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# The Silent Body of Audrey Santo

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*Mathew N. Schmalz*

THE SILENT BODY OF  
AUDREY SANTO

I. SILENCE

Your silence is more eloquent than a thousand words. Your sufferings and resignation to His holy will is a soothing balm for the wounds of Jesus and his cross, so despised and rejected in these days of darkness. (Anonymous, "A Prayer to Audrey")

On an August day in the year 2000, pilgrims came from throughout the world to Worcester, Massachusetts. They came to Christ the King Church to see Audrey Santo, a then sixteen-year-old female stigmatic whose intercessions have been credited with miraculous healings. For the entire

Research for this article was primarily conducted on site at the Santo home in Worcester, Massachusetts, during the fall of 2000. I would like to thank Linda Santo, Mary Cormier, and other members of the Apostolate of a Silent Soul for their kind and open cooperation with the research for this article. I was especially grateful for this opportunity since journalists and other authors seeking to write about Audrey Santo have routinely been denied interviews and access to the Santo home. My own identity as a Roman Catholic and my affiliation with a local Catholic liberal arts college no doubt had a considerable influence on the Apostolate's decision to cooperate with my research. In asking permission to write about Audrey Santo, I submitted a formal, written request to Mrs. Santo and stated that I was concerned with the "meaning" of Audrey Santo. I also made it clear that I would not venture any definitive opinion as to whether the phenomena surrounding Audrey Santo were true or false. My intent throughout this article has been to remain consistent with this intention without sacrificing analytic honesty and rigor. It should also be noted that the Apostolate of a Silent Soul did not request or receive an advance copy of this article, as it

day, pilgrims flowed through the church with a loudspeaker broadcasting devotional hymns and “Little Audrey’s” theme song. As striking as this event was, it paled in comparison to the spectacle in 1998, when eight thousand pilgrims filled the football stadium at the College of the Holy Cross to attend a mass for Audrey and to adore four Eucharistic hosts that, it was claimed, had miraculously bled when consecrated in her proximity. In Audrey’s bedroom at her Worcester home, statues of Jesus and the saints have also appeared to spontaneously weep tears of blood and oil. But while pilgrims continue to travel great distances to see her, Audrey never acknowledges their presence. The celebrations in her honor take place on the anniversary of a drowning accident that left her mute and paralyzed. Since August 9, 1987, Little Audrey has spoken not a word as she lies in a coma-like state in her family’s Worcester home.

While there has yet to be an academic article published about her case, Audrey has been the subject of international media attention for the last five years. The BBC, the American television news magazines *20/20* and *48 Hours*, *USA Today*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post* have all reported on the strange happenings at the Santo home in Worcester.<sup>1</sup> For many in the media who have followed her story, Audrey is an enigma, and not only because the phenomena surrounding her have yet to be definitively explained. Writing in the *Worcester Phoenix*, the journalist Ellen Barry observed that the real strangeness of the Audrey Santo case lies in the fact that “strangers gather, rapt, around a miracle that has no information to convey.”<sup>2</sup>

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has with some journalistic articles that have examined the Audrey Santo phenomenon. I would also like to thank Father Tom Reilman, who gave me permission to quote from his letter to me. I would like to acknowledge Joanne Pierce, Susan Rodgers, and Andy Rotman for their insights and encouragement in the development of this article. I would also like to express my gratitude to John P. Jagusiak. As always, thanks to Kristin, Anna, Maxi, and Jude. In order to avoid repetition and confusion, I will refer to the individual members of the Santo family by their first names. This stylistic choice also reflects the tone of the Apostolate of a Silent Soul’s public discourse. For a historical overview of the tradition of the victim soul in American Catholicism, see Paula M. Kane, “She Offered Herself Up: The Victim Soul and Victim Soul Spirituality in Catholicism,” *Church History* 71 (March 2002): 80–119. Kane’s article was published while this article was in press, but it also discusses the Audrey Santo phenomenon.

<sup>1</sup> Charles Rhodes, “The Adoration of Audrey,” *BBC Online Network* ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/world/americas/newsid\\_156000/156889.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/world/americas/newsid_156000/156889.stm), August 23, 1998); “The Miracle of Audrey,” *20/20* (ABC Television Network, May 31, 1999); “Desperate Measures,” *48 Hours* (CBS Television Network, June 24, 1999); John Larabee, “Thousands Seek God at Girl’s Sickbed,” *USA Today* (August 7, 1998); Gustav Niebuhr, “Unconscious Girl Inspires Streams of Pilgrims,” *New York Times* (August 30, 1998); Gene Weingarten, “Tears for Audrey,” *Washington Post* (July 19, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Ellen Barry, “The Strange Case of Audrey Santo,” *Worcester (Mass.) Phoenix* (December 26–January 2, 1998).

From the perspective of the academic study of religion and its current preoccupation with embodiment, what is most intriguing about the Audrey Santo phenomenon is that such religious and journalistic fervor surrounds a living person who neither moves nor speaks. The case of Audrey Santo revolves around her silent body, and this article will examine how her body “speaks,” or is made to “speak,” through its silence. Beginning with the aftermath of Audrey’s accident, we will first examine how Audrey’s body is framed as a saintly body, “a victim soul,” to be gazed on by the pilgrims who come to her Worcester home. Our discussion will then shift from Audrey’s framing to her containment as we consider how the Roman Catholic bishop of Worcester intervenes to limit Audrey’s public display when the publicity surrounding her reaches a level that can no longer be ignored. But as we will see, the reverberations of Audrey’s case extend beyond the confines of Catholicism with critics vigorously contesting the apparently cruel manipulation of a defenseless girl. In turning finally to link the case of Audrey Santo to the corpus of scholarly reflection on the body, I will argue that the silent body of Audrey Santo is a body out of place and as such becomes a locus for contending understandings of embodiment itself. In this sense, the framing, containment, and contestation of the silent body of Audrey Santo lend rather unconventional support for what has now become a rather conventional point within academic discourse: the body is a pivot of interpretation and conflict shaped by relations of power. But the case of Audrey Santo also reveals more than this, for the efforts to interpret and appropriate her mute paralysis also powerfully involve questions of agency and its relation to the meaning of human suffering.

## II. FRAMING

You have become a woman of prayer, you are serene in your immolation, on your Golgotha, as a heroine, in a holocaust of love.  
(MONSIGNOR DONATO CONTE)<sup>3</sup>

The case of Audrey Santo begins with her childhood and the accident that left her mute and paralyzed. As claims of miracles steadily accumulate around her in the accident’s aftermath, Audrey becomes framed as a victim soul who offers up her own sufferings in restitution for the sins of others. But while the presentation of her body for pilgrims is carefully structured to evoke resonances of sanctity, Audrey is silent, and it is her silence that sets in motion a particularly contentious process of interpretation.

<sup>3</sup> Donato Conte, foreword to *In God’s Hands: The Miraculous Story of Little Audrey Santo*, by Thomas W. Petrisko (McKees Rocks, Pa.: St. Andrew’s Productions, 1997), p. iii.

## A MUTE AND PARALYZED BODY

Born on December 19, 1983, in Worcester, Massachusetts, Audrey Marie Santo was the fourth child of Linda and Stephen Santo. Accounts of her life before her accident alternately emphasize its normality and its holiness. She was a playful child, “loquacious, vivacious and entertaining,” according to the documentary “Audrey Santo: Mystic and Victim Soul.”<sup>4</sup> Priests who mention her during their homilies often extol her devoutly religious nature as evidenced by her respect for the clergy and her displeasure with those who would talk during mass. Linda recalls one day when Audrey said to her beloved grandmother, “Grandma, I wish you would die.”<sup>5</sup> Before her mother could deliver a sharp rebuke, Audrey explained that since heaven was so beautiful she wished her grandmother could go there straightaway. In such retrospective visions, the young Audrey embodies the simplicity and purity of traditional Catholic piety.

On the night of Saturday, August 8, 1987, Linda recalls that she had a dream in which she saw her children playfully floating over the family pool.<sup>6</sup> When the Santo family drove to mass the next day, they recall that Audrey was unusually quiet.<sup>7</sup> After returning, Linda began to prepare the afternoon meal while Audrey played in the driveway with her father. When she called her family to the table, Linda asked her husband where “her baby” was. But Audrey was not in the driveway—she was floating face down in the backyard pool.

After being pulled from the water, Audrey went into cardiac arrest in the ambulance en route to Worcester City Hospital. Although she was soon revived, she never regained consciousness. During her four-month stay in the hospital, her condition was classified as an irreversible form of “akinetic mutism” that most doctors predicted would leave her paralyzed and silent for the rest of what would be a very short life.

