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Towards an Interpretation of the Penitentes**

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TOWARDS AN INTERPRETATION OF THE PENITENTES

By

Robert Sprott

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INTRODUCTION

But you must hold fast to faith, be firmly grounded and steadfast in it, unshaken in the hope promised you by the gospel you have heard. It is the gospel which has been announced to every creature under heaven, and I, Paul, am its servant. Even now I find my joy in the suffering I endure for you. In my own flesh I make up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of his body, the church.

Colossians 1:23-24

Paul's reference to his own sufferings, embedded as it is in an exhortation to faith, has been understood at different times as an encouragement to the mortification of the body. This phenomenon exercises a certain fascination on many moderns. Anglos have shown a fascination with the Penitentes of the Southwest from the time they heard of them. The Penitentes have been described by many tourists, academics, and clergy, and many, if not the majority, of these descriptions focus heavily on flagellation, crucifixions, and processions of blood. Such accounts, often exaggerated and erroneous, offer little by way of explanation of the Penitentes. Even more balanced treatments tend simply to rehabilitate the Penitente image without exploring the underlying raison d'etre of the movement. Why did such a thing develop in New Mexico? What can account for its origin and growth? What did the Penitentes see themselves as doing?

To work with these questions we must first take a look at the history of the Penitentes; this will concern the first part of the paper. The second part will begin to develop an interpretation of the Penitentes along two lines: first, the advantages and the inadequacies of seeing the Penitentes through the lens of the Spanish and Mexican cofradías will be discussed; and second, the notion of kerygma will be introduced and developed as a more fruitful approach to the Brothers.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

New Mexico lay on the extreme fringe of New Spain. The clusters of settlements along the Rio Grande and in the mountains north of Santa Fe were months away from the New World's cultural, economic, and religious centers to the south, and they were also cut off from the Spanish settlements in Texas and California. During the heyday of the Penitentes, the late 18th century to the beginning of this century, New Mexico was isolated and pretty much left to its own devices no matter who held nominal control. The treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo did not change very much at first -- the area that had been an isolated colonial outpost of first Spain and then Mexico had become an isolated frontier territory of the United States, and life went on much as before (Woodward 1935:260).

This isolation made itself felt in all areas of life. In economics, trade was so limited that village self-sufficiency became absolutely essential (Weigle 1976:3). The government,

administration of justice, and the maintenance of the peace was likewise of necessity a thoroughly local affair. The isolation also keenly affected the Spanish population in the sphere of religion. From the first settling of the region until at least territorial times, most villages suffered from a chronic shortage of priests. With no resident bishop, no seminary, no encouragement of native vocations, and no spare men for the Mexican friars and bishop to send north, the area often seemed to have been deserted by the church (Farrington 1975:12). Religiously no less than politically and economically, the people found themselves on their own. The sacraments and other priestly ministrations were perceived as being so central to Roman Catholicism that it seemed incredible that the faith should continue under such circumstances.

That it did continue, and continued strong, is in large measure due to the Penitentes. There is no sure date for the beginnings of the Brotherhood in New Mexico. Fray Angelico Chavez, however, has argued persuasively that the order must have begun between 1790 and 1810. Fray Dominguez made a visitation of the New Mexico missions in 1776, and the Penitentes are not mentioned at all in his very detailed report written the following year. Yet the decree of Bishop Zubiría issued in 1833 refers to them as having existed "already for a good number of years." Chavez thus points to the period between these two visitations as the time of Penitente beginnings in the region (Chavez 1954:109-111).

The origin of the Brotherhood has long been a point of contention. Chavez and others argue against the theory that the Penitentes are an offshoot of the Franciscan Third Order. The most significant fact about them, he says, is that there is no evidence of a formative period. The earliest data describe them as already well formed and fully possessed of a complement of titles and terms reminiscent of early 16th century penitential societies of the city of Seville. Both the Sevillian and New Mexican cofradías speak of "Our Father Jesus," and he is known by that title in no other part of Christendom. Both have classes of members called "Brothers of Blood" and "Brothers of Light." Both use masks in the performance of public penance. The function of the New Mexican pitiro seems to mirror that of the Sevillian trumpeter. And the New Mexican alabados reveal Sevillian metric form and minor key cadences (Chavez 1954:118-119). Thus, he maintains, the idea behind the Penitentes is a recent import; it is not really an indigenous phenomenon at all, and certainly it does not owe its life to the Franciscans who administered the territory until Mexican independence.

