



The Ricci Institute Public Lecture Series

Feb. 16, 2005

“Guadalupe and Guanyin: Images of the Madonna in Mexico and China”

Edited Transcript



On February 16, 2005 the Ricci Institute presented “*Guadalupe and Guanyin: Images of the Madonna in Mexico and China*” as part of its ongoing public lecture series. At this event, two keynote speakers, **Ms. Lauren Arnold** and **Prof. Tom Lucas, S.J.** invited the audience to explore the impact of missionary Christianity on traditional cultures in pre-modern Mexico and China through a visual art history presentation. As the edited transcripts reveal, this often-turbulent spiritual contact with European Christian culture and imagery resulted in the emergence of two very important ethnographic versions of the Virgin Mary: Guadalupe and Guanyin. In the presentations below, Arnold and Lucas trace the evolution of these compelling Marian images from medieval European prototypes overlaid upon indigenous folk goddesses to fully developed Christian devotional images of distinct and moving ethnicity.

Co-sponsored by the EDS-Stewart Chair at the USF Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History, the USF Center for the Pacific Rim, and the USF Department of Visual and Performing Arts.



Fr. Thomas Lucas, S.J. is associate professor of art and design and director of the Thacher Gallery at USF. He holds a doctorate from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. An internationally known liturgical artist and consultant, Lucas is currently directing the restoration of St. Ignatius Cathedral, Shanghai. His book *Landmarking: City, Church, and Jesuit Urban Strategy* won an AJCU National Book Award in 1999.

It's a pleasure to be with you this afternoon, and to share the podium with my distinguished colleague and good friend Lauren Arnold as we attempt to tease out some fundamental and difficult questions about the use of religious imagery in cross cultural dialogue. The themes are complex and overlapping, and given the time constraints we will operate under, we need to begin with a simple disclaimer: our short presentations today and the conversation we hope they will generate are intended as first step in a complicated dialogue that includes such diverse themes as the hermeneutics of hegemony and colonialism, the encounters of clashing yet sometimes surprisingly complimentary world views and meaning systems, the mysterious power of images, hybridization, fusion cuisine, and the creation of Dolly Parton roses.

What do hybrids, fusion cuisine and the Dolly Parton rose have to do with Guadalupe and Guanyin? I beg your indulgence for a brief metaphorical escapade before we launch into our topic. The creation of hybrids is one of nature's and humanity's most creative and dangerous processes. Almost everything we eat and most of what we grow in our gardens is the result of selection, fusion, transformation, whether through natural selection or deliberate manipulation. Some consider hybridized food products the promise for a well fed world; others dub them “frankenfoods”; sometimes good news, sometimes bad. Consider, for a moment, the Bay Area's famous fusion cuisine. When the mixture of Asian, European, and New World ingredients is just right, complimentary rather than contradictory, we have a splendid dining experience. When novelty exists for the sake of novelty, or when the blend is unbalanced—we've all had to suffer cilantro macadamia nut pesto or one of its unlikely cousins

somewhere--the magic emphatically doesn't work. Consider too the blowsy, overly pungent, overly pink, lipstick, Dolly Parton hybrid tea rose—so remote from the rose's refined European and Chinese ancestors, which were themselves hybrids. It provides a cautionary tale about the dangers of indiscriminate, thoughtless mixing.

The history of the use of imagery in the Catholic tradition is a story of successful and unsuccessful hybridizations, of careful and clumsy fusions. Today we want to look at two particular image sets that grew out of Catholicism's encounters with diverse world cultures: the hybrid Guadalupe imagery of Mexico, and the Guanyin-Mary fusion in China.

The Catholic tradition, for all its many sins and failings, is essentially a world affirming belief structure. It affirms that because humanity was created in what Genesis calls "the image and likeness of God" and because Christ became God incarnate, the word in the flesh, in the end there is no absolute barrier between sacred and profane.

The early church, of course, was Jewish in its roots and cautious because of that tradition's imperative against the making of idols. Nevertheless it grew up in the media soaked and philosophically heady world of late antiquity. Neo-Platonism confidently posited that the visible can move us to the invisible, and the influence of near-Eastern mysticism and mystery religions had already enriched the soil in which Christianity's roots would spread. From as early as the mid second century of the common era, Christians were adorning the meeting places and cemeteries with frescoes that served to inspire and instruct viewers. With the adoption of Christianity as the imperial state religion in the 4th century, inevitable shifts in imagery occurred: Christ took on attributes of Apollo and the Emperor; the virgin Mary's depiction eventually came to mix domestic, imperial, and even pagan Egyptian elements.

The early doctors of the Church laid down important if somewhat abstract distinctions between the adoration that is due to God alone and the proper use and veneration of images in the popular devotional life of the faithful. In the West, Gregory the Great taught that images serve practically as the "bible of the poor", while in the Eastern Empire theologians both before and after the iconoclastic crises of the 7th and 8th centuries proposed an analogical understanding, positing that the sacred image moves us toward, and in some way mystically participates in the reality of the archetype. In popular devotional life, icons, relics, and later sculptural images and stained glass windows became commonplaces, literally common places where the unsophisticated and unlettered could encounter the transcendent. In the pre-reformation/pre-enlightenment world, the line between miraculous and mundane had yet to be drawn. Encounters with the Celtic traditions of northern Europe, the visigothic and Islamic traditions of Spain, and the Byzantine and near eastern traditions brought back during the Crusades all enriched Christianity's iconographic fusion with rich new flavors. The medieval iconographic synthesis was a rich soup indeed.

