Creating a Cult, Faking Relics

The Case of St. Dominic of Soriano

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This paper will, through the case-study of the miraculous icon of St. Dominic of Soriano, analyse how thanks to a multifaceted layering of falsehoods, a modest 16th-century painting was counterfeited into a miraculous icon, enabling a small convent in a marginal region of 17th-century Italy to become a leading cultural and cultic presence in the Dominican order in Italy, Spain and overseas. As Luisa Elena Alcalà has stated, "the history of religious images and the relationship of artists to them are similar across many geographical areas. Nonetheless, studying the local circumstances often allows us to identify cultural processes that distinguish how images were crafted to respond to the particular needs and situation of societies" (2009: 66).

The legend of the miraculous icon of St. Dominic of Soriano (fig. 1), as it is recounted in a hagiographical narrative,[1] narrates that on a night in December 1510, St. Dominic appeared three times in a vision to Brother Vincenzo, friar in the Dominican convent of Catanzaro, in Calabria, and invited him to leave his hometown and to visit Soriano, to build a new house. When Brother Vincenzo

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Figure 1: Paolo di Ciacio di Mileto(?), "Saint Dominic", before 1621, oil on canvas, San Domenico, Soriano.

arrives in Soriano, he finds a small community in assembly, debating on where to build a new convent, a detail that may testify to a rivalry with the Franciscans, who have just refused to build a new house in town. This aspect of the story should be historically analysed in the context of the new Dominican settlement campaign in Southern Italy, after two centuries during which a variety of historical circumstances contributed to the scattering and diffusion of the Order of Preachers.[2]

Upon his arrival in Soriano, Brother Vincenzo is considered a celestial messenger, and he promptly starts the building of the new house, characterized by subsequent miracles, which pertain to the location chosen and the apparition of the building material.

Twenty years later, in 1530, on the night before the octave of the Virgin Nativity, the sacristan, Lorenzo da Grotteria, descends into the church to light the candles, and sees three women of sublime aspect. He does not immediately realise that he is witnessing a celestial vision, and, upset, checks if the door is closed. Questioned by one of the three women for the church's name and its main icon, he answers that the church is devoted to St. Dominic, but it only has a poor fresco, close to the altar. One of the women, giving him a canvas, instructs him to place the new icon on the main altar. Since the sacristan is not trusted by his superiors, the image ends up being placed in the sacristy. Because of this collocation, which does not satisfy the divine will, St. Catherine appears again: She reveals her identity, and explains that the image was not painted on earth; it has been brought to the convent by herself, together with the Virgin Mary, and St. Mary Magdalene.

Forging a Legend

The first problem connected to this legend is the delay between the supposed miracle and the first hagiographical official accounts. The tale of the miraculous arrival of the image in 1530 and the story of the convent's miraculous origins (in 1510) are in fact recounted together for the first time only in a text published in 1621, *the Raccolta de' miracoli fatti per l'intercessione di san Domenico*,[3] by

2 | On the history of the Dominican Order in Calabria and southern Italy see Longo 1991: 137-38; Cioffari/Miele 1993: 11-22; Pellegrini 2005: 64-65, 98-115.

3 | Frangipane published the first version of the volume in Messina in 1621 and the following year the book was reprinted in Florence. For the history of Frangipane's text see Panarello 2001: 20-21, 24; 2009: 551. The most successful edition was the one issued in Florence, in 1622: The following quotes come from this version. The history of the miraculous foundation of the convent is told in Frangipane 1622: 42-45, the history of the arrival of the canvas, 45-48.

Silvestro Frangipane, prior of the convent twice, between 1609-1610 and again from 1620 to 1623 (Longo 1991: 138-51).

