

The Holy Week Tradition, Step by Step

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Since the time when this city was San Miguel el Grande, it has been characterized by its sense of religious tradition. Its centennial processions are silent witnesses.

During Holy Week, the streets of this old town are turned into real rivers of *mastranzo* (aromatic herb), chamomile, and flowers that are like rugs covering Christ's path on his way to the cross and later to the tomb.

The religious traditions are lived without restriction and "are not a spectacle," according to traditionalists like Antonio Rayas, but a way of reviving the justice, love, honesty, and sanctity of Jesus, who gave His life to save humankind. The processions are in silence, are not classist, and are even open to visitors. Throughout the years, the processions in San Miguel have changed their structure, but not their intention—to revive the events of Jesus's passion and death. History states that the oldest tradition, the Holy Burial, started in 1712. In 1742 the Procession of the Divine Master, or the Holy Encounter as it is known nowadays, began. Twenty-two years ago, a representation of Jesus on his way to the cross was started in Atotonilco, and almost 15 years ago, a second one emerged in colonia San Luis Rey. The Condolence Procession will be revived this year.

Here is the history, meaning, and order of the main events of Holy Week in San Miguel.

Procession of the Holy Encounter

It takes place on Good Friday, this year on April 3, at 11:30am. According to city historian Graciela Cruz, this procession was begun by Father Luis Felipe Neri de Alfaro, who was responsible for founding Atotonilco. Cruz comments that the procession was a way of attracting people to Catholicism in old San Miguel using a graphic way to do it. Neri de Alfaro started a brotherhood called the Holy School of Christ, based at the Santa Escuela, a church next to the Parroquia.

The historian comments that since the beginning, the processions have taken place along the same route—leaving from the Parroquia and strolling through Correo, Corregidora, San Francisco, Plaza Principal, and Portal Allende, to end in front of the Parroquia. Cruz, who has regular access to the historic archives of the parish of St. Michael the Archangel, comments that in the past the procession used to start the night before, when the Father Alfaro, representing Jesus, left Atotonilco carrying a 60-kilo mesquite cross, recalling the Way of the Cross. When he arrived the next morning at the Parroquia, the procession started.

Traditionalist Antonio Rayas, responsible for the procession of the Divine Master, commented that city historian Cruz gave him a document (dating from 1829) with the order of the procession, in which steps from the Old and New Testament were included. Rayas comments that traditionalists want to recover the history and structure of the procession as it was since the beginning. He added that in that document, Our Lord of the Column, which was sculpted in 1823 and is brought in procession annually to Atotonilco before Holy Week, was then included in the Holy Encounter, but 10 years ago it did not participate. This year, although not the

original, a Lord of the Column will be added to the event. This year's procession will also include insignias of the passion, such as the crown of thorns, leather, and nails.

Rayas also invited all those interested in participating in the procession to show up on Good Friday before 10am at the Parroquia.

Graciela Cruz commented as well that in the past, and "it is registered in documents," all the attendants viewing the procession used to wear mourning, but the tradition was lost in the early 60s.

The procession, stage by stage

This reenactment of the Way of the Cross, because of social, political, and religious conflicts, was limited to the interior of the Parroquia of St. Michael the Archangel in the past and in 1985 was restored to its present form. A painting of the original procession held by Father Alfaro was done at the Santuario de Atotonilco by Antonio Martínez de Poca Sangre, and from it we can tell that the procession has been modified over time.

The event takes place on Holy Friday (April 3) and starts with the arrival of pilgrims from Atotonilco, who bring the cross originally carried by Father Alfaro (portraying Jesus Christ). At 11:30am, the first stage is held on the stairs of the chapel next to the Parroquia, la Santa Escuela, where a mock trial takes place at which Pontius Pilate sentences Christ to death. After the judgment Pilate washes his hands, a ritual to signal that justice has been done, declaring, "I am innocent of the blood of this just man." Jesus is represented by a statue known as the Lord of Ecce Homo. After the judgment the procession starts, departing from the Parroquia. Following the trial, a statue of the Sorrowful Virgin Mary leaves from the Parroquia, one block in advance of the rest of the images. This Virgin follows the path and arrives at the Portal de Guadalupe, where she stays waiting for her son (the Holy Encounter).

The procession is headed by a cross and an image of St. Roque, patron of a second brotherhood. Young girls dressed in white follow, throwing mastranzo, chamomile, and flowers on the path. Following them, 24 barefoot penitents wearing silicios (rough woven garments) walk; 12 of them with crowns of thorns on their heads and 12 carrying skulls (representing the path from death to eternal life). These men are guarded by a line of Roman soldiers in the the parish priest, who carries the cross as Father Alfaro used to do. For this reason the procession is called the "Passing of the Priest." The two bound thieves, Dimas and Gestas, tied to a post, walk alongside the priest.

Following the priest, 22 men carry a statue of Jesus the Nazarene that dates from the 18th century and was created at the request of Padre Alfaro. The sculpture has a special mechanism that allows its head to move. Also carried in the procession are statues of Saint John, Mary Magdalene, Mary Cleophas, and Veronica.

The Holy Encounter happens at the end of the procession, when the Virgin of Solitude is carried from Portal de Guadalupe and the Nazarene from the Portal Allende to the center of the Plaza Principal, when they finally meet, and Jesus raises his head three times.

The changes were not yet specified by Rayas, but the procession will feature more images and steps this year.