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**"OUR LADY OF THE GARBAGE DUMP":**

***NICHITOS* AS PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SACRED SPACE**

by

Shelley TSivia Rabinovitch, B.A., M.A.

A thesis submitted to  
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**Department of Classics and Religious Studies**

**University of Ottawa**

**Ottawa, Ontario**

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**Canada**

**Our Lady of the Garbage Dump:  
Nichitos as Public and Private Sacred Space**

Shelley TSivia Rabinovitch, B.A., M.A.

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## I - ABSTRACT

This research is based on the examination of artifacts, specifically a series of artifacts known in Spanish as *nichitos* (little niches), found, among other places, in the Catholic Spanish speaking areas of Tucson, Arizona. Similar objects or constructions are also found in the Catholic Italian speaking communities of New York State and Missouri, and in the Catholic French Canadian communities of Québec and Ontario, as well as in French speaking Louisiana. *Nichito*-like artifacts found in other cities, regions, and countries are included for the sake of comparison.

The study of these artifacts is approached from an anthropological perspective, including ethnography, supplemented by folklore studies and informed by the multi-disciplinary context of religious studies.

The research progresses through several phases. A classification of *nichitos* and *nichito*-like artifacts allows for definitions and contextualization of the artifacts themselves. Terms in Tucson Spanish are used for clarification and to establish a lexical norm for classification, as this community appears to have the most specialized collection of terms. An analysis of the context of the *nichitos* identifies the iconographical components of the artifacts. Religious and social aspects of *nichito* use are examined in the barrios of the Tucson area, leading to questions concerning *religiosidad popular* (popular religion) and the links or conflicts between domesticity and official religion.

## II - DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my mother and grandmothers, both by blood and by adoption. Beatrice; Sylvia, Lily; Johanna, Marie-Françoise; Doreen, Joeline. Each one of you stands as a beacon of light in a world which can be filled with monsters under the bed. May your light never dim. Thank you all.

### **Oh Grandmother!**

Shelley TSivia Rabinovitch

*Abuelita* -- little, loving Grandmother.  
How could I expect to find you in Nahuatl garb?  
I stand a Jewish woman, looking at a Jewish woman  
Seen through the eyes of Juan Diego.

Bubby: I thought I knew you.  
Small and loving, making *knishes* and *challah*,  
*Sopapilla* and *tamal*.

My mind understands You.

*Mi Bubby es su Bubby* --  
For nurturing is Universal.  
Archaic music whispers behind you  
As you darn socks.

Luminescent: that I always knew.  
Even as a child, I could see that glow,  
Surrounding you like a holy nimbus.

I light a candle at Your feet,  
Gratitude and thanks for favours granted.  
I say a little prayer of thanks to You.

How can one not love You?  
Old eyes and young heart,  
Guadalupe, Bubby *mi*.

16 November 1999.

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Many graduate students never finish their degree prerequisites due to the incursion of "life" into their studies. I have always been determined not to be one of these students, despite the fact that five years of my PhD studies were subsumed by the trauma of a violent sexual assault. In February of 2000, the Superior Court of the Province of Ontario gave me the vindication I needed in order to complete my stalled academic work. I thank the Greek Goddess Themis, (popularly known as "Blind Justice") for guiding the hand of the judge in this case, and my lawyer, John Summers. May my struggle become a source of inspiration for others who find life threatening to their academic work.

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**I am also grateful to my Committee who found themselves faced with a massive document and poor black and white reproductions of these glorious photographs, yet somehow succeeded in sifting through the chaff to find the wheat within. To Dr. Peter Beyer of the University of Ottawa, Father John Dourley, PhD, of Carleton University, Dr. J. H. Stuckey, University Professor Emerita of York University, and Dr. "Big" Jim Griffith, former Director of the Southwest Folklore Centre at the University of Arizona, my gratitude and thanks.**

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

### 1.1: INTRODUCTION

Ask people what they mean by religion and they usually mention God, rules for moral behavior, and whatever happens in their churches, synagogues, or temples. But behind those beliefs, codes, and forms of worship lie the rituals and values they live by at home: the holiday things that absolutely have to be done; the kinds of success for which no sacrifice or effort would be too much; the sports events that connect with the whole struggle of life; the songs that stand for transcendent love, sadness, and joy; the television shows that express exactly how life is, or should be; and the foods and drinks that can yield the last happiness of old age. This is the realm of domestic religion<sup>1</sup>.

This quote, from Dr. Peter Gardella, highlights the focus of this research on a rarely mentioned but ubiquitous religious practice, that of devotion to the Virgin Mary (and several saints) found mostly in Catholic communities<sup>2</sup>. These practices are centred on the construction, maintenance, and use of niches and/or miniature church-like home chapels or altars.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gardella, opening to Domestic Religion, (1997) quoted in private email, 25 December 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Yvonne Milspaw has written one article (1986) about Protestant home-altars mentioning "*herrgottswinkles*" in German practice, but these artifacts are almost exclusively Catholic in origin.

## **1.2: METHODOLOGY**

This research is based on the examination of artifacts, more specifically a series of artifacts known in Spanish as *nichitos*, found, among other places, in the Catholic Spanish speaking areas of Tucson, Arizona. Similar objects or constructions were also found in the Catholic Italian speaking communities of New York state and Missouri, and in the Catholic French Canadian communities of Québec and Ontario. *Nichito*-like artifacts found in other cities, regions, and countries are included for the sake of comparison.

This study of these artifacts is approached from an anthropological perspective, including ethnography, supplemented by folklore studies and informed by the multi-disciplinary context of religious studies.

The main anthropological references are provided by Clifford Geertz, who pointed out:

The notion that religion tunes human actions to an envisaged cosmic order and projects images of cosmic order onto the plane of human experience is hardly novel. But is hardly investigated either, so that we have very little idea of how, in empirical terms, this particular miracle is accomplished. (Geertz, 1966: 90)

Geertz's definition of culture and religion are used as a starting point for the theoretical questions issuing from this study.

...A religion is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and

motivations in men [sic] by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (b) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Geertz, 1966: 90)

Raymond Firth (1973) is useful in providing a classic definition of symbol, and Victor Turner (1969, 1982) cannot be avoided as the classic reference for ritual as well as the discussion of community involvement. Edith Turner (1992) has become similarly unavoidable when one is dealing with the experiential aspects of religion and ritual. Mary Douglas and her classic studies of Purity and Danger (1966) and Natural Symbols (1973) together with Gregory Bateson (1991), together introduce the discussion on the sacred, purity and impurity when linked with the domestic aspects of *nichitos*.

The folklorists, first among them Kay Turner (1982, 1986, 1990, 1996, 1999), Joe Sciorra (1985, 1989, 1998, n.d.), and Jean Simard (1979, 1989, 1995), strengthen the validity of material culture studies and open a window into the differences between folk and institutional religion. Both anthropologists and folklorists recognize the importance of that part of culture and meaning shown in artifacts and the importance of information transmitted through non-written, oral culture.

Religious studies allows us to bring together such scholars as Colleen McDannell (1995), a historian interested in material Christianity, William Bainbridge (1985), a sociologist working on religious pluralism, Santos Vega (1997), an educator and Hispanic specialist,

Gilbert Romero (1991, 1992, 1993, 1997) and Allan Figueora-Deck, both academics and priests working in California Mexican American communities.

This research progresses through several phases. In Chapter One, a classification of *nichitos* and *nichito*-like artifacts allows for definitions and contextualization of the artifacts themselves. Terms in Tucson-area Spanish are used for clarification and to establish a lexical norm for classification, as this community appears to have the most specialized collection of terms for these practices. Basically, I have taken emic terms and in some cases, adapted them for etic application. For instance, the use of *nichito* to denote a small niche which is privately owned versus *nicho* to denote a larger niche on public property, is my adaptation. In Tucson, *nichito* denotes a small niche regardless of location, while *nicho* merely indicates a larger structure. As most privately owned niches are small while many of the publicly located niches are often quite sizeable, I opted to use the terms in a more technical manner than does the local population.

In Chapter Two, a review of the *nichito* as artifact found in different periods of history and cultural contexts leads to a recognition of its belonging to specific religious and social orientations.

In Chapter Three, an analysis of the content of the *nichitos* identifies the iconographical components of the artifacts, and echoes the conclusion of Chapter 2.



We are then ready in Chapter Four to place the artifacts back into their socio-cultural context, focussing primarily on Mexican American, Italian American, and French Canadian communities.

In Chapter Five, religious and social aspects of *nichito* use are examined within the barrios of the Tucson area, leading to questions concerning *religiosidad popolare* (popular religion) and the links or conflicts between domesticity and official religion.

This link becomes the focus for the discussion in Chapter Six, of what takes place at the *nichitos*, that is, the ritual aspects of the *nichitos* complex.

The issue of domesticity and its place in religion is taken up again in Chapter Seven, in the larger framework of *religiosidad popolare* and the theoretical implications of the presence of domestic religious practices within, or beside, institutional religious practices.

### 1.3: INFORMATION GATHERING TECHNIQUES AND INFORMANT BACKGROUNDS

Data on the artifacts was originally compiled from printed sources such as magazine articles. This collection was soon extended to photographs taken by me over an eight year time span. Following discussions with acquaintances and friends, as well as with email

correspondents, more photos became available, both as prints and as electronic "jpg" files<sup>3</sup>. This spider's web of contacts and volunteered documentation led to a collection of several hundred pictures.

The visual records were supplemented by ethnography in the barrios of the Tucson area. Formal interviews were conducted with 17 individuals, with informal interviews supplemented with casual conversations with approximately 35 more people. In all cases, Tucson informants were Mexican American, and self-identified as '*Tucsonenses*'. Most came from large families with between five and twelve siblings. The youngest *nichito* owner interviewed was in her early 30s, and the eldest was 74. Approximately 25% of the women indicated a parent had abandoned their family at some point<sup>4</sup>. Most informants were from the Tucson area; those who had relocated into Tucson did so from Mexican or Mexican American locations<sup>5</sup>. Most informants spoke both English and Spanish, although the level of fluency in English varied greatly, and in four cases a child or grandchild translated my questions. In one case, despite a Mexican surname, an informant did not learn Spanish until she studied it in elementary school. All informants had children, and/or step-children, although elderly informants no longer had them living at home. All

---

<sup>3</sup> "Jpg" files are an electronic format of storing images on a computer once scanned.

<sup>4</sup> This loss of a parent was underlined in the strong familial relationship these informants expressed towards the Virgin Mary. Informant Ruth Bravo indicated "I talk to her all the time because I have no mother." Mary Garcia indicated, "To know Her is to love Her, since I have no mother."

<sup>5</sup> One informant moved from Tombstone to Tucson in 1949; another from Sinaloa in Mexico via Los Angeles, in 1980.

informants identified themselves as being devoutly Roman Catholic, but as with an old joke from the area<sup>6</sup>, they were not necessarily regular church-goers. No informants self-identified as Anglos (i.e.: Irish Catholic).

Interviews were frequently difficult to obtain for two reasons. Many photos were taken first, with a subsequent knock at the door going unanswered. In two cases, neighbours indicated the resident of the house was deceased. In a few cases, the family spoke essentially no English, and no one was in the home who could act as interpreter. Ethnicity was in some cases obtained from the name on the mailbox at the house, or by the name given to me by a neighbour.

In cases where a knock on the door was answered, the man of the house if he was at home, almost always answered the door. Once I was asked the nature of my visit ("I am a university researcher from Canada, and I would like to talk with you about your *nichito*"), the husband would then most often invite his wife to answer my questions. In two cases the husband indicated it was not his business ("Ah, that. It's my wife's, let me ask her to talk to you."), and in one case the husband offered to bring me to a much larger, more impressive *nichito* where I would find more interesting information. This is how I

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<sup>6</sup> The joke tells of a parish priest meeting a man he has never seen before, asking if the gentleman is Catholic and Mexican. When the priest asks the man why he has never been seen in church at mass, the stranger replies "*Bueno, padre. Soy católico, si; pero no soy fanático.*" ("Well father, I am Catholic, but I am not a religious fanatic.") Officer, 1981, p. 138.

discovered one particularly lovely large fountain-*nichito* in Menlo Park, owned by Ruth Bravo (fig. 128, 129).

I made a conscious effort to be culturally sensitive to the concerns and sensibilities of the barrio communities. In order to put informants at ease, I dressed in a very conservative fashion. Most often, I wore a scarf over my hair, and a long skirt, dressing in an acceptably modest fashion for a Mexican American woman. Before taking pictures, I lingered at the fence of the home, looking admiringly at the *nichito* with the hope that a resident of the house would notice me. This was also designed to put informants at ease, rather than "shooting and running".

During one photo expedition, a summer monsoon started pouring while I was taking pictures. As the desert gets very severe storms, I decided to note addresses with *nichitos*, and return another day for photos and interviews. The informants who had seen me cruising by their homes slowly, in a brand new rental car remembered my presence. Since in some barrio neighbourhoods, a new car driving by homes slowly can be a sign of an impending drive-by shooting, it was understandable that I was noted by neighbours. Needless to say, they were quite relieved when they found out why I was in the area.

Once a conversation was engaged, informants took great pleasure in talking about their *nichitos* and the contents therein. One informant sent her two children scurrying about, pulling all the items out of the *nichito* to sweep and dust, in order to make it "tidy" for the

photographer. In a second case, the elderly *nichito* owner unscrewed the plexiglas cover to her *nichito* so that I could better admire its contents. She lovingly pulled out *bultos* (statues of saints and related figures) and other tokens of her faith, cradling each with great care and reverence.

The informants' reaction to discussing their *nichito* was at first surprise, then pleasure that someone felt this humble practice was worth studying. In nearly all cases, informants indicated they had a *nichito* because they "wanted" one. In one case the wife indicated the *nichito* was built because her husband desired it, and he and his friends used it more than she did. In most cases the pattern was that the wife wanted a *nichito*, the husband agreed, and either the husband and other male relatives built the structure, or else a community *nichito*-builder was hired to do the work.

In every case, once my business was made clear to the owner, I was greeted with open arms and invited in past the fence (the boundary between public and private is very clear in Mexican American homes with the *nichito* being a sort of gateway between these two states<sup>7</sup>). Similarly, in Western Mexico during a cruise with my mother, I found the ubiquitous street urchins and taxi-drivers left me alone as soon as I asked where the *zocalo* (town square) was, and where was the church dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe. Somehow, this interest in things spiritual clearly differentiated me from the run of the mill

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<sup>7</sup> Daniel D. Arreola (1980/81: 102) explains the Mexican American view of fences in Tucson: "good fences make good neighbors". p. 102

tourist. The *Tucsonenses's* sense of spirituality unites the community, and my interest in this personal expression of belief opened doors for me which might have been closed otherwise<sup>8</sup>.

## CHAPTER 2: THE ARTIFACTS

### 2.1: DEFINITIONS

Depending on the country studied, small household Virgin Mary or saint shrines follow set patterns depending on the ethnicity of the family owning it. In order to simplify this study, terms most often used by families in Southwestern Arizona to describe these artifacts will be used, as this geographic area represents location of the greatest number of artifacts studied, and has a specialized lexicon for specific, related practices and artifacts<sup>9</sup>. This standardization of terms is intended to clarify the discussion of numerous, related practices from vastly-differing linguistic groups. When a term is applicable to French Canadian or Italian American practice, it will be noted as such.

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- <sup>8</sup> Important in so many cultures, food became a guide as to whether or not I had been accepted by my informants beyond the level of social politeness. By my second visit to Ruth Bravo, I was invited in as an old friend, and offered home made tamales for lunch. Dr. Santos Vega of Arizona State University brought me into his favourite restaurant in Guadalupe, introducing me to the staff, translating for me and treating me to a delectable Baja-style meal. Mary Garcia offers soft drinks and other items from her store every time I visit. Clearly, my interest in *nichitos* and the Virgin Mary opened both doors and hearts.
- <sup>9</sup> The exception will be the use of the Italian term *edicole* to refer to ceramic wall-plaques. Tucson Mexican-Americans seem to have no term to differentiate these from other *nichitos*.

### 2.1.1: *NICHO* (fig. 1)

In Mexican Spanish, the term "*nicho*" merely denotes a niche, whether it serves a religious or a secular purpose. *nicho* is a secular architectural term denoting a specific construction in Spanish mission-style of indentations in walls reminiscent of the religious practice of niches featuring saint-statuary in churches. Religiously, a *nicho* is a large niche-like structure with walls and/or a roof of some shape where one or more religious statues ("*bulto*" in Mexican Spanish) are housed. (fig. 2) An Ecuadoran taxi driver in New York City informed that his community calls these little niches "*urnas*" rather than "*nichos*"<sup>10</sup>.

My Arizona informants indicated that a *nicho* can accommodate one adult standing inside (but rarely more than one adult). They are most often erected on private land or on land where the ownership is indeterminate (e.g., the side of a roadway or on a cliff side). A few *nichos* may have a plaque indicating the names of owners and/or builders of the niche, but most often they are apparently anonymous in origin. The term *niche* in French Canadian usage is a very specific one, and refers to the indented location in which a religious statue would be placed.

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<sup>10</sup> Personal communication, Luis, New York City, June 1999.

### 2.1.2: *CAPILLITA (CAPILLA)* (fig. 3, 4)

At first glance, one might mistake a *capillita* for a *nicho*. Like *nichos*, they are also stand-alone religious structures, but in Hispanic practice, a *capillita* is different from a *nicho* in that it is either on church grounds, or sponsored/maintained by a church-related organization. In Tucson, Arizona, a *capillita* was recently erected on Fort Lowell Road outside an old mission church. The *capillita* is large enough for one worshipper only, and is situated on the edge of the church property. Like most *nichos*, it features *bultos* and a shelf where a worshipper can leave candles and/or offerings. A *capillita* is often blessed, but is not consecrated in Hispanic practice. (Larger structures are called "*capillas*".)

There is a *capilla* in Santa Cruz Parish that is dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe. It is used on a regular basis for Mass, but more so for prayer by the immediate neighborhood. Also, we would recognize Our Lady of Guadalupe/Casa Maria as a *capilla* serving the homeless, with Mass celebrated each Monday. It also is within the boundaries of Santa Cruz Parish<sup>11</sup>.

In French Canadian practice, a "*chapelle*" may or may not be the same as a *capillita* despite the linguistic similarity. A *chapelle* always has walls, a roof, and a door (if merely decorative ironwork). In French Canada however, a *chapelle* is exclusively intended for prayers, and will feature a blessed and consecrated altar within, an attribute which is not necessarily shared by a *capillita*.

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<sup>11</sup> Email from Fred Allison, Roman Catholic Diocese of Tucson, 19 Dec 2000.



As well, size is not relevant in the use of the French term, so one may find a place of worship properly referred to as a *chapelle* such as the one in the Mother House of the Grey Nuns in Montréal: this *chapelle* can easily accommodate over two hundred worshippers. In French Canadian practice, a small roadside place for personal devotion can be termed an "*oratoire*" (literally, a place where one orates, or speaks), and need not feature walls and/or a roof. A roadside cross or crucifix (*croix de chemin*, in French; see *Cruces*, below) can serve as an *oratoire*. In a country where the weather could be brutally inclement, it was understood that prayers said at an *oratoire* could serve as an acceptable emergency substitute for attending mass<sup>12</sup>.

### 2.1.3: *NICHITO* (fig. 5, 6)

Keeping with the Spanish practice of indicating size by adding "*ito*" or "*ita*" to a word, a *nichito* is a small *nicho*. Some families will refer to their front-yard shrine as a *nichito*, while others will call them a *nicho*. This primarily seems to relate to the size of the shrine, and sometimes to the sophistication of the decoration and design of the structure. *Nichitos* always feature some sort of arched structure, miniature church- or house-framework, or other enclosure, to protect the statuary and other items therein. They have sometimes been disparagingly described as "Mary on the Half-Shell", or "Mary in a Bathtub", owing the fact that an actual bathtub is often utilized, buried in the ground, to create a niche-like shape around its contents.

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<sup>12</sup> Conversation with Lucie DuFresne, January 2001.

*Nichitos* are most often on private property, and are maintained by the family living at the location. As documented in the Italian community of Brooklyn, N.Y. by Joseph Sciorra (Sciorra, 1986), new families moving into a house with an existing *nichito* will often continue to maintain the structure. The smallest *nichito* documented in this study stood just over a foot tall, while the largest one was described as a *nicho* by the owner's brother-in-law, and was an ornate tiered fountain structure, surmounted by a *nichito*. The latter *nichito* stands over eight feet tall.

French Canadian folk religious practice also encompasses *nichitos*, where they are called *petites niches* (literally, "little niches") or "*oratoires*". There is no comparable French word for the English term "shrine".

#### 2.1.4: YARD SHRINE

This is a related practice, more popular among the Italian communities than the French or Spanish, but appearing in all three cultures. A yard shrine features a *bulto* (or more than one, in some cases), often with spotlights to keep the figure lit during the evening hours. (fig. 7) It is not unusual to find figures of the Immaculate Conception atop bird bath-type fountains, or behind some potted plants. (fig. 8) The main difference between yard shrines and *nichitos* appears to be the lack of a structure around the statuary. The boundary of the yard shrine is often delineated by the planting of decorative blooming flowers, (fig. 9) or by placing the statue in a structure such as a tractor-tire sprayed white.

French Canadian families often place a statue of the Virgin Mary on a pedestal or by itself, often with a trellis of real or artificial flowers to form an arch over her head, in a front or back yard. However, there appears to be no specific term for this practice in the vernacular. As well, such religious statues without architectural protection are often brought inside the house over the winter months to protect the figure. When they are left outside to cope with the harsh Canadian weather, *bultos* are often wrapped up mummy-like in plastic or burlap to protect the statue. (fig. 10)

#### 2.1.5: *CRUZ* (CROSSROAD CROSS) (fig. 11)

Roadway intersections in many Roman Catholic countries have traditionally been marked by whitewashed crosses, often 10 feet or taller in height. This practice is far more common in French Canada, where they are termed "*croix de chemin*", literally, roadside cross, than in the *Pimeria Alta*<sup>13</sup>, and continues today in parts of Québec, New Brunswick, and Ontario, as well as in parts of rural France. The crosses are most often erected on private property adjoining public roadways, facing intersections where three or four arms of a road intersect. European folk belief has often considered crossroads to be dangerous places, and in Greek mythology, crossroads were the place where the chthonic goddess Hecate dwelt. (Grimal 1965: 103). In modern French Canada, the placement of a *croix de chemin* often delineates the boundary of a parish.

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<sup>13</sup> The *Pimeria Alta* is the old Spanish term for the region including southern Arizona and northern Sonora state, Mexico. The term has been used extensively by Dr. Jim Griffith in his books.

*Cruces* in Québec and Ontario will often have a small glassed-in gabled style box mounted on the cross itself, usually at eye-level to the standing traveller. Inside the box is a *bulto*, most often an Immaculate Conception (Mary) or Sacred Heart (Jesus)<sup>14</sup>. (fig. 12) These crosses were often the closest a traveller could get to a church for regular mass, and in times of extreme inclement weather it was considered an acceptable substitute to pray at the foot of these crosses. Even today, it is not unusual to see travellers stopping at a roadside cross to say a quick prayer and make the sign of the cross before continuing on their travels<sup>15</sup>. In the *Pimeria Alta*, travellers utilize *nichos* in a similar fashion, as most of the *cruces* are simple iron structures devoid of religious statuary.

#### 2.1.6: *DESCANSO* (DEATH-MARKER CROSS)

Sometimes called *cruces* as well, this is an old practice in some Roman Catholic countries. A number of drivers have remarked that one can tell in Italy where the dangerous curves are on the road by the number of white crosses positioned in the area. In its simplest manifestation, a *descanso* is a simple cross of decorative wrought iron or simple wood,

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<sup>14</sup> Environ 40% des croix possèdent de telles niches. Elles renferment une statuette qui représente la plupart du temps la Vierge Marie, soit comme **Immaculée Conception**, nimbée de 12 étoiles et écrasant la tête du serpent, comme **Notre-Dame de Lourdes**, en robe blanche ceinturée de bleu, ou encore comme **Notre Dame du Cap**, avec sa couronne de majesté. (Simard: 1989, 34.)

<sup>15</sup> Il n'y a pas si longtemps, on récitait encore dans certaines campagnes la prière du soir et les litanies de la Vierge au pied de la croix. L'église étant souvent trop éloignée, plusieurs paroissiens venaient y faire leurs exercices de Mois de Marie, notamment si la croix était parée d'une niche contenant une statuette de la Vierge. (Porter et Desy, 1973: 135.)

sometimes with the name of the deceased on it and/or the death date. *Descansos* are very common throughout Arizona and New Mexico, and are gaining an increasing presence in parts of Canada. More ornate death markers start with a cross and will have silk flower wreaths placed on them. Some *descansos* are still more elaborate: some number of roadside *descansos* start with a *nichito*, often with a picture of the deceased in it, and have the death *cruz* atop the *nichito*. Such *descanso nichitos* are often less than a foot tall and are not visible from the road unless one knows to look for them.

This Hispanic practice has been adopted in recent years by high school students of all religious and ethnic backgrounds in the *Pimeria Alta*. In the 1970s in Tucson, it was rare to find a roadside death marker that was more than a cross with a name and perhaps silk flowers. Outside a major shopping mall in Phoenix, is an elaborate death marker complex from 1998 which is being maintained by the students from the high school the deceased attended. (fig. 13, 14) Spray painted messages to the deceased cover half a city block on the pavement around the actual *cruz*, and cross the street to the traffic island across from the *cruz*. Stuffed animals and candles surround the white wooden cross with the victim's name, as do faded pieces of paper and ribbon. One of the unique features of this roadside death marker complex is that the *descanso* and candles are ringed in the shape of a heart, with smooth stones marked with messages such as "you are loved", and peace signs. The marking of *descansos* with rings of smooth stones is common among the Tohono O' Odham tribe (formerly the Papago) of southern Arizona, as documented by Jim Griffith (1992). The *descanso* features attributes of Hispanic Roman Catholic and O' Odham

Catholic practices, and is still maintained by the deceased's classmates over a year and a half after his death.

#### 2.1.7: *ALTARCITO* (fig. 15)

*Altarcito* is Spanish for "little altar". The *Altar* is an altar found in a Church, blessed and consecrated; the *altarcito* is a small, or domestic, altar in a home. Home altars fall within the Roman Catholic Church's view of personal devotions, and they are evident in most Roman Catholic cultures. Homes with a *nichito* will usually have at least one *altarcito*, and more likely, a number of *altarcitos* within the home. Some devout Mexican American families have an entire room devoted to their daily "*sacramentales*", but most working class families cannot afford such luxuries.

*Altarcitos* are most often found in the kitchen, the bedroom, and in the main, or living, room. Kitchen *altarcitos* are concerned with making sure there is enough food in the home, much as the Romans had altars for the *Lares* and *Penates*. (Haddad, 1965) They are most often dedicated to either the Archangel Gabriel, or Saint Martin of Tours (San Martin Caballero). A small ritual is performed, usually once a week, and the saint is supposed to make sure there is food and drink sufficient for the family, in return.

Bedroom *altarcitos* will often feature a religious statue or two, often a family bible and, most frequently, clippings and/or statues of deceased members of the family. The

bedroom *altarcito* is often found atop a dresser or on top of the bed headboard if the headboard features a largish flat surface such as a book shelf. Most often the figure in the bedroom *altarcito* is a Pieta (Mary holding the dead body of her Son), or a crucifix. (fig. 16) This *altarcito* features prayer cards from funerals of family members, obituary and memorial notices, and pictures of prominent and noteworthy deceased Roman Catholics. One informant in Tucson informed me she kept pictures of the late President John Kennedy on her *altarcito*, adding Pope John Paul II's picture after he was shot by a would-be assassin. She indicated that 'important, special people' would be represented on a bedroom *altarcito*. As the bedroom is a private location, prayers regarding the family and one's personal devotions are often said by the bedroom *altarcito*.

The third type of *altarcito* found in Mexican American homes is the main room *altarcito*. As many of the old barrio-type homes were comprised of a kitchen, a living room, and the sleeping rooms, the main *altarcito* is most often found in the living room. Today, these are often perched atop an entertainment system cabinet or television, but they can often take up a bridge-table sized table. These will feature the Holy Family members and other saints which are most favoured in the family. Most often there will be at least one Virgin Mary *bulto* (statue) here and fresh flowers, with figures such as Saint Francis of Assisi, El Niño de Atocha, or Saint Joseph ranged around the Mary. These seem to be places of individual meditation and where a family gathers for family prayer. When a family blessing is offered to the children of the home, such as on Sundays, this is the location of the blessings.

*Altarcitos* seem to function as liminal places. They are located IN the home of the Mexican American family, but function as a bridge between the daily, mundane life, and the sacred world of God and the Holy Family. Prayers can be offered here and small daily rituals are performed to insure the health and happiness of the human family. Those things which are both least important and at the same time, most important, are discussed at home *altarcitos*.

#### 2.1.8: WORKPLACE *ALTARCITO* (fig. 17)

These are common in many Roman Catholic countries, and can be found adjacent to cash-registers in Lebanese Catholic restaurants in Ottawa and Sardinian (Italian) tourist shops. Overwhelmingly, these workplace *altarcitos* feature the Virgin Mary in some incarnation as well as other religious figures. They can feature prayer-cards, religious statuary (often under 5" in height), and/or Palm Sunday crosses<sup>16</sup>. Unlike many of the more public manifestations of religious faith and identity, workplace *altarcitos* often face the employees and NOT the public. Prayer cards to a particular saint are often tucked under the cash register or taped to it, and the more dangerous the job, the more likely one is to find a workplace *altarcito*. A 1994 visit to a glass-blowing factory in Cabo San Lucas (Baja, Mexico) revealed a workplace *altarcito* permanently installed in a cinder block wall of the factory near the furnaces (fig. 17). Between the fire of the furnace and the risk of

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<sup>16</sup> These are crosses and other shapes fashioned from Palm Sunday fronds which are blessed during mass and then displayed in the home for the rest of the year as an apotropaic object. (DuFresne, personal communication, Jan. 2001)



injury as the craftsmen shaped the molten glass, it was no surprise that the Holy Family was present in the workplace to guard and protect the workers.

#### 2.1.9: *SACRAMENTALE* AND VEHICULAR *ALTARCITO*

In the Sonoran areas adjoining southern Arizona, Mexican buses and cars alike are festooned with pictures, hanging medals, rosaries, and other religious paraphernalia. These function as both workplace and vehicular *altarcitos*, such as this one over an Ecuadorian taxi driver's rear-view mirror in New York City. (fig. 18) Working drivers, such as those driving buses or taxis, often have a picture of the Virgin Mary taped to their dashboard, or around a bus driver's windshield in Mexico. Small commercial flags with religious mottos and/or papal flags, silk flowers and religious pictures, often create a virtual *nichito* on a bus driver's windshield on the Mexican side of the international border which divides the *Pimeria Alta*. The general Mexican Spanish term for the medals, holy saint pictures and figurines, and other related paraphernalia is "*sacramentales*", or sacramentals<sup>17</sup>.

More privately, vehicular *altarcitos* are evident in French Canada and both Italian and Hispanic America. They can be as simple as a small Virgin Mary or Sacred Heart of Jesus plastic statuette on the dashboard of a car or as ornate as a complete "sacred space" delineated with offerings. Many Roman Catholics will place 2 to 3 inch tall religious

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<sup>17</sup> Email discussion, Dr. Santos Vega, Arizona State University, 27 October, 1999.

figures on the dashboard as a sort of protective talisman, as well as serving as an identity statement. The practice was so common that a popular folksong of the 1960s made light of the "Plastic Jesus riding on the dashboard of my car"<sup>18</sup>. It is notable that a random sampling of automobiles parked in various shopping centre parking lots in Ottawa in 1999 featured similar numbers of cars with rosaries or Virgin Mary figures on the front dashboard, as miniature prayer chests with quotations from the Koran in them. (fig. 19)

The height of 'automobile as personal sacred space' was one car in the Sylmar, California, area. Borrowed from a friend by the driver in 1998, the compact car was a rolling Goddess shrine. Bumper stickers proclaimed the spirituality of the owner, and the entire front dashboard was covered with tiny Goddess statuary from around the world, sacred stones, a sweetgrass braid, flower petals, and other offerings. The driver (whose own car was under repair) expressed extreme discomfort at this very public statement of her friend's religiosity, which she felt was very 'over the top', as it were.

#### 2.1.10: *TIRADITO* (fig. 20, 21)

Dr. Jim Griffith of the Southwest Folklore Centre has indicated that there are some number of shrines in the *Pimeria Alta* region he describes as "victim-intercessor" types.

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<sup>18</sup> The tune to this ditty is from the oral tradition. The parody words were written by Ed Russ and George Cromarty in the 1960s, and later arranged by Ernie Marrs. The Marrs rendition was published in Sing Out! magazine V. 14, #2, 1964. (Source: <http://bestofbroadside.com/Marrs.htm>, viewed 13 Jan. 2001)

(Griffith, 1990) The most famous of these is in the old barrio section of Tucson, referred to as "*El Tiradito*", or the "Wishing Shrine". *El Tiradito* sits in the middle of busy downtown Tucson, Arizona, and is on the register of National Historic Places, noted as "the only shrine in the United States dedicated to the soul of a sinner buried in unconsecrated ground"<sup>19</sup>. The Shrine itself is a three-sided adobe wall, with a niche in the middle of the back wall. There is always at least one iron stand for pillar-candles, and the site is always festooned with flowers, candles, prayers and other notes on paper, as well as other offerings. Although there are other *tiraditos* in Arizona, "*El Tiradito*" is the best known.

The official "legend" of the site indicates:

Dr. F.H. Goodwin employed a young sheepherder named Juan Oliveros, who lived with his wife and his father-in-law on Goodwin's ranch. Oliveros had become infatuated with his mother-in-law, who lived in Tucson, and would visit her when he was able. One day he was with her when her husband, who had come down completely unsuspecting that anything might be going on, surprised the couple in their adulterous love. The older man evicted Juan violently from the house and in the ensuing struggle, seized an axe from the woodpile and killed him. The father-in-law fled to Mexico, and Juan was buried where he had fallen. (Griffith, 1990: 106)

Another account explains the importance of the site, even if it is a bit vague on the narrative: "There's this wishing shrine down by the community centre. This old man was killed, and if you want anything real bad, like if you want a new car or if you're in the third

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<sup>19</sup> This information is provided on a historic sites plaque placed in front of *El Tiradito* itself.

grade and want to pass into the fourth, you go there and tell the old man that if you get it you'll go and light a candle for him." (Griffith, 1990) This, of course, is the whole point of *El Tiradito*. It is a place of petitions, a place where miracles can be requested and where it is believed they can be granted. (Griffith, 1990: 108)

#### 2.1.11: *EDICOLES* (CERAMIC HOUSE PLAQUES) (fig. 23)

These are particularly popular in the *Pimeria Alta*, and appear in Portugese, Spanish, and Italian European Catholic practice as well. Homes in Ottawa of Portugese origin sometimes feature favourite religious scenes comprised of approximately a half-dozen ceramic tiles. The tiles are most often mounted somewhere on the entrance face of the home, but additional scenes can be located anywhere on the outside of the home. (fig. 22)

In Tucson, the most popular plaque scene is that of the Virgin Mary as Our Lady of Guadalupe, Patroness of the Americas, sometimes nicknamed the Dark Virgin, or the Mexican Mary. The classic picture of Guadalupe is inspired by her image on the *tilma*, or fibre cloak, said to have been worn by the Mexican convert Juan Diego who had a visitation of the Virgin outside Mexico City. The actual artifact is still on display in the Cathedral dedicated to Guadalupe in Mexico City.

This particular rendition of the Virgin Mary appears on artwork all over Hispanic America, and sets of eight to twelve ceramic tiles comprising her image are very common items in religious supply stores throughout the Southwestern United States. Most often, ceramic

Guadalupe tiles appear in communities of mixed ethnicity, and seem to replace the *nichito* as a public statement of religious identity. They always appear on an outside house wall facing the street, often near the doorbell. Ceramic tile saints and *nichitos* seem to be mutually exclusive in the Pimeria Alta: no examples of both occurring concurrently were collected during the fieldwork for this study. A few samples in Tucson featured a Virgin Mary ceramic wall plaque and an empty *nichito*.

#### 2.1.12: PEREGRINACION (TRANSITORY PILGRIMAGE SITE)

These are different from permanent sites of prayer, such as Lourdes grottos attached to churches. Most often a transitory pilgrimage site marks the violent death of someone in the local community and after a suitable period of mourning, offerings are moved and the location returns to its former, secular, state. These sites are also different from death-crosses in that they do not generally have anything left permanently on the site to mark the deaths.

These are not unique to the Roman Catholic world, although the offerings left by mourners seem to differ slightly in different contexts. The temporary and transitory nature of these locations is the result of public response to a specific incident where the public, feeling moved to express grief and solidarity with the families involved, leave notes of condolences, flowers, stuffed animals and more, at a location related to the deceased.

#### 2.1.12.1: DIANA, PRINCESS OF WALES

One example of this phenomenon was the the outpouring of grief after the death in 1997 of Diana, Princess of Wales, and her companion, Dodi Fayed. Offerings and notes were left not only at the Princess' main residence (Kensington Palace) (fig. 24), or at Buckingham Palace; but rather, they were deposited around the world wherever the public perceived a relationship with the Princess. Flowers were left outside the Princess of Wales' military unit, in Winchester (England) (fig. 25); outside the Princess of Wales' Theatre in Toronto (Ontario); outside the British Embassy (Washington, D.C.); and all across England where any tenuous link with the Princess could be made. Indeed, a poster reading "Diana, We Love You" outside a flower nursery in one small town was sufficient to cause mourners to deposit offerings nearby. (fig. 26)

In most cases, offerings consisted of flower bouquets, sometimes with a personal note attached. Very few other items were left, such as toys or pictures, but candles were lit at many locations outside of churches. The outpouring of grief was so profound that English florists had to declare a shortage of flowers<sup>20</sup>. A permanent museum and pilgrimage site has been established by Diana's family on the family estate, and it is reported that visitors still leave offerings near the grave.

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<sup>20</sup> Unattributed quotation, Newsweek Magazine, Dec. 22, 1997, p. 27.

#### **2.1.12.2: JOHN F. KENNEDY, JR.**

The death of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Jr., his wife and sister-in-law spurred a nonstop pilgrimage of what the media called "average Manhattanites<sup>21</sup>" to the front of his home in the TriBeCa area, in 1999. Unlike the offerings to Princess Diana, the JFK Jr. site was covered in offerings more common to Roman Catholic transitory pilgrimage sites: a plethora of stuffed animals, framed pictures and hand-made posters (fig. 27) , money taped to the walls of the building (fig. 28), ornate floral arrangements from "A Cuban", or "A Mexican", pillar candles featuring the Sacred Heart of Jesus or the Crucifixion (one anonymous mourner left three matching white pillar candles to which s/he affixed newspaper photos of the three deceased, creating prayer candles for each individual) (fig. 29) , and a range of small good-luck charms such as pictures of four-leaf clovers (the Kennedy family being Irish), little crystal pendants, and notes indicating that masses would be said in the memory of the deceased.

A week after the bodies had been recovered from the crash site, mourners had disappeared from the Hyannisport area where the Kennedy family had mourned, but the lineups outside the TriBeCa apartment had barely abated in volume. Within a few weeks of the funeral for the three victims of the crash, life returned to normal outside the TriBeCa apartment

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<sup>21</sup> Jane Gross, "Small Gestures of Grief for a Young Man Larger Than Life", p. b-1, New York Times, Thursday July 22, 1999.

building, with virtually no signs of the thousands who had lined up to share a moment with the deceased.

#### **2.1.12.3: PIERRE ELLIOT TRUDEAU**

As Canada's 15th Prime Minister, Pierre Elliot Trudeau remained an enigma to many who knew him well. His rapid rise to power in the country's Liberal Party was so charismatic, the media coined the term "Trudeaumania" to describe the phenomenon. At home on the national or international stage, a mix of English and French ancestry, Trudeau became a politician who was in some ways, larger than life. His two surviving sons indicated in the late summer of 2000, that their father was ailing. As a result, his death on Sept. 28, 2000, created more of a sense that a statesman had been lost and that an era had ended, than the sharp pangs left by a young life cut short. The outpouring of grief, sorrow, and appreciation from Canadians towards Trudeau surprised everyone.

Trudeau had been known for his wearing of a trademark red flower in his lapel every day he served as Prime Minister of the country, most often (but not exclusively) a single red rose. So it was that from the moment of his death onwards, red roses became the offering of most mourners. Immediately after the news of Trudeau's death was announced, local residents in Montréal started to visit his front yard, leaving roses and Canadian flags. newspaper As the body was shifted to Parliament Hill in Ottawa to lie in state, thousands



began to leave offerings around the Eternal Flame, a gas-powered fountain on Parliament Hill with a large 24 hour flame at its apex. (fig. 30)

Before long, there were oceans of flowers, mostly roses (fig. 31). The National Capital Commission, which oversees the grounds on Parliament Hill, had to remove the mountains of offerings twice a day to keep up with the volume of tributes to the late Prime Minister. Visitors left canoe paddles with poems written on them, a tribute to Trudeau's penchant for travelling by canoe in Canada's wilderness. One child left a "beanie baby" angel along with a handwritten note expressing her sorrow at the death of the man who had done 'so much for the country'. (fig. 32)

A smattering of votive candles were left by the Eternal Flame, but visitors seemed to feel that the flame itself took the place of any offering candles they might light around it<sup>22</sup>. Photos of individuals with the Prime Minister, election paraphernalia, small offerings of personal meaning, all dotted the area atop and around the Eternal Flame. A very small number of visitors left flowers or other gifts by Trudeau's portrait in the main hall of the Parliament buildings, or next to the flag-draped casket itself, but these were whisked away within moments by Hill staff, who duly brought handfuls of flowers from inside the Hall of Honour, back out to the Flame.

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<sup>22</sup> Informal discussions with various visitors to the Eternal Flame, Ottawa, 30 Sept. and 1 October, 2000.

Tributes and offerings continued to pile up around the Flame until the day after Trudeau was buried in Montréal. After the state funeral, it was as if mourners felt closure had been achieved, and the flood of flowers and gifts was stemmed. As with other sites of *peregrinacion*, within a week of Trudeau's death, no sign of the pilgrimage site remained.

#### 2.1.12.4: O.C. TRANSPO (OTTAWA, ONTARIO) (fig. 33)

Another example of the *peregrinacion* phenomenon includes the flowers and notes left outside the garages of the Ottawa-Carleton Regional Transit Commission (known as "OC Transpo") in early 1999 when four employees were gunned down by a disgruntled former employee. This Ottawa pilgrimage site was marked by flowers and some hand-written letters, but few other items (e.g. stuffed animals). (fig. 34) On the anniversary of the shootings, some individuals have continued to leave floral memorials at the edge of the corporate offices, but there is again, no ongoing memorial location.

#### 2.1.12.5: PIZZA HUT (TUCSON, ARIZONA) (fig. 35)

The murder of three Tucsonans at a Pizza Hut restaurant in 1998 created a spontaneous pilgrimage site which left the restaurant chain owners baffled as to how to cope with the phenomenon. The evening manager, a waitress and the cook were gunned down one evening by the waitress's estranged boyfriend. The restaurant management opted to close

the restaurant for some indefinite period of time while they tried to decide if they could reopen, or sell the land to another business.

The billboard outside the restaurant featured a large black bow around it, erected by the management. (fig. 36) The local population turned the actual building into a peregrination site. The entire west side from parking lot edge to entrance, was constantly covered with offerings from mourners. Poetry, stuffed animals, flowers, coins, letters to the deceased, and even food (oranges, apples, a ketchup bottle) were left outside the doors. (fig. 37) Messages were even written on the walls themselves with spray paint and felt-tip markers.

The outpouring of grief at this site was so intense that, after two months had elapsed, some of the family members of the deceased went on local television thanking the people of Tucson for their feelings but asking them to please desist. In all probability, the restaurant chain would be well served to build a small *nichito* on the edge of the parking lot so that mourners could continue to leave offerings while the building owners could reclaim the location itself. Two years after the shootings, the restaurant remained vacant although offerings were no longer left at the building<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> As of the winter of 2001, the entire building had been destroyed and the plot of land was up for sale. No visible offerings remained at the site.

### 2.1.13 *NACIMENTO* (fig. 38)

Literally, a *nacimiento* is a Nativity scene. Arizonan Mexican Americans build quite ornate indoor *nacimientos*, often featuring whole villages as well as members of the Holy Family. Although less in vogue than they were 30 years ago, outdoor nativity scenes are still seen among both Italian and French communities in the U.S. and Canada. (fig. 39) French Canadians most often refer to these as *crèches*, although the word actually refers to the manger itself. With the inclement northern weather during the Christmas season, the most ornate Nativity scenes are found inside the home rather than being displayed outside. The most ornate *nacimiento* in this collection comes from a church in Tucson, on Swan Rd. (fig. 40) The congregation puts together ornate life-size displays every year which are so eye-catching that city police have to regulate the flow of visitors by the church's entrance. These pictures were taken in 1993. For the bi-millennial year of Christ's birth, Saint Joseph's Oratory museum in Montréal featured 300 *nacimientos* from over 100 countries in an impressive display of both artistry and faith.

### 2.1.14: *ALTAR (OFRENDA)* (fig. 41)

Although this literally translates as "altar", the word has a very specific meaning to Arizona's Mexican American community. The altar is the specific altar used for the Day of

the Dead rituals, and is erected only in private homes. *Ofrenda* is an alternate term for the Day of the Dead altars, and translates to "offerings" (one assumes, to and for the Dead.) *Altars* often feature marigold flowers and/or petals, as they are thought to help guide the dead home, (Rice, 1993: A-16) as well as skeletal figures, pictures of the beloved dead, and other artifacts. *Altars* are always located inside the family home, much like *altarcitos*, and are not visible from outside the house. The Day of the Dead festivities blend All Saint's Day (Nov. 1 and All Soul's Day (Nov. 2)) from the Roman Catholic church, with Mexican pre-Christian beliefs about the dead.

#### 2.1.15: *BULTO*

A *nichito* is not a *nichito*, nor a *nicho* a *nicho*, without the presence of the Virgin Mary and/or various saints of the Roman Catholic church. In Arizona Spanish parlance, religious statuary is referred to as *bultos* (singular, *bulto*), and this thesis will follow this practice. In New Mexico, *bultos* of saints rather than the Holy Family are termed "santos", but this term is not used in Arizona.

#### 2.1.16: *MILAGRO* (fig. 42, 43)

Known in the Roman Catholic church as "ex votos", these are frequently symbols of a wish or request. A *milagro* can be an eye or hand, foot or crutch, made of tin or other base metal, which is pinned to the clothing of a holy figure or onto a picture of a saint.

Some *milagros* are made in the shape of a tiny man or woman, representing the petitioner's wish for a spouse. In the Hispanic world it is rare that a *milagro* is larger than an inch or two in size. Some individuals will leave a silver "wedding band" at the church in order to underline their prayers to God for a wife or husband. The statue of Saint Francis at the Mission San Xavier del Bac outside of Tucson, Arizona, is frequently covered in *milagros*, as is the hem of the Virgin Mary figure in the main chapel.

#### 2.1.17: RETABLO

A *retablo* is a specific type of picture featuring the Virgin Mary or other members of the Holy Family. The term comes from the Latin '*retro tabulum*', meaning "behind the [altar] table"<sup>24</sup>. Theoretically, any painting of a religious figure can be termed a *retablo*, but the Mexican American use of the term is far more specific: a *retablo* is a painting, usually on tin, which is painted by an individual in thanks for a miracle received. The University of New Mexico, Las Cruces campus, has a collection of *retablos* numbered at over 1,500, featuring *retablos* which thank saints and religious persons for miracles ranging from helping out during an illness, to helping someone cross into the United States illegally (e.g., to help them avoid the Border Patrol). The Virgin Mary in various forms is extremely popular on *retablos*.

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<sup>24</sup> [http://www.nmsu.edu/General/ucomm/public\\_html/Panorama/sept99/center.html](http://www.nmsu.edu/General/ucomm/public_html/Panorama/sept99/center.html) viewed Jan. 14, 2001.

## 2.1.18: *MANDA*

A *manda* is a promise made to a saint in exchange for the saint's intervention on behalf of the supplicant. Many *nichitos* and *altarcitos* are built as *mandas*, in fulfilment of the petitioner's half of the bargain, as it were<sup>25</sup>. Arizona has many *nichos* and *nichitos* built after sons returned home safely from World War II, Korea, and the Vietnam conflict. (fig. 44, 45) In the case of the Mule Pass *nicho*, its builders mounted in front of the structure a plaque with these words for all to read.

Dedicated to Our Blessed Mother by the Madrid Family:  
May 12/1951

Mary Mother of God, pray for us...,  
For those in the Armed Forces  
For the weary traveller  
And for all who ask for your help.  
Amen.

Here the mother, Josifina Madrid, pledged to have the *nicho* built if her sons came home safely from Korea. Buy and Sell type newspapers such as the Pennysaver in Ottawa, are often filled with little classified ads to Saint Jude "for favours fulfilled". These are also *mandas*.

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<sup>25</sup> "If someone was sick a promise was made (I will make a pilgrimage, etc.). This goes back to God's BILATERAL agreement with Israel. If the prayer or promise was not answered -- it was the wrong time, etc." (Father Gilbert Romero, 28 August, 1998, Los Angeles, California.)

### 2.1.19: BARRIO

In some Hispanic and Latino communities, "barrio" is a politically charged description of a community or part of town. The Spanish word *barrio* can also mean "political ward", or "precinct", as in an area so-designated for voting purposes. Tucson has historically used this term to denote a community, or closely-knit Mexican American neighbourhood. In this thesis, the use of *barrio* is intended in the spirit that Tucson and Phoenix Mexican Americans utilize it: the demarcation of a neighbourhood which is culturally and ethnically Mexican American, and geographically congruent.

### 2.2 WHAT A *NICHITO* IS NOT, AND WHY

The construction and maintenance of *nichitos* is not officially sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church of any country. Rather, *nichitos* appear to be a manifestation of the folk-veneration of the saints and other quasi-religious figures. *Nichitos* are not public places of worship; rather they are semi-public, and appear to be primarily located on private property (most often on the home-side of a fence). The construction and use of *nichitos*, *altarcitos*, and related practices is broadly tolerated under the umbrella moniker of "personal devotions".



*Nichitos* are not merely locations for the depositing of *bultos* or candles, nor are they "showplaces" for the items they contain. *Nichitos* serve as a link to the ethnic and religious roots of the family itself. There are no "official" rules regarding the form, size, or decoration of *nichitos*, yet the individual tastes of the owners and the understood practice of a given community influence the look of each *nichito*.

*Nichitos* rarely appear attached to apartments (e.g., on balconies or front lawns); they are primarily a phenomenon associated with detached or semi-detached homes<sup>26</sup>. As Father Gilbert Romero of Los Angeles noted, "sacred geography is YOUR place, therefore one sees no *nichitos* on apartment balconies. We have been blinded to the sacrality of SPACE by the urban geography, and by the enlightenment."<sup>27</sup>

When access to the figure is not possible to the general public (i.e., someone uninvited), or when the figure is not easily seen by someone walking or traditionally, riding a horse, then it is not a *nichito* - it is something of a statement of faith, but not something which expects and invites, the passerby to participate in the sharing of that faith. (fig. 46)

*Nichitos* are not purely sacred space, nor are they purely secular. Similarly, they are neither public nor private, yet they remain both. They are shared, yet individually owned.

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<sup>26</sup> In my travels I have found only one niche (French) in Ottawa in the East end of the city, where the figure, niche itself, and flowers were located in front of a rowhouse.

<sup>27</sup> Father Gilbert Romero, PhD, interview, 28 August, 1998.

There are rules as to what goes in, on, or around a *nichito*, yet no regulations are published anywhere. They are an intensely Roman Catholic expression of faith, yet *nichitos*-like structures are present in numerous religions. The one thing one can affirm about *nichitos* is that they are personal expressions of a relationship between the worshipper and the Divine.

*Nichitos* are not built when a family first moves to a location. Rather, they appear to have a relationship with time and place and space, such that a new location is inappropriate for a *nichito*. Many informants indicated that they waited seven or more years before erecting a *nichito* on their property. Establishing a *nichito* at a location indicates a much deeper relationship between family and home.

Similarly, a family does not take down or transport the structure of their *nichito* if they move. There are numerous examples of *nichito*-structures which now sport potted plants or nothing at all. Similarly, it is Jewish practice to leave *mezuzahs* up on the door lintels if another Jewish family is to move into the home<sup>28</sup>, and it appears that something similar occurs with *nichitos*. Sometimes the statuary and other personal artifacts are removed from the structure, but the structure is left extant.

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<sup>28</sup> This folk-practice was related to me by my mother when I was a child, and I have heard it verified by other Jewish families of my acquaintance.

Father Romero affirms that *nichitos* are not portable because the changing of space equals the changing of historical reality.

One cannot pick up sacred space and move it. It is the memory of what has transpired at the sacred space that **MAKES** it sacred. Therefore when architecture and space is changed, sacrality changes. The external representation of what makes it sacred **MUST** start over all over again. Once you've left the place you can't just have the same thing. You must start over.

The memory of experience with feelings, history, is maintained for them. When you move to a new place, you need a new way of making contact with God. It might be a new *altarcito* or *nichito*, it may be new rituals or devotions.<sup>29</sup>

Joseph Sciorra documents cases in New York City where new families take up the upkeep of a *nichito* and its contents when inherited from the home's former owners. (Sciorra, 1989) Barry Ancelet discovered a bizarre case where a Creole (Protestant) family purchased a home from a Cajun (Catholic) family in Louisiana. The new owners of the home were uncomfortable dismantling the *nichito* they inherited, but were also uneasy with the presence of a Roman Catholic structure on their property, as well. Apparently they compromised by leaving the *nichito* with its Virgin Mary intact, but they 'augmented' the structure by placing a ceramic goat atop the *nichito*, painting the goat with black and white zebra stripes<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Father Gilbert Romero, interview, 28 August, 1998.

<sup>30</sup> Dr. Barry Ancelet, personal communication, 2000.

*Nichitos* are not exclusively a Roman Catholic practice, as other Christian denominations feature similar practices. The *herrsgottswinkle*, or "God's-corner", is a contemporary practice in parts of Germany as well as in the Pennsylvania German Protestant communities of the United States<sup>31</sup>. This bedroom *altarcito* is from the Protestant tradition, yet Milspaw herself notes that her grandmother's *herrsgottswinkle* featured some Roman Catholic figures.

The Greek Orthodox church has a related practice of icon niches called *eikonostasio*. These often look much like a mailbox (e.g., a glass and iron structure poised atop a pole, at eye level), and are related to the hearth altars of ancient Greece. (Turner, 1999: 50) (fig. 47) Greek niches as seen in many Greek towns are OUTSIDE the property line and/or fence, while *nichitos* exist on the private side of the fence or hedge. One informant in Greece<sup>32</sup> indicated that these structures were filled with candles, icons, oil and water, and were intended for travellers to refresh themselves both spiritually and physically.

*Nichitos* are not required of the religious practitioner. Many families will wait for years before building their *nichito*, as noted above, but there is no pressure on them to build one at all. *Nichitos* are constructed out of a genuine wish to have one; they are a religious enhancement to one's worship, rather than a surrogate for regular attendance at church.

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<sup>31</sup> Milspaw, in Turner, 1999: 51.

<sup>32</sup> A tour guide in Rhodes, Greece, in 1997.

## 2.3: DESCRIPTIONS

### 2.3.1: *NICHO/LES NICHES*

**"*Nicho*"** is a term which is sometimes used to denote any sort of niche where *bultos* or other religious paraphernalia are kept. Therefore it is technically possible for one to have a personal *nicho* in one's bedroom or living room. However, Arizonans primarily use **"*nicho*"** to indicate a large structure in a public, or semi-private, location. Some *nichitos* will be described as **"*nichos*"** because they are large structures despite their private location, i.e., on someone's lawn, but as a rule, a *nicho* is understood to be large and accessible by the general public without having to open a private gate or trespass on private land.

The location of a *nicho* is up to the patron who erects it: they are most often found at the side of highways (public locations) or on the property of Roman Catholic schools and hospitals. Larger-than-usual niches on private property are often referred to as **"*nichos*"** in recognition of their grand scale.

*Nichos* are most typically white on the outside, and either white or medium-blue on the inside, the colour most associated with the Virgin Mary in Roman Catholic iconography. Some are constructed out of adobe or plaster, while others can be built of fieldstone with

mortar. Few *nichos* are built of wood boards or steel/aluminum. When built of plaster/adobe, *nichos* appear to try and echo the shape of a chapel, but emulate grottos in other cases. Grotto type structures such as the one the Virgin of Lourdes (France) appeared in, are quite typical forms for *nichos*, and examples have been collected of such *nichos* in numerous cities and towns. *Nichos* in grotto-shapes (*grottes* in French) are particularly numerous in French Canada due to the popularity of the Virgin of Lourdes among that population.

More popular than the man-made grottos for prayer and veneration, are actual grottos and caves. Often these are also on land of indeterminate ownership, and have been "claimed" by the worshippers as their own. On the island of Mauritius is a grotto to "Our Lady of Good Hope" (Notre Dame de Belle Espoir), in which are offerings including *bultos* (statuettes), fruit, and a plethora of candles.

In Tucson, a large natural grotto is in regular use despite its daunting access route. Situated partially up the side of "A" Mountain, the grotto is located approximately four storeys above the rushing cars at the intersection of Mission and Starr Pass Roads/22nd Street. Accessing the grotto is a real test of faith and perseverance, as there are no stairs or other conveniences for the faithful. Small red ribbons mark the path through the desert brush up the side of the cliff. Below the cave itself is a man-made structure of glass and white-painted wood, in which are numerous candles and statuettes to Saint Jude, the patron saint of lost causes. (fig. 48)

A short climb above the lower *nicho* is the cave itself, its entrance outlined with red silk flowers. This cave is large enough for two or three persons to enter, and it is littered with both intact and broken *bultos*. The Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and Saint Jude are the most common, with a few Virgins of Guadalupe in evidence amid the pillar candles, wax spills, foodstuffs, coins, and much more. (fig. 49, 50) One legend says that this cave was originally sacred to the Tohono O' Odham, the First Nations of that area of the Southwest, but that Roman Catholic Tucsonans took the cave over for their practices. Whatever its origins, the cave *nicho* and the smaller man-made *nicho* below it are clearly still actively used as sites of prayer and supplication.

Jim Griffith, former director of the Southwestern Folklore Centre at the University of Arizona has indicated that some impressive *nicho*-like cliff side paintings in Mexico (Sonora) have been erected by members of the drug trade. Their creators had been unwilling to ask the Virgin to help them in their crimes, but they are apparently quite willing to thank her for protecting them during their dubious enterprises, and for aid in the future.<sup>33</sup>

*Nichos* are usually stand-alone structures with the Virgin Mary as the central figure within. A typical *nicho* is that found on the side of the highway near the Mule Pass outside Bisbee, Arizona, west on Highway 80, built in 1951 by the Madrid family. (fig. 44, 45) The *nicho* was built as a *manda* to give thanks for the safe return of the Madrid sons from the

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<sup>33</sup> Dr. Jim Griffith, private conversation, Tucson, Arizona, 1995.

Korean War. The *nicho* is a narrow whitewashed structure with a wrought iron unlocked door, approximately seven feet tall at maximum height, with enough room for one adult to stand upright within. On any given night, over two dozen tall pillar candles gleam within, along with numerous rosaries draped around the neck and feet of the Virgin Mary statue. The *nicho* stands in a small cut-out on the side of the highway, with a sheer drop of many hundred feet on the opposite side. Two cars can comfortably park nose-to-tail in the rock cut-out.

Like other *nichos*, this one features numerous items left by strangers, such as notes to Jesus, Mary, and the saints, coloured printed pillar-candles, *milagros* (tin representations of body parts) and *sacramentales*, and items of personal significance, such as a watch belonging to a dead relative, or a photo of a beloved family member (or sometimes even a pet). Hospital patient-ID tags are very often found at these sites. Small amounts of coin are also often found in niches, along with the ubiquitous silk flowers and small saint-figurines. French Canada does not seem to join in the practice of large semi-public *nichos*; certainly the building of large semi-private religious monuments by private individuals has dropped out of vogue in Québec since the "Quiet Revolution" in the 1960s.

One notable *nicho* is located in Miami, Arizona, at the side of a major copper-mining operation. Local informants indicated to me that this *nicho* was erected as a thank-you for miracles performed for one family in town. (fig. 1, 2) It is approximately eight feet tall, with a shelf inside which serves as an altar-top of sorts. Miami is a very small community



on the outskirts of Globe, and the boundary between the two communities is somewhat vague to the casual traveller. My informants in Miami have indicated that the mine-side *nicho* is often vandalized by unknown individuals<sup>34</sup>, and a number of local citizens have become self-appointed guardians of the *nicho*. When vandalism occurs, these individuals repaint and repair the *nicho*. Despite the fact that it features wrought-iron gates, the *nicho* is still left unlocked at all times. It is possible that the cycle of vandalism and restoration could be one manifestation of the tension in this community between the Anglo and Hispanic population.

#### 2.3.1.1: "OUR LADY OF THE GARBAGE DUMP " *NICHO* (fig. 52)

Given the prerequisite of a *nicho* being located on somewhat public land, and accessible without the need to cross onto private property, the smallest *nicho* in this study is located just west of the Tucson, Arizona, city limits, in rural Pima County. (fig. 51) By size this would qualify as a *nichito* (small niche), but by location and usage it is better categorized as a *nicho*. This structure, nicknamed "Our Lady of the Garbage Dump", was constructed by Freddie, a local resident. There are no services into this area of the county, and no

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<sup>34</sup> The tale of vandalism and repair was verified by Tucson's Bishop, Manuel Moreno, during a personal interview in 1998. Dr. Jim Griffith reports that some *capillita* owners view such vandalism as acts of ultra-Protestant iconoclasm.

roads. As pointed out by one informant, "every time the monsoons come, the geography changes out here. You have to know where you're going."<sup>35</sup>

The "Garbage Dump" *nicho* is located approximately an eighth of a mile into the desert, through mesquite and cactus clusters, and is not evident from the nearest road<sup>36</sup>. This area is one which has been an informal garbage dump for over ten years; not one administered by any governmental agency, but rather, the sort of area where old couches, burnt out car bodies, and cases of alcohol go to die, as it were.

Both Clint and Lisa Davis have indicated that the Garbage Dump *nicho* was originally actually IN a pile of cast-off items. Clint Davis indicated that the statuette in the centre of the *nicho* had been discarded into the garbage as it had a broken arm and was also broken at the knees.<sup>37</sup> Apparently someone dug the pieces out of the pile of garbage and stood them up, at which time a neighbour started to tease the area children that Mary would "get them" for leaving her there.

Subsequently, another neighbour (Freddie) apparently felt that the Virgin Mary might well be displeased at the treatment of her image. He took the statuette home, reattached the

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<sup>35</sup> Lisa Davis, personal conversation, August 1998.

<sup>36</sup> My guide and I took two wrong turns into the desert in search of this *nicho*, and almost imbedded the car in the loose sand of an arroyo, or dry river bed. Although on public land, the *nicho* is not easily accessible.

<sup>37</sup> Davis further indicated that the *nicho* was built in 1994.

body to the lower legs and cleaned the figure up, but did not repair the broken arm and veil. Originally he replaced the figure in a prefabricated plaster "brick-look" niche structure, but later decided to build a "proper" *nicho* for the statuette, out of brick and mortar. As a result, the statuette and plaster "niche" are enclosed by a brick and mortar peaked structure, approximately four feet in height.

In the five years since the Lady of the Garbage Dump arrived in the middle of the desert, order has begun to appear out of the chaos of a dump. By the time photos were taken of the site for this study, the garbage had been moved approximately ten feet away from the *nicho* in all directions. The remains of boxes, an old sofa, various alcohol bottles, rubber tires, and other flotsam of humanity are still evident around the *nicho*, but the cleared area around the statuette has been carefully maintained by parties unknown.

Inside the *nicho* itself are various offerings which were not placed therein by Freddie. Draped around the feet of the *bulito* is a rosary, and two largish candle holders have been placed on either side of the figure. Both real and silk flowers stand on either side of the statue, framing it. Candle wax stains and burned-out glass pillar candles indicate that the *nicho* is in fairly regular use. As no one appears to claim ownership of the *nicho*, and as it is on public land (or land whose ownership is uncertain), this structure is clearly a small *nicho*, rather than a *nichito*.

### 2.3.1.2: GUADALUPE *NICHO*, GALLERY OF THE SUN

Towards the northern end of Swan Road in Tucson is the Gallery of the Sun, an art gallery and foundation left by the late Arizona artist Ted de Grazia. De Grazia is arguably the most famous artist in the state, having worked in numerous media during his lifetime. A devout Roman Catholic, in the 1950s de Grazia and some of his local First Nations friends built a small chapel to the Virgin of Guadalupe on the edge of his property. Although the Gallery itself has set opening and closing hours, the chapel itself is never locked, and is accessible from the road without entering other parts of the Gallery lands. (fig. 53)

The building can seat approximately fifty people in the main sanctuary, which features openings in the roof so through them one may contemplate the natural beauty of the Santa Catalina mountain range. The front of the building is adorned with a larger-than-life painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe, known as the Patroness of the Americas, applied directly on the adobe walls. The adjoining wall space and all other walls are covered with brightly decorated de Grazia artwork, including little children, angels, and a smaller painting of Christ in his Passion on a side-wall.

