Images of Penance, Images of Mercy

By Martha Mary McGaw, CSJ

An exhibition of religious images from the Hispanic Southwest (1860-1910), titled "Images of Penance, Images of Mercy," is currently being shown at the Fred Jones Jr. Art Center at the University of Oklahoma Museum of Art, Norman.

It opened Jan. 19 and will continue until March 15. The exhibit was organized by the Taylor Museum, a part of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, one of the largest owners of Hispanic images. Dr. William Wroth, a specialist in Hispanic cultural history of the Southwest and northern Mexico, served as project director for the exhibit. His book, "Images of Penance, Images of Mercy," published by Oklahoma University Press, 1991, furnishes excellent background material for understanding this exhibit.

The exhibit is very beautifully arranged and catalogued. The santos fall into two categories. A retablo is a painting done on wood which could be used by itself or as part of an altar screen. A bali is a three-dimensional painted sculpture varying in size from one to two feet to life-size. Some of the bales have garments sewn for them. They may have real hair. Almost always the figures of Christ are articulated, with folded shoulders, elbows, knees and hands so that the figures can be placed in varying positions.

This exhibit concentrates more on bales than on retablos. The santos shown are those which were used by the Catholic lay confessions in New Mexico and southern Colorado from 1860 to 1910 although some are modern, a few dated 1901. For the most part the santos are Passion figures, showing Christ suffering, and were used in Holy Week processions. There are no santos depicting Christ after his resurrection.

Some background for this exhibit may be needed. New Mexico and southern Colorado formed the northernmost frontier for the Spanish Empire in the New World from the 1600s on. But this area was isolated from the other Spanish settlements and also offered a harsh environment. It never became heavily populated.

Franciscan priests took care of the spiritual needs of the people. Daily life centered on faith, Penance, love and union prepared one for eternal life. Penance was very important. Lay penitential confraternities (cofradies) which had been numerous in Spain from the 15th and 16th centuries spread to the New World and from Mexico and were given a new lease to New Mexico.

The Brotherhood of the Sangre de Cristo began to grow. Today many are called the Brotherhood of our Father Jesus Nazareno. Popularly the brotherhoods are known as the Penitentes.

The brethren (hermanos) organized processions during Holy Week to reenact the suffering and crucifixion of Christ. At one time self-flagellation was practiced until that was forbidden by the church since it led to excesses.

The brothers also served as a welfare agency for their members and families through monitory assistance, donations of food and labor, vigil for the deceased, and interment. They were dedicated to living pious Christian lives through devotion to the sufferings of Christ. Their devotion was most obvious during Holy Week processions.

The saints which were used during Holy Week were kept during the year in meeting houses (moradas). Moradas usually had two rooms. One was a chapel where the statues were kept. The other was a meeting room where members came regularly and where they lived during Holy Week.

The Brotherhood is still very active in many communities in New Mexico and to some extent in southern Colorado.

Dr. Wroth said he first became interested in the santos of the Hispanics when he lived in New Mexico in Hispanic villages in the late 60s and 70s. He was working on his doctoral dissertation on cultures for the University of Oregon.

"I was impressed by the simplicity and sincerity of the people," he said. "They had faith. And their art was done not just for humanitarianistic reasons but because of their faith."

"The brotherhoods are alive today, attracting young people," he said. In connection with the exhibit, the art museum has posters, books, jewelry and tapes. Education programs will be offered.

On Feb. 6, 13, 20 (7 p.m.) there will be a film series. The first will be "Conquest of Souls." The second will be "1492." The third will be "Cortez and the Legend."

On Feb. 29 (2 p.m.) Charles Carrillo, a contemporary santos, religious image maker, will give a lecture and demonstration. Carrillo is from Santa Fe, N.M.

On Sunday, March 1, a Family Fiesta will give families an opportunity to enjoy Hispanic folk art-making, dance, music, storytelling and a demonstration by Charles Carrillo. All programs are free and open to the public.