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Diana George and Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori

Holy Cards/Immaginette: The Extraordinary Literacy of Vernacular Religion

Like other seemingly ordinary materials (cookbooks, street art, scrapbooks, etc.) the subject of our investigation—holy cards or (in Italian) *immaginette*—often function as rich repositories of personal and cultural memory as well as indicators of popular literacy practices. But to relegate them to the category of ephemera, as is customary with materials of this sort, diverts attention from their significant cultural and pedagogical value. In our attempt to foreground the complex nature and function of these artifacts, we have found much of the scholarship on vernacular or material religion and everyday culture particularly helpful. In their attention to what popular culture scholar David Morgan has called “objects that have not mattered in most historical accounts,” these areas of study have lent support to our “understanding of the[ir] power and meaning” (xi). Yet, it is literacy studies that has enabled us to cast light on and to articulate their intricate, extraordinary pedagogical workings. At the same time, these humble artifacts have enabled us to critically re-approach and put pressure on some of the most commonplace articulations of literacy. Our goal then is to demonstrate that these seemingly “ordinary objects” are significant cultural and historical signifiers and that as such they can contribute to a fuller understanding of the common literacy practices of vernacular religion.

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Holy cards: small printed cards containing pious sentiments or depicting popular religious figures. Widely distributed after the advent of printing, the cards are used as mementos of religious events, to foster a particular devotion, or as a means of remembrance, e.g., for a deceased person. The subject matter is diverse but some tend toward the sentimental.

—Richard P. McBrien, general editor, *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*

Our understanding of literacy practices and our appreciation of the texts that engender and sustain them have, in the past twenty-five years, extended far beyond the classroom. Literacy has been tied to parents' storytelling, workplace rules, and street games, to women's clubs and Bible study groups (see, for example, Heath; Cintron; Gere; Brandt; Daniell). Its operations have been traced through the intelligent and inventive uses of "texts" as varied as sale catalogs and work manuals, cereal boxes and street signs, recipes, prayer books, and ex-votos (Salvatori). Literacy studies in this vein have directed scholars' attention both to an expanded notion of what constitutes a text (and its inherent significance) and to a reconsideration of what comprises an archive (see, for example, Carr, Carr, and Schultz). The subject of our investigation here—holy cards or, in Italian, *immaginette* (also called *santini*)¹—bears out the significance of this shift, for just as such seemingly ephemeral materials as cookbooks, street art, or scrapbooks reveal the workings of everyday literacy practices (see Trimbur), so too does the material culture of religion and religious practice.

Holy cards/*immaginette* are small, mass-produced, wallet-sized cards that have been, and still are, a significant marker of "growing up Catholic." In many respects they represent, and have been used as, the people's Lives of the Saints, the child's first lesson in orthodoxy and everyday manners, art for the masses, a modern version of the Bible of the illiterate. Despite the adjective "holy" and although they are often treated by the devout as placeholders for the sacred, holy cards are not really sacred objects. They are, instead, aids to worship, reminders of the sacraments and of the model lives of saints and other hallowed figures. More than that, as we show here, they can be understood and often function as rich and cherished repositories of personal and cultural memory—both visual and verbal (Figure 1).

In our attempt to foreground the complex nature and function of these artifacts, we have found much of the scholarship on vernacular or material religion and everyday culture particularly helpful. In their attention to what



Fig. 1. Typical assortment of holy cards still available in religious goods stores

popular culture scholar David Morgan has called “objects that have not mattered in most historical accounts,” these areas of study have lent support to our “understanding of the[ir] power and meaning” (xi). Yet, it is literacy studies that has enabled us to cast light on these artifacts and to articulate their intricate, extraordinary pedagogical workings. At the same time, these humble artifacts have enabled us to critically re-approach and put pressure on some of the most commonplace articulations of literacy.

Our goal then is to demonstrate that these seemingly “ordinary objects” are significant cultural and historical signifiers and that as such they can contribute to a fuller understanding of the common literacy practices of vernacular religion. Though we examine the role of holy cards in general as tools of popular piety and cultural literacy, we limit our visual analysis to holy cards/immaginettes of Mary, “the Perfect Mother,” specifically to the teaching function they have been (and are) as-

signed, and to the power and meaning they carry. What is it, we ask, about these particular “teaching aids” that has placed them among the kinds of articles of faith Vatican II has tried to control or, at the very least, downplay while the cards continue to be mass-produced and sold through religious goods stores, cathedral shops, and religious communities? What do these small objects promote, signify, or teach that is unsettling to the Church? What is the Church trying to control and how has that control been historically exercised? Ours are questions not isolated in religion or unrelated to popular literacy practice. They foreground a tension between hierarchy or dogma and the people’s appropriation and use of objects meant to guide them.

As we embarked on this project, the two of us began with memories from school and family and with artifacts—the holy cards and immaginettes we had

held cautiously, even secretly, for many years. The first difficulty we encountered when we began to extend our personal exchanges into a scholarly investigation was how and where to locate primary materials. As is the case with other materials of this sort, holy cards/immaginette are archived in surprising places. Some are, of course, housed in libraries like Boston College's John J. Burns Library, the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley—a collection made up exclusively from cards found between the pages of donated books—or DePaul's Vincentia Collection; and in private collections like those of Brent Devitt, Gian Piero Stradella, and Father Eugene Carrella (see, for example, *Dipasqua*; Bollig; Petruzzelli), which bulge with tens of thousands of holy cards of all types. But they are also collected more informally—in shoeboxes, prayer books, and novels; in drawers and long-neglected pockets and purses. Over time, and as we asked friends, relatives, colleagues, and acquaintances for their memories of immaginette or holy cards, the most beautiful, precious, and odd things have come our way—from a green scapular to contemporary cards depicting Jesus as a sports hero, to rare, early versions of holy cards, to more traditional prayer and memorial cards from family, friends, colleagues, and elementary school teachers.² In this context, the question of how to read them, of how people from different educational and religious contexts engage and evaluate them, became more pressing. We begin, then, with a consideration of holy cards/immaginette as an expression of what is considered the least intellectual aspect of Catholic religion—the physical nature of faith and the many traditions and issues their materiality raises for institutional religion.

Holy Cards/Immaginette: "Some Tend toward the Sentimental"

Popular religiosity, of course, certainly has its limits. It is often subject to penetration by many distortions of religion and even superstitions. It frequently remains at the level of forms of worship not involving a true acceptance by faith. It can even lead to the creation of sects and endanger the true ecclesial community.

But if it is well oriented, above all by a pedagogy of evangelization, it is rich in values.

— Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi* (December 8, 1975)

Devotions (also called popular devotions, because of their appeal to the general populace of the Church) are forms of affective prayer. They appeal to religious feelings. The cultivation of popular devotions as a distinct form of prayer has its origins in

the Counter-Reformation as a response to the spiritual needs of people who did not understand or feel fully at home in the Church's increasingly elaborate and complex liturgical celebrations.

—Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism*

“Popular religiosity . . . has its limits,” Paul VI declared in a 1975 papal encyclical, remembered today primarily for its role in recovering the importance of popular piety in the Church’s social justice mission. Not surprisingly, however, in his very emphasis on the role of popular piety in the people’s lives, the pope explicitly suggests that without the guiding hand of the Church, such practices can lead to superstition and “deformation of faith.” Juxtaposed, the epigraphs above convey remarkably different understandings of the educational value of vernacular religion. More to the point for our investigation, they provide insight into the relation between those understandings with their constructions of “popular piety” and the noncritical, nonreflexive literacy practices that it presumably fosters and that sustain it.

Robert Orsi, whose work informs our own, lists holy cards among the many devotional objects Catholics use “as points of encounter between humans . . . and between humans and sacred figures.” He defines them as “media of presence . . . used to act upon the world, upon others, and upon oneself” (*Between* 49). Indeed, both as “points of encounter” and “media of presence” and in their individual construction of the sacred, holy cards have been endowed with “extraordinary power” (as, for example, when small pieces of them have been ingested as if in self-administered communion or healing aid, but also, as we shall see, as holders of memory and concrete expressions of absence)³ and have blurred hierarchies (as, for example, when people address saints too informally and even scold them for not listening) in ways that evade or circumvent the control of the Church. From this perspective, what the Church may categorize as “deformations and superstitions” in need of harnessing, or forms of prayer signifying insufficient understanding of the Church’s complex liturgy, the people experience and practice as ways of adjusting to and containing otherwise unfathomable mysteries of faith.