As a structure on private property, the Guadalupe chapel could technically be labelled a *nichito*. The usage of the site is, however, more in keeping with *nicho* than *nichito* practices, as it is always accessible without "trespassing". As well, one need not open a private gateway or door in order to enter this part of the Gallery. Offerings are left at its

front and side altars both day and night. Photos taken over the course of five years show continually shifting offerings and supplication at the site, often by travellers. (fig. 54, 55)

Typical offerings at the Guadalupe *nicho* are varied in form: prayer cards to a specific saint in English and Spanish; burned-out and still-burning saint pillar candles; hospital bracelets; photos of loved ones, both ill and departed; small cash offerings; flowers, both silk and natural; handwritten prayers and letters to Mary and Jesus; small items of personal jewellery (rings and watches are most common), and a plethora of rosaries and necklaces. More unique offerings have included Navajo cedar-seed necklaces, a ceramic Kwan Yin statuette, and an old silver-beaded Christmas ornament in the shape of a heart. (fig. 56)

The messages are always poignant and simple, and cards or notes of love to a departed friend or family member are always in evidence. As the Guadalupe *nicho* does not have a consecrated altar, it is not a *capillita*.

### 2.3.2: NICHITO

*Nichitos* are small, family structures, most commonly on private land<sup>38</sup>. The smallest *nichito* in the research sample was found in Tucson, measuring approximately 12 inches tall, and made of corrugated metal sides and roof, but with no back. It shields a small

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<sup>38</sup> "Our Lady of the Garbage Dump" is one exception, where a *nichito* was built in the home-style to house a Virgin Mary figurine which the builder found half-buried in the desert sand. The figure had been thrown in a wilderness area where locals dumped garbage, possibly because it had a broken arm. The *nichito* built for it was placed exactly where the figurine had been buried, but it is in classical home-*nichito* style.

weather-worn Virgin Mary figure from the elements and contains nothing more; no candles, flowers, or other standard offerings. (fig. 58) *Nichitos* are more commonly in the two to three foot tall range.

The largest privately owned *nichito* in this study was situated at 162 Baseline Road, in Ottawa. (fig. 57) This is owned by a family where the father had converted to Catholicism, and describes his ethnicity as "Canadian". The *bulto*, a life-sized Virgin Mary, was on sale at a local yard statuary outlet he passed daily to and from work, and had a broken hand. He purchased the *bulto* and had his wife's aunt do the repairs on the figure, as she is a nun who repairs religious statuary for a living.

The Baseline Rd. *nichito* is approximately seven feet high in order to comfortably accommodate the *bulto* and built-in lighting behind it. It was built by "the homeless and local alcoholics", says the owner, and was dedicated with great pomp by the local Knights of Columbus. The owners always find offerings in their *nichito* but never take any for themselves. As the father said, "If someone needs bus fare or money for food, they can have what's there. That's why it's left in the first place; it's charity at work."<sup>39</sup>

More often than not, a *nichito* is built in one of two standard styles in Hispanic communities: grotto-style of stones, plaster, ceramic, or brick, a reclaimed old-fashioned four-footed bathtub or refrigerator (see Griffith, 1988); or mission-church style made most

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with family at 162 Baseline Rd., 1998.

often of ceramic material. (fig. 60, 61) The grotto or arch style is extremely common in French, Italian, and Hispanic practice. (fig. 59) That being said, artistic sensibilities and the practical issue of what materials are easily obtainable will dictate the form and material from which a *nichito* is built.

*Nichitos* can be built of any material which can weather whatever the seasons can throw at them. *Nichitos* can be simple and unadorned, or creative and joyous (e.g., mortar and rock with numerous niches for different figurines built in). In Ontario and Québec, small Virgin Mary *nichitos* appear to be brought inside for winter, and returned outside when the snow has mostly melted. One logical practice in Ottawa includes wrapping the saint or Holy Family members in protective plastic like a mummy, protecting the images from the elements during the harsh Canadian winter. (fig. 10) This occurs where the images are too large to move, or are permanently affixed to the shrine and cannot be moved inside, such as the Virgin Mary figure inside a Lourdes niche behind the Saint Vincent hospital in Ottawa.

*Nichitos* are clearly constructed and decorated in a very individual manner. Most of the main figures are commercially available at religious supply houses and yard-figure stores, yet each *nichito* is as individual as the family which erects it. Hispanic *nichos* are filled with things personal to the family which owns the land it is located on. Contents can be as simple as a candle and a *bulto*, or as baroque as a plaster of Paris Indian head, made by the homeowner's son, aged 7, or plastic elephants. Mexican American families in Kansas City,

Missouri decorated their *nichitos* with ceramic cats, inexpensive fountain statuary, or even ceramic rabbits. (fig. 62)

By comparison, French and Italian *nichitos* are far more Spartan. With these communities, the *nichito's* contents are spare (often just a Virgin Mary figure), but the creativity and individuality of the family is expressed by the surrounding decor. The French Canadian, Cajun, and Illinois-area French *nichitos* were ablaze with flowers of all sorts, and carefully nurtured rose bushes. (fig. 137)

The Louisiana *nichitos* (research data is primarily from what is termed the "Acadiana" district of Louisiana<sup>40</sup>) were most often simple structures, but some were festooned with eye-catching colours and ribbons. Dr. Barry Ancelet of South West Louisiana University has indicated that these bright (often garish) colours attached to a *nichito* often indicate the Mardi Gras Society to which the owners belong<sup>41</sup>.

Italian *nichitos* seem to be closer to the French than Spanish styles. Few items are left within the *nichito* itself other than *bultos*. The lawn adjoining the figure, however, can be decorated with flowers and bushes, whimsical figures such as cartoon ducks or little men, or even sport team memorabilia. (fig. 64)

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<sup>40</sup> Photographs were supplied by both Mark Charleville and Dr. Barry Ancelet. Unfortunately, Dr. Ancelet misplaced his originals and was unable to supply any samples for inclusion herein.

<sup>41</sup> Ancelet, personal communication, June 2000.



In Arizona, the most common *bulto* within a *nichito* is the Virgin Mary, often as Our Lady of Guadalupe, but also often as Mary Immaculata, Our Lady of Sorrows, and Our Lady of Lourdes. Figures of Jesus are far less common, and rarely the main (i.e. largest) figure in a Hispanic *nichito*. Other saints are fairly common to the *nichitos*, including the fairly unique reclining image of San Xavier<sup>42</sup> (Saint Francis Xavier), San Francisco (Saint Francis of Assisi) (fig. 65), San Ysidro (Saint Isadore), San Judeo Tadeo (Saint Jude) and San Martin de Poirres (Saint Martin).

Italian *nichitos* feature many of the same saints as the Hispanic ones as well as a few specific to that culture. Sts. Cosmas and Damian (preferred in the Apulia area of Italy), Saint Anthony of Padua, Saint Lucy, and Saint Joseph are also favoured in the Italian *nichitos*. In French Canada, Saint Anne (mother of the Virgin Mary) and Saint Joseph are also common *nichito*-saints. Saint Bernadette is often depicted kneeling by the Virgin of Lourdes, and in Arizona Juan Diego is often shown kneeling by the Virgin of Guadalupe. (fig. 65)

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<sup>42</sup> See Griffith, 1998, for a discussion of the reclining San Francis Xavier.

### 2.3.2.1: LOCATION

*Nichitos* appear to be in many ways, both a public and private statement of religiosity. As noted previously, *nichitos* are in part differentiated from *nichos* by their location on clearly-delineated private property. One study shows that *nichitos* are most often placed so that the public can see the structure and its contents while remaining on public property<sup>43</sup>. Most frequently *nichitos* are placed at a 45 degree angle to the street, facing the front pathway and the public. There seems to be little preference as to whether the *nichito* is placed to the viewer's left or right facing the domicile. (fig. 67)

A practice more common in Arizona but occasionally evident in other *nichito* communities, is the creation of a *nichito* which is integral to the structure of the home itself. These *nichitos* are most often made of brick if the home is of brick, and are placed directly facing the public eye. (fig. 68) *Nichitos* facing the front of the home and not visible to the public are rare; there was only one example in this survey of over 400 photos, taken in over 20 geographic locations around North America and Europe.

Understandably, *nichitos* in Canada which are located near the home are often moveable and will be taken into the home over the snowy months. Many *nichitos* sit on balconies or at front entrances of homes.

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<sup>43</sup> See Husband (1985).

A trend noted in both Ottawa and Kansas City, Missouri, was the recent relocation of *nichitos* from front yards to sides of homes or back yards. (fig. 69) Clearly, the function of a *nichito* must change drastically when it can no longer be seen by the public walking by. Back-yard *nichitos* in Ottawa can sometimes be seen through fencing such as metal link-fencing, but when the statuary and structure itself is moved from the front yard to the back yard, it becomes impossible for the public to share in the holiness of the *bultos* therein.

"The Hill" region of Kansas City, Missouri, is a very old Italian American community, and overwhelmingly Roman Catholic. During the surveying for this thesis, it was noted that many parts of The Hill apparently had no *nichitos*. As a result, the researcher explored the back alleyways behind the homes on The Hill, and discovered the presence of one or more *nichitos*, per home. The structures appeared the same as those facing the public in other areas of the U.S.A, except that they faced away from the alley road and towards the back windows of the homes.<sup>44</sup> As a result, the casual observer may note the existence of a grotto-type or plaster-type structure in the back yard, but could in no way share in the religious experience.

Some *nichitos* are not directly placed on the ground. Small hexagonal or octagonal wooden structures are sometimes found with a *bulto* placed in the middle; these are

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<sup>44</sup> In many cases, it was not possible to discover if the *nichitos* facing the kitchens were indeed, congruent with the ones visible to the public. Many of the homes were clearly posted as "no trespassing", facing the alleys.

common in Italy and some parts of France. As a result, one occasionally sees these 'elevated' *nichitos*: Mark Charleville reports one Virgin Mary *nichito* located on a tiny island in the bayou, accessible only by boat<sup>45</sup>, (fig. 70) and at least one *nichito* exists in Québec on a miniscule spot of earth in the middle of a lake. (Simard, 1995).

It appears that specific saints were popular for their protective aspects, and specific *nichitos* would be built for them. Some older barns in Québec feature *nichitos* located directly over the animal entrance, (Simard, 1985) (fig. 71, 72) most often representations of Saint Francis of Assisi, protector of animals, and Saint Joseph. Photos taken during Dr. Sciorra's 1985 fieldwork in Italian New York City feature a near-life-size Saint Francis statue imbedded in its own niche directly above twin garage doors. (fig. 73) It is possible that the owners no longer remember why Saint Francis would be properly placed above the entranceway where the "working animals" (i.e., cars) live.

Many *nichitos* exist to this day on the sides of buildings in Italian cities such as Florence and Naples, and the presence of votive candles burning in these niches on the second floor is proof of the popularity of this form of religiosity. (fig. 74) It is possible that part of the intensity of one's spiritual experience is thought to be accentuated by the physical difficulty of reaching such inaccessible *nichitos*.

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<sup>45</sup> Charleville, personal communication, 1999.

### 2.3.2.2: MATERIALS AND CONSTRUCTION

*Nichitos* can be built from whatever is at hand. Some are quite ornate and feature gurgling fountains or exacting woodwork, while others can be as simple as the Tucson *nichito* with corrugated metal for sides. The majority of *nichitos* studied were built by a relative of the family owning them: fathers, sons, uncles, nephews, and male in-laws<sup>46</sup>. In some cases, the husband or father of the home hired a local craftsman who specializes in *nichitos*, to build a specific structure. This seems to be a common practice in some Italian American communities, as Dr. Joseph Sciorra notes.<sup>47</sup>

As many Italian immigrants to the U.S.A and Canada worked in construction, many of the *nichitos* of Italian America are brickwork or ornate woodwork structures. (Sciorra, 1998) Ocean-type motifs are more popular in Italian practice, and many *nichitos* have been disparagingly nicknamed "Mary on the Half-Shell" as a result of the construction of shell-shape niches.

Mexican American *nichitos* are far less uniform in size, style, or construction materials than their Italian cousins. *Nichitos* around the Tucson area have been made of brick, plaster, adobe, wood, or some mix of materials. (fig. 75, 76) Newer *nichitos*, and those in

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<sup>46</sup> Santos Vega has reported there is a group of female plasterers in the Phoenix area who are also involved in the construction of *nichitos*, but this is fairly unique. Dr. S. Vega, personal communication, 1999.

<sup>47</sup> Sciorra, in Culturefront (V.7, #3), 1998.

higher-crime neighbourhoods of both Arizona and New York City, often feature wrought-iron doors with locks to protect the statuary and items therein. One *nichito* in this study, in the Menlo Park area of Tucson, had plexiglas sheets placed on the inside of the wrought iron door to further protect the contents from vandalism and the weather. The owner showed me new bulletholes in the upper left hand side of the plexiglas, apparently from a drive-by shooting the night before. (fig. 77, 78) The owner was understandably mortified at the situation. Previous vandalism to her *nichito* had prompted her to install the plexiglas a few years beforehand, and now even that appeared to be ineffective.

One universal material used in French, Spanish, and Italian Roman Catholic North America is the bathtub. Examples have been collected in all three communities of *bultos* mounted within a recycled deep white bathtub, with the bathtub itself acting as the *nichito*. (fig. 79) Some individuals try to hide or elaborately decorate the bathtub by creating a structure around the tub itself, while others merely sink half the tub in the dirt, fill the ground in front of it, and place the *bulto* therein. It is this practice which has earned these types of *nichitos* the moniker of "Mary in a Bathtub" in some areas of Canada and the American Southwest.

A favourite *nichito* of folklorists and anthropologists working on the topic was one in Tucson affectionately called the "Philco" *nichito*. Documented by both Husband (1985) and Griffith (1992), this half-height *nichito* was formed by using a half-height bar refrigerator as the structure itself. (fig. 80) Less well known but equally creative is the

Coldspot Mary outside the Southern Ontario hamlet of Enterprise, Ontario. Here a life size Virgin Mary *bulto* looks beatifically down on the crossroads of two highways, mounted on a manmade hill and placed within a full size white refrigerator whose door had been removed. (fig. 81, 82)

The use of recycled items such as four-footed bathtubs or even the bar refrigerator from Tucson, seems to be a practical use of items which serve both levels of need: they are white and therefore the proper colour (white porcelain), and they are sturdy enough to protect the contents from the elements.

There are always exceptions to the "rules" of *nichito* materials or construction, and one *nichito* on Highway 7 Northwest of Deep River, Ontario, is worth mentioning. Most often, the main *bulto* in a *nichito* is some aspect of the Virgin Mary. The *nichito* in question has been seen by quite a few travellers driving between Ottawa and North Bay<sup>48</sup>, and features a statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus within. It is not the *bulto*, but the protective niche itself which is unusual: it is the only structure collected in this survey, in any country, which placed religious statuary in a URINAL<sup>49</sup>. The figure of Jesus, approximately three feet in height, is mounted in the front of the urinal, with the water

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<sup>48</sup> Witness to this very unusual *nichito* include the author and Dr. Marie-Françoise Guédon of the University of Ottawa.

<sup>49</sup> There is anecdotal evidence of another *nichito* in Quebec featuring a *bulto* of the Virgin Mary placed in the middle of a bed of flowers. Of note is the fact that the flowers fill the centre of an old Victorian pedestal-style TOILET, creating the visual effect of the flowers and Mary being located in a vase.

tank above filled with an explosion of colourful flowers (real, not silk). The *bulto* itself is flanked on both sides by flowers in planters.

If any generalization can be made about the materials used in the construction of a *nichito*, it is that there is no universal rule. Clearly, the original usage of an item does not play a major role in whether or not it is considered appropriate to house a *bulto*. Some artistic *nichitos* have even been built from what appears to be used Freon gas tanks. (Simard, 1995)

#### 2.3.2.3: SHAPE

Whereas a yard shrine may have flowers or a trellis of greenery woven onto a wooden frame delineating its boundaries, *nichitos* come in some fairly standardized shapes. The most common form, and hence the name "niche" (*nicho*) or "little niche" (*nichito*), is that of an indentation. The alcove, described as a form with a back which curves around the statue to create the impression of "walls", and an arched roof, is most typical of Mexican American and French Canadian *nichitos*. Numerous companies sell preformed alcoves, some with crosses, cherubic winged angels, or hearts, decorating their outside edges. (fig. 83) These prefab niches often have a simulated brick texture on the walls.

Related to the alcove type of *nichito* are those which utilize old deep bathtubs as the structure surrounding the *bultos*. At first glance, these *nichitos* look very close to those of



the alcove-style, and the use of the bathtub is probably merely serendipitous: a alcove is white, as were most four-foot bathtubs. A alcove has a curved, shallow roof, as a bathtub when set up on end. A alcove has a back and two sides created by its back curving towards the viewer, and the bathtub creates the same protective framework for the *bulto*. (fig. 79) The use of a bathtub for a *nichito* is so common in all cultures studied that the phrase "Bathtub Mary", or "Mary in a Bathtub" is common slang in areas with dense Roman Catholic populations. Indeed, an internet search of the term "Bathtub Mary" turns up web sites featuring religious statues as well as a band which has adopted the name "Bathtub Mary".

A related shape, popular in Arizona, is that of a brick alcove made of red-brick, with a curved brick "roof". These are often made by a family member or by specialists within the barrio, and they are built of brick to match the style of the owner's brick house. (fig. 84) These curved brick *nichitos* are often quite deep, owing to the depth of the bricks themselves, creating the effect of a brick alcove with a back, distinct sides, and the curved roof. These were difficult to photograph without a fill-in flash, as the depth of the structures shaded the *bultos* and other contents.

Another popular shape for *nichitos* is an architecturally inspired "building" surrounding the *bultos* and *sacramentales*. (fig. 85) These are more often built by a member of the family, and are of wood and/or brick. Here, the shape is less that of a alcove and more of a three-sided building with a gabled, sharply pointed roof. The pointed roof will often feature a

cross cut out of the wood in front as decoration. These are more popular in the French and Italian communities than in the Mexican American areas.

Due to the ease of its construction, many *nichitos* are constructed in a rectangular shape. Some may feature doors of plexiglas, coloured glass/plastic, and/or wrought iron. (fig. 86) These are simply boxes, three sides and a flat roof, and a front wall with door or open area to view the *bultos*. These are more often built of wood than any other material.

A favoured *nichito* style in Arizona, New Mexico, and other Southwestern states is one referred to as "Mission style". (fig. 60, 61) These are inspired by the early mission churches of the Jesuit and Franciscan Orders in the Southwest of the United States and parts of Mexico. Typically a mission-style *nichito* is a modified rectangle, but with a stepped silhouette in front, similar to the construction of mission churches 150 years ago. These may feature a cross on top of the highest "step" of the roof, or may not. Mission style *nichitos* are most often built of adobe, and are often either white or clay/sand in colour.

The last common style of *nichito* found across most cultures which maintain niches appears to be the grotto style. (fig. 87) here rocks and/or stones are imbedded in mortar to form a "grotto", in which the *bulto* is displayed. These can be quite small or life-size, with the Virgin of Lourdes being the most common Virgin Mary displayed in grotto *nichitos*. One ambitious Tucson *nichito*-builder created a *nichito* with about a half-dozen

separate "grottos" in one structure, set up at different levels and in different sizes, to show off the collection of *bultos* owned by the family. (fig. 88) A few Italian examples of the grotto *nichito* incorporate fountains and/or ponds in the display, and some take over a large portion of a family's front or back yard. (fig. 89)

#### 2.3.2.4: COLOUR

Many *nichito* owners, using naturally pigmented materials such as rock or wood, do not paint the structure after its construction is completed. When the *nichito* has been painted, it is rare to find an exterior colour other than white. Occasionally the white will be highlighted (e.g., to imitate the mortar between bricks, or between rocks) with a second colour, most commonly either medium blue or medium pink.

The interior of the *nichito* is often a riot of colour, particularly in Hispanic America. A baroque collection of items from *bultos*, rosaries, and prayer-cards, to photos, flowers, and secular statuary (everything from ceramic cats to stacked fake-ivory elephants), inhabits the inside of some *nichitos*. The structure itself, when painted, is almost universally either white or blue. Some wood *nichitos* also feature whitewashed interiors and exteriors. Very occasionally, pink will again feature as a third colour inside the *nichito*, but the unwritten rule of white and/or blue holds true for the decor as well.

The famous half-height *nichito* in the Tucson area<sup>50</sup> built from a bar fridge/freezer, "Our Lady of the Philco", is again of interest; perhaps the original use of the item was the issue. Rather, it was white and of the general shape of a *nichito* and therefore, considered suitable for this usage.

The village of Enterprise, Ontario, features a related *nichito*. Unlike the half-height refrigerator, this one is a full sized family refrigerator/freezer, also pressed into service as a *nichito*. Again, the structure fulfills the minimum requirement for a *nichito*: it is white, and has a vaguely rounded top. The Enterprise *nichito*, nicknamed "Our Lady of the Coldspot", has had blue paint added inside so that the structure is both white and blue, the colours of the Virgin Mary.

Pigmentation on the *bultos* themselves is often directly related to the pigmentation of the *nichito* itself. Analysis of the primary *bultos* within *nichitos* seem to show a trend. Where the *bulto* itself is unpainted, the *nichito* is more often unpainted as well. Practically, this means that a white plaster religious figure is most often found situated within a natural *nichito* such as a monochrome Virgin Mary figure found within an unpainted plaster pre-fabricated *nichito*. By comparison, polychrome *bultos* most often appear in *nichitos* which have been painted with blue and/or white interiors.

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<sup>50</sup> See Griffith (1992) and Riley (1997) in Journal of the Southwest, (V. 34, #2).

### 2.3.2.5: EXTERIOR DECORATION

The *nichito* structure itself does not constitute the totality of the sacred space. In many cultures, great care is given not only to the *nichito* itself, but also to the landscaping around the *nichito*. Many *nichitos* are built on artificial hills, mounds created expressly for this purpose. The Enterprise Coldspot *nichito* sits atop a hill which requires approximately a dozen half-height stairs to access the *nichito* itself.

External decorations vary based on the taste of the owners, but common exterior decorations include gold putti (small, baby-like cherubs with wings), crosses, silk flowers, and/or Christmas-type lights. It is not unusual to find ceramic doves atop or on the outside sides of a *nichito*, as the dove is often used as a symbol for the Holy Spirit.

One unusual example of exterior decoration was collected by Dr. Barry Ancelet -- unusual enough that he interviewed the family living in the home to discover the rationale for their notable *nichito*. Apparently the former owners of the home were Cajuns: Louisianans of Acadian French descent, and therefore white Roman Catholic. The new owners of the home were Creoles: Louisianans descended from black slaves, and Baptist. The Cajun family did not remove the niche when they moved, knowing the incoming family was also Christian. This, however, caused a conundrum for the new owners of the home, as Protestant theology speaks against the 'worship of idols'. The Virgin Mary statue in its little *nichito*, could well be interpreted as such by some Protestants.

The family, therefore, decided to compromise on the existence of their newly acquired *nichito*. They did not remove the structure, leaving the *bulto* intact. However, for some inexplicable reason, they perched a ceramic white goat atop the stone structure, painting the goat with black zebra stripes.<sup>51</sup>

French Canadians and Italian Americans seem to be more concerned with the external decor and adjoining decorations of the *nichito* than Mexican Americans. It is rare to find a French Canadian *nichito* with any sort of ironwork or door in the front, and flowers seem to be the external augmentation of choice. Some Italian American *nichitos* are quite artistically pleasing, notably one from Dr. Sciorra's study which he now owns, made by a woodworker out of scraps gleaned from nearby roadwork. Sciorra's study in Culturefront magazine features photos of *nichitos* with dollar store Virgin Mary figures atop the niche itself, and even tomatoes. (Sciorra, 1998: 62) In the geographic areas studied for this thesis, yard shrines appeared far more popular in Italian American cities, than *nichitos* per se.

#### 2.3.2.6: CONTENTS

Different Roman Catholic communities treat the interior of a *nichito* quite differently. French Canadian *nichitos* are often the most Spartan, classically featuring the niche structure itself, a *bulto* (rarely more than one statue), often a rosary draped around the

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<sup>51</sup> Barry Ancelet, personal conversation, Montreal, July 1999.

neck of the *bulto*, and silk or real flowers flanking the structure. Few if any other items clutter the structure. They are simple and artistically pleasing, with the choice of floral decor the main difference between them.

One sometimes finds empty *nichito* structures in some parts of Arizona where the drug-trade does a brisk trade. One portion of South Tucson, posted as a high crime area by the city's police force, also features a collection of empty *nichitos*, staring at the casual walker like empty eyes. One now sports a silk spider plant; most others are simply empty.

#### 2.3.2.7: "RAPE SURVIVOR'S *NICHITO* TO THE WARRIOR WOMAN"

I created this *nicho/nichito* initially as an art installation for a two-month display of women's art held in conjunction with the academic conference "Divina et Femina", sponsored by the Canadian Centre for Research on Women and Religion, of the Department of Religious Studies and Classics Department of the University of Ottawa. The installation was built in April of 2000, with minor changes made approximately a week after its initial construction to improve its sturdiness. The display was unique in that the installation was designed to be viewed from the outside of the museum rather than from the inside. Also, it was constructed in an inner courtyard where grass, trees, benches and ivy growing up the walls are all present.

Being on private property, it would be proper to refer to this installation as a *nichito*.

However, as the piece was mounted to face a public thoroughfare with some items placed on the exterior of the building, it could also be considered a *nicho*. To simplify things, the display will be referred to in this case as a *nichito* due to its size.

The Warrior Woman *nichito* was constructed of found items, primarily second-hand domestic items, and was mounted within a recycled wash-basin painted powder blue inside and white outside. Materials were used to create an arch-shape to the front of the basin, creating a recognizable niche shape. The interior floor of the *nichito* was covered with white linen cloths, and was a multi-level construction. The rear wall of the *nichito* featured a small, white plastic Immaculate Heart of Mary night-light which was plugged into a socket within the museum.<sup>52</sup> The *nichito* itself featured things which would comfort a woman: a box of chocolates, an apple, a china teacup with tea bag, vases filled with silk flowers, candles, and a ceramic cat. With the comfort items were various images of strong women of popular and folklore note: Ms. Piggy from the Muppets, Diana Rigg from the Avengers T.V. series, a triptych featuring Xena, Warrior Princess plus two other women from that T.V. show, a plush stuffed witch, a statue to Themis, Goddess of Blind Justice, and a polychrome Virgin of Guadalupe. Small figures, such as the Goddess Kali, She-Ra

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<sup>52</sup> A second unrelated Immaculate Heart night-light appeared anonymously approximately two weeks after the start of the display, with this night-light being plugged in above the extension cord which powered the light within the *nichito*. The second night-light was a specific addition to the exhibit as a whole which another artist had brought in and INSISTED that it be used. Lucie DuFresne, personal communication, January 2001.



(a child's toy and comic book character), Disney's Pocahontas, and a drinking cup with Wonder Woman, also graced the interior of the display.

The unique aspect of the art installation was the fact that it did not end where the glass of the museum intersected it. Much like Tucson *nichitos* where plexiglas windows are placed between the viewer and the *nichito*, offerings continued outside the building. Red cloth delineated a square of pavement directly outside the *nichito*. A boundary was created with four-inch high plastic fencing (the sort used to edge gardens) and blue silk flowers lining the inside of the "sacred space". Inside the fencing, two shallow glass bowls were placed, with one penny and one nickel placed within each bowl. Finally, a plastic vase with silk flowers and a Virgin of Guadalupe pillar candle were placed in the middle of the red fabric square.

This *nichito/nicho* became a sort of barometer verifying my observations as to how the public at large interacts with other, anonymous *nichos*. Within a week, coins were being left anonymously in the "offering" bowls of the *nichito*. The pattern became clear after a week or two passed: money would pile up in small change within the bowls until there would be approximately \$2 in each bowl by week's end. By Monday, the bowls would be back to holding under a dime each, in small change.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Most of my informants who maintain *nichitos* indicated that they do nothing with the coins left in their niches. They feel that whoever needs the cash, can have it, for it is left as an offering to God.

Within a few weeks, additional small items were being left at the *nichito's* exterior. One week, a cartoon on relationships was left. Another week, a religious medallion to the Angel Raphael was found. Clearly, the art installation had taken on a life of its own and had become a corner of sacred space in a public location. The exterior display featured only a small sign with information on the Divina et Femina art display, but no information on the artist or the name of the piece. The general public became quite engaged with the niche: one middle-aged woman actually went up to the Religious Studies department and engaged a graduate student in a heated discussion about the niche. She was very concerned that the monies in the glass bowls "would be stolen" and "should be put somewhere safe".<sup>54</sup> She was quite confused when the graduate student informed her that the money was intended to be taken, and left after indicating she did not believe the student.

Items left in the exterior of the *nichito* were chosen with an eye to possible vandalism and/or theft. Indeed, in the sixth week of the display, the exterior was vandalized by unknown individuals. The Virgin of Guadalupe candle was thrown into the fenced-in area, shattering glass all over the display and leaving the interior wax to melt, staining the red material. At this point I left the vandalized site untouched for approximately a week, to see if passers-by would clean up the display or in any other way react to the vandalism. As the week progressed, it became evident that the desecration concerned people. No cash was left in the bowls, contrary to the set pattern. Indeed, members of the department who

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<sup>54</sup> Related by Rubina Ramji, May 2000.

were raised Roman Catholic expressed great concern and discomfort at the state the display was in. Clearly, the resonance of the *nichito* ran quite deeply in individuals.

After a week of disarray, the broken glass was swept up and a new candle to the Virgin Mary was placed outside. Immediately, cash donations resumed in the glass bowls, and the departmental members expressed a sense of relief or contentment at the correction of the situation. Again, one week after the placement of the new Virgin Mary pillar candle, vandalism occurred. This time, the candle was stolen from the display.<sup>55</sup> Instead of buying a third pillar candle, I left a Jewish memorial candle in the *nichito*'s exterior area.<sup>56</sup> The public seemed to find nothing unusual with the mixed religious metaphors within the *nichito*: passers-by started to light the memorial candle whenever it was blown out by the breeze, and within a week, the memorial candle was burned out. At that point, passers-by started to leave coins within the metal container from the memorial candle as well as in the two glass bowls.

At the end of the two-month art show, the Rape Survivor's *nichito* to the Warrior Woman was dismantled, both interior and exterior elements. Occasionally, passers-by can still be seen to look in that area of the path, looking for the shrine. I was astonished to realize

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<sup>55</sup> Generally, the perception of those I interviewed was that if someone took an item from a *nichito*, it was acceptable since that individual clearly NEEDED whatever they took, be it candle or coin.

<sup>56</sup> Being Jewish, I felt it appropriate to light a memorial candle within the confines of my *nichito*, as the two-month period of the display included the anniversary of my father's death. "It is my sacred space, and I see no reason not to use it as such." May 15, 2000.

that I felt a deep sense of loss in the dismantling of the *nichito*. Anthropologically, the creation of this *nichito* on the university grounds became an interesting study, particularly since the University of Ottawa has a high French Roman Catholic presence in its student body. Despite the mixed symbols contained therein, the shape and general form of the *nichito* was immediately recognizable by the public, and it was adopted as "real" and appropriate in some way. It is unfortunate that one can only speculate on the reasons for the acts of vandalism of the shrine.

### 2.3.3: YARD SHRINES

A *nichito* literally features a niche, or indented, type of structure. Yard shrines lack the presence of a protective structure around the *bultos* (walls and/or a "roof"). Religious statuary can be present in a yard without a protective niche-structure of any sort. A popular form of yard shrine where the climate is more temperate than in Canada is religious yard statuary which has been incorporated into fountains and bird-baths. Saint Joseph is a very common yard-shrine figure in Arizona. Italian American yard shrines in Missouri feature the Virgin Mary atop bird-baths, as well as Saint Francis of Assisi. One "*nicho*" (an eight foot *nichito*) in the Menlo Park area of Tucson consists of various levels of fountain, capped by a small niche on top with a polychrome Virgin Mary and ceramic white doves. (*La Paloma*, or *Palomita*, the white dove, is often used in Catholic

symbology to denote the Holy Spirit, associated with the Virgin as a sign of the Annunciation.)

Some of the most ornate examples of gardening and decoration around the *nichito* were collected in middle-America, particularly in Kansas, Missouri, Illinois, and Indiana. These areas are a mix of French and Italian Catholic populations.

#### 2.3.4: *ALTARCITOS*

As noted previously, *altarcitos* can be grouped as general, workplace, and/or vehicular. Kay Turner's Pd.D. thesis (1990) at the University of Texas (Austin) studied primarily the construction and use of *altarcitos* in the South Texas area of the United States, and she indicated therein that the Austin Mexican American community called these sacred locations "*capillas*" when they were outside, and *altarcitos* when a niche or altar existed within the home. (Turner 1990) Turner's study focussed on in-home *altarcitos* as women's religious expression and as art form. It is unclear whether Mexican American communities outside of Arizona refer to death-marker crosses as *descansos*, but the death-markers do exist throughout the Hispanic world.

In-home *altarcitos* can be very simple, or baroquely ornate. They are most often owned by, and maintained by, the woman of the home, assisted by her daughters (who are thus

being trained in the proper veneration of the *santos*<sup>57</sup>) and/or young sons. Turner interviewed 20 women who owned their own *altarcitos*, with only a passing mention that some men might also own and maintain *altarcitos*. Dr. Santos Vega indicated that men appreciated and used *altarcitos* as much as women did:

The men are as pious, or maybe even more so, than women.  
It [*altarcito* building] is not a man or woman thing.  
Sometimes a man comes from a home where his mother  
kept one. The decision to have one is a family thing.<sup>58</sup>

The most common location for a home *altarcito* appears to be in the living room (family room) or in the master bedroom. As noted earlier, slightly different types of *altarcitos* exist with different functions. Death *altarcitos* appear in spare bedrooms or master bedrooms, family *altarcitos* (most often dedicated to some aspect of the Virgin Mary) appear in living rooms, and kitchen *altarcitos* appear near where food preparation is done or over the refrigerator.

Workplace *altarcitos* are most often small and inconspicuous, much as Chinese prosperity and/or ancestor shrines are part of the landscape in Chinese restaurants and/or grocery stores and are often mounted high above people's heads. A workplace *altarcito* can be a prayer-card with a patron saint or Virgin Mary tucked by the cash register, a small *nichito* to the rear of a restaurant with various *bultos* and offerings, or as ornate as some seen in

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<sup>57</sup> *Santos* is the Spanish term for saints.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Dr. Santos Vega, Arizona State University, 17 March 2000.

Mexico. A glassblowing business in Cabo San Lucas, Baja, featured a foot-high *altarcito* built into the cinder-block walls of the factory so that the Holy Family could watch over the workers in what is undeniably a somewhat hazardous business. One Italian restaurant in Elmont, New York, featured a 1900s style lithograph of Saint Anthony of Padua over the maitre d's station, flanked by silk flowers.

*Altarcitos* in cars are often the most simple of the three types. They often feature a picture of a Virgin Mary or saint hung from the rearview mirror of the car. Some cars will feature small *bultos* affixed to the front dashboard, and it is unusual to see additional items such as flowers, in the car. Bus drivers in both Mexico and Greece tended to have more ornate vehicular *altarcitos*, with Palm Sunday crosses, silk flowers, and multiple pictures/prayer cards of favoured saints, found tucked around the large glass windows of their buses. In lieu of a Virgin Mary or saint picture, some cars will simply hang a *sacramentale* of a rosary, from the rearview instead of the picture. Favoured vehicle hangings include Virgin Marys, pictures of the Last Supper (Da Vinci), and small crucifixes attached to the dashboard.

### 2.3.5: GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION

*Nichitos* appear to exist in most countries where there is a substantial Catholic and/or Greek Orthodox population base, whether that is Roman Catholic or Eastern Rite.

Without a doubt, the practice follows immigration trends into the New World as well. The

practice of *nichitos* in French Canada came over with the original settlers from the French speaking countries such as France and Belgium.

En Europe, les endroits de prédilection des calvaires sont la Bretagne, l'Auvergne, les chemins des Flandres et les routes du Luxembourg. C'est au XVI<sup>e</sup> et XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles que les calvaires bretons ont connu leur plus grande extension, fait non négligeable pour peu que l'on songe que plusieurs de nos ancêtres sont venus de ce coin de France. Il s'agit sans doute ici des sources premières de nos calvaires et crois de chemins. (Porter and Desy, 1973: 41)

The practice of *nichitos* virtually ceased to exist in France after the French Revolution, when public displays of religiosity were considered bourgeois, and might well earn the owner a trip to the guillotine<sup>59</sup>. Roadside *cruces* remain throughout France to this day, as do other related forms of veneration, such as well-dressing<sup>60</sup>.

Where French settlers migrated, so too did their veneration of their Saints in *nichitos*. French *nichitos* show up along both banks of the Mississippi river in the United States, and many are distinct in form and content from their Italian American cousins. Similarly, the migration of Acadians from Atlantic Canada southwards into Louisiana and its environs

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<sup>59</sup> The author has made two trips to France, one to Brittany, Normandy, and the Paris environs, the second to the Camargue and area. Despite using secondary roads rather than highways, not one single *nichito* was noted.

<sup>60</sup> Overwhelmingly, well-dressing is done primarily for female saints. Wells which are dedicated to a particular saint are refurbished and/or elaborately decorated by worshipers on that saint's feast day. Flower petals and prayer rags tied to trees are frequently left as part of the ritual. Personal communication, Lucie DuFresne, January 2001.



explains the high number of *nichitos* found in the "Acadiana" area of that state. Photos from the 1940's done for the Farm Security Administration of the U.S. government show domestic scenes similar to anywhere in rural New Brunswick, including neat and proper *altarcitos* placed atop fireplaces and tabletops<sup>61</sup>. These photos document by accident the *altarcitos* of Polish, French, and other ethnic groups while documenting the families themselves.

A pocket of *nichito* Marys exist in the heart of the U.S. Protestant Bible belt, and is apparently quite the tourist highlight. The migration of a community of Roman Catholics from Maryland in the 1790s to Kentucky brought the practice of *nichito*-building with it. As described by an ardent amateur photographer of *nichitos* in the area:

I live in Marion County, Kentucky and am from the small town of Loretto (home of Maker's Mark whiskey); I now live in Lebanon, which is supposedly in the exact geographic center of Kentucky. I don't know who measured. Marion County is part of a three county area here in central Kentucky that is very unusual. here we are - smack in the middle of the Baptist 'Bible Belt' - yet the three counties of Marion, Nelson and Washington are mostly Catholic. ...This Catholicity is evidenced by the huge number of yard shrines dedicated to our Mother Mary which dot the landscape.<sup>62</sup>

As well, saint statues mounted on buildings continue to dot the landscape throughout North America. A cross between the Mexican American ceramic wall plaque and the

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<sup>61</sup> Contained in McDannell, 1995, p. 21.

<sup>62</sup> Email correspondence with Donna Mattingly, 18 July, 1999.

Italian *edicole*, these saints seem to perform the same function they held in the Old Country: protection of livestock. Mounted atop the main entrance to a barn in Château-Richer, Québec, Saint Anthony of Padua looks out across the landscape protectively. (Simard, 1989: 263) Similarly, Saint Francis Xavier gazes placidly out at the streets of urban Brooklyn, mounted in a similar niche atop a two-car garage entrance. (fig. 73) It is possible that the urban Italian American does not remember why a saint should be mounted in the front wall of a garage, but s/he does it because it is correct; it has always been done that way.

Throughout North America, where Italians immigrated, so too did their niche practices. The Italian countryside is dotted with *nichos* and *nichitos*, many facing the road on the boundary of a farm. This is a standard and familiar practice in Italy, for a *retablo* from the 18th century features a man praying at a *nichito* to Saint Anne while two others look on from behind prison bars. (Peerson, 1987: 93) *Nichitos* are a favourite topic for photographers in Italy, with urban and rural *nichitos* documented in various magazines and books<sup>63</sup>. "As immigrants and their descendants moved from Manhattan slums to private homes with front yards in the outer boroughs [of New York City], they updated these old-world public expressions of faith to suit their newly acquired spaces." (Sciorra, 1998: 58)

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<sup>63</sup> See Revelli, 1979, and Salvatore Mancini, 1980, "Street Saints of Naples", in Attenzione V.II, No. 12, as examples.

The third major *nichito*-building culture within North America is the Mexican American community. Mexican-style *nichitos* show up from New York City to San Antonio, Texas, and anywhere in between where a sizeable Mexican American community can be found. Mexican American *nichitos* are more elaborate and colourful than their Italian or French equivalents, (fig. 90) a stylistic variable which has been in part attributed to the Mexican baroque sensibilities of space and culture<sup>64</sup>. Dr. Allan Figueroa-Deck, S.J., has an additional explanation to this stylistic difference. He points out that Mexican American Roman Catholicism is a syncretic mix of pre-Columbian Mexico, Western African beliefs through the slave trade, the northern emigration of freed Brazilian slaves after the end of slavery in that country, and the fact that Catholicism entered Mexico during the Baroque era in Spain<sup>65</sup>. This mix gives folk Mexican American Catholicism its own flavour, reflected in the look of its *nichitos* and *altarcitos*.

Much smaller pockets of *nichito*-building cultures exist throughout North America as well. Wisconsin has a pocket of Belgian *nichitos* and *capillitas*<sup>66</sup>, and many large urban areas with Greek populations have Greek Orthodox *nichitos* containing holy oil and icons. As well, local apparitions will spawn *nichitos* unique to a specific saint. The community of

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<sup>64</sup> Mesa-Banes, "Domesticana" The Sensibility of Chicana *Rascuache*, 1998.  
<http://dizzy.library.arizona.edu/images/cadena/cadena.html>

<sup>65</sup> Father Figueroa-Deck, interview, 19 August 1998.

<sup>66</sup> See Laatsch and Calkins, "The Belgian Roadside Chapels of Wisconsin's Door Peninsula", in *Journal of Cultural Geography*, V. 7, No. 1, and Kolinski, "Shrines and Crosses in Rural Central Wisconsin", in *Polish American Studies* V. 33, No. 47, Autumn, 1994.

Marmora, Ontario, Southwest of Ottawa, has reported sightings of the Virgin Mary as "Queen of Peace" since the mid-1990's, and *nichitos* to her are now starting to spring up in that area. (fig. 91)

In South America, *nichitos*, *nichos*, *capillitas*, *cruces* and *descansos* cover the landscape. Literally thousands of grottos and mountaintop Virgin Marys exist where pilgrims travel for blessings and *mandas*: Luis, a taxi-driver in New York City showed me the religious *sacramentale* he received after a pilgrimage in Ecuador<sup>67</sup> to a hilltop Virgin Mary. (fig. 18) Father Joe Kane supplied the words to this popular folksong about a little Virgin Mary *capilla* in Peru, where he worked for many years as a missionary:

*La Hermita -- The Wayside Shrine*<sup>68</sup>

When I make my way to the wayside shrine  
of my Patroness on the Mountain,  
the climb to the top feels like going downhill.

And when I am coming down,  
my goodness as I descend  
the downward slope is like an uphill climb.

I know not, I know not  
what it is with you my little Virgin.  
I don't know what holds me when you look at me.

Oh it's your eyes, indeed,

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<sup>67</sup> The place of honor for this Virgin Mary was hanging off his rear-view mirror, accompanied by a picture of Father Pio given to Luis by a customer. June, 1999.

<sup>68</sup> Unpublished manuscript: a song of "*Religiosidad popolare*" from Peru, translated by Reverend Joseph Kane, Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Ottawa, 1999.

your lovely eyes like lights  
I could spend forever seeing myself in them.

From Bogota, Columbia, comes the Divine Child Jesus of Bogota, a child in pink clothing with golden, curly hair, arms reaching out as if asking to be picked up. This Santo Niño de Bogota has recently become popular where Columbians are immigrating, and *milagros* to Him are showing up at *capillas* and *nichos* in the Tucson area for the first time.

Europe features huge numbers of *nichitos* and *nichos* throughout most countries (with the exception of France, as noted). Catholic parts of religiously diverse countries such as Germany still have hundreds of *nichitos*, and they are ubiquitous in countries such as Italy, Malta, and Greece. Reports from scholars working on post-Communist Europe report that niches are again appearing in countries such as Poland and Ukraine, after decades of suppression<sup>69</sup>. As with other countries, pilgrimages to apparition and/or healing sites continues unabated. The popularity of the pilgrimages to Lourdes and Fatima continue unabated, as with other holy apparition sites.

What goes into a *nichito*, or on an *altarcito*, is ultimately up to the individual(s) using it. The placement of "what feels right" upon the altar allows the worshipper a type of control over both sacred space and familial space. French Canadian *altarcitos* and *nichitos* are in some ways the most spartan: they are reflections of the tools of the institutionalized Church. Starched linen and lace runners, a rosary, flowers: these are the tools of worship

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<sup>69</sup> Dr. Eileen Barker, London School of Economics, private conversation, 1998.

kept where they **should** be. French *nichitos* found in Louisiana and around the Mississippi River are similar in nature to those found in French Canada, although they occasionally feature a small patch of freshly-planted flowers and/or the occasional non-religious lawn ornament.

Italian Americans express a higher degree of personal creativity in what resides on their *altarcitos* and *nichitos*. The placement of family photos above the *altarcito* invites the Holy Family to remember those who are still linked to the living family, to protect them, and to invite the ancestors to protect the living family. *Retablos* often have faded photos of deceased family members tucked in the corners of their frames, and formal family portraits of grandparents and other ancestors will often be placed alongside pictures of holy figures. The juxtaposition of the holy and earthly establishes the link, the relationship, and the ties between the two parts of the family.

Less "Romanized" than their French Canadian cousins, Italian American *altarcitos* may also feature a seashell or other gift from a child to a parent, small tokens of personal importance (a special stone), as well as the tools of worship. The *nichitos* are most often framed by gardens, exploding with a riot of flowers, pleasing to the eye and nose. This, of course, is a suitable decoration at a *nichito*, since the Virgin Mary is often linked in legend to various flowers such as roses. More personal taste is expressed at Italian American *nichitos*, with some ornately decorated. The boundaries of the *nichito* are clearly defined in most cases: where the garden ends, or where a step is situated. Italian American

*nichitos* also feature more lawn ornaments in close proximity than French Canadian *nichitos*: wooden ducks, plastic windmills, and little garden statuary of a secular nature, all help decorate and personalize the surrounding area. When a family has a garden and the crop has been good, extra produce is often left atop or beside the *nichito* for anyone who wants it<sup>70</sup>. Italian Americans display more creative *nichitos* than their French cousins.

Both the tendency to splinter Marian devotion and the predilection for bypassing the institutional church when establishing contact with the sacred suggest that Italian Catholicism possesses a creative impulse, that is, a potential for creating new forms of religious devotion, that is missing in other Catholic traditions. I want to argue that it is this creative impulse, or more precisely, the "creative instability" that results from it, that most undermines the spirit of doctrinal and devotional orthodoxy that is part and parcel of Romanized Catholicism. In other words, because Italian Catholicism possesses the potential for constantly creating new forms of Catholic devotion that arise outside the institutional Church, it would inevitably present a problem to those Romanizers who wanted to standardize Catholicism by promulgating a uniform set of Catholic devotions. (Carroll, in O'Toole, 1990: 43)

Mexican American *nichitos* are often described by art historians as "baroque" in taste - a plethora of images, figures, items, and layer upon layer of family history represented by the items on the altar. Each item tells a story, establishes a relationship, and encodes another level of symbolic and actualized meaning. The bombardment of the senses hearkens back to the days of pre-Christian religious practices, a synthesis of African tribal shrines, Aztec, Mayan, and Incan temple art, and Spanish Baroque church art and architecture. The

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<sup>70</sup> Sciorra, 1985, also personal conversation, 1999.

Mexican American *altarcito* and *nichito* is no more personal than those of other Catholic ethnic groups, but they are more personalized. Each Roman Catholic ethnic community establishes *nichitos* and *altarcitos* by the unwritten sensibilities - aesthetic and religious - of their communities. Each *nichito* is a place of transformation and communication: the transformation of the domestic into the sacred, and a wellspring of religiosity where human and Divine meet and communicate.

...The sacred place is often the place where humans enter the realm of the gods, or conversely, the place where the gods are among humans. In either case, it becomes the place of the presence of divinity and therefore an image of the realm of divinity...<sup>71</sup>

## 2.4: WHAT A *NICHITO* IS

From the preceding discussion we can make some generalizations about what a *nichito* is, and its physical attributes. A *nichito* denotes a physical area on a family's private property which is considered sacred. This demarcation can be indicated by a flower bed, a structure sheltering the *bultos* such as a bathtub, prefabricated niche, or niche built of wood and/or bricks. It can also be indicated by a raised mound of dirt, with the suggestion of a sheltering niche created by a trellis of flowers or other flexible article creating an arch

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<sup>71</sup> Brereton, "Sacred Space", Encyclopedia of Religion, v. 12, p. 532.



around the *bulto*. In some cases special lighting such as Christmas lights, or a spotlight, may be trained on the *nichito*.

*Nichitos* always have one or more statues within, unless they have been abandoned for some reason (which will be discussed in Chapter 6). Statues (*bultos*) can be tall or small, plastic, wooden, concrete, or plaster. They can be painted, or left unpainted. Most common in all communities are Virgin Mary *bultos*, with the Sacred Heart of Jesus and *bultos* of other saints, also present.

In most cases, *nichitos* are oriented either 45 degrees to the front sidewalk, or else directly facing the sidewalk. Few *nichitos* are left obscured by foliage or fencing. In a few select communities, many *nichitos* were found to be facing the kitchen of the home in the back yard, away from public visibility, but this will also be discussed in Chapter 6.

*Nichitos* are made of unremarkable ingredients, unless one views a urinal as something remarkable. *Nichitos* are built of commonly obtained, and recyclable items, such as old wooden boards, left over metal sheeting, and even tractor-tires used to form a flower bed edging. Many *nichitos* are formed by reusing common family items such as non-functional refrigerators, or items removed from the home during renovations such as old four-footed bathtubs and the Highway 7 urinal. *Nichitos* are comprised of common things from the domestic sphere of life.

## **CHAPTER 3: ORIGINS OF THE PRACTICE**

### **3.1: HISTORY OF THE PHENOMENON**

The veneration of a holy person or persons is hardly a new phenomenon in human action and experience. Similarly, setting aside a place in one's personal environment for interacting with the Sacred is also a very old practice. As noted earlier in this chapter, the creation of *nichos*, *nichitos*, and *altarcitos* of various types is not unique to those of the Roman Catholic faith, with some Protestants and Greek Orthodox practitioners owning similar types of home-altars. Many African and African-derived religions, such as Santeria, Voudoun, Obeah, and Macumba, instruct their practitioners to build shrines and altars within their homes for the honouring of the Divine as well as for the creation of links with the Beloved Dead.

The Roman Catholic practitioner must walk a thin line between daily religious devotion through Church-approved *sacramentales*, and perceived idolatry. By the Middle Ages, Christianity itself formulated the notion that only "weak" Christians needed visual aids to aid in their faith, and that "strong" Christians could grasp spiritual truths without use of these so-called crutches. (McDannell, 1995: 8) As a result, the type of worship which involved physical representations of the Divine became increasingly suspect.

This internal battle between the popular use and official condemnation of visual expressions of Christian faith was also used to create a sort of biological and intellectual

hierarchy of practitioners. Only the illiterate were considered to need aids such as *bultos* and *milagros* in prayer, because they could not read. "The uneducated, women, and children were particularly responsive to sacred images, objects, and spaces. ...such "helps" could be tolerated because illiterate Christians needed them to understand and express their faith." (McDannell, 1995: 9) With this rationalization, both women and the undereducated were relegated to a second-class, but tolerated, expression of religious belief through the use of *nichitos* and *altarcitos*. Although popular and widespread, the utilization of *altarcitos* and *nichitos* became perhaps a little embarrassing due to this assumption about its clientele.

The Protestant Reformation's emphasis on Christians needing to put their faith in God alone while scorning physical representations of the Divine exacerbated the stereotype of what sort of Christian used *bultos* and *nichitos* or *altarcitos* in worship. (McDannell, 1995: 10) Even today one can hear some Roman Catholics express feelings ranging from ambivalence to discomfort with *nichitos* and *altarcitos* as something they do not understand or which they feel is out of place in modern Roman Catholic practice.<sup>72</sup>

What many Christians do not realize is that this practice of using a statue or painting to represent the Divine's presence is almost as old as humanity itself. The creation of a special location where the worship of natural forces, God(s) and Goddess(es), or spirits could be held can be traced back to preliterate religious practice. Colour, such as red

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<sup>72</sup> Mary Kuhfeld, private email, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1998.

ochre or white clay, the setting apart of a portion of a structure such as a room or architectural area, and remnants of what appear to be offerings and/or ritual tools, all signal special places where human and Divine are to interact. Earliest Christianity inherited this practice from the religions which preceded it, but, as with other practices, tailored it to its needs and belief system. What might have had its origins in pagan practice became a firmly imbedded, important piece of early Christian worship.

### **3.1.1: PRE-LITERATE: JERICHO, ÇATAL HÜYÜK, MALTA**

The city of Jericho is one which evokes rich Biblical imagery in the imagination of the Peoples of the Book. Gospel singers sing of how "Joshua fit the battle of Jericho and the walls came tumblin' down", and a 1990s bible-study series for children illustrates the legendary battle with celery stalks, peas, and tomatoes as the actors. ("Veggie Tales", 2000) The historical Jericho lies in the Jordan Valley, where archaeologists have proven the existence of an agrarian culture in that area dating back to 10,000 B.C.E., known as the Natufian culture. (Mellaart, 1965: 23)

Around the seventh century B.C.E. a new culture arrives in the Jericho area, supplanting the Natufians. Very little is known of the daily lives of this Jericho culture, but numerous buildings were designated as shrines. As Mellaart notes,

**the simplest shrine consisted of a small room with a niche at the back<sup>73</sup>, in which a stone stela may have been deposited; another, the fullest plan of a building available, looked like a 'megaron' and may have had columns leading from a courtyard into the building, and a third with a huge room, at least 6 by 4 metres, and curvilinear annexes along the long sides, may also have served cult purposes. (Mellaart, 1965: 41- 42)**

**Mellaart's book features a photo of one shrine building with a stone pillar found in situ, located within the back-wall niche. (Mellaart, 1965: 41) Numerous fertility cult type figurines and some fairly lifelike mother-and-child figures were also found in the shrine buildings.**

**It appears then, that the veneration of the Divine (particularly in female form) was marked by the people of pre-Biblical Jericho by the placement of some symbolic figure within a niche built into the wall of the shrine buildings. The symbolism of the pillar and the function of the figurines found are open to speculation but one thing is clear to archaeologists: the red ochre walled rooms were religious shrines and a venerated or worshipped figure was placed within those walls, in clearly delineated niches.**

**Between 6000 B.C.E. and 5800 B.C.E., a highly developed culture emerged in the Anatolian highlands of what is now Turkey. Scholars believe there are over 32 acres of land comprising the town of Çatal Hüyük. The people of Çatal Hüyük lived in single-**

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<sup>73</sup> **emphasis added**

room mud (or adobe) houses, accessing the rooms through their rooftops with wooden ladders.

In most of the shrine-rooms of Çatal Hüyük, female figurines were found, often grouped with stone pillars and/or natural pillars such as stalactites or stalagmites. These shrines featured three-dimensional bull heads (aurochs) protruding from the walls, with benches and/or pillars creating niche-areas. Sketches positing possible shrine room reconstructions at Çatal Hüyük show offerings being placed at the base of these auroch-pillars (see Mellaart, 1965, illustrations 62, 86), much as one might leave offerings such as flowers to a deity today. Again, as Çatal Hüyük was a pre-literate culture, scholars can only guess as to the symbolism of the figures and wall-paintings found in these shrines. Notable however, is the presence of highly elaborately decorated niches, both small and large, in these places of worship.

The most sophisticated of the early cultures, and the one with the best-preserved religious sites, is that of prehistoric Malta. Waves of agrarian settlers appear to have made the crossing from Sicily to the Maltese islands as early as 7000 B.C.E., with the temple-builders having arrived on Malta and Gozo around 3600 B.C.E. The earliest of the dated megalithic temples, known as Ggantija, is located on the island of Gozo. The Ggantija complex is actually comprised of two separate temples within an encompassing outer wall. The larger building is five-lobed, with the smaller being a four-lobed structure. Both buildings feature niches in prominent locations; the larger building has three niches on one

wall, while the smaller temple building has one niche against a wall. (Bonanno, 1997: 14, 16)

A slightly newer structure (c. 3300 - 3000 B.C.E.), the Hypogeum, exists on the island of Malta as a massive underground temple structure. The architecture mimics much of the Ggantija temples, including niches hewn out of the limestone walls. As the Hypogeum was discovered by accident during some construction in 1902, the interpretation of the complex and the niches therein, are merely speculative due to some damage sustained in their discovery. This being said, some of the finest female sculptures of Maltese prehistory, such as the "sleeping ladies", were discovered in the Hypogeum<sup>74</sup>.

The height of the Maltese temple-building civilizations is noted as the *Tarxien* phase, between c. 3000 and 2500 B.C.E. Numerous temple complexes have been excavated, including at Hagar Qim and Tas-Silg, two temple structures at Mnajdra, and a massive complex at Tarxien with four separate temple buildings. The level of artistic stone carving featured in these later temples is astonishing for a pre Bronze Age culture. Extensively decorated altars, niches, friezes, and even a stone knife<sup>75</sup> have been found in the Tarxien

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<sup>74</sup> One statuette in particular is called "The Sleeping Lady" of Malta, and it is an elegantly detailed figure of a woman sleeping on a couch (0.12m long). During my visit to the National Museum in Valetta in 1997, I noted a second sleeping woman, face down, on a similar couch. I have chosen to refer to the figures in the plural. The second figurine is in less-pristine condition than the first, with part of the head and shoulders missing, which is probably one reason why it is rarely mentioned.

<sup>75</sup> Current theories indicate this knife was probably for some sort of rituals such as animal sacrifices, as it was placed inside one of the altars. Bonanno, 1997.

**digs. In each massive Malta temple, as in the Hypogeum, niches feature as prominent elements of the construction. The niches are unmistakable in form and undoubtedly served religious purposes.**

**Clearly, the shape and form of the niche dates back to prehistoric times as a religiously-recognisable form. It is unclear whether these niches held figures of veneration or merely religious supplies, but current archaeological thought holds that these niches denoted the presence of the Divine, usually seen as female. (Bonanno, 1997) Some of these sites show remnants of offerings left in or near the niches, with religious art of varying levels of sophistication adorning others. These pre-Bronze age sites certainly seem to offer a plausible pre-historical precedence for the placement of Divine representations within a niche.**

**With the establishment of religious niches as a practice in the ancient Maltese culture, its dissemination appears to have been secured. By 700 B.C.E., the Phoenician peoples, established sailors with a written language, were using Malta as a trading post. (Bonanno, 1997: 49)**

**The successors to the Phoenicians in both Malta and other parts of the Mediterranean basin were the Carthaginians. By the middle of the 6th century B.C.E., the artifacts found throughout Malta indicate strong ties between the people of Malta and the people of Carthage. (Bonanno, 1997: 51) The Carthaginians survive in classical literature as a major**



cultural force which successfully challenged both the Greek and Roman Empires for political hegemony.

### 3.1.2: CLASSICAL MEDITERRANEAN BASIN SHRINES AND ALTARS: GREECE, ITALY

The use of set-apart places for a statuette of the Divine was clearly a common practice in the Mediterranean basin by the time of the Greek empire. Artifacts of Goddesses within niches are on display in major museum collections. Numerous terra cotta figurines of Venus or Aphrodite exist posed within an arch shape. Both the British Museum in London, and the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria, Egypt, have such figurines in their collections. They are approximately a foot or so in height, made of terra cotta, and stand in iconographically established poses within an archway. Some artifacts have a closed-back niche, while others stand posed within a niche resembling Grecian temple columns with arches. Both styles clearly resemble the current Virgin Mary *nichito* or *altarcito*.

It is unclear which came first, the institutional temple-worship of Goddesses within niches, or the private home-altars with Goddesses in niches. I noted both types of niches throughout the Greek world during my travels to the region. There is an altar to Aesculapius (Greek God of Healing) placed below the theatre on the south slope of the

Acropolis in Athens, where the altar sits in front of a niche carved out of, or enhanced from, a cavern in the side of the slope itself. (Scully, 62: 118) (fig. 92)

The practice of offerings to the gods and heroes in niches was clearly a common one throughout Classical Greece. On the sacred island of Delos, on Mt. Cynthus, there is a grotto and altar to Herakles located part-way up the mountain. The altar sits in front of the niche itself, with the niche built with peaked-roof stones, creating the visual impression of a gabled roof. "There was also a cave on Mount Cynthus, dressed up with cyclopean corbel vaults during the Hellenistic period as a chthonic grotto with a statue of herakles inside but probably sacred long before and an intrinsic part of the holiness of the island." (Scully, p. 117 - photos, figures 222 a, b.)

It is almost impossible to determine if the precursors to the Romans also worshipped their gods and goddesses through the use of home-altars. The Etruscan language continues to confound scholarly research, and it appears the Etruscans vastly preferred to build their homes and other institutional buildings out of building materials other than stone, leaving few artifacts for modern scholars to investigate. (Hamblin, 1975: 99) It is known, however, that the Etruscans seemed obsessive about the proper practice of their religious rituals. The Roman writer Livy noted that the Etruscans were "more concerned than any other nation with religious matters." (Hamblin, 1975: 87)

Part of the earliest religious practice of the Romans appears to have been the veneration of spirits, or *numina*, such as the *lares* and *penates*. The *Lares* guarded the home and the boundary of each family's fields, while the *Penates* were the spirits of the kitchen and larder. (Hadad, 1975: 121 - 122) It is thought that the head of each family would have handled his own private observances, but as Roman civilization expanded, worship became more institutionalized. Despite this, most private homes appear to feature some number of small *altarcitos* to various gods and goddesses.

Our best examples of domestic Roman life come from Pompeii and Herculaneum (Ercolano), in Italy. Settled by the Romans by the 4th century B.C.E., Pompeii was a city of approximately 20,000 residents, supported primarily by trade and agriculture.

Herculaneum was a much smaller community, patronized primarily by the rich as a seaside resort town due to its legendary natural beauty. On August 24, 79 C.E., Mt. Vesuvius erupted spectacularly burying Pompeii in tons of ash and drowning Herculaneum in a river of lava. Because the destruction was so sudden and swift, both cities remained frozen in time. The excavations of these preserved cities have revealed a wealth of information on the daily life of Romans, including much on their daily religious practice.

In Pompeii, there are excellent examples of both *nichitos* and *altarcitos*. On the Via dell'Abbondanza is the *Thermopolium* with the *Larium*, featuring an excellently preserved *altarcito* to the Genius of the shop's owner, a sort of spiritual self, as it were. The altar features the Genius itself, flanked by four *Lara*, with two serpents painted below the main

scene<sup>76</sup>. Further to the west in the House of the Vettii, featuring another excellent *aedicule lararium*: "the Genius in a *toga praetexta* is shown executing a libation between two dancing lares holding the drinking horn while below a crested serpent moves towards an altar which holds offerings of food." (Giuntoli, 1994: 70) (fig. 93)

One notable in-house *altarcito* has been excavated in Herculaneum, in the House of the Skeleton. This house has a magnificently preserved shrine in situ, complete with ornate mosaic decoration on the pillar the niche itself sits upon. (Giuntoli 1994: 90) The external shape of the shrine is reminiscent of classic Roman temple architecture (peaked roof, columnar front pillars), but an examination of the interior shape of the shrine reveals a smaller, reddish terra cotta curved roof interior niche set within the "temple" facade. Stylistically, the terra cotta interior niche closely resembles both the Greek artifacts in museums noted above, and also the "bathtubs" of contemporary Virgin Mary *nichitos*.

