

IMAGENES DE DIOS EN EL CAMINO: RETABLOS, EX-VOTOS, MILAGRITOS, AND MURALS

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[The author examines the importance of the ancient arts of retablos, ex-votos, and milagros. She suggests how border crossings from Latin America to the United States may be producing new sources and expressions of spirituality and art for Latinos/as living in the United States. This spirituality is deeply rooted in ancient Meso-america and in the subsequent encounter with Christianity.]

AT THE BACK of the dimly lit church hangs a large cross with the crucified body of Jesus. The image draws many of the Latino parishioners to stop there to reverence the pierced feet of the crucified Jesus. One by one they first kiss the tip of their fingers and then reach up to place the kiss on his wounded feet. The young, elderly, and even small children engage in this gesture often, and from the countless gestures of love and reverence that the cross has received over the years the nails have worn down. This simple practice resonates with the people's need to express symbolically a prayer of petition or thanksgiving or to seek a blessing by touching the wounds of *Jesús crucificado*.

This gesture expresses the ancient religious human need for divine supplication. This need spans the reality of human existence and for U.S. Hispanics is deeply rooted in a variety of sources, which open to ongoing exploration. In this article I examine the importance of the ancient arts of retablos, ex-votos, and *milagros* and suggest how border crossings from Latin America to the United States may be producing new sources/expressions of spirituality and art for U.S. Latinos/Hispanics.¹ Their spiri-

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tuality is rooted in ancient Mesoamerica and in the subsequent encounter with Christianity.

FLOR Y CANTO

In the world of ancient Mesoamerica, the phrase *flor y canto* (flower and song) developed as a metaphor for truth. By extension, since ultimate truth could only be fully revealed through the spiritual—the divine—*flor y canto* became synonymous with the spiritual. As the research of Eduardo Matos Moctezuma and David Carrasco has indicated, the divine—the spiritual—was foundational in the construction of Mesoamerican society.² The excavation (1978–1982) of the *Templo Mayor* in Mexico City unearthed valuable material and renewed interest in scholarly research regarding the Aztec Empire. The grand temple of Tenochtitlan marked the *axis mundi* of the Aztec world. According to their founding myths, this spot was the place upon which the people were to settle. Their patron god Huitzilopochtli had shown himself as an eagle resting on a *nopal* (cactus) indicating the center of the Aztec settlement. The *Templo Mayor* would subsequently be constructed on that sacred center. “It was the great meeting point of heaven, earth, and the underworld from which emanated supernatural authority for priests and rulers to organize the world.”³ The spiritual—the divine—was foundational and at the heart of the Mesoamerican existence. Its presence and reality permeated all aspects of life, including the oral traditions of its society.

In Mesoamerica the system of communication relied both on the spoken word and on pictographs. At the core of each form was the belief that in order to access truth, the *tlamatinime*, the wise one of the community entrusted with the memory of the community’s history, had to commune with the divine. Furthermore, in the Nahuatl religion, the heart symbolized the source of dynamism in human will. For that reason it was believed that God resided in the human heart.⁴ Therefore, the *tlamatinime* had to meditate deeply in his heart in order to communicate the oral tradition of the people. This charisma was equally true of the *tacuil* or the artist who was entrusted with the task of painting the stories of the community in the codices or painted books. In fact, the role of the *tlacuil* was believed to have originated with the Toltecs, a people who existed before the Aztecs

² Johanna Broda, David Carrasco, Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, *The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan: Center and Periphery in the Aztec World* (Berkeley: University of California, 1987) 5.

³ *Ibid.* 5.

⁴ Ana María Pineda, “The Oral Tradition of a People: *Forjadora de rostro y corazón*,” in *Hispanic/Latino Theology: Challenge and Promise*, ed. Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Fernando F. Segovia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 104–15, at 108.

and who had the reputation of being the master artists of the truth. The Toltec *tlacuilo* was known to be wise, able to evoke the divine because he had conversed with his heart where God resided.⁵ Following this logic, the wise one and the *tlacuilo*, the artist, were the masters of *flor y canto* and would not only be in communication with the divine, but could also speak of spiritual realities. The spiritual task of the *tlamatinime* was to memorize in his heart all that pertained to the history of the people and to be able to pass on faithfully this tradition orally from one generation to the next. The spiritual task of the *tlacuilo* was to be led by divine inspiration to paint that history in the codices and painted books.⁶

The subject matter of the paintings generally reflected matters of the economy as well as religious and political realities. Nevertheless, the most numerous presentations focused attention on spiritual concerns found in the books of the years and times, festive days, the baptism and the names given to children, the ceremonial rituals pertaining to marriage, and other sacred rites.⁷ It was the *tlacuilo* or the painter who was responsible for its pictographic representation. The drawings were painted on large sheets of deerskin or tree bark called *amate*.

