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PREVIEW

**SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY**

**THE EX-VOTO AS SYMBOL OF FAITH AND SURVIVAL**

**A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**BY**

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NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND**

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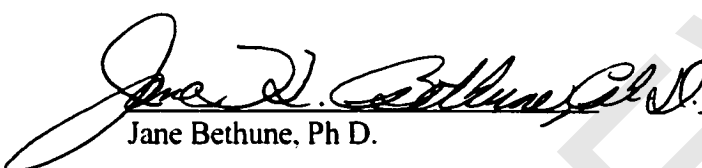
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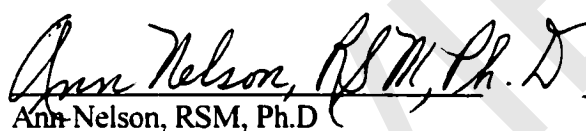
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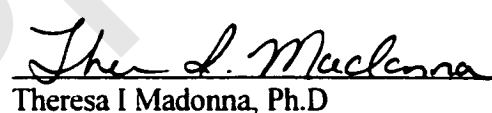
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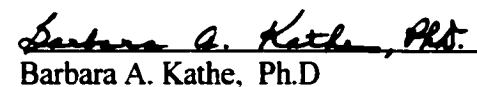
The dissertation of Marjorie Atwood entitled "The Ex-Voto as Symbol of Faith and Survival" submitted to the Ph.D. Department in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of Salve Regina University has been read and approved by the Committee:

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## EPIGRAPH

**“For those who believe in God, no explanation is necessary.  
For those who do not believe in God, no explanation is possible.”**

**From the movie, *The Song of Bernadette***

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This journey of deliberation, persistence and delight now comes to an end.

## ABSTRACT

Prehistorically and historically throughout human experience, man has looked to the supernatural for rescue from disaster and for favor of many kinds. Man's quest for supernatural assistance may be identified as early as the Paleolithic Age. The search for the sacred is thought to be related to cave painting found in cave "sanctuaries" in petition for success in hunting.

Later civilizations (North Africa, Mesopotamia and the Greek Archipelago) reflect further developments of this human endeavor. The Jewish tradition and early Christian votive offerings bring an additional wealth of testimony.

The Christian cult of the saints was accompanied by the construction of sanctuaries and the popularization of pilgrimages to them. Local festivities in honor of a sacred personage were also celebrated with song and dance. These *romerías* were similar to larger scale pilgrimages but were generally more geographically concentrated.

Testimony of the human need for divine support is reflected by the emergence of the *ex-voto*, a symbol of humanity's recognition of the necessity for supernatural assistance in its constant pursuit of faith and survival.



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## ILLUSTRATIONS OF THIRTY-NINE RETABLO EX-VOTOS LOCATED AT THE END OF THE TEXT

The illustrations were chosen from the private collection of Marjorie Atwood to acquaint the reader with the appearance and content of the ex-voto illustrating the themes of faith and survival.

They include some of the eight thematic divisions described by Elin Luque Agraz and Michele Beltrán. The divisions are accidents; actions of grace; incarceration and violence; natural disasters; wars, social upheavals, and revolutions; mediums of transportation; rural difficulties; and problems of health (Agraz and Beltran 1996, 99ff, 271 ff).

# **INTRODUCTION**

PREVIEW

## INTRODUCTION

As one contemplates human experience, it is clear that humanity has consistently recognized personal inadequacy. This has been noted from prehistoric times when, according to theoretical anthropology, the primary response to recognized human need was the pursuit of supernatural assistance. Cave paintings, considered supplicative, and the utilization of ex-votos to secure response to human needs are testimony to this phenomenon.

Prehistorically and historically throughout human experience, man has looked to the supernatural for rescue from disaster and for favor of many kinds. Human beings have used religious faith and symbols to order their world and to insure their survival in it and beyond it. They have done this because they have believed that the mysterious world beyond their senses interacts with them and responds to their prayers and vows. (See illustrations of this in the ex-voto collection at the end of the text). This dissertation will examine the use of images to symbolize human relationships with the spiritual world, especially the use of ex-votos in the human-divine interchange. Without faith, the ex-voto would not exist. In the ex-voto, faith in miraculous intervention is inextricably bound to survival. A vow made to a sacred personage is offered when all else fails.

The ex-voto symbolizes the exercise of power by the deity or sacred personage and acknowledges gratitude in the fulfillment of a vow or thanksgiving. As a material representation of an answered petition, it relates the supplicant to the deity or saint petitioned and promises to publicize the power of the intercessor rendered as a response to the supplication.

The divisions of this dissertation are based on the theory that throughout human experience, man has looked to a greater power for rescue from perceived threats and for supernatural dispensations of many kinds. Man's search and the attempt to communicate with a greater power is recorded in his art which has given concrete form to these longings. In this sense the first examples of votive art may have been manifested in the art of the cave. From this conjecture concerning the earliest of man's artistic endeavors and in the civilizations that followed, the votive tradition has manifested itself in art and architecture.

