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## GOOD FRIDAY IN OMAHA, NEBRASKA: A MEXICAN CELEBRATION

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**ABSTRACT**—Mexicans and Mexican Americans in Nebraska commemorate Holy Week with a popular display of religious fervor. In semblance with the old religious traditions in Mexico, the Mexicanos, old and new residents, parade through the Omaha streets following the Way of the Cross on Good Friday. Processions, rituals, and plays are not only a yearly Catholic ritual in the streets of Omaha but an essential part of Mexican American and Latino cultural identity. Palm Sunday and the Way of the Cross are but a few of the constituent elements of the growing manifestations of Latino popular culture in the state. The religious celebrations are organized and sponsored by the Catholic parish of Saint Agnes-Virgin de Guadalupe, which are the pivot, protector, and guide of the Latino community in Omaha.

**KEY WORDS:** Omaha, Nebraska, Good Friday, Holy Week, Mexican American community, Catholic Church, popular culture

In the past 25 years, the number of Latino immigrants in the United States has increased dramatically. The influx of close to 32 million Hispanics, both as newcomers or in ancestry, in the population count not only has reconfigured the country's demographic composition but also has transformed American popular culture. In this respect, the national commemorative calendar has had its share of additions and accommodations. Civic and religious celebrations of Latino origin and flavor have been incorporated locally and nationally and are observed regularly. Community associations, grassroots organizations, business people, commercial sponsors, philanthropists, media, and government agencies fiercely compete to organize any and all celebrations. Common feasts are the *Cinco de Mayo*, *El Grito*, *Calle Ocho*, *El Dia de la Raza*, *Los Reyes*, *Dia de Muertos*, and Hispanic Heritage month, just to enumerate a short list of the nationally known commemorations (Carlson 1994). *Mariachis*, *salseros*, and *bandas* accompany parades, speeches, and public festivities. Food vendors of *tacos*, *arepas*, and all sorts

of *antojitos* fill the air with their inviting aroma, while merchants offer a myriad of arts and crafts in nearby booths. Nationwide Latino festivities have become common occurrences and an undeniable ingredient in the expanding ethnic tapestry of American popular culture (see Glossary of Spanish Terms at end of article).

Most of the observances have a local flavor according to the Latino demographic of the city or state. The majority of the celebrations are of Mexican origin, corresponding to the distribution of the Hispanic community in the United States. According to a Census Bureau report, two-thirds of all Latinos in the country come from Mexico (US Bureau of the Census 2000).

The unprecedented tidal wave of immigrants that entered the US in the late 1980s and early 1990s was mainly Latin American in origin, and Mexicans were on top of the numbers list (Martin and Midgley 1997). The rush of migration, both legal and undocumented, reinforced preexisting Hispanic communities in the US. As migration scholars have indicated, more now than ever before the new arrivals are moving from and to areas where networks of family and communal support are already in place (Portes 1995). Throughout the country Latinos have created enclaves based on kinship, friendship, and ethnicity. Many of these new communities can be traced back to the towns and regions of origin. Migratory clustering has reinforced attachment to cultural behaviors and solidified long-held beliefs.

As the Mexican community multiplies and strengthens its footing across the US, its civic and religious celebrations expand in number and visibility. Through the periodic commemoration of these observances Mexican cultural traditions have materialized in the secular and spiritual domains of American public spaces. Deeply embedded in Mexicans is their affiliation to popular religiosity, in particular their devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe, religious drama, and to the memorial of the Day of the Dead. These celebrations have crossed the border without the formality of a visa, ventured ever further north, and have surfaced in the Heartland of America. Mexican and Mexican American festivities are varied, but in all of them the spirit of community, ethnic identity, and the ritual of tradition are manifest. This article will focus on the commemoration of Holy Week by the Mexican community in Omaha, NE. It begins with a discussion of the background of religious celebrations in Mexico and a commentary on the historical presence of the Mexicans in Nebraska.

