

Photos by Daniel Munguia

# The Unquestionable Power of Faith

“I’ll never happen, even if you go dance at Chalma.” For many Mexicans, this saying means there is no hope whatsoever. And, the thing is, whatever they want is surely so impossible that not even a visit to the sanctuary of Our Lord of Chalma can fix it, even though the miraculous powers of this Christ are widely respected and recognized, as proven by the thousands of pilgrims who prostrate themselves every year at his feet to request his aid or thank him for favors re-

ceived. And although little is known about when and how he began to show his divine power, his story began almost five centuries ago, shortly after the Spanish arrived in these lands.

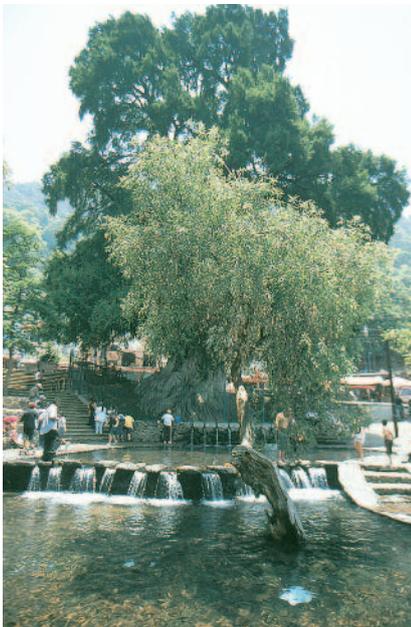
## THE REASONS AND THE LEGEND

The campaign to spiritually conquer the pre-Hispanic peoples was not easy. The evangelizing friars

began by destroying the indigenous temples and the representations of their gods, building monumental churches under which they thought they could bury the manifestations of a culture that for thousands of years had rested on a theocratic state. However, for a long time the “converted” indigenous worshipped a god that was still foreign to them while keeping in their minds the image of their fallen gods and in their hands an offering secretly dedicated to them. This is why in Chalma, like in many other places, a miracle

occurred there. They decided to begin their evangelizing by exhorting the indigenous to abandon these bloody practices and convert to Christianity. The miracle occurred a few days later: on the floor of the cave a figure of Oxtoteótl was found in pieces, replaced by a figure of Christ crucified, with fresh flowers at his feet. It is said that, given this demonstration of power, many indigenous began their conversion right there.

Whether a miracle or an intelligent substitution by the friars, in a short time Chalma became a place



The *ahuehuate* tree (left), one of the decorated crosses left by pilgrims (center) and the cave of the apparition (right), located outside the church.

was required to justify complete surrender to the new faith.

Thus, according to legend, in 1539, two Augustinian friars who were preaching in the region of Malinalco and Ocuilán heard that the natives made pilgrimages to a place called Chalma, whose name means “place of caves.” They walked for days carrying flowers, copal and other offerings on their heads, finally reaching a cave where they worshipped Oxtoteótl (the lord of the cave).<sup>1</sup> Before entering, the pilgrims bathed themselves in the river born of a nearby spring. On their visit, the Augustinians found flowers, other offerings and traces of blood, evidence that human sacrifice was prac-

of worship so important that by the end of the sixteenth century, the decision was made to found a monastery there to attend to the pilgrims. Built at the bottom of the ravine and flanked on the west by a river, the first building was inaugurated in 1683, rebuilt in 1721 and renovated in 1830. But the most significant thing about its history was that it was given the title of Royal Monastery and Sanctuary of Our Lord Jesus Christ and Saint Michael of the Caves of Chalma by King Carlos III of Spain, on September 6, 1783.

Nevertheless, we should recognize that the worship of the old, vanquished gods did not die out altogether. It would survive in the dances, the rites

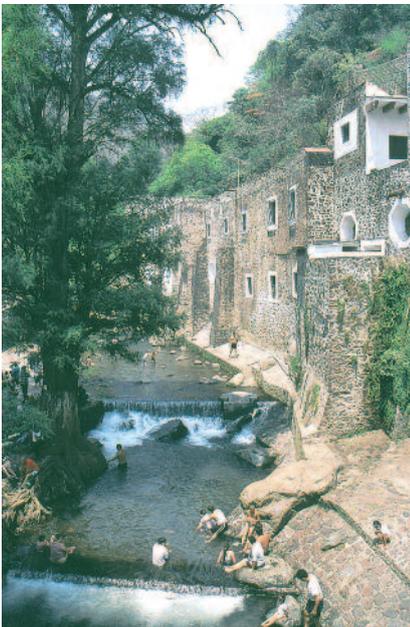
and the floral offerings that are part of the basic practices of those who today still come to see the miraculous benefactor.

