Kodak Catholicism: Miraculous Photography and its Significance at a Post-Conciliar Marian Apparition Site in Canada

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There are many people who feel that the ability to maintain an enchanted religious worldview has become increasingly difficult for American and Canadian Catholics in the years following the Second Vatican Council. Proponents of this view have often pointed to three different factors to support their claim. These include the notion that heightened diabolical activity from Satan and his minions is luring people away from knowing and perceiving the action of God’s grace in their life; that living in a predominantly secular and materialistic culture has devalued the mystical and the merits of religion; and lastly, that the modernization of the Catholic Church, mainly as a result of the reforms of the Second Vatican council, has made it increasingly difficult for people to perceive the propinquity of the sacred within the Church. Those who note the last factor, often suggest that architectural changes, the use of the vernacular language, and the gradual suppression of paraliturgical activities and personal sacramental objects such as rosaries, scapulars, religious medals, and so forth, has functioned to de-emphasize the immediacy of the supernatural within Catholicism.1

While Catholicism may seem less mysterious and enchanted to certain church going Catholics, especially those born before Vatican II, there exists, beyond the walls of the parish church and outside of standard liturgical celebrations, a Catholic culture made up of different movements that is driven by a desire to re-awaken what it perceives is a

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1 The following represents a summary of responses given by various Canadian and American Catholics interviewed by the author. These interviews, both formal and informal, were conducted between 1997 and the winter of 2002. The information gathered from these interviews form part of an ethnographic study that is being conducted on the apparition events associated with the Greensides’ farm located in Marmora, Ontario, Canada and the larger Marian movement within Catholicism.
lost sense of the sacred in the modern world. While this desire to proclaim the presence of God in secular society is expressed in a variety of ways by different groups, it is the Marian cult and popular Marian devotion above all other expressions of post-Conciliar Catholicism which most actively uses signs and wonders to safeguard against the challenges of the modern age, affirm the reality and immanence of the divine, and promote the efficacy of its ritual practices and beliefs. Moreover, given the stress popular Marian devotion places on direct religious experiences and tangible expressions of the sacred, it is not surprising that images believed to be in some way an expression of divine presence and power form an important component of Marian popular piety.

During the pontificate of John Paul II, a revival of Marian devotion has occurred within Catholicism. This revival has been accompanied by an increase in reports and claims of images deemed by some to be of miraculous character. This resurgence is not simply due to an upsurge in reports of icons and religious objects weeping, bleeding, and becoming animated, or of divine figures suddenly appearing in material matter, it is also the result of an emerging folk religious practice “...that uses photography to document miraculous phenomena, produce signs of the supernatural, and create sacred images.”

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4 Two important factors that have contributed to this revival are the intense Marian devotion of John Paul II and the dramatic increase in the number of Marian apparition sites. See Sandra Zimdars-Swartz, “Marian Revival in American Catholicism,” in *Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America*, eds. R. Scott Appleby and Mary Jo Weaver (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 213-40.


“Miraculous photography” or the photographic documentation of paranormal phenomena is a technological innovation on previous Catholic traditions of miraculous images that has grown in popularity and prominence during the post-Conciliar period largely as a result of the wider availability of photographic cameras and the dramatic increase in the number of Marian apparition sites. Despite the increased importance of miraculous photography at the level of contemporary Catholic piety, this topic has been given minimal attention by scholars of religion. The most noteworthy exceptions are Paolo Apolito's consideration found in his book dealing with the apparitions of the Virgin Mary at Oliveto Citra, Italy and Daniel Wojcik's article found in the 1996 issue of the *Journal of American Folklore*. Of these two works, it is Wojcik's account, “Polaroids from Heaven,” which provides the reader with the most information concerning the history of miraculous photography and the meaning of picture miracles for Catholic believers. Wojcik's essay, however, only focuses on how certain members of a non-conformist Marian cult, namely, Veronica Leuken’s Bayside, New York movement understand and utilize miraculous photography. Accordingly, his work does not adequately demonstrate the various ways picture miracles function and are understood at the level of more mainstream Catholic piety.

In contrast, Paolo Apolito’s research reports on the use of miraculous photographs among less deviant Catholics. However, one of the major points he raises in his analysis, mainly his claim that the use of photographic technology to document supernatural phenomena is a “modern version of magical constraint,” is debatable and certainly

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7 The reputation of Marian apparition sites as locations where a plethora of divine graces are dispensed has motivated a great many pilgrims to not only attend these areas but also to bring cameras in the hope of capturing some form of supernatural activity on film. As a consequence of this, apparition sites, especially those where visions of divine beings continue to be claimed, have become the locations where the bulk of picture miracles have been produced in the post-Vatican II era. See also Sandra Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary: Visions of Mary from La Salette to Medjugorje* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); and Rene Laurentin, *The Apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary Today*, translated by Luke Griffin (Dublin: Veritas Publications, [1990], 1991).


10 See Apolito, 209.
contrary to this study’s ethnographic findings. Furthermore, both Apolito and Wojcik fail to consider adequately the negative effects and associations of miraculous photography among Catholics. Thus, the double-sided nature of miraculous photography is not sufficiently discussed by either author.

