INVENTING CATHOLIC IDENTITIES IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY SPAIN: THE VIRGIN BIEN-APARECIDA, 1904–1910

BY

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Since *The Invention of Tradition*, the collective volume edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, was first published in 1983, a tremendous amount of historical research has been done along the lines proposed by the contributors to this most inspiring book. However, the study of religious traditions, especially of Catholic traditions, may not have benefited from this approach as much as the traditions of other areas of scholarly interest. The aim of this article is to explore how modern Catholic identities—or rather some signs that convey Catholic identities—may have been invented or re-invented—and why this necessity was felt.

To this purpose, a particular devotion is examined. It is the case of a local madonna who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, was made the patroness of the Spanish northern diocese and province of Santander, more commonly known as La Montaña or Cantabria (the latter has been the official name of this autonomous region since 1980). How the patronage was achieved (despite the non-existence of an alleged popular will); the enthusiasm of the Marian movement and the struggle against secularization which formed the context of the patronage; the unifying symbol that the Virgen Bien Aparecida was intended to represent, and the type of Catholic identity it related to and helped to promote are discussed in the following pages.

I

An August day in 1605: Some shepherd children from Marrón (a small hamlet in the foothills of the Cantabrian mountains) were sheltering from a storm in a little ruin of a shrine devoted to St. Mark, on a wooded

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hill known as Somahoz. Suddenly, they noticed strange lights shining from one of the windows. Curious about the origin of the lights, the children approached the window and discovered a tiny statue of the Virgin Mary and Child. They did not even dare to touch it. The following days they continued to visit the shrine, lingering in front of the luminous madonna until late at night. When asked about where they went for so long, they eventually confessed. Although the children were not believed, several villagers could not resist approaching the site of the "apparition" to ascertain for themselves the truth or falsehood of the story. When they got there, they could see an unusual light coming from the little church. Frightened, they went back to Marrón and reported the fact to the parish priest. He became convinced that the children had told the truth and decided to lead a procession to St. Mark's.

On September 15, the villagers of Marrón made their way toward Somahoz. When they arrived at the shrine, the priest looked for the madonna, found her on the window-sill and took her down to show her to the people. Then, the parishioners carried the statue around the church in a procession, went inside again, placed it on the altar and devoutly heard Mass.

Some days later, the townspeople decided to move the image to a nearby church, that of St. Peter, at least until St. Mark's was rebuilt. However, as they were attempting to do this, the sunny day was suddenly disturbed by a terrible thunderstorm. Frightened, the villagers returned to St. Mark's, replaced the madonna on the altar, and had a Mass said. The day cleared up again, as clear as the Virgin's will to remain at Somahoz. At that point, the inhabitants of Marrón decided to have the Virgin's shrine built on the site of her apparition. And the Virgin was named Bien-Aparecida, that is the 'Well-Appeared,' Virgin.¹

So far, this would be just one example of a long series of discoveries of Marian statues and images in early modern Spain, and would tie in with the discovery pattern identified by William Christian—the finding of a sacred image by shepherds or their animals in the countryside, the miraculous failure of attempts to move it to the closest village, and the eventual building of a shrine on the very site of the apparition.² How-

¹The account of the apparition of Our Lady Bien-Aparecida is taken from Father José de León, *Historia de la Sagrada Imagen de Nuestra Señora Bien Aparecida que se venera en Hoz de Marrón, Provincia y Diócesis de Santander* (Rennes and Paris, 1890 [1777]).

²William A. Christian, Jr., *Apparitions in Late Medieval and Renaissance Spain* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1981), pp. 15–21. See also Mary Lee Nolan and Sidney Nolan, *Christian Pilgrimage in Modern Western Europe* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1989), pp. 258–266.

ever, three hundred years later, the Bien-Aparecida shrine was no longer just the objective of processions formed by local peasants, but the destination of larger pilgrimages coming from the provincial capital and from elsewhere in the diocese of Santander. In fact, by December, 1905, Our Lady Bien Aparecida had been proclaimed patroness of the diocese and province of Santander. In this way, not only was Mary's prominent role in the life of the Church during the so-called Marian age solemnly acknowledged; she now had also become involved in the heated politico-religious atmosphere of the Spanish 1900's.

II

The chronology of the Marian age of the Church¹ is symbolically delimited by the definition of two controversial Marian dogmas: the Immaculate Conception (1854) and the Assumption of the Virgin Mary into Heaven (1950). In the eighteenth century, enlightened clergymen found some forms of Marian piety (which would later become acceptable) bordering dangerously on superstition. From the 1960's, the Second Vatican Council would constitute a turning point leading toward a Catholicism oriented more toward Christ and the scriptures. In between, however, for more than a hundred years, Marian apparitions, pilgrimages, fraternities and congregations, prayers and other expressions of the devotion to Mary, maybe only competing with devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, marked and furthered the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century revival of Catholicism.

