

**MADE IN THE AMERICAS?
DECIPHERING THE ENIGMA OF THE *MANO PODEROSA***

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Art History

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ABSTRACT

The *Mano Poderosa* is an unusual devotional image whose origins are still unknown. It is composed primarily of a disembodied hand, usually identified as the Hand of Christ, and perched on top of each finger are the figures of Jesus, Saint Joseph, Virgin Mary, Saint Joachim, and Saint Anne. Its devotees pray to the image and ask for its divine intercession to grant them an otherwise impossible request. First, we will look closely at various visual manifestations of this image in Mexican *tin-retablo* painting and in Puerto Rican *santos* carving tradition, and explore the compositional differences according to its medium. Consequently, we will attempt to trace back the iconography of the theological concepts that make up the image to gain a better understanding of how these concepts were combined to create this devotion. Furthermore, a historiographic review of the multiple theories of the birth of this image will be presented, as I provide additional evidence for the most plausible theory which says that this devotional image might have been born in New Spain as a product of the cultural interplay between the Franciscan missionaries and the Natives they indoctrinated.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The *Mano Poderosa* is an intriguing devotional image that has eluded proper research and study for a long period of time, for not much has been written about it. With this essay, I want to expose this unusual popular devotion in hope of expanding its current body of study. Its unique combination of iconographic elements and the unusual historical circumstances surrounding its possible origin provide the devotion with an enigmatic quality. We will look closely at various manifestations of the *Mano Poderosa*, exploring the differences in representation according to its medium. In addition, we will attempt to trace back the iconographical sources of each of its compositional elements to gain a better understanding of the origin of the *Mano Poderosa*'s iconography as a possible product of the historical interplay of Native American religions, Iberian Catholicism, and African-based religions and spiritualism.¹ Then the study moves to a brief historiographic review of the multiple theories of the birth of this image. Consequently, I will argue that the most convincing

¹ See Dulce María Román, *Santos: Contemporary Devotional Folk Art in Puerto Rico*. (Gainesville: University of Florida Cultural Plaza, 2003), 30.

theory of origin is that the *Mano Poderosa* emerged in New Spain as a response to Franciscan evangelization efforts and educational methods practiced in their missions, their coat of arms and their pedagogical practices serving as a departure point for this discussion. As a local popular devotion, the *Mano Poderosa* has not enjoyed the exposure and consequent study that other mainstream devotions have in the field of Art History, such as the Virgin of Guadalupe. This paper calls out for a deeper analysis of its iconography and a more complex study of the possible origins of such a peculiar image.

Chapter 2

WHAT IS THE *MANO PODEROSA*?

The *Mano Poderosa*, translatable in English as the All-Powerful Hand of Christ or the Omnipotent Hand, is a popular devotion that does not possess any public and/or official cult within the Catholic Liturgical Calendar. In March 13th, 1901 the *Mano Poderosa* was proscribed by the Supreme Inquisition.² Those devoted to the *Mano Poderosa* consider it as the mediating hand between the human realm and God's infinite grace. In its most widespread form nowadays (Fig. 1), it consists of an upward extended hand with a wound at the center of its palm, identified by most scholars as the right hand of Christ and in some instances as Saint Francis's hand, with

² Padres Agustinos, *La ciudad de Dios: Revista religiosa, científica y literaria* 50, no. 7 (1901): 527. This is a biweekly magazine published by a group of Spanish Augustinian clergymen during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. A small article regarding the *Mano Poderosa* was published in their *Crónica general* (General Chronicles) section. In the *Crónica general* were published the most important news and events of the preceding fortnight. In 1901, the *Crónica general* announced that the *Mano Poderosa* was condemned, as it was proscribed by the Supreme Inquisition on March 13th, 1901. Full text reads: *La devoción de la MANO PODEROSA está condenada. – Esta devoción que consistía en imágenes y medallas que representaban una mano abierta en cuyo centro campea una llaga y en las extremidades de los dedos las figuras del Niño Jesús, María Santísima, San Joaquín y Santa Ana, como precondenada por el Concilio Tridentino, fue proscrita por la Inquisición Suprema el 13 de marzo de 1901.*

five figures perched on top of each finger: Jesus, mostly represented as a child; Saint Joseph and the Virgin Mary, Jesus's earthly parents; and the figures of Saint Anne and Saint Joachim, the Virgin Mary's parents. Accompanying the hand and the five figures are four angels carrying the *arma Christi*. As the faithful pray to it, they ask for divine intercession in hopes of being granted an otherwise impossible request. The following prayer often accompanies the image:

Here I come with the faith of a Christian soul, to seek your compassion in a situation so distressing for me. Do not forsake me and the door that wants to open in my path, let it be your powerful hand the one to close it if it does not suit me, or leave it open if it should provide me with the tranquility I long. I leave this plea at your feet, a plea made by a soul forced to great sufferings that cannot keep battling if your powerful hand does not stop the law of reason.³

Folk belief has attributed magical powers to the *Mano Poderosa*, and it is very popular with local spiritualists, although its use does not appear to be restricted to them.⁴

³ As indicated in the novena dedicated to the *Mano Poderosa* and other prayers dedicated to it. The prayer presented is commonly found in several leaflets distributed nowadays. The original text reads: *Aquí vengo con la fe de un alma Cristiana, a buscar tu misericordia en situación tan angustiada para mí. No me desampares y la puerta que quiera abrirse en mi camino, sea tu mano ponderosa la que me la cierre para no entrar en ella sino me conviene, o me la dejes abierta, si ha de volver mi tranquilidad tanto tiempo deseada. A tus pies dejo esta suplica, que te hace un alma obligada por el destino a grande sufrimientos, que ya no puede combatir si tu mano ponderosa no detiene la ley de la razón.*

⁴ See Yvonne Lange, *Santos de Palo: The Household Saints of Puerto Rico* (New York: Museum of American Folk Art, 1991), 8.

Chapter 3

EARLIEST EVIDENCES OF THE DEVOTION

The earliest manifestations of the *Mano Poderosa* are mostly present in Mexican tin-*retablo* painting and in the Puerto Rican *santos* carving tradition. As we delve deeper into the history of the *Mano Poderosa*, we will address both traditions in more detail. Although its origins are unknown, there is evidence of a cult to the *Mano Poderosa* that dates back to the first decade of the nineteenth century. I have located two novenas dedicated to the *Mano Poderosa*, one dated 1807 and the other dated 1819.⁵ They are almost identical except for the fact that they were printed by different people. The first pages of both novenas read (Fig. 2-3):

Hand of God, ponderous and prompt, liberal and benign for those who are deserving of the intercession of its five Glorious Fingers. JESUS, MARY, JOSEPH, JOACHIM and ANNE. Whose novena serves to ignite devotion, a Devoted to those five Holy Lords.⁶

⁵ A novena is a devotion consisting of a series of prayers that are performed over the course of nine days to obtain special graces. See Joseph Hilgers, "Novena," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1911), accessed October 27, 2010, <http://www.neadvent.org/cathen/11141b.htm>.

