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## THE PENITENTES\* OF NEW MEXICO

By FRAY ANGELICO CHAVEZ

### *Introduction*

THE origin and nature of the Penitentes of New Mexico have been the subject of much wonderment and conjecture ever since the first United States Americans arrived here in the early Nineteenth Century, a period, by the way, in which this penitential society was at its height. The members themselves, taking their rules and practices as immemorial traditions that were inherited from their forefathers, assumed that their society came to New Mexico with the original Spanish colonists. It was a reasonable assumption, and an irrefutable one in view of a total lack of evidence to support their belief or else prove the contrary. This lack of concrete evidence, however, gave ample room to the growth of a mass of confusing misinformation which has held sway for more than a century.

This confusion on the subject was brought about through two distinct, yet in this case complementary, American sources, the clergy and the writers. The first source embraces the efforts of the Catholic hierarchy in New Mexico to suppress, or at least temper, the society's activities, and the society's resistance, as well as the interference by some early Protestant clergymen in this regard. The second consists of the writings in books, journals, and periodicals, by a varied assortment of writers from American Occupation days down to our own times. Historically speaking, the early American Catholic clergy beclouded the issue by incorrectly assuming that the Penitentes had degenerated from the Third Order of St. Francis.<sup>1</sup> The squabbles following their

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\* This term is resented by the *Hermanos* themselves because it became one of ridicule since American times. Because it is an honored word in its older connotations, and has been consistently used in all writings on the subject, it is employed here with all due respect.

1. St. Francis of Assisi founded three ascetic "Orders." The First Order consisted of priests and lay-brothers (friars), and the Second Order comprised the cloistered nuns which he founded with St. Clare (The Poor Clares). The *Third Order*, founded in 1221, was for men and women outside the cloister who still wished to be real disciples of St. Francis without leaving their homes and worldly occupations. Their

attempt to reform the society, in some instances abetted by early Protestant proselytizers, also helped to emphasize and magnify its strange practices before the observing eyes of strangers. And it was these, the American newcomers with a penchant for writing, who, out of the strangeness of the subject, and their own lack of background concerning Christian penance as an idea and, more particularly, as a penitential tradition peculiar to Spanish lands, distorted the Penitentes' rites and motives beyond their natural bounds. The result was a welter of theories that further obscured their origin and nature. The bulk of later writings has been but a rehash, often sensational, of what had been written before.

Those authors with some knowledge of certain medieval sects of Europe, like the *Flagellanti*, found a ready connection between them and this New Mexico society, simply because the latter also practiced flagellation. Conversant also with the account of New Mexico's first colonization as told in Villagr a, they noted that O ate had scourged himself to blood in Holy Week of 1598,<sup>2</sup> and therefore concluded that the Penitentes of New Mexico had come with the first colony. From Father Benavides' indirect reference to penitential processions through the streets of Santa Fe prior to 1630,<sup>3</sup> the existence of the brotherhood was further traced to the

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Rule forbade the carrying of weapons, to promote peace, and prescribed certain days of fast and abstinence as well as a number of daily prayers. Worldly spectacles and dances were also to be avoided, as well as extravagance in food and clothing. The Tertiaries originally wore a modified form of the Franciscan garb over or underneath their regular clothing, but later it was worn only at meetings and in church processions. When not worn, a token scapular and cord had to take its place, and this is still of strict obligation for members of the Third Order. (The full habit is now used as a burial shroud).

From the start the Third Order was also called "The Order of Penance," in Spanish "*Orden de Penitencia*." This led the uninitiated, like Lummis and others, to confuse this term in old documents with the "*Penitentes*." In Spain and Spanish-America Tertiaries did practice flagellation over their habits. This was, however, not a distinct Third Order feature, but the general Spanish practice among all societies in those times.

2. Gaspar de Villagr a, *History of New Mexico*, tr. by Gilberto Espinosa (Los Angeles: 1933), Canto XI.

3. F. W. Hodge, *Fray Alonso de Benavides' Revised Memorial of 1634* (Albuquerque: 1945), p. 66. A note on p. 244 states that the Penitentes are an outgrowth of the Third Order of St. Francis. The sources given range from Lummis down to Henderson, which will be treated further on.

pioneer Franciscan clergy of New Mexico and their Third Order.

*The American Clergy and the Penitentes*

In 1850 a Catholic diocese was established in Santa Fe for the extensive Southwest Territory recently acquired by the United States. John B. Lamy, a French-born priest laboring in Ohio was sent to Santa Fe as first bishop, and was soon joined by a body of clergy which he had recruited in France. Among the many and extremely difficult problems that confronted the new clergy, none was more strange to them, and in a way more difficult to cope with, than that of the *Hermandades* or Brotherhoods found in almost every village, societies of men who practiced bloody flagellations and similar tortures during Holy Week and on other occasions. It was a phenomenon from another age, something buried in ancient books. Bishop Lamy knew right away that these penitents did not fit in with church discipline in modern times and, noting the greater shock and scandal created among the ever-increasing number of people "from the States," both Catholic and otherwise, he felt a still greater urgency to remedy the situation as soon as possible.

Judging from the decrees of his successor, we may assume that Lamy tried at first to abolish the Penitentes, and failed. The problem was complicated by the fact that most of these people were good men, sincerely and deeply Catholic in their own simple faith, who believed that they were carrying on an old Spanish Catholic heritage. Furthermore, he could not tell them that their penances, performed by saints in the past, were wrong in themselves. There simply was no common meeting ground of minds whereby he could make them understand that he was not trying to destroy their Spanish heritage, and that their peculiar practices were not only contrary to present ecclesiastical order, but most harmful to their religion under present circumstances. As he was deeply appreciative of New Mexico's thoroughly Franciscan past, Lamy felt that these brotherhoods had degenerated, since the disappearance of the

Franciscans, from the Third Order of St. Francis; and in this thought he found a possible solution. By returning them to the Third Order he would gradually and peacefully wean them away from their tenaciously held ideas. He then composed a set of rules for them under the name of the Third Order. These regulations toned down their penances for the present, eliminated the severer ones for good, and consigned their entire practice to strict privacy; they laid stress on good Catholic living and the reception of the Sacraments.<sup>4</sup>

Evidently, most of the brotherhoods accepted the reform, while some did not. Or else, if all accepted it at first, there were several that went back to their old ways of public flagellation and other accompanying rites—to the headache of their pastors and the embarrassment of other New Mexican Catholics for generations to come, and to the delight of writers and others ever on the lookout for the odd and the strange. What Lamy accomplished was to leave the idea of their Third Order origin implanted in the public mind, including the Penitentes themselves.

