Blessed among All Women: The Missionary Virgin, Identity and Territory in Patagonia

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Abstract: After the creation of the Diocese of Viedma (1953), in Northern Patagonia, there took place the dedication to the Missionary Virgin, promoted by the Diocese’s second Bishop, Monsignor Miguel Hesayne (1975–1993). In the midst of the military dictatorship (1976–1983), he appointed her Patron Saint of Río Negro, a province that at the time belonged to the Diocese of Viedma. He followed the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, especially the Puebla Document, which considers the Virgin Mary as the patron saint of the Americas, with the dedication of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Hesayne sought to identify his Diocese with a female figure with indigenous features, like the Virgin of Guadalupe. In conceiving the Missionary Virgin deprived of ornaments and royal attributes, the bishop aimed to reflect his pastoral of the “option for the poor,” thus bringing attention to the marginalized groups and peripheral spaces of the province, and also attributing a new meaning to its social and territorial identity.

Résumé : C’est suite à la création du Diocèse de Viedma (1953), au nord de la Patagonie, que la Vierge Missionnaire a été désignée patronne de la province de Río Negro par le second évêque du diocèse, Monseigneur Miguel Hesayne (1975–1993). C’est sous un régime dictatorial (1976–1983) que Monseigneur Hesayne, suivant les enseignements de Vatican II, a répondu aux impératifs faisant de la Vierge Marie la patronne des Amériques. Plus concrètement, Monseigneur Hesayne souhaitait associer son diocèse à une figure féminine arborant des caractéristiques physiques locales.
The Virgin Mary in Latin American and Patagonian Perspective

In Latin America, devotion to the Virgin Mary is one of the most popular religious manifestations of the Catholic Church. “Likewise, the image of the Virgin Mary symbolized a feminine orientation which Catholicism imprinted upon its own specific conquest of the world during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Changes in gender relations, the ‘desertion’ of males from the rank and file of the Church, and the feminization of religion (a phenomenon also notable within Protestantism) had an influence on the pastoral strategies of the Church and gave incentive to new forms of association, of worship and charity whose protagonists were either secular or religious women who were inspired by the religiosity of Mary” (Di Stefano and Ramón Solans, 2006: 12).

In the mid-20th century, this was reinforced by the Vatican Council II Post-Conciliar Documents Lumen Gentium and Gaudium et Spes, which exalted the Virgin Mary (Pope Paul VI, 1974). In the eighth chapter of the first document, Mary appears as a sign of hope for the peregrine people of God, devoid of triumphalist and monarchic rhetoric: “Meanwhile, the Mother of Jesus, glorified in body and soul in heaven, is the image and foundation of the Church that will come. She shines on earth, until the day of the Lord shall come (Pope Paul VI, 1974: 304), as a sign of sure hope and solace to the people of God during its sojourn on earth” (Pope Paul VI, 1964, VIII: 68) (Vatican Council II, 1964, VIII:68).

That is to say, her image became popular in Church documents. In fact, Mary was appointed “star of evangelization and Mother of the people of Latin America” (Latin American Episcopate, 1979: 168) by the Third General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate (1979) that took place in Puebla.

This Latin American ideal is personified in the Virgin of Guadalupe, who “became the great sign, with her maternal and merciful expression... and promoted the union among men and nations,” appealing to her native nature (Latin American Episcopate, 1979: 282). The Puebla Document also mentions the territorial Marian impressions, taking the American sanctuaries dedicated to the Virgin – to where pilgrims travel – as “signs of the coming together between the Faith of the Church and the Latin American history” (Latin American Episcopate, 1979: 282), in which Mary takes part and pleads against “the misery, discrimination, injustice, and corruption that hurt our Continent. . . Her powerful
intervention will allow it to overcome the ‘structures of sin’ of personal and social life, and will grant it the ‘true liberation’ which comes from Jesus Christ” (John Paul II, 1979: 3, Homily at Zapopán).

This conception emphasizes the image of Mary as the “Mother” of the people: “a female figure that encourages a family, welcoming atmosphere, and love and respect for life. She is the sacred representation of God’s maternal features. She is so deeply human and saint that she inspires prayers of tenderness, pain and hope” (Latin American Episcopate, 1979: 291). This female image is completed with the image of a free, active and collaborative woman who plays a leading role in history (Latin American Episcopate, 1979: 293). As the Document says:

Mary is a woman. She is “blessed among all women.” In her, God dignified women to an unsuspected extent. In her, the Gospel penetrated, redeemed and enhanced femininity. This is extremely important for our cultural horizon, in which women must be higher valued and where their social tasks are being defined and amplified. Mary represents the greatness of being a woman, and shows the specific way to be a woman, to be a soul with devotion to spiritualize the flesh and to incarnate the spirit. (Latin American Episcopate, 1979: 299)

With Mary, the earthly experience is key: the “poverty, suffering, escape, and exile” (Latin American episcopate, 1979: 302), which are common ground for Latin American people. She is the center of Latin American popular piety:

Mary and “her mysteries belong to the very identity of these peoples, and characterize their popular piety” (John Paul II, Homily at Zapopán, 1979, p. 2). She is venerated as the Immaculate Mother of God and men, as Queen of our different countries and of the whole continent. The saints as protectors; the deceased; the consciousness of personal dignity and the fraternal solidarity; the awareness of sin and the need of atonement; the ability to express Faith in a total language that surpasses rationalisms (singing, images, gesture, colour, dance); Faith in time (holy days) and places (sanctuaries and churches); pilgrimage as a symbol of human and Christian existence; filial respect towards pastors as representatives of God; ability to celebrate Faith expressively and as a community; deep integration of the Sacraments and of what is sacramental in personal and social life; warm affection towards the Holy Father; ability of suffering and heroism to overcome the obstacles and confess the Faith; value of prayer; acceptance of others. (Latin American Episcopate, 1979: 454)

