

Holy Week focus

Film highlights spirituality of Valley communities' lives

By MARVIN READ
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

The religious piety and fervor that characterized Spain for centuries is alive and well --- perhaps nowhere as much as in Colorado's San Luis Valley. It draws from the sense of faith that came to the New World with the Franciscan and other missionaries in the 16th century. The spirit was refined and reshaped by the Indio-American cultures of Mexico and the Southwestern United States, and the living and display of that faith takes on an even deeper and richer character in the current Lenten season and climaxes during Holy Week. San Luis Valley native Rick Vigil has captured and recorded some of that faith in a 24-minute documentary, "Spirituality and Its People --- El Valle de San Luis." His film, shot between 2001 and 2005, features both religious leaders and laity from the communities of San Luis, Antonito, Capulin, Conejos, La Jara, San Antonio and San Francisco. Featured on the DVD are the Rev. Pat Valdez and Sister Rene Weeks, a member of the Dominican Sisters of Great Bend, Kan., who has worked in the Valley for 16 years.

Valdez, a priest of the Theatine order, is a long-term pastor at Sangre de Cristo Parish in San Luis and an impressive --- some would say fabled --- motivator of his parishioners' energy and faith. Together, pastor and congregation visualized --- and then built --- an impressive, and not inexpensive Stations of the Cross on a mesa outside of town, with each of the stations, including a 15th Resurrection statue, cast by local sculptor Huberto Maestas. At the top of the hill, parishioners and supporters have built All Saints Shrine, the white dome of which is visible for miles. That's all typical of the intense faith of the people of Conejos and Costilla counties: A rich and generous faith set in the midst of two of the poorest counties in the United States. A part of that spirit has its roots in Los Hermanos Penitentes, men in something of a secret society who, since the beginning of the 19th century, have provided both social help and religious motivation that climaxes with the events of Holy Week. Once known for their flagellation --- whipping of their bodies to signify their union with the physical sufferings of Jesus after his arrest --- the aging movement continues to re-enact portions of Holy Week, Good Friday and, in some Valley communities, the meeting between Jesus and Mary on his way to Calvary. In a valley and communities whose neighboring mountains are named Sangre de Cristo --- Blood of Christ --- such spirituality seems well-placed. For a people who have sometimes prospered but often suffered with poverty and tough physical work, the union of Christ's pains and their own seems a good match. The Roman Catholic Church has not been hesitant to offer that faith as a salve for physical and other woes. Many of the Holy Week activities involve pilgrimages --- walking from the bottom to the top of the San Luis mesa, from a church to a Penitentes chapel (morada) --- all involving a remembrance of the painful journey of Christ from Jerusalem to Calvary. Music and

meals are a part of the community celebrations. Vigil has recorded the solemn yet jubilant participation of old people and young as they carry large crosses and statues, as they participate in a variety of encuentros --- the encounters between Jesus and Mary --- and re-enactments of the road to Calvary. "The reason I decided to make the documentary is to make people aware of the traditions that are being lost and forgotten in the San Luis Valley," Vigil said, adding that the film is "a tribute and dedication to my deceased mother, Severina, who died in 2003." Valdez and Weeks appear often in the video to explain the spiritual, historical and sociological importance of their parishioners' devotion and many of the men and women for whom the Holy Week rites are a part of personal and familial tradition explain what it all means to them. What it means has nothing to do with show; after all, these small-to-tiny communities are not even on most people's radar. It has nothing to do with commercialism or showy faith; after all, the rites involve individuals, families and villages where, in fact, everyone is family, literally or otherwise. It does have something big to do with faith, with appreciation of their sense of Gospel, with their identification with the sufferings of Jesus and an attempt to place their lives within that context. It has something to do with simplicity; not that the lives of Valley residents are less complex than those of any other community, but an uncomplicated trust in their religion that provides a haven of sorts from complexities that may burrow away at the human spirit. Vigil said that he'll share 30 percent of the revenues from sales of the DVD with parishes in the three communities: San Luis, Conejos and La Jara-Capulin, giving 10 percent to each. "These churches are having a hard time surviving, and I'd like to see if we can't generate some money to help those parishes continue," he said. An unspoken but real part of the story relates to the mystical beauty of Southern Colorado and northern New Mexico --- a connection of sky, earth, faith, art and prayer. Vigil's film shows how music, costumes, food, tears and prayer all combine as the San Luis Valley communities live out their understanding of and devotion to the mystery and pain of the passion of Christ.

Marvin Read
Pueblo Chieftain
(719) 544-3520
marvinr@chieftain.com