

PART ONE



Pilgrimages of Healing

INTRODUCTION

People have long associated particular places, people, and objects with mysterious healing powers, and then gathered around them. Even the Gospel of John records this human impulse in its description of a pool called Beth-zatha, whose waters were believed to have healing properties. The “blind, lame, and paralyzed” lay nearby, the Gospel records, hoping to reach the pool and be healed when the water was “stirred up” and its powers activated.

Yet, accounts of pilgrimages to sites of healing reveal that we’re generally not satisfied with being healed only—we also crave an explanation for the healing. It’s not enough that a place, person, or thing *can* heal us; we have a deep human need to know *why*.

Hence, rich tales and legends often accrue around healing pilgrimage sites to explain the curative powers. These tales are as likely to be a mixture of hearsay, conjecture, and pious wishful thinking as they are to be true. The Gospel of John also records our human impulse to explain and understand the mystery. In some versions of that Gospel's manuscripts, an unlikely verse was inserted that ascribes Beth-zatha's healing powers to one of God's angels: "for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred up the water; whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was made well from whatever disease that person had."

At El Santuario de Chimayó in Chimayó, New Mexico, the healing agent is not water, but dirt. Not just any dirt, but holy dirt drawn from *el posito*, a small hole in the ground in a tiny room just off the sanctuary. Various stories compete to describe the origin of the dirt's healing properties, but the handwritten testimonies of healing, the photographs of the healed, and the no-longer-needed crutches and prosthetic limbs all left near *el posito* testify to the power itself. This compelling physical evidence of so much faith helps explain why every year on Good Friday, thousands of pilgrims walk from as far away as Albuquerque, some on their knees for part of the journey, and descend upon El Santuario to seek healing and blessings from God.

Part I: Introduction

The National Shrine of Saint Jude in Chicago is the pilgrimage destination for those seeking aid from the “patron saint of seemingly impossible or desperate causes.” Until recent decades, Jude was a relatively unknown saint, but those who have received his aid “publish the miracles”—spread the word that Jude can help in even the most desperate situations. Today, those who feel they have nowhere else to turn flood the saint with petitions for restoration of all kinds: physical healing, relief from unemployment, the safe return of sons and husbands from war. The fact that so little is known about Jude himself seems only to endear him more to those seeking his help; he resonates with everyday people in ways that other, more exalted saints, do not. Ironically, the saint’s very obscurity has earned him widespread devotion.

At the Healing Rooms of Santa Maria Valley, in Santa Maria, California, healing is not associated with any particular feature of the landscape, sacred object, or holy personality. Quite the contrary. The Healing Rooms’ entire ministry is founded on the premise that God can and does use ordinary people in ordinary circumstances to bring healing to those in need. Miracles and healing, they say at the Healing Rooms, can occur anywhere. Yet, paradoxically, the very uniqueness of this everyman and everywoman approach sets the Healing Rooms of Santa Maria Valley apart. Dramatic stories of divine

American Pilgrimage

healing have gotten around and compel people from across the country, even the world, to journey there and pray for miracles in the little unassuming white-steepled church.

We travel to healing pilgrimage sites to receive healing of body and soul, to be sure. But the stories we tell reveal that we are also looking for something deeper: meaning and certainty amidst the turmoil of life. Our holy dirt, our shrine of last resort, our prayers for a miracle—do we hope they will be our tangible points of contact with another realm? In our souls, do we hope that healing will allow us momentarily to pierce this veil that keeps us spiritually blind, lame, and paralyzed, and see for ourselves an angel of the Lord stirring the waters?

The Lourdes of America

El Santuario de Chimayó
Chimayó, New Mexico

Deep within a small, verdant river valley in northern New Mexico sits a quiet, worn adobe chapel nearly two centuries old. From a certain vantage point, the sanctuary and its environs seem part of some idyllic pastoral scene: well-loved old church in the foreground, rugged mountain in the background, between them contented livestock grazing in green fields beside a lazy river.

Indeed, from appearances, you'd be hard-pressed to guess that El Santuario de Chimayó is not some forgotten rural church, but is rather the destination for hundreds of thousands of pilgrims who journey here every year to seek healing from the holy dirt; that the significance of El Santuario has not dwindled to the mere charm of some historical relic, but rather

remains the source of a remarkable power that continues to draw believers with their fervent prayers for restoration of body and spirit.

