

Good Friday in Ixtapalapa

During Easter or Holy Week, processions and ceremonies take place in many parts of Mexico.

Interesting events can be seen in Chiapas, Oaxaca, Jalisco, Veracruz, Guanajuato as well as in the metropolitan area. In some places, the story of Jesus Christ is performed with carved figures representing the actors, while in other places, real life actors reenact the Passion story.

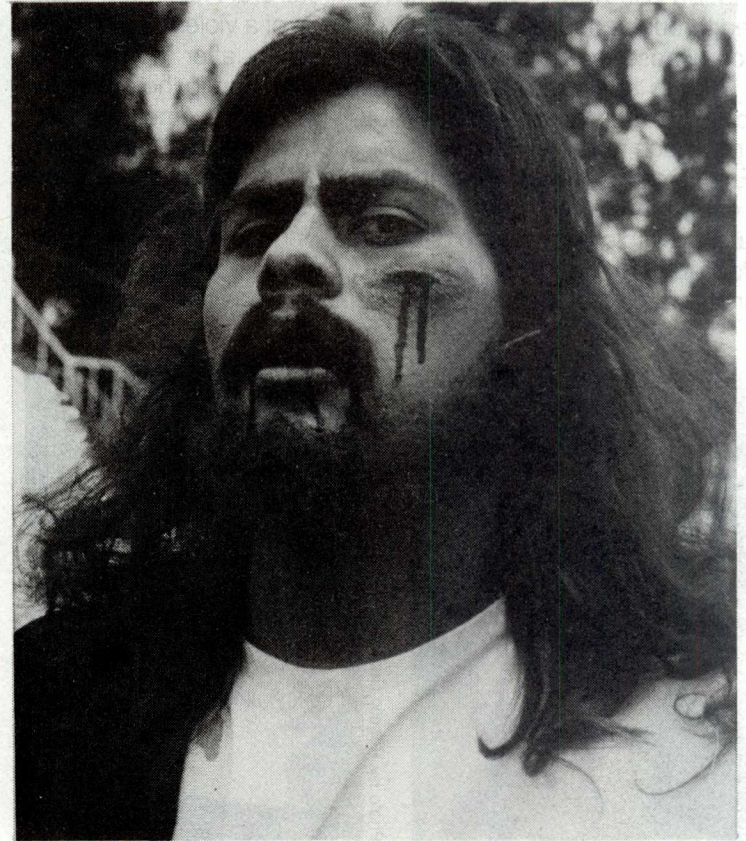
Within Mexico City, huge crowds attend the reenactment performed in Ixtapalapa. Voices photographer Rafael Bonilla and reporter Jackie Buswell visited Ixtapalapa on Good Friday.

More than 2 million people attend the re-enactment of the passion and crucifixion of Jesus Christ in the area of Ixtapalapa, in eastern Mexico City. The people of Ixtapalapa have acted out this story each Easter for 144 years, and today the event is planned by the Ixtapalapa Easter Week Organizing Commission, together with the local government.

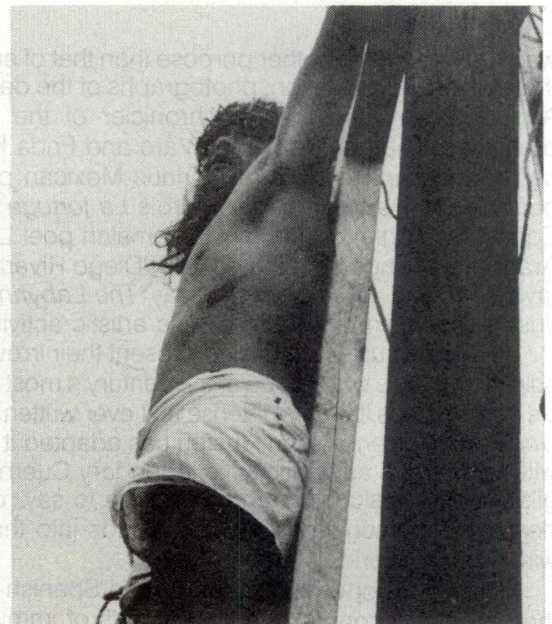
On Good Friday at 10 in the morning, crowds are beginning to gather, while the apostles and friends of the man from Nazareth, the ladies of Herod's court, the Roman soldiers and the priests and Pharisees are calmly preparing for the day's activities.

