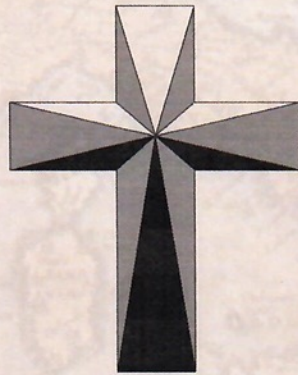


THE PENITENTES

by ISAAC L. UDELL



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FORWARD

I was very young when my father completed the Penitentes series. It wasn't until years later that I realized the significance of what he contributed to the New Mexican people and the religious community in general. I am continuously impressed and awed by my father's work as well as those to whom I share the paintings with. These paintings are truly a treasure to New Mexico and especially to those who share the Penitentes experience.

FARRELL L. UDELL

Introduction

The paintings which appear in this booklet are the product of the artist's desire to depict a phase of American culture with which he has deep sympathy and great familiarity. Mr. Udell holds the degree B.A. from the University of Colorado and is now a student in the University's Department of Fine Arts, working toward his Master's degree. While most of the work indicated here was done prior to his coming to the University, we are extremely gratified to have some part in his development as a painter. It is to be hoped that these paintings will show to those who see them the vigor and feeling of the artist and that they will eventually repose permanently in the land from which they came and to which they belong.

/s/ ROBERT L. STEARNS
President, University of Colorado

UDELL

From among a group of more or less average students at the University of Colorado, last summer, a student approached me who was markedly un-average. That was Udell.

Middle-aged, rather impressive in his speech and bearing, he might have been one of the professors in the University, a doctor, perhaps—even a downtown business man.

His request was rather an unusual one: whether it would be acceptable to me if he were to work away from the class. He seemed a little reluctant even to bring his paintings in for criticism, obviously hoping that I would make a trip to his studio. That I had no intention of doing.

Ultimately he brought some paintings. At first viewing, I found them curiously uneven. Two distinct directions were there: the first, it seemed, was intuitive, self taught; the latter direction reflected the most recent trends in art teaching.

I began to be curious about Udell. What was his background? What was stirring in him, a man well past the dabbling age, to make art seem so important a career?

He told me something of himself. He was married and had five children. He had once studied medicine, given it up and gone to live among the Spanish-American Penitentes of New Mexico. Working under the title of Chiropractor, he had mended bones, prescribed diet, delivered some seventeen hundred babies, had been accepted by the local hospitals, and had generally ministered to the sick—all without benefit of sheepskin.

In our long talk, Udell made constant reference to the Penitentes. A wistful, a (could you call it maternal?) devoted and entirely authoritative account of their life and habits ran through his conversation.

He said that he had made many paintings about the Penitentes. Would I care to see them? This time I accepted.

I was quite unprepared for the impact of the Penitente paintings. Udell brought them out in the sequence of the Penitente ritual, accompanying the showing with a richly detailed monologue about the life and practices of these self-martyred people.

Here all division of personality disappeared. The technique was not good, but it was also not important. The burning objective here was to tell the story of a people. And despite the fact that he had not painted before, the great compassion, the urgency of the painter came through and was the dominating factor of the paintings. In every area of the canvasses one recognized the authority of the person who is no sightseer, but a careful student and participant.

It was Udell who remarked to me that he thought he was glad to have painted these canvasses before he had had formal training of any sort.

A second viewing of the paintings did not diminish their power. But an uneasy question did arise—whether Udell's subsequent art training had been harmful to him. Has the deviation into method and manner diminished his intensity?

Is the apparent dissipation of feeling and conviction merely temporary, and will he ultimately emerge from formal art training a better painter?

I would answer all this with an “if”, that is, if he can somehow bring to the mastery of the craft of painting the same sort of drive, the singleness of purpose that impelled his first paintings, then I think that he may emerge a truly monumental painter.

At present his problem is a difficult one: first he must achieve a return to that original purpose, i.e., the realizing in paint of a profound sympathy—perhaps he must return to its actual source. Then he must decide, with more objectivity than can rightly be expected of anyone, just how much of his training to keep and improve, and what to weed out as tricky and entirely unrelated to his purposes.

