

THE VIA CRUCIS: San Fernando Cathedral's Passion Play & Procession



Photo by Ruben R. Alfaro

Dir. Mario Mandujano. Rector Fr. David Garcia. San Fernando Cathedral, San Antonio, Texas. Good Friday, 14 April 2006.

In 1264, out of a desire to make the church more relevant to the lives of ordinary people, Pope Urban IV established the Feast of Corpus Christi, inviting secular sponsorship and participation. The laity didn't need to be asked twice: in the hands of the faithful, vernacular religious drama took off. This same spirit of religious faith, local traditions, cultural pride, and community involvement animates the annual re-enactment of the *Via Crucis* or "Way of the Cross," performed for over twenty years by the congregants of San Fernando Cathedral. Staged in the heart of downtown San Antonio, the Passion play traverses urban streets and plazas filled with over 25,000 spectators: young and old, natives and tourists, regular theatregoers, and people who seldom—if ever—venture out to see a play. An intergenerational cast of sixty begins the piece in Milam Park with Christ's trial before Pilate and processes to Golgotha, set on the broad steps of San Fernando Cathedral in the Main Plaza; the journey between Jerusalem and Calvary transforms Main and Houston streets into the *Via Dolorosa*, or "Way of Sorrows," that Jesus trod.

Performed entirely in Spanish, the *Via Crucis* is a religious ritual, a civic festival, and of course, a performance. It is also—at various times—a concert; a parade; and a demonstration. As a yearly San Antonio festival, the *Via Crucis* honors the city's

oldest church, the San Fernando Cathedral, now celebrating the 275th anniversary of its founding by Spanish missionaries. An important historical landmark and popular tourist destination all year long, the cathedral attracts even greater numbers to the special events and additional services it offers during Holy Week. San Fernando's Passion play, however, attracts the most visitors, for it offers virtually unlimited seating to an event that combines worship, performance, history, culture—even commerce: *Via Crucis* tourists generate revenue for local businesses, from hoteliers and restaurateurs to the vendors of religious souvenirs during the performance. In the south Texas region, the Passion play receives broad coverage in English and Spanish-language newspapers and on local television stations. The entire performance, in fact, is broadcast on Catholic Television, a cable channel offered through Time-Warner. Consequently, the *Via Crucis* cuts a wide swath, reaching its audience through multiple formats. Regardless of the medium of transmission, the play's disparate performative elements come together to create a mass experience in religious theatre, combining dramatic dialogue and action with liturgy, scripture, music, and audience participation. As such, the *Via Crucis* cannot be reviewed as a conventional theatrical piece; rather, it should be analyzed as a collection of events portraying a culture of faith, a communal experience directed at individual souls.

On a sunny and pleasant Good Friday, at the south end of Milam Park near San Antonio's Market Square, a crowd gathers around 8:30 a.m. in front of a small stone pavilion with a semi-circular performance area at ground level and riser-like steps at the back. Already the park is crowded, with early birds standing at the edge of the performance area and others milling around or standing on benches, picnic tables, or the gazebo at the back. At 9:30, two young women in red choir robes strum guitars and sing, harmonizing on traditional and modern hymns in Spanish. Standing on the steps at the back of the pavilion is an ecumenical group of Christian leaders—Lutheran, Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Baptist ministers—invited by San Fernando Rector David Garcia to participate in the pre-performance service and procession. Among them is special guest José Gomez, Archbishop of San Antonio, who continues the annual tradition of his predecessors by joining the procession and walking the *Via Dolorosa* with his fellow clerics. On a tall platform near the playing area are several cameras operated by television crews from local network affiliates, Catholic Television, and the Spanish language stations. Onlookers stand by, too, with digital cameras rolling and cell phone cameras at the ready. From the outset, the *Via Crucis* is a unique combination of ancient story, medieval performance traditions, modern urban setting, and post-modern technology.

At the music's conclusion, no announcements are made, no programs distributed, no prologue recited; in the artistic tradition of the Middle Ages—when art was created not for personal fame but for the glory of God—no introductions of players or production staff are given; all cast and crew remain anonymous. Instead, prayers are offered in Spanish and English, then Father Garcia steps forward briefly to welcome the audience and quietly express his appreciation to the director of the play and his wife. With that, a roll of drums and trumpet fanfare announce the arrival of Roman soldiers bringing Christ in chains before Pontius Pilate; at their heels is a mob of angry citizens, shouting at Jesus, calling for his trial and execution. A small band of Jesus followers enter next, including the three Marys, Veronica, and Joseph of Arimathea; then the trial begins. The text, written in the early 1980s by a San Fernando priest, borrows judiciously from

all four Gospels to reconstruct the narrative of Christ's Passion, beginning with Christ's condemnation and ending with his crucifixion. Although some knowledge of Spanish is helpful in understanding the dialogue, it certainly is not necessary: the text is schematic, taken directly from scripture, and staged in the manner of *tableaux vivants*, with characters momentarily "framed" in the classic images found in religious iconography.

