It Gives Us Pleasure; It Gives Us Peace

Mediating Relationships through Mexican-American Catholic Altars

Kathryn Estabrook

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Professor Anne McGuire

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Abstract

Many Mexican-American Catholics, both men and women, mediate the experience of immigration and ensuing struggles and questions through domestic altars. I investigate this relationship through interviews with four Mexican-Americans in Philadelphia. These altaristas navigate between the sacred and the mundane, between their hogar (literally home or hearth) in Mexico and their new home in the United States, and within various relationships. In this way altaristas find comfort and support by coping with and celebrating the quotidian through their altars.

Altaristas dedicate their altars to Mary and Jesus, often choosing to represent these figures through particular images such as la Virgen de Guadalupe. By communicating with Mary and Jesus altaristas develop relationships with these sacred figures as well as family and friends. They provide flowers and candles, as well as communication and adoration. In this way altaristas create a reciprocal relation with Mary and Jesus. However, the altar is not just a place in which altaristas develop relationships, but also one in which altaristas maintain bonds with their hogar and family and friends still in Mexico. On the altar, altaristas intermingle images of Mary and Jesus with images of their friends and family, as well as souvenirs and other representations of memories. Through the personifying process of creating relationships with sacred figures and the act of combining various images and figures that are not innately related, altars blur the categories of the sacred and the mundane.

Culture, religion, and personal experience influence the altar tradition. Altaristas thus build and maintain their altars for an audience, whether that audience is other people, sacred figures, or cultural expectations. Altars, as a tradition culturally relevant to Mexico, create an enduring connection to the hogar despite the distance. Altaristas teach the altar tradition to their children because altars represent not only religious belief, but also enduring connection to cultural heritage. By continuing the altar tradition through generations, altaristas reinforce faith, traditions and identity.

Though altaristas often attend church in addition to praying at their altars, they view these two spaces very differently. Altaristas communicate more intimate themes and petitions within the privacy of their homes. At their altars, altaristas exercise personal religious authority in ways that they cannot within the patriarchal institution of the Catholic Church. By personalizing the altar, they incorporate the themes most important to them: belief, culture, family and friends. Altars provide a space in which altaristas communicate with Mary, Jesus, friends, and family. Through this communication, altaristas find support, pleasure, and peace.
Introduction: What Is In Your Heart

*Altaristas,*¹ or people that build or maintain home altars,² exercise personal religious authority at their altars by determining the rituals, the prayers, and the audience of their religious practices. By incorporating personally significant material objects *altaristas* express themselves, and thus liberate themselves from the constraints of official religious practice by using their own experiences as a guide. Altars support Mexican-American *altaristas* as they navigate issues of immigration, separation and celebration. *Altaristas* mediate the quotidian by using their altars as a source of empowerment and support in their struggles, their relationships, and their enduring connection to tradition and cultural heritage. I address these issues through interviews with four Mexican-American *altaristas* in Philadelphia who use altars to adjust to life in the United States while maintaining their culture and identities. I argue that home altars mediate relationships, cultivate a sense of identity, and allow *altaristas* to navigate between the cultures of Mexico and the United States.

Previous literature on Mexican-American home altars focuses on the ways in which women in particular maintain altars to understand their physical, emotional, cultural, religious, and artistic identities. In her dissertation on Mexican-American altars, Kay Turner discusses maintaining altars as a woman’s practice, focusing on the value of relationships. In order to do this she elaborates on the material objects, the historical significance of altars, and the prayers and rituals performed by *altaristas*. Colleen McDannell builds on Turner’s discussion in *Material Christianity* by investigating the ways in which women express their personal religious authority through their altars. McDannell and Maria Romero Cash, author of *Living Shrines:*

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² According to information gained from an interview with Edward Windhuas, 11/10/09, the proper nomenclature within official Catholic doctrine is shrine. However, I will use the terms interchangeably, but with a tendency to use the term “altar” as a reflection of the language used by the *altaristas.*
Home Altars of New Mexico, discuss the ways in which artists use altars to make statements, and investigate the question of artistic burden for altaristas. My study of Mexican-American altars draws on each of these authors; however, I argue that both men and women express their personal religious authority at their altars through the incorporation of individualized items and rituals. Like Turner, I am interested in relationships, however I concentrate on the ways in which Mexican-American altaristas use their altars to negotiate their struggles, continue to develop their identities, and mediate the distance that separates them from their hogar (literally home or hearth) in Mexico. By developing relationships with sacred figures, connecting to their hogar through their altars, and creating their altars with an audience in mind, altaristas mediate relationships. Throughout my discussion of home altars I work through various categories such as the sacred and the mundane, relationships and tradition, and location. In doing so, the themes of struggle, immigration, and self-understanding consistently arise. These themes are interconnected and their repetition is intended to display this sense of relation.

Through their altars, altaristas participate in the “personifying process” that occurs through the creation of relationships between the altarista and Mary or Jesus, the main recipients of the prayer and worship. These figures exist between this world and that of the sacred, as historical figures that lived and struggled, and as figures that, according to Roman Catholic doctrine, ascended to heaven. Through their relationships with Jesus altaristas gain an increased self-understanding as well as a more thorough comprehension of worlds, both the sacred and the mundane. Altaristas also view Mary as an intercessor who mediates relationships and who connects the worlds of the mundane and the sacred. As a mother, she is accessible to families;
she is compassionate and helps those in need. In Latin America, the Virgin Mary, or more commonly, *la Virgen de Guadalupe*, symbolizes struggles for independence and rights. Her image galvanizes the congregations, the masses, and the troops of Mexico. Mary and Jesus provide a means for *altaristas* to better communicate with the sacred, to interact with the world, and to understand themselves and their neighbors.

This mediation occurs on a daily basis as part of *altaristas’* day-to-day life, or *lo cotidiano*. 

*Lo cotidiano* incorporates the “daily lived experience of Hispanic women as an authentic source without ignoring social location. On the contrary, *lo cotidiano* makes social location implicit for it is the context of the person in relation to physical space, ethnic space, social space.” In the study of home altars, location represents the implied audience of an altar. 

*Lo cotidiano* emphasizes the significance of daily activities, such as the creation and maintenance of altars and thus suggests the significance of the lived experience of people everyday. The category of *lo cotidiano* refers “to the ‘stuff’ and the processes of Hispanic women’s lives.” This “stuff,” or the material objects and representations that form home altars, consists of the collection of physical representations of identity, culture, and spirituality. *Lo cotidiano* manifests itself in the material objects that *altaristas* display on altars.

Domestic altars do not exist in a vacuum. Particularly for immigrant *altaristas*, altars represent their home culture and significant friendships and relationships. *Altaristas* learn the altar tradition from their family and the culture in which they grow up. Parents teach their children about altars, culture, and tradition, and thus maintain cultural heritage. Ada Maria Isasi-

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5 I want to thank Isasi-Díaz for introducing me to the term *lo cotidiano* as a category. The term is part of Isasi-Díaz’s attempt to “rescue Hispanic women’s daily experience from the category of the unimportant.” *(La Lucha Continues, 68)* I have adapted this category because I think it expresses more clearly the substantial and essential need to understand and embrace the importance of daily lived experience than any English translation of the term.


7 Ibid., 67.
Díaz, author of *Mujerista Theology*, tracks this tradition, which she refers to as the “main vehicle” of Latinas’ Catholicism, to the combination of pre-Reformation Spanish Christianity of the conquistadors “mingled with the religious beliefs and rituals of African and Amerindian cultures.”  

Drawing from these traditions, altars often display a combination of family members, ancestors, and religious figures, and other personally significant representations through statues, objects and images. On the altar, *altaristas* incorporates an amalgamation of religiously, culturally, and personally meaningful objects.

The personal narratives of *altaristas* express their struggles and their successes and the ways in which their altars mediate these experiences. This mediation appears in the material objects displayed on and around the altar, in the function of the altar, and in the significance of the altar to its creator. The objects carry meaning in their origin, their intended purpose, how the *altarista* acquired them (gift, craft, purchased, etc), and their use. The less tangible practice of creating, maintaining, and praying at the altar expresses *altaristas’* interpretations of their lives and their self-understandings. Within the tradition of domestic altars, *altaristas* gain authority over their own beliefs, affiliations, and practices in a way not available within the patriarchal structure of the Catholic Church.

*Altaristas* gain understanding of sacred figures, their families and friends, and of themselves. At their altars, *altaristas* express what they feel; as one *altarista* told me, “You just ask what is in your heart.”  

This dialogue that occurs at the altar entails immigration, separation, and celebration. Because the domestic altar is home to both Mexican and American cultures, it bridges the dislocating experience of immigration. By displaying home culture through figures such as *la Virgen de Guadalupe* and pictures of distant family and friends, *altaristas* mediate the

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8 Ibid., 74.
9 Interview with Enedina, 2/27/10.
separation innate to the experience of immigration. *Altaristas* not only express their struggles and petition Mary and Jesus, but they also acknowledge the good, praise Mary and Jesus, rejoice and commemorate worldly successes, both commonplace and significant.

This analysis is based on interviews with four Mexican-American *altaristas* living in Philadelphia. Three of the four interviews were conducted in Spanish and translations into English are my own. Each *altarista* has a unique story, but each suggests the themes of struggle and tradition, as well as the ‘personifying process’ of creating relationships with Mary and Jesus. Antonio explores these themes through his relationship with *la Virgen de Guadalupe*.\(^{10}\) He requested that a friend send him images of *la Virgen* from Mexico. By emphasizing the perceived authenticity of these images, Antonio demonstrates how he values his home culture despite the distance. At her altar, Enedina creates a sense of reciprocity with Mary and Jesus by offering flowers, candles, and attention in return for their love and aid.\(^{11}\) She looks to Mary and Jesus for protection in the foreign land in which she now lives. Teofila and her sons understand their altar to be a crucial part of making a home into a *hogar*.\(^{12}\) Without an altar they feel exposed and vulnerable. Teofila maintains her altar to mediate relationships between herself and other people, and between herself and the sacred. Catalina and her husband, Jorge encourage others to consider Mary and Jesus as they do, including their two sons.\(^{13}\) In this way Catalina and Jorge abate their feelings of separation, and instill in their children pride in Mexican traditions and beliefs. Each of these *altaristas* use their personal religious authority at their altars to mediate between the sacred and the mundane, to build relationships with others, and to help translate home and tradition in Mexico to their new life in the United States.

\(^{10}\) See Appendix D for complete interview.
\(^{11}\) See Appendix E for complete interview.
\(^{12}\) See Appendix F for complete interview.
\(^{13}\) See Appendix G for complete interview.
Chapter 1: Close to La Virgen

Using personal religious authority to explore the sacred and the mundane

On my way to Antonio’s house, he called me to let me know that we only had an hour for the interview because the priest was coming over right after me to show Antonio’s images of la Virgen to some fellow church-goers and to say el rosario (the rosary). When I entered Antonio’s house, I understood why—heh front room was filled with religious images. The two main ones display la Virgen de Guadalupe and hang on opposing walls. Beneath each of the images Antonio has small tables with a variety of flowers, candles, and statues. Framed by las Virgenes, Antonio has a small couch facing the television and a fish tank. Antonio covered the altar tables in cloth and on it he placed photographs his friends and family members. A glass panel protects these images. On top of the glass, Antonio set framed images of Saint Vincent and Our Lady of Sorrow, a statue of el niño Dios (baby Jesus), and an assortment of other religious images.

Antonio has been in Philadelphia for 10 years. He comes from Puebla, Mexico. He is not married and lives with two male friends. The altar is his, but he encourages everyone to use it. Even when Antonio and his roommates don’t have time to pray together, they still make time to stop and greet and speak to la Virgen. Antonio chose la Virgen de Guadalupe as the central figure of his altar because of the importance of the image in Mexico and her accessibility as a mother. He regularly uses one of the images in church processions. The other he displayed in the St. Thomas Aquinas Church in Philadelphia until logistical problems (a heavy frame and a weak wall) encouraged him to take it back. Antonio told me that he keeps an altar celebrating la Virgen in his house, “Because you get to feel like she is among us, among our family, among our people, and the people who live here. And we feel like she is among us, with us in spirit. That’s how I feel.”

Antonio expresses his religious authority at his altar to build his relationship with la Virgen. Through this process, Antonio blurs the line between the sacred and the mundane by creating a sense of the sacred through his personal interactions and through more official means.

