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Nursing Madonnas: Treasured Images of Tender Care

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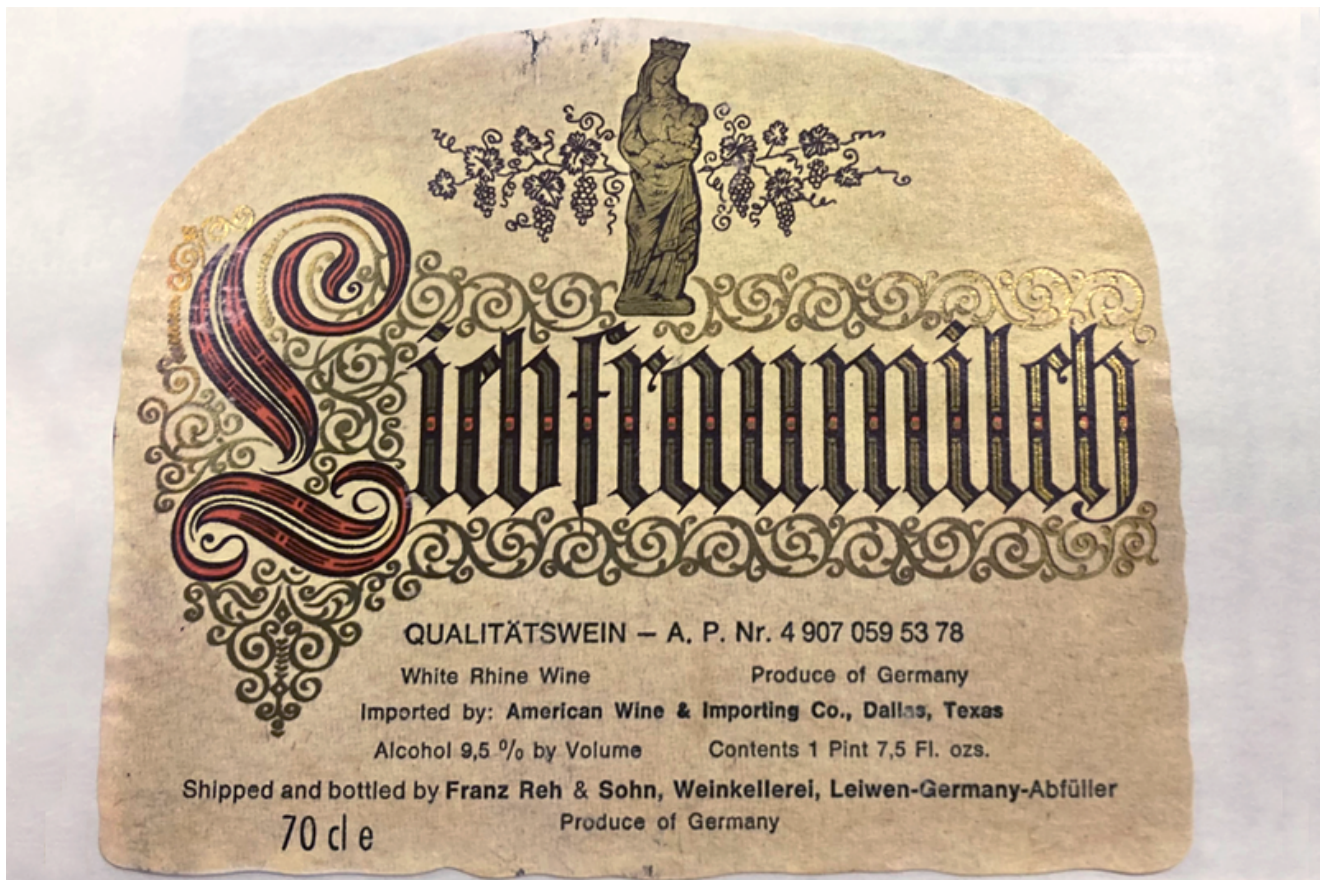
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Nursing Madonnas: Treasured Images of Tender Care

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By Neomi De Anda

Lactating and nursing Madonna images have been part of Christian tradition for centuries. Some claim that these images originated as statues of the ancient Egyptian goddess Isis and her son, Horus, usurped by Christians to be Mary and Jesus. Along with the images have come strong devotions.

Bethlehem: The Milk Grotto

The Milk Grotto in Bethlehem may be the root of this devotion. It is believed that during the Holy Family's flight to Egypt and the Massacre of the Innocents (Matthew 2:13-18), Mary, Joseph and Jesus took refuge in this cave, above which is now a chapel dedicated to this Marian image. Today, devotees make pilgrimages to this site to pray to conceive a child or in thanksgiving for answered prayers.

In the Americas: San Juan, St. Augustine

Nursing Marian images are among the oldest Madonna images on the American continents. These images have long histories within what are now the physical borders of the United States. Nuestra Señora de Belén (Bethlehem), a nursing Madonna image, arrived in Viejo San Juan (Old San Juan), Puerto Rico, between 1511 and 1522. The second-oldest church in the American continents, San Jose church in Old San Juan, has always had a chapel devoted to this image. Today, the newly renovated church with the chapel of Nuestra Señora de Belén hosts the Blessed Sacrament just below its nursing Madonna image. The chapel is surrounded by stained-glass windows depicting evangelical Nativity narratives.

The oldest Catholic site of what is now the continental United States is also dedicated to a nursing Madonna image. Nuestra Señora de la Leche y Buen Parto is the primary image in what is now considered the country's most sacred acre. The image originally arrived in St. Augustine, Florida, in 1611. In 2021, the site was granted a canonical coronation by Pope Francis because of the centuries of strong devotion to this image.

— *Neomi De Anda is executive director of the International Marian Research Institute at the University of Dayton.*



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Our Lady of Happy Delivery, statue by Hans Heinzeller, Marian Library Art and Artifacts Collection