Bringing Orsi’s definition of vernacular/material religion to bear on the words of Pope Paul VI reveals the possibility that the pope’s real concern might have been not so much the limits of vernacular faith to carry out the lessons of the Church, as the limits of the Church to control how people understand and live their religion. In that way, the pope’s words actually serve to acknowledge

the power of vernacular faith. By contrast, both the encyclopedia's definition of holy cards that begins this article and McBrien's definition of "popular devotion" that opens this section reduce these objects to the categories of the affective and the sentimental—categories that high-brow religion and culture construct as intellectually lacking. By way of foiling such official dismissals, we offer two vignettes and, further along in the text, two narratives (Intermezzo I and II).

A Vignette

In his book-length examination of popular religion (*Between Heaven and Earth*) Orsi recounts the following. While at dinner at a friend's place, he was asked about his work by a prominent liturgist who had been deeply involved in the project of Second Vatican Council:

I started to tell him about St. Jude, the founding of the shrine in 1929, and about the feelings that people, especially women, had toward the Saint, the way they treated images and statues of him, taking him into their beds, kissing him, punishing him when he did not . . . until slowly I became aware that he was becoming very agitated, turning this way and that in his chair, splashing wine from the glass in his hand onto the table cloth and onto his pants. Suddenly he pushed himself back from the table and said loudly and furiously as he got to his feet something along the lines of 'You are trying to bring back everything we worked so hard to do away with.' Then he walked out. (*Between* 152)

A Second Vignette

When we decided to write about *immaginette*, I (Mariolina) thought it would be appropriate and useful for me to rely on my pastor's help. I expected that, as a priest born and raised in Ireland, he would lend an ear to my lamentations and queries about the relative absence in U.S. culture of some of the Catholic devotional practices and rituals that had cast a spell on me as a child. I spoke to him about the hold that *immaginette* have had on me since my childhood as graspable representations of the sacred, as means of connection between humans—relatives, friends, people in need⁴—and between humans and the divine.⁵ And I spoke about my devotional habits: seldom praying to God, more often relying for help on Mary and a rich panoply of saints, and "reading" *immaginette* prayers rather than prayer books. I was waiting for him to join in with his own reminiscences. He did not. His friendly countenance stiffened a bit. He said he did not know much about holy cards—they had not been part

of his Irish childhood and U.S. adult experience and education. And he warned me that in my devotion to saints, I was risking “idolatry and heresy.”

I was taken aback by his reaction. A year or so later, reading Orsi’s work, especially the episode about his encounter with the liturgist, I began to understand how my pastor’s comment categorized me in much the same way that Father McBrien categorizes popular devotions and their use(r)s.

The unnamed prominent liturgist of Orsi’s story, Catholic scholar McBrien, Mariolina’s pastor, and Pope Paul VI—each one betrays a perspective on popular devotions laden with considerable class and intellectual bias. That barely veiled condescension to forms of popular piety makes it possible for the institution not to acknowledge popular devotions as effective teaching and learning strategies, strategies by which the devout—across cultural, class, and gender lines—manage to interpret and to transform old and new demands of Catholic faith, and to transmit them in ways that do not contradict how they understand the nature and function of religion.⁶ This failure to understand has serious implications for a thorough assessment of holy cards as valuable pedagogical, personal, cultural, and historical texts. Our goal, then, is to foreground how ecclesial dismissals and reorientations of popular devotions (i.e., that of Pope Paul VI) can ultimately result in doing away with the history, the culture, and the literacy practices of the people who lived, and live, through and by these devotions.

In the remaining discussion, we strategically and purposefully move away from a deficit understanding of holy cards/immagnette. What we hope to demonstrate is that in this case, as in the case of everyday literacy practices that are a priori judged as approximate, incomplete, or aberrant (as, say, in some students’ attempts to come to terms with the abstract demands of formal education), shifting our attention from what the practices fail to accomplish to what they are trying to accomplish reveals their power, meaningfulness, and ability to expose the interestedness of discriminatory judgments that place them at the margins of elite culture.

Holy Cards: Traces of History

Holy cards have a long and rich history. Their antecedents have been traced back to parts of Europe in the Middle Ages and have been linked to images of the Virgin Mary and saints commissioned by the rich and the powerful for their own or others’ devotional use (Van Westerhout). With the advent of print-

ing, and later of lithography, these “high-brow” objects of devotion, reproduced in a much smaller format and more affordable medium, became accessible to the masses.

From the outset, then, holy cards/*immagnette* were meant as a kind of portable reminder of the Church. A creative scaling down of material objects and of faith otherwise out of reach, literally and materially, *immagnette/santini* brought images of the divine within the visual and actual grasp of the poor.⁷ Securely tucked away in a pocket, or pinned to the folds of clothing, they could be retrieved in moments of anguish or need to be looked at, touched, perhaps kissed, and often spoken to. During the 1700s and 1800s, as the middle and merchant classes increased in numbers, the cards reflected that changing economic demographic. For those rising in wealth and status, elaborate lace versions of *immagnette*, *canivets*, very similar to Victorian valentines, began to circulate alongside humbler and simpler versions in Europe, particularly in France and subsequently in Italy. Carefully crafted, expensive versions of *immagnette* were exchanged as gifts and mementos of important religious occasions (Figure 2). When left blank, and in the hands of literate people, the *verso* (back side) of these artifacts became the site of “epistolary” exchanges between teachers and students, between parents and children, and between friends. These exchanges alone provide intriguing records of, thus far, scarcely examined literacy practices.

In American Catholic schools, where they were introduced by nuns who came from Europe or, as Sister Mary Benedict (now Rosemary Buhr) reminded us in an interview, by American nuns whose orders originated in Europe, holy cards were often used as ways of “teaching with pictures.” She reported using the cards as visual aids—walking the class through the pictures on the cards and noting the lessons made possible by them—to teach children how to act toward others, to teach the proper posture in prayer, to exemplify a life of devotion. One U.S. collection of cards that the two of us came across traces a child’s relationship with her teachers, nuns (based on evidence in the cards, very likely Sisters of the Most Precious Blood) who presented signed cards to a Virginia Hoch (Figure 3).

They were found in an auction box late in the 1990s, saved for sixty years or more perhaps as school mementos, perhaps as family history, perhaps as a treasured church item. We cannot know. In terms of everyday literacy, however, we can infer that these cards, these objects of devotion, were used to instill and to enact a caring model of respect, of responsibility, of gentleness, and



Fig. 2. Elaborate Italian imaginetta



Fig. 3. Top right: "For washing ink bottles, June 8, 1936. Sr. Rosalie." Bottom right: "Happy Birthday To Dear Virginia. Sister M. Rosamond."

of motherhood through the relationships of the Madonna to the Christ Child depicted on them. As a gift "for washing ink bottles" or for winning spelling bees or even for remembering birthdays, the cards also take on the personal. These are no longer generic holy cards. They are now gifts, rewards, mementos.

Intermezzo I: Diana

As a child, I believed quite firmly in the people and events portrayed on these cards. When, as a consequence of Vatican II reforms, Saint Philomena—the name saint of my local parish—was dropped from the liturgical calendar, I argued staunchly with classmates from Saint Anthony's that the cardinals were wrong. I knew Saint Philomena was real. I had her picture.

Of course, what I had was a holy card.

It was that childhood memory that persuaded me to contact teachers and classmates from Saint Anthony's in High Ridge, Missouri. I had never lost track of Esther Luaders (now Esther Brewer). I assumed Sister Mary Silveria Fricke, my first-grade teacher, was long gone, but I found her just retired at more than eighty years of age. Sister Mary Benedict (Rosemary Buhr), my second-grade teacher, was more than seventy, but like Sister Silveria, she was filled with memories that dated back to 1954 when I began first grade. Both could name my classmates and tell me what I wanted to know: When were we given holy cards? How did the sisters use them in the classroom? Why were they special—impossible to throw away but very easy to lose?

My teachers' memories led me to classmates I had not heard from in forty years. Linda Carter sent cards given to her and signed by Sisters Silveria and Benedict. Patty Hunt found a stash of cards dating back to 1935 and given to what must have been a very young Virginia Hoch "for washing ink bottles." Joan Gabris wrote her relatives and forwarded this message from an aunt:

I can tell you that I just loved holy cards. We received them as awards in school. I used to win a lot of them in spelling bee contests. I really prized them. We also had a religious goods store [in St. Louis] up on Merrimack Street (about 5 blocks from my home). When I had a little money of my own I would walk up there and buy some. They were mostly a penny each, but some really special ones were 3 cents and 5 cents each.

Most of them were of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. There were also some of saints. The ones of saints were to help us remember what good lives they led and how they set an example for us to follow. We would learn about the lives of a lot of saints in school. My favorite was St. Theresa and St. Bernadette. I think they [the cards] were so attractive because they were printed up in Italy. Their inks and drawings were so unique. You never saw pictures printed in the USA that pretty. When Mom and I went to Italy I saw a lot of that type of artwork still existing over there. I saved all of my holy cards in my prayer book. I have it packed away somewhere, if you still need some, I will try to get some for you. Let me know.