Lamy's successor, Archbishop Salpointe, called on the societies "to return" to the Third Order of St. Francis.<sup>5</sup> In the first Synod of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, celebrated in June, 1888, he firmly condemned the Penitentes as "not to be fostered in the least." Believing that they had degenerated long ago from a perhaps legitimate church society, he urged the individual pastors to guide the groups in their parishes into embracing the Rule of the Third Order. He further commanded them to refuse to celebrate Mass in the chapels of groups continuing their abuses, and to deny the Sacraments to those who insisted on observing their old wakes for the dead, and those who had opposed his legisla-

4. Copies shown me by the *Hermanos*. The bylaws are essentially those of the Cochiti-Conejos brotherhoods quoted by Darley. See Notes 11-13. While bearing the title of the Third Order and the fact of their Lamy derivation, the copies I have seen in no way resemble the Rule of the Third Order. Nor have I found evidence that the good archbishop ever had authority, or knew how, to establish the Third Order, or that the Penitentes ever wore the strictly required scapular and cord of St. Francis.

5. *Revista Catolica*, Vol. XII, No. 12, pp. 138-139.

tions and ignored his threats of the year 1886.<sup>6</sup> This Archbishop's term was punctuated by heated controversies between the Catholic pastors of some northern villages and his local Penitentes, and the fire was fanned by some Protestant preachers.

Originally, the Penitentes' general opposition to complete suppression, and the later open defiance from certain northern groups to the church authorities, came not so much from a spirit of disobedience as from a distorted notion of patriotism or racial sensitivity. It was the same spirit that incited the 1847 rebellion at Taos and the murder of Governor Bent, though not by the Penitentes as such. As the Americans were invaders, to them, in the political and economic field, so had appeared to be these strange new clergy in the ecclesiastical, outsiders who were imposing French and American customs to the abolition of the Spanish. For, to repeat, the Penitentes erroneously considered their brotherhoods an essential part of Spanish Catholicism and a heritage from earliest times to be kept intact. No minor cause of this dissident spirit was the rebellious priest of Taos, Don Antonio José Martínez.<sup>7</sup>

Fomenting much of the trouble in Salpointe's time were some early Protestant ministers, bent on winning the Penitentes to their side, or at least into being a thorn in the side of their Catholic pastors. On November 1, 1876, there was a meeting in the Presbyterian church at Las Vegas with two *hermanos mayores* of Mora County who were organizing a Protestant church there, while at Conejos in Colorado another such church was founded in the home of another *hermano mayor*, or head brother.<sup>8</sup> Apparently, it was the non-flogging leaders who resented the Archbishop's intrusion into their heretofore unquestioned preserve, while the poor brothers of blood wanted to continue as faithful, if stubborn, Catholics. To further confuse the issue, some

6. *Synodus Sanctae Fidei Prima* (Las Vegas: 1893), Cap. IX, Par. 1, No. 2, pp. 81-82.

7. Huntington Library, *Ritch Collection*, Memo Book No. 4, p. 325. Martínez wrote a pamphlet in their defense entitled: "Order of the Holy Brotherhood."

8. *Revista Católica*, Vol. II, No. 46, pp. 545-546; Vol. III, No. 45, pp. 529-530.

preachers, while praising the Penitentes for any opposition to Catholic authority, had also cause to complain that they were often in peril of being whipped by them.<sup>9</sup> And the Jesuit Fathers, who were publishing the weekly *Revista Catolica* in Las Vegas at the time, while entreating the Penitentes to obey their Catholic pastors in one breath, in another editorialized against them as "fanatics."<sup>10</sup>

The foremost Protestant protagonist was the Rev. Alex. M. Darley, self-styled "Apostle to the Colorado Mexicans," who wrote a book on the Penitentes<sup>11</sup> that proved quite controversial in its day, and has inspired some sordid writing in ours. Ostensibly about the Penitentes, it was a direct attack on the Catholic Church. As the author admits having read Lummis, much of the historical background of the Penitentes can be traced to him, though Darley did make up a history of penance in the "Romanist Church" by stringing scattered dates and data from medieval history. He started out by saying that the Penitentes were a "Mexican 'Third Order of St. Francis,'" that their bylaws and practices showed that "this body was founded and maintained by the priests of Romanism, in spite of their protests to Eastern-raised 'Catholics' that they are 'ignorant fools' whom they cannot control," and that the doctrine underlying the society bound it "indissolubly to the ancient penitential practices of the Papacy."<sup>12</sup> He set out to prove its Third Order nature by quoting *in toto* a copy of the constitutions used by the Conejos brotherhood, and derived from one kept at Cochiti. He also referred to a priest in Saguache County who in a sermon had declared that the society was indeed the Third Order of St. Francis.<sup>13</sup> His summary at this point was that the Catholic Church, while condemning Masonry for being a secret society, was hypocritically fostering a more sinister secret society. Next he tackled the female

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9. *Ibid.*, Vol. III, No. 30, pp. 353-354.

10. *Ibid.*, Vol. III, No. 14, p. 160; No. 15, p. 173.

11. *The Passionists of the Southwest* (Pueblo: 1893).

12. *Op. cit.*, pp. 1-8.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 9-18. He also included similar bylaws of the Rincones brotherhood, pp. 20-22.

Penitentes; but, there being none in Colorado and New Mexico,<sup>14</sup> to his chagrin, he reached far down to Old Mexico and brought up tales about women flogging themselves naked before the priests; and since celibacy, wrote he, was an impossibility in his own confirmed opinion, this and the confessional were the means by which the tyrant clergy held the women in their power. As for the immediate origin of the Penitentes, coming back to the Third Order as a connection, he said that the local ones were reported begun in 1792,<sup>15</sup> but he personally believed them much older, from the days of the early Franciscans who had substituted their own barbarities of penance for the hardly worse barbarities of Indian dance worship.<sup>16</sup>

Mr. Darley was quite correct in saying that the practices of the Penitentes were none other than those "ancient penitential teachings of the Papacy," but his own Nordic lack of appreciation for penance as a primitive Christian idea, as explained further on, and also his anger at a Church he madly hated, made him view this connection all out of joint, historically as well as spiritually. His belief that the society was the Franciscan Third Order (also the opinion of the Saguache priest whom he quoted as proof) was undoubtedly derived from Lummis as well as from the erroneous declarations to this effect by the first two Archbishops of Santa Fe. However, the Penitente constitutions reproduced by Darley as internal proof have nothing about the Third Order in them, being merely a set of pious bylaws of their own and, in my belief, their old rules watered down by Lamy.<sup>17</sup> Darley's farfetched diatribe against female penitents speaks for itself. All in all, the angry clergyman was fulminating against the Catholic Church and using the barbarous Penitentes as a weapon. This comes out so plainly when he

14. Lummis "heard" that there had been women Penitentes at San Mateo up to the year 1886. *Land of Poco Tiempo* (New York: 1893), p. 106.