Udell is, emotionally, at least, still strongly identified with his Penitente sources. The thing that would be right for him would be a cementing of that identity by some sort of regional acknowledgement, by patronage or by any other sort of recognition that would carry with it a modicum of security. No one could predict in advance either a van Gogh or a Gauguin, but it would be an honorable and distinguished boast on the part of any community (or State, or Parish) to be able to say, “We recognize there a talent in the making and gave it what we could in encouragement and support.”

Whatever his future performance, these Penitente paintings of Udell’s stand on their own feet as a great and moving epic. However weak they may be technically—and they are that—I prefer them a thousand-fold to the technically glib and humanly empty work which we see in such profusion today.

/s/ BEN SHAHN



ISAAC L. UDELL
1903-1985

Origin of Penitentes

By the beginning of the sixteenth century all of Europe enjoyed a peculiar unity under the name of Christendom. Most peoples owed allegiance and obedience to church and empire. The church served the spiritual needs of the people but it also exercised vast political power. Men were born, lived, and died in the ritual of the church. Religion was an all-powerful influence in the mind and action of the time. Not the least of the churches' responsibilities was education. One phase of education which reached the masses was carried on by the Franciscan Friars, a mendicant order, which went from home to home telling the stories of the lives of the Saints. In this way the Saints came very close to the people and were integrated into their daily lives.

These Mendicant Franciscan Friars were by papal charter known as the Third Order of Saint Francis. And it was these Friars who most often accompanied Spain's gentlemen explorers and men of arms on their expeditions. So it was that these Franciscan Friars accompanied Coronado and his colonists to the New World and to that region which is now New Mexico. Coronado and his men and Friars with some six hundred colonists arrived at San Juan, an Indian Pueblo on the Rio Grande river about mid-way between the modern towns of Taos and Santa Fe. Coronado, facing winter without adequate food or shelter for his band, asked self-flagellation of his followers with a two-fold purpose. First, as a form of thanksgiving for having arrived this far on his journey safely and, secondly, as a form of supplication to the Deity to aid and provide for them in this wild new land.

Once the colonists were established Coronado was ready to explore farther inland and eventually return home. Some of the Friars accompanied him, some went in search of new souls to convert, many were killed by hostile Indians. The eventual result was that the colonists were at last left without benefit of clergy. In this way these men who could not conceive of life without the church, not being able to celebrate the Mass, found it necessary to make use of that phase of religious legend they did know. They had learned of the lives of the Saints and of the Passion of Christ from the Franciscan Friars. These things they understood and could emulate. Hence it may be said that Los Hermanos Penitentes derive indirectly, if not authoritatively, from the Third Order of Saint Francis. The Third Order having been known as a penitente order and described as a vast lay confraternity—practicing penance and charity among the poor.

Los Hermanos Penitentes, The Penitent Brothers or simply Penitentes as the members of the brotherhood are commonly referred to, are known in modern times to the southwestern area of the United States. Their practices are a fragment of another and medieval civilization which has survived as the native in this rather stark and brooding land has clung uninterruptedly to his religious heritage to sustain himself. The ordeal of self-flagellation is nearly as old as man. There is nothing new in its use as atonement for sin. At one time in history it was a privilege permitted only martyrs and godly men, even kings.

The brotherhood as it exists today, with many modifications and variations reenacts the Passion of Christ each year during the days of Lent.

The members of the brotherhood who practice the ritual today are neither a segregated clan nor class. They are the descendents of the Spanish colonists who brought a culture to the New World at a time when Spain was at the height of her wealth and power and glory. Today they are referred to as Spanish-American and their culture is the Spanish-American culture of the great southwest. They are normal men who go about their daily businesses as ranchers, sheepmen, storekeepers, mechanics, clerks, teachers, etc. They live common everyday existences. Only during Lent, a time of penance and atonement for wrongdoing are they in evidence as Los Hermanos Penitentes. Their processions were once quite public but as the Anglo came, and especially with the advent of the "touring American Public" they suffered many indignities from lack of sympathy and understanding. Over the years they have withdrawn more and more into the secrecy of the land. Time, was, too, when the church frowned upon the brotherhood and ex-communication as the penalty for openly avowing membership. However, in 1947, by Papal decree, they (being all Catholics) were accepted into the church, as Penitentes, with the stipulation that their practice become less severe. Their membership is growing smaller and smaller. Soon Los Hermanos, in all save the deep religious spirit which first moved them will pass into history as another chapter of the great and varied American scene.

