

Notes From The Field , 2017

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Since July I have been conducting field work in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca. My research is focused on the village of Santa Cruz Mixtepec (pop. 1338), where a 16th century Dominican convent is currently being restored by the municipal authorities with assistance from the federal government and a private cultural foundation. The main intention of this research is to understand how the different actors involved – restoration experts, local authorities and the local Catholic community – understand the value and importance of historical religious buildings and objects.

While the professional art restorers, architects and engineers are especially concerned to preserve the material integrity of the convent for its historic and cultural value, for the religious community of Santa Cruz, the architecture is just one component of a much larger spiritual landscape. In Santa Cruz, religious life is focused upon personal and collective devotion to particular saints and iterations of the Virgin Mary, whose divine presence can be encountered in the carvings or paintings (*imágenes*) that represent them. Rather than just historical works of art, these *imágenes* are cognizant persons who care for, and are cared for by, their followers .

This past weekend, we celebrated the feast of La Virgen del Rosario (Our Lady of the Rosary), which is celebrated annually on October 7th in the Catholic liturgical calendar. She is a particularly important saint throughout Oaxaca because of her association with the Dominican order, who were the first Christians to evangelise the indigenous peoples of Oaxaca after the Spanish conquest. The fiesta began with a mass in the church, during which the imagen of the Virgin was gifted a new silver rosary, which was purchased by the *mayordomo* (patron) of the fiesta. The priest blessed this rosary and the Virgin herself with prayers and incense, and also blessed a large quantity of plastic rosaries which were given to other members of the congregation. After the mass was over, people were invited to the home of the *mayordomo* who supplied food, *mezcal* (a strong spirit made from the agave plant), music and dance in honour of the Virgin.

At three in the morning, the spiritual aspect of the fiesta resumed. We gathered in the church to begin the recitation of the rosary. Each participant was given a large wax candle and the carving of the Virgin was placed on a platform which was lifted onto the shoulders of volunteers who carried her in procession out of the church, where we began the first 'decade' of the rosary in the darkness. The candlelit procession continued around the village, accompanied by music from the brass band, fireworks and song. Around the village small flower-covered crosses had been placed to mark the spot where prayer would take place. As we stopped at each cross, the Virgin was re-sanctified with incense and we recited one decade of the rosary, as we were invited to reflect upon a particular mystery of the Catholic faith. We made our way all around the village, singing and praying, until we arrived back at the church, just before 6 am. When we concluded the final prayer, everyone gathered in a small outbuilding to have pastries and sweet coffee, provided by the church committee.

Everyone returned to their homes to catch a few hours of sleep before the final mass at 10 am. This was followed by another party at the mayordomo's house, with more food, music and mezcal, which lasted well into the night, although I confess that I didn't last very long at all.