As a spectacle, San Fernando's Passion play is as colorful and busy as an illuminated manuscript. Characters are dressed in the period clothing of biblical epics; clad in flowing robes and head scarves, the citizens are of all ages, with women cradling babies or holding children by the hand; the soldiers bear weapons and authentic-looking armor; even the musicians are dressed like Roman slaves. Pilate's court looks appropriately lavish, with Roman officials and their wives dressed in brilliant togas and jewels. Herod and his retinue appear even more decadent, tricked out in exaggerated finery and adornments. Similarly, the rich raiment of the Jewish high priests indicates their status and preoccupation with power. By contrast, Christ and his followers wear simple peasant clothing, with Jesus in homespun cloth, stripped to the waist. An open white cape, resting lightly on his shoulders, is torn off for his flogging. While the scenery itself is a bare stone pavilion, actors establish the setting through subtle activity: during Pilate's interview with Jesus, for example, courtiers continue to laugh, gossip, drink wine, and nibble on fruit—a striking background to Christ's poverty and simplicity. Another notable contrast to the court's party atmosphere is a short, tense interlude between Pilate and his troubled wife. Taken from the Gospel of Matthew—the only scripture that mentions the incident—the scene effectively portrays Pilate's beautiful spouse as an unlikely prophetess, taking her husband aside to tell him her terrible dream, and begging him to take no part in Jesus's condemnation. Succumbing to the pressure of the high priests, however, Pilate agrees to their demands for Christ's execution. Thus beaten, mocked, and crowned with thorns, Jesus is finally marched away, led to Houston Street, and the actual *Via Crucis*—the age-old re-enactment of the Stations of the Cross—begins. What began as a conventional play staged with proscenium-style composition, a circumscribed playing area, and "fourth-wall" realism, now becomes an environmental piece in which actors playing biblical characters cross the boundary between stage and audience, move through the crowd, and turn the spectators into citizens of Jerusalem, making them present, involved—even complicit—in Christ's punishment and crucifixion.

For the procession and what follows, the audience is by no means comfortably situated, stable, or passive: closely packed and constantly shifting to obtain a closer look, spectators stand, walk, run, carry children, or push strollers; they sit on benches, perch in trees, or lean out the windows of apartments and office buildings. Those who accompany Christ all the way to Calvary follow a winding trek through downtown streets, taking about ninety minutes. Despite the seeming chaos, the crowds are remarkably quiet and orderly, due, in part, to their reverence for the event, but also thanks to an efficient staff of dozens of teen-aged parishioners in bright yellow t-shirts with their church's name and logo; thus San Fernando's Catholic Youth Organization takes on the job of keeping spectators off the road, on the sidewalks, and out of the actors' way. Like medieval *stytelers*, who once corralled and directed spectators through the use of ropes or long poles, these young ushers stand in line a few feet apart, holding a long rope at waist level.

The physical arrangement of the *Via Crucis* follows a fixed order that combines

a fascinating layering of “on stage” and “back stage” activity: “on stage” are the actors, completely focused on the play and their performative tasks; also visible, however, are the “back stage” personnel, intent on ensuring a smooth, safe, and technically enhanced production. Bracketed by patrol cars and escorted by police officers, the procession starts with a troop of Roman soldiers bearing tall banners and marching in formation. They are followed by drummers who, at intervals, signal the start of the next significant scene or “station” by playing a loud, repetitive beat that periodically halts the procession, draws attention to the main playing area, and cues the enactment of the next station. Behind the drummers are a small band of musicians, playing hymns between the scenes; technicians follow with large cameras on their shoulders, walking backwards and guided by assistants holding them around the waist—also walking backwards—but looking behind to make sure the operators’ paths are clear. The cameras are focused, of course, on Jesus’s face and the actions of the four Roman guards who accompany Christ as he drags his enormous cross along the street. Armed with swords and whips, two of the guards walk ahead of Jesus on either side and two walk behind him; unlike the rigid phalanx of centurions marching ahead of them, these soldiers move freely through the space, changing position, laughing and joking with each other, but mostly interacting with Jesus: mocking him, pushing him, lashing or striking him if he slows down or stumbles. After Christ come the two thieves, in chains, sentenced to die with Jesus. Though occasionally pushed and abused, neither gets the crushing treatment that Jesus endures; Jesus’s cross is taller and appears much heavier; his face is bloody from the crown of thorns and his back is striped with lash marks.