This power is most evident on Good Friday every year, when the sick, the faithful, and the curious alike descend upon El Santuario *en masse* to pray to God and—culminating the journey—to draw healing dirt from *el posito*, a little hole in the ground near the sanctuary that in shape and proportion resembles a bellybutton dug right into the earth. When you see it for yourself, you might find it curious that a simple hole maybe two feet across and two feet deep could be the central focus of so much faith and devotion. In fact, *el posito* occupies its own tiny room, a sort of Holy of Holies within the church, as if this miniature well—which really does look like a kind of navel in the flat belly of the earth—were a direct and potent line to the center of the world, to the source of spirit, to the power of God. Perhaps this is why, year after year, legions upon legions of pilgrims are drawn to this sanctuary, to this little *el posito*, source of healing, America's own omphalos.

Yet, come to Chimayó and you will soon discover that though visiting *el posito* may be the culmination of the journey, the process of transformation and healing begins long before you get anywhere near the dirt. Change begins with the walk.

In this sense, Chimayó represents a more traditional kind of spiritual pilgrimage than many others in America—one that involves a journey of some hardship as a way of preparing the heart and mind. Many pilgrims to Chimayó start walking from the town of Española, ten miles away, while many others start from Santa Fe (thirty miles). Some begin in Taos to the north (fifty miles); others walk from Albuquerque to the south (ninety miles). A few walk from even farther afield.

While pilgrims visit Chimayó all year long, the annual pilgrimage on Good Friday is a sight to behold. In groups of a dozen or more, whole families together, or in pockets of twos and threes, pilgrims walk down the freeways and back roads of New Mexico. It's a chaotic-looking, beautiful procession: They walk wearing muscle shirts, T-shirts, flannel shirts, fleece pullovers, ratty jeans, pressed khakis. Vets in fatigues wave American flags. Many walk carrying pictures of Jesus or statues of saints; others bear large crosses and crucifixes, some so big it takes two men to carry them. Some chatter amiably, others are quiet, others hold hands and pray. Many sing as they walk. Some in wheelchairs, both manual and motorized, join the walk. Local radio stations broadcast updates for and about the walkers, giving weather updates and alerting motorists to where the pockets of pilgrims are thickest.

American Pilgrimage

As a sign of devotion, some walk barefoot or crawl on their knees for a portion of the journey, which can take a few hours or a few days. Some walk all night. Some pilgrims camp out alongside the road; a few stay at bed and breakfasts along the way. Communities along the pilgrimage route set up support stops, giving total strangers goodies such as oranges, bottled water, homemade burritos—anything that hungry walkers might need for sustenance. Eventually these streams of pilgrims converge onto the two-lane Route 76, the main road into Chimayó, where they flow into one long, marching column of devotion.

As you quickly discover, walking such long distances takes time. It takes patience. It necessarily slows your frenetic everyday technology-driven pace to a much more human rhythm: one foot in front of the other; repeat. The journey is an opportunity to literally walk yourself out of your everyday experience and into a space of the spirit.

Jan, a pilgrimage veteran, said, “For me, the walking is a good time to reflect. I walk with a lot of personal intentions, and I pray for family members.”

Jan’s friend Kim said, “I walk as a sign of penance and as a time of reflecting on Christ on the cross and his suffering, and I ask for spiritual guidance along the way.”

One man was carrying a large, heavy wooden cross over his shoulder. “The cross is an important reminder,” he

explained. “It’s easy for your mind to drift, easy to get a little more social than reflective—and the whole idea is to get reflective and introspective. And when you’re carrying the cross, you *know* it’s there. It makes you think.”

But the walk is even more than a chance for reflection; it’s also an opportunity for transformation in itself—a mini-pilgrimage within the larger journey to Chimayó. A woman named Theresa who has been walking for years said, “There’s different things you go through. In the night, you really wonder, ‘How much further? *Can we do it?*’ And then in the morning, when the sun comes up, the sun is your inspiration and you know you can keep on going.”

Theresa’s companion Eugene agreed. “You’re definitely questioning why you’re doing it while you’re out there walking. It makes you do some soul-searching, and it’s a time of sacrifice—you’re giving up stuff. You’re letting things go.”

As they walk, pilgrims encourage one another, look out for one another (cars speeding by present a real danger), and swap stories of healing, previous pilgrimages, and of El Santuario itself. Interestingly, everyone seems to have a different understanding of El Santuario’s origins and the specific healing properties of the dirt.

In fact, another thing you discover on the walk is that much of Chimayó’s power lies in its very mystery. Although

El Santuario, sometimes referred to more fully as El Santuario de Nuestro Señor de Esquímulas after the crucifix it houses, is a bona fide phenomenon—or perhaps precisely because it is a phenomenon—no one can pin down the exact story of how and why it came to be.

