



“God” is Coming to My Home: Catholic Images and the Sacred in the Case of a Rural Village in Western Mexico

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Abstract This paper aims to clarify the dynamic aspect of the sacred that the religious image is imbued with, focusing on a Catholic practice in a current rural village of western Mexico. In classical studies of the sacred, it has generally been considered disconnected from the profane and ambivalent. Other research has revealed the multi-layered nature of the sacred and its constructive aspect. In contrast, this paper will discuss a sacredness that arises from the interaction between human beings and objects, a sacredness that is both performative and intimate. Thus, this article will analyze practitioners’ everyday, contingent acts, free from formality. In conclusion, “the sacred” contains a part of the profane caused by the Catholic image going back and forth between the realms of “the sacred” and “the profane”.

Keywords the sacred, the catholic image, intimacy, Child Jesus, Mexico, daily practice

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to clarify the dynamic aspect of the sacred by examining the relationship between the human beings and the objects, the Catholic sacred images. It focuses on not only liturgies and feasts but also everyday life, using the Catholic practice in a western Mexican village as a case study.

1.1 *Objects in Catholicism*

In Mexico, the Catholicization of the Indigenous peoples was promoted as part of the Spanish conquest project that began in the fifteenth century. Because Catholicism was introduced in a manner that overrode existing local cultures, Mexican Catholicism is characterized by hybridity and diversity (cf. Hughes 2012:8-9).

Until today, each municipality in Mexico has a patron saint, and feasts are held throughout the year to celebrate Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, or various saints. These celebrations often retain elements of mountain worship and local deities that existed among the Indigenous people prior to coloniza-

tion. Objects have played a major role in this process of syncretism driving the localization and diffusion of belief in Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary and the saints among Indigenous communities.

Objects in Catholicism include Hosts, wine, relics, sacred images, liturgical objects, and other objects, including the commodities. The Hosts is a round, thin sheet of unleavened bread that is consecrated at Mass and consumed together with wine during communion. These objects represent the body and blood of Jesus Christ and are understood to be Jesus himself. Through the Hosts and wine, the sacrifice of Jesus is re-experienced at Mass. Relics are also found in Islam, but in Christianity they are defined as “the body of Christ or a holy person (body, remains, ashes, etc.), or anything that has touched a holy person or his relics” (水野 2014).

In addition, sacred images depict Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and various saints in human form. Relics and sacred images are objects of veneration, whereas liturgical and other objects are not objects of prayer but rather tools and devices

that enable ritual and religious practice in the Mass.

Mass-produced objects such as crucifixes, images, paintings, and photographs of sacred images are also sold for home use. Pictures and paintings of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and saints can be found in streets (and sometimes on buses and in taxis), while calendars bearing sacred images are commonly displayed in homes. Religious objects thus abound not only in churches, but also in domestic and public spaces. Among these, this paper focuses specifically on sacred images¹⁾.

Churches throughout Mexico typically possess sacred images, and their feasts are almost always accompanied by them. However, pre-existing studies of Catholic sainthood in Central America have focused primarily on the meanings of saints and the functions they serve within particular societies or groups (e.g. Wolf 1958; Gudeman 1976; Graziano 2006; 落合 1984; 加藤 2012). The material existence of sacred images themselves has not been sufficiently examined (川本 2019 for details). The meaning attributed to saints, which have been the subject of extensive debate, are largely predetermined by doctrine and are therefore treated as fixed and static.

In Catholicism, sacred beings are defined by doctrinally and are understood to exist prior to belief and independently of objects. A sacred image is thus regarded as an object that represents a universal being. For example, despite variations in form and appearance, images of the Child Jesus are doctrinally interpreted as representing the same Child Jesus. The veneration of sacred images is grounded in the dual nature of the image as both vessel and a representation of a universal being. In this framework, the sacred image functions merely as a medium between sacred beings and believers, thereby avoiding the idolatry.

In contemporary Mexico, however, some sacred images are closely associated with particular lands or localities (Turner and Turner 1978; Hughes 2012:9-15). These images appear to maintain unique relationships with their devotees, as if they were distinct entities.

The works of Victor Turner and Judith Turner (1978), as well as Jenifer Scheper Hughes (2010), who conducted semantic analyses of Catholic iconography, provide useful perspectives on this phenomenon. According to the Turners, symbols such as sacred images are not limited to universal

meanings; rather, through interaction, images acquire meanings linked to the emotions and experiences of those who engage with them (Turner and Turner 1978:144). Hughes similarly argues that Mexican sacred images possess their own histories and identities over time, becoming powerful through the coexistence of singularity and multiplicity (Hughes 2010: 129).

While both studies are important in their attention to the presence of images themselves and in their demonstration of dynamics nature of meaning and image identity, they nonetheless retain a view in which humans unilaterally assign meaning and identity to images. By contrast, this paper adopts the position that the relationship between images and humans is mutual. It draws on Alfred Gell's theory of agency (1998). As noted in the introduction, Gell rejects an epistemological approach and argues that both people and objects are social agents who that mediate social relationships through action (Gell 1998). He further suggests that devotees' actions toward art objects, such as idols and images (portraits), render these objects social agents by endowing them with a state of "liveliness," or agency comparable to that of persons (Gell 1998:126-153). In line with this perspective, this paper considers sacred images as important agents that also create religion, focusing on what each human and object does and how they interact with one another.

1.2 *The sacred and the profane*

In this paper, I consider the relationship between the Catholic image as an object and human beings from the perspective of the sacred and the profane. The term "sacred" has generally been regarded as being disconnected from the profane, such as everyday life, and this view is particularly strong in Christianity. Here, however, the "sacred" is considered not as something static, but as something fluid that is created within a moving continuum between the domestic sphere and the religious or other-worldly.

As mentioned in the Introduction, studies in Western art history have shown that in medieval Christianity the concept of *acheiropoietos* (not made by human hands) emerged in order to avoid idolatry. Iconic legends claim that Christ's face remains elusive even when depicted, yet that his likeness is created through the miraculous power of Christ himself. This logic holds

that if Christ himself created the image, it would be sacred rather than idolatrous (水野 2014: 52). Similarly, works by artists that lack visible traces of human intervention were considered more sacred. In this framework, the sacredness of an object is maintained by separating the sacred from the profane. It is precisely through this separation that sacred objects are distinguished from everyday objects and oriented toward specific beliefs. Norms thus determine both the meanings of objects and the actions of people.

By contrast, this paper adopts a standpoint that emphasizes the interactive relationship between humans and objects and focuses on the practices through which such interactions take place. It takes the view that certain objects are sanctified through these practices, thereby giving rise to a sacred existence, or sacredness.