Paul VI’s Pastoral Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi (1975) states the terms for popular religiosity and popular piety, choosing the latter as the “religion for the people.” In that sense is the Marian devotion included as the “observance of Faith through cultural expressions” (Pope Paul VI, 1975: 629), which is described in the Puebla Document in the following way. It is

the set of deep beliefs sealed by God, the basic attitudes generated by these beliefs, and its manifestations. It is about the form or the cultural existence that religion takes on a certain population. In its most characteristic cultural form, religion in Latin America is an expression of Catholic Faith. It is a popular Catholicism. (Latin American Episcopate, 1979: 444)
This process of modifying the Church documents was done together with different Marian studies focused on Mary’s “responsible humanity” expressed in the Magnificat. R. Guardini, K. Rahner, L. Bouyer, and H. Köster have presented Mary as “having the kind of Christian personality that accepts God’s salvationist invitation with responsibility. Today it seems necessary to find in Mary a person constituted by relationality” (De Fiores, 2011: 32). This invitation is reinforced by Leo Scheffczyk’s emphasis on the idea that Mary is an “exponent of the Catholic Faith. Thus, Mariology becomes a doctrine of Christian existence, the reception of God’s grace and the redemption of all human beings.” (L. Scheffczyk, cited in De Fiores, 2011: 33) To 20th century Mariology, Mary is “God’s motherly face” (De Fiores, 2011: 36). From Christa Mulack’s protestant and feminist perspective, Mary portrays the feminization of divinity and the representation of the matriarchal values as a symbol of the feminine experience, who carries humanity in her arms. Her humanity and sensitivity become visible: “You’re not made of ivory. You’re sensitive, you have breasts and armpits, your veins and wrinkles are visible” (G. Livi, in De Fiores, 2011: 35).

The post-conciliar anthropological and social challenges that in recent decades have significantly contributed to Marian studies provide “a reinterpretation of Mary taking into account the demands of our times and, in particular, the privileged moment we are living in, in which the historical consciousness of women’s place is beginning to emerge” (Azcuy, 2001: 172), in addition to seeing in Mary “a ‘sister,’ a ‘disciple,’ a ‘Jewish woman,’ ‘one of God’s friends,’ a ‘role model’ (although not an ideal one), and a ‘prophet,’ with equal dignity to that of a man” (Azcuy, 2001: 172).

Regarding the creation of the Missionary Virgin, the Liberation Symbol and the Sister in Faith models can be directly associated with the spirit of the post-conciliar teachings and the liberation theology that Bishop Miguel Esteban Hesayne introduced in Río Negro (1975–1993). According to him, “for the Argentinian Church, there is a document consigned to complete oblivion (. . .) written by the Argentinian Episcopate, called ‘San Miguel del año 1969.’ In my opinion, if Medellín is the Second Vatican for Latin America, San Miguel from 1969 is the Second Vatican for the Argentinian Church” (Hesayne, Dieuzeide and Moia, 2016: 62).

In Northern Patagonia, inspired by this post-conciliar theological framework, the Catholic Church, together with Bishop Miguel Esteban Hesayne, brought this idea to the Diocese of Río Negro, considering it the “place where Jesus Christ makes seeds grow,” where “there is a true religious gesture and where the people should walk together,” where there exists “a popular piety” and not a “popular religiosity” (Hesayne, Dieuzeide and Moia, 2016: 152).

Hesayne celebrated the first diocesan synod of the Church of Río Negro (1980–1984) because he believed that “the Council should be implemented through all the documentation we have. The Church documents (pastoral letters, the very Synods) discuss what ‘ought to be’ rather than ‘how to be’ a conciliar Church” (Hesayne, Dieuzeide and Moia, 2016: 137). A document was published after this council: Exhortación Pastoral Post-sinodal de la diócesis de Viedma para anunciar a Jesucristo (Post-synodal pastoral exhortation of the Diocese of Viedma to announce Jesus Christ, 1985). Centered in the analysis of the evangelization “from the poor to everyone,” it cites from the Gospel and the Magisterium of the Catholic Church, especially from the Post-Conciliar Documents.
and the *Evangelii nuntiandi* exhortation. These teachings are adapted for the “man from Río Negro . . . for our people’s culture and for its social environments and structures . . . For the first owners of our land, the *people of the ground*, the Mapuches . . . and for their offspring, who populate the deprived neighbourhoods . . . for our brothers from Chile, who continue to cross the border in considerable numbers . . . for the immigrants from other countries . . . for the Argentinians coming from the north of our country” (Hesayne, 1985: 9–10). The idea of the Synod was to evangelize “from their reality . . . given that ‘divine Salvation is achieved through sociological incarnation’ (John 1:14),” to perceive “the signs of the personal and communitarian times,” with the objective of “dynamically transforming the structures of society” and the economy, whose current form “hinders the achievement of real social justice,” starting from “the poor to everyone . . . thinking about evangelization not from the centre but from the periphery . . . creating communities around parishes,” to build “the new civilization of love,” based on “respect towards the people’s rights” (Hesayne, 1985: 12–15, 18–20, 23–30, 36–40).

Hesayne put the Council and Synod’s teachings into practice on his way to Bariloche down Route 23. While crossing the Río Negro desert, he saw an old lady who lived with barely a puddle of water. “That’s when my pastoral project was born. Maybe not in an explicit way, like I’m saying it now, but somehow I wanted my people to have water; I wanted to give them water.” And thus, he ordered the missionaries who were on their way to a very small town called Aguada de Guerra to build a windmill (Hesayne, Dieuzeide and Moia, 2016: 106–107).