The troubles afflicting the Santo family only deepened in the period immediately following Audrey’s accident. Linda refused to institutionalize her daughter and brought her home. Blaming himself for the accident, Stephen abandoned his family and was later arrested and imprisoned for grand theft auto and armed robbery.<sup>8</sup> In hope of finding healing for her daughter, Linda took Audrey to Medjugorje, Yugoslavia, a site of reported apparitions of the Virgin Mary. But in Medjugorje, Audrey went

<sup>4</sup> *Audrey Santo: Mystic and Victim Soul*, prod. Apostolate of a Silent Soul, 1998, video-cassette.

<sup>5</sup> Linda Santo, interview by author, Worcester, Mass., September 12, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Petrisko, *In God’s Hands*, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> Antonia Felix, *Silent Soul: The Miracles and Mysteries of Audrey Santo* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2000), p. 5; see also Petrisko, *In God’s Hands*, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> See Bronislaus B. Kush, “Santo Parents Keep Faith in God and Their Daughter,” *Worcester (Mass.) Telegram and Gazette* (January 30, 2000); see also Felix, p. 32. Stephen Santo rejoined his family after his release from prison.

into respiratory arrest and had to be airlifted to the United States on a U.S. Air Force medical transport specially requested by a central Massachusetts congressman.<sup>9</sup> As costs for Audrey's care increased, fund-raisers were held, and both Linda and her mother were forced to remortgage their homes. Such efforts could provide funds for care but could do nothing to alter Audrey's akinetic mutism.

#### VICTIM SOUL

After Audrey was brought home, visitors continued to come to the Santo home to pray and local church congregations fasted for her healing. In 1988, Audrey's condition did indeed seem to change. Linda and nurses reported that red stripes had appeared all over Audrey's body, which they likened to marks made by a whip.<sup>10</sup> Linda and nurses also noticed what were alternatively called "creases," "cavities," "purple marks," or "wounds" on Audrey's palms, feet and forehead.<sup>11</sup> Later, Linda and nurses claimed, Audrey experienced an extended period of inedia when her feeding tubes stopped during Lent. For those reporting these occurrences, these were unmistakable signs that Audrey now bore the signs of the passion of Jesus Christ.

The 1990s witnessed an ever-expanding penumbra of miracles surrounding the mute and paralyzed body of Audrey Santo. In 1993, some statues in Audrey's bedroom were found turned to face a tabernacle that had specially been placed in Audrey's room with the permission of the local bishop. Then one day, as the Eucharistic liturgy was being celebrated in Audrey's bedroom, a picture of the Virgin Mary of Guadeloupe began to weep tears of oil. Soon more than twenty statues and images in her bedroom were seen to weep both oil and blood. According to Linda, chalices also poured forth oil, an oil that mysteriously dried up during the Lenten season. The most striking claim, however, was that four Eucharistic hosts had spontaneously bled in the Santo home, with the last Eucharistic phenomenon taking place during a mass being celebrated before the rolling cameras of a documentary film crew.<sup>12</sup> Along with these claims of tears of oil and blood, there were healings and miracles attributed to Audrey's intercession, such as the rapid recovery of a victim of a motorcycle accident and a mother's successful effort to expel a piece of meat from her daughter's windpipe by saying the words, "Audrey Santo I believe you are a living saint."<sup>13</sup> Linda also reported that Audrey would

<sup>9</sup> See Kush, "Santo Parents Keep Faith in God and Their Daughter."

<sup>10</sup> Petrisko, *In God's Hands*, p. 100.

<sup>11</sup> This list of terms relies on my interviews with Linda Santo and Mary Cormier and various journalistic accounts of Audrey Santo's case.

<sup>12</sup> *Audrey's Life: Voice of a Silent Soul*, prod. Mercy Foundation, 60 min., 1996, video-cassette.

<sup>13</sup> See Kush, "Santo Parents Keep Faith in God and Their Daughter."

sympathetically manifest the symptoms of some of the pilgrims who visited her and specifically claimed that after a visit by a woman afflicted by ovarian cancer a routine X ray revealed an image on Audrey's ovaries that resembled a "little angel."<sup>14</sup> Soon a group of laypersons formed the Apostolate of a Silent Soul and dedicated themselves to proclaiming such healings to the public. For the Santo family and an ever-growing number of pilgrims and devotees, if six years earlier the body of Audrey Santo seemed shrouded by an inert silence, now it seemed illuminated by the glow of divine grace.

As claims of miracles steadily grew, so too did speculation that Audrey's life had a place in a mysterious temporal scheme. The Reverend Charles McCarthy, a Maronite priest from Boston, noticed that the time of Audrey's accident on August 9, 1987, exactly matched the time of the detonation of the atomic bomb over Nagasaki, Japan, on August 9, 1945.<sup>15</sup> August 9 is also the feast day of Edith Stein, a Jewish convert to Catholicism and Carmelite nun who went to her death in Auschwitz. This association of Audrey with Stein only intensified when the Apostolate of a Silent Soul moved into a house next door to the Santo residence. According to the Apostolate's spokesperson, the house's former owner was an Auschwitz survivor, and the day, month, and time of Audrey's accident corresponded with Stein's murder in a Nazi gas chamber.<sup>16</sup> Linda also mentions with a laugh that some have noticed other associations with August 9, such as Richard Nixon's resignation of the presidency and the murder of Sharon Tate and her houseguests by the Manson family.<sup>17</sup> Also on August 9, the rock guitarist Jerry Garcia died, and Linda states, although she does not remember exactly, that he once lived either on Santo or Audrey Street in San Francisco.<sup>18</sup> While Linda says she does not know what to make of some of these associations, the very fact that pilgrims have reported them to her testifies to their belief that Audrey is positioned within a divine plan whose fullness has yet to be revealed.

The belief that God had specially touched Audrey found its most forceful expression in the identification of her as a victim soul by the

<sup>14</sup> See Barry (n. 2 above).

<sup>15</sup> This is a consistent claim made in a variety of contexts—e.g., it introduces the Mercy Foundation video *Audrey's Life*. Interestingly, in her otherwise quite celebratory book, Felix mentions in passing that the times of Audrey's accident and the bombing of Nagasaki are separated by one minute, although both events occurred on August 9 (p. 102).

<sup>16</sup> Mary Cormier, interview by author, Worcester, Mass., September 15, 2000.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Nixon resigned the presidency on August 9, 1974. The murder of Sharon Tate and her houseguests was committed on August 9, 1969.

<sup>18</sup> Jerry Garcia died on August 9, 1995. With regard to Santo or Audrey Street and Jerry Garcia, John Paul Jagusiak graciously volunteered to search the Web and to ask various "Dead Heads" in chat rooms about Linda Santo's claim. After several months of diligent searching, Jagusiak reported that he could find nothing about Santo or Audrey Street in Grateful Dead lore.



pilgrims who would come to her home and implore her intercession. A victim soul is chosen by God to aid the redemption of other souls by vicariously suffering for them.<sup>19</sup> While the precise origin of the term “victim soul” is obscure, it has been in use in the twentieth-century parlance of Catholic mysticism. Sister Mary of the Holy Trinity, a Poor Clare of Jerusalem who died in 1942, wrote that God had asked her to be consecrated by “The Vow of the Victim,” since God desires “a great army of victim souls” to join “the apostolate” of “Eucharistic Life.”<sup>20</sup> The contemporary Irish stigmatist and seer Christina Gallagher reportedly also uses the term “victim soul” to describe herself.<sup>21</sup> While the emphasis on soul might seem to indicate a soul/body dualism, the specific embodiment of the victim soul is crucial since the stigmata and other somatic manifestations are emblematic of a special union with Christ. Within this framework, the body becomes a sign of “inwardness” reflecting the state of the soul.<sup>22</sup> What distinguishes Audrey as victim soul, however, is her own silence.

To emphasize Audrey’s status as a victim soul, Linda and members of the Apostolate of a Silent Soul would often place her within a special lineage of sufferers: Padre Pio, the Italian stigmatist; Therese Neumann of the Bavarian town of Koneresreuth, who reportedly subsisted on the Eucharist alone for over a decade and bled copiously from her stigmatic wounds; and Catherine Emmerich, the German mystic in whose “dolorous visions” Christ’s Passion and the fires of hell were vividly described.<sup>23</sup> But the victim soul closest to Audrey hailed from neighboring Woonsocket, Rhode Island. In 1925, as Rhode Island’s French-Canadian émigrés protested against efforts by the bishop of Providence to tax their schools, a young woman named Marie Rose Ferron moved from Fall

<sup>19</sup> For an exposition of the theology behind “the victim soul” and a compendium of “victim souls,” see Michael Freeze, S.F.O., *They Bore the Wounds of Christ: The Mystery of the Sacred Stigmata* (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, 1989).

