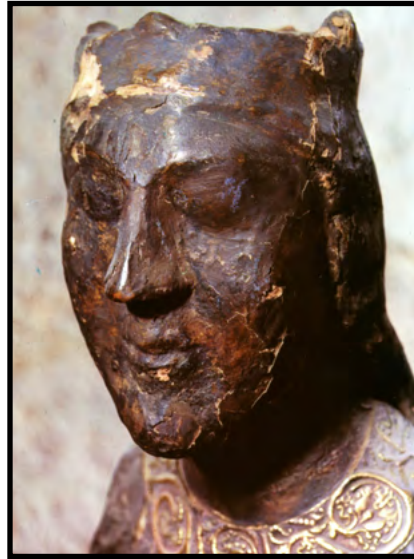


SEARCHING FOR THE SECRET OF THE BLACK VIRGIN

Jean Donohue, SRC

In 1978 I moved to Paris. My intention was to finish my Bachelor's Degree in Art History, focusing on iconography. My independent studies were to be in French Late Renaissance art. I shared an apartment with a friend from college. On the first part of the journey, I met up with one of my art history professors, two researchers, and a group of art history students from Geneva, Switzerland. Our brief was to visit and photograph potentially significant early Christian sites. We set out in three cars across the Alps toward Italy. My head spun from travel, cultural shock, and my failing French lessons. We stopped in Lake Como and stayed in a decaying chateau overlooking the lake. We spent one day hiking up an excruciating penitential trail to an early Christian church high above Milan. The next day was spent in the ancient center of Milan. We took notes and photographed a mural languishing in the dining hall of the fifteenth-century Convent of Santa Maria Delle Grazie. The damaged and fading mural was Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. Little did I know that in twenty-five years Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* would bring that painting into a global spiritual furor about the sacred feminine, and, that I was embarking on a life-long spiritual journey into the mysteries of the black virgin.

In addition to having the privilege of viewing Leonardo's masterpiece on the first leg of the trip, a memorable moment occurred in a field outside Milan. It was a warm, sunny day, and a welcome change from the cold damp of the Alps.



*Our Lady of Rocamadour.
Photo by F. Debaisieux.*

Our group was led by a crusty old farmer across a pasture when he suddenly stopped and pointed down. The group started disappearing into the ground. Stone steps led to an underground chamber hewn from the rock and soil. It was simple construction with two rooms joined by an arched doorway, and was surprisingly well lit with sunshine pouring in from hidden portals in the ceiling. The deepest room had a bowl-like receptacle carved into

the floor. After years of visiting churches, this was the first time in my life I felt the presence of something sacred. It was described as an early Christian site, but now with more informed hindsight it may have been a Cathar site or a secret underground sanctuary of the Knights Templar. The next day we moved on to Naples, in another month I was in Paris.

I stayed with a friend named Jean-Louis and his parents in their apartment below the Montmartre area. In late October, they invited me to go with them to the south of France. Along the way, we kept stopping at churches where his mother, Mme. Truel, would get out of the car and

go in. Eventually we pulled up alongside a very large cathedral in Lourdes. As she got out of the car one more time, I asked my friend what she was doing. He replied she did this pilgrimage every year, and that a lot of people in France, particularly women, visited these sites to pray to the Virgin Mary. I knew about that through my art history training, but had not seen anyone actually do it. He explained that the water at Lourdes was supposed to be special. Parked practically under the eaves of the great cathedral Our Lady of Lourdes, we didn't even bother to get out of the car. We dozed in the warm autumn breeze under the soft rattle of the leaves of the great sycamores that lined the street. She finally returned with a bottle of water.

Our final destination was a forest in Languedoc on the edge of the Grands Causses. As we drove through the landscape, I kept looking for signs of a town. Nothing broke the horizon, no church steeples or chimneys. Suddenly, we descended through a dark tunnel, which threatened to jettison us off into the sky like a rollercoaster. A sharp turn to the right and we skittered along a narrow lane cut out of limestone cliffs. We then entered the village of Rocamadour, an ancient town built on a sacred spring dedicated to Isis. It was in rubble and being rehabilitated; the main street was still dirt.

The main gate was an arch of stone, narrowly built, to allow for horses and wagons. The fortress and chateau loomed

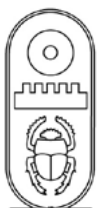
over the narrow main street and clung to a sheer rock face high above. My friend told me: "The town was built by a military order of monks." I wasn't Catholic; this did not mean anything to me. All I knew about religion was how to identify Christian saints in art. A rocky path to the sanctuary led to a steep, stone penitential stairway. Mme Truel was quite heavy. She slowly and painfully made her way up these stairs. We waited at the top beneath rows of sculptured disembodied heads of bearded men along the roofline. I was thinking to myself: what a strange place, why was it built in such solitude and secrecy, and why would she put herself through this?