To Jesus’s right, about five feet away, is the rabble that called for his death at his trial, walking alongside, jeering and shouting at him. To Jesus’s left are the three Marys, Veronica, Joseph of Arimathea, and two other disciples, supporting the arms of the women. They try to speak to Jesus, beg the soldiers to stop their torment of him, and talk animatedly to each other in confusion and distress. Mary speaks little; her face is truly like the Madonna’s—a living mask of sorrow. Directly behind Jesus and the thieves are Archbishop Gomez and the ecumenical band of clerics who, directly after Jesus’s condemnation by Pilate, join the procession and, marching shoulder to shoulder, follow him to Calvary, singing hymns of praise and thanksgiving at the conclusion of each station. All around the procession, of course, are the citizens of San Antonio/Jerusalem, some watching passionately, some indifferently. Some hold up cameras and some hold up crosses.

Once the procession begins, alternating layers of mechanics, performance, and worship contribute to another transformation: a drama that formerly encompassed one setting, one action, and one period—Christ’s trial in Jerusalem in 33 A.D.—divides into three parallel worlds whose agents occasionally meet by crossing over—intentionally and unintentionally—from one world to the next. The principal story is the world of the past: Christ’s passion—his suffering and death of long ago—inhabited by the characters in biblical dress. The second world combines the past and present: a 2,000 year-old story in the streets of San Antonio, played against thriving businesses and abandoned buildings, fancy restaurants and *taquerias*, swank hotels and dilapidated apartments; passing a diverse cast of residents, laborers, tourists, professionals, the homeless and indigent—all witness to Jesus Christ’s last hours on earth. Whether fervent believer,

intentional observer, or random bystander, the spectator at the present-day *Via Crucis* becomes a participant in the past event; the implication, of course, is that all humanity carries the guilt of Christ's crucifixion, yet the grace of Christ's sacrifice—salvation—is available to all. The third parallel adds a future dimension: as both temporal and spiritual figures, the clerics following Christ seem like visitors from an imminent, eternal realm—who already know the triumphant outcome of the tragedy happening only a few feet in front of them. Their close proximity to Jesus, their solidarity, and their songs—sung by many of the spectators as well—emphasize the hope of Christ's Passion and strike a deliberate contrast to his torment.

The last movement of the *Via Crucis* takes place in the Main Plaza, thus opening the tight and intimate focus on Christ—isolated in the narrow street—to a much broader image of a huge crowd filling a town square, closing in on the procession and surrounding it. In the park across from the church, raised platforms with TV cameras broadcast the last section of the play live; microphones now amplify the dialogue. Remarkably, Jesus mounts the steps of the Cathedral exactly at noon. As the bells toll, soldiers begin nailing him to the cross; through impressive stage effects, the nails and blood look authentic. The raising of Christ and the thieves on their huge crosses takes place—accompanied by the spectators' raising of dozens and dozens of flashing cell phones—with impressive efficiency and coordination. True to the Gospel narrative, once Christ is crucified, bystanders ridicule him, telling him to save himself; likewise, the Roman soldiers mock him and cast lots for his clothing. The text even includes the exchange between the two thieves—found only in the Gospel of Luke—in which one rebukes the other for railing at Christ, saying that they themselves deserved punishment, but that Christ is innocent. The repentant thief then asks Jesus to remember him and Christ promises, "Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43, KJV). All the dialogue spoken by Christ and the thieves is transmitted by the placement of a cleverly concealed microphone on the tip of a spear held by a soldier near the faces of the actors hung high on the crosses; thus Christ's wrenching final cries echo throughout the square. Once Jesus commends his spirit to God and dies, thunder rolls and the bells in the cathedral ring again. Christ's body is carefully brought down, placed on a bier, raised aloft and carried slowly in a circle in front of the Cathedral steps. Mary is led away, weeping, while Christ's body is carried slowly to the courtyard behind the church. The bells continue to toll as the faithful move toward the Cathedral entrance for the service of the Seven Last Words of Christ.