Most scholars, however, are not willing to ascribe such narrow roots to the movement. True, many of the organizational trappings of the order are similar to the Seville societies, and these could have been introduced to New Mexico at a relatively late date. However, many other features characteristic of Penitente worship have no analog in the penitential cofradías of old Spain; these have roots traceable to the

Friars or to practices common throughout the Hispanic church. The tinieblas, for instance, clearly derives from the Catholic tenebrae service. The symbolic crucifixion of either a bulto of Christ or of a man was a standard part of most passion plays in both the Old and New World. The carrate de la muerte can be found in many medieval mystery plays. And of course the stations of the cross were a common devotion greatly popularized by the Franciscans. Moreover, Marta Weigle sees a strong link between Franciscan Third Order chapels and many of the Penitente moradas and practices (Weigle 1976:44-47).

All in all, it would be most curious if there were no connection between the Penitentes and the Franciscans who had furnished the pastoral care in the region for so long. One does not have to subscribe to the theory of the Penitentes as a degenerate offshoot of the Third Order to see many traces of Franciscanism in the Penitente practices. Indeed, the most commonsensical approach is to see the Penitentes as having patterned themselves on many available sources -- the cofradías of Spain and Mexico, memories of Franciscan customs and devotions, church services, and religious dramas and tableaux. Left to their own devices and searching for ways to fill up the religious void created by the dearth of priests, they are likely to have been eclectic and innovative while trying all the while to be traditional and conservative of the faith.

If the origin of the Penitente movement can be debated, the fact of its rapid and widespread growth cannot. Bishop Zubiría was obviously astonished and dismayed by this strange

order of penitents which obviously was entrenched well beyond the village of Santa Cruz whence the bishop issued his decree of condemnation in July of 1833. In October of the same year he wrote a pastoral letter to all of the priests in the district urging them to deal forcefully with this great evil that seemed to be so prevalent. The hermandades were totally unauthorized, and their predilection for such extreme forms of penance was harmful to the life of the church (transcribed in Weigle 1976:196).

The bishop's decree and his pastoral letter had no effect. The people clearly did not see the Penitentes as destructive of their faith, and the few priests Zubiría had in the region did not seem disposed to contradict the people. Most of the males in most of the villages were either full-fledged members of the Brotherhood or at least cooperators with it in its various functions throughout the year. For the Penitentes were not active only during the Lenten and Easter season. They had something of the air of the benevolent society about them and performed a number of vital social functions. They rendered both material and spiritual assistance to families that had lost loved ones. They were usually the ones who arranged for the funeral and conducted the wake (velorio) and the burial service. There being no hospitals in the region, they devoted much of their time and energy to the care of the sick. The morada treasury helped see many a family through times of crisis. And the Penitentes were a positive force for the maintenance of public order -- by claiming authority to

adjudicate disputes and keep the peace between the members, Penitente officials ended up being the de facto law officers in most of the villages (Weigle 1976:151).

So crucial and so powerful was its role in the life of the village that some scholars have considered the Brotherhood to be more of a social reality than a religious one. Dorothy Woodward, while acknowledging the difficulty of classifying such societies, insists that "their aim was primarily religious and the social provisions were secondary" (Woodward 1935:122). Perhaps. It may be, however, that New Mexicans of the preceding centuries were less inclined to see a distinction between the social and the religious. Christianity without its social and moral imperatives would not have been considered authentic and, conversely, most social obligations and arrangements were considered to have a base in religion.

At any rate, although the Penitentes were active all year, their activities during Lent and Holy Week seem to have been especially important to the life of the village. Certainly these events involved the most number of people both as participants and spectators. Penitente cofradías were autonomous, and so the arrangement of things varied from place to place. Horca-Follick has given a good "typical" description of what likely happened in most 19th century New Mexican towns in Lent and Holy Week. The Wednesdays and Fridays of Lent were set aside as special days of penance. This penance might be carried out at home, privately, or in the morada.