Pompeii features numerous *nichitos* on the exterior of buildings, facing passers-by. One notable one is built into a frescoed shop-wall on the Via Dell'Abbondanza, somewhat near the Via Stabiana. To the right of the *nichito* is a street marker (not contemporary) which in part reads, "REG.IX.INS". Above the niche itself is what appears to be a portrait of a woman. Around the niche itself are remnants of a fresco featuring numerous men and women, with a branch of laurel above their heads. The niche itself is rectangular with a

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<sup>76</sup> Serpents were commonly depicted on kitchen altars, and symbolized fertility and procreative power.

temple-style roof (gabled), in which sits a white bust of a bearded man or God. The frame of the *nichito* and its inside is of a terra cotta colour. (fig. 94)

Phallus veneration appears to have been a major part of life in Pompeii due to the phallus's apotropaic nature. Numerous incised and/or cast erect penises are the sole occupants of *nichitos* and ceramic type wall shrines. (fig. 95) In walls, atop street corners, or carved into street stones, these phalluses were apparently used for propitiatory purposes. (Matina, 195: 18-19) Some of these figures were framed in the typical shrine form (e.g., rectangle with gabled roof, stairs leading up to the figure), while others were placed in rectangular niches without the peaked roof. Some were incised into stones without any enclosure at all. Joseph Sciorra cites sources who suggest that contemporary Italian *edicole*<sup>77</sup> trace their roots to Roman household and public shrines, or *lararia*, dedicated to domestic deities. (Sciorra, 1998: 58)

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<sup>77</sup> Mosaic or painted representations of members of the Holy Family, often placed above doorways or on the side of buildings. *Edicoles* feature prominently in the discussion on *nichitos* and *altarcitos* in Europe.

### 3.1.3: THE EARLIEST CHRISTIAN NICHE: SAINT PETER'S TOMB

The practice of placing some representation of the Divine in a niche-shaped location seems quite clear as one traces the artifacts from prehistory through Graeco-Roman times. What appeared to be the weak link in the theory was linking the pagan practice of *nichitos* and *altarcitos* to the Christian practice. It is not always logical to link the religious rituals of one culture in a geographic region to another: indeed, some religions choose to differentiate themselves from neighbouring peoples by outlawing the practices of their neighbours as heretical. Judaism boasts many of these prohibitional laws, including the cautionary tale of the Golden Calf in Exodus<sup>78</sup>.

The conundrum was solved through architectural archaeology. Recent finds below the floor of the Vatican itself offer a compelling and direct link between the veneration of the holy by pagans and Christians by utilizing niches. What was discovered was an ancient cemetery which would have stood above ground rather than below.

...third-century Christians preferred to bury their dead in open-air cemeteries (*areae*) rather than in catacombs. Such cemeteries are known to have existed from about A.D.

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<sup>78</sup> Exodus 32, 19 - 24. God's wrath is visited upon the Israelites after they lose patience with Moses, collect their gold jewelry, and melt it into what is described as a "Golden Calf" which they then worship. The description of the animal as a calf derides the practice of bull worship, denigrating the virile animal by changing the metaphor. Many peoples, from the Canaanites to Rome's Mithraic cults, represented their male gods in forms such as bulls.

200.... In between rose small mausolea (*cellae*); some have survived, transformed into crypts, in some medieval churches in France. ...The worship of such sites and the structures built to shelter them are closely linked to pagan antecedents and contemporary pagan custom. (Krautheimer, 1965: 11)

Throughout the Roman period, heroes and great persons were venerated after their death. The strong Roman belief in the afterlife encouraged this practice, as these legendary persons were thought to intercede on behalf of the living when supplicated. Simple mausolea began to evolve in these cases to holy burial sites with an attached niche for the placement of propitiatory offerings. The Romans inherited this practice from the Greeks before them, and it appears the pagan practice of venerating special people after their death left its mark on the early Roman Christians. After all, every Christian of the first generation was a convert. With no guidelines as to how to bury the dead or how to mark the passage of special persons it seems logical for the early Christians to have turned to their ancestral practices for guidance.

The sites linked to their deeds and their deaths had been marked by *heroa*: structures which fused the function and design of temples and sanctuaries with those of mausolea. In their simplest form such heroa were areas open to the sky, terminated by a niche sheltered under an *aedicula*. ...*heroa* and the hero cult are the roots from which Christian martyria and the martyr cult sprang, apparently as early as the second century.

Finds under Saint Peter's in Rome have unearthed what appears to be the oldest known *martyrium* [where] ...a small area has survived. ...The area is terminated by a wall which

oversails one of the poor graves. From brick stamps, the wall can be roughly dated c. A.D. 160. Above the grave a niche was hollowed into the wall, either when built or at least before 200. (Krautheimer, 1965: 11)

This wall is referred to as the Red Wall, named for the red plaster covering the brick of the wall which still remains. The archaeological findings fit the report of Saint Peter's death in Rome before 100 C.E. mentioned by Gaius, a learned Roman ecclesiastic, towards the end of the second century. (The Vatican and Christian Rome, n/d: 48)

...By 200, his *tropaion*, the monument of his victory over death and paganism, was venerated on the Vatican Hill. This is apparently the *aedicula* now unearthed. Imprecations scratched into an adjoining wall leave no doubt that to Christians of the mid third and presumably the late second century, this was the shrine of the apostle. ...To this day, it forms the centre of veneration in the church of Saint Peter's below the high altar. (The Vatican and Christian Rome, n/d: 12)

It seems a logical extrapolation that, if a *nichito* was suitable to mark the final resting place of one saint, it was probably suitable to indicate the presence of other saints and holy people. Early Roman converts to Christianity would have been familiar with *nichitos* and *altarcitos* in their daily life through the home *larium* and outside shrines; it would make sense to replace the presence of the "old" gods in the niche with the "new" God.



### 3.1.4: MEDIEVAL AND BAROQUE PILGRIMAGE PRACTICES

Visitors to the tomb of Saint Peter left offerings at the tomb in the form of coins. Coinage from all periods of history and all countries have apparently been found near the Red Wall. By the end of the sixth century C.E., the graves of various saints became the locus of ecclesiastic communities. Some saints were canonized after founding religious orders while others were sainted due to miracles attributed to them.

[This tendency to build religious communities where saints had died]... was because the saint in Heaven was believed to be "present" at his tomb on earth. The soul of Saint Martin, for instance, might go "marching on"; but his body, at Tours, was very definitely not expected to be "a-mouldering in the grave". (Brown, 1981: 3-4)

Indeed, popular legends held that if a saint's crypt were opened, the body would not have putrefied, but rather, would smell like roses.

Although superficially similar to the veneration of saints by early Christians, the pagan veneration of heroes was clearly separate from the veneration of their gods. The gods were totally 'Other'; heroes were humans who had god-like attributes. The two were different categories, and were treated and worshipped in different ways. In contrast, the Christian veneration of martyrs, **humans** who died in service to Christ, was virtually anathema to the pagans of Rome. Christians understood martyrs to be special entirely

because of their humanity: it was that unique human nature which made martyrs special to God, as it were, (Brown, 1981: 6) and able to intercede for humanity.

As the cult of the saints grew during the first six centuries C.E., so too did the practice of travelling to the burial location of a saint. In the popular imagination, saints belied the sadness and horror of human death: they died gloriously in service to God and Jesus, and having been human themselves, they continued to take a special interest in human issues. As time continued, this concept of the saint as close to God was expanded to the view that items related to the saint, such as relics (fabric, bones), would by extrapolation also have some of the efficacy of the saint's presence. As a result, the medieval industry of pilgrimage arose, feeding the pilgrim's need to get as close to a specific saint as possible.

One motive for going on pilgrimage is the feeling that a saint's shrine has a sort of "hot line" to the Almighty. One purifies oneself by penance and travel, then has one's prayer amplified by asking a saint at his own chief shrine to forward it directly to God. This theory is characteristic of the peculiar union of individualism and corporateness that made up the medieval Christian Church; ordinary mortals can augment the efficacy of their prayer by passing their request, preferably on behalf of someone else, upward through a mediator or chain of mediators of increasing sanctity, to the source of all creative power. (V. and E. Turner, 1978: 16)

The business of catering to religious tourists and pilgrims became a booming one in Europe up to the Reformation. On specific feast-days, portable *nichitos* sponsored by guilds or families would be mounted on the road-side routes commonly taken by the

pilgrims. Sometimes blessed bread would be offered to the travellers; other times, the travellers would be invited to stop and say a little prayer at the *nichito* while making the arduous trip to the site of choice. Chaucer tells of pilgrims travelling to Canterbury Cathedral in his Canterbury Tales, c. 1400, and pilgrims still travel each year to San Juan de Compostella in Spain, wearing a scallop shell as a sign of their destination. Some of these practices have survived to the present time, including the practice in Italian communities of feeding pilgrims and neighbours on Saint Joseph's feast day. (Sciorra, Saint Joseph's Table, n/d)

As the industry of relics grew, so too did the related industry of pilgrim badges and images of the saints. Badges indicated the owner was a member of a small, select group of religious people who had travelled to a given saint's shrine. A pilgrim's badge was also thought to hold some of the efficacy of the saint's presence as it originated at the saint's chief shrine. This "essence" of the saint became, in the popular mind, present at the place of burial, in relics, and in badges which had been in contact with the place of burial. It was a logical extrapolation to the faithful that, if something which had been in physical contact with a saint was imbued with sacrality, surely a representation of a given saint would evoke that sacrality in the viewer. here we have the origin of representational *milagros*.

The use of relics and representations in worship remain a pivotal point of argument between Catholics and Protestants. In the Protestant cosmology, using a figure of a saint or the Holy Family to represent the actual persons is idolatry. To the Roman Catholic,

*retablos*, *bultos*, and *milagros* are evocative of the feelings the saint brings to them, and they are a means of evocating the power of the sacred as well as to participate in it. These fall under the broad umbrella of what is called "devotional piety". As one priest explained it,

[We have]... no tangible visions of God therefore how can you be sure HE is here? Devotional piety forms the relationship [between the worshipper and God]. It is like watching a film or VCR: if one is moved by the experience, then how can one say what doesn't exist can't AFFECT me??<sup>79</sup>

The Virgin Mary in various incarnations became the most popular figure for Catholic pilgrimage throughout Europe. Viewed as a representative of the most perfect believer, She was petitioned to for special favours, healings, and the sorts of spiritual and mortal issues one might turn to a grandmother to help with. By the 16th century however, the Reformation's hostility towards pilgrimage curtailed the practice in many countries of Europe. As the Protestants did not make notable headway into the Iberian peninsula, the practice of pilgrimage in general and Marian pilgrimage in particular continued to grow in both Spain and in its possessions in the New World. (V. and E. Turner, 1978: 48) Much like the practice of keeping *nichitos* in French Canada after the cessation of the practice in France, pilgrimage in New Spain continued to grow in popularity.

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<sup>79</sup> Father Gilbert Romero, interview 20 Aug. 1998, Los Angeles, Calif.

Why then did acts of pilgrimage and the keeping of Marian and saintly representations become so overwhelmingly popular in the Spanish New World? Apparently the practice of pilgrimage was popular among the Mayans, and the earliest missionaries realized that it was a trait to be fostered in this community rather than suppressed.

Pilgrimages seem to have existed on a regional scale in pre-Columbian Mexico. Not only the Maya of Yucatan but many other peoples went regularly to venerate certain deities at their shrines, and to propitiate them with gifts or sacrifices. Some of these shrines were later Christianized. It did not take the missionaries long to realize that pilgrimage was an effective instrument for maintaining regional cohesion, and their earlier misgivings gave way to enthusiastic support. (V. and E. Turner, 1977: 51)

Pilgrimages to holy sites in Mexico continue to this day. Magdalena, a town in Sonora state about an hour or so south of the Mexican American border with Arizona, remains a holy site to the First Nations and Mexican peoples today. By car, donkey, and on foot, thousands travel a set route to visit the numerous statues to San Francisco, with the pilgrimage culminating at the shrine to Father Kino, one of the first missionaries in the Mexican Southwest. Some travel to fulfil a *manda*, others as an act of faith.

Oct. 4 is the Feast of Saint Francis of Assisi. [On this day], the faithful go down to Magdalena, Sonora for a pilgrimage. This is where Father Eusebio Kino is buried<sup>80</sup>. ...After the Jesuits were banned by the Pope, the Franciscans took over the Mission and the missionizing of the Southwest. As a

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<sup>80</sup> Father Kino is revered through much of the Southwest as a great missionizer. His personal patron was San Francisco Xavier, also known as the patron of missionaries.

result of the confusion over the two San Franciscos, the Tohono O' Odham started the pilgrimage to Magdalena for Saint Francis Xavier AND Saint Francis of Assisi.<sup>81</sup>

The little items bought on pilgrimage become pivotal in the *nichito* and on the *altarcito*. A special place was needed to honour the saint represented by the *milagro*, *bulto*, *retablo*, or other item such as holy water from a shrine. Originally, Mexican Americans built secular niches, or *cajitas*, to hold work implements.

*Cajitas* (little boxes) ...were used to hold household items in house and in the field, tacked onto a tree. Artists turned the *cajitas* into an art form. However, *cajitas* are also used in a religious manner when turned into a *nicho* or *cajita* altar.<sup>82</sup>

The *cajita* was a familiar form to the Mexican and Mexican American, and made an obvious and logical place to put the souvenirs and *sacramentales* from a pilgrimage; it became a synthesis of the secular little boxes and of niches seen in churches where saint *bultos* were housed. If one could have a *cajita* for secular tools, why not one for religious tools? Perhaps one reason Mexican American *nichitos* are so visibly different from Italian or French Canadian *nichitos* is in part due to their origin as *cajitas*, or tool boxes.

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<sup>81</sup> Bishop Manuel Moreno, Tucson Diocese, interview 24 February 1998.

<sup>82</sup> Dr. Santos Vega, email communication, 06 July 1999.

### 3.1.5: CONTEMPORARY NON-CHRISTIAN *NICHITO* PRACTICES

The veneration of special ancestors, or Holy People, is not unique to Roman Catholic belief. Despite this fact, Roman Catholics often have to fend off repeated accusations of worshipping idols in their use of *bultos* and other representations of the saints. As Vega put it in an email discussion on popular devotion:

...a *sacramentale* as a religious picture that is looked at ...reminds a person of a friend, in this case a saint, Our Lady, and then this person can invoke help from the saint for the saint to pray to God on their behalf. The faithful don't pray to saints (or shouldn't), but only pray to God, but may invoke or petition help from a saint to intercede for them<sup>83</sup>.

As numerous informants said to me, one does not think that a photo of one's sister, or mother, *\*IS\** one's sister or mother. It REMINDS the viewer of them. So too with *bultos* and pictures of the saints; they REMIND the worshipper of the saint, the Virgin, or of Jesus Himself. Some cultures use fairly abstract representations of the Divine, while others are quite concrete though still symbolic, as in the case of Roman Catholic *bultos*. In all cases though, the interaction functions at the levels of faith and memory, not at the

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<sup>83</sup> Dr. Santos Vega, email discussion, 27 October 1999.

level of a literal worshipping of the item itself. As Gregory Bateson would point out, this is the difference between the literal and the metaphoric, mind<sup>24</sup>.

In Catholic teaching, the good dead, but not the damned, may and do (as official reports of numerous devotions attest), communicate with the living, through apparitions, visions, dreams, and the like, and intercede with God to work miracles on behalf of the living. ... The "good dead" are either saints in heaven or on their way to being saints through the fiery cleansing of purgatory. (V. Turner 1978: 204-5)

The following section looks at how non-Christian cultures interact with the Divine through *nichitos*, *nichos*, and *altarcitos*. Despite the disparate backgrounds and geography, patterns of interaction with the Divine appear increasingly familiar - patterns which can perhaps be identified as more than metaphor, and more than ritual. Perhaps the universality of the practice comes closer to identifying the concept of sacrament. In his metalogue, "Why a Swan", Bateson comes to the following point in his discussion:

F: All right, let's try to analyze what "sort of" means. Let's take a single sentence and examine it. If I say "the puppet Petroushka is sort of human", I state a relationship.

D: Between what and what?

F: Between ideas, I think.

D: Not between a puppet and people?

F: No. Between some ideas that I have about a puppet and some ideas that I have about people.

D: Oh.

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<sup>24</sup> Bateson discusses this at some length in both Steps to an Ecology of Mind (1972), and Sacred Unity (1991).



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D: Well then, what sort of a relationship?

F: I don't know. A metaphoric relationship?

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F: ...I can only say this: that it is not one of these statements but their combination which constitutes a sacrament. The "pretend" and the "pretend-not" and the "really" somehow get fused together into a single meaning.

D: But we ought to keep them separate.

F: Yes. That is what the logicians and the scientists try to do. But they do not create ballets that way -- nor sacraments. (Bateson, 1972: 36-37)

### 3.1.5.1: HAWAIIAN

Wahiawa is a small town situated near the centre of the island of Oahu, in Hawaii. The town is described in tourist guides as being fairly unimpressive, but it does feature one oddity which is of interest to this study: the Healing Stones. (fig. 96) The stones are ensconced in a concrete-brick *nicho* next to the Methodist church.

The main stone is thought to have been a gravestone of a powerful Hawaiian chief, moved long ago from the original burial place in a field a mile away to a graveyard at this site. In the 1920s people thought the stone had healing powers and thousands made pilgrimages to it before interest waned. The streets, housing development and church came later, crowding in on the graveyard and leaving the stones sitting out on the sidewalk. (Bendure 1990: 180)

Apparently the stones have been linked to both good luck and bad, explaining why they have not been relocated to a less awkward site. One group in the area sees some sort of

spiritual connection between Indian and Hawaiian beliefs, and have subsequently begun to visit the *nicho* regularly. Offerings include flowers, bananas, coconuts, and wreaths of Ti leaves. (fig. 97)

### 3.1.5.2: BUDDHISM AND ANCESTOR WORSHIP

Shrines both to Buddha and to ancestral spirits are common throughout the Buddhist world. In all cases, the *bultos* and offerings are put in a special place, most often separated from other space by shape or size of placement. Two contemporary examples of modern Buddhist workplace *altarcitos* are from the Manphoang Grocery Store on Somerset Saint in Ottawa (fig. 98) and the Chez Nam Restaurant on Preston Saint in Ottawa (fig. 99).

In the case of the Manphoang *altarcito*, the owner's wife indicated it was her mother who tended the shrines, as she (the owner's wife) is Roman Catholic. There were, however, no Catholic prayer cards or other ephemera evident. Not pictured here is the second *altarcito*, which is placed at the eight foot level against the south wall of the store above the main entrance to the establishment. The *altarcito* by the cash features both Buddhist and traditional Chinese figures, as the family is ethnically Chinese rather than indigenous Vietnamese. The *altarcito* features *bultos*, fruit as offerings, incense, flowers, and electric candles, plus some good luck calligraphy.

The Chez Nam *altarcitos* are tended by the wife of the owner. I was unable to ascertain the function of the small *altarcito* between the storm doors and the inner doors (fig. 100). I suspect that it serves the same purpose as the small *altarcito* at the Manphoang, and probably invites only good people to enter the establishment. The exterior *altarcito* is set against the north glass plate wall, near the entrance to the store. The inner *altarcito* is typical of prefabricated Buddhist home-shrines, and features fruit, tea and incense as offerings, plus electric candles. A small jade Buddha sits in the centre of the *altarcito*. The shape of the elevated section where the Buddha sits has been decorated to create a niche-type shape behind the figure.

A third location with Buddhist *nichitos* is from Glastonbury, England. A small new age store is located near the White Well outlet, inside what was apparently the hydro substation for the area. (The White Well is on public property, while the Red Well is the famous Glastonbury waters owned by a Trust.) The owners are Buddhist, and their store features Buddha in a workplace *altarcito* inside the store itself, and Blue Tara outside the store but inside the front entrance to the building. (fig. 101) In both cases, offerings include candles, fruit, and flowers. The *nichito* to Tara is perched atop an access to the waters of the White Well, and has healing properties attributed to it by visitors.

For comparative purposes, we may look at a stele on display in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York City. The "Buddha Amitaba in Foliated Niche" (Met. catalogue 1997-138) features numerous representations of the Buddha of compassion, always

depicted within a niche. (fig. 102, 103) The stele dates to the 10th or 11th century C.E., showing that the placement of the Buddha within a niche-shape is an old practice within that religious tradition, one echoed in the shape of the workplace *altarcito* at the Chez Nam.

### 3.1.5.3: HINDUISM

A tour of the Sri Lankan Ambassador's residence in Ottawa in 1999 was featured on the cover of the Homes section of the Ottawa Citizen. Among the photos of the building's features was a Hindu religious figure from the front lawn, housed in what can only be described as a classic "bathtub" style *nichito*. The existence of the home shrine on so lofty an estate as the Ambassador's home shows that the practice of in-home devotion continues today with devout Hindus. No offerings were evident, but they would probably include candles, food, and flowers, perhaps as wreath garlands.

Stylistically, this figure can be compared to another Hindu carving at the Metropolitan Museum of Art: "Vishnu with Lakshmi and Sarasvati", (Met. catalogue # 57.51.7) (fig. 104) This carving, in a black stone, is dated to the 11th or 12th century C.E. As it is now housed in a museum it is impossible to tell what sort of offerings might have been made at the feet of the figures, but the shape of the piece has Vishnu and the two Goddesses

artistically displayed in a niche. The niche, with pointed apex and curved roof, echos the architecture of so many *nichitos* throughout the Catholic survey areas.

#### 3.1.5.4: JUDAISM AND ISLAM

Both Judaism and Islam are unique in this study, as both have strong religious prohibitions against physically depicting God (and sometimes by extrapolation, human beings). As a result, I had mistakenly assumed that there would be no symbol for the presence of the Divine which could be spotted as a physical metaphor. I was wrong.

Judaism has no physical representation of God, but it does have one artifact which is personified and is considered to be Holy: the word of God, transmitted directly by Him to Moses in the Five Books of Moses. This part of the Bible is called the Torah, and it is to this day laboriously hand-lettered on animal skin parchment, and never touched by the reader. When a Torah is too badly damaged to be of use to a congregation, religious law demands it be buried with all the care and compassion given to a human body. Torah scrolls are referred to as "She", and they are dressed in luxurious Torah-bags of velvet, ornately embroidered, and crowned with silver spool-tops. For Jews, the Torah scroll is the embodiment of God's presence in their lives.

In every synagogue or temple, Torah scrolls are stored carefully in a particular location, called the Ark. A good friend in Massachusetts, a scholar of Jewish medieval history, pointed out to me that the Ark is nothing more than a niche itself<sup>85</sup>. His point was graphically brought home during a visit to Odessa, Ukraine, in May of 1997. A small impromptu group was brought by a professional tour guide to the only functioning synagogue in that city, as the old synagogues from that vibrant community were turned into government buildings after the Communists invaded Ukraine. The synagogue was being built from an old fruit market, and was still far from complete.

The first things which were finished and decorated, however, were the trappings related to the Ark. (fig. 105) The Ark itself was covered by heavy blue velvet drapes, ornately embroidered with Hebrew text and imagery. Above the drapes, the wood was carved with a book (the Torah) and lions (the Lions of Judah). Eventually the Ark will have a hanging candle or electric light suspended in front of it, the Eternal Flame. Offerings are not left to, or in front of, a Torah Ark, as Judaism ended the practice of offering sacrifices to God after the destruction of the Second Temple. However, the Ark is the place which represents God to Jews, by its contents, the Torah scrolls. The shape of the Ark in Odessa is typical of most Arks - niche shaped. Therefore, it is no stretch of the imagination to say that Jews recognize the presence of the Divine through the shape of a niche, much as other cultures do.

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<sup>85</sup> "Steven", Fall 2000. Clearly, even a good scholar can have a cultural blind spot to what they see as familiar, religiously not seeing the forest for the trees, as it were.

Like Judaism, Islam also has severe prohibitions against any attempt to depict Allah. And like Judaism, Islam represents the presence of Allah in the lives of believers in a non-literal manner. To Moslems, the holiest place in the world is Mecca, and all prayers are said facing towards Mecca. Mecca is the metaphor for Allah: it is where the spirit of Allah exists.

Like Judaism, one must look at the sacred architecture of Islam to get a hint as to how it represents the Divine. My travels through Turkey included visits to numerous mosques, and as Moslems pray on prayer rugs directly on the floor, the patterns of the rugs always point in a direction. This way, the rugs are oriented towards Mecca, and the worshipper is always properly positioned for prayer. The most common pattern on Turkish rugs intended for prayer, is a niche, or arch. In this manner the owner of the rug can be sure s/he faces in the proper direction, by orienting the rug towards Mecca.

The Süleymanie mosque in Istanbul dates back to 1557. It is one of the most magnificent examples of Moslem architecture in the world, and many subsequent mosques have been patterned on its architecture. It is said that this mosque has some of the most perfect acoustics in the world, and it can accommodate over a thousand worshippers. Inside the Süleymanie mosque, the niche, known as the *mihrab*, orients all worshippers towards Mecca, the most sacred city in Islam. (fig. 106)

The eastern windows of the mosque, on the East wall, are the most ornate of any in the building. Light flows in through stained glass panels ornately decorated with geometric figures and artistic calligraphy. Like the Ark containing the Torah scrolls, the East window wall of the Süleymanie mosque is the most ornate location within the building, and it is designed with a complex of niche-shaped windows, and a physical niche at ground level. As with Judaism, Islam may have no literal representation of Allah, but it does represent the PRESENCE of the Divine in a niche.

### 3.2: GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF THE SAMPLE

The primary areas of discussion for this dissertation are Arizona (Guadalupe, Tucson and Phoenix); Ontario and Québec (Ottawa-Carleton region, plus the Outaouais<sup>86</sup>); and New York State (New York City, Long Island, and Upstate). Secondary information was obtained in specific areas by me and some of my informants such as Mark Charleville, a photographer in Louisiana, and Barry Ancelet, a folklorist in Louisiana. Although there are no samples from the U.S. or Canadian northwest, North American areas represented by the research also include: Québec; Nova Scotia; Prince Edward Island; Illinois; Indiana; Louisiana; Kansas; Missouri; Northern and Southern California; New Mexico; Arizona; Texas; Massachusetts; New Jersey; Wisconsin; Hawaii; Florida; Pennsylvania. Anecdotal

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<sup>86</sup> The term "Outaouais" is the French language designation for the West Québec region across the river from Ottawa, Ontario.



information was also obtained about locations as diverse as Kentucky and Iowa. Within Mexico, sample data was obtained from Sonora, Baja, Sinaloa, and Chiapas states, as well as isolated photos from other areas such as Acapulco, Zihuatanejo, Tampico, and Malpitas.

Outside of North America, anecdotal information was obtained for Peru and Columbia, in South America, as well as for Germany and Portugal, in Europe. Photos were obtained from Malta; Mauritius; Italy; Spain; Monaco; France; Ireland; Turkey; Greece; Bulgaria; and England.

### 3.3: ETHNICITY AND RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

In most cases, the *nichitos* and *altarcitos* studied were of Roman Catholics, although a few Greek Orthodox *eikonostasos* were also collected in Greece and Bulgaria. The practice of home altars is not unique to Roman Catholics, although Yvonne Milspaw's study on Protestant home shrines stands out as one of the very few enquiries into the practice within that community. (Milspaw, 1986)

No samples in this study were identified as belonging to Protestant households except one example from Louisiana collected by Dr. Ancelet. In this case, a Cajun family (French Roman Catholic) sold their home to a Creole family.

Three major ethnic groupings were identified from the sample photos and literature: 1) Italian Americans and Italian Canadians; 2) Mexican Americans; 3) French Canadians (Franco-Ontariens and Québécois), French Americans (along the Illinois/Indiana and Missouri communities near the Mississippi) and Cajuns (Louisianans of Acadian descent).

Italian Americans are the most populous ethnic community within the study, with the widest geographic distribution. Americans and Canadians of Italian descent were found from coast to coast, with samples from large communities throughout New York and New Jersey, as well as in Toronto, Philadelphia, and Saint Louis.

Mexican Americans were primarily studied in U.S. states bordering Mexico, such as California, New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas, with a smattering of Cuban Spanish Catholic samples from Florida. As well, a small community of Mexican Americans were sampled in Kansas City, Missouri.

Franco-American samplings from communities in proximity to the Mississippi river were evident, with examples found in both rural areas (near the Mark Twain Nature Sanctuary), and urban areas (Saint Louis). Louisiana is a wealth of *nichitos* from French communities, with samples provided by both Charleville and Ancelet covering most of what is referred to as the "Acadiana" area of the state. Although no samples were obtained from communities west of Toronto, Ontario, there are Franco-Manitoban *nichitos* reported by informants, as well as throughout Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Most French

Canadian *nichitos* were collected within a 30 km. radius of Ottawa, Ontario, as well as some in areas around Montréal and the Eastern Townships, in Québec.

A small number of *nichitos* and/or *altarcitos* were found in ethnically-diverse Roman Catholic communities, most influenced heavily by French Catholicism. Ottawa has a number of Lebanese Catholics who maintain *nichitos*, as well as Vietnamese "boat people", also practicing Roman Catholics. Anecdotal reports were also obtained of Chinese Roman Catholics from areas such as Hong Kong who owned both *altarcitos* and *nichitos*, but no photos were obtained.

Finally, anecdotal reports from various undergraduate students of mine indicate there are a small number of Ottawa *nichitos* in back yards used by Moslem women. Apparently these women, Lebanese and Palestinian Moslems, venerate the Virgin Mary as an Islamic saint, and her son Jesus, as a prophet. This practice is not particularly wide-spread I am told, and the women who have such back-yard *nichitos* are not particularly forthcoming about this practice. As will be discussed in more detail further in this dissertation, the fact that these shrines are placed in the back yard is very important as to how "public" this practice is.

## CHAPTER 4: CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE ARTIFACTS

The general form and possible reasons for the popularity of *nichitos* appear traceable through the investigation of the history of the *nichito* as a religious practice. Collecting *nichitos* appears to have an effect on people much like the childhood game of collecting licence plates from as many different states as possible, while on long trips. In short, it becomes addictive. Friends, acquaintances, and colleagues all found these little yard decorations compelling once I described my thesis topic. Before long, I was receiving email attachments and photographs from across North America as travellers noted *nichitos* on lawns from one end of the continent to another.

The content analysis of the *nichitos* has been greatly facilitated by these "amateur" *nichito* collectors. The body of photographs used to analyze what goes into a *nichito* now exceeds over 700 photos. As well, pictures of *nichitos* in newspaper clippings, books, and magazine articles have augmented the data. This chapter looks at what is placed inside a *nichito* and what is placed outside it, and some theories as to why.

The individual figures found within the *nichitos* need analysis and consideration. The vast majority of Catholic *nichitos* both in Canada and the United States are dedicated to the Virgin Mary. The contents of Tohono O' Odham Native *nichitos* South and West of Tucson appear to focus primarily on Jesus (Sacred Heart) alone, or Jesus and Mary of an equal size, and equally venerated. This study did not collect enough samples of O' Odham

*nichitos* (under a half-dozen samples) to allow a full analysis, but this difference may well be related to the differences between Hispanic and Aboriginal forms of Catholicism. As well, there are clearly other ethnic Catholic communities which are simply not represented in this study due to their numbers. Vietnamese Catholics, and Lebanese Catholics are both a presence in Ottawa, yet very little information was gathered on their *nichito* and *altarcito* practices.

One example of a Vietnamese *altarcito* was gleaned from the Fall 1998 issue of Culturefront Magazine. On page 45 there is a picture of a Vietnamese-American grandmother with her grandchild. The photo, taken in the living room of the family, prominently features an *altarcito*, placed on top of the family entertainment system (with a large saint statue beside the unit as well). The *altarcito*, created upon a white lace runner, features figures of a saint and the Virgin Mary with child, a prayer card, candles, and silk flowers in a vase. (Rosenthal, 1998: 45)

#### 4.1: *BULTOS*

Inside all *nichitos* is some manner of statuary. The most common figure is that of the Virgin Mary, in Hispanic America and Mexico as Our Lady of Guadalupe (Patron of Mexico and the Americas). *Nichitos* also feature Jesus (Sacred Heart), Saint Jude (lost

causes), and saints/religious figures of local preference. When a saint is depicted in two dimensions it is a *retablo*; when it is a three-dimensional depiction, it is a *bulto*<sup>87</sup>.

Countless factories throughout Mexico churn out small and large depictions of various saints and members of the Holy Family. Some are made for tourists, while others, often more ornate, are intended for the local devout worshipper's *nichito*. Some Mexican *bultos* are carved from wood as well, but these are usually more expensive than the plaster *bultos*. The plaster *bultos* are more often sold for devotional purposes while the larger, more ornate wooden ones are primarily sold as art objects<sup>88</sup>. In Canada, unless a family passes down a *bulto* from parent to child, the statues used are not now Canadian-made. Lucie DuFresne, a part-time professor at the University of Ottawa, has noted that the last factory manufacturing saint statuary in Québec closed many years ago and that Canadians must now buy imported Italian statuary for their niches<sup>89</sup>. *Bultos* adhere to strict iconographical rules as to the pose of the saint, colour of clothing, accessories, etc. Every active *nichito* studied in this thesis featured at least one *bulto* in it; some had numerous figures. Of the popular *bultos*, the Virgin Mary in various forms was overwhelmingly the most popular figure seen, regardless of the ethnicity of the *nichito*'s owners.

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<sup>87</sup> Dr. Santos Vega, personal conversation, March, 2000.

<sup>88</sup> Letter, Jim Griffith, May, 2001.

<sup>89</sup> DuFresne, personal conversation, 1999.

A casual observer might consider the largest statuette in a *nichito* to be the one the *nichito* is dedicated to, but this is not always so. Oftimes if the larger figure is that of a saint, and a smaller figure of the Virgin Mary is also present, the *nichito* is still dedicated to the Virgin if other supporting symbols, such as roses, or the colour blue on the interior, are evident. The relative size of the figures within the *nichito* may be nothing more than a by-product related to who purchased which statuette, or when. Certainly a twelve inch tall Lady of Guadalupe handed down for six generations will have far more emotional and spiritual meaning to the owner than the eighteen inch Saint Martin of Porres situated next to her.

#### 4.1.1: VIRGIN MARY

Large or small, monochrome or coloured, *bultos* of the Virgin Mary comprise the largest number of figures in *nichos*, *nichitos*, and on *altarcitos*. Many families are indifferent as to which variant of Virgin Mary they have in their *nichito*: many *nichitos* will have various aspects of her in the niche at the same time. (fig. 107) In Mexican-America, the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos are particularly popular, as both are Hispanic apparitions. "San Juan de los Lagos has a clone, Nuestra Señora de San Juan, Tejas - in Texas. The statue was brought... from San Juan de los Lagos, Jalisco, and is now a devotional and pilgrimage focal point in its own right." (Griffith, letter, May 2001.) Guadalupe, named by the Pope as the "Empress of the Americas", is more universally

venerated throughout Mexican-America, while San Juan de los Lagos appears to be predominantly popular in Texas. (K. Turner, 1990)

French Canadian niches have many Our Lady of Lourdes figures, as this is a French apparition and therefore close to the hearts of the Francophone population. Reproduction grottos of the Lourdes site appear throughout Canada, as well as at numerous sites in the U.S.A.<sup>90</sup> The young Virgin Mary is also seen frequently in Québec and parts of Ontario as a young girl standing at the side of her mother Saint Anne, particularly in the iconographical pose of Saint Anne de Beaupré, a major pilgrimage site near Québec City. It is quite rare to find *nichitos* featuring the Madonna and Child; only one example was found in the collection of data for this thesis.

Another community present in this research but of low numerical impact is the Lebanese-Catholic community in Ottawa. Ottawa had a very high Lebanese immigration in the 1960s, bringing many Roman Catholics to the city. Many of the *nichitos* in this study featuring a lone Virgin Mary were thought to be of French origin, but were subsequently discovered to be owned by Lebanese Catholics. The Lebanese frequently do not build any structure around their *bultos*; many homes have a Virgin Mary free-standing to one side of the entrance, often with a trellis of flowers in summer, or a spotlight year round. As well,

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<sup>90</sup> One famous reproduction grotto to Lourdes is on the grounds of the University of Notre Dame, built in 1896. "This grotto would eventually evolve into the most sacred space on the Notre Dame campus, rivaling even the football field." McDannell, 1995: 160.



two different sources in Ottawa have indicated that a small minority of Lebanese Moslem women also maintain a private *altarcito* or back-yard *nichito* to the Virgin Mary<sup>91</sup>.

Most common in niches throughout the surveyed areas, however, is a somewhat "generic" Virgin Mary statue. She is portrayed in veil, with arms open in greeting towards the viewer, often (but not always) perched atop a sphere (sometimes representing the orb of the world), often standing atop a snake she crushes with one foot. Nuns living in the Mother House of the Grey Nuns, in Montréal, informed me quite firmly that when the Virgin Mary stood atop the world and crushed a snake with her foot, this was the Immaculate Conception<sup>92</sup>. However, others have described this as a "generic" Virgin Mary, and that the Immaculate Conception figure was quite new in the history of Virgin Mary figures<sup>93</sup>. In my survey I have counted this figure as the Immaculate Conception, realizing that this may be an error of interpretation.

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<sup>91</sup> This fact was related to me by two different undergraduates after lectures. Both cases were reported in different parts of the city of Ottawa, and the reports were two years apart. One student indicated that Moslem women have a high regard for the Virgin Mary, as Her Son is venerated as a prophet in Islam.

<sup>92</sup> Discussion with members of the Order of the Grey Nuns, Montreal, May 1999. Despite a small language barrier, they pointed quite firmly at a life-sized *bulto* of the Immaculate Conception in their main meeting room, which was exactly as I have seen in *nichitos*.

<sup>93</sup> The opposing view has indicated that Mary is only the Immaculate Conception when she has the list of features noted previously, AND wears a crown. Some books of Catholic iconography agree with this, others do not.

When painted, most Virgin Mary figures wear a medium-to-sky blue cloak and veil. her sash is most often painted either blue (as in the Lourdes apparition) or red. her dress is often left white (for purity). More often than not, her face and hands are not painted a flesh-tone, but left the white of the plaster itself. If any pigment at all is put on the statue, it is the veil and cloak. There are numerous examples of Mary statues with only the veil painted. (fig. 108) Families seem content, however, to leave their *bulto* unpainted. (fig. 109)

Popular in some areas of Italian Brooklyn is the Virgin of Mt. Carmel. She is usually portrayed wearing a large crown, white gown, and white cloak with gold patterns on it. In Canada, the occasional *nichito* will also feature a small *bulto* of Notre Dame du Cap (of the Cape), or Notre Dame des Neiges (of the Snows). These were quite uncommon, however. Other Virgins will be found as *bultos* (see below), but the statuary is fairly uniform with a "generic" or Immaculate Conception Virgin Mary as the main figure in the *nichito*. Where candles are found, there seems to be no concern towards having a candle of the same aspect of the Virgin as the *bulto*. Many an Arizona *nichito* was found to have a candle to Nuestra Señora de Socorro (Perpetual Help), with a *bulto* of Guadalupe inside.

One interesting local manifestation of the Virgin was found in Kansas City, Missouri. At the corner of Askew and Garner is a three-story walkup brick building noted as the apparition site for "Mary, Queen of Love". (fig. 110) The entire balcony area of the main floor has been enclosed by a mesh patio and metal roof, and worshippers have access to it

at any time of the day or night. The *nichito* for this apparition is unique: a store mannequin has been encased in plaster or polyfilla which has been shaped to look like classical Virgin Mary attire. The clothing has been left white, in startling opposition to the bright colouring of the mannequin's face and lips. The Queen of Love stands behind a plexiglass window, with a small moat in front of the *nichito* for donations. Small plastic rosaries hang from the ceiling, one assumes, accessible for worshippers. No one appeared to be inside the building while I was taking photos, but the next door building has a plaque indicating it is the home of the "congregation". Kansas City, Missouri is primarily an Italian American Catholic community, but two women exiting the "congregation" office were speaking Spanish.

In Arizona the Virgin Mary is most often polychrome, in keeping with Mesa-Baines' theory of the "Baroque tastes" of the Mexican community<sup>94</sup>. Another explanation could relate the bright colour of Hispanic *nichitos* to other forms of Central American art. In this manner, the joyous colours seen in *nichito* figures seems to mirror the plethora of colour seen on birds and flowers, particularly in the desert during the short rainy season. Despite the classic Roman Catholic relationship between the Virgin and the colour blue, many representations of her in Mexican culture have her in a green cloak, peppered with gold stars, in her form as the Virgin of Guadalupe.

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<sup>94</sup> <http://zonezero.com/magazine.distant.zclomes2.html>, Jan. 14, 2001. Mesa-Banes discusses the link between the Mexican American's preference for bright colours and 'busy' artwork, with the artistic styles of Medieval and Baroque Spain.

#### 4.1.2: JESUS

Second in frequency only to His mother in *nichitos* is Jesus. Many *nichitos* will have no figure other than a Virgin Mary within, but if there is any other figure, it is most often some aspect of Jesus. *Nichitos* will often have the infant Jesus in the arms of saint-*bultos* as part of the iconography (e.g., Saint Joseph).

Sacred Heart of Jesus: *bultos* representing the Sacred Heart of Jesus are most common in *nichitos*, even outnumbering crucifixes. Sacred Heart *bultos* feature the figure of Jesus with his heart exposed on his chest. Two main commercial representations of the Sacred Heart have been collected, one with arms out at 90 degrees to the body (beckoning to the viewer), and one with the arms flat to the chest, pointing at the exposed heart itself. The 'beckoning' Sacred Heart appears primarily in Italian Catholic New York City (fig. 111), with the closed-arm Sacred Heart collected in most other areas with *nichitos* (fig. 112).

Crucifix/Crucified Christ: Although it is a familiar figure to Roman Catholics, the Crucified Christ (whether mounted on the cross or free-standing) is usually a secondary or tertiary figure in *nichitos*. Where a crucifix is present, it is usually mounted on a back wall or side wall of the *nichito*, or lying against a wall in a somewhat haphazard form. (fig. 113) Christ on the cross is rarely the main *bulto* or figure in *nichitos*, whether they are French, Italian, or Mexican.

**El Niño de Atocha:** El Niño de Atocha is by far the most popular figure of Jesus seen in Mexican American *nichitos*<sup>95</sup>. Atocha is portrayed as a seated pilgrim child, in a large-brimmed hat, wearing a pilgrim's scallop-shell on his breast, holding a palmer's basket in one hand and an accoutred staff in the other. One informant described her relationship with El Niño de Atocha as that of a close friend. "I am too close to El Niño to pray to Jesus or Mary, except in Church."<sup>96</sup>

**El Niño de Bogota:** New on the Mexican American *nichito* landscape, El Niño de Bogota appears to have made inroads quite recently, with the first photos of Him having been collected in 2000 (fig. 114) around Tucson. This apparition of the child Jesus is localized to a mountain near Bogota, Columbia. The iconography of the Niño de Bogota features a cherubic-faced, gold haired child with arms outraised as if to be picked up, wearing pink robes, a blue sash, and a halo. His feet are bare. Sometimes referred to as the "Divine Child Jesus"<sup>97</sup>, this *bullo* has been nonexistent in *nichitos* throughout the survey areas until extremely late in the information-gathering process.

As there has not been a large influx of Colombians or South Americans into the Tucson area, it is possible that the Niño de Bogota may well have entered the area as a result of

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<sup>95</sup> Although there is also an iconographic Virgin of Atocha, She is rarely seen in *nichitos*. El Niño is most often displayed alone.

<sup>96</sup> Josephine, 4 January 1997.

<sup>97</sup> The "Divine Child Jesus" features the identical iconography.

the drug trade from Colombia. Tucson is a main gateway for the illegal drug trade, and has adopted other religious or quasi-religious figures from the drug trade such as Jesus Malverde (see below), into its *bulto* practice.

**The Pieta:** Reproductions of Michaelangelo's Pieta occur in approximately a half-dozen *nichitos* in this study. Although a popular depiction inside homes and as paintings, the Virgin cradling her Son is quite unusual as a *bulto* in *nichitos*. The representation of the child Jesus as the Infant of Prague is seen in the occasional *nichito*, but seems to be far less popular than the Niño of Atocha. Like El Niño de Bogota, El Niño of Atocha is a standing figure, dressed in red.

#### 4.1.3: SAINTS

It is rare to see a *nichito* (or *nicho*) dedicated to a Saint without a member of the Holy Family within, but they do occur. Of those, Arizonans seem to venerate a syncretized Saint Francis (see below) and Saint Martin of Porres in their own *nichitos* when the Virgin Mary is absent. Italian *nichitos* seem to show a great fondness for Saint Anthony of Padua, collected alone in dozens of *nichitos* in Italian New York City.

Saint Joseph, husband of Mary: *nichitos* with Saint Joseph without Mary, or with Mary as a minor figure, are found most commonly in Canada. One can attribute this in part to

Saint Joseph's favoured status as Patron Saint of Canada, along with the existence of Saint Joseph's Oratory in Montréal as one of the great pilgrimage sites in the Roman Catholic world. Saint Joseph is most often portrayed as an older man, with balding hair and long beard, sometimes with a pilgrim's walking stick or staff, holding the child Jesus in His arms.

Saint Joseph and Saint Anne are present in home *altarcitos* as well as in outdoor *nichitos*. Saint Joseph and Saint Anne de Beaupré share place of honour on one Québec *altarcito*. The *altarcito* is formed with statues placed on two shelves of the owner's bookshelf units. The left-hand side features flowers in two vases and a statuette of Saint Joseph holding the infant Jesus (Saint Joseph du Mont-Royal). On the right side are two matched vases and a statuette of Saint Anne with the young Virgin Mary at her feet (Saint Anne de Beaupré). (Simard, 1979: 54) As well, in some Italian American communities, it is reported that some families will bury a statue of Saint Joseph on their property in order to assist them with selling their house. (Sciorra 1998: 63)

Saint Anne: Mother of the Virgin Mary, Saint Anne is a popular saint on *altarcitos*, but not nearly as common in *nichitos*. This study found one example of Saint Anne as the main *bulto* in an Italian *nichito* in Elmont, New York (fig. 115). She is popular in Québec due to the major pilgrimage site of Saint Anne de Beaupré Cathedral near Québec City, but few *nichitos* feature her statuary.

**Saint Francis of Assisi:** In the Tucson area, this saint has become somewhat co-mingled with Saint Francis Xavier. The O' Odham Mission Church, San Xavier del Bac<sup>98</sup> was founded by Father Eusebio Kino, the Jesuit missionary whose personal patron was San Francisco Xavier. The two saints have become somewhat syncretized, with the Jesuit Saint Francis Xavier (black robes) often shown in the brown robes of the Franciscan Saint Francis of Assisi, and vice-versa.

**San Francisco Xavier:** Quite uncommon in *nichitos* except around the O'Odham communities in southern Arizona. A large life-size reclining wood carving of the saint in the Mission Church at San Xavier del Bac is said to have healing powers, and the statue's blanket is always covered in photos, *milagros*, hospital i.d. bands, and related ephemera. It is also said that only the pure of heart are able to lift the *bulto's* head with one hand. A steady lineup of visitors stops briefly at the statue to kiss its face or say a quick prayer. The most famous instance of San Francisco Xavier in a *nichito* was the no-longer extant "Philco" *nichito* in Tucson, a favourite of niche-researchers.

The "Philco" *nichito* was of interest because the alcove itself was a USED BAR REFRIGERATOR, with the interior light wired to stay on and illuminate the *nichito*. (fig. 80) The main figure in the alcove (body of the refrigerator) was Saint Dymphna, a saint

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<sup>98</sup> Also known as the White Dove of the Desert, construction on this church began on April 28, 1700. It is viewed as the most magnificent example of Spanish colonial religious architecture in North America, and remains the main house of worship for the Tohono O' Odham people of that area. "Bac" is a mispronunciation of the O' Odham word "Wa:k": point of water.



responsible for healing mental illness. A prone figure of Saint Francis Xavier, imitating the *bulto* at the Mission church, filled the freezer section of the fridge. The *nichito*, albeit unique in form, still fulfilled the basic needs of the practice: it was alcove-shaped, and it was hollow so that the religious statuary could be properly displayed. Both Jim Griffith (1992) and Eliza Husband (1985) have recorded the bar refrigerator *nichito* in their research.

The I-10 *nicho* of the transforming Saint: Of great interest to me was a favourite *nicho* (large anonymous niche) off the access road to Interstate 10, between exits 240 and 236, Northwest of Tucson, near Marana, Arizona. Photos of this *nicho* were taken over a course of four years, originally out of simple interest and later with an eye to the thesis itself. Approximately two years after the first photo in 1997, (116, 117) the head of the Saint was knocked off by unknown vandals, and was then reattached with some sort of tape. (fig. 118) As is evident, the original figure was dark-skinned (note the hands) with a full beard and moustache, and a monk's tonsure. Some of the iconography suggests it might have represented Saint Martin of Porres (skin colour, position of the cross, beads), while the features of the face suggested the *bulto* might have been of Saint Francis of Assisi (tonsure, brown robes).

Subsequently, the head was removed or stolen, leaving a headless *bulto* to stand guard in the full-size *nicho*. The loss of the head did not appear to concern those who used the *nicho*, as offerings of flowers, candles, and small statuary continued to appear regularly.

(fig. 119) In place of the original plaster head, a flat stone was left by some anonymous worshipper atop the neck of the *bulto*. The statue was repainted, and now featured clearly caucasian hands. Animal statuary had been placed at the feet of the headless *bulto*, syncretizing it by pigment, robe colour, and statuary, with Saint Francis of Assisi. As well, a second, small *nicho* was constructed to the left of the large grotto-style *nicho* as a memorial *nicho* to Maria A. Daniels, 1978 - 1996. Given the popularity of highway *nichos* as death-markers, it is possible that the eighteen year old met her death on the highway near that location.

The religious syncretism continued. At the feet of the *nicho* can be seen yet more iconographical mixing. A smaller *bulto* of San Francisco Xavier (the Jesuit saint) is present, with a skull by his feet and his black robes making his identity unmistakable. To the right of the smaller *bulto* was a saint-prayer candle to San Martin de Porres, a mestizo (mixed-breed) saint, also depicted in black robes, but with his iconographical broom in his right hand. Clearly, whoever the original *bulto* was intended to represent, he had ultimately become different saints for different travellers, regardless of religious Order or racial identity.

Further study of the I-10 *bulto* has become problematic thanks to the Arizona Highway Department. A massive project to widen the access roads near Marana, originally a small agricultural community which grew into a Tucson bedroom community, caused the construction teams to temporarily remove the exit 240 grottos. The I-10 *bulto* is captured

in a photo featured on the inside fly-leaf to Jim Griffith's 2000 book, Saints of the Southwest, proving that the *nicho* does still exist despite my fruitless search for it in 2000. As well, Griffith reports that the head is being replaced when it is vandalized, by carved and painted wig stands, painted to look like a man's head.

Martin of Porres; Tucson niches often also feature Saint Martin of Porres, a *mestizo* (mixed-blood) saint. Saint Martin is most often depicted as a dark-skinned man with no facial hair, holding a cross or crucifix in one hand to his chest. He is dressed in black robes, often with a white under-robe showing through. He is often shown iconographically holding a broom, and wearing a large rosary. His popularity in Tucson was attributed by one informant as being due to the fact that he was neither black nor white, but a mix of races<sup>99</sup> as are so many Mexican Americans. He often appears in *nichitos* with other *bultos*, but the occasional *nichito* dedicated entirely to him does exist.

San Martin Caballero (Saint Martin of Tours): The Spanish name of this saint stumped many of the French and English Catholics helping identify the saints in this study, as *caballero* indicates horseman, or perhaps knight, in English, while one informant referred to San Martin simply as *San Esperito*<sup>100</sup> (Saint Spirit). Saint Martin of Tours was a Roman pagan who converted to Catholicism, and ultimately became Bishop of Tours. He is depicted iconographically dressed as a Roman officer on horseback, cutting a red cloak

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<sup>99</sup> Conversation with Mary Garcia, Tucson, Az. (no date).

<sup>100</sup> Josephine, 3 Jan. 1997, Tucson. Az.

in half to offer to a beggar who sits on a stone nearby. San Martin shows up more often in the kitchen of the home rather than outside in a *nichito*, but he does occasionally share a spot in *nichitos*.

Popular folklore attributes the prosperity of the home and food on the table, to San Martin. One informant indicated that, in order to assure ample food and drink for her family, she placed one penny inside the frame of a print of San Martin every Wednesday<sup>101</sup>. To underline the importance of this practice, she showed two pictures of San Martin, the one currently in use and her "retired" print. The old print was filled to bursting with hundreds of piously-offered pennies.

Another informant indicated some people offered to San Martin's horse rather than to San Martin himself<sup>102</sup>. Instead of a penny, a small shot glass of water and a tiny pinch of straw or hay would be left in front of the picture of San Martin, in order to assure the horse was fed and watered. By inference, if one cared for the horse, this kindness would be reciprocated. Home prosperity in Phoenix, Arizona, is often left to the Archangel Michael rather than to San Martin Caballero, according to Dr. Santos Vega<sup>103</sup>. There, Saint Michael is viewed as the protector of the house and in charge of supplies for the kitchen.

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<sup>101</sup> Interview with Josephine, El Rio Street, Tucson, 3 January 1997.

<sup>102</sup> Conversation with Dr. Jim Griffith, March 2000, Tucson, Az.

<sup>103</sup> Conversation 17 March, 2000, Phoenix, Az.

According to Vega, San Martin Caballero is placed in *nichitos* in the Phoenix area in order to ask for protection and aid.

San Judas Tadeo (Saint Jude): Saint Jude's popularity as the saint of hopeless causes has been constant for almost 100 years, as documented by Robert Orsi in his book Thank You Saint Jude (1996). In 1923 Father Jaime Tort was stationed in Prescott, Arizona, a mining town, when he found a small prayer-card to San Judas in the church. San Judas had to that time been the focus of a small cultus in Santiago, Chile, where he was revered as the patron saint of hopeless causes and other liminal persons (such as prostitutes). Tort brought his devotion to San Judas with him to Chicago two years later, where he had a statue of him commissioned. To that point, the English language Roman Catholic community had rarely heard of this saint.<sup>104</sup>

Since that time, regardless of whether one surveys Italian, French, or Mexican American communities, Saint Jude *bultos* appear frequently. Clearly in the United States his veneration started in the Southwest, and it is no surprise that he is one of the most popular saints found in *nichitos*. His iconography in the Mexican American community includes biblical robes, most often white with a green over-robe or cloak, holding a staff or walking stick in one hand while holding in the other hand a gold disk with the head of Jesus imprinted on it, close to his heart. Mass-marketed *bultos* show Saint Jude with a gold

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<sup>104</sup> See Orsi, pp. 6-7 for more details.

flame emanating from his forehead which often looks like a bright yellow lock of hair sticking up like a horn from the front of the saint.

San Judas is most often invoked for specific situations, rather than as a general aid, due to his relationship with hopeless situations. Many of the *bultos* to San Judas were found to be broken, in keeping with a belief common to some Mexican Americans. Jim Griffith discovered during his fieldwork a belief that, when a *bulto* was damaged, that saint had interceded on behalf of the family which owned the *bulto*<sup>105</sup>. This would explain the presence of so many damaged San Judas Tadeo statues throughout Arizona *nichitos*.

San Judas Tadeo Pilgrimage Site, Starr Pass, Tucson, Arizona: All but hidden on the side of a small Tucson hill called "A" mountain is a two-step site of local veneration. Research did not turn up a name for the two shrines, but in Spring 1999, four intrepid friends of the author volunteered to scale the almost-invisible path up A mountain to obtain photos of the site at Starr Pass and 22nd Street<sup>106</sup>. The climb up the side of A mountain is marked with tiny pieces of red ribbon marking the path. (fig. 120) From the street hundreds of feet below, the two sites are almost invisible, with a bare hint of the lower *nicho* visible due to its whitewash exterior. Despite the fact there are no signposts to indicate the presence of the pilgrimage sites, across the wide street from the base of the mountain is a bench where

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<sup>105</sup> Conversation with Dr. Jim Griffith, March 2000, Tucson, Az.

<sup>106</sup> Grateful thanks go to Clint and Lisa Davis, Wynd Wilson, and Deliana Noel, as the author would not have been able to scale the path, clearly intended for mountain goats.

one can sit and stare at the face of A mountain. From that location, the *nichos* become evident to the naked eye.

In both *nichitos* are found dozens of burned printed pillar candles to various saints, silk, plastic, and real flowers, and various religious statuary. The lower site (fig. 121) seems to be intended for those who are unable to continue the treacherous climb up the mountain path, and is not nearly as filled with offerings as the higher grotto.

The upper grotto (fig. 122) is literally packed with offerings from worshippers, penitents, and supplicants. Dozens of intact and broken statues of San Judas Tadeo litter the site, along with a plethora of flowers, crosses, pictures and *bultos* of the Virgin Mary (most often as Guadalupe), coins, and candles, both burning and extinguished. (fig. 123) The upper *nicho* is a naturally occurring grotto in the side of the mountain, and one informant indicated that she thought there had been some discussion in town about its origins as an O' Odham holy site<sup>107</sup>. Whatever its origins, it is quite clear that many believers scale the side of the mountain to give offerings and thanks to members of the Holy Family.

Saint Anthony of Padua: A favourite of Italian communities throughout the countries in this study, Saint Anthony of Padua quite often does not share his *nichito* with other statuary. Research by Dr. Joseph Sciorra of New York City and photographer Martha Cooper in 1985 established Saint Anthony as one of the most common saint *bultos* in

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<sup>107</sup> Conversation with Deliana Noel, March 2000.

Italian *nichitos* throughout the Brooklyn communities they studied. Saint Anthony is depicted in brown robes, tonsured, with a spray of white lilies in one hand and a book in the other, on which a young Jesus sits or stands. Although *nichitos* with Saint Anthony do exist in Tucson and in French Canada, they are not common.

**Less common Saints:** Many of the same saints are favoured by the rural and agricultural communities of both Arizona and Québec, including Saint Isadore (San Ysidro), patron of farmers. Despite the in-home veneration of many of these saints, few *bultos* were found within *nichitos* of these saints. Specific saint *bultos* seem to have meaning for the family themselves, explaining why only one *nichito* in a given neighbourhood might have a *bulto* for Santa Lucia (Saint Lucy).

As one example, Saint Lucy is the saint who intercedes for issues dealing with eyes. One informant told me she had a Santa Lucia from her childhood when she had suffered from an eye ailment. When her *nichito* was built by her husband, she placed the *bulto* with the others, in her outdoor niche. (fig. 124) When a neighbour has an issue involving eyes (e.g., a daughter suffering from pink-eye), they go to Mrs. Valenzuela and obtain her permission to burn a candle and pray at her Santa Lucia *bulto*<sup>108</sup>. In short, less common *bultos* become a part of communal religious practice and reinforce a sense of community in this manner. This may be one reason that most *nichitos* are built to face the street rather than the home.

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<sup>108</sup> Conversation with Mrs. Valenzuela, St. Clair St., Tucson January 1997.



Other saints found infrequently within *nichitos* include Saint Ramon Nonnatus, frequently prayed to by pregnant women as patron of childbirth (he was born by caesarian section, hence "Nonnatus" or "not born"); Saint Lazarus (Saint Lazaro), particularly common to *nichitos* where Santeria is practiced, as he is syncretized with the Yoruba Orisha<sup>109</sup> Babalu-aye; and Saint Severius, invoked in cases of cancer.

#### 4.1.4: QUASI-RELIGIOUS FIGURES

Another category of items found in relationship to *nichitos* and *altarcitos* are those which are not members of the Holy Family or "official" saints. There are many of these semi-holy figures in Hispanic folk Catholicism, from Juan Soldado, to Jesus Malverde. In the case of these not-quite-saints, they are always found OUTSIDE the *nichito* itself: on top of the structure, to the side of the structure, or adjacent to the *nichito* itself. These proto-*santos* seem to represent the underdog, both financially and in issues of class.

Sociologists say many new-wave Mexican immortals arose during the turbulent years after the 1910 - 17 revolution, a time when Catholic leaders - viewed as allies of the wealthy upper classes - were exiled, persecuted and bound by restrictive laws. Folk saints were cast as protagonists of highly secular existential dramas and were often anti-establishment. (O'Connor, 1997)

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<sup>109</sup> *Orishas* are Yoruban and Santerian spirits - sometimes described as Gods and Goddesses.

**Malverde:** One Malverde *nichito* was just south of the Menlo Park community (an old established *Tucsonenses* community), on El Rio Street. (fig. 125) The wife of the builder, Norma, indicated it was her husband's wish to have the *nichito* built. In her *nichito* were Saint Maria of Atocha, Infant of Atocha, Sacred Heart of Jesus, Our Lady of Guadalupe, a ceramic Indian head decorated by her husband's son, along with a picture of her husband's son by an earlier marriage (deceased). Atop the *nichito*, carefully protected by a box of plexiglass, was a ceramic bust of a dark-skinned man in a white shirt, with "MALVERDE" printed below.

Norma explained that the bust was of "Malverde", a "Mexican saint" from Sinaloa state from where her husband originated. She described Malverde (lit. "Evil-green") as a sort of Robin Hood figure, and unique to Sinaloa. She indicated that her husband and his friends often prayed there, burning pillar candles. Norma explained that, "I pray here for my house, my kids and my family. ...Our Lady of Guadalupe was the Mother of God, and carried God's son. So we honour her the way our kids have relationships with their mothers."<sup>110</sup>

Jim Griffith has the only explanation of this mysterious Sinaloan saint in academic writing. In his book "Beliefs and Holy Places" we discover:

...A bandit named Jesus Malverde is said to have lived in Sinaloa in northwest Mexico. He was hanged in 1909 at

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<sup>110</sup> Interview with Norma, El Rio St., 3 January 1997.

Culiacan, Sinaloa, and has been described as a 'patron saint to contemporary thieves and smugglers'. I have seen a printed prayer to him, purchased in a religious articles store in Tucson. It shows a young man dressed in a light-coloured shirt with dark pocket flaps, standing with his hands bound and a noose around his neck. (Griffith, 1992)

An internet search for "Jesus Malverde" backs Griffith's description of Malverde as a saint to smugglers and drug dealers. There are numerous articles from newspapers describing shrines to Malverde around Tijuana, Baja - a notable location for smuggling drugs into the United States from Mexico. Rather than ask the Virgin Mary to aid them in illegal activities, pious Hispanic individuals pray to individuals such as Juan Soldado or "Most Holy Death". Griffith indicates that drug smugglers are prone to building huge *nichos* to the Virgin Mary as thanks for their survival in their trade.

The narcotics smuggling subculture is pervasive enough in Sinaloa that popular ballads, *corridos*, have increasingly become focussed on the exploits of the drug smugglers, creating the new folklore style of *narcocorridos* - narcotic smuggler ballads. Jesus Malverde has become one of the popular heroes of this culture: a *narcosanto*.

Malverde is said to have robbed from the rich and given to the poor, much like the famed hero-bandit of English lore, Robin Hood (whom the legends also associate with the colour green). Some who venerate Malverde describe him as being "love", while others say he

makes miracles, and anyone who wears a *sacramentale* of him around the neck will become the recipient of miracles. (Silverman and Quinones, 1999)

Santos Vega makes the point that not all followers of Malverde are in the drug trade.

"Malverde is someone Sinaloans consider a helpful icon back home, so they bring that faith with them. They might practice their religion at home, praying to both canonized saints and popular folk saints like Malverde.<sup>111</sup>" Malverde's following has become mainstream enough in southern Arizona that his bust has shown up as an offering in the side-chapel at San Xavier del Bac. (fig. 126) As with other locations, Malverde's bust was liminalized, placed away from the *bultos* of saints and the Holy Family.

El Indio Poderoso: A small number of *nichitos* in Tucson, such as that owned by Norma, contain some figure which can be identified as "American Indian" in nature. The presence of these First Nations figures is at first, quite confusing, until one realizes there is a strong connection between the poorer communities in Tucson and the Santeria community.

Although there are but a few Botanicas<sup>112</sup>, they do a steady business. Similarly, an *altarcito* from the area near Tampico, Mexico, features two wood type Indian head figures. (fig. 127)

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<sup>111</sup> Vega, in "Drug Lord", Silverman and Quinones, p. 2. [www.sfweekly.com/extra/beyond/malverde2.html](http://www.sfweekly.com/extra/beyond/malverde2.html)

<sup>112</sup> Supply shops for Santeria worship.

There is a figure in Santeria practice referred to as *El Indio Poderoso*, the "Powerful Indian". This is a legendary figure whose origins are said to have occurred during the early contact between African slaves and the indigenous communities on islands such as Cuba, Hispanola (Haiti/Dominican Republic), and other Spanish holdings in the New World. The Powerful Indian represents the Arawak tribe, who were able to heal the African slaves from illnesses which befell them in the New World. As the indigenous people were able to use the ethnobotany of the area to make medicinals, the African slaves viewed them as powerful healers. Santeria practitioners honour the ancestors of the Arawaks as the Indio Poderoso, and still call on this figure in their rituals<sup>113</sup>.

The *Indio Poderoso* is usually represented in Santeria folk-culture as a Plains Indian in full feathered-war bonnet, much like the young boy's painted statuette. Given this second meaning and the presence of syncretic African slave practices in Hispanic Catholicism, painted Indian heads can also represent luck and good fortune for the family. *El Indio Poderoso* sprays and scented oils are sold in Tucson in at least one local Botanica.