This paper will address the principal limitations of these and other scholarly works in the hope of providing a more developed and accurate understanding of miraculous photography and its role and significance in Catholic popular piety. In particular, this study will trace the antecedents of contemporary miraculous photography, classify the various types of photographs believed to be of supernatural origin, and provide a more critical understanding of the way these photographs function and are experienced by Canadian Catholics and Catholics in general.

In addressing these issues, this study will draw information from various written sources as well as from ethnographic research gathered from devotees of the Marmora, Ontario, Canada apparitions – a contemporary Catholic Marian movement that is closely wedded to a “church-approved apparitional tradition” and thus more indicative of popular Catholic piety. While the apparition events which began at John and Shelagh Greensides’ farm in 1992, and which continue to occur, have not garnered as much public attention or as many supporters as other post-Vatican II apparition sites such as Medjugorje, Bosnia-Hercegovina, or Conyers, Georgia, it has been the focal point of noteworthy regional and trans-national Catholic attention and influence. Moreover, since the

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11 Apolito’s viewpoint that a Marian devotee, because of the technology he or she possesses, can capture an image of the divine without the consent or against the wishes of the Virgin Mary (ibid.: 208-11) is an idea that is contrary to this study’s findings. Although it is possible certain Marianists uphold this hubristic point of view, all the Marian devotees interviewed for this study expressed the opinion that divine intervention and/or the willingness of the divine being to be photographed, not modern technology or chance, was the reason and cause for the creation of an extraordinary/miraculous photograph.

12 See Cuneo 1997b, 175-94.

13 Both the messages and devotees of the Marmora apparitions, with very few exceptions, have been supportive of Catholic doctrine and established Church authority. In fact, most members have demonstrated a fondness for Ultramontane religious practices and spirituality. For more information on this movement and its relationship with the Catholic hierarchy, see Sister Alice Johnson, *Immaculate Paths* (Peterborough, Ontario: Amor Enterprises, 1995).

14 The Greensides’ farm in Marmora, Ontario has attracted and maintained a significant following of Marian devotees from Canada (mainly from Ontario and Quebec) and from the U.S.A. Since 1997, for instance, the Greensides’ farm has averaged between 2500-8000 visitors on Marian feast days with larger crowds attending the site when these commemorations occurred on weekends and on the feast of the Immaculate Conception.
inception of the Virgin Mary’s alleged appearances at the Greensides’ farm, the white blaze of camera flashes and the clicking sound of camera shutters has become a familiar sight and sound for pilgrims who have travelled and continue to travel to this place of pilgrimage.

Although the use of the photographic process to document supernatural phenomenon has become an important component of the Marian pilgrimage and religious experience for many Catholics both in Canada as well as abroad, it is nineteenth-century Spiritualists that were the first group to widely adopt photographic technology with the hope of trying to reveal and document a transcendental realm. In 1855, sixteen years after the advent of modern photography, the first recorded examples of supernatural photography were claimed. These photographs contained extra materializations, often in the form of white markings. In more exceptional instances, these white markings resembled the shape of human figures. These extra markings on the photographs were interpreted as souls of the dead and were promoted in Spiritualist publications as evidence of the continuation of life after death. Shortly after the publication of these and other “spirit photographs,” the adoption of the photographic process by Spiritualists to promote their own ideological concerns became more widespread. Photo studios specializing in taking pictures of deceased spirits were opened and became increasingly popular at the turn of the nineteenth century. Besides using conventional photographic methods to take spirit pictures of dead family member and friends, Spiritualists also introduced two new photographic innovations; thoughtography – a technique that involves psychically impressing images directly onto a film plate, film, or printing paper; and “psychography” – a form of spirit communication that involves receiving symbolic messages from deceased people on a photographic surface.

With regard to the experience of “supernatural” photography in Canada specifically, it is likely that the earliest examples of spirit photographs to be witnessed by Canadians originated from abroad, particularly from Spiritualist publications and photographic journals published

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15 Apolito, 204; Wojcik, 135.
17 Apolito, 204.
18 Ibid.
20 Wojcik, 135-6.
21 Ibid.
in both Britain and the United States. Although the roots of the modern Spiritualist movement can be traced to Canada, initial interest in this religion as well as the practice of spirit photography was greater and much more pronounced in America and Britain. Thus, it is not surprising that foreign magazines and journals contained the earliest examples of “spirit photographs” and articles on this subject. Besides written publications, those living north of the American border interested in psychic matters in the mid to late nineteenth century would have gained knowledge of Spiritualist doctrines and been informed of the latest developments of this movement by travelling Spiritualist mediums and lecturers, by local elected officers and mediums at smaller Spiritualist society gatherings (private circle meetings) and at larger scale, but much less frequently occurring, Spiritualist conventions and camp site meetings.

One location of particular importance for the promotion of Spiritualism and spirit photography, both in the nineteenth century as well as today, is the Lily Dale Assembly located in South Western New York State. Originally called the Cassadaga Free Lake Association, “Lily Dale” is proclaimed to be the “world’s largest centre for the religion of Spiritualism” and has been visited regularly by Spiritualists since its inception in 1879. Moreover, this popular Spiritualist centre was one of the first places in North America to operate a photo studio specializing in photographing the spirits of the deceased. In fact, one of the earliest documented examples of a spirit photograph involving a Canadian subject was presumably taken at Lily Dale sometime in the late nineteenth or very early twentieth century.