RETABLOS: VISUAL/ORAL CATECHESIS

Another tradition of visual/oral catechesis was developing in Europe during the Middle Ages. It was a common practice in churches to use retablos or paintings, sculpture, and decorative pieces as instructional tools to teach Christianity to the people.⁸ The imagery and visual depictions of these retablos were used as catechetical means to transmit the faith. For a society, largely illiterate, the retablos provided powerful and didactic illustrations of the truths of Christian doctrine. The retablos did not necessarily require explanation, but often spoke for themselves. The retablos served as an important dimension of catechesis. Their use was a popular catechetical technique, easily accessible and comprehensible for the common folk. Gradually the term retablo also referred to reliquary boxes that were placed at the rear of the altar.⁹ By the 12th and 13th century, retablo was

⁵ Ibid. 109.

⁶ See Serge Grunzinski, *La colonización de lo imaginario* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1991) 20. The artist drew from three elements for his painting: pictographs, drawings that express an idea (ideographs), or symbols that combined with drawings could elicit a sound (phonetic graphs).

⁷ Ibid. 21.

⁸ Jorge Durand and Douglas S. Massey, *Miracles on the Border: Retablos of Mexican Migrants to the United States* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1995) 6.

⁹ Francisco de la Maza, "Los retablos dorados de Nueva España." *Enciclopedia Mexicana del Arte* (Mexico City: Ediciones Mexicanas, 1950) cited in Durand and Massey, *Miracles on the Border* 6.

a general term referring to all painted altar panels. The word *retablo* itself comes from the Latin *retro tabulam* (behind the altar).¹⁰ Over time this modest art form was transformed into larger architectural art frames that supported statues of saints and religious paintings. Initially, the *retablos* were located inside the church. Eventually, wealthy people who could afford these spiritual art treasures began to commission them for their private use. The depictions of saints were popular and the *santos* migrated from the inside of churches to the homes of the wealthy and pious. The *santos* nurtured a private devotional spirituality.

Retablos and Santos in the “New World”

As the Catholic Church in the 1500s migrated to the “New World” with the European colonizers, the practice of *retablos* influenced new missionary endeavors. Church architecture attempted to replicate what the missionaries had left in Spain. In medieval Spain the *retablos* had been serving as decorative backdrops to altars. Examples of the larger framing *retablos* can be seen today in some of the missions established by missionaries in the Southwest and throughout Latin America. Familiar with the catechetical nature of *retablos* in Spain, the missionaries turned to the visual approach as a way to communicate church teaching to the inhabitants of the newly conquered land called New Spain.¹¹

Influenced by the practice of the *santos*, Spanish missionaries also promoted the smaller size *retablos*. Originally the *santos* were created on wood or canvas. Later, tin largely replaced this medium.¹² The Spanish missionaries, in the books they transported, brought a variety of sacred images that served didactic functions. Artists in the New World followed the depictions of the saints portrayed in missals, prayer books, and the Bible of the official Church.¹³ The *retablos* gave the clergy a way of presenting Christianity to the indigenous world.¹⁴ For the artist in the New World drawing pictures of Jesus, Mary, and saints was creating a visual presence of the sacred. The *retablo* maintained its conventional art form with little deviation or artistic embellishment. Over time the practice of the smaller *santos* art

¹⁰ Durand and Massey, *Miracles on the Border* 6.

¹¹ See Gabrielle Palmer and Donna Pierce, *Cambios: The Spirit of Transformation in Spanish Colonial Art* (Albuquerque: Santa Barbara Museum of Art in cooperation with University of New Mexico, 1992) 76.

¹² For a more extensive explanation of the use of tin, see Durand and Massey, *Miracles on the Border* 7–8.

¹³ Elizabeth Netto Calil Zarur and Charles Muir Lovell, *Art and Faith in Mexico: The Nineteenth-Century Retablo Tradition* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2001) 32.

¹⁴ Durand and Massey, *Miracles on the Border* 6.

became part of the Mexican sacred landscape. By the 19th century, retablos of all dimensions were popular and widely dispersed throughout Mexico. This art form is still found in parts of the Southwest.