Climbing yet another steep stairway, we entered a small, dark, rock-hewn room. The silence was thick and palpable. The space was more of a cave than a chapel. At the center of the room was a little icon, no more than twenty-four inches high. Our Lady of Rocamadour was a rough, burnt-looking, older female figure, painfully thin and her face distorted and strange. The child on her lap was weird, with a serious adult visage. Hers was a look of desolation and sadness, yet it was also emanating solace and power. She didn't look like anything I'd seen in art history books. Astounded, I wondered:

What is this? It was not the Virgin and Child I had studied in art history. Something shot through me at that moment; I too felt loss and grief. I connected with her on a fundamental level.



Our Lady of Rocamadour.
Photo by F. Debaisieux.



The whole experience left a mark, a door had opened. I didn't realize at the time but, I had been given a peek at an ancient mystery. Long denied by the Church, over seven hundred black virgin icons point to the existence of the sacred feminine, and their role in ancient initiatic ritual, and, a potentially explosive alternative history of Christianity and Western spirituality.

The memory of Our Lady of Rocamadour dwelled inside me for years. It was as though an alchemical spiritual change had occurred. At the same time, I was personally struggling with questions of spirituality and authenticity. My brothers, sister, and I grew up more or less unchurched. My mother was raised in a moderate Protestant church in Horse Cave, Kentucky, and my father was raised by Irish Jesuit priests in a boy's home outside New York City. To say the least, they did not agree on how we were to be raised in regard to religion. They were both intuitive. My mother saw auras and my father took dreams seriously.

Many of my generation rejected mainstream religions. To some, they were too contradictory, misogynistic, untrustworthy, and they regarded nature as something to control and exploit. We were asked to accept wild, Bible-based edicts as truth. Most importantly, most mainstream religions didn't offer practices that gave direct access to the Divine, something that I knew as a child was possible. I spent the next years secretly pursuing esoteric studies – Druidism, Merlin, the Grail legends, Anthroposophy, as well as Lakota

and Yoruba spirituality. All the while, Our Lady of Rocamadour endured in my heart. Questions were fermenting and bubbling to the surface: Why was she black? Who were these military monks? It wasn't until the late 1980s that I started to find some clues and direction as to why she was kept in that lonely room sheltered by the great cliffs of Rocamadour.

It seemed important to reconcile my interest in Egypt, its pyramids and temples, as well as Europe's indigenous traditions. Author Caitlin Matthews, in her book *The Western Way*, wrote: "The Knights Templar were the guardians of the Black Virgin." Reading this quotation took my breath away, as the memory of my encounter with the Black Virgin at Rocamadour rushed back to me. Were the Knights Templars the same monks that Jean-Louis had mentioned? Why would



*A Madonna statue above a doorway to a church in Marseille.
Photo by Jean Donohue.*

they be interested in the Black Virgin? It's easy to take for granted the amount of literature that is currently available about these matters. In the 1970s and 1980s there was very little, and scholarly work on the topic was not being generated by academia. It was considered too fringe and it could lay a scholar open to ridicule.

I am not one of those lucky seekers who have dramatic revelatory moments when the Cosmic drops an important book on my head. I have to pay attention. While in London, I visited Cecil Court, where Watkins Books, my favorite esoteric bookseller, was located. Poking around thousands of books about all kinds of spiritual traditions. I spotted Our Lady of Rocamadour; her image was the cover art

for Ean Begg's *The Cult of the Black Virgin*. At last!

Reading his book was like standing in a whirlwind, a crash course in prehistory, the pantheon, philosophy, Gnosticism, astrology, Christianity, and Jung. By 1985, Begg, a Jungian analyst and classics scholar, had documented, gathered oral histories, and published the locations of more than 500 Black Virgins. He'd found them in villages and towns throughout Europe, North Africa, the Caribbean, and the Americas. He associated Mary Magdalene and Isis with the Black Virgin. He pointed out that the Church denied them and attributed

their blackness to candle wax, dirt, and soot. He used the term "Divine Feminine," sometimes called "Sacred Feminine," in a meaningful way. He introduced the idea that Yeshua and Mary Magdalene were married following ancient traditions of the Divine Consorts. I knew I didn't understand the images exhibited in Begg's book. My iconographic training didn't penetrate the hidden meaning of Medieval and Renaissance art. My search had suddenly become bigger.

The more I pulled the threads, the more there were, and they were leading me further and further. By 1998, the magnitude of the challenge was becoming clear. There were so many mysteries that I decided to make a film. What are the Black Virgin Mysteries? What purpose do they serve? If I had these questions, so did others.

