

El Santuario de Chimayo: New Mexico's Lourdes

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photography the by author

Sacred Places

Sacred sites are not selected, we comply. The act of consecrating a place is an acknowledgment of something immensely holy and obvious to those involved. Rationales may be summoned, facts assembled and anointed, but this is all a mere formality to support what is plainly and thoroughly felt.

The sacred is not rational, but facts are not the truth.

To many, all of Nature is holy. But in our daily lives we experience that feeling locally - in a certain cultural landscape that has become our home. Certain rare places take on extraordinary spiritual power, as if a small crack in the earth's secular crust opens to reveal the divine. The world has such compelling sites. They may be broad terrains or small nodes. The Navajo world, "Dinétah," framed by four sacred mountains, the Golden Temple in the Punjab, Mecca, Jerusalem, and Mt. Fuji are examples. Each has intense cultural meaning, but is also a gate of heaven and passageway to personal transformation. Sacred sites are geography where miracles are expected.

Northern New Mexico is the location of the largest religious pilgrimage in the United States. Each Good Friday over 30,000 people flock to Chimayo, a small Hispano village thirty miles north of Santa Fe. At the heart of a cluster of modest adobe dwellings and trailer houses is a small folk church - El Santuario de Chimayo. This is a place where believers find healing. Some even call it the Lourdes of New Mexico. But it isn't water that brings miracles here; it is the dirt itself, dirt with a long history.

Northern New Mexico

Northern New Mexico was a center of ardent colonialism. Spanish exploration commenced with Coronado in 1540 but conquest began in 1598 when Don Juan de Oñate moved up the Rio Grande into a region called "Rio Arriba" - the Upper River.

Geographers and historians studying this region have most often focused their work on the political, economic, and land tenure facets of this settlement process. This area was rich in timber, water, forage, and minerals, and the struggle between Indian, Hispano, and Anglo groups for "ownership" of this landscape was and continues to be one of most intense in North American history.

Yet, Northern New Mexico's fractious geography of land grant disputes and rebellions does not totally define life here. Neither does the marvelous light captured on canvas by painters such as Georgia O'Keefe. Even conflicts over the recent in-

migration of wealthy Anglos into an Indian/Hispano homeland does not adequately explain the passion local people feel for this astonishing place.

Northern New Mexico is also explained by devotion - by the religious connections between the land, human beings, and their gods. These connections run as deep as bone and rock.

El Santuario de Chimayo

For New Mexico's Catholics, the Santuario in the village of Chimayo is a cosmic pillar made of mud. The simple adobe building is rich in the poetic architecture of faith. Two square bell

Map of Northern New Mexico showing location of Chimayo.



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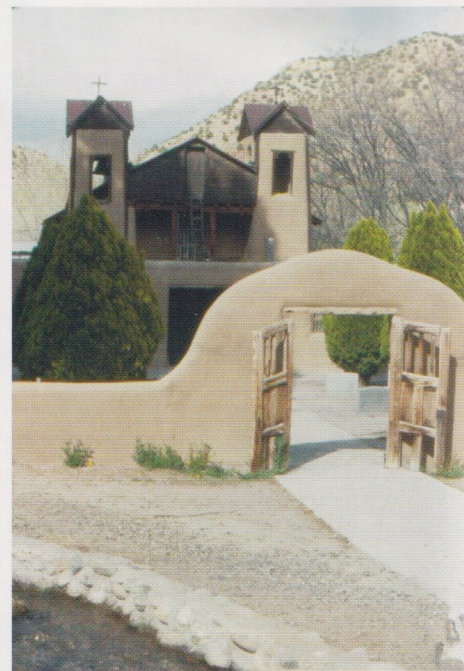


Rural life in Northern New Mexico: the Chimayo landscape.

towers rise above a modest rectangular chapel. Low adobe walls surround the courtyard and a dozen gravestones. A small acequia (irrigation ditch) meanders around the front of the building. Out back, a creek completes the fluid circle. Stations of the Cross have been marked beside the furrowed trunks of a dozen tall cottonwood trees. In the fall, bright yellow leaves float onto open air benches where the devout attend mass while magpies swoop and sing overhead. Cooing pigeons chime in from the vernacular chapel's shadowy eaves. Horses and cows stroll and graze across the

creek in small, perfectly green pastures. A priest puts it plainly: "Nature attracts itself here."