Retablos and Ex-votos

Subsequently, a second type of retablo, the ex-votos, developed with wider appeal for the common folk. The term ex-votos derived from the Latin phrase, which meant that a vow or promise had been made by the supplicant. Retablo ex-votos were popular art forms that could be offered in supplication or in thanksgiving for prayers answered. Illustrated petitions are known as the retablo ex-votos, or sometimes as votive offering. However, the simple term retablo is most commonly used by the people and by artists of that medium; the term ex-voto is seldom used.¹⁵ It is clarifying, however, to use the retablo ex-votos combination term to indicate that a drawing is accompanied by a text of gratitude for a favor granted or received.¹⁶

Milagritos

A third form of visual prayer was specifically used to give thanks for miracles granted. These are the *milagritos* or “little miracles,” miniature charms depicting parts of the body such as the heart, hands, and legs. Placed at a shrine that is considered to have miraculous power, they are attached to the clothing of the saint’s statue responsible for the miracle. A similar custom was practiced in the ancient Mediterranean world, particularly among the Greeks who placed charms at the shrines of healing. The Greeks built many shrines in honor of Asclepius, the Greek god of healing. Offerings of life-size ceramic heads, ears, eyes, hands, arms, legs, feet, female breasts, and male genitalia have been found, all dedicated to Asclepius dating to 480 and 325 B.C.¹⁷ Such votive offerings were customary in a variety of sites from Mexico, throughout the Mediterranean Basin, North Africa, the Middle East, across Europe and even in Scandinavia.¹⁸ Prior to the conquest of the Americas by Spain, the indigenous world supplicated the divine by offering a variety of gifts. There is some evidence to support the possibility that such offerings included some form of *milagritos*. Unfortunately, the destruction of the codices and of other sources of infor-

¹⁵ Ibid. 6.

¹⁶ In this article, I use the term retablo ex-voto to refer to artistic works that combine both a drawing and a text for either a favor granted or a favor sought by the person offering it.

¹⁷ See Martha Egan, *Milagros: Votive Offerings from the Americas* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico, 1991) 8.

¹⁸ Ibid. 7.

mation from the period of the conquest of Mesoamerica makes it difficult to understand the significance of the charms, some of which still exist from that era.¹⁹ Regardless of the dearth of information on the functions of charms used in Mesoamerica, a variety of studies have demonstrated that *milagritos* continue to be used even today.

Contemporary Practice of *Milagritos* and Retablos Ex-Votos

A visit today to some of the popular pilgrimage sites in Europe give evidence of the past when the practice of *milagritos* was a vibrant expression of Christian devotion. The practice continues in areas of Italy, Crete, Greece, Sicily, as well as Andalusia, Catalonia, and Mallorca in Spain,²⁰ and Portugal and the Philippines.²¹ It is a practice that can also still be found in small or large sanctuaries and in roadside chapels throughout Mexico.²² Here the faithful travel to offer their *milagritos* to Jesus, Mary, and saints who have interceded and granted requests for help. The *milagritos* sometimes are miniature representations of kneeling or standing people as well as body parts (legs, heads, eyes, arms, hearts, feet, hands, fingers, breasts, lungs) to show either the fervor of the petitioner or the part of the body that was healed.²³ At times miniature cars, houses and animals are also found. The *milagritos* are pinned on the vestment of the saint granting the favor or attached to the statue or painting or placed as close to the saint as possible, i.e., a pillow upon which the statue rests.

Milagritos as Border Offerings

In the contemporary Americas the border between Mexico and the United States is a more recent political construct. For a variety of reasons, however, people continue to use familiar routes to migrate north. The migration transports people across borders carrying with them not only their hopes for a better future but also their religious and cultural tradi-

¹⁹ Ibid. 4.

²⁰ Ibid. 12.

²¹ See Eileen Oktavec, *Answered Prayers: Miracles and Milagros among the Border* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1995) 4. The author indicates places throughout the world including parts of the United States where *milagritos* are still offered as an expression of gratitude for a favor granted.

²² It is interesting to note that the interior of the modern Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico seems to be devoid of *milagritos* despite its important significance for Mexican Catholics and devotees of Guadalupe. While store vendors sell different religious devotional items outside the Basilica, what portion of them can be placed inside?

²³ Eileen Oktavec work looks into the number, types of representations, and use of *milagritos* found in churches along the border such as Mission San Xavier del Bac, Tucson, Arizona, and Magdalena de Kino, Sonora, Mexico (*Answered Prayers* 193–200).