⁶The original text reads: *Mano de Dios, ponderosa y pronta, liberal y benigna para los que se valieren de la intercesión de sus cinco Gloriosos Dedos. JESÚS, MARÍA,*

The second novena I was able to find is dated 1819. (Fig. 3) At the bottom of its first page it reads:

MEXICO: 1819. Office of D. Alejandro Valdés, Santo Domingo street and corner of Tacuba.⁷

Both novenas, specially the one dated 1807, are interesting findings since the apparition of the *Mano Poderosa* in New Spain has been traced as far back as its visual representations in nineteenth century Mexican tin-*retablo* painting. Gloria Giffords, in her book *Mexican Folk Retablos*, notes that “although the beginning of the production of the tin *retablo* is difficult to date, it is thought to have begun sometime in the early nineteenth century and can be seen to disappear at the beginning of the twentieth, with the surge perhaps beginning after 1820 and coming to a climax before the 1880’s.”⁸ Therefore, if there was an established tradition for novenas dedicated to the *Mano Poderosa* already in 1807, as this document proves, it is

JOSÉ, JOAQUÍN Y ANNA. *Cuya novena ofrece para encender la devoción, un Devoto de estos Santísimos cinco SEÑOR.*⁶

⁷ The first one was printed in 1807 by the office of D. María Fernández de Jaurequi, same street. The original text reads: *MÉXICO: 1819. Oficina de D. Alejandro Valdés, calle Santo Domingo y esquina de Tacuba*

⁸ Gloria Giffords, *Mexican Folk Retablos: Revised Edition* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992), 2.

completely plausible to state that this devotion was already present in Mexican popular culture at least in the last decades of the eighteenth century. However, it should be noted that none of the published sources referenced in this essay relevant to the *Mano Poderosa* regard the existence of these novenas as evidence of the existence of this image and its cult, which can be considered our most concrete clue to establish the origin of this image.

To prevent confusion with the generic Spanish term *retablo*, which refers to any type of altarpiece, it is important to clarify that in the scholarship dealing with Mexican colonial art the word *retablo* has been applied to pieces made of tin, which are the ones discussed in this essay. According to Gloria Giffords, an authority on Mexican *retablo* painting, “the terms *retablos*, *santos sobre hoja de lata*, and *láminas* all describe a particular type of Mexican religious art that dates from the early nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries. These are images of a single saint or groups of holy personages painted in oil on pieces of tin-plated iron.”⁹ She goes further to explain that the term *retablos* can also be used to refer to paintings of thanks, *ex-votos* or *milagros* (miracles), which depict events where individuals dedicating the paintings are assisted through divine intervention. Therefore, *retablos*

⁹ Gloria Giffords, *The Art of Private Devotion: Retablo Painting of Mexico* (Dallas: University of Texas Press, 1991), 33.

can be used in either sense, in a context where there might be confusion the terms *retablo santo* and *retablo ex-voto* are used to distinguish between the two types.¹⁰ For the purpose of this essay, since we will not address *ex-votos*, whenever a reference to a *retablo* is made, it will adhere to the first definition provided by Giffords, religious images painted in oil on pieces of tin. To understand the scale of these works of art, they measure from 2.5 inches by 3.5 inches all the way to 14 inches by 20 inches. The smallest and the largest are the rarest, and the most common sizes are 7 inches by 10 inches and 10 inches by 14 inches.¹¹

It is important to note that there are variations between different *retablos* depicting the *Mano Poderosa*. For example, while the majority depicts the figures of Jesus, Joseph, Mary, Joachim, and Anne seated on clouds, others depict them perched on top of each finger, or even seated on vines (Fig. 4), perhaps making an allusion to the Tree of Jesse. Pictorial representations of the Tree of Jesse show a symbolic tree or vine with spreading branches to represent the earthly genealogy of Jesus Christ. Jesse, the father of David, is shown in a recumbent or sitting position, almost always

¹⁰ Giffords, *The Art of Private Devotion*, 33.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

asleep.¹² The tree grows from Jesse's body, most commonly from his side or heart.

According to Jacinto Quirate, in his essay titled "*Los Cinco Señores and La Mano Poderosa: An Iconographic Study*":

The ancestors of the Virgin Mary are shown as busts or seated in the branches of the tree. The culminating part of the image is the seated figure of the Virgin Mary, with or without the Christ child. In some examples, God the Father and Saint Joseph are shown together in the upper part of the image.¹³

By the sixteenth century the tree of Jesse focused on the genealogy of the Virgin and sometimes it was used to refer to her Immaculate Conception.¹⁴ A nineteenth century Mexican *retablo* titled *Jesús hijo de David* (Jesus son of David), depicts King David as the trunk of the tree, and on top of its branches are the figures of Anne, Joachim, Mary, and Joseph, and in the central branch we find Jesus, in the form of a child (Fig. 5). A comparison between this *retablo* and another nineteenth century *retablo* of the *Mano Poderosa* (Fig. 4) demonstrate a connection between both themes. In addition to allusions to the Tree of Jesse, some of the *Mano Poderosa retablos* include representations of lambs drinking the blood of Christ in a chalice (Fig. 6), others just

¹² Jacinto Quirate, "*Los Cinco Señores and La Mano Poderosa: An Iconographic Study*," in *Art and Faith in Mexico: The Nineteenth Century Retablo Tradition*, eds. Elizabeth Netto and Charles Muir Lovell (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 80.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

the chalice (Fig. 4), and the majority include various representations of the *arma Christi* (Fig.6 and Fig. 7). Nevertheless, all the images of the *Mano Poderosa* seem to follow a general pattern that features the right hand, the five figures, the wound, and the pouring blood.

Chapter 4

THE *MANO PODEROSA* IN PUERTO RICO: A COMPARISON

Scholars have also found early manifestations of the *Mano Poderosa* in Puerto Rico, although these images have been represented in sculpture (i.e. relief panels and in the round) and date to the early twentieth century. In fact, Yvonne Lange has traced back the carved *Mano Poderosa*'s theme to the Mexican *retablo* tradition.¹⁵ Chronologically, its carved images are dated later than their *retablo* counterparts, most of them within the range of the first half of the twentieth century. One of the earliest examples of a carved *Mano Poderosa*, if not the earliest recorded in Puerto Rican history, is a high relief wood panel dated 1915 by Florencio Cabán, a member of the Cabán Family, a well-established group of *santeros* (saint carvers) from the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Fig. 8).¹⁶ According to Lange, this

¹⁵ See Doreen Colón Camacho, *El Santo en el Arte Puertorriqueño: Devoción, Imagen y Trascendencia* (San Juan: Museo de las Americas, 1996), 61.

¹⁶ The Cabán family was from the northern coast of the Island, specifically from the town of Camuy. By the time that Florencio sculpted his version of the *Mano Poderosa*, the family was already known for being a long line of *santeros*. Florencio had learned the trade from his father Quiterio Cabán (1848-1941), who had learned from his own father Eduvigés (1818-1890). See Vidal, *Escultura Religiosa Puertorriqueña*, 88.

piece is inspired by a chromolithograph of Italian provenance, whose circulation is still today widespread (Fig. 1).¹⁷ It is the image commonly found pasted on votive candles used for prayers and printed on leaflets accompanied by the prayer to the *Mano Poderosa* nowadays. A critical issue in question is that chromolithography is a rather modern medium, not in use in the Americas until the 1840's, and its origin is dated to be around 1796 in Germany. Therefore, the "Italian chromolithograph" can be dated to be from the second half of the nineteenth century at the earliest, if indeed related to the images produced in Mexican *retablo* paintings around the same time. In addition, it has been proven in this essay that by 1807 there was in existence novenas dedicated to the *Mano Poderosa* devotion; thus, even if this image was reproduced in Italy, it does not mean that the image represented is a devotion of Italian provenance. It is plausible to assume that the print in question was exported from Italy to the Americas during the mid-nineteenth century as part of an international commercial network of religious images. These prints enjoyed widespread distribution in contrast to their *retablo* counterparts, since it is decisively easier to purchase a printed image than to commission a painted tin *retablo*. However, it should be noted that Cabán's

¹⁷ Lange, *Santos de Palo*, 7. Proper documentation for this image has not been found. I have searched countless image databases and the internet, and all I have been able to find is that in a catalog titled *Santos de Palo: The Household Saints of Puerto Rico* published by the Museum of American Folk Art in New York it is referred to as an Italian chromolithograph and identified as the source for Cabán's relief by Dr. Lange. The catalog does not provide the name of the author, nor its specific date.

relief is dated 1915, when printed holy cards were widely distributed and were commonly exported from Europe.

