

The Vintage Voice

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Mexican Passion

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Last year my husband and I were in Mexico during Holy Week. On Good Friday we decided to go out to the dusty little village of Atotonilco to watch a reenactment of the Crucifixion. They have been doing these for years in the little back villages of Mexico, but we had never seen one. We were told it would start at 10:00 in the morning, before the sun got too hot. (April and May in central Mexico are the hottest months of the year.) We got there by 10:00, and the vendors were setting up their booths along the one street of the town: pottery, rosaries, whips for self-flagellation, carvings, bells, toys, cold drinks, tacos . . . you name it! Wherever two or three are gathered together in Mexico, there are always merchants. Buying and selling is the national pastime.

We could see a stage set up against an outside wall of the ancient church, but there was no action. Then we got the report that it wouldn't start until 11:00. At 11:00, we got the report that it wouldn't start until noon.

People gathered in great numbers . . . mostly Mexicans, but a sprinkling of *anglos*. Lots of families, children, old people, strapping young men, teenagers, babies . . . all sorts and conditions.

Finally the Roman soldiers materialized, as did Christ, with his hands chained behind him, Pilate (the best actor of the lot), and the high priests. I watched in transfixed awe. It was like the miracle plays I had read about in medieval times. The story was being told, being acted out. Earlier it was because no one could read; certainly no one owned a Bible. But, in Mexico, the custom has never stopped.

After the trial, the whipping of Jesus, and crowning him with the crown of thorns, they all left the stage and set off on the long walk to Calvary, down another dusty road that led up to a hill at the edge of town. By this time, probably more than 4,000 people had gathered.

We found a little shade under a thorny mesquite tree, which we shared with scores of others. We watched as the two thieves and Jesus were tied to the crosses, and then the crosses were hauled upright. (Fortunately the Mexican government no longer allows nails.) By this time it was about 2:00 in the afternoon; the sun was fierce. We were parched, sweaty, and tired.

Since we had already been there for over four (hot) hours, we decided we would leave before they were taken down from their crosses. We walked across the hillside where vendors were

selling their beautiful fruits (mangos carved like flowers), and we spotted our old friend, Jesús, the ice cream vendor. We each gave him a big *abrazo*, bought his ice cream to cool ourselves off, and left.

But, I left with images that will live with me for a long, long time. Images of simple Mexican people scattered around the hillside participating in the Passion of Christ . . . images of Christ and the two thieves hanging on their crosses in the hot sun . . . images of vendors hawking their wares as Christ was carrying his cross down the Via Dolorosa . . . images of dogs wandering along beside him . . . images of my friend, the ice cream vendor, serving us strawberry ice cream as we turned from the heavy sorrow of the Passion story back into the living of the day.

How do I make sense of all these disparate images? You know what? I lay them at the foot of the cross. I give them over to this God who made his loving son, but also made dogs, and ice cream vendors with warm smiles and warm hearts, who made babies who were asleep in the swaddling of their mothers' *rebozos*, who made my own life and has filled it full of good things. Not only good things, but extraordinary, miraculous things. Like Mexico and all its passions. But, also, Easter celebrated with our English-speaking congregation at St. Paul's in San Miguel de Allende.

The Mexicans definitely express the pain, sorrow, and suffering of Good Friday with more pathos and drama than we *anglos*. But perhaps we capture the intensity and joy of the resurrection experience more fully: the music, the flowers, the words . . . the Episcopal "beauty of holiness" in worship.

For me, it is the best of both worlds. One is not better than the other, but the two are the yin and yang of our mystical theology. This death. This new life. It is, perhaps, only after truly experiencing his death that we can celebrate with such glorious joy Christ's Easter morning resurrection.



Joal Donovan is the wife of the Rev. John C. Donovan. From 1971–1976, John was the first rector of the English-speaking St. Paul's Church in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. Thereafter, the family moved to Galveston where John became Rector of Trinity Church and Joal worked with her longtime friend, Sally Wallace, at Hendley Market on the Strand, a shop renowned for its eclectic handmade wares, including nativities from around the world. Joal's interests are folk art, writing (mostly poetry), celebrating life with friends, and visiting their three sons and five "grands" in New Mexico, Arizona, and Argentina. She and John spend three months a year in San Miguel — the enchanted pueblo of her soul.



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