In spite of the crowds filling the house, the actors and actresses talk quietly among themselves as they paint their faces, spray their hair, and in the case of Herod's ladies, arrange their jewels. Impressive wounds and bruises are painted on Jesus Christ and Judas Iscariot. Meanwhile, a file of women and girls wash dishes and prepare food, and a group of men attend to the journalists and photographers.

Outside, the street is lined with some five thousand men and boys dressed as humble citizens of Nazareth who will carry their own crosses this day. The younger boys carry weights of some 45 pounds, while a notice advises that the maximum weight of the cross should be no more than 90 pounds. But Jesus himself, 23 year-old engineering student Hugo Valdez, has his own specially-made cross for the occasion, a mere 160 pounds.

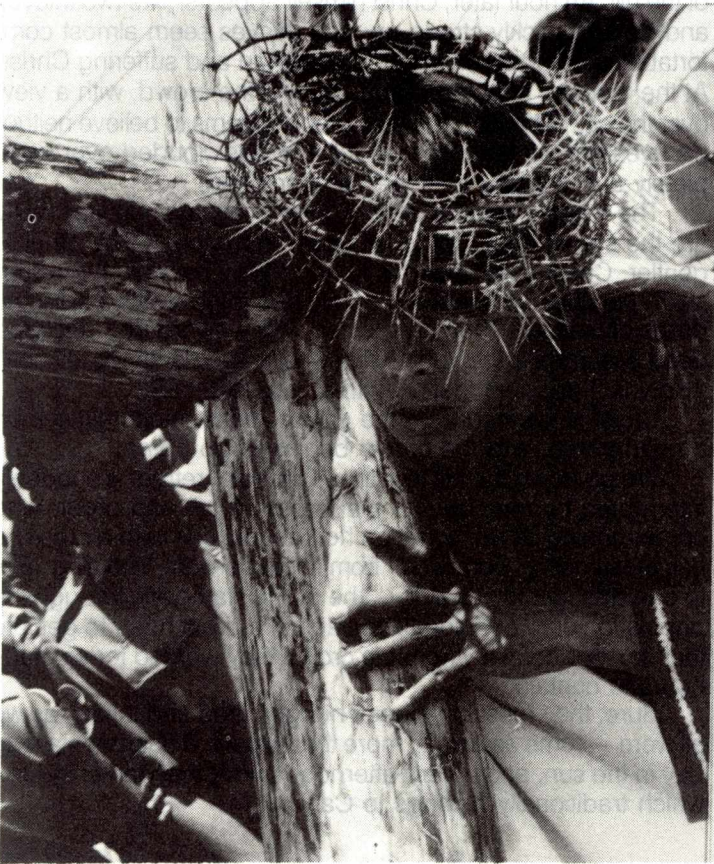


Christ on the way to crucifixion.



A procession of the penitents —each with his crown of thorns— moves off around 11 a.m., accompanied by family and friends from Nazareth and Ixtapalapa. Their route to Calvary includes 2.5 miles through the surrounding streets before they return to the Plaza Cuitláhuac where a huge crowd awaits them, and where the trial of Jesus Christ, carpenter of Nazareth, is about to take place.

As the penitents enter the plaza, it seems some of them have reached that "other state" suffering is said to provoke. Those who carry crosses too heavy for them and those who go barefoot, are the ones who suffer most. Health and rescue units are on hand to aid anyone who faints and to treat the blistered, bleeding feet of others.



Iztapalapa penitent.

Family and friends of Jesus Christ

The Garden of Cuitláhuac has been transformed in the few hours since we walked across it this morning. By now it is filled —as are all the surrounding streets— with thousands of small-time vendors who sell everything from traditional arts and crafts to modern plastic artefacts, fruits, tacos, oysters and junk food.

The streets have also been occupied by the forces of law and order, around two thousand police: some men, some women, some with hats, some with helmets, some on horseback, some in cars, most on foot. They physically cordon off the Plaza to prevent people from moving onto the square, which is reserved for actors and the press.

