The War and the Church: The Differences between Commemorative Devotional Art in Mexico and El Salvador

My research has almost always been based specifically on devotional imagery popular among the working class in present day Mexican society. I recently took great interest in the way miracles and promises are documented in ex-voto painting on tin, a common practice throughout central Mexico. A patron tells the an artist the story of a miracle, the artist renders this story with strict guidelines, and finally the patron takes it to a local church where it is then displayed among hundreds of other ex-voto paintings as an act of public commemoration for a particular patron saint.

I have questioned the nature of devotional and commemorative art in general following a recent trip to the country of El Salvador. I discovered a new nature of devotional and commemorative art that made me wonder about religious art in general. In El Salvador religious art is completely touched by the faith of the people to the point that religion and at times even Christ may be hidden through layers of interpretation. In effect, my original understanding of commemoration and devotion was broadened. What caused my crisis in questioning commemorative and devotional art was The Chapel of Archbishop Romero at the University of Central America, or the UCA in San Salvador. The Chapel is a dramatic juxtaposition of devotional religious art and war imagery. Upholding a common theme present all over modern
day El Salvador, the Chapel of Romero has become a physical "protest against death, [and a] plea for life" (Art 1).

The image and struggle of Christ is represented in a way that is completely pure and typical in terms of El Salvador’s unique history. The Chapel of Oscar Romero at the UCA addresses the theme of crisis and peace through a move toward personalized visualization of the civil war synonymous with a redefinition of devotional imagery which at times may seem inappropriate to any other Westerner conscious of Catholic culture. More specifically, the art in the chapel is a respective redefinition of devotional art through imagery and subject matter that can only be understood in terms of the struggle and repression that has occurred all over Latin America.

In almost any present day Catholic Church in central Mexico, there is no lack of imagery depicting Christ, Christ’s mother, and patron saints of the specific church. While ex-votos have been replaced since the 18th and 19th centuries with small personal offerings such as locks of braided hair, or a crutch, there is no lack of accommodated religious material fused with indigenous belief and Catholic standards. However, the case with El Salvador is somewhat different. While religious imagery is still very strong and dramatic, the drama lies mostly in the extreme combination of Catholicism, indigenousness, and the influence of a long and horrifically ugly civil war. While much of popular piety is still restrained by Catholic Dogma in Mexico, El Salvador has embraced a radically different Catholicism called Liberation Theology. This brand of Catholicism does not prescribe to historical accounts where the clergy stands by the rich, but instead does the opposite. Stemming from insurrection of the poor masses, and the influence of Archbishop Oscar Romero, Liberation Theology openly denounces the rich criticizing government oppression. While Liberation Theology in itself is radical, devotional imagery is
also a radical break from prescribed standards in subject matter. The struggle of the people in terms of the open denouncement of oppression has become synonymous with the passion of Christ, and the subject matter of devotional imagery reflects this relationship.

Salvadoran art stays true to the struggle of the poor, and this imagery is both popularized and iconic. However, what I realized was that this imagery, just as Mexican devotional imagery, ex-voto’s in particular, also assist the visitor in coping through crisis. From this coping a dialog between the afflicted, anguished, abused, and the implied or visualized deity, develops. The representation of the icon in the image becomes sacred in and of itself.

Seemingly typical and vibrant altarpieces by Fernando Llort greet the visitor upon entry, while monochromatic graphite figure drawings by Roberto Huezo stand directly across from Llort’s altarpiece along the back wall of the chapel. Both pieces recall vividly the history of struggle that remains in El Salvador today, and while Llort’s altarpiece may not seem as obvious, both pieces are strikingly atypical and certainly discombobulating for any non-Salvadoran.

Dedicated to the six Jesuit priests that were brutally assassinated at the University in 1989, to the memory of Monsignor Oscar Romero, whose role among the Salvadoran people cannot be underestimated, and the general suffering of the victims and overall casualties of twelve years of bloody civil war, the chapel stands as a reflection of Christ through the story of the struggle of the people.

The altarpieces created by Fernando Llort appear to be normal devotional altarpieces, yet drastic differences occur upon closer examination. The pieces fit together to tell a story about the emergence of a new social order and civilization rooted in a gospel reflecting the preaching of the higher Catholic church in terms of the struggle of the poor. Romero is the central figure of the altarpieces, representative of a martyr taking up the cross of the poor and the seed of Christ.
working through God to educate and liberate the *campesinos*. The altarpiece is not a highly stylized representation common to Catholic ideology, but instead employ symbols such as the sun in the center of the cross to imply the presence of Christ through symbolism.