The child who takes the holy card image as evidence of history is pure naïveté. We expect that of small children and eventually disabuse them of their error. It is the adult looking back on childhood interactions with these cards that interests us here. Joan's aunt does recall the pedagogical reason for using holy cards in her classes, "to help us remember what good lives [the saints] led and how they set an example for us to follow." She does not dismiss this function but indicates her own love for them as school prizes and inexpensive art. The aesthetic and tactile clearly were the real draw here with "inks and drawings

. . . so unique. You never saw pictures printed in the USA that pretty." Like many before and after her, she saved her cards in prayer books and packed away—not merely as lessons in right living, but as treasures, things of rare beauty.

Holy cards often function in this way, as encounters with memory and place, with history and sentiment.

Intermezzo II: Mariolina

The phone rings. It's early morning. "*E' bene che tu venga.*" . . . My sister's voice is heavy with sorrow. And concern. She knows my worry has always been I might not be able to say good-bye.

Next day I fly to Italy. My brother, my sister, and our family doctor say my mother has been waiting for me and knows I have arrived. They say she smiled at me—before she stopped breathing. I believe them. I want to believe them. I spend the night by her bed, watching her, talking to her . . .

On the nightstand, clear now of medicines, a family picture and a prayer book. I look at the photo. It soothes me to think that wherever she is now she can see and be close again to my oldest brother and my father. I leaf through the prayer book. Several *immaginette* mark oft-read pages. I recognize them. Local saints—Madonna Incoronata, Madonna dei Sette Veli, San Michele Archangelo, San Gerardo Majella. We had gone to their sanctuaries on pilgrimage, year after year, to pray for my brother's safe return from the war. Among these familiar *immaginette*, one I had never seen before: a *Pieta*-like figure, captioned "A Prayer for the Departed." I take it back with me to the States, with the prayer book and the other *immaginette* it contains (Figure 4).

Thirty years later, wherever I am, I begin my daily prayers by holding this *immaginetta* and reading the prayer that accompanies it, *Per Tutti I Defunti* (For all Departed Souls). I still hold onto the belief that opening that prayer book was not accidental. That in fact, my mother was sending me a signal: she was asking me to pray for her, as she had prayed for others, especially for "mio figlio," her firstborn, killed at twenty-one, at the end of WWII. I didn't know she had been reading this prayer. I didn't know she had edited the text of the prayer the way she did. As I hold this *immaginetta*, every morning, I think of her hand holding it, and I feel her presence . . . And it is through the feel for my mother's pain, for my mother's sorrow, which I revisit daily, that I think I can begin to know the intensity of Mary's pain.



Fig.4. Per Tutti I Defunti

The Perfect Mother: Lessons in/of the Visual

What simple people could not grasp through reading the scriptures could be learned by means of contemplating pictures.
—Synod of Arras, 1025 (qtd. in Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading*)

Reviews of *Holy Cards: Picturing Prayers*, a 2005 exhibit at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington, D.C., aptly point to a resurgence of interest in holy cards and, in particular, the images that appear on them. One reviewer notes that until recently, such an exhibit would have been “unthinkable. To art historians, the term ‘holy card’ evokes mass-produced kitsch—sentimental objects of scarce artistic value.” The reviewer goes on to argue (if somewhat condescendingly) that as “folk art,” these objects have “considerable aesthetic charm” that is “long overdue for appreciation” (Hammerman). This reviewer and others reclaim the historic and cultural importance of the cards and point to the upsurge of fascination leading collectors to pay as much as \$1200 for items that were given as gifts or sold for as little as a penny each. In its press release for the exhibit, the Cultural Center argues, “Because they are everyday objects, holy cards are an example of a folk art that helps expand the spiritual lives of those who cherish them.” As “folk art” the cards are an appropriate subject for exhibit, and certainly that is why many collectors keep them and others exhibit them.



Fig. 5. Roberto Ferruzzi's nineteenth-century painting sometimes called *The Wayside Madonna*

Our own interest in holy cards has less to do with their value as folk art—though we appreciate that art—than questions we have yet to see addressed. That is, we ask what is actually conveyed or, as the Church would have it, *taught* through the images on these cards? In essence what is their pedagogical function? What might account for what seems to be the Church's investment in controlling how these images are used and received?

In our attempt to address these questions, we begin with lessons the Church surely (and, for better or worse) meant to teach Catholic women about at least one extremely popular and certainly ancient representation—the Madonna and Child—whose image on holy cards/immaginettes ranges in style from reproductions of great paintings like those of Raphael to the popular idea/ideal of Mother and Child (seen here in the Roberto Ferruzzi painting—a perennial favorite for

holy cards, Figure 5) to what might be called a 1950s U.S. greeting card style.⁸

Holy cards were in the past, as they continue to be today, what Helen Waddy Lepovitz describes as part of a world Catholics experienced as “peopled with willing helpers” in the guise of painted windows, shrines, and images of saints, the Blessed Mother, and other intercessors ceaselessly “working to support any supplicant who might turn to them for assistance” (116). The tradition Lepovitz writes of dates back at least to the Middle Ages and continues forward into the nineteenth (and, we would add, much of the twentieth) century.

Many of the Catholics who turned to these images could not read or write, but through church art of all sorts, they knew of the existence of these “helpers,” these intermediaries to God. Holy cards/immaginettes were one type of these “images of faith,” to borrow Lepovitz’s title, that anyone could own and look at—reading the image if not the prayer—any time they needed to call upon angels, saints, or the Holy Mother for assistance. What Lepovitz finds in her study of the world of Catholic imagery is the extent to which Catholics turned to the image—whether statue, painting, or story window—as a teach-

ing aid and as assurance that these heavenly helpers were real, that they populated a world that could be understood through faith, if not through acts of formal literacy. This was a world in which, because so many could not read or write, the clergy were the official intermediaries between the people and their access to God. For the laity to turn directly to saints and the Blessed Mother as intermediaries through their uses of these images might be interpreted as one “end around” those clergy. Holy cards, then, served as the portable expression of a kind of “direct line” to the divine.

As we turn our attention to representations of the Madonna and Child, especially as that representation appears on holy cards, it is important to remember that lessons on the life of Mary and Marian devotions are core knowledge for many generations of Catholics—so much so that canon law, the many iterations of the catechism, and popes throughout history have all felt it necessary to address the pedagogical role of Mary. We begin here, then, with lessons of the Church on who the Madonna is and on what the Church seems to hope she should teach—how she should be read, interpreted, and emulated.

Marian scholar Jaroslav Pelikan has written that Catholics’ notion of who Mary is has less to do with scriptural evidence (and we would add with Church teaching) than with “what ‘through the centuries’ she has been experienced and understood to be” (7). For the Church, Mary is the model of chastity, forbearance, deference, and faithfulness (“Be it done unto me according to Thy will”; Luke 1:38). For many Catholics, however, she has often been something more—the very real human embodiment of the loving mother who watched her son be executed by the state and now has his ear in matters of importance. As such, she extends the mother’s love, strength, and lessons, to all children, including especially to the poor and the oppressed.

As Jeanette Rodriguez explains in her ethnographic investigation of Mexican American women’s devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe, belief—belief in Mary’s virginity or in apparitions of her or in any myth attributed to her—makes little difference to many of her devotees. Instead, the women Rodriguez interviewed called the Madonna “caring” and “unselfish.” Above and beyond that, however, Our Lady “is someone who can speak to God for me,” as one informant said (107). For these women, there was clearly no need of ecclesiastical intervention for them to understand this mother of all mothers. They addressed Guadalupe as a mother, as an intercessor, and as a survivor. As one tells Rodriguez: “She has more leverage. . . . When you talk to Mary to talk to God, that’s his Mother and he gives in to her, you know. He has that love for her when she asks him for something, that he’ll bend and he’ll give in” (122–23).

