

**"Blessed among all women": The Missionary Virgin, identity and territory in Patagonia (Argentina)**

Journal:	<i>Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses</i>
Manuscript ID	SIR-17-0060.R2
Manuscript Type:	English Language Original Article
Keywords:	Patagonia, Virgin Mary, Bishop Hesayne, identity
Abstract:	<p>After the creation of the Diocese of Viedma (1953), in Northern Patagonia appeared the dedication to the Missionary Virgin, promoted by the Diocese second Bishop, Monsignor Miguel Hesayne (1975-1993). In the midst of the military dictatorship (1976-1983), he appointed her Patron Saint of Río Negro, 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, under 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 "option for the poor" pastoral, 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.</p>



1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60





**VIRGEN MISIONERA  
DE RIO NEGRO**

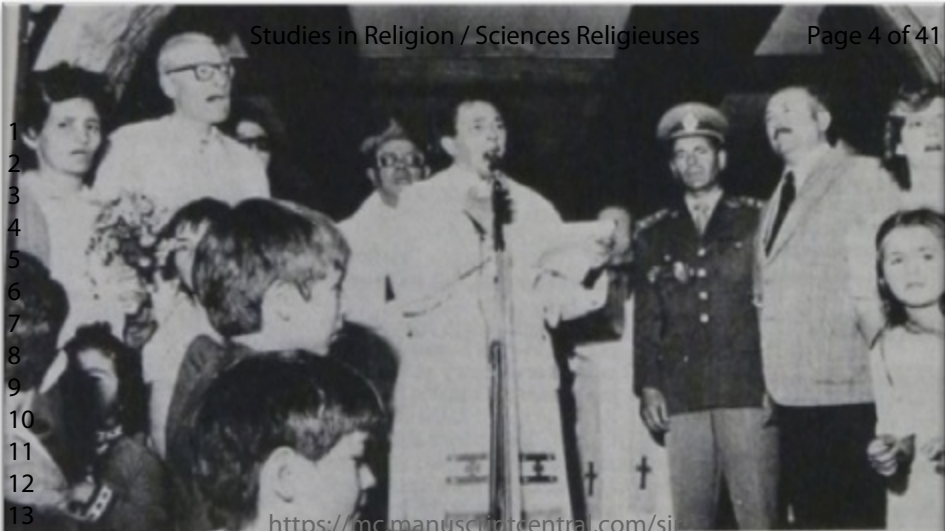
<https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/sr>

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16



<https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/sir>

*La imagen de la Virgen Misionera llega al Centro Cívico en una autobomba de la Asociación de Bomberos Voluntarios.*



<https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/si>

Rodeado de autoridades y fieles, el reverendo padre Carlos Mateos entona un cántico durante la ceremonia de recepción en Bariloche de la Virgen Misionera, en la Municipalidad local.

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60



1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36

AGIAS  
BENCITA  
POR TODOS  
1700 S.V.



<https://www.manuscriptcentral.com/>

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11
- 12
- 13
- 14
- 15
- 16
- 17
- 18
- 19
- 20
- 21
- 22
- 23
- 24
- 25
- 26
- 27
- 28
- 29
- 30





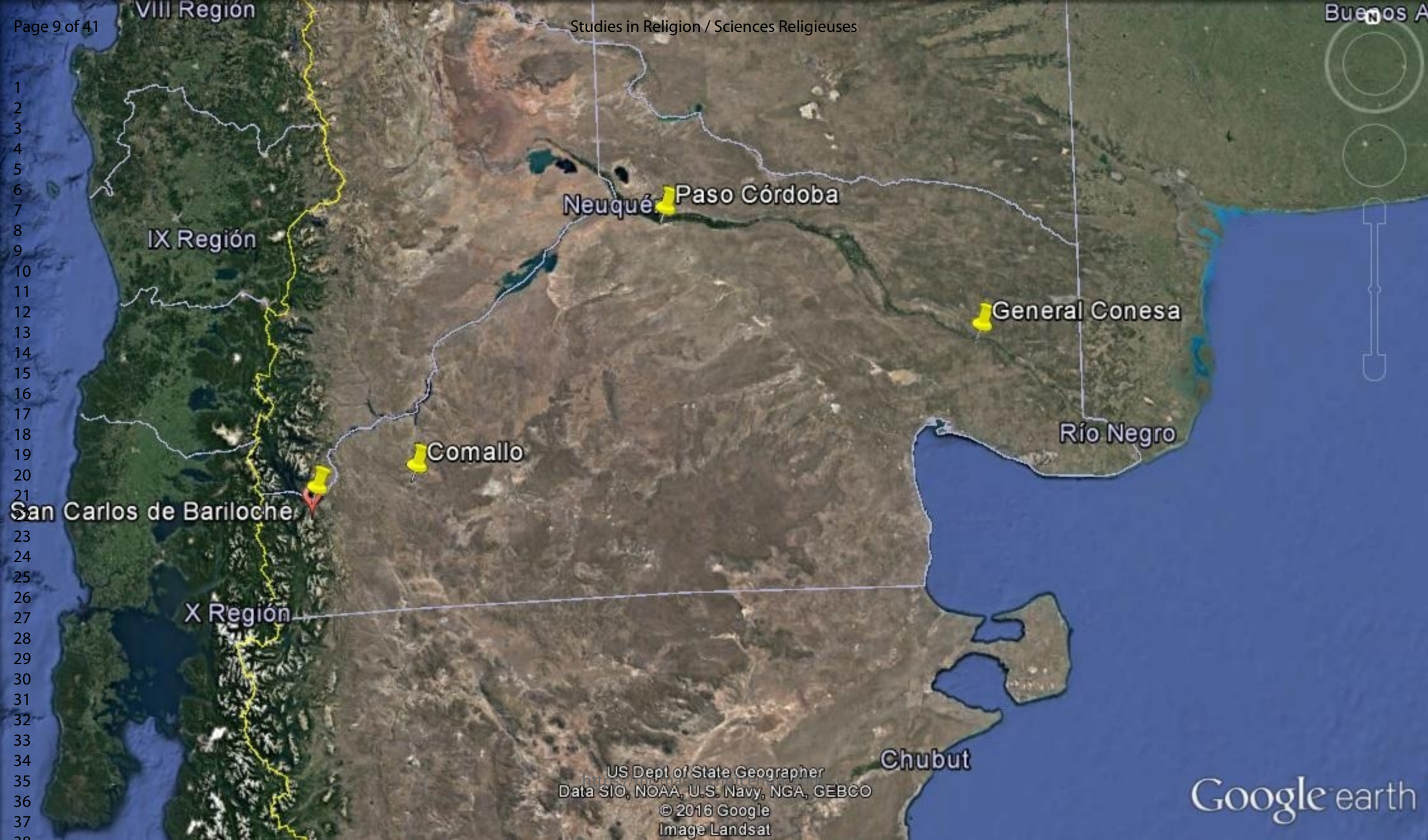
# Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses of 41

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9

<https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/sir>



1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38



## Blessed among all women: The Missionary Virgin, identity and territory in Patagonia

### Abstract

After the creation of the Diocese of Viedma (1953), in Northern Patagonia appeared the dedication to the Missionary Virgin, promoted by the Diocese second Bishop, Monsignor Miguel Hesayne (1975-1993). In the midst of the military dictatorship (1976-1983), he appointed her Patron Saint of Río Negro, 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, under 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 “option for the poor” pastoral, 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.

### 1. 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 workshop and charity whose protagonists were either secular or religious women who were inspired by the religiosity of Virgin Mary.” (Di Stefano and Ramón Solans, 2006, p.12).

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, this was reinforced by Vatican Council II Post-Conciliar Documents *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*, which placed Virgin Mary in a high spot (Pope Paul VI,

1  
2  
3 1974)<sup>1</sup>. In the eighth chapter of the first document, Mary appears as a sign of hope for the  
4 peregrine people of God, devoid of triumphalist and monarchic rhetoric: “Meanwhile, the  
5 Mother of Jesus, glorified in body and soul in heaven, is the image and foundation of the Church  
6 that will come. She shines on earth, until the day of the Lord shall come, (Pope Paul VI, 1974,  
7 p.304) as a sign of sure hope and solace to the people of God during its sojourn on earth.” (Pope  
8 Paul VI, 1964, VIII p. 68).

9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17 That is to say, her image became popular in the Church documents. In fact, Mary was appointed  
18 “star of evangelization and Mother of the people of Latin America,” (III Conference General of  
19 the Latin American episcopate 1979, p.168) by the Third General Conference of the Latin  
20 American Episcopate (1979) that took place in Puebla.