This retard leads to a complete critical rethinking of how we should date the creation of the Soriano miracle, and thus to the reasons behind manufacturing, or we may say faking, this cult. As it is recounted or rather 'created' by Frangipane, in 1609 Frate Agostino Galamini, Dominican general master, having witnessed the great multitude of miracles which happened in the sanctuary, ordered the friars to start to register them to increase the devotion towards the image and to spread its cult (1622: 52): In reality any written record of Galamini's order does not exist, and, as I will clarify, no conclusive argument demonstrates that Galamini was aware of the miracle and the cult when he visited Soriano. In 1611, in fact, Galamini published a *Vita et miraculi s. p. Dominici*, which is a sort of collection of prints about the patron's life. Surprisingly, the first one, *Vera effigies S. Dominici*, has no relationship with the Soriano icon, at a date when, according to Frangipane, Galamini should already have known the Calabrese canvas and already have ordered the official enquiry.

The first written mentions of the miracle date back, in fact, only to 1612 and are very vague: In a letter dated 30th August, Serafino Secchi, provincial master, orders that the next general chapter should be held in Soriano because of the daily miracles which happen in the convent, "propter miracula quae quotidie Soriani fiunt",[4] and during this provincial chapter Frangipane is elected as master for the Calabrese area. The next year, 1613, Frangipane sends to Galamini, the general master, a detailed relation on the Calabrese houses, and again, in this account no mention of the miraculous icon occurs (Longo 1991: 170-225). In 1620 Frangipane is back in Soriano (146) and in 1621 the first edition of the *Raccolta dei miracoli* is published and it contains the detailed account summarised above. Instead of imagining almost 60 years of a 'spontaneous' cult, it is more likely the miracle was 'manufactured' in 1609-1610, and Frangipane's narration is either a forged promotion of a local cult, or an immediate reaction to a spontaneous devotion. This hypothesis concerning the first emergence of the cult at the beginning of the second decade of the 17th century is present in the text of a friar from Antwerp, Nicolas Janssenius, who, writing in 1622 placed the miracle in 1610 (book II, chap. XII).

When it was founded, the Soriano settlement was not even technically a convent, but rather a small vicar house, in a marginal region that saw a very late expansion of the Dominican order; it was only during the general chapter of 1564, held in Bologna, that Soriano obtained the designation of 'convent' (Panarello 2001: 12). This marginality started to vanish in 1644, when Tommaso Turco was elected general master and the feast of Soriano was for the first time recorded in the act of a general chapter, together with the existence of a brotherhood devoted to the image.

4 | The document [Roma, Archivio Generale dell'Ordine dei frati predicatori, IV, 58, I, 14v. 18r] is quoted by Longo (1991: 142).

Is it thus possible to conceive an intentional strategy behind the creation of the Soriano painting as a miraculous icon, a strategy that will promote the Soriano area as a counter-reformed leading religious centre? We can answer this question considering the effects of the icon's presence in changing the denomination of the former small house of Soriano. Thanks to the active role of Frangipane in promoting the cult of the miraculous icon, the convent became the centre through which the Observant reform was first introduced and later established in Southern Italy. The 'localization' of the Soriano image in a formerly marginal region, and the ways in which the Calabrese Dominicans came to feel identified with their most famous cult image over time, played a fundamental role in the promotion of the devotional cult. When the *Raccolta dei miracoli* was published in 1621 it became not only a key text for the convent, but also, a key piece in promoting a new, clean and purified image of the Dominicans in Southern Italy, after the dramatic downfall of the Calabrese Dominican friar Tommaso Campanella. He was tried by the Inquisitions for his writings five times, and definitively condemned to death in 1601 by the Spanish authorities for conspiring to establish an ideal republic in Calabria in 1599 (Cioffari 2001). In fact, the ostracization of Tommaso Campanella from the Dominican order, and his subsequent condemnation, proceeded simultaneously with the invention and promotion of the cult of the Soriano icon, and the success of its main promoter or maybe counterfeiter, Frangipane, whose vision for the Dominican order in southern Italy had been strongly opposed by Campanella (Longo 1991: 150). Within this struggle internal to the order, a struggle that Campanella was destined to lose, it is possible to find the reasoning behind a 'retrospective' hagiographical narration and the forgery of a miraculous cult. Counterfeiting a cult and back-dating the miracle to the thirties of 16th century meant, for Frangipane, rewriting a turbulent past and reinventing a difficult memory.

