure has the power to save a man's life and health. The pictorial mixing of the sacred and the profane—the screen separating the nuns and the holy image from the men would normally have been covered by a heavy black drape—allows us to appreciate colonial Mexico's shared religious culture in a way that may not have been obvious to the participants in this drama themselves. Ordinarily, the physical spaces inhabited by the nuns and the laypeople were segregated, but the pictorial device

⁵⁰ In *Pecados y milagros* (México: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Arte/Museo Nacional de Arte, 2012), cat. 68, p. 77.

that brings together the two spaces illustrates the extent to which religious images served to unite people of various social positions.



Figure 2.15: The Uncontrollable Hemorrhaging of the Administrator at the Convent of St. Clara de Jesús, 1711 (Source: *Pecados y milagros*, cat. 68, p. 77)

Disasters, whether experienced collectively or privately, required both human and divine action. Natural disasters and plagues were thought to be cosmic punishment for bad human behavior, and both individuals and the society at large appealed to higher powers for help.⁵¹ In 1544, a severe smallpox epidemic—one of many that wreaked devastation on the indigenous population in the sixteenth century—broke out in Mexico City. The Franciscans, following a well-established tradition in Europe and implementing it in America, organized a procession dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe to ask her for relief from this unprecedented pestilence. By turning out *en masse*, the afflicted population (which included a good number of Spaniards, among them the chronicler Fray Bernardino de Sahagún) could appeal to the benevolence of Mary and show her the devotion and respect she deserved. This show of adulation for the Mother of God, if properly carried out, might result in respite from the dreadful illness that spared few (especially not the Indians, who had no natural defenses against the European pathogen).

⁵¹ Sherry Fields, *op. cit.*



Figure 2.16: Performative Ex-voto Painting (Source: *Dones y Promesas*, cat. 70, pp. 43-44)

The supplicants' procession was commemorated in a large painting (figure 2.16) that, in its depiction of human-divine communication, might be called a performative ex-voto because it offers a glimpse into Novohispanic supplicative rituals.⁵² Housed in the Museum of the Basilica of Guadalupe, it was painted in the seventeenth century and shows a multitude pleading to the Virgin Mary for an end to the horrible pestilence that was ravaging the city. A long trail of penitents, holding devotional paraphernalia, humbly approaches the altar of the miraculous image of Our Lady of Guadalupe to beg for her divine mercy. The stricken Indians make their way on their knees toward the altar, gazing beseechingly up at the Virgin Mary as a Franciscan friar opens his arms in a gesture of welcome. The friar and other clergy, as they look down on the desperate Indians from their positions between the painting and the supplicants, confirm the Indians' belief in the power of this holy figure to aid them. Their physical position close to the altar and painting, moreover, serves to communicate their roles as intermediaries between the divine and mortals, a message that was promulgated and reinforced in countless ritual and visual manifestations throughout church history. By assembling in this way, the denizens of colonial Mexico—organized by the Franciscans entrusted to their evangelization—made clear their devotion to the figures of the Christian pantheon, and expressed the society's belief in the presence of the miraculous or supernatural in everyday human life. The plague of 1544, unprecedented in the New World, contributed to the catastrophic decline in the Indian population of New Spain in the sixteenth century, and the only remedy was to implore divine intercession.⁵³

⁵² In *Dones y Promesas: 500 años de arte ofrenda (exvotos mexicanos)*. México: Centro Cultural Arte Contemporáneo/Fundación Cultural Televisa, 1996, cat. 70, pp. 43-44.

⁵³ Manuel Ortiz Vaquero, "Procesión franciscana de Tlatelolco al Tepeyac implorando la intersección de la Virgen de Guadalupe para aplacar la peste (*cocolixtli*) de 1544," in *Dones y Promesas: 500 años de arte ofrenda (exvotos mexicanos)*. Centro Cultural Arte Contemporáneo/Fundación Cultural Televisa, 1996, pp. 43-44.

To whom could they turn in times of catastrophe and pestilence, in situations of violence or hunger? What force could mitigate collective or personal disaster? Colonial Mexicans turned to their altars and their devotions, knowing that while only God could suspend the laws of nature that He himself had established, the best way to approach Him was through his intermediaries: angels, saints, and especially the myriad Marian advocations promoted by the church.⁵⁴

Processions in honor of holy beings were a common occurrence in all of Catholic Europe and America in the early modern period.⁵⁵ Whether the motive was to gain divine favor or to thank a saint for her help in times of calamity, these performances are closely related to ex-votos in that they engage a supernatural being in a dialogue with humans. Each party, the saints and the people, has its obligations and expectations of one another. The people appealed to the holy being, made a show of honoring him or her, and in return hoped for divine help. In the case of this painting commemorating the procession to the Virgin of Guadalupe's shrine on the occasion of the *cocolixtli* epidemic of 1544, we see a *collective* action being taken in an attempt to alleviate the society's suffering. Indeed, the very nature of processions dictates collectivism. Much like political demonstrations or protests, there is strength in numbers; surely the Holy Virgin Mary could appreciate the incredible outpouring of emotion coming from a crowd, and be swayed by the sheer force of all those awe-struck people praying to her as she passed by. Surely she wouldn't forsake so many repentant sinners at once, not when all that pathos and genuine devotion were there for her to see!

In contrast to the collective performative aspect of processions, most ex-voto paintings depict a *personal* drama. They tell the story of an individual who, beset by illness or other danger to herself or a family member, prayed to a holy being and received divine favor. It was important to make note of this favor, to commemorate it publicly, so that the saint would feel no offense or ill will toward the petitioner. Because the saints could, and did, harbor malevolence toward humans if they were not properly venerated, if humans did not hold up their end of the bargain.⁵⁶ In medieval Europe, Patrick Geary writes, "saints manifested their power not only through beneficial miracles like working cures and finding lost objects but also by punishing and afflicting people who had offended them...saints were capricious, powerful, severe, jealous of their rights, and quick to reward or punish those who either trespassed or denied them."⁵⁷ The sentiment is echoed in a traditional verse from Puerto Rico:

⁵⁴ Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, "Lo prodigioso cotidiano en los exvotos novohispanos," in *Done y Promesas*, p. 49.

⁵⁵ On processions in different regions of Spain and its American empire, see William Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain*; Carolyn Dean, *Inka Bodies and the Body of Christ: Corpus Christi in Colonial Cuzco, Peru* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); and Linda Curcio-Nagy, *The Great Festivals of Colonial Mexico City: Performing Power and Identity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004).

⁵⁶ On the potential for divine punishment by images in Renaissance Florence, see Richard Trexler, "Florentine Religious Experience: The Sacred Image," *Studies in the Renaissance* v. 19 (1972), 7-41.

⁵⁷ Patrick Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 116-117.

*Tuvo su castigo
pa' que se recordara
que lo que se ofrece
se debe y se paga.*⁵⁸

The saints took seriously the making of promises, and held the supplicants to deadlines, causing relapses of illnesses if the cures they had bestowed were not acknowledged in a timely fashion.⁵⁹ Such was the case of Don Antonio de Vera and his wife Doña Catarina Ortis de Palacios, whose daughter they commended to St. Michael of the Miracle when she died shortly after being baptized (figure 2.17).⁶⁰ Don Antonio promised St. Michael that he would visit his shrine if he would restore the child to life, but neglected to make good on his vow. Years later, the daughter, now a *doncella*, was afflicted with a hemorrhagic condition that caused her to bleed out of her mouth and eyes, and in addition caused her excruciating pain, so that she could neither sit, lie down, or even stand. In this fashion, St. Michael was reminding Don Antonio of his unfulfilled promise. In desperation he renewed his vow to the saint, this time promising a painting testifying to the miracle, if he would only cure her once more. St. Michael came through once again, curing their daughter within nineteen days with nothing but a print (or scapular) of the saint hung on her back, but a year and a half went by and due to other, earthly occupations Don Antonio had yet to give St. Michael his due. Seeing that this human was obviously lax about his spiritual obligations, and desirous of inspiring him to fulfill his promise, the saint made Don Antonio's daughter ill five more times and struck two of his brothers and another of his daughters with debilitating, mortal illnesses, which finally brought Don Antonio to his senses and led to the commission of the promised ex-voto. He must have felt enormous relief, because St. Michael could have easily withheld his favor in light of the insults he had endured.⁶¹

⁵⁸ "He received his punishment/so that he'd not forget/that that which one has offered/one owes and one pays the debt." In Martha Egan, *Milagros*, p. 29; citing Vidal, p. 32.

⁵⁹ Pilar Gonzalbo, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-60.

⁶⁰ *Dones y Promesas*, cat. 83, p. 57, or Sherry Fields, <http://www.gutenberg-e.org/fields/chapter5.html>, p. 27.

⁶¹ "Dn. Antt.o de Vera y Da. Catarina Ortis de palacios lexitimos consortes tubieron una hija qa. la aborto dha. Da. Ca.tal.rina sumamente pequena debil y moribunda qacababa de Bautisar que do por largo espacio muerta y la Resusito Sn. migel del milagro. a petición de su Padre que prometio visitar el santuario. esoi la misma que se refiere abajo. La misma q ariba esta pintada Resien nasida y muerta abiendo buelto a bibir por milagro de Sn. Migel siendo ya Donsella grande padesia de presipitarsele la sangre a salirle por boca y ojos Con mortales agonias sinco años la curaron y cada día se aumentaban sus males y por el mal de sangre contrajo el de llagas ynteriores en toda la espalda de que no podia estar ni acostada sentada O em pie porque se le rebanaban entrañas nerbios y guesos esperando morir antes de dos cemanas y no curarse Ya. Ilego la demanda de Sn. migel del milagro y le prometio aser pintar el milagro de aberla resusitado si esta bes la sanaba y antes de 19 dias ce allo buena sin otro remedio que una estampa del Sto. que traia sobre la espalda año y medio se dilato en cumplir la promesa y le an buelto, los dolores y enfermedades sinco beses con aser animo de cumpir lo prometido y queda biba y sana en el tiempo que se a dilatado a pedido al Sto. prinsipe y a conseguido sanidad. para dos saserdotes ermanos suyos grabemente enfermos yncurables y vida para otra donsella ermana de la referida que estaua ya para espirar de desinteria de sangre y procondia y de sipela la cual queda buena y los tres ermanos suyos [...] en este año 1748 Abiendose dilatado en enbiar el milagro



Figure 2.17: St. Michael of the Miracle Ex-voto (Source: *Dones y Promesas*, cat. 83, p. 57)

As noted above, while religious devotion tended to be expressed by collective action in public performances such as processions, it was manifested more privately in ex-votos and in unauthorized home altars, which were common in even the poorest households.⁶² An exception to the generally individual nature of ex-votos is the frontispiece to Cayetano Cabrera Quintero's account of the Virgin of Guadalupe on the occasion of the *matlazahuatl* epidemic in 1736-7 (figure 2.18). In the tract, published in 1743, Cabrera expresses the common belief that "sickness

ariba por barias ocupaciones y por a bia discernimiento una yglesia luego que se feniesieron estos se allo esta Sa. de ynprobiso Con todos los cuales de que antes le abia librado el C [...] ria Arcangel Sn. Migel de culla interesesion se balia para su alibio sinn consegia unas qe la umento de sus males cullo rigor con las medisinas Cresiantras y a [...] boto de an di alos otros este milagro si el Sto. lo alcansaba del Srr. y enbiamos conbreda [...] Sa.tuario de S. Migel del milagro y deJando los Remedios. qulas 24 oras Consolo [...] lo se allo sana en este mes de Junio de 1750—.” In *Dones y Promesas*, cat. 83, p. 57, private collection.

⁶² On images in Indian homes, see William Taylor, *Magistrates*, p. 659 n 37.

that comes from heaven also requires remedies from heaven: God is the principal and sometimes the only author of pestilence.”⁶³ “Remedies from heaven” could not be expected without the proper formalities observed, however. Processions, masses, and other public rituals complemented private forms of prayer and supplication, and this ex-voto is a rare example of collectivism (although it is safe to say that the book circulated in exclusive circles). It comes in the form of an engraving and is inscribed in Latin, making references to the second king of Rome, Numa Pompilio (715-672 B.C.), who was credited with the salvation of that city during an epidemic. The Virgin of Guadalupe hovers over a horrifying scene of dead and dying people congregated in Mexico City’s main plaza, and the engraver uses the occasion of the Virgin Mary’s intercession in the epidemic to give thanks and simultaneously to proclaim her as the Patroness of Mexico.⁶⁴

⁶³ Cayetano Cabrera Quintero, *Escudo de Armas de México* (México: Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social, 1981), p. 25.

⁶⁴ Pilar Gonzalbo, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-50. Paul Ramírez (personal communication, August 2010) notes that archiepiscopal authorities were pushing hard for the version of events that Cabrera ultimately published, and for the election of Guadalupe as patron of the city, so the print may reveal political intrigue as well as communal devotion. See also Paul Ramírez, “Isolating Disease: Cayetano Cabrera y Quintero’s *Escudo de Armas de México* and the *Matlazahuatl* Epidemic of Mexico City, 1736-1737,” unpublished seminar paper, University of California, Berkeley, 2005.



Figure 2.18: Cayetano Cabrera Quintero's Account of the Virgin of Guadalupe (Source: Cayetano Cabrera Quintero, *Escudo de Armas de México*, p. 25)

Showing again the futility of trying to separate elite from popular attitudes toward religious responses to a calamity experienced collectively, the sick are strewn about Mexico City's central plaza, their social rank indeterminable from their half-clothed bodies. Meanwhile, representatives of the Novohispanic elite, in wigs and formal coats, assume attitudes of imploration or prayer. This representation, along with Cabrera's elite status and the thousands of official supplicative processions to one Virgin or another in times of catastrophe, lends strong support to the conclusion that elites and commoners shared a common religious culture in colonial Mexico, one that shifted and branched out after Independence, but in which all Mexicans continued to participate.

Conclusions

One of the most salient features of the ex-voto phenomenon in Mexico—indeed, of Mexico’s highly visually oriented religious culture in general—is the devotees’ conception of divine beings as human. When they commission or make an ex-voto, they are communicating with the saint as though she were a close friend or even a family member. The divine dwells in the same mental space as the human; there is no clear break between the supernatural and the natural worlds. The familiarity with which devotees address their saints is one way they express this sense of inhabiting the same world; the contractual nature of humans’ dealings with their saints is another. At the same time, esconced within this framework is an acceptance of inexplicable phenomena—otherwise known as miracles—as being as “real” as a scorpion sting or a sudden downpour. In making ex-votos, people acknowledge the saints’ power to control events, and those events that seem to go against the laws of nature are attributed to divine virtue.⁶⁵

In this chapter, we have explored a number of themes of import to the remainder of this dissertation. The first deals with social class. Ex-voto production in Mexico during the early colonial period seems to have been driven by people wealthy enough to commission paintings from professional artists. The idea was to honor the saint for a favor received, to show proper deference to the holy, all in the hope of reducing the amount of time one would have to spend in Purgatory after death. In a sense, then, the story of colonial Mexican ex-votos is an elite one, even with the caveat that poor people also felt—and expressed—their devotion to the various Christs, Virgins and saints that populated the Mexican imaginary.

At the same time, it bears repeating that the religious culture of New Spain was a shared one, in which people of all social classes participated. The physical evidence is skewed toward offerings, such as ex-voto paintings, that were more or less permanent; the more ephemeral offerings of flowers, candles, clothes, and hair that are still left at altars throughout the country have simply not survived to be able to tell the stories and motivations of the people who left them. This shared religious culture is a theme that will appear in later centuries, modified and “lived” differently by different people, but uniting Mexican Catholics to this day. Despite the extreme stratification of colonial Spanish American society, the sense of the sacred permeating everyday life was expressed constantly in processions honoring holy beings, saints’ feast days, liturgical celebrations, pilgrimages, and, of course, physical offerings of thanks for heavenly favors received. As discussed above, one of the hallmarks of pre-modern societies is a shared religious mentality (which may, as it was in the case of colonial Spanish America, be imposed and enforced by a governing body such as the Inquisition). A culture in which social position was rather fixed, with drastically different material circumstances for different social groups, but that was also unified by common attitudes toward the divine and of the “correct” ways of expressing religious devotion, makes sense if we keep in mind the ubiquity of sacred images in

⁶⁵ Such is the definition of miracle given in Sebastián Covarrubias’s 1611 dictionary of the Spanish language, cited in Solange Alberro, “Retablos and Popular Religion in Nineteenth-Century Mexico,” in *Retablos y Exvotos* (México: Museo Franz Mayer/Artes de México, 2000), p 73.

daily life; the messages promulgated in these images, and the meanings that people gave them, converged to produce a kind of social equalization, at least with regard to the saints. In the following chapters we will see a significant change in this “democracy” of the faithful, where formerly elite practices were reinterpreted, co-opted, and given new meanings and expressions by non-elites, thus being transformed into “popular” art, religion, and culture.

Likewise, we will track another important change in Mexican religious culture, this one having to do with an emergent sense of individualism in the late eighteenth and especially the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I have shown various prototypes of Mexican ex-voto paintings in order to trace their development in the formal or aesthetic sense, but the relative dearth of extant ex-votos painted before 1750 is due not only to their physical conservation or lack thereof. Equally as important is the fact that throughout the colonial period and up until the mid-nineteenth-century Reform Laws, which in principle dramatically reduced the wealth, power, and visibility of the Catholic church, public, collective religious performances were a constant feature in Mexico, especially in the capital and other larger settlements. Ostentatious religious processions were a ubiquitous feature of city living, and drew throngs of participants and onlookers regardless of their social status. Religion was thus often, though not exclusively, experienced collectively. As the state began to rise in the mid-eighteenth century and to assert its power over the church, a collateral effect was that in many ways, religion became a more individual matter, with the relationships between humans and holy beings becoming more intimate; it is these expressions of closeness and familiarity with the saints that drove the flowering of the Mexican ex-voto tradition in the coming centuries.

Chapter 2

The Persistence of Divine Intervention:

Religious Culture in Mexico from Independence to the *Reforma*

Mexico's religious culture, from the conquest period onward, was highly visually oriented. Images of saints, the Virgin Mary, and Christ were ubiquitous not only in religious settings such as churches and convents, but in the public and domestic spheres as well. Processions in honor of Catholic holy beings were common and frequent, and the celebrations of each town's patron saint were important civic as well as religious rituals. Even the poorest of Indians' dwellings featured a home altar, sometimes consisting of no more than a cross and perhaps a candle or a flower, but more likely including a print or a small effigy of Mary or a saint.¹ Protocols established in the colonial period for the proper treatment and handling of religious images survived both the tumultuous independence period and the long-running war between liberal and conservative forces, with Mexico City's *Ayuntamiento* (governing council) ordering processions in honor of the Virgins of Remedios and Guadalupe, both in supplication and in thanks, well into the 1840s.

This flooding of the Novohispanic imaginary with religious symbols had long-lasting effects on the Mexican psyche. Despite dramatic, often violent changes in politics and government in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many of which were directed at the church, the importance of Catholic symbols in Mexico did not diminish. Indeed, if we consider the documented religious practices, the picture that emerges is one of a population clinging to the familiar as it faced political and social revolutions and unrest. If we take ex-voto production as a measure of spiritual practices, which in turn shed light on spiritual beliefs, it becomes obvious that as Mexico made its long, bloody entry into the modern world-system, people's ideas of the supernatural continued their hold; in the absence of adequate medical care, financial security, and police, saints and other divine intercessors were more trusted figures than agents of the government or of science.²

Images of holy beings, so fundamental to the Novohispanic understanding of the world, remained central in the Mexican imaginary after independence. In myriad ways, images of saints functioned as markers of social identity for Mexicans, whether as the focal figures of *cofradías* and other pious associations, the patrons of parishes, Indian villages, provincial capitals, or the nation. Monastic orders were founded in their honor, as were schools and hospitals; carved niches on the corners of public and private buildings housed their statues, making them familiar and immutable features of the urban landscape; in rural areas, the heart of the smallest human

¹ William Taylor, *Magistrates of the Sacred: Priests and Parishioners in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (Stanford, 1996), p. 659 n 37; Serge Gruzinski, *Images at War: Mexico from Columbus to Blade Runner (1492-2019)*, trans. Heather MacLean (Duke, 2001), p. 161.

² Claudio Lomnitz, "Prólogo," in Moisés Gómez and Oresta López, *Tesoros populares de la devoción. Los exvotos pintados en San Luis Potosí* (Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Instituto de Cultura de San Luis Potosí, El Colegio de San Luis, 2001).

settlement was the parish church, with its patron saint watching over devotees' lives and well-being. Their hallowed status in the Novohispanic mentality led to the official promulgation of edicts codifying their sacrality and Inquisitorial prosecution of reported abuses against them.³ After independence, as William B. Taylor points out, "images as pathways to divine favor were still regarded as vital to wellbeing, and rights to them were sought and vigorously defended with an open purse, especially in times of rampant illness and political crisis."⁴ Moreover, holy images remained so important in the nascent republic that they were involved in frequent disputes about ownership and access, especially between the institutional church and lay people; so entrenched were colonial-era perceptions of the presence of the divine in statues and other images of Catholic saints that their "desecration" in the colonial period was seen as a serious threat to the social order, while iconoclastic actions undertaken by liberals, revolutionaries, or mere vandals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries made similarly forceful statements about the standing that holy images had in the Mexican psyche.⁵

This chapter explores the continuities and changes in Mexican image-centered devotional practices after independence. A central focal point of this inquiry is an exploration of the shift in the *ways* that images were revered. I posit that one of the key differences between colonial-era and later religious practices was a gradual change from collective worship to more individuated interactions between the saints and their devotees, and that this change can clearly be seen in the rise in popularity of ex-voto paintings. While the ex-voto tradition in Mexico can be traced back to the early colonial period, there seems to have been a dramatic increase in ex-voto production beginning in the nineteenth century. In this chapter I explore some of the reasons for this upsurge, connecting artistic developments with political and technological changes after Mexico's independence from Spanish rule in 1821. I begin by considering the continuities in religious mentalities that seem to characterize the earlier part of the century, laying out the framework for the gradual changes seen in modes of religious expression, as well as the larger social changes—from collective to more individual interactions with the divine—that those expressions of piety signify. I cover the period from independence in 1821 to the mid-century liberal reform, the wars it spawned, and its aftermath, leading into the major political and social changes brought about by the Reforma; in the following chapter, I take up the church's response to the attacks on its hold over Mexican hearts, minds, and pockets, as well as by Mexico's rapid entry into modernity at the end of the nineteenth century.

³ Kinga Novak, "Using and Misusing Images in Colonial Mexico: A Query into Popular Attitudes, Social Norms, and Visual Culture," unpublished paper, UC Berkeley, 2004.

⁴ William B. Taylor, *Shrines and Miraculous Images: Religious Life in Mexico Before the Reforma* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010), p. 171.

⁵ See Adrian Bantjes, "Burning Saints, Molding Minds: Iconoclasm, Civic Ritual, and the Failed Cultural Revolution" in *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico*, ed. William H. Beezley, Cheryl English Martin, and William E. French (Scholarly Resources, 1994); Bantjes, "The War against Idols: The Meanings of Iconoclasm in Revolutionary Mexico, 1910-1940," in *Negating the Image: Case Studies in Iconoclasm*, ed. Anne McClanan and Jeff Johnson (Ashgate, 2005); and Bantjes, "Making Sense of Iconoclasm: Popular Responses to the Destruction of Religious Images in Revolutionary Mexico," in *Iconoclasm: Contested Objects, Contested Terms*, ed. Stacy Boldrick and Richard Clay (Ashgate, 2007).

The Latin American independence movements in the early nineteenth century had varied and regionally-specific motives. The Bourbon reforms of the mid-to-late eighteenth century, which aimed to increase Crown control over the political and economic activities in the American colonies, have long been recognized as a major factor in increasing Creole resentment against the distant monarchy, and in provoking armed resistance to Spanish rule.⁷ Royal officials, many of whom had little to no experience with the realities of colonial society, were sent to oversee the functioning of the colonies, and often alienated their Creole counterparts with their occasionally heavy-handed tactics. As regarded the clergy, the Bourbon monarchs Carlos III and IV, Enlightened despots, sought to establish absolute royal authority over the political and, especially, the financial activities of the Catholic church. Nancy Farriss and others have shown that the Crown's efforts to consolidate control over the American church backfired, especially among the lower clergy, due to a growing resentment of peninsular royal officials' presumptions of superiority over both papal and local clerical authority.⁸ While Spain's enforcement of the Bourbon ecclesiastical reforms was only one factor in the complex unfolding of the independence movements in Latin America, it is noteworthy that in Mexico, where the church had historically been stronger than in the other Spanish viceroyalties, two of the leading independence figures were priests—the now-revered insurgents Miguel Hidalgo and José María Morelos.

Despite Bourbon efforts to marginalize the church, late colonial Mexico retained many of the elements of the twin system of governance, with crown and church sharing power. This meant that the fundamental question for the new government was to determine the role of the church in post-independence politics. While the wars of independence can be termed revolutionary in that they sought to overthrow the existing imperial government, the Catholic church was so fundamentally a part of the Mexican psyche that it was impossible to imagine a secular republicanism of the sort that had been established in France, or even the separation of church and state that was implied in the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. Indeed, Mexico's first post-colonial government was not a republic at all, but a monarchy

⁶ Brian Connaughton, *Religión, política e identidad en la Independencia de México* (México, D.F.: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana; Puebla, Pue.: Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades "Alfonso Vélaz Pliego," 2010); *Clerical Ideology in a Revolutionary Age: The Guadalajara Church and the Idea of the Mexican Nation, 1788-1853*, trans. Mark Alan Healey (Calgary, Alta.: University of Calgary Press; Boulder, CO: University of Colorado Press, 2003).

⁷ Eric Van Young, *The Other Rebellion: Popular Violence, Ideology, and the Mexican Struggle for Independence, 1810-1821* (Stanford, 2001); D.A. Brading, *Church and State in Bourbon Mexico: The Diocese of Michoacán 1749-1810* (Cambridge, 1994); Solange Alberro, *El águila y la cruz. Orígenes religiosos de la conciencia criolla. México, siglos XVI-XVII* (México, D.F.: El Colegio de México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999).

⁸ Nancy Farriss, *Crown and Clergy in Colonial Mexico, 1759-1821: The Crisis of Ecclesiastical Privilege* (London: Athlone Press, 1968); D.A. Brading, *Church and State in Bourbon Mexico: The Diocese of Michoacán 1749-1810* (Cambridge 1994); William B. Taylor, *Magistrates of the Sacred: Priests and Parishioners in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (Stanford, 1996).

headed by the leader of the 1821 independence movement, Agustín Iturbide. More importantly, under the Three Guarantees stipulated in Mexico's independence from Spain, the Catholic church was to retain its privileges and religious monopoly.⁹

It appeared, for a while, that the church would be safe. Mexico would remain Catholic, and traditional civic practices would remain religious. In keeping with the tradition of jointly organizing processions of statues of saints for the collective spiritual—and *physical*—well-being of its citizens, Mexico City's Ayuntamiento and the Archicofradía of the Virgen de los Remedios continued calling for the image of this Virgin to be brought from its shrine in Naucalpan to Mexico City's Cathedral, four leagues (approximately 20 km) away, during and after the war, for novenas in times of "public necessity."¹⁰ In these various directives for honoring the Virgin of the Remedies a clear sense of human-divine reciprocity can be detected, and I want to highlight this relationship for the post-independence period in order to show the continuity in religious mentality. Rather than a revolutionary break from the colonial past, Mexico's early national period was instead characterized by a continuance of colonial-era spiritual beliefs and practices.¹¹

One of the most salient expressions of this human-divine reciprocity in the calls for novenas to the Virgin of the Remedies is the repeated mention of thanks to her for saving the population from various catastrophes, and for the conceptualization of divine assistance as a very real presence in daily life. In 1809, the Cofradía of the Virgin of the Remedies petitioned to make the procession and novena a permanent, recurring ritual, citing her efficacy in "dissipating pestilences and epidemics, reversing the sterility of the land, improving the weather...and fertilizing the fields with rains," which could not be expected by "natural" means: only the

⁹ Timothy E. Anna, *The Fall of Royal Government in Mexico City* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978); Christon I. Archer, ed., *The Birth of Modern Mexico* (Wilmington, Delaware: SR Books, 2003); Brian R. Hamnett, *Roots of Insurgency: Mexican Regions, 1750–1824* (Cambridge University Press, 1986); Jaime E. Rodríguez O., ed. *The Independence of Mexico and the Creation of the New Nation* (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, 1989).

¹⁰ AHDF, Fondo: Ayuntamiento del DF, Sección: Santuario de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios, Vol. 3902, Exp. 66, 1809-1828: La Cofradía de nuestra señora de los Remedios sobre que esta ciudad promueva el que cada año se traiga a la santísima virgen a esta capital para que se le haga novenario; Vol. 3904, Exp. 125, 1829-1833: Sobre hacer un Novenario de rogacion á María Santísima de los Remedios, por las necesidades públicas.

¹¹ Thousands of official directives for taking the image of Remedios from its shrine in Naucalpan to the Metropolitan Cathedral and back are preserved in the Archivo Histórico del Distrito Federal (formerly known as Archivo del Ex-Ayuntamiento de la Ciudad de México). These directives go back to the sixteenth century and continue through the mid-nineteenth, showing a continuity of practices (and thus beliefs) surrounding the Virgin of the Remedies, who was thought to be especially helpful in warding off drought and the potentially lethal consequences that come from a lack of rain, such as famine and epidemics. In addition to her drought-relief work, however, in the nineteenth century Remedios was called upon for divine assistance in other calamities, both natural and political; a number of processions were ordered in the aftermath of earthquakes (AHDF Fondo Ayuntamiento Gobierno del Distrito Federal, Sección Santuario de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios, Vol. 3902, Exp. 66, 1809-1828; Vol. 3908, Exp. 183, 1845), and also in relation to elections and military engagements with the United States in 1847 (AHDF Vol. 3908, Exp. 176, 1843; Vol. 3908, Exp. 192; Vol. 3908, Exp. 191, 1847). See also AHDF, Fondo Ayuntamiento Gobierno del Distrito Federal, Sección Santuario de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios, Vol. 3904, Exp. 125, 1829-1833; Vol. 3906, Exp. 160, 1839; Vol. 3906, Exp. 161, 1839; Vol. 3908, Exp. 167, 1840; Vol. 3908, Exp. 171, 1841; Vol. 3908, Exp. 194, 1848.

Virgin could bring them. Continuing to sing her praises, the officials noted that she caused the seasons to change (to farmers' benefit), and prevented earthquakes from striking whenever she was brought from her shrine to the Metropolitan Cathedral.¹² Even more clear evidence of the sense of reciprocity between Remedios and her devotees is the deal-making language used a little later on: years of prosperity and well-being would be dedicated to thanking her for her favors, while unfavorable times would prompt the faithful to pray to her for the remedy of their problems.¹³

In addition to these calls for regular, ongoing processions to honor the Virgin Mary as protector and patron of Mexico City, Remedios was also frequently invoked by the Ayuntamiento and members of her *cofradía* in times of specific collective disasters. Over a five-year period beginning in 1829, the Cabildo repeatedly petitioned the Ayuntamiento for rogative novenas to Remedios for "public necessities" arising from a recent series of earthquakes, which, they feared, would have a ripple effect on the public's health and livelihood.¹⁴ Their fears, it seems, were well-founded: in 1830, an outbreak of plague originating in Tehuantepec, in southern Mexico, was making its way toward the capital, and Remedios was needed to stop it. The Virgin of the Remedies made several emergency visits to the Cathedral and to the second most important church of Mexico City, Santa Veracruz, in 1830-1834, thus giving much-needed relief to her devotees.¹⁵ That the public's distress was assuaged by the Virgin's presence is evident in several official communiqués from 1834, which ordered her procession from Santa Veracruz to the Cathedral "so that the public may thank her for restoring the peace and for having saved us from the invasion of cholera that has caused many in other parts to suffer."¹⁶ An

¹² AHDF, Fondo: Ayuntamiento del DF, Sección: Santuario de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios, Vol. 3902, Exp. 66, 1809-1828, f. 1: "...apiadada la misericordia del Altísimo, apenas se presentan las calamidades, quando implorando su singular patrocinio, se ve, con admiración general, disipadas las pestes y epidemias, deshecha la esterilidad, mejorado el temperamento, socorrido México, y fertilizados los Campos con lluvias, que escaseadas en sus tiempos, y sin aparato, ni esperanza de lograrlos en lo natural, en el momento que se piensa, y determina la rogacion, y que se traslada la Santa Ymagen de su Santuario á esta Metropoli, varía la Estación, mejoran los Aires, y se presenta la fertilidad, desapareciendo los temores, y advirtiendose siempre...en el inmenso concurso que tiene el consuelo de adorarla, la mas piadosa emoción, que es sin (duda) bastante á alcanzár su protección...

¹³ AHDF, Fondo: Ayuntamiento del DF, Sección: Santuario de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios, Vol. 3902, Exp. 66, 1809-1828, f. 2: si el año presenta felicidad, será dedicado á darle gracias pr. sus beneficios, y si las necesidades lo exigen, á clamár, y pedir el remedio de ellas.

¹⁴ AHDF, Fondo: Ayuntamiento del DF, Sección: Santuario de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios, Vol. 3904, Exp. 125, 1829-1833: El Pueblo bastante consternado pr. los pasados temblores...y temeroso por otra parte de su continuacion y otras plagas q. deben ser consiguientes, a lo ardoroso de la estacion, variedades del tpo. y escases de viveres...

¹⁵ Just as in colonial times, such outward displays of devotion were common in the early national period, despite earlier Bourbon attempts to promote a more "interior" piety. See Pamela Voekel, *Alone Before God: The Religious Origins of Modernity in Mexico* (Duke 2002).

¹⁶ AHDF, Fondo: Ayuntamiento del DF, Sección: Santuario de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios, Vol. 3904, Exp. 125, 1829-1833: "...he dispuesto que en el dia 15 del corriente sea trasladada la Imagen de la VR á la parroquia de la Sta. Veracruz para que el dia siguiente pase á la Catedral á recibir las gracias del pueblo por el completo restablecimiento de la paz y por habernos librado de la invacion del Cholera en el presente año en que han padecido este mal otras poblaciones.

official notice posted on church doors advised residents that on November 15 and 16, 1834, an “action of thanks,” involving another procession from Santa Veracruz to the Cathedral, was to take place, and requested the “pious presence” of the Mexican people.¹⁷

While it is tempting to ascribe the *cofradías*’ and the Ayuntamiento’s proceedings regarding processions and novenas to the Virgin of the Remedies as a holdover of early modern mentalities in which the sacred was just as much a part of the world as the profane, it must be recognized that the question of divine intervention in human affairs had long elicited philosophical and theological debate. As Pamela Voekel has eloquently shown, the late-eighteenth century reforms of funeral practices in Mexico were partly driven by Enlightenment-era rationalist, scientific thinking which made a clear distinction between the natural and supernatural worlds.¹⁸ They were also driven by a desire on the part of certain reformers within the Catholic church, attuned to intellectual currents in Europe, to carry out a kind of incipient modernization. Thus in the same documentation that I have referenced regarding the Archicofradía of the Virgin of the Remedies’ desire to instate a permanent, periodic rogative procession from her shrine in Naucalpan to the Metropolitan Cathedral, we see a “voice of reason” denying such a proposal coming from the Archbishop himself. On August 31, 1809, His Excellency disagreed with the Archicofradía’s petition, arguing that despite the drought and its negative consequences, the circumstances did not warrant a special visit from Remedios.¹⁹ Two central concerns factored into his objection. One was that the drought of 1809 did not seem to be bad enough to warrant a procession, as rains had fallen in Querétaro and in Guanajuato, leaving open the possibility that the Valley of Mexico and the rest of the viceroyalty would soon enjoy much-needed precipitation. He warned that it was important to avoid the “abuses” that “tend to occur in times when there is a shortage of corn,” a veiled reference to food riots of the past. But his larger concern was that, since the drought was not severe, the proposed rogation would be interpreted by some as motivated by the crown’s misfortunes provoked by Napoleon’s invasion of Spain: concerns about military defeat in Europe were to be suppressed. In 1809, just over a year before the *grito de independencia* propelled New Spain to nationhood, signs of imperial

¹⁷ AHDF, Fondo: Ayuntamiento del DF, Sección: Santuario de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios, Vol. 3904, Exp. 125, 1829-1833: AVISO: Para recibir las debidas gracias por el restablecimiento de la paz y por habernos librado de los nuevos estragos de cólera morbus, ha de ser conducida la SANTISIMA VIRGEN DE LOS REMEDIOS la tarde del 15 del actual á la Santa Iglesia parroquial de la Veracruz, y de allí en la siguiente á la Santa Iglesia Metropolitana; y esperándose que el pueblo mexicano esfuerce las demostraciones de su piedad en tan religioso acto, se le anuncia con la debida anticipacion. Secretaría del Exmo. Ayuntamiento de México noviembre 11 de 1834. Lic. José María Guridi y Alcocer, secretario.

¹⁸ Voekel, *Alone Before God*.

¹⁹ AHDF, Fondo: Ayuntamiento del DF, Sección: Santuario de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios, Vol. 3902, Exp. 66, 1809-1828: ...he determinado q e suspenda la venida de aquella sagrada imagen, pr. no hallarnos en las cicunstancias q.e explica la Real Cedula de 9. de agosto del año de 800, y en efecto despues de la fha. del indicado Oficio de VS. han caido algunos aguaceros, habiendo sucedido lo mismo en Queretaro y Guanaxuato.

Aunque no hay noticias positibas del restante del Reyno sobre haber ó no llovido, no pueden dilatarse en cumplim.to de las estrechas orns. q se comunicaron pr. esta Sup.d á los respectivos intend.tes...con el objeto de...dictar las providencias q correspondan á evitar los abusos q suelen cometerse en las ocasiones de no ser abundantes las cosechas de Mais.

weakness and political unrest were beginning to emerge, and the Archbishop wanted to preserve stability, the monarchy, and the church's privileged position in the colonial system at all costs.²⁰

There seems to be a delicate balance in the Archbishop's mindset between acknowledging the divine power of the Virgin of the Remedies, and more prosaic, or political, concerns. The wording of the Archbishop's comments suggests that he, as the top church official and thus the closest in human stature to the divinity of the Virgin Mary, had qualms about "abusing" his privileges by asking her for too many favors. He qualifies his reluctance by stating that if the situation were truly dire, then requests for divine favors would certainly be warranted. In this case, however, he argues against the request for divine intervention out of the force of habit; that is, the yearly petitions for religious processions honoring Remedios run the risk of overdoing it, and verge on complacency on the part of the people. His argument is yet another clear indicator of a mentality that still emphasized a fundamental sense of mutual obligation between humans and the divine, of reciprocity.

Tensions were rife in the early nineteenth century between the typically early modern thinking that accorded the sacred the same mental space as the profane, and the secularist tendency to separate the spiritual realm from earthly affairs. In a stunning override of the Archbishop's authority, the Ayuntamiento prevailed and the Virgin of the Remedies was honored with a procession on May 10, 1810. The argument in favor of requesting divine protection superseded the Archbishop's more politically calculated message of not wanting to appear concerned about the events in Spain. As Dr. José Ignacio Vélez put it, although it had indeed begun to rain in other parts, there was no guarantee that it would continue to do so; asking for heavenly aid was always a good policy. There would be other calamities, necessities, and deaths if God and the Virgin were not appeased in the ways to which they were accustomed.²¹ The Junta of Mexico City summarized this point of view in a letter from May 4, 1810, in which it argued that the devout people of the kingdom desired a show of faith "for the release of their Piety, hopeful of receiving the favors of God, imploring them by way of his Holy Mother before an Image which has given continuous and frequent marvels."²² Processions in honor of holy beings, then, were a kind of generalized insurance policy for colonial and early nineteenth-century Mexicans.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, AHDF, Fondo: Ayuntamiento del DF, Sección: Santuario de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios, Vol. 3902, Exp. 66, 1809-1828: En esta intelig.a y en la de q no siendo notoria la escases de las lluvias, podrian tal vez pensar muchos q la causa de la rogacion pretendida consistia en algun reves de ntras. Armas en Esp.a, no debe hacerse novedad pr. ahora en la venida de Ntra. Sra. de los Remedios...

²¹ AHDF, Fondo: Ayuntamiento del DF, Sección: Santuario de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios, Vol. 3902, Exp. 66, 1809-1828:...para esta Continuacion, siempre es, y será, un excelente medio, implorar el auxilio del Cielo...En esta Virtud ruega a V.E. el Sindico se sirva instaurar ante el...Virrey...á fin de q.e...se digne acceder...á la venida de la Virgen para que haciendole sus rogaciones con el culto acostumbrado nos obtenga de Dios, tiempo en todo mas felices de los q.e estamos experimentando...

²² *Ibid.*, ...todo el Pueblo Devoto decea semejante demostracion pa. desaogo de su Piedad esperansado de recibir los favores de Dios implorandolos pr. medio de su Smma. Madre delante de una Imagen de q. há experimentado continuadas y freq.tes maravillas.

All of these public, supplicative measures taken by Mexico City's Ayuntamiento can be interpreted as a form of ex-voto—a collective, performative kind. Just as the individual and highly personal paintings that thanked a saint for interceding on a devotee's behalf were a form of communication between human and divine beings, so, too, were processions. In taking an image of a holy being out of its shrine or church and publicly processing with it, in advertising the procession and highlighting its sacred, ceremonial nature in order to attract the largest possible number of participants, civic and religious officials signified to the Virgin Mary society's faith in her. Simultaneously, religious processions reified Mexico's prevailing, Catholic, hierarchical, and corporate societal structure.²³ As in colonial times, when catastrophes were experienced collectively, society reacted in unison. Racial and class differences—which were very marked for the whole of the colonial era and lingered on well into the national period, and persist even today—did not manifest themselves in terms of people's devotions to the saints. While undoubtedly different saints held different meanings for different people, the public nature of the official notices of processions and novenas on Mexico City's church doors, echoed in sermons by priests saying Mass, reinforced a society-wide recognition of and devotion to holy figures such as the Virgin of the Remedies, Guadalupe, and other major figures of the Catholic pantheon, just as prints and the statues themselves did.

But what of the small, personal, ex-voto paintings that expressed gratitude for individual prayers answered? Were *acciones de gracias* in the early nineteenth century always expressed collectively, in processions and other public performances? And is it possible to trace a trajectory from collective devotional practices, such as processions, to increasingly individuated expressions of piety, such as ex-voto paintings? New currents in Mexico's political landscape portended changes to society and mentalities; from the institutional level to the individual, religion was experienced in ways that reflected a changing world. The steady increase in the number of ex-votos painted and the simultaneous decline of institutionally sponsored processions may certainly indicate an internalization of (or at the very least, an acquiescence to) Bourbon-era and liberal calls for the end of colonial corporatism in matters of both church and state.²⁴ The decline of *cofradías*, the mutual-aid societies organized around Catholic devotions, could also be taken as a sign of increasing individualism, but only if we acknowledge the simultaneous rise of other lay associations that functioned in similar ways, especially with regards to the sense of social identity they provided.²⁵ (It must be said that even these new lay groups—collectives—all

²³ Linda Curcio-Nagy, *The Great Festivals of Colonial Mexico City: Performing Power and Identity* (University of New Mexico Press, 2004); Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, "Las fiestas novohispanas: Espectáculo y ejemplo," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Winter, 1993), pp. 19-45; Carolyn Dean, *Inka Bodies and the Body of Christ: Corpus Christi in Colonial Cuzco, Peru* (Duke, 1999).

²⁴ Matthew D. O'Hara, *A Flock Divided: Race, Religion, and Politics in Mexico, 1749-1857* (Duke 2010), pp. 12, 55-88, 126-142; Voekel, Alone before God.

²⁵ For example, in the late eighteenth century a new kind of penitential, yet inwardly-oriented brotherhood, the *Santas Escuelas de Cristo*, emerged in Mexico City; the mid-nineteenth century saw the emergence of female-led groups such as the *Vela Perpetua* and the *Hermanas de Caridad*. See Matthew O'Hara, "The Supple Whip: Tradition and Innovation in Mexican Catholicism" (forthcoming) and *A Flock Divided*, pp. 143-144; Margaret Chowning, "The Catholic Church and the Ladies of the Vela Perpetua," *Past and Present*, forthcoming (November 2013); Silvia Arrom, "Mexican Laywomen Spearhead a Catholic Revival: The Ladies of Charity, 1863-1910," in *Religious Culture in Modern Mexico*, ed. Martin Austin Nesvig (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

bore various markers of modernity, whether in their emphasis on individual contemplation or in their female leadership structures.) The close connection between ex-votos and pilgrimages, both of which were on the rise in the nineteenth century,²⁶ can simultaneously be seen as barometers of modernity—more movement, more travel, and more individualized relationships with the divine—and a resolute entrenchment of mystical mentalities that readily accepted miracles as integral components of the cosmos.

We have seen several examples of ex-voto paintings from colonial times, and know of countless references to processions dedicated to various images, both for supplicative and thanksgiving purposes, pre-1821. Undoubtedly many ex-voto paintings were commissioned or painted by individual devotees to the Virgin of the Remedies and many other saints, for maladies such as diseases, earthquakes, and wars, in the early national period. However, the documentary record shows far more performed events (such as processions) expressing communication with the divine than individual commemorative paintings giving thanks. Part of this dominance of collectively-performed expressions of devotion can be attributed to a holdover of the corporate configuration of Novohispanic society, in which people's sense of self was defined by their residence in parishes or towns, divided along ethnic lines, or membership in *cofradías*, convents, and other communities.²⁷ Since in many aspects life was experienced collectively, it was logical that this corporatism should extend to the religious sphere. Tied in with Mexican society's corporate proclivities, economic issues may also have played a part in the favoring of collective over individual religious expression. Especially immediately after the wars for independence, Mexico's economy was in a shambles; the insurgents naturally did not receive any funds from the Spanish crown to finance their uprising, and Mexico accrued a substantial debt to Great Britain after the fall of the First Empire in 1823. Meanwhile, the mines, so central to the colonial economy, were mostly abandoned during the war, and rendered virtually inoperable due to flooding and the removal of machinery. Although independence did open the way for new opportunities in trade with partners formerly proscribed to the colonies by the Spanish empire, and a number of people—all members of the elite—did find ways to accumulate personal wealth, especially in the 1830s,²⁸ it would have been far easier for corporate associations such as *cofradías* and even city governments to gather the funds for a communal procession than for non-elite individuals to commission an ex-voto painting. If they did, they may have been hidden from the marauding factions, ultimately decaying in church vaults, or “recycled” for scrap metal.

²⁶ Elin Luque Agraz, *El arte de dar gracias. Los exvotos pictóricos de la Virgen de Soledad de Oaxaca* (México, D.F.: Centro de Cultura Casa Lamm, 2007); Mary Michele Mansour and Elin Luque Agraz, “Algunas consideraciones sobre los exvotos pictóricos de tema guadalupano siglos XIX y XX de la colección del Museo de la Basílica de Guadalupe” (M.A. thesis, Universidad Iberoamericana, 2001); Marianne Bélard and Philippe Verrier, *Los exvotos del occidente de México* (México: El Colegio de Michoacán, 1996); Rosa María Sánchez Lara, *Los retablos populares exvotos pintados* (México, D.F.: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 1990); Gloria Fraser Giffords, *Mexican Folk Retablos* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992 [1974]); *Dones y promesas. 500 años de arte ofrenda (exvotos mexicanos)* (México, D.F.: Centro Cultural Arte Contemporáneo, 1996).

²⁷ O'Hara, *A Flock Divided*.

²⁸ Margaret Chowning, *Wealth and Power in Provincial Mexico: Michoacán from the Late Colony to the Revolution* (Stanford, 1999).

Finally, ex-votos often were offered long after the catastrophic incident had occurred; lapses of ten or more years between the miracle and the offering are not uncommon. Quite often, a *manda* (a promise to a saint) could not physically be fulfilled by the devotee; financial hardship, dangerous travel conditions, the intrusion of political instability or violence, and personal circumstances such as illness or death prevented people from making pilgrimages and personally delivering their messages of thanks to their heavenly benefactors. The example of the ex-voto commissioned by the Bishop of Oaxaca, cited below (figure 3.10), shows that an ex-voto offered much later in a devotee's life still "counted" as a fulfillment of a promise—a promise that was taken seriously and which had serious spiritual ramifications.

A few ex-votos from the early national period do exist. This example from Jalisco (figure 3.1) details an accident that occurred during a procession honoring the Virgin of Zapopan, combining two important expressions of devotion and even mentioning a third: the accident took place as the devotee was fulfilling a *manda*. We don't know why the original promise was made, but it involved giving thanks to the Virgin of Zapopan for some spiritual or earthly benefit. As he was fulfilling his end of the deal, Luciano Lima, in penitential garb, was assisting other penitents in pulling a carriage containing the image of this Virgin when he grabbed the wheel from below and fell under it. He invoked her help and was saved, thus precipitating another cycle of human-divine reciprocity. He made sure to give her the appropriate thanks, and commissioned this ex-voto in 1825.²⁹

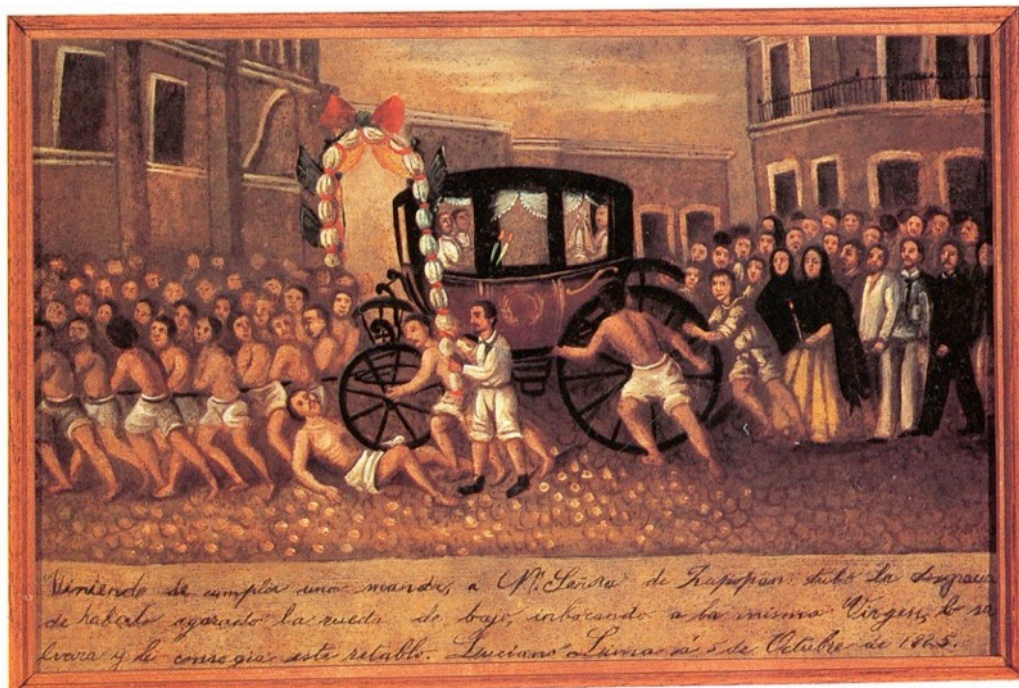


Figure 3.1: Accident at the Procession Honoring the Virgin of Zapopan (Source: *Dones y promesas*, cat. 262, p. 186)

²⁹ *Dones y promesas*, cat. 262, p. 186. "Viniendo de cumplir una manda, a Ns. Señora de Zapopan: tubo la desgracia de haberlo agarrado la rueda de bajo, invocando a la misma Virgen, lo salvara y le consegia este retablo. Luciano Lima a 5 de Octubre de 1825."



Figure 3.2: Apprehension by *dragones* and the Invocation of the Virgin of Guadalupe (Source: *Dones y promesas* cat. 251, p. 183)

Testifying to the continued political instability in Mexico following formal independence from Spain, above all the tumultuous thirty-two years between 1824 and 1856, the ex-voto above shows a frightening scene in which José Silvestre Barcenaz and María Rosalía de Jesús were apprehended by the dreaded *dragones*—infantry and cavalry soldiers—on suspicion of harboring fugitives.³⁰ Invoking the Virgin of Guadalupe—who had been declared the official patron of New Spain in 1746 and taken up as a symbol of the independence movement in 1810³¹—the two escaped with their lives, prompting the commission of an ex-voto. It is unclear whether or not the soldiers' suspicions were well founded: in the image, an apparently wounded figure rests in the doorway of their humble dwelling. Is he an escaped prisoner or a family member? I would be inclined to believe it was the former, as the couple makes no mention of him in their expression of gratitude. Or perhaps they were not harboring a fugitive at all, and the artist included a

³⁰ *Dones y promesas* cat. 251, p. 183. “en 18 de Septiembre de 1832 allandoce en peligro de Muerte Je. Cilbestre Barcenaz y Ma. Rosalía de Jes.s en manos de dos dragones [infantry and cavalry soldiers] q.e fueron a su Casa despues de la accion d y Gallinero en Vusca de los dispersos presos y abiendo imbocado a N. Sra. de Guadalupe quedaron libres de peligro y en muestra de agradesimiento pone el precente retablito.”

³¹ Brading, *Mexican Phoenix*.

fictitious one in the painting to depict the accusation and the very real danger faced by the pair to those viewers of the ex-voto who could not read the explanatory text.

The Church, the State, and Popular Piety, 1821-1856

Extreme political instability marked independent Mexico's first decades. The new nation experimented with monarchy, republicanism, and empire while suffering through fractious and often-brutal regimes marred by the caprices of despotic opportunists and the interminable wars between liberal and conservative forces. But amidst all of this tumult, some aspects of Mexican culture—particularly religious practices and mentalities—changed little, if at all. Not only did religious processions continue to be important social events, but people's attitudes toward the presence of the divine in everyday life were apparently quite unaffected. As Taylor observes, “reports of miracles—those events in human affairs that seem to defy natural explanation and are regarded as direct interventions of divine goodness or retribution—abounded in Mexico during the nineteenth century, with reports of fervent mass reception, much as they had during the colonial period.”³² For example, in a case that stretches from 1841 to 1853, a privately owned painting of the Lord of Chalma was seen by dozens of witnesses, including the local clergyman, to sweat and bleed. News of the miracle prompted both an organic, grass roots new pilgrimage route and a church investigation.³³ This case raises several important issues with respect to the role of the church in promoting and/or censoring religious beliefs, as well as the intersections and overlappings of official and popular cultures.

The owner of the painting, don Ramón Lucío, was a wealthy provincial merchant living in what is now Hidalgo state, northeast of Mexico City.³⁴ As such, he was part of Mexico's elite—socially superior to those with whom popular cultures were often associated. His enthusiasm in promoting this miracle story therefore places him as a participant in popular religious culture; as the owner of a miraculous painting, he potentially stood to gain from its fame in ways similar to lower-class “owners” of other apparitions.³⁵ The priest who first reported the miracle, the *cura coadjutor* of San Pedro Tezontepec, Br. Fernando de Cárdenas, was as credulous of the miracle as the fourteen witnesses interviewed by the priest of Tizayuca, Lic. don Francisco Villagómez, sent by the ecclesiastical authorities in Mexico City to investigate. Villagómez, like the Church officials who sent him, was more skeptical, but locally in Tezontepec, there was an apparently unanimous feeling of wonderment—so much so that the image was taken from don Ramón's house to the parish church “in a procession of blood” in

³² Taylor, *Shrines and Miraculous Images: Religious Life in Mexico Before the Reforma*, p. 172.

³³ AHAM Caja 89, exp. 37. Fondo: Episcopal, Sección: Provisorato, Serie: autos. Año: 1853. Sobre el sudor que en la casa de don Ramón Lucio y pueblo de Tezontepec se observó a una imagen del señor de Chalma.

³⁴ In 1841, Tezontepec was part of the State of Mexico; Hidalgo state was created by Benito Juárez in 1869.

³⁵ In its heyday, the Mexican Inquisition tried and prosecuted numerous claimants to witnessing apparitions or otherwise experiencing supernatural events, thus establishing firm ecclesiastical control over ownership and access to the sacred.

thanks for the miracle. The feeling of human-divine reciprocity was still alive and well in 1841, despite skepticism on the part of both secular and church officials. Just as the epidemics, earthquakes, and warfare of the independence years and beyond warranted processions of the Virgin of Remedios—in supplication and in thanks—so did the apparition of a sweating and bleeding Christ of Chalma require a “procession of blood” to honor and thank him for making his divine presence felt in Tezontepec. The case ends with church officials moving to suppress the allegations of the occurrence of a miracle, despite the efforts of the local priest, Fernando de Cárdenas, and the support of the painting’s owner, Ramón Lucío. For good measure, ecclesiastical authorities also impounded the painting from don Ramón and vetoed Padre Cárdenas’s request to display it in the parish church, so as to discourage further pilgrimages and devotion.

