

Chapter 4

The Virgin of Alcala

This chapter discusses the religious materiality that exists in the shrine of the Virgin of Alcala and the key people involved who make the shrine function ‘behind the scenes’ or ‘day to day’. Here discussed are the roles of the Virgin, offerings that are given and performances that take place in relation to her, and what she gives in return to her devotees, i.e. to those members of the cult of the Virgin, the villagers, and those who travel from within Spain and abroad to visit her. My hope is that the colourful materiality of this case study can be conveyed through these written accounts and imagined for something close to what it is: a complex, rich, multi-layered site, riddled with mystery and power.

Before the ethnographic account begins, it is necessary to lay a foundation in terms of the doctrinal and vernacular roles of both materiality and the Virgin Mary in Catholicism. I will also briefly discuss Andalusian specific Catholicism and the effects that the Second Vatican Council had on statue devotion. This will aid in understanding how and why devotion to the Virgin of Alcala is in the stable, continuous and passionate state that it is today.

The Virgin in Catholicism

Forms of Catholic materiality such as statues and images are referred to as ‘devotionals’. They are tools that aid in the devotional act of contemplation. Religious materiality such as relics, icons, the monstrance, altars, robes, candles, images, incense, etc. are favoured amongst Catholics. They are not rejected as, what Marion Bowman called ‘distractions’ as they would be perceived within most Protestant discourses (although Protestants also engage religious

materiality, but this is an argument destined for another time and place). Statues and images are of particular relational importance to practicing Catholics. McDannell says,

The Catholic Church has a long history of encouraging its members to use images to help maintain and create relationships with Christ and the saints. Images are handled, cherished, prayed to, and even eaten in order to arouse affection and evoke tears (1995:25).

Statues of the saints, Jesus, and the Virgin Mary play the roles of tool-like conduits of devotion that help stimulate and achieve communications with the divine. For example, the Virgin Mary has the power to approach her Son Jesus, who then approaches God the Father. She is venerated and adored specifically for her relationship to Jesus, i.e. she is the mother of the Son of God and her relationship to Jesus is more close to God than that of the saints. Warner writes,

The theology of the Virgin's intercession maintains very strictly that the Virgin does not have the power to grant any boon by herself, but only intercedes with her son, who as God is the only source of salvation. But the powers of mediation attributed to her throughout Christianity are considered sovereign: the son can refuse his mother nothing. So a prayer to Mary, made in a spirit of repentance and resolve, is wonder-working; and men and women gathered together to pray to the Virgin forget the distinction between direct and indirect power (1978: 286).

Arguably, a combination of Mary's human, motherly, divine roles make relationships with her more plausible, more tactile, more interactive, more emotional and more personal. Corporeal images and statues of Mary are key in the largely physical aspect of her devotion.

The dynamic of holiness of icons and relics did not just stir the soul to the contemplation of higher things, they also physically communicated the properties of their subject or owner. Images were alive, and so they could breathe life into the dying (Warner, 1978: 293).

The Virgin Mary's role is and has been a complicated matter throughout church history. For example, the question of Mary's 'purity' continues to puzzle theologians. For this reason she is 'officially' said to have been immaculately conceived, which means she was 'born free of taint of original sin' (Chidester, 2000: 301). Then, as a virgin, she gave birth to Jesus. She maintained her virginity throughout her life. Then, as recent as 1954, Warner tells us that

the dogma of the Assumption, proclaimed by Pius XII...was a logical development from the dogma of the Immaculate Conception: free from original sin, she was dogmatically free from putrefaction in the grave (Warner, 1978: 253).

After being freed from physical decomposition (albeit rather late) Mary's status changed again. In 1954 she was officially proclaimed Queen of Heaven (1978: 116). All of these changes suggest a 'not knowing exactly where to place the Virgin' within official, doctrinal approaches to Mary.

Whereas Catholicism in Spain experienced its own forms of internal and civil disruptions (including being affected by the changes brought about by the Catholic Counter-Reformation and later Vatican II), direct interruptions to Catholicism stemmed mainly from political and secular movements, not from religiously motivated assaults on the Catholic faith, as was the way with the changes incurred through the more aggressive effects of the Protestant Reformation. In contrast to what Marion Bowman referred to in a personal communication as 'interrupted devotion' when discussing the effects that the Reformation had on Catholic England, the Virgin

of Alcala can be said to come from a line of ‘continuous devotion’. Spanish Catholics have been venerating, touching, kissing, processing, and adorning statues since Roman Catholicism was superimposed over the indigenous votive practices of the Iberians to statues of their own gods.

Second Vatican Council

In the 1960’s (1962-1965) the Second Vatican Council sought to modernize the Church and many attempts were made to reduce Mary’s importance on the vernacular level, i.e. through turning Catholic’s attention away from statue devotion (of Mary and other saints) with a re focus on personal ‘friendships’ with Jesus. However, Greeley (2004) asserts that certain groups, apart from the lower clergy and laity, used the changes put in place by Vatican II to remove elements of Catholicism that they did not like, such as the emphasis on Marian devotion. He writes,

The leaders of this secondary revolution banned statues, stained glass windows, votive candles, crucifixes, and representational art from new or remodeled churches. They rejected popular devotions like May crowning, processions, First Communion, incense, classical polyphony, and Gregorian chant. They dismissed the rosary, angels, saints, the souls in purgatory, and Mary the mother of Jesus. They considered these old customs and devotions liturgically or ecumenically or politically incorrect (2004: 82).

Greeley (2004) says that there was never anything written in the changes made by the Second Vatican Council that condemned the use of devotionals. Drawing on Duffy’s 1992 book title *The Stripping of the Altars*), he writes,

There was nothing in any of the documents of the Council to justify the stripping of the altars. The Council never said, never even hinted that Catholic churches should be made to look like Protestant churches or Quaker meeting halls (2004: 82).

He continues, ‘It certainly did not proclaim that devotion to the Mother of Jesus was no longer appropriate’. The intention of the Second Vatican Council was to modernize the Church, and the devaluing of public images and statues was part of that process, whether theologically supported or not. What does this mean for the status of the Virgin Mary? The editorial statement written in the first volume of *Maria: A Journal of Marian Studies* (2000) says,

approaches to theology and proclamation aiming somehow to accommodate the benefits and challenges of modernity have found Mary an embarrassment and have ended up with a minimalist position about her that reduces her status simply to that of any other human being under God (2000: 6).

Devotees to vernacular statues of Mary, however, defy this. The Virgin in the context in this chapter, for example, is far from an embarrassment. So what roles do the Virgin play at the vernacular level in Spain and in Andalusia specifically? Like other parts of the Mary venerating world, the Virgin is the feminine divine within Catholic Christianity. She serves the needs of her devotees in similar ways to those that which expected of a mother. She is said to listen, she cure illnesses, help with both wanted and unwanted pregnancies, is adorned with jewels and gold, and takes part in rituals and ceremonies.

Andalusian Catholicism

In Andalusia, the materiality surrounding the Virgins (in whatever local form) is immense, and the Virgins are fully engaged by many with passion and *ganas* (desire). Like a network of kinship relations, the greater theological Mary is present in many individual, localized statue forms in the province of Cadiz and greater Andalusia. Famous Virgins of Andalusia are the *Virgin del Rocio* (or Virgin/Madonna of the Dew) from Huelva and the black *Virgin de la Regla*

from Chipiona, and the Virgin of Alcala de los Gazules, among many others. In Spain, statues of the Virgin form a type of sisterhood. Universally they are ‘the Virgin’ but they are also unique to place and in their abilities. The Virgin of Alcala, for example, is thought to be able to cure infertility, be of particular help in times of accidents, and is able to aid the community of Alcala in times of drought. *La Virgin del Carmen*, also known as the Virgin of the Sea, is the local Virgin of San Fernando (a coastal town). Del Carmen is prayed to regularly on behalf of fishermen, sailors, and others who themselves or their families work near or on the sea.

