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**IMAGES OF VISIONS:  
MARIAN DEVOTIONAL IMAGES FROM THE  
NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES  
IN NORTH AMERICA**

*Nicholas Glisson\**

Apparitions of Mary have been an important element in popular Catholicism during the last century-and-a-half. While the nature of a vision is highly personal, the images based on apparitions enable others to participate vicariously in the faith-experience of the visionary. In a similar way to messages and miraculous cures, this art plays an important role in the spread of Marian devotion under the title of a particular apparition. The images distinguish for the devotee one apparition from another and aid in identifying the various apparitions.

An examination of the images from major apparitions reveals much about the atmosphere that surrounds them and about the place of Mary in the Church. The nineteenth-century apparitions of Mary (at Paris, La Salette, Lourdes) and the twentieth-century apparitions at Fatima and Medjugorje all occurred in Europe, but have large followings in North America and, thus, merit consideration here. They have striking similarities and distinguishing characteristics as well. Although the apparition of Mary at Guadalupe, northwest of Mexico City, occurred centuries earlier than those listed above, it also bears numerous similarities. A brief study of the apparition at Guadalupe will provide not only a contrast to the images attached to more recent apparitions, but will also show that

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many elements of the Guadalupe events transcend factors of time and locale.

Before examining the images, some important elements of their study should be noted. Almost no scholarly work has been done with respect to the evolution of Marian devotional imagery. Voluminous amounts of material exist, but for the most part the material (pictures, holy cards, statues, etc.) reflects devotional piety and is highly subjective. Frequently, artists are unknown, and the year in which an image was first executed is almost impossible to ascertain accurately. As will be seen later, this "hidden" background plays a part in the way such artwork affects or is interacted with by the devotees.

It is also important to understand the Church's position on devotions to Mary arising from apparitions. The papal magisterium has never given official recognition to an apparition. However, the Council of Trent established a procedure for investigating reports of apparitions. All the European visions reported here were so investigated. An investigation is begun by the bishop of the diocese within which the vision is alleged to have occurred. The visionary must be of sound mind and good moral character. In addition any messages or directives issuing from the apparition are scrutinized to determine whether they are in keeping with Church teaching. If the vision passes these tests, it will be judged worthy of belief. Teaching received from a vision is considered "private revelation," which must be distinguished from public revelation.

### **Descriptions of Apparitions**

#### ***Paris, 1830 (The Miraculous Medal): The Vision***

In 1830, Catherine Labouré, a French peasant, was a religious at the Convent of Saint Vincent de Paul in Paris. Late at night on July 18th of that year, she was led by a child to the convent chapel. The child announced, "Behold the Blessed Virgin!" Catherine heard the rustling of a silk dress and saw Mary seated on the director's chair. The Lady said that the times were evil but graces would be given to all who approach the altar of God.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Our Lady, Her Medal and Her "Central Association"* (Philadelphia: Central Association of the Miraculous Medal, 1950), 3-4.

A second vision occurred on November 27th. During that apparition, Catherine recounted, Mary asked that a medal be minted in her honor. Catherine witnessed a vision which served as the pattern for the medal. In that vision, Mary's gown was the "the color of dawn," and she wore a veil that descended to her feet. At first, she held a globe symbolizing the world and the individuals of the world; then the globe disappeared and she extended her arms. Rings appeared on her fingers, some of which had rays emanating from them. The fingers without rays shining from them represented graces not asked for. An aureola appeared around her and the words, "O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee" was seen around the circumference (*Fig. 1*).

A prominent letter "M," surmounted by a cross with a bar at its base, was directed to be placed on the reverse side of the medal. The emblems of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (heart with crown of thorns) and the Immaculate Heart of Mary (heart pierced by a sword) were to appear below the monogram. Twelve stars were to adorn the medal's circumference.

### ***Paris, 1830 (The Miraculous Medal): The Image***

Medals were struck in consonance with the above description. Miraculous cures were soon attributed to the medal, which was widely distributed in France and wherever the Daughters of Charity and their brother community, the Vincentian priests, ministered throughout the world. Pope Pius IX was said to have laid the medal at the foot of his crucifix.<sup>2</sup>

At that time, wearing the medal required investiture by a priest who received special faculties to do so. Investiture included membership in the "Central Association," a sodality of devotees. Annual dues (\$.25 in 1950) were collected to support mission work under the auspices of the Miraculous Medal.<sup>3</sup>

The symbolism of the medal is significant. Mary stands *contrapposto*, almost entirely covered by her gown and veil, with only her face, some hair, hands and feet visible. Physical fea-

<sup>2</sup>*Our Lady, Her Medal*, 6-10.

