

# THE CHALLENGE OF PRIESTLESS PARISHES

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Learning from Latin America

EDWARD L. CLEARY, EDITOR

WITH David T. Orique, OP

INTRODUCTION by Robert Schreiter, C.P.P.S



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## Argentina: Praying Women Ministers and Keepers of the Faith

*Cynthia Folquer, OP*

THE HIGH MOUNTAIN INDIGENOUS communities of northwest Argentina have maintained a strong tradition of Andean Christianity without benefit of resident priests for centuries. How they accomplished that only became evident after twenty years of observation. I found evidence of the effects of the first evangelization of Christianity mixed with indigenous religiosity. Jesus Christ and the Virgin live harmoniously with the earth goddess Pachamama, nature goddess Llastay, and several deities of nature.

When priests are scarce—as they have been for centuries in this region of Argentina—indigenous communities have maintained their version of Christian religiosity through a deeply embedded cultural system in which lay persons assumed responsibility for the practice of faith. Women have been especially active as ministers who pray and educate children in religion.

There is clearly a mixture of Catholic tradition and ancestral religion. Through the years of my friendship with and investigation of these communities, I discovered that it was women who kept alive the memory of the native and

Catholic traditions. I recorded their voices, prayers, stories, and songs as part of an oral history analysis. In this chapter, I will address how women acted as the custodians and teachers of tradition to preserve the faith for centuries with only the sporadic presence of priests.

The high mountain region in Tucumán is a severely isolated area, even in such a modern country as Argentina. The region is so far removed from highways that it can be reached only on horseback along the countless paths that crisscross mountains and gorges. Several places that I investigated are six to eight hours away from tiny points on the map—for example, Raco and El Siambón, to which I traveled by bus or car and then switched to horseback. (Riding horses is a long-standing skill for Argentine men and women.) A few landing strips for small planes are located in hamlets and are typically used only for medical emergencies.

The indigenous communities studied are in the districts of Trancas, Tafi del Valle, and Tafi Viejo of Tucumán province. They have had electricity from solar panels for only four years. They can now watch television and thus they have more contact with urban life.

### The Sporadic Presence of Priests

Evangelization in this region began in the middle of the sixteenth century, when the first priests came with the conquistadors. The presence of priests was always scarce in Tucumán, which is some distance away from Buenos Aires, and very sporadic, particularly in the mountainous regions. No statistics of priests are extant for earlier historical periods for this province, but table 1 shows the prolonged scarcity of priests.

Table 1.  
Priests and Population of Tucumán Province<sup>1</sup>

Date	Source	Population in Tucumán	Priests
1869	National Census	108,953	55
1914	National Census/ Ad Limina Inform	332,933	88
1949	Ad Limina Inform	659,117	149
1961	Ecclesiastical Yearbook	742,000	155
1972	Church Annual Statistics	559,307 <sup>2</sup>	139
1981	Church Annual Statistics	703,708	127
1992	Church Annual Statistics	815,075	111
2000	Church Annual Statistics	996,178	132
2008	Church Annual Statistics	1,158,870	149

From the colonial period, this region of the Southern Cone was a marginal area of the Spanish Empire. Hence it was only infrequently that a bishop came to administer the sacrament of orders. The few candidates for the priesthood typically had to go to Buenos Aires, Córdoba, Chile, or Charcas (present-day Bolivia)<sup>3</sup> on very long journeys to be ordained. Further, recruiting for clerical life was difficult. The late creation of the Viceroyalty of Río de la Plata (1776) did not put an end to the long periods of vacant bishoprics in the region that in turn resulted in a lack of ordinations.

Later, with the Argentine revolutionary process of the early 1800s, the ecclesiastic situation weakened even more, and the lack of communication between the Church and the Holy See between 1810 and 1858 resulted in the nearly complete absence of bishops and the impossibility of new ordinations.<sup>4</sup> The enlightened romanization and organized

parishes of the Catholic Church in the nineteenth century did not reach these societies, particularly in the rural areas, where a large part of the population was scattered until the mid-twentieth century. Only occasionally did missionaries come and offer sacraments to large gatherings. Pastoral activity was not aimed at educating individuals and forming their consciences.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout recent centuries, the only resident ministers were "praying women/men." Only by the end of the nineteenth century did a slow process of revitalization of the Church begin in Argentina with the creation of seminaries and new dioceses, along with the arrival of European religious congregations or the restoration of established religious orders. The more "disciplined" and "parochialized" Catholicism of Italian and Spanish immigrants to Argentina who came at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries was not as common, since this region had the lowest migratory percentage with respect to the pre-existing population (according to state data, it was between 4 and 8 percent toward 1914, when the national median percentage was 30 percent).<sup>4</sup> Fluctuations in populations of priests and people continued in this period until the crisis provoked by the Second Vatican Council, which constituted a crisis-and-change type of religious upheaval in Argentina together with the complex political situation and cultural changes of the 70s that shook both Church and society.

