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**Catholics in the Movies (Cushwa Center for the Study of  
American Catholicism); "Passage through the Borderlands:  
the Transformational World of *Santitos*"**

[Clip: Esperanza's escape from Doroteo's brothel and  
encounter with the Virgin of Guadalupe on L.A. mural]

Esperanza's encounter with the Virgin of Guadalupe comes at a pivotal moment in her long search for her missing daughter Blanca. Esperanza -- which means "hope" in Spanish -- has wandered all the way to Los Angeles from her home in Veracruz, having worked undercover as a prostitute in a series of whorehouses to which she is sure Blanca has been abducted. This rather strange conviction goes all the way back to a series of apparitions Esperanza beheld of Saint Jude, the patron saint of hopeless causes, shortly after the doctors announced that Blanca had died of a mysterious infection during a routine tonsillectomy in the local hospital. Appearing through the grease-stained doors of Esperanza's oven, Saint Jude had assured her, "Your daughter is not dead," and "Go look for her!" -- two statements that she ends up interpreting in light of her own deepest fears and hopes. Driven by the fury of maternal love -- which death has fractured into a complex mixture of grief, longing, and guilt -- Esperanza descends into an outlaw world of hookers and thieves in search of her daughter, until her encounter with the Virgin of Guadalupe -- who is the Mother of the Mexican people -- brings her back to her senses. She will return to Veracruz and behold yet another apparition -- this time of the risen spirit of Blanca in her bathroom mirror -- and at last accept the loss of her daughter to death. By the end of the film, Esperanza has not only healed from her grief, but has found a new husband -- a professional wrestler known as the Angel of Justice whom she met in L.A. The last shot of the film shows the new couple driving back to the United States to begin a new life, with a section of the bathroom wall where Blanca appeared strapped down in the back of the wrestler's pickup truck.

Although it is a work of fiction, *Esperanza's Box of Saints* (reincarnated as the movie *Santitos*) invites us to think about devotion to saints in real life, not from a theological angle but from the perspective of the devout. Theologians discuss saints as people who have lived their lives in imitation of Christ to draw near to God, and who in the afterlife can intercede on behalf of the living to grant them divine favors. Maria Amparo Escandon's story, in contrast, gives us a glimpse of the saints as they emerge as the byproduct of human faith, imagination and emotion. From this latter perspective, the significance of saints lies not only in their exemplary lives and deeds, but also in their power to transform human perception. As an old adage puts the case, prayer may not change God or the saints, but it definitely changes the person who prays. For me, the power of Escandon's story lies in this central insight about the role of devotionism in the process of personal transformation. With the help of Saint Jude, Saint Anthony, the Virgin of Guadalupe, and many other supernatural beings in the Catholic communion, Esperanza undertakes an odyssey of self-discovery to become a stronger, braver, and wiser woman than she was before Blanca's death.

I will begin my reflections with a phrase that Escandon has included in an afterward to her book, and this is the concept of "magical reality." She writes that she "wanted to keep this story outside the margins of magic realism. Why keep magic within the parameters of extraordinary worlds when it abounds in real life? Esperanza's story is magical reality, the kind that people who live in Mexico encounter every day." Magical reality, as I interpret the term in light of Esperanza's journey, is a reality that is highly fluid and dynamic – one that is likely to change in unexpected, surprising, and even playful ways. I would agree with Escandon that the magical dimension of human experience is not extraordinary at all, but one that most if not all people have at times encountered in their day-to-day lives. Magical reality includes – but is certainly not limited to – apparitions of supernatural beings. It encompasses uncanny coincidences, premonitions, sudden turns of fortune -- in short, all that can not be reduced to some rational narrative of life that modern societies are so fond of reciting to themselves.

Escandon's qualifier that magical reality is a dimension of life for people who live in Mexico is important. In the Mexican context, we are dealing with a culture where pre-

Tridentine Catholicism mixed and melded with Native American cultures to produce a society that has forever since acknowledged the shape-shifting aspects of human experience as one of its central attributes. The boundaries between human beings, the natural, and the invisible worlds are not always so fixed. *Curanderos* heal diseases through spiritual diagnoses of illness and their personal relationship with medicine plants; the living dine with departed ancestors every year on the Day of the Dead; and Catholics make pilgrimages to spiritually charged destinations within Catholic and indigenous landscapes. Escandon's thoughts on magical reality in Mexico echo what the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier, once noted as the prevalence of the "marvelous real in [Latin] America." "Because of the virginity of the land, our upbringing, our ontology, the Faustian presence of the Indian and the black man, the revelation constituted by its recent discovery, its fecund racial mixing, America is far from using up its wealth of [marvelous or magical] mythologies. After all, what is the entire history of America if not a chronicle of the marvelous real?" Carpentier asked.