Among the most visible features of Mexican popular culture, at home and abroad, is the public display of gaiety, fanfare, rhythmic sounds, and

color. That there are close to 6,000 yearly civic and religious feasts observed in Mexico bespeaks this celebratory spirit. To outsiders, it is a culture identified by fiestas, carnivals, massive demonstrations of religious fervor, and in the political domain by the rowdy crowds during patriotic commemorations and demonstrations. To the Mexicans, celebrations, secular or religious, express and reinforce the people's sense of community, national pride, ethnic identity, and the feeling of belonging. According to Octavio Paz, fiestas are the only luxury for the sorrowful Mexicans and provide the one occasion when they converse with God, country, neighbors, friends, and family (Paz 1959). However, beyond the melancholic aphorism of Paz, the festive spirit expresses cultural fortitude and an unwavering attachment to a solid heritage built through the centuries. It is the élan condensed in the expression of *mexicanidad*.

Religious observances constitute a significant element of Mexican public pageantry. In these events converge new and old Catholic rituals, indigenous practices, and folklore. In these public ceremonies social and cultural hierarchies fade. For the most part, they are solemn gatherings where spirituality and faith are openly displayed. They are also among the very few episodes in which class distinctions momentarily eclipse and the personal becomes collective. In the same manner, these celebrations dissolve, even if only temporarily, ethnic divisions and social tensions. The massive character of the events and their religious content contribute to the social equalization of the crowd. Gatherings of more than 1.5 million on the courtyard of the Basilica de Guadalupe every 12 December, and on Good Friday in Ixtapalapa, attest to the vibrancy and tangible appeal of the celebrations.

Mexicans celebrate Holy Week, one of the most important religious milestones of the Catholic liturgy, in remarkable public spectacles. Since colonial times, the play of the Way of the Cross has been performed by members of *cofradías* led by a *mayordomo* of a town or a *barrio* in Mexico City. Continuous reenactment makes this event a vital feast and performance renews the cultural sense of identity. Among the most flamboyant plays are those staged in Ixtapalapa, Mexico City, San Juan Chamula, Chiapas, and in Ajijic in the northern state of Jalisco. No Holy Week celebration is too small nor people too few to honor the occasion. Often the plays are organized, directed, and produced by parish priests and congregations. In most instances, government institutions are involved in the strategic planning and provide technical support. Police, Red Cross and fire department officials are on site to assist the multitudes.

Each local or regional commemoration has its own chronology for Holy Week; some have made the annual event a magnificent theatrical production filled with fervent spirituality. The reenactment of the Christian drama galvanizes religious belief, emotion, and communal solidarity. It entails an intricate mix of family relations and loyalties, *compadrazgos*, fraternal societies, community networks, religious associations, and political organizations.

The event has serious economic implications for organizers, actors, and the throngs of revelers. Organizers and participants alike have to disburse money for costumes, food, and of course, alcoholic beverages. The people invest in soft drinks, ice cream, *antojitos*, and gadgets. In Mexico, where there is a crowd, there is money to be made by the swarms of petty vendors that assail the *peregrinos*. *Fiestas* and *procesiones* afford important opportunities for those in the informal market; to many these events are means of survival. The vendors' petition to the Virgin of Guadalupe and the saints are signs that *Dios aprieta pero no ahorca* (God pressures but He does not strangle), as the popular adage goes.

Home parties usually accompany the public fanfare after the procession. These involve plenty of food and hard liquor—*pulque*, *mescal*, *tequila*, and more recently Bacardi rum—for relatives and friends. In private and in public the fiestas are costly, but to the participants it is money well spent. While the economic fallout of the festivities is an inseparable part of the complex social mesh that underpins the event, it is the cultural significance of the commemoration that is consequential to the participants.

The reenactment of the Way of the Cross has deeply rooted symbolic meaning and its strength has not faltered with the sweeping secularization of modern Mexico. Nor has it been curbed by profound economic crisis, growing inflation, massive unemployment, or mounting crime. Instead, national adversities seem to have added inducement to hold the ritual. It is precisely the promise of fulfillment and the idea of deliverance embedded in the celebration that is meaningful.

Profound cultural attachment to religious celebrations has carried across the border for centuries and has mushroomed in the US. More precisely, they have always been present among the Mexicans and their American children. Their importance resides in their mass effect as they are more visible today than ever in the Northern Plains.