21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26 This Latin American ideal is personified in the Virgin of Guadalupe, who “became the great  
27 sign, with her maternal and merciful expression, (...) and promoted the union among men and  
28 nations,” appealing to her native nature. The Puebla Document also mentions the territorial  
29 Marian impressions, taking the American sanctuaries dedicated to the Virgin –to where pilgrims  
30 travel– as “signs of the coming together between the Faith of the Church and the Latin American  
31 history,” (III Conference General of the Latin American episcopate, 1979, p. 282) in which Mary  
32 takes part and pleads against “the misery, discrimination, injustice, and corruption that hurt our  
33 Continent (...) Her powerful intervention will allow it to overcome the ‘structures of sin’ of  
34 personal and social life, and will grant it the ‘true liberation,’ which comes from Jesus Christ.”  
35 (John Paul II, Homily at Zapopán, 1979, p. 3).

36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49 This conception emphasizes the image of Mary as the “Mother” of the people: “a female figure  
50 that encourages a family, welcoming atmosphere, and love and respect for life. She is the sacred

---

51  
52  
53  
54  
55 <sup>1</sup> Especially the apostolic exhortation of Paul VI *Marialis Cultus* (1974) is dedicated to the Virgin Mary

1  
2  
3 representation of God's maternal features. She is so deeply human and saint that she inspires  
4 prayers of tenderness, pain and hope." (III Conference General of the Latin American episcopate,  
5 1979, p. 291). This female image is completed with the image of a free, active and collaborative  
6 woman who plays a leading role in history (III Conference General of the Latin American  
7 episcopate, 1979, p. 293). As the Document says:

15 Mary is a woman. She is "blessed among all women." In her, God dignified women to  
16 an unsuspected extent. In her, the Gospel penetrated, redeemed and enhanced  
17 femininity. This is extremely important for our cultural horizon, in which women  
18 must be higher valued and where their social tasks are being defined and amplified.  
19 Mary represents the greatness of being a woman, and shows the specific way to be a  
20 woman, to be a soul with devotion to spiritualize the flesh and to incarnate the spirit  
21 (III Conference General of the Latin American episcopate, 1979, p. 299).

29 With Mary, the earthly experience is key: the "poverty, suffering, escape, and exile," (III  
30 Conference General of the Latin American episcopate, 1979, p. 302) which are common ground  
31 for Latin American people. She is the center of Latin American popular piety:

37 Mary and "her mysteries belong to the very identity of these peoples, and characterize  
38 their popular piety." (John Paul II, Homily at Zapopán, 1979, p. 2). She is venerated as  
39 the Immaculate Mother of God and men, as Queen of our different countries and of the  
40 whole continent. The saints as protectors; the deceased; the consciousness of personal  
41 dignity and the fraternal solidarity; the awareness of sin and the need of atonement; the  
42 ability to express Faith in a total language that surpasses rationalisms (singing, images,  
43 gesture, colour, dance); Faith in time (holydays) and places (sanctuaries and churches);  
44 pilgrimage as a symbol of human and Christian existence; filial respect towards pastors as  
45 representatives of God; ability to celebrate Faith expressively and as a community; deep  
46 integration of the Sacraments and of what is sacramental in personal and social life; warm  
47 affection towards the Holy Father; ability of suffering and heroism to overcome the

1  
2  
3 obstacles and confess the Faith; value of prayer; acceptance of others (III Conference  
4 General of the Latin American episcopate, 1979, p. 454).

5  
6  
7  
8  
9 Paul VI's Pastoral Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) states the terms for popular religiosity  
10 and popular piety, choosing the latter as the "religion for the people." In that sense is the Marian  
11 devotion included as the "observance of Faith through cultural expressions," (Paul VI, 1975, p.  
12 629) which is described in the Puebla Document as:

13  
14  
15  
16  
17 (... ) the set of deep beliefs sealed by God, the basic attitudes generated by these  
18 beliefs, and its manifestations. It is about the form or the cultural existence that  
19 religion takes on a certain population. In its most characteristic cultural form, religion  
20 in Latin America is an expression of Catholic Faith. It is a popular Catholicism (III  
21 Conference General of the Latin American episcopate, 1979, p. 444).

22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31 This process of modifying the Church documents was done together with different Marian  
32 studies focused on Mary's "responsible humanity" expressed in the *Magnificat*. R. Guardinim,  
33 K. Rahner, L. Bouyer, and H. Köster have presented Mary as "having the kind of Christian  
34 personality that accepts God's salvationist invitation with responsibility. Today it seems  
35 necessary to find in Mary a person constituted by the relationality." (De Fiores, 2011, p.32). This  
36 invitation is reinforced by Leo Scheffczyk's emphasis on the idea that Mary is an "exponent of  
37 the Catholic Faith." "Thus, Mariology becomes a doctrine of Christian existence, the reception of  
38 God's grace and the redemption of all human beings." To the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Mariology, Mary is  
39 "God's motherly face." (De Fiores, 2011, p.36). From Christa Mulack's protestant and feminist  
40 perspective, Mary portrays the "feminization of divinity" and the representation of the  
41 matriarchal values as a symbol of the feminine experience, who carries humanity in her arms.  
42 Her humanity and sensitivity become visible: "You're not made of ivory. You're sensitive, you

1  
2  
3 have breasts and armpits, your veins and wrinkles are visible.” (G. Livi in De Fiores, 2011,  
4 p.35).

5  
6  
7  
8 The post-conciliar anthropological and social challenges that in recent decades have  
9 significantly contributed to the Marian studies<sup>2</sup> provide “a reinterpretation of Mary taking into  
10 account the demands of our times and, in particular, the privileged moment we are living in, in  
11 which the historical consciousness of women’s place is beginning to emerge (Azcuay, 2001,  
12 p.172), in addition to seeing in Mary a ‘sister,’ a ‘disciple,’ a ‘Jewish woman,’ ‘one of God’s  
13 friends,’ a ‘role model’ (although not an ideal one) and a ‘prophet,’ with equal dignity to that of a  
14 man.” (Azcuay, 2001, p. 172)<sup>3</sup>.

15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24 Regarding the creation of the Missionary Virgin, the Liberation Symbol and the Sister in  
25 Faith models can be directly associated with the spirit of the post-conciliar teachings and the  
26 liberation theology that Bishop Miguel Esteban Hesayne introduced in Río Negro (1975-1993).  
27 According to him, “for the Argentinian Church, there is a document consigned to complete  
28 oblivion, I would go as far as to say it was ‘hold up,’ written by the Argentinian Episcopate,  
29 called ‘San Miguel del año 1969.’ In my opinion, if Medellín is the Second Vatican for Latin  
30 America, San Miguel from 1969 is the Second Vatican for the Argentinian Church.” (Hesayne,  
31 Dieuzeide, Moia, 2016, p. 62).

32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42 In Northern Patagonia, inspired by this post-conciliar theological framework, the Catholic  
43 Church, together with Bishop Miguel Esteban Hesayne (1975-1993), brought this idea to the  
44 Diocese of Río Negro, considering it the “place where Jesus Christ makes seeds grow,” where  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52

53  
54 <sup>2</sup> Regina Radlbeck, Ivonne Gebaram María Clara Gingerm Catharina Halkes, Rosematy Radford Ruether, Luise  
55 Schottroff, Dorothee Sölle.

56  
57 <sup>3</sup> Anne Carr, Marianne Dirks, Elizabeth Gössman, Els Maeckelberghe, Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel, Elizabeth  
58 Johnson are among the most representative authors.

1  
2  
3 “there is a true religious gesture and where the people should walk together,” where there exists  
4  
5 “a popular piety” and not a “popular religiosity.” (Hesayne, Dieuzeide, Moia, 2016, p. 152).  
6  
7

8 Hesayne celebrated the first diocesan synod of the Church of Río Negro (1980-1984), because he  
9  
10 believed that “the Council should be implemented through all the documentation we have. The  
11  
12 Church documents (pastoral letters, the very Synods) discuss what ‘ought to be’ rather than ‘how  
13  
14 to be’ a conciliar Church.” (Hesayne, Dieuzeide, Moia, 2016, p.137). A document was published  
15  
16 after this council: *Exhortación Pastoral Postsinodal de la diócesis de Viedma para anunciar a*  
17  
18 *Jesucristo* (Post-synodal pastoral exhortation of the Diocese of Viedma to announce Jesus Christ,  
19  
20 1985). Centred in the analysis of the evangelization “from the poor to everyone,” it cites from the  
21  
22 Gospel and the Magisterium of the Catholic Church, specially from the Post-Conciliar  
23  
24 Documents and the *Evangelii nuntiandi* exhortation. These teachings are adapted for the “man  
25  
26 from Río Negro, (...) for our people’s culture and for its social environments and structures. (...)  
27  
28 For the first owners of our land, the *people of the ground*, the Mapuches, (...) and for their  
29  
30 offspring, who populate the deprived neighbourhoods, (...) for our brothers from Chile, who  
31  
32 continue to cross the border in considerable numbers, (...) for the immigrants from other  
33  
34 countries, (...) for the Argentinians coming from the North of our country.” (Hesayne, 1985, p.  
35  
36 9-10). The idea of the Synod was to evangelize “from their reality, (...) given that ‘divine  
37  
38 Salvation is achieved through sociological incarnation,’ (John 1, 14)” to perceive “the signs of  
39  
40 the personal and communitarian times,” with the objective of “dynamically transforming the  
41  
42 structures of society” and the economy, whose current form “hinders the achievement of real  
43  
44 social justice,” starting from “the poor to everyone, (...) thinking about evangelization not from  
45  
46 the centre but from the periphery, (...) creating communities around parishes,” to build “the new  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60



1  
2  
3 civilization of love,” based on “respect towards the people’s rights.” (Hesayne, 1985, pp. 12-15;  
4  
5 18-20;23-30; 36-40).