The same way of relating to the Virgin has been reported by other scholars working in this tradition, in particular Orsi, who examined Italian American devotions to the Madonna of 115th Street in New York's Italian Harlem. For the informants in his study—and especially for the women—the Madonna played (again) the role of protective mother and powerful intercessor. She gave favors in exchange for promises and sacrifices. Orsi writes:

The Madonna to whom these women were so attached was not a distant, asexual figure, but a woman like themselves who had suffered for and with her child. Her power was located precisely in those areas where the power of Italian women, in all its complexity was located: the *domus*. Like Italian women, the Madonna was expected to hold families together. She was also asked to forgive and to protect, suggesting a complex and considerable power—and one that could be wielded capriciously. (*Madonna* 205–6)

This power is, as well, that of Our Lady of Lourdes, Our Lady of Fatima, of the many holy sites, crowned statues, and venerated paintings that are located throughout the world. It has been the function of holy cards and *immagiette* to make available those images to the devout, in essence to offer the Virgin's presence in the cards. It is, however, the mother—the Madonna and Child (the Lady with Child)—tender, loving, sorrowful, strong, wise, comforting, protective, accessible—who has become a visual type recognizable both within and beyond religious contexts. This is a type that begins with but extends beyond the sacred in its insistence on Mary's humanity. It is to this type we turn our attention. As Orsi explains,

Encounters with images of the Virgin are encounters with presence and they are characterized by the whole range of emotion and behavior that is possible when persons are present to each other in one place. So whatever artists, patrons, and curators intend—and I recognize they intend many things, including, in some cases, devotion—Mary is there [is present] in representations of her. ("Many Names" 5)

Holy cards are meant to be both devotional aid and moving representation. They teach devotion through representation and recognition. What, then, is the lesson in this presence of Madonna and Child, and how is it conveyed visually? Take, for example, the following pair of secular images that have often been referred to as Madonna-and-Child types (Figure 6). In its subject, composition, and visual gesture we recognize the type often called "Madonna" — the mother and child; child resting on arm or lap; the two touching each other,

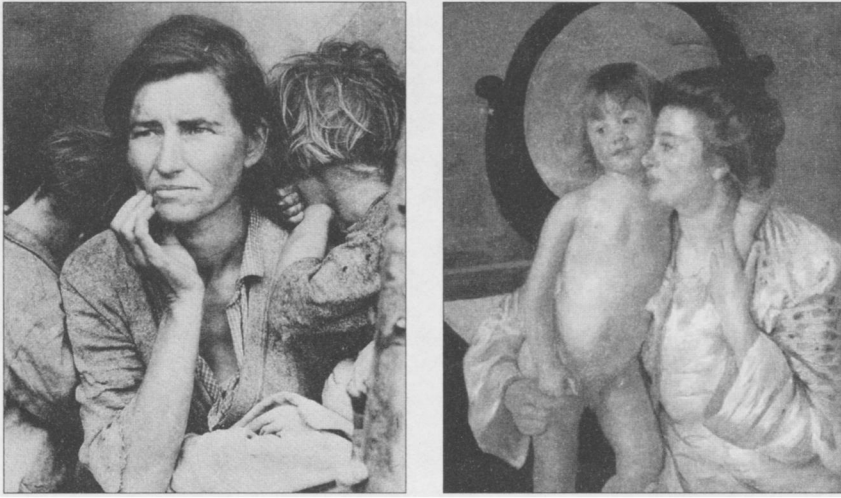


Fig. 6. Two immaginette depicting the Madonna and Child. Left: Photo of Florence Thompson by Dorothea Lange (Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, No. LC-USF34-9058-C). Right: *Mother and Child, Oval Mirror*, 1899 by Mary Cassatt (used with permission of the Metropolitan Museum of Art).

sometimes absorbed in the circle of maternal affection, often one or the other making visual contact outside the frame, a gesture that allows viewers to see into a private world and not be seen. We are observers, not participants in this composition. The mother's hand that touches the child's fingers or caresses a foot; the child pulling at the mother's bodice, clutching her veil, cupping her face.

These are visual expressions of the Madonna and Child that bring the sacred into the secular and move the secular into the sacred. Dorothea Lange's photograph of Florence Thompson has often been called *Migrant Madonna*. Her left hand, barely visible, reaches out to balance herself and her child against a support in the foreground; her expression of concern looks forward to the sorrowful Madonna. Mary Cassatt, who said she took her inspiration from Coreggio's depictions of the Madonna and Child, even includes a kind of halo in the mirror frame of the painting here. But it is in the gesture—the mother's hand encircling the toddler's fingers—that this image becomes one of intimacy and affection.⁹ This is the same visual move that many of the artists in holy card representations make as well. More to the point, as the religious rep-

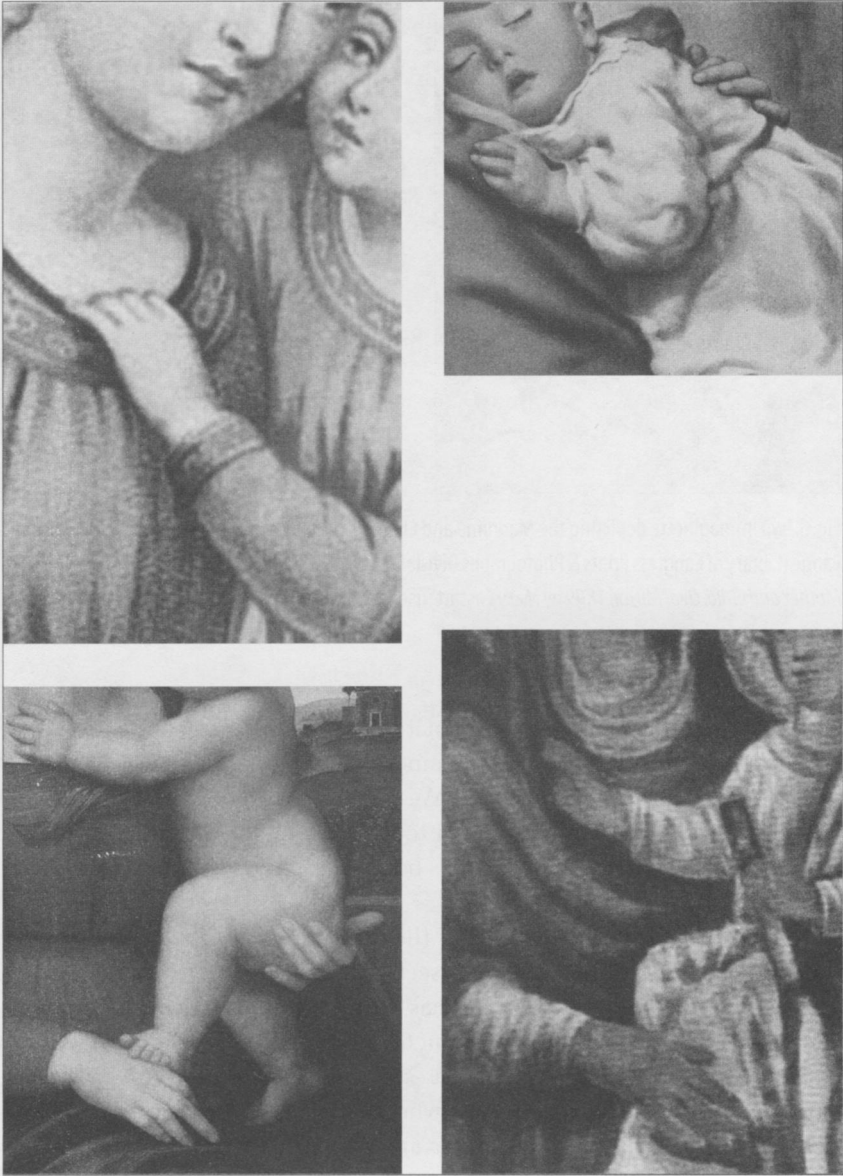


Fig. 7. Details clockwise from upper left: *Madonna del Buon Consiglio*; Ferruzzi's *Madonna of the Streets* or *The Wayside Madonna*; *Madonna del Pozzo*; a Raphael *Madonna*

resentation precedes the secular, the first elevates the second into a realm beyond the moment, a realm that identifies these mothers as special—even iconic—and, in so doing lends them the character of the mother.

We recognize the mother and child. We see the importance of the touch, the tactile quality that characterizes holy cards (Figure 7). Today, many collectors express dismay over the most recent practice of laminating cards. Lamination gives the cards longer life, so we suppose they might seem less “ephemeral,” but they also have a less intimate feel. In even a small sampling of cards (Figure 8), the trope is obvious. It is one that balances the sacred with the secular; the mother’s tenderness and sorrow with the impossible Virgin. Even the names of many of these Madonne are instructive: *Notre Dame de Bon Secours*, *Madonna del Buon Consiglio*, *Our Lady of Perpetual Help*; the *Sorrowing Mother* or *Sorrowful Madonna*.

As portable models to emulate, as images tucked away and pulled out in times of need, these cards offer the closeness and tangibility of which Lepovitz writes—Mary, the Holy Mother, is always at hand in this humble and still inexpensive (each about \$0.65 or less) portrait. Catholics raised with the visual tropes of the Church recognize or “read” these and other cards with little difficulty primarily because they have become a part of the visual lexicon of a Catholic tradition, one that asks the people not simply to recognize (as, for example, an art history major might recognize a *Madonna and Child* composition) but also to emulate—to become that mother, that woman. The *Imitation of Mary* goes far beyond mere virginity.