The carving of the Lord of Chalma had been promoted by the church as miraculous since the founding of an Augustinian monastery on the site of an old Aztec shrine in the seventeenth century; the friars superimposed their Christian message on the sacred associations that the Indians held with the spring that feeds the valley of Chalma, taking advantage of the area’s numinous qualities by appropriating them and making them fit within a Christian rubric as a means of conversion. Chalma’s Christ, then, was an old devotion, and miracles associated with the blackened statue had a long history. But in 1841, when reports of don Ramón Lucío’s painting of the Christ of Chalma sweating and bleeding surfaced, the church moved to dismiss the claims. It would be tempting to infer that this stance reflected a move toward the rationalism espoused by the nineteenth-century heirs of the Enlightenment, but church officials had more prosaic (and not entirely spiritual) motives. The shrine at Chalma and the holy image it housed were firmly under the church’s control; to ecclesiastical authorities, the power to declare the divinity of an apparition or the occurrence of a miracle, and the subsequent establishment of devotions, was of utmost importance. Reports of miracles from extra-official sources always prompted thorough investigations as to their “veracity,” giving the church the final word on which saints, marvels, and holy images would be approved for mass devotion.

Through these and other claims of ownership of the holy, the church asserted its authority and simultaneously engaged in social control, which was manifested in various ways. The Inquisition of the colonial era is the best-known example of the church’s policing activities, but officials shaped morality and social behavior through sermons, edicts and other official proclamations, both before and after the abolition of that institution in 1820. One especially targeted feature of popular religious expression in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was the festive atmosphere surrounding ceremonies that, ironically, the church had introduced and promoted. Since the late eighteenth century, church reformers and secular authorities had been attempting to tone down the often raucous, Carnavalesque flavor of religious processions.³⁶ Feast days of towns’ patron saints and informal *romerías* (short pilgrimages or processions to nearby shrines housing holy images) were viewed with suspicion, not least because they threatened to distract participants from solemnly contemplating their religious beliefs (and comportment) amidst the music, dancing, eating, and drinking that characterized

³⁶ Juan Pedro Viqueira Albán, *Propriety and Permissiveness in Bourbon Mexico*, trans. Sonya Lipsett-Rivera and Sergio Rivera Ayala (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1999); Voekel, *Alone Before God*.

these events. More often than not, church and secular authorities' perspectives and actions converged in their attempts to suppress the "excesses" of the public during such celebrations. In 1828, the governor of the State of Mexico announced the prohibition of *romerías* to Chalma, citing economic losses that resulted from too many people abandoning their family and work duties in order to participate in these religious activities.³⁷ Not only did the pilgrims neglect their jobs, but they also spent more than they could afford on the festivities, whether by giving alms for the upkeep of the image, organizing the dances, or simply partying. So much money was squandered that some people, having been completely wiped out financially, ended up begging for funds to be able to return home. This behavior was also seen as loosening morals and degrading the holy doctrine that it purported to honor.³⁸ The root of this evil was the oft-cited "superstition" and "ignorance" of the Indians, and the government's attitude was that such "exterior" expressions of piety had no place in that day and age.³⁹

Despite governmental and ecclesiastical efforts to rid religious celebrations of unseemly, "immoral," and other negatively viewed behaviors, popular understandings of the holy had taken on a life of their own. Authorities' need to prohibit certain behaviors show that those very behaviors were widespread, while the proliferation of new shrines, the increase in the number of visitors to already-established ones, and the pilgrimages and *ex-votos* dedicated to the shrines' holy images all attest to a vibrant religious culture functioning both within and outside of officially-recognized traditions. Earlier, I note that some aspects of religious life in Mexico (such as its image- and miracle-oriented culture) changed little, if at all, but the nineteenth century also saw significant changes in the *ways* that that religion was experienced and expressed, most notably in the rise of *ex-voto* paintings associated with miraculous images, and, later in the century, with long-distance pilgrimages.⁴⁰

³⁷ Archivo Histórico Municipal de Capulhuac, Disco 01, Caja 1, Presidencia, Exp. 5, Prohibido *romerías*. Chalma, 1828. En contra de las fiestas populares religiosas de Chalma, sus costosas peregrinaciones. Document courtesy of Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, "q.e se abstengan de semejantes esterioridades religiosas q.e en nada conducen p.a el culto, y antes bien relajan las constumb.s, corrompen la moral, y fomentán los establecimientos mas degradantes ala sana doctrina del Evangelio q.e no conocio jamás, ésa simonia escandalosa y ciego decco de atesorár riquezas q.e no necesitan sus Ministros, y delas q.e se abusa casi siempre p.a objetos muy agenos de su dedicación."

³⁹ *Ibid.*, "Deseando este Gov.no en cumplim.to de una de sus principales obligacion.s desterrar de los pueblos todos los objetos q.e los mantienen en estado de ignorancia y supersticion en q.e por desgracia fueren educados, há fijado su atención en las *romerías* q' se practican en el Santuario de Chalma y particularm.te en los días dela Pascua de Pentecostes, en los cuales, á de más de q.e se cometen ecsecos de concideración a causa de su numerosa concurrencia q.e hay de personas de ambos secos, el Estado sufre algunos quebrantes p.r q.e los Pueblos cultos guiados de la costumbre llegada la Pascua abandonan sus lugares, familias y labores p.r hacer una peregrinación q.e les es demasiado costosa, ya por los ecsecibos desembolsos q.e so colór de limosna, hacen en el Santuario, y ya p.r los q.e verifican p.a formar danzas, llegando algunos al extremo de agotár las cantidades que lleban, y de verse en el estrecho caso de mendigár el sustento p.a poder llegar a sus lugares=semejantes abusos y algunos ptros q.e se cometen producidos p.r la superstición, y muy estraños en el siglo presente, no pueden verse con indiferencia p.r un gobierno q.e se desvela p.r el engrandecim.to de sus Pueblos."

⁴⁰ See William Taylor, *Shrines and Miraculous Images: Religious Life in Mexico Before the Reforma* (University of New Mexico Press, 2011), pp. 165-205.

While cases like that of the mysteriously bleeding, sweating Lord of Chalma, ultimately suppressed by church authorities and relegated to the archive, were far more common than those where the institutional church did recognize miracles, it is nonetheless noteworthy that reports of miracles were taken seriously and accorded thorough investigations observed with proper protocol.⁴¹ In addition, it is worth pointing out that while many reports of miracles and apparitions were ultimately dismissed, several new devotions and shrines were granted church-approved status in the nineteenth century, reflecting both the zeal of their promoters, whether lay or ecclesiastical, and the inclination of the church to co-opt popular devotions in order to maintain control over them. Moreover, a number of already-established shrines dedicated to various advocations of the Virgin Mary and Christ experienced a consolidation and notable rise in attendance, and, most importantly, offerings in the form of painted ex-votos. Taylor observes that

Perhaps the most striking, or at least obvious, development in Mexican religious life during the early nineteenth century was the new and old shrines to miraculous images that prospered, despite the prevailing dangers of the road from prolonged warfare, separatist movements, highway robbery, the spread of firearms, economic troubles, and periods of famine and epidemic disease. These catastrophes, coupled with weak national governments and a diminished institutional church, may well have abetted the development of regional shrines more than hindered it.⁴²

One such new devotion and shrine was that dedicated to the Lord of Mercy (El Señor de la Misericordia) in Tepatitlán, in the Altos de Jalisco. This important devotion sprang up in the 1840s when a peasant named don Pedro Medina of the ranch of El Durazno saw a bright light emanating from beyond some nearby hills one night in 1839. He tried to find its source the next day, but was unsuccessful. The light continued to shine for the next two nights, and finally on the third day, tired and confused from his search, he leaned against an oak tree to rest. As he looked up at the tree shading him from the brutal sun, he noticed in its branches a perfect cruciform, and the more he looked at it, the more he could make out the vague shape of Christ on the cross. Don Pedro ran home to tell his wife about the miracle, and then returned with an axe to cut down the tree. Because the felled oak was too big for him to lift on his own, he asked his neighbor Jerónimo Gómez to loan him his oxen so that he could pull it back to his home. Despite the efforts of the oxen, the tree would not budge. Thinking that the trunk was stuck on a root or rock in the ground, the two began to wiggle it free of the obstruction. That was when don Pedro

⁴¹ Even more common were apparitions and reports of other miracles that were tacitly accepted by ecclesiastical authorities, especially parish priests, and not documented by higher officials. William B. Taylor, personal communication, 26 April 2011. See also Benjamin T. Smith, *The Roots of Conservatism in Mexico: Catholicism, Society, and Politics in the Mixteca Baja, 1750-1962* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012).

⁴² William B. Taylor, *Shrines and Miraculous Images*, p. 185.

noticed that the image of Christ appearing in the branches was face down, and once he and don Jerónimo flipped the tree, the oxen were able to drag it effortlessly back to his cabin.⁴³

The marvels did not cease with this feat. A few days afterwards, an image restorer and his assistant happened along and offered their services to don Pedro. “I don’t have any *santos* to be restored, but I do have a cross with an image of Christ drawn on it; if you’d be willing to carve it for me, I am very poor, but I could pay you something”, he replied.⁴⁴ The artists went to work immediately and soon the image was beautifully carved and finished out of the branches of the oak tree, to don Pedro’s delight. The next morning, before don Pedro had had a chance to pay or even thank them, the artisans were gone, never to be seen again.⁴⁵ Word of this miracle spread rapidly, and people from around the region began to visit El Durazno. Don Pantaleón Leal of Tepatitlán finally convinced don Pedro to bring the Christ to his house in the county seat, in order to properly honor it. The priest of Tepatitlán, don Eufracio Carrillo (in other accounts, Eutemio Cervantes), enthusiastically supported the construction of a chapel, and the first Mass was celebrated there in honor of the Señor de la Misericordia on April 30, 1852.⁴⁶

Ex-votos to the Señor de la Misericordia soon began to appear at the shrine. Already by 1840, local devotees were thanking him for various miracles, and leaving their painted testimonials of the efficacy of this image. After a series of earthquakes in 1847, it was seen to appear in the sky above Ocotlán, Jalisco, cementing its reputation of prodigiousness among *alteños*.⁴⁷ Tepatitlán’s ex-votos are well documented from the 1840s to 1900 and beyond; it is one of the few Mexican shrines with a significant number of ex-votos documented from before the 1880s.⁴⁸ This early ex-voto (figure 3.3, left), chronicles the miracle worked by Tepatitlán’s Lord of Mercy in the accident suffered by a young boy thrown from a mule who survived the fall, whose only consequence was that he got the wind knocked out of him. His parents, a man

⁴³ Francisco Gallegos Franco, *Los Retablos del Señor de la Misericordia de Tepatitlán* (Guadalajara: Gobierno del Estado de Jalisco, Conaculta, 2001), pp. 13-15.

⁴⁴ Gallegos, p. 15.

⁴⁵ This type of miracle story is very common in Mexico, with medieval and colonial precedents. Typically, an exemplary Christian—often poor but hardworking—finds an image which inexplicably becomes too heavy to move; in other versions, an image is taken to a different location, but miraculously, without human agency, returns its original apparition site. Another version involves mysterious artists showing up unexpectedly in order to fix or restore the image, only to disappear before they can be paid or thanked. See, among many others, Francisco de Florencia, *Origen del célebre santuario de Ntra. Sra. de San Juan* (San Juan de los Lagos, Jal.: Imp. “Alborada,” 1966 [1757]).

⁴⁶ Gallegos 15; see also http://www.tepatitlan.gob.mx/paginas/santuario_senior.php.

⁴⁷ Margarito Ortega, *El prodigio de Ocotlán. Recopilación de documentos históricos relativos a la aparición de Señor de la Misericordia, que tuvo lugar en Ocotlán* (Guadalajara, 1945).

⁴⁸ Francisco Gallegos Franco, *Los Retablos del Señor de la Misericordia de Tepatitlán* (Guadalajara: Gobierno del Estado de Jalisco, Conaculta, 2001). Published collections of ex-votos at other major shrines show that a great majority were produced after 1870, with earlier examples either lost or nonexistent. See Bélard and Verrier, *Los exvotos del occidente de México*; Luque and Beltrán, *El arte de dar gracias. Los exvotos pictóricos en el santuario de la Virgen de Guadalupe*; and Giffords, *Mexican Folk Retablos*.

who suffered from gout and a woman who had difficult menstrual periods, included themselves in the ex-voto, either as thanks for the Lord's help in easing their suffering or in propitiation.⁴⁹



Figure 3.3: Ex-votos to Tepatitlán's Lord of Mercy (Source: Gallegos Franco, *Los Retablos del Señor de la Misericordia de Tepatitlán*, pp. 20-21)

In a sign of troubled times and the political upheaval that came with the Reforma and the civil war that ensued in its wake, several ex-votos, including the one above, right, from the 1860s, thank the Señor de la Misericordia for rescuing their subjects from the draft. The *federales* must have been desperate for military personnel; they forcibly recruited the 70-year-old don Pantaleón Villa, who was finally released by his captor Col. Antonio Rojas after a fifteen-day forced march, during which he contracted dysentery. It was only due to his and his son's imploration of the Señor de la Misericordia that he survived the ordeal.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ En 1840 habiendo subido en un burro (Lonjas) Gutierrez joben pequeño empeso a (reparcir), tirandolo al suelo desmayado y lleno de aire y habiendo echo la noticia a este Divino Sr quedo sano y sin leccion en su cuerpo. De la misma (___dner) se en comendo Manuel Gutierrez q.e padecia de gota hacia 8 años, hasi mismo se encomendo su esposa a esta misma (may.r) q.e padecia de secrecion menstrual, los q. a la presente se (traijan) buenos p.r la devocion q.e (___) con (___) Sr. de la Misericordia. In Gallegos, pp. 20-21.

⁵⁰ En 5 de marzo de 1860 habiendo llegado las fuerzas federales a esta Villa, del Coronel Dn. Antonio Rojas, se pasaron las fuerzas al rancho de las calabazas, endonde reclutaron a este pobre anciano Pantaleon Villa Sr. de 70

The devotion to the Señor de la Misericordia of Tepatitlán is an intriguing counterpoint to the purported miracle of the sweating and bleeding image of the Señor de Chalma. Both miracles were reported around the same time, but only Tepatitlán's Christ attained official church approval, warranting its own ex-votos and other honors. Even during the colonial period, when miracles seemed to abound, the church was always cautious about declaring them as such; much like the lengthy process of beatifying saints, it required in-depth investigations into the veracity of claims of supernatural events.

Meanwhile, although the apparition story of the Tepatitlán crucifix followed established conventions—spontaneously-appearing bright lights, leading to a vision of a crucifix in a tree that would not move until it was placed in an upright, honorable position—there was no old devotion upon which to base any claims of further miracles (such as the sweating, bleeding copy of the miraculous image of the Lord of Chalma); this was a completely new apparition. The local priests in both places, Tepatitlán and Tezontepec, were key figures in determining and conceding miracle status to the respective images, but in Tepatitlán the priest was either more active in the promotion of the new devotion or better-connected than his counterpart in Tezontepec, whose claims were overridden by a skeptical diocese. It is possible that the Archdiocese of Mexico, which included Tezontepec and the shrine at Chalma, was loath to confer additional prodigious qualities on a copy of an image it had already deemed miraculous. Meanwhile, although Tepatitlán is near several important shrines and pilgrimage sites with their own ex-voto traditions, including San Juan de los Lagos and Zapopan, it is one of the new devotions to crucifixes of the nineteenth century, offering a masculine counterpoint to the heavily Mariocentric devotions of western Jalisco.

A phenomenon indirectly related to ex-votos and miracles was the appearance in the 1840s of a new kind of lay association dedicated to honoring the image of the Blessed Sacrament. In a time of dwindling church attendance, reflecting the severe shortage of priests caused, in part, by an institutional crisis in which there were no bishops to ordain them,⁵¹ pious associations known as the Vela Perpetua, with mostly female membership and leadership, provided a partial answer to parishioners' spiritual needs. Sharing some similarities with colonial-era *cofradías*, the members of the Vela Perpetua prayed for the souls of their fellow *cofrades* at the moment of their deaths and sponsored masses for the dead. They also enjoyed indulgences as a benefit of their membership. In other ways, the nineteenth-century Vela Perpetua associations differed markedly from their colonial predecessors, especially with regard to their leadership structure and their objectives: rather than functioning as true mutual-aid societies, which covered members' funeral expenses, the goal of the Vela Perpetua was simply to

años de edad, caminando 15 días seguidos por puntos dificultosos atormentado por los soldados y la ambre hasta llegar a Colima, y biendo el Sr. Rojas que estaba sercano a la muerte le dio de alta, tubo en este tiempo un ataque de desenteria de sangre en el que pensaba morir, y en tan afligido tormento recurrio al Sr. de la misericordia, lo mismo su hijo y familia aclamaron a este mismo Sr. por donde calmó la enfermedad y en este momento se le presenta don Ramón Aguirre quien lo conduce hasta ponerlo en su casa. Gallegos p. 76.

⁵¹ Margaret Chowning, personal communication, February 2011, notes that there was no bishop in Michoacán from 1809 to 1831. See also Taylor on the "diminished institutional church," *Shrines and Marvels* p.185.

keep vigil over the Blessed Sacrament.⁵² This deceptively simple objective, however, masked an important function; in a time when the Church had already suffered serious economic setbacks and a precipitous decline in the ranks of the clergy, “the Vela served as a crucial means by which lay devotion and commitment to the church was re-energized at the community level, and...this helped bolster, perhaps even rescue, the church’s political fortunes during this highly contentious and yet formative period in national politics.”⁵³

Echoing the grass roots, bottom-up formation of new pious associations in a time of political turmoil, this same period is when ex-voto painting became a preferred method for expressing Christian devotion. Like the activities of the Vela Perpetua, the dedication of ex-votos was both a church-recognized devotional practice and yet outside the official liturgy. The ladies who kept candle-lit vigil by the monstrance that held the Blessed Sacrament did so inside the churches; ex-votos, too, were left by the images they honored, in churches. Yet both the Vela Perpetua and the people who left ex-votos functioned outside of the church hierarchy; in the case of ex-voto donors, there was no organizational structure at all. Rather, the commissioning of an ex-voto was a highly personal action, becoming collective only by being added to the testimonials of the saint’s efficacy in the same physical space as the others.

Technological Developments in Nineteenth-Century Ex-voto Production

Surviving colonial ex-votos were painted on canvas or on copper plates, and the quality of workmanship necessary to their preservation indicates that they were commissioned by wealthy people. This is not to say that the poor did not produce ex-votos, merely that the materials available to them—crude canvas or wood panels—as well as the financial were-withal to protect them as family heirlooms, prevented their conservation. 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, ex-voto painters took to the new medium as soon as independence opened Mexico up to new trading partners.⁵⁴ The newly available tin plate greatly facilitated access to the materials necessary for quality ex-voto 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.

In 1841 another technological development, this one a by-product of the Industrial Revolution, further encouraged the mass-production of ex-voto paintings. For the first time in history, oil paint could be produced in bulk and packaged and sold in tubes, eliminating the need for hand mixing by trained colorists and, more importantly, the problems of preservation that earlier technology had posed. Oil paints are made from a mix of pigment and a binder, most

⁵² See Margaret Chowning, “The Catholic Church and the Ladies of the Vela Perpetua: Gender and Devotional Change in Nineteenth-Century Mexico,” *Past and Present*, forthcoming (November 2013).

⁵³ Chowning, pp. 3-4.

⁵⁴ Gloria Fraser Giffords, *Mexican Folk Retablos* (1974), p. 3; Giffords (2006): 197.

commonly linseed oil. The problem of their storage had long vexed artists: as the oil dries in its storage container, it renders the paint inflexible and ultimately useless. Prior to the invention of hermetically sealed tin tubes for storage, oil paints had commonly been stored in pigs' bladders which were stoppered with a tack, but the permeability and malleability of the bladders meant that paints were prone to drying and/or spilling.⁵⁵ Aside from the advantage of longer storage, the new manufactured paints had uniform consistency and color, eliminating the need for training in the proper mixing techniques and other technical considerations. While manufactured paints might still be prohibitively expensive to the poorest sectors of society, enterprising artisans could now invest in a few tubes of paint and mix them to create new colors, and thus meet the demand for devotional paintings by people who had previously only been able to marvel at the ones left in churches by wealthier devotees.

The availability of paint stored in tubes in Mexico in the nineteenth century is subject to debate. It was first patented in England in 1841, and some scholars have cast doubt on the rapidity of its adoption by artists working in France.⁵⁶ Others assert that the collapsible tubes became hugely popular almost immediately, save for a few artists who preferred to work using traditional materials.⁵⁷ Giffords notes that most of the ingredients for oil paints used in Mexican ex-votos, including pigments and binders, had to be imported from Europe and the United States.⁵⁸ According to a French color-merchant's catalogue of c. 1850, tube paint cost significantly more than paint stored in bladders, but the difference in price had dropped significantly by 1860.⁵⁹ In any case, in order to survive the trans-Atlantic voyage, it is quite likely that American and Mexican artists were prepared (or resigned) to pay for the added guarantee of longer storage, afforded by the hermetically sealed tin tubes. And as with all new technology, prices tended to go down with time. Whether or not there is a direct connection between the invention of collapsible tubes for storing oil paints and the sharp increase in ex-voto production in Mexico around 1840, the new technology certainly could not have been a hindrance to their increased popularity. Factory-stamped sheet metal and manufactured paints, both products of the Industrial Revolution, portended modernity for Mexican devotional art in ways mirrored by nineteenth-century political developments.

Religion, Politics, and Ex-votos: 1855-1876

From a steady but slow trickle, the number of ex-voto paintings produced in Mexico became a torrential downpour in the mid-nineteenth century. The change is quantifiable not only

⁵⁵ Anthea Callen, *The Art of Impressionism: Painting Technique and the Making of Modernity*. Yale University Press, 2000, pp. 105-107; R.D. Harley, "Oil colour containers: Development work by artists and colourmen in the nineteenth century." *Annals of Science* 27:1 (March 1971).

⁵⁶ Callen, pp.106-107.

⁵⁷ Harley, p.11.

⁵⁸ Giffords (2006): 198; 199 n.1.

⁵⁹ Callen 106.

in sheer numbers, but also in the social makeup of the producers. In colonial times and even in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, the commissioners of ex-voto paintings tended to be elites. As with the tradition of funerary portraiture discussed in Chapter 5, the well-to-do had more means at their disposal to commission commemorative art, but some of the poor had access to the homes of the wealthy, where they could view devotional images (or portraits of deceased family members), and all could enter Mexican churches and view the testimonials to the efficacy of Christian holy figures left by the pious devout. The effect on the popular classes of this exposure to the artistic and religious expressions of elites was neither linear nor simple; the transmission of culture never is. A complicated process of reception, reaction, rejection, and reworking of forms and ideas to fit the needs of a population with different material and psychological needs was at play in the lower classes' assimilation of ex-voto paintings. This section analyzes this process, especially as it relates to the profound political changes taking place in the country with the final liberal victory after nearly half a century of war and instability.

The Reforma is well known to students of Mexican history as a pivotal turning point in the country's development. Following a decades-long period of political instability, with two foreign invasions (by the French in 1838 and the U.S. in 1846-1848), the twenty-two year off-and-on reign of Santa Anna, interminable battles between liberals and conservatives, the loss of two-fifths of Mexico's territory to the United States, and a still-depressed economy, the liberal faction finally prevailed with its 1854 Plan of Ayutla. This manifesto called for the ouster of the dictator Santa Anna and a new constitution, along with several new laws aimed at ridding Mexico of the vestiges of its colonial past. These Reform laws were to have a far-reaching impact on the Catholic church. The 1855 Juárez Law abolished the old *fueros*—military and religious courts which liberals saw as protecting the members of those institutions from the prosecution of crimes. The 1856 Lerdo Law went after a chief source of the church's revenue: its real estate. The church had, over the course of three centuries, accumulated vast holdings of land and urban real estate, most of which it rented out. With the new law, the institution could keep only the buildings and land necessary for its operation; all other property had to be sold. Other laws limited the fees charged by the clergy to perform the sacraments of baptism, marriage, and burial, and made the registration of births, marriages, and deaths the prerogative of the state, not the church.

In all these ways, the liberal government sought to emasculate the church and strip it of its colonial-era wealth and power. The Constitution of 1857, which reaffirmed the abolition of slavery and compulsory service and guaranteed freedom of speech, education, and the right of assembly, was opposed by conservatives and churchmen. These provisions in particular went against the interests of the church, which argued that the abolition of compulsory service would affect the vows of priests and nuns, and that "freedom of education" effectively barred the church from exercising its customary privilege to teach young Mexicans according to its traditional canons.⁶⁰ So vehement was the conservative opposition that Mexico once more

⁶⁰ For a Catholic perspective on these Reform laws, see the Archbishops of Mexico, Michoacán, and Guadalajara's plaintive Instrucción Pastoral published in *El Mensajero Católico*, Tomo I, no. 1, April 8, 1875, pp. 22-24: "Por más que creamos que con esa serie de disposiciones, llamadas *orgánicas*, se ataca en lo más vivo á la divina constitucion de la Iglesia, puesto que se coarta su libertad hasta los últimos extremos; por más que en ellas se impida la enseñanza religiosa, prohibiéndola rigurosamente en todas las escuelas y establecimientos de educacion,

erupted in civil war in 1858-1860, plunging the country into extreme debt that paved the way for another foreign intervention, by France, which installed the puppet emperor Maximilian von Hapsburg in 1864. The reign of the European emperor was short, but it had the effect of tripling Mexico's foreign debt. Peace was out of reach as the routed liberal government headed by Benito Juárez continued to harass the imperial one imposed by France. Once the American Civil War was over, Washington sent former Union troops and supplies to aid Juárez and the republicans; this and other factors, such as France's waning support amid Mexico's mounting debt, led to the court-marshal and execution of the hapless Maximilian in 1867.

With the triumph of the republicans under Juárez, Mexico could finally begin to repair its economy and move toward peace and prosperity. Church-state relations continued to be fraught with tension, however, especially after the Reform Laws were incorporated into the Constitution in 1875. The victorious liberals restricted Mexico's formerly highly public expression of religion by nationalizing the church property that had not been privatized under the earlier Lerdo Law, closing monasteries and convents, outlawing religious processions, restricting the ringing of church bells, and forbidding the clergy to wear clerical garb in public. The law with perhaps the most visible impact on Mexican society was the prohibition of religious ceremonies performed outside church walls, effectively killing one of Mexico's most paramount, socially unifying phenomena: processions. Yet despite these powerful anticlerical measures, the increase in the nineteenth century in ex-voto production, and in the practice of pilgrimage with which ex-votos are closely associated, suggest that popular piety in Mexico in no way diminished, and perhaps even grew.

How can we measure or determine ordinary Mexicans' responses to the government's anticlerical edicts? In a sense, the liberals aimed to demystify a highly mystical tradition, replete with miracles and the presence of divinities among humankind. The attempts at restricting people's devotion to images of saints, furthermore, were not-so-veiled programs to rid the populace of its colonial mentality, its "pre-modern" superstitions. From the government's side, countless cases in which the law prohibiting "public displays of religion" was defied survive.⁶¹ By themselves, they are invaluable documents that shed light onto the reactions of pious Catholics to a hostile liberal government. They are also one of the few written sources that indirectly document Mexican Catholics' continued fervent desire to practice their religion in traditional ways. Along with ex-votos, which approach the religious mentalities of their creators from a different direction, they can help us understand the intricate and intertwined relationship

dependientes del Supremo Gobierno nacional, de los de los Estados y de los municipios; por más que se prive á la Iglesia aun del recurso de la mayor parte de las limosnas de los fieles; por más que se agraven todas las supremas disposiciones anteriores, que pugnan con los dogmas de la religion, y por más, en fin, que no se deje á los sacerdotes, ni á los fieles otra expectativa, que la de la más espantosa miseria para los primeros, y a casi absoluta falta de libertad para el cumplimiento de los deberes religiosos á unos y otros..."

⁶¹ I reviewed a large number of these cases in the AHDF. They range from breaches of the law against public processions to others where orders restricting the ringing of church bells and the use of fireworks in a religious context were defied. For a solid study of the popular Easter Week celebration of the Passion of Christ in Iztapalapa, which has nineteenth-century roots, see Richard Trexler, *Reliving Golgotha: The Passion Play of Iztapalapa* (Harvard, 2003).

between religion and politics, and between official and popular cultures, in the late nineteenth century.

On May 13, 1872, the Mexican government, echoing an earlier provision in the Reform laws, decreed a ban on religious processions conducted in public.⁶² In October of that year, the Ayuntamiento of Azcapotzalco, just outside Mexico City, requested a license for a procession along the municipality's central plaza, in order to celebrate the traditional fiesta of the town's patron saint. The government of the Federal District granted the license.⁶³ Eight months later, in July of 1873, a similar request was made for a procession to celebrate the Virgin of Carmen, complete with fireworks and a "medium"-level ringing of church bells. This time, the officials denied the license for the procession, citing the law of 1872. However, they did permit the solicitors to set off firecrackers and ring the church bells.⁶⁴ Why, if public religious processions had been banned in the late 1850s, was it necessary to continually renew these restrictions? And, assuming that the law was known and understood, why did Mexican citizens persist in requesting licenses for religious celebrations, as if the law were a mere bureaucratic measure, easily sidestepped by submitting the necessary paperwork for a "special" license?

In October 1874, the same year that President Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada expelled the last remaining order of nuns, the St. Vincent de Paul-affiliated Sisters of Charity, two men in the district of Guadalupe Hidalgo outside Mexico City were arrested for taking the image of Santo Domingo out in the streets, accompanied by fireworks, incense, and a noisy throng of devotees.⁶⁵ The original arrest warrant was directed at the Mayordomo of the barrio of San Francisco and specified a punishment of either a fine of twenty-five pesos or a month in the dreaded Belén prison. The organizers of this procession, José de la Fuente and Felipe Alvarado, claimed that their actions were motivated not by criminal intent, but rather resulted from pure ignorance. (Once again, this statement begs the question of why it was necessary to repeatedly re-state a key Reform law. Was the men's claim of ignorance an indication that their mistake was failing to request the proper license? Or were they aware of the law but hoped that claiming ignorance would reduce their punishment?) They furthermore claimed that they could not afford the fine. Instead of sending both men to jail for thirty days, however, the prefect split the sentence between the two men, who now faced fifteen days each. In an interesting twist, a week later the prefect requested that they be released because their presence was required for some vaguely defined proceedings. Possibly the prefect was friends with the men, or he may have been a religious man himself who believed the punishment did not fit the "crime." In any event, the contrast between the colonial and the liberal republican governments' official attitudes toward religion could not be starker. Just twenty-seven years prior to this case, the Cabildo and Ayuntamiento of Mexico City had requested the "pious presence" of the citizenry to participate

⁶² This decree was one of many outlawing religious processions referenced in the legal cases I reviewed.

⁶³ AHDF Fondo: Municipalidades. Sección: Guadalupe Hidalgo. Serie: Cultos. Caja 1, Exp. 14, 1872. Unfortunately, this series of licenses provides few details as to any restrictions that may have been placed on the traditional festivities.

⁶⁴ AHDF Fondo: Municipalidades. Sección: Guadalupe Hidalgo. Serie: Cultos. Caja 1, Exp. 16, 1873.

⁶⁵ AHDF, Fondo: Municipal, Sección: Guadalupe Hidalgo, Serie: Cultos. Inv. 53, Caja 1, Exp. 17, 1874.

in a three-day religious observance and procession whose purpose was to request the military assistance of the Virgin of the Remedies in the war with the United States, which had recently invaded (see figure 3.4).⁶⁶

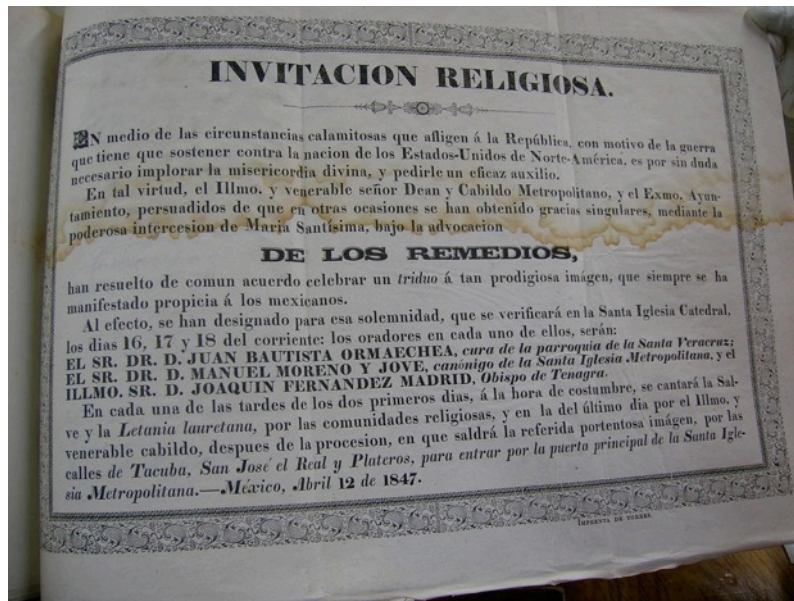


Figure 3.4: Religious Flyer Invoking the Virgin of Remedies (Source: AHDF, Fondo: Santuario de los Remedios, Tomo 14, Vol. 3908, Exp. 191)

Yet the lessening of the severity of Alvarado and de la Fuente's punishment for violating a key Reform law also speaks to the distinction that late-nineteenth-century Mexicans made between anticlericalism and anti-religious sentiment, or between laws that targeted the church as an institution versus those that punished individual people for expressing their religious beliefs. The laws of the Reforma were explicitly directed at the Catholic church, with the goal of weakening the institution so as to pave the way for the liberal vision of a secular, modern nation; with these anticlerical measures, the liberal reformers hoped that the citizenry's traditional deference to the church and its clergy would gradually diminish and that popular religious practices would fall by the wayside.

The Reform laws were accompanied and underscored by articles mocking popular religion in the liberal press. Liberal journalists delighted in debunking the myths of apparitions and miracles perpetuated by the clergy and by self-appointed "holy men," eagerly lapped up by gullible peasants whose hard-earned alms supported these "parasites."⁶⁷ In June 1861 there were reports of the apparition of a Christ figure and a Virgin of the Solitude in a cave near Orizaba, to

⁶⁶ AHDF, Fondo: Santuario de los Remedios, Tomo 14, Vol. 3908, Exp. 191.

⁶⁷ Pamela Voekel, "Liberal Religion: The Schism of 1861." In *Religious Cultures of Modern Mexico*, ed. Martin Nesvig, p. 80.

which certain “holy men” had attributed a prophecy of a severe earthquake, which was expected to rumble throughout the whole republic for no less than three hours. According to a staff writer at the liberal weekly *Siglo Diez y Nueve*, “fortunately nothing happened, and so we can say that we escaped” such a terrible fate.⁶⁸ The authorities were investigating the charlatans (*vagos*) who had spread the rumor, and it was expected that they would be put in the “high category” that befitted them.⁶⁹ *La Orquesta* mentions “a new hermit saint” who had appeared the same year in Orizaba, living off the “frugality...of the abundant donations of nearby ranchers.”⁷⁰ The credulous Indians and ranchers who viewed these “santos” as holy were under the same spell of Catholicism that yoked them to the church and its holy men, and liberals were determined to rid Mexico of this hocus-pocus by decree or through satire.

In the following years, the government of Mexico City issued numerous decrees restating the law against religious processions, as though the original laws had had no effect on the comportment of the population. It appears that the tradition of religious processions was so strongly ingrained in the Mexican psyche that it would take more than a liberal law (or ten) to change the people’s attachment to their saints. The traditional ways of honoring the saints, furthermore, seem to have been taken with utmost seriousness. Just a quarter-century earlier, and following a centuries-old tradition, the city government itself was sponsoring processions to the Virgin of the Remedies for help with natural disasters ranging from drought to earthquakes to epidemics, and for man-made ones such as war, as well. The people, unmoved by the politics inspiring the attacks on the Catholic church, and perhaps even indifferent to the institutional church itself, resolutely clung to their saints. Church was where the saints lived; the sacraments that were practiced there by the clergy were perhaps ancillary to the “true” ways of worshiping, which involved lighting candles, meditating and praying, and leaving mementoes such as flowers, ex-votos and *milagritos*. The anthropomorphized saints were fully internalized in popular mentality as real beings with real powers to change fortunes in everyday lives. Certainly the Catholic church lamented, and had been lamenting for some time, the manifestation of “backwardness” in popular religion. In the eyes of the Christian intellectuals and theologians, the state of religious affairs was dismal; on the one hand, the church was under fire from liberals, “free-thinkers,” and Protestants, and on the other hand the Indians and lower classes persisted in their superstitions and pointless exterior devotions.⁷¹

⁶⁸ *Siglo Diez y Nueve*, no. 150, p. 3, col. 4, 13 June 1861. “Los santos profetizaron hace algun tiempo, que ayer debia haber un temblor de tierra en toda la República, y que duraria tres horas por lo menos. Afortunadamente no hubo nada, y por eso decimos que ya escapamos.”

⁶⁹ *Siglo Diez y Nueve*, no. 150, p. 3, col. 4, 13 June 1861. “La autoridad se ocupa de hacer las investigaciones correspondientes acerca de esos vagos que se dan el nombre de santos, y no dudamos que los colocará en el lugar que corresponde á su alta categoria.” *El Herald*, no. 3, col. 2, June 13, 1861, also mentions the same apparition and the investigation of the “vagos que se dan el nombre de santos” (holy men).

⁷⁰ *La Orquesta*, no. 14, p. 3, col. 2, 17 April 1861. “El santo se ha retirado a la soledad de las selvas á alimentarse con la frugalidad de...las donaciones abundantes de los rancheros de las cercanias.”

⁷¹ See, for example, *El Mensajero Católico* (official publication of the Sociedad Católica) no. 1., 8 April 1875, p. 15: Reporting on a mission to a leper colony in the Sandwich Isles, at which the Catholic missionaries were received gratefully by the lepers, the staff writer asks, “Enemigos de la fe, libre-pensadores, panegiristas de la moral universal, ¿qué día saldrán de vuestras filas hombres semejanates a ése? Pues bien. Sabedlo para vergüenza vuestra:

Despite the fulminations of elite liberals, supported paradoxically and most likely unwittingly by their enemies, elite Catholics, the Reforma did not succeed in erasing popular religious practices from Mexican culture. Not only did processions continue being held (as clandestinely as possible), but the rise of apparitions and associated pilgrimages in France, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, had important repercussions for popular Catholicism in Mexico. The Catholic church, in attempting to co-opt a popular practice in order to establish control over it, in this regard actively promoted some of the very practices with which it had previously been at unease. From the Mexican church's perspective, organized pilgrimages and official coronations of various Mexican Virgins were two strategies with which to counter the secularizing effects of the Reforma, and by the late nineteenth century both of these were on the rise. But popular religion was one step ahead of the institutional response: a notable increase in ex-votos dated after 1857, some referencing the violence of the Reforma, has survived.

la Iglesia católica los produce muy á menudo.” In the same newspaper, Tomo I, no. 3, 22 April 1875, pp. 36-39, an editorial covering the Archbishops' Instrucción Pastoral bitterly complains about the prohibition of religious processions in public places, arguing that such prohibitions effectively bar Catholics from exercising their right to freedom of expression. See also “Revista Semanaria” in *La Voz de México* (precursor to *El Mensajero Católico*), no. 1, 17 April 1870, pp. 2-3, in which the staff writer, responding to a piece in the liberal periodical *Siglo XIX* celebrating the “changes of customs” in the past twenty years, sarcastically asks how the laws against processions and the ex-claustration of monks and nuns are an improvement in the nation's moral life: “En efecto, ya no hay procesiones, ni monjas, etc.: en cambio tenemos suicidios y duelos, que no se usaban antaño; tenemos can-can, y *espiritistas* y miseria; y sobre todo, una paz octaviana. ¡Qué mejor!”

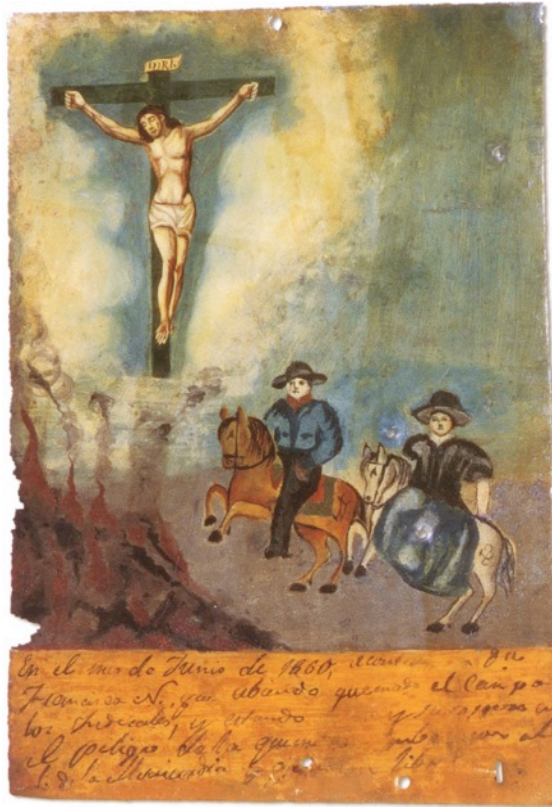


Figure 3.5: Ex-voto to Tepatitlán's Señor de la Misericordia (Source: Gallegos Franco, *Los Retablos del Señor de la Misericordia de Tepatitlán*, p. 80)

The Reforma, War, Violence, and the Political Victory of the Liberals

Ex-votos provide an illuminating view of ordinary people's perspectives on the Reforma and the attacks on the church. A number reference the War of the Reform, but only inasmuch as war's disruptiveness and destruction affected their donors; they show little interest in liberal ideology. Figure 3.5, dedicated to Tepatitlán's Señor de la Misericordia, depicts burning fields set afire by Federal troops;⁷² the devotee who commissioned this ex-voto was far more concerned with the safety of his wife (and probably the loss of his crops) than with moralizing about godless liberals, although the fact that he mentions the *federales* as the arsonists may well be a jab at them. In the Altos de Jalisco, it seems, as in other regions discussed below, politics informed daily life only when they intruded on lives and livelihoods.

⁷² En el mes de junio de 1860 aconteció a Juan Francisco N. que habiendo quemado el campo los federales y estando el y su esposa en el peligro de la quemazón, pidieron al Sr. de la Misericordia y quedaron libres. In Francisco Gallegos Franco, *Los Retablos del Señor de la Misericordia de Tepatitlán*. Guadalajara, Jal.: Conaculta, 2001, p. 80.



Figure 3.6: Ex-voto of Manuel Rajel (Source: *Dones y promesas*, cat. 254, p. 185)

Figure 3.6, meanwhile, shows the reach of image-centered, popular Catholicism in the Mexican imaginary. Its subject, Manuel Rajel, was “a defender of the nation...apprehended by soldiers of the government.”⁷³ Although the painting is undated, the wording and the style of clothing depicted suggest that Rajel was part of a contingent of liberals defeated in a battle against Maximilian’s French government. Upon being wounded by gunshot *and* bayonet, he entrusted himself to “this divine Grace,” personified in the painting by the Virgin Mary, and thanked her divine intervention according to ancient protocol. That an avowed liberal, fighting for nationalistic, anti-imperialist, and anticlerical ideals, would commission an ex-voto in order to commemorate the miracle of surviving his battle wounds speaks volumes about the depths of the entrenchment of Catholicism in the Mexican mindset.

⁷³ En 26 [...] por haber pertenecido á las filas de los defensores de la [nación] fue aprendido Manuel Rajel por una partida de [soldados] del gobierno que [...] y [fue herido] por una bala y [recibido] por las ballonetes se encomendo a esta divina Gra [gracia] y quedo sano y sin lecion alguna. In *Dones y promesas: 500 años de arte ofrenda (exvotos mexicanos)*. Mexico City: Centro Cultural Arte Contemporáneo, 1996, cat. 254, p. 185.



Figure 3.7: Ex-voto to Señor de la Misericordia of Tepatitlán (Source: *Dones y Promesas* cat. 115, p. 146)

Figure 3.7, by the famous portrait artist and *retablero* Hermenegildo Bustos,⁷⁴ describes politics and violence only in the text, but in its visual composition it speaks to the image-based religious faith practiced by the overwhelming majority of Mexicans, unmoved by the War of the Reform or the French Intervention that followed. As with the above ex-voto to the Señor de la Misericordia of Tepatitlán, invoked to save the donor's wife from the burning fields ignited by federal troops during the War of the Reform, the donor of this ex-voto was concerned with politics only because a careless comment landed him and his friends in trouble. Moreover, in his view, the inflammatory remarks were less important than the intervention of the Lord of the Column (El Señor de la Columna).⁷⁵

⁷⁴ *Retablo* is a common term for ex-voto paintings in Mexico, not to be confused with the ornate altarpieces of the same name. A *retablero* is a *retablo*-maker.

⁷⁵ En el año de 1862. como en el mes de Octubre, los Sres. Antonio Chabes, Joaquin Montes, y Diego Puente estaban en Teocaltiche comprando sombrero, los dos primeros, despues de hacer su compra, tomaron unas copas de vino: lo cual hizo en la tienda que estaban tomando, (era la del Gefé politico y ellos sin saberlo, comenzaron hablar de los franceses: y el Gefé politico despues de hacerles varias preguntas ordenó que los llevasen presos, otro día los sacaron para ser fusilados; y el Sor. Puente al berlos en tan estado: invoco al Sr. de la Columna, por lo que fueron

In 1862, Antonio Chávez, Joaquín Montes, and Diego Puente were out hat shopping in Teocaltiche, Jalisco. After completing their purchases, Chávez and Montes settled in to a local store to enjoy a few drinks. Their tongues loosened, they began to discuss the French (apparently in unflattering terms), unaware that the establishment at which they were drinking belonged to the local *jefe político*. The *jefe*, after interrogating them, ordered their arrest and scheduled their execution for the following day; Diego Puente, upon finding his friends in this predicament, asked the Lord of the Column for help. Christ granted the miracle and they were released, and in gratitude Mr. Puente commissioned an ex-voto so as to increase the devotion to Him. The text seems to highlight that Diego Puente was not participating in either the drinking nor the bad-mouthing of the French; his insistence on this point hints at either his Christian uprightness or his disinclination to engage in political activity, mixed with a healthy dose of self-preservation. Whether or not he was involved in the incident at the *jefe político*'s bar, his commissioning of the ex-voto certainly underscores his belief that the statue of the Señor de la Columna had the power to save his friends' lives. This painting, although forgoing other ex-votos' use of dramatic visuals, drives home the centrality of the holy image in Mexican spirituality.



Figure 3.8: Firing Squad Scene, 1875 (Source: Museum of the Order of Augustinians, Shrine of Chalma, Edo. de México, 2008. Photo by Gerardo Cortina)

libres en el acto por maravilla del Sr. y para aumento de su devocion dedicó el precente retablo. In *Dones y Promesas* cat. 115, p. 146.

Violence, whether instigated by the state, competing political factions, bandits, individuals looking to settle personal scores, or in domestic settings, has been a constant throughout Mexican history. Figure 3.8, from Chalma, details a fairly common practice in Mexico's frequent wars. In 1875 Jesús Escamilla and a companion faced a firing squad; apparently only Jesús survived.⁷⁶ It would be hard to attribute his survival to anything other than a miracle, and he makes it clear that this was, in fact, the reason for his being spared certain death. He attributes the force behind this miraculous turn of events to Divine Providence, while the painting, badly damaged in the upper-right corner, appears to depict the Holy Trinity as his celestial caretakers. The violent experiences chronicled are representative of some of the daily concerns of nineteenth-century Mexicans, speaking to us in ways that written documents rarely can.

Clerical Participation in Popular Religious Culture: The Virgins of Dolores and Soledad

Like other elites, the clergy participated in popular religious expression. In a painting from 1840 (figure 3.9), a group of nuns gives thanks for the intervention of Our Lady of the Sorrows in a freak lightning attack. The women cower in terror (one is knocked flat) as a lightning bolt comes through an upper window, strikes the frame of a painting of Christ, then makes its way to another picture frame, then the altar in which the statue of the Virgin of the Sorrows is housed, before finally being grounded.⁷⁷ The lightning damaged the picture frame, broke the glass case holding the Virgin, burned her dress, and split her foot in two, but none of the nuns was hurt. It was as if the Virgin took the impact for the nuns, even as they would likely not have had time to pray to her for her help. But in the spirit of reciprocity, they made sure to thank her for her divine intercession.

⁷⁶ “Dedico el presente retablo a la Divina Providencia por hacerme el milagro de que siendo fusilados el 27 de Oct. de 1875 sobrevivio Jesus Escamilla. Doy gracias.” Museum of the Order of Augustinians, Shrine of Chalma, Edo. de México, 2008. Photograph by Gerardo Cortina.

⁷⁷ *Dones y promesas*, cat. 246, 1840. “En el año de 1840 día 19 de Mayo, cayeron dos centellas, segun se infiere por los muchos estragos que se experimentaron; entrando por la bentana del Coro alto, y estando allí varias Religiosas, á ninguna le tocó. Una de dichas centellas se introdujo al Coro bajo: lo primero que hizo fué, quemar la cabellera del Señor Crucificado; y concluyendo en el nicho de la Sma. Virgen de los Dolores, rompió la vidriera: le dividió un pie: quemó parte del vestido; y estando junto al Altar de dicha imagen, dos Religiosas y una niña, no tubieron novedad.”

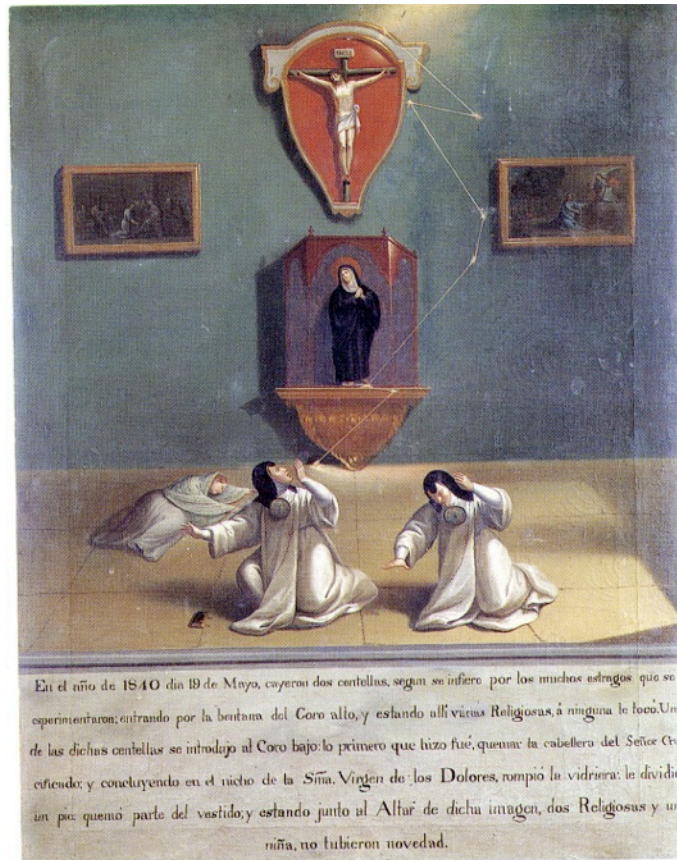


Figure 3.9: Giving Thanks to Our Lady of Sorrows after a Lightning Attack (Source: *Dones y promesas*, cat. 246, 1840)

A rare collection of ten ex-votos commissioned by priests and dedicated to the Oaxaca's Virgin of Soledad has recently come to light, allowing us to approach clerical mentalities from an angle seldom recorded, let alone studied.⁷⁸ The paintings' dates span exactly a century, from 1762 to 1862. Their distribution of themes parallels those in "ordinary" ex-votos: two have health and illness as their subject matter, two are general *acciones de gracias*, four describe accidents, and two give thanks for surviving natural disasters. The existence of these ten clerical ex-votos from Oaxaca is tantalizing; it is tempting to suppose that there were once many more. Unfortunately, various issues have plagued the preservation of ex-votos from the very beginning of their history in Mexico. Aside from one or two others commissioned by nuns in the colonial period, our source base for ex-votos given by the clergy is woefully incomplete; indeed, the same can be said for all ex-votos. But the opportune rescue of these ten paintings hints at a tradition of human-divine communication among representatives of an institution often considered at odds with the religious traditions of the popular classes.

⁷⁸ See Elin Luque Agraz, *El arte de dar gracias: los exvotos pictóricos de la Virgen de la Soledad de Oaxaca*, especially Fray Eugenio Torres's essay, "Sacerdotes devotos y agradecidos" (México, D.F.: Centro de Cultura Casa Lamm, 2007).

Of especial interest, because of his rank in the priesthood at the time he commissioned this ex-voto and because of the date it was dedicated, is the one given by the Bishop of Oaxaca José Agustín Domínguez in 1858 (figure 3.10).⁷⁹ It shows the bishop as a young man on horseback, on his way to the Hacienda del Carmen to hear Mass, when his foot got stuck in the stirrup. As he was attempting to free himself, the saddle came loose and began to slide upside down; he invoked the Virgin of Soledad and by her intervention, his shoe came off and he fell onto soft ground. That he never forgot his debt to the Virgin speaks to his piety, certainly, but it also indicates his participation in a cultural tradition that saw divinities as personally intervening in human affairs, and requiring proper thanks for their intercession. Despite his high rank in the church hierarchy, despite the theological training he'd received at seminary, his concern with the payment of his debt to the Virgin took on aspects of the same mentality that propelled the unlearned and low-ranking devout in making ex-votos and otherwise expressing their understandings of the reciprocal nature of their relationships with holy beings. Finally, although the date of the ex-voto might suggest a grasping at a pre-Reforma world, the political tumult of the previous thirty-odd years, and the major changes that the Reforma was bringing to Mexico, seem completely absent from the bishop's concerns. The cult of the Virgin Mary and the ex-voto tradition were so ingrained in Mexican spirituality that high-ranking clerics and peasants participated in the same religious traditions. Moreover, despite liberal attempts to limit the clergy's influence over the national psyche, colonial-era conceptions of divine intervention persisted well into the nineteenth century.

⁷⁹ "El Obispo actual siendo Joven de 20 años, caminaba desde la estancia de Prio á la Hacienda del Carmen para oír Misa, y haviendosele atorado el estrivo en un pie quiso que soltase; mas en un momento se volteó la silla é invocó á N.S. de la Soledad. y reventado el zapato cayó en tierra suavemente, y el caballo fué corriendo...leguas con la silla colgando. Por todo dá gracias á la V.Sma. Oaxaca Nov.e de 1858. En reconocimieto de este favor le dedica José Agustín Domínguez." In Luque p. 151.



Figure 3.10: Ex-voto Commissioned by José Agustín Domínguez, 1858 (Source: Luque, *El arte de dar gracias: los exvotos pictóricos de la Virgen de la Soledad de Oaxaca*, p. 151)

Conclusion

The first half of the nineteenth century brought widespread changes, fueled by political and ideological concerns and technological developments, to Mexican society, though these changes were tempered by their local contexts.⁸⁰ The Catholic church saw its wealth diminish considerably, and its political power wane, with independence and the ascension of liberalism. Its leadership feared that both its doctrinal message and its clerical ranks would become obsolete, lost amidst what they perceived as increasing secularization and religious pluralism in the modern world. These fears were not unfounded, but with its internal regrouping and promotion of lay involvement in its religious activities in the late nineteenth century, the church did avoid irrelevance. At the same time, Mexico's Catholic heritage was far too strongly ingrained in the population to submit to liberal attacks on the sort of expressive, exterior, performed religious culture that had characterized most of the nation's history. Popular religious culture changed in its visibility and even its scope in some regions and among some social groups, but it remained a

⁸⁰ See Benjamin Smith, *The Roots of Conservatism*, in which he analyzes the Mixteca Baja, an area that experienced less political and cultural change than others, even as it underwent significant social changes in land distribution and usage.

powerful force shaping Mexican society. To the consternation of liberals, devotion to Catholic holy beings seemed only to grow with the implementation of laws designed to limit their visibility and presence. The church, meanwhile, had ambivalent reactions to the upsurge in popular religious expression. It supported traditional and new expressions of piety, such as attendance at Mass and receiving the sacraments, participation in church-organized pilgrimages and the adherence to Catholic guiding principles, and was receptive to increased female activity in devotional practices, supporting pious associations such as the Vela Perpetua and the Ladies of Charity. At the same time, it looked askance at some of the more exuberant, outward displays of devotion (as it had for some time prior to the Reforma), preferring quiet prayer groups and orderly pilgrimages to the raucous parties that had characterized the feast days of patron saints in colonial times.

