Mary in Latino/a Catholicism

Four Types of Devotion

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One very important identity marker—both constructive of and constructed by cultural identity—is a relationship with Mary under a culturally specific devotional name, intimately bound with the history of the devotion and the history of the cultural community. Four main Latino/a types of relationships with Mary are explored.

Anyone familiar with Latino/a Catholic communities knows that the Virgin Mary is very much present in the communities’ faith life. Latinos/as appear to be intensely “Marian,” regardless of the specific cultural community they might belong to (e.g., Mexican American, Cuban American, etc.). And yet, Marian devotions are very frequently grounded in the history and culture of these specific communities—for example, Guadalupe is usually regarded as “Mexican” and is typically absent from the devotional life of most other Latino/a Catholic communities.

Types of Marian Devotion

Nearly three decades of research on, and engagement with, Latino/a Catholicism suggest to me that there are four basic types of Marian devotions among Latinos/as. There is overlapping among the types and the same “devotional name” for Mary (e.g., Altagracia, Guadalupe) can and will probably be found in more than

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one devotional type, because there can be more than one way of relating with/to Mary.

There are nineteen (but arguably at least twenty-one) historically and culturally distinct Latino/a communities in the United States. These communities ground the various Latino/a familial, personal, and Catholic identities. One very important identity marker—both constructive of and constructed by cultural identity—is a relationship with Mary under a culturally specific devotional name (i.e., a Marian devotional name specific to each community). These names, in turn, are intimately bound with the history of the devotion as well as with the subsequent history of the cultural community.

I propose four basic types of Marian devotions here: colonial, Romanized, syncretic, and pneumatological. They are grounded on these important issues and not on peripheral devotional practices. In other words, there are four main Latino/a types of relationships with Mary. The names I have given to each of the four types are not the only ones possible. I use these labels as a means organizing these reflections. The types of relationships they indicate are more important than their labels, of course, because no labeling (no matter how masterfully crafted or explained) could ever exhaust the complexities of reality.

**Colonial**

Most of the specific Marian devotional names in this type (e.g., Altagracia, San Juan de los Lagos, etc.) have roots in the colonial period (1492–1820s or 1898) that included most of the regions of Latin America in the Spanish and Portuguese empires (1490s–1820s).

The devotional names from this historical period indicate either a quality of Mary or, more often, the geographic location associated with the devotion’s founding miracle. Because of the historical period that saw the birth of these Marian devotions of this first type, I call this type “colonial.” *It is the most frequent among Latino/a Catholics.* These devotions are very much identified with one or another Latino/a cultural community and rarely appear beyond these cultural borders (although they might be present all across the United States). Although their origins are found in the colonial period, the devotions in this type are very much alive today—and are an important part of Latino/a Catholicism.

**The Founding Stories**

The devotions of the colonial type often claim that through Mary’s intercession a miracle happened. More specifically, a miracle occurred that benefited individuals (or the groups to which these individuals belonged) that were publicly
and actively marginalized by the powers of their day, church and/or civil leaders, or by other respected and/or wealthier members of (colonial) society and church. The details of the founding story vary across the devotions, but in common they share Mary’s (and thereby God’s) acknowledgment of the dignity and needs of the marginalized, and also Mary’s (and God’s) self-distancing from the attitudes and actions of church and civic leaders that marginalized the persons or groups whom Mary (and God) in fact accept and bless. In the colonial period, these miracle stories were very powerful prophetic messages against the manipulation of religion by the dominant in society and church—powerful (and potentially subversive) prophetic messages believed and repeated by the marginalized themselves.

An example from these founding stories comes from the Mexican state of Jalisco. Perhaps second only to Guadalupe in popularity among Mexican Americans is the devotion to the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos. The name of the devotion refers to the town of San Juan de los Lagos where the more frequently repeated version of the founding story claims that a remarkable miracle took place in 1623. The story narrates that a band of circus people were attempting to come into the town to perform. Because of the terrible reputation as thieves and as child-abductors that circus people had in 17th-century Mexico, the town’s civil and ecclesiastical authorities denied them permission to perform. The acrobats were required to stay in the periphery of San Juan de los Lagos while the local “respectable” and “good Christian” citizens were encouraged to avoid the company or the performances of “those people.” Then, continues the story, the young daughter of two of the acrobats unexpectedly died while performing, and when her parents attempted to bury her in the town the permission was denied. A group of circus people broke into the church at night and placed the girl’s corpse before the main altar where, above, was a statue of Mary. (Another version of the story claims that an old woman took the parish’s statue of Mary and brought it to the dead girl at the circus grounds outside the town). Many hours passed, while the group prayed for the girl and her parents, and then—to everyone’s amazement—Mary performed the miracle and the child returned to life. The news spread, beginning what became the devotion to the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos. In the early 1950s this devotion became very popular along the Rio Grande Valley, when a replica of the same statue of Mary was installed in a shrine in San Juan, Texas, where she is now known as the Virgen de San Juan del Valle.