It is difficult not to notice the concurrence of the "age of Mary" with the "age of revolutions"—if we can apply Hobsbawm's phrase to a longer span of time. The Catholic devotion to Mary had deep roots, but Tridentine, and later enlightened Church authorities had distrusted visions, pilgrimages, miracles, and in general any type of religious mani-

¹The centrality of Mary in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Catholic Church has recently aroused the interest of historians and anthropologists. Among the various works dealing with this issue see, for example, David Blackburn, *Marpingen: Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Bismarckian Germany* (Oxford, 1993); William A. Christian Jr., *Visionaries: The Spanish Republic and the Reign of Christ* (Berkeley, California, 1996); Thomas A. Kselman, *Miracles and Prophecies in Nineteenth-Century France* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1983); Nicholas Perry and Loreto Echeverria, *Under the Heel of Mary* (London and New York, 1988); Barbara C. Pope, "Immaculate and Powerful: The Marian Revival in the Nineteenth Century," in C. W. Atkinson, C. H. Buchanan and R. Miles (eds.), *Immaculate and Powerful. The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality* (Boston, 1987), pp. 173-200, and Sandra L. Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary: From La Salette to Medjugorje* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1991).

festation that lay outside the sacramental system. In the nineteenth century, however, there was a shift in attitude. In the midst of such a turbulent century, many Catholics continued to turn to the powerful mediation of Mary to help them deal with their hopes and fears. Many even claimed to have seen her, and many more made their way toward the sites of apparitions, longing for spiritual or physical healing. In accepting some of these forms of Marian cult, the Church not only channeled a potentially dangerous movement of popular piety which might get out of control at any time but saw in it a powerful weapon to fight back against secularization, anticlerical policies, socialism, and whatever other modern threats might jeopardize its stability.⁴ In turn, the Church's consent to and promotion of the cult of Mary legitimized and intensified the Marianism already present in popular Catholicism, and fostered new instances of its most extraordinary manifestations.⁵

The definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854 symbolically opened an era of Marian devotion. From a historical point of view, it would be almost impossible not to relate the proclamation of this dogma by Pius IX to his continued opposition to the unification of Italy, the subsequent issue of the *Syllabus errorum* in 1864, and the dogma defining papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council in 1870 while the Italian troops laid siege to the capital of Christendom. No doubt, the Catholic Church never ceased to consider itself under siege during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: a "beleaguered tower" in hostile territory. In this context, the flourishing cult of Mary, and especially the doctrine of her Immaculate Conception, reassured the Church that it would finally prevail over its enemies.

Not only the universal Church, but also the Spanish Church saw itself as increasingly isolated in a hostile modern world. Having begun the nineteenth century in a position of privilege, the Spanish Church soon underwent the abolition of the tithe, the secularization of its properties, the dissolution of religious communities, and the slaughter of friars during 1834-35. In 1851 a settlement was reached by means of a Concordat, which granted the Church rights and privileges. However, in 1868 a revolution overthrew the Bourbon dynasty and the Spanish Church again felt itself to be under threat. Moreover, the anticlerical actions of the revolutionary *juntas* and the provisional government, as well as the constitutional recognition of religious freedom, confirmed

⁴See Blackbourn, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-53; Ralph Gibson, *A Social History of French Catholicism 1789-1914* (London and New York, 1989), pp. 138-157; Kselman, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-94, 141-160; Pope, *op. cit.*, pp. 173-175.

⁵Blackbourn, *op. cit.*, pp. 395-396.

the ecclesiastical authorities' motives for condemning liberalism, in whose name the attack on the Church had been launched. Even in 1875, when a more moderate liberal rule was re-established and a Bourbon king had been restored to the throne, the Church was to retain a strong suspicion of liberalism. Nevertheless, thanks to the support of the new moderate liberal rulers, by the turn of the century the Spanish Church had achieved an impressive recovery.⁶

III

By 1905, the first year of the official patronage of the Virgin Bien-Aparecida in Cantabria, the Spanish Church was again in trouble. Anticlericalism, confined to republican newspapers for more than twenty years, had resurfaced anew in the political arena and had reached both the government and the people. After the loss of the remains of the Spanish empire in 1898, awareness of the precarious state of the nation was widespread, and anticlericalism regained political force as some groups (intellectuals, republicans, radicals), alarmed by the institutional recovery of Catholicism, insisted on blaming the Church for the decline of Spain.⁷ At the same time, French anticlerical politics offered a path for them to follow. And, in fact, in 1901 the Liberals (one of the two parties taking turns to share power) decided to advocate an anticlerical policy. Their anticlericalism, however, was moderate compared with that of the republicans. The republicans were a significant political force—in Santander (the provincial capital of Cantabria) they were the most-voted-for political group. They were also the ones who had kept anticlericalism alive for a quarter of a century. By the turn of the century, as a result of the 1898 mood of discontent, their anticlericalism was growing in regard both to the importance it was given in their politics and to the violence of the language employed to express it. Not surprisingly, violence was not restricted to words; it extended to actions: thus, for instance, in Santander in 1901 and 1903, two demon-

⁶Two good introductions to the Spanish Church during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are William J. Callahan, *Church, Politics, and Society in Spain, 1750-1874* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1984), and Frances Lannon, *Privilege, Persecution, and Prophecy: The Catholic Church in Spain, 1875-1975* (Oxford, 1987).

⁷See Carlos Serrano, "1900 o la difícil modernidad," in S. Salaün and C. Serrano (eds.), *1900 en España* (Madrid, 1991), pp. 193-205; Manuel Revuelta González, "La recuperación eclesiástica y el rechazo anticlerical en el cambio de siglo," in J. L. García Delgado (ed.), *España entre dos siglos (1875-1931). Continuidad y cambio* (Madrid, 1991), pp. 219-231; Julio de la Cueva, "The Stick and the Candle: Clericals and Anticlericals in Northern Spain 1898-1910," *European History Quarterly*, 26 (1996), 241-265.

strations ended with a mob attacking convents and other religious institutions.