Like the *Madonna and Child*, popular saints also fall into this category. *St. Francis of Assisi*, tonsured, dressed in brown robes, with hands raised to show the stigmata, perhaps surrounded by birds or other wild animals—though there is little in actual accounts of Francis to support the notion of this attachment to animals—is one of the most recognizable, but there are others. *St. Theresa*, the *Little Flower*, wears the nun’s habit and carries roses. *St. Anne* is nearly always

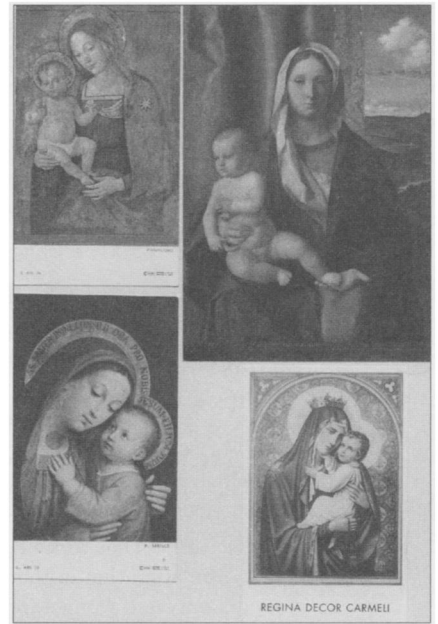


Fig. 8. Sampling of typical holy cards featuring the *Madonna and Child*

depicted sitting, a book open on her lap, with the child Mary standing beside her, learning to read. St. Anthony, in monk's garb, carries the Christ Child. Other saints were and are today recognized in this way—through visual attributes—often a reference to the manner in which they were martyred or simply in the subject and visual metaphor readily available in the Catholic visual lexicon. The Madonna, the Holy Family, the Sacred Heart—all are common visual types that people might not know in terms of their history or origin but recognize as models to follow, lessons to contemplate.

The Lesson Taught, the Lesson Learned: “What Was It I Had Worshipped?”

In her 1976 study of the Cult of the Virgin, Marina Warner laments what sounds like the loss of a lover. As a prologue, she tells the story of her own anger at having been taught to worship and emulate the Virgin. “In her mercy, her sweetness, her overflowing goodness,” Warner writes of Mary:

she was incapable of withholding her favour if approached with the right courtesies and correct salutations. . . . The bond of motherhood that attached her to her son and to the whole human race through him presupposed a natural law of inalienable, irreducible, indestructible love. . . . It was only in the last two years at school . . . that I felt the first chill wind sigh through this blissful dome. (xx)

Already, during her school years, Warner had begun questioning the Church's model of the Virgin Mary, so unreachable, so lacking human sexuality. Yet, even in this awareness, it took her years to shake free of what she identified as the chilling lessons on what it meant to be a woman of faith:

The Virgin, sublime model of chastity, nevertheless remained for me the most holy being I could ever contemplate, and so potent was her spell that for some years I could not enter a church without pain at all the safety and beauty and salvation I had forsaken. . . . But, though my heart rebelled, I held fast to my new intimation that in the very celebration of the perfect human woman, both humanity and women were subtly denigrated. . . . What was it I had worshipped? (xx-xxi)

Warner's is a painstaking, scholarly examination of the many and varied sources for the life and myth of the Virgin Mary, yet her study is also meant to address the author's own feelings of betrayal: “What was it I had worshipped?”

For Catholics there exists a long tradition of teaching women and young girls what has been referred to as the “Imitation of Mary.” Notice, for example,

how Father F. X. Lasance's 1906 little book *The Catholic Girls' Guide* (a publication that features the Church's imprimatur and that grew in popularity into at least the first half of the twentieth century) teaches about Mary. Father Lasance exhorts young girls to reject Eve and to learn from the "Virgin of Virgins!" Mary, he writes, teaches girls to "love retirement," to be in the world but "not of the world," to "love seclusion," and to "remember the violet," a "modest little flower which thrives and blossoms most beautifully in the shade" (145–47). Warner lays bare that lesson, the Church's Virgin Mary, the woman who "alone of all her sex" was conceived without sin and in whose chastity the Church has ever had a stake. The people's Mary is often of a very different sort.

Holy Cards/Immagine as Cultural and Historical Signifiers

*Christian iconography expresses in images the same Gospel message that Scripture communicates by words.
Image and word illuminate each other.
—The Catechism of the Catholic Church*

*To foster the sanctification of the people of God, the Church commends to the special and filial reverence of the Christian faithful the Blessed Mary ever Virgin, Mother of God, whom Christ established as the Mother of all people.
—Code of Canon Law*

*All images are polysemous; they imply, underlying their signifiers, a "floating chain" of signifieds . . . in every society various techniques are developed intended to fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs; the linguistic message is one of these techniques. . . . Anchorage is [its] most frequent function. [Hence] text and image stand in a complementary relationship.
—Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message"*

In the mid-nineteenth century, holy cards began to feature both word and image (Sella). The words that appear on holy cards today might be anything from memorials to stories to local histories of the iconography printed on the front of the card. Most often, however, these words have been in the form of prayer. Up until this point in our discussion, we have primarily focused on the function of the image as a pedagogical tool. In this section we shift our focus to the function of the prayer that accompanies these images.

In our investigation of the pedagogical function of the prayer and its relation to the image we have become particularly interested in a category of Italian holy cards that we call *Madonne Ritrovate* (“Recovered Madonas”). Their humble vernacular roots offer unexpected and rich opportunities to reflect on the meaning of cultural commonplaces such as the reciprocal (Catholic Church) or complementary (Barthes) relationship of image and word, and call attention to that which those commonplaces may obfuscate.

Immaginette of *Madonne Ritrovate* are miniaturized artistic representations—visual and verbal retellings—of the origin stories of sacred objects such as icons or statues of the Virgin Mary that, since the beginning of the eleventh century, began to “miraculously appear” in the fields, on the shores, and in the woods of Puglia, Southern Italy.¹⁰ Originally disseminated *di bocca in bocca* (“from mouth to mouth”), these stories are still kept alive in people’s collective memory through yearly elaborate and haunting reenactments of the miraculous event, through vernacular *laudae*, and by means of the very artifacts we are examining here, the imaginette printed for and distributed at the churches and sanctuaries built in memory of the miraculous apparition.¹¹ Reminiscent of ancient pagan rites of birth and rebirth, these stories are actually elaborations of a well-documented historical nucleus: the recovery of ancient icons of the Virgin Mary which had been brought over to this region, and carefully hidden, mostly by Byzantine monks fleeing from Sicily during Muslim occupation or from the Orient, where the iconoclastic persecutions launched by Leo III Isauricus (717–41) still continued.

Immaginette of *Madonne Ritrovate* are remarkable for a number of reasons. They are beautiful, quaint artifacts—a collector’s dream. They serve as reassuring records of times when the Virgin Mary is said to have made herself “present” to the humble and the poor, during their daily toils, without ecclesiastic mediation. They are examples of the intricate literacy practices that undergird the teaching and learning of what seem to be simple devotional acts. They belong to legend, to vernacular history. But in so far as the “apparitions” they record, in word and image, are linked to well-known iconoclastic persecutions, they also belong to official ecclesiastic history. This double belonging is, as we shall see, a source of significant and consequential difference between how the two genres of history remember and represent the miraculous event.

For limits of space, in what follows we concentrate on just one *Madonna Ritrovata*, “*Madonna dei Sette Veli*” (*Madonna of the Seven Veils*), whose story/history we examine through a series of imaginette produced and disseminated to nurture devotion to her. Our goal is to foreground how each

immaginetta, through the particular relationship between image and word it is set up to represent, “anchors” the miraculous apparition, and the consequences that each anchorage has for the story/history of the event and its participants. We begin with the legend.

The Legend: Miracle in the Marsh

It was the year 1062, or according to others, 1073. A few oxen, led to pasture by their herdsman, had come to water in a marsh near a village called Gufo (“owl”), when prodigiously three small flames appeared, floating on the marsh’s waters. At the sight, one of the oxen genuflected.

Astonished, the good herdsman began to drag the muddy waters under the three small flames and extracted an icon wrapped in seven veils. With great care, they gathered it up in a white sheet and carried it to their shelter, or Tavern.