As noted in earlier studies of ritual and action, formality has long been regarded as a crucial element in generating religious worlds. Maurice Bloch (1974) and Catherine Bell (1992) emphasized the formality of action in ritual, while David Morgan (2010) argued that belief is created through the everyday, repeated religious behavior of the devotees. These studies demonstrate that religious worlds are constituted through the regular performance of prescribed actions.

Bell, in particular, proposed the concept of “ritualization,” understood as a mode of action that differentiates certain activities from others and accords them a privilege. As she writes:

Ritualization appreciates how sacred and profane activities are differentiated in the performing of them, and thus how ritualization gives rise to (or creates) the sacred as such by virtue of its sheer differentiation from the profane (Bell 1992: 91).

Bell thus argues that the sacred is generated through “ritualized” actions that distinguish it from the profane. This paper shares the premise that the sacred is produced through action. However, although sacredness in Christianity is often perceived as innate in its doctrine, this study extends the analysis to mundane, ordinary life and contingent actions that are not bound by ritual formality. In doing so, it seeks to clarify that the sacred—as the object of belief—is created performatively

through interactions between the material existence of the image and the human beings.

1.3 *Miracles and Pilgrimage*

I have discussed elsewhere (川本 2019) the relationship between the image of the Child Jesus and devotees, which is the subject of this paper. That study focused not only on rituals, but also on the non-institutionalized act of the devotees in the daily care of the sacred image. Acts of caring for the image in search of a “comfortable state” for them are not symbolic performances in any sense. As Gell notes, “they were not at play, but at work” (Gell 1998:134). From this, it is clear that caring for a sacred image constitutes an important activity through which the relationship between God and devotees is formed, a relationship characterized by both sacredness and intimacy.

In this paper, I continue this line of inquiry by focusing on miracles that occur in ordinary spaces. Typically, miracles are understood as mystical experiences that take place between God and devotees. Victor Turner’s studies of pilgrimages (Turner 1966; Turner and Turner 1978) are representative of this perspective. In many contexts, devotees leave their daily lives behind and travel to extraordinary spaces—sacred sites where statues of Christ, the Virgin Mary, or various saints, believed to possess strong spiritual power, are enshrined—in search of miracles.

That is also true for Mexican Catholics. The Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, now a national symbol of Mexico, is always filled with pilgrims. According to Catholic doctrine, the Virgin and the saints do not themselves perform miracles; only God can do so, while the Virgin and the saints serve merely intermediaries who convey the wishes of the devotees to God.

In practice, however, gratitude for miracles is often directed toward the saint or sacred image to whom the request was made. Devotees therefore return to the same site to express thanks. Although visits to sacred images may take place not only at distant temples but also at nearby churches and temples, previous studies have pointed out that leaving one’s home and undertaking a journey is itself a significant religious experience (cf. 土井 2012).

The following is also a report on the petitions to saints in Latin America. Even when not canonized by the Catholic

Church, the posthumous veneration of individuals as saints—often as symbols of resistance to social problems or established authority—is widely practiced in Latin America. Frank Graziano called such saints as “folk saints,” distinguishing them from canonized saints (Graziano 2006). In the worship of folk saints, faith is a spiritual contract, which consists of mutual obligations between the folk saint and the devotee. The relationship begins with the devotee’s request for a miracle, and the believer maintains the relationship with the saint by promising to do something in return for the miracle (Graziano 2006:60).

However, in this paper, miracles are not treated solely as phenomena “detached from daily life” or as events occurring only between God and an individual devotee. Rather, this paper seeks to clarify the collective dimension of miracles as they unfold in ordinary spaces. It also argues that flexible and contingent engagements between objects and people render an image not only sacred but also intimate.

2. Catholicism in Tingambato

2.1 About the Research

This paper is based on the field research conducted over a total of 22 months between 2011 and 2019 in Tingambato, a rural village in Michoacán, Mexico (Figure 1, 2). The research methods included participant observation and interviews, and Spanish, the official language of Mexico, was used for the investigation. The ages and occupations of the individuals in this paper are those at the time of the survey, and names are given as pseudonyms. The author has taken all the photos shown here.

Tingambato was founded in 1581 by the Augustinians. The village is located at 1,981 meters above sea level in a mountainous area surrounded by coniferous forests. Since 1877, it has served as the administrative center, or *cabecera municipal*, of Tingambato, where party politics is practiced. The smallest administrative unit in Mexico is the *municipio*, which roughly corresponds to a county; however, in this paper, the term “village” is used, following the local term *pueblo*. The village is situated along a main road connecting two cities and lies within an active flow of people and goods.

A total of 113 residents and their families (59 men and 54 women) were interviewed by the author during the fieldwork.



Figure 1. Map of Mexico

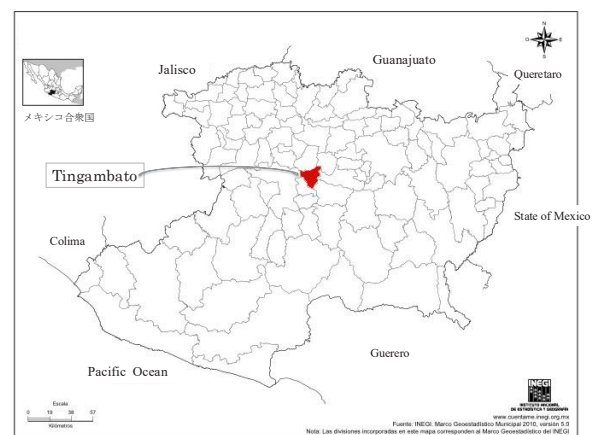


Figure 2. Map of Michoacán

Their occupations were as follows: among men, there were 13 teachers, 11 peasants, 5 carpenters, 5 merchants, 5 day-laborers, and 12 others. Among women, there were 33 housewives, 12 merchants, 10 teachers, and 4 others. According to residents, many people in the village work are engaged in teaching and other professional occupations.

Maize, frijoles (beans), wheat, maracas wheat, and cherimoya—staple foods—are cultivated in the village (Román Arauz 1997: 25). In the past, cultivation was primarily for household consumption, but in recent decades many residents have sifted to avocado cultivation as the local economy was stimulated by the introduction of new avocado varieties. Prior to this shift, avocados grew wild in the area, but these belonged to a different species.

2.2 The religious life in the village

Since its establishment, the village has experienced a shift in ecclesiastical administration, moving from Augustinian

control to the secular Church, which assumed responsibility for pastoral care of the area in the mid-eighteenth century. According to census data, the village currently has 7,458 Catholics, 198 non-Catholic Christians, 3 adherents of other religions, and 69 people with no religious affiliation (INEGI 2010). The church is situated at the center of the village and is equipped with a *curato* (the priest's residence) and several additional rooms that can accommodate large gatherings. Because the priest resides there, access to religious services, including Mass, is readily available. The village's patron saint is Santiago Apóstol, or St. James the Greater, whose feast day on July 25 is one of the largest annual events in the village.