<sup>20</sup> Silvere Van Den Broek, O.F.M., ed., *The Spiritual Legacy of Sister Mary of the Holy Trinity* (Rockford, Ill.: TAN, 1981), no. 363.

<sup>21</sup> Ted Harrison, *Stigmata: A Medieval Phenomenon in a Modern Age* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1994), p. 163; for more on Christina Gallagher, see Thomas W. Petrisko, *The Sorrow, the Sacrifice and the Triumph: The Apparitions, Visions and Prophecies of Christina Gallagher* (New York: Touchstone, 1995).

<sup>22</sup> The body as a sign of inwardness is a point made by Andrew Louth in his characterization of perceptions of the body in Catholicism (see his “The Body in Western Catholic Christianity,” in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997], p. 129).

<sup>23</sup> For an interesting discussion of these stigmatics, see Herbert Thurston, S.J., *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism* (London: Burns & Oakes, 1952). For a devotional account of Therese Neumann, see Johannes Steiner, *Therese Neumann: A Portrait* (New York: Alba House, 1967); see also “Neumann, Theresa,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1967), 10:365–66. For the visions of Catherine Emmerich, see Anne Catherine Emmerich, *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (London: Burns & Oakes, 1911).

River, Massachusetts, to Woonsocket, Rhode Island. According to her biography, the bishop of Providence asked Rose Ferron “to suffer” for the diocese in reparation for those who had challenged his authority.<sup>24</sup> Like Audrey, Ferron displayed the stigmata. But “Little Rose,” as she came to be called, and Little Audrey also experienced a very distinctive sign of mystical ecstasy: the phenomenon of weight. Rose’s biographer states that while on her sickbed Rose became so heavy that she could not be moved, a condition also experienced by Audrey according to her mother.<sup>25</sup> Within the specific context of Catholicism in New England, Little Rose and Little Audrey seem to share a very intimate connection as young women believed to offer up their own sufferings to atone for the sins of others.

#### FRAMING AUDREY

With word spreading that Audrey was a true victim soul, her home became a site for pilgrimage. During such pilgrimages, visitors would first enter the Santo’s garage that had been converted into a makeshift chapel. On the walls, they would see pictures of Catholic saints, most notably Padre Pio, and a variety of popular Catholic devotional images with paper cups affixed to them to collect the copious amounts of oil. Pilgrims would often listen to a brief talk given by Mary Cormier, spokesperson for the Apostolate of a Silent Soul, and record their petitions on pieces of paper to be read to Audrey later in the day. They also might say “A Prayer to Audrey,” approved by a French priest for those who seek Audrey’s intercession. If they were fortunate, a priest would be there who would say Mass and allow them to adore one of the four blood stained hosts. Pilgrims would then finally receive cotton balls, infused with the “miraculous oil,” which they would use to anoint sick friends and relatives who could not make the journey to Worcester.

The culmination of the pilgrimage would be to behold Audrey herself. After spending time in the chapel, pilgrims would be led into the Santo home. A window cut into the wall of her bedroom would frame the gaze of pilgrims and focus their attention on Audrey. Video records of such viewings show Audrey lying on her bed, with stuffed animals set on the pristine white sheets.<sup>26</sup> Audrey’s face is visible and her long black hair, tied by a large pink bow, extends around her. The headboard of her bed also displays a large pink heart-shaped pillow set in its center. The

<sup>24</sup> O. A. Boyer, S.T.L., *She Wears a Crown of Thorns* (New York: published by author, 1939), pp. 52–53. The leaders of what was called “the Sentalist movement” were excommunicated.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97; Petrisko, *In God’s Hands* (n. 3 above), p. 99.

<sup>26</sup> For reasons clarified below, I did not request special permission to see Audrey. This description is based on video records of such viewings in *Audrey Santo* (n. 4 above) and *Audrey’s Life* (n. 12 above).

predominance of the colors pink and white would quite obviously serve to gender Audrey and to emphasize her purity. The pink roses festooning Audrey's bed would also recall the "odor of sanctity," associated with the breath of the Holy Spirit in the Christian tradition.<sup>27</sup> Audrey thus is positioned to appear not only as an innocent girl but also, in the words of her mother, as a spotless "incorruptible."<sup>28</sup>

When viewed by pilgrims, the body of Audrey Santo would also be framed by the composition of the immediate surroundings in her bedroom. Around her room would be numerous religious images—a crowned statue of the Virgin Mary, pictures of the Virgin Mary of Guadeloupe, Sainte Thérèse of Lisieux, and numerous images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In video recordings of Audrey's bedroom, the room's light also seems softened by a length of diaphanous white cloth shading a large picture window and veiling the room from the outside world. Crucial to the whole scene would be the tabernacle standing opposite the bed, placed there so that Audrey, in the words of her mother, can "serve and love" Jesus. The effect of this would be to deemphasize the prosthetics attached to Audrey that provide her the sustenance necessary for life. Instead of seeing a virtually bionic body joined to medical machines, pilgrims would view Audrey as the focal point of a tableau of purity, sanctity, and divine presence. The boundedness of the space enclosing her, accessible only to family members and her attendant priests and nurses, would intensify the privileged experience of beholding her: Audrey Santo is a living saint who inhabits a liminal space connecting heaven and earth.

The window opening into Audrey's bedroom both focuses attention on Audrey's body and emphasizes the separateness of the space she inhabits. Given the number of pilgrims who have come to see her, viewing the silent Audrey can be a powerful experience indeed. As David Morgan has argued in *Visual Piety*, what allows an image to acquire an aura of authenticity is its assimilation to the memories of those who view it.<sup>29</sup> For example, Warner Salman's famous painting of a blue-eyed, blonde-haired Jesus is often curiously described as a "photograph of Jesus" precisely because it encapsulates all the aspects that its American Protestant viewers have learned to associate with Jesus through their literature and devotional practices. In the same way, Audrey in her bedroom seemingly reflects all the qualities commonly associated with the victim soul: a childlike innocence and the mystical signs of stigmata and inedia. The

<sup>27</sup> On smells in Christianity, see Constance Classen, *The Color of Angels* (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 36 ff. Roses (usually red) are also associated with "The Little Flower," Thérèse of Lisieux, a Catholic saint to whom "Little Audrey" Santo is often explicitly compared.

<sup>28</sup> Linda Santo, interview by author, Worcester, Mass., September 15, 2000.

<sup>29</sup> David Morgan, *Visual Piety* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 34–35.

presence of images and statues that weep only intensifies the viewing experience, for many pilgrims use and interact with such material artifacts in their own domestic rituals of devotion. Perhaps the power of seeing Audrey was best expressed by a pilgrim who said, "There's definitely something supernatural taking place here. There's too much; everything's in one location . . . between weeping statues and miracle cures."<sup>30</sup> Thus, the full range of signs of divine presence are telescoped or condensed into the physical space of Audrey's Worcester, Massachusetts, bedroom. For those who seek a victim soul, Audrey embodies everything a victim soul is expected to be.

#### PRAYERS OF SILENCE

For those who travel to see her, the space surrounding Audrey has been made sacred by her presence. Some pilgrims have tried to remove tiles from the floor of the Santo home or even attempted to cut off a lock of Audrey's hair in their hunger for relics. Such behavior, of course, extends the logic of framing Audrey as a living saint. But it is crucial to realize that the framing of Audrey focuses attention on a silent but still living body that itself gives no sign as to how it should be read. The silence of Audrey Santo finds a prominent place in titles of books and articles published about her and in the Apostolate's own description of her as "a silent soul." Indeed, for some pilgrims, Audrey's silence is the most affecting part of their experience of her. Among those who have traveled to Worcester to enter Audrey's silence is Father Tom Reilman, a Catholic priest from Iowa who recently retired from his formal pastoral duties after completely losing his hearing. On entering Audrey's bedroom, Father Reilman recalls,

I knelt down beside the bed. This time I told her, "We really do not need to speak to one another. We understand each other in silence, no words needed." It was a true heart to heart exchange in silence. I held her right hand for 5–6 minutes without saying anything. I knew she knew what was on my heart and I could sense her love in my heart. For me it was a moment similar to that which I often experienced with Our Lord before the Holy Eucharist. This wordless presence in the exchange of hearts beating in love is what I call Audrey's prayer of silence.<sup>31</sup>

In reflecting on "Audrey's prayer of silence," Father Reilman does not mention the images framing Audrey in her room or the miracles attributed to her presence. Instead, Audrey's inability to speak becomes joined with Father Reilman's inability to hear in an empathetic and mutual silence.