When comparing Cabán's relief to the chromolithograph that might have served as its source of inspiration, there are various compositional similarities that we can observe. First of all, we should take note of the four angels on the lower left and right registry of the composition. In the chromolithograph, each angel was carrying an instrument related to the Passion of the Christ, the *arma Christi*. From right to left, the first angel is carrying the Crown of Thorns, the second angel is carrying the Holy Cross, the third angel is carrying the Holy Sponge, the Holy Lance, and the hammer and nails. Identifying what the fourth angel is carrying is somewhat more problematic. It seems to be an oblong-shaped object, with a ridge-like border with three indentations, or what I interpret to be blood spots, on top of it. In the carved wooden relief, the four angels are also represented, but they are kneeling in direction of the wrist of the hand, and they are missing the attributes they are carrying in the lithograph. On the upper register of both works we can see groups of *putti* peeking through the clouds, the only difference is that they are grouped differently in both images. Surprisingly, the five central figures are in the same order, both in the chromolithograph and in the wooden relief.

One striking difference between painted and carved representations of the *Mano Poderosa* is the positioning of the figures on top of the fingers. In painting, the figures are mostly positioned as follows: Joachim on the thumb, Joseph on the forefinger, Jesus (mostly in the form of a child) on the middle finger, Mary on the ring finger and Anne on the ear finger. In its sculpted form; Jesus is positioned on the thumb, Mary on the forefinger, Joseph on the middle, Anne on the ring finger and Joachim on the ear finger. It is interesting that the print Lange identifies as being the source of inspiration for Cabán's relief of the *Mano Poderosa* presents the same order of the figures as the carved versions found in the Caribbean, the only two-dimensional example of the *Mano Poderosa* with this figure arrangement I could find. Even though we are not dealing with a tin *retablo*, but a colored print, it is rather curious that they both share the same compositional order of the central figures. I agree with Lange's theory that this print might have inspired Cabán's piece, since it is more plausible for a Puerto Rican *santero* to have had contact with a widely distributed print than a localized *retablo* due to their availability to reach the Caribbean. As it has been discussed earlier, this wooden relief is the earliest recorded manifestation of a carved *Mano Poderosa* in Puerto Rico, and it might have served as a model to follow for the Cabán family and other groups of *santeros*.

What can be said of this difference in the positioning of the figures on top of the fingers? Scholars discussing the carved version of the *Mano Poderosa* argue that the positioning of Christ on the thumb symbolizes the idea that without the thumb, the rest of the hand would be useless; thus, the thumb holds a position of primacy, just as Christ would have held within his earthly genealogy. In a number of discussions of the *Mano Poderosa* in *retablo* painting, this position of primacy is given to the middle finger since it is the highest digit in the hand.¹⁸

There also are compositional differences between the painted and carved examples of the *Mano Poderosa* that are worth mentioning. In Mexican *retablo* painting, the five figures are usually seated in clouds (Fig. 6), forming a great arc, with Jesus in the upper center, followed by his parents, Mary and Joseph, slightly lower, and by his grandparents, Anne and Joachim, lower still, on each side. Each is perched or placed in relation to the fingers of the open hand with a wound in the center of the palm.¹⁹ This iconography of the five figures, Jesus earthly family, is also known in Mexican painting as the *Cinco Señores*, or the Five Lords, an iconographic variant of the medieval Holy Kinship. Also, in painting, the stigmatized hand depicted can be seen wearing a blue robe, normally attributed to the Franciscan order, which has led

¹⁸ Quirate, “*Los Cinco Señores* and *La Mano Poderosa*,” 85.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

various scholars to argue that the hand depicted is that of Saint Francis.²⁰ Meanwhile, in sculpture, the hand is never shown wearing any kind of sleeve, since its representation is always a disrobed hand from the wrist up.

Another compositional difference between the painted and carved versions of the *Mano Poderosa* is the discrepancy in the representation of blood. In many of the *retablos* published in catalogs, the wound at the center of the palm is pouring out a violent stream of blood that usually flows into a chalice of some sorts. In addition, this poured blood is drunk by a group of lambs, which can be interpreted as a Eucharistic symbol for redemption through the spilled blood of Christ. In the known examples of carved *Mano Poderosa* images there is an almost complete absence of

²⁰ In Latin America, it is common knowledge that the Franciscan friars that participated in the missions wore blue robes. However, it should be noted that there is no definitive consensus as to why this happened in this particular area. Gloria Giffords states: "... Franciscans, who, like all Spanish and New World friars of that order, wore blue robes instead of the traditional gray-beige as a sign of their devotion to the immaculateness of the Virgin." Giffords, *Mexican Folk Retablos*, 73. In contrast, José María Irabúru presents an interesting theory in which he claims the eventually the friars' clothing worn away, and they commissioned the indigenous women to make them new robes. According to Irabúru, the indigenous women dyed the robes blue because it was the most common dye the natives had in their possession. Original text reads: "Ropa apenas tenían otra que la que llevaban puesta, y como no encontraban allí sayal ni lana para remendar la que trajeron de España, que se iba cayendo a pedazos, acudieron al expediente de pedir a las indias que les deshiciesen los hábitos viejos, cardasen e hilasen la lana, y tejieran otros nuevos, que tiñeron de azul por ser el tinte más común que había entre los indios." José María Irabúru, "Hechos de los apóstoles en América," accessed April 14, 2010, <http://hispanidad.tripod.com/hechos8.htm>

blood in the composition, except for the red paint used to identify the wound, but it is neither pouring nor dripping excessively from it. More recent examples may include the nail still imbedded in the wound, but these are mostly seen as contemporary interpretations of earlier practices (Fig. 14).²¹ Further on, we will address the theological concept of the Five Lords and the issue of the alleged hand of Saint Francis, among others, as we analyze the different iconographic components of the *Mano Poderosa*.

After briefly analyzing various examples of the *Mano Poderosa*, it is reasonably to say that even if it has an established iconography, meaning the different theological concepts that make up the image, i.e., the stigmatized hand and the Five Lords, each depiction is unique because no two *Mano Poderosa* images are the same. The compositional differences between the painted and carved versions can be reconciled if it is envisioned as an adaptive process where a painted two-dimensional icon was translated into a three-dimensional carved form, in which certain elements may have been lost in translation due to the technical limits dictated by the medium. Thus, the sculpted form will embody the essence of its painted counterpart, but it will have adapted from its original form to fit the medium. It is crucial to remember that

²¹ This example was included to demonstrate that the devotion to the *Mano Poderosa* is still prevalent nowadays, and Puerto Rican *santeros* still represent it utilizing contemporary techniques.

both the tin-*retablos* and the carved *santos* were produced in a religious context for devotional purposes and mostly formed part of domestic shrines.²² In the case of the carved *santos*, they had to be in small scale, lightweight, and unostentatious in design.

²² The use of *santos* in this instance should not be confused with its literal meaning, saints. It is used to refer to the carved images of saints and popular devotions in general.

Chapter 5

ICONOGRAPHIC ELEMENTS OF THE *MANO PODEROSA*

Regardless its specific origin, the *Mano Poderosa* is an iconographic combination of various Christian theological concepts. In order to facilitate the study and analysis of this image, I will address each theological concept represented in the *Mano Poderosa* on its own, providing the reader with a clearer view of the evolution of each component, most of them from the Middle Ages to their conflation in the New World.

The Five Lords

The first theological concept I will address are the central figures of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, Saint Joseph, Saint Joachim, and Saint Anne. These five figures depicted in the *Mano Poderosa* also known as the *Cinco Señores* (The Five Lords). Since its creation in the late Middle Ages, the theme of the Holy Family had always demonstrated

flexibility in configuration.²³ In the earliest depictions, dating from the fifteenth century, the Holy Family took the form of the Holy Kinship. This theme was very popular in Germany and the Low Countries during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. These representations of the Holy Kinship often included the nuclear Holy Family, Saint Joachim and Saint Anne, and Mary's apocryphal sisters, as well as their husbands and children.²⁴ In addition, some representations of the Holy Kinship also depicted Anne's other husbands after Joachim. The Holy Kinship is usually represented in an intimate setting, and it has the look of a family portrait of sorts. Yet its meaning as the supernatural presentation of the Virgin's Immaculate Conception is transmitted by the dove of the Holy Spirit hovering over the Virgin Mary and child.²⁵

The theme in European art is known as the Holy Kinship or the Holy Parentage, but when it was brought to New Spain it became known as the *Cinco Señores*, a descriptive reference to the number of personages depicted in the scene. One of the earliest, if not the earliest, representations of *los Cinco Señores* found in New Spain is a sixteenth-century painting in the Cathedral of Mexico City by Andrés

²³ See Charlene Villaseñor Black, *Creating the Cult of Saint Joseph: Art and Gender in the Spanish Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2006), 60.

