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Miraculous images and devotional practices in Italy at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic¹

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The aim of this paper is to analyse the use of Catholic miraculous images during the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy, focusing on the way in which they have been used and the related rituals performed, especially involving movement, temporality and nature. I take a multidisciplinary approach, based on a historical perspective, but enriched by the strong influence of anthropology and semiotics. An interesting focus emerges on the devotional practices – both online and, when possible, in presence – in which the miraculous power of historical images is rediscovered and sometimes re-elaborated in light of contemporary sensibilities. At the same time, the rituals performed by clergy constitute a complex negotiation, with the aim of imploring the miraculous power of the supernatural helper that the image represents. The devotees' idea of a miraculous power involved in the image is itself part of the representation of their power.

Keywords: Covid-19, miraculous images, Catholicism, Christianity, pandemic, miracles, rituals

The Covid-19 pandemic has been deeply influencing people for many months and it will probably have lasting impacts. It is not just a question of health and sickness, but of habits, behaviours, and approaches to life. Even religion has been influenced by the pandemic: all over the world Masses have been suspended, the participation of people has been forbidden, pilgrimages to shrines have been interrupted, and public expressions of faith have been modified or postponed. But the relation between the Covid-19 pandemic and religion is also an opportunity to rediscover rituals, symbols and gestures that have characterised religions through history.

While describing many examples of the relation to and influence on religion of the Covid-19 pandemic that I will focus especially on the use of and recourse to miraculous images in Catholicism, particularly in Italy. The winter and spring of 2020 were characterised by the exposition of some images and objects – paintings, crucifixes, statues, relics – that people consider miraculous and useful in imploring God's help and cure.

From the relics of saints to the Holy shroud – which is supposed to have covered the body of Jesus and is today enshrined in the Duomo of Turin – to the statues of the Virgin Mary and the relics of the Cross, over the centuries, with a high point in the Middle Ages, believers have perceived a miraculous power in many objects, especially as these are related to sickness (cf. Freeman 2011). On many occasions, local churches – in the person of the bishop or the Pope

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himself – have decided to organise processions and extraordinary expositions of relics, with the aim of blessing infected places.

I begin by describing the main characteristics of miraculous images, including from a diachronic perspective. From there I analyse the extraordinary exposition made by Pope Francis, in addition to other miraculous crucifixes and of statues. Finally, I focus on the role of two important categories of meaning involved in the rituals performed: movement and temporality.

Because of the complexity of the subject, it is important to use a multidisciplinary methodology, in which different disciplines can dialogue and help one another. After a historical reconstruction of the use of various miraculous images over the centuries, I will employ an anthropological and semiotic approach to focus on ritual performances, to analyse their meanings and functions. A comparative perspective will be applied to correlate the recourse to these sacred objects in the Covid-19 pandemic and other plagues in history.

Miraculous images

The history of Christianity – particularly Catholicism – is characterised by a very strong and enduring tradition of miraculous images and objects (Frank 2016: 11-57; Cardarelli and Fenelli 2017; Kürzeder 2011). Despite the Hebrew prohibition of depicting God (Ex. 20, 4-6), generally followed also in Islam, Christianity during its history has paid great attention to the representation of sacred figures, especially since Late Antiquity, and increasingly during the Early Middle Ages, both in the East (icons) and in the West (icons and statues). In the representation of non-human figures, a central role is also held by the cult of relics, often included inside the statues themselves, as in the case of many reliquary-statues carved during the Central Middle Ages (Canetti 2017).

Some of the images used for devotional purposes are considered miraculous because of a supernatural event that is supposed to have happened. This idea is expressed through the belief in the presence, stronger than in other cases, of a power – in Medieval Latin texts it is called *virtus* or, in the Greek, *dynamis* – incorporated in the object. At the same time, Christian theology, during the centuries, has not considered this aspect from a magic perspective, underlining that the *virtus* is not possessed by the object itself, but by the non-human figure that it represents (Schomburg-Scherff 2000). Devotees in general – both popular and often clerical – attribute a significant role to these objects, expressing a deep devotional desire through touching or praying in front of the images. From this perspective, the image *is* what it represents, even if theology would not approve such an understanding. A statue of Mary is not just a representation of her, for example, but it is perceived by devotees as Mary herself, as her *praesentia* (presence) (Brown 1981: 86-105). A difficult period in the history of image veneration, especially in Eastern Christianity, is represented by the iconoclastic persecution, starting with the emperor Leo III in 730 CE and ending definitively in 843 CE. Iconoclasm, designed to destroy many images of supernatural helpers, such as the saints, Our Lady and Jesus, was condemned during the Second Council of Nicaea (787 CE), which restored the use of these images (Barber 2002; cf. Morgan 2005: 117-125). Through the centuries, the Catholic Church has also underlined the importance of venerating images just as a *sign* that refers to the non-human figure represented, as in the case of the Council of Trent (1545-1563), and this is emphasised still today by the Catholic catechism (Graziano 2016: 11-18).

Miraculous power is grounded in a belief that one or more supernatural events happened and can be directly traced to the images. Even if the miraculous power of images and relics is often linked to their supposed capacity to heal people, in the cases considered it is connected with specific interventions involving nature and against catastrophes. On the basis of help supposedly given by the non-human figure represented through the image, the latter begins to be considered miraculous and its power is requested and implored over time – in certain instances just for some years, in others for centuries – often with many gifts (*ex-voto*, prayers, objects) being offered to him/her (Mauss 1990). Pilgrimages to the relics of saints are a practice that characterises cult and devotion, and saints, Christ and the Virgin Mary are the main recipients of pleas to stop epidemics of illnesses (plague, cholera, typhus fever, etc.), through specific rites of crisis (Gennep 1960), defined in this

way because of their crisis dimension in the life experience of people. Italy has a long history – rooted in the people's strong relationship with the Catholic faith – of the population's resorting to miraculous images in a plea for help against the disastrous effects of epidemics, particularly during the plague in the 1600s (Barker 2017).

In concurrence with this aspect the belief in a miraculous power can come 'faith, emotive cognition, devotional culture, need in pursuit of relief, and miracle precedent documented in votive offerings' (Graziano 2016: 34). Frank Graziano identifies three different steps in the 'creation' of a miraculous image: devotion creates the object, then it expresses and consolidates personal and social agency, and finally the miraculous power is considered a property of the object itself (Graziano 2016: 34).