### Religion from the Mother

Since indigenous people have been isolated for a very long period, they actively maintain pockets of beliefs and traditions related to ecology, health, and religion (they believe there are few walls between the three aspects of life). Both Christian and native traditions exist together, and they

make up an important reservoir of customs that challenge urban life with old and still-relevant insights.

Women's faith is fundamental to the construction of the religious experience of the group, because the religious subject is the family or the community in these rural societies.<sup>5</sup> Here faith is *not* the consequence of a decision or a personal conversion; every person is born into it just as they are born into a tradition. Faith is transmitted through the same process of socialization as culture.<sup>6</sup>

Women preserved both indigenous and Christian traditions, and they ensured their transmission generation after generation. It was the mother who passed along a way of being in the world, a symbolic order that makes up a set of relations with God, human beings, and the cosmos. As Luisa Muraro notes, when the mother teaches her children how to speak, she gives them a way of being in the world together with their native language.<sup>7</sup>

The foundation myths of the high-mountain communities are the warp of everyday life. Mothers and grandmothers teach children about their world and history, thus strengthening identity roots. Human life is a multiple framework of stories. Thanks to them, persons, groups, and communities stay alive and meaningful. These narrations are the roots and projections to the future for their members.

Women, possessors of their own symbolic order, help to create a habitat and to contribute to the creation of their small cultural world. The women of these communities have a maternal authority with which they build relationships and construct and transmit family knowledge. Authority is the capacity to create order, understand, and decide about the self. In this sense, praying women of the high mountains wield true authority.

The preservation of tradition depends on authority in these rural communities that are isolated from the processes of urbanization and industrialization. Authority generates

continuity by imposing a code of values that guide individual and collective conduct from generation to generation. It is a heritage that defines and maintains order. In this universe, states Danièle Hervieu Léger, religion is the only code that makes sense and that establishes and expresses social continuity.<sup>10</sup> Tradition is thus defined by the authority that is grounded in the past.

The mountainous communities of Tucumán are immersed in a number of representations, images, theoretical and practical knowledge, behaviors, and attitudes that give continuity to the past. Religious collective memory strengthens collective identity because these communities understand themselves as a believing lineage. The rites, the regular repetition of gestures and words fixed in them, facilitate the continuation of their heritage. The production of collective memory shapes the community itself and has a creative and normative character at the same time.<sup>11</sup>

### Indigenous Peoples and the Encounter with Catholicism

Most contemporary Latin American scholars examining religious phenomena in their region no longer accept the once-dominant evolutionist perspective that emphasized the linear evolution of history. According to this perspective, secularization would cause reason to prevail over "myth" and the "holy" and an age would arrive in which religion would cease to exist and religious institutions would totally lose their influence. This evolution would take place with modernization and industrialization. From this point of view, many anthropologists have studied the "remains" of traditional religions and carry out inventories of what is disappearing. As the eminent Argentine scholar Fortunato Mallimaci states, however, most recent research analyzes

religious phenomena, not only as a legitimizer of a social order, but also as a generator of resistance, struggles, and confrontations.<sup>12</sup> What for some is legalization, for others works as resistance.

In this study, we approach the religious experience of the high mountain communities of Tucumán by attempting to discover signs of native cultural resistance that have survived in their beliefs and rituals for five centuries. In addition, the Iberian baroque aspects of their Catholicism are another bastion for protecting their identity against urban and industrialized culture.

The contemporary religious diversity of the Andean region can be traced to the sixteenth century, when Spanish Catholicism came to America, along with some aspects of African traditions that would interact with native traditions. In this period, three religious worlds with different beliefs, origin, history, symbology, and hierarchies met.<sup>13</sup>

In sixteenth-century Europe, the memory of the "witch hunt" that had tried to control popular beliefs that had escaped church regulation was still very much alive. The persistence of practices and creeds that were outside Church-defined orthodoxy made the autonomy of some of the recalcitrant sectors evident, and it was perceived as an attack against the current state policies. The winning religious culture came to America with a series of intransigencies already institutionalized.

On the South American continent, another history was unfolding. The Diaguitas people inhabited the region I observed. They were conquered and became part of the Inca empire some decades before the Spanish arrived, as the Inca empire (or Tawantinsuyu) extended its influence to the Argentinean Northwest in the fifteenth century. The Inca religious world left its imprint on the Indian-American culture of this region. As recorded in the first reports of the Spaniards, the efforts of the Incas to manage and integrate

their territory also included religion as a way to establish ideological unity. However, their efforts could not overcome preexisting beliefs of the tribes absorbed by Inca power.

