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THE PENITENTES OF THE SANGRE de CRISTOS

AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY

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PREFACE
SECOND EDITION

The celebration of the events of Christ's Passion that culminated at Calvary, summons together the most awesome coterie, conspiring to desolate the psyche of the participants in a discordant drama of evil, terror, conflict, pain, regret, defeat, and tragic loss.

While the mystic rites of Lent unfold, the Penitente achieves identity with the suffering Christ; transcending the base and mundane of every day events. He is then no longer an ordinary man paralysed with the inadequacies and frailties of his human condition.

Rarely is the ordinary man given the opportunity to participate in such great events that are a luxury usually reserved to kings and angels, upon whom such awesome forces are brought to bear, thus achieves for the Penitente a sense of superhuman nobility.

He knows that as he moves forward in the procession that he will be inexorably crushed; that the dark forces of evil will triumph, but he is driven by the grandeur and pageantry while they sing and march toward defeat, with their swaying lanterns, whirring matracas, the blowing of flutes, and the fluttering robes of the Cristo toward inevitable pain and death at Calvario, but it is his abiding faith and the magnitude of that defeat that is sublime, and wins our admiration and fills us with awe, and causes us to reach aesthetic heights. He has surrendered to the inevitability of the tragic event, and our eyes are filled with tears of rapture when we achieve awareness of the awesome powers with which he is faced, but through his faith he remains sublime in his downfall.

The tragedy of Calvary has made heroes out of the survivors. The Penitente has triumphed over pain and defeat, and on Easter Sunday he is allowed to share with his Saviour the joys and the triumph of the resurrection.

How otherwise are we to measure the victory gained by the resurrection, if it has not come out of sorrow and defeat, yes, even death?

Bill Tate, Truchas, N. M. 1967

Tragedy is the reenactment of an event of high importance. The Penitentes of the Sangre de Cristos each year during Lent reenact the Passion of Christ.

The Penitentes method of worship through the rite of tragic drama is a way of rendering the incomprehensible comprehensible. It is a manner in which to express the abstract in the concrete, an attempt to make the conceivable perceivable, a striving toward objectivity.

He finds in the unfolding events of the Lenten drama the meaning of the irony and tragedy that he faces in his own life, the unravelling of the inscrutable that he finds all around him in every day events.

Without placing a high value on his own life, the Penitente would find no meaning in his reenacting the tragic events that inevitably led to Calvary. To quote Nietzsche, "they worshipped death so much because they loved life so well." The prerequisite for tragedy is that a high value be placed on human life. ✓

The sorrows and tragedies, and the final agony of Calvary is the supreme epic drama in the Penitente's life, and makes his own misfortunes seem less tragic, thus to imitate this sorrowful drama is to attain a kind of atonement for his own inadequacies.

This is the mystery of tragic drama. This is the motivating force of the Penitentes.