15. Darley, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-24. This date is evidently Darley's hazy recollection of a Third Order document which Lummis (*op. cit.*, p. 82) misquoted as a genuine Penitente source of the year 1793. But actually the date was Sept. 17, 1794, a report on the Third Order at Santa Fe and Santa Cruz by Fray Cayetano Bernal. Cf. *El Palacio*, Vol. VIII, No. 1, p. 4.

16. Darley, *ibid.*

17. See Note 4.



tells how a Colorado priest was selling tickets to view the Penitentes at one dollar a head, and, after Salpointe forbade the practice, this priest raised the price to two dollars—so that he and the archbishop could divide the profits!<sup>18</sup> The angry man's one consolation, said he, was that practically all the Penitentes of Conejos had been "converted to Presbyterianism," the *hermano mayor* of Taos had become a Protestant also, the one at Conejos had "died in the true Christian faith," and one thousand Bibles had broken the back of the society (and the Church?) in the San Luis Valley.<sup>19</sup>

The Penitentes of the southern part of the territory were described in 1885 by another minister, the Rev. Jacob Miles Ashley, as being a New Mexican "Catholic Society called Penitentes," whose barbarous exercises he correctly gives in a general way, though not as an eyewitness apparently. Also correct is the members' own name for themselves as, "the slaves of Jesus" whom they have to imitate. Mr. Ashley states that at Cubero, where his church had a mission school, two youths died under the torment, one on the cross and the other from being trampled upon. And one of them was a prize student of the school.<sup>20</sup>

The Rev. Thomas Harwood, another pioneer preacher, was admitted into a *morada* in 1871, at a canyon opening into the La Junta (Watrous) valley. Seven years later he described the rites correctly and minutely to Mr. W. G. Ritch at Santa Fe, but without any bias or disgust. Indeed, he himself seemed deeply touched by the reverent earnestness of both penitents and spectators.<sup>21</sup>

At the end of the century, Archbishop Salpointe, after having retired to Banning, California, wrote his last comments on the Penitentes, who had given him so much trouble, in his much-quoted history of the Catholic Church in New Mexico, Colorado, and Arizona. This brief reference merely

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18. Darley, *ibid.*, p. 30. See Salpointe's decrees of First Synod of Santa Fe above Note 6.

19. Darley, *ibid.*, pp. 18, 35, 44.

20. NEW MEXICO HISTORICAL REVIEW, Vol. 24, No. 1, p. 74.

21. Huntington Library, *loc. cit.*, pp. 325-326.

repeats his formerly expressed beliefs as to their Third Order derivation. His quoting of an old Santa Fe Tertiary in this regard throws no light on the problem. And he erroneously makes "Brothers of Darkness" (instead of "Blood") to be the opposite of "Brothers of Light."<sup>22</sup>

That these troubles, caused by attempts at reformation on the one side, and at proselytism on the other, served to confirm the Penitentes' Third Order origin in the public mind, there is not the least doubt. But even had there been no such pandemonium, which is hard to imagine under the circumstances, the very nature and practices of the brotherhoods would not have escaped the writers and their theories. The Flagellanti-Oñate-Franciscan theory of origin was too tempting to be ignored by the well-read observer.

#### *Principal American Accounts*

The main published source for the early American and still current theory on the Penitentes' origin is Charles F. Lummis.<sup>23</sup> Well before his time, Josiah Gregg,<sup>24</sup> forerunner of early American writers on New Mexican life and customs, briefly described a Holy Week ceremonial that combined an old-time Passion Play with some authentic Penitente rites. What with all his disdain for all things Spanish, Mexican, and Catholic, Gregg was naturally shocked. That he did not dwell long on the matter, makes this account all the more credible, since he has been proven merrily mendacious with regard to other matters that he treated in greater detail.<sup>25</sup> One of his observations on the Penitentes, repeated ever since, is their alleged belief that a Holy Week's round of

22. *Soldiers of the Cross* (Banning: 1898), pp. 161-163.

23. *Land of Poco Tiempo*, pp. 79-83, and *Mesa, Canyon, and Pueblo* (New York: 1938), reprint, pp. 125-127.—So well did Lummis and those who repeated him establish the Franciscan theory of origin that even an eminent Franciscan historian concurred with others in re-confirming this derivation of the Penitentes. Cf. Mitchell A. Wilder, *Santos* (Colorado Springs: 1943), pp. 15, 37-39.—Von Wuthenau, in treating about the Reconquest chapel of the Santa Fe garrison, arbitrarily thought it to be the birthplace of the Third Order in New Mexico, and therefore of the Penitente movement! Cf. *NEW MEXICO HISTORICAL REVIEW*, Vol. X, No. 3, p. 180.

24. *Commerce of the Prairies* (Philadelphia: 1849), pp. 258-259.

25. E.g., the native origin and character of Gertrudis Barceló, *El Palacio*, Vol. 57, No. 8, pp. 227-234. See also the tale of the old church clock of Santa Fe in the monograph, *The Santa Fe Cathedral* (Santa Fe: 1947), p. 16.

penances wiped out all their sins and gave them leave to start out on another year of crime.<sup>26</sup> As Gregg himself admits, this was told him by others, very likely native New Mexicans who were not Penitentes, the same way Lummis got this idea.<sup>27</sup> W. W. H. Davis, quoted as a Penitente source,<sup>28</sup> described a Good Friday procession at Peña Blanca in which the faithful carried images representing the Passion of Christ. He pitied the people's ignorant veneration of their ugly *santos*, but mentioned no Penitente rites.

It was Lummis, the enthusiastic pioneer promoter of our Spanish and Indian Southwest, who became the chief source of all subsequent Penitente writing, good and otherwise. Unlike Gregg and Davis, he had no anti-Catholic bias, or Anglo-Saxon sense of superiority, to discolor or distort his observations. Yet, his lively sense of wonder and his exaggerated style of writing gave to his eyewitness accounts, howsoever true, a lurid quality that has tended to mislead not so well-equipped readers and writers. Moreover, his farfetched theories on their origin, likewise emphasized beyond their value by his bombast, were consequently picked up and repeated as history. In brief, his descriptions of what he himself saw at San Mateo in 1888, including good photographs of a procession and a crucifixion, are invaluable historical material on the subject; also, in a lesser degree, his remarks that by 1888 only three towns in New Mexico had public Penitente processions, and only one (San Mateo) had a crucifixion.<sup>29</sup>

But his linking of the New Mexico Penitentes with medieval sects, with Oñate's personal act of scourging, "unquestionably" with the pioneer Franciscans and their Third

26. Gregg, *op. cit.*

27. *Land of Poco Tiempo*, *loc. cit.*—This was a popular native New Mexican canard poking fun at the Penitentes, more in jest than out of malice. It certainly was not the belief of the honest and sincere brethren as a body, even if the lives of many did lend substance to the idea. A little sarcastic verse about a stolen cow, sung by us children when I was a boy, was already being recited to Lummis in 1888.