This “founding story” indicates that a miracle was performed to benefit a group marginalized by the leaders of society and church. The people heard Mary’s
prophetic message on behalf of the poor as challenge to those who would marginalize them. As is most frequent with these stories, there was no need for historical proof other than the witness of those who benefited from or saw the miracle and its first consequences. Once the miracle (or a chain of miracles) was credibly claimed, news spread like wildfire among other marginalized and/or needy communities and persons. Thus the devotion began, expressed through a set of practices that in time were considered “traditional.” Apparitions are rarely connected with the colonial type, although apparitions of Mary are often claimed thereafter (once the devotion is established).

**Relationships Expressed**

All devotions are relationships and only secondarily a set of practices; even though the practices, as in the case of Marian devotions, may serve as good indicators of the type of relationship that exists between the devout and Mary. What do the devout ask of Mary in this colonial type? What do they expect to receive from her? How do they convey their requests? Why do they believe that Mary may hear them and favorably respond?

*Who* asks a favor of Mary (in this and the other three types) is crucially important. In this colonial type of Marian devotion the ones who come to the Virgin are usually the poor and marginalized—marginalized by those who think of themselves as respectable or educated or successful or even “good Catholics.” The poor and marginalized, in these cases, recognize themselves as often powerless to navigate their daily world in significant areas like housing, employment, healthcare, or education, to mention a few. Their self-acknowledgement as powerless shapes what they ask of Mary—typically requests regarding assistance in those necessary areas, and increasingly for an end to bigotry, violence, or hostility against them and their communities.

The requests of the poor and marginalized are conveyed to Mary often through ritualized acts of insistence (e.g., lighting candles), or through “promises” or through ritualized displays of commitment (e.g., “walking” on one’s knees from the parish church’s door to a statue of Mary, thereby demonstrating one’s desperate need and complete sincerity).

These Latino/a Catholics believe that Mary will hear them. Not because she is like them, but because she is *not* like those who participate in and benefit from structures that oppress and marginalize others in both church and society. The belief that Mary will (preferentially) hear the poor is, in itself, an accusation against the status quo and against those who benefit from it at the expense of the poor and marginalized.

In the history of the various Latin American nations, especially as they struggled for independence and later for national unity, no symbol of cultural identity seems
to have become as powerful and respected as Marian devotion (see Carrasco; Brading; Nebel; Espín). In the United States, Latino/a Catholics, frequently facing renewed campaigns intent on their cultural and religious re-colonization, have found in their respective Marian devotions powerful symbols of cultural identity and means for denouncing their continued marginalization (Espín).

**Romanized**

The second type of Marian devotion among Latino/a Catholics is one I have called “Romanized.” In this category I include devotions well known to many Catholics throughout the world—for example, Lourdes, Fatima, La Salette. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries they successfully accompanied members of the many newly established religious congregations that spread from Europe to the rest of the Catholic world. These Marian devotions were of European (and only of European) origins and would have had no impact beyond their local or regional birthplaces had it not been for the global activity of these religious congregations. The dissemination of these devotions accompanied the centralized sense of a Catholicism situated in Rome; therefore, I describe it as “Romanized.” The effective canonical and doctrinal Roman centralization of Catholicism—which significantly increased during the pontificate of Pius IX—occurred as the new religious congregations were being canonically sanctioned by the Holy See. Pius IX and his successors employed the new religious congregations effectively to counterbalance many local or regional church “variations” or customs.

Many Latinos/as have adopted (and perhaps also adapted) these devotions of European origin. But these Latino/a Catholics tend to share certain identifying elements: they are active or participate in institutions (especially schools) run by the religious congregations that brought these European Marian devotions; they tend to have higher levels of socioeconomic and educational attainment; and consequently they seem to have less of an identification as poor or marginalized in either church or society (Dolan and Hinojosa; Dolan and Vidal; Dolan and Deck).

**Founding Stories and Relationships Expressed**

There is no need here to remind most readers (and that, by itself, is probably a telling point) of the Lourdes or Fatima founding stories. The common structure of the stories (in this type of devotion), however, is not the same as in the colonial type. In these Romanized devotions there are apparitions of Mary who, during such an apparition, performs a miracle. The founding event, therefore, is
not a miracle but an apparition (or series of apparitions). Those who see the apparition are not necessarily the beneficiaries of the miracle. In fact, the seers as well as the apparition tend to be only vehicles for Mary to convey messages to the world and/or the hierarchy of the church. Although the seers are poor and marginalized, their condition acts as support for the credibility of the apparition. The poverty of the seers is ultimately irrelevant to understanding the message conveyed through the “founding event.” The message that each apparition conveys reinforces the centralizing Romanization of 19th- and early 20th-century Catholicism.