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22 It was not uncommon for nineteenth-century Canadians interested in Spiritualism to subscribe to foreign Spiritualist publications. See for instance, a letter from A.N Buell to Partridge and Britten, 342 Broadway, New York, sending $2 to continue subscription to the “Spiritual Telegraph”, 20 August 1856. Archives of Ontario, Andrew Norton Buell Papers, F62, Box MU 305.

23 Many modern Spiritualists point to the spirit rapping that purportedly occurred at the Fox family residence (a family of Canadian origin) in Hydesville, New York on March 31, 1848 as the event that marked the birth of their religion. See Carroll, 3.

24 Ramsay Cook, The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 66-68; Reverend Alva Folkes (current president of the Spiritualist Church of Canada)” Canadian Spiritualism” (unpublished essay, 2003), 1-6.

25 Ibid., Cook, 68; Christine Wicker, Lily Dale: The True Story of the Town that talks to the Dead (San Francisco: Harper-San Francisco, 2003).


This documented incident is found in James Coates 1911 book entitled, *Photographing the Invisible: Practical Studies in Spirit Photography, Spirit Portraiture and other Rare but allied Phenomena*. In this work, Coates describes a variety of different accounts concerning the alleged production of non fraudulent spirit photographs and related manifestations in order to convince his audience that they have been either “…produced by the operation of Intelligences in the Invisible…or (that) man possesses psychic faculties and powers which have not yet received the attention they demand.”\(^{28}\) Among the accounts cited by Coates to defend his thesis is the story of Ruthven Macdonald, a Methodist from Toronto, Ontario. According to Coates, Ruthven was a baritone soloist who accepted an engagement to sing at the Lily Dale Assembly. While there, the singer, purportedly acting out of curiosity, selected a spirit photographer to have his portrait taken. Upon completion of the portrait, a bizarre photograph was developed that contained an image of a human figure standing behind Mr. Macdonald holding up a hand with two recognizable thumbs. This image reportedly disturbed and deeply embarrassed the baritone soloist causing him to exclaim, “Destroy that! Why that is my mother! She had two thumbs on one hand.”\(^{29}\) The author concludes this tale by stating that the spirit photograph in question, along with other forms of mediumship experienced by Ruthven Macdonald, caused him to become “…a convert to Spiritualism and an ardent advocate of its teachings.”\(^{30}\)

Although supernatural photography was a component of early Canadian Spiritualist activity, the scant historical record on this subject matter makes it difficult to measure the extent to which Spiritualists in Canada were informed or motivated by spirit photography. That said, some scholars believe that the initial popularity of the services offered by Spiritualists was likely due to a lack of knowledge of the photographic process at the time. Ignorance with regard to how easily photographs could be doctored, either intentionally or unintentionally, may have inspired some people to look to spiritual and unnatural causes as a means to explain the extra-ordinary character of a photograph.\(^{31}\) However, it is also important to note that people both within and outside the Spiritualist movement were quick to challenge the veracity of spirit photographs. The literature from the period indicates that individuals more sceptically inclined, as well as those knowledgeable of photography, publicized the various ways the photographic process could be
manipulated to create false impressions.\textsuperscript{32} These and other challenges to the photographic process caused nineteenth-century Spiritualists to become much more guarded in their acceptance and promotion of spirit photography. This shift in attitude was certainly evident in writings published by Spiritualists as early as the mid 1870s. During this period, Spiritualists demonstrated that they were making a conscious effort to distinguish between genuine and fraudulent spirit photographs.\textsuperscript{33} The author of an article published in a Spiritualist magazine in 1874, for example, goes to great lengths to prove the authenticity of photographs purportedly taken of ghosts at a séance. Not only does the author detail the conditions under which the photographs were produced, he also provides a long-winded description of the moral character and reputation of the person who took the photographs so as to repel any claims that the “ghost pictures” were impostures.\textsuperscript{34}

Since the nineteenth century, the popularity of spirit photography has waxed and waned.\textsuperscript{35} Despite these fluctuations in interest, as well as criticisms from various camps concerning the relative ease by which photographs can be doctored, photographic technology continues to be viewed and utilised as a means to reveal the existence of a transcendent realm. In fact, almost every photographic technique from the wet plate, to x-ray, and now to digital technology, has been used to create “supernatural” photographs.\textsuperscript{36} This is largely due to the widely held view that photography is a tool that can effectively and efficiently document and preserve images of reality. Given the perceived ability of photography to carry out this function, it is not surprising that it continues to be employed by various people and groups to verify that which is typically not visible.\textsuperscript{37}

With regard to miraculous photographs that are specifically Christian in theme, it appears that the oldest known photograph that is purported to be a depiction of a supernatural Christian presence is of Canadian origin. This image predates the previous oldest recorded miraculous Christian photograph found in the literature by over twenty-five years.\textsuperscript{38} It was taken by T.B. Hayward on 24 June 1905, approximately
five years after the first mass marketed camera, the “Brownie,” was introduced by the Eastman Kodak Company. The photograph in question depicts what many people believe is a clear picture of a wondrous iceberg showing the figure of the Virgin Mary in the narrows off the coast of St. John’s, Newfoundland (see image 1). While it is unknown how closely Hayward’s print resembles the original iceberg, the favourable reaction to the frozen statue by Michael Francis Howley, the Catholic Archbishop in office at the time the event occurred, indicates that Hayward’s photograph is probably a close representation of the event. In fact, the Archbishop was so impressed by the extraordinary iceberg, something he undoubtedly perceived to be a hierophany, that he composed a sonnet in honour of the frozen statue entitled “Our Lady of the Fjords.” In the poem, he refers to the glistening ice figure that mysteriously appeared in 1905 as “a shimmering shrine – our bright Atlantic Lourdes.”