6  
7  
8 Hesayne put the Council and Synod’s teachings into practice on his way to Bariloche  
9  
10 down Route 23. While crossing the Rio Negro desert, he saw an old lady who lived with barely a  
11  
12 puddle of water. “That’s when my pastoral project was born. Maybe not in an explicit way, like  
13  
14 I’m saying it now, but somehow I wanted my people to have water; I wanted to give them  
15  
16 water.” And thus, he ordered the missionaries that were on their way to a very small town called  
17  
18 Aguada de Guerra to build a windmill (Hesayne, Dieuzeide, Moia, 2016, p. 106-107).

19  
20  
21 This community that fed on the new documents of the Church needed to be represented,  
22  
23 recognized and embodied. So, the Missionary Virgin of Río Negro became the personification of  
24  
25 their actions:

26  
27  
28  
29 After hearing what the people had to say, I realized I had to try to turn the whole of  
30  
31 Río Negro into a united community: the communion of the Church would help the  
32  
33 communion of the province. With that in mind, the Missionary Virgin of Río Negro  
34  
35 was born, with the statue of a Virgin that would visit each and every single Parish as a  
36  
37 Mother, making their children come together and strengthening their fraternal bond. I  
38  
39 came to the conclusion that pastoral activity and spirituality should not be separated.  
40  
41 They are different, but sometimes people have stressed this difference so much that  
42  
43 now we have to experience spirituality first and later we can get involved in the  
44  
45 pastoral activity (Hesayne, Dieuzeide, Moia, 2016, pp.107-108).

46  
47 At the end of the synodal document, Mary appears as the one responsible for this action his  
48  
49 pastoral project:

50  
51  
52 Mary, Mother of Jesus, Help of Christians, Missionary Virgin of Río Negro, join us in  
53  
54 this new pastoral phase of our particular Church, making the journey in the hope that  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 millions of Latin Americans achieve their liberation in the new evangelization of our  
4 continent (Hesayne, 1985, p. 43).  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9

10 The document mentions Mary Help of Christians and the new devotion: the Missionary Virgin,  
11 as the “Virgin of Río Negro,” playing with their identities, mingled by historical periods and  
12 social transformations. In this particular case, we can see how the two Marian devotions created  
13 in Río Negro a devotional place with an identity perspective, changing the meaning of symbolic  
14 spaces to dynamic territorial constructions. Their social inclusivity or exclusivity differentiates  
15 these spaces, and, in each historical context, it can territorialize the devotion, emphasizing  
16 symbolical borders, where icons and rituals are appropriated by ideologies.  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25

26 Don Bosco’s Mary Help of Christians, patron of the Salesians and of the first Diocese in this  
27 territory (1934), arrived in times of conquest and violence (1879-1884). This devotion is one of  
28 the signs of Salesian presence, “transplanted” from Turin with royal attributes and the old  
29 identification of the Virgin Mary as “Help of Christians,” against heretics and pagans in times of  
30 conquest. In Patagonia, this devotion is connected with the Salesian Congregation “evangelizing  
31 and civilizing” actions that took place between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>  
32 Centuries. It is also seen as a “national” symbol of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, because it  
33 was used by nationalist movements, which identified it with the Argentinian agricultural elite  
34 (Nicoletti, 2012, pp.127-148). In contrast, the Missionary Virgin was Bishop Hesayne’s project,  
35 successor of Salesian Bishop José Borghatti (1953-1968). The devotion was born from a  
36 pilgrimage designed by Hesayne, which “would travel through the parishes of the Diocese of  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Viedma with an image of Virgin Mary.”<sup>4</sup> In 1978, in the midst of the military dictatorship,  
4 Hesayne brought his presbyterium together to present his project. “Bearing in mind the aim of  
5 the peregrination and the popular value of ‘motherhood’ in the Mapuche culture, when the time  
6 came to choose the image by unanimity, they were asked to select an image which represented  
7 Mary Mother of Jesus and reflected the idiosyncrasy of the people of Río Negro.” “These images  
8 of the Virgin were (and many still are) powerful. They significantly enhanced the sense of the  
9 Virgin’s presence. People who believed in the Virgin’s powers felt the presence in the  
10 representation, not apart from it. Although theologically the idea that she is within the image is  
11 murky, nevertheless that is exactly what many believers felt and feel.” (Hall, 2004, p. 4).

12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23 In a pastoral letter, the Bishop addressed “all the people of Río Negro —believers and  
24 nonbelievers— through all the media of the province”; he gave the letter to “the sculptor in  
25 charge of creating the image of Mary Mother of Jesus, who was in fact agnostic and admitted not  
26 knowing who the Virgin was and what she meant to the People of God:” (sculptor Atilio  
27 Morosín)

28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60  
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

---

<sup>4</sup> “The Missionary Virgin Pilgrimage left Viedma on the 27<sup>th</sup> of November of 1978, and returned to the city on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December. In a little Chapel, built in the solitude of a hill near the village of General Conesa, located in the “Valle Medio” (area around the middle course of the Río Negro river), the Pilgrim image was exalted to establish the Sanctuary of the Missionary Virgin of Río Negro.” Alegria, J. (unpublished). *Historia de la advocación de la Virgen Misionera de Río Negro*. Testimony sent by Bishop Miguel Hesayne to María Andrea Nicoletti, Azul, 26<sup>th</sup> May 2011. (Hesayne, 2011 (Testimony given to María Andrea Nicoletti by the Bishop Miguel Hesayne, 21<sup>st</sup> May 2011))

1  
2  
3 which he read that Mary Mother of the Church was willing to beg her Son Jesus to  
4 transform the anguish and sadness of the people of Río Negro in joy and hope of a  
5 more human, fraternal, and participative world (Testimony given to María Andrea  
6 Nicoletti by the Bishop Miguel Hesayne, 21<sup>st</sup> May 2011).  
7  
8  
9

10  
11  
12  
13 “The Virgin, as a human and accessible person *re-presented* in an image, becomes a  
14 conduit between the human being and the divine. This same sense of liveliness and efficacy, it  
15 seems to me, persists today in interactions with the images of the Virgin.” (Hall, 2004: 4).  
16  
17

18 Within a context of violence and genocide, such as the last Argentinian military dictatorship  
19 (1976-1983), the project encouraged the construction of a devotion that positioned the Diocese  
20 and the Bishop with the sector of the Church that condemned the abuses of the military  
21 dictatorship, following the ideology of the documents from Vatican II, especially from the II and  
22 III Conferences of Latin American Bishops, Medellín, Colombia (1968) and Puebla, Mexico  
23 (1979), respectively.  
24  
25

26 The blond, white woman, with royal attributes and conquest titles, standing barefoot on a cloud,  
27 was displaced by this new Marian devotion, the Missionary Virgin of Río Negro, in the form of a  
28 dark-skinned, rural, indigenous woman, deprived of ornaments and attributes, walking in rough  
29 sandals, carrying her child, covered with a poncho.  
30  
31  
32

33 Thus, in the light of the post-conciliar theological framework and the historical national context,  
34 the present article aims to tackle the construction of the social and territorial identity of the  
35 Missionary Virgin, not only from the pastoral discourse but also from her iconographic symbols.  
36  
37

38 The article is divided into two parts: one dedicated to the context of the origin of the devotion  
39 from the feminist Mariology, and the other devoted to the image of the Virgin from her  
40 iconography and from her territorial marks.  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 *Figure* 1. Picture of Mary Help of Christians. Colegio María Auxiliadora, Buenos Aires.  
4  
5

6 *Figure* 2. Official stamp of the Missionary Virgin of Río Negro.  
7  
8  
9

## 12 **2. The construction of the Missionary Virgin from the feminist Mariology** **The**

### 14 **Missionary Virgin as a historical construction**

15  
16  
17  
18 Analysing the Missionary Virgin poses an epistemological challenge that tries “to explore this  
19 religious phenomenon’s cultural and social history, without neglecting the regional aspect and  
20 the changes in the analysis range, which are necessary to better understand the forms of religion  
21 and its manifestations, usually known as the religiousness forms.” (Fogelman, Ceva, Touris,  
22 2013, p.10).  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28

