

Walking and praying, no matter what the destination, we may find we have become pilgrims along the way.¹

Three hundred thousand visitors make their way each year to a small village in northern New Mexico. Most travel by car. Thousands still walk the miles on foot. Some drag wooden crosses over their shoulder as they slog through roadside mud in sleety rains. In warmer weather, they set foot at midnight, by moonlight, to avoid the desert sun. Some chant the rosary. Others sing in Spanish or English. Some make the last part of their journey on their knees. When they leave Chimayó, they leave behind signs of their passing: lit candles, photos, twig crosses, painted rocks, scraps of paper, prayer feathers, baby shoes, and abandoned crutches. They take with them things invisible and handfuls of sacred dirt. How did Chimayó, this obscure village, become such a center of faith and healing, a place of American pilgrimage?

¹ Jim Forest, *The Road to Emmaus: Pilgrimage as a Way of Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 13.
Rob Pierson

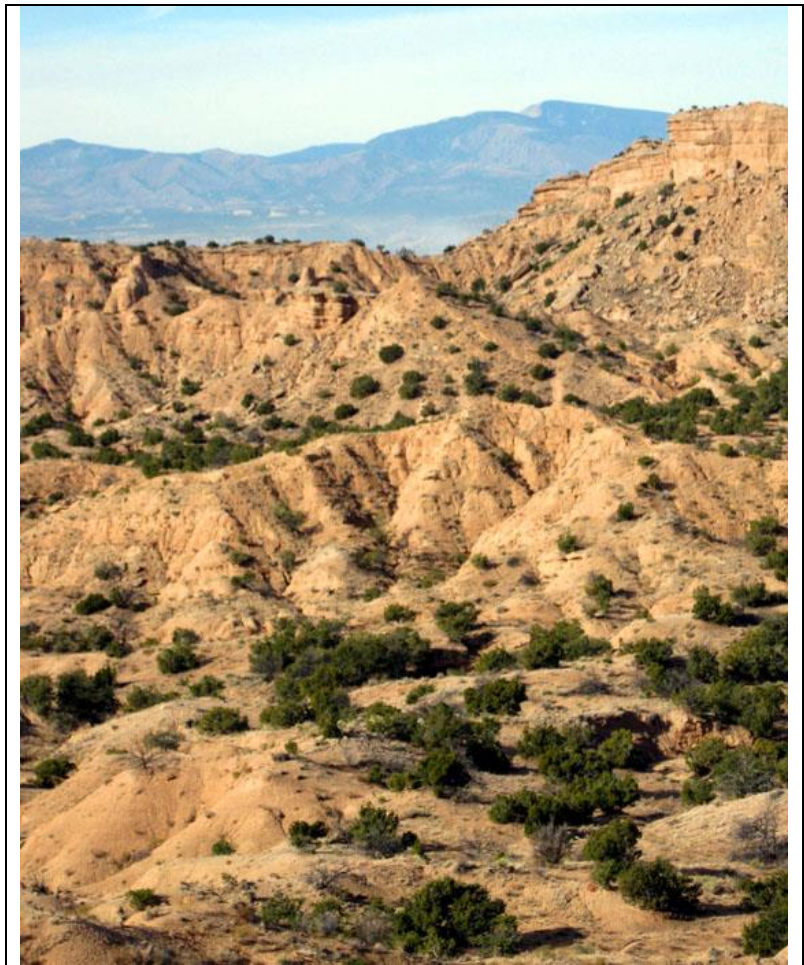
TSI MAYOH

“These are the hills,” writes Don Usner in his loving history of Chimayó valley, “that welcomed the First People... And taught them how to pray.”²

Before the time of names and maps, the Rio Grande flowed south through northern New Mexico along a cottonwood-lined floodplain that followed an ancient geological rift in the spreading earth. To the east rose the massive volcanic caldera of what we now call the Jemez Mountains with its alpine

hot springs and towering cliffs of ash. To the west, the granite peaks of the Sangre de Christos, the southernmost ridgeline of the Rockies, rise above dark pine forests and glow rosy in the light of the setting sun. Rivers flush with late summer storms or the springtime rush of melting snows cut fertile valleys through the piñon dotted foothills.

When Spanish settlers arrived in 1598, the Tewa people had already occupied this area for hundreds of years.³ The colonizer, Oñate, noted eleven Tewa-speaking pueblos, of which seven survive today.⁴ The principal pueblo, Ohkay Owingeh, lies on the Rio Grande about ten



Hills south of Chimayo looking across the Rio Grande Valley to the Jemez Mountains

² Don J. Usner, *Sabino's Map: Life in Chimayo's Old Plaza* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1995), 9.

³ Writing for the New Mexico Office of the State Historian, Wroth notes at least 33 prehistoric sites along the Santa Cruz River and dates these Tewa settlements to “probably 1200 A.D.” See: William H. Wroth, “Santuario de Chimayo,” New Mexico Office of the State Historian, <http://www.newmexicohistory.org/filedetails.php?fileID=505> (accessed 19 October 2009) and William H. Wroth, “Ohkay Owingeh,” New Mexico Office of the State Historian, <http://www.newmexicohistory.org/filedetails.php?fileID=510> (accessed 22 November 2009).

⁴ Wroth, “Ohkay Owingeh.”

miles west of the hill that the Tewa call *Tsi Mayoh*, which gives Chimayó its name.⁵

Religion, for the Tewa, like many Pueblos, is pervasive and integral to life.⁶ The Tewa define their world in terms of sacred space.⁷ Four sacred mountains bound the world to north, south, west and east with the Tewa village as sacred center. The village itself has a sacred center and landmarks at its north, south, west and east end. Finally, between the local village and the distant mountains there are four more intermediary landmarks – sacred hills, to the north, south, west and east. For the Tewa of Ohkay Owingeh, *Tsi Mayoh* is the sacred hill of the East.⁸

Tsi Mayoh is like a geographical acupuncture point on a sacred meridian. It lies at the end of the ordinary world where that world intersects and balances against the world of spirit. Only the initiated may proceed beyond, whether on a hunt or on pilgrimage to the sacred shrines.⁹

In the Tewa emergence myth, when the people ventured out from under the lake of the North while the earth was still soft, pairs of brothers called *Towa é* threw mud to the cardinal directions, creating flat-topped hills or *tsin*. These powerful protectors, the *Towa é*, still watch over the Pueblo from the hills. They mediate between mythical time and space before emergence and historical time on the surface. Thus, the hills are associated with underground labyrinths inhabited by the ancient and dangerous *Tsave Yoh*. These masked supernatural beings maintain order between the divine and human by literally whipping both into shape.¹⁰

⁵ As with many details about Chimayó, even the name spawns confusion due to misunderstanding of the Tewa root. Usner provides a summary and analysis of other translations. See: Usner, 13-14.

⁶ “Traditional Pueblos have no separate word in their vocabulary for ‘religion’ since it is not viewed as a separate concept.” Kathleen Egan Chamberlain, “Competition for the Native American Soul: The Search for Religious Freedom in Twentieth-Century New Mexico,” in *Religion in Modern New Mexico*, eds. Ferenc M. Szasz and Richard W. Etulain (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 86.

⁷ “‘Christianity speaks of far-off lands and places,’ whereas Native stories ‘tell of the four sacred mountains, at least one of which is visible almost everywhere in Navajo country.’” Chamberlain, 84.

⁸ Alfonso Ortiz, *The Tewa World: Space, Time, Being and Becoming in a Pueblo Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 19. Ortiz, an ethnographer and Tewa, presents a remarkable account of Tewa perspective.

⁹ Pueblo people made “midsummer pilgrimages to their sacred hills and mountains to clean shrines, sweep the trails to them, and pray for rain.” Elizabeth Kay, *Chimayo Valley Traditions* (Santa Fe: Ancient Cities Press, 1987), 11.