<sup>3</sup>*Our Lady, Her Medal*, 10-16.

tures are almost completely absent. Her bare feet are shown crushing the head of a snake, a reference to the traditional interpretation of the Genesis text on the fall of humanity.<sup>4</sup>

The almond-shaped halo surrounding the image of Mary, which forms the circumference of the medal, is also known as a mandorla or, more specifically, an aureole—a type of halo reserved for the Godhead and Mary. Mandorlas are formed by the intersection of two spheres and represent the convergence of heaven and earth. An image enclosed in a mandorla is, thus, represented in its glorified state. In the context of apparitions, this halo iconographically indicates that the visionary sees beyond the physical world into the world of the spirit.<sup>5</sup>

Mary's hands are extended in a gesture of blessing or embrace from above, which at once reinforces her glorified state and beckons the visionary to follow her there. The rays shining from the rings on her fingers represent the spiritual help available for people in a weak human condition and encourage them to undertake the spiritual journey necessary to participate in this blessed glory.

The legend around the circumference of the medal—"O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee!"—has historical import. The Immaculate Conception had long been an accepted teaching of the Catholic Church but had not been promulgated as official Church teaching. That appellation was part of the vision and was seen as confirmation of its veracity. It helped lead to the declaration of the Immaculate Conception as a doctrine of the Church some twenty-four years later.<sup>6</sup>

The historical context in which the apparition occurred and the medal was struck gives an indication of how the phenomenon of devotion to the Miraculous Medal affected both the Church and the secular world. Within living memory of many who witnessed the events of 1830 was the campaign of de-Christianization during the French Revolution, symbolized by

<sup>4</sup>Gen. 3:15.

<sup>5</sup>Edward N. West, *Outward Signs: The Language of Christian Symbolism* (New York: Walker and Co., 1989), 27-28.

<sup>6</sup>Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, December 8, 1854.

the erection of the statue of the goddess of Reason in the Cathedral of Notre-Dame. Although Napoleon had reestablished religion in France, he had used the papacy of Pius VII as a tool for his own political campaigns and humiliated the pope by crowning himself emperor. Full-flowered secularism was attempting to suppress the Church again. Movements like the one generated by the Miraculous Medal aided the *esprit de corps* of besieged Catholics. Wearing the medal symbolized allegiance to the Church with its supranational character.

Additionally, the apparition served to strengthen Church authority in its struggle against secular governments. The Church accomplished this by reasserting its spiritual authority. The definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854 manifested that the Church could exercise a kind of supremacy unavailable to secular powers. The Church alone held the key to the ongoing revelation of God to the world—a power potentially much stronger than military force. The Miraculous Medal was an instrument in the Church's struggle against secularism.

### ***La Salette, 1846: The Vision***

Mélanie Calvat and Maximin Giraud, two shepherd children, reported that the Virgin Mary spoke to them in a field near their home at La Salette in southwestern France. A globe of brilliant light caught their attention, whereupon they saw a beautiful lady resplendently attired but weeping. She told them that unless people repented from religious apathy, she would be unable to withhold the wrath of her Son.<sup>7</sup>

From the beginning, there were difficulties surrounding the apparition. Many were offended by the uncouth behavior of the children, neither of whom subsequently manifested the qualities necessary for sainthood. The saintly priest Fr. John Vianney interviewed Maximin and believed the boy denied the vision; later, Vianney stated that he had misunderstood the child. Nevertheless, after a canonical inquiry, the local bishop, Philibert de Bruillard of Grenoble, judged that the apparition

<sup>7</sup>Sandra Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary: From La Salette to Medjugorje* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 166–67.

"had all the characteristics of truth." Later, the bishop established a religious congregation to propagate devotion to "Our Lady of La Salette." Both Pius IX and Leo XIII were favorable to the apparition.<sup>8</sup>

### *La Salette: Images*

Unlike the Miraculous Medal, no detailed description of Mary's appearance seems to have been recorded at the time of the apparition. Perhaps because of this, images of Mary at La Salette are less codified. In one image she is seated, weeping, wearing the traditional headdress of women in this part of France in the 1830s (*Fig. 2*). Other images show her standing, but in similar dress (*Fig. 3*). Yet other images show her unveiled and standing (*Fig. 4*). Finally, there is an image of her standing, similarly attired, but veiled and wearing a crown.

