

## **Ajijic's Pasión de Cristo (Passion Play)**

From *Living At Lake Chapala* by Judy King, April 2007

The celebration of Easter in Mexico is a big deal—huge. For the devout and even those who are mildly religious (Mexico is 87% Catholic, so that's almost everyone), the week preceding and the week following Easter Sunday are a combination of holy times for worship and holiday times for family events.

One of the most spectacular events of the year at Lakeside is the week-long Ajijic passion play which depicts the last days of Christ. This beloved local tradition was resurrected in the 1980s when a group of young men decided to recreate the town's former *Semana Santa* customs which had been cast aside for years.

Eduardo Ramos Cordero (Lalo) and his companions began by researching the clothing and details of the Biblical stories of the events during the last week of Christ and then Lalo wrote a script and the group started planning scenes that they could portray.



Ajijic's passion play begins on Palm Sunday, with a reenactment of Jesus riding a donkey into Jerusalem.



Dressed in her Sunday best and clutching her own woven palm, this small girl waits the arrival of the Palm Sunday procession at the Ajijic plaza.

Nearly 40 years later Lalo is still directing his friends and dozens of other townspeople in a *Semana Santa* (Holy Week) theatrical extravaganza.

From the opening event, the triumphal entry of Christ into the city riding on a donkey on Palm Sunday (this year on April 1) through the last supper, trial, crucifixion and the light show which accompanies the resurrection late on Holy Saturday, this is a beautiful moving event you'll not want to miss.

Following is a schedule of Passion Play and other events planned during *Semana Santa* (April 1-8) in Ajijic:

### **Domingo de Ramos (Palm Sunday)**

On the corner across from San Andrés Church, *artesanias* work all day forming intricately woven crosses, virgins and other figures from fresh palm fronds. These small works of art are sold for a dollar or two and are carried to the day's Masses to be blessed. After today's events the palms will be kept near the door of village homes where family members can see them and bring to mind the life and death of Jesus every time they enter or leave the house.



Pablo Leja, who is portraying Jesus for the third year reports that he feels a great responsibility to his difficult and emotional role. There are occasional accidents during the whipping scene, and Pablo says he has the scars to prove the intensity of the event.

Shopkeepers and homeowners along Parroquia and Hidalgo, all the way from Ajijic's San Andrés Church to Six Corners, clean the sidewalks and street then dampen the area to help control the dust for the several hundred people who will walk in the procession. By 5 o'clock, they are covering the street with fragrant, freshly cut alfalfa. The entire length of the Hidalgo procession route is as green as a lush lawn.

When the reenactment of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem begins, the men playing Jesus' disciples lead the burro carrying Jesus to the church. The setting sun in the west creates a spectacular effect for photographers. Some shots show the rays of sunlight forming a natural halo around the head of Pablo Leja, a framer and glass cutter who will be portraying Christ for the third year.



Just as described in the scriptures, the followers of Jesus walk along the path which has been covered with the branches of the fields and wave their palms singing hosannas.

As the procession nears San Andrés Church, small boys climb up into the steeple to ring the old bells with the clangors and mallets while the town's newer bells peal pneumatically. Jesus and his disciples lead the crowd through the church gates for a 7 p.m. outdoor celebration of Mass in the church's atrium.

### **Jueves Santo (Maundy or Holy Thursday)**

In some of Mexico's cities and villages, the faithful spend Holy Thursday visiting seven different churches to commemorate the seven stopping places of Christ between his arrest at Gethsemane and his crucifixion at Calvary. For some the custom has been expanded to meditate on one or two of the Stations of the Cross (Via del Crucis) in each church.

Ajjic's reenactment of the passion of Jesus continues on Thursday evening when Jesus and his disciples gather for their portrayal of the Last Supper, (7 p.m. Mass in the atrium of San Andrés.) During this service one of the priests repeats the motions of Jesus by washing the feet of the disciples.



A village priest washes the feet of the disciples during the Thursday Last Supper Mass.

After Mass Jesus and his followers walk up onto the mountain for the scene in which Jesus retreated from the group to pray and returned to find his disciples asleep. By the time the Roman soldiers go up the mountain to find and arrest Jesus, it is dark in Ajijic. The torches carried by the Romans and by the disciples can be seen from the village as a serpent of fire curving up the hill.