Bill Tate
Truchas, N. M.
1966

CALVARIO IN TRUCHAS

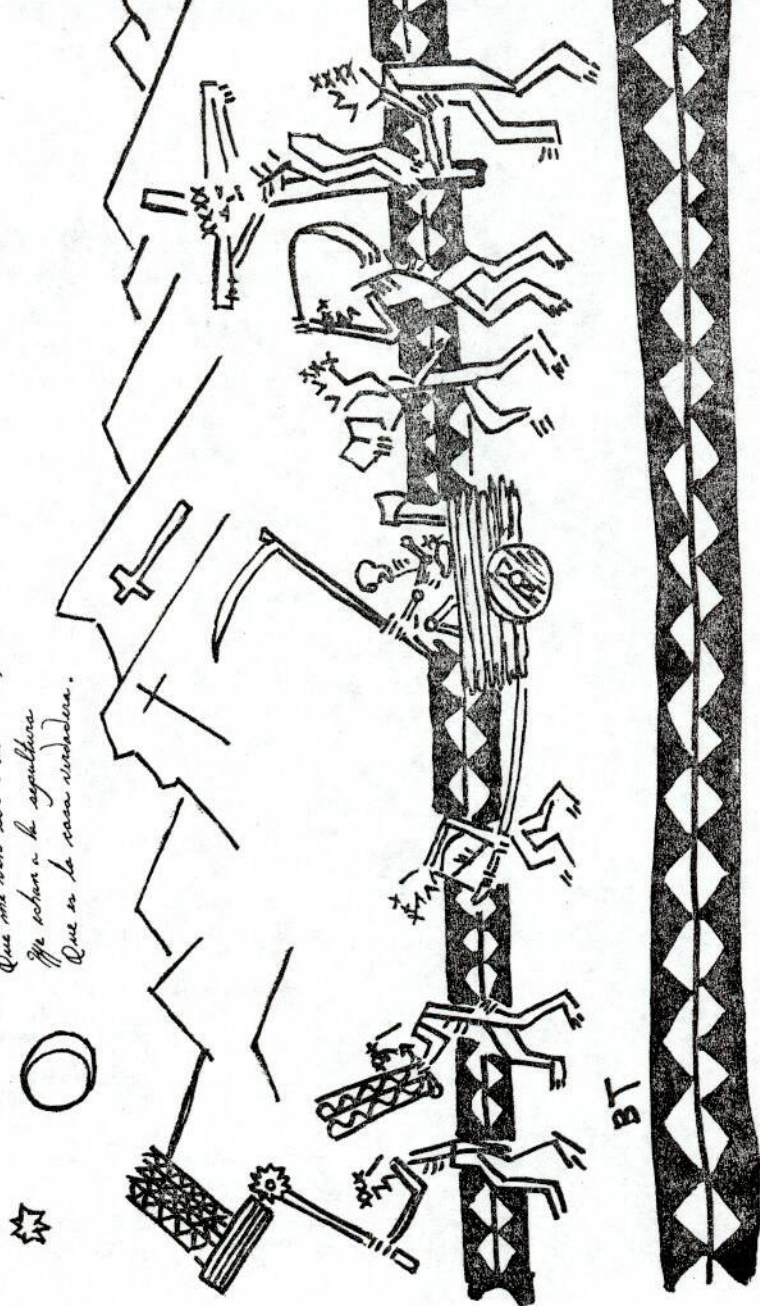
A PENITENTE OATH

The members of the Pious Fraternity of the County of Taos should know that our intention since old times has been devotion to the Blood of Christ, which was shed to save us sinners, for so did God give His only Son to be offered in sacrifice for sinners. The principal object of our organization is to serve God our Creator in the belief that Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the World according to the teachings of the Holy Gospel; to keep the Ten Commandments of the Law of God, to live humbly; to abjure discord and unjust dealings with our fellow men; to shun saloons and all other temptations the world offers, for "what does it profit a man, if he gain a whole world, but ✓ suffer the loss of his own soul "; to act toward one another with charity and mutual love like brothers in Jesus Christ to provide a good example for each other, helping in illness, afflictions and times of need, pardoning one another's offences, and mutually tolerating our weaknesses; to follow the humble life given to us as an example by our Lord Jesus Christ, and to recognize and respect each other as members of a body that is Christ Jesus, our Redeemer, and to say as says the Gospel of Saint Matthew, chapter 11, verses 25-26: "I praise Thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou didst hide these things from the wise and prudent, and didst reveal them to little ones. Yes, Father, for such was Thy good pleasure."

—O—

This document dated February 23, 1861, and is published in *La Hermandad*, XI, 2 (April, 1889) Pueblo, Colorado. Courtesy Taylor Museum of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center.

*Adios por ultima vez
Que me van sobre la tierra,
Me van a la agricultura
Que es la casa verdadera.*



PROCESSION

INTRODUCTION

Much has been said and written about the Penitentes⁽¹⁾ of the Upper Rio Grande Region of Northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado, most of which has been colored by the prejudices and preconceived notions of the reporters. Much more is completely untrue.