According to William A. Christian, Jr., statues of saints are found in places of geographical natural importance or difference, i.e. places that stand out such as caves, springs, mountain tops, etc. and that can be seen as ‘contact points with the worlds below and above’. He writes,

Throughout Spain they mark critical points in the eco-system-contact points with other worlds. Mountain peaks, springs, and caves seem to be contact points with the worlds below and above; boundary shrines with other earthly worlds. With their periodic devotions at these sites it would seem that the villagers were at once confirming the boundaries of their world, assuring the continuity of the annual cycle of seasons, and attempting, through propitiation or the use of promises, to gain some control or some influence upon the entry of foreign material or foreign power into their world. Since they themselves are not capable of fully regulating their environment, there must be other powers beyond who are capable, and the chapels are located at the most logical transaction points with these powers beyond. Individual promises and individual regular devotions served the same ends for the individual as the village ceremonies did for the village – to influence the course of crises and ensure the normal unfolding of the life process (Christian, 1989: 182).

Shrine placement indicates boundaries from one region to another, from village to village, or cultivated from uncultivated land (1989: 182). This would have certainly been true for the prominent hill top area that boasts the shrine of the Virgin of Alcala. Despite attitudes fostered by the Second Vatican Council (which took their toll in Spain, especially in the more northern regions), for over 400 years the Virgin of Alcala has flourished within an ongoing vibrant cultic movement where displays of passion and physical contact are alive, stable and continuous. According to Boissevain (1992), the effects of the Second Vatican Council led to a different outcome in Andalusia. He writes,

Since the Second Vatican Council, bishops and priests have renewed their opposition to the boisterous cult of the saints in Andalusia. At the same time, many of them are aware of the strength of what they call ‘folk Catholicism’ and are obliged to condone it. When in 1979 local and regional leaders of the left were elected to positions of power, they publicly promised to respect the celebration of Holy Week as a “manifestation of popular Andalusian culture”. The regionalist movement that has emerged in Andalusia since Franco’s death regards outdoor religious celebrations as one of the major manifestations of regional culture. Since then the Council of Andalusia and local governments throughout the region have contributed to a revitalization of Holy Week celebrations and the cult of the saints (cf. Driessen 1989:99) by sponsoring festivals they manipulate local and regional consciousness. These three examples suffice to indicate that ‘popular religion’ has become part of a cultural policy pursued by various power elites. Intellectuals, politicians, and religious specialists are all involved (1992: 80-81).

However, according to Boissevain, the attempt to secularize Andalusian devotion by making it ‘cultural’ has had the opposite effect.

During the past decade the socialist government of Spain has reduced the number of religious holidays. In the same period there has been an increase and intensification of pilgrimages, processions, and the cult of the saints in both urban and rural contexts, along with a drastic decline of liturgical practice (cf. Rodriguez Becerra 1982:8) (1992: 82).

It can be concluded from this that when devotions are under threat by either politicians or councils such as Vatican II, the Andalusians retaliated with increased intensity in the face of secularization.

The Village of Alcala

This ethnographic account begins with a description of a physical locale. The village of Alcala de los Gazules (or Alcala de la Sierra) rests on a hill top in the Southern Spanish region of Andalusia, and in the province of Cadiz. Geographically and historically, Alcala is positioned in a strategic, elevated position capable of providing long views that stretch to surrounding territories.



4.1 The village of Alcala de los Gazules, La Sierra, Andalusia, Spain (to the right)

Currently Alcala has a small population of around 5,300 inhabitants (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística*, 2011) and looks much like many of Andalusia's other 'white villages'. It has schools, bars, restaurants, shops, plazas, churches, and countless other establishments that aid in life's day to day happenings.



4.2 The Village of Alcala de los Gazules, La Sierra, Andalusia, Spain

In January, 2008, I spent a week around the village of Alcala. While conducting fieldwork, the *camaristas* that I met introduced me to a local historian of Alcala called Immaculada ('Imna'). She met me at the shrine of the Virgin one afternoon. As we walked around the shrine land together, she pointed out areas of historical interest. She gave me information with regards to both recorded history and legends surrounding the Virgin. She told me that roughly 900 years ago, Alcala was considered a 'precious jewel' that became the point of a great conflict that arose between the Muslims and the Christians. Here, each side claimed governance and divine right over the terrain. She said that the grounds that now belong to the shrine and sanctuary of the local statue of the Virgin is where one of the Muslim/Christian battles took place and that the well that is on these grounds provided the meeting place for the arrival of troops. Prior to the Muslim and Christian conflicts, Alcala went through several other historical occupations from peoples such as the Romans, Visigoths, Vandals, Phoenicians, and indigenous Iberians. What is

now known as ‘Alcala’ has been inhabited for many centuries and is understood to be (for many reasons) a place of significance both past and present.

The Virgin and her Shrine

The performances that take place in relation to the Virgin of Alcala are complex and many. They are best described as acts resulting from a combination of official doctrine and popular piety in connection with the local folk customs practiced in relation to her uniqueness of place and ties with the village community of Alcala. According to my first meeting with the *Santero*, this statue of the Virgin is particularly powerful in that she is recognized for performing miracles (as mentioned before, especially those concerning infertility, drought, and accidents).

The *Santero*’s role is important for this case study and it must be addressed in further detail before this account continues. His relationships can be considered an ‘everyday’ relationship with the Virgin. From speaking with him, I found that he is responsible for many things such as the security of the complex, answering the telephone, making preparations for events such as children’s day visits, processions, weddings and funerals, and welcoming pilgrims and devotees to the shrine. Generally, the *Santero* is responsible for the upkeep of the sanctuary and grounds surrounding the shrine. I have observed him watering plants, moving rocks, or doing whatever needs to be done in relation to maintenance and the shrine. Further, the *Santero* is a man of the country. He grows food for him and his family; he shoots his own game, and generally survives off the land surrounding the shrine. He receives a salary and housing for being in the position of *Santero*. He lives in the sanctuary with his wife (the *Santera*) and their two children. The *Santero* is never permitted to leave the shrine without first making sure that someone is there to take his place, hence he very seldom leaves. His wife works outside the sanctuary, and their children go

to school in the village. One of the pre-requisites for the position is to be of local origin and to be a devotee to the Virgin. In September 2007 he told me that people view him as more than a maintenance or grounds man. They see him as having a special relationship to the Virgin, and for this reason he will often play the role of listener and counsellor to those who bring their hardships and offerings to the shrine. Further, as I have observed, the *Santero* plays the role of a kind of gate keeper to the Virgin (and consequently miracles she can perform), i.e. the *Santero* is responsible for unlocking the door that leads to the chamber of the Virgin where devotees can have physical access to her. He also plays the role of information provider to those who visit the shrine. It is also part of the *Santero*'s job to change the flowers at the base of the statue on a weekly basis, making sure that the Virgin always has fresh flowers.

In January, 2008, the *Santero* and Imna both said that the Virgin of Alcala is known to conduct miracles and that surrounding villages have made attempts to call the Virgin of Alcala their own. From accounts told by Paqui, Yolanda, Imna, my mother-in-law, and an elderly woman passerby who overheard us speaking, I understood that the statue has three origins, all of which are centered upon similar elements: the sudden and unannounced appearance of an unclothed statue in a field overnight, an olive tree, a well, a long journey, two undercover angels, and a shepherd. The stories change depending on who is doing the telling, but they consist of these elements:

Between four to five hundred years ago, a shepherd was in a pasture around where the shrine now stands. He was herding his sheep. In the evening he fell asleep under an olive tree. When he awoke, he found an unclothed wooden 'doll' sat next to him. Bewildered, he tried to get rid of it. The next morning the shepherd awoke to the presence of the statue under the tree for the second time, so he built a fire and put the wooden statue in it.

