The Mexican Ex-Voto Tradition as a Potential Subversion of Authority

Samantha Ros

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses

Part of the Latin American History Commons, and the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses/1519

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
The Mexican Ex-Voto Tradition as a Potential Subversion of Authority

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Art History from The College of William and Mary

by

Samantha Engelke Ros

Accepted for Honors (Honors)

Dr. Anne Williams, Director

Dr. Betsy Konefal

Dr. Fabricio Prado

Dr. Cristina Stancioiu

Williamsburg, VA
May 6, 2020
Acknowledgements

I owe so much to my thesis advisor Dr. Anne Williams for her patience, encouragement, and expertise in completing this thesis, and to Dr. Susan Webster for sparking my interest in Latin American art in the first place. I also thank my family and friends for their unending love and support.
# Table of Contents

Introduction........................................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter One: A History of Ex-Votos and Their Study................................................................. 9

Chapter Two: Ex-votos as ‘In Between’ and Contextualizing the Presence of Catholicism in Mexico ................................................................................................................................. 25

Chapter Three: Instances of Subversion...................................................................................... 44

Conclusion......................................................................................................................................... 52

Figures................................................................................................................................................. 53

Bibliography...................................................................................................................................... 72
In essence, retablos condense extreme human emotions such as fear, sorrow, apprehension, gratitude, relief, horror, and rage onto small sheets of tin painted in the most elemental of styles. Looking at people depicted in the throes of a circumstance that appears to have no earthly remedy, or imminently facing a crushing and painful loss, we not only share the intensity of the fear and sorrow, we also experience the relief of delivery. It is the rendering of such powerful and elemental human emotions in simple and unpretentious artistic terms that makes retablos so compelling as works of art.¹

- Durand and Massey, Miracles on the Border

Introduction

The tradition of votive offerings, works created and presented in devotion to a divine being, is ingrained and recognizable throughout much of human history. The ex-voto, a small devotional painting on tin testifying to a received miracle, or else petitioning for divine intervention, presents a derivation of this recognizable devotional practice. The term ex-voto, translated from Latin meaning “from a vow,” “the promise of,” or “the miracle of,” reflects the necessarily transactional nature of these works.² In practice, the ex-voto functions as a fulfillment of the promise made between a devotee and the divine, offered in exchange for the enacted miracle.³

While acknowledging that votive traditions are quite ubiquitous across a multitude of cultures, the acceptance of the practice among Christians is often traced back to Italy between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, evidenced by the inscription of initials corresponding to the phrase “votum fecit gratiam accepit, Latin for ‘made a vow and received grace,’” included on votive tablets.⁴ Once established as a Christian tradition, the devotional art gained popularity throughout the Iberian peninsula and the New World, flourishing in Mexico during the

---

³ Ibid., 19.
⁴ Ibid.
nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{5} The distinctiveness of the ex-votos produced in Mexico during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has understandably attracted academic interest from a variety of disciplines, and it is this time period that is under consideration in the present thesis.

By way of contextualizing the following discussion of Mexican ex-votos, it is helpful first to define terms that often appear alongside the subject in scholarship. The iconography of the Catholic saints to which the vast majority of ex-votos are dedicated derive from the liturgical images brought by the Spanish to the Americas during the sixteenth century. These images typically took the form of altarpiece panels, initially intended to be components of larger altarpieces in missionary churches, or else in the form of missals, liturgical books used during Catholic Mass. The altarpiece images comprising the retablo mayor in the Franciscan monastery of San Miguel Arcangel in Huejotzingo [figure 1], for example, would have been used for didactic purposes. The term *retablo*, derived from Latin and essentially translating to “behind the altar,” recalls these massive altar screens found in the apses, transepts, and aisles of Mexican colonial churches.\textsuperscript{6} In the context of nineteenth-century Mexican devotional art, the term *retablo* rather broadly refers to both religious retablos, or *santos*, and votive retablos, or *ex-votos*. Both derivations are typically composed using oil paint on tin plates.\textsuperscript{7} Additional terminology is also used in reference to these works, such as *láminas*, meaning “sheets of metal,” or *santos de hojalata*, translating to “saints on tinplate.”\textsuperscript{8} Religious retablos and votive retablos (or ex-votos) both engage with Catholic holy figures, clearly linking the traditions through subject matter. Despite this similarity, the two traditions are markedly different in their historical lineage and historical contexts.

\textsuperscript{5} Mary Lee Grant, “Becoming the Crossroads: Female Cultural Creators of the Mexican American Generation in the Texas Borderlands,” (PhD diss., Texas A&M University, 2015), 161.
\textsuperscript{8} Giffords, “Promises and Answers: Retablos and Ex-votos,” 197.
treatment by the Catholic Church. As previously mentioned, ecclesiastical images, often in the form of altarpiece panels or missal engravings [figure 2], were transported to the New World by missionaries in order to aid in religious education. These instructional images advanced the forced conversion of indigenous Mexicans by visually outlining the basic tenets of Catholicism. Religious officials would encourage, and often require, indigenous artisans to paint their own religious images using the European examples as a guide. The intention in creating these devotional paintings was to accurately recreate the likeness of the saint, resulting in works by anonymous indigenous artisans that appear to be heavily based on the ecclesiastical sources which inspired them.

An anonymous nineteenth-century retablo, characteristically composed using oil paint on tin, functions as an example of the type of work that would result from this process [figure 3]. Saint Jerome is centered in the panel, gazing pointedly in the direction of the viewer. He has been beating his chest with the rock he holds in his left hand as a gesture of penance, and blood drips dramatically between his prominent ribs from the wound in his chest. Although not an identical copy to the previously referenced missal engraving from Flanders, which dates to 1701, the nineteenth-century recreation clearly garners some inspiration in its inclusion of the saint’s attributes. Just as in the engraving [figure 2], Saint Jerome is depicted in the ex-voto as an elderly man with a full beard and an encircling halo overhead. A red mantle is draped around his body, referencing the role Saint Jerome occupied during his life; later ascribed to cardinals. Other symbols typically associated with the saint are also present, such as the crucifix held in the right hand, the skull, book, and quill to the right of the figure, and the lion just below. The familiarity of this image, which would likely be identifiable to any viewer with a shallow

---

understanding of Catholic iconography, was intentional. Indigenous Mexican artisans were required to adhere closely to the models outlined by the didactic material and to abide by predetermined and sanctioned iconography.\textsuperscript{10} This Saint Jerome santo, displaying both iconography and a process of production which were highly regulated by religious authorities, provides a contrast for the history of ex-votos. Santos began as sanctioned images encouraged and monitored by the Catholic Church, and were transmitted from the clergy to the laity in a distinctly top-down formula.\textsuperscript{11} The downward diffusion of santos perpetuated the hierarchy of colonial Latin American mission churches, maintaining the need for an intercessor between the laity and the divine.

Ex-votos can be placed at the opposite end of the spectrum, fundamentally intimate as a manifestation of popular devotion. Whereas santos originate from the top of the religious hierarchy, ex-votos enter into religious spaces—such as churches, pilgrimage shrines, and home altars—from the laity.\textsuperscript{12} While ex-votos still rely on the framework of Christianity, this intimate expression of popular devotion decidedly prioritizes the relationship between the pious individual and the divine, in effect undermining the strict hierarchy of the Church.

Moreover, although ex-votos and retablos display obvious similarities in materiality and subject matter, the genres differ slightly in function. While retablos depict individual saints, ex-votos depict miraculous intercession. These votive objects are composed with the purpose of petitioning for divine intervention or expressing gratitude for a miracle received.\textsuperscript{13} In both cases, a singular and isolated event is depicted, including the image of a saint alongside the devotee.

\textsuperscript{11} Gutiérrez, “Sacred Retablos: Objects that Conjoin Time and Space,” 32.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Giffords, “The Art of Private Devotion: Retablo Painting of Mexico,” 33.
Priests are rarely referenced or included in these narrative scenes, attesting to the popular, rather than institutional, nature of the art form.

In contextualizing the way in which ex-votos operate alongside Catholicism, notions of ‘popular’ versus ‘official’ religion inevitably arise.\footnote{This discussion, though not new, remains relevant, as many of the scholars grappling with these ideas continue to conceptualize and reconceptualize the relationship between these two spheres of religion. Especially in more recent scholarship, authors are careful to avoid falling into too much of a dichotomy. Positioning popular and official religion as two entirely separate, and even opposing, traditions promotes incorrect assumptions about practiced and lived religions, giving the false impression that these were static forces operating in a consistent manner regardless of geographic or temporal variation. Still, as Paul Vanderwood suggests in “Religion: Official, Popular, and Otherwise” (2000), authors continue to distinguish the popular from the official “undoubtedly because the Church has so often taken such a strenuously proclaimed and sternly dismissive stance against certain religious practices of ordinary lay people.”\footnote{Vanderwood, “Religion: Official, Popular, and Otherwise,” Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos 16, no. 2 (2000), 413, https://doi:10.2307/1052206.}}\footnote{For the purposes of this thesis, religion refers to Roman Catholicism unless otherwise stated.} This discussion, though not new, remains relevant, as many of the scholars grappling with these ideas continue to conceptualize and reconceptualize the relationship between these two spheres of religion. Especially in more recent scholarship, authors are careful to avoid falling into too much of a dichotomy. Positioning popular and official religion as two entirely separate, and even opposing, traditions promotes incorrect assumptions about practiced and lived religions, giving the false impression that these were static forces operating in a consistent manner regardless of geographic or temporal variation. Still, as Paul Vanderwood suggests in “Religion: Official, Popular, and Otherwise” (2000), authors continue to distinguish the popular from the official “undoubtedly because the Church has so often taken such a strenuously proclaimed and sternly dismissive stance against certain religious practices of ordinary lay people.”\footnote{This statement by Vanderwood comes in response to an assertion made by sociologist Michael P. Carroll, who suggests that in order for popular religions to be considered Catholic they must be closely associated with divine beings endorsed by the Church and the rituals themselves must be legitimated by the local clergy; Vanderwood, “Religion: Official, Popular, and Otherwise,” 414.} These discussions maintain relevance due to the complexity of the relationship between official and popular religion, refusing to adhere to a universal argument. Unsurprisingly, laws and regulations put forth by the Catholic Church were not enforced with complete consistency, just as lay practitioners of faith did not receive religious instruction with complete passivity. Vanderwood cautions against holding popular religion to excessively strict standards, such as requiring that the religious customs earn clerical recognition or approval in order to fit the definition of so-called ‘popular religion’.\footnote{Rather, it is repeatedly...}
demonstrated by historically and temporally diverse examples of popular religious practices that
lay people welcomed clerical approval when it was offered, but did not consider it a necessity in
order to carry out their own local or personal traditions.\textsuperscript{17}