The first two images are culturally consonant with what the children's image of a beautiful woman would have been. Physical detail is nearly absent, with only her face and hands visible. The later images assume a more classical image of Mary. She stands *contrapposto*, with a crucifix on one hand while she points to it with the other. Scapulars appear to be hanging from the crucifix. In the final image, Mary holds the hands of Mélanie and Maximin and appears, in relation to them, to be over six-feet tall, assuming that the children are approximately four feet in height. She has a large sash of contrasting color tied about her waist, and the crucifix and scapulars hang over her breast. One bare foot is visible under the hem of her gown.

None of the images bears a date. One method for establishing the dates of the La Salette images is by analyzing the changes in the traditional dress. In the earlier artwork, it would be logical to assume, the children would see Mary in dress with which they were familiar. In fact, the more classical images are from older sources (holy cards probably printed before chromo-lithography became popular). Additional research is required to test this theory.

<sup>8</sup>John S. Kennedy, *Light on the Mountain: The Story of La Salette* (New York: McMullen Books, 1953), *passim*.

As in the times during which Catherine Labouré's vision occurred, peril continued for the Catholic Church in France. Secularism and anti-clericalism continued unabated. Mary's remarks about the wrath of her Son hardly resonate with the post-Vatican II Church, but they were solace to a Church whose existence was threatened.

### ***Lourdes, 1858: The Vision***

In February 1858, as Bernadette Soubirous was gathering wood, she saw something brilliantly white in a grotto; it seemed to be a woman. Bernadette continued to witness visions of the woman at the grotto through July of that year. The woman gave messages, asking for prayers and penance for the conversion of sinners. She also asked that a chapel be built in her honor. On February 25, a crowd watched as Bernadette scrambled to one side of the grotto and began to eat tufts of a local herb. Later, she dug in the ground until a spring appeared from which she drank. Subsequently, she explained that the woman had told her, "... go and drink from the fountain as there is a fountain within yourself, and eat the herb that is growing at its side." The next day the first miracle occurred, when a quarryman's sight was restored after he washed in the water. The spring continued to produce water which now flows into a nearby river.<sup>9</sup>

The woman had not revealed to Bernadette who she was. When Bernadette inquired, after Church officials had questioned her, the woman replied, "I am the Immaculate Conception." Given Bernadette's lack of schooling, the officials were amazed at this response and took it as a confirmation of the newly proclaimed doctrine of Mary's birth free from original sin.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Lourdes: Images***

Unlike her image from La Salette, Mary's image from Lourdes has remained relatively constant (*Fig. 5*). She appears in a

<sup>9</sup>Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 134-35.

<sup>10</sup>McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 134-35.

white veil and gown, with a blue sash. A rosary is draped over her right arm. Her face, hands and feet are the only visible parts of her body. Her face is one of placid contemplation, her eyes cast heavenward. Most frequently, she is shown with her hands folded in prayer. Alternately, her hands may be extended as in the image on the Miraculous Medal. Her stance is often erect, but may also be *contrapposto*. The image of Mary at Lourdes is that of the classical Madonna—devoid of sensuality, remote, passive, yet loving and accessible.

Difficulties with anti-clericalism and secularism, as well as strained relations between the French government and the Catholic Church, continued during the time of the apparitions at Lourdes. The documents that would later become the *Syllabus of Errors* had only recently been given by the Pope to the commission which had also drawn up the papal bull on the Immaculate Conception. The Church was formulating a condemnation of the rationalism that attacked the Church's authority in worldly matters.<sup>11</sup>

In North America, devotion to Mary under the title, "Our Lady of Lourdes" was fostered largely through the efforts of Father Alexis Granger, C.S.C., at the University of Notre Dame in *Ave Maria Magazine*. It was not so much Mary's image, but the distribution of water from the spring dug by Bernadette that drew many people to this devotion. Water from Lourdes was distributed to people throughout the United States, first through Fr. Granger and later through John McSorley, a New York importer. Many attributed miraculous cures to drinking the water or bathing in it.<sup>12</sup>

The image gradually made its appearance in American households through statues, prints and holy cards. Devotion to "Our Lady of Lourdes" fostered the building of numerous shrines that imitated the grotto where Mary appeared to Bernadette. Perhaps the most famous of these is the one at Notre Dame University (South Bend, Ind.). At a time when most people traveled rarely, these shrines brought the

<sup>11</sup>Pius IX, *Quanta cura*, December 8, 1864; Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*; McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 137.

<sup>12</sup>McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 142-52, *passim*.

experience of the sacred site to the people. Interest in Lourdes is supported today by numerous publications, like *Lourdes Magazine*, and promoted by travel agencies. Several tour operators limit their bookings exclusively to Lourdes pilgrimages.