Christian missionaries arrived in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the memory of war against the Muslims in Spain and with the later experience of the Protestant Reformation crisis in Europe. The Spanish clergy had a solid power structure and ideological control. When the preachers settled in the Viceroyalty of Peru (which included northern Argentina), they refined their conceptual tools to counter any dogmatic deviation. The Inquisition and secular clergy enjoyed a well-defined authority in the cities where most of the population was white or christianized. Away from urbanized places, religious orders were in charge of evangelization and the organizational structure of pastoral care was not as well developed. Hence, the rural world kept their local gods. They survived the extirpation campaigns carried out in the seventeenth century, something similar to the witch hunts of fifteenth-century in Europe. For the sixteenth- to eighteenth-century Spaniards, evangelizing was also hispanizing. Religion was part of the state apparatus and the religious-ideological unification was instrumental to holding the power of monarchy in these lands.<sup>14</sup> However, communal cults persisted in the Inca Empire and under Spanish authority under the formal acceptance of Christianity. Thus, native and Catholic traditions underwent a series of adaptations and mutual influences.

The Calchaqui wars that lasted through the sixteenth century kept the Spanish authorities on constant alert in the southern part of their empire, the Argentinean Northwest.<sup>15</sup> Indian resistance was very strong in this part of the Inca Empire and the Viceroyalty of Peru. Through resistance, communal religious practices were revitalized and messianic movements and pan-regional sanctuaries emerged.<sup>16</sup>

In the context of our study, when the Spaniards arrived, the present-day mountain territory of Tucumán was inhabited by the Diaguitas. This encompassed the Aconquijas, Amaichas, Yocaviles, Quilmes, and part of the Calchaquíes peoples, among others. Lorandi and Bioxadós report that the names of these tribes were related to their place of origin rather than to real groups or identities.<sup>17</sup> The eastern boundaries of the Diaguita area are marked by the frontier of the Tucumán Andes,<sup>18</sup> through which the Diaguitas came to settle in the high valleys such as Tafi and Choromoros in Tucumán.

In this context, Hispanic American Catholicism emerged from the cultural collision between the "baroque Catholicism" of Spain and "Amerindian religiosity" of the native peoples. As Dussel notes, the struggle between Spanish and Indian warriors was also a struggle between the gods of both armies. The defeat of Amerindian forces was for those men the defeat of their gods at the hands of Christian gods.<sup>19</sup>

Christian Parker explains that the origin of religiosity in Latin America lies in the trauma provoked by the arrival of Europeans in these lands. The most sophisticated cults and indigenous religious agents were ousted and repressed, the old gods became "demons," the ancient cults were considered "idolatry" and their priests "wizards." Their devotions became "pagan," their gods were under the light of the new unique God, and they began a slow agony. The natives witnessed their death.<sup>20</sup>

Such destruction was not complete, however. Indians accepted Catholic dogma and liturgy, but their own religious beliefs remained unchanged. The process seemed to be the triumph of the foreigners over the natives, but after some time the transformation was visible in the winning indigenous religion.

Syncretism in the cultural mediations was carried out not only in the dogma or theory but also in the liturgy. Such

an amalgam affects the ethos or way of being in the world. Manuel Marzal, a leading anthropologist, defined syncretism as "the formation of a new system originated in two religious systems in contact with one another. It is the product of the dialectic interaction of the elements from the two original systems (beliefs, rites, forms of organization and ethic rules) that causes such elements to persist in the new system, totally disappear, synthesize with those that are similar in the other system or reinterpret themselves for a change in meanings."<sup>27</sup>

Hispanic American Catholicism took what had come from Europe but acquired a local color in these lands. This religiocultural collision would have an influence both in the Indians and in the Spaniards, in the Creoles as well as in the mestizos, thus confirming a state of affairs that would prevail both in the countryside and the towns, although to a lesser extent in the latter. In the rural world, the people remained attached to their old gods, while the clergy—the specialized sector of the new religion—was unable fully to reach the Indian world with their new truths. The removed gods acted as a resistance, causing the indigenous people to become secluded and impervious.<sup>28</sup>

### Are They Christian? Indigenous Religious Experience

Any religious experience implies objects of worship or devotion, mediators and mediations. Religious persons strive to put two realities in touch with one another by means of rituals that "relegate" them, establishing a link between humanity and what transcends it, the "other," the divinity. The following account allows for a deeper insight into what it means to be an indigenous religious person in Latin America. Are they to be counted as Catholic and

Christian? At very least, one might say that they would benefit from another evangelization. But Christians might learn from them such practices as care for the environment, spiritual sensitivity, and remembering the deceased.

### THE GODS OF NATURE

The recipients of many of the prayers are Pachamama<sup>29</sup> and Llastay,<sup>30</sup> surviving gods of nature in Indian imagery. Pachamama is the great earth goddess of farming peoples, mother earth, the recipient of many rituals and tributes. Both Pachamama and Llastay have a specific function within the society that harbors them: they are the protectors of soil, fauna, and flora; they control hunting and fishing and, therefore, preserve ecology.