The inconsistency with which the Catholic Church approves or disapproves of a religious
practice, or sanctions or demotes a saintly figure, could arguably be perceived as contradictory.\textsuperscript{18}
Vanderwood cites a broad example applicable to shrines in Mexico, where a ‘people’s saint’, or
a saint unsanctioned by the Catholic Church, may be worshipped alongside and with the same
enthusiasm as an officially sanctioned figure, such as Saint Michael the Archangel.\textsuperscript{19}

Christián Parker discusses popular religion from the perspective of the mindset of the
individual as it informs their religious practice in \textit{Popular Religion and Modernization in Latin
America: A Different Logic} (1996). Parker provides examples of what he defines as “expressions
of popular religion” and suggests that these traits fall under “popular Catholicism.”\textsuperscript{20} The
examples he includes are useful in forming my own definition of popular religion for the purpose
of this thesis, such as instances in which religious beliefs are inherited by younger generations as
part of a larger family tradition, not as lore, but also not directly in affiliation with the Church.
Practitioners of popular Catholicism, Parker suggests, may decidedly refrain from participating
in official religion, such as attending Mass, but remain active in popular religion through various
means, including the act of leaving votive offerings.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{17} Vanderwood, “Religion: Official, Popular, and Otherwise,” 414-415.
\textsuperscript{18} Saint Christopher, for example, was never officially canonized by the Catholic Church and his feast day was
removed from the Church’s universal liturgical calendar in the mid-twentieth century, but individuals continue to
worship Saint Christopher as the patron saint of travelers.
\textsuperscript{19} Vanderwood, “Religion: Official, Popular, and Otherwise,” 416.
\textsuperscript{20} Christián Parker, \textit{Popular Religion and Modernization in Latin America: A Different Logic} (Oregon: Wipf and
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
At the risk of providing an oversimplified perspective of these dynamic spheres of religious life, I leave room for contradiction and acknowledge the difficulty in pinning down one definition of what constitutes popular versus official religion. Taking these caveats into consideration, for the purposes of this thesis popular religion will follow the definition provided by Elin Luque and Michele M. Beltrán, who describe popular religion as “that religion lived and experienced by the people as opposed to the religion prescribed by the clergy, as well as the subaltern religious practices that reveal their opposition to the dominant social elites.”

Further, Luque and Beltrán qualify the unique access granted by the intimacy of popular religion, stating that the practice is “always an expression of the direct relationship between the believer and the supernatural and does not require a clerical intermediary.” This understanding of the intimacy and autonomy afforded through popular religion is of central interest in this research, and informs the following discussion.

Broadly speaking, the majority of scholarship dedicated to the study of ex-votos has characterized the format as part of the material culture of popular piety. This method of research privileges the materiality and function of objects, gleaning an understanding of a work using information regarding its production and use as well as the cultural and historical context within which it was created. Only recently have scholars begun to conceptualize ex-votos from a visual perspective, parsing out the implications of not only the manner in which Catholic saints are depicted, but also the unique duality inherent to the scenes documented, which traverse the boundaries between the divine and earthly realms. Acknowledging the crucial work conducted by the study’s earliest scholars, these more recent visual analyses have invaluably enriched

---

23 Ibid.
appreciation of the ex-votos’ significance. Beyond earlier considerations of the production and iconography of ex-votos, more recent visual analyses have prioritized the content of the specific scenes depicted in these works. Even with the valuable contributions of the genre’s earliest and more recent scholars, Mexican ex-votos have been overwhelmingly overlooked in academia. Historical neglect of the genre, especially regarding visual analyses, can arguably be attributed to the ex-votos’ devaluation as a ‘folk art’ tradition. Art historians have made notable efforts to rectify these oversights, but the traditionally held bias that ‘folk art’ is somehow lacking in visual significance still necessitates further scholarly contribution that actively points to the contrary. This thesis intends to contribute to existing scholarship by further examining the particular liminality occupied by the ex-voto tradition, as an analysis that explores this quality allows for a more nuanced understanding of the objects’ use and function in society. More specifically, this thesis examines how this ‘in-betweenness’ can be understood in a changing society, illuminating the way in which Mexican ex-votos can be conceptualized as a subversion of nineteenth-century dictates regarding the acceptable use and display of religious images.
Chapter One: A History of Ex-Votos and Their Study

In making the assertion that the prevalence of the ex-voto during the nineteenth century in some way indicates an undermining of authority, it is first necessary to trace previous scholarship regarding these objects. The extensive contributions of Gloria Giffords to the subject of Mexican retablos, her notable publications including *Mexican Folk Retablos* (1974), “The Art of Private Devotion: Retablo Painting of Mexico” (1991), “Religious Images of Viceregal and Nineteenth Century Mexico” (2006), and “Promises and Answers: Retablos and Ex-votos” (2006), are significantly valuable and necessary to this topic. As stated previously, the tradition of Mexican retablos has only recently been given recognition in scholarship, an oversight, Giffords argues, due to the historical exclusion of folk art from the realm of ‘high art.’ In Giffords’s early publication, *Mexican Folk Retablos*, the term ‘folk art’ is used when discussing the works in reference to both their partial utility as a devotional object and the nature of their artistic production, as ex-votos are typically created by artists lacking formal training. In response to the disparaging criticism of folk art that aims to negatively associate the type with conceptions of ‘low art,’ Giffords makes meaningful claims. In testifying to the artistic value of ex-votos, Giffords contrasts the works with that of retablos, which are frequently directly copied from any number of widely distributed sources. Ex-votos, depicting a unique scene of miraculous intercession alongside the image of a divine figure, necessitate artistic interpretation.24 Further, as the term traditionally carries derogatory connotations meant to designate a style as being ‘outside’ historically valued art forms, Giffords clarifies that, as with most ‘outsider’ art, these works possess a rich and intrinsically valuable history. Ramón Favela, writing *Colonial Mexican* 

---

and Religious Art (1990), also disagrees with the use of the term, favoring instead “arte popular religioso” in reference to the deeply spiritual, personal, and expressive nature of the tradition.\textsuperscript{25}

\textit{Characteristics of the Ex-Voto}

The basic elements of the ex-voto format remain largely unchanged from its earliest examples to the later nineteenth and twentieth-century examples, although it is difficult to quantify exactly what ‘earliest’ means in this context due to the personal nature of the format and the general disregard for the genre by art historians and collectors until relatively recently. The earliest ex-voto included in Gloria Giffords’s \textit{Mexican Folk Retablos} (1974) dates to 1797 [figure 4]. The simple format lends itself to clear articulation, enabling the devotee to convey their concerns to a divine being. The tendency in retablo and ex-voto paintings to depict the religious figure frontally or in a three-quarter view, often static, enhances the transparency of meaning. The composition itself is also very structured, resulting in a recognizably formulaic format. In nearly all ex-voto examples, the divine figure appears in the top of the image. The center of the composition is reserved for the recreation of the event, while the lower portion is used for a narrative and commemorative inscription.\textsuperscript{26} The iconographic symbols in the form of specific attributes, which identify particular saints, are generally traceable across variations in artist or subject matter. Variation in the chosen saint is representative of the deeply personal nature of this format, as there is a saint dedicated to nearly every aspect of one’s identity.\textsuperscript{27} Such ease in recognition is due to the conventionalization of saints and their symbols. These separate symbols lack meaning out of context but were imbued with significance by European artists. Focusing on an incident of martyrdom or miracle that best characterizes the saint, the figure is synthesized;


\textsuperscript{26} Giffords, “Promises and Answers: \textit{Retablos} and \textit{Ex-votos},” 198.

\textsuperscript{27} Farmers, for example, may pray to Saint Isidore the farm worker.
reduced to a symbol. Applying this iconographic analysis to the aforementioned late eighteenth-century example [figure 4], the saint depicted in the top right of the composition, balancing this upper register in his positioning directly opposite the crucified Christ, is visually understood as Saint Anthony. While the inscription in the lower register confirms this identification in text, the recognizable attributes—albeit reduced in size—such as the Christ child held in the arms of the saint alongside the lily flower contribute to the establishment of this figure as Saint Anthony.

Moving away for a moment from the strictly religious content of ex-votos, the evolution of the materials used in production as well as the secular symbols depicted offer meaningful insight into the history of the genre. Rooted in elite practices during the eighteenth century, ex-votos were traditionally commissioned of specialized artisans by individuals of elevated status. These works, painted using oil paint on large, high quality canvas or copper, often depicted symbols of status and wealth alongside the devotee. Mexico’s independence from Spain in 1821 opened new trade routes, allowing access to imported metal sheets from England. The availability of cheaper materials, such as tin sheets and industrial paints, enabled non-elites to commission and produce the popular devotional art. The scenes of intercession most commonly depicted in ex-votos reflect this change, as earlier elite examples more commonly include gratitude for recovery from illness rather than issues that would affect one’s livelihood, such as

29 Ibid., 81.
31 Marjorie Atwood, “The Ex-voto as a Symbol of Faith and Survival” (PhD diss., Salve Regina University, 2002), 57.
32 Giffords, “Promises and Answers: *Retablos* and *Ex-votos,*” 197.
the loss of livestock or an injury incurred through labor.\textsuperscript{34} Members of diverse socio-economic backgrounds began to engage with the format, drawn to the approachability of the artistic style as well as the economic accessibility made possible through the increasing availability of tinplate.\textsuperscript{35} The standardized range of sizes in which retablos and ex-votos appear attests to the mass production of the genre. The most typical sizes seen are 5 x 7 inches, 7 x 10 inches, and 14 x 20 inches. It is suggested that these standard sizes are due to the ease with which the original tin sheet could be cut in half along its shorter end to create the subsequently smaller pieces.\textsuperscript{36} Sizes between these ranges do exist, but are much rarer. Production of these works originated in central Mexico, especially popular in pilgrimage centers such as Zacatecas or San Luis Potosí.\textsuperscript{37}

Following this shift to cheaper and more accessible materials, nineteenth-century ex-votos were largely produced by local artisans lacking formal training. Approaching the medium from outside of the academic art world, local examples generally ignore technical traditions of perspective and color.\textsuperscript{38} Even with this relative isolation from regulated artistic education, the resulting work is not only spiritually significant, but formally significant as well, employing elements of the composition in a distinct construction of meaning.

