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In the Presence of Beauty and Mercy

Marian Devotion in Los Angeles

Wendy M. Wright, Creighton University

Introduction

[1] It is the intimacy with which he speaks which arrests me. This silver haired Augustinian priest, pried from the parish rectory on a weekday afternoon by my journalistic entreaties, leans over the back of the blond wood pew between us and, in a voice gentled with tenderness, speaks of the polychrome wooden figure set in the marbled side altar before us. Rising above an ornate Eucharistic tabernacle and flanked by sprays of green foliage, Our Mother of Good Counsel leans her cheek against the forehead of the child cradled in her right arm. I have been inquiring about Marian devotion in his Los Angeles parish, the same research query I have been making at dozens of parish churches throughout the metropolitan sprawl of the Catholic archdiocese of this “minority majority” city.

[2] Unlike most Los Angeles parishes, the Augustinian informs me, this one, Our Mother of Good Counsel, (named for this distinctive patronal image) is mostly Anglo, although

increasing numbers of Filipinos and Hispanics frequent the liturgies here. Devotion to Mary, he continues, is not as lively here as in many more culturally diverse congregations. However, it still thrives among members of his Augustinian community and the secular order that it sponsors. My conversation partner bows his head slightly, lowers his voice, and recalls the onset of each day when he and his confreres begin with prayer to the Mother of Good Counsel. He directs my attention to the statue beneath which we sit: “See, the hands of the Christ child,” he gestures fondly upward, “they hold on to her for security. In this way too, we Augustinians lean upon our good mother.”

[3] It is something of a truism among scholars who study the visual manifestations of religion to affirm that images are intrinsically powerful. People relate to them in a range of striking ways. Individuals may enshrine, venerate, caress, decorate, speak with, pray before and to, travel to, wear as protection, or fear, deface, and destroy sacred visual images. Communities as well as individuals form close bonds with specific images; they can be the means by which a given community expresses its deepest hopes and suffering. They embody a people’s history, encode moral and metaphysical assumptions, carry aspirations, and give expression to that which is felt most deeply in the heart. In the words of David Morgan, “Images are instrumental in forming both a sense of self and of social *habitus*: those worlds that provide inhabitants with conscious and unconscious codes and protocols that shape the decisions, routines, ceremonies and acts by which a world is built and made to cohere (on the power of images, see Morgan 2007: 260-62; 1998; McDannell). These worlds of meaning may alternately confirm the status quo, reinstate perceived lost worlds, or allow access to worlds yet to be realized. Similarly, they may function as bridges providing the connection between worlds past, present and future. Thus images can be liberative as well as reactionary. They can be experienced as consoling, destabilizing, enabling or energizing. They can buttress some ideals and suppress others.

[4] Here in the cool marble-floored sanctuary of Our Mother of Good Counsel in the Los Feliz district of central Los Angeles, this image is consoling, one that holds the heart: of one religious community, one man, and his religious vocation. But the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-linguistic minority-majority archdiocese in which this interview is taking place is, in fact, a microcosm of the world wide Catholic Church. As such it is awash in beloved devotional images from virtually every region of the globe, each beloved by differing individuals and communities and each creating varied worlds of meaning for devotees. I am here to study these global expressions of Marian devotion and the way that the Catholic people of Los Angeles relate to them.



Figure 1. August 9-10: Mother of Good Counsel, Our Mother of Good Counsel Parish, Los Angeles; Photo: Dorothy Tuma.

Inhabiting a Sacred World: Guadalupe

[5] For the purposes of this essay I will focus on two other visual images of the Virgin Mary and explore something of their power not merely to create human worlds of meaning but, to use the term introduced by Sigurd Bergmann in his study *In the Beginning is the Icon*, to be *theo-iconic*, to reveal the divine. Images can transform perception and allow devotees to inhabit a world endowed with sacred meaning and significance (Bergmann). I will explore this perceptual revelation in a Catholic mode.



Figure 2. December 12: Guadalupe with flowers, Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, Guadalupe, CA; Photo: Dorothy Tuma.