Man's search for and dependence on the supernatural is ongoing; therefore, this paper proceeds with a detailed focus on religious imagery which touches on historical background and discusses the representations in the painted ex-voto. This is followed by a discussion of sanctuaries and pilgrimages and culminates in an analysis of faith and survival. A selection of illustrations of ex-votos provided at the end of the text shows some of the eight thematic divisions of the ex-voto as described by Elin Luque Agraz and Michele Beltrán for the exhibit *Dones y Promesas: 500 años de arte ofrenda*. The conclusion states that the ex-voto is a legitimate symbol of faith and survival.

A number of authors such as William Fleming, Rosa María Lara, Edward Lucie-Smith, and María del Carmen Medina San Róman, suggest that cave art was in some way supplicative. Art, such as the cave paintings of our earliest forebears is not merely a primitive expression of the Paleolithic era, but is considered to have a certain sophistication. According to Mircea Eliade cave art may be seen as having a "magico-religious intentionality." (1981 Vol 1, ff).

These representations seen in the art of the cave may be thought of as seeking to communicate with higher powers, an activity that spans the ages and is found in many cultures and civilizations. Since pre-Christian times man has expressed his spiritual needs in his art and architecture. Literature also has recorded man's search for the supernatural shown in the *Old*



*Testament* and in the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which relates Gilgamesh's quest for the meaning of life in the face of death (Fleming 1995, 7).

The varieties of votive art are diverse and include literary, sculptural, architectural and pictorial forms and even manufactured articles. An example of a literary ex-voto, *Las Cantigas* of Alfonso X, is a play written by Lope de Vega, a Spanish playwright. An example of a sculptural ex-voto may be seen in Teypeyec Gardens at the Basilica of Guadalupe where a sculpture of a giant sail was given by seamen in thanksgiving for their salvation. Architectural ex-votos are many. Churches such as Valenciana in Guanajuato, Mexico were often constructed in response to a vow or in thanksgiving. Large format painted ex-votos in oil include the very large oil of a Franciscan procession asking for intervention by the Virgin of Guadalupe. This painting is housed at the museum of the Basilica of Guadalupe. Other examples of large format ex-votos are the well known ex-voto painting by Phillippe de Champaigne "The Ex-voto of 1662" which hangs in the Louvre and one by Henri Royer titled "Ex-voto" in the Colección Musée des beaux artes de Quimper, France (see Chapter II, page 11).

Ex-votos emerge in various places at various times in accord with crises and predicaments, both personal and communal. Ex-votos were utilized by the pagans; Cicero speaks of the nautical painted ex-voto in the first century B.C. (Calvo 1996, 32). However, in the Middle Ages, saints and their relics were considered vehicles of the miraculous. Pilgrimages to their tombs became common. During the Roman era, inscribed tablets were left at temples and, later, at the shrines of early Christians. (Calvo 1996, 32).

In the Medieval world, the veneration of holy and sacred personages and their relics were utilized as a way to attract miraculous power. Because of this, the painted ex-voto seems to have ebbed in popularity as miracles became the prerogative of saintly intercession. However changed in

form, the ex-voto tradition has continued with tokens of appreciation brought to the shrines in thanksgiving and/or in answer to a promise.

### VALUE OF THIS STUDY

Previous published studies of the ex-voto, especially of the painted form have been concerned mainly with content studied from an ethnological viewpoint. Content and date lend themselves to this kind of study, as ex-votos depict a variety of events which reflect customs and attitudes of a specific time period. Scenes of revolution and social upheaval give insight into history and supply information on manners and costumes of the period. Often authors have focused upon technique, color, and especially perspective, the technique of representation of the three-dimensional with the experience of depth. Most of the painters of nineteenth and twentieth-century ex-votos were untrained artists using a naive perspective to create a scene that often seems to float on a one-dimensional surface. The painted ex-voto is in most cases an anonymous work and, although there are illustrations of ex-votos shown at the end of the text which show signatures, they are the exception rather than the rule.

Although the ex-voto has an evolving and undeniable link with faith, this study focuses on the previously unexplored idea of the ex-voto as an illustration of man's use of symbols to express his faith. Man's quest to bring the divine into closer contact has been a motivating factor in the production of votive objects. This work seeks to broaden the ethnological and sociological treatment of the ex-voto which symbolizes man's communication with a greater power. Man's search for an unseen power in his life and his predilection to portray images of his faith is another facet of the study.

