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David M. Mellott

I Was  
and  
I Am Dust

Penitente Practices  
as a Way of Knowing

Virgil Michel Series

Don E. Saliers, Editor



**A PUEBLO BOOK**

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# Contents

Foreword	vii
by Don E. Saliers	
Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xv
Introduction	1
Chapter 1. Historical Background	21
Chapter 2. Holy Week in Arroyo Seco	41
Chapter 3. Era y soy polvo	67
Chapter 4. Ethnography as Theology	91
Appendix 1. The Feast Day of Nuestra Señora de los Dolores	115
Appendix 2. The First Night of Las Posadas	123
Appendix 3. Larry Torres' Life Stories	131
Appendix 4. Larry's Picture Book	149
Select Bibliography	155
Index	159
The Penitente Paintings by Isaac L. Udell	167



## Foreword

It is difficult now to believe that theological thinking about sacraments could proceed for so long without paying attention to the details of liturgical life. It would be difficult to understand how religious communities understand themselves theologically without studying how persons actually live and practice their faith. Thus it is significant that theologians have increasingly turned toward the actual practices of religious communities for insight into what and how people make sense of their religious life. In recent decades a growing literature focusing on the varied devotional, liturgical, and ritual practices of daily life has begun to open up deeper connections between human experience and theological insight. How is the Christian life really lived and interpreted? What can Christian theology learn from detailed observation and conversations with living groups of Christians? These questions animate David Mellott's pages.

This book makes an impressive case for ethnographic study of particular communal practices as a major contribution to theological studies. It does so by taking us deeply into the Holy Week rituals of the Penitentes of Arroyo Seco, New Mexico. Very few readers will know much about the Brotherhood and its seemingly off-putting practice of flagellation and ritual identification with the passion of Christ. Yet, as we are taken inside this community, we may begin to appreciate what Aidan Kavanagh and others have called "primary theology"—what is transacted and enacted between God and human beings in actual ritual and life practices.

I am especially pleased that this study appears in the Virgil Michel Series. David Mellott's book offers an uncommonly forged depiction of what few have been privileged to see and hear. While its subject is an uncommon Christian community, such a depiction reveals what theology often misses in our tendencies to abstract from the specificity of the theological depth of the whole pattern of a faith community's life and struggles.

The reader comes away from these pages with a more profound appreciation for the rich layering of meaning-making and depth of spirituality found in the Morada of Arroyo Seco. David Mellott's deep

respect and empathy as well as his descriptive acuity are found in every phase of this study. This book stands robustly at the intersection of ethnographic study and theological reflection on matters of life and death—the mystery of Christ’s passion and its reception in particular cultural forms.

Don E. Saliers

## Preface

In the early 1990s I served as associate pastor for a Roman Catholic Church in the Midwest. Our parish literally sold truckloads of votive candles each year despite the best efforts of the pastoral staff to discourage the practice by removing or relocating the candle stands and by (re)labeling the custom as “superstitious.” On numerous occasions we had to unlock the church doors at odd hours so that a parishioner could light a candle in church and pray for the needs of a friend or family member.

One particular Sunday evening we received a call in the rectory from Mary Elizabeth, one of our elderly members. Mary Elizabeth asked me if I would reopen the church so that she could light an eight-day votive candle for the safety of her granddaughter, who was leaving for Paris the next morning. I gently suggested that Mary Elizabeth could say a prayer at home for her granddaughter and that she could light the candle the following morning when she came for daily Mass. Mary Elizabeth insisted that the candle needed to be lit that night. She had promised her granddaughter that the candle would be burning when she flew to Paris early the next morning. In the end, Mary Elizabeth agreed that it would be satisfactory for me to light the candle for her and place it on the Marian side altar; she would offer the prayer for the safe travels of her granddaughter from her home.

When I returned to the rectory after lighting the candle for her, the other members of the pastoral team questioned me about the wisdom of my decision to light the candle for her. They wanted to know why I was helping her. According to them, instead of lighting the votive candle for her, I should have used the opportunity to explain to her that lighting votive candles is a superstitious practice that encourages an immature relationship with God. I understood what they were saying. In fact, I agreed with them that God didn't need a votive candle to be lit in order to hear Mary Elizabeth's prayer for her granddaughter. I also shared their concern about the quality of Mary Elizabeth's spiritual development. Like them, I was taught that many of the pre-Vatican II practices in the Roman Catholic Church supported a less developed faith that often manifested itself in the striving of human beings to manipulate God. Unlike them, however, I grew up after the

reforms of the Second Vatican Council had been implemented. I also grew up in a family that did not engage in the practice of lighting votive candles. I tried to invite Mary Elizabeth to consider the possibility that God would hear her prayer without lighting the votive candle. Because she wasn't open to my perspective at that moment I decided not to stand in the way of her spiritual practice. At our next staff meeting, however, we decided to renew our commitment to teaching the parishioners about the dangers of superstitious spiritual practices.

Years later I reflected on those particular interactions with Mary Elizabeth and our pastoral team. Only then did I realize that it never occurred to us to invite Mary Elizabeth, or any of the other dozens of parishioners who were like her, into a conversation about their spiritual practices and what they meant to them. Asking them about their experiences and the ways they understood their practices didn't occur to us because we assumed that we knew more about their practices than they did. Even though we did not participate in the practice of lighting votive candles, we had concluded that it was a practice indicative of an immature faith. Furthermore, we could cite the testimony of expert theologians and psychologists who had published books and journal articles about levels of psychological development and the spiritual practices that correspond with each of the stages.

We didn't need to talk with Mary Elizabeth; there wasn't anything she could tell us that was worth knowing. At least that was what I thought then. Now I realize that I missed a valuable opportunity to hear her stories about how she lived her faith and how her practice of lighting votive candles, among other practices, shaped her life of faith. Even worse, I lost the chance to allow her stories and her life to shape my life and my theology; I missed the chance for a deeper spiritual relationship with Mary Elizabeth.

Today, many years later, I remain fascinated by the dynamic that was occurring between our parish staff and our votive-candle-lighting congregants. The practice of lighting votive candles makes sense to me in the pre-Vatican II era, when the communal nature of the Eucharist was obscured and church law closely regulated spiritual practices. Lighting votive candles was one of few things that Catholic laypeople could do without permission or much interference from the clergy. All the members of our staff, however, were strong promoters of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. We preached and taught that the work of the church was the work of all the people, clergy, religious, and laity. We wanted our parishioners to trade in their votive candles

for an active role in the eucharistic assembly. The irony was that we were still dictating what people should do and how they should interpret what they were doing. We claimed that the people were primary actors in the life of the church, but we didn't treat them as such. If we had, we would have engaged them in conversation about their practices and we would have paid closer attention to the ways in which those practices shaped their faith. If we had chosen to interact with them on that level, I suspect we would have also been challenged to be more aware and forthcoming about our own anxieties, concerns, and doubts that lingered within our own spiritual practices. Our exchanges might not have ended in agreement, but they would have strengthened the bonds among us. We also would have learned something theological from these practitioners.

As popular as votive candle lighting has remained among Roman Catholics, despite heavy scrutiny and criticism since the Second Vatican Council, conceiving that we could learn something theological from the people who have been engaging it, often for decades, allowed me to imagine learning from Roman Catholics who engage in less popular and more extreme forms of spiritual practice.<sup>1</sup> Imagine, now, conversing with a member of a church-sanctioned, voluntary fraternity of Roman Catholics who strip down to their underwear, press their faces into a dirt floor, and beat themselves with a whip of cactus fibers to the point of bleeding. Larry T. Torres, a Roman Catholic layman, has performed this penitential practice for over four decades as part of his membership in the Penitentes, which means "penitent ones" in Spanish. He joined the fraternity of Penitentes in northern New Mexico when he was nine years old. This book is an exploration of his experiences.

Despite the fact that many books have been written about the Penitentes in the United States and other countries, few Christians, including Roman Catholics, are familiar with this penitential practice. Flagellation, the act of scourging oneself or being scourged,

<sup>1</sup> I find this idea exciting. Others, however, are less enthusiastic. Once, while speaking with a diocesan director of religious education, she told me that it was ridiculous to ask Roman Catholics about their experience with lighting votive candles, praying the rosary, or any other devotion. For her, the church's teaching had made it clear that the Eucharist was the central practice for Roman Catholics. She thought that my idea to ask Roman Catholics about their experiences was not only a waste of time, but also "not very Catholic."

however, is a practice that has been used for spiritual purposes for centuries. Upon first hearing about this practice, we may find it hard to imagine why someone would voluntarily beat oneself and why the Roman Catholic Church would approve of a behavior that causes such physical pain. As extreme as this spiritual practice is, we may not assume that we know more about it than Larry and his fellow practitioners, but we may assume that we know enough to say that the practice couldn't lead to any spiritual wisdom. From a distance, some of us may quickly charge that the practice is dangerous, physically and psychologically, and it has no place within the Christian community. That was certainly my concern when I first learned about the Penitentes in New Mexico. Supporting my assumptions was the fact that Pope Pius IX had ordered the disbandment of the fraternity in the nineteenth century.

What if, however, we were to take the time to ask Larry about his experience? What if we asked him about what he has learned from doing this practice for the last four decades? What if we could spend long periods of time with him, talking with him and following him around as he went about his daily life, to see how his experience of being a Penitente shapes who he is and his understanding of the spiritual life? Most of us would be surprised by what we would learn. I was. Through his participation in flagellation and the other practices of the Penitentes, Larry has found a way to a deeper knowledge of himself, God, and the world. He has come to know that he was and he is dust; an insight that has given him new life. In fact, his communion with the dust of the earth has been more powerful to him than the "ecstasies" of receiving Communion at Mass.

This book was born out of my experiment with finding out what I could learn from Larry and his experience of Penitente spirituality, including flagellation. The process was more challenging than I had imagined. My theological training didn't prepare me to consider what laypeople could teach me, especially about theology or spirituality. I had to set aside my assumptions that I knew more than Larry and the other Penitentes about their practices and what counted as an acceptable spiritual practice within the Christian tradition.

In the pages that follow you are invited to join me in my process of trying to understand Larry and the Penitentes of northern New Mexico on their own terms. My intention is not to convince you to become a Penitente. I do hope that what you learn about Larry's experience and my experience of seeking to understand him better will

inspire you to go out and engage the Larrys and Mary Elizabeths in your world. I suspect you will be surprised by what you hear and see. I imagine that you will not only learn about them, their experiences, and their world, but also about yourself, your assumptions, and the life you are creating.



## Acknowledgments

Selecting a research project and then bringing it to completion can be a perilous process. Fortunately, my decision to research the practices of the Penitentes in Arroyo Seco, New Mexico, was greeted with enthusiasm from many of my professors at Emory University, where I did my research and writing. In particular, I am grateful to Don Saliers, whose passionate interest in my work and wise counsel carried me through many difficult moments in the writing process. Joyce Flueckiger and Mark Jordan graciously guided me through the process of bringing theology and ethnography together. Joyce patiently mentored me as I ventured into ethnographic research. Mark gently and persistently helped me to see the wider implications of bringing together ethnographic research and theology. I also benefited from my conversations with Bobbie Patterson, Wendy Farley, Nancy Eiesland, and Brian Mahan while working on this project.

Early on in the research stage, Robert Orsi advised me to “always tell the truth” in the research process. This advice and his ongoing support of this project sustained me despite the many changes in my personal life while doing my research and the writing.