29 The construction of the Missionary Virgin’s identity is analysed based on Stuart Hall’s identity  
30 concept (2000): a process of socio-historical construction, far from any essentialist notion, in  
31 which intersected and antagonistic discourses, practices, and positions, situated in a “cultural and  
32 relational space”, are considered key. “Societies have construed narratives around the cult of the  
33 Virgin Mary, in which the city and its social actors constituted a changing, dynamic scenario.”  
34 (Fogelman, Ceva, Touris, 2013,p.16).  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42

43 The identification of the Missionary Virgin’s figure is also studied in the light of the  
44 anthropological and social post-conciliar challenges, which, in the last decades, have contributed  
45 significantly from feminist schools of thought to the studies of Mary. There have been different  
46 phases in this clash between feminism and Mariology: “from a tangential reference, through a  
47 controversial opposition, arriving finally to an earnest and constructive confrontation” (Azeuy,  
48 2001, pp.164-165). In this sense, it is interesting to point out some of Azeuy’s guidelines on the  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 “feminist appeal to current Mariology.” She outlines four models, which are a result of the clash  
4 with Mary’s figure and which are helpful to analyse the Missionary Virgin: 1) Ideal (patriarchal)  
5 image of women, 2) Myth of the feminist goddess, 3) Liberation symbol, and 4) Sister in Faith.  
6  
7 The first represents the early steps of the feminist Mariology, and is reticent towards Mary’s  
8 figure. The criticism is concerned with showing “the unilateral emphasis on the virtue of  
9 humbleness in Mary’s presentation,” an image that recreates the situation of subordinated  
10 women, dismissing it as a model for identification. A Mariology of receptivity, applied only to  
11 women from a sexist and patriarchal view, is also criticized. The second model tackles the field  
12 of what is symbolic, because it considers that today’s women rediscover Mary in a new light. In  
13 this interpretation, “the goddess appears as the origin of all that lives; as it was common in early  
14 periods in many Mediterranean cultures, this myth was translated in the truth of Mary Mother of  
15 God in the Christian vision” (Azcuy, 2001, p.170). The third model is composed of a group of  
16 theologians close to the liberation theology, who criticize the symbolic construction of Mary.  
17 The model, as defined by Gebara and Lucchetti Bingemer (1994), quoted by Azcuy (2001),  
18 “does not try to lend importance to Mary as a woman, idealized and projected from different  
19 necessities and cultures, but it seeks to reinterpret her from our modern needs, particularly from  
20 the privileged moment humanity is going through since the awakening of women’s historical  
21 consciousness” (Azcuy 2001, p. 172). A group of authors concerned with the biblical recovery of  
22 Mary as a starting point for a new Mariology compose the last model. They suggest “the image  
23 of a singular woman of faith, with the courage of decision, and hold that this model is currently  
24 valid, and applies for both women and men” (Azcuy 2001, pp.173). From this perspective, the  
25 titles “sister,” “disciple,” “Jewish woman,” “friend of God,” “model” (not ideal), and “prophet”  
26 (Azcuy 2001, pp. 181–184) are incorporated, and the solidarity among women in an inclusive  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 community and in the community of saints as mediator is highlighted (Azcuy 2001, pp. 174).

4  
5 Mary is reformulated by these theologians “from an *anthropological and inclusive* horizon, in  
6  
7 which Mary is presented as a model of human being, not only of woman, and in which male and  
8  
9 female dignity is equally acknowledged” (Azcuy 2001, pp. 174).

10  
11  
12  
13 Even though this Marian thinking is not contemporary to the creation of the Missionary Virgin,  
14  
15 the Liberation Symbol and Sister in Faith models can be directly associated with the spirit of the  
16  
17 post-conciliar teachings and with the liberation theology, led in Río Negro by Bishop Hesayne.

18  
19  
20  
21 In our country, the Missionary Virgin is another chapter in the long history of “national Marian  
22  
23 tradition,” born with the Virgin of Luján in times of colonial evangelization. This tradition  
24  
25 spread all over the national territory, adding, sharing, and, in this case, also creating new  
26  
27 advocations and titles.

28  
29  
30 Because of the context in which this dedication was created (1978), the Missionary Virgin  
31  
32 has been a symbol of freedom from the political oppression of the dictatorship and the reflection  
33  
34 of a society in crisis.

35  
36  
37 During the last dictatorship in Argentina, the provincial military governments of Aldo L.  
38  
39 Bachmann (1976-1978) and Julio R. Acuña (1978-1983) put emphasis on public works (Port of  
40  
41 San Antonio Este, Invap, Soda Solvay, Idevi), but lacked an equitable development plan. This  
42  
43 emphasized the *inequity between* the already unevenly developed subregions of Río Negro. In  
44  
45 the small towns located to the sides of the train track that connects the province from east to west  
46  
47 (area commonly known as *Línea Sur*), due to the lack of response from the local governments, in  
48  
49 1974 small-scale producers and farmers, mainly indigenous people, came together and formed  
50  
51 workers’ cooperatives, which gained full recognition in 1987, with democratic governments, and  
52  
53 were supported by government agencies, such as the Department of Livestock Farming and  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Cooperatives of Río Negro, the National Institute for Agricultural Technology (in Spanish,  
4 INTA) and different NGOs, such as the missionary group “San Francisco Javier” or the  
5 cooperative “Amuleim com” (all together) in Pilcaniyeu, led by the Bishop of Viedma. In the  
6 Alto Valle region (valley of the Río Negro and Neuquén rivers) and the Cordillera area, the flow  
7 of cheap labour, coming specially from Chile, went through a crisis due to the Beagle Channel  
8 dispute between Argentina and Chile in 1978. Employers tried to fill this gap by hiring migrant  
9 workers from the Argentine Northwest region and Bolivia. Initially, these workers were brought  
10 to the work fields in inhumane conditions and even had their identifications confiscated until the  
11 harvest was finished.

12  
13  
14 It is in this context that the Missionary Virgin appeared and became an integration force  
15 between people from different ethnic, social, and territorial backgrounds. Just as the Virgin of  
16 Guadalupe in Mexico, the Missionary Virgin is seen as “a symbol of the identity of the poor and  
17 the indigenous people, and throughout history, this idea has been picked up to promote a  
18 compassionate Mariology towards the needy, and to encourage popular movements that seek to  
19 free people from poverty and injustice.” (de la Torre, 2014, p.21).

20  
21  
22 During this period, Río Negro was one of the few dioceses in Argentina that, together with  
23 Bishop Miguel Hesayne, tried to intercede for the people disappeared by the military regime in  
24 the region and to put a stop to human rights violations. “As soon as I found out that some of my  
25 brothers and sisters were being subjected to extreme violence, tortured, held prisoners or  
26 exterminated, I didn’t hesitate to advocate for their rights from my role as a priest,” claimed  
27 Hesayne (Hesayne, Dieuzeide, Moia, 2016, p.85). In times of state terrorism in our country,  
28 Bishop Hesayne wrote numerous letters and made several requests to different Governors and to  
29 the Deputy Chief of the 5<sup>th</sup> Army Corps, General Abel Catuzzi, asking them about the missing



1  
2  
3 people. Given the lack of response, Hesayne asked General Videla himself, the President of  
4  
5 Argentina at the time, not to deliver his customary Christmas message without first answering to  
6  
7 Pope John Paul II's request regarding torture practices and human dignity. Hesayne himself  
8  
9 asked Pope John Paul II "to somehow rectify the mistake that we'd made by letting you give  
10  
11 these torturers the Holy Communion" (Hesayne, Dieuzeide, Moia, 2016, p. 86) next time he  
12  
13 visited Argentina. Videla's answer was blunt: neither him nor the people of Argentina "have  
14  
15 anything to regret." From that moment on, Bishop Hesayne and the Church of Río Negro were  
16  
17 persecuted by police forces, which the Governor of that time strongly denied. This persecution  
18  
19 did not only involve threats and harassments against the clergy, but also slander by national  
20  
21 magazines and the theft of important documentation belonging to the Bishop. Bishop Jaime de  
22  
23 Nevaes, President of the Human Rights Association, was also a victim of persecution (Nicoletti,  
24  
25 Navarro Floria, 2001, p.142).

