



# In Search of Christian Miraculous Images in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, and Beyond

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## In Search of Christian Miraculous Images in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, and Beyond

Ivan Gaskell

Throughout the existence of Christianity the status of images has been varied and controversial. Some Christians ban images, others see them as no more than illustrations, and yet others view them as a means of channeling veneration to the subjects they represent, and therefore sacred. Among sacred images there are degrees of sanctity. Some are sacred by virtue of consecration. Among these, Roman Catholics believe that an image can be deconsecrated, whereas Orthodox Christians do not. Yet both Catholics and Orthodox agree that certain images can transcend the simply sacred to assume a form of divine agency peculiar to that image itself. Millions of Christians believe that certain images work miracles. Some of these images are many hundreds of years old. Others were created within living memory. How does an image that is sacred—that is, a channel of devotion to what it represents—make the leap to miraculous status—that is, to something more than a representation, whether as the tool of divine agency or as imbued with agency itself?

Since it is inherently implausible that an artifact—a material thing made by human hands—should be miraculous, the oldest and most effective way of promoting the status of an image as miraculous has been to deny it human authorship. Two of the most celebrated examples of an image allegedly not produced by human hands are the Mandylion of Edessa (fig. 1), and the Sudarium, or Veil of St. Veronica (*vera eikon*). The Mandylion was a cloth impressed directly with Christ's features that he sent to the crippled King Abgar V of Edessa to cure him miraculously. It was taken to Constantinople in 944 where it remained until the sack of the city by the Fourth Crusade in 1204, after which its fate is unclear. Various cities in western Europe, including Paris, Rome and Genoa, claim to possess it. The Sudarium is the cloth with which a woman, later named Veronica, wiped the face of Christ as he carried the cross to Calvary, leaving his features impressed upon it. In Rome since the eighth century, it had been transferred to St. Peter's by the mid-twelfth century where it remains one of the three Greater Relics of the Passion. The Mandylion and the Veil of St. Veronica have the added status of being *brandea*, or touch relics, which have been in contact with Christ himself.<sup>1</sup> Of the Veil of St. Veronica, the art historian Hans Belting notes it is "more authentic than any work of art, in that it did not rely on artistic imitation. It was as authentic

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<sup>1</sup> For the Mandylion and the Veil of St. Veronica see in particular, David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 207-209; Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 208-224; and Gerhard Wolf, "From Mandylion to Veronica: Picturing the 'Disembodied' Face and Disseminating the True Image of Christ in the Latin West," in *The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation: Papers from a Colloquium held at the Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rome, and the Villa Spelman, Florence, 1996*, ed. Herbert L. Kessler and Gerhard Wolf (Bologna: Nuova Alfa, 1998), pp. 153-179, with further references.

as a photograph.”<sup>2</sup> This raises a puzzle: If images held to be sacred—even miraculous—were generated supposedly by a means analogous to photography long before its invention and diffusion in the 1840s, why has this medium hardly played a role in the generation of miraculous images? In trying to address this puzzle, I shall look at four case studies in which photography might have been expected to have played a significant part.

In February, 1858 a fourteen-year-old French girl, gathering firewood, was addressed by a “beautiful lady” in the entrance of a cave. As she told her mother, the same lady addressed her at this spot, the cave of Massabielle, several times during the months that followed. Most significantly, she told the girl that she was the Immaculate Conception, thus affirming the truth of the newly declared dogma concerning the conception of the Virgin Mary without the stain of original sin. This claim had been disputed within the Roman Catholic Church for generations. It had only been settled by Pope Pius IX four years previously, in 1854. A cult soon began, and by the mid-1860s was fully approved by the Church. A statue of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception was placed at the high spot near the cave entrance where the girl, Bernadette Soubirous, had seen the “beautiful lady.” The grotto of Lourdes grew to become one of the most visited pilgrimage sites in Europe.<sup>3</sup>