### ***Fatima, 1917: The Visions***

As the First World War raged elsewhere in Europe, news of an apparition of Mary came from a remote region of Portugal. Again, it was three shepherd children—Lucia, Francisco and Jacinta do Santos—who witnessed the visions. They reported seeing a lady, brighter than the sun, in an evergreen tree, on May 13, 1917. Two of the children, Lucia and Jacinta, heard the lady tell them to visit the site on the thirteenth of each month between May and October, when she would reveal who she was and what she wanted of them.<sup>13</sup>

When a local official took the children into custody and interrogated them, the lady appeared to the children in nearby Valinhos promising that a great miracle would occur in October. After returning to Fatima in October, the crowd watching the children recounted that the sun appeared to tremble, rotate, and fall dancing over their heads before it returned to normal. The children said that the woman revealed herself to be "Our Lady of the Rosary." She called for the amendment of people's lives; she also gave the children secrets that were to be revealed later.<sup>14</sup>

A canonical investigation began in 1922 which lasted seven years. In 1930 the bishop of Leiria pronounced the apparitions worthy of devotion and authorized the cult.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Fatima: Images***

Jacinta and Francisco died shortly after the visions, but Lucia, now a contemplative nun, continues as a witness to the apparitions. It is from her descriptions that the image of "Our

<sup>13</sup>C. C. Martindale, *The Message of Fatima* (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1950), 31-32.

<sup>14</sup>Martindale, *Message*, Pt. 1, Chap. 5 and Pt. 2, Chap. 6.

<sup>15</sup>Martindale, *Message*, Pt. 2.

Lady of Fatima" has developed. Several well-known images, all following similar form, have become part of the cult.<sup>16</sup> She is clothed in white, wearing a floor-length veil and gown. Her hands carry a rosary and are either folded in prayer or reaching forward. Her face and feet are the only other visible parts of her body. What would be termed as the "Immaculate Heart of Mary" (a heart pierced by a sword and surrounded by thorns) appears prominently over her left side. Frequently, she also wears a large crown (Fig. 6).

A "Pilgrim Virgin" (the work of José Thedim) regularly travels around the world for use in Fatima devotions. It stands approximately four feet tall with the characteristics mentioned above—hands folded and wearing a crown (Fig. 7).

Two colossal statues of Our Lady of Fatima are also well known. Thomas McGlynn's, in white stone, is more than twice life-size. The Virgin's left hand is raised while her right hand points down. Her stance is slightly off-balance as though about to step forward. Her Immaculate Heart is prominent; she wears no crown. Sister Lucia was consulted throughout the sculpting of this statue which may explain why it differs significantly from McGlynn's other works (Fig. 8). This statue resides in front of the entrance to the Basilica of Fatima.<sup>17</sup>

The second statue, sometimes referred to as the "awesome Madonna," is a thirty-two-foot stainless steel representation by the sculptor Charles C. Parks; it stands outside Our Lady of Peace Church in Santa Clara, California. Although not specifically depicting Our Lady of Fatima, the statue's attributes and explanatory literature identify her with the devotion. She stands *contrapposto*, arms outstretched; an enlarged symbol of the Immaculate Heart is prominent on her chest. Her gown is floor-length; her long veil hangs nearly to the ground. The facial characteristics register concern and, perhaps, anger. Her shoulder-length hair is more prominent than in many veiled statues of the Virgin (Fig. 9).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Richard A. McAlister, *Thomas McGlynn: Priest and Sculptor* (Providence, R.I.: Providence College Press, 1981).

<sup>17</sup>McAlister, *Thomas McGlynn*.

<sup>18</sup>A *Family Fatima Peace Plan* (Santa Clara, Calif.: Our Lady of Peace Shrine).

McGlynn's and Parks' statues exhibit similarities that contrast to the other images discussed here. Both were intended for display outdoors which allowed their monumental size. Neither are colored; both feature the natural qualities of the materials from which they are made.

The images of Mary under the appellation of Our Lady of Fatima exhibit characteristics that reflect the concerns of their devotees. In all but Parks' statue, Mary's tearful face indicates pained endurance. She is apparently deeply hurt because of human behavior; that which was stated at La Salette is now visible in her countenance. She may be hurt, but her Son is angry and may unleash his wrath on a world which does not heed God's commands. As with all images discussed here, she is without distinct sensual features. Most of her body is concealed in her veil and gown. This may reflect a rejection of the blatant sensuality of the twentieth century. The crown that is so prominent on many images of Fatima can also be seen as a commentary on the age. Crowns are symbols of secular monarchies, many of which were toppled during World War I. Mary's crown is a symbol of spiritual authority.