This community that fed on the new documents of the Church needed to be represented, recognized, and embodied. So, the Missionary Virgin of Río Negro became the personification of their actions:

After hearing what the people had to say, I realized I had to try to turn the whole of Río Negro into a united community: the communion of the Church would help the communion of the province. With that in mind, the Missionary Virgin of Río Negro was born, with the statue of a Virgin that would visit each and every single Parish as a Mother, making their children come together and strengthening their fraternal bond. I came to the conclusion that pastoral activity and spirituality should not be separated. They are different, but sometimes people have stressed this difference so much that now we have to experience spirituality first and later we can get involved in the pastoral activity. (Hesayne, Dieuzeide and Moia, 2016: 107–108)

At the end of the synodal document, Mary appears as the one responsible for his pastoral project:

Mary, Mother of Jesus, Help of Christians, Missionary Virgin of Río Negro, join us in this new pastoral phase of our particular Church, making the journey in the hope that millions of Latin Americans achieve their liberation in the new evangelization of our continent. (Hesayne, 1985: 43)

The document mentions Mary Help of Christians and the new devotion: the Missionary Virgin, as the “Virgin of Río Negro,” playing with their identities, mingled with
historical periods and social transformations. In this particular case, we can see how the
two Marian devotions created, in Río Negro, a devotional place with an identity per-
spective, changing the meaning of symbolic spaces to dynamic territorial constructions.
Their social inclusivity or exclusivity differentiates these spaces, and, in each historical
context, it can territorialize the devotion, emphasizing symbolical borders, where icons
and rituals are appropriated by ideologies. Don Bosco’s Mary Help of Christians
(Figure 5), patron of the Salesians and of the first Diocese in this territory (1934), arrived
in times of conquest and violence (1879–1884). This devotion is one of the signs of
Salesian presence, “transplanted” from Turin with royal attributes and the old identifi-
cation of the Virgin Mary as “Help of Christians,” against heretics and pagans in times of
conquest. In Patagonia, this devotion is connected with the Salesian Congregation’s
“evangelizing and civilizing” actions that took place between the end of the 19th and
the first half of the 20th centuries. It is also seen as a “national” symbol of the second half
of the 20th century, because it was used by nationalist movements, which identified it
with the Argentinian agricultural elite (Nicoletti, 2012: 127–148). In contrast, the Mis-
sionary Virgin was the project of Bishop Hesayne, successor of Salesian Bishop José
Borghatti (1953–1968). The devotion was born from a pilgrimage designed by Hesayne,
which “would travel through the parishes of the Diocese of Viedma with an image of
Virgin Mary.”5 In 1978, in the midst of the military dictatorship, Hesayne brought his
presbyterium together to present his project. “Bearing in mind the aim of the peregrina-
tion and the popular value of ‘motherhood’ in the Mapuche culture, when the time came
to choose the image by consensus, they were asked to select an image which represented
Mary Mother of Jesus and reflected the idiosyncrasy of the people of Río Negro”
(Testimony given to María Andrea Nicoletti by the Bishop Miguel Hesayne, 21 May
2011). According to Linda Hall, “These images of the Virgin were (and many still are)
powerful. They significantly enhanced the sense of the Virgin’s presence. People who
believed in the Virgin’s power felt her presence in the representation, not apart from it.
Although theologically the idea that she is within the image is murky, nevertheless that is
exactly what many believers felt and feel” (L.B. Hall, 2004: 4).

In a pastoral letter, the Bishop addressed “all the people of Río Negro – believers and
nonbelievers – through all the media of the province” he gave the letter to “the sculptor
in charge of creating the image of Mary Mother of Jesus, who was in fact agnostic and
admitted not knowing who the Virgin was and what she meant to the People of God” (the
sculptor Atilio Morosini).

The image depicts a Mapuche mother strongly and tenderly carrying the fruit of her loins
in her arms. She is wearing a Mapuche poncho, and holds the child to her heart while she
walks expressively, showing her mission as the Mother of God and of the Church. Even
more expressive is her two-sided face: one side represents a sad and old woman, and the
other, a cheerful and young one. When the artist was asked by the Bishop the reason for
this two-sided face, he said he was inspired by the pastoral, in which he read that Mary
Mother of the Church was willing to beg her Son Jesus to transform the anguish and
sadness of the people of Río Negro in joy and hope of a more human, fraternal, and
participative world. (Testimony given to María Andrea Nicoletti by the Bishop Miguel
Hesayne, 21 May 2011)
“The Virgin, as a human and accessible person re-presented in an image, becomes a conduit between the human being and the divine. This same sense of liveliness and efficacy, it seems to me, persists today in interactions with the images of the Virgin” (L.B. Hall, 2004: 4).

Within a context of violence and genocide, such as the last Argentinian military dictatorship (1976–1983), the project encouraged the construction of a devotion that positioned the Diocese and the Bishop with the sector of the Church that condemned the abuses of the military dictatorship, following the ideology of the documents from Vatican II, especially from the Conferences II and III of Latin American Bishops, in Medellín, Colombia (1968), and Puebla, Mexico (1979), respectively.

The blond, white woman, with royal attributes and conquest titles, standing barefoot on a cloud, was displaced by this new Marian devotion, the Missionary Virgin of Río Negro, in the form of a dark-skinned, rural, indigenous woman, deprived of ornaments and attributes, walking in rough sandals, carrying her child, covered with a poncho.

Thus, in light of the post-conciliar theological framework and the historical national context, the present article aims to tackle the construction of the social and territorial identity of the Missionary Virgin, not only from the pastoral discourse but also from her iconographic symbols. The article is divided into two parts: one dedicated to the context of the origin of the devotion, and the other devoted to the image of the Virgin from her iconography and from her territorial marks.

**The Missionary Virgin as a Historical Construction**

Analysing the Missionary Virgin poses an epistemological challenge that tries “to explore this religious phenomenon’s cultural and social history, without neglecting the regional aspect and the changes in the range of the analysis, which are necessary to better understand the forms of religion and its manifestations, usually known as the religiousness forms” (Fogelman, Ceva and Touris, 2013: 10).

The construction of the Missionary Virgin’s identity is analysed based on Stuart Hall’s identity concept (2000): a process of socio-historical construction, far from any essentialist notion, in which intersected and antagonistic discourses, practices, and positions, situated in a “cultural and relational space,” are considered key. “Societies have construed narratives around the cult of the Virgin Mary, in which the city and its social actors constituted a changing, dynamic scenario” (Fogelman, Ceva and Touris, 2013: 16).