As Catholics, villagers receive the seven sacraments over the course of their lives: Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Communion, Reconciliation, Ordination, Marriage, and Extreme Unction. After receiving the sacrament of First Holy Communion, they are able to partake in Holy Communion during Mass. Sunday Mass is attended by so many people that the church is often filled to capacity.

In addition to individual religious practice, feasts play a central role in the village's religious life. In Tingambato, feasts can be broadly divided into two types: feasts related to the life of Jesus and those dedicated to the Virgin Mary or the patron saints. Some form of feast is held almost every month, and in most cases sacred images play a central role. These feasts are organized by the residents, and each year volunteers assume official roles on a non-remunerated basis.

2.3 Sanctification in Catholicism

In Tingambato, the Catholic priest serves as a moral authority and occupies a central position alongside the municipal government. There is one parish church and seven chapels in the village, each dedicated to a patron saint. The parish church houses an image of the village's patron saint. In addition, there are several images of Jesus in various forms, including the Child Jesus, as well as an image of the Virgin Mary. Residents engage with the church through the sacraments, beginning with baptism, as well as through daily Masses and festivals held throughout the year. The priest is the only person authorized to conduct the sanctification of objects. The process is as follows.

When considering objects and sacredness in Catholicism,

two behaviors related to the sanctification of objects can be identified, suggesting two distinct forms of sanctification. One is *consagrar*, or consecration, which refers to the act of sanctification performed by a priest on the Hosts and on liturgical objects used in the Mass. It is also carried out for those who are to be ordained as bishops. Consecration is a priestly authority recognized by the Church as an institution. It is also said that once an object has been consecrated, a formal act of deconsecration is required in order to dispose of it.

The other is a *bendecir*, or blessing, which is a sanctifying act performed by a priest on a person or an object. Through this act, divine protection is believed to be granted. Sometimes, at the end of the Mass, the priest lifts an image to a height where many people can see it, prays, and finally cuts the cross with it. In this case, there is no need to act for deconsecrating.

However, blessings are also given between laypersons, for example from parent to child, and in some cases, devotees consider themselves to receive a blessing by touching sacred images. Although a blessing is less strictly regulated than consecration and may be obtained from persons or objects other than a priest, there is also a view that receiving a blessing directly from a sacred image without the mediation of a priest is inappropriate (interview with the parish priest of the village, 2016).

These processes of sanctification consist of institutionalized behavior. Both are generally accomplished through similar gestures: the priest places his hands over the object, offers prayers, and traces the sign of the cross. A detailed analysis of these priestly acts of sanctification is beyond the scope of this article; instead, the present study focuses primarily on non-institutionalized forms of engagement between objects and devotees.

3. Worship of the Child Jesus

This paper focuses on the image of the Child Jesus venerated in Tingambato. The belief in the Child Jesus originated in medieval Europe, where his childhood became an object of worship in order to demonstrate the reality of Jesus's humanity (Zárate Hernández 2017:60). This devotion was later brought to Nueva España (present-day Mexico) via Spain (Zárate Hernández 2017:76). To this day, images of the Child Jesus



Figure 3. Mass-produced images of Child Jesus (photographed by the author in Uruapan, 2019)

are venerated in many villages in the Michoacán region.

In Catholicism, Jesus Christ possesses a dual nature as both God and human (according to an interview with a villager in his late twenties). This theological understanding explains why the Child Jesus is depicted as a baby or a toddler. Today, many mass-produced images of the Child Jesus are readily available, allowing individuals to own such images in their homes as well as encounter them in churches. Although these images vary in appearance, they are all recognized as representations of the Child Jesus.

In the past, most images of the Child Jesus were carved from wood; more recently, however, many have been made of plaster or fiberglass (Figure 3). Devotion to the Child Jesus is widely familiar among Catholics in Mexico, and it is no exaggeration to say that almost every church has its own image of the Child Jesus.

3.1 The Image of the Child Jesus in Tingambato

The image of the Child Jesus in Tingambato is locally called Niño Dios (Figure 4). In Spanish, *niño* means “child,”



Figure 4. Image of Child Jesus of Tingambato (photographed by the author in Tingambato, 2011)

and *Dios* means “God”. To avoid terminological confusion and to distinguish this image from other images of the Child Jesus, the term “the image ND” or the pronoun “it” is used hereafter to refer specifically to the image of the Child Jesus of Tingambato. To emphasize the object dimension of the image, I use “it” rather than “he” as the pronoun of the image ND. However, the names and pronouns used by local people when referring to the image ND are reproduced as they appear in their speech.

According to the villagers, the history of the image ND began more than 100 years ago. The image ND was initially placed in a *nacimiento* (a puppet display depicting the Nativity scene) that a foreigner²⁾ who operated a sawmill in the village, decorated for Christmas. During the *posada*³⁾ season, he invited villagers to his home and entertained them. However, when the Mexican Revolution broke out in 1910, the foreigner left the village and handed the image ND over to a villager. Until the 1930s and 1940s, it remained in the villager’s home, and the celebrations were domestic. Later, the parish priest at the time, Father Reinaldo Ábalos, encouraged the people to

make it a community celebration, establishing a village-wide celebration that continues to this day (Aguilera Montañez and Próspero Maldonado 2005: 3-5).

It began as a personal image of a devotee, but over time, it came to be cared for at the community level. A male villager in his 60s told me that in the 1960s, those who visited the image ND brought candles and flowers as offerings, rather than clothes or toys as they do today. They also brought corn instead of money to the feasts. The parish priest who began his service in Tingambato in 1981 also said that the feasts of the image ND were celebrated only among the locals at that time. Nowadays, a large number of devotees visit it not only from the village but also from all over the country, and even from overseas. This is because, on the one hand, the population of the village growth in the village and, on the other hand, to the villagers' perception that the image ND became widely known after a U.S. television channel aired an interview about the tradition of the Child Jesus of Tingambato in 1995. However, as the number of visitors (or pilgrims) increased and devotion to the image grew, a problem arose regarding the care and custody of the image ND.

Usually, the image ND is enshrined not in the parish church but in a villager's house. It is placed in the parish church only from December 25 to January 6 of the following year.

In 1998, however, the parish priest planned to build a shrine in the parish courtyard specifically for the image ND, where it would be permanently placed in a niche, while another image of the Child Jesus would circulate to the villagers' houses. This meant that the image ND would no longer leave the church and could not be touched.

According to the parish priest at the time, his intention was for pilgrims to come to the church to see the image ND, rather than to the villagers' house. Many villagers disagreed with this plan and did not want another image to replace it. As a result, a conflict arose.

During this period, villagers did not take the image ND to the church from 1998 to 2001 and again from 2011 to 2016. Meanwhile, they organized a union to pray the Rosary with the image ND every Sunday. They also invited priests from other parishes to celebrate the Mass with the image ND. When the problem was finally resolved in 2016, the church and the villagers agreed to continue the tradition of the image ND as it

had been practiced previously (For more details on the problem, see 川本 2017).