As did nineteenth-century France, Portugal experienced a strong tide of anticlericalism and secularism during the time of the apparitions. In addition, the Industrial Revolution had begun to reach even remote areas of Europe like Cova da Iria (Fatima). Lifestyles that had changed little in centuries were fading in the face of technology. To many of the faithful, Mary's apparitions at Fatima became a rallying point for people shaken by the changes all around them which they were powerless to stop. She became an apocalyptic voice of church members who believed the world's behavior would be punished.<sup>19</sup>

In 1947, the Blue Army took up the cause of Fatima in the United States. Promulgation of the message of Fatima continues through the wide distribution of *Soul Magazine*, as well as numerous books and pamphlets.

<sup>19</sup>Cf., Antonio Borelli and John R. Spann, *Our Lady of Fatima: Prophecies of Tragedy or Hope for America and the World?* ([New Rochelle, N.Y.]: The America Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property, 1985).

### ***Medjugorje, 1981–: The Vision***

Once again, in 1981, youths from a country beset by strife reported visions of the Virgin Mary. This time they took place in Medjugorje, Yugoslavia (now Croatia), and again were met by opposition from the authorities. Originally, people gathered for the appearances on a rocky hill, but, after Communist officials became alarmed, they moved to the nearby Saint James Church.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast to the tone of Fatima and La Salette, the messages from Medjugorje are less alarming and more ecumenical. In addition to messages given to aid the children in their personal growth, there are messages intended for all humanity. Mary wants to convey that God exists and he is the fullness of life. To obtain and enjoy this fullness of life and peace, one must return to God. Mary calls all to strive for peace (in their homes and families), to pray (fifteen decades of the rosary each day), to commit themselves to God, to fast on bread and water each Wednesday and Friday. Finally, the messages call all to participate in daily mass and monthly confession.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Medjugorje: Images***

Although the visions are recent, one image from Medjugorje has emerged and become popular. It is claimed that the image is an accurate representation of what the children saw. Mary stands on a cloud, as though walking forward (*Fig. 10*); her hands are stretched forward as though ready to embrace. She wears a blue gown with a white transparent veil. Above her head is a halo of nine stars. Mary's face has classical features reminiscent of Botticelli's Venus de Milo. She is less distant or severe than in some other images and, although not directly visible, her human qualities seem more apparent. Nevertheless, she remains almost completely covered. Her head and hands are visible, but her unsashed gown reveals nothing of her figure.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup>Michael D. Pfeiffer, "The Medjugorje Story," *Medjugorje Magazine* 1 (Summer 1990): 5.

<sup>21</sup>Pfeiffer, "Medjugorje Story," 5.

<sup>22</sup>Janko Rubalo, "The Image of the Queen of Peace: Interview Reprinted from the M. J. R. Information Center (Du Page, Illinois)," *Medjugorje Magazine* 7 (Spring 1997): 46–48.

Medjugorje's historical context is similar to that of the other appearances. While Yugoslavia was officially tolerant to religion, hostility remained between the Church and State. The apparitions began at the height of the Cold War, proceeded through the collapse of Communism and continued through the break-up of Yugoslavia. Perhaps, reflecting the decline of hostilities, the messages from Medjugorje are less severe than those from earlier visions. Mary's image, in turn, has a softer, more-ingratiating cast.

### ***Guadalupe (Mexico, 1531): The Vision***

The apparition at Guadalupe and its image contrast in many ways with the later visions discussed above. It occurred in the sixteenth century, while the others took place relatively recently—in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Rather than taking place in Europe, this event took place in America, and the devotion spread from the New World to the rest of the world. Notwithstanding these differences, there are still many similarities, and an examination of Guadalupe provides a good opportunity to separate cultural influences from elements central to the vision and its imagery.

The first apparition took place northwest of Mexico City on December 9, 1531, to Juan Diego, who was of the indigenous culture. Mary instructed him to build a church on the site. During the second apparition, on December 12, Mary told Juan Diego to pick the flowers growing on the site and bring them to the bishop. He rolled the flowers into his cloak; when the bishop opened it, he saw an image of the Virgin imprinted there.<sup>23</sup>

Since the apparition occurred before the Council of Trent had provided norms for the investigation of such occurrences, authentication of Guadalupe came about in a spontaneous manner. Narratives exist from the early period, but the first printed documents appeared 100 years after the event. By that time, the devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe was firmly established.

<sup>23</sup>The Trappist Abbey of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Pecos, N.M., *Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Hope of America* (Pecos, N.M.: Trappist Abbey of Our Lady of Guadalupe, 1951).

The cult of Guadalupe spread wherever Spain colonized. It was brought to the Philippines in 1654 and carried to other parts of the world when the Jesuits were expelled from Spanish territories in 1767. An image of Guadalupe, claimed to have miraculous powers, is now in the Vatican.