Like other re-enactments of the Passion, such as the Oberammergau Passion Play, the San Fernando *Via Crucis* combines scripture and biblical legend, especially concerning Christ's journey to the cross and the moments after his death. For example, it faithfully enacts Simon of Cyrene's enlistment as the bearer of Christ's cross, found in three of the Gospels, but also dramatizes the legend of Veronica, a follower of Jesus, who ministers to Jesus when he falls the second time. As the story goes, Veronica presses a towel against Jesus's face to wipe his brow, an act of compassion and intimacy that transforms her. The *Via Crucis* adds a striking and unusual event to the encounter, however: when Veronica removes the plain white towel, she opens it and the face of Christ—the well-known image on the Shroud of Turin—is imprinted on the fabric. Looking at the spectators and holding up the image for all to see, she walks silently,

ritualistically, in a circle—approaching the crowd on both sides of the playing area. The image of Christ, displayed with such reverence and openness, indicates—far better than any invented dialogue—the impact of Christ in Veronica’s life. It also creates a wonderful sense of mystery and ambiguity: is it a preview of his imminent death, or an omen of Christ’s resurrection, when he casts off his shroud and leaves the tomb? Another arresting image portrayed to great effect in the *Via Crucis* comes from the legend of Christ’s descent from the cross, specifically the placement of Christ’s lifeless body in his mother’s lap. This moment captures Jesus and Mary in a living *Pietà*—framed in the same physical relationship as the figures in Michelangelo’s immortal sculpture. Instantly recognizable, the portrait of the grieving mother and her child generates an immediate response of sympathetic murmuring throughout the square.

Although the *Via Crucis* achieves sophisticated special effects and presents an awe-inspiring spectacle, its most impressive aspect is its actors, not just for their dedication and discipline, but for the power of their playing. None are professional actors, yet all present convincing, committed performances motivated by their belief in the story they portray. Described by San Fernando Rector David Garcia as “the working poor,” the actors and production staff are all volunteers—working class members of the San Fernando parish—who participate as an act of faith.¹ A number of cast members have performed in the Passion play for years, taking various parts, but always playing whatever role is assigned them. The production requires a lengthy commitment: actors rehearse for eight weeks, two hours a night for two nights each week. Most of the players, says Garcia, come straight from work to their 7:00 rehearsal, missing dinner altogether; fortunately, various groups within the parish now provide meals for the actors once they finish at 9:00. Two weeks before the performance, the entire cast goes on a retreat to a monastery or convent to pray and reflect on their purpose of re-living Christ’s Passion. The morning of the performance, they meet for a prayer service in the courtyard of the Cathedral Center. Such emphasis on mission, ensemble, and the prayerful preparation of one’s role inspires self-abnegation, belief, and unity among the cast. Even actors playing unsympathetic figures learn to imagine events from their character’s perspective. In a newspaper interview, Felicitos Flores, the actor playing Pontius Pilate, admitted “I think some of the people wanted to lynch me . . . If I’d been in his place, I’m not so sure I would have done the right thing either” (Parker).

In his portrayal of Jesus, Derly Cirlos seems the embodiment of belief and self-denial. His torturous march to Calvary is a riveting, trance-like performance, difficult to watch but impossible to look away from; during the crucifixion, his cries to God sound anguished but strangely ecstatic, suggesting the redemptive, transformative power of Christ’s sacrifice. After seeing Cirlos as Jesus, it is hard to imagine any other actor in the role: slender and dark, with long black hair, a mustache, and beard, he fits the part. In a profile for the *San Antonio Express-News*, Cirlos is quoted as saying, “I hope it will inspire others to have deeper faith in God” (Parker).

Father Garcia says that by bringing parishioners together through faith, hard work, and a sense of community, the *Via Crucis* has been transformative—not just for its audience, but for the cast and crew as well. Perhaps the most dramatic example of transformation is the experience of director Mario Mandujano, who spent his first night in San Antonio sleeping on a park bench. Homeless and unemployed, he sought help at San

Fernando; by committing himself to the church and Passion play, he found a “family,” learned English, got work, and met his future wife. Now, as a lay leader and director of the *Via Crucis*, Mandujano touches the lives of thousands every year. Doubtless his story exemplifies the power of faith in ordinary people, the same idea that animated Pope Urban’s sanctioning of the Feast of Corpus Christi centuries ago. Through the immediate and redemptive power of performance, the *Via Crucis* players embody their beliefs—and thus live their faith to inspire others.

Stacey Connelly
Trinity University

Notes

1. In a personal interview, Rector David Garcia explained that the *Via Crucis* is handled entirely by parishioners; neither he nor San Fernando’s other full-time priest act as supervisors or administrators. A few days before the actual performance, Garcia is usually invited to attend a rehearsal to offer any comments or suggestions he might have, but his role is mainly to offer support and spiritual direction.

Works Consulted

The Holy Bible. Nashville, TN: Cornerstone Book Publishers, 1998.

Garcia, David. Personal Interview. 19 May 2006.

Parker, J. Michael. “View of Resurrection.” *San Antonio Express-News* 14 April 2006: 1B.

“Passion Play Deepens Faith.” *San Antonio Express-News* 15 April 2006:1B.