As well, Jim Griffith commented on the *Indio Poderoso* thusly:

"El Indio" in various forms is also one of the spiris often channeled by Spiritist mediums. He seems especially popular in South Texas. While Santeria is Afro-Cuban in origin, there has also been a strong current of spiritism and spiritualism in Mexico since the late 19th century - and back

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<sup>113</sup> Conversation with Lucie DuFresne, University of Ottawa, February 1999.

in those days, situated in the middle and professional classes.<sup>114</sup>

There are other answers to the riddle of the First Nations statuette, depending on the family. Norma's figure was painted for her in school by her son, and would have had no religious value if it had been placed, for instance, on a television set or on a bookshelf. The presence of the statuette in the niche indicates a relationship between those who worship at the *nichito*, and between the dead and the living. Rarely is the aesthetic value of the piece important; rather, it is the person who made it and why it was made, which is important. (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981: 77) Here we have a familial relationship established between the child and the parents, and symbolically between the family which is alive and their deceased son, whose photo is also located in the *nichito*.

A third answer is concurrently applicable. Dr. Allan Figueroa-Deck of the Loyola Institute of Orange, California, has indicated that Hispanic popular Catholicism is flavoured by both the religious practices of the Native American tribes in the region before contact with Christianity, and by the animist practices of West African slaves brought to Spanish territories during the practice of slavery in the 1700's<sup>115</sup>. If this is the case, then one would expect some syncretic elements between the practices of the Yoruba, Ibo, and Fon peoples, and Hispanic Catholicism. As many Mexican American families in and around

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<sup>114</sup> Jim Griffith, letter, May 2001.

<sup>115</sup> Interview with Dr. Allan Figueroa-Deck, S.J., Loyola Institute for Spirituality, Orange Ca., 19 August, 1998.

Tucson acknowledge First Nations ancestry as well as Spanish, the statuette could be a way of recognizing the family's First Nations ancestry as well.

Mexican American proto-*Santos*: Juan Soldado; El Niño Fidencio; Santa Theresa (Teresita of Cabora). These three individuals are part of a pattern of folk *santos*, or holy people. Some have only very local followings, such as Teresita of Cabora, while others are quite wide-spread such as El Niño Fidencio. None of these three holy people were found in the research for this study, but El Niño Fidencio shows up in studies by both Dore Gardner<sup>116</sup> and Kay Turner (1990).

Bishop Manuel Moreno of Tucson (1998) has indicated there are dozens of local "saints" who are venerated in Hispanic America, both north and south of the U.S. border. Around Texas, near Monterray there are many figures in *nichitos* dedicated to El Niño Fidencio. Near Tijuana, Mexico, there are many figures of "Juan Soldado" (John the Soldier). And around San Antonio Texas, many shrines feature Little Pedro, a folk saint and *curandero*<sup>117</sup>. One curious attribute of the folk-hero veneration appears to be that no FEMALE folk santos appear to presently exist: none were mentioned during interviews, and only Teresita appears in the scanty literature, mostly as a historical footnote.

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<sup>116</sup> [www.zonezero.com/exposiciones/fotografos/dore/default.html](http://www.zonezero.com/exposiciones/fotografos/dore/default.html), viewed Jan. 15, 2001.

<sup>117</sup> *Curandero* is a Mexican term for a folk-healer, or one who cures. Jim Griffith identifies "Little Pedro" as don Pedrito Jaramillo, a deceased faith healer whose shrine is in Texas.

El Niño Fidencio, or Jose Fidencio Sintora Constantino, lived in the Nuevo Leon part of northeastern Mexico. By the time he died in 1938, he was arguably Mexico's most famous *curandero*, or folk-healer. To this day, *materias* (women) and *cajones* (men) are still possessed by the spirit of El Niño Fidencio in order to heal others. Photos of El Niño Fidencio and printed candles to him, are common in the Rio Grande area of Texas, and show up on *altarcitos* and in *nichitos*.

Juan Soldado, or John Soldier as the name translates into English, was Juan Castillo Morales, a soldier from Jalisco state in Mexico. In 1938 he was accused unjustly of the rape and murder of an area girl, and was executed by firing squad. Since that time, hundreds of little miracles have been attributed to Juan Soldado's intervention. Juan Soldado *bultos* are most popular around Los Angeles and San Diego, California, and he is credited primarily with helping illegal aliens cross the border from Mexico into the United States without being caught. (O'Connor in L.A. Times, July 18, 1997)

"Santa" Teresa, or Teresita of Cabora, has almost completely disappeared out of folk memory although she was prominent around the turn of the last century. Born Teresa Urrea in 1873, she was the illegitimate daughter of a wealthy Sinaloan rancher and an impoverished Mexican woman. Her father moved her to Cabora, in Sonora state, where she studied under a local curandera. Like shamans in many cultures, Teresa fell into a coma and was thought to have died. As she was laid into her coffin, she awoke, screaming. From that time on, she had miraculous curing abilities attributed to her. She



was adopted as a patron "saint" by the Yaqui and Mayo peoples of both Sonora and Sinaloa, who rose up against the Mexican government on her behalf in the 1890s. Teresita died in 1906 in Clifton, Arizona. To this day visitors still travel to Clifton to see the grave of the folk-heroine, but the grave was relocated and no marker exists at the new site<sup>118</sup>. There are reports of Teresita of Cabora *bultos* having existed, but if they did it was in the past. Currently, "Santa" Teresa is a mere footnote in the archives of *curanderas* and quasi-historical folk-saints.

#### 4.2: FLOWERS

Most common in Arizona *nichitos* are roses, whether they are paper, silk, plastic or natural. (fig. 128) The legend of the Virgin of Guadalupe tells of her appearance to an aboriginal convert, Juan Diego. When the Bishop of Mexico City refused to believe Diego's tales of the apparition, the Virgin left a pile of roses in Juan Diego's *tilma* (a plant-fibre piece of clothing) which he presented to the Bishop as proof of the veracity of his claims. Because roses were not in season when this occurred, the Bishop was convinced and a church to the Virgin of Guadalupe was erected in Mexico City, where the *tilma* which bears her image is displayed to this day. As a result, roses and rosewater are equated with the Virgin Mary in Mexican America. (fig. 129) Roses as decoration are far more than just the taste of the builder; they are a statement that the *nichito* is dedicated to the Virgin, specifically as the Virgin of Guadalupe.

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<sup>118</sup> Sam Negri, "Teresita, The Saint of Cabora", in Arizona Highways, March 1994, p. 13.

Although roses are the most common flower adorning *nichitos* in Mexican America, others are not unusual. Offerings of fresh flowers can be any type the petitioner can afford, from carnations to wildflowers. Plastic cacti often adorn Tucson area *nichitos*

Although present at all times of year, fresh or silk lilies are also frequently seen in *nichitos* and *nichos*. These are understandably most common around Easter, and are part of the iconography of Saint Anthony of Padua. They are frequently seen in *nichitos* dedicated to this particular saint as well as to Saint Joseph.

Italian *nichitos* are often awash with flowers (fig. 154). Most often, the Virgin Mary is placed in the middle of a flower bed, with the border of the flowers delineating the "sacred space" of the yard. (fig. 9) In these cases, the types and colours of the flowers seem to be determined by the individual taste of the gardener him/herself.

French *nichitos* are more often simple, with vases or urns of flowers flanking the Virgin Mary *bulto* on either side. Although other flowers may be left as offerings, the most common French Canadian *nichito* style is simple and unadorned. When the *bulto* does not sit within a niche, a trellis is often evident and the gardener coaxes growing plants to create an arch of growing flowers over the statue in lieu of a *nichito*. (fig. 155)

### 4.3: CANDLES

Most cultures view fire and light with reverence, and Christianity has used candles as a form of supplication since medieval times. Candles are the most common item found in *nichitos* and on *altarcitos* other than *bultos* themselves, even more common than flowers. Most popular in Mexican America are what are called "seven day" candles, although they have been downsized in recent years. Some candles will only burn for three or four days, while others are guaranteed to burn "into the seventh day"<sup>119</sup>. Most candle companies who supply ethnic communities, such as Mexican American, Cuban, and Italian, distribute printed pillar candles with different saint images and prayers. One Los Angeles based company sells over 100 different saint images.

Different saints are prayed to for different reasons. Tucson *nichitos* most often feature Guadalupe candles both unscented and rose-scented. Other popular candles include many to the saints described in 4.1, such as Saint Anthony of Padua, El Nino de Atocha, the Virgin of Los Lagos, and San Judas Tadeo. There are a few select candles which are not direct prayers to a specific saint, such as La Maño del Todopoderoso, the "Five Powerful Fingers" candle. This candle, popular with Santeria practitioners, depicts the four Gospel authors, one per finger, with a Child Jesus on the thumb.

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<sup>119</sup> Walter Manser, vice-president of sales for Reed Candle Co., "A Flame of Reverence", Tom Turner, Arizona Daily Star, Sunday Nov. 24, 1991, p. E1.

Various types of candles other than pillar, or printed, candles, are also found in *nichitos* and on *altarcitos*. Many families will buy candles from the local church to burn at home. These are most often one solid candle, with a raised or embossed cross on the front. Some, such as the candles sold at the San Xavier del Bac mission, will have a depiction of the church on the glass itself. Store-bought votive candles, or ten-hour candles, are often lit in front of a specific *bulto* the worshipper wishes to petition. Although it is not common to find standard taper candles burning in *nichitos*, it does occur. When a simple candle is burned in prayer, the most common colour used is white. In A Candle to Light Your Way, author Mikhail Stabo explains in some detail what colours are attributed to which saint, and for which petition a given colour is suggested. Although the Roman Catholic church is uneasy with the practice of burning candles as part of personal worship<sup>120</sup>, Bishop Moreno of Tucson views it as a manifestation of private devotion<sup>121</sup>, and therefore an acceptable practice.

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<sup>120</sup> "The church discourages superstition and voodoo surrounding candles. But there is a fine line between culture and the teachings of the church." Rev. Marcos Velasquez, associate pastor of St. Augustine's Cathedral, Tucson, quoted in "A Flame of Reverence", Tom Turner, Arizona Daily Star, Sunday, Nov. 24, 1991, pg. E1.

<sup>121</sup> Interview with Bishop Manuel Moreno, Tucson Diocese, 24 February 1998.

#### **4.4: MISCELLANEOUS: BLESSED OR RELIGIOUS ITEMS SUCH AS HOLY WATER, ROSARIES; EPHEMERA SUCH AS PHOTOS, JEWELLERY, HOSPITAL I.D.; *MILAGROS* (EX-VOTOS)**

Items within a *nichito* can include holy water, prayer cards, pictures of deceased relatives/friends, and occasionally items of personal preference such as the "Indian Head" mentioned in 4.1. Coloured printed prayer candles to members of the Holy Family are common. Occasionally fresh food will be left inside as special offering.

Some Mexican American niches have a myriad of interior items. Typical are photos (often of someone ill or deceased), *milagros* (ex-votos, from the Latin *ex voto suscepto*), personal items belonging to someone in need of healing (hospital name bracelets, watches), and gifts to someone deceased (e.g., teddy bears, toys). (fig. 56)

It is this creativity in the items within these *nichitos* which appears initially puzzling.

Mexican American *nichitos* feature a plethora of items, including headless statues of saints, bottles of holy water, jewellery, horseshoes, and a plastic version of an "elephant tusk" carved to represent a half dozen elephants, stacked one atop the other. (fig. 130)

The items are often scattered in a helter-skelter manner, as if they were placed therein with little thought. It is here that content-analysis sheds some light on the symbolics of *nichitos*

other than one author's offhanded comment that the jumble of items was indicative of the 'baroque tastes' of Hispanic women<sup>122</sup>.

Items found within *nichitos* group into distinct categories. Those which were at first confusing, ultimately appeared to be symbolic of luck, such as horseshoes, Saint Brigit crosses, plastic shamrocks, the painted Indian Head, and the "lucky elephant tusk". These luck items are the most creative and disparate of all the categories investigated, as a symbol of luck to one person is not necessarily the same to another.

Clearly, there are many symbol-sets working at the same time within a single *nichito*. Scholars of religion may feel the symbolism of a given *bulto*, of a given type of flower, or a colour, is self-evident; however, within the individualized realm of the *nichito* many symbols, often from disparate origins, are interacting.

Another category of contents within the *nichitos* of the Southwest is the religiously-symbolic. Clearly rosaries, prayer cards and holy water fall into this category, as do printed prayer candles. Holy water is often picked up after Mass by the *nichito*'s owner, and is often used weekly to wash down the interior of the *nichito*.

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<sup>122</sup> Mesa-Bains, [www.zonezero.com/magazine/essays/distant/zdomes2.html](http://www.zonezero.com/magazine/essays/distant/zdomes2.html), viewed March 10, 1998.

Rosaries are commonly found in *nichitos* throughout the Roman Catholic world. Virgin Mary *nichitos* feature a simple rosary around the neck, hands, or feet of the *bulto* at least 75% of the time in Italian, French, and Mexican American communities. As one informant explained it, "you keep the tool for prayer where you are going to be praying. It's that simple."<sup>123</sup>

Prayer cards are sold for under a dollar at most general stores and even in grocery stores in Mexican American neighbourhoods in Arizona such as "Southwest Supermarkets". They show a colour picture of the specific saint on one side, and a prayer in Spanish, on the reverse. They are most often found in a plastic envelope, or laminated. Cards are put into *nichitos*, *nichos*, and on *altarcitos* to entreat a specific saint to intercede for the petitioner.

Far less common are what can be called "quasi prayer cards". These seem to be tailored specifically for the *narcosanto* business, and never appear in the same place as a saint prayer card. Jim Griffith has collected a few of these cards in his research, including some he discovered to "Most Holy Death", in Magdalena, Sonora in 1989.

Many were addressed to some aspect of Death. Most Holy Death, the Secret of the Most Holy Death, and the Holy Corpse were all objects of printed petitions. Other mysterious figures like the Seven Nudes, the Just Black Judge, and Don Diego Duende (a *duende* is a spirit -

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<sup>123</sup> Conversation with Lucie DuFresne, Ottawa, Ont. 1998.

frequently an evil spirit or goblin) appeared in the texts. Each of the pamphlets was illustrated with a line drawing of some kind, often of an articulated, living skeleton. All of the petitions had to do with gaining power over other people. ...Men involved in the drug trade ...are often very religious individuals. However, they know better than to ask God, the Virgin, and the Saints for help in such projects as defeating the opposition or ensuring the safe arrival of a drug shipment. They turn, rather, to the devil, who is reputed to look more favourably on that sort of activity. (Griffith, 1992: 65)

Another category of items found within *nichitos* are those related in some way to the act of petitioning for healing, or remembering a deceased loved one. There is no way of telling what the intent of leaving a watch, ring, or photo of an individual is at a *nichito*, unless the donor is there to explain the item's symbolism. Often, small rings are left in front of Virgin Mary pictures or pinned to her clothing on a *bulto*, as an *ex-voto*, or *milagro*, by a petitioner seeking marriage. Other ephemera left for healing or to the memory of the deceased include personal items such as watches, earrings, and rings; photos; hospital identification bands; religious medals strung on a necklace; and stuffed animals.

*Milagros* are often found in *nichitos* in the form of small tin or wooden images of an arm, ankle, leg, eye - whatever part of the anatomy the petitioner seeks to have healed. *Milagros* are often under an inch in size, and are attached to *bultos* with safety pins wherever possible. The practice of *ex-votos*, or *milagros*, can be traced back to the antiquity of the Biblical world, with examples found in Assyria, Egypt, and ancient Israel. (Creux, 1979: 7-8)



What is intriguing is that these offerings change over time. A staff member at the De Grazia Gallery of the Sun in Tucson informed me that there is a caretaker who cleans up the offerings left in the little chapel on-site and puts them in storage. Theoretically, an exhibit of religious art could be staged by displaying a number of years' worth of these little offerings. Public *nichos* are a place of constant, creative religious action: photos from year to year of any given *nicho* (I-10 near Marana; De Grazia's Gallery; Our Lady of the Garbage Dump) will show changes in all items within the *nicho* except the main *bullo*. One rosary will disappear, another will appear. A necklace will arrive and a watch will disappear. A statue to Kwan Yin, Buddhist figure of mercy might show up one year, and the next year a small Indian Buddha might take its place.

The *nicho* at the Ted De Grazia Gallery of the Sun has also been tracked over numerous years, and is perhaps the *nicho* with the most interesting collection of offerings over time. (fig. 53, 54, 55, 57) As the photos attest, different candles, flowers, necklaces, and other ephemera show up regularly. One year a Kwan Yin *bullo* stood on the altar; another year, it was a ceramic smiling anthropomorphized molar. Swiss army watches, coins from around the world, and pine-nut necklaces have all been laid on the Guadalupe altar of the Gallery of the Sun *nicho*. I was told by a sales woman in the Gallery's gift shop that there is someone who collects the offerings after some period of time, off the altar itself, but she was unclear as to where the items were stored, or disposed of.

A Nigerian art shop owner in Ottawa once informed me that offerings to the Orishas in Yorubaland were kept for a period of time until the priests of that temple decided the *ashé*, or power/spirit/life force, was exhausted from the item<sup>124</sup>. Then, the gift was transformed in some manner into something new, and resold to raise funds for the temple. Numerous bronze and/or gold necklaces, earrings, and rings were transformed in this manner into new Yoruban art to be purchased by the devout, filled with new *ashé*. Art pieces created in this way from the Oshun temple run by Priestess Suzanne Wenger are particularly prized, as Wenger is also an accomplished German artist. Although most *nichitos* and *nichos* do not "resell" or recycle offerings, perhaps they are also removed when it is felt in some spiritual manner, the offering has been exhausted.

## CHAPTER 5: THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT (MEXICAN, ITALIAN, FRENCH)

### 5.1: MEXICAN AND MEXICAN AMERICAN

The practice of keeping religious items in a niche is hardly unique to any one particular segment of the Roman Catholic faith. Everywhere I discussed my thesis topic, people would discuss niches seen in areas where I would not have expected to find them: Kentucky, Iowa, districts of Germany and Poland. I had anticipated finding *nichitos* in

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<sup>124</sup> Conversation with Osain, co-owner of Africa in the Glebe, Ottawa, On. late 1980s.

countries and areas recognized as having a high Roman Catholic population base, but this was not always the case. The comparisons which follow are random, based on the countries and areas I have been able to visit, and those areas friends and acquaintances were in when they noticed one.

#### 5.1.1: DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE TUCSON MEXICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

##### 5.1.1.1: RELIGION

Mexican American communities in many urban areas of the Southwest have felt the missionizing effects of various Protestant sects such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) and some evangelical Pentecostal churches, the religious affiliation of most Mexican Americans in the Tucson and Phoenix areas of Arizona remains predominantly Roman Catholic. (Officer, 1981: 140) *Nichos* have, in part, become a battleground between the Roman Catholic and Protestant parts of the Mexican American communities. Jim Griffith has observed the desecration and repair of various *nichos* on both sides of the American/Mexican border in recent years, some times with pleas written inside the *nicho* to the anonymous vandals, to leave the religious site alone as a mark of respect<sup>125</sup>.

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<sup>125</sup> Conversation with Dr. Jim Griffith, Tucson, Az., March 2000.

Although most Tucson and Phoenix Mexican Americans self-identify as Roman Catholic, they are not necessarily religiously observant in their attendance of mass. The owner of the "San Diego Bay" Restaurant in Guadalupe, Arizona, Lupita Llamas, was asked if she had a *nichito* in her restaurant. her reply, in Spanish, was translated by Dr. Santos Vega as "No: I am culturally Roman Catholic but not very religious<sup>126</sup>." A similar joke is recounted by the late Tucson Bishop Gercke in the proceedings of the eighth Arizona Town Hall meeting in 1981.

There are approximately 182,000 Roman Catholics in Tucson, of which seven parishes are denoted as primarily Mexican American, totalling approximately 78,000 members. Of these, the largest single parish of Mexican American ethnicity is Our Lady Queen of All Saints, with approximately 28,000 members. Approximately half the membership attends Mass weekly, with 20% involved with parish activities on a regular basis beyond Mass attendance; five to 10% are very involved<sup>127</sup>. It appears that church attendance figures for Los Angeles are probably similar to Phoenix, therefore: in Los Angeles, according to Dr. Allan Figueora Deck, S.J., only 10% to 15% of Angelino Hispanics attend church weekly, but 70% to 80% identify themselves as Catholic.

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<sup>126</sup> Conversation with Lupita Llamas, Guadalupe, Az., 17 March 2000.

<sup>127</sup> Email from Fred Allison, Roman Catholic Diocese of Tucson, 19 Dec 2000.

Mexican Americans connect themselves to their community through their religious and ethnic identities. Fiestas are observed on religiously significant dates such as the feast day of the Virgin of Guadalupe (Dec. 12), All Soul's Day (Nov. 2), and many walk or drive to the town of Magdalena in Sonora state during the first week of October in commemoration of Saint Francis of Assisi/Saint Francis Xavier. The cultural identity of being Mexican American in southern Arizona is tied unextricably into the religious calendar as well as the secular one. To many *Tucsonenses*, their religiosity is a lived experience rather than a book-learned experience, and is perceived by them as one part of their cultural identity as Mexican Americans.

Some informants complained that many parish priests in Tucson were from outside the *Tucsonenses* community, and that as a result, they did not understand the concerns unique to them<sup>128</sup>. Dr. Gilbert Romero, a priest at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles addressed the conundrum of an Irish priest ministering to a Mexican American parish in this manner.

The problem occurs when those from other cultures are put in a culturally different community. For example, Father "Murphy" cannot always serve a Latino community properly. A major, major problem is really, to have to take a closer look at culture as a hermeneutical tool. Then, we must allow those tools to FUNCTION.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Bravo, Ruth and Norma, 3 Jan. 1997.

<sup>129</sup> Conversation with Father Gilbert Romero, 20 August 1998.

As recently as the early 1980s, there had not been a Mexican American Bishop in Tucson, a topic which concerned the community. (Officer, 1981: 141) It is noteworthy that the current Bishop of the diocese is indeed Mexican American, having been raised in Los Angeles, and he strongly identifies himself as an Angelino and a Latino<sup>130</sup>. There is little question that the problem of finding culturally appropriate priests for the sizeable Southwestern Mexican American Roman Catholic communities such as Tucson and Phoenix will continue to be a challenge to the church, however: as of 1977, it was estimated that there were only 185 Spanish speaking priests in the entire United States. In an interview with the Arizona Daily Star in the same year, Father Arsenio Carrillo indicated that "religion as a vocation of the Mexican in the Southwest has been and still is a disaster"<sup>131</sup>.

The direct experience of miracles, and visitations, are part of the fabric of the *Tucsonenses* community. These experiences are part of a complex referred to by the Official church as "little miracles", unusual or supernatural experiences which belie normal explanations. Two different *nichitos* in the Menlo Park barrio of Tucson are both famous within the neighbourhood for their apparitions and associated miracles.

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<sup>130</sup> Interview with Bishop Manuel Moreno, Tucson, 24 February, 1998.

<sup>131</sup> Quoted in Officer, 1981, p. 142.

In the "Hollywood" district of the Menlo Park barrio in Tucson, there is a large *nichito* dedicated to a weather-beaten crucifix which the family claims is over 500 years old (fig. 181). "Nuestro Señor de los *Milagros*", Our Lord of the Miracles, is supposed to have been passed down within the same family since its origins in Spain, and it said to be a very powerful *bulto* (fig. 182, 183). Services are held at the *nichito* at Easter and Christmas, and dozens of *milagros* are pinned around the *bulto* (and other *bultos* in the *nichito*) as thanks for miracles given and received. The owner of the *bulto* does not allow photographs of the *bulto*, preferring to sell her own photograph in order to pay for the upkeep of the *nichito*, which incurs costs such as water taxes for the drinking fountain installed for worshippers to use. As well, she also sells pictures of an apparition of the Virgin Mary which she saw on a wall of the *nichito*, and which left an indelible mark in the paint.

One *nichito* on Niagara Saint in Menlo Park is also famous in the area for miracles associated with it. The front, side, and rear of the house, plus the inside of the home, is festooned with various *bultos* and religious symbols. Ruth Bravo, the owner of the *nichito*, reports that she has twice had the experience of seeing the Virgin Mary in her back yard. In both experiences, she smelled the perfume of roses before seeing the Virgin, dressed as Our Lady of Lourdes rather than as Guadalupe. Upon seeing the apparition, she described falling to the ground, unable to speak or move for minutes. The first time she saw the Virgin, she was alone. her second experience was shared, she reports, with her daughter and sister, who arrived as she smelled the roses from her living room.

Mrs. Bravo reported that the second apparition transformed herself into a dove (*La Palomita*, the Holy Ghost as a dove) and flew the few blocks to the local church, where it sat atop the head of the Virgin Mary statue. All three women followed the dove to the church, where they entered and prayed to the Virgin. Mrs. Bravo expressed her experience as affecting her deeply. "I was full of the Virgin, and Jesus; so full I could barely talk<sup>132</sup>."

Although she describes her husband as thinking she is "a little crazy" about her religiosity since the experiences, her husband and her son-in-law built her magnificent *nichito* (or as her brother-in-law referred to it, "her *nicho*" (emphasis his) in ten months, without any plans. (fig. 128, 129) During the cooler desert evenings, neighbours will bring food and beverages to her back yard, where she sets up bridge tables, neatly covered with clean tablecloths, and chairs. She turns on the coloured flood lights to the *nichito* and the water pump for the fountain, and sits outside with neighbours, talking about the travails of the day. her experiences, and her *nichito*, have become a real focus for the community in her area of the barrio. She rarely discusses the apparitions with non-*Tucsonenses*, as she is afraid of being ridiculed<sup>133</sup>. She has no explanation for the apparitions, nor any reason for her being so honoured. She does, however, pray daily to the Virgin at her *nichito*. "I talk

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<sup>132</sup> Interview with Ruth Bravo, 3 January 1997, and March 1998.

<sup>133</sup> Mrs. Bravo indicated that the only time she mentioned the experiences to her parish priest, she was 'poo-poo'ed by him. She noted that the priest was Irish, and she therefore felt he did not understand such experiences. "They just think they're the stories of an old, crazy woman."



to her all the time because I miss my mother. I call her my mother. She makes me very, very happy.<sup>134</sup>"

This direct relationship with the saints, and the Holy Family, is typical of *Tucsonenses* spirituality. They ask for intercessions by the saints on a regular basis, and pray at home.

This relationship between the individual and the Divine is not unusual in many other religions. Victor and Edith Turner point out:

For Catholics, prayer by the living to the saints in heaven, to intercede on their behalf with God, is also a mode of communication between members of the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant. Anyone who has lived in a society with a strong ancestral cult, as in tribal Africa, or China before the revolution, will find nothing unusual about this way of thinking. (V. and E. Turner, 1978: 204-205)

Similarly, it is the popular religion which is most often expressed in both Tucson and Phoenix. Stories, often derided by the outside community, often arise of Jesus, or the Virgin Mary, appearing on unlikely articles such as a tortilla<sup>135</sup>. The Arizona Daily Citizen, Wednesday, April 15, 1998, ran a story of the hundreds of people who were making the trip to a south-side home where the Virgin of Guadalupe's image was said to be growing in the branch of a walnut tree. The image, approximately 2 inches in length, caused enough

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<sup>134</sup> Interview with Mrs. Ruth Bravo, 3 January, 1997, Menlo Park, Tucson, Az.

<sup>135</sup> I have lost the article to which this refers, but a student some years ago gave me a photocopy of a weekly tabloid article which proclaimed that the face of Jesus had been seen on a tortilla in Los Angeles.

of a stir that the family who own the tree had to request visitors only visit between 11 am and 6 pm daily. Pilgrims to the walnut tree left pillar candles, flowers, rosaries, paper crosses, picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe, much as they would at any *nicho*.

It is stories such as these, of apparitions and manifestations of the presence of the Holy Family, which mark the religiosity of Mexican Americans in southern Arizona. Dr. Figueroa Deck explains the uniqueness of the strong Mexican American belief in supernatural manifestations of God and Jesus, as a unique syncretic blend of historical religious strands. He points out that Mexican Catholicism has adopted strands of pre-Columbian aboriginal beliefs, West African animism and traditional practices, via the Spanish slave trade and through the northward migration of freed Brazilian slaves in 1888, and Medieval Spanish Catholicism<sup>136</sup>.

Figueroa Deck also attributes the popularity of colour, pomp, and celebration in worship to the baroque sensibilities brought to Mexico in the 1600s from Spain. Clearly, the Mexican brand of Roman Catholicism is unique. It is perhaps, no surprise that Mexican Americans in Tucson feel that priests from other cultures are unable to truly understand their expression, and experiences, of religion.

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<sup>136</sup> Interview with Dr. Allan Figueroa Deck, S.J., Loyola Institute for Spirituality, Orange, Calif., 19 August, 1998.

#### 5.1.1.2: LINGUISTICS AND GEOGRAPHY

The barrios of Tucson are unique, even when compared with the nearest city of size in the region, Phoenix. Tucson remained part of Mexico far longer historically than most other areas of the U.S. Southwest, with virtually no Anglo immigration occurring before 1860. (Officer, 1981: 3) "Tucson remained predominantly Hispanic until the decade 1900 - 1910 when the Anglo population exceeded the Mexican minority". (Arreola, 1980/81)

The *Tucsonenses* are a unique community even when compared to Phoenix, or other Southwestern cities, as many locals speak Spanish as their first language, despite being sixth or seventh generation Tucsonans. This is quite different from the general trend in the United States, which does not officially support bilingualism. A study of the Spanish spoken around Tucson identified three distinct dialects present: southern Arizonan, considered a variant of *Norteno*; standard Mexican (typical of radio announcers, or the population around Mexico city); *Pachuco* (a dialect primarily used by youth, and informal in the way one would use "tu" rather than "vous" in French); as well as Yaqui (a First Nations language brought with the Yaqui as they fled Mexican governmental persecution in the 1800's). (Officer, 1981: 131)

The Mexican presence in Tucson and points south dates back to the 1700's. Southern Arizona experienced repeated waves of low and working class immigration from Mexico, far more so than New Mexico did. (These comparisons are relevant as both states

comprised the "Arizona Territory" until the late 1800's, and both still feature a high Mexican American population base.) In 1736 silver was discovered near modern-day Nogales, causing the first major influx of Mexicans northwards, seeking their fortunes. (Officer, 1981: 2) The massive movement of the Spanish into Pima country sparked major uprisings by the First Nations, forcing the construction of various *presidios*<sup>137</sup> between Nogales and Tucson. By 1850 however, most Mexican Americans had relocated in Tucson, seeking safety in numbers.

The emerging copper mining industry in southern Arizona was another attraction to working class Mexicans from the Sonoran region. A majority of *Tucsonenses* found employment between the copper mines and the railroad, another employer of many Mexican Americans in Tucson in the early and middle years of the 1900's. (Officer, 1964: 75) An influx of poorer, less-well educated immigration has been steady as the demand for farm labourers has continued in the region. Up until the 1980's cotton was a major crop. In the 1970's, tests proved the Southwestern desert was perfect for pecan-farming. As the cotton industry waned, pecan and avocado growers took up the call for migrant workers.

As a result, the Mexican American population of Tucson was derived primarily from Sonora. A 1960 study of Mexican Americans in Tucson discovered that over 70% of *Tucsonenses* were born in, or descended from, Sonorans, (Officer, 1964: 73) and the 1970 U.S. Census indicated almost 24% of Tucson's population had Spanish surnames.

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<sup>137</sup> *Presidio* is a Spanish term for fort.

(Arreola, 1980/81: 96) This fact alone lends a homogeneity to the *Tucsonenses* community which makes it unique compared to most other large Southwestern cities.

There has been little movement in the high-density locations of Tucson's Mexican American population. Areas identified by the late Dr. James Officer as barrios, or highly populated by *Tucsonenses*, in 1964 are still primarily Mexican American in the year 2000. The fieldwork for this thesis was targeted primarily at the barrio neighbourhoods identified by Officer, including Menlo Park, Barrio Hollywood, Barrio Libre, Barrio El Hoyo, Barrio Ladrillera, Barrio Anita, Barrio Tiburón, Barrio El Río, and the Yaqui communities of Pascua and Barrio Santa Rosa.

In order to prove or disprove Eliza Husband's choice of survey areas<sup>138</sup>, I drove further afield, and particular to the east of the city's old centre core, hunting down communities with a high percentage of *nichitos*. Except for the old *Tucsonenses* community of *El Fuerte* ("the Fort", 1850s), located near the site of Fort Lowell (Ft. Lowell Road, Beverley Ave., Glenn Saint and Craycroft Rd.), I did not find them. Tucson's Mexican American community is geographically stable, and not highly mobile. This is probably due in part, to the strong ties with location and land which has been expressed to me by numerous informants.

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<sup>138</sup> Husband's general survey area was bounded along the Santa Cruz River north and south from Tucson's old Spanish centre eastwards from the junction of the Santa Cruz and the Rillito River, plus post World War II suburbs along the southwest and southeast margins of Tucson's urbanized area. (Husband, 1985)

As well, part of the old Barrio Libre spreads into the City of South Tucson (which is entirely enclosed by Tucson on all sides). As a result, some photos are from South Tucson rather than Tucson proper.

### 5.1.2: MEXICO

As Tucson's Mexican American community is fairly homogeneous in its origins, it is no surprise that *nichitos*, *nichos*, and workplace *altarcitos* in Mexico closely resemble those in the Tucson survey. My survey covered a half dozen cities up the west coast of Mexico between the San Diego, California border and Acapulco. Included were small villages such as Malpitas, and a glass-blowing factory near Cabo San Lucas. As well, Dr. Eliza Steelyard (née Husband) featured a sampling of *nichitos* and *capillitas* from five off-highway villages in Sonora, plus samples from Hermosillo and Magdalena, two larger towns in the state, in her M.A. thesis at the University of Arizona (1985).

The presence of the Virgin of Guadalupe is perhaps more pronounced in Mexican *nichos* and *nichitos* than in southern Arizona. Some *Tucsonenses* families talk about the Virgin Mary as Guadalupe, even if they have a generic, or Immaculate Conception, in their *nichito*. Mary as Guadalupe is ubiquitous both in Sonora and further south and west in Mexico, as she is the religious Patroness of that country. Guadalupe's unique image, from the tilma in the Mexico City basilica, can be found on necklaces, tattoos, painted as frescos

on walls, and even on mahogany bed headboards. (fig. 131) Her presence is felt everywhere in daily life.

One of the most personally-moving *nichitos* in my research was found off Mexico's Highway 1 in Baja, near Cabo San Lucas. In 1994 the modern superhighway linking the southern tip of the Baja peninsula to the rest of the state had been opened with great pomp less than three months before a natural disaster struck. When the annual monsoon rains hit that area, they washed out within hours, the brand-new multi-lane highway despite 15 and 20 foot tall diversion pipes under the structure. Few lives were lost at the overpass, but dozens of people perished in the torrential downfall in neighbouring villages.

Our guide informed us that we were the first tourists being driven through the area since the rains, which had left the concrete walls of exclusive resorts buried under rivers of sand when the flooding receded. Highway 1 had not been rebuilt, and a temporary diversion to the road had been built down either side of the culvert and across the arroyo<sup>139</sup> bed itself. In the middle of the arroyo someone had constructed a *nicho* on a concrete base, approximately six feet in height, painted blue with a red roof, and a glass or plexiglas "door". (fig. 132)

Inside the riverbed *nicho* were a Guadalupe *bulto*, silk roses, and other items which could not be identified due to the fact I viewed it as our mini-van drove by. In front of the *nicho*

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<sup>139</sup> An arroyo is the Spanish word for a riverbed which is dry except during the rainy season.

were dozens of candles, both votive and pillar, and silk flower offerings. Around the *nichito* were numerous vases filled with both real and artificial flowers, plus other unidentifiable offerings. It is unclear whether or not the *nicho* survived the next year's rainy season, given the fact that most arroyos carry away at least one car per monsoon when some unfortunate decides s/he can ford through the water. The currents are notoriously fast.

It is hard to judge whether or not the *nichitos* in Mexico are more ornately decorated than in the Tucson area, as my trip up the west coast coincided with the period around the Virgin's feast day of November 12. Displays dedicated to Guadalupe were everywhere, with gaily coloured streamers dangling from *nichitos* and *nichos*. As the *Peregrinacion del Virge Maria* (the Pilgrimage of the Virgin Mary) is a national fiesta, floral floats and displays were everywhere during the 10 days of the trip. It was my great fortune to arrive in Puerto Vallarta on November 12, as the basilica in that city is viewed as her church throughout Mexico. Our tour guide informed me that pilgrims would walk hundreds of miles to get to the city, once named after the Virgin<sup>140</sup>, in order to celebrate the all-day Mass.

The city itself was essentially shut to retail business, except for some tourist businesses which stayed open to cater to the large cruise ship which was in port. To my mother's

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<sup>140</sup> Puerto Vallarta was renamed after a Mexican politician, but originally had a long name dedicated to Guadalupe in one of Her manifestations.



intense anxiety, I left our tour in downtown Puerto Vallarta to join in the peregrination.

At first, being noticably not Mexican, I was shunned as I joined the end of the pilgrimage lineup through the city. People looked at me suspiciously, trying to see where my camera was. (It was hidden in a shoulder-bag.) Dressed in my conservative skirt and head-scarf, I waved at small children and smiled at those around me, and shuffled slowly with the others towards the Basilica.

A tradition in Mexico which I have not seen practiced in Arizona is that of dressing small boys up as Juan Diego<sup>141</sup> for the fiesta. Many mothers held boys under the age of five in their arms, with little black moustaches pencilled on, dressed in white peasant costumes trimmed with rick-rack, and many with little bird cages on their backs<sup>142</sup>. I had shown up quite late in the fiesta, and was at the very back of the line with the taco and candy vendors, who traditonally join the *peregrinacion* after they had sold out their wares to other pilgrims.

At one point, an elderly taco vendor broke out in a hymn to the "*Virge Maria, Regina Estrella*" (Virgin Mary, Queen of the Stars). Listening to the crowd join in on the refrain,

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<sup>141</sup> Juan Diego is the Aztec convert to Christianity who is said to have seen the Virgin of Guadalupe at Tenochtitlan. It is his *tilma*, a type of fibre shirt, upon which the image of the Virgin was imprinted, and which is still displayed, 500 years later, in Mexico City.

<sup>142</sup> Dr. Jim Griffith reports that the bird cages are actually representations of carrying baskets, or racks, as used by male porters in earlier centuries. Some of the bird-cages I noted contained miniature pots and other utensils, lending credence to Griffith's remarks. (Letter, May 2001)

I decided to do the same. This action seemed to assure the crowd that I was there as a pilgrim and not as a tourist, and the ranks of pilgrims closed around me like welcoming arms. Before long, my broken Spanish was assuring proud mothers and fathers how *bueno* their young boys looked, and I was invited to take appreciative photos of some of the little ones. I shared in the experience of the *peregrinacion* on Guadalupe's feast day with the people of central Mexico, and was able to get some candid photos of children, folk-art, and even obtain a carved Guadalupe wooden rosary. One tour guide assured me the only place one can buy this particular style of rosary is in Puerto Vallarta at the *peregrinacion*, and it was an item of great reverence back at the ship, where most of the dining room crew were Mexican and Italian nationals.

As a result, it is difficult to tell if the *nichitos* seen in western Mexico were decorated for the fiesta, or always draped with shiny metallic bows and ribbons. Most decoration seen in both churches and on *nichitos* during this period were in the colours of the Mexican flag: red, white and green. Tucson *nichitos* are dressed according to the preference of the family which owns them, and are only occasionally bedecked in Mexican colours.

Other than the extravagant use of coloured ribbons and flowers, *nichitos*, *nichos* and *capillas* in Mexico were virtually indistinguishable from those in Arizona. Of the samples in Eliza Steelyard's M.A. thesis (1985)<sup>143</sup>, the Sonoran samples were identical to those in

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<sup>143</sup> Defended under her maiden name of Eliza Husband.

Tucson. Steelyard shows a *nichito* she calls a "yard chapel"<sup>144</sup> in her thesis which is identical to one found in Barrio Santa Rosa, the Yaqui enclave in the south end of Tucson. Steelyard found *nichitos* in front yards, attached to houses, and free-standing; examples of each type were collected throughout Tucson's barrios. Tucson and Sonoran *nichitos* are made of the same types of materials, and show many of the same architectural stylistics. Similarly, both Mexican and Arizonan *nichitos* display a plethora of different *bultos*, candles, flowers, and religious articles within. It is clear that the *Tucsonenses* styles of *nichitos* are direct inheritors of the Mexican types.

#### 5.1.3: MEXICAN KANSAS CITY (MISSOURI)

It is said that, if Saint Louis faces Eastwards, Kansas City faces Westwards. Saint Louis is referred to as the gateway to the West, and is in tone and timbre, a very "east-coast" type city. It has high rise housing, office skyscrapers, and a very cosmopolitan feel to it. Conversely, Kansas City expresses the feel of a Western city: single-level dwellings, lower level office towers, and a slower pace of life. Its "feel" is definitely more congruent to the pace of life in Arizona and New Mexico, than it is to New York City or Boston. As a result, there is a fairly high Mexican American population in Kansas City Mo., in part due

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<sup>144</sup> Husband, p. 43, figure 4.5. c - Yard Chapel, Magdalena, Sonora

to jobs such as the railroad and cattle wrangling<sup>145</sup>. Along with the mix of the two Latin cultures, Kansas City, Missouri features a famous apparition site: Our Lady, Queen of Love.

The Queen of Love site is famous enough that the city has erected tourist signs directing the faithful to the home which has been turned into the Our Lady, Queen of Love Centre. It is situated in a middle class part of Kansas City on Garner Saint, and involves two homes. One house seems to be the office for the public, with a list of rules posted and hours for public prayer. Despite the fact this is an Italian part of the city, two women standing at the stairs spoke rapid-fire Central American Spanish. All signage was in English only.

The second house has had a semi-permanent structure built to enclose the balcony area. Inside this structure, which is open at all times to the public for private devotion, is a full sized department store mannequin. The mannequin has been coated in a substance such as plaster, to simulate the white plaster of commercial Virgin Mary statues. In her hands is a pink rose, and a rosary depends from her clasped hands. A second rosary frames her head and body. She is behind plexiglas, with a grotto-type *nichito* built to enclose the entire display. The grotto is then draped with pink silk rose trellises. Atop the grotto is a small painted Saint Michael figure, slaying the dragon. The entire *nichito* sits in a shallow moat

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<sup>145</sup> Historically, Kansas City was a major cattle market, where cattle drives from the southwest ended their treks. Even today, some of the finest auctioneers in the United States are trained in Kansas City.

painted blue. Imbedded in the water-filled channel are a small white plaster Virgin Mary and a bust of the popular beatified Father Pio. (fig. 133) Numerous plastic rosaries hang from the roof of the structure, so that petitioners can borrow one and say a prayer.

Kansas City, Mo. has a well-known district known as the "Argentine", or "Westside". Apparently many diverse Roman Catholic communities settled around the Argentine, including Italian Americans, Mexican Americans, and a smattering of Polish Catholics. The Westside featured a plethora of *nichitos* in front yards, with an ethnic mix of Italian Americans and first- and second-generation Mexican Americans. In the area round the Guadalupe Church and Cesar Chavez "saint", far more *bultos* had small *nichitos* enclosing them than anywhere else in Kansas City - there appears to be a company manufacturing prefabricated *nichitos* which are popular. These are designed less like a "bathtub" shape, and more like a brickwork house, with a steeply gabled roof. This was the only location where I saw this particular style of prefab niche.

Three streets around the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe were clearly inhabited by Mexican American families. The difference in the style of the *nichitos* was immediately striking, and unmistakable. Where the Italian American *nichitos* were most often one single *bulto*, often delineated and accoutred with fresh growing flowers, the Mexican American *nichitos* were a plethora of items organically interacting at once. The effect was baroque: every item seemed to be swirling, and defining, the figure next to it.

The Ramirez family had an extensive *nichito* which somehow felt "wrong" to me. As I questioned the daughter of the house, a woman in her early 20s, she informed me that her father had died two years ago, and they had augmented their *nichito* in his honour. There was a freestanding polychrome Virgin Mary, two ceramic rabbits, a pot of flowers, and other related offerings. When I asked if there had ever been a "*nichito*" around the figures, her face darkened. "Yes", she replied, there had been a bathtub-type niche around the Mary, but "druggie" neighbours had stolen it<sup>146</sup>. She indicated that the family intended to replace the *nichito* when they could afford it.

The neighbours next door to the Ramirez family had a most astounding and extremely Mexican American, *nichito* complex. The entire front yard was taken up with *bultos*, flowers, knick-knacks, and a hoard of cats of every description: ceramic, plaster, plastic, wooden...it is truly magnificent. The family was not at home to be interviewed, unfortunately. One wonders if the *nichito* is dedicated to a beloved family pet who died, or merely echoes the love the owners have for cats. The main *bulto* in what might be assumed to be the main *nichito* (again, a white ceramic bathtub structure) was a large *bulto* of San Judas Tadeo (Saint Jude), with a Sacred Heart and a Virgin Mary flanking the large *bulto*. Nearby stood various other *bultos*, including one which appeared to be Saint Francis of Assisi, and a Virgin of Guadalupe.

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<sup>146</sup> Discussion with Ms. Ramirez, May 1999.

The third Mexican American family *nichito* down the street also lacked a niche defining the sacred space, but featured a polychrome Virgin Mary flanked by a lawn statue of a little peasant boy and girl. Other *bultos*, much smaller, adorn the area, and the entire display sits in a shallow ring of earth which clearly had had flowers in it at one time.

## 5.2: ITALIAN AMERICAN

Italian Americans (and Canadians) comprise a major Roman Catholic minority throughout North America, with Toronto being named the second-largest Italian city (outside of Rome) in some descriptions. Both pre-and post-World War II immigration waves to the United States and Canada have allowed large communities of Italian expatriates to form. This study looks at sample groups in Missouri, New York City, and Long Island, New York, plus a few samples from upstate New York. Family structure and cultural interaction are quite similar between Mexican American and Italian American communities.

### 5.2.1: ITALIAN SAINT LOUIS, MISSOURI

By 1850, Saint Louis, Missouri, was the most multi-ethnic city in the United States, with nearly sixty percent of the city's population "foreign born". (Mormino, in Harney and

Scarpaci, 1981) A large Italian immigrant population settled in Saint Louis, primarily in the Southwest part of the city. By 1882, the discovery of a high grade of clay in the Cheltenham district of the area enticed an immigration wave of Italians from Lombardy and Sicily into the area. Settling in the area, Cheltenham was dubbed "*La Montagna*" (The Hill) by the Italian workers.

As wages were low and immigration continued to draw from a handful of Lombard and Sicilian villages, the Hill remained an Italian American enclave until well after World War II. Baseball great Lawrence "Yogi" Berra, himself a son of the Hill, described it thusly: "The Hill is strictly an Italian neighbourhood, except I can remember one German family that lived on the same block with us."<sup>147</sup> Understandably, it was to the area around the Hill that my Saint Louis friends travelled to give me an afternoon of *nichito*-photography on my visit in 1999.

The Hill area and nearby Fairmount/Blue Ridge were indeed filled with *nichitos* and *bultos*, but at first this was not at all evident. Most of the Hill neighbourhoods have back alleys, and as families have become more acculturated to the general (Protestant) American milieu, it appears the *nichitos* have been moved from the public, to the private sphere, as it were. Literally dozens of these *nichitos* sit in the back yard, facing either the home or the alley itself. After waving at one gentleman sitting in the back yard, I was invited into the yard (from the rear entrance), and shown his *bulto*, leaning behind a chain-

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<sup>147</sup> Quoted in Mormino, no page.



link fence against a tree. A Sicilian by birth, he proudly told me how his young daughter had painted the *bulto* more than a decade before, and that it was there because it was a good thing to have. (fig. 134) More than this, he was reticent to discuss, and as he was visiting with a *compadre*, I felt it rude to continue to discuss something with which he was uncomfortable.

Seeing one stone, "grotto" style *nichito* facing the rear entrance of a home up one alley, (fig. 135) I started to walk up the driveway to see what it looked like from the front. Both my friends started to wave frantically and yell at me. As I returned to the car, they both made it extremely clear to the "naive Canadian" that one DID NOT trespass on private property, particularly in THAT part of the Hill. As a result, many of my photos from the Hill show backwards-facing *nichitos* and *bultos*.

One characteristic which seems to be typical of many Italian American *nichitos* is a plethora of yard statuettes arranged around the *bultos*. (fig. 64) Ducks, birds, garden gnomes: they all stand like "guards" or "supplicants" around the *bultos*, primarily the Virgin Mary (generic), the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and/or Saint Anthony of Padua. No other *bultos* were photographed in Italian Saint Louis. As well, Italian Americans seem less inclined to build niches to protect their contents: a large number of the *bultos* stood near the front or rear of the home, freestanding without a trellis, a "bathtub", or any other structure.

### 5.2.2: ITALIAN KANSAS CITY (MISSOURI AND KANSAS)

Many Italians did not stop in Saint Louis, Missouri, on their search for the American Dream. Much like Saint Louis, Kansas City has a high Italian American population, expressed in *nichitos* throughout the twin cities. The most striking attribute of *nichitos* in the Kansas City area overall is the lack of structure protecting the *bultos*. *Bultos* stand at the side of buildings, in the middle of flower gardens, and atop bird-baths and fountains. A niche of wood, plaster, or stone is an unusual feature among the Italian Americans in the Kansas City area.

Some of the *nichitos* were painted, but most were left white. The Italian part of the neighbourhood featured a mix of Virgin Marys, Sacred Hearts, and Saint Anthony of Padua. Again, many *bultos* showed up on pedestals, or atop fountain/bird bath structures. Most *bultos* were one level down from the balcony of the home, as these houses are built on steep hills in most cases, creating a multi-tiered access to each home. (fig. 136) The *bultos* can be seen from the street, but accessing them demands one climb at least one flight of stairs before reaching the fence and gate.

As with other areas surveyed, the Virgin Mary is by far the most popular *bulto* displayed. She may be short, tall, monochrome, polychrome, full painted, or just her cloak and sash coloured. One of the most magnificent displays of *bultos* was found around Independence Avenue and Cliff Dr. The owner was tending her flower beds as we pulled up and was

more than willing to share a moment discussing her masterful religious gardening. Two sides of her home face the street, and she has placed the Virgin on one side and a Sacred Heart of Jesus on the other side, both united with a flower bed which joins the two sides of the home (fig. 37). In her back yard (which faces the same street as the Virgin Mary *bulto* faces), she has a magnificent separate *nichito*: fresh-roses adorn the head of the second Virgin Mary *bulto*, bushes and flowers are trained to form a frame to the statue, and above the head stands an arch made of white plastic and wire dryer hose! (fig. 137) her family and her husband's families are both from Italy, and they are third-generation Italian Americans.

Kansas City, Kansas, is a less affluent community than its sister across the river. My guide drove me to the "Strawberry Hill" area, a small Roman Catholic community, including Orchard Saint and Ohio Avenue. One home had a *nichito* of note: a monochrome Virgin Mary stood at the front of the home, and at the side was a more ornate display, featuring a monochrome Virgin of Lourdes, complete with a kneeling Saint Bernadette to the side of the *nichito*. Other than this, there were few *nichitos* which were different from those on the other side of the river.

### 5.2.3: ITALIAN NEW YORK

There are few areas in the United States with as concentrated a population of Americans of Italian descent as in the state of New York. Both in and around New York City and upstate, the traveller can enter any Italian pizzeria and find dishes cooked "the way Mom taught us"<sup>148</sup>. Numerous parts of the boroughs feature a "Little Italy", and yard-shrines are so visually familiar as to be commonplace. In order to cover these communities adequately, this section is divided between the New York City/Long Island areas, and Upstate/Western New York.

New York City and Long Island: Frequently blue-collar workers and craftsmen, Italian Americans have been installed in Brooklyn for over a hundred years, and have had a major influence in the area. The majority of *nichitos* found around Brooklyn are either made of wood or of brick, and some are gloriously ornate and finely-crafted.

In 1985, Dr. Joseph Sciorra received a grant to document with photographer Martha Cooper, Italian American front yard *nichitos* in the Williamsburg, Flatlands, and Carroll Gardens neighbourhoods of Brooklyn. The archives of his research are held by CityLore; an organization dedicated to research on the ethnography and folklore of the New York City area. Unfortunately, there are no field notes accompanying the collection of over 300 photos, so much of my information drawn from the CityLore archives has been scantily

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<sup>148</sup> Discussion with a waitress, local pizzeria, Elmont, N.Y. (Long Island), Sept. 1999.

augmented by a visit with Dr. Sciorra in 1999 and by drawing on articles he has published on his research (1985, 1988, 1999).

Notable from the Sciorra collection is the fact that most Italian American *bultos* in the Brooklyn area are monochrome - they are left plaster-white by the owners. Interestingly, when a Virgin Mary *bulto* is painted, it is more likely to have a *nichito* built around it than if it is left pristinely white. Stylistically, the Brooklyn Italian *nichitos* are of the "house" style (peaked roof, brick-style sides) if the *bulto* is monochrome, and the "bathtub" style is more commonly found with polychrome *bultos*.

In Brooklyn, Virgin Mary *bultos* comprise the vast majority of *bultos* found in the Sciorra survey. Almost 40 different *bultos* were found with the Virgin, primarily "generic" Marys, but a reasonable number featuring the Virgin of Mt. Carmel. Second in popularity in this collection is Saint Anthony of Padua, (fig. 63) appearing 18 times either alone, or with other *bultos*. The Sacred Heart of Jesus *bultos* only appeared five times. Other *bultos* found in the survey collection included the twins Cosimo and Damian<sup>149</sup> (1); Saint Francis of Assisi (2); Saint Jude (2); Saint Lazarus (1); Saint Martin of Porres (2); The Infant of Prague (2); Saint Lucia (Lucy) (1); Saint Theresa of Avilla (1). In three cases, praying children were found in or near the *nichito* as well.

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<sup>149</sup> This *nichito* is noted in one article by Dr. Sciorra as being in Elmont, which is on Long Island and not in Brooklyn at all.

Sciorra notes that the display of *nichitos* became popular after World War II when inexpensive plaster and/or concrete *bultos* could be purchased. (Sciorra, 1998: 59) As with the *Tucsonenses*, many families erect *nichitos* as *mandas*, in thanks for gifts offered and prayers answered. One *nichito* dedicated to the Virgin by the Chinnicis family in Gravesend, Brooklyn, was built as a *manda* in thanks for the safe return of their sons after World War II. (Sciorra, 1998: 61) Sciorra notes other *nichitos* built as *mandas* and dedicated to various saints, including Saint Joseph, a particular patron saint to the Sicilian community. One phenomenon not seen in any other areas photographed for this study was the decoration of street lampposts with flowers and a picture of the Virgin Mary. (fig. 138) Dr. Sciorra says this seems to be a practice in some areas of Italy which has survived the transfer to the United States.

As immigrants and their descendents moved from Manhattan slums to private homes with front yards in the outer boroughs [of New York City], they updated these old-world public expressions of faith to suit their newly acquired spaces. (Sciorra, 1998: 58)

As well as Dr. Sciorra's collection, I was able in July 2000 to obtain some photographs around Elmont, Long Island. My informant and guide, raised in the neighbourhood, indicated the area had been entirely Italian as she grew up<sup>150</sup>. The area seems to have had only a minor ethnic shift since the 1950s. One *bulto* found in this area was clearly the Virgin of Mt. Carmel, although the only colour on the *bulto* was the painting of the face

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<sup>150</sup> Conversation with Alyson L. Abramowitz, July 2000.

and hands of the figure, and gold highlighting of the Virgin's cloak, rosary, and scapular. The iconography of the Virgin of Mt. Carmel is one of the few where She wears a cloak which is not depicted as blue.

Elmont was one of the few places in the United States where a *nichito* featured Saint Anne and the young Virgin as the main *bulto*. (fig. 115) Typically for Italian American *nichitos*, one can see the front of the home is decorated with ornate topiary work, and numerous whimsical yard statuary, including plastic flamingos and pelicans, green frogs, and a little cherub atop the *nichito* itself. This *bulto* was of particular interest to me, as this was the only *bulto* of Saint Anne I had seen which was not Saint Anne de Beaupré, so popular in Québec.

The other *bulto* of interest noted in Elmont was approximately half a block from the Saint Anne *nichito*, and featured a most handsome Holy Family display behind plexiglas. (fig. 139) In this *nichito* the Virgin and Saint Joseph are depicted as "everyday people", rather than in iconographic clothing; Saint Joseph wears his carpenter's apron, and the Virgin wears no veil. The young child Jesus stands between His parents, holding a small wooden cross. The statuary is of fine manufacture, and it is my suspicion that this particular depiction of the Holy Family is probably specific to a particular area of Italy. The *nichito* itself was of concrete or plaster with a slightly gabled but still arched roof, and the area around the *nichito* was clearly delineated with raised trim, white stones, and low shrubbery. The other *nichitos* found in Elmont followed the general pattern established in

Sciorra's collection: monochrome Virgins stood without a *nichito*, polychrome Virgins and other *bultos* were enclosed.

Upstate and Western New York: Viewed from the highway during numerous visits to areas such as Rochester, Syracuse, Watertown, Ogdensburg, Canton, Westfield, and the area around the Akwesasne Mohawk Reserve, *nichitos* in both Upstate and Western New York state follow the patterns of most Italian American *nichitos*. They appear to favour the same *bultos*, and to use the same styles of construction and materials for their *nichitos*. One sample, from Covington, near the Akwesasne Mohawk Reserve, features a smallish Virgin Mary *bulto* in a literal half-bathtub. Around the feet of the *bulto* is a collection of fresh-growing flowers. The *bulto* is polychrome, the *nichito*, white. (fig. 79) The ethnicity of the owners is unclear, but a sign in front of the home proclaimed it as belonging to a local Justice of the Peace, the Honourable Jerome T. Brockway.

A second sample from the same border area, Westfield, New York, featured a polychrome Virgin Mary inside a prefabricated *nichito*, cast in a seashell-style. (As Dr. Sciorra noted, many New York City residents disparagingly refer to Italian American *nichitos* as "Mary on the Half-Shell" (1988)) The lawn also features ornaments such as two grazing wooden sheep, a plastic swan planter, and other ephemera. The family name on the mailbox is "Yadolav", again of unclear ethnic background (possibly Polish?). The use of additional lawn ornamentation is typical of Italian American *nichitos*, but the distance between the *nichito* and the other ornamentation could indicate a cultural difference.



One *nichito* on an island in the 1,000 Islands region of New York State is typical of the *bultos* found in Greece and Italy at the mouths of ports; here a monochrome life-sized Virgin Mary holds her hands out protectively over the vessels which pass under her gaze. (fig. 140) The island was owned by a wealthy Irish Catholic family before being sold to its current owners, who have kept up the display of *bulto* and international flags, at the edge of the island.

### 5.3: FRENCH (CANADIAN AND AMERICAN)

Although the French presence in the New World was quite widespread prior to the Louisiana Purchase, Francophone Americans are often lost in most studies of modern-day French communities in North America. Although this study primarily looks at French Canadian artifacts and communities in Ontario and Québec, additional information was provided by Mark Charleville and Dr. Barry Ancelet, both of Louisiana. Some isolated samples of *nichitos* were also collected during travels along both sides of the Mississippi River during 1999, with photos obtained in Illinois and Missouri.

### 5.3.1: FRENCH QUÉBEC AND OTTAWA VALLEY, ONTARIO

Compared to my childhood in Montréal, there are significantly fewer *nichitos*, *nichos*, and *capillitas* in Québec at the dawn of the new millenium. In part, this can be easily attributed to a social upheaval in the 1970s which is referred to as the "Quiet Revolution", in Québec. Until the 1960's, the Roman Catholic Church had been extremely influential in the daily lives of French Canadians in Québec, but like other cultural communities around North America, the 1970's were marked by social upheaval. The Quiet Revolution urged Québécois to become independent of the Church, and to 'throw off' the trappings of public religiosity. As a result, hundreds of *nichitos* throughout rural Québec either disappeared completely, fell into disrepair, or were moved to back yards from front yards. Despite this trend, informants have indicated that *altarcitos* are still kept in most religious homes.

Despite this, there are numerous public signs of deep spiritual ties between the communities of French Québec and the Ottawa Valley, and their Roman Catholic roots. In both 1989 and 1991, the Québec government's Ministry of Culture surveyed by administrative region, the frequency of *nichitos* in the province. The more rural regions had very high numbers of *nichitos*: Montérégie: 199; Maurice-Bois-Francs: 138; Chaudière-Appalaches: 126. Where the population was more urban, and more influenced by the Quiet Revolution, niches were rarely seen. here we see the two largest cities in the province devoid of *nichitos*: Montréal: 0; Nord-du-Québec: 0; Laval: 0. (Simard, 1995: 8)

Contemporary French Canadian *nichitos* are, by contrast to Mexican American *nichitos*, spartan. It appears there is a very narrow list of what is considered proper, *propre*<sup>151</sup>, to be placed next to a religious statue in these communities. The vast majority of French Canadian *nichitos* are pre-fabricated niches or recycled bathtubs, (fig. 83) and most *bultos* are purchased rather than manufactured by hand.

Many families seem fond of placing statues atop pedestals, creating a sort of yard-statue and/or bird bath. In these cases, flowers are frequently planted around the base of the pedestal, delineating the sacred space connected with the statue. In nearly all cases, niches are left white (both the bathtubs and the plaster shells); when colour is evident, it is a medium to light blue, a colour associated with the Virgin.

French Canadian *nichitos* often feature large flower pots flanking the *nichito* itself, and occasionally one might find a much smaller *bulto* at the feet of the Virgin. Despite the popularity of Saint Anne de Beaupré, very few images of her were found in *nichitos*. White cherubs or winged angels often flank the *bulto*, (fig. 141) but as a rule, there is little personalized decoration in or around the *nichito*.

One interesting observation regarding the placement of *nichitos* occurred after watching one new *nichito* in Ottawa, on Saint Laurent Boulevard. This is a major thoroughfare in the near-east part of the city, and this particular *nichito* was erected around late 1997 or

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<sup>151</sup> A word which can also mean "clean" and "seemly".

early 1998, at a 45 degree angle to the street and lit with a string of Christmas lights. Originally red lights, these were replaced with blue or blue-green lights within a year of its establishment. The street has no other *nichitos*, and I saw few in the adjoining neighbourhood on either side of the Saint Laurent Blvd. itself.

What is interesting is the fact that, in mid-2000, the next door neighbours to the first *nichito* erected one of their own. Slightly different in style and orientation (the new *nichito* faces directly onto the street), the newer *nichito* is a two-level construction of white trellis plastic or wood, with a statue of the Virgin in the upper section and a collection of silk flowers in the lower area. In summer, very large white flowers were coaxed to lean on either side of the *nichito*, framing the *bulto* within with live flowers. Apparently both families have lived in their houses for some time, and it is as if the construction of the first *nichito* gave the second family a sort of tacit permission to build theirs. It will be interesting to watch this area of the road and see if additional *nichitos* appear in the next few years.

Due to the harshness of winter in these areas, many *nichitos* are taken inside the house for the winter. It is unclear whether they are then re-installed inside the home, or merely "stored" until spring arrives again. What is clear is that, when a *nichito* is taken in for the winter, it is returned to its place of honour in the spring.

Where *nichitos* are not dismantled for the winter, it is rare that the owners shovel a path to, or around, the installation. They are left to weather the season as best they can. The exception to this is a lifesize grotto *nichito* on Baseline Road, in Ottawa. Because numerous passers-by pray at this spot, the father or one of the children makes a concerted effort to keep a small path shovelled from the city's street to the front of the niche itself. This *nichito*, dedicated by the Bishop of Ottawa, was built by a Roman Catholic convert and his wife in order to house a special statue of the Virgin. The husband drove by the concrete statue repeatedly, noticing that it was not being purchased as the veil and part of an arm, had broken off. He bought the *bulto*, brought it home, and the family invited his wife's aunt, a cloistered nun from Québec, to come and properly repair the statue. The aunt was given permission to leave the cloister long enough to refurbish the *bulto*, and give the family instructions on exactly how the *nichito* for it should be built. Cash, candles, flowers, and a small statue of the Sacred Heart have all been left inside the *nichito*. The owners leave all offerings, feeling that anyone who needs a rosary, *bulto*, or cash, should be free to take it.

Frequently, one or more plastic rosaries are found draped around the *nichito's bulto*. Various informants indicated that basically, one left the tools of worship where they were needed, e.g., by the place where one would pray. *Nichitos* in both Québec and Eastern Ontario are most often oriented at a 45 degree angle to the road or sidewalk so that they can be viewed by passers-by, much as they are in Arizona and Mexico.

French Canadian *nichitos* can be described as elegant in their simplicity, uncluttered, and dignified. This is not to insinuate that they are in any way uncreative or boring. *Nichitos* in all areas of the world display a creative form of recycling items in their construction and decoration, and Québec and Ontario *nichitos* are no exception.

One example of a *nichito* in Québec is built from a recycled freon gas tank: the side of the tank was cut away so that passers-by could see the statue, and the entire contraption was then mounted on a hook so that it hangs suspended in mid-air (in Simard, 1995) . Another, in the hamlet of Enterprise, Ontario, features a nearly life sized *bulto* of the Virgin Mary wired and tied into a recycled Coldspot refrigerator, whose interior has been spray-painted blue. (fig. 81, 82) The entire installation is placed atop a man-made hillock on the front of the farm's property, facing the crossroad of the village. The refrigerator and *bulto* are reached by climbing thirteen shallow, white wooden stairs. A concrete two-foot tall statue of Saint Francis of Assisi sits by the side door of the house, next to a concrete statue of a Dalmatian dog.