¹⁰ The Tewa appoint individuals to represent the *Towa é* and impersonate the *Tsave Yoh* in ritual. Wearing ritual masks, they whip tribal members who have disobeyed or refused to participate in sacred ritual. Even those who represent the deities themselves may be “mercilessly whipped.” Ortiz, 75.

As a result, Tsi Mayoh is a hazardous place associated with smoke and fire.¹¹ This is the place, where the twin war gods killed a giant, causing flames to erupt from the ground, drying up the healing waters of a sacred spring or pond.¹² All that was left was drying mud, still charged with healing power. Whether such legends are original or derivative of later history is difficult to ascertain,¹³ yet the point remains that Tsi Mayoh was a nexus of power in the Tewa world.

Don Usner notes how far astray we can go when we follow the trace of legends too literally. A friend of his explored the sacred cave in Tsi Mayoh and was disappointed to find that it ended abruptly a dozen feet past the entrance. Usner writes:

I realized that my friend had missed entirely the point of the Tewa stories. Seeking to explore, conquer, and solve the mystery of the cave, he proved only how different the worldview of the Western mind is from that of the Tewa who knew this hill over centuries of living in its shadow. For those people, the important fact was that the cave and the hill are conduits for the flow of spiritual energy, vital to the well-being of the community.¹⁴

The way the Tewa approach such truth is ritual. “Within and around the earth,” goes one ritual pronouncement, “within and around the hills, within and around the mountains, your authority returns to you.”¹⁵ When one dies, one travels through all the points that define the Tewa world – shrines, hills, and sacred mountains.¹⁶ The journey is critical to the underlying unity of existence. One Tewa compares these sacred places to airports.¹⁷ Like airplanes, all things must pass through these sites, no matter where they are headed.

¹¹ Ortiz, 142.

¹² Stephen F. De Borhegyi, *The Miraculous Shrines of Our Lord of Esquipulas in Guatemala and Chimayo, New Mexico* (Santa Fe: The Spanish Colonial Arts Society, 1956), 8.

¹³ I return to this point in a later section. There are multiple legends of a pueblo and/or a sacred pool at the current site of the Santuario de Chimayo. c.f. Kay, 14-16. Usner reasonably questions whether the Hispanic legends built on the Tewa or the Tewa on the Hispanic. See Usner, 89.

¹⁴ Usner, 17.

¹⁵ Ortiz, 13, 23.

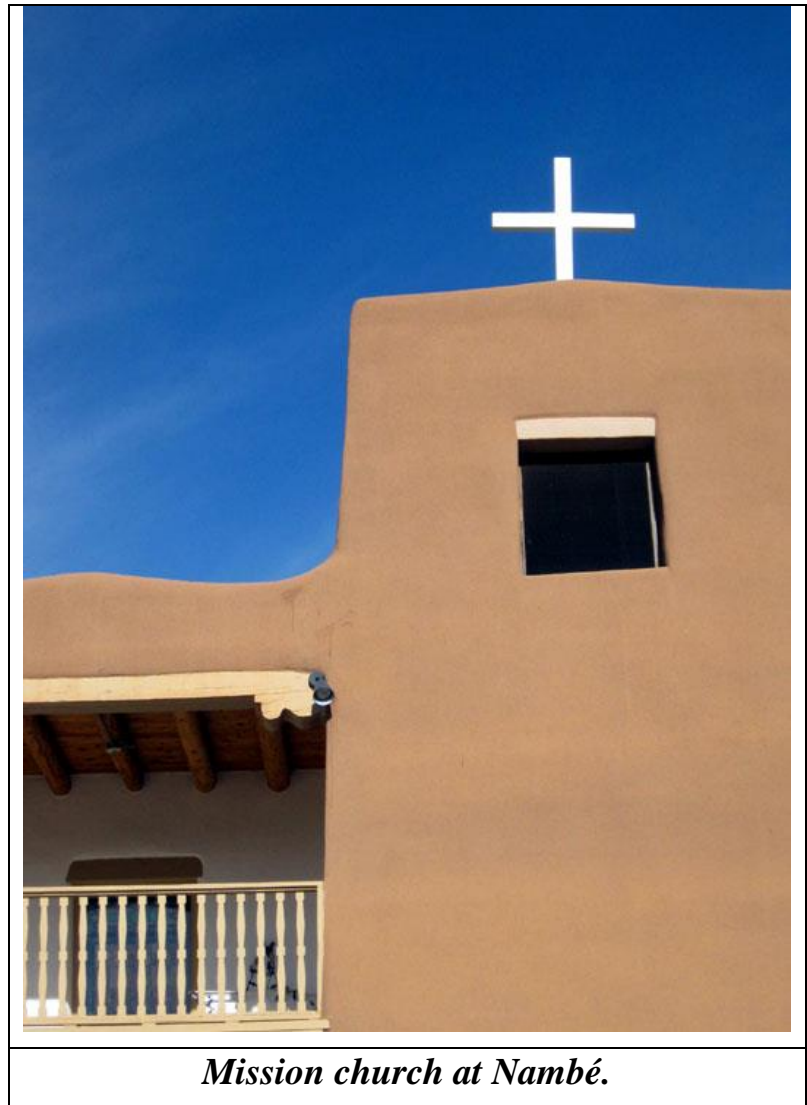
¹⁶ Ortiz, 52.

¹⁷ Ortiz, 24.

Tsi Mayoh is a waypoint on the spiritual journey. The labyrinths of the hills provide access to the sacred, to purification and consecration.¹⁸ Even the dangerous masked Tsave Yoh who inhabit Tsi Mayoh have a healing function. When they visit the home during village rituals, they care for the sick. Their treatment is said to be effective when all others have failed.¹⁹

SANGRE DE CRISTO

In 1598, the first Spanish governor of New Mexico, Juan de Oñate, settled in the heart of Tewa territory, re-imagining the landscape in his own image and that of the Catholic faith. The mountains that glow red at sunset and whose waters feed the sacred rivers became the Sangre de Christos (blood of Christ). The ancient pueblo of Ohkay Owingeh was rededicated to John the Baptist as the Pueblo de San Juan de los Caballeros. Oñate, ever the *caballero*, founded his capital, San Gabriel, by evicting natives from the twin pueblo across the river.²⁰ Although the capital relocated



¹⁸ Ortiz, 161.

¹⁹ Ortiz, 159.

²⁰ In 1598, the Spanish occupied a Pueblo house block of 400 apartments in Yungé Owingeh on the west side of the Rio Grande. See: Wroth, "Ohkay Owingeh." This town, renamed San Gabriel, was Oñate's capital - although some texts confuse it with the Tewa Pueblo of San Juan on the other side of the river. Further confusion results from the tribal council's 2005 decision to reverse 400 years under Oñate's naming, changing San Juan Pueblo back to Ohkay Owingeh ("Place of the Strong People"). Some texts have not caught up (or ignore) this latest change of the map.

to Santa Fe ten years later, the names and the Blood of Christ remained.

Ten Franciscan friars marched with Oñate into New Mexico, following a missionary trail marked by the blood of martyrs.²¹ Eight more marched north from Mexico one year later. Within ten years, the Franciscans had built 11 churches and converted, by their count, 14,000 natives. Ten years later there were 27 missions, 43 churches, and 34,000 baptized.²²

However, relations with natives, and the Tewa in particular, were tense. The Spanish occupied land, forced labor, and demanded increasing tribute in goods. At the same time, they forcibly suppressed native language and religion. In 1675, the Spanish jailed 47 Pueblo religious leaders in Santa Fe, hung four and whipped the rest.²³ One of the survivors, a Tewa from Ohkay Owingeh called Popé, went on to lead the ensuing Pueblo Revolt.²⁴

The Revolt of 1680 drove the Spanish out of New Mexico and kept them out until 1692 despite attempts to return. The natives swept the countryside, killing every priest and settler who had not fled to Santa Fe. As the Spanish marched south into exile, the Tewa razed their churches. Of 33 missions catalogued in 1680, none remained one year later. Of 32 missionaries, 21 were killed. Even after the Spanish re-entry, the Tewa helped mount a second rebellion in 1696 that killed missionaries (as well as soldiers and settlers) and destroyed their churches.