The presence of the icon, and the cult devoted to it, in fact, changed the fate of the Dominican settlement: In 1652, the convent had become so powerful that it could buy from the Carafa family the fief of Soriano (Panarello: 15). But most importantly, the Soriano miracle was used to consolidate the relationship between the order and the Spanish crown, and to promote the small region of Soriano on an international and global scale (Caridi 2009: 55-67): In 1635, Philip IV sent as a votive gift a silver lamp, and placed the convent under his royal protection. Five years later, in 1640, again according to Philip IV's will and after a miracle which happened to the viceroy's son, St. Dominic was chosen as patron saint of the Naples Vicereame (Carrió-Invernizzi 2009: 190).

Earthquakes have also dramatically characterized the convent's story: The first one, in 1659, destroyed the convent and badly damaged the church; the only chapel, which survived — miraculously — is the one that preserves the holy canvas (Lembo 1665: 158-59). Most of the donations that arrived to

help rebuild the convent came directly from the Spanish viceroy, the count of Peñaranda.[5]

The following century the convent was devastated by another earthquake: On the night of 7th February 1783 the building, whose ambitious reconstruction was completed only a few decades earlier on the model of the Escorial in Madrid,[6] almost entirely collapsed. The region, ravaged by the Napoleonic invasions, remained so poor and deserted that the convent was only partially reconstructed in 1860, when the village became the site of a new miracle. When a statue of St. Dominic miraculously came to life in front of the community, the old cult was revitalized.

Forging the Icon

The convent's turbulent story explains the very poor condition in which the painting is preserved: According to 18th-century sources, the survival of the painting was considered miraculous; however, the canvas, which was transferred to wood after the 1783 earthquake, has been heavily repainted, and it may be considered a fake in itself, a highly restored or rather completely repainted icon.

The painting is nearly two metres high and 1.25 wide (so that St. Dominic's figure appears larger than life) and was initially preserved on the main altar, as prescribed by St. Catherine on her second apparition, and only later moved to a separate chapel, made of white marble, porphyry and bronze. The painting portrays the saint with the typical white Dominican dress and a dark mantel. The background showing a brick wall and an open window onto a landscape probably dates to a later stage of a so-called 'restoration', since it is absent from all the old copies, and appears for the first time in a print made in 1791.[7] It is interesting to read the account made to justify this evident repaint: Giovan Bettista Melloni, Bolognese priest and biographer of more than fifty saints, saw the image after 1783 and considered the brick wall and the window as part of the original, that, covered through centuries, miraculously reappeared only after the earthquake (Melloni 1791: 194). As reported again by Melloni, the 1783 earthquake had damaged the image so much that the canvas was broken into two separate parts and the rediscovery of the lower part, at first thought missing, was considered a miracle (191). On that occasion, the restorations were massive — and they were again considered miraculous, since the painter called to 'restore', or, more accurately, to repaint the canvas, found his work divinely completed without his intervention, a miracle

5 | On the viceré see Mauro 2007; 2009.

6 | The impressive building of the XVII century convent of Soriano is extensively reconstructed by various studies of history of architecture (Panarello 2001: 39-122; 2010).

7 | The print, by Bernardino Rulli, decorates Melloni.

that recalls the famous *topos* of the SS. Annunziata in Florence.[8] Maybe in one of those restorations the saint's beard was cleaned, a detail which appears in many antique copies (fig. 2),[9] but not on the present state of the icon. The beard is not an insignificant detail, since it is not typical of St. Dominic's traditional iconography: The difference between the Soriano typology and the more common Bolognese type may explain why, at a later stage, St. Dominic of Soriano was perceived as a new saint.

