



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.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

Dr. Patrick Hatcher (Hatcher): Tom, when I go to Poland to Cz_stochowa, I find the black virgin the dominant feature. Some are not all that happy with what they call Marianism in the Catholic Church and here they're looking at the Polish version: she looks Slavic; obviously the Poles do connect to her. Some who are more conspiracy oriented think this is a Vatican plot—these clever Vatican types, some Jesuits go about the world, taking over the picture of the mother of something and putting her together with the child and say, ‘Now we've got this cultural soul.’ What do you say to these who accuse the church of Marianism?

Lucas: To return to the metaphor that I was using before, folks who get in to those theories are unable to see the shades of grey, and the shades of pink, and the shades of the pastels. Certainly Catholicism uses whatever is readily to hand. It's been part of the cultural dynamism of Catholicism since the very beginning to reinterpret the world through the prism of the gospel. And in the gospel, certainly, although Mary only appears something like seven times in the whole of the text of the four evangelists. Those four crucial moments are in some ways definitive of who Jesus is and how God has been understood to be working in the world. Of that the early church could fairly easily see in Isis holding baby Horus on her lap, in one of the images we saw here, an echo of that. It shouldn't surprise us; it shouldn't scandalize us in the least. It should, I think rather, point to the universality of a message which here is about compassion, is about the Mother of Mercy, the Mother of Peace. Is there some sort of conspiracy? I wish that we were organized enough to have such a conspiracy. Certainly it's one of the criticisms that extreme folks will level about the Guadalupe image, that it's simply the worst sort of cultural chauvinism that the valid local divinity has been co-opted by another system. It's interesting to note that at least in the Latin American context, of course, this was hardly the first time this had happened. Over and over again there had been replacement imagery and replacement understandings of the great, sort of cosmic, power. So, actually in the case of the Guadalupe image, about which I know a lot more than I know about the Guanyin, it seems to have been a fairly seamless transition and one that made more sense probably than the Trinity and many of the more other refined pieces of Catholic lore. Lauren?

Arnold: I agree. I think, coming off of what you last said, Tom, was that for some reason the image of Guanyin being melded with the image of the child-giving Madonna, more or less, it had much more

resonance with Chinese culture than say the crucifixion. Which seems to be universally abhorred, that depiction, by the Chinese, there's something about it that simply is too difficult to get around. But the image of the woman with the child on her lap has become very beloved and universal within Chinese culture.

Lucas: Everybody has a deep memory of sitting on their mother's lap.

Arnold: The emperor's mother particularly liked that image of the virgin holding a child.

Hatcher: I recently visited a Shanghai church where Tom is, in fact, involved. You have to see this church—it's really wonderful, Christianity coming along again in Shanghai. It's beautifully done and they have the stained glass windows being done by some very talented Chinese women who live in Shanghai. At least I met the women who were doing the work and I looked up and there was not the dove that we see in the Euro world you know where the dove comes down the Holy Spirit but instead there was a Chinese phoenix. And instead of we use the lily if you know us at Easter at all, the Christian churches, and there were nothing but lotus. And suddenly I realized I was out of the world of the West and into the world of the East and how wonderfully wonderful these women working with Jesuits were in moving into that other world. Am I being unfair here, Tom?

Lucas: No not at all. And if I can simply just piggyback on to your conspiracy theory here, it's been a remarkable experience—and I hope next year, Xiaoxin and I have already spoken of this—one of the artists—the lead artist is going to be here next fall and we're going to do a presentation on this project. It's an immensely complicated project. Half of the people in the church in Shanghai, for a variety of reasons, many of which are very valid, they held on to the old, blond French looking Marys and bearded ladies Sacred Heart of Jesus, because that was the vocabulary that they had. But we're trying to move forward into an acculturation kind of experience. I find it wonderfully ironic that here I am the running dog of Western capitalism and slave of the Vatican, encouraging the Chinese to be more Chinese and they're saying, 'No, no we want to be more Roman'. There are levels and levels of irony there, but the imagery speaks very profoundly. I mean, everybody looks at these images of the nativity done in the style of Chinese paper cut-outs and they get it.