In addition to the Our Lady of the Fjords photograph, there are other examples of Christian miraculous photographs that predate the popular folk practice of taking picture miracles at apparition sites. Although it is difficult to pinpoint an exact date, the practice of bringing a
camera to a Marian pilgrimage site in the hope of documenting the supernatural does not become prevalent among Catholics until the second half of the twentieth century – a time when photographic cameras were more commonly used by Marian devotees and members of the general populace.42 While there are some examples of miraculous photographs taken at apparition sites as early as the 1930s,43 the earliest and most significant example that demonstrates photography playing an important role among Marian devotees at a widely recognized apparition event is related to the apparitions that took place at San Sebastian de Garabandal, Spain between 1960 and 1965.44

The “Garabandal” Marian apparitions continue to have ardent supporters from different parts of the globe, including Canada. This despite the fact that the apparitions were the subject of a negative decision by the local bishop with regard to their supernatural origin.45 The continued popularity of the Garabandal apparitions is partly a result of the paranormal activities that have been witnessed by various people. This not only includes those people who observed the paranormal activity at the apparition site, but also those who saw the events captured on still photographs and on video after they had been publicized throughout the world. The most well known of these documented events is the so-called “little miracle” that occurred on 18 July 1962.46 The “little mira-


43 A case in point is certain photographs depicting various Spanish visionaries in an altered state of consciousness. See William A. Christian Jr., Visionaries: The Spanish Republic and the Reign of Christ (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996). While the Ezkioga photos are one of the earliest examples that link miraculous photography with Marian devotional piety, it appears that the photographs were taken by a select group of individuals that were competent photographers. There is no indication that the contemporary folk practice of “taking picture miracles” [photographs being taken by a group of non-specialists “deliberately seeking to document supernatural phenomena in a sacred context” (Wojcik 1996: 136)] was in evidence at Ezkioga.

44 The lack of documented evidence surrounding Marian apparition events makes it difficult to decisively trace the antecedents of the contemporary Catholic folk practice of taking “picture miracles.” There is evidence, however, that a noticeable amount of Garabandal believers were bringing cameras and other image making equipment for the purpose of documenting supernatural phenomena and creating “sacred proofs.” See Joseph A. Pelletier, God Speaks at Garabandal: The Message of Garabandal with a Summary and Picture Story of the Apparitions (Worcester, Massachusetts: An Assumption Publication, [1970], 1973).


cle” photograph is said to depict the visionary Conchita Gonzalez receiving the Eucharist on her tongue from an invisible angel. People who accept the veracity of the Garabandal apparitions tend to believe that photographic and film cameras captured this miracle occurring. In fact, it was a still photograph of the “little miracle” that convinced Conchita’s mother that her daughter was not lying about her visions.47 Today, the photographic record of the ‘little miracle’ has not only become a religious icon and a sacred souvenir, it also continues to figure prominently in the lives of those people who continue to argue for the authenticity of the event.48

At Garabandal, there is no doubt that photography was an important part of bringing international attention to the apparitions; convincing many people of the sacredness of the site, and reaffirming for people belief in the intercession of divine beings. Furthermore, it is also reasonable to presume that public knowledge of the extraordinary Garabandal pictures may have also inspired others to bring cameras to apparition sites in the hope of capturing another “little miracle” on film.

In the years following the Garabandal apparitions, photographic technology became progressively more user friendly as well as affordable. This caused the photographic camera to be increasingly put into the hands of the general believer.49 It is during this time period, the late 1960s, that the use of photography to capture supernatural activity, create sacred images, and to interact more readily and intimately with divine beings, begins to emerge as a popular folk practice within the Catholic tradition.50 Unlike earlier examples of miraculous Christian photographs, however, which were often inadvertent and fortuitous documents of a divine presence, such as the “Our Lady of the Fjords” photograph, the bulk of miraculous photographs that have been produced in the past thirty years have been taken at sites where the Virgin Mary is believed to be appearing by non-specialists that were actively and deliberately seeking to document supernatural phenomena.51

This fervent and repeated picture taking that is indicative of the contemporary Marian practice of taking miraculous photographs has helped to increase the quantity and variety of Christian “picture miracles” currently in existence. The photographs, presumed to be a manifestation of a divine Christian presence, are numerous and can vary greatly. However, three categories (none of which are rigid) may be

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49 Wojcik, 137.
50 Reports of miraculous photographs appear to increase after the Garabandal apparitions. For examples see Laurentin 1990. Furthermore, the popular use of cameras to record miraculous phenomena is clearly evident by the early 1970s. See Wojcik 1996.
51 Wojcik, 138.
used to identify and classify these different types of Christian “picture miracles.” The first category encapsulates the least common type of miraculous photograph while the other two categories are indicative of the customary practice of taking picture miracles at apparition sites.