²⁴ See *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁵ See Quirate, "Los Cinco Señores and La Mano Poderosa," 81.

de Concha, a Spanish born artist who worked in colonial Mexico after 1563 (Fig. 10). In the center of the composition we have Mary and Anne, both attending to the standing figure of Christ.²⁶ On the left side we see Joseph, while Joachim is represented on the right side. Hovering over them is the white dove symbolizing the Holy Spirit. There are some noteworthy examples of this theme in the art of New Spain by Juan Correa, Cristóbal Villalpando (Fig. 11), Nicolás Rodríguez Juárez, amongst others.²⁷

An interesting aspect about the popularity of the *Cinco Señores* is that in Spain, after the Council of Trent (1545-1563), images that promoted the cult of Saint Anne were being suppressed. Charlene Villaseñor Black notes “Because of the unauthorized, vernacular nature of Anne’s cult, however, some delegates at the Council of Trent, the church council convened in response to the Protestant Reformation, as well later Tridentine reformers, regarded popular enthusiasm for Saint

²⁶ Ibid., 82.

²⁷See Joseph F Chorpenning, “The Iconography of St. Joseph in Mexican Devotional Retablos,” in *Mexican Devotional Retablos From The Peter's Collection* ed. Joseph F Chorpenning (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph University Press, 1994), 83. Author did not provide images of said paintings. Instead he provided their location within his text. It reads: “Among the Colonial Mexican artists who painted this subject are Juan Correa (Guatemala City, Museo de Antigua Guatemala), Villalpando (Toluca, Mexico, Museo de Bellas Artes), and Nicolás Rodríguez Juárez (Querétaro, Museo Regional, and Guadalajara, Church of Santa Ana).” I was able to locate an image for Villalpando’s painting, but was unable to locate the rest.

Anne with suspicion.”²⁸ This is evident in Spanish painting in the seventeenth century, depictions of the Holy Kinship were in decline and the Holy Family had undergone a major metamorphosis as Spanish artist produced fewer scenes of the Holy Family with the Virgin’s parents, and instead they focused on the nuclear family: Saint Joseph with Mary and the Child.²⁹ Villaseñor, in her book *Creating the Cult of Saint Joseph*, makes an interesting observation as she notes that “the theme’s [Holy Family] changing form articulated and responded to a variety of social discourses.”³⁰ Her chapter titled “Happy Families” is a comprehensive study of the pictorial evolution of the representations of the Holy Family, with a special focus on Spain and colonial Mexico. She proceeds to note that while the depictions of the Holy Kinship were in decline in Spain in the seventeenth century, and most depictions of the Holy Family were characterized as patriarchal and nuclear in nature, another current was emerging in New Spain. She states:

...many Mexican Holy Family images persisted in constructing the Holy Family as matriarchal by placing the women of the family in positions of prominence, and continued to depict the extended family

²⁸ Charlene Villaseñor Black, “St. Anne Imagery and Maternal Archetypes in Spain and Mexico,” in *Colonial Saints: Discovering the Holy in the Americas, 1500-1800*, eds. Allan Greer and Jodi Bilinkoff (New York: Routledge, 2003), 8.

²⁹ Villaseñor Black, “St. Anne Imagery,” 8.

³⁰ Villaseñor Black, *Creating the Cult*, 61.

throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with special importance accorded Saints Anne and Joachim.³¹

This preference for the extended matriarchal family in colonial Mexican Holy Families may be traced to the influence of indigenous family structures, which were more matriarchal in nature and frequently composed of extended kin networks.³²

Another case in point that may support Villaseñor's hypothesis of indigenous influence is the flourishing of Saint Anne's cult in New Spain, as it declined in the motherland, Spain. Many scholars have dealt with this issue, attributing it to Spain's lack of clerical control of their colonies. However, Villaseñor explores an interesting avenue by proposing the creation of new hybrid cultural forms in colonial Mexico.³³ In her essay "Saint Anne Imagery and Maternal Archetypes in Spain and Mexico" in *Colonial Saints*, she explores the decline of Saint Anne's cult in Spain while its popularity increased almost exponentially in the New World. She proposes a compelling theory that while much colonial Mexican religious art follows general developments in Spain, notable variations suggest an independent evolution in

³¹ Ibid., 81.

³² Ibid., 84.

³³ Villaseñor Black, "St. Anne Imagery," 3.

the Americas.³⁴ She goes further by exploring a possible conflation between depictions of the Holy Kinship, which gave preponderance to Saint Anne, and the Aztec goddess *Toci*, the matriarch of the indigenous pantheon.³⁵ *Toci* translates into “Our Grandmother” and there is evidence that indicates that native Mexicans favored the cult of Saint Anne because it allowed them to continue religious practices to *Toci*. For instance, the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún reported in the 1580s that native neophytes conflated Saint Anne with *Toci* in the village of Santa Ana Chiautempan. As we have seen, the theological concept of the *Cinco Señores* is an extremely complex image in itself, contributing to the enigmatic symbolism and the religious syncretism the *Mano Poderosa* seems to embody.

The Hand of God

The second theological concept that makes up the *Mano Poderosa*'s iconography is what most scholars have identified as the right hand of Christ. Devotion to the fragmented Holy Body of Christ and other holy bodies is a practice that has been documented since medieval times, as it is evident by the practice of preserving relics of holy bodies, such as bone fragments. There also exists a particular devotion

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

dedicated to the fragmentation of Christ's body according to the wounds He suffered during the Passion, the Five Sacred Wounds. The devotion to the Five Sacred Wounds of Christ, unlike the devotion to the *Mano Poderosa*, is approved by the Catholic Church. Its feast is celebrated the Friday after Ash Wednesday in Mexico after it was granted on 1809.³⁶ A chaplet to the Holy Wounds was approved by the Holy See on August 11, 1823.³⁷ It contains a series of prayers dedicated to each of the Five Wounds; the prayer to the Wound of the Right Hand reads:

Holy wound of the right hand of my Jesus, I adore Thee; I compassionate Thee, O Jesus, for the most bitter pain which Thou didst suffer. I thank Thee for Thy graces lavished on me with such love, in spite of all my most perverse obstinacy. I offer to the Eternal Father all the pain and love of Thy most holy humanity; and I pray Thee to change my heart and its affections, and make me do all my actions in accordance with the will of God.³⁸

It is one of those devotions which are centered on the Passion and which were promoted by the Franciscans.³⁹ The wounds Christ suffered on the cross were considered to express the essence of his humanity. According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*:

³⁶ See Frederick Holweck, "The Five Sacred Wounds," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1912), accessed October 15, 2010, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15714a.htm>.

³⁷See "Devotion to the Five Wounds," *Fish Eaters*, accessed December 10, 2010, <http://fisheaters.com/5wounds.html>

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Lange, "Santos," 176.