The Soriano icon is probably a painting that was already present in the convent when Frangipane created the miraculous forgery, promoting it as an icon not made by human hands. Instead, the icon is probably a work by Paolo di Ciacio di Mileto, a modest local painter active around the mid-15th century, author of the so-called *Madonna of the Pears*, for the Dominican church of S. Maria della Consolazione in Altomonte. It is highly probable that this 'old-fashioned', archaic and static composition positively contributed to its ripeness for a miraculous activation, after initially poor reception or even contempt, for which possible background is provided in the account of St. Catherine's second apparition.[10]

The painting started to have an increasingly outstanding role in the Dominican order, even displacing the saint's relics, preserved for three centuries in Bologna in a monumental sepulchre, which hides and obscures the body itself.[11] Unusually, St. Dominic's body is preserved almost entirely in Bologna (only the head is in a separate reliquary since 1383) (Faranda/Rosetus 1998), but the image was the vehicle for the spreading and renewal of the 13th-century cult: It is basically through the Soriano icon — which fixes, and multiplies a new iconographical typology — that St. Dominic became a leading Counter-Reformation and thaumaturgical saint, whose only competition in Southern Italy was the increasing popularity of St. Francis of Paola.[12] The Soriano case works as a visual paradigm: The miraculous image and its copies come to renew and later to substitute the cult of the relics preserved in Bologna, and St. Dominic of Soriano, who appears in numerous visions to believers and ill people, proudly affirms his identity (*I am the St. Dominic of Soriano and not of Bologna* as it is written in many of the accounts of his miraculous epiphanies).

8 | See, with previous bibliography, Holmes 2013: 57.

9 | The beard is very evident in the print by Nicolas Perrey "San Domenico da Soriano fonte perenne di Grazie" datable at the beginning of XVII century (published in Panarello 2001: 35) and again in the anonymous print that illustrates the 1733 edition of the Acta Sanctorum, in which the saint actually has long and curious moustaches (present also in the copy by Raffellino in S. Chiara, Carpi).

10 | On this topic, see at least Alcalá 2009: 55-73; Holmes 2013: 160.

11 | On the Arc of Saint Dominic in Bologna see Moskowitz 1994.

12 | On the cult for San Francesco di Paola see Sallmann 1996: 83-120.

Figure 2: Francesco Caivano, "Saint Dominic", 1648, Museo Diocesano Antonio Marena, Bitonto.

At the end of this complex devotional process, the icon was itself able to produce relics: In Palermo in 1741, the *particula ex sacris ossibus Gloriosi sancti Dominici Suriani confessoris* appears (literally: a small part of St. Dominic of Soriano's bones). The saint of Soriano somehow became a new, independent saint, whose cult was promoted by the Dominican order, and whose relics are also collected and venerated.[13]

Copies and Forgeries

The phenomena of relic production had already begun in the 17th century, when contact relics were being documented. Contact relics are manufactured by a saint's body, 'touching' the miraculous icon with a new material that, upon contact, becomes miraculous in itself. As already recounted in Frangipane, the oil of the lamps burning in front of the canvas was considered miraculous.[14] The same happens to the *misure*, literally, the 'dimensions' of the icon: Small ribbons made of canvas, with the same length of the icon, were used particularly in cases of difficult pregnancies (Lembo 1665: 20-21). The relics were used to multiply the icon's miraculous power, and even to substitute the miraculous seeing of the icon for those who could not reach the sanctuary; but they also work as powerful material memories, helpful for those returning from a pilgrimage, who wanted to take home a fragment of the miraculous power for themselves, their family or even their animals, as is attested by a 17th-century blessing.[15]

The mechanism of copying and reproducing the miraculous image is part of this forgery: Focusing mainly on the miraculous activations of the copies in the last part of my paper I will describe some case studies taken from the network that I am reconstructing. Those examples will clarify how Soriano's cult was used to promote the Dominicans' role not only in Southern Italy, but also, thanks to a miraculous copy in Madrid, the Iberian Peninsula, and, later, the Americas; and how those copies — sort of certified fakes — spread and popularized the devotion overseas.[16]

In the first descriptions of the image, the icon is described as being so beautiful that it couldn't have been made by human hands (Frangipane 1622: 48): That the icon's

13 | The authenticity of the relic is certified in 1741, as recounted by Casillas García 2006: 383.