I live among the Penitentes in the village of Las Truchas,⁽²⁾ New Mexico, a Spanish American community high on the ramparts of the Sangre de Cristo⁽³⁾ Mountains, at the foot of the towering Truchas Peaks, the triple crowns of Nueva Espana.

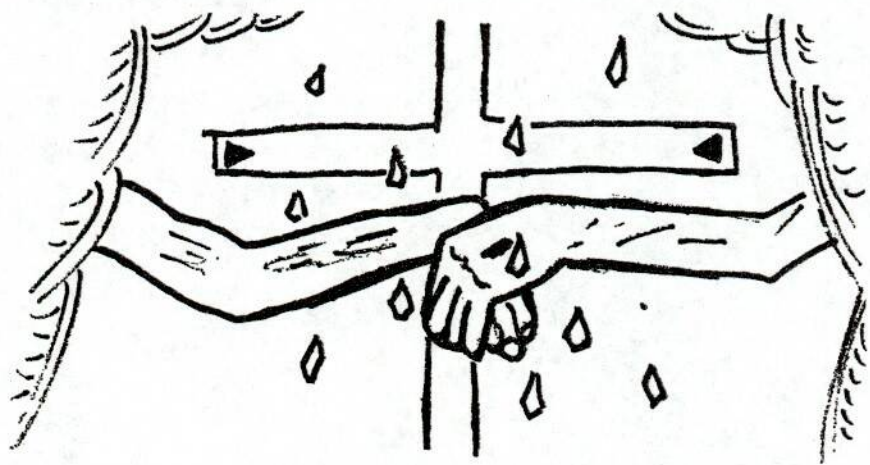
I have no portfolio to be their apologist or oracle, but I have taken it upon myself to portray and to clarify who the Penitentes are, what they do, and why, as lucidly and objectively as is possible.

It is important that I achieve my purpose, because I believe that the Penitentes of this region are an important part of our American Heritage. They are the only existing theological and cultural folk expression in America of the ancient world, a link between the old and the new.

Because of the nature of the material, very little testimony is available—even less that can be verified. The rest must be left to conjecture. Therefore the validity of the evidence is dependent upon direct observation and participation. I have done both.

I don't believe that one can probe the profundity and mystery of a drama by catching a part of the 3rd act, or be moved by a liturgy by watching it from afar. To achieve the desired enlightenment requires involvement, not by the clock or calendar, but as an unending, continuing, all permeating part of one's life. The Penitentes are an important part of mine.





I

WHO ARE THE PENITENTES?

The Penitentes are a secret(4) and sacred Spanish-American brotherhood who live in the mountains of Northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado, who have pledged themselves to Christian devotions without completely withdrawing from the daily world. They have dedicated themselves in remembrance that Christ was condemned, crucified, and died on the cross for the salvation of mankind, and the expiation of his sins.

Their devotions are observed usually in secret because the Penitentes believe that worship is a private matter, and that one should not seek approbation for one's sacred endeavors.

The Penitente liturgy consists mainly of prayers called rosarios, (5) rapturous songs called alabados (6) and processions.

The principal events on the Penitente calendar occur during Lent, primarily during Holy week called Semana Santa,⁽⁷⁾ beginning on Wednesday, and culminating Saturday morning before Easter.

They practice their worship by reenacting the events that led to Christ's crucifixion and entombment, much like the Greeks who by tragic drama celebrated the sacred rituals of their gods.

It is inherent in the Spanish mystique to believe that through mystery and tragedy will transcendental beauty and nobility emerge, because as surely as the warm sun follows the rain, out of tragedy will follow ecstasy.