The lands along the Santa Cruz River had been settled and farmed by the Spanish prior to the Pueblo Revolt, then occupied by Tano Indians during the revolt. These Tanoans proved reluctant to be relocated “at the end of the canyon called Zimayo close to the mountains.”²⁵ Instead, they joined the 1696 uprising and, in their most symbolic gesture of religious contempt, killed and lay two priests across one another in the form of a

²¹ The first Christian martyrs in what was to become the United States were two Franciscan priests and a lay brother who had accompanied Francisco Vázquez de Coronado into Pueblo lands in 1542.

²² A. Espinosa, “New Mexico,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911). <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11001a.htm> (accessed 24 November 2009).

²³ The Spanish authorities hung three of the religious leaders. One more hung himself before they could do so.

²⁴ New Mexico erected a statue honoring Popé (Po’pay) in the rotunda of the United States Capitol in 2005. Jemez Pueblo sculptor Cliff Fragua carved Popé holding the knotted rope used to count-down days to the revolt. See “National Statuary Hall Collection,” Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Statuary_Hall_Collection (accessed 25 November 2009).

²⁵ Diego de Vargas quoted in Usner, 44.

cross outside the church at San Cristóbal.²⁶ Governor De Vargas crushed the rebellion, which was far less widespread than 1680, and the Tanoans fled, leaving the Santa Cruz valley open for settlement.

By the early 1700s, there are references to a place called Chimayó and, by the late 1700s, to a village plaza.²⁷ This Plaza del Cerro (Plaza by the Hill) with its oratorio (small chapel) to San Buenaventura still stands in Chimayó. It is arguably the most intact Spanish Colonial plaza in New Mexico.²⁸ The very existence of a defensive plaza in Chimayó indicates a shift in dynamics. The shrinking native and growing Hispanic populations found themselves allied in fending off attacks from nomadic tribes taking advantage of their settled isolation. Both groups battled other scourges, such as the smallpox epidemic that struck with particular ferocity in 1780.²⁹

After resettlement, forced Christianization of the Pueblos shifted toward mutual accommodation.³⁰ Although much of traditional religion remained hidden to outsiders, the Tewa dramatically blended traditional religion and Catholicism in outward practice.³¹ For example, Pueblo Catholics combined the ritual year of Catholicism with seasonal rites of the Pueblo, merging Catholic Mass and native dances into syncretic feast days.³² Tewa marriages involve both a Catholic church wedding and a village ceremony that is “partly a mock-Catholic rite and partly native, but it is difficult to draw the line between the two.”³³ Similarly, there is no line in spiritual preparations for marriage: “Christ, his cross, the Virgin Mary, and even saints are invoked right along with, and sometimes in place of, Tewa spirits.”³⁴

Just as Tewas found reason to attend mass, Hispanics came to the Pueblos for feast days. Both the Hispanic and Tewa villagers had adapted their traditions to each other and to a common landscape and agricultural cycle. The Catholic village year was defined by prayer, and

²⁶ Usner, 46.

²⁷ Usner, 54-55.

²⁸ Usner, 2.

²⁹ Kay, 27.

³⁰ Carol Jensen, “Roman Catholicism in Modern New Mexico: A Commitment to Survive,” in Szasz and Etulain, 2.

³¹ Wroth, “Ohkay Owingeh.”

³² Jensen, 4.

³³ Ortiz, 47.

³⁴ Ortiz, 46.

the change of seasons marked by holy days.³⁵ The Plaza del Cerro at Chimayó had its own patron saint (San Buenaventura) and major celebrations for Easter, *El Día del Santiago* (Saint James' Day) and *Mes de María* celebrating Mary, mother of Jesus.³⁶ San Isidro, patron saint of farmers, doubtless brought blessings to the field during his day in spring and San Juan (the Baptist) blessed the waters of the streams that fed the ditches through the fields in summer.

In many ways, Chimayó was at the remote edge of the Catholic world. It was a tiny village at the edge of wilderness, in the shadow of a pagan hilltop shrine, upstream in the hinterlands, hours by wagon from the local church at Santa Cruz, which was in turn remote from the church of Mexico and increasingly distant from Spain and Rome. People living in the community simply had to tend for most of their religious needs themselves.³⁷

Self-reliant lay Hispanics in Santa Fe, Santa Cruz, and Albuquerque built churches at their own expense.³⁸ Similarly, Plaza residents in Chimayó built their own small *oratorio*.³⁹

However, building local chapels could not cure the lack of priests. Remote villages may have seen a priest once a year. Until the last century, children born in Chimayó were rushed down the valley to the church in Santa Cruz for baptism, and villagers died and were buried without a priest's blessing.⁴⁰ In the early 1800s, the situation became particularly severe as external religious and political forces conspired to remove the Franciscan friars who had long served the extended community outside of the missions.

Lacking priests, the lay leadership produced *confradías* (lay societies) who gathered and led parishioners in religious ceremony.⁴¹ *Los Hermanos Penitentes* (the Penitente Brotherhood) were one of the most important of these lay religious movements.⁴² The Brotherhood still exists, still performs the Stations of the Cross at Easter in Chimayó,

³⁵ Kay, 23.

³⁶ Usner, 195.

³⁷ Usner, 184.

³⁸ Jensen, 13.

³⁹ Usner, 188.

⁴⁰ Usner, 183.

⁴¹ Jensen, 13.

⁴² Kay, 25.

but they had a much larger role in the life of the village in the 1800s. They looked out for the welfare of the community and visited the private devotional chapels to sing, pray, chant, lead rituals and sing for their dead.⁴³

The Penitentes sometimes take a rather dark and mysterious place in the public imagination because of their black-hooded secrecy, public penance (prayer and self-whipping) and annual reenactments of the Passion. Their actions embody the widely held understanding of the suffering Christ: *Tiene uno que sufrir para mercerer; esa es lo que decían* (one has to suffer to earn grace), and they became a powerful force for preserving local identity, custom and faith well into the 20th century. Yet despite the clear relation to a suffering Christ, the secretive Penitente Brotherhood descending from the hills into the Catholic village bearing whips and wearing masks to obscure their identity echo the role of the Tsave Yoh who come down to the Tewa from the hills to heal and maintain right order. The *Hermanos Mayores* (Elder Brothers) of the Penitentes were leaders of their communities spanning the political and religious, very much like the Pueblo leaders who represented the Towa é. In more ways than one, the Spanish and Tewa were now both under the shadow of both Tsi Mayoh and the Sangre de Christos.