[6] The first image, *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*, is an ubiquitous one in the southern California basin. Although always and everywhere present, Guadalupe comes to the forefront of Catholic devotional attention during the first weeks of December, her official feast being observed on the 12th of that month. Processions, parades, novenas, pageants, triduums, veneration, pilgrimages, liturgical and para-liturgical events proliferate in those weeks. It is upon one ritual custom that takes place during this period that I wish to focus: *las mañanitas*, the dawn “awakening” of *la virgencita* on her special day. Several features of the ritual centered on her are constant. Devotees gather before the first light, often outside, sometimes inside, a parish church to serenade their beloved Guadalupe. Mariachis, dressed in traditional costume, strum guitars and lead the singing of distinctive songs. Among these is the *canto* traditionally offered to family members on the mornings of their birthdays.

This is the morning song that King David sang
Because today is your saint’s day we’re singing it for you
Wake up, dear one, wake up, look it is already dawn
The birds are already singing and the moon has set

How lovely is the morning in which I come to greet you
We all come with joy and pleasure to congratulate you
The morning is dawning now, the sun is giving us its light
Rise in the morning, look it is already dawn.

[7] Other musical offerings similarly capture the relationship felt between *la virgen morenita* and her devotees. She is the White Dove, beautiful, the one who bestows blessings, the one who has a mother's heart and a smile that welcomes. She is the flower in the garden of God's love. Without fear her devoted ones come to her and tenderly serenade her on this most auspicious day. The melodies are lilting, the lyrics sweet without being sentimental. They convey the intimacy felt with the little dark virgin of Guadalupe.

[8] The academic scholarship about the multi-layered dimensions of devotional practices and beliefs centered on the Guadalupe symbol is vast (see Elizondo 1997, 2002; Rodriguez 1994, 1996; Brading 2001, 1996, 1969; Dunnington). Much of it explores the complex theological, social, anthropological, and psychological roles she plays in the lives of her followers. She has been described theologically as a harbinger of the new creation proclaimed in the gospels: a *mestiza* embodying the cultural melding of the old and new worlds. Similarly, her story – her encounter with the peasant Juan Diego who entreats the bishop to build a sanctuary to honor her – has been read as a sign of the radical reversal proclaimed in the *Magnificat*, that canticle sung by the Virgin Mary in the opening chapter of the Gospel of Luke. She, in choosing the peasant as her spokesperson, acknowledges that the lowly will be raised up and the rich sent away empty.

[9] As a source of social identity Guadalupe has been seen as a complex and contradictory figure who encompasses, in the words of Timothy Matovina, “patriotism, political protest, divine retribution and covenant renewal, ethnic solidarity and reinforcement of social hierarchy” (40). In terms of gender, *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* has served contradictorily as an oppressive symbol, a model of female domesticity and virginity as well as an inspiration for women to be active in the public arena and demand equality, a plea for miraculous intervention and an inducement for greater participation in the church's sacramental life (see Pineda-Madrid). For displaced or marginalized persons the Guadalupe experience is the center of what Thomas Tweed calls “diasporic nationalism.” She is the focus of a complex process that allows them to make sense of themselves as a displaced people. Such Guadalupan devotion also provides a ritual arena especially for Mexicans and Mexican-Americans (with whom she is most closely identified) to forge and celebrate an alternative world, one in which powerful realities like exile and racism can be defined and re-imagined.

In the Presence of Beauty

[10] Insights such as these can illuminate the Guadalupe experience from anthropological, sociological, and theological perspectives. But as much as I am struck by the powerful implications of these studies, it is one other dimension of the visual religious experience that I would like to explore here – the issue of beauty. I do not mean beauty as defined by art criticism or by those with culturally acknowledged aesthetic sensibilities. Rather, I mean beauty as experienced by those who genuflect, caress, make pilgrimage to, pray before and venerate devotional images. In his study of American popular religious imagery, David Morgan has made observations that need, I believe, to be re-considered. He claims that

images function for different groups of people according to their relative status in a particular culture. He distinguishes popular art from two other forms of elite aesthetic sensibility – fine and *avant garde* art and taste,

Fine art is the art of the intelligentsia, that is the broadly defined class that premises the recognition and enjoyment of artistic value on the possession of discerning taste, which is typically the cultural domain of those who possess the distinctions of wealth, education or leisure necessary to acquire, display and refine such taste, *Avant garde* art is the art of another, sometimes closely related elite, namely, the art of those who understand themselves as cultural producers rather than consumers or guardians. This art prizes innovation in order to distinguish itself and its experience from other art and its admirers. Rather than security or comfort, adherents of avant-garde art seek to challenge and re-define the normative templates of moral and imaginative values. Revolution, transformation and novelty are its principle concerns (2006: 425-26).



