

TABASCO REPORT

Where the People Live The True Meaning of The Paschal Mystery

By Father Neil Miller

Oxolotan, Tabasco -- Holy Week, "La Semana Santa," is the most venerated and sacred week in the lives of the people who live in the mountains and struggle each day for their daily bread. I have never experienced the meaning of the passion and resurrection of Christ as I have this year. To be with people who because of their own sufferings identify with the suffering Lord and who struggle in faith for the resurrections in their own lives is to really experience the paschal mystery.

Holy Week in Oxolotan begins on the sixth Friday of Lent, the Friday before Palm Sunday. This Friday, known as El Viernes de Dolores -- the Friday of Sorrows -- brings hundreds into the village. The activities began early, about 5 a.m., as people brought their candles to the church to place before a symbolic sepulcher of Christ. Each candle represented a prayer, a struggle, a tear in the lives of the people who placed them there.

A large crowd bearing candles and flames assembled before 8 a.m. Mass and afterwards began the solemn and ancient ceremony of lowering the sepulcher of the Lord for the people to venerate. Slowly, the men carried a statue of the Body of Jesus to the front of the church where a table was prepared to receive the body. Two village men, the oldest and most venerated, were designated to open the coffin and place the Body on the table. Their every move was precise as the rest of the congregation sang hymns pleading for mercy and pardon. The feet of the image were finally exposed and the long line of people crawling on their knees began to kiss the feet of their Lord. With their hands, they touched the image and then themselves and their children pleading for favors of health, peace, strength in their own lives.

The image which they venerate is 400 years old and was brought to the village from Spain by the early missionaries who founded the church in the 16th Century. During the persecution of the church in the early 1930s, the statue was hidden in the mountains.

This occasion became a wonderful opportunity for the reception of the Sacrament of Penance which lasted 3½ hours, only to be interrupted by another Mass for the pilgrims who had come from far and near.

After hundreds had kissed the feet of the image, the body was then washed with a special wine by the two venerated men, again very slowly and deliberately so as if not to pain any further the wounded Body of Christ.

PALMSUNDAY

The church was beautifully decorated with great palm and flowers strung from the high ceiling, along the sidewalk and the front entrance. The people gathered in the park in front of the church for the blessing of the palm and the re-enactment of the triumphal entrance of Christ into Jerusalem. With their own palms fancifully decorated with flowers and candles, they commemorated this event in the life of their Lord.

Parish youths re-enacted the entrance of Jesus with dialogue, costume and one, Martín, representing Christ, rode horseback through the crowd to receive its homage. Palms were thrown on the ground in memory of those who did the same at the arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem. The procession went to the church where a trumpeter announced the arrival of Jesus.

In the afternoon, we set off for another village, Cuitlahuac,

to repeat the services. Returning home that night, we had to walk several miles through a rainstorm but we made it -- wet, tired but happy.

Monday through Wednesday were spent visiting our other nine villages, speaking about the meaning of what we were celebrating that week and encouraging participation.

HOLY THURSDAY

We left Oxolotan at 5:30 a.m. to participate in the Chrism Mass at the Villahermosa cathedral. Bettie and Melecio, a couple representing the parish, came with us to receive the sacred oils from the bishop and take them back to the village.

Late in the afternoon, parish youths celebrated a paschal meal near the river to remember the Lord's Supper.

At 7 p.m., the village was swelled with people who came to celebrate the Mass of the Last Supper. Members of the Nocturnal Adoration Society came with their banner and insignias to spend the night in adoration and thanksgiving for the Lord's gift to His people. People walked hours to gather to celebrate this sacred night. We washed the feet of the head catechist from each of the villages -- as a sign of their unity and their willingness to serve the people. The procession with the Blessed Sacrament took place through the park with people singing and carrying lit candles. The church was open all night with many spending time in prayer before the Eucharistic Presence of the Lord.