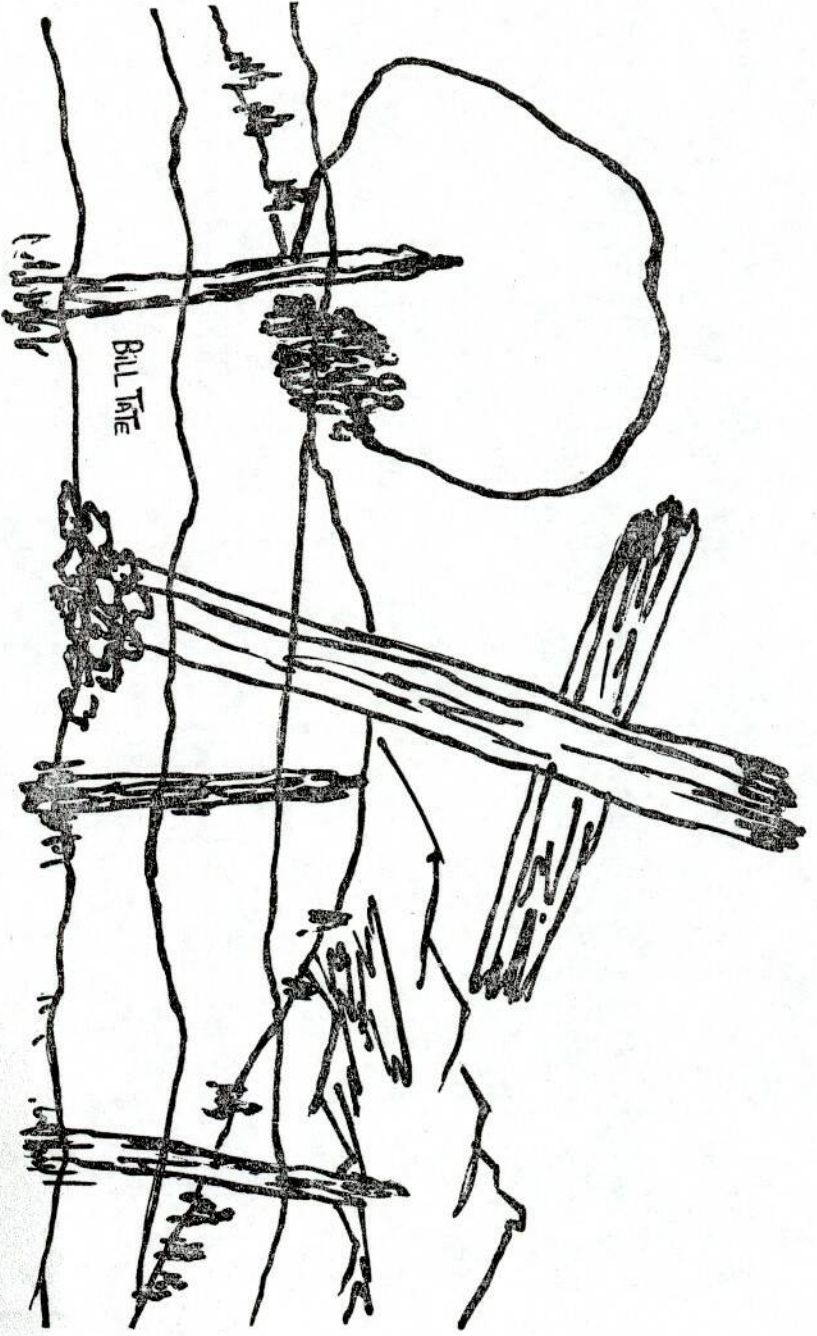
✓ The Penitentes are the descendants of the vanguard of Spanish colonists who settled in the highlands of Northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado during the floodtide of Spanish colonization.

As the occupation receded, and Mexico subsequently achieved her independence from Spain, the representatives of both Church and Government were ordered by the Crown of Spain to return to the homeland from Nueva Espana, leaving the people to their own resources, limited as these must have been in those times.

Inexorably it developed upon the Penitentes to become the guardians of the Faith, to nurture it, and keep it alive. As the churches fell into neglect and disrepair, the moradas grew and flourished.