#### THE RITUALS OF THE FAITH

Chalma is the second most visited sanctuary in Mexico after the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The church and monastery, from the bottom of the ravine that surrounds them on three

all ages, carrying small children or infants, travel long distances, mainly on foot, to fulfill an oath or a tradition handed down for many generations. People come the whole year long, as do the delegations from towns and organizations that make annual visits. The biggest celebrations are on the Day of Kings, Easter Week and Christmas, but the calendar of fiestas and pilgrimages is very full.

As long as people can remember, every visit to Chalma more or less includes the same activities. A few kilometers before arriving to the sanc-



A river next to the complex serves as a resting place (left). The interior patio (center) is seldom visited. The ex-votos room (right), testimony of the wonder of faith.

sides, rise imposingly, giving the impression that a true power inhabits them. More than three centuries have made for experience in housing pilgrims. All along the left side of the atrium, the hospice lodges travelers and receives them with words of encouragement and reflection at the door of each room. At the church entrance, the words “Come unto me all ye who are worn and charged, that I shall succor thee,” is a promise that everyone who crosses the threshold takes to heart.

Pilgrims come to Chalma from the states of Mexico, Hidalgo, Tlaxcala, Morelos, Puebla, Querétaro, Guanajuato and Michoacán, as well as Mexico City, among others. Men and women of

tuary, the pilgrim stops at the *ahuehuete* tree, an ancestral symbol of the dialogue the pre-Hispanic peoples engaged in with nature, from whose roots a spring emerges that is attributed with miraculous powers. There, he or she must bathe or wash his/her hands as a form of purification. Some people take away water from the spring in bottles. At this place, the pilgrim places a wreath of flowers on his or her head that he/she will wear for the rest of the journey.

Dances are also frequent and a special esplanade is used for them. The visit to the church to pray is preceded by placing votive candles on the altar after rubbing them against the body of

the petitioner, the child or the sick person who is asking for protection. The Christ can also be approached from behind his niche in the large altar, and, even though he can only be partially seen from the side through a transparent curtain protected by glass, people form long lines to be closer to him. To one side, in the sacristy, two Augustinian fathers bless pilgrims and religious objects like crucifixes, images of Christ, books, charms, rosaries, etc., bought there or brought from home. With the display of mysticism and religious fervor, the monastery, its interior patio and its decorations and paintings are usually ignored. Chalma is seldom cited for its architectural value.

On the rocks around the church are large crosses called “penitences.” Some pilgrims carry them down to the church either by foot or on their knees as payment for a favor received or to purge themselves of an evil deed. The belief that a debt to God is paid with sacrifice and pain translates into injured, bloody knees that stain the ground with blood, just like the blood that the Augustinians tried to erase 300 years ago when they assured people that their God did not demand human sacrifice.

In the back of the monastery, a small place holds the *ex-votos*, or devotional paintings, of hundreds of the faithful. This popular custom, very widespread in Mexico, demonstrates the incomparable faith in miracles that the most needy have.

Just like our indigenous ancestors, today’s visitors to the sanctuary deposit offerings and show their gratitude when they are blessed with the salvation of their bodies and spirits. The *ex-votos* thank the Lord for having saved the petitioner from death, disease, vice or temptation. The smallest aid is always welcome, even just passing an examination.

Thus, the ancient pre-Hispanic ceremonies did not die out altogether; they adapted to the god of the victors and survived in the practice of purification, offerings and flowers, dances, the votive candle, a symbol of the light on the way, the amulets in today’s form of crucifixes, rosaries or stamps, but, above all, in the unquestionable belief in a supernatural power that extends its protecting mantle over everyone who needs it urgently and comes humbly to request it. **MM**

*Elsie Montiel*  
**Editor**

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#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> The god’s name varies according to the source: Ozteotl, Oxtoteótl and Ostoctheotl. The latter is how the name is spelled on a plaque at the entrance to the so-called cave of the apparition in the Chalma sanctuary.