Even though I will use the generic term 'image' to refer to miraculous representations of non-human figures, different typologies will be considered which, on the basis of their intrinsic characteristics (material, size, three-dimensionality, etc.), may be utilised in rituals in different ways. The rite itself underlines – especially from the devotees' perspective – the special dimension of the sacred image and, above all, its miraculous power. In fact, the relation between the officiant and these images – expressed by special prayers, gestures, ritual movements of the object – is distinct from other types of relations, and is intended, from a semiotic perspective, to signify that the object is not like others.

One of the most representative miraculous images used during the centuries – mostly in the Modern era – against natural disasters, and, for this reason, also during the Covid-19 pandemic, is the crucifix, generally a wooden representation of Christ on the cross. Many wooden or stone statues are considered miraculous and used for this purpose. Icons are perhaps the most ancient example of miraculous images, also because of their antiquity and their link with Eastern Christianity. Many legends recount that these images are supposed to have arrived in the West to escape from iconoclastic persecution. All these images are enshrined inside cathedrals, churches, sanctuaries, and local chapels: sometimes the cult involving them is still very important and even before the Covid-19 pandemic, they were venerated with feasts, processions and ritual practices; other times their cult is no longer important, probably because devotees have forgotten the historical link with that object, but also because the memory of their ancient miraculous power has not been consolidated by the clergy. At the same time, it is important to underline that during the centuries, and particularly in the last few decades, some Catholics have partially lost their faith in supernatural powers – especially those linked to objects involved in practices considered to be superstitious or to have magical properties – because of the increasing diffusion of scientific and rational thinking. The Covid-19 pandemic has represented a way to rediscover forgotten cults and miraculous objects in an important process of recovering – or sometime just rethinking – local past community memories: indeed, in many cases, thanks to the need to practise rituals against the pandemic, people have rediscovered forgotten traditions about the miraculous power of these images, revising the rituals linked to them in the light of contemporary sensibilities and liturgies.

The two images exposed by Pope Francis

The Covid-19 crisis began to dramatically affect Italy by the end of February 2020. Unfortunately, day by day the infection spread in many towns and regions, and within a few weeks the entire country – even if to different extents and with varying levels of severity from region to region – had been infected. The Prime Minister decreed a lockdown on 9 March. On 15 March Pope Francis visited two important Roman churches: the Basilica of Saint Mary Major and the Church of Saint Marcello al Corso. In these buildings are enshrined two of the most important miraculous images of Rome and Catholicism. The first is the Byzantine icon of the Virgin, known as the *Salus Populi Romani* (Salvation of the Roman people). Although it is traditionally attributed to the evangelist Luke (Barker 2017: 29-31), it was probably painted during the Middle Ages and has been venerated for centuries. Today, the icon is enshrined in the Borghese chapel, inside the Basilica itself.

The second image – perhaps less well known – is a wooden crucifix from the 15th century, considered miraculous because it was not burnt during the fire that destroyed the church on 22 May 1519, but also because three years later, in 1522, the crucifix – by then considered miraculous – was carried in a penitential procession for sixteen days, from 4-20 August, with the aim of imploring Christ for the end of the pestilence. Today, the crucifix is enshrined in a small chapel, the fourth on the right [Figure 1 near here].

Pope Francis visited the two churches, walking through a deserted town to cover the distance between Saint Mary Major and Saint Marcello al Corso. In his prayers, he entrusted Italy to Christ and the Virgin, in an endeavour to have God put a stop to the pandemic. This was one of the first concrete and symbolic actions carried out by the Church to underline the need for supernatural help against the coronavirus epidemic. On the evening of 27 March 2020, Pope Francis completed what he had begun earlier that month: in a deserted St. Peter's Square he celebrated an extraordinary moment of prayer and blessing during which he pronounced the meditation based on the Gospel account of the sedated storm (Mc 4, 35-41). The two miraculous images were positioned in the parvis of the Basilica, one to the right and one to the left of the main entrance [Figure 2 near here]. The Pope, after his meditation, approached each image, praying for some minutes and touching them. The value of the two images lies in devotee's beliefs in their miraculous power, especially in relation with their use, through the centuries, against epidemics. One of the most relevant innovations in the recourse to miraculous images today is the prohibition of carrying them in procession along the streets of the town. While in the Middle and Modern Ages these images were often followed in procession by priests and devotees (cf. Trexler 1972: 12-13), with the purpose of blessing the whole city, today this is prohibited to prevent the diffusion of the contagion. This is an interesting innovation in which the belief in a supernatural helper is mitigated by a scientific perspective, based on the awareness of the risks of social gathering: religious belief and rational thinking thus fuse in a complex way.

Pope Francis' action has to be considered a symbolic gesture designed not only to underline the real request to miraculous helpers – the Virgin and Christ – to stop the epidemic, but also to remind all Christians of the presence and importance of religion in their lives. The rite, watched all over the world thanks to television and online streaming, was a concrete way to make people feel part of a strong community, closely gathered around the Pope. Moreover, it was performed in the geographical heart of Catholicism, thus acquiring a strong historical and symbolic dimension, in which the Pope's power – but at the same time his vulnerability in front of the global sickness caused by Covid-19 – was accentuated by the totally empty square.

The expositions of miraculous crucifixes

Pope Francis' decision to pray in front of the crucifix and to carry it into St. Peter's Square is the most representative initiative involving miraculous images, but not the only one. More than a week before his decision, some parish priests and bishops had decided to hold an extraordinary exposition of crucifixes considered miraculous. Among them there were: the 17th century crucifix of Casalmaggiore in the province of Cremona, one of the areas worst hit by Covid-19, exposed by the parish priest in St. Stephen's Duomo (Oglio Po News 2020); the 13th century crucifix of St. Miniato in Tuscany, already used during the plague epidemic between 1628 and 1631 CE, to which thanks were offered by means of the construction of a church to enshrine it (Tgcom24 2020); and the 15th century crucifix enshrined in the sanctuary of the same name in Como, which is said to have protected the town from bombardments in the two World Wars. This crucifix was exposed, without devotees, on 6 March 2020, in the presence of priests and bishops. Soon afterward, on 19 March, a black and white enlargement of the miraculous image was displayed on the central door of the shrine, as had already happened during Pope John Paul II's visit to the city in 1996 to pray to the holy Cross, while he passed on the avenue in front of it (Settimanale Diocesi di Como 2020).