Hatcher: You have to see this church to believe it. During the days that were dark in Shanghai, the 50's, it was used as a stable for animals and most of the work inside was destroyed. So it's amazing to see it come to life again. And when I was there with the group, the BBC could not believe that there was this functioning ongoing process, so they were there to make a BBC program out of it. They were actually filming the artists themselves and looking at the windows and watching the mass that was going on in the meantime.

Audience Member (Audience): A friend of mine told me a rumor that the Pope has a plan to make the Virgin Mary, or rather, excuse me, Guadalupe, the patron saint of all of Latin America—

Lucas: That happened about 15 years ago. First in 1740 or so Guadalupe was named the patroness of Mexico. In the 19th century she was named the patroness of Central America. And I think about 10 or 15 years ago she is now the mother of *the Americas*, plural.

Audience: Well, I guess that answers my question. But just as a comment, some of my family is from Bolivia, and they find it kind of offensive because of their belief in the Pachamama, the Mother Earth.

Lucas: Yeah, of course, of course.

Audience: I'm curious to know if there are any actual definitive female images of Guanyin now before the Franciscans showed up?

Arnold: Do you mean as a feminine figure without the child?

Audience: Yes.

Arnold: Yes, yes there are.

Audience: Lauren when you said that the crucifixion the Chinese find it particularly repellant. Is that true in other cultures as well?

Arnold: If you look at German medieval art it's very crucifixion oriented. For some reason though the Chinese have never felt comfortable with the image.

Lucas: But if we go back, the first crucifixes that we would recognize as crucifixes didn't emerge until the 7th or 8th century. Before then there were jeweled crosses of victory. And most of the art historians believe that people up until the 6th or 7th century had an active recollection of what it looked like to see someone crucified. Which is about the most horrible form of death that the Romans could devise for non-citizens.

Audience: I've read some place that the costume that's worn by our lady of Guadalupe is distinctively Renaissance whereas she was supposed to represent the American image.

Lucas: You know there's a lot of controversy about that. Certainly the colors that she wears—that amazing, unearthly peacock blue somewhere between peacock and cerulean blue was a sacred color for the Aztecs. It was a color that was reserved, at least in some of the reading that I've done, to the royal family and to the highest people in the nobility. And, as I mentioned in my remarks, certainly the decoration was, there's no question really in any serious scholar's mind, that the decoration was added on later, the stars on the mantle, the sunbursts behind her, the arabesques on the dress. There are some who argue that some of the particulars are in fact particularly not unknown in their nature: the black cord around her chest there, at least some of the commentators say was a typical thing that a pregnant woman would wear as a sign that she was bearing a child.

Audience: Yes, I've been studying this for some time. I'm wondering if there are some parallels between either of these and the Eastern Orthodox concept of the mother of God and the fact that in some churches in Eastern Orthodoxy, the mother is occupying the whole ceiling and Jesus is down below.

Lucas: Very interesting research has been done recently on the sermons that were preached about Guadalupe in Mexico in the 17th century, 17th and early 18th centuries. And one of the pieces that has come out of that research, which I find particularly interesting, is that the Jesuits who were teaching at the major universities in Mexico went back not to the Latin fathers but the Greek fathers of the church. And they developed a whole theology of imagery and iconography that is much more Eastern, in terms of the Orthodox approach than, of course these texts were written long before the split in 1054, but in their approach they have an almost sacramental view of the power of the image. The image isn't the way that Western artists would think of a window that we look through to the frames of reality, but rather they developed, coming out of John Damascene, and some of the other, especially John Damascene, a whole kind of neo-Platonic philosophy of the image somehow kind of mysteriously containing the reality it represents. And so the resonant power of this image, of images like the Copacabana in Bolivia, of each of the areas of Latin America has its own particular patronal Madonna. We shouldn't be surprised by that at all.

Audience: I have one more comment. In my number of years in Japan, I found that a lot of Japanese Christians did not like eating the blood and the body. And that turned off a lot of people, similar to the crucifixion. Do you have anything to comment on that?

Lucas: Different cultural sensitivities. That's never been a major issue in the West, it certainly was an issue in China, I recall reading something about that somewhere way back as well. Because of the —And if we get into the conspiracy theories there were Christians accusing the European Jews of eating their babies and there are Protestants accusing the Catholics of eating their children. It's a very profound and it's a very troubling metaphor that we have to live with coming out of the Christian Revelation that this is about as intimate a union as you can get. But yeah for some folks it's very troubling image.