Bernadette herself became a center of attention. As early as 1862, a photograph circulated purporting to depict her kneeling before the newly installed statue of the Virgin in the cave entrance.<sup>4</sup> The following year, then aged nineteen, Bernadette was photographed at least twice with the permission of her diocesan bishop, under whose authority the apparitions had been investigated. She was still in local dress, for she had not yet joined the convent of the Sisters of Charity in Nevers where she was to spend the rest of her short life. She took her preliminary vows in October, 1867. Four months later, the Bishop of Tarbes commissioned a photograph of Sister Bernadette (fig. 2). He did so specifically to sell copies to raise money for the construction of the pilgrimage basilica at Lourdes. Each print is inscribed, “Portrait Authentique de la Sœur Bernadette.” The promotion of the cult of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception of Lourdes was inseparable from an accompanying cult of Sister Bernadette herself that made full use of her photographic image, yet the inscription stressing its authenticity is an indication that even by this date the reliability of a photograph might need to be guaranteed. Examples of manipulation had become commonplace and widely known, compromising the integrity of the medium.

Sister Bernadette was scrutinized throughout the remainder of her illness-racked life for signs of heroic virtue. On her death in 1879 she was immediately photographed. The Sisters of Charity of Nevers began to promote her cause as a saint, introducing it formally in August, 1913. After an exhaustive process, which included the exhumation of her allegedly uncorrupted body three times, she advanced to the ranks of the blessed in 1925, permitting

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<sup>2</sup> Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, p. 221. The Turin Shroud is another celebrated and controversial example of the same supposed type.

<sup>3</sup> The literature on Lourdes and St. Bernadette is immense. See, in the first instance, Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (New York: Viking, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> This and other photographs of St. Bernadette of Lourdes can be found at:

[http://www.catholicpilgrims.com/lourdes/lourdes\\_photo\\_aa.htm&h=281&w=389&sz=67&hl=en&start=15&um=1&tbnid=mDm0pFcgWP7zM:&tbnh=89&tbnw=123&prev=/images%3Fq%3DLourdes%26gbv%3D2%26um%3D1%26hl%3Den%26sa%3DN](http://www.catholicpilgrims.com/lourdes/lourdes_photo_aa.htm&h=281&w=389&sz=67&hl=en&start=15&um=1&tbnid=mDm0pFcgWP7zM:&tbnh=89&tbnw=123&prev=/images%3Fq%3DLourdes%26gbv%3D2%26um%3D1%26hl%3Den%26sa%3DN) (accessed April 28, 2008). An early photograph (c. 1865) of worshippers at the grotto can be found at: <http://www.sspx-thepriesthood.com/lourdes.shtml&h=600&w=800&sz=128&hl=en&start=3&um=1&tbnid=9Ib4OgLNTUhCOM:&tbnh=107&tbnw=143&prev=/images%3Fq%3DVirgin%2Bof%2BLourdes%26gbv%3D2%26um%3D1%26hl%3Den%26sa%3DG> (accessed April 28, 2008).

her cult within her own order. Her wax-skimmed body was exposed in a glass coffin for veneration in the convent church, where it remains. When St. Bernadette was canonized in 1933, her cult became universal within the Roman Catholic Church. However, the Sisters of Charity had no need of a cult image, for in the entire body of the new saint itself they had a miraculous presence superior to any representation, even though the layer of modeled and colored wax laid over her sunken and discolored features resulted in a hybrid corpse-sculpture. The effect is a degree of verisimilitude that not even a photograph can approach. The wax is superficially indistinguishable from the saint's remains, so its authenticity, unlike that of a photograph, is unimpeachable. Although photographs were important in the development of the cult of St. Bernadette, none has been claimed to be miraculous. Further, the images representing her that were seen most widely were not those of the saint herself, but of the actress Jennifer Jones who played her in the 1943 Oscar winning movie, *The Song of Bernadette*.<sup>5</sup> If miraculous photographs are hard to find, miraculous Hollywood movies, even about saints, are quite unknown. Movies, characteristic of the age of mechanical reproduction, lack aura in Walter Benjamin's formulation, so they can scarcely be expected to work miracles.<sup>6</sup> We shall return to Benjamin's claims.