We know that ex-voto production began increasing steadily in the nineteenth century. Although surviving ex-votos are scattered and complete collections of them have been impossible to assemble due to diverse factors, such as the physical preservation of a medium subject to corrosion, theft, and disposal, the samples available point to an increasing interest in this form of religious expression. The new availability of an inexpensive medium on which to execute them, tin plate, ensured that more people had access to this form of expression, formerly the exclusive domain of wealthy elites. The development of oil paint technology also contributed to ex-votos' accessibility. The combination of substrate and paint technologies similarly encouraged the growth of a cottage industry of professional *retablers*, local artists who specialized in these kinds of devotional images.

In the introduction to this chapter I suggested that the increase in the number of ex-votos produced in the nineteenth century was an indication of a changing religious sensibility, of an incipient individualism in the ways that people related to their saints. Prior to the Reforma, the evidence does not seem to support such an assertion very strongly. The church worked with the state in organizing religious processions, collective endeavors in both the institutional sense and at the individual level. The corporate nature of colonial Mexican society changed only gradually. However, in many important ways, it did change, particularly in the inverse relationship between the mid-nineteenth-century decline of the church and simultaneous rise of the state. The triumph of the liberals, culminating in the Reforma, helped instill a sense of individualism in Mexican society; the dissolution of monastic communities and the related dissipation of religious sodalities are a powerful example of a liberal push for a society based on individuals, rather than corporations.⁸¹ Ironically, those same individuals used their newly guaranteed freedom of expression to express their continued devotion to religious figures and images. At the same time, the church, with its back against the wall, was loath to come down on popular religious culture, despite its negative view of its lower-class associations. Any Catholic devotion was better than no devotion at all, and so ex-votos were never banned, despite the threat to the clergy implied in the direct conversations between devotees and holy beings, conversations that obviated the need for a priestly mediator between parishioners and the divine.

⁸¹ Liberals were also behind the efforts to dismantle the landholding collectives known as *ejidos*, another form of corporate organization with colonial roots.

While it is possible to suggest an incipient modernization in religious mentalities, heralded by ex-votos' insistence on individual expressions of relationships between humans and the divine, the real change to an increasing individualism came later in the nineteenth century, during the regime of Porfirio Díaz and the regrouping of the Catholic church. During that thirty-five year period of relative political stability, an expanding economy, and significant industrialization, the major shrines saw a veritable explosion of human activity, in pilgrimages and the ex-votos those pilgrims left as thanks for divine intervention in their lives. In the following chapter we will pick up this thread and explore the persistence of the power of saints in the face of Mexico's entry into modernity.

Chapter 3

“In These Impious Times”: The Aftermath of the *Reforma* and the Porfiriato, 1876-1912



Figure 4.1: Justina López Aguado’s Traffic Accident (Source: *Retablos y exvotos*, p. 42)

Sometime around the turn of the twentieth century, a mishap involving a mule-drawn tram befell a *señora* named Justina López Aguado in Morelia, Michoacán (figure 4.1).¹ As she was getting off the streetcar, her dress got caught and she fell beneath the wheels. The first urban tramway system in Latin America had been inaugurated in Mexico City in 1858, using horse-powered streetcars.² These trams, and the electric streetcars introduced in Mexico City in 1900, reflected a consistent effort on the part of the Mexican government to modernize urban infrastructure. As these efforts paid off and the population of cities like Morelia and the capital

¹ En Morelia le acontecio a la Sra. Justina Lopez AGuado que al Bajar del Tranvia aToresale el vestido y callendo bajo las Ruedas invoco a la Sma. Virgen de la Salud. y resultado salva y en reconocimiento dedica el precente. In *Retablos y exvotos* (México: Museo Franz Mayer/*Artes de México*, 2000), p. 42.

² <http://www.tramz.com/tw/p.html>; <http://www.tramz.com/mx/mc/mc00.html>

grew, streetcar accidents like the ones depicted above and below increased, to the consternation of some and the ridicule of others.³ Fortunately for Sra. López, despite the trappings of modernity promoted by the liberal government of *fin-de-siècle* Mexico, the Virgen de la Salud was still on hand to come to her aid, and disaster was averted.



Figure 4.2: Esteban Marchena's Appeal to the Lord of Chalma and the Virgin of the Remedies (Source: *Dones y promesas*, cat. 273, p. 245)

Esteban Marchena, the victim of a similar accident in 1902 (figure 4.2), also turned to tried-and-true solutions to the dangers inherent in newfangled modes of transportation.⁴ He appealed to and was blessed by the intercession of both the Lord of Chalma and the Virgin of the Remedies. In the painting he commissioned to commemorate his accident, the galloping horses pulling the trolley seem to have lurched suddenly to the left, causing Marchena to lose his balance and topple off the platform, still gripping the reins in his right hand. Evidently the speed at which he and his fellow driver were traveling made his situation seem especially grave; were it not for the divine intercession of Christ and the Virgin Mary, this streetcar driver would surely have met a painful and terrible end, an end which the artist seems to imply is connected to an unfamiliar and in some ways frightening new form of transport. In keeping with their traditional religious practices, both Sra. López and Sr. Marchena requested the help of their traditional local

³ José Guadalupe Posada, the engraver who popularized *calaveras*, put some of these satirical skeletons to use in depictions of streetcar accidents and other news published in the penny press. See Patrick Frank, *Posada's Broadsheets: Mexican Popular Imagery, 1890-1910* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), pp. 186-191.

⁴ MEXICO AGOSTO DE 1902. EN GRATITUD DEL PRESENTE MILAGRO DEL S. DE CHALMA Y N. SA. DE LOS REMEDIOS DEDICA ESTE RETABLO HESTEVAN MARCHENA. In *Dones y promesas: 500 años de arte ofrenda (exvotos mexicanos)*. México: Centro Cultural Arte Contemporáneo/Fundación Cultural Televisa, 1996, cat. 273, p. 245.

saints—the Virgen de la Salud for highland Michoacán, and Remedios and the Señor de Chalma for the central valley—to protect them from modernity’s bewilderingly fast-moving trains and trolleys.

The ex-votos pictured above demonstrate not only the continued centrality of Catholic holy beings to Mexican mentalities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but also allude to a changing world, one characterized by rapid urbanization and increasingly easy communication and travel. Changes that we can loosely characterize as “modernizing” were evident in several spheres: in politics and government, in the institutional church, in technology. They gave rise to wide-reaching cultural repercussions, including those that were reflected in varied forms of religious expression. In this chapter, I discuss the dynamics of political, social, technological, and religious changes in Porfirian Mexico, arguing that despite the secularizing implications of “modernity,” traditional religiosity—with its processions, pilgrimages, and other saint-oriented devotional practices—flourished rather than foundered, both because of its ability to adapt to the “modern world” and because the institutional church itself experienced a revival. Seemingly paradoxically, the interplay of the forces of modernity and of tradition resulted in an upswing of popular religious expression, most visibly in an increase in ex-votos left at shrines, but also in the augmented negotiations over the proper role of religion in public life.

As with technological and political developments, religion, both “as prescribed” and “as practiced,” was affected by modernizing changes. Perhaps the best indicator of this process by which religious practices themselves became “modernized” is the double phenomenon of the church’s campaign to combat secularization by using rhetoric similar to that employed by anticlerical forces, and the simultaneous appropriation and reworking by the so-called “popular classes” of certain spiritual conventions that were formerly the province of elites.⁵ Of these, two visual examples are the rise in ex-voto production and in children’s funerary photography, both of which had aesthetic and cultural roots in elite devotional practices, but which became firmly associated with poorer Mexicans over the course of the nineteenth century. In this chapter, I set up the discussion of visual devotional practices—the making of ex-votos and the photographic commemoration of deceased children—by analyzing the broader context of religious change in Mexico and in the Catholic world in the second half of the nineteenth century. Specifically, I examine a number of apparitions in Mexico and France, as well as the new devotions and rise in pilgrimages associated with them. As part of this query, I also consider the Catholic church’s varied responses to reports of apparitions and miracles, and the interplays between “official” and “popular” cultures. The analysis of these religious phenomena provides a useful context to show how despite fundamental continuities—Mexicans’ belief in the efficacy of holy images and the intervention of saints in daily life remained strong—the forms that these beliefs took, and the

⁵ Peter Burke and Lawrence Levine both note similar processes of cultural change, in which elite cultural practices were appropriated and reworked by the popular classes, that accompanied industrialization in early modern Europe and in the United States. See Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, especially his discussion of how in pre-industrial Europe, “popular” culture was not exclusive to the “popular” classes. Levine, in *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Harvard University Press, 1990), uses the example of opera and Broadway musicals to illustrate the transformation of elite cultural forms into ones more palatable to the masses. See also Levine, “The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and its Audiences,” *The American Historical Review* 97:5 (Dec., 1992), pp.1369-1399.

people expressing them, changed in important ways. The material culture of non-elites gradually began to offer glimpses of their religious mentalities in ways that prior to the introduction of cheap, accessible new consumer goods, such as industrially produced tin plate and oil paint, had been hidden, simply because so few had been able to afford the materials with which to visually express their spiritual beliefs.

Through this analysis of the continuities of religious beliefs, expressed through devotional practices, I join a number of historians who have recently called into question a long-held theoretical assumption that posits a linear historical development in which modernization entails secularization, paralleling the separation of church and state in the liberal nationalist scheme.⁶ The assumption that “modernization” and religious belief are mutually exclusive has ineluctably shaped political and historical thought.⁷ Historian Austen Ivereigh notes that “the conflict was cast at the time and frequently since in terms of a modern state throwing off a clinging anti-modern and un-modern Church,” but despite our “inherited narrative” that modernity entails secularization or de-Christianization, and that “the nation-state rose and the Church declined” in the nineteenth century, the reality is far more nuanced and complex.⁸ In this chapter, I show some of the ways that this paradigm—of religion on one side and modernity on the other—fails to give an accurate picture of late nineteenth-century Mexican realities. Like the overlapping, interwoven dynamics of the elite-popular divide in Mexican society and culture, religion and modernity occupied the same plane of existence in the late nineteenth century, even amidst often acrimonious debate—or armed conflict—over the power dynamics between the church and the state.

The previous chapter explored some of the incipient changes that Mexican religious culture underwent prior to the liberal, anticlerical Reform Laws of the 1860s and 70s, fueled by an often wildly oscillating political climate that culminated in far-reaching new consequences for the Catholic church. By forcing the church to sell its landholdings through the disamortization program, and then nationalizing church-held mortgages as well as property, the state effectively took away from the church a major component of its wealth and power.⁹ Prior to the *Reforma*, too, the institutional church had already been experiencing declining revenues, along with a dwindling priesthood. However, in terms of religious culture, as we have seen, the first half of

⁶ Pamela Voekel, *Alone Before God: The Religious Origins of Modernity in Mexico* (Duke, 2002); Brian Connaughton, *Clerical Ideology in a Revolutionary Age: The Guadalajara Church and the Idea of the Mexican Nation, 1788-1853* (Calgary and Boulder, 2003); Brian Larkin, *The Very Nature of God: Baroque Catholicism and Religious Reform in Bourbon Mexico City* (New Mexico, 2010); Darrin McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford, 2001); Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (New York, 1999); Jonathan Sheehan, “Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization: A Review Essay,” *American Historical Review* 108:4 (2003), pp. 1061-1080; and Austen Ivereigh, ed., *The Politics of Religion in an Age of Revival: Studies in Nineteenth-Century Europe and Latin America* (London: Institute of Latin American Studies, 2000).

⁷ Margaret Lavinia Anderson, “The Divisions of the Pope: The Catholic Revival and Europe’s Transition to Democracy,” in Ivereigh, ed., *The Politics of Religion in an Age of Revival*, p. 22.

⁸ Ivereigh, “Introduction,” *The Politics of Religion in an Age of Revival*, pp. 11, 4.

⁹ Jan Bazant, *Alienation of Church Wealth in Mexico: Social and Economic Aspects of the Liberal Revolution, 1856-1875* (Cambridge University Press, 1971).

the nineteenth century was characterized more by continuities than by change. Traditional Catholic religious sensibilities were still quite evident in the processions to the Virgin of Remedios and other holy beings; these processions, aimed at currying favor with the Virgin Mary for the collective benefit of Mexico, were “joint ventures” of the church and the state, taking place as late as 1848, on the occasion of the U.S. invasion.¹⁰ At the same time, amid heavy debate, the liberal Constitution of 1857 both acknowledged and guaranteed religious freedom through its provision for “tolerancia de cultos.” (Although such religious tolerance would seem to extend to Catholics, this encouragement of non-Catholic religious organizations, particularly the establishment of North American Protestant churches, was certainly seen as a way to weaken the Catholic church.)¹¹

Despite the anticlericalism of the mid-century Reform Laws, the Virgin Mary, Christ, and the saints remained alive and well in Mexican hearts and minds. Images of sacred beings continued their hold over the collective mentality, with many of the recorded violations of the law involving the use of religious images in now-proscribed public places. Serge Gruzinski hypothesizes that “in the absence of a deep de-Christianization and a real industrialization, Mexico, until the second World War, kept the receptivity to the image it had inherited from baroque religiosity and its *imaginaire*.”¹² Gruzinski’s point could be taken beyond World War II: the material and documentary evidence strongly suggest an ingrained and flourishing Catholic, image-based sensibility to this day. For our purposes here, however, it will suffice to bear in mind that Mexico’s image-based religious sensibilities continued their hold over the collective mentality during a period of change that might seem to have produced a move away from traditional Catholicism. Thus, the central questions informing this chapter are: Did religious practices change amidst the technological and social changes ushered in along with modernity? Put another way, how did Mexican Catholicism accommodate or adapt to the secularizing forces that accompanied the separation of church and state in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? What did the separation of church and state amount to in cultural as well as political terms?

Religious practices that shed an alternative light on popular mentalities of the time include an upsurge in reported apparitions in the second half of the nineteenth century, those in Mexico echoing and paralleling similar incidents in France, both phenomenologically and politically. Well-known apparitions in France, such as Lourdes, were embraced by the institutional church, which used them to galvanize the pious against secularizing trends that began with the French Revolution and, in Europe, culminated in the Revolutions of 1848.¹³ This

¹⁰ See figure 3.4 in Chapter 2, p. 85.

¹¹ AHDF, 1890s-1900s, has lists of Protestant (Masonic) churches operating in Mexico City, and of licenses granted to North American Protestant evangelicals to establish churches there; the Mexican government was actively trying to attract non-Catholic churches at this time. Also see Gabriela Díaz Patiño, “Imagen religiosa y discurso: Transformación del campo religioso en la arquidiócesis de México durante la Reforma liberal, 1848-1908.” Ph.D. diss., El Colegio de México, 2010.

¹² Gruzinski, *Images at War*, p. 220.

¹³ See Ralph Gibson, *A Social History of French Catholicism 1789-1914*, and Raymond Jonas, *France and the Cult of the Sacred Heart: An Epic Tale for Modern Times*.

strategy was also employed in Mexico. Once the Mexican church began to recover from the blow of the Reforma, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, it too promoted mass pilgrimages to established shrines, such as the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the church of the Holy Child of Atocha.¹⁴ Such pilgrimages were seen as an antidote to the “poisonous” liberal legislation that sought to remove religion not only from politics, but also from public life. Meanwhile, many ordinary Mexicans ignored the liberal rhetoric calling for the removal of religion from public life and continued to honor and worship the *santos* as their holy status required.¹⁵ In visual culture, this continued commitment to traditional Catholicism was seen in a veritable flood of ex-votos (many of which alluded or responded to political, social, technological, or economic “modernizations”) being deposited at shrines as material testimonies of *mandas* (promises to a saint) fulfilled, the personal relationships between humans and their saints made public. Modernity came to Mexico in fits and starts, and never precluded the continuation of traditional beliefs and practices. Rather, much like the “divide” between official and popular, tradition and modernity intertwined and interacted in a kind of yin-and-yang relationship: one was an essential component of the other, and depended on the other’s existence for its own.

Porfirian Modernities

Ushering in nationalism, industrialization, and the development of capitalism, the “long” nineteenth century was a time of massive social changes, brought about by the challenges to absolutism and colonialism exemplified by the French, American, and Haitian revolutions. In the aftermath of these revolutions and of the Latin American independence movements, new nations and ideas about the relationships between the individual and society were forged, fed by the scientific and industrial revolutions as well as by radical political and economic changes.¹⁶ The

¹⁴ AHAM, Base de Pelagio Antonio de Labastida y Dávalos, Caja 88, exp. 41. Sección: Secretaría Arzobispal, Serie: Circulares. 1874. Peregrinaciones en espíritu á los mas celebres santuarios del orbe catolico. For more on the 1874 call for *peregrinaciones en espíritu* see also AHAM, Base de Pelagio Antonio de Labastida y Dávalos, Caja 86, exp. 7, Sección: Secretaría Arzobispal, Serie: Conventos; Caja 86, exp. 14, Sección: Secretaría Arzobispal, Serie: Parroquias, Tepotzotlán; Caja 86, exp. 54. Sección: Secretaría Arzobispal, Serie: Parroquias, Acambay; Caja 86, exp. 65. Sección: Secretaría Arzobispal, Serie: Parroquias, Tultepec; and Pedro Loza, *Carta Pastoral del Ilustrísimo Señor, Arzobispo de Guadalajara, sobre Peregrinaciones*. Guadalajara: Tip. de N. Parga, 1874. Universidad de Nuevo León, digital collection. See also Juan Javier Pescador, *Crossing Borders with the Santo Niño de Atocha* (University of New Mexico Press, 2009).

¹⁵ Terry Rugeley, *Of Wonders and Wise Men: Religion and Popular Cultures in Southeast Mexico, 1800-1876* (University of Texas, 2001).

¹⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, in *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), argues that nationalism arose out of a need to satisfy a need for a sense of collective belonging. See also *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, 1983); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2006 [1993]); Claudio Lomnitz, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2001); and Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, Harvard 1992. Greenfeld argues that the idea of the nation is “the constitutive element of modernity” (18).

ancien-régime was overturned in both Europe and Latin America, and with it many long-held collective cosmological (though not necessarily spiritual) beliefs. The nineteenth century constituted, in many ways, the formative years of the modern world. Fundamental and dramatic shifts in economics, politics, and culture meant new power paradigms and attitudes toward the past and the future. How could traditional religion survive in a new age of revolutions, science, industry, and societies based on national boundaries, not on creed or loyalty to a distant monarch?

A critical question to be considered in this chapter is what is meant by “modernity,” in the context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Mexican religious culture. What can explain the apparently anachronistic survivals of early modern religious thinking, exemplified by the intense devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe and others, the long-distance pilgrimages that persist even today, the outpourings of intensely personal sentiments left on painted tin sheets and handwritten scraps of paper at altars throughout the country? How can we account for the throngs of people who went (and still go) to the Basilicas of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos, the Holy Child of Atocha, and others to be blessed by a priest sprinkling holy water in a country that rather unambiguously separated church and state by stripping away most of the church’s political identity and rights in the mid-nineteenth century, and even more radically in the revolutionary period of the 1920s and 30s? And even after the state’s attempts to relegate religion to a personal matter that has no bearing on the functionings of a modern society, why does Mexico strike even the most casual observer as overwhelmingly religious?

Part of the confusion over accounting for Mexico as both religious *and* “modern” stems from a linear view of historical development, posited by Max Weber and perpetuated by generations of historians who detected a trajectory of political history in which modernization of the state equals secularization.¹⁷ In this line of thinking, as societies develop along industrial, capitalist, and nationalist lines, they become more “rational,” obviating the need for religion, which is increasingly seen as “irrational” and “anti-modern,” a holdover from less enlightened times. Historians, according to Ruth Harris, have tended to divide “our ‘modern,’ ‘rational’ age [from] the ‘irrational,’ ecstatic world that supposedly preceded it.” But this division, she continues, “erase[s] any acknowledgement of the sustained attraction to religious mystery...and tends to “see these practices in terms of ‘survival,’ an orientation that either ignores or belittles the constant evolution, and vitality, of belief that was manifestly present.”¹⁸

For Mexico, and for many other modernizing societies in the late nineteenth century, this analytical framework does not work. Like the official/popular dichotomy, the opposition of “traditional/religious” and “modern/secular” is far more nuanced than such a dichotomy allows. Writing about the historiographical acceptance of the notion that secularization began with the

¹⁷ Martin Austin Nesvig, “Introduction,” *Religious Cultures in Modern Mexico* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), p. 3.

¹⁸ Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, 1999), pp. 12-13. For twentieth-century perspectives, see also William Christian, *Visionaries: The Spanish Republic and the Reign of Christ* (University of California Press, 1996); and Sergio Luzzatto, *Padre Pio: Miracles and Politics in a Secular Age*, trans. by Frederika Randall (New York: Picador, 2010).

Enlightenment, Jonathan Sheehan notes that “the rise of religious politics in the United States and elsewhere has made it crystal clear that the dissipation of religion as an ideological force can in no way be understood as an inevitable consequence of modernity.”¹⁹ In Mexico, despite the (successful) efforts of the liberals to separate church and state in the nineteenth century, this separation could only apply to the church as a political entity; to remove the vestiges of an entrenched mentality was another matter entirely. Catholicism remained deeply embedded in the culture, even as Mexico was modernizing.²⁰

How did this modernization come about? A pivotal event that portended modernity for Mexico was Porfirio Díaz’s ascension to the presidency in 1876, with important effects on the ways that religion was “lived” in Mexico in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Díaz, a former general in Juárez’s liberal army, made “order and progress” the guiding principles of his government, encouraging economic development while only loosely enforcing some of the most anticlerical provisions of the 1857 Constitution. While state-directed modernization in the Porfiriato was multidimensional—rural and urban, industrial and agricultural, social, economic, and political—there are two aspects that are especially important in the context of late nineteenth-century popular religious culture: the railroads and rural peace. Díaz favored promoting foreign investment as a means of expanding Mexico’s economy, with mining and the development of infrastructure—specifically the railroad system—seen as the keys to achieving this crucial goal. Building on the liberal policies of Juárez and Lerdo, Díaz lowered or eliminated taxes on mineral products, most importantly silver, as well as providing concessions to foreign mining companies. To facilitate the shipment of metal ore, it was necessary to modernize the transportation system, still consisting of mule trains as late as the 1870s.²¹ In 1876, the year Díaz became president, 640 kilometers of track were in use in Mexico, most of which had been laid by the British-owned Mexican Railway company and connected Veracruz to Mexico City; by the end of Díaz’s reign in 1911 Mexico boasted over 24,000 km of track, built mostly by American, British, and French investors, comprising a fairly well-developed network between the capital and points north, east, south, and west.²² Aside from contributing to Mexico’s economic growth,

¹⁹ Jonathan Sheehan, “Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization,” *American Historical Review* 108:4 (2003), p. 1066. This stance fits with the one put forth by the contributors to Austen Ivereigh, ed., *The Politics of Religion in an Age of Revival: Studies in Nineteenth-Century Europe and Latin America* (London: Institute of Latin American Studies, 2000).

²⁰ Nesvig, p. 4.

²¹ Although railroad-building concessions had been granted in the 1830s and 40s, construction on the nation’s first rail line, between Veracruz and Mexico, did not begin until 1858—and the only segment completed by 1861 was between downtown Mexico City and La Villa, site of the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The completed Veracruz-Mexico City line was inaugurated in 1873 by President Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada.

²² Jan Bazant, *A Concise History of Mexico from Hidalgo to Cárdenas 1805-1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 111). By 1911 railroads and mining accounted for about 85 percent of American capital in the Mexican economy; see David M. Pletcher, *Rails, Mines, and Progress: Seven American Promoters in Mexico, 1867-1911* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1958), cited in Robert R. Alvarez, *Familia: Migration and Adaptation in Baja and Alta California, 1880-1975* (University of California Press, 1987), pp. 29-30. See also Michael Matthews, “Railway Culture and the Civilizing Mission in Mexico, 1876-1910,” Ph.D. diss., University of Arizona, 2008.

the development of the railroads would also have a significant impact on the ways in which religion was practiced, a matter which will be discussed in more detail below.

None of this foreign investment in Mexico's economy and development would have been possible without the relative political stability and security that marked the so-called "Pax Porfiriana," achieved through iron-fisted control and aided by the strengthening of the *Guardia Rural*, the police force whose numbers Díaz increased from a few hundred in 1876 to over two thousand by 1889. With independence and the dissolution of the Spanish crown's distant authority, travel in Mexico had become more hazardous; the rampant regional upheavals of the early to mid-nineteenth century certainly contributed to essentially nonexistent security on the sparsely-traveled roads, all but inviting bandit attacks. Banditry was a concern that cut across class lines; Mexican and foreign elites as well as the poor were subject to its dangers. The lawlessness described by foreign travelers such as Frances Calderón de la Barca ("The pestilence of robbers, which infests the republic, has never been eradicated")²³ morphed into an image of Mexico as "a dangerous and semicivilized land in which political opportunists ran the government while bandits ruled the road."²⁴

Eliminating Mexico's widespread banditry was of utmost importance if foreign investors were to be successfully courted; to this end, a carefully-constructed image of a ruthless, capable, and efficient police force was disseminated through both official and popular outlets.²⁵ Such was the success of the public relations campaign promoting the fearsomeness of the *rurales* that their reputation soon eclipsed that of the bandits they were dispatched to eliminate. While historian Paul Vanderwood has debunked the myth of the *rurales*, noting that their numbers and sparse distribution prevented them from ever establishing complete control over the countryside, their legend certainly became entrenched in Mexican popular culture, expressed in print culture and in *corridos*. Porfirian modernization involved installing institutions to establish and preserve order (or "discipline," as Foucault would say), not just progress. However, as some of the ex-votos analyzed in the following chapter make clear, much of nineteenth-century Mexico's peasantry had more faith in the protection of the saints and the Virgin Mary than in instruments of the state such as the police, with which, in the words of anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz, rural Mexicans had a "tenuous" relationship.²⁶

The success of the *rurales* and the build-up of the railroad system did have indirect and far-reaching consequences for Mexican ex-voto production, for the improved safety and ease of

²³ Frances Calderón de la Barca, *Life in Mexico* (Middlesex, U.K.: Echo Library, 2007 [1843]), Letter the Thirty-Sixth, p. 292.

²⁴ Chris Frazer, *Bandit Nation: A History of Outlaws and Cultural Struggle in Mexico, 1810-1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006) pp. 58-59.

²⁵ See Paul Vanderwood, *Disorder and Progress: Bandits, Police, and Mexican Development* (Wilmington: Latin American Silhouettes, 1992); Patrick Frank, *Posada's Broadsheets: Mexican Popular Imagery, 1890-1910* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998); and Chris Frazer, *Bandit Nation*.

²⁶ Claudio Lomnitz, "Prólogo," in Moisés Gámez and Oresta López, *Tesoros populares de la devoción. Los exvotos pintados en San Luis Potosí* (Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Instituto de Cultura de San Luis Potosí, El Colegio de San Luis, 2002), p. 13.

travel made long-distance pilgrimage more accessible to devout Mexicans.²⁷ The first long-distance pilgrimage documented in Mexico occurred in 1840 and was comprised of a small group of Ópata people from Sonora who walked to the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico City, a journey of at least 1,500 km.²⁸ Prior to that, and also afterwards to a large degree, pilgrimages had been mostly local in Mexico, centered on regional devotions, with the paradox that the nationally-acclaimed Virgin of Guadalupe's shrine at Tepeyac attracted few devotees from beyond central Mexico.²⁹ But as the capital grew, and along with it the railroad, local pilgrims began flocking to Tepeyac in droves. It is telling that the earliest section of the Mexico City-Veracruz rail line to be built connected downtown Mexico City and Tepeyac. This important route carried nearly one million passengers between 1857 and 1860, many of whom were pilgrims traveling with the purpose of fulfilling *mandas* by leaving ex-votos at the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe.³⁰

Díaz, was, like many other liberals, personally a religious man, and perhaps partly for this reason as well as because it was politically convenient, his dictatorship was marked by conciliatory policies vis-à-vis the church. He reached out to Mexico's Archbishop, Pelagio Antonio de Labastida y Dávalos, early on in his presidency, assuring him that he was not an enemy of the clergy. Indeed, Labastida performed Díaz's wedding to Carmen Romero in 1881. Díaz also proposed the promotion of Eulogio Gillow to bishop of Oaxaca, and presided over that diocese being transformed into an archdiocese.³¹ In return, Mexico's bishops formally recognized the government as legitimate, the first time they had done so since 1857. The *Pax Porfiriana* referred not only to the absence of war during the Díaz government, but to this rapprochement with the church; one might say that the government's status went from being "excommunicated" to "blessed" by the church hierarchy, which was simultaneously a pawn of and an accomplice to Porfirio Díaz's repression of dissent.³² Especially with regard to the

²⁷ It should be noted, however, that an increase in long-distance pilgrimage does not necessarily imply more fervent devotion, nor was the greater ease of travel the only motivating factor for undertaking a pilgrimage, whether local or distant. See William B. Taylor, *Shrines and Miraculous Images: Religious Life in Mexico Before the Reforma*, pp. 131-136, 185.

²⁸ C. Dora Tabanico, "De Tuape a la Basílica de Guadalupe," in *Memorias: IV Simposio de la Sociedad Sonorense de Historia*. Hermosillo: Instituto Sonorense de Cultura, 1991: 133-38. Citation courtesy of William B. Taylor.

²⁹ William B. Taylor, *Shrines and Miraculous Images*, pp. 9, 65, 130-136, 185.

³⁰ Manuel Escandón, *Segunda exposición al público sobre el negocio del camino de fierro entre México y Veracruz* (México: Imp. de Ignacio Cumplido, 1861), cited in Taylor, *Shrines and Miraculous Images*, p. 185.

³¹ Both Archbishops Labastida and Gillow would figure prominently in the church's resurgence in the late nineteenth century. See Edward Wright-Rios, *Revolutions in Mexican Catholicism: Reform and Revelation in Oaxaca, 1887-1934* (Duke University Press, 2009); Jaime Cuadriello, "La corona de la Iglesia para la reina de la nación: Imágenes de la coronación guadalupana de 1895," in *Los pinceles de la historia. La fabricación del estado, 1864-1910*, v. 3; and D.A. Brading, *Mexican Phoenix: Our Lady of Guadalupe: Image and Tradition Across Five Centuries* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

³² María Alicia Puente Lutteroth, "Repercusiones sociales de una política de conciliación. Iglesia y Porfiriato (1876-1910)," in María Alicia Puente Lutteroth, ed., *Hacia una historia mínima de la Iglesia en México* (México, D.F.: Editorial Jus; CEHILA, 1993), pp.133-134.

indigenous rural poor, who were prone to making land claims that the government did not wish to honor, the state used its newly cozy relationship with the church to suppress possible uprisings. Archbishop Gillow recalled in 1909 that one of the Catholic church's accomplishments was to have "imbued in the indigenous people the habits of humility, submission, and passivity."³³ Díaz astutely harnessed the political sympathies of elites of all persuasions, strengthening his own position while making it possible for the church to reorganize and make a comeback.

Thus while in theory the Porfirian regime was the heir of the mid-century liberal reforms, in practice the government was significantly more lax about enforcing the reforms' most radical anticlerical statutes. As discussed in the previous chapter, even under the more stridently anticlerical regimes that preceded Díaz's, outright transgression of the laws prohibiting public religious processions were punished only haphazardly; arrests might be made, but fines and jail terms were often reduced or not imposed.³⁴ By the late nineteenth century, scores of complaints about "nuisances" ranging from the ringing of church bells to public processions were recorded, but the "crimes" often went unpunished. In all of the official complaints about the "excessive" ringing of church bells cited, the extent of the Federal District's legal actions was to issue stern warnings to the priests in charge of the offending church bells; no fines or other punishments were levied.³⁵ The ringing of church bells, a quintessential sound defining the colonial Mexican urban landscape, was destined to remain a central sensory feature of the purportedly secular, reformed Mexican city.

Other kinds of violations of the Reform Laws were also commonplace. In 1905, the Archbishop of Mexico, Próspero María Alarcón, wrote personally to the Governor of the Federal District, complaining that the priest Porfirio Tinoco of Ixtayopan parish had been unfairly jailed and fined by the Prefect of Xochimilco.³⁶ His "crime" had been to hold a procession in the church's atrium, whose gate, Alarcón noted, had been dutifully covered so as to prevent those outside the atrium walls from seeing in. According to Alarcón's informants, moreover, the Prefect of Xochimilco did not permit religious functions to be held in any of his jurisdiction's church atriums, a clear violation of the law, which did allow religious ceremonies to take place in church patios, provided they were hidden from street view. In response, the city government

³³ Puente Lutteroth, p. 136, "humildad, sumisión, y mansedumbre."

³⁴ See the case of José de la Fuente and Felipe Alvarado, who in 1874 were arrested for organizing a procession in honor of Santo Domingo. AHDF, Fondo: Municipal, Sección: Guadalupe Hidalgo, Serie: Cultos. Inv. 53, Caja 1, Exp. 17, 1874.

³⁵ AHDF Fondo: Ayuntamiento, Sección: Gobierno del Distrito, Serie: Cultos, v. 1380, Exp. 3. 1906. Se recuerda el art.o 6º. de la ley de 14 de Dbre de 1874 sobre el uso de las campanas al encargado del templo de S Lúcas; AHDF Fondo: Ayuntamiento, Sección: Gobierno del Distrito, Serie: Cultos, v. 1380, Exp. 7. 1909. Se recomienda al parroco de la Santa Veracruz y Capellan de San Juan de Dios se abstengan del uso exesivo de las campanas de dichos Templos, sugetandose á la prescripción de la Ley de 14 de 1874; AHDF Fondo: Ayuntamiento, Sección: Gobierno del Distrito, Serie: Cultos, v. 1380, Exp. 4. 1912-13. El prefecto de Tacubaya se queja del uso inmoderado que se hace, de las campanas del Templo católico principal de esa Ciudad.

³⁶ AHDF Fondo: Ayuntamiento, Sección: Gobierno del Distrito, Serie: Cultos, v. 1380, Exp. 4. 1905. Queja del Arzobispo de México contra actos del Prefecto de Xochimilco.

intervened with Xochimilco's prefect and "recommended" that he conform to the law: the priest was to be freed and the fine dropped. This early twentieth-century instance of the state's cooperation with the church highlights both the partial rapprochement of the two institutions, at least at the top levels, and the failure of the anticlerical Reform Laws to fully take hold in Mexican culture.

One case rich in detail that allows us to apprehend the complexity of the contestations between Catholics and anticlericals, and between church and state, comes from 1909.³⁷ It concerns the extent to which the law forbidding religious ceremonies performed outside of church walls, imposed in 1874, remained highly controversial some thirty-five years later. As with the above-mentioned correspondence between the Archbishop and the government of the Federal District, the issue of what constituted the public and private spheres continued to be hotly contested. In 1909, a priest named Evaristo Sánchez blessed a number of market stalls erected in the plaza of Tepito, at the request of the stalls' owners. A passing gendarme tried to put a stop to this "public display of religion," but, surrounded by the angry shopkeepers and fearing a riot, he backed down and allowed the ceremonies to continue. The merchants closed the windows of their stalls and the priest made his way through the plaza, stepping inside each little structure to inaugurate the newly-established small businesses with a traditional Catholic blessing.

The police officer reported the incident to his superiors, and despite the shopkeepers' protests that the priestly blessings had occurred within enclosed spaces of private property (whose construction had been approved by the city government), the government wielded its authority over the desacralized plaza of Tepito. The priest's objection that he was unaware of any law that prohibited him from performing a Catholic ritual *behind closed doors*, meanwhile, fell on deaf ears. He and five of the shopkeepers were fined 10 pesos each, and unfortunately for them, this time the Archbishop did not intervene on their behalf. However, the policeman himself admitted that this was not quite an open-and-shut case of publicly-celebrated religious ceremonies: upon hearing music and seeing the priest, who was dressed in "civil" clothing but who had some unnamed religious accessories on his person, he had initially merely inquired whether he had a license to perform these apparently religious ceremonies. The priest replied that he did not, but that he did not think he needed one. Inside one of the little market-stalls, the officer could make out an altar of some sort, with candles burning, but in the course of the confrontation with the priest and the shopkeepers, the "doors" (window-coverings) were shut, and the priest continued his rounds at the other stalls unmolested. The police officer himself was unsure whether the blessings did, in fact, constitute a violation of the Reform Laws, and the merchants, as well as the antagonistic crowd of onlookers, were definitively of the opinion that the government had no business restricting their religious freedoms, especially not within the confines of their own "homes."

As this case illustrates, the murkiness of the law's intent, and the limitations of the government's reach, reverberated in post-Reforma Mexico. Frequent contestations of what

³⁷ AHDF Fondo: Ayuntamiento, Sección: Gobierno del Distrito, Serie: Cultos, v. 1380, Exp. 5. 1909. El Comisario de la 1ª. Demarcacion comunica la Ynfraccion á la ley de 14 de Dbre de 1874. Cometida por el Cura del Templo de Tepito.

constituted too much power and influence, on the part of both the clergy and the government, characterized the church-state dynamic. A third, crucial group that took part in these debates was comprised of Mexican citizens, both devout Catholics and more anticlerical elements. The involvement of people who were neither “agents of the state” nor “agents of the church” in these conflicts complicates the impact of the Reforma on Mexican cultural history, expanding it from a top-down imposition of institutional or elite power; as these examples and many others show, the legal impact on the ways that Mexicans experienced and created religion was fraught with complex negotiations between multiple actors.

Another example of the Porfirian government’s somewhat inconsistent, but ultimately cleverly accommodating, position on the Reform Laws with regard to the Catholic church can be observed in the wildly popular theatrical re-enactments of Christ’s Passion staged during Easter Week in Iztapalapa, in southeastern Mexico City.³⁸ These passion plays, in the late nineteenth century and to this day, involved throngs of spectators following a procession of actors from the Church of San Lucas to an outdoor stage complete with Roman soldiers and Pontius Pilate, participating in the drama of the death sentence imposed on Jesus Christ, the arduous walk to Calvary, and finally culminating in the crucifixions of Christ and the thieves Dimas and Gestas. Not content merely to watch the performance, many Iztapalapans bore crosses in solidarity with Jesus, plodding behind him as he made his way up the *Cerro de la Estrella*, the Iztapalapan Calvary, fulfilling a penitential *manda* made to atone for their sins. The intense outpouring of emotion on display in this annual manifestation of religious theater had to have been disturbing to the liberal, reformist Mexican state, and yet the sheer number of participants made it impossible to enforce any proscriptive laws designed to limit the visibility of the church. How did the government respond to the raucous, religious passion plays of Iztapalapa in the late nineteenth century?

The roots of the passion plays throughout Mexico can be traced to the early colonial period, when they were just one of many pedagogical tools employed by evangelizing missionaries to convert indigenous Americans to Christianity and to establish a Spanish Catholic social order in the New World.³⁹ In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, passion plays and other religious performances marked the liturgical and agricultural calendars throughout the Spanish empire, much as they had in medieval and early modern Europe.⁴⁰ Such religious ceremonies were visually and symbolically connected to imperial power, reflecting Spain’s political and cultural dominance in all its dominions. For this and other reasons, religious processions and other events performed in public formed the crux of the problem of the role of

³⁸ See Richard Trexler, *Reliving Golgotha: The Passion Play of Iztapalapa* (Harvard, 2003).

³⁹ See Louise Burkhardt, *Holy Wednesday: A Nahua Drama from Early Colonial Mexico* (University of Pennsylvania, 1996); *The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (University of Arizona, 1989); and *Nahua Theatre Volume 4: Nahua Christianity in Performance*, co-edited with Barry D. Sell (University of Oklahoma, 2009).

⁴⁰ See Carolyn Dean, *Inka Bodies and the Body of Christ: Corpus Christi in Colonial Cuzco, Peru* (Duke 1999); and Linda Curcio-Nagy, *The Great Festivals of Colonial Mexico City: Performing Power and Identity* (New Mexico 2004).

the church in post-independence Latin America.⁴¹ The push for independence, fed by a need to establish a political and cultural identity separate from that of the colonial power, could not accommodate the old twin system of governance by church and state. The right to control public spaces, then, became the key motivating factor underlying the Reform Laws of 1874. As noted by historian Richard Trexler, “the purpose of this stream of legislation was to restrain the church by restricting clerically inspired public assembly,” but it went at the heart of Mexican religiosity in an even more fundamental way by restricting religiosity’s visibility.⁴² Underlying the liberal state’s reform project for the church was a wishful-thinking scenario of “out of sight, out of mind.”

The re-enactment of Christ’s passion at Iztapalapa and elsewhere is a drama with important implications for post-Reforma cultural history. The repeated publication of the Lerdo laws expressly prohibiting religious functions taking place outside of church walls may have tamped down popular religious fervor in central Mexico City, “but in the vast margins of the capitaline area, where indigenous peoples still made up important parts of the population, villagers and townspeople continued the tradition.”⁴³ And in the modernizing capital, despite the growing alienation of elite and popular cultures, the ties that bound the two remained strong. Amidst the condemnations of the “indecent” of the “spectacles” on display at Iztapalapa, Mixcoac, Iztacalco, and elsewhere on the fringes of the capital, both liberal and conservative newspapers nonetheless published train schedules to these sites, encouraging their readers to go see “the terrible scenes of the passion of the savior.”⁴⁴ Reflecting an understanding that the Easter week Passion plays were popular with *capitalinos* of all social stripes, newspapers implicitly encouraged elites to “go slumming” in the indigenous and mestizo suburbs, if only as a way of mentally separating themselves from the “rabble” that created these diversions. Yet even as social stratification grew ever more rigid, educated and elite spectators participated and contributed to the growing popularity of the Easter week phenomenon.

The Porfirian government’s muted response to the passion play of Iztapalapa was to conceptualize it as a folkloric, as opposed to religious, custom, thereby diminishing its potentially threatening aspect and eliminating the need to engage the church as an adversary. Demonstrating a creative flexibility with regard to the Reform laws and the church that was a hallmark of the Porfiriato, by 1883, the date that Trexler suggests as the origins of the play in its modern incarnation, “the government’s prohibition of outdoor religious processions with priests and images, for example, of Jesus, had been in effect for nearly a quarter of a century, and the age of the Iztapalapan passion with live actors but *no images* (emphasis added) had begun.”⁴⁵ Prior to the Díaz regime, the passion plays had been small enough to be contained within the

⁴¹ This problem had its inception in the Bourbon reforms of the late eighteenth century. See David Brading, *Church and State in Bourbon Mexico: The Diocese of Michoacán, 1749-1810* (Cambridge 2002), especially pp. 150-170.

⁴² Trexler, p. 67. See also Ivereigh, “Introduction,” *The Politics of Religion in an Age of Revival*.

⁴³ Trexler, p. 64.

⁴⁴ *El Tiempo*, 14 April 1895.

⁴⁵ Trexler, p. 78.

church and its atrium, thus making government intervention unnecessary. By the end of the century, the tradition of using live actors and the decreased visibility of the institutional church creatively side-stepped the letter, if not the intent, of the law prohibiting religious functions from taking place in public, although fines and other punishments continued to be levied on priests and citizens who defied the Reform laws and went out in processions with images, and the question of using outdoor church patios for religious functions remained contentious.⁴⁶

With its raw, emotional theatrics inspired by the central drama of Christianity, the Iztapalapa passion play could have represented one of the most flagrant, and colorful, infractions of the Laws of the Reform, but Mexico City's municipal authorities seem to have downplayed its religious overtones, treating it as a relatively harmless diversion rather than as an implicit challenge to government authority. This attitude was helped in large part by the church's relative lack of involvement with the staging of the plays. Confined to the churches, where they performed the liturgy, the priests were constrained from within; the archdiocese, anxious not to make waves with the government, reminded clerics not to sermonize along the processional route or perform any religious functions outside of approved spaces. In this way, the church cooperated with the state's approach in desacralizing the tradition.

The lay associations in charge of organizing the plays, meanwhile, were happy to work without clerical oversight, and thus make the celebration of Christ's Passion their own. People persisted in making official requests to local civil authorities to host processions and other religious celebrations throughout the post-Reform period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴⁷ Numerous cases filed in the archives of both the Archdiocese of Mexico and the Government of the Federal District call attention to the ways that a law intended to limit the power of the Catholic church—by limiting its physical presence in the ritual life of the nation—remained controversial, and to the many and varied actors involved in its complex contestation, accommodation, and negotiation.

The state's discouragement of "traditional enchantment" was paralleled by the church, for reasons ranging from the desire to put a modern face on Mexico to their shared mistrust of the popular classes. Yet the church was also pulled into the perpetuation and evolution of a popular religious culture based on the celebration of images and symbols it had introduced and promoted. These religious symbols, internalized through centuries of indoctrination and by the circulation of devotional images, and greatly augmented in the nineteenth century thanks to the increased production of printed broadsides and other periodical literature, became a hallmark of modern

⁴⁶ AHDF Fondo: Ayuntamiento, Sección: Gobierno del Distrito, Serie: Cultos, v. 1380, exp. 1. 1902. El Prefecto de Tlalpam participa que el Presidente Municipal de Yxtapalapa impuso e hizo efectiva la multa de \$100. a varios vecinos que infringieron las leyes de Reforma sacando procesiones por las calles del pueblo; AHDF, v. 1380, exp. 3. 1903. El Prefecto de Tlalpam, participa que impuso una multa de \$100. á varios vecinos de Yxtapalapa, que sacaron una procesion; AHDF Fondo: Ayuntamiento, Sección: Gobierno del Distrito, Serie: Cultos, v. 1380, exp. 2. 1906. Circular, aclaratoria de la prevencion del art.o 5º. de la ley de 14 de Dbre 1874 p.a que no se ejecuten actos de culto religioso en los atrios y cementerios anexos a los templos.

⁴⁷ AHDF, Fondo: Ayuntamiento, Sección: Gobierno del Distrito, Serie: Cultos, v. 1380, Exp. 2. Los vecinos del pueblo de San Pablo Ostotépec piden permiso para celebrar una funcion al Sr. de Chalmita. 1903; AHDF, v. 1380, Exp. 4, Varios vecinos de Santa Ana Tlacotenco solicitan permiso para danzar en una fiesta de Santiago. 1903.

industrial society just as surely as other, more secular symbols did, by virtue of the technology used to stamp them into Mexican mentalities. In the following section, I analyze the church's efforts to regroup from the blow of the Reforma, first by looking at some of its internal structural reforms and then by considering its use of symbols and images in its "public relations campaign."

The Catholic Resurgence

The Reforma was both a nadir and a wake-up call for the Mexican church. Despite often vicious attacks on its autonomy and even its right to exist, the institution proved resilient, immeasurably aided by the piety ingrained in the populace, and not insignificantly by the quiet backing of some of the power elite. Discussing the "irresistible invitation to place Catholicism in opposition to the modern world," Frances Lannon notes "two striking features of the nineteenth-century Catholic revival...the centralising of authority within the Catholic Church in the papacy—including the authority to define doctrine—and the promotion of Marian piety."⁴⁸ Although the long-accepted image of the Reforma-era church, established by a historiography that dates to the mid-nineteenth century, portrays the institution and its clerics as conservative and reactionary against the growing tide of liberalism, some of the church's staunchest defenders recognized the need for internal reform as a means of maintaining its authority. One such reformer, the famously intractable Bishop of Michoacán, Clemente de Jesús Munguía, in fact asserted the Mexican church's autonomy vis-à-vis the state by strengthening its ties to Rome, appropriating elements of liberal discourse and insisting upon its sovereignty.⁴⁹ In doing so, Munguía, with the support of the Mexican ecclesiastical hierarchy, showed a quite radical departure from the *ancien-régime* idea that church and state were two branches of the same ultimate authority. Indeed, according to Pablo Mijangos, "the Mexican bishops...strengthened their ties with the Pope not out of a blind ultramontane zeal, but out of the realization that the best way to increase their real authority was by taking sides with the Vatican." Mijangos goes on to argue that these bishops actually achieved a certain degree of independence during the liberal reform, "paradoxically under the Pope's protection."⁵⁰

Other clerics' efforts at internal reform took a more parish-centered approach, focusing

⁴⁸ Frances Lannon, "1898 and the Politics of Catholic Identity in Spain," in Ivereigh, ed., *The Politics of Religion in an Age of Revival*, p. 57.

⁴⁹ Pablo Mijangos y González, "The Lawyer of the Church: Bishop Clemente de Jesús Munguía and the Ecclesiastical Response to the Liberal Revolution in Mexico, 1810-1868" (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2009), p. 6; see also David Brading, "Ultramontane Intransigence and the Mexican Reform: Clemente de Jesús Munguía" (*The Politics of Religion in an Age of Revival*); "Clemente de Jesús Munguía: Intransigencia ultramontana y la reforma mexicana" (in Manuel Ramos Medina, ed., *Historia de la Iglesia en el Siglo XIX* (México, D.F.: El Colegio de México, El Colegio de Michoacán, Instituto Mora, UAM-Iztapalapa, Condumex 1998); and Brian Connaughton, *Ideología y sociedad en Guadalajara (1788-1853)* (México, D.F.: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1992).

⁵⁰ Mijangos, p. 16.

less on high politics than on increasing lay devotions as a way of strengthening local Catholicism in Mexico. In Porfirian Oaxaca, Archbishop Eulogio Gillow y Zavala renewed and reformed his archdiocese by promoting lay associations and devotions, focusing his flock's loyalty on parish institutions and, through them, on the official ecclesiastical hierarchy. One of the ways that Gillow and his parish priests accomplished this was by appropriating certain aspects of popular Catholicism as they encouraged parishioners to participate in newly-formed pious associations devoted to an image of the Virgin Mary. According to historian Edward Wright-Rios, "both the church's retooled social ideology and new pious style had roots in Catholic tradition. In fact, the local clergy did not attempt to uproot existing Catholic practices so much as to graft new meanings and institutions on existing religious customs."⁵¹

What were these popular practices, appropriated by reformers such as Archbishop Gillow? And how does their perpetuation in a time of global upheaval, from the perspective of the Catholic church, tie in with this chapter's theme of modernity?⁵² In Oaxaca and elsewhere, image-centered devotions surged as the institutional church began placing a renewed focus on a practice with long colonial roots. Aided by the formation of new lay associations, operating under clerical supervision and dedicated to well-known miraculous images, the church was able to tap into popular piety and command the laity's allegiance by emphasizing commonalities between ecclesiastical and lay devotions and concerns. These *asociaciones canónicamente erguidas* (canonically structured associations) "discouraged the time-honored, frenetic celebration of titular feasts. Instead they emphasized scheduled group spiritual exercises, frequent sacramental practices, and special liturgies purged of profane revelries and uninhibited fiesta piety."⁵³ In this sense they echoed earlier efforts at reforming Baroque Catholicism. Like the late eighteenth-century *Santas Escuelas de Cristo*, which used traditional penitential practices such as public confession and self-flagellation in more controlled, less "frenetic" environments,⁵⁴ and the "more quiet, interior and constant" forms of worship practiced by new, female-dominated associations such as the *Vela Perpetua*,⁵⁵ the lay associations of post-Reform Mexico repurposed familiar symbols of the Catholic pantheon in ways befitting the rapid urbanization, proletarianization, and the longing for simpler times engendered by the dramatic social changes

⁵¹ Edward Wright-Rios, *Revolutions in Mexican Catholicism*, p. 46.

⁵² In terms of the broader global (European) context, the anti-Catholic *Kulturkampf* initiated by Otto von Bismarck in 1871 had numerous parallels with the post-Reforma troubles of the Mexican church, including the Prussian Catholics' response of reorganizing and strengthening from within, rather than protesting violently. See Michael B. Gross, *The War Against Catholicism: Liberalism and the Anti-Catholic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Michigan, 2004). See also Jonathan Sperber, *Popular Catholicism in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Princeton, 1984); and Austen Ivereigh, ed., *The Politics of Religion in an Age of Revival: Studies in Nineteenth-Century Europe and Latin America* (London: Institute of Latin American Studies, 2000).

⁵³ Wright-Rios, p. 47.

⁵⁴ Matthew D. O'Hara, "The Supple Whip: Tradition and Innovation in Mexican Catholicism," forthcoming. See also his "The Orthodox Underworld of Colonial Mexico," *Colonial Latin American Review* 17:2, December 2008, pp. 233-250. See also Juan Pedro Viqueira's *Propriety and Permissiveness in Bourbon Mexico* for an idea of the raucous environment both state and church reformers were trying to eradicate in the late eighteenth century.

⁵⁵ Margaret Chowning, "The Catholic Church and the Ladies of the Vela Perpetua: Gender and Devotional Change in Nineteenth-Century Mexico," *Past and Present*, forthcoming (November 2013).

Mexico underwent with the Reforma and the Porfirian obsession with modernity. But while the Escuelas de Cristo and the Vela Perpetua aimed to promote a more interiorized piety free of the Baroque predilection for visual exuberance,⁵⁶ late nineteenth-century church reformers used the popular attraction to images as a way of keeping the Catholic flock intact.

*New and Old Images in the Church's Public Relations Campaign:
The Sacred Heart of Jesus and The Immaculate Conception of Mary*

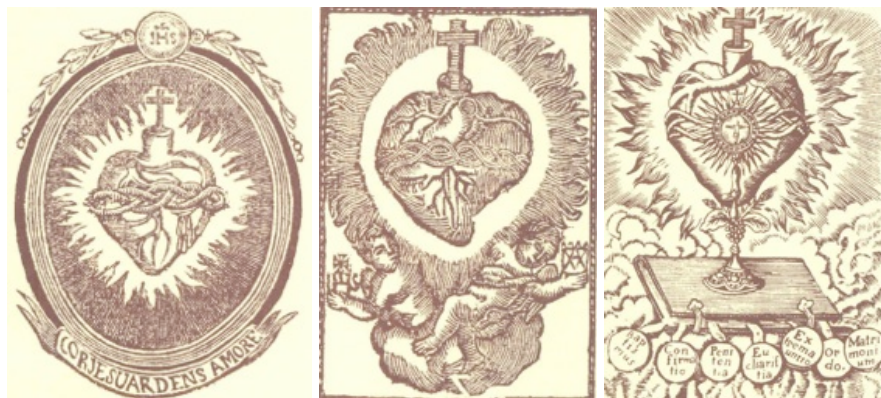


Figure 4.3: Images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. On left (19th c.), cat. 74; center (18th c.), cat. 75; right (19th c.): cat. 76 (*Devocionario mexicano*, p.58)

The image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (figure 4.3) is one example of a devotion widely promoted in the nineteenth-century Catholic world as an “antidote” to the perceived threat of impiety plaguing the modern world.⁵⁷ In a time of virulent anticlericalism in Mexico, Spain, Germany, and elsewhere, the devotion emphasized the unmitigated love, compassion, and long-suffering of the heart of Christ towards humanity, a message embraced by its beleaguered audience, whether lay or ecclesiastical. The perception of faith under attack prompted the church to undertake formal Acts of Reparation to Jesus Christ (in Spanish, *desagravios*), expressing Catholics’ remorse for the godlessness of the age. The expression of contrition for one’s sins, already a fundamental aspect of Catholic thinking, found a new outlet through the contemplation of Jesus’s heart, encircled by the thorns of impiety.

⁵⁶ The Vela Perpetua was one of the few Catholic organizations that I can think of that was *not* devoted to an image of a saint, but rather, to something arguably more essential: the host, which literally embodies Christ. However, even here the Baroque predilection for images surfaced in the ornate monstrosities that held the Blessed Sacrament, upon which the perpetual vigil was focused.

⁵⁷ Anticlerical legislation was enacted in Mexico in its 1857 Constitution and more radically in the revolutionary Constitution of 1917; France during the revolution and the Third Republic (1871-1940); Italy under the Savoy Monarchy (1860-1870), which banned all religious orders; and Germany under Bismarck’s *Kulturkampf* policies (1871-1878), which aimed at secularizing Germany and reducing the influence of the Catholic church.