The first church on the site (a small hermitage) was erected about 1533. Built on a boggy lake bed, the large baroque basilica, completed in 1709, began to sink into the ground. The present basilica, begun in 1964, replaced the older structure.

### ***Guadalupe: Images***

Since the image of Guadalupe has no human artist, it occupies a unique place among the visionary art discussed here (*Fig. 11*). One eighteenth-century image in the possession of the shrine at Guadalupe depicts God painting the image on the cloak while angels hold it.<sup>24</sup>

Mary is clothed in a white gown, topped by a blue veil covered with stars. Her gown is held together by a black sash indicating, according to local tradition, that she is pregnant. Her hands are folded in prayer. She stands in a mandorla, with golden rays emanating from her body, set *contrapposto* atop a crescent moon held up by an angel. The complexion, both of the angel and of Mary, is darker than that of most Europeans, denoting she is ethnically American. The image displays features related to standard iconographical canons, yet retains qualities of indigenous art (not uncommon during the generation following the Conquest).

Unlike the other visions, the part of Mary's message urging Juan Diego to have a church built has a significance which cannot be overestimated. This apparition had a strong influence in fusing the indigenous cultures with both Christianity and European mores. It ratified the Conquest and continues to play an important role in Mexico's self-understanding. The image is a strong part of popular culture wherever Mexicans live, and can be seen literally everywhere—decorating everything from public murals to body tattoos.

<sup>24</sup>Cf. *La Reina de las Americas: Works of Art from the Basilica of Guadalupe* (Chicago: Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, 1996), 18–50 *passim*.

### **An Analysis of the Images from Marian Apparitions**

All of the images discussed here represent Mary in her glorified state, that is, after her assumption into heaven. As mentioned above, the mandorla and halo are explicit attributes of paradise. Thus, Mary is not depicted within the context of her life on earth, as was the custom of Protestant artists during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.<sup>25</sup>

The crescent moon on which Mary stands in many of the apparitions has multiple meanings. It stands for changing forms or phenomena; for the passive, feminine; and, from the Middle Ages, for paradise.<sup>26</sup>

Mary's youthful appearance may be attributed to her portrayal in the glorified state. Her appearance remains relatively constant. She is tall, slender, fully covered. More often than not she is veiled or wears some other type of full head covering. Her bodily attributes are not emphasized. The face, which reflects traditional European canons of beauty (e.g., high cheek bones, small nose), generally is without expression of emotion.

One may object that these attributes defined a broadly held understanding of the characteristics of womanhood in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This does not hold up when images from apparitions are compared with other popular representations of Mary in the same period. In paintings of the Immaculate Conception by the Spanish painters Murillo or Joseph Ribera, Mary is portrayed as a regal personage surrounded by clouds and angels. These artists' renderings of the Virgin convey a stateliness and strength absent in the visionaries' representations.

Paul Gauguin's *Ia Orana* shows Mary as a Polynesian woman carrying her nude child on her shoulder. Other than their halos and angel attending them, there is no evidence that she is different from other mothers in the South Pacific. She is depicted in natural surroundings, has the physical attributes of Pacific Islanders and conveys a sense of strength without dominance. Once again, this is a sharp contemporary contrast with

<sup>25</sup>McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 26-27.

<sup>26</sup>J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. Jack Sage (New York: Philosophical Library, 1971), 66.

images from apparitions. Among the latter, the Guadalupe image alone acknowledges non-European attributes of beauty, by means of Mary's and the angel's dark complexion. Guadalupe (from three centuries earlier) represents a fusion of European and indigenous tastes.

Except for Guadalupe, pregnancy is not emphasized in the images from European apparitions. Guadalupe alone emphasizes this element of Mary's role in salvation history. The apparition images are a far cry from the nursing madonnas of the Middle Ages and may reflect a tendency to associate pregnancy with sin. This author vividly recalls the exclamation of an elderly European priest who objected with disgust at the portrayal of a pregnant Mary. His sentiment apparently reflected that of a number of other people viewing the image. The Christ Child is not visually present in any of the visionary images. Yet, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries other popular images (e.g., Our Lady of Mount Carmel) continued to follow a long tradition of portraying Mary with her Son.

