

THE VOW AS VISUAL FEAST. HONORING ST. JOSEPH IN SICILIAN AMERICAN HOMES

LEONARD NORMAN PRIMIANO

This article discusses the home altars built by Sicilian American women to honor St. Joseph in the seaport community of Gloucester in the state of Massachusetts. Of particular importance when considering the communicative and creative esthetics of this belief and practice is the rich way this votive tradition expresses and exemplifies nine fundamental characteristics of vernacular Catholicism.
Keywords: *home altars, ex voto, Italian American, vernacular religion, vernacular Catholicism.*

Prispevek obravnava domače oltarje, ki jih ameriške Sicilijanke v pristaniški skupnosti v Gloucesterju (Massachusetts) postavljajo v čast sv. Jožefu. Ob obravnavi komunikacijske in ustvarjalne estetike verovanja in prakse je posebnega pomena bogatost votivne tradicije, ki izraža in ponazarja devet temeljnih značilnosti vernakularnega katolištva.
Ključne besede: *domači oltarji, votivi, ameriški Italijani, vernakularna religija, vernakularno katolištvo.*

I always like to present¹ a visual feast in my religious studies courses at Cabrini College by bringing into the classroom a variety of objects of religious material culture to challenge and teach the students something about creativity and religious expression. Recently, as a part of the course “The Search for Meaning” [Primiano 2001b], which is my undergraduate course on vernacular religion [Primiano 1995], I brought an object into class to help illustrate my lecture on visual traditions of the human body in everyday religious practice. This charm or talisman, a representation of a single open eye affixed to a circular dark-blue disc of blown glass, is meant to protect one’s person, family, and home against the “evil eye.” It was purchased for me by a student at a market in a village outside of Istanbul. Though illustrative of Turkish religious culture, four of my North American students on this day, and to my complete surprise, immediately related such practices to their own lives, referencing contemporary Italian American traditions about the *malocchio* or *gettatura* in their families, including the training received from Roman Catholic grandmothers concerning a variety of protections and cures against negative vibrations and intentions possibly caused by assaults of the evil eye. Such classroom experiences remind me that traditional religious

¹ This article was first presented as a part of a panel at the 2003 meeting of the American Folklore Society. The research was supported by a Faculty Development Grant from Cabrini College. I wish to thank Deborah Ann Bailey, Lourdes Barretto, John DiMucci, Margaret Kruesi, Charlie McCormick, Kathy McCrea, Kathleen Malone O’Connor, and Joan Saverino, as well as Anne Schwelm and Corey Salazar of Cabrini College’s Holy Spirit Library for their assistance. I am especially grateful to Katie Reing for her technical assistance, and to Nicholas Rademacher, Joseph Sciorra, and Nancy Watterson, who read final drafts of the article.

belief and practices can still be found among contemporary American Catholics, even in the face of secularization and an increased religious illiteracy concerning institutionalized religious traditions.²

Many of these practices still involve the home and the use of objects in it, as in the case of the Italian American Christmas Eve custom of serving a meal of “seven fishes,” or the Polish American blessings of Easter tables filled with holiday foods including dyed eggs and butter in the form of a lamb symbolizing Jesus. Secular objects such as food can be given a religious purpose, and religious objects can be used for public display such as in hanging palm crosses on doors, Marian holy corners in prominent spaces, or window displays of religious statues or images. The elaborate home altars dedicated to St. Joseph or St. Anthony by Sicilian Americans living in Gloucester, Massachusetts offer a most compelling example of such a living vernacular religious tradition. These feasts for the eyes of color, spirit, and creativity, rooted in the religious tradition of making vows to God for the granting of some blessing or healing, are at the ethnographic center of this essay reflecting on the theme of “Senses and Religion.”

