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### Salve Regina, *Mater Misericordiae*: Images and Identity

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**SALVE REGINA, MATER MISERICORDIAE:  
IMAGES AND IDENTITY**

*Jayme M. Hennessy, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies*

When the University community gathers to celebrate the matriculation and graduation of our students at the Convocation and Commencement ceremonies, we join our voices to sing the University hymn: Salve Regina. In this nineteenth-century rendition of a twelfth-century plainchant we intone:

*Hail, Holy Queen enthroned above – O, Maria.  
Hail, Mother of Mercy and of love – O, Maria.  
Triumph all ye Cherubim. Sing with us ye Seraphim  
Heaven and Earth resound the hymn....*

Usually we seem to catch the triumphant tone of the hymn and joyfully belt out the closing line: Salve, Salve, Salve Regina! Putting enthusiasm aside, I often find myself wondering about the significance and meaning of these medieval titles and images of Mary for an American Catholic University in the twenty-first century. In our present day, the religious devotions and Catholicism of the European immigrants who staked out their own place in American culture has ceded to an “American” type of Catholicism, which does not offer its adherents access to the cultural experience of identifying with an earthly Queen, much less a “Holy Queen enthroned above.” At best, we can generally imagine some idea of Princess—thanks to the media images of Diana and the magical world of Disney. Those endearing images of princesses, however, seem tied to rather negative ideas of queens as old women struck with jealousy, and sometimes inclined towards evil. Further complicating the access of most American Catholics to the significance of the Marian images within the tradition is the decline or discouragement of Marian devotions that followed the reforms of Vatican II. Add to this situation the tendency of feminist theologians to treat the traditional Marian images as a means of perpetuating the patriarchal

oppression of women through conveying impossible ideals, and these images of Mary, then, seem at best irrelevant and at worst problematic. What then to think of the images of Mary in the Salve Regina hymn for our University community in the twenty-first century? Do these images of Mary as Holy Queen and Mother of Mercy have any significance for the identity and mission of the present day Salve Regina University, or are they merely pious notions or quaint artifacts of medieval European Catholicism?

I propose that the task before us is the reinterpretation of these images of Mary as Holy Queen and Mother of Mercy for the identity of the University in the historical reality of our present day. The intention of this paper, then, is to initiate that interpretive project by treating the images of the Salve Regina hymn as symbolic images, whose significance and meaning for the identity of the University call for further examination. My work here is but the opening of a conversation about these images with the hope that others will contribute to this interpretive project. Towards that end, I briefly develop the foundations of this task, and initiate the processes of retrieval and reinterpretation that can lead us to exploring the particular identity in the history of Salve Regina University in relation to the claims of the present day. To put the project simply: What does it mean when our Alma Mater is the Mater Misericordiae?

#### I. FOUNDATIONS: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

“Who I am” has everything to do with “what I do.” Approaching the relationship of the name “Salve Regina” to the mission and self-understanding of the University in the twenty-first century, involves understanding if, or how, the symbolic images offered in the chant and prayer have any significance for the self-understanding of the University community. Contextually, the study falls neatly into the concerns of the field of virtue ethics, which strives for the harmonization of actions with one’s character or identity. Simply put, virtue ethics attends to the cultivation of character and the processes by which this character is developed. In this model of ethics, a person consciously aims to develop his or her identity/character, and then proceeds to shape this character through the practices, habits, virtues and affections that serve as both the means and end of this life-long project. The formative task of virtue, while creative and dynamic, rarely starts with a blank slate. Persons mature and develop within a community that communicates and maintains a certain set of virtues,

values, and affections through its stories and symbols. The character or identity of both the community and its individual members, then, are matters of construction, which take place within the context of historical claims of the present day and the traditions maintained by the community.