In the apparition images of Mary, the absence of sensuality, of the Christ Child, and of her pregnancy may reflect a tendency to deny her humanity and to divinize her. This orientation emphasized the "privileges of Mary" and simultaneously diminished her role in salvation history. In terms of Church teachings, this approach reached its fullness in the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of Mary. In the period immediately preceding Vatican II, attention was directed to the Queenship of Mary. The appellations "Co-redemptrix" and "Mediatatrix of All Graces" also gained popularity during the same period.<sup>27</sup> (Support for the exaltation of Mary to the divinity came from an unexpected source. The psychologist, Carl Jung, commenting on the doctrine of the Assumption, stated that it was a sign of the ongoing revelation of God and corrected a tendency to see the Godhead in overly masculine terms.<sup>28</sup>)

<sup>27</sup>Johann G. Roten, "Popular Religion and Marian Images," *Marian Studies* 45 (1994): 73.

<sup>28</sup>Carl Jung, et al., *Man and His Symbols*, ed. Marie-Luise von Franz (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1964).

Another explanation for the absence of Christ in the apparition images is the difficulty in one image bearing the weight of a complex of symbols. In discussing the origins of the liturgical year, Nathan Mitchell argued that the early Church's feast of Sunday strained under the challenge of carrying the symbolism of the entire Paschal Mystery. Gradually, the feasts of Easter and Christmas, with their attendant seasons, developed so that the Christ-event could be celebrated in all its aspects. Similarly, it may be argued that no single image of Mary can carry the totality of her place in the mystery of God's relationship with the world. The apparitions emphasize her intercessory role, while other images display other aspects.<sup>29</sup>

Other symbols associated with Marian apparitions straddle the line between heavenly attributes and those associated with secular power. Mary stands on an orb or globe in many of the images. This is similar to the orb held by the Christ Child in many medieval depictions. Orbs in the Middle Ages were a symbol of the sovereignty of Christ and were part of the royal regalia of European kings and emperors.<sup>30</sup>

Mary regularly wears a crown, a symbol of secular authority and the bond of loyalty between sovereign and subjects. At once, the crown symbolizes the bond between Mary and the faithful and the vertical (hierarchical) relationship rather than a horizontal (communitarian) one. Appellations on the queenship of Mary also betrayed the strain between Church and State at the time of the apparitions. Mary's crown symbolized the sovereignty of spiritual authority over the temporal.

While an apparition is witnessed only by the seer(s), an image of the vision renders it a public event. The medium of painting or sculpture enables a wider audience to participate in the vision. This explains in part why images of visions are rarely considered great art. The artist who translates the vision into an illustrative rendering performs a role similar to

<sup>29</sup>Nathan Mitchell, *Cult and Controversy: The Worship of the Eucharist Outside Mass*, Studies in the Reformed Rites of the Catholic Church series, vol. 4 (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1982), 38-39.

<sup>30</sup>West, *Outward Signs*, 111.

that of a sketch artist, and the depiction of an apparition serves the function of narrative painting—before photography transformed it—to record the event. Artistic style differentiates art from illustration, but the imprint of the artist makes the rendering of a vision his or her interpretation of it rather than a direct experience of it. Thus, that which makes Murillo's paintings of the Immaculate Conception art—his artistic style and craftsmanship—distances the viewer from a spiritual experience of the event he recorded. McGlynn's sculpture of the apparition at Fatima, while closely directed by the visionary, Lucia, nevertheless bears the marks of his style and is thus slightly more removed from the event than a depiction where the artist's imprint is less visible. Painted plaster statues and saccharine holy cards may mediate the experience of the vision more immediately than great art can. Images of visions perform a discursive function, and the viewer supplies the expression.<sup>31</sup>

Because of their discursive function, images of visions become highly codified and, while evolving slightly over time, they generally change very little. This aids in denoting which apparition is portrayed and allows the viewer to enter a mystical relationship with any image of the vision. Elements that are subject to change are dress, which tends to move toward classical images of Mary with long veil and gown, and facial features that, again, move from ethnic characteristics to classical canons of beauty. Later images of Guadalupe and Lourdes, in particular, often follow this trend.<sup>32</sup>

A second type of image, closely associated with a direct image of the vision, is one in which the visionary is depicted experiencing the vision (*Fig. 12*). These images record the event of the vision so that the viewer witnesses the event of the vision and participates in it (somewhat less directly). They

<sup>31</sup>Cf. Suzanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 50–52.

<sup>32</sup>Pierre Descouvemont discusses this process in portrayals of Theresa of Lisieux. The same pattern can be seen in Marian images: P. Descouvemont and Helmuth Nils Loose, *Sainte Thérèse de Lisieux: La vie en images* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1995), 463–68.

serve to edify the viewer, by identifying him or her with the visionary, rather than providing a direct experience.