The folklife scholar Gábor Barna, in his contribution to the collection of papers drawn from the first meeting of the SIEF Commission for Folk Religion in 1993, chronicles the challenges of studying domestic religious objects such as statues, prints, holy cards, rosaries, and so on in his native Hungary.³ What makes his article particularly useful is its integration of historically informed work with contemporary ethnography. He notes that historical studies of the presence of such religious material culture in the home are difficult because of the paucity of relevant available data, especially from the Middle Ages or the Early Modern period. In the case of contemporary analyses of religious objects in the home, few ethnographic studies exist concerning their use, or even the sources and distributors of such objects. With his data coming from estate inventories, from available photographs of Hun-

² Folklorist Joseph Sciorra of the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, Queen’s College (City University of New York) has done outstanding work studying such ethnic Catholic traditions in his region including such examples as yard shrines, vernacular chapels, religious processions and feasts, and nativity crèches of the Italian American community [cf. Sciorra 1989a, 1989b, 1993, 1999, 2001a, 2001b, 2004, 2006].

³ Studies of religious objects in the homes of American Roman Catholics and Protestants have used religious magazines and guidebooks as research sources [cf. Taves 1986 and McDannell 1986, and my reviews of their work, Primiano 1987, 1989]. While not employing what I would call the ethnographic method, some studies have used surveys and some interview data on the placement and meaning of religious iconography used in the homes of Americans [cf. Halle 1993, and, more prominently, Morgan 1998, 2005]. Primiano [1999] traces the source of many varieties of contemporary Catholic religious articles to one store in the suburbs of Philadelphia, which currently operates a thriving Internet business in these objects. A recent text that complements Barna’s Hungarian work, but concerns North American Protestant Pennsylvania Germans, is Yoder, *The Pennsylvania German Broadside* [2005]. Yoder offers a history and ethnographic journey through the lives of a variety of Christian “church people” and “sectarians” in Pennsylvania with special attention to sources of creation, distribution, and use of a variety of secular and religious paper ephemera, including religious prints [cf. Primiano 2007].

garian peasant homes, as well as ethnographic work within particular communities, Barna notes that in terms of the dissemination of relevant devotions and associated objects (as in the case of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the apparitions of the Virgin Mary at Lourdes or Fatima), the influence of the institutional Catholic Church has been significant. He is also attentive to pilgrimage sites with their own unique vernacular religious ecology as sources for such objects especially when *the sparse network of shops selling devotional objects ceased to exist under the totalitarian atheistic regime, and as a result the mediating role of the places of pilgrimage grew even stronger* [Barna 1994: 109]. He is reflecting on what I call “vernacular Catholicism” [Primiano 2001a: 51–58] when he considers that contemporary personal decisions about religious objects as home furnishings or worn as accessories of dress [Barna 1994: 116] reveal a transformation and negotiated flexibility of an everyday religious practice. This practice is influenced by institutional models and ideals of orthodoxy and orthopraxis. It is also powerfully formed by community and individual spiritual traditions of interpreted belief and practice existing alongside organized religious idealizations.

At the root of Barna’s research about present practice and the use of religious material culture lies issues of power (institutional Christianity’s influence over individual and community belief and practice), esthetics (what is considered beautiful, artful, or even visually appropriate within a particular ecclesiastical, domestic, or personal context, and how such ideas can shift over centuries and generations), and secularization (the loss of understanding, appreciation, respect, and sensibility for religious ideas and meanings). He therefore poses a very postmodern question: are these *objects of popular devotion or only objects of decoration* [Barna 1994: 105]?

Another way of asking Barna’s important question is whether some vernacular religious displays are both decorative and devotional at the same time. Furthermore, is there a basic set of characteristics or qualities of vernacular Catholicism helpful to folklorists working in government and nonprofit organizations as well as academic teaching and research contexts that would assist in answering this question, in identifying particular relevant expressions, and in linking diverse traditions under a broader umbrella of recognizable characteristics? For public sector folklorists, such characteristics would offer a language to communicate and explain, not only to their colleagues, but to believers themselves, as well as government administrators and funders, the quality, history, esthetic, creativity, and meaning of an object or practice. For folklorists involved primarily in scholarly work, such a synthesis provides cognitive constructs for the identification of relevant material and a better understanding and appropriate contextualizing of a practice or artifact, and its communicative and creative esthetic. To help clarify this issue, the conclusion of this article offers a basic set of characteristics of vernacular Catholicism drawn from my own research on religion, material culture, and the senses.