In 1904 the fiftieth anniversary of the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was to be commemorated in Cantabria, as everywhere else. As required by the pope, pilgrimages to Marian shrines were made throughout the region, and on December 8 special religious services were held in all the churches of the diocese. These events were intended as pious celebrations, but were also presented as "comforting" demonstrations of the vitality of Catholicism in a country which was thought to "have lost an enormous treasure of faith and morals."⁸ Mary and the Immaculate Conception gave the faithful hope in the final victory of the Church and the destruction of all evil.⁹ The vigor of a threatened Spanish Catholicism could certainly rely on a figure of Mary considered "the blessed Woman who alone triumphed over all heresies, over all the enemies of Her Most Holy Son, over all the refuters of His Vicar and of His Church."¹⁰ Consequently, the well-attended novenas, vespers, vigils, Masses, and other services, as well as the multitude of blue cloths and lights displayed in the streets, could be regarded by the Diocesan Bulletin as "a glorious page in the difficult history of the present day."¹¹

The Marian enthusiasm evoked by these commemorative events encouraged Emilio Hidalgo, parish priest of Marrón and administrator of the Bien-Aparecida shrine, to put forward the idea that Mary, under her title of "Bien-Aparecida," should be declared patroness of La Montaña. The sources do not reveal the origins of the proposal, as Hidalgo used the impersonal form: "the idea has been conceived that . . ." in all the available documentation.¹² It must be said that, in any case, the rapidity and ease with which the project became a reality point to a remarkable predisposition for it to be accepted.

One thing is known about this initiative: the bishop of Santander, Vicente S. Sánchez de Castro, did not inspire it. Moreover, he was reluctant

⁸*Boletín Oficial Eclesiástico del Obispado de Santander* (hereafter cited as *BOEOS*), December 14, 1904.

⁹*El Diario Montañés*, December 8, 1904; *Páginas Dominicales*, December 8, 1904.

¹⁰*BOEOS*, December 14, 1904. For this argument, see also Wenceslao Escalzo, "Recuerdos y esperanzas," *Páginas Dominicales*, December 8, 1905.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²The documents used in the proceedings leading to the proclamation of Our Lady Bien-Aparecida as patroness of Cantabria are kept in the Archivo del Santuario de la Bien-Aparecida, Marrón (hereafter cited as ASBA), book "Crónica del tercer centenario y patronato de Nuestra Señora Bien-Aparecida" (hereafter cited as "Crónica").

to sponsor the patronage and ask for its approval by the pope without first assessing the devotion to the Virgin Bien-Aparecida, probably considering that the universal popularity of a madonna located in a shrine in the far east of the province was not at all self-evident. In order to help the bishop overcome his reticence, on March 6, 1905, Hidalgo sent a circular letter asking all the rural deans of the diocese for their opinion on the faithful's devotion to the Virgin Bien-Aparecida. Since the letter was written in ambiguous terms, it could have given the impression that it was the bishop himself who wished that Our Lady Bien-Aparecida be proclaimed patroness of the diocese.¹³ Thus, it is no surprise that all the deans whose response is recorded gave their approval to the project. However, only those in charge of deaneries in the eastern third of the diocese clearly confirmed the faithful's keen devotion to Our Lady Bien-Aparecida. Those from the center reflected the reality of such a devotion less enthusiastically, or made vague references to its expansion throughout the province. The only two recorded reports from the west (San Vicente de la Barquera and Comillas) brought to light the fact that the Catholics of that area not only lacked devotion to the Virgin Bien-Aparecida but also that they did not even know of her existence.¹⁴ Furthermore, as only the deans from the diocese of Santander were consulted, the extent of the devotion in western and southern parts of the province that did not belong to that diocese, but whose patroness (as the patroness of La Montaña) Our Lady Bien Aparecida would also become, was not taken into account.

After completing the consultation with the rural deans, Emilio Hidalgo also sought the blessing of the council of the provincial government (*Diputación Provincial*), as it was thought necessary that the "civil constituent [of Cantabrian society] added their supplications to those of the religious one."¹⁵ A letter and several personal interviews secured the support of the councilors, and the proposal that the Holy See should authorize the proclamation of Our Lady Bien-Aparecida as patroness of the province was quickly and almost unanimously (but for one vote) passed on May 18.¹⁶ On the same day, the town council of Ampuero (the municipality to which Marrón and the shrine belonged) had reached a similar agreement. Letters from both councils, asking for pa-

¹³Circular letter from Emilio Hidalgo to deans, March 6, 1905, ASBA, "Crónica."

¹⁴The Dean of San Vicente de la Barquera and the Dean of Comillas to Emilio Hidalgo, March 29, 1905, and March 30, 1905, ASBA, "Crónica."

¹⁵Emilio Hidalgo to the President of the Provincial Council, May 16, 1905, ASBA, "Crónica."