14 | See for example the miracles listed by Frangipane 1622: 18, 27, 50, 114, 228; Lembo 1665: 18-19.

15 | See for example the blessing for the animals: *Benedizione de' Cordoncini tagliati alla misura dell'immagine del S. Patriarca S. Domenico per salvaguardare gli animali*, quoted by Zucchi 1951.

16 | The issues of copying a miraculous image is addressed by Belting 1994: 440; Freedberg 1989: 142; Holmes 2013: 145.

beauty itself is evidence of divine production is obviously a *topos* which dates back to the *acheiropoieta* images attributed to St. Luke, an aesthetic observation clearly contradicted by the material evidences of the painting (Portús Pérez 2009: 40-43).

The Soriano icon, in Frangipane's words, has another peculiar characteristic: It is not only so beautiful that it couldn't have been made by human hands, but also it is thanks to its divine beauty that is impossible to copy, despite the vain attempts of various artists (1622: 48-49).

Beyond Frangipane's words, the cultic and performative reality of the miraculous icon of Soriano was very different: Between the 17th and 18th century, the Soriano image was continuously copied and multiplied.[17]

It is possible to subdivide the immense network of the copies into two basic groups. The first series consists of paintings that reproduce the Soriano icon exactly: The first copies appear in nearby Dominican convents, such as in Bitonto; where a linen dated 1648 and signed by its author, Francesco Caivano, is displayed in a massive baroque structure — a peculiar case of a miraculous image made and authenticated by human hands (fig. 2; Pasculli Ferrara 1998).

Despite the trope of the impossibility of the image's reproduction by artists, the production of copies started in the Soriano sanctuary itself: In a description of the convent's situation after the 1783 earthquake a reproductions atelier is documented, close to the convent itself, where a group of artists (or rather craftsmen) were deputized to copy the image. Given the high number of copies, we can imagine that a similar set-up existed in the 17th century (Panarello 2001: 217-22). In fact, the text "this is the true portrait of St. Dominic of Soriano" which appears in many early Calabrese copies (but also in Bruges, Empoli, Liguria and Taggia),[18] could be the proof of a 'certificate of authenticity' requested by Dominican convents and may refer to the copies manufactured directly in Soriano or at least approved by the convent.

But in the 17th and 18th centuries, copying the Soriano icon usually meant not a simple reproduction of the icon, but a reproduction of the performative *mise-en-scene* of the miracle related in Frangipane's account, with a painting within a painting, an iconography that probably derives from the 17th-century clay frame, recorded by the sources and lost in the 18th century's earthquakes.[19]

17 | In recent years, many studies on the copies have appeared: See the repertories drawn by Stagno (for the Liguria; 2009), Marías and Carlos Varona (on the Spanish copies; 2009) and Čapeta Rakić (for a Dalmatian copy that is derived from the Bertarelli print; 2013).

18 | Stagno 2009: 720-21, with useful reconstruction of the diffusion of the Soriano iconography in Liguria, where at least fourteen different canvases are documented.

19 | All the material pertaining to the baroque frame, with a possible reconstruction, is documented in Panarello 2010: 182-83.

Figure 3: Saint Dominic of Soriano and his miracles, 18th century, Civica Raccolta Bertarelli, Milan.