The financial support of the Graduate Division of Religion at Emory, the Society of St. Sulpice, and the Louisville Institute made my fieldwork in Arroyo Seco possible. The generosity of family members and friends was also significant in bringing this project to completion.

I am indebted to several other people who assisted, guided, and inspired me during the writing stages of this project. I am particularly grateful to Helen Mitchell, my friend and former colleague at Howard Community College, whose willingness to think with me about the writing process allowed my voice to emerge. Jeremy Paden and Nasario García helped in creating the English translations of the sacred dramas of the Penitentes. Fran Kelleher saved me from becoming isolated through my work and was the perfect writing partner and friend.

Although the initial draft of this manuscript was written during my graduate studies at Emory University, I revised and prepared the final text for publication with Liturgical Press after I began teaching at Lancaster Theological Seminary. I am grateful to my students in the Doctor of Ministry program who closely read and commented

on some of the chapters. Their comments helped me to clarify my thoughts, and their delight in ethnographic research motivated me to get this manuscript published. Bryce Rich, a staff member of our library and one of my students, offered much-needed and appreciated assistance in preparing the electronic files of the Udell paintings.

From the moment of my initial interview at the seminary, I have been deeply grateful for the enthusiasm the seminary faculty has shown for my research and writing. Thanks to my colleagues I have been given the freedom to explore with our students the ways ethnographic research can enrich programmatic theological education. I am grateful to Ed Aponte, our dean, who regularly advised me to make room in my schedule for writing. In addition, Bruce Epperly and Bud Hartley provided valuable comments on early drafts of the manuscript. Anabel Proffitt and Julia O'Brien helped me to remember the gift and pleasure of writing.

Hans Christoffersen, editorial director at Liturgical Press, and Don Saliers, editor of the Virgil Michel Series, have been guiding forces as I transformed my doctoral dissertation into the current book. Mary Stommes, Lauren L. Murphy, Colleen Stiller, and Ann Blattner, also at Liturgical Press, patiently guided me through the editorial process and helped tremendously to create a more readable text. I am honored by Liturgical Press's decision to include *I Was and I Am Dust* in the Virgil Michel Series. The editorial staff's excitement about the book nourished my own enthusiasm for bringing theology and ethnography together.

To the members of Holy Trinity Parish in Arroyo Seco, New Mexico, I owe a special word of gratitude. They generously welcomed me into the life of their community. To all those who invited me to participate with them in their activities and to those who spoke with me about their experiences, I am very grateful. I especially want to thank Rev. Vincent Chávez, who invited me to Arroyo Seco the first time and who introduced me to the Penitentes. Most of all, I want to thank Larry Torres, whose participation made my research possible and provocative. His remarkable openness transformed me and my appreciation for the potential of ethnographic research. I look forward to many more years of working together with him. Special words of gratitude go to Tina Larkin of *The Taos News*, who provided the photograph of Larry's painting *Era y Soy Polvo* for the front cover.

Thanks to the permission of Farrell Udell and Christy Udell Stripe, son and daughter of Isaac L. Udell, I have been able to include in this book Isaac's thirteen Penitente paintings. These paintings have never

been published in color and are a valuable part of the history of the Penitentes in New Mexico. I am honored that the Udell family and the owner of the collection entrusted me with the publication of these works of art.

Through the unfolding of this project I have enjoyed the immeasurable support of family and friends. My parents, Joyce and Francis Mellott, were the ones who taught me to listen to the stories of others. Sharon and Joseph Mellott, my sister and brother, never tired of reassuring me of my potential. Mary Mellott, Kurt Ewen, Joe Reynolds, Gaila Mullins, Terry Mullins, Pauline Gurley, Patrice Miles, and Jesse Miles regularly offered encouragement, especially in my moments of frustration and disappointment.

Most important, my life partner, Lance Mullins, has been my best friend and my delight throughout this creative and challenging adventure. His love and laughter have nourished me. His wise counsel and his commitment to the ways of Jesus have helped me to discover my voice and my path in this world.

February 2, 2009

The Feast of the Presentation of Jesus



# Introduction

## INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s I studied theology at one of the oldest Roman Catholic universities in the world: the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KUL) in Belgium. Fresh from college seminary in the United States, I went to Leuven to study theology at the famous university and to prepare to become a Roman Catholic priest. My classes at the KUL included students from around the world who were also preparing to become priests or professional theologians or both. During our first semester of theological studies we noticed that the professors would lecture all three hours of our class time. No time was allotted for questions, comments, or discussion with the professor or our classmates. We soon realized that this was the teaching philosophy behind the classes that we were taking there. Attending class meant listening to the lecture and adding any additional comments to the preprinted sets of notes we had purchased from the bookstore. The classroom dynamics were never explained to us by the professors. Consequently, we looked to upper-level students to inform us about why we weren't allowed, or at least encouraged, to ask questions at the end of a lecture or to engage the professor in a conversation. Our informants interpreted the pedagogical practice as the professors' way of communicating to us that we were not in a position to ask questions or to have a conversation with them because we didn't know anything about theology yet. We didn't have anything to contribute to a theological conversation. Our informants also explained that if we continued into the second cycle of theological studies (beyond the three-year bachelor program), the professors would begin to accept questions and permit some discussion at the end of class.

My formation as a theologian and pastoral minister left a strong impression on my self-understanding. I saw myself as an expert when I arrived as a priest in the parish and as a professor in the classroom. The fact that I received both the training to be a professional theologian and a pastoral minister enhanced this image I had of myself. I became dedicated to passing on the valuable information that was passed on to me. In fact, at the beginning of my first assignment as

a priest, the pastor asked me if I would be willing to take over the weekly column in the church bulletin, titled “Did You Know?” which had been written by the former assistant pastor.

I offer this narrative because it unmask some of the assumptions embedded in the patterns of my formation as a professional theologian and pastoral minister. Among those assumptions were that I arrived at the university with no knowledge of theology, and that when I graduated, I would be an expert in theology. The pedagogical practices of that theological studies program were geared toward providing me with all the knowledge I needed to become an expert in theology. The hope was that I would go forth from the university and pass on that knowledge to the people in my parishes and my classrooms who were similarly uneducated. I was charged to tell them what we assumed they didn’t know.

The assumption that the people in our parishes and classrooms were uneducated theologically went beyond their not knowing the details of church history, Scripture, liturgy, and systematic theology. The assumption was that because the people didn’t know these important pieces of information, they couldn’t make any sense out of what we were doing as a faith community. More specifically, many of my colleagues and I believed that people weren’t able to interpret the liturgical practices of the community, or even their own individual spiritual practices, because they didn’t know the history, development, and church codes that were associated with those practices.

My assumptions about being an expert in theology, however, were quickly challenged by the people in our church and the students in my classroom. For example, no matter how many times a member of the parish staff or a faculty colleague would explain that the Second Vatican Council stated clearly in the Constitution on the Liturgy that the liturgy was the source and the summit of the life of the church and that full, active participation in the liturgy was expected,<sup>1</sup> people would continue to pray the rosary during Mass. Their persistent resistance to our teachings and mandates intrigued me. I began to question whether I was an expert, and whether the people in my parish had something to teach me.

<sup>1</sup> The Constitution on the Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) can be found in *Documents on the Liturgy 1963–1979: Conciliar, Papal, and Curial Texts*, ed. International Committee on English in the Liturgy (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1982) as DOL 1.

## RAISING THE QUESTION

Is there anything we—theologians and pastoral ministers—can *learn* by asking our Christian companions about their everyday lives, about what they consider to be their spiritual practices, and about the ways in which they understand and interpret those practices in the midst of their contexts?<sup>2</sup> Yes, there is much of considerable importance we can learn from studying the lived experience of practicing Christians. The underlying argument of this book is that ethnographic research should be an essential component of theological studies. I have chosen to make this argument primarily through performing ethnographic research and sharing my results and reflections in written form. Another argument of this book comes from what I learned in the process of doing ethnographic research in Arroyo Seco, New Mexico: doing ethnographic research can also be a theological act.

Through extended interviewing, participant observation, and gathering spiritual life stories, I explored the practices of the Penitente Brotherhood performed in the northern New Mexican village of Arroyo Seco and how those practices have been experienced by one of their most senior members. The most commonly used formal name for the Brotherhood is La Fraternidad Piadosa de Nuestro Padre Jesús Nazareno.<sup>3</sup> More popularly, they are known as Penitentes (Penitent Ones) or Hermanos (Brothers) or la Hermandad (the Brotherhood).<sup>4</sup> They have established a number of chapters, called Moradas, throughout northern New Mexico and southern Colorado.

Throughout this inquiry the reader will notice that I have chosen to capitalize all references to the Brothers, the Moradas, and the Brotherhood as a whole. I have done so because those terms were presented

<sup>2</sup> Although the context of my question and my research is the Roman Catholic Church, I have chosen to use the terms “Christian” and “pastoral minister” because I believe other denominations would also benefit from engaging this question.

<sup>3</sup> The Pious Fraternity of Our Father Jesus of Nazareth.

<sup>4</sup> In at least one other village, the members use other titles. Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe Morada uses the word *Cofradía* (Confraternity), instead of *Fraternidad* (Fraternity). In addition, they use *Cofrados* and *Cofradas* to refer to the men and women who belong to their Morada. They use this language intentionally to reflect the presence of men and women in their Morada. See Felipe Ortega’s foreword to Michael Wallis and Craig Varjabedian, *En Divina Luz: The Penitente Moradas of New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), xiii.

this way in the local parish bulletins and newspaper columns I read. Customarily, in English-language documents, words from other languages are italicized. I have chosen not to italicize the Spanish words, however, because they are not considered foreign words to the people of this community. Local parish bulletins and publications, which utilize both the Spanish and English languages, do not italicize Spanish words.

#### SITUATING THE QUESTION

My proposal that theologians and pastoral ministers should inquire into the spiritual practices of fellow Christians and engage them in conversation about how they interpret those practices is not particularly new. Aidan Kavanagh made a similar suggestion in 1981, in his Hale Memorial Lectures of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary. In his lectures, which were recast into his manifesto, *On Liturgical Theology*, Kavanagh challenges the way in which theology has been practiced and understood within the academy. He claims that thinking about God and about humanity's relationship with God has become primary in theological studies. Consequently, the actual being in relationship with God has become secondary. Yet, this is the place where humanity is changed, even if imperceptibly, through its encounter with God. Primary theology has shifted from *being in* relationship to *thinking about* that relationship. This shift, or better this reversal, has resulted in a diminished sense of both liturgical worship and theological reflection. First of all, theological reflection, or theologizing has been severed from its liturgical roots and is often lost in its desire for internal coherence and consistency. Second, liturgical worship has not only lost its place at the center of theology but also become the vehicle or tool by which doctrines can be promulgated and dispersed.

Against these tendencies, Kavanagh proposes that liturgical worship is primary Christian theology. Christian liturgy is the faith of the church in action. To put it another way, the celebration of the liturgy is a theological act. Kavanagh wishes to restore liturgical worship to its primacy within Christian theology. He develops his argument out of and around the patristic aphorism, *lex supplicandi legem statuat credendi*: the law of supplicating (praying) constitutes the law of believing (Prosper of Aquitaine).<sup>5</sup> What Kavanagh doesn't acknowledge in his

<sup>5</sup> Prosper of Aquitaine was a disciple of Augustine. For more on his perspective, including the connection with Augustine, see Basil Studer, "Liturgy and the Fathers," trans. Edward Hagman, in Anscar J. Chupungco, ed., *Introduction*

analysis of this maxim is that there are other examples of the faith of the church in action. Feeding the poor, clothing the naked, forgiving our enemies, and loving our neighbor as ourselves are also examples of faith in action. They are theological acts that also transform us through our encounter with God and one another.