26  
27  
28 "As in similar cases, there was a diverse response from the different areas of the population,  
29  
30 ranging from disinformation, indifference, fear, concealment, justification and complicity, to  
31  
32 opposition, public complaints and active resistance." (Mignone, 1996, p.136). The Church did  
33  
34 not escape from any of these reactions. There were as many repercussions as there were people,  
35  
36 situation that was aggravated by the fact that the Church is one of the largest and most  
37  
38 representative institutions in Argentina. Precisely for this reason, society demanded that the  
39  
40 Church took some action, even if it was just making a public and firm claim for justice. By that  
41  
42 time, the Episcopate was divided in two. On one side stood Bishop Tortolo and Bishop Bonamín,  
43  
44 who publicly supported and praised the Army's actions, which they considered a "purging  
45  
46 process." On the other side were those who were murdered for opposing the regime, like Bishop  
47  
48 Enrique Angelelli from La Rioja, Bishop Carlos Ponce de León from San Nicolás, the Pallottine  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Fathers and a group of French nuns, among others. “In this context, the Conference General of  
4 the Argentinian Episcopate adopted an extremely prudent approach<sup>5</sup>, maintaining only private,  
5 secret contacts and publishing generic documents containing repeated doctrinaire concepts, thus  
6 avoiding any direct accusations. Only a few bishops dared file public complaints. They also  
7 looked after, protected and defended the victims and their families, and had an active role in  
8 human rights organizations.” (Mignone, 1996, p.136). Hesayne asked direct, thought-provoking  
9 questions:

10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21 At the Conference General of the Argentinian Episcopate, while we were reflecting on  
22 the last civic-military dictatorship, I asked: “Why don’t we welcome the Mothers of  
23 Plaza de Mayo here, as we have welcomed the military in the past?” We had to do it in  
24 secret. One of the bishops, a strong figure in the Conference, I won’t give any names,  
25 answered: “Well, the military were in a position of authority; they were the authority.”  
26 That is, their criterion was not that of the people of God (Hesayne, Dieuzeide, Moia,  
27 2016, p. 34).

28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40 De Nevares and Hesayne, together with the “voiceless”, the poor and the needy, continued  
41 advocating for human rights, even in times of democracy, which was re-established in 1983.

42  
43  
44 In this critical context, the construction of the Marian figure began, ~~it was chosen~~ after a  
45 consultation with Hesayne’s presbyterium, and all the social sectors of Río Negro. According to  
46 the Bishop, “bearing in mind the aim of the peregrination and the popular value of ‘motherhood’  
47 in the Mapuche culture, when the time came to choose the image by unanimity, they were asked  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52

---

53  
54  
55 <sup>5</sup> It refers to the Conference General of the Argentinian Episcopate’s first letter, written in San Miguel, on May 15th,  
56 1976 and the Pro Memoria. It was a document handed in to the Government by the Executive Committee of the  
57 Conference General of the Argentinian Episcopate, November 26th, 1977 in: Documentos del Episcopado argentino

1  
2  
3 to select an image which represented Mary Mother of Jesus and reflected the idiosyncrasy of the  
4 people of Río Negro.” In this identification, Mary answers to the Sister in Faith model. **Mother**  
5 **of the people of Río Negro and Sister in Faith of those who suffer, the Missionary, just as Renee**  
6 **de la Torre defines the Virgin of Guadalupe, has also fulfilled this triple purpose of “integrating**  
7 **and merging cultures, establishing cultural dominance, encouraging people to resist and bringing**  
8 **traditions closer to contemporary ideas to meet today’s challenges.” (De la Torre, 2014, p.22).**

9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17 Hesayne expressed these aims in a pastoral letter, agreeing with the presbyterium to  
18 Father Jesús Alegría’s proposal: that the dedication was named Missionary Virgin of Río Negro.  
19 The journey gave the Bishop time to think about creating a devotional symbol that had more in  
20 common with the region, and that united all the believers from the different parishes of Río  
21 Negro. **Hesayne’s ideas on the matter were included in the Diocese of Viedma’s Newsletter:**  
22 **“The major short-term objective of the ‘visit’ of the Missionary Virgin of Río Negro, the Mother**  
23 **of God and our Mother, is to spread and strengthen our identity as Church, one that preaches**  
24 **while it becomes a preacher (...) Our pastoral project aims to be a comprehensive endeavour**  
25 **inspired by the Virgin Mary that encourages all the people of Río Negro to live a Christian life.**  
26 **As a symbol of this, the statue of the Missionary Virgin will be visiting all the parishes in the**  
27 **province.” (Archive of the Bishopric of Viedma, "Letters of the Bishop", Ecclesiastical Bulletin**  
28 **of the Bishopric of Viedma, August-October 1978, p. 93).** It was Enrique Lafforgue, a  
29 seminarian, who suggested leaving the image of the Virgin in a chapel built in a hill near the  
30 village of General Conesa, finishing the “Marian journey” there, and turning it into a place for  
31 pilgrimage.

32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60  
During the first pilgrimage, the image of the Virgin travelled, on the Bishop’s car, around 5,500  
km throughout the province (*El Diario de San Carlos de Bariloche*, 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1978, Year

1  
2  
3 1, N° 16, p. 7. *Figures* 1 and 2). The journey took place during November and December of  
4  
5 1978, and was joined by  
6 priests from different parishes of Río Negro and believers from each  
7  
8 city. “It is not an exaggeration to say that the pilgrimage excited the inhabitants of the whole  
9  
10 province. From cities and urban areas to the most inhospitable rural areas, the Missionary Virgin  
11  
12 of Río Negro was welcomed with joy and acclaimed as the Mother of God and our Mother by  
13  
14 long caravans of pilgrims on foot and on horseback, in cars, trucks, buses and even tractors. The  
15  
16 Missionary Virgin Pilgrimage left Viedma on the 27<sup>th</sup> of November 1978, and returned to the  
17  
18 city on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December.” (Bishop Miguel Hesayne’s testimony, 26<sup>th</sup> May 2011). One year  
19  
20 later, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of October of 1979, the Virgin was exalted in the chapel Colonia de San Juan,  
21  
22 in General Conesa, where a peregrination to the little sanctuary chosen for the Missionary  
23  
24 Virgin, beside the National Route N° 250, 16 km away from the city, was made. The pilgrimage  
25  
26 and celebration were presided by the Apostolic nuncio Pío Laghi together with Bishop Miguel  
27  
28 Hesayne, and the faithful who walked the 16 km to meet the Virgin. Hesayne’s testimony  
29  
30 concludes as follows:  
31  
32  
33

34  
35  
36 It was remarkable that in the middle of the desert, and for the first time in the Marian  
37  
38 Sanctuary of Río Negro, more than ten thousand pilgrims from every direction of the  
39  
40 province gathered at the feet of the venerated image of Mary, the Mother of God.

41  
42 Since then, the second Sunday of October, the Diocese Pilgrimage takes place, which,  
43  
44 after 16 km on foot, ends celebrating a Mass presided by the Diocese Bishop, the  
45  
46 presbyterium and the followers from all the parishes of the Diocese of Viedma  
47  
48 (Alegria, 2011).  
49  
50  
51

52  
53 In 2005, the Missionary Virgin chapel, in Colonia San Juan, beside National Route N° 250, was  
54  
55 recognized as Historical Patrimony of the province (Law n° 3.572).  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 These types of pilgrimage are the equivalent to the peregrination to Our Lady of Luján, the  
4 Protector of Argentina. By themselves or with their families, pilgrims visit her sanctuary in trips  
5  
6 organized by dioceses, parishes, institutions, associations, schools or tourist groups, in which  
7  
8 “the religious symbols build a bridge to connect people’s ethnical differences. These different  
9  
10 communities let their religious beliefs become their common ground (religion-culture-ethnicity  
11  
12 triad), making religion the foundation of the cultural ties that legitimate them. These dynamics  
13  
14 have been constantly used in all kinds of environments and geographic areas. They are the  
15  
16 strategies of a religious institution applied to ethnic relations.” (Gutiérrez Martínez, Balslev  
17  
18 Clausen, 2008, p. 28). The pilgrimage to the Missionary Virgin strengthens these ties, not only  
19  
20 because of the iconography of the Virgin, but also because of what a pilgrimage implies, as in  
21  
22 the case of the gaucho pilgrimage to Luján. “Besides being an event linked to the devotion to the  
23  
24 Virgin Mary (...), it is also an opportunity for the popular culture to express itself, a culture that  
25  
26 is related to our identity and traditions.” (Olaechea, 2013, p.115).  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35

36 **Figure 3.** “The image of the Missionary Virgin arrives at Bariloche Civic Centre in a fire engine  
37  
38 belonging to the association of volunteer firefighters.”  
39  
40

41 **Figure 4.** “Surrounded by authorities and believers, Reverend Father Carlos Mateos sings a  
42  
43 canticle during the reception ceremony for the Missionary Virgin in the Town Hall of  
44  
45 Bariloche.”  
46  
47  
48

49 Source: *El Diario de San Carlos de Bariloche*, 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1978, Year 1, N° 16, p. 7.  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Below, the social and territorial identity construction of the Missionary Virgin's image in Río  
4 Negro will be analysed, taking into account the new post-conciliar ideas. ~~in tune with the~~  
5 ~~feminist Mariology~~.  
6  
7  
8  
9