<sup>30</sup> See *Audrey's Life*.

<sup>31</sup> Tom Reilman, letter to author, May 23, 2001 (quoted by permission).

Interestingly, Father Reilman recalls that he initially prayed with Audrey vocally. But when he only saw Audrey's eyes "darting back and forth," he paused, and in this silence, he felt his first "connection" with her. It is as though her silence, her lack of response, drew him more closely to her.

Evidence of the power of Audrey's silence fills the chapel in what was once the Santo's garage. Primary and secondary relics of Audrey, such as locks of her hair, tissues stained by her tears and blood, and her pink plastic rosary beads, are juxtaposed and intermingled with postcards, family pictures, and prayer cards in bricolage presentations on cardboard. There are statues that weep oil and photographs of statues weeping oil that weep oil themselves. There are poems dedicated to Audrey, votive candles, statues, and a picture of the bishop. While these artifacts are testimonials and offerings to Audrey's victimhood, they are also the material products of the process of interpreting Audrey herself—a process that can often be improvisational and fluid. For example, members of the Apostolate often point to a particularly large oil stain that they describe as resembling "either a mushroom cloud or a chalice," an observation that prompts pilgrims to gaze on the many other oil stains in the chapel in a free-associative form of divination.<sup>32</sup> The indeterminacy of meaning surrounding Audrey is part of her framing and the dynamic of her silence. If Audrey could speak, or if those around her made specific pronouncements in her name, it would limit the range of evocations that her presence could elicit. As Linda remarked to me during my first visit to the Santo home, "You'll find a variety of views of Audrey here—Audrey is what you make her out to be."<sup>33</sup> Because Audrey is silent, she may be imbued with a wide range of meanings by those who view her. While talk of miracles might draw pilgrims, the very fact that these miracles have no information to convey is the source of their continuing power.

### III. CONTAINMENT

There are inexplicable manifestations of oils and other substances emanating from religious objects in the Santo home. They are still under study. The purpose of the Church's investigation is not simply to become a promoter of claims of the miraculous. Rather, it is to review the theological foundations for such claims to assure that the faithful who follow them are not being misled. (DANIEL P. REILLY, BISHOP OF WORCESTER)<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> This comment was made by Mary Cormier during a presentation I attended on September 15, 2000, at the Santo chapel.

<sup>33</sup> Linda Santo, interview (n. 5 above).

<sup>34</sup> Daniel P. Reilly, "Diocese Issues Interim Findings on Miraculous Claims," *Diocese of Worcester* (<http://www.worcesterdiocese.org/bishopsoffice/audrey.htm>, June 28, 2002).

To frame Audrey as a victim soul is to channel the power of her silence but not to end the process of evocation that her silence elicits. Indeed, the very idea of a victim soul carries with it a deep ambiguity that itself must be interpreted. In next examining the response of the bishop of Worcester to the Audrey Santo phenomenon, we will consider how her case raises vexing issues for the institutional Catholic Church that move our discussion from Audrey's framing to her containment.

#### ANOTHER PASCHAL VICTIM

On August 9, 1998, pilgrims came to Fitton Field Football Stadium at the College of the Holy Cross to view Audrey on the anniversary of her drowning accident. Audrey arrived by ambulance and was placed in a mobile, air-conditioned room that had been towed to the football field by a tractor-trailer. The room, specially designed by the son of the man who constructed the "Pope-mobile" for John Paul II, had the requisite large picture window that allowed Audrey to be seen through bulletproof glass.<sup>35</sup> Over forty priests gathered for the procession that began the mass, although noticeably absent were any official representatives of the diocese of Worcester or of the Jesuit community at the College of the Holy Cross.<sup>36</sup> After the Eucharistic liturgy, four monstrances containing blood-stained hosts were displayed to the eight thousand faithful who had come to see Little Audrey Santo.

While the mass at Fitton Field gave evidence that Audrey had become an international object of devotion, it also marked the most expansive interpretation of her victimhood. As one would expect, homilists and speakers reiterated the standard elements of Little Audrey's nascent hagiography: her piety as a child, the claims of healings, the statues and pictures emitting oil, the miraculous bleeding hosts, and the temporal concordance between the moment of her accident and the bombing of Nagasaki. But the most striking interpretation of Audrey's life came from Father George Joyce, the Santo family's spiritual advisor and a retired priest from the neighboring diocese of Springfield. Speaking to the assembled crowd as the mass was to begin, Father Joyce asked the question, "What is our Lord saying through Audrey?" He paused momentarily and then said, "Times are so corrupt that He chooses another innocent lamb to suffer for us in our sins."<sup>37</sup> Father Joyce's words perhaps unintentionally reflect the ambiguous status of the victim soul. A

<sup>35</sup> As reported in the video produced to commemorate the event (see *Audrey Santo*).

<sup>36</sup> Raymond L. Deslisle, spokesman for the diocese of Worcester, has said that the diocese would not "sanction" the mass. On this and the preparations for the event, see Kathleen A. Shaw, "Thousands Expected at Mass for 'Victim Soul' Girl," *Worcester (Mass.) Telegram and Gazette* (August 5, 1998).

<sup>37</sup> See *Audrey Santo* (n. 4 above).

victim soul like Audrey is a silent servant of Jesus and a heroic imitator of his Passion. The victim soul who embraces Christ's sufferings can also be understood to co-suffer with him. This can lead to another, bolder claim. Indeed, Father Joyce's words most certainly seem to suggest that the mute and paralyzed Audrey is not just a living saint but a veritable second Christ.

If Audrey is a redeeming paschal victim, then it is an association initially evoked by the parallels between her life narrative and that of Jesus. Audrey's birth appears miraculous, since relatives claim that Linda's body was so affected by cancer that she could not conceive.<sup>38</sup> After her accident, Audrey experienced a resurrection of sorts when paramedics revived her. Like the legs of the crucified Christ, Audrey's legs were broken on what might be called the "cross" of her hospital bed as she was being given physical therapy after her accident. Then, of course, there are the claims of the stigmata.

This intimate link with the life of Christ is further intensified by Audrey's identification with the Eucharist. A tabernacle faces her bed and four Eucharistic miracles are linked to her presence. Petitions are brought to her much as petitions would be placed near a tabernacle or reliquary in a church. Recall Father Reilman's reflection that he felt a presence with Audrey that he had also felt before the Host. Perhaps the connection between Audrey and the Eucharist was prefigured in a vision that Linda reportedly had at Medjugorje in which, according to her, she and other village residents saw her daughter's face radiating from the moon in the nighttime sky.<sup>39</sup> To some, the white disk of the moon might suggest the white disk of the unleavened Eucharistic host. Surely for some pilgrims, the tale of such a "lunar" vision would resonate with their experience gazing through the glass window "luna" that frames Audrey in her bedroom monstrance.<sup>40</sup>

#### CONTAINING THE VICTIM SOUL

The claims made about Audrey include a number of elements that seem to move beyond official Catholic doctrine and codes of canon law. The belief that she is a victim soul could be understood to challenge the unique salvific efficacy of Jesus' immolation on the cross. Moreover, even if Audrey did "choose" to co-suffer with Christ, then she did so before the completion of her seventh year, the age at which "physical persons" are considered to have the use of reason according to Catholic

<sup>38</sup> Felix (n. 7 above), p. 32.

<sup>39</sup> Petrisko, *In God's Hands* (n. 3 above), p. 1; Felix, p. 48.

<sup>40</sup> A monstrance is a special holder to display the Eucharist. Often the host is set at the center of a sunburst design. The glass holder in which the Eucharist is set is called a "luna" (moon) or "lunette" (little moon).

canon law.<sup>41</sup> The panoply of devotional practices surrounding her, from “A Prayer to Audrey” to the distribution of holy oil, also could be understood to attribute to Audrey a sanctity that would normally be reserved for those entered into the roll of saints, which of course can occur only after death and the long process of canonization in the Roman Catholic tradition. Moreover, in the claim that Audrey is “another innocent lamb” sent by God, one could perhaps see the potential for a new, even schismatic, religious movement within contemporary Catholicism. Although Linda herself emphatically states that there are no specific prophecies associated with her daughter and the Apostolate of a Silent Soul could hardly be described as anticlerical, it is still not difficult to see how Audrey’s silence could be used as potent medium for challenging the charisma that priests and bishops maintain by virtue of their office.