Following the arrest Jesus is marched to the town plaza where he is taken to the courtyard of the chapel on the north side of the plaza which represents the court of the Sanhedrin. There he is placed into custody to await trial. To complete the prophecies, the spectators also witness the three betrayals of Christ by Peter, and hear the crowing of the cock.

With the arrest of Jesus, the church bells which normally chime every hour and quarter hour and announce several daily Masses are silenced. They will not ring again until the end of the Easter Eve vigil and the resurrection of Christ.



Beaten, hands tied and crowned with thorns, Jesus is presented to the crowd during the trial.

### **Viernes Santo (Holy or Good Friday)**

The front of Ajijic's San Andres Church is transformed into the opulent palace of King Herod for Friday's trial of Jesus as the passion play resumes on Friday morning.

The local townspeople take honor in portraying the cast mentioned in the Bible. Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary are there, along with wonderfully costumed early Christians and complacent Roman townspeople and authority figures.

The human statues and fountains that decorate the palace of Herod are Ajijic's younger residents who are painted gold and stand motionless in classic poses.

The Roman soldiers fend off the angry uprising of the people in the mob who cry, "Crucify Him" in response to the offer to release Jesus. The action is as real as the players can provide in the annual event. As Jesus is scourged by the Romans' whips, sometimes real blood dots his back as one of the men with the whips miscalculates and actually strikes the actor. Trickle of stage blood dot his head under the crown of thorns.



The hand hewn cross carried by Jesus through the streets of Ajijic and up onto the mountain is said to weigh between 80 and 90 kilos or nearly 200 pounds.

When he picks up the huge cross to carry it through the village and up onto the mountain to the site of his crucifixion, spectators are visibly moved.

On the mountain, Jesus is hung between two thieves to die. As he speaks from the cross, weakens and dies, the agony and grief in the crowd is palatable, heavy and real. Subdued, most of the crowd disperses but his mourners remain on the mountain with him until nightfall. Then, as Jesus said in his last words, "It is over."

In a 1992 issue of the local paper, *Ojo del Lago*, writer Tod Jonson reported, "To look into the tear-stained faces of actors and spectators alike as Jesus is lead through the cobblestone streets of Ajijic to his imaginary destiny on the cross is so touching and real that one fails to remember that it is 1992...and that these are non-professional actors who have prepared all year long for this huge annual undertaking.

"To experience this ceremony makes you understand what it must have been like nearly 2000 years ago living in the Middle East and being subjected to and witnessing such humiliations on a daily basis."

You'll find that it doesn't matter that none of the participants are professional actors. Each participant offers all of their energy to God, taking great personal pride in the sacrifices of time, energy and money needed to accurately fulfill their role. Each participant observes the Catholic tradition of the story of Christ's passion as closely as possible. Their suffering and courage is mixed with a great deal of enthusiasm, soul and love.

### **The Procession of Silence**

Friday evening the year's most moving and emotional processions is held. Townspeople gather and move in absolute silence through the streets. In sharp contrast to other processions punctuated by sky rockets and the music of the town's brass band, the mournful slow drum cadence and the quiet shuffling of the feet on the cobblestones is the only sound. One of their throng moves



An angry mob of actors react to the events of the trial of Jesus.

through the streets ahead of the procession turning out streetlights and leading the sad entourage in darkness. At the head of the group, banners proclaim, "Silence! Jesus is dead."

Throughout the somber crowd, village people carry signs listing the sins for which Jesus died.

### ***Sábado de Gloria or Sábado Santo (Holy Saturday)***

On Easter Saturday, most church doors in Mexico are closed and locked. The always-burning candles at the altar were extinguished at the hour of Jesus death, and the altar remains veiled. In church buildings where from two and eight Masses are celebrated on every day of the year, only a brief prayer service is held on this day of deep mourning.

All remaining consecrated communion wafers and wine are removed from the church buildings during the Friday afternoon remembrance of the death of Jesus. On Saturday Jesus is no longer in the wafers or wine. There is no one home in the church. It is a dark, sad, empty shell.