Yet again, the following morning the statue was found to have returned unscathed. In his anger and confusion, the shepherd hit the statue in the head with his staff. This part of the story accounts for the mild cross eyed look of the statue. Finally, the shepherd went and sought out the local priest. The priest, after hearing the story and seeing the statue, proclaimed it to be that of the Virgin Mary and a miraculous happening, hence the constructing of a shrine dedicated to the statue in that place.

Another story goes as follows:

The locals in the village decided they needed a statue of the Virgin Mary (or perhaps they needed a new one). Two men were sent with money to Malaga to see someone who could help. They had only been walking for one day when, in Tarifa, they encountered someone who gave them a statue – the same statue that resides in the shrine today.

A further story in relation to the shrine and the two angels goes as follows:

Two men came to help build the shrine of the Virgin. The locals brought the men food and water that would last for a few days so that the men would have enough to eat and drink. When some of the locals went turned back up at the site where the shrine was to be built, the shrine was complete and the food and water had not been touched. For this reason, according to the story, the two builders were angels disguised as men.

The *Santero* and Imna agree that the statue is at least 400 years old, and both say that it could be much older. Community identities of both the Virgin and the local devotees are interconnected, each giving strength and importance to the other. William A. Christian writes,

With this analogy the symbolic role of Mary as village patron becomes a very important practical one. She is a significant factor in binding the villagers together as member of the same family. Just as the extended family stays together as long as the widowed matriarch is still alive and active, so the village stays together under the continued activity of a powerful image. This is how the very essence of the village as home can come to be bound up in a revered image (1989: 175).

Approximately five kilometres from the village of Alcala, this Baroque-style shrine is over 400 years old and is accessed through a long open road that runs through the middle of large olive grove.



4.3 This is an aerial image of the shrine and sanctuary of the Virgin of Alcala

The complexity, size and adornment of the sanctuary (also known as the *ermita de Nuestra Señora de los Santos*) are testimony to her local, regional, national and international fame. From this image, the shrine within the complex can be seen. It is the right side of the complex with the two raised and pointed rooftops. Further, the wall façade that houses the shrine bells indicates the main shrine entrance. Although this is the ‘main entrance’, it is rarely used. As indicated further on, the shrine is typically accessed through the patio courtyard.



4.4 The front entrance to the shrine

There are, in fact, three entrances to the actual shrine, and two entrances to the main complex.

Once at the complex, one of the first things I noticed that there were many animals around. There were several dogs and cats, and all had little offspring running around. When I asked the *Santero* about this, he said ‘This is a sanctuary for everyone’, and told me that he feeds the animals and takes care of them. To get to the actual shrine it is necessary to pass through an

archway that takes you into a tiled patio area. Above the door, a painted tile plaque reads ‘Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus’.



Figure 4.5 The entrance to the shrine complex

In this area, to one side, there is a small souvenir shop dedicated to the Virgin, i.e. everything inside is Virgin of Alcala materiality that has been *bendicido*, or blessed. There are statues, rosaries, fans, pictures, prints, amulets, medals, plaques, bells, salt and pepper shakers, milk jugs, painted tiles, painted plates, clocks, mugs, flags, candles, jewellery, and more, all bearing the image of the Virgin of Alcala.



4.6 Inside the souvenir shop of the shrine

From the same patio area, another archway is passed through that takes you into the large central courtyard typical of Spanish architecture where open air ‘patios’ are central to the building.



4.7 The patio

Here, plants, flowers and decorative tiles dress the inner sanctuary where rooms with balconies house visitors, pilgrims, and members of the community who come and stay during *romerías*, pilgrimage, and other events. The rooms are also the subject of a yearly raffle in which people buy tickets and whoever has the winning tickets will be able to occupy the rooms during the week of the Virgin's birthday (which is the large fiesta and annual procession that takes place around the grounds of the shrine). The shrine appears to be most frequently entered through the two dark heavy doors in the corner right hand side of the central patio courtyard.



4.8 The entrance to the shrine part of the complex

Upon entering the shrine, the first thing that struck me was the ornate, colorful decoration. Then, the next noticeable thing is that it is cool, dimly lit, and smells strongly of a mixture of frankincense, must, and flowers. The shrine has marble floors and a dome-like painted ceiling.



4.9 The Virgin in her Shrine

The statue of the Virgin is elevated roughly 12 feet off ground level. She sits in another, higher chamber that has her facing out into the shrine. She is framed and displayed within a large arch, and she is sometimes illuminated beneath what appear to be large white carnival light bulbs. Some of the bulbs work and others do not, while there are sockets without any bulbs at all.

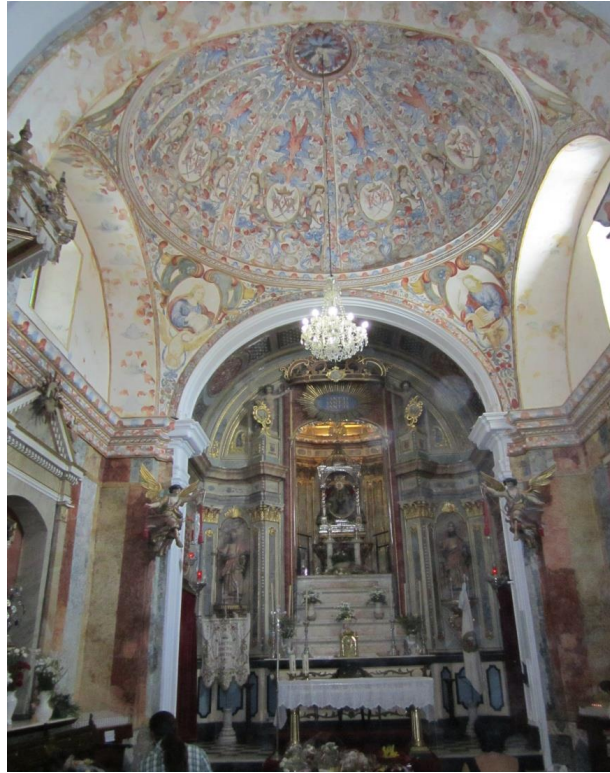
Most of the paintings on the dome shaped ceiling are rubbed out and faded. A large chandelier hangs from the centre of the larger dome-like structure. The mouldings are also chipping in places. This faded, antique look is shared by most of the pictures, paintings, and statues found within the shrine. One can see hundreds of *ex votos* along the walls, and pews are set in rows before the altar of the shrine which sits a step above ground level. *Ex votos* are, according to McDannell, ‘physical expressions of thanks for a cure or divine help’ (1995: 152).



4.10 The long view of the shrine illustrating the ex votos and domed ceiling

The Original Shrine

On my June, 2010 visit, the *Santero* told me that the complex as it stands now is built around an older, original shrine. He is not certain about the age of the original shrine, but speculates that it could be from the 15th century. The following picture shows the original part of the shrine around which the rest of the complex has been built. From the aerial photo, this would be the front, right side of the building with the second raised/pointed rooftop.



4.11 The original shrine around which the rest of the complex was built

The older part of the shrine is distinguished from the rest of the shrine because of the dome-like structure. The *Santero* told me that the statue would have originally sat where the altar is now placed (with the white table cloth). The shrine and complex as it stands now was built in the 1800s, the original part being much older, but as indicated before, the age of the original part of the shrine is speculative. The *Santero* speculates that it is as old as when the Virgin first ‘appeared’ on the land where the shrine now stands, probably in the 1400s. He also says that the Virgin’s ‘appearance’ was actually a ‘reappearance’. In a casual conversation during my most recent visit in July, 2011, the *Santero* told me that the Virgin had been buried by early priests during the Muslim invasions and was unearthed once peace had been restored and Spain was once again under Catholic rule. This would have been when this first part of the shrine was built.