### THE SOULS AND THE CULT OF THE DEAD

The belief in the survival of the soul has deep roots in the mountain culture. The soul is not merely spiritual; it is, indeed, the person who can somehow eat and speak. It is seen like a vapor or felt like the wind. The *ánimas* (souls) thus have a certain corporality. *Ánimas* are beings with whom peasants live. All the fear in the mountain is nourished by them. Apparitions, ghosts, screams, the whistling of the *ánimas*, all still force people to practice spells, to show the crossguard of their daggers, to sprinkle the place with holy water, and to make the sign of the cross fervently. Indigenous as well as Catholic tradition with its angels and demons, spirits of the other world, and souls in purgatory make up a voluminous body of legends and myths.

Cristina Ayala<sup>31</sup> tells us of her confidence in the intercession of souls: "The soul I pray to the most is that of Germán Álvarez, he grants me whatever I ask for. If I'm looking for a lost animal, he helps me find it." Irma Ayala<sup>32</sup> also says: "To the little souls I pray before I travel, that I may fare well when I go and when I return. I pray for my children,



that they get help in school, that they may have a good memory that they may learn, that they don't steal. The little souls are miraculous and they protect us."

The medieval Christian doctrine of purgatory took hold very strongly in the Andean world of the Argentinean Northwest. We may find numerous prayers that bear witness to the strength of this belief. In an introductory prayer to the rosary used by community *rezadoras* (praying women), we find an intercession for the souls in purgatory: "You know well Mother Mary, that there is no pain more pitiful than the one the poor little souls of purgatory suffer, for them we beg you for their relief, we beg you for their glory."<sup>27</sup>

The rituals about death constitute a central core of Amerindian Catholicism, heir of colonial baroque piety and of the ancestors' cult traditions of the native cosmovision. In the communities observed, the funeral wake for the *angelito*, carried out when the deceased is a child, is one of the best-attended ceremonies. The baby, it is believed, becomes a little angel when it dies, and turns into an important intercessor in heaven. Children have a privileged place in the "holy ground," since all of them are buried at the entrance of the graveyard.

All Souls Day draws a massive assembly of people at the cemetery to pray. This visit is not primarily for a mourning but a gathering to celebrate the place of deceased spirits in the life of the community. Simple wreaths that hang from horse saddles are placed on the crosses of the graveyard, and a large number of candles are lit on the tombs to "illuminate" the souls. The cult of the dead, visiting their graves and praying for them, has a privileged place among the rituals of the high mountain communities.

### THE SAINTS AND POPULAR CANONIZATIONS

Indigenous communities do not depend on the Holy See for canonizations; rather, they tend toward canonizing

those who had an extraordinary death or an innocent life. These people come to be objects of devotion and are made into local and regional saints. The inhabitants of this region carry out canonizations and generate devotions in the hope that new and sometimes ephemeral saints will listen to their dramatic requests.

The place where somebody was found dead is considered a holy place; a cross is set there and a little monument is built with stones where candles are permanently burning, rogations are chanted, and promises are made because that deceased person is "miraculous." A typical canonization of these communities is that of Mercedes Yampa, a heroic policeman who died frozen in the summit of Raco because great fatigue brought on by his work made him fall asleep and freeze to death. Near the place where he was found, a stone monument was built and a cross was put on it. All those who climb the mountain have to pass by it and it is common to stop, make petitions, and ask for the blessing of the deceased for a safe journey.<sup>28</sup>

The patron saints have the function of a *waka*, or protector god of the local community. The patron saints characteristic of the Hispanic towns replaced the totems of the indigenous clans (animals, plants, or imaginary or celestial divine characters) with which the group identified. The favorite saints, such as St. Mary, are those who protected cattle and other animals or produced abundant harvests, such as St. Isidore the Farmer. St. Martha is considered the patron of household chores, and it is common for women to entrust themselves to her for difficult tasks at home. St. Rita, patron of the impossible, and St. Anthony of Padua, patron of lost objects, are also favorite intercessors. On the home altars, pictures and images of St. Anthony and St. Jude Thaddeus and many more can be found.

Dofia Panchita Morales describes the images she keeps in her home altar:

Here we believe in all saints...because, for example, I don't have St. Peter but I pray to him...I don't have St. Paul, but I pray to him, I don't have all the images, but I pray to them... St. Cayetano I have and I ask him that my children don't lack bread, I ask for myself and for everybody...because I see that in some places the poor don't even have a piece of bread... We pray to the almitas, to St. Martha who is the protector of the servants... to St. Rita I pray because she can grant any request, she gets the impossible... St. Anthony is the patron of the lost things.<sup>29</sup>

In the prayer notebook that belongs to Doña Panchita Morales,<sup>30</sup> the following poem is found to invoke all saints:

My sweet Jesus  
Look with piety  
At my lost soul  
For her mortal blame.  
My Lord Saint Ignatius, *alférez mayor*<sup>31</sup>  
Wave that flag  
For the Lord is going by.  
My Lord St. Peter,  
God's servant,  
Open the door to it  
For the love of God.  
My Lady St. Ann, sovereign mother  
And grandmother of God.  
St. Magdalena,  
By the cross  
Run and stay by Jesus' headboard.  
Jesus of Nazareth,  
King of the jews,  
Do not abandon us  
By day or by night.  
My sweet Jesus

My life and my love  
Save me from sins  
My Lord.