28. *El Gringo* (New York: 1857), pp. 345-346.

29. *Land of Poco Tiempo*, pp. 84, 106, and *Mesa, etc.*, facing pp. 125, 127.—In Santa Fe, it was reported, there had been only one public procession since 1846, in 1859 or 1860; but two native octogenarians of the city insisted in 1878 that there had been none since the arrival of the American Army (Huntington Libr., *loc. cit.*, p. 325).

Order—all this has no complete basis in fact, as will be seen. This also led to his honest but mistaken reading of the Penitentes into an old New Mexico document of the late Eighteenth Century that dealt with the Third Order “of Penance,” and not “of Penitentes” as he and others would have it.<sup>30</sup> His further efforts to connect their practices with age-old penitential rites among the Pueblo Indians was also illogical and farfetched.<sup>31</sup> But, in all fairness, let it be said that it was not good old hearty Lummis who sinned, but his vigor and honest enthusiasm that carried him away. Still, it muddied the waters for generations after among the writing brethren of books as well as the Sunday supplements of newspapers.

The Nineteenth Century ended with a novel about the Penitentes of San Luis Valley<sup>32</sup> which embodied the ideas found in Lummis and Darley. Rehashing the same ideas, some of them inextricably tangling up the Penitente rites with the old mystery plays (two distinct entities), other authors kept pace with every decade of the Twentieth.<sup>33</sup> Among these, Alice Corbin Henderson’s book stands out as the best by far because of her warm human understanding; but her historical background is no improvement on what had been written before. An article printed in 1920, purportedly a University of New Mexico thesis written in 1910,<sup>34</sup> is a forerunner of Mrs. Henderson’s book in its sympathetic approach, but again, historically, it merely digests anew the old theories and misconceptions. There was much

30. *Land of Poco Tiempo*, p. 82. See Note 15.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

32. Louis How, *The Penitentes of San Rafael* (Indianapolis: 1900). Forty-two years later it was followed by a much more sensational and false novel by Joseph O’Kane Foster, *In the Night Did I Sing* (New York: 1942).

33. Charles F. Saunders in his *The Indians of the Terraced Houses* (New York: 1912), pp. 112-124; L. Bradford Prince in his *Spanish Mission Churches of New Mexico* (Cedar Rapid: 1915), pp. 363-373; Ralph E. Twitchell in his several works; George Wharton James in his *New Mexico, The Land of the Delight Makers* (Boston: 1920), pp. viii, 269 *et seq.*, 227 *et seq.*; Mary Austin in her *The Land of Journeys’ Ending* (New York: 1924), pp. 349-372; Earl E. Forrest in his *Missions and Pueblos of the Old Southwest* (Cleveland: 1929), pp. 195-206; Alice Corbin Henderson, *Brothers of Light* (New York: 1937); and other lesser articles in the same general vein and chain-reaction derivation.

34. “Los Hermanos Penitentes,” *El Palacio*, Vol. VIII, No. 1, pp. 3-20. Alice Corbin Henderson, *op. cit.*, cites it as a thesis by Laurence F. Lee.

merit, however, in an article written around this time by Dr. Aurelio M. Espinosa.<sup>35</sup> While considering the Lummis and Salpointe ideas of origin, he prudently did not accept them as final. One statement, that the Penitentes had prevailed in southern Colorado and northern New Mexico since the beginning of the Nineteenth Century, carried considerable weight, from the fact that the author was a native of those areas. However, this signally different article went to naught twenty years later, when its author joined the crowd by categorically linking the Penitentes of Oñate's Conquistadores and the Third Order of St. Francis.<sup>36</sup>

### *Origin of the Penitentes*

Internal historical evidence about the founding and founders of the Penitentes in New Mexico, that is, specific names and dates, is nonexistent to my present knowledge. What has been furnished me by "old-timers" among the penitential brethren has no intrinsic value, for all the information received can readily be traced to Lummis and Salpointe. Contemporary external evidence is likewise negative, insofar as I know. Confronted by such an impasse, one looks for other historical evidence by which a *terminus a quo* and a *terminus ad quem* can be reached. In other words, one must find a period, the latest, in which they did not exist, and then another period, the earliest, in which they are mentioned as already in existence. Then one places their beginnings within these two points.

I believe that I have found both terminal points in two excellent documentary sources: the report of Fray Francisco Atanasio Domínguez of 1777, from material he gathered the previous year,<sup>37</sup> and a decree of Bishop Zubiria of Durango written at Santa Cruz in 1833.<sup>38</sup>

Father Domínguez was a learned Franciscan priest of the

35. "Penitentes, Los Hermanos," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: 1910).

36. "Traditional Spanish Ballads in New Mexico," *Hispania*, Vol. XV, No. 2, p. 95.

37. *Biblioteca Nacional de Mexico*, Legajo 10, No. 43. This important document with related papers is in its final steps of preparation for the press.

38. Archives of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, *Book of Visitations*, LXXXIX, pp. 71-72.

City of Mexico who was commissioned to make a minute description of all the New Mexico missions, their buildings, lands, missionaries, religious program, income and expenditures, number and classes of people, geography and climate, and, not the least item, *religious societies*. The Padre carried out his mandate to the letter, and left no stone unturned in examining, describing, approving or condemning every minute phase of mission activity. With regard to religious societies, he named every single one with their respective *mayordomos* and their funds and properties, he examined their documents of ecclesiastical foundation, severely censuring those that had none to show, and he made a full report on their annual feasts, periodic meetings, their annual income and expenditures.

But nowhere are the Penitentes mentioned, either in name or in practice. The religious societies found were limited to the three Spanish parishes of Santa Fe, Santa Cruz de la Cañada, and Albuquerque. There were none in the Indian Pueblo Missions. Those in Santa Fe were the Third Order of St. Francis (in a very sad state), the Confraternities of Our Lady of the Rosary and of the Blessed Sacrament, both now under the same administration, the Confraternity of the Poor Souls, and also the Confraternity of Our Lady of Light at the military chapel of the same name. Those at Santa Cruz were the Third Order of St. Francis and the Confraternities of the Blessed Sacrament and of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. At Albuquerque there were only two societies, the Third Order (in a very poor condition) and the Confraternity of the Poor Souls. From the way Father Domínguez condemned, reproved, and even ridiculed certain abuses down to the smallest detail, it is obvious that the Penitentes, had he found them in existence, would have provided plenty of rich grist for his mill.

The closest thing to the idea of the Penitentes was what he observed being done at Abiquiu, but recently re-founded as a Pueblo for *genízaros*. He found it worth commenting on because it was not done in any other Mission. Every Friday of Lent, the resident missionary observed the devotion of

the Way of the Cross in church, and this was followed by scourging after the lights were blown out, in which his example was followed by some of the faithful, both Spanish neighbors and the Indians of the place. Father Domínguez was quick to point out that all this was voluntarily done at the zealous missionary's "suggestion and good example." There was no society of any kind. This Padre was Fray Sebastián Fernández, thirty-four years old, and a native of Asturias in northern Spain.