The first category refers to those photographic images that demonstrate paranormal or extraordinary behaviour. These types of images include photographs that have a reputation for miraculous cures and favours as well as those photographs that become animated, exude fluid, give off odours, emit sounds, mend themselves if they become damaged, or demonstrate any other type of bizarre activity. One such example is a photograph of the Virgin Mary that belongs to Maria al Kahars, a visionary from Damascus, Syria. This picture has reportedly exuded olive oil containing curative powers on an intermittent basis since 1982.52 One other example is a photograph of Mary which belongs to Narcisse Khouzam of Montreal, Canada. According to Narcisse, he possesses a photograph depicting the Virgin Mary that brightens and smiles every time he prays in front of the image.53

The second category refers to those photographic images deemed to be miraculous because they are thought to depict a supernatural occurrence, a supernatural being, or a symbol associated with a divine being. These photographs can be clear depictions of something alleged to be of supernatural origin such as a picture of a weeping statue of the Virgin Mary (see image 2); ambiguous depictions of something purportedly miraculous, such as an image in the landscape that is purported to be a manifestation of a divine being (see image 3); or display highly vague and indistinct imagery such as patch of fog or a stream of light. It is these latter ambiguous and vague forms that are only considered miraculous because of context - i.e. where and when the photograph was taken and one’s selective perception.

52 Laurentin 1991, 76-82.
53 Ibid., 161.
One example of a popular, yet relatively ambiguous photograph, that belongs to this second category concerns an image which has been referred to by various Marmora devotees as “Jesus in the Clouds” and alternately as the “Face of God.” This photograph was taken at the Greensides’ farm some time in the late 1990s and is said to depict a “miraculous” cloud formation (see image 3). Among those interviewed that believe the photograph depicts a supernatural occurrence, the overwhelming majority perceive (in the break of light between the clouds in the sky over Marmora) the body of Jesus crucified and or a face peering through the clouds – a face which is often referred to as belonging to God.

The last category describes photographic images that are believed to have been created by a divine source. In this way, these photographs are similar to the Shroud of Turin, the Edessan image, or any other traditional Christian icon reputed not to be “made by human hands.” Similar to the previous category, photographs which are believed to have been inscribed in some way by the divine can be relatively clear depictions of something religious, vague and ambiguous, or at times, even completely unnoticeable. That is unless one is granted the divine grace to see the otherwise invisible image that is purportedly in the photograph.

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One example of an easily recognizable photograph belonging to this genre is a photo of the Virgin Mary embracing Pope John Paul II (see image 4). It is piously claimed that this particular photograph was intended to be a depiction of a landscape. When the photographer took his film for developing, however, it was the image of the pope and the Virgin Mary, not the intended image, which “miraculously” appeared on the negative.

An example of a less distinct image believed to have been created by a divine source concerns a photograph taken in the spring of 2003 by a woman while on group pilgrimage to celebrate the feast of St. Joseph at Marmora. The photographer claims not to have seen anything out of the ordinary when she took the picture in question. She admitted, however, that she was taking indiscriminate photographs of the surrounding landscape at the Greensides’ farm in the hope that she would be graced by a sign from the Virgin Mary. After receiving the results of her photographic endeavour, she claims to have been both surprised and grateful to discover a photo that she believes depicts the Virgin Mary and a “solar Cross” surrounded by branches from trees on the Greensides’ farm (see Image 5). Enthused by her discovery, she notified her friend and organizer of the pilgrimage to Marmora and told her of her “little sign given from heaven.” Upon seeing the source of her excitement, the pilgrimage organizer also became convinced of the photograph’s miraculous nature and asked that fifty copies of the photo be reproduced so that everyone who attended the pilgrimage with them would be aware of the Virgin Mary’s continued presence in their life and thus be further inspired to continue their acts of religious devotion.

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55 For an exclusively Canadian example see Dolores M. Tan and John B. McLarney, Our Blessed Mother Speaks to Dory Tan in Marmora (Toronto: Tan/McLarney Enterprises, 1997), 59.
56 Interview by author, April 2003, Vaughan, Ontario, Canada.
Finally, there are seemingly normal photographs depicting standard material reality that are considered divinely created and thus miraculous. With regard to these photographs, it is piously held among certain Catholics that God or the Virgin Mary will place an image into a photograph. It is only a chosen few, however, that are given the grace to see the divinely placed image. Although this interpretation seems rather out of the ordinary, it follows the same type of Catholic logic used to explain apparitions of the Virgin Mary. During Marian apparitions, it is typically understood that it is only a privileged few that are granted the grace to see the otherwise invisible Virgin.

One example of this type of miraculous image is a photograph owned by an Ontario woman that depicts a dead tree bark that was located behind the twelfth station of the cross at the Greensides’ farm in Marmora, Ontario, Canada (see
images 6 & 7). According to the owner of the alleged miraculous photograph, the picture of the tree bark was taken at random while on pilgrimage at the Greensides’ farm in 1997. When the photograph was developed, she examined it to see if she had captured anything miraculous. While she did not notice anything peculiar at first, she soon saw an image of her dead cousin appear to the left of the tree bark. When she informed her sister of what had happened, her sister also looked into the image and discovered that she too saw a deceased individual. It was not their cousin that she perceived, however, but another relative they had in common – their great uncle. The owner of the photograph continued to show other people the “Marmora tree bark photo” and found that certain individuals were having similar experiences. From this, she concluded that she had in her possession an extraordinary photograph through which God grants certain people the grace to perceive particular images that relate to their life. According to her, however, the images people most often perceive (and should perceive) are deceased family members and friends.57

Although three principal types of miraculous photographs exist at the level of Catholic popular piety, the bulk of the picture miracles examined by this study belonged to the latter two of the three categories described in this paper and tended to display imagery which failed to have an obvious religious or miraculous value. The reason for this high concentration of seemingly unremarkable “miraculous” images is related to the manner by which the majority of Christian “picture miracles” is being produced as well as how they are being interpreted by Marian devotees.