The materialism of our technological age often ignores the faith dimension of previous generations and thus has had a devastating effect on the creative expression of the painted ex-voto which is now rarely made. Instead, photographs and letters are left at shrines. Manufactured objects, some of great value to the petitioner, are promised and taken to a sacred personage in response to intercession. For the majority of people, faith in the supernatural has changed, and man is now more attracted to technology for solutions to crises. In many parts of the world people still continue to make offerings but these offerings reflect the world of technology rather than the earlier religious art forms of the people.

#### TERMS OF MAJOR SIGNIFICANCE

Specialized definitions of terms utilized in this dissertation are helpful to the reader who may be aware of the many meanings that terms can engender. An important concept in this dissertation is faith, belief in the unseen. Without natural faith in which trust is placed in another, everyday living would be fractured by paranoid and suspicious behavior. Natural faith is the foundation of social life. Supernatural faith, belief in divinity, gives man's life another dimension. It is the knowledge that there is a power that can be called upon in time of need. Examples of this supplication are shown in all of the ex-voto illustrations following the text. Faith has great bearing on the ex-voto since, without faith in divine intervention, the ex-voto would not exist.

The term "survival," used in this work concerns physical survival as well as psychological survival. It signifies the action or fact of continuity in preserving life or promoting its fulfillment. Generally in the painted ex-voto, the events leading to supplication and survival are narrated.

"Ex-voto" is a Latin term meaning according to, or because of a vow. The ex-voto, often referred to as a retablo in Mexico, is a focus of this study within the larger context of human

experience. The ex-voto is the material evidence of a gift to a deity or sacred personage because of a vow or solemn promise. The tangible gift of an ex-voto comes into being because of a vow; it represents man's need to communicate with a higher power to express gratitude for assistance. The ex-voto is a symbol of man's dependence on and faith in the supernatural. Ex-votos may be artistic expressions, or simple offerings such as flowers, fruit, braids of hair, crutches, x-rays or any other of a variety of promised gifts or articles given in thanksgiving. Artistic ex-votos include sculptures, images made of gold, silver, or tin called *milagros* (miracles). Votive art fulfills a social and religious function with pilgrimage to a sanctuary as a frequent part of the vow connected to the ex-voto. When taken to the sanctuary ex-votos offer public testimony to the miraculous event.

Pilgrimages have a relationship to vows in that they are considered an active form of the vow often dedicated to a sacred personage or deity. Pilgrimage involves travel to a specific place, usually a shrine or sanctuary, and may require taking the gift of the ex-voto as a token of faith and gratitude. The miracle that took place is publicly promulgated through fulfillment of the terms of the vow. Pilgrimage requires leaving the familiar and going forth to an unknown area both in a physical and a spiritual sense. The root of the word in Latin is *peregrinus* meaning pilgrim or stranger. The pilgrim is often a traveler in an unknown environment.

Localized pilgrimages, called *romerías* may be viewed as performance votive art. *Romerías* within a community are celebrations of a miracle or the anticipation of a favor to be received. Faith in a sacred image is paramount, and this image carried in procession is the central feature of the *romería*. The fervor of the participants often initiates song and dance in tribute to the image as the participants ask for a specific blessing. Thus this community or regional celebration is enhanced by the communal faith dimension.

Individuals depict their faith in the sacred by wearing amulets. The amulet has a relationship to the ex-voto since both are symbols of man's need for protection. Although its origin is shrouded in time, the use of amulets is believed to be coeval with the existence of homo sapiens on this earth (Budge 1978, 1). The life of early man was understandably precarious. Anxiety and fear led to a perceived need for protection. The frequent use of amulets is often due to man's belief in the existence of demons and evil spirits to whom were attributed all bodily ills, ailments, and misfortunes. The amulet is still used in many parts of the world for a variety of purposes. The wearer anticipates that it will be a protection against evil and bring him good luck. The continued use of amulets is a practice which "dates from the time when animism or magic satisfied the spiritual needs of man." (Budge 1978, xv). The effectiveness of amulets may be dependent upon the devotion of the community and of the individuals who wear them.

Sometimes indistinguishable from amulets are *milagros*. These are generally cast or stamped metal, but are also made in carved wood, molded wax, and occasionally in amber, jet and black coral (Egan 1991, 57). They are fashioned into figures, body parts or any related object connected to a specific supplication, either promised or in an act of thanksgiving. This form of the ex-voto is virtually unchanged since the Classic period in Greece. *Milagros* are still used in the present day in many of the same forms (Egan 1991, 2).

## METHODOLOGY

This dissertation is primarily descriptive. It describes various examples of ex-voto art from prehistoric time to the present in order to discover the evolution of the ex-voto as a symbol of faith and survival. Chapter I discusses the early examples of man's quest for supernatural help. The foreshadowings of the ex-voto, which potentially arose in the Paleolithic era, also touch upon other

examples with possible votive connections in early civilizations. Chapter II continues with later examples of man's search for and dependence on the supernatural. The focus of Chapter III concerns man's response to images. Some historical background information leading to the appreciation of the images shown in the painted ex-voto is provided. Chapter IV is devoted to pilgrimage and sanctuary, often the sites of miraculous images and the many ex-votos dedicated to these. Chapter V links cultural changes in faith and survival to the ex-voto.