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14 Interview with Antonio, 2/23/10.
A. Problematizing a “Women’s Tradition”\textsuperscript{15}

At his altar, Antonio expresses his personal religious authority. His altar includes images of friends and family, of \textit{la Virgen de Guadalupe}, and Jesus. There he communicates intimate feelings and personal struggles in the privacy of his own home. Despite the fact that as a man he can pursue his desire to exercise religious authority as a priest, he chose a different course, a course that is available to both men and women: maintenance of home altars. However, much of the literature on domestic altars, such as Kay Turner’s \textit{Mexican-American Home Altars}, incorrectly emphasizes that the altar tradition applies almost exclusively to women:

Certainly the data gained from my study demonstrates that the home altar tradition is one maintained and used primarily by women. But the tradition is not exclusively woman-centered. As certain interviews reveal, men and children may make occasional use of the altar; they may contribute sacred items to its composition; or they may maintain an altar after the death of a wife or a mother.\textsuperscript{16}

Turner explains that men rarely maintain altars and thus she essentially does not include them in her research. However, without specifically seeking to find a male \textit{altarista}, I met Antonio. Antonio maintains his altar in his house where he lives with his two male housemates. He not only uses the altar more than occasionally and contributes to other people’s altars, but he also maintains his altar despite not having a particular obligation to a woman he loves. He has an altar simply because in exercising his religious authority he feels the presence of \textit{la Virgen}, and it makes him feel at peace.\textsuperscript{17}

In framing the discussion of gender and altars, authors resort to gender stereotypes to create a notion of feminism. Colleen McDannell, in her book, \textit{Material Christianity: Religion

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} Turner (1990), 4.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 82. (Emphasis original).
\item \textsuperscript{17} Interview with Antonio, 2/23/10.
\end{itemize}
and Popular Culture in America, supports the idea that there is an innate difference in the ways in which men and women interact:

In recent years, considerable effort has been expended in trying to understand the differences between the ways that men think, act, talk, and believe and the ways that women think, act, talk, and believe. When religious objects gain power through their association with the authority of religious institutions [specifically, the Roman Catholic Church], that process is defined and administered by men [i.e. by male priests]. When objects are enlivened through the power of relationships, that process is frequently mediated by women.18

McDannell understands the process of creating the sacred through relationships, such as ritual, prayer, and communication, as a feminized practice. By doing so she relies heavily on the assumption that women are relational. Though, as she notes, this was a trend at the time when she published her book, it serves to reinforce gender stereotypes rather than to interrogate them. McDannell addresses this gendered divide as if it were universally present, when in fact it pertains, within the religious context, only to particular varieties of religious communities.

Turner too supports this framework, claiming, “Altars symbolically convey women’s concern for reconciliation, continuity, and the muting of opposition.”19 In this, Turner asserts her understanding of the particular motivations of women. She suggests that these are only women’s concerns. By doing so, Turner reinforces the gender dichotomy that women are relational and caring and men are authoritative and aggressive.

It is true, as Turner suggests, that there tend to be more female than male altaristas in the United States. When I asked Catalina to compare the number of men and women with altars, she implied that it is different in Mexico: “Here in this country? Women.” In this way Catalina seems to share Turner’s impression. However, that does not mean that men cannot or do not

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express their personal religious authority through altars. Altars increase inclusiveness and interaction between genders within the religious sphere, and in doing so counteract the denial of rights and authority to women. Altaristas realize their personal religious authority through this culturally significant tradition. Altars mediate the religious sphere by giving control over the religious experience to the altarista and thus the altarista chooses the roles that religion plays in his or her life. Altars, as an equal space for men and women, lend authority to both.

B. Creating the Sacred

Through their personal religious authority altaristas navigate between the realms of the mundane and the sacred, ultimately blurring the distinction between the two. Unlike the hierarchy of divinity that the Catholic Church promotes—with the trinity as divine and humans as mundane—, altars exist within both the sacred and the mundane. By eliminating the strict boundary between these two realms, altaristas also come to understand the flexibility of other boundaries, such as those separating the altarista from her family in Mexico. At their altars, altaristas mediate their personal understandings of themselves and others, the intersection of cultures, and religious teachings.

Antonio values the authenticity of the images of la Virgen de Guadalupe on his altar because he believes that these images bring him closer to la Virgen. Antonio framed and arranged lighting for his two central images of la Virgen de Guadalupe, displaying their importance. He asked a friend in Mexico to send him both images when he realized that he could not find anything like them in the States. As he told me, “I have a friend, she’s in Mexico, and she sent it to me. And I have another friend and he made the frame and everything. To frame la Virgen de Guadalupe. It’s the same size as the original.” Antonio not only values the fact that the images came from Puebla, Mexico (much closer than Philadelphia to where la Virgen
originally appeared), but also that his images reflect the original as much as possible. He emphasizes that his main image is the same size as the original painting, thus suggesting the authenticity of the image. The images represent the religious, cultural, and personal aspects of the sacred. These images, as well as the other objects—a manger scene, photographs of his friends, baby Jesus in a basket, a crucifix, estampitas, a small statue of Mary’s head—incorporate two levels of meaning, the first: shared or cultural, the second: particular or personal.

The cultural meaning of the image of la Virgen relates both to the cultural narrative enveloping the figure and her religious significance. There exists a certain culturally based respect for this image, even more so than other images of the Blessed Mother, as la Virgen de Guadalupe evokes a particularly Mexican image. La Virgen is “a symbol which seems to enshrine the major hopes and aspirations of an entire society.” The Virgin Mary appeared to a peasant, Juan Diego, in 1531 on the Hill of Tepeyac. In his native language, Nahuatl, she commanded him to inform the archbishop of Mexico of her desire to have a church constructed in her honor on that hill. In order to convince the archbishop, Juan Diego asked the Virgin Mary for help. She instructed him to pick roses from an area in which roses did not normally grow. Juan Diego succeeded in this quest and, following her instructions, he put the flowers in his cloak. When he opened his cloak to show the flowers to the archbishop, the image of la Virgen appeared among the flowers. The incident was declared miraculous and devotees built a shrine on the Hill of Tepeyac. Since then the image has been central to Mexican Catholicism and has played a significant role in Mexican nationalism as well. In the Mexican War of Independence, the image of la Virgen “preceded the insurgents into battle.” Again, when Emiliano Zapata led

20 Illustrations, generally of Mary or Jesus on small laminated cards, often with sayings on the back.
22 Ibid.
the Mexican Revolution in 1910, he used the image of *la Virgen* to inspire his troops and emphasize the morality of his mission. The dual religious and cultural implications associated with *la Virgen de Guadalupe* cement her place as a leading symbol of Mexico and Mexican Catholicism:

The Guadalupe symbol links together family, politics, and religion; colonial past and independent present; Indian and Mexican. It reflects the salient social relationships of Mexican life, and embodies the emotions which they generate...It is, ultimately, a way of talking about Mexico: a ‘collective representation’ of Mexican society.23

*La Virgen de Guadalupe* culturally and religiously symbolizes a Mexican ethos that *altaristas* proudly bring with them to feel more at home in a foreign society.

Just as *la Virgen* connects various aspects of Mexican society, so too does the image connect immigrants to their *hogar* in Mexico. *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is maternal in her compassion and her disposition to help all those who ask for her assistance. Antonio recognizes a special significance of *la Virgen* as a mother: “When she appeared in Mexico in 1531, she became our mother for everyone.”24 Mary’s appearance in Mexico cemented Mexicans’ relation to *la Virgen* as guardian, intermediary, and mother. In this way, the meaning of *la Virgen* is “culturally contingent;”25 it depends on the myth of the religious figure, existent in Mexico in particular, to develop meaning. The figure of Mary represents Mexican society as mother of a people, intercessor, and a source of comfort. She also represents the sacred as mother of Christ. In the figure of Mary, the sacred combines with the mundane. Through the culturally motivated ‘personifying process’ of associating particular human characteristics and traits with *la Virgen de Guadalupe*, the figure becomes more of this world. However, because the significance of *la

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23 Ibid., 173.
24 Interview with Antonio, 2/23/10.
25 McDannell, 4.
Virgen is largely based on her connection with Jesus, and her potential to intervene (or cause intervention) in worldly affairs, she also represents the sacred.

The Virgin Mary exists as sacred not only in a cultural context but also a wider religious context. According to Catholicism, consecration, which falls under the responsibility of male authority figures in the church, creates the sacred. Through consecration, a particular object takes on a quality of holiness, and in this way becomes fit for holy use. Blessing an object or officially recognizing the sacredness of an object validates the object’s potential for sacred use. In this way, the church suggests that the object acts as a reminder of the sacred in everyday life, and as a representation of a believer’s faith and the Church’s sanction of that faith. Pope Leo XIII performed this ritual by officially recognizing the sacredness of la Virgen de Guadalupe in 1894.26 The culturally contingent meaning of la Virgen de Guadalupe reflects both the cultural significance and the religiously officiated significance.

Altaristas’ daily ritual and performance at their altars further emphasizes the sacred. The feeling of religion and sacredness “is created through constant and long-term personal interaction with both the image and a spiritual concept.”27 By erecting his altar, praying there, and communicating with la Virgen and Jesus, Antonio reasserts and redefines the sacredness of these images. This practice, and the daily usage of the sacred image, creates an individualized sacredness. Through performance and thus acknowledgement the sacred presence within an object, that object takes on a quality of the sacred. The cultural and religious aspects of the sacred lead altaristas to recognize the potential connection to Mary and Jesus through an object. Thus the making sacred of objects does not require official consecration. Through ritual performance involving the object, altaristas solidify its sacred meaning.

27 Ibid., 30.
Not only do officially sanctioned and culturally recognized images take on a quality of the sacred on altars, but so too do the worldly or mundane images. The personal connection with the sacred that altaristas develop through communication and ritual can also extend to others who are not present. Pictures of friends and family members on the altar create a relation, as the altarista understands it, between that person and the sacred figures. The physical proximity of the images of friends and family to the image of the sacred reassures Antonio that these figures in his life remain close in a less literal way as well. These images adopt sacredness through relation with the culturally and religiously recognized sacred statues or images. In this way, they take on a sacred quality within the context of the altar. These are highly individualized images and objects and generally refer directly to the altarista’s personal life and experiences. As Antonio described his altar to me he pointed out personal photographs, saying, “That is a picture of my family. That is a friend. That is another friend; he died. I like to have them close to la Virgen.” He values this association, offering his family and friends a privileged position among the sacred in his altar. Association develops sacredness. This can occur in a myriad of ways, ranging from the understanding that a certain person—as represented by an image or object—has been blessed and thus has developed an aspect of the sacred, or that a certain object or image has helped to achieve a petition to the sacred and thus, through its communication and relation with the sacred, becomes sacred. In this way worldly objects and persons take on a quality of the sacred. It is through the interaction between the relational and the official that the altarista creates the sacred. Altaristas recognize the validity of both routes to sacredness.

The categories of cultural, official, and personal sacredness are not three separate means of achieving the sacred. Instead, these meanings interact and grow with one another. During an annual tradition that is widely celebrated in Hispanic communities, the church encourages
families to bring their statues of the baby Jesus from their home altars into church. This happens once a year, forty days after Christmas. As told in Luke 2.22, Mary and Joseph brought the infant Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem forty days after his birth to carry out the traditional rituals of the time for newborn babies. *Altaristas* who incorporate statues of baby Jesus continue this tradition, bringing their statues for the priest to bless forty days after the birth of Jesus. Mothers also bring their own children for the priest to bless forty days after birth to follow the same tradition.²⁸

This tradition emphasizes the interrelatedness of the various means by which to achieve sacredness by providing a space for religious and personal consecration. *Altaristas* treat the baby Jesus as if he were their own son. At the same time, it emphasizes the cultural weight of this specific tradition as a particularly Hispanic tradition, and the role of the male authority in the official sanctification of the statue. In this way, *altaristas* do not necessarily understand the creation of the sacred to be entirely their own. Instead, they continue to celebrate their relation with Jesus on a personal and daily level, while simultaneously recognizing that the priest, too, can play a role in consecration. However the priest consecrates the statue only once a year, forty days after Christmas, and only for *altaristas* with altars that incorporate a statue of the baby Jesus. Throughout the rest of the year, and for altars that do not incorporate *el niño Dios*, *altaristas* create their own daily sense of sacredness at their altars.

For Antonio, official consecration signifies an important connection with the sacred. A priest blessed his two main images of *la Virgen de Guadalupe*. Antonio displayed his primary image in St. Thomas Aquinas Church. When the bishop came to visit the church, he blessed the image:

The bishop blessed it. Two times, and that one [the other large image of la Virgen] also. The first time he came, this image was in St. Thomas Aquinas, and so he blessed it when he was at the altar. I didn’t have to ask him. He just felt that he wanted to bless it when he saw that image.29

When I then asked if the images held a particular importance because they are blessed, he replied, “Yes, yes.” Antonio is proud to own two blessed images, particularly because the images inspired the bishop to bless them. It is thus the innate quality that Antonio recognized in the images, which relate to their cultural, religious, and personal significance, that the bishop also acknowledged. The images inspired the bishop to consecrate them. Though the images already were sacred, by blessing them, the bishop bestowed upon them a particular importance. However the bishop only emphasized what Antonio has understood and evoked from the images through his relation to them.

Sacredness in the altar tradition comes into being through cultural and religious narratives, but also ritual enactment. The ritual may be individualized or officially sanctioned, but through repetition and personal significance, altaristas create sacredness while still acknowledging the value of cultural and religious sacredness. Throughout the year, altaristas maintain the sacred at their own altars. However, each year altaristas also have the opportunity to bring their statues of baby Jesus for the priest to bless, to officially recognize them as sacred. Additionally, as Antonio experienced, a priest may recognize the sacredness of an image in less traditional situations. The sacred is thus simultaneously both an individualized and a highly public category. Just as the altars themselves represent personal, religious, and cultural narrative, so too do they represent the particular altarista and his or her personal narrative of immigration, separation, and celebration within a religious and cultural context.

29 Interview with Antonio, 2/23/10.
Chapter 2: You Are Not Alone

Relationships between altaristas, friends and family, and the sacred

Enedina lives in a house with her son, daughter-in-law, and seven other people. In the entranceway of her house, Enedina made her altar. The main image on her altar is a large framed image of Our Lord of Divine Mercy, a picture of Jesus as a grown man with his hand raised to bless his devotees. Artificial flowers frame the image. The Divine Mercy image appears three times throughout the altar. A framed painting of la Virgen de Guadalupe and a statue of Mary hang on the wall. Enedina is proud of the fact that she has not purchased any of the images or figures on her altar—all were gifts. Enedina informed me that, according to the altar tradition she learned, all the images on an altar should be gifted: “People always give things; you don’t buy them because these images always have to be gifted. People give to you what they feel. That’s why everything is gifted.” Enedina attributes such value to the gifts because they represent her relationships with various people. This altar has exclusively religious images and figures.