3.2 *The Features of the Image ND*

The image ND is made of wood. Since the image ND is repaired almost every year, it retains a shiny surface despite being more than 100 years old. As it cannot stand on its own, it is usually placed on a chair or held in someone's arm.

The image ND is approximately 60 cm in height and wears clothes made for a three-year-old child. However, its weight is unknown. In addition to the fact that it has never been weighed, there are also testimonies that its weight is perceived differently depending on the person holding it. Moreover, even the same person may feel it to be light or heavy on different days.

3.3 *The Villagers Called Carguero*

It has been shown that Central America has a civil-religious system that forms the basis of indigenous communities. Researchers have explored this by referring to it as a "cargo system." In previous research on cargo systems, community members rotate annually through civil or religious tasks. Religious tasks include organizing feasts, cleaning the church, and related activities. These tasks are performed on a pro-bono basis. Even when feasts are organized in coordination with the church, the separation between the ecclesiastical and secular realms is maintained. In other words, there is a division of labor, with the priest as the sole authority who can preside over ritual (Mass) and the office holders serving as the secular authorities (清水 1988). Office holders are not clergymen.

In Tingambato, villagers called *carguero* organize feasts for the image ND thirteen times a year and take care of it in their homes for one-year terms. A *carguero* of Tingambato consists of a married couple⁴⁾. They cover the expenses related to the feasts and the maintenance of the image ND.

Motivation for applying for the charge often include petitions for miracles, expressions of gratitude, affection for the image ND, or the joy of receiving it in one's home. To become a *carguero*, one must be from the village and be a married couple in an ecclesiastical marriage. Among the 27 former *carguero* families, male *cargueros* of 8 peasants, 6 teachers, 5 merchants, and others, while female *cargueros* 12 housewives,

8 merchants, 7 teachers, and others.

Once the *carguero* receives the image ND on January 6, they take care of it at home until the evening of December 24, when they bring it to the church. The image ND is moved each year from *carguero*'s house to the church, and then to the new *carguero*'s house. In this way, the image ND continually moves between the church and devotees' homes. Whenever the image ND is transferred between the *carguero*'s house and the church, it is carried in the procession accompanied by musical band. The procession is organized by the *carguero* on duty and joined by the many villagers and tourists. The *carguero* carries the image ND in his arms, and go at the end of the procession with their family. Although many people watch from the streets, no one is allowed to touch the image during the procession.

Once the image ND arrives at the *carguero*'s house, other family members and relatives actively assist the *carguero* in their duties. Due to population growth and the opening of a main road connecting nearby cities in the 1980s, the scale of feasts for the image ND has increased year by year. Because the *carguero* must prepare meals for all those who attend the feasts, the events would not be possible without the cooperation of other villagers. What is important here is the relationship of reciprocity.

In the next section, I will discuss how the image ND is treated and what people do with and to it.

3.4 How to treat the image ND: At the Church

On the evening of December 24, when the old *carguero* brings the image ND to the church. Mass is celebrated there, and the image of the ND is handed over from the *carguero* to the priest. On this day, the old *carguero*'s responsibilities are almost complete. From then until January 6 of the following year, the image ND is placed in a *nacimiento*, which is placed beside the high altar of the church (Figure 5).

During this period, devotees are not allowed to touch the image ND, as it represents the newborn baby Jesus. At this time, the image of the Child Jesus is under the custody of the parish priest, while several villagers (mostly women) volunteer to take care of it. Devotees bring gifts as offerings to the image ND and place them in the *nacimiento*. Many of the offerings are toy cars and balls, reflecting the fact that the image



Figure 5. In the *nacimiento* (photographed by the author in Tingambato, 2019)



Figure 6. The image ND in the parish church (photographed by the author in Tingambato, 2019)

ND is perceived as a boy. Many people visit the church to see the image ND. In the quiet atmosphere of the church, devotees typically engage with the image ND and other sacred images by gazing at them and offering prayers (Figure 6).

3.5 How to treat the image ND: At the Carguero's House

For the rest of the year, the image ND is enshrined in the *carguero*'s house. While the image ND remains there, it is understood that the Child Jesus has awakened; therefore, devotees can now touch it and carry it in their arms. At this stage, the *carguero* assume the custody of the image ND, meaning that responsibility is transferred from the priest to the new *carguero*. The new *carguero* must prepare an altar before the image ND arrives at the house, a space to receive many worshippers, and a "bedroom" for the image ND.

3.5.1 Altar Space

Unlike a church, which is considered a sacred space as “God’s house,” a devotee’s house is not usually regarded as sacred⁵¹. However, once the image ND arrives at the new *carguero*’s home on January 6, the villagers begin to behave in the same manner as when entering a church, such as making the sign of the cross and removing their hats upon entering the altar space of the new *carguero*’s home while the image ND is present (Figure 7).



Figure 7. The altar of the image ND in the *carguero*’s house (photographed by the author in Tingambato, 2015)

This suggests that the presence of the image ND temporarily sanctifies the *carguero*’s house. The altar space is open to the street, and everyone is welcome. An altar is set up at the back of the space, where the image ND is enshrined. A chair is placed above the altar and the image ND is placed upon it. In this altar space, anyone—not only the *carguero*—may hold the image ND in their arms. Furthermore, as villagers frequently make spontaneous visits to the image ND while going about their daily tasks in the area, the image has come to occupy a place within their everyday routines. (Figure 8,9).

3.5.2 Bedroom

The new *carguero* must also provide a bedroom and a crib for the image ND (Figure 10). In many cases, a family member’s bedroom is converted for this purpose. In such cases, the owner of the room sleeps in the same room as the image ND and stays with it throughout the night. The image ND is treated as a real baby: devotees cradle it, dress it, “dandle” it, and



Figure 8. The altar space inside the *carguero*’s house (photographed by the author in Tingambato, 2015)



Figure 9. The *carguero*’s house, outside (photographed by the author in Tingambato, 2015)

sometimes even scold it. Every night, they put it to sleep in the crib while singing lullabies.

This type of engagement occurs most frequently in the bedroom. For example, when caretakers try to dress the image ND in clothes given as an offering (Figure 11), but are unable to do so—despite the clothes being of the correct size and material—they interpret this as image ND “not wanting to wear them.” They then attempt to persuade it “to wear them” by cradling it or speaking to it in a stern tone (Figure 12). This kind of affectionate relationship is commonly observed in the bedroom. In previous article (川本 2019), I examined in detail the care of this “selfish” image ND and its agency. Based on the practice of baby-like care within the highly private space of the bedroom, I demonstrated the intimacy that the



Figure 10. A crib for the image (photographed by the author in Tingambato, 2015)



Figure 11. Changing the cloth (photographed by the author in Tingambato, 2015)

emerges from flexible responsive modes of relating to objects.