Kavanagh proposes that the liturgy needs to be taken from the hands of liturgists, religious bureaucrats, and other specialists and returned to the people. When he says this, he is not talking about getting laypeople more involved in liturgical planning. What he envisions is an epistemological shift from the perspective of the specialists to that of the participants, and a shift in focus from the classroom and library to the field. A consequence of this restoration is that the people who participate in the liturgical life of the church are once again understood as primary theologians. These primary theologians know the liturgy through their participation in it. As an illustration of his point, Kavanagh gives an example of a group of tourists watching a group of New Mexican Indians perform a ritual dance. Kavanagh suggests that although the tourists may know a lot of facts about the ritual dances from the books they've read, they don't know the dances in the same way that the Indians know them. In the ecology of the academy, including theology, Kavanagh observes, ironically, that the interpretation of the tourists is more trustworthy than that of the dancers.<sup>6</sup> At the end of the first half of his argument, Kavanagh writes,

I hoped to set up a situation in which alternatives might stand out in high contrast—such as World, City, and Church as artifacts, as things we make. I tried to seduce us all into artistic discourse, into talking and thinking about how we make and, in making, discover reality. If we could grow ourselves into that discovered reality, I suggested we might stumble onto the road out of suburbia, a road best traveled not in a tour bus but on foot so that we could stop when we wished in cold woods, with laughing flesh, to admire ladies in silk dresses and their beaux, and even get ourselves swept up into a rowdy mob on its way

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to the Liturgy, vol. 1, *Handbook for Liturgical Studies* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), 53–79, esp., 60–63.

<sup>6</sup> Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology: The Hale Memorial Lectures of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, 1981* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1984), 10.

downtown to do the world now and then, there perhaps to encounter a new possibility leaning into the wind.<sup>7</sup>

Despite Kavanagh's proposal to theologians and pastoral ministers nearly twenty-five years ago to hit the streets and to find out what Christians are doing, how they are doing it, and what they are discovering in the doing, few have taken up the challenge. This has been the case for several reasons. We'll discuss some of those reasons in chapter 4. For now it is sufficient to say that restoring the worship of the Christian community to its place of primacy within Christian theology is not enough. Attention must be given to how the assembly construes and deepens its own experience of the liturgy.

As I illustrated in the preface and in the narrative at the opening of this introduction, there has been and continues to be a presumption that there is little to be learned by paying attention to the lived experience of the members of the Christian community. When I was ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1992, I was comfortable, perhaps too comfortable, with my new role as spiritual guide and authority. My formation as a priest and theologian included both studying the liturgical, theological, and pastoral reforms of the Second Vatican Council and living them. My classmates and I went into ministry with the charge to put into practice the vision put forth in the Constitution on the Liturgy: "every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the Priest and of his Body which is the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others; no other action of the Church can equal its effectiveness by the same title and to the same degree" (SC 7). The liturgy of the church was to be central in my life as a priest and in the lives of the Roman Catholics that I served. There was no need to inquire among our parishioners about their spiritual practices and what they meant to them. Our responsibility as pastoral ministers was to teach them which practices should be central in their lives. More important, we were to teach them what those practices were supposed to mean to them.

Talking about practicing Christians as primary theologians is very different from treating them as primary theologians. Historians of religion, sociologists, anthropologists, and a few theologians are out in the field, in our communities, seeking to understand more fully the lived experience of Christians. Many of them are employing ethnographic

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 69.

research methods, such as participant observation, interviews, focus groups, life stories, and surveys, to gather their information. They are studying Christians who are handling snakes,<sup>8</sup> flagellating themselves,<sup>9</sup> seeking the intervention of a particular saint in heaven,<sup>10</sup> or who have a relationship with and devotion to Mary through a specific apparition.<sup>11</sup> These are just a few examples of the research that is taking place within Christian communities. Robert Orsi laments they are too few, that little attention is paid to the “experiences and beliefs of people in the midst of their lives,” in both religious studies and theological studies. Orsi writes:

Flushing with pride edged by anger, I think: I am here among these working-class people in this postindustrial landscape because I want to hear their stories. I take their voices seriously. This is what research in religion means, I fume, to attend to the experiences and beliefs of people in the midst of their lives, to encounter religion in its place in actual men and women’s lived experience, in the places where they live and work. Where are the theologians from the seminaries on the South Side, I want to know, with all their talk of postmodernism and narrativity? When will the study of religion in the United States take an empirical and so more realistic and humane direction?<sup>12</sup>

Christian theologians need to pay more attention to practicing Christians and the everyday circumstances of their lives. Ethnographic research can help us do that.

Let me be clear here about a few things that I am not suggesting. I am not suggesting that Christian theologians, pastoral ministers,

<sup>8</sup> See Dennis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995), as noted in Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 238.

<sup>9</sup> See Michael P. Carroll, *The Penitente Brotherhood: Patriarchy and Hispano-Catholicism in New Mexico* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> See Robert Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude: Women’s Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> See Jeanette Rodríguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 147.

or, more specifically, liturgical theologians go out on reconnaissance missions to learn how people respond to particular practices in their various styles, shapes, and techniques, so that they can in turn plan more effective liturgies and rituals. Nor am I suggesting that we explore the everyday circumstances of Christians so that we'll be better equipped to guide them toward the official, authorized rituals of our particular denominations. I am not advocating another method by which we can simply gather more data about Christians and the way they live, organize, and interpret their lives. And, I am certainly not advocating ethnographic research as a way for theologians and pastoral ministers to arrive at a definitive interpretation of why a particular group of people perform a particular practice (e.g., why some Roman Catholics have a devotion to the Divine Mercy) in order to put a particular practice (and its practitioners) into our established categories or hierarchies of religious experience.<sup>13</sup> In fact, one thing that ethnographic research helps display is the multiple and multifaceted ways in which people interpret what they do. The working assumption is that there will be a variety of responses, positions, and interpretations among a group of participants.

I am suggesting that we take seriously the peoples' experiences of being primary theologians. Ethnographic research can provide theologians and pastoral ministers with an opportunity to *learn* about the practices the people are doing, how they are doing them, and what those practices mean to them. Through this type of research we will also be able to better appreciate the multiple ways in which people engage and interpret their religious practices. This is not as simple as it may sound. As researchers we can be tempted to think that all people who participate in a particular practice or share in an event will have the same experience or the same self-understanding.

Beyond learning about other Christians, doing ethnographic research provides a structure through which the researcher can enter

<sup>13</sup> I am thinking here specifically of the way in which Erik Erikson's work on the ontogeny of ritualization, as found in *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* (Austen Briggs Monograph, no. 7 [New York: W. W. Norton, 1968]), was used in my courses on Roman Catholic liturgy as a way to categorize particular rituals or practices according to Erikson's levels of human development. Another book used to support the process of categorization was George S. Worgul Jr., *From Magic to Metaphor: A Validation of the Christian Sacraments* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980).

into relationship with the practitioners. In this case, when we are talking about Christian theologians and pastoral ministers going to other Christians to learn from them about the different ways they construct their lives and give them meaning, we are strengthening the bonds within the Christian body. Entering into relationship with other Christians in this way will require something of us. As we will see in chapters 3 and 4, we may be challenged by the ways we are both like and not like the people with whom we are working.

So far I have been using the term “theologian(s)” without explanation. Before proceeding any further I should clarify what I mean. Since I am using Kavanagh’s work as a context for posing my question, I am also borrowing his terms of primary theologians and secondary theologians. By primary theologians, he is referring to all members of the worshipping community. Through their participation in the worship of the church, they become primary theologians. The worship of the church community is the context for their relationship with God and one another. Secondary theologians are those we know more commonly in the academy and the church as “theologians.” Their role is to reflect critically on this interaction between God and the worshipping community. Kavanagh writes, “For if theology as a whole is critical reflection upon the communion between God and our race, the peculiarly graced representative and servant of cosmic order created by God and restored in Christ, then scrutiny of the precise point at which this communion is most overtly deliberated upon and celebrated by us under God’s judgment and in God’s presence would seem to be crucial to the whole enterprise.”<sup>14</sup> Throughout this book I will be using the terms “theologian” or “professional theologian” to designate those who provide that “critical reflection upon the communion between God and our race.” At the same time, I consider the members of the community to be the primary theologians. The obvious problem with these terms is that they gloss over the fact that many, if not most, secondary theologians are also primary theologians, that is, they are worshipers too.

Before proceeding I want to address another possible concern: this type of research could be construed as condoning or approving particular practices and perspectives. On this matter I would agree with Orsi, who writes:

<sup>14</sup> Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 78.

We may not condone or celebrate the religious practices of others—and let me emphasize this here because it is always misunderstood: to work toward some understanding(s) of troubling religious phenomena is not to endorse or sanction them . . . —but we cannot dismiss them as inhuman, so alien to us that they cannot be understood or approached, only contained or obliterated (which is what the language of good/bad religion accomplishes, the obliteration of the other by desire, need, or fear). The point is rather to bring the other into fuller focus within the circumstances of his or her history, relationships, and experiences. It is chastening and liberating to stand in an attitude of disciplined openness and attentiveness before a religious practice or idea or another era or culture on which we do not impose our wishes, dreams, or anxieties.<sup>15</sup>

Taking on this attitude of seeking to understand the religious practices of others without the intention of offering a final word on whether such behaviors are “appropriate,” “healthy,” or “Christian,” may be extremely challenging for some theologians and even more pastoral ministers. While I know this can raise issues of ecclesiology and church polity I simply want to point out that practicing “disciplined openness and attentiveness” can become a kind of spiritual practice for the professional theologian or pastor. Furthermore, in particular situations, where there has been an expressed desire to “contain” or “obliterate” a set of practices by church authorities, as was the case with the Penitentes, researchers may find research participants especially hesitant about speaking with researchers who are associated with those authorities. It’s in these very cases, however, where I think that ethnographic research can become a powerful theological act. Engaging people within their own contexts can create and strengthen relationships. We may find a particular practice to be troubling; if so, we are presented with an opportunity to learn how others go about constructing their religious worlds.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE FIELD SITE

Over four hundred years ago European colonists arrived in what is now called New Mexico with the hope of finding gold and serving God. The Franciscan friars among the colonizers intended to convert the native Pueblo people to Roman Catholicism. As the Franciscans focused their efforts on the Native Americans, the European community

<sup>15</sup> Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 7–8.

received less attention. The European community also suffered a decrease in the number of clergy due to the wars between Mexico and Spain (1821), and Mexico and the United States (1846). It was in this context that the Hermandad (the Brotherhood) emerged throughout northern New Mexico with a number of Moradas. In Spanish, the word "Morada" has several meanings, depending on usage. The most common meaning is home, dwelling, or residence. In the phrase, "la eterna Morada," it takes on the meaning of heaven, eternal home, or the great beyond. In the phrase, "última Morada," it takes on the meaning of final resting place, as in place of burial. The way that the Penitentes use the word Morada resonates with each of these meanings. The Morada is the building, the place where they gather for meetings, prayer, penance, and meals. They even sleep there, on the floor, during Holy Week. The Morada is also a cemetery, a final resting place. Deceased Brothers and parishioners are buried on the grounds surrounding the buildings. The Morada is a place where one prays for the dead as well. Each year the Hermanos in Arroyo Seco host parishioners at the Morada for an entire evening dedicated to the dead. One year the parish bulletin described it as "A Special Night for All Souls."<sup>16</sup> When we hear the spiritual life stories of Larry Torres we could add another meaning; the Morada is the place where he experiences death and identifies with the dead.