Another miraculous crucifix exposed during the pandemic is enshrined in the Basilica of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Naples. Generally covered by a red drape, it has typically been unveiled

annually from December 26-January 2 (Il Mattino 2020). It is considered miraculous not only because of its role during the plague of 1656 CE, the earthquake of 1688, and the Vesuvian eruptions, but also because in 1439, the Christ figure seemed to bend his head on his right shoulder so as to avoid a bombardment fired during the Aragonese siege. Subsequently, the miraculous crucifix was enshrined in a tabernacle under the triumphal arch of the tribune, built by Alfonso V of Aragon to repair the apse. Similarly, the Black Crucifix of Minervino Murge, Apulia, was taken from its usual position and exposed near the main altar of the town's Mother Church (Minervino Live 2020). The crucifix had been carried in procession on 10 May 1901 against a drought – which preceded what to devotees was obviously a miraculous rain. Two commemorative plaques highlight the recourse to this miraculous image through the centuries, including for aid against hunger and plague. Among the first expositions of miraculous crucifixes is that of the Reform, enshrined in the shrine of the Most Holy Crucifix in Cosenza, exposed to public veneration on 1 March 2020 (Garro 2020). In this case as well, exposition had been made in the past in particular circumstances of need.

Along the lines of the expositions previously mentioned and the most important one made by Pope Francis, I can also mention the extraordinary showing of a miraculous crucifix in Crema (Agensir 2020), or the blessing of the city of Milazzo, Sicily, the first Tuesday after Easter (14 April 2020), through the miraculous crucifix made by Friar Umile from Petralia between 1632 and 1633 CE. The friars blessed the city from the terrace of the convent of Saint Papino, where the crucifix was built and is today enshrined, using the relic of the handkerchief utilised to dry the Christ figure's miraculous tears (Guzzone 2020). According to the tradition, there have been two important miracles from this crucifix: on 11 April 1798, during a bad drought, after being exposed to public veneration, the crucifix is supposed to have brought rain; then, in the procession carried out on that occasion, while it was being returned to its church, there is said to have been a miraculous lacrimation from the right eye of the wooden sculpture, which was dried with the aforementioned handkerchief.

Minor churches carried their crucifixes in solitary processions too, as was the case in Villachiaviche in Cesena, where the parish priest decided to carry the 16th century cross 'in procession', encouraging devotees to look out of their windows and make the sign of the cross during his passage (Corriere Cesenate 2020).

Even after the first wave of the epidemic, churches continued exposing and blessing places with miraculous crucifixes. In Seminara, Calabria, in the South of Italy, the parish priest father Domenico exposed the miraculous crucifix of 1458 CE, as announced through the official Facebook page of the basilica of Our Lady of the Poor, where it is enshrined. On 20 September 2020 – while the contagion in Italy was already increasing again – after an hour of praying in front of the cross in the presence of the people, he carried it out with the help of a collaborator – unaccompanied by the people, due to Covid-19 anti-contagion measures – across the town of Seminara and the Sant'Anna district, in order to bless the inhabitants and protect them from the pandemic ("perché ci benedica e preservi dal Covid," as we read in a small announcement published on a Facebook page and displayed in the shrine) (Basilica Madonna dei Poveri Seminara 2020). In the videos the priest went out through the roads and squares, holding the crucifix in his hands, often lifting it upwards to signify the diffusion of its curative and preserving power.

Based on these examples, the crucifix seems to be one of the main sacred images exposed and carried in procession against Covid-19 and other plagues in history. The cross is the main symbol of Christianity and is the sign traced by priests and saints through the centuries to heal people and bless places and objects, as confirmed in Late Antiquity sources (for example, in the tales of the passions of martyrs) or in Early Medieval hagiographic accounts, such as Gregory of Tours's *Miraculorum Libri* (The Books of Miracles) and in Pope Gregory the Great's *Dialogi* (The Dialogues). Even without considering the miraculous dimension, the power of the cross is founded on the symbolic reference to the crucified Jesus who, thanks to the healing episodes described in the Gospels, is considered the doctor par excellence. The literary and anthropological theme of the

Christus medicus (Christ the doctor) was and is very diffuse – above all, in our cases, if the cross exposed or carried in procession, is believed to be full of a special, miraculous power.

Miraculous statues and relics

Although in these months we have seen mainly extraordinary expositions of crucifixes – proof of deep devotion to them – there are many examples related to the displaying of and recourse to the Virgin and saints as well.

In Biancavilla, near Catania in Sicily, on 18 March 2020, the parish priest Agrippino Salerno of the Basilica of Santa Maria dell'Elemosina opened the small sacellum in St. Placidus' chapel, where the statue of the martyr is enshrined. According to a tradition common to many Sicilian shrines and churches – but also found in Calabria, as in the case of the shrine of Our Virgin of Mount Carmel, in Bagnara – the statue is always hidden inside a small sacellum on the altar, opened just during the days of the annual festival which, in this case, reaches its climax on 5 October, the date of his martyrdom according to an early modern tradition (Gallo 2020). The martyr's relics are said to have been discovered in Messina. The motivations for the extraordinary exposition of the statue are strictly linked to the Covid-19 pandemic, its aim being to implore the martyr's intervention on the basis of his miraculous fame.

Another example of recourse to saints is that of Lecce. On 28 April 2020, the bust of St. Orontius, the town's patron saint, was carried from the Diocesan Museum to the Cathedral (Colaci 2020). The bust was particularly venerated during the plague of 1690 CE, when he helped the town.

Yet another interesting case is that of Our Lady of Graces in Sassari, Sardinia, enshrined in the church of St. Peter of Silki, one of the most ancient Catholic shrines in the town and in the region itself. On 22 March 2020, the archbishop moved the statue in solitary procession from the small church to the Cathedral of St. Nicholas (Gambassi 2020). The wooden simulacrum of the Virgin is considered miraculous also because during the Second World War it protected the town from bombardment, which did not take place. In the voting of 1943, the archbishop Arcangelo Mazzotti organized an extraordinary procession without devotees because of the war, in which the statue was carried to the Cathedral on priests' shoulders.