After talking to me for a while about this altar, Enedina invited me to her bedroom. There, too, she has an altar. This one is much smaller and without any framed images. Enedina has made it more personalized. She had left her Bible laid out, open to a page on which she had written, and with a rosary laying on top of it. The Divine Mercy image is the center of this altar too, but around it she has pictures of family members and friends—her nieces with her 10-year-old daughter, her son and his wife, the photograph from a group she participated in30—letters from her family in Mexico, and arts and crafts that have been made for her.

Enedina came to Philadelphia from Puebla, Mexico two years ago with her oldest son. She had to leave her three other children at home with her mother. One of the things that Enedina treasures about having her altar is that she is able to find comfort knowing that her children still in Mexico also pray at their home altar and that in this way they are always in communication, despite the distance. Her altar helps to mediate the struggle of separation from family, home, and culture and allows Enedina to continue to make sense of her emotional, social, and ethnic situation.

30 The label on the photo reads, “Primer retiro de la evangelización de mujeres,” or “The First Retreat for the Evangelization of Women.”
The religious images on Antonio’s altar generally rested on top of personal images of friends and family in the same way that his experience is built on the influence of important people in his life.

Altaristas express these narratives of immigration, separation and celebration through individualized displays of images of Mary and Jesus, friends and families, and souvenirs. Home altars maintain the sacred and place it within the domestic sphere. Both the mundane and the sacred coexist within lo cotidiano. Images of the Mary and Jesus lean against images of friends and family. This collage of images and objects reflects both the altarista and her community. Robert Orsi notes that when Italian-Americans’ celebrate the Virgin of Mount Carmel, there is an “intimate connection between private grief and joy and the claims and contributions of the community.”

Like those Italian-Americans, altaristas address both public and private petitions and thanksgiving to la Virgen de Guadalupe. Altaristas do no parade their altars through the streets in the same way, but their altars too represent personal grief and joy, and public claims, and contributions.

Altars reflect the claims and contributions of the community in a very literal way—items the altarista purchased and gifts from others through material contributions. Altaristas may bring objects from their country of origin, inherit them, and receive them as gifts. Objects can thus represent a particular memory, event, or relationship.

31 Orsi, 181.
Enedina has two altars. Her little altar contains a variety of objects that represent certain moments to her, including, “…letters from my children, some little things from my family; this picture is my daughter with her two cousins ….”

Enedina also placed on her altar a poem credited to Mother Teresa, a letter from her friend signed, “your sister in Christ,” a store-bought card wishing her Feliz fiestas de la Madre (Happy Mothers’ Day), and a Hello Kitty sticker that reads, “Great!” Each of these personal items, collected or gifted, represent particular moments in or aspects of Enedina’s life. Her altar combines the public and the private through these objects.

Items can represent the personal and the public, and often one cannot be entirely separated from the other. In this way, through material objects, altars represent the intimate connection between public and private that Orsi describes. Altars negotiate meaning, and integrate personal interpretation with public sentiment or ethos. Domestic altars incorporate a variety of images and symbols reflective of personal history, faith, culture and traditions. Altaristas create a single sacred space by gathering materials from various aspects of their lives that do not intuitively connect. Antonio, for example, displays an image of his friends’ wedding, with an estampita of la Virgen de Guadalupe leaning against it. The estampita almost covers a picture of a group of his friends from a trip taken together. Though these three objects do not relate to each other in any obvious way other than their shared significance to Antonio, within the context of the altar they take on a particular unified meaning. Antonio personalizes,

32 Turner (1999), 40.
interprets, and reinterprets this meaning to reflect his own experiences. Just as an immigrant balances two separate cultures and experiences, and from this develops a cohesive (but still changing) self, so too does the *altarista* combine disjointed items to create a cohesive and enduring whole, but one that is subject to change.

*Altaristas* continuously add to their altars, viewing them as ongoing projects. In this way the altar mediates the experience of immigration by providing an outlet for the growing and changing self-understanding that results from such drastic change. On a regular basis, Antonio replaces wilted flowers with fresh ones on the altar and takes away used-up candles. As important events occur, *altaristas* may give away objects from their altars or add to them. The altar simultaneously changes and exists as a unified whole. This contradiction functions cohesively because, as Turner describes, “The meaning of images on the altar is encountered, not fixed; it varies according to the ongoing fluctuations and relationships of exchange among the [altarista], her social world, and what she worships.” 33 Meaning depends on external influences and personal interpretation. The meaning of the altar, and even certain objects included on the altar is ever in flux, even while the altar as a whole endures. This provides an outlet for *altaristas* to fluidly reinterpret their identities and experiences through material objects. Altars help *altaristas* to maintain cohesive self-conceptions through these representations in the midst of immigration, struggle, and change. 34

This process of collage constantly allows *altaristas* to make and re-make meaning by adding, removing, and rearranging objects. Throughout this process the altar constantly reflects the *altarista* and her current self-understanding as mediated by cultural, social, and religious

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33 Ibid., 263.
34 Though this practice is not unique to immigrants, and *altaristas* in Mexico also add to their altars as they continue to change and adapt, immigrant *altaristas* utilize this practice as a way to mediate their unique struggles and the particularly drastic changes they experience.
factors. As Teofila and Sergio told me, *altaristas* recognized the changes made to their altars and acknowledge the potential for future alterations:

Teofila: I’ve added some new things. This image, I didn’t have it before. I’d been keeping my eye out for new images because I wanted to add more, always getting more images. The last thing that I put on the altar was—

Sergio: The statue of baby Jesus.

Teofila: The statue of baby Jesus. A friend gave me baby Jesus, and I already brought him to mass and they already blessed him. He’s the latest addition. And I am surely going to continue to put more things on the altar. Surely. I want to make it bigger. And this [showing me an estampita of la Virgen] will be the next thing I add, but much bigger.35

Teofila actively looks for new images for her altar; she even has certain images in mind. She recognizes the altar as an ongoing project. However, not only does Teofila want to make her altar bigger by adding objects and images, but she specifically desires a large image of *la Virgen*. Increased size of the image provides a sense of increased presence; Teofila will feel more connected to *la Virgen* through a new big image. By displaying a large image of *la Virgen*, Teofila will continue to develop a relationship with Mary and to show her devotion through material objects.

**B. The Most Natural: Prayer and Communication**

The alteration of the altar allows for an ongoing process of meaning making and self-understanding for the *altarista* and in this way helps the *altarista* to negotiate her surroundings. This process occurs as part of both the daily usage of altars and their ongoing maintenance. Through prayer, replacing flowers and candles, and building altars, *altaristas* constantly negotiate their relationships with both their family and friends represented on the altar and with Mary and Jesus. Enedina prays at her altar and talks with Mary and Jesus everyday. She changes the flowers and candles as necessary and

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35 Interview with Teofila, 2/23/10.
over time collects new objects and images to add to her altar. Each *altarista* that I interviewed told me of the importance of these routines.

*Altaristas* communicate with Mary and Jesus and ask them for protection. As immigrants, the *altaristas* I spoke with had a heightened sense of the necessity of an ongoing and positive relationship with Mary and Jesus. Catalina expressed the importance of this relation given her family’s particular situation:

I ask that He protect my children, my husband, that we do well with work, and above all, that we do well in this country without our [immigration] papers, and that sort of thing...It’s difficult for us to be here in this country without papers. We walk with fear; we don’t feel free, because of this, first, before we leave the house, we ask that He protects us.36

Catalina’s status as an illegal immigrant serves as a central theme in her communication with Mary and Jesus. The altar mediates this struggle. Her relationship with these sacred figures allows her to feel they protect her and her family. This perception of protection facilitates Catalina’s interactions with the world outside of her house. Enedina similarly expressed how her situation as an immigrant makes her more wary in general and more intimate with sacred figures:

As an immigrant, you have more contact with God. Because in a foreign country, you never know what could happen tomorrow. And I know that; I feel it. I am in a strange country, and so I call upon God to guide me.37

Both women discuss fear and a desire for guidance in difficult situations.

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36 Interview with Catalina and Jorge, 2/21/10.
37 Interview with Enedina, 2/27/10.
The sense of sacred at the altar distances *altaristas* from the foreign and dangerous world outside of their houses and their immediate communities. The intimacy created at the altar through association of friends, family, and sacred figures and subsequent protection alleviates the sense of alienation by emphasizing the community that *altaristas* do have. As a tradition, altars connect *altaristas*’s current home where they now live to the home from which they came, and, through ritual and prayer, connect *altaristas* to family and friends. By maintaining an altar with images of loved ones, *altaristas* invite into their homes those loved ones who remained in Mexico. In this way, though none of the *altaristas* that I interviewed had returned to Mexico since arriving in the United States, they still felt the ongoing connection to home and tradition, and this, in turn, abates their loneliness while simultaneously providing them with a sense of protection. *Altarista* immigrants, particularly illegal immigrants, rely on their altars to communicate with sacred figures and distant friends and family to maintain their community and their security.

Picture 8: Enedina’s upstairs altar shows her active communication with the divine—an open Bible, a prayer book, a candle, a flower, and a rosary all mark the ritual and communication in which Enedina participates at her altar.
C. Always Burning: Ritual and Practice

*Altaristas* ask for divine help in these practical matters of protection and living *lo cotidiano*, and in return maintain a relationship with the sacred through their altars. *Altaristas* use altars for everyday communication, such as chatting about the day, reciting learned prayers, and thanking sacred figures for particular events of the day. For Catalina, because *el Padre Nuestro* is “the prayer that Christ gave us…[it] is always the most important, and we say it every day.”

Catalina tended to accentuate the importance and beauty of traditional prayers. Enedina, on the other hand, emphasized the worth of more personal interactions: “Sometimes a prayer just comes out of you, and you don’t even know what it will be. Often you don’t say any prayer, you just ask what is in your heart.”

*Altaristas* care for the sacred figures on their altars not only through communication, but also by providing fresh flowers and burning a candle. Enedina, for example, discussed the importance of flowers, particularly fresh flowers, and elaborated on her communications with both Jesus and her grandmother regarding the flower tradition:

> It’s also part of my routine to change the flowers. They dry out often. And sometimes I say, “Forgive me, but I don’t have money for your flowers.” And I do feel like He listens to me, as if He says, “Don’t worry.” My nana told me that He likes natural flowers. Maybe because of the smell. They ought to be natural flowers, not artificial. You can adorn him [with artificial flowers], but it’s better to have natural flowers.

Enedina desires to always have fresh flowers to display her devotion and her adoration, and to continue to develop her very interpersonal relationship with the image of Our Lord of Divine Mercy, the main figure in her larger altar. The altar tradition is passed down through such cultural heritage that conveys beliefs regarding knowledge of the sacred figures, controls personal devotions and gifts, and presents the means to please the figures that the images

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38 Interview with Catalina and Jorge, 2/21/10.
39 Interview with Enedina, 2/27/10.
40 Interview with Enedina, 2/27/10.
represent. Enedina knows the flower preferences of Jesus, as her grandmother told them to her. She works to always provide fresh flowers, ideally roses, for, “although, really, any flower will do… the rose is the most natural” because the rose is the flower of la Virgen de Guadalupe. Enedina does not rely entirely on her nana and also communicates with Jesus directly. She believes that Jesus understands the financial burden of fresh flowers and understands her financial burden. Thus Enedina’s devotion to Jesus does not impose difficult monetary demands, but instead allows for flexibility in light of her financial struggles.

_Altaristas_ develop relationships with Mary and Jesus by conversing, and also by providing flowers, and candles. Candles represent the ever-present light of Mary and Jesus and thus _altaristas_ strive to keep the flame alive. Antonio always has candles:

“I have two candles, one here, one there, always burning. It is a tradition from my town.”⁴¹ Both Enedina and Antonio emphasize the inherited knowledge implicit in the altar tradition. Enedina’s grandmother taught her the preferred flowers for the altar. Antonio always keeps the candle burning because it is a tradition he learned growing up in Puebla, Mexico. Altars, and the daily maintenance and traditions implicit in having an altar, facilitate maintenance of a connection to home and family. By carrying out the habits and traditions learned in Mexico, _altaristas_ continue to feel the presence of distant loved ones.

_Altaristas_ worship and adore Mary and Jesus, talking with them, praying to them, and thanking them. Teofila particularly notices this relationship:

⁴¹ Interview with Antonio, 2/23/10.
I can communicate with her whenever I want. I speak with *la Virgen* so much that they [her sons] tell me, “Mom, *la madrecita* is going to tell you to be quiet soon because you ask her for too many things!” [Laughs]… I think that the altar tradition brings us together, unites us, unites us with everything that they have done for us. It is because of this, too, that we thank them. I have their flowers, their candles; I have this little flame for them. It is something so insignificant considering everything they do for us, protecting us, helping us, blessing us. And in reality, they don’t need anything; we’re the needy ones!  

Teofila feels gratitude for all that Mary and Jesus have done for her and she also recognizes herself as needy. She lessens this by creating a more reciprocal relationship through giving back to Jesus and Mary. Teofila is proud of the frequency of her communication with *la Virgen* and she is thankful for how the altar serves as a unifying force. She knows that *la madrecita* and Jesus do not require anything, but still she persists in providing them with candles and flowers and company in order to continue to develop her relationship with them. By giving something to the sacred figures represented on her altar Teofila establishes a relationship and mutual commitment. Even though, as she notes, Jesus and Mary do not need the flowers or the candles, by giving these objects to them, Teofila encourages a sense of reciprocity. The appropriate response to a gift is to show gratification regardless of the necessity of the gift. According to Teofila, Jesus and Mary do this by protecting her and her sons. In return, Teofila continues to replenish the flowers and candles and spend time at her altar. Thus the *altarista* and Mary and Jesus enter into a cycle of mutual giving.