The image ND, which is carefully tended and cherished, is also known beyond the village for its reputation as a miraculous image, as mentioned earlier. What kinds of miracles, then, does it perform? What kinds of relationships do people form with the image ND? In the following section, I present specific examples from my fieldwork.

4. Testimonies of Miracles

When people talk about the image ND in Tingambato, they often say, “This image of Child Jesus is very miraculous” and that “there are many testimonies of miracles which it has performed”.

When people need God’s blessing or protection, they sometimes come to the *carguero*’s house to visit the image ND.



Figure 12. Ready to go to the alters. (photographed by the author in Tingambato, 2015)

There, they stand in front of the image ND and ask it to perform a miracle. In fact, when a devotee is in a severe crisis, it is the image ND that immediately comes to her mind, rather than the universal God. She asks specifically for the blessing of this image ND. In most cases, the wish is expressed in front of the image ND, or it is made mentally at the site or under the circumstances of a crisis, such as an incident or an accident. Sometimes wishes are made to a photograph of the image ND. The kinds of wishes expressed to the image ND vary widely. In the cases I was able to identify, they include prayers for the cure of illness, the birth of a child, the success of an operation, or the return of a child who has been abducted or has otherwise disappeared. In addition, there are prayers for everyday blessings, such as recovery from a cold or success in an examination, rather than more urgent wishes.

In total, I collected approximately 50 testimonies of miracles attributed to the image ND through observations and interviews. Some of these are presented below.

4.1 A Shared Miracle

The first example concerns the image ND as a child-giving god.

A man in his twenties in the village frequently visited the image ND with his pregnant wife. Inés (in her thirties), a distant relative of the *carguero* woman and a friend of *carguero*’s son, assisted the *carguero* family in handling visitors and caring for the image ND at that time. She came to the *carguero*’s house on weekday evenings and Sundays. According to Inés,

the couple visited the image ND to ask for help because they had been unable to have children for several years. When they finally conceived, the husband was so happy that he brought clothes as offerings to image ND. However, when the wife later suffered a miscarriage, her mother-in-law came to visit the image ND. Inés and the *carguero* family also addressed the image ND, saying “Give them a baby; they have asked for it so much—give it to them”.

After the baby was born safely, the couple brought a large cake to the *carguero*’s house for the feast on January 6, 2016, as an expression of gratitude. The husband asked the *carguero* to distribute the cake to the visitors, and in return *carguero* gave him clothes and a ball belonging to the image ND (September 4, 2015).

In this case, the couple had long been aware of the image ND, and the young man had previously visited it to ask for a miracle. When the miracle occurred, they returned to express their gratitude. This illustrates one process by which a miracle is performed: “the devotion first, then a miracle.” Furthermore, this miracle was initially limited to the couple and the image ND. However, the man’s mother later participated in the process and, unbeknownst to him, Inés and the *carguero* family also became involved. At this point, it can be said that the miracle is both individual and collective. This is because the couple had been talking with the *carguero* from the moment they told the image ND about their wish, and Inés was aware of the situation.

4.2 A Miracle in Progress

The following is a case: those around the image ND are witnesses to the ongoing miracle.

One day, a woman from the village visited the image ND with her husband, children, and mother. She had offered a doctor’s outfit before undergoing eye surgery. Inés told them that on the day of the surgery, when the image ND was placed on the altar dressed in the doctor’s clothes, no one came until 12:00 p.m., and thus the image ND remained in its chair. When the *carguero*’s daughter, Maite (in her twenties), went to cradle the image ND, she noticed that its eyes were sweating. According to Inés, the image ND appeared as a doctor wearing a surgical mask, with only the eyes visible. Shortly there-

after, the woman’s family called, and said that the surgery had been completed. Inés and the *carguero* family interpreted this as meaning that image ND had accompanied her during the surgery. Later, she came with her family to pay her respects (October 14, 2015).

In this case, it can be said that a wonder occurred at that moment other than the miracle. This wonder—the transformation of the face of the image ND through sweating—is interpreted by those present as a sign that the image ND was in the process of performing a miracle by accompanying her during her surgery. To conclude the process of the miracle, the woman needed to return to express her gratitude to the image ND. At that point, Inés, as a witness of the wonder, was able to share what she had seen with the family and relate the mystical event to the miracle realized by the image ND. The miracle process was thus completed.

In the next section, I will discuss the relationship between the image ND and humans that began with the miracle.

4.3 A Miracle via the Name

In the previous cases, those who made a wish to the image ND already believed in it. However, there are also those who began to believe in the image ND after experiencing a miracle. They prayed for a miracle to the image ND not because of their devotion, but because they heard about the miraculous image of the Child Jesus of Tingambato from others. In some cases, someone made a wish on behalf of others, and those who received the miracle were then required to thank the image ND. Since a relationship with the image ND was to have already been established, they could not withdraw from the situation.

The next case concerns a person who, without knowing the image ND or its appearance, wished for a miracle through an immaterial object—namely, the “name.”

One day, Inés was telling visitors from outside the village about a miracle that had happened to a girl in a photo on the wall⁶. The story of the miracle goes as follows.

The girl had been kidnapped several days earlier. She was a resident of a nearby city. A woman from Tingambato said to the girl’s mother who was searching for her daughter, “Ask the Child Jesus of Tingambato, he is very miraculous.”

Although the mother did not know about the image ND, she prayed based on the name. According to her, her daughter was found immediately in a neighboring state, even though she had been missing for about eight days. The mother later came to the *carguero*'s house with the girl. The girl had not known about the image ND. However, when she saw it, she said, "You really told me not to be afraid. You were really embracing me. So now I will not hold you in my arms." According to Inés, the girl looked at the face of the image ND and began to speak to it (November 8, 2015).

In this case, the mother prayed to the name "Child Jesus of Tingambato," relying on the statement that "he is very miraculous," without using the physical image ND or its picture as the object of prayer. The girl's experience was revealed only when she saw the image ND, and her declaration of the miracle was articulated in relation to it. Through this process, a new relationship was formed between image ND and the girl, as well as between image ND and her mother. In Graziano's terms, the image ND and the mother entered a relationship of mutual obligation that begins with a wish (Graziano 2006).

4.4 Portable Child Jesus

This section focuses on the portability of the image ND. Since it is forbidden to take the image ND out of the village, visitors must go to *carguero*'s house in order to see it. However, in exceptional cases, such as when a villager is ill, the image ND may visit her home at the request of the *carguero*. The following case concerns an elderly woman named Tita, who sold *atole*, a corn-based drink, in the village square every night, and who became ill. The terms "Papa Diosito," "Niño Diosito," "Jesusito," "Niño," and "Chuchito" that appear below are all nicknames and affectionate appellations used in the village to refer to the image ND.