“The revival of religious life and the zealous activity of St. Bernard and St. Francis in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, together with the enthusiasm of the Crusaders returning from the Holy Land, gave a wonderful impulse to devotion to the Passion of Jesus Christ and particularly to practices in honor of the Wounds in His Sacred Hands, Feet, and Side.”⁴⁰

This devotion is explained in more detail in the memorial of the Polish bishops to Clement XIII:

Moreover, the Five Wounds of Christ are honored by a Mass and an Office, and on account of these wounds we venerate also the feet, hands and side of the most loving Redeemer, these parts of Our Lord's most holy body being held more worthy of a special cult than the others, precisely because they suffered special pains for our salvation, and because they are decorated with these wounds as with an illustrious mark of love. Therefore, with living faith they cannot be looked upon without a special feeling of religion and devotion.⁴¹

Depictions of the isolated Hand of God are not common in European art, but it does have its antecedents in the Middle Ages. During the course of this research, I have found a couple of compelling examples that date back to the eleventh century and that might help us begin to comprehend the importance of the depiction of the disembodied Hand of God and why this theological concept might have evolved into what we know today as the *Mano Poderosa*.

⁴⁰ Holweck, "The Five Sacred Wounds," The Catholic Encyclopedia.

⁴¹ Ibid.

In his book titled *The Uta Codex: Art Philosophy in Eleventh-Century Germany*, Adam Cohen goes to great length to discuss a full-page frontispiece depicting the Hand of God found in the Uta Codex.⁴² The Uta Codex is an illustrated Gospel lectionary produced in Regensburg around the year 1025 at the behest of Uta, Abbess of the Niedermünster nunnery. According to Cohen, there are earlier depictions of the Hand of God, mainly found in the ninth-century Codex Aureus of Charles the Bald (fol. 97v) and in the Sacramentary of Henry II (fol. 21r) executed in Regensburg between 1002 and 1014.⁴³ In his chapter titled “Time, Eternity, and Virtue: The Hand of God,” Cohen makes the distinction that the Hand of God found in the Uta Codex differentiates itself from the earlier examples, because the illumination highlights and maintains the emphasis on the divine Hand itself, while the other earlier illuminations, i.e. the Hand of God found in the Codex Aureus, relates directly to Charles the Bald.⁴⁴

⁴² See Adam Cohen, *The Uta Codex: Art Philosophy in Eleventh-Century Germany* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 27-38. Author provided a color plate of the image on page 64. Proper documentation reads: Munich, CLM 13601 (Uta Codex), fol. 1v, Hand of God.

⁴³ Cohen, *The Uta Codex*, 28. See page 30 and 31 for images of both examples. Proper documentation for plate on page 30 reads: Munich, CLM 1400 (Codex Aureus), fol. 97v, John incipit page. Proper documentation for plate on page 31 reads: Munich, CLM. 4456 (Sacramentary of Henry II), fol. 21r, ornamental page with Hand of God.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

This particular example in the Uta Codex is crucial to our discussion of the depictions of the disembodied Hand of God, for it provides us with a clue regarding possible uses for these types of images. According to Cohen:

The very nature of these images [illuminations in the Uta Codex] as compact, interrelated theological discourses dense with pictorial and textual elements, structured compositionally by means of geometric schemata, suggest that the book and its illustrations functioned to organize knowledge and to stimulate memory among its monastic audience.⁴⁵

Cohen's insight relates directly to our discussion regarding mnemonic practices in the Franciscan missions in New Spain. He further states that in the increasing scholarship on memory in the Middle Ages, little attention has been paid to how actual images may have functioned within such system. We will address the issue of *memoria* and mnemonic practices as we engage in a discussion of the theories of the *Mano Poderosa*'s possible origin.

Another illustration found is discussed for the first time in depth in an article dated 1956 by Wolfgang Stechow (Fig. 12). It is an early woodcut with the Hand of God. This item is so rare that only one impression of it is known to exist. Stechow offers a delightful description of the image and it reads:

⁴⁵ Ibid., 3.

Printed with glossy black ink on a sheet of paper measuring 136 by 95 mm, it shows in a roundel the Hand of God in the gesture of benediction. The fingers are hand colored in a light red tint. The circle is clearly identified as a nimbus both by its color, a deep yellow, and by the three lily-shaped rays which are often used to indicate the Supreme Being, the number of rays suggesting the Trinity.⁴⁶

Furthermore, in the center of the palm we can clearly distinguish a wound, which implies an additional identification with Christ.⁴⁷ The earlier examples briefly discussed did not contain the depiction of the wound at the center of the palm, as they were clearly labeled as the Hand of God, not Christ. This issue has led me to believe that this image might be considered a precursor in the tradition of representing the Hand of Christ. An inscription in Latin surrounds the image of the Hand, “*Quod appositum est et apponetur / per dexteram dei patris omnipotentis benedicetur*” (“Whatever has been, or will be, placed next to this, shall be blessed by the right hand of the omnipotent Father”). This woodcut once formed part of the collection of W. L. Schreiber, and Schreiber established a correlation between the woodcut and the Mainz Psalter of 1457, for the color of the printing ink corresponded to the earliest products of the printing press, and the shape of the letters was extremely similar to that of the

⁴⁶ Wolfgang Stechow, "An Early Woodcut With the Hand of God," *Bulletin* 14, no. 1 (1956): 7.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

Mainz Psalter, except for some missing i-dots.⁴⁸ His analysis puts the woodcut around the decades of 1450 and 1460.

A later example, not by much, is a German woodcut dated 1466, titled *The Hand as the Mirror of Salvation* (Fig. 13). According to Joseph Chorpenning in his essay “The Iconography of St. Joseph in Mexican Devotional Retablos,” this image was intended as an aide in the teaching and the memorization of Christian doctrine.⁴⁹ It is preserved at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., and in their catalog *Fifteenth Century Woodcuts and Metalcuts* it is described as being intended for moral instruction, an aid to the clergy and the layman, as it parallels the *Ars Memorandi*, an aid in the teaching and memorization of the Gospels, produced in about 1470 in the Upper Rhineland.⁵⁰ At the center of the composition is a hand and four sayings of Jesus taken from the Gospels appear above the hand: “But strive for the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33); “What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, but loses or forfeits himself?” (Luke 9:25); “And he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I

⁴⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁹ See Chorpenning, “The Iconography of St. Joseph in Mexican Devotional Retablos,” 83.

⁵⁰ See Richard S. Field, *Fifteenth Century Woodcuts and Metalcuts* (Washington, D.C.: Publications Department of the National Gallery of Art, 1965), Cat. entry 269.

will pay you whatever is right” (Matthew 20:4); “I am true vine” (John 15:1). Each finger, knuckle, and joint of the hand is labeled, and the meaning is set forth in explanatory verses on either side of the hand:

When thou knowest the will of the Lord, then own the faults in order to avoid them. When thou has done evil then repent of it. When thou verily repentest then confess it. When thou has confessed then do penance.

The thumb signifies God’s will; the forefinger signifies examination; the middle finger signifies the repentance; the ring finger signifies the confession; the ear finger signifies the satisfaction. ⁵¹

***Arma Christi* and the Lambs**

The last two theological concepts we will briefly address are the *arma Christi* and the lambs drinking Christ’s blood from the chalice. As I have mentioned, both of these concepts were lost in translation when the *Mano Poderosa* was transcribed from Mexican *retablo* painting to Puerto Rican folk sculpture, as they abound in *retablo* versions of the *Mano Poderosa*, but are completely absent from the sculpted versions, except for the aforementioned relief by Cabán in the first half of the twentieth century where we find the symbols for the *arma Christi*. The *arma Christi* are the instruments of the passion that actualize the sufferings of the Redeemer and symbolize His victory

⁵¹ Ibid.

over death and Satan. In the Middle Ages, devotion to the Cross was extended to other instruments of the Passion and soon they were attributed magical powers. The *arma* was also combined with prayers dedicated to the Man of Sorrows or associated with the Mass of Saint Gregory.⁵² In the thirteenth century, the number of instruments was limited to six: crown of thorns, pillar and rods of flagellation, cross, nails, sponge, and lance.⁵³ By the fifteenth century, there was a substantial increase which encompassed among other things the thirty pieces of silver belonging to Judas, Malchus's lantern and his ear attached to Peter's sword, the rooster of Peter's denial, the jug and basin associated with Pilate's hand-washing, the Sudarium of Veronica, the colobium of Jesus and the dice with which lots were cast for it, the hammer that drove the nails into the cross, and the ladder and pincers used to take Christ down from the Cross.⁵⁴

As for the lambs drinking the pouring blood, they are considered a symbol for redemption through the spilled blood of Christ. They can also be interpreted to represent the redemption obtained through the Holy Sacraments since in most *retablos* the number of lambs is seven. Giffords was the first to make a connection between the *retablo* version of the *Mano Poderosa* and the Man of Sorrows/ Mystical Vine

⁵² See Lange, "Santos," 170.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ See Lange, "Santos," 170-171.

because in both, the lambs are drinking the blood at the lower part of the composition. This theological concept can also be traced back to medieval traditions through the representations of the Man of Sorrows.