Although the Iconavetere (“ancient icon”) had been wrapped again in the seven veils in which it had been found, for many years, every Saturday afternoon, the face of the Madonna shone through them and showed itself to the people. As the news spread, pilgrims from neighboring fields and villages came to venerate the prodigious icon.

When the tavern could no longer hold the crowds of the faithful, it was enlarged into the Church of San Tomaso Apostolo, which became the center of the cultural and economic development for what would eventually be the town of Foggia.¹² According to Don Michele Di Gioia, theologian and historian of the cult of Madonna dei Sette Veli, the account of the miracle we reported was narrated by “our fathers consistently and uninterruptedly . . . to their children” until, in the seventeenth century, it was finally sanctioned by and validated in official histories (21–22).

The old, undated (and no longer in circulation) immaginetta of Madonna dei Sette Veli shown in Figure 9 provides a detailed visual retelling of “the miracle in the marsh.” The prayer on its verso addresses the “Queen of Universe” who, “because of God’s will, makes [herself] manifest through various images, which become portentous and munificent dispensers of grace.” It exhorts the devout to remember that the image “had been venerated in Constantinople,” had then been transferred to Italy, and had been donated to the ancient town of Arpi (a town near Foggia) whose bishop buried it to save it from heretic furors; it testifies that much later, at the beginning of the eleventh century, the image, uncorrupted and wrapped in seven veils, “chose to reveal itself to herdsman and to a genuflecting ox.”



Fig. 9. Early *immaginetta* of Madonna dei Sette Veli, no longer in circulation

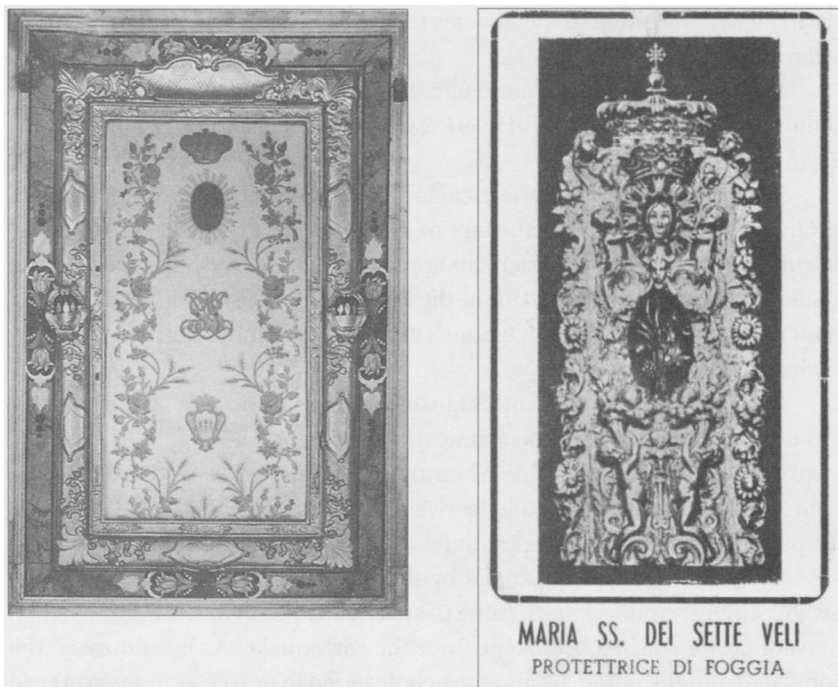
The text of the prayer extends the legend in interesting ways. It authenticates the miracle by establishing the historical provenance of the icon. But in so doing, it changes the nature of the miracle in consequential ways. While the prayer reminds the devout that the Queen of the Universe had chosen to make herself manifest to the humble herdsmen, it also introduces well-known and literate historical personages: the bishop of Arpi and S. Lorenzo Majorano, bishop of Siponto, “savior,” and “donor” of the icon.¹³ The bishops of Arpi and Siponto, who, although not present at the scene of the original miracle (the legend does not mention them, and the image on the *immaginetta* does not figure them), lend credence to and verify what would otherwise remain an oral apocryphal story.

As we mentioned, this *immaginetta* is no longer in circulation. The *immaginetta* in Figure 10 have come to replace it over time. For people unfamiliar with the legend and history of Madonna dei Sette Veli, these later *immaginetta* are quite enigmatic. What we have is a framed black hole—in Figure 10a without a face, in Figure 10b with a face. The detailed

pictorial narrative, the image of the miracle in the marsh featured on the earlier *immaginetta*, has been reduced to the image of the found object, the *Iconavetere*, venerated in the Cathedral of Foggia. Gone are the marsh, the herdsmen, and the genuflecting ox. The visual details of where the icon was found, how it was found, and by whom are elided. What then is the story of the miracle these *immaginetta* record? Without appropriate historical contextualization, the story of the miracle they document is simply unreadable.

The History: Miracle in the Cathedral

According to the legend described above in “Miracle in the Marsh,” “for many years, every Saturday afternoon, the face of the Madonna shone through [the seven veils] and showed itself to the people.” Then the face ceased to appear: when and why the legend does not tell. In a sense, then, the image on the *immaginetta* in Figure 10a, with that ominous black hole, can be read as com-



Figs. 10a and 10b. Two immaginette depicting Madonna dei Sette Veli. Left: An empty oval replaces the Madonna's face. Right: The Madonna's face is visible.

memorating the cessation of the miracle.¹⁴ But the prayer that accompanies it asks the devout to believe that even if no longer visible the Madonna is still present in the ominous black hole, and that she will appear again to those who have faith in her, if not on earth, then “in the house of our Father”:

Most Saint Virgin of the Seven Veils, who through the sign of the Sacred Icon gave origin to our town, and made the icon a token of your maternal presence, listen to our prayer.

We, Foggiani, owe everything to you, Virgin Mary, who chose to manifest your predilection for us appearing, comforting and smiling, to our fathers, out of that sign of consolation and hope, the Iconavetere, sacred goal of pilgrims and saints.

Recollecting those apparitions, memorials of a past that lives in the present, we come to you. . . . May we, after our journey on this earth, join you in Heaven, in the house of our Father, to contemplate your face, without veils. . . .

Until then, the devotion to the “Iconavetere, sacred goal of pilgrims and saints,” will nourish their faith.

As we now turn to the *immaginetta* in Figure 10b, we must ask, what about the face of the young girl peering out of the black hole? What does that mean?

Reliable records of ecclesiastical history reveal that the face of the young girl in Figure 10b represents the face of the Virgin Mary as she, long after the original eleventh-century miraculous apparition, and precisely on April 1, 1732, made herself manifest again, out of the icon’s black hole, to Bishop (and later Saint) Alphonsus de’ Liguori (De Santis 49). Same Madonna. Different miracle. Revised history.

According to reliable civic and historic records, on March 20, 1731, a series of devastating earthquakes almost razed the city of Foggia. The people invoked their Madonna’s help. When the icon, rescued from the crumbling Church of San Tomaso Apostolo by two priests, was brought to the people in the public square, the Virgin’s smiling face appeared several times.

The following year, beckoned by the news of these recurring miracles, Bishop Alphonsus de’ Liguori, came to venerate the icon in the Church of San Giovanni, where it had been kept since the earthquake. As he addressed the populace from the pulpit, he and the people he led in prayer were again graced with the vision of the Virgin’s face, smiling at them out of the black hole. The following day, to commemorate and to fix *this* apparition, Bishop Alphonsus de’ Liguori commissioned, with detailed instructions, a painting of the Iconavetere with the face of the Virgin peering out of the oval. The *immaginetta* in Figure 10b reproduces this painting, which memorializes the miracle as seen and told by Bishop de’ Liguori. The prayer on the back of this *immaginetta* is a generic prayer, one we have seen linked to other images of the Virgin Mary. It makes no mention of the miracle in the marsh. What accounts for this visual and verbal emendation?

It is a well-known fact that the Catholic Church follows rigorous and lengthy procedures both to canonize individuals and to acknowledge the miraculous powers of sacred objects or places. It is an equally well-known fact that the reliability of the witness or receiver of a miracle weighs heavily on the Catholic Church’s deliberations. All this might account for the fact that although since 1062 (or 1073), the face of the Madonna had revealed itself many times to the common folk, the *immaginetta* that are currently in circulation are the ones that either commemorate the found object, an object whose authenticity has been carefully preserved, tested, and validated—historically, theologically,

and scientifically—or that validate the witnessing of the miraculous powers of the found object by St. Alphonsus, on whose reputation the Church could cast no doubt.

While we can only hypothesize the rationale for the emendation of the visual and textual retelling of the original miracle (memorialized in the early *immaginetta* shown in Figure 9), we can point to one of its consequences. One of the stories featured in Joan Carroll Cruz's *Miraculous Images of Our Lady* is the story of Madonna dei Sette Veli. But the image Cruz selects is what we have called the image of the found object; and the miracle attributed to this image is the Virgin's apparition, out of the black hole, in the Church of San Giovanni, to Saint Alphonsus de' Liguori.

