

FOREVER IN CHIMAYO

By Michael Ventura

June 25, 1999

The priest is a very small man, almost dwarfish, with an unusually large head -- a head that would seem large even on a tall man. He's in his seventies, I should guess; his hair is thick; he's bowlegged, and walks with small decisive steps; his hands are agile in their gestures, and callused -- hands of manual labor. His brown skin is deeply lined, and it's as though he has been carved out of dark heavy wood -- a folk carving, crude of feature but marvelously expressive. I am sitting in a pew, watching him. He stands in the aisle and speaks Spanish to several women who are even smaller than he is. He listens intently, talks quietly but with surety, and looks them straight in the eye. The subject seems serious, perhaps urgent, and they speak as though they are the only ones in this small church.

He is not the kind of man one interrupts, and even the gaggle of affluent Anglo tourists knows it -- proprietary people who act as though picture-taking confers the right to speak loudly of nothing, even in church. They stand a discreet distance from this priest while he finishes with his parishioners. When he finally turns toward the tourists they seem suddenly smaller than he, though they tower over him. He is open, smiling -- not judging them the way I am. He is charged with upholding the sacredness of this house of God, a sacredness rooted in treating everyone not merely as a welcome guest but as kin in the family of God. I do not believe in this priest's doctrines, but I believe in and pray to God, and I often think of that beautiful phrase, "In my Father's house there are many mansions." I respect the way this priest conducts this house.

One of the tourists, a woman, asks this old priest, "Father, how long have you been here?"

"Forever," he replies quietly.

Right away their conversation turns to other things, but I have stopped listening. His reply has opened my heart, and I am overwhelmed with so many conflicting emotions. I am again a small boy afraid of priests, because they can make you go to Hell -- a boy who went to confession only once, before his First Holy Communion, and never, as boy or man, had the courage to go again. And I am again an adolescent, 16, who wants to be a priest but knows he cannot, there are too many doctrines he can never accept and too much sensuality simmering in his flesh and too many blockages between himself and God -- yet for I haunted churches of New York, which were open 24 hours a day back then, praying to be freed from his doubts and even from his sexuality so that he might be allowed to become a priest, and feeling even as he prayed that God's answer was a deep and inescapable *No*. And I am again and again a man of many ages, reading the Gospels as I so often have, and coming to that most poignant line: "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief." And for me the line no longer has to do with the Catholic Jesus or with anybody's Jesus; it has to do with the question that haunts everyone, at one time or another: Why did the Creator create the sources of evil? All of this flickers in my sense of being overwhelmed, sitting in that pew, but mostly:

I want one day to say the word "forever" the way this priest has said it. Quietly but not casually; with no special or self-conscious emphasis, but deeply; it is as though the presence of Forever is so real to him, so present, that he can evoke it with the

mere saying of the word, and it's no big deal, he goes on to other things, for his reference point, his center of gravity, is *Forever*. He lives there, and so with trust he can die there. All his life he has mediated between the sacred and the everyday, between Forever and our sense of time, and so when he uses the word it's as though I can feel Forever in the room.

I am stunned. How often is one in the presence of a holy man or woman? How often does one feel the substantial day-to-day results of true devotion emanating from a human being?

For me, too, Forever is a felt (rather than an abstract) reality; but I am a long way from it being the reference point, the center, of my life. Yet I imagine that evil is a small thing in the vastness of Forever -- and goodness, too, is small; they take their place as small flickering lights in Forever, if that is where one truly lives; and still there is the work of the day to do, the work of this priest's callused hands, and hearing the god-awful secrets of the confessional, and administering the sacraments of marriage and baptism and death, and offering communion with the One for whom even Forever is merely one part of Creation. The concerns of those small earnest women are to be addressed -- Forever doesn't trivialize that need, but rather makes it all the more present, present but not overwhelming. Or so I imagine. "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief."

I said to a friend a year ago: "We live *in* God. We call it living in Time." As though Time is the physical body of God, but where that body exists is larger than Time. And I remembered visiting my brother Aldo in a mental ward when he said to me, "We're not the creations of God, we're the result of God's exertion. We are God's sweat." He liked that image and he laughed -- and Aldo doesn't laugh often; he laughed again, saying, "And if we are God's sweat -- then we are God's smell!"

But Forever exists outside of all such images and laughter -- and at their center. And in that sense, perhaps, are we made of Forever? Is that why God seems so unutterably familiar and yet so far away?

Well ... I am very much out of my depth in these matters. And now I am pulled further out -- out of myself.

One of the tourist women says: "Father, please give me your blessing."

Well, he is a true priest of the Nazarene, for, following the example of Jesus, he doesn't ask this woman for proofs and doesn't seem to care whether or not she's Catholic; the priest simply looks intently at her and gives her the sign of blessing.

Now I have tears in my eyes -- which is incredibly surprising to me. But I know what I must do, what I will do, and I can hardly believe it even as I'm doing it: standing, going to the priest, and saying in a voice I hardly recognize, "Father, please give me your blessing."

He looks into me, as we stand in the aisle of that small church, his eyes are very dark and not sympathetic. His is an utterly inclusive stare -- as though there are only he and I now in the world. It is a look of intensity and seriousness that pierces me -- and makes me a little afraid. When he reaches his hand toward me I flinch. I flinch! Men have thrown punches at me and I haven't flinched (and, at times, I have); but I flinch now from this old priest's gesture. With his large and very callused thumb he presses the sign of the Cross into my forehead. His thumb is so rough it scratches. He presses hard. I have to push my head against his thumb, or my head will just go back and back. I'm surprised at the force.

I say, "Thank you, Father." I return to my prayers. I am sitting in the center of Forever, for a small bit of time-out-of-time, with the sting of his blessing pulsating on my

forehead. Something has been opened in me by the presence of this holy person -- something that has to do not with Christianity (I am not a Christian) but with reverence. How long will it take me to live into and truly occupy this new opened place?

All this happened two years ago at the Santuario de Chimayo, a small adobe church in the mountains of New Mexico. Behind the church is an outdoor chapel beside which a cold fast stream rushes down the mountain. Huge old trees shade the outdoor pews and altar, the sunlight reaches through the leaves in shafts of dust-speckled gold, and horses and cows graze in the meadow beyond the stream. It used to be you could wade in the stream, but now they've put up a metal fence at the edge of the water. A sacrilege, you'd think, but people have made a sacrament of it: Everywhere on the fence are handmade crosses constructed of two sticks tied together with strands of the tough grass that grows all around. So the fence itself has become a kind of altar -- a sweet and remarkable transformation. Wondering who was the first to fashion such a cross and fasten it to the fence, and thanking that person, I too made a cross of two small sticks, tied them with a strand of grass, and with another long blade of grass I bound my cross to the altar-fence in an offering of thanks. And the reverence I felt was like a song I'd heard lifetimes ago and was just now remembering. That is the way of Forever in Chimayo.

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