This is certainly not, however, from a lack of stories to choose from. On a Good Friday sometime around 1810, one of these stories goes, a man named Don Bernardo Abeyta was performing ritual penance in the hills near Chimayó when he saw a strange light emanating from the ground. He began to dig with his bare hands and soon uncovered a crucifix six feet tall, which he named El Señor de Esquímulas after a similar crucifix located in Esquímulas, Guatemala. He notified his neighbors and the local priest of his find, and they proceeded with great rejoicing into nearby Santa Cruz where they placed the crucifix on the altar of the church. The next morning, however, the crucifix had vanished, but Don Bernardo found it again back in its hole in the hills of Chimayó. He returned El Señor to the church in Santa Cruz, only to find it missing again the following morning. Once more they returned the crucifix from its hole in Chimayó to the church in Santa Cruz, but the same thing happened yet again, and “by then, everybody understood that El Señor de Esquímulas wanted to remain in Chimayó, and so a small chapel was built” in the location where he was discovered.

Another story has it like this. Although he was very sick, Bernardo Abeyta was tending his sheep in the hills thinking pious thoughts about how much good he could do the world if it were not for his illness. Just then San Esquíputa, his patron saint, appeared to him across the way and “beckoned to him.” Abeyta “threw off his blankets and hobbled toward the spot” where the apparition had appeared; he knelt there “and immediately he was cured. The news of his miraculous healing spread quickly, and from that time on the sick were brought to the spot where they too were cured immediately. In thanks and devotion to his patron saint, Don Bernardo built a chapel on the spot.”

Yet another explanation circumvents El Señor and Don Bernardo altogether, positing that the healing properties of the dirt were recognized by the Tewa Indians, who inhabited the area long before European settlement. It is even suggested that a healing pool of mud was located in the precise location of today’s *santuario*, and that the Native Americans rubbed the earth on their bodies (much like today’s pilgrims) or consumed it in order to take advantage of its healing powers.

Under normal circumstances, you might find it easy to dismiss elements of these stories as imaginative embellishment, legend, or myth. After all, how could Don Bernardo find a six-foot crucifix in a hole less than three feet deep?

Yet the long walk to Chimayó puts you in a different frame of mind, a head space where you might find yourself looking at such incongruous details not as fantastic tales but rather as something more like a Zen koan: impossibilities that confound the rational mind in order to awaken it to something larger and more *true* than mere facts can convey. The walk encourages a fundamental shift in perception, from seeing the world in strict rational categories, to perceiving it through the lens of *possibility*. The walk is a chance to begin seeing your illnesses through the eyes of hope instead of fear; to see your frailties and failures through the eyes of grace instead of judgment.

You haven't even reached El Santuario, and already the healing has begun.



While you're walking to Chimayó, you generally enjoy the spaciousness of the open road, but the situation changes once you reach your destination. The various courtyards of El Santuario and the surrounding buildings are choked with pilgrims, vendors, tourists, and local kids with the day off from school. Getting into the sanctuary requires special patience as the queue for entrance spills out the door, through the central courtyard, up the walk and around the corner.

But it's worth the wait. When you enter, you are immediately struck by the intimacy of the sanctuary. Unlike, say, the jaw-dropping, awe-inspiring force Gothic cathedrals achieve through sheer magnitude of scale, this is a manageable sacred space. Whitewashed adobe walls, straight-backed wooden pews, wooden crossbeams supporting the ceiling all give it a feel like home; you feel comfortable inside the sanctuary. The lines and corners of the architecture are a little crooked and wobbly; the building has settled into the earth, and somehow you feel invited to settle into the earth, too.

Yet the space is far from austere. The centerpiece is El Nuestro Señor de Esquípuilas, the six-foot crucifix reputedly found by Don Bernardo Abeyta, housed just behind the altar in one of five reredos, colorful decorative panels hand-painted in vivid-but-not-garish light greens, pinks, earthy oranges, and water blues. Each of these reredos reaches from floor to ceiling and portrays various angels, saints, and heroes of the faith.

These reredos help create a sacred context supporting the prayers of the faithful. When you walk into the sanctuary, you feel as though you are entering the community of saints and that you are one of the family. Indeed, the reredos, though executed with unmistakable skill and artistry, feel as if they might have been painted by your neighbor. In Chimayó, faith and devotion occur on the personal level;

God is not so much majestic and grand as he is powerful and nearby.

For many, arriving in the sanctuary is just as important as visiting *el posito*. Eugene described the transition from walking toward Chimayó to arriving in the sanctuary itself: “Once you’re inside the chapel you just know it’s the completion of a journey—you’re *there*.” He started to become emotional. “That’s when I let everything go, was right there inside the church. And it just felt good. Troubles, problems, anger, whatever—it was time to give it all up and start over.”