In Omaha, the Catholic Church of the Virgin of Guadalupe organizes the Holy Week commemoration and Good Friday celebration. La Guadalupe is the main parish of the expanding Hispanic community in the city and the

state. According to a recent release of the Census Bureau there are approximately 72,519 Hispanics in Nebraska (González 1999). Unofficial estimates report around 85,000 or close to 5% of the population of the state (Chagoya 1998 personal communication). Mexican nationals and Mexican Americans represent more than 80% of this community. The other Hispanics are mostly Central Americans and a few South Americans.

La Guadalupe parish is recognized as the pivot of the Hispanic community in Omaha, in Nebraska, and in the neighboring counties of Iowa, across the Missouri River. La Guadalupe had very humble beginnings when it was established in 1919. It was first established in a rented room over a baker's shop. At that time, the population of Mexicans and their descendants in the city and the state was approximately 1,500 registered members (Voboril 1991).

Since 1910 several Mexican families have been among the residents who settled in South Omaha. They lived close to the stockyards and meatpacking houses where most of the men were employed. However, the presence of Mexicans in Omaha and the state dates from the beginnings of the city in 1854, and their numbers grew with the coming of railroad construction in the 1860s (Mulvey 1979).

The founding priest of La Guadalupe was an Augustinian father from Mexico, Leonardo Azcona, who had been originally assigned to the parish of the Holy Ghost in North Omaha. At the request of local Mexicans, the priest took charge of the community's religious needs by celebrating Mass, administering services in Spanish, and becoming its spiritual guide and advisor. The community soon began to grow and root, but the Guadalupe parish was placed on hold when Father Azcona was recalled to Mexico in 1923 (Mulvey 1979).

In 1928, as a result of the endeavors of the community, the church reopened its doors at a modified South Omaha store. The priest was the Mexican Mario Alba who came to take charge of the parish and the community. By 1930 the ill effects of the Great Depression had reduced significantly the number of Mexicans in the state, but over 900 of them remained in the Omaha area, many of whom periodically drifted to the sugar beet fields of western Nebraska (Mulvey 1979).

Regardless of the drive to move, the ones who stayed recognized that Nebraska was home after all. La Guadalupe church remained at the store until 1944. By that year the number of Mexicans and Mexican Americans had grown to twice the size it was in 1930. The expanding number of parishioners thought the store was an inadequate place for worship and

decided it was time to give La Guadalupe a building of her own. Through extraordinary efforts at fundraising with the usual *tamaladas*, *enchilada* nights, *rifas* (raffles), *menudo* (tripe soup) Saturdays, and *tianguis* (street markets) sales, combined with individual and business contributions, La Guadalupe Church opened its welcoming doors to the community at its present location in 1951. The present building at 23rd and O Streets seats 350, but is still not big enough because at the Sunday and holiday services people stand in the halls and outside the doors (Fr. Damian Zuerlein personal communication 2000).

The Augustinian order, which oversaw La Guadalupe, left Omaha in 1987. The parish was then incorporated to the extensive Archdiocese of Omaha and was administered by the Hispanic Ministries. La Guadalupe is today under the leadership of Father Damian Zuerlein, appointed in 1990 to oversee the parish. It provides an extensive network of assistance and an umbrella of protection. La Guadalupe serves as support base and cultural cement for the community. It embraces newcomers and addresses their material and spiritual needs. To the old and new Hispanics in Omaha, residents and transients, the parish is a familiar welcoming environment with Spanish-language services and a listening ear. In addition, La Guadalupe serves as a base for those who seek to protect the rights of Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and all Latino migrants as it provide volunteer's legal aid, instruction, education services, moral support, health services, and economic relief. The Hispanics of Omaha and all of Nebraska consider La Guadalupe the heart of their community.

La Guadalupe is located in the middle of the Hispanic neighborhood of South Omaha. This part of town houses the majority of the Hispanics in the city. It is the "Southhood" or "South O" as the *vecinos* and neighbors are fond of calling the quarter. It has been the Latino hamlet of Omaha since the early days of the community. The murals painted on the long walls of local business buildings by young artists of the community bespeak the Mexican presence. The murals bear desert landscapes, cacti, birds, mountains, and beautiful children and girls with their hair braided with red, white, and green ribbons. The murals are painted with the palette of deep red, blue, and green hues and the indispensable hot Mexican pink.