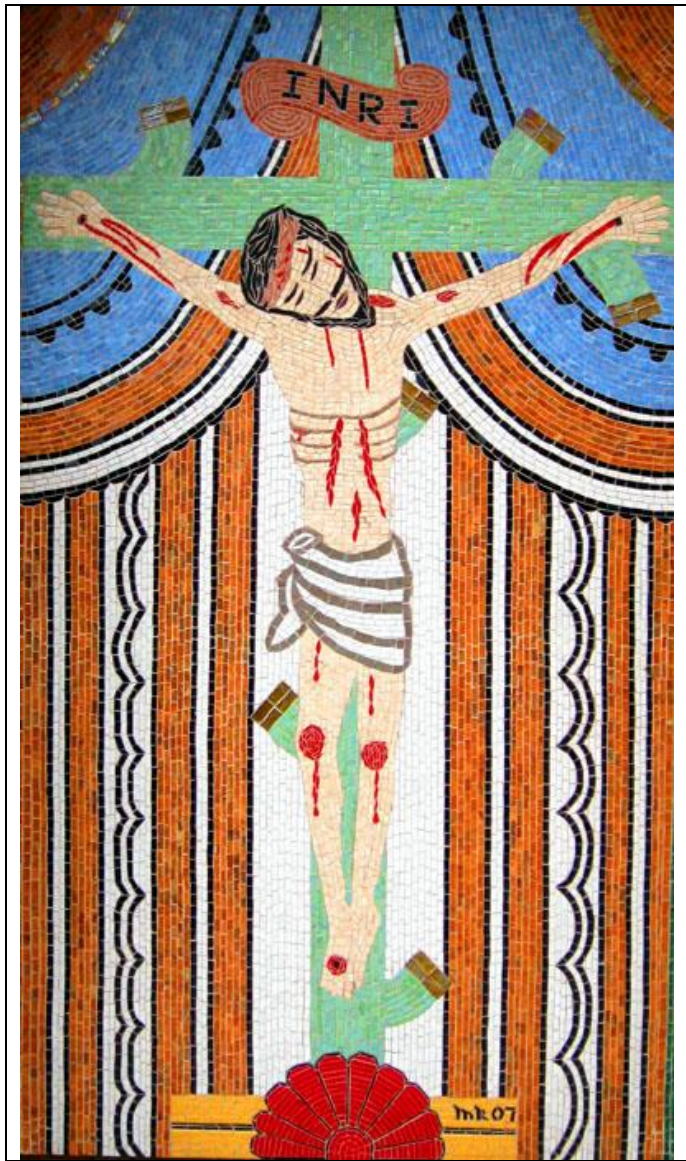
⁴³ Usner, 194.
Rob Pierson

THE BLACK CHRIST, THE BLUE, AND THE GREEN

Bernardo Abeyta was one of the early leaders in the Penitente movement and the *Hermano Mayor* from El Portrero (the Pastures) in Chimayó. Don Bernardo is also the person most closely associated with the building of El Santuario de Chimayó and its *santa tierra*, holy ground.⁴⁴

In 1805, Father Sebastian Alvarez of Santa Cruz baptized a nephew of Don Bernardo as Juan de Esquípuas, the first occurrence of the strange name “Esquípuas” in New Mexico.⁴⁵ In 1813, Abeyta’s son was christened Tomás de Esquípuas, and a few months later Abeyta wrote to Father Alvarez petitioning for

permission to build a chapel to Our Lord of Esquípuas in the Plaza of El Portrero in Chimayó.⁴⁶ Clearly the petition came as no surprise to Father Alvarez who wrote the very next day to the Vicar General of Durango in favor of Abeyta’s petition. Alvarez’ letter notes that “the miraculous Image of Our Lord of Esquípuas has been already honored for three years” in a small chapel built at Abeyta’s expense, adjoining his home.⁴⁷



Nuestro Señor de Esquípuas
tile mosaic at Chimayó

⁴⁴ Abeyta may have been one of the founders of the Penitente movement. His “Rule” of order is cited in an 1860 constitution for the Brotherhood. He also associated the Brotherhood with *santa tierra* (holy ground) which the novice is to kiss. See: Kay, 37.

⁴⁵ Borhegyi, 11.

⁴⁶ Borhegyi, 11.

⁴⁷ Fray Sebastian Alvarez, quoted in Borhegyi, 11.

The church in Durango granted permission quickly, and the community built the 90 foot by 30 foot Santuario, with adjoining rooms, pinewood roof beams and adobe walls over three feet thick, by about 1816.⁴⁸ The carved wooden doors were locally finished and financed by Fray José Corea of Santa Cruz. Officials from Durango visited the new Santuario in 1818 and again in 1826, by which time they found it already necessary to order that it be cleared of an apparent overabundance of folk icons. By 1830, the interior of the Santuario resembled its current state.⁴⁹

From Fray Alvarez' letter of 1813, we know that the image of Our Lord of Esquípuilas was "miraculous" and that many came to give praise and "alleviate their ailments."⁵⁰ From the earliest days, there was a strong connection of this healing to holy ground, literal dirt, scooped by the faithful out of a hole in the ground. To this day, the side chapel at El Santuario beside that hole overflows with written prayers and abandoned crutches in testimony to healing.

Our Lord of Esquípuilas, the *Christo Negro* (Black Christ), is associated with healing dirt in another small village at the foot of highlands. For four centuries, people have gone on pilgrimage to Esquípuilas and eaten *tierra del Santo* (holy dirt) for its curative powers. Yet that Mayan site is in south-eastern Guatemala, 2,000 miles from Chimayó.⁵¹ The story is that the Mayans, having witnessed the destruction wrought by white Christians, were deeply distrustful of a white Christ. So, a new Christ was carved from balsam and orange wood in native skin tones. Over time, this cross blackened from the smoke of prayer candles, resulting in *El Cristo Negro*.⁵² The crucifix in El Santuario de Chimayó is clearly inspired by the Mayan Jesus, nailed to a green and budding cross – a Tree of Life. But how did Our Lord find his way from Esquípuilas to Chimayó?

By the time of Don Bernardo, the Spanish New World had an

⁴⁸ Borhegyi, 13-14, for architectural layout, see Borhegyi's figure 7.

⁴⁹ Borhegyi, 15.

⁵⁰ Fray Sebastian Alvarez, quoted in Usner, 89.

⁵¹ The exact origin of the name "Esquipulas" is uncertain, although the case for a Mayan Chorti dialect seems convincing. See Borhegyi, 3, especially footnote 2.

⁵² Borhegyi, 3.

established network of shrines,⁵³ and devotion to Our Lord of Esquípuilas had spread throughout Mexico. It is likely that Don Bernardo (and certainly Father Alvarez) had ties with the seat of the diocese in Durango, encountered the popular devotion there, and brought back paper engravings that served as iconographic models for local *santeros*.⁵⁴ The Christo Negro became once more flesh-toned for the local population, or, occasionally, a symbolic light blue.⁵⁵

But what of the miraculous image, the crucifix? Although Bernardo Abeyta left no record, the faithful have written and rewritten it for him. In fact, the most recent brochure from El Santuario de Chimayó begins with an elaborate fiction told in the first person by Don Bernardo and signed as if it were a historical document.⁵⁶ Such deliberate obfuscation of fact and legend is typical. In the story, Abeyta is doing penance at night in the hills above Chimayó with the Penitente Brotherhood when he sees a light down in the valley. Leading the others through pitch darkness down towards the river, he literally stumbles and falls to his knees over the crucifix of Our Lord of Esquípuilas which he and the brothers proceed to unearth from the sand.

Two pages later, the brochure admits there is no written record yet proceeds to relate two more accounts, both of which are “true” depending on the story teller.”⁵⁷ In one, Don Bernardo is again performing penances with his Penitente brothers, but now he sees a light coming from the slope of a hill. He digs up the crucifix but leaves it there for others to venerate while Father Alvarez is called from Santa Cruz. The priest and people carry the cross in festive procession back to Santa Cruz where it is installed in the church, only to disappear overnight. It is found again in its original location in Chimayó. The procession happens again. The cross disappears again. The procession

⁵³ Gutiérrez lists eight major shrines as one traveled south from Santa Fe to Mexico City along the *Camino Real*—“the royal road traversed by all personnel, commerce, and ideas.” See Ramón A. Gutiérrez, “El Santuario de Chimayo: A Syncretic Shrine in New Mexico,” in *Feasts and Celebrations in North American Ethnic Communities* eds. Ramón A. Gutiérrez and Geneviève Fabre (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 74.

⁵⁴ Charles Carillo, “Our Lord of Esquipulas in New Mexico,” *Tradicion Revista*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Spring 1999) also Wroth, “Santuario de Chimayo.”

⁵⁵ Among *santeros*, blue is associated with the Franciscans, who were associated both with the spread of the cult of Esquipulas and the Penitente Brotherhood. Carillo suggests the Christo Azul (Blue Christ) of northern New Mexico may derive from Our Lord of Esquipulas through iconographic color association. See: Carillo.

⁵⁶ Julio Gonzalez and Jim Suntum, *El Santuario de Chimayo: The Shrine of Our Lord of Esquipulas* (Chimayo, NM: Santuario de Chimayo, 2009), 5-8.