Among Latinos/as (and others) the founding stories, the apparitions and the miracles have (in this type of Marian devotion) sometimes been reworked. The apparition then becomes a wondrous means that establishes Lourdes, for example, as a place for healing, and the water from Lourdes becomes a means for Mary’s miraculous aid. For the most part, however (given who among Latino/a Catholics engage in these devotions), the founding story and especially the relationship with Mary expressed through these Romanized devotions remain those mediated by the aforementioned religious congregations and their institutions. The status quo of society is not challenged in its abuse or marginalization of the weak and poor. Whatever challenge Mary’s messages communicate (usually employing the language of conversion, e.g. from communism) is geared to promote greater loyalty to Rome and greater compliance with papal teachings and directives. The relationship with Mary, expressed through these devotions, is one of obedience to her message and loyalty to the Holy See. Some might suggest that this type of Marian devotion is the least culturally Latino/a type.

**Syncretic**

Among some devotions that originated as colonial as in the first category discussed above, there are some that have developed a parallel set of founding stories and web of relationships. These I call “syncretic” because (and only because) the parallel developments occurred when non-Marian (and sometimes non-Christian) elements were combined with the Marian (and Christian) ones, thereby producing a set of parallel and “mixed” stories and relationships.

While many Latinos/as would only recognize the parallel, mixed devotion as coextensive with what they believe to be the devotion, others will continue to engage the devotion in a manner that remains fully within the colonial type, displaying no syncretic characteristics whatsoever. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that the reference to any specific devotional name (e.g., the Virgin of Charity) does not exclusively or mainly imply that the devout have a syncretic type of devotion. It is completely possible that the devotion (its founding story and relationships, as well as its practices) remains strictly within the colonial type.
Perhaps the clearer (but by no means sole) example of the syncretic type is the devotion to the Virgen de la Caridad (the Virgin of Charity), patroness of Cuba and of Cuban Americans (Díaz). The main shrine is the basilica in the town of El Cobre, in eastern Cuba, where the original statue is kept. There is another important shrine in Miami where an exact replica of the original statue is found. There are chapels and shrines dedicated to Caridad in cities across the United States, Latin America, and Europe.

**Founding Stories**

The original version of the story places the events in 1610. The narrative tells of three individuals (one young black slave and two adult Taíno brothers) who left the eastern Cuban town of Santiago del Prado (now called El Cobre because of the copper mines there) and traveled to the northeastern coast’s Bay of Nipe to collect salt. While canoeing to Cayo Francés, a small key in the bay, they noticed something floating on the water. As they approached they discovered it to be a statue of Mary standing, with a child Jesus on her arm. The statue stood on a small piece of wood that bore the label, “I am the Virgin of Charity.” According to the story, the statue’s cloth dress was not wet, in spite of its floating on the water. The salt-gatherers brought Mary’s statue first to the Hato de Barajagua (a hamlet in the area) and there built for it the first simple chapel. Soon thereafter Mary began to heal the sick, specifically slaves and poor whites, and miraculously helped many black slaves and white peasants who appealed to her. As a consequence of her growing popularity, the statue was brought to the more important town of Santiago del Prado (present-day El Cobre) and a better chapel was built for it there, after new miracles indicated the spot on which Mary wanted the chapel built. Today’s basilica, built in the 1920s, stands on the same location.

A parallel founding story closely follows the original version, except for two crucial reinterpretations: (1) the three rescuers of the statue are now said to have been one white, one black, and one native, all together in the same canoe; (2) the story’s narrative now says that there was a terrible storm and that Mary appeared to the three men in the canoe and saved them. That this “development” of the original story likely occurred during the early nineteenth century is telling—the number of Yoruba slaves brought to Cuba more than tripled during this last century of Spanish colonial rule, and throughout the entire century there were repeated Cuban attempts at independence. The reinterpretations made sure that the demographic roots of the Cuban people were represented as equals in the same canoe that faced the same storm (although by the nineteenth century, the native Taíno people were no more than a remote historical memory). Furthermore, if there were an apparition, then Mary “chose” the Cuban people (now represented by the three
ethnicsities in the same canoe) as her own. They didn’t choose her (as would be in the original story of the statue’s rescue), but she chose them, if she appeared.