The extraordinary exposition of the statue of St. Mary of the Sea in Maiori, Campania, occurred on 21 April 2020. The parish priest's gesture was linked to the Covid-19 pandemic but was made on the anniversary of the simulacrum's benediction by Pope John Paul II in Rome in 2004. The exposition of the statue of the Virgin, which is enshrined inside the collegiate of Saint Mary of the Sea, followed the same ritual performed by Pope Francis with the crucifix of Saint Marcello and the icon of the *Salus Populi Romani*. According to the legend, the statue was miraculously 'caught' by some fishermen, emphasising that its presence in Maiori was an expression of God's will. In this specific context, the miraculous power of the simulacrum emerges from the parish priest's words. During his prayer, he referred to this event in various ways, for example, underlining Maiori's assignment to protect the 'miraculous simulacrum of the blessed Virgin Mary' (Parrocchia S. Maria a Mare Maiori 2020).

The requests for extraordinary expositions have been numerous. Another example is the desire of Our Lady of Assumption's devotees to carry her statue in procession or expose it to protect the town of Cassino against Covid-19 (Valente 2020). Devotees believe that the miraculous power of the simulacrum was proven during the plague of 1837 CE and the cholera epidemic of 1882.

Among the extraordinary expositions of miraculous images, I must also mention that of the Holy Shroud, which was enshrined in a chapel in the Duomo of Turin after a fire on the night between April 11-12, 1997 had partially burnt the original palace chapel that had been built by Guarino Guarini at the end of the 17th century. The Holy Shroud is always covered by a red drape and is only exposed during special exhibitions (in Italian called *Ostensioni*) performed over the centuries in particular moments of need or to celebrate special events, such as those with a strong connection to political and ecclesiastical power (cf. Nicolotti 2020). The exhibition took place on 11 April

2020, in the presence of the archbishop of Turin, while people watched it on television and online streaming (Martinengo 2020).

Given such examples, the exhibition of statues and relics has to be considered in the same way as that of crucifixes: these particular images are exposed especially because they are believed to have miraculous power, which devotees believe has been confirmed over the centuries.

Expositions/processions of miraculous images in literature and cinema: two examples

The recourse to miraculous images in particular moments of need is also expressed in literature and in the collective imaginary. One of the most famous Italian literary works is *The Betrothed* (in Italian: *I promessi sposi*) by Alessandro Manzoni (1785-1873), which was published in its definitive version between 1840 and 1842. In Italy, it is part of the high school program, which is one of the reasons for its fame. In Chapter 32, set in Milan, the Church, in the person of the cardinal archbishop, urged on by the lay authorities, agrees to organise a procession with St. Carlo Borromeo's relics; they will then be extraordinarily exposed on the major altar of the Duomo.² Manzoni, using historical sources, with a method midway between history and fiction, describes many people in procession, especially women, 'many of them barefoot, and clothed in sackcloth' (Manzoni 1844: 662), priests and friars. The miraculous relics are in the centre of the procession and their power is represented also by the care adopted while carrying them through the city roads:

In the centre, amidst the brilliancy of still more numerous torches, and the louder tones of the chanting, came the coffin, under a rich canopy, supported alternately by four canons, most pompously attired. Through the crystal sides appeared the venerated corpse, the limbs enveloped in splendid pontifical robes, and the skull covered with a mitre; and under the mutilated and decomposed features, some traces might still be distinguished of his former countenance, such as it was represented in pictures, and as some remembered seeing and honouring it during his life (Manzoni 1844: 662).

St. Carlo's corpse is described in its coffin, enveloped in robes, with his mitre on the skull. These supposedly powerful relics are displayed with the aim of ending the plague epidemic. At the same time, the people stay behind their windows or exercise caution because of fear of contagion. Unfortunately, the relics carried in procession – as Manzoni writes and history confirms – did not have the power to stop the plague. On the contrary, the gathering of people probably contributed to its spread.

Together with the other tales and chapters of *The Betrothed* devoted to the plague and its effect on society (e.g., the deserted towns, the fear, the hatred against the so-called plague spreaders, the numerous deaths, the general uncertainty, etc.), this literary and historical tale is part of Italian 'literary memory' and has come forcefully back to mind during the contemporary Covid-19 epidemic. Newspaper articles, newscasts, books, and editorials all explicitly link the Covid-19 pandemic with Manzoni's plague – as well as with Boccaccio's *Decameron* – to underline the recurrence of this phenomenon in history.

There is another interesting literary example related to the use of religious objects to protect people from natural calamities, which involves a miraculous crucifix. The episode is narrated in the accounts of *Don Camillo*, an imaginary priest created by the Italian writer and journalist Giovanni Guareschi (1908-1968), which is set between 1946 and 1947 in a rural context in the North of Italy, in the Po Valley, in an unreal place called Small World (in Italian: *Mondo Piccolo*). In one of the 347 tales, *The Procession*, Don Camillo embarks on a procession with the crucifix – with whom he generally talks as if it were Christ himself – carrying it in his arms through the small town until he

² "[...] that the urn which contained the relics of San Carlo should afterwards remain exposed for eight days to the public concourse, on the high altar of the cathedral" (Manzoni 1844, 661).

arrives at the banks of the River Po³, where, he prays to Him to prevent a flood: “[...] I ask You to save this countryside from the river’s waters and to give it every prosperity” (Guareschi 2013: 103). The crucifix used by Father Camillo is considerable as a miraculous image particularly because he talks regularly to and is answered by the crucified Christ. The object, in the cinematographic version, is represented near the river, with the purpose of blessing the countryside and the water. This episode, along with many others, has become widely known, also thanks to the cinematographic transposition made by Cineriz (i.e., Cinema Rizzoli). It is included in the first film of the *Don Camillo* series, an Italian-French production filmed in 1952 and directed by Julien Duvivier.

The particular gesture of Don Camillo was also reproduced in more recent times, in November 2014 but also in 2013, when the parish priest of Brescello – the town in the province of Reggio Emilia where the cinematographic adaptation of the tales is set – carried the crucifix in procession and immersed it in the waters of the Po, which had already overflowed its banks (Tg2000 2014), although in the tale Don Camillo stops near the riverbank and does not touch the water. Like the fictional Don, the priest used the crucifix as a supernatural simulacrum with the power to protect the countryside. People followed him to pray and bless the water. In an interview he underlined that these processions have three functions: safeguarding the countryside, remembering in prayer people who have lost their lives in Italy because of the flood and bad weather, and reflecting on the gift of Creation.⁴

The fictional tales quoted are important as literary examples of the same context that people experienced during the pandemic, but above all because they are very famous, especially in the Italian imaginary. The pages of *The Betrothed* and to a lesser extent *Don Camillo* constitute very familiar topics that sprang to the minds of many Italians in association with the diffusion of the coronavirus and the institution of the lockdown. The gestures and practices executed by the fictional characters are very similar to those carried out by the priests and friars during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Aspects of the ritual: movement

From the examples taken into consideration, the use of miraculous images involves some rituals that implicate the presence/absence of movement (cf. Faulstich 2005; Morgan 2005: 56-59). Three different modalities can be observed: static use (the objects are prayed to without any movement), the *translatio* for exposition (they are moved inside/outside the church), and exposition through a ritual of disclosure (the opening of normally closed chapels without the movement of the sacred objects, the displacement of a veil). I will consider each of these closely.