¹⁶Minutes of the session of May 18, 1905, Archivo Histórico de la Diputación Provincial, Santander, book 0842.

pal approval; a summary of the deans' reports along with another report from the Cathedral Chapter, and a letter from the Cantabrian community in Cuba were all sent to Rome by the bishop. Only then did Emilio Hidalgo break the news of the projected patronage to the general public, apologizing for the secrecy of the proceedings thus far.¹⁷

In Rome the process slowed down. The original project looked forward to celebrating the third centenary of the apparition and the first feast day of Our Lady Bien-Aparecida as patroness of La Montaña at the same time. The Sacred Congregation of Rites, however, took its time: on July 14 it formally admitted the request; on October 26, it was informed favorably, and in a meeting held on December 5 it decided to sanction the patronage. Subsequently, on December 6, Pope Pius X ratified the Congregation's decision and officially declared the Virgin Bien-Aparecida patroness of the province of Santander, and a decree of the Sacred Congregation of Rites was issued. Finally, on January 14, 1906, the *Diocesan Bulletin* of Santander published the decree.

An immediate consequence of the decree of patronage was the transformation of local pilgrimages to the shrine into diocesan pilgrimages. Thus, in September, 1905, even though the Virgin Bien-Aparecida was not yet the official patroness, the third centenary of her apparition was solemnly commemorated with a triduum which intended to gather together people from all over the diocese—the fact that Rome was being slower than expected could not hinder a fitting celebration of the centenary. Nevertheless, during the first two days of the triduum, the only organized pilgrimages came from nearby areas. On September 15, the anniversary of the apparition and the main day of the celebrations, “no special pilgrimage was registered” and although “hundreds and thousands of people” were reported to have visited the shrine despite the rainy weather, there was no mention of *how many* hundreds or thousands.¹⁸

In 1906 the first diocesan pilgrimages to the shrine of the now-official patroness of Cantabria were made. After a series of delays, they were eventually scheduled for September 7, 8, and 9. The triduum was presided over by Bishop Sánchez de Castro and was led by a canon, a parish priest, and a Jesuit, in an obvious attempt to have all the clergy represented. This time a longer and more careful preparation, as well as the appeal of the newly-proclaimed patronage, attracted a larger number of the devout. The official account calculated between 18,000 and

¹⁷*El Diario Montañés*, June 13, 1905.

¹⁸*BOEOS*, September 21, 1905.

20,000 people turning out at Somahoz during the three days. However, the organizers were not successful in bringing pilgrims from any deanery west of Santander (e.g., from the western half of the diocese) or from the Cantabrian areas belonging to other dioceses. The absence of pilgrims from San Vicente de la Barquera, Comillas, and Torrelavega was blamed on the railway companies. The absence of pilgrims from Liébana, Polaciones, or Campoo (valleys belonging to the dioceses of León, Palencia, and Burgos respectively) was neither explained nor even mentioned.¹⁹

IV

The traditions of modern Catholicism are as worthy of being interpreted within the general framework put forward by the contributors to *The Invention of Tradition* as the traditions of other modern institutions. In our case, "the use of ancient materials to construct invented traditions of a novel type for quite novel purposes"²⁰ had an effective part in the Spanish Catholic revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This revival did not involve the re-emergence of the old type of customary, communal, local Catholicism, but rather reflected the endeavor to create a new type of more militant, internalized, strongly united Catholicism. At the turn of the century, this "new" Catholicism was needed to face the threat of secularization, which in the 1900's was felt as a real, political—rather than a vague, sociological—threat. It was needed as well by the Church's never-abandoned aspiration to establish a fully Catholic state and Catholic society in Spain. In order to achieve that Catholicism, modern and traditional, sacred and profane methods were set in motion simultaneously. Therefore, on the one hand, Spanish Catholics understood that they had to resort to "modern," purely profane means if they wanted to push forward their proposals in a world becoming more secular; so the press, meetings, demonstrations, and mass political movements were some of the devices employed by Catholics to respond to the socio-political circumstances of the 1900's. At the same time, Spanish Catholics in no way dismissed customary teaching and preaching, sacraments, religious services, missions, pro-

¹⁹BOEOS, September 17, 1906.

²⁰Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, England, 1994), p. 6.

cessions, devotions, pilgrimages, *romerías* and *fiestas*, pious associations, etc.; instead, they updated these old instruments and made ample use of them. Thus, these traditional means, while remaining symbolically associated with the past and tradition of the Church, were charged with different meanings and now applied to present-day purposes.

One of the needs of Spanish Catholicism was to promote its unity, to serve as a source of strength in the critical circumstances of the 1900's. The need was even more obvious in a diocese like that of Santander, consisting of a multitude of small, isolated valleys whose inhabitants, proudly fond of their local traditions, showed little identification with other, larger geographical units.²¹ The political confrontations between Catholics who accepted the liberal state and those who did not were an even more worrying source of divisiveness, just when the Church was feeling challenged from the very political realm. There were also other types of division, of greater or lesser importance, which could not be ignored: different spiritual attachments and devotions, the difference between and within secular and regular clergy, class differences among the laity, and so on. The construction of a unique identity was, therefore, an objective necessity of Cantabrian Catholicism. And the finding—the invention—of a unifying, identifying symbol could be expected to provide a feasible means to that end. Emilio Hidalgo, though surely not aware of all these considerations, supplied that symbol when he proposed that Our Lady Bien-Aparecida be made the patroness of La Montaña.

Hence, the character of "invented" tradition of the patronage of the Virgin Bien-Aparecida is apparent in its use as an "artificial" unifying symbol in times of trouble for the Church. However, it is even more clearly revealed by the very process of its invention. There were real elements of popular tradition at the heart of the whole matter, as the cult of Mary has always been a major theme—and one of the most appealing—of popular religion, and as the devotion to the Virgin Bien-Aparecida could actually claim to be firmly rooted in the tradition of the people. However, the truth of Mary's general popular appeal notwithstanding, her particular popularity as Bien-Aparecida had always been confined to the eastern third of the region of Cantabria.