⁵⁷ Gonzalez and Suntum, 11.

repeats a third time, and the cross again returns miraculously to its original site. At this point a chapel is built over the hole in the dirt.

Variations of this story are common.⁵⁸ In some, Don Bernardo is herding sheep in the hills or sitting on his porch when he sees a manifestation of his patron saint of “San Esquípula” down by the ditch. In others, Don Bernardo is ill and kneels on the spot of the apparition where he is instantly cured.⁵⁹ In yet another, Don Bernardo is watering his fields when he sees a light and finds a little crucifix of Señor de Esquípulas in a cave. He takes it home twice, but it returns to the site near the river, so he builds a chapel there.⁶⁰ This last story has the benefit of a small crucifix (rather than tripping over the six foot high one currently in the Santuario) and fewer processions to Santa Cruz.⁶¹

Yet another story asserts that Don Bernardo’s chapel and its healing dirt predated the arrival of the crucifix of Our Lord of Esquípulas which appeared, miraculously, in a box on the back of a mule who carried it down from the mountains and stood waiting by the church door.⁶²

Returning to the official site brochure, its second story takes a different tack, recounting how the Santa Cruz River flooded in 1810, revealing both the crucifix and the body of a martyred priest. Bizarrely, the priest is from Esquípulas and the crucifix is only accidentally named after his home town. The story further muddies the metaphorical floodwaters by noting that “this same spot where the Crucifix and the body of the priest were found was considered a sacred place by the Tewa Indians long before the Guatemalans and the Spaniards came to Chimayó.”⁶³

Because the Tano Indians briefly occupied the valley during and immediately following the Pueblo Revolt, it is plausible that a priest could have hidden a crucifix in the dirt before the later resettlement of the valley or in fact been martyred on the spot. In fact, hiding objects by

⁵⁸ Internet postings accelerate the variations. See for example, “A brief history of Chimayo,” <http://chimayo.org/history.html> (accessed 20 October 2009) where Don Bernardo becomes a “Chimayó friar.”

⁵⁹ Borhegyi, 18.

⁶⁰ Usner, 86-7. The narrator of this story, Benigna O. Chávez adds the detail that everyone helped to build the Santuario, including the women, who, she says, did all the plastering.

⁶¹ Kay notes that a smaller crucifix does exist at El Santuario and that some locals identify it with the miraculous cross of Our Lord of Esquípulas first found in the ground. See: Kay, 45.

⁶² Kay, 39-40.

⁶³ Gonzalez and Suntum, 13.

burial under such tenuous conditions was not uncommon, and discovery of such objects certainly generated folktales.⁶⁴ However, there is no record of such a priest, nor any Guatemalans.

What do we make of Tewa claims on the healing dirt? The Pueblos clearly have a very real association with Tsi Mayoh. Natives have been known to eat dirt associated with healing, and Pueblo stories have long claimed the site of El Santuario below Tsi Mayoh as their own. As mentioned earlier, it is often named as an ancient location of a sacred shrine or healing spring upon which the Spaniards built their church.⁶⁵ But the stories don't stop there. Some claim that it was a Native herding sheep who found the miraculous "Saint Istípula" or "Escápula" (a little head) sticking out of the ground, and that the Spanish somehow came to possess both the saint and the site.⁶⁶ It is difficult to untangle who has syncretized whom. Everyone lays claim, and the effort to syncretize both the healing dirt and Esquípuas appears mutual.⁶⁷

Many of the stories echo European legends known as *el cieclo de los pastores*, where holy images are found in the ground or in caves by a shepherd led by unnatural light, noise, or a vision. Attempts to remove the image to a more accessible location only cause it to return two or three times to its original location before a church is built on the sacred site.⁶⁸ As Usner noted about his friend's attempt to plumb the depths of Tsi Mayoh, it is futile to trace these legends as if they were fact. They reflect archetypal stories that relate the invisible landscape of faith to visible artifacts of healings, sacred dirt, and unlikely chapels. Their purpose is "to provide the faithful with ample evidence that their religion is very much alive in the Chimayó valley and that God demonstrates His omnipotence through miracles, wonders, and signs."⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Kay, 43.

⁶⁵ Borhegyi, 8. See also Ramón A. Gutiérrez, "El Santuario de Chimayo: A Syncretic Shrine in New Mexico," in Ramón A. Gutiérrez and Geneviève Fabre, eds., *Feasts and Celebrations in North American Ethnic Communities* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 74. Gutiérrez quotes Pueblo informants insisting that "the padres came and learned about the sipapu's power ... so they built a church." He seems sympathetic to this view, noting that Catholic priests frequently "baptized the local customs" and "Christianization of Mexico's Indians proceeded, in part, through the creation of such syncretic shrines." However these generalizations seem misapplied when historical documents indicate the intention to build El Santuario to serve Hispanic families in the village.

⁶⁶ Borhegyi, 19.

⁶⁷ "As can be seen, almost every family or group of people have tried to claim as its own the discovery of the miraculous image of Our Lord of Esquipulas." Borhegyi, 19. See also Footnote 13 on legends of healing springs.

⁶⁸ Kay maps the local legends quite closely to *el cieclo de los pastores*. See Kay, 42-44.

⁶⁹ Kay, 39.

The crucifix of Our Lord of Esquípuas offers powerful storytelling. The bloody figure of the suffering Christ on a Tree of Life fits perfectly into the world of the Penitente Brotherhood. Christ takes on the suffering and even the skin tone of the New World, revealing its hope in the green and budding cross. In the stories, the miraculous crucifix itself emerges out of the ground (perhaps out of the dark cave first associated with Tsi Mayoh), rising triumphant from its tomb.

The cult of Our Lord of Esquípuas spread quickly throughout northern New Mexico. Late in the 1800s, someone working on the nearby Oratorio de San Buenaventura, left their name scrawled on its ceiling along with *el Arbol de la Cruz*, a sketched crucifix sprouting leaves.⁷⁰ Green crosses are still found among the Penitente Brotherhood. As one iconographer notes:

The color green symbolizes the merciful, life-giving qualities of the cross, emphasizing the fact that the crucifixion is not a negative event, sorrowful though that is, but rather a positive one, giving divine life to the faithful.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Usner, 93.

⁷¹ William Wroth, *Images of Penance, Images of Mercy: Southwestern Santos in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 48 as quoted in Carillo.

JESUS VS. JESUS

Pilgrimage to Chimayó was common even in the earliest years of El Santuario and pilgrimage was directly linked to trade.⁷² Indeed, the inventory of 1818 indicates that aside from the accumulating folk icons left in the sanctuary by pilgrims, the front rooms of El Santuario were filled with local woven goods, presumably for sale to visitors.⁷³ To this day, Chimayó is known for its fine weavings and these rooms may have been built for this purpose.

Bernardo Abeyta died and was buried in El

Santuario in 1856. Almost immediately, a competing chapel opened just a couple hundred yards away. This one, dedicated to Santo Niño de Atocha, is said to have been built by a neighbor, Severiano Medina.⁷⁴ Clearly unsatisfied with the local healing a few steps away, Medina undertook the long pilgrimage to the Santo Niño shrine in Plateros, one in the network of shrines along the Camino Real in Fresnillo, Mexico. He returned healed and with his own icon of the Holy Child. Very quickly, the Santo Niño began to overwhelm and absorb the earlier cult of Esquípuas.



*Santo Niño de Atocha
tile mosaic at Chimayó*

⁷² A skeptical Gutiérrez characterizes Abeyta more as a one man chamber of commerce than a man of faith. He was, “a wealthy resident of the area who traded the Chimayo Valley’s products far and wide... one suspects that Don Bernardo hoped that by creating a shrine ... Chimayo would become a prosperous trading spot.” Gutiérrez, 75.

⁷³ Usner, 85.

⁷⁴ Kay, 47.