The Iberian success of this cult — thanks to a series of those copies and translations of Frangipane's text — changed the fate of the convent and its icon. In the 1620s — immediately after the publication of Frangipane's text — a print of the Soriano miracles, probably similar to the sheet now preserved at the Civica Raccolta delle Stampe Bertarelli (fig. 3), arrived for Padre Francisco de Sotomayor, prior of the Dominican convent of St. Tomas in Madrid, who asked the painter and Dominican friar Juan Batista Maino to paint the scene with the miraculous arrival (Panarello 2009: 537-55). Maino's altar was consecrated on 13th May 1629. The Madrid convent of St. Tomas became the first Spanish devotional centre. It was soon followed by the female Dominican convent of Santo Domingo el Real, which hosted from 10th July 1638 a painting of the same subject made by Vicente Carducho (Colocacion 1638). Both Carducho's and Maino's painting are now lost, but a print taken by Pedro da Villafranca after Charduco's in 1638, together with the numerous other versions made by the two painters throughout their careers (fig. 4), clearly show their relationship and dependence on the model drawn by the Italian print.[20]

During the procession made to enshrine the painting, Carducho's copy for St. Domingo el Real performed miraculous healings: In the presence of more than 200 Dominicans, friars and nuns, the miraculous power of the Soriano icon was prodigiously transferred to the Madrid copy, a sort of fraudulent activation that substituted for the forged original (Colocacion 1638).

What happened in Madrid is very different from what occurred in Naples, in 1652. Here, as it is recounted in an anonymous libellus, the *Trionfo di S. Domenico in Soriano*, printed in Naples in 1653, a possessed woman was brought in front of a copy in the church of S. Maria della Salute, but the demons, once seeing the copy, considering it a fake, refused to leave and forced her to go on a pilgrimage to the true Calabrese icon. Despite the failure, the first attempt to heal the woman in front of a copy means that, except in peculiar cases that required the original power of the true icon, the practice of substituting the icon and its power with a manufactured copy was indeed common.

A Successful Devotion Overseas

The miraculous activation of the first Spanish copies moved the devotional centre of the Soriano cult from Southern Italy to the central Iberian Peninsula, and it is not by chance that in 1666 Antonio Gonzales was the first Spaniard who obtained the role of Dominican general master (Carrió-Invernizzi 2009: 190). From the Iberian Peninsula, a new "colonization of the imagery"[21] began to play out in the Americas:

20 | On the Maino paintings see Marías/Carlos Varona 2009: 71-73; Carlos Varona 2002. On the Madrid copies see Collar de Cáceres 2005.
21 | The expression is the title of a famous book by Gruzinski.