HOW THE PENITENTES CAME TO BE PAINTED

The years I spent in New Mexico were formative, early adult years. After having spent a childhood in a constant state of "moving" from one place to another, over the length and breadth of the United States, New Mexico seemed the land of my home. There I felt that I "belonged". I found a certain peace, security, and vital interest. I liked the people. They seemed a part of what I sought. I lived and worked with and among them. The land and the people became a part of me, a rich and fulfilling part. New Mexico was my home, the first place as such that I could claim as mine.

When circumstance removed me from New Mexico I lived with a terrific and terrifying nostalgia. The land was within me but I was without the land. My compromise was logical. I must create things of the land to keep with me as tangible evidence that *it did exist*.

I wrote, for my own satisfaction, of the land and people. I carved rough Santos for my walls. I made crude drawings of the life there. These things, however, did not seem a large enough gift to return to the land which had given so much to me. It was then, with a certain doubt in my own ability but with a strong conviction that it should be done, that I began the series of Penitente paintings. I felt that represented in this segment of faith was the one constant which had influenced the minds and culture of a goodly portion of the Southwest. Aside from the Indian culture it was the one uninterrupted thread of heritage and it was the land. The paintings were a fragment of life there which I could keep within my grasp.

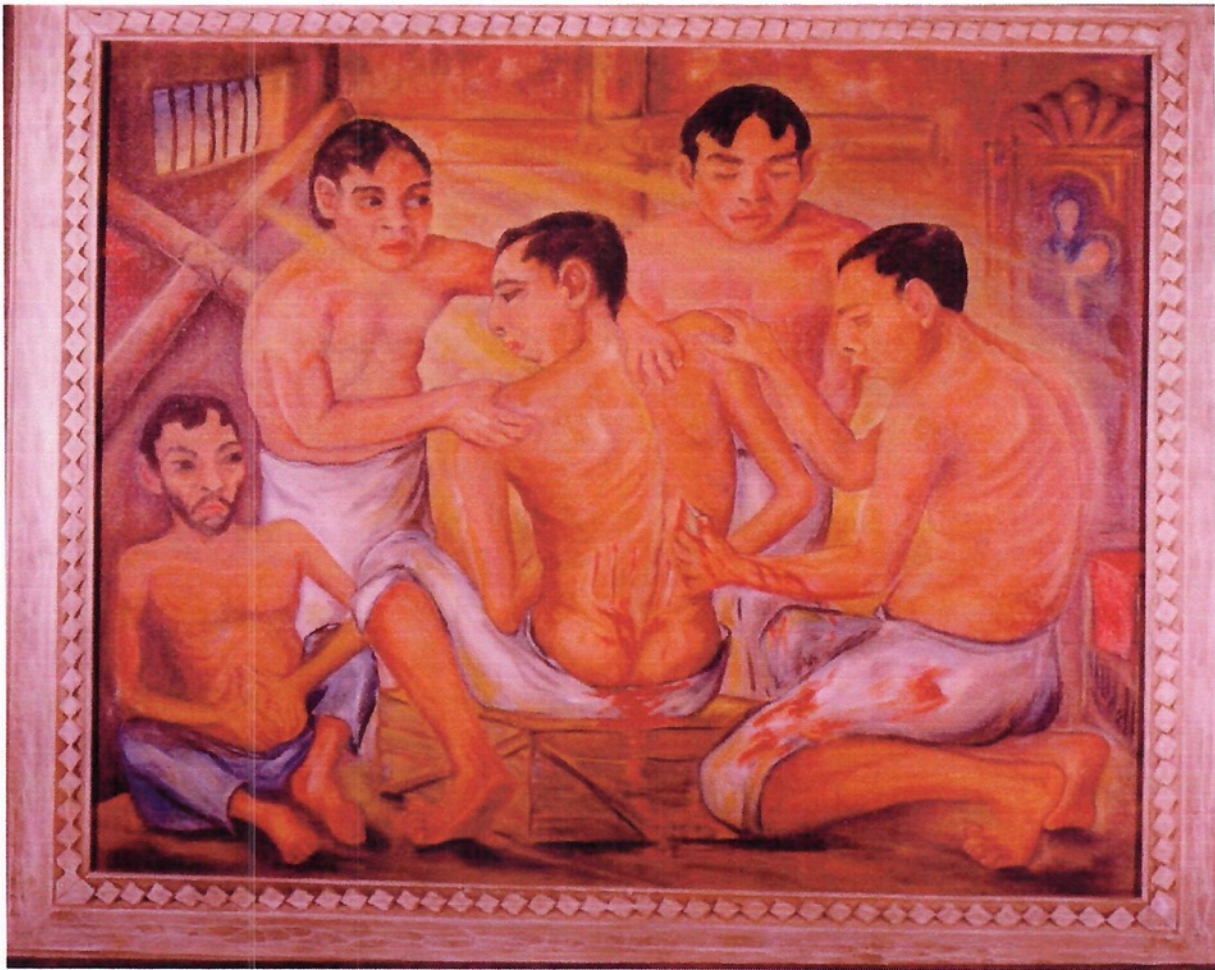
Some thirteen or fourteen months went into the paintings. A few people saw them in progress and were more than interested. Gradually and over a period of some ten years, more and more people have come to see the paintings and to acquire first hand information of Los Hermanos Penitentes. I have been asked to write articles, research papers, and to lecture on the subject. All of which I have kept to a minimum. But at last I have been persuaded that my experience should be shared.