In Argentina, the Missionary Virgin is another chapter in the long history of “national Marian tradition,” born with the Virgin of Luján in times of colonial evangelization. This tradition spread all over the national territory, adding, sharing, and, in this case, also creating new advocations and titles.

Because of the context in which this advocacy was created (1978), the Missionary Virgin has been a symbol of freedom from the political oppression of the dictatorship and the reflection of a society in crisis.

During the last dictatorship in Argentina, the provincial military governments of Aldo L. Bachmann (1976–1978) and Julio R. Acuña (1978–1983) put emphasis on public works (Port of San Antonio Este, Invap, Soda Solvay, Iderv), but lacked an equitable development plan. This emphasized the inequity between the already unevenly
developed subregions of Río Negro. This can be seen in the small towns located to the sides of the train track that connects the province from east to west (an area commonly known as Línea Sur). In 1974 small-scale producers and farmers, mainly indigenous people, came together and formed workers’ cooperatives, which gained full recognition in 1987. These cooperatives were supported by democratic governments, government agencies such as the Department of Livestock Farming and Cooperatives of Río Negro, the National Institute for Agricultural Technology (in Spanish, INTA) and a variety of NGOs, such as the missionary group “San Francisco Javier” or the cooperative “Amuleim com” (all together) in Pilcaniyeu, led by the Bishop of Viedma. In the Alto Valle region (valley of the Río Negro and Neuquén rivers) and the Cordillera area, the flow of cheap labour, coming especially from Chile, went through a crisis due to the Beagle Channel dispute between Argentina and Chile in 1978. Employers tried to fill this gap by hiring migrant workers from the Argentine North-west region and Bolivia. Initially, these workers were brought to the work fields in inhumane conditions and even had their identifications confiscated until the harvest was finished.

It is in this context that the Missionary Virgin appeared and became an integrating force between people from different ethnic, social, and territorial backgrounds. Just as with the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico, the Missionary Virgin is seen as “a symbol of the identity of the poor and the indigenous people; throughout history, this idea has been picked up to promote a compassionate Mariology towards the needy, and to encourage popular movements that seek to free people from poverty and injustice” (De la Torre, 2014: 21).

During this period, Río Negro was one of the few dioceses in Argentina that, together with Bishop Miguel Hesayne, tried to intercede for the people disappeared by the military regime in the region and to put a stop to human rights violations. “As soon as I found out that some of my brothers and sisters were being subjected to extreme violence, tortured, held prisoner or exterminated, I didn’t hesitate to advocate for their rights from my role as a priest,” claimed Hesayne (Hesayne, Dieuzeide and Moia, 2016: 85). In times of state terrorism in Argentina, Bishop Hesayne wrote numerous letters and made several requests to different Governors and to the Deputy Chief of the 5th Army Corps, General Abel Catuzzi, asking them about the missing people. Given the lack of response, Hesayne asked General Videla himself, the President of Argentina at the time, not to deliver his customary Christmas message without first answering to Pope John Paul II’s request regarding torture practices and human dignity. Hesayne himself asked Pope John Paul II “to somehow rectify the mistake that we’d made by letting you give these torturers the Holy Communion” (Hesayne, Dieuzeide and Moia, 2016: 86) next time he visited Argentina. Videla’s answer was blunt: neither he nor the people of Argentina “have anything to regret.” From that moment on, Bishop Hesayne and the Church of Río Negro were persecuted by police forces, which the Governor of that time strongly denied. This persecution did not only involve threats and harassments against the clergy, but also slander by national magazines and the theft of important documentation belonging to the Bishop. Bishop Jaime de Nevares, President of the Human Rights Association, was also a victim of persecution (Nicoletti and Navarro Florida, 2001: 142).

“As in similar cases, there was a diverse response from the different areas of the population, ranging from disinformation, indifference, fear, concealment, justification and complicity, to opposition, public complaints and active resistance” (Mignone, 1996:
The Church did not escape from any of these reactions. There were as many repercussions as there were people, a situation that was aggravated by the fact that the Church is one of the largest and most representative institutions in Argentina. Precisely for this reason, society demanded that the Church take some action, even if it was just making a public and firm claim for justice. By that time, the Episcopate was divided in two. On one side stood Bishop Tortolo and Bishop Bonamin, who publicly supported and praised the Army’s actions, which they considered a “purging process.” On the other side were those who were murdered for opposing the regime, like Bishop Enrique Angelelli from La Rioja, Bishop Carlos Ponce de León from San Nicolás, the Pallottine Fathers and a group of French nuns, among others. “In this context, the Conference General of the Argentinian Episcopate adopted an extremely prudent approach, maintaining only private, secret contacts and publishing generic documents containing repeated doctrinaire concepts, thus avoiding any direct accusations. Only a few bishops dared file public complaints. They also looked after, protected, and defended the victims and their families, and had an active role in human rights organizations” (Mignone, 1996: 136).

Hesayne asked direct, thought-provoking questions:

At the Conference General of the Argentinian Episcopate, while we were reflecting on the last civic–military dictatorship, I asked: “Why don’t we welcome the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo here, as we have welcomed the military in the past?” We had to do it in secret. One of the bishops, a strong figure in the Conference, I won’t give any names, answered: “Well, the military were in a position of authority; they were the authority.” That is, their criterion was not that of the people of God. (Hesayne, Dieuzeide and Moia, 2016: 34)

De Nevares and Hesayne, together with the “voiceless,” the poor and the needy, continued advocating for human rights, even in times of democracy, which was re-established in 1983.