Figure 3. December 13: Guadalupe devotional display, Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, Santa Paula, CA; Photo: Dorothy Tuma.

[11] In contrast, in popular visual religiosity (Guadalupe and other forms of Catholic devotion would be in this category), Morgan sees artistic quality as less important than the appeal of imagery to devotional sentiments and narrative clarity. In his view, originality is far less important than an engaging manipulation of traditional visual forms. Most importantly, he sees that a central task of popular religious imagery is to safeguard the viewer from change, offering a pastoral anchoring of self and community by the use of well-recognized visual formulae that link the viewer without ambivalence to tradition and the original object of tradition. While there may be something to say for this analysis, I do not know how to square this insight with the powerful effects of devotional art in transformative religious contexts. It seems to do a great deal more than secure the participants from change.

[12] Here in the chill of the Los Angeles winter, banks of colorful floral arrangements litter the altar and accumulate at the feet of *la virgen*. The words of *las mañanitas* float upward in the pre-dawn air; they are scented, melodic, tender, and intimate. This is who she is and she is palpably present. This ritual, focused on the familiar visual image, allows the ordinary

barriers between the visible and invisible to dissolve. A sacramental sensibility prevails. Hope transforms sorrow; beauty transfigures the harsh contours of the quotidian world. To say that this ritual is in the realm of the “imaginative” is not to suggest fantasy, or wishful thinking, or the denial of “facts”; rather, it is to claim that the imagination is a central component of human perception, integral to whatever we perceive. The melodic songs with lilting lyrics, the profusion of flowers placed before the “little virgin” (*flores y cantos* being in indigenous meso-American symbolism attributes of the divine), and the vigil held in the presence of her image usher the participant into the presence of beauty. I suggest that this is not simply world maintenance but a radical revelation of the divine. It is impossible to be privy to this ceremony and not to experience the effect on all present. Reverence, yes, familiarity, yes, but something more is going on. Guadalupe’s people exist in a realm of realized beauty. The encounter, as Virgil Elizondo describes the meeting between Juan Diego and the mysterious woman on Tepeyac and her subsequent meetings with devotees, transforms this earthly space into a sacred realm.

In the Presence of Mercy: Dolores

[13] I turn now to my second image, Our Lady of Sorrows, or Dolores as she is known in Spanish. The mature, maternal presence of this Marian image makes itself known most keenly at the *pesame* ritual in which I participate in the depths of Holy Week at Dolores Mission, in the gang-invested barrio of East Los Angeles. Gathered on the evening of Good Friday in the tiny sanctuary are the inhabitants of the neighborhood, workers documented and undocumented, men and women, young and old who come to grieve with *la virgen* who has lost her son and to bring their own poignant sorrows to lay at her feet. The image on display here is of the mother who swoons at the foot of the cross. In the dim light of the crowded sanctuary, those of us gathered pray together the sorrowful mysteries of the rosary and raise our voices in Spanish laments giving expression to the unimaginable pain of the mother. We keen with the young priest’s meditation on Mary’s whispered words “*m’jo, m’jo . . . my son, my son . . .*” and then, slowly walk forward in ragged procession to offer Dolores flowers and slips of paper on which we have inscribed our own sorrows, a few of which, at the invitation of the presider, are voiced aloud. “My son is in prison, I don’t know if I will see him again,” “my daughter is dying of cancer, how will we care for the little ones she will leave?” “The drugs find our children, even on the school playground,” “I have buried two sons and weep with the mothers of those gang members who killed them.” The atmosphere is heavy with sorrow but strangely tempered with the leaven of solidarity, both human and divine.