One interesting find that encompasses most of the different theological concepts that are found present in the iconography of the *Mano Poderosa* is folio 10r of the manuscript titled *Le Passionaire de l'abbesse Cunégonde (Passional of the Abbess Kunigunde)* in the Prague University Library. The page shows the Man of Sorrows amidst the *arma Christi*, the Sudarium of Veronica and, next to it, Christ kneeling on Mount of Olives with the Hand of God speaking to Him, set against a cruciferous nimbus.⁵⁵ In addition, alongside the Man of Sorrows, there is a disembodied right hand in the illustration, which does not appear to correlate to the Hand of God represented in the upper right corner of the composition. As its descriptions clearly points out, we have the Man of Sorrows, a symbol of redemption that can be related to the depictions of the Mystical Vine (*Vendimia Mística*) in Mexican *retablos* with the lambs drinking the blood from the wound; the *arma Christi*, and the Hand of God. This manuscript is dated around the last decade of the thirteenth century (c.1290); therefore, it is rather exciting to see these theological concepts we have been talking about starting to come together in a single image of

⁵⁵ See Stechow, "An Early Woodcut," 13.

symbolic content.⁵⁶ This work of art could be considered to be some kind of antecedent to the conflation of theological concepts that occurs in the devotion to the *Mano Poderosa* in colonial Latin America.

Further research and study is needed to establish a direct connection between this manuscript and other images of the disembodied Hand of God, or the Hand of Christ, that are considered by scholars in the field as precedents to the *Mano Poderosa*'s iconography. It should be noted that even though it has been established that there is documentation for the conflation of the theological concepts that make up the iconography of the *Mano Poderosa* in the Middle Ages, it just proves that these concepts were already being thought of as a group for what they represented, redemption through the spilled blood of Christ. Nonetheless, the *Mano Poderosa* is an intriguing image whose origins are still unknown, except for the fact that it emerged in Mexican *retablo* painting in the nineteenth century and that novenas dedicated to it were already in print in Mexico by 1807. The unique combination of these theological concepts and the unique circumstances that may have surrounded its birth are what makes the *Mano Poderosa* the enigmatic and powerful symbol it is.

⁵⁶ See. Alfred Thomas, *Anne's Bohemia: Czech Literature and Society, 1310-1420* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 28.

Chapter 6

BIRTH OF A DEVOTION

After tracing the different theological concepts that compose the unusual iconography of the *Mano Poderosa*, it is only appropriate that we provide a historiographic review of the different theories about the birth of the image itself and the function it may have originally served in New Spain. Currently scholars have advanced two theories regarding the possible origin of the *Mano Poderosa*, one dealing with the cult of Saint Anne and the other with Franciscan influences and cultural interplay. Even though a general consensus about the origin of this popular devotion and its iconography does not exist, it is my objective to provide additional research and evidence to sustain the theory that I believe to be the most accurate- that the *Mano Poderosa* emerged as a mnemonic aid in the Franciscan missions of New Spain, as a tool for teaching effectiveness

The most popular theory is the one proposed by Gloria Giffords in her groundbreaking book *Mexican Folk Retablos*, whose first edition was published in 1974. Giffords argues that the symbolism of the Omnipotent Powerful Hand can be

traced to the introduction of the cult of St. Ann by crusaders returning from the Holy Lands. She proceeds by saying that relics of St. Anne included a hand-shaped, bejeweled reliquary known as the Anna-Hand, and that through an evolution of ideas another element was added, the Hand of Christ.⁵⁷ After making such a broad statement, Gifford fails to provide proper documentation for her theory, and what it is worse; she is quoted in almost every single publication about the *Mano Poderosa* in Mexican *retablo* painting. After conducting my own research, I did find some examples that could relate to the relics she mentions, mainly in the Basilica of Saint Anne de Beaupre, in Quebec, Canada. The reliquary is shaped like a hand and it contains three relics belonging to Saint Anne. The first relic, a portion of the bone of Saint Anne's finger, was obtained by the Carcassonne Chapter, and was brought to the Shrine on March 12, 1670 by Bishop François de Laval. The first major relic arrived at the Shrine on July 26, 1892, as a gift from Pope Leo XIII. It is a four-inch portion of the bone of Saint Anne's forearm. It was obtained from the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, and was brought from Rome to Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré by Bishop Joseph-Calixte Canac-Marquis (1821-1904). Finally, on July 3, 1960, another major relic of

⁵⁷ See Giffords, *The Art of Private Devotion*, 30.

Saint Anne, also from her forearm, was brought to the Shrine from St. Paul Outside the Walls, this time as a gift from Blessed Pope John XXIII.⁵⁸

It is very intriguing that the cult of one of the saintly figures represented in the iconography of the *Mano Poderosa* has a very strong connection with the representation of a hand as the central focus; however, a number of saints whose reliquaries take the shape of a hand prove that the case of Saint Anne and the Anne-hand is not unique; therefore, it might just be a coincidence. Furthermore, the hand represented in the *Mano Poderosa* seems to be instead the Hand of Christ, which has other precedents in art, as we have discussed.

In 1975, Yvonne Lange advanced an alternative theory about the origin of the imagery of the stigmatized hand featured in the *Mano Poderosa* in her dissertation on household wooden saints of Puerto Rico. Taking as starting point Giffords' theory, Lange provides her readers with a brief historic background of Saint Anne's cult from the time the Crusaders allegedly introduced it to Europe to the inception of the Anna Hand reliquary to the Austrian court in 1687. One interesting aspect of her findings is

⁵⁸ "Relics of Saint Anne," Saint-Anne-de-Beaupre Sanctuaire Shrine, accessed April 24, 2010, http://www.shrinesaintanne.org/eng/2_5_relics.htm.

that according to her research, holy cards that incorporated the Anna-Hand and “conscience-hand” were already distributed by 1720.⁵⁹ Moreover, according to Lange, there was another holy card in circulation around the same time that illustrated Mary and her parents Joachim and Anne. It was used to pray for the intercession of its figures for a good death.⁶⁰ It did not contain the image of a hand, but it depicted the extended Holy Family, with Anne at the center of the composition. After carefully considering all the elements surrounding the evolution of the cult of the Anne-Hand, she proceeded to state:

This evolutionary trend explains the meshing of ideas and devotions concerned with a holy death and the grouping of Joachim, Anna, Joseph, Mary and Jesus which is now found on the tips of the fingers of the *Mano Poderosa*. It does not take into consideration, however, transposition of the figures from the Anne-Hand and Mary-hand to the hand of Christ.”⁶¹

Furthermore, she states at the end of her dissertation section regarding the *Mano Poderosa* that images of this devotion abound in Mexico and “reasons for this frequency in Mexico and for the transposition of the figures of the Child Jesus and His

⁵⁹ See Yvonne Lange, “Santos: The Household Wooden Saints of Puerto Rico” (PhD diss. University of Pennsylvania, 1975), 186. The “conscience-hand” was an illustrated mnemonic device for examining one’s conscience.

⁶⁰ See *Ibid.*, 187.