The actual origins of Los Hermanos Penitentes are not known. Records indicate that people were performing acts of self-flagellation in the region in 1598. The particular village of Arroyo Seco has been home to both Pueblo people and Spanish settlers since the latter part of the seventeenth century. Its oldest known church was built in 1834 by the Hermanos. Early pictures of the first church building show a west wing on the church that was used by the Hermanos as a place for meetings and rituals. Apparently this west wing was dismantled and moved adobe by adobe to the present location after the church authorities disbanded La Fraternidad in 1854. The church of Holy Trinity in

<sup>16</sup> The bulletin reads, "The evening will begin with some explanations about the Feast of the Ascensión and the nature of Purgatory by Hermano ——. After that, a ritual called La Procesión de los Muertos [The Procession of the Dead] will take place. It is a special devotional procession with farolitos [paper bags with sand and candles] lit in memory of the souls of those whose names we receive. It will also include a rosary followed by a celebration of the Holy Mass right at the Morada."

Arroyo Seco is the regional center for Penitente rituals from Wednesday of Holy Week until late at night on Good Friday.

The public<sup>17</sup> rituals consist of praying the Stations of the Cross in the field surrounding the Morada, reenacting in the Morada, church, and church plaza scenes from the final days and death of Jesus Christ, making pilgrimages from the surrounding villages to the church plaza, processing the statues of Mary and Jesus from the various locations, and hosting a Good Friday Lenten meal in the Morada.

The Penitentes also perform private rituals during their Holy Week stay at the Morada. These rituals consist of self-flagellation and other acts of penance. Although I have limited information concerning the nature of these activities, I have obtained photographs of a series of paintings of New Mexican Penitentes done by Isaac L. Udell who addressed the medical concerns of the brothers in the earlier part of the twentieth century. These paintings are held in a private collection and are not publicly displayed because they so graphically portray the private rituals of the brotherhood.<sup>18</sup> These private acts of penance, performed in one of the private rooms of the Morada and in secluded places nearby, are reportedly protected by an oath of secrecy.

The Penitentes plan both the public and the private rituals and decide who performs the specific roles. In public, several of the Brothers are responsible for the speaking roles and for leading the alabados (hymns of praise). Other Brothers are responsible for carrying statues or other items in the procession. All of the rituals have silent roles, which are played primarily by Penitentes. Other men and women from the parish are invited to participate on Holy Friday by making a pilgrimage from their surrounding villages to the plaza outside the church. Although the speaking roles are performed solely by the male Penitentes, various acting roles are played by both men and women. Within the

<sup>17</sup> By “public” I mean that anyone is welcome to attend. When Larry Torres, a Penitente and instructor at the University of New Mexico, Taos, is in town he invites fifty to a hundred of his students to participate in the Good Friday events. By “public,” I also mean that many of the rituals are performed outside, either in the village plaza or in the yard surrounding the Morada.

<sup>18</sup> I was able to view the Udell paintings in person. The paintings had to be pulled from storage for viewing. The curator of the collection explained to us that the paintings are in storage because of their graphic depictions of Penitente practices.

rituals themselves, there are three roles played by women. The first group is composed of the Verónicas,<sup>19</sup> who are young women aged thirteen and who play the role of Veronica or the Virgin Mary. The second group is composed of the Auxiliadoras (Auxiliaries), women, usually the wives or daughters of Penitentes, who participate in the prayers and processions and prepare all of the meals for the Penitentes and their guests. The last group is actually a single person who is one of only two women in northern New Mexico who are Penitentes. For over twenty years she served as the person responsible for training and guiding the Verónicas. She also participates in the processions and prayers, often helping carry the statue of the Virgin Mary. In addition to these women there are also women who participate in the pilgrimages from the surrounding villages and join the gathered assembly for the public rituals.

The indices of the major texts written about the Penitentes in northern New Mexico, rarely make any reference to Arroyo Seco. Arroyo Seco doesn't appear in Alex M. Darley's *The Passionists of the Southwest*, Alice Corbin Henderson's *Brothers of Light*, Bill Tate's *The Penitentes of the Sangre de Cristos*, Fray Angélico Chávez's *My Penitente Land*, William Wroth's *Images of Penance, Images of Mercy*, Ray John de Aragón's *Hermanos de la Luz: Brothers of the Light*, or the most recent book on the Penitentes, Michael P. Carroll's *The Penitente Brotherhood*. In addition, Arroyo Seco never made it into the WPA guides to New Mexico in the 1930s and 1940s. Marta Weigle, however, does mention Arroyo Seco in both her *Brothers of Light, Brothers of Blood* and *A Penitente Bibliography*. Each of these texts records a 1931 certificate of incorporation for Penitente Moradas of Taos County, including Arroyo Seco. In *Brothers of Light, Brothers of Blood*, Weigle briefly relates how several young girls in Arroyo Seco were selected to be the Verónicas and to assist with the enactment of the Encuentro on Good Friday morning, which I will describe in detail in the following pages.<sup>20</sup> In Weigle's *A Penitente Bibliography* she notes a 1954 photograph in *El Crepúsculo*, a Taos newspaper. The entry includes the explanation that

<sup>19</sup> According to legend, there was a woman who accompanied Jesus as he carried his cross. She wiped his face with a cloth, which retained his image. Consequently, the woman was named after the image that she bore, Veronica or true icon.

<sup>20</sup> Marta Weigle, *Brothers of Light, Brothers of Blood: The Penitentes of the Southwest* (Santa Fe, NM: Ancient City Press, 1976), 167–68.

the photograph included the Morada of Seco, which was reportedly sold and converted into a private home.<sup>21</sup> This, however, was not the case. It was the Morada of Arroyo Hondo, which was more widely known and written about, that was closed in 1954 and sold to become a home for the Clinton Bennetts. At the same time, most of its Bultos (statues) and Penitente paraphernalia were sold.

The absence of Arroyo Seco in the majority of these prominent books on the Penitentes may be one reason little attention has been paid it by other scholars. Perhaps the reports that the Morada of Arroyo Seco was sold also helped to maintain its obscurity. It is also true that until 1948, Arroyo Seco belonged to the parish in Taos. At that time, the villages that composed the parish of Taos were reconfigured. A new parish, consisting of San Antonio de Padua Church in Valdez, Nuestra Señora de Dolores in Arroyo Hondo, La Santísima Trinidad in Arroyo Seco, San Cristóbal in San Cristóbal, and Santo Niño in Las Colonias, was established by the Archdiocese of Santa Fe. After taking a census of the five churches, the archdiocese decided to establish the rectory, the residence of the priest, at La Santísima Trinidad in Arroyo Seco and to call the newly established community Holy Trinity Parish.<sup>22</sup> In addition, when the Morada of Arroyo Hondo was closed shortly thereafter, some of the remaining Hermanos joined the Morada of Arroyo Seco.

Even with the development of the Taos ski resorts just above Seco and the creation of Holy Trinity Parish, there continues to be a lack of documentation and exploration of the religious practices of this small village. Because the Morada of Seco continues to be one of the most active in the Brotherhood, sociologists and anthropologists do visit Seco seeking to investigate the practices of the Penitentes. Larry Torres, the archivist for the Seco Morada and a member of the Penitentes for over forty years, told me during the initial stages of my inquiry that academics come around each year hoping to get some glimpse of the inner life of the Penitentes in this mountain village. In response to their inquiries, Larry usually tells them that they are welcome to participate in the public rituals of the parish and Brotherhood, as long as

<sup>21</sup> Marta Weigle, *A Penitente Bibliography* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1976), 148.

<sup>22</sup> Rev. Vincent P. Chávez, interview by author, tape recording, Santa Fe, NM, December 7, 2003.

they do not attempt to record or photograph any event. They are welcome to whatever they can gather from participating in those events, Torres tells them. He denies their requests for interviews or any other documentation.

## RESEARCH METHODS

I chose the village of Arroyo Seco for three reasons. First of all, I already had an entree into this community through my seminary classmate, who was a former pastor, and I had begun to develop a relationship with the people during my first visit in 1995. The second reason was that the Morada in Arroyo Seco was one of the largest and most active Moradas in New Mexico. Third, the Morada in Arroyo Seco was one of only two Moradas in New Mexico that had a female Penitenta.

I had two goals as an ethnographer in this project. My first goal was to document as much as possible the activities of the Brotherhood in Arroyo Seco during the years of my research (1999–2003). This became particularly important to me once I realized that even though there have been a significant number of books published about the Penitentes in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado, there has been little mention of Arroyo Seco. The second goal of my research was to get a clearer understanding of what these Roman Catholics are doing and what these practices mean to them, in light of their particular history and context.

For this project I used a variety of research methods and resources: participant observation; interviewing; collecting spiritual life stories; analyzing video recordings, paintings, historical artifacts, and buildings; reviewing local newspaper columns, local radio programs, locally published books, and church bulletins; and library research. During the years of my research, I made five trips to Arroyo Seco in order to participate in different events that are celebrated throughout the year. Three of those visits (1999, 2001, 2002) were organized around participating in the Holy Week services. The other two visits were in September and December of 2002. In addition to these five encounters, I visited Seco once before I had chosen it as a research site. I participated in the Holy Week services in the spring of 1995. That was my first encounter with the Penitentes. Since there can be more than one activity happening at the same time during Holy Week, successive visits allowed me to participate in different aspects of the same events. For example, the first year I was accompanying the pastor and

his participation in the services. The following visit I accompanied the Penitentes. Another visit allowed me to spend time in the kitchens where some of the women were preparing meals.

In addition to attending the Holy Week services, I also participated in one of the parish feast days, Nuestra Señora de los Dolores (Our Lady of Sorrows), which is celebrated on or near September 15 of each year. A description of this event can be found in appendix 1. During a December visit to Seco I participated in Las Posadas, which commemorates the story of Mary and Joseph searching for a place to stay the night. A description of this event can be found in appendix 2. I have included them because they were among the ritual events that formed the larger, yearly cycle of events in Holy Trinity Parish during the years of my research. They were also part of the yearly cycle of Penitente events.<sup>23</sup> In both instances they included the participation of the Penitentes from the Morada in Arroyo Seco. In other villages this may not have been the case. Each Morada has its own relationship with the local church. In addition to attending the events noted above, I also attended the feast day celebration in Taos for Our Lady of Guadalupe, a traditional pole climbing ritual at Picuris Pueblo, and Mass on a regular basis in Seco.

Doing ethnographic research among people who perform secret practices presents ethical and practical challenges for the researcher. Access can be severely restricted. Having access does not automatically mean that people will be willing to talk or be willing to have their ideas published. When access is obtained, ethical issues emerge quickly. A researcher can upset or harm a practitioner by asking questions that will require the interviewee to break their codes of secrecy. The original research protocol for this project included interviewing a sampling of people who participate in the Penitente rituals throughout the year: the Penitentes, the Verónicas, the Auxiliadoras, the parish priests, the parishioners, and visitors, both local and from outside the community. Practical limitations, however, prevented consulting such

<sup>23</sup> In fact, there are a number of events that made up the repertoire of events in Arroyo Seco. A complete ethnographic study of the Penitentes in Arroyo Seco would need to take a closer look at the many activities that have been included in their yearly cycle and at the way in which that repertoire has shifted over the years. In addition, each participant would also have his or her own personal repertoire of activities, e.g., private devotions that would intersect with that of the community.

a wide sample. The limitations stemmed from the fact that the activities of the Hermanos are surrounded by rules of secrecy, which they have been asked to keep by the Archdiocese of Santa Fe. Permission for the Hermanos to participate in such research projects can be approved by the governing body of the Hermandad, the Mesa Directiva. I was not able to get explicit permission to officially interview members of the Penitente Brotherhood. My requests for permission were met not with denial but with silence. Rather than ask the members and the other participants to compromise their relationship with the Mesa, with the possibility of jeopardizing the entire research project, I decided not to do taped interviews with members of the Hermandad or the Auxiliadoras and Verónicas. While trying to obtain permission from the Mesa, I also learned through the relatives of the one female Penitente in Seco that she wasn't willing, and never has been, to talk about her experiences as a member. It's public knowledge that she participates in the sacred dramas that the Penitentes perform during Holy Week, but I was told by one Hermano that because she was a woman, she had to perform her acts of penance in her home.