Given that the basic compositional elements have remained quite similar over time and that the figural elements are relatively simplistic in their representation, this format has been criticized or devalued in previous scholarship as lacking in artistic value. Devotional images, far from unique to Mexico, often adhere strongly to tradition, remaining recognizable despite differences in cultural and temporal context. Still, this recognizability does not equate to

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Giffords} Giffords, \textit{Mexican Folk Retablos}, 143.
\bibitem{Ibid} Ibid., 4.
\bibitem{Giffords} Giffords, “Promises and Answers: \textit{Retablos} and \textit{Ex-votos},” 197.
\bibitem{Atwood} Atwood, “The Ex-voto as a Symbol of Faith and Survival,” 57.
\end{thebibliography}
stagnation. Even as the format, comprised of an inscription, miraculous event, and divine figure, remains constant, these works respond to change, aptly reflecting the clothing, personal belongings, and individual concerns relevant to the time in which they are created. This malleability is visible when we consider the way in which the content of ex-votos can be used as an indication or construction of identity. Clothing and jewelry, as well as accompanying furniture, vehicles, and buildings, can all function as visual markers of status, although this is not to say that the representation of status is always and entirely based in reality. The use of symbols as an indication of social standing is exhibited in an ex-voto commissioned by Dolores Hernández [figure 5], dated to 1938. This ex-voto is larger in size than many of the other typical examples, measuring 11⅞” x 16½”. The lower inscription records the illness and miraculous recovery of Dolores Hernández’s daughter, whom Dolores commended to the Holiest Virgin of Remedies. The ex-voto is dedicated to the Virgin, included in the upper left portion of the composition, in gratitude of divine intercession; providing the miracle of two operations which resulted in the daughter’s successful recovery. Of particular note with regards to the adaptability of the genre are the modern elements included which indicate the time in which this piece was created. Among the more familiar components—such as the figure of the interceding saint, the ill daughter relegated to her bed, and the mother depicted in a recognizable kneeling position of prayer—the inclusion of the wall clock flanked by two paintings, the bedside table and lamp, and the lace used along the edge of the bedspread and window curtains are personalized indications of luxury. Used together, these components reference the earlier eighteenth and nineteenth-century ex-voto artistic and spiritual traditions in the new context of a characteristic upper
middle-class bedroom that might readily be found in Mexico in the first half of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{39}

The adaptability and personalization afforded by ex-votos has prevented the format from falling entirely out of use. Ex-votos continue to be produced even in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, illustrated in Alfredo Vilchis Roque and Pierre Schwartz’s \textit{Infinitas Gracias} (2003), a collection of ex-votos by artist Alfredo Vilchis Roque. \textit{Infinitas Gracias} provides a thematic survey of nineteenth and twentieth-century ex-voto paintings, spanning subjects from “Prosperity” and “Parenthood” to “Drugs and Depression.”\textsuperscript{40} Although the genre has by no means become entirely obsolete, it admittedly began to fall out of favor during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries due to the popularization of other methods of commemorating miracles and displaying gratitude toward a particular saint. Other votive traditions, some of which had been in use prior to the inception of ex-votos, gradually gained favor as a means of more graphically or accurately depicting the miracle than a narrative scene. Examples of more modern votive offerings include photographs and miscellaneous objects related to the miracle. A pair of abandoned crutches or an x-ray proudly displaying fully healed bones may be left at a saint’s shrine in gratitude of recovery.\textsuperscript{41} A small silver token, referred to as a \textit{milagro}, in the shape of a heart may be left at an altar in reference to concerns with one’s heart condition. Gradually, these more ‘realistic’ testaments to divine intercession began to replace the tinplate tradition, which was thought to be more vulnerable to artistic interpretation.

\textsuperscript{39} Giffords, \textit{Mexican Folk Retablos}, 162.
\textsuperscript{41} Giffords, \textit{Mexican Folk Retablos}, 147.
The vast majority of ex-votos are unsigned, but some examples can be attributed to a handful of named artists, often referred to as retablers.\textsuperscript{42} Jorge Durand’s essay “Aesthetic Alliances: The Retablos of Hermenegildo Bustos” (2000), examines the life and work of the retablo artist, active from 1852-1906. While not exclusively a retablo painter, the artist’s later work shows a clear preference for the tin devotional paintings. Bustos became a highly sought-after painter over the course of his career, though his abundant production was quite geographically restricted. Much of his work was dedicated to popular regional saints, such as the “Lord of la Columna, Lord of Esquipulas, Lord of Sacromonte, worshipped in the churches of Purísima del Rincón” and the Virgin of Guadalupe worshipped in the local church of San Francisco del Rincón.\textsuperscript{43} Bustos’s compositions are unique in their exhaustive description of the work’s donor, dedicating much of the inscription to the commemoration of their piety even if they were not the subject of the miracle depicted. His compositions vary little in form, as can be seen in an ex-voto dedicated to María Santísima de San Juan, 1902 \textsuperscript{[figure 6]}. This work testifies to the recognizable and formulaic quality of the ex-voto format. Bustos would typically paint the divine figure, here the Virgin Mary, resting on a cloud in the uppermost register. The center of the composition includes the devotee, often depicted kneeling in a position of thanksgiving. The inscription fills the lower register. Due to Bustos’s prioritization of this narrative element, it was not uncommon for the writing to become gradually smaller and more compact in an effort to include all details.\textsuperscript{44} Despite Bustos’s fame throughout the region, the notable popularity of his ex-voto paintings in light of his more highly regarded portraits and still lives attests to the

\textsuperscript{42} Porfirio Mauricio Loeza, “The ‘Retablo’ Practice in Mexican Votive Art: An Ethnographic Study of Life, Literacy and Meaning Making” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2002), 57.


\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 90.
inclusivity and accessibility of the ex-voto genre. The relatively inexpensive material allowed patrons of diverse socioeconomic status to commission the work.

*Ex-Votos as a Votive Tradition*

The decision to commemorate a saint contributes directly to how highly that figure is regarded. The cycle feeds into itself, as the saint’s reputation for miracle working grows exponentially with the documentation of each instance of divine intervention. In turn, devotees are more likely to turn to that reputable saint in a time of need.\(^{(45)}\) This “votive behavior,” a term coined by anthropologist Marion Oettinger and referenced repeatedly by retablo scholar Martha Egan, can be understood as the fulfilment of a promise—such as wearing a commemorative item, completing a pilgrimage, or naming one’s child with the intent of honoring a specific saint—in exchange for a miracle received.\(^{(46)}\) Votive behavior can be directly observed in the abundance of ex-votos left at popular pilgrimage sites throughout Latin America, such as at the shrine of the Basilica of Our Lady of Copacabana, near Lake Titicaca in Bolivia, or at the shrine dedicated to the Santo Niño de Atocha in Zacatecas, Mexico.\(^{(47)}\) Enthusiastic veneration of the Holy Child of Atocha is apparent in the abundant collection of ex-votos covering the walls of the Santuario del Santo Niño de Atocha [figure 7], quantified as one of the largest Mexican sanctuaries.

Regarding the notion of votive tradition, the practice is nearly universal. As Marjorie Atwood discusses in her dissertation, “The Ex-Voto as a Symbol of Faith and Survival” (2002), the tradition reveals deep individual insecurity manifested in the continual search for a personal connection between the human spirit and the divine.\(^{(48)}\) It is unsurprising, then, that the pre-
Conquest Americas also displayed an established votive tradition, that will be discussed with greater specificity in the following chapter. Regarding the Mexican ex-voto tradition that developed post-Conquest, Atwood frames her discussion around the significance of the vow itself, arguing that the emergence of the ex-voto not only reveals the continuing human need for divine intercession, but has also nurtured the enduring pursuit of survival.\footnote{Atwood, “The Ex-voto as a Symbol of Faith and Survival,” 19.} Of particular relevance to this thesis, Atwood’s dissertation departs from previous ethnological studies in order to analyze the ex-voto as a visual manifestation of individual faith expressed through symbols, tying the production of ex-votos to the desire for spiritual intimacy.\footnote{Ibid., 5.}

Martha Egan’s essay, “Small Metal Votive Figures: Milagritos” (2006), expands upon the complicated history of votive offerings in relation to the Catholic Church. These instances of tension, specifically the degree to which popular devotion was either accepted or rejected by the Church, are useful in informing the aforementioned ‘in-between’ quality of the tradition. Egan contextualizes this discussion, noting that in Christian Europe, prior to any Catholic presence in the Americas, devotees were encouraged to call on saints to act as intermediaries in dealings with God. The established pre-Christian tradition of leaving votive offerings, traced by Egan through Native American, Andean Indian, ancient Mediterranean, ancient Greek, and ancient Roman examples, was often regarded by the Church, throughout history, to be a form of bribery or paganism.\footnote{Egan, “Small Metal Votive Figures: Milagritos,” 200.} Egan applies this history of contention between pre-Christian tradition and Catholic response to the context of colonial Mexico. In an attempt to dissuade indigenous devotees from leaving offerings in a manner thought to closely resemble pre-Christian traditions, colonizers encouraged indigenous Mexican populations to engage with Catholic iconography in their votive
practices. Restriction extended from spiritual content to votive behavior as well, as votive offerings intended as a form of persuasion rather than offered solely in gratitude were discouraged. Egan states that when ex-votos were discussed by Church authorities in Latin America, which was relatively seldom, the tone was generally dismissive, denouncing the objects as “superstitions.”

Throughout Christian Europe, and especially during the Middle Ages, ex-voto objects were frequently produced. Despite their value to the individual, these objects were of arguably little importance to the Church, as the materials used would often be melted down or sold during periods of economic hardship. While the outright prohibition of ex-votos by the Church is not supported by the literature, these instances of clear devaluation are helpful in gleaning a more accurate understanding of the position of ex-votos within the broader context of Catholicism. Although the Church encouraged engagement with Catholic icons, these efforts had clear ulterior motives. The overarching desire for conversion acted to override apprehensions within the Church that popular religious practices would take on a more unmanageable, and potentially idolatrous, nature. Still, these fears of sacrilege remained, and resulted, in many instances, in what can be described as toleration rather than overt acceptance.

A similar skepticism becomes apparent when one considers the relationship between popular religious practices and the secular state, the relationship further strained by the ability and willingness of the retableros (ex-voto artist) and patron to articulate social and political concerns.

Socio-political Spirituality


---

53 Ibid.
Novak demonstrates the significant persistence of Catholic faith in Mexican identity, withstanding the societal changes that occurred as Mexico transitioned from colonialism to independence. Novak’s study characterizes the ex-voto as the material culture of popular piety, using the objects 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.”