In order to disguise this original lack of universal acceptance, it was pretended that our Lady Bien-Aparecida had been chosen as the pa-

²¹This continued to be the same even in the 1960's, as shown by William A. Christian, Jr., *Person and God in a Spanish Valley* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1989), pp. 13-15.

troness of La Montaña as a result of "the people's will," either reflecting an ancient, self-evident universal devotion to this Virgin throughout the region²² or as the result of this particular madonna being freely selected as a patroness out of all the local madonnas of Cantabria. In either case, "popular will" would have been expressed through the vote of the rural deans, as representatives of the clergy, and the provincial councilors, as representatives of "the people."²³ It is already clear that the movement leading to the patronage was not born "from below" but imposed "from above" by ecclesiastical and political elites onto the populace. It is no wonder, then, that a Catholic journalist, after having admitted the limited success of the 1906 pilgrimages in spite of the ecclesiastical triumphalism, recommended various actions to "popularize" the patronage, thus challenging the official presumption that the Virgin Bien-Aparecida *already* enjoyed widespread popularity.²⁴

Alongside the lack of universal favor of the Virgin Bien-Aparecida and the striking feature revealing the invented character of the "tradition" of her patronage, what should also be borne in mind is that this patronage was probably only possible in the emotional and doctrinal context of the Marian age, a rather recent phenomenon in the history of the Church.²⁵ More prosaically, one would wonder whether the choice of patroness would have fallen on the Virgin Bien-Aparecida had the shrine not been connected to Marrón by a road built in 1888, and had Marrón not, in turn, been connected to the provincial capital and other towns by the Santander-Bilbao railway laid in 1896.

²²Thus, absolutely ignoring the non-existence of the devotion to the Virgin Bien-Aparecida in western and southern Cantabria, the provincial council affirmed: "throughout the province all the faithful kneel down before her in devotion" (the Provincial Council to the Pope, May 21, 1905, ASBA, "Crónica").

²³Bishop Vicente S. Sánchez de Castro's pastoral letter of January 8, 1906, *BOEOS*, January 14, 1906; Sacred Congregation of Rites' decree, *BOEOS*, January 14, 1906; Manuel Sainz de los Terreros, *Santuarios marianos en la Provincia de Santander* (Madrid, 1906), p. 24; Eduardo de Huidobro, *Noticia Histórica de Ntra. Sra. Bien-Aparecida, Patrona de la Diócesis y Provincia de Santander, y novena en honor de la misma excelsa Abogada principal de la Montaña* (Santander, 1906), pp. 34-35; Carmen González Echegaray, *Santuarios marianos de Cantabria* (Santander, 1988), p. 91.

²⁴Pedro Sánchez, "Por si vale," *El Diario Montañés*, September 10, 1906.

²⁵As to the emotional context, Lourdes was the ultimate reference—thus, in the official account of the pilgrimages of September, 1906, the narrator indicated: "we witnessed scenes which reminded us of those we had recently seen in the grotto of Lourdes" (*BOEOS*, September 17, 1906). The bishop himself compared the Bien-Aparecida shrine to Lourdes after the pilgrimages of September, 1908 (*BOEOS*, September 21, 1908).

V

The Catholic unifying identity that the Virgin Bien-Aparecida was expected to symbolize emphasized the image of the Church as a redoubt of righteousness surrounded by the forces of evil. So, when Bishop Sánchez de Castro, one of the hierarchy's most severe critics of liberalism, presented the new patroness of the diocese, not only did he point out the popular features of Mary as the heavenly Mother particularly concerned with sufferers and sinners, but, above all, he emphasized her role as she who "dissipating the darkness caused by errors and continuous social turmoil, shows us the safe path leading to Jesus Christ."²⁶ And when calling the pilgrimages of September, 1906, he invited the faithful to go to the shrine and pray not for their own particular needs, but for the more general needs of the Church and the country,

asking [the Virgin] not to turn her merciful eyes away from our diocese, to deliver us from evil, to guard our faith, to make it thrive free from heresy and impiety in our dear motherland, to thwart the plans of the enemies of the Church, and to defend Our Most Holy Father Pius X, who has made her our Defender and Advocate, against them.²⁷

The final victory could well rely on Mary, who, "as in her Immaculate Conception crushed Satan's head, [was also trusted to] [. . .] halt the advance of the legions that serve under his command."²⁸ Even more significantly, one influential Catholic publicist invoked the ideal of a crusade and, regarding Our Lady Bien-Aparecida as a twentieth-century Virgin of Covadonga, explicitly connected the purpose of her patronage with the launching of a new Reconquest against "the modern Moors."²⁹

The characterization of a common enemy—the "modern errors" and their advocates—and the affirmation of the will to defeat it were only a part of the definition of a common identity which was attempted by Cantabrian Catholicism under the mantle of Our Lady Bien-Aparecida.

²⁶Bishop Sánchez de Castro's pastoral letter of January 8, 1906, *BOEOS*, January 14, 1906.

²⁷Bishop Sánchez de Castro's pastoral letter of August 14, 1906, *BOEOS*, August 14, 1906.

²⁸Bishop Sánchez de Castro's pastoral letter of November 21, 1906, *BOEOS*, November 22, 1906.