tions. The practice of the *milagritos* has become a “border offering” which appears in churches situated along the borderlands of the Southwest. The *milagritos* represent the answered prayers of the immigrant to the U.S. who seeks help in facing the challenges of entering an unfamiliar land with unknown realities and hardships. *Milagritos* are also a source of hope and refuge for marginalized groups who share a similar religious impulse to appeal to holy ones to intercede for them. As migrant and marginalized people continue to seek and pray for miracles, *milagritos* are found in the United States. The intriguing work of Eileen Oktavec²⁴ uncovers the practice of *milagritos* along the Tucson-Magdalena corridor, a stretch of land that extends from southern Arizona into northern Sonora, Mexico. There, in the churches of Mission San Xavier del Bac, Tucson, Arizona, and Santa Maria Magdalena, Magdalena de Kino, Sonora, Mexico, an abundance of *milagritos* are found pinned to the vestments of the popular and beloved Saint Francis Xavier. The affection of the devotees for Saint Francis Xavier is profound, as reflected in the copious *milagritos* that have been offered to the saint over the years.²⁵ The power of Saint Francis to answer the prayers of supplicants is apparent at both sites in the successful sale of *milagritos*. The devotional practice serves as a testimony to the relational quality of people’s faith and the need to express it in concrete and tangible ways. The people turn to Francis Xavier because they see in him someone who can advocate for them, someone certain to hear their prayer. While Saint Francis is the most prominent, supplicants also seek out Saint Martin de Porres, the Infant Jesus of Prague, Sacred Heart of Jesus, Mary, and other saints.

EL SANTUARIO DE CHIMAYO AND MILAGRITOS

Other sites along the southwestern border of the United States evidence the practice of *milagritos*. One of the most well-known and popular pilgrimage sites continues to be *El Santuario de Chimayo* in New Mexico. Built in 1816, it replaced a small chapel (1810) that marked the place of the appearance of a crucifix thought to have miraculous healing power. The healings were so numerous that in time the chapel was too small to accommodate the number of pilgrims who came there to be cured. It was believed that *El Santuario de Chimayo* rested on earth that had once been

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Eileen Oktavec studied the collection of *milagritos* obtained from Mission San Xavier del Bac in Tucson with those obtained from the Iglesia Magdalena de Kino in Sonora. The five-year collection from the former totaled 3,045 items and the latter fifty-two-month collection totaled 43,891. It is unimaginable just how many *milagritos* have been offered over the years just in these two sites. Many have been given away, stored, lost, or sold but the numbers obtained from Oktavec’s five-year/fifty-two month collection is numerous in itself (*Answered Prayers* 151).

an ancient sacred indigenous site. In time, the healing power attributed to the crucifix shifted with the people's belief that the cure emanated from the soil itself, which was obtained from a hole (*El Posito*) in the ground inside the shrine. Thousands of pilgrims came to *El Posito*, to be cured of their physical illnesses. In the adjoining sacristy, people cured by the holy earth began to leave their crutches, and canes. Today, over 300,000 visitors come annually to Chimayo. Over time, the walls of the sacristy have been filled with the life-size *milagritos* that gave testimonial to the bodily limbs restored to health. At Chimayo, or *El Santuario* as it is popularly referred to, the miniature *milagritos* fashioned by local craftsmen and sold to faithful seeking help or wishing to express their gratitude have been replaced by the actual crutch or cane hung in the shrine. In the midst of the crutches, canes, and other such items, an assortment of photographs, drawings, letters of petition and gratitude are also found. The reality-size offerings represent a new style, a retablo ex-voto, moving away from the artifacts commissioned and entrusted to an artist.

THE PEOPLE'S RETABLO EX-VOTO

Historically, however, the retablos began with the commissioned artist. In the effort to evangelize, the clergy used the painted images of saints for religious instruction. Following the criteria established by the Catholic Church, the artists who were drawing the saints were required to use a specific stylized format.²⁶ The particular saint was identified by a particular symbol or symbols that the Church associated with the saint. The standardization of the images made it possible for the general population who did not read to identify readily the saint portrayed. Originally these *santos* were commissioned for the interior of the churches. Later wealthy people employed artists to paint the religious images for their homes. The private works were drawn on canvas, which the wealthy could afford. The poor, however, relied on wood, which was more affordable but, as a medium, was not as durable.²⁷ The production of tin sometime around the early 19th century introduced a less expensive and more enduring medium for the painting of *santos*. As a result, thousands of the retablo of *santos* were produced on tin. While some of the retablos were painted by trained artists, a growing number were created by local folk artists who had little or no training. Occasionally, the names of the artists were found on the retablos,

²⁶ See Gloria Kay Giffords, *Mexican Folk Retablos: Masterpieces on Tin* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1974) 13.

²⁷ Since the "saints" were drawn on wooden panels or tablets for the Mexicans of the poorer class, the term retablo came into popular use in the world of Mexican art of that period.

but often they remained unsigned.²⁸ Although the names of the saints were sometimes written on the retablo, the primary purpose of the retablo was to provide the devotee with a visual representation of the saint. Nevertheless *santos* as an art form was short-lived and never gained the attention of the masses. This particular genre of devotional art ended in the 1920s and gave way to another style of retablo art that was more appealing and compelling for the common folk.

