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## ANATOMY OF GOD

*Russel Vernon Hunter*

**P**RIESTS WERE KILLED, missions burned and the ecclesiastical arts therein destroyed when the Indians rose against the Spanish colonists of New Mexico in 1680. Evacuating the capital, Santa Fe, Spanish inhabitants fled south to a point near which El Paso now stands.

There they waited for the Crown to send someone who could help them return. During their starved waiting, lips prayed in the direction of the fertile, irrigated valleys of the north. In exile the refugees went to mass at the mission of Guadalupe, but they were homesick for the thick, comforting walls of northern missions where they had knelt with savages and known retreat.

During mass on the morning of October 11, 1693, their thoughts strayed from prayers to northern slopes and were punctuated with hopes that they could return before the last golden leaves fell from mountain flanks. Don Diego de Vargas, a man of noble heart, had arrived with an army to take them home. For this they had waited twelve years.

As they passed for the last time through the doorway of Guadalupe chapel, the exiled lifted their arms to an image of the Virgin raised on a standard at the head of the column forming to start north. Earlier Vargas had written the viceroy of his plan to take this statue to Santa Fe as its patroness and protectress.

Eagerness sustained the resettlers through that waterless stretch, the Jornada del Muerto. Their food was scant. Their pace was slow, too slow for the anxious leader. With a portion of the army he marched ahead to plan his entry into the capital. When the followers arrived at Santo Domingo he was waiting to lead them on.

Leaving there, where leafless branches of cottonwood trees feathered the air in gray clumps, they struggled up the winding pass to the northeast and emerged upon the mesa which gave them the first broad view

of the Sangre de Cristo mountains, white with solemn December snow.

With joy hushed by uneasiness, the Spanish people waited outside the city until the image of the Virgin, lifted high at the procession's head, passed through the gates. Her right hand was raised in eternal blessing. Arriving at the plaza accompanied by her color-bearers, she saw the assembled Indians look up at her with indeterminate expressions, giving witness neither to friendliness nor hostility. All were unarmed, but she saw in their calmness indications of trouble ahead. She looked at them and tried to understand them. She wanted them to understand her: the woman announced by God to be victorious through her seed, the Mother of all living. Hers was sublime dignity, "clothed with the Sun, with the Moon under her feet and on her head a crown of twelve stars."

While her guardians, fifteen brown-frosted Franciscans, lifted their voices in Gregorian cadence she swayed in omnipotence on her standard planted on the soil which she had been brought to possess. Voices rang with a force indicative of faith in the security of the future, but hers was an unknowing, foreboding sensation which she must not reveal.

She had appeared in the bush which burned in the Paradise of Eden, the Ark of the Covenant, the Fountain sealed, the Garden enclosed, and in the Cloud which rose out of the sea while Elias prayed. Now she had been brought across the Atlantic, through Mexico to the wilderness of the north, to a people of the most demonic mein she had ever encountered. Had they not destroyed all images of her holy kindred saints which had been placed in New Mexico missions?

She heard Vargas telling the colonists that their villa was restored; that the Indians were pacified and their submission to "Divine and human majesty" was accomplished. All would live as brothers, happily together. He promised the Indians that he would take nothing from them!

So intent was Our Lady upon her duties, the dependence of her own upon her, that she was but faintly aware of her transference to a snow-covered ridge north of the villa. She watched her subjects drag themselves and their belongings up the frozen slope. It saddened her to see their disappointment as they looked down at the remnants of their former homes.

Among the houses on the rise south of the river stood the skeleton of the church of the Archangel San Miguel. Like the foundations of God it had resisted heretical attack. On the north side of the river

the royal headquarters plaza remained unchanged except that a kiva ladder replaced the belfry of the military chapel, Nuestra Señora de la Luz.

Mothers turned from the city in shambles to their babes. Our Lady suffered with them when children cried with fear, from hunger and cold. Her divine heart was as torn as any mother's when an anguished cry told that another child had drawn its last breath and stiffened colder than the freezing atmosphere. She had led her people well but thirty deaths en route were too many. Children were now succumbing to the rigors of the long trip. Youth brought victory in war and in perpetuation, in destruction and creation. Was that why her maker had placed so many images of them around her feet? She sought courage within the folds of her being.

Replaced in her canvas-covered wagon she could not see her subjects huddled around the campfires. She could only hear their groans, sometimes a murmur of discontent.

In the morning there was at her feet a wreath made of pink mistletoe gathered from the hillside. The berries glistened like pearls but to her they were far more precious. They gave her courage, courage that came through this devotional act of one of her subjects.