The origin of this devotion in its modern form is derived from a French Roman Catholic nun, Marguerite Marie Alacoque, who described numerous visions and conversations with Jesus in the 1680s. The Jesuits, in particular, began promoting the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus as a symbol of divine love for humanity, and “lay Catholics, with the approval of the Catholic clergy and hierarchy, wore the emblem as a talisman for protection against danger, illness, and evil.”⁵⁸ Despite its growing popularity throughout France—the Marseilles plague of 1720 provided the impetus for its solemn consecration and public worship, with other cities in the region following suit—and repeated efforts throughout the eighteenth century to recognize the devotion at the papal level, the Holy See was slow to respond. Finally in 1856, eight years prior to the publication of his famous *Syllabus of Errors*, in which he expressed his (and the church’s) inability to reconcile the Roman Catholic church with modernity, Pope Pius IX approved the extension of the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to the Roman Catholic church under the rite of double major, noting that this devotional image was “the remedy of all our evils.”⁵⁹ With this papal blessing, its renown soon grew well beyond the rarefied intellectual world of the Jesuits or the local esteem it enjoyed in southern France, and was further popularized by the mass circulation of devotional prints. Several lay associations devoted to this image were established under the pontificate of Leo XIII, who raised the cult to the double rite of first class in 1889, calling it the emblem of the rebirth of the Catholic church.⁶⁰ In the cult and image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the embattled church found a popular audience, receptive and fervent, that it had previously underestimated and underappreciated. There was great potential for retaining adherents by tapping into currents of popular Catholicism, and lay associations formed around new and old sacred images were excellent vehicles for channeling those pious energies.

The Sacred Heart of Jesus was a lively symbol of the resurgence of Catholicism in both Europe and America, but by far the image and cult promoted most actively by the church in the nineteenth century was that of the Virgin Mary. The Mother of God was a most apt symbol with which to offset the secularizing currents that seemed to go hand in hand with industrialization, liberalism, and modernization, and Mexico abounded with devotion to various advocations of Mary. In the wake of the 1848 liberal revolutions in Europe, with anticlericalism at a high tide, the Catholic church saw the need to redirect its message of a “God of fear,” the product of a more militant, *reconquista* and counter-Reformation era, to a more accessible “God of love.”⁶¹ One of the first manifestations of ecclesiastical reform was the official definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, proclaimed by Pope Pius IX in 1854.⁶² The new universalist Mary,

⁵⁸ Raymond Jonas, *France and the Cult of the Sacred Heart: An Epic Tale for Modern Times* (University of California Press, 2000), p. 3.

⁵⁹ Gabriela Díaz Patiño, “Imagen religiosa y discurso”: Transformación del campo religioso en la arquidiócesis de México durante la Reforma liberal, 1848-1908” (Ph.D. diss., El Colegio de México, 2010), p. 80.

⁶⁰ Díaz Patiño, p. 85.

⁶¹ On the idea of this shift in message and mentality, see Ralph Gibson, *A Social History of French Catholicism, 1789-1914* (Routledge, 1989), pp. 15-29; 227-267.

⁶² Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, 8 December 1854. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception proclaims that Mary, despite being human, and thus a child of Adam and Eve, was born free of the “stain” (Latin *macula*) of original sin.

according to Ralph Gibson, personified God's love for man. She "became the key intercessor between sinful men and a stern and angry God—or even a stern and angry Jesus."⁶³ Mother Mary was the kindly, accepting holy figure to whom sinners burdened with the weight of their evil deeds could turn; unlike the remote, cold, judging Father or the agonized, sacrificial Son, she was approachable and would intercede on behalf of a repentant devotee. This conceptualization of the Holy Family was one in which official and popular sensibilities overlapped, and reformist clergy seized upon it as a potent means of reeling in wayward souls.

Two examples of the official church recognizing and promoting popular image-centered devotional practices are the coronation ceremonies of the Virgins of Guadalupe and Soledad in 1895 and 1909, respectively, and the recognition of certain miraculous apparitions tied into a new willingness to sponsor and organize pilgrimages to the shrines that housed those apparitions. The following section examines the coronations of these important images and the ways these ceremonies went hand-in-hand with Mexico's modernization, showing how religion was (and is) a living, dynamic tradition, not an anachronistic "survival" in the modern world.

Crowning Glories: Guadalupe and Soledad

An excellent illustration of the Mariocentric bent of the reformist church in the late nineteenth century, which coincided with both popular fervor and with the Porfirian government's relatively relaxed attitude toward the anticlericalism of the Reforma, were the festivities surrounding the coronation of the Virgin of Guadalupe in October 1895. The idea had its roots in the eighteenth century, when the Jesuit Lorenzo Boturini received papal approval for a coronation that was never realized, in part because of church-state tensions arising from the mid-century Bourbon reforms. In the post-Reforma world, when church-state hostilities were even more pronounced, the coronation of Guadalupe was intended to rally the faithful around a national symbol and, in doing so, to reaffirm the church's traditional claim on Mexico as a Catholic nation. Following the example that had been established in France, the month-long fiesta and pilgrimage was modeled on the coronation of Our Lady of Lourdes, who had been similarly honored in 1876.⁶⁴ Echoing these acts of worldwide Catholic revival, Our Lady of Hope was crowned in Jacona, Michoacán, in February 1886, planting the seed in the minds of Archbishops Pelagio Antonio de Labastida of Mexico, Pedro Loza of Guadalajara, and Ignacio Árciga of Michoacán to revive the century-and-a-half-old efforts of Boturini.⁶⁵ After nearly a decade of planning, fundraising, and organizing, the three archbishops saw their dreams realized. A huge spectacle full of the kind of pomp and circumstance that the Reform laws had prohibited, the coronation of the Virgin of Guadalupe attracted both the official church and government hierarchies, as well as members of the popular classes, including twenty-eight Indians of

⁶³ Gibson, p. 255.

⁶⁴ Brading, *Mexican Phoenix* p. 292.

⁶⁵ Jorge Adame Goddard, "Significado de la coronación de la imagen de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe en 1895," in Nelly Sigaut, ed., *La Iglesia Católica en México* (El Colegio de Michoacán, 1997), p. 188.

Cuautitlán, “all dressed ‘in their own clothes and with the greatest cleanliness.’”⁶⁶ By inviting these native Mexicans garbed in their exotic “costumes” to attend, the church underscored the links binding it to the national symbol of Guadalupe and to the Mexican people, thereby legitimizing itself as a necessary entity in the construction of the modern nation. Like the architects of the Aztec palace constructed for the 1889 World’s Fair in Paris, the event planners of the coronation of Guadalupe in 1895 saw Mexico’s Indian heritage as a critical component of national identity, with the added ingredient of this homegrown saint completing the mix.⁶⁷ But the presence of the token Indians notwithstanding, the coronation ceremonies presented a stark contrast to the perceived religious indifference then threatening Mexico, and was a powerful symbol of the revival of the church both there and worldwide.⁶⁸

The Virgin of Guadalupe was the nation’s patron saint and a symbol whose instant recognizability rivaled that of the national emblem of an eagle devouring a serpent atop a *nopal*. Her coronation provided a political boost for the church. For one thing, the participation of the Porfirian government in the coronation ceremony lent the government’s stamp of approval to a major religious symbol; for another, it functioned as a public relations event for the resurrected church. The Catholic church’s comeback after the Reforma was predicated on its ceding temporal power to the state, while gaining ground on a moral and spiritual plane.⁶⁹ In his essay on the coronation of Guadalupe, art historian Jaime Cuadriello points out that “through the magnitude and significance of this highly politicized, ‘paraliturgical’ event, the Mexican church aspired to fill...the cultural vacuum left by the state,” which, in the church’s view, had stripped Mexico of its fundamental Catholic identity through the passage of anticlerical legislation.⁷⁰ Above all, the clerical hierarchy’s objective was to “reconstitute its own corporate system of social classes and groups that, in parallel and exemplary forms, would engender the social and moral regeneration of the nation.”⁷¹ Through the unceasing efforts of the Archbishop of Mexico, Pelagio Antonio de Labastida, and his nephew, the abbott José Antonio Plancarte y Labastida, the project to give state legitimacy to a religious symbol in an avowedly secular nation finally bore fruit after years of campaigning, cajoling, and fundraising.

Elsewhere in Mexico, similar festivities were organized with the same objectives in mind. The Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos was crowned on August 15, 1904, as part of the festivities

⁶⁶ Brading, p. 297.

⁶⁷ Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, *Mexico at the World’s Fairs: Crafting a Modern Nation* (University of California Press, 1996).

⁶⁸ Brading, pp. 288-292.

⁶⁹ Jaime Cuadriello, “La corona de la Iglesia para la Reina de la nación. Imágenes de la coronación guadalupana de 1895.” In *Los pinceles de la historia. La fabricación del estado, 1864-1910* (Museo Nacional de Arte/Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 2003), pp. 150-185.

⁷⁰ Cuadriello, p. 151 (translation mine): “No cabe duda que con la magnitud y significación de este evento tan politizado y ‘paralitúrgico’, la Iglesia mexicana intentaba asumir y ocupar...el vacío cultural dejado por el Estado que le permitiera modelar las conciencias de sus feligreses, y...recimentar su nuevo proyecto de ‘construcción nacional’...”

⁷¹ *Ibid.* “...reconstruir su propio régimen corporativo de clases y grupos sociales que, de forma paralela y ejemplar, emprendieran la regeneración social y moral de la nación.”

surrounding the fiftieth anniversary of the proclamation of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary.⁷² Renewed devotion at the institutional level to Oaxaca City's main patron saint, the Virgen de la Soledad, was clearly visible in the coronation festivities dedicated to her in 1909.⁷³ These, in intent and scope, echoed the coronation of the Virgin of Guadalupe in 1895, but the coronation was just the culmination of the Archbishop of Oaxaca's all-out campaign to revive Catholicism and the church during the Porfiriato. Historian Edward Wright-Rios delineates the various ways in which Oaxaca's "enterprising" Archbishop, Eulogio Gillow y Zavalza, "revamped urban piety and Catholic institutional culture within Oaxaca City, bringing it in line with prevailing European modes of practice and organizational structure,"⁷⁴ all the while projecting the church's lofty aims onto the symbol of Soledad, who "symbolize(d) the feminine refusal to accept Christianity's alienation from public life and embrace of the church's adamant assertion that miraculous intercession in human affairs remained crucial if Christian civilization was to be salvaged from the modern era's fundamental rebellion against God."⁷⁵

Gillow's and other high-ranking church officials' efforts to promote the symbols (and meanings) of Catholicism in post-Reforma Mexico were well-received by their intended audience. Events like the coronation of Soledad, far from being a top-down imposition of elite religious values onto a populace feared to be indifferent, are a perfect example of the interplays between official and popular cultures, where the values and aspirations of different social classes overlap and coincide. In advance of the festivities, which took place in January 1909, "Oaxacans had been girding their souls for months. They participated in rounds of scripted corporate pilgrimage to the shrine, a campaign to inspire mass participation in the sacraments, revivals, and relays of spiritual exercises."⁷⁶ Despite the "scripted campaign" to induce mass devotion to the Virgin of Soledad, it would be cynical to attribute the piety expressed toward this holy figure and marker of local identity as anything other than genuine. Indeed, upon the arrival to Oaxaca City of the chartered train carrying the VIPs of the Catholic world, including an emissary from Rome and several archbishops, "public piety gave way to a citywide party."⁷⁷ After being welcomed by Gillow, the bishop of Tehuantepec, and the cathedral chapter, the distinguished guests boarded carriages and followed a parade route from the train station to the central plaza. "Along the way, Oaxacan spectators showered them with flowers, and the Workers' Circle, like a proletarian honor guard, lined the entire route."⁷⁸

The coronations of the Virgins of Hope, Guadalupe, San Juan de los Lagos, and Soledad

⁷² Patricia Arias and Jorge Durand, *La enferma eterna. Mujer y exvoto en México, siglos XIX y XX* (Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara, El Colegio de San Luis, 2002), p. 30; Rubén Vargas Ugarte, *Historia del culto de María en Iberoamérica y de sus imágenes y santuarios más celebrados* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Huarpes, 1947), pp. 99-100.

⁷³ Wright-Rios, ch. 2.

⁷⁴ Wright-Rios, pp. 43-44.

⁷⁵ Wright-Rios, p. 45.

⁷⁶ Wright-Rios, p. 74.

⁷⁷ Wright-Rios, pp. 73-74.

⁷⁸ Wright-Rios, p. 74.

were an effective way to rally Catholic support for the church, for they drew on the devotees' emotional attachment to these *Virgencitas*. Another, related, tool employed by the late nineteenth-century church to combat secularism, impiety, and anticlerical legislation in Europe and Latin America was in lending official credence to reports of supernatural phenomena, then shaping—and controlling—the resulting new devotions.

Apparitions: A Revival of Ancient Phenomena

The coronation of the Virgins of Guadalupe, Soledad, and others illustrate some of the ways that the church attempted to use popular images and devotions to both galvanize and control its flock. Another, somewhat more problematic, effort was to try to harness the power of new miraculous apparitions. In a perfect melding of ecclesiastical authorities' need to retain adherents to the faith and popular receptiveness to miraculous occurrences such as apparitions, the nineteenth century witnessed a veritable explosion of reports of mysterious appearances of Virgins and crucifixes.⁷⁹ While these visions and their increased official recognition may seem surprising in a time of increasing secularism, it is worth exploring the historical roots of the phenomenon in order to better understand its flowering in the nineteenth century.

Apparitions of holy beings were a common phenomenon in medieval Christianity. As in Spain, most of Mexico's miraculous images since the colonial era came to light as a result of their appearing to the faithful, usually humble peasants with no political or economic power. The Virgin of Guadalupe herself was such an apparition, materializing before the newly-converted Indian Juan Diego in 1531. As such, apparitions were a powerful manifestation of a belief that the supernatural pervaded everyday life, and this belief was shared across a wide spectrum of society. One has only to consider the official campaigns against witches and the devil in early modern society to see that the maintenance of religious orthodoxy involved a belief, equally pronounced among theologians and laypeople, in the existence of supernatural beings with the power to intrude on human affairs, in both negative and positive ways.⁸⁰

Paradoxically, apparitions surged in the nineteenth century, the era of scientific rationalism and nationalism. This was particularly true in the countries most dedicated to overthrowing their *ancien-régime* or colonial pasts and implementing liberal policies, such as France and Mexico. Beginning with the story of Notre-Dame de Redon-Espic (who appeared to the teenaged shepherdess Marie-Jeanne Grave in 1814, warning her of the impending deaths of her parents, who blasphemed, worked on Sundays, and did not attend Mass), France also

⁷⁹ An example of a new devotion to a miraculous image arising in the 1840s is the apparition of the Señor de la Misericordia of Tepatlán, discussed in the previous chapter.

⁸⁰ See Fernando Cervantes, *The Devil in the New World: The Impact of Diabolism in New Spain* (Yale, 1994); Kenneth Mills, *Idolatry and its Enemies: Colonial Andean Religion and Extirpation, 1640-1750* (Princeton 1997); Luis Millones, *De la evangelización colonial a la religiosidad popular peruana. El culto a las imágenes sagradas* (Sevilla: Fundación El Monte, 1998); Millones, *El rostro de la fe. Doce ensayos sobre religiosidad andina* (Sevilla: Fundación El Monte, 1997); Millones, "Religion and Power in the Andes: Idolatrous Curacas in the Central Sierra," *Ethnohistory* 26:3 (Summer 1979).

produced two of the best-known miraculous apparitions of the Virgin Mary later in the nineteenth century: the Virgins of La Salette and of Lourdes.⁸¹ Like Our Lady of Redon-Espic, the Virgin who appeared to the adolescents Mélanie and Maximin near the Alpine village of La Salette was displeased about the impiety of the people who did not pray, attend Mass, or observe the Sabbath, and foretold of potato blights and famine unless people changed their wicked ways.

But by far the biggest “smash hit” of nineteenth-century French apparitionism came in the form of the Virgin of Lourdes. In contrast to the problematic visionaries (illiterate and possibly fraudulent), and the threatening messages of the earlier apparitions, the Virgin who appeared to the devout and humble Bernadette Soubirous in 1858 at Lourdes imparted a less specific, less threatening message, asking only that a shrine be built at the grotto where she appeared. Indeed, the apparition barely spoke at all; when pressed to identify herself, the mysterious girl clad in white replied cryptically, “I am the Immaculate Conception,” which, in the Pyrenean patois spoken by the locals, sounded awkward and discordant, lending credence to the notion that this was a divinely-ordained message.⁸² The dogma of the Immaculate Conception had been proclaimed in Pius IX’s papal bull *Ineffabilis Deus* only four years prior, in 1854, and the local priest and magistrate sent to investigate Bernadette’s visions believed her when she said she had never heard those words before. The spring that Bernadette unearthed upon receiving instructions from the “beautiful lady in white” was soon rumored to have curative powers, and large numbers of the curious and the faithful were drawn to it. After initial skepticism on the part of the church, both the apparition and the miraculous spring were officially sanctioned, and the shrine began receiving massive amounts of pilgrims. As Ralph Gibson has pointed out, “the message fitted in with the enthusiasm surrounding the proclamation of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception in 1854...Lourdes was the perfect meeting-point for clerical and popular religion in the nineteenth century, and therein lies, perhaps, the secret of its success.”⁸³

The apparently paradoxical phenomenon of an upsurge in miracles, apparitions, and other intrusions of the supernatural into a rapidly-modernizing, and more importantly, secularizing, world in fact presents no paradox at all: in times of rapid social change, old, known, and stalwart *mythos* help to explain the inexplicable, and help to make sense of the bewildering changes occurring.⁸⁴ This helps account for the rise in apparition stories in the nineteenth century, but by no means is the only explanation; it accounts only for the popular receptivity to miracles and the presence of the supernatural in daily life. The active participation of the beleaguered Catholic church in promoting evidence of divine presence in everyday life is the other crucial ingredient. Without both popular and institutional receptivity to manifestations of the supernatural in the world, the phenomenon of apparitions would be one relegated to the more mystical, more

⁸¹ Ralph Gibson, *A Social History of French Catholicism*, pp. 145-151.

⁸² Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (New York: Penguin Compass, 2000 [1999]), p. 8.

⁸³ Gibson, p. 147.

⁸⁴ Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2000), pp. xv-xviii; Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988); William Christian, *Visionaries: The Spanish Republic and the Reign of Christ* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

mythos-centric worldview of medieval Christianity, the one that crossed the Atlantic Ocean in the sixteenth century and found “potentially congruent” mentalities in the indigenous religious traditions it encountered.⁸⁵ Akin to the reactions of modern-day fundamentalists in the face of rapid secularization, Catholic clerics from Pope Pius IX in Rome to Bishop Clemente Munguía in Michoacán called for a return to the Christian “roots” of a disappearing world, and the claims of otherworldly occurrences that might have invited derision in a time when Catholicism was less threatened were now investigated carefully for their potential to retain adherents to the faith—and the church.

The church’s receptivity to reports of miracles was more than a mere ploy to remain relevant, however. It was not just a cynical “harnessing” of popular credulity, but rather an example of the ways in which modernity encompasses religious belief, rather than excluding it. While the visionary at Lourdes was a poor, uneducated farm girl, many others in the surrounding areas, and eventually from afar, shared her mental landscape, in which God, the Virgin, and saints were omnipresent. As noted by Ruth Harris,

The Lourdes story shows how genteel Catholics inhabited the same miraculous realm as the shepherdess...their beliefs were hardly the superstitious remnants of a bygone age. They were potent enough to appeal to urban, educated Catholics around the world, to influence virtually all subsequent Marian apparitions, and to transform the veneration of the Virgin in contemporary Catholicism.⁸⁶

The Apparition of the Virgen de la Candelaria, 1912

An example of official receptivity, albeit lukewarm and ultimately retracted, to miracles in modern Mexico is the case of a sculpture of the Virgin Mary in the parish church of Candelaria de los Patos in Mexico City that was seen to move its eyes in May of 1912 (see figure 4.4).⁸⁷ The case was formally investigated by the Archbishopric of Mexico after several parishioners, seconded by a number of priests, claimed to see the Virgin’s eyes follow them around different points of the church, much like portrait paintings seem to do. Some even saw movements like those of a mother soothing her baby (*arrullar*) applied to the infant Jesus she was holding. The original apparition, it was claimed, was witnessed by a devotee who had gone to the church to pray to the Virgin, asking her to restore peace in those early days of the Mexican Revolution. The vitrine that housed the mother-and-child statue was missing a few of its window panes, leaving open the possibility that the movement had been caused by a breeze, but the

⁸⁵ William Taylor, *Magistrates of the Sacred: Priests and Parishioners in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (Stanford, 1996), p. 49.

⁸⁶ Harris, p. 13.

⁸⁷ AHAM, Base Próspero María Alarcón, Caja 38, Exp. 9, fs. 61. Sección: Secretaría arzobispal, Serie: Parroquias, 1912; *El Tiempo*, Año XXIX, Número 9480, 10 May 1912, p. 4; *El Tiempo* Año XXIX, Núm. 9501, 31 May 1912.

seminarian Luis G. Sepúlveda reported seeing the image move both before and after the glass had been replaced.⁸⁸ The movements, it was thought, could also have been caused by the fact that the chair upon which the Virgin Mary sat was broken, so that the slightest outside motion could mimic baby-soothing movements, although the matter of the eyes complicated this theory. Furthermore, at times the flower vases surrounding the vitrine trembled, too. Most baffling, however, was the time frame of the reported movements. The first instance was on the first of May, and several more were witnessed over the course of the next few weeks. But by the time the news of the miracle had garnered newspaper coverage on the throngs of curious visitors it drew, and hymns in the Virgin's honor had been published, the movements had all but stopped.⁸⁹



Figure 4.4: Posada Broadside, 1912 (Source: Image courtesy of William B. Taylor)⁹⁰

A detailed investigation of the possible causes for the “prodigious” movements was undertaken, involving engineers, the testimony of parishioners of excellent character, and clergy. Both natural and supernatural explanations were offered. Engineers produced detailed analyses

⁸⁸ AHAM, Base Próspero María Alarcón, Caja 38, Exp. 9, fs. 9v.-13.

⁸⁹ *El Tiempo*, Año XXIX, Número 9480, 10 May 1912, p. 4; *El Tiempo* Año XXIX, Núm. 9501, 31 May 1912.

⁹⁰ José Guadalupe Posada, “Un caso portentoso conmueve a los vecinos del barrio de la Candelaria de los Patos.” Mexico City: A. Vanegas Arroyo, 1912.

of the surrounding area's physical stability, and pointed out that the barrio of Candelaria, having been built on the filled-in bed of Lake Texcoco, was naturally unstable, subject to the typical up-and-down vibrations (*trepidaciones*) of minor earthquakes. The movements could also have been caused by passing cars, although the priest Amado G. Parvadé testified that there was no car passing at the time that he saw the Virgin move.⁹¹ A nearby mill was also considered, then discounted, as the source of the rumbling in the unstable earth.⁹² Two pious women, Guadalupe Caballero de los Olivos, age 63, and María Concepción Escudero de Ortega, age 51, gave sworn testimony affirming that supernatural events had indeed taken place. Their accounts give a glimpse into some of the popular religious practices common at the time, practices which are corroborated by evidence unrelated to this event, such as the large numbers of ex-votos appearing at more established shrines in pre-revolutionary Mexico. Sra. Escudero claimed that the first time she had gone to the church of Candelaria was on May 7, having read about the miracle in the newspapers. She claimed that she, too, witnessed the Virgin's eyes move "as if they were looking for something," and that she promised the Virgin that as long as she continued seeing her move she would continue to pray the Rosary to her on a daily basis.⁹³ Sra. Escudero had kept up her end of the bargain for four months at the time of her testimony, although as time went on, fewer and fewer people claimed to see the Virgin moving. Srta. Caballero, meanwhile, despite her poor eyesight, claimed to have seen the same eye movements as her friend Concepción Escudero, and testified that they had gone together to "touch some medals to the image," thus receiving some of its holy essence.⁹⁴ Moreover, she continued, she knew that the priest had received alms from people all over Mexico in exchange for favors they had received from the miraculous image, although she also knew that the priest at first had not wanted to accept the donations because "people were saying that he was moving the image in order to receive alms." This subterfuge was averted, however, when she and Sra. Escudero went to the Archbishop personally to obtain permission to "organize the cult," after which the priest celebrated Mass daily.⁹⁵

⁹¹ AHAM, Base Próspero María Alarcón, Caja 38, Exp. 9, f. 17.

⁹² As with the examples in the opening pages of this chapter, of the ex-votos that address modern forms of transportation, it is intriguing that another aspect of modernization, the mechanization of food production, is linked to the ancient phenomenon of a preternaturally-moving holy being.

⁹³ AHAM, Base Próspero María Alarcón, Caja 38, Exp. 9, fs. 33v.-35v.: "que en esta vez vió que los ojos de la imagen se movian, como quien busca algo; que otras veces los baja, y que otras, y es lo más frecuente, los sube, como a quien suplica; que desde esta vez prometió a la Sma. Virgen que mientras ella viera los movimientos... todos los días iría á rezarle el Rosario, lo que ha hecho todos los días hace ya cuatro meses... que estos movimientos los observa algunas veces, cuando está rezando el primer misterio, otras en el segundo, ó tercero y á veces al concluir el rosario; que algunas veces ha visto cuando ella dice "Refugio de los pecadores; auxilio etc... de la letania) la imagen de tal manera eleva la vista que hasta se ve toda la parte blanca de la pupila..."

⁹⁴ The practice of touching an object thought to have divine properties, with the aim of absorbing some of its power, is called *brandea*. The practice has ancient roots, and became especially important in medieval Christianity, with the propagation and diffusion of relics.

⁹⁵ AHAM, Base Próspero María Alarcón, Caja 38, Exp. 9, fs. 36-37v.: "que desde el día (dieciocho) veintidos de Mayo, diariamente fué al lugar de los sucesos, y que en estos días, aunque tiene su vista demasiado debil, le pareció que la Sma. Virgen movia los ojos á veces, como quien busca algo, y otras que levantaba la vista como quien suplica (y que esto era de tal manera notorio que se dejaba ver (toda la parte (planco) del ojo, perdiendose (por

The testimony of these women and about twenty-five other people was ultimately discounted by the church, and nothing ever came of the claims for official recognition of a miracle. The Promotor Fiscal (prosecuting attorney)'s final recommendation was that the entire case be dismissed on the grounds that there were perfectly acceptable, natural explanations for the reported miracle. After a lengthy consideration of all the various testimonies, and of what constitutes a miracle, Promotor Tomás Twaites came down of the side of science and rationalism. Pointing out that the ground was unstable, the chair supporting the statue was broken, and that the purported occurrences were not witnessed systematically, he also took issue with the limited time frame of the movements. If the ground's instability was constant, why did the image move in the month of May, but not in August? And if tiny earthquakes produce up-and-down *trepidaciones*, what accounted for the side-to-side motion of the Virgin's eyes? The issue of the differing accounts of the eyes' movements was also troublesome. Another priest, Félix Alejandro Cepeda, mentioned an officially-accepted miracle involving the Virgin Mary's eyes moving in Taggia, Italy in 1855 (fitting in with the receptivity to apparitions occurring in the wake of the revolutions of 1848 and immediately after the declaration of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854), but in that case the witnesses' claims were unanimous, unlike at Candelaria de los Patos. In the final ruling, Juez Delegado Canónigo (Canonical Judge) Villagrán y Heras cited the Council of Trent—which had taken place nearly three hundred fifty years earlier—in his justification of the church's opinion that this was not a manifestation of the supernatural in this world. There were three prerequisites in order for a miracle to be declared, he noted: a *perceptible* occurrence that is out of the ordinary; the occurrence must be the work of God; and it must manifest the truth of a doctrine.⁹⁶ None of these requirements had been met. Moreover, he rejected the testimonies of both Guadalupe Caballero and Concepción Escudero de Ortega, Srta. Caballero's because of her poor eyesight, and Sra. Escudero's due to a conflict of interest, as evidenced by her insider's knowledge of the priest's reluctance to promote the cult, which encouraged her "illusions." The women's ulterior motives, obvious in their interest in organizing devotion to the Virgin of Candelaria, also precluded their objectivity, but in the final

completo lo negro) bastante la pupila, que vió tambien que las borlas del vestido se movian mucho, unos dias mas que en otros: que el dia de ayer fué á visitar á la Virgen y que todavia le pareció que se movia en el sentido que ha dicho respecto á los ojos, aunque no con tanta claridad como antes: que...llegó el Sr. Secretario de la Delegación Apostólica y despues de haber observado, (manifestole) oyó que este Señor que aunque no habia observado movimientos en los ojos, sin embargo notaba algo extraordinario en el rostro; que por el último de Mayo...acompañada de la Sra. Concepción Escudero, fué á la Capilla, con el fin de tocar á la Imagen unas medallas; que al hacer esto, el P. Capellán tuvo necesidad de despegar un papel que estaba adherido al nicho, con el fin de evitar que entrara el aire pues los movimientos eran atribuidos á corrientes de aire; que ha sabido que el P. Capellán ha recibido (varias de dos limosnas que de diferentes parted de la República han enviado) personas en agradecimeinto a los favores que han recibido de la Imagen: que (le consta que) el P. Capellán le dijo que no queria recibir al principio limosnas, porque segun le manifestó, la gente decia que él movia la imagen para tener limosnas; pero que la que habla y la Sra. Escudero fueron á ver al Sr. Arzobispo para que les diera permiso de organizar el culto, y que de esta manera ya hubo misa con órgano (cantada) todos los dias y ~~rosario en las tardes~~, y el P. Capellán espontaneamente exponia al Smo. y rezaba el Rosario."

⁹⁶ AHAM, Base Próspero María Alarcón, Caja 38, Exp. 9, fs. 56-60: "Que para declarar un hecho milagroso se requiere I.-conocer con certidumbre que se ha producido o realizado una obra *sensible*; II.—que esa obra tiene a dios por autor; III.—que es un signo que habitualmente tiene por objeto manifestarnos la verdad de una doctrina, o la glorificación de alguna persona piadosa..."

analysis, it really came down to their gender. “It is a universally-known fact, borne out by experience,” he proclaimed, quoting Pope Benedict XIV and showing off his Latin, “that women imagine things, believing phenomena to be miraculous that are not...women, dragged down and blinded by a misunderstood faith, affirm occurrences they judge to be marvelous, because they believe that in this way they procure the glory of God.”⁹⁷

Having incontrovertibly proved his case, Villagrán seemed to have put the church on the side of science and rationality, dismissing the claims of a miracle, apparently in line with the premise that modernity and religious belief are mutually exclusive. As we have seen, however, this dichotomy is unsatisfactory; this case clearly shows that modernity did not preclude belief in divine presence in the profane world. And like the apparition case at Tezontepec, Edo. de México in 1840 (discussed in the previous chapter), in which a privately-owned painting of a crucifix was seen to sweat, the church’s thorough investigation shows that it was not the possibility of a miracle that was problematic, but rather a host of other factors, such as unreliable witnesses, inconsistent claims, and the “natural phenomenon” explanation. For the church, “owning” or having control over the supernatural was of utmost importance, and devotions that arose around an apparition spontaneously could be useful or dangerous, depending on the circumstances. For this reason, devotions such as those of La Salette, Lourdes, and the Mexico’s Lord of Tepatitlán enjoyed official approval while many other potential new devotions, such as those to the mysteriously-moving Virgin of Candelaria, the sweating Lord of Chalma of Tezontepec, and the Lord of the Wounds of Tlacoxtalco, Oaxaca⁹⁸ never “made it” into the church canon of miraculous images, even if they did—or still do—enjoy great esteem at the popular level.

The Virgin of Guadalupe Appears on a Maguey Leaf (Amecameca, 1894)

A brief mention of another apparition that was never recognized by the church hierarchy—indeed, was viewed with great alarm and consternation—adds a layer of complexity to the discussion of the acceptance or rejection of miracles, and serves as a counterpoint to the church-sponsored coronations of the Virgins of Guadalupe, Soledad, Lourdes, and others. In May 1894, the Archdiocese of Mexico issued an urgent communiqué to the priest of Zoyatzingo, in the district of Amecameca (which has its own, officially-sanctioned miraculous devotion to the *Santo Entierro*, or Holy Burial of Christ), regarding rumors of a celebration of a miraculous image of the Virgin of Guadalupe which had appeared “imprinted” upon a maguey leaf. The

⁹⁷ AHAM, Base Próspero María Alarcón, Caja 38, Exp. 9, fs. 56-60: “Es un hecho universalmente reconocido por la experiencia, dice el Sr. Benedicto XIV. (De beatific. et de la Canon.) que las mujeres facilmente se alucinan: facillime hallucinantur) llamando milagros, fenómenos que no lo son,”...“ambas fueron a ver al Arzobispo para que las autorizara para organizar el culto a la Virgen de la Candelaria y le pidieron que se formara un proceso acerca de los movimientos que se observaban en dicha Imagen, circunstancias que hacen presumir lo que dice el Sr. Benedicto XIV: que las mujeres arrastradas y cegadas por una piedad mal entendida afirman hechos que juzgan maravillosos; porque se imaginan que así procuran la gloria de Dios (De Beat. et Canon. ib. No. 4).”

⁹⁸ Edward Wright-Rios, *Revolutions in Mexican Catholicism*, ch. 5.

authorities had seen a flyer (figure 4.5) advertising the miraculous “apparition” and some attendant religious ceremonies, including the cutting of the cactus leaf and its placement in a beautiful reliquary, then its display in the parish church and masses sung in its honor. Although the flyer was printed and the ceremonies planned with the priest’s knowledge, the church hierarchy heard about it only second hand, from the flyer itself, possibly obtained through an anonymous tip. The bypassed episcopal authorities wanted a full report from the priest Magín González; the Archbishop let it be known that his office was highly displeased and alarmed at these rumors.⁹⁹ According to the flyer, the priest would bless the maguey leaf and preside over a three-minister Mass, after which there would be a collective Rosary prayer and a procession to the cemetery, accompanied by the town band. In this way, the vecinos in charge of organizing the ceremonies aimed to “officialize” the apparition and institute a new devotion, under the auspices of the Catholic church.

⁹⁹ AHAM, Base Próspero María Alarcón, Sección: Secretaria arzobispal, Serie: Parroquias, Caja 33, exp. 78. 1894. El párroco sobre la supuesta aparición de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe en la penca de un maguey. “Informe el párroco de Amecameca lo que haya de verdad en lo que se dice en una hoja que aparece impresa en Ayatzingo (*sic*): 1°. Si el dicho Cura cortó la penca del maguey y la encerró en relicario. 2°. Si la depositó en la Iglesia. 3°. Si predicó en la función y qué dijo. Tenga entendido que estas especies nos tienen descontentos y alarmados.”

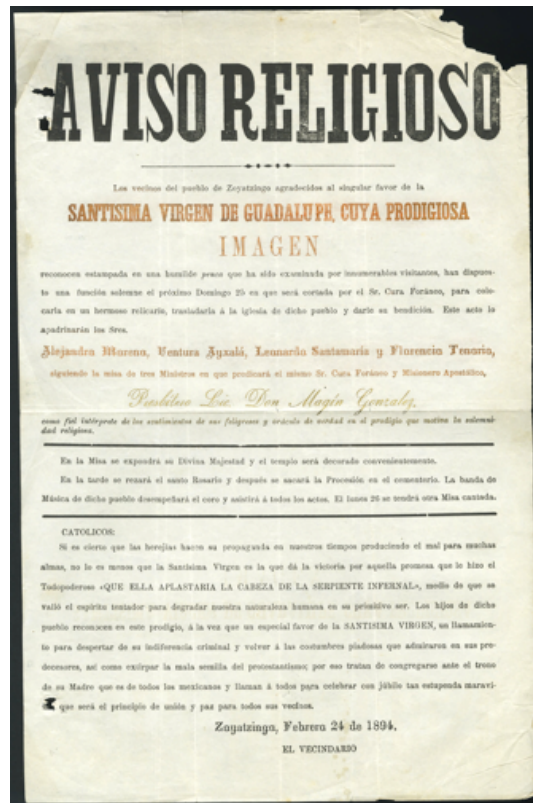


Figure 4.5: Religious Announcement of the Miraculous Celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe, 1894 (Source: AHAM, Base Próspero María Alarcón, Sección: Secretaria arzobispal, Serie: Parroquias, Caja 62, exp. 71)¹⁰⁰

In his report, the priest acknowledged the veracity of the rumors, and offered a number of explanations for his actions, all of which underscore the intricacies of religious culture in late nineteenth-century Mexico. His first line of defense was to play the “race card.” The Indians of the parish were superstitious, ignorant, and xenophobic; they viewed him, a Spaniard, with mistrust, and he was fearful of making too strong a stance opposing the claims of an apparition. He cited a conversation he had once had with the late Archbishop Labastida regarding the Indians’ “superstitious customs, that so repulsed me”; the Archbishop had advised him to “leave them to their good faith,” that outward manifestations of religiosity such as receptivity to apparitions and miracles were acceptable expressions of Christian belief.¹⁰¹ (This attitude was echoed not much later by a priest responding to Archbishop Gillow’s 1908 questionnaire, saying

¹⁰⁰ AHAM, Base Próspero María Alarcón, Sección: Secretaria arzobispal, Serie: Parroquias, Caja 62, exp. 71. Parroquia de Amecameca sobre la aparición milagrosa de una imagen de la Virgen de Guadalupe sobre una penca de maguey en el pueblo de Zoyatzingo.

¹⁰¹ AHAM, Base Próspero María Alarcón, Sección: Secretaria arzobispal, Serie: Parroquias, Caja 33, exp. 78. 1894. El párroco sobre la supuesta aparición de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe en la penca de un maguey. “...soy enemigo de esas visiones tan ridículas pero, recuerdo q. un día hablando con el Yllmo. Sr. Labastida (Q.E.G.E.) de las costumbres tan supersticiosas de los indios q. me repugnaban, me dio el consejo q. era mejor dejarlos en su buena fé...,” f.4.

that the religion practiced in his corner of the Tehuacán Valley was “*la religión Católica, a su modo de ellos.*”¹⁰² “Catholics in their own way” was preferable to not Catholic at all, a disposition that went back to the earliest Christian evangelizers attempting to reconcile vastly different belief systems in the new world they were conquering.

Father González’s second line of defense was to cite the Protestant threat to Mexico, a decidedly nineteenth-century problem made possible by the freedom of religion proclaimed by the 1857 liberal constitution. This menace he played up dramatically, calling his parish a “*pueblo* divided into factions,” with a majority professing the Protestant faith. (The question of how he had “lost” his flock to Protestantism is not addressed.) In his promotion of the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe on the maguey leaf, he was trying to steer these wayward souls from the “path of error” back onto the right track; his message of Catholic unity, he assured his archdiocesan superiors, was the only way to obtain the Virgin’s protection.¹⁰³ By his account, his efforts were successful: with the celebration of the hotly contested apparition, Zoyatzingo’s erstwhile Protestant majority was now reduced to “only four or five who have resisted” the call of the true faith.¹⁰⁴

González made special mention of the enthusiasm of his parishioners for this new devotion and the growing number of visitors to the unrecognized shrine. One of the reasons he gave for cutting the maguey leaf and placing it in the church was that the land the cactus was on was also on the road to Orumba, and he feared that both the ecclesiastical and civil authorities would be displeased with the spontaneous, public gathering of religious devotees jockeying for a position to witness the maguey *in situ* in its field. The church, he felt, would be a safer repository for the miraculous image. An important added benefit of housing the maguey leaf in the church was that the alms collected would be kept under clerical supervision; González wrote that the devotees intended to donate these alms to the Colegiata of the Virgin of Guadalupe.¹⁰⁵ That this apparition occurred the year before the coronation of Guadalupe, when massive fundraising efforts for both the event and repairs to the Colegiata building, where the painted image of the Virgin was to be transferred, were definitely underway, could not have been lost on González.¹⁰⁶

The authorities were unmoved. In no uncertain terms, Archbishop Alarcón (who had taken over from the reformist Labastida upon the latter’s death in 1891) ordered the priest Magín González to desist in his unsanctioned conversion efforts. Adding that he doubted that González fully comprehended the magnitude of difficulties his “clumsiness” had caused, he made it clear

¹⁰² Edward Wright-Rios, *Revolutions in Mexican Catholicism*, pp. 142 and 313 n.2.

¹⁰³ AHAM, Base Próspero María Alarcón, Sección: Secretaría arzobispal, Serie: Parroquias, Caja 33, exp. 78. 1894. El párroco sobre la supuesta aparición de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe en la penca de un maguey, f.3.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, “...en la actualidad solo unos cuatro ó cinco son los q. han resistido á dejar el mal camino.”

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, “las limosnas q. han dejado los visitantes tienen el pensamiento de q. S.S.Y. las reciba pa. las obras de la Colegiata.”

¹⁰⁶ See Cuadriello, “La corona de la Iglesia para la reina de la nación: Imágenes de la coronación guadalupana de 1895,” in *Los pinceles de la historia. La fabricación del estado, 1864-1910*, v.3, and Jorge Adame Goddard, “Significado de la coronación de la imagen de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe en 1895,” in Nelly Sigaut, ed., *La Iglesia Católica en México* (El Colegio de Michoacán, 1997).

that this accommodation of popular religious sentiment had gone too far. This devotion had to be nipped in the bud; the maguey leaf was to be removed from the church, and the alms that had been collected were to be distributed to a school or other charitable cause, “but never to the cult.”¹⁰⁷ As with the Lord of the Wounds of Tlacoxtcalco, in whose case both the ecclesiastical governor and the Archbishop of Oaxaca issued unambiguous orders “banning participation in the new cult” and “a strongly worded condemnation of the movement and its leader/seer,”¹⁰⁸ church officials grew alarmed at González’s “alternative” interpretations of the vision of the Virgin of Guadalupe on a maguey leaf. In contrast to the alleged miracles in Tlacoxtcalco, however, in Zoyatzingo the promoter of the cult was himself part of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, making the charges of charlatanism more serious, and the threat to the church’s control over the sacred more palpable.

Pilgrimages

No matter which saint the devotion centered on, and regardless of whether these devotions were officially promoted by the colonial church-state apparatus, subjected to reform by the Bourbon-era church, or vilified by the liberal and revolutionary states, the focus on an established, recognizable *image* was a constant in Mexican Catholicism. This unwavering focus on iconographically standardized images of holy beings was manifested in various devotional practices, from individual prayers done at a home altar, group spiritual exercises during *cofradía* meetings, candlelight vigils, or pilgrimages. The paradox articulated by William Taylor of a national devotion to the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, despite the fact that few pilgrims traveled to her shrine from long distances prior to the late nineteenth century, can partially be explained by the wide circulation of her image, mostly in the form of prints, from the colonial period onward.¹⁰⁹ With the image “fixed” in people’s minds by way of well-traveled copies, there was less of a need for a physical pilgrimage with which to partake of the holy essence radiated by the original image.

But the late nineteenth century did afford new opportunities for travel, and a confluence of circumstances contributed to a rekindling of interest in pilgrimage by reformist clergy and devout parishioners alike. A spate of correspondence concerning Pope Pius IX’s 1873 edict granting indulgences for “spiritual pilgrimages,” in which spiritual exercises were undertaken in lieu of physical journeys to sacred places (in response to the difficulties of pilgrimage to Italy after the loss of the Papal States in 1870), shows the Mexican church adapting to new political realities. Taking cues from Rome, in 1874 the Mexican clergy also offered indulgences for the completion of “pilgrimages in spirit” to the Catholic world’s most important shrines, including

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, f.5. “Dígame: que procedió desafortunadamente en el caso y que esa torpeza nos ha creado dificultades que tal vez él no alcanza á medir; que procure hacer que saquen del templo la penca consagrada y que se apliquen los recursos de que habla, muchos ó pocos, á alguna escuela ú otro objeto de beneficencia, pero jamás al culto.”

¹⁰⁸ Wright-Rios, p. 165.

¹⁰⁹ Taylor, *Shrines and Miraculous Images*, pp. 9, 131-132.

Rome, the Holy Land, and Lourdes.¹¹⁰ Proclaimed in a series of circulars distributed to all the parishes in the archdioceses of México, Michoacán, Guadalajara, and elsewhere, these calls for *peregrinaciones en espíritu* demonstrated a reversal of the colonial-era “lack of official encouragement, if not active discouragement, for European-style great pilgrimages on the grounds that pilgrims would contribute to vagrancy, social disorder, and economic dislocations.”¹¹¹ Indeed, this was the first time that the Mexican church had issued indulgences for pilgrimages.¹¹² In extending the indulgences to “pilgrimages in spirit,” moreover, the church recognized the opportunities for drawing potentially indifferent Catholics (a common complaint expressed in the Catholic press) more firmly back into the fold. By undertaking a pilgrimage, in person or in spirit, and by doing the attendant spiritual exercises, Catholics bedeviled by the modern world’s apparent godlessness could reconnect to their Christian roots and find solace in the familiarity of a disappearing world, all under the beneficent auspices of the Holy Mother Church.

Beginning with the incentive-laden “pilgrimages of the spirit” of the 1870s, actual pilgrimages surged during the Porfiriato, paralleling and indeed paving the way for the increased appearance of ex-votos at Mexico’s most important shrines. In 1888, during the tenure of Archbishop of Mexico Pelagio Antonio Labastida y Dávalos, a number of Mexican clerics made an official pilgrimage to Rome.¹¹³ The document trail created during the tenure of Labastida’s successor Próspero María Alarcón y Sánchez de la Barquera (1891-1908) meanwhile, reveals a pattern of ever-larger groups of laypeople traveling increasingly greater distances to famous shrines, and just as important, they were doing so through official channels, led by their priests.¹¹⁴ In 1892 the *cura* of Teotihuacán requested permission for his parish to visit the Sanctuary of Guadalupe in light of the “spiritual and temporal public calamities” then facing the

¹¹⁰ AHAM, Base de Pelagio Antonio de Labastida y Dávalos, Caja 88, exp. 41. Sección: Secretaría Arzobispal, Serie: Circulares. 1874. *Peregrinaciones en espíritu á los mas celebres santuarios del orbe catolico*. For more on the 1874 call for *peregrinaciones en espíritu* see also AHAM, Base de Pelagio Antonio de Labastida y Dávalos, Caja 86, exp. 7, Sección: Secretaría Arzobispal, Serie: Conventos; Caja 86, exp. 14, Sección: Secretaría Arzobispal, Serie: Parroquias, Tepotzotlán; Caja 86, exp. 54. Sección: Secretaría Arzobispal, Serie: Parroquias, Acambay; Caja 86, exp. 65. Sección: Secretaría Arzobispal, Serie: Parroquias, Tultepec; and Pedro Loza, *Carta Pastoral del Ilustrísimo Señor, Arzobispo de Guadalajara, sobre Peregrinaciones*. Guadalajara: Tip. de N. Parga, 1874. Universidad de Nuevo León, digital collection.

¹¹¹ Taylor, *Shrines*, p. 131.

¹¹² “...indulgences for actual pilgrimages were not issued by colonial bishops, and when a creole Spanish woman from Monterrey in northern Mexico promised to go to Tepeyac if she recovered from a grave illness in 1758, the Bishop of Guadalajara was quick to excuse her from the vow.” Taylor, *Shrines*, p. 131.

¹¹³ AHAM, Base de Pelagio Antonio de Labastida y Dávalos, Caja 191, exp. 73. Sección: Secretaría Arzobispal, Serie: Circulares, Año: 1888; Caja 191, exp. 20. Sección: Secretaría Arzobispal, Serie: Conventos, Año: 1888; Caja 191, exp. 24. Sección: Secretaría Arzobispal, Serie: Eclesiásticos, Año: 1888; Caja 191, exp. 29. Sección: Secretaría Arzobispal, Serie: Eclesiásticos, Año: 1888; Caja 191, exp. 27. Sección: Secretaría Arzobispal, Serie: Parroquias, Año: 1888.

¹¹⁴ See Taylor, *Shrines and Miraculous Images*, pp. 135-136, on the difference between *peregrinación* (pilgrimage) and *romería*.

nation.¹¹⁵ In 1895, the *cura* of Tlalpan parish wrote the Archbishop informing him that several monks and other men would be accompanying him on a previously approved pilgrimage to the Basilica of Guadalupe, and he wanted to make sure that all of them had the necessary ministerial licenses required for celebrating Mass and hearing confession both in the parish church and at the shrine.¹¹⁶ The “officialization” and bureaucratization of pilgrimages continued in 1898 with the Archbishop granting licenses to priests on pilgrimage to the Basilica of Guadalupe to “exercise their ministry in any church (within the archbishopric) for the duration of the pilgrimage.”¹¹⁷ (In true bureaucratic fashion, the diocese of Querétaro wrote back the following year to confirm this information before undertaking the pilgrimage to Tepeyac, which the Archbishop of Mexico ratified.)¹¹⁸

In 1901, Timoteo Macías, a lay organizer and president of several Mexican pilgrimages to Rome, wrote to Archbishop Alarcón regarding a fourth such pilgrimage for the occasion of the pontifical jubilee of Pope Leo XIII.¹¹⁹ In his letter, he brings up pilgrimages’ power to “invigorate the people’s religious sentiment,” as well as their political benefits (“of all demonstrations of Catholic piety, none are so agreeable to the Holy Father as pilgrimages, especially when they originate from such remote countries [as in, indigenous villages] that are so besieged by propaganda from sects [that is, Protestants].”)¹²⁰ He ends by requesting the Archbishop’s blessing for the undertaking “that the enemies of our faith are combating with exceptional tenacity, determined to frustrate it, precisely because they know that this [pilgrimage] will bring such consolation to the heart of the Vicar of Christ [the Pope].”¹²¹

Ecclesiastical authorities saw the potential for church renewal in promoting popular devotional practices such as pilgrimage, and there is a marked increase in the documentation of pilgrimages, in the form of circulars, pastoral letters, and other correspondence, in the late

¹¹⁵ AHAM, Base Prospero María Alarcon. Caja 8, exp. 31, 2 fs. Sección: Secretaria arzobispal, Serie Parroquias, Año 1892. Teotihuacán. El párroco don Antonio Fonseca sobre que desea venir con una peregrinación al santuario de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe.

¹¹⁶ AHAM, Base Prospero María Alarcon. Caja 48, exp. 80, 2 fs. Sección: Secretaria arzobispal, Serie Parroquias, Año 1895. Tlalpan. El señor cura con respecto a una peregrinación.

¹¹⁷ AHAM, Base Prospero María Alarcon. Caja 73, exp. 56, 2 fs. Sección: Secretaria arzobispal, Serie Eclesiástico, Año 1898. Con relación a las licencias de los eclesiásticos que vienen en peregrinación.

¹¹⁸ AHAM, Base Prospero María Alarcon. Caja 82, exp. 5, 2 fs. Sección: Secretaria arzobispal, Serie Catedral de Querétaro, Año 1899. Querétaro. Con respecto a la peregrinación.

¹¹⁹ See Alberto G. Bianchi, *De México a Roma y de Roma a Barcelona. Memorias de la peregrinacion mexicana de 1900*, ed. Timoteo Macías (Barcelona: Ed. Gonzalez y Ca., Editores Pontificios, 1901).

¹²⁰ AHAM, Base Prospero María Alarcón. Caja 98, exp. 60. “Excuso por superfluo, llamar la atención de V.S. Illma. sobre la gran influencia que ejercen las peregrinaciones en la vigorización del sentimiento religioso de los pueblos, en los respetos políticos que debe gozar el Sumo Pontífice por parte del Gobierno Italiano, como excusaré decir, que de todas las manifestaciones filiales de los Católicos ninguna es tan agradable al Padre Santo como las romerías, máxime cuando proceden de estos países tan remotos y tan trabajados por la propaganda de las sectas.”

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, “Dígnese V.S. Illma. bendecir una obra que están combatiendo con excepcional tenacidad los enemigos de nuestra fé, empeñados en frustrarla, precisamente porque saben que esa obra llevará intensos consuelos al corazón del Vicario de Cristo.”

nineteenth century. In 1874, during the tenure of Archbishop Labastida, there are eight mentions of pilgrimage in the official documents of the Archdiocese of Mexico; by Archbishop Alarcón's time, in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, this number had increased to at least two hundred. In Oaxaca, Archbishop Gillow decreed a series of pilgrimages to local images of Mary, the two most important being Soledad and Juquila.¹²² The increase in official directives and correspondence concerning pilgrimage shows that church officials took seriously the power of popular devotional practices, and actively sought to harness pilgrimage as one of many church-led initiatives to "cement" image-based religious devotion in Mexican Catholic mentalities.

The priest of Texcoco wrote an elegiac letter to the Mexican Archbishop in 1899, praising the piousness of the French, of whom 42,000 prostrated themselves at the feet of the Divine Mary Immaculate (at Lourdes) with the objective of attaining the "moral cure of France" the previous year.¹²³ Thus seizing on the popularity of Lourdes, he proposed a men's pilgrimage to the Basilica of Guadalupe, to be dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.¹²⁴ Lay associations called *corporaciones sacramentarias* also organized and undertook pilgrimages, to the Basilica of Guadalupe and elsewhere, under the aegis of the Mexican church in the late nineteenth century.¹²⁵ A "children's pilgrimage" to the Basilica of Guadalupe was begun in 1899, drawing youth groups from Mexico City and surrounding areas, from as far as Toluca, Metepec, Chalco, Tepotzotlán, and Cuajimalpa.¹²⁶

The Basilica of Guadalupe became an increasingly visited pilgrimage site, with masses of devotees streaming in from Querétaro, Pachuca, Aguascalientes, and even Durango between 1894 and 1908.¹²⁷ The development of the railroads, discussed above, contributed to the growing numbers of pilgrims arriving at the major shrines at Guadalupe, San Juan de los Lagos, Plateros, and elsewhere; by allowing for mass pilgrimage to previously too-distant holy sites, technology helped modernize religious practices. Conversely, religion was a factor in the development of

¹²² Wright-Rios, pp. 87-90.

¹²³ AHAM, Base Prospero María Alarcón. Caja 84, exp. 67, 5 fs. Sección: Secretaría arzobispal, Serie Parroquia, 1899. Texcoco. Con respecto a una peregrinación, f.2.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, f.5.

¹²⁵ AHAM, Base Prospero María Alarcón. Caja 33, exp. 79, 6 fs. Sección: Secretaría arzobispal, Serie Asociación Pía, Año 1894. Varias corporaciones sacramentarias con relación a una peregrinación a la villa de Guadalupe.

¹²⁶ AHAM, Base Prospero María Alarcón. Caja 85, exp. 23, 1899.

¹²⁷ AHAM, Base Prospero María Alarcón. Caja 37, exp. 48, 2 fs. Sección: Secretaría arzobispal, Serie Catedral de Durango, 1894. Lista de la jerarquía eclesiástica de allá que viene en peregrinación a Guadalupe; Caja 46, exp. 53, 2 fs. Sección: Secretaría arzobispal, Serie Catedral de durango Año 1895. Durango. El señor canónigo don Filemón Fierro con relación a la peregrinación Guadalupeana; Caja 128, exp. 52, 2 fs. Sección: Secretaría arzobispal, Serie Catedral de Aguascalientes Año 1906. Aguascalientes. El señor obispo con respecto a la peregrinación de la Basilica de Gaudalupe; Caja 96, exp. 28, 3 fs. Sección: Secretaría arzobispal, Serie Parroquia Año 1901. Pachuca. El párroco con respecto a una peregrinación.

AHAM, Base Prospero María Alarcon. Caja 134, exp. 6, 2 fs. Sección: Secretaría arzobispal, Serie Catedral de Querétaro Año 1908. Querétaro. Con respecto a la peregrinación a la basilica.

modern technology; recall that the first completed section of the Mexico City-Veracruz rail line connected the capital to Tepeyac, showing the extent of the demand for access to the Basilica of Guadalupe. The appeal of long-distance pilgrimage, whether by new or traditional forms of travel, was growing. The Diocese of Querétaro began a tradition of walking pilgrimage to the Basilica of Guadalupe in 1884 that continues to this day.¹²⁸ Originally a men's pilgrimage, in 1960 women began to participate; it is commemorated in the documentary "Flowers for Guadalupe."¹²⁹ Querétaro's bishop, Rafael Camacho y García, had been promoting pilgrimages to the Basilica of Guadalupe for some time, and in Guadalupe's official coronation program this diocese was the only one to include "pilgrimage" along with the mass accorded it, but the custom soon became widespread among other dioceses.¹³⁰ In all of these cases, an ancient, popular tradition was seen as having great potential to reinvigorate not only religious devotion, but allegiance to the Catholic church.