#### 1.1 VISION AND REALITY: SALVE REGINA COLLEGE

The name “Salve Regina College” held particular significance for the founding Sisters of this University who sought to establish a Catholic institution of higher learning for young women. Granted a State Charter for a College in 1934, the Sisters spent the following thirteen years praying the Salve Regina, as they sought Mary’s assistance in securing a campus for their mission. Their prayers were answered in 1947 with the gift of Ochre Court from the Goelet family and the Bishop of Providence. Thus, what had formerly existed as a vision was finally a tangible reality embodied in the limestone walls of Ochre Court, the collected texts for the library, and the hearts and minds of the students and their Sister professors. With deep gratitude to Mary, the Sisters named the college “Salve Regina.” Its name honored not only the advocacy of Mary, the Queen of Heaven and Mother of Mercy who had delivered a stunning mansion to the Sisters, it also honored the faith of the Sisters who found in Mary a partner whom they could trust to support them in their work of mercy – educating the women prohibited access to the Catholic colleges of the day – just because they were women.

What we may fail to realize in this story of vision and piety is that these images of Mary as Holy Queen and Mother of Mercy may have offered the Sisters and young women of that day a vision of a powerful woman who acted in the public arena. It was a model of womanhood not usually found in the images that characterize American life in the late forties and throughout the fifties, and early sixties. During these post-war years, the culture attempted to return American women to domestic life after their contributions to the workforce and armed forces during the years of World War II, through what Betty Friedan termed the “Happy Housewife Syndrome.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, it was against this backdrop of images of the “Happy Housewife” provided in media like “Father Knows Best,” and “Leave it to Beaver,” or “the Loony Housewife” of “the Lucy Show” that the Sisters of Mercy, and the young women who came to Salve Regina, envisioned the possibilities for women that upheld their capacity for scholarship as well as

their potential to contribute to the public life of the country.

Approaching the name, and thus the identity of Salve Regina University in this present day, sixty years after the founding of this University, we do so in a social and cultural context that differs from the reality of its founders and the young women who formed its first class of students. Even though we may find ourselves connected by faith and hope to the vision of the Sisters of that day, we cannot assume that the same extends to our understanding of the particular significance of the University's name and its mission in the present day. Thus, the images of Mary presented in the University hymn and their significance for the identity of the University call for both retrieval and reinterpretation. Just as the founding Sisters of the University, and very likely the young women students who attended Salve Regina in those first few years of the college, found or constructed some significance and identity of Salve Regina for their institution, the same task falls to us, today: the task of bridging the gap that stands between the 12th century medieval world that gave rise to these Marian devotions and titles and the claims of our own historical context.

## 1.2 RETRIEVAL AND REINTERPRETATION OF THE MARIAN IMAGES OF THE SALVE REGINA: WHY AND HOW?

In taking up a study of these medieval titles and images of Mary and their relationship to the identity of the University, the question arises: "Why bother with probing the significance of these quaint medieval religious symbols?" We bother to retrieve and reinterpret these symbols because of their role in the construction of communal identity. In some sense, what we proclaim in song, voice in prayer, or symbolize in visual images is tied to our self-understanding as an academic community. Moreover, these Marian titles presented in song, prayer, and visual image were never just titles for Mary, but a matter of identity and identification for the Christian community in history that generated these images. These devotional images of Mary were symbols through which the medieval community came to discern their identity within their historical context, as they embodied and prompted the affections and virtues deemed essential to Christian life in that day.

Sociologist Clifford Geertz has observed the function of symbols for preserving and expressing the way a community both understands and acts in the world. Symbols, according to Geertz, are not "mere expressions,

instrumentalities, or correlates of our biological, psychological, and social existence; they are prerequisites of it.”<sup>2</sup> Operating, in a sense, as the building blocks for social construction, symbols not only serve to aid in the construction of a social reality, they offer members of a community a means of participating in this reality because they serve to instantiate the beliefs, affections, and values of a community.

While the observations of Geertz are addressed to the cultural reality of religion in general, the contribution of Christian devotional images or texts to the construction of communal identity has been examined by Rachel Fulton, David Morgan, and Paul Lauritzen who treat, respectively, textual devotions, visual piety, and the role of emotions in communal and Christian formation. Pursuing a sympathetic analysis of the devotions of the medieval world, Fulton has proposed that the Marian devotional texts of the times reflect the efforts of medieval Christians to discern their identity in history. To paraphrase Fulton, the images of and devotions to Mary were the tools forged by medieval Christians, to help them know how to feel, to develop the emotions and the dispositions deemed essential to the Christian life.<sup>3</sup> When viewed as a part of a process of discerning emotions, these images reveal a community probing the significance and shape of compassion for the Christian life. Creating images to plunge deeper into the human dimensions of the Incarnation, examining the realities of embodiment and vulnerability shared by the Incarnate God and humanity: images that synthesize the love of God, love of Neighbor, and love of Self with compassion. These different images, then, assert particular affective claims on the viewer as medieval Christians examine the significance of the Incarnation for their lives.