57 Interview by author, 8 December 2001, Marmora, Ontario, Canada.
At Marmora, Ontario, and other apparition sites, the photographs most often taken by Marian devotees are of the sun, the sky, and the surrounding landscape. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for those who take photographs at apparition sites to use questionable photographic techniques such as poor camera exposures, the use of slow shutter speeds, or taking direct photographs of the sun. This will inevitably cause flaring and other pictorial distortions/extra-materializations to occur on the photograph. Once images taken at apparition sites are developed, either on spot, if they were taken by an instant camera, or later at another location, it is quite common for people to gather and attempt to construe divine figures or religious symbols in the pictorial distortions (i.e., flares of light), cloud formations, or whatever else was depicted in the photograph. 58

While there are some striking photographs that have been taken by devotees at apparition sites, the majority of purported “picture miracles” that were examined by this study contained imagery which was ambiguous. As this study has already noted however, photographs, which display indistinct or questionable imagery, can be and are often viewed as miraculous documentations of the sacred by Marian devotees. This is often the case even when a devotee agrees that a particular “picture miracle” is not a conclusive proof of a divine existence. One devotee interviewed, for example, defended the miraculous nature of ambiguous photos by arguing that photographs are generally intended to be “personal signs given from heaven” rather than clear manifestations from the divine. According to the interviewee:

most photographs taken where our Blessed Mother is appearing are not meant for unbelievers because they would be sceptical no matter what you showed them. These (photographs) are little glimpses of heaven meant for people’s own personal viewing and spiritual development. Mother Mary is using photographs to communicate with people on an individual level. She wants to strengthen our faith because she needs our prayers…And if you are confused about the meaning of a photograph, all you need to do is pray to her and she will tell you through the Holy Spirit what the picture means.59

The above-mentioned quote is but one of many interpretations given by Marian devotees to describe and defend the miraculous character of ambiguous photographs. Despite the various responses given, most of the Marian devotees interviewed for this study who sought to defend the sanctity of a particular photograph, whether ambiguous or not, did

58 On this point, see also Rene Laurentin & Rene Lejeune, Messages and Teachings of Mary at Medjugorje (Milford, Ohio: Faith Publishing Company, 1988), 71-3; Wojcik; Apolito; and Nickell.
59 Interview by author. December 2001, Marmora, Ontario, Canada.
so by constituting their explanation in purely religious terms. In addition to these particular devotees, there were some Marianists who adopted a more rationalistic and secular discourse to explain the supernatural character of particular photographs. These Catholics, not unlike some of their nineteenth-century Spiritualist counterparts, demonstrated a scientific spirit in their examination and consideration of supernatural photography. They were concerned with responding to secular challenges made against the veracity of “miraculous photography” as well as committed to bridging the divide between science and religion. Hence, they explained their belief in “picture miracles” using both religious and naturalistic terms and often spoke of the conditions by which particular photographs were taken and developed in order to dispel any claims that a particular “miracle photo” may have been created by natural or deceptive means.

Finally there were people who challenged the miraculous authenticity of “picture miracles.” Not surprisingly, critics of miraculous photography provided naturalistic or secular explanations to support their point of view. They often cited people’s active imagination, photographic manipulation, and credulity among believers to argue against the miraculous nature of photographs. Those who explained miraculous photography in this way, however, were not only people outside the Marian movement or the Catholic tradition. As this study will further demonstrate, many people who challenge the veracity of picture miracles are Marian devotees that are not opposed to other types of miraculous claims or religious experience.

The various explanations given by both believers and sceptics of miraculous photographs reflects the type of discourse surrounding debates concerning the authenticity of other types of miraculous Christian images and objects. Picture miracles, however, in contrast to such things as miraculous statues and icons, have tended to garner a lesser degree of public exposure and status within the Catholic Church. Unlike the “weeping statue of Akita” or the “image of Our Mother of Perpetual Help,” there does not appear to exist any photograph that has given rise to a parochial cult. While the oozing Damascus photograph owned by Maria al Kahars has attracted a fair amount of attention, the status

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60 Two responses that followed this type of reasoning was the view point that the Virgin Mary entered the camera after the photograph was taken to transform the imagery already captured on film. The second common religiously based explanation involved the notion that a divine figure purposely made an appearance from the transcendent sphere into the temporal sphere, for a minuscule moment in time (a period of time that was brief enough to elude human detection but long enough to be captured on film), in order to be documented photographically.

61 See Nickell’s book, Looking for A Miracle, for examples.

62 See Cruz, Miraculous Images of Our Lady, for more information on these, and other, Marian images.
afforded that picture is essentially an anomaly. In spite of this, however, miraculous photographs do form an important part of people’s religious experiences and serve a variety of different religious functions.