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42 Interview with Teofila, 2/23/10.
Chapter 3: You Notice the Difference
Understanding the presence of the Sacred through relationships and communication

Teofila

Among her sons’ awards and certificates, Teofilia’s front room hosts El Sagrado Corazón, a representation of Jesus and His physical heart, symbolizing His divine love for humanity. But that’s not where she keeps her altar. She led me through the kitchen and the dining room before arriving in her bedroom. A large bed with a red comforter is centered in the room. To the left of the bed a Mexican flag hangs on the wall. In front of the bed is a dresser with a mirror on it, and surrounding the mirror are about fifteen hats hung on the wall. To the right of the bed is Teofila’s altar.

Teofila came to Philadelphia five years ago with her two sons. The three live together in their house on 18th Street. Teofila’s sons are both fluent in English, but she still hasn’t learned the language. The boys attend community college in the evenings and work during the day. I met one son, Sergio, who brought juice to Teofila and me and then stayed to listen, and sometimes even to participate in the interview.

The largest image on Teofila’s altar is a hand drawn image that a friend in her Bible reading group made for her. It depicts Jesus multiplying the bread in the story of the Fishes and the Loaves. Below this drawing she has a variety of images of Jesus as a grown man and the Virgin Mary. There are many estampitas of la Virgen de Guadalupe, tucked into the corners of the framed images. In front of all the images are two vases of flowers, a candle, a rosary, and two statues, one of el niño Dios and the other of Mary. Teofila feels the presence of Mary and Jesus rooted in the altar. At her altar she develops her relationship with these figures, often communicating specifically with one or the other (or one through the other) depending on the nature of her petition or praise.

43 See Appendix E for complete interview.
A. Presence and Representation

Through the ‘personifying process’ altaristas create relations of reciprocity and dependence with Mary and Jesus. Their central presence further encourages the development of relation between the altarista and the sacred. Teofila emphasizes the importance of space; she feels a more direct connection with the sacred because she has set aside a particular space dedicated to Jesus and Mary. All the altaristas I interviewed suggested that they carry their relationship with the sacred throughout the day, and that they know that Jesus and Mary watch out for them. However, some of the altaristas also emphasized that within their homes they feel a particular presence of the sacred on their altars. Some expressed that this presence originates from the omnipresence of Jesus and Mary. Others suggested an intrinsic link to the altar.

Teofila’s son, Sergio, voiced his feeling of the necessity, not just the importance, of the altar:

Sergio: Because sometimes when I go to my friends’ houses, they don’t have altars. They’ll have an image or two, but nothing like this. And I don’t know, maybe it’s just me, but you feel like something is missing. Ever since you were little, you know that it is something substantial in your life, something like food.

Teofila: They are part of our life.

Sergio: And in a way, it’s just natural, I don’t know why, but you feel something different [in houses without altars]. If you go into a place that doesn’t have an altar, you feel differently. You feel better, positive, when there is an altar.

Teofila: You feel peace, tranquility. You feel nice. And, it’s true, you go to other places where there is no altar, and because of that it isn’t an enjoyable atmosphere, but instead an unpleasant atmosphere. You notice the difference.45

Teofila and Sergio distinguish between an atmosphere that actively invites Jesus and Mary, and one that allows their sacred presence, but still does not encourage it. For Teofila and Sergio, the intentional presence of Jesus and Mary in the home is necessary and substantiating. The epicenter of this presence stems from the home altar.

For the altarista, the altar creates a sense of hogar. This sense reflects the comfort of Mexican culture, and friends and family not immediately present. By bringing them into the

45 Interview with Teofila, 2/23/10.
house and creating a space that represents the houses in which the altaristas grew up, altaristas maintain their cultural heritage. In this way, the altar creates belonging such that the lack of an altar feels abrasive and unpleasant. The altar, as representative of hogar, provides a sense of security. The absence of an altar and thus of this security makes Teofila and Sergio feel exposed and vulnerable. The comfort of altars reflects the experience of immigration. There is a rift between an altarista’s feeling of comfort in her hogar and the difficulty of leaving an established community. The altar provides a familiar retreat to mediate the difficulties of immigration.

Antonio feels that the presence of la Virgen in his house centers on her images. Every December he donates his images to be used in the processions leading up to and celebrating la Inmaculada Concepción and Christmas. For that month, he takes the pictures down and brings them to the church. To him, “it looks very empty here. I feel like nobody’s here. When I get them back again and I put them in the same place, I say, ‘Well, you came back.’ When I am praying at the altar I feel that presence. When you pray, you feel she is with us.” This sense of sacred presence enlivened through the images (and conversely, lessened by the absence of the images) blurs the distinction between Mary or Jesus and images of them, but does not entirely erase it. This process occurs through the personification of the sacred figures, but altaristas continue to understand Mary and Jesus as more than human and thus do not erase the distinction completely.

Though no one that I interviewed suggested that Mary or Jesus actively inhabit the statues and images, they also did not make a clear distinction between the statue and the spirit in their conversations with me. Personal relationships with the sacred figures, elaborated through communication and maintenance of the altar, encourage the continued blurring of this

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46 *La Inmaculada Concepción* is the feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary celebrated by Roman Catholics on December 8th and 9th to venerate Mary’s sinlessness form the time of her birth.

47 Interview with Antonio, 2/23/10.
distinction. The image does not merely represent the figure, but also facilitates the development of a relationship with sacred figures. *Altaristas* thus lessen the difference between sacred figures and images of them, but do not entirely ignore it. *Altaristas* have a sense of sacred presence in their altars, suggesting that the main statues and images serve as more than just “a focus for concentration”\(^48\) but not as fully embodied sacred figures. The images do not become the sacred figures themselves. Instead, they take on certain characteristics that allow *altaristas* to feel the presence of the sacred more fully so that they may address, petition, and thank Mary and Jesus. Turner claims that this occurs through a process based on relationship: “[An *altarista*] extends personhood to the divine in a continuing presence; she recognizes divine beings as persons and therefore makes them ever more capable of loving and being loved.”\(^49\) In the process of extending personhood, *altaristas* do not deny the divinity of the sacred figure; they simply make that figure more accessible and relatable, and thus establish intimate relationships with *la Virgen de Guadalupe* and Jesus in a foreign land. In this way the altar lends itself to this ‘personifying process’ based on relationship. Though the representation does not fully embody a sacred figure, it is “an embodied basis for communicative exchange between the human and divine.”\(^50\) By anchoring the sacred presence in a physical representation, *altaristas* create and maintain an intimate and casual communication with Mary and Jesus.

The images represent relationships with sacred figures. By personifying Mary and Jesus, the *altarista* mediates between the sacred and the mundane, bringing the sacred into the domestic sphere. *Altaristas* recapture the power and strength of the sacred, representing Mary and Jesus through image, statue, or figure, and so increase and maintain their accessibility.

\(^{48}\) Ibid.
\(^{49}\) Turner (1990), 272.
\(^{50}\) Ibid.
B. Accessing and Communicating with Sacred Figures

Altaristas’ relationships with sacred figures mediate the process of meaning making and increase self-understanding. Regardless of the central figure on their altars, the altaristas expressed a devotion to both Mary and Jesus. They understood the two figures as inseparable, but simultaneously had a distinct relation with and understanding of each of them. When I asked the altaristas about why they chose to include a particular representation of Mary or Jesus, or to whom they dedicated their altars, each, like Antonio, articulated that they devoted their altars to a specific image of Mary of Jesus and elaborated that though distinct, the figures do not exist in isolation:

I always think that when you pray to Jesus, well I think when you pray to Our Mother, it is to connect to Him. They are not alone. They are together. So when you pray to her, you pray to Jesus, and when you pray to Jesus, you pray to her.  

Antonio identifies Mary and Jesus as one while making a point to separate the two figures. In this way his understanding of Mary and Jesus reflects his own position. Antonio expresses a sense of distance between Jesus and Mary, like that between his home in Mexico and life in Philadelphia, but also an unshakeable connection that binds Jesus and Mary so that “they are not alone.” These two figures are inseparable, despite distinctions and distance, which allow altaristas to feel closer to family members that remain in Mexico. Immigrants find comfort in seeing Mary and Jesus simultaneously as two distinct figures and inseparable. By representing this duality, altars also mediate the inevitable distance that separates altaristas in the United States from Mexico. Their altars mirror their situation of physical separation but emotional proximity, for Mary and Jesus too are at once together and separate. This dual distinction and unification of Jesus and Mary reflects the effort of altaristas to stay connected with their hogar through tradition and communication with sacred figures.

\[51\] Interview with Antonio, 2/23/10.
After noting the interchangeability of Mary and Jesus, Antonio told me that the “way to go to Jesus, is through His mother.” Mary serves as an intermediary between devotees and God. Because Mary and Jesus represent two distinct faces of the sacred, altaristas develop a particular relation with one or more aspects of these figures. Antonio knows that in speaking to la Virgen he speaks to Jesus, but he prefers to go through Mary because he thinks that she more effectively addresses his needs.

By appealing to Mary for certain issues and Jesus for others, altaristas develop particular relationships with each figure. They assign Mary and Jesus specific personalities and characteristics depending on their understanding of these figures. Through the establishment of these relationships, altaristas mediate between the sacred and the mundane, making Mary and Jesus more human and accessible. This then allows altaristas to invest themselves in these relationships and confide more in these sacred figures, alleviating their struggle in a foreign world.

Enedina too emphasized how the sacred figures on her altar help to strengthen and reinforce relationships. She also discussed certain instances in which she will choose to speak to with la Virgen over Diosito mío. Through these particular relationships with certain figures, altars mollify the sense of displacement intrinsic in the immigrant experience:

They go hand in hand. In her you confide as a fellow mother and woman, and in Him like a son, like a father. As I said, I have a 10-year-old daughter, and before I came here, I brought her to the church and told her, “I am leaving, but you won’t be alone. You will be with your mom. Here is your mom. Whenever you want to talk with someone, to chat, or if you have any sort of problem, come here and talk to her. She will listen to you.” And Guadalupe (that’s my daughter’s name, Guadalupe) promised me that she would. She’s ten years old and she says the rosary. I call home and I talk to my mom, I say, “Where is

52 Ibid.
53 Diosito mío literally means “my little God,” and refers to Jesus. This term of endearment for Jesus reflects Enedina’s personalized relationship with him.
Guadalupe?” and she tells me that Guadalupe is praying or that she’s talking with la Virgen. That makes me feel good. I am here and she is there, but we are in it together.\textsuperscript{54}

La Virgen as a fellow mother connects Enedina to her daughter, and, in turn, connects Guadalupe to her mother. Enedina understands that she has a particular relation with la Virgen and draws on their commonalities in order to extend this relation beyond herself to include her daughter as well. Even though Enedina cannot communicate with her daughter as much as she would like, she knows that la Virgen de Guadalupe connects her with her daughter. Enedina cannot watch over her daughter but another mother will. And not just any mother, but Guadalupe’s “mamá.” The Virgin as mother is an accessible figure for both mother and daughter. For Enedina, la Virgen is compassionate and understands the struggles of parenting. In this way, la Virgen de Guadalupe mediates separation. Through her, Guadalupe and Enedina maintain their sense of connection in which each informs the other’s daily experience.

For Catalina too Jesus and Mary are simultaneously connected and distinct. In our interview, Catalina emphasized the importance of these sacred figures in protecting her family in their daily struggles and teaching her sons Mexican culture and Catholic values. She feels the constant presence of Jesus but her relationship with God is quite distant:

I think that Jesus is always with us, even if you don’t have His image, and even though sometimes we don’t realize that He is with us, he truly is; but with God, we don’t know. I mean, I know that there is a God, but I’ve never talked with Him, I’ve never offered to serve Him, I’ve never asked Him for anything. I know that there is a God, but that’s it.\textsuperscript{55}

Because Jesus and Mary have a presence in her house, Catalina has developed a relationship with them. As she said, “Mary and Jesus are complete together.” Each compliments the other, and with both she creates relationships. Her ability to imagine and access Mary and Jesus facilitates this process. However, to Catalina, God is an abstract concept. She believes in “Him,” but she

\textsuperscript{54} Interview with Enedina, 2/27/10.
\textsuperscript{55} Interview with Catalina and Jorge, 2/21/10.
does not communicate with “Him” or even offer to serve “Him.” Catalina understands her primary obligation and worship to be directed towards the combined but separate figures of Jesus and Mary, and not to God. Catalina further emphasized the importance of having a place for Jesus and Mary in her house:

And since we have an altar, we come downstairs in the morning, come down and talk to Jesus, thank Him for another day of life, thank Him for giving what He has to me—talk with Him directly, because I have a little place, a space, where I can talk with Him. And that, for me, is something—I’d feel bit strange if I were talking to Jesus but I didn’t see an image of Him or an image of Mary. That’s why I think it is custom, you know? It’s what they taught us so that we’ll always see them and so we can stop and talk with them. That’s the custom, isn’t it?56

Images of Mary and Jesus make them more accessible. Mary and Jesus can thus mediate altaristas’ relations to God by serving as intermediaries. Catalina does not need to have a developed relation with God because through her communication with Mary and Jesus, she can address God.