Flagellant processions might be organized as well. Holy Week would begin with a procession on Spy Wednesday. Holy Thursday might involve a dramatization of the arrest of Jesus; it would almost surely involve la cena, a meal eaten in memory of the Last Supper and consisting of special foods carefully prepared by the women. Good Friday demanded the participation of all villagers and Penitentes. The morning was usually devoted to hymns, prayer, and kissing the cross. Shortly before noon came el encuentro, the sorrowful meeting of Jesus and Mary. In many towns the women carried the statue of Mary out from the church to meet the men carrying the bulto of Christ from the morada. The afternoon saw the way of the cross, led by the bulto or the Cristo (a man chosen the day before to play the part of Christ) if there was one. The re-enactment of the crucifixion might take place anytime between noon and dusk. Afterwards, bulto or Cristo was carried back to the morada; the bulto to be returned to its coffin, the Cristo to be revived after his "death" (i.e. fainting) on the cross. The tinieblas followed late in the evening. This simple and yet highly dramatic ceremony, modeled on the Catholic tenebrae, was based on the singing of alabados and the snuffing out of candles one by one. Darkness and noise engulfed the morada with the snuffing out of the last candle, a sign of the world's reaction to the death of the Lord. With that, Holy Week ended. The Resurrection of Easter Sunday did not figure much at all in the Penitente practices (Horaka-Follick 1969:102-112).¹

The Resurrection theme was not the only thing noticeably absent. Priests were seldom, if ever, present during this period, and because of that there was no celebration of the Eucharist or the other Christian sacraments. The Penitentes were indeed much as Bishop Zubiría had described them -- unauthorized and not under the direction of ecclesiastical authority. How could it have been otherwise? Durango, the bishop's see, was far to the south. There were few priests to minister to so vast an area. In 1850 that began to change. In that year Pope Pius IX created the vicariate apostolic of New Mexico and appointed Jean Baptiste Lamy, a French-born priest of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, as first vicar apostolic. Lamy was consecrated bishop and arrived in Santa Fe in 1851. Although apparently never as upset about the Penitentes as his successor, Archbishop Salpointe, was to become, Lamy was very much aware of the tension between the Brothers and the new clergy he was bringing into the area. The reasons usually given for this tension are: (1) an acute lack of understanding of and sympathy for the Hispanic customs of the local church on the part of the newly arrived Anglo and French priests; (2) distrust of increasing political activity of the Penitentes during the territorial period; and (3) the Penitente's issue's getting involved in the conflict between Archbishop Lamy and Padre Martinez (Woodward 1935:244-245). Of these, the first is usually credited with being the most significant.

It must be acknowledged that the Penitentes presented the newly constituted New Mexican hierarchy with a mammoth public relations problem. More and more Anglos were moving into the territory. These people, in addition to making up a growing proportion of the territory's citizenry, all had contacts back East, and they were writing those contacts about all the wonders of this new land. Penitente flagellant processions and other Holy Week observances soon began to figure prominently in both private letters and newspaper articles. This created a very bad image of the church, and so the concern of the archbishops was to moderate the more severe expressions of Penitente discipline and to reform the Brotherhood until it looked and behaved more like the Third Order of St. Francis which, the archbishops sincerely believed, it had once been (Weigle 1976:59; Chavez 1954:99).

The story of the different measures employed by the hierarchy toward this end need not be told. Some of them, e.g. the threat of excommunication, were quite severe, but none of them were very effective. The Penitentes continued as strong, if not stronger than, before, and the only change worked by the archbishops' efforts was that the Brotherhood became more secretive -- though this increased secrecy was also a reaction to Anglo prying and sensationalizing. The local clergy never acted on the archbishops' instructions with anything like the same zeal evinced by the archbishops in issuing them, and there does not appear to have been any widespread effort to dissolve the Brotherhood or excommunicate its members.