Pilgrimages to shrines elsewhere in Mexico surged in the late nineteenth century, as well. A devotion previously local to the mining region of Zacatecas in northwestern Mexico, the Holy Child of Atocha became the object of a national—indeed, an international—following during the Porfiriato. According to historian Juan Javier Pescador, the first train arrived in Zacatecas City from the capital on March 9, 1884, sparking "a renewed increase in the income and social importance of the Plateros shrine. Visitors from central and northern Mexico, along with pilgrims from the U.S. Southwest, could reach Plateros in days instead of weeks."¹³¹ Noting that the economic bonanza and the incipient industrialization of the late nineteenth century led to a golden age for the shrine to the Santo Niño de Atocha, Pescador goes on to say that

Since 1864, with the creation of the diocese of Zacatecas as an autonomous ecclesiastical jurisdiction completely independent from the Archbishop of Guadalajara, the new authorities, whom Ignacio Mateo Guerra led as the first bishop of Zacatecas, placed a strong emphasis on the shrine's maintenance. The second bishop of Zacatecas, José María del Refugio Guerra y Alva, appointed in 1873, visited the shrine in 1882. He arranged for the construction of a separate building to allocate and display the numerous thanksgiving retablos the faithful left.¹³²

¹²⁸ La diócesis de Querétaro en su novena peregrinación al Santuario del Tepeyac llevada a cabo el 2 de julio del presente año de 1894. Querétaro: Imprenta de la Escuela de Artes, 1894. See also Jorge Adame Goddard, "Significado de la coronación de la imagen de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe en 1895," in Nelly Sigaut, ed., *La Iglesia Católica en México* (El Colegio de Michoacán, 1997).

¹²⁹ *Flowers for Guadalupe: The Presence of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexican Women's Lives*. Judith Gleason, with the collaboration of the Colectivo Feminista de Xalapa and of Elisa Mereghetti (New York: Filmmakers Library, 1995).

¹³⁰ Adame Goddard, p. 196.

¹³¹ Juan Javier Pescador *Crossing Borders with the Santo Niño de Atocha* (University of New Mexico Press, 2009), p. 119.

¹³² Pescador, pp. 124-125.

These bishops' interest in and efforts to maintain the Plateros shrine, including its popular accoutrements—the ex-votos left there in thanks for favors received from the Santo Niño—demonstrate once again the serendipitous overlapping between official and popular Catholicism in the late nineteenth century. Such care shown for the shrine, including for the preservation and display of the ex-votos that served as testimonials to the power of this saint, was echoed at other Mexican holy sites, including San Juan de los Lagos, Zapopan, Talpa, Chalma, Amacameca, and many others.

The tradition of undertaking long-distance pilgrimages, begun over a century ago, has flowered in Mexico; originally established by the church as a means of strengthening religious devotion, the practice has grown organically and today includes pilgrimages made on foot or bicycle, by bus or airplane. The objects of people's devotions do not necessarily correlate to the shrine that is physically closest to them; in Oscar Lewis's classic anthropological study of a working-class family from Mexico City's tough Tepito neighborhood, members of the Sánchez family walk for several days in order to visit the Lord of Chalma, even though the Villa of Guadalupe is much closer geographically.¹³³ In a more recent example, in the town of Xonacatlán, Estado de México, a strong devotion to the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos compels parishioners to ride bicycles to the Altos de Jalisco for the Virgin's annual feast in August, a 525-kilometer journey that takes four days. In Xonacatlán, the shrines of the Lord of Chalma, the Virgin of Remedios, and even the Virgin of Guadalupe are much closer than San Juan de los Lagos, but following local custom and personal conviction, *xonacatlenses*, under the aegis of their parish church, gladly make the physically exacting sacrifice to pay their respects to the miraculous Virgin of San Juan. The pattern is repeated throughout Mexico and large swaths of the United States, from any number of towns and cities to hundreds of shrines. The Basilicas of Guadalupe, San Juan de los Lagos, the churches of the Santo Niño de Atocha, Chalma, Zapopan, Talpa, and a good many others get so much traffic that parishes throughout the nation are assigned specific dates for group visits. Other shrines may see huge influxes of pilgrims only a few times a year during the saint's titular feast or other important celebrations, but the tradition begun in earnest in the nineteenth century continues to thrive.

Conclusion

The late nineteenth century brought modernization to Mexico's political, economic, infrastructural, and spiritual realms. In terms of politics, the mid-century Reforma was the culmination of a decades-long conflict between liberal and conservative forces, manifesting itself particularly sharply in the firm separation of church and state. But, as Austen Ivereigh points out, "as it 'came of age,' the Liberal project collided with another modern success story: the Catholic

¹³³ Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sánchez. Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963).

revival. The result was a lengthy and unusually intense conflict over public space.”¹³⁴ While the separation of church and state entailed the *de facto* subjugation of the Catholic church, it also brought about the church’s resurgence through the efforts of both the ecclesiastical hierarchy and grass-roots initiatives by lay associations, both in Mexico and worldwide. The Mexican church undertook a series of administrative reforms in response to the challenges posed to the church by the Reforma, both reacting to and echoing the Porfirian interest in order and progress. Its goal was to hold onto what power it had left, and to reinstill traditional piety in what it saw as an increasingly secularized nation. Catholic newspapers, echoing the views of their conservative elite readership, bemoaned the liberal currents taking hold of government and sought to reawaken Christian fervor amongst the populace, stressing the sacraments and an “interiorized” form of piety involving silent prayer and regular attendance of Mass and confession.¹³⁵ The “exterior” forms of worship—especially the exuberant, noisy processions centered on images—were seen as an embarrassment to the sober piety of “true” Catholics; to many of the Catholic elite, they were just an excuse for the vulgar rabble to get drunk and party. Their disdain for traditional forms of religious expression reflects the growing alienation of elite and popular cultures in the late nineteenth century, but elites’ participation in pilgrimages and “popular” devotions also reinforces the ways in which the two overlapped. The church hierarchy began to devise ways to corral the religious energy of its constituents in more seemly ways, sponsoring organized pilgrimages to holy sites and pulling lay organizations into the campaign to revive the Roman Catholic church.¹³⁶

As Mexico modernized its economy, its transportation system, its relationship to the church, and its political bureaucracy, the church found itself needing to adapt in order to stay relevant. Pablo Mijangos notes that “in the spirit of Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum*, (the church) attempted a ‘spiritual reconquest’ of Mexican society from below, achieved without the state and through greater grassroots efforts in education, culture, and social work.”¹³⁷ The perceptible increase in the religious phenomena discussed in this chapter—apparitions and pilgrimages—points to a blurring of the dichotomy of official and popular, and instead reveals a synergistic relationship between the two. The measures that the church took to avoid irrelevance in the late

¹³⁴ Ivereigh, *The Politics of Religion*, p. 1.

¹³⁵ Voekel, *Alone Before God*; O’Hara, *A Flock Divided*; Brian Larkin, *The Very Nature of God: Baroque Catholicism and Religious Reform in Bourbon Mexico City* (New Mexico, 2010); and Margaret Chowning, “The Catholic Church and the Ladies of the Vela Perpetua: Gender and Devotional Change in Nineteenth-Century Mexico,” *Past and Present*, forthcoming (November 2013). These authors’ temporal focus is on the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but late colonial Catholics’ concerns about piety, impiety, religiosity, and secularization bore marked similarities to those expressed a century later.

¹³⁶ Chowning, *op. cit.*; Silvia Arrom, “Mexican Laywomen Spearhead a Catholic Revival: The Ladies of Charity, 1863-1910,” in Martin Nesvig, ed., *Religious Culture in Modern Mexico* (Rowman & Litchfield Publishers, 2007).

¹³⁷ Pablo Mijangos y González, “The Lawyer of the Church: Bishop Clemente de Jesús Munguía and the Ecclesiastical Response to the Liberal Revolution in Mexico (1810-1868).” University of Texas, Austin, Ph.D. Diss., 2009, p. 283. On late nineteenth-century social Catholicism, see Manuel Ceballos Ramírez, *El catolicismo social: un tercero en discordia: Rerum Novarum, “la cuestión social” y la movilización de los católicos mexicanos, 1891-1911* (México: El Colegio de México, 1991.)

nineteenth century, seen in its encouragement of lay devotional organizations and the promotion of old and new Catholic devotions, were successful in large part because they coincided with popular receptivity, which was itself a reaction stemming from a deeply-rooted religious faith. Popular receptivity was visibly expressed in a new penchant for pilgrimages and recorded in tens of thousands of ex-voto paintings, discussed in detail in the following chapter. It turns out that it was not only the ecclesiastical hierarchy that fretted about “these impious times”; ordinary Mexicans, too, insisted on integrating into the modern world upon a solid base of the Catholic precepts, symbols, and images that had long structured their worldview.¹³⁸ As I suggest in the introduction to this chapter, the nuances of Mexico’s particularly Catholic accommodation of modernity—its strong image-based religious tradition, the continued belief in divine intervention, the upsurge in pilgrimages and ex-voto production in the late nineteenth century—call into question the Weberian, linear dichotomy that opposes “tradition” and “modernity,” “religious” and “secular.” Modernity not only did not preclude religion, religion was an essential part of modernity.

I have already addressed the “persistence of divine intervention” in Mexican mentalities in the earlier nineteenth century, but I want to emphasize that the *fin-de-siècle*, with its incipient industrialization, rise of Positivism and scientific rationalism, and most importantly, post-Reforma anticlerical bent, operated alongside a strong “traditional” religious culture. There is no easy and linear correlation between “traditional” Catholicism and the poor, and “modern,” “interiorized” piety and the wealthy and middle classes.¹³⁹ As discussed in this chapter, pilgrimages and other religious phenomena, such as the Passion Play of Iztapalapa, drew ever-larger crowds toward the end of the nineteenth century. Many of the spectators and participants in these popular religious events were indeed poor, but as Richard Trexler has shown, newspapers catering to elites encouraged their readers to witness the spectacle, and thus to participate in popular religious culture.¹⁴⁰ Meanwhile, the church-led celebrations of myriad patron saints, such as the coronations of the Virgins of Guadalupe, Soledad, and others, not to mention the many parish-organized pilgrimages in the late nineteenth century, also reified “traditional” Catholicism. Mexico’s exuberant, visually rich Catholicism appeared to be irrepressible, driven by a double-edged sword of church and lay activism, and perpetuated by Catholics of all social classes.

¹³⁸ This point is also made by Benjamin T. Smith, *Provincial Conservatism in Mexico: Religion, Society, and Politics in the Mixteca Baja, 1750-1962* (University of New Mexico Press, 2012).

¹³⁹ Pamela Voekel, *Alone Before God*, draws an association between liberalism and the middle class.

¹⁴⁰ Trexler, *Reliving Golgotha: The Passion Play of Iztapalapa* (Harvard, 2003), p. 64, and *El Tiempo*, 14 April 1895.

Chapter 4
Ex-votos and Popular Spirituality, 1880-2013

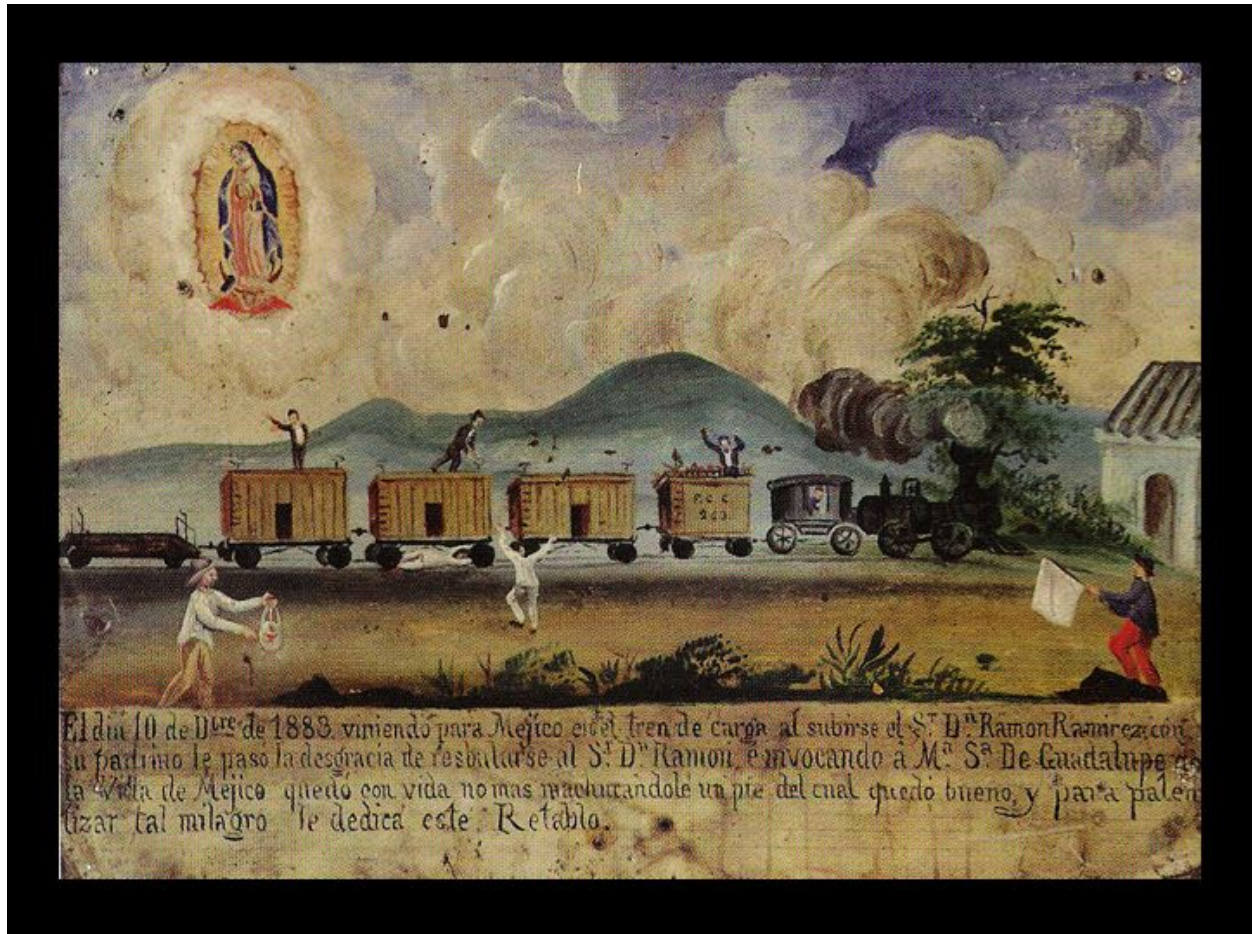


Figure 5.1: Ramón Ramírez's Invocation of the Virgin of Guadalupe (Source: *La Reina de las Américas*, Cat. 57, p. 48)

On December 10, 1883, Ramón Ramírez and his godfather jumped a freight train to Mexico City.¹ Like many other poor Mexicans of his time, don Ramón took advantage of the railroad—a prime symbol of the Porfirian government's efforts to modernize the country—to

¹ El día 10 de Dbre de 1883 viniendo para Mejico en el tren de carga al subirse el Sr. Dn. Ramon Ramirez con su padrino le pasó la desgracia de resbalar al Sr. Dn. Ramon é invocando a Ma. Sa. De Guadalupe de la Villa de Mejico quedó con vida no mas machaccandole un pie del cual quedó bueno y para patentizar tal milagro le dedica este Retablo. In *La Reina de las Américas: Works of Art from the Museum of the Basilica of Guadalupe*. Chicago: Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, 1996. Cat. 57, p. 48.

advance his own personal agenda. Unfortunately, don Ramón slipped as he was boarding the train, and, fearing for his life, he invoked the Virgin of Guadalupe to come to his aid. He survived the accident with only a crushed foot, from which he recovered. His gratitude to the Virgin for this miracle prompted him to commission this ex-voto, now housed in the Museum of the Basilica of Guadalupe.

Like the ex-votos that introduced the previous chapter, this painting speaks volumes about don Ramiro's world, in which a new form of transportation had become incorporated into Mexican life in ways that symbolized the concurrently changing political and social landscapes. Since we do not know the purpose of his trip to the capital, we might speculate that it was to go on a pilgrimage to the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe; this seems like a plausible reason, given fact that he invoked this holy being just two days before the major holiday associated with her (December 12). He may also have been going to Mexico City to try his luck at finding work, an equally plausible motive in a time when large numbers of peasants from the countryside were beginning to converge upon the capital in search of new opportunities, greatly enlarging the urban working class. His poverty is evident in the fact that he was not a paying customer on the train; many poor Mexicans took advantage of the new modes of transportation in order to pursue economic, religious, and leisure opportunities, despite the risks of jumping aboard fast-moving vehicles. As we shall see throughout the course of this chapter, a central change in Mexican ex-voto production in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is that this devotional practice increasingly became associated with lower-class Catholics, a departure from the "typical" commissioner of votive paintings in earlier times. With industrialization and the formation of a working class, more people (including, importantly, women), were now earning wages, wages that they could spend on commissioning devotional paintings to honor their saints. Ex-voto production in Mexico increased in tandem with the growth of the economy and railway networks, and with the country's modernization. A key factor in this increase was the more widespread access to means of devotional expression.

The late nineteenth century was a time of rapid social change, during which the interrelated processes of urbanization, industrialization, and modernization impacted official and popular religiosities. With the liberal victory over Maximilian in 1867, Mexico was at (relative) peace for the first time since the colonial period, but at a great cost to the Catholic church. The liberal state asserted its dominance over the institution with which it had shared power as recently as the late eighteenth century, and placed significant restrictions on the role of religion in public life. The multifaceted campaign to divest the church of its wealth and influence, however, in some ways laid the groundwork for clerical reorganization. It also freed up space for unofficial, grassroots lay religious activity. On the official side, the church undertook a crusade to regain its footing after the blows it received from the reform laws. The ecclesiastical hierarchy strengthened its ties with the Vatican and harnessed popular spiritual practices, such as pilgrimages, to its project of retaining (or regaining) spiritual relevance. The church also continued to monitor and exert control over the reception of miraculous apparitions, with some—especially Marian images—gaining official approval and accorded large-scale coronation ceremonies. Promoting traditional, church-based Catholic ritual as well as innovative, community-building initiatives in the newly secular Mexico helped the church remain an important cultural and social, if no longer political and economic, force in Mexican society.

During the long reign of Porfirio Díaz, moreover, church-state relations warmed significantly, with some of the anticlerical bite of the Reform Laws now merely a sting.

Popular spirituality coincided in many ways with official Catholicism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As discussed in the previous chapter, the upsurge in apparitions and pilgrimages, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century in Europe and Latin America, was a serendipitous confluence of official and popular mentalities. What these phenomena reveal, in both their existence and in people's reactions to them, is that belief in miraculous events could and did coexist with a secularizing, modernizing world. Despite the liberal disdain for what was seen as the "superstition" and "backwardness" promoted by the Catholic church, the sacred was an integral part of Mexicans' mental landscape; so much so, in fact, that the Virgin of Guadalupe, already Mexico's national patron saint, was crowned Queen of the Americas in a joint state-and-church ceremony in October 1895. David Brading has noted that "in an age dominated by religious indifference, the 'Miracle Image' had once more come to fill the hearts and minds of the Mexican people."² Official coronations of other Virgin Mary images preceded and followed this momentous occasion elsewhere in Mexico and in Europe.

Official and popular attitudes toward the sacred and its manifestations, especially in the devotional practice of pilgrimage, were the subjects of the previous chapter. In this chapter, I continue to explore these attitudes, but through the lens of ex-voto paintings. I trace the rise of ex-votos left at shrines by visiting pilgrims during the period between the Reforma and the 1930s, basing my analysis of religious mentalities on a different, visual form of documentation. Church and state records are essentially silent on the subject of ex-votos, and the attitudes that go into their making must be extracted from the voluminous writings of both religious and secular officials on other devotional practices. But ex-votos are themselves an incredibly rich source of historical documentation, and I aim to delve deeper into the complex world of Mexican spirituality by focusing on this aspect of material culture during its great flowering in the late nineteenth century.

As this chapter will show, quantitative data from shrines throughout Mexico show a significant increase in the number of ex-votos deposited at altars beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, coinciding with both the Reforma and with the upsurge in Catholic pilgrimage activity discussed in the previous chapter. Ex-votos' geographical range of distribution also appears to have widened during the late nineteenth century, reflecting the growth of various devotions and, by extension, of shrines. As discussed in the previous chapter, the growth of the railroads contributed in an important way to the mass mobilization of Catholic devotees to holy pilgrimage sites, and a number of shrines that had previously attracted devotees from relatively short distances were now drawing pilgrims from farther away.

Along with this numeric increase in ex-voto paintings, the social make-up of the donors of ex-votos changed in significant ways. Paralleling the shift in the commissioners of commemorative funerary photography (Chapter 5), ex-votos became "democratized" over the course of the nineteenth century. From a form of spiritual expression available only to people wealthy enough to commission paintings, the new availability of cheap, industrially-produced

² D.A. Brading, *Mexican Phoenix*, pp. 288-289.

painting materials meant that poorer people could now express their gratitude and devotion to the saints in ways formerly restricted to elites. As the divide between elites and the popular classes grew in the late nineteenth century, ex-votos, like children's funerary photography, became devotional forms associated with the working class, even as wealthier people seemed to shun them in favor of other kinds of pious expression.

In addition to the change in social classes reflected in ex-votos, another important and related demographic change will be discussed in this chapter. While it is difficult to give precise numbers, it seems that more women were having ex-votos painted than ever before. More importantly, some of the motifs in ex-votos commissioned by women in the late nineteenth century present a departure from the themes addressed in earlier ex-votos. Interpersonal relationships apparently took on a more prominent role, with a number of ex-votos depicting taboo subjects such as domestic violence and adultery. Women offered these tokens of gratitude when they were the direct beneficiaries of a miracle or, just as frequently, in cases where they had prayed on someone else's behalf. This increase in women's "buying power" ties in with Mexico's urbanization and the proletarianization of the peasantry. With more women working for wages, and thus having more control over their families' discretionary spending, these visual, often visceral forms of spiritual expression became favored by the social classes least likely to have been able to afford them in earlier times.

Finally, in this analysis of ex-votos produced in pre-revolutionary Mexico, we will pick up a thread we left off in the last chapter, namely the theme of the intersections of modernity with Mexican folk Catholicism. We will look at some of the recurring concerns expressed in the paintings produced in the late nineteenth century, for example the apparently "timeless" issues of illness and natural disasters. Such concerns about health and physical wellbeing, and the willingness and desire to engage in conversation about these issues with holy beings, seemed to change little from the colonial period onward. However, a number of new motifs emerged in late nineteenth-century ex-votos that reflected various aspects of the modern world. Aside from new forms of transportation and the inevitable accidents associated with them, interpersonal violence became an increasingly common motif, reflecting their commissioners' changing demographic.³ The increase in ex-votos commissioned by women, meanwhile, seems to point to their increased participation in their families' spiritual economy, and in some cases indirectly reflects their gradual integration into the paid work force. The divine protagonists of ex-votos were changing, too. Various advocations of Christ and the Virgin Mary became increasingly popular recipients of ex-votos, reflecting the nineteenth-century church's efforts to "purify" the faith by giving prominence to its central figures. Local devotions to lesser saints still ran strong in some places, but official campaigns, such as the papal proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854 and the coronations of the Virgin of Hope (Jacona, Michoacán, 1886), the Virgin of Guadalupe (1895), the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos (Jalisco, 1904), and the Virgin of Soledad (Oaxaca, 1909), resulted in the explosive growth of Christo- and Mariocentric shrines in the late nineteenth century, and, with the important exceptions of San Miguel del Milagro in

³ While wealthy people certainly were not immune from violence, bar brawls, incarceration, and armed robbery—frequent subjects of late nineteenth-century ex-votos—were much more likely to affect the poor.

Tlaxcala and San Francisco de Asís in San Luis Potosí, a kind of official “streamlining” of the central figures of the Catholic pantheon.⁴

An Increase in Ex-votos

Hard data on numbers, geographical distribution, and demographic information pertaining to ex-votos are notoriously difficult to pin down. However, historians of ex-votos agree that “it was during the nineteenth century that the custom became geographically generalized and socially recognized.”⁵ Based on the few secondary sources that provide statistical information about the actual numbers of ex-votos left at churches and shrines during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it seems clear that ex-voto production in Mexico increased significantly in the late nineteenth century, and that this numerical rise in ex-votos corresponds to both societal and cultural shifts that rejected the Reform Laws’ attempts at secularization and insisted upon a “traditional” Catholic cosmology or worldview, while reflecting social and economic trends toward urbanization and the increase in the wage-earning working class. This correlation seems to make sense, but a deeper inquiry into the actual numbers underlying the claim is warranted, because it is extremely difficult to be precise about the number of ex-votos produced at any time. How do we know that the number of ex-votos increased significantly in the mid-nineteenth century?

Inventories of churches and museums that collect ex-votos are the obvious places to start, but both of these potential sources are problematic. Churches never included ex-votos in their inventories, as from the church’s point of view, they were not considered materially, aesthetically, or spiritually valuable until very recently, if at all. The first time I saw ex-votos exhibited in a church was in July 1996, at San Francisco de Asís in Real de Catorce, San Luis Potosí. Real de Catorce was the site of an important silver mine in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but today it is a “ghost town” (designated as a *Pueblo Mágico* in 2001) that relies on tourism to its mine, church, and the sacred peyote plants scattered through the desert floor a thousand feet below the town. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of paintings adorned the walls of the church, a major pilgrimage site drawing thousands of visitors to the otherwise nearly abandoned mining town every October 4. The display of religious fervor and devotion to Saint Francis was profound and poignant. A painting from the 1990s (figure 5.2, below) thanked the saint for standing by the donor’s side during the year that he was locked up in prison, “fulfilling [his] obligation,” and asked him to remain with him and not allow him to “fall” again. Another one (figure 5.3) showed a pickup truck and thanked San Francisco for having returned the stolen vehicle. I was fascinated by these little paintings, but at the time there was no priest or anyone

⁴ The church had been pushing for these kinds of reforms—promoting Mary and Christ over the saints—since the eighteenth century; see Pamela Voekel, *Alone Before God* and Brian Larkin, *The Very Nature of God*.

⁵ Patricia Arias and Jorge Durand, *La enferma eterna. Mujer y exvoto en México, siglos XIX y XXI* (2002), pp. 149-150. Translation mine.

who could tell me anything about these amazing images other than that they were expressions of popular piety, *una costumbre del pueblo*.



Figure 5.2: Ex-voto to San Francisco de Asís, Real de Catorce, San Luis Potosí, 1990-91 (Source: Photograph by the author, 1996)



Figure 5.3: Ex-voto to San Francisco de Asís, Real de Catorce, San Luis Potosí, 1986 (Photograph by the author, 1996)

A few years later, in 2000, I traveled to the sanctuary of the Lord of Chalma, in the State of Mexico, for the first time. There were fewer ex-votos there than I remembered at Real de Catorce, but they were displayed in two rooms, one off the main nave of the church and another in a separate structure behind it. I asked the priest what happened to the older ex-votos when new ones were brought, in fulfillment of someone else's *manda*, and he shrugged, saying that "they get lost" (*se echan a perder*). At the shrine of San Miguel del Milagro in Tlaxcala state, where I had heard there were many ex-votos, I found only about thirty paintings in 2008; the other ex-votos on display were baby clothes, photographs, and some metal *milagritos*. Finally, in 2009, at the shrine of Our Lord of Villaseca, near the Cata mine in Guanajuato, I interviewed a curmudgeonly priest who told me that ex-votos were a waste of time, not valid expressions of faith. "Better that the faithful should donate money to the upkeep of the church, or garments for the *Señor*," he sniffed.⁶ Relegated to the disdained category of "*lo popular*," painted and other kinds of ex-votos have only recently begun to elicit serious consideration as documents of mentalities and/or as art objects worth studying. This attitude and ex-votos' resulting exclusion from church inventories have severely hampered researchers interested in the topic, but paradoxically it has also forced us to be creative and integrate other disciplinary methods and sources.

Museums are the only repositories of inventories of ex-votos, and poor record-keeping in many of these, coupled with the historical exclusion of ex-votos from high-art categorization, have also been an obstacle to obtaining reliable data. In their Master's thesis on the collection of

⁶ Padre Rector Rafael Ramírez, Iglesia del Señor de Villaseca, Mineral de Cata, Guanajuato, July 23, 2009.

ex-votos at the Museum of the Basilica of Guadalupe, one of the most comprehensive catalogues of a Mexican ex-voto collection, Elin Luque and Mary Michele Michael Mansour [Beltrán] are unable to give precise dates for the beginnings of the Basilica's collection of ex-votos, but estimate it to be sometime in the mid-nineteenth century. They note that the majority of votive paintings at the Basilica of Guadalupe have been lost; only those made of materials able to withstand poor storage and handling conditions survived, aided by a certain "inertia" on the part of the Basilica's caretakers. "There was no interest in preserving ex-votos, as they were considered products of popular piety, without any value, on the level of candles or floral arrangements. *The promoters of the new art were the devotees themselves.*"⁷ The surviving ex-votos remained in storage until perhaps the 1940s, when, most likely on the initiative of "some sacristan," they were hung on the walls in the main entryway of the museum, where they remain (after a major conservation project) today.⁸ The current collection numbers some 2000 ex-votos, of which they catalogued 650.

Marianne Bélard, who catalogued over 500 of the oldest and best-preserved ex-votos at the Basilica of Our Lady of San Juan de los Lagos, in Jalisco, estimated that there were about twenty-five *thousand* ex-votos of all types, including photocopies of diplomas, braids of hair, baby shoes, and paintings on tin plate at the *pocito* (little well), an off-site display and storage area in the town.⁹ Storage conditions at the *pocito* are deplorable; with the rust-prone tin plates stacked in wire-bound bundles "from floor to ceiling." Most of the paintings are inaccessible, blocked by "mountains" of crutches and rusted prosthetic limbs (also left as offerings to the Virgin of San Juan).¹⁰ Of the paintings within Bélard's reach and whose texts were preserved well enough to read, the oldest dates from 1880, although the shrine has been an important trading and pilgrimage site since the seventeenth century and surely had many more ex-voto offerings prior to that date.

A study done at the shrine of Our Lord of Chalma, in the State of Mexico, in the mid-1970s counted 513 ex-votos and *milagritos*, without giving dates.¹¹ A similar number of paintings, mostly dating from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, is exhibited in the

⁷ Luque Agraz and Michael Mansour, "Algunas consideraciones sobre los exvotos pictóricos de tema guadalupano siglos XIX y XX de la colección del Museo de la Basilica de Guadalupe." M.A. thesis, Universidad Iberoamericana (Mexico), 2001, pp. 55-56. "No se sabe con exactitud cuándo se empezó a formar la colección de exvotos pictóricos de pequeño formato...A mediados del siglo XIX, los exvotos se empiezan a guardar y es así como, por inercia, se forma la colección, ya que la mayoría de las láminas votivas se perdían y solo se salvaron aquellas que por su técnica eran más resistentes al mal trato y a los movimientos...no había interés en conservar los exvotos, por considerarlos productos de la piedad popular, sin ningún valor, al igual que las veladoras o los arreglos de flores. *Los promotores de la nueva modalidad artística eran los propios fieles.* Translation and emphasis mine.

⁸ Luque and Michael, p. 57.

⁹ Marianne Bélard and Philippe Verrier, *Los exvotos del occidente de México* (México: El Colegio de Michoacán, 1996), p. 65.

¹⁰ Bélard and Verrier, p. 65.

¹¹ Arias and Durand, p. 28; citing Gilberto Giménez, *Cultura popular y religión en el Anáhuac* (México: Centro de Estudios Ecuménicos, 1978).

anteroom of the church of the Virgin of Zapopan, just outside Guadalajara.¹² According to Patricia Arias and Jorge Durand, there are around 4,000 ex-votos dedicated to the Señor del Saucito in San Luis Potosí, and about 2,500 at the shrine of the Señor de la Misericordia in Tepatitlán, Jalisco.¹³ Mario Colín, in his study of the votive paintings dedicated to the Señor del Huerto of Atlacomulco (Estado de México), was able to photographically reproduce only thirty-one of what he estimates to be many more ex-votos.¹⁴ Frida Kahlo, whose interest in Mexican folk art was notorious, collected some 450 ex-votos from various churches; that these little paintings influenced her own art is evident, but unfortunately the collection remains uncatalogued and her motives for selecting the particular paintings she collected remain unclear.

Earlier studies of ex-votos were written by artists such as Gerardo Murillo (Dr. Atl), Roberto Montenegro, Jean Charlot, and Diego Rivera; none of these addressed either the history of the art form or of its collection, although Dr. Atl's sample of the ex-votos dedicated to the Señor del Hospital in Salamanca, Guanajuato, were painted mainly between 1860 and 1900.¹⁵ Roberto Montenegro, in his 1950 study of Mexican *retablos*, presented 79 paintings; thirteen from the eighteenth century, forty-nine from the nineteenth, and seventeen from the twentieth.¹⁶ Despite the ahistoricity of these artists' studies, they did plant the seed of interest for later generations of art historians. One of the seminal studies of the Mexican devotional painting tradition, which paid equal attention to *retablos* and ex-votos, was published in 1974 by Gloria Fraser Giffords.¹⁷ Giffords notes that in the late nineteenth century, generic painted *retablos* (the painted portraits of saints that figured as centerpieces in home altars) were gradually supplanted by increasingly inexpensive color lithographs, an option unavailable to those who wished to give a more personalized ex-voto to the saint who granted them a miracle. Thus *retablos*, the straightforward portraits of saints, became mass-produced, in line with Mexico's incipient industrialization. She claims that both ex-votos and *retablos* reached their numerical apogee in the late nineteenth century, and subsequently experienced a decline: "in general...the day of the ex-voto has passed, and the little paintings are being replaced by the more realistic and perhaps more graphic method of illustrating favors and healings by silvered *milagros* (tiny tokens symbolizing the favors received), photographs, braces, crutches, and even x-ray plates."¹⁸ The claim that ex-votos "declined," however, is predicated on a rather narrow separation of ex-votos

¹² Arias and Durand, pp. 33-34.

¹³ Arias and Durand, pp. 39-40.

¹⁴ Mario Colín, *Retablos del Señor del Huerto que se venera en Atlacomulco*. México: Biblioteca Enciclopédica del Estado de México, 1981, p. 28.

¹⁵ Dr. Atl (Gerardo Murillo), "Los retablos del Señor del Hospital," *Forma* (Mexico City) 1, number 3 (1927), pp. 17-20. At the time of writing, Dr. Atl noted that there were barely any retablo painters left, at least for this particular devotion.

¹⁶ Roberto Montenegro, *Retablos de México. Mexican Votive Paintings*. Trans. Irene Nicholson (Mexico City: Ediciones Mexicanas, 1950).

¹⁷ Gloria Fraser Giffords, *Mexican Folk Retablos*, revised edition (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992).

¹⁸ Giffords, pp. 146-147.

into “high” and “low” categories, a somewhat ironic categorization of an art form that had already passed from elite to popular status once it made the jump from canvas to tin-plate substrates, and from guild or academy-trained artists to self-taught artisans. A different interpretation (borne out by the examination of newly discovered caches of ex-votos that Giffords may not have been able to take into account) would be that ex-votos continued to flourish well into the twentieth century: the families of painters who had pioneered painting on tin expanded their repertoires to continue providing devotional paintings of miracles for their clientele. For example, several local devotions in the state of Guanajuato continued to produce ex-votos in the mid-twentieth century and to this day, though the churches where these ex-votos reside have not always been open to the public. One such little-known devotion, in the city of Guanajuato, was dedicated to the Niño de los Atribulados, a Christ-child figure with a reputation for being miraculous. The devotion spawned a significant number of ex-voto paintings from at least 1895 onward, continuing into the 1970s, when they seem to have dropped off. The church has experienced numerous changes in administration, and today is open only by appointment with the caretaker. I was able to visit it, and see some of the ex-votos, by accompanying Patricia Campos Rodríguez, a historian at the University of Guanajuato, in 2009. Dr. Campos has written fairly extensively about lesser-known devotions in Guanajuato state, and she estimates that the collection of painted ex-votos at the church of the Niño de los Atribulados numbers perhaps 75, not counting the many that must have been lost due to poor storage conditions and other factors.¹⁹ A novel feature of the ex-voto tradition at this church is a number of early *photographic* ex-votos, mainly from the 1940s and ‘50s.²⁰ Below (figures 5.4 and 5.5) are two ex-voto paintings from this church.²¹

¹⁹ Patricia Campos Rodríguez, personal communication, July 21, 2009.

²⁰ While in recent times it has become increasingly common to leave photographs—often of the kind used in photo identification cards—as mementoes or wordless testimonials of favors received at shrines, these photographs at the church of the Niño de los Atribulados are unusual for their time, and for the fact that some of them have text of the kind common in ex-voto paintings written on the back, with identifying details (names and dates). Unfortunately, I was not able to take pictures of any of these photographs.

²¹ Figure 5.4: Niño de los Atribulados, Guanajuato, Gto. “Milagro que obro el Santísimo Niño de Atribulados á la Sa. Eulalia (Belos) que estando muy enferma de parto Maria Ojeda quien por el Santo niño consijio la salud el dia 3 de Diciembre de 1895.” Figure 5.5: Niño de los Atribulados, Guanajuato, Gto. Micaela Alvarez encomendo a su hijito Pedro Lopez al Niño Dios de los Atribulados olvidara el vicio de la embriaguez perdicion de los hombres. Le dan gracias Padre mio. In the transcription I have corrected the orthography to facilitate comprehension. Photographs by the author, July 2009.



Figure 5.4: Niño de los Atribulados #1, Guanajuato (Source: Photograph by the author, 2009)



Figure 5.5: Niño de los Atribulados #2, Guanajuato (Source: Photograph by the author, 2009)

Campos has documented about a dozen shrines and local devotions, of which the majority are Christ figures, in the state of Guanajuato.²² The number of *extant* ex-votos at each of these “smaller” shrines ranges from ten to 113. Many more ex-votos are dedicated to the best-known miracle images in the state, the Señor de Villaseca in the Cata mine just outside the city of Guanajuato (at least 3,000),²³ the Señor del Hospital in Salamanca, and the Niño de la Cruzada in San Diego de la Unión, but these smaller, lesser-known devotions provide important information about the inclusivity of religious expression in Mexico; to be a devotee of, for example, the Señor de la Conquista in San Felipe did not preclude devotion to the Señor de Villaseca, the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos, or even the Virgin of Guadalupe.

A recent study by the above-cited art historian Elin Luque Agraz documents the not insignificant collection of ex-votos at the Basilica of Our Lady of Soledad, in Oaxaca. In the previous chapter I discussed the coronation of this Virgin Mary image in 1909, which is covered in much more detail by Edward Wright-Rios.²⁴ Aside from the devotion and local pride evident in the exuberant reception of the Catholic dignitaries visiting on the occasion of the coronation of the Virgin of Soledad, another demonstration of the heartfelt devotion to Oaxaca’s patron saint, unaffected by institutional machinations, are the prolific ex-votos to Soledad commissioned around this time. Luque catalogued over two hundred ex-votos, the vast majority of which were produced in the nineteenth century, in the collection of the Basilica of the Virgin of Soledad.²⁵ Of the extant ex-votos to Soledad housed in the Basilica, about one hundred twenty-five are published in the study, and of these, nineteen were made in the eighteenth century, ninety-four in

²² They are: the Señor de las Tres Caídas in Apaseo el Grande (two ex-voto drawings from 1947 and 1948); el Señor del Llanito and the Niño de los Afligidos in Dolores Hidalgo (19 ex-voto paintings, with some dating from the eighteenth century); el Niño de la Cueva in Cerro del Cedro (74 ex-votos, distributed between paintings to the Niño de la Cueva and the Santo Niño de Atocha); el Niño de los Milagros in Las Trancas, Acámbaro (no painted ex-votos, but a lively photographic and fiesta tradition); el Niño Manuelito de Puerta in San Agustín de las Flores in Silao (7 ex-votos from the 1980s); el Señor de los Trabajos in the San Pedro de los Pozos mine (at least 133 paintings); eight ex-votos dedicated to the Virgen de la Montañita, the Virgen de Guadalupe, the Virgen del Sagrario, San Diego, and a priest named Esquivel in San Diego de la Unión, which is also the home of an important devotion to the Niño de la Cruzada (with 762 documented *promesas votivas*; see Patricia Campos Rodríguez, “Migración a través de los exvotos. El Niño de la Cruzada: El que cruza el Río Bravo. Parritas, San Diego de la Unión, Guanajuato,” *Sincronía* (Fall 2009): <http://sincronia.cucsh.udg.mx/camposfall09.html>, accessed on August 21, 2012; and Campos, *El Niño de la Cruzada, protector del migrante. Un estudio histórico-sociológico*. Guanajuato: Universidad de Guanajuato, 2008); San Miguel Arcángel in San Felipe Torres Mochas, with at least 84 ex-votos; el Señor de la Conquista, also in San Felipe, at least 116 ex-votos; el Señor del Hospital in Salamanca (33 documented paintings); el Señor de la Humildad in the parish church of Nuestra Señora del Perpetuo Socorro in León (39 paintings); and the Señora de los Remedios of Cerro Grande, Victoria (6 drawings and paintings from the late 1990s).

²³ Arias and Durand, p. 36; this number is corroborated by my own (unscientific) observations. In 2009, I visited the Cata church, from where the ex-votos had been taken down and stored as part of an INAH conservation project. While I was only able to see a few boxes’ worth of paintings, I counted about 50 boxes with roughly 50 ex-votos to a box.

²⁴ Edward Wright-Rios, *Revolutions in Mexican Catholicism: Reform and Revelation in Oaxaca, 1887-1934* (Duke University Press, 2009), Chapter 2.

²⁵ Elin Luque Agraz, *El arte de dar gracias: Los exvotos pictóricos de la Virgen de la Soledad de Oaxaca* (México: Centro de Cultura Casa Lamm, 2007).

the nineteenth century, and thirteen in the twentieth century. It is far from clear whether this is a complete collection; numerous factors could have influenced some of the paintings being lost or destroyed. These factors range from issues of conservation and preservation (ex-votos, commonly painted directly on tin-plated iron sheets with no primer to help the paint adhere to the substrate, are particularly subject to corrosion) to the Basilica’s priests’ aesthetic preferences (some ex-votos may have been considered “ugly” or otherwise inappropriate for display), or even financial concerns (some may have been sold to collectors as interest in Mexican popular and folk art began to build in the early twentieth century). Nevertheless, the numbers align in a general way with extant ex-voto distribution at other Mexican shrines, in the sense that the largest numbers date from the second half of the nineteenth century.

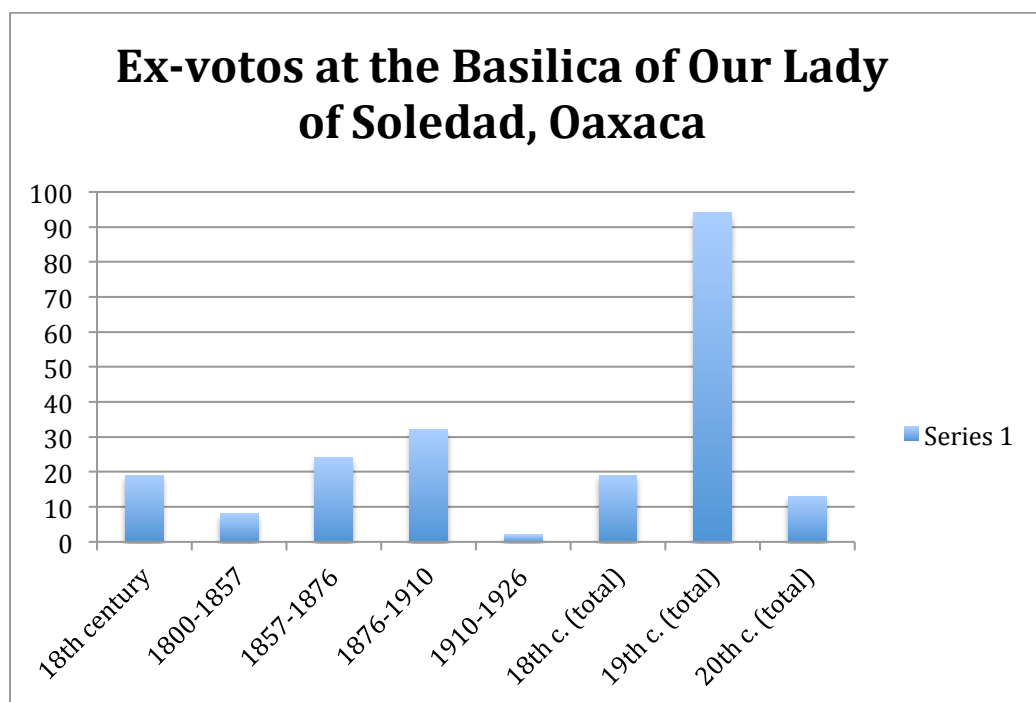


Table 4.1: Ex-votos at the Basilica of Our Lady of Soledad, Oaxaca

If we take these numbers at face value, it appears that ex-votos to Oaxaca’s Virgin of Soledad skyrocketed immediately following the Reforma, and peaked during the Porfiriato. Curiously, however, ex-voto production dropped precipitously right after the coronation ceremony in 1909, and, based on the paintings included in Luque’s study, it would appear that Soledad never regained the numbers of ex-votos she had received prior to the officialization of her cult in Oaxaca. Of course, this abrupt drop-off can be partially explained by the sudden intrusion of new political instability and radical regime-change brought about by the Mexican

Revolution of 1910.²⁶ Perhaps the departure of Porfirio Díaz, a Oaxaca native, influenced this decrease, but then again, Oaxaca did not experience the same degree of disruption during the revolution that other regions, such as Guerrero, Morelos, Sonora and Jalisco did. Moreover, as Patricia Arias and Jorge Durand have argued, the dearth of ex-votos with revolutionary themes can be attributed to Mexican Revolution scholars' culling of such ex-votos from their original provenances, resulting in an uneven sample.²⁷

Aside from their potential to aid historians in making educated guesses, the numbers compiled by curators like their predecessors, the priests in charge of churches and their contents, do little to elucidate the matter. Given the difficulty of pinning down precise numbers with regard to ex-votos—how many were painted, and when?—from inventories, we must turn to often no less uncertain sources of information, such as contemporary writings by journalists, novelists, and travelers. As noted previously, church records are essentially useless for quantifying ex-voto production. Despite the church's tolerance for these expressions of popular religiosity, its silence in documenting ex-votos stands in sharp contrast to its penchant for documenting other religious matters, which were recorded in painstaking and often mind-numbing detail. While there are a few clerical references to ex-votos made in the colonial period, most notably by Francisco de Florencia, S.J., in the seventeenth century, these are mentions of "high art" paintings commissioned by elites, before a much larger segment of the population had access to creating or commissioning ex-votos. The plebeian, unschooled paintings on tin, which were gradually popularized in the nineteenth century, are given no mention by church officials.

A few accounts by foreign travelers, struck by "exotic" Mexican customs, are our only other references to ex-votos until Diego Rivera, Jean Charlot, and Dr. Atl wrote about them in the context of promoting the revolutionary ideals of *indigenismo* and the appreciation of *lo popular* in the early twentieth century. One of the earliest post-colonial references to ex-votos in Mexican churches comes from Frances Calderón de la Barca's "letter the eighth," written in January 1840.²⁸ In a visit to Guadalupe's shrine at Tepeyac, she and her party "bought crosses and medals which have touched the holy image, and pieces of white ribbon, marked with the measure of the Virgin's hands and feet." The custom of touching an amulet or other object to an image or relic, with the idea that the amulet will absorb or become imbued with the sacred essence of the holy image or relic, is ancient; both it and writing prayers on ribbons measured to meaningful lengths continue to this day (see figures 5.6 and 5.7). Beside the chapel at the top of the hill, she observed "a sort of monument in the form of the sails of a ship, erected by a grateful Spaniard, to commemorate his escape from shipwreck, which he believed to be owing to the intercession of Our Lady of Guadalupe."²⁹ This sculpted ex-voto pertains to an elite tradition, but

²⁶ See P. Arias and J. Durand, *La enferma eterna. Mujer y exvoto en México, siglos XIX y XX* (Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara, El Colegio de San Luis, 2002), p. 156.

²⁷ Arias and Durand, p. 156.

²⁸ Frances Calderón de la Barca, *Life in Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). Mrs. Calderón de la Barca was the Scottish-born wife of the Spanish ambassador to Mexico, who lived there from 1840-1842. Her collection of letters to friends and family abroad, written in the style of a journal, is a rich source for an elite foreigner's perspective on Mexican society.

²⁹ Calderón de la Barca, p. 85.

its juxtaposition with the popular tradition of *brandea*³⁰ in 1840 is yet another indicator of the interconnectedness between the two. (In a later letter, Calderón de la Barca comments on the democracy of Mexican churches, in which “the peasant and the marquesa kneel side by side.”)³¹



Figure 5.6: Prayer Ribbons Dedicated to San Charbel, Cathedral of Veracruz (Source: Photograph by the author, February 2009)

³⁰ The touching of a holy object in the hope of receiving some of its sacred essence.

³¹ Calderón de la Barca, pp. 307-308. She does qualify this image of seeming social equality: “However, one consequence of the exceeding dirtiness of the Mexican churches, and the number of léperos who haunt them...is that a great part of the principal families here, having oratorios in their houses, have engaged the services of a padre, and have mass at home.”

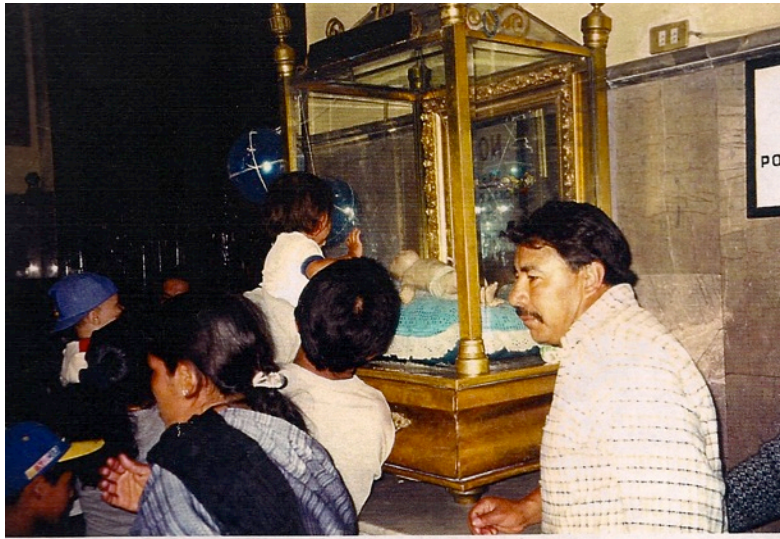


Figure 5.7: Niño Jesús Sculpture, side altar, Chalma (Source: Photograph by the author, 2001)

In T. Philip Terry's 1909 edition of *Terry's Mexico. Handbook for Travellers*, *ex-votos* are mentioned three times. In the general description of churches, we are told that

It is the custom to hang or paste *ex-votos* on the doors and outer walls of Mexican churches, and various notices invoking *pater-nosters* (or *aves*) for the repose of the souls of departed friends... Religious tracts, silver or wax objects to be used as votive offerings, ribbons purporting to give the size of the virgin's head, or of that of some particular *santo* or *santa*: photographs of holy personages, prayer-books, and such, are usually offered for sale at the church atriums or just within the entrance. There is usually a tallow-chandler's place hard by, where candles (*velas* to the value of ten thousand *pesos* a month are said to be used in the churches of the Mexican Republic) ranging in size from five inches to as many feet are sold to the faithful.³²

At the sixteenth-century church of Santo Domingo in Mexico City,

The half-obliterated figures and minor sculptures of the façade, as far as they have survived the riots which followed the Reform Laws, are good examples of

³² T. Philip Terry, *Terry's Mexico. Handbook for Travellers* (Mexico City: Sonora News Company, 1909), p. cxv.

Spanish craftsmanship. *Ex-votos*, jubilee circulars, notifications of *difunciones* and whatnot, adorn the massive carved doors and the time-stained buttresses.³³

The *indios* of Amecameca, meanwhile,

come also to worship an image of Christ, called the *Santo Entierro*, said by some to have been made by the good friar (fray Martín de Valencia, one of the 12 Apostles [p. 324] who reached Mexico in 1523) himself. Others pin their faith to a number of legends which refer to the alleged miraculous origin of the figure. This image, undoubtedly of high antiquity, is very light and is perhaps made of the pith of the maize. The Indians form processions, carry the figure (which reclines in a glass case) from place to place, and conduct impressive and very picturesque ceremonies. A stone stairway, terraced out of the hillside, leads to the shrine, which contains many *ex-votos* and Indian offerings.³⁴

There are still a good number of *ex-votos* at the shrine of the Santo Entierro (better known as the Señor del Sacromonte) in Amecameca a century later. One of the most striking features of Terry's description of Amecameca is his association of *ex-votos* with the town's Indians. The geographical area in which *ex-votos* are generally thought to proliferate are the central-western, *mestizo* regions of the Bajío: Guanajuato, Aguascalientes, Jalisco, and portions of Zacatecas and San Luis Potosí. Giffords's and other scholars' work have certainly focused on this area, and numerous claims have been made as to the purportedly "mestizo" nature of the *ex-voto* phenomenon, as well as to the Bajío as the most Catholic region of Mexico (thus "explaining" the preponderance of *ex-votos* there).³⁵ But as this description and the one that follows show, the custom was (and is) more widespread, with a good deal of *ex-votos* originating from several areas to the southeast of Mexico City, such as Amecameca and Oaxaca, in areas with higher Indian populations.

Traveler Hans Gadow was struck by the many *ex-votos* in Tlacolula, Oaxaca, in the last years of the Porfiriato:

Tlacolula is a town, well-built and clean; its 6,000 inhabitants are mostly Zapoteca...There is a fine church, with many solid silver ornaments, but more interesting were the numerous oil and water-colour pictures by native artists, hung

³³ Terry's *Mexico*, p. 354.

³⁴ Terry's *Mexico*, p. 462.

³⁵ Giffords (1992), Luque and Beltrán (2001), Durand and Massey (1995), John Tutino, *Making a New World: Founding Capitalism in the Bajío and Spanish North America* (Duke, 2011), and Juan Pedro Viqueira Albán (personal communication, September 22, 2008).

on the walls, votive offerings perpetuating the miracles wrought by the saints and the Virgin Mary. Some of them were exceedingly realistic. A drowning scene in a spate, a woman and baby floating on top of a straw-thatched roof, and being rescued by means of the branches of a tree; runaway horses jumping over a prostrate child; murder, fire, cattle stampeded by a jaguar, etc., and in some of the scenes the directing spirit of the rescue is indicated by a hand or face peeping out of the clouds.³⁶

Terry's and Gadow's descriptions show that while the ex-votos extant in Mexico today are concentrated in the central-western regions of the country, there were once many more in other regions that today are not known for their ex-voto tradition, such as Amecameca and Oaxaca. Tlacolula's church still stands and it houses an impressive number of religious paintings and sculptures, but in 2000, when I visited it, there were no ex-votos in sight. (As with many other former collections, their whereabouts are unknown; they may have been "lost" to decay or destruction, sold, or perhaps they were in storage.) Elin Luque's study of the ex-votos in the collection of the nearby Museum of the Basilica of Soledad in Oaxaca, too, shows that the ex-voto tradition was more widespread than was previously thought; it was only due to the growing public and scholarly interest in Mexican ex-votos—as an art form, as historical documents, as expressions of popular culture—in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that the museum decided to open its collection to the public and invite researchers and conservators to work with these objects.

One brief mention of an ex-voto can be found in the writer and diplomat Manuel Payno's *Los bandidos de Río Frío* (1891), a humorous *costumbrista* novel set in the mid-nineteenth century. Doña Pascuala and don Espiridión, who are first introduced as "de raza indígena, pero casi son de razón," have been married for seven years when doña Pascuala becomes pregnant.³⁷ Her pregnancy becomes a tremendous ordeal, lasting years, despite the interventions of a pompous team of medical doctors who conclude that Pascuala has counted the months incorrectly. Desperate, Espiridión hires a benevolent pair of Aztec witches who, after ministering to Pascuala with herbs, potions, lizards, and the blood of a rooster, finally resort to having a "conference" with the Virgin of Guadalupe, who demands that a child be sacrificed in exchange for a successful birth. This demand may or may not have been met, but the next day, doña Pascuala finally gives birth to a healthy son, and the family commissions an ex-voto.

In one corner of the painting was the bed, and upon it doña Pascuala, dying and with her hands joined, entrusting herself to the Virgin of Guadalupe painted on the other side. Don Espiridión next to the bed, with a handkerchief at his eyes, and

³⁶ Hans Gadow, *Through Southern Mexico, Being An Account of the Travels of a Naturalist*. London: Witherby & Co., New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1908, p. 246.
<http://books.google.com/books?id=8hguAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>. Reference courtesy of Larissa Kelly; accessed on July 3, 2012.