⁶¹ Lange, “Santos,” 187.

ancestors on to the fingers of the hand of Christ have eluded this writer so far.”⁶² It is surprising that the most-widely accepted theory on the origin of the iconography of the *Mano Poderosa* is indeed a theory that can be easily contested and refuted, which highlights the difficulties one encounters in this field. Even with Lange’s subsequent research on the Anna-hand, Gifford’s generic statement that through an evolution of ideas the element of the Hand of Christ was added to the Anna-Hand is still vague and unsubstantiated. Nonetheless, Lange’s research might provide us with an important clue for deciphering the *Mano Poderosa*. If indeed there is a precedent of a conflation of a iconic hand image and a mnemonic hand image, the Anna-Hand and the “conscience-hand,” in the eighteenth century, this might help us substantiate the second theory of origin of the *Mano Poderosa*, in which the cultural exchange between Franciscan missionaries and Native Americans might have provided the ideal circumstances for the birth of the devotion to the *Mano Poderosa*.

⁶² Ibid., 188.

Chapter 7

THE OTHER HAND: FRANCISCAN INFLUENCE

The second theory about the origin of the devotion to the *Mano Poderosa* discusses the possibility that this devotion may have emerged as part of the evangelization process by the mendicant orders that first arrived to the New World in the sixteenth century, specifically the Franciscans. In 1974 Gloria Giffords, in conjunction with her theory of the Anna-Hand, suggested that some special significance within the Franciscan order and the *Mano Poderosa* was present since in some *retablos* the hand depicted allegedly represents the hand of Saint Francis, due to the blue robe that can be identified in the composition, along with the stigma in the center of the palm (Fig. 4 and Fig. 7).⁶³ Other scholars have followed suit by providing further evidence that could establish a correlation between the depiction of Saint Francis' hand and the Franciscan evangelization efforts in the New World. Fernando Juárez Frías briefly agrees with Giffords in his 1991 book *Retablos Populares Mexicanos: Iconografía religiosa del siglo XIX*. He notes that there is no clear data about the origin of this particular devotion, but that it is widely regarded by

⁶³ See Giffords, *Mexican Folk Retablos*, 39.

its followers and it is attributed to the Franciscans due to the color of the robe represented in the image.⁶⁴

Joseph Chorpenning in his 1994 essay titled “The Iconography of St. Joseph in Mexican Devotional Retablos” cites both Giffords and Juárez Frías in his discussion of the *Mano Poderosa* and the Five Lords, adding a comparison between the *Mano Poderosa* and a fifteenth-century woodcut titled *Hand as the Mirror of Salvation*, an aid in the teaching and the memorization of Christian doctrine.⁶⁵ This has led Chorpenning to believe that the *Mano Poderosa* might have emerged as a mnemonic aid for the memorization of standard prayers.

In 2001, Jacinto Quirate in his essay “*Los Cinco Señores and La Mano Poderosa: An Iconographic Study*” cites both Giffords and Juárez Frías in his discussion regarding the different iconographic elements found in the various representations of the *Mano Poderosa*. Furthermore, he poses that the Five Lords had an important role in the teaching of Christianity to the natives in the New World since

⁶⁴ See Fernando Juárez Frías, *Retablos Populares Mexicanos: Iconografía Religiosa del Siglo XIX* (Mexico City: Inbursa, 1991), 66.

⁶⁵ See Chorpenning, “The Iconography of St. Joseph in Mexican Devotional Retablos,” 83.

the parentage of Mary would have been an easy lesson to present to the neophytes.⁶⁶ In addition, he notes that Franciscan friars used the open hand to teach the natives the rudiments of music, as it is evident in a wall painting at the Mission of Santa Barbara, California.⁶⁷

So far, this is the scholarship published that deals with this theory of a possible origin of the *Mano Poderosa*. In what follows, I will provide further evidence of the Franciscans pedagogical methods employed in the missions to gain a better understanding of how the different theological concepts found in the *Mano Poderosa* meshed with the cultural exchange taking place between the Franciscan Friars and the natives in New Spain to give way to a rather unique and special devotion.

Before engaging in a discussion about the educational methods of the Franciscans in their New World missions, it is necessary to briefly direct our attention to the concept of *memoria* (memory) and its importance in the Middle Ages. *Memoria* was an honorable mental discipline in a world where books were scarce and rhetorical

⁶⁶ See Quirate, “*Los Cinco Señores and La Mano Poderosa*,” 85.

⁶⁷ Quirate failed to provide an image of the aforementioned painting.

dialogue was instrumental in teaching and learning catechism.⁶⁸ In the Middle Ages, memory involved the Christianization of memory and of mnemonics⁶⁹ A well-trained memory was considered a moral force and a virtue. In other words, *memoria* was a matter of ethics and character for the discipline it required. To quote Carruthers in her book *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*:

Proper preparation of material rigid order, and complete concentration are the requirements which Thomas Aquinas himself defines in his discourse on trained memory, and as we will see, are continuously emphasized in all ancient and medieval mnemonic practices.⁷⁰

. The Order of St. Francis is a mendicant order founded in 1210. The founder of the Franciscan order had intended its members to follow literally in the footsteps of Christ and his apostles. The order soon experienced a metamorphosis and adopted a style very similar to the Dominicans; they purchased buildings in the cities, laid down courses of study and began to acquire libraries.⁷¹ Unlike other monastic

⁶⁸ See Noel Packard and Christopher Chen, "From Medieval Mnemonics to a Social Construction of Memory," *American Behavioral Scientist* 48, no. 10 (2005): 1300.

⁶⁹ See Jeffrey Olick and Joyce Robbins, "Social Memory Studies: From "Colective Memory" to the Historical sociology of Mnemonics Practices," *Annual Review of Sociology*, no. 24 (1998): 114-115.

⁷⁰ Mary J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 8.

⁷¹ See Anders Piltz, *The World of Medieval Learning* (Great Britain: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 161.

orders, mendicant orders were on the move and had to be active at the very core of communications and trade. Therefore, memory and education became a priority in everyday business. Mendicant orders were in the service of the Universal Church, bearing with them the new learning and spreading of ideas and impulses across the length and breadth of Europe.⁷² Consequently, they were the ones that undertook the responsibility of evangelizing the newly discovered territories of the New World.

The Church played a crucial role in the establishment of Spanish culture in the Americas. Its institutions were central to the life cycle of most persons and influenced even the most mundane aspects of daily culture.⁷³ The first order to take it upon themselves with the evangelization of the newly discovered territories was the Franciscans. They were the protagonists of a cultural interplay that forever changed the face of the New World. In order to establish the Catholic Church as the religious authority in the New World, the Franciscans had to establish a connection between themselves and the natives they encountered. The friars had to first become the natives' disciples, as they initiated the friars in the art of objective teaching, by means

⁷² Ibid., 161.

⁷³ See John F. Schwaller, ed., *The Church in Colonial Latin America* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 2000), xi.

of theatrical representation, mimicry, dancing, singing, and hieroglyphic writings.⁷⁴ By means of signs, the natives' method of establishing communications with the visitors, these Franciscans made the natives understand the existence of God and who was the Virgin Mary.⁷⁵ However, this sign-based visual communication proved to be insufficient, and the next step was to teach them the rudiments of the Spanish and Latin languages so that they might understand the basis of catechism, the Holy Sacrifice and the Day's Orations.