A portion of Novak’s argument centers around the assertion that both the elite and the poor engaged in displays of popular devotion, making these instances of intertwining, transforming, and continued spirituality applicable to the experiences of many social classes. The period of instability following Mexico’s independence from Spain in 1821 intensified tension surrounding the changing role of the Church in a newly secular society. Known as La Reforma, the state was ultimately successful in its goal to reduce the authority of the Catholic Church, resulting in the prohibition of religious rituals outside of an ecclesiastical setting. While the expression of and access to faith was still permitted within the walls of the Church or home, Novak argues that this sudden shift in social climate, from a primarily religious society to one which was more secular, was perceived by the religious population as an attack on Catholicism. This conflict arguably solidified devotion to particular saints, contributing to the survival of Catholic doctrine as the devout became more defensive of their personal spirituality. In its application to the ex-voto, the format becomes the perfect response to the anxiety caused by societal change, being characteristically small, portable, and relatively inexpensive.


---

55 Ibid., 3.
56 Ibid., 12.
existing body of scholarship by examining Mexican ex-voto paintings that appear to directly engage with social and political issues in theme and artistic content. Hamman privileges the study of images in her methodology, drawing conclusions about a culture from what is revealed in the visual. In order to exemplify this relationship between politics and religion, Hamman examines several topics illuminated through ex-votos, such as the Virgin of Guadalupe as a symbol of national identity, the presence of police action, and the reality of economic disparity.\(^5^8\) Hamman’s unique perspective regarding the function of ex-votos within society has been especially useful in forming the guiding questions of this thesis, as Hamman uses ex-votos dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe, particularly those that frame the figure as a cultural symbol alongside depictions of police action, to argue that these ex-votos can be seen as examples of subversion of a dominant political power.\(^5^9\) One particularly convincing example provided by Hamman is the ex-voto dedicated by Vicente C. [figure 8], 1990. The composition depicts the devotee crossing a river between the United States and Mexico, accompanied by an inscription that reads, in translation: “I called upon the Queen of Mexicans to grant me the good fortune to arrive safely, promising her this if I managed to get there, and I did. After running so many risks, it worked out very well, and now that I’ve come back I am fulfilling my vow to her.”\(^6^0\) Given the complex history of the Virgin of Guadalupe, which will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter, she is regarded as a symbol of both indigenous liberation as well as oppression.\(^6^1\) Due to this inherently political nature of the Virgin of Guadalupe, her image has been used as a symbol of Mexican nationalism, employed with “specific intent to engage socio-


\(^5^9\) Hamman, “Faith and politics: The socio-political discourses engaged by Mexican ex-voto paintings from the nineteenth-century and beyond,” 57.

\(^6^0\) Roque and Schwartz, *Infinitas Gracias: Contemporary Mexican Votive Painting*, 147.

political subjects such as race, nationalism, feminism,” and immigration, among others. By displaying the image of the Virgin in the same composition as overt police presence, Hamman concludes that a socio-political statement is being made. As it applies to the ex-Voto of Vicente C. [figure 8], the Virgin is invoked to aid in the evasion of border patrol authorities; denoted by the helicopter and white vehicle in the composition. The presence of the Virgin of Guadalupe in this context is two-fold. First, Hamman argues that although the votive depicts Vicente crossing into the United States in pursuit of economic opportunity and independence, the miraculous intercession of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a figure so entrenched in Mexican identity, suggests that he is able to do so while still maintaining his own identity. Second, the Virgin of Guadalupe has historically been frequently employed in art in order to visually articulate criticism of inadequate political systems. The use of her image in this way allows Vicente to voice criticism of his own government, particularly the lack of economic opportunity necessitating migration. Whether this political statement is intentional or not remains uncertain, but Hamman maintains that these examples portray the devotee turning to divine intervention in response to their own distrust of the government. This identification of political criticism and the undermining of political authorities, however intentional, applies to the objective of this thesis in that the traditional format is being employed as a means of publicly articulating one’s personal anxieties and concerns on the walls of a church or shrine.

Laying much of the groundwork for the images examined by Hamman, Jorge Durand and Douglas S. Massey must also be credited for their significant research into this art form, fully

63 Ibid., 27.
64 Ibid., 28.
65 Ibid., 57.
realized in their book *Miracles on the Border* (1995). In conducting this study, Durand and Massey have analyzed ex-votos left at shrines in western Mexico by the family members of U.S. migrants as well as by the migrants themselves.66 This work focuses on examples of migrants crossing the border from Mexico into the United States, acknowledging not only the inherent danger of traversing the border, but also the difficulty in navigating foreign cultures. Ex-votos, Durand and Massey argue, are unique in their ability to provide comfort to the individual through the presence of a familiar icon and culture, employing the use of Catholic saints as a means of reconciling intimate fears.67

The theme of migration appears alongside several iterations of the Virgin Mary, the most common being the Virgin of San Juan, associated with pilgrimage. Several examples stand out in this study, such as the *Retablo of Tivurcia Gallego* [figure 9] (1917), commissioned in gratitude for surviving a traumatic injury garnered from crossing over train tracks.68 The *Retablo of Amador de Lira* [figure 10] (1995) gives thanks to the Virgin of San Juan for safe passage over a dangerous river, while the *Retablo of M. Esther Tapia Picón* [figure 11] (undated) depicts the successful evasion of migration authorities. Two final examples exemplify the variation in isolated events found in this genre, even within this narrowed subtheme. The inscription running along the bottom of the composition, *Retablo of Domingo Segura* [figure 12] (1932), narrates the miraculous intervention of the Virgin as the devotee is saved from drowning in the Rio Grande. The *Retablo of Concepción Zapata* [figure 13] (1948) is dedicated to the Virgin in exchange for rescuing the devotee from abduction. This diversity of miraculous events depicted attests to the deeply personal nature of this format.

---

68 Ibid., 124.
I am especially interested in the accumulation of votive images at pilgrimage sites as it relates to the interaction between popular and official religious tradition. In their systematic collection of votive images, Durand and Massey have found that institutional factors, such as inconsistent stances taken by parish churches regarding public expressions of popular devotion, have in fact not played a large role in the survivability of these works. Despite this perceived tolerance on the part of the parish church, “well-established traditions are no guarantee of continuity in policies toward retablos.”\textsuperscript{69} Such inconsistencies are found at the sanctuary of El Señor de Villaseca, located in the central Mexican city Guanajuato. In the case of the sanctuary of El Señor de Villaseca, the introduction of a new priest to the pilgrimage site was ultimately detrimental to the votive images. Although a tradition of toleration and preservation of votive images previously existed at the site, this attitude was in clear opposition to the position held by the newly introduced priest who adamantly rejected these traditions of popular devotion, ordering that the retablos that had been amassed and displayed in the sanctuary of the church be removed immediately.\textsuperscript{70} Establishing a precedent of shifting clerical and secular attitudes toward popular religious practices is essential in supporting the assertion that the works function as a form of resistance to established dictates.

\textit{Construction of Meaning}

Jordyn Murray analyses Mexican ex-votos in “By Our Lady: A Brief and Eclectic Survey of Art as Potential Prayer from the 7\textsuperscript{th} Century to the 21\textsuperscript{st}” (2019), in order to glean greater insight into the nature of prayer. Though ex-votos are just one of the many art forms considered in Murray’s dissertation, the conclusions that are reached regarding the genre are of notable relevance to this paper. Murray significantly frames the ex-voto as both a religious and documentary object,

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{69} Durand and Massey, “Miracles on the Border: The Votive Art of Mexican Migrants to the United States,” 220.
\item\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
asserting that the works “function as both prayer and a cross-section of the concerns and lifestyles of the vast majority of the Mexican population who identify as Catholic.” Amplified by the inherently public nature of ex-votos, most commonly displayed in shrine spaces visible to the public, the format then becomes not only a reflection of personal experiences and anxieties, but also a critical vehicle in communicating that information to others.

Common to all of these examples found in previous scholarship is the significant relationship and communication between the devotee and the divine. While these works maintain a Catholic intent and function, the specific iconography becomes less important to the significance of the composition. In contrast to devotional paintings and images restricted to the regulated and formal context of the Church, often appearing as part of an altarpiece, the ex-voto affords the devotee access to a more direct, personal, and informal relationship with the divine. The active devotion of carrying the object, before eventually parting with it at a shrine, reinforces the intimate meaning behind the painting. These ex-voto examples serve a dual purpose, commemorating the miraculous event performed as well as functioning as a token of protection during the journey. Whether used as a means of reconciling personal trauma, or simply addressing an everyday occurrence, the lines between the spiritual and the earthly, the divine and the ordinary, become blurred. In this way, a personal experience is validated, providing the supplicant with a means of reconciling the hardships they have faced or expressing gratitude for the blessings in their life within the framework of religion.

---

Chapter Two: Ex-votos as ‘In Between’ and Contextualizing the Presence of Catholicism in Mexico

Contestation inevitably emerged between officially-sanctioned religion and popular religion—or religion of the masses—from the transmission of Catholicism to the indigenous populations during the Spanish Conquest.\footnote{In keeping with the definition of ‘popular religion’ laid out in the introduction, ‘religion of the masses’ here refers to the religious life of those traditionally excluded from elite political and religious leadership positions.} No amount of theological regulation outlined by clerical elites in an attempt to control the religious practices of the laity could prevent the development of a dynamic, lived religion. The intimate nature of popular devotion, creating a direct link between the divine and the individual, threatened the elevated status of the clergy as intercessor in all religious matters.\footnote{Solange Alberro, “Retablos and Popular Religion in Nineteenth-Century Mexico,” in \textit{Art and Faith in Mexico}, ed. Elizabeth N.C. Zarur and Charles Murir Lovell (Albuquerque: New Mexico Press, 2001), 58.} The intent of this examination of the ex-voto, and of this chapter, is not to argue that Mexican devotional paintings represent the complete abandonment of and vengeful resistance toward the Catholic Church, but to explore the malleability of this genre, occupying a space decidedly ‘in between’ officially recognized forms of private and public devotion. This ‘in-betweenness’ transcends the physical realm, defined by spaces of popular religion (i.e., the home altar) and more rigidly orthodox spaces (i.e., the church), finding refuge in less well-defined notions of popular religious beliefs.