What David Morgan literally brings into focus is that the visual images associated with religious beliefs are not merely illustrations of religious ideas or hopes: these visual symbols and visual practices contribute to the construction of a particular and concrete social reality.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the traditional images of Mary as Holy Queen or Mother of Mercy contributed to the construction of a particular social reality in their own day through presenting affections and beliefs that contributed to the self-understanding of late medieval Christians, who identified with these images of Mary.

Finally, the cultural construction and communication of values, affections, and identity in the observations of both Fuller and Morgan is not a *fait accompli*. Paul Lauritzen has observed that the role of the community

in constructing and maintaining its identity is not a matter of the past, but an ongoing process. Communities discern in their own specific historical context the lived claims of the Christian narrative, and accordingly cultivate and communicate the affections constitutive of Christian identity in history. These affections that arise from this synthesis of narrative and life, are what Lauritzen terms “cultural artifacts” given that they are “culturally mediated or constructed experiences that are shaped by, and crucially dependent upon cultural forms of discourse, such as symbols, beliefs, and judgments.”<sup>5</sup> The combined insights of Geertz, Fulton, Morgan, and Lauritzen provide the foundation for approaching these medieval Marian titles and images as cultural artifacts and symbols that contributed to the formation of Christian identity. Participating in the affections instantiated in these cultural artifacts and symbolic images, then, contributed to the construction of both the social and personal identities of the communal members, who located themselves either within or without the world created and sustained by these artifacts.

### 1.3 RETRIEVAL: PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES

It is one thing to recognize that the textual and visual images presented to us in the *Salve Regina* hymn contributed to the construction of social and individual identity in the medieval world, and another to propose that we understand the significance of these images and their relevance to the identity of *Salve Regina University* in the twenty-first century. The problem before us is the 800 years of history and culture that cautions us against blithe or naïve assumptions as to the meaning of these titles and images in the context of the medieval world. Nancy Netzer reminds us that our knowledge and experience of these images of Mary as Holy Queen and Mother of Mercy is fundamentally fragmented, since our study of these images is often severed from their ritual context, thus “when the context of the signifier changes, what is signified may be altered.”<sup>6</sup> However, taking up the task of retrieval I follow the work of Margaret Miles who insists that the meaning of an image lies primarily **within** the image, within its access to the “inner experience” of life. This “inner experience” of the images which Miles references involves the emotions that are embodied in and expressed through the image.<sup>7</sup> Thus, while these images of Mary as Holy Queen and Mother of Mercy arise from a particular context and have a particular meaning, their significance is not closed to the viewer in the present-day. We can retrieve

some understanding of their meaning. There is some experience of emotional identification that arises in this engagement of the devotee with the visual or textual image, as she understands herself in relation to the stern authority of the Queen or the comforting compassion of a tender mother. In concurring with this proposal of Miles, I would suggest that although she limits her comments to the meaning of images, her insights are applicable to the emotional experience encountered in a devotional text or song.

Finally, given the limitations of this paper, my efforts of retrieval are focused primarily on the image of Mary as the Mother of Mercy, an image that seems more accessible and significant for a twenty-first century American-Catholic community than the Marian image of Holy Queen. Moreover, it is due to her role of the Mother of Mercy and her own *compassio*, her co-suffering with Christ on the Cross, that Mary gains the title of Holy Queen or Queen of Heaven. Although I leave the retrieval of the image of Mary as Holy Queen to a later date, I find it helpful to begin a visual analysis of the images of Mary as Mother of Mercy with the image of enthronement in order to examine the relationship of the image to the identity of the devotee. Moving from the *Throne of Wisdom*, I take up a brief analysis of the events and images that portray Mary as the Mother of Mercy, and provide a foundation for reinterpreting this important image of Mary offered in the *Salve Regina*.