In the case of Pope Francis’ rituals, he decided to pray in front of the two images – the Cross of San Marcello al Corso and the icon of the *Salus Populi Romani* – going personally to the two churches. In the second part of the ritual, he had the miraculous images moved and set up St. Peter’s square, but there was no procession, and the transport of the images was not part of the ritual performed by the Pope or shown on television. The Pope did not want to bless the city by carrying them through it – also because processions were not allowed – but just to expose them in the square, to propose collective devotion and invocation of help. The material movement is an indispensable aspect of Pope Francis’ blessing and prayer that involves, at the same time, a spiritual and virtual movement of people, praying in front of the television or computer while watching him. In many shrines, there were prayers in front of miraculous images, without their being touched or moved. This is a *static use* of the miraculous images – the only movement involved in the rituals was that of

³ ‘Every year, as part of the village festival, the Crucifix above the altar was carried in procession as far as the river bank, where the water was blessed to make sure the river behaved itself and didn’t get up to any funny business’ (Guareschi 2013: 103).

⁴ This is an important element also for the recent encyclical written by Pope Francis, *Praise be to you* (Italian: *Laudato Si*), and related to the Creation, released in 2015.

the Pope himself – considered in their power without the necessity to move them to bless places through their exposition.

Slightly different are the extraordinary expositions of crucifixes and statues. In many of the examples considered, the miraculous images were taken from their chapels and exposed to public veneration. The rite of moving them has a special meaning because, unlike Pope Francis' exposition, the crucifixes and the statues were often exposed permanently in the churches, until the end of the pandemic. The gesture of transferring a sacred object from one place to another is full of meaning and has many similarities with the ritual gestures. In the history of cults and devotions, relics are often moved to bless concrete and symbolic spaces. For instance, through the centuries, and particularly in the medieval hagiographic legends, the *translationes* (translations) of saints' relics were moments full of miracles during which saints extended their blessing and protection over the whole town (Geary 1991; Papasidero 2019). Moving sacred objects is a way to activate their power, but also to underline the need for their miraculous intervention (Lešák, Rosenbergová, Tvrzníková 2020; Lucherini 2018).

In the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, the space of movement of sacred things was generally a reduced space – compared, for instance, to the procession of St. Charles' relics in *The Betrothed*, which involved the town – namely, the church itself or the space in front of the church (*parvis*) because of the risk of contagion. These powerful signs describe a supernatural and temporary geography of miraculous power, which expresses itself in the devotees' and clergy's consciousness of the 'real' God's intervention in history through the objects that already in the past – as in the numerous previously mentioned cases of crucifixes – had proven their power. These temporary geographies are expressed in various ways. In the case of Pope Francis' exposition (without movement), the ritual involves just the space of St. Peter's Square, already considered the focal centre of Catholic Christianity. In other rituals calling for the movement of images, the geography can be composed by the journey of the image itself from the place in which it is enshrined to the church where it is to be exposed; by the space of the church, with symbolic inner processions; or by some road in the town, where solitary priests carry the images to invoke a blessing. The different itineraries of sacred images are all characterized by the idea of activating, through movement, also in confined spaces, the miraculous power of the supernatural helper (cf. Knott 2005; Knott 2010; Chidester 2016).

Another modality of use of miraculous images is the opening of small doors or the removal of objects that usually block the devotees' view of the chapel or cell in which they are enshrined. This was the case of the crucifix of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Naples, which was generally covered by a red drape, or that of the small cell of St. Placidus in Biancavilla, Sicily [Figure 3 near here]. In these instances, there is no movement – the cross and the statue are not carried in procession or moved in the church – but only the intention to show them. The so-called *svelata* – which in Italian means 'disclose something' – is a variant of an extraordinary exposition, in which the object is exposed without being moved.⁵ The case of St. Placidus could be very interesting because his *virtus* is part of the chapel and, above all, of the small 'closet' in which the statue is enshrined and covered by a red drape. Its opening represents the possibility for the miraculous power to flow outside it, symbolically involving the entire town and all the places in it. It is an important ritual, generally carried out during festivals but also in moments of need, as in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic. The movement, included in the previous category, is performed by the object-veil that covers the miraculous image, allowing an extraordinary exposition without any movement.⁶ It is important to

⁵ There are many cults linked to the ritual practice of the *svelata*, like St. Agatha of Sicily in Catania, or St. Alphius, Philadelphus and Cyrinus, venerated in Trecastagni, not far from Catania. Their statues and relics are uncovered just during a small part of the year, normally during their feasts (on the days of their martyrdom or of the discovering of their relics).

⁶ Another interesting example comes from the Italian Quattrocento and Cinquecento, in which the statue of Our Lady of Impruneta, Florence, was carried in procession and then her face was

consider that a specific rite of opening the small cell was restored in 2018 – previously it had been opened without a specific ritual or only in order to remove the statue and place it on the main altar – with the use of three different keys to open the cell door. The rite was not performed in 2019 due to the damage caused by an earthquake which happened the previous year, but the Covid-19 pandemic again prompted the recourse to a traditional practice, recently rediscovered, and strengthened in the moment of need. The cell remained open from 18 March to 31 May 2020. On 6 October 2018, a few days after the opening of the chapel, Biancavilla and other cities in Sicily were hit by an earthquake. On that occasion, the saint, but also the previous patron, St. Zeno, and the Madonna dell'Elemosina, were thanked because the town had been spared and there had been no victims.