Like Eugene, many people sit in the pews and pray or kneel at the altar before El Señor de Esquímulas. Some bring rosaries and other objects of devotion to be blessed by a priest standing by. Eventually they rejoin the line of pilgrims, which files past the altar and through a little door on the left of the sanctuary.

As you leave the sanctuary, you turn a corner, duck through a second door, and suddenly find yourself in a tiny room facing the goal of your journey: *el posito*, the little well, the sacred hole in the ground filled with holy dirt.

This is the culmination of hours or days of walking, so although hundreds of people are waiting their turn to visit *el posito*, no one tries to hurry you. One or two other pilgrims may join you in the room, but everyone is reverent;

approaching the hole, everyone understands, is a holy moment.

The dirt is cool and slightly moist to the touch; it has a slightly reddish tint. Inside the hole are a couple of white plastic spoons that many pilgrims use to scoop small amounts of dirt into plastic bags, envelopes, little ceramic vessels, or other containers they bring with them. Some take the dirt with them to bless their homes; others take it to use on ailing family members; others lay it by in case of future illness.

But some pilgrims hope for a miracle on the spot. One man bent down, picked up a handful of the dirt and rubbed it enthusiastically on his wrist, allowing the excess dirt to fall back into the hole. The woman after him stood directly in the hole and rubbed the dirt on her feet eagerly. Another woman with cataracts smeared the dirt right on her eyelids.

None of those three pilgrims seemed to experience a miraculous healing right there, but that didn't dampen the faith of Carmen, who also visited *elposito* that day. "There have been miracles attributed to the healing powers of the holy dirt," she said with conviction. "And you just pray for your own personal miracles and for other people's miracles." Has she ever experienced one of those miracles? "I feel always a renewal of spirit in my faith, and

I see my family healed a little. So sometimes it's my miracle, sometimes it's somebody else's. It's all good."

Not all pilgrims who take the dirt are as certain as Carmen of its effectiveness, but they're willing to suspend their disbelief, if only a little. Pam came from Virginia with her daughter to experience the pilgrimage and to retrieve some of the dirt for her husband, who had recently recovered from a serious health problem. Does Pam think the dirt truly has healing properties? "I don't know," she said. "But I want to believe it. It's certainly worth a try."

Juan, who comes every year, sees the significance of the dirt in larger terms. "I do have faith and I believe that God does wondrous things. But I think it's within each person's faith. I think that God helps those who help themselves, so that when people have the dirt and they really believe they've got the cure for cancer, their body will do what it thinks is right. I call the dirt 'holy placebo.'"

Yet, Juan reflects on the very real ability of the pilgrimage to raise faith and devotion in even the most reluctant pilgrims. "I've seen nonbelievers, you know, straight-out people who were antireligious, who make the trip and they're changed. Even if they don't take on religion, they take on a bit of faith, I believe. They find something that's bigger than their problems, something that's more than themselves."

After visiting *el posito*, you exit through a long narrow anteroom filled with the paraphernalia of devotion. The variety and sheer number of the faith-related objects stuffed into this room boggles the mind. The most striking, and moving, are perhaps the dozens of crutches and canes—even a banged-up, well-used prosthetic arm—left along the wall, presumably by those who no longer needed them after visiting *el posito*. But these objects of devotion take many forms: Painted images of Our Lady of Guadalupe hang on the wall; photographs of loved ones needing healing are propped on shelves; handwritten notes pleading with God for healing and other handwritten notes thanking God for healing lie on tables. Devotional candles flicker; rosaries of all sizes and varieties hang on hooks; there is a black velvet painting of Jesus wearing the crown of thorns. Plastic and ceramic statues of Mary, Jesus, and saints fill shelves. There is a needlepoint replica of da Vinci's *The Last Supper*.

The utter lack of organization, the kitsch mixed with the tasteful, and the obvious history of real pain, devotion, and gratefulness behind each offering confound and humble you. People bring their brokenness and hurt to El Señor and *el posito*, receive healing and hope, and leave with deep gratitude. If you had any doubts about the healing power of the dirt itself, you no longer doubt that there is *some* serious power at work here. You can feel the force of hope at

American Pilgrimage

work in this room, and it seems to follow you as you conclude your journey by stepping back out into the courtyard and bright sunlight.

Referring to the objects of devotion left by so many pilgrims, one man concluded, “There’s power in that deep kind of faith,” and he was right. Whatever condition you came in, when you make a pilgrimage to Chimayó—whether you experience a profound change of perspective or an actual physical miracle—you can scarcely leave El Santuario without a renewed faith in the power of *possibility*, even the possibility of experiencing God’s healing power mediated through nothing but the dirt found in a hole in the ground.