

Instilling Faith: The Power of Religious Symbols

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From my earliest childhood memories, I recall my parents and our parish creating a world that deeply fed my active imagination as well as my religious inclination. I was born and spent my early childhood years in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and my later childhood and adolescent years in El Paso, Texas. Theological dramas, devotional reminders, and ritual practices all contributed to my formation as a Mexican-American Catholic. Indeed, they may have outweighed my formal instruction in the faith. These practices introduced me to God's active presence in my life and to the many ways in which God's Spirit unceasingly feeds my soul.

Theological Dramas

Each year our parish marked the Advent season with the reenactment of two dramas, one in celebration of Our Lady of Guadalupe and the other entitled *La Pastorela* or *Los Pastores* (a shepherd's play). Both took place in our parish church, contributing color, music, story, and symbolism to our faith journey. The Eucharistic liturgy on December 12,

Guadalupe's feast day, typically began with a procession led by colorfully dressed Native Americans dancers performing the traditional *Matachines* dance, a sacred dance. In their performance, they used religious symbolism to depict the struggle of good versus evil with good ultimately prevailing. The liturgy of the word included a dramatic presentation of Guadalupe's appearance to Juan Diego. For the offertory, I along with other children present would process up the center aisle to offer roses, red or pink, to Guadalupe. We did so while the choir sang "*Las Mañanitas*," a traditional song that speaks of daybreak, of awakening, of the day of our birth. This song carries clear allusions to baptism. Family and friends traditionally sing this song at dawn to a loved one on their birthday. It is also sung to mothers on Mother's Day and sung to Guadalupe to honor her.

Parishioners performed *La Pastorela* in our church sometime after Guadalupe's feast day and before Christmas. It dramatizes the story of shepherds being enticed by both good, in the form of the Archangel Michael, and by evil, in the form of the devil, Lucifer. The shepherds struggle

with whether or not they will acknowledge the baby Jesus and receive him as the Christ into their hearts. All the performers were parishioners from a local parish whose ministry it was to travel to different parish communities, like ours, and to share this theological drama.

While Guadalupe and *La Pastorela* were performed in the context of our parish, during Advent my mother organized an enactment of *Las Posadas* in our neighborhood. For *Las Posadas* we sang a song by the same name and walked through our neighborhood knocking on the doors of a couple of our neighbors' homes. We asked for lodging, reenacting Mary and Joseph's journey as they searched for a place to stay in Bethlehem when Mary was about to give birth to Jesus. In the first two homes we are turned away and in the third home we are invited in to share a meal and to celebrate Jesus' birth and his place in our lives. In addition to these dramas, many parish communities in the Southwest perform the passion of Jesus Christ during Holy Week. Many times I have taken part in this theological drama as well.

During my early years and up to the present time these dramas stirred my imagination such that the Christian stories became real and my faith meaningful. In a profound way, all of us present at one of these dramas participated in the drama (we were not merely spectators). The dramas invited us children and adults to identify our lives with the lives of the characters and to experience our own uniqueness and giftedness as existing fundamentally in relation to God. This dynamic comes about, first of all, because all present were asked to invest themselves, cognitively, emotionally, physically, imaginatively, and even kinesthetically in the Christian story. These Christian stories became my story in a highly personal way. As a child and now as an adult these dramas invited me to become sensitized to time and space in a fashion different from my ordinary awareness. Through them I became aware of the sacred dimension of time and aware that the drama of my life at its depths is a sacred drama.

Devotional Reminders

My childhood home and neighborhood had many visual reminders of my faith that steadily and quietly had an impact. For example, my mother devoted one wall in our home to various visual interpretations of Guadalupe, and in local businesses store owners prominently displayed Guadalupe's image or one of Jesus. Community member often painted representations of Guadalupe and/or Jesus in murals on the outside walls of businesses in various neighborhoods in our city. We always had a nativity set on display in our home during the Advent and Christmas seasons and these served to reinforce the sacred drama as integral to our lives.

In our home my parents created a home altar with our family Bible laid open, along with candles, prayer cards, and pictures of loved ones who had already gone home to God. To see sacred images of saints, images of deceased

family members, along with the Word of God provided an ongoing visual connection between our lives and those of the saints. Our home altar served as a constant reminder that we too are called to a life of holiness.

My father had the habit of blessing himself with the sign of the cross when we traveled and passed by a Catholic church or a cross memorial by the side of the road. He did not explain it but simply did it. His gesture provided me with a visual reminder of God's constant presence and our dependency on God for all that we have.

Ritual Practices

My family practiced a number of rituals by which I deeply absorbed my Catholic faith. Throughout their lives my grandparents always said a prayer over each one of us and blessed us when we left them after a visit. My grandparents' blessing was particularly poignant when we knew we would not see them again for a long time—for example, the blessing they gave me when I left home for college. The blessing would end with the sign of the cross. My parents have continued this tradition with my generation, with their grandchildren, and now with great-grandchildren.

Even the food we ate linked our religious discipline with our ethnic background. Every Friday during Lent we ate cheese enchiladas stacked like pancakes with a fried egg on top, as is the custom in the state of New Mexico. As I grew older my enchiladas had more chili on them, a sign of my growing to maturity and being able to handle hotter chili. To this day I associate enchiladas with Lenten practice.

Good Friday in El Paso meant a hike led by our pastor two and one-half miles up the somewhat steep Cristo Rey (Christ the King) mountain. Fourteen stations of the cross marked the intervals of our journey. We stopped and prayed at each. As a result of this practice I internalized more deeply the passion and crucifixion of Jesus. I had time along the way to reflect on the passion and what it meant for me.

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These three arenas of religious experiences unleashed my imagination, my feelings, and my sense of wonder. They formed my identity as a Catholic Christian. They taught me that my faith involved my whole self—my intellect, my body, my emotions, my relationships, my actions, and my spirit. Moreover, I began to see the ways God's spirit calls me and all of us to transform the world so that it is more in line with what God wills. To experience the Catholic Christian drama as the depth dimension of human experience instilled in me a faith with tenacious roots and an ability to see God's hand in all of life.

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