



Nigra sum. Cults, sanctuaries and images of the Black Madonnas in Europe
Sanctuary and Sacred Mount of Oropa - Sanctuary and Sacred Mount of Crea
International Convention 20-22 May 2010



Presentation of the Conference

The *Documentation Centre for European Sacred Mounts, Calvaries and Devotional Complexes*, and the *Special Natural Reserve of the Sacred Mount of Oropa*, in collaboration with the *University "Cattolica del Sacro Cuore" of Milan*, the *Sanctuary of Oropa* and the *Sanctuary of Crea*, announce the International Conference on the dissemination of the Black Madonnas in Europe. The Conference, which takes place in **Oropa** (in the province of Biella) and **Crea** (in the province of Alessandria) **from the 20th to the 22nd of May 2010**, hosts lecturers from across Europe to discuss a theme which, being of interest to several European devotional sites, has been the focus of research and debate for decades.

The Sacred Mounts of Oropa and Crea, as significant components of the devotional complexes of the homonymous Sanctuaries, figure on the site "Sacred Mounts of Piedmonts and Lombardy", recognized by the UNESCO World Heritage List (July 2003). Both are described as being 'of exceptional and universal historical, artistic and scientific value'. In consequence of such international recognition, the *Piedmont Region* created the Documentation Centre for the Sacred Mounts, Calvaries and European devotional complexes, situated on the site of the Sacred Mount of Crea, whose aim is to safeguard and promote the religious site itself, with its historical, artistic and cultural patrimony, through a program of scientific research and scholarly debate. For this purpose Oropa and Crea have been selected as ideal locations to host the International Conference.

The Sanctuary of Oropa, whose ancient origin is connected to Saint Eusebius, is the centre of the cult of the Black Madonna, which to this day attracts thousands of worshippers. According to the legend Saint-Eusebius, fleeing the Arian persecution, diffused the Marian cult across Piedmont. Thenceforth his name would be connected with **the Sanctuaries of Oropa and Crea**. Unfortunately after the 1981 restoration the Black Virgin venerated in the Sanctuary of Crea lost its original dark tinge.

The Madonnas of several Marian Sanctuaries situated across Europe present a black or light brown hue. *Oropa*, *Crea*, *Varese* and *Loreto* in Italy; *Montserrat* in Spain, *Czestochowa* in Poland; *Einsiedeln* in Switzerland, *Rocamadur* in France are the most notable examples of a little known phenomenon, the occurrence of dark-skinned representations of the Virgin. For centuries such unusual colour for images, icons and polychrome statues of the Virgin has been considered an enigma, stimulating both research and scholarly debate. Experts, worshippers and religious authorities have been frequently found to disagree. In the context of medieval and modern religion, as well as of traditional iconography, the Black Virgin is a conspicuous exception. In the medieval imaginary the colour black is connected to darkness, sin and evil.

Several scholars argue that the dark hue might be a consequence of soot, produced by the constant burning of devotional candles in front of the images, or else that it might be caused by accidental

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fires that miraculously spared them. The black images could also be connected with ancient cults dedicated to the pagan mother goddesses, consequently 'assimilated' into the accepted forms of Marian cult with the advent of Christianity.

The only reliable source, amidst such numerous theories, is the well-known description of the bride in the Song of Songs: '**Nigra sum, sed formosa,**' 'I am black but beautiful'. In the Middle Ages several interpretations of the biblical passage tend to focus on the role of the Church and humanity in general, rather than on the Virgin, who is nonetheless considered the mother of mankind.

The phenomenon of popular devotion to the Black Madonnas touches not only upon religious and artistic issues, but is also of interest to the disciplines of anthropology, social studies, history and politics. It is not accidental that several of the previously mentioned devotional sites have benefited, throughout history, of a national as well as international reputation, attracting pilgrims and worshippers from remote countries.

The European Black Madonnas represent a shared religious, historical, artistic and cultural heritage, of the sort that can promote European identity and a sense of belonging beyond the observance of common laws and the participation to transnational projects. The Oropa and Crea Convention does not aim at exhausting all the possible issues raised by the topic, however it does aspire to embody that principle of 'unity in diversity', which reminds us of Ecumenism and most notably of Europe's motto.

Scientific Committee

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