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56 Interview with Catalina and Jorge, 2/21/10.
Chapter 4: They Already Know the Tradition

Locating altars and cultural heritage

Catalina & Jorge

It was a rainy day in February when I made my way to Catalina and Jorge’s house in South Philadelphia. They opened the door before I had finished knocking and ushered me into their home. Music that seemed to be from video games escaped from upstairs. That’s where their two sons, 6- and 9-year-olds, must have been camped out. As soon as I entered the house I saw the altar, not 10 feet from the front door. They have a sitting area with a television and some couches, and on and around the corner table of the couches; right up against the wall, there is an altar. The altar resembles the traditional nativity scene with Mary and Joseph just inside the wooden frame of la casita, or the manger. Just outside of la casita is a much bigger statue of el niño Dios on his throne. El niño Dios, or the baby Jesus, is a common figure on home altars. This image emphasizes the familial aspect of the altar. Animals, the traditional donkey, cow, etc, and the slightly less traditional giraffe and zebra, surround the statue. Catalina explained to me, “We have all the animals that were at the birth of Jesus in the inn. This is one [the zebra] the kids added and I didn’t want to take it away.” For Catalina, her altar centers around her children and her faith. The altar does not have clear boundaries: the otherwise rather barren walls extend up past the altar and are ornamented with religious images that further toppled onto the bookshelf to the side of the altar. A portrait of la Virgen de Guadalupe is placed alongside another image of la Virgen appearing to Juan Diego. On the bookshelf the religious

57 Though pesebre is the direct translation of “manger,” Catalina referred to it as la casita, or “the little house.”
58 Interview with Catalina and Jorge, 2/21/10.
images encounter the mundane, the Bible leans up against a novel in Spanish and an image of Jesus is tucked into the corner of a photograph of Catalina and Jorge’s oldest son.

Catalina and Jorge moved to Philadelphia eleven years ago, each seeking a better life in the United States because, as Catalina said, “The situation in Mexico is difficult.”59 The two met here and got married. They haven’t been able to go home because neither of them is here legally. They both learned the altar tradition from their mothers and see it as very important to continue their faith through this tradition. Though this altar belongs to and is used by Catalina, Jorge, and their sons, Catalina did most of the talking throughout the interview. Both Catalina and Jorge emphasized to me, “I’ve always had my altar,” even before they shared a house, both maintained altars because, “for us, it’s like our mother, our father; they are the principal beings in our life. So I guess for me, it is just the norm to have my altar.”60 Catalina and Jorge value their altar as a means to instill values in their sons and teach them about Mexico. However, the purpose of the altar is also to fuel discussions and encourage others—not just their sons—to consider the meaning of the altar.

A. Location of Home Altars

Altaristas can choose to make sacred figures more accessible to others by sharing them. Altars appeal to a particular intended audience depending on their physical location. For instance, the front door is a public space: if an altarista displays religious symbols, it requires no personal interaction between the audience and the creator of the religious display, and is thus public. An altar visible from the front door is semi-public; strangers visiting the house see the altar without entering the home. An altar placed in a living room, parlor, or other gathering room is semi-private. There is a degree of intimacy in this location not present in the first two for the altarista must invite the guest into the house. Finally, an altarista may place her altar in her bedroom or personal room that visitors do not regularly enter. This location can be considered private in that the altarista does not create it for potential visitors or guests. Altar placement reflects the altarista’s intended audience.

59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
*Altaristas* understand the purpose of the altar based on its location. More public altars facilitate discussion, whereas more private altars provide a space to communicate directly with sacred figures. Catalina and Jorge proudly display their altar in the front room of their house. Jorge told me that the location of his altar reflects the tradition he learned growing up: “Traditionally in Mexico when guests come into the house, the first thing they see is the altar, *la Virgen*, or whichever saint, or other image, but always when they enter a house, there is the altar.” Catalina added that though some people have altars in their bedrooms, “or somewhere else hidden away,” she cannot imagine having the altar in a less public location. Because the images on their altar constitute an intrinsic part of their lives, like “our mother, our father,” Catalina and Jorge want to have an altar that everyone can see. They want to show their pride in their cultural heritage. They want people to form conclusions based on this religious display. Antonio too has his altar in his front room. He summarized the issue of audience neatly when he told me: “It’s for the people when they come. It’s for everybody.” In this context, the altar is performative in that the *altarista* specifically intends it for others. The *altarista* creates it for the semi-public eye and thus subjects it to external critique. An altar shapes the audience’s view of both the *altarista* and the sacred figures. Thus performative altars in the home incite interpretation from those who enter this sacred space.

However, not all altars are public in this sense of external audience. Teofila, for example, keeps her altar at her bedside. While referring to this choice of location, Teofila told me that she chose it,
because of the bed. Because we feel that they are closer to us, and that they care for us and protect us. And just as we feel their presence, they feel our presence. That’s why we have it here. I love having it right here. I come home from work tired and hungry, but how could I not want to spend time with them if they are right here?… [H]ere, where the three of us [Teofila and her two sons] wake up in the morning, where we lie down at night, we give our regards to la Virgen, we get up, we go to bed, and we thank them [Mary and Jesus]. In this way, we feel that they look after us, that they protect us. Because here they are, just a step away from the bed.62

Teofila’s two main reasons for having her altar in her bedroom are the comfort of physical proximity and the convenience. Just as the altaristas expressed a sense of comfort derived from the physical proximity of images of loved ones and sacred figures, so too do Teofila and her sons derive a sense of divine protection and caring because they sleep next to the altar. Teofila does not experience the same external pressure to create an appropriate altar as altaristas with more public altars might. For instance, Teofila has a unique religious image on her altar—a hand drawn representation of Jesus multiplying the bread. To her, this image represents both the divine power of Christ and her personal relationship with the artist. Because Teofila only expects herself, her sons, and certain guests to see the altar, she builds the altar only for those intimate relations, and not to evoke reactions from more distant others. Though Teofila too may have an intended audience, that audience is her very own.

Teofila discussed a feeling of mutual support and comfort, in which

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62 Interview with Teofila, 2/23/10.
both the sacred figures feel her presence and she theirs. The desire to feel continually this sacred presence suggests a desire to connect with those still in Mexico. The altar, as a Mexican tradition, represents Teofila’s cultural heritage from Mexico. She displays the aspect of the Virgin most closely associated with Mexico, and pictures of family and friends still in Mexico. Thus as Teofila communicates with Mary and Jesus, she also acknowledges her hogar. Just as Through la Virgen Enedina and her daughter Guadalupe mediate the distance between them, so too do other altaristas associate communication with Mary and Jesus and with others who are not immediately present. Teofila believes that Mary and Jesus transmit her thoughts and her love to those she is thinking of, even if she cannot do it herself.

Because she has both a semi-public and a private altar, Enedina provides insight into the distinction between the two. Downstairs in the entranceway Enedina has a carefully composed altar. The central image is Our Lord of Divine Mercy, adorned with artificial flowers. She has the altar there because she wants to share it with others:

A lot of people come to the house and they see the altar and always say, “How nice!” It gives us pleasure; it gives us peace. We leave the house and He blesses us, or we arrive back home and He blesses us. In your room, no one else has the altar but you. You don’t share it with the rest of your family, with everyone else. People come here and the image is shared with them. It is where it is visible, where everyone can know God and share in Him.\(^6\)

Enedina wants others to participate in relationships with Jesus. She recognizes the importance of sharing His divinity and thus constructed an altar that allows for others to recognize Christ’s importance. Because Enedina wants guests and tenants in the house to form  

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\(^6\) Interview with Enedina, 2/27/10.
certain opinions of Jesus based on her display, she builds the altar with a specific audience in mind. However, at the very end of our interview, Enedina turned to me and said, “This altar that you see here is my big altar, the one that I share with everyone. I also have a little altar in my room.” She led me up a narrow staircase, onto a hall, past all the rooms that she rents to others. We turned a corner and continued our ascent. When we arrived in her room, she giddily began to point to things on her altar, “Here I have letters from my children, some little things from my family; this picture is my daughter with her two cousins. Here is la Virgencita. And up here I have Our Lord of Divine Mercy again. This is my Bible.”

Enedina displayed awareness regarding how others view her semi-public altar. She knows that others come into her house and share in her understanding of the sacred figures and she constructs an altar to influence how others interpret her and the sacred figures. Enedina displays her altar so that “everyone can know God and share in Him.” For Enedina, this altar appeals to an audience. However her more private altar upstairs is more chaotic and more effectively represents Enedina.

As the difference between Enedina’s two altars reveals, altaristas build altars with a preconceived notion of external expectations. However Lucy Lippard, in her essay in *Living Shrines*, claims that, “the only ‘audience’ aside from the powers being addressed is family and friends” and so altar-builders are unburdened by “artistic difficulty.” She continues, “Because theirs are private altars, personal devotions, they need conform to no one else’s idea of what is proper, what is the right way to assemble them.” Lippard claims that because domestic altars are displayed only within the home they are not subject to public standards. Though “artistic difficulty” is not overtly present in the process of building an altar, family and friends and even

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64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
the sacred figures qualify as audience and encourage the altarista to pursue certain manners of expression. The altar tradition is taught, and in this way it incorporates certain specifications regarding acceptability, whether or not such teachings are explicit or unconscious. Altaristas learn the tradition through societal influences and religious expectations. Even an altar like Teofila’s in her bedroom is not entirely private as it does have an external intended audience. The notion of audience exposes the altarista to the pressure to conform to certain expectations. This does not mean, however, that altaristas do not individualize their altars. Altars express the altaristas’ personal faith, customs, and identity, but still reflect cultural and religious standards.

The domestic altar, then, expresses individuality through performance. The two elements are not easily separated as personal experience informs understanding and goals of performance and external expectations also inform individuality. The way in which an altarista chooses to place and adorn the altar can carry certain implications regarding the altarista’s relation with the figures as well as the figures’ larger religious and culturally significant role. However, depending on the physical location, altaristas may also intend their altars for particular audiences. Altaristas build even those altars located in private areas, such as the bedroom, within a greater context of culture and religion. They are not solely personal, though they are highly individualized. In this way through their location and intended audience, altars mediate between the altarista and the external world as a representation of the altarista and her religious beliefs and cultural heritage.

This image of la Virgen de Guadalupe, now draped with a rosary and lights, was the first image that Enedina had on her altar.
B. Absorbing the Tradition

*Altaristas* learn the altar tradition largely through their home culture. In constructing their altars, *altaristas* mediate the cultural expectations and teachings of family members. Immigrant *altaristas* build their altars to represent ideas and concepts passed down to them. In each of my interviews I asked when the *altaristas* learned the altar tradition and each responded in more or less the same way, telling me, as Catalina said, “Always, ever since I was born, I remember having seen la Virgen or Jesus on my mom’s altar. I was accustomed to that from the moment I first opened my eyes, from my first memories, I’ve always had an altar in my house. And ever since I’ve had my own house, I’ve had my altar.”67 The home altar tradition for Catalina was not something that she remembered learning; she never received direct instructions on how to maintain an altar or what to do. Instead, she grew up watching and participating in the altar tradition. So when it came time to move into her own house, as Catalina noted, and Jorge affirmed, it seemed natural to maintain the spiritual presence in the home through the altar. To Catalina and the other *altaristas*, altars represent cultural heritage both as a learned tradition and as a way to teach values and beliefs.

Catalina began her altar without an image of Jesus. Since then she has continued to add to her altar, and now has multiple images of Mary and Jesus, but she began with a single image of *la Virgen de Guadalupe*. *La Virgen* represents motherhood, family, and Mexican cultural tradition. *La Virgen* serves to connect immigrants such as Catalina and Jorge with their home and family in Mexico. It is for this reason that even before they had complete altars, they displayed images of *la Virgen* to establish a greater sense of *hogar* through prayer and devotional routine.

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67 Interview with Catalina and Jorge, 2/21/10.
Home altars are a culturally embedded practice in Hispano-America. Catalina told me of Mexico, “I remember everyone there having altars.” Mexican Catholicism and nationalism espouse la Virgen de Guadalupe as an ethnic, cultural, and religious symbol. The loaded significance of this symbol within the altar tradition inspires many Mexican-Americans to maintain altars. Catalina proudly told me that her children, “already know the tradition.” For her, the importance of her children understanding the altar tradition connects to her desire that they maintain their Mexican heritage despite growing up in the United States:

It is a custom that our parents taught us, and now we bring the children here [to the United States] and we continue teaching it to them...It is important to teach kids the tradition, because there are a lot of kids that don’t know it. We come from our country and our parents teach us this tradition, but we arrive here and there are already a lot of kids that don’t know anything of the tradition, or that are violent, that don’t speak Spanish, and don’t even know how to pray. So I think that [the altar tradition] is something really special that we can’t let the children not know; we have to teach it to them, to maintain the faith, to not lose ourselves and our traditions.

Catalina understands losing the altar tradition as potentially losing faith, traditions, and ultimately identity. Through the altar tradition she teaches her children about religion and culture. Altars provide a means to connect with Mexican heritage. Lack of knowledge about altars and inability to speak Spanish are intrinsically connected for Catalina because home altars represent tradition. Thus she expressed her pride that her two young sons already know the altar tradition. Just as she grew up already understanding the altar tradition, so too have her sons, and in this way, she not only augments their spiritual growth, but also their understanding of their culture.