With the publicity surrounding Audrey reaching a level that could no longer be ignored, the Catholic bishop of Worcester appointed a commission to investigate the phenomena and claims surrounding Audrey Santo. In his introductory remarks to the *Summary Report*, Bishop Reilly praises the dedication of the Santo family to Audrey, a dedication that the report praises as the true “miracle” in the whole complex story.<sup>42</sup> The *Summary Report*, however, cautions that intimations of the paranormal are themselves hardly miraculous and states that while there was no evidence found suggesting chicanery, the phenomena surrounding Audrey would need further investigation.<sup>43</sup>

While the bishop’s statement did not render a definitive judgment about the claims of the miraculous, it did move to define doctrinal boundaries surrounding the entire Audrey Santo phenomenon. The bishop first affirmed that all consecrated hosts are equally sacred—a bleeding host is no more the body of Christ than a host that does not bleed, nor does the presence of “miraculous oil” add anything to the sacramental species. Bishop Reilly also prohibited the use of “A Prayer to Audrey,” stating that praying for her intercession was contrary to Catholic teaching. But the most crucial intervention was not mentioned in the public statement released to the media. Instead, it came during an informal discussion between Bishop Reilly and the Santo family. According to Linda, a collective decision was made to remove Audrey from

<sup>41</sup> Canon Law Society of America, *The Code of Canon Law* (Washington, D.C.: Canon Law Society of America, 1983), canon 97, sec. 2.

<sup>42</sup> See Reilly; see also “Bishop Reilly’s Statement,” *Worcester (Mass.) Telegram and Gazette* (January 22, 1999).

<sup>43</sup> The diocese is also planning tests in conjunction with the University of Massachusetts Medical Center to determine whether Audrey Santo responds to stimuli. Tests on the blood found on the Eucharist hosts confirm that it is human blood of a type that does not match those of members of the Santo family. On these tests, see Bronislaus B. Kush, “An Inspiration for Faith, Questions,” *Worcester (Mass.) Telegram and Gazette* (January 30, 2000).



public display.<sup>44</sup> Visitors coming to the Santo home would no longer be allowed to enter the Santo home and view Audrey in her bedroom.

If the mute and paralyzed body of Audrey Santo was framed as a victim soul, it was now being contained along with the more radical implications of her victimhood. While Audrey's body was presented in the image of the body of the crucified Christ, it now was brought into conformity with the body of Christ understood as Church. Indeed, although the laity can no longer view Audrey without the bishop's permission, the numerous priests who come to her Worcester home need no official approval to see her. The body of Audrey Santo thus becomes an object for the administration of sacraments rather than a subject whose very existence has an almost Eucharistic sacramentality. The exclusion of the laity from seeing Audrey also contains her silent charisma within a circle of priestly authority. The diocese of Worcester, however, does permit public viewing of Audrey during a prayer service on the anniversary of her accident. Pilgrims can see their Little Audrey but in a context without the celebration of the Eucharist or anything else that could be interpreted as an attribute of the cultic celebrations venerating canonized saints and their relics.<sup>45</sup> Audrey Santo is no longer a victim soul but simply a victim in need of pastoral care.

#### A FRAME WITHIN A FRAME

In the aftermath of the bishop's intervention, the Apostolate of a Silent Soul moved dutifully to conform their presentation of Audrey to more conventional Catholic themes. Pilgrims still come to the Santo home but are allowed only to enter the chapel and hear a presentation about the victim soul many of them had hoped to see. The presentations begin by stating that the Apostolate of a Silent Soul remains under obedience to the bishop and for this reason Audrey cannot be seen by the public. The "meaning" of Audrey Santo is then encapsulated into two slogans: "the real presence" and "respect for life."

In affirming the "real presence" of Christ in the Eucharistic host, the Apostolate seeks to affirm a foundational point of Catholic doctrine that subsumes the more specific claims concerning the Eucharistic miracles associated with Audrey. The bulk of the presentation, however, concerns "respect for life." Here the prophetic significance of August 9 is emphasized by symbolically linking the atomic bombing of Nagasaki with Audrey's accident. Father Charles McCarthy has elaborated the significance of August 9 by maintaining that the date corresponds to Tisha B'Av, the

<sup>44</sup> Linda Santo, interview (n. 5 above).

<sup>45</sup> For a journalistic account of this prayer service, see Kathleen Shaw, "The Santo Family Is Forgoing Mass," *Worcester (Mass.) Telegram and Gazette* (July 21, 1999), and "Believers Flock to Silent Soul," *Worcester (Mass.) Telegram and Gazette* (August 7, 2000).

commemoration of the destruction of the First and Second Temples, and the martyrdom of Franz Jaegerstaetter, a prominent Catholic resister of Nazism.<sup>46</sup> Against this background, the Apostolate maintains that August 9 has an almost prophetic significance as a date associated with suffering and death. The accident that befell Audrey on August 9 thus points to the miraculous transformation of suffering through God's redemptive action in the world. Members of the Apostolate repeat the phrase "God does not make junk" as they proclaim that Audrey stands as a witness to the value of all human life in a "culture of death."<sup>47</sup>

Along with the slogans that relate Audrey to more officially palatable Catholic themes, the Apostolate has sought to reclaim the sanctity of motherhood. One of the most obvious characteristics of the Audrey Santo phenomenon is the predominance of women and gendered imagery. Little Audrey is framed as a saintly girl, Linda and Mary Cormier are the most prominent members of the Apostolate of a Silent Soul, and Audrey's primary caregivers are nurses led by Joanne C. Erikson, who is affectionately known as "The General." During my interviews with her, I asked Linda's opinion about whether Audrey's case would resonate most deeply with women, particularly those who live lives of "silent suffering" in dysfunctional or highly patriarchal families.<sup>48</sup> In response, Linda acknowledged that many of those who are a part of the Apostolate have had rather unhappy family histories, as did she.<sup>49</sup> But she added that mothers would perhaps be especially drawn to her daughter simply because they were mothers. Linda then excoriated "women's lib" and argued that "women should be allowed to do their jobs" and "be women," seemingly implying that the role of women as mothers and caregivers is no longer valued by society as a whole.<sup>50</sup> The literature and videos produced about Audrey always highlight Linda's decision to take her daughter home instead of sending her to an institution. Such accounts not only extol the virtues of motherhood but also implicitly portray Linda's decision as an act of resistance against a medical bureaucracy

<sup>46</sup> Emmanuel McCarthy, "The Non-Violent Emmanuel," *The Apostolate of a Silent Soul, Inc.: Newsletter* 3, no. 8 (August 2000): 1, 4.

<sup>47</sup> The phrases "God does not make junk" and "culture of death" were used by Mary Cormier during a presentation at the chapel in the Santo home on September 15, 2000.

<sup>48</sup> Robert Orsi and Michael Carroll, drawing on historical and psychoanalytic methodologies, respectively, have linked cults of the saints and the Virgin Mary to social powerlessness and various family pathologies. See Robert Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996); and Michael Carroll, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986).

<sup>49</sup> Linda Santo, interview by author, Worcester, Mass., September 14, 2000. Interestingly, Linda also offered the experiences of Mary Cormier as a counterexample to this "family-dysfunction" hypothesis since Mary Cormier, by her own admission, had a quite loving relationship with her husband before his untimely death (on his death, see the concluding section to this article).

<sup>50</sup> Linda Santo, interview, September 12, 2002.

that has displaced women from one of the traditional roles they could claim as their own.<sup>51</sup>

Of course, the primacy of motherhood in discourse surrounding Audrey is best reflected in the centrality of Linda herself. In the quasi-devotional literature that has been produced about her daughter, Linda is often likened to the Virgin Mary. This sense of Audrey and Linda as a kind of mirror image of Jesus and Mary also finds its way into interpretations of Eucharistic phenomena, for one priest claimed that he saw an image of the Madonna and child and one of the bloodstained hosts. When Cormier, the Apostolate's spokesperson, came to Audrey's house for the first time, she heard God's voice "in her heart" telling her to "go to the mother."<sup>52</sup> This Cormier did, and she gave most of her savings to Linda, who was facing a mortgage foreclosure.<sup>53</sup> In place of allowing her to be seen by the public, the Apostolate now shows an apparently homemade video of Audrey to pilgrims who come to the chapel at her home. The video does not discuss the miracles but simply shows Audrey being cared for by her mother and other female relatives in the living room of her home. Most significant, the television and VCR are placed directly behind the altar. The television frames the video and the altar frames the television by linking the sacrifice of the Santo family to the sacrifice of the Mass in what is nothing less than an apotheosis of Catholic motherhood.