As common folk experienced ownership of religious expression, local artists were hired to draw the account of how the individual was cured or saved from a disaster through the intercession of a patron saint. The work of the artist paid less attention to conventional or ecclesiastical artistic criteria and was inspired more by the person's experience and the artist's imagination. The drawing was accompanied by a written text expressing the petitioner's gratitude or narrative account of the miracle and identifying the saint who was responsible for the miracle. Thus this new retablo combining the drawing of the miracle story and the written text produced a retablo ex-voto. Today examples of retablo ex-votos found in a number of Mexican pilgrimage sites bordering the United States far outnumber the offerings that were historically left at European sites. At the Mexican/U.S. sites the numbers of donated retablo ex-votos are so great as to raise issues of how to care for them or how to dispose of them. Also, as artistic expressions of folk religiosity, there is evidence that the art pieces have also become valuable collectors' items.²⁹ In any case, the religious significance of the retablos ex-votos and their importance in the lives and religiosity of the common folk provide the basis for a consideration of the dynamic and richness of Hispanic spirituality.

The retablo ex-voto (image and written text) taps deeply into the daily life of its supplicants, plumbing the depths of ordinary human experience and reality. In Hispanic religious cosmology, everyday activities of life open themselves to the sacred and to the need for God in one's ordinary life. The concept of the ordinary as locus of the sacred has been addressed by several U.S. Hispanic theologians, many of whom referred to it in the Spanish term *lo cotidiano*. The theme is addressed in the works of Ada María Isasi-Díaz,³⁰ Orlando Espin, and María Pilar Aquino. Other U.S. Hispanic theologians have given special attention to the poignant value of

²⁸ Giffords, *Mexican Folk Retablos* 20–22.

²⁹ Durand and Massey, *Miracles on the Border* 16–17.

³⁰ For a description of the meaning of *lo cotidiano*, see Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "Lo Cotidiano: A Key Element of Mujerista Theology," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 10 (August 2002) 5–17. It is also defined as: "A Spanish-language expression that refers to daily life experience, or to reality as it is experienced in daily life." The expression literally means "the daily" (*From the Heart of Our People*, ed. Orlando O. Espin and Miguel H. Diaz [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999] 262).

ordinary life and the many little ways that reveal God throughout human history. In particular, the work of Virgilio Elizondo has creatively introduced the intimate connection existing between faith and culture and its crucial role in illuminating the relationship between people and the divine.³¹ Alejandro Garcia-Rivera has written about the “little stories” or the life narratives that are told within the text of people’s lives.³² Similarly Jeanette Rodriguez’s work collects the stories of faith and struggle as recounted by Hispanic/Latina women to other Latina relatives or friends.³³ Such stories provide background accounts for the images and written texts that appear in retablo ex-votos. Today the immigration routes obligating people and families to move back and forth across the border of Mexico and the United States create many of the stories. Recording untold stories of struggle, hope, and faith these new “painted books”³⁴ literally hang from church walls along the border. These are the stories that Jorge Durand and Douglas Massey have studied and written about in *Miracles on the Border: Retablos of Mexican Migrants to the United States*.

Pursuing their interest in stories told by migrants traveling from Mexico to the United States, Durand and Massey searched for evidence of the artistic expression as captured by retablo ex-votos. For approximately five years (1988–1993), they visited pilgrimage sites, as well as art galleries and antique stores, along the Western territory of Mexico. Their search yielded a collection of 124 retablo ex-votos that relate specifically to issues of migration. They divided the evidence into tables listing the saints to whom the petitions were directed and the subject matter of the petition. The vast number of images were dedicated to Christ, Mary, and popular saints, among them Saint Martin de Porres, Saint Francis of Assisi, and Saint Jude.³⁵ The “little stories” recount specific needs in the migrant experi-

³¹ See *Beyond Borders: Writings of Virgilio Elizondo and Friends*, ed. Timothy Matovina (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2000) for a more comprehensive treatment of Elizondo’s groundbreaking contribution in the development of Hispanic theology.

³² See Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, *St. Martin de Porres: The “Little Stories” and the Semiotics of Culture* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995).

³³ Jeanette Rodriguez, *Stories We Live, Cuentos Que Vivimos: Hispanic Women’s Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, 1996). See Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Yolanda Tarango, *Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988). The latter groundbreaking work was the first to draw on the lived experience of U.S. Hispanic women in the creation of *mujerista* theology. In interviewing grassroots Hispanic women Isasi-Díaz and Tarango found a way to have their voices heard.

³⁴ The term “painted books” referred to the work of the artists in Mesoamerica that were drawn upon the sheets of pressed tree bark or in some instances were rendered on deer skin. I am suggesting that today the retablo ex-voto painted by local artists or by the supplicants themselves may be a contemporary rendering of the ancient “painted book.”

