

[Opinion](#)
[Guest Voices](#)



The author repaired this Mary statue, which stands on a counter of Alta Baja Market, a restaurant in Santa Ana, California. (Gustavo Arellano)



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My wife is not a person of faith, but she nevertheless respects the devotion to saints we Catholics maintain. That's why when she opened Alta Baja Market, a restaurant in Santa Ana, California, Delilah (don't hold the name against her) made sure to fill it with them.

Votive candles warm tables during the winter. A mural of St. Anne embracing the Virgin Mary as a child looks over customers eating. Small devotional cards behind the register feature the Santo Niño de Atocha, the Virgen de Guadalupe and St. Martin of Tours — the first two apparitions are favorites among all Mexicans, while business owners favor the latter saint, known in Mexico as San Martin Caballero.

Alta Baja Market specializes in foods and products of the American Southwest, so we've picked up other saints in our travels across the region over the years. They include a wooden St. Francis of Assisi and a New Mexico-style tin retablo of San Pascual, the patron saint of cooks. But our favorite find was a foot-tall ceramic statue of the Virgin Mary that we bought in Las Cruces.

It was a manifestation of the Miraculous Medal. Mary slightly smiles as she stands on a large green snake with an apple in its mouth. Her hands are stretched out in love, and her cloak is imperial blue. The medal's traditional backside — 12 stars, two hearts, and a crossbar and cross over the letter M — sits by Her feet.

To see Mary shattered before me was a reminder that when we see something sacred broken, we must do everything possible to fix it.

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We placed this Mary on a counter near the kitchen next to a giant jar of kumquats in vodka — a reminder, I told Delilah, that Jesus' first miracle happened after his mom told him that partygoers needed some booze. Our Mary saw us through the death of my mother in 2019, the COVID pandemic, construction in front of Alta Baja that threatened its livelihood and so much more.

Her prominent position near the kitchen meant Mary was never out of our sight, minds and hearts. Which is why when the Miraculous Medal statue wasn't there one day during the lunch rush, I immediately knew something was wrong.

"Oh, someone bumped into the wall and the statue fell," Delilah said sadly.

Delilah gestured toward a low counter, where Mary now lay. A hole was where Her face once glowed. Her body was severed from the base with the snake, which now seemed to grin in triumph. Shards were all strewn all around.

"Don't worry, I'll glue it back for you," she tenderly assured me. But I was inconsolable.

"No," I told my wife. "I'll glue it myself."

"You're not good at those things," Delilah replied, and she was right. She's a Tetris whiz, while I was the kid who pounded the proverbial square peg into round holes — still do. But I insisted I would and could put Mary back.

Nothing is permanent in this life except death, of course. But to see Mary shattered before me was a reminder that when we see something sacred broken, we must do everything possible to fix it.

I found more Mary, including Her lopped-off face, under one of Alta Baja's produce carts. After a quick trip to our local hardware store for clear Gorilla Glue, I began to plan my reclamation project while watching CNN as a reminder of why we must pray to Mary more than ever so that God can reunite our divided country.

With Mary in pieces, I noticed things I hadn't before. We had allowed years of dust to turn into grime in the folds of Her tunic. A sticker on the base said the statue was a product of Turtle King, a California company that imports and sells home tchotchkes. Ebay currently lists a lot of Virgin Mary Turtle King statues, but not ours — making her even more special.

The damage wasn't as bad as I first thought. Only her face and the base needed attention, and the remaining shards were big enough that all I had to do was figure out how to jigsaw everything back together.

I began by gluing a sliver of brown ceramic hair to the top of Mary's face. I followed with a bit of Her veil. I tried to put all that into the hole where her visage once

existed. But I didn't shove all the parts together as tight as they should, so it wasn't fitting comfortably in its original place. I had to carefully take apart my work and start over.

As a journalist, I live by the rule of doing things as fast as possible so you can finish first. Now, I had to remember Mary's lived lessons of patience. She waited patiently for Christ to grow in her womb. She endured the tribulations of exile in Egypt and a rambunctious son. John 19:25 tells us, "Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother along with Mary's sister and Mary Magdalane."

Patience is a virtue too many of us forget in these internet times, and putting this statue back together wouldn't be a quick thing. I breathed, uttered a Hail Mary, and returned to my work

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After multiple attempts, I successfully affixed Mary's face to Her head, although the right side was missing. That was OK. I then slotted Mary's body atop the base, the snake's beady eyes staring at me as I wiped off excess glue. I positioned Her to dry overnight so that Mary's half hand — I couldn't find its fingers — could rest on a box and bear the weight. All that was left was the Miraculous Medal, which would go where a giant hole remained.

The following morning, I shook Mary to see if my work would hold — it did! But I realized that I should've put the Miraculous Medal in before gluing Mary's body to her base. There was no way I could wedge in the Medal without causing further harm, so I glued it as best as I could. There was one more piece missing ... which I accidentally shoved into the hole, never to be recovered but now anointing my Mary statue with a permanent rattle.

Delilah saw my work. "You did good!" she said. We gave Mary a gentle scrubbing and brought her back to Alta Baja.

Mary stands again next to the giant jar of kumquat vodka, more glorious than ever. Now, if anyone notices Alta Baja's glued-back Mary, we have a story to tell. And any time I see Her, I'll remember not just Mary's love, but the most important lesson She taught me this time:

Patience, my hurried child, patience.