Of course, the Penitentes are considerably more "moderate" in their exercises now than they were formerly, and the Brotherhood as a whole is much less prominent in New Mexico village life than it used to be. This is owing, however, not to the effect of official church documents, but to the increased contact with the modern world and the end of the isolation of the villages (Horka-Follick 1969:160). The decline of the Penitentes coincided not with the issuance of episcopal decrees but with the general decline of village life that began in the first part of this century.

INTERPRETATION

The Penitentes as Cofradía

Canon Law (canon 298) defines a sodality or confraternity as an association of the faithful erected to promote works of charity or to further acts of piety and public worship. Although in the present discussion this narrow, legal definition will have to be supplemented by historical and anthropological considerations, it does at first glance seem to take in a great deal of what we have already seen of the Penitentes. They were certainly engaged in a wide range of benevolent activities. Their services and penance, both public and private, furthered the cause of piety in the village. And they were an "association" of the faithful as opposed to a canonically sanctioned religious order or society with its own rule and form of life. Such considerations have led some scholars (e.g. Woodward, Chavez, and Weigle) to see

the Penitentes as a cofradía, a confraternity, a brotherhood. In that sense it would not be generically different from its more modern counterparts such as the Holy Name Society, the Knights of Columbus, or the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

There is no denying that the Penitentes performed many of the functions, social and religious, that were typical of both peninsular and Mexican cofradías. Yet in at least two important respects the Penitentes do not seem to fit the mold of the cofradía. First, there is the relationship of the cofradía to the wider church. Canon Law clearly envisions the association as operating within the framework and under the guidance of the competent ecclesiastical structure. Canons 301 and 305 charge the local bishop with the task of establishing and regulating the associations, seeing that they have adequate spiritual direction, and making sure that they do not interfere with each other to the detriment of the church. Not all associations have fit this mold, but most have -- the Code is here simply writing into the law the long-standing custom and practice of the church with regard to pious unions, sodalities, and confraternities.

As we have seen, the Penitentes do not fit this pattern at all, at least not until the quite recent past.² The isolation of New Mexico meant that they functioned for the most part not within the larger framework of the church but outside of it. Priests and bishops had no part in the founding or direction of the penitential brotherhood, nor was it ever the recipient of any kind of official support until Archbishop

Byrne's 1947 statement (cf. Weigle 1976:225-228). The Penitentes developed outside the church's pastoral care and, without exception until 1947, those occasions when the official church did attempt to exercise direction resulted in tension and hostility.

This is an important point, and one that is too often overlooked. Much of the literature portrays the tension between the hierarchy and the Penitentes in terms of a culture clash. The newly arrived archbishops and foreign clergy were insensitive to traditional Hispanic expressions of religion; they did not understand them, were embarrassed by them before the dominant Anglo culture, and so sought to modify or repress them. And the Penitentes, for their part, reacted by defending their cultural and religious patrimony. Their resistance to the demands of the hierarchy was thus simply a part of their resistance to the incursion of Anglo culture and values in general (cf. Woodward 1935:310 and Horka-Follick 1969:154).

Yet that is a distortion of the historical record. For the Penitentes had trouble with church officials, Hispanic church officials, from the very beginning. We have already seen how Bishop Zubiría reacted when he came into contact with the Penitentes in his 1833 visitation. He condemned the Brotherhoods as malevolent innovations in the territory. Some of their specific practices were indeed ancient and praiseworthy, but the Brotherhood's use of them and indeed the Brotherhood itself was worthy only of condemnation and speedy

dissolution. Other ecclesiastics, Franciscan and secular, responded similarly. The early condemnation by Zubiría, for if Chavez's chronology is correct the Penitentes were indeed relatively new at that point, indicates that there is more to the tensions between the Brotherhood and the clergy than is accounted for by cultural conflicts in the territorial period. We will have more to say about the sources of that tension later; for now it is enough to note that the relationship of the Penitentes to the wider church and its officials is not typical of the cofradías. Treating the Penitentes as a cofradía, therefore, casts no light on this very important aspect of their history.