At the same time that I was realizing the limits of my access to the community, I also believed that a deeper look at the experiences of one member could be just as beneficial, if not more so. I decided to approach Hermano Larry Torres, who is a catechist and the archivist for the Morada in Seco, to participate in my research project. Larry has been a member for over forty years and plays a key role in the organizing and performance of the Brotherhood's public activities. He is also one of the few Penitentes who speaks and writes regularly about the history of their activities in northern New Mexico. Through the lens of his spiritual life stories, Larry doesn't disclose anything new about the practices of the Hermandad. He doesn't violate any of their rules. He does, however, provide us with an account of his experiences of being an Hermano. This is something new.<sup>24</sup>

The activities of the La Fraternidad Piadosa de Nuestro Padre Jesús Nazareno and the experiences of the various participants are worthy of a complete ethnographic study. The rich juxtaposition of the Penitente practices with official Roman Catholic liturgies is an important site of primary theology. Due to the practical limitations involved, I had to limit the scope of my research. The implications of the limita-

<sup>24</sup> Larry gave permission for his name to be used both in the dissertation and this book.

tions of this project will be taken up in chapters 3 and 4. Besides the issues I have outlined here, we'll also look at how changes in my relationship with the Roman Catholic Church affected my role as researcher in the field.

## CHAPTER REVIEW

There are two conversations happening within the pages of this book. The first and the wider one is about the role of ethnographic research within theology and theological studies. There are a number of ways to have that conversation. I chose to engage it by experimenting with the practice of doing ethnographic research, which takes us to the second conversation. That is about the particular ritual behaviors of the Penitente Brotherhood in the northern New Mexican village of Arroyo Seco. The research that I did was not an exhaustive ethnographic study, but it was an exploration of their practices sufficient enough to illustrate how imperative it is for theologians and pastoral ministers to engage Christians about their lived experience. At the same time, the results of this research make a contribution to the body of literature available about the Penitente Brotherhood.

In this introduction we have raised the question concerning what we theologians can learn from engaging Christians more explicitly about their lives. We have situated the question and its importance in the context of Aidan Kavanagh's proposal to restore Christian worship to its primary place within theological studies, and consequently, restore Christian worshipers to their roles as primary theologians. If Christian worshipers are primary theologians, we should be taking their experiences and how they understand them more seriously. I have chosen to explore this claim by doing ethnographic research with the Penitente Brotherhood in Arroyo Seco, New Mexico.

Chapter 1 provides the reader with the historical context of the Penitente Brotherhood in northern New Mexico and Arroyo Seco in particular. The chapter traces what is known at this point about the development of the *Hermandad*, without attempting to solve the questions about its origins. Chapter 1 also introduces the reader to the key persons in the Brotherhood's history in New Mexico and to a long-standing member of the *Morada* in Arroyo Seco, Larry Torres.

Chapter 2 takes us directly into the most active week within the Penitente yearly calendar of events: Holy Week. The first part of this chapter documents the various activities of the Penitentes during Holy Week and how those events interconnect with the other Holy Week

services that are part of the official rites sponsored by the church. The centerpiece of the chapter is a thick description of El Encuentro (The Encounter), which is the reenactment of Mary and Jesus encountering each other as Jesus carries his cross. In this account, we get a glimpse of the complexities of the Penitente practices and of the experiences of the participants. Throughout this chapter, we'll see Larry Torres emerge as a central figure in the performance of these practices and in the life of this community.

Chapter 3 focuses on the experiences of Larry Torres as a Penitente. In this chapter I include a significant portion of the transcript from the spiritual life stories that we recorded, along with my commentary. This chapter also describes how developments within my own life impacted and interacted with the research process. Far from being incidental, the particular dynamics of the interactions between Larry and me shaped my conception of ethnographic research as a theological act.

In chapter 4 we return to the two conversations proposed in this introduction: the contribution that ethnographic research can make to theological studies and what the Hermanos Penitentes in Arroyo Seco do and how they interpret those practices within their context. We'll begin with the latter conversation because it will provide us with a lively illustration of how ethnographic research can be a powerful way to reflect with other Christians and to engage them in dialogue about their spiritual practices, their everyday lives, and the ways in which they interpret those experiences. In the end, we'll see that ethnographic research can go beyond gathering data and learning to see others more clearly. Ethnographic research can also be an act of primary theology. That is, it can also be the faith of the church in action.

Four appendixes follow chapter 4. Appendix 1 provides a description of the Vespers service for the parish feast day of Nuestra Señora de los Dolores (Our Lady of Sorrows). I have included it here because it provides the reader with additional information about the ritual activities of the Arroyo Seco Morada. This feast day celebration is another example of how the Penitentes play a prominent role in the life of the community. This particular account also illustrates Larry's role within the community, including his relationship with the pastor and the parish community. The second appendix presents an account of another celebration from the calendar of events of the Arroyo Seco community: Las Posadas. The Penitentes as a group are not central in the festivities, but the way this celebration is executed in Arroyo Seco

adds to our understanding of the particularities of the larger community. In this description of the first night of Las Posadas we also see yet another view of Larry's role within the community. The third appendix offers the reader a much fuller transcription of Larry's spiritual life stories. Offered here without additional comment, the transcription gives a direct account of Larry's voice and his own self-conscious leadership. Appendix 4 provides two illustrations from Larry's picture book for children about the bogey creatures of the Southwest. I also include his descriptions of the illustrations. In offering all four of these appendixes, I intend to help bring the Penitente Brotherhood and their practices into fuller focus for the reader.

### Historical Background

#### THE PAPAL MEDALLION

In December 2002 Larry Torres handed me a copy of the next article to appear in his weekly column, *Cruising the Camino Real*, published in *The Taos News*. “Maybe It’s Time to Make Peace with the Pope” was at the top of the first page.<sup>1</sup> The newspaper’s online description of his column notes that, “It allows Torres the opportunity to address the multiple historical events, beliefs, traditions and family records that reveal what northern New Mexico has become across the centuries through the eyes of its Hispanic population.” In this particular installment, Torres tells the story of how the people of Holy Trinity Parish in Arroyo Seco, New Mexico, found buried, face down, in the sanctuary’s mud floor a gold-plated copper medallion of Pope Pius IX. The medallion was retrieved in 1996 during a restoration of the adobe La Santísima Trinidad Church. The church was built in 1834, but had been nearly abandoned since 1961, when another, larger Holy Trinity Church was built across the plaza.

According to Torres, the local church has carried resentment toward Pius IX. Finding the medallion opened up “a deep wound in the history of the Catholic Church in northern New Mexico.” In his column, Torres continues by recounting how Pius IX was the pope who told Archbishop Jean Baptiste Lamy, the first bishop of Santa Fe, to disband the Penitente Brotherhood. Soon after Archbishop Lamy had visited Rome in 1854, he visited Padre Antonio José Martínez, who was both the pastor of Taos and the spiritual head of the Penitente Brotherhood. Lamy relayed to Martínez the pope’s directive to disband the Penitente Brotherhood and all similar organizations. As pastor of Taos at that time, Martínez was also the pastor of Arroyo Seco, where records indicate that the present Morada of the Penitente Brotherhood of Seco dates from 1870.

<sup>1</sup> Larry T. Torres, “Maybe It’s Time to Make Peace with the Pope,” *Cruising the Camino Real*, *The Taos News*, December 26, 2002.

Upon analyzing a Gene Kloss sketch of the original La Santísima Trinidad Church, Torres conjectures that the original west transept of the 1834 church was the meeting room of the Penitentes until Pius IX ordered their disbandment. Torres suggested that sometime before 1870 the Penitentes moved their Morada adobe by adobe across the road to their present location. And in using the papal souvenir to make a statement of protest, they buried the blessed article face down in the mud floor of the church.

Since finding the medallion in 1996, Torres has been reconsidering “the great disfavor that the pope showed to the Penitentes of New Mexico.” Moved by reports that Pius IX used to walk barefoot across Rome at night to rest upon the relics of Jesus’ crib, Torres suggests that Pius IX’s decision to disband the Penitente Brotherhood was “due more to inexperience than to malice. . . . Any man who can humble himself before a baby’s crib is certainly a man who might have been different if he had only been better informed.”<sup>2</sup> After carrying resentment against Pius IX since the 1850s, Torres thinks that perhaps it is time for the Brotherhood and Holy Trinity Parish to make peace with this pope.

This series of interconnecting and overlapping stories introduces the reader to some of the key figures in the history of Holy Trinity Parish of Arroyo Seco. At the same time the narrative reveals many of the rich complexities of this small, predominantly Roman Catholic village of northern New Mexico, which will allow us to explore the contributions of ethnographic research to theological and liturgical studies. Larry Torres’s column of December 26, 2002, was not simply a history lesson for Taoseños. He was offering absolution to a pope from the 1850s who had made decisions affecting the life of his village. Torres’s column was performatory.

After all these years, what precipitated such reconciliation between the Catholic Church in northern New Mexico and Pope Pius IX? Pius IX was beatified on September 3, 2000, and in the research process before his beatification, it was reportedly discovered that he had a practice of secretly slipping out of the Vatican at night in order to rest upon pieces of Jesus’ baby crib, now housed in the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome. Torres writes that this discovery moved him to offer forgiveness to Pius IX. Let’s look at Torres’s words of absolution again: “Any man who can humble himself before a baby’s crib is certainly a man who might have been different if he had only been better informed.” Despite

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

the pope's devotion and his beatification, Torres maintains that Pius IX remains in the wrong about his decision to disband the Hermandad. Torres could interpret the story differently. He could conclude that since the pope had such humility and was beatified, he must have been right to disband the Penitentes. But Torres doesn't. Instead he concludes that the pope must have had insufficient information about the practices of the Brotherhood when he chose to disband them.

Recent discoveries about the devotional life of Pius IX weren't the only factors that led Torres to pronounce his absolution. The finding of the gold-plated medallion in the mud floor of the old church also played an important role in this process. In his column, Torres makes a point that I heard other members of the renovation crew make: the medallion was found face down in the mud. While this placement of the medallion served to preserve it in excellent condition, the *interpretation* of this placement is what stands out. Torres and the renovation crew take the face-down position of the medallion as an act of resistance on the part of their ancestors. Thought to be a papal souvenir, a gift blessed by Pius IX and given to his visitors, Torres and the pastor responsible for the renovation, Rev. Vincent Chávez, believe that Lamy might have brought the medallion to Seco when he met with Padre Martínez of Taos to deliver the pope's instruction to disband the Penitentes. Signifying their refusal of the pope's mandate to disband, the Penitentes buried the medallion in the ground underneath the church. By burying the papal souvenir in the ground, the Brothers were following the longstanding Roman Catholic custom of burying sacred items, rather than throwing them away.

