

CORPUS CHRISTI IN VALENCIA



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FROM ITS VERY BEGINNINGS, THIS RELIGIOUS MANIFESTATION WAS ORGANISED IN THE FORM OF A CIVIC EVENT. THE DIFFERENT SOCIAL GROUPS THAT WENT TO MAKE UP PUBLIC LIFE ALL TOOK PART, FROM THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF CITY SOCIETY DOWN TO THE LOWEST.

JOAN E. PELLICER LECTURER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VALENCIA

The city of Valencia, like so many others in the Christian world, has been celebrating Corpus Christi for more than six hundred years. This festivity, one of the deepest manifestations of our spirit of joy, undoubtedly adds to the Valencians' reputation as carousers. Year after year, the first Sunday after Whitsuntide week, the facades and balconies of the main streets of the old town –carrer dels Cavallers, carrer del Tossal, carrer de la Bosseria, plaça del Mercat, Sant Vicent...– are

decorated to commemorate one of the three Thursdays –now a Sunday, as laid down by recent Church directives– which according to a traditional Castilian song shine more brightly than the sun.

And although the celebration is exclusively religious in character, in Valencia, and since its very beginnings, it has had a large following in the civil society and, in particular, the City Council.

This celebration seems originally to have been fostered by the future Saint

Juliana of Liège, thanks to whom the bishop of her diocese, Robert de Torete, instituted it in 1246 within his ecclesiastical demarcation. When the then archdeacon of Liège, James Jacob Pantaleon of Troies, ascended the papal throne with the name of Urban IV, in 1264, he introduced the celebration for the whole of the Christian world and it was ratified half a century later, in 1316, by Pope John XXII.

The Valencian interpretation has always indicated that the main reasons



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why the papacy decreed this celebration were, apart from the miracle of Viterbo, also known as the miracle of the “Bleeding Host of Bolsena”, the extraordinary events which occurred in Llutxent (a town in the Valencian region of Vall d’Albaida) in the year 1248. According to this story, some corporals, or altar cloths, were hastily hidden under a rose bush to save them from the Moors who had invaded the area, and later, when they were retrieved, they were found to have bloodstains on them. As well as this miracle there is also the popular “Miracle of the Little Fish”, which took place in the year 1348: a few kilometres from the Valencian capital, a priest from Alboraida who was returning from administering Communion to an invalid was caught up in a flood in the Carraxet ravine and the casket containing the holy wafers was washed away. When the danger was over and the priest looked around for the casket, he found it empty, but not far from the

beach he saw two fish, with their heads out of the water, holding out the sacred wafers to him in their mouths. Yet another episode helped to popularize the worship of the Body of Christ amongst the Valencians of the time. In this case the events feature, amongst others, the guild of bankers of the city, who played an important part in the expedition to Alger organised by the Kingdom of Valencia –with a bull of crusade granted by Benedict XIII– to rescue a monstrance stolen by the Saracens in 1397 in the sack of Torreblanca, a town in the region of la Plana.

Nevertheless, we do not know for sure in what year the General Procession was first held. The oldest account we have goes back to 1355, under the reign of Peter the Ceremonious, when a proclamation was made by the city magistrates in agreement with the Cathedral authorities. Although the original idea was that the celebration should be held each year, it was suspended for a num-

ber of reasons and resumed, this time uninterruptedly, from the year 1373.

From that moment on, the celebration gained steadily in popularity to the extent that for many years it was considered the city’s main festival and is often referred to by some authors of the time as the “Festa Grossa”.

From its very beginnings, this religious manifestation was organised in the form of a civic event, since it constituted a hierarchical reflection of the different social groups that went to make up public life. Everyone took part, in rigorous order, from the highest levels of city society –nobility and clergy– down to the lowest, according to their rank: guilds, commoners, peasants, etc.

Furthermore, from early on, the flexible structure of the procession meant that other elements were gradually introduced –some of them with clearly pagan associations– which added to the colour and the diversity of the event. There were Biblical figures from the old and



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new testaments, representations of saints, dances, mythological animals, floats carrying dramatic representations, etc., all straight from the common people's unsullied imagination.

While all these elements were, and still are, to be found in many of the Corpus Christi processions held in different places, in Valencia they are of particular significance, especially for the history of the theatre. Just to give an idea of the scale and magnificence the General Procession acquired, in the year 1400, only twenty-seven years after the celebration was resumed, the entourage already had a considerable symbolic complexity: thirty figures representing angels, devils, prophets, patriarchs, apostles, saints, innocents, kings, etc., mythological animals such as dragons, snakes, the *Cuca fera*, or monstrous worm, of Santa Margalida, eagles, lions, etc., paraded alongside the *Entremesos* (Interludes) or *Roques* (Rocks), as they were also called, elements of enormous

importance in the history of the theatre in the País Valencià. The *Roques* were, and still are today, floats (which also existed in England and Italy at that time) which were used as a mobile stage set for certain set theatrical pieces, or mystery plays, a general term applied to the various scenes performed during the procession. Of the countless mystery plays recorded as having been performed during the history of Corpus Christi in Valencia, only three texts have survived: "The Mystery of King Herod", commonly known as "The Slaughter", "The Mystery of Saint Christopher" and "The Mystery of Adam and Eve". Today, though, the *Roques* are beautifully crafted wheeled platforms on which nothing is actually performed but which are like tableaux of important characters or events. They have names such as the Immaculate Conception, the Holy Trinity, Faith, Saint Vincent, Pluto (commonly known as the Devil's float), Valencia and Fame. It is these

floats that now open the procession. When they are brought out from the storehouse where they spend the rest of the year, the "Priest of the Floats", at the "Invitation Cavalcade", invites everyone to take part in the celebration. Before the Procession itself, there is a great parade: the city's mounted police, giants and "big-heads", the various dance groups –la Moma, els Cavallets, la Magrana–, the characters from the Mystery plays –Saint Christopher, the Pilgrims, the Magi, the Virgin of the little donkey–, and a host of others impossible to include in such a short account prepare the great event.

Finally the procession starts: more than two hundred allegorical characters, as well as the guilds, the churchgoers, the children celebrating their first communion, etc., followed by the monstrance, behind which come the religious, civil and military authorities, and bringing up the rear, a military picket closes the grand parade. ■