The second way that the Penitentes do not seem to fit the cofradía mold is their relationship to their community matrix, the village. It would seem that the Penitentes were not simply "an association" of the faithful -- to a great degree it was the faithful, nearly all of them. The Penitentes were a far cry from being an association or sodality that involved a minority, however large, of like-minded and similarly dedicated individuals. Lorenzo de Córdoba remembers:

Throughout the north, the Penitente Order was supreme. For the most part, all males belonged to the Brotherhood. It governed and imposed its code of behavior through its members. The morals of the villages were a reflection of the behavior patterns of those in the moradas.
(de Córdoba 1972:21)

The penitential societies and processions of Seville were accounted large, but then so was the city. Chavez (1954:118) quotes a turn of the century newspaper article in which the

author expresses his astonishment that the Seville society numbered over three hundred. Three hundred out of a city of several hundred thousand is a very small minority, and indeed most such associations tend to be but a fraction of the total Catholic population. But the Penitentes were different. They seemed to involve nearly everyone in the village, both the men who could be full-fledged members and the women so many of whom were auxiliadoras to the morada. Thus, the Penitentes are highly atypical of cofradías both in their relationship to the church and in their relationship to the wider community.

It is possible that both of these divergences from the cofradía model could have resulted from the isolation in which the movement developed. Both divergences, after all, are really indicative of an enlarged importance of the Penitentes beyond that which was usual for the cofradías, and the religious vacuum and isolation of New Mexico could well have prompted this greater importance. The cofradía ended up assuming the role and function of the ordained clergy, not to the extent of presuming to celebrate the sacraments but at least to the extent of being the de facto religious leaders and the conductors of whatever religious services there were. Such an enlarged role for the Penitentes has seemed "natural" to more than one writer (Henderson 1937:10; Chavez 1954:116-117) given the conditions of isolation.

Surely this has the ring of truth to it. An organization that would normally be an ancillary adjunct to a greater

enterprise might, in certain situations, grow to fill the void left by the absence of the larger entity. It is not difficult to imagine that this dynamic was at work in the beginning of the Penitente story, say in the late 18th-early 19th century.

Yet if this is true, it is also true that when the isolation is ended it might well be expected that the enlarged ancillary adjunct would shrink. In other words, if the Penitentes grew up to fill the void left by there being no priests, why did their role not decline beginning with the return of the priests in the middle of the 19th century? As has already been noted, the decline of the Penitentes dates not from the return of the clergy and still less from the pronouncements of the higher members of that clergy, but from the first decades of this century, especially after World War I, and the general disruption suffered by New Mexican village life at that time.

Certainly the cultural difference between the new priests and the people played a part. In quite a number of cases the arrival of Lamy's Anglo and French recruits was seen less as the return of the priests and more as the religious contingent of the invading Anglo wave. Yet the suspicion lingers that there was more to it than that. The clerical imports were for the most part not a bad lot. That most of them adapted to their new cultural environment to at least some degree is indicated by their refusal to attempt to implement a number of the archbishops', especially Salpointe's, directives with regard to tithes, ceremonies, and the Penitentes themselves.

At the local level, the priests and the people often got along remarkably well -- Florence Hawley Ellis has chronicled the story of Fr. Railliere, the French priest of Tome who made every effort to adapt and who was well loved for it, and although it may well be an exceptional story it was not unique (Ellis 1955).

Moreover, in the realm of ritual, ceremony, and religious services it is not clear how an Hispanic priest could have been that much of an improvement over an Anglo or French one. In the Catholic Church of the 19th century, after all, when it came to ritual, every cleric was doing and saying the same thing no matter where he found himself and no matter what his mother tongue was. Everything was in Latin and the rubrics of each ceremony determined the least gesture and modulation of voice. Could not this have been part of the problem, something that would have been faced by any new priest to the area whether Mexican or Anglo? The problem, or at least part of it, lay not with the ministers but with the sacraments themselves. The priests' ceremonies were not as evocative, not as spiritually fulfilling, as what the Penitentes had to offer, and many of the people (and many of the scholars who came after them) simply attributed it to the alien ministers' not knowing what they were about. But the ministers did know what they were doing. They celebrated mass and did everything else in New Mexico exactly as it was being done in Mexico City or Madrid or Paris or Cincinnati or anywhere. But it was not enough for the people of the

new American territory.³ They had grown up with something much more powerful. For the Penitentes had responded to the isolation of New Mexico at a level much deeper than they are usually given credit for. They were not just doing religious things in memory and faulty imitation of the priests who were no longer there to do them; with their customs and imagination they had reached down to touch the very heart of the Christian religion they were trying so desperately to preserve. The cofradías had grown, and evolved, and become kerygmatic.