In 2003, I was introduced to a Sicilian American tradition vibrantly continuing on the East Coast of the United States that astonished me: namely, the building in Gloucester, Massachusetts, of home altars dedicated to St. Joseph, the foster-father of Jesus and the

husband of the Virgin Mary (Fig. 1). Familiar with the work of folklorist Kay Turner [1999], I knew that such altars remained a living tradition in the United States in communities of Sicilian Americans in Texas and New Orleans. I had also been informed of isolated examples, specially constructed in church basements in New York, New Jersey, California, and Kansas City, but not such a contemporary proliferation of domestic altars in one community on the East Coast of the United States.



Fig. 1: Statue of St. Joseph, St. Joseph Altar, LaRusso Family, Gloucester, Massachusetts, March 2005 [Photo by Joseph Sciorra].

Starting in 2003, I traveled to Gloucester to witness for myself these altars assembled as part of the 19 March feast day of St. Joseph. I was immediately struck by the quantity of altars created in the community. On the eve of the saint's feast, I participated in car caravans that drove around Gloucester neighborhoods visiting six different homes, each decorated with large altars filled with statues, flowers, family photos, and candles – an assemblage surrounding a large statue of St. Joseph, carefully layered and color coordinated (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: St. Joseph's Day Altar, Fontana Family, Gloucester, Massachusetts, March 2005 [Photo by Joseph Sciorra].

Alongside these displays were stacks of lemons, oranges, and specially shaped breads, some marked with crosses others formed into staffs. After songs, prayers to the saint, and the recitation of the rosary, the assembled stopped for coffee and tea, and a few pastries (Fig. 3); actually, an explosion of *zeppole*, or cream-filled St. Joseph cakes, as well as *cannoli*. It was a veritable food heaven. These altars were but a small fraction of the total homes participating in the tradition: between 35 and 40 families built large and small home altars in 2003.

As I spoke to the women that had designed these domestic shrines, all Sicilian Ameri-



Fig. 3: Unidentified woman praying at St. Joseph's Day Altar, Groppo Family, Gloucester, Massachusetts, March 2005 [Photo by Joseph Sciorra].

cans, the wives of fishermen, or individuals employed in that industry, and from 35 to 75 years old, it became clear that the common element in their decision to participate in this tradition was the powerful religious practice of making a “vow” to holy figures. These altars were votive offerings to St. Joseph, as vibrant as any retablo painting or cast tin milagros of bodily organs, thanking the saint for a favor received and a blessing granted due to his intercession. With the exception of the work of Robert Teske [1980; 1985] and Joseph Sciorra [1989b], little scholarship has been done about vowing within American vernacular religion. Making a “vow” to accomplish something, an individual dedicates himself or herself to a task completely, unequivocally, and passionately. Religious vows affect a person’s entire being [Klinger 1987: 301]. They are personal promises to Jesus, Mary, and the saints; moreover, such vows establish a substantial bond between a giver and receiver. A religious vow thus both creates and simultaneously solidifies a sacred partnership based on reciprocal giving. A vow is not a pledge to the past, but to the future because *vows encourage the fulfillment of obligations and the accomplishment of certain tasks* [Klinger 1987: 303].

In Gloucester, the home altars of 19 March can best be understood as visualized narratives for the community of altar makers, relatives, visitors to the altars, the healed, and those praying for healing. The altars are materialized vows of gratitude for recovery from life-threatening illness, financial instability, emotional trauma, and a multitude of other individual and family problems.