I needed to cover a lot of ground to fill in my knowledge gaps in history and

prehistory. I became a forensic spiritual detective. I wanted to establish the provenience of the Black Virgins (the material, local and historical context of the icons), as well as the provenance (the chain of custody) of the traditions, teachings, and practices related to them. Over time there was a growing foundation of scholarly work that shed light on the history of Christianity based on the Nag Hammadi library (Gnostic Gospels), the history of the Knights Templar, and the Black Virgin, particularly by French researchers. I am grateful for all of them. Ean Begg's early and original approach resonated

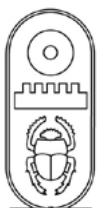
with me and was key for understanding the occult meaning of the Black Virgin.

I knew at the beginning that it was going to be a long road both as a seeker and a filmmaker. When I began writing and planning the film, it felt daunting and I knew it was going to be expensive. It was during this early period that I was first visited by the Divine Feminine. I was in my attic office writing and struggling with how to convince someone to help out. The subject matter was thought by many to be "too fringe

and too religious." Sitting at my desk, I felt a presence. In my mind's eye, I was looking over my left shoulder. A feminine figure bathed in a dark light was there. She didn't speak or gesture. She emanated peace and calm and made me feel that I was on the right track, perhaps *called*. This occurred a couple of times in the next few months, providing encouragement. Ever since I've called her Lady of the Dark Light and, if



Our Lady of Tindari in Sicily, Italy.



asked, she continues to assist at critical moments in my search.

In 2001, I realized that I needed to get back on the ground of southern France. It was the cold, grim winter after my mother had gone through transition. I decided to start at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, the reputed place where Mary Magdalene, Mary Salome, Mary Lazarus, possibly Yeshua, and forty-two apostles had landed after fleeing Jerusalem via Alexandria. This first visit provided a valuable lesson in history and geography. I drove into the Camargue, a tidewater area famous for Black Sara, Roma gatherings, flamingos, and indigenous white horses. The mistral, a cold, damp wind that comes across the mountains from the north, was ever present. This tourist and pilgrimage destination, with its bullring, seafood restaurants, and sandy beaches, presented a desolate winter scene.

I found a small hotel at the water's edge called Hotel La Plage (Beach Hotel). I was the only guest. The quiet would offer the peace I needed from being on the road. As I came up the stairs to find my room, I noticed the ease of the incline and the worn steps. I arrived on the second floor and was startled to find a woman's face peering out from a stone wall. It was Minerva, the Roman virgin goddess of poetry and wisdom! I realized this was an ancient Roman building that would have stood here when the three Marys arrived. This could have been the very same hotel they stayed in. People traveling for commerce or even vacationing in the ancient world

had been an unfamiliar concept for me at that point in time. In fact, the Romans were very fond of traveling for recreation and are documented to have had popular vacation spots in Turkey, Egypt, and Tunisia. The paradisiacal weather of Southern Gaul made it a preferred place for wealthy Romans and Jews alike. The remains of vineyards, sumptuous houses, and elaborate baths attest to it. The family of Herod Antipas even had a great estate up in the hills above Avignon.



*A Black Virgin above a doorway in Les Baux-de-Provence, France.
Photo by Jean Donohue.*

The Camargue region had, for millennia, been part of the trade routes of the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Greeks, and Romans. They also moved inland and settled in the fertile valleys throughout Gaul. They brought and kept a great diversity of spiritual practices, including that of the cults of Isis, Cybele, and Artemis. They mingled with the local indigenous traditions of the Druids,

and even older Neolithic venerations of the Great Goddess. I thought, "Of course, why wouldn't Yeshua and Mary Magdalene choose Occitanie as their refuge?" As I stood on the sandy beach facing Africa, I could see the tired, sunburnt Essene family easily disembarking from their boat into the shallow waters of Ra, now called Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. I should not have been surprised that there was an ancient hotel in this tiny beach town.

The question still remained, what did the Black Virgin icons have to do with Isis and Mary Magdalene? While studying maps and driving the country roads of France I realized I could trace Mary Magdalene's



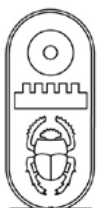
Our Lady of the Pillar (1508) in Chartres Cathedral, France. Photo via Flickr user Walwyn.

ministry by cross-referencing pilgrimage routes with Black Virgin sites listed in Ean Begg's gazetteer, and with the location of sacred springs and caves dedicated to Isis. I believe she used the pathways between some of these same places which became early Christian or more likely Gnostic settlements. Sites like Sion-Vaudemont and Saint-Germain-des-Prés housed black statues of Isis, and Roman Emperor Julian reported seeing a sculpture of a blackened mother and child statue called the *Virgo Paritura* (the virgin who will give birth), which was venerated by Druids at the pre-Christian site at Chartres. For the seeker, Black Virgin icons are most often found in churches and cathedrals that include "Our Lady" (Notre Dame) in the title, referring to the Dark Lady of the Knights Templars. They are also found in Templar commanderies scattered throughout France. At some sites, like the hot springs of Rennes-les-Bains, Mary Magdalene's visit is still recounted by locals. This overlap of place and time indicates a continuity of beliefs and practices.