Miraculous pictures, not unlike other images and sacred objects, have been used to create a sacral environment, inspire devotional piety, develop one’s interior life and relationship with the divine, and even help provoke intercessory intervention. At the level of Catholic popular piety, however, picture miracles are more commonly used as a sign to recall one’s experiences at an apparition site; as scientific proof to confirm the reality of intercessory beings; and as a means to promote and legitimize one’s religious beliefs and concerns. This latter explanation helps to explain why miracle photos, especially those that are most impressive, are often publicly displayed at apparition sites, prayer meetings, in devotional publications, in wall hangings, on religious web sites, and even for sale in religious stores. Despite these more popular applications, however, miraculous photography is also used for purposes of receiving communication from the divine, as a form of religious entertainment, and as a means to garner charismatic authority.

As a medium through which people seek to determine the will of God, predict the “second coming” of Christ, and obtain information about future and past events, miraculous photography is a form of divination. Daniel Wojcik’s study of the Bayside apparitions provides an excellent description of how Bayside devotees often looked to miraculous photos for prophetic information about the imminence of the apocalypse and for personal revelations. His work describes how devotees often applied the symbols they perceived on photographs to a divinatory chart provided by the Bayside visionary Veronica Leuken in order to help decipher their meaning. The manner in which divination was used, however, and the extent to which it was promoted appears to be a unique “Bayside” trait. Photo divination charts are unorthodox and would generally not be tolerated at mainstream apparitional cults that tend be under the guardianship of Church authorities. Furthermore, visionaries from mainstream apparitional cults often seek approval and endorsement from the Catholic Church as well as from Catholics in general. Thus, they are likely to avoid public displays of unorthodox behaviour.

In addition to the use of a divinatory chart, Marian devotees have also used other means to receive divine communication through the photographic process. The most common method witnessed among

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64 Wojcik, 139-48.
65 Ibid., 133.
Marmora devotees involved pilgrims taking photographs at the apparition site and then examining the photographs they had taken for an answer to a question or concern they had put forward to their heavenly parents. On one occasion, for instance, a Marmora pilgrim informed me that she had asked the Madonna to notify her about the spiritual state of her father-in-law who had recently passed on. More specifically, she wanted to know whether his soul was in purgatory (and therefore, required more prayers and acts of devotion on her behalf for its release) or if his soul had been taken to heaven. In order to receive this information, she petitioned “la Madonna di Marmora” to convey the answer to her query in the photograph she had recently taken of the tenth station of the Way of the Cross at the Greensides’ Farm. According to the Marmora devotee, she asked the Madonna to alter the photograph, that is produce some type of extra-materialization on the photo, to indicate that her Father-in-law’s soul was in heaven. However, if his soul was in purgatory, she asked that the photograph of the tenth station of the Way of the Cross remain unaltered and thus appear as a standard photograph devoid of any extra imagery.

In his study of the Bayside apparitions, Daniel Wojcik observed similar behaviour among Bayside devotees and likened the desire among pilgrims to search for signs in a photograph to a Rorschach test. He also noted that; “like a religious Rorschach test, the ambiguous imagery on miracle photos allows for a variety of attributed meanings, which reflect both the theology of the shrine and the dominating concerns of the individuals at the apparition site.”

While the use of a photographic camera for divinatory purposes is well documented, the taking of picture miracles as a form of religious entertainment has not been given much consideration. Commentaries that have written about the use of picture miracles have tended to only describe those Marian devotees who appear to have sanctified the photo taking process. There has been little discussion allotted to those who do not view the photographs they take as always being in some way a manifestation of divine presence. At the Marmora apparition site, some of the devotees who take pictures are knowledgeable about photographic technology and thus perceive the bulk of the pictures they produce as explainable by natural causes. While these devotees are open to the fact that a picture miracle can be an authentic hierophany, they do not bring a camera to simply try and document supernatural happenings. They also view and treat picture taking at Marian apparition sites as an extra curricular activity. These devotees enjoy photography and have demonstrated that they take pleasure in picking out symbols in photographs. Furthermore, they have felt a sense of pride and heightened level of status when they produced a striking photograph. It should be said, that an impressive photo taken at an apparition site often draws a crowd and

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66 Ibid., 135.
generates a degree of attention from pilgrims, many of whom are interested in catching a glimpse of the divine.

While taking an impressive photograph or being in possession of a miraculous object can help to temporarily elevate one’s status, it can also be a source of charismatic authority and a licence to justify heterodox behaviour, even schism. While the previously mentioned owner of the “magical Marmora tree bark photograph” does not engage in any blatant heterodox behaviour, the photograph provided her with an opportunity to command attention from people at the apparition site that she otherwise would not possess. Furthermore, given that various people responded positively to her personal interpretation of the photograph’s power and function (see figure 7), it would not be difficult to imagine that she could use her “tree bark” photo as a tool to challenge religious authority.