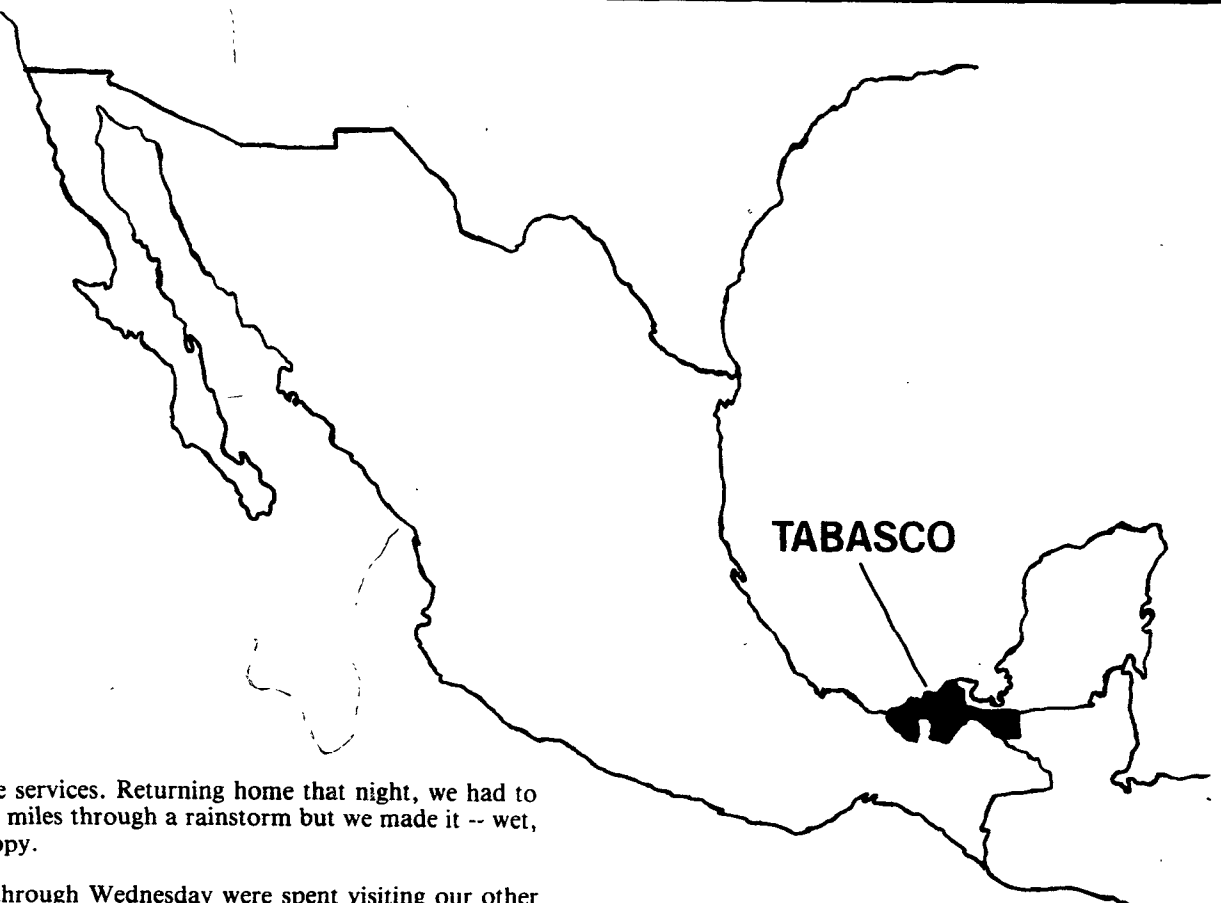
GOOD FRIDAY

At 8 a.m., the people were praying the Way of the Cross through the streets of Oxolotan. The stations had been set up at 14 homes throughout the village so as to lead the procession through the whole village. The streets were filled with villagers and visitors who had come to remember the Lord's walk to Calvary. At noon, we started the preaching of the seven last words and confession and at 1:30 p.m. celebrated liturgy. After, the image of the Body of Christ was once again taken down and a funeral procession with people singing and bemoaning the death of Christ took place around the church. At the end of the procession, the Body of Jesus was placed for veneration on the side altar in front of the church where the scene of Calvary has been reconstructed. The rest of the day and night was spent in vigil with the Lord who had been placed in the tomb, as if in a "wake" service. This continued until the early hours of the morning.

HOLY SATURDAY

A quiet day. People going in and out of church to keep vigil near the tomb of Christ. Others were busy preparing the church for the Easter Vigil which would take place at 10 p.m. Confessions were heard.

Around noon, we left for Cuitlahuac to celebrate the Easter Vigil Service there at 3 p.m. This village is about seven



kilometers farther in the mountains and is second in size to Oxotolan.

We arrived back in Oxolotan around 7:30 p.m., took quick showers and sat down to our Easter dinner of turkey and trimmings. Valerie Smith's sister, Pat, who was visiting us, helped prepare the meal. It was good to have her with us even though she said we tired her out.

At 10 p.m. for the Vigil Mass, the church was dark and a high drapery had been placed across the sanctuary. People gathered in the dark outside for the blessing of the new fire and the Easter candle. We proceeded around the park holding high the Easter candle, symbol of the Living Christ, which shone brilliantly in the darkness. We entered the dark church which began to be illuminated by the light of the Easter candle. As the people moved in with their candles lit from the Easter candle, the church was brightened by the power of the light which represents Christ. It was very moving. We conducted the first part of the Easter Vigil with only the light of hundreds of candles.

