

Seeking the Black Madonna Cecilia Corcoran, FSPA

The quest takes us through Central France where we seek the Black Madonna behind high altars, ensconced in crypts or in dusty niches, amidst the glow of candle lights. Why? Why a twenty-first century pilgrimage? What is it we seek in the Black Madonna? Each of us will answer that question in our own way. For me, after years of tracking the Feminine Divine, I have come to a confluence of her images in France where it seems she is everywhere! Over two-hundred fifty images in as many churches dotting the countryside. Granted *God* is ineffably beyond gender or image and *She* is only a shadow of all that our puny awareness struggles to express, nonetheless, in reaching for words and images this one, the Black Madonna, is ancient, female, imminent, dark and mystical. All attributes rich in metaphor that open me to live more gently in relationship with others and the earth.

But why do I do this pilgrimage? I'm drawn out of the unease I feel for the world around me. Faced with old answers that aren't working, and solutions leaving me mired in worn out structures and narrow visions, I look beyond the prevailing myths that hold our society on its unhappy course. I go on pilgrimage to discover some light by facing darkness. Looking into the blackness of her ebony face, I seek wisdom to live with hope and to walk sure-footed in this night. For me the pilgrimage is pure gift-- a time suspended where I am one with the starry sky even if the clouds are thick. One, despite the dimness of my mind that cannot yet imagine a shift or conversion so massive as to save the planet.

As seekers we will find ourselves in medieval holy places where hundreds of years ago foot-sore pilgrims sought answers for the unsolvable questions of life. We may have the ease of twenty-first century travelers to swiftly cross time zones and continents, and our questions may probe a different reality, but our soul-searching is much the same. We leave the familiar for the road less traveled and we pursue a dark image that stands as the Gate of Heaven. The Madonna is black and her invitation is to find her in all the dark places of our lives.

For more than a decade I've trekked across Mexico and Eastern Europe to explore the meaning of the Feminine "face" of God and of the faith of whole nations devoted to her. In Mexico she is celebrated as Our Lady of Guadalupe, but her roots are strong and deep, reaching into ancient traditions on both sides of the Atlantic. La Morenita, the "Dear Dark One" is everywhere honored in the Central Highlands of Mexico, but few can trace her lineage back to the Great Mother goddesses of the Nahua people. Rather, her very name refers to Guadalupe, a remote place near Extremadura, Spain. Guadalupe- a Muslim word meaning "Hidden Spring" and a wood-carved image that was a favorite of the Spanish conquerors. Surprisingly then, her name is linked to Islamic traditions of the Near East.

In Eastern Europe I found the Black Madonna of Czestochowa, Poland, imprisoned behind a silver screen, but a piercing glance from her sad eyes sent me deeper into the quest for what has been all but lost from the earliest story of the human family. Portly female figures crafted in the late ice age, 30,000 thousand years ago, have been found along the Danube River and other areas that were trade routes of ancient civilizations. These figures give testimony to the sacred feminine that has been shunned in patriarchal cultures. As a woman, something in me seeks to honor this Divine Mother who has been banned from our consciousness millennia ago.

The Quest for the Black Madonna draws me now to Central France where I delight in quaint villages, elegant Paris, and the joy of journeying with spirited companions. All this enhances the pilgrimage but does not distract me from the question that still begs an answer: Why the Black Madonna? This pilgrim seeks the sacred in what has been banished. Together we bring her out of the dusty niches and examine her darkness in the light of day. Hold before us all our own dark energy and honor the Black Madonna both in ourselves and in the mystery of what is. We travel through a land that is not our own and learn to be stretched by the unfamiliar. We mingle with people for whom we are the stranger and kneel in their holy places to find a living light for the world.

A pilgrimage stretches and changes, heals and strengthens the pilgrim. If you are ready for such a journey, I look forward to sharing the road with you. ◇