The three typologies related to the use of miraculous images during the Covid-19 pandemic are different modalities for imploring God's help and power. Each of them involves a movement (spiritual or material; of the sacred objects; or of objects that hide them) which may be considered the main element of the ritualistic request for intervention. The most representative exposition of all is that of Pope Francis, which does not involve any movement. During his homily, the two miraculous images are located behind him, under St. Peter's colonnade. Their presence, although characterized by a *static use*, is the expression of their deep power against Covid-19, also thanks to the form of the square itself, which seems to embrace the city and humanity. The static exposition of the two images was accompanied by the words of the Pope and had an impact on media and personal perception all over the world. A *static use* is also included in the extraordinary exposition of the Holy Shroud of Turin, displayed as an aid to prayer against the pandemic. Archbishop Cesare Nosiglia, during his discourse, refers to the victims of the pandemic and asks Jesus to intervene. The relic of the Holy Shroud is an interesting example because, in contemporary era, it is never carried in procession, partly on account of its dimension and fragility. In this case it is the people who must move and go to the Duomo where it is enshrined.

Another case involving the movement of relics and miraculous images is that relating to Saint Anthony of Padua. On 13 June 2020, the saint's reliquary-bust was taken on an Italian Army helicopter to the symbolic places of the fight against Covid, which included a hospital, some towns, and two prisons (Ansa 2020). In this case, the movement of the miraculous image involved the airspace, putting its *virtus* into action from above, as if it could involve the space below. This ritual action recalled, in the Italian collective memory, a famous scene from the film 'La Dolce Vita' (1960) by Federico Fellini, in which, in the opening scene, a helicopter flying over Rome with a statue of Christ hanging from it was taken to St. Peter's by the pope. In this case, however, Fellini did not want to represent a ritual translation aimed at blessing the city of Rome, while in the translation of the bust of St. Anthony into the sky, this purpose is clear and represents another use of miraculous images in the battle against Covid-19.

In all these extraordinary expositions there are important movements – real and symbolic – which involve above all deacons, priests, archbishops and the Pope. The clergy are deeply involved in personal movement to discover/activate the power of the miraculous images. Inside empty churches and squares they are the main characters in complex ritual which only they can perform. From this perspective, the Covid-19 pandemic has had great social and political impact, with a specific part of society (the clergy) assuming a particular role and function. At the same time, in some cases, politicians have also been afforded a special role, for example the mayor of Turin, Chiara Appendino, who was present at the extraordinary exposition of the Holy Shroud, together with the President of the Piedmont Region, Alberto Cirio, and the President of the Regional Council, Stefano Allasia. Their presence is the expression of a mixed participation in the religious rites performed to obtain God's help. However, it should not automatically be considered a

unveiled, to be prayed to. One of her extraordinary expositions was made against the excess of wind and water, another against five months of drought. The recourse to her was also connected to the military and warfare (Trexler 1972: 12-14).

declaration of faith, but the expression of an official role through which the whole city is represented.

Aspects of the ritual: temporality

Another important aspect of the rituals performed with miraculous images during the Covid-19 pandemic is the relation between the sacred object itself and temporality (Morgan 2005: 56-59). As previously shown, all images (crucifixes, statues, relics, etc.) are historical objects, created in a precise moment of history – generally some centuries ago – which have acquired a supernatural role over time, thanks to a moment of crisis in which they began to be considered miraculous. In summary, on the basis of this temporality, it is possible to take into consideration the presence of three different instances in the history of miraculous objects: their creation, generally without the presence of a consciousness of their miraculous power; the activation of this miraculous power, for example, thanks to a moment of crisis (plague, earthquake, storms, famines); and the repetition of the manifestation of power whenever necessary, as in the latest Covid-19-related uses.

The use of miraculous objects against Covid-19 can be seen as a link between the present and the past. In all cases in which these miraculous simulacra are taken, exposed, moved or uncovered by priests, bishops or friars, the clergy emphasize their historical miraculous properties. In the case of the extraordinary exposition and procession of the crucifix enshrined in the basilica of Our Lady of the Poor in Seminara, the announcement prepared by the parish priest, in addition to general information, provided a specific reference to an hour of prayer in front of the miraculous crucifix of 1468, ‘Ci sarà un’ora di preghiera dinanzi al Crocefisso miracoloso del 1468’ (Basilica Madonna dei Poveri Seminara 2020). Two words are very important in underlining the power of this sacred object: *miraculous* (it. *miracoloso*), which explains that it is really powerful, especially over nature, and *of 1468* (it. *del 1468*) – the date in which the crucifix was carved – a historical link very useful for emphasising its antiquity and the fact that is supposed to have helped the town of Seminara several times across the centuries.

The prayer pronounced by the rector of the collegiate of Our Lady at Sea in Maiori, too, is deeply linked to the miraculous history of the uncovering of the statue and its power over the centuries. The miraculous power of the wooden Virgin – which saved the town’s forefathers in the past – is expressed by a memory learned by the forefathers, ‘Come ci hanno insegnato i nostri padri’ (Parrocchia S. Maria a Mare Maiori 2020). The memory of the legend, according to which the statue was miraculously rescued from the sea, is the first reference to its prodigious history and confers on it a specific supernatural power starting from its arrival in the town. The rector, during his supplication, highlights the role of the Virgin in history, especially against wars, famines and storms, also asking for her protection in many fields of life – economy, justice, society, health – following the example of his forefathers.

Very similar is the case of the Byzantine icon of Our Lady, enshrined inside the cathedral of Cosenza, Calabria. According to tradition, the Virgin protected the town many times against natural calamities in the past, especially in 1576 CE, during a plague outbreak, when a bubo seemed to appear on the Virgin’s face, symbolising how she wished to take the plague on herself, delivering the town from it; or again during the terrible earthquake of 1783, when some cracks seemed to become visible on her face. On 11 March 2020, during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, a prayer was published and shared via social media channels of the Cathedral of Cosenza. This prayer contained an explicit request to the Virgin to help her devotees and her town against the virus, for the sake of their historical devotion. As in the past she has already shown herself merciful towards her people, ‘Come un tempo già ti sei mostrata misericordiosa verso il nostro popolo’, as written in a public Facebook announcement published on the official page of the Cathedral of Cosenza (Cattedrale di Cosenza 2020). Even today she is prayed to for this purpose.

There is a clear aim to accentuate the miraculous power of these objects, proving it with strong historical connections. This operation allows the objects to solicit people’s memories so that they

place their faith in their power. At the same time, the presence of temporal references allows people to consider miraculous images as the characters in a complex historical tale, in which they have performed miracles during history, in a complex succession of events (Greimas and Courtés 1993: 288).