To appreciate the nature and power of these Gloucester vows, one needs to understand something about this community, its people, and their working lives in a hazardous occupation which has continued there for 375 years. In this period, over 5,000 Gloucester fishermen have died at sea. In February 1879, 53 women became widows in a single storm. Gloucester is a community whose economic survival is based on fishing, and whose family survival is based on the resilience of women – mothers and daughters – to bear up with long hours, sometimes weeks, alone without their husbands and fathers. Wives’ responsibilities have included managing homes, shore businesses, and other needs of the community. They have raised their children alone. They have prayed that their men would come back to them, and that their husbands and sons would not drown or lose fingers or limbs at sea. They have lived with a sense of fear and a need not for saintly role models, but for saintly patrons and protectors that would guide their men home.

Italian fishing families have proliferated in Gloucester since the 1920s, especially coming from small towns in Sicily. They gradually saved money and purchased their own boats. By the 1970s, Sicilians made up three-quarters of the 400 men that fished out of Gloucester. In 1994 and 1995, federal fishing regulations curtailed massive fishing activities, and, as retraining programs started for some of these men, concerns widened to include not only fears about fishing, but about their very economic survival. In the face of such challenges, these women did not lose their Catholic faith. Instead they maintained their traditional understanding of death, sickness, unemployment, and troubled children not as God’s abandonment of them, but as a manifestation of both divine attention and the sacred mystery

of life. Katie Fontana, whose St. Joseph Day festivities include making 16 pounds of fresh pasta to feed family and friends, as well as distributing four cases of oranges and two cases of lemons to visitors to her altar, noted to me in her expression of both relationship to the saints and fatalism about that interaction: *You never know what they're [the saints] going to do to us.*

The individual vows that keep the Gloucester altar tradition alive are themselves embedded in the social environment of a religious and ethnic organization called "The Mother of Grace Club." The existence of the club is itself the result of the vow of three sisters, Katie Fontana included, made to their powerful Sicilian-American mother to keep the club alive. The Mother of Grace Club currently comprises 63 women of Italian and Portuguese descent, all wives of Gloucester fishermen. Dedicated to the Virgin Mary, the founding women of the club came together during the early 1940s to pray for the safety of their fathers, husbands, sons, and brothers off fighting in the Second World War. In response to such anxiety, the women regularly gathered together to pray, recite the rosary, and sing hymns. The focus of their petitions to Mary and the saints was the safe return of their men. Their meetings created a network of support and friendship in a time of isolation and loneliness. After they prayed, the women would eat pasta, and enjoy pastries and coffee. At the conclusion of the war, all of their loved ones returned home to them. Their devotion had worked, and their prayers were answered. These women decided to maintain their meetings and approached the city of Gloucester about purchasing an abandoned building downtown as their clubhouse.

The women, with the assistance of their husbands and network of relations, restored the building on Washington Street. The club's location makes it central to a variety of Italian American parades, pageants, feasts, and novenas that take place in the city. Within the constellation of religious activities of which the club members partake is the tradition of building domestic shrines. These home altars to St. Joseph are a direct transplant of Sicilian tradition, but fashioned for the North American context. I have been privileged to meet these women, see their altars, and enjoy their endless hospitality on a number of trips. This vibrant practice of vow-making and vow-fulfillment surrounding the design, construction, and maintenance of their altars continues, as a vow to a saint made by a mother continues to be kept by her daughter in fulfillment of a vow made to the dying matriarch.

This cycle is continuing as the granddaughters of the original Lady of Grace Club members step up to build altars to honor *San Giuseppe*. My favorite example of this continuity is the daughter of Mrs. Margaret Giacalone, who, in fact, after her mother's death and her assumption of the altar-building tradition, had her home remodeled to include the construction of two Corinthian columns to frame a permanent space to accommodate her mother's six-foot St. Joseph statue. The altar with this plaster image now remains visible and partially decorated the entire year.

These religious lives are bound up in a complex negotiated ethnic religious sensibility filled with devotionalism, with belief in the efficacy of religious healing, and with a worldview open to communications from dead relatives in a series of visionary dreams and signs. In

this vernacular Catholicism, vows to dead relatives and powerful saints remain a significant means of communicating love and respect, and the communion of saints is not simply a theological construct, but a living reality. Biological and sacred families are interwoven on the altars through the careful placement of photographs of family members and petitionary letters among blessed candles and the multitude of saints' statues of various sizes (Fig. 4). Here images and words stand side-by-side interacting, alive, and open for sacred intervention concerning a family's problems; the secular family items are sacralized by their contact with the holy objects and their position on this altar of vows.

