

RELIGIOUS FOLK PRACTICES

From *Chicano Folklore – A Guide to the Folktales, Traditions, Rituals and Religious Practices of Mexican Americans* by Rafaela G. Castro

Folk rituals, customs, and traditions based on religious or spiritual beliefs and on the ceremonial disciplines of the Catholic Church. In Mexico and in small southwestern communities the church was often located in the center of town, and the soul and rhythm of the people were synchronized with the liturgical seasons of the Church. Processions, *fiestas*, blessings, home prayers, *velorios* (wakes) and religious societies were integrated into daily life. The rural nature of many *Mexicano* communities meant that often a priest or official church clergy was absent, so popular religiosity or folk religious practices developed among the strong spiritual people. Some neighborhoods had *rezadores* or *rezadoras*, spiritual leaders who led the community in prayer for funerals, saints' day celebrations and whenever the priest was unavailable. The home shrine or *altarcito* (little altar) in many homes took the place of a house of worship. Margaret Clark's study of the Mexican community in San Jose, California, in the 1950s found that over 50 percent of the homes had *altarcitos*.

The American Roman Catholic Church was not always receptive to Mexican or Hispanic Catholicism. In many communities the church clergy openly discriminated against Mexicans. In Emporia, Kansas, "the basement of the Sacred Heart Church was renovated and Mass was said for Mexicans two Sundays of each month" (Beeson, Adams, and King, xix). The lack of hospitality and the shortage of priests who spoke Spanish kept many *Mexicanos* from participating in the American Catholic Church.

This situation served to reinforce religious folk practices and rituals brought from Mexico, many based on a syncretism of Indian religious beliefs and medieval Catholicism from the sixteenth century. The strong spiritual faith in the power of particular saints was frowned upon by the American church and considered to be an "exaggerated superstitious" belief (Dolan and Hinojosa, 57). Recent histories of Chicanos and the Catholic Church suggest that Mexicans were not dependent on a priest-centered religion and developed their own popular devotions performed without a priest. "Mexican American spirituality developed both private and public expressions. Private spirituality, which was practiced individually or within the family, stressed sacramental and personal devotions, while the public religious stressed processions, *fiestas*, symbols, and symbolic action that displayed the beliefs of the Mexican Catholic to the rest of the community" (Dolan and Hinojosa, 177).

Eventually every Chicano community had its own parish, due usually to the commitment and work of one individual priest in the diocese. There is probably a *Virgen de Guadalupe* parish in every single Mexican community in the United States. In spite of the fact that in some regions there was hostility by the church officials, the importance of the Catholic Church in creating Chicano communities cannot be overemphasized. It was the church that created an environment where people could speak Spanish; celebrate religious, social, and political ceremonies; cook the special foods of the holy days and holidays; and of course pray together. The experience of Chicanos in Kansas, as described by Beeson, Adams, and King, was repeated throughout the Southwest and Midwest. "The church remained the most powerful center and cohesive force in the Mexican American colony. . . . The church also perpetuated the separateness of the Mexican Americans and their Anglo neighbors" (Beeson, Adams, and King, xx).

Religious celebrations for a saint's day brought a community together and reinforced religious conviction and ethnic solidarity. Throughout the Southwest, *fiestas* for *San Juan*, *San Isidro*, *San Francisco*, *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, and many other favorite saints incorporated religious rituals and secular revelry. When paying homage to a saint, the church held Masses and processions early in the day; picnics, horse races, *corridos de gallos* (rooster games), and dances were held later in the day and evening. A community's social calendar was based on the Catholic liturgical calendar, which provided frequent occasions for religious and cultural celebrations. Lent started with Ash Wednesday, and the belief was that, if one received ashes, one would live to see the end of the year. *La Cuaresma*, Lent, was and still is a time of sacrifice, prayers, *Via Crucis* (stations of the cross) every Friday, special meatless foods, and spiritual preparation for *Semana Santa* (Holy Week). Palm Sunday with the distribution of holy palms resulted in the palms being made into crosses and tacked over doorways to protect the family from illness or harm. Good Friday included processions and in some communities the burning of Judas. *Sábado de Gloria* (Holy Saturday) and the end of Lent was often celebrated with jubilation and a dance. Easter Sunday celebrations and the customs of new clothes and Easter egg hunts were adopted by Mexican American communities later, probably after World War II.

One of the most important religious celebrations is the *fiesta* for *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, held on December 12. It often includes a *Mañanitas* (dawn) Mass and serenade with *Mariachi* music, a procession through the streets, and a dinner and dance. During the Christmas season there are usually *Las Posadas* for nine nights and performances of *Los Pastores* (Shepherds' Play).

Many religious practices and beliefs have survived in some families without anyone knowing the source of the custom. For example, there is a custom performed the communicant drinks exactly three swallows of water. There are many beliefs, *creencias*, connected to Holy Week observances, such as not working on Holy Thursday and not taking baths. In some regions this day is referred to as *el día de bañar*, meaning the day to take a bath of some kind. It could be jumping in a river, lake, or waterway, or just being splashed with water. The tradition is connected to the baptism of St. John, and throughout Mexico, it is common to see water fights on this day, with buckets of water thrown on friends and family. The maintenance of a family altar and reciting the rosary every day, lighting votive candles, blessing the children every night, the blessing of homes and yards, and making promises, *mandas*, to particular saints are all fold practices passed on from generation to generation. Believing in the benevolent power of the saints and developing a special relationship with one particular saint is still a common habit. Mary Helen Ponce, in her book *Hoyt Street*, has some wonderful descriptions about the religious practices in her family, from First communion celebrations to Holy Week rituals.