The Santuario is not particularly old. It was built in 1816 when Chimayo functioned as a Spanish border garrison against raids by Apache, Comanche, and Navajo. The Santuario arose during isolation, but its seemingly local history embraces broad swaths of Latin American geography. The church's true name is "El Santuario de Nuestro Señor de Esquipulas" (The Shrine of Our Lord of Esquipulas). Two thousand miles to the south is the Guatemalan city of



El Santuario de Chimayo

Esquipulas where a massive, white, baroque church houses a six-foot-tall crucifix. Nailed to the hard wood is the intense, suffering image of a Black Christ - el Cristo Negro. Legend speaks of a time when a Mayan leader named Esquipulas allowed the Spanish to settle here without violence. In exchange, the town thrived as a colonial trade center where conversion to Catholicism was widespread. Yet, the Mayans found a way to resist conquest by canting this new religion toward their own culture. Christ would be dark-skinned. He would look like a Mayan.

El Cristo Negro was carved from balsam and orange wood. Its brown color quickly turned black from the smoke of countless candles and incense burners placed at Christ's bleeding feet. By 1595, the crucifix was placed in a chapel built at the former site of an Indian shrine known for its clear, flowing springs. Miraculous healings began to be reported by those praying to the figure. Pilgrims descended from cloudy, mountain refuges to seek comfort against the disease and want of colonialism. Geophagy - earth eating - had long been practiced by the Mayans as a source of trace minerals and spiritual medicine. The increasingly mestizo population of Guatemala quickly melded Catholicism and Indian belief into a melange of practices. Clay cakes, "tierra de Santo" or "benditos," were made, and each adorned with the image of the Nuestro Señor de Esquipulas. The cakes were sold to pilgrims who ate the dirt as a form of sacrament. Spanish and Mayan cultures,



Open air services are held out back beside flowing water and cottonwood trees.



A seventy pound cross carried thirty miles to el Santuario by a pilgrim.

although separate at their cores, became interwoven around the church.

By the early 1800s, the landscape of New Mexico had also been transformed into a significant but isolated Spanish colony. However, increasing trade with Indians selling American goods from the Santa Fe Trail was beginning to connect the colony to the outside world. Most of this contact was focused on Santa Fe. In remote villages like Chimayo, ancient, even medieval ways of

land and life proceeded largely unaffected by this 19th century version of modernity.

Rural portions of Northern New Mexico did not have enough priests to serve the growing populace. In the absence of a formal clergy, Los Hermanos Penitentes - "the Penitent Brothers" - arose as a lay priesthood to serve the religious needs of villagers. This secretive sect was banned by the Roman Catholic Church until well into the twentieth century. But in the early

1800s, the Penitente message was spoken openly and quickly attracted an earnest brotherhood of believers. Since many rural Hispanos received only irregular contact with formal Catholic orthodoxy, the region became a hotbed of religious innovation.

The origin of El Santuario de Chimayo and its strange connection to Nuestro Señor de Esquipulas came during this period. The story is rich in legend. One version, supported by archival documents in the Diocese of Durango, Mexico, says that a Guatemalan priest traveled to Chimayo in 1808. "El Padre de Esquipulas," the Father from Esquipulas, preached to Hispanos and Puebloan people until being killed by Indians seeking to rid the landscape of Europeans. He was buried at Chimayo. Days later the Santa Cruz River swept away the soil covering the grave, exposing his body and the large crucifix that never left his side. In this story, the Santuario was built to honor the spot where this revered Guatemalan priest was re-interred. The structure was built at a site that Tewa Indians believed to be sacred.

The most repeated account of the origin of El Santuario begins on a Good Friday in 1810, when a Penitente named Bernardo Abeyta was performing services in the eroding sandstones above Chimayo. He saw a bright light rise up from the valley. Abeyta rushed down and dug with his bare hands to find the source of this strange illumination. Soon, a large crucifix appeared in the hole. Abeyta left the cross where it lay, and rushed off to bring neighbors and a priest to uphold the miracle. Father Sebastian from nearby Santa Cruz arrived and held the cross over his head for all to see. He then led an ecstatic procession back to the parish church where the cross was set in the main altar's niche. By dawn of the next day, the crucifix had disappeared and was later found back in the hole at Chimayo. This happened a second and then a third time. Finally, Abeyta argued that the cross belonged in his village, in a small personal chapel - an "ermita" - that his family had erected. The larger Santuario of today was completed in 1816 as the proper resting place of the crucifix, the shrine that God intended. In this version, little explanation is offered of the Guatemalan name of the church. For most people visiting the shrine, toponymy is irrelevant. Call the place El Santuario de Chimayo or El Santuario de Nuestro Señor de Esquipulas - no matter. The faithful believe it is a place of actual miracles.

Pilgrimage

The Spanish brought the practice of pilgrimage with them to the New World. There are many pious sites visited by pilgrims in Spain. Often these are the burial place of martyred saints. Santiago de Compostella is one of the most important. It is said that the body of the apostle St. James appeared here following his death. For centuries, Spanish pilgrims have walked great distances to pray at the church erected there. Tens of thousands still visit each year.