### **The Burning of Judas**

In Chapala, another old tradition continues on Holy Saturday when paper maché effigies of Judas and unpopular local and national political figures are burned and exploded with fireworks in the center of town. This tradition, which began in Spain while still under Arabic Moorish rule, was popular in Mexico in the early years and was later eliminated. In recent years, it has been resurrected and is almost a form of social therapy, providing each person an opportunity to explode, burn or bury his or her own traitor, Judas or his own personal demons.



It is easy to feel a part of the ancient times when the people around you look this authentic.

### **The Easter Eve vigil**

On Saturday night around seven, Ajijic townspeople carrying two-liter bottles of water and candles begin to gather on the plaza and in the churchyard for the Easter Eve vigil. During the first portion of this three-hour service the parish priest blesses the year's supply of holy water and sacred candles, for the church and the people who have brought them to keep in their homes. The first candle to be lit is the huge ceremonial candle that resides in front of the altar all year and burns during baptisms, confirmations, first communions, weddings and other special ceremonies. From it all the other candles are lit, and the blessed fire is passed on from person to person through the crowd until the dark area begins to glow.

The hundreds of chairs in the churchyard aren't nearly enough to hold the crowd that has assembled for this special ceremony and Mass. The service is highlighted by an 11 p.m. chorus of bells and skyrockets. The light, smoke and sound show accompany the announcement that Christ's tomb is empty and that he has risen from the dead. The candles, the holy water and the Host are carried into the church (empty and dark since Friday afternoon) bringing life back to the building. The religious portion of the night ends with the celebration of the Mass, the first held since early Friday morning.

### **The celebration**

The social portion of the night begins when Mass ends and the dances and celebrations continue until dawn.

### ***Domingo de Gloria or Pascua (Easter Sunday)***

Until I learned about the tradition of the Easter Eve vigil, I was puzzled by the absence of riotous celebration at the church on Easter morning. I thought that if ever there was a time for pealing bells and skyrockets, it would be Easter morning. Like Christmas morning, Easter morning in Ajijic is eerily quiet. Few people are on the streets; traffic has quieted to a standstill. The celebration was held the night before, and on this day, the people sleep.



Each year the staging and set design for Ajijic's passion play becomes more elaborate. One thing that doesn't change is the honor that is involved in being chosen to be spray painted gold and to stand motionless for hours in the hot April sun.

### **Tips for attending these events:**

#### **Palm Sunday**

Spectators for the Palm Sunday procession are reminded not to park on or near Calle Hidalgo anywhere between San Andrés Church and Six Corners. Bring a bunch of your own rosemary or a small bouquet of white flowers to wave while singing hosannas.

#### **Holy Thursday**

Unless you are in very good shape, choose just one vantage point for the Thursday evening events and plan to see just some of the scenes—the Last Supper, the vignette of the prayer in the garden, the arrest or

the denial of Peter. The action is fast, with the Roman soldiers moving quickly through the streets and up the mountain, making it difficult for some older spectators to keep up.

#### **Friday's trial**

If you plan to attend Friday's trial and crucifixion be sure to arrive prepared to be in the heat and sun, possibly standing for the length of the performance in the heat and the sun. Bring a folding chair if you have difficulty standing for a long period of time. There is no shade, so be sure to wear a hat that will protect your face and eyes. Apply sunscreen frequently throughout the day. Carry plenty of drinking water. Remember that the full sun, time of day, and altitude are a combination of conditions that cause rapid and serious dehydration.

#### **Friday night silent procession.**

This is a solemn, quiet, very serious event. Keep your comments until later. Please do not smoke or drink as the people pass by.

#### **Easter Eve Vigil**

If you are Catholic, you may want to bring a bottle of water to the Easter Eve vigil to be blessed for your use at home during the year. You can purchase traditional candles to be blessed (adorned with the current year) at a shop two doors north of the International Realty Office on Colón in Ajijic. You may want to bring a bottle of drinking water and your own folding chair.

Although it is usually hot and sunny in April, witnessing the *Semana Santa* events in Ajijic is a rare privilege. Bring your camera. This portrayal of the last days of Jesus will be one of the highlights of your Lake Chapala experience.