³⁵ Durand and Massey, *Miracles on the Border* 67–69.

ence. As one undertakes the difficult and dangerous journey traveling North (*El Norte*) the supplicant asks to be accompanied by the saint. The retablo ex-votos reveal the personal relationship the Latino faithful have with sacred personages, e.g., Christ, Mary, saints, and the Latino confidence that prayers will be answered. The requests relate to the myriad daily concerns and events that are the “stuff” of immigrant life. The migrant deals with many of the same dangers that strangers in the Old Testament sometimes encountered: the real possibility of rejection, of getting lost in an unfamiliar land, and not knowing how to cope with its customs and structures.³⁶ The migrant prays to find a job for personal survival or to support the family. Some migrants fear getting sick in a foreign land, while other migrants pray to be healed. The migrant may cross the border without legal documentation and may subsequently be burdened by legal problems. Many petitioners pray for miracles that will bestow legal residence or some form of visa granting them security in the United States. They pray for divine intervention to combat the fear of deportation and exploitation as they cross the border. Women, for example, often pray to marry well, to be treated with dignity, and to be free of poverty and oppressive situations.³⁷

Durand and Massey note in their research that as the immigration laws undergo change, the number of petitions left at shrines increase dramatically. The authors’ further note that copies of visas or legalization permits are often left at pilgrimage sites by grateful migrants whose prayers had been answered, giving evidence of yet another evolving style of retablo ex-voto.³⁸ In the place of artistic renditions of petitions and miracles, some supplicants leave behind actual letters, photos and copies of important legal documents, i.e., visas, marriage licenses, graduation diplomas.³⁹ The survey of retablos by Durand and Massey list expressions of gratitude for favors granted. Regardless of the subject matter expressed in the drawings of the retablo ex-votos, what is clear is the supplicants’ engagement with real life situations (*lo cotidiano*) and the call for divine intervention.

Leaving family or friends, migrants in the United States characteristically turn to the extended “spiritual” family of the saints. The *santos* assume the role of friends who accompany them in the journey of life or migration and

³⁶ See Ana María Pineda, “Hospitality,” in *Practicing Our Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997) 29–42.

³⁷ These issues have been of great interest and concern for Latina theologians in particular the works of Ada María Isasi-Díaz and María Pilar Aquino. See Isasi-Díaz, *En la Lucha/In the Struggle: A Hispanic Women’s Liberation Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); also see María Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993).

³⁸ Durand and Massey, *Miracles on the Border* 99.

³⁹ Durand and Massey (p. 99) give examples of these in their work. I have personally seen this type of retablo ex-votos at the Shrine of Chimayo.

to whom they turn for advice, comfort and help.⁴⁰ Durand and Massey state that “with the emergence of painted *ex-votos*, therefore, retablos passed from being mere archaeological artifacts to being authentic historical documents.”⁴¹ This is an interesting insight: what is being documented are personal histories of experiences with the divine, imprinted not in official history or ecclesiastical books, but in the “books” of the lives of ordinary people. Retablo *ex-votos* underline the authentic reality of the personal relationship that exists between the supplicant and the communion of saints. Hispanic spirituality is fundamentally incarnational. God is divine and human. The saints, the extended family in heaven is also touchable on earth and present to men and women in the context or fabric of *lo cotidiano*. In Hispanic devotional spirituality, God, together with the saints, is tangible and within reach. Nothing can be considered insignificant in the human drama of life whether it be a story of struggle or failure or that of victory and success. The “little stories” of human beings carry that value and deserve respectful theological consideration for the reality of faith that they reveal.

MURALS IN THE SACRED LANDSCAPE OF *EL NORTE*

Moving further North, along the migration routes to the cities and urban centers of the Southwest and West Coast such as San Diego, Los Angeles, San Jose, San Francisco, Fresno, Bakersfield, and Phoenix, the visual documentation of histories and religious practices, reminiscent of the pictographs of Mesoamerica, suggest that many of the murals found today in Latino neighborhoods can also be considered modern retablos. They are not found inside the designated sacred space of a church or chapel,⁴² but in the public spaces of neighborhood walls.

Murals are a revitalized visual language that have roots in the pre-Columbian painted codices that documented the oral traditions of Mesoamerican ancestors.⁴³ Across the United States, murals are found on the

⁴⁰ Victor Villaseñor provides the reader with some wonderful examples of the ability of the common folk to relate to Mary and the saints in familiar and human ways. Villaseñor has drawn with his words vibrant images of Hispanic spirituality. See Victor Villaseñor, *Rain of Gold* (New York: Dell, 1991) 1–562, at 425–27.

⁴¹ Durand and Massey, *Miracles on the Border* 10.

⁴² A mural worthy of attention painted by Teok Carrasco with the history of Cuba resides inside the National Shrine of Our Lady of Charity (*La Ermita de la Caridad*) in Miami, Florida. It depicts the history of Cuba at a glance centering its attention on 44 historical figures. This mural is not outside the church building but has become a public site of pilgrimage for the Cuban community in the United States.