In an article titled "Educational Methods of the Franciscans in Spanish California," Daniel McGarry discusses various instructional methods employed by Franciscan missionaries in California during the years of 1769 to 1834 as part of their Indian evangelization campaign. He focuses part of his discussion on the teaching of the Spanish language to the natives. Spanish was a crucial element in the process of evangelization; in fact, everyday business were to be conducted in Spanish, and Indians were required to say their prayers, recite catechism, and sing hymns all in Spanish.⁷⁶ However, teaching Spanish to the native proved to be harder than initially

⁷⁴ See Eduardo Enrique Rios, "The Franciscans Contribution to Mexican Culture," *The Americas* 1, no. 1 (1944): 38.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁷⁶ See Daniel McGarry, "Educational Methods of the Franciscans in Spanish California," *The Americas* 6, no. 3 (1950): 347.

perceived. In fact, the biggest problem encountered in the missions was the language barrier. The Mexican synod of 1555 had forbidden the baptism of adult natives without basic religious instruction and in 1585 another synod directed that preliminary religious teaching had to occur in the Indian's own language.⁷⁷ This meant that before teaching the natives to the basics of Spanish language, the Franciscan friars themselves had to learn the rudiments of the natives' many languages. Because of their troubles with the abundance of natives' dialects, missionaries turned to local natives hoping that they would learn Spanish and serve as their interpreters. Due to the limited nature of this essay, it is sufficient to say that it was a long and arduous process, but at the end, most natives were able to speak both, their own language and Spanish. By 1795 in some California missions the natives recited the catechism mornings and evenings, once in Spanish and once in their own language.⁷⁸ As McGarry states, "the Indians had not merely to acquiesce passively to Christian beliefs; they must actively memorize and recite the principal prayers and articles of the Catholic faith twice a day."⁷⁹

⁷⁷ See Steven W. Hackel, *Children of Coyote, Missionaries of Saint Francis: Indian-Spanish Relations in Colonial California 1769-1850* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 146.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁷⁹ McGarry, "Educational Methods," 347.

The main goal of these missions was the indoctrination of the natives, their conversion to Catholicism and their rejection of their pagan past. The whole mission system was essentially designed as a series of object-lessons or exercises based on the daily recitation of the *doctrina*.⁸⁰ Steven Hayes, in his book *Children of Coyote, Missionaries of Saint Francis*, provides us with an interesting outlook at the important role memorization played in the religious instruction of the natives in colonial California during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. He states:

“Catechism was the centerpiece of the natives’ religious indoctrination, but they were to learn further Catholic beliefs by memorizing and reciting the acts of faith, hope, charity, and contrition, the Apostles’ Creed, the sign of the cross, and fundamental prayers, such as the Our Father, the Hail Mary, and the Salve Regina.”⁸¹

He also describes how the natives had to learn by memory the Ten Commandments, the Five Commandments of the Church that provided order and discipline to their communal worship, and the Seven Holy Sacraments.⁸² As mentioned earlier, the natives had to recite this *doctrina* twice a day as part of their instruction.

⁸⁰ *Doctrina* refers to the catechisms and basic prayers that were recited daily as part of the evangelization process.

⁸¹ Hackel, *Children of Coyote*, 146.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 146.

In addition to a strict program based on memorization of the *doctrina*, the Franciscans used the visual and performative arts to teach Christian doctrine to potential converts. Indigenous cultures in the Americas relied heavily on oral, physical, and visual representations of history.⁸³ It is known that liturgical drama, paintings, pantomimes, murals, and songs made mass and doctrinal lessons more comprehensible and better piqued the interest of native students.⁸⁴ Liturgical art played a big role in the indoctrination of the natives, as it was intended to display the glory and power of the church. Just as the *doctrina* that the converts had to recite in a daily manner, the liturgical art in the missions was the product of Franciscan scrutiny.⁸⁵ These devotional paintings and engravings were intended to present the natives with dramatic visual representations of Catholic belief.⁸⁶

There is documentation of the exacting requests made by several friars regarding these images, for they were to be liturgically correct and varied in color as to catch the natives' attention. These images proved so indispensable to native

⁸³ See Kristin Dutcher Mann, "Christmas in the Missions of Northern New Spain," *The Americas* 66, no. (2010): 337.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 337.

⁸⁵ See Hackel, *Children of Coyote*, 148.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

indoctrination that on occasion some missionaries tore out images of their missals and displayed them in front of the assembly of converts.⁸⁷ Inventory and annual reports suggest that natives at all the missions were widely exposed to liturgical paintings and prints. Furthermore, due to the massive quantities of prints sent to various missions in California, it is proposed that many natives themselves possessed their own Catholic imagery, perhaps given to them as a reward for their efforts.⁸⁸

A common thread in all the material researched for this essay regarding the Franciscan missions is the importance of memorization in conjunction with visual aids. Quirate mentions that Franciscan friars used the open hand to teach the natives the rudiments of music. According to tradition, the hand has been used as a mnemonic device outside of a religious context for music notation and fortune-telling, among other uses. Within a religious framework, the hand has been used as a teaching aide in catechism primers for the examination of conscience prior to confession, a practice still in use nowadays.⁸⁹ Furthermore, the coat of arms of the Franciscan Order of Friars Minors depicts two stigmatized hands, one belonging to Christ and the other one to Saint Francis (Fig. 14). It is evident that the devotion to Christ's Wounds was

⁸⁷ Ibid., 148.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 151.

⁸⁹ See Lange, "Santos," 184.

important to the order, along with the importance of the hand itself. The hand possesses a rich symbolism in Christian faith, since the hand is used to create, bless, judge, condemn, and redeem. Along with the memorization of the *doctrina*, the Franciscan friars relied on visual aids, such as liturgical art to supplement the conversion process. The hand itself may have played an important role, since it is human condition to utilize the hand to help memorize any given subject.

Taking into consideration that depictions of the Hand of God are not very common, and that those that were indeed created and circulated were mostly used as mnemonic devices, such as the *Ars Memorandi*, it is reasonable to suggest that the *Mano Poderosa* may have emerged as a mnemonic aid in New Spain, as a tool for teaching effectiveness. Juárez Frías argues that the correlation of the Five Lords with the thumb and four fingers of the *Mano Poderosa* suggests that it was a memory aid for the recitation of a series of standard prayers, such as the Hail Mary and the Our Father, to honor and/or to invoke the special intercession and protection of Jesus, His parents, and His maternal grandparents.⁹⁰ This interpretation of the *Mano Poderosa* provides us with further evidence for our argument that this popular devotion may indeed have derived from the cultural interplay and religious syncretism present in the Franciscan missions of New Spain. All the elements are present: the earthly genealogy

⁹⁰ See Chorpenning, “The Iconography of St. Joseph,” 85.

of Jesus Christ represented by the Holy Kinship, the *arma Christi* symbolizing the Passion of Christ, and the Eucharistic symbols of the chalice and the lambs drinking the blood. All these theological concepts and their iconography are representatives of different lessons in the Catholic doctrine that would have been imparted by the Franciscan friars in New Spain, represented in the *Mano Poderosa*. Even if the iconography of the *Mano Poderosa* is a collective of theological concepts whose origins can be traced to the Middle Ages, the earliest evidence recorded is found in Mexico. Before its novenas and its appearance in Mexican *retablo*, there is no record of the *Mano Poderosa*'s existence.

Chapter 8

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study of the *Mano Poderosa* as a popular devotion thought to be born in New Spain has proved to be an arduous process with many dead ends due to the insufficient documentation that deal with this peculiar image. After approaching its study from different perspectives, we have come to terms with the fact that it cannot be established decisively when and where this intriguing devotion came to fruition. Many of the different theological concepts that make up its iconography have been in existence since the early Middle Ages, and there is recorded evidence that there were attempts to combine several of these concepts in individual compositions already by the fifteenth century. Nonetheless, the earliest documentation of the *Mano Poderosa*'s existence is a novena published in Mexico 1807, which indicates the possibility that it may have been in existence in eighteenth-century New Spain. A brief historiographic review provided us with the scope of the general accepted theories of its origin. I proceeded to provide further evidence to support the claim that the *Mano Poderosa* might have indeed resulted from a cultural interplay between the Franciscan missionaries and the natives they indoctrinated. Already by

the fifteenth century, woodcuts of hands with religious and mnemonic purposes were in use, and it is very probable that the Franciscans were familiar with these techniques since the concept of memory was emphasized throughout the whole conversion process. The possibility that it may have emerged from a conflation of Franciscan educational methods and the lessons learned by the converted natives is a strong theory backed up by plenty literary and visual evidence.

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