The altar sits at the centre of the shrine on ground level. This is where venerative flowers are placed. These are funded by the organising body responsible for the details of the Virgin’s care

called the *hermandad*, which literally translated means ‘fraternity’ or ‘brotherhood’ (I will discuss this further on in this chapter). On the floor in front of the altar there are six white buckets filled with fresh water daily that are there to receive the bouquets of flowers brought by devotees to the shrine.



4.12 The two doors either side of the altar.

On either side of the elevated chamber that houses the Virgin and on ground level there are two sets of double wooden doors shrouded by thick red velvet curtains that lead to white marble staircases that take one up and into the Virgin’s chamber. The right hand staircase is the passage most often used.



4.13 The chamber of the Virgin

Once in the inner chamber, one can see that the Virgin stands on an ornate pedestal that raises her roughly four feet off of the floor. One can see that it is round, has stained glass windows, and another, high, painted dome ceiling where the faces of cherubs come out of a mixture of painted cloud and blue sky. Entering the chamber allows one to access the back of the Virgin and her mantle/robe, while her front faces outward to the shrine.

As illustrated, the Virgin sits within a *templete* (or small temple) of silver. The Virgin permanently resides, even during processions, in her *templete*. On the top of the *templete* there is a gold miniature and elongated angelic figure blowing a trumpet toward the heavens. At the base of the *templete* at feet level of the statue, there is a large crescent moon. Warner tells us that the symbol of the moon is a symbol of fertility which,

Has been the most constant attribute of female divinities in the western world, and was taken over by the Virgin Mary because of ancient beliefs about its functions and role, which Christianity inherited (Warner, 1978: 256).

The chamber of the Virgin is the place where one can have physical contact with her and at the *Santero's* discretion.



Figure 4.14 The Virgin in her chamber, facing out into the shrine

The Virgin is roughly three feet tall, and has fine, delicate looking, classically European features that are framed in gold. By this I mean she has a long narrow face, a small nose and

pronounced, yet small lips. Her eyes are painted brown without indication of the presence of eyelids.



4.15 The Virgin up close

This supports the *Santero's* claim in January 2008 that 'she never sleeps', making her eyes appear wide open and giving her the appearance of a 'gaze'. Her 'skin' is painted fair. She holds a sceptre in one hand, and a smaller statue of the baby Jesus (also crowned and robed) in the other. This statue of Jesus is tiny in comparison with the statue of the Virgin, and is probably no larger than eight inches in height, yet his appearance is that of a miniature crowned and robed toddler. The small Jesus is dressed in coordination with the Virgin, holds a sceptre in one hand and a *globus cruciger* in the other. She also wears a large crown of gold.

On a day visit in January 2008, the *Santero* told me that he often goes into the chamber and chats with the Virgin about the hurt and pain in the world. He told me that ‘She [the Virgin] has the power to help heal both individuals and the world situation’. On my last visit he told me that he takes all of his troubles to her. He then said ‘Sometimes the Virgin gets angry with me and punishes me for doing something as simple as killing a mosquito and when I tell the *Santera* [his wife] these things, she tells me that I am crazy’. Sometimes he speaks of how her face changes, or how he sees her move. He also says that sometimes she is angry and other times she radiates with joy. The *Santero* speaks about the statue as a living, animate, being. In September 2007, when he has been in the chamber with me, he said ‘Now touch this side of her robe and look how her face looks content.’ Then he will take me around to the other side of the statue and say, ‘Now touch this side of her robe, and look at how she looks more serious’. According to Warner, ‘Mary and the saints are begged to pray for us and not to act directly and grant the ultimate object of the prayer’ (1978: 288). This differs from accounts told to me by the *Santero*. He says ‘she is so powerful that she can perform miracles and answer prayers, and if she does not want something to happen, then it will not happen’.

Another statue in the shrine that is particularly popular with pilgrims is a small statue of the infant Jesus (about 18 inches in height). Enclosed in a protective glass case on the ground level, he sits on a table to right of the Virgin. On one arm hangs a silver basket, and in the other hand he holds a pearlescent *globus cruciger*. This Jesus is kept under a glass box-like container and is dressed in formal baby clothes: a white satin gown with ruffles, white socks, and silver shoes.



4.16 The fertility Jesus

This statue is carved wood. His features are more doll-like than that of what is usually associated with the baby Jesus, i.e. the hair and face is painted on. People that come to the shrine seeking the Virgin's help with infertility or other problems with conception will request that the glass case is removed so that they can tug on the infant Jesus' genital region. The *Santero* told me that a person has give *dos tirones de la pichita* ('two tugs on the penis') to ensure conception. According to one of my informants, a friend of mine and my husband's called 'Mariano', a male in his early 30's, he went to the shrine, tugged on the penis of the statue, and asked for a child. Mariano said '*Funcionó*' (it worked). He pointed to his seven year old daughter.

This genital region is covered by a pair of small underpants, and although I normally have no problem in fully engaging in participant observation in all of its forms, this is one engagement that I chose to miss out. Hence, I do not know how this statue is physically made (I question

myself now wondering if I didn't want to engage in this act because of embarrassment or because I was afraid that it might work). What I do know is that on my June, 2009 visit, the baby Jesus was in the village of Alcala being restored. The *Santero* told me that this is due to its popularity and the fact that years of physical contact have taken their toll. It is also for this reason that the baby Jesus statue now sits within a glass case. In the past he was open to the public, but now the *Santero* can have more control over who touches it and how. Further, the statue of the infant is loaded down with gold baby jewellery (rings, bracelets and necklaces) and things like baby dummies, baby pictures, and knitted or bought baby shoes that are often found both on and around this little statue. These offerings have been brought by people who have conceived a child and attribute the child's conception to a visit to the shrine and a tug at the genitals of the baby Jesus. It can be suggested from this last that the Virgin and the Jesus work together in terms of fertility.

On my July, 2010 visit, I was shown another chamber that I never knew existed. It is partially underground and sits below the elevated chamber of the virgin. This room houses the *ex votos* left by children and *ex votos* dedicated to children. The *Santero* also showed me one wall lined with boxes full of devotions, drawings, finger paintings, and other children's things. This smaller sanctuary is simple with white walls lined with paintings, pictures and rosaries. There were also several framed locks of hair hanging on these walls, more than in the main part of the shrine. Two of the 'locks' of hair were not actually 'locks' but substantial long thick braids. One them was salt and pepper in color (silver and black) and the other was a dark reddish brown. When I pointed at them and looked at the *Santero*, he said '*prometido*' (promised). The *Santero* indicated (and I paraphrase here because I did not have my digital recorder present) that there is simply not enough room to display all of the devotionals left at the shrine. In an adjoining chamber there is a

huge wardrobe full of the robes used by the priests and a large antique desk, chairs, and tray holding a bottle of sherry. This part of the shrine is not usually accessed by the public and I felt privileged to be allowed entry.

It must be clarified at this point that the shrine of the Virgin is not a church. It is a shrine and sanctuary dedicated specifically to the Virgin. As will be discussed further on with regards to property and revenue, the Virgin and her shrine generate their own economies independent of the local church. The church that is meant to ‘correspond’ to the shrine is called ‘La Iglesia de la Victoria’ and it sits in the village of Alcala. The parish priest, Father Marco, officiates at ceremonies, rituals, and the summer masses that take place within the shrine, while officiating at his own church within the parish.



4.17 Inside La Iglesia de la Victoria with the miniature Virgin of Alcala to the right hand side

Further, inside the church there resides a miniature statue of the Virgin of Alcala. This ‘mini-Virgin of Alcala’ (seen to right hand side of this image) indicates a connection between the shrine of the Virgin and La Iglesia de la Victoria. According to Father Marco, more people attend mass in the church during the winter than in the summer months.