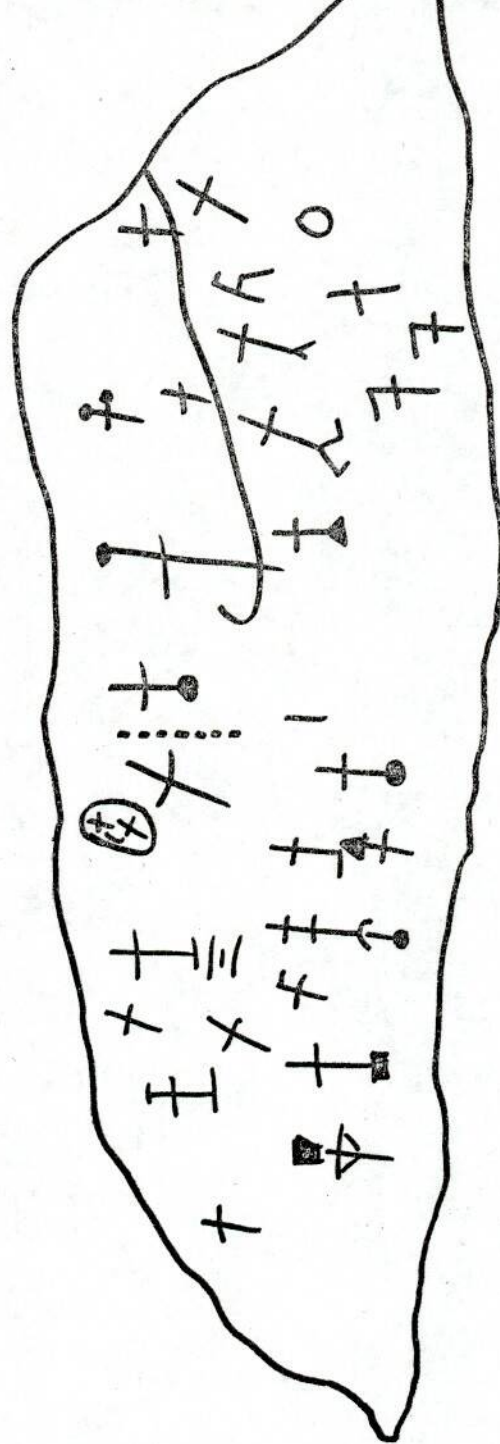
* The Morada⁽⁸⁾ became the town hall and temple. Those who were not members in those days were certainly the exception and not the rule. These conditions prevailed until the arrival of Archbishop Lamy in 1851,⁽⁹⁾ and the subsequent revival of Catholic orthodoxy. To a degree they continue to prevail in the more isolated areas of Northern New Mexico to this very day.

* The Penitentes of today are farmers, laborers, and oftentimes public officials. Your next door neighbor may be a Penitente, if you live in Northern New Mexico.



Bill Tate

PROCESSION TO CALVARIO



Bill Tate

Petroglyphs, believed to record a Penitente ritual and subsequent procession to Calvario.



II

THE ORIGIN OF THE PENITENTES

Much has been said, but little is known about the origin of the Penitentes. Each historian, it seems, has his own particular version of when and where they came from, contingent upon from what perspective he views them. Due to the obvious lack of concurrence, it must be considered that there are no "facts" as such. Therefore it can be only assumed that one version is as equally valid as the other.

Some trace them to the flagellant sect of the 3rd Order of St. Francis,⁽¹⁰⁾ because much of their ritual was evidently assimilated from the early day Franciscans, the first religious leaders of Nueva Espana, but this need not be the whole story. They may well go back earlier than that. Through the ages man has utilized the tragic drama as a

means of catharsis and expiation.⁽¹¹⁾ We witness this in the songs of Homer, the dramas of Aeschylus and Euripides.

Identity and transcendence have been achieved through imitation and representation since the dawn of human history. This phenomenon perhaps antedates the Cro-Magnon paintings in the caves of Altamira in Santander, also the eagle and buffalo dances of the Pueblo Indians.