#### IV. CONTESTATION

People seem to hunger for some tangible religious experience, and wherever there is such profound want there is the opportunity for what skeptics call "pious fraud." Money is rarely the primary motive, the usual impetus being to renew the faith of believers and confound the doubters. (JOE NICKELL)<sup>54</sup>

One of the most prominent devotees of Audrey is a woman who is reportedly constructing the world's longest chain of religious medals. As she makes her chain, she and others who observe Audrey make another chain of symbolic associations connected to Audrey's mute and paralyzed body. As we have seen, the silent body of Audrey Santo is initially framed as a victim soul, an interpretation that evokes other interpreta-

<sup>51</sup> The Apostolate of a Silent Soul, and the priests associated with it, often claim that Audrey's akinetic mutism is actually the result of an overdose of medication given to her at the hospital. Against the background of the Apostolate's celebration of motherhood, such charges seem to reflect a deep antipathy to the medical establishment.

<sup>52</sup> Cormier, interview (n. 16 above).

<sup>53</sup> Linda Santo, "An Interview with Mary V. B. Cormier," *Apostolate of a Silent Soul Inc.: Newsletter* 2, no. 12 (December 1999): 3.

<sup>54</sup> Joe Nickell, "Miracles or Deception? The Pathetic Case of Audrey Santo," *Skeptical Inquirer*, 23, no. 5 (September/October 1999): 18.

tions that eventually transform the process of framing into one of containment. One would expect such a progression of responses to the Audrey Santo phenomenon, for not only is Audrey's body silent, it is also out of place.

The Apostolate of a Silent Soul revels in the mystery of Audrey Santo by citing a litany of juxtapositions that emphasize how Audrey's life defies conventional expectations and parameters of meaning: her accident was a senseless tragedy but now serves a divine purpose; she suffers but bears no sign of her sufferings other than marks of mystical union with Christ. Most crucially, Audrey's silent body rests on a blurred boundary between life and death—from one perspective, she is dead but still lives on, while from another perspective, she only appears dead and is, in fact, very much alive. With claims continuing to be reported among pilgrims that Audrey appears in dreams or that her soul leaves her body as she mystically manifests her presence to others, it seems as though Audrey is not limited by the boundaries of time and space.<sup>55</sup> When such paradoxes become part of her framing as a victim soul, Audrey must be contained as body out of place within the doctrinal and hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church. Yet Audrey has also become an international figure whose case has attracted attention from quarters well removed from the institutional and devotional confines of contemporary Catholicism. What non-Catholic critics of the Audrey Santo phenomenon find most distasteful is her public display, for surely a mute and paralyzed body is out of place when intentionally presented to be gazed on by others. In moving now to examine criticism of Audrey's public display, we find not only criticism of Audrey's treatment and the miraculous powers attributed to her but also contestation over the meaning of embodiment itself.

#### A PIOUS FRAUD

The containment of Audrey Santo by the bishop did little to quiet those who were still appalled by her public display. One of the most prominent critics of the Audrey Santo phenomenon is Joe Nickell, a member of the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. In appearances on national news programs and in articles written for the *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine, Nickell has denounced the entire complex of "miracles" associated with Audrey as a hoax perpetrated on a particularly credulous audience. Perhaps echoing Friedrich Nietzsche's discourses on the "holy lies" that make up religion, Nickell argues that the Audrey

<sup>55</sup> This has been a long-standing claim with regard to Audrey Santo (see Ted Harrison, "Miracle Child," *Fortean Times* [December 1998]; also available on-line at [http://www.forteanimes.com/articles/117\\_child.shtml](http://www.forteanimes.com/articles/117_child.shtml)).

Santo phenomenon is manifestly a “pious fraud.”<sup>56</sup> In addition to pointing out the obvious financial motives for such chicanery, Nickell maintains that the statues that supposedly weep oil “are consistent with the surreptitious application of a non-drying oil.”<sup>57</sup> Indeed, one laboratory reported to the *Washington Post* that the oil was 80 percent vegetable oil and 20 percent chicken fat.<sup>58</sup> In one sense, Nickell is simply countering the well-publicized claims made about the phenomena occurring in the Santo home, since authorized video documentaries and books on Audrey make much of a laboratory test that revealed a nonidentifiable “paraffin oil” in samples taken from statues in the Santo home.<sup>59</sup> But Nickell also observes that such claims often arise from a context in which “despair and superstition can coexist” and offers the parenthetical comment that the Santo phenomenon “takes place in the midst of Portuguese immigrant families.”<sup>60</sup> The Santo family is part Italian and part Lebanese, while the vast majority of the members of the Apostolate of a Silent Soul are of Irish, Polish, or French Canadian descent and, in any case, could hardly be described as immigrants. But immigrants are surely bodies out of place, and what Nickell’s editorial comments do suggest is that the presentation of the body of Audrey Santo involves issues of class and ethnicity beyond the institutional confines of contemporary American Catholicism.

But Nickell and many others have a more serious objection to the Audrey Santo phenomenon that moves well beyond nativist distaste for what appear to be Old World superstitions. Nickell likens the exhibition of Audrey to the public display of the Siamese twins.<sup>61</sup> He calls the entire spectacle surrounding Audrey “pathetic” and quotes the television correspondent Lynn Sherr who asks whether the whole case is a “cruel hoax” perpetrated on a “defenseless young girl.”<sup>62</sup> He also points to the claims of stigmata that raise the interest of “the concerned skeptic,” seemingly implying that these wounds have been inflicted on her by a party he does

<sup>56</sup> Interestingly, this interpretation of the Audrey Santo phenomenon as a type of holy lie also finds its way into other journalistic accounts. Weingarten (n. 1 above) quotes Linda Santo’s comment to the effect that lying to entice children out of a burning home is not a sin. The implication seems to be that the miracles surrounding Audrey Santo are falsehoods that nonetheless are intended to serve a good purpose.

<sup>57</sup> Nickell, p. 18.

<sup>58</sup> A discussion of this test can be found in Weingarten. Other tests have produced different results, which Nickell argues may be the consequence of a deliberate attempt to “confound” the analysis even further by changing the composition of the oil (see p. 18).

<sup>59</sup> For example, see Petrisko, *In God’s Hands* (n. 3 above), p. 89; see also *Audrey’s Life* (n. 12 above).

<sup>60</sup> Nickell, p. 18.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17. Nickell particularly refers to the mobile home carnival exhibition of the Siamese twins that allowed them to be viewed as they watched television.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

not name.<sup>63</sup> The bishop of Worcester has also expressed his distaste for “the spectacle” surrounding Audrey, while the diocesan communications director has admitted his uneasiness with the public display of a young girl.<sup>64</sup> For Nickell, and for many others, both Catholic and non-Catholic, the real horror of this “pious fraud” is not its perceived superstition but its manifest exploitation of someone who can neither speak nor act for herself.

#### THE SILENT BODY

In the case of Audrey Santo, we find her silent body a locus of contestation between competing understandings of embodiment. For Nickell, the presentation of Audrey’s body violates her dignity as a human being. By relating her display to that of the Siamese twins, Nickell is placing Audrey in a long line of exotic bodies that have been displayed in order to profit from the prurient curiosity they elicit. On one level, Audrey’s dignity is violated because she is a commodity, an inert thing that is apparently treated as something less than human. From this perspective, the announcement that Audrey would be available “to be *seen* this day only” has the air of carnival hucksterism.<sup>65</sup> Underlying this criticism is an understanding of embodiment that emphasizes the individual as a bounded, autonomous whole—an understanding that finds expression in a variety of Western legal codes regulating everything from organ transplantation to sexuality.<sup>66</sup> But while the language of “autonomy” and “privacy” dominate the criticism of Audrey’s public display, such criticism also assumes that the body of Audrey Santo is intractably “other.”

The distaste for the carnival-like spectacle surrounding Audrey is perhaps more telling than critics realize. As Phillip Mellor and Chris Schilling have argued, the rejection of the grotesque body in the West has been associated with a more general rejection of that which cannot be controlled or “normalized” within the classificatory schemes, “controls,” and “strict hierarchies” of modernity.<sup>67</sup> But while the indeterminacy of

<sup>63</sup> This statement appears in the on-line version of Nickell’s article.