Another interesting reference was with regard to special Holy Week observances at Tomé, a *visita* of Albuquerque at the time. The author merely refers to its "*función de Semana Santa*," apparently not observed every year, but also evidently an exclusive feature of Tomé at the time. However, it had no Penitente features, and is to all appearances the Holy Week pageantry for which the town became famous in later years, the origin and nature of which has also been linked with the Penitentes,<sup>39</sup> but is an entirely different thing even if taken over by the penitential brotherhoods in later times.

We may safely assume, then, from the Domínguez Report, that there were no Penitente brotherhoods in all New Mexico in 1776, and that they did not exist prior to that date.

The other terminal point is the Zubiría decree of 1833. In this year this bishop of Durango made his first visitation of his flock in New Mexico; in fact, it was the first episcopal visitation in seventy-three years, since Bishop Tamarón's memorable journey in 1760.<sup>40</sup> At Santa Cruz, Bishop Zubiría found something he did not like at all, and promptly issued a vehement condemnation, dated July 21, 1833,<sup>41</sup> of "a Brotherhood of Penitentes, already existing for a goodly number of years, but without any authorization or even the knowledge of the bishops, who definitely would not have given

39. An excellent sympathetic article is Florence Hawley Ellis' "Passion Play in New Mexico" in *New Mexico Quarterly*, Summer, 1952, pp. 200-212. She, however, identifies the old mystery plays with the Penitentes, just as Penitente writers identified their subject with the mystery plays.

40. The Tamarón Journal and related material are currently appearing in the *NEW MEXICO HISTORICAL REVIEW*, Vol. 28, Nos. 2, 3, 4, and Vol. 29, No. 1.

41. See Note 38.

their consent for such a Brotherhood . . . since the excesses of very indiscreet corporal penances which they are accustomed to practice on some days of the year, and even publicly, are so contrary to the spirit of Religion and the regulations of Holy Church . . . We strictly command, laying it on the conscience of our present and future pastors of this villa, that they must never in the future permit such reunions of Penitentes under any pretext whatsoever." He further ordered each and every Penitente never again to consider himself a member of such a "Brotherhood of Penitence which we annul and which must remain forever abolished."

Furthermore, the bishop charged every future pastor of Santa Cruz, should he discover the existence of Penitentes in any other place, to intimate the contents of this decree to the pastor of that parish. Twelve years later, in 1845, Don Juan de Jesús Trujillo, then pastor of Santa Cruz, used this very decree to advise the priest of Albuquerque, Don José Manuel Gallegos, to bear down on the Penitentes in his parish.<sup>42</sup>

Unfortunately, Zubiría gave no more precise information, save that the abuse found at Santa Cruz had existed "*ya de bastantes años atrás*"—for a goodly number of years since. He did not say "*bastante tiempo*," thus restricting an indefinite period of time to a shorter period of "years." It is also possible that there were such brotherhoods in other places at this time, but the tenor of the decree seems to confine their existence to the environs of Santa Cruz. Yet the bishop, suspecting their present or future existence elsewhere, made provisions for this contingency. Now, since we are quite certain that they did not exist at all in 1776, the bishop's "goodly number of years" could extend back some fifty-six years to that date; but since the movement seems to have been restricted to Santa Cruz when he wrote, it may well be that the Penitentes of New Mexico had their beginning at the turn of the century, perhaps a decade beyond or after, between 1790 and 1810.

This makes the Penitentes a late New Mexico phenom-

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42. AASF, *Santa Cruz Book*, XIX, p. 43.



enon of the half-century prior to the American Occupation of 1846, and definitely not a society and movement inherited from the first two centuries of New Mexico as a Spanish Kingdom.

However, if such is the case, how can we explain the later existence of this penitential society, and why it took root so readily on New Mexican soil? Moreover, how can we account for Oñate's own act of scourging far back in 1598, Father Benavides' reference to public flagellation in Santa Fe before 1630, and Father Fernández' practice at Abiquiu in 1776? The answer for all these questions can be found in one single source—the spirit of primitive Christian penance inherent in the Spanish soul for centuries after it had disappeared from Christendom in general.

#### *The Spanish Penitential Tradition*

The early Christian Church, ever bloodstained from continuous persecutions and the bloody deaths of her martyrs, had likewise kept the Passion and Death of her Founder uppermost in her consciousness. Personal acts of severe penance were a requisite for the forgiveness of grave sin, that is, a balancing of the scales of divine justice even when the sin itself was forgiven sacramentally. And even though Christ had redeemed mankind through His own Death on the Cross, each individual felt that he must show his devotion to his Master by imitation, an idea reflected by St. Peter in saying that Christ suffered for us, leaving an example for us to follow in his steps.<sup>43</sup> A further motive for penance was self-discipline and the curbing of carnal passions, as when St. Paul remarked that he chastised his own body and brought it into subjection to keep himself from becoming a castaway.<sup>44</sup> All kinds of corporal mortification were widespread even after the Roman persecutions came to an end. The Fathers in the desert are the classic example of those times.

The Dark Ages, brought on by the sacking of civilized Europe by the northern barbarians, while causing defections

43. I Peter, II, 21 (*Douay Version*).

44. I Corinthians, IX, 27 (*Ibid.*).

and laxity in Christendom, also crystallized and further emphasized bodily penance among the faithful. When the Middle Ages followed with their quaint beauty in art and song in the embellishment of forms of worship, penitential practices accompanied them hand in hand. St. Francis of Assisi is the prime example at the end of this era, preaching to the birds and singing his Canticle to Brother Sun, while at the same time he fasted vigorously, rolled himself in nettles, and lashed "Brother Ass" into subjection. As a striving toward sanctity, all sorts of penitential practices came into vogue, under restraint and direction as practiced by genuinely saintly persons, with insane abandon by fanatics who spurned all guidance.