The Cofradía as Kerygma

"Kerygma" is a word, a concept found often in the New Testament. It is never defined explicitly, but its usage makes its meaning clear enough. It denotes both the act and the message involved in an address or calling out or summons. It is often translated as "preaching," which would be an acceptable English equivalent were it not for its connotations of doctrine and moralizing. "Proclamation" is probably a better term for it; at least it is the most commonly used in theological circles today. The kerygma, then, is the solemn and public proclamation of salvation in Christ made in the name of God to non-Christians; it was accompanied by an appeal to signs and wonders to dispose the hearers to faith, conversion, and a return to God (New Catholic Encyclopedia, vol. VIII, p. 167). The message consists basically in proclaiming Christ dead and risen as the Son of God who gave himself for the sins of humanity (cf. Romans 8:34). The

apostolic kerygma is perhaps best exemplified in the speech of Peter in Acts 2:14-39, which announces salvation by way of a brief description of the life and death of Jesus coupled with an exhortation to repent and be baptized.

The New Testament writers were thoroughly convinced that salvation is essentially linked to the word. The kerygma is not simply information about a salvation that might be "wordless" in itself. Salvation is understood as the reality of the word, for God expresses himself as word. The kerygma is thus the word of salvation, i.e. the word constitutive for the coming of salvation. In other words, salvation happens in its being proclaimed and, conversely, there is no salvation apart from its proclamation. The kerygma, as word of Christ, is "a reality which mediates salvation and which understands itself as such" (Simons 1975:797-798).

The original proclamation of salvation was made by Jesus to the people of Israel. This announcement made present God's mercy and love to all who would accept the word and believe. Those who did so were formed into a community, the primitive church, which was empowered by the Spirit of the Risen Lord to continue the work of proclamation/salvation in the world. Thus the church becomes the locus of the kerygma, the point at which it is both received by the believer and preached to the world. The New Catholic Encyclopedia attempts to capture all of these aspects in a sentence that defies diagramming:

It (kerygma) is the living proclamation of the word of God in the Church by a divinely (through the Church) empowered and designated preacher,

in such a way that this word -- uttered by the preacher in the strength of the Spirit unto faith, hope, and charity as an evangelical offer of salvation and as a power that binds and judges -- makes itself present with the actuality of the 'now' presence characteristic of salvation history in Christu Jesus, from the beginning to the end of time. (vol. VIII, p. 168)

What has been said to this point might give the impression that the kerygma is a purely verbal phenomenon. Actually, it attains its highest signification in the church's sacramental and liturgical life, especially in the Eucharist where word and action join. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:26, "Every time, then, you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes!"

To sum up, kerygma is the proclamation of the existential, here and now offer of salvation present in the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is not information about Christ's salvific event, but the actual mediation of that event both for him who speaks and him who hears. It engages the hearer at his deepest hopes and longings and faces him with a choice he cannot evade: either acceptance of the word and commitment to it, or rejection. The kerygma is proclaimed within and by the church, and finds its fullest expression in the Eucharistic celebration. The proclamation is the re-presentation of the original salvific event in Christ both for the agent who does the proclaiming and for the recipient in faith.

The thesis here is that Penitente religiosity functioned kerygmatically. This thesis not only offers very plausible explanations for the hitherto unaccounted for features of the

cofradías, but also squares with what the Penitentes have had to say about themselves.

This is admittedly not the kind of thesis that can be proved or disproved. It is the kind of pursuit Thomas Steele engages in, and he is undoubtedly right in saying that it can be at best "a conjectural theology of the New Mexico Penitentes" (Steele 1974:45). All that can be done here is to measure it against the data we have and see how much it can account for.