### 10 11 12 13 14 **3. Image of the Missionary Virgin in the Río Negro space** 15

#### 16 17 a) *The Missionary Virgin: face of the people of Río Negro* 18

19  
20 From her conception, the Missionary Virgin had a “popular” stamp, evident not only in the  
21 context of military repression ~~in which it was created~~, but also in the iconographic and symbolic  
22 plot and in the meaning that believers gave her. The dedication was born from a synod (“walk  
23 together”) between the Bishop, his presbyterium and the faithful. Her image comes from the  
24 hands of a non-believer sculptor ~~who followed~~ the Bishop's description. The image tries to  
25 reflect the ideas of the synod “from the poor to everyone.”<sup>6</sup> Her face and her clothing could  
26 belong to a countrywoman from Río Negro, a Mapuche woman, or a Chilean immigrant, of an  
27 undefined age. It is the image of a pilgrim, with a particular dynamic, opposite to the usual. It is  
28 Mary who walks towards her people, and not the people who venerate her in a Sanctuary.  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40

41  
42 ~~The Missionary dedication appeared in a violent context, marked by the military dictatorship~~  
43 ~~(1976-1983). During those years, Bishop Hesayne, who was persecuted and threatened for his~~  
44 ~~defence of human rights (Hesayne, Dieuzeide y Moia, 2016, p. 87-92), decided to create a Marian~~  
45 ~~image that represented the people of Río Negro and that would become a symbol of resistance~~  
46 ~~and protection for the poor and the marginalized. Thus, Hesayne's~~ idea of resistance to violence  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53

54  
55 <sup>6</sup> In the published dialogue between Miguel Hesayne, Carlos Moia and Juan Ángel Dieuzeide, this expression is  
56 discussed, arguing that the word “option” refers to something that can or cannot be done, whereas “from the poor to  
57 everyone” reflects a “christological” and not a “sociological” idea (Hesayne, Dieuzeide, Moia, 2016, p. 70).  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 is depicted in the Missionary Virgin's iconography: a pilgrim who walks protecting her child,  
4 and whose face shows the sorrow and the joy of the ones who follow her: "Violence is not  
5 human nor Christian, because it entails a denial of justice and truth, and therefore it will never be  
6 able to solve any human conflict." (Hesayne, 1989, p. 1). This resistance, together with the  
7 "popular" character of the Virgin, is materialized in the first pilgrimage (1978) of the image  
8 across the province. For Bishop Hesayne, the objective of the journey was to make real the  
9 reunion between the Virgin and her people, marking the beginning of the Marian identity  
10 construction. One of his visits to San Carlos de Bariloche is as an example of this. On that  
11 occasion, described as a "great religious fervour" by the press, Hesayne invited the entire city to:  
12 "unite with the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, under the Missionary of Río Negro devotion, to  
13 open our hearts towards the one who comes to save us," (*El Diario de San Carlos de Bariloche*,  
14 22-12-1978, 1, N° 16: 7) and at the end of the event, he asked people to pray for the peace of the  
15 Latin American family (figures 3 and 4). In other words, the Bishop appealed to this particular  
16 image of the Missionary Virgin and to this singular journey towards a popular identity, moving  
17 to find her people, because it was the Virgin who visited the people, breaking with the sanctuary  
18 tradition. In this action, the Virgin is a "sister" travelling with us.

19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41 From the symbolic and iconographic plot, it can be appreciated that the Missionary Virgin,  
42 unlike the other Patagonian Marian devotion, Mary Help of Christians (Nicoletti, 2012, pp.127-  
43 148), and in accordance with the post-conciliar views, presents an image that is extremely  
44 simple, earthly, and with "historical consciousness," as Azcuy puts it (2001, p.173).

45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51 *Figure 5.* Don Bosco's Mary Help of Christians stamp, patron saint of the Argentinian  
52 agricultural elite.  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 **Figure 6.** Picture of a Missionary Virgin statue.  
4  
5

6 We can see this stamp in Hesayne's choice to represent Mary as a dark-skinned Mapuche  
7 countrywoman, wearing simple clothes and covering Baby Jesus with a poncho. According to  
8 the Bishop, "the image depicts a Mapuche mother strongly and tenderly carrying the fruit of her  
9 loins in her arms. She is wearing a Mapuche poncho and holds the child to her heart while she  
10 walks expressively, showing her mission as the Mother of God and of the Church." (Alegria,  
11 2011).  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20

21 **Figure 7.** Stamp of the Missionary Virgin (2012)  
22  
23

24 The artist said that he was inspired by a "native mother, with her poor clothes and native  
25 poncho," dispossessed of ornaments and riches. This Virgin is not between heaven and earth, but  
26 entirely earthly. In accordance with this earthly image, the Diocese official publication explains  
27 that the Missionary Virgin is travelling, "she is a different Virgin, one who crosses de dessert of  
28 Río Negro," which is signalled by her right foot being in front of left one (Diocese of Viedma,  
29 [www.hansa-sur.com.ar](http://www.hansa-sur.com.ar)). This movement generates a continuous closeness and companionship  
30 feeling in her believers, and also gives Mary a human and historical condition, which strongly  
31 identifies her with the reality of the people of Río Negro. Her creators describe the Virgin as  
32 "Mapuche," as "a pilgrim image with indigenous face and poncho, carrying her baby,"  
33 (Dieuzeide, 2004, p.199) and as "native." (artist).  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46

47 These "dark-skinned Virgins," inspired by the Virgin of Guadalupe, "have been a key figure in  
48 the *Teología Indígena*, a movement within the Catholic Church that, developing out of the  
49 implementation of the Second Vatican Council in Latin America and the experience of the  
50 Theology of Liberation, has advocated for the revelation and incarnation of the Gospel in  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60



1  
2  
3 indigenous cultures, granting to indigenous spiritual practices a renewed capacity for revelation  
4 of religious truth and an important role in interfaith dialogue.” (Judd 2004, p. 218; Norget, 2004,  
5 pp. 166-9 quoting Napolitano, 2009, p. 104).  
6  
7  
8  
9

10 The Bishop identifies her with the native people, the artist, with mixed-race people. From  
11 Boccara’s point of view about “mixed-race logic” as a resistance strategy against the power of  
12 “civilization” manifested as violent imposition, we understand that “mixed-race is indigenous.”  
13 (Boccara, 1999).  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18

19 From the liberation theology’s perspective, as Napolitano points out in the case of the Virgin of  
20 Guadalupe, the Missionary Virgin “has been interpreted as a mediator between liberation and  
21 submission, a liberating symbol with significance for salvation. Within this view some Latino  
22 theologians have played a key role in arguing that she is a central player in the process of  
23 inculturation and mestizaje of Christianity in the Americas. She is thus described as a popular  
24 religious symbol for evangelical transformation and life-enhancing processes rather than  
25 disruptive racial mixing (Napolitano quoting Elizondo 2000, p. 516), providing a sense of origin  
26 of the ‘*new mestizo*’ of the Americas that signals a passage from ‘brokenness to integration  
27 through a conversion process.’” (Napolitano, 2009, p. 99).  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39

40 Meanwhile, carrying on with the iconographic analysis, the Virgin’s face presents a double  
41 material and symbolic expression: sad and old on one side, consequence of the severity of the  
42 Patagonian weather, and of the sorrow and alienation of the people of Río Negro; joyful and  
43 young on the other side, since the face transforms into joy and hope with the announcement of  
44 the Gospel to the Poor. Her face represents life itself, with joy and sadness, youth and old age.  
45 Her feet are protected by rough sandals for the journey. According to the artist, the idea of the  
46 two faces was inspired in the pastoral letter, in which it was stated that Mary Mother of the  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Church was willing to beg her Son Jesus to transform the anguish and sadness of the people of  
4 Río Negro in joy and hope of a more human, fraternal, and participative world.

5  
6  
7  
8 The baby stands out because of the red blanket, he is covered and protected by the Virgin, and  
9  
10 only his dark skin is perceived. Although he is looking at his Mother, she is looking at the  
11 people. The red blanket stands for the fire and the blood: the sacrifice of Christ. It represents life  
12 and burning love. “Red is the colour of power. But in this case, there is a poor boy wearing it,  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17 (...) a reminder that the power of the Gospel is not like the authoritarian and furious power of the  
18 world’s **mighty** people, but the power of service. Without love, power becomes arrogance, pride,  
19 high-handedness, oppression.” (Diocese of Viedma, [www.hansa-sur.com.ar](http://www.hansa-sur.com.ar)).

