

Spain's Holy Week rituals parade a church represented by all

Mario T. García | Apr. 3, 2013 NCR Today

I just returned from a trip to Sevilla, Spain during *Semana Santa*, or Holy Week, and was thoroughly impressed by the majestic and inspiring rituals employed in observance of the Passion of Christ.

In all of Spain, Sevilla has the most amazing rituals. I was there only the first part of the week, but every day, commencing with Palm Sunday, there were the so-called "pasos" — huge wooden floats often depicting multiple images, such as a scene from the Passion and the sorrowful Mary.

Each float must weigh several hundred pounds and are installed in each church. Up to 40 or more men are required to lift and move the floats out of the church and begin the procession, or "paso," to the equally magnificent cathedral in Sevilla.

The procession, however, is not just the floats but also hundreds of Nazarenos, members of the brotherhoods attached to each church. They wear the pointed and tall hoods that also cover their faces and bodies. The brotherhood members range from quite elderly to as young as five-year-old children; while most are men, I noticed some women, as well.

But what is impressive about these rituals is not just the physical scope of the pageantry but also the sense of faith and devotion by the people. This is not done for tourists or for show, but for the Catholics of Sevilla to display their religious sensibilities. These are expressions of popular religiosity that seem to have little to do with the official clergy but are organized by the brotherhoods themselves.

It made me reflect on the Vatican II concept that we as Catholics all represent the church and not just the clergy. In fact, at this time of major crisis in the church, primarily due to the sexual scandals, it is the people who are really sustaining it by their continued faith and devotion that go beyond the clergy and the institutional church.

What I also reflected on by witnessing *Semana Santa* in Sevilla was how important the incarnational aspect of Catholicism is, and how it is reflected on the stress on the suffering Christ and the sorrowful Mary. All people, but especially the poor and the oppressed, can identify with such suffering due to their own experiences.

Christ came into this world not just to prepare the way to a heavenly kingdom, but to alleviate sufferings in this world, which is why he ministered to the poor, the sick and the persecuted. We need a church that pursues this incarnational direction.

It is my hope that Pope Francis will lead in this direction and include the sufferings that we impose on our priests by an unrealistic policy on celibacy; the sufferings of women who are not allowed to enter the priesthood; the suffering of women who need a church that supports family planning.

My days in Sevilla were memorable not only by what I witnessed during *Semana Santa*, but for the inspirations it gave me for thinking of a new future for the church.

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