Visiting many Black Virgin icons, I learned they are not always black in color; they can be brown, beige, and even white. Some are difficult to differentiate from

the Church's preferred white Virgin Mary and Child. Since Black Virgins were often created during periods of suppression, myriad symbols and visual references were used to distinguish them, to communicate their message. But it was not enough for me to view the icons and study their iconography. I needed to know what she was pointing to. What did she want me to know? What are her secrets?

The Black Virgin stands at sites where adherents to the teachings of "Our Lady" and Mary Magdalene once gathered and perhaps still do. Sometimes called the "other church," "Church of Light," or the Cathar "Church of Love," they indicate the presence of Gnostic and initiatory teachings. Their Sacred Knowledge flowed from the Egyptian mystery schools, the Essenes, the ancient "Temples of Love," through the Greek mystery schools and the Isis cults that lingered alongside the Druids, to an amalgam of Gnostic sects. Worshippers of the Black Virgin believe the human soul fell from "paradise" into matter in the far past, and that human consciousness was split: the Divine Feminine is consciousness that is of Divine potential/Heaven, and the Divine Masculine is consciousness that is of the

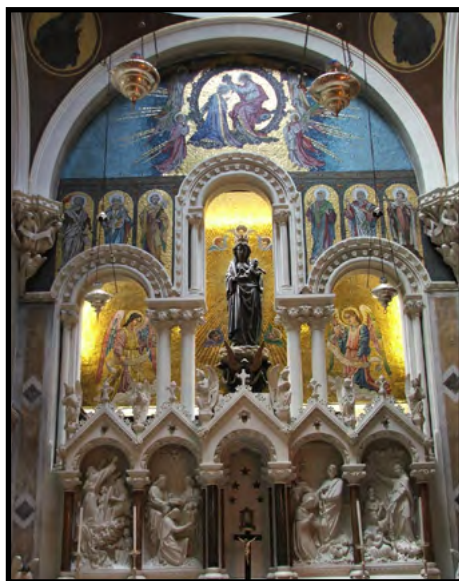


material existence/Earth. The Sacred Feminine seeks reunion with its earth-bound consort, the Divine Masculine; this is called Hieros Gamos, the divine marriage of these two potentials.

From deepest time, spiritual traditions included the Divine Consorts – Isis and Osiris, Shiva and Kali, Rosmerta and Wotan, Yeshua and Mary Magdalene. It is important not to get entangled with the idea of gender. Even though the Black Virgin is a female figure and references the Sacred Feminine, it refers to the energy of the Divine Source or Spirit. The Sacred Hermaphrodite is key to understanding the sacred union. Gnostic ritual and spiritual practices aim to attain the grace of the Sacred Feminine with the purpose of achieving liberation from the darkness of ignorance, to experience selflessness and immortality. A hermaphroditic figure found at an old Gnostic site had an inscription, “Love, you have made us one instead of two with higher virtue through wedlock.” This is what the Rosicrucians call Sacred Androgyny.

By the twelfth century, Occitanie was the light of Europe, a vibrant center of learning and science, philosophy and spiritual practices that were core to the evolution of human consciousness in the coming millennia. Many of the spiritual communities of Occitanie were anathema to the Church and were subjected to centuries of persecution and brutal suppression, driving them underground.

Despite the efforts of the Church, Gnostic and initiatory groups such as the alchemists, troubadours, Le Consistoire du Gai Savoir, L’Académie des Jeux floraux, Sufis, Kabbalists, Freemasons, and the Rosicrucian Order, as well as the Roma (Gypsies), have hidden, protected, and kept the Sacred Feminine mysteries at their heart and continue to perpetuate its traditions.



The shrine of Our Lady of Dublin, the representative of the Black Madonna of Ireland, in Whitefriar Street Carmelite Church in Dublin, Ireland.

My encounters with the Sacred Feminine mark a path illuminated by the dark light of the Black Virgins from France, Italy, Egypt, Spain, England, Ireland, Malta, Ethiopia, and Mexico. What I know is that there is a hidden underground stream flowing from an ancient fountainhead of Sacred Knowledge. The Sacred Feminine is real. It has been here, underneath the surface, percolating, giving signs, and pushing the

seekers along. The guardians of the Sacred Feminine did their work well. They hid just well enough in hopes that we would see the proverbial light piercing the veil. My encounter with the Black Virgin was spiritually alchemical in effect and called me onto a path to unlock her secrets, to find what happened to Western spirituality, and to discover my true spiritual roots and practice.

Jean Donohue recently retired as AMORC’s Grand Councilor for Washington and Oregon. Her film, *The [Terrible] Secret of the Black Virgin*, is a documentary.