Prayers, such as this prayer to St. Michael, are also addressed to angels and archangels, characteristic recipients of colonial baroque devotions:

O glorious St Michael, prince of the angels,  
guardian of the Church and executioner of the  
infernial dragon, we wish by your hand and free of  
blame to present ourselves to the Divine Majesty.  
Amen.

#### GROTTOES: CHRIST OF ALTO DE LA POPOSA

Grottoes are scattered throughout the Andean region. In the area studied, the image of the Lord of the Heights of La Poposa is in a grotto at 4000 meters (12,000 feet) above sea level. As one of the villagers from Chaquivil recounts, the reason why such a high place had been chosen was Christ's function as a protector of the travelers from the "spooks" that inhabit the summits and the "mysteries" of the mountain.<sup>32</sup> Another adds that it is a very lonely place, and it was chosen for people who pass by looking for a lost animal to know there is a Christ up there who is looking after the stray.<sup>33</sup>

#### THE CROSS

The outstanding element among the devotions to Jesus Christ is the cross. There are crosses by the paths, left to memorialize the name of someone who died there, and travelers stop in front of them to light candles and pray. On May 3rd, the day of the Cross is celebrated.<sup>34</sup> Everybody goes to the cemetery or "holy ground" to decorate crosses with flowers and to clean the above-ground tombs. After praying, they

share the food and drinks that each one brought. As people from very distant places participate in the ceremonies, a market fair is organized on that occasion for them to sell or exchange their products. The flowery crosses of May become an assertion of life over the experience of death.

A villager, Felix Coluccio, analyzes the different celebrations of the cross of May that are carried out all over the Argentinean Northwest, and the similarity of gestures and rites to those of our feast observed at the Chaquivil cemetery is remarkable. Many times the cross becomes a magic, talismanic element. After killing an animal, for example, and before skinning it, the sign of the cross is made on it with the spilled blood to ask for Pachamama's blessing to get the cattle to breed. When mountain dwellers travel at night they live with "ghosts" that they scare away, "pouring wine in the shape of a cross" or showing their knives to the crosses placed at intersections of paths "to get the spook to go away."<sup>11</sup>

### THE HOLIEST TRINITY

The Triune God is named in some ancient petitions that are still recited by the pray-ers. In the prayer book of Paula Velardez, we find the following text:

All faithful Christians are obliged to have devotion with all their hearts. With the holy cross Christ wanted to suppress our pains and died to redeem us from enemy captivity. Hence, you have to make the sign of the cross with your right hand three times, the first on your forehead for God to free us from evil thoughts, the second on your mouth for God to free us from dirty words, the third on your chest for God to free us from evil works, and saying like this: Our Father... Hail Mary Full of grace, Wife of the Holy Spirit, born without original sin, Immaculate Conception. Amen."<sup>12</sup>

### VIRGIN MARY

The Virgin Mary, Mother of God, had a fertile ground in the agricultural pre-Christian cult of Pachamama. Many of the Marian cults in Latin America and Argentina arise in places of pre-Christian cults. Evangelists tried to give Christian meaning to the "native holy place." Most Marian sanctuaries emerged in that fashion. Marian grottoes in Chaquivil are holy places along pilgrimage routes. It is common for travelers to stop by to ask for protection for the journey or to light candles in keeping a promise.

### THE DEMONS

Baroque Catholicism with its angels and demons found elements in the native tradition that favored strong beliefs. Many gestures of Andean religiosity are directed at neutralizing the effects of the multiple ways in which the "demon" can deceive, curse, or hurt mortals. Mountain dwellers fight against the devil, demons, Satan, evil spirits, and so forth, with their amulets, spells, and magic formulas, among which is the signal of the cross.

The "Salamanca" is the place where the devil lives. Those who have sold him their souls in exchange for wealth and triumph in life go there. Francisca Morales tells us that the Salamanca exists in the mountain: "There's Salamanca in a place called La Isla, near Potrero de las Tablas, we were going to La Rinconada... you can see a black thing, like the entrance to a dark cave or maybe it is just black or there may be a black mineral that gives it this look."

People go to The Salamanca to learn any profession. "If you want to be a good carpenter, you go to the Salamanca and learn... the one who teaches there is the devil, of course, because, who can live there?... They say you learn and pay with your soul."<sup>13</sup>

## Maintaining Faith: Women Ministers and Core Practices

Belief was kept alive through ritual routines conducted by mediators (one of the key roles of a priest of most religions) within the community. The indigenous people acted as if human beings cannot establish relations directly with the Divine. Hence they established bridges or mediators to relate them to the Divine. All mediators, for them, relate to corporality. Humans need to mediate toward the Absolute through ways that are characteristic of their own corporality. Three of the most common practices are processions, home altars, and novenas. Holy water and blessings are also common.