Our second photographed subject was born near Rimini, Italy, three years after St. Bernadette's canonization. Carla Ronci led an exemplary life in her home village of Torre Pedrera, not taking the veil in part because of ill health, but participating in the life and work of various Catholic lay organizations.<sup>7</sup> One surviving photograph is the work of a small town professional, while others are snapshots by family or friends. In so far as she is known beyond the diocese of Rimini, it is as a rider of that quintessentially Italian vehicle, the scooter. Indeed, a prayer card from a church in Rimini, advancing her cause, depicts her as a demure but spirited young woman seated on her Vespa (fig. 3). This prayer card is something of a contrast with others of the same genre, not least because it is clearly derived

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<sup>5</sup> The movie was derived from the romanticized hagiography by Franz Werfel published the preceding year: Franz Werfel, *The Song of Bernadette*, trans. Ludwig Lewisohn (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1942); *The Song of Bernadette*, 1943, produced by William Perlberg, directed by Harry King (Twentieth-Century Fox).

<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin first examined what he termed *aura* in "Little History of Photography" (written in 1929 and originally published in *Die literarische Welt*, September-October, 1931) in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 274-298. He defines aura as "[a] strange web of space and time: the unique appearance of distance, no matter how close it may be" (p. 285). As Michael W. Jennings puts it, "A work of art may be said to have an aura if it claims a unique status based less on quality, use value, or worth per se than on its figurative distance from the beholder" (Jennings, "The Production, Reproduction, and Reception of the Work of Art" in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, 2008, p. 14). Benjamin explored aura further in the article first published (in French) in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 5, 1, 1936, but published in English translation for the first time only in 1969 as "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1969), and subsequently in the edition published in London: Fontana, 1973, pp. 219-253. Benjamin wrote the first version in Paris in 1935. The second version (from which the 1936 published version, shorter by seven manuscript pages, was derived) was the version that Benjamin had wanted to publish, yet it remained unpublished until its appearance as "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit" in Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Herman Schweppenhäuser, et al., vol. 7 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989). It was translated by Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn as "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version" in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, 2008, pp. 19-55. The third version (1936-39) is in Benjamin's *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 251-283.

<sup>7</sup> For Carla Ronci and her cause, see <http://www.diocesi.rimini.it/carlaronci/> (accessed May 7, 2008), which includes photographs of her (with the exception of the prayer card described below).

from a 1950s color photograph. When I acquired the prayer card in 1985, Carla Ronci's cause had been under investigation by the diocese for three years. After its conclusion in 1986, her cause advanced to the next stage, in which the Vatican conducts the inquiry. This resulted in the confirmation of Carla Ronci's heroic virtues, advancing her in 1997 to the status of Venerable. To proceed to the next stage, beatification, she must be shown to have performed a miracle. This is being investigated at present. In the mean time, her fame is spreading, thanks to photographs of her on her scooter. She turns up, for instance, on a ska music website.<sup>8</sup> To become the patron saint of the scooter—or, at least, of those who ride them—the Venerable Carla Ronci will have to perform two miracles. Any future devotion will undoubtedly include images, and photographs are clearly available. They are already in use by those promulgating her cause. But how likely is it that photographs will directly play a part in veneration, let alone be found to be miraculous? Other instances of advancement to the communion of saints of those known from photographs suggest this to be highly unlikely.