Audience: I vaguely remember that in the book of St. John at the end's, the book of Revelation, is it that one? Is it Chapter 12, I believe, that the virgin is exactly the same.

Lucas: Yes, exactly—the woman clothed in the sun, standing on the moon. The first Spanish commentator played off of that Revelations 12 text as the kind of hinge pin on which the whole of the narration relied. And certainly those elements are here: the woman standing before the sun, on top of the moon, surrounded by stars. At the same time, if you look at the iconography of both the Aztec Empire and especially when you get down into Peru, this solar imagery is fantastically powerful. And the lunar imagery to a lesser extent. The Corichanco in Cusco had a huge, gigantic sun-dish and some very

interesting research recently has come out saying that probably that, you know, the form of the Catholic monstrance, the great vessel that holds the Eucharist for Eucharistic devotion, up until the late 16th, early 17th century the form that was used in Europe of that was typically architectural. It looked like the tower of a church and the host was put inside of that. Starting in the 1600's all of a sudden these solar implements come and there's fairly convincing evidence that they came from the new world and back to Europe. Especially with the huge discoveries of gold and silver that happen in Potosi and places like that.

Audience: Right, I also when I visited in Spain, learned about the virgin of Guadalupe there, as opposed to the lady of Our Lady...

Lucas: Right, the virgin there is an entirely different image set. Probably the name came from Spain and was applied to this place. There are all kinds of theories, some of them very far-fetched, some of them which seem at least linguistically possible. The name of the place sounds kind of like Guadalupe. There was a virgin here there was a virgin there. The virgin of Guadalupe in Spain has the child sitting on her lap. The virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico, which is based on Franciscan models again of Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, doesn't. So it seems to be an onomastic thing, the place name came across... Actually there are some wonderful documents the monks who ran the Guadalupe shrine in Spain tried to sue the Guadalupe shrine in Mexico for infringement of copyright—they wanted a cut of the collections, because they said, 'We've got the real Guadalupe and you're using our trade name'.

Audience: I wanted to ask about, you had said how the stars and other adornments on the virgin of Guadalupe were added later. But yet you even had a slide that showed the star maps placed on top of the mantle which they have shown through computer analysis of star maps that it goes to the day of December 10, 1531.

Lucas: Yes, but that's precisely what we did in the chapel here in St. Ignatius church. That's why I juxtaposed those two images. It seems like that addition was fairly soon. The earliest visual, the first hard visual evidence we have of the shrine is from around 1610 or so. The fully articulated legend says 1531, December 10th to 12th. There is clear documentary evidence that there was a drawing by 1550 or so, but the first descriptions, or the early descriptions suggest that there was a crown tacked on the top that was later on removed. But it seems as if this came as a second level. I don't know that anybody has done any serious work on this; it's something I've just been reflecting about as I was preparing these remarks. This level of, and certainly with the whole fascination, the Aztec fascination, and indigenous fascination with the calendar systems, the fact that they certainly had the technology to go back 50 years or 15 years to get the star map and to place it on there. That's one of the more convincing arguments that in fact the constellations are figured there in the clothing.

Audience: I wanted to ask, in some of the understandings of Mahayana Buddhism in the northern part of China, that went eventually through Korea to Japan, there is this understanding that the Guanyin, originally bodhisattva, is precisely gender neutral to indicate that it is beyond human.

Arnold: Yes.

Audience: Then I wondered if there are such images that remain, you know sort of, gender neutral images that remain that went parallel with the images of Guanyin with the child that's available.

Arnold: Yes, there are a number of very androgynous, it's hard to tell whether male or female. The ones that hold the child though, I would say I've never seen one that wasn't female. But yes, many images of Guanyin it's hard to tell if it's male or female. As well it should be, as you say because in the Buddhist canon, it's a very gender neutral image or figure.

Audience: It's sort of the flip side to the observation that Professor Arisaka was making, you know, that maybe Guanyin is gender neutral to indicate that she's beyond human. I guess would it be possible that it could have a message at the other end saying every human has both genders inside themselves on a spiritual level, not physically, but spiritually.

Arnold: You said it better than I ever could, so I would say yes, that's probably true.