While the stories about the devotional life of Pius IX changed Torres's perception of the pope, the medallion and its placement changed the way Torres and other parishioners of Seco perceived themselves. Finding the image of Pius IX in this way, in the mud, legitimized the "deep wound in the history of the Catholic Church in northern New Mexico." After nearly one hundred and fifty years of living with the pope's decision to disband the Penitentes and fifty years since the 1947 reconciliation between the Penitentes and the archbishop of Santa Fe, the discovery of the medallion makes the wound tangible. Not only that, the placement of the medallion tells Torres and his pastor that their ancestors did not succumb to the pope's demands. The combination of the discovery of the medallion and the stories of Pius IX's devotions gave Torres the opportunity to offer the pope absolution for his actions without either side being humiliated.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF NEW MEXICO AND ARROYO SECO

Nestled between Carson National Forest and Taos Pueblo lands, Arroyo Seco is a small farming and ranching village at the foot of the Sangre de Cristo Mountain Range, just eight miles northeast of Taos. Before the Taos Ski Valley opened in 1955,<sup>3</sup> few people outside of New Mexico would have known about “Seco,” as the locals call it. Since then, thousands of skiers drive through Seco each winter when they want to ski on the slopes of the Taos Ski Valley. Nonetheless, well-known politicians, actors, actresses, and businesspeople continue to seek out Seco as a refuge from the world and as a place to live in privacy. Despite its popularity for skiing in the winter and river rafting in the spring, Seco remains an isolated village of the United States, just as it was an isolated village of Mexico and Spain in previous times.

Although little information is presently available, local historians believe that members of the Anasazi people (the ancestral Pueblo people), who were responsible for building Pueblo Bonito at Chaco Canyon, dwelt in the Seco-Taos area centuries before the region was explored by Francisco Vázquez de Coronado and claimed as a possession of Spain in 1540.<sup>4</sup> By the time that Capitan Hernando Alvarado of Coronado’s exploration team arrived in the area, the Taos Pueblo had already been built by the Tiwa-speaking Pueblo people.<sup>5</sup> The Taos area, however, remained relatively unsettled by Spanish explorers until Don Juan de Oñate officially established settlements in the region in 1598.

Between 1598, when Oñate firmly established settlements in northern New Mexico for the kingdom of Spain, and 1680, when the Pueblo Revolt led by Popé drove the Spanish missionaries and colonizers to retreat to El Paso del Norte (El Paso), the Spanish village of Taos was

<sup>3</sup> James C. Bull, *Out of Time: Arroyo Seco: An Historic Look at a 250 Year Old Northern New Mexico Village* (Taos, NM: Wolf Publishing Works, 1998), 44.

<sup>4</sup> Bull calls the Anasazi the First People of Arroyo Seco and suggests that wandering members from Chaco Canyon began to settle there in pit houses along the banks of the river. See Bull, *Out of Time*, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Coronado’s expedition into New Mexico was based on reports from Franciscan Friar Marcos de Niza, who with his Moorish slave Estévanico, previously explored the area in 1539. Estévanico was killed during the expedition, but de Niza returned to Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza in Mexico with reports of potential wealth in the northern Indian villages. For a concise summary of the history of New Mexico see Myra Ellen Jenkins and Albert H. Schroeder, *A Brief History of New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974).

established, probably around 1615. During that same period a Spanish land grant of nearly sixty thousand acres was given to Diego Lucero de Godoy.<sup>6</sup> The grant included the area of present-day Arroyo Seco. After the revolt of 1680, Godoy never returned to his lands in the Arroyo Seco region.

In 1692, the king of Spain reconquered the territory of New Mexico through the new leadership of Governor Don Diego de Vargas Zapata Luján Ponce de León y Contreras, better known as de Vargas. The process of rebuilding and refounding the Spanish settlements of New Mexico began in 1693 by de Vargas, seventy families, one hundred soldiers, and seventeen Franciscans. Despite de Vargas's success at quickly defeating a second Pueblo revolt in 1696, a number of Franciscans were killed. The successful "reconquest" of New Mexico by de Vargas and his forces was attributed, in part, to a small wooden statue of Our Lady of the Assumption which they believed was originally brought to New Mexico in 1624 and was rescued during the Pueblo revolt. In gratitude for her assistance, the statue was renamed La Conquistadora.<sup>7</sup>

The time between de Vargas's resettlement of New Mexico and Mexico's independence from Spain in 1821 was marked by ongoing conflicts among the various peoples inhabiting the region: the Spanish authorities, the Pueblo Indian peoples, the Nomadic Indian peoples, the Franciscan friars, and the diocesan bishops. While Spanish authorities and the Pueblo Indians had uneasy relationships, they were often unified in their defense against attacks from nomadic or migrating Apaches, Navajos, Utes, and Comanches. In the meantime, as the shrinking Franciscan community sought to expand their missionary activities into new territories in the West, the bishop of Durango, Mexico, sought to exercise spiritual authority in what was considered his jurisdiction. As the Franciscan population died off or migrated into new territory, diocesan priests were assigned to provide spiritual leadership.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Bull, *Out of Time*, 20.

<sup>7</sup> For a ritual analysis of the celebration of La Conquistadora in Santa Fe, see Ronald L. Grimes, *Symbol and Conquest: Public Ritual and Drama in Santa Fe* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> Diocesan priests, often referred to as "secular priests," differ in several ways from priests like the Franciscans, who are members of a religious community. Diocesan priests do not take vows of poverty, they are not required

The Taos area, which actually included much of northern New Mexico from Ranchos de Taos (just south of present day Taos) up into present-day southern Colorado, underwent tremendous change during the eighteenth century. After killing the Commanche leader Cuerno Verde, Juan Bautista de Anza established a treaty with the Commanches in 1786. Attacks by other nomadic peoples remained a threat, but the treaty of 1786 allowed for the population of Ranchos de Taos to expand northward up the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

Begun during the Spanish rule of New Mexico, and honored under Mexican rule, a system of bestowing grants of governmental lands to either heads of individual Spanish families or to entire communities was enacted. In Arroyo Seco, the land that was abandoned by Diego Lucero de Godoy after the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 was regranted to Don Antonio Martínez in 1716. Between one and two miles northeast of the present-day plaza of Arroyo Seco, are the ruins of a torreón (tower) positioned just high enough in the mountains to give visual access to the region. Recent studies by local archeologist Jeffrey L. Boyer, which dates the original construction of the torreón at 1745, supports local claims that the original center of Arroyo Seco was upstream before it eventually was relocated to its present location surrounding La Santísima Trinidad Church.<sup>9</sup>

Boyer believes that the torreón provided both a lookout for potential raids from Apaches and Commanches and a place of protection, should one be too far from home during an attack. Boyer also states that before the treaty with the Commanches the area of Arroyo Seco was populated by a few ranchers and farmers, scattered across the valley. After the treaty, however, Spanish settlers from Ranchos de Taos began to move northward into the Taos valley.

In addition, in 1821, when Mexico achieved its independence from Spain, the new leadership of the Republic of Mexico decided to permit foreign traders to enter into its territory and to do business. Traders from the United States began crossing Raton Pass and entering the newly established province of New Mexico, creating what quickly became the Santa Fe Trail. William Becknell, the first trader to seize the opportunity of new trade prospects, followed the Cimarron route to

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to live in community with other priests, and their immediate superior is the bishop or archbishop of the diocese. Typically, the ministry of the diocesan or secular priest is the local parish community.

<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey L. Boyer, phone interview by author, April 2, 2003.

Santa Fe. An offshoot of the trail brought traders, goods, and trappers to Taos. Consequently, the village experienced a moderate increase in economic activity and growth. The Taos Trade Fairs, where produce, dried goods, and handmade items had been traded for decades, grew to their height in the late 1700s, as the fairs expanded to include French and American trappers and traders and their wares.

Taos, however, wasn't directly on the Santa Fe Trail. When train travel arrived in New Mexico in the late nineteenth century it was bypassed again. The Sangre de Cristo Mountains made access to Taos Valley difficult. For this reason, it did not prosper to the extent that Santa Fe did. But, as traffic and commerce along the Santa Fe Trail increased and raids from Comanches and Apaches decreased, the number of settlements in New Mexico grew, including the area of Taos and Arroyo Seco.

Receiving new settlers from both the south and the north, Arroyo Seco saw a significant growth in population in the late 1700s and early 1800s. In 1745 the same tract of land that had been granted to Antonio Martínez was granted to Antonio Martín. Upon his death a dispute arose among his heirs. A settlement in 1826 awarded the land above the arroyo to the Sanches family. This property was subdivided among the members of the family, with a portion of it used for the Arroyo Seco plaza. The remaining land, south of the arroyo, was awarded to the Martín family, who sold it to the Taos Pueblo.

Also in 1826, permission from the Diocese of Durango, Mexico, was given for the construction of a church in the plaza of Arroyo Seco.<sup>10</sup> In that same year, Padre Antonio José Martínez became the pastor of Taos, which included not only Taos, but also the outlying areas, including Arroyo Seco. Completed in 1834, La Santísima Trinidad Church was built, reportedly, by the Hermanos of Seco. San Antonio de Padua church in Valdez, which also belonged to the Taos parish at that period and presently is one of the other churches in Holy Trinity Parish, was completed in 1826, and was consecrated in 1842. Although

<sup>10</sup> According to the archives of the Archdiocese of Durango, Bishop Juan Francisco Castañiza Larrea y Gonzalez de Agüero was the ordinary from 1816–1825. Bishop José Antonio Laureano de Zubiría y Escalante wasn't appointed until 1831, which would suggest that although approval was given to build a church in Arroyo Seco (under the auspices of the parish of Taos), there was limited oversight of the activities of these small village communities. Zubiría served as the ordinary of Durango until his death in 1863.

there is no extant evidence for the consecration of the church in Seco, former pastor Rev. Vincent Chávez believes that La Santísima Trinidad was consecrated by Zubiría during the same trip in which the church in Valdez was consecrated.

At the same time that the Hermanos were building the church in Arroyo Seco, their pastor, Padre Martínez was writing to Bishop Zubiría about the presence of La Hermandad de la Sangre de Cristo (the Brotherhood of the Blood of Christ) in his parish. In February 1833, Martínez wrote,

In the time that I have had in my charge the spiritual administration of this parish [San Gerónimo de Taos], there has been a congregation of men in a Brotherhood of the Blood of Christ, who make exercises of penance during the Lenten seasons principally on Fridays, all of Holy Week, Fridays from this time until Pentecost, and other days of such significance in the year. These exercises consist of dragging wooden crosses, whipping themselves with scourges, that they have for the purpose, piercing their backs with sharp stones or flints until the blood flows; and other rigorous means such as the following: They walk barefoot, even over the snows, and [illegible]; naked, with only certain coverings over their private parts, or in white short trousers, and neckerchiefs over their faces in order not to be recognized, and yet to be able to see. In the said days of Lent and all those of Holy Week, they do this everywhere by day, but in the processions of Holy Week, they have the custom of marching in front of the images in the manner described, so that they cause a great spectacle to the bystanders. They say that thus it has been granted to them from time immemorial.