And here is an *immaginetta* that records a more dramatic instance of retelling, another form of erasure sanctioned (and celebrated) by the Church. On March 22, 1944, in the Church of Saint Alphonsus in Rome, a solemn celebration took place to mark the 213th anniversary of the first apparition of Madonna dei Sette Veli to the people of Foggia after the March 20, 1731, earthquake. On that occasion, the Church was packed with WWII refugees from Foggia and its province. A large number of high-ranking prelates participated, and Pope Pius XII granted a special Apostolic Benediction and Plenary Indulgence to those who took the sacraments. For that occasion, a commemorative *immaginetta* was produced and distributed to the faithful. The image on the recto of this *immaginetta* reproduces a stained glass window from the Cathedral of Foggia (see Figure 11). The window memorializes yet another, and even more extraordinary, miraculous apparition of the Virgin to Saint Alphonsus.

The History

Thirteen years after the miraculous apparition of the Virgin to St. Alphonsus and the faithful in the Church of San Giovanni [represented by the *immaginetta* in Figure 10 b], St. Alphonsus with a large number of fellow missionaries came again to pay homage to the sacred icon of Madonna dei Sette Veli, which had by now been moved to the Cathedral. While St. Alphonsus addressed the congregation from the pulpit, a beam of light out of the black oval came to shine on him and raised him above the heads of the orants. The levitation, which lasted about 15 minutes, is accurately documented in the process of his beatification. (De Santis 20)

Judging from the story the stained glass window tells (see Figure 11), the faithful whom St. Alphonsus led in prayer, did not—unlike the original shepherds, or the devout in prayer after the earthquake—see the Madonna directly.¹⁵ What they saw instead were the effects of her apparition on Alphonsus (his

levitation, his ecstasy), and they bore witness to the miracle with which *he* was graced. This “image of faith” deprives the people of that “direct access to the divine” that the original discovery, as represented in the early *immaginetta*, celebrates. The prayer on the verso of this *immaginetta* pleads to the *Madonna dei Sette Veli*, “suave iris of peace,” to protect Foggiani refugees from the destruction of war, just as she, 213 years earlier, had saved them from the destruction of the earthquake. No mention is made of the eleventh-century miraculous finding.

On May 24, 1782, the Vatican publicly and irrefutably recognized this icon as miraculous and with a crown of gold classified it among the most renowned miraculous images (Spada 35). It is reported that the reputation of Saint Alphonsus (and of other reliable witnesses) greatly aided this decision.

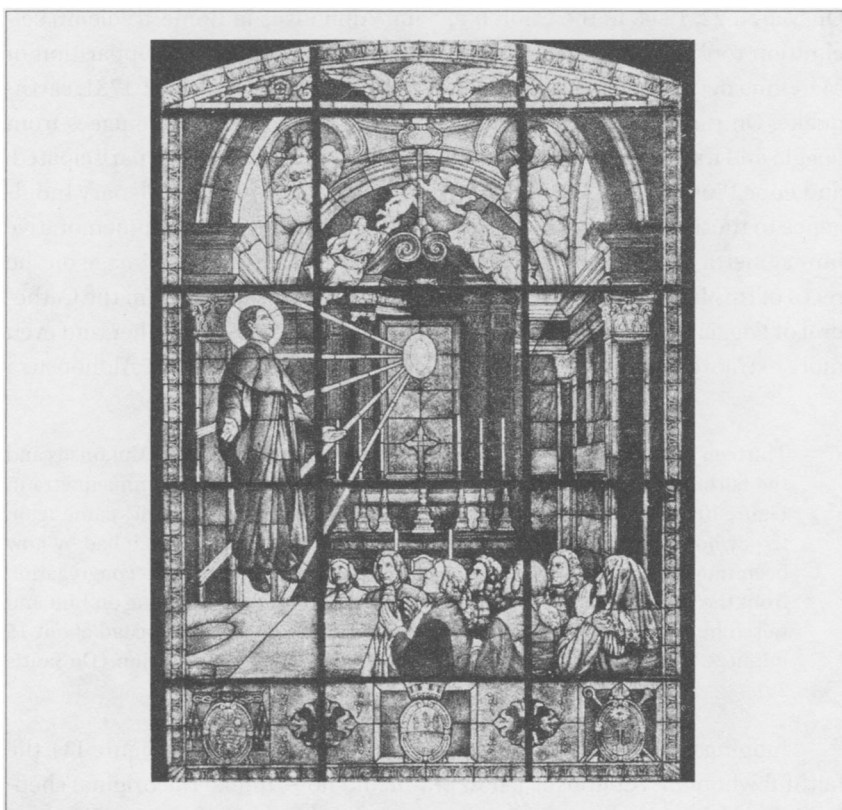


Fig. 11. The story of Alphonsus de' Liguori depicted in a stained glass window

This series of *immagnette* raises a host of interesting questions about literacy in general and more specifically about visual literacy and its supposedly immediacy of communication, its reciprocally illuminating relation to verbal literacy, and some of the uses of “anchorage.”¹⁶ If we were to accept the notion that the image, by itself, carries meaning enough, then the story told in the *immagnette* in Figure 10b and Figure 11, a story that centers on a recognizable and reliable historical personage—Saint Alphonsus—is one that is, perhaps, more useful to the Church than is the original story of the poor peasants who were gifted with the sacred vision, the miracle object (Figure 9). By replacing the herdsmen (and the ox) with Saint Alphonsus, bishop and theologian, doubt is not cast on the miracle, but on who is worthy enough, literate enough, to reliably witness, mediate, and record the encounter with the divine. The replacement itself is, of course, something only the literate have control over.

Our investment in exploring practices and documents of literacy “that have not mattered in most historical accounts,” as demonstrated by our work with holy cards, has given us intellectual solace. But it has also been a painful yet useful reminder of the strategies of control that seemingly objective and generous constructions of literacy (the appeal of the visual, the visual as aid, the mutual help that visual and verbal lend each other) can be made to serve and cover over.

Conclusion

In *A History of Reading* Alberto Manguel argues that conventions of Christian iconography were already being developed by the fifth century (99). That is, anyone familiar with the teachings of Christianity could already read Christian imagery in at least roughly the way the Church expected. The people knew the stories from the priests, and those stories were given form in murals painted on local church walls. It was in the fifth century that St. Niles, when asked for his opinion on what pictures would most properly decorate the church, wrote that scenes from the Old and New Testament on either side of the altar would “serve as books for the unlearned, teach them scriptural history and impress on them the record of God’s mercies” (qtd. in Manguel 97). In this same period, the Church was already setting into law the ways these books should be read. As Manguel writes,

In 787 the Church Council in Nicaea made it clear that not only was the congregation not free to interpret the pictures shown in church, but neither was the

painter free to lend his work any private significance or resolution. 'The execution of pictures,' the council declared, 'is not an invention of the painter but a recognized proclamation of the laws and tradition of the overall Church. The ancient fathers caused them to be executed on the walls of the churches; it is their thought and tradition that we see, not that of the painter. To the painter belongs the art, but the arrangement belongs to the Church fathers. (101)

Cheryl Glenn writes that within the strong oral component of medieval popular literacy, "the masses of people read by means of the ear rather than the eye" (57). The Nicean Council was, however, speaking of a literacy that very much depended on both ear and eye. Like the massive fifteenth-century Bibles of the Poor (*Bibliae Pauperorum*) that told stories through pictures and were chained to lecterns and opened by the priest "to an appropriate page" (Manguel 103) for the unschooled to "read" and for the priest to interpret, these pictures reinforced iconographical conventions established so much earlier. Considerable, highly calculated mediation controlled the supposed immediacy of both the aural and the visual.

The use of word/image to disseminate Christianity was widespread. Both visual and verbal literacy were essential to that dissemination. Consider the seventh-century Ruthwell Church in Dumfriesshire, Scotland. Inside this tiny country church still stands the Ruthwell "preaching" or "teaching" Cross. The massive stone cross stands eighteen feet high and features scenes from the Old and New Testaments carved on two of its four sides. Standing before this massive visual aid, priests would use the carved images to teach stories from the Bible. In this way, as with murals, stained glass, and religious painting, image and word were bound—the image made or approved by the institution; the word read or told by the priest. One did not exist outside the other. Instead, the image, even in early Christianity, was already tied to the word. In this case, then, as in the case of the holy cards and *immaginetta* we have examined, we cannot speak of the image divorced from the word—in particular, the ecclesiastical word; neither can we speak of "image and word illuminat[ing] each other" in a "naturally," mutually supportive way.