This is perhaps most clearly visible when we consider the uncontrollable nature of representations of the divine in popular devotion. Solange Alberro touches on this point in “Retablos and Popular Religion in Nineteenth-Century Mexico” (2001), stating that “the representation of the image and the beliefs it inspires in its followers are not always entirely orthodox in nature, resulting in processes of syncretism that the Church hierarchy finds impossible to control.”\footnote{Ibid., 59.} Given the complex relationship between the orthodoxy of the Church
and the malleability of popular devotion, points of departure on the part of the laity are often difficult to parse out. It is these points of departure, however, which are essential to the argument put forth by this thesis. It would be incorrect to suggest that popular devotional art, and the genre of ex-voto paintings in particular, has existed in rebellious, absolute opposition to the authority of the Catholic Church. Rather, I am arguing that the format facilitated, and continues to facilitate, a divergence from ‘official’ religious practices by privileging the relationship between the devout and the divine. A degree of intimacy is made possible that cannot be found elsewhere; its ability to fulfill a spiritual deficiency has sustained the practice through time. Ownership over the devotional paintings and the intimate relationship they express is evident in the passion with which the works continue to amass at the shrines of pilgrimage sites,\(^7\) enduring even through periods of conflict between the Church and secular State. In supporting the argument that the liminality of the ex-voto harbors the potential for subversion, it is useful to contextualize the ex-voto as it operates within these broader institutions, identifying instances in which the genre challenges established dictates. In this chapter I also provide a brief history of the presence of the Catholic Church in Mexico, particularly focusing on this history as it relates first to colonization and later to contemporary religious practice, so that it may provide context for the discussion of ex-votos and their significance.

*Catholicism in Colonial Mexico*

As evidenced by the clear connection between Mexican devotional paintings and Catholic iconography, the early history of religious retablos is rooted in the conversion efforts that took place during the Spanish colonization of Mexico. Hernán Cortéz arrived in Mexico in 1519,
landing in what is now known as Veracruz. Cortéz did not find himself on untouched land, but rather confronted fully established civilizations. A thorough discussion of the socio-political histories of both Maya and Aztec culture is unfortunately beyond the scope of this essay, but it is important to note that these were fully realized and dynamic societies. Centuries before the arrival of the Spaniards the Olmec constituted the first Mexican civilization, occupying modern-day Tabasco and Veracruz. Dates for the emergence of the Olmec vary slightly across sources, but historians generally place them at roughly 1500 BCE; this period of Mesoamerican history is often called the Preclassic period.77

Dated monuments created by the Maya aid in outlining the Classic period, thought to range from about 200-900 CE. The Postclassic period, during which time the Aztec culture flourished, spans from 900 CE to the time of the Spanish conquest, 1519.78 Tenochtitlán, modern-day Mexico City, was founded by the Aztecs in 1325. Even before the first Franciscan missionaries arrived in Mexico City in 1524, indigenous traditions of worship and devotional offering were already established.79 The Mexica, rulers of the Aztec Empire, built El Templo Mayor at Tenochtitlán, comprised of two pyramids atop a large, stepped platform.80 Subsequent excavation of these dual pyramids, built in dedication to Tlaloct, the god of rain, and Huitzilopochtli, the god of war, has revealed ‘votive behavior’ in the form of animal offerings alongside constructed images of the gods.81 El Templo Mayor itself was likely constructed as a votive offering, commemorating the divine fulfilment of land promised to the Mexica; the legend

follows that when the Mexica encountered an eagle devouring a serpent while perched on a cactus they had arrived at the promised land, and Tenochtitlán was built in gratitude.\textsuperscript{82} The city of Tenochtitlán fell to the Spanish in 1521, after which point the colony of New Spain was established.\textsuperscript{83}

The Roman Catholic Church worked in tandem with the Spanish Crown in the Viceroyalty of New Spain, relying on a Royal Patronage system (\textit{patronato real}) by which the Spanish Crown was granted authority in the Viceroyalty in exchange for funding the evangelization of the local indigenous populations. It was through this arrangement that the production of altarpieces, paintings, and churches was made possible.\textsuperscript{84} Friars who came to the Americas observed both the pre-Columbian traditions of worship as well as the artistic capabilities of indigenous artisans, and subsequently exploited both as a means of conversion. Given the language barrier between the Old and New Worlds, religious imagery served a pivotal role in the transfer of Catholic concepts to a potential congregation.\textsuperscript{85} Worship of religious imagery was cautiously encouraged by the friars. While concerned that engagement with icons would result in idolatry, such a response was seen as a necessary step in severing native ties to pagan beliefs.\textsuperscript{86}

Indigenous artisans were educated in European artistic traditions through the establishment of schools by local friars, such as the foundation of a school in Mexico City by the

\textsuperscript{82} Cukierkorn, “Mexican \textit{Ex Votos}: Applying an Intercultural Model to Religious Art and Student Experiences,” 86.
\textsuperscript{85} Giffords, “The Art of Private Devotion: Retablo Painting of Mexico,” 34.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 35.
Franciscan friar Pedro de Gante.\textsuperscript{87} It was understood that the creation of devotional objects by indigenous artists increased the palatability of Catholic teachings, but this was not permitted without anxiety and restriction. In an attempt to address these fears of idolatry and to work toward the destruction of native religion, indigenous traditions and sites of worship were appropriated by Spaniards in order to infuse them with Catholic significance. In order to make this transition appear less intrusive, aspects of indigenous myths or physical spaces would often be incorporated into the opposing doctrine, exploiting the parallels between the two faiths.\textsuperscript{88}

Despite European attempts to regulate ecclesiastical depictions, local variations were common. Once imported from Europe, saints would often undergo some transformation as they were assimilated into local Mexican culture. This assimilation is evident in instances of variation in identification, such as Christ being referred to as Lord of Ixmiquilpan or the Virgin being renamed Lady of Zapopan.\textsuperscript{89} Assimilation occurred visually as well, exemplified by the reinterpretation of significant attributes as relevant Mexican symbols.\textsuperscript{90} A santo depicting the \textit{Mater Dolorosa} provides an example of such familiarization [figure 14]. Here the cane used to whip Christ, an iconographic symbol typically appearing alongside the mourning mother, is reimagined as a cornstalk.\textsuperscript{91} Instances of syncretism affected the physical religious landscape as well, perhaps most evident in the appropriation of a spiritually significant Aztec in the origination of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, or the Virgin of Guadalupe. The Virgin of Guadalupe, one of the most common saints depicted in ex-voto art and a figure eventually

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{89} Ixmiquilpan is a city in central-eastern Mexico founded by Augustinian monks in 1550. The Lady of Zapopan became regarded as the patroness against storms and lightning in 1734; Giffords, \textit{Mexican Folk Retablos}, 66.
\textsuperscript{90} Giffords, \textit{Mexican Folk Retablos}, 68.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 45.
recognized as the patroness of New Spain in the middle of the eighteenth century by Pope Benedict XIV, played a significant role in the conversion of the indigenous Mexican populations to Catholicism. The legend described the miraculous appearance of the Virgin to Juan Diego, a newly Christianized shepherd, in 1531 at the hill of Tepeyac. Speaking in Nahuatl, the Virgin told Diego to ask the Archbishop Juan de Zumárraga in Mexico City to construct a temple in her honor. Tepeyac holds particular Aztec significance, as the hill was originally the location of a temple dedicated to the goddess Tonantzin, or Coatlicue. Juan Diego initially disregarded this apparition, but the Virgin appeared twice more, surrounded by Castilian roses on the third appearance. Diego gathered the roses in his tilma (an indigenous garment), and brought them to the archbishop. When Diego unfolded his tilma in the presence of the bishop, the acheiropoietic image of the Virgin was imprinted on the cloth. The legend of the Virgin of Guadalupe was extremely influential in the reception of Catholic beliefs by an indigenous audience, suggesting that the superimposition of the Catholic shrine onto a site with pre-Hispanic significance was in no way unintentional. In addition to the explicit appropriation of physical space, redefining Tepeyac as a site of Christian significance, this appropriation was reinforced culturally as well. The feast day of the Virgin of Guadalupe was established to occur before the onset of the rains, effectively aligning her with and affording her the same divine powers as the goddess Tonantzin; a figure traditionally associated with rain-bringing.

---

93 Nahuatl is the language spoken by the Aztec.
95 The blooming of Castilian roses was miraculous because the flower is not native to Mexico.
While many sources conflate the arrival of the first Franciscan friars in 1524 with the beginning of the evangelization of Mexico, Christianization arguably did not begin full force until the delivery of the Papal Bull *Sublimis Deus*, issued by Pope Paul III in 1537. *Sublimis Deus* decreed that the indigenous populations were capable of receiving the tenets of Christianity, opposing indigenous enslavement on the grounds that Native populations did possess souls and should not be deprived of their liberty or property. Prior to this, the Aztec and Inca populations encountered by the Spanish were regarded as heathens. The preoccupation of missionaries to convert the native populations was not pursued delicately. All images associated with pre-Columbian religion were considered idolatrous and regarded as devil worship and any idolatrous images that somehow survived the conquest were later destroyed by missionaries. The immediacy of this regime is noted by Esther Pasztory in *Pre-Columbian Art* (1998), providing the example of the Aztec deity Huitzilopochtli “represented in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European prints as a horned devil with European features,” visually communicating the European disdain for pre-Columbian religions.99 Even as the *Sublimis Deus* officially opposed the enslavement of Native peoples, the Spanish employed many other officially recognized methods to subjugate the Aztec and Inca, namely the Royal *Encomienda*, which functioned as a mandatory tribute paid to the Spanish Crown using profits garnered from forced labor, or *Repartimiento*.100 In addition to other military responsibilities, encomenderos who had been ‘granted’ forced laborers were also obligated to contribute to Christianization efforts as well as tasked with providing monetary support to build churches and supply a stipend for a local priest.

99 Esther Pasztory, “The Western Discovery of Pre-Columbian Art,” in *Pre-Columbian Art* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 8; Huitzilopochtli is the Aztec deity of war.
Although these obligations were not always fulfilled by the encomenderos, these officially sanctioned systems permitted missionaries and Spanish conquistadors to abuse their means in order to brutally exercise control.\textsuperscript{101}

Of particular importance to the context of idolatry, or image-worship, the Council of Trent came about in response to Reformation efforts spearheaded by the emergence of Protestantism. The Council convened three times throughout the sixteenth century: in 1545-47, 1551-52, and 1562-63, with the goal of launching a global Counter-Reformation campaign and re-affirming the beliefs and teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.\textsuperscript{102} A significant outcome of the Council of Trent was the rejection of iconoclasm, or the breaking of images, precipitated by Protestant rejections of supposed Catholic image-worship. The Council instead encouraged the use and production of images for didactic purposes. The toleration of images did not come without stipulations, as members of the religious clergy were still appointed as intercessors in devotional matters and turned to as authorities on the proper veneration of images and objects, the appropriate invocation of saints, and the authorized utilization of images.\textsuperscript{103} The Council met twenty-five times between 1545 and 1563. The initial meeting in 1545 of the general council of the Catholic Church was convoked by Pope Paul III, but the duration of the sessions spanned the reign of five popes. In colonial Mexico these counter-Reformation efforts had the effect of re-affirming the authority of the Roman Catholic Church over that of the monastic orders in the Americas.\textsuperscript{104} Bishops of the monastic orders were responsible for overseeing the religious


\textsuperscript{103} Atwood, “The Ex-voto as a Symbol of Faith and Survival,” 86-87.