³⁷ Manuel Payno, *Los bandidos de Río Frío* (México, D.F.: Editorial Porrúa, 2011 [1891]), p. 3.

the two herbalists kneeling beneath the print of the Virgin of Guadalupe, in an attitude of prayer. The malicious features of the *licenciado* Lamparilla poked out from behind a half-open door. Below the painting was this sign:

On the 12th of March doña Pascuala, owner of the rancho of Santa María de la Ladrillera, began to feel gravely ill, and having called the doctor Codorniú to help her, he and the doctors of the University erred in her cure, and having no recourse, she invoked the Most Holy Virgin of Guadalupe, and by the next morning she was well and gave birth to a very robust son.³⁸

While the ex-voto anecdote is ancillary to the novel's plot development, and reflects Payno's anticlericalism in its ridicule of popular religious culture, its inclusion brings up a critical issue, namely, that ex-votos were so widespread in Mexico—even in the earlier nineteenth century, unless Payno was projecting his cultural perceptions of the 1890s—that they played an integral role in the religious culture. So common was the use of votive offerings to holy beings (underscoring the reciprocal nature of human-deity relations in Mexican mentalities) that it is portrayed as a quotidian reaction to a potentially life-threatening event that required divine intercession.³⁹

We are left with little reliable data on actual numbers, and therefore are hard-pressed to make claims about what ex-votos meant for Mexican society in the late nineteenth century. The uncertainty of the statistical information, however, can be mitigated by drawing some general

³⁸ Payno, p. 34. Translation mine.

³⁹ Stylistically, the descriptive text reads like that of many other ex-votos, with several identifying details (dates, names) included in the passive, third-person voice. A curator cataloguing this painting would file it under the theme of “difficult pregnancy,” or the more general “health and illness.” But knowing as we do the circumstances of this particular pregnancy, the text, even with its identifying details, seems generic, standardized. It invites speculation as to the “real” stories behind many actual ex-votos, whether they include much detail or not. Many ex-votos have health as their theme, and often express a distrust of medical science; the recovery from illness is often seen as divinely ordained after all human interventions have failed. Few mention herbs or traditional healers as having an impact on health; whether this is because of old, internalized prejudices against “superstition” or because indigenous medicine was so intertwined with Catholic ritual that they were not thought of as distinct practices, ex-votos express an apparently single-minded faith in the power of the saints.

Finally, the mention of this votive offering offers some clues about the commissioners of ex-votos in the mid-nineteenth century. The protagonists are first introduced as Indians, though “almost *de razón*.” They are not wealthy, but neither are they wretched; they own a little ranch that brings them some income, and have a relationship with a well-connected lawyer (the malicious-featured Lamparilla) who hires the ineffectual doctor Codorniú. Apparently, they are well-off enough to commission an ex-voto, and not just from a country artisan, but by “one of the most celebrated painters of the Academia de San Carlos” (p. 34). Is this attribution a novelistic flourish, or did the Academy's painters work on commission for ranch-dwelling Indian patrons in the 1840s? No, the novel tells us: the ex-voto was commissioned by Lamparilla, not from a sense of religious faith (he was already “contaminated by freemasonry”), but because the doctor, Codorniú, owed him some money, and he took his revenge by refusing to acknowledge Codorniú's learning. Thus, Payno has a skeptic (Lamparilla) and a participant in a potentially Faustian bargain (doña Pascuala) joining forces in the commission of a devotional painting honoring a holy being that neither believes in; still, such is the power of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a cultural icon that each has his own reasons for glorifying her.

conclusions about how many ex-votos were being painted at what point in time. Despite the incompleteness of our data, the work of art historians like Giffords, B  lard, and Luque, and historians like Campos, in cataloguing poorly-preserved collections of ex-votos is instrumental in providing us with a sense of an arc of production that spans the late colonial period, growing throughout the nineteenth, peaking during the Porfiriato, and continuing, through changing mediums, to this day. Despite not having hard numbers, we can trace from extant collections of ex-votos a definite increase in numbers that at least roughly mirrors those shown in the graph of the collection of ex-votos at the Basilica of Our Lady of Soledad in Oaxaca (p. 18). Moreover, the work these scholars have done in cataloguing and compiling data on ex-votos has tremendous implications for Mexican social and cultural history; it indicates a significant social change in the commissioners of ex-votos, and this change from elite to popular, from “high” to “low,” coincides with a growing working class, the increased visibility of women in devotional art, and a shift in religious culture that was driven by demographic fluctuations, coupled with a growing societal divide.

Changes in Commissioners of Ex-votos: Class and Gender

A Growing Divide, and Expanding Access

Mexico experienced marked rural-to-urban migrations during the Porfiriato. The railroad offered unprecedented opportunities for movement across all levels of society, and people previously confined to their immediate localities were now able to expand their economic and cultural horizons. As Patricia Arias has pointed out, “the building of railroads during the regime of Porfirio D  az initiated a profound restructuring of rural space and its internal and external articulations. This new means of communication and the ensuing economic boom broke down the barriers of rural isolation.”⁴⁰ The increased movement of people, however, created a new set of problems from the perspective of the Mexican bourgeoisie. Instead of serving as a social equalizer, the railroads made poverty much more visible and palpable. With a growing “*poblaci  n flotante*” of migrants streaming into both the capital and other destinations throughout the republic, searching for work, the Porfiriato was marked by a growing economy as well as a growing divide between elite and popular social classes. The newly mobile migrants earned the reprobation of the middle and upper classes, which saw these transients as lazy and prone to vice. According to William French, while middle- and upper class Mexicans “touted railroads as the primary example of Porfirian progress, they were appalled by the growing army

⁴⁰ Patricia Arias, “Three Microhistories of Women’s Work in Rural Mexico,” in Heather Fowler-Salamini and Mary Kay Vaughan, eds., *Women of the Mexican Countryside, 1850-1990* (University of Arizona Press, 1994), p. 161.

of beggars, drifters, and workers who rode the rails into...cities and mining towns,” associating this new population with crime.⁴¹

This fear of poor people was not restricted to northern rural areas. In Mexico City, thousands of people fleeing debt peonage on *haciendas* or otherwise looking for better economic opportunities melded with the capital’s slum-dwellers, forming a growing urban underclass. As analyzed by historian Pablo Piccato, the nation’s first comprehensive census, taken in 1895, revealed that the capital’s population had grown at an unprecedented rate, from a mid-century estimate of 200,000 people to 329,774; by 1921 the number had swelled to 615,327.⁴² In keeping with the government’s modernizing mission, by the end of the nineteenth century “railroads, tramways, paved and illuminated streets, broad avenues, parks, new residential areas, and high buildings appeared as distinctive signs of material progress.”⁴³ But this modernization had a dark side, exemplified by hordes of migrants eking out an existence on the margins of the glorious *centro*, living in slums lacking sanitation and teeming with disease. The city’s elites viewed their social inferiors with disdain, and distanced themselves from interactions with the poor. “Improvements in the design and use of urban space were based on the understanding that the rich and poor were not to mingle: a rational division between the safe and beautiful areas of the modern city and the dangerous and unhealthy marginal zones.”⁴⁴ Yet the ideal modern city, as envisioned Porfirian planners, was a failure, because “the constant arrival of migrants and the development of new means of transportation, both expected to facilitate progress, instead weakened social divisions and undermined the authorities’ control over public spaces.”⁴⁵ The creation of a professional police force, trained in what philosopher Michel Foucault would call mechanisms of discipline that control delinquents and citizens alike, reified a view of Mexican society as one divided between *gente decente* and *la plebe*, or, to use William Beezley’s term, those who occupy the shady and the sunny sides of the bullring.⁴⁶ And “certain barrios and lower-class colonias were identified by *gente decente* as places of criminality and vice.”⁴⁷

This attitude that recognized a growing divide between social classes was especially visible in Mexico’s rich broadsheet tradition, whose primary audience was the working class. The engraver José Guadalupe Posada, best known for his rich output of *calaveras* and *Catrin*as (skeletons used as social commentary), was equally prolific at illustrating the apparent—and actual—rise in crime in pre-revolutionary Mexico City, although he tended to favor the most

⁴¹ William E. French, “Prostitutes and Guardian Angels: Women, Work, and the Family in Porfirian Mexico,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 72:4, 1992, p. 533.

⁴² Pablo Piccato, *City of Suspects: Crime in Mexico City, 1900-1931* (Duke University Press, 2001), p. 21.

⁴³ Piccato, p. 13.

⁴⁴ Piccato, p. 13.

⁴⁵ Piccato, p. 21.

⁴⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979); William H. Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club and Other Episodes of Porfirian Mexico*, 2nd edition (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), p. 5.

⁴⁷ Piccato, p. 37.

sensationalistic kinds of crimes, in response to popular demand.⁴⁸ Violence was hugely popular as a topic of news; broadsheet audiences lapped up stories of baby-killers, child-torturers, and devilish outlaws who seemed to systematically elude and defy the police. “Murders, suicides, natural disasters, bullfight gorings, folk heroes: all were eagerly bought up by the capital’s urban peasantry, and taken together, they form a ‘people’s history’ of life in Mexico City during the years bracketing the turn of the twentieth century.”⁴⁹ This popular interest in violence—Posada’s and others’ broadsheet illustrations were the precursors to today’s *notas rojas*, the sensationalistic, often gratuitous photographs of crime scenes available at newsstands throughout the city—had a parallel in ex-votos, as some of the examples below will show.

This discussion of shifting demographics and a widening of the social and cultural distance between rich and poor in the late nineteenth century lays the foundations of a related phenomenon. What seems clearly to have been a numeric increase in the production of ex-votos over the course of the nineteenth century correlates with a demographic shift in the people having them painted. That is, plainly put, more people could afford to commission them. As discussed in Chapter 2, the materials used to paint this devotional art became more available and accessible to people with less money; no longer was the commission of a painting out of reach for the majority, and non-elites took to the practice of offering painted expressions of devotion in thanks for miracles.⁵⁰ Instead of the well-to-do commissioning artworks and the poor leaving estampitas, flowers, or candles, now non-elites, too, could leave something “nicer.” Art forms and devotional practices introduced by elites were appropriated and reconfigured by non-elites, resulting in a “democratization” of devotional forms. (As we will see in the following chapter, photography gave the poor and middle class another way to approximate and give new meaning to “elite” forms of devotional art.) Class differences are immediately apparent in a comparison of colonial-era and later ex-votos, through two principal indicators: textual allusions to their protagonists’ financial situations and levels of education, and visual representation of their material possessions, such as clothing and interiors.

As we saw in Chapter 1, the main themes in colonial ex-votos are recoveries from illness and injuries, and surviving natural disasters and other accidents—such as Dona Inés de Barrios de Sáenz’s commissioned painting giving thanks for the double miracle of surviving an earthquake and giving birth successfully. In contrast to ex-votos of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, *economic* survival does not appear as a major concern in these ex-votos. This may have been partly because the quotidian problem of poverty would have been thought of as an unseemly subject matter for a religious painting, a crude mixing of the sacred and the profane.

⁴⁸ Piccato, pp. 211-212; Patrick Frank, *Posada’s Broadsheets: Mexican Popular Imagery, 1890-1910* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), p. 6. Posada, like so many of the capital’s new arrivals, was a migrant who moved from Aguascalientes to Mexico City in 1888, thus fitting into the demographic trend discussed above.

⁴⁹ Frank, pp. 4-5.

⁵⁰ While it is not inconceivable that non-elites might also have offered painted ex-votos prior to the availability of mass-produced (and thus cheaper) painting materials, the forms that non-elite ex-votos took most likely involved more ephemeral offerings, such as flowers, candles, or metal *milagritos* that were subsequently melted down and recycled.

But just as importantly, the people who commissioned ex-votos prior to the availability of cheaper painting materials did not generally face issues such as hunger, eviction, and the loss of their livelihoods.

Nineteenth-century ex-votos, like the colonial prototypes on which they are based, certainly showcase illness, injury, and natural disasters prominently. Recovery from illness, above all, is the most common theme in ex-votos, even today. But new themes begin cropping up: surviving bandit attacks and war, finding lost oxen, escaping or being freed from prison or execution, interpersonal violence, and other problems in personal relationships.



Figure 5.8: Félix Medina and María R.'s Donation to the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos, 1886 (Source: Bélard and Verrier, *Los exvotos del Occidente de México*, p. 16)

In the ex-voto above, donated to the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos in 1886, a frightening, familiar story is told by Félix Medina and María R. on their way from Celaya to Salamanca, in Guanajuato, in August 1881.⁵¹ It is a terrifying scene, although almost amusingly rendered—the bandits, despite the weapons they brandish, appear in this folk artist's rendering not as threatening brigands so much as cute cartoon characters. However, there was nothing amusing about a bandit attack on a lonely road or by railroad tracks in the nineteenth century, even with the newly-established rural police force to discourage them; Félix and María were fortunate to have escaped with their lives, and knew that their survival was thanks to the intervention of the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos. As in the paintings that introduce this chapter and the one before it, the artist seems to highlight the railroad, this symbol of modernity,

⁵¹ Marianne Bélard and Philippe Verrier, *Los exvotos del Occidente de México*. (México: El Colegio de Michoacán, Centre Français D'Études Mexicaines et Centraméricaines, 1996), p.16.

in conjunction with the bandits as a way of suggesting modernity's somewhat menacing, frightening undertones, its dark side. Paralleling the reception of the new means of transportation in the capital, where “tramways, trains, and automobiles were commonly identified with the worst, most aggressive aspects of modernization,” in rural Guanajuato people did not necessarily view the railroad as a harbinger of good things.⁵² “Progress” brought more material comforts to some, but it also entailed danger.



Figure 5.9: Tomás Cabrera's Gift to the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos (Source: Bélard and Verrier, *Los exvotos del Occidente de México*, p. 17)

In this ex-voto, which bears stylistic resemblance to the one above (but inscribed by a different hand), Tomás Cabrera gives thanks to the same Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos for returning a lost ox.⁵³ The ox was missing for eight days, during which Tomás appealed to the Virgin for help in finding it; in return, he promised her a *retablo*. For a farmer, the loss of an ox was tantamount to the loss of livelihood, and this type of ex-voto becomes increasingly common

⁵² Piccato, p. 24.

⁵³ Bélard and Verrier, *Los exvotos del Occidente de México*. (El Colegio de Michoacán/Centre Français D'Études Mexicaines et Centreaméricaines, 1996), p. 17. Inscription reads: “Berdadero Retrato de Ma. Sa. de San Juan que iso con Tomas Cabrera que abiendosele perdido un buei y duro ocho dias perdido y selo encomendo á esta dibina Señora que le paresiera su buei y le presentaria un retablo donde lo álo amarrado en un bosque. por lo que da gracias. Junio 22 de 1877.” Following this text, faint but possibly in the same handwriting as the previous ex-voto, are inscribed the names Leonardo Cabrera and Demetrio Cabrera, of (illegible), Hidalgo.

in the late nineteenth century, paralleling the demographic shift in ex-voto donors. As more people had access to devotional paintings with which to express their gratitude to their saints, the daily realities that non-elites such as Félix, María, and Tomás experienced became visible.

A highly useful indicator of social class in ex-voto paintings is the text that accompanies nearly all of these offerings. More than just a catalog of names, places and dates, the way that the text is written offers a glimpse into the level of education of the devotee as well as the painter. As the nineteenth century progresses, and even more so in the twentieth, the spelling and grammar of many ex-votos worsens, often dramatically in comparison to ex-votos commissioned by colonial elites. The letters *b* and *v* are often interchangeable, as, for example, in the text of Tomás Cabrera's ex-voto: "Berdadero retrato" and "dibina Señora." This same interchangeability can be seen in the letters *ll* and *y* and *c*, *s*, and *z*, reflecting a phonetic understanding of Spanish spelling (which, to be sure, did not begin to be standardized until 1780 with the publication of the Real Academia Española's *Diccionario de la lengua española*. The *Diccionario* has undergone nearly two dozen editions, and the frequent changes to the Real Academia's rules on spelling in the past 232 years has meant that many of them not been completely internalized, even by educated people). The silent *h* is frequently omitted where orthographically required (for example, *aviendo* instead of *habiendo*, or, to use Tomás Cabrera's example once more, *iso* instead of *hizo*), or used where not required (*hestando* rather than *estando*). At the same time, late nineteenth-century ex-votos generally stick to the legalistic style of recounting events pioneered by their colonial forebears, showing a trickling-down of elite forms, adapted and repurposed for popular needs. The gerund forms of verbs are employed to provide background information (*Estando la Sra. María Pérez en su casa...*), much as they appear in seventeenth- or eighteenth-century legal documents, and in the same vein, the narratives are nearly always presented in the third person, despite the intimate and personal nature of the testimonies.



Figure 5.10: Ex-voto to the Niño de los Atribulados, Guanajuato (Source: Photograph by the author)

In ex-votos that are clearly homemade and not painted by a professional *retablero*, and even in some that are commissioned works, the donors' lack of formal education is also visible in the poorly-understood orthographic rules for capitalization, punctuation, and accents, which are often haphazard or nonexistent. In addition, again reflecting a phonetic understanding of spelling, a word might be split up into syllables ("Mi qey la" for "Micaela"), or joined to other words that through emphasis on particular syllables audially might "flow" together ("Elvisio delaimvria Ges" for "El vicio de la embriaguez").⁵⁴ This is one of the reasons that country people, if they had the means, preferred to commission their ex-votos, rather than making them themselves; for a still-largely illiterate population, being able to donate an ex-voto done "correctly"—made by someone who knew how to write as well as paint—was thought to better honor the saint being thanked. In his prologue to Moisés Gámez and Oresta López's study of ex-votos painted in San Luis Potosí, Claudio Lomnitz dissects and rejects the frequent attribution of the terms "naive" or "ingenuous" to Mexican ex-votos, calling such a characterization paternalistic.⁵⁵ Ex-votos are formulaic, yes, but they are formulaic for a reason: just as a person who didn't know how to write would go to the village scribe for a letter, expecting the scribe to express his spoken thoughts and sentiments by a "recognized formula" that would give weight to

⁵⁴ The text in the above ex-voto (also seen on p. 127) reads: "Mi qey la Alvares Encomendoasuijito Pedro LoPes Al NiNo dios De Los AtrivuladosolviDara Elvisio delaimvria Ges Perdision deLosom vrs Ledan Grasiás Padre mio." (Micaela Alvarez encomendo a su hijito Pedro Lopez al Niño Dios de los Atribulados olvidara el vicio de la embriaguez perdicion de los hombres. Le dan gracias Padre mío.)

⁵⁵ Claudio Lomnitz, "Prólogo," in Moisés Gámez and Oresta López, *Tesoros populares de la devoción. Los exvotos pintados en San Luis Potosí* (San Luis Potosí: Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Instituto de Cultura de San Luis Potosí, El Colegio de San Luis, 2002).

his words, so would someone with no artistic training make use of a *retablero* who specialized in devotional paintings to perform the essential service of visually thanking a saint for a favor received. This “sensitivity of formalism” rejects spontaneity or what we might call artistic creativity, because it would indicate a lack of care; the commissioners of ex-votos sought instead harmonious compositions and recognizable features that were derived from elements they had seen in “high” art in churches. Basing their ex-votos on the religious paintings that adorned churches, and faithfully reproducing the images of saints that circulated in religious prints, poor people could express the “purest sentiments of gratitude” and glory befitting the holy beings who had performed miracles just for them.⁵⁶

Other signifiers of social class in ex-votos are clothing and interiors. The ex-voto of Doña Inés Barrios de Sáenz, as we saw in Chapter 1 (figure 2.11), almost delights in the portrayal of her family’s wealth; her elite status is indicated by giving her full, compound surname, by mentioning the injured servant, and by showing us the accoutrements of a wealthy household, complete with a large, two-storied, stone-built house featuring marble pillars and a tile roof, several well-dressed men in the white wigs favored by eighteenth-century elite men, and two dark-skinned servants—one black, one probably an Indian—as well as one possible source of her family’s wealth, the wine casks in the lower register. Compare this ostentatious display with Félix, María, and the bandits’ apparel and environment (figure 5.8): Félix in a sombrero, María in a *rebozo*, the one bandit whose feet are shown in *huaraches*. (The fact that all of the bandits are in spotless white does not make them well-dressed; they wear the standard loose white cotton garments of the peasantry, also portrayed in Tomás Cabrera’s ex-voto.) Félix and María are surrounded by the bandits as they struggle through the brush, on foot; so poor are they that they cannot even avail themselves of the railroad for transportation.

Interior scenes also show more modest homes and other indicators of material wealth as ex-voto paintings became popularized. As we saw in Chapter 1, figure 2.14, doña Jacinta Camacho’s ex-voto documenting her brush with death shows a less ostentatious domestic interior than doña Inés de Barrios de Sáenz’s palatial-looking house, but it holds a number of material comforts. A late nineteenth-century ex-voto (figure 5.11) showing a similar scene of a sickbed presents quite a different image of the protagonists’ material circumstances.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Lomnitz, p. 12.

⁵⁷ *Gerónimo de León. Pintor de milagros*, coord. Francisco Baños Urquijo (México: Roche, 1996), cat. R-43, p. 49. “El día 11 de Marzo de 1888, la Sa. Da. Lucía Torres Vesina del Rancho de S. Rafael Jurisdiccion de Totatiche, á los quince dias de sanar de una enfermedad natural, se agravó de una mala digestion hasta el extremo de verse en el último término de su vida: y viendo esto su esposo el Sr. D. Gorgonio Jara, y la Señora Da. Lagos Cortines Madre de la citada enferma, que yá no hallaban remedio que hacerle, inbocaron con veras de corazon al Sr. de los Rayos que se venera en Temastian, que le hiciera la merced de darle su salud si le convenía; quien lo oyó benigno y le dio su salud. Precentandole este retablo, para recuerdo de sus beneficios.”



Figure 5.11: Doña Lucía Torres' Invocation to the Señor de los Rayos (Source: *Gerónimo de León. Pintor de milagros*, cat. R-43, p. 49.)

In this painting, doña Lucía Torres had mostly recovered from an illness, when a case of indigestion brought about a recurrence and she became gravely ill once more. Seeing that she was drawing her last breaths, her husband, don Gorgonio Jara, and mother, doña Lagos Cortines, invoked the Señor de los Rayos, and the patient was cured. In contrast to the interior scene in doña Jacinta Cahacho's ex-voto to San Miguel del Milagro, this home is overwhelmingly sparse. Although clean, the room has no furniture save for a humble *petate*—a woven reed mat that has served as bedding for poor Mexicans since ancient times—and a makeshift clothesline holding a towel. The walls are bare, unadorned by even a simple cross; the floor is packed dirt. Doña Lucía's worried husband and mother kneel on the floor, praying. They are dressed in the fashion of the rural peasantry, the woman's head covered by a dark *rebozo*, don Gorgonio in the classic white shirt and pants and *huaraches* of a *campesino*. His sombrero is on the floor, as befits his attitude of prayer and rogation. The only apparent luxury item is his beautifully embroidered *serape*, perhaps lovingly sewn by his sick wife.

This comparison of two interiors, painted about a century apart, shows a vivid contrast in the material wealth of their respective donors. It is, of course, a somewhat simplistic comparison. Not all colonial ex-votos were made for rich patrons, just as not all nineteenth-century ex-votos were commissioned by the poor. The progression from ornate, large format, baroque paintings on canvas to the small, tin-plate *retablos* made by self-taught artisans was a trend on a continuum, never a linear or inexorable "decline" of either the art form or the material circumstances of its

creators. Moreover, non-elites sometimes had themselves portrayed as better off than they actually were, perhaps in order to better honor the saint being thanked. Elites may have introduced ex-votos as an expression of religious devotion, but lower-class people adopted the form once the means to make similar devotional objects became available to them, in the process adapting them to their own needs. At the same time, ex-votos did not become the exclusive province of illiterate peons and urban slum-dwellers; the middle and upper classes did not abandon their religious culture. Still steeped in “traditional” Catholicism, they, too, continued to commission ex-votos when the need arose.

Elías Medina, suffering from a kidney stone, had a medical intervention in Atotonilco in 1895, but to buttress the power of science he also entrusted the operation to the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos (figure 5.12).⁵⁸ The text does not tell us about his occupation and refers only obliquely to his socioeconomic status; by informing us that he has had an operation, we can infer that he had access to a medical doctor (whose instruments can be seen laid out on the table) and that the operation went well, unlike those ex-votos proclaiming that “no human remedy” was available. The other textual indication of Medina’s social status is that he calls his ailment “stone in the urine,” a nearly accurate designation for what is known medically as a urinary stone. (In other ex-votos the condition is colloquially often referred to as “mal de orina.”)



Figure 5.12: Elías Medina’s Medical Intervention (Source: *Dones y promesas*, cat. 194, p. 165)

⁵⁸ *Dones y promesas*, cat. 194, p. 165. “Elías Medina, enfermo gravemente de piedra en la orina, ha sido operado en Atotonilco, y habiéndose encomendado á Ntra. Sra. de S. Juan ha quedado enteramente sano; por lo que dá infinitas gracias á tan Divina Señora y le dedica éste. S. Juan de los Lagos, mayo de 1895.

The visual evidence of Elías Medina's relatively favorable economic circumstances is far more compelling. The four men in the picture are well dressed, in the dark, somber jackets and ties of the professional or upper class. They wear shoes, not *huaraches*, and mustaches; one of them even wears a full beard, indicating a good deal of European ancestry. The large, airy room, presumably the doctor's office, overlooks a lush garden behind a high wall, and is paved with adobe bricks. The graceful bentwood chairs and settee that line the decorative blue and yellow walls, as well as the classical marble urn atop a column and the oriental rug by which the cured Elías Medina kneels in front of the Virgin, are additional markers of prosperity. But notwithstanding his faith in (and access to) medical science, he attributes the successful outcome of his operation to divine intervention, showing that scientific and religious thinking could and did operate on parallel, rather than opposing, tracks in late nineteenth-century Mexico.

This point merits some further exploration. What Elías Medina's ex-voto has in common with those commissioned or painted by Gorgonio Jara and Micaela Alvarez is the use of a similar form of religious expression, a form that in earlier times would only have been available to people with disposable income. However, despite the fact that some wealthy people continued to commission these paintings, ex-votos began to take on a noticeably more "popular" look beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, whether in the artistic skill of the painter, the grammar and orthography of the text, or the subject matter. Ex-votos like Elías Medina's, which show relatively affluent devotees, seemed to wane in inverse proportion to ex-votos given by the less well off. With widening access to them, ex-votos became a popular devotional medium.

The number of ex-votos increased with the number of people undertaking pilgrimages to increasingly far-flung locations throughout the republic. Having heard about the miracle-working powers of different advocations of the Virgin Mary and Christ and aided by somewhat safer travel conditions, thanks in part to the development of the railroad network and to the strengthening of the rural police force, Mexican shrines attracted pilgrims from beyond the immediate vicinity. Tepeyac, Plateros, San Juan de los Lagos, and other shrines all experienced significant growth as more and more visitors made the journeys to fulfill a *manda* or to ask for divine protection in the late nineteenth century.⁵⁹ Still, even though some prosperous devotees

⁵⁹ Juan Javier Pescador, *Crossing Borders with the Santo Niño de Atocha* (University of New Mexico Press, 2009); Elin Luque and Michelle Beltrán, "Algunas consideraciones sobre los exvotos pictóricos de tema guadalupano siglos XIX y XX de la colección del Museo de la Basílica de Guadalupe" (M.A. thesis, Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico 2001); Marianne Bélard and Philippe Verrier, *Los exvotos del Occidente de México* (El Colegio de Michoacán, 1996); For the beginnings of rotating pilgrimage dates from different parishes within the Archdiocese of Mexico, see AHAM, Base de Pelagio Antonio de Labastida y Dávalos, Caja 224, exp. 54. Sección: Secretaría Arzobispal, Serie: Correspondencia Año: 1884. Manuel García, de la Colegiata de Guadalupe, sobre peregrinación de Puebla; AHAM, Base Próspero María Alarcón. Caja 8, exp. 31, 2 fs. Sección: Secretaría Arzobispal, Serie: Parroquias. Año 1892. Teotihuacán. El párroco don Antonio Fonseca sobre que desea venir con una peregrinación al santuario de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe; AHAM, Base Próspero María Alarcón. Caja 33, exp. 79, 6 fs. Sección: Secretaría arzobispal, Serie: Asociación Pía. Año 1894. Varias corporaciones sacramentarias con relación a una peregrinación a la villa de Guadalupe, AHAM, Base Próspero María Alarcón. Caja 37, exp. 48, 2 fs. Sección: Secretaría Arzobispal, Serie: Catedral de Durango. Año 1894. Durango. Lista de la jerarquía eclesiástica de allá que viene en peregrinación a Guadalupe; AHAM, Base Prospero María Alarcon. Caja 44, exp. 6, 2 fs. Sección: Secretaría arzobispal, Serie: Eclesiástico. Año 1895. Concediendo licencias ministeriales a los presbíteros

like Elías Medina continued to commission painted ex-votos, these votive offerings, like the tradition of photographing deceased children, became increasingly associated with the poor. Wealthier Catholics tended to express their piety in other ways, such as by joining and participating in the activities of dues-paying lay associations and prayer circles. Those who could afford it went to the Holy Land or other far-flung pilgrimage sites in Europe and South America, perhaps bringing a token of appreciation to the saint in question. And while Mexican ex-votos have long been exceptional for the amount of text they incorporate into the visual expression of thanks, in comparison to Italian, French, and German ex-votos,⁶⁰ some grateful devotees began to publish simple *acciones de gracias* in cofradía newsletters, eschewing visual imagery altogether.⁶¹ Despite their lack of visual images, these expressions of thanks “read” in ways similar to the texts in ex-voto paintings.⁶²

de la peregrinación de Córdoba; AHAM, Base Prospero María Alarcon. Caja 46, exp. 53, 2 fs. Sección: Secretaria arzobispal, Serie: Catedral de Durango. Año 1895. Durango. El señor canónigo don Filemón Fierro con relación a la peregrinación Guadalupana; AHAM, Base Prospero María Alarcon. Caja 48, exp. 80, 2 fs. Sección: Secretaria arzobispal, Serie: Parroquias. Año 1895. Tlalpan. El señor cura con respecto a una peregrinación; AHAM, Base Próspero María Alarcón. Caja 82, exp. 5, 2 fs. Sección: Secretaria arzobispal, Serie: Catedral de Querétaro. Año 1899. Querétaro. Con respecto a la peregrinación; AHAM, Base Próspero María Alarcón. Caja 84, exp. 67, 5 fs. Sección: Secretaria arzobispal, Serie: Parroquia. Año 1899. Texcoco. Con respecto a una peregrinación; AHAM, Base Próspero María Alarcón. Caja 85, exp. 23, 69 fs. Sección: Secretaria arzobispal, Serie: Índice. Año 1899. Con respecto a la peregrinación infantil; AHAM, Base Próspero María Alarcón. Caja 96, exp. 28, 3 fs. Sección: Secretaria arzobispal, Serie: Parroquia. Año 1901. Pachuca. El párroco con respecto a una peregrinación; AHAM, Base Próspero María Alarcón. Caja 117, exp. 60, 2 fs. Sección: Secretaria arzobispal, Serie: Parroquia. Año 1903. Tlalpan. El párroco con relación a la peregrinación de niños; AHAM, Base Próspero María Alarcón. Caja 122, exp. 79, 3 fs. Sección: Secretaria arzobispal, Serie: Colegiata de Guadalupe. Año 1905. Con respecto a la peregrinación a la Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe; AHAM, Base Prospero María Alarcon. Caja 128, exp. 16, 4 fs. Sección: Secretaria arzobispal, Serie: Circular. Año 1906. Decreto del ilustrísimo señor arzobispo sobre la peregrinación a la Basílica el 12 de enero; AHAM, Base Prospero María Alarcon. Caja 128, exp. 26, 4 fs. Sección: Secretaria arzobispal, Serie: Parroquia. Año 1906. El presbítero don Santiago Garza Treviño con relación a peregrinaciones al santuario de los Remedios; AHAM, Base Prospero María Alarcon. Caja 128, exp. 52, 2 fs. Sección: Secretaria arzobispal, Serie: Catedral de Aguascalientes. Año 1906. Aguascalientes. El señor obispo con respecto a la peregrinación de la Basílica de Guadalupe; AHAM, Base Prospero María Alarcon. Caja 134, exp. 6, 2 fs. Sección: Secretaria arzobispal, Serie: Catedral de Querétaro. Año 1908. Querétaro. Con respecto a la peregrinación a la basílica.

⁶⁰ Eli Bartra, *Women in Mexican Folk Art: Of Promises, Betrayals, Monsters and Celebrities* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), pp. 30-32.

⁶¹ See, for example, AHAM, Base Labastida y Dávalos, Fondo Episcopal, Sección S.A., Serie Asociación Pía. Caja 9, Exp. 77, 1907. One such *acción de gracias* reads: “Doy infinitas gracias al Divino Rostro por haberme concedido el siguiente favor, habiendo estado mi hermano Alberto muy grave de un tumor lo encomendé al Divino Rostro y le unté el aceite y en el momento le reventó el tumor, y ahora lo tenemos gracias á Dios completamente bueno. Rosario López.”

⁶² For example, AHBG/Biblioteca Lorenzo Boturini, *La Voz Guadalupana*, Anales de la Basílica, Epoca IV, número 1, 12 de octubre de 1937: “Nicolás Díaz, recuerda que en el año 1914 en el pueblo de Jalpa, Zacatecas, en un terrible combate entre las defensas sociales y los revolucionarios de la región, que eran como 4,000, siendo los de la defensa sólo la mitad, el punto más expuesto del combate era un Santuario de la Virgen de Guadalupe, a la que los de las defensas se encomendaban con toda su alma; y resultó que aunque éstos perdieron en el combate, ni solo una muerte tuvieron, mientras que los revolucionarios atacantes perdieron como 300 hombres, que allí mismo él vió enterrar. Después huyendo toda la gente del pueblo, los acometieron con ametralladora los revolucionarios, por los

Sometimes the evidence for ex-votos' democratization in the late nineteenth century comes in the form of the mentalities they project onto the objects of their donors' devotion. The subject of the ex-voto below, Zenón Parra, suffered from dysentery for nearly two years; so grave was his condition that he was close to death on several occasions. Doctors threw up their hands and according to "human opinion," he had no other remedy but to die. But "having placed his heart, his hope, in this sacrosanct image of the Lord of the Column, he re-established his health."⁶³



Figure 5.13: Ex-voto of Zenón Parra by Hermenegildo Bustos (Source: Tibol, *Hermenegildo Bustos, pintor del pueblo*, plate 16)

caminos, y tampoco mataron a alguno. Finalmente huyendo él mismo por la falda de un cerro, se encontró frente a cuatro de los enemigos, que le dispararon una gran cantidad de tiros, a 60 pasos de distancia, y ni sólo uno le tocó, optando al fin por tumbarse como si estuviera muerto. Los revolucionarios se fueron y a las pocas horas se levantó sano y salvo. Sólo una protección especialísima de la Virgen de Guadalupe, a quien se encomendaban todos puede explicar este caso, y por eso aun ahora le está agradecido y publica nuevamente tan gran beneficio.”

⁶³ “De el Mes de Mayo de 1858 al año de 1860. (En) toda esta época ajusto año ocho meses que padecía Dn. Zenon Parra de una gravisima enfermedad de decinteria al grado de agonizar varias veses. desa(piado) por algunos medicos, pues no habia ya remedio alguno que le proba() bien y segun la opinion humana (no) tenia mas remedio qe. morir. segun lo es-(per)imentado en esta enfermedad. y havien-(do) puesto su corazon, su esperansa, en esta (sa)crosanta imagen del Señor de la (Col)umna, se llegó árestablecer su salud y quedo enteramente sano por maraviya del Señor.” In Raquel Tibol, *Hermenegildo Bustos, pintor del pueblo* (Guanajuato: Gobierno del Estado de Guanajuato, 1981) pl. 16. Collection of María Luisa Piña, widow of Aceves.

As with the ex-voto commissioned with the intention of thanking the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos for her intervention during a bandit attack (figure 5.8), Zenón Parra's ex-voto points to his "tenuous" relationship with state institutions, such as hospitals.⁶⁴ Mexico's Instituto Mexicano de Seguro Social, the national health care organization, was not created until Lázaro Cárdenas's revolutionary presidency in the 1930s; the kind of medical care available to nineteenth-century Guanajuatans would have primarily consisted of country doctors trained, perhaps, in regional capitals, if they were lucky to have had access to a trained physician at all. The Lord of the Column was, to Zenón Parra, a far more reliable healer of dysentery and other serious illnesses, as evidenced by his absolute faith in his efficacy after all human interventions had been exhausted (one only resorted to divine intervention in the most serious cases).

This same rejection of rudimentary medical science in favor of proven supernatural methods is evident in another ex-voto by Hermenegildo Bustos. In 1863, Pedro de la Rosa, a soap-maker in a factory who had been suffering from a leg wound for twenty-seven years, was at his wits' end (figure 5.14). He was gravely ill and could find no relief in human remedies; neither doctors nor anyone else had helped him. He commended himself to the Lord of the Column, promising a silver milagrito in the shape of a leg and this ex-voto if the Christ figure gave him relief. He presented both offerings as a testament to his marvels and so that the devotion to him might grow among his devotees.⁶⁵ His working-class occupation of soap-maker highlights my observation that by the second half of the nineteenth century elite ex-votos were waning in inverse proportion to the upsurge of popular ones.

⁶⁴ Claudio Lomnitz, "Prólogo," in Gámez and López, *Tesoros populares*, p. 13. Lomnitz mentions this tenuous relationship with the state as an indicator of lower-class mentalities and realities.

⁶⁵ "En el Pueblo de S. Francisco del Rincon, á 29. de Mayo de 1863 Pedro de la Rosa, jabonero de la fabrica del Sr. D. Ysidro Ca(rr)ena 27. años hacía, que padecía de una llaga en una pierna, y (hal)landose grabemente malo sin encontrar alivio en lo humano; (ni r)emedios de los medicos y de otras barias personas: se encomendó al S(eñ)or de la Columna que se benera en esta parroquia prometiendole si con(seg)uia su alibio una piernita de plata y este retablo que le presentó para (testa)mento de sus marabillas; y que cresca mas la debocion en sus devotos." In Tibol, plate 31. Collection of María Luisa Piña, widow of Aceves.

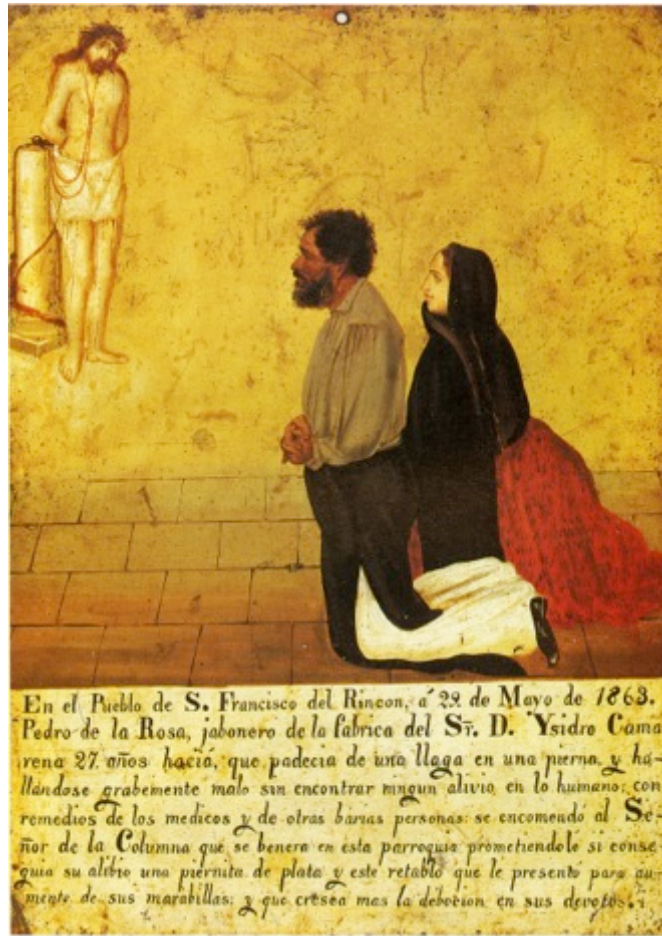


Figure 5.14: Pedro de la Rosa's Promise, 1863 (Source: Tibol, *Hermenegildo Bustos, pintor del pueblo*, plate 31)

Several noteworthy issues emerge in these two ex-votos. Their donors both highlight the inefficacy of human intervention and show little faith in modern medicine. No doctors could help them, although they tried. In rural Guanajuato in the mid-nineteenth century, medical science had not yet progressed to a level where it had begun to displace faith in holy beings; little secularization is evident in these recountings of human suffering. Even the apparently upper middle-class Elías Medina, who had a successful medical procedure to treat his kidney stone (figure 5.12), ultimately credited and thanked the Virgin of San Juan for his recovery. Also noteworthy is the conceptualization of the presence of the divine in the image. Zenón Parra specifically commends himself to the *image* of Christ of the Column; Pedro de la Rosa, whose profession of factory worker indicates a lower social class, does not make the distinction between being and image. He does, however, highlight the reciprocal nature of the deal between himself and Christ, whereas this reciprocity is merely implied in Parra's ex-voto. He promises a milagrero and an ex-voto *in exchange* for being healed.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ This attitude of bargaining is also noted by Thomas Calvo, "Milagros, milagrosos y retablos: introducción al estudio de los exvotos del occidente de México," in Bélard and Verrier, *Los exvotos del occidente de México*, p. 16.

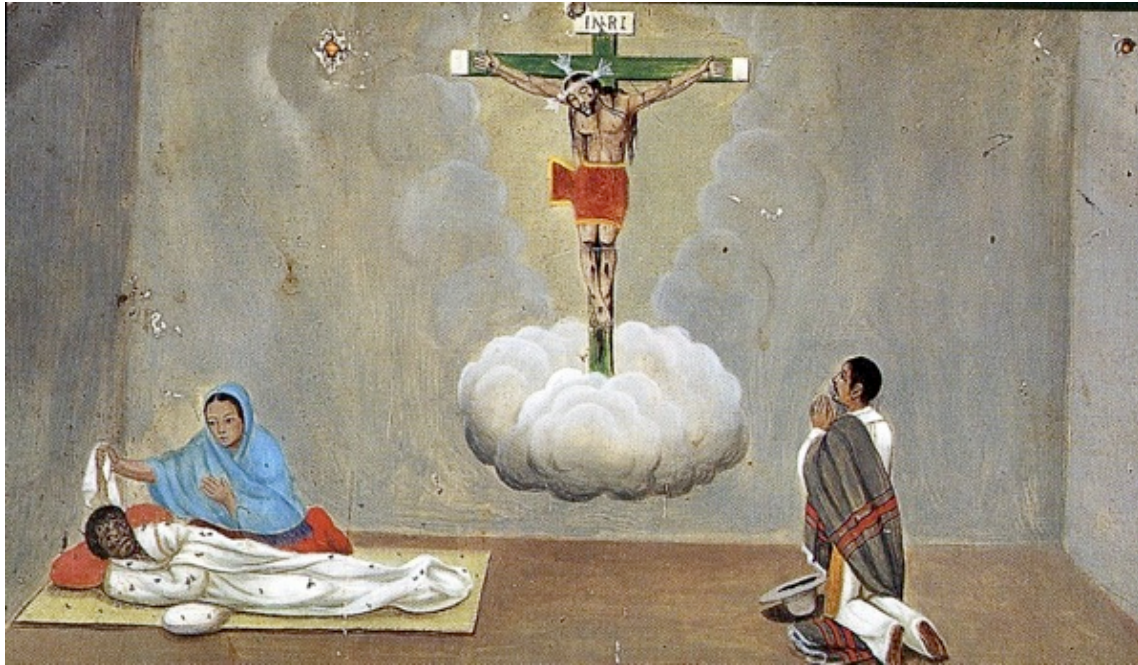


Figure 5.15: Ex-voto to the Señor de los Rayos, 1893 (Source: *Gerónimo de León*, p. 58, cat. R-49)

When interiors are depicted in late nineteenth-century ex-votos, rooms are often spare and contain few furnishings save for a *petate* upon which a sick devotee rests and a requisite crucifix or religious painting, fitting in with contemporary descriptions of the material culture of the peasantry.⁶⁷ The text in Gerónimo de León's ex-voto thanking the Señor de los Rayos for saving a youth from the ravages of measles (*alfombrilla*) references God as a "Divine Doctor"; Claudio Lomnitz would call this attitude indicative of a lower-class mentality, one that did not trust science and modern medicine, due to a lack of familiarity with state institutions.⁶⁸ The boy's mother tries to fan her son with a cloth, waving away the flies that have gathered around the pustules on his body. His father, meanwhile, prays to the Christ figure in roughly the same position as don Gorgonio Jara does in the ex-voto, also by Gerónimo de León, on page 37. Their poverty is evident in the sparse furnishings of the room and in the lack of a medical doctor, in that their only hope for their son's recovery was divine intervention.

⁶⁷ See William Beezley, "Rocks and Rawhide," in *Judas and the Jockey Club*.

⁶⁸ In *Gerónimo de León, pintor de milagros*, p. 58, cat. R-49. En el año de 1893, por el mes de Diciembre, cayó gravemente enfermo de alfombrilla, un Joven de edad de 15 años; pero tan Formidablemente, que viendo su padre el estado en que la enfermedad lo había puesto, que era una compasión verlo, con todo su corazón aclamó al Sr. de los Rayos, que como Médico Divino lo limiara de aquella espantosa lepra; como así sucedió; pues dentro de poco, se vió enteramente sano. See Lomnitz, "Prólogo," in Gámez and López, *Tesoros populares*, p. 13.

Another unit of analysis that can be employed to record changes in religious culture/ex-voto production over the course of the nineteenth century is the apparent increased female presence in ex-votos, both as subjects and as commissioners (though not as artists). Women have figured in Mexican ex-voto paintings since colonial times, but the increase in ex-voto production in the second half of the nineteenth century was a gendered increase, that is, a higher proportion of ex-votos seems to have featured women—either as protagonists or as commissioners—than in the colonial or early national period. Again, this statement must carry a caveat: since it is impossible to know the number of ex-votos produced in any given period, it is also impossible to make definite claims about whether women's presence in ex-voto production increased, and if so, to what degree. However, since the sample from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is quite large, at the very least we can make some general statements regarding not only the social makeup of ex-voto donors, but also their gendered aspects. In many cases, social class and gender are overlapping issues, particularly in ex-votos that detail domestic and interpersonal violence, as we shall see below.

Tying together the themes of class and gender in this study of changes in devotional visual culture is rural Mexico's gradual transition from a primarily agricultural society to a more diverse economic base during the Porfiriato and later. Susie Porter notes that women's increased participation in the labor force in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was "intimately intertwined with the evolution of class relations. As a material and cultural process, industrialization resulted from and gave new life to new relations of work, the rise of a class-bound society, and new places for women within class distinctions."⁶⁹ Not only were class and gender relations in flux as a result of industrialization, but family dynamics were also changing. Heather Fowler-Salamini and Mary Kay Vaughan's collection of essays on women in rural Mexico pinpoints the 1880s, with the building of railroads, political stabilization, and legal reforms, as marking the advent of modern capitalist development, although the authors are careful to point out that women had been in the domestic and agricultural work force long before the Porfiriato.⁷⁰ The political and social ramifications of this development included a challenge to Mexico's patriarchy, with women's increased buying power in the economy changing the types of transactions conducted in the cultural and religious spheres as well as in other areas. As Patricia Arias points out,

Despite their restrictions, women found a way to obtain monetary resources. The railroad made it possible to transport food from the highlands of Jalisco and Michoacán to Mexico City and generalized and feminized the old traditions of

⁶⁹ Susie S. Porter, *Working Women in Mexico City: Public Discourses and Material Conditions, 1879-1931* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003), p. xv.

⁷⁰ Heather Fowler-Salamini and Mary Kay Vaughan, eds., *Women of the Mexican Countryside, 1850-1990* (Tucson and London: University of Arizona Press, 1994), p. xvii.

raising and fattening pigs and chickens and selling eggs...The money they earned was used to cover the endless round of daily expenses, but it also allowed the purchase of novelties, which reached even the smallest and most distant places in the Porfiriato.⁷¹

While the most prized novelty in Arias's study was the Singer sewing machine, other possible uses for extra cash could surely have included an ex-voto commissioned in fulfillment of a promise to the Virgin Mary. As John French and Daniel James write in their edited work on female workers in Latin America, "...the fact that women worked outside the home was bound to have an impact on the dynamics of power within the patriarchal structure of the family. To the extent that wage earning by women lessened economic dependency, even if only slightly...it did provide women with somewhat greater leverage vis-à-vis their male partners."⁷² Women's increased economic independence, resulting from their low-wage factory or domestic jobs, helped them play a greater role in their families' religious activities, and could be a factor in both the upswing in ex-voto production and in women's increased visibility in these public testimonials of the efficacy of the saints.

Little has been written about women and religion in nineteenth-century Mexico, much less about women and ex-votos. One important exception is Patricia Arias and Jorge Durand's *La enferma eterna. Mujer y exvoto en México, siglos XIX y XXI* (2002).⁷³ This work analyzes ex-votos found at twelve shrines concentrated in the central-northwestern states of Mexico, Guanajuato, Jalisco, San Luis Potosí, and Zacatecas. The authors make the claim that beginning in the late nineteenth century, women began to figure prominently either as protagonists, or, more frequently, as commissioners of ex-votos on someone else's behalf. Women prayed to various saints for the recovery from illness of their husbands, sons, and daughters; for their sons' release from prison; for better treatment by their husbands; for the safe crossing of their family

⁷¹ Patricia Arias, "Three Microhistories of Women's Work in Rural Mexico," in Fowler-Salamini and Vaughan, *Women of the Mexican Countryside*, p. 164.

⁷² John D. French and Daniel James, "Squaring the Circle: Women's Factory Labor, Gender Ideology, and Necessity," in John D. French and Daniel James, eds., *The Gendered Worlds of Latin American Women Workers: From Household and Factory to the Union Hall and the Ballot Box* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 12.

⁷³ Other exceptions include Eli Bartra, *Women in Mexican Folk Art: Of Promises, Betrayals, Monsters, and Celebrities* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), and María Rodríguez-Shadow, "Women's Prayers: The Aesthetics and Meaning of Female Votive Paintings in Chalma," in Eli Bartra (ed.), *Crafting Gender: Women and Folk Art in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2003). Patricia Campos Rodríguez has written about a rare female ex-voto painter, Josefina Camarillo de Avila, in *El Niño de la Cruzada, protector del migrante. Un estudio histórico sociológico* (Guanajuato: Universidad de Guanajuato, 2008), and an article on women's daily lives as seen through their devotion to Guanajuato's Niño de los Milagros, "El epistolario del 'Niño de los Milagros': Las angustias cotidianas de la mujer," in Norma Gutiérrez Hernández, Emilia Recéndez Guerrero, Diana Arauz Mercado, and Cirila Cervera Delgado (coords.), *Voces en ascenso. Investigaciones sobre mujeres y perspectiva de género* (Zacatecas: Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas, Instituto para las Mujeres Zacatecanas, 2010).

members to the United States.⁷⁴ As with other studies, they have little to say about actual numbers of ex-votos commissioned by women, but they pay special attention to the kinds of miracles experienced by women devotees.

One gendered theme that appears with increasing frequency in the nineteenth century is interpersonal violence. While in the colonial period the most frequent themes in painted ex-votos were the recovery of health, and, to a lesser extent, surviving natural disasters, in the nineteenth century interpersonal violence began appearing with increasing frequency, for both women and men. We have seen examples of institutionalized violence, such as the ex-votos commissioned to give thanks for divine intercession during war, the draft, or other confrontations with the military (see Chapter 2), and also of the violence experienced by victims of banditry (see figure 5.8). In the following images, another kind of violence, domestic and told from a female perspective, makes its debut as a motif. They expose a topic seldom discussed but consistently present in lower-class Mexican life.⁷⁵ The reticence with which wife-beating and other forms of domestic abuse has historically been treated in Mexico—as a “family matter,” not something that its victims had the right to challenge, and certainly not something that ought to be brazenly publicized on a church wall—points to a “hegemony” of permissible topics in ex-votos. Patricia Arias and Jorge Durand argue that in the nineteenth century, as women began to outpace men in commissioning ex-votos, the accepted themes worthy of thanking in *retablos* continued to be “incredibly restricted” to illnesses and accidents.⁷⁶ Citing Jean Franco, they write that ex-votos projected an image of women that unnamed social forces (but surely meaning patriarchal society and its instrument of social control, the Catholic church) sought to imbue and reinforce: “the classic themes of the ex-voto can be seen as hegemonic narrations” which assigned women to “‘their place in the social text.’”⁷⁷ In other words, the proper image for femininity was that of a mother, a caretaker, and a martyr.⁷⁸ Arias and Durand found just three published ex-votos (they acknowledge that they do not take into account those shown in churches) that address tensions and problems in social relations; one dealing with rape, another with an accusation of illegitimacy, and one that refers to adultery.⁷⁹ The following images provide evidence that the

⁷⁴ On migrants’ ex-votos, see Jorge Durand and Douglas Massey, *Miracles on the Border: Retablos of Mexican Migrants to the United States* (Tucson and London: University of Arizona Press, 1995); and Christina Heisser, “Thanks to the Virgin of San Juan: Migration and Transnational Devotion during the ‘Mexican Miracle,’ 1940-1970” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 2012).

⁷⁵ William B. Taylor, *Drinking, Homicide and Rebellion in Colonial Mexican Villages* (Stanford, 1979); Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sánchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (Vintage Books, 1963).

⁷⁶ Patricia Arias and Jorge Durand, *La enferma eterna. Mujer y exvoto en México, siglos XIX y XX* (Universidad de Guadalajara, El Colegio de San Luis, 2002), pp. 46-47.

⁷⁷ Arias and Durand, p. 46; Jean Franco, *Las conspiradoras. La representación de la mujer en México* (México: FCE, 1993): 12. (English edition: *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico*. Columbia, 1989).

⁷⁸ This description of normative femininity has also been advanced by Susie Porter. In *Working Women in Mexico City*, she writes: “For Latin America, scholars have identified these norms as self-denial, motherhood, chastity, religious piety, and domesticity. In 1973 Evelyn P. Stevens first used the term *marianismo* to describe normative femininity, tracing its cultural origins to the veneration of the Virgin Mary and the culture of chastity.” (p. xvi.)

motif was more common than Arias and Durand's few examples suggest, but the existence of ex-votos depicting domestic violence and other types of disturbances is nonetheless surprising in a culture that supposedly glorifies women's self-abnegation and submission to men. On the contrary, they seem to indicate that Mexican women could and did speak out against injustices and abuse directed at them, a far cry from Evelyn Stevens's *marianismo*.



Figure 5.16: Ana María de Salado's Invocation to the Virgin of Soledad (Source: *Dones y promesas*, cat. 225, p. 175)

Ana María de Salado was the victim of gossip ("malas lenguas") rumoring her to have cheated on her husband. When Sr. Salado heard the rumors, he became enraged and threatened to kill her. She invoked the Virgin of Soledad, who, as an all-knowing divine protectress, helped

⁷⁹ Arias and Durand, p. 47.

her to convince her husband that the defamatory hearsay was false, and return to his senses and desist from his murderous intentions.⁸⁰



Figure 5.17: Ex-voto to the Niño Salvador de Morelia (Source: *Dones y promesas*, cat. 231, p. 176)

Another ex-voto thanks the Niño Salvador de Morelia for intervening on the donor's behalf in a near-death experience.⁸¹ This woman's husband had taken her outside at night with the intention of killing her, and had already tied her up to deliver the fatal blow when her appeals to the Child Jesus were heard.

⁸⁰ *Dones y promesas*, cat. 225, p. 175. "Dedico este Retablo a la Sma Virgen de la Soledad que me salvo de la ira de mi esposo pretendia matarme por que malas lenguas le contaron que yo engañaba como esto era una vil calumnia ila Sma. Virgen todo lo sabe lo hize entrar en razon i me salve de morir por malas lenguas. Ana Maria S. de Salado.

⁸¹ *Dones y promesas*, cat. 231, p. 176. "habiendome sacado mi esposo... [] de noche para quitarme la vida y aviendome lla amarrada para esperar el golpe mortal aclame al Niño Salvador de Morelia y fui hoyda en mi petision Hoy le doy las gracias poniendole el presente retablo Ma. [Teresa...] [1919]."



Figure 5.18: Ex-voto to the Virgin of Soledad, 1886 (Source: *Dones y promesas*, cat. 222, p. 174)

In 1886, the husband of Francisca López, Marcial Avila, was stabbed by an “offended husband,” presumably because of an illicit involvement with that man’s wife.⁸² He stumbled and collapsed, unable to go on; feeling death approaching, he and Francisca invoked the intervention of the Virgin of Soledad to save his life. He promised the Virgin a retablo, but more importantly, he promised to *mend his ways* and end his adultery. While this ex-voto involves male-on-male violence, it was caused by an extramarital affair that Francisca López must have known about. The humiliated wife is thus the victim of a different kind of violence, emotional not physical, and participates in the thanksgiving action partly out of gratitude for her husband’s life, but also because she appreciates his newfound fidelity to her.