According to the *Santero*, those devotees who visit the shrine do not necessarily have an affinity with the church, or even Catholicism. On my latest visit in July, 2011, he said: ‘When some people come to see the Virgin and see that mass is going on, they turn around and leave. The thing of the Virgin doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with the church’. In other words, many, but not all, Virgin devotees are often on a different ‘trajectory’ to those who regularly attend mass. When I asked him about the social classes of people who come to visit the Virgin, he said ‘*Hay de todo*’ (There is every type of person). Further, when I asked him about gender (whether there more women than men, or vice verse) he said ‘*Es igual*’ (It’s the same). Then ‘There are even atheists who come to see the Virgin’. Paraphrased, he said ‘the Virgin is a thing of generations’ and said that I am now a devotee of the Virgin, too. When I asked why he thinks that, he said ‘you keep coming back’.

When I asked the *Santero* about other shrines in the area he told me that ‘the shrine most similar to this one is the one in Vejer’. Vejer de la Frontera is another Andalusian hilltop village roughly 40 kilometres from the village of Alcala. But, he emphasised, ‘*esta es unica!*’ (this one is unique!). When I asked how, exactly, is this shrine different, he replied ‘*No hay otra virgen como ella*’ (there is no other Virgin like her). He said (to paraphrase) ‘his’ Virgin was crowned ‘the Virgin of the Saints’ which means that her sovereignty is acknowledged by the Rome. Details of this will be discussed in the section of this chapter called ‘The Coronation’. He then told me about the significance of the *ex votos*, how the shrine is a ‘living record’ of the lives of

people, past and present. He said that some people return to the shrine to collect family photos that were left there in cases such as needing one for a driving license. The *Santero* said that he points to the correct box, which will be labelled and dated, and tells them to go through the pictures and look for their own.

When I researched information about the *ermita* at Vejer in July, 2011, I saw that it is dedicated to La Señora de la Oliva. I did not visit this shrine physically as I did not have transportation (and a baby in tow), but from the images I found on the website [http://cadizpedia.wikanda.es/wiki/Ermita_de_Nuestra_Se%C3%B1ora_de_la_Oliva_\(Vejer_de_la_Frontera\)](http://cadizpedia.wikanda.es/wiki/Ermita_de_Nuestra_Se%C3%B1ora_de_la_Oliva_(Vejer_de_la_Frontera)), I discovered that, this shrine, although the complex is a building of smaller but similar architectural style, this shrine does not have *ex votos* and is much less ornate than that of the Virgin of Alcala. There are, however similarities. La Señora de la Oliva occupies a central, elevated position in the shrine and there are flowers in buckets on the floor at the altar below. The statue of this Virgin appears to be much larger than the Virgin of Alcala. Clearly, I did not do research in terms of the similarities of the demographics, devotees and venerative performances/offerings that take place between La Señora de la Oliva and the Virgin of Alcala, but this would be a worthwhile undertaking for future investigations.

She/Her

During my time spent with some of the devotees of the Virgin, especially during my January, 2008 trip, I began to realize that the statue is referred to as *ella* or ‘her’. In further dealings with the statue and after increased familiarity, I also began to refer to the statue as ‘her’. Now it seems there is no other appropriate way to refer to the Virgin of Alcala. Calling her ‘the statue’ does not seem suitable or justifiable. This is due in part to the fact that those who love her and dedicate

their time to her refer to her in this loving, human-like way. Therefore, I refer to the statue of the Virgin of Alcala as ‘her’, only sometimes referring to her as ‘the statue’ when I need to discuss her physical components (although those form part of ‘her’, too). However, my husband, a proclaimed agnostic, also refers to the statue as *ella*. He said ‘that’s the way it is around here’; although he says he thinks that *ella* is just a statue. He insists this is normal in Andalusia and that to refer to the statue as *ella* is cultural and not particularly dependent on religious faith. Hence, there is also the possibility of a cultural factor that influences how people refer to statues of Mary in Andalusia.

Materiality and the Virgin of Alcala

Since religious materiality is by definition anything that can be interpreted by and related to through the senses, i.e. things that are touched, smelled, felt, heard, tasted or experienced in sensuous ways, then the shrine, the statue, the sanctuary, and all of its contents and surrounding territories are set are all part of the religious materiality that forms part of the cult of the Virgin of Alcala. A single visit to the shrine can potentially fill the senses with a million colourful possibilities; and for the researcher, the territory surrounding the shrine and all of its related stories and happenings is expansive enough to fill a second thesis. However, the focuses of this chapter are the statue and offerings. This includes issues of display, composition, restoration, adornment, dressing, and the materiality left as offerings within the shrine. This also includes the performances and acts of veneration that take place therein.

Both Father Marco and the *Santero* informed me, on different occasions, that the Virgin of Alcala’s shrine, sanctuary, and surrounding territories are literally in her name, i.e. ‘The Virgin of Alcala de los Gazules’ is what one will find on the property deeds, and this is one of the ways in which the Virgin of Alcala is personified. Those responsible for her affairs are an organized

body consisting of over 2,000 members called the *hermandad*. The building used by the *hermandad* to house their offices, the Virgin's monies, jewels, gold, mantles, and numerous other Virgin-related objects are also owned by the Virgin. The *hermandad* is responsible for organizing the processions (*romerías*) and other events that take place on sanctuary ground. The Virgin is the hostess. For example, many activities for children are hosted at the *ermita* and paid for by the Virgin. The Virgin of Alcala is also the *patrona* and protectress of the village. She is processed in the village in times of distress, drought, or other disasters, and this has nothing to do with liturgy. Further, in a formal interview with Father Marco in January, 2008, he told me that 'When the Virgin has to be sent away for restoration, the villagers get upset and kick up a fuss until she gets returned'. This is why, Father Marco said, that several members of the cult of the Virgin are taking courses in restoration so that they can restore the Virgin without her having to leave her shrine.

Offerings (a testimony to healing)

During each fieldwork visit that I undertook, the Santero reiterated the fact that the Virgin is petitioned for help with varying problems such as economic hardship, infertility, sicknesses, family troubles, or offered simple devotion or given thanks for a miracle or answered prayer. This healing function can be seen all throughout the shrine of the Virgin of Alcala and in the forms of the offerings left there, mainly through *ex votos*. Some of the *ex votos* are contemporary, while others are much older, dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.



4.18 Ex voto depicting child's survival of a fall, giving thanks to the Virgin



4.19 Contemporary ex voto in the shrine



4.20 Ex voto dated 1817



4.21 Ex voto depicting man surviving execution, 1815

Here, material offerings and promises help to facilitate relationships with the statue. In my visits to the shrine, by taking field notes and photographs, I documented offerings such as: framed locks of hair which hang on the walls of the shrine, and photos of loved ones placed in frames or in the corners of the frames of *ex votos* which have been made or given by a family member.