It was in these medieval times that the various fanatical sects of flagellants, the *Flagellanti*, had their rise in Italy and northern Europe. They were not societies within the Church, but truly heretical sects: *heretical* because they went their own way, rejecting most of the Church's teachings and blowing up the practice of flagellation out of all due proportion as their chief tenet of salvation; they were *sects*, because they cut themselves off from existing ecclesiastical authority. ("A slice completely on its own" is a literal as well as a perfectly semantic rendering of "heretical sect.") These flagellants were but one type of many such groups in those times, differing from each other in the one feature of the Church which they chose to emphasize as the only means to salvation, to the rejection of all the rest. The Fraticelli, for example, emphasized "poverty," the Albigenses "celibacy," and the Waldenses "the Bible."<sup>45</sup>

The Renaissance, with its return to classic Greek and Roman paganism in literature and the arts, affected the Church in many ways, and very much so in the matter of bodily penance. People became softer in their mental outlook, more hedonistic with regard to the care of their bodies. Ancient disciplines were gradually relaxed or dispensed with. Lenten fasts and days of abstinence from meat became fewer, and these have come down in continually mitigated

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45. Cf. these sects in Encyclopedias: Americana, Britannica, and Catholic.

forms to our day. The monasteries retained some of the old forms of penance in varying degrees, according to the severity of each particular Order. This is not to say that the ancient Church had abandoned her primitive doctrines of penance, but the modes and degrees of severity had accommodated themselves to the times.

Then came the "Reformation," or birth of modern Protestantism, which, rejecting most Catholic doctrines and customs, emphasized salvation by faith alone, by an emotional inner feeling of being already saved, or by predestination. Obviously, corporal penance did not fit into this new scheme, and its very concept eventually vanished in the countries of northern Europe, except among the Catholic minorities, and then in its Renaissance watered-down forms.

But Spain, medieval Spain, was not greatly affected by the Renaissance, nor was she touched by the Protestant Reformation, for political as well as geographical reasons. The Spanish-Catholic mind and heart still thought and felt about religious matters, and penance in particular, as did the Catholics of the Middle Ages and beyond. The inherent traits of the Spanish character helped, perhaps, and the harsh central plateaus and landscapes of their land contributed to some extent. Later products and ideas from the Renaissance and the Reformation that did trickle into Spain had their several effects, but not in altering the severity of the Spanish character in this regard.

And this is the Spanish soul that colonized the New World from Patagonia to New Mexico. No Spaniard marveled at Oñate privately scourging himself during Holy Week, for it was a common practice all over Spain and Spanish America. Processions like the one described by Benavides were the ordinary thing on certain occasions, when the members of religious Orders, lay members of parish societies, and particular individuals, scourged themselves or carried heavy crosses in religious processions. The singular practice of the Padre at Abiquiu was a part of this tradition. Generally, these public flagellations were done over fully clothed bodies; they were token disciplines for

those of blood which an individual might do in private, as when Oñate left the camp of his colony to perform this penance out of the sight of his people.<sup>46</sup>

While most of Spain and Spanish America, at least the larger centers, became more "modern" as the centuries went by, though much less so than northern European nations and their own American colonies, New Mexico was still decidedly medieval in character when the Nineteenth Century arrived. The chief cause was the lack of cultural contact with Spain for two centuries, and very little with New Spain and other Spanish American colonies. There was none with New England or New France. Also to be considered was the poverty and suffering of the New Mexicans as a result of continual depredations by savage nomadic Indian tribes, a siege endured for generations on end which kept the people on most intimate terms with the basic realities of life and death. The landscape was no less harsh and ascetic, if starkly enchanting, very similar to the bare Spanish countryside which the New Mexican life-force had left long ago in León, Estremadura, La Mancha, and parts of Aragón and Andalucía.

In connection with these struggles with savage tribes, there was the rise at this period of the *genízaros*, a segment of the population composed of hispanicized and christianized non-Pueblo Indian captives, and the descendants of such captives since the Reconquest of 1694. Church and civil records amply show that they were a mixture of such varied peoples as Apaches, Cumanches, Utes, Navajos, and even such far-away tribes as the Pawnees and Kiowas, whose common language now was Spanish. From their former masters they

46. Fray Agustín de Vetancurt casually mentions "*Procesiones de Sangre*" in 1616 and 1641, between Mexico City and Vera Cruz, which were acts of rogation in times of pestilence and drought (*Crónica de la Provincia del Santo Evangelio*, Mexico, 1697, p. 131). Yet, such practices were strictly forbidden both by church and royal decrees; witness an Ordinance promulgated in Mexico City under date of April 16, 1612, prohibiting all scourgings and processions during Holy Week under pain of a fifty-peso fine and ten days in jail (*Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico, Ordenanzas, Tomo I, f. 150*).

Such repeated regulations were continually being ignored by the masses, sometimes led by imprudent clerics, even as late as the 1800's. Henderson quotes vivid descriptions of such goings-on in Mexico as late as 1843 (*op. cit.*, pp. 117-122). *This late resurgence in Mexico is evidently the source of the movement in New Mexico brought up by some migrant at the turn of the century.*

had also received Spanish names, and in many instances Spanish blood. They were generally shiftless and lazy, as reported by Father Domínguez in 1776.<sup>47</sup> A great number of them were not recently-made Catholics, but the children and grandchildren of Catholics, and they took their religion seriously; and so it is significant that certain villages in which the Penitente movement was strongest were also greatly populated by *genízaros*.<sup>48</sup>

By 1800, too, the Franciscans had dwindled away, leaving the people, especially those in outlying districts, to their own devices in matters of worship. In 1797 the bishop of Durango had effectively "secularized" the Hispanic parishes by sending priests from Durango to administer them. These *curas* did not stay long, and the aging *frailes* had to replace them again. Other priests came from Durango later on, some native New Mexicans were ordained, but these were never near enough to cover a vast primitive territory which the Franciscans had left vacant, and whose population had increased and spread out in many new villages and hamlets away from the Rio Grande Valley.

It was in this "Secular Period" (1790-1850) that the now-famed New Mexico *retablos* and *santos* came into being, primitive altarpieces and statues by untutored craftsmen that replaced old Spanish art pieces which time had destroyed. In many ways, the Penitentes are a living counterpart of these bizarre *santos*. These animate and inanimate contemporaries undoubtedly influenced each other to some degree. As the one replaced the old images and paintings, so the other replaced the church societies that had died, including the Third Order, and also took over the ceremonies

47. BNM, *loc. cit.*

48. *Genizaro* has a double derivation. The older one, from the Greek "born of a stranger," was applied in Spain to a European of mixed blood, but especially to a Spaniard with French, Italian, or other such admixture. This first meaning became obsolete in Spain, but was continued by New Mexicans as applied to Indians of mixed nomadic tribes living among them in more or less Spanish fashion.—The second derivation of *genizaro*, more correctly spelled *jenizaro*, comes from the Turkish "new militia," and was originally applied to the Sultan's special guard. It still is the Spanish word for special troops, English "janizary" or "janissary." (Early American writers thought the New Mexico *genizaros* were so called because the Spaniards used them as auxiliary troops!)

of worship (except the Mass and the Sacraments) in the place of clergymen whom time had also taken away and never adequately replaced.