⁸² *Dones y promesas*, cat. 222, p. 174. “En el mes de Fevrero de 1886 fue apuñalado Marsial Avila por un marido ofendido que le dio tres en el pecho con un BerDuguillo cuando caminaba por Jesus Maria y llenlo a los tres no pudo mas y se rindio en lo humano que sentia el ansia de la muerte. Y estando en tal trance que sentia que la vida se la escapaba el y su muger Francisca Lopez invocaron con todo su corazon el ausilio de Ma. Sma. de la Soledad de Sta. Cruz con lo que salvo la vida prometiendo enmendar su vida y ofrecerle este retablo. Mejico 1886.

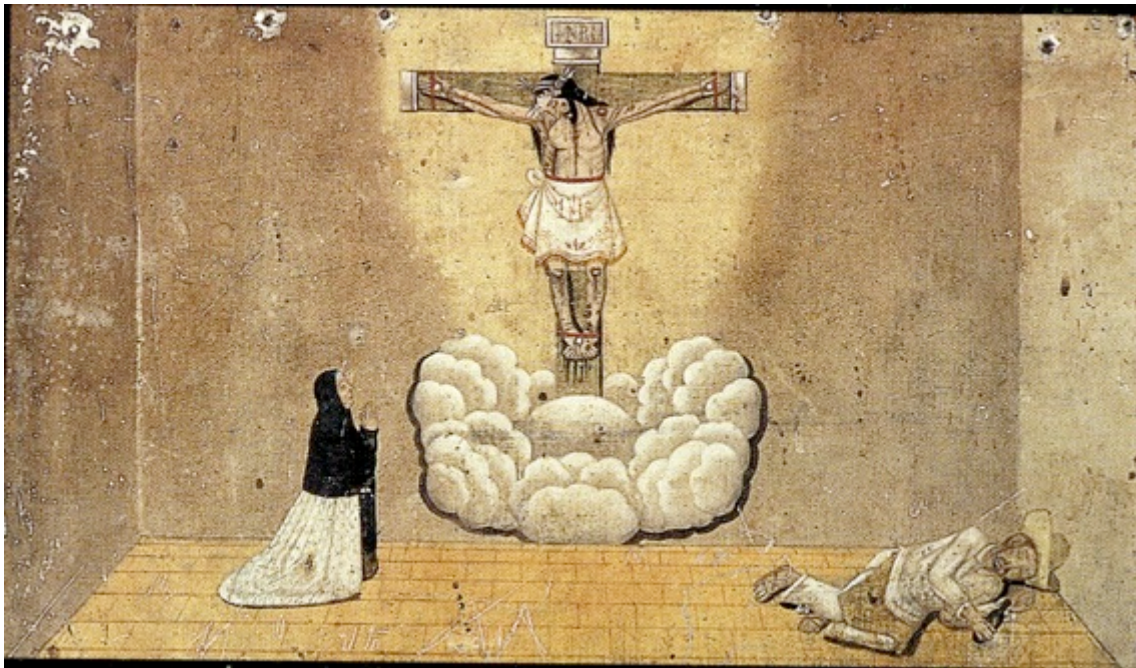


Figure 5.19: Ex-voto to the Señor de los Rayos (Source: *Gerónimo de León*, cat. 82, pp. 95, 124)

In the example above, another serious domestic stressor—alcoholism—is named and recorded in the “social text.” The donor, a devout woman, thanks the Señor de los Rayos for setting her husband on the right path to salvation: having gone from a passed-out drunk “dissipated” by alcohol, on the verge of atheism, he had had a change of heart due to her prayers, and no longer drank as before. More importantly, he now went to confession.⁸³ Despite the post-Reforma fears of the Catholic hierarchy, the sacraments of the church were still relevant to Mexicans; it is telling that this woman’s main concern was not that her husband regularly drank to inebriation and unconsciousness, but that he was neglecting his religious duties as a result. At the same time, the fact that she makes a bigger issue out of her husband’s “religious indifference” than his alcoholism itself alludes to the “hegemony” of permissible topics for discussion in these public displays of gratitude for miracles. Could his failure to go to confession and his pulling away from the church have been the worst consequences of his drunkenness? Is there something else she is not telling us? He may not have beat her while drunk, but perhaps he failed to go to work, causing financial stress in the household. However, if we take the text at face value and believe that his alcohol-fueled impiety was the only problem she perceived, it is

⁸³ Esta señora sufría mucho en su alma, el ver, que su esposo se dicipaba mucho en el alcohol á tal grado que ya entraba en el indiferentismo pués ya no hacía casi aprecio de confesarse ni de otros sentimientos de Religión. Aclamó al Sr. de los Rayos con todo su corazón y el Sr. lo oyó piadoso y á cambiado su corazón de su esposo, que ya a la presente ya no toma como antes y de consiguiente ya se confiesa. En agradecimiento de este beneficio, publica esta maravilla la dicha Señora por medio del presente retablo donde se ve prostrada dándole al Sr. infinitas gracias. In *Gerónimo de León. Pintor de milagros*, coord. Francisco Baños Urquijo (México, D.F.: Roche, 1996), cat. 82, pp. 95, 124.

nonetheless significant that she was, in a way, enlisting the church in a campaign to expose him and mend his ways.

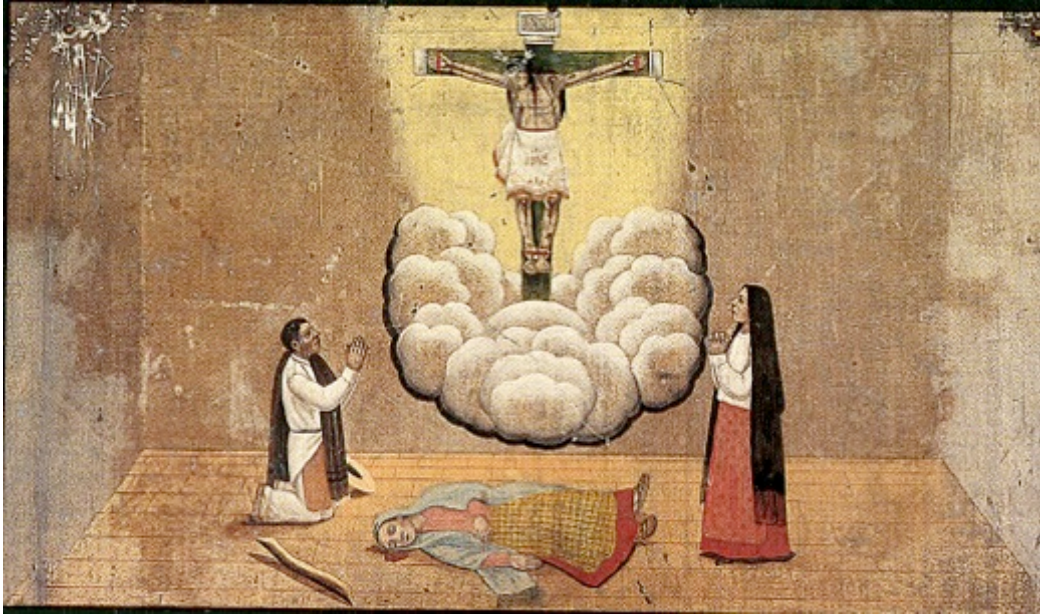


Figure 5.20: Sebastián Contreras's Invocation to the Señor de los Rayos (Source: *Gerónimo de León*, cat. 85, pp. 100, 124)

The topic of domestic violence could also be broached by a repentant male. In the above ex-voto (by the same artist, Gerónimo de León), Sebastián Contreras, in a fit of rage and “lack of good sense,” hit his wife with a piece of kindling, causing her to fall to the floor with a bleeding head wound.⁸⁴ The text in this painting is partly illegible, so we do not know what the outcome of this attack was. But Sr. Contreras and another woman, perhaps his mother-in-law, are depicted praying to the Señor de los Rayos in desperation, with the injured wife lying in between them. The crucified Christ looks down on Sra. de Contreras, imbuing her with his resuscitating power.

⁸⁴ *Gerónimo de León*, cat. 85, pp. 100, 124. “Por el mes de Marzo del año de 1906. Aconteció al Sr. D. Seasteán Contreras vecino del rancho [...] comprensión de [...] El que, por violencia y falta de cordura, y un momento de arrebato, le pegó a su esposa con un leño en la cabeza del cual golpe le derribó al suelo [...] que había cometido [...] rando haber matado a su esposa [...]



Figure 5.21: Anonymous ex-voto to the Señor de la Misericordia (a.k.a. el Señor de la Humildad), Parroquia del Perpetuo Socorro, Guanajuato (Photograph courtesy of Patricia Campos Rodríguez)

Domestic problems have proved to be an enduring theme in women's ex-votos. In this undated (most likely from the late twentieth century) ex-voto dedicated to the Señor de la Misericordia (in other paintings from this church, the patron saint is referred to as the Señor de la Humildad), its anonymous donor begs the *Ecce Homo* figure to remove her husband's "evil habits," alluding to his infidelity or other form of trickery and betrayal, and to make peace with her and with his parents. She plaintively notes that her life has been a torment. (Here, her words seem to fit the definition of self-denying *marianismo*, the woman as long-suffering martyr.)



Figure 5.22: Anonymous ex-voto to the Señor de la Humildad, Parroquia del Perpetuo Socorro, Guanajuato (Source: Photograph courtesy of Patricia Campos Rodríguez)

In this ex-voto from the same church, dated 1984 and by all appearances painted by the same artist, Adriana Ramírez Zacarias thanks the Señor de la Humildad for her husband, “who returned to us.” She does not explain his motivations for leaving his family, but we can speculate that relational difficulties played a part, that there may have been another woman. Male migration to the United States was certainly a cause for the breakup of many Mexican families in the twentieth century, but the way she phrases her thanks makes it seem that she perceives his departure in wholly negative terms, without any of the financial benefit that might have come from his going north (or anywhere else) for work.



Figure 5.23: Ex-voto to the Señor de la Humildad, Parroquia del Perpetuo Socorro, Guanajuato (Source: Photograph courtesy of Patricia Campos Rodríguez)

In this undated ex-voto from the same church, again appearing to be by the same artist as the two above examples, but this time giving the painter's business address (Retablos Altamirano #455), the donor, Lucía Zacarias, thanks the Señor de la Humildad for returning her wayward son to her. A detail of interest here is that this mother may be a relative of Adriana Ramírez Zacarias, whose ex-voto is seen above; they share the surname Zacarias and Lucía's son is a Ramírez. If they are indeed related, it supports the pattern of local devotions to Catholic holy beings, spread through family ties, that has been advanced by authors from William Christian to William Taylor, and by my own interviews with parishioners at the shrine of San Miguel del Milagro in Tlaxcala.⁸⁵

In the discussion of gender as a unit of analysis in Mexican ex-votos, we should not leave out men as protagonists. Male-on-male violence also began to appear as a theme of ex-voto paintings toward the later part of the nineteenth century. In addition to the paintings discussed

⁸⁵ William Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton 1981); William B. Taylor, *Magistrates of the Sacred: Priests and Parishioners in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (Stanford 1996); interviews with Zenón Ramírez Palma and Reynalda Vega Picil, Nativitas, Tlaxcala, September 2008. Doña Reynalda's father, Manuel Vega Guzmán, was a "propagandist of the devotion" to San Miguel, while don Zenón had a personal intervention by San Miguel and the Virgin of Guadalupe one night in 1976, when he was attacked by a gun-wielding group of drunks, and now carries the torch to both of these holy beings by teaching his children about their powers (and by going on pilgrimage to their shrines when he was younger).

above, of the bandit attack (fig. 5.8), and the man stabbed by a jealous husband (fig. 5.18), other ex-votos refer to interpersonal violence, suggesting that the saints' intercessory powers, and people's motives for commissioning ex-votos, were expanding, along with the access to ex-votos as a form of communication between humans and divinities. The increase in depictions of assaults seems also to point to a culture of man-made violence—as opposed to God-sent violence (earthquakes and other natural disasters, epidemics)—that was drawn along class lines.⁸⁶ The acceptance of violence as a daily reality seems also to point to a democratization of the ex-voto, once again tying together the themes of class and gender.

One such vivid image of violence, incorporating the themes of jealousy and the protection of honor as well, is shown below (figure 5.24). In this ex-voto from 1895, the donor, don Francisco Delgado, is described as being at home, minding his own business, when “at seven o'clock on Holy Tuesday, an individual appeared in the door of his house inciting him to a duel,” to which occasion Francisco was compelled to rise, nearly losing his life in the process.⁸⁷ He left the house unarmed, while his “traitorous” nemesis began throwing punches and stabbing him in the head, the ribs, and the back, and then leaving him for dead. The attacker can be seen shielding himself from Francisco's defensive moves with a canvas sack draped over his arm, as Francisco tries to dodge the blows in vain. His sister, after washing Francisco's wounds, prayed to the Señor de los Rayos for his health, and Christ responded by saving his life. Francisco, “filled with faith,” in thanks presented this retablo, where he can be seen above and to the right, kneeling before the Lord with his mother and sister.

⁸⁶ More frequent portrayals of interpersonal violence at the same time that ex-votos were becoming more democratized does not mean that poor people were more violent, just that rich people did not resort to the same kinds of violence. For example, elites expressed violence through mechanisms of the state (war, prison, public executions) or duelling between individuals. For more on Porfirian perceptions of criminality, and its association with a (lower) social class, see Piccato, *City of Suspects*, and Frank, *Posada's Broadsheets*.

⁸⁷ *Gerónimo de León. Pintor de milagros*, coord. Francisco Baños Urquijo (México, D.F.: Roche, 1996), p. 99, cat. R-84. En el Rancho de Juanon Jurisdiccion de Tlaltenango el dia 9 de Abril de 1895. á D. Francisco Delgado vesino del mismo rancho susedió la desgracia de que el mencionado dia Martes Santo a” las 7 de la noche compareció un individuo en la puerta de su casa insitándolo á desafio, el cual sin armas el Sr. Delgado salió á competir. Saliendo afuera del cayejon á un camino que allí pasa, el traidor le empesó a tirar puñaladas cubriéndose con unos costales de istle que traía; de lo cual hirio al indicado Francisco en la cabeza, en el costado y en la espalda, como lo manifiesta la 1ª. posecion. Al labar las heridas del (pasante), una hermana en su corazon aclamó al Sr. de los Rayos por su salud, del cual por su piedad infinita lo favoreció de morir El referido Francisco lleno de fe, y en agradecimiento le presenta este Retablo en donde se vé postrado en compañía de su mamá y hermana, dándole infinitas gracias por tan singular favor.”



Figure 5.24: Don Francisco Delgado's Ex-voto to the Señor de los Rayos (Source: *Gerónimo de León. Pintor de milagros*, coord. Francisco Baños Urquijo (México, D.F.: Roche, 1996), p. 99, cat. R-84)

Conclusion

During the Porfiriato, ex-votos became popularized or “democratized,” with greater numbers of ex-votos being painted than ever before. The social make-up of ex-votos’ donors changed, as well. Visual and textual information gleaned from ex-votos points to a growing presence of previously underrepresented sectors of society—the poor, particularly poor women—participating in this form of devotional expression. Prior to Mexico’s modernization in the arenas of transportation, incipient industrialization, the creation of a working class, and the increased presence of women in the labor force, these sectors had been locked out of this type of devotional practice, mainly because of their lack of access to cash. With a changing economy, spurred by the government’s promotion of wage-based production and a growing network of railways linking rural areas to urban centers, access to ex-voto paintings widened, and people responded enthusiastically to this newfound access by commissioning more of these expressions of gratitude to the saints for their divine intervention in their daily lives.

Ex-votos, as expressions of religious sentiment, are unique indicators of adherence to Catholic precepts in a rapidly-modernizing nation, for they combine tradition and innovation, orthodoxy and heterodoxy, in their personal articulations of a worldview in which saints and holy beings are present and alive. They point, indirectly, at an increasing individualism, often seen as a gauge of modernity. In depicting individuals’ experiences with intercessory saints, especially in their insistence on including identifying details such as names, places, and dates as

integral parts of the stories they tell, ex-votos affirm their subjects' individuality; they emphasize the relationship between the devotee and the saint as opposed to devotional images of only the saints, as seen in *retablos*, or in the similarly generic *milagritos*. In recounting the incidents that warranted the request for the intercession of a saint, which Mexican ex-votos typically do with significant attention to personal, identifying detail, the devotee essentially insists upon his or her individuality. In essence, an ex-voto painting expresses the feeling that even the most humble devotee's story, and thus his existence, matter—validating the individual's experience, as well as the idea of individuality. In this sense, ex-votos are quite “modern,” regardless of the year they were created. That the period of their greatest production coincides with Mexico's entry into modernity in other respects does not signify that the upsurge in ex-voto production was fueled by devotees' self-conscious choice to celebrate their “individuality” and be “modern.” What it does suggest, however, is a shift in mentalities that, together with the technological advances that made rapid, almost mass-produced ex-voto production possible, dovetailed with the Porfirian elites' decidedly self-conscious desire to promote a modern image of the nation.⁸⁸ It also reinforces the notion of circularity, of the interconnectedness between elite and popular culture, that runs throughout this study.

⁸⁸ Tenorio-Trillo, *Mexico at the World's Fairs* (University of California Press, 1996); William H. Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club and Other Episodes of Porfirian Mexico*, 2nd ed. (University of Nebraska Press, 2004).

Chapter 5
Angelitos: Posthumous Portraits of Children



Figure 6.1: Posthumous Infant (Source: *Artes de México* 15, Spring 1992, p. 83)

The democratization or popularization of Catholic ritual practices in the nineteenth century, at a time when the church was under attack and by some measures Mexican society appeared to be secularizing, has been a common thread linking the individual chapters of this study. In addition to increased access to ex-voto painting and the significant growth of the pilgrimage “industry,” aided by technological advances such as the development of tin substrates, pre-mixed oil paint packaged in tubes, and a burgeoning railroad network that made travel far easier than it ever had been, another way that ordinary Catholics made formerly elite practices their own was in photographs commemorating the death of a child.

The above photograph, taken around the turn of the twentieth century, shows a dead infant laid out on an altar-like table, dressed for burial. It is a somewhat eerie, but poignant, image, part of a larger nineteenth-century tradition, practiced in the United States and Europe as well as Mexico and other Latin American countries.¹ These images fall within the category of

¹ See Elisa Mandell, “The Birth of Angels: Posthumous Portraits of Infants and Children in Mexican Art” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2004); and Edward J. Sullivan, *Language of Objects in the Art of the Americas* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007). In his chapter “Naturalezas muertas,” he discusses a number of Mexican, Peruvian, and Puerto Rican examples of posthumous child portraiture. See also

death portraiture, and in many cases would have been the only photograph of the child ever taken, the only reminder of the baby's brief time on earth. While the rituals surrounding child death in Latin America often involved a bittersweet—some contemporary observers labeled them “joyful”—celebration of life, the photographs associated with these funerary traditions convey deep sorrow and despair. In Mexico, moreover, these commemorative photographs are fairly abundant, compared to other places; this cache of late nineteenth-century photographs adds to our knowledge of Mexico's rich religious visual culture, and brings new perspectives to the questions of ordinary people's relationships with the supernatural, and of the relationships between elite and popular cultures, that are the central issues explored in this dissertation.

Commemorating the death of a child by commissioning a painting was a practice with colonial-era roots, but with the advent of the new technology of photography in the mid-nineteenth century these commemorative rituals became available to sectors of society that had previously been unable to afford them. The new medium for recording personal histories was seized enthusiastically by Mexico's “humble classes,” who observed the death of a child with a ritual rich with theological implications and an important visual component. Elaborate and ornate, the photographs of dead children are visually—and viscerally—striking expressions of mourning and sorrow. Viewing these images from the distance of time, geography and culture, the outside observer is moved by their articulation of family and religious values held by rural or provincial Mexicans in the late nineteenth century.

Death, and especially child death, was a familiar, if unwelcome, presence in the premodern era. Indeed, infant mortality rates were quite high in Mexico until the mid-twentieth century, when the revolutionary government of Lázaro Cárdenas vastly improved the public health system. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, death took children of both high birth and low with alarming frequency, and an elaborate commemorative tradition developed in which a key feature was the identification of the dead children with angels and/or saints; both the babies and the images are known as *angelitos* to this day.² But the visual expression of grief and loss changed significantly over time; as with ex-votos, commissioned, painted death portraits (themselves the heirs of the Spanish mortuary practice of commemorating dead nuns) morphed into staged photographs, far more accessible to people of lesser means, and the practice increasingly came to be associated with the poorer classes. The attitudes and beliefs beneath the practice seem to have been shared by all sectors of society, but their expression seems to have diverged, at some point in the nineteenth century, between a literary tradition for elites and a visual expression for the poor.³

In this dissertation's previous chapters, I discussed the ways that Mexicans sought to deal with the precariousness of life by enlisting the help of supernatural beings and expressing gratitude through commissioning devotional painting, and I argued that technological advances

Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996).

² Mandell, “The Birth of Angels.”

³ The literary tradition includes tombstone inscriptions and poetry; I will touch on some examples of both of these, but keep my focus on the images that over time came to represent Mexicans of lower social standing.

enabled folk artists to produce thousands of these ex-votos. The roughly contemporaneous development of *angelitos* art followed a similar trajectory from elite to popular, and answered a kindred need—the deeply felt desire for religious consolation in the face of death. Moreover, as with ex-votos, technology allowed poorer people to appropriate a ritual and visual practice that had previously been the exclusive province of elites. Just as Mexico’s poor sought the aid of the supernatural to deal with the dangers and challenges of everyday life, so they sought the consolation of religion in the face of death. Mexican Catholics made use of the new technology of photography to *appropriate, democratize, and transform* the upper-class tradition of funerary child portraiture.

In this chapter, I describe the images and rituals surrounding child death in nineteenth-century Latin America from the perspective of contemporary observers, before delving into a discussion of the tradition’s European antecedents, which stemmed from a Baroque Catholicism that was heavily concerned with death, salvation, and a deeply ingrained sense of sin. The visual expression of this concern with death is best illustrated in the images known as *memento mori*, literal reminders of the death that awaits us all. I then turn to colonial Mexican images of child death; again echoing the development of the Mexican ex-voto tradition, colonial-era funerary paintings portray children of elite status, a class separation that would close in the nineteenth century. By the late nineteenth century, both *angelitos* and ex-votos had become associated with lower-class or popular culture, with important implications for this dissertation’s focus on the enduring nature of belief among Mexicans in a modernizing, secularizing world. The severely reduced presence of the church in post-*Reforma* Mexico paradoxically allowed folk Catholicism to thrive; in terms of funerary customs, the prohibition against priests appearing in public in their clerical garb meant that they were banned from participating in funeral processions, allowing new rituals, and their associated images, to develop. And, as with Mexican ex-votos, the *angelitos* photographic tradition exemplifies the ways in which “popular” culture shifts and changes shape with the input of different social groups, allowing for new interpretations and expressions of belief.⁴

Ethnographic and Historical Documentation of the Images and the Ritual

The photographic documentation of dead children in Mexico is not vast, but the fair amount of surviving images and ethnographic documentation warrants a closer investigation into this practice and ritual. More than isolated incidents or strange occurrences, they reflect a common practice and thus a shared system of beliefs. The ritual associated with the image is fundamental to this phenomenon. The pictures are the only more-or-less permanent reminders of some of the ephemeral spiritual practices surrounding child death at the turn of the twentieth

⁴ The classic work on the shifting of cultural expression from “elite” to “popular” is Peter Burke’s *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Scolar/Ashgate Press, 1994). For a different context, see Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Harvard University Press, 1990), and especially his “The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and its Audiences” in *The American Historical Review* 97, no. 5: 1369-1399.

century.⁵ The photographic and ethnographic evidence comes from central-western Mexico, although scattered documentation has been found in Nuevo León, in the north.⁶

Only four photographers are known to have worked in the *angelito* tradition, though more almost certainly existed. The two best known are Romualdo García in Guanajuato and Juan de Dios Machain in Ameca, Jalisco. Very little is known about the latter artist, whose portraits were mainly of peasants, judging by their dress. Romualdo García, meanwhile, had a somewhat more diverse clientele, but the majority of his portraits also appear to be of *la gente humilde*, the humble people. The other two known photographers are Rutilo Patiño, also active in Guanajuato, and José Bustamante, who worked out of Fresnillo (Zacatecas) and Mexico City.⁷ The geographical proximity of the areas in which the few known photographers of *angelitos* worked, and the lack of visual documentation of the practice from other regions of the country, make researching *angelitos* problematic. Are the photographs representative of the mentality of all Mexicans at this time? And what are the ramifications of the iconography associating dead children with holy beings in a secularizing liberal republic? Was the tradition of commemorating the death of a child embraced by a class of people for whom the liberal project of removing the vestiges of religion from society served only to reinforce their faith, and expressed by reinterpreting the death portraits of elite children? Fortunately, ethnographic research from other regions complements the visual record, and the two combine to offer a more complete picture of what the images represent.⁸ Meanwhile, tomb inscriptions and funeral elegies from diverse areas of Mexico also reference *angelitos* and identify heaven as the reward for innocence.

When a child dies, according to Catholic doctrine, he or she goes directly to heaven, by virtue of being free of sin. A conceptual link between heaven and angels led to the labeling of dead babies as *angelitos*—little angels. Last rites were unnecessary; the (baptized) child enjoyed direct access to paradise, without having to endure the trials of purgatory. While at first glance, this belief would seem to be more in line with popular or folk Catholicism than with official church dogma, the separate treatment of child burial practices from adult ones is well documented and even earned a place in the *Rituale Romanum*, which “provides a separate form of burial for infants and children who have died before they have reached the years of discretion.”⁹ At the same time, the association of children with supernatural beings like angels and saints stems from a commingling of folk sentimentality and Catholic doctrine, which states

⁵ See Mandell, “The Birth of Angels.”

⁶ Julia Santa Cruz Vargas and Enrique Tovar Esquivel, “Alabanzas a un niño muerto: Una costumbre mortuoria para despedir angelitos.” Paper presented at the 6^a. Reunión Nacional de la Red Mexicana de Estudios de Espacios y Cultura Funerarios, Mérida, Yucatán, 2009.

⁷ Mandell, pp. 31-33.

⁸ Neither the ritual nor the images are unique to Mexico. The ethnographic evidence of the ritual points to Spain, the Caribbean, and South America, as well. Nevertheless, the images are much more prevalent in Mexico. Whether this is due to questions of conservation and preservation is debatable. Some paintings from the Caribbean (e.g. Francisco Oller’s *El velorio* of 1893) show a similar ritual, but the iconography of a formal family portrait is best documented for Mexico, possibly reflecting the photographers’ personal styles.

⁹ *Catholic Encyclopedia*, “Christian Burial.” <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03071a.htm>; accessed on 23 February 2013.

that “an angel is a pure spirit created by God.”¹⁰ The perceived innocence and purity of children before they develop a personal ethical or moral code helped solidify this association in Catholic Mexico.

A wake and funeral procession would be organized and paid for by the child’s godparents, a demonstration of Mexico’s complex kinship system. The idea was to celebrate, not mourn, the death. “The philosophy underlying the observance is the belief that the baptized infant or young child, free of sin, becomes, at death, an angel, to join the other angels in heaven, to pray for its family and perhaps one day return to lead its forebears into *gloria*.”¹¹ While the mother would remain at home, the coffin would be carried to the cemetery in a noisy and joyous procession, accompanied by music and fireworks. This custom struck a number of foreign observers, in geographically distant locales, as the epitome of strangeness. Consider the reactions of the American Isaac Foster Coffin, traveling in Chile during its war for independence:

I entered the room without having been advised of the reason or nature of the entertainment; the most conspicuous object was a figure, highly decorated with flowers and ribbons, and seated upon a shelf, over the table, and with a number of lights burning before it; and to which those not engaged in dance, would often advert. I took it for granted that this was the image of some patron saint, whose festival the family were celebrating; judge then of the indescribable horror and disgust that I felt, when on approaching to examine it, I found that this image had really once been a living child. I am told the mother does not always join the crowd, but sometimes sits apart and weeps...this celebration is kept up only on the death of children under seven years of age. The reason they give for it has more philosophy than reason in it. “El Angelito,” the little angel, “has died in innocence, and gone to Heaven; we ought then to rejoice, and not weep.”¹²

The Norwegian ethnographer Carl Lumholtz, working in western Durango at the turn of the twentieth century, observed the following ritual:

One afternoon a gay little procession of men and women passed my camp, some on horseback, some walking. One of the riders played the violin, another one beat a drum. An old woman who just then stepped up to sell something explained to me that “an angel” was being buried. This is the designation applied to small children in Mexico, and I could see an elaborate white bundle on a board carried

¹⁰ Catholic Online, “Angels.” <http://www.catholic.org/saints/angel.php#definition>; accessed on 4 May 2013.

¹¹ John M. Schechter, “Velorio de Angelito/Baquiné/Wawa. Velorio: The Emblematic Nature of the Transcultural, Yet Local, Latin American Child’s Wake.” *Latin American Studies Working Papers*, University of California, Santa Cruz, 1987, p. 1.

¹² Coffin, Isaac Foster, *Journal of a Residence in Chili (sic), by a Young American, Detained in That Country, During the Revolutionary Scenes of 1817-18-19* (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1823). Quoted in Schechter 11-12.

aloft by a woman. My informant told me that when a child dies the parents always give it joyfully to heaven, set off fireworks and dance and are jolly. They do not weep when an infant dies, as the little one would not enter paradise, but would have to come back and gather all the tears.¹³

These celebrations and processions formed an integral part of the funerary ritual for children, and while local variations existed, the conceptual base likely originated in Spain and was disseminated to Latin America. Baron Jean Charles Davillier of France observed a similar ritual in 1872 in the town of Jijona, in Alicante Province on the Costa Blanca of Spain:

We were walking along a deserted street, when we heard the strumming of a guitar, accompanied by the high-pitched song of a bandurria and by the clicking of castanets. We pushed open the door, already ajar, of a farmer's house, thinking that we had happened upon a wedding: it was a burial. In the back of the room we saw, lying on a table covered by a rug, a little girl between five and six years of age, dressed in her Sunday best; her head, adorned with a crown of flowers, was resting on a pillow. Our first belief was that she was asleep, but at the sight of a vase full of holy water beside her, and of four large tapers at the corners of the table, we understood that the poor little one was dead. A young woman, who could have been her mother, was crying bitterly, seated next to her child. Nevertheless, the rest of the picture contrasted strongly with this scene of sorrow: a young man and a young woman, wearing the ceremonial costume of Valencian *labradores* (laborers) were dancing a *Jota*, accompanying themselves with castanets, while the musicians and guests made a circle around them and were cheering them, singing and clapping their hands. It was difficult for us to understand this rejoicing in the midst of such grief. "Está con los ángeles"—she is with the angels—one of the relatives told us. Indeed, in Spain, it is believed that the child who dies, goes right away to heaven: "Anjelitos al cielo"—little angels in the sky—the saying goes; that is why one rejoices to see them go to God, instead of feeling grief-stricken.¹⁴

In all three of these geographically separated rituals, a number of common features are observable. The most obvious ones are the celebration of the death and the identification of the dead child with angels. Iconographic similarities are detectable, as well. In the Chilean case, the

¹³ Carl Lumholtz, *Unknown Mexico. A Record of Five Years' Exploration Among the Tribes of the Western Sierra Madre; in the Tierra Caliente of Tepic and Jalisco; and Among the Tarascos of Michoacán*, v. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), pp. 448-449.

¹⁴ Baron [Jean] Ch[arles] Davillier, *L'Espagne*, illus. by Gustave Doré. Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1875, quoted in John M. Schechter, "Velorio de Angelito/Baquiné/Wawa. Velorio: The Emblematic Nature of the Transcultural, Yet Local, Latin American Child's Wake." *Latin American Studies Working Papers*, University of California, Santa Cruz, 1987, pp. 2-3, trans. by John M. Schechter.

child was propped up in a sitting position, but, like the prone children in Mexico and Spain, was raised up as a central focus of the scene. Flowers and ribbons, candles, and holy water surrounded and adorned the dead children, much as they adorn the saints in churches and in processions.

The Puerto Rican painter Francisco Oller, in the painting he submitted to the Paris Salon in 1893, shows a contemporary *angelito* wake, with the child laid out on a table, dressed in white, and adorned with flowers. Art historian Edward Sullivan has pointed out that Oller, having lived for many years in Spain and France, intended this painting as a satire and criticism of what he saw as a backward custom of the poor and uneducated, but regardless of his intent, the image captures the atmosphere of celebration referenced by the above travelers' accounts.¹⁵ Aside from the man paying his respects to the dead child, everyone else in the painting, including the priest, seems to be focused on the roasted pig that is to be served for dinner.



Figure 6.2: *El Velorio* by Francisco Oller, 1893. Oil on canvas (Source: Museum of Anthropology, History and Art, University of Puerto Rico)

¹⁵ Edward J. Sullivan, *The Language of Objects in the Art of the Americas* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 118; he quotes Oller, declaring the painting to be an “astonishing criticism of a custom that still exists in Puerto Rico among country people and which has been propagated by the priests. On this day the family and friends have kept vigil all night over the dead child, extended on a table with flowers and laces. The mother is holding back her grief...she does not weep for fear her tears might wet the wings of this little angel in his flight to heaven. She laughs and offers a drink to the priest...This is an orgy of brutish appetites under the guise of a gross superstition.”

Oral history contributes to our knowledge of *angelitos*, as well. A series of interviews conducted in Guanajuato with people living in the early twentieth century reveals that while the ceremony of the funeral procession was indeed a noisy and seemingly cheerful event, it masked the pain felt by the parents, who were “afflicted, crying.”¹⁶ Aurea Gordillo recounts her son’s good manners; she remembers him being very careful, never littering, and expresses the sadness she felt at this death, which was compounded by the fact that he was her first-born. Her husband took it especially hard; his first marriage had been childless, and he had doted on the little boy.¹⁷ José Chávez Morado, an 89-year-old painter, recalled having painted a few portraits, and revealed that his wife Olga Costa, also a painter, had been commissioned to do a funerary portrait in Guanajuato as recently as 1944. He added that it was a tradition of the lower classes; he’d seen a few photographs of middle-class children as well. Asked what was the reason for people wanting paintings and photographs of their dead children, he replied that it was a “tradition of the pain of death.”¹⁸

Clementina Ramírez recounts the joy she felt when she got pregnant; she had fourteen children and four of them died. Only two of them were buried as *angelitos*, because her husband, a mine worker, was too poor to afford and observe the proper ritual forms. She did not have them photographed, because to her “it seems like a lack of respect; although one knows [the child] is going to heaven, it caused sadness...I preferred to keep the memory of when [the child] was alive, or to see photographs of them alive.”¹⁹ Clementina’s choice not to have her dead children photographed sheds new light on what was a very personal ritual practice and how it was justified or rejected. The spending of very scarce disposable income for this purpose was a choice that families as poor as hers made often, and indicate their perceptions of the importance of properly commemorating their dead children. In this context, Clementina’s assertion that she felt a photograph would be disrespectful may mask her sadness at the poverty that prevented her and her husband from participating in this aspect of the ritual, and deflects the even greater sadness of not having been able to bury the other two as *angelitos* at all.

¹⁶ María (INSEN), age 77, May 6, 1998: “Los papás estaban afligidos, llorando.” In Luz Delia García Hermosillo, *El retrato de angelitos. Magia, costumbre y tradición* (Guanajuato: Dirección Municipal de Cultura, 2001), p. 68.

¹⁷ Aurea Gordillo, widow of Hernández, age 90, 1998, “...A su edad era un niño muy educadito, muy entendido...cuando llegamos a San Luis Potosí le explique que esa no era su casa; se las caían las hojas de las plantas y de los árboles, y recogía las hojitas...era muy cuidadoso, no tiraba la basura. ¡claro que lo siente uno en el alma y más siendo el primero!...Yo sí lo sentí mucho, su papá igual, porque él había sido casado y no tuvo hijos; yo me casé con él siendo viudo, él lo sintió ¡muchísimo! Ya tenemos un escaloncito en el cielo, pero eso no quiere decir que no lo haya sentido,” in García Hermosillo, pp. 76-77.

¹⁸ José Chávez Morado, “una tradición del dolor de la muerte,” December 4, 1998; in García Hermosillo, pp. 89-90.

¹⁹ Clementina Ramírez, age 75, 1998; “Cuando sabía que estaba embarazada me daba mucha alegría, luego luego se lo decía a mi esposo, tuve catorce hijos y se murieron cuatro, de esos sólo enterramos a dos como “angelitos”. Mi marido era muy pobre, era empleado de una compañía minera”. Asked whether she had had them photographed, she replied: “No, se me hace falta de respeto, aunque sabe uno que se iba a ir al cielo, causaba tristeza...yo prefería guardar el recuerdo de cuando estaba vivo, o verlo en las fotografías cuando todavía no estaba muerto.” García Hermosillo, pp. 71-72.



Figure 6.3: *Retratos* by Romualdo García (Source: Archivo Romualdo García, Museo de la Alhóndiga de Granaditas, INAH, 1989)

The phenomenon of celebrating the occasion of a death and the visual component of the ritual share a conceptual base that originates in the religious practices of Catholic countries, one that is fundamentally image-based. Images of saints, whether painted or sculpted, are the focal point in Catholic churches, and are seen as requiring proper expression of devotion. This is done by adorning, garlanding, or otherwise decorating the image, and an apparently organic aesthetic involving flowers, candles, and other little mementoes has developed over the centuries and seems to be a constant in Latin American and Iberian altars.²⁰

²⁰ David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 91.



Figure 6.4: Mexican Shrines. On left, El Señor de la Humildad, Church of La Santa Veracruz, Mexico City. On right, outdoor altar to the Virgin of Guadalupe, Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mexico City. In both of these Mexican shrines we see many of the common elements characterizing Catholic shrines in Latin America: flowers and candles arranged around the central image (Source: Photographs by the author, February 2009)

If we compare these two Mexican altars to photographs of *angelitos*, we immediately see close visual and conceptual resemblances. The flowers surrounding the *Ecce Homo* figure on the left and the Virgin of Guadalupe image on the right are arranged in ways similar to the flowers piled around the infants laid out on the tables in photographs of *angelitos*, in all cases serving to elevate and honor the central figures, whether human or anthropomorphized objects of devotion. The photograph on page 1, with the inclusion of ears of maize in addition to the flowers, appears especially designed to connote an offering, somewhat subverting the merely commemorative intention of post-mortem photography.

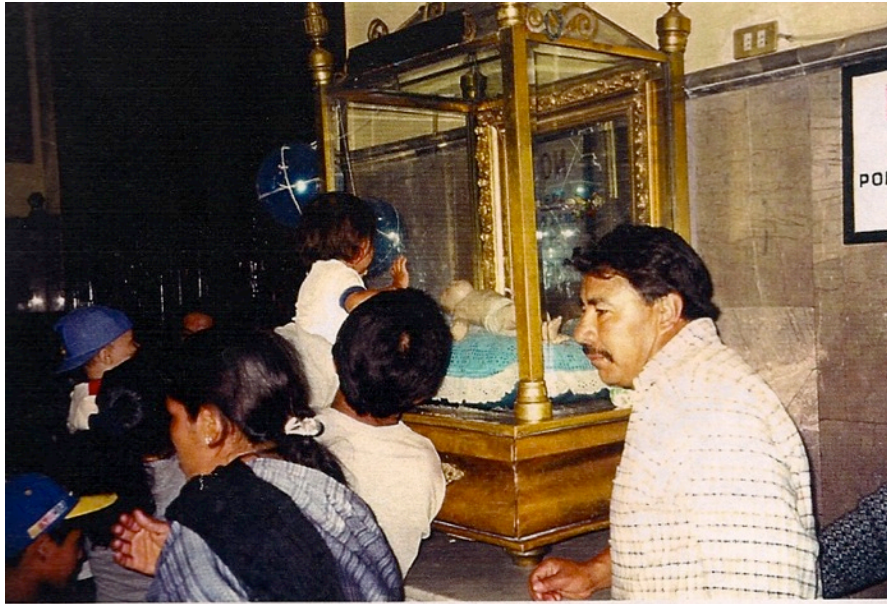


Figure 6.5: A sculpture of the infant Jesus laid out in the style of the *Santo Entierro* (a representation of Christ entombed before being resurrected), Shrine of Our Lord of Chalma, State of Mexico (Source: Photograph by the author, 2001).

Angelito photography is iconographically related to images of dead Christs, both as an adult and as a child. Above, we see a procession of people at the shrine of Our Lord of Chalma filing past a glass case holding a dead Christ child. The glass is dirty from all the hands and lips that touch it daily, attesting to the potential healing and wish-granting function of this image. Meanwhile, the images below represent the *Santo Entierro* (the Holy Burial), an important devotion in both Mexico and Spain.



Figure 6.6: El Señor del Santo Entierro, Santiago Papasquiari, Durango (Source: *La ruta de los santuarios en México*, 1994)

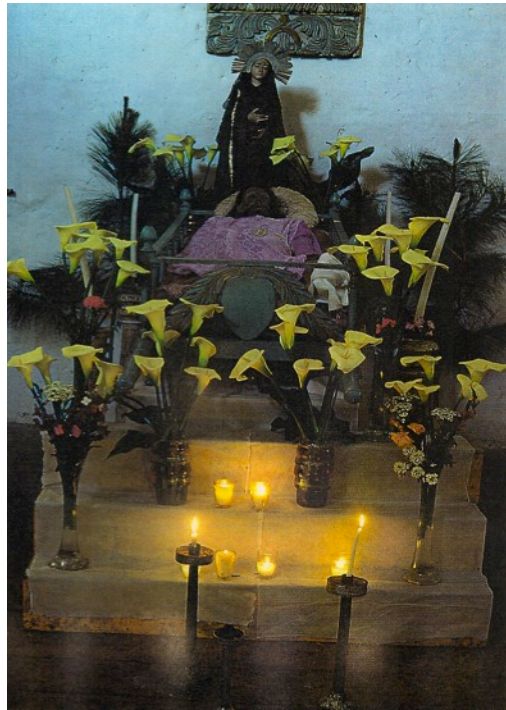


Figure 6.7: *Santo Entierro* (Source: Porter and Auerbach, *Mexican Churches*, 1987)

The veneration of the dead Christ finds a certain parallel in representations of *angelitos*. The floral arrangements and candles bear stylistic resemblance to the photographs. Witnessing the dead laid out for view during wakes was and is an important aspect of Catholic funerary practices, with antecedents in medieval phenomenological and visual culture. Seeing sculptures of saints—especially the all-important image of Christ, who made the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of sinning humans—laid out for their perpetual wake both stimulated and reinforced the ritual of the wake for members of the community. In this light, the images of dead babies make perfect sense. Memorializing the dearly departed, whether Christ the Savior or an innocent cherub, was an important part of reaffirming the bonds between the living and the dead so evocatively observed in the annual Day of the Dead festivities when the defunct return briefly to visit their living relatives.

The act of ritually dressing the dead for public viewing and mourning is an ancient custom shared by diverse cultures. It is an occasion to say goodbye and to close a chapter, but it has a commemorative function as well. Painting or photographing the deceased extends the memorializing function, and the rich iconographic traditions seen in the collection of Mexican photographs is the result of cultural interaction among various continents and among various social classes. In mortuary rituals for children in Spain and Latin America, the ubiquitous flowers and the white dress symbolize purity and innocence, qualities associated with young children and babies. The placing of the dead child on a table connotes a sacrificial altar, an inverse allusion to the sacrifice the parents had to make in losing their precious offspring. The very act of commemorating a child in this way has important implications for Spanish and

Spanish American conceptions of the social order, death, and sin, and these points will be discussed in greater detail below. The development of the iconographic tradition in Mexico will be the next point to be considered.

Colonial Antecedents: Funerary Portraiture in Mexico

The photographs that form the corpus of this discussion have stylistic, iconographical, and conceptual links to a genre of painting in colonial Mexico. Portraits commissioned to commemorate the dead, both young and old, survive from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Most numerous are portraits of nuns and monks, but wealthy lay people also had themselves and their family members memorialized in this way. Many of these paintings show the deceased as though still alive, sometimes standing, other times lying down with eyes open. A few funerary portraits show the deceased with eyes closed, but even these give the impression that the subject of the painting is sleeping. Many colonial paintings of dead children include text, giving name, family ties, and age and date of death; these textual markers sometimes serve as the only indication that the subject of the picture is dead.



Figure 6.8: Funerary Portrait of María Josefa de Aldaco y Fagoaga, 1746 (Source: *Artes de México*, núm. 15, Spring 1992)



Figure 6.9: Anonymous portrait of José Manuel Cervantes y Velasco, 1805 (Source: *Artes de México* 15, Spring 1992)

Moreover, these children are often portrayed as being older than they actually were at the time of death. This stylization and others, such as the stiffness and rigidity even of standing figures, indicate the social values influencing portrait painting in New Spain, as we saw was also true of colonial ex-votos; almost all art from the colonial era is religious in nature. The idea informing portrait painting of the eighteenth century, surviving into the nineteenth, was to indicate clearly the subject's social status and race, while individual personality and character were generally de-emphasized. Such mannerisms were informed by the eighteenth-century interest in scientific categorization, in which plants, animals, and people all had an established place in the political, social, and cosmic order.²¹ The sumptuousness of the clothes and jewels worn by the children in their death portraits, too, serves to place them within the aristocratic social order of their families, rather than connecting them to the celestial beings evoked in the photographs.

The dead also had a place within the social order, and their portraits indicate a close relationship in the Novohispanic mind between the living and the dead, a point which will be discussed in greater detail below. The paintings of deceased adults are first and foremost

²¹ *Converging Cultures: Art & Identity in Spanish America* (The Brooklyn Museum in Association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996); Ilona Katzew, *Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (Yale, 2004); Magali Carrera, *Imagining Identity in New Spain: Race, Lineage, and the Colonial Body in Portraiture and Casta Paintings* (University of Texas Press, 2003).

commemorations of people important in their society: religious, wealthy, or powerful; they do not indicate the personal grief felt by their relatives.²² In funerary portraits of babies and children, however, an element of sentimentality can be detected, and not just in the rich ornamentation and lavish attention to floral and textile details. The text accompanying portraits of very young children sometimes contains minute details of their age, giving it not just in years or months, but to the day. In the portrait below, even the time of death is recorded.



Figure 6.10: Anonymous portrait of Domingo Francisco Jabier Emigdio de Jesús Padilla, 1846 (Source: *Artes de México* 15, Spring 1992)

Such conventions give the viewer an intimate glimpse into the anguish and bereavement felt by parents who have lost their children; these sentiments are on display in *all* commemorative portraits of babies, whether they are paintings commissioned by wealthy aristocrats or photographs purchased with funds scrounged together by the child's extended family.

Viceregal iconography in depictions of children's deaths necessarily reflects aristocratic values, but the sumptuous portraits commissioned for children with long names, evidencing noble blood lines, show only part of the story, for no images of the humble dead survive from colonial Mexico.²³ This seems to have been a tradition with upper-class roots; in any event, the pomp exhibited in both the funerary portraits and in the elaborate funeral processions that accompanied the bodies of the powerful in Spain and New Spain points to the value the elite placed in the control over one's emotions as inculcated by religious thought and courtly standing.²⁴ Children's effigies of the period almost always present a grave countenance, as do portraits of adults. Such seriousness is meant to convey the dignity befitting someone of high social standing, and in the case of children's funerary portraits, the imagery of stoicism is a device used to illustrate the high moral standing of the defunct child who accepts his or her fate

²² Carlos Eire, *From Madrid to Purgatory: The Art and Craft of Dying in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

²³ Why no such paintings have survived may have to do with conservation issues, but it is far more likely that painted portraits of dead children were simply unaffordable for most people.

²⁴ *La muerte niña*, Museo Poblano del Arte Virreinal (Puebla, 1999), p. 17. See also Matthew Esposito, *Funerals, Festivals, and Cultural Politics in Porfirian Mexico* (University of New Mexico Press, 2010); and Pamela Voekel, *Alone Before God: The Religious Origins of Modernity in Mexico* (Duke University Press, 2002).

with dignity. Painted funerary portraits of children in New Spain, then, represent an elite way of coming to terms with the inevitability of death.

However, this was an incomplete acceptance of the death of a child. Portrayed standing up as though still alive, with a flower symbolizing purity in hand, these children represent veiled images of death, likely as a way of protecting their parents from the grief and pain they must endure.²⁵ In colonial paintings (and as we will see, in nineteenth-century photographs of dead children, as well), however, a defense mechanism can be detected: by commemorating them in images, bereaved parents consoled themselves with the belief in the afterlife and their child's place in heaven. Belief in the child's immortality helped to sustain the parents' hope that someday, after they themselves had passed through the trials of Purgatory, they might all be reunited.²⁶ The following tombstone inscription from 1861, in the Belén cemetery in Guadalajara, illustrates this point well:

Ejemplo noble de filial ternura
Ensueño hermoso que duró un momento
Que la muerte arrancó en una desventura
Como la nube la arrebató el viento
¿No me adorabas con filial dulzura?
¿No era tu aliento parte de mi aliento?
¿Porqué te fuiste angelical creatura
y me dejaste en el hondo sufrimiento?
En mi existencia bárbara y mezquina
En los momentos en que más me aflijo
Una sola esperanza es mi consuelo
Y es mirar que mi vida ya declina
Y que al fin moriré querido hijo
Para vivir unidos en el cielo.

Noble example of filial tenderness
A beautiful dream that lasted a moment
That death destroyed in a misfortune
The way the cloud blocked the wind
Did you not adore me with filial sweetness?
Was your breath not part of my breath?
Why did you leave, angelic creature
And leave me in this deep suffering?
In my barbaric and miserable existence
In the moments when I am most afflicted
One hope is my only consolation
That is to consider my life as it abates
And know that in the end I will die,
So that we may live together in heaven.²⁷

This attitude of grief and unrelenting despair, shared by unlettered and educated alike, illustrates the scope of popular Catholicism in Mexico in the colonial period and beyond. But what attitudes or mentalities underlay this popular Catholicism that placed children and adults in separate categories, that exempted children from the trials of Purgatory and accorded them the status of angels? A key factor in the development of the concept of *angelitos* in the Novohispanic mind was the preoccupation with sin in the early modern Catholic world.

²⁵ Gutierre Aceves Piña, "La muerte niña," in *La muerte niña*, Museo Poblano del Arte Virreinal, Puebla, 1999.

²⁶ García Hermosillo, *El retrato de angelitos*, p. 45.

²⁷ Manuel Aguilar Moreno, *El Panteón de Belén y el culto a los muertos en México: una búsqueda de lo sobrenatural* (Secretaría de Cultura, Unidad Editorial, Guadalajara 1997).

Conceptions of Sin in Spanish Catholicism

Carlos Eire has written that “unlike the Protestants, who taught that one’s salvation depended on faith rather than good works, Catholics believed that heaven could be gained or lost by one’s actions.”²⁸ Furthermore, “this mentality perceived the entire human race, and thus every individual, as worthy of eternal damnation.”²⁹ Sixteenth-century attitudes toward death encouraged despondency and self-criticism at the scope of one’s sins; graphic despair at the likelihood of damnation was a carefully manipulated tool of the twin social structure of church and state, providing an unparalleled opportunity for shaping and controlling a society’s thought and behavior. The contemplation of the enormity of one’s sins and of one’s utter depravity was a favorite pastime of the religious: St. Teresa of Avila referred to herself as “the worst sinner in the world” in her deathbed confession, and “Philip II’s will implores ‘The Divine Majesty’ for mercy, calling himself ‘the greatest of sinners.’”³⁰ In Spanish American religious thought and literature, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz summed up this sentiment when she called herself “*la peor de todas* (the worst of them all).” Although Christian “theology proclaimed a message of forgiveness, outright pardon seemed improper, even impossible. Redemption could not be simply effected in beings so thoroughly evil. Deep within, the collective psyche ached for punishment.”³¹ Eire sees this need being filled by the concept of purgatory, “a place of temporal rather than eternal punishment, a way station to heaven.”³² Purgatory offered a means of lessening anxiety over death by offering some hope of salvation, even if one had to endure a period of torments first. This was why the manner of one’s death, particularly the status of one’s soul at the time of death (the chance to confess one’s sins prior to the event), was so important. Furthermore, Eire stresses the close connection between the living and the dead in sixteenth-century Spain. Prayers for the dead were a communal responsibility. The living cared for the dead with these prayers and masses, shortening their time in purgatory. They buried them under or near the churches, symbolically keeping them in proximity to God and to the living. Thus, the dead remained an integral part of the community.

These sixteenth-century conceptualizations of death and sin had deep implications for colonial and nineteenth-century Catholic belief and practice. Numerous expressions of remorse for one’s sins, conceptualized as serious offenses against God, illustrated the religious sentiment of late colonial society; confessionals, written as guides to help one make amends to God for one’s moral transgressions, enjoyed immense popularity. Penitence in the form of confession and self-mortification was relentlessly promoted and advertised in titles such as *The Screams of*

²⁸ Carlos Eire, *From Madrid to Purgatory: The Art and Craft of Dying in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 516.

²⁹ Eire 516.

³⁰ Eire, pp. 516-517.

³¹ Eire, p. 520.

³² Eire 520.

Purgatory, and Ways to Quiet Them,³³ *The Repentant Sinner: Or, Useful Ways to Recognize and Abhor Mortal Sin*,³⁴ and *The Practice of Mystical Theology for the Final Catharsis*.³⁵

This apparent preoccupation with sin and repentance was characteristic of what many scholars have called an external, mediated, corporate Catholicism, typically Baroque. The colonial paintings and their stylistic heirs, as we have seen, illustrate the idea that young children were free of sin and thus bypassed purgatory upon their deaths; these beliefs in Mexico were an imported aspect of Mediterranean folk Catholicism. “When and how they became part of the village Catholicism of western Mexico is hard to establish, but it was obviously before 1700.”³⁶ How the preoccupation with sin, or the exculpation of children from it, survived in the nineteenth century brings up the question of whether external, Baroque Catholicism changed much in popular practice, particularly in rural areas. Historians Pamela Voekel and Brian Larkin argue for a shift from this external, corporate Catholicism to an interior piety in nineteenth-century Mexico, in which a new focus on personal virtues such as self-discipline and moderation, and on a direct, personal relationship with God, replaced the collective spirituality of the colony.³⁷ The intimate family portraits do express aspects of an “interiorized” and personal relationship with God. They were made for the private consumption of the family, who put the photograph on the home altar. However, the evidence for change marshaled by both Voekel and Larkin is strongest for elite populations. It is notoriously difficult to document the changes over time *or* the continuities in the religious sensibilities of the non-elite. The visual, ethnographic, and historical evidence points to an even more conservative Catholicism than among the educated powerful, at least some of whom began to adopt a more “modern” form of the religion in place of baroque Catholicism.³⁸ Indeed, Charles III’s 1787 prohibition of burials in or around churches, and his orders to construct suburban cemeteries throughout his realm, sparked bitter debate between those members of the colonial elite who wanted to be assured of their continued monopoly on the markers of social status that church burial implied, and the hygiene-minded *sensatos*, the

³³ *Gritos del purgatorio, y medios para callarlos* (José Boneta y Laplana). This title and the two that follow are referenced in *Juegos de ingenio y agudeza: La pintura emblemática de la Nueva España*. México: Museo Nacional de Arte, 1994.

³⁴ *El pecador arrepentido; esto es: motivos eficaces para conocer y aborrecer el pecado mortal* (Pablo Celt, in *Juegos de ingenio y agudeza*).

³⁵ *Práctica de la Theologia mística para la vida purgativa del último fin* (Miguel Godínez, in *Juegos de ingenio y agudeza*).

³⁶ Murdo J. MacLeod, “Death in Western Colonial Mexico: Its Place in Village and Peasant Life.” *The Middle Period in Latin America: Values and Attitudes in the 17th-19th Centuries*, ed. Mark D. Szuchman (Boulder & London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1989), p. 66.

³⁷ Pamela Voekel, *Alone Before God*; Brian Larkin, *The Very Nature of God: Baroque Catholicism and Religious Reform in Bourbon Mexico City* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010).