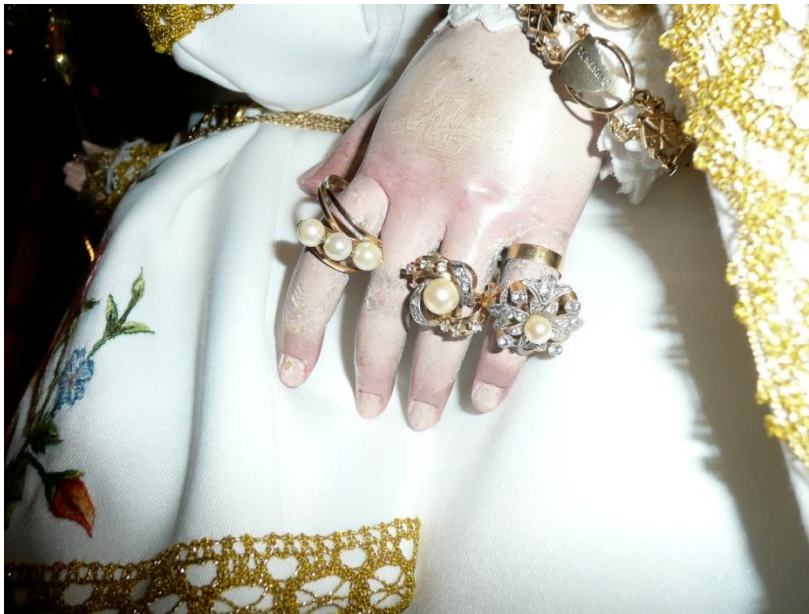
4.22 *Ex voto* depicting family pictures

Economically valuable objects such as gold and silver jewelry such as rings, necklaces, and bracelets can also be seen on the statue. From this I observed that objects offered to the Virgin vary in materials and are extremely personal and of sentimental value, valuable through the lens of normative Western economic value systems, or both.

Through both observation and explanations given by the *Santero* I also documented in my field notes that offerings can take the form of an abundance of seasonal flowers, plants, money left on offering plates, and jewelry bought especially for the Virgin. The *Santero* told me that the rings offered to the Virgin are ‘placed on her fingers and changed weekly so that every piece has some time on her hands’. He said that there is a ‘back log’ of jewelry that must be placed on the

Virgin. From this I gathered that he meant on her fingers, around her neck, and on her wrists.

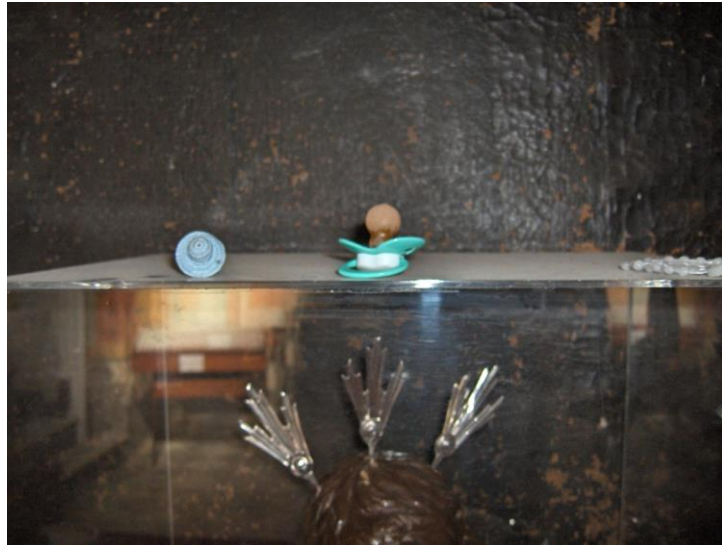
The Santero said 'There is too much jewellery to put on the Virgin and not enough time'. On my June, 2009 visit to the shrine I saw that the finger of the detailed hands of the virgin, had one or more ring placed on them. There were also several bracelets hanging from her wrists.



4.23 Offerings of rings and jewelry on the Virgin's hand

I also documented (through field notes and photographs) offerings such as rosary beads, candles, cloth cut from the clothes of loved ones, and written petitions placed under the feet of the statue.

On my January 2008 visit there were baby dummies, baby jewelry, and baby shoes left in the shrine as offerings given for prayers answered with regards to fertility.



4.24 Offering of a baby dummy on top of the fertility Jesus' glass case

Framed military medals are also common shrine inhabitants. Examples of this can be seen from the image below on the lower left hand side.



4.25 *Ex votos* in the shrine

The shrine of the Virgin of Alcala is filled with different forms of artistry that graphically depict the actual accidents or tragedies that occurred which called for the Virgin's intervention. In this Virgin's shrine, *ex votos* line the walls.

Sometimes offerings are practical. Materials, time and labor are sometimes volunteered as offerings. I am told by the *Santero* that people offer what they have to offer, including skills. For example, if a person is a builder, he will offer his labor. If a person owns a ship he will offer it to the service of the Virgin. If a person is a farmer, he or she will offer a cow. On my visit to the shrine one afternoon, a delivery of stone was made which turned out to be the materials to construct a new patio for the sanctuary, a promise made by a local tradesman that if the Virgin healed his wife, he would donate the stone to make a new patio floor. On my January 2008 visit, the *Santero* told me that a new roof was also recently donated as an offering to the shrine, and that some of the laborers of the village will donate their time to putting it on. As will be discussed in the case of the Goddess, a form of petition by prayer is practiced with the same, exemplary, reciprocal phrase, 'If you do this for me, I will 'x,y,z' for you or your shrine'.

The Coronation

In January, 2008 both the *Santero* and Father Marco told me that the Virgin of Alcala was coroneted in 1990 and acknowledged by the Vatican as 'the Virgin of the Saints'. The *Santero* told me that all of the other statues of the Virgin Mary in the Province of Cadiz were physically and literally brought to Alcala's shrine to witness her crowning and placed at her feet. The *Santero* indicated that this gesture signified her superiority to other statues of the Virgin Mary in the province. He also told me that getting the Virgin crowned and acknowledged took a lot of hard work, yet *she* did it. The Virgin is responsible for getting herself to the position of being

crowned. It is also interesting to note that the content of the Virgin's crown is melted down gold from the jewellery given as offerings to the statue from the devotee parishioners of Alcala.

Interviews with the *Santero* and Father Marco revealed that much of the jewellery on the body of the Virgin is heirlooms and other pieces of sentimental value. According to Orsi's account of the Madonna of 115th Street, when the Vatican 'crowns' a statue of Mary, 'The crown is a symbol of papal power, the authority of Rome, and of a particular kind of Catholicism'. He tells that this type of event has 'both local and international context' (1985:64). This can be applied to the statue of the Virgin of Alcala. The contents of the crown help create closer links between the Virgin, Rome, and her community of devotees, i.e. the vernacular and the doctrinal are bridged.



4.26 Illustration of the crown and gold framed face of the Virgin

Display

The Virgin of Alcala is displayed in a way that is conducive to the reception of physical touch and contact. Her positioning in the extended, yet reachable, upper chamber demonstrate her power and authority. The mantles are touched, and although a sign is up in the chamber that asks devotees not to kiss the cloth, from the lipstick stains on the Virgin's mantle (which was cream coloured when I was there June, 2009) it is obvious that many do it anyway. In any case, this Virgin's chamber is designed for company. In the chamber there are window seats for people who come with relatives and/or friends to wait their turn at being able to put their head under the back of the mantle and ask for a miracle, or whatever it is that they need.

The Virgin's robes are one of the major foci of performance in the shrine. In the chamber, her mantle, which is said to have miraculous properties, can be touched while one asks for a miracle, prays to the Virgin, or asks for a blessing. The devotee puts the train of the Virgin's mantle over his or her head.



4.27 Devotee beneath the back of the Virgin's mantle

This is the moment when objects such as jewellery, photos, or prayer requests small pieces of paper are left in contact with the ‘body’ of the Virgin, particularly under her feet. This is also one of the most physically intimate of moments that one can share with the virgin. I have observed devotees cry upon first entry to the shrine and upon coming out from under the back of the Virgin’s robe. Although I have made it very clear to the *Santero* that I am not Catholic, at one point during the fieldwork visit of January, 2008 (when I was focused on questioning him), he urged me to ‘participate’ by placing my head under the back of the Virgin’s mantle and asking for a ‘miracle’. Under the mantle, the world is dark and smells of sweet must, yet it was still possible to make out the little pieces of paper and photos that have been placed under the feet of the statue. Being somewhat emotionally affected by this experience, and coupled with accounts from devotees, I can better understand how material engagements with the statue make her ‘real’ for those that love her. In the moments of touch and physical engagement, this ‘thing’ (the Virgin of Alcala) is a subject of devotion. I found her to be personal and approachable.