South Omaha is dotted with businesses, restaurants, and grocery stores. Spanish is the lingua franca, and residents and customers can find virtually any Latin American food specialty, Spanish CDs, videos, and magazines, as well as homemade Latino goods and wares. South Omaha hosts private, state, and federally funded outreach centers such as the Chicano Awareness Center, Indian-Chicano Center, Salvation Army Thrift Store, and the *Nuevo*

*Mundo* newspaper. Not many blocks away is the Museo Latino, a center for cultural activities, exhibits, fiestas, celebrations, and until the recent establishment of the Mexican Consulate in the city of Omaha, temporary host for the three to four annual visits of the Mobile Consulate from Denver.

La Guadalupe, the church and its annex, houses the parish offices, residential quarters, meeting places, and a large area dedicated to servicing the community. Aside from providing the parishioners with regular religious services, according to Catholic liturgy, it handles the customary Hispanic weddings, christenings, *quinceañeras*, and funerals. The offices are always bustling with activities oriented to accommodate people in need. Walk-ins can find a helping hand and direction to housing, clothing, health providers, and food. Educational services are among its main priorities. In the annex, English as a Second Language (ESL) and Survival English are taught. At the same time, special classes are held to prepare residents waiting for their naturalization tests. There are orientation sessions and conferences concerning immigration law and its always-difficult paperwork. A job placement service is constantly finding work for those who approach the center for referrals and recommendations.

In 1998 the growth of the Hispanic population and the increasing demand for parish services moved the Archdiocese of Omaha to place the church of Saint Agnes under the jurisdiction of La Guadalupe. Located within walking distance, Saint Agnes provided much-needed space. The church can seat 500 people and is much more spacious in its halls than La Guadalupe. Its school building is now a nursery and elementary school for migrant children. Saint Agnes and La Guadalupe provide the foundations and the organizational support for all Catholic celebrations.

Since Good Friday in 1993 the Hispanic community of South Omaha has staged the religious drama of the Stations of the Cross, the *Via Crucis*. The commemoration is fraught with the intensity and passionate devotion of participants and members of the procession. It is an enactment that parallels the ritual as it has been performed historically in Mexico.

The leading actors assume the roles of Jesus Christ, the Virgin, Pontius Pilate, the Roman soldiers (riding horses or afoot), Mary Magdalene, Veronica, Simon the Cyrene and others. On the front yard of the Church Hall of La Guadalupe, to the amazement of unfamiliar onlookers, Jesus and the two thieves are hoisted and tied to their wooden crosses in a replication of the crucifixion. The event is similar to those featured in any Mexican town except for the weather, a sobering reminder of the alien environment. Unlike the Mexican celebrations held under sunny, bright blue skies, dry winds, and warm weather, the early spring conditions in Nebraska often



envelope the participants in overcast skies, frigid temperatures, and a piercing wind. The liturgical calendar determines that Easter must be held the first Sunday after the first full moon of spring, which is usually too early in the northern latitudes for friendly weather. The flowering magnolia tree in the churchyard and its greening lawn may provide a prelude for the warmth of summer, but they afford little consolation to the participants who have to grapple with the cold.

According to the Catholic liturgical calendar, Lent officially begins on Ash Wednesday. It is around this date, when the *chargé* of the Youth Center of La Guadalupe, Adela Rodriguez, starts to prepare for the reenactment of the Way to the Cross. The actors are selected from among the young parishioners. During the next 40 days, those selected meet on Tuesdays and Saturdays for doctrinal studies and rehearsals. Provisions are made to accommodate work and school schedules, and certainly, Nebraska weather conditions. Adela Rodriguez writes the scripts and the individual lines for each of the participants, drawing on her own experience and additional research. She pens the lines in Spanish, using a simple language and an appealing rhyme (A. Rodriguez personal communication 1998).

Adela Rodriguez was born in San Jose de la Boca, in the municipality of Los Tepehuanes in the northwestern state of Durango. She is young, dynamic, musically talented, and a devoted Catholic. Adela loves her country and her culture with an unswerving passion. She has committed herself, as a mission, to develop and preserve Mexican Catholic popular lore beyond the border. Most of her family lives in Omaha, but she and her immediate family keep firm ties with the rest of the kin back home. They visit Durango at least once a year and the family maintains constant communication. Adela is married and has an eight-year-old boy. Her husband works in the meatpacking industry and the three make up a tightly knit family. They came to Omaha in December of 1991, and the following year Adela became a volunteer at La Guadalupe. She played the guitar and sang during Sunday mass. From the time of her arrival, Adela became increasingly involved in the community work at the parish. She was briefly transferred to the Hispanic Ministries of the Archdiocese of Omaha but was soon called back to La Guadalupe and given the task of organizing activities for the young members of the parish.