#### 1.4 ENTHRONEMENT AND IDENTITY

The interpretations of the enthronement theme in Marian imagery vary in their mood, appeal to regal authority, and depiction of the humanity and relationship of Mary and Jesus. One of the earliest treatments of the majesty of Christ and Mary is found in the *Throne of Wisdom* (FIGURE 1), sculptures that emerged in the Carolingian period and emphasized the royal dignity and power of Mary and the Son of God, and served also to infuse the power of the Throne with the power of God.<sup>8</sup>

The *Throne of Wisdom* sculptures present Mary as a Capetian Queen who serves as the throne through which Christ asserts his authority over the Kingdom of the earth.<sup>9</sup> In this particular example, the artist has clearly attempted to stress the bond of humanity that Mary shares with Christ through careful attention to the similarity in facial features. The sculpture is quite formal in its presentation of Mary and Christ, as befitting an audience with any Queen and her son and King. The rigidity of the



sculpture and the symmetry of the carving invest the image with a sense of order and perfection that intensifies the power of the figures and the threat of judgment. All of these characteristics combine to establish a sense of distance between the viewer and the divinity and power of Christ, who is presented as ruler, lawgiver, and judge. The law book missing from the hand of Christ, the rigid symmetry of the figures, his figure centered and squarely facing the viewer, their emotional detachment<sup>10</sup> all combine to identify the viewer as a subject who is sworn to reverence and obedience. One may seek favor or mercy from Jesus, but in kneeling or standing before this image the viewer identifies herself as subject and sinner confronted with the imminent reality of divine judgment.

Over time, as the humanity of Mary comes into focus, these images of enthronement will be softened by depictions of the love shared by Mother and Son. This emphasis on the humanity of Mary is evident in the Italian interpretations of *The Madonna Enthroned*. This painting by Duccio (FIGURE 2) presents Mary as a noblewoman, rather than queen, thus reflecting the social organization of the Italian city-states. Whether one is engaging the image of Mary as Holy Queen or Noblewoman, the engagement is a matter of identification, through which the devotee comes to understand herself in terms of the power and authority embodied in the image, and, in some images, the beauty of the Madonna and her child.

## 2. IDENTIFYING WITH THE MOTHER OF MERCY

Medieval devotions offer at least two different understandings of Mary as the Mother of Mercy. The earliest devotions tend to focus on the event of the Incarnation, with Mary as the Mother of the Mercy of God: the Mother of Christ. In these devotions she is more a vehicle or medium for the enfleshing of divine mercy, than an agent of mercy, although that point does merit further discussion. Later images, like the Cloak of Mercy, tend to focus on the mercy that Mary offers to those who suffer, or for the sinners facing the judgment of Christ and the possibility of eternal damnation. It is fascinating to watch the increasing agency of Mary, relative to the growing interest in her humanity, which marks the devotions of later medieval Christianity.

In the following images we can see some aspects of Mary's motherhood of Mercy. The *Eleous* icon and the Fra Angelico's interpretation of the Annunciation event both portray Mary as the one who bears the Mercy

of God into the world. The Ravensburg *Madonna* depicts Mary's Cloak of Mercy, thus emphasizing her own merciful actions in a rather subversive interpretation of Mary as co-redeemer.

### 2.1 MOTHER OF THE MERCY OF GOD

This twelfth-century Byzantine icon is typical of the genre (FIGURE 3). The images serve to make the divine Mercy of God present to the viewer, thus they function as a window through which we glimpse the divine. Here we encounter the mercy of the God become flesh. The scene is purposely tender, as the God who has become flesh presses his cheek against his mother's, the woman who has shared with him her flesh. Mary, here, is the Mother of the Mercy of God, as the event of the Incarnation has overcome, to some extent, the distance between the divine and human.