Such rites are not confined to a particular place in geography, but exist over the entire surface of the earth.

The magic that lies behind the imitation of Christ's Passion and subsequent Resurrection presumes the expiation of man's sins, his inexorable death, and subsequent rising, and sharing a seat in paradise.

Understanding this, one may conclude, if he can be objective and gifted with sufficient sophistication that these rites and aspirations have been germane to most cultures since earliest history, and that the Penitentes represent a continuation of these rituals until the present time.

To arrive at this conclusion would necessarily require some perspective of Spanish history during the time of the conquest and colonization of Spanish America.⁽¹²⁾

Ferdinand of Old Castile was confirmed by Alexander VI, the Spanish Pope as "The Catholic King" and was reigning during the consummation of medievalism in Europe. The Spanish Church was wealthy and powerful at this time, because the people were not only intensely religious, but it was also a national institution, and the Crown was supreme, and had the Inquisition under its control.

Cut off from the sea on all sides, and still engaged in the bitter struggle with the Moors, Castile still preserved through the era of Spanish American colonization the medieval features of its culture.

✓ Castilian was the literary language of Spain, and consequently of Spanish America as well. Old Castile was the matrix

out of which the religiosity of the early colonists of Nueva Espana was formed.

It was during this time in Old Castile that Santa Teresa⁽¹³⁾ instituted the reforms of the Carmelites⁽¹⁴⁾ which spread throughout Spanish America. She wrote the Libro de su Vida and Libro de las Moradas; thus extending the philosophical limits of the Spanish language and the embryonic probing of the subconscious.

San Juan de la Cruz de los Caballeros⁽¹⁵⁾ also of Avila in Old Castile was the author of symbolistic hymns and poetry that achieved the epitome of rapturous ecstasy. He was also a member of the Carmelites and was often times imprisoned for his unorthodox teachings and religious practices, but even so, exercised considerable influence on the subconscious of the early explorers and settlers of Nueva Espana.

This is the literary and religious heritage of the Penitentes, that has been carried down by them to the present day.

This has been possible because Nueva Espana at that time was almost as isolated from the Old World as the other planets of our solar system are from us today. Thus New Mexico retained, with little adulteration the rituals and faith of her Spanish forebearers in Old Castile.⁽¹⁶⁾

There were many secularist years after Mexico gained her independence from Spain. During these years, there were few, if any, representatives of the Church in the Northern New Mexico mountain villages. Because of this, the people's only religious expression was through the rituals of the Penitentes. This circumstance continued until long after the American invasion by General Kearney, who brought with him an alien anglo-protestant theology.

After the troops of the United States secured the northern region of New Mexico, the Church in the person of Archbishop Lamy made its reentry into the area. Once again these people were urged to return to the rites of the Roman Catholic Church. ✓

However, because of their isolation from population centers and routes of commerce, as well as the strong hold their traditions had on them, these deeply religious people continued to retain the rites of the Penitentes, practicing them under the most difficult circumstances. For this they were condemned and ostracised, both by an unsympathetic church and government. It was for these reasons that the Penitentes were compelled to go more or less underground.

Because of the encroachments and demands of modern society, all that remains today are only the vestiges of these rituals that at one time played such a large part in the lives of the people that inhabited the valleys and the hidden villages in the highlands of the Sangre de Cristos.

Economics and social convention are strangling the life out of what little is left of these practices and traditions that have been germane to their culture since the beginning of their odyssey in Old Castile.