In the whole reflection on temporality and miraculous images, the constant element is the antiquity of the latter. All the objects considered were painted, carved or constructed many centuries ago, and this is one of the explicit reasons that support and prove their power. Due to their historical use during the centuries, they can now be considered potent arms against Covid-19. At the same time, the historical link that emerges in each prayer, reflection or social content, is a semiotic – but spontaneous – reference that aims to emphasize that the miraculous power has been proven by time and by the occurrences of supernatural help against natural disasters and calamities.

The rituals performed with these images inside or outside churches represent a strong connection with time: in all cases in which the clergy takes, moves or uncovers them, a temporal link is established. For the faithful, inside these objects there is a miraculous power that the ritual reactivates in favour of the town and against the virus. The efficacy of prayers and spatial rituals is connected to many historical events in which the objects are believed to have expressed their power (Vauchez 2014: 9-10). These sacred simulacrum are considered celestial weapons against natural or human catastrophes, a treasure which people can resort to in serious moments of crisis. Using or moving miraculous ancient objects is a way in which it is possible to activate their power, in a symbolic connection between the present and the past through the image.

My last consideration in relation to temporality concerns the continuity or interruption of cults of miraculous objects. Some of the aforementioned images have given rise to a cult that has continued uninterruptedly from the beginning of the ‘discovering’ of their miraculous power. Among them can be listed the crucifix of San Marcello al Corso in Rome, the Crucifix of the Reform in Cosenza, the *Salus Populi Romani* icon in Rome, or the statue of St. Placid in Biancavilla. In all these cases, regardless of their role against natural catastrophes, these images have been venerated during the centuries for their capacity to heal people and to express the power of God. In other cases – probably of some of the crucifixes mentioned – these images were no longer part of a strong cult or just partially, but the interest raised during the Covid-19 pandemic has been useful in reactivating the public memory of them. This pandemic has had a crucial role in the resurrection of forgotten cults.

The role of nature

The rituals performed and the pandemic situation have a connection with nature. The main typology of motivations for which people have turned to miraculous images for help is that of ‘natural agents.’ Earthquakes, storms, plagues, and famines are all moments of crisis in the relationship between nature and humanity (Gennep 1960), where the cause is recognizable outside the latter, even if there is also an influence of human activities which are often not taken into consideration. For example, wars that provoke death or wrong behaviours are often linked to the diffusion of epidemics. The main purpose of the rituals of crisis analysed is not ‘to restore the relationship to a state of balance’ (Magliocco 2005: 1389), but to fight against an enemy, symbolised as evil from a Christian perspective. In such cases, recourse to miraculous images often happens when a *limen* (border) is crossed between everyday and extraordinary events, such as a global pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic is a natural disaster – at least in the same sense as those caused by human incursions into wildlands and abuse of wildlife or by the exploitation of intensive farming can be described as natural disasters – and is regarded by some religious adherents as an expression of something against which people can resist from a psychological perspective. The role of miraculous images is that of helping objects – but, above all, helping figures: a Saint, Our Lady, the Christ – particularly useful in moments of crisis. They have been used throughout history, especially during previous natural disasters, and very often until the contemporary era, were considered to have been caused by God himself or not prevented by Him (for example: due to sin).

From a theological perspective, God is the Creator and the King of all Creation and disasters, too, are linked to his will and intervention. In the historical cases considered, devotees and clergy asked God – with or without the mediation of Mary or a Saint – to prevent them and/or to remove the danger. It is very interesting that their requests were related to an intervention in nature, because it is under the total control of God himself. Contrary to what one may think, in the sources considered on the exposition of miraculous images (social announcements, homilies, prayers, etc.) not much space has been reserved for the discussion of the Covid-19 pandemic's origin, and above all specific references to its Satanic/evil origin are very few or completely absent.⁷ As already highlighted, it is possible that this approach is due to a more scientific outlook that has exerted some influence on religious thinking as well: God's intervention is possible (*supernature*), but natural catastrophes are part of human life (*nature*) and there are only sparse references to Satan. The reference to the concept of a "trial" is also very limited: maladies, famines, and the pandemic itself are nowadays not commonly considered a way for God to verify people's faith – even if faith may indeed be strengthened in times of difficulty – to test them or even to punish them.⁸ In this perspective, the *natural* origin of the Covid-19 pandemic is the most appropriate approach in many religious leaders' points of view, and God, thanks to His capacity to dominate nature, is very powerful in such circumstances. On 27 March 2020 in St. Peter's Square, Pope Francis cited the Gospel episode of the calming of the storm, in which Jesus performed a miracle over nature. The Apostles – and above all the Evangelists – do not consider the storm as an expression of Satan, but just as a natural moment of peril and need in which Jesus' intervention is necessary. The natural perspective is predominant.⁹

In the announcement published by the friars of the Convent of the Crucifix of the Reform in Cosenza, there is an explicit request to be delivered from natural calamities, pandemics, famines and ills, 'essere liberati dalle calamità della natura, dalle epidemie, dalle carestie e dalle malattie' (Cattedrale di Cosenza 2020). Nature is one of the words taken into consideration, even if it is used as a general category or with a reference to the earthquake which occurred in that area at the time. In this case, too, the Covid pandemic is not explicitly considered an evil project or a Satanic attack, but just a natural event like many others.

An important word used in some cases is "scourge" (the Italian *flagello*), underlining the idea of something which comes from an otherness to vex humanity. Covid-19 is sometimes considered a *flagello* – the word is used in the prayer shared on Facebook by the Cathedral of Cosenza – but this perspective does not link the pandemic itself to the idea of an evil origin. As in the past, and above all based on Biblical suggestion of the ten plagues of Egypt, such events do not come from the devil, but from God himself. At any rate, in our cases there is no explicit link between Covid-19 and God's will to punish humanity: the *flagello* is just a way to underline the burden of a natural disaster on human existence, and the need for people to pray to God – in His supposed omnipotence – for health and for an end to the plague.

⁷ It is difficult for me to verify all the homilies pronounced on these occasions, and it might not be very relevant for the present purpose, but I can underline that in some of these (the Pope's discourse in St. Peter's square, the Archbishop of Turin's in front of the Holy Shroud, that of the priest of the Collegiate of St. Mary at Sea in Maiori, etc.), there are no references to an evil or supernatural origin of the pandemic (but just to people's deaths, fear, suffering, etc.).