Adela's active participation with Catholic-based community organization dates back to her childhood in Durango. In her hometown she was an active member of the parish youth group and of the local Base Christian Community (*Comunidad Eclesial de Base*). She worked as a catechist, choir member, and performer in the *pastorelas* during the Christmas season.

Adela found the Catholic community works so appealing that when she finished junior high, she opted for conventual life. She thought then that she was destined to be a nun, and following her call entered a nunnery in Zamora, Michoacan. In Zamora she prepared for religious life and took high school with the order of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Close to taking her vows, Adela searched her heart and decided that a nun's life was not what she had envisioned. Her decision was not hard. She simply thought she would not be happy with the commitment, and could still work with the church in other capacities and went back home. In San Jose, she married and remained close to the parish and her volunteer work. In the mid-1980s, the shock waves of the Mexican economic crisis hit Los Tepehuanes. In 1989 Adela and her husband lost their jobs. With no relief in sight, they managed for a while by taking temporary odd jobs. Her brother and sisters, already in the US, offered their assistance in helping them relocate. In 1990 they moved to Los Angeles and in 1991 settled in Omaha. In this midwestern city, the economy was flourishing and jobs were plentiful. With family support, they had few problems starting a new life.

In 1992 Adela approached Father Damian with the idea of reenacting the Way of the Cross on Good Friday. Because she was already the chorus organizer and had a following among the young parishioners, Father Damian gave his approval. Working with the sisters of the parish, the youth group became the base for liturgical and secular commemorations including choirs for regular masses and private functions as well as *mañanitas*, *posadas*, *pastorelas*, *quinceañeras*, weddings, parties, fundraisers, sports events, and Holy Week. The initial year was dedicated to small performances and to strengthening the youth group. According to Adela's own words, they had a humble and simple beginning. It was the groundwork for what was to come.

Adela's work went from volunteer to full-time employee of the parish. She honed her organizational skills by undertaking the job with unbridled enthusiasm and the zeal of the missionary. Adela has vowed to keep her revered Mexican religious traditions alive by celebrating and doing things in Omaha the Mexican way. She is well aware that maintaining the traditions depends on instilling in the children and young adults an appreciation of the culture and devotion to its rituals.

Teaching the young Mexican Americans to love their traditions has not been difficult. Adela has on her side the recent tidal wave of new Mexican migration into the Midwest. In this respect, in South Omaha there are virtual transplants of small towns from Guanajuato, Coahuila, and San Luis Potosi. In 1998 estimates, the area housed around 20,000 Hispanics, 80% of which were Mexicans or of Mexican descent. In addition, modern technology has

allowed the newcomers to maintain close relationships with their families across the border. Inexpensive calling cards, cell phones, faster and cheaper means of transportation, instant money-grams (*dinero al minuto*), and improved earnings have contributed greatly to the solidification of these ties.

Many scholars and community leaders agree that with or without the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the thriving North American economy of the 1990s released a powerful and irresistible pull on unemployed and underemployed Mexicans. Strapped for manual and menial labor, the Nebraska economy has consistently resisted attempts by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to curb the undocumented influx.

For Adela Rodriguez and La Guadalupe, this is one more reason to keep holding the celebrations and garnering the patronage of the community. The more visible the community, the less likely that pressure on the undocumented will be successful. Consequently, she keeps an eye on her young flock and eagerly recruits the newcomers into her group of young Catholics and ardent *Guadalupanos*.

The young adults that approach the parish are voluntarily enrolled into the gamut of activities held by the church. What they do is their own choice. Adela leads a group of 20 to 25 young men and women who are between 14 and 27 years of age. The group enacts the play on Good Friday. Many of its members have witnessed or participated in similar experiences in their hometowns in Mexico. For several of them, that was the reason they approached the parish: to resume church activities and gain a sense of cultural belonging in the remote prairies of the Midwest. In Mexico, they were members of parish or communal groups that traditionally staged the religious drama and held other religious celebrations. For these young people, it was as simple as being part of a broader but known and familiar culture. According to their own explanations, it gave them sense of direction, abated their estrangement, and instilled in them a strong feeling of attachment to tradition.