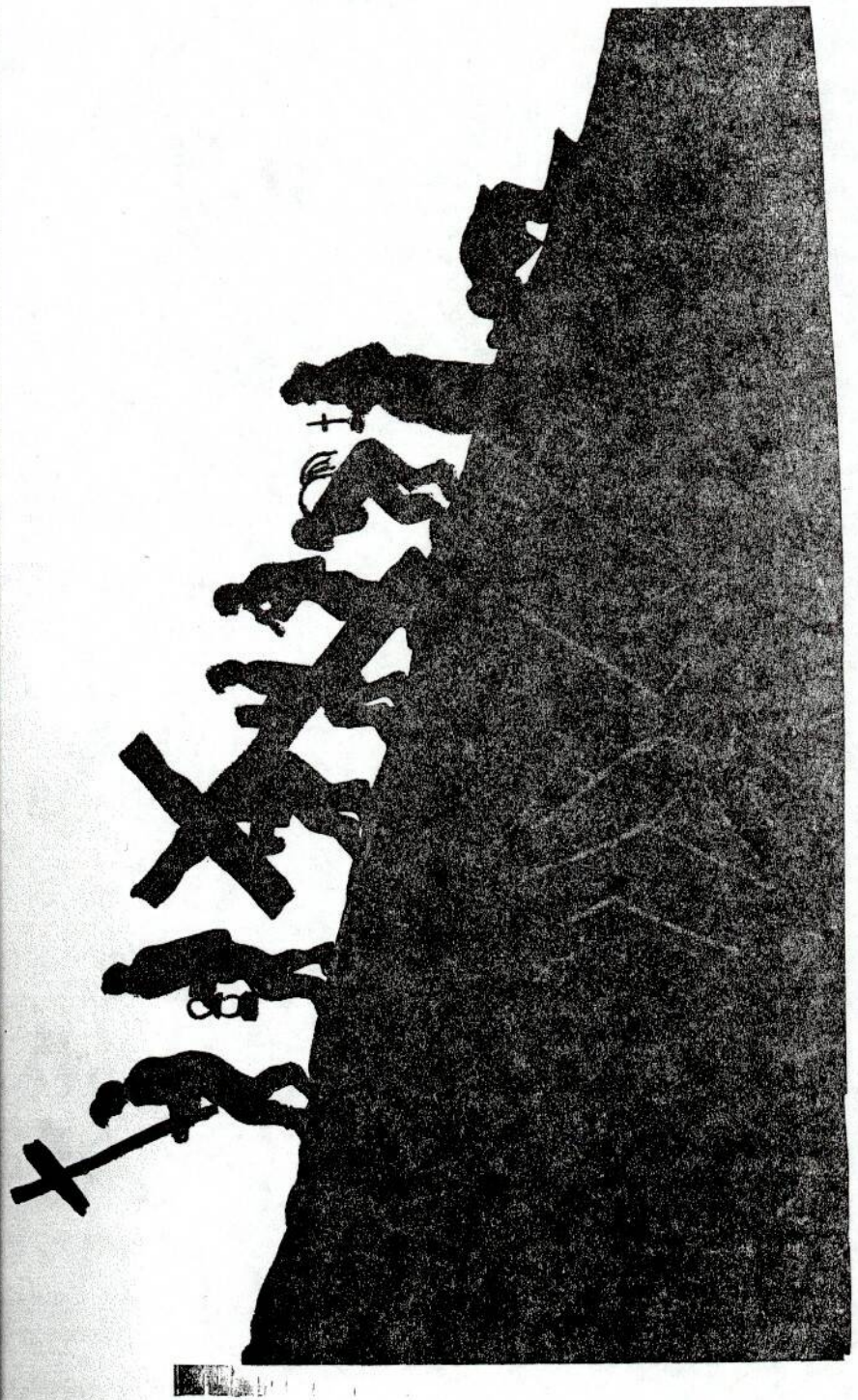
Bid farewell to the processions and the songs that have fulfilled the vital essence of the Penitente psyche for so many generations, for though the Alabados may disappear like the wind into the past, but like the wind which no one has ever seen, but only has heard, his spirit will still ask with yearning, "What does it say?" He will sense the answer, but go unknowing.