The discovery of the New World at the end of the 15th century coincided with last great yet ambiguous flowering of the medieval tradition in Spain. The religious devotion of Ferdinand, Isabella, and the Spanish Hapsburg dynasty they founded was largely untouched by the winds of theological and philosophical change that were blowing over northern Europe. It was this devotional tradition that the Spanish conquistadors brought with them to Mexico in 1521, along with less salubrious items including firearms, malaria, and measles.

There are three great approaches that attempt to describe and explain the religious colonization of the new world: what we might call the "white" legend, the "black" legend, and the "gray" legend. To grossly oversimplify a very complicated discourse, the traditionalist "white" legend sees the importation of Christianity and European values and systems as the salvation of a benighted, primitive, even demonic western hemisphere. The "black" legend focuses entirely on the destruction of indigenous culture, religion, and hegemony at the hands of corrupt invaders who used religion as a cynical tool for enslavement and exploitation. What I dub the "gray legend", the route of "acculturation," is a much more complicated, nuanced, and difficult position to maintain, because it attempts to understand and interpret

how old world and new world religious world views mutually shaped one another and ultimately influenced and transformed Christianity even as Christianity reshaped already flexible indigenous beliefs and structures. It posits a dialectic of encounter that occurred more at the popular level than among hierarchies, wherein narrative, images, symbol, and rich sensual experience played immensely important and nuanced roles. This gray legend bursts into vivid living color in the devotional art of Catholic Latin America, which, incidentally, will be featured in a large show entitled “Sacramental Light” next winter at the USF Thacher Gallery.

No image demonstrates the thesis and ambiguities of the “gray legend” better than that of Our Lady of Guadalupe. What can be told with historical-critical certainty can be summed up briefly. As early as 1550 a shrine of the Virgin Mary had replaced a sanctuary of Tonantzin, the Aztec mother goddess-force, some two leagues north of Mexico City. Franciscan missionaries railed against the shrine at Tepeyac because of the danger of religious confusion, syncretism, and even idolatry they saw implicit in it. They claimed that the image had been created “yesterday” by an Indio named Marcos. Despite opposition, it became a favorite pilgrimage center for Spaniards, Criollos (those of Spanish blood born in the New World who were frequently discriminated against by the Spanish-born *peninsular* elite), mestizos (those of mixed blood) and indigenous people alike. In the late 1640s two books were published, one in Spanish and the other in Nahuatl, laying out detailed narrative accounts that purport to ground the devotion in Marian apparitions to an indigenous man named Juan Diego in 1531, more than a century before.

The narratives center on the miraculous creation of an image of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception that was indigenous in its style and attributes. While the Spanish language account locates the narrative in the context of Western scriptural exegesis, the Indian narrative is rich in poetry, lyricism, and sensual appeal. The Nahuatl account is full of birdsong, flowers blooming out of season, and the splendid light of dawn. Redolent and harmonious in the *flor y canto* tradition of Nahuatl literature, it suggests something entirely new occurring in a violent and brutal world.

Dismissed by the proponents of the “black” legend as one more imperialist manipulation and defended by the “white” legend supporters as a literal miracle, the Guadalupe image remains the western hemisphere’s most potent and beguiling icon. The dark lady, pregnant and benign, is cloaked in sacred turquoise and the pink of dawn. Close examination of the image suggests that the golden sunburst behind her, the constellated golden stars on her mantle, the silver crescent moon on which she stands, and the flower arabesques on her gown were later adornments that could rely as much on indigenous imagery as on traditional Catholic iconography.

As the cult around this extraordinary image grew among *criollos*, *mestizos*, and *indios*, the image seems to have undergone what we might call “progressive indigenization” both in its decoration and its appeal to every rung of society. Criollos and mestizos found in the image a particular resonance. They saw this dark-skinned American Madonna as a guarantee or warrant of their legitimacy and as the icon of a new world order growing out of the new world’s soil. Similarly, as time progressed, she was embroidered on the indigenous peasants’ flag of rebellion against Spanish rule in 1810, and was worn as a cockade on the hats of Pancho Villa’s insurgents and by Cristero martyrs in the 1920s. In the 1960’s she marched with the UFW through California’s Central Valley. She is now found on the walls of panaderias in Denver, on the tattooed backs of prisoners at San Quentin, in Tijuana taxis, Wiccan shrines, and the cathedral in Shanghai, where she seems as much at home as in Tepeyac. Like all great symbols, she is capable of every kind of transformation, from Michael Walker’s Pensando Planchando, to Yolanda Lopez’s sneaker clad modern woman to Alma Lopez’s rose-bikini reinterpretation that riled the faithful and attracted large crowds recently in New Mexico.

Neither black nor white legend can capture or contain her. Paradoxically, it is in the gray-pink light of dawn that she appears, between the absolute realms of black and white: a complex image that reconciles opposites and integrates cultures. As such, she serves not only as icon for the sacred feminine, but as a kind of patroness of intercultural dialogue.

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