St. Maksymilian Maria Kolbe is one of the most prominent Franciscan saints of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> Rajmund Kolbe was born in 1894 in part of Poland that was then in the Russian Empire. He joined the Conventual Franciscans in Lviv, now in Ukraine, but then in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He took his final vows in Rome in 1914, where he studied at the Pontifical Universities before his ordination in 1918. He professed a particular devotion to the Immaculate Conception, founding the Militia of the Immaculata in 1917, which now claims a membership of nearly four million worldwide. Between 1919 and 1930 he was in newly independent Poland, where he founded Niepokalanów (“City of the Immaculate”), a Franciscan community dedicated to living a radical consecration to the Immaculate Virgin through prayer, asceticism and media evangelization. By the mid-1930s, Niepokalanów was the largest religious community in the world, housing nearly 900 men. Between 1930 and 1936, Father Kolbe undertook a number of missions to Japan. There, with three other friars, he founded a monastery and seminary, Mugenzai no Sono (“Garden of the Immaculate”) outside Nagasaki. When Father Kolbe returned to Poland in 1936, his fellow friars remained, gaining a reputation for working among the poor, especially after the nuclear attack in 1945.

In Poland, after the German invasion in 1939, Father Kolbe's monastery took in refugees, including many Polish Jews. The Germans closed Niepokalanów in February, 1941, and imprisoned Father Kolbe. Three months later he was sent to the concentration camp of Auschwitz. That July, a prisoner from his barracks disappeared. In retribution for the supposed escape, the guards selected ten men to be confined apart and starved to death. When one of those selected protested that he had a family, Father Kolbe volunteered to take his place. After almost two weeks of starvation and dehydration, only four of the ten remained alive. Father Kolbe was then murdered with an injection of carbolic acid to his heart. His body was cremated. The man whom he had saved, Franciszek Gajowniczek, survived, and was present when Pope John Paul II canonized St. Maksymilian Maria Kolbe

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<sup>8</sup> “You see, me and R.S. (resident skinhead) have begun a scooter zine that is chalk full of ska stuff like interviews with the skatterbrains and King Apparatus. Our main focus is on scooters; however, ska is an essential component of the Carla Ronci Scooter Zine (who's Carla Ronci? she may become the patron saint of the scooter)”: <http://www.faqs.org/faqs/music/ska-faq/part2/> and <http://stason.org/TULARC/music-genres/ska/2-8-p2-What-are-some-ska-related-zines-fan-created-magazi.html> (accessed April 28, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> The literature on St. Maksymilian Kolbe is considerable. Among recent non-Polish language publications, see Diana Dewar, *Saint of Auschwitz: The Story of Maksymilian Kolbe* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982), André Frossard, *“N'oubliez pas l'amour”: la passion de Maximilien Kolbe* (Paris: Laffont, 1987), and Gerlando Lentini, *Massimiliano Kolbe, il campione dell' immacolata* (Rome: Città nuova, 1989).

as a martyr of charity on October 10, 1982. He is considered the patron saint of those in media communications, prisoners, drug addicts, persons with eating disorders, and the pro-life movement. There are altars dedicated to him in various Franciscan churches, including the basilica at Assisi. In Poland, several churches have been dedicated to St. Maksymilian Kolbe, including a new parish church in Grudziń dz-Strzemiń cin consecrated in 1992. In the USA, Marytown, the Conventual Franciscan monastery in Libertyville, Illinois, founded in 1948, was designated the National Shrine of the saint in 2000. Pilgrims are able not only to venerate relics of the saint in the chapel dedicated to him, but to learn about his life and martyrdom through the “Kolbe/Holocaust Exhibit.” The Marytown Website claims that “Through photographs and original artwork, the display presents the life and work of St. Maximilian Kolbe, and a history of the Nazi Holocaust that will transform your life.”<sup>10</sup>