### 2.2 THE ANNUNCIATION

In this fifteenth-century painting, Fra Angelico depicts Mary's "Yes" to the Angel Gabriel, the messenger who presents Mary with her call to play her part in salvation history (FIGURE 4). His portrayal of this moment teases out the intimacy of this experience, while placing it in the cosmic drama of Salvation. The modern viewer may interpret the image as a depiction of passive compliance with God's will, thus missing the intense drama of this moment as Mary begins her work as the co-redeemer of humanity. Placed within the context of the fallen world, Fra Angelico presents this scene of the Annunciation and Incarnation as a moment in time in which Mary's answer will change everything. Here, Mary becomes the Mother of Mercy, enfleshing the divine redeemer who will save humankind from sin and eternal death. Fra Angelico emphasizes this moment of recapitulation in which obedience to the divine will redeems us from the disobedience of the Fall. We see Mary and Gabriel juxtaposed against the sad figures of Adam and Eve as they are banished from the Garden of Eden. The ray of divine light, symbolizing the creative power of God, diagonally cuts across the scene, unifying the pairs of Adam and Eve with Mary and the angel Gabriel. We see Adam and Eve bent with shame, driven forward by the Angel, whereas Gabriel and Mary are bent towards each other with reverence, sharing the same visual plane. In this manner Fra Angelico brings forward the collapse of the distance between the human and divine instantiated in the event of the Incarnation, and emphasizes the

capacity of the human for divinization, for the actualization of the Image of God within the person.

This painting is but one of Fra Angelico's interpretations of the Annunciation story. In his scenes he is consistent in his depiction of the symbolic details traditionally found in the late medieval and renaissance paintings of this New Testament scene: the creative and animating light of divine power, the presence of the Holy Spirit, the angelic messenger, and the text of the Old Testament scriptures on Mary's lap. Later we will see that a number of these elements have been preserved in a contemporary interpretation of the Annunciation event by Patty Wickman.

### 2.3 THE MADONNA OF MERCY

This wonderful sculpture of the Ravensburg *Madonna of Mercy* depicts Mary as the one who acts with mercy (FIGURE 5). When Christians turned to Mary, here, as the Madonna or Mother of Mercy, they sought the love and care of a mother who would never turn them away or abandon them to suffering. She was their advocate who could soften the judgment of Christ against the sinful, and if that failed, you could hope that she would enfold you into her cloak of mercy and sneak you past Christ and into heaven.

Amy Neff, in her article "The Pain of Compassio: Mary's Labor at the Foot of the Cross" (1998), addresses the active compassion of Mary that unites her to the redemptive suffering of her son, as well as the suffering of humanity. Neff proposes that the *co-passio* of Mary, in later medieval paintings of the *Passion*, presents Mary's suffering as a physical sharing in Christ's passion: the 'pain of childbirth' through which Mary gives birth to the community of believers, her children for whom she is "mother, protector and intercessor."<sup>11</sup> Note the profound difference between this sculpture of Mary as the Madonna of Mercy and the majestic representations of the Queen at the beginning of this study. Where the images of Mary as Queen establish distance and embody stoic power, this image presents an accessible and tender woman who will protect those who seek her care. Where images of Mary as Queen claim the devotee's obedience, fealty, or perhaps even fear as subject of a Holy Queen, these images of the Mother of Mercy evoke love and tenderness, and establish a rather intimate relationship between the devotee and Mary.

These three images of Mary as the Mother of Mercy provide a small

sampling of the richness of this tradition and how these images engaged the devotees and contributed to his or her self-understanding within the Christian community and the historic reality of the larger world. What emerged towards the close of this Marian tradition in the late medieval world was a profound sense of the importance of compassion in the Christian life. Rachel Fulton, in her study of the devotional texts of the period, proposes that the various images of Mary that stressed the humanity of her motherhood and her compassion for her son: "...schooled religiously sensitive men and women in the potentialities of emotion, specifically love, for transcending the physical, experiential distance between individual bodies – above all, bodies in pain."<sup>12</sup> Through these images of Mary's love, Christians came to identify with the potential of love in their own lives, particularly the compassion that was so needed in the chaos of their own world as the Black Death ravaged the European continent. The question remains: "What might these images offer to us in our own world?"