The Santo Niño is the Christ child, a young, happier, pre-crucified Lord of Esquípuilas. At some point the child got separated from the statue of his mother, Mary, the Virgin de Atocha and took on a life of his own. He is traditionally shown seated, dressed as a pilgrim wearing a hat and traveler's cape adorned with a cockleshell, holding a basket in one hand and wanderer's staff with water gourd in the other.⁷⁵ The Santo Niño is the patron of those unjustly imprisoned and accompanies travelers and pilgrims. Santo Niño is said to wander about at night, helping those in need, and thus wears out pair after pair of shoes.⁷⁶ Thus the faithful bring baby shoes as a gesture of devotion. Day after day, the niche in the Santo Niño Chapel overflows with little sneakers.

What Medina actually brought from Mexico appears to have been a German papier-mâché doll bent into position to resemble the Santo Niño.⁷⁷ However, folk devotion, from the time of Medina until now, can excuse such inconsistencies, including the larger confusion between the Santo Niño and the Holy Child of Prague, a saint who is usually shown dressed as a child prince holding a globe and scepter. Both icons appeared in Plateros and appear in Chimayó today.⁷⁸

Practically overnight, the Santo Niño usurped the healing power of the earth at Chimayó. Following Medina's lead, pilgrims turned to the Holy Child for miraculous cures, even though healings are not traditionally associated with him.⁷⁹ To complete the growing confusion, the heirs of Bernardo Abeyta, not to be outdone, procured their own Santo Niño. They placed him in the side chapel in El Santuario where the faithful came to collect sacred dirt. Thus the Santuario regained its flow of pilgrims who now told stories of how the miraculous Holy Child had been unearthed from sacred ground where one or the other chapel

⁷⁵ The cockleshell is the traditional symbol of pilgrimage along El Camino de Santiago in Spain.

⁷⁶ There is a delightful new illustrated children's story on this theme that captures both the devotion to and playfulness of the Santo Niño. See: Peggy Pond Church, *Shoes for the Santo Niño: Zapatitos para el Santo Niño, a Bilingual Tale* (Rio Grande Books, 2010).

⁷⁷ Borhegyi, 22.

⁷⁸ For example, a site on the history of the Santo Nino de Atocha describes an inventory of 1816 from the Mexican shrine in Plateros that clearly describes the Holy Child of Prague instead of the Santo Niño. See "Santo Niño de Atocha: History" <http://www.ninoatocha.com/history.html> (accessed 20 October 2009). Similarly, a website on the history of Chimayo shows a wall picture that is also the Holy Child of Prague. See "A brief history of Chimayo" <http://chimayo.org/history.html> (accessed 20 October 2009).

⁷⁹ Borhegyi, 21.

had later been built.⁸⁰

The Santo Niño fit well with a shift away from the dangerous frontier to a settled domestic life. When the Santo Niño came, said one informant in 1916, “sickness disappeared, the crops were abundant, the number of sheep multiplied, better markets were found for the Chimayó blankets woven in the homes and the Chimayó’s prospered wonderfully.”⁸¹ As Kay writes: “Few religious figures ever had so strong an appeal to the Hispanics of northern New Mexico. The Child’s activities, good or bad, were the common stuff of fireside stories.”⁸² And the child, even if it was a Christ child, could be naughty. On its way through Mexico, Santo Niño may well have absorbed aspects of the Aztec child-god, Teopiltzintli, who also guards travelers and pilgrims.⁸³

But in any case, here was a Jesus one could approach without mask or whips, a child straight from the blessed Mary’s lap. This Jesus hides the greatest in the smallest and least.⁸⁴ Where Our Lord of Esquípuas calls to those doing penance in the hills, Santo Niño visits families at their kitchen table. As a result, as one researcher put it, “the Santo Niño now reigns supreme.”⁸⁵

⁸⁰ See, for instance, the account where the Santo Niño is unearthed by a man and his daughter working in the fields when they hear church bells ringing underground. Gutiérrez, 79.

⁸¹ Gutiérrez, 79.

⁸² Kay, 49.

⁸³ Kay, 51. She names Carillo here as a source but does not cite the reference.

⁸⁴ Kay, 53.

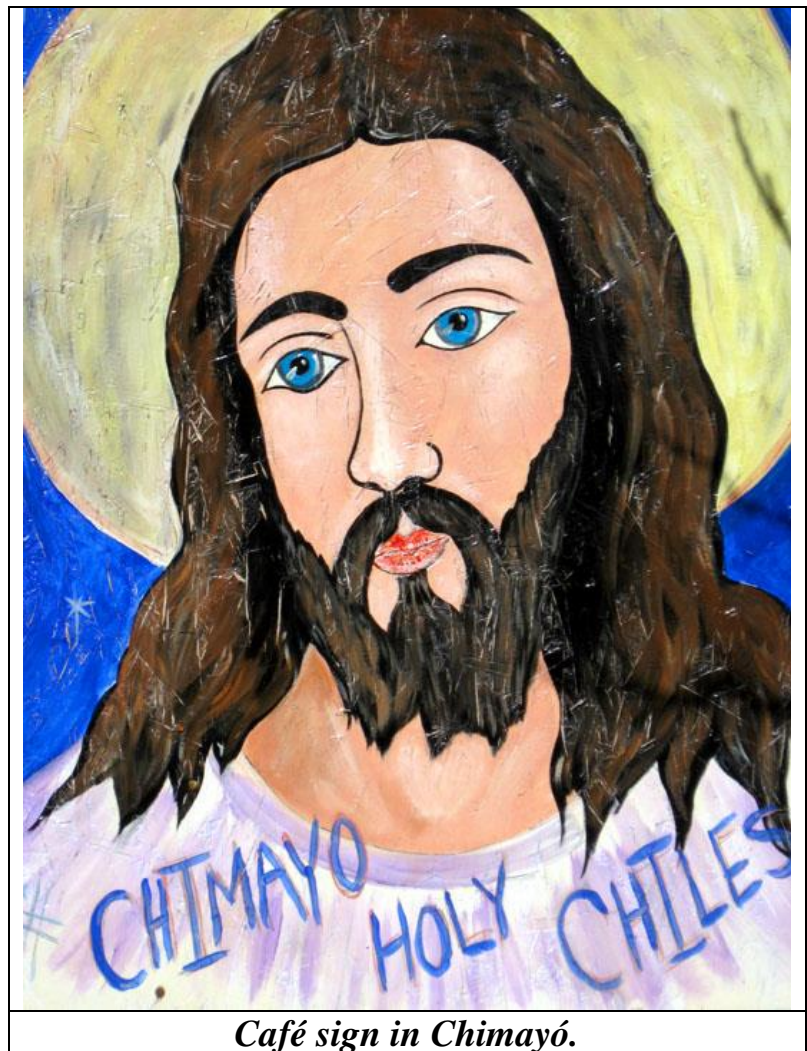
⁸⁵ Borhegyi, 22. “...even the saints are subject to social pressure when they are introduced from a foreign area. In spite of their protestation, they are soon clad in native garb and are given attributes according to the needs of the new community.”

THE LOURDES OF AMERICA

The continuing evolution of Chimayó as a pilgrimage site happened against a backdrop of rapid and dramatic change in the former Spanish colony. For hundreds of years, New Mexico had looked south along the Camino Real, but with the opening of the Santa Fe Trail in 1821, it turned East for commerce as strange new *Anglos* entered the land.⁸⁶ In 1841, Mexico threw off Spanish rule and New Mexico became part of the Mexican nation. Only five years later, General Kearney invaded New Mexico and declared it part of the United States. By 1880, the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway reached Albuquerque, trailing behind colorful advertisements that promised dissatisfied Easterners a romanticized, healthful and exotic life in the Southwest.⁸⁷

Americans who know little else about New Mexico sometimes recall Willa Cather's novel, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, about New Mexico's first archbishop, Jean Baptiste Lamy. If nothing else, Cather's early 20th century American fascination with a French Catholic bishop in former Mexican territory signals a new era for northern New Mexico.

Lamy, who arrived in 1851, is most famous for the beautiful St.