At the Gloria, the church bells rang! The people sang! The marimbas played! The lights went on! Leaves were dropped from the ceiling and, most majestically, the drapery across the sanctuary was lowered to reveal a beautiful statue of the Risen Lord!! It was truly a joyful announcement -- "Jesus resucita, Aleluya!"

The 2½ hours of celebration were followed by a sharing of a small meal in front of the church.

EASTER SUNDAY

The church was filled with people who had come to celebrate the greatest and most beautiful mystery of faith. "He lives and is here with us. Aleluya!"

I don't know if we will ever again experience such a moving and faith-filled celebration of Holy Week and Easter. To think -- here in the mountains of Tabasco among people who live isolated from the sophistication of life, people whom we never knew existed, people simple but strong in faith; here in the wilderness of Tabasco, the Lord lives in the lives of a people who keep Him alive as a testimony to us. We were all exhausted from the week but happy for having had the privilege of sharing faith with the people of Tabasco.

Father Miller is the priest-member of the diocesan mission team in Tabasco. Valerie Smith, Mark Kavanaugh and Yolanda Ramos are the other members.

Journalists See 'Injustice' in Removal of Imprimaturs

By NC Nes Service

American Catholic journalists, spearheaded by book publishers, criticized the Vatican's doctrinal congregation for "injustice" and a "failure to recognize due process" in recent withdrawals of imprimaturs from Catholic books.

In a "sense of the convention" resolution May 25 at the annual meeting of the Catholic Press Association in Chicago, the CPA members said they were "gravely disturbed and bewildered" by the recent Vatican actions.

They asked the CPA board of directors to forward the resolution to the doctrine committee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and ask that committee to initiate a dialogue with Rome on the subject.

William Holub of Twenty-Third Publications, a Catholic book publishing firm in Mystic, Conn., introduced the resolution. It did not mention the books by name, but Holub said that they were "Christ Among Us" by Anthony Wilhelm, and "Sexual Morality" by Sulpician Father Philip Keane.

In separate actions in April the doctrinal congregation asked the bishops who had given their imprimaturs to those books to withdraw them. The imprimatur, Latin for "let it be printed," is official church permission to publish a book that deals with matters of Catholic teaching or practice.

Holub also cited another book, "A Challenge to Love: Gay and Lesbian Catholics in the Church," edited by Salvatorian Father Robert Nugent, as an object of concern, although it did not involve an imprimatur.

The doctrinal congregation last October asked the Salvatorians to intervene to stop further printings of Father Nugent's book. The publisher, Crossroad, refused the request.

Crossroad executive vice president Michael Leach told NC News May 25 that Crossroad has sold more than 10,000 copies of the book and had just printed 5,000 more two weeks earlier.

The CPA resolution said the actions by the doctrinal congregation raised several concerns:

-- "The apparent disregard" of subsidiarity in bypassing the NCCB and ordering the bishops directly to withdraw the imprimaturs.

-- "The failure to recognize due process."

-- "The injustice to the publishers and authors."

-- "The damaging effect" on U.S. bishops' credibility.

-- "The climate of uncertainty created."

-- "The discouragement of creative thought."

The journalists asked for an explanation from the doctrinal congregation of the reasons behind its actions. They asked the NCCB Committee on Doctrine to start a dialogue with the Vatican congregation on the controversy.

The final language of a letter to the NCCB committee conveying the resolution was left up to the CPA board, which met immediately after the convention and appointed a committee to draft the letter.

Father John Catoir, publisher of Christopher News Notes and the CPA

board member in charge of drafting the letter, said May 29 that board approval of a final version would be done by mail. The specific points of concern spelled out by the membership and the requests for clarification and dialogue would be part of the letter, he said.

CPA members took different views on the resolution. In the debate over its wording, Redemptorist Father Norman Muckerman, outgoing CPA president, urged "less strident" language. Elmer von Feldt, editor of Columbia magazine, described it as "inflammatory."

But Paulist Father Thomas Comber, publisher of The Catholic Bulletin of St. Paul-Minneapolis, noted the significance of Wilhelm's book, which has sold 1.6 million copies and has been widely used as a text for adult courses in Catholicism. In an emotional appeal, he said it "might be time for a primal scream."

Jason Petosa, publisher of National Catholic Reporter, said the resolution was "watered down" and urged stronger language to respond to a "terrible injustice."