\textsuperscript{104} The monastic orders constitute part of the regular clergy sent by Holy Roman Emperor Charles V to Christianize the Americas. The monastic orders include the Benedictines, the Franciscans, the Dominicans, etc.
practices of the newly converted congregation, and correcting the laity when necessary.\textsuperscript{105} While the twenty-fifth session permitted the use of religious images strictly for the purpose of teaching, images of the divine were meant to be used without superstition. Idolatry was rigidly prohibited, and festivals or other practices of veneration that could undermine the purity of the divine image with unruly behavior were discouraged.\textsuperscript{106}

Although the Church encouraged engagement with Catholic icons, there were still historically established guidelines regarding the formality and respect necessary when reproducing the image of a holy figure. During the early sixteenth century the Mexican Inquisition, an expansion of the Spanish Inquisition in New Spain, prohibited the reproduction of images in an inappropriate context, such as on tables, seats, or cushions. Intent was not relevant in these instances, as even if the image was produced with the earnest goal of fostering a closer relationship with the divine, the work was still unauthorized due to the belief that a certain degree of veneration was owed to the sacred image.\textsuperscript{107}

Luis Corteguera tackles these complexities in “Sacrilege, Profanation, and the Appropriation of Sacred Power in New Spain” (2016), examining the Protestant iconoclastic violence rampant in the sixteenth century. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries the Inquisition tried individuals for the desecration of Catholic images: such as spitting on, stabbing, or breaking them. While it is tempting to attribute these sacrilegious actions to attempts to deny the power of holy images and their inadequate representation of divinity, Corteguera argues that the motivations behind these destructive actions were far more complex. In his essay, Corteguera

\textsuperscript{106} Atwood, “The Ex-voto as a Symbol of Faith and Survival,” 87.
makes the case that sacrilegists were often acting directly against their own desires for an intimate relationship with the divine, and that the intense emotions expressed through the destruction of Catholic images, namely anger, desperation, and loneliness, are deeply connected to the emotions incited through the ritual worship of images.\textsuperscript{108}

Corteguera’s approach to popular devotion is interesting and useful to the argument presented in this thesis. Central to his discussion is the notion of the sacred becoming increasingly ingrained into everyday life, and as a result the distinction and hierarchy ordering these realms becomes blurred. Discussion of instances of sacrilege relies heavily on documents produced by the Mexican Inquisition, recording activity from Mexico, Central America, and the Philippines.\textsuperscript{109} Although these documents provide some insight into sixteenth-century religious life, they do not provide an unbiased history. Even through the context of a formal trial, the records are infused with personal biases and preconceived beliefs about the accused.\textsuperscript{110} Evidenced by these case studies, it is apparent that intimacy with the divine, as in the case of personal religious images, can lead to extremely emotional responses. These instances reflect the unpredictability of private and popular devotion. While image veneration was in many ways encouraged by religious authorities as a tool of conversion, examples of object destruction attest to the fact that when the Church enabled private devotion, they enabled other possibilities as well. As concluded by Corteguera, many of the individuals on trial for iconoclasm were ardent devotees, who only turned to image destruction when they felt they had fallen out of divine favor.\textsuperscript{111}

\textsuperscript{109} The Mexican Inquisition was established in 1571.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 5.
Catholicism in Nineteenth-Century Mexico and Beyond

Centuries later, the role of Catholicism in Mexico continues to be debated. The subsequent laws that emerged during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that address this complicated relationship indicate constant interaction between Church and State authorities and reveal how these power dynamics have changed over time. William B. Taylor explores devotional practices in Mexico during the nineteenth century, shedding light on a portion of Mexican history that has largely been ignored due to the elusive nature and incompleteness of national records following Mexico’s independence from Spain in 1821. Taylor’s study traces Catholic devotion through shrines and news of miracles, emphasizing the unique importance of images in Mexican-Catholic devotion. Nineteenth-century Catholicism in Mexico is characterized by the significant paradox of “the weakness of the institutional church coupled with abundant signs of faith and action, both public and private.”\(^{112}\) The role of the Church in the context of public life was uncertain, resulting, in part, in a decline in the financial resources accessible to religious institutions. Instances of laicization increased during the nineteenth century while the local laity became more active, resulting in the management of religious life—such as charity organizations, administration, and finances—falling largely to the community rather than the institution.\(^{113}\)

The religious landscape of Mexico in the wake of independence was unstable and rife with contradiction between what was prescribed and what was actually practiced. Members of the community outside of the refuge of Church hierarchy began to question the role of clergy members in public life, their previously indisputable authority threatened as church and state leaders continuously found themselves at odds with one another. Even as many of the ingrained

---


\(^{113}\) Ibid., 166.
aspects of religious life, such as reliable sources of income and the established training of younger generations in preparation for priesthood began to fall into decline, popular devotion intensified. As discussed by Taylor, the widespread, gradual withdrawal of the clergy from the work of pastoral care had significant implications on the development of popular devotion, especially in rural Mexico. As the presence of the clergy diminished, the influence of leaders in local lay communities increased, illustrated in Taylor’s reference to Franciscan missionaries returning to the Sierra Madre Occidental mountains after prolonged absence to find that the local community had returned to “idolatrous rites, being performed in ‘little pagan temples’ under the direction of native shamans.” Central to the discourse beginning in the 1820s regarding appropriate devotional practices were questions of jurisdiction, particularly church versus state authority. Additionally, distinction between private and public devotion was heavily debated. Many initiatives established by the Bourbon Reforms of the eighteenth century continued well into the first half of the nineteenth century. Several of these legislative measures were concerned with diminishing both the public presence of Catholicism and the extravagance of religious rituals. More specifically, these initiatives discouraged excessively ornamented ecclesiastical architecture and the excessive amount of obligatory religious holidays.

In its application to the more modern instances of popular devotion relevant to the context of ex-votos, the regulations outlined by the Council of Trent have been referenced, even in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as a means of control over the popular devotional practices of the laity. One of the stipulations defined by the Council was the responsibility and authority of bishops or the Pope in authorizing or rejecting miracles put forward by the devout.

---

114 Taylor, Shrines and Miraculous Images: Religious Life in Mexico Before the Reforma, 169.
115 Ibid.
116 The Bourbon Reforms were essentially a series of legislative measures enacted by the Spanish Crown during the eighteenth century with the goal of lessening the authority of the Catholic Church in opposition to state authority.
Kinga Novak cites one such example of the complicated relationship between popular and institutional religion, discussing an instance of a miracle in modern Mexico related to a sculpture of the Virgin Mary in the Candelaria de los Platos in Mexico City. Novak maintains that the receptivity of the church to modern miracles was not merely a self-serving method of maintaining relevance and power, but rather a testimony to the omnipresence of divinity within daily life even in a modern world. However theoretically receptive the Church may have been in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in practice it is clear that the institution still remained skeptical of claims of miraculous events reported by the laity and even by members of the secular clergy. The claim investigated by Novak, that the eyes of the statue of the Virgin Mary had moved in May of 1912, was initially tolerated and later rejected by Church officials. Ultimately, the testimony that the miraculous event had occurred was denied, culminating in a final official ruling by Canonical Judge Juez Delegado Canónigo Villagrán y Heras in which the judge supported his retraction of miraculous status, in part using the Council of Trent, on the grounds that the testified events did not constitute a “manifestation of the supernatural in this world.” The claims of the Virgin’s moving eyes could too easily be attributed to natural explanations, such as the instability of the ground on which the church was built or the factor that the chair on which the statue was placed was broken. Villagrán also relied on his own biases in denying the miracle, discrediting two of the female testimonies and further proclaiming that women have a tendency to falsely imagine miraculous phenomena and are generally more vulnerable to misguided and misunderstood practices of faith. I include this example as evidence to the fact that while popular devotion and engagement with Catholic iconography was

---

118 Ibid., 125.
119 Ibid., 126.
mostly tolerated and even encouraged, it was in many ways still held at arm's length by ecclesiastical authorities.

Ex-votos, though not always intentionally, disrupt the careful balance and degree of order the Church hoped to have over the laity. Similar to the example of the miraculous statue of the Virgin, ex-votos often depict events that are described as miraculous using arguably arbitrary criteria. An ex-voto depicting El Señor del Llanito [figure 15] is dated to 1912 and attributed to an anonymous Mexican artist. Painted on a muted background, the devotee kneels in front of the apparition of the Lord with his hat placed on the ground in front of him. He holds a candle in his right hand and his gaze is cast respectfully downward. On the right side of the composition the Lord of Llanito is nailed to a cross with a garland of flowers stretched between his hands. The Virgin Mary and Saint John the Evangelist stand to either side of the crucified Christ. The inscription, written on a darker brown background than that of the rest of the composition, reads in translation: “In the year of 1912 the misfortune befell [him] (...) apprehended for a crime that has not been proven and his affliction … to the Lord of the Llanito (...)(...) the miracle that was quickly done (...)and in proof of gratitude we dedicate this [retablo].”120 The casual use of the status of “miracle” in this ex-voto, though likely not intentionally defiant of the role of the bishop or priest in authorizing miracles, still offers a significant and interesting example of the ability of this genre to disrupt religious hierarchies.

An ex-voto dedicated to Nuestra Señora de Lourdes [figure 16], dated January 4, 1879, also provides an interesting example of popular devotion. Far more brightly colored than the previous composition, here Our Lady of Lourdes is depicted in a typical manner: standing in a grotto with a stream at her feet, wearing a white mantle with a blue sash tied at her waist and

---

ornamented by the gold crown on her head. A plethora of flowers surround the divine figure, whose hands are drawn together in prayer. A woman wearing a black mantle, blue sash, and head covering kneels before Our Lady of Lourdes, holding a rosary up to her from clasped hands. Behind her, a man presumed to be Don Mauricio Velasquez is relegated to a bed due to his illness. Translation of the inscription reads: “The 4th day of January of [18]79 Don Mauricio Velasquez being gravely ill of some ulcers in his throat invoked Our lady of Lourdes and regained his health.”¹²¹ As before, it is improbable that the intent in commissioning this work was to boldly reject church hierarchy, but the statement in the inscription that Don Mauricio Velasquez “invoked” Our Lady of Lourdes himself, rather than relying on an official intercessor, is not to be overlooked.