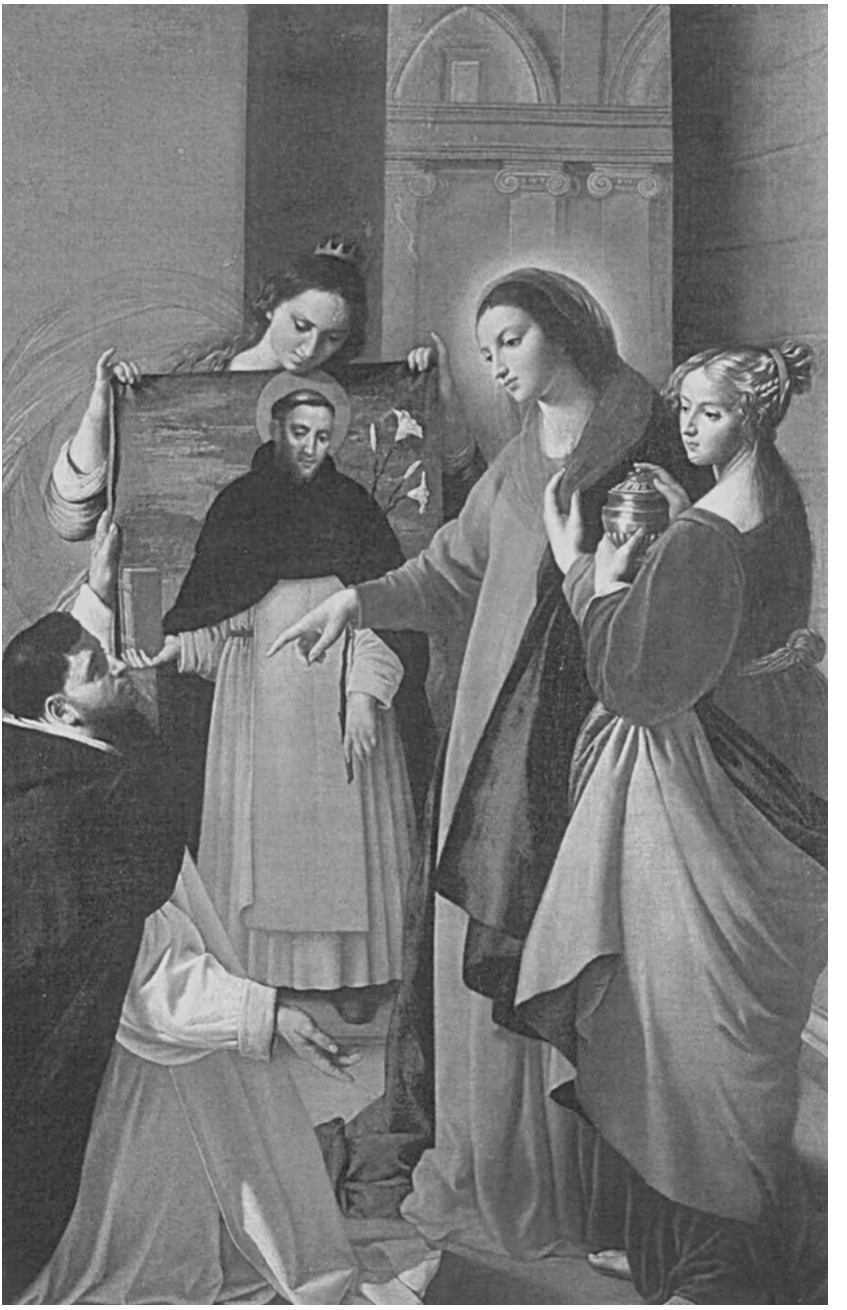

Figure 4: Juan Bautista Maino, "Appearance of the Virgin to St. Dominic in Soriano", 1630s, Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg.

The icon was used to prevent a flood in Mexico City in 1630,[22] and, when the Dominicans settled in Uruguay, they renamed the first Spanish colony Santo Domingo de Soriano, now known as Villa Soriano.[23]

In all Spanish copies, the core of the painting, the Soriano icon itself, seems to remain unchanged, at a moment when the true icon was in fact about to be repainted and completely forged by adding the brick wall as the background: A fake icon that had become a true relic, was offered through the narrative image to the devotees' adoration.

To sum up and conclude: In this multifaceted stratification of fakes, firstly, we have a miraculous image that changed the role and the fate of a religious order in a formerly marginal region, an image that does not even exist anymore in its original conditions: Damaged by subsequent earthquakes and completely repainted, the icon is now a fake in itself. Secondly, the hagiographical account that popularized the icon's miracles is probably highly forged, at least in how it anticipates the cult, for specific political reasons. Thirdly, later in its veneration, the icon created fake relics, venerated in Palermo, such as the rather mysterious apparition of a saint's bone, whose body is venerated and preserved (presumably intact) elsewhere. Moreover, the mechanism that led to the production of many copies of the miraculous image — sort of certified reproductions, or true 'fakes' — raises issues about artistic reproduction of icons supposedly not made by human hands, but also with respect to the role of the artists who made, repaired, and restored the original image through the centuries, and were responsible for the copies that popularized this devotion.

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22 | In 1629-1630 Santo Domingo de Soriano is called to protect Ciudad del Mexico during a series of floods. See Ragon 2002: 371-72. A painting representing the miraculous arrival is documented in Mexico City in 1645. See Esponera Cerdán 1992: 91.

23 | The village now known as Villa Soriano was actually built by the Franciscans in 1624 and only around 1662 was renamed Santo Domingo de Soriano. See Esponera Cerdán 1992: 75-95.

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