In this critical context, the construction of the Marian figure began, after a consultation with Hesayne’s presbyterium, and with all the social sectors of Río Negro. According to the Bishop, “bearing in mind the aim of the peregrination and the popular value of ‘motherhood’ in the Mapuche culture, when the time came to choose the image by unanimity, they were asked to select an image which represented Mary Mother of Jesus and reflected the idiosyncrasy of the people of Río Negro.” In this identification, Mary answers to the Sister in Faith model. Mother of the people of Río Negro and Sister in Faith of those who suffer, the Missionary, just as Renée de la Torre defines the Virgin of Guadalupe, has also fulfilled this triple purpose of “integrating and merging cultures, establishing cultural dominance, encouraging people to resist and bringing traditions closer to contemporary ideas to meet today’s challenges” (De la Torre, 2014: 22).

Hesayne expressed these aims in a pastoral letter, agreeing, with the presbyterium, to Father Jesús Alegria’s proposal: that the dedication named the Missionary Virgin of Río Negro. The journey gave the Bishop time to think about creating a devotional symbol that had more in common with the region, and that united all the believers from the different parishes of Río Negro. Hesayne’s ideas on the matter were included in the Diocese of Viedma’s Newsletter: “The major short-term objective of the ‘visit’ of the Missionary Virgin of Río Negro, the Mother of God and our Mother, is to spread and
strengthen our identity as Church, one that preaches while it becomes a preacher . . . Our pastoral project aims to be a comprehensive endeavour inspired by the Virgin Mary that encourages all the people of Río Negro to live a Christian life. As a symbol of this, the statue of the Missionary Virgin will be visiting all the parishes in the province” (Archive of the Bishopric of Viedma, “Letters of the Bishop,” Ecclesiastical Bulletin of the Bishopric of Viedma, August–October 1978: 93). It was Enrique Lafforgue, a seminar-ian, who suggested leaving the image of the Virgin in a chapel built on a hill near the village of General Conesa, finishing the “Marian journey” there, and turning it into a place for pilgrimage. During the first pilgrimage, the image of the Virgin travelled, on the Bishop’s car, approximately 5500 km throughout the province (El Diario de San Carlos de Bariloche, 22 December 1978, 1(16): 7; see Figures 1 and 2). The journey took place during November and December of 1978, and was joined by priests from different parishes of Río Negro and believers from each city. “It is not an exaggeration to say that the pilgrimage excited the inhabitants of the whole province. From cities and urban areas to the most inhospitable rural areas, the Missionary Virgin of Río Negro was welcomed.

Figure 1. Picture of Mary Help of Christians. Colegio María Auxiliadora, Buenos Aires.
with joy and acclaimed as the Mother of God and our Mother by long caravans of pilgrims on foot and on horseback, in cars, trucks, buses and even tractors. The Missionary Virgin Pilgrimage left Viedma on the 27th of November 1978, and returned to the city on the 22nd of December” (Bishop Miguel Hesayne’s testimony, 26 May 2011). One year later, on 12 October of 1979, the Virgin was exalted in the chapel of Colonia de San Juan, in General Conesa, where a peregrination to the little sanctuary chosen for the Missionary Virgin, beside the National Route N° 250, 16 km away from the city, was made. The pilgrimage and celebration were presided over by the Apostolic nuncio Pío Laghi together with Bishop Miguel Hesayne, and the faithful who walked the 16 km to meet the Virgin. Hesayne’s testimony concludes as follows:

It was remarkable that in the middle of the desert, and for the first time in the Marian Sanctuary of Río Negro, more than ten thousand pilgrims from every direction of the province gathered at the feet of the venerated image of Mary, the Mother of God. Since then, on the second Sunday of October, the Diocese Pilgrimage takes place, which, after 16 km on foot, ends celebrating a Mass presided over by the Diocesan Bishop, the presbyterium and the followers from all the parishes of the Diocese of Viedma. (Alegría, 2011)
In 2005, the Missionary Virgin chapel, in Colonia San Juan, beside National Route N° 250, was recognized as Historical Patrimony of the province (Law n° 3.572).

These types of pilgrimage are the equivalent of the peregrination to Our Lady of Luján, the Protector of Argentina. By themselves or with their families, pilgrims visit her sanctuary on trips organized by dioceses, parishes, institutions, associations, schools or tourist groups, in which “the religious symbols build a bridge to connect people’s ethnic differences. These different communities let their religious beliefs become their common ground (religion–culture–ethnicity triad), making religion the foundation of the cultural ties that legitimate them. These dynamics have been constantly used in all kinds of environments and geographical areas. They are the strategies of a religious institution applied to ethnic relations” (Gutiérrez Martínez and Balslev Clausen, 2008: 28). The pilgrimage to the Missionary Virgin strengthens these ties, not only through the iconography of the Virgin, but also because of what a pilgrimage implies, as in the case of the gaucho pilgrimage to Luján. “Besides being an event linked to the devotion to the Virgin Mary . . . it is also an opportunity for the popular culture to express itself, a culture that is related to our identity and traditions” (Olaechea, 2013: 115).

Below, the social and territorial identity construction of the Missionary Virgin’s image in Río Negro will be analysed, taking into account the new post-conciliar ideas.

Image of the Missionary Virgin in the Río Negro Area

The Missionary Virgin: Face of the People of Río Negro

From her conception, the Missionary Virgin had a “popular” stamp, evident not only in the context of military repression in which it was created, but also in the iconographic and symbolic plot and in the meaning that believers gave her. The dedication was born from a synod (“walk together”) between the Bishop, his presbyterium and the faithful. Her image comes from the hands of a non-believing sculptor who followed the Bishop’s description. The image tries to reflect the ideas of the synod “from the poor to everyone.” Her face and her clothing could belong to a countrywoman from Río Negro, a Mapuche woman, or a Chilean immigrant, of an undefined age. It is the image of a pilgrim, with a particular dynamic, the opposite of what is usual. It is Mary who walks towards her people, and not the people who come to venerate her in a Sanctuary. Hesayne’s idea of resistance to violence is depicted in the Missionary Virgin’s iconography: a pilgrim who walks protecting her child, and whose face shows the sorrow and the joy of the ones who follow her: “Violence is not human nor Christian, because it entails a denial of justice and truth, and therefore it will never be able to solve any human conflict” (Hesayne, 1989: 1). This resistance, together with the “popular” character of the Virgin, is materialized in the first pilgrimage (1978) of the image across the province. For Bishop Hesayne, the objective of the journey was to make real the reunion between the Virgin and her people, marking the beginning of the Marian identity construction. One of his visits to San Carlos de Bariloche can be seen as an example of this. On that occasion, described as a “great religious fervour” by the press, Hesayne invited the entire city to “unite with the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, under the Missionary of Río Negro devotion, to open our hearts towards the one who comes to save us” (El Diario de
San Carlos de Bariloche, 22 December 1978, 1(16): 7) and, at the end of the event, he asked people to pray for the peace of the Latin American family (Figures 3 and 4). In other words, the Bishop appealed to this particular image of the Missionary Virgin and to