The role of apparition imagery has undergone development during the second half of the twentieth century. In the 1950s, the image of Mary's Queenship and her privileged role in creation dominated. However, in the 1960s, at Vatican II, the ancient image of Mary's relation to the Church once again surfaced. In the 1970s and 80s, Popes Paul VI and John Paul II concentrated on Mary's person. She was presented as a strong and liberating woman. Still more recently, the Queen of Heaven imagery has re-emerged, especially in "traditionalist" circles.<sup>33</sup>

This development has had its effect on the place apparition imagery has played in the spiritual life of the Catholic faithful. Prior to the Second Vatican Council, numerous images of Mary could be found throughout many churches. When Mary's role as model of the Church gained favor simultaneously with reforms in the liturgy, the Church refocused the laity's attention on the eucharistic celebration and homage to images of Mary within churches declined. Devotions to Marian apparitions were no longer to be exercised during liturgy. Instead, the faithful were encouraged to participate in the liturgy itself.<sup>34</sup> The "awesome Madonna" in Santa Clara, California, is an example of the reassertion of the devotional image of Mary accompanied by the "traditionalist revival."

### **Apparition Images and the Church**

The images from apparitions occupy a significant place in popular Catholicism. They have provided an affective counterpoint to the discursive nature of Catholic theology. While the Church's central rituals are cerebral, devotions

<sup>33</sup>Roten, "Popular Religion," 73-74.

<sup>34</sup>*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 125; *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 278; *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* (U.S. Bishops Committee on the Liturgy, 1978), 98-99.

to Mary and the saints personalize faith and give the devotee an emotive means of expressing belief. The images proceeding from apparitions mediate belief analogically rather than conceptually. Often the messages from apparitions have lent support for Church teachings and causes. Both the visions of Catherine Labouré and Bernadette Soubirous prepared and strengthened the Church's teaching on the Immaculate Conception. Although the message linked with an apparition is of supernatural origin, participation in the associated devotion gives its followers a direct stake in its expression.

Each of the visions discussed here have furthered and confirmed the Church's mission. Guadalupe helped integrate Mexico's indigenous population during the Conquest, and each of the other appearances have aided popular support against governments hostile to the Church. La Salette provided a bulwark against secularism; Fatima has played a similar role in the Church's struggle against communism. More recently these same images have come to represent various factions within the Church. Guadalupe emblemizes the cares and concerns of Mexican Catholics. For many, Fatima has come to represent those members of the Church unhappy with the reforms of the Second Vatican Council and the changes of modern lifestyle.

In many ways, images of apparitions are similar to "sacramentals," which continue and make an event present in response to the faith of the individual. They do not lock the event into a past contextual scene, as do paintings of the lives of Mary and the saints. Rather, they present an image of Mary never bound by the restraints of an earthly life. These images continue and extend the message of the apparitions.

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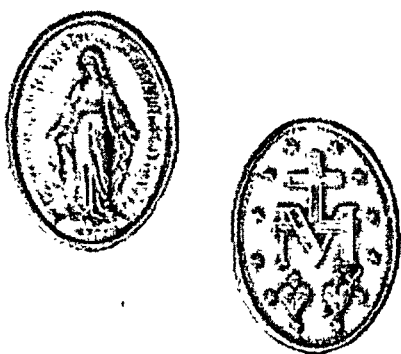


Fig. 1. Miraculous Medal



Fig. 2. Our Lady of La Salette  
(seated, weeping, wearing traditional headdress of the time)



Fig. 3. Our Lady of La Salette  
(standing in similar dress)



Fig. 4. Our Lady of La Salette  
(standing, unveiled)



Fig. 5. Our Lady of Lourdes Grotto



Fig. 5a. Our Lady of Lourdes at the entrance to the esplanade



Fig. 6. Our Lady of Fatima (traditional image, with crown)



Fig. 8. Our Lady of Fatima: Statue at entrance of Basilica of Fatima (sculpted by Thomas McGlynn, O.P.)



Fig. 7. Our Lady of Fatima: The Pilgrim Virgin Statue (by José Thedim)



Fig. 9. Our Lady of Peace. Our Lady of Peace Church, Santa Clara, California (sculpture in stainless steel, by Charles C. Parks)



Fig. 11. Our Lady of Guadalupe

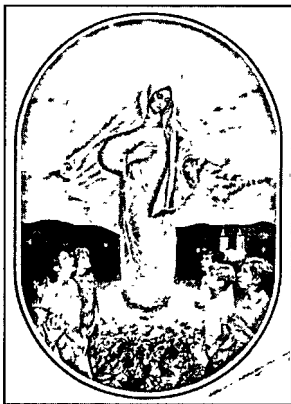


Fig. 10. Our Lady of Medjugorje



Fig. 12. Visionaries of Medjugorje experiencing a vision