In this first publication of a work which was originally not intended for publication, I can ask only, at the expense of appearing sentimental, that the story of Penitent Brotherhood, be received with understanding charity and humane kindness in return for a knowledge of a people whose heritage is rich in bravery and daring, whose faith is deep and unquestioning, and whose conviction is sure.

No claim is made for the artistic accomplishment in the paintings. If they merit claim as an historical documentation of a phase of Americana, if they give pleasure and insight to the observer (without any sense of exploitation of things sacred) then a gift will have been returned to a land and people I cherish, and whose memory is a part of my daily life.

I. L. UDELL

Boulder, Colorado August, 1950



Official Seal of the Order

The seal of the order is cut upon the back of the aspiring initiate. The seal consists of three cuts on each side of the spine in the region of the kidney and is then usually “cross-hatched” leaving scars which crudely resemble crosses. This rite is usually performed by the *Hermano Major*, the chief brother, or by the *Sangrador*, the blood-letter. Although the movements of the operator may appear unskilled, a certain amount of skill is required to complete the performance without permanent injury from severed nerves and muscles. The cutting is usually done with a piece of flint or obsidian, not sharp enough to cut too deeply, but to cut broadly leaving a “good” scar. The penitent *wears* this scar much as a lodge member wears a pin in the lapel of his coat, although it is rarely if ever seen.



Beginning the Procession

Throughout the year the huge crosses are dismantled and are stored within the *morada*. During Lent, however, when they are so much in use, one may see them leaning against the *morada* walls between processions. They are worn smooth from so much handling, and catch the sun and reflect it brightly, or, seen at night, if there is a moon, they seem to glow strangely.

The timbers for the crosses are cut in late February or early March, when the sap begins to rise. Cut at this season the bark slips off easily, leaving the poles with a hard glazed resinous surface, almost as though they were varnished. Here some of the brothers are seen taking the crosses down preparatory to beginning a procession.