In several chapters, the following subjects are discussed. Man's prehistoric depiction of life forms, sometimes disputed as having spiritual significance, are featured. The successive evolution of the ex-voto to the modern age of materialism is surveyed. Image, pilgrimage and sanctuary as tangible links to the ex-voto are examined. Accounts of oral and written sources are reviewed and evaluated. Since history is usually the record provided by the elite, the oral tradition of the common experience, although frequently recounted by elites, is taken into consideration for reflection.

A new appreciation of the perception of the ordinary as extraordinary is increasingly advanced by scholars. While the ex-voto may seem a simple and sometimes primitive endeavor, it is an extraordinary manifestation of faith. The evolution of the ex-voto is entrenched in the faith of the common man. As a tangible symbol of his faith and often survival, it is a significant testimony in human development. It has a validity that ought not to be ignored as man becomes increasingly enamored with technology.

## IMPORTANT SOURCES

Major sources used in connection with this dissertation that contribute heavily to the basis of Chapter I include *A History of Religious Ideas*, Volume I, by Mircea Eliade (1981). Although other religious anthropologists have written about the spiritual stirrings of early man, authors of the

following works recognize the domination of Mircea Eliade in the field. *Paleolithic Cave Art* by Peter Ucko and Andrée Rosenfield (1967), *Prehistoric Religion* by E.O. James (1957) and *Secrets of the Ice Age* by Evan Hadingham (1979) have been used to broaden Eliade's concepts. Another major source *Arts and Ideas* by William Fleming (1995), is important for the identification of man's artistic works inspired by his search for a higher power.

*Folk Art of Spain and the Americas: El Alma del Pueblo* (The Soul of the People) the exhibition catalog edited by Marion Oettinger (1997), contains invaluable material, especially the chapter entitled, "Votive Art: Miracles of Two Thousand Years" by María del Carmen Medina San Román. As senior curator at the San Antonio Museum of Art, Oettinger has written extensively on the folk art of Latin America, Mexico and Spain. In this recent publication, there are illustrations of the Spanish ex-voto with textual comments. Oettinger categorizes the ex-voto as folk art or *arte popular*, a vernacular of the people. His reference to them as "little altarpieces" is apt and an expression that is not used commonly in reference to the painted ex-voto, but which seems fitting.

This work includes a discussion of Spanish and Mexican ex-votos as well as those from other European countries. Fine early maritime ex-votos from Cataluña are illustrated in the publication *Folk Art of Spain and the Americas*. These were lent to this exhibition of the folk art of Spain and the Americas, by the Museu Maritim in Barcelona. Illustrations of votive ship models in the sanctuaries of Spain and Mexico are also included. Oettinger's research makes valuable connections between the folk art of Spain and that of the New World. His point that, "books dealing with votive paintings in Mexico, for example, hardly mention the connections with Spain" is well taken (Oettinger 1997, 28). Other exhibit publications by Oettinger are *Folk Art of Latin America* (1992) and *Folk Treasures of Mexico* (1990).

Contributions by George Foster are worthy of note. *Culture and Conquest: America's Spanish Heritage* (1960) is considered a pioneer work, an anthropological study which discusses the acculturation of Spain and the Americas. The chapters include studies on "Contemporary Hispanic American Culture: the Product of Acculturation." These are sociocultural and psychological mechanisms. Conquest culture is a culture that is considered to be artificial and standardized, partially created and designed to cope with recognized problems. "The Diversity of Spanish Culture" deals with Spain and its tremendous cultural differences. Iberian background continues in Latin America and, although it is not identical, it cannot possibly be understood apart from the history of Spain and Portugal. In the same way, the conquest cultures of Latin America cannot be understood apart from history as a whole. Foster chooses certain cultural characteristics for comparison, for example how towns and cities are laid out in Spain and in Latin America, agricultural practices, the raising of domestic animals, fishing techniques, arts and crafts including a discussion on costume. He further compares transportation and marketing, discusses folklore concerning pregnancy, birth and infancy, courtship and marriage, death and the rituals attached to them.

Foster also includes a chapter on "Religion in Spanish America;" however, the significance of the votive tradition is barely touched upon aside from by his provision of only a few paragraphs of description. One paragraph is devoted to ex-votos of silver, tin and wax. The second paragraph considers the painted forms of the ex-voto on wood or tin sheets. He refers to them as "crude folk art" depicting an accident or illness from which the supplicant is rescued by his appeal to the Virgin or saint. Foster refers to two illustrations used by Juan Subías Galter in his work, *El arte popular en España* (1948). One of these illustrations shows a workman falling off a roof and, the other, a *peón*