### 3. REINTERPRETATION OF MARY, THE MOTHER OF MERCY

The last ten years have witnessed the efforts of Elizabeth Johnson, Ivone Gebara, and Maria Clara Bingemer to develop a Mariology that refrains from the divinization of Mary, while uncovering the prophetic dimensions of her life, and her commitment to the Kingdom of God.<sup>13</sup> While these efforts are valuable in recovering the historic and liberating character of the biblical person of Mary, the work of Els Maeckelberghe in reinterpreting the devotional images of Mary is more pertinent to our project at hand. Leaving behind a thorough analysis of Maeckelberghe's project, let it suffice, for now, to note that she uncovers the complexity of Mariology and its images, observing that the tradition is not at all monolithic, and does not necessarily perpetuate patriarchal ideals that contribute to the oppression of women. Adapting the symbolic theory of Paul Ricoeur, Maeckelberghe treats traditional Marian images as symbolic images whose meanings are not fixed in time, but determined by the interpreting subject. Key to Maeckelberghe's methodology is the role of women in consciously reinterpreting the traditional images of Mary from their own experience, rather than defaulting to the meanings constructed in the past by the interpreting community of males, who have brought their own gendered experiences and expectations to these images.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Maeckelberghe insists that this interpreting community cannot be limited

to professional theologians, it must include the women who are outside the academy, thus awarding their experience of these images adequate consideration in the process of reinterpretation.

Following Maeckelberghe's method, I propose that identifying with the image of Mary as the Mother of Mercy is a matter of identifying with the human capacity for bringing mercy to life in this world. I offer the following thoughts in order to initiate the long overdue process of reinterpretation of the image of the Mother of Mercy, thus to discover or construct the significance of these images for the present-day identity and mission of Salve Regina University.

### 3.1 MARY AND THE ANNUNCIATION: BEARING THE GOD BECOME FLESH INTO THE WORLD.

"Aren't there annunciations of one sort or another in most lives?" queries Denise Levertov in her poem of the same name.<sup>15</sup> Levertov finds in Mary, a model of human openness to the revelation of the divine, reminding us that we are each called to play our own part in the dynamic event of the Incarnation, of the ongoing reality of the God become flesh. The Word of God's mercy proclaimed by the Prophets is the Word become flesh in Jesus Christ, the Word that Mary bore within her own body, the word that was "flesh of her flesh." The motherhood of mercy in the Annunciation reminds us that this "yes" voiced in freedom demands more than assent to a creed, it entails the embodiment of mercy, the willingness to en flesh some portion of the mercy of God in our communal existence. Whether we embrace this encounter with the Word of God, or turn from it in "... dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair and with relief" the fact remains that the choice is ours to make.

The intersection of the divine revelation of the Annunciation into the experience of the "ordinariness" of our lives is evident in the work of some contemporary artists who bring into focus the intimacy of the revelation of the Incarnation, as well as the ongoing reality of this event. The vibrant oil painting *Annunciation*, by the Jamaican artist Michael Parchment, offers a reflection on this biblical event from the perspective of Caribbean culture (FIGURE 6). Parchment creates a scene that differs from the traditional medieval paintings in its lack of formality and gravity. Here he presents a scene of divine-human friendship and co-operation as Mary and the Angel are joined hand-to-hand- in an informal and happy embrace.

The painting heightens the sense of the “ordinariness” of this extraordinary moment with its sense of intimacy and friendship, as well as the symbolizing fertility and life through the fruits and food that lay at Mary’s feet- all while a cat sleeps cozily at the periphery of the work.

Taking this sense of the extraordinary breaking into the ordinary to another level is (FIGURE 7) the painting *Overshadowed* by Patty Wickman. Here a young woman gazes with curiosity and some sense of caution at the exposed and brightly glowing bulb of a table lamp that illuminates her youth, and the utter messiness of her room. The basic setting seems to resemble an ordinary college dormitory room, yet borrows some of the symbolism of Fra Angelico’s interpretation of the Annunciation Event. We see the figure of the Holy Spirit in the bird shaped shadow projected upon her body. In the lower right hand corner of the scene lies a phone, a rather ordinary means of communication, when contrasted with the angelic messengers. The scene depicts a moment of illumination breaking into the disheveled reality of room and of life. This is the moment of the Annunciation- not in some beautiful garden or room- but in the chaos of our ordinary existence. We are faced with the message: what will be the answer? Will we say “Amen?” Will we allow the Mercy of God to become enfleshed in our lives?

