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The greatest week

The last week of the season of the time Christians spend in preparation for Easter, is the week Oaxacans like to call the "Semana Mayor" or "the Greatest Week." For many people in Mexico, Holy Week is nearly the second most important religious period after Christmas. But the reason is not the reason this week is called "greatest."

Holy Week in Oaxaca is laden with traditional religious practices, some shared with the rest of Mexico, some unique to Oaxaca, but all of which express a sentiment rooted as deep in the history of the people as in Catholic religion they manifest.

It is no coincidence that the indigenous peoples of Oaxaca feel such strong identification with the suffering of Jesus Christ, which is the central theme of the religious customs and rituals celebrated during Holy Week.

Several popular customs express devotion to a suffering Jesus and one of these practices which takes place on Good Friday, remem-



"La Soledad" Church.

bering the Friday of Jesus death; is the procession of silence, or "pésame a la Virgen" which is an act of accompanying Mary to console her at the death of her son much like a wake in other cultures.

As evening falls on Good Friday, the people of a town or colonia gather at the church. Accompanied by lighted torches, they carry a statue of the "Virgin of Sorrows" in a silent procession in the darkness marked only by the funereal beat of a solitary drum. In this act of solidarity with the mother of Jesus, the poor find a refuge from their own grief, whether it be death, poverty, or family problems. This companionship is beyond words, and thus the silence of the procession.

Another custom with a particu-

larly Oaxacan flavor is the Way of the Cross, a popular remembrance of Jesus walk up the hill of Calvary to the place of his execution.

Although there are many of these processions on Good Friday and the other Fridays of Lent throughout Mexico and in many other cultures, the indigenous groups of Oaxaca give special meaning to the fourth station of the procession which is called the "encuentro", or the meeting of Jesus and his mother Mary.

As the procession is prepared a certain location along the route is designated as the place of "encuentro" and the women of the locality bring the statue of the Lady of Sorrows to this point and wait for the arrival of

Continued on Page 3

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The greatest week



A silent procession.

... procession. The men begin the
... of the Cross at the church build-
... carrying a statue of Jesus bearing
... cross. They pause for prayer and
... at the first three stations;
... then, as they approach the scene
... the encuentro, the women move
... forward, carrying the statue of Mary,
... and the two groups join in an emo-
... recalling of the moment when
... Mary sees her tortured son carrying
... his shoulder the very instrument
... his execution.

At this point in the procession
... images of Jesus and Mary are
... carried side by side, and women and
... proceed together, but before
... continuing along the Way of the
... cross, there is a sermon by the local
... priest on the theme of the encuentro.
... This time of reflection is typical of a
... moment that transcends the
... history of years of repetition and
... touches the present experience of a
... suffering people. The anguish of some
... brothers may be the fact that their
... sons or husbands have gone to "el
... porte" to look for work. For others it
... would be the recent death of a little
... one from malnutrition.

For all the people, this moment
... becomes a personal encounter in
... which one, is able to share his trials
... with others and thus does not feel
... alone.

The long lived experience of
... suffering of the people of Mexico,
... and of Oaxaca in particular, is mani-
... fested by an interesting turn in the

history of popular religiosity in the
State of Oaxaca. The Spanish mis-
sionaries used to leave images of
Christ, Mary, or other saints in the
mountains where, they hoped, the
indigenous people would find them
and develop through them a Chris-
tian devotion. Any Oaxacan can sell
you that "la Soledad" (our Lady of
Solitude), whose basilica on Inde-
pendencia Street is visited daily by
people from all over the state, is the
patroness of the State of Oaxaca. Not
many people can tell you that when
the image of the Virgen de la Soledad
was found in a bundle on the back of
a dead burro, another image was
found with it: the image of Jesus
resurrected from the dead after his
crucifixion. It is a testimony to the
character of Oaxacan indigenous re-
ligious experience that La Soledad,
and not the Risen Christ, became the
state patron.

Yet the triumphant note of res-
urrection and glory which is the cli-
max of "the greatest week" is not
completely lost to Oaxacans. The
image of Jesus Risen in his glory is
still to be found in the church of
Carmen Alto, a few blocks above the
Zócalo on García Vigil Street. And
on Easter Sunday, all the suffering
past, the people of the parish bring
out the image and carry it in proces-
sion. The message of nature and sac-
rifice to a new beginning is humbly
present in the indigenous customs
which live on in present-day Oaxaca.

Written by James M. Gibson, C.R. ■

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Art sale for orphans

The American artist Phoebe Scholl has spent long periods in Oaxaca sketching and painting scenes and people local of the area. Two years ago she presented a highly successful exhibit of watercolors in the Municipal Gallery, which revealed how she uses her technique to express the individuality that surrounds us with vision and sensitivity.



Backstrap weaver

Phoebe Scholl has been involved with art all her life, as a student, artist and teacher. She received her doctorate in art from Columbia University in New York, and subsequently became a full professor at Edinboro State University in Pennsylvania. She works in watercolors and oils, as well as being an accomplished printmaker.

The prestigious gallery *Arte De Oaxaca* (105 Murguía St.) is currently showing a selection of six linoleum prints of scenes of Oaxacan life which are for sale in benefit of the *Albergue Infantil Josefino, A.C.*, (St. Joseph's children's Home), a non-profit private organization (NGO) founded by a small group of Oaxacan women whose pur-

pose is to provide shelter, food and education for orphaned and abandoned children, taking responsibility for their integral growth so that they develop individually and become positive members of society. When conditions are favorable for the child, adoption is arranged with the assistance of the competent

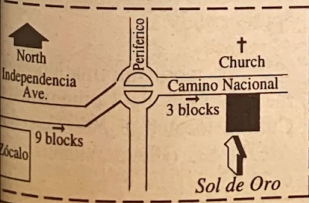
authorities. Through donations and fund-raising activities, a permanent home with capacity for 50 children was completed in 1993, where at present 33 boys and girls between the ages of one and 14 years, all of indigenous origin, are cared for. They attend government schools, and their activities in the Home include music, sports and vegetable gardening. Support is mainly local, although Oaxaca is one of the poorest states in Mexico, second only to Chiapas in levels of illiteracy, malnutrition and poverty.

The following prints are being sold for only N\$ 400 pesos each:

- Oxen resting, Two burros, Backstrap weaver, The Net Mender, Blind musicians, Perpetual motion.

Good news for vegetarians !

The "Sol de Oro" Association invites you to visit our new Vegetarian Natural Foods Kitchen !! Meals to go or eat in. We guarantee delicious and nutritious cuisine: for only N\$ 10 pesos !! We also offer natural peanut butter, vinegar, honey, tofu, and quality brown rice! And try our vegetarian cooking classes! (20 New pesos including lunch) We're unique! Come see yourself! We're at 114 Lazaro Cardenas Ave. (The old Camino Nacional)



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