Café sign in Chimayó.

⁸⁶ I follow the local practice here in New Mexico of referring to all of this last wave of English speakers as *Anglo*.

⁸⁷ Kay, 58-59.

Francis Cathedral in Santa Fe. However, for many Hispanics, he remained a foreigner whose formal hierarchy and distaste for folk art icons clashed with their popular devotions. It still irks locals that no Hispanic served as archbishop for one hundred years after Lamy's arrival, and only dogged efforts of the faithful maintained chapels like El Santuario de Chimayó intact. In fact, in the late 1800s, Lamy sought to bring El Santuario under church control but was rebuffed.⁸⁸ One could say that Lamy's attempts to rein in folk Catholicism inadvertently opened doors for Presbyterian missionaries.⁸⁹

Of course, some of the first Protestants looked at the rural Catholics with eyes like those of the Spaniards who first saw Tewa. One wrote: "these poor people have been warped spiritually by a religion that has... deteriorated into idolatry... Countless people are seen bowing to a... doll which, at Easter time, is paraded through the plaza."⁹⁰ The Catholics were often likewise suspicious of Protestants who were allergic to community ritual and dance.

Yet, the Presbyterians came bearing education and healthcare to a rural community that had neither. In one year, 1900, Miss Prudence Clark petitioned for missionary work, left her home in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, and opened school class in Chimayó. She did not know a word of Spanish, and anyone who attended her school was threatened with excommunication. Yet within a few years she came to be a loved *comadre* to the community.⁹¹

Over time, the Presbyterians claim about a fourth of village residents.⁹² Just as the Catholics watched the Pueblo Feast Days, Protestants now observed the *Mes de María*, as women, dressed in black, walked in procession, with flower girls scattering rose petals on them as they prayed.⁹³

Ironically (or providentially) it was the Anglo non-Catholic outsiders who played a pivotal role in preserving Chimayó. In 1925, the writer

⁸⁸ Usner, 185.

⁸⁹ Jensen, 7.

⁹⁰ Olga E. Hoff, "The Life of a Recent Graduate from an Eastern College as Maestra in a New Mexico Plaza," *Home Mission Monthly*, Nov. 1914, 13, as quoted in Usner, 211.

⁹¹ Usner, 201. Usner's account of "La Miss Clark," as she came to be called, is a beautiful tribute to a deeply religious woman who taught, healed and cared for her adopted community and opened it to a larger world.

⁹² Usner, 212.

⁹³ See Usner for reminiscences of the *Mes de María*. Usner, 189-191.

Mary Austin and artist Frank Applegate formed The Spanish Colonial Arts Society to preserve and perpetuate Hispano art forms that were threatened by the inrush of American modernization.⁹⁴ The architect John Gaw Meem joined the Society in working to preserve places of significance such as El Santuario de Chimayó.

By the 1920s, El Santuario was in disrepair and pilgrimage in decline. The owners of what was still a private chapel were looking to sell off the original wood doors for quick cash.⁹⁵ The Society moved quickly to purchase the property and donated it to the Archdiocese of Santa Fe. El Santuario became, for the first time, church property. Since 1959, Father Casmiro Roca has served as resident priest, maintaining and upgrading the property while finally providing the local Catholic cleric that the village had wanted for centuries.

In a final irony, the onslaught of the outside world that threatened to destroy Chimayó helped save it. In the early 20th century, cars and tourists began reaching Chimayó.⁹⁶ These outsiders came not only to buy the traditional weavings but also to visit the famous Santuario which has been touted relentlessly in tourist brochures since 1920 as the “Lourdes of America.”⁹⁷ *Santeros* found a new market for carved *santos*,⁹⁸ and with the paving of a new road from Nambé in 1965, the steady flow of tourists became a flood.⁹⁹ As bus loads of tourists entered the quiet chapel in hushed expectation, Our Lord of Esquípuas rose again from the floodwaters.

Have people been cured at this “Lourdes of America”? The Catholic Church takes no official position, despite the pile-up of ex-votos and abandoned crutches that have to be continually thinned.¹⁰⁰ “It’s not the

⁹⁴ Austin may have epitomized the wave of Anglo religious seekers, having rejected her childhood religion and adopted the spirituality she had learned from a Paiute medicine man where “prayer was an outgoing act, expressed in dance, words, music, rhythm, color, or whatever medium served the immediate purpose.” Mary Austin, *Earth Horizon: Autobiography* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1932), 276. as quoted in Kay, 64.

⁹⁵ Kay, 65.

⁹⁶ Usner, 224.

⁹⁷ Usner, 240.

⁹⁸ “That contemporary santeros like Charles Charles Carillo can make a living creating these pieces for church affiliated and secular customers alike suggests that this aspect of the grassroots relationship with the larger society is growing.” Jensen, 14.

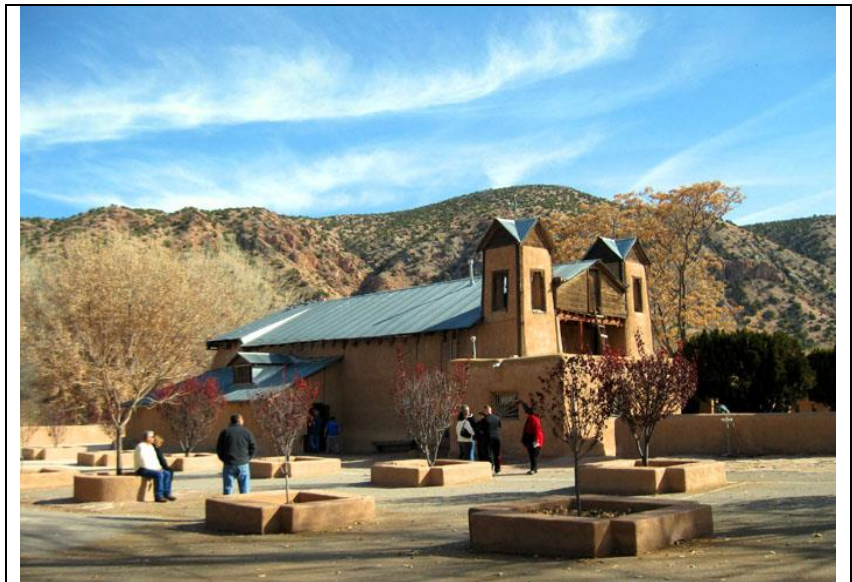
⁹⁹ Usner, 240. Lamadrid writes: “Chimayo... is to holy earth what Loures is to holy water, a *sipapú*, or emergence place, a healing wellspring.” Enrique R. Lamadrid, in Sam Howarth and Enrique R. Lamadrid, *Pilgrimage to Chimayo: Contemporary Portrait of a Living Tradition* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1999), 13.

¹⁰⁰ The healing dirt can be embarrassing to the church. “In the 1970s the priests were asked by the Archbishop to stop sending samples of the soil to cancer victims who wrote to the church seeking a cure’ he was afraid they might

dirt that makes the miracles!” insists Father Roca with fifty years of practiced exasperation.¹⁰¹ The dirt, as Roca likes to point out, is trucked in. “I even have to buy clean dirt!” he quips.¹⁰² Roca insists that plenty of visitors have been cured, but more have been transformed. “I mostly find changing minds,” he says.¹⁰³ “I always tell people that I have no faith in the dirt, I have faith in the Lord. But people can believe what they want.”¹⁰⁴

PILGRIMS IN SEARCH OF A SHRINE

*La vida es un Camino y tú escoges ser turista o peregrino. (Life is a Journey and you choose to be a pilgrim or a tourist.)*¹⁰⁵



El Santuario de Chimayó with Tsi Mayoh behind it.