²⁹José M. de los Corrales, "La Bien-Aparecida," *El Adalid*, September 16, 1906. According to historical tradition, the first Christian victory and beginning of the Reconquest, after the Moorish invasion of 711, took place in 722 in Covadonga (Asturias), under the special protection of the Virgin venerated in this place.

It has already been indicated that overcoming the localism of Cantabrian popular religion could be considered another absolutely essential aim of a Catholicism that needed unity as a source of strength.³⁰ The challenge for Catholicism was to retain its popular appeal, while gaining a translocal dimension. Marian devotions seemed to be particularly suitable for that goal. At a wider level, the endeavor to transform Our Lady of Pilar, in Saragossa, into a national shrine, reached its peak in connection with the fiftieth anniversary of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, and eventually failed.³¹ However, the well-established devotions of Our Lady of Covadonga in Asturias or of Our Lady of Begoña and Our Lady of Arantzazu in the Basque Country (both neighboring regions) showed the potential of Marian cults in constructing regional Catholic identities.³² Moreover, the very recent declaration, in September, 1903, of the Virgin of Begoña as the official patroness of Vizcaya could have triggered the wish of Cantabrian churchmen to have their own regional patroness—and it should not be forgotten that the idea of the patronage was initiated in the part of La Montaña nearest to Vizcaya.

In this manner, the Virgin Bien-Aparecida was an instrument for the integration of the diocese of Santander. The motherly figure of Mary could not be more appropriate for gathering such a scattered diocesan family around her. Her representation as Advocate and Queen added the role of almighty intercessor on behalf of the entire diocese to that of loving common Mother of all the diocese's people. The importance of the patroness for the diocese was well understood by Bishop Sánchez de Castro, who soon forgot his initial reluctance and cared both for the success of her cult and for the improvement of everything

³⁰The characterization of Spanish popular religion as "local religion," in William A. Christian, Jr., *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1981).

³¹See BOEOS, August, 1904–May, 1905; also see William A. Christian, Jr., *Moving Crucifixes in Modern Spain* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1992), pp. 13–14.

³²The fact that Cantabria lacked a major Marian devotion was resented by one of the rural deans: "if this project is successful, we will no longer envy Covadonga, Montserrat, El Pilar, Lourdes, and all those happy places chosen by the heavenly Queen as site of her throne" (the Dean of Escalante to Emilio Hidalgo, April 25, 1905, ASBA, "Crónica"). Later, Emilio Hidalgo would refer to this argument and would add the case of Vizcaya as a province favored by the Virgin—Our Lady of Begoña—with her patronage (*El Diario Montañés*, June 13, 1905). And later it would be repeated by Agapito Aguirre, one of the preachers of the 1906 triduum (*El Diario Montañés*, September 9, 1906). In 1908 Covadonga and Begoña were still the models to be followed as far as the cult of the Virgin Bien-Aparecida was concerned (Nionato, "La Patrona de la Montaña," *Páginas Dominicales*, September 13, 1908).

concerning her shrine. In 1908 he asked the Trinitarians to found a community in Somahoz to look after the shrine.³³

The inhabitants of the province of Santander lacked a definite identity as a whole—unlike the Basques, who had a different language, or the Asturians, who had a mythical participation in the formation of Spain. They neither completely felt themselves to be part of Castile nor perceived themselves as a separate region, and they lived in isolated valleys, divided into four different dioceses, etc. So, the Virgin Bien-Aparecida could provide them with a common symbol to relate to. Furthermore, it was a symbol perfectly suited to the incipient, mild Cantabrian regionalism of the turn of the century, which was profoundly Spanish and profoundly Catholic.³⁴ Thus, the close connection of the Virgin Bien-Aparecida and La Montaña with the fate of Catholic Spain was emphasized by the recounting of old legends about the residence of Pelayo (the mythical first king of Asturias and proto-hero of the Reconquest against the Moors) and the upbringing of Fernán González (first independent count of Castile, a region which was, in turn, looked upon as the medieval kingdom that led both the fighting against the Muslims and the unification of Spain) at or near Somahoz.³⁵ The patronage of our Lady Bien-Aparecida also supplied these “regionalists” with an opportunity to clearly equate region with religion, of *montañesismo* (Cantabrian regionalism) and devotion to Our Lady Bien Aparecida. Thus, in September, 1906, “the noble and Catholic Cantabrian people” would have been represented by the pilgrims to the shrine, whereas those who had expressed their reservations or criticism about the patronage would be accused of “lack of *montañesismo*.”³⁶ The identification of Cantabria and Catholicism would be, therefore, of the same kind as the identification of Spain and Catholicism which summarized the ideology of national-Catholicism (*nacional-catolicismo*), thirty years later under Franco. The devotion to the Virgin Bien-Aparecida, therefore, sought to rein-

³³The diocesan dimension of the patronage was highlighted by Bishop Sánchez de Castro in his cited pastoral letters and in that of September 14, 1906, *BOEOS*, September 17, 1906. The characterization of Mary as Mother, Advocate, and Queen is common to all the literature about the patronage, and these three aspects were continually stressed by the bishop. On the foundation of the Trinitarian community, see various documents, ASBA, book “Fundación del Convento de la Bien Aparecida.”

³⁴On the Catholic traditionalism of Cantabrian regionalism, see Manuel Suárez Cortina, *Casonas, bidalgos y linajes. La invención de la tradición cántabra* (Santander, 1994).