On the basis of what has been said about kerygma, if the Penitentes were operating in a kerygmatic role there are certain traits that we would expect to see. They would focus relentlessly on the death of Jesus as the unique event that has accomplished salvation. They would attempt to make this event as real and as vivid as possible, both for themselves and for all those who participated in their services; this would necessitate a manner of presentation that would completely engage the people who might witness it.

The Penitente practices did indeed concentrate the mind marvelously well on the sufferings and death of Christ -- and that is all they did or were ever intended to do. From the very beginning, Anglo observers of the Penitentes have concluded that their extreme penances had the purpose of atonement or expiation for sin. By such discipline the Brothers attempted to purge themselves of evil, to endure great hardship to cleanse their souls of sin. The idea was to use the Lenten season to expiate the sins of the rest of the year.

This notion has made its way even into some of the scholarly literature (e.g. Horka-Follick 1969:47,90) even though it is quite at variance with what the Penitentes have often said about themselves. They do not undergo these penances to erase their sins; they undergo them to memorialize and make present again (or still) the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. As one young Penitente put it not long ago, "The crucifixion was only symbolic, to remind us of what Christ suffered. That is what the Anglos never understood" (Laxalt 1970:302). The Penitente Lenten and Holy Week regime clearly had one goal and one goal only -- the making present to the people of the saving act of Jesus.⁴

Again, it is important to emphasize that what is going on here is not just a dramatic narration of a past event -- it is the making present again of the original crucifixion itself. Steele makes an illuminating analogy with the Eucharist:

Just as in Catholic theology the given particular contemporary Mass is not adequately distinguishable from the Sacrifice of Calvary, so the Penitente crucifixion ritualizes and hence becomes the original Calvary. (Steele 1974:62)

This is possible because of the nature of ritual. As explained by Mircea Eliade (1954), the pattern of the present existence was set in illo tempore when the culture-hero established a myth and a ritual, the former validating rather than explaining the latter. The performance of the rite opens up this special time and allows one to enter into the myth. It is not that the myth is done over and over again; it is

only done once and for all, but it is still active. For Christians, illud tempus is that of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and to do the ritual is to enter into his life. This is what most Catholics understand to be happening in the mass, and it is behind the assertion that Christ is ever and always the celebrant at the Eucharist as he offers his prayer and sacrifice to the Father. It is also what the Penitentes understood to be happening at their Holy Week services as they entered in illo tempore of the crucifixion not through the sacraments but through acting out the saving death of Christ by way of the models familiar to them in the stations of the cross and the passion plays (Steele Ibid.).

And these services worked spectacularly well. By all accounts, even the most critical, the Penitentes developed a religious system that resonated perfectly with the New Mexico communities, and thus was able to function exactly as kerygma is meant to in the re-presentation of Christ's word of salvation as a summons to faith and conversion.

Set alongside the Penitente regime of services developed in the New Mexico village for the New Mexico village, the official rites and sacraments performed by an Anglo or French clergyman must have seemed pale. It is no wonder that the villagers refused to give them up, and so this approach sheds light on the tension between the Penitentes and the official church in at least two ways. It accounts for the tenacity with which the New Mexicans clung to their Penitente practices. And it also accounts for the suspicion with which those practices were viewed by the newly arrived clergy.

For surely there was nothing in their seminary training that would dispose them to be sympathetic to the Penitente's way of looking at the world and ritualizing that world-view. The "conjectural theology" outlined here with its emphasis on the symbolic's effecting the real precisely insofar as it is symbolic depends on schools of thought that were very much out of favor in the 18th and 19th centuries. It is an explanation of the efficacy of the sacraments highly reminiscent of Bonaventure's notion of "exemplar causality" as it came to be held in the Franciscan schools in the late middle ages.⁵ At the time of the Penitentes, however, no one in the church took such ideas seriously. Thomas Aquinas furnished the standard course in all seminary training, and his use of Aristotle's "efficient causality" to explain how the sacraments and other signs work went unquestioned. From the Thomistic point of view, the approach described here could only be seen as the crassest superstition, and that indeed appears to be the way many of the new priests evaluated the Penitente practices.