[14] Dolores of the *pesame* ritual is more than a sister, more even than a heavenly intercessor. She embodies divine mercy. She reaches out with infinite compassion into the anguish of the violated human heart, into the violence, hopelessness and dereliction of the barrio. Dolores knows. She stands at the base of the brutal, blood stained cross where her precious child hangs. To be in her presence is to enter a space capacious enough to embrace all that suffering that rises up from this diminutive church, indeed all the suffering of the world. She embodies the paradox of hope experienced in the midst of unimaginable sorrow. Profound anguish is here transmuted into hope: the mystery at the core of Christian faith occurs here,

not through argument, proposition or creedal formula but through the presence of the image of Dolores herself and the ritual action undertaken in relation to her.

[15] Sigura Bergmann, Norwegian theologian and author of *In the Beginning is the Icon: A Liberative Theology of Images, Visual Arts and Culture*, describes the visual arts as “an intuitive and rational interpretation of reality.” Images for him are *theo-iconic*, capable of imaging the divine, and *locus theologicus*, sites “where God acts and the human experience of God becomes manifest in an autonomous medium.” Bergmann’s interest therefore is not in academic theological aesthetics or in the way art reflects classical theological themes but much more about what he terms “theology in context,” theological reflection about those who make and engage images, the theology that emerges from this, and the ways that images are engaged. In addition, Bergmann is interested in images as liberating. He offers a perspective on visual imagery based, as he suggests, on “God’s loving gaze” and God’s commitment to the poor and to the creation. He sees the visual arts as capable of expressing perspectives on culture and society that make visible and transcend prevailing patterns of perception. Visual arts can and do offer critiques of the sin that dominates much contemporary society with its instrumental, goal-orientation pursued to the detriment of those who are on the margins of power. From this perspective, he avers, the visual arts can offer alternative courses of action to confront this sin.



Figure 4. August 11: Our Lady of Sorrows, Dolores Mission, East Los Angeles; Photo: Dorothy Tuma.

[16] More powerfully still, and I am here extending Bergmann’s insights, visual images not merely critique or catalyze to action, they can make the sacred present. Because a visual image includes the perceptual richness of the human body, it can create reality using spatial intuition. An image is capable of producing inner images and influencing the imagination and thus the human capability to act in the tension between internal landscapes and external surroundings. Characteristic of images is their special ability to create meaning sensuously, spatially and visually. This meaning is not reducible to linear discursive thinking. Images make present both totality and diversity: unity and particularity. Images allow access to a knowing that is all its own: knowing that is multidimensional, sensuous, intuitive, and present. Through the encounter with the image human beings know in other than in the text-based, discursive, linguistic ways that generally have been privileged in theological and

religious discourse. They know spatially, sensuously, and intuitively. There is autonomy to the mystery of pictures and of vision, the knowing gained from which cries out to be further refined.

[17] With this in mind I am struck with the experience gleaned at *las Mañanitas* and *pesamé* rituals that center on images of *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* and Our Lady of Sorrows. The sense of sacred presence, felt in the community gathered around the images of the youthful Guadalupe and the mature, sorrowful mother, is palpable. In Dolores the divine presence is revealed as infinitely compassionate and merciful, capable of embracing the breadth and depth of human suffering and illuminating it. It is not that an explanation has been given or a rationalization offered or even that a new lens has been provided which reveals suffering as something less terrible than it is. No, sorrow and grief are met for what they are. But they are transfigured precisely because they are known for what they are – as deep violations of human dignity and as wrenching destructions of the bonds of love. Yet sorrow and grief are transfigured because they *are met* and acknowledged at the most profound of levels, they reverberate in the heart of the Mother of God.

[18] The sacred presence is also revealed by the visual image as ushering in beauty: a beauty that is not merely decorative or ornamental or even aesthetically pleasing to elite sensibilities. On the dawn of her feast day as followers gather to waken her with flowers and songs, not only is Guadalupe herself experienced as most beautiful but the space in which devotees gather, and the devotees themselves, are beautiful: they are beloved, cherished, worthy of praise, possessed of the dignity of the children of God. This is what she brings, this is what is manifest in the presence of *la virgen morenita*. As suggested, theologian Virgil Elizondo has referred to the Guadalupe event not as an apparition but as an encounter. This captures the reality well. In her presence, compassion, mercy, and beauty can be touched, felt, and sensed. Ordinary space and time give way to depth, breadth, width of divine love. The image is a medium that has a unique capacity to represent and make present the divine.

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