After inspection of the hermitage of San Miguel, Vargas ordered the Indians to repair the church they had destroyed. This was to be considered a Christian duty, performed under the grace of God and His Most Blessed Mother, Our Virgin Lady, who must have an abode befitting her great virtues. The birthday of Jesus was near, and there should be a suitable place to honor Him as well.

Severity of the weather was the excuse the Indians gave for their refusal to make the repairs. So a temporary altar of evergreen boughs was constructed beside the encampment. The Virgin had grown accustomed to these makeshifts.

When items for the crèche for the Christ Child were brought forth it was discovered that there were not among the holy possessions enough figurines to complete the Nativity scene. They must have been lost during the journey. Someone clever with the knife would have to carve new ones. When complete search did not reveal the figure of the Christ Child, the entire camp was aroused. Had this been a trick stealthily performed by Indian medicine men? Many remembered the wretched divinations by which Indian shamans had scourged priests before the

rebellion. Now, in the bosom of each soldier flared determination for revenge.

Among the soldiers was a certain young mestizo in whose eyes was a questing look. Many times, at his prayers, the Blessed Virgin had seen his eyes open widely, his body incline, his hands lift and turn as if they were caressing her wooden garments. Once these brown, well boned but sensitive hands had actually touched her, had steadied her as her cart crossed a treacherous ravine on the Jornada. The morning before Christmas these hands slipped three figurines under her wagon cover. The hands which made them owned more than immediate holy ability, for on the efforts of such hands the ecclesiastical arts in New Mexico would almost entirely depend, for the next century and a half.

As the Christmas eve sun sank behind a western range, its afterglow lighted the Virgin's face warmly, sweeping a film of light across the mountains at her back, changing the white crust to deep red. At a like sunset time the range had been named Blood of Christ. Here, everywhere, was His blood, but where was the baby born for the Cross? The blood-light gathered into an expansive halo above Our Lady. Darkness came; the camp was silent.

The Virgin saw the figure of the young mestizo drift from the altar; the manger at her feet was no longer empty. There lay the Child. Her joy was abundant. She took the moon from under her feet and, to eclipse the rising pagan moon, lifted it into the sky where it could pour over the whole sacred eve landscape, upon the heathen below and upon the pine-bough arbor under which she stood with the Holy Family now complete. She waited. Fulfillment was hers.

Facing her the worshipful knelt between two flaming columns of heaped cedar wood. Slowly the smoke rolled up, a tenuous Gothic arch over them. From below came the beat of drums fracturing solemn chants, at intervals making a diabolical accompaniment for the "Hail Mary," but never an echo.

As voices lifted her name she looked down at the newly carved figures, at the Child. Roughly hewn, they lacked the skilled beauty she possessed. Still, they owned fervent beauty so fine, so sincere, so directly true in the revelation of their intention that she almost blanched under her golden encrustations and felt that possibly refinements in the arts relinquish the fervor that holds and conveys the most.

She was proud to have consented to be the Mother of all Messiahs. Perhaps here was one to be unknown—this artisan. Now she knew that

if the meaning for which she had been made and the meaning of the Holy Child were to be continued, many little carvings like these would have to be made in New Mexico that the people might be guided in their faith.

The flames of altar candles were tossed by a wind that lifted the smoky arch higher above the kneeling. The Virgin surveyed those who had placed in her their hope for victory and their faith. Already they were calling her Our Lady of Victory, Our Lady of the Conquest—*La Conquistadora*. But they knew not how near to defeat they might be. They did know that she would help them. As they knelt they trembled; the sunken entrails of the men clutched upward against their ribs; the middles of the women were sagging; their breasts were empty and so were the stomachs of their babies. They were weary, suffering, they were gnawed at by the cold. Their very souls were eroded by years of misfortune. The long journey home to the place they loved had only brought them to cold and starvation. They were weary unto death and their bones were pitifully fleshed, but theirs was the anatomy of God. Therein lay their strength.

They seemed to know it too and by contact with holy powers they would live to fulfillment in the land of hardship they had learned to love. Comforted, they went to their night's rest. The Mother of them all saw them go—slowly—all but one, who remained kneeling. By proper order he should have gone first, but tonight something had leveled all stations of man. Finally she saw him drag wearily away, his fine sword sagging.