Our project began with stories the two of us told to each other—a mother who tucked holy cards into the corners of framed family photos arranged atop the television; another mother's *immaginetta* left behind after her death, now touched in prayer and memory each morning over coffee; a teacher's prize; a communion gift. That is a simple enough beginning for what might seem a simple enough object. And, yet, as we have argued, nothing is simple about these artifacts. Relationships, life stories, evocation of the past, competing

understandings and constructions of religion, literacy, and history all are incorporated into how holy cards/immaginette work both for people who dismiss them as unworthy of attention and for the people who somehow cannot part with them, despite any allegiance to or rejection of the institution from which they have originated. These objects of popular devotion, like all popular sign systems, embody a kind of literacy that results when the popular is wedded to and yet held in tension with a powerful institution—a kind of literacy that simultaneously incites and resists appropriation or containment; a literacy whose power and resiliency are attested to by institutional attempts to reform it.

Notes

1. According to Dolores Sella, the terms are now used interchangeably, but originally they identified two artifacts, which although similar, were used for different purposes. “Santino” is a small vertical paper or parchment rectangle, 11 x 7 cm, representing a religious subject. It was printed or manually composed to be placed between the pages of a prayer book, missal, or Breviary. “Immaginetta” is almost always larger in size. It was usually made by hand and by different techniques. Its location in the prayer corner of a monk’s or nun’s cell or on small home altars so much in use in the past suggests its devotional function (our translation of Sella). One way of understanding the difference is to think of santini as objects manufactured to pray with. They are portable. Immaginette, on the other hand, are manufactured as objects to pray to. They are not necessarily portable. Anna Van Westerhout, in *Santini e la loro Simbologia* (11) acknowledges the merging of the terms in common parlance. Throughout this article we refer to Italian holy cards as “immaginetta/immaginette” (singular/plural) to foreground the connotation of “little image” that is a key focus of our argument.

2. The holy cards/immaginette we have reproduced and worked with are from our personal archives, with the exception of the immaginetta in Figure 11, which came to us as a photocopy.

3. Although neither of us has ever seen this practice, Kane, Devitt, and Orsi each mention the ingestion of pellets of holy cards. This might be one of the instances in which popular devotion comes close to deformation and transgression. But what needs to be pointed out is that the “pellets” were manufactured and sold; we do not know if this was done with or without ecclesiastical approval. If this is a superstition, it is one that is fed and nourished by economic interests.

4. In a recent visit to a hospital, in the room where people wait to hear the results of surgery performed on relatives and friends, I saw a woman hand a holy card to another woman who was sobbing, all by herself, sunken in a chair across from me.

The exchange seemed so natural: no hesitation between giver and receiver of the holy card (Virgin of Guadalupe)—just a hint of a smile and a nod. Both women seemed to be from South or Central America, and their shared understanding perhaps came from that cultural tie.

5. Robert Orsi writes much the same in his discussion of presence quoted earlier. These reflections, written before and separate from our encounter with Orsi's words, draw much needed confirmation and support in his studies.

6. In her analysis of the "religious economy of devotions," Paula Kane points out the imbrication of interests and forces that tie elite and vernacular religion. "The institutional Church also derived social benefits from devotions. Comments made in the late nineteenth century by members of the American hierarchy . . . suggest that devotions were essential tools to preserve the loyalty of the masses to the Church: 'It is absolutely necessary that religion should continue to possess the affections, and thus rule the conduct of the multitudes. . . . To lose influence over the people would be to lose the future altogether'" (93).

7. In *Images of Faith*, Helena Waddy Lepovitz focuses on a similar kind of "miniaturization" of (large) religious images—in this case, stained glass windows. "The vibrant color and luminosity of stained glass windows delighted the medieval visitors to churches and cathedrals all over Europe. Not surprisingly, these special qualities of decorative glass inspired its transferal from the sacred space of the churches to the private homes of the well-to-do. By the sixteenth century, smaller windows or roundels and paintings on glass had begun to enliven living quarter or enhance family shrines. This practice in turn encouraged middle- and lower-class Europeans to display framed paintings executed on the reverse side of glass panes as inexpensive substitutes for oil paintings. The result was the translation of the elite medium of stained glass into a folk art" (xiii). We want to foreground the similar impulse behind these two instances of "appropriations." In both cases, the "reduction" of the images makes "people" partake in the protection of and direct access to the divine.

8. According to reports, when in 1897 Ferruzzi painted the eleven-year-old Angelina Cian (a girl he spotted one day on the streets of Venice holding her brother Giovanni), he did not have a religious portrait in mind. Yet, this image was immediately picked up to be reproduced on *immaginettes* or sold in religious goods stores as a Madonna. He called it *Madonnina*. It has also been called *Madonna of the Streets*, *Wayside Madonna*, and *Madonna of the Poor*. Local Venetians reject the name *Madonna of the Streets* as a reference to prostitution and prefer *Madonnina*. For further information see, <http://www.americancatholic.org/Messenger/Jan2000/feature1.asp>.

9. In his commentary on this Cassatt painting, Frank Getlein notes that Degas called it "the quintessential Mary Cassatt, since it showed 'the infant Jesus with his

English nanny.” Getlein goes on to note that this painting became widely known as *The Florentine Madonna* (120).

10. Puglia is not the only region in Italy where these icons were found, but because of its geographical position, the number of findings here is very high.

11. The title of each Madonna Ritrovata is a reminder of the place where the icon was found: a well (“Madonna del Pozzo”), a barge (“Madonna della Madia”), a brush (Madonna dello Sterpeto”), a high ridge in a field (“Madonna della Ripalta”). The title, prominent on the recto and verso (in the text of the prayer) of each *immaginetta*, serves as an important reminder that the Madonna made herself present, materially, at that specific place. For those who are not familiar with them, these Byzantine-looking Madonnas, as it is true of most icons, much resemble each other, and so the title performs an important identifying function. This identifying function has also significant economic implications, since these *immaginette* are distributed and function as “calling cards” for the specific church or sanctuary built spontaneously, or in response to the Virgin’s request, at the place of her apparition.

12. The three small flames floating on the water survive in the name of Foggia (gr. *Fos*, light) and are figured on the heraldic blazon of the city.

13. “According to an ancient tradition, never interrupted or contradicted, an image of the Virgin, painted by St. Luke, had been venerated in Arpi, and before in Constantinople. During the second half of the 5th century, San Lorenzo Maiorano, who came from the Orient as Bishop of Siponto, brought the icon and donated it to the city of Arpi.

During the iconoclastic persecutions of the 8th century, the inhabitants of that illustrious city saved the icon: they wrapped it in veils to protect it from every damage, and hid it away from peopled areas, waiting for a better era, when it could be again publicly venerated.

The vicissitudes of those tumultuous times cast the icon and its site into oblivion, until God intervened and brought it to light in prodigious circumstances” (Di Gioia, 8).

14. A large painted or embroidered version of this *immaginetta* can be found in the homes of most Foggiani. One such embroidered painting, now in my home in Florida, graced a wall in the bedroom of one of my aunts. I grew up fearing that ominous black hole. Somebody had told me never to look into it, least I go blind. Recently, I discovered a reference to a tradition that partially explains the interdiction that so anguished me: “Never should anybody dare uncover the face of the veiled Image, according to the authority of the old; such curiosity or reckless investigation was punished in some cases with immediate death in others with blindness” (Spada 21).

15. A stained glass window in the Church of San Tomaso, built where originally stood the Taverna del Gufo, does instead tell the story of that miracle. The image corresponds to the one on the early *immaginetta* in Figure 9.

16. In *Immagini di Santa Chiara: L'Iconografia di Santa Chiara di Assisi nelle immaginette popolari (santini)*, Vincenzo Boragine corroborates our hypothesis about the uses of holy cards' prayers as "anchorage." He writes: "The *immaginetta*, from exclusive object of devotion gradually assumes, from the beginning of the eighteenth century many other functions: announcement, good wishes, memory. Even convents and monasteries will rely on the use of images, with the objective of making known the life, virtues and miracles of the founders. It is exactly in monasteries and convents that the *immaginetta*, produced by artisans in unique exemplars, reaches results of incomparable beauty and technique, as in the case of 'Canivets.' At the end of the eighteenth century, after centuries of free distribution, the Church seizes the right of diffusion of *immaginetta*. It will take longer, however, for the Church to establish the so-called *imprimatur*—that is, the official ecclesiastical authorization for the circulation of the *immaginetta*, and the ecclesiastical approval of the prayer printed on its verso" (Boragine 18–19).

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