Huezo's *Via Crucis* is a drastic turn from the indigenous style of Llort to a graphic representation of nude bodies in poses of extreme torture inspired directly by the passion and suffering of the Salvadoran people through massacres, death squads and overall insurrection. Huezo's *Via Crucis* implies the passion of Christ, yet this passion is told through the passion of the poor.

Both pieces juxtapose and accommodate indigenous ideology with Catholic motifs. At first the viewer may think that the Chapel is not a reflection of Christ, but rather an homage to the people. Peterson describes the role of Christ's passion and resurrection as being integrated with existing indigenous traditions to "help make sense of the conquest" (80). Placed in terms of the present day establishment the physical figure of Christ has been restored and refreshed by socially relevant themes that instead personify Christ's passion through the ongoing struggle that has become a part of everyday life in El Salvador.

Martyrdom is not exclusive of Bishops and priests, but also every anonymous victim of Salvadoran society that became a victim of the war. In El Salvador, Christ becomes the main pragmatic figure in a physical transubstantiation (Peterson 99). Therefore, when someone is massacred or assassinated by the system, the death becomes a recreation of the death of Christ, and the passion of the cross occurs all over again. This reinterpretation of martyrdom prepares people for the death of religious leaders, and confirms the continuality of the struggle of the people (Peterson 80).
If the themes within this imagery are traced back to the time of the conquest, both the stunning devotional art at the Chapel of Romero, and devotional ex-voto painting in Mexico have strong similarities. Both are representative of the same indigenous heritage, the Nahua in Central Mexico, and the Nahua-Pipil of Central America. Both are an infusion of beliefs within extremely volatile social environments that use the theme of crisis and chaos to visualize the deity from a deep human need to feel a sense of the divine. In Mexico this sense of the divine is felt through offering and documentation, in El Salvador it is through martyrdom. Since the Conquest of religion in Latin America, the role of indigenous influences in Catholicism has continually been obscured. At a basic level both martyrdom and the action of giving an offering are extremely similar. According to K. Read, with the Conquest, “a new kind of sacrifice entered MesoAmerica: the one time sacrifice of Jesus Christ” (32). Sacrifice became symbolic. The documentation and offering of ex-votos recreates the story, and the representation of the martyrs of El Salvador “repeat Christ’s sacrifice” (Read146). As a tradition in Mexico, ex-voto painting is based on the pictorial recreation of a miracle for purposes of documentation for a particular patron saint. This painting assumes the role of a public document, a testimonial to the true story of the occurrence of the miracle. In El Salvador the images in the Romero chapel question the role of martyrdom by depicting, also documenting the 70,000 martyred victims of the war including the 6 Jesuit Priests at the University of Central America, Archbishop Oscar Romero, and every innocent campesino massacred in pueblos such as El Mozote, Copopayo, and Neuva Esperanza. The role of Christ is not blatant. The flexibility of the artists to distance the role of Christ and, in a sense, substitute it for more socially relevant themes opens a door to many critical concerns. It is shocking to enter a chapel where the image of Christ seems hardly relevant. However, in both instances is it not simply about present day Catholicism. Roots
dating back to the accommodation of religious beliefs after the Conquest in Mexico and El Salvador provide an explanation for imagery related with documentation, commemoration and devotion. Both in Mexico and El Salvador there is a sacrifice, whether it be a sacrifice of a life, or the public offering involved with ex-voto painting. Each is centered on a history of struggle stemming from traditions based in the Conquest which justifies questions of appropriateness and a redefinition of devotional imagery.

Ultimately I found that Commemorative and devotional imagery is not universal in style and subject matter, but is instead infused with the divine in such a way that it is difficult to separate it from history and society. What may appear as idolatrous and pagan to Western Catholicism, is truly an appropriate association of religion to the natural environment and social setting. The images at the Chapel of Oscar Romero, and ex-voto painting in Mexico allow the viewer to approach commemoration and devotion in a much different aspect, transcending doctrine and incorporating humanity.
Art at the Chapel of Archbishop Romero in the UCA: A Protest Against Death, A Plea For Life.

University of Central America: San Salvador.