These instances of increased spiritual autonomy seen in the invocation of saints on one’s behalf and in the designation of arguably ordinary events as ‘miraculous’ are also evident when we also consider the plethora of saints to which ex-votos are dedicated and the confidence with which devotees dedicate ex-votos to figures not necessarily recognized by the Catholic Church. In order to enrich our understanding of these instances, it is helpful to establish how saints and sainthood are understood by the Roman Catholic Church. In addition to the extensive range of devotional figures featured in ex-votos, iterations of the tradition in the twentieth century find the inclusion of mortal figures as well. Filling the space in the composition traditionally reserved for saints or members of the Holy Family with ordinary individuals essentially elevates these figures nearly to the status of sainthood. The few individuals afforded this status are regarded as victims of injustice, such as Juan Soldado, Pedro Blanco, The Child Fidencio, and Jesús Malverde. Apart from the obvious implications of substituting a religious figure sanctioned by the Church for a

figure significant only on a community level, associating sainthood with particularly nefarious figures, such as Jesús Malverde (“the patron saint of drug dealers in Culiacán”), is arguably sacrilegious.\textsuperscript{122}

James S. Griffith approaches the study of votive images from this perspective, quoting the \textit{New Catholic Encyclopedia}’s description of saints as “those members of the mystical body of Christ who have lived and died, whose lives were notable for holiness and virtues practiced, and who have been officially declared saints by the church through the process of beatification and canonization.”\textsuperscript{123} Griffith describes what he refers to as \textit{folk devotions} and \textit{folk saints}, arguing that the context of migration often uniquely values saints and devotions outside of those traditionally accepted by the Church. According to Griffith, \textit{folk devotions} are “situations in which mainstream saints are asked to perform unusual tasks,” while the term \textit{folk saints} describes individuals petitioned “who are not and probably never will be saints in the official Roman Catholic Church.”\textsuperscript{124} Regarding methodology, Griffith considers material housed in the Southwest Folklore Center of the University of Arizona Library, particularly referencing printed prayers on file. Of particular relevance to this thesis are the instances Griffith describes in which saints are petitioned under unorthodox circumstances and engaged with in a context outside of the church or home altar. For example, San Martin Caballero—also known as St. Martin of Tours—is called on to bring good fortune upon the devotee, even to the detriment of their enemies.\textsuperscript{125}

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{122} Roque and Schwartz, \textit{Infinitas Gracias: Contemporary Mexican Votive Painting}, 10.
\item \textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 41.
\end{footnotes}
Saints are invoked without hesitation in events related to drunkenness, adultery, robbery, and revenge. While these themes may be unpalatable to Catholic tradition, they reflect unapologetic engagement with Catholic doctrine, resulting in radically intimate honesty between the individual and the holy figure. Further, the miraculous events represented in ex-votos are often decidedly mundane when compared to the gravity of such concerns as achieving salvation: transcending the hardship of this life for the promise of life eternal. Instead, ex-votos more often seek to comfort the individual in moments of crisis faced in daily life. While not necessarily resistant to the authority of the Catholic Church, this essential quality of the ex-voto is disruptive to authority and tradition due to its use of religious imagery, imbued with so much tradition and meaning, as a format through which to discuss controversial topics. Amy Hamman provides a useful example of the potential of ex-votos to challenge religious discourses, analyzing an ex-voto dedicated by Edith Y.A. The ex-voto depicts a woman kneeling before the Virgin of Guadalupe, surrounded by an overturned stool, a loose high heeled shoe, and a bottle of alcohol. Overhead a stretched pair of tights hangs limply from the ceiling, communicating to the viewer even before the inscription that Edith has survived a suicide attempt. The deeply personal nature of this ex-voto, proclaiming gratitude for another chance at life, incites religious discourse in its controversial subject matter. Even as the content of the painting clearly operates within a religious context, strictly speaking, suicide is regarded as a mortal sin in Catholicism. As testified by the accompanying inscription, Edith was able to repent and achieve salvation, but the subjects engaged by this work still indicate controversies between ‘popular’ and ‘official’ religion.

---

Additionally, even when the ex-voto intentionally depicts a sanctioned figure, the officially established iconography associated with the holy figure is abided by only broadly. As has been previously discussed in characterizing the aesthetics of votive paintings, the act of creating the image is often regarded as being of greater importance than the adherence to strict iconographic guidelines. Further, the context in which ex-votos are typically displayed—often placed at the shrine of a particular saint—also supersedes the need for an especially detailed or specific rendering of the saint, as both the physical context and accompanying text aid in the figure’s identification.\textsuperscript{128}

Moving beyond the iconographic significance of ex-votos, pilgrimages provide an interesting context through which to consider the role of votive objects. Public expressions of faith, as can be seen in the act of performing a pilgrimage, directly demonstrate the relationship between the devout and the divine. Hughes describes the significant intimacy of the relationship manifested in votive culture in which the “devotee is neither submissive nor subservient to the divine personage; rather; they are co-equal agents who engage in mutual care…both tending to and keeping company with the sacred.”\textsuperscript{129} Examples of collective pilgrimage, in which a neighborhood organizes a group excursion to a particular shrine, elevate the context of the act from the level of the individual to that of the community. The community itself is consecrated and sustained. During these pilgrimages, it is common for elaborate votive objects to be carried to the site, at which point they are blessed by the priest and returned to the home altar. The annual consecration of the object reinvigorates it with spiritual meaning, protecting the family. In this way, this form of popular practice is legitimized within the framework of the Church.

\textsuperscript{128} Durand and Massey, “Miracles on the Border: The Votive Art of Mexican Migrants to the United States,” 217.
\textsuperscript{129} Jennifer Scheper Hughes, “Contemporary Popular Catholicism in Latin America,” in Cambridge History of Religions in Latin America (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 486.
As noted in the introductory discussion of popular and official religion, although it is tempting to view popular religion as an ardent subversion of ecclesiastical authority, it is important to note that the distinction between popular and ecclesiastical religion is not always easily made. While popular religion has often been deemed unpredictable, at times rebellious and even dangerous, these two spheres of Catholicism—one existing at the margins of the institution and the other at the center—often align in many fundamental respects. Jennifer Scheper Hughes provides examples of these instances of seamless agreement between popular and ecclesial religion, demonstrated “when priests lend their support to the celebration of locally significant patron saints or affirm local experiences of the miraculous.”130 Many members of the laity view their engagement with Catholicism as existing in accordance with Christian history, not at its periphery.

130 Hughes, “Contemporary Popular Catholicism in Latin America,” 487.
Chapter Three: Instances of Subversion

Contextualizing the role of the Catholic Church in nineteenth-century Mexico through the conflict between Church and State authority is useful in understanding the survival and evolution of popular devotion in Mexico, as rising tensions resulted in attempts to limit the widespread use of religious images, especially in the context of public processions or pilgrimages. Drawing on an earlier practice in which church officials would demand that religious images in private possession be returned to the context of the Catholic Church, political authorities—such as the alcalde or ayuntamiento—reinvigorated this practice in the 1820s and began removing religious images from family chapels in order to place them in a parish church instead.\(^{131}\) Efforts to enforce these policy reforms reflect not only the desire to exercise some control over the public, but also the intent to designate specific areas as the proper context for religious activity, effectively attempting to regulate and restrict public and private expressions of devotion. Instances of this enforced restriction are evident in examples such as the removal of religious images from outdoor sites in 1824, ordered by the government in Mexico City.\(^{132}\) The explanation provided by the government for this imposition was that the removal of religious images from secular settings was justified due to the perceived profanation of the sacred by displaying them in a context where sacrilegious activity may occur.

The intensifying tension characterizing the period of instability following Mexico’s independence culminated in a series of anticlerical Reform Laws enacted between 1855 and 1857.\(^{133}\) As discussed by William Taylor, this period, known as La Reforma, is reminiscent of the Bourbon Reforms in Latin America in that one of the primary intentions of the Reform Laws

---

\(^{131}\) Alcalde refers to a municipal magistrate; ayuntamiento translates to “town council”; Taylor, Shrines and Miraculous Images: Religious Life in Mexico Before the Reforma, 169.

\(^{132}\) Taylor, Shrines and Miraculous Images: Religious Life in Mexico Before the Reforma, 170.

was to curtail the power of the Catholic Church. Among the changes enacted by the Reform Laws, some of the especially notable revisions include Ley Iglesias (1857), which aimed to make Catholic sacraments more accessible, prohibited the Church from charging unreasonably high fees, and stipulated that the poor would receive free sacraments. Additionally, the 1857 Constitution did not establish Catholicism as the officially recognized religion nor did it promise freedom of religion, effectively undermining the free reign the Roman Catholic Church had over the religious landscape of Mexico and providing some leeway for other faiths.

While the expression of and access to faith was still permitted within certain contexts, the sudden shift in social climate—from a primarily religious society to one which was suddenly experiencing drastic and radical secular influence—was perceived by the religious population as an attack on Catholicism. As demonstrated by the notable continuation of popular religion following periods of transition in nineteenth-century Mexico, ongoing conflict between Church and State arguably fostered and strengthened devotion to particular saints, contributing to the survival of Catholic doctrine as the devout became more defensive of their personal relationship to spirituality.

The survival, and arguable growth, of religious mentalities despite the pressures of the Reform Laws is evidenced by the documented growth in reported apparitions during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Recognized apparitions were even encouraged by the institutional Church. This strategy was employed by the Church largely in response to the Reforma; the Church expressed support of pilgrimages to specific shrines, such as that of the Virgin of

---

134 Cruz, “Mexico,” 398.
135 Ibid., 399.
Guadalupe and the Holy Child of Atocha, as a means of renouncing the legislation committed to eradicating religious activity from political and daily life.\footnote{Novak, “Of Gratitude and Sorrow: A Visual History of Everyday Mexican Spirituality, 1700-2013,” 103.}

The 1917 Constitution, written and ratified during the Mexican Revolution, further distinguished between Church and State.\footnote{Library of Congress, “The Mexican Revolution and the United States in the Collections of the Library of Congress: The Constitution of 1917,” accessed March 14, 2020, https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/mexican-revolution-and-the-united-states/constitution-of-1917.html.} Two notable outcomes of the Constitution include Article 24, which stipulates that public devotion be restricted to designated religious spaces, and Article 130, which in part specifies that religion must remain separate from politics and states that “religious publications cannot comment on public or political matters.”\footnote{Cruz, “Mexico,” 399.} The anticlerical articles of the Constitution were later reformed; among the changes made in 1992, members of the clergy were allowed to vote and public worship, with the proper permissions, was tolerated. Even as many of the restrictions were ultimately redacted, the volatile relationship between religious and state authorities undeniably affected popular religious practices.