Devotion to these saints has been transferred from Sicily to America, representing well-known international Catholic saints, such as St. Joseph and Padre Pio, to more localized figures such as regional Sicilian Black Madonnas. Indeed, some of these statues themselves have made the trans-Atlantic journey, purchased in European centers of pilgrimage such as Rome, Fatima, and Lourdes, the sacredness of those places adding to the authenticity and increased possibility of their intercessor power.



Fig. 4: Saints' statues on St. Joseph's Day Altar, Scola Family, Gloucester, Massachusetts, March 2005 [Photo by Joseph Sciorra].

The day-to-day relationships with a saint like St. Joseph, whose image is central to these domestic shrines, are complex. At one point, his petitioners see him relationally as a miracle-working friend of the family, not a hierarchical holy figure. At other times, the capriciousness of his decisions makes him appear cold and forgetful of his faithful. Thus, accompanying a sense of living in relation to a saint in the process of coming to and sustaining belief is a feeling of divine fatalism, a vernacular interpretation that all events are subject to fate or are somehow predetermined. Whether such fatalism is a Catholic, Italian, or Sicilian American cultural trait, I would rather not speculate at this time. However, like the variability of the weather, the sea, or the moods and personalities of family and friends, these women of Gloucester believe that one never has total control. Life means submission to God's will. These divine relations can love and victimize, bring joy or suffering, but still paradoxically, yet very significantly, there remains the possibility for negotiation, for

dealing with the effects of the inevitable or transforming what is judged negative through intercession, vow, and miracle.

Such sacred relationships are the soil from which the artfulness of building altars and making vows arises and concepts for both altar appearance and vow dedication emerge only after serious consideration by the altar/vow-makers. The fabrics covering an altar's surfaces, for example, are carefully chosen and the colors of the candles and even flower arrangements are considered for their appropriate beauty. In the same way, the length of time for the fulfillment of a vow to a saint may take a short or extended span of commitment. Of particular importance when considering the communicative and creative esthetics of this belief and practice is the rich way this altar tradition expresses and exemplifies nine fundamental characteristics of vernacular Catholicism. I have crafted this list influenced by my ethnographic experiences in Gloucester and work with other Catholic individuals and communities.

This synthesis also owes a debt to the ideas of those pillars of religious folklife scholarship, Richard Weiss [1946] and Don Yoder [1974], as well as the American Catholic theologian Richard P. McBrien [1994]. Importantly, these characteristics are often observed as central principles of Catholic normative theology, but it is in the vernacular religious belief and practice of the people among whom they achieve their own subtle, dramatic, erratic, touching, engaging, colorful, and paradoxical vitality and reality. In this sense, these are characteristics drawn from *the practice rather than the recognition of the Church* [Broderick 1976: 518].⁴ The nine fundamental characteristics of vernacular Catholicism are:

Sacramentality: the understanding of all reality as potentially or actually bearing and expressing the sacred presence of God; the created world not only embodies the sacred, but it can itself serve as a sacred, divine, or ultimate source;

Mediation: the principle that the deity works through secondary phenomena, objects, or facts to achieve both divine and human ends;

Communion: the idea that the purpose of all religious activity both institutionally-sponsored and vernacularly conceived is the union of self, family, and community with God;

Imitation: the notion that an individual or community can create a new atmosphere by repeating acts of devotion and bringing their power to bear on the intended;

Objectification: the concept that one can take ideas and actions and make them significant holy things; that is, the idea of the holy as a transferable quality;

Historicizing: relating the history of the present to the sacred history of the past;

⁴ McBrien gives a succinct explanation of *principles or themes one might select to describe and explain the distinctive reality of Catholicism* [1994: 14]. Writing from a theological perspective, he offers useful foundational definitions of sacramentality, mediation, communion, tradition, reason, analogy, and universality [Mc Brien 1994: 8–16]. Here, I have drawn from and adapted McBrien's abbreviated definitions as articulated in entries in his edited *HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (cf. especially "Catholicism," 1995: 256–258, and "principle of sacramentality," 1995: 1148), as well as from his longer work on the subject, *Catholicism* [1994], from which relevant entries have been extrapolated.