Readers are invited to consider these archaic practices through the light of contemporary papal teaching that regards many ancient religions as containing "seeds of wisdom." Indeed, they may have something to teach us about the body in worship.

### PROCESSIONS

The *misachico*, or procession, is among the most frequent modes of intercession for asking for some grace or to give thanks for a favor granted. It consists of transporting an image of the Virgin or some saint on a portable platform. The sacralization of everyday space is carried out by means of these processions traversing paths and ravines. The sacred places to which these pilgrimages go are the goal that is reached after much sacrifice. (Physical suffering or striving is central to this religious devotion.)

The villagers make arrangements for musical instruments, such as a bass drum and violin, to accompany the image in procession to "give music to the image."<sup>44</sup> The procession begins with the image escorted by numerous Argentinean and papal flags with the colors corresponding to each saint or Marian devotion. The flags are waved at the

sound of the music. The image has been adorned with flowers and other decorations,<sup>45</sup> and it sways to the rhythm and cadence of those who carry it.

When the procession is over, the image is "untied." Each participant in the celebration approaches and unties a ribbon or a flower with which the platform and the image were decorated while the musicians accompany this gesture with bass drum, *bandoneón* (concertina-like instrument), or violin. Once the rite is concluded, a member of the community, the oldest woman or the person who organized the *misachico* to fulfill a promise, carries out the blessing with the image. This is known as the "treading on," since the image is placed upon the heads of the participants, marking a cross. Thus the image is considered "charged" with grace after the procession, pouring its blessings on the believers.

Secundino Rasgado explains the motives for a *misachico*: "A promise is made to a saint, Jesus, or the Virgin, asking for any need, such as for health if someone is sick, for the animals and for all the needs of the people of the place. Then a promise is made, a candle is lighted for a saint, and the procession is celebrated."<sup>46</sup>

As occurs with pilgrimages generally, the *misachico* produces a community experience that strengthens the pilgrim in social links, in the sense of belonging, and in enhancing communitarian identity. As David Carrasco states, the relationships created among the people who share the rite of pilgrimage make them experience an intense feeling of intimacy and equality.<sup>47</sup>

During a *misachico*, barriers among the members of the community fade; even the angriest feel a common link based on the unifying experience of the pilgrimage. We concur with Virgilio Elizondo that the sense of a pilgrimage "seems to answer a deep necessity of human beings to go beyond the limits of ordinary experience to enter the mysterious dominions of the afterlife."<sup>48</sup> *Misachicos* constitute an

"open air liturgy," where contact with nature is an important source of attraction.

Raimon Panikkar argues that "Man and nature belong to each other. They are joined by space...plains, mountains, valleys, gorges, rivers, rocks, trees, animals and men...all are part of a whole and are united by space...Man is also a cosmic being."<sup>4</sup> This cosmic experience is evident in these open air rituals, when *misachicos* are seen traversing the hills and the violin and bass drum, heard from far away, are the signal that attracts many neighbors to join in the procession. Pilgrimage has been a constant phenomenon in all religions throughout history.<sup>4</sup>

### HOME ALTARS AND NOVENAS

In the family dwelling, a place is reserved for religious worship. This is a small home altar consisting of a table where the images of the Virgin and saints are placed together with candles with which to "illuminate" them. The family, presided over by the oldest woman or the person in charge of prayer, gathers around this altar to pray the rosary and ask for their daily needs.

Among the most common intercessions are the prayers, rogations, or novenas very often carried out by designated persons who pray (pray-ers). These women were taught by their mothers and grandmothers and are chosen from among the ones who have the gift to recite easily. Generally they use old handwritten notebooks they inherited from previous official pray-ers to brighten up their recitation. Hence, some prayers express ancient contents and manners. In each community, there are one or two official pray-ers and they are always wanted for novenas and rogations. They do not receive any pay for this service, only deferential treatment and room and board.

Novenas are celebrated in honor of different Marian devotions and a number of saints. A novena is arranged in

order to ask for something or acknowledge a favor granted or to fulfill a promise. Through the year, many people organize novenas so that in several homes or chapels groups are found faithfully and devoutly praying the rosary at different times.