For the present: I have suspended their public activity and have permitted them only to do it at night and during the day in solitary places, because it makes me very uneasy, the manner in which they have done it until now, and more so since their number has increased. Also it has scattered discord among them and other consequences that cause scandal. So in the meantime I am consulting your Lordship as to what I should prescribe for them in this case: whether they should continue, be modified or simply just cease.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> William Wroth, *Images of Penance, Images of Mercy: Southwestern Santos in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 40. For the Spanish text of Martínez's letter, Zubiría's response, and a report from Zubiría's visit in April 1833, see 172–73. (Wroth translates the first paragraph on page 40 of his text. I have translated the second paragraph from the

Although we know that the Hermanos were active in Seco during the time that Martínez was pastor, there is no evidence that he was writing to Zubiría about the Hermanos of Seco. The territory of the Taos parish was expansive and its mission churches were many. Having become their pastor in 1826, however, we can be confident that Martínez would have been familiar with the Hermanos of Seco and their activities there.

In his response to Martínez, Bishop Zubiría affirmed the pastor's decision to limit the Hermanos' penitential activities. Both the bishop and the pastor focused on the fact that the acts were done publicly and that they were excessive. According to Zubiría, such excessiveness is harmful to both the body and the soul.<sup>12</sup> In April 1833, he wrote, "in regard to which the best way to please Him is to listen to and docilely obey the voice of their pastors, being content for now with doing penances in the privacy of the church, always with moderation."<sup>13</sup> A few months later Zubiría visited New Mexico and published a special letter in which he reiterated his position that although the Hermandad de Penitentes had existed for some time and that performing private acts of penance in moderation could be spiritually beneficial, he prohibited all organized, public, penitential activities of the Brotherhood.<sup>14</sup> In fact, Zubiría went even further in this letter. He prohibited the construction of any building or place where the Brothers could gather for activities or where they could store the large wood crosses that they used for penance. At the end of his pastoral visitation to New Mexico in October 1833, Zubiría published a pastoral letter in which he stated once again his concern with "esas hermandades de penitencia ó más bien de carnicería,"<sup>15</sup> these brotherhoods of penance or better, of butchery.

Despite Zubiría's pronouncements in 1833, he found the Hermandad continuing their practices of public penance in 1845, when he returned for a second pastoral visit. In response, the bishop had his letter of 1833 read again in the parishes of New Mexico. There is no record of Zubiría addressing the subject again when he returned for his third

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Spanish on pages 172–73.) The original letters are held by the archives of the Diocese of Durango.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>14</sup> Marta Weigle, *Brothers of Light: Brothers of Blood: The Penitentes of the Southwest* (Santa Fe, NM: Ancient City Press, 1976), 195–96.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 196.

(and final) pastoral visit to New Mexico in 1850. By that time New Mexico had become a possession of the United States, and Zubiría was more concerned with the ways in which the Roman Catholic faith of these communities could be jeopardized by the invasion of nonbelievers.

While Zubiría was making his third pastoral visitation in New Mexico, the pope in Rome, at the request of the Provincial Council of Baltimore, was creating a new vicariate for the United States' newly acquired territory of New Mexico.<sup>16</sup> Jean Baptiste Lamy, who was born in France but working in Covington, Kentucky, was named the new vicar. Arriving in August of 1851, Lamy took up his role of spiritual leader of the Vicariate Apostolic of New Mexico. Shortly thereafter, perhaps as early as 1853, Lamy began publishing sets of rules for the Brotherhood of Penance.<sup>17</sup> Concerning Lamy's rules of 1856, Marta Weigle writes, "These rules have three main thrusts: regulation of the Confraternity by the priests and prelate, specifications of the responsibilities of the Hermano Mayor and other officers of the Brotherhood, and definition of membership procedures, including the rights and duties of the full-fledged Brothers."<sup>18</sup> In 1857 Lamy reaffirmed his previously published rules and promulgated five more rules for the Penitentes, which primarily addressed issues of membership.

Among the rules of 1856 and 1857, several of them need to be highlighted here. In rules 9 and 10 of 1856, Lamy situated the Hermanos within the hierarchy of the Roman church by making it clear that the members of the Hermandad were to be obedient to the bishop of the diocese, at that moment Lamy, and to the pastor of the parish in which their particular Morada was located. This obedience was to be performed without any complaining and with the awareness that the

<sup>16</sup> Thomas J. Steele, ed. and trans., *Archbishop Lamy: In His Own Words* (Albuquerque, NM: LPD Press, 2000), 9–10.

<sup>17</sup> Weigle reports that the earliest set of rules, dated February 17, 1853, which Chávez noted were in the archives of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, are no longer there. See Alex M. Darley, *The Passionists of the Southwest or the Holy Brotherhood: A Revelation of the "Penitentes"* (1893; repr., Glorieta, NM: Rio Grande Press, 1968) for a copy of "The Constitution," dated February 17, 1860, which Weigle believes resembles closely the 1853 document. For the 1856 edition of Lamy's rules and the five additional rules that he published in 1857, see Weigle, *Brothers of Light*, 201–6.

<sup>18</sup> Weigle, *Brothers of Light*, 54.

bishop enjoyed the freedom to move their pastor to another parish at any time. Just as the Brothers were to be accountable and obedient to their pastor, rule 10 stated, their pastor was to be accountable and obedient to the bishop.

Rule 3 of 1856, as it is recorded by Weigle, states:

All brothers must keep secret all matters that may be transacted at the meetings to be had and the President [Hermano Mayor] shall himself or through another notify the parish Priest in order that he may attend and be present at all meetings, if he so desires. If any one of the brothers should break the secrets he shall be severely reprimanded according to the disposition of the President (Hermano Mayor) and councellers and if he after being admonished should insist, he shall be expelled from the brotherhood.<sup>19</sup>

Unlike Zubiría, who mandated that the Hermanos do their acts of penance in the *privacy* of the church or their homes, Lamy placed all the proceedings of the Brotherhood under the rule of *secrecy*. Apart from the membership, only their priests and their bishop were permitted to know the details of their activities. In the rules that Lamy added in 1857, he stated that their acts of penance, “must be done, as hidden as possible, without giving scandal, to the rest of the faithful according to the spirit of the Church and without doing it with vain-glory.”<sup>20</sup>

Concerning the issue of membership, Lamy declared in rules 4 and 5 of 1856 and rule 3 of 1857 that the Hermano Mayor (the head Penitente of the Morada) was to screen candidates for membership closely. Recent criminals or those guilty of “vices” were not to be welcomed into the Brotherhood. More particularly, “murderers, adulterers and thieves and other men, who on account of their former habits”<sup>21</sup> were also prohibited from membership.

Whatever Lamy’s opinion of these Brotherhoods of Penance, he took a very different position with them than did his predecessor Zubiría. Instead of condemning them as brotherhoods of butchery, he issued rules stating clearly that the members of the brotherhoods must be

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 201–2. While I’m not aware of anyone being expelled from the Brotherhood on account of breaking the rule of secrecy (rule 3), I am aware of a case in 2004, in which an Hermano was expelled for breaking rule 9, the rule demanding respect and obedience to the archbishop and the Mesa Directiva.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

obedient to him (rule 9), and must maintain secrecy concerning all the practices and activities of the Brotherhood. While admitting the importance of performing moderate acts of penance in private, Zubiría had sought to disband the Brotherhood as a penitential organization by prohibiting them from assembling publicly and by forbidding local churches from offering them space to meet or even to store their implements of penance. As noted above, Zubiría's approach was not successful.

Lamy, instead, inserted the Brotherhood into the hierarchical structure of the church, which allowed them to continue within a context of strict accountability to and close scrutiny by their pastors and the bishop. Having situated the Hermandad within the larger institution in this way he began imposing restrictions on its membership.<sup>22</sup>

In 1875, the Diocese of Santa Fe was elevated to an archdiocese. In July 1885, Lamy retired and Jean Baptiste Salpointe was named the new archbishop of Santa Fe. Salpointe arrived at his position of archbishop with over twenty-five years of experience working in the churches of the Southwest, first in Santa Fe and Mora, New Mexico, and later in Tucson, Arizona. Within two months of becoming the new spiritual leader of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, Salpointe issued rules concerning the Hermandad and additional rules pertaining to all Catholic associations that already existed within the archdiocese or that would be newly established. Following Pope Leo XIII's interest to establish and foster Catholic lay associations that would be faithful to the church, Salpointe sought to revive the Third Order of St. Francis, originally called the Order of Penance.<sup>23</sup> Hoping both to follow the di-

<sup>22</sup> Weigle notes that in the archives of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe there is also a letter from Martínez to Lamy, dated November 27, 1856, in which the pastor of Taos recalls that Lamy had previously related the Holy Father's order to disband such fraternities as the Penitentes. This is entirely possible, since Pius IX (1846–1878) published directives in 1846, 1849, and 1854 that all secret societies should be disbanded, and Lamy traveled to Rome in early 1854. Unfortunately, there is no textual evidence of Lamy's remarks about such extinguishing of the fraternity beyond the letter from Padre Martínez.

<sup>23</sup> The Third Order of St. Francis first began as a way for lay Roman Catholics to follow a life of penance and charity while continuing to honor their social and family commitments. Today they are known as Tertiaries or the Secular Franciscan Order. See Fray Angélico Chávez, *My Penitente Land: Reflections on Spanish New Mexico* (Santa Fe, NM: Museum of Santa Fe Press, 1974), 107–9.

rectives of the pope and to build on the history of Franciscan presence in New Mexico, Salpointe encouraged Roman Catholics to pursue the practice of penance and obedience by joining the Third Order.

In particular, in 1886 Salpointe encouraged the leaders of the *Hermandad de Nuestro Padre Jesús* to distribute the rules of the Third Order so that they could see for themselves that the penitential practices of the *Hermandad* came directly from St. Francis's Order of Penance.<sup>24</sup> Salpointe, however, went even further. He asserted that the Brothers "must *return* to her [the Third Order of St. Francis], if they wish to obtain the Indulgences which have been granted to the Order by the Supreme Pontiff."<sup>25</sup> Salpointe concluded his statement, which was published in the diocesan Catholic newspaper *La Revista Católica*, by stating that he was dispensing them from the penitential practices of the Brotherhood that were not included in the practices of the Third Order and, therefore, prohibiting the flagellation and the dragging of wooden crosses that they had been practicing heretofore in public. In 1889 Salpointe repeated his call for the Brothers to dissolve the *Hermandad* and to become members of the Franciscan Third Order. Despite Salpointe's insistence that the *Hermandad* *return* not only to its Franciscan roots, but also to its official position within the hierarchical structure of the Roman Catholic Church, the Brothers continued to perform their penitential practices and refused to disband.

Recent scholarship on the history of the Penitente Brotherhood in New Mexico claims that Salpointe's decision to create a liaison between the Third Order of St. Francis and the Penitentes was an act of historical construction. Alberto López Pulido argues that Salpointe created the link between the two organizations as a way to gain control over the Brotherhood in the hopes that this would silence its members.<sup>26</sup> Supporting this claim is Salpointe's 1886 letter to the Brotherhood in which he tells pastors to refrain from celebrating Mass in the *Morada* and to withhold the sacraments from members of the Brotherhood if they refused to submit to the new Third Order rules.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> For the entire text of Salpointe's 1886 comments on the Third Order of St. Francis and the *Hermandad*, see Weigle, *Brothers of Light*, 207–8.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* Translation and emphasis mine.

<sup>26</sup> Alberto López Pulido, *The Sacred World of the Penitentes* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 48–51.