Universalization: the internationalization of local religious ideas, practices, and figures;

Parochialization: the localization of internationally recognized religious ideas, practices, and figures;

Negotiation: the personal interpretation of normative Catholic belief and practice expressed in both dramatic and gentle ways by believers as a natural part of their religious lives.

These characteristics have been framed within the worldview of the traditional belief system known as Roman Catholic, but could obviously be applied to other systems of religious belief and practice as well.

The description of the theme of the “Senses and Religion” for the 2006 Fifth Meeting of the SIEF Commission on Folk Religion continued the work of Professor Barna and other folklife scholars by considering how the senses in general influence, shape, establish, and maintain the religious life of all people, and, indeed, their community, individual, and institutionalized religious traditions. These preliminary suggestions will be further fleshed out as analysis of local religious vow-making and altar-creation in Gloucester is completed. As one Gloucester consultant, Katie Fontana, fatalistically stated, we may never know what the saints are going to do to us, but we as folklorists can appreciate the beauty and creativity perceived by the senses and expressed in myriad religious forms in the anticipation. The Gloucester altars built organically from sacred vows are as much feasts of fatalism as they are celebrations of the joy of visual, tactile, auditory, and gustatory creativity and display. As bounties of vernacular Catholicism, they are both decoration and devotion (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5: St. Joseph Altar, LaRusso Family, Gloucester, Massachusetts, March 2005 [Photo by Joseph Sciorra].

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ZA OBLJUBA KOT VIZUALNI PRAZNIK.

ČAŠČENJE SV. JOŽEFA V DOMOVNIH AMERIŠKIH SICILIJANCEV

Pred kratkim sem opravil etnografsko raziskavo v prostovoljnem združenju »Klub Usmiljene Matere božje« in v skupnosti katoliških ameriških Sicilijancev v pristaniškem mestu Gloucester v državi Massachusetts. Klub je izjemno družbeno in versko združenje ameriških Sicilijank različnih generacij, večinoma so žene ribičev. Klub je nastal kot podporna skupina za ženske, zaskrbljene za varnost mož in sinov med drugo svetovno vojno. Z izročilom devetdnevnih procesij in uličnih zabav so imele članice kluba pomembno vlogo v civilnem, etničnem in verskem življenju v Gloucestru. Versko življenje mesta se je iz medvojnih dejavnosti razvilo v močno kulturno

prizorišče. Po petdesetih letih se članice še vedno zbirajo ob molitvi, petju, druženju in hrani. Njihove molitve in upanje na blagoslov – za mlade družine, ob težavah z alkoholom in mamili, bolezni, za ekonomsko blaginjo in bogat ribji ulov – ostajajo razlog za obstoj organizacije. Številne domače verske prakse, npr. postavitve oltarjev v čast sv. Jožeta 19. marca in sv. Antona 13. junija, nadaljujejo domače versko izročilo, kakršno težko najdemo med katoliki na vzhodnem obrežju Združenih držav. Prispevek poudarja izročilo domačih oltarjev, posvečenih možu Device Marije. Oltarji, obloženi s kipci svetnikov, fotografijami živečih in pokojnih družinskih članov, svečami in cvetjem, so narejeni za izpolnitev osebnih zaobljub sv. Jožetu. Ob obravnavi komunikacijske in ustvarjalne estetike verovanja in prakse je posebnega pomena bogatost votivne tradicije, ki izraža in ponazarja devet temeljnih značilnosti vernakularnega katolištva.

Prof. dr. Leonard Norman Primiano, Cabrini College, Radnor, PA, USA; primiano@cabrini.edu