### 5.3.2: FRENCH "ACADIANA" AREA OF LOUISIANA

History attests to the forced relocation in the 1700's of thousands of French Canadians living in the Maritimes into what is now Louisiana. This massive movement of French speaking people gave a unique flavour to Louisiana which is recognized today, and called

"Cajun", short for Acadian. Throughout the state one finds families and communities whose first language is French, and in particular a dialect of French having much in common with the dialects now spoken in New Brunswick and Eastern Québec.

It is therefore, of little surprise to see *nichitos* throughout Louisiana which bear striking resemblances to those seen in Québec. The photos representing this part of the United States were taken by professional artist and photographer Mark Charleville, and are all from a part of the state referred to as "Acadiana". A second group of photos are held in the archives of folklorist Dr. Barry Ancelet of Baton Rouge, but Dr. Ancelet misplaced the slides chosen as samples; so they are not available for the dissertation.

Without a doubt, *nichitos* found in Acadiana strongly resemble those of rural Québec and Eastern Ontario. One *nichito* in Plaquemine (fig. 85) shows an unpainted generic Virgin Mary placed within a wooden *nichito* whose appearance strongly resembles rural Québec architecture. The area surrounding this *nichito* appears to be delineated by small stones. Another *nichito*, from the Nellie Plantation in Assumption Parish, (fig. 108) shows another generic Virgin, head held onto its body with duct tape, placed within the exact same prefabricated "niche" as those sold in Eastern Ontario. As with French Canadian niches, the figure is flanked by two flower vases (devoid of flowers). Yet another *nichito*, in White Castel, features the Virgin flanked by kneeling angels on both sides, typical of French Canadian *nichitos*. The similarities are striking.

One unique *nichito* more in keeping with Mexican American sensibilities is one found on Pecan Island, Louisiana. (fig. 142) here the Virgin is placed within a structure which looks like as if it is built of coloured glass, with lighting inside and two pristine white cherubs keeping her company. Outside the *nichito* but still within the "sacred space" delineated by a raised box-frame, are a collection of figures including a cherub holding flowers, two plastic swans, various plastic lawn-ornament birds, and a garishly-painted caricature of an African-American man, sitting and eating a piece of watermelon, in the worst 1930's "Uncle Tom" style. It is a garish display, and one cannot but wonder about the ethnicity of the owners.

Mr. Charleville's collection includes other intriguing *nichitos*, including one which features HALF a Virgin Mary, attached by plaster to what appears to be a mailbox.

### 5.3.3: FRENCH ILLINOIS

Originally settled by the French, the area flanking the Mississippi river in both Illinois and Missouri remains clustered with rural residents sporting French names and of Roman Catholic faith. Driving between Alton and Grafton, Illinois takes one on a scenic drive along the eastern banks of the Mississippi river, through tiny hamlets with old French families. Many of these communities such as Brussels, near the Mark Twain Nature Preserve, sported numerous Virgin Mary *nichitos* and yard-statuary. Some were placed



on pedestals, some sat raised inside old tractor-tires, and a few were sheltered by niche-type structures of wood or plaster. Most had flowers in or near the *nichito* itself, but little or nothing else around the *bulto*. Although the raised *bulto* is more commonly seen in Italian communities, it is possible this practice started in order to avoid losing one's statuary to the annual flooding of Old Man River<sup>152</sup>. Rural Missouri *nichitos* follow a generally French pattern of *nichito* construction: simple and elegant, with little else inside the niche but the main *bulto*, flowers, and/or candles and a rosary.

#### 5.3.4: FRENCH SAINT LOUIS, MISSOURI

Right near the waterfront there are still some old families of French descent in Saint Louis, living on streets with French names, such as Gasconade. Only two families with *nichitos* were identified as such (by the name on the mailbox), and the *nichitos* themselves were more stylistically in keeping with the French *nichitos* than the ones in Italy (see below). One appeared to be inspired by the Virgin of Lourdes, placed in a plaster "bathtub" grotto, and flanked on either side by two kneeling young girls, modelled after the typical *bulto* of Saint Bernadette. Due to the angle of the photo, only the tops of the kneeling girls can be seen.

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<sup>152</sup> Those who have never seen the Mississippi during flood season have trouble understanding exactly how high the river can get: the floods around St. Louis in the mid 1990s sent the waters swelling over twenty feet above their normal level. Canal St. in St. Louis spends part of its year submerged as a matter of course.

The second family featured not one, but two separate *nichitos* on their property, both behind the fence-line of the property. Facing the road is a monochrome white generic Virgin Mary, sheltered inside what appears to be an actual bathtub which has been spray-painted dark royal blue. (fig. 143) Live flowers grow around the *nichito* itself, providing the *nichito* a pleasing contrast of colour. A second *nichito* faces the back entrance to the home (one can see a table and chairs at the corner of the home), with a second identical Virgin Mary turned towards the entrance. Around this *bulto* are more live flowers, a "fence" of short white wire edging, and behind the *bulto* stands a large white flower hanger with a pot of geraniums hanging from it. Two different explanations for the pair of *nichitos* appear plausible: one, that the family decided to have one *nichito* for themselves and another for the public (which would be rare), or two, perhaps there is a mother and daughter(s) in the home, with different members of the family caring for each *nichito*. As no one was home when the photos were taken, the question must go unanswered.

#### 5.4: WORLDWIDE (BULGARIA, FRANCE, GREECE, MAURITIUS, ITALY, MALTA, MONACO, SPAIN, TURKEY)

This section encompasses *nichito* practices in various countries, primarily in Europe. Some are Roman Catholic, while others are members of various branches of the Orthodox Church, such as Ukraine, Bulgaria, and Greece. These descriptions are primarily intended to show the global attraction of little corners of sacred space on private property.

Countries such as Bulgaria and Ukraine are still recovering from Communist governmental regulations, which enforced official atheism. Few *nichitos* or *nichos* have to date returned into public view to date in those countries. As well, informants have assured me that they have seen *nichitos* and *nichos* in Roman Catholic areas of Germany, Poland, and Belgium.

Religious pilgrimage in modern Europe is predominantly Marian in nature. Mary is the principal subject of devotion at nearly two-thirds of today's shrines throughout Europe. (Nolan and Nolan, 1989: 116) An overview by county and region as to density of Marian pilgrimage sites clearly shows a strong propensity to Marian shrines in southern Europe, primarily areas bordering the Mediterranean<sup>153</sup>. As a result, it is no surprise that the practice of venerating Mary and the saints is more common in North American communities with the same ethnic background as the countries in Europe with Marian pilgrimage sites.

High proportions of pilgrimage centres devoted to Mary extend from southern Portugal through most of Spain and southern France into northern and north-central Italy. Other areas with higher-than-average proportion of Marian shrines are in southern Italy and western France, and in a belt extending from Belgium through the French provinces of Lorraine and Alsace. (Nolan and Nolan, 1989: 121)

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<sup>153</sup> Nolan and Nolan, p. 120: subjects of devotion by country shows Italian pilgrimage sites as Marian in 920 cases, devoted to various saints 232 times, and to Jesus in a mere 40 locations. In France (primarily southern France) pilgrimage sites were dedicated to Mary 742 times, compared to 236 saint locations and only 18 devoted to Jesus. Spain was a similar case, with 754 Marian pilgrimage sites, 154 to various saints, and a surprisingly high 100 locations dedicated to Jesus.

**Bulgaria: Church of Saint Stephen, Nessabar.** Bulgaria has very few public displays of religious ephemera, but there has been a major return to the Greek Orthodox Church since the fall of Communism in this country. Evidence of the veneration of religious personages in niches is therefore, inferred at this point. The Church of Saint Stephen, in Nessabar, is part of the old town which has been designated a UNESCO world heritage site. The Church is Byzantine, and services are not currently held inside. High up on a wall in the front of the church is a fresco, not well known - the tour guide expressed the opinion that it is the only known fresco of Jesus Christ as a youth (i.e., a young teen). The fresco is painted flush to the wall, but is within a double-frame and sits upon a protruding plaster shelf, creating the effect of a *nichito*. (fig. 144) The niche would not look out of place in the front yard of a private home, needing only candles and/or flowers to finish the impression.

**France:** Despite two trips through rural France, both north (Brittany and Normandy) and south (Camargue), very few *nichitos* were spotted. What was most frequently mistaken for a *nichito*, were little wishing wells which many farm families seem to have adopted as lawn decoration. These appear to correspond to the old Celtic beliefs, inherited by the early French Catholic communities, of natural springs being sacred. Only two examples of *nichitos* were collected first-hand; one, a Virgin and Child at the corner of a building in Arles, Province, and the second, a classical niche of French Canadian style at the foot of the lengthy staircase up to the Cathedral in Marseilles. (fig. 145) Inside the *nichito* is placed a reproduction of the Virgin and Child from the Church itself.

The French Revolution created an atmosphere hostile to the practice of *nichitos* and *nichos*. As public religiosity was considered "bourgeois" by the masses, anyone having a *bulto* or *nichito* was immediately suspect. As a result, very few public locations in France have *nichos*. The book Les Saints Qui Guérissent En Bretagne, Tome 1 features hundreds of healing saints and their holy places. Interestingly, almost none of these saints are shown in *nichitos*; rather, they are all identified with healing waters, or fountains. This too, is in keeping with the old Celtic practice of identifying the Divine with rivers and streams, and the practice of well-dressing continues in both France and Ireland today. The only picture of a saint which appears to be a *nichito* is that of Saint Mathurin, situated in a forest. (Gancel, 2000: 16)

The practice of *nichitos*, cruces, and crossroad crosses marking parish boundaries, survived in Canada and in the United States due to the fact the French Revolution occurred in the 1700s. By that time, the French had been established in North American for well over 150 years, and the rural practices of the people had taken a firm foothold in the country. By the time the Revolution occurred in France, the wars between England and France in the New World had changed the political landscape of the country such that France would never again directly influence Canada's practices, religious or civil.

Greece: Rhodes, Katakólon, highway near Nauplion, Skala (Patmos). The Greek Orthodox Church encourages the practice of something related to *nichitos*, the *eikonostasos*. As mentioned in the lexicon, these are kept outside the fence delineating

private and public land, and are intended for use by travellers. It is no surprise that the practice of *nichito* use has continued in Greece, as the Classical Greeks used home altars and public altars as well. *Eikonostasos* do not classically hold *bultos*, but rather, *retablos*. The Greek Orthodox church works with icons, painted images of the Holy Family and saints, rather than with statuary. As a result, their *nichitos* most often hold icons rather than figures. Most *eikonostasos* sit about at eye level to the traveller, and appear to come in two general styles: those which are simple rectangles holding their contents, (fig. 47) and a few which seem to have been constructed to emulate the shape of a Greek Orthodox church building. This is similar to the *nichitos* in Tucson and environs designed in "Mission style", echoing the shape of the old Spanish colonial churches.

Ile Maurice (Mauritius): Céline Leduc, an undergraduate at the University of Ottawa, supplied two photos taken in the fall of 1998 on Ile Maurice. I believe she said this island is off the coast of Africa. The photos are of a natural grotto dedicated to the Virgin of Great Power, Notre Dame du Grand Pouvoir. (fig. 146) The interior is filled with *bultos*, flowers, candles, and other offerings. Most *bultos* were of a Madonna and Child clearly syncretized with the Virgin of Grand Pouvoir, two *bultos* were of the Virgin of Lourdes, and one was a generic Virgin Mary. It is unclear from the photo, but I was told that the *nicho* has a natural stream running through it as well. The *nicho* appears to be very similar to the San Judas Tadeo pilgrimage site atop A Mountain, in Tucson.

Italy: Alghero (Sardinia), Amalfi Drive, Florence, Naples, Rome, Sorrento. Arguably, Italy is the home of the practice of *nichos* and *nichitos*. Certainly the Christian practice originates with the veneration of Saint Peter, as described in Chapter Three. Everywhere in Italy one sees *nichos*, *nichitos*, and *edicules*; the practice is so ubiquitous that *nichos* are featured on tourist postcards. (fig. 147) Indeed, an entire book is dedicated to the sacred edifices of Rome, with artist's renditions and photos of medallions to the Virgin atop door entrances, at building corners, and over bridge underpasses. (S-Grioni, 1975)

Along with *nichos* and *nichitos*, the practice of *altarcitos* is common throughout Italy. Descended from the home altars found in Pompeii, workplace and homes alike have them throughout the country. Even a tourist film and cigarette shop in Alghero (Sardinia), featured a discreet workplace *altarcito* atop a shelving group filled with sales goods. Atop the metal shelves stands a large Sacred Heart *bulto*, a much smaller Infant of Prague *bulto*, and a very small Virgin Mary *bulto*. Flanking the *bultos* on either side are vases holding a small sheaf of wheat on one side, and what appear to be Palm Sunday fronds on the other. (fig. 148)

*Nichos* are often placed where there is danger to travellers, such as at the entrance of harbours, or at the side of narrow cliff roads. The Amalfi Drive is famous as a touristic drive along the cliffs of western Italy, but it is a roadway entirely too narrow for modern tour buses. Indeed, the windy, rocky roads are so narrow that the Italian government has had to legislate it as a one-way highway for such large vehicles in order to avoid vehicles

tumbling down the cliffside. As a result, it is no surprise that the drive from Sorrento features numerous *nichos*, many perched high on the cliffs.

Like Rome, Florence features *edicole* on many buildings. One figure, of a Sorrowing Virgin, sits at the corner of the Piazza Della Signore, looking down at the populace below from the second story. Despite the apparently inaccessibility of the *edicole*, one can clearly see a red candle in front of the Virgin. (fig. 74) The vast majority of Florentine *nichos* are of the Virgin and Child, although a few were found featuring the infant Jesus and Saint Anthony of Padua. Naples also features numerous *edicole* throughout the city. Again, most were dedicated to the Virgin Mary, with the occasional saint.

Rome has the most intriguing collection of *edicole* and *nichos* of the cities sampled here. One particularly interesting *nicho* was one built right into the Roman walls of the Old City. (fig. 149) Fresh flowers and candles are ranged around the iconographic plaque, as there is no *bulto*. Many Italian *nichos* seem to feature paintings of the Virgin (sometimes as the Madonna with Child) rather than *bultos*.

One *edicole*, standing opposite the Trevi Fountain, is both striking and old. S-Grioni's book features a black and white illustration of the same *edicole* by Ph. Benoist, as stands today. (S-Grioni, 1975: 43) Putti support an upper dish-like protective structure, with one picture of the Virgin directly below (bounceback off the glass does not allow for the identification of the figure). Below this is an extremely ornate, baroque sunburst, with a



Madonna and Child within. The second *edicole* is framed by two lifesized angels, and the entire display sits upon a six foot raised stand. Although there were no offerings the day of the picture in 1997, there were numerous candle wax stains and assorted debris to mark the fact that offerings are left at the *edicole*. Based on the costumes of the people in Benoist's illustration, it appears this *edicole* is at least 200 years old.

Malta: Marsaxlokk, Tarxien, Blue Grotto. With a multicultural history which reaches back into prehistory, Malta's population is virtually entirely Roman Catholic. The island is said to have been one of the locations where the Apostle Saint Paul preached, and it is said this is when the island converted to Catholicism<sup>154</sup>. Malta is the current world headquarters of the Order of the Knights Hospitaller of Saint John of Jerusalem (Saint John's Ambulance). Malta was under British Rule until 1964, when it was granted its independence.

Currently, Malta has strong cultural ties with both England and Italy, and is considered a tourist destination throughout much of Europe. The Italian influence is clearly seen when looking for *nichitos*, *nichos*, and related phenomenon: Most cities feature numerous *edicoles*, familiar to the Italian landscape. (fig. 150) Due to Malta's strong identification with Saint John, many *edicoles* feature this figure in the *edicoles* as well as the Virgin.

During my visit to Malta in 1994, I mentioned to my tourguide that I was researching grottos and niches. We had just stopped at the Blue Grotto, one of the island's most

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<sup>154</sup> Berlitz Pocket Guide: Malta, p. 8.

famous natural sites; a cliffside drive overlooks a natural archway and series of rainbow-hued caves below the drive. As I explained to my Maltese companion what a "niche" was, he turned over his shoulder and pointed to the opposite side of the highway - where a large *nicho* was constructed from the natural globular limestone! (fig. 151) Inside the *nicho* stands a large picture of the Sacred Heart, a Virgin Mary, a third picture, plus candles and flowers. The *nicho* was strikingly like those seen in Mexico and Arizona, except for the fact that *bultos* are replaced with pictures.

Monaco: Monte Carlo. This tiny country is, much like Malta, almost entirely Roman Catholic. One would expect similarities in the practice of *nichos* and *nichitos* to French practice due to this country's having historically been a duchy of France. This was borne out by the few examples found during a visit in 1995. Most notable is a *nicho* to Saint Estelle which sits in the side of the cliff protecting the church where Princess Grace is buried: the *bulto* stands alone in the carved niche, framed by natural plants. The *nicho* is almost inaccessible without a high ladder.

The second figure found is more confusing and it is not clear whether it is accessible at all anymore. The *bulto* is of a large Virgin Mary mounted against a wall which once clearly belonged to some sort of building. (fig. 152) The expansion of the city seems to have obliterated the original building, and a road is perched atop the "roof" of the original structure. Although there is clearly a metal railing around the outside of the level where

the *bulto* stands, later inspection revealed it is flush to the wall and is not to protect those visiting the Virgin from falling off the cliff. No access to the figure was discovered.

Turkey: Ephesus. As noted earlier in this study, the Virgin Mary holds a special place in the hearts of Moslems as well as Christians. Ephesus was a large, teeming city in Greek and Roman times, and remains a popular tourist site today as the ruins are in a fairly good state of repair. Currently an Islamic country, Turkey was the heart of the Byzantine Empire, with its capital having been Constantinople (now Istanbul). As a result, the country has thousands of ancient and medieval ruins from early Christian times, including the famous Hagia Sophia.

Christian tradition tells that the Virgin Mary died in Jerusalem in 63 C.E., and a tomb stands on that site. However, the Third Ecumenical Council of 431 in Ephesus stated that Mary travelled with Saint John between 37 and 48 C.E., ending her days at Ephesus. (Can, 1997: 75) A building attributed as the House of the Virgin Mary (*Panaya Kapulu*) stands approximately 7 kilometres from Ephesus, atop a small mountain. The ruins of a Byzantine chapel were found at this site in 1891, built on top of ruins which date from the first century C.E. As a result, both Christians and Moslems travel to the building, where they pray and leave offerings to the Virgin.

An altar placed within a niche dating to the Byzantine era remains in the house, featuring a copper statue of the Virgin. Two much smaller niches flank the central arch, in which are

left various *bultos* and pictures of the Virgin. Offerings here include candles, flowers, and at least one crucifix. (fig. 153) Two pictures taken at different times show how the linen on the altar, icons and other trappings such as the rug, change with time.

## CHAPTER 6: SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS CONTEXT OF *NICHITO* USE

Why is a *nichito* placed so that passers-by can see the contents? Why are some items left on the in-house *altarcito*, while others are left in the *nichito*? How do the items within the *nichito* influence the *nichito* itself? And how does the *nichito* influence the family which builds it and those who pass by the home? Clearly, one cannot look at the issues related to the use of *nichitos* and related phenomena without looking at symbol theories, for the *nichito* and *altarcito* clearly act as symbols to those who build them as well as to those who view them.

Informants have been clear they are not worshipping the *bultos*, the pictures, or the sacramentales within a *nichito* or on an *altarcito*; rather, they act as symbols which invoke intense feelings of religious joy. The term symbol comes from the Greek term *sumbolos*, referring to the putting together of what has been divided. "An example would be the production of two halves of a token which had been broken and given to a pair of friends so that they would share a mark of identification." (Firth, 1973: 47)

All symbols of social integration, however, can also act as signs of the opposite process, namely, social differentiation and opposition. The cross is a concrete expression of the unity of all Christians, but it also underlines the separation between the latter and the followers of Islam or any other religion. (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981: 36)

In this way, Christian symbols also serve to differentiate that community from non-Christians. As ritual circumcision differentiates a male Jew from a non-Jew, so Christian symbols such as the Creed, or baptism, differentiate Christians from non-Christians.

Christians use religious goods to tell themselves and the world around them that they are Christians. ...Religious objects also signal who is in the group and who is not. They teach people how to think and act like Christians. ...Religious goods not only bind people to the sacred, they bind people to each other. (McDannell, 1995: 45)

Subsequently, a second layer of meaning was applied to the use of symbols in Christianity. Now a material token was linked with something unseen, immaterial; the material church, a building of stone or wood, became a symbol of the spiritual church, the community of the saints and the faithful with the Trinity. (Firth, 1973: 49) This understanding of symbolic meaning pervades Roman Catholic theology and explains how a symbol can function on many levels at once. here we see the origins of how a *bulto* or *retablo* of a saint or member of the Holy Family can act as symbol. Having established the function of these symbols in Christianity, one must look at how the symbol is treated.

## 6.1: REINFORCEMENT OF IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

Who uses *nichitos* and *altarcitos*, and why? What do they say about the Roman Catholics who practice this form of popular religion, or devotional piety? I would argue that the practice of building, tending, and praying at a *nichito* defines the person who engages in these practices on many levels. The presence or absence of a *nichito* defines many different relationships with both human and divine. Time and space, sacred and secular, all become part of this equation through the establishment and maintenance of the *nichito*. "Altar objects have a potent ability to recall relationships from the past and to affirm relationships in the present". (K. Turner, 1999: 83)

### 6.1.1: GENDER

Most often, men (fathers, cousins, sons) build the external structure of the *nichito*. Santos Vega (1999) indicates that this is not a huge surprise, as most carpentry or masonry skills are traditionally men's skills. He did, however, mention one class of women who are master plasterers in New Mexico, particularly skilled in the repair of plaster and adobe building facades, but noted this is an exception to the rule. The *nichito* may be built by the men but designed by the woman, or it may be built exclusively to the artistic and aesthetic tastes of the men themselves.

Tending of *nichitos* is equally done by men and women. As a rule the man builds the *nichito*, and the woman tends it. It is a family expression of religion<sup>155</sup>.

The interior design and decoration of the *nichito* falls upon the women of the home. My initial assumption when embarking on this thesis was that *nichitos* were exclusively the realm of women. In French Canadian practice, the father brings family and friends (except for the adult women) to Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve while the adult women of the house cook up the celebratory Revellion dinner, eaten after Mass. I had erroneously assumed that these small in-home altars and niches were the exclusive domain of women, who were, as with the example of Midnight Mass, often unable to attend the formal rituals in the Church.

In every case where I inquired about the usage of a *nichito*, or *altarcito*, I was firmly informed that both men and women utilized these sacred spaces. My informants were all adamant that men and women were equally engaged in the practice of popular religion via *altarcitos* and *nichitos*. "Friends of my husband built our *nichito*. My husband had the *nichito* built, and both of us tend it."<sup>156</sup>

The tending of *nichitos* is equally done by men and women.  
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<sup>155</sup> Bishop Manuel Moreno, Tucson, 24 Feb. 1998.

<sup>156</sup> Norma, 1385 El Rio, Tucson, Az., 4 January 1997.

It is a family expression of religion. ...The men of Tucson have great devotion, and are strong in their faith.<sup>157</sup>

Men are as influenced by symbols as women are: they may just show it in different ways. In traditional Mexican culture, there was a division of labour by gender. Machismo has religious underpinnings; Mary reinforces the TRADITIONAL view of women.<sup>158</sup>

Men love her too: you should see their face when they talk about her. I think sometimes they bring candles, too. They build the *nichitos* because they want to; you can tell someone to do something but they don't have to, you know? Our men, especially the Mexican ones, they are, you know, reserved.<sup>159</sup>

Most of my informants described themselves as feeling comforted, safe, and mothered, by the presence of the Virgin Mary in their *nichito*. Women in particular described their relationship to Mary as similar to the one they shared with their mothers, and/or grandmothers. "She is like my mother; I talk to her all the time because I miss my mother. I call her my mother. She makes me very, very happy. She doesn't talk to me. I feel safe and protected because of her."<sup>160</sup>

She is my mother. She makes me all warm. To know her is to love her (since I have no mother). ...She is IN me, and she sometimes speaks in me. If I have a woman come in, and

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<sup>157</sup> Bishop Manuel Moreno, Tucson, Az., 24 Feb. 1998.

<sup>158</sup> Dr. Allan Figueora-Deck, S.J., Orange, CA., 19 August 1998.

<sup>159</sup> Mary Garcia, Tucson, Az., 3 Jan. 1997.

<sup>160</sup> Ruth Bravo, Tucson, Az., 3 January, 1997.



they are, you know, upset, I ask her "what's wrong", and then She talks through me. I know it is her<sup>161</sup>.

In her 1990 Ph.D thesis on *altarcitos* in Texas, Kay Turner describes some of her female informants using their *altarcitos* for long, leisurely conversations with the Virgin Mary as one might have a talk with a close, intimate friend. (K. Turner, 1990) In these cases it appears the presence of Mary is being viewed both as transcendent and immanent, both symbolic and literal. In my interviews, this was one of the few gender differences I discovered; men did not appear to have such personal dialogues with Mary or the saints at the *nichito*.

At her altar a special kind of speech is heard: that of a woman seeking and gaining the power of relationship through the language of giving and receiving. Language use at the altar strategically combines prayers of praise and supplication - the language of giving - with conversational outpourings, affirmations, and petitions for blessings and aid - the language of receiving. (K. Turner, 1999: 140-141)

Men appear to petition at *nichitos*, while many women also described themselves as discussing at the *nichito*. Clearly however, the use of a *nichito* involves more than just women in a given community. "Mormon men wear garments and Catholic men use Lourdes water. Material Christianity is a means by which both elite and non-elite Christians express their relationship to God and the supernatural...". (McDannell, 1995: 11)

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<sup>161</sup> Mary Garcia, Tucson, Az., 3 January 1997.

As well, women are the primary co-ordinators of pilgrimages and fiestas dedicated to members of the Holy Family and/or Saints. Of particular popularity are the Guadalupanas, fiestas in honour of the Virgin of Guadalupe. In Tucson, this is no different from other cities.

The Diocesan Marian Committee organizes an annual Rosary Congress; the Guadalupanas are active in most Mexican American parishes; there are May crownings and processions at several parishes. Yes, most of the organizing is by women devoted to the Blessed Mother<sup>162</sup>.

#### 6.1.2: FAMILY

The *nichito* is ultimately personal and passionately maintained by a family. It is a nexus of sorts for family activity, with each family member having a set job in its creation and upkeep. Once the *nichito* is built and decorated, *bultos* of the Holy Family and saints are placed therein. If the parents in the family come from different parts of Mexico, a large number of favourite saints may well be found within the niche. Certain family heirloom *bultos* will be located in the *nichito*, along with any *bultos* purchased or given to the family for specific needs (e.g., San Ramon Nonnatus, for women in childbirth, or Saint Lucy/Lucia, invoked for issues regarding eye care).

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<sup>162</sup> Email from Fred Allison, Roman Catholic Diocese of Tucson 19 Dec 2000.

From this point on, however, things located within the niche are placed there by all members of the family for their own personal reasons. No informant I ever interviewed indicated that the placement of items into the family *nichito* was ever discussed between family members. No "permission" ever needed to be given within the family unit.

The rabbits in the Kansas City, Mo. *nichito* were placed there by a daughter of the family after the family's pet rabbit died. The ceramic Indian head was placed in the Tucson *nichito* by the mother, to represent her child's presence in the family and in that manner to invite the saints and Holy Family to watch over the child. The deceased child's picture in the same niche was placed there to remind the worldly family of the child's presence in heaven and to remind the Holy Family to care for the innocent soul as if he was their own.

Family photos, crumbling sepia-prints in old oval frames, are passed from generation to generation as part of the continuity of history and ancestry. These are most often located within the home, on or above the *altarcito*. Their inclusion unites God's family and the worldly family. The elevation of photos of the deceased ancestors **above** the *altarcito* indicates an elevated, or changed, status between the deceased and living, family members. "That these heirloom photos are raised up reflects the sense of honor given to the forbearers of the family; they are remembered with the reverence that makes their place near the altar appropriate". (K. Turner, 1990: 189)

One informant from Tucson told me that the church is "God's House", a place which is formal and rule-bound. To visit God's house (i.e., for Sunday mass), one had to dress in Sunday best, and be one's best behaviour. There were certain types of issues, or prayers, which might be considered unacceptable to bring to God in His house. (One example given by an informant was any prayer which, if overheard by another parishioner, might be thought to be selfish or self-absorbed.) The church was typified as very much the place for formal petition and weighty matters.

In some ways, a *nichito* could be described as functioning much as a spiritual "spare bedroom". The Holy Family is invited into the home of the individual family via the medium of the *nichito* itself. Perhaps the analogy is better served by comparing the *nichito* to a "granny flat": a small, or one-room, building on a family's land where a member of the extended family can live. The granny flat allows the family member his or her privacy, yet keeps him/her close enough to the extended family should they need care, medication, or just companionship. The relationship establishes some seemly distance, yet is quite intimate and inviting at the same time.

..The most important objects on the altar are statues and pictures of the Virgin, Christ, and saints that comprise, in effect, a holy family of images. The altar literally becomes a home on earth for this sacred family. As Petra Casorena explained to me, "I didn't want my saints roaming around all over the place, so I made a home for them here [at the altar]." Or as Micaela Zapata confirmed, "Everyone needs a home. The saints, the Virgin - I have them here. They have a place with me." (K. Turner, 1990: 167)

The *nichito* is a structure built specifically for the Holy Family and saints yet it belongs to the family who builds it, is located on their soil and behind their boundary lines, and can be maintained by the earthly family on behalf of the Holy Family. Children most often do the weekly sweeping and/or wiping down of the interior of the *nichito* when it is done (and some families do not clean the *nichitos* nearly that often), learning how to maintain something special and holy. In this way, children are taught reverence and respect for the Holy Family as well as learning obedience and respect for their own family. At a young age then, children learn that God and His family deserve special reverence, and a special place in their hearts.

If the Church is God's House for His community, then the *nichito* is the family's house for God. It is the warm place where any member of the Holy Family or the host of saints may visit when they so choose. Food offerings are rarely left in *nichitos*, but prayer candles and fresh flowers are often left to beautify and sustain God and His family. The Virgin Mary is most often the primary *bulto* in the *nichito*, and most informants indicated that the *nichito* was "her" place. As one Latina informant from New York City put it, "I was always told to pray to Mary when it was something important. After all, Mary is Jesus's mother, and what son can say no to their Mother's wishes?"<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Elena Martinez, New York City, August 1999.

So, in Mexican American homes, there is always a place for Mary and her family. By its location facing the street, the *nichito* invites passers-by to share in the holiness of the place with a brief prayer or by crossing him or herself. The *nichito* invites the Holy Family and saints to share a moment with the Earthly family. The *nichito* is a sacred place, set aside from the home yet intrinsically part of the home and on its land. The *nichito* represents an unbroken inheritance from parent to child, and from Spiritual to Earthly family -- an inheritance of prayer, intimacy, and duty. The *nichito* is a sacred space, a shared space, and an informal space. It exists in a harmony dictated by its owners and its community. Kathy Vargas, Visual Arts Director of the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Centre in San Antonio, Texas, explains this link between the worldly family and the Holy Family thusly:

To house an image in an altar...establishes a relationship with the sacred, so when you take an object, say a family photograph, and place it in an altar next to a saint, you are basically saying to the saint, 'Pray for this person. Make this family member a part of your holy family.' Putting them in sacred space makes them..accessible to each other. (In K. Turner, 1999: 96)

The *nichito* is the ultimate expression of sacred domesticity, for it is here in the domestic sphere of influence that Mary as *Abuelita*, the Grandmother, is invited to sip tea with her earthly family and listen to their daily concerns and fears.

The Grandmother invites the family around her; the *Madrina* invites and draws her family in. Therefore, a Virgin Mary *nichito* is where you invite the Holy Family into your home

AND SHE draws her community to her, as with the Grandmother<sup>164</sup>.

The Spanish expression *Mi casa es su casa* is a very old one, literally "My home is your home". It embodies the entirety of Mexican American views on hospitality and familial ties: one would only say these words to a special friend. It denotes a level of trust where a person would give a close friend the keys to their apartment along with an open invitation to stay there whenever said friend was in town.

Similarly, the *nichito* is *mi casa* -- MY home, since I (the worshipper) built it and it is on my land. It is *su casa*, as it is the place Mary, the Holy Family, and the saints in Heaven, are invited to rest, refresh themselves, and interact candidly and lovingly with the worshippers as family members. In this *casa* which straddles earthly and heavenly space, conversations with Mary can truly occur.

...familial, domestic metaphor is highly appropriate to the Catholic concept of the communion of saints, and terms such as father, son, mother, daughter, brother, sister, spouse, are freely applied within that corporate body to created persons both living and dead, as well as to the uncreated Persons, the Father and Son of the Trinity. (V. Turner 1978: 204-5)

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<sup>164</sup> Bishop Manuel Moreno, Tucson, Az., 24 February, 1998.

#### 6.1.4: LOCATION, HISTORY, AND MEMORY

Traditionally, one thinks of location as a set place in time and history. One has a rootedness in location, and many traditional communities identify themselves to a place by the fact that their ancestors and/or gods, are located there. A recent impromptu discussion between a group of friends underlined how different urban Canadians (and perhaps, Americans as well) are from so many Europeans in their attachment to location and geography: one British woman commented that she had no relatives who had ever lived away from the village in which they had been born. By comparison, of the dozen Canadians in the room, not one had lived in less than two different cities, and many had moved three or four times by the time they were 40<sup>165</sup>. Many Canadian urbanites would probably find the concept of connection, or attachment, to a place through one's ancestors, a hard concept to fathom.

In comparison, Italian Americans and Mexican Americans are far less mobile communities. In both cases, when individuals move, they often move from one Italian or Mexican enclave to another, shifting geography and location, but not necessarily locus. As with other ethnic communities, there is comfort in living among co-religionists with a shared language, history, and identity. This concept of rootedness appears to be a driving force behind the establishment of so many communities studied in this dissertation, such as "the Hill" in Missouri, Elmont, in New York, and the barrios of Tucson and Phoenix, Arizona.

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<sup>165</sup> Impromptu discussion with various informants on location and attachment, December 2000, Ottawa, Ontario.



Location comprises more than just a geographical description; it is more than topography or a longitudinal and latitudinal description. For the members of the various Roman Catholic communities who erect *nichitos*, location has to do with the individual's relationship to that location: their history and shared memories. The relationship to a place is defined in many ways, some uniquely related to Roman Catholic theology.

Daniel Arreola of Arizona State University prepared notes on some cultural elements unique to Tucson Mexican American barrio houses, which reveal some insights as to how the community relates to location<sup>166</sup>. Barrio houses are set back slightly from the street level, but are always enclosed with fences or walls. This is a signature of Mexican American neighbourhoods: they are boundaries. Mexican Americans do not tend to move out of their neighbourhoods as their wealth increases, but rather, improve their property. Even in barrio areas with multiple family public housing, enclosures are evident.

Classically, the Sonoran style of Mexican American home was a frontage with high walls and no windows facing the street, but with windows and doors facing inwards, towards a shared central square or large back "yard"<sup>167</sup>. In the town of Guadalupe, just outside Phoenix, Arizona, entire communities still share this Sonoran style of construction, with large common *zocalos* (town or community squares) invisible from the street.

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<sup>166</sup> Dr. Daniel Arreola, prepared for the 1997 AP Geography Institute at Macalester College, St. Paul, MN - notes prepared by F. Kunze.

<sup>167</sup> This style of inward-facing home construction seems to be somewhat similar to that in areas of Louisiana, where yard-shrines are also quite commonly found.

Further, Arreola's research showed that enclosures were also typical of the communities in Iberia, the Mediterranean, and Spanish Southwestern U.S., as well as in 19th century Mexico City. Despite the fact that other communities (such as Anglo-American homes) were enclosed prior to the advent of the automobile, Dr. Arreola found that enclosures did not disappear in the Tucson barrio, although other cultures gave up their fences. He questioned why this was so, and discovered an interesting fact related to sacred space.

Dr. Arreola found that in the 1600s the Pope was trying to convert the Aztec Indians (there were millions). To do this, they created a large, enclosed space called the "atrio" to hold thousands of Indians who were being taught and baptized around a central church in the 16th century. Many of the churches were like this. The atrio form was carried north and found its way into New Mexico [and Arizona]. Another form of evidence is that conversion is much easier when you take something familiar in the culture of the people you are converting and show it in the religion being converted to. Aztecs had courtyards imbedded into some of their functions. The Priests may have amplified and modified this for their purposes. So, there were sacred spaces in both places<sup>168</sup>.

Here we have a strong example of location as something special within this culture. The location and physical construction of the home in relation to the front and back yards, and the fencing or walling-in of the boundaries, links the family to its history as Mexican Americans. The low incidence of relocation as family wealth increases is another indicator that location is important to the community. The barrio communities have a long history in

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<sup>168</sup> Dr. Daniel Arreola, 1997 AP Geography Institute notes, Macalester College, St. Paul, MN, transcribed by F. Kunze.

these locations, and they appear to be loathe to move. "For most people, the home is a church in that it is the place where ultimate goals can be cultivated, sheltered from the intrusions of public life." (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981: 12)

Many an informant discussed the fact that they lived in the same home as their mothers, or grandmothers, and some even showed pictures of the old Sonoran style barrio homes they grew up in. Ruth Bravo indicated that her grandparents' home was torn down as a result of road improvements in the 1940's, but she lived in the "new" home which was erected on the same plot of land. The house was essentially moved backwards approximately eight feet as the road was laid in. The photos of the pre-1940's home was that of a classic Sonora style home, facing the "street", with nothing but a small door towards the viewer.

If home location and the delineation of boundaries is important to the Mexican American community, then location within the home is equally important. Dr. Gilbert Romero indicated that during his childhood in Northern New Mexico, the home itself was viewed as sacred space. As he grew up, the kitchen was a particularly important part of the house.

In Northern New Mexico, you entered a home through the kitchen. The kitchen was sacred space; that is where you were received. They would try to feed you; the food was a bonding ritual. As soon as you enter [the kitchen] you ARE in sacred space<sup>169</sup>.

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<sup>169</sup> Dr. Gilbert Romero, 20 August 1998, Los Angeles. This explains why I could tell I was trusted and accepted by my informants when I was offered a tamale, or soft drink, in their home.

Romero pointed out that interacting in the kitchen was a different dynamic than in the living room. "There was a difference between visiting in the kitchen, and in the formal living room," Romero explained. "One is visiting, one is ENTERTAINING."<sup>170</sup> This difference between locations within the house helps inform the question of why *altarcitos* are located at certain points in the home. The importance of the kitchen in Mexican American culture probably explains why the *altarcito* to San Martin Caballero is located there, for this saint is related to the well-being and sustenance of the family.

The home altar is another logical step, as it is transcribed in the living space. It focusses it [the *altarcito*] more by making it for the Deity. Therefore a home altar is for direct dealings with the Deity. This is where "Deals" were made because of the possibility of connecting more directly with your saint (whose life was probably not much different from yours)<sup>171</sup>.

Similarly, the location of an *altarcito* in the bedroom has practical and religious reasons for its placement. "That is where you wake up, you've dressed: your memory starts and ends in that place. It is part of the continuity of memory"<sup>172</sup>.

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<sup>170</sup> Dr. Gilbert Romero, 20 August 1998, Los Angeles.

<sup>171</sup> Dr. Gilbert Romero, 20 August 1998, Los Angeles.

<sup>172</sup> Dr. Gilbert Romero, 20 August 1998, Los Angeles.

Many of my informants had numerous *altarcitos*, and a few had more than one *nichito* on their property (this was more common in Missouri among the Italian Americans than in either French or Mexican American communities, but some *Tucsonenses* families had more than one *nichito* evident). This is in keeping with the notion that anywhere within one's boundary is suitable to locate a *nichito*: there is none one "proper" location for a *nichito*. Or, as Romero put it,

...there is NEVER just one "Sacred Space". Sacred geography is YOUR place, therefore one sees no *nichitos* on apartment balconies. We have been blinded to the sacrality of SPACE by the urban geography, and by the enlightenment<sup>173</sup>.

Along with location defined as a place within time and space, the Roman Catholic worldview also recognizes location as being beyond mundane time and space, in another reality. The construction of *nichitos* is also part of a practice called "religious replication", where a miniature of a particular shrine or pilgrimage site is constructed. Numerous "grottos" to Our Lady of Lourdes exist attached to churches, and many *nichitos* are also built as miniature Lourdes grottos.

...To be Catholic also meant to embrace the universality of the supernatural. It meant to participate in a worldwide community that did not recognize the limits of time and space. Houses could be miraculously moved by angels from their original site in the Middle East to various places in Italy

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<sup>173</sup> Dr. Gilbert Romero, 20 August 1998, Los Angeles.

and then reproduced in Indiana. The divine was not anchored to one place. The construction of the shrines and the distribution of miraculous holy water made a physical statement that the divine, and Catholicism in general transcended national boundaries. Reproducing shrines told the Catholics of northern Indiana that they were not living in an undefined, wild space but that they were directly connected to the spiritual centres of Catholicity. (McDannell, 1995: 160-161)

It becomes clear that *nichitos* are related both to the sense of concrete location and ancestry/history, and also beyond time and space, uniting people by stirring, or activating, feelings which connect the owner of a "Lourdes" type *nichito* to the original miraculous site in France. Replicating a pilgrimage site on one's personal location evokes a sense of the holiness, the sacredness, of the original site within the *nichito*'s owner and other viewers. It links the participants with history through direct interaction by sharing the experience, rather than building the *nichito* to "relocate" the sacredness.

Changing of space equals the changing of historical reality. One cannot pick up sacred space and move it. It is the memory of what has transpired at the sacred space that **MAKES** it sacred. Therefore when architecture and space is changed, sacrality changes. The external representation of what makes it sacred **MUST** start over all over again. [i.e., when one moves, one can relocate the religious statuary but **NOT** the *nichito* itself.] Once you've left the place you can't just have the same thing. You must start over<sup>174</sup>.

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<sup>174</sup> Dr. Gilbert Romero, 20 August 1998, Los Angeles.

The location of a *nichito* within a family's personal boundaries, what goes into the *nichito*, and the shape of the structure itself, all add to how the *nichito* affects the family and others who view it. The construction of a *nichito* embodies one message to the owners, and other messages to those who view them. If the passers-by are also Mexican Americans, then they may share the same experience when seeing the *nichito*. The construction materials, shape and content of the *nichito* express the family's veneration of the Divine, and also expresses something about the family itself.

In almost every culture, objects are chosen to represent the power of the bearer. More than any other trait, the potential energy of the person, his or her power to affect others, is the one that is symbolically expressed. (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981: 27)

Every *nichito* is in a way, a microcosm of Roman Catholic faith and practice. Very few *nichitos* were found without a rosary (around the *bulto* or at its' feet) and flowers and/or candles. Seeing the tools of worship at the *nichito* reinforces the fact that the *nichito* is a place of worship; it is a place of power and relationship between human and the Divine. One *bulto* can act as a symbol for an entire religious complex by its placement within a *nichito*, or on an *altarcito*.

Condensation and miniaturization are fundamental in making both sacred and social power accessible. A small image of the Virgin of Guadalupe carries her whole history and meaning. ...Images on the altar [and in a *nichito*] work through substitution and association; the part stands for the whole, like attracts like. The aesthetic of relationship is

dependent upon the way selected objects reveal "dimensions of similarity' in both metonymic and metaphoric ways. (K. Turner, 1999: 101)

*Nichitos* are not static, nor are they merely art exhibits with religious components. They act on memory, faith, and respect (or depending on the viewer, disrespect; some non-*nichito* using individuals expressed contempt or embarrassment when they saw such "blatant" expressions of "private" religious belief). They are related to both action and memory: memory of ancestry, history, faith, and identity. Like other personal religious actions, the importance of having an *nichito* is more bound up in the act of professing one's faith, than in the effect the professing has. "Consider, for example, leaving Christmas gifts, drinks, for the dead in Catholic cemeteries. It is not important what HAPPENS to the gift, but that the action has been made<sup>175</sup>."

So we have the action of building a *nichito* and worshipping at the *nichito*, as tied to both worldly and spiritual location; location in the barrio, in the city itself, in one's ethnic community, and as importantly, in relation to the community of faith and in space and time. Roman Catholic theology asserts that the Divine is beyond time and space, which allows the *nichito* to exist in a similar "between-ness", as it is a shorthand for the relationship between the Divine and humanity. The *nichito* is evocative of a sense of rootedness in place, space and time, and is itself rooted in memory and experience. All these things explain why a family does not move its *nichito* when it relocates, but merely its *bultos* and offerings.

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<sup>175</sup> Dr. Gilbert Romero, 20 August 1998, Los Angeles.



When a family moves from its home, it must by necessity, renegotiate the relationship to both the Divine and the family's own sense of identity.

The memory of experience with feelings, history, is maintained for [the family through its *nichito*]. When you move to a new place, you need a new way of making contact with God. It might be a new *altarcito* or *nichito*, it may be new rituals or devotions<sup>176</sup>.

#### 6.1.4: NEIGHBOURHOOD AND COMMUNITAS

Ethnically-diverse cities throughout North America have areas which are defined by their ethnic populations. Ottawa sports a "Little Italy" and a "Chinatown" (including a sizeable Vietnamese and Korean population) among other neighbourhoods. Larger cities such as Toronto, New York City, or Los Angeles, have dozens of such culturally-congruent neighbourhoods, often located next door to each other. (At least one Italian community on New York's Long Island backs onto an older Jewish community.)

*Nichitos* indicate both who is "in" and who is "not" in a community, and also act as a unifying focus within a community.

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<sup>176</sup> Dr. Gilbert Romero, 20 August 1998, Los Angeles.

Symbols of the self, for instance, might stress the unique qualities of the owner, his or her skills and superiority over others. In this case the objects serve a process of differentiation, separating the owner from the social context, emphasizing his or her individuality. Or they might represent dimensions of similarity between the owner and others: shared descent, religion, ethnic origin, or lifestyle. In this instance, the object symbolically expresses the integration of the owner with his or her social context. This dialectic pervades the human predicament. (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981: 38-39)

The fact that different *nichitos* hold different retablos and *bultos* helps unify a neighbourhood. The physical location of the *nichitos* facing the street aids in this process, for the casual bystander or neighbour up the street can see at a glance, which *bultos* are in a given *nichito*. In the case of the Tucson barrio communities, the low rate of turnaround indicates that neighbours are more likely to know each other than in newer neighbourhoods. If one isn't sure who has a Santa Lucia, or San Sevarius<sup>177</sup>, *bulto*, a quick glimpse from the other side of the fence will ascertain that fact.

Although *nichitos* are privately owned, any *bulto* is available for a neighbour to pray at and offer petitions. Mrs. Lydia Valenzuela mentioned that her mother had given her a Santa Lucia *bulto* when she was a child suffering from an eye-disorder. As a result, Mrs. Valenzuela says when a neighbour's child has an eye problem, a parent will visit and ask if they can burn a candle to petition Santa Lucia at Mrs. Valenzuela's *nichito*<sup>178</sup>.

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<sup>177</sup> A saint considered particularly efficacious in treating cancers.

<sup>178</sup> Interview, Lydia Valenzuela, August 1997, Tucson, Az.

The location of *nichitos* inside the boundary fence, as noted previously, aids in the creation of neighbourhood. Unlike Anglo-American fences, which are designed to keep a visitor out, Mexican American fencing is intended to define boundaries, not deter visitors.

(Deterrent fencing is clearly obvious, most often with a large "Beware of Dog" sign affixed.) The act of having to open the gate and approach the front door of the home engages the homeowner and the neighbour. It is virtually impossible to ask to pray at a neighbour's *bullo* without engaging the neighbour in basic pleasantries. In this simple way, neighbourhood is encouraged.

Tucson informants relate that particularly in summer when the nights are cool but the days are stifling hot, the entire family will often gather at the *nichito* and pray. Similarly, some of the larger *nichito*'s owners will put out fold-down tables and tablecloths, inviting the neighbours to visit in the cool evening air. Sometimes prayers are said, sometimes not. Refreshments are often brought pot-luck style, and the fraternity of the community is extended to include the Holy Family through the *nichito*. This echoes back to the days of the old Sonoran style homes, where neighbours would congregate in the common *zocalo* to chat and enjoy the evening's coolness.

The single most common explanation for the construction of a *nichito* given in the interviews was as a thanksgiving action. Both Italian Americans and Mexican Americans indicated they build *nichitos* as a *manda*, a thank-you for favours received. "If someone was sick a promise was made, such as 'I will make a pilgrimage, etc.'. This goes back to

God's BILATERAL agreement with Israel. If the prayer or promise was not answered -- it was the wrong time, etc.<sup>179</sup>." It is felt that, since the saints and Holy Family acted on behalf of the family, it is suitable and proper for the family to now build a place where they can offer prayers of thanks. As well, if a *nichito* is built to give thanks for one *manda*, is it not therefore, a suitable place to petition for other *mandas*?

Every *manda* granted adds status to the family and vicariously, to the neighbourhood and community of believers. A *manda* granted indicates the family which received the act or gift is a family of piety and faith; that it is worthy of having received a gift or favour from God through the saints. By inference, we may conclude that a large number of *nichitos* built as *mandas* indicate a neighbourhood of piety and worshipfulness. Having a *nichito* can be interpreted as indicating a particular religious and pious status. The inverse is clearly true in communities with numerous empty *nichitos*: these communities are viewed as criminal, and spiritually bankrupt.

The orientation of *nichitos* so that they are clearly visible from outside the family's boundaries is a clear means of acknowledging the family owning the *nichito*, and in some ways, recognizing the status of the family and their *nichito*. The interaction between the passers-by and the *nichito* also adds to the status of any given *nichito*. Josephine and her husband Cristobal are Tucson barrio residents in their 70s, with a large whitewashed *nichito* in front of their home. (fig. 5, 6) Both indicate they are church-going, and have lived in

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<sup>179</sup> Dr. Gilbert Romero, 20 August 1998, Los Angeles.

Tucson for decades (Josephine was born in Tucson, and her husband moved there from Tombstone, Arizona, in the 1940's). Josephine noted that neighbours stop and cross themselves when they go by the *nichito*, a practice not common to all *nichitos*<sup>180</sup>.

In truth, *nichitos* are so common in Josephine and Cristobal's barrio neighbourhood that one would take over an hour to walk to work if one crossed oneself at every *nichito*. It is possible neighbours cross themselves at this *nichito* because of the distinguished age of the owners, but neither husband or wife could give an answer to why this practice occurred outside their *nichito* in particular. What is clear is that this particular niche has a higher status than others in the surrounding area.

...An object can gain status simply by **attracting the attention of people who have status**. People of high status control others' attention, thus their own goals can exert more influence than that of average people. An object that is "in" among the elites will embody their status and thus attract the attention of those with less power. ...Status symbols, therefore, express a very general aspect of their owners -- their power to control others. They are in some ways a summary of all the salient characteristics of the self, a global measure of the owner's standing in that community. It should be remembered, however, that status itself is a symbol, standing for generalized power but not necessarily translatable into it. (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981: 30-31)

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<sup>180</sup> Interview with Josephine and Cristobal, 4 January 1997, 1543 El Rio, Tucson, Az.

K. Turner's Ph.D dissertation (1990) on Mexican American women's home altars notes *nichitos* (or as she sometimes calls them, *capillas*) functioning in a completely different way than the *nichitos* in Arizona and New Mexico. I am not certain whether this is a differing system of practice between Texas and Arizona/New Mexico, or whether Dr. Turner's informants only offered partial explanations on how they interact with their *nichitos*. Turner's study heavily focusses on *altarcito* use, and her discussion of *nichitos* is tertiary to her thesis.

Turner notes that "...the Icon faces the street, for it is meant to index the homeowner's status as a practicing Catholic." (K. Turner, 1990: 352) I would argue that *nichitos* are not constructed to indicate the religious affiliation of the owners at all. As well, Turner states:

Interestingly, Icons in yard shrines are rarely addressed in prayer nor are they attended much with iconic gestures. Rather, they are adorned with flowers, shells, and lights to indicate their representational status to passers-by. ...The enshrined Icon signifier continually broadcasts the presence of the signified, and thereby contextualizes the house and its inhabitants within the greater family of the Church, Christ, Mary, and the saints. The outdoor Icon is an index of membership in this greater sacred kinship structure. (K. Turner, 1990: 357)

Once again, my interviews with Mexican Americans in Arizona, as well as discussion with Italian Americans and French Canadians, indicate that this is not the case. The presence of a *nichito* may indicate to outsiders that the house is a member of that "greater family" Turner mentions, but I have documented numerous examples of family and neighbours

praying at *nichitos*, crossing themselves while passing a *nichito* such as that owned by Cristobel and Josephine, and leaving offerings at *nichitos* (such as coins, rosaries, etc.).

The history of Italian Americans in New York City forming a strong bond with the Virgin of Mt. Carmel is one example of popular religion creating *communitas* and a sense of neighbourhood. A number of East Harlem residents from Salerno, Italy, founded a mutual aid society named after the Madonna in 1881. These societies "allowed *paesani* to get together and enjoy each other's company; they also encouraged and enabled the immigrants to remember and preserve traditional customs in the new world", (Orsi, 1985: 51) such as burial traditions.

The first celebration, or *festa*, to the Virgin of Mt. Carmel was organized by the members of this society a year later. As Italian Americans moved into a given block of tenements, they would transform the backyard of the building into the locus of religious celebrations. Orsi describes the early *festas* to the Virgin of Mt. Carmel thusly:

During the earliest years, the *festa* was intimate and intense and immensely Neapolitan, and there is no indication of any ecclesiastical supervision; it was a popular, lay-organized celebration - as these *feste* usually were, to the consternation of both the American and Italian Catholic clergy. The first celebrations were quite simple. The immigrants knelt in someone's apartment or behind a tenement, in a courtyard...before a small printed picture of the Madonna that had been sent for from Polla. They said the rosary, prayed the Magnificat, and then sat down to a huge meal together. (Orsi, 1985: 52)

Clearly, early Italian American devotion to the Virgin of Mt. Carmel not only helped establish that manifestation of the Virgin in the American Catholic landscape, but it also established a strong sense of Italian American community through shared faith and ritual. Interestingly enough, by 1884 the New York Archdiocese was to refer to this manifestation of folk religion as "the problem" for the next thirty years, (Orsi, 1985: 53) and eventually appropriated the *festas* and rituals to Mt. Carmel, as their own.

Arguably, the cycle of the Madonna of 115th Street *festa* and its appropriation by differing segments of the community (including the Institutional Church) are typical of the forming and dissolution processes of *communitas*<sup>181</sup>, as outlined by Victor and Edith Turner.

There may be a continuous cycle of *communitas*/structure/*communitas*, etc. For example, religious vision becomes sect, then church, then a prop for a dominant political system, until *communitas* resurges once more from the liminal spaces. These processes can coexist and modify one another continuously over time in the same ritual field. (V. and E. Turner, 1978: 252)

The New York City example is of one particular religious icon becoming a rallying point within a neighbourhood and thusly creating more than just a local identity or community, but rather, a greater *communitas*. Veneration of the Madonna of Mt. Carmel spread

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<sup>181</sup> Here, *communitas* is understood to be a community of people created out of individuals from differing backgrounds, unified by belief.



throughout Italian American communities in greater New York City and beyond, to the extent that Mt. Carmel is now a common manifestation of the Virgin Mary in most North American Italian expatriate communities. As the Virgin of Guadalupe functions to Mexicans and Mexican Americans, so the Madonna of Mt. Carmel functions in Italian American (and Canadian) neighbourhoods; they both create a sense of *communitas* as well as community.

[*Communitas* is defined as a] relational quality of full unmediated communication, even communion, between definite and determinate identities, which arises spontaneously in all kinds of groups, situations, and circumstances. It is a liminal phenomenon which combines the qualities of lowliness, sacredness, homogeneity, and comradeship. The distinction between structure and *communitas* is not the same as that between secular and sacred; *communitas* is an essential and generic human bond. *Communitas* is a fact of everyone's experience, yet it has almost never been regarded as a reputable or coherent object of study by social scientists. (V. and E. Turner, 1978: 250-251)

In this manner, we can argue that the popular religious practice of creating *nichitos*, an external expression of faith within a culturally or ethnically congruous neighbourhood, reinforces membership within the group, the neighbourhood, the community of faith, and reinforces a sense of *communitas*. In French Canadian practice, the two most popular variants of the Virgin Mary found in *nichitos* are the Immaculate Conception and Our Lady of Lourdes. It is quite probable that prior to Québec's "Quiet Revolution" in the 1960's, the

construction and maintenance of a Lourdes or Immaculate Conception *nichito* functioned in a similar fashion.

#### 6.1.5: ASSIMILATION AND ACCULTURATION

Tucson was a fairly static, smallish city until the last half of the 1990's. Since then, the growth rate of the city and environs has been rapid, with one report rating it as one of the five fastest growing cities in the United States<sup>182</sup>. As with other cities with increasing population bases, the influx of people with different faiths and economic levels has an effect on the public face of ethnic and religious communities such as the Mexican Americans in Tucson.

Practically, the presence of non-Catholics from other ethnic communities in the city has started a shift in the public face of *religiosidad popolare*. Families which might have once had a *nichito* in the front yard have coped in varying ways. Most commonly, *nichitos* are either abandoned, moved to the back yard (where they are no longer a public statement of religiosity), or replaced by a ceramic wall-plaque (*edicole*).

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<sup>182</sup> B. Rabinovitch, email, Dec. 2000.

#### 6.1.5.1: RELOCATING AND/OR REPLACING *NICHITOS*

Not every Catholic maintains a *nichito* or *altarcito*. For some, this level of public display of belief is uncomfortable as it singles them out in their neighbourhood as "other". For others, they have adopted a more Protestant view of religiosity, and are not comfortable with what others might view as their display of idolatry. In any case, as ethnic Roman Catholic communities such as Tucson's Mexican Americans, Saint Louis' Italian Americans, or Québec's French Canadians find their communities less geographically discreet, many of them change their patterns of *nichito* use and display.

The first line of response to an increase in non-community members moving into one of these areas seems to be the relocation of the *nichito* from the front yard to the back yard. As long as the viewers are identified as members of the same community, *nichitos* will remain despite the disdain of some insiders. Dr. Sciorra mentions that Italian Americans in New York City do not now necessarily appreciate the presence of a *nichito* in their neighbourhood.

...This vernacular architecture [is]...not universally accepted within the Italian community. Some *paesani* disparagingly refer to neighbours' statues as "Mary on a Half Shell" -- an allusion to the ubiquitous niches in which they are housed. Denial of the shrines' popularity is not uncommon for Italian Americans in the suburbs, where the stigma of gauche working-class culture is an ever-present threat. Denial of the shrines' popularity is not uncommon for Italian Americans in the suburbs, where the stigma of gauche working-class culture is an ever-present threat. (Sciorra, 1998: 58)

Saint Louis's Hill district was a prime location for back-yard *nichitos* which could be documented due to the existence of back alleys, something now uncommon in most Canadian cities. Here armies of Mary *bultos* yard-statues and *nichitos* were erected to face the back of the owner's house (most often the kitchen). (fig. 134, 135) By the positioning of the *bultos* and/or *nichito* itself, it was clear that the family continued to use the *nichito* as a sacred space, but the community at large was no longer invited to participate. French Canadians also relocate their *nichitos*, as this photo from Gloucester, Ont. shows (fig. 157). It was harder to document this trend as Ottawa-area back yard fences are quite high. As one has no indicator as to which yard has a *nichito* and which does not, one would have to trespass in order to obtain photos of back-yard *nichitos*.

A second form of less-public statement of faith practiced in more ethnically-diverse neighbourhoods, is the placement of *edicoles*. These are either a casting of a saint or member of the Holy Family in a small shelf which is mounted on the outside wall of the home (fig. 112), or they are a collection of ceramic tiles with a religious figure on them, arranged to create a mosaic (fig. 156). Figure 156 features an empty *nichito* to the viewer's right, and a less-noticeable *edicole* above the doorbell to the home's main entrance.

Some of this trend towards removing the *nichito* to a less-public location has to do with a sense of propriety as a community becomes less ethnically homogeneous. One does not want to light candles so that one becomes a side-show form of entertainment, as it were.

*nichitos* exist in an environment where they are religiously "proper", not where they would be improper (a curiosity). In part, the issue is one of religious modesty: if you cannot do it publicly you should not do it in public.

The public "display" of one's religiosity gets curtailed in part due to the Protestant sensibilities of one's new neighbours. In the Mediterranean basin we see people drying their underwear in public view, on the shutters, while in North America one generally does this on lines in the back yard (the private area). Therefore that which is seen to be "embarrassing" when seen by other eyes is moved into a private space.

In an ethnically-mixed area, the community is seen less as a Roman Catholic one, and so there is more private practice of ritual and prayer to reaffirm one's identity. If the area is mixed, one's sacred space is restricted. Therefore religion moves into the home, or into the Church. When changing demographics make the individual feel that the erection and maintenance of a *nichito* is somehow improper on her/his own private property within the public view, the locus of private prayer moves to the edifice of the Church itself. William Bainbridge discusses the effects of different ethnic populations in cities thusly:

...if ethnic groups are concentrated in different geographic parts of the community, their different needs may be met by several neighborhood churches of a single denomination, each with a distinctive style. This has certainly often been the case with Catholicism in the United States, where separate Irish and Italian congregations exist in different neighborhoods of the same city. If a society is stratified by ethnicity, then separating the population into different denominations by

social class simultaneously separates them by ethnicity<sup>183</sup>.  
(Bainbridge, 1995: 1-18)

In some communities, the frequency of *nichitos* and other related religious public symbols such as *cruces* has dropped dramatically since the 1960's due to Vatican II, which changed the language of liturgy into the local vernacular, and stripped many of the old-style "high church" religious decorations and devotions, such as stations of the cross inside the church. As a result, many families which had maintained *nichitos* on their land have taken them down as antiquated and no longer sanctioned by the Institution. (In some cases, informants indicate that "only old folks" maintain *nichitos*.)

In Québec, a second issue can also be highlighted for the drop in public displays of popular devotion: the Quiet Revolution. This was a cultural upheaval which occurred in the province of Québec during the 1960's, a period of extreme political turmoil as well. Revolutionary authors challenged the historical control of the organized Church on parishioners for things other than religious concerns, including who parishioners should vote for during elections.

One of the polemics of the Quiet Revolution was to exhort the population of Québec to 'move beyond' the stewardship of the Church and into decisions dictated by personal choice. External symbols of faith fell into disuse, with many old family *bultos* showing up in second

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<sup>183</sup> As this text was sent electronically, no page references are available.

hand stores around the province, as well as much of the statuary and 'art' stripped from the interior of old churches. Some families maintain familial *nichitos* out of a sense of historicity, but not necessarily as a symbol of faith. This change in sensibility towards *nichitos* and *cruces* is typified by the fact that Jean Simard's book refers to "*un patrimoine méprisé*" referring to such religious items as *capillitas* and *nichitos*, as part of the patrimony of the province, rather than as religious artifacts per se. Inside the home, however, is another matter entirely; many families which would never dream of maintaining a *nichito* on their lawn still have *altarcitos* in the home, and/or crucifixes on interior walls of the home. It is not so much a matter of the faith dissolving, as the trappings disappearing from public view.

#### 6.1.5.2: EMPTY *NICHITOS*

As much of the city of South Tucson is quite poor, there are probably as many photos from this area of empty *nichitos* (fig. 159) as active *nichitos*. As noted in the earlier discussion of *narcosantos* and prayers to Most Holy Death, most Mexican Americans are too pious to pray to members of the Holy Family to achieve illegal goals. Hence the high percentage of empty *nichitos* in South Tucson, staring accusatorily at the street like an army of empty eye sockets.

Areas with a high percentage of empty *nichitos* often indicate financial status rather than ethnic diversity, as most Mexican Americans in mixed geographic areas of Tucson replace their *nichitos* with *edicolas* or other religious items such as a small, inobtrusive lawn statue among the other lawn furniture. As in figure 156, some families neglect to remove the *nichito* structure. Instead, they are returned to secular functions such as holding potted plants.

## 6.2: HEGEMONY AND CONTROL: OFFICIAL CHURCH CHURCH COMMENTARY ON *NICHITOS*

Official commentary from the Roman Catholic Church is surprisingly quiet on the practice of building and maintaining *nichitos* and *altarcitos*. As long as the practice of *nichito*-building and use remains at the most local and personal level, it appears the institutional church pays it little note. The practice is perceived to be part of a larger, sanctioned complex referred to as "devotional piety". Bishop Manuel Moreno indicated that the use of *altarcitos* and *nichitos* is in keeping with the Church's approval of members practicing devotional piety. "Private devotion is encouraged [and *nichitos* are private devotions] by the Church. These are encouraged insofar as the use of images and paintings goes. Therefore the locale of personal devotion has been moved from inside the house to outside<sup>184</sup>."