When the smoke arch had vanished and there was nothing left of the fiery walls but a few embers, she saw the moon hanging over a southern ridge formed like the backbone of a mammoth whose rump made the valley. She did not know that this moon which she considered her moon too, had come to such a position that it was shining into a crater in the mountain rim and striking, as it did once a year, the center of a pagan altar in the home of the Twin War Gods. She did not know that on the altar burned the most sacred fire of the savage, tended by the finest young braves of the tribe. Two nights before they had gone from the city below to the mines of Los Cerrillos. There they labored, taking the turquoise matrix. It made the most acceptable gift for the altar of the War Gods around which the young men crowded, fortifying their strength against the approaching battle.

The moon was moving slowly down to the mountains in the west.

It was going now and she wanted to snatch it quickly and put it under her feet for it was casting shadows toward her from the burial ground close by. They were long shadows and pitiful, cast from the bases of the small crosses that had now become twenty-three.

The shadows were also pointing to the back of the captain-general, in full armor, who now knelt before her. He had been obliged to take corn from the Indians so there would be food for the morrow. He did not have to explain this to the Mother of God although he had promised the Indians he would take nothing from them, not even the Royal City of the Holy Faith of Saint Francis of Assisi.

The Holy Mother was perplexed but proud of him. His pride was more than irked, for tonight she and her people were unhoused while the savage was warmed in the palace of the Spanish governors. He knew that the Holy Mother would understand his intentions to take the city by force. Trembling and with childish tears he made known to the Lady in whom he trusted for victory that she should have, on that very spot, a sanctuary in her honor. She listened to him pledge that forever afterward she should be brought once each year from her high place in the principal church in the villa to this promised shrine. There for nine days the faithful would adore her and commemorate the victory that was near.

The moon vanished behind a cloud that had streamed from the north, half filling the sky. As the captain-general arose and pressed his clasped finger tips to the feet of La Conquistadora, it came to her how strange are the promptings for conquest, how lonely a conqueror can be.

As he turned she saw a faint glimmer of light cross the shoulder of his armor; the morning star had risen. Below, the city's hush was softly broken as Indians rose to greet Morning Star, girt by an ample corona. Thus Indians knew that the crisis was near.

At daybreak Vargas assembled his entire army and repeated his earlier vow to La Conquistadora.

On the morning of December twenty-ninth, after prayers were said for the courageous, the Virgin was once more raised on the staff where she saw the spirits of all lifted to her as she led their charge against the Indian defense. With composure but no little concern she led her troops through a fury of arrows and hurled stones, to walls over which pots of boiling water were emptied onto the armored Spaniards attempting to scale.

Night brought the fighting to a close, both sides exhausted. The Indians surrendered.

La Conquistadora was then brought into the Palace of the Governors and placed in the east section which had been the military chapel. There in 1704 she saw the body of Don Diego de Vargas entombed at her feet in the soil he had conquered. The captain-general had finished his work and La Conquistadora had served her purpose.

As years passed and victory for the reconquerors meant tilling the soil, they sought aid by devotions to San Isidro, born on the Vargas ancestral estate in Spain. In commemoration of his miraculous production of a free-flowing spring and to signify peaceful well-being, blue and white lines appeared on the crest of the house of Vargas, whose son, Don Diego, the captain-general, knew the impelling spirit of conquest despite his respect for peace. He knew how quickly treachery could throw men back into desire for warfare, to prey upon industrious and peaceful producers for whom San Isidro is patron.

He knew that wars would never cease. Therefore, lest La Conquistadora be forgot, he ordered annual devotions to her. On the site where he had knelt and sought aid Rosario chapel now stands. There on the second Sunday after Trinity the Magnificat is sung and for nine days mass is celebrated, until La Conquistadora is returned to the Cathedral in solemn procession.

Many are the images of saints which have been duplicated in New Mexico by men whose abilities were by nature like those of the mestizo wood carver, but La Conquistadora is not among them. The original La Conquistadora remains to meet the greatest of emergencies—war.

In Santa Fe, on the morning of the second Sunday after Trinity, 1941, the boy descendants of the reconquerors shouted news that Germany had invaded Russia. After vespers in the Cathedral the long procession moved through the streets, up the slope. La Conquistadora was borne on a litter resting on the shoulders of four young ladies. The Reverend Father had said, "In these troublous times, more than ever, we need her favor."

A year later, young descendants of the reconquerors summoned up valor which had been dormant during the years that San Isidro guided. In La Conquistadora's procession mothers and fathers walked with sad yet proud steps. Many were the prayers she heard for Spanish American boys in battle lines across the world, defending still her conquest.