⁴³ See Ana María Pineda, “The Oral Tradition of a People” in *Hispanic/Latino Theology: Challenge and Promise*, ed. Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Fernando F. Segovia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 112.

walls of Latino neighborhoods. It is an art form that publicly displays the life narratives of the people in their communities. Murals reflect images of the past and present. The mural belongs to the people because it tells their “little stories” as individuals and as community. Murals are not the property of the elite and are not bound by the criteria of curators of art galleries or the like. Rather the mural is the artistic expression of the people and their vehicle for self-expression. Murals have the power to convey powerful stories of cultural and religious values, identity, and the history past and present. The subject matter of the murals embraces *lo cotidiano* and touches upon the diverse dimensions of daily life. In similar ways, the murals function for the Hispanic immigrant and resident, as the retablo *ex-votos* do for the migrant supplicant.⁴⁴ They reflect daily, concrete needs in a public way. Murals document the political realities of the community and address issues such as the need for quality education, the protest against police brutality, the impoverishment of youth, the losses of life from gang violence and drug abuse.⁴⁵ The mural images of women laboring in the lettuce fields and those of the United Farm Workers (UFW) are not only visual pleas for justice but forceful reminders of the rights and dignity of all human beings. These mural images might be thought of as a way of making Catholic social teaching public and visual in concrete ways through the hands of neighborhood muralists. In neighborhoods where access to education is often limited by the financial resources of the family or government support, murals addressing education serve as visual petitions asking for education of their children. In other instances, murals have served explicitly as mirrors of the sacred. Religious images emerge on the streets, making the reality of the sacred present to everyone. The murals paint stories of faith amid overwhelming obstacles. Images of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Jesus crucified, the Sacred Heart, and other Christian signs and symbols are painted alongside images of pre-Columbian deities, a visualization of the community life narrative. The ancients looked to beauty as a reflection of *flor y canto*, the presence of the divine, and murals have beautified neighborhoods defaced by poverty and violence. All murals can be considered mural *ex-votos*.⁴⁶ The murals that adorn the walls of Latino

⁴⁴ Durand and Massey offer a provocative suggestion that the public nature of *ex-votos* provided an alluring model for muralists (e.g., Rivera, Siqueiros, and Orozco) who were seeking to create a new public art (*Miracles on the Border* 42–43).

⁴⁵ See Ana María Pineda “The Murals: *Rostros del Pueblo*,” *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 8 (November 2000) 10. I have written on the subject of murals in this article and also “The Oral Tradition of a People: *Forjadora de rostro y corazón*” 104–16. I draw freely from my earlier work in this section on murals.

⁴⁶ A term I create to give expression to what I believe is a new form of retablo/*ex-votos*.

neighborhoods throughout the United States visually express the hopes and struggles of the community.

One particularly evocative mural *ex-voto* is painted on the walls of St. Peter's rectory located in the Hispanic neighborhood of the Mission District in San Francisco, California. It is entitled *Nuestra América, 500 Años de Resistencia*.⁴⁷ The mural was commissioned by the local pastor for the Quincentennial (1492–1992) of Columbus's voyage and encounter with the Americas.⁴⁸ Fr. Jack Isaacs was inspired in its design by the "Articriptic" art form that consists of three paintings.⁴⁹ Following this art form, the center painting is further explained by the painting on the left and right leaves. Consequently, the St. Peter's mural is divided into three major sections.⁵⁰ The central section of the mural depicts the invasion of the Spaniards and moves toward the picture of a nuclear bomb. A crucifix bearing the body of an *indigeno*, a Native American, is suspended over the story of conquest and destruction. On the right side of the central painting is a picture of a burial place for the dead. The dead are buried beneath the surface of the earth but above it are signs of new life, new growth. On the left side of the central painting is a "family" portrait of the heroes and heroines of the Americas. This portion of the mural depicts the "common folk" of the neighborhood dressed in ordinary working attire gathering strength as they pull up an enormous wheel. This group moves out to a larger assembly of the community who surround those pulling on the wheel. In the sea of everyday faces appear some visages known in the neighborhood: Fr. Jack Isaacs, beloved pastor who died from cancer at the age of fifty-two, and Jeanette Sacchen, parish secretary for many decades. Above this neighborhood scene appear the faces of Archbishop Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King, Jr., Bartolomé de Las Casas, Kateri

⁴⁷ The title of the mural is Our America, 500 Years of Resistance.

⁴⁸ I purposely avoid using the word "discovery" of the Americas since this interpretation is problematic for many today. Columbus's trip led to an encounter/clash with a thriving indigenous civilization and to its eventual demise.