Penitente Procession

The processions of the Penitentes may occur at almost any time of the day or night during the days of Lent. The processions are composed of officers of the order, the cross-bearers, and the whippers (often a gallery of men, women, and children follow). Occasionally a lone exalting whipper is seen. The processions wind their way from the *morada*, the brotherhood house, to *calvario*, a cross located, usually on a hill, which may be a distance of from a fraction of a mile to several miles, or to the nearest campo santo, the graveyard, where the pilgrims stop before each grave offering prayers.

In every procession the Hermano Mayor, the major brother, who carries a crucifix, the Rezador, the reader, who chants from a small hand-written copy book of ritual, and the Pitero, the flute-player, who plays the pito, a reed flute, is to be found.

The cross-bearers wear black hoods over their heads as a form of self-effacement. The crosses weigh from three to eight hundred pounds and often have stems over twenty feet long. There are usually attendants for the cross-bearers to aid them should they fall beneath the terrific weight and to urge them on should they falter.



Calvario

The Penitent procession having arrived at *Calvario*, the whippers in humility, prostrate themselves before the Cross where they remain while prayers are read and chants are sung.

It should not be understood from the painting that the Penitentes lash one another. Here a Brother is simply holding a *disciplina* dropped by one of the flagellants. An occasional “encouraging” lash is sometimes administered to a faltering or weary member. Each penitent measures his ordeal according to the dictates of his own conscience—atonement in proportion to his own interpretation of his wrongdoing.

After the ceremony at *Calvario* the procession makes its way back to the *morado* where it is met by a group who have remained to welcome the pilgrims back.



Penitentes Around the Cross

Usually at the end of a procession those making the pilgrimage are met by another group in front of the Morada. Some of the members of this group carry nearly life-sized images of the Virgin and the Christ on platforms; the Virgin in pure white and the Christ in flaming red. Here hymns are sung and prayers said. Below is a typical chant translated from the Spanish.

“Penitence, Penitence
Sin no more, unfortunate man,
Examine your conscience,
Come to the temple and hear the voice.

It is time to make penance,
You who have been too busy
To take warning to repent
Examine your conscience.”



Whippers at Night

The costume of the whippers is a pair of cotton drawers rolled up above the knees. Here the Penitents' drawers are saturated with blood to their very ankles.

Their *disciplinas*, or whips, are made of the tough sharp-edged fibers of the yucca plant. They are three to three and a half feet long, braided at the handle and left to fall loose and fan-like at the end. They weigh from two to three pounds. The end which lacerates the back is often dipped in a solution called "romero," a sort of herb tea which has salt added. Perhaps the salt increased the sting slightly, but too, it is mildly anti-septic. Often cactus is braided into the *disciplinas*: sometimes pieces of glass and wire hooks are added so that whipping aside from bruising penetrates and tears the flesh. The Penitent usually whips on each third step, alternately, over the right, then the left shoulder.