Plaza Cuitláhuac is a big space, although the presence of some 500 police makes it seem smaller now. The square is rapidly filled with the penitents from Nazareth, who stand with their crosses, and the other actors who now enter the scene: the priests and Pharisees, Pontius Pilate and his court, the apostles, family and friends of Jesus Christ, the court of Herod, and Judas Iscariot, who acts magnificently, half mad, half bad, shaking the bag of money he earned when he betrayed Jesus to the priests and Pharisees.

Now we all suffer in the mid-day sun: the penitents, the police-women in their tight-fitting nylon uniforms, the photographers carrying their equipment and the onlookers who have been standing waiting for hours.

The priests and Pharisees begin their part, demanding the execution of Jesus Christ, "seditious young man who has been provoking the population, who says he is the son of God." While this is going on, the police are pushing back part of the crowd that wants to enter the plaza, the atmosphere is tense, but lines are re-established.

The play continues: Pontius Pilate demands to see the prisoner, who is then brought on stage by the Roman soldiers. Pilate says that the priests and Pharisees are "false and envious" while "the beauty of Christ's soul can be seen in his face." Unable to resolve the case to the priests' satisfaction, Pilate sends the prisoner to Herod, whose court is on the other side of the plaza. Christ, who has talked with Pontius Pilate, refuses to talk to Herod, who is scornful and abusive. He declares that Christ is guilty and sends him back to Pilate for sentencing. Barabbas, a common prisoner accused of murder, is freed, while Christ —a political prisoner— is sent off to be whipped and crucified, at the insistence of the priests and Pharisees.

Two fat and solid men, dressed in animal skins, have been seen in the Plaza for some hours: they are the whippers. They



Virgin Mary weeping.



life and culture

have carried about, with much show, huge bundles of thorns, but at the last moment they change their instrument, and Christ is whipped with a bunch of thornless herbs.

After this, the actors, the procession of penitents and the crowd all move off to Calvary, in this case, El Cerro de la Estrella, Star Mountain. This is a dusty hill not completely cleared of rubbish. All around it, a waiting throng is surrounded and contained by police on foot and on horseback. The streets leading up the hill are likewise filled by the crowd.

The Ethic Of Suffering

The people have been standing in the sun and dust for



Judas.

some three or four hours, occasionally struggling with the police in the midst of stamping horses and restless children. A member of the organizing committee who said he once acted as a Roman soldier, tells me the police forces are necessary for the safety of the crowd. This message was constantly repeated over the loudspeaker system by a paternalistic voice.

Why the people themselves, many with young children, choose to stand in these conditions for so many hours during their Easter holiday, is one of the mysteries in this ethic of suffering. Those who carried crosses said they did it because "God has given me a lot" or because they are repenting for their sins. This was another mystery: that young boys, eight or 14-years old, should have such an intimate sense of repentance, and such a will to suffer so as to feel "satisfied at the end."

The penitents with their crosses begin to arrive at the top of the hill. An hour later, Christ himself appears. The two thieves and he are quickly strung up. The thieves seem almost comfortable in comparison with the stretched and suffering Christ. At the moment of being raised up over the crowd, with a view over the city of Mexico, the young actor seems to believe neither his eyes nor his fate. By now the sky has clouded over completely and the whole scene has darkened.

The theater goes on slowly. One thief says, "If you really are the son of God, get us all down from here." The other is gentler. Christ calls upon his father: "Why have you forsaken me?" He cries out that he is thirsty and is given the traditional drops of vinegar. Then he's tested with a sword and declared dead. Meanwhile, the Virgin Mary weeps and demands to know: "How is it possible that they treat you like this?"

Christ is lowered from the cross, Judas hangs himself on a nearby tree, and the crowd begins to go home.

We go down the hill together. Our calm retreat is suddenly interrupted by members of the forces of law and order, who come running down, some on horseback, one with a cross he has presumably "borrowed" from some penitent. Shouting "Get to one side, get to one side," the police stampede through the population onto Avenida Ixtapalapa in a great hurry to get into their buses and away from the crowd they worked for so many hours to contain.

Sure, they must have been hungry, tired and thirsty, as we all were —some assuredly more than others. It had been a long day in the sun, and a hard afternoon under that darkening sky which traditionally belongs to Calvary.★