One prominent example of the foregoing, that is, a miraculous photograph being used as a means to endorse and justify schismatic behaviour, is evidenced among the followers of the Palma de Troya, Spain apparitions that began in 1968. The visionaries and followers of this apparition have been extremely critical of Vatican II reforms and the Catholic hierarchy. Moreover, they have relied on a photograph that depicts certain Palma de Troya visionaries allegedly receiving the Eucharist from an invisible angel as a means to promote and justify their rebellious Catholic movement.67

The last point this paper addresses concerns the manner in which miraculous images are interpreted at the grassroots level. According to Daniel Wojcik, all Bayside devotees accept picture miracles as authentic manifestations of divine presence. It is only persons outside of the Bayside cult who question or reject their authenticity. Correspondingly, Paolo Apolito’s research also fails to mention any Marian devotees as having an aversion for miraculous photography. The research derived from this study, however, revealed that the interpretation of picture miracles at the grassroots level is by no means consistent. A great many devotees are quite guarded in their view of picture miracles. In fact, a few Marian devotees that were interviewed appear to have been suffering from picture miracle burnout. These devotees were particularly distressed by the quantity and quality of most purported “picture miracles” and by their knowledge of certain miraculous photographs being proven to be the handiwork of a hoaxer rather than divine intervention. One devotee expressed this perspective in the following way:

Whenever I’m up here (at Marmora), somebody will usually show me a miracle photo. And believe me, the stuff they show me just doesn’t seem that miraculous. Sometimes I think it’s a miracle that they think it’s a mira-

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67 For more information on this movement see Laurentin 1990: 142; Cuneo 1997a, 99-105.)
There’ll be a streak of light, a white spot, some ring in a tree, and they’ll tell you that it’s the Virgin Mary or the Crown of Thorns. But to me, it just usually looks like a streak of light or a white spot. Most of the time, I am just not impressed. And if somebody does come along and show you something really striking, you wonder if it’s a fake. With the computers and photo editing software they have nowadays, it’s so easy to manipulate photographs. You just can’t trust the photographs people show you unless you were there when the photo was taken or if you took the picture yourself. A couple of years ago, somebody showed me a picture of the Virgin Mary floating in mid air and looking down at the visionaries and people inside of St. James Church (in Medjugorje). The thing was impressive but it was exactly like a wedding picture I once saw. And I couldn’t help but think that some photographer created that image and was trying to make a few bucks. You know they sell these types of photos in religious stores. 68

Finally, there was a minority of devotees who were not only sceptical of most picture miracles but had also distanced themselves from miraculous photography. These devotees tend to reject the use of picture miracles and regard the people who promote them as “fanatical” and as a hindrance to the effective dissemination of the Marian message. One devotee expressed their distaste for miraculous photography and other types of ritual innovation in the following way:

Miraculous photography? You want to me to talk about those people who snap pictures of the sun and sky and then go around with their poorly exposed photographs and claim they captured the Virgin Mary and Jesus on film. Or those people who walk around with photographs and think that what they actually have in their hand is a magic mirror from Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. What can I say? I think what these people are doing is ridiculous. I don’t support this Kodak Catholicism. I think it’s distracting. And I think it runs counter to what Our Blessed Mother is teaching and what she truly wants us to do…. For a while, I have been inviting different people to spend a day of quiet prayer and reflection at the farm in the hope that I can get others to accept our Blessed Mother’s call for conversion. Believe me, this is no easy task given the society we live in. And it’s even more difficult to get people to take this place seriously when you have a bunch of fanatics engaging in all kinds of ludicrous behaviour at the site…You know, people staring directly into the sun, people laying hands over one another, people taking miracle photographs—all this stuff. It just leaves a negative impression on people and it makes us and this place look foolish. 69

To conclude, the increasing availability of modern photographic cameras coupled with the desire among Marian pilgrims for external signs of their religious faith has caused the photographic process and the taking of picture miracles to become an important component of the Marian pilgrimage and religious experience for many Catholics. Moreover, the emergence and popularity of this folk practice has had a sig-

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68 Interview by author. September 2001, Marmora, Ontario, Canada.
69 Interview by author. August 2001, Marmora, Ontario, Canada.
nificant impact in various Catholic circles. For instance, the practice of miraculous photography has helped to facilitate the proliferation of portable Christian sacred objects in the post-Conciliar period and has democratized the divine viewing experience, allowing average Catholics (specifically, those who believe in the miraculous nature of particular photographs) the opportunity to view that which has traditionally been accepted as only being privy to seers, saints, and the deceased.  

This ritual activity has also affected the religious sensibility of certain Catholics. Although this study has ascertained that the practice of supernatural photography and belief in the miraculous nature of photographs by Marmora devotees has generally functioned to fortify their existing religious world view (especially a continued belief in the intercession of divine beings and the sacredness of the Greensides’ farm), the adoption of photographic technology to create picture miracles, not unlike other forms of ritual activity or direct encounters with the sacred, can potentially challenge an established system of belief as well as significantly alter one’s relationship with, and perception of, the divine.

Finally, this study has found that the attitude Catholics have towards supernatural photography has not simply been positive nor has it remained fixed. There are Marian devotees who are ambivalent towards picture miracles, those that are adamantly opposed to this ritual activity, and even Catholics whose acceptance of miraculous photography has waned. With regard to this last point, it appears that the current abundance of Christian miracle photos, their questionable quality, and the relative ease by which miraculous photos can be produced (and subsequently reproduced) has diminished the sacred value of these objects for certain believers. Despite these facts, there continues to be a significant number of Catholics who accept photography as a means to prove the existence of, and remain in contact with, an immanent and sacred cosmos. Thus, it is not surprising that miraculous photography continues to be accepted by many Marianists as another weapon in their miraculous arsenal to defend and sustain their supernaturalistic view of the world. However, given the function of miraculous photography as a source of alienation, scepticism, and as a justification for schism, picture miracles may be aptly described as a double-edged sword in this Marianist arsenal.

70 Wojcik, 141.