⁸ An example of this approach is included in the Miracles related to St. Angel the Carmelite in Licata, Sicily, where the plague of 1624, but also that of 1575, are considered decisions made by God to punish their sins, which people have to stop through their prayers to the Saint (cf. *Miracula et Beneficia misericordia Domini intercedente S. Angelo Virgine et Martyre Sacerdote Carmelita Ierusalemitano protectore civitatis dilectissimae Leocatae hac in curia spiritali solemniter testificatione descripta*, General Archive of the Carmelite Order, Rome, Post. III 2).

⁹ A similar approach is included in the homily of Cardinal Friar Raniero Cantalamessa at Easter 2020 (Cantalamessa 2020).

Nature is seen in all cases as an “enemy” against which it is necessary to implore the help of God through miraculous images. However, it is not an enemy in the sense that it is Satanic or evil, but rather something that at times endangers human life. In this view, nature is separate from humans, as in the post-Edenic context, in which nature must be subdued/tamed by them.

At the same time, nature is a particular context which supernatural beings can modify with their intervention, in favour of humanity. Even if natural events – such as earthquakes, epidemics and famines – are just conditions without a specific will, from some devotees’ perspective Covid-19 is an evil attack against humanity. To combat this evil, it is necessary to resort to miraculous images and prayers. From their perspective, the virus has a natural dimension, propelled by an evil driver. This position is expressed and emphasized principally in specific social network groups with underlying radical assumptions. In general, and in the cases considered in this paper, people do not specify the origin of the Covid-19 virus. In the numerous comments published by devotees below the Facebook posts or YouTube videos mentioned, for example, there are no references to these aspects, but just the desire that God bless the world and heal it from the virus. The general focus of the problem – on the part of both devotees and priests – is the necessity to return to God to implore His help in ending the plague.

In the cases considered, Covid-19 is a natural condition; nevertheless, in many cases people resort to miraculous images to defeat this ‘neutral enemy’. The rituals performed during the pandemic, with the use of many powerful images, are a specific response to the emergency: rituals are cultural devices used by people to activate the power of images and, consequently, to request and obtain the aid of the supernatural helper that they represent. For these devotees, the chaotic condition caused by the pandemic must be rebalanced and resolved by a supernatural intervention. Miraculous images, as shown by Pope Francis in St. Peter’s square, are not just objects, but *mediums* through which the supernatural power of God can influence reality.

I also want to devote a few words to the ‘natural’ origin of miraculous power. The objects considered have been carved or prepared starting from a piece of wood or stone. Their natural component has undergone a radical process of elaboration, in which the natural elements (colour, smell, form, size) have been deeply altered. The final image (a wooden crucifix or a stone statue) is perceived as a non-natural form, as a human one, very similar in all aspects that characterize the non-human figures that have been reproduced. At this moment, the statue is the expression, from the believer’s perspective, of two different levels of reality: the concrete one, undergirded by the material of the image, and the supernatural one, expressed by the *praesentia* of the non-human figure and, above all, of its miraculous power (Graziano 2016: 35-37). Miraculous images, as material and non-material objects, are social elements, and their artistic creation removes them from the dimension and dominion of nature. The naturalness inherent in the wood to be carved is now cancelled in favour of a representation of an invisible figure, with its own attributes (Graziano 2016: 45). Simultaneously, the material image embodies a complex system of symbols and meanings, including the belief in a supernatural power (Morgan 2005: 55).

The natural creation process of the image is very often disregarded by devotees and pilgrims, in favour of legends and traditions according to which the objects have been miraculously discovered, almost implying that they were created without any human intervention – as in the case of the acheropites (cf. Monaci Castagno 2011; Morgan 2012: 3), images and works that, on the basis of legendary traditions, were not made by man but by supernatural figures, such as angels or God himself – or, even if they are known to have been made by an artist, this aspect is not taken into consideration, as though they were born already carved or sculpted. At the same time, the miraculous power is regarded as an aspect included in the image from the beginning and not at a precise moment in its history, even if this *virtus* reveals itself in a moment of crisis (Schomburg-Scherff 2000: 196). The rites performed with these miraculous images allow people to create a social link among themselves against the ‘natural enemy’, represented by Covid-19. Online performances on social media, public prayers, frequently developed by clergy, are often expressions of this idea.

Conclusions

The recourse to a miraculous image is characterized by a sequence of moments: the beginning of a crisis (a storm, a plague, an earthquake) and the manifestation of the concrete or supposed risks for a community (risks related to health, to survival, to the town); the recourse to the miraculous image through a specific action (moving/exposing/uncovering it) and with prayers and devotional practices; and the supposed good effects.

One of the most interesting aspects in which recent instances of recourse to miraculous images differ from those of past ages concerns devotional practice. While in past centuries people, also during pandemics, could approach the miraculous object personally – as in the aforementioned literary examples – now, due to the Covid-19 restrictions for the prevention of contagion, devotees cannot touch or pray in front of the miraculous simulacrum, or in front of its reproductions. At the same time – and this is the main innovation – people have prayed in front of the images thanks to the power of social media and television, watching on Facebook and YouTube the streaming of the rituals performed by bishops and priests (and sometimes deacons) who, due to Covid-19 protocols, on many occasions, have become the only people who could be physically in the presence of the miraculous images. In this way, the relation between these figures and the supernatural helper has become stronger and more crucial.

Shrines represent the most important places in which miraculous images have been housed, but also moved and used during the crisis rites of the Covid-19 pandemic. These places are full of elements related to the necessity to ‘establish, negotiate and maintain relationships to the sacred’ (Magliocco 2005b: 36). As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, these places are being rediscovered and the power enshrined in them is being reconstituted.

The Covid-19 devotion to miraculous images is strongly linked to the request not only for protection from the virus, but above all for liberation from it. In fact, the recourse to these sacred objects was especially focused in the first months of the pandemic, particularly in March of 2020. Clergy and devotees were looking for a miracle of protection, a collaborative performance in which the positive intervention of a Saint, Christ or Mary would not come about without the prayers and requests made by the devotees themselves (cf. Graziano 2016: 155).

Among the most important aspects of the relation between miraculous images and Covid-19 is their use. According to a visual study theory, using images is a complex act that involves not only the material dimension of the object, but also allows an act of imagination, strongly related to the meanings represented by the images used (Morgan 2005: 55). The decision to use an image underlines the will to put a complex system of symbols, meanings, and imaginaries in action to obtain the desired result. The supernatural power expressed by these images is part of the horizon of belief and consciousness of their devotees: in other words, the devotees’ idea of a miraculous power involved in the image is itself part of the representation of their power.

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