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<sup>184</sup> Interview with Bishop Manuel Moreno, Tucson Diocese, 24 February 1998.



The main fear with the practice of *nichitos* and *altarcitos* as places of personal devotion appears to be that of idolatry, or superstition. Bishop Moreno explained it thusly, when asked if *nichitos* border on superstition: "Sometimes people get away from what they believe and create other objects of devotion [e.g. Malverde, or the Indian head statue]<sup>185</sup>." Reverend Marcos Velasquez of Saint Augustine Cathedral in Tucson, was less charitable about the topic when discussing the practice of burning printed pillar candles to particular saints in *nichitos*.

Candles are lighted to externalize our prayers, our pleas before God. The candles say, 'Lord, let my prayer always be burning before you.' There is no power in the candle itself to make things happen or prevent them from happening. The church discourages superstition and voodoo surrounding candles, but there is a fine line between culture and the teachings of the church. We can't always get into the daily lives of our parishioners to make sure they do things from the heart, from the spirit<sup>186</sup>.

Gilbert Romero states the problem quite succinctly, in that the Institutional Roman Catholic Church is "...not able to differentiate between the absolute and the relative. If something is not part of the Official Church, therefore it is suspect or 'not existent'<sup>187</sup>."

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<sup>185</sup> Interview with Bishop Manuel Moreno, Tucson Diocese, 24 February 1998.

<sup>186</sup> Rev. Marcos Velasquez, associate pastor, St. Augustine Cathedral, Tucson, Az., quoted in Arizona Daily Star, Sunday, November 24, 1991, pp. E-1 and E-7.

<sup>187</sup> Dr. Gilbert Romero, 20 Aug 1998, Los Angeles.

*Nichitos* are utterly unregulated by the Institutional Church. They are built according to the tastes and religious sensibilities of individual parishioners, without any input from the local Church authorities. They are places where the individual Roman Catholic prays, confides, berates or bares his/her soul. *Nichitos* function without an intermediary; they are one location where the priest, or lay-chaplain, are unnecessary. Only as long as one assumes the individual worshipper knows the "rules" for prayer, veneration, and proper thought can one accept this form of religious expression. When the possibility of drifting into pagan, or idolatrous, practice occurs, then *nichito* usage can be viewed as a threat to the hegemony of the Institutional Church.

The church sets the formula for prayer and the worshipper must follow those rules exactly. Audible or inaudible, how one worships when in the edifice of a Church is structured, prescribed, and controlled. The advantage and disadvantage of prayer at a *nichito* or *altarcito* is the very fact that this is a location where the individual can pray by his or her own rules. When the community of worshippers goes beyond what is acceptable to the institution of the Roman Catholic Church, then the institution must step in to maintain its control.

As mentioned earlier, the Italian American experience with the hegemony of the Roman Catholic (official) church is but one example of the institution needing to address a "problem" when the populace started to venerate the Virgin of Mt. Carmel with a *festa* and local devotions in New York City. By 1884, the Pallotine fathers were invited to New

York City to help minister to the Italian American community. The first church to the Virgin of Mt. Carmel was completed the same year, with a church-based society replacing the mutual aid society as sponsor of the *festa*. (Orsi, 1985: 53)

...The erection of the church and the formation of the society mark an official change in the public life of the devotion, which was now officially associated with a church. The members of the society were all male, as was customary with such organizations. For the entire history of the devotion, this celebration of a woman, in which women were the central participants, was presided over by a public male authority. (Orsi, 1985: 53)

Ultimately, short-term balance was reached between the institution of the Roman Catholic Church, the Mt. Carmel Society, and the populace of Italian Americans. Three different but related celebrations existed, serving the three different groups: the Church operated the day of celebration to Mt. Carmel in the church on 115th Street, distributing scapulars, receiving candles, and collecting offerings to the Madonna. The Society ran a *festa* in the streets, where it sold concession rights to the street vendors. "The third *festa* was the celebration of the popular devotion to the Madonna, which existed and developed apart from the struggle between the clergy and the society, the church and the street, and which expressed itself in both the church and the streets". (Orsi, 1985: 59) A war between Church and Mt. Carmel society erupted over control of the *festa*, with the Church wresting control of the street *festa* away from the Society in the late 1930s.

The supremacy of the Virgin of Mt. Carmel in New York's Roman Catholic worship was sealed by Pope Leo XIII to resolve an ethnic conflict throughout the American Roman Catholic church. New York's old Roman Catholic community was comprised primarily of German and Irish immigrants, and a crisis arose over the differing religious practices. An 1880 international conference urged the organization of American Catholicism along multiethnic and multilingual lines, (Orsi, 1985: 62) leading to a strong statement from the Vatican denouncing the proposed dividing up of the American Roman Catholic community. This viewpoint certainly ran contrary to the concept of one church, universal and catholic.

Ultimately, the Pope stepped into the fray to define and unify or divide Roman Catholics in the United States by crowning the Virgin of Mt. Carmel - the placement of a crown atop the image of the Madonna, thereby approving the devotion to this particular aspect of the Virgin. By "crowning" the Madonna of Mt. Carmel (the Madonna of 115th Saint), Pope Leo and his advisors affirmed a clearly non-American devotion which was supernatural in its impulse<sup>188</sup>. This move asserted the will of the institution by utilizing popular religion as a tool to silence the debate. "He was asserting the triumph of Marian Catholicism over modernism and he was sealing the presence of a Rome-centered Catholicism in the United States." (Orsi, 1985: 63)

Originally a local practice by an immigrant community, the veneration of the Madonna of Mt. Carmel was gradually subsumed by the institutional Roman Catholic Church in order to

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<sup>188</sup> See the discussion in Orsi, 1985.

serve its need. Folk practice was ultimately turned into an institutionally-sanctioned complex of worship. From a peculiar practice which was treated with disdain by some clergy, the veneration of the Madonna of Mt. Carmel was transformed into a worship which actually strengthened the position of the institutional Church in the United States. Gone were the days when one author decried the fiestas and other forms of devotional piety as:

"the peculiar kind of spiritual condition", of the Italian immigrants, fed on pilgrimages, shrines, holy cards, and "devotions" but lacking any understanding of "the greath truths of religion"<sup>189</sup>.

*Nichitos* allow individuals some leeway in how they express their daily devotions. Like *altarcitos* and other related practices, *nichitos* fall under the theological umbrella of *sacramentales*. *Sacramentales* create another timeless link between the worshipper and the ineffable Divine, linking both throughout time via the tool of sacramentals.

Catholic sacramental theology contends that there are certain ritual gestures, established by Christ himself, that sanctify people and their religious communities. Through "words and objects", these "sacraments" are ways of worshipping God and instructing the faithful. ...The sacraments required visible, sensual signs in order to be effective. ...Eventually, making the sign of the cross with holy water, praying with a rosary, giving alms, eating food blessed for holiday celebration, or even having a car blessed, all became sacramentals. (McDannell, 1995: 19)

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<sup>189</sup> Rev. Bernard Lynch in The Catholic World, 1888, quoted in Orsi, 1985, p. 55.

Sacramentals are part of the backbone of *nichito*-use. Many *nichitos* and/or *altarcitos* have a phial of holy water or other blessed object, and as noted before, rosaries are almost ubiquitous in *nichitos* of all Catholic cultures. The use of *sacramentales* at a *nichito* or *altarcito* gives the lay person more control over his/her expression of religiosity than could ever be had under the watchful eye of a parish priest. *Sacramentales* give the parishioner access to the sacred without mediation.

Sacramentals also channel grace through gestures and objects but not to the same extent as the sacraments. ...According to Catholic thinkers and teachers, sacramentals parallel more complicated, church-bound rites. While a priest might be needed initially to make the sacramental valid, the point of the sacramental is to allow non-ordained men and women to integrate the sacred into their daily lives. Lay people become "priests" and decide when and where the sacramentals will be employed. (McDannell, 1995: 19-20)

Control of personal devotions by the institutional Church ends when a *sacramentale* is "made valid". The use of the *sacramentale* may be carefully outlined, but whether or not the individual adheres to those rules is beyond the sphere of the institution's control. Once *sacramentales* move from the Church to the home, from the altar to the *altarcito*, and from the saint's niche to a *nichito*, the locus of control shifts from the institution of the Roman Catholic church, to the home and neighbourhood of the parishioner. Quasi-endorsed by the institutional religion, this is what is called "*religiosidad popolare*" in Spanish, or "popular religion". It is a combination of classical Catholic theology and pre-Christian sensibilities, and changes from culture to culture.

### 6.2.1.: *RELIGIOSIDAD POPULARE*

*Religiosidad popolare*, also called "*religion casera*"<sup>190</sup>, is the expression of Roman Catholic practice with its own distinctive and personal flavour. For many centuries, the Institutional Roman Catholic hierarchy worked to obliterate *religiosidad popolare* as a superstitious mix of church-practice and old beliefs. The keeping of small altars, shrines, and holy items such as *sacramentales*, all fall within the description of "*religiosidad popolare*". In 1979 the third General Conference of Latino bishops was held in Puebla, Mexico, with a final document issued of over 300 pages (in English translation). Dealing with numerous different aspects of the relationship of the Roman Catholic church with Latino cultures, less than three pages of text dealt with popular religion<sup>191</sup>. Of those three pages, most of the commentary was on the use of *religiosidad popolare* as an evangelizing tool<sup>192</sup>.

*Religiosidad popolare* is a very old practice, dating back hundreds of years in the Mexican American communities of the U.S. Southwest.

Grandparents, especially grandmothers or abuelitas, usually taught the faith in the home. Religion Casera or Home Religion played an important part in their lives because for

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<sup>190</sup> "Home religion".

<sup>191</sup> The salient excerpts are contained in Appendix 1.

<sup>192</sup> See Appendix 1 for textual comments regarding *religiosidad popolare*.

centuries families were isolated from large urban religious centers with priests. Many people were isolated even more after 1848 when Mexico lost its lands that now comprise the Southwestern states of the United States<sup>193</sup>.

Christian popular religion features certain characteristics which may or may not be present in any given ethnic community. In Mexican American practice, *religiosidad popolare* features the following characteristics, typical of popular religion in general. I have abbreviated these characteristics, which are drawn from the entry on "Popular Christian Religiosity" in the Encyclopedia of Religion. (Galilea 1987: 440-442) Not all characteristics are listed below.

1) AUTONOMY: *religiosidad popolare* remains rooted in Catholicism, but emphasizes values and practices that do not always coincide with official Christianity.

2) EMPHASIS ON DEVOTIONS AND RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS AS MEDIATIONS TO GOD: here symbols which speak directly to the heart of the worshipper are utilized, such as the presence of God in nature, in images, in places, and in material things related to religion, such as candles and holy water (*sacramentales*).

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<sup>193</sup> Dr. Santos Vega, March, 2000, Phoenix, Az.



3) **GOD IS PRESENT IN EVERY DAY LIFE:** God is perceived as able and willing to intervene continuously in the lives of His children; therefore mediations to reach God, such as saints, certain feasts, particular places, and prayer, have great importance.

4) **COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE:** *religiosidad popolare* is often expressed in processions, pilgrimages, and mass celebrations.

5) **PILGRIMAGE:** processions and pilgrimages to shrines and holy places embody a special grace of God that for many worshippers may be the climax of their yearly religious experience.

6) **RELIGIOUS VALUE GIVEN TO THE WEAK:** The very poor, the sick, the elderly, and children are the locus of God's presence; so *religiosidad popolare* is based on solidarity and mercy among the poor as much as on ritual expression.

*Religiosidad popolare* is most often a manifestation of daily devotions by individual Roman Catholics, coupled with local, ethnic, and/or familial customs. Some originally-pagan practices have been incorporated into *religiosidad popolare*, but these vestigial rituals have survived primarily because the actions have been given revised, Christian meanings.

*Religiosidad popolare* incorporates *nichitos*, *nichos* and *altarcitos*, plus other actions and rituals such as *descansos*, *altares* (*offrenda*) for the Day of the Dead, and the use of

*milagros* (ex-votos). In all cases, theological explanations have been given for these folk practices.

This is why Mexicans and Mexican-Americans celebrate the "Day of the Dead". They believe that although their ancestors have passed away, they continue to live on, albeit in a different form and in a different place. There is a reason-based faith for these beliefs: First of all, when Moses and Elijah appeared with Christ on the mountain, Peter, overwhelmed, said something like 'That is all good, Lord, build something here or do some marker or what?' This experience, when Christ was transfigured, showed that people (Moses and Elijah) that had passed away from the Earth continued to live in another dimension<sup>194</sup>.

"Devotional piety (*religiosidad popular*) is very rich in symbols: the symbols are very rich and can be reinterpreted over and over", says Gilbert Romero. He indicates that practices such as keeping a *nichito* or *altarcito*, help express the personal devotion which informs the worshipper's experience of the Divine. He feels the experience of scriptural interpretation through devotional piety allows the worshipper to experience the meaning and intention of scripture directly and personally<sup>195</sup>.

*Religiosidad popular* can be compared simply to the structure and workings of the institutional Roman Catholic church. The 'religion of the home' is practiced and led by a layperson, often an elder in the home (*abuelita*, father or grandfather). This contrasts to the

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<sup>194</sup> Dr. Santos Vega, March, 2000, Phoenix, Az.

<sup>195</sup> Interview with Dr. Gilbert Romero, PhD, Diocesan priest, Los Angeles, 20 August 1998.

church institution, where a priest celebrates the Mass, hears confession, and performs rite of passage rituals such as baptisms, weddings, etc. *Religiosidad popolare* is intensely personal to the individual and the family in which it is practiced; Church religion is sanctioned by, and held at, the church, and is regulated by that institution. *Religiosidad popolare* is a complex of informal, fluid acts encompassing personal rituals and private prayer, while the institutional Roman Catholic Church offers faith in a formal and regulated fashion.

Finally, '*religion casera*' is the faith of the community. A community can sponsor a fiesta to honour a particular saint or of the Virgin, or it can be as informal as sitting during a warm summer night in front of a *nichito* discussing the day's travails. Political action is often planned during an evening honouring a religious person, and passionate prayers or thanks are offered to God at a *nichito* or *altarcito*. *Religiosidad popolare* is an expression of the community and is experienced within the community. Institutional church action is regulated by the Church's hierarchy, and is most often performed within the confines of the church edifice. Theoretically, a practicing Roman Catholic should attend Mass weekly; in practice, most Mexican Americans attend Mass irregularly, but pray daily at their *altarcito* or *nichito* as part of their expression of *religiosidad popolare*.

Traditional and "popular" religiosity and spirituality remains very strong in the Tucson area among Mexican Americans, as evidenced by home shrines dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe and Saint Therese, quinceneras for teen girls, Las

Posadas this time of year, and Our Lady of Guadalupe images everywhere, from tatoos to car window decals<sup>196</sup>!

The number one focus of *religiosidad popolare* appears to be the Virgin Mary, often as the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexican American devotion, the Madonna of Mt. Carmel in Italian American worship, and Our Lady of Lourdes or Immaculate Conception, among French Canadians. In Mexico, Guadalupe is viewed as particularly close to the hearts of the people for two reasons: this manifestation of the Virgin is a *mestiza*, or mixed-blood figure (a dark-skinned woman), and she is viewed as a champion of the oppressed. Popular devotion to Mary includes *nichitos* and *altarcitos* devoted to her, praying the Rosary, and asking her to intercede with her son on behalf of the petitioner.

...The history of this devotion especially emphasizes two intimately related aspects. First of all, Mary of Guadalupe has always been perceived by the people as a tender mother, always compassionate, accepting, supportive, and forgiving. And secondly, she is seen as protector, identified with her people but most especially with the weakest and most in need. She procures justice for the oppressed and takes up their cause. (Espin, 1997: 76-77)

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<sup>196</sup> Email from Fred Allison, Roman Catholic Diocese of Tucson 19 Dec 2000. A *quinceneras* is a church-type ritual reminiscent of "sweet 16's" in Anglo society. Posadas are re-enactments of the efforts of Mary and Joseph to find a safe place for the birth of Jesus. Children usually portray the main characters of the *posada*, which travels from home to home during the Christmas season.

The keeping of an *altarcito* "brings a sense of presence of Transcendence in the home.

These symbols make real to the people a connection with the Divine<sup>197</sup>." Atop a clean white lace or linen cloth *bultos* may be arranged, along with a *retablo*, candles, and/or flowers.

Candles, whether printed pillars, votives, or simple dime-store candles, represent light and therefore, knowledge within the practice of *religiosidad popolare*<sup>198</sup>. here or at the *nichito*, silent or spoken prayer may be offered as *manda*, entreaty, or assertion of faith. The use of the *nichito* or *altarcito* links in a tangible, physical way the human, live family to the members of the eternal family in heaven.

Many of the day-to-day activities of the Spanish speaking have a religious basis. The Catholic faithful do not pray to the statues or the pictures of saints but to the saints in Heaven represented by the pictures or statues. This prayer practice among family is thus extended in time, space and relationship, The altar prayer practice involved friends and relatives at home and through spiritual projection, reached out to Heaven<sup>199</sup>.

The argument comes back to hegemony once again: as long as the devotions at a *nichito* or *altarcito* are within the acceptable framework of the institution of the Roman Catholic Church, they are permitted. When *religiosidad popolare* strays from "proper" worship to

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<sup>197</sup> Dr. Gilbert Romero, 20 August 1998, Los Angeles.

<sup>198</sup> Dr. Gilbert Romero, 20 August 1998, Los Angeles.

<sup>199</sup> Dr. Santos Vega, March, 2000, Phoenix, Az.

"idolatry" or "superstition", then it must be controlled by the Institution itself. Most common is the accusation that prayer at a *bulto* or *retablo*, is idolatry.

This is an important point: People wrongfully get accused through misunderstanding and ignorance of such practices for seemingly to pray to pictures of saints. In actuality, the picture served only as a reminder and prayer was meant for the saint in heaven. The deceased family members were believed yet alive but living in heaven, another dimension of creation. Many of these people were connected to the world of God, which included saints. When we asked [them] to comment on their thoughts about the saints they had, one of the families simply replied that they were like their extended family. Thus, their extended family included those who had gone forth into the next world<sup>200</sup>.

The Greek Orthodox church, another institution with *nichito* practice (*eikonostasio*), differs theologically with the Roman Catholic church on the use of statuary and/or iconography for worship. For the Greek church, there is a concept of divine power which is somehow imbued into a *bulto* or *retablo*, making the use of these items intrinsic to both popular, and institutional, forms of worship.

...The Greek Church regarded imagery of divinity and the saints as being itself somehow holy, and Saint John of Damascus (c. 675 - 749) had stated that "The saints were filled by the Spirit of God. And after their death this divine power remains in their souls and is also communicated to their body, their name and their image." The official Roman view was essentially different, namely that the images are not in themselves holy, so that any veneration before an image of

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<sup>200</sup> Dr. Santos Vega, March, 2000, Phoenix, Az.

Christ is in reality a veneration of Christ not of the image: the veneration "referred to the prototype". (Sinding-Larsen, 1984: 103)

In comparison, the Roman Catholic church has been careful to indicate there is nothing supernatural in the essence of the imagery itself. The Council of Trent in the 16th century dealt with the veneration of the Divine through the use of sacred imagery, as the use of images to substitute for the presence of the Divine itself.

One may have images of Christ, the Virgin Mother of God and the other saints in churches ...one may offer them due honour and veneration, not because of belief that there is any holiness in the images, or any virtue, because of which they should be venerated; nor that one may ask the images for something or have trust in them...but because the honour shown upon the images refers back to those who are depicted therein ('honos, qui eis exhibetur, refertur ad prototypa, quae illae [imagines] repraesentant'); so that if we kiss an image or bare our head before it or kneel down before it, it is Christ that we adore, and the saints that we venerate<sup>201</sup>.

here we see the difficulty of regulating *religiosidad popolare*. As the reverend at Saint Augustine's Cathedral in Tucson mentioned, it is indeed difficult for the institution to be in the homes and hearts of its parishioners, confirming exactly their intent when they pray using a *bulto* or *retablo*. The theological difference between *idolatria* and *latria* became important to clarify. *Latria* denotes a gesture of homage directed to Christ or the cross

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<sup>201</sup> Council of Trent, quoted in Sinding-Larsen, 1984, p. 103.

through a representation of Christ or the cross, whereas *idolatria* denotes worship of the thing itself.

...We must say that no reverence is shown to Christ's image, as a thing -- for instance, carved or painted wood: because reverence is not due save to a rational creature. It follows therefore that reverence should be shown to it, in so far only as it is an image. Consequently the same reverence should be shown to Christ's image as to Christ Himself. Since, therefore, Christ is adored with the adoration of *latría*, it follows that His image should be adored with the adoration of *latría*<sup>202</sup>.

This explains why many Christians view the practice of *altarcitos*, or *nichitos*, as idolatry. The difference between worshipping statues of stone or wood, and using them to invoke passionate feelings of memory and faith in the parishioner, is a fine theological tightrope. Most practitioners of *religiosidad popular* would be horrified at the accusation that their use of a *bulto* or *retablo* in their *nichito* was anything but a form of *sacramentale*. Their use of *sacramentales* symbolises an act of pious faith to them.

The name for rosaries placed in a car, religious statues, medals, etc. are called "*Sacramentales*" or Sacramentals. These are used in "popular religion" or "home religion". It is a matter of faith and not superstition. ...Just think of my digital symbols of 1s and zeros that are being used now by me [in writing this email] and transformed into letters that make up words. It is my thoughts, invisible but made visible and

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<sup>202</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 3. Q 25, Art. 3, quoted in Camille, 1989, pp. 206-7.



concrete in words. So it is with a sacramental as a religious picture that is looked at and it reminds a person of a friend, in this case a saint, Our Lady, and then this person can invoke help from the saint for the saint to pray to God on their behalf<sup>203</sup>.

The tools of *religiosidad popolare* hold a particular position of privilege in relation to the rest of Roman Catholic ritual; they are a complex of ritual items and actions practiced when the layperson decides they are needed. Unlike most rituals of the institutional Roman Catholic church, prayer at a *nichito* or *altarcito* is controlled by the worshipper, not by the hierarchy. Each unscripted prayer, each unstructured petition, each request from the heart, becomes part of a complex group of ritual actions defined as sacrament.

Sacrament may be defined as a ritual that enacts, focuses, and concentrates the distinctive beliefs, attitudes, and actions of any religious tradition. While any ritual may perform this function to some degree, it will usually be possible to discriminate within the ritual complex of a tradition as a whole that ritual (or group of rituals) that functions as a paradigm for other ritual action and so may be said to have a privileged and normative relationship to the articulated system as a whole. Usually these sacraments will be found within the prescribed corporate ritual or liturgy. (Jennings, Jr., 1987: 504)

Clearly then, the practice of *religiosidad popolare* allows the layperson some sense of control over his/her daily life. Prayer, petition, use of holy water, and the manipulation of

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<sup>203</sup> Email - Dr. Santos Vega, Wed. 27 October, 1999.

*bultos*, *retablos*, and personal items, all combine to create a microcosm of the universe at the *nichito* or *altarcito*. The layperson has control of the home spiritual realm through worship within the house, compared to the sense of the church having control of worship when in its sanctified edifice. The father can pray for a good job, or justice in a court case; the mother can pray for a child to be obedient, safe passage for travelling members of the family, and all can pray for health and prosperity in the family. The *altarcito*, or *nichito*, becomes the locus of personal prayer. Like the uniting of the ceramic painted Indian head with the photo of a deceased brother in a *nichito*, deceased family members can be united through *religiosidad popular*, with both their living members, and the celestial family of God and the saints.

Women place the photographs of those they pray for on the altar, and portraits of deceased relatives are frequently positioned high on walls to indicate the status of ancestors. Dead children can be remembered at the altar and thus remain a part of the family. (McDannell, 1995: 35)

Not only does the *altarcito* or *nichito* allow for the unification of the human family with the Divine Family; it also allows for the control of those family members. Photos of a family member can be removed, or covered up; *bultos* can be turned away from the owner's view. Displeasure can be shown via the *nichito* in the same way that inclusion can be indicated.

If photographs can be placed next to saints' statues, they can also be removed. Mothers can plead for the conformity and submission of their children as well as their protection. Authority can be asserted through not "remembering" people in prayers, just as dissatisfaction with a saint may motivate turning his or her statue to the wall. A home shrine is

connected to the patterns of relationships in the lives of family members, and those bonds can both nurture and constrain. (McDannell, 1995: 35)

Perhaps it behooves the Roman Catholic official church hierarchy to continue to ignore the phenomenon of *religiosidad popular*. Within the vague definition of devotional piety, the institution allows its community a great deal of personal choice as to how and when they pray, and for what reasons. When one defines a ritual practice, one must then patrol the practice, assuring it is done "correctly". *Religiosidad popular* seems to fulfil the human need to speak directly with the Divine in a manner which is at once eloquent and personal, while remaining within the confines of doctrine and faith.

## CHAPTER 7: RITUAL AND RELIGION

The existence of the *nichitos* depends on a ritual context without the study of which they could not be properly defined. *Nichitos* exist to be used in a ritual fashion.

The study and theory of ritual has undergone many stages and a recent upsurge of interest exemplified by the publication of Readings in Ritual Studies, (1998) edited by Grimes, and since 1987 the Journal of Ritual Studies. We are concerned here with religious rituals rather than ritual in general, as *nichitos* are always regarded by their owners as belonging to the religious domain. From an anthropological perspective, the main components of a definition of religious ritual usually include:

- 1) a patterned form of behaviour, repetitious, stereotyped, or predictable for the participants
  - 2) a contact with the supernatural realm or the sacred
  - 3) a socially prescribed symbolic context - the symbols are communicated to the society or provide the participants with the power to act or interact with the divine or sacred
  - 4) a performative function, derived from the intent of manipulating reality or using links with the sacred towards specific aims
- (See Crapo 1993: 246; Miller 1999: 314-317; Scupin 2000: 80-84, 87-93)

As far as the *nichitos* are concerned the first characteristic is obvious in that *nichitos* can be recognized not only within the Catholic barrios of Tucson, or the Catholic communities of North America, but also associated to *nichito*-like structures in many other cultures. They could probably be considered a cultural system, in Geertz's terms (Geertz, 1966). They are sufficiently identifiable as to allow non-Catholics not only to recognize them but even to use them.

The second characteristic is equally obvious. The nature of the space-time-event created by the *nichito* is sufficiently engaging as to require investigation. By explicitly building a

connection with such supernatural powers as the Virgin Mary and her Son, the owners and users of *nichitos* build a new sacred ecology around them.

The third characteristic, that is the symbolic context, is more ambiguous than it appears at first, even though the symbolic system of the *nichito* is relatively simple. In the previous chapter, allusions were made to the communicative nature of the *nichitos*. Edmund Leach (2001) and later Victor Turner (1969; 1982) and Mary Douglas (1965; 1966; 1970), are among the anthropologists who articulated most clearly the importance of the communicative aspects of rituals. The term communication can be defined in two ways, as sharing information within and outside the community, or referring to conversation with the Divine. In this respect, Scupin (200: 81-82) has noted the complementarity between these perspectives on ritual emphasising the communicative aspects and the theories building on the importance of ritual as a facet of religion. He concludes:

...We can see...a concern with power (here defined as a kind of coercive authority) from some kind of transcendent external source, whether that is defined explicitly as 'sacred' (i.e., supernatural) or not. We can therefore see ritual as affording a special kind of space and occasion for special social experience, underlining, yet potentially altering, social life. Performed at regular intervals, 'generation after generation', rituals may convey timeless cultural messages, collectively held values and beliefs, and senses of identity. Though participants in ritual can be seen to be concerned with representation for the sake of representation, many rituals have a concrete purpose and are aimed at accomplishing some socially defined goal. (Scupin, 2000: 82)

The fourth item, that is the performative function also asks for a deeper observation of what goes on at the site of a functional *nichito*. If the classic approach opposing sacred and profane breaks down in the case of the *nichito*, it is important to describe how this occurs.

In concrete terms rituals entail localized events. According to Gregor Goethals, who uses a more pragmatic, concrete approach to ritual, elements of traditional religious ritual events include:

- 1) [Participation:] active participation of individuals. ...The participant must actually live the truth of the enacted myth. ...Persons are actors in a ritual and their bodily gestures and motions affect others in the drama.
- 2) [Space:] Ritual space is extraordinary, set apart from the ordinary spaces of daily life and specifically appropriate for particular events.. ...Essentially it is space that is specially ordered for communion and interaction among persons with a common faith and loyalty.
- 3) [Time:] Like ritual space, it is extraordinary in quality, not the ho-hum clock time of our workday. Ritual casts us into measures that are outside ordinary time. The flow of everyday existence - open-ended and unresolved - is suspended and the believer leaps timelessly into creation and timelessly into eternity. (Goethals in Grimes, 1996: 258-259)

This definition uses classic elements. Do actual *nichito* rituals fit in with these categories?

- 1) At a *nichito*, *altarcito*, or other folk religious practices, participation does not really entail a total distinction between the participants and the rest of society. How are participants or actors defined when the religious drama is included in daily life?

2) Is sacred space marked as different when enclosed in the domestic space, or while open to the public?

3) Is time really suspended around the *nichito*? The concept of sacred time may be applicable to worship in a Church, but does not necessarily function in the same manner within the confines of folk-ritual practice such as *nichitos*. here we have the flow of everyday existence very much included in this home-based religion. Every day time not only exists in home-based religious worship; it in some ways defines this type of worship. A family member can snatch a few minutes alone with the saints or members of the Holy Family at a *nichito*. Is the time set apart, or is it uniquely inclusive at the *nichito* or *altarcito*?

Does *religiosidad popolare* ask for a subcategory of religious ritual? It can be said to encompass private devotions in both private and semi-public space and time, where an absolute definition of ritual time does not appear to be applicable. This blurring of public and private space, of domestic and religious activity in a ritual format, makes these practices of interest for further study.

## **7.1: DOMESTIC RITUALS**

**There is a paucity of literature on the small, domestic actions of worship which help a religious community maintain and transmit its sense of what is, and is not, sacred action.**

### **7.1.1: PARTICIPATION**

**Domesticity also modifies the notion of participants. Judaism passes the sense of the sacred onto its membership in the most unexpected ways, such as through domestic rituals such as drying the dishes.**

**RACHEL: Now I did not like to wipe the dishes because the towel was so rough, it didn't feel good, and I did not know how to explain this to Grandmother....So I rebelled against that. The job was not well done. I'll never forget that, how my grandmother, she took me aside one day....She began first all around with praises.**

**"Rucheleh," she says,"...you know you are carrying a holy name. And according to your name, you have to be perfect." Well, she gave me all that until when I looked at her, my spirit was rising and rising, higher and faster until I forget all about that sturdy towel and my hatred for it....after that speech, I was transformed into a different person. The towel became soft as fine linen and I loved to wipe the dishes. And always before me, when I was wiping the dishes was the name of the holy mother Rachel, and I thought, 'She's right. I am that woman.' That, that is what I call domestic religion....**

**I think the boys didn't have it that way. They knew what the sacred words meant so they could argue and doubt. But with us girls, we couldn't doubt because what we knew came**



without understanding. These things were injected into you in childhood....When it goes in this way, I describe, Jewish comes up in you from the roots and it stays with you all your life<sup>204</sup>.

The making of sacred things is an important part of religious rituals. In the cultural context of concern here, it is part of the domestic sphere of worship and religion. It is one of the few domains where prestige is earned by proficiency with the domestic arts and crafts used to create items for religious practice. The creator (most often, creatrix) of handicrafts such as embroidered vestments or *challah*-covers (egg-bread, often used for Sabbath meals in Judaism) receives by her skills a particular status within the religious community<sup>205</sup>. Some particular handicrafts, are handed down by specialists within a community to apprentices, who continued the art-form for religious purposes.

In both the religious and secular home, Easter, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and even Independence Day are marked by the production of embroidered, quilted, or appliqued textiles and seasonal foods. Even the buying and sending of greeting cards can be seen as a ritual activity. (DuFresne in Young, 1999: 220)

The creation and utilization of religiously oriented handicrafts then, is one link in the chain of religious experience. Kay Turner, in Beautiful Necessity, mentions many of her informants as having inherited particular family *bultos* from mothers and grandmothers.

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<sup>204</sup> Rachel, quoted in Number Our Days, Barbara Myerhoff. Noted at <http://www.jwa.org/exhibits/myerhoff/religion.htm> Jan 16, 2001.

<sup>205</sup> DuFresne, Lucie, entry on "Craft", in Young, ed. 1999, p. 219.

**This Guadalupe [*bulto*] was given to me by my mother, Maria Luisa Cruz, shortly before she died. She gave it to me because I was the eldest daughter. ...Forty years She has been with me. ...Just as my mother did, I bring my children here to pray with me. I will give her the Virgin so that she may have an altar. (K. Turner, 1999: 46)**

As Protestant families often pass on a special Bible from generation to generation, (Milspaw, 1986: 133) material items can be part of the link between family history and religious history. The statue of a saint, a favourite Passover *seder* dish (ritual dish for the items used during the Passover dinner) or a hand-crocheted altarcloth from a grandmother, all become part of the experience of religion. The act of inheriting, and passing on, the item, becomes part of the domestic ritual related to the rituals of the faith.

From another of Turner's informants comes the story of one particular *bulto* on her Saint Joseph's Day altar. The *bultos* sit amidst a plethora of Sicilian fig-cookies, made specifically by the women for this feast-day:

**The Infant Jesus of Prague was Katherine's, my partner's. We had a dress shop together, and then she died of cancer. This was her statue. I told her... 'Katherine, don't you worry.' And she said 'I won't be here for your altar'... And I said, 'That's something we don't know...But I will promise you if you're not with us, your Infant Jesus will be on my altar...'. (K. Turner, 1999: 49)**

In my opinion, the act of baking the cookies, of organizing the display of the altar, and of inheriting *bultos* (sometimes also rituals involved in changing the clothing on a *bulto*) are all part of domestic practice, and intimately woven into the fabric of domestic religion.

As mentioned by informants such as Gilbert Romero, most practitioners learn the keeping of an *altarcito* or *nichito* from their mother and/or grandmother. To this day, mothers are still recognized as the people who keep the home religion healthy, with fathers more involved with the interface between the home and outside spheres. Kay Turner mentions repeatedly that the women in her study practice a sort of religion flavoured by relationship: their interaction with the *bultos*, their children, and other neighbours define their spirituality more so than with the men. Men appear to be equally observant of their religiosity, but seem to interact with the Divine independently, where women seem to interact with the Divine and with others, simultaneously. They teach the children how to maintain the sacred space, how to clean it, and how to offer it proper reverence. The father may be the head of the home, but it is the mother who teaches the acts of daily domestic religion. "My sister is teaching her children how to do their Personal Devotions, as they were getting careless in their devotions."<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Interview with Bishop Manuel Moreno, 24 February 1998, Tucson.

### 7.1.2: SPACE

As sacred spaces, *nichitos* are clearly and visibly defined, both by form (and content), and by specific acts such as prayers and offerings. The most awkward locations do not alter this definition thus ensuring recognition by the passers-by.

A sacred space is first of all a defined place, a space distinguished from other places. The rituals that a people either practice at a place or direct towards it mark its sacredness and differentiate it from other defined spaces.... It includes places that are constructed for religious purposes, such as temples or temenoi, and places that are religiously interpreted, such as mountains or rivers.... Sacred space does not even exclude nonsacred space, for the same place may be both sacred and nonsacred in different respects or circumstances. (Brereton in Encyclopedia of Religion 1987: 526)

The example of the Lady of the Garbage Dump *nicho* is classic: the *bulto* and original niche-structure was placed right in the middle of the discarded garbage, as this is where the *bulto* was discovered (her "proper" place, as it were). As people saw the holy placed amidst the garbage, they moved the garbage further and further away from the actual niche. Currently, the piles of refuse litter the area around the *nicho*, but there is an eight- to ten-foot clear spot around the *nicho* which has been cleaned up. (fig. 160, 163) Similarly, the planting of flowers and bushes around the *nicho/nichito* also helps to define the "sacred" environment around the niche itself. (fig. 161, 162)

The *nicho* is the unowned sacred space. It is the most public of the three major types of home religion location, as it exists completely outside of private property. The *nicho* aside the highway north of Tucson existed between two highway exits, and adjacent to the service road, not the main highway. The *nicho* at the Gallery of the Sun is more safe because it is located on gallery land and the paintings inside are considered art, but there is no hand orchestrating the offerings.

*Altarcito* space is the most personal, private space in the *religiosidad popolare* practices of Mexican Americans, Italian Americans, and French Canadians. These are hidden from the public view, and are used exclusively by the family located inside the home. (fig. 15, 16, 164) These are rarely shared. The space they occupy is, however, clearly delineated. The beloved dead are present through old photographs, memoriam clippings from newspapers, and other ephemera. The *altarcito* can be as small as a *bulto* and some silk flowers on a bookshelf, such as the examples from Québec; or it can be as ornate as an entire room dedicated to the *altarcito*, as in some Mexican American families.

The *nichito* is a mid-point between private and public sacred space. It is **behind** the Sonoran fence-walls but is mounted specifically to face the street, inviting, beckoning, and reassuring the public. Neighbours can see which *bultos* and *retablos* exist within the *nichito*; so it invites the sharing of sacred space with others of the same faith. The *nichito* is the doorway beckoning the Divine to be present, and also inviting the neighbour, another believer, to shelter him/herself spiritually therein.

*Nichos* stand between the world of humans and the world of nature. All three, *altarcito*, *nichito*, and *nicho*, allow for private devotion outside of the official church.

### 7.1.3: SACRED TIME

*Nichitos* and *altarcitos* are a "24-7" location of the sacred. Unlike the local parish church, which has specific times for mass and confession, times when the doors are open or locked, the home-based religious location is always accessible. Many *altarcitos* are located in bedrooms and/or living rooms, so that the petitioner can address the Divine whenever it is perceived to be necessary.

One of the *nichos* on the side of Highway 81 near Bisbee, Arizona, has candles blazing at any time of day and/or night, although it is a couple of miles from any human presence. On many occasions, as I observed, one can find a car stopping at the two-car sized cutout in the rock face as a traveller stops to enter the six-foot tall *nicho*, say a quick prayer, kiss the lips of the large Mary *bulto* inside, perhaps light a candle or leave an offering and speed off into the night. Similarly, the Lady of Guadalupe *nicho* on the grounds of the De Grazia Gallery of the Sun is never locked and people are often found there hours after the gallery closes, saying a prayer or meditating under the shadow of the mountains.

*Nichitos* and *altarcitos* are the sacred living **within** the domestic boundaries of a home. Here, there is not a mythical time which is set apart in the manner of official 'sacred space'.

The mythical time of the Divine interacts constantly with the family time. Mary is there **now** - she listens **now**. Things added to or removed from the *nichito* or *altarcito* ebb and flow organically, as the family ebbs and flows with births, deaths, and members who move out as they grow up. Things are added to the organic whole when they are deemed appropriate: sometimes this means a *nacimiento* for Christmas, flowers for the Day of the Dead altar/*offrenda*, or the removal of the photo of a disgraced family member.

Objects are packed into the altar space. Things ride up against each other and are positioned in relation to each other: a photo leans against a statue; a ribbon bow encircles a votive candle; a spill of loose change spreads out between images; a Mother's Day card is tucked inside the frame of a picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe; and so on creating a stacked, multiplied, and invitingly receptive scene. (K. Turner, 1990: 251)

There are no rituals to consecrate a *nichito* or *altarcito*. The *nichitos* enter into the life of the family as easily as it is built. Sometimes they are created with focussed intention, and sometimes they grow organically as things are added in a particular location which is somehow set apart, yet handy.

...A house is a functional space, but in its construction, its design, or the rites within it, it may be endowed with religious meaning. In short, a sacred place comes into being when it is interpreted as a sacred place. (Brereton in Encyclopedia of Religion, 1987: 526)

## 7.2: RITUAL IN ACTION

People pray at *nichitos* and *altarcitos*. People socialize at *nichitos*, and sometimes lovers meet at *nichos* prior to finding an appropriate venue for secret trysts. Each form of sacred space serves a slightly different purpose, and each is marked with actions and practices which are similar.

### 7.2.1: RITUAL GESTURES

Most often, a worshipper will make the sign of the cross when in front of *bultos* and/or *retablos* at any of these locations. Among Mexican Americans, it is common to form a cross by placing one's thumb over (and therefore across, at a 90 degree angle) one's forefinger, and then cross oneself, ending with the touching of the thumb to one's lips in a kiss (a form of crossing the cross, as it were). Many worshippers will either kiss the lips of a Virgin Mary *bulto*, or else touch the lips of the Virgin with their hand and then kiss their fingers in a motion of extreme reverence and deep personal love. Few people kneel at *nichos* or *nichitos*, but as the family blessing is often given by the family's father at the *altarcito*, the wife and children will often kneel in front of the *altarcito* at this time.

Food offerings can be left on an *altarcito*, usually special gifts typical to the feast day of a particular saint. Mention has already been made of the Italian American practice of Saint



Joseph's Day tables, with rich fig cookies and other sweets, all offered by Sicilian families to honour the husband of the Virgin Mary. *Nichos* have sometimes featured an apple or orange, perhaps to feed those travellers who may be in need of more physical sustenance.

As well, Italian Americans often leave excess produce in front of, or atop, their *nichitos*. These are also offered as a form of charity towards those who are in need by those who have reaped an excess from their garden. Pilgrimages from shrine to shrine in a neighbourhood by Italian Americans (particularly in the New York City area) are often marked by the giving and receiving of holy bread on certain days as well<sup>207</sup>. Spiritual and physical hunger are both offered a feast at *nichitos* and on *altarcitos* in examples of ultimately domestic rituals. Certainly there are few more "homey" practices than the baking of breads or cookies, or the reaping of bounty from the garden one planted by one's own hand.

Many families leave at regular intervals fresh flowers on the *altarcito*, or in the *nichito*. This can be when the offering has dried out, or for special occasions. Silk flowers are nearly always present at these sites as well. It is not unusual to leave one flower from a special bouquet at the home altar or *nichito*, such as from a wedding bouquet or First Communion, or birthday gift. Although some informants indicated the flowers were sometimes as a gift for a particular saint, they also indicated they put them in the sacred space because it would please the Virgin Mary. It is perceived as a sharing of that which is

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<sup>207</sup> Sciorra, in conversation, 1999.

nice, with the Divine - a reciprocal relationship. If the Virgin Mary is nice to the members of the family, then they should be nice to her with offerings. These small offerings appear to establish and acknowledge reciprocity between the *nichito* using family and the Divine.

Other quasi-religious items are often left on the *altarcito* (less so in the *nichito* possibly due to its semi-public nature, or because it is exposed to the elements) such as Palm Sunday crosses, *milagros*, rosaries, and holy water. One owner of a *nichito* in Ottawa indicated that his proximity to a local church was possibly the reason why his Mary *bulto* was often draped with over a dozen rosaries left by passers-by. Most of these items have functions directly related to prayer and the Institutional Church so it is fitting that they be kept close to the Divine at the *altarcito*.

"The functions of sacred space are, in their different ways, aspects of its essential function: to identify the fundamental symbols that create the patterns of life in a culture.  
"...The sacred place is often the place where humans enter the realm of the gods, or conversely, the place where the gods are among humans. In either case, it becomes the place of the presence of divinity and therefore an image of the realm of divinity... (Brereton in Encyclopedia of Religion, 1987: 532 )

Every item left on an *altarcito*, or at a *nichito*, has a story and a meaning. They are not left at random; they correspond to the moments of prayer, and specific entreaty, or argument which occur at the *nichito* or *altarcito*, and are entirely personal. The Indian head statuary may be secular when it is bought, or made, but once it is placed inside the *nichito*, it

becomes something more. It is important to note, however, that when used, these items are not necessarily "representative".

Unlike what one expects from formalized rituals in institutionalized religious contexts, this is not analogy. Flowers do not represent something because of their colour or scent.

Candles do not represent a spiritual intention because of their colour or shape. The lighting of a candle may be interpreted metaphorically as the invitation of the light of God into one's life, or the flame carrying one's prayers to Jesus, but in fact a worshipper rarely thinks this.

As a ritual act, the action of the lighting of the candle is sufficient unto itself. The action combined with a quick, silent prayer is what is important. Myerhoff's remark applies here:

"All rituals are efficacious to some degree merely by their taking place. " (Myerhoff, in Grimes, 1996: 407)

Offerings and ephemera come and go in *nichitos* and on *altarcitos*. There is no ritual related to putting something in a *nichito* except for the ritual of doing so. Similarly, there is no prayer or specific action which is prescribed for removing holy water so that it can be brought to the home of an ailing relative, or for removing wilted flowers so that new ones can be placed in their place. The *nichito* and *altarcito* are a mix of symbols which are recognized throughout the Catholic world as special, with those which are sacred only by their placement and use. Christmas balls on a tree are not "sacred" by their nature, but Christmas balls placed around a *retablo* of the Virgin Mary in the colours of the Mexican, or Italian, flag, makes them a premeditated part of the *nichito* itself.

## 7.2.2: PRAYER

*Nichitos* are places of personal communication with the Divine, through prayer. Prayer can be defined simply, in Sam Gill's words, as "the soul's sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed" and "the address of personal spirit to personal spirit". (Gill, in *Encyclopedia of Religion* 1987: 489) Prayer at a *nichito* is truly from person to person - one is there in person as an individual, and the Divine is also there in person, whether as the Virgin or as a saint. The presence of a statue ensures the personification of one's Divine partner.

Dona Chole kept an altar in the small room between the kitchen and the back bedroom. She called it *mi altarcito* (my little altar) and there on a daily basis, Chole prayed and made petitions to her saints for herself and others. ...At the time we met Chole she had not attended Church (the Guadalupe Church that stands directly across the street from her house) in over twenty years, preferring instead to keep her relations with God on her own terms at home. (K. Turner, 1990: 98)

Dona Micaela attended Mass regularly at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. ...She asserts that "the altar in the church is a very sacred thing, because truly, it's the one that counts." Only at the church altar can the blessed sacrament of Holy Communion be received. But Dona Micaela went on to say that, "There is a large difference between the... church and the concerns of the altars we have. These altars are particular to us. The church altar is the foundation. But, one kneels or petitions, their elbows dug in, but with the satisfaction that God, the all powerful, is listening." For Dona Micaela the home altar is a place for personally promoting and ensuring one's talking and listening relationship with God through the development of intimate communications with the saints, the Virgin, and Christ. The home altar is a special place for receiving benefit and blessing, a sign of abundance: gesturing

to her altar Dona Micaela said "*es mi riqueza*" (it's my source of richness or wealth). (K. Turner, 1990: 114)

Prayers at a *nichito* or *altarcito* are not about the state of the world, or abstract theological problems, and rarely about society at large; they are about concrete lived situations. As Kay Turner writes: "Family history and sacred history are conjoined at the altar site, bearing witness to a lasting heritage of relationships that binds the family together through time and in spite of it." (K. Turner, 1990: 189) The *nichito*, *nicho*, and *altarcito* are a point of emergence where the Divine can manifest, joining the worldly family in one place.

This unification of experience and history gives the *altarcito* a privileged time in the daily schedule. The daily rituals held at a *nichito* or *altarcito* create a sacredness above and beyond the dictionary-sense of "time". The *nichito* is a doorway of sorts, a doorway between the here-and-now, and the sacred. It is a liminal place.

All of these images are windows. And doorways. An altar is a collection of special objects that are doorways to your own soul and being. These images allow you to enter a deeper reality through gazing at them, through looking at them, through touching them, through being with them. (Adler, quoted in K. Turner, 1999: 33-34)

Without existing literature analysing the phenomena of *nichitos* and *altarcitos*, one must look to other religions for patterns and reasons for their existence as well as the reason for their wide popularity. The *nichito* seems to embody the human need for an informal yet intensely personal sacred space. It seems to function in part as a *Kamidama* (Shinto god

shelf), enshrining protective deities and acting as a repository for protective tokens of faith (e.g., Holy Water, Palm Sunday crosses). (Reader, 1994, no page)

As well, the *nichito* (and *altarcitos* as well) features aspects of the family Buddhist altar, the *Butsudan*. The *Butsudan* memorializes the family's ancestors and is a place of encounter between the living and their ancestors, and is often a setting for various religious rites. Similarly, the *nichito* often has photos of the "beloved dead", obituary notices, hospital i.d. bracelets, and pictures of an infant who died before baptism. In Japanese religious altar and shrine practices, we find commonality with the *nichitos* of folk Catholic practices.

As humanity began to develop this procedure of making certain things represent others, the symbols themselves were creating human beings who, in turn, could reflect on their surroundings and accordingly could change their own conduct to a degree not even remotely approximated in other species. (Csikszentmihaly and Rochberg-Halton, 1981: 21)

*Bultos* are not a representation of the saint or the Virgin. Rather, they serve as a doorway offering the worshipper access to the Divine. One could describe the relationship of the *nichito* or *altarcito* to the Divine as a sort of doorbell. One knows the Virgin Mary, or Saint Francis, or the Infant of Atocha, is on the other side of that door, always present. By the actions of prayer and worship which are held at the *nichito*, the doorbell is rung, inviting the Divine to answer the prayer/invitation.

### 7.3: SYMBOLIC CONTEXT

Having a *nichito*, or an *altarcito*, allows one to communicate to the Divine. It also spreads powerful messages to the outside world, as well as to the community and the family unit.

#### 7.3.1: THE SOCIAL MEANING OF *NICHITOS*

Different messages may be encoded through which an audience receives the communication, along with what the audience perceives *nichitos* to mean. One person may be moved by a *nichito* and choose to light a candle inside it, while another may be embarrassed at what he/she views as a tacky form of public religious display. "When I was growing up, I was embarrassed by those 'Mary in a Bathtubs'. They made me feel uncomfortable. Now that I'm older and converted to Episcopalian, they bother me a great deal more."<sup>208</sup>

The *nichito* is a personal space for all participants despite the fact that the public is invited to share it with the family. One need not be "a Christian" so much as one need only be oneself. Prayer becomes less socially regulated at the *nichito*. The space of the *nichito*, the actions the individual chooses to engage in when at a *nichito*, all these things engage the participant in an intensely-personal form of religious experience unlike the experience shared within the walls of the church itself. The experience of prayer at the *nichito* or

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<sup>208</sup> Private email, informant, May 1999, Minnesota.

*altarcito*, to use Geertz's explanation "...is like a high mass, not like a presentation of Murder in the Cathedral: it is a drawing near, not a standing back." (Geertz, 1966: 116) Even when the viewer is repulsed by the *nichito's* existence or aesthetics, a *nichito* still engages the audience in a very personal way. None of my informants have ever indicated that they have the same visceral reaction to the altars within the Church walls. Something other than the message of the Church is being communicated at the *nichito*, and first of all a message about the family who owns it. Having a *nichito* in one's courtyard announces one's faith. What is in the *nichito* is equally revealing. A *nichito* may elicit a voyeur-like reaction in the spectator, even when items come from many different, often unknown worshippers.

Altars join like with like and like with unlike. Margarita Guerrero kept an image of the Buddha given to her by a friend's daughter. ..."I don't know his prayers, but he keeps company with the Virgin." (K. Turner, 1999: 103) Similarly, during one visit, I was not surprised to see a *bulto* of Kwan Yin comfortably nestled between Virgin Mary *bultos* on the Gallery of the Sun Guadalupe *nicho*.

Another level of communication concerns the fact of the existence of a sacred space in that location with the explicit function of providing a meeting place with the Divine for anyone. Many visitors to *nichos* don't even know the vernacular symbolic language of the practice, yet still find themselves inspired to leave something which expresses their reaction to the place and its sacrality. The *nicho* and *nichito* are what Clifford Geertz would call a cultural



complex. People of all religious backgrounds recognize them as places of prayer and/or meditation - places of communication with the Divine.

In 2000, my mother, a devout Jew who grew up in a Conservative household, was faced with a profound religious crisis. her younger daughter, my only sister, married a non-Jew in a civil ceremony without telling my mother. Although there were extenuating circumstances, and a religious service was scheduled for later in the year, my mother was devastated. In an effort to distract her from the situation, I offered to drive her up to the De Grazia Gallery of the Sun to look at the Guadalupe *nicho*.

For a while my mother sat quietly while I walked around the various altars, taking photos of offerings and *milagros* for the dissertation. When I was ready to leave, my mother asked me to leave her alone inside for a little while. I was surprised, but acquiesced to her request.

After a few minutes, she emerged looking somehow more relaxed. She then confided to me that she prayed to God to give her some level of peace over the situation with my sister and brother-in-law. here was a Jewish woman, praying at a Catholic *nicho* which features a large painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe! I asked her about this, and she merely replied that she felt God was listening in that place, and that she had had " a good conversation with Him". Clearly the *nicho* acts as a cultural complex - my mother knew what to do

there, and felt at home in that place and space. She was engaged directly with conversation with God.

The distinction between personal and ritual prayer has often been made when viewing prayer as act. ...When prayer is considered as act, a whole range of powerful characteristics and religious functions may be discerned. here the issue is not primarily to show that prayer is communication with the spiritual or divine, or even necessarily to discern what is communicated, but rather to direct attention to the comprehension and appreciation of the power and effectiveness of communication acts that are human-divine communications. (Gill, in Encyclopedia of Religion, 1987: 490-491)

The moment one stands in front of the Mary *bulto* in the Bisbee *nicho*, or by the Saint Lucy *nichito* in New York City, one cannot help but be engaged by the experience in whatever way one's own religious background allows.

The building of the *altarcito* or *nichito*, and its use, is one way of professing one's faith as well as of establishing a personal sacred location within one's own home. A *nichito* faces the street so that it can tell the world that the family is pious and prays. A *nichito* also delineates a location used by the family, neighbours, and those who are in need of it, for the ritual of prayer. What is communicated to the public by the *nichito* is that the people pray here, and the people here pray.

### 7.3.2: ASPECTS OF THE *NICHITO*'S SYMBOLIC SYSTEM

What a *nichito* is not, is a miniature 'representation' of the church. A *nichito* is not a miniature church for three main reasons: a) it is not an institutional building; b) there is no priest in charge; and c) it is not a downsized image of a church. The history and geographic distribution of the artifacts speak for its independent existence as a phenomenon.

While churches and official religious institutions are perceived at worst as places of hierarchy and at best, places of community, *nichitos* stand outside the Church and give value to the individual practitioners.

Power, therefore, becomes vested in the individual. Building a *nichito*, interacting with a *nichito*, and praying at a *nichito*: all these actions highlight the intrinsic value of the worshipper. The individual becomes sacralized by the act of interacting with the divine at the *nichito*, or *altarcito*. The message directly given from this relationship is that any life, and any object, can be sacred. The sanctity of life, existence, and experience is underlined by the very action of interaction with a *nichito* or *altarcito*. "Religious symbols formulate a basic congruence between a particular style of life and a specific (if, most often, implicit) metaphysic, and in so doing sustain each with the borrowed authority of the other." (Geertz, 1966: 90) A bricklayer, a grade 5 dropout, and a company president: all these people can talk to God at a *nichito*.

Since most *nichito* users come from cultures where class and status were defined by one's status at birth (e.g., king, duke, baron), the very act of building and using a *nichito* establishes the individual working class man and housewife, the child and the elder, as equal in the value of their actions and prayers. The Virgin Mary listens to the ten year old's prayer as attentively as she would a city Mayor. This is more than mimicking the royal practice of having a personal chapel in a castle; the act of building and maintaining a *nichito* is an affirmation of the worshipper's value in the eyes of the Divine.

Each individual who uses the *nichito* or *altarcito* interprets the figures therein, and the rituals they express, in intensely personal ways. The Church teaches only one level of meaning for the *bultos*, retablos, and other representations of the Divine held within; the needs, desires, and experiences of the individual worshipper also lend levels of meaning to each item within the *nichito* and *altarcito*. Religious icons are open to wider interpretation than religious texts. Meaning is then "not so much imparted as appropriated in a dialectical process whereby it becomes subjective reality for the one who uses the symbol". (Caroline Walker Bynum, quoted in K. Turner, 1999: 123)

Moreover, a *nichito* is much more acceptable as a place for the experiential individual aspects of religiosity. Indeed, many *nichitos* are direct results, or expressions of, religious experiences if not mystical encounters with the Virgin Mary.

...There has long been a tradition within Catholicism centred around individuals who are supposed to have established direct and unmediated contact with the sacred. ...The

number of Catholics over the centuries who claim to have heard, seen and talked to Christ during an apparition easily runs into the hundreds. If we expand our notion of the "sacred" to include all the supernatural beings venerated by Catholics, notably including the Virgin Mary and the saints, then the number of Catholics who have experienced apparitions of these beings runs into the thousands. (Carroll, in O'Toole (ed.), 1990: 38)

Given this aspect of Catholicism, one can accept without surprise the large number of people claiming a direct experience of the Divine related to their *nichito*.

#### 7.4: THE CONTINUITY OF SACRED AND PROFANE

What defines sacred? What defines profane? The dichotomy between the two concepts is an old one, and familiar to classic Christianity. We are somehow led by writers such as Emile Durkheim, or Mircea Eliade, to see the universe in a binary fashion, where the realms of "sacred" and "profane" cannot, or do not, intersect. The architecture of churches does affirm this dichotomy. By contrast, *nichitos* in particular and the practice of folk religiosity in general seems to create a real blurring of those boundaries, if boundaries they indeed are.

McDannell supports this perspective:

A dichotomy has been established between the sacred and the profane, spirit and matter, piety and commerce that constrains our ability to understand how religion works in the real

world. ....By looking at material Christianity, we will see little evidence that American Christians experience a radical separation of the sacred from the profane. If we look at what Christians do rather than at what they think, we cannot help but notice the continual scrambling of the sacred and the profane. (McDannell, 1995: 4)

If we do not accept this dichotomy, nothing within an *altarcito* or *nichito* is intrinsically "sacred" or "unsacred" in and of itself. A *bulto* of the Virgin Mary can be sold next to a ceramic goose, and a bust of Elvis Presley (and often is, at open-air markets in Mexico). The plaster, wood, or plastic is not intrinsically sacred. Rather, anything can be transformed into a sacred item by being placed in a *nichito* or by being used to create the space itself.

Domestic items are particularly involved in this interactive process. A normal bathtub can be turned into a *nichito*; plastic flowers are turned into offerings and decoration; a stovetop protective ring becomes a halo; and ultimately, an item as "lowly" as a urinal can be turned into a *nichito* as demonstrated by a *nichito* on Highway 17 near Sudbury (towards North Bay). Size, colour, and cost of a *bulto* or *retablo* have very little to do with the spiritual value of the item.

There are statues of the saints in the Church: "Some very powerful ones made of gold or silver". But the greater expense paid for a statue does not indicate a greater faith. As Miss Salazar says, 'You can get a big cross, but that's not necessary. A small thing is just as good.' (K. Turner, 1990: 144)

*Nichitos* and *altarcitos* take profane items such as stove-top burner rings or bathtubs, and associate them with or turns them into representations of the sacred. (fig. 165) The stove top ring is not a sacred item when it is placed atop a stove, but when it becomes a halo around a Saint Joseph *bulto*, somehow its basic task and status changes: it becomes part of the sacred by its placement and new function. Removed from its new location, it again becomes "just" a stove top ring. This mixing and blending of what the institution may recognize as "sacred" and that which it does not is one mark of *religiosidad popolare*.

Kay Turner has documented this same process at work in the making of home altars:

In the case of home altar use, images are deinstitutionalized from their representational and doctrinal status and made more explicitly the relators or channels of power in women's individual, personal lives. Altarmakers effect a blurring of the distinction between the sacred and the mundane, between the sacred as distanced *other* and the sacred as intimate *other*. Women draw sacred images into the realm of the social and cultural making them co-partners in a process of nurturing the individual, the family, and the world. (K. Turner, 1990: 173)

Our Lady of the Garbage Dump, outside Tucson, is one striking example of the blurring between sacred and non-sacred. The fact that a chunk of a garbage dump has been reclaimed for sacred practice is in itself, an amazing phenomenon. There are no signs proclaiming the existence of any "shrine to the Virgin of the Sonoran Sands" for instance. The *bulto* itself is broken, and obviously only partially repaired. One *nicho* structure sits nestled within a second *nicho*. A second layer of concrete has been poured atop of the first "floor" to the niche, where the *nicho* was ineffectually "dedicated" to someone deceased

(one guess would be to the memory of a gang member, as many serious drug deals take place in this part of the desert outside town - dead bodies are found in that area fairly frequently) (fig. 180). The name and dates of the person have been rubbed out of the concrete so that it can barely be made out. Clearly someone had mounted a second *bulto* next to the broken Virgin Mary in the second concrete pouring, but the second *bulto* has been removed by other anonymous hands (fig. 179).

The *bulto* is damaged. The protective structure has been twice built, and the floor poured twice. Other figures have been placed therein, and removed. The *nicho* itself was "dedicated" to the memory of someone, and then "undedicated". The *nicho* was built in a pile of garbage, and anonymous actors pushed the garbage away to a 'respectful distance' from the *nicho*. One visit showed a necklace wound around the feet of the Virgin *bulto*; the subsequent visit discovered the necklace was gone, but a rosary now hung off the figure. One set of candlesticks was gone, replaced by others. The figure is organic, and can be said to be alive insomuch as it is a live location of worship. Yet, beer bottles and open condom wrappers still litter the area. Old sofas and other detritus of human domestic life continue to collect around the *nicho*.

One can draw from this setting a picture of someone coming to dump some items, taking a moment to say a quick prayer at the *nicho*, then continuing on his/her way. It is a refreshing moment of the sacred in the middle of the mundane world, but it is organically part of this garbage dump. "When these *bultos* get old and worn they may repair them if



suitable, or bury them in the back yard, or throw them away as garbage. Once at the dump someone rescues them and builds them a place to be present to others<sup>209</sup>."

Numerous other *nichitos* and *nichos* feature what one could term 'recycled' items in the display. Vases are not thrown out if they are chipped or cracked: if they can no longer hold water, then silk flowers will be placed therein. In Québec, there is a Virgin Mary *nicho* placed within a reclaimed freon-gas tank. Northern Ontario has the Sacred Heart of Jesus displayed in a urinal. Both Tucson and Enterprise, Ontario, have featured *nichitos* built from old refrigerators. Virgin Mary *bultos* located in bathtubs are so ubiquitous that the disparaging term for such *nichitos* is "Mary in a Bathtub", and a currently popular band calls itself the "Bathtub Marys". Candles are placed inside empty pillar candle glass jars for re-use. Old Christmas tree decorations are drafted into service as *bulto* decorations. Christening gowns for a family's infant can be used to dress a cherished family heriloom *bulto* of the Infant Jesus. The examples outweigh the scope of this dissertation, to enumerate.

It appears there is a relationship between the reuse of domestic items for *nichitos* and ethnic traits, as well as Roman Catholic theology. Many Anglo communities complain that Mexican American homes lower real estate values when in proximity to their homes, as Mexican American families are stereotyped as keeping "garbage" in their yards. Perhaps one needs to ask who determines what "garbage" is, and what the criteria are for this

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<sup>209</sup> Dr. Santos Vega, email correspondence, 6 January 2001.

designation. Many contemporary artists create engaging, thought-provoking art by recycling used domestic items such as bicycle tires, drapery rods, and so forth. Why would this tendency to use items in new fashions be inappropriate in a *nichito*?

When an item has outlived its usefulness in its current form and position, it is moved outside the house to the liminal area of the yard. here it becomes less "domestic", and closer to the undomestic, the wildness of the outside world. For neighbours who do not perceive the world in this manner, the yard becomes a jumble of non-working cars, broken chairs, old bathtubs, and so forth. To the Mexican American family, the yard is the holding location for things which will again have a task, but that job is as yet, undetermined. The bathtub which once held water for bathing becomes the shelter for a prized family heirloom *bulto*. The steel ring off the old family stove becomes a shiny silver halo around the head of yet another *bulto*. The yard is the place for liminal articles, no longer domestic, but not yet recast in their new roles.

This reuse of "profane" articles in a sacred setting could be said to be a form of spiritual recycling.

In many areas of the world there are poor people who make a living at dumps and live near the dumps to harvest what ever can be sold to scrap dealers and others. Many of these people are people of faith and thus will rescue a thrown away *bulto* of Our Lady Mary and place her in a place that becomes holy<sup>210</sup>.

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<sup>210</sup> Dr. Santos Vega, Email correspondence, 6 Jan 2001.

This practice is not present because the items are too expensive to be discarded, nor is it because the families are too poor to build, or pay for the construction of, a "proper" *nichito*. It corresponds to a culturally imbedded view of used domestic items and recyclable materials. It also fits with the culturally recognized habit which allows one to use recycled items for religious purposes: an old broken statue is as good as a new one for devotional purposes.

Similarly, it is clear that profane items can be used in a sacralized manner. Of all the samples collected for this study, the urinal used for the Sacred Heart *bulto* was to me, the most striking. As Mary Douglas points out, few things are viewed as quite so polluting as bodily secretions (blood, mucus, saliva). (Douglas, in Lessa and Vogt, 1965: 200) How is it then, that the container in which men deposit their urine can be somehow redeemed into a fitting place to deposit a holy *bulto*? Indeed, the same can be asked of bathtubs, which contain the sloughed-off dead skin and hair that humans deposit while bathing. These items are the epitome of domestic, or household items, which are located in the bathroom because they are involved in the processes which humans consider somehow dangerous.