Margarito Ponce performed as one of the thieves during the 1999 commemoration, but he was Jesus in the previous reenactment. A native of Cuautla, Morelos, he was part of the passion plays as staged by the parish of Santa Ana and San Vicente de Paul in his hometown. He performed for four years before moving to the US, and while only 24 years old, he considers himself a seasoned actor. He also defines himself as a devout Catholic. In Omaha, Margarito is a construction worker and is very active in church activities. Antonio Cedillo, another Cuautla native, performed as Jesus. A close friend of Margarito and involved in the same youth group in Cuautla,

Antonio, like Margarito, crossed the border and moved to Nebraska in 1997. When I first met Margarito at a rehearsal, it was relatively easy to detect his previous experience. He vocalized his lines well with an impressive ease and projected well. His body movements and mastery of the physical space were those of a veteran performer. Margarito and Antonio love being part of the celebration and feel a strong attachment to La Guadalupe parish. Both plan to remain in the group and participate in the parish activities as long as they are in Omaha.

During the first two years of the commemoration of the Stations of the Cross, it was staged in the parking lot of the parish. It was not until the third year that Adela decided it was time to move it into the surrounding area, as the number of participants and *peregrinos* had grown beyond the capacity of the lot. For Adela that meant taking over the neighborhood streets, as it is done in Mexico. It also meant that as in Mexico, the public had to be actively involved, be part of the drama, and relive the Passion. People had to pray, chant, and be emotionally engulfed by the reenactment of the crucifixion. The participants had to grieve, scorn Pontius Pilate, and vilify the Roman soldiers and at the same time comfort Jesus and the Virgin. People are apparently entangled in a public catharsis created by the drama. According to many of the participants, what else has been their pilgrimage into Omaha but their private Via Crucis?

Taking the play into the streets required permits from the city and coordination with the fire and police departments. These challenges were met without major difficulties with letters and phone calls. In 1995 for the first time, the performance took over the streets of South Omaha. To date there has not been a single incident that demanded intervention by the police or even paramedics. The bare-breasted Jesus Christ and thieves have caught head colds from the wintry weather, but none of them suffered severe complications, except for their runny noses.

Every year the crowd is larger. The 1999 estimated attendance was between 750 and 1,000. The number of participants might have been larger, but for most in South Omaha, Good Friday is a regular working day.

After the crucifixion, the last two of the 14 Stations of the Cross are observed on the south yard of the church. At night another performance of the Passion is staged for those who were not able to attend the afternoon celebrations. The presentation at the church is on a much smaller scale but is just as intense as the earlier performance.

The celebration on Holy Saturday, *Sábado de Gloria*, has not yet been incorporated into the Holy Week in Omaha. Even in Mexico, they have been sobered for decades. The unexpected water baths inflicted on passers-by

have been forbidden given the scarcity of the precious liquid. However, Adela does expect to incorporate the burning of Judas with its accompanying chanting, dancing, and merrymaking. In effect, the burning of Judas is an integral part of the Mexican Holy Week. On this day, effigies of politicians and perceived villains of the people are made with old clothes, papier-mâché, and filled with straw and gunpowder. The effigies are hung like *piñatas* and are so finely done that almost anyone can identify the individuals portrayed. At mid-morning they are set afire amid mockery, laughter, and roaring cheers from the crowd. The symbolism of the feast cannot be stressed enough. It is, and has been, for those involved in the Holy Week romp, their greatest opportunity to get even with authority figures. What can be better than ridiculing, blowing up, and burning to ashes the effigy of a lawyer, an officer of the law, or a politician? For the crowd it is an allegorical form of justice finally served for those real and perceived wrongdoing and abuses. The tradition has not withered in Mexico, and Mexicans in Omaha often ask Adela when this part of the celebration will be incorporated. One can only wonder who the Mexicans would choose as the Judas to be burned. Adela is not intimidated by the prospects of objections from the fire department, city council, or police, as she plans to add the Judas burning and will file the necessary paperwork for next year's Holy Week. In this manner, the Omaha Holy Week celebration will be closer to be as *como en Mexico* (like in Mexico). Adela only yearns that "if the weather cooperated a little bit more, everything would be just perfect!" (A. Rodriguez personal communication 1999).