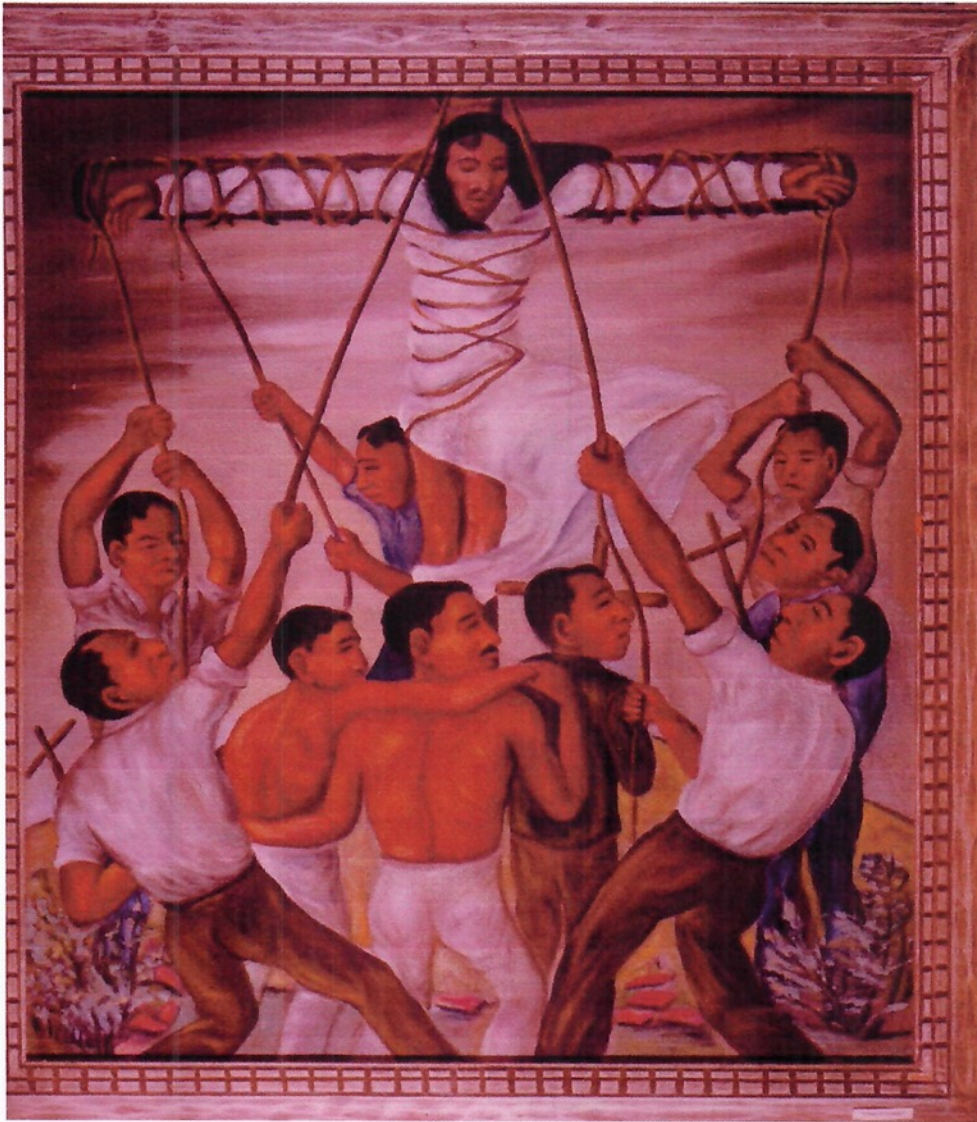
It is of record that some flagellants have laid upon themselves well over two thousand lashes in the course of one day.

Every member whips at least once after his initiation. He may whip more often, he may scourge himself every year or he may omit it some years. His ordeal will depend upon what his conscience dictates for his way of life during the past year.



Raising the Cross

The ritual of the crucifixion varies slightly in the presentation from year to year and in the various communities, although essentially it is the same. Here the crucifixion portrayed, is one of a small group of people closely related, almost a family affair, in an isolated community where members of the Brotherhood are not so numerous and cannot indulge a grand scale ceremony. The cross used is smaller and does not need to be steadied by guy-ropes as in the case of larger, taller crosses. The black head-bag or hood has been omitted because in small or family portrayals of the crucifixion, all members know one another and there is not a large gallery, hence, the secretiveness of the black hood is not necessary. The painting does not show how devoutly the Passion is re-enacted. Neither the circumstance of isolation, nor the lack of audience denies them their own particular deeply rooted conviction in their way to salvation.



Penitente Crucifixion

Crucifixion of one of the members is a regular occurrence and climaxes the activities of the Order until another Lenten season. Often only one crucifixion is held for several participating communities or neighboring villages. Such a crucifixion is usually off with more solemnity and exactness, and with greater drama. The chosen subject is bound to the cross while it is lying upon the ground. Many cry out to be nailed rather than tied, but in the last few years nailing has been abandoned. The subject securely bound, the cross is raised by lifting and pushing and with the aid of guy-ropes until it "chugs" into the hole dug for it. Men nailed to the cross have remained conscious for several hours: those bound remain conscious only a matter of minutes, since the circulation is so greatly impaired. Injury often occurs to the heart. When the man on the cross has lost consciousness the cross is lifted from the hole and lowered (often a lengthy process). The limp form is then unbound and carried to the morado.