<sup>64</sup> James Dempsey, “Explaining the Audrey Phenomenon,” *Worcester (Mass.) Telegram and Gazette* (January 27, 1999).

<sup>65</sup> The phrase that I quote here can be found in an insert to the *Apostolate of a Silent Soul, Inc.: Newsletter* 3, no. 7 (July 2000).

<sup>66</sup> For a helpful overview of Western legislation concerning the body, especially as reflected in the debate surrounding organ transplants, see Richard E. Gold, *Body Parts* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1996).

<sup>67</sup> Philip A. Mellor and Chris Schilling, *Reforming the Body* (London: Sage, 1997), p. 10. In making this observation, Mellor and Schilling are drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and Alain Touraine. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); and Alain Touraine, *A Critique of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

the silent body of Audrey Santo might recall the ambiguous position of “grotesque bodies” in Western society, her public display for pilgrims evokes resonances not of the grotesque but of the sacred.<sup>68</sup> In the introduction to the massive *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, Michel Feher observes that religions posit particular bodies or forms of embodiment as a central element for envisioning the relationship between human and divine worlds.<sup>69</sup> The silent, suffering body of Audrey Santo thus evokes a silent, suffering God. For pilgrims, the embodiment of Audrey is not isolated or autonomous but communal since she is a victim soul who offers up her own sufferings in restitution for sin. The boundaries of Audrey’s body are subsumed within the boundaries of other bodies, and her physical form is in some way permeable and marked by signs of connection to other bodies—although this is a connection pilgrims must make imaginatively, as they do when gazing on a consecrated host, since Audrey’s stigmata are themselves never displayed. Viewing Audrey within this devotional context is thus animated by a very different visual aesthetic and understanding of embodiment than that assumed by Nickell and other critics. In the obvious connection between Audrey’s body and that of the crucified Christ, we also find the distant echoes of the Catholic emphasis on women embodying the humanity of Jesus, so suggestively discussed by Carolyn Walker Bynum in *Holy Feast, Holy Fast*.<sup>70</sup> Of course, if Audrey’s body does mirror that of Jesus, withdrawing her from view would be tantamount to withdrawing the host from the faithful. In light of its emphasis on respect for life, the Apostolate would surely argue against its critics that a society that can find no meaning in suffering would certainly want to hide those who suffer from public view.

While differing understandings of embodiment struggle to define the silent body of Audrey Santo, this contest is hardly an innocent exercise in hermeneutics. The framing, containment, and contestation of Audrey’s embodiment are also articulations of power designed to seize the discursive opportunity that her silence provides. Yet the play of power surrounding Audrey does not lend itself to straightforward analysis and seamless characterization. Her public display is taken by some to be an obvious act of exploitation, while others might see her body as a point of community for those who have no other place to share their silent sufferings. Some might point to the outrageousness of the claims sur-

<sup>68</sup> Of course, one of the results of the eventual embrace of carnival by the Catholic Church was that the grotesque and the sacred become understood as being quite intimately linked. See Mellor and Schilling, p. 65.

<sup>69</sup> Michel Feher, “Introduction,” in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body, Part I*, ed. Michel Feher (New York: Zone Books, 1989), p. 13.

<sup>70</sup> Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

rounding Audrey as sure evidence of chicanery, while others might identify the elitist sensibilities of class informing such criticism. Some might understand her withdrawal from public view as a necessary doctrinal and pastoral intervention to preserve authentic Catholic teaching and to protect a defenseless girl. But others might view the same acts as reassertions of patriarchal authority over women who seek to define a space that they can call their own. Such perceptions, of course, are the function of Audrey's silence, a silence that elicits contending efforts of interpretation and reinterpretation, appropriation and reappropriation.

With characteristic double entendre, the late Ioan Culianu once observed that the body has been produced "by much intercourse."<sup>71</sup> To be sure, the academy's discursive dalliances with the human body have produced suggestively theorized lineages of bodies: bodies of power, bodies in pain, slender bodies, and fragmented bodies.<sup>72</sup> To this academic collection of bodies we can now add the silent body of Audrey Santo. To draw attention to Audrey's body is not to reduce her to a kind of inert status but to call attention to how her body exists as the point of contact and contestation for the pilgrims, observers, and critics who have followed her case. To say that her body is silent is to focus consideration on how her embodiment is framed, contained, and contested in relation to her mute and paralyzed physical form. In the process of interpreting her silence, the body of Audrey Santo has been linked to other bodies: to the body of Christ as suffering victim, to the limbs of the body of Christ as Church, and to the exploited body of a carnival oddity. One would perhaps expect a silent body to be hermeneutically paired with a succession of other bodies if, as Sarah Coakley observes, Western society no longer has a single *verum corpus* to bring it together.<sup>73</sup> While it is most certainly debatable whether Western society was ever unified around a single idealized body, it is clear that attempts to posit a particular kind of body as normative or exemplary can become part of various agenda that seek to include or exclude, liberate or control, other bodies. At the foot of the altar in the Santo chapel is set a graphic picture of an aborted fetus—an emblem, perhaps, of the Apostolate's future mission but also a reminder that questions of embodiment are inextricably connected to very

<sup>71</sup> Ioan Culianu, "The Body Reexamined," in *Religious Reflections on the Human Body*, ed. Jane Marie Law (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 2.

<sup>72</sup> On bodies of power, see Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); on bodies in pain, see Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); on slender bodies, see Susan Bordo, "Reading the Slender Body," in *Body Politics*, ed. Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Sally Shuttleworth (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 83–103; on fragmented bodies, see Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

<sup>73</sup> Sarah Coakley, "Introduction: Religion and the Body," in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 6.



real issues of social conflict. The framing, containment, and contestation of the out-of-place silent body of Audrey Santo thus could be most suggestively joined to the corpus of scholarly consideration of bodies that are silenced, marked, or even sacrificed, since the strategies of defining and interpreting the body are inevitably connected to the techniques used to act on it.

#### V. AGENCY

Audrey's silence in her bed united with Jesus in the tabernacle are misunderstood even scandalized viewing [*sic*] both as an apparent defeat of one who is always silent in the face of anything. Audrey tells us—imitate Jesus in all things. We must bear our suffering and triumphs in silence. She tells us to bear witness to God—trusting in silence. (LINDA SANTO)<sup>74</sup>

It is rather commonplace in contemporary academic discourse to argue that the body is constituted by society or made and remade through the efforts of “interested actors,” to use a none-too-artful term. But the continuing appeal of such theoretical perspectives lies in their challenge to conventional understandings of bodies as self-evident, biologically given entities. Certainly in the case of Audrey Santo, we find that the self-evident facts of her mutism and paralysis are subject to wide-ranging interpretations of the meaning of her embodiment, interpretations that lead to different applications of power in regard to her silent body. What is interesting about these applications of power, and the reasons legitimating them, are their appeals to Audrey's own agency. Obviously, the Apostolate of a Silent Soul argues that Audrey has her intellect fully intact and that the expansiveness of their actions with regard to her are justified by an equally expansive sense of Audrey's own agency as a victim soul. For critics of the phenomenon, notwithstanding their position that Audrey has no agency whatsoever because she is brain-dead, the assumption seems to be that even if she had consciousness she would in no way give consent to being publicly displayed. While Audrey remains silent in her paralysis, the agents involved in her case authorize their own actions by appeals to Audrey herself as an agent with a discernible will and intent.

#### AGENTLESS SUFFERINGS

The theme of agency, however, is not simply limited to the discourse surrounding whether or not Audrey Santo should be publicly displayed. On the Web site dedicated to Audrey Santo, there is an electronic guest book filled with cyber testimonies from those who have been drawn to her

<sup>74</sup> Linda Santo, “Audrey's Life,” *Apostolate of a Silent Soul, Inc.: Newsletter* 2 no. 9 (September 1999): 5.

case.<sup>75</sup> While the testimonials range widely, one particularly prominent theme remains diseases whose etiology and cure are beyond the power of human beings—afflictions such as fibromyalgia, autism, and multiple sclerosis. Mary Cormier came to Worcester after her husband died of a rare blood disorder, a genetic affliction that her children may also carry. These sufferings could be described as agentless, for just as their causes cannot be attributed to human agents, so too their cures are beyond the agency of human beings to effect. Also, and most crucially, the afflictions of children figure prominently in requests made to Audrey. In Catholic understandings of suffering, there is a deep ambivalence, for suffering can either be a sign of sin or of sanctity.<sup>76</sup> For this reason, Audrey is always presented as an innocent girl, a sinless and “immaculate” victim. The silence of Audrey Santo then seems to resonate most deeply with families who silently confront agentless, or undeserved and incurable, afflictions without recourse to any apparent frame of meaning. Of course, for those who believe in divine omnipotence, the agent most clearly implicated in such sufferings is God. Accordingly, for those pilgrims who come to Worcester, Audrey is not only a silent victim but also a victim soul who gives witness to how seemingly meaningless sufferings are intimately connected to the agency of God.