In the well-worn notebook of Doña Francisca Morales, we find an ancient introductory prayer to the Rosary asking for "victory against the infidel heretics" and "peace and harmony among the Christian princes," expressing a rogation of past centuries:

We offer this part of the Rosary in memory and in reverence to the Holiest Son of God and we beg that our Catholic faith be exalted. Give us peace and concord among the Christian princes, victory against the infidels, and heretics; and the conversion of all those of our trade, of our catholic religion, and true penitence of all sinners. Give the blessed souls in purgatory spiritual and corporal health to all of those alive. Holiest Virgin increase our devotion to the Holiest Rosary and have our hearts feel the wonderful effects of this sacred devotion and give us, Queen of Heaven, protection. Look after us, Our Lady, in all our needs and dangers. Give us the forgiveness of our sins from your Holiest Son and the perseverance in so sacred a devotion so that by serving in this life we may deserve seeing and enjoying eternal glory. Amen.<sup>15</sup>

### HOLY WATER AND BLESSINGS

Another fundamental intercession in this religious experience is the use of holy water to bless the most diverse objects. Holy water is considered a very strong medicine in the treatment of disease and protection against any evil. Thus, as priestly presence is very sporadic, many turn to "help water" for the newly born to receive a blessing until

they can be properly baptized. According to an old belief, every Good Friday, women gather spring water since on that day everything is blessed by the mystery of redemption. On that day too, medicinal herbs are harvested to be used through the year by those who have the power to cure (many women take on the role of healers) in the conviction that herbs are more powerful if they are blessed.

### Conclusion

The long periods of absence of bishop and clergy during the Spanish empire, the decrease of priests during the Wars of Independence, the slow growth of a national clergy in the first decades of the twentieth century, and the crisis of the Second Vatican Council in the 70s brought about the emergence of spontaneous lay ministries in the church of Argentina, especially in rural areas. These lay ministers were mostly women who kept the thread of the memory of the faith in their communities. This faith, imbibed in the baroque Catholicism of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, was preserved with the influence of ancestral native traditions.

The richness of this Latin American popular Catholicism has been maintained and transmitted from generation to generation, from grandmothers to daughters and granddaughters, thus making up a feminine genealogy in which the nucleus of religious faith has been preserved and enriched. Praying women of the high mountain communities of Tucumán have learned to save and recount old and new knowledge, like the scribe of the Gospel who learned that the kingdom of God is like the home owner who pulls out from his trunk "new and old things" (Matt 13:52).

Francisca Morales, Berta Gutiérrez, Simeona Pistán, Cristiana Ayala, and Paula Velardez are some of the names that evoke the number of women who, besides creating and

recreating life, carry out their every day civilizing, transmitting, and creating a way of being in the world.<sup>22</sup> These women understand their political action by securing life, as Hannah Arendt very well put it, making coexistence possible and space inhabitable, where God also has a place.<sup>23</sup>

### NOTES

1. The author is grateful to Lucía Santos Lepera for the data to make this chart based on national censuses and church statistics. This chart should be refined to distinguish the Catholic population from populations of other religions, especially since Pentecostals and other groups brought greater religious diversity to Argentina. See Ana Teresa Martínez, "Religión y diversidad en el NOA: explorando detrás de un Documento Regional de Identidad," *Sociedad y religión* 20, nos. 32/33 (2010): 157-87.

2. The population decreased because the closing of the sugar factory in Tucumán pushed a great stream of migration toward Buenos Aires.

3. For a view on the ecclesial situation in the history of Argentina, see Roberto Di Stefano, and Loris Zanatta, *Historia de la Iglesia Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Mondadori, 2000).

4. Américo Tonda's *La Iglesia argentina, incomunicada con Roma (1810-1858)* (Santa Fe: Editorial Castellví, 1965) offers insights on the small amount of priests in the Independence period.

5. Ana Teresa Martínez, "Religión y diversidad en el NOA."

6. N. Gomez and M. Isorni, "Demografía," *Cien años de historia* (Santiago del Estero: Editorial El Liberal, 1999), 287-308.

7. For a study of the importance of women in the transmission of faith, see Jean Delumeau, ed., *La religion de ma mère. Le rôle des femmes dans la transmission de la foi* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1992).

8. Juan Martín Velasco, "Religiosidad Popular y Evangelización," *Communio, Revista Católica Internacional* 9 (September–October 1987): 388–400.
9. Luisa Muraro, *El orden simbólico de la madre* (Madrid: Horas y Horas, 1994), 86.
10. Danièle Hervieu Léger, *La religión, hilo de memoria* (Barcelona: Herder, 2005), 141–45.
11. The contribution of Maurice Halbwachs, *La memoria colectiva* (Zaragoza, Spain: Prensas Universitarias de Zaragoza, 2004) is fundamental for approaching the question of the religious memory in the making of a community identity.
12. Fortunato Mallimacci notes the changes in understanding religiosity in "Religion," in *Diccionario de Ciencias Sociales y Políticas*, ed. Torcuato di Tella (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2008), 304–606.
13. For a synthetic view of this sixteenth-century process, see Luis Millones in his *Religiosidad Popular en el Mundo Andino* (Buenos Aires: Di Tella, 2008), 607–13.
14. Hans-Jürgen Prien, *La historia del cristianismo en América Latina* (Salamanca: Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca, 1985).
15. The reports on the Calchaquí wars are a fundamental tool to distinguish ethnic groups in the Argentinean Northwest. These documents have been transcribed by Teresa Piossek Prebisch and were published by the National General Archive, 1999. Marta Otonello and Ana María Lorandí, *Introducción a la Arqueología y Etnología. 10.000 años de Historia Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 1987). These studies also add interesting data on the constitution of native communities of this area.
16. Luis Millones, "Religiosidad Popular Andina," in *Diccionario de Ciencias Sociales y Políticas*, ed. Torcuato Di Tella et al. (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2008), *passim*.
17. Ana María Lorandí and R. Boixadós, "Etnohistoria de los Valles Calchaquíes en los siglos XVI y XVII," *Runa* 17–18 (1987–88): 266.