Chimayó has been called the most important Catholic pilgrimage site in the United States.¹⁰⁶ Estimates indicate 300,000 visitors per year.¹⁰⁷ During one hour in the early 1990s, one researcher counted 218 Hispano pilgrims, 37 Anglos, and 10 Pueblo Indians, although his categories were based on outward appearance.¹⁰⁸ My experience is that the number of Hispanic Catholics remains high, but the complexity of the mix continues to increase. There are more languages and ethnicities, and the mix of faiths is even less visible or audible.

forgo more effective treatments.” George Johnson, *Fire in the Mind: Science, Faith, and the Search for Order* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 19.

¹⁰¹ Casmiro Roca, as quoted in Erik Eckholm, “Chimayo Journal: A Pastor Beggars to Differ with Flock on Miracles,” *New York Times*, 20 Feb. 2008.

¹⁰² Roca as quote in Eckholm. Estimates are 25-30 tons of sacred dirt carried off by pilgrims a year.

¹⁰³ Gustav Niebuhr, “Faith Is a Miracle; In Search of Holy Ground,” *New York Times*, 7 December 1997.

¹⁰⁴ Roca as quoted in Eckholm.

¹⁰⁵ Gonzalez and Suntum, 2.

¹⁰⁶ Wroth, “Santuario de Chimayo.”

¹⁰⁷ Wroth, “Santuario de Chimayo.”

¹⁰⁸ Gutiérrez, 83.

In 1946, just after World War II, veterans of New Mexico's 200 Coast Artillery, survivors of the Bataan Death March, took up the pilgrimage to Chimayó.¹⁰⁹ Their march of life in the face of the march of death revived the pilgrimage itself on a scale never seen before at El Santuario. Tens of thousands now walk to Chimayó on Easter weekend, and many faithful make it their part of pilgrimage to provide snacks, water and shelter from the back of parked cars along the way.¹¹⁰

On her first visit to New Mexico, anthropologist Holmes-Rodman expressed fascination with what she had seen. Her Acoma Pueblo host responded "if you *really* want to know about our land and our people, *you should walk the land with us. .. Then you'll see.*"¹¹¹ Three days into her long walk with the 25th Pilgrimage for Vocations in 1997, Holmes-Rodman recounts: "I am starting to *see* the land and its people."¹¹² Pilgrimage opens new eyes.

In April 1984, the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, under its first Hispanic archbishop, Robert Sanchez, sponsored a Prayer Pilgrimages for Peace, with relay runners carrying the Flame of Peace and healing dirt across the Rio Grande valley from Chimayó to Los Alamos, birth place of the atomic bomb.¹¹³ Increasingly, such pilgrimages become a sacred time and space where all people can walk together in common faith, even when they lack a common religion.

New Mexico itself has become a magnet for many faiths.¹¹⁴ "There are few places on earth that so many people have claimed as holy and where so many people see the world in different ways."¹¹⁵ Within an hour or two drive from the ancient Tewa Pueblos, one finds Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, New Age, Benedictine, and Presbyterian centers. As one historian notes: "The presence of such a stunning array of spiritual communities in such a lightly populated state ... has often led to

¹⁰⁹ Kay, 71.

¹¹⁰ For both pictures and the words of pilgrims, see Howarth and Lamadrid.

¹¹¹ Paula Elizabeth Holmes-Rodman, "'They Told What Happened on the Road': Narrative and the Construction of Experiential Knowledge on the Pilgrimage to Chimayo, New Mexico," in *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism*, eds. Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 26.

¹¹² Holmes-Rodman, 34.

¹¹³ Kay, 79ff. See also: Jensen, 18.

¹¹⁴ Szasz and Etulain, viii.

¹¹⁵ Johnson, 20. "The result of all this," writes Johnson, "is not a melting pot but a turbulent, chaotic boil."

comment.”¹¹⁶ Perhaps the Pueblos were right in their sense of sacred center, or perhaps the sense of sacred center now resonates among many faiths. As a local Sikh leader reportedly quipped: “God is everywhere, but His address is in Española.”¹¹⁷

Out of curiosity, I asked others about their journeys to Chimayó. When and why had they gone? What had they found? One elderly couple saw the place primarily with the eyes of tourists as “a quaint little village with a good weaving shop and a lovely church,” but the rest named it as a place of pilgrimage that involved what one called “a journey of faith and reflection and hope.”

An ex-Catholic found the site “very spiritual.” “The atmosphere in the church was remarkable. I sensed a strong spiritual presence and a strong feeling of God’s love and healing.” A former Mormon (now a UU ministerial candidate) felt moved sitting in the Santuario during worship and touching the sacred sand. A Quaker woman brought her ailing Catholic husband to pray; she gathered dirt for his healing, although healing did not come. One self-identified born-again Christian woman had been struggling through issues of abuse and divorce. Her friend prayed for her, had a vision of the Santuario, and drove her to Chimayó. “My life turned around after that,” she writes, sending along pictures, testimonials and words of praise.

One man is typical in noting the fellowship with family and friends enjoyed during the Good Friday pilgrimage (about 25 miles on foot) and the experience of “walking into the dawn south of Chimayó.” Similarly, a woman walking from Tesuque recalls the faces and stories along the way and “the small prayers and blessings” she and others left behind. Many of those who answered my questions had walked out of the faith of their youth and were already underway on a spiritual quest long before their journeys to Chimayó.

When I asked people to describe Chimayó, they said: a “beautiful and glorious natural and comforting place,” “a holy place of adobe and prayer,” “a place of history, beauty and healing.” It’s always a *place of/and*, a confluence of different kinds of place. As one poet observed:

¹¹⁶ Stephen Fox, “Boomer Dharma: The Evolution of Alternative Spiritual Communities,” in Szasz and Etulain, 148.

¹¹⁷ Fox, 148.

*In Chimayó two churches lie,
One of earth and one of sky...¹¹⁸*

Last week, I was wondering how one could sense out of the history and experience of Chimayó. As I was sitting for a haircut, my stylist, a Hispanic woman who turned out to have married a Native American, proceeded to spontaneously communicate her own faith and healing. In rapid succession, she warned of owls that presaged deaths in the family, praised modern hospitals and emergency care, laughed at folk wisdom that predicted pregnancies from the rising of corn tortillas and then vouched for their accuracy.

Miracles, she said, did happen at Chimayó, if one came ready to receive them. Following a miscarriage and complications, she had been advised to proceed with a hysterectomy as soon as possible. Troubled, she took the matter on prayer and pilgrimage and received the answer that she must learn to care for her body herself through traditional medicines.

“Has this worked?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. Her doctors said she was doing well, *but that*, she quickly added, *was not the point*. The point was the answer to prayer and the granting of insight, regardless of physical outcome. The point was seeing with new eyes.

Like Usner’s friend who went exploring Tsi Mayoh only to find a dead end, it is possible to look at the landscape of faith with the wrong set of eyes. If we reduce Chimayó to a topographic map and a list of historical facts, we miss the gift of the journey through the sacred hills. With such eyes, we will never see what draws hundreds of thousands to this remote corner of the United States every year, nor will we experience the healing they receive in handfuls of sand.

Perhaps George Johnson offers the best view over this complex landscape:

¹¹⁸ Joseph M. Rawls, “The two churches of Chimayo,” *Christian Century*, February 17, 1993, 165. The first stanza continues: “In Chimayo two churches lie / one of the earth and one of sky / one of retablo, adobe wall / another of cottonwoods all / enclosing rough altar and pews / exposed to the breezes; and views / of surrounding hill its windows, / its precincts bounded by meadows. ...”

In the never ending drive to bring order to the world, humanity's different tribes are constantly bumping into one another, encountering alien systems, webs of explanations strung together according to different assumptions. Sometimes one tribe tries to eliminate the competition by wiping out the infidels, waging holy war. More often people simply try to absorb the other religion into their own. Did the Spanish co-opt the Chimayo legend from the Tewa? Or was it the Tewa, so adept at absorbing new gods into their ever-expanding pantheon, who adopted the Spaniard's magic? We'll probably never know. By asking this kind of question we betray our own attempt to absorb the Chimayo legend into a framework in which rational explanations must always prevail.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Johnson, 302.

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