Catalina worries that children will fail to maintain their parents’ culture. Altars maintain a sense of tradition that serves to alleviate homesickness and creates a feeling of belonging. By

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68 Interview with Catalina and Jorge, 2/21/10.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
teaching the altar tradition to her children, Catalina also instills in them respect and admiration for Mexican culture, which she hopes they will call their own. The altar tradition mediates the struggles of immigration by joining old and new cultures through practice and belief. This occurs by incorporating Mexican culture within an American house, by adding images and objects from the United States alongside those from Mexico, and by combining new practices and ideas learned in the United State with those brought from Mexico.
Conclusion: Imagining Beautiful Things

*Altaristas* arrange their altars in order to experience a sense of *hogar* that in turn facilitates highly personalized communication. Both Enedina and Teofila elaborated on the difference between praying at home and praying at church, emphasizing that while both environments are efficacious, they communicate more personal themes while praying at their altars:

[At] home you pray with Him, you chat with Him personally. At church and when we go to other people’s houses as a group to pray the rosaries, you are going to express what you know, not what you keep guarded within you, but instead the things that you can share with people. Here, it is automatically personal. What happens to me, I tell Him.  

Though Enedina knows that she addresses the same sacred figures at home and at church, she prefers to be truly open with these figures only when praying at home because there her communication “is automatically personal.” Enedina distinguishes between praying something that she knows, such as the *Padre Nuestro* or *Ave Maria*, and praying something that she feels. Enedina knows certain prayers, and she recognizes the religious significance and biblical stories surrounding the figures. In church Enedina is a guest. The church welcomes her, but she does not exercise personal authority there. Nor does she maintain the privacy to express her more personal thoughts and needs. Prayers in church are shared much like her home public altar. Enedina has no photographs or letters in her own public displays, and at church she does not pray about intimate issues. Personal objects and intimate prayer exist within her private space. In her home, she hosts Mary and Jesus, actively inviting in these figures through her personal altar. This relationship is much more personal, and reflects the roles that sacred figures play for *altaristas*. They understand these figures from their own perspectives: Mary as a woman, mother, parent;

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71 Interview with Enedina, 2/27/10.
72 *Padre Nuestro* is Our Father and *Ave Maria* is Hail Mary
Jesus as a son, traveler, and altruist. At home *altaristas* develop these personal connections, ask for advice, and maintain these relationships.

Teofila, like Enedina, understands an important distinction between praying at home and praying at church. While at home as host to Mary and Jesus, she is free from the constraints that are present elsewhere:

The difference, perhaps, is that in the church, because there are other people, you can’t be satisfied. In your house, you carry yourself away, you are really able to satisfied, being able to go with your mind, imagining beautiful things. That is the difference: that in your house you are better able to be satisfied than in the church, which is also very nice, but it is not the same.\(^7^3\)

Teofila emphasizes a more personal communication at home. Altars mediate worlds by activating the imagination and providing a space in which *altaristas* seek comfort in beautiful things such as their *hogar*, their family, and heaven. The altar represents a welcome break from the difficult world outside. The *altaristas* that I interviewed immigrated to Philadelphia from Mexico as recently as two years ago, and no more than eleven years. Only Antonio speaks English fluently. Not all live in the United States legally. Each expressed concern about the dangerous world outside their doors. To cope with these struggles, *altaristas* imagine beautiful things, particularly beautiful things that, through their faith, build relationships with the country left behind. All four *altaristas* proudly displayed *la Virgen de Guadalupe*. *La Virgen* is important not only for her religious role, but also for her cultural value as mediator. She connects Mexican-American *altaristas* with their distant *hogar*. In addition to the figure of *la Virgen*, *altaristas* use photographs to invite family and friends into their homes who cannot be physically present. Just as Teofila noted, “[If] you have an altar you are with them [Mary and Jesus] everyday,” so too do altars allow *altaristas* to be with family and friends not immediately present. Altars mediate these relations and in this way lessen the strain of the immigrant experience. Furthermore, the

\(^{73}\) Interview with Teofila, 2/23/10.
presence of friends and family alongside sacred figures encourages altaristas to believe that Mary and Jesus protect their loved ones. This proximity of images also allows for a sort of supernatural communication. Even though Mexican-American altaristas cannot always maintain regular contact with all their loved ones, particularly those far away, they can always speak with Mary or Jesus as messengers, just as Enedina and her daughter, Guadalupe, maintain contact through la Virgen. Through cultural and familial mediation, altars abate the difficulties of immigration and represent lo cotidiano.

The altar tradition is an inclusive tradition that allows altaristas to exercise personal religious authority. Altaristas—both men and women—use this authority to find comfort and meaning in ways most appropriate to their personal situations. This contrasts with a church hierarchy that centers on the authority of certain men. Altaristas activate their religious authority in order to mediate their struggles. By personalizing the altar, they incorporate the themes most important to them: family, friends, belief, and culture. Through ritual performed at the altar, altaristas personify Mary and Jesus, involving these figures in every aspect of their lives. They ask for guidance from La Virgen de Guadalupe and Jesus, and thus find strength to continue their struggles. Altaristas take charge of their religious experience, activating sacred figures to comfort, assist, and communicate with them on a daily basis. These are the beautiful things imagined on the home altars of Mexican-American altaristas.
Appendix A: Photographs from the Interviews

Antonio

Picture 1:
Antonio stands next to the smaller image of *la Virgen*. Behind him a candle burns, celebrating the eternal light of Mary and Jesus.

Picture 2:
Antonio has a statue of baby Jesus, however he is much more proud of his blessed images of *la Virgen*.

Picture 3:
The religious images on Antonio’s altar generally rested on top of personal images of friends and family in the same way that his experience is built on the influence of important people in his life.

Picture 4:
Antonio adjusts a candle on his altar.

Picture 5:
Antonio hung his primary image of *la Virgen* between a Mexican flag (only corner is visible in photograph) to the left and an American flag to the right, suggesting the altar as a space that mediates between the two cultures.
Enedina

Picture 4: Enedina stands next to her downstairs altar. She adorned the central image with artificial flowers and lights as well as roses.

Picture 17: Enedina’s downstairs altar features exclusively religious items and she decorated it with flowers and lights.

Picture 10: Enedina’s downstairs altar has roses for la Virgen and Jesus, as well as candles that she always burns.

Picture 19: This image of la Virgen de Guadalupe, now draped with a rosary and lights, was the first image that Enedina had on her altar.
Enedina’s upstairs altar has an image of her family, *el Sagrado Corazón*, letters, and another image of Jesus all side by side, suggesting their interrelatedness as Enedina understands it.

Enedina built her upstairs altar to be much less conscious of others’ impressions and more focused on her personal religious experience.

Enedina’s upstairs altar shows her active communication with the divine—an open Bible, a prayer book, a candle, a flower, and a rosary all mark the ritual and communication in which Enedina participates at her altar.
Catalina & Jorge

Picture 14: Catalina and Jorge next to their altar in their house in Philadelphia. The altar features a nativity scene, but further spreads up the walls and onto the bookshelf.

Picture 15: The altar in Catalina and Jorge’s house enjoys a prominent space just inside their front door.

Picture 13: Catalina and Jorge’s nativity scene hosts a cow, a sheep, and a zebra.
Teofila

Teofila was proud to tell me she had already brought her statue of Jesus to the church for the priest to baptize.

On the wall adjacent to her altar, Teofila and her sons have a wall of hats; the mirror below the hats reflects the Mexican flag on the other wall.

Teofila stands next to her altar in her bedroom.

Teofila has a hand-drawn image of the multiplication of the breads on her altar.

Picture 2: Teofila was proud to tell me she had already brought her statue of Jesus to the church for the priest to baptize.

Picture 12: Teofila stands next to her altar in her bedroom.

Picture 11: On the wall adjacent to her altar, Teofila and her sons have a wall of hats; the mirror below the hats reflects the Mexican flag on the other wall.

Picture 16: Teofila has a hand-drawn image of the multiplication of the breads on her altar.
Appendix B: Note on the Interviews

I found the Church of the Annunciation through contacts in the Instituto por la evangelización católica in Philadelphia. I went to a few services there that were conducted in Spanish and after one service I approached Teofila, who, after I explained my project, generously invited me to her house. Sister Lorena, a lay nun who works for the Church of the Annunciation, introduced me to Catalina and Antonio, knowing that they have altars in their homes. Catalina then suggested that I speak with Enedina, her friend that attends St. Thomas Aquinas Church. I also went to a service at St. Patrick’s Church of Norristown and conducted preliminary interviews outside.

All of my interviews (that is to say, Catalina and Jorge, Antonio, Teofila, and Enedina) were conducted in the houses of the interviewees. All were tape recorded with the consent of the interviewees. Each also allowed me to take pictures of their altars and at times asked to be able to first arrange their altars in a slightly different way for the purpose of the photograph. All were aware that I would be using this information to write my thesis.

The interview questions that I include in Appendix C were guidelines and not always followed exactly. I interviewed Catalina and Jorge, Teofila, and Enedina in Spanish and the transcripts here are my translations of our conversations. In translating, I tried to remain as true as possible to the original language, and at times I use footnotes to clarify words that did not translate fluidly into English so as not to lose their original significance. I interviewed Antonio in English and have included the complete transcript of his interview as well.
Appendix C: The Interview Questions

1. What is your full name? Your occupation? Your marital status? How many children do you have?
2. Where were you born? How long have you lived here? From what country does your family originate? Have you ever lived there?
3. How long have you kept an altar in your home?
4. How did you choose this location in your house for your altar?
5. Why do you have an altar in your house?
6. Where did you learn this tradition?
7. To whom (which particular saint or aspect of the Virgin of Christ) is your altar dedicated? How do you feel about this holy figure? What special qualities does He or She possess? Why is belief in this particular image important for you? What is your relationship with Her/Him?
8. From whom did you receive the image or statue of this saint or Virgin? (Or did you purchase it? If so, where & why?) On what occasion did you receive it? How were you instructed to use it or take care of it?
9. Who are the other holy figures represented on your altar?
10. What are the other items on your altar? How did you obtain them and when? What is their purpose?
11. Have you added things to your altars over the years? Have you taken anything off?
12. How do you use your altar? (Daily personal devotion? Family devotion? What special devotions occur here—novenas, group rosaries, feast day celebrations?)
13. What kinds of prayers do you say here? How and when did you learn these prayers? Can you recite any of these prayers for me?
14. What is your basic routine for daily devotion? When do you pray? How do you start out? What prayers do you say every day?
15. What special issues/concerns have you communicated to the Divine over the years? Have they been made with a promise to return thanks in a certain way? Which saints or Virgin have you communicated with the most?
16. Is there a divine presence at your altar? Do you feel this presence only when you are praying, or is it something that is always there at your altar?
17. What is the difference between praying at your altar and at the Church?
18. In your family do primarily women keep the home altar tradition?
19. Why is the home altar tradition important to you? How do you feel about your relationship with God, Christ, the saints, or the Virgin?
20. Will you pass or have you passed on the home altar tradition to your children? Which one(s)?
21. Would you like to tell me anything else about your home altar tradition? Or about yourself?

Footnote: In some of these questions I draw from the interview questions that Kay Turner used in her dissertation. (Turner 1990).
Appendix D: Interview with Antonio
Conducted February 23, 2010

1. My name is Antonio. I am not married. I live here with two other guys.
   (Me: Is this your altar?)
   It’s for everybody, but I have had the images for eight years. I have a friend, she’s in
   Mexico, and she sent it to me. And I have another friend and he made the frame and everything.
   To frame la Virgen de Guadalupe. It’s the same size as the original. I have two because I use
   this one for the processions. And that one I use it for the church, in the main altar. So I used to
   put some flowers around there and, the people, they carried that. And that one, they can’t
   because it’s too big, so I put it in the main altar for a while.

2. I was born in Mexico. I have been here 10 years. I’m from Puebla, it’s close to
   Mexico City. My family is still there.

3. I think 8 years, maybe, 8 years ago. Because before I came here I didn’t have any
   image of Our Lady, at least not a big one, and it is very expensive. So I tried to get it, but I
   couldn’t here. So I talked to my friend [in Mexico] and she said, “Okay, I will send it to you.”

4. Because it is for the people when they come. They say, “Oh, this is the Blessed
   Mother?” and I say, “Yes.” So we have had it here for a long time, except for the feast, or
   something like that [because then the image is brought to the church for the procession]. The last
   time [for the last procession] they carried the image to the cathedral in December. And they put it
   up there, how would you say, up in the central altar.

5. Because you get to feel like she is among us, among our family, among our
   people, and the people who live here. And we feel like she is among us, with us in spirit. That’s
   how I feel.

6. You know, I used to, in my town I used to do something in the church, helping the
   priest, helping the people. When I came here I continued to do it. I did it there and here. But you
   know, in Mexico everybody has an altar, small or big, but they all have one. People when they
   converted from Catholicism [to another religion] they took away the altar. But most people have
   an altar in the home. And here also, people have an altar, small, you know, because they don’t
   have much money, but they still have an altar.

7. It is for la Virgen de Guadalupe. Because, you know, when she appeared in
   Mexico in 1531, she became our mother for everyone.
   (Me: Do you have a particular relationship with la Virgen? Do you communicate more
   with her?)
   Antonio: I always think that when you pray to Jesus, well I think when you pray to Our
   Mother, it is to connect to him. They are not alone. They are together. So when you pray to her,
   you pray to Jesus, and when you pray to Jesus, you pray to her.
   (Me: Is there a reason to address one instead of the other then?)
   Antonio: Yes, I think so. I think, for me, the way to go to Jesus is through His mother.