**Figure 3.** “The image of the Missionary Virgin arrives at Bariloche Civic Centre in a fire engine belonging to the association of volunteer firefighters.”

**Figure 4.** “Surrounded by authorities and believers, Reverend Father Carlos Mateos sings a canticle during the reception ceremony for the Missionary Virgin in the Town Hall of Bariloche.”

*Source: El Diario de San Carlos de Bariloche, 22 December 1978, Year 1, N° 16, p. 7.*
this singular journey towards a popular identity, moving to find her people, because it was the Virgin who visited the people, breaking with the sanctuary tradition. In this action, the Virgin is a “sister” travelling with us.

From the symbolic and iconographic plot, it can be appreciated that the Missionary Virgin, unlike the other Patagonian Marian devotion, Mary Help of Christians (Nicoletti, 2012: 127–148; see Figures 1 and 5), and in accordance with the post-conciliar views, presents an image that is extremely simple, earthly, and with “historical consciousness,” as Azcuy puts it (2001: 173).

We can see this stamp in Hesayne’s choice to represent Mary as a dark-skinned Mapuche countrywoman, wearing simple clothes and covering Baby Jesus with a poncho. According to the Bishop, as we saw above, “[t]he image depicts a Mapuche mother strongly and tenderly carrying the fruit of her loins in her arms. She is wearing a Mapuche poncho and holds the child to her heart while she walks expressively, showing her mission as the Mother of God and of the Church” (Alegría, 2011) (see Figure 2).

The artist said that he was inspired by a “native mother, with her poor clothes and native poncho,” dispossessed of ornaments and riches. This Virgin is not between heaven

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**Figure 5.** Don Bosco’s Mary Help of Christians stamp, patron saint of the Argentinian agricultural elite.
and earth, but entirely earthly. In accordance with this earthly image, the Diocese’s official publication explains that the Missionary Virgin is travelling, “she is a different Virgin, one who crosses the desert of Río Negro,” which is signalled by her right foot being in front of her left one (Diocese of Viedma, www.hansa-sur.com.ar). This movement generates a continuous closeness and feeling of companionship in her believers, and also gives Mary a human and historical condition, which strongly identifies her with the reality of the people of Río Negro. Her creators describe the Virgin as “Mapuche,” as “a pilgrim image with indigenous face and poncho, carrying her baby,” and as “native” (Dieuzeide, 2004: 199) (Figure 6).

These “dark-skinned Virgins,” inspired by the Virgin of Guadalupe, “have been a key figure in the Teología Indígena, a movement within the Catholic Church that, developing out of the implementation of the Second Vatican Council in Latin America and the experience of the Theology of Liberation, has advocated for the revelation and incarnation of the Gospel in indigenous cultures, granting to indigenous spiritual practices a renewed capacity for revelation of religious truth and an important role in interfaith
dialogue” (Judd, 2004: 218; Norget, 2004: 166–169, quoting Napolitano, 2009: 104 quoting in Napolitano).

The Bishop identifies her with the native people, the artist, with mixed-race people. From Boccara’s point of view about “mixed-race logic” as a resistance strategy against the power of “civilization” manifested as violent imposition, we understand that “mixed-race is indigenous” (Boccara, 1999).

From the perspective of liberation theology, as Napolitano points out in the case of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Missionary Virgin “has been interpreted as a mediator between liberation and submission, a liberating symbol with significance for salvation. Within this view some Latino theologians have played a key role in arguing that she is a central player in the process of inculturation and mestizaje of Christianity in the Americas. She is thus described as a popular religious symbol for evangelical transformation and life-enhancing processes rather than disruptive racial mixing (Napolitano 2009:99, quoting Elizondo, 2000: 516 quoting in Napolitano), providing a sense of origin of the “‘new mestizo’ of the Americas that signals a passage from ‘brokenness to integration through a conversion process’” (Napolitano, 2009:99 quoting Elizondo, 2000:516).

Meanwhile, carrying on with the iconographic analysis, the Virgin’s face presents a double material and symbolic expression: sad and old on one side, consequence of the severity of the Patagonian weather, and of the sorrow and alienation of the people of Río Negro: joyful and young on the other side, since the face transforms into joy and hope with the announcement of the Gospel to the Poor. Her face represents life itself, with joy and sadness, youth and old age. Her feet are protected by rough sandals for the journey. According to the artist, the idea of the two faces was inspired in the pastoral letter, in which it was stated that Mary Mother of the Church was willing to beg her Son Jesus to transform the anguish and sadness of the people of Río Negro in joy and hope of a more human, fraternal, and participative world.

The baby stands out because of the red blanket; he is covered and protected by the Virgin, and only his dark skin is perceived. Although he is looking at his Mother, she is looking at the people. The red blanket stands for the fire and the blood: the sacrifice of Christ. It represents life and burning love. “Red is the colour of power. But in this case, there is a poor boy wearing it ... a reminder that the power of the Gospel is not like the authoritarian and furious power of the world’s mighty people, but the power of service. Without love, power becomes arrogance, pride, high-handedness, oppression” (Diocese of Viedma, www.hansa-sur.com.ar).