What is of utmost significance is the fact that the Penitentes appear full-blown, with a recognizable and still more significant terminology for the society itself, for its classes of members, and for its main rites. The society is an *Hermanidad* (Brotherhood, Fraternity) or a *Cofradía* (Confraternity), with the pious title of "*Nuestro Padre Jesús Nazareno*." It is divided into *Hermanos de Luz* (Brothers of Light) and *Hermanos de Sangre* (Brothers of Blood), those who scourge themselves to blood, carry heavy crosses, and perform other drastic acts of penance.

This terminology and its accompanying practices are exactly the ones pertaining to the penitential societies of Seville that date from the early part of the Sixteenth Century. The first fraternities are believed to have been started by a knight, Don Fadrique Henríquez de Ribera, following his return from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1533. These societies made the Via Crucis, or devotion of the Way of the Cross, through the city streets and the countryside. A large wooden cross headed the march of each *Cofradía*, followed by a *muñidor* (beadle) announcing the procession's approach, and also signalling its stops and starts, with the sound of small bells on a frame. Trumpets were used instead on more solemn occasions. Then came the *Penitentes*: first, the *Hermanos de Sangre*, naked from the waist up, with loose hoods completely covering their heads, and scourging themselves with leather whips studded with metal; next came the *Hermanos de Luz*, bearing thick giant candles; then came a third group, the *Nazarenos*, carrying heavy crosses on their backs, and dressed in long red or purple gowns tied at the waist with a thick cord, with long scraggly wigs on their heads that reached to their shoulders. This was the picture in earlier times. Eventually the Church authorities suppressed these extravagant acts of penance, but to this day these very same confraternities, still using the same names, march through the streets of Seville in Holy Week

with their standards and statues, and dressed in long gowns of various colors with tall conical hoods with masks.<sup>49</sup>

Cervantes had his Don Quijote encounter such a penitential procession of flagellants in the manner that the mad knight had assaulted the windmill. The author treats them as nothing unusual, a religious procession praying for rain, with clergy attending, and the disciplinants "laying open their flesh."<sup>50</sup> But more detailed is another old description of these Spanish Penitentes and their customs, a fact also taken for granted by the author, which may be found in the droll Spanish classic, *Fray Gerundio*, first published in 1758. The same terminology and ritual of the brotherhood are here brought out by the picaresque author, who also playfully observes that the Penitentes of Light, like the Leaders of the Brotherhood, content themselves with "lighting up" the Penitentes of Blood with their candles, while the latter "burn themselves up" with their scourging.<sup>51</sup> A news account of the Seville processions, in 1908, pictures these barefoot "*penitentes, Nazarenos descalzos*," and how their "*Hermandad de Nuestro Padre Jesús*" now numbers no less than three hundred *Hermanos*.<sup>52</sup>

As previously stated, the New Mexico Penitentes suddenly appear in the Secular Period with all the trappings of the Penitentes of Seville in their earlier phase. There is the distinctive name and title of *Cofradía de Nuestro PADRE Jesús Nazareno*," a peculiar title indeed, for nowhere else in Christendom is the word "Father" applied to Jesus Christ, the Son of God in the Holy Trinity.<sup>53</sup> Then there is the important division of the brethren into those of Light and those of Blood. (The *Nazarenos* with their long gowns and wigs<sup>54</sup> are missing in New Mexico, and their heavy burden

49. José Ortiz Echagüe, *España Mística* (Bilbao: 1950), p. 26.

50. Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, Libro I, Cap. LII.

51. José Francisco de Isla, S.J., *Fray Gerundio de Campazas*, Libro III, Cap. V (Danzig Edition: 1885), pp. 225-235.

52. *La Hormiga de Oro*, Barcelona, April 11, 1908, p. 236. One of the photo plates is of their large statue of *Nuestro Padre Jesús*.

53. New Mexico Penitentes were also much devoted to "*El Cristo del Gran Poder*." A realistic statue of Christ bearing His Cross, and having this very title, is one of the famous religious images of Seville.

54. *Jesús Nazareno* and the *nazarenos* are not derived, as commonly supposed, from Jesus as a native of Nazareth, but from "Nazarite," a Hebrew term applied

of cross-bearing is taken up by the brothers of blood.) The beadle with bells or trumpet is replaced here by the *pintero* with his fife, but his office is exactly the same; and his weird flute is none other, at least in sound, than the ones heard when drum and fife teams play on the street corners of Seville. Also identical with the original brothers of blood in Spain are the bare torsos and loose hood-masks of the New Mexican flagellants. Their hymns and *alabados* are also Sevillian, both in métric form and in their minor-key cadences, as well as in their uninhibited yelled manner of delivery. It is the *cante jondo*, a deep singing brought up from the very depths of being, a cry wrenched from the soul as in a fit of paroxysm, and trailing off in unexpected tones and half-tones.<sup>55</sup>

#### *A Late Transplant*

To call all this a coincidence is unreasonable, to say the least. The only inference possible is that the Penitentes of New Mexico as a society are a late transplant. In other words, a society or groups of similar societies which came from southern Spain to the New World after the discovery of America did not come up to New Mexico during her first two centuries of existence as a Spanish colony. Was it because she was not settled by Andalucians as a body? Perhaps. But toward the end of those two centuries the society does appear, and similar in all its essentials to the ancient societies of Seville.

Sometime in the Secular Period, some individual, or more than one, came to New Mexico from New Spain (soon

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in the Old Testament to one who was "consecrated to God" in a very special manner. One exterior feature of the Nazarites was that they never trimmed their hair. Samson and Samuel, for example, were Nazarites.

In Spanish devotional writing these men prefigured Christ in His unkempt appearance as described by the Prophet Isaias. And so, when representing Christ bearing His Cross with scraggly, blood-matted hair, they called Him "*Nazareno*" because of this Nazarite connotation, not because of the town of Nazareth. Consequently, the Penitentes who wore long gowns and wigs and carried heavy crosses in imitation of Christ were also called "*nazarenos*."

55. This theory on Penitente singing is my own, but is also expressed by Henderson who witnessed the Holy Week processions of Seville (*Op. cit.*, p. 73). Expert research and comparison, both textual and musical, of the old New Mexican hymns and *alabados* and the old Andalucian *soleds*, *seguiriyas*, *sacetas*, and *peteneras*, would, I believe, confirm this opinion.



to become Mexico), or from some other Spanish colony to the south, where such penitential societies had long existed.<sup>56</sup> Such individuals had belonged to such a society, to be able to impart its organization and ritual to their new neighbors here in New Mexico. And if we consider the New Mexicans' own medieval-Spanish religious background at the time, a feeling made more acute by living for generations so close to the essentials of life and death in a stark land, the soil was most fertile and ready for such a transplant. Within a few years the movement had spread, despite Bishop Zubiría's prohibition, from the Santa Cruz and Chimayó area to almost every village in New Mexico.

An alternate supposition is that some book, which described the old Spanish penitential societies and their rites, had found its way to New Mexico at this time, in the quarter-century after 1776, to inspire the first *Hermandad*. The quick results, however, suggest a living person as the prime mover.