### 3.2 MARY AND THE CLOAK OF MERCY: COMPASSIONATE SOLIDARITY AND ADVOCACY

The Cloak of Mercy today remains a sign of love and compassion in a world that remains battered by suffering and injustice. Yolanda Lopez in a delightful reinterpretation of the the iconic Virgin of Guadalupe offers us a compelling vision of what it means to be the children of the Mother of Mercy, and find ourselves under her cloak (FIGURE 8). This is a cloak that empowers as well as protects. To identify with this Mother of Mercy is to identify with power of compassion and justice as they enter into the world with hope and joyful expectation for the possibilities of a world transformed by love.

The medieval images of Mary’s compassion and mercy for those who suffer or fear the judgment of Christ reveal her ties to her children and her influence with Christ. To identify with Mary, the Mother of Mercy in these contemporary images does not encourage us to cultivate a childlike passivity in the face of our own troubles or the problems of the world. These images compel us to recognize the capacity of the human person for acting

with mercy. We have been redeemed by mercy and called to become persons of mercy. Mercy, then, both given and cultivated is, in a sense, the birthright or obligation of every Christian.

#### 4. CONCLUSION: IDENTIFYING WITH MARY, THE MOTHER OF MERCY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

At the beginning of this essay I raised the question: “What does it mean when your Alma Mater is the Mater Misericordiae?” Allow me to suggest that there are at least three identifying characteristics of a community that identifies with Mary, the Mother of Mercy: compassion, advocacy, and hope. As Salve Regina University we are called to identify with the compassionate love that Mary held for Christ and our fellow human beings. Because of her love for Christ, she is the advocate of those who long for relief from their suffering, and for those who hunger and thirst for justice. Her motherhood and her compassion compel her to care for all humanity. Thus to identify with the Mother of Mercy, today as a University community is to know that we have been called to solidarity with the suffering of persons in the world, and to act with compassion for the relief of this suffering. We do so by cultivating the civilizing affection of compassion in our students, and embodying this compassion in our communal relations.

It is this compassion, then, that compels us to advocacy for those whose voices are not always clearly heard in our world. By virtue of education, and the political and social influence this education yields, we bear the responsibility of advocacy for those whose causes and needs are either ignored or rendered inadequate representation and recognition. Finally, to identify with Mary, the Mother of Mercy is to know not only the suffering of the world, but also the hope of redemption and transformation. In the twelfth century, St. Bernard of Clairvaux penned an imaginative reflection “The Whole World Awaits Mary’s Reply,” in which he depicts the how the biblical patriarchs anxiously hoped that Mary would say “Yes” to Gabriel and God’s plan of salvation would unfold in the world. This hope for redemption and transformation is sorely needed in a world flattened by greed, violence, war, and injustice, a world in which indifference and despair may seem more palpable than love and mercy. As a University community we know the tides of history and the fortunes and misfortunes of humanity: as a Catholic University community we also

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know the “now and not yet” eschatological reality of the Kingdom of God as it continues to unfold in this world.

On this sixtieth anniversary of the founding of Salve Regina University, let us pray that Mary, the Mother of Mercy will continue to intercede for this academic community, and that Christ’s love and mercy will continue to transform the hearts and minds of its students, faculty, and staff. Let us follow Mary’s example of cooperation with the mercy of God, so that we will embody compassion, advocate for justice, and offer hope to those who long for the continued transformation of this world with the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God.

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[All images have been removed for copyright reasons. Images can be viewed by following the links below]

## IMAGES

FIGURE 1. Unknown Artist, *Throne of Wisdom (Sedes Sapientiae)*, 1150-1200, wood sculpture, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

[http://www.metmuseum.org/works\\_of\\_art/collection\\_database/index.aspx?dep=17&vw=0](http://www.metmuseum.org/works_of_art/collection_database/index.aspx?dep=17&vw=0) (accessed April 7, 2006).

FIGURE 2. Duccio di Buonisegna, *Rucellai Madonna (Madonna en Maestas)*, 1285, tempera on panel. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Web Gallery of Art. <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html> (accessed October 12, 2006).

FIGURE 3. Unknown Artist, *Virgin Eleousa*, ca. late 14<sup>th</sup> century, Icon. [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/virg/hd\\_virg.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/virg/hd_virg.htm) (accessed December 11, 2007).