³⁵See Bernardino Peña Diego, “Por la Bien-Aparecida,” *El Diario Montañés*, June 26, 1905; Huidobro, *op. cit.*, pp. 24–26; Sainz de los Terreros, *op. cit.*, pp. 13–14.

³⁶*BOEOS*, September 17, 1906.

force a sentiment of Cantabrian regionhood proudly related to a sentiment of Spanish nationhood, with both regional and national sentiments inseparably linked to Catholic religion.

Another level of the translocal Catholic identity that was promoted by the patronage had to do with the universal dimension of the Church. The universalism of the Church after a century of ultramontaniam was translated into a strong allegiance to the pope. Unlike local patrons and patronesses, who usually owed their position to age-old popular custom, the patronage of the Virgin Bien-Aparecida was ultimately due to the confirmation of the alleged "will of the people" by the pope. The conclusive role of the pope in the selection of the patroness never ceased to be highlighted.³⁷

In these different ways, the minute madonna of Somahoz came to represent a call to Cantabrian Catholics to relate themselves not only to their local communities and devotions, but also, and above all, to the diocesan, national, and universal Church.

The pilgrimages to the Bien-Aparecida shrine may also have been aimed at reinforcing the desired translocal dimension of Cantabrian Catholicism since people from all the districts of the diocese could be gathered in a single place to engage in religious exercises and socializing. As a Catholic newspaper commented: "on the summit of Somahoz, under the mantle of their common Patroness, the most distant districts and villages have tightened the bonds of regional brotherhood with those of Christian charity."³⁸ This socializing among the pilgrims points to another aspect of the integrative potential of the devotion—the momentary forgetting of social differences. Pilgrimage has been defined as a "liminoid" phenomenon which tends to blur the differences of status among the individuals participating in it.³⁹ The split between the rich and the poor, patricians and plebeians was, for one day, symbolically forgotten. Therefore, although no record was kept of the way the faithful were accommodated in the trains heading for Somahoz in these first years, it is plausible to think that, like the Marian pilgrimage to Las Caldas in 1904, the devotees of Our Lady Bien-Aparecida traveled to Mar-rón by train "making no distinction between social classes or categories," and so:

³⁷See Bishop Sánchez de Castro's pastoral letters of January 8, 1906, *BOEOS*, January 14, 1906, and August 14, 1906, *BOEOS*, August 14, 1906.

³⁸*Páginas Dominicales*, September 20, 1908.

³⁹Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture. Anthropological Perspectives* (Oxford, 1978).

in many carriages one was able to see together like brothers, bound by the tie of a common fraternal love, a common fervor, a common hope, the distinguished gentleman from an old Cantabrian family and the humble workshop laborer; the illustrious professor devoted to science, or the senior civil servant, or the wealthy bank owner, or the rich landowner, and the modest clerk or the poor artisan.⁴⁰

VI

There were no official pilgrimages to the Bien-Aparecida shrine in September, 1907. And the unofficial ones confined themselves to the traditional local pilgrimages of the faithful of nearby areas. Even the indulgences granted by the bishop to those visiting the shrine on the patroness's feast day were not enough to encourage pilgrims from other areas to go to Somahoz. By contrast, 1908 was "the year of the pilgrimages"⁴¹: from the diocese of Santander, pilgrims had set off toward the Marian shrines of Covadonga, Saragossa, and Lourdes. The Bien-Aparecida shrine was also the destination of many Cantabrian Catholics during the celebrations held on September 13, 14, and 15. For the first time, the faithful from the western districts of the diocese came to meet Our Lady Bien-Aparecida. They, like their fellow pilgrims from the rest of the diocese, had been packed into special trains by zealous priests wanting to please their bishop. In fact, it was Sánchez de Castro's desire that the patroness be honored with all the pomp and ceremony provided by the splendor of carefully prepared liturgy and the gathering of pious masses. The newly installed community of Trinitarian friars contributed enormously to the successful organization of the events. In 1909 and 1910 the patroness's day was also solemnized with pilgrimages and special services, but the standards of the 1908 celebrations were never reached again.⁴² However, the absence of grand displays of Marian devotion at the Bien-Aparecida shrine was absolutely justified at least in 1910, since attention focused on another issue of the greatest importance for Catholics. In the course of the events regarding this issue, Mary was going to be given a major symbolical role.

The year 1910 marked a peak in the tension between the Catholic Church and the advocates of secularization in Spain. The government had introduced the "*ley del Candado*" ("the Padlock Bill"), a bill that for-

⁴⁰BOEOS, September 21, 1904.

⁴¹*Páginas Dominicales*, September 6, 1908.

⁴²For an account of the celebrations in these years, see *El Diario Montañés*. September, 1907-1910.

bade the establishment of new religious communities for two years, a period during which a stricter law on associations (stricter at least as far as the submission of religious associations to common legislation was concerned) was expected to be passed. All anticlericals, even those who regarded the proposal as extremely timid, supported the law, in the hope of further secularization measures. The reaction of religious forces was unprecedented and led to mass mobilizations throughout Spain.

On October 2, according to the Catholic *El Diario Montañés*, sixteen thousand people demonstrated against the bill in the streets of Santander and over forty thousand more in the rest of the region. The latter gathered in more pious sites—they rallied in a dozen shrines scattered throughout Cantabria.⁴³ And, not surprisingly, all the shrines chosen for the gatherings were Marian shrines, and one of them was, of course, the shrine of Our Lady Bien-Aparecida. A certain image of Mary was thus proved to be well established, certainly in the perception of Catholic leaders and very plausibly in the minds of many of the faithful. In Cantabria, at least, Mary had been confirmed in her role as the guarantor of the unity of Catholics against the progress of secularization.