What is the place of photographs in the cult of St. Maksimilian Kolbe? At Marytown handcrafted images take precedence over photographs in the decorum of visual veneration. The most important space is the chapel dedicated to the saint, where relics are presented for veneration, its dignity signified by its architecture and decoration. An elaborate mosaic image of the saint serves as an altarpiece above the relics. Photographs have no place here. They are confined to the exhibit, which is essentially a site of teaching and documentation rather than of worship and veneration. Its architecture, with exposed ductwork and lighting fixtures, allies it with the conference hall next door. In Grudziń dz-Strzemiń cin, Poland, the devotional image of the saint in the parish church dedicated to him is certainly not a photograph, but a painting. He holds a concentration camp prisoner’s striped shirt as an attribute, while a martyr’s crown hovers beyond his left shoulder, and his head is encompassed by a saint’s halo.<sup>11</sup> Comparison of the 1940 photograph of the saint with a print after a painting demonstrates that, when it comes to devotion, the ability of the handcrafted medium to include symbolic, non-naturalistic elements, such as a saint’s halo, trumps the character of the photograph as an actual physical trace of the person it depicts<sup>12</sup> (figs. 4 & 5). The handcrafted image can readily be made to conform to the visual decorum of sanctity, whereas a photograph of a saint is indistinguishable from a photograph of an ordinary person. As Walter Benjamin claimed in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” the unique painting has “aura”—in a literal sense in this instance—whereas the photograph (excepting some early portraits)—ironically—has none.<sup>13</sup> Photographs do not work miracles.

Images play a vital part in another twentieth-century devotion, that of the Divine Mercy. Helena Kowalska was born in 1905, like St. Maksymilian Kolbe, in that part of Poland then

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.marytown.com/default.aspx?id=54> (accessed May 8, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.parafia-strzemiecindir.pl/patron.php> (accessed May 8, 2008)

<sup>12</sup> The photograph is in the Franciscan Archive, Niepokalanów, Poland (reproduced at <http://members.shaw.ca/escapinghell/04-piek.htm>; accessed May 8, 2008); a reproduction of the print can be found at [http://www.kolbe-janow.katowice.opoka.org.pl/patronowie.htm&h=142&w=120&sz=5&hl=en&start=200&um=1&tbnid=PU\\_gfmetExqohM:&tbnh=94&tbnw=79&prev=/images%3Fq%3D%2522Maksymilian%2BKolbe%2522%26start%3D198%26ndsp%3D18%26um%3D1%26hl%3Den%26sa%3DN](http://www.kolbe-janow.katowice.opoka.org.pl/patronowie.htm&h=142&w=120&sz=5&hl=en&start=200&um=1&tbnid=PU_gfmetExqohM:&tbnh=94&tbnw=79&prev=/images%3Fq%3D%2522Maksymilian%2BKolbe%2522%26start%3D198%26ndsp%3D18%26um%3D1%26hl%3Den%26sa%3DN) (accessed July 18, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> “In photography, exhibition value begins to drive back cult value on all fronts. But cult value does not give way without resistance. It falls back to a last retrenchment: the human countenance. It is no accident that the portrait is central to early photography. In the cult of remembrance of dead or absent loved ones, the cult value of the image finds its last refuge. In the fleeting expression of a human face, the aura beckons from early photographs for the last time. This is what gives them their melancholy and incomparable beauty” (Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version,” 2008, p. 27).