The increase of Mexican immigration into Nebraska since the 1970s reinforced the existing community with swelling numbers of new arrivals. The influx invigorated the sense of cultural identity and attachment to long-held beliefs and religious rituals. In this respect, expressions of popular Catholicism such as Good Friday are tangible elements of the endurance and strength of Mexican cultural traditions. In Omaha, it is through the pageantry of the public spectacle, the dramatization of the Way to the Cross, that Mexicans and Mexican Americans evidence cultural cohesiveness and exercise their sense of cultural belonging. The enactment of the passion in South Omaha is a vivid manifestation of the centrality of popular Catholic symbolism in Mexican culture. Good Friday celebrations reflect the faith and practice of the Catholic majority of the Latino community of South Omaha.

The heart of Hispanic community is the parish of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The parish has assumed the leadership of the community, and

with its proactive ministry has guaranteed that these demonstrations of popular religiosity are honored and acknowledged as fundamental values of the Hispanic culture in the Midwest. The public devotion under the patronage of the Catholic Church bespeaks a church that is determined to maintain its role as an advocate and provider of assistance to the Hispanics in Omaha. At the same time, the parish maintains the spirit of the first pastoral letter on Hispanics issued by the bishops of the United States in 1983, "urging the Church to see the presence of Hispanics as a gift and not as a problem to be solved" (E. Rodriguez 1994).

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## GLOSSARY OF SPANISH TERMS

- antojitos.** Food snacks, among which are *tacos*, *tamales*, and *tostadas*.
- arepa.** A tortilla-like food staple from Colombia and Venezuela made from corn.
- Autos Sacramentales.** Theatrical representations of biblical scenes or Christian virtues. In the aftermath of the Spanish conquest, the Catholic clergy used the plays to instill Christianity in the indigenous population.
- banda.** Popular band music of the borderlands. Main instruments are the accordian and guitar. Contemporary song themes incorporate traditional Mexican *corridos* (folk ballads) and Caribbean tropical beats.
- barrio.** City district.
- Cinco de Mayo.** The day in 1862 when the Mexicans defeated the first attempt of the French invasion aimed at the establishment of a Mexican Empire. Since 1960 Mexican Americans commemorate the event.
- cofradías.** Confraternities, or organizations of men and women that mainly serve religious purposes. Some of them have social functions.
- compadrazgos.** Godparentage.
- El Día de la Raza.** Columbus Day, 12 October.
- El Día de Muertos.** Day of the Dead, celebrated on 1 and 2 November. An amalgamation of pre-Conquest indigenous religious rituals and Christianity that honors the dead with offerings of food, flowers, and mementos of the departed.
- Festival de la Calle Ocho.** A block party held in early spring in Miami, Florida. Currently it is known as Carnival Miami. It takes place in Little Havana and attracts more than a million attendants. Calle Ocho is the largest Latino festival in the US.
- El Grito.** The “cry for freedom” that commemorates the beginning of the Mexican struggle for independence from Spanish rule in 15 September 1810.
- mañanitas.** Traditional birthday song in Mexico, usually accompanied by mariachi music.
- mariachi.** Music style played by a band also called mariachi. They usually play rancheras or folk ballads.
- mayordomo.** Steward, or the one in charge of celebrating religious festivals.
- ofrenda.** Offering built like an altar to honor the departed relatives on the Day of the Dead.
- pastorela.** Theatrical representation of the shepards’ journey to Bethlehem that is staged during Christmastime.
- posadas.** Literally “looking for shelter.” Represents the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem and are religious festivities celebrated during the nine days prior to Christmas.
- quinceañera.** Party to celebrate the coming of age of girls. It has been considered as a rite of passage.
- procesión.** Procession.
- peregrinación.** Peregrination.
- Reyes.** The Magi celebration on 6 January.
- salsa.** Music genre that originated in the Caribbean. Especially in Santo Domingo, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. It is immensely popular in Latin America as dance music.