

March 2013

Easter in San Miguel

Sure it's a little early to begin Easter Week. Does anyone complain about St. Patrick's Month?

First Lent. It is a big deal in this predominately Catholic country. Every Friday is meatless. San Miguel restaurants boast a plethora of delicious Lenten recipes that are drawn from past generations: eg. cream of corn and poblano chile soup.

Here in San Miguel they begin the pre-Easter ritual in a big way. It starts in the small village of Antontonilco in a beautiful little church, the Shrine of Jesus the Nazarene, also known as the Sistine Chapel of Mexico. The church interior is covered with frescos. It also houses the banner which depicts Santa Maria de Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico. This banner was used as the standard carried by Fr. Manuel Hidalgo, Allende and the other leaders the night of the beginning of the 1810 revolution for independence from Spain. The church is also the home of a famous statue, "Nuestro Senor de la Columna", "Our Lord of the Column". It depicts Jesus with His crown of thorns, resting on a short column, his back a mass of open, bleeding wounds from whipping -- an image that could have come straight from Mel Gibson's film, "The Passion of Christ". The statue is credited with miraculous powers. <http://www.experience-san-miguel-de-allende.com/atotonilco.html>

On the Saturday night before Passion Sunday (the fifth Sunday of Lent) a massive crowd of worshippers gather at the church to begin a procession carrying this statue, as well as that of Our Lady of Sorrows and the Apostle John, the 12 kilometers to San Miguel. They walk all night carrying candles and traditional silver and copper lanterns along the highway and streets that are lined with worshippers. Several processors are costumed: Christ in purple robe, Roman centurions with uplifted swords. The procession arrives in SMA via Avenida Independencia just after dawn, to the accompaniment of fireworks.

We awoke Sunday at 5:30 AM and walked over to Rich's house to arrive at 6:30. Rich Beatty, former Newburyporter and longtime resident of San Miguel agreed to guide us to the procession of Christ of the Column. We arrived at the church, San Juan de Dios. People were setting up an altar and chairs for an outdoor Mass. The grassy medians and berms that surrounded the church were taken up by blanket-covered lumps. These lumps were people sleeping. They had arrived during the night from the countryside. From the church we traced the path that the procession would take.

The street decorations are amazing. Please check out the accompanying photos. Worshippers spend the night decorating the street with flowers, purple and white balloons, colored tissue paper and sawdust. The large pictures are

done with colored sawdust. The greens you see strewn are fennel, chamomile and other fragrant herbs that emit wonderful fragrances when trod upon by the procession. At this point the parade has become a huge mass of humanity. It resembles a swarm of locusts. As it goes by the decorations are stripped as souvenirs as high as the crowd can reach. The sawdust pictures turn into a non-descript porridge.

The procession stops before a kind of reviewing stand to sing and to receive blessings from the priests. It ends at the church, San Juan de Dios, where a mass is celebrated. The statue of Jesus is then placed inside the church on the high altar, where it remains until Easter Wednesday. It is then returned to Antontonilco in a much smaller procession.

Part two of the three-week Semana Santa is the Celebration of Our Lady of Sorrow. This happens on Friday night before Palm Sunday. Many of the townspeople create wonderful decorated altars and open their homes. Some of these altars have up to a 50 year history with generations creating the same beautiful altar. Families and businesses give drinks, cookies and ice cream to passers-by. The streets are packed with people going from site to site eating and having fun.

Palm Sunday begins the final Holy Week, or Semana Santa. This is a national holiday for the whole week, and San Miguel is packed. Religious ceremonies occur all week in the center of town. Many of the ceremonies date back to the early 1700's.

Sunday: A procession through the center of town features Jesus riding a donkey – both a live version and a statue which is carried on the shoulders of 12 men. These are followed by groups representing various parishes, youth groups and dancing Indians in full native garb, including feathered headdress.

Wednesday: The Via Crucis, the Way of the Cross. The procession represents the 14 stages, or stations, of Christ's path to martyrdom, carrying the cross.

Thursday: Visita de las Siete Casas, The Visit of the Seven Churches. All the churches in the city set up altars representing Christ in different passages before his death. It is customary to visit at least seven churches. Blessed bread and tiny religious images are distributed among the visitors.

Friday: In the morning we have the Procession of the Holy Encounter, representing the meeting of Christ and His Holy Mother on His way to Calvary. The procession includes three life-size statues of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, Veronica – who wiped the face of Jesus with a towel (aka the Shroud of Turin), another male saint (John or Peter?) and another female (Mary Magdalene?). These statues are heavy; they are transported on the shoulders of up to twenty men. Veronica and Mary are transported by many women.

Before the Procession begins, the trial of Jesus by Pontius Pilate is re-enacted. Pilate and several centurions are dressed in roman garb. A statue of Jesus heads the Procession, followed by a centurion who whips Him from time to time. The remainder of the Procession issues from this relatively tiny chapel next to the larger Parroquia of St. Michael the Archangel: men carrying crucifixes, angels with baskets of chamomile, a children's choir and a band. It called to mind the clown car in the circus, where 20 clowns emerge from a VW Beetle. How on earth did all these people, statues and accessories fit in this tiny chapel? Well, they've been doing it for over 300 years, so I guess they've got it down to a science.

After doing a slow circuit around the downtown, the Procession arrives back in front of the Parroquia. The statue of the Holy Mother is placed upon a raised platform. The statue of Jesus carrying the cross is placed upon another platform, facing the Holy Mother. Jesus raises His head, via a special mechanism, thereby acknowledging His mother. This is the Holy Encounter.

Late Friday afternoon: The Holy Burial. This is the largest and most solemn procession. It includes men and women wearing black who carry life-size statues of archangels and saints, including a transparent coffin which contains "Christ's corpse", through the main streets of the city.

Sunday: The Destruction of the Judases. The celebration ends when up to 30 papier machè images of Judas (and unpopular politicians) are exploded.

This series of ceremonies are impressive in several ways: visually, aurally, etc. However, the most important to us is the strong religious faith that it conveys.

Thank you Mexico for another inspiring season!

Chuck and Anzie