As for the colours of the Virgin, blue symbolizes the depth of people, their profundity, their ability to think. It reflects the transparency of truth – as a clean glass – and the promises kept, the words said and not taken back. It implies honesty. It represents the things that have a meaning which overcomes us, a meaning that cannot be pinned down: like air, water, the sea. Blue connects what is deep with what is high; it links the human with the eternal. Her robe is a reminder of the intimacy of the person, an intimacy that must be protected without false secrecy, but with simplicity. The human person has an unforgettable right to intimacy. The veil, in covering the head, reminds us that above the person exists a greater Other: God. It is a sign of the orders of God, from His will: “May your word to me be fulfilled.”
White symbolizes purity; it recalls the transfiguration of Jesus, our baptism and the victory over death. The brown poncho represents the earth,

the “Pachamama,” the “humus.” It is the colour of humbleness, of virtue of the fragile, as baked clay, but with the ability to keep in that clay cup the treasure of the Gospel, the Kingdom. In this sense, brown is the colour of those who truly accept their limitations, but also know their talents, and put them to the service of others. It is the colour of poverty, typical of pilgrims, who take their being as the earth. Poncho and rough sandals, like the ones born in this land: worn poncho that provides warmth and shelter from the wind, the rain and the cold; poncho that can be shared, since there are no different sizes; sandals which are comfortable to walk slow and go far. (Diocese of Viedma, www.hansa-sur.com.ar)

It should be noted the contrast with black, which is associated with evil darkness, with what is negative, and with death, defeated by the Virgin in her journey. This Virgin does not step over the snake from a cloud, as the Immaculate Virgin does; she gets her feet dirty as she walks, and from earth’s dust she steps over evil.

**The Missionary Virgin: With her Feet on the Earth**

The territorial construction from the image is analysed according to Carballo, who states that religious beliefs and cults are not free from the need for a space to reproduce and grow (Carballo, 2009: 32–40). Based on this, she redefines the notions of territory and space. The first is described as the space appropriated and valorised by social groups. The second is characterized “by its use value, in which the territory would be the result of the appropriation and valorisation of the space through representation and work” (Carballo, 2009: 25). This appropriation can be instrumental or symbolic/expressive. The former refers to a utilitarian relationship of space, centered in political, economic and social relationships. The latter emphasizes the role of territory as a symbolic and cultural sedimentation of space. Thus, territory is not only understood as instrumental, but also as an object of symbolic actions: territory can be characterized as the framework for objective cultural practices (parties, rituals, etc.), and as an object of representation, as a symbol of social belonging. In this last case, not only do subjects interiorize the territory into their cultural system, getting past the idea of territory as an object, but also the territory “is built through an ‘internal’ social reality, and becomes an ‘invisible’ territory, as a result of the subjects’ interiorizing process” (Carballo, 2009: 29). The author also suggests that religious phenomena need to be tackled from “multi territoriality,” meaning multiple territorialities “merging in one recreation of spatiality, not mixing themselves up, but drawing borders that share the same support and/or political territory in one same map” (Carballo, 2009: 40).

The Missionary Virgin was constructed from a territorial trajectory. During the 1978 journey through every chapel of Río Negro, the Bishop consolidated her as the province’s patron saint, from the “desert,” “travelling from every direction of the province” (Alegría, 2011). The official prayer makes a reference to this journey through Río Negro’s landscape:
Bless our jobs, our social and family relationships, our flocks and fruit trees, our rivers and deserts, our sea and Cordillera. Thus, all the natural riches and beauties will bring us closer to God, and we will be brothers. (Diocese of Viedma, www.hansa-sur.com.ar)

The chapel mentioned by Hesayne became the Parish Church of San Juan and Sanctuary of the Missionary Virgin.

At the same time, from General Roca to Paso Córdoba, an informal pilgrimage began, led by Enrique Barbudo SM, the Marianist priest of Cristo Resucitado parish (1977–1983). “It was a movement of young people, with scouts, sleepless nights here and there, and things like that” (Testimony of Father Javier de Aguirre SM, 23 May 2011) (Figure 7).

According to Javier de Aguirre, current Marianist priest, it is possible that the pilgrimages became official with the division of the Diocese of Río Negro, in 1993, which left the sanctuary of Conesa outside the territory of the Diocese of Viedma.8

The pilgrimages have been taking place for more than 15 or 20 years, from all the towns in the valley to Paso Córdoba, on the morning of the third Sunday of November. That day, all services are suspended in the Diocese parish churches, so that everyone can take part in the pilgrimage. We are talking about two or three thousand people, with some young people coming on foot from Regina and some more from Cipolletti. There is a central Mass, presided over by the Father Bishop, and then the breaking-up. Some groups stay to have

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**Figure 7.** Pilgrimage to the Sanctuary of the Missionary Virgin.  
*Source: http://www.rionegro.com.ar/diario/rn/nota.aspx?idart=466576&idcat=9521&tipo=2 (accessed 27 May 2011).*
a barbecue there or by the river bank. Many groups leave from Roca, and we meet on National Route N° 6, the one that goes south and crosses the bridge of Paso Córdoba. (Testimony of Father Javier de Aguirre SM, 23 May 2011)

This territorial demarcation goes from the valley of the Río Negro river to the Cordillera area and the “Linea Sur” of the Río Negro province (the land and villages to the sides of the train track that connects the province from east to west). Two parish churches were established there, which, despite not having annual pilgrimages, are dedicated to the Missionary Virgin. One, under the charge of Claretian priests, was located in Comallo, a town of the “Linea Sur,” and transferred to the Diocese of San Carlos de Bariloche in 2010, under the two dedications: Mary Help of Christians and the Missionary Virgin (Diocese of Viedma, http://www.claret.org/index.php?option=com ). The second one was the Missionary Virgin parish church, in a San Carlos de Bariloche neighbourhood, established in 1983 by a Mapuche priest, Juvenal Currulef, who described himself as “a labourer priest, (open) to the world of politics and to the pain of the people in the process” (Aguero, 2007: 31). In this last case, the post-conciliar stamp is more evident, and the models, such as Liberation symbol and Sister in Faith, are more clearly seen, owing to the fact the Juvenal Currulef did more than introduce the dedication into Bariloche. He established a working-class neighbourhood with marginalized sectors of society, which he named “Virgen Misionera,” on km 7 of Avenida Pioneros, at the foot of the northern hillside of Otto hill. According to Agüero, “the consolidation of the neighbourhood began in the mid-1980s, with the beginning of the interaction between the local people and the mediators, through the parish-educational organization; during this period, a process of
organization and participation took place, which produced institutions and actions related to the needs and requests of the neighbours.”