In earlier times the man who was to represent the Christ (usually a teen-aged boy) was chosen a few years in advance and was to lead an exemplary life until the time of his supreme ordeal came. Today, with pressure from church and state, and from education in regularly functioning schools few young men are found who will submit themselves to the exemplary life and to the crucifixion: the Christo now is usually chosen by lottery.



Procession with *Carreta del Muerto*

In many processions the *Carreta del Muerto*, death cart, is dragged by one of the brothers. It is a wooden cart with solid hand-hewn wheels. More often than not it is loaded heavily with stones atop of which rides *El Santo del Muerto*, the Saint of Death, carved in the form of a skeleton, draped in black garments and carrying a bow, with a red tipped arrow.

Legend has it that once the arrow loosed itself from the bow and penetrated the heart of an unbeliever who mocked. The arrow remains poised to speed on its just mission should the occasion arise again. The death cart may be dragged for miles leaving a trail splashed with blood from the torn feet of the brother dragging it. Its origin and use in penitente processions is somewhat obscure, it does however, add much to the ordeal of penance.



Tinieblas

Tinieblas service takes place within the morada. The brothers station themselves before an altar and about a candelabrum upon which are lighted candles (here a difference occurs, many times only twelve candles are used, one for each disciple: when thirteen are used they represent the stations of the cross). One by one the candles are snuffed out, and as the room becomes dark the *Rezador* and *Pitero* pull the blanket completely about them so that light from their lantern does not show into the darkened room. The lantern is necessary that they may see to read the ritual which is too long to be memorized. When the room is totally dark, chains are rattled, shrieks pierce the quiet, and general pandemonium breaks loose: such is the representation of the earthquake and storm after the crucifixion of Christ, when the graves yielded up their dead and when the wailings of souls in torment were heard.

Once the service has begun no one leaves. It may last a little time or hours. The air is stifling from the close-packed sweating bodies; the smell of blood is heavy and oppressive; the swish and thud of the whips punctuate moments of silence. Such is Tinieblas.



Procession with Gallery

Here is pictured another version of a typical procession with *Hermano Mayor*, *Pitero*, *Rezador*, cross-bearers, and whippers followed by a gallery of men, women, and children. The religious impulse is individual, is family, is universal. Although the women receive no official credit, and are not acknowledged in any way as part of drama enacted, they often walk miles with beans in their shoes, or walk with strands of barbed wire bound tightly about their thighs. During the days that the men are occupied in the *morada* with things religious the women are in waiting upon them, bringing them food and drink.



Death Came During Penance

The painting above portrays a tensely dramatic moment, that of announcing death during penance of a brother. The announcement is made by leaving some article of the deceased's clothing, usually his shoes, upon his door-step. This is the only notice of his death or admission of it. An occasional death occurs from loss of blood, exposure, and pneumonia, especially in a season when there is raw cold winds or late sleet and snow.



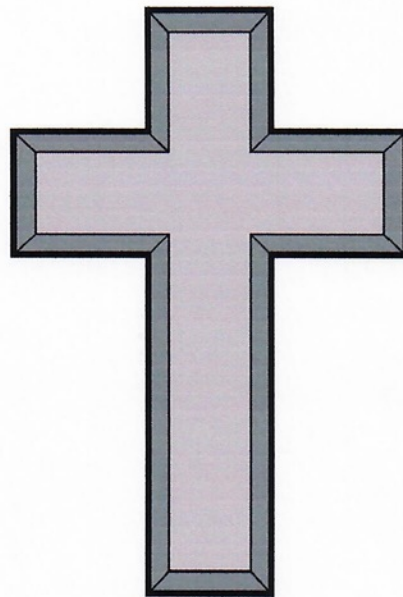
The Last Cross

The Last Cross—does not show any particular ceremony or ritual. It pictures a corner of an adobe-walled grave yard—with a fresh grave where one of the Penitents has been buried. The family has learned of the death and is at the grave as the procession of brothers leaves the scene.

Need for this painting was felt much as a writer feels the need for a concluding paragraph. It is one of the few instances in the series where the artist has taken the liberty of personal statement.

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