20  
21  
22  
23  
24 As for the colours of the Virgin, blue “symbolizes the depth of people, their profundity, their  
25 ability to think. It reflects the transparency of truth –as a clean glass– and the promises kept, the  
26 words said and not taken back. It implies honesty. **It represents the things that have a meaning**  
27 **which overcomes us, a meaning that cannot be pinned down**: like air, water, the sea. Blue  
28 connects what is deep with what is high; it links the human with the eternal. Her robe is a  
29 reminder of the intimacy of the person, an intimacy that must be protected without false secrecy,  
30 but with simplicity. The human person has an unforgettable right to intimacy. The veil, in  
31 covering the head, reminds us that above the person exists a greater Other: God. It is a sign of **the**  
32 **orders of God, from His will**: ‘May your word to me be fulfilled.’” White symbolizes purity; it  
33 recalls the transfiguration of Jesus, our baptism and the victory over death. The brown poncho  
34 represents the earth, “the ‘Pachamama,’ the ‘humus.’ It is the colour of humbleness, of the virtue  
35 of the fragile, as baked clay, but with the ability to keep in that clay cup the treasure of the  
36 Gospel, the Kingdom. In this sense, brown is the colour of those who truly accept their  
37 limitations, but also know their talents, and put them to the service of others. It is the colour of

1  
2  
3 poverty, typical of pilgrims, **who take their being as the earth**. Poncho and rough sandals, like the  
4  
5 ones born in this land: poncho that provides warmth and shelter from the wind, the rain and the  
6  
7 cold; poncho that can be shared, since there are no different sizes; sandals which are comfortable  
8  
9 to walk slow and get far.” (Diocese of Viedma, [www.hansa-sur.com.ar](http://www.hansa-sur.com.ar)). It should be noted the  
10  
11 contrast with black, which is associated to evil darkness, to what is negative, and to death,  
12  
13 defeated by the Virgin in her journey. This Virgin does not step over the snake from a cloud, as  
14  
15 the Immaculate Virgin does; she gets her feet dirty as she walks, and from earth’s dust she steps  
16  
17 over evil.  
18  
19

20  
21  
22 *b) The Missionary Virgin: with her feet on the earth*  
23

24  
25 The territorial construction from the image is analysed according to Carballo, who states that  
26  
27 religious beliefs and cults are not free from the need for a space to reproduce and grow (Carballo,  
28  
29 **2009, pp.32-40**). Based on this, she redefines the notions of *territory* and *space*. The first one is  
30  
31 described as the space appropriated and valorised by the social groups. The second one is  
32  
33 characterized “by its use value, in which the territory would be the result of the appropriation and  
34  
35 valorisation of the space through representation and work.” (Carballo, 2009, p.25). This  
36  
37 appropriation can be *instrumental* or *symbolic/expressive*. The former refers to a utilitarian  
38  
39 relationship of space, centered in political, economic and social relationships. The latter  
40  
41 emphasizes the role of territory as a symbolic and cultural sedimentation of space. Thus, territory  
42  
43 is not only understood as instrumental, but also as an object of symbolic actions: territory can be  
44  
45 characterized as the framework for objective cultural practices (parties, rituals, etc.), and as an  
46  
47 object of representation, as a symbol of social belonging. In this last case, not only subjects  
48  
49 interiorize the territory into their cultural system, getting past the idea of territory as an object,  
50  
51 but also the territory “is built through an ‘internal’ social reality, and becomes an ‘invisible’  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 territory, as a result of the subjects' interiorizing process." (Carballo, 2009, p. 29). The author  
4 also suggests religious phenomenon need to be tackled from "multi territoriality," meaning  
5 multiple territorialities "merging in one recreation of spatiality, not mixing themselves up, but  
6 drawing borders that share the same support and/or political territory in one same map."  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12 (Carballo, 2009, p. 40).

13  
14  
15 The Missionary Virgin was constructed from a territorial trajectory. During the 1978 journey  
16 through every chapel of Río Negro, the Bishop consolidated her as the province patron saint,  
17 from the "desert," "travelling from every direction of the province." (Alegría, 2011). The official  
18 prayer makes a reference to this journey through de Río Negro landscape:  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23

24  
25 Bless our jobs, our social and family relationships,  
26  
27 our flocks and fruit trees, our rivers and deserts, our sea and Cordillera.  
28  
29 Thus, all the natural riches and beauties will bring us closer to God,  
30  
31 and we will be brothers (Diocese of Viedma, [www.hansa-sur.com.ar](http://www.hansa-sur.com.ar)).

32  
33  
34  
35 The chapel mentioned by Hesayne became the Parish Church of San Juan and Sanctuary of the  
36  
37 Missionary Virgin.  
38  
39  
40

41 **Figure 8.** Pilgrimage to the Sanctuary of the Missionary Virgin

42  
43  
44 Source: <http://www.rionegro.com.ar/diario/rn/nota.aspx?idart=466576&idcat=9521&tipo=2>

45  
46  
47 At the same time, from General Roca to Paso Córdoba, an informal pilgrimage began, led by  
48 Enrique Barbudo SM, the Marianist priest of Cristo Resucitado parish (1977-1983). "It was a  
49 movement of young people, with scouts, sleepless nights **here and there**, and things like that."  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54 (Testimony of Father Javier de Aguirre SM, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2011).

1  
2  
3 According to Javier de Aguirre, current Marianist priest, it is possible that the pilgrimages  
4 became official with the division of the Diocese of Río Negro, in 1993, which left the sanctuary  
5 of Conesa outside the territory of the Diocese of Viedma.<sup>7</sup> “The pilgrimages have been taking  
6 place for more than 15 or 20 years, from all the towns in the valley to Paso Córdoba, on the  
7 morning of the third Sunday of November. That day, all services are suspended in the Diocese  
8 parish churches, so that everyone can attend the pilgrimage. We are talking about two or three  
9 thousand people, with some young people coming on foot from Regina and some more from  
10 Cipolletti. There is a central mass, presided by the Father Bishop, and then the breaking-up.  
11 Some groups stay to have a barbecue there or by the river bank. Many groups leave from Roca,  
12 and we meet in National Route N° 6, the one that goes south and crosses the bridge of Paso  
13 Córdoba.” (Testimony of Father Javier de Aguirre SM, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2011).

14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29 **Figure 9.** Map of the Diocese of Viedma and the towns in which there is an image of the  
30 Missionary Virgin.  
31

32 Source: Made by Inés Barelli.  
33  
34

35  
36  
37  
38 This territorial demarcation goes from the valley of the Río Negro river to the Cordillera area and  
39 the “Línea Sur” of the Río Negro province (the land and villages to the sides of the train track  
40 that connects the province from east to west). Two parish churches were established there,  
41 which, despite not having annual pilgrimages, are dedicated to the Missionary Virgin. One,  
42 **under charge of Claretian priests**, located in Comallo, a town of the “Línea Sur,” and transferred  
43 to the Diocese of San Carlos de Bariloche in 2010, under the two dedications: Mary Help of  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51

52  
53  
54 <sup>7</sup> In 1993, the province of Río Negro is divided into three Diocese: Viedma (Atlantic area of Río Negro), Alto Valle  
55 (valley of the Río Negro and Neuquén rivers) and Bariloche (Cordillera area). **Hesayne was the last Bishop to be the**  
56 **head of the diocese that covered the whole province.**  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Christians and the Missionary Virgin (Diocese of  
4 Viedma.<http://www.claret.org/index.php?option=com>). The second one was the Missionary Virgin  
5  
6 parish church, in a San Carlos de Bariloche neighbourhood, established in 1983 by a Mapuche  
7  
8 priest, Juvenal Currulef, who described himself as “a labourer priest, (open) to the world of  
9  
10 politics and to the pain of the people in the process.” (Agüero, 2007, p.31). In this last case, the  
11  
12 post-conciliar stamp is more evident, and the models, such as Liberation symbol and Sister in  
13  
14 Faith, are more clearly seen, owing to the fact the Juvenal Currulef did more than introducing the  
15  
16 dedication into Bariloche. He established a working-class neighbourhood with marginalized  
17  
18 sectors of society, which he named “Virgen Misionera,” on km 7 of Avenida Pioneros, at the  
19  
20 foot of the northern hillside of Otto hill. According to Agüero, “the consolidation of the  
21  
22 neighbourhood began in the mid-80s, with the beginning of the interaction between the local  
23  
24 people and the mediators, through the parish-educational organization; during this period, a  
25  
26 process of organization and participation took place, which produced institutions and actions  
27  
28 related to the needs and requests of the neighbours.”<sup>8</sup>.  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35

36 The pilgrim nature of the Missionary Virgin, besides demarcating the territory, generates, in  
37  
38 Carballo’s words, a “symbolic expressive” appropriation of space (Carballo, 2009, p. 40),  
39  
40 unifying the province subregions, and becoming an exclusive, but not excluding, symbol of the  
41  
42 people of Río Negro. She is a gathering dedication, one that calls pilgrims from different towns  
43  
44 around the province to both sanctuaries. The pilgrimages in Conesa and Paso Córdoba take place  
45  
46 in rural areas that reflect its inhabitants, which belong to the poorer sector. In San Carlos de  
47  
48 Bariloche, by being in a poor and deprived neighbourhood, the Missionary Virgin’s presence  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53