El Santuario de Chimayo attracts more than 30,000 pilgrims in a single day - Good Friday. The local village is transformed into the axis mundi, the center of the world, but anyone can gain entry. Pilgrims walk here from Nambe and Española, five and ten miles distance wearing shorts and running shoes, orange reflector vests and rosary beads, sweat-stained baseball caps and frayed blue jeans. Formality is unimportant, even inappropriate. This is a day to feel Christ's pain, to sacrifice a bit of your body as a corporeal form of thanks. Some even walk all the way from Albuquerque, 80 miles; still others trek from Santa Fe, 30 miles to the south. A few carry heavy wooden crosses on their backs. Not too many years ago, pilgrims crawled the last mile on bleeding hands and knees.

Upon reaching El Santuario, pilgrims hug each other in the parking lot and laugh loudly. Some weep. Shoes and socks are removed and tired feet are soaked in the acequia out front. Tacos and gorditas are sold to the hungry people from the porches

of adjacent houses. Souvenir shops like the Vigil Store sell santos - carved statues - and plastic images of La Conquistadora and lesser saints. The size and boisterousness of the pilgrimage to Chimayo now offends those who visit the church year-round and know it is a hushed, private place. But most view the revelry as joy, as a wonderfully human response to the divine power of perseverance.

The Chapel

It is inside El Santuario, that quiet displays of personal belief can be viewed. The narrow adobe chapel has square beams (vigas) and high airy ceilings. A central adornment rises in back of the altar. It is a magnificent reredos - a sacred painting that is attached to a decorated, hand-carved wooden tabernacle. A rough-hewn replica of the Crucifix of Our Lord of Esquipulas dominates its heart. Four other reredoses cover the side walls of the church. Saints such as St. Anthony and St. Francis, and Our Lady of Sorrows fill the painted shells of each. Bultos, carved figures of Jesus and St. James ("El Señor Santiago") on horseback, are arranged on narrow ledges.

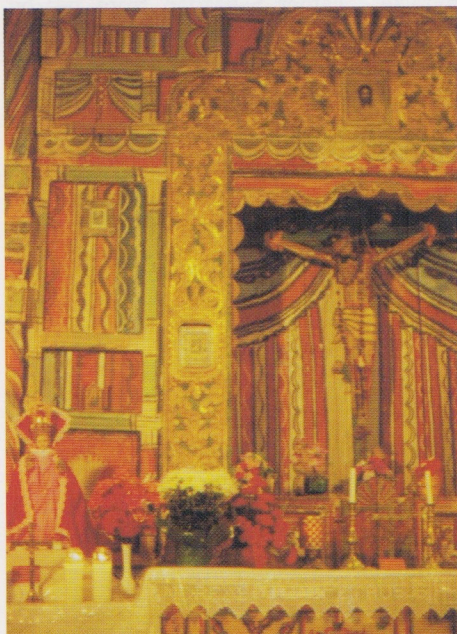
St. James is especially praised here. It is said he brought Christianity to Spain before being beheaded. Centuries later during the war against the Moors, Spanish soldiers reported seeing El Señor Santiago on a white horse leading them on to victory. Local Spaniards began putting on a play each year entitled "Moros y Christianos" to commemorate this miracle. The Conquistadores brought this tradition to Northern New Mexico four hundred years ago but it faded from memory until 1976. Each July since, the people of the Chimayo stage a dramatic re-creation of the play outdoors, complete with period costumes, horse-mounted actors, and loud battle cries of "Santiago! Mata Moros!" - Santiago! Death to the Moors!

El Santuario's most touching elements are its most plain. Two small rooms are attached to one side of the altar. In one, crutches and canes line the walls, left behind

by those who claim to have been healed by the power of God. Simple paintings of Jesus, some on cardboard or velvet, have been left as offerings. Photographs of soldiers, fathers, and daughters - family members needing protection - are tucked into the frames of hand-brushed or store-bought religious artworks. Notes to God are carefully leaned against santos. Each is simply written but deeply felt. "Please Jesus, protect my son in the Army," "God, if you make my father's cancer stop, I will come here each year to give thanks," and "El Señor, por favor, please let my daughter stop drinking." The messages of loss, fear, hope, and desperation are often more than you can bear to read. But this is a place of promises. Modern life swirls outside, yet faith is never embarrassing in this small room.

On the north end of the chapel is an even smaller space. You must duck to enter the six-foot-square alcove. The air is hot from dozens of candles set aflame for ailing loved ones. There is a circular hole in the center of the floor - "El Posito." People kneel down and remove handfuls of fine dirt and fill cups or envelopes to take home. Others simply rub the healing dirt on arthritic joints or failing eyes or just eat la tierra and wash it down with root beer. People believe in this dirt, which is said to have cured thousands of grave sickness. Or if it is God's time, standing barefoot on the dirt will make the passing peaceful. Some believers even sprinkle the dirt on their flower beds and rave about the beautiful yield or dust it on their window sills during lightning to keep the household safe.