It is true that certain practices common to all the New Mexican brotherhoods are different from the original Spanish ones. The absence of the *nazarenos* is one, perhaps because their long gowns and wigs were unavailable. The use of obsidian knives and spiny cactus, of yucca scourges, for drawing blood and causing pain, the penance of kneeling on *arroz* (rice) composed of tiny sharp stones from our Southwest anthills, all these were features and modifications suggested and provided by the local landscape.

The *Tinieblas* rites of Holy Week with their multiple candlestick and noisemaking chains and *matracas* were nothing else than their imitation of the liturgical *Tenebrae* services as they remembered them from the now-vanished Franciscans. So also was the procession of the Way of the Cross, though this, too, had been associated with the original Penitentes of Spain.

The rare practice of "crucifying" by tying a volunteer to a cross on Good Friday—never by nailing<sup>57</sup>—came from

56. See Note 46. Different Mexican priests have told me of similar Penitentes that have existed from time immemorial in remote sections of Mexico.

57. Lurid articles in the past have accused the Penitentes of nailing a victim to the cross, more for sensational effect and out of ignorance, we trust, than out of

a different source, the old folk Passion Play, the crucifixion scene of which was made a realistic part of the Penitente rites by the brethren who eventually were the only ones to preserve some elements of such dramas of the people.<sup>58</sup> Also from the miracle plays was the macabre feature of a wooden figure of Death riding a heavy cart with ready bow and arrow. This *Carro*, or *Carreta de la Muerte*, one of the most common features of the medieval mystery plays, like the Crucified of the Passion dramas, was made part and parcel of the Penitente rites.<sup>59</sup> A nun writing her doctoral thesis on old New Mexico folk plays, while repeating the oft-told errors about the Penitentes' origin, showed rare insight in one brief paragraph: "Passion plays were undoubtedly used by the missionaries in the Colonial days, then were taken over by the Folk, and later made part of the expiatory practice of the Penitente Brothers."<sup>60</sup> Yes, there was a clear distinction between the original rites peculiar to the Penitentes and the old mystery plays of the people, and it is most important to keep them separate, even if the New Mexico Penitentes assimilated them into their own rites.

These and other peculiarities, however, do not alter the fact that, as an organization, the New Mexico Penitentes had an outside origin that was recent. They were not much more than fifty years old, perhaps even less, when the United States took over in 1846.<sup>61</sup>

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malice.—A volunteer was bound hand and foot, and also at the waist sometimes, and taken down from the cross at his request or if he fainted. Lummis' photographs at San Mateo in 1888 may be found in the sources already cited.

58. Lummis wrote that in 1888 only one town (San Mateo) carried out a crucifixion (*loc. cit.*), adding that others had been held there in 1889, 1890, and 1891.—Samuel Ellison saw a boy lashed to a cross and wearing a cactus crown at Peña Blanca in 1867 or 1868; he witnessed a similar scene at Mora in 1859 or 1860 (Huntington Libr., *loc. cit.*, p. 325).—Alice Corbin Henderson warmly describes one at Abiquiu that she herself witnessed in this present century! (*Op. cit.*, pp. 46-47.)

59. Father Domínguez described the present church of Trampas minutely, but did not find its famous Death Figure and Cart here, nor elsewhere.

60. Sister Joseph Marie, I.H.M., *The Role of the Church and the Folk in the Development of the Early Drama in New Mexico*, University of Pennsylvania. (Philadelphia: 1948), p. 89.

61. At least in strength and size, for the initial *Hermandad* could have started obscurely any time between 1777 and 1800.—Someone wrote in the *Albuquerque Record*, April 6, 1878, that the Penitentes had started there in 1820, but Ritch thought they were older. (Huntington Libr., *loc. cit.*)

The functions of the New Mexico brotherhoods were public in those early days, during Lent and particularly during Holy Week, at funerals and other special occasions, as when rogations were made for rain. The villagers participated (for not all were members by any means) as a most sympathetic audience, or congregation rather, since the society was supplying these priestless villages with religious ceremonies for which they greatly hungered. There were no women Penitentes at all, although some served as auxiliaries in providing meals and cleaning the *moradas* (combination chapel and meeting rooms).<sup>62</sup> The poor, whether white or *genízaro*, were generally the more devout souls who became "brothers of blood." The *ricos* and more sophisticated men, if they joined at all, tended to be only "brothers of light" who, as in the quip by the author of *Fray Gerundio*, were content to light the way for their more simple and sincere brethren and their scourging, and, after the American Occupation, to peddle them as vote-blocks at the polls. Some were also ready to become Protestants when the Archbishop invaded their sphere of influence.

The uncompromising attempt of Bishop Zubiría to abolish the society in 1833 has already been told. But in New Mexico there was no closely-knit church administration at that time, the few pastors in the larger centers being responsible to the bishop in Durango far away through a Vicar in Santa Fe who did not seem to exercise much authority. As previously pointed out, there had been no episcopal visitation between 1760 and 1833, and Bishop Zubiría did not make another until 1850. In the meantime, the Penitentes spread into every hamlet and town. Due to the paucity of priests, or carelessness among the few, his decree of suppression had no effect at all. A year after this bishop's second and last visit to New Mexico, Lamy came as first resident bishop, to meet the problem in the way he saw best. Evidently he was not made aware of his Mexican predecessor's strict condemnation; probably this decree had never been seen or read

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62. A *morada* is a dwelling place or lodge, from the verb *morar*, and not from the feminine of the adjective "purple," as some writers have guessed.

again since 1845 until recently. Had Lamy and Salpointe known about it, they would have taken a different view from that of a Third Order derivation, and consequently would have proceeded against the brotherhoods with much greater severity and finality.

Regardless of whatever course they would have taken, or whether or not the Rev. Mr. Darley and his helpers had interfered, the Penitente brotherhoods would still have been there with all their strange practices to shock the first Anglo-Americans, and provide exotic material for the books and journals that continue to be the source of so much Penitente-writing down to our times.

Finally, let it be said that New Mexicans need not apologize for the Penitentes. Whatever their failings, they are not a real blot on the history of this region and its native people. While graphically representing a distinct phase in our local history, like the strange *santos*, they also were instrumental in preserving for us, during a most critical period, many old Christian and old Spanish nuggets of virtue, courtesy, and folklore, which we have since squandered away. Culturally and religiously, the Penitentes themselves are and ought to be a thing of the past. If they still persist, though in steadily diminishing numbers, it is because of the universal need that human males have of belonging to a "club" of their equals, one which reflects their individuality and gives it opportunity for action; and their individualities' only reflection is in the past, with their forefathers of recent memory. They are the few whose outlook has not changed enough for them to feel at home with the Knights of Columbus or the Holy Name Society or, secularly, with the Elks and Kiwanis.