**Relationships Expressed**

What constitutes a web of relationships in this syncretic type? Here again there are close similarities between the original and the parallel. If treated as a colonial devotion, the same expectations and concerns are expressed as in the colonial type—nothing “un-Marian” seems involved in a colonial reading of the devotion to the *Virgen de la Caridad*. But in the parallel development, other (i.e., non-Marian and arguably non-Christian) practices and symbols appear in the devotion, thereby making it “syncretic.”

The original founding story and devotion show no difference from other “colonial” Marian devotions. However, in the parallel syncretic developments of the devotion, some significant narrative changes and changes in practices have been introduced: the practices came to emphasize bringing to Mary gifts of gold, yellow, copper and/or glass coloring, and/or bringing the gift of honey, for example. Furthermore, the original statue was changed in this syncretic development, becoming a visual record of an apparition of Mary to three men (one white, one black, one native) in a canoe about to sink in the midst of a storm. Anyone familiar with Cuba’s long struggles for independence and national unity can understand the purpose of the ethnic reinterpretation of the three men in the canoe. Anyone familiar with the history of slavery in Cuba will know the huge ethnic, racial, and cultural importance of the Yoruba and their descendants in Cuba in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One will remember, too, that a frequent religion among Cubans and Cuban Americans (of all colors) is Lukumí—a reformed version of the Yoruba traditional religion. Among the Lukumí *óríṣá* (i.e., sacred beings, but not “gods”) is Oshún, a female *óríṣá* whose colors are gold, yellow, copper and/or glass, and who is offered honey. Oshún in fact became associated with the *Virgen de la Caridad*, because copper is sacred to Oshún, as well as a number of (otherwise irrelevant) external coincidences.

Many Cuban-American Catholics have invested the *Virgen de la Caridad* with stories and practices that originated in the Yoruba veneration of Oshún. They sincerely believe that they are only devoted to Caridad, and they intentionally might be, while they seem unaware that some of their devout practices came from the veneration of Oshún.
What do they pray for to this syncretic Mary? What is their relationship with her like? Fundamentally it is the same as in the colonial type: those who come seek employment, housing, health, education, healing, and assistance with family matters, to name but a few. These needs remain the most important focus of prayers and practices, with the added element of freedom and cultural identity. No cultural symbol can unite Cuban-American Catholics like the Virgen de la Caridad can. In this there is a close resemblance and continuation of the role as “symbol of cultural identity” found in the colonial Marian devotions.

**Pneumatological**

The fourth type of Marian devotion among Latino/a Catholics is “pneumatological.” This adjectival term refers to the Holy Spirit. I have already written about this in relation to the Virgen de Guadalupe (Espín 1997) and remain confident that a pneumatological devotional type exists among Latino/a Catholics, beyond the one case of Guadalupe.

Let me clarify what I am not saying. First, I am not suggesting or implying that Mary, the mother of Jesus, is God or divine, in any way, for Latino/a Catholics—this claim would be outright unacceptable to any Catholic and, thus, unacceptable to Latino/a Catholics as well. Second, I am not implying, or leading to the conclusion, that Latino/a Catholics are insufficiently evangelized because of what they may be implicitly assuming and expressing about or through some apparently Marian devotions. Third, I am not saying that Latino/a Catholics have somehow fallen into some form of syncretism if and when they “image” God through the Marian symbol. Fourth, I am not assuming or saying that every Latino/a Catholic (in order to be really Latino/a and really Catholic) has necessarily to image the Divine through Mary—there is nothing genetic about this, and obviously there are many authentically Latino/a Catholics who do not image God through the Mary symbol.

So, what am I saying? What do Catholics believe regarding the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit, in Catholic belief and practice, is one of the Trinity. Simply put, the Holy Spirit is one of the three ways in which God is God, in the Mystery of Godself, throughout eternity. God—the Holy Spirit—is loving, accepting, sustaining, guiding, enthusing, and correcting. God—the Holy Spirit—leads and comforts, teaches, counsels and enlightens, gives courage, makes possible faith, hope and love, and in every best way is and acts maternally. Although most Catholics throughout the world have not seemed particularly good at frequently speaking pneumatologically, it is undeniable that any serious understanding of Catholic doctrine, liturgy, and devotional practice discovers the presence, belief in, and action of the Holy Spirit throughout the Catholic universe. There are historical reasons for this apparent Catholic paucity of explicit pneumatological language, but paucity of explicit
language about something does not equal absence of what the explicit language might name. The key question to raise is not whether among Latino/a Catholics there is explicit pneumatological language used in reference to Mary but, rather, whether Mary is related with and to pneumatologically—the relationship is the key component of any devotion.

References