On this day, the *carguero* was asked to take the image ND to the home of a sick woman. Upon arrival, Marcelo, a *carguero* man of 2015 in his 50s, remained outside her house with his granddaughter, while his daughter Maite and the author went inside with the image ND.

Tita's husband and daughter were there. When the daughter received the image ND, she repeatedly called out, "Mama Tita! Wake up, papa Diosito (Daddy God) has come to visit

you," "niño Diosito (child God) has come to see you" and "Jesusito (little Jesus) is here." She then opened her mother's eyes, as Tita would not wake up, and massaged her. Tita's husband also said, "Wake up, here is *el niño* (the child) next to you." Partway through, Tita opened her eyes slightly. Another woman who also present moved Tita's hand and said, "You want to grab it?" and brought her hand to the image ND. From the left side of the bed, the daughter held the image ND and called out to it, sometimes placing its foot on Tita's right hand. When the husband held the image ND, he said, "Kick her so that she wakes up" and gently kicked Tita's foot with it. Everyone laughed a little. When Tita's daughter said, "She does not wake up," Maite addressed the image ND, saying, "You, wake her up, Chuchito (little Jesus)."

On the way home, the husband placed a 200-mexican-peso bill²⁾ into the sleeve of the image ND. The daughter touched the image ND, then touched Tita's head, then touched image ND again, and then touched Tita's chest repeatedly, perhaps thinking that her mother might not wake up during the visit of the image ND. As she did so, she said something like "Tell him to cure you, eh" (December 2, 2015).

Tita passed away a short time later.

In Tita's case, her family attempted to encourage her by showing her the image ND, but she was not able to see it. Nevertheless, they tried to make her aware of its presence by allowing her to touch it. By alternately touching the image ND and her mother, the daughter appeared to be conveying a blessing to her mother through the image ND.

One advantage of God being embodied as an object is that, as in this case, people and the image mutually visit, see, and touch one another. Unlike pilgrimages that take people away from their daily lives, the image comes to the home, allowing individuals to relate to the sacred presence in an intimate and familiar way within everyday life.

5. Surprise from the Image ND: Niño Dios as an Agent

People experience the transcendent and divine power of the image ND through magical events, or wonders, that it performs. The agency of the image ND can often be observed in these events. The following case concerns a lullaby time of

the image ND.

5.1 Blankets, Wink, and Warmth

One night in the bedroom, Maite, the daughter of the *carguero* in charge, was changing the image ND into pajamas before putting it to sleep in the crib. She told me about a mystical experience she had had with the image ND.

One day, after Maite had put the image ND in the crib and covered it with a blanket, she left the bedroom. When she returned a short time later, the blanket had been slightly moved. Maite said “This happened to me.” Her tone was curious, but she did not appear surprised by such an extraordinary occurrence. Maite had also seen the image ND wink. She interpreted the wink as some kind of *señal*, sign from the image ND (November 6, 2015).

There is another magical experience associated with holding the image ND in one’s arms: “warmth.” The *carguero* family is always careful to ensure that the image ND does not become cold. When they go outside early in the morning, they wrap the image ND in blankets. Under such circumstances, I was present on several occasions where the image ND was “warm”. Here, I present one such case from 2015.

One evening, after 8:00 pm, the altar space was already empty of worshippers, leaving only the relatives and friends of the *carguero*. Deborah, the wife of Marcelo’s brother, was holding the image ND with a blanket wrapped around it. Tingambato is cold in the mornings and evenings throughout the year. In the evenings, when it was time to close the altar, the image ND was more often wrapped in blankets or shawls called *reboso*, which regularly used to wrap the image ND daily.

After a short chat, *carguero*’s son Miguel (in his twenties) took the wrapped image ND to the bedroom, as it was time for it to “sleep.” I accompanied him and observed him place the image ND on the bed and open the blankets. He put his hand between the back of the image ND and the blankets underneath and said to me, “It’s warm, you should touch it.” I immediately put my hand there, and it felt somewhat warm. I thought Deborah and Miguel’s body heat must have transferred to the blanket while they were holding it, but Miguel

said it was as if the image ND itself had warmed the blanket (June 28, 2015).

The “warmth” was often felt when the image ND was wrapped in a blanket and was repeatedly confirmed during moments of care, such as putting it to sleep or dressing it. The “warmth” could also be perceived through objects other than the image ND itself—in this case, the blanket—, making it accessible even to those who were directly touching the image ND, such as the author, as long as they are present. The warmth of the image ND was not interpreted as another kind of *señal* or sign. Rather, people simply shared their impressions of how warm the image ND felt, and that was the end of the matter.

5.2 History and Evidence: Being a Devotee

The relationship between the image ND and devotees is formed through miracles, wonders, and small everyday interactions, as described above. These individual and collective experiences become a part of the “history” of the image ND. This history is not that of the being represented by the image ND, but rather that of the image ND itself. As Catholics, people believe in Jesus, whom the image ND represents in a universal sense. However, being a Catholic does not necessarily entail faith in the image ND. Although people may behave respectfully in front of the image ND, they need “history” to develop faith in it.

Conversely, in the case of the image ND, the accumulation of “history” in the relationship between the image ND and people provides an opportunity to “become” a devotee of the Child Jesus of Tingambato, rather than remaining an ordinary Catholic. Even after “becoming” a devotee of the image ND, however, faith in it does not remain constant or unchanging. It is formed and transformed through continued interaction with the image ND. The following case can be understood as both a miracle performed by the image ND and a testimony to its power.

An elderly woman from the village came to the *carguero*’s home to speak with Sarita, a *carguero* woman of 2015, in her fifties. Sarita recounted a story of a woman she had seen earlier who had asked the image ND, in an inappropriate manner,

to cure her wound, and Sarita went on to explain the proper behavior toward the image ND. She said:

One day when I was a child, a friend said, “Let’s go see Niño Dios,” and I replied, “What’s the use of seeing that?” We ended up going to Child Jesus’s place, but I went there angry. I was kind of disgusted. When I arrived at baby Jesus’s house, I got down on my knees and looked at him. I noticed a bill between the fingers of Child Jesus’s hand, and as I was staring at him, he took the bill into his other hand. I saw him putting it back in his first hand and smile. When I told this to my friend, she said, “Only Sarita saw Child Jesus change his hand, so the Child Jesus must have shown you proof.” I still couldn’t believe it, so I went to look behind the altar, which at the time was a table serving as an altar, with flowers arranged around it. It saw that the *carguero* woman and her daughters were doing their chores and that no one had moved Child Jesus’s arm from behind. When I left, I kept thinking about it and became scared. When I got home and told my mother that Child Jesus had taken the bill back, and I also said, “What’s the use of seeing something like that?” she replied, “You’re an idiot. That’s why Child Jesus showed you proof.” I have had faith in the Child Jesus since that moment (September 5, 2015).