³⁸ On the other side, Benjamin Smith’s recent study of southern Oaxaca details the religious mentalities of the rural peasantry, emphasizing the enduring nature of religious belief, which was strongly influenced by the deep roots of the Catholic church in the region, with historically strong ties between the laity and the clergy. B. Smith, *The Roots of Conservatism in Mexico: Catholicism, Society, and Politics in the Mixteca Baja, 1750-1962* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012).

enlightened ones.³⁹ So strong was opposition to the cemetery project that by Mexico's Independence in 1821, "the resulting cemeteries were few and shabby at best."⁴⁰

This discussion of Spanish American religious sensibilities and conceptions of sin is integral to an investigation of the mortuary treatment of dead children. Babies and young children were exempt from all the sufferings of purgatory that awaited sinful adults. Their exaltation as *angelitos* defines them in opposition to what they are not: despicable, ungrateful and depraved beings who continue to pursue the pleasures of the body even as they "are cooking a meal for the worms that will feed upon it, exchanging a few bright pleasures for everlasting torments."⁴¹ The extent to which the warnings of the religious elite of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain were available to, and were internalized by, late nineteenth-century provincial Mexicans is debatable. Colonial parishes were so large that even the most active priests could not hope to be regularly present at all their local churches, making the transmission of official religious rhetoric next to impossible.⁴² With the Mexican government's often outright hostility to the church in the nineteenth century, there is no reason to believe that the people would be any more exposed to Catholic theology, but they were certain to have been exposed to basic tenets of Christian dogma, including the ideas of sin and repentance, purgatory and salvation. At the same time, the internalization of official dogma had its limits, as the custom of dressing dead babies as angels shows.

It is beyond debate that the church did not look favorably on the practice of dressing up deceased children as angels and/or saints (nor would it have approved of the partying priest in Francisco Oller's *El Velorio*, figure 6.2)). As we have seen with ex-votos, in which rogative practices such as directly praying to holy beings challenged the liturgical command to act through priests when communicating with the sacred, the church saw the practice of directly communing with the dead as potentially dangerous. Colonial bishops, visiting their archdioceses to make sure religious orthodoxy was upheld, were consistently disappointed and often outraged. In 1774, a *visita* in the Archdiocese of Monterrey complained about the "excesses" and "abuses" surrounding the custom of "the most vulgar people" dressing the corpses of children in clerical garb and other accoutrements of sanctity such as wings and crowns made of flowers, "making them into curiosities or objects of diversion"; in other words, making a mockery of the trappings of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. This rabble would "parade" the corpses through the streets to take them to their godparents' and relatives' houses as though they were "toys" or "baubles," and insolently passed by the doors of their parish churches, where the priests were sometimes obliged to take them away for burial.⁴³ Indeed, later on the church decreed that funerals were to be

³⁹ Pamela Voekel, *Alone Before God*, p. 1.

⁴⁰ Voekel 1.

⁴¹ St. John of Avila, *Audi, filia*, ch. 60, *Obras Completas*, v. I, p. 708; quoted in Eire, *From Madrid to Purgatory*, p. 515.

⁴² William B. Taylor, *Magistrates of the Sacred: Priests and Parishioners in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (Stanford University Press, 1996).

⁴³ Archivo de la Arquidiócesis de Monterrey, cited in Julia Santa Cruz Vargas and Enrique Tovar Esquivel, "Alabanzas a un niño muerto: Una costumbre mortuaria para despedir angelitos," paper given at the conference of the Red Mexicana de Estudios de Espacios y Cultura Funerarios, Mérida, Yucatán, Mexico, June 2009. The authors

coordinated with the parish, showing its intent to regulate the rituals surrounding child death. Ironically, it was the liberal reforms of the nineteenth century, which restricted the church's influence over funerary rituals, that allowed these commemorative traditions to thrive among ordinary Mexicans.

The Nineteenth Century

The development of children's funerary portraits in the nineteenth century was shaped by changes in political and social structures and developments in technology, all of which had an impact on cultural traditions and religious beliefs. In this section I emphasize the importance of viewing photographs of *angelitos* within these contexts. As we saw with the painted ex-voto tradition, the *Reforma* and the Porfiriato marked a sea change in *angelitos* imagery in both visual and social terms: the tradition of commemorative death portraits seems to have passed from the elite to the popular class, with elites choosing not to have their dead children photographed (although perhaps still commissioning a painting, such as the one from 1846 on page 19). An important factor in the evolution of this commemorative tradition was the invention of photography.

Technological Developments

Much like the proliferation of painted ex-votos, which became far more available in the mid-nineteenth century with the introduction of commercial tin plate and oil paint, the custom of having a portrait made of a dead child would not have taken root among ordinary Mexicans had it not been for the advent of photography. A combination of technical developments, most importantly the invention of silver collodion glass plates and albumen paper for printing, transformed the painstaking and time-consuming processes employed in daguerrotype into a medium that boasted quick results and hence significantly lower production costs. The new process cut down the time it took to produce a portrait, made serial reproduction much easier, and improved the scope of distribution.⁴⁴ Like the daguerrotype with its roots in France, the "rule book" for studio portrait photography was written by the Frenchman André Adolphe Eugène Disdéri, and his recommendations were taken very seriously by Mexican photographers

did not provide an exact citation, but the text of the edict reads as follows: "[...] el común abuso de vestir los cuerpecitos difuntos con diversos trajes, ya de clérigos, religiosos, y aún de obispos y cardenales, y tal vez con alas, y otras insignias en la figura como suelen representárenos visibles los santos ángeles; excesos todos en abuso de aquél vestuario propio de la edad, y corona de flores que el ritual permite; haciéndoles asunto de curiosidad o diversión, sacándoles por las calles en hombros o cabeza de las personas mas vulgares del pueblo, para llevarlos a enseñar a las casas de sus padrinos, parientes o conocidos, como si fuesen dijes o bujería, pasándolas por las puertas de sus parroquias, con insolente desacato a sus curas, que muchas veces se han visto precisados a quitarlos y darles sepultura en sus iglesias."

⁴⁴ Patricia Massé Zendejas, *Cruces y Campa. una experiencia mexicana del retrato tarjeta de visita* (México: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 2000).

experimenting with the new medium.⁴⁵ This francophilia is not surprising given the “French craze” that swept the upper classes during the Porfiriato.⁴⁶

Disdéri’s 1862 book *Sur le portrait photographique (Extrait de l’art de la photographie)* defined the aesthetic of the portrait as one in which the sitter’s true character was represented in an exact and pleasing manner.⁴⁷ The close relationship between truth and beauty, expounded by eighteenth-century art critics such as the Briton Sir Joshua Reynolds, was to be upheld in the new medium, as well. Portrait photographs were, at first, most commonly used as subject matter for the calling cards left for their friends by members of the aristocracy and the upper middle classes with elitist pretensions. Their aesthetic reflected a bourgeois, international mode diffused from Paris.⁴⁸ The backgrounds for these studio portraits were generic suggestions of upper middle-class parlors, with ornate *fauteuils* placed in rococo painted backgrounds of pleasant floral patterns and *trompe-l’oeil* windows opening onto suggested gardens. They give an appearance of prosperity, in order to show the prestige of the sitter. Some of them show members of the working class, dressed in the costume appropriate to their station. Such portrayals of social types were the descendants of the eighteenth-century preoccupation with categorizing and classifying the diverse ethnic groups of New Spain.⁴⁹

The lighting in these calling card portraits is soft and uniform; it does not cast shadows. The poses are formulaic, with three-quarter profiles, busts, and frontal, full-figure portrayals predominating. The model represents the bourgeois perception of domestic space, which dictates that the decorations and furniture act as vehicles for signifying the social category of the sitter. The sober and serious expressive mode reflected values favored by the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, and even the portrayals of the poor were idealized. Their clean clothes and neatly braided or combed hair imbued them with a sense of dignity, entrenching in the middle class mentality a well-defined social order where everything—and everyone—was in its proper place.⁵⁰ Romualdo García, the photographer best known for his photographs of *angelitos*, did a number of such calling card portraits (figures 6.11 and 6.12).⁵¹

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Mexico, having experienced French imperialism first hand during the French Intervention and subsequent reign of the Habsburg monarch Maximilian in 1864-1867, was well-acquainted with French politics and culture. On the “French craze” in Mexico, see William Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club and Other Episodes of Porfirian Mexico* (University of Nebraska Press, 1987).

⁴⁷ Patricia Massé y Zendejas, *Cruces y Campa*.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Katzew, *Casta Painting*.

⁵⁰ Massé Zendejas, *Cruces y Campa*.

⁵¹ Emma Cecilia García Krinsky, ed. *Imaginarios y fotografía en México, 1839-1970* (México: Lunwerg Editores, Conaculta/INAH, 2005); Claudia Canales, *Romualdo García. Un fotógrafo, una ciudad, una época* (Guanajuato: Gobierno del Estado de Guanajuato, 1980).



Figure 6.11: Romualdo García, from the series *Men Alone—Full-body*, c. 1910 (Source: *Imaginarios y fotografía en México, 1839-1970*, p.116)



Figure 6.12: Romualdo García, c. 1910. A group of three friends, glasses of beer in hand, grins impertinently at the lens. (Source: Canales, *Romualdo García: Un fotógrafo, una ciudad, una época*)

Romualdo García's and Juan de Dios Machain's studio photographs of dead children fall within the parameters set by this aesthetic, with generic painted backgrounds and a style of clothing often indicating the social class of the baby's family, but these parameters are changed and subverted by the specific intentions and purposes of commemorative portraiture. The purpose of these portraits is not to show one's friends how well off one is, but to memorialize a family member. The poses are equally generic, with family members framing the space behind the dead child, who is generally laid out on a table or coffin or sitting on the lap of its mother or father. The influence of the photographer, who could direct the sitters' gazes in order to create a symmetrical composition, is often evident. But they are meant to serve as reminders, *memento mori*, of the child's place within the family unit, and of the importance of that family unit. In a sense, they reinforce the social order in the manner of the middle class calling cards, but this is a different social order, the social order of the *gente humilde*, in which children epitomize innocence and their death represents an escape from the travails of life. They are bittersweet portrayals of an unhappy occasion; there is nothing of the supposed joy and merriment described by the foreign travelers who witnessed the ritual of the child's wake. The inclusion of religious

imagery also sets them apart from the secular, parlor-like interiors of their middle-class precursors.⁵²



Figure 6.13: Romualdo García, c.1910 (Source: *Artes de México*, no. 15, Spring 1992)

⁵² Figure 6.13: On left: Fototeca Romualdo García, Museo Regional de Guanajuato, INAH; on right, Colección Fototeca Guanajuatense, Museo de la Alhóndiga de Granaditas, INAH. Figure 6.14: Juan de Dios Machain, *Tránsito de angelitos*.

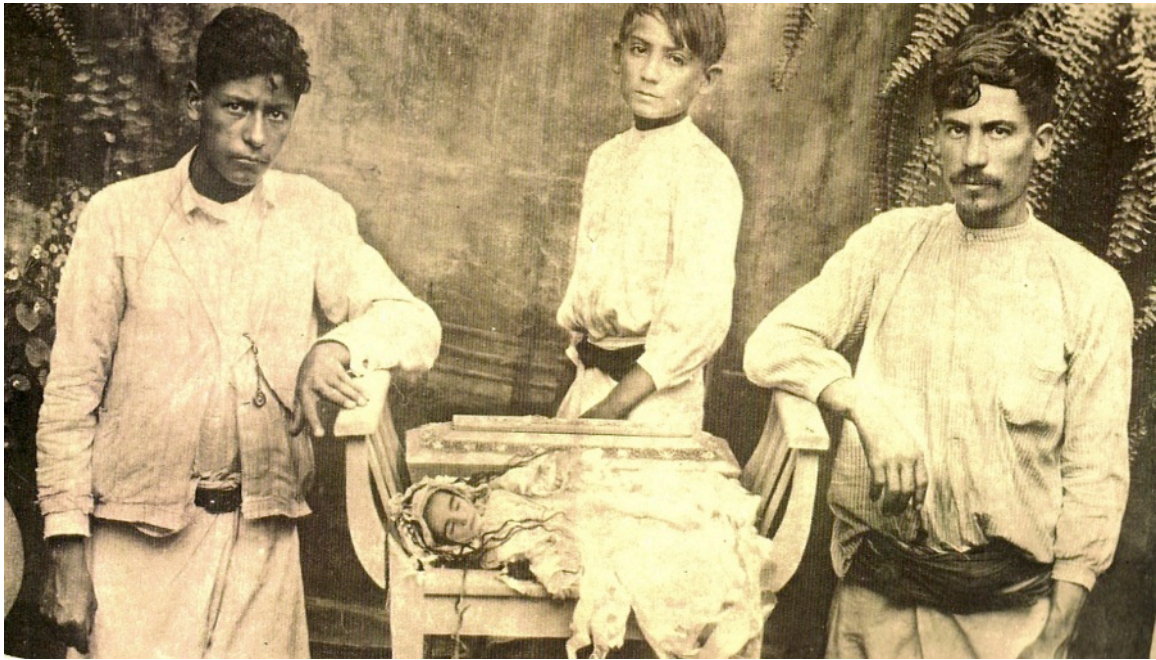


Figure 6.14: Private Angelito Photograph (Source: Machain, *Tránsito de angelitos*, 1988)

Not all photographs of dead children were taken in a photographer's studio. Sometimes the photographer was called to the private residence where the wake was taking place. The humble living conditions of their sitters are evident in these pictures. An adobe wall, a simple tiny coffin on the floor, an elaborate altar-like table set amid a drainage canal between two hacienda buildings—these demarcate the immediate realities of the families of *angelitos*. Yet for all the poverty of their surroundings, the utmost care is taken in the presentation and decoration of the body. Flowers adorn every surface, and the babies' costumes are of the finest quality their families could afford. A sense of ceremony and dignity imbues each one of these photographs, in ways diametrically opposed to the dignity and sobriety projected by the middle-class calling cards. Here the subject matter is not the social position of the sitter, but the intersection of the sacred with the profane, of death and life, the crossroads where life ends and eternity begins.

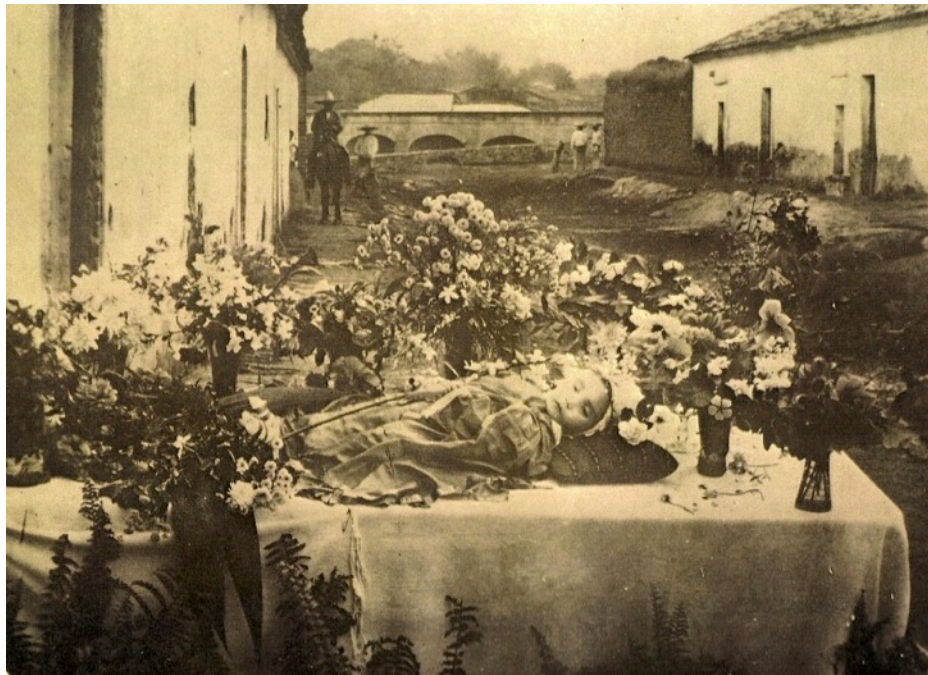


Figure 6.15: Juan de Dios Machain Photograph, Private Collection (Source: *Artes de México*, no. 15, Spring 1992)



Figure 6.16: Juan de Dios Machain Photograph, c. 1900 (Source: <http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/digital/mexico/images/247.html>)



Figure 6.17: Juan de Dios Machain, *Tránsito de angelitos* (Source: *Tránsito de angelitos*, Museo de San Carlos, 1988)

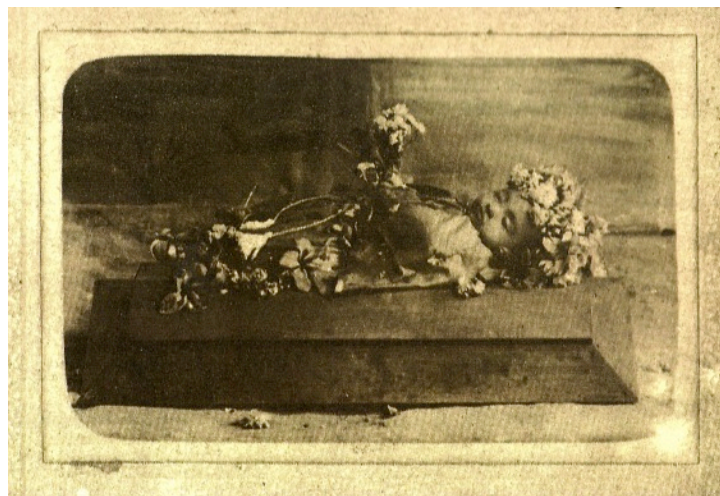


Figure 6.18: Anonymous Angelito (Source: *Artes de México*, no. 15, Spring 1992)

Death Rituals and Mentalities During the Reforma and Beyond

As we have seen in Chapters 3 and 4, the political changes wrought by liberal reformers in the mid-nineteenth century had important implications for the ways religion was practiced in Mexico. The wealth and power of the Catholic church were severely curtailed, and per the Reform Laws of 1857, which were incorporated into the constitution in 1874, the church's very visibility was markedly reduced: all religious activity was now to be confined to the interior of church buildings. The highly visible religious processions of the colonial period, which simultaneously expressed and created the predilection for the "outward" expressions of faith typical of "Baroque" Catholicism, were banned, and priests were prohibited from wearing clerical garb in public. More importantly for the *angelitos* tradition, they were no longer permitted to accompany the dead to their gravesites. Funeral masses could be held inside the church, but after that the funeral cortege went to the burial grounds (relegated since the late eighteenth century to suburban cemeteries away from church buildings) without the intercessory figure of the priest to guide the souls of the departed to their final resting place.⁵³ The laws prohibiting priests from performing ceremonies outside of the church essentially confined them, reducing their visibility and thus their importance with regard to Mexican death rituals. In effect, it permitted funeral rituals to evolve without the direct influence of the church, thus allowing the photographic tradition of commemorating *angelitos* to thrive.

We also saw in previous chapters that, while there was a limited *rapprochement* between the church and the state during the Porfiriato, the fundamental restrictions on the church's visibility, and thus influence, remained in place. What gave an additional impetus to the development of the *angelito* tradition during the Porfiriato, however, was the expansion of the economy. While huge extremes of wealth characterized this economic expansion, it also made possible the access to funerary portraits for those of the lower socioeconomic sectors. As we have seen with ex-voto paintings, despite the undeniable social and economic inequalities of pre-revolutionary Mexico, the incipient economic modernization projects in the late nineteenth century brought more wage-based jobs to Mexico, especially in the cities. This increased access to cash income allowed at least some of the poor, who had perhaps been subsistence farmers before, to spend their earnings on devotional and funerary art.⁵⁴

⁵³ This proscription of priests and other religious figures from funeral processions has been in effect for so long as to have become internalized, even if the restrictions have been lifted. In October of 2008, I attended the funeral of a friend's father in Xonocatlán, Estado de México. After the church ceremony, his sons carried the coffin to the house for some more prayers, and then loaded the coffin onto a truck and walked behind the vehicle to the gravesite, a few kilometers away. They dug the grave, lowered the coffin into it, covered it, and said more prayers. The priest was involved only in the context of the mass held inside the church. I asked my friend about the absence of the priest and he said having a priest during the actual burial was "unnecessary."

⁵⁴ See the essays in Heather Fowler-Salamini and Mary Kay Vaughan, eds. *Women of the Mexican Countryside, 1850-1990* (Tucson and London: The University of Arizona Press, 1994); and Susie Porter, *Working Women in Mexico City: Public Discourses and Material Conditions, 1879-1931* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2003).

While the elite continued to prosper, and the middle class grew as a social group, the majority of Mexicans were classified as *gente humilde*, humble people. It is this group that is overwhelmingly represented in the photographs of dead children, and oral history substantiates this perception.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, very few photographs of apparently middle-class or wealthy dead children and their families exist. Elites seem not to have developed the taste for commemorating their dead by photographing them, although some of the paintings discussed above are from the nineteenth century, and the written record supports the contention that they still grieved, often despairingly, for their lost babies.⁵⁶ Little José Navarrete's parents were utterly bereft at his death; his portrait inscription reveals their anguish:

Don José Manuel Navarrete, born on the 28th of November 1843 and died on the 18th of September 1847 at the age of 3 years and 10 months. He was docile and his good inclinations brought his parents many honorable satisfactions...his early death ended such a bright future, leaving them with intense pain that will end when it ends, and which is mitigated only by the consolation of Our Holy religion. He occupies the place promised to innocence because our God, omnipotent, called him to increase the number of his angels.⁵⁷

A mid-nineteenth-century unpublished funeral elegy for a little boy named David reflects the tenderness and affection with which elite parents regarded their children.⁵⁸ Handwritten in a flowery script common at the time, it is matched by equally flowery language that indicates a highly educated author. References to classical mythology and frequent literary flourishes offer a glimpse into the mentality and mode of expression of the upper classes. The boy's father expresses his nearly unbearable pain at the loss of his little son. The man constructs his elegy as a play in fourteen acts, beginning with a monologue by the dead David. In this first "hymn," as the boy's life slips away, he moans heartwrenchingly "I die...I perish...oh, terrible pain!...I lose what I most adore."⁵⁹ In the next "act," the grief-stricken father furiously addresses Death:

⁵⁵ Luz Delia García Hermosillo, *El retrato de angelitos*. Interviews with nine people of various social classes who were alive in the early 1900s consistently stress that both the ritual and the practice of taking a picture were the exclusive domain of *la gente humilde*.

⁵⁶ A poem written by an educated widower, discussed in more detail below, illustrates this feeling of despair. Sutro Library, SMMS BV10, *Cantos fúnebres dedycados á la tyerna memória de my Esposa é Hyjo*, 1849.

⁵⁷ Don José Manl Navarrete, Nació el día 28 de Nbe. de 1843 y falleció el 18 de Sept. 1847 a la edad de 3 años y 10 meses. Se ejerció dócil y sus buenas inclinaciones prometían a sus Padres muchas y honrosas satisfacciones su temprana muerte acabó con tan alagueño porvenir dejándoles con inteso dolor que teminará cuando deje de ecsistir que sólo los consuelos de Ntra. religión Santa los mitiga. El ocupa el lugar prometido á la inocencia porque nuestro Dios omnipotente lo llamó á aumentar el número de sus ángeles (trans. by the author); inscription is from an 1847 painting by José María Estrada. Inscription quoted in an article by Gutierre Aceves Piña in *La muerte niña: mayo a octubre de 1999*, ed. Beatriz Mackenzie (Puebla de los Angeles: Museo Poblano de Arte Virreinal, 1999).

⁵⁸ Sutro Library, SMMS BV10, *Cantos fúnebres dedycados á la tyerna memória de my Esposa é Hyjo*, 1849.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Canto 1: "yo muero...yo fallezco...¡oh terrible dolor!...pierdo a lo que más amo"

“What good is the innocent blood to you/Of one who has only just been born?”⁶⁰ The author then relates the sad story of David’s demise: his mother could not produce milk, and the poor infant had a succession of fifteen wet-nurses, all of whom cruelly left despite the father’s pleas. They made David suffer from hunger! Finally, a ragged, tattered and indecent girl showed up, nursed David back to health, only to abandon him—cruel, inhumane woman!⁶¹ The malnourished David died just before his first birthday; “your pulse...totally lost...”⁶²

The rest of the elegy employs similarly melodramatic language:

¡oh dolor..! Ya estás frío! ¡falleciste!	O sorrow...! You are cold! You have died!
¡Ya acabó tu vivir en este mundo....!	Your time of living in this world is over!
¡Y allá de la eternidad en lo profundo,	And there in the deepest eternity
Tu existencia es constante y permanente....!	Your existence is constant and permanent! ⁶³

Next, the father descends to the sepulcher, where he is severely disillusioned. He cannot find his beloved son; all he sees around him are bones and dust. He again rails against Death:

Fiera Parca, sangrienta, inescorable!	Savage Death, bloody, inexorable!
¡Mira, oh Muerte inhumana, tus despojos!	Look, o inhumane Death, at your plunder!
¡Por dó quiera que yo ponga mis ojos,	Anywhere I lay my eyes
No veo en este lugar mas que tristura!	I see nothing but sorrow!
Esqueletos, cadáveres, y huesos	Skeletons, cadavers, and bones
De víctimas sin fin que á tus antojos	Of limitless victims whom your whims
Has inmolado, cruel, con los arrojados	Have immolated, cruelly, with the boldness
De tu horrenda segúr, aspera y dura.	Of your horrendous being, sour and hard.
¡Ya nada, nada de David existe....!	Nothing, nothing of David remains!
¡Ay! ¡Todo está ya al polvo convertido....!	Ay! Everything has turned to dust!
¡Y todo se halla á la nada reducido....!	And everything has become nothing!
¡Se borró su existencia totalmente....!	His existence has been erased totally! ⁶⁴

No hopeful belief that David has flown to heaven, that he is now happily playing with other *angelitos*, is evident in this bitter and moving elegy. This difference in attitude from that expressed in the ethnographic evidence citing the hope that the child is in heaven, and from

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, Canto 2: “¿Qué te sirve la sangre inocente/Del que apenas al mundo ha nacido?”

⁶¹ *Cantos fúnebres*, “nodriza andrajosa...bribona”.

⁶² *Cantos fúnebres*, “tus pulsos...totalmente perdidos.....”.

⁶³ *Cantos fúnebres*, p.10.

⁶⁴ *Cantos fúnebres*, Canto 5.

gravestone inscriptions utilizing *angelito* terminology and expressing intense grief,⁶⁵ points to some of the differences between elite and non-elite conceptions of what happens after death. David's father expresses an upper class view of death, echoed in contemporary tombstone inscriptions.⁶⁶ This conceptualization tends to focus more on the cruelty and injustice of losing a child, while the *angelito* rituals and photographs of the *gente humilde* expresses more resignation, and, in the view that children who die go straight to heaven, ultimately more hopefulness. Yet in a further instance of the interconnection between elite and non-elite, in the humanity shared by all social classes, the despair expressed by David's father is testimony to the anguish felt by parents of all social classes upon losing their children.

High mortality characterized both colonial and nineteenth-century Mexico, a fact that undoubtedly plays a central role in the development of funerary portraiture and ritual. During the relative political stability of the Porfiriato, death caused by violent insurrections was less common than it had been during the early to mid-nineteenth century, but the socioeconomic position of the majority of the population was dismal. The entrenchment of the hacienda system, with its brutal exploitation of the peasantry, meant that by 1910 a large majority of rural Mexicans was caught in a trap of declining real wages and land concentration. The lower-class diet was consistently inadequate: people subsisted on Mesoamerican staples such as corn, beans, chile and *pulque*,⁶⁷ while meat, dairy, and nutritious fruit and vegetables were rarely consumed. Medical science, especially in rural areas, consisted of an amalgamation of Mesoamerican shamanic traditions mixed with the Catholic cult of saints.⁶⁸ While the Porfiriato saw a sustained population growth, life expectancy averaged thirty years, and infant mortality averaged 30 per cent. In Guanajuato, where the photographer Romualdo García was active, a brief survey of baptisms and child deaths points to a stark picture: of 1415 baptisms in 1892, 184 girls and 203 boys are listed in the death records for that year, a total of 387, representing 27.35 per cent.⁶⁹ That figure, of course, also represents deaths of children baptized before 1892, but does not include children who died in a subsequent year. In 1900, 1640 babies were baptized, while 188 girls and 230 boys died, the total of 418 representing 25.49 per cent, a slight improvement, but still extremely high.⁷⁰ Parents would have to have four children if they hoped that two or possibly three of them would survive infancy, and this statistic is representative only of Guanajuato, which, along with the entire *Bajío* region of west-central Mexico, was relatively better off than the rest of the country. In some parts of the republic the child mortality rate was as high as 40 per cent.

⁶⁵ See figure 6.19 for Oscar Carrales T.'s tombstone.

⁶⁶ Aguilar Moreno, *El Panteón de Belén y el culto a los muertos en México*.

⁶⁷ *Pulque* is a fermented drink, of pre-Hispanic origins, made of the *maguey* cactus.

⁶⁸ Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *Medicina y magia. El proceso de aculturación en la estructura colonial* (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional Indigenista, 1963); Hugo Nutini, *Bloodsucking Witchcraft: An Epistemological Study of Anthropomorphic Supernaturalism in Rural Tlaxcala* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1993).

⁶⁹ Luz Delia García Hermosillo, *El retrato de angelitos: Magia, costumbre, y tradición* (Guanajuato, 2001), pp. 51, 54-55.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 52, 56, 57.

A century earlier, the figures were just as or even more dismal. In the tribute records for the jurisdiction of Cadereyta, the Hacienda de Real de San Antonio lists the following burial statistics for the years 1792-1805: Of Indians, 458 adults, 632 infants; of Mulatos, 15 adults, 4 children.⁷¹ In the neighboring parish of Pinal during the same years, there were 601 Indian adult deaths and 656 Indian child deaths; for Mulatos, there were 42 adult deaths and 50 child deaths. In the *cabecera* (head town) of San Juan Bautista Yahualica and its neighboring village Xochicoatlan, 446 adults and 473 infants were buried in the first half of 1803 (this *visita* did not distinguish between ethnic groups; it is possible that San Juan Bautista Yahualica was an Indian parish.)⁷²

The most common cause of child death in Guanajuato from 1880-1905 was gastroenteritis, an inflammation of the intestinal tract.⁷³ Unsanitary conditions undoubtedly contributed; worms and microbes must have been busily attacking the digestive tracts of small children with weak immune systems. Pneumonia, bronchitis, meningitis, dysentery, and plague were also frequent killers.⁷⁴ A Protestant missionary in Mexico during the Porfiriato wrote that

I used to ask: "How many of you, fathers and mothers, have children in heaven?" Usually all hands would promptly go up, while the replies came, "*Tengo cinco.*" "*Tengo ocho*"...Deplorable ignorance as to proper sanitary conditions in the home and the care of children is responsible for the large proportion of this death harvest among the little ones. Children's diseases, as measles and scarlet fever, carry multitudes away.⁷⁵

It is difficult to imagine the emotional toll taken on parents who had lost as many as eight children. The tender treatment of the dead babies, the considerable effort and expense to which the family and godparents went to properly dress and adorn them, the drawn-out wakes and funeral processions, and the added cost of having a photograph taken all point to the relative importance of children to Mexicans of all social classes.

What changed in the visual record? Why are there no photographs of elite children, and why the preponderance of photographs depicting working-class people?⁷⁶ Did the elite shun the medium of photography, and hold on to their tradition of commissioning paintings? Moreover, what accounts for the stylistic changes, such as the inclusion of family members and food offerings, conventions never seen in the paintings? These questions are best approached through

⁷¹ AGN, GD113 Tributos. Fecha 30 de noviembre de 1804 - 1º de agosto de 1805. Vol. 1, exp. 4. 129-165.

⁷² AGN, GD113 Tributos. Fecha 3 de abril - 4 de junio de 1803. Vol. 57, exp. 1, fs. 1-206.

⁷³ García Hermosillo, *El retrato de angelitos*, pp. 55-57.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Alden Buell Case, *Thirty Years with the Mexicans: In Peace and Revolution* (New York, 1917), pp. 61-62.

⁷⁶ There are one or two photographs of people wearing middle-class dress; the photographs are not *exclusively* of poor people. Still, the overwhelming majority appears to be lower-class.

a careful consideration of the interactions between the social classes and the cultural influences they have on one another. These intertwining of elite and “popular” cultures are processes with important implications for *angelitos* and their photographic tradition. As discussed above, while colonial-era children’s death portraits emphasize the defunct child’s social status in life, both the photographic and ethnographic evidence of the nineteenth century indicate a starker conception of death, while at the same time identifying dead children with celestial beings such as saints and angels. Both types of portrayals are tinged with sentimentality, but in quite different ways. In a number of photographs, the white garments, flowers, religious images, and altar-like displays of the corpses draw a connection between the dead child and celestial beings; these iconographic associations must have provided a source of comfort to the bereaved. In at least one image (see above, p. 1), ears of maize are included in the funeral display, recalling one of the most potent symbols of ancient Mesoamerican spirituality and still the fundamental source of food, and life, in Mexico; these corn cobs also evoke Day of the Dead altars. Historian Daniela Marino notes that

photographs that portray low-class little angels, both urban and rural, are not nurtured by paintings of high-class children, but derive from the same religious iconography...they also add other elements of daily existence (as food offerings, especially tender corn on the cob)...while both expressions flow from the same source and consequently share many elements,...social use makes them basically different.”⁷⁷

This lack of cultural hegemony is evident in the kinds of social interactions that characterized nineteenth-century Mexico. While the elite and the middle classes—the *gente decente*—tried to maintain their social exclusivity, they relied on the *gente humilde* to plow their fields, to fetch their water, to tend to their animals, to breast-feed their children, to sew and wash their clothes, and to drive their mules. More importantly, in small provincial towns and especially in the countryside, on haciendas, they worshiped at the same churches and thereby exchanged ideas and images. Thus, the people who commissioned these photographs, who may have seen painted portraits in the homes they cleaned, took from the images that which spoke to them, and reinterpreted them in light of their own belief systems, which were also modified, “local” or “folk” versions of Spanish (elite) Catholicism. The reinterpreted beliefs have their visual counterpart in the appropriation and transformation of elite commemorations of dead children in nineteenth-century photography, for similar reasons. In the words of anthropologist Stanley Brandes, “artistic styles and motifs are not merely transmitted across generations. The people who inherit these traditions retain them, transform them, or discard them according to particular historical circumstances.”⁷⁸ As we have seen, the historical circumstances that informed the retentions and transformations of colonial images of dead children included a high

⁷⁷ Daniela Marino, “Prayer for a Sleeping Child: Iconography of the Funeral Ritual of Little Angels in Mexico,” *Journal of American Culture* 20:2, 1997, p. 43.

⁷⁸ Stanley Brandes, “Iconography in Mexico’s Day of the Dead: Origins and Meaning,” *Ethnohistory* 45(2): Spring, 1998, p. 206.

mortality rate, a strong tradition of devotions to local saints, the newly introduced technology of photography, and the reduced presence of the Catholic church in Mexican death rituals.



Figure 6.19: The Grave of Oscar Carrales, Municipal Cemetery of Guanajuato (Source: Photograph by author)⁷⁹

Conclusions

The tradition of commemorating children posthumously has a number of parallels to the ex-voto tradition. Both visual practices stemmed from deep, even primal emotions such as love, gratitude, and sorrow. The haunting photographs of little ones taken too soon offered the children's families a way to come to terms with the anguish of losing their babies, and the development of a distinct *angelitos* iconography in the nineteenth century, in which the association between innocent children and angels was made explicit, followed a path similar to that of the entrenchment of the custom of thanking a saint for a miracle received. Moreover, both traditions began as luxury items accessible only to elites; technological and political changes in the nineteenth century eventually allowed people of fewer means to commission them, thus permitting their democratization. The invention and eventual affordability of photography, like

⁷⁹ The text reads, "The child Oscar Carrales T. flew to heaven on April 25, 1977 at the age of 4 months. A memento of his parents R.I.P. in perpetuity." The original Spanish text on this wooden cross memorial reads "El niño Oscar Carrales T. voló al cielo el 25 de Abril de 1977 a la edad de 4 meses un recuerdo de sus padres R.I.P. perpetuidad." Here, in a late twentieth-century memorial, the association of babies with angels (who have wings and fly about in heaven) indicates an instance of continuity in folk religion. Guanajuato Municipal Cemetery, 2001.

the increased availability of industrially made tin plates and oil paints, made it possible for poorer Mexicans to express their emotions and religiosity in visual ways. Taking their cues from the models generated by the wealthy, which they would have seen in the churches where they all worshipped, and in some cases in the homes where they were employed, the *gente humilde* appropriated and transformed the visual aesthetics of both ex-votos and photographs of *angelitos*. The Mexican government's sharp curbing of the wealth and visibility of the Catholic church in the mid-nineteenth century paradoxically allowed both traditions to thrive. In the case of *angelitos*, because the church was no longer the executor of death registries and burials, ordinary Catholics were more free to embellish and transform the children's death rituals that had developed over time.

What are we to make of the visual association of dead children with sacred beings? There is visual and ethnographic evidence that children were often dressed as saints before burial, seen in numerous photographs and in the travelers' descriptions discussed above.⁸⁰ The children were sometimes dressed in the manner of the various advocations of the Virgin Mary (for girls) and of Saint Joseph (for boys), or, more frequently, in white, symbolizing the purity befitting a little saint. The iconographic and stylistic identification of children with saints makes sense in a society in which the "official" religion was "folk" Catholicism. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, the weakening of the Catholic church's position of power in relation to the Mexican state in the nineteenth century in no way translated into a secularization of folk society. Indeed, "the folk" appear to have been ever more fervent in their devotions, as evidenced in the proliferation of ex-votos and in the upsurge in pilgrimages to established and newly-founded shrines.

The practice of burying infants without recording their names or those of their families, and referring to them merely as *angelitos*, underscores a custom in many parts of the Hispanic world of not naming infants "until it was plain that they had passed the stage when infant mortality was likely," thus denying them a psychological and cultural identity, as a way of guarding against the very real possibility that the little one would not survive and the sadness and pain that this possibility entailed.⁸¹ Many of the children in the photographs seen above seem to have been past infancy, and likely had been baptized and given names. The anonymity of the babies in the photographs, as opposed to the annotated painted portraits, however, is striking. It may simply reflect the clients' illiteracy, although the photographers surely could have been asked to write the names of the babies on the images, just as the clients of *retableros* (ex-voto makers) had their stories written into the paintings. But if the photographs hide the officially approved identity of those portrayed, they reveal another kind of identity, in which the child plays an important role in the social order, and in which sacred beings inhabit the earth, visiting once a year and requiring proper commemoration. Identifying dead babies with angels, and with saints such as the Virgin Mary or Saint Joseph, functioned as an added defense mechanism in the face of the possibility of their loss, and reaffirmed the ties between this world and the other. Photographs of Mexican *angelitos* offer a window into the mentality of people who left few

⁸⁰ García Hermosillo, pp. 93-94.

⁸¹ MacLeod, p. 65.

written records, and document their attitudes—sometimes diverging, sometimes converging—in relation to the attitudes of people in faraway countries and different social classes. For people living in the nineteenth century, photography made possible the preservation of the memory of the child just past the point between life and death, as close as possible to life, denying death.

Conclusion

Mexico's religious culture has undergone many permutations in the past five centuries, but one of its constants has been a visually rich output of pious expression. While Mexico is still an overwhelmingly Catholic country, the political processes described in chapters 2 and 3, which shifted the balance of power from the church to the state, and which laid the foundations for increasing anticlericalism following the Mexican Revolution, contributed to the decreased visibility of the Catholic church in the country. The custom of photographing *angelitos* was already in decline by the mid-twentieth century, and to my knowledge, is today extinct, although in some rural areas the ceremonial wake is still observed. The physical appearance of ex-votos, too, has been altered; most notable is a trend toward handwritten or computer-generated offerings, and the near-disappearance of the *retablero* as an integral player in Mexico's religious economy.¹ Recent scholarly and general interest in Mexican ex-votos has led to a small but important network of collectors in Mexico and the United States, as well as a black market in new paintings deliberately made to look antique, or paintings showing social concerns rarely expressed prior to 1980, such as homosexuality, prostitution, male impotence, and cuckoldry. The deliberately antiqued ex-votos are geared toward tourists who may not have the discerning eye to distinguish "real" from "fake," while those depicting sexual and other "*risqué*" themes may or may not have been commissioned by their purported donors. The painting below (figure 7.1) exemplifies this kind of new ex-voto. It seems unlikely to express actual religious devotion, but it certainly follows the visual paradigm established in the colonial period and further developed in the nineteenth century.

¹ A few *retableros* are still in business, although their output tends to be geared toward the tourist market, with a certain kitsch appeal. One of the best known artists is Alfredo Vilchis Roque, whose sons have kept up the family's workshop.



Figure 7.1: Ex-voto by Alfredo Vilchis Roque, 2004

The painting depicts a nude woman in bed with her sleeping husband, who is unaware that his wife's lover, the butcher's son, is hiding under the bed. Grateful that her husband did not wake up as her lover fled the bedroom, she apologizes and promises not to do it again. Her offering is made to a saint rarely seen in Mexican ex-votos, St. Jude Thaddeus, whose cult has grown immensely over the past two generations, particularly in Mexico City.²

The phenomenon of devotion to St. Jude, or San Judas as he is known in Spanish, bears mentioning here. One of Jesus's apostles (not to be confused with Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Christ), he is known as the patron saint of difficult or hopeless causes. Devotion to him was strong in Armenia until the eighteenth century, when Christians were driven from the area; the devotion was reinvigorated in Italy and Spain in the nineteenth century. Claretian monks began to promote this devotion in the United States in the 1920s, and it became especially popular

² Ex-voto offered by "Sra. Carolina," painted by Alfredo Vilchis Roque, 2004. Text reads: San Judas Tadeo eternamente agradecida te ofresco este retablitto porque mi marido se quedo dormido y no se dio cuenta que estube con el hijo del carnisero al berme en penosa situación arrepentida te pido perdon pues no lo buelbo hacer pues te lo prometi que si salia con bien de esta te traia este presente. y aqui cumplo. Tu fiel devota. Sra. Carolina de la colonia Roma México D.F. 28 octubre - 2004. Image courtesy of Tom Abercrombie.

among Polish Catholic women in Chicago.³ The Claretians established themselves in Mexico in the 1940s, after the wave of revolutionary anticlericalism had settled, and the devotion has grown significantly, especially in Mexico City, and especially among the poor and the working class. His saint's day is October 28, although throngs of devotees pack his church of San Hipólito in downtown Mexico City on the 28th of every month, bringing with them plaster or plastic replicas of his image that they line up to have blessed by the priest.



Figure 7.2: Devotees Crowd the Church of San Hipólito in Mexico City, 2011 (Source: jorgalbrtotranseunte.wordpress.com)

Despite his immense popularity, San Judas receives relatively few painted ex-votos. According to Father René Pérez of the Templo de San Hipólito, he is instead the recipient of thousands of written requests—for help in finding a job, getting out of a bad domestic situation, recovery from illness, recovery of stolen property, and sometimes evading the police.⁴ Indeed, the devotion is especially popular with economically and socially marginalized urban youth, including gang members. In 2008, Father Pérez and other church employees collected 21,247 of these requests from the urn in which they are deposited, and tabulated them according to type of favor requested. By far the largest category of requests involved a family member (6,992, or 16%), followed by requests for health (5,099, or 11%). Requests involving work—obtaining or maintaining—numbered 3,168, or 7%. Love and peace were also popular themes, as were protection and security, being a better person, and happiness. Less prevalent but still significant were requests involving the release of prisoners (739) and for help in quitting drugs “and other vices” (327). Eighty-four people wrote to St. Jude asking him to help them win the lottery, while

³ Robert Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (Yale University Press, 1996).

⁴ Interview with Father René Pérez, June 2009.

2,384 wrote to thank him for favors received.⁵ It appears that the tradition of communicating with the divine, and the perception that holy beings can and do intercede on humans' behalf, is alive and well in the twenty-first century, even as the forms in which this tradition is expressed have changed. At the same time, in keeping with traditional Mexican Catholic practices, the devotion to St. Jude is centered upon his image—dressed in green and white, with a flame coming out of his head—clear visual markers that convey critical information about who the saint is, and what he can do.

As noted in the introduction and in Chapter 4, the production of painted ex-votos in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has dwindled. But the ideas informing *retablos* are firmly entrenched, whether they take the form of a painting, a *milagrito*, a lock of hair, a set of crutches, a wedding dress, a photocopy of a diploma, baby clothes, or a handwritten note. In the nineteenth century, the heyday of the painted ex-voto in Mexico, these ideas were remarkably similar to those expressed today, especially as regards the concept of human-divine reciprocity or the “spiritual contract.”

One of the reasons for this continuity of ideas across a broad arc of time, even as their visual expression takes new forms, has to do with people's responses to political and institutional changes. As we saw in Chapter 2, in the early nineteenth century the institutional church in Mexico shrank precipitously: the independence wars claimed a number of lives, and many Spanish-born curates, like their lay counterparts, fled the political instability and anti-*peninsular* fervor of the new nation. After independence, too, anticlerical sentiment led many potential curates to choose professions outside the priesthood. The result was a sharp decline in numbers of priests guiding their flocks, and with little institutional direction, laypeople were effectively forced to take care of their own spiritual needs. Thus, we see new devotions such as the one to the Lord of Tepatitlán (discussed in chapter 2), as well as old devotions that began growing apparently organically, aided by the increased availability of materials (tin plate, oil paint, photography) with which to make visual expressions of these devotions.

During the Reform, when the institutional church was by all measures under attack, the process was sharpened and resulted in ever more spontaneous expressions of popular piety. The massive Easter Week celebrations at Iztapalapa and the numerous infractions of the Lerdo Law prohibiting “public displays of religion” (discussed in Chapter 3) were manifestations of a deeply felt need for spirituality in an age of official church weakness and state-enforced secularization. Ordinary, everyday people refuted the removal of their emotional and spiritual anchors, and insisted upon their rights to practice their religion as they saw fit—as they had always practiced it. In quite different contexts, Margaret Chowning and William B. Taylor have both noted this “laicization” of Mexican religiosity in the nineteenth century. Taylor notes a marked increase in both old and new shrines and devotions in rural Mexico prior to the middle of the century, fueled

⁵ Chart provided by Father René Pérez, Church of San Hipólito and San Damiano, Mexico City.

largely by indigenous devotees.⁶ Chowning focuses on a female-led lay association, one of the first of its kind.⁷

My arguments about the increase in and popularization of ex-voto production and the *angelitos* tradition build on this schema of an increasing laicization of faith in the nineteenth century. As Taylor puts it, “public quest for religious experience and answers continued” even as the institutional mechanisms for fomenting devotion faltered.⁸ The Catholic pantheon had long provided a spiritual framework for Mexicans of all social classes, and despite the church’s “diminished institutional presence” for much of the nineteenth century, devotions to Christ and Mary flourished.⁹ Funerary customs, too, built on traditions derived from Spanish Catholic theology and transformed them into new rituals. The visual record—thousands of ex-voto paintings and hundreds of posthumous photographs of children—attests to the unbroken power of faith.

In the late nineteenth century, the state’s partial *rapprochement* with the church allowed for the latter to regroup and revive. Particularly in the 1890s, the institutional church was on a mission to “modernize,” with more emphasis on training for priests and bishoprics being reconfigured to more efficiently serve the laity; this meant smaller and more administratively coherent organizational units. Reformers like Archbishops Próspero María Alarcón y Sánchez de la Barquera (México) and Eulogio Gillow y Zavalza (Oaxaca) encouraged lay participation in Catholic rituals and the formation of new lay associations under the close supervision of an increased number of priests operating in their bishoprics. We might expect, then, a tapering-off of the “independent” expressions of piety such as the production of ex-votos and commemorative funerary photography, as priests worked to regain control over their parishes and to channel piety through official organizations and practices.

To a certain extent this did happen. Many of the new lay associations founded in the mid- to late Porfiriato were founded by the priest and closely supervised by him.¹⁰ And many of the pilgrimages of that era were organized by the church, even to the extent of buying up railway tickets at a discount for pilgrims and treating pilgrimages (to the Basilica of Guadalupe in Mexico City, among others) from the outlying towns almost as a competition between country

⁶ William B. Taylor, “Shrines and Marvels in the Wake of Mexican Independence,” in *Shrines and Miraculous Images: Religious Life in Mexico Before the Reforma* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2011), pp. 165-205.

⁷ Margaret Chowning, “The Catholic Church and the Ladies of the Vela Perpetua: Gender and Devotional Change in Nineteenth-Century Mexico,” *Past and Present*, forthcoming November 2013.

⁸ William B. Taylor, “Shrines and Marvels in the Wake of Mexican Independence,” p. 204.

⁹ Taylor, “Shrines,” p. 177.

¹⁰ Edward Wright-Rios, *Revolutions in Mexican Catholicism: Reform and Revelation in Oaxaca, 1887-1934* (Duke University Press, 2009); see also Manuel Ceballos Ramírez, *El catolicismo social: un tercero en discordia; Rerum Novarum, la cuestión social y la movilización de los católicos mexicanos (1891-1911)* (El Colegio de México, 1991); and Jorge Adame, *El pensamiento político y social de los católicos mexicanos, 1867-1914* (UNAM, 1981).

priests, to see who could enlist the most pilgrims.¹¹ It was a policy that worked: to this day, the major shrines in Mexico (the Basilica of Guadalupe in Mexico City, the Basilica of Our Lady of San Juan de los Lagos in the Altos de Jalisco, the Augustinian church of the Lord of Chalma in Malinalco, State of Mexico, the church dedicated to the Holy Child of Atocha in Plateros, Zacatecas, and others) attract so many devotees that pilgrimages are scheduled, with each parish having a particular day to visit, even if it isn't the saint's feast day.

But an apparent paradox is that ex-votos and postmortem photographs of babies, which I have characterized as "uncontrolled" impulses of gratitude and grief, emanating directly from the faithful, were flowering at this very time, even with a stronger church presence in daily life and a more hands-on role for priests. This dissertation resolves that paradox by showing that the historical circumstances that preceded the church's revival and reconfiguration—the crisis of the church in the post-independence period and the emergence of new technologies that made it easier for lay people to commission art and photography—stimulated a process of lay expression of faith that by the mid to late Porfiriato was already well established. "Direct" communication with the saints proved impossible to stop. Instead, the Porfirian church was compelled to turn a blind eye to certain popular forms of devotion, while encouraging lay participation in church-led activities such as pilgrimages and prayer groups.

While I do not suggest a Weberian "crisis thesis" of popular devotion, in which the myriad wars, the crisis of the church, and the Reform all contributed to a more "enchanted" religious sensibility among the peasantry, it is indisputable that the reduced human and financial resources of the institutional church essentially forced lay people to attend to their spiritual needs without much clerical oversight. Put another way, during the colonial period the church was in a better position to shape and control popular religiosity; by the mid- to late Porfiriato the church had to accept, or adjust to, popular expressions of piety such as ex-votos.

This adjustment was not without problems. The church had two reasons for being uncomfortable with ex-votos, one theological and the other institutional. In theological terms, the ordinary, everyday miracles chronicled in *retablo* paintings were problematic because laypeople's definition of a miracle was much more liberal and all-encompassing than the constricted version defined by churchmen.¹² In the institutional sense, as we have seen, ex-votos circumvented the need for a priest in people's dealings with the holy. This was an advantage for lay people who were not well served by priests in the early to mid-nineteenth century, but it was a problem for the Porfirian church because, as Solange Alberro put it, they "make priestly

¹¹ Beginning in 1901, the bishoprics of Michoacán and Guadalajara encouraged these "competitions" in their respective *Boletines Eclesiásticos* by publishing the numbers of people who came from each parish or town, and commenting favorably or unfavorably on the priest's efforts to bring devotees on pilgrimage to Morelia or Guadalajara.

¹² The Tridentine definition stated that a prodigious event must unequivocally demonstrate that it is an act of God and not attributable to natural causes. This definition was later solidified in the first dictionary of Castilian Spanish, written by the cleric Sebastián de Covarrubias in 1611, in which a miracle was defined as "'that which provokes admiration, whether it be against the laws of nature, a portent, a prodigy, a monster'... 'but strictly speaking we use the word miracle to refer to deeds that can only be accomplished by Divine Virtue'." Cited in Alberro, "Retablos and Popular Religion in Nineteenth-Century Mexico" (*Art and Faith in Mexico*), p. 59.

intervention completely superfluous.”¹³ The church was opposed to any expression of faith over which it did not have complete control. The poor quality of the conservation of ex-votos in the churches that still exhibit them, which has resulted in the loss of countless examples due to corrosion and neglect, is a byproduct, in part, of this reluctance to sanction independent lay expressions of faith.

But only in part, because even if ex-votos were not valued highly enough to have been well-preserved by the priests in charge, it is nonetheless clear that they were tolerated and perhaps even encouraged on a temporary basis. The presence in any Mexican church today of small tokens of gratitude placed near an altar or image, perhaps computer-generated rather than hand-painted, are testament to the ongoing complexity of the relationship between the church and material demonstrations of lay piety like ex-votos. Alberro sees ex-votos as potentially subversive because they bypass the priest’s mediation between mortals and holy beings. In other words, she sees an inherent conflict between official and lay piety. My view is that the relationship between official and lay piety can be conflictive, but is not necessarily so. The very fact that there is no written legislation against them indicates tolerance and even a degree of acceptance, as do the collections of *retablos* still preserved (if haphazardly) at many churches. Although the church did not explicitly call for people visiting shrines to leave ex-votos, which chronicle the personal relationships between people and their saints, it implicitly encouraged them by providing space within churches for the display of these testimonies of personal miracles bestowed upon the faithful. Furthermore, clerical encouragement of pilgrimages made it easier for the faithful to fulfill *mandas*, the age-old promises made to a saint for public recognition of his or her power in exchange for a miracle benefiting the devotee. In short, the flowering of the ex-voto tradition in the late nineteenth century shows that the increased presence of the official church did not have a negative impact on popular religiosity, and especially where organized pilgrimages were concerned, actively supported such expressions.

We have seen a few examples of contemporary ex-votos and other expressions of popular devotion, and I would like to end with one last example of how firmly entrenched this image-based Catholic spirituality remains in Mexico. In addition to their immense devotion to San Judas Tadeo, many Mexicans have embraced a “saint” who will never be canonized by the Catholic church. She is known as *la Santa Muerte*, or Saint Death, and despite her grisly appearance and reputation as the patron saint of drug traffickers and gang members, she is honored and adored in many of the same ways as the Virgin Mary.

¹³ Alberro, “Retablos and Popular Religion in Nineteenth-Century Mexico” (*Art and Faith in Mexico*), p. 59.



Figure 7.3: Santa Muerte Statue in a Market Stall in Guadalajara (Source: <http://morbidanatomy.blogspot.com/2013/02/santa-muerte-my-search-for-bony-lady.html>)

In Mexico City, where her “official cult” was first established in 2001 by a mother whose son gave her a life-size effigy in gratitude for all the times she had visited him in prison, la Santa Muerte has become so popular that various shrines hold monthly “rosary services” in her honor. Like the rosaries to the Virgin Mary, these prayers prominently feature flowers—typically roses—and other offerings. Aside from flowers and candles, the most common offerings are water, beer, tequila, and tobacco, but R. Andrew Chesnut, who has researched la Santa Muerte extensively, notes that he has seen ex-votos dedicated to her, as well.¹⁴ In the photograph above, what look like photographs (often used in contemporary ex-votos) adorn the bottom of her cloak. The floral arrangement at her feet echoes those seen at Catholic shrines to various saints, especially Mary; and like all Catholic saints, she holds her attributes, in her case the scales of justice, the better to mete out her judgments. As much as the Catholic hierarchy opposes these parallels between its saints’ iconographies and what it views as a “Satanic” abomination, the similarities are unmistakable, and the roots of this devotion clearly point to the image-based religious tradition that this dissertation has explored. Just as the “diminished institutional church” of the nineteenth century unwittingly encouraged the flowering of popular art forms, the reduced presence of the church in recent times has opened the way for new kinds of religious expression—still anchored firmly in an early modern Catholic tradition—to blossom.¹⁵ Far from

¹⁴ R. Andrew Chesnut, “Santa Muerte: The New Saint in Town,” interview with the World Religions and Spirituality Forum, Virginia Commonwealth University, <http://www.has.vcu.edu/wrs/FORUM/Interview%20with%20R.%20Andrew%20Chesnut.pdf>. See also his book, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹⁵ William B. Taylor, *Shrines and Miraculous Images*, p. 177.

signifying a societal rejection of faith, this new devotion—like the nineteenth-century ex-voto tradition and the shorter-lived but related custom of funerary photography—affirms the primacy of a religious mentality with colonial roots, one that resolutely resisted becoming a casualty of modernity, secularism, and irreligion.

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