FIGURE 4. Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation*, ca. 1426, tempera on wood. Museo Nacional del Prado, Spain. <http://www.museodelprado.es> (accessed April 18, 2008).

FIGURE 5. Michael Erhart, Ravensburg *Madonna of Mercy*, ca. 1480, painted limewood. Staatliche Museen, Berlin. <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html> (accessed October 12, 2006).

FIGURE 6. Michael Parchment, *The Annunciation*, ca. 1990, oil on cardboard. <http://www.aviscarribeart.com> (accessed April 10, 2008).

FIGURE 7. Patty Wickman, *Overshadowed*, 2001. In *A Broken Beauty*, ed. Theodore Prescott, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005.

FIGURE 8. Yolanda Lopez, *Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe*, 2002. Acrylic. <http://www.udayton.edu>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (Norton Press: New York, 1963.) See Chapter Two for Friedan's observations on this period.

<sup>2</sup> Clifford Geertz *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Book, 1973), 49.

<sup>3</sup> Rachel Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800-1200*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 197.

<sup>4</sup> David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 33.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Lauritzen, *Religious Belief and Emotional Transformation: A Light in the Heart* (Cranbury: Associated University Press, 1992), 57.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Netzer, "Collecting, Re/collecting, Contextualizing and Recontextualizing: Devotion to Fragments of the Middle Ages" in *Fragmented Devotion: Medieval Objects from the Schnutgen Museum Cologne*, eds. Nancy Netzer and Virginia Reinburg, (Chestnut Hill: Boston College, 2000), 17.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Miles, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 76.

<sup>8</sup> Ilene H. Forsyth, *The Throne of Wisdom: Wood Sculptures of the Madonna in Romanesque France*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 6. Forsyth teases out the rather complex relationship between the Throne of Wisdom and the authority and legitimacy of the Carolingian Emperors. This sculpture aligns the throne of the ruler with the throne of both Christ and Solomon, thereby witnessing to the divine right of kings and the relation of the Emperor through Christ and Solomon to divine authority.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 26. Although it may be visually evident to the contemporary viewer that the humanity of Mary has been transformed into the throne for Christ, the significance of this throne, for the medieval viewer is not visually accessible to the modern person. Forsyth observed that “for the Romanesque period Mary clearly figured the Throne of Solomon. She held in her lap the New Testament counterpart to the wise King of the Old Testament, the incarnation of Divine Wisdom, the Word become flesh.”

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 23. Forsyth proposes that the detached and rigid demeanor of this image reflects the Royal Deportment “in his imperious aloofness he recalls the vivid description which Ammianus Marcellinus applied to the attitude affected by the emperor Constantius in procession at the time of this triumphal entry into Rome: “and looking straight before him as though he had his neck in a vise he turned his eyes neither to the right nor to the left, as if he had been a statue.”

<sup>11</sup> Amy Neff, “The Pain of Compassio: Mary’s Labor at the Foot of the Cross”, *The Art Bulletin*, 80, (1998): 14. Neff describes how the physical suffering of Mary, embodied in the ‘swoon’ of some Passion imagery emphasizes both the death and rebirth that takes place at the Cross. Some of the Marian traditions held that although Mary was spared the pangs of labor in giving birth to Christ, she suffered great physical pain at Calvary. There at the Cross she experienced the labor pains through which she gives birth to the Church, and becomes co-redeemer of humankind: “When contemplating Mary collapsing next to the Cross, the Christian viewer could feel compassion for her sorrow and understand that this sorrow enabled Mary to be mother, protector and intercessor.”

<sup>12</sup> Fulton, 197.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 313-315.

Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Binagemer, *Mary: Mother of God, Mother of the Poor* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1989), 99.

<sup>14</sup> Els Maeckelberghe, *Desperately Seeking Mary: A Feminist Appropriation of a Traditional Religious Symbol* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1991), 73.

<sup>15</sup> Denise Levertov, “The Annunciation”, [www.chriscorrigan.com/parkinglot/levertov.htm](http://www.chriscorrigan.com/parkinglot/levertov.htm) (accessed April 10, 2008).