However the dirt is used, people say it only works if you believe. An old woman



The main altar and stunningly beautiful reredoses. The cross bears Our Lord of Esquipulas.



Crutches and canes left behind by the healed.



El Posito - the source of the sacred dirt.

tells me, "This belief cannot be easy or half-way." It must be complete, even ancient, dating back to when the tremendous mystery became God and was incarnated, believers say, as Jesus Christ - a person who felt pain like us, who died for us, whose example is a state we should aspire to. El Posito is not about the God of intellectuals or abstract ideology. The dirt was given by a God who is a loving but awful force; judgmental, all powerful, and real. A crucifix laid nearby shows our human suffering; the face and body of Jesus are streaked with long, terrible lines of chili-colored blood.

Some say that El Posito never empties. A young man tells me, "The dirt just reappears every morning - God provides more for us." The parish priest dismisses this. "No, we gather the dirt from a nearby field, sift it, bless it and bring it here. I don't know where that story started." I've even seen the dirt poured into El Posito from metal buckets with worshippers watching. Yet, the story survives. While it is not literally true, the widening stream of those seeking contact with the sacred ground makes the refilling miraculous enough.

El Santo Niño

A small glass-sided case is near the door of the room full of crutches. Inside the case is a porcelain doll of the infant Jesus - el Santo Niño - the Child King. This figure holds a globe of the world in one hand. It wears fine, satin clothing and elegant, leather-bottomed shoes.

In the mid-1800s, another layer of religious meaning was added to Chimayo's story. The rumor began to spread that a statue of the Christ Child had been found by Bernardo Abeyta, not the Crucifix of Esquipulas as had long been believed. Villagers told of seeing the Santo Niño walking through the landscape at night performing miracles. Pilgrims began bringing new baby shoes to Chimayo to replace the ones worn out by the traveling child.

In 1855, Severiano Medina, moved by the spiritual power and financial possibilities of the growing Santo Nino cult, journeyed to Zacatecas, Mexico to visit the shrine erected to Santo Nino de Atocha. Medina returned to Chimayo with a child figure and placed it in a church he had erected beside El Santuario. Pilgrims arrived from all over Northern New Mexico to pray before the divine infant. Growing legions began to believe that the power of El Santo Niño was stronger than Our Lord of Esquipulas. Fewer people entered El Santuario and made offerings.



El Santo Niño - the Child King.

Soon, a Santo Niño figure was placed in El Santuario to compete for worshippers. The Chaves family, who operated the chapel at the time, announced that their Santo Niño also wandered the countryside at night but had greater power since he was accompanied by San Rafael, Santiago, and San Jose. Worshippers began flocking back to El Santuario bringing money and hundreds of pairs of new shoes to replace the ones the saints wore out each evening. In 1890, Maria Martinez, later a renowned "black on black" potter from San Ildefonso pueblo, was just a child suffering from a debilitating sickness. Maria's mother traveled to El Santuario and spoke a vow (promesa) to the Holy Child to cure her daughter. The girl recovered. Today, despite the odd choice of the Holy Child of Prague as the El Santuario's Santo Niño, the power of this local belief remains strong. Few residents of Chimayo or visiting pilgrims even refer to Nuestro Señor de Esquipulas anymore. The Santo Niño and the healing dirt - all folk evidences of God - are said to be the true power of the place.

Shifting Sacredness

El Santuario de Chimayo reveals the brave, urgent, and sometimes clumsy striving of human beings for connection with the divine. Northern New Mexico is a landscape of both visions and apparitions. Sacred stories are born, shift, and become interwoven, yet believers never doubt that God's truth survives. Spain and Guatemala, Indian and Hispano cultures, dirt eating and Holy Communion, the global and the local are all evoked within the walls of Chimayo's simple folk church. Despite these varied influences and the pull of the outside world, from Santa Fe's self-consciousness trendiness to the eerie,

atomic glow of Los Alamos, El Santuario de Chimayo has abundant endurance. The chapel seems to provide an absolute position in a relative world, orientation based on a fixed point. The pilgrims now coming to Chimayo represent all religions, races, and classes. It appears we need places like this. Even with the ample evidence that human imaginations have conjured up these myths, even with our educated cynicism that easily explains them away, it is impossible to ignore the feel of the air inside this small chapel where dirt, dolls, and scarified crosses brush aside certainty leaving awed silence and marvelous doubt.

Further Reading

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