This event led Sarita to believe in the image ND. Although she had known about the image ND before then, it is likely that she has come to believe in him with conviction.

What the image ND did to Sarita was to play a “prank,” teasing her by moving the bill and smiling at her. However, when the image ND “showed evidence,” the emotion it aroused in Sarita was fear. After witnessing the image ND behaving out of the ordinary, she reported the event to her mother, who situated the image ND’s “action” within her framework of faith. Those who expressed disbelief in the image ND were thus presented with evidence from it, gradually adding reality to the relationship between the image ND and its devotees. As an adult, Sarita—now a *carguero*—holds the image ND in her arms daily, cajoles it, scolds and soothes it when it “refuses” to change its clothes, and put it into bed at night. Her fear has disappeared, and she now diligently cares for it.

6. Discussion

The aim of this paper was to clarify the dynamic aspects of the sacred with which the image ND is imbued, focusing on Catholic practices in a contemporary rural village in western Mexico. This paper has analyzed how the relationship between humans and a Catholic image is created not only through liturgies and feasts, but also through miraculous experiences and everyday life. By including in the analysis everyday and contingent acts that are not bound by formality, this study has examined how an object of worship is created performatively through interactions between the physical presence of the image and humans.

6.1 Moving between the Sacred and the Profane

The “sacred” has generally been considered to be separate from the profane. Classical studies of the sacred have broadly defined sacredness as having an ambivalent nature that is distinguished from the profane (デュルケム 2004 (1912); Rudolf Otto 1958; Mircea Eliade 1959). Furthermore, research has revealed the multilayered nature of the sacred (Stirrat 1983) as well as its constructive aspects (Eade and Sallnow 1991). Catherine Bell’s concept of “ritualized” acts (1992), meanwhile, describes practices that are detached from the profane and thereby generate the sacred.

When we consider the sacred in relation to objects, a similar separation between the sacred and the profane can be observed. In his writings, Durkheim used stone and wooden objects called *churinga* as examples of sacred objects. These objects were isolated from the profane and could only be touched by a limited number of members (デュルケム 2004 (1912)).

In contrast, this paper has demonstrated a form of sacredness that is performative and intimate, arising from close relationships between humans and objects. The aim of this paper was to reveal the dynamic aspects of the sacred without separating it from the people, objects, and spaces that are usually regarded as belonging to the realm of the profane.

This paper has shown two transformations brought about by movement between the realms of “the sacred” and “the profane.” The first concerns changes in villagers’ ways of caring for and recognizing the image ND.

The image ND was originally a personal object, but it later came to be enshrined in the parish church for certain periods of the year, and community-level celebrations were eventually held. This represents a shift from a personal image situated in the realm of the profane to one placed in the Church, within the realm of the sacred.

Years later, the image ND changed from a local image of the Child Jesus into a miraculous image known beyond the village through American television. Many people visited the *carguero's* house and shared accounts of miracles and wonders. This expanded devotion to the image ND.

As devotion grew, the parish priest began to view the tradition surrounding the miraculous image as problematic. He proposed that the image ND be permanently enshrined in the Church, while another image of the Child Jesus would be placed in the *carguero's* house. However, many devotees wanted the image ND to continue traveling from house to house so that it would remain close to them. This proposed change would have separated the image ND from the realm of the profane in everyday life.

This conflict made clear that the image ND, which had originally been interchangeable, had become irreplaceable for devotees. During this period of disconnection from the Church—that is, when the institutional sacred connection between the two realms was absent—the *carguero* and followers attempted to maintain the link between the sacred and the profane by praying frequently and requesting Mass from another priest. In this sense, the devotee's home became the most critical space for the veneration of the image ND in the village.

In cases such as the visit of the image ND to the *carguero's* house and to the home of Tita, the sick woman, the image ND entered the space of the devotee's home. This means that a sacred object entered ordinary domestic space, an experience distinct from pilgrimages that take place away from the mundane. When villagers sought to encourage a sleeping sick person, they brought the image ND close, attempted to show her its "face," and allowed her to touch it. This treatment contrasts with that of the *churinga* (デユルケム 2004 (1912)), which preserve sacredness by isolating sacred objects. Although villagers may pray to an abstract deity, they also require the concrete presence of the image ND in times of trouble. This is why Tita's family believed that showing her the image ND

would encourage her. They invited the image ND into their home and used intimate names, such as Jesusito, to announce its visit. One advantage of the Child Jesus being embodied as the image ND is that the *carguero* can bring it to the sick, as in this case. Furthermore, the Child Jesus can be seen and touched as an object, enabling blessings to be obtained through physical engagement.

6.2 The Sacredness and Intimacy of Miracles, the Intimate Space of the House

Another transformation brought about by movement between the sacred and the profane is the transformation of the object itself, the image ND. The key concept here is intimacy.

The home evokes greater intimacy in contrast to the church. In the church, tranquility is maintained, and relationships between images and people center on gazing and prayer, emphasizing the relationship between God and the devotee.

By contrast, people often engage in conversation, including small talk, in the altar space of the *carguero's* home, making it a semi-public space. Interaction between the image ND and people in this space is characterized by practices such as prayer, supplication, and the sharing of miracle stories, including wonders, which strongly emphasize the image ND as the Child of God. In this worship space, miracles and wonders are shared, and multiple people participate in a single miracle, as seen in the case of the couple who wished for a child and in the case where a third person confirmed a miracle in progress through the transformation of the image's face as evidence. Thus, miracles are not hidden within a private relationship between God and a devotee; they exist between the image ND and multiple people. In other words, miracles consist of the engagement of the image ND with several individuals.

In contrast, the active and transcendent power of the image ND, as seen in Sarita's case, appeared in the form of a child-like prank, such as "surprising her by changing the bill." Here, the physical characteristics of the image ND are intertwined with its manner of engagement with humans. Physical characteristics refer not only to the shape of the image ND, but also to other properties such as material, size, weight, and the mobility of its joints, that is, its "physicality" (古谷 2017:15; 吉田 2016:146). Because of this physicality, in Tita's case, her husband could hold the image ND and allow it to gently

kick her with its small feet. This act served not only to convey a blessing through touch, but also to produce laughter among those who were anxious about Tita's condition. With an adult Christ statue marked by bleeding wounds, such engagement would be difficult due to its size and expression. The physicality of such a statue instead directs engagement toward prayer and the reception of blessings through touch. Because the image ND is the size of a baby and cannot stand on its own, it is constantly held, dandled, and "lived with" within the warmth of families and friends, much like a human infant.