8. When the image came, I couldn’t buy a frame, so I told my friend that he had to
   make me a frame. And he agreed. I told him that because we were going to leave that image in
   the church. So that image was in St. Thomas Aquinas Church for one year. And then I talked to
   my friend [in Mexico] and said I need one more [image of la Virgen] because the first frame is
   very heavy, and the wall in the church is not very strong, and I didn’t want the image to fall, so I
   told her I needed another one. I found the money to make the frame, and this time it was lighter.
   So that’s why we have two.
9. One is *San Vincent*. Another is from a friend, he came from Spain and he gave the Lady of Sorrow, there in the purple frame, to me.

10. That is a picture of my family. That is a friend. That is another friend; he died. I like to have them close to *la Virgen*.

11. When people give me something—“Antonio, this is for you.”—and so I put it on the altar. You know, it depends on the season. When it is advent I put out the manger for baby Jesus, that’s the other thing that we do. So we make like a little house. And we say *la novena*. I do take things off; I do, always. When we go to pray the rosary, four days a week [at other people’s houses], and I see that people don’t have an altar, I sometimes give them a picture and tell them, “You have to make your altar.” I have too many images, so I give them to the people. And I do put new things on mine. I change the flowers and the candles.

12. I have two candles, one here, one there, always burning. It is a tradition from my town. Sometimes I pray with the other guys when they aren’t busy. But they work at night sometimes. So when we are not going to pray the rosaries at other people’s homes, we pray here. We try to pray everyday at the altar. On Mondays—I am busy—on Mondays I go to the Legion of Mary in the Anunciación [Parish]. Tuesday we have rosary at homes. Wednesday we have rosary at homes. Thursday we have rosary at homes. Friday I have to change the flowers at St. Thomas Aquinas. So I go there to change the flowers. I go to the church I take all the flowers, and I replace them with fresh flowers. On Saturday, of course, I have to go to mass. So I don’t have much time to spend by myself praying at the altar. I do have time, but not much.

13. Sometimes, I pray before I go to work, pray rosaries.

16. Look around here and you see both pictures. But in December when we take the pictures away, it looks very empty here. I feel like nobody’s here. When I get them back again and I put them in the same place, I say, “Well, you came back.” When I am praying at the altar I feel that presence. When you pray, you feel she is with us, when I pray here.

17. In the church, you know, we pray with everybody, but when I pray here, sometimes I do it by myself, sometimes I pray with friends, we try to do it together once in a while, but most of the time we pray alone.

21. You know that image [the one in the heavier frame]? The bishop blessed it. Two times, and that one also. The first time he came, this image was in St. Thomas Aquinas, and so he blessed it when he was at the altar. I didn’t have to ask him. He just felt that he wanted to bless it when he saw that image.

(Me: So do these images have a particular importance to you because of that?)

Antonio: Yes, yes.
Appendix E: Interview with Enedina
Conducted February 27, 2010

1. Enedina. I live here with 10 people. I live here with my daughter-in-law and my son. And the others are people who were looking for rooms. It’s expensive to have a house, so I find people to rent the rooms. And everything’s been going smoothly so far. All the renters behave well. I enjoy being Catholic. *El Diosito* sends me good people. I have more children. My two sons, 18 and 16, and my 10-year-old daughter are still in Mexico. Ever since we arrived my son and I have had jobs ever since we got here. So how could we not give Jesus and Mary our free time, after they have given us everything?

2. I was born in Mexico, in Puebla. I’ve been here for two years.

3. I’ve always had an altar in my house. In Mexico too. There everyone is Catholic, everyone believes. So when I came here, of course, I wanted an altar still. I’ve always been a believer.

4. A lot of people come to the house and they see the altar and always say, “How nice!” It gives us pleasure; it gives us peace. We leave the house and He blesses us, or we arrive back home and He blesses us. In your room, no one else has the altar but you. You don’t share it with the rest of your family, with everyone else. People come here and the image is shared with them. It is where it is visible, where everyone can know God and share in Him.

5. Because He blesses you; He protects you; He cares for you. You chat with Him, and if you truly talk to Him, talk to Him from your heart, He hears you. He always has his hand here [she raises her hand as just as Jesus does in the image] so that when you leave, He can bless you. That’s why His hand is always like that. And you feel it inside; you feel Him; you feel the Virgin Mary.

6. From my parents. A person realizes what her parents do. And in this way they teach you; that’s how I learned.

7. They [Jesus and Mary] listen to you. When there are problems or difficult moments, I just focus on Him, I ask Him to help me, to guide me through the good and the bad. And He hears me. If you truly talk to Him from the heart, He listens to you. And He helps you.

8. They gave me this image. Just the way it is [decorated], that’s how they gave it to me. They told me, “Señora Enedina, you really like this image?” And I told them I love it, so they told me that I could take it. I asked them, “When should I bring it back?” and they told me that it is mine forever. There are other people who have already been with this church for much longer than I have, and they said, “Señora Enedina, how lucky you are! We’ve been here years, and they’ve never given us this image, and you, having just arrived, they give it to you.” I have a connection with this image. There are some people that truly need it. And they [the people in the church that gave the image to her] see that I have a big heart, and that I did need it. And it’s true, every time I come downstairs, I say, “Papito, take care of me.” And when I get back I thank Him for bringing me home safely. I dedicate all of my free time to God. Because He gave me His life, and He cares for us, so how could I not give Him my time too?

9. People gave them to me. Everything here was a gift. People always give things; you don’t buy them because these images always have to be gifted. People give to you what they feel. That’s why everything is gifted. She [a statue] is Mary. It is small, but it’s very significant. This is *la Virgen de Guadalupe*. I know that the Virgin is one; she is the same. She just appears in distinct states, distinct countries, and they know her by a different name, but the Virgin is the
Virgin, *la Virgen de Guadalupe*, *la Virgen de Fatima*, *la Virgen de Montserrat*—many names, but the Virgin Mary is the only one.

10. I have the little lights and the flowers. Now I have these roses because the traditional flower is the rose. They were the flowers that appeared with *la Virgen de Guadalupe*. She arranged the roses on Juan Diego’s cloak and when he climbed down the hill, the image of *la Virgen* appeared. That’s why I have the roses on the altar, although, really, any flower will do, but the rose is the most natural.

11. If people give me more things, of course I’ll continue making it bigger. And I also give away the *estampitas*. And I give away rosaries too.

12. When I enter my house, when I leave, when there are problems, I ask something from my heart, and they help me. It’s also part of my routine to change the flowers. They dry out often. And sometimes I say, “Forgive me, but I don’t have money for your flowers.” And I do feel like He listens to me, as if He says, “Don’t worry.” My nana told me that He likes natural flowers. Maybe because of the smell. They ought to be natural flowers, not artificial. You can adorn him [with artificial flowers], but it’s better to have natural flowers.

13. The main prayers are Our Father, *la Salve*, and Hail Mary. I say those everyday, and my own daily prayer. Sometimes a prayer just comes out of you, and you don’t even know what it will be. Often you don’t say any prayer, you just ask what is in your heart—take care of me on my path, protect me. When I had just begun to say the rosaries [in other people’s houses] I didn’t know the way, I didn’t know the area well, and I got lost. I felt desperate. I walked and I walked without arriving anywhere. And I closed my eyes, and I said, “Diosito, you know that I am coming from praying for you, show me the path on which you brought me. He told me, “Turn around,” and I turned around and walked and walked, and soon I was near houses that I recognized. Sometimes you think that that’s impossible, but I know that He guided me.

14. I have a particular relation with both of them, *la Virgen* and Jesus. They go hand in hand. In her you confide as a fellow mother and woman, and in Him like a son, like a father. As I said, I have a 10-year-old daughter, and before I came here, I brought her to the church and told her, “I am leaving, but you won’t be alone. You will be with your mom. Here is your mom. Whenever you want to talk with someone, to chat, or if you have any sort of problem, come here and talk to her. She will listen to you.” And Guadalupe (that’s my daughter’s name, Guadalupe) promised me that she would. She’s ten years old and she says the rosary. I call home and I talk to my mom, I say, “Where is Guadalupe?” and she tells me that Guadalupe is praying or that she’s talking with *la Virgen*. That makes me feel good. I am here and she is there, but we are in it together. I sent her rosaries, too, and my sister, who really likes rosaries, asked her who bought the rosary for her, and Guadalupe told her, “My mom sent it to me from across the border.” And my sister admired the rosary. My mom told me that Guadalupe never takes it off, not even to shower. It is what you teach your children.

15. Yes. If I didn’t have an altar in my house, I wouldn’t have a place to pray. I wouldn’t have this contact; I wouldn’t be living my faith. It’s not the same to pray in a room without an altar and to pray here. I think that I always feel the presence of God, sometimes, for example, if there is some difficulty at work, I’ll say, “Diosito mio, help me.” He always moves me forward, wherever I am.

16. Yes, because like I’ve said, at home you pray with Him, you chat with Him personally. At church and when we go to other people’s houses as a group to pray the rosaries, you are going to express what you know, not what you keep guarded within you, but instead the
things that you can share with people. Here, it is automatically personal. What happens to me, I
tell Him.

18. It’s the same, well, it’s really not the same the way a man and a woman have
altars. A woman puts everything on her altar. A man puts, oh I don’t know, an image, a little
statue of a saint, but he does have that in his room. It’s just that women always want to keep
putting more on their altars.

19.

20. Ever since they were little they’ve known the tradition. And they aren’t going to
forget about it. Even when I am not there telling them to go to church, they still go, they still
pray.

21. This altar that you see here is my big altar, the one that I share with everyone. I
also have a little altar in my room.

a. Here I have letters from my children, some little things from my family; this
picture is my daughter with her two cousins. Here is la Virgencita. And up here I have Our Lord
of Divine Mercy again. This is my Bible. This is my candle, but I only have it lit when I am
praying. It is blessed, you see, and the ones downstairs aren’t. Those ones I always keep lit, but
here it is just when I need it, for a particular prayer, something I need to ask for or thank them
for, those are the moments when I light the candle.

b. As an immigrant, you have more contact with God. Because in a foreign country,
you never know what could happen tomorrow. And I know that; I feel it. I am in a strange
country, and so I call upon God to guide me.

c. You feel good, it fills you, to have an altar here.
Appendix F: Interview with Teofila
Conducted February 23, 2010

1. My name is Teofila Ramirez Arizmendi. I work at Bruman. Before I worked at a café called Panera on Springfield Street. I have two sons. They are working and studying at community college. It’s really good for me that they are working.

2. We are from Mexico. I lived there my whole life. I’ve only been here 4 years. I’ve noticed that in Mexico they celebrate religious life more than they do here. Here there aren’t many Catholic churches. Here there are a lot of other religions. In Mexico it isn’t like that. There are very few other religions, not many Protestants, but there are a lot of Catholics.

3. Well, I’ve been adding to the altar for a while. At first, I just had the image of la Virgen de Guadalupe, nothing else, just that image. But then Toñito gave me the Sacred Heart image. He also gave me this, and this, and this. And the little images (estampitas) that you see here, those I found in the church, and I liked them, so I brought them here. This [photograph of a young priest] is from the church [la Iglesia de la acquisición]; his name is Father Abel. He went to his birthplace in Mexico and when he came back, he showed us the pictures, and I really liked this one, and so he gave it to me. I like to have it here as a commendation to Jesus, so that He will illumine him and protect him. This is also a photograph of a priest. He was a really wonderful priest. He spoke Spanish too. I don’t know what medical issue he had, but he died when he was still very young, just like you see him in this picture. But he, too, is close to the Virgin here. And this little image is of the Virgin Mary, la Virgen de Guadalupe. Here is the heart of Mary. And this is the Basilica in Mexico; I cut it out of a magazine. It [the basilica] is big, isn’t it? Very big. Do you want an image of la Virgen?

4. Because of the bed. Because we feel that they are closer to us, and that they care for us and protect us. And just as we feel their presence, they feel our presence. That’s why we have it here. I love having it right here. I come home from work tired and hungry, but how could I not want to spend time with them if they are right here?

5. I learned the altar tradition from my mom. Ever since I was smaller than the altars. My mom had a few huge images. Although now her altar has already been taken apart. My sisters divided everything up between them and keep them in their houses. They each have one or two images, but not an altar like this [indicates her own altar]. My mom loved having green leaves, like climbing plants that you put in water, hanging vases with lots of green climbing plants. She also liked to have plastic flowers. It’s a lot of work for my sisters to have an altar, and that’s why they don’t have one. It’s for my mom that I have an altar. More than anything else, I have an altar because it makes me think of my mom. I would have liked to have a more special place for the statues and images, but here, where we live, it’s all that I have. And here, where the three of us [Teofila and her 2 sons] wake up in the morning, where we lay down at night, we give our regards to la Virgen, we get up, we go to bed, and we thank them [Mary and Jesus]. In this way, we feel that they look after us, that they protect us. Because here they are, just a step away from the bed.

7. The central figure is la Virgen, la Virgen and Our Lord of Divine Mercy. Every eight days is the day to worship him, every Thursday, not any other day. And for the Virgin, it is every Tuesday and Wednesday, but when it is the day to celebrate her [la inmaculada concepción], beginning in November we pray the rosaries to her everyday.

10. This drawing a very smart classmate of mine who is very interested in the church. The priest did a Bible class for us, and in this course he gave out themes. My theme had to do
with the multiplication of the breads. So when it came time for me to pray about my theme, I
didn’t want to do it empty-handed. And before when we’d been preparing it, he’d been listening,
listening to the theme and drawing, drawing this, but smaller. And I told him that he should draw
it for my prayer, but bigger. He also gave me this image, and this Virgin.