It is interesting to note that both bathtub and urinal use occur in cultures as geographically disparate as the Spanish speaking communities of Arizona and New Mexico, and the French Canadians of Sudbury, Ontario. Can we interpret the use of the bathtub or the urinal as a process which appears to replace the disorder of bodily fluids, with the order of the Divine

Presence? Following Mary Douglas's notion of purity as one pole of two extremes recognized and ritually acknowledged, one would expect a similar recognition here. But there is no ritual recognition of the impurity of the domestic items. There is no set ritual one applies to a bathtub or urinal in order to make it cleansed, or prepared for the Holy to reside therein.

In Judaism, there would be a prayer said over the item to somehow thank God for letting the builder utilize this creation for holy purposes. For the Roman Catholic, it appears the juxtaposition of the tub or urinal with *bultos* and *retablos*, and the actions which occur at the *nichito* or *nicho*, are what creates the sacred from the profane. It is possible that the discomfort expressed by the non-Catholic informant from Minnesota regarding the existence of the 'Mary in a Bathtub' may well be a deeply rooted discomfort at seeing something so mundane, so involved with bodily functions, utilized as a house for the sacred. Perhaps the distinction for that individual is so labelled as to engender her discomfort. But for most families involved in building *nichitos*, there is clearly no such discomfort.

#### 7.4.1: *NICHITOS* AS SACRED DRAMA

Life is filled with daily dramas. A baby's first steps, the death of a teen in an automobile accident, or the passage of a beloved elder in her sleep; all these things comprise the experience of a life lived. When a culture sees life and religion as a continuity where all

things are sacred and humans are merely one piece in this giant drama, daily life is comprised of a million daily ritualized experiences. Catholic life is ideally lived in this continuity where every act of life is supposed to become a prayer.

Stanley Diamond, the anthropologist, critiques the decline of direct participation in the religious rituals of urban-bound state religions:

In a sequence from archaic to modern civilization, we can trace the process through which religion, drama and daily life split apart. The drama, the primary form of art, retreats to the theater, and religion escapes into the church. The sacraments, those formalized remnants of the primitive rites and the "theater, the play", develop into carefully cultivated and narrowly bounded conventions. Civilized participation in culture becomes increasingly passive, as culture becomes increasingly secularized. (Diamond, 1974: 150-151. )

For instance, increasingly participants to Christian services are spectators or acting in minor roles, watching the main actor, that is the priest or minister representing them. Worship at a *nichito* or *altarcito* brings ordinary people back to full participation in the religious drama. This can be seen as a vitalizing force in Roman Catholic practice. The use of *sacramentales* and personalized prayer in a geographic location which is wholly personal allows the participant to feel rooted in the religious and ethnic traditions of his/her ancestors. There are of course, some set prayers used to petition certain saints, or members of the Holy Family, and petitioners often leave handwritten lists of prayers at *nichos* in order to aid others who come after them. Appendix 3 features various prayers left on a folded-up piece of 8 1/2" x 11" three-hole punch paper, at the Gallery of the Sun *nicho* in Tucson. Printed

prayer candles also feature a specific prayer for that saint or manifestation of the Virgin Mary on the back of the pillar (in English, French, or Spanish, depending on the market). The action, the intent, and the words, all create a religious experience for the participant, which is in-drawing and compelling. It is immediate, and dramatic.

Prayer is not necessary in order to create a sense of the sacred in a participant. The ritual of prayer directly and actively engages the worshipper actively in the experience, but displays of a religious nature can also stimulate and engage the participant in a less-direct manner. Holding a rosary in one's hand evokes the sense that the sacred is nearby. Looking at a Palm Sunday cross placed by a *retablo* in the kitchen reminds one of the sense of the numinous experienced in Church during the ritual. The scent of cathedral incense burned for a play tickles old memories of church ritual through olfactory memory. Memory and interaction with symbols create transference.

The display during the Divina et Femina conference and art show at the University of Ottawa in 2000 was an example of the transference between the sacred and general public in the piece mentioned earlier as the "Rape Victim's Shrine to the Warrior Woman". (fig. 166) Here, the art installation was primarily mounted inside the art gallery but displayed such that it could only be viewed from outside the building through the glass walls. The public was drawn to the art display through the secondary installation outside the building: a bright red cloth was laid on the ground upon which were mounted white plastic fencing (approximately four inches high) and blue silk flowers around the perimeter. In the centre

of the external display were placed two glass half-bowls, each "seeded" with a nickle and a penny, plus a large printed pillar candle to the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Curators and docents in the art gallery noticed that passers-by were inevitably drawn to the display by the bright colours of the cloth and flowers on the outside. Some people glanced and continued to walk, but many paused to engage the interior display more fully. Coins were left in the bowls, as were saint *milagros*, newspaper clippings, and other miscellaneous "offerings", such as a bird feather. The pattern was predictable: by the week's end there would be over \$2.00 in small change in the bowls. By the next Monday, the bowls were back down to under fifteen cents each. Clearly passers-by were engaged by the display. Similarly, the people inside the art gallery were engaged by the actions and reactions of the passers-by themselves. No text was placed to explain the display to the outside viewer, yet the public left "offerings" and lit the offering-candle repeatedly over the life of the display. No instructions were needed: the public was engaged by this display which straddled the boundary of *nicho* and *nichito*. They recognized that the display was a doorway to the Divine, and treated it as such without any prompting.

Similarly, "The Last Supper/The First Congregation" is a display consisting of twenty life-sized soft-sculptures arranged in two parts, done by Ottawa artist Heather Dawn Guild. The installation was also displayed as part of the Divina et Femina conference in 2000 at the University of Ottawa. The tableau was inspired by a religious vision Guild experienced in 1997. The artist adjusts and moves each figure slightly each day, and uses lit candles and

glasses filled with liquid, trying to engage the viewer with the sense that the figures are indeed, alive. Guild describes her intentions in constructing the interactive display. (fig. 167, 168)

The experience was so real and so intense that I felt I was present in the room, observing a scene that had taken place centuries ago. I was amazed and delighted to discover that the disciples were multi-racial, representing various nations and races from all corners of the earth. ...Observers of this creation can trace the journey through which the message of Jesus travelled from an audience of Jews, Gentiles, Greeks, and Romans, crossing oceans and language barriers to reach a broader worldwide acceptance of His ministry and teachings. The Last Supper/The First Congregation of the new millenium, may encourage viewers to delve into their own subconscious, to re-examine their preconcieved [sic] notions of the man Jesus, as well as their knowledge of the role played by Judas the betrayer. In order to give viewers an opportunity to participate in this work, and to ensure that the theme of the work remains centered as a celebration of the life of Christ, I have chosen to identify the disciples not by their names, but instead by the race and nation that they represent. In this way, viewers can accept the challenge of identifying the disciples based on their knowledge of Jesus and his disciples. ...I profoundly believe that this work of art was divinely inspired and guided to act as a magnet, drawing together people from all races and religious backgrounds to immerse themselves in the magic, finding inspiration and hope in this unusual and powerful creation, side by side in peace and harmony<sup>211</sup>.

Both displays, though quite different, represent sacred dramas. They involve acts and engagement, they engage the body and mind, and they are validated by individual acts and

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<sup>211</sup> Heather Dawn Guild, 3-page handout on "The Last Supper/The First Congregation", summer 2000, part of the Divina et Femina women's conference and art show, University of Ottawa Dept. of Religious Studies and Classics.



action. The viewer becomes a worshipper, rather than a subject waiting to be "entertained", as it were. Visitors to both displays became something other than "just" visitors in most cases: they were engaged wholly with the symbols used by the artists, and found themselves participants in the experience. *Nichitos*, *nichos* and *altarcitos* function in a similar manner. Few passers-by are religious "tourists" around *nichitos*; whether they look for just an instant, cross themselves, or burn a candle within, the *nichito* engages individuals in the experience of the Divine -- if even for a fleeting instant. Geertz has noted the consequences of such participation:

Where for "visitors" religious performances can... only be presentations of a particular religious perspective, and thus aesthetically appreciated or scientifically dissected, for participants they are in addition enactments, materializations, realizations of it -- not only models of what they believe, but also models for the believing of it. In these plastic dramas men attain their faith as they portray it. (Geertz, 1966: 113-114)

Faith at church, and participation in official rituals, implies acquiescence. The prayers at *nichitos* are typically much more ambiguous and carry the possibility, often noted by informants and demonstrated by the content of the *nichitos*, to argue with God, to petition Mary against the social, or even religious, authority. It can even be argued that the closest thing urban Catholicism has to cathartic ritual today are the daily devotions held at the home *altarcito* and *nichito*. Here the worshipper can plead, argue, or even curse the

Divine, actions severely frowned upon within the larger Church milieu<sup>212</sup>. Tom Driver notes the transformative power of private rituals thusly:

The "social magic" of rituals, their character as "transformative performance" (Turner) or simply "transformance" (Schechner), is only partly the result of their power to envision a reordering of the world. It comes also from their power to expose society's injustices and contradictions. Turner speaks of ritual as "a transformative performance revealing major classifications, categories, and contradictions of cultural processes." (Driver, in Grimes, 1996: 185)

This is religion lived. Stanley Diamond has characterized rituals in tribal societies by opposition to urban state societies in terms which fit the *nichitos* complex:

[By contrast with the urban, state society, among tribal peoples] rituals are cathartic and creative. They are cathartic in that they serve as occasions for open, if culturally molded, **expressions of ambivalent feelings** about sacred tradition, constituted authority, animal and human nature, and nature at large. ... These rituals are also creative in the **dramatic revelation of symbols** and the anticipation and elaboration of new roles for individuals; **they make meanings explicit** and renew the vitality of the group. [Emphasis mine] (Diamond, 1974: 151-152)

One particularly engaging *nichito*-like object found during the collecting of data for this dissertation was in a "merchant's court" of sales booths at the "Pennsic War", a 10,000 plus participant medieval re-enactors' function near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Held for over

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<sup>212</sup> However, such actions are familiar and commonplace to Jews, who are socialized to have a very direct, unmediated, relationship with God. Teyve in the movie and musical, "Fiddler on the Roof", is a prime example of this ability to both praise and rail at God.

twenty years, this war is the largest function held by the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA). In 1999, the 'King' and 'Queen' of the 'kingdom' covering most of Ontario were a couple from the Toronto-area, Craig Cox (King Thorbeorn Osis) and Nancy Frankel (Queen Caitlin Stuart).

In the summer of 1999, Frankel had attended a function in Hamilton, Ontario, while Cox had driven to Michigan to attend a different event. That Sunday, while returning on a particularly notorious stretch of southern Ontario's highway 401, Cox lost control of the truck he was driving. He and a passenger were killed at the site of the accident. The tragedy left a profound impact on the entire organization, in part due to the newness of the Ontario kingdom<sup>213</sup>, and in part due to the high visibility of Frankel and Cox in the organization's structure. Both travelled frequently, and it was not unusual for them to drive over a thousand kilometres in a three-day weekend to attend a function.

The Pennsic War was held a few months after the tragedy. A group of participants focussed on medieval book-arts calling themselves the "Gabriel Guild" was located near the food court area. One participant had been experimenting with ceramic sculpting, and had placed a piece representing a nun (the members of the Guild take on personas as members of a Catholic religious order) in front of their stall. Before long, passers-by were leaving little tokens beside the nun sculpture.

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<sup>213</sup> Frankel and Cox were only the second pair of "royalty" in the history of the kingdom.

As soon as someone left a miniature wooden "shield" featuring Cox's SCA coat of arms, the entire assemblage took on the role of a transitory pilgrimage site. Dozens of momentos, crosses, crucifixes, bottles of alcohol, and other tokens from the heart were left around the nun and the shield in memory of the deceased King Osis and Lady Lauren. Robert A. Calahan, known within the organization as "Ragnar Bloodaxe", took the photo of the shrine which is included here. (fig. 169) here a very diverse community comprised of Christians, Jews, neo-Pagans, and the agnostic created a memorial site to the memory of the deceased King and his travelling companion. The site became a very vital sacred space. There has been talk of continuing the use of that space yearly as a memorial location for all members of the SCA who die during the year.

Clearly the Church may teach doctrine and the correct ways in which to worship, but it is *religiosidad popolare*, which informs the lived experience of the community and relates it to the lived experiences of the Holy Family and saints. *Religiosidad popolare* indeed, renews the vitality of the group.

## CHAPTER 8: RELIGION AS MATERIAL CULTURE

The transmission of a heritage and the process of cultivation, which are at the heart of cultural life, are dependent on some enduring continuity to the meanings that are to be conveyed, which in turn involves an internalization of the moral standards and norms of the community and a continual

refinement of these standards. (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981: 239)

The material manifestations of religious experience have been poorly discussed in the academic world, especially in Religious Studies, outside of research on art and religion. Like most religions, Christianity produces a plethora of material items related to worship and personal devotion, from hand-carved wooden rosaries through prayer cards, *bultos*, and *milagros*. From tasteful to tacky, consumers of religion hold fast to physical manifestations of their faith in the world of religious observance. Latter-Day Saints have their "Garments", specific underwear to be worn from a certain age<sup>214</sup>; Jews have hand-crocheted *kepot* (skullcaps) and hand-woven *tallesim* (prayer-shawls)<sup>215</sup>. Saint Joseph's Oratory in Montréal sells various glow-in-the-dark saint images, including the Virgin Mary, and a mail-order company will happily ship you a two-inch tall Our Lady of Lourdes, glow-in-the-dark, enclosed in holy water from Lourdes itself. Despite all this, there is a paucity of literature on this phenonemon.

Currently, there exists no book-length study of mass-produced religious objects and only one work, Religious Folk Art in America: Reflections of Faith, on handmade religious artifacts. Religious objects have been almost totally ignored by both scholars of religion and by material culture specialists. (McDannell, 1991: 372)

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<sup>214</sup> McDannell includes a thorough analysis of Latter Day Saint Garments in her book (1995).

<sup>215</sup> A friend of mine in the Santa Clara area of California, Alyson Abramowitz, introduced me to the complex world of symbolism and artistry of women's *tallesim* during one visit. Similarly, during my undergraduate days, young women often judged an Orthodox man's dating "availability" by whether he wore a hand-crocheted *kepot* or a store-bought one, on the assumption that a girlfriend crocheted the skullcap as a token of affection.

It is strange then, that so little is written about the "trappings" of religion: the things which worshippers utilize as tools, to help bring their devotion into a more sharp and personal focus. Religion is NOT just comprised of words; a great part of it is NON VERBAL in that it is comprised of actions and things used in the making of those actions. Material culture deals not only with that which is made: it addresses both the making of the item and the item itself.

Worshipping is also a physical action. The position of one's body such as kneeling, or *shokling* (swaying forward and backward in Jewish prayer) may be acts of worship. Similarly, the making of *bultos*, *nichitos*, or *altarcitos* is also part of the creation of that which is sacred. The act of making the item is part of the worship - the process itself is the issue, much as the process of creating sandpaintings is more important to the Navajo than the finished item itself. The acts of using the item are part of the worship. There is a firmly-linked relationship between the carving of the wood, the painting of the tin or plaster, and the words and actions which occur in front of the item after it is constructed.

In the Menlo Park area of Tucson there is a video store whose owner is recognized as a community '*abuelita*' to everyone. The side of Menlo Park Video, the store owned by Mary Garcia, one of my main informants, features a brightly coloured fresco on its west exterior wall. A curiosity to me prior to my thesis research, this fresco is one of the items I have documented since 1986 when I first noticed it. Only many years after the initial photograph

did I realize that at ground level, a small *nichito* sits in front of the fresco and is indeed, the actual focus of the entire fresco.

The first photo was taken in 1986 (fig. 172), before construction sealed off an old boarded-up window. As a result, the fresco was fairly small. To the left of the Virgin of Guadalupe was a portrait of a Mexican American man wearing a typical farmworker's straw hat. To the right were some local cacti with fruit. The *nichito* below the figure of Guadalupe featured solid wooden doors, and was painted to resemble a stone grotto. Due to the flammable nature of the doors, it is not clear that the "grotto" was serving as a place to burn candles at this time.

The second photo (fig. 173) was taken in 1997. As Mary told me, she had had some of the local young men repaint the fresco as it was peeling. The religious painting now extended across the entire western-facing of the store, featuring angels and putti as well as the Virgin of Guadalupe. The fresco was substantially brighter in pigmentation, with the classic nimbus surrounding Guadalupe resembling flames emanating from the figure. The wooden doors to the *nichito* had been replaced with wrought-iron grillwork, and by this time candles were being burned by members of the local community. Mrs. Garcia indicated that she was not happy with the extremely bright colours in which the Virgin had been rendered.

Another repainting of the wall occurred in 1999, again by local members of the community. (fig. 174) Mrs. Garcia indicated she was far happier with those revisions to her wall, which

again resembled the version from the 1980's. The Virgin was again in more muted tones, with a gently emanating nimbus around her. The "typical Mexican American" face returned to her left, and the fruitful cacti also returned to her right, this time with a dove atop a node (representing the Holy Spirit). The *nichito* itself was painted a rock-like brown, no longer imitating a stone grotto. To the left of the Guadalupe a far gentler and less fanciful fresco was seen - a woman, probably the Virgin Mary, cradling the entire earth in her arms, while a winged cherubic face looked on in the upper left hand side.

Mary Garcia stands in front of the *nichito* (fig. 175) in order to demonstrate the overall size of the fresco itself. Inside her store is perhaps the largest private collection of material Catholic items in the Southwest: shelves overflow with pictures of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, the Holy Family, and innumerable saints. Most of the items have been given to her over the years by customers, friends, and those who have received a manda from her *nichito*. As well, many of the items in her collection of faith were made for her by local young men in prisons, who view her as their spiritual *abuelita* and link to the Virgin Mary.

Once again, in the winter of 2001, the Menlo Park Video fresco was repainted (fig. 176, 177). Bright colours returned to the wall, and figure 177 shows the *nichito* with the grillwork opened so the prayer candles can be clearly seen. The actual *nichito* itself has been rendered in a stone grotto style.



For Mary Garcia, the maintenance of her religious items collection, her *nichito*, and its related fresco, are all part of her faith: they are her religious rituals. The painting of the fresco is a religious ritual. The cleaning of the *nichito* is a religious ritual, and the display and maintenance of her collection inside the store, all these are as much part of her religious faith as is visiting the Church.

Objects of religion then, are related to worship itself. The creating of the object is a form of worship, as the *santo*-makers (saint-makers literally: those who carve or make *bultos*) in Arizona and New Mexico affirm. Material culture fosters an understanding of the making, contexts, and use of these items which is necessary to understand and interpret their meanings: what they express about the sacred and the mundane, or ordinary.

What are the categories, units, organizations, theories and meanings which the original producers and users employed? Since the artifact or environment is constructed with certain artistic and functional rules in mind, the user easily recognizes the meaning intended by the artist or producer. This meaning, however, may not necessarily be evident to the scholar. Often the rules can be read through an analysis of common images, concepts, stories, allegories or themes. ...Of particular importance in the analysis of religious articles or environments is understanding how the subject fits into conventional theological, ritual or ethical structures. It is imperative that a religious context be established.  
(McDannell, 1991: 375-376)

Therefore, it is legitimate to examine actual artifacts of faith, or **things** - material culture - instead of merely asking those who use or manufacture the things, what they think and what the object represent. By doing this, one looks at the physical manifestation and expression

of the faith rather than merely investigating the words, liturgy, and/or theology of a religious community. Ukranian Easter eggs, home-made rose petal rosary beads, and even glow-in-the-dark Virgin Mary *bultos*, all illuminate levels of faith by their use and manufacture. The manufacture of religious "things" is at some level, the manufacture of religiosity and the religious experience.

Most studies on *nichitos* and *altarcitos*, including Kay Turner's works, focus on them as artistic expressions of the sacred. I would argue that those who build and decorate *nichitos* are not aiming to create art nor are they trying to create sacred space. They are very concretely building a place for the Virgin Mary in their home. Aesthetics are present; they serve the holy guest. How artistic the *nichito* is depends largely on the artistic sensibilities and abilities of those women who decorate them. Most *nichitos* express some level of symmetry, with large *bultos* being grouped with large, and smaller with smaller. Pictures or other items are grouped to create symmetrical displays of items, but this is not necessarily so. As a *nichito* or *altarcito* acquires age, the items placed therein are less and less "organized" in any artistic fashion. They become a collection of items which Turner refers to as "baroque" and which I prefer to describe as organic; the collection has a personality of its own, as it were, ebbing and flowing. These motley collections of religious and secular items grouped in a fairly hodge-podge manner, represent the literal meaning of "symbol".

The meaning that releases the symbolic power of things is created, first of all, by the act of perception. The primary skill one needs to unlock the magic of things is that of seeing them objectively and subjectively at the same time, thus joining the nature of the perceiving subject with the nature of the object.

This act of bringing together two entities in a process that unites while preserving the distinctive characteristics of the elements is the basic symbolic act - **sym-ballein**, to "throw together". (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981: 247)

The organic nature of the contents of *nichitos* and *altarcitos* is then, utterly symbolic in function. Their relationships to each other and to the worshipper function on the symbolic level as well as on the literal level. As Roman Catholic iconography originated in a culture where most worshippers were not literate, they were supposed to recognize saints and other holy figures by what they wore, what they held in their hands, and so forth. How these figures are grouped and what is left in the *nichito* with them, all function as symbols or keys to a larger complex of religious experience. Rather than being thrown together without rhyme or reason, the items on and around a *nichito* create a coherent and direct experience. It is sacramental, and it is real, or "really real", as Clifford Geertz asserts, composed of familiar, domestic, common items originating from the life experience of the worshipper.

If *nichitos* are part of the fabric of Roman Catholic worship in communities of Mexican, Italian, and French descent (as well as among other communities not studied in this dissertation such as Lebanese Catholic and Vietnamese Catholic), we can ask what these bathtubs, concrete "seashells", and little wooden structures say about the process of being religious in this Catholic context. Rather than try and analyse why practitioners use particular *bultos* and not others (psychology) or what having a Guadalupe *bulto* means to your neighbours if you are of a different ethnic background than them; I will try and look into the interplay between worshipper and *nichito*, as expressed in the *nichitos* themselves.

Clifford Geertz argues that symbolic action needs to be researched more thoroughly if we want to further our understanding of religion. He states:

...The anthropological study of religion is therefore a two-stage operation: first, an analysis of the system of meanings embodied in the symbols which make up the religion proper, and second, the relating of these systems to social-structural and psychological processes. ...[Contemporary social anthropological work]...neglects the first, and in so doing takes for granted what most needs to be elucidated. Only when we have a theoretical analysis of symbolic action comparable in sophistication to what we now have for social and psychological action, will we be able to cope effectively with those aspects of social and psychological life in which religion...plays a determinant role. (Geertz, 1966: 124-125)

*Nichitos*, as locus of symbolic action, offer several avenues of exploration. Before the analysis of the content of symbolic systems, one must look at who constitutes meaning (or creates the sacred), and how symbols are defined.

## 8.1: SYMBOLIC SYSTEMS AS PRODUCTS OF CO-OPERATION IN FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

We have seen various levels at which the practice of *nichito* and *altarcito* use brings communities and individuals together through personal devotions. My initial assumption about the use of *nichitos* was that they were used almost exclusively by women, but interviews with informants and clergy proved otherwise. Men and woman may have differing roles at a *nichito*, and they may interact with the symbols differently, but they do

use the *nichitos* equally. As well, children are taught at a young age what is done at a *nichito* or *altarcito*, and are often put in charge of the sweeping and dusting of the *bultos* and other items therein. When a *nichito* is used by men, women, and children alike, it unifies the family in prayer and practice. Therefore, *nichito* practices cannot be conceived outside of families' religious devotion and familial duties.

*Nichitos* are not displayed in front yards where there is a high level of religious and ethnic diversity; the audience would then be perceived as being unable to understand the practice. In culturally and religiously disparate neighbourhood, *nichitos* migrate to the back yard (e.g., Saint Louis, Missouri, Ottawa, Ontario) or into less functional symbols of faith such as wall plaques (edicules). When, however, a community is fairly religiously and/or ethnically homogeneous, *nichitos* are seen frequently. here there is a religious experience of unification and sharing, as neighbours will visit other *nichitos* where a particular *bulto* is displayed, for a special prayer. Neighbours will visit special *nichitos*, such as Ruth Bravo's large fountain *nichito*, and socialize about the day's experiences. Often, groups of women or men will visit a particular family's *nichito* to say special prayers. *Nichitos* aid in the experience of a shared sacred space and shared identity, thereby unifying the community or neighbourhood into a *communitas*.

## 8.2: WHAT *NICHITOS* SAY TO OTHERS

Along with establishing *communitas* within a community, building and maintaining a *nichito* is a statement addressed to the community of one's culture, ethnicity, and religiosity. The *nichito* says things about the owners' strength of faith. The structure and colours of the *nichito*, the items used to decorate and build it, and the items kept within, all establish the cultural membership of the family in a greater family of faith. Membership denotes being part of a larger whole: the *nichito* affirms the individual family with its ethnic and religious community. If one is a Polish Catholic family in an Italian neighbourhood, the maintenance of the *nichito* still establishes oneself as part of the Catholic family if not of a Polish Catholic community.

While *altarcitos* are exclusively private to the family sphere of influence, and *nichos* are exclusively public on unclaimed land, *nichitos* straddle these barriers, and allow the public to have a glimpse into the private lives and experiences behind the Sonoran-style fences in the barrio. This straddling of public and private spheres of influence makes the *nichito* a liminal location, blending the domestic, private world with the communal, accessible, public world.

Mexican American *nichitos* are perhaps the most personalized style of *nichito* in this study. They feature a great deal more than "just" religious statuary and pictures, holy water and pictures of the deceased. One gets a glimpse into the personal life of the individual(s) who

own the *nichito* through the myriad non-religious items contained therein. Ceramic Indian heads, small plastic toys, seashells, brightly coloured marbles, and a thousand other individual items within a *nichito* expose the personal, private lives of those in the home, to the public. The *nichito* in Kansas City with the rabbits, or the *nichito* with all the cats of every description: they are a moment in lived lives. The exposure of that which is personal, to the public, allows the bystander to see a glimpse into what is important in the life of the *nichito's* owner. As symbols they do not lead to socially recognized abstract meaning. Instead, these tokens bring individual concrete experiences in contact with the power of the *nichito*. They do not call for interpretation as much as memory. In that sense, a *nichito* is both symbol and medium of communication.

Finally, *nichitos* are points of religious negotiation. They are doorways allowing the worshipper access to the presence and aid of the saints and the Holy Family in the affirmation of ethnic and religious identity. *Nichitos* negotiate between Mexican American Roman Catholics and Evangelical Protestants; the Catholics view these as important manifestations of *religiosidad popolare*, while the Protestants view them as heresy and idolatry. The battle over these perceptions of *nichitos* as sacred and profane occurs every time a *nicho* or *nichito* is vandalized and lovingly restored.

*Nichitos* are a recognizable marker for a minority ethnicity and/or religious viewpoint. Here the *nichito* stands as a statement that the family is here, and their beliefs and culture are staying as well. They are not built as a defiance of the majority culture but rather, as a

negotiating point. The public cannot walk past the house without seeing the *nichito* and so they too, are engaged by the structure. They may not understand the symbols therein, but they recognize them as particular to certain cultures and religious communities.

The *nichito* also serves as a battleground of sorts. here the eternal struggle between good and bad, holy and sinful, is played out over and over with every prayer and petition offered. It is a poignant fact that crime-ridden areas of large cities have almost no *nichitos*, although there are many empty *nichito* shells in evidence in those areas of Tucson and Los Angeles.

The *bultos* within the *nichitos* are on a symbolic level, rather simple - they are images of the saints and the Virgin Mary. Mary herself does not stand for a meaning, quality, or function. She is not a symbol; she is a person. In fact, she is not just a person; more precisely, she is more than just one person. She manifests as a different person in every *nichito*.

...There is a layer deeper still, one that has been the least studied. The outward manifestations of this last layer are (1) the Italian tendency to splinter religious devotions to a single supernatural being, notably Mary, into a range of devotions and each separate and complete in itself, and (2) the tendency for Italian Catholics to bypass the institutional church in favor of direct contact with the sacred, as evident in the experience of apparitions and stigmatization, and belief in the incorruption of corpses. It is here, I think, at this third and final layer that we come upon another important source of the 'Italian problem...'. (Carroll in O'Toole, 1989: 43)



As discussed in Orsi's study on the Madonna of 115th Street, the Irish-dominated Roman Catholic priesthood in New York City perceived this use of folk-religion as a problem, or threat, to the future of the religion.

The *nichito* allows direct, unmediated prayer between the human and the Divine. Mary steps in as mediatrix, replacing the parish priest. Here the worshippers know their prayers have been said and heard.

The *nichito* is a place which unifies much in the world of the practitioner. It unifies and communicates to the petitioner, the Divine world, and the secular world around it. But what does it communicate, and why?

### 8.3: *NICHITOS* AND RITUAL

As ritualized space or ritualized context, *nichitos* are marked by their domestic aspects. At a *nichito*, *nicho*, or *altarcito*, the Divine can come and visit with humans. No Roman Catholic would ever suggest that the Virgin Mary lives in the *bulto* or *retablo* which represents her presence - that would be idolatry. She does not manifest physically in most cases, although I would argue that my informants who have experienced apparitions have indeed experienced *hierophany*, the presence of the Divine through the Mother of God. What is communicated at a *nichito* is the intense respect, love, and joy which the Divine

evokes in the worshipper, and the love and caring which the Virgin Mary offers to her earthly family.

Negotiation is one form of communication, and *nichitos* and *nichos* offer various levels of negotiation. I am grateful to Dr. Jim Griffith for this model of *nicho* use. At the most obvious level, a *nichito* or *nicho* allows for the communication and negotiation between the worshipper and the Divine, seen as God or Jesus, the Holy Spirit, Virgin Mary, or the family of saints. As well, deep concerns are communicated to the Divine at a *nichito*. Issues discussed at *nichitos* have typically been described as "small things, not important" by some of my informants, but in truth they are things which might even be seen as selfish. The most "unimportant" things can be the most important things in an individual's life, things which are simply too personal to discuss with most people, things so secret or some important or so painful that one would tell them to one's *abuelita* but not to anyone else. At the *nichito* or *altarcito*, one can bare one's soul without worrying about what anyone else thinks of your worries, and there is the feeling of safety and understanding engendered in talking to the Virgin Mary as Madonna. Mothers pray for the safety of their husbands and children at their *nichito*. "She is like my mother; I talk to her all the time because I miss my mother. I call her my mother. She makes me very, very happy. She doesn't talk to me. I feel safe and protected because of her"<sup>216</sup>.

She is IN me, and she sometimes speaks in me. If I have a woman come in, and they are, you know, upset, I ask her

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<sup>216</sup> Interview with Ruth Bravo, Tucson, Az., Jan. 3, 1997.

"what's wrong", and then She talks through me. I know it is her. ...I think She tells me what to say to women because I had no mother and so I am like that to them when they need me<sup>217</sup>.

This relationship is deeply felt at the emotional level. Informants in my study, as in those of Kay Turner, expressed strong feelings of deep religious joy at their relationships with each other, with the community, and with the Divine. Josephine expressed her extreme sense of joy at the completion of her *nichito*. She had a hand in its decoration, and sent her husband out hunting for the "perfect" gold-gilt angels for the exterior. She views the *nichito* as a proper place to display her *bultos* of the Infant of Atocha, the manifestation of the infant Jesus to which she is drawn.

Joy and religious enjoyment are emotions often forgotten when scholars discuss religiosity, yet they are two of the strongest motivators for the perseverance of religious practice. One cannot pass on the sense of enjoyment in worship unless it is directly experienced. Perhaps this is one reason why *religiosidad popular* is such a wellspring of faith in Roman Catholicism; it allows the individual worshipper to access and share those experiences of religious joy in an unmediated manner.

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton have remarked on the link between perception and enjoyment thusly:

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<sup>217</sup> Interview with Mary Garcia, Tucson, Az., 3 January 1997.

People who discover the objective possibilities of things through perception cease to see the world strictly in terms of their own needs and thus see many new things to do with it. If these actions are enjoyed, they will gain meaning and be valued independently of the hierarchy of terminal material goals that is our modern heritage. ...It is the social world in which we live; the sum of the people, transactions, habitats, traditions, and institutions that form a vital aspect of everyday life. (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981: 248-249)

A *nichito* is indeed, a "quite vital aspect of every day life". This gives ritual in general, and prayers particularly, a special quality of comfort noted by my informants. Prayer is described as being enjoyable at a *nichito* or *altarcito*, compared to within the institutional church, and there is a sense of owning the unique sacred space of the *altarcito* or *nichito*, as evident in the comments from Kay Turner's informants in the previous chapter. The experience of creating, viewing, experiencing the items within each is enjoyable<sup>218</sup>. The relationship with the Divine becomes enjoyable. The sharing within one's family, neighbourhood, *communitas* is enjoyable. To be enjoyable, something instills a sense of joy, and is this not the ultimate goal of prayer, veneration, and worship? The worshipper experiences true joy in his/her relationship with God, the Holy Family, and the saints, through the sharing of pain and sorrow, joy and happiness - an intense, personalized sense of enjoyment.

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<sup>218</sup> See Csikszentmihalyi, pgs. 247-248 for a discussion on how the flow experience heightens a person's sense of enjoyment at a task, and how this compares to alienation, a sense of separation from a task.

The *nichito* complex, the artifact itself, its content, and even its location share a very strong effect.

Anthropologist Robert Armstrong has written that "in all cultures certain things exist which, though they may appear to be but ordinary objects, yet are treated in ways quite different from the ways in which objects are usually treated." (Armstrong, quoted in McDannell 1995: 18) He explains that the reason for this special and different treatment lies in their "affecting presence". ...How [do] people activate or enliven objects so that an object's influence can be felt[?] The nature and extent of affecting presence or power may differ, but even commercialized objects that are no longer used in a religious context still have religious associations because their iconography originated within particular Christian communities. (McDannell, 1995: 18)

*Nichitos* are created by daily ritual, every time they are approached each day. The physical building of the *nichito* most often only occurs once in a family's lifetime, but the spiritual building of the relationship between earthly and holy family occurs every time a person stops to pray, think, worship, or leave an offering, at a *nichito*.

The *nichito* is one more instance of the larger category of ritual as defined by Geertz: the image and the lived are joined.

...It is in ritual -- that is, consecrated behavior -- that this conviction that religious conceptions are vertical and that religious directives are sound is somehow generated. It is in some sort of ceremonial form...that the moods and motivations which sacred symbols induce in men and the general conceptions of the order of existence which they formulate for men meet and reinforce one another. In a ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms,

**turns out to be the same world. ...Whatever role divine intervention may or may not play in the creation of faith, ...it is, primarily at least, out of the context of concrete acts of religious observance that religious conviction emerges on the human plane. [Emphasis mine.] (Geertz, 1966: 112-113)**

So it is the items within the *nichito*, and the actions of those who build, tend, and worship at the *nichito*, which make the Divine manifest therein.

The few discussions on home altars and yard shrines in the past have assumed that the *nichito* is a microcosm of the spiritual reality of the church, but the ways in which *nichitos* function and are viewed seem to contradict this. My initial theories about *nichitos* also assumed that these manifestations of *religiosidad popolare*, or *religion casera*, were reflections of the practices of the Institutional Church. Instead, it appears that the private devotions practiced by the faithful at their *nichitos* and *altarcitos* are **not** merely echoes of the rituals practiced within the church.

In fact a *nichito* is not a 'miniature representation' of a church. It is not an institutional building; it is not controlled by a priest; it is not even a downsized image of a church, as the history and geographic distribution of similar artifacts speak for the independent existence of *nichitos* as a phenomenon.

It may be that religion does not spring from the large (institutional) then "copied" by the small in the home (*nichito/altarcito*). Could it be suggested that religion springs from the small, and that practices of the institutional Church are patterned upon these humble

domestic practices? The *nichito* may not be a derivative of the Church. Instead, the church could be perceived as an amplification of the universe as represented at the *nichito*. We refer to the State, or nation, as a large family, rather than individual families being miniature models patterned on the State. Similarly, one can view the relationship between the Church as institution (State), and the *nichito* as family. The *nichito* is NOT lesser, it is merely different. Religions need both; they form a synergistic interrelationship that we call "religiosity". The two aspects of worship, institution and family, public and private, then give the religion form and structure.

This interrelatedness of public and private worship echoes the two complementary practices which existed simultaneously in ancient Rome: one worshipped the State Gods at the institution (temple), but also had both in-home altars where the home Gods (lares and penates) were honoured, and semi-public shrines and altars where offerings could be left by the building's owners and/or bypassers (Hermes and other *edicules* mounted on building facades). Both Pompeii and Herculaneum have numerous examples of all three forms of sacred spaces: Church (temple), *altarcito* (lares and penates), and *nichito* (*edicules*, *hermes*).

Arguably, *nichos* are similar to *nichitos* but because of their locations in "wild" space (e.g., outside the boundaries of privately- or institutionally-owned land, such as adjacent to highways) and their semi-anonymous origins, they can be compared more to sacred spaces such as sacred groves. Here they are recognized as special locations, yet no one "owns"

them. Religions may well thrive without this multi-layered system of worship, but the differing ways and means in which one can express different religious issues allow for the individual worshipper to find the path best suited to the moment, and the need.

#### 8.4: A VISIT TO THE DUMP

This dissertation looks at *nichitos* in the context of many different manifestations of *religiosidad popolare*, from *nichitos* to roadside crosses, from pilgrimage practices to Day of the Dead offrenda. The title was chosen to highlight one of the most intriguing *nichos* in the collection: a humble, all-but-anonymous *nicho* built directly in the middle of an informal garbage dump. How is it that something as holy as a *bulto* of the Virgin Mary can be at home in the middle of such an unlikely space as a dump?

A mere two weeks before the deadline for submission of this dissertation, Dr. Peter Gardella emailed me with information on a new book he had heard featured on National Public Radio in the U.S.A. Laura Chester had authored a book entitled Holy Personal, which investigates small privately-owned chapels across the United States. A quick email between Chester and myself led to her sending me excerpts of her book which she felt might be of interest. Of particular immediacy was the following:

**At the end of the flyer something strikes me: Everywhere  
Our Lady has appeared on earth She has chosen very**



**humble surroundings. This property has one factor that is consistent to the setting of a very famous apparition site. Years before Alfredo purchased the property it was the site of a landfill ...In Lourdes, the Blessed Mother appeared to Bernadette at the cave which was used as a garbage dump. [highlights in original.]**

**I am reminded of another holy place of worship in New York State, Pacem in Terris, owned by the Frederick Frankels, also built on the site of an old dump. I wonder -- what are the soulful qualities inherent in a dump site -- Out of the fecund compost of useless matter and cast-off things springs new life? Alfredo turned his landfill into a garden and then a holy park, but he also has visions of doom...<sup>219</sup>**

How, therefore, do we explain the existence of Our Lady of the Garbage Dump? The issue is not its "anonymous" nature, nor its location in the wilds of the desert. Rather, the puzzle remains the placement of holy symbols such as a *nicho* with a *bulto* therein, in the middle of a garbage dump. I believe that the answer of a landfill site as fecund land is only one small answer to the larger puzzle.

Another orientation would perceive garbage heaps as the anthesis of order, and even purity. Does the presence of the Immaculate, pristine Virgin Mary somehow rehabilitate the dirtiest land? Is the Virgin's presence in garbage dumps and landfills, some sort of allegory to Mary Magdelene being rehabilitated by Jesus? Does the presence of the Mother of God in a garbage dump have something to do with God's ability to reclaim the most soiled of us all? Does the presence of the Divine in garbage heaps have a profound message?

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<sup>219</sup> Laura Chester, excerpt from Holy Personal, published 2000 by Indiana University Press; quoted in email, 29 December 2000.

The Virgin Mary is by far the main focus of this process of building and worshipping at *nichitos* and *nichos*; perhaps there is some tie between her presence at the location, and its sacrality. Mary is the ultimate mediatrix: she stands between human and divine, and aids in the communication between the two states of being. Similarly, the *nichito* is located between the Church and the home, and between heaven and earth. A *nichito*, or an *altarcito*, is a classic example of Victor Turner's concept of liminality.

The domestic becomes the sacred: sacrality is created by intent, action, purpose. By this transformation from garbage to grace, profane to sacred, a normal bathtub is turned into a *nichito*; plastic flowers are turned into offerings; a stovetop protective ring becomes a saint's halo. (fig. 165) The domestic creates the sacred environment where the "doorbell" can be rung (through ritual action and words) and dialogue with the Divine can occur. Place that painted ceramic Indian head statue on a living room shelf and it evokes memories of the painter and relationship to family. Place the same Indian head inside a *nichito* and it becomes a visual link between the live and the dead; it invites and affirms the relationship between the entire family: *incarnadas et non-incarnadas* (incarnate and disincarnate).

The establishment of a *nichito* or *nicho*, filled with old things, and daily ephemera, could be perceived as straddling the barrier between dirt and clean, sacred and profane. It does straddle the barrier between home and institution, and between humans and the Divine. Laura Chester's theory is that the Virgin Mary manifests in garbage dumps and on landfill sites because garbage is transformed from waste to fertile humus. Like leaves every

autumn, "garbage" is supposed to be buried or burned so that it can eventually be reclaimed by the land and transformed by natural processes, into fertile land. Certainly one could turn to theology to show how the presence of the Virgin Mary and/or saints would lend a supernatural hand in a form of spiritual composting<sup>220</sup>. We could go further and see in that transformation a whole cycle of recycling garbage into grace. Through the practice of spiritual recycling in the reclaiming of old bathtubs and refrigerators for a reborn spiritual purpose, the human is put into contact with the presence of the Divine, where Catholic belief promises divine redemption. For surely, if the Spirit can visit the petitioner inside a half-bathtub, can she not believe that when she dies, there will be a form of salvation awaiting her as well? We could go even further and link dirt with sin. Yet the type of symbolic connection demanded to accomplish that leap is out of place in the *nichito* context.

If garbage dumps and landfill sites are defined as liminal locations, threatening and dangerous (whether one is describing this as psychologically or environmentally dangerous), the presence of a *nichito* can be explained following the principles espoused by Mary Douglas. As Canadian film director Donna Read points out in her movie "Full Circle", (National Film Board of Canada, 1993) we refer to the act of disposing of refuse<sup>221</sup> as

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<sup>220</sup> Jim Griffith notes in his letter, May 2001, that there are numerous Virgin Mary stories dating back to the Middle Ages showing the Virgin's preference for humble surroundings. As well, he points out that she is neither "rational" nor "sensible" in who she helps.

<sup>221</sup> Even the term for garbage itself, "re'-fuse" is also "re-fuse": to refuse these things as superfluous, or used up.

"throwing it away -- where's away?" That which we discard as polluted, or disordered<sup>222</sup>, is trucked, shipped, and moved to locations on the boundary of domesticated space.

We often hear through the media of a rural area vehemently protesting plans to bury or burn a large city's garbage in its 'back yard'. In 2000, while the City of Toronto strove to win an Olympic bid for the year 2008, the battle raged with a small community north of the Greater Toronto Area as to whether or not Toronto's garbage surplus would be trucked there for disposal.

This transformation from defiled into holy seems to fit wonderously with Mary Douglas's theories of pollution. (Douglas, 1966) Humans create disorder and the impure, while the Divine presence transcends the dichotomy between disorder and order, between impurity and purity.

The theory, however, ignores the cultural context of *nichitos* located in front yards. The question suggests the importance of one relatively-neglected aspect of the *nichito* phenomenon, that is, the location of the artifacts. The location as part of the artifacts must be replaced in its cultural context.

If there are few examples of *nichitos* built on garbage dumps, there are many indications of yards being associated with junk and refuse. The most obvious issue in our interpretation is

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<sup>222</sup> Concepts best crystallized by Mary Douglas in the classic Purity and Danger.

one of culture. Anglo-Americans often whinge about the value of their housing being driven down when Mexican American families move into their neighbourhood, primarily due to the allegation that Mexican Americans fill their yards with "garbage". In fact, this is a culture gap between the two communities. That which has moved from the domestic sphere (the home) to the semi-wild (the yard) is not without use; rather, it has been placed in a state of liminality (outside the home) until a new, revised use for it has been established. Whether an old bathtub becomes a *nichito*, or a piece of "scrap" metal forms a sculpture (fig. 170, 171), the "garbage" is transformed by the hands of a person into something new and no longer "refuse".

As one of my informants pointed out, following her childhood experiences, garbage dumps are good places to find things which can be re-used, and rehabilitated: recycling could therefore be viewed as a type of 'secular salvation'<sup>223</sup>. Certainly the *bulto* itself was transformed from "garbage" to activated *bulto* again, much like the headless *bulto* at the side of the interstate north of Tucson which went from Saint Francis to Saint Martin. Once the *nicho* was installed in a "classic" niche type housing, other nameless individuals started to clear the other refuse away from the structure. Before long, the *nicho* stood alone, flanked by piles of garbage now located a minimum of ten feet away from the *nicho* in any direction. The *bulto* was transformed, and the land was transformed.

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<sup>223</sup> Dr. M-F Guédon, private conversation, December 2000.

According to the reaction of several informants, the notion of impurity did not have anything to do with what people from other cultures saw as garbage. A junk yard for them was opportunity and old things, rather than dirt. A garbage or junk pile is a liminal space in Turner's terms; it is not so impure, nor so symbolically dirty, that it could not become sacred. The bathtub is, like the courtyard, not so much impure as domestic. The potential function and form of the artifacts (from toys to plastic flowers, from garbage items to bathtubs) transcend their associations with bodily functions or domesticity. The juxtaposition with Mary's *bulto* is sufficient to allow it to go from "just" a bathtub to the required oval shape of the *nichito*.

Three aspects of *nichito* rituals confirm the irrelevancy of the pure/impure, clean/dirty, and even sacred/profane Durkheimian-like oppositions.

a) Rituals of consecration or blessing are virtually absent. Unlike the church which is established as a church following the placing of a consecrated altar, the *nichito* is not blessed officially. Though it could be done if a priest agreed, in fact this is rarely the case.

b) Given the nature of the artifacts used to construct and decorate the *nichitos*, one would expect rituals to purify the location or the artifacts themselves. There are definitely no rituals of purification. The total absence of such rituals would correspond to the absence of the idea that recycled items are impure.

c) Neither do we find rituals designed to emphasize the domestic or recycled, nature of the materials: Indeed, the fact that a fridge, or a bathtub, or a sink, is transformed into a *nichito* is not alluded to in the decorations for instance (one could think that a soap or sponge could accompany the bath tub for instance. This is never the case). The fridge ceases being a refrigerator, and the bath tub is no longer a bath tub. The domesticity is recalled rather, in the placement of family items, such as picture or toys.

One strong clue to the question is the fact that the "impurity" of the garbage or recycled artifacts is never stressed in the ritual use of the *nichitos*, nor indeed, of all related objects. Instead, it seems to be assumed that the need of the Virgin or the saint to be placed and housed transcends any prior use of the material used to construct, maintain, and decorate the place where the Divine dwells. This appears to occur when accessed by common people who do not need the formality of the big institutions.

Part of the amazing nature of the existence of Our Lady of the Garbage Dump is the transformation of that space by the actions of anonymous individuals. The site had been a pile of rubble in the middle of the desert on unserviced land. Indeed, the broken *bulto* of the Virgin arrived in that place exactly because it was a dump. Someone, unhappy with a broken *bulto*, had refused its presence and turned it into refuse<sup>224</sup>. The *bulto* was then

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<sup>224</sup> Clearly whoever tossed the *bulto* into the trash was not aware of the belief that a broken *bulto* merely proves that saint has intervened on the owner's behalf. Some families cherish their broken statues.

restored or 'recycled' from broken and salvaged, into active and viable by the actions of the man who repaired it and built the niches housing it.

The Virgin Mary is not only the mediatrix between God and human being; she is also the mediatrix between that which is wild (uncontrolled, chaotic) and domestic (controlled, ordered), as well as between Jesus and humanity. As woman and mother, she is the archetypal symbol of the domestic sphere of influence. As mothers order and tidy up the home, so one can say that the Virgin Mary tidies up disorder and chaos by her presence in the disordered corners of the world.

The locating of the holy Mary in the seemingly ordinary garbage dump or landfill is also related to transformation of place and time, and ritual actions as process. Dr. Santos Vega of Arizona State University offers a partial explanation and confirmation in terms of Roman Catholic theology. Here the issues of faith and humility come into play.

If one thinks theologically, one would say God is Love and God is Humility. The humility ascription can be understood by reading scripture about the Old Testament prophet who found God in a tiny breeze passing by the cave where he stood. The son of God Jesus being born in a stable in a cave. What does one find in a stable if not humble animals, their odors, hay, and a humble food box. So is scripture full of examples of rejection and redemption, being lowly and uplifted, and the last shall be first, conquering evil by good, etc. So why not a *nichito* in a dump? ...Even so one helps themselves through prayer and good works. Good works and prayer is [sic] practice of that faith. So one can find that faith in the poorest of the poor at a dump who creates a sacred



place with a *bulto* which represents a holy concept, a religious story, a place of prayer <sup>225</sup>.

Mary can be described as the ultimate liminal figure in Roman Catholic religion, being neither fully saint nor God(dess). Her shared attributes of being wholly human, and therefore "really real", make her accessible to men and women. Why do so many people pray to the Virgin Mary rather than directly to her son, Jesus? My Roman Catholic informants confirmed over and over that her relationship to Jesus was the defining reason: she was his mother. "You ask Mary because she's Jesus's mother, and you don't refuse your Mother anything"<sup>226</sup>.

At the theological level, the wonder of the miraculous experience of being *theotokos*, Mother of God, gives her a level of experience beyond anything a mere mortal can imagine, while granting her special status.

God was born of Mary, but she contributed to him only human nature and nothing of divine nature. She herself was completely human in nature, a created being, not an uncreated being, like God, though her role as Theotokos makes her unique among human beings. her beauty is precisely in her humanity and in the specific direction of that humanity in the scheme of redemption. ...She incites awe not because of any divinity, but precisely because she is "one of us". ...Both her worry and her impatience are human, and

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<sup>225</sup> Dr. Santos Vega, email communication, January 6, 2001.

<sup>226</sup> Elena Martinez, Puerto Rican/Irish (attributed to her mother) 12 August, 1999.

excite a human response in Jesus, showing him to be her son. Yet she is the channel and instrument of the Incarnation. It is the disparity, not the parity, between mother and Son, which so impressed the early Christians, and continues to impress Catholic and Orthodox believers alike. Mary is a paradigmatic instance of the recurrent Christian theme of the power of the weak. ...hers is the ultimate success story, so to speak; the human being whose griefs were greatest becomes the one whose power to remedy the griefs of others is also greatest. Hence she becomes the greatest pilgrimage saint, whose pleas are most efficacious with God, as they were with Jesus her son at Cana. (V. and E. Turner, 1978: 153-154)

To build a *nichito*, to worship at an *altarcito*, and to clear away the garbage around a *nicho*, all of this is the process of making the sacred manifest in daily life. *Nichos*, *nichitos*, *altarcitos*, and the various incarnations of *religiosidad popular* are all manifestations of the sacred in the world. Most people understand the concept of that which is so holy as to be sacred, but working from Emile Durkheim's writings, and anticipating Mary Douglas, Bateson crystallized the concept of things being sacred. He summed up the traditional dichotomy between sacred and profane in these terms:

The original Latin word '*sacer*', from which we get our word, means both 'so holy and pure' as to be sacred, and 'so holy and impure' as to be sacred. It's as if there's a scale -- on the extreme pure end we have sacredness, then it swings down in the middle to the secular, the normal, the everyday, and then at the other end we again find the word '*sacer*' applied to the most impure, the most horrible. So you get a notion of magical power implied at either end of the scale, while in the middle is prose, the normal, the uninteresting, and the secular. (Bateson, 1991: 267-268)

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This classic view is challenged by the *nichito* complex in that it does not reject the domestic sphere of life; it feeds on it, enriches it, and is integrated into it. Far from dwelling on the extreme of the sacred, the most impure or the most holy, that which is sacred in a *nichito* is indeed located in the normal, the uninteresting, the mundane, and the secular.

**APPENDIX 1: Salient Comments on *RELIGIOSIDAD POPULARE* from the Third Conference of Latino Bishops, Puebla, Mexico, 1979.**

**John Eagleson and Philip Scharper, eds. Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary. 1979, Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis Books**

**Quotations from 3. Evangelization and the People's Religiosity:**

**447 This people's religion is lived out in a preferential way by the "poor and simple" (EN 48 - Paul VI, *Evangelii muntiandi*). But it takes in all social sectors; and sometimes it is one of the few bonds that really brings together the people living in our nations, which are so divided politically. But of course we must acknowledge that there is much diversity amid this unity, a diversity of social, ethnic, and even generation groups. (p. 185)**

**448 At its core the religiosity of the people is a storehouse of values that offers the answers of Christian wisdom to the great questions of life. The Catholic wisdom of the common people is capable of fashioning a vital synthesis. It creatively combines the divine and the human, Christ and Mary, spirit and body, communication and institution, person and community, faith and homeland, intelligence and emotion. (p. 185)**

### **3.2 A Description of the People's Religiosity**

**454 We can point to the following items as positive elements of the people's piety: the trinitarian presence evident in devotions and iconography; a sense of God the Father's providence; Christ celebrated in the mystery of his Incarnation (the Nativity, the child Jesus), in his crucifixion, in the Eucharist, and in the devotion to the Sacred Heart. Love for Mary is shown in many ways. She and "her mysteries are part of the very identity of these peoples and characterize their popular piety"<sup>227</sup>). She is venerated as the Immaculate Mother of God and of human beings, and as the Queen of our individual countries as well as of the whole continent. Other positive features are: veneration of the saints as protectors; remembrance of the dead; an awareness of personal dignity and of solidarity brotherhood; awareness of sin and the need to expiate it; the ability to express the faith in a total idiom that goes beyond all sorts of rationalism (Chant, images, gesture, color, and dance); faith situated in time (feasts) and in various places (sanctuaries and shrines); a feel for pilgrimage as a symbol of human and Christian existence; filial respect for their pastors as representatives of God; an ability to celebrate the faith in expressive and communitarian forms; the deep integration of the sacraments and sacramentals into their personal and social life; a warm affection for the person of the Holy Father; a capacity for suffering and heroism in withstanding trials and professing their faith; a sense of the value of prayer; and acceptance of other people. (p. 186)**

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**227 Jean-Paul II, Homily of Zapopan 2, AAS LXXI, P. 228.**

456 The negative aspects that we can point to are varied in origin. Some are of an ancestral type: superstition, magic, fatalism, idolatrous worship of power, fetishism, and ritualism. Some are due to distortions of catechesis: static archaism, misinformation and ignorance, syncretistic reinterpretation, and reduction of the faith to a mere contract with God. Some negative aspects are threats to the faith today: secularism as broadcasted by the media of social communication consumptionism; sects' oriental and agnostic religions; ideological, economic, social, and political types of manipulation; various secularized forms of political messianism; and uprooting and urban proletarianization as the result of cultural change. We can state that many of these phenomena are real obstacles to evangelization. (p. 186)

## **APPENDIX 2: PHOTOS**

### **APPENDIX 2a: List of Photos and Credits**

Unless otherwise noted, all photos are copyright Shelley TSivia Rabinovitch.