Seeing the cofradías as kerygmatic also accounts for the position they occupied in the village community. As bearers of the kerygma, they also necessarily functioned more as church than as an association of like-minded church members united for the achievement of some particular goal. Hence it is not surprising that virtually all of the villagers were either members or otherwise involved with the group.

And finally, regarding the Penitentes as kerygmatic is congruent with the date and reason for their decline. For kerygma is not a timeless truth that is unchanging, always the same. It is an existential summons addressed to a particular person or community as they exist in history. A kerygmatic proclamation thus remains valid and strong only so long as the community remains essentially unchanged. When the community changes, the forms by which the kerygma expressed itself will necessarily fade into the past. The Penitentes began to fade not at the order of the church officials, but as the village life in which they were situated and to which they addressed themselves began to undergo change prompted by the decreasing isolation of the early 20th century (Ellis 1952:204).

CONCLUSION

Everyone agrees that the Penitentes were born in frontier isolation to make up what was lacking in the religious and social institutions of the region. There is a tendency on the part of many writers, however, to underestimate the depth of the need the Penitentes responded to and how successful they were in responding to it. Viewing the Penitentes as a New World variant of the Spanish cofradía was judged to be helpful up to a point, but ultimately inadequate. An alternative approach was suggested in seeing the Penitentes as having grown into a kerygmatic role. This was seen as dealing plausibly with aspects of the Penitente history that are left unexplained

when the Brotherhood is interpreted as simply a cofradía. For the Penitentes understood well what was at stake and what they were attempting to do. Theirs was a struggle to keep faith, with "faith" here being meant not just as dogmas and tenets but as a summons and call at its deepest and most existential. Their memories, imaginations, and practices enabled them to keep and to proclaim the faith that gave meaning to their lives.

NOTES

¹Nor was the resurrection faring much better any place else in the Catholic world. Beginning around 1000 the Western, Latin Church tended to see salvation as being effected by the death of Jesus, rather than by the death and resurrection. Resurrection tended to be treated as the Father's validation or acceptance of his Son's sacrifice, the divine seal of approval on the salvific death. Liturgy, theology, and popular devotions all reflected this relegation of the resurrection to the status described by one writer as "a theological footnote to the saving death."

²The present-day Penitentes could be accurately characterized as a cofradía. Members form a very small percentage of the New Mexican Catholic population, and they receive guidance and direction from the clergy through both the Archbishop's Supreme Council and a liason with the archbishop's office (cf. Weigle 1976:110ff). Thus in recent times the hierarchy has realized its longstanding goal of "reabsorbing" the religious energy of the Penitentes to "divert it into more moderate forms of expression" (Henderson 1937:76).

³There is some doubt whether the sacraments of the post-Tridentine Church were "enough" for anyone. It is a commonplace of church history that popular devotions flourish during those times when the sacraments are not all they should be, as if popular religiosity moves in to fill the gap created when the sacraments are not allowed to exercise their full power within the ecclesial community. Certainly this description fits the 18th and 19th centuries when hardly anyone received communion on a regular basis while Marian, Sacred Heart, and Eucharistic (benediction, Corpus Christi processions) devotions held sway.

The great fall-off in the popularity of all these devotions in the wake of the Vatican II reforms has been taken by some to be a positive sign that the sacraments are once again moving to occupy the pride of place in Catholic spirituality. This may, however, turn out to have been wishful thinking; it is still too early to tell.

⁴Florence Hawley Ellis has an interesting insight into Penitente flagellation that lends support to the contention that the purpose of the penances was symbolic representation rather than expiation. She points out that the cuts made along the back before flagellation did not increase either the painfulness of the experience or the damage done to the back.

On the contrary, these cuts, shallow enough not to damage the back muscles, allowed for the free flow of blood, and so prevented the forming of welts that would have been much more painful and hurtful than the flagellation itself. She thus concludes that the flagellation and blood flow were intended to be symbolic. They acted as graphic symbols of sacrifice (Ellis 1952:203).

⁵It is interesting to speculate on whether the Penitente worldview might owe anything to the Franciscans who administered the district since its first settlement. Aquinas had long since been the standard text in seminaries by papal decree, but perhaps some vestiges of Bonaventurian thought lingered in Franciscan seminaries.

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