Confining ourselves to Mexico alone, we might say that the various images of saints – in churches, on home altars, at shrines, or on the *retablo* paintings depicting various miracles -- are so many markers throughout the landscape of where reality has assumed a magical quality, where it has taken an unpredictable twist or turn. For many citizens of the United States – including, I daresay, Catholics whose faith has been shaped by the modernizing trends of Vatican II -- the intrinsically magical quality of human existence may require some explanation or justification. Despite our embrace of cultural diversity, the United States can not undo its own cultural foundation in both Puritan and Enlightenment thought, which for different reasons cast a skeptical eye towards something as spurious as "magic." But let us simply remember that devotion to the saints– in whatever country it occurs – is almost always born in a rupture of our taken-for-granted realities. In the story of Esperanza, this rupture is the terrible fact of her daughter's death. For others it occurs in a moment of some other kind of intense loss – of health, economic security, or love. In moments like these, the burden of proof does not rest on the reality or unreality of magic, but on our naïve and usually unconscious faith in the solidity of our conventional concepts and lives. In moments like these, when our lives have suddenly been turned upside-down, when the set stories of who we are and what our lives are about

no longer make any sense, the claim that life is fluid, shifting, and ephemeral indeed becomes a simple statement of existential fact.

Scholars of religion have long discussed the importance of ritual in helping human beings to navigate through and manage these anti-structural or "liminal" experiences, where magic dwells as both the solvent of our certainties and the occasion for our rebirth. In cultures like the United States where modernity has made deep inroads into our everyday lives, the institution of psychology has taken over many of the functions once reserved for priests or shamans. Conversely, we can say that devotees like Esperanza find in their own rituals – their devotion to the saints – the same support and clarity that many others might find in a counselor or therapist. In Esperanza's case: first, she needs someone to whom she can talk and who will listen to her; second, she needs to find the inner space in which to incorporate the reality of her loss; and third, she needs to find a way to reconfigure herself in the wake of the massive upheavals in her life. Let us consider each one of these three dimensions of devotionism in turn.

First, Esperanza finds in her devotion to saints a receptive and listening audience. Devotionalism is, after all, an intimate *talking to* the saints, not merely a talking about them. We see this confessional nature of devotion throughout the film *Santitos*, but in Escandon's book it becomes especially clear. *Esperanza's Box of Saints* is replete with passages written in the second person – the "you" form – reminding us that saints are nothing more or less than the byproduct of an ongoing conversation. In addition to Esperanza's pleas and questions to Saint Jude, there is her ongoing relationship with her local priest, Padre Salvador, which unfolds quite literally in a confessional booth. Esperanza talks directly *to* Saint Jude, and then talks to Padre Salvador *about* him. Padre Salvador is allowed to "eavesdrop" on Esperanza's relationship with Jude, and never fully understands how his priestly advice will affect her relationship with her *santito*. In fact, it is Padre Salvador's ambiguous and open-ended responses to her relationship with Jude (he neither affirms nor denies the reality of the apparitions) that inadvertently catalyzes her flight into the world of prostitution. Escandon's book also includes a number of confessions by Padre Salvador that never appeared in the movie, concerning his erotic

desire for Esperanza and his memories of a sexual encounter he had as a child with his nanny Consuelo. These are also written in the second-person, addressed by the priest directly to God. Finally there are Blanca's own confessions – a number of "Dear Diary" entries discovered by Esperanza after her death – recording the intimate details of her awakening sexuality. As Padre Salvador gets to eavesdrop on Esperanza's conversation with Jude in the confessional booth, so too are readers of Escandon's book allowed to eavesdrop on the conversations between the priest and God, and between Blanca and her diary. In the movie and even moreso in the book, devotionism is recreated as an experience of intimacy born out of confession, an "I-Thou" relationship that allows for the opening of the heart to an other. Its antithesis is prostitution, which Escandon poignantly describes as the "violation of intimacy" – the lifeless gaze upon the objectified bodies of women.