in the Russian Empire.<sup>14</sup> She took her final vows in the convent of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy in Plock in 1926, with the name Sister Maria Faustyna of the Most Blessed Sacrament. Within five years, she was experiencing visions of Christ, which she later recorded in a diary. On February 22, 1931, Christ appeared to her clad in a white robe from beneath which at the breast emanated two rays of light, one red, the other pale. She wrote: “After a while, Jesus said to me ‘Paint an image according to the pattern you see, with the signature: Jesus, I trust in You.’”<sup>15</sup> Christ further directed that a Feast of Mercy should be instituted, and that the imagery in Sister Faustyna’s vision derived from his future appearance as the King of Mercy, shortly before his arrival as Just Judge in the Last Days.<sup>16</sup> Sister Faustyna was sent to the convent at Wilno (Vilnius) where her confessor, Father Michał Sopoćko, eventually encouraged her to have an artist paint her vision. Eugeniusz Kazimirowski made a painting under her direction between January and June, 1934. The nun had the artist change the face at least ten times. The painting was shown publicly for the first time during religious jubilee celebrations in April, 1935. It was exposed in a chapel window above the Eastern Gate of the city of Vilnius. Two years later, the image was placed in St. Michael’s Church, Vilnius. In the mean time, Sister Faustyna had fallen seriously ill. She died in October, 1938. Thereafter the image of the Divine Mercy went through a number of vicissitudes. The spread of the devotion to the Divine Mercy during the horrific war years led to the painting of other versions of the image, including two by Adolf Hyla, one of which was later placed above the tomb of Sister Faustyna in Kraków. After World War II, Nowa Ruda, where the first image had been taken, was in that part of Poland absorbed by the Soviet Union, where Catholicism was persecuted. Meanwhile, suspicion of heresy had fallen on Sister Faustyna and her confessor. In 1958, the Vatican condemned the work of the Institute of Divine Mercy and reprimanded Father Sopoćko. Only after Karol Józef Wojtyła, the future Pope John Paul II, became Archbishop of Kraków in 1963 did matters change. The new archbishop instituted an investigation that confirmed the devotion. In 1986, the damaged original painting was returned to Vilnius, then still in the USSR, and poorly restored. Sister Faustyna was beatified in 1993, and canonized in 2000. The original image was conserved fully in 2003, and the following year the church of the Holy Trinity in Vilnius, now in independent Lithuania, was reconsecrated as the Shrine of the Divine Mercy. The first image of the Divine Mercy was placed in this shrine in September, 2005. Meanwhile, the Poles, deprived of the original image, moved the version that had been placed above the tomb of the new saint to a huge, purpose-built basilica in Kraków. The devotion spread world-wide, in part through the Polish diaspora. The US National Shrine is at the monastery of the Marians of the Immaculate Conception, Stockbridge, Massachusetts. The annual feast of Divine Mercy on the Sunday after Easter attracts about 10,000 pilgrims each year.

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<sup>14</sup> Accounts of Saint Faustyna are predominantly devotional. See Maria Tarnawska, *Blessed Sister Faustina Kowalska: Her Life and Mission*, trans. Anne Hargest-Gorzela (London: Veritas Foundation, 1993), and *Pillars of Fire in my Soul: The Spirituality of Saint Faustina*, ed. Robert Stackpole (Stockbridge, Mass: Marian Press, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska: Divine Mercy in My Soul*, trans. Adam Pasicki, Danuta Pasicki, and George Pearce (first English edition, 1987), 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Stockbridge, Mass.: Marian Press, 2007), p. 24 (*Diary*, 47).

<sup>16</sup> *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska*, p. 24 (*Diary*, 47), p. 42 (*Diary*, 83).

For the purpose of this article, the matter of interest is the character of the image—or images—at the center of the devotion.<sup>17</sup> We have seen that further versions were painted within a decade of the original made under St. Faustyna's direction. Her diary records the instructions from Christ that she received in a vision: "I desire that this image be venerated, first in your chapel, and (then) throughout the World", and "By means of this Image I shall be granting many graces to souls; so let every soul have access to it."<sup>18</sup> These words sanctioned the proliferation of the image through reproduction. Most significantly, those promoting the devotion interpret the image not as the work of the painter, Eugeniusz Kazimirowski, nor even of St. Faustyna, but as nothing less than the direct product of Christ himself. The website "rayofmercy.org" claims that "the Divine Mercy image is one of the few divinely mandated or created images," which include the Mandylion of Edessa, and the Veil of St. Veronica. The peculiarity of the Divine Mercy image, though, is that its miraculous character is not confined to the original, but is distributed among copies and even reproductions, in accordance with words attributed to Christ in St. Faustyna's Diary: "I am offering people a vessel with which they are to keep coming for graces to the fountain of mercy. That vessel is this image with the signature: 'Jesus, I trust in You.'"<sup>19</sup> Thus a prayer card of the Divine Mercy, hidden in the clothing of a concentration camp prisoner, was credited with miraculously preserving her life during the Holocaust. No wonder that devotees cling to their personal reproductions of the image. Printed photographic reproductions of the Divine Mercy can work their own miracles anywhere in the world. Some purported miracles have even been captured photographically. One instance is the "Divine Mercy Tabernacle Alight," in Smithtown, New South Wales, Australia, found on the website of the Purgatory Project for the registration of souls for masses for the remission of Purgatory.<sup>20</sup>