---

54 <sup>8</sup> At present, the “Virgen Misionera” education project consists of the following institutions: “Arco Iris” nursery and  
55 kindergarten, “Virgen Misionera” primary school, “Carlos Mugica” skilled trades training program, “Amuyén” high  
56 school, and “Don Jaime de Nevaes” school for adults (Agüero, 2007, p. 33).  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 tries to change the social matrix imposed by the commercial and touristic sector of the “mountain  
4 village.” (Navarro Floria, 2010, p. 15). Her presence is associated to what is popular, to  
5  
6 denunciation and to the Church walking together with the poor; she alludes to the Third World  
7  
8 Movement (to which Currulef belonged) and to the resistance to the violence of the military  
9  
10 dictatorship (Pérez Pertino, 2011, p. 3). In that sense, the Missionary Virgin serves the purpose  
11  
12 of being an object of devotion that connects the broad differences among the subregions and  
13  
14 towns in the province, and creates a common identity, which puts an end to “the antagonistic  
15  
16 tension between the universalistic Christian appeal of the Virgin Mary's messages and the  
17  
18 possibility of its particularistic/local appropriations, such as in nationalism.” (Skrbis, 2005, p.  
19  
20 458 quoting Halemba, 2008, p. 343).  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29

### 30 3. Final Thoughts

31  
32  
33 The Missionary Virgin was born as a pilgrim after a popular consultation, in the midst of a  
34  
35 military dictatorship; she was materialized in the form of a statue representing the people of Río  
36  
37 Negro. Her link to the feminist Mariology, which rests in the post-conciliar teachings, allowed us  
38  
39 to relate this thinking with the symbolism of her origin, devotion and iconography. Her  
40  
41 pilgrimage in chapels, sanctuaries and parishes made it possible for the subregions of the  
42  
43 province to be integrated and for the social matrix to be resignified. Her image reflects what  
44  
45 Bishop Hesayne thought and felt as Pastor of the people of Río Negro, the people he and the  
46  
47 Virgin met in a fraternal way. Moving people who do not go to a sanctuary, but meet her on the  
48  
49 way instead. A native Virgin, stripped and earthly: a “Pachamama,” who bears in her face both  
50  
51 pain and joy, who experiences violence and fights the authority, who has fire, blood and sacrifice  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

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 creature and daughter of God, dressed with 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 space 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 of the neighbourhoods belonging to booming touristic cities. Her moving territoriality creates a pilgrim identity through her iconography, for she walks almost barefoot, “slow to get far.” (Diocese of Viedma, [www.hansa-sur.com.ar](http://www.hansa-sur.com.ar)).

#### 4. Bibliography

- Agüero, A. (2007). Virgen Misionera: 'somos de acá'. En R. D. Fuentes, & P. Núñez, (ed.), *Sectores populares: identidad cultural e historia en Bariloche* (pp.23-64). Bariloche: Núcleo patagónico.
- Azcuy, V. (2001). Reencontrar a María como modelo. Interpelación feminista a la mariología actual. *Proyecto*, 39, 163-185.
- Boccaro, G. (1999). Antropología diacrónica. Dinámicas culturales, procesos históricos y poder político”. En G. Boccaro (dir) *Lógica mestiza en América* (pp.15-21). Universidad de la Frontera. Temuco.
- Carballo, C. (2009). Repensar el territorio de la expresión religiosa. En C. Carballo (coord.), *Cultura, territorios y prácticas religiosas*. Buenos Aires: Prometeo.
- De Fiore, S. (2011). *María Síntesis de valores. Historia cultural de la Mariología*. Madrid: San Pablo.
- De la Torre, R. (2014). Los símbolos y la disputa por la definición de los límites entre Fe y política en México. En A. Ameigeiras, (comp), *Símbolos, rituales religiosos e identidades nacionales: los símbolos religiosos y los procesos de construcción política de identidades en Latinoamérica* (pp.17-38). Buenos Aires: CLACSO.
- Di Stefano, R y Ramón Solans, F.J. (2006). *Marian Devotions political mobilization and nationalism in Europe and America*, London, New York, Shangai: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Fogelman, P, Ceva, M y Touris, C (ed). (2013). *El culto mariano en Luján y San Nicolás. Religiosidad e Historia regional*. Buenos Aires: Biblos.



- Gutiérrez Martínez, D y Balslev Clausen, H (coord.). (2008). *Revisitar la etnicidad: miradas cruzadas en torno a la etnicidad*. México: Siglo XXI.
- Hall, S. (2000). ¿Quién necesita «identidad»? In: S. Hall and P. du Gay, (ed). *Questions of cultural identity*. London: Sage Publications.
- Hall, L. B (2004). *Mary, Mother and Warrior: The Virgin in Spain and the Americas*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Halemba, A (2008). From Dzubyk to Medjugorje: The Virgin Mary as a translational figure. Transnationalism and the nation-state. *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung*, 57, 329-345.
- Hesayne, M, Dieuzeide, J.A and Moia, C (2016). *Diálogos en Azul. Tres peregrinos, un camino y el Concilio Vaticano II*. Buenos Aires: PPC.
- Mignone, E. (1996). Dictadura e Iglesia en Quilmes. Contexto para una investigación. *Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, 5, 135-143.
- Napolitano, V (2009). The Virgin of Guadalupe, a Nexus of Affect. *Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute*, 15, 96-112.
- Navarro Floria, P. (2010). Procesos de resignificación, desarrollos locales y formación territorial en los Territorios Nacionales. El caso de la “Suiza argentina” entre los siglos XIX y XX”. *Anuario del IEHS*, 25, 14-45.
- Nicoletti, M.A y Navarro Floria, P. (2001). *Río Negro, mil voces en una Historia*. Neuquén: Manuscritos.
- Nicoletti, M.A. (2012). “La Virgen fronteriza: la Auxiliadora de Don Bosco como dispositivo de Territorialidad devocional (SXIX-XX). *Revista sociedades de paisajes áridos y semiáridos*. VI, 127-148.
- Olaechea, S (2013). “Etnicidad y tradición. Peregrinaciones y fiestas de bolivianos y gauchos en Luján”. En P. Fogelman, M. Ceva y C. Touris (ed) *El culto mariano en Luján y San Nicolás. Religiosidad e Historia regional* (pp.99-118). Biblos. Buenos Aires.
- Pérez Pertino, P. (2011). Cristo al sur del río Colorado: El Movimiento de Sacerdotes del Tercer Mundo en la Patagonia Norte durante la década del 70. *IV Jornadas de Historia Social de la Patagonia*, Santa Rosa, 19 y 20 de mayo de 2011.

a) *Published sources*

Archive of the Bishopric of Viedma, "Letters of the Bishop", Ecclesiastical Bulletin of the Bishopric of Viedma.

Dieuzeide, J. A. (2004). *Recuerdos y Esperanzas. La historia que yo viví*. El Bolsón: Talleres gráficos de La Loma.

Documentos del Episcopado argentino (1965-1981). Colección completa del Magisterio posconciliar de la Conferencia Episcopal Argentina. Buenos Aires, Claretiana, 1982.

1  
2  
3 Document from the Second General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate (1968),  
4 Medellín, Colombia.

6 Document from the Third General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate, Carta del Santo  
7 Padre a los Obispos Diocesanos de América Latina (1979), Puebla, México.

9  
10 *El Diario de San Carlos de Bariloche*, 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1978, Year 1, N° 16, p. 7.

12 Hesayne, M. E. (1989). *Cartas por la Vida*. Buenos Aires: Página 12.

14 Hesayne, M. E. (1985). *Exhortación Pastoral Post-Sinodal "Para anunciar a Jesucristo"*.  
15 Viedma: Obispado de Viedma.

17  
18 Homily of The Holy Father John Paul II in the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Zapopán, 1979.

19  
20 [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/es/homilies/1979/documents/hf\\_jp-](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/es/homilies/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19790130_messico-zapopan.html)  
21 [ii\\_hom\\_19790130\\_messico-zapopan.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/es/homilies/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19790130_messico-zapopan.html).

22  
23 Paul VI (1974). The Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus*.

24  
25 Vatican Council II (1962). *Lumen Gentium. Evangelii Nuntiandi*. (1964).

26  
27  
28  
29  
30 *b) Unpublished sources*

31  
32 Alegría, J. (unpublished). *Historia de la advocación de la Virgen Misionera de Río Negro*.  
33 Testimony sent by Bishop Miguel Hesayne to María Andrea Nicoletti, Azul, 26<sup>th</sup> May 2011.

34  
35 Testimony given to María Andrea Nicoletti by Father Javier de Aguirre SM, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2011.

36  
37 Testimony given to María Andrea Nicoletti by the Bishop Miguel Hesayne, 21<sup>st</sup> May 2011

38  
39  
40  
41  
42 *c) Web pages*

43  
44 [www.hansa-sur.com.ar](http://www.hansa-sur.com.ar)

45  
46 [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council)

47  
48 [http://www.celam.org/doc\\_conferencias/Documento](http://www.celam.org/doc_conferencias/Documento)