1. Miami, Az., Exterior, *nicho*
2. Miami, Az., Interior, *nicho*
3. Tucson, Az., El Fuerte neighbourhood, Exterior, *capilla*
4. Tucson, Az., El Fuerte neighbourhood, Interior, *capilla*
5. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk. neighbourhood, Exterior, *nichito* (Josephine and Cristobal)
6. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk. neighbourhood, Interior, *nichito* (Josephine and Cristobal)
7. Ottawa, On., MacArthur Ave., Mary *bulto* with spotlight
8. Blue Springs, Mo., Mary flower planter
9. Kansas City, Mo., Virgin Mary and Jesus *bultos* in garden
10. Ottawa, On., St. Vincent Hospital grounds, winterized *bulto*
11. Crystal Mines, Que., *cruz* (photo copyright Daphne Griffiths)
12. Crystal Mines, Que., *cruz & bulto* detail (photo copyright Daphne Griffiths)
13. Paradise Valley, Az. (Phoenix), *descanso* to Mike Williams
14. Paradise Valley, Az. (Phoenix), *descanso* detail
15. Tucson, Az., *altarcito*
16. St. Roch-des-Aulnaies, Que., *altarcito*, (photo copyright François Brault)
17. Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, glass-blowing factory workplace *altarcito* (semi-obsured, against back wall)
18. New York City, NY, Debra Taxi Co., Luis's vehicular *altarcito*

19. Ottawa, On., St. Laurent Shopping Centre parking lot: Moslem prayer box  
*sacramentale*
20. Tucson, Az., El Tiradito (Wishing Shrine), Old Barrio
21. Tucson, Az., El Tiradito (Wishing Shrine), Old Barrio
22. Ottawa, On., Portugese *edicole*
23. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk., Guadalupe *edicole*
24. Kensington Palace, UK, *peregrinacion*, Diana, Princess of Wales (photo copyright Newsweek, Peter Turnley)
25. Winchester, UK, *peregrinacion*, Diana, Princess of Wales, Princess of Wales' own regiment flagpole
26. So. England, *peregrinacion*, Diana, Princess of Wales, impromptu shrine at a garden store
27. Tri-Be-Ca area, Manhattan, NYC, *peregrinacion*, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Jr., stuffed teddy bears
28. Tri-Be-Ca area, Manhattan, NYC, *peregrinacion*, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Jr., money taped to wall
29. Tri-Be-Ca area, Manhattan, NYC, *peregrinacion*, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Jr., customized pillar candles
30. Ottawa, On., *peregrinacion*, Pierre Elliot Trudeau, eternal flame
31. Ottawa, On., *peregrinacion*, Pierre Elliot Trudeau, roses
32. Ottawa, On., *peregrinacion*, Pierre Elliot Trudeau, beanie bear angel
33. Ottawa, On., *peregrinacion*, O.C. Transpo bus company, wide view
34. Ottawa, On., *peregrinacion*, O.C. Transpo bus company, close- up
35. Tucson, Az., *peregrinacion*, Pizza Hut, Broadway Ave., side of building with offerings
36. Tucson, Az., *peregrinacion*, Pizza Hut, Broadway Ave., corporate logo with black ribbon



37. Tucson, Az., *peregrinacion*, Pizza Hut, Broadway Ave., close- up of offerings
38. San Jose, Ca., *nacimiento* (photo copyright Marna Nightingale)
39. Vanier, On., *nacimiento*
40. Tucson, Az., *nacimiento*, Swan Road church
41. Chiapas, Mexico, *ofrenda/altar*, (photo copyright Dana Salvo)
42. San Xavier Mission, O'Odham reservation, Az., Virgin Mary *bulto* with *milagros*
43. San Xavier Mission, O'Odham reservation, Az., Virgin Mary *bulto* with *milagros* (detail)
44. Bisbee, Az., Highway 80, Mule Pass, *Manda nicho* (exterior)
45. Bisbee, Az., Highway 80, Mule Pass, *Manda nicho* (interior)
46. Ottawa, On., Virgin Mary *bulto* on 2nd floor of Stewart Ave home
47. Nauplion, Greece, *eikonostasos*
48. Tucson, Az., A-Mountain *nicho* (lower nicho)
49. Tucson, Az., A-Mountain *nicho* (upper nicho/grotto)
50. Tucson, Az., A-Mountain *nicho* (upper nicho interior)
51. Pima Co., Az., Our Lady of the Garbage Dump (2000 photo) interior
52. Pima Co., Az., Our Lady of the Garbage Dump (2000 photo) exterior
53. Tucson, Az., Ted De Grazia Gallery of the Sun *nicho* (exterior)
54. Tucson, Az., Ted De Grazia Gallery of the Sun *nicho* (interior, 1994)
55. Tucson, Az., Ted De Grazia Gallery of the Sun *nicho* (interior, 1998)
56. Tucson, Az., Ted De Grazia Gallery of the Sun *nicho* (interior, 1999)
57. Ottawa, Baseline Rd., *nichito* 1999.
58. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk., Paloma St. 12 inch *nichito*

59. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk., Niagara St., typical *nichito*
60. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk., Niagara St., "mission style" *nichito*
61. Tucson, Az., Ajo Way, "mission style" church
62. Kansas City, Mo., Argentine District, Mexican-American "Cat" *nichito*
63. Long Island, NY, Elmont, St. Anthony of Padua *nichito* (copyright Martha Cooper)
64. St. Louis, Mo., *nichito* with *bultos* and wooden ducks
65. Tucson, Az., Old Ft. Lowell community, St. Francis of Assisi *nichito*
66. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk., Guadalupe and Juan Diego *nichito*
67. Tucson, Az., *nichito* placed at 45 degree angle to street
68. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk., *nichito* built to appear integral to home architecture
69. St. Louis, Mo., "The Hill" district, *bulto* facing rear of home
70. Pierre Port, La., isolated *bulto* on island (photo copyright Mark Charleville)
71. Château Richer, Que., barn with St. Francis *bulto* (wide angle) (photo copyright François Brault)
72. Château Richer, Que., barn with St. Francis *bulto* (detail), (photo copyright François Brault)
73. New York City, New York. St. Francis Xavier *bulto* over garage doors echoes the old practice of saints atop barns. (Photo copyright Martha Cooper)
74. Florence, Italy, *edicole* on second story of building exterior with votive candle
75. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk., pressboard and roofing *nichito*
76. Tucson, Az., south of 35th St., wood *nichito*
77. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk., Niagara St., bullet holes in plexiglas front of *nichito*
78. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk., Niagara St., bullet holes in plexiglas front of *nichito* (detail-note far left side of plexiglas)

79. Covington, NY, "Mary in a Bathtub"
80. Tucson, Az., "Our Lady of the Philco" (photo copyright Michael Riley)
81. Enterprise, On., "Our Lady of the Coldspot", Virgin Mary *bulto* mounted in a recycled Coldspot refrigerator, Murphy family farm
82. Enterprise, On., "Our Lady of the Coldspot", Virgin Mary *bulto* mounted in a recycled Coldspot refrigerator, Murphy family farm, (detail)
83. Ottawa, On., prefabricated niche form
84. Tucson, Az., Mission Ave., specialists design curved brick *nichitos* such as this one
85. Plaquimire, La., weathered wooden "house" style *nichito* (photo copyright M. Charleville)
86. Guadalupe, Az., Yaqui *nichito* with wrought iron front
87. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk., Niagara St., 'grotto style' *nichito*
88. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk., Paloma St., multi-niche *nichito*
89. New York City, NY, multi-level Italian fountain *nichito* dedicated to St. Anthony of Padua (photo copyright Martha Cooper)
90. San Jose, Ca., colourful Mexican-American *nichito* (photo copyright Marna Nightingale)
91. Marmora, On., "Queen of Peace" apparition prayer card
92. Athens, Greece, *Aeskalypion* at side of Odeon Theatre
93. Pompeii, Italy, Kitchen altar
94. Pompeii, Italy, head of god in a *nicho*
95. Pompeii, Italy, phallus *nichito*
96. Wahiawa, Hi., Healing Stones of Wahiawa
97. Wahiawa, Hi., Healing Stones of Wahiawa, (Detail)
98. Ottawa, On., Manphoang Grocery Store shrine

99. Ottawa, On., Chez Nam Restaurant, interior shrine
100. Ottawa, On., Chez Nam Restaurant, exterior shrine
101. Glastonbury, U.K., Tara shrine at exterior of store by the Red Spring
102. New York City, NY, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Buddha in Foliate Niche detail 1  
(catalogue # 1999-138)
103. New York City, NY, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Buddha in Foliate Niche detail 2  
(catalogue #1999-138)
104. New York City, NY, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Vishnu with Lakshmi and  
Sarasvati (catalogue #57.51.7)
105. Odessa, Ukraine, New Jewish Synagogue, Torah Ark
106. Istanbul, Turkey, E. Wall of Suleymanie Mosque, (photo copyright Tur-Yay  
postcards)
107. Utica, NY, Vietnamese Catholic *altarcito* (photo copyright Mel Rosenthal)
108. Nellie Plantation, Assumption Parish, La., Virgin Mary *bulto* with blue veil (photo  
copyright M. Charleville)
109. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk., monochrome white Virgin Mary *bulto*
110. Kansas City, Mo., "Mary, Queen of Love" *bulto*, Askew and Garner Sts.)
111. Jackson Heights, NY., Sacred Heart of Jesus, open-arm style *bulto*
112. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk., Sacred Heart of Jesus, closed-arm style
113. Pima County, Az., off Camino Verde, crucifix in *nichito*
114. San Xavier del Bac Mission, O'Odham Reservation, Az., Niño de Bogota *bulto* at  
Virgin Mary chapel
115. Elmont, NY, Ste. Anne and young Virgin Mary, Italian statuary
116. Interstate I-10 near Marana, Az., Saint *nicho* exterior 1997
117. Interstate I-10 near Marana, Az., Saint *nicho* interior 1997

118. Interstate I-10 near Marana, Az., Saint *nicho* interior 1999 (note headless *bulto*)
119. Interstate I-10 near Marana, Az., Saint *nicho* 1999 (detail)
120. Tucson, Az., A-Mountain, red bows mark the path to the *nichos* (1999)
121. Tucson, Az., A-Mountain, lower *nicho* to St. Jude (1999)
122. Tucson, Az., A-Mountain, grotto entrance (1999)
123. Tucson, Az., A-Mountain, grotto (detail) (1999)
124. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk., *nichito* with St. Lucy and other *bultos* (Valenzuela family)
125. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk., El Rio St., *Nichito* with Malverde bust atop the structure (under plexiglas)
126. San Xavier del Bac Mission, O' Odham Reservation, Az., Malverde bust located below "regulation" saint *bultos*, Mary chapel.
127. Near Tampico, Mexico, *Altarcito* with two Indian head busts (photo copyright Elizabeth Lynch, scanned by David Corbett)
128. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk., Niagara St., Mary Bravo's Virgin Mary *nichito* with flowers and fountain
129. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk., Niagara St., Mary Bravo's Virgin Mary *nichito* with flowers and fountain (detail)
130. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk., Elephants and headless *bulto* in *nichito*
131. Concordia, Sinaloa, Mexico, Virgin of Guadalupe carved on mahogany headboard
132. Baja, Mexico, Highway 1 near Cabo San Lucas, Riverbed *nicho* erected in arroyo after disastrous flooding
133. Kansas City, Mo., Father Pio and Virgin Mary figures imbedded in moat surround "Mary Queen of Love" *nichito*
134. St. Louis, Mo., "The Hill" district, *bulto* moved to rear of home, facing kitchen (Italian American)
135. St. Louis, Mo., "The Hill" district, grotto *bulto* facing rear of home

136. Kansas City, Ks., Strawberry Hill district, *bulto* at entrance to home, perched atop two flights of steep stairs
137. Kansas City, Mo., Virgin Mary adorned with crown of silk roses and framed by plastic dryer hosing
138. Brooklyn, NYC, Street pole decorated to the Virgin Mary
139. Elmont, NY, Italian *nichito* to the Holy Family
140. Thousand Islands, NY, Virgin Mary *bulto* facing lake-traffic blesses travellers
141. Gloucester, On., Sacred Heart of Jesus with angel, monochrome
142. Pecan Island, La., Virgin Mary Cajun *nichito* with 1920's style "Watermelon Eating Nigger" figure (photo copyright Mark Charleville)
143. St. Louis, Mo., French section, pair of *nichitos*, one with dark blue bathtub niche
144. Nessebar, Bulgaria, Church of St. Stephan, Jesus as a youth fresco
145. Marseilles, France, *nichito* to Virgin Mary at base of stairs to Cathedral
146. Ile Maurice, *nicho*/grotto to Notre Dame de Grand Pouvoir (photo copyright Céline Leduc)
147. Sorrento, Italy, postcard of Virgin Mary *nicho* with fishing boats
148. Alghero, Sardinia, Italy, workplace *altarcito* at local corner store
149. Rome, Italy, *nicho* built into the old Roman walls of the city
150. Tarxien, Malta, *edicole* in Italian style
151. Blue Grotto, Malta, limestone *nicho* at side of highway overlooking Blue Grotto
152. Monte Carlo, Monaco, inaccessible Virgin Mary *bulto* in cliff
153. Aladag Mt. (Ephesus), Turkey, "House of the Virgin Mary", with *altarcito* (photo copyright Turhan Can)
154. Elmont, NY, Our Lady of Mt. Carmel *nichito* with flowers (Italian American)

155. Vanier, On., *nichito* with trellis for coaxing vines into an alcove-type shape
156. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk., Paloma St., empty *nichito* to right replaced by ceramic *edicole* plaque above doorbell
157. Gloucester, On., Virgin Mary yard shrine moved to back yard
158. South Tucson, Az., empty *nichito*
159. Pima County, Az., Our Lady of the Garbage Dump, 1999, distance photo shows the piles of garbage nearby
160. Pima County, Az., Our Lady of the Garbage Dump, 1999, fresh flowers placed in used pillar candle glass jars
161. Pima County, Az., Our Lady of the Garbage Dump, 1999, close up (note left front: signs of removed *bulto*)
162. Pima County, Az., Our Lady of the Garbage Dump, 2000, necklace placed on *bulto*
163. Pima County, Az., Our Lady of the Garbage Dump, 2000, detail of rubbish piles
164. Quebec City, Que., bookshelf *altarcito* (photo copyright Paul Laliberte)
165. New York City, NY., stove ring as halo on saint in *nichito* (photo copyright Martha Cooper)
166. Ottawa, On., University of Ottawa, Divina et Femina art display: "Rape Survivor's Shrine to the Warrior Woman", 2000
167. Ottawa, On., University of Ottawa, Divina et Femina art display, Heather D. Guild soft sculpture installation, "The Last Supper/The First Congregation" (view 1)
168. Ottawa, On., University of Ottawa, Divina et Femina art display, Heather D. Guild soft sculpture installation, "The Last Supper/The First Congregation" (view 2)
169. Cooper's Lake, Penn., Osis and Lauren memorial shrine (impromptu) (photo copyright Robert A. Calahan)
170. Tucson, Az., Havasupai Rd., "Lips" mailbox - recycling as art I
171. Tucson, Az., Ft. Lowell community, recycling as art II
172. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk., Menlo Park Video fresco, 1986

173. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk., Menlo Park Video fresco, 1997
174. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk., Menlo Park Video fresco, 1999
175. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk., Menlo Park Video fresco, 1999, Mary Garcia at her *nichito*
176. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk., Menlo Park Video fresco, 2001
177. Tucson, Az., Menlo Pk., Menlo Park Video fresco (detail), 2001
178. Pima Co., Az., Our Lady of the Garbage Dump 2001
179. Pima Co., Az., Our Lady of the Garbage Dump 2001 - detail (note base of missing statue)
180. Pima Co., Az., Our Lady of the Garbage Dump 2001 - detail (note cash offerings and resurfaced base)
181. Tucson, Az., El Señor de los Milagros *nichito* 2001
182. Tucson, Az., El Señor de los Milagros *nichito* 2001 - detail (left side)
183. Tucson, Az., El Señor de los Milagros *nichito* 2001 - detail (right side)

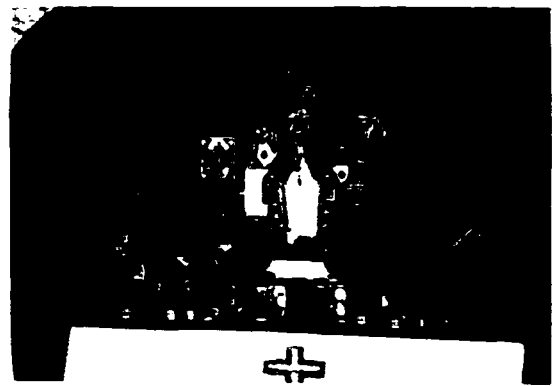


## **APPENDIX 2b: PHOTOGRAPHS**

**Plates follow on pages 359 - 408, figures 1 - 183.**



*Figure 1*  
*Miami, AZ*  
*Nicho (exterior)*



*Figure 2*  
*Miami, AZ*  
*Nicho (interior)*



*Figure 3*  
*Tucson, AZ — El Fuerte*  
*Capillita (exterior)*



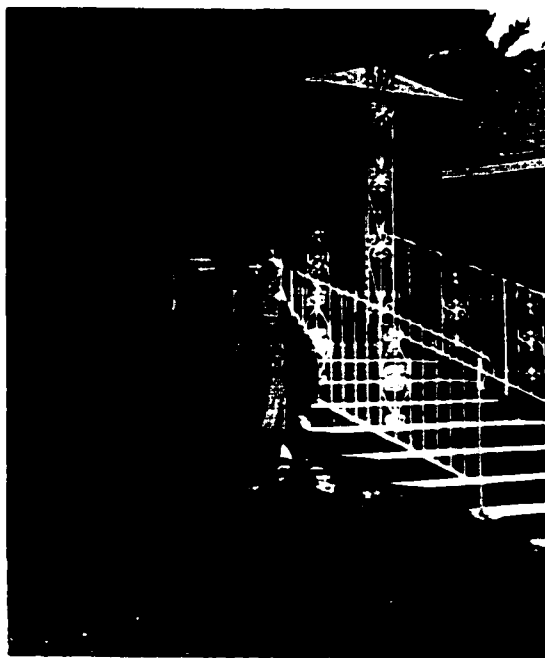
*Figure 4*  
*Tucson, AZ — El Fuerte*  
*Capillita (interior)*



**Figure 5**  
Tucson, AZ – Menlo Park  
Nichito (interior)



**Figure 6**  
Tucson, AZ – Menlo Park  
Nichito (exterior)



**Figure 7**  
Ottawa, ON – MacArthur Rd  
Mary with spotlight



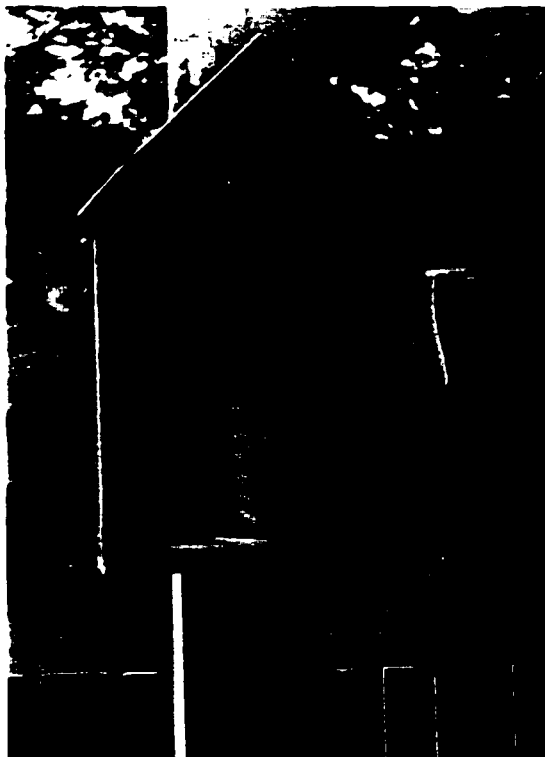
**Figure 8**  
Blue Springs, MO  
Mary planter



**Figure 9**  
**Kansas City, MO**  
*Bultos in garden (Italian)*



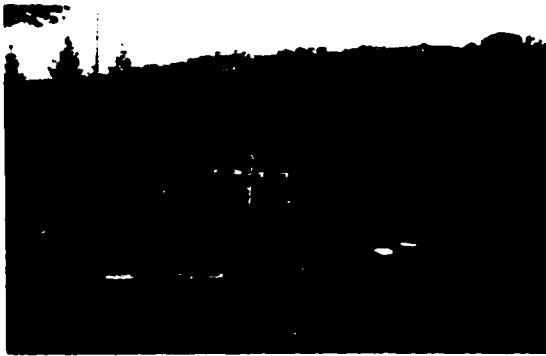
**Figure 10**  
**Ottawa, ON - St. Vincent's Hospital,**  
*Winterized bulto*



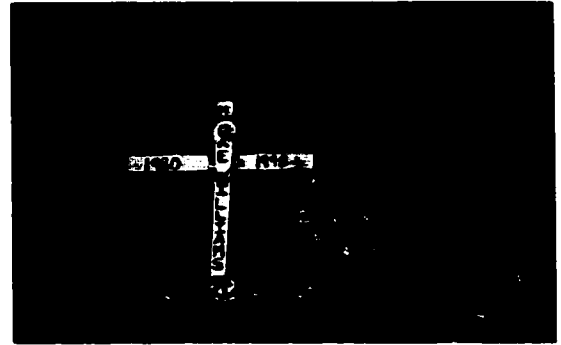
**Figure 11**  
**Crystal Mines, PQ**  
*Cruz (detail)*



**Figure 12**  
**Crystal Mines, PQ**  
*Cruz*



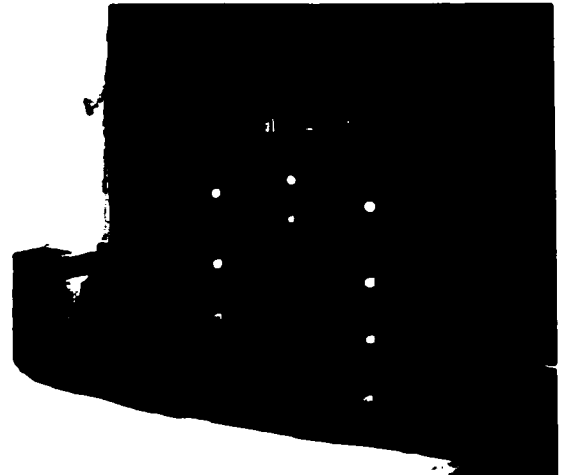
**Figure 13**  
**Phoenix, AZ – Paradise Valley**  
**Descanso to Mike Williams**



**Figure 14**  
**Phoenix, AZ – Paradise Valley**  
**Descanso to Mike Williams (detail)**



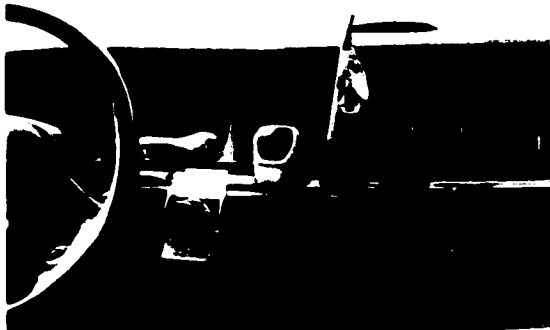
**Figure 15**  
**Tucson, AZ**  
**Altarcito**



**Figure 16**  
**St-Roch-Des-Aulnaies,**  
**Altarcito**



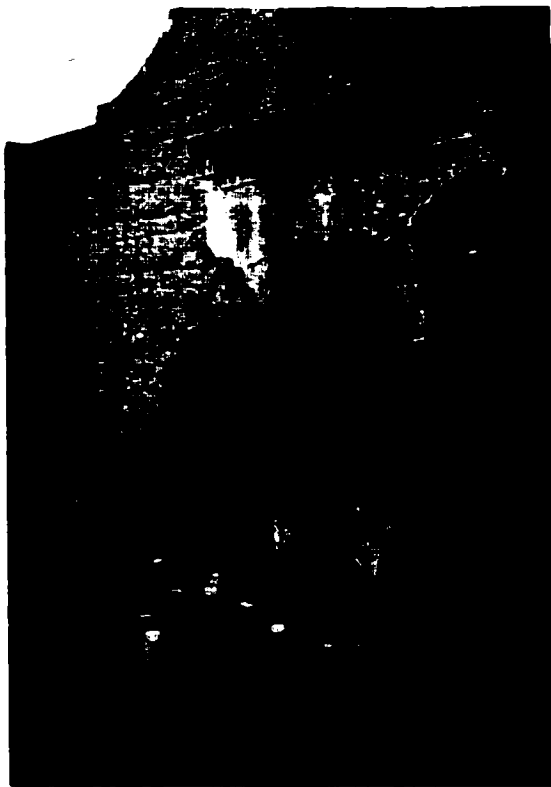
**Figure 17**  
**Cabo San Lucas, Mexico**  
**Glass Factory with workplace altarcito**



**Figure 18**  
*New York City,  
 Sacramentales and vehicular altarcito in taxi*



**Figure 19**  
*Ottawa, ON – St. Laurent Shopping Centre  
 Muslim prayer box*



**Figure 20**  
*Tucson, AZ – Old Barrio – El Tiradito*



**Figure 21**  
*Tucson, AZ – Old Barrio – El Tiradito  
 Alternate view*



**Figure 22**  
*Ottawa, ON – Portuguese edicole*



**Figure 23**  
*Tucson, AZ – Menlo Pk  
Guadalupe edicole*



**Figure 24**  
*Kensington Palace, UK  
Peregrination site – Diana, Princess of Wales*



**Figure 25**  
*Winchester, UK  
Peregrination site – Princess of Wales Regiment*



**Figure 26**  
*Southern England, Peregrination  
Impromptu shrine at flower nursery*



**Figure 27**  
New York City, NY – TriBeCa  
Peregrinacion – John F. Kennedy Jr.  
(stuffed bears)



**Figure 28**  
New York City, NY – TriBeCa  
Peregrinacion – John F. Kennedy Jr.  
(cash offerings)



**Figure 29**  
New York City, NY – TriBeCa  
Peregrinacion – John F. Kennedy Jr.  
(prayer candles)





**Figure 30**  
Ottawa, ON  
*Peregrinacion – Pierre Elliot Trudeau (flame)*



**Figure 31**  
Ottawa, ON  
*Peregrinacion – Pierre Elliot Trudeau (roses)*



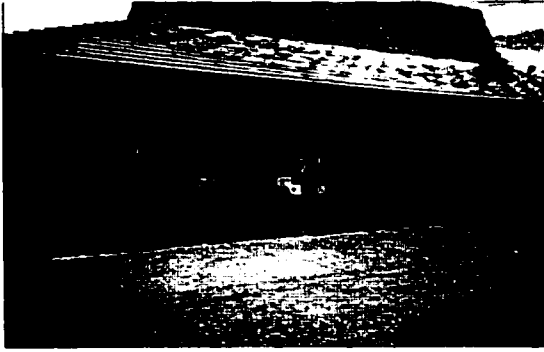
**Figure 32**  
Ottawa, ON  
*Peregrinacion – Pierre Elliot Trudeau (beanie bear)*



**Figure 33**  
Ottawa, ON  
*Peregrinacion – OC Transpo (detail)*



**Figure 34**  
Ottawa, ON  
*Peregrinacion – OC Transpo*



**Figure 35**  
**Tucson, AZ**  
**Peregrinacion – Pizza Hut (side of building)**



**Figure 36**  
**Tucson, AZ**  
**Peregrinacion – Pizza Hut (logo w/black ribbon)**



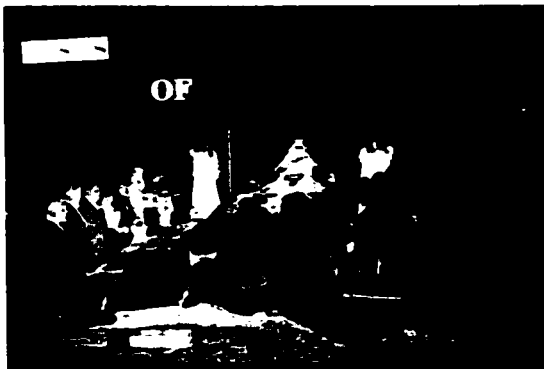
**Figure 37**  
**Tucson, AZ**  
**Peregrinacion – Pizza Hut (detail of offerings)**



*Figure 38*  
*San Jose, CA*  
*Nacimiento*



*Figure 39*  
*Ottawa, ON*  
*Nacimiento*



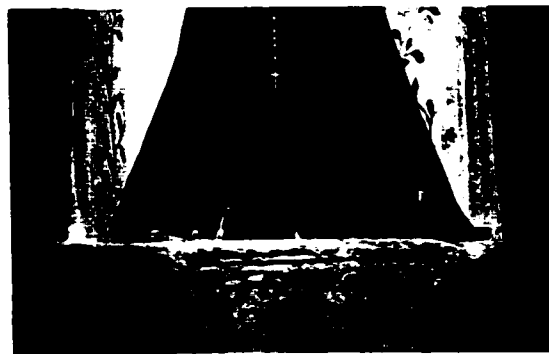
*Figure 40*  
*Tucson, AZ - , Swan Road*  
*Nacimiento*



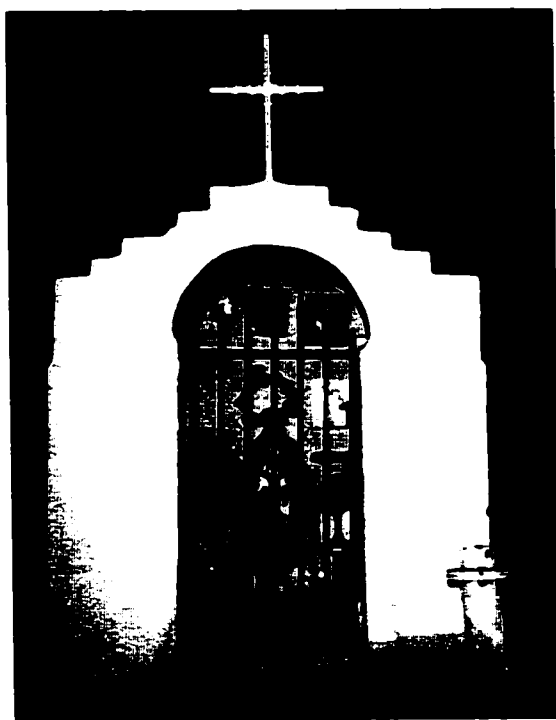
*Figure 41*  
*Chiapas, Mexico*  
*Day of the Dead Ofrenda*



**Figure 42**  
*San Xavier Mission Church, AZ*  
*Mary w/Milagros*



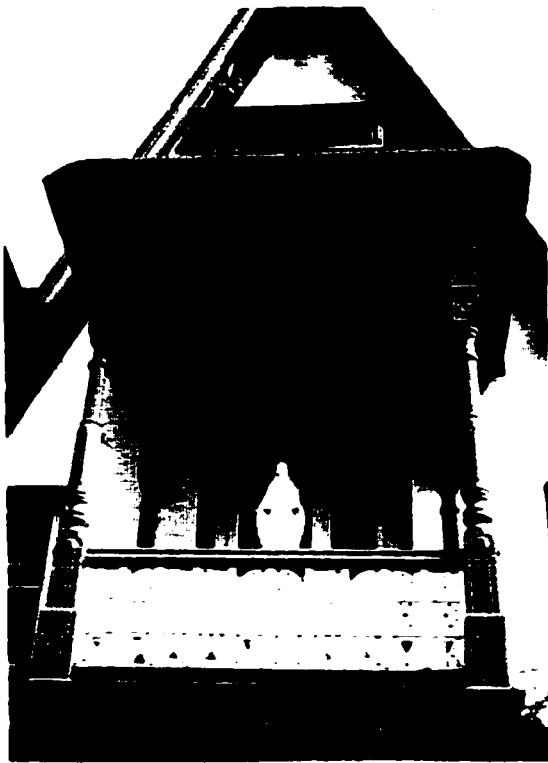
**Figure 43**  
*San Xavier Mission Church, AZ*  
*Mary w/Milagros (detail)*



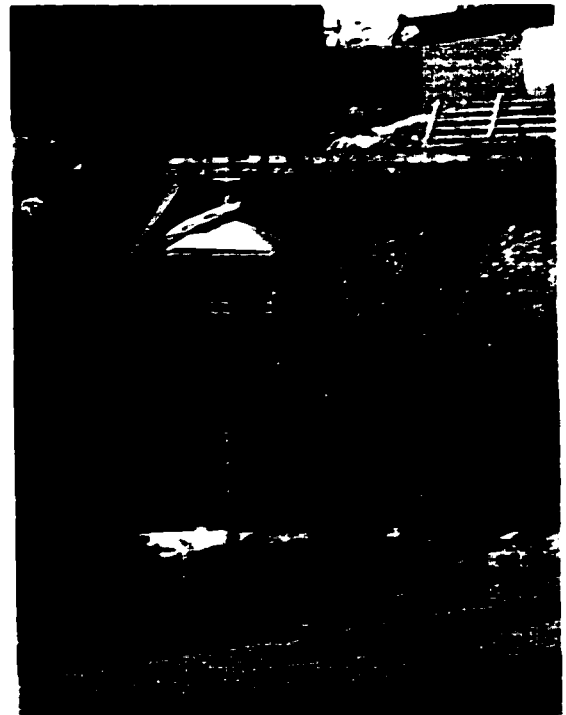
**Figure 44**  
*Bisbee, AZ – Hwy 80, Manda nicho (exterior)*



**Figure 45**  
*Bisbee, AZ – Hwy 80, Manda nicho (interior)*



**Figure 46**  
*Ottawa, ON – Virgin Mary on 2nd story of home*



**Figure 47**  
*Nauplion, Greece – Eikonostasos*



**Figure 48**  
**Tucson, AZ**  
**A Mountain (lower niche)**



**Figure 49**  
**Tucson, AZ**  
**A Mountain (upper niche - Grotto)**



**Figure 50**  
**Tucson, AZ**  
**A Mountain (upper niche - interior)**



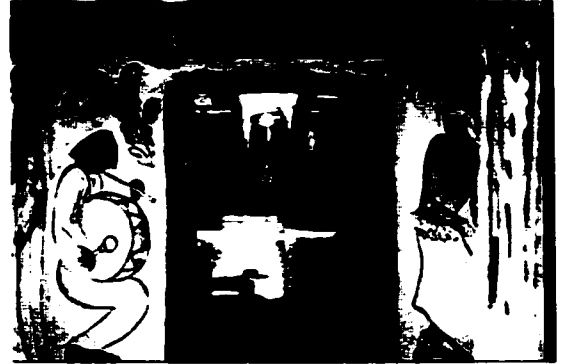
*Figure 51*  
*Pima Co., AZ (2000)*  
*Our Lady of the Garbage Dump*  
*Interior*



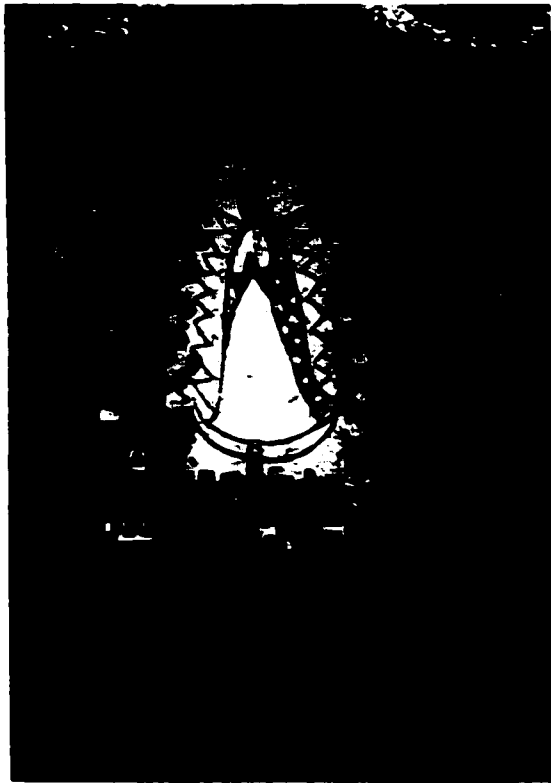
*Figure 52*  
*Pima Co., AZ (2000)*  
*Our Lady of the Garbage Dump*  
*Exterior*



**Figure 53**  
Tucson, AZ – De Grazia "Gallery of the Sun"  
Nicho (exterior)



**Figure 54**  
Tucson, AZ – De Grazia "Gallery of the Sun"  
Nicho (interior)



**Figure 55**  
Tucson, AZ – De Grazia "Gallery of the Sun" (1998)  
Guadalupe (main altar)



**Figure 56**  
Tucson, AZ – De Grazia "Gallery of the Sun" (1999)  
Main altar – offerings (detail)

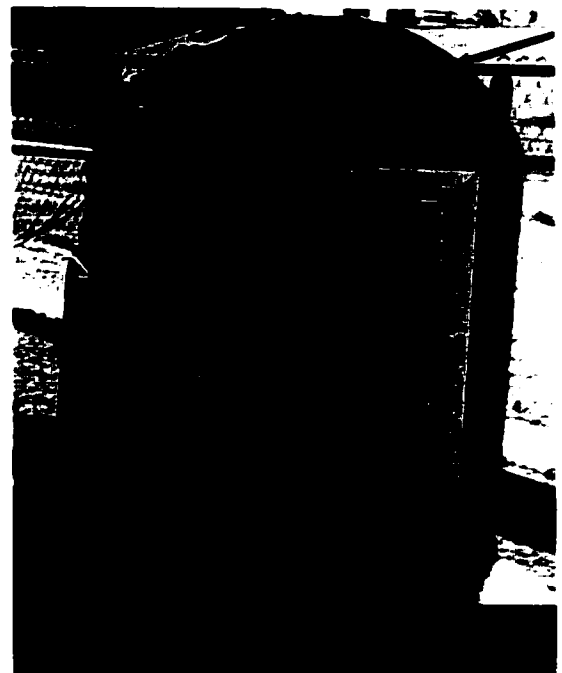




**Figure 57**  
*Ottawa, ON – Baseline Road (1999)*  
*Nichito*



**Figure 58**  
*Tucson, AZ – Menlo Park – 12" nichito, Paloma St.*



**Figure 59**  
*Tucson, AZ – Menlo Park*  
*Niagara St. – typical nichito*



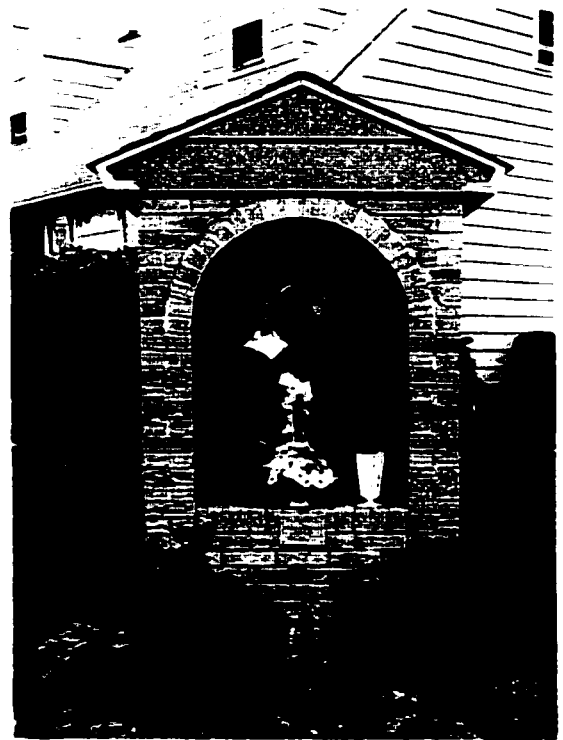
**Figure 60**  
**Tucson, AZ – Menlo Park**  
**Niagara St. – Mission-style nichito**



**Figure 61**  
**Tucson, AZ – Mission Style Church – Ajo Way**



**Figure 62**  
*Kansas City, MO – Argentine District*  
*Mexican American "Cat" nichito*



**Figure 63**  
*Elmont, NY*  
*St. Anthony of Padua nichito*



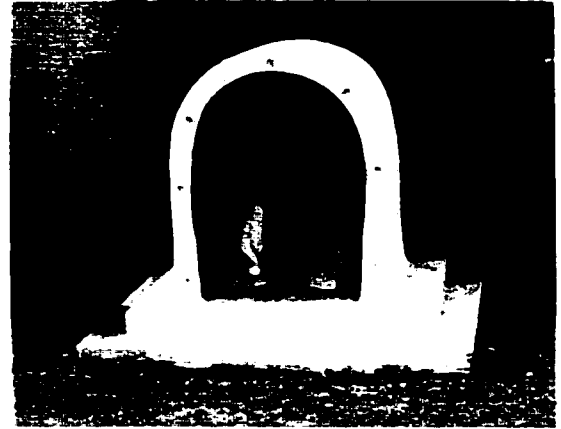
**Figure 64**  
*St. Louis, MO*  
*Lawn ducks and bultos*



*Figure 65*  
*Tucson, AZ – El Fuerte*  
*St Martin nichito*



*Figure 67*  
*Tucson, AZ*  
*Nichito placed 45° to home, facing street*



*Figure 66*  
*Tucson, AZ – Menlo Park*  
*Guadalupe and Juan Diego*



*Figure 68*  
*Tucson, AZ – Menlo Park*  
*Brick nichito, integral to house*



**Figure 69**  
*St Louis, MO – "The Hill" – Mary bulto facing rear of house*



**Figure 70**  
*Pierre Port, LA – Isolated nicho on island*



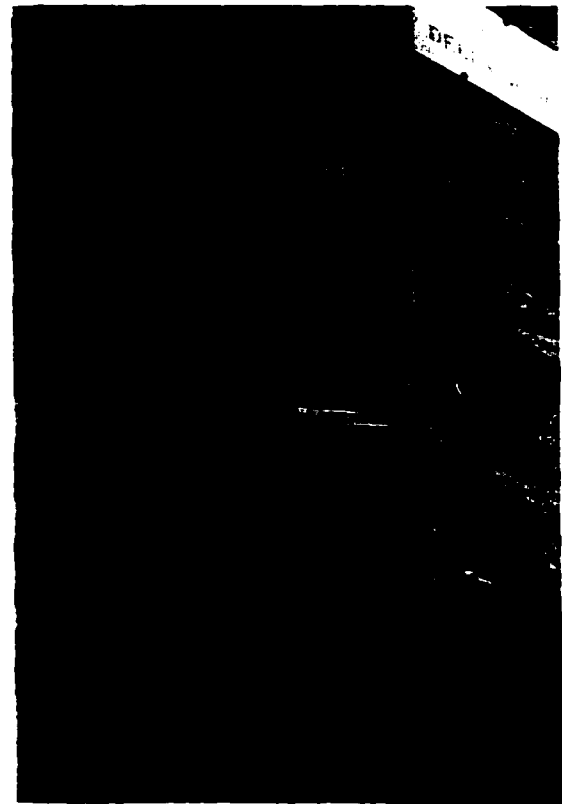
**Figure 71**  
**Chateau Richer, PQ**  
**Barn with bulbo above entrance (exterior)**



**Figure 72**  
**Chateau Richer, PQ**  
**Barn with bulbo above entrance (detail)**



**Figure 73**  
**New York City, NY**  
**St Francis Xavier (garage bulbo echoes style of barn)**



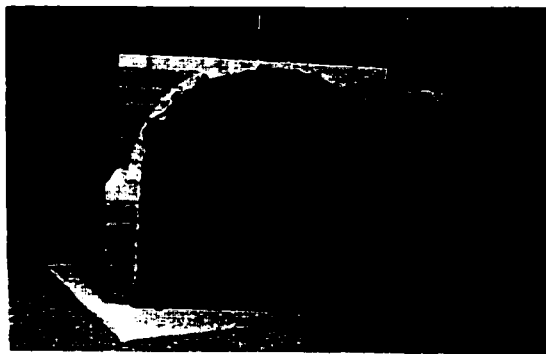
**Figure 74**  
**Florence, Italy**  
**Edicole on 2nd storey of building (exterior)**



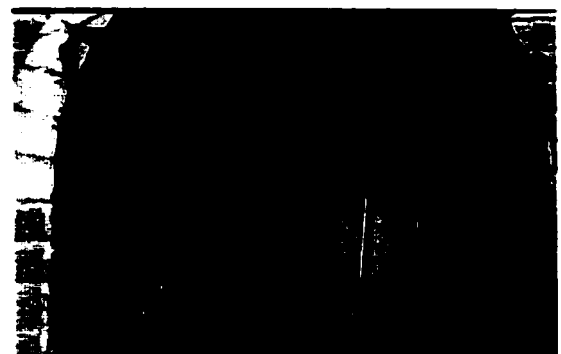
**Figure 75**  
Tucson, AZ – Menlo Park  
pressboard and roofing nichito



**Figure 76**  
Tucson, AZ – South of 35<sup>th</sup> St  
Wooden nichito at side of house



**Figure 77**  
Tucson, AZ – Menlo Pk, Niagara St.  
Bullet holes in Plexiglas plate on front of nichito



**Figure 78**  
Tucson, AZ – Menlo Pk, Niagara St.  
Bullet holes in Plexiglas plate on front of nichito  
(detail)



**Figure 79**  
Covington, NY – "Mary in a Bathtub"



**Figure 80**  
Tucson, AZ  
"Our Lady of the Philco" – bar refrigerator nichito



**Figure 81**  
Enterprise, ON – Murphy Family Farm  
"Our Lady of the Coldspot"



**Figure 82**  
Enterprise, ON – Murphy Family Farm  
"Our Lady of the Coldspot" (detail)





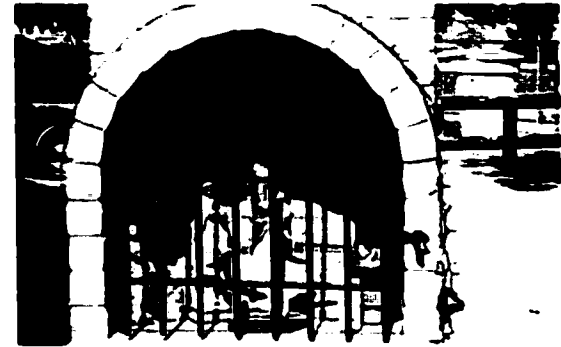
**Figure 83**  
Ottawa, ON  
*Prefab Niche Form*



**Figure 84**  
Tucson, AZ – Mission Ave.  
*Curved roof brick nichitos are designed by specialists*



**Figure 85**  
Plaquimire, LA – Weathered wooden "house"  
*Nichito*



**Figure 86**  
Guadalupe, AZ – nichito with wrought iron gate



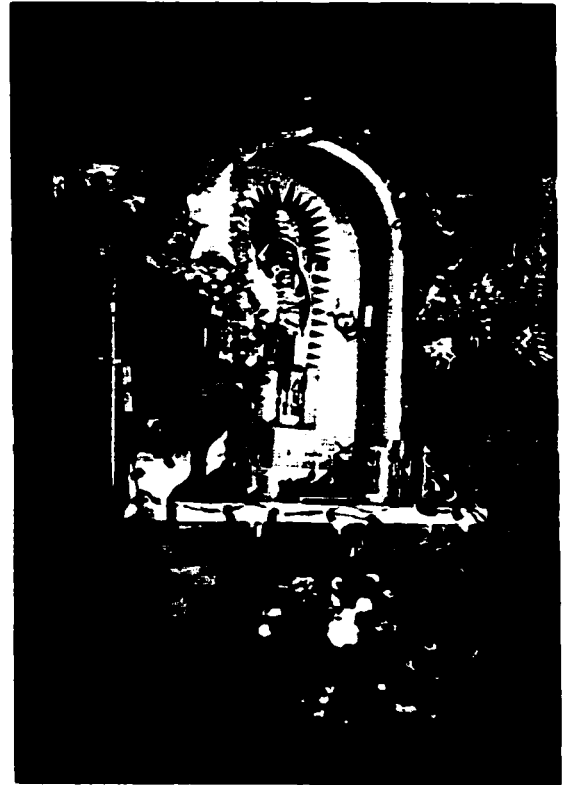
**Figure 87**  
Tucson, AZ – Menlo Pk, Niagara St.  
*"Grotto style" nichito*



**Figure 88**  
Tucson, AZ – Menlo Pk, Paloma St.  
*"Multi-niche" style nichito*



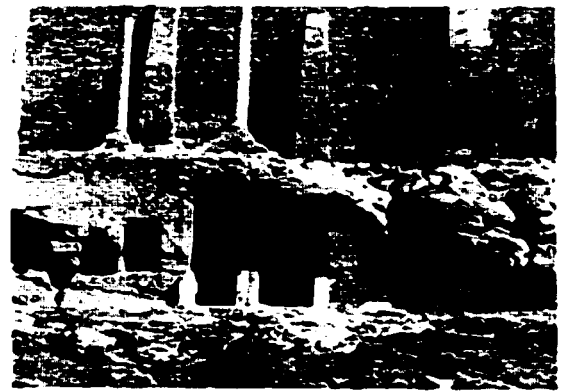
**Figure 89**  
*New York City, NY*  
*Italian fountain nichito to St. Anthony of Padua*



**Figure 90**  
*San Jose, CA – Colourful nichito*



**Figure 91**  
*Marmora, ON – "Queen of Peace" Apparition*  
*Prayer Card*



**Figure 92**  
*Athens, Greece – Aescaleypion at side of Odeon*



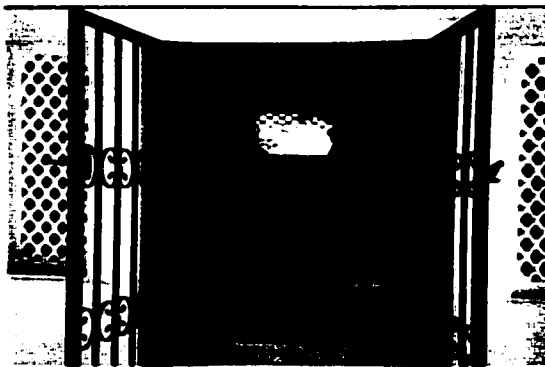
**Figure 93**  
Pompeii, Italy  
Kitchen altarcito



**Figure 94**  
Pompeii, Italy  
Head of God niche



**Figure 95**  
Pompeii, Italy  
Penis niche



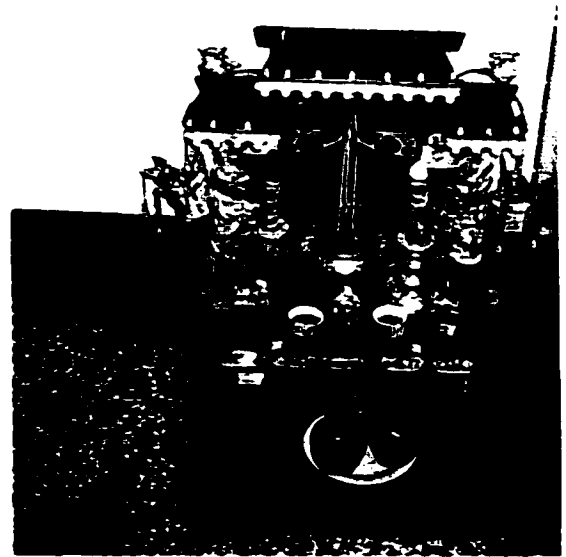
**Figure 96**  
Wahiawa, HI  
Healing stones



**Figure 97**  
Wahiawa, HI  
Healing stones (detail)



**Figure 98**  
Ottawa, ON – Manphoang Grocery Store – Shrine



**Figure 99**  
Ottawa, ON – Chez Nam Restaurant – Interior Shrine



**Figure 100**  
Ottawa, ON – Chez Nam Restaurant – Exterior Shrine



**Figure 101**  
Glastonbury, UK – Tara Shrine at exterior of store by "Red Spring"



**Figure 102**  
New York City, NY – Metropolitan Museum of Art  
*"Buddha in Foliate Niche" (1997-138) detail 1*



**Figure 103**  
New York City, NY – Metropolitan Museum of Art  
*"Buddha in Foliate Niche" (1997-138) detail 2*



**Figure 104**  
New York City, NY – Metropolitan Museum of Art  
*"Vishnu with Lakshmi and Sarasvati" (57.51.7)*



**Figure 105**  
*Odessa, Ukraine – New Jewish Synagogue*  
*Torah Ark*



**Figure 106**  
*Istanbul, Turkey*  
*East wall of Suleymaniye Mosque*



**Figure 107**  
*Utica, NY*  
*Vietnamese Catholic altarcito*



**Figure 108**  
*Nellie Plantation, Assumption Parish, LA*  
*Virgin Mary with blue veil only*



**Figure 109**  
*Tucson, AZ – Menlo Pk – Monochrome white Virgin*  
*Mary bulto*



**Figure 110**  
*Kansas City, MO – "Mary Queen of Love" (Askew*  
*and Garner Sts.)*



**Figure 111**  
New York City, NY – Jackson Heights  
Sacred Heart of Jesus (open armed)



**Figure 112**  
Tucson, AZ – Menlo Park  
Sacred Heart of Jesus (closed arms)



**Figure 113**  
Pima Co., AZ – Camino Verde  
Nichito with crucifix



**Figure 114**  
San Xavier del Bac Mission, AZ  
Niño de Bogata in Mary chapel



**Figure 115**  
Elmont, NY  
St. Anne statuary (Italian)

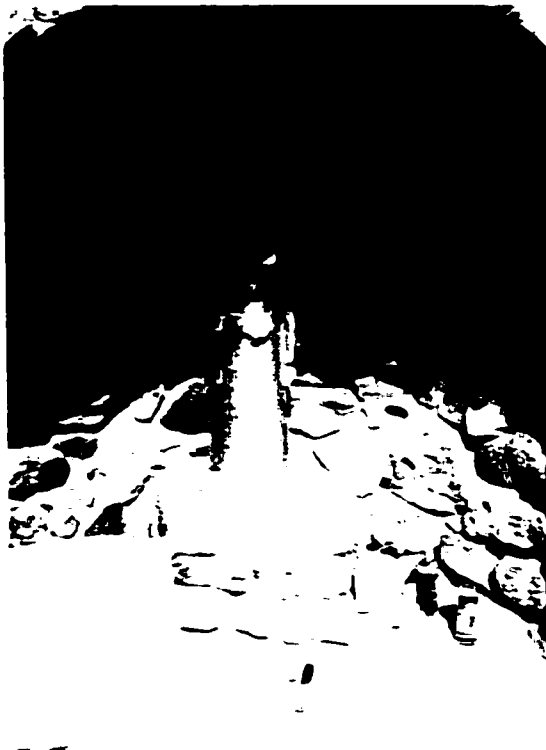




*Figure 116*  
*I-10 near Marana, AZ – Saint nicho (1997)*  
*exterior*



*Figure 117*  
*I-10 near Marana, AZ (1997)*  
*Saint nicho (interior)*



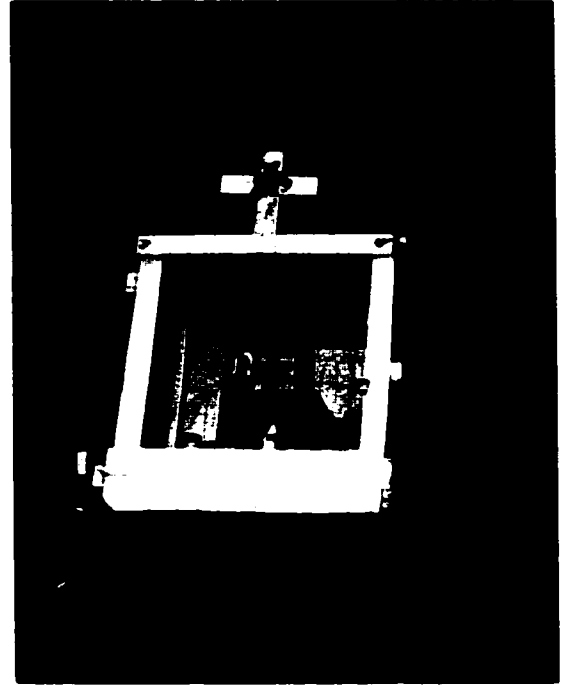
*Figure 118*  
*I-10 near Marana, AZ (1999)*  
*Saint nicho (headless)*



*Figure 119*  
*I-10 near Marana, AZ (1999)*  
*Saint nicho (St. Francis Xavier bulto)*



**Figure 120**  
**Tucson, AZ – A Mountain**  
**Red bows mark the ascent up the mountain**



**Figure 121**  
**Tucson, AZ – A Mountain**  
**Lower niche to St. Jude**



**Figure 122**  
**Tucson, AZ – A Mountain**  
**Grotto entrance**



**Figure 123**  
**Tucson, AZ – A Mountain**  
**Grotto (detail)**



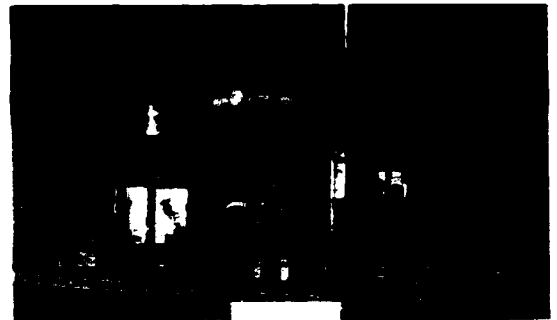
**Figure 124**  
Tucson, AZ – Menlo Park  
Nichito with St. Lucy and other bultos



**Figure 125**  
Tucson, AZ – Menlo Park  
Malverde bust atop nichito



**Figure 126**  
San Xavier del Bac Mission, AZ  
Malverde bust below regular bultos



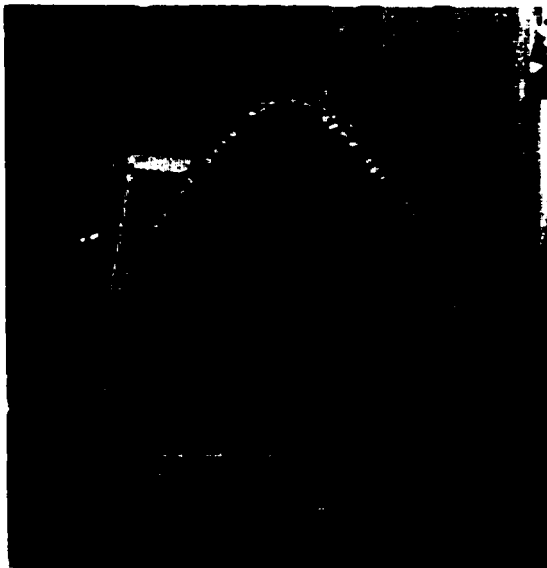
**Figure 127**  
Tampico, Mexico  
Altarcito with Indian head busts



**Figure 128**  
**Tucson, AZ – Menlo Park**  
*Nichito with flowers and fountain*



**Figure 129**  
**Tucson, AZ – Menlo Park**  
*Nichito with flowers and fountain (detail)*



**Figure 130**  
**Tucson, AZ – Menlo Park**  
*Elephants in nichito*



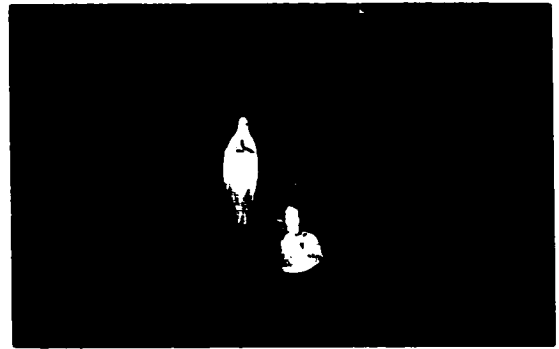
**Figure 131**  
**Concordia, Sinaloa, Mexico**  
*Guadalupe carved on headboard*



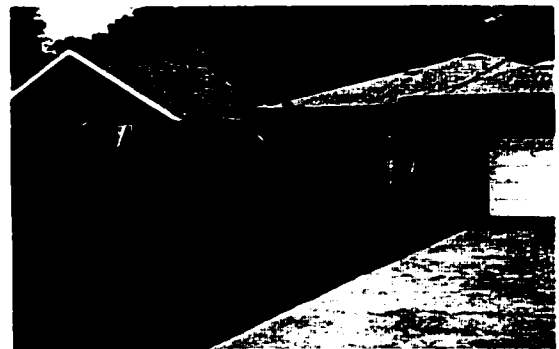
**Figure 132**  
Hwy 1 near Cabo San Lucas, Baja, Mexico  
Arroyo nicho after flood disaster



**Figure 134**  
St Louis, MO – "The Hill"  
Italian American bulto moved to rear of house



**Figure 133**  
Kansas City, MO – Father Pio and Virgin Mary in  
base of moat below "Our Lady, Queen of Love"



**Figure 135**  
St Louis, MO – "The Hill"  
Grotto facing rear of house



**Figure 136**  
**Kansas City, KS – "Strawberry Hill"**  
*Bulto up high flight of stairs*



**Figure 137**  
**Kansas City, MO**  
*Virgin Mary with flowers and dryer-hose niche*



**Figure 138**  
**Brooklyn, NY**  
*Pole decoration to Virgin Mary*



**Figure 139**  
**Elmont, NY**  
*Italian nichito to the Holy Family*



**Figure 140**  
**Thousand Islands, NY**  
**Virgin Mary bulto at edge of lake**



**Figure 142**  
**Pecan Island, LA**  
**Virgin Mary nichito with watermelon-eating**  
**"nigger"**



**Figure 141**  
**Gloucester, ON**  
**Sacred Heart with angel – monochrome**



**Figure 143**  
**St. Louis, MO – French Section**  
**Double nichito with dark blue bathtub**



**Figure 144**  
*Nessebar, Bulgaria – Church of St. Stephan*  
*Jesus as teen fresco Niche*



**Figure 146**  
*Ile Maurice, France*  
*Grotto niche to "Notre Dame de Grand Pouvoir"*

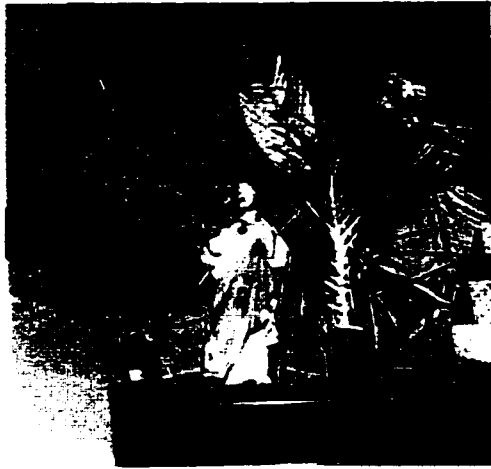


**Figure 145**  
*Marseilles, France*  
*Virgin Mary nichito at foot of stairs to cathedral*

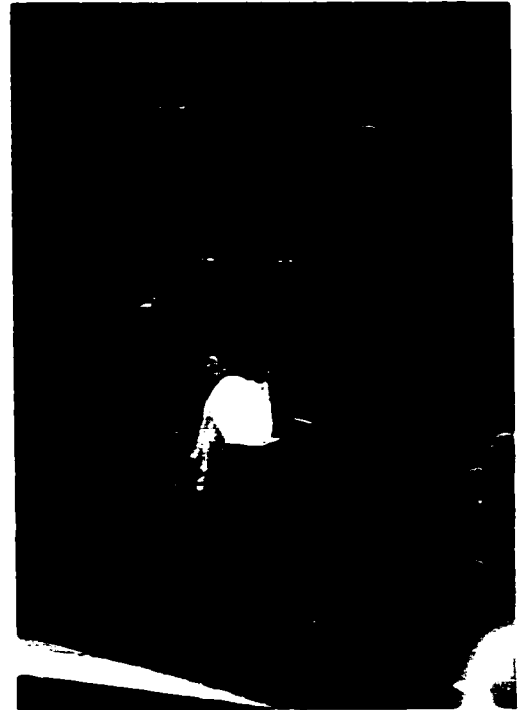


**Figure 147**  
*Sorrento, Italy*  
*Postcard of Virgin Mary nicho*





**Figure 148**  
Sardinia, Alghero, Italy  
*Workplace altarcito in a corner store*



**Figure 149**  
Rome, Italy  
*Nicho built into old Roman walls*



**Figure 150**  
Tarxien, Malta  
*Edicole in Italian style*



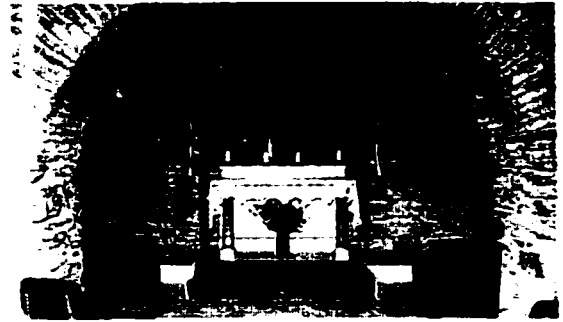
**Figure 151**  
Blue Grotto, Malta  
*Limestone niche at side of drop to ocean*



**Figure 152**  
**Monte Carlo, Malta**  
*Inaccessible bullo at cliffside*



**Figure 154**  
**Elmont, NY**  
*Our Lady of Mount Carmel with flowers*



**Figure 153**  
**Aladag Mt. (Ephesus), Turkey**  
*House of the Virgin Mary with altarcito*



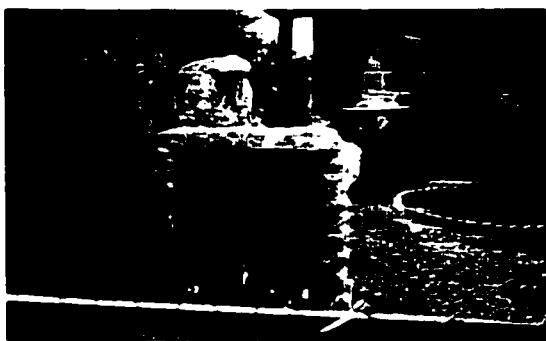
**Figure 155**  
**Vanier, ON**  
*Nichito with trellis for foliage*



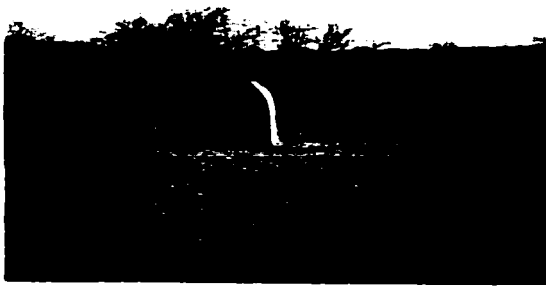
**Figure 156**  
*Tucson, AZ – Menlo Park – Paloma St.*  
*Empty nichito replaced by edicole*



**Figure 157**  
*Gloucester, ON*  
*Yard statue moved from front to back yard*



**Figure 158**  
*South Tucson, AZ*  
*Empty nichito*



**Figure 159**  
**Pima Co., AZ (1999)**  
***Our Lady of the Garbage Dump***  
***Rubbish near nicho***



**Figure 160**  
**Pima Co., AZ (1999)**  
***Our Lady of the Garbage Dump***  
***Close-up***



**Figure 161**  
**Pima Co., AZ (1999)**  
***Our Lady of the Garbage Dump***  
***Pillar candles used as vases***



*Figure 162*  
*Pima Co., AZ (2000)*  
*Our Lady of the Garbage Dump*  
*Detail – note necklace*



*Figure 163*  
*Pima Co., AZ (2000)*  
*Our Lady of the Garbage Dump*  
*Note change in rubbish*



**Figure 164**  
*Québec City, PQ – Bookshelf altarcito*



**Figure 165**  
*New York City, NY -  
Stove Ring as halo on bulito*



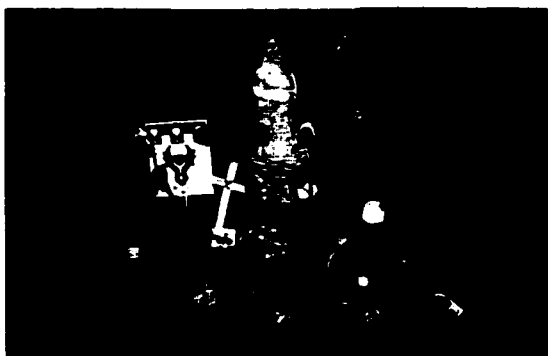
**Figure 166**  
*Ottawa, ON – University of Ottawa Campus  
"Rape Survivor's Shrine to the Warrior Woman"*



**Figure 167**  
*Ottawa, ON – University of Ottawa Campus  
"Last Supper/First Congregation" display 1*



**Figure 168**  
*Ottawa, ON – University of Ottawa Campus  
"Last Supper/First Congregation" display 2*



**Figure 169**  
**Cooper's Lake, PA**  
**"Osis and Lauren" peregrinacion shrine**



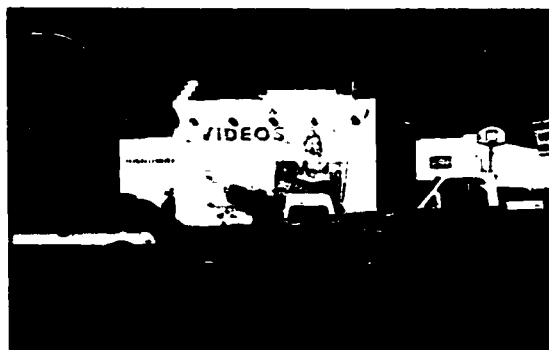
**Figure 170**  
**Tucson, AZ – Havasupai Rd.**  
**"Lips" Mailbox – Recycling as Art I**



**Figure 171**  
**Tucson, AZ – El Fuerte**  
**Recycling as Art II**



**Figure 172**  
**Tucson, AZ – Menlo Pk (1986)**  
**Menlo Park Video (fresco)**



**Figure 174**  
**Tucson, AZ – Menlo Pk (1999)**  
**Menlo Park Video (fresco)**



**Figure 173**  
**Tucson, AZ – Menlo Pk (1997)**  
**Menlo Park Video (fresco)**



**Figure 175**  
**Tucson, AZ – Menlo Pk (1999)**  
**Menlo Park Video (detail – with Mary Garcia)**





*Figure 176*  
*Tucson, AZ – Menlo Pk (2001)*  
*Menlo Park Video*



*Figure 177*  
*Tucson, AZ – Menlo Pk (2001)*  
*Menlo Park Video (detail)*



**Figure 178**  
**Pima County, AZ (2001)**  
**Our Lady of the Garbage Dump**



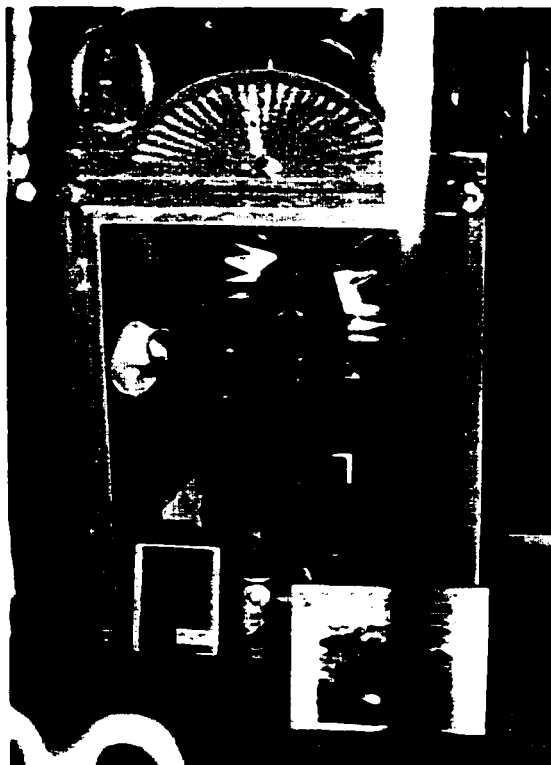
**Figure 179**  
**Pima County, AZ (2001)**  
**Our Lady of the Garbage Dump**  
**Detail – note base of missing statue**



**Figure 180**  
**Pima County, AZ (2001)**  
**Our Lady of the Garbage Dump**  
**Detail – note cash offerings and resurfaced base**



**Figure 181**  
Tucson, AZ (2001)  
*El Señor de los Milagros nichito*



**Figure 182**  
Tucson, AZ (2001)  
*El Señor de los Milagros nichito (detail – left side)*



**Figure 183**  
Tucson, AZ (2001)  
*El Señor de los Milagros nichito (detail –right side)*

**APPENDIX 3: Text of prayers, Guadalupe *Nicho*, Gallery of the Sun, 1999.**

The text of these prayers was hand-printed on a folded 8 1/2" x 11" sheet of lined paper and deposited on the main Guadalupe altar at the Ted de Grazia Gallery of the Sun *nicho*.

**Lord's Prayer**

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. Amen.

**Hail Mary**

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

### **Prayer to Our Lady**

**Hail Mary, etc. My Queen! My Mother! I give thee all myself, and to show my devotion to thee, I consecrate to thee my eyes, my ears, my mouth, my heart, my entire self.**

**Wherefore, O Loving Mother, as I am thine own, Keep me, defend me, as thy property and possession. Amen.**

### **Our Lady of Guadalupe**

**O our Lady of Guadalupe mystical rose, make intercession for Holy church, protect the Sovereign Pontiff, help all those who invoke thee in their necessities, and since thou art the ever Virgin Mary and Mother of true God, obtain for us from thy Most Holy Son the grace of keeping our faith, sweet hope in the midst of the bitterness of life, burning charity and the precious gift of final perseverance. Amen.**

### **Holy Spirit**

**Holy Spirit, you are the only one who clears everything for me. You who brighten all paths so that I can reach my ideal, you who give me the Divine knowledge of forgetting the evils that have been done to me and who in every instance of my Life are with me. I want,**

in this short monologue, to thank you for everything and to make sure once again that I will never want to be separated from you, no matter how big the material illusion may be. I wish to be with you and all my Loved ones. Amen. Thank you for the received favor. Should be said 3 days without mentioning favor. Publish when favor received.

#### **Prayer to Saint Jude**

Most Holy Apostle, Saint Jude Faithful servant and Friend of Jesus pray for me who am so Despaired in the House of Great need. Bring visible and speedy help for (here make your request) I promise you, O Blessed Saint Jude to be ever mindful of this Great Favor. I will never cease to honor you as my most special, most Powerful Patron. Amen.

#### **Prayer to the Sacred Heart of Jesus**

O sacred Heart of Jesus, who said "Ask and you shall receive", I implore you by the ardent flames of Love that burn in your Heart that you would hear my prayer: (make request) grant me the grace I ask and pour forth your blessings and Mercy upon me that I may be made worthy of your Divine and Most Sacred Heart. Amen.

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