Second, Esperanza creates through her devotion to the saints an inner space through which to incorporate the reality of Blanca's death. The anthropologist Victor Turner once remarked that mysticism is interiorized pilgrimage, and pilgrimage is exteriorized mysticism. In Esperanza's case, the journey of inner healing can not be separated from the external journey she takes from Veracruz through Tijuana to Los Angeles, and home again. The director of *Santitos*, Alejandro Springall, seems especially tuned to this insight. The movie is replete with scenes in which Esperanza beholds Blanca in a mirror – subtly reminding us that the outer acts of devotion both reflect and shape the inner life of the devotee. Esperanza's own journey into the brothels of Mexico and the United States reflects her descent into the underworld of emotional and cognitive chaos – the dangerous dimension of liminality – but she is able to undertake this journey because she has faith and trust in her intimate relationship with Saint Jude. Furthermore, because devotees of saints act out their inner lives in public – making pilgrimages, keeping altars, leaving ex-votos at shrines and in churches – they are afforded the companionship of other human beings along their way. Here the comparisons between religious devotion and modern psychotherapy break down. One United States reviewer misread *Santitos* as a "self-help" film – glossing over the fact that Esperanza's journey leads her to a variety of social encounters, some of them exploitative and others supportive. A relationship with a supernatural being unfolds not in a private therapist's office but in the mess of society and history– calling the devoted into a

real-time initiatory journey with real people and real events that will test and change them.

Finally, devotion enables Esperanza to reconfigure herself in the wake of Blanca's death.

In yet another exploration of devotion to Saint Jude, the anthropologist of religion Robert Orsi has discussed the psychological importance of rebuilding our "horizons of hope" in the midst of devastating loss. Once again, we return to the central importance of conversation in the devotional life. The process of rebuilding horizons of hope amounts to imagining a new story about oneself and one's place in the world, which is shared with and shaped by others. For Orsi's subjects – suburban American women in the 1950s oppressed by various constraints of their patriarchal culture – hope circulated as a series of stories. First there were narratives of petition – prayers to Saint Jude – that gave public voice to otherwise private sufferings. These stories served an important cathartic function for individual women, and helped to catalyze a social awareness of their predicament. Next there were narratives of grace – those accounts of Saint Jude's miracles – that served as the foundation upon which a new identity and a new hope could be built. Esperanza's horizons of hope are similarly reconfigured through her ongoing relationship with Saint Jude and Padre Salvador. For Esperanza grief is compounded by the fact that she can not put closure on Blanca's death, which is to say that she can not find a meaningful way to end the story about their relationship. In both the movie and the book, she is not even able to see her daughter's corpse. Due to the nature of the strange virus that took her life, Blanca's body is immediately quarantined in a seran-wrapped casket, and promptly buried in the local cemetery. Ultimately her healing comes when she is able to find a place for her daughter – not only physically, but in a new narrative that she tells about herself and her world, and shares with others.

With the aid of devotionism, tragedy thus strikes as an opportunity to recreate one's place in the world, to undergo a profound experience of personal transformation. Devotionism is based on a relationship of intimacy, created in and through ongoing confessions to the saints and with other devotees. Such I-Thou encounters speak to and draw forth the passions of the heart. At the same time, a new imaginary space is opened up for the catharsis

of pain and for the recasting of desire. Through continued conversations with the saints and the faithful, new horizons of hope emerge. While I think that psychology is probably for U.S. citizens, the closest analog we have to a heartfelt devotion to Saint Jude, I do not think that devotionism can be reduced entirely to psychological categories. The fact remains that devotion to the saints is worked out in a public, social context, which returns us to the significant fact that the "magical reality" of the saints continues to thrive in Latin American/Latino/a contexts. In these societies, it would seem that the formation of mestizo/a cultures based on pre-Tridentine Catholic, Native American, and/or African worldviews has given a prominent and public place to the transformative dimension of human experience. The Catholic motif of death and resurrection, and the dual nature of the Mesoamerican gods – who embodied the dance of life and death in a holistic vision of life – have fused together in Mexico to create a vibrant devotional culture where the saints are so many markers of a truly magical reality. As a Mexican American writer, Maria Amparo Escandon has managed to do what few U.S. authors could achieve: to write a story about religion and grief that is ultimately much lighter than what my comments might suggest – a tale that is intended to be, in her words, "a painful comedy...[that] make[s] the reader laugh to tears in the midst of tragedy."

The fact that devotionism has largely disappeared from Euro-American Catholicism, the fact that magic has become interiorized into the private spaces of an individual's psyche, has something to do, I think, with what Richard Rodriguez once characterized as the "comic" cast of modern United States culture. The raw fuel of Catholic devotionism – its alchemical integration of suffering and death into the center of what it means to be human – is largely precluded in a society driven by utopian fantasies of happy endings. Paradoxically, as Rodriguez suggests, this collective denial of death ultimately renders the comic United States a sadder culture in the process. Escandon's sheds light on the liberating dimensions of magical reality, the transformational dimension of our individual and shared experience, which both gives rise to devotionism, and that saints help us to understand.