VII

Opposition and lack of success were two of the risks which faced the promoters of the patronage. First of all, the patronage of the Virgin Bien-Aparecida was regarded as a threatening symbol by those who did not share the prospect of a religious society for Cantabria and Spain. Thus, the Cantabrian republicans firmly opposed the organization of the pilgrimages which were to be held in September, 1906, on the grounds that these kinds of religious events only served as manifestations of "Catholic exclusivism" and usually ended up turning into political demonstrations against "Freedom and Progress."⁴⁴ Moreover, they accused the promoters of the patronage of attempting to introduce a new, nontraditional devotion as a way of achieving political goals of a reactionary character by spurious means, and related the celebrations to the advance of clericalism in northern Spain.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the republicans felt that the pilgrimages would be a real provocation, given the heated atmosphere surrounding the religious question at the time

⁴³*El Diario Montañés*, October 3-5, 1910.

⁴⁴*La Montaña*, August 17, 1906.

⁴⁵*La Montaña*, August 19, and September 10, 1906.

as well as the general strike by miners who were reportedly prone not to distinguish between employers and the devout.⁴⁶ Finally, after these subtle threats, the most radical republicans would claim that, if the pilgrimages had been able to take place without bloodshed, it had been due to their own benevolence and control over the masses.⁴⁷

The new regional cult of the Virgin Bien-Aparecida, therefore, attracted the anger of anticlericals and secularists, but failed to arouse the deep attachment of many devout Cantabrian Catholics. The difficulties of these first years' pilgrimages have already been underlined—their success was somewhat limited as well as devoid of spontaneity. In the beginning, indeed, they were not even able to compete with expeditions to more traditional, local shrines which also celebrated their festivals in mid-September, attracting the faithful from nearby areas, and thus preventing them from going to Somahoz.⁴⁸ Moreover, the tercentenary of the apparitions and the proclamation of the Virgin Bien-Aparecida as the patroness of the diocese and province of Santander met with the indifference of the press, even of the Conservative party press, local organ of one of the liberal regime's dominant parties; only the Catholic newspapers offered an extensive coverage of both events. Later, the Conservative press would join the Catholic press in promoting the patronage but, even so, it was not possible to organize diocesan pilgrimages every year. The local press of the far east of Cantabria would continue to reflect people's affection toward the Virgin Bien-Aparecida but, in these first years, would never regard her as the patroness of the whole region.⁴⁹

The evidence suggests that the devotion to Our Lady Bien-Aparecida really did spread in the long term, but in a rather incomplete way. As late as the 1960's, in some southwestern parts of the diocese, devotion to the Virgin Bien-Aparecida ranked well below local devotions—and even below the devotion to images located in other regions, in the preferences of the faithful.⁵⁰ Quite recently (December 8, 1986), during the opening ceremony of the Diocesan Synod of Santander (the first in a hundred years), the statue of the Virgin Bien-Aparecida had to share its privileged position in the cathedral of Santander with that of the Virgin of the Light, patroness of the westernmost district of Liébana, and with

⁴⁶*La Montaña*, September 3, 1906.

⁴⁷*La Montaña*, September 9, 1906.

⁴⁸Sánchez, *op. cit.*

⁴⁹See *El Asón*, September, 1909–1910, and *El Avisador* and *La Ilustración de Castro*, September, 1906–1910.

⁵⁰Christian, *Person*, pp. 54–78.

the Virgin of Montesclaros, patroness of the southern district of Cam-poo.⁵¹

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Spanish Church was in need of symbols which would help promote a Catholic sense of belonging to a united community in order to struggle more efficiently against secularization. In "the age of Mary" Marian devotions would seem perfectly fitted to fulfill that function. Unifying symbols of this and other types were sought both at a national and at a regional/diocesan level, but the search appears to have been more successful at the latter level. In the northern region of Cantabria, geographical, political, social, and even purely religious divisions among Catholics made the necessity for a strong collective identity—and therefore of a unifying symbol—even more acute if possible. The proposal that the Virgin Bien-Aparecida, venerated in the far east of Cantabria, should be declared patroness of the diocese and region offered a chance to satisfy that need. Thus, in times of crisis for the established religion, a patroness was invented for Cantabria, with the old materials of a popular local devotion serving the new goals of reaffirming the identity of the region as a common and uniquely Catholic identity. The story of the invention of the patronage would eventually be, as many others, a story of both achievement and failure. Catholic elites succeeded in turning a local madonna into the patroness of the region and having her progressively accepted as such by the Cantabrian faithful. However, they failed to make her a unique, deeply felt, supreme religious symbol, as they also failed to impose a single religious identity on all Cantabrians. It is a story which could well be applied to the whole of Spanish Catholicism and maybe to other regional and national Catholicisms—the attempt to create a single common identity based on religious traditions of a more or less invented nature, and the eventual failure to achieve such a goal.

⁵¹Ana María Rivas, "Símbolos religiosos en Cantabria: crisol de identidades," typescript of the paper given at the course "La religiosidad en Cantabria: una mirada antropológica," Camargo, July, 1992 (copy provided by Prof. Manuel Suárez Cortina).