The pilgrim nature of the Missionary Virgin, besides demarcating the territory, generates, in Carballo’s words, a “symbolic expressive” appropriation of space (Carballo, 2009: 40), unifying the province’s subregions, and becoming an exclusive, but not excluding, symbol of the people of Río Negro. Hers is a gathering dedication, one that calls pilgrims from different towns around the province to both sanctuaries. The pilgrimages in Conesa and Paso Córdoba take place in rural areas that reflect their inhabitants, which belong to the poorer sector. In San Carlos de Bariloche, by being in a poor and deprived neighbourhood, the Missionary Virgin’s presence tries to change the social matrix imposed by the commercial and touristic sector of the “mountain village” (Navarro Floria, 2010: 15). Her presence is associated with what is popular, with denunciation and with the Church walking together with the poor; she alludes to the Third World Movement (to which Currulef belonged) and to resistance against the violence of the military dictatorship (Pérez Pertino, 2011: 3). In that sense, the Missionary Virgin serves the purpose of being an object of devotion that connects the broad differences among the subregions and towns in the province and creates a common identity, which puts an end to “the antagonistic tension between the universalistic Christian appeal of the Virgin Mary’s message and the possibility of its particularistic/local appropriations, such as in nationalism” (Skrbis quoting Halemba, 2005: 458, quoting Halemba, 2008: 343).

Final Thoughts

The Missionary Virgin was born as a pilgrim after a popular consultation, in the midst of a military dictatorship; she was materialized in the form of a statue representing the people of Río Negro. Her link to feminist Mariology, which rests in the post-conciliar teachings, allowed us to relate this thinking to the symbolism of her origin, devotion, and iconography. Her pilgrimage in chapels, sanctuaries, and parishes made it possible for the subregions of the province to be integrated and for the social matrix to be giving new meaning. Her image reflects what Bishop Hesayne thought and felt as Pastor of the people of Río Negro, the people he and the Virgin met in a fraternal way; moving people who do not go to a sanctuary, but meet her on the way instead. A native Virgin, stripped and earthly: a “Pachamama,” who bears in her face both pain and joy, who experiences violence and fights against authority, who has fire, blood and sacrifice, symbolized in red, contrasting with the depth, the truth and the purity of blue. With her simple tunic, the Virgin represents the defence of human rights, the idea of the creature and daughter of God, dressed in the clothes of the countrywoman of Río Negro: a poncho, whose colour represents the fragility of human rights and the poverty of the people.

In short, the Missionary Virgin brings to the symbolic and cultural sedimentation of the Río Negro area the feminization of a territory conquered and dominated by men. However, that feminine territoriality is sacred, since it is about the image of the Mother of God. Nevertheless, the Missionary is different: she brings attention and integrates the deserted and deprived spaces of the province and those of the neighbourhoods belonging to booming tourist cities. Her moving territoriality creates a pilgrim identity through her iconography, for she walks almost barefoot, “slow to go far” (Diocese of Viedma, www.hansa-sur.com.ar).
Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes
1. Especially the apostolic exhortation of Paul VI *Marialis Cultus* (1974), which is dedicated to the Virgin Mary.
2. All Spanish quotations have been translated to English by the authors of this work.
3. Regina Raddbeck-Ossmann, Ivonne Gebara, María Clara Bingemer, Catharina Halkes, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Luise Schottroff, and Dorothee Sölle.
4. Anne Carr, Marianne Dirks, Elizabeth Gossman, Els Maeckelberghe, Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel, and Elizabeth Johnson are among the most representative authors.
5. “The Missionary Virgin Pilgrimage left Viedma on the 27th of November of 1978, and returned to the city on the 22nd of December. In a little chapel, built in the solitude of a hill near the village of General Conesa, located in the ‘Valle Medio’ (an area around the middle course of the Rio Negro river), the Pilgrim image was exalted to establish the Sanctuary of the Missionary Virgin of Rio Negro.” J. Alegría (unpublished), *Historia de la advocación de la Virgen Misionera de Río Negro* (Testimony given to María Andrea Nicoletti by the Bishop Miguel Hesayne, 21 May 2011).
6. It refers to the Conference General of the Argentinian Episcopate’s first letter, written in San Miguel on 15 May 1976, and the Pro Memoria. It was a document handed in to the Government by the Executive Committee of the Conference General of the Argentinian Episcopate, 26 November 1977. In: Documentos del Episcopado argentino (1985–1981).
7. In the published dialogue between Miguel Hesayne, Carlos Moia and Juan Ángel Dieuzeide, this expression is discussed, arguing that the word “option” refers to something that can or cannot be done, whereas “from the poor to everyone” reflects a “christological” and not a “sociological” idea (Hesayne, Dieuzeide and Moia, 2016: 70).
8. In 1993, the province of Río Negro was divided into three Dioceses: Viedma (Atlantic area of Río Negro), Alto Valle (valley of the Río Negro and Neuquén rivers) and Bariloche (Cordillera area). Hesayne was the last Bishop to be the head of the Diocese that covered the whole province.
9. At present, the “Virgen Misionera” education project consists of the following institutions: “Arco Iris” nursery and kindergarten, “Virgen Misionera” primary school, “Carlos Mugica” skilled trades training program, “Amuyén” high school, and “Don Jaime de Nevares” school for adults (Agüero, 2007: 33).

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