In addition to physicality, the bedroom space in the devotee's house also encourages childlike behavior and intimate engagement with the image ND. In Tingambato, the bedroom is the one place in the house generally restricted to family members. In the *carguero's* house, visitors may enter the image ND's bedroom with permission, but it remains primarily reserved for the *carguero* family, their relatives, and close friends. The magical events experienced in this space are small in scale, such as the blinking of the image ND, the displacement of blankets, and the warmth felt through being wrapped in blankets. In contrast to studies that emphasize the creation of religious worlds through the regular performance of ritual acts with prescribed forms (Bloch 1974; Bell 1992; Morgan 2010), this study also incorporates mundane and contingent acts into its analysis. This reveals how the image ND is enacted as a "little baby who likes to be dandled" as an object of worship. It also shows that relationships formed through miracles are not limited to dyadic interactions between the image and an individual petitioner, but are also shaped through relationships among objects, spaces, and multiple people. The "long-awaited baby" is thus shared by many.

Nevertheless, other forms of intimate engagement between humans and sacred objects with similar physical characteristics can be observed. Amy Whitehead's (2013) study of the Catholic statue of the Virgin of Alcalá in Spain describes how the changing of the Virgin's clothes is performed by a group of female devotees known as *camaristas*, who serve the Church. The clothing change takes place in a closed space so as not to make the Virgin uncomfortable, as she is represented as an adult female figure. The *camaristas* speak to her while undressing her and sometimes "scold" the image of the Child Jesus in her arms (Whitehead 2013:130). This too is an inti-

mate relationship. In Whitehead's case, the statue's adult and female characteristics create a closed space accessible only to a limited group of women. As a result, the statue's intimate presence is not widely shared. For a sacred object to become collective rather than individual, it must be embedded in a network of relationships. Being located in a devotee's house rather than in a church facilitates this process.

7. Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be argued that the boundary between the so-called "sacred" and the "profane" is disturbed by the fact that the image ND, as an object, repeatedly moves between the ecclesiastical world (the parish church) and the mundane world (devotees' houses). However, this disturbance does not necessarily diminish the sacredness of the image ND.

The image ND, which was originally an object in the secular realm, has become a sacred object venerated at the community level and enshrined in the church for certain periods of the year. This paper has shown that the sacred is transformed through this movement between the sacred and the profane, and that it comes to include a sense of intimacy, as the sacred object continues to receive personal care in the homes of devotees within the profane realm.

This paper argues that sacredness is not diminished even as intimacy increases. God, who is inherently invisible and feared, is treated like a baby: scolded by humans and even engaging in minor mischief, such as removing a blanket. Through these engagements, the sacred can be seen as descending from the position of a divine child to that of a human baby. The emotion evoked in people by this baby-shaped image is compassion for a fragile being rather than awe of an omnipotent God. At first glance, this may appear to suggest that the image ND has become more familiar and that its sacredness has been diminished. In reality, however, even when treated like a mundane being such as a human baby, interactions with the image ND are always acts of service to God, oriented toward seeking its comfort. Furthermore, devotees are driven by the agency of the image ND and are overwhelmed by its power. The closer people become to the image ND, the more familiar it becomes, and the more they pray for miracles, leading to an increase in miracle narratives and a strengthening of its divine power. This is evidenced by

the large number of miracle stories discussed in this paper, as well as by the numerous *ex-votos*, letters of gratitude, and reciprocal gifts found in the *carguero's* house and the Church.

Taking this transformation of the image ND through intimacy into account, it can be said that the image ND has become an intimate Jesusito, a little Jesus, from the universal being of the Child Jesus. Rather than representing a complete transition, the image ND alternates between the Child Jesus and Jesusito depending on the space it inhabits, accompanying its movement between the sacred and the profane.

In comparison, the statue of St. James, the village's patron saint, is usually enshrined in the church but leaves it on the day of the annual feast to be paraded through the village in a religious procession. In this sense, the statue of St. James also moves between the sacred and the secular. Nevertheless, the image ND attracts greater devotion. This paper suggests that while behavior during Mass and religious processions is characterized by formality and emphasizes visual engagement, interactions with the image ND instead emphasize proximity, contact, and touch. This is a distinctive feature of the case examined here: the image ND is not merely worshipped but engaged with in an intimate and embodied manner.

At the same time, even though devotees may temporarily hold the image ND in their arms and establish an intimate relationship with it, the image ND never becomes their personal possession. For this reason, intimacy increases without diminishing sacredness, and the value of the image ND is enhanced through its circulation, similar to a *kula* object (Malinowski 1922). Through constant engagement, the image ND becomes both sacred and profane, holy and intimate. This reveals the dynamic aspects of sacredness with which objects can be imbued.

For future research, I aim to clarify the foundations of sacred objects and how practices of sanctification differ from other forms of engagement. The scope of analysis will be expanded beyond community-level sacred images to include liturgical tools, mass-produced religious images, objects found in ordinary households, and everyday objects. It will eventually be extended to natural objects such as mountains.

In addition to qualitative analysis, I also plan to conduct a statistical survey of people's actions toward objects in order to examine the relationships among objects, practices, and religion.

Finally, with "intimacy" as a key concept, future research will address not only the possibility of objects entering a "singularized" state (Kopytoff 1986:69), in which they become significant to a limited number of actors, but also the possibility of objects being shared collectively and communally as "new sacred beings." This will require further engagement with the problem of idolatry.

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Note

- 1) This paper uses the term "image" as a translation of the Spanish word *imagen*. Although "figure" and "statue" are synonymous terms, "image" was more frequently used by both clergy and devotees in the local area; therefore, I use "image" here.
- 2) There are two hypotheses: that he was American or Spanish.
- 3) It is celebrated from December 16 to 24 to commemorate the nine days of walking that Joseph and the pregnant Mary made in search of a place to stay, and it is also a time of spiritual preparation for the birth of Jesus (Ruiz Álvarez 2006:55).
- 4) In this paper, the *carguero* of the image ND is written as follows. Nouns in Spanish, the official language of Mexico, have masculine and feminine, singular and plural forms. For example, the office of *carguero*, which is held by a husband and wife, is locally referred to as *carguero* for the male *carguero*, *carguera* for the female *carguero*, and *cargueros* for the husband and wife when referring to them collectively or to several former *cargueros* and *cargueras*. In this paper, however, the singular masculine form "*carguero*" is used as the basic form, with the words "male" and "female" added as necessary, in order to avoid complicating the nomenclature.
- 5) Nevertheless, many houses are blessed by priests during

the pre-construction phase.

- 6) In the altar space in the *carguero*'s house, visitors offer gifts, flowers, ex-votos, and letters asking for miracles or expressing gratitude. They often place the letters on the wall together with a photo of the person who needs a miracle.
- 7) At the time of my fieldwork, 1 Mexican peso was equivalent to 7.6 yen. The teachers interviewed earned monthly salaries ranging from 6,500 to 21,000 pesos.

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