



## Vecinos

### Farewell to Fr. Jose Rodriguez

It was Thursday (Feb. 22) that I received a sad message on my answering machine: "Larry, this is Fr. Vincent Chavez. I just called to say that Fr. Jose Rodriguez died yesterday at his home in Puerto Rico. His remains will be brought back to New Mexico for interment."

As I listened, a flood of memories came pouring forth of what had happened on the night of Jan. 8, 1988. It was the eve of Deacon Jose Rodriguez's ordination into the priesthood. The road had been long and bumpy, but he knew he was going to make it. As we sat up late into the night he said, "Hermano, just think, tomorrow I'll be a prince of the church."



#### Aquí en los valles

Larry Torres

Those words struck ill against me as I wondered if this man had learned nothing. He watched my reaction and asked, "What's wrong?" I replied that the church was already full of too many kings, queens and princes. "What do you want from me?" he asked. I thought for a moment and then I said, "Tomorrow, at the moment of your consecration, I should like to see your face in the dirt!" He took up the challenge and quietly said, "You bring the dirt."

It had long been my contention that anyone who was to be ordained to the priesthood should be consecrated with the holy dirt of Chimayo as the ultimate outward sign of service and obedience. I drove to Chimayo early the next morning and gathered the dirt, wrapping it in a plain piece of folded linen. I prayed over it as I drove to the cathedral in Santa Fe. I had arrived early enough to visit with Rodriguez and his mentor, Fr. Conran Runnebaum (always known to Rodriguez as Père). The holy dirt and the instructions were given.

The hour of consecration to the priesthood had arrived. Rodriguez was led by his sponsors before Archbishop Robert F. Sanchez. He was laid face down before the high altar. The silver pillow upon which his chin was to have rested was spirited away by Runnebaum. Rodriguez reposed his face on a plain piece of folded linen filled with the dirt of New Mexico. As he did so, the clerk on the plaza struck 11. Rodriguez turned to look at me, and we each remembered a line so often quoted between us: "Even at the 11th hour, a man can come to glory." He closed his eyes. By noon Jan. 9, 1988, Rodriguez emerged from the cathedral as Fr. Rodriguez.

This was a strange spiritual moment for the man born in Ponce, Puerto Rico, graduated from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London, England; Mariologist Brother; and founder of *La Compania*, New Mexico's first grassroots bilingual theater.

When he decided to give up the stage in favor of priesthood, he was given to the care of Runnebaum in Arroyo Seco. I was just then newly arrived in my native village after an 11-year hiatus. Runnebaum said to me, "We have an actor who is to begin his seminary studies for the priesthood. Teach him all there is to know about New Mexico culture." That was a tall order for those days.

My first conversation with Rodriguez was a memorable one. I remarked, "*La Compania* is so successful! Just look at the plays already produced: *Nuevo Mexico*, *Si, El Sueño de Navidad del Santísimo*, *La Pasión de Jesús Chávez*... Why would you want to change careers now?"

He replied, "Last May, we were invited to perform *La Pasión de Jesús Chávez* (a modern New Mexico version of the Passion of Jesus) for some pilgrims who were to walk from Coitilla to Chimayo. I'll never forget the faces of the young men as they watched something that made sense to them spiritually. When the last lines were spoken, instead of applause, the pilgrims jumped to their feet yelling, '*Cristo! Cristo! Cristo!*' The shouts reverberated over

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the auditorium as they caught up the actors upon their shoulders. I'll never forget the impact that moment had upon me. I thought, "For this I was given my stage experience. I can use it to teach in the church." I thought quietly that this moment of conversion must have been every bit as dramatic as Saint Paul's.

Rodriguez left behind him... the members of his theater troupe in Albuquerque, following their careers from a distance. But he never forgot them in his prayers as he knelt before the Aragón Cross which he chose as his personal symbol for ordination: "Please bless Oscar Ginez, Ramon Florez, Margarita Martinez, Irene Oliver-Lewis, Bennett Hammer..." He was thrilled when Martinez's daughter, Patricia, landed a role in "The Three Amigos" with Chevy Chase and Steve Martin.

And then he got busy, founding *La Compania de La Santisima Trinidad* in Arroyo Seco as a sister theater troupe to *La Compania* in Albuquerque. The first play he produced locally was "El Santero de Cordoba," written by Denise Chavez of Doña Ana. The original cast included the late Adelaida Romero, Oclides and Edwina Tenorio, Michelle Peña, Annette Quintana, Arsenio, Willie, Kathy and Tessa Cordova, Andy Montoya and me. The second play produced was "Las Cuatro Apariciones de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe." The cast included Anthony Lujan, Lucy Torres (now Briseño), Arsenio, Willy and Boyd Cordova, Andy Montoya and me. When he left for Mt. Angel Seminary in Oregon, *La Compania de La Santisima Trinidad* went on to produce "Los Pastores," "Los Tres Reyes Magos."

"Los Matachines" and "El Niño Perdido," adding more actors to the troupe.

The last conversation I had with Rodriguez was shortly before he left back to Puerto Rico. He was the priest in Abiquiu at the time. I stopped by on my way to Farmington for my first performance of "The Life and Times of Archbishop Jean-Baptiste Lamy." He said he was getting the local people involved in theater. He also expressed a longing to play the role of Fr. Damian, the leper priest of Molokai. He came for my brother's, Filmer Torres, funeral in 1990. He wrote to me once more after my Disney award and then nothing.

Later on this week, his ashes are to be brought back to his beloved New Mexico. He will be laid to rest in the churchyard in Abiquiu among the dirt that had first consecrated him to the priesthood. In pace requiescat.