During the January 2008 interview with Father Marco, I asked if the mantles could be powerful when they were not on the ‘body’ of the Virgin. This was an attempt to better understand the significance of the Virgin’s robes for this religiosity. Father Marco replied that the robes are ‘only powerful once they are placed on the statue’. However, before any mantle is placed on the statue of the Virgin, the priest said that it must be ritually blessed. According to a female devotee informant in her late twenties called Mayca (my sister-in-law), she took her newborn son to the shrine on a day visit. She told me that Father Marco was there and he offered to ‘*pasar el bebe de abajo del manto de la virgen*’ (pass the baby below the mantle of the Virgin). Father Marco performed this act in order to bless the baby. Further, on my last visit to the shrine in July, 2011, my mother-in-law ‘introduced’ our baby daughter Lucia to the Virgin by

placing herself and Lucia under the Virgin's mantle. As will be discussed later, the importance of the Virgin's mantles can also be seen in the rites that surround the changing of her robes.

Dressing the Virgin

It is difficult to begin this discussion of the how the Virgin is dressed and changed without also engaging a discussion of the varying roles in operation in the shrine complex, i.e. the parts of the facilitators is equally telling and important to this ethnography as the devotions. Within this complex there are those who 'set the stage' for devotion, members of the cult of the Virgin who belong to the *hermandad*. There is a hierarchy within the *hermandad* and the cult of the Virgin. I have identified three of the most significant roles within the *hermandad* that facilitate the decisions, dressings, daily life, and survival of devotion for the Virgin and her shrine, who is the epicenter of all of this activity. These are the role of the priest, the roles of the *camaristas*, and the role of the *Santero*. These roles must be addressed and outlined in order to understand the attitudes, devotion, treatment, relationships and display of the Virgin.

The Parish Priest

Father Marco is the person responsible for making decisions regarding almost every aspect of the Virgin's existence in the shrine. He is a young priest, appears to be in his mid-twenties, and is from Cadiz, moving to Alcala to fill the role as parish priest. Father Marco told me that he is responsible for choosing what colour of mantle the Virgin will wear in correlation with the liturgical year and for which processions. Generally, the statue is changed six times a year and in loose correlation with Lent, the Ascension, the Assumption, and the Conception (*Immaculada*). Her mantles are also changed before any other type of non-liturgical procession whether it is for her most famous procession in celebration of birthday in September, or when she is needed by

the village in times of crisis (which still occur). In the autumn and winter months of the year the Virgin is dressed in darker colours such as navy blues and reds, and in the spring and summer, she is dressed in lighter colours such as teal greens, whites, gold, and so on. On my June, 2009 visit, the Virgin was dressed in a brand new mantle that had been donated by a convent. It is cream coloured and embroidered with colourful flowers in a traditional Southern Spanish design. Father Marco told me that he holds special masses to bless the mantles both when they are taken out of storage from the *hermandad*, and when a new one is made and donated as an offering.

Before I interviewed Father Marco, I had already been told by both the *Santero* and the *camaristas* that there are taboos surrounding the dressing and changing of the Virgin, and that nobody apart from the *camaristas* knows how she is composed beneath her robes. Hence, I did not dare enquire about the statue's unseen physicality for fear of being out of line or rude (although it is a major concern of my research to know how religious objects are made and of what material). What is interesting is that the priest volunteered this information without any form of leading or provocation. During our conversation Father Marco repeatedly referred to the Virgin as the *imagen*, or image. He then began to tell me that the statue is no more than an image, and that 'the people of the village are crazy about her'. With this statement he made a dismissive gesture with his hand. He then proceeded to tell me (again without the slightest provocation) that the statue is made of painted cedar with iron support rods that has ball joints in the arms to facilitate gesture making. He also said it is difficult in terms of restoration to upkeep and maintain 'these images' due to their antiquity and delicacy. Further, the priest told me how much revenue the statue brings to Alcala yearly, saying that the shrine brings in over 36,000 euro a year in donations and revenue from her cattle and other farmlands. He also spoke of all of the gold, silver, and valuable possessions owned by the statue that stays in the *hermandad*. Father

Marco's role appears to be that of someone who manages the devotees who set the stage for the devotional rites and practices that take place in relation to the Virgin.

The Camaristas

The role of the *camarista* is interesting because it is the most intimate role within the *hermandad* and the cult of the Virgin. Their job is to clean the statue-body and change the mantle of the virgin in accordance with the liturgical year, seasons, or whenever Father Marco tells them to. Once the priest has chosen the colour, the *camaristas* have the freedom to decide amongst themselves which mantle and tone of that chosen colour she will wear (the Virgin has many mantles of varying colours and tones, some of which are up to 400 years of age and need proper care and occasional restoration). According to the *Santero*, only women can have the role of *camarista* because the modesty of the Virgin must be protected at all times. She can never be seen disrobed by a man. This is one of the greatest taboos in the village with regards to 'their' Virgin, and there are several myths that circulate about what exactly goes on when the Virgin is being changed in that secret way. Even the *Santero*, the person in the most constant contact with the Virgin, is not allowed to see her without her mantles. For that matter, the taboo is such that, according to the *Santero*, all of the shrine's security cameras are turned off, the doors are bolted shut, and the shrine is closed down for the day.

As mentioned in the methodology, I had the honour of formally interviewing and recording three *camaristas* on my last visit to Alcala about their experiences with the Virgin. I was told from the beginning of the interviews that there are things to do with the Virgin that are secret and that they cannot tell me, such as how the statue is made beneath her petticoats. They did, however, tell me she wore handmade white undergarments that they washed and ironed, but

anymore than that is out of bounds for an outsider. The *Santero* had told me that there was a kind of hierarchy within the *camaristas* but when I asked the ones that I met about this, they said this is not true. They reiterated the fact that it is taboo for someone outside of the *camaristas* to know anything about the statue's body, especially a man. Yet the *camaristas* were happy to tell me about their intimate interactions with the statue during her ritual changing and washing. They each told me different accounts of their encounters with the Virgin, but what they all had in common was that they sing devotional songs to her during the process (of which they sang for me during the interview to give me an example). They also each said that they speak to the Virgin and the baby Jesus. Paqui said that they say things such as '*Que guapa estas hoy!*' (Aren't you beautiful today!) The baby Jesus that the Virgin holds is also changed in this process. So when changing the statue of the baby, Paqui says things such as 'Hold still and stop squirming, son! How can I change you if you keep moving?'

Yolanda told me that she goes into a trance-like state during the process whereby hours can pass and it will feel like 20 minutes. Paqui and the one who wished not to be named nodded their heads in agreement. All three women told me that the experience is beautiful for them and extremely feminine and intimate. Yolanda said 'The experience is very intimate and feminine, and very special, you can't explain it'. Paqui told me that three different *camaristas* have seen a tear on the Virgin's face during the process and that she was one of them. She said 'Me and others, we have seen a tear on the Virgin's face'. In her account, Paqui got chill bumps, giggled, and her eyes welled up with tears.

According to the *camaristas*, the role the *Santero* plays in the changing of the statue is that he leaves buckets of soap and water, sponges and towels by the statue in the chamber for when they arrive. Another one of the *Santero*'s roles is to protect the statue's modesty from outsiders while

the *camaristas* do their work. In the beginning of my research, before I had fully grasped what was going on at the shrine, I asked the *Santero* why he could not be present during the washing and changing of the virgin. He exclaimed, ‘You’re a woman! Would you want some man looking at you while you got changed?’