⁴⁹ This decision was made after lengthy discussions with members from the parish community and Isaias Matas, the muralist commissioned for the work. It is also interesting to note that the local pastor, Fr. Jack Isaacs, who was commissioning the mural did not want it to specifically address the traditionally familiar Church history involving the missionary endeavors in the "New World." This mural was to clearly focus on the history and culture of the people in the community.

⁵⁰ The explanation of the St. Peter's mural was documented by Teresa Almaguer and Mariana Hernandez, students from San Francisco State University, as part of an oral history project assignment. To my knowledge, it is the only written account of its undertaking. The written project was completed in January 1996. It was misplaced after the death of Fr. Jack Isaacs. In 2000 while I was researching an article, it was discovered in the parish office. I am indebted to the authors of this project and I draw substantially from the oral history project of their work.

Tekakwitha, and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. In the tradition of the retablo ex-votos these modern day *santos* are being invoked for protection and for companionship as the community labors to transform contemporary realities. This mural ex-voto is a modern day retablo which is no longer behind the altar but in the public plaza of the neighborhood. The *santos* it bears give testimony to those who have completed *el camino* (the journey) and those still *en camino* (on journey). This public mural ex-voto (public retablo) teaches the community of the many ways that the divine and the human are one. It teaches the “family” about the many journeys that have been undertaken by the *santos* and of the journeys that are still being undertaken by the unfinished *santos en camino*.

In symbolic and visual language, the mural ex-votos have the ability to teach truths of the human condition; they speak of the need for justice and they mirror the joys and hopes, the grief and the anxieties of impoverished and marginalized Latino communities. The murals give public and symbolic expression to the people’s realities and hopes. It is a subversive reminder that life is lived in the plaza of the neighborhood and that the presence of God is not limited to the formal worship celebrated inside church buildings.

IMPLICATIONS

The ancient arts of retablos, ex-votos, and milagros coupled with the realities lived by Latino communities in the U.S. are producing new sources/expressions of spirituality and art for U.S. Latinos/Hispanics. The public nature of murals points to the migration of the sacred from the enclosed spaces of the church to the streets of the barrio. The activity that takes place along the border with retablos, ex-votos and *milagritos* are strong indicators of the creative ways that Latinos seek in order to be in touch with the sacred. As Allan Figueroa Deck writes in this issue of *Theological Studies*, faith cannot become deep or authentic until it really penetrates the profound significance of the symbols, rituals and metanarratives of a people. Yet, as Figueroa Deck further argues, the Church’s discomfort with Latino popular religion and worship is creating a greater disconnect between Latinos and Roman Catholicism.

If the Catholic Church fails to understand and appreciate the fact that Latinos relate to the sacred within the context of their cultural and religious traditions, then it must accept the reality that the desire to be in touch with the sacred will lead Latinos to seek out their own spirituality and practices. In fact, it is happening not only with retablos, ex-votos, *milagritos*, and murals as described in this article but also in less public ways. There is a subversive manner in which occasional medals are mysteriously placed and left in churches without the pastor’s permission or knowledge.

The celebration of special Marian feasts give Latino faithful permission to practice some of the forms of popular religiosity that are not allowed during the regular liturgical year, e.g., dressing the statue of Mary and the organization of processions and community “fiestas.” The celebration of other feasts may offer them the opportunity to bring a statue of a favorite saint, which under normal circumstances would not be allowed in the church. The *santo* may be tolerated on the day of the festivity and the community will make the best of the occasion.

Among young Latinos a renewed interest in sacramentals is evident. For example, scapulars are worn not only by the elderly but have also become an item of interest for young Latino youth. The body has become an art canvas as Latino youth adorn themselves with tattoos that reflect religious images and themes. Low-riders adorn their cars with images of Guadalupe and other religious items such as rosaries, crosses and the like. Retablos, ex-votos, and *milagritos* are found not only inside churches but imprinted on the body, hung around the neck, and adorning the interior of cars. Figueroa Deck reports in his article on the social science analysis produced by Dean Hoge and colleagues that concludes that popular devotions and spirituality in the form of prayer are significant for Latino youth. Although, Figueroa Deck asserts that this finding is to be expected, it does seem to go contrary to popular opinion. Nevertheless, experience provides some evidence that Latino youth are finding ways of touching the sacred through spiritually inspired art. As Roberto Goizueta claims in his work *Caminemos con Jesús*, “U.S. Hispanic theology stresses the fact that God is known in the form of the Beautiful.”⁵¹ Art can invite others to enter into the realm of that which is beautiful and which speaks of the divine. The significance of *flor y canto* is as relevant today for the Latino community as it was in ancient Mesoamerica.

⁵¹ Roberto Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995) 106.