11. I’ve added some new things. This image, I didn’t have it before. I’d been keeping
my eye out for new images because I wanted to add more, always getting more images. The last
thing that I put on the altar was—

  Sergio: The statue of baby Jesus.
  Teofila: The statue of baby Jesus. A friend gave me baby Jesus, and I already brought
  him to mass and they already blessed him. He’s the latest addition. And I am surely going to
  continue to put more things on the altar. Surely. I want to make it bigger. And this [showing me
  an estampita of la Virgen] will be the next thing I add, but much bigger.

12. Well, my relation with them is to chat with them, greet them when I arrive home
from work, thank them for protecting me and my house. This is my relation. In the morning I
say, “Accompany me, Mother. Help me at work. Let everything turn out well.” And with that, I
go. I also ask her to protect my sons. That’s how I start the day.

14. My routine is every eight days. Every eight days I have to change their flowers,
usually Thursday or Friday because that’s when I have time. There is a boy nearby that sells
flowers. So I remove the old flowers and replace them with new ones. But now that it’s getting
warmer, they get dry so quickly. Oh, look! I feel so badly when their flowers are dry. And, well,
my daily routine? My daily routine is to pray the rosary. It’s so nice, a beautiful prayer, and so I
like it a lot. Would you like to have a rosary?

16. Teofila: Yes. Yes, I feel, I’m not sure how to explain it
  Sergio: Because sometimes when I go to my friends’ houses, they don’t have altars.
  They’ll have an image or two, but nothing like this. And I don’t know, maybe it’s just me, but
  you feel like something is missing. Ever since you were little, you know that it is something
  substantial in your life, something like food.
  Teofila: They are part of our life.
  Sergio: And in a way, it’s just natural, I don’t know why, but you feel something
different [in houses without altars]. If you go into a place that doesn’t have an altar, you feel
differently. You feel better, positive, when there is an altar.
  Teofila: You feel peace, tranquility. You feel nice. And, it’s true, you go to other places
  and where there is no altar, and because of that it isn’t an enjoyable atmosphere, but instead an
  unpleasant atmosphere. You notice the difference. When I am in bed and I see la Virgen, I feel
  peaceful. I communicate with her whenever I want. I speak with la Virgen so much that [my
  sons] tell me, “Mom, la madrecita is going to tell you to be quiet soon because you ask her for
too many things!” [Laughs] But I don’t know, it’s something that I have noticed, that the people
that have altars in their houses, who go to mass, who have faith, they know the culture; they are
good, agreeable people. I think that the altar tradition brings us together, unites us, unites us with
everything that they have done for us. It is because of this, too, that we thank them. I have their
flowers, their candles; I have this little flame for them. It is something so insignificant
considering everything they do for us, protecting us, helping us, blessing us. And in reality, they
don’t need anything; we’re the needy ones! And if they help us, let me tell you, we remember
them when the water is up to here [indicates her neck] and after that, we’re off to the party. But if
you have an altar, you are with them every day.
17. The difference, perhaps, is that in the church, because there are other people, you can’t be satisfied. In your house, you carry yourself away, you are really able to be satisfied, being able to go with your mind, imagining beautiful things. That is the difference: that in your house you are better able to be satisfied than in the church, which is also very nice, but it is not the same.

18. There aren’t many men that maintain altars, just a few. Women are more interested in altars. I’ve been to [men’s] houses in which there are altars, but they are neglected, or they are provisional because it would be like they knew we were coming to pray the rosary, and so they hung up the image just beforehand. But I’ve also been to [men’s] houses in which, yes, they do have altars.
Appendix G: Interview with Catalina and Jorge
Conducted February 21, 2010

1. C: My name is Catalina
   J: And I’m Jorge.
   C: We’re married and have 2 kids, both boys. They’re 9 and 6-years-old.
2. C: We were born in Mexico, but we’ve been here 11 years already. We decided to come here because the situation in Mexico is difficult. We came to find a better life, even though he came alone by his own motivations, and I came with mine. We met here and got married. Our parents are still in Mexico.
3. (Me: How long have you had an altar in your house?)
   C: Here? Because, well, in Mexico, of course, our parents are Catholic. Always, ever since I was born, I remember having seen la Virgen or Jesus on my mom’s altar. I was accustomed to that from the moment I first opened my eyes, from my first memories, I’ve always had an altar in my house. And ever since I’ve had my own house, I’ve had my altar.
   J: I’ve always had my altar as well.
5. J: Traditionally in Mexico when guests come into the house, the first thing they see is the altar, la Virgen, or whichever saint, or other image, but always when they enter a house, there is the altar.
6. C: Well, my mom. Growing up, whenever I left the house, or before I ate, I’d always say something to Jesus or Mary. And it is a very important tradition for us. Of course, there are sometimes when you go into a home and people actually don’t have an altar, or they have one in their bedroom or somewhere else hidden away, but we’ve had this house for a while and I can’t imagine having the altar hidden. For us, it’s like our mother, our father; they are the principal beings in our life. So I guess for me, it is just the norm to have my altar by the front door.
   J: Yeah, it’s basically the same for me. It is tradition to have it there.
7. C: We really dedicated our altar to all aspects of Jesus, like it says in the Bible, Mary and Jesus are complete together. Mary is present, but Jesus is the principal figure, no?
   C: For me, Jesus is just one figure. Of course we have one image [indicates the central statue of Jesus as a child], that, actually, we haven’t had for that long. But, for me, it is the same [as having a portrait of Jesus as a grown man] he has the same worth. Jesus the child who you can see there, and Jesus the already grown man. For me they have the same values. It’s just one figure, right? For us, the custom is to have a figure of the child Jesus, we’re used to that, to the story of the birth of Jesus, and Jesus when He was small, but for me, they have the same value.
   J: I feel the same way.
   C: I think that Jesus is always with us, even if you don’t have His image, and even though sometimes we don’t realize that He is with us, he truly is; but with God, we don’t know. I mean, I know that there is a God, but I’ve never talked with Him, I’ve never offered to serve Him, I’ve never asked Him for anything. I know that there is a God, but that’s it. And since we have an altar, we come downstairs in the morning, come down and talk to Jesus, thank Him for another day of life, thank Him for giving what He has to me—talk with Him directly, because I have a little place, a space, where I can talk with Him. And that, for me, is something—I’d feel bit strange if I were talking to Jesus but I didn’t see an image of Him or an image of Mary. That’s why I think it is a custom, you know? It’s what they taught us so that we’ll always see them

75 Catalina used the term “valor” which can be translated as monetary value, sentimental value, validity, worth, or courage
[Mary and Jesus] and so we can stop and talk with them. That’s the custom, isn’t it? We feel them closer to us, as if they have a certain place; we have a place for Him, so that we can talk with Him; that place is the altar.

8. C: Yes, he [Jorge] gave it to me for my birthday, which is February 2nd, which also happens to be el día de la representación del niño Jesús, the day they presented Him at the temple. Before Jorge gave this Jesus to me, we didn’t have any representation of el niño Jesús, but everything else we did have already. That little house that you see there, and Mary and Joseph, they are the pilgrims that we got from the inn in the nativity scene at the church. These figures we brought home. That’s why we have this little house with them, Jesus and Mary. That’s why I have it.

9/10. C: We use the candles, and sometimes we have flowers too. The candles I use when I’m here, I blow them out before I leave to be safe, but I do use them.

(Me: And what is this image up here?)
C: It is la Virgen de Guadalupe, and the man that is kneeling is Juan Diego.
Because la Virgen appeared to Juan Diego in Mexico. She is the one that appeared in Mexico.

(Me: And this zebra?)
C: Oh! (Smiles) We have all the animals that were at the birth of Jesus in the inn. This is one the kids added and I didn’t want to take it away.

(Me: And where is this angel from?)
C: This is just a little angel, like the angel that appeared to the shepherds. I bought this, just over there, at a little store.

11. C: Well, for example, this Christ and the Virgin, the painting of the Sacred Heart, I added, but no, I haven’t taken anything away. I just add things. People have given me paintings or statues, or I buy them for myself, so I put more on. But for us, the altar is sacred, you know? So throw it out? Definitely not. For us, it’d be a bad thing to take an image or figure away.

12. C: When do I use the altar? Well, really, everyday. We come downstairs; Jorge comes down and before he goes to work, prays at the altar. I do the same, while getting the kids ready for school, I’ll take a moment and talk with Him, thank Him, I do it practically every day. And in their rooms the kids have images of la Virgen and Christ. Every night they thank God too, for the things that happened during the day, or yeah, for anything really, they always thank Him. The routine that I have with the kids is that when they go to sleep, they talk with Him, I mean, they pray a Padre Nuestro, and an Ave María; they give thanks to God that they had a good day at school or for anything like that. In that way, when we go to sleep upstairs, they always pray their Padre Nuestro, and pray to Jesus.

13. C: We say el Padre Nuestro too. It’s the prayer that Christ gave us. It is the most important prayer that we have. There are a lot of prayers, but Padre Nuestro is always the most important, and we say it every day. It was the custom of our parents, for first communion, they teach all the prayers that you have to learn, but we know most of them before that. For our children, too, while they are still young, we tell them, “You have to learn this, you have to learn el Padre Nuestro.” And they already know it; they’ve known it since they were little.

C: Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

14. C: More than anything else, we ask that He protect us. I ask that He protect my children, my husband, that we do well with work, and above all, that we do well in this country without our [immigration] papers, and that sort of thing. We always ask Him to protect us and bless us because so many situations—it’s difficult for us to be here in this country without
papers. We walk with fear; we don’t feel free, because of this, first, before we leave the house, we ask that He protects us.

15. C: You’re asking about a sort of promise? Many people make promises, like make me a promise that if such-and-such a thing turns out well, or if I find work, so yeah, I guess so. Sometimes when we ask Him something, if we are sick, or we need work, and yeah, we ask Him for help. And afterwards we thank Him for helping us to find work or to become healthy again, but yeah, we thank Him.

16. C: Yes, there is a divine presence here. When a person enters the house, well, it’s like how we help the priest—we’re sort of involved with the church, so we help the priest with what he needs—we go around to different houses saying the rosary every Tuesday, we bring the image of the la Virgen, and so when I enter my house, I feel a certain peace. And yeah, it’s my home, and of course we all feel something like that at home, but sometimes you leave the house, and you see the world the way it is, you know? So many things, so much violence, there is so much bad out there, it makes it so that when you enter the house, you feel at peace. I think that His presence is inside of us. There is a connection with Christ all the time: He is always there with us. Sometimes we don’t realize it, but he is always there with us. So yeah, I truly do feel his presence.

J: I think that prayer, prayer that you say from your heart [Catalina adds, “with faith”], that you say with faith, that if you truly believe that He exists, that He’s always existed, I think that that sort of prayer is a way to feel the presence that is always within you.

17. C: Well, church—mass—has something very important for me, you know? And, well, praying? It’s the same; I think that God is where we want Him to be. When we are going to say the rosaries, and, like we just said, if your mind is truly on Christ and your faith, it connects you with Him. If you really talk to Him from your heart and with faith, with love, then you feel his presence, you feel joy. So for me, it is the same. In church you know that Christ is real. For me, church is very important, but prayers, you can do them wherever you want. I guess it’s the same.

(Me: So is it the same to pray at your altar and in the street?)

C: It is the same for me. In the house, because we have our altar, you concentrate on your prayers and all of that. But sometimes I don’t have time in the morning to get up, get the kids ready, and go to work, so I pray on my way to work. It’s not easy because you have to be walking, with people around, but I’m used to doing it because if I don’t say all my prayers in the morning, I don’t feel content; something tells me that I’ve got to pray, and so I do it on my way to work.

J: It’s the same for me.

18. C: Here in this country? Women. We have been to visit houses, we go and we tell people, tell couples, “We are all going to pray together,” because we evangelize, we teach them, because there are people who don’t even know how to pray a Padre Nuestro or they find it difficult, particularly men. They say, “Oh no, I don’t do that! I am a man; it’s just my wife that does it. She prays, not me.” And we tell them that Christ didn’t come and tell the women how to pray, if anything he came to talk to the men, right? But no, it should be everyone. But here, in this country, we do meet a lot of men that find it hard or can’t pray the rosaries. But that is what we do, we teach them. We have a group of men, well, it is a group of men and women, but sometimes the men from our group go separately and they go and they say the rosaries so that the others see them and so that it isn’t so hard for the others to do that same, and so that it is not just women’s, but everyone’s. And afterwards the men begin to do it alone. Our group takes away the
fear, and it makes them feel better to pray the rosaries, and that is fulfilling. There is a lot of need here, but we are helping, and results such positive responses give us strength to continue.

(Me: Is the situation similar in Mexico?)

C: Well, like I said, we haven’t been there in 11 years, but I remember everyone there having altars. And those that didn’t have altars practiced a different religion. I don’t know what it is like there today, but here, yeah, I think the majority of [Mexican-Americans] have altars.

19. C: Yes. They see the altar. And like I said, they already know; when the celebration of la Virgen is coming up, we pray the rosaries every day from October on—everyday in different houses. And so the kids ask, “Mom, is today a rosary day?” They already know. Already the younger one is saying, “What do we have today, Mom? Are we going to mass or are we praying the rosary?” Because they already know the tradition. It is a custom that our parents taught us, and now we bring the children here [to the United States] and we continue teaching it to them.

20. C: I don’t think so, just that it is important to teach kids the tradition, because there are a lot of kids that don’t know it. We come from our country and our parents teach us this tradition, but we arrive here and there are already a lot of kids that don’t know anything of the tradition, or that are violent, that don’t speak Spanish, and don’t even know how to pray. So I think that it [the altar tradition] is something really special that we can’t let the children not know; we have to teach it to them, to maintain the faith, to not lose ourselves and our traditions.
Bibliography

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