As we have seen, Walter Benjamin distinguishes between unique original artworks imbued with aura and authenticity, ultimately derived from cultic associations, and those media, such as photography and most particularly, film, characterized by multiples in which any notion of unique individuality and authenticity has been displaced by the proliferation of copies. These, he claims, therefore lack aura. The Divine Mercy image, in its proliferation through photographically based prints, is, at first blush, a remarkable counter-example. Believers hold that each of these reproductions is as fully charged with the aura of divine grace as is the original. This is wholly consonant with Benjamin's theory, if one recalls that according to devotees, the authenticity of the Divine Mercy image does not reside in its manually produced manifestation—the painting by Eugeniusz Kazimirowski—but in Christ's instructions regarding its realization as reported by St. Faustyna. Therefore reproductions of the painting are as authentic, auratic, and even miraculous, as the painting itself. Further, since the advent of the Internet, that grace is no longer distributed solely mechanically, but also electronically. The Roman Catholic Church has embraced digital media. Popes now use the Internet. The Marians of the Immaculate Conception advertise DVDs on the Divine Mercy on their website.<sup>21</sup> Anyone with access to the Internet can download high quality digital versions of the Divine Mercy image of their choice to their

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<sup>17</sup> I leave out of the account here that the popularity of the Divine Mercy images among Poles and the Polish diaspora likely reflects national as well as devotional enthusiasm owing to the red and white rays emanating from Christ evoking not only the blood and water of the Passion, but the Polish flag.

<sup>18</sup> *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska*, p. 24 (*Diary*, 47), p. 242 (*Diary*, 570).

<sup>19</sup> *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska*, p. 148 (*Diary*, 327).

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.holysouls.com/divinemercurtabernaclealight.jpg> (accessed May 8, 2008).

<sup>21</sup> <https://secure.marianweb.net/giftshop/search.php?sb=DVD&go.x=14&go.y=5> (accessed July 18, 2008).



computers from the website, “rayofmercy.org.” It states that “this website was created mainly in response to the surprising lack of quality Divine Mercy images available on the Internet for download.”<sup>22</sup> Most remarkable is that each of these digital images is said to share the miraculous character of the original painting.

Yet, in spite of miraculous images having entered the digital age through the diffusion of the Divine Mercy image, the Catholic Church continues to distrust photography.<sup>23</sup> The decorum of the handcrafted image, permitting the inclusion of attributes, marks of sanctity, or intercession, trumps photography, a widely distrusted medium notoriously open to manipulation, and long associated with the supernatural in ways that the Church shuns, such as the innumerable instances of nineteenth and early twentieth-century supposed “spirit photographs.” The Church has strongly and repeatedly cautioned against accepting instances of photographs presented by devotees of emerging cults as miraculous, such as the photographs used by Veronica Lueken (d. 1995) in connection with the unsanctioned cult of Our Lady of the Roses statue to which her visions gave rise in Queens, New York in 1970.<sup>24</sup> None the less, the Church cannot be accused of not moving with the times, as it has consistently done since Roman antiquity. Today, the Internet permits a new variant on what we have seen to be the oldest and one of the most effective ways of promoting the miraculous status of an image: denying it human authorship. Many devotees would claim that anyone with a digital image of the Divine Mercy on their laptop is sure to be miraculously protected (fig. 6). In Catholic practice, the future of miraculous images lies not in analogue photography, long distrusted and now superseded, but in digital technology. Digital technology preserves and spreads the age-old type of the miraculous image not made by human hand. *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.*<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> [http://rayofmercy.org/index.html?middle=image\\_download.html](http://rayofmercy.org/index.html?middle=image_download.html) (accessed May 8, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Photographic reproductions are occasionally produced for public devotional purposes. For example, in 1999 an unspecified number of digital replicas (three?) of the miraculous image, the Virgin of Guadalupe, in the basilica of Guadalupe near Mexico City, were produced. They are the same size as the prototype (a long-standing criterion promoting efficacy), were brought into physical contact with it (a long-established mode of sanctifying replicas), and blessed by the pope. They have gone on worldwide devotional tours. See Jeanette Favrot Peterson, “The Reproducibility of the Sacred: Simulacra of the Virgin of Guadalupe,” *Exploring New World Imagery: Spanish Colonial Papers from the 2002 Mayer Center Symposium*, ed. Donna Pierce (Denver, Colo.: Denver Art Museum, 2005), pp. 43-44. I owe this reference to Ronda Kasl.