The Virgin in Procession

Every year on the Sunday that falls after the 12th of September (the day of the Virgin) the Virgin of Alcala is processed around her territory. At the processions that I attended in September of 2007 and 2008, there were just as many men as women in attendance. The ages of the people vary from the elderly to the very young. The procession appears to be a family affair. An enormous pot of stew is cooked to feed all of the procession goers. It is cooked on an open fire and stirred with what look like rowing paddles. Here, the food is ‘free’, as the cost is covered by the Virgin, so all that attend leave with a full belly.



4.28 The making of food at the procession

I have participated in two of the Virgin's *romerías*, one in September 2007 and another in September 2008. At each one, the crowds are stifling and large. People push and shove to get a better view of the Virgin, and they also push and shove to be able to touch the bier while in procession. Just before the Virgin was brought out and placed on her bier before one of her annual processions, I watched how the bier, already outside, was kissed and leaned upon by devotees. Some elderly women wrapped their arms around it and would not leave their spot for fear of someone else taking it.



4.29 Annual procession, or *romería*, of the Virgin around her territory.

The weight of the processional bier is distributed among men and women alike. After a time in procession, the bier carriers stop and allow others to take their place. The *templete* that houses the Virgin is made of solid silver. According to Father Marco, the Virgin's mantles also weigh more than the statue itself, so supports must be placed under the mantle. All of these factors make the Virgin's processional bier a heavy load to carry.

At other processions of the Virgin I have attended in Andalusia (San Fernando's Virgin del Carmen and Cadiz' Nuestra Señora de la Alegria), the people in attendance appear to be more or less the same as those who attend processions of the Virgin of Alcala in terms of gender balance, age and economic social class. There are just as many men as women, and people of all ages can be found to participate. As these are 'city' processions, compared to the village countryside procession of Alcala, there is no food cooked for devotees. Further, the virgins of San Fernando and Cadiz are 'church' virgins. They do not have an *ermita*/sanctuary.

There is a large Spanish gypsy (*Gitano*) presence at the *romerias* of the Virgin of Alcala, and this also differs from the processions I have observed in San Fernando and Cadiz. My mother-in-law told me that there is also a large *Gitano* presence at the annual procession of the Virgin del Rocio in Huelva. The church that houses the Virgin del Rocio is located in the countryside as well. In September 2007, my husband and I camped on the grounds of the sanctuary the night before the procession. There were other people camping, too. Out of the darkness I could see the land dotted with fire light. I could hear also hear flamenco guitar, clapping (*las palmas*) and singing. People were also drinking and driving dirt bikes all over the terrain. Later on during the night, groups of adolescents turned up and played music loudly from their car boots. The atmosphere was one of tolerance, yet I found myself somewhat on edge and out of my depth. I have never experienced this kind of devotion at 'roots level' before.

Interpretations of Observations

I have drawn interpretations from the data retrieved in the fieldwork. Pertaining to the role of Father Marco, it can be suggested that he typifies post Vatican Council II attitudes toward the Virgin Mary, and the theological role of the Virgin Mary in contrast to how the *Santero* and

other devotees engage her. He appeared to have no sense of taboo in telling me the details about how the Virgin is made. I took from this that Father Marco had, in fact, seen the virgin disrobed, but never found out if this was a permissible act because of his vow of celibacy. Father Marco appeared to see the Virgin as a statue, not as a living ‘her’. This disclosure of what is regarded as deeply taboo to her devotees, i.e. the Virgin’s physicality beneath her mantle, indicates a lack of attachment and/or objectification of the statue that I found most intriguing.

As mentioned before, the shrine of the Virgin is not a church. Father Marco’s apparent detachment from the Virgin could potentially originate from two different sources. First, Father Marco is a young post Vatican II priest. Second, although he officiates at the rites that take place in the shrine, according to a conversation I had with the *Santero*, more people choose to have their weddings, baptisms and funerals at the shrine of the Virgin than they do the church. This could simply be because of the shrine’s countryside location, i.e. practically, parking is ample at the shrine while it is a source of difficulties in the village (this speculative information is influenced from my own experience and difficulties with parking in the village of Alcala as well as my own preference for the open air, olive trees, and views of the Sierra mountain range that surround the shrine). These practical considerations do not, however, negate the assertion that Mary sometimes poses problems to priests and theologians due to her popularity among vernacular Catholics. Not only because of her gender, but because, as mentioned before, the popularity of the Virgin and the frequency with which the villagers visit the shrine outweighs that of liturgical services.

In terms of the procession, when the Virgin is carried around her territory on the bier there is a reversal of performance. From my observation, this is when she performs for her devotees. Her processional bier can be touched, kissed, and carried, and she not only accessible, but interactive.

During this event, the Virgin appears to be truly treated like a queen. She is dressed in her most expensive mantle (some of them have gold thread, some are more humble) and she is adored by her subjects as they throw bouquet after bouquet of flowers on the bier. Here, the Virgin displays her bountiful, motherly nature.

Similarities to the Hindu murti

The ways in which the Virgin of Alcala are dressed and displayed are similar to those of the Hindu *murti*. Although Hindus and Catholics do not do religion in the same way, the seeing eyes of the Virgin reflect the eyes of found on the *murti*. *Murtis* are either directly on display in Hindu temples, or else they can be brought out on special occasions for the worshipper to receive *darshan* (sight) of the statue. The 'normal' *murtis* one sees in a Hindu temple, e.g. Vishnu, Krishna, Radha, Durga, Shiva, Ganesh, are treated as if they are alive. Following a visit to India and Sri Lanka, George Chryssides (University of Birmingham) told me that devotees change the clothes of the *murti* and offer food and drink to them. He said 'I have even seen miniature salt and pepper pots being placed alongside the offerings - real attention to detail here!' The ceremony for offering food is known as *bhog*, and the curtains around the *murtis* are drawn in order to ensure privacy. Like the Virgin having her clothes changed and being bathed, the *murtis* do not want all the public coming in and watching them at these intimate moments.

Note about Mary and the Goddess

Before continuing into the ethnographic account of the Goddess, I should note here that I am aware of the common idea that the Virgin Mary is a continuation and superimposition of ancient local Goddesses such as Isis or Cybele (to name two of many). When Christianity was in its early stages of growth in the ancient world, goddesses were replaced by statues and images of Mary.

Indeed, Imna (the historian) made the observation that the statue and the style of the shrine share an uncanny likeness to those of some of the female deities celebrated throughout the ancient worlds of Greece and Egypt. Chidester (2000) tells us that Christian emperor Constantine selected the Greek city of Byzantium for his capital – a city that had he previously dedicated to Rhea ‘mother of the gods’ and that later became identified with Athena, Hecate, Cybele, and Isis. As Mary’s royal status grew, she slowly began to assume the roles previously held by the former pantheon. These roles included that of divine mother, urban protectress, agricultural and fertility insurer, and goddess of fortune. Mary, like her predecessors, was crowned, and called ‘virgin’, ‘bride’ and ‘queen’, and she offered nourishment and salvation (Chidester, 2000: 314). However interesting and poignant are these ideas, I suggest that those ideas be temporarily suspended both for the sake of this chapter and in respect of those devotees that might find that idea disagreeable. It is not the point of this work to say that Mary is really one form or another of the Goddess, or, as some Catholics might think, that the Goddess is really a popular seeking for Mary. It is, however, the point of this work to comparatively illustrate the conceptual and ontological uses of religious offerings that take place in relation to the Goddess, the Virgin and Mary. In any case, the point is to work out how materiality is used in relation to a new religious movement and to two continued traditions, one interrupted, the other not. Catholicism in both England and Spain has suffered the consequences of interrupted devotion through different reforms, cultural ideologies and political movements, and these deep changes are reflected in the modes of physical, active relating with statues of the Virgin.