The Cristero Rebellion, taking place between 1926 and 1929, marks one such instance of popular religious response to these secularizing articles. As with virtually all notable historical moments, the secularizing efforts of the Mexican national government and the subsequent responses of the Catholic Church cannot simply be reduced to a struggle for power between two dominant forces. To characterize it as such would be to discount the complexities of these interactions and the variety of political, spiritual, economic, and regional concerns that acted as motivators.\footnote{Sonya Leigh Scott, “The Many Faces of the Cristero Rebellion,” Eastern Illinois University, Fall 2008, 1-2, https://www.eiu.edu/historia/Historia2009Scott.pdf.} Because of these historical intricacies, many scholars diminish the religious context of the Rebellion, arguing that some cristeros engaged in the movement from a purely...
political or economic perspective.\textsuperscript{141} Still, as Matthew Butler contends, “religion was central to popular opposition to the revolutionary state,”\textsuperscript{142} evidenced by the “public reinvigoration of lay religion.”\textsuperscript{143} While recognizing the host of factors—many of them nonreligious—that characterize this period of Mexican history, understanding the degree to which religious persecution may have contributed to resistance and innovation on the part of the laity is particularly useful in supporting the argument that ex-votos demonstrate potential subversion of institutional authority.

The presidency of Plutarco Elías Calles, in office from 1924 to 1928, is largely regarded as the culmination of anticlericalism during this period, introducing ‘Calles law’ (1926) which aimed to enforce the clerically opposed legislation defined in the 1917 Constitution.\textsuperscript{144} Due to the restrictions imposed on the Church by the Constitution, ecclesial authorities began refusing to perform sacraments for the lay community, hoping to incite peaceful protest among the devout and demonstrate the significance of the Catholic Church to government officials.\textsuperscript{145} In 1926 the Church suspended public worship in Mexico entirely, driving the priests who remained with their rural parishes to attempt continued ministration in an undetected manner while the forefront of the uprising claimed the lives of thousands of peasants and priests.\textsuperscript{146} Primarily, these uprising events were geographically restricted to west central Mexican states: Jalisco, Zacatecas, Michoacán, Guanajuato, and Colima.\textsuperscript{147} Playing a role in many of these instances of insurrection

\textsuperscript{141} Scott, “The Many Faces of the Cristero Rebellion,” 5.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 465.
\textsuperscript{146} Butler, “Revolution and the Ritual Year: Religious Conflict and Innovation in Cristero Mexico,” 465.
was the National League for the Defense of Religious Liberty, a group of lay Catholics formed in 1925 in Mexico City.\textsuperscript{148} While initially the League called for peaceful resistance, often taking the form of economic boycott, the organization abandoned this position in 1927 and instead encouraged mass rebellion, joining the Catholic Association of Mexican Youth “in leading small uprisings throughout Mexico.”\textsuperscript{149} Support of the cristeros by the Catholic Church was implied in these early stages of the uprising, but ultimately approval was officially withdrawn. The Rebellion came to an end in 1929, at which point Church and State officials had been in negotiation for two years, aided in mediation by U.S. ambassador Dwight W. Morrow.\textsuperscript{150} The agreement reached in 1929 did little to address the concerns of the bishops or the laity. As noted by Jennie Purcell the agreement “did not reform or modify any of the existing anticlerical laws…Nor did the state provide any guarantees that religious practice would be tolerated within the narrow confines allowed by law.”\textsuperscript{151} Despite the arguable failure of the Rebellion, Matthew Butler identifies instances of “passive resistance to the state” that tend to fade into the background of more prominent and violent rebellion.\textsuperscript{152} With the closure of many churches and suspension of ‘official’ religious activity, the religious landscape of Mexico was arguably restructured, placing greater importance on private worship. Butler makes note of public pronouncements in support of this claim, citing an order made by Leopoldo Ruiz y Flores, archbishop of Michoacán during the Cristero Rebellion, encouraging the transfer of religious life “from the altar and confessional to protected ‘offstage’ sites in the homes and hearts of


\textsuperscript{149} Purnell, \textit{Popular Movements and State Formation in Revolutionary Mexico}, 72.

\textsuperscript{150} Jennie Purnell, “Cristero Rebellion.”

\textsuperscript{151} Purnell, \textit{Popular Movements and State Formation in Revolutionary Mexico}, 90.

believers.” This order came as an attempt to secure the faith of the community while more public displays of devotion faced persecution.

Butler does not make explicit reference to ex-votos as one such outcome of this structural reworking of religious life, but the tradition—so ingrained in popular devotion—is easily applicable in this context. More convincing evidence, perhaps, of this connection is found when we consider ex-votos produced during the Cristero Rebellion. *Martyrdom of Five Cristeros* [figure 18], is immediately recognizable as an ex-voto, following the recognizable composition of an inscription below a horizontal narrative scene. In translation, the inscription reads:

“Execution of cristeros by federal soldiers on the outskirts of San Gabriel, Jalisco, October 8, 1927. On the same site, the soldiers were ambushed, suffering the same fate.”154 A notable departure in this ex-voto from previously referenced examples is the absence of a religious figure or mention of miraculous intercession. Given that the composition clearly draws on the artistic conventions of the ex-voto tradition, it can be surmised that this absence is due to fear of persecution if the devotee were identified as Catholic by the recognizability of a religious figure.

An exhibition in 2013 at the Schneider Hall Gallery of the University of Louisville, *Los relatos pintados: la otra historia, exvotos mexicanos*, comes to the same conclusion. Of the ex-votos in their collection that date to this period, the exhibition catalogue notes that nearly all the few surviving examples omit the divine figure.155 The artist and commissioner of this ex-voto is unfortunately ambiguous, provoking lingering questions of the relationship of the commissioner to those depicted. What does seem likely, however, is that this work was commissioned or

---

produced in remembrance of those lost. A clearer example is found in an ex-voto dedicated to Saint Paschal [figure 19] containing the following translated inscription: “While she was in her kitchen in Puebla, in 1928, a wounded Cristero rebel came to the house of Maria Nojera, so she entrusted him to San Pascualito [Saint Paschal Baylon] and since everything went well she dedicates this small retablo to the saint, giving him endless gratitude.”\textsuperscript{156} The inscription professes gratitude for the aid received by a cristero rebel upon entering Maria Nojera’s kitchen, painted on a circular metal lid rather than the stereotypical rectangular format. The political nature of both these works adds a significant element to the genre’s potentially subversive qualities.

In parsing out the characterization of ex-votos as a potentially subversive works, Amy Hamman’s insight proves helpful. Hamman draws on scholar Lucy Lippard’s analysis of images, arguing that images can be used as an outlet in articulating criticisms of dominant culture.\textsuperscript{157} In this way, and especially relevant when considering 	extit{Martyrdom of Five Cristeros}, ex-votos function almost as a mirror held up to imposing institutions. The public nature of the work facilitates clear expression of individual concerns, while the malleability of the composition—particularly the potential for ambiguity and discretion—provides a relatively safe format through which to protest mistreatment. Even when disregarding the more politicized examples, the very fact that ex-votos continued to be produced through periods of conflict between the Church and State deserves consideration as well. Particularly applicable to nineteenth- and twentieth-century dictates aimed at reducing the presence and power of the Church, ex-votos may represent a token


of protection outside the refuge of a church. Equally useful in professing gratitude for arguably insignificant instances of divine intercession, ex-votos also provide a medium through which intimate fears and traumas can be reconciled. By establishing that this form of popular devotion—whether displayed at a pilgrimage site or left at a shrine—was under scrutiny from political, and to some extent Catholic, authorities, ex-votos then become a form of subversion of institutional power, flourishing despite suppression.
Conclusion

Mexican ex-votos dating between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries represent instances in which the objects’ production and use disrupt established dictates. Much like the complexity of the ex-voto itself, traversing the boundaries between the earthly and divine realms, from the study of the tradition emerges an art practice that occupies a certain ‘in-betweenness.’ Not quite accepted by the Church or State, the Mexican ex-voto tradition finds refuge with the individual. The unrelenting link to self-expression and uniquely intimate access to the divine afforded through the work has sustained the practice through time. Through the ex-voto the individual is able to satisfy a profoundly personal need for spiritual aid, gaining a degree of autonomy and control in a world fraught with suffering. The desire to continue to seek this comfort in light of skepticism from the Church and restrictions on public religious practices and other mistreatment imposed by the State then becomes a testimony to resilience and empowerment, undermining authorities in exchange for spiritual autonomy.

Study of the Mexican ex-voto tradition is far from exhausted. Other research directions warranting further exploration include the potential development of artistic identity as the tradition has evolved, instances in which an ex-voto is created by the devotee rather than commissioned, and the possible implications of dedicating an ex-voto in petition for divine intervention rather than solely in gratitude. Scholarship on this subject would also benefit from future research into ex-votos that specifically address concerns related to migration, as this context continues to be particularly relevant in today’s political climate. In addition to the socio-political information that can be gleaned from migratory ex-votos, as evidenced in the work of previous scholars, these visual expressions of popular devotional practice have undoubtedly continued to flourish as symbols of resilience and resistance.
Figure 1: Simon Pereyns and Pedro de Requena. “Main altar/retablo mayor,” San Miguel Huejotzingo, Puebla, 1588. Oil on wood. WMDID.
Figure 3: Anonymous, Mexico. Nineteenth century. Oil on tin. 9¼ x 6¼" (23.5 x 15.9 cm).
Calil Zarur and Carles Muir Lovell, eds., *Essays in Art and Faith in Mexico: The Nineteenth-
Figure 4: Ex-Voto. 1797. 10¾" x 14", oil on canvas. From: Giffords, Gloria Fraser. *Mexican Folk Retablos*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974, p. 149.
Figure 5: Ex-Voto. 1938. 11 7/8" x 16½". From: Giffords, Gloria Fraser. *Mexican Folk Retablos*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974, p. 162.
Figure 14: *Mater Dolorosa* or *N. S. de los Dolores*. From: Giffords, Gloria Fraser. *Mexican Folk Retablos*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974, p. 44.
Figure 15: Anonymous, Mexico. 1912. Oil on tin. 7 x 10¼” (17.8 x 26 cm). Collection: NMSU Art Gallery #1966.5.59. Donor: Mr. C. Andrew Sutherland. From: Elizabeth Netto Calil Zarur and Carles Muir Lovell, eds., Essays in Art and Faith in Mexico: The Nineteenth-Century Retablo Tradition (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 250.
Bibliography


Corteguera, Luis R. “Sacrilege, Profanation, and the Appropriation of Sacred Power in New