<sup>27</sup> Weigle, *Brothers of Light*, 207–8. Also, for the most recent review of the different theories about the origins of the Brotherhood, including the possibility

From the time of his installation as Archbishop of Santa Fe in 1885 until he stepped down in 1894, Salpointe, like his predecessor Lamy, sought to bring the Hermandad under the authority of the priests, bishops, and the pope. The Brothers, however, although willing to abide by the rules that Salpointe had originally published in 1885, resisted the archbishop's actions to subsume the Hermandad into the Third Order of St. Francis.<sup>28</sup> Weigle notes that his lack of influence over the Brothers might have been what provoked Salpointe to write in 1892, "not only do we not progress, but we are perceptibly retrogressing year by year, with the passing of time."<sup>29</sup>

After Salpointe's unsuccessful attempts to transform and dissolve the Penitente Brotherhood into the Third Order of St. Francis, the policies of his successors in the last part of the nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth century could be described as noninterfering. Although some additional rules were supposedly issued, the archbishops of New Mexico during this period continued to denounce public acts of penance and to threaten offenders with denial of the sacraments and the impossibility of becoming godparents. Enforcement of these policies, however, was left to the parish priests.

These same years, 1894–1947, for the Brotherhood in New Mexico were also characterized by an increase in attention from Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregationalist, and Baptist ministers and their communities who were moving into the new U.S. Territory and, later, the new State of New Mexico (1912). Perhaps the most well known among them was Rev. Alex M. Darley, who titled himself the "apostle of the Colorado Mexicans" on the title page of his book, *The Passionists of the Southwest, or the Holy Brotherhood: A Revelation of the 'Penitentes'*.<sup>30</sup> Darley found the practices of the Penitente Brotherhood as the perfect platform from which he could articulate his critiques against the Roman Catholic Church. In his book, Darley blames the Roman

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of their link to the Third Order of St. Francis, see Michael P. Carroll, *The Penitente Brotherhood: Patriarchy and Hispano-Catholicism in New Mexico* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 2002), 27–35.

<sup>28</sup> For more details of the ongoing struggles between the Hermandad and Salpointe over approving rules for the Brotherhood, see Weigle, *Brothers of Light*, 57–63.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>30</sup> Darley, *The Passionists of the Southwest*.

Church of misleading its membership through the propagation of penitential practices:

These serious seekers, by a false road, for salvation, have not been forgotten of God, ever on the watch for the sincere, even though ignorant and, therefore, false seeker for light. . . . The author desires to say, in spite of false Jesuit denunciation of them, that the members represent the sincerest followers of “Her—drunk with the blood of the saints.” Papacy and Penance are a loyally married pair, and salvation sought by the latter’s hard road has been, we believe, the aim of the majority of the old-time members. God’s answer in the conversion of so many of them seems to prove it. Sad it is, that they knew not the “free salvation” route sooner, and sadder it is that so few care whether they are saved or not. May that only true Penitente,—Jesus Christ—reveal Himself soon, as the last to suffer for sin unto salvation.<sup>31</sup>

Darley did convince some Penitentes to disassociate with the Brotherhood. How many he converted is not known. From those he did convert, however, Darley was able to obtain copies of the Penitente rules and specific details concerning their penitential practices. Darley published his discoveries with the hope that more members of the Hermandad would be inspired to abandon both the Roman Church and the Penitente Brotherhood.

Thanks both to the ongoing pressure by the archbishops of Santa Fe to keep Penitente activities private and secret and to the increased negative publicity of Protestant commentators such as Darley, the Penitente Brotherhood increased the level of secrecy surrounding its membership and its activities. Consequently, determining an accurate estimate of Penitente membership has been impossible. Even after extensive research into population studies and archival materials, Weigle states, “While the Brotherhood was by no means extinct then [two to three thousand in 1960], it had clearly declined dramatically from the nineteenth-century estimates of 85–95 percent of the entire Hispanic male populace.”<sup>32</sup>

In addition, the increased secrecy served to strengthen suspicions and accusations that some of the Moradas were seeking to exert

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>32</sup> Weigle, *Brothers of Light*, 98.

political influence over government officials and judicial proceedings.<sup>33</sup> The negative, public image of the Brotherhood that these charges created, regardless of their veracity, inhibited developing more open dialogue between the Brothers and church leaders during the first half of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, as Weigle notes, the Roman Church did not accuse the Brotherhood of becoming a secret society in the same way it branded the Masons.

At the same time, within the Brotherhood there was a growing number of members, led by Don Miguel Archibeque, interested in organizing the Moradas in New Mexico and southern Colorado into one association and affecting a “reconciliation” with the Catholic Church.<sup>34</sup> This process began during the time when Rudolph Aloysius Gerken was the archbishop of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe (1933–1943), but didn’t come to fruition until the time that Edwin Vincent Byrne was leading the archdiocese (1943–1963). In 1943, Archibeque approached the new archbishop about reconciling the Hermandad with the church. Amenable to Archibeque’s invitation, Archbishop Byrne, in 1946, approved a new set of rules for the Hermandad with the stipulation that they be accepted unanimously by all of the Moradas. Although Archibeque was not able to obtain unanimous approval, Byrne issued a statement in early 1947 announcing the creation of the Archbishop’s Supreme Council, with Archibeque named as the first Hermano Supremo Arzobispal.

The archbishop’s statement of 1947 included a declaration with four parts. The first sought to clarify the official status of the Brotherhood, saying, “That the Association of Hermanos de Nuestro Señor Jesús Nazareno is not a fanatical sect apart from the church, as some seem to think, but an association of Catholic men united together in love for the passion and death of our Blessed Lord and Saviour.”<sup>35</sup> Second, he defended the Brothers’ practice of “corporal and spiritual penance,” maintaining that it was mandated by Jesus himself as a “necessity” for salvation and that the Hermandad “descended from those Tertiaries founded here by the Franciscans in centuries gone by.”<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> For an exploration of Penitente political involvement in New Mexico, see Weigle, “Secular Aspects of the Territorial Period,” in *Brothers of Light*.

<sup>34</sup> “Reconciliation” is the word that Weigle uses to describe what the Brothers sought with the Catholic Church. See Weigle, *Brothers of Light*, 106.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

In the third part of his declaration, Byrne defined the nature of the Hermanos' penitential activities as being rid of excesses, and as being neither sadistic nor masochistic. Nonetheless, the archbishop affirmed the position of previous archbishops that their penitential practices must be done in moderation and in private, so as to avoid scandal and pride. He added, though, that outsiders must respect the privacy of the Hermanos and should not intrude on their activities.

In the fourth and last part of his 1947 statement and declaration, Byrne reminded the Penitentes, "That we have the authority and power to suppress this association, just as we can and must suppress any other pious association in the church which goes counter to, or exceeds, the laws of God and His church, or the dictates of reason. But if the Brethren proceed with moderation and privately and under our supervision, meanwhile giving a good example to all as Catholics and citizens, they have our blessing and protection."<sup>37</sup>

Archbishop Byrne's official recognition and approval of the Penitente Brotherhood in 1947 changed the relationship between the Hermanos and church officials. Since 1833, when Padre Martínez of Taos and Bishop Zubiría of Durango voiced their disapproval of the public penitential practices of the Hermandad, the activities of the Brothers had been under close scrutiny. When Roman Catholic officials couldn't disband the Brotherhood or reshape it into the Third Order of St. Francis, they sought vigorously to remove the penitential activities from the public eye. The secretiveness that the Roman officials prescribed made the Brotherhood even more enticing and mysterious to Protestant missionaries, investigative reporters, and curious tourists.<sup>38</sup> After surviving 114 years of dissension between the Hermandad and church officials, the Brothers not only achieved official church approbation but also initiated and successfully established a council through

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 208. Originally in *Santa Fe New Mexican*, January 29, 1947.

<sup>38</sup> In 1936 Carl N. Taylor, a journalist for *Today Magazine*, was murdered in New Mexico. Taylor was doing research on the Penitentes and had reportedly taken pictures of the Brothers while they were flagellating themselves. Although the case was never solved, the Penitentes became associated with the murder. In 1937 Roland Price directed a movie called *The Lash of the Penitentes*, in which he claims to tell the story of Taylor's murder by the Penitentes in documentary style. For more details, see Pulido, *The Sacred World*, 51–53; and Weigle, *Brothers of Light*, 105–10.

which the Hermanos and the archdiocesan administrators would have regular contact.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The history of the Penitentes of northern New Mexico and southern Colorado is a complicated one—one that surely cannot be completely captured in a few pages. Furthermore, it continues into the present day. As the story of the copper medallion indicates, the Penitentes themselves are struggling to renarrate a past that authorizes their evolving present. Numerous scholars have sought to establish the origins of the Penitente Brotherhood, only to admit in the end that we do not know—and are not likely to ever know the precise origins of the Hermandad. In chapter 4 we return to this question about the origins of the Brotherhood, but by examining the way in which Larry constructs their story and why that's important to them.

My intention here is not to take one more look at all the evidence available and to draw new conclusions about how and why the European settlers in New Mexico began performing penitential practices. I will leave those questions for historians to pursue. Should we ever discover more precise details about the origin and development of these penitential practices in New Mexico, our questions about the effects of these practices on the participants would remain. What we do know and what we have presented in this chapter is that the Hermandad in this area has survived for nearly two hundred years, despite the criticisms of religious leaders, both Roman Catholic and Protestant. Even papal orders have not succeeded in disbanding the Hermandad.

Two observations are worth noting here. The first relates to the noticeable increase of secrecy that has come to surround Penitente practices. That secrecy has developed for several reasons. The primary reason is that the bishops and archbishops of the area have mandated the Brothers keep their practices secret. As we saw in this chapter, making the practices private was not sufficient. Beginning with Lamy and continuing to the present day, one of the responsibilities of the Hermandad is to “observe secrecy on activities concerning Hermano matters.”<sup>39</sup> Equally significant, the Penitentes and their activities have received substantial and widespread attention over the past decades by church leaders, historians, sociologists, artists, religion scholars,

<sup>39</sup> Taken directly from “Responsibilities of the Hermandad,” distributed by the archbishop for Lent 2001.

and investigative reporters. A considerable amount of that attention has been negative and has resulted in the Brothers wanting to keep certain aspects of their spiritual practices secret, or at least private. While understandable, this veil of secrecy has also made access to the Brotherhood nearly impossible for those sympathetic to their way of life. We should also note that it's ironic that the Roman Catholic bishops were prescribing secrecy at the same time they were concerned with secret societies.

The second thing we should highlight here is Archbishop Lamy's 1856 directive to screen candidates for membership in the Brotherhood. Lamy decreed that anyone who was a recent criminal or who was guilty of "vices" was prohibited from membership. If the intention of the Hermandad is to do penance for personal sins and the sins of others, this decree appears out of place. Unless, of course, there are differences in the way their practices are viewed within the context of the spiritual life. We return to this topic in the last chapter of this work.

As noted in this chapter, we have some sense of the historical events that have shaped the Penitentes and their practices over the years. This book explores how the practices of the Penitentes have shaped them. While issues of access continue to exist, the Penitentes promise to be powerful conversation partners for theologians wishing to explore how spiritual practices shape their practitioners and their communities.

The Morada in Arroyo Seco is presently one of the most active within the Brotherhood and one of the least written about in Penitente scholarly literature. In this chapter I sought to introduce the reader not only to the Hermandad and its history, but also to the Penitentes of Seco. My intention is to document the activities of the Brotherhood in Seco. Another is to hear some of the people who participate in the penitential rituals and to understand more fully their experiences. In the following chapters, we will pursue our goal of documentation, adding to the amount of primary materials available for future research, and we will enter into conversation with some of the participants. In chapter 2 we'll take a closer look at the variety of practices that the Penitentes perform during Holy Week.