#### MEANING AND POWER

The question of the meaning of suffering is central to the discourse surrounding Audrey, and its connection with agency returns us to the question of power. To embrace suffering is one way to transform human pain into something meaningful and empowering. Indeed, Mary Cormier mentioned to me, with obvious Eucharistic undertones, that suffering gives one strength if one loves its “taste.”<sup>77</sup> In making this point, she was certainly affirming the nobility of one who bears sufferings in silence. For Linda, however, her daughter’s sufferings are but a prelude to the dramatic vindication of God’s power, for she earnestly maintains that Audrey will finally be healed. For both women, however, suffering is linked to particular forms of empowerment. Linda often speaks in staccato aphorisms about religion and the family, and her public pronouncements show an increasing concern with issues surrounding the care and treatment of children. While Mary Cormier has thus far not chosen to make her own personal narrative a central part of her statements as the

<sup>75</sup> See <http://www.geocities.com/MadisonAvenue/2407>. The Audrey Santo homepage can also be accessed at <http://members.aol.com/TheBVMPage/audrey.htm>.

<sup>76</sup> For a discussion of the ambivalent attitudes toward suffering in American Catholicism, see Robert Orsi, “Mildred, Isn’t It Fun to Be a Cripple?” in *Catholic Lives, Contemporary America*, ed. Thomas J. Ferraro (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), pp. 19–64.

<sup>77</sup> Cormier, interview (n. 16 above).

Apostolate's spokesperson, she does share her life experience with other members of the Apostolate who themselves have quite distinctive accounts about what brought them to Audrey. More generally, the dynamics of the Apostolate of a Silent Soul as a whole also suggest that the experience of agentless suffering is understood to confer both authenticity and authority. In this sense, the agency exerted through the silence of Audrey Santo most intimately concerns the creation of a community for those who suffer.

There is, of course, another way to interpret such a valorization of suffering. To so affirm suffering as a path to sanctity can quite easily lend itself to the belief that not only is it one's positive obligation to suffer but also that it is necessary to inflict suffering on others. Certainly the criticism of the treatment of Audrey implies that, in some as yet unidentifiable way, such a dynamic is indeed at work. Beyond their disdain for Audrey's public display, many commentators on her case have raised questions about other assertions of the Apostolate's agency. The Worcester journalist Ellen Barry has written about the Apostolate's apparent tendency to prefer the orthodox Catholic press and its desire to review advance copies of stories written about Audrey.<sup>78</sup> Antonia Felix, in her otherwise extremely laudatory book about Audrey, criticizes Linda for her suspicion, a suspicion that, according to Felix, restricted her journalistic access to Audrey and other members of the family.<sup>79</sup> If the Apostolate and its supporters extol the silent agency of the victim soul, critics of the treatment of Audrey lay the blame for her sufferings with the agency of the very human actors entrusted with her care. Questions about the nature of suffering thus deeply inflect the contending voices that "speak" through the silence of Audrey Santo. Of course, what all these voices agree on is that Audrey is someone's victim.

In the framing, containment, and contestation of the silent body of Audrey Santo, we find concerns of meaning and power inextricably intertwined. It is perhaps because of the complexity of interpretations surrounding Audrey that the bishop of Worcester moved with great delicacy to limit her public display. When I asked Linda about the bishop's intervention, she praised its pastoral sensitivity and reflected, "He could have shut us down."<sup>80</sup> Cormier sometimes mentions in her presentations that it is "a good sign" that the diocesan investigation has reached its second stage, apparently holding out hope that future tests will confirm the miraculous nature of the oil emitted by statues and images in the Santo home. For her part, Linda says that her daughter has been made into "an icon" and that the "faith of the faithful" will grow in response to her

<sup>78</sup> See Barry (n. 2 above).

<sup>79</sup> Felix (n. 7 above), pp. 139–40.

<sup>80</sup> Linda Santo, interview (n. 5 above).

daughter's removal from public view.<sup>81</sup> In making this observation, Linda surely wanted to emphasize a point well in accord with the intent underlying the bishop's intervention: with her daughter's withdrawal from public view, the focus will be on the power of God and not on the power of Audrey herself. But while the laity are prohibited from viewing Audrey in her bedroom, priests still arrive at the Santo household and may view Audrey without permission of any kind. Ironically, such a division between clergy and laity with regard to viewing her body might be interpreted to attribute to Audrey an even greater sanctity. With her display still permitted for a single day that commemorates her accident, it is possible that the hunger to see the silent body of Audrey Santo will only grow.

#### VI. ADDENDUM

Or are these clever tricks being played on gullible groups of fools? Is said to be by those who live by "Satin [*sic*] rules?" While those of you of little faith, believing God is but a fraud, may someday find the truth too late as you stand before the Lord. (OTTO R. GRAEPHEL)<sup>82</sup>

With funds provided by "a wealthy anonymous donor," the Apostolate of a Silent Soul has maintained a house next to the Santo home as a base of operations for publicity and as a communal gathering place. During the period of research for this article, I spent a majority of my time in the house, engaged in informal conversation with Cormier and other members of the Apostolate. One September day, Monsignor Donato Conte arrived. Monsignor Conte, an Italian priest, has been one of the most outspoken clerical supporters of the authenticity of the phenomena linked to Audrey Santo. I joined members of the Apostolate at a mass celebrated by Monsignor Conte in the chapel in what was once the Santo's garage. While Monsignor Conte did not bring out the bloodstained hosts for adoration, he did encourage the congregation to pray for Audrey's intercession, since such prayers simply reflect how people "feel" about her. After mass, I returned to the house with other members of the Apostolate for coffee. I had just taken my usual place at the kitchen table when Mary Cormier said to me excitedly, "Mat, look at that!" I turned to my right and looked over my shoulder at the series of photographs of "weeping" statues on the kitchen wall. One of the photographs of these "weeping" statues had a streak of oil that began at the eye of the photographed statue and ran down until it pooled at the slightly upturned bottom corner of the photograph. Linda, who had not attended mass as I recall, entered the kitchen and commented to me on the distinctiveness of the oil streak.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Otto R. Graephel, "Earthbound Angel" (a poem in the Santo chapel).

I looked at the photograph; the oil appeared fresh, but the picture could not be described as weeping since the oil itself was not flowing. Monsignor Donato Conte soon entered the room, rubbed his fingers in the oil, applied it to his eyes and then asked, "Has this been investigated?"

"Has this been investigated?" is the question that reflects the general sentiment informing the various discourses circumscribing the case of Audrey Santo. From Linda Santo to the Roman Catholic bishop of Worcester to Joe Nickell, from the *Washington Post* and the BBC to *USA Today* to the newsmagazines *20/20* and *48 Hours*, questions concerning the nature of the phenomena surrounding Audrey seem foremost on the minds of commentators on her case. When Mary Cormier pointed to the oil-stained photograph on the kitchen wall, it seemed that I, too, was now confronted with the question, is this a miracle or chicanery? This was the very question that I had tried hard to avoid. When I planned my research, it seemed to me that it would be most interesting to set aside the question of truth entirely since this is precisely what most other commentators have not done. When I wrote Linda to ask permission to write about her daughter, I had also indicated that I would not venture a definitive judgment about whether the claims surrounding Audrey were true or false. Accordingly, when members of the Apostolate asked me what I thought about the oil-stained photograph, I responded with a polite silence. Silence, of course, is not unknown to historians of religions who have chosen a phenomenological method characterized by *epochē*, or "bracketing." While such a general theoretical disposition has informed my approach to Audrey's case, my silence when asked about the oil-stained photograph was more akin to that of ethnographers who find themselves drawn into the dynamics of their research in ways that challenge their own scholarly agency. This article has focused on the body of Audrey Santo and how its silence is saturated with meaning and power. In maintaining this as an interpretative frame for understanding the dynamics of the case of Audrey Santo, this article has also relied on the agency afforded by silence.

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