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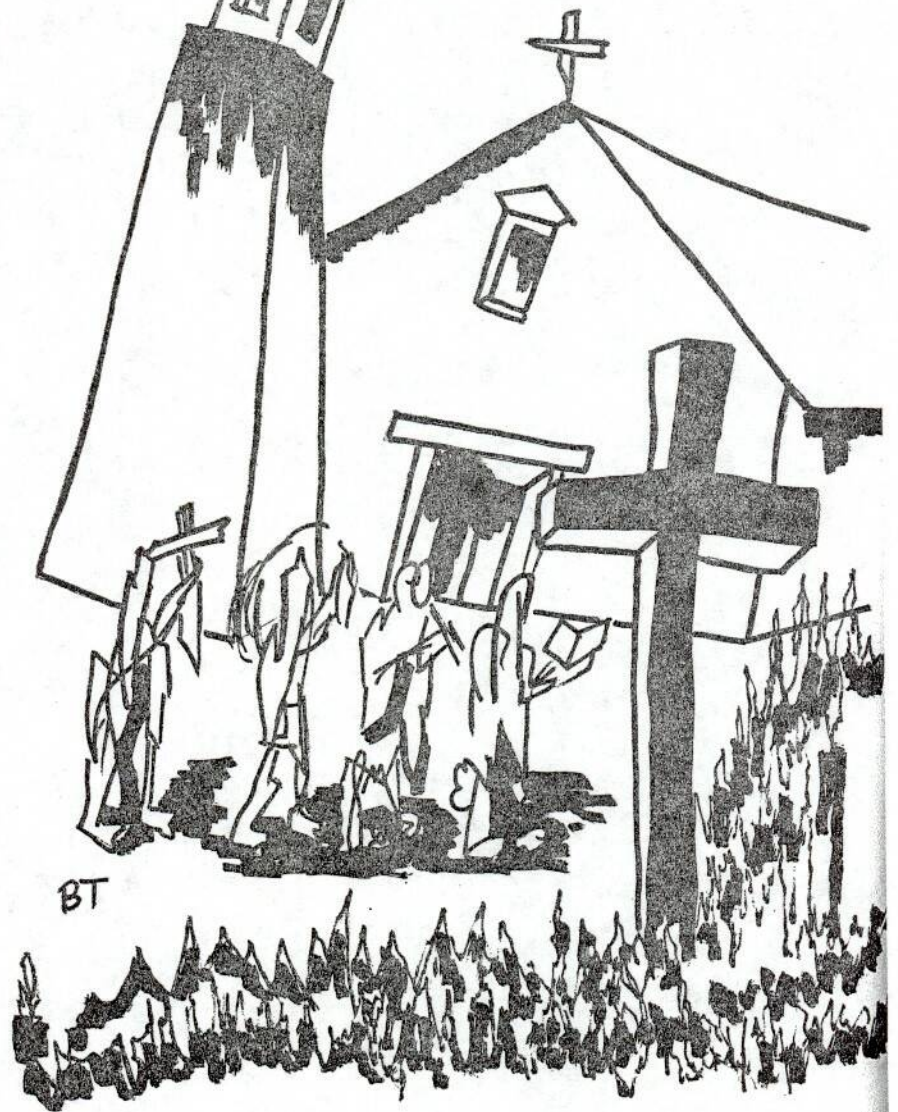
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VIA DOLOROSA

*Adios acompañamiento.
Que ya voy al Campo Santo,
y todos mis pecados
Quedan en arroyo llanto.*



NIGHT CHANT



III

THE CARMELITES

Very little has been written about the Ladys' Order of the Penitentes, known as the Carmelites, even though they are a vital and active part of the society.

It is quite possible that they antedate the Penitentes by many centuries. It is legendary that the Carmelites antedate the Birth of Christ, and that they celebrated their rituals on Mt. Carmel in the Holy Land back to the days of the prophets. It is said that Mary, the Mother of Jesus attended services there, and was pledged as a member, and that St. Peter delivered a sermon on Mt. Carmel to them on Pentecost, and also joined them, as well as the other apostles. Among their membership were believed to be the Essenes.

The Carmelites are one of the mysteries of history, and are