18. In the old chronicles, the first men to enter the Calchaquí Mountains are called "Tucumán Andes."

19. Enrique Dussel, *Historia General de la Iglesia en América Latina* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1983), 1:91. Tzvetan Todorov, *La conquista de América. El problema del otro* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2003), also analyzes this confrontation of gods.

20. This process of paganization of the defeated religion is poetically analyzed by María Zambrano, *El hombre y lo divino*, última edición (Mexico City: FCE, 2005), when she speaks about the collision between Roman gods and Christianity. Her insights can be very well applied to any experience of birth and death in different religions.

21. Manuel Marzal, *El Sincretismo Iberoamericano* (Lima: Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 1998), 175–9.

22. María Zambrano, *El hombre y lo divino*, 242.

23. Pachamama comes from the Inca tradition, and she has strong roots in Andean religiosity in general.

24. Llastay is a characteristic deity of the communities studied here. There are parallels with this protective deity of nature, but they are given other names in the Andean cosmivision of the Argentinean Northwest.

25. Interview with Cristina Ayala, Campo Santo de Chaquivil, Tucumán, November 2, 2008.

26. Interview with Irma Ayala, La Ramadita, Tucumán, October 7, 2005.

27. Handwritten prayer notebook of Francisca Morales, La Ramadita, Tucumán.

28. The data on Mercedes Yampa have been collected from the testimony of Agustín Pistán. Interview carried out in Cumbre de Raco, October 30, 2001.

29. Interview with Francisca Morales, La Ramadita, Tucumán, May 2, 2000.

30. Handwritten prayer notebook of Francisca Morales.

31. Colonial rank in pious associations.

32. Interview with Simeona Pistán, Chaquivil, Tucumán, September 24, 2006.

33. Interview with Secundino Rasgido, Chaquivil, Tucumán, May 25, 2008.

34. The Feast of the Holy Cross during May is an ancient celebration that was removed from the liturgical calendar, while the September liturgical remembrance continues.

35. These stories were told by Doña Delfina Chocobar, San José de Chaquivil, March 19, 1988.

36. Handwritten prayer notebook of Francisca Morales.

37. Interview with Francisca Morales.

38. Devotional images of baroque piety have been closely studied by historians of the colonial period. See Patricia Fogelman for diverse styles of such devotion: "El culto mariano y las representaciones de lo femenino. Recorrido historiográfico y nuevas perspectivas de análisis. La Aljaba Segunda Época," *Revista de Estudios de la Mujer* 10 (2006): 175–88, and Patricia Fogelman and Marta Penhos, "Una imagen mariana por los caminos del comercio en el siglo XVII. La Virgen de Luján," *Boletim do CEIB [Centro de Estudos da Imaginária Brasileira]* 11, no. 36 (2007): 1–5.

39. Dressing images, a baroque practice, was unsuccessfully fought by the efforts to introduce a more enlightened piety in this region. See Di Stéfano and Zanatta, *Historia*, 164.

40. Interview with Secundino Rasgido.

41. David Carrasco, "El viaje Sagrado: diversas formas de peregrinación," *Concilium, Revista Internacional de Teología* 266 (August 1996): 623.

42. Virgilio Elizondo, "La peregrinación, un constante ritual de la humanidad," *Concilium, Revista Internacional de Teología* 266 (August 1996): 604.

43. Raimon Panikkar, "Peregrinación al Kailāsa y Mānasaras," *Concilium: Revista Internacional de Teología* 266 (August 1996): 667.

44. Carrasco, "El viaje Sagrado," 662, remarks that "The itinerant characteristic of human existence is reflected in the Tibetan word used to name a living being, human or not: groba, which means 'the one who marches.'"

45. Prayer notebook of Doña Francisca Morales, San José de Chaquivil.

46. I. Beltrán, Marta Tarres, et al., *De dos en dos, prácticas de creación y recreación de la vida y la convivencia humana* (Madrid: Horas y Horas, 2000).

47. Hannah Arendt, *¿Qué es la política?*, (Barcelona: Paidós 1997), 67.