<sup>24</sup> See <http://ourladyoftheroses.org/Photographs.htm> (accessed May 14, 2008). The photographs are discussed by Daniel Wojcik, “Polaroids from Heaven?: Photography, Folk Religion, and the Miraculous Image Tradition as a Marian Apparition Site,” *Journal of American Folklore* 109, 1996, pp. 129-148, and E. Ann Matter, “Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in the Late Twentieth Century: Apocalyptic, Representation, Politics,” *Religion* 31, 2001, pp. 134-138.

<sup>25</sup> I should like to thank Akira Akiyama for the opportunity to present an earlier version of this article at the symposium, “Miraculous Images in Christian and Buddhist Culture,” organized by the Center of Excellence: A Construction of Death and Life Studies Concerning Culture and Value of Life, at the University of Tokyo in June, 2008. I offer thanks to fellow participants for their observations that led to revisions, notably Gerhard Wolf. This article is for my traveling companions in Japan, David Carrier and Marianne Novy.



Fig. 1 The Mandylion of Edessa, Private Chapel of the Pope, Vatican



Fig. 2 Unidentified photographer, *Sister Bernadette* (commissioned by the Bishop of Tarbes, February 4, 1868)



Fig. 3 Prayer card of Servant of God Carla Ronci, c. 1982



Fig. 4 Unidentified photograph, *Father Maksymilian Kolbe*, 1940



Fig. 5 Unidentified artist, *Saint Maksymilian Kolbe*, print after a painted image derived from a photograph, 1980s

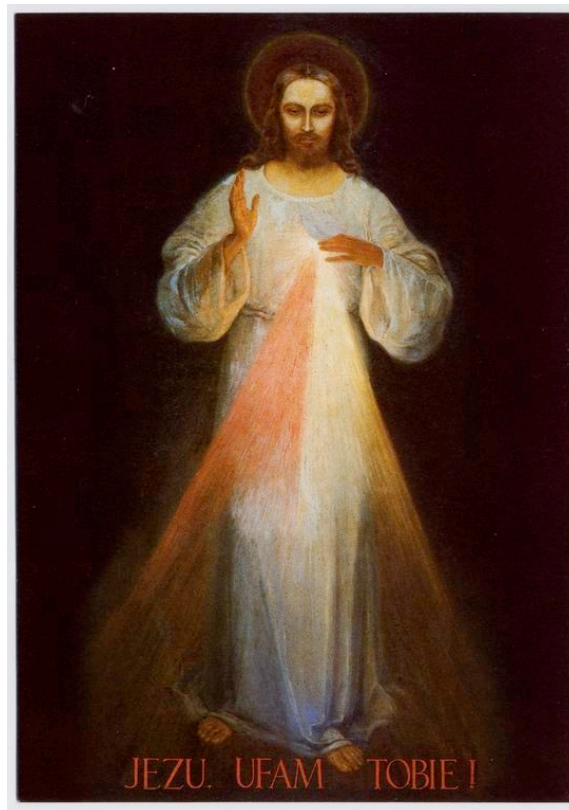


Fig. 6 Download of the miraculous image painted by Eugeniusz Kazimirowski, *Jesus as the King of Mercy* ("The Divine Mercy"), 1934