

TRAPANI: THE MYSTERIES OF GOOD FRIDAY

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Sacred and profane, folklore and tradition, rites and myth, art and history, devotion and emotions indissolubly blend in the Mysteries procession taking place on Good Fridays in Trapani. This procession has a particular place in the collective imagination of the people living in Trapani.

In fact, if fascination and interest that the Mysteries exert on those who are present - tourists or visitors - are strong, the suggestion on the local people is still more intense and arcane, as if sounds, smells, colours of the procession have been indelibly imprinted in the archetypes of memory.

Suggestion whose call makes meet again - punctually on Good Fridays - friends, acquaintances, relatives, concealed, for the rest of the year, in the space-time pleats of their private life.

Citizens of the world, otherwise apparently forgetful of their town of origin, arrange a tacit meeting there for the Mysteries.

Inhabitants immersed, for the rest of the year, in entirely profane occupations discover again, on the day dedicated to the Passion and Death of Christ, the roots of their own religiousness, of their past, of the sense of belonging.

Observants and agnostics, conservatives and progressives, rich people and proletarians, men and women, often find themselves side by side, joined by the same tacit feeling.

The Mysteries are, for Trapani and its inhabitants, much more than a tradition, much more than a religious event, much more than a custom, much more than a historical event; they are an integrating element of the town itself and of being citizens of it.

The Christianity of the historical dawning, moving its first steps in a still deeply pagan world - in which there were rites that the contemporary man's morals would but consider barbaric and tribal, had to conciliate, to be accepted and able to spread, its faith and liturgies with the deep substratum of the pre-existent religiousness.

As the celebration of Christ's Nativity replaced the cult of the sun, which had its climax in the winter solstice and in the relative celebrations, so the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ found, not by chance, its temporal placement after the first spring plenilune, at the revival of nature, when the fertility propitiatory rites were solemnized.

Life which prevails over death, the light over the shadow, the spring over the winter, constitute the archaic symbolism of every Christian or less celebration, connected with the beginnings of every spring.

Therefore, the christian rites replaced the pagan ones, relegating the latter to narrower and narrower spaces until they completely replaced them.

These Christian ceremonies progressively assumed their own features and traditions expropriating - with the typical integralism of the monotheistic religions - what deeply earthly and sexual the primitives rites had contained, thanks also to the demonization of the body, and of the woman in particular, which found place in the Christian morals.

The Church, then, consolidating its power and spiritual authority on its believers, could almost completely efface the idolatrous roots from rites and cults.

Apart from every primeval derivation, however, the embryonal beginnings of the Mysteries procession, though with different configuration in comparison with the modern one, date from the 16th century and the influence of the Spanish domination in Sicily.

In fact, it originates from the sixteenth-century tradition, of the Catholic countries, to represent sacred scenes following biblical events; with the passing of time these scenes had a series of evolu-

tions and changes, also under the impulse of the ecclesiastical authorities, watchful on the orthodoxy of what was being represented.

This logic promoted the continuation and the growth of performances, concentrated in the Easter period, taken from the New Testament and inspired to the Passion and Death of Christ, played by the believers themselves.

These performances were often mixed and confused with corporal mortification practices, so the word *Casazze*, old buildings where penitents met to flagellate themselves, became then synonym of the processions, which they joined following sacred images or performances.

As well as Genoa - because of the frequent exchanges between the two ports - Trapani itself had accepted some rites of Spanish origin, also under the impulse of the local Company of Monserrato, of Catalan provenance.

It was, however, in 1603 that the Confraternity of the Precious Blood of Christ created, in Trapani, the bases of the Mysteries Procession as we know it.

The original animated performances were progressively replaced by sculptural groups which, by means of a series of notarial acts, from 1612 to 1788, were commissioned to the guilds and built or redone by them after the commission.

The term itself with which originally they were called *Casazze*, from Spanish *Las Casazas*, soon was replaced by the controversial term *Misteri*, from Latin *ministerium*, function and, for extension, trade, or *mysterium*, religious mystery, with a clear reference to the dogmas of the Church.

The *Casazza Magna* - so the original procession was called - with its flagellants, was replaced by the sculptural mysteries which began to give the procession a more composed character though still full of fervour.

The *battenti a sangue* or flagellants went on taking part in it for over a century, until their presence was forbidden in 1856 by the

pro-tempore Bishop, but they were no longer an integrant and essential part of the procession.

The Confraternity of the Precious Blood, which in 1646 joined the Company of St. Michael Archangel, had a very intense and important task in spurring the assumption of responsibilities from the guilds and in watching over the spiritual congruity of the procession.

At that time, guilds enjoyed great welfare, the out-come of a quite lively economy, thanks, above all, to a fairly intense harbour activity.

And yet the torpid Spanish influence hadn't completely killed the commercial and intellectual fervour prospered during the most illuminated Arabian and Norman ages.

So the guilds, in the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, progressively took on the responsibility and the honour to adorn the groups and arrange their exits on Good Fridays.

A series of notarial acts states the commissions to the categories, even if neither the considered sculptural groups nor their respective authors are ever described.

Therefore, it's right to suppose that, at the time of the commissions, most of the groups didn't exist yet or consisted of raw works without any particular artistic value.



The vicissitudes of the confraternities were also determinant for the custody of the sacred groups. The *S. Spirito* Church, or *San Giacomo Minore*, housing the Confraternity of Precious Blood, kept the early Mysteries. In the meanwhile the brethren of *San Michele Arcangelo*, to give space to the Jesuit Fathers, were taken from their seat in *San Michele* and placed in *Santo Spirito*. Certainly from this forced closeness, between the two confraternities, there was born a first cooperation, which led to the unification - ratified in 1646 by a notarial act - with the name of the Company of *San Michele Arcangelo*.

The union between the two confraternities was stressed by the new vestment: the red one of the Precious Blood and the white one of *San Michele* blended into the red vestment with the white cap of the new confraternity.

In the early eighteenth century the confraternity obtained to come back to *San Michele* Church, where the previously existing Mysteries were carried.

After the construction of more and more numerous groups, it was necessary to build an oratory, annexed to the *San Michele* Church, where all the groups of statues were housed.

They stayed there until 6th April 1943, when a bombing seriously damaged the church and the oratory of *San Michele* with a lot of preserved groups and ruined the whole town, which still shows the scars of that remote event.

After the 2nd world war, because of innovations and building speculations, it wasn't conceived to start any possible restorations in *San Michele* and the area was employed for other uses.

It was necessary to find another seat for the Mysteries; for a short time in the *Badia Grande* Church, from 1947 to 1957 in the *Collegio* Church. From that time on it was the *Purgatorio* oratory that housed the sacred groups, with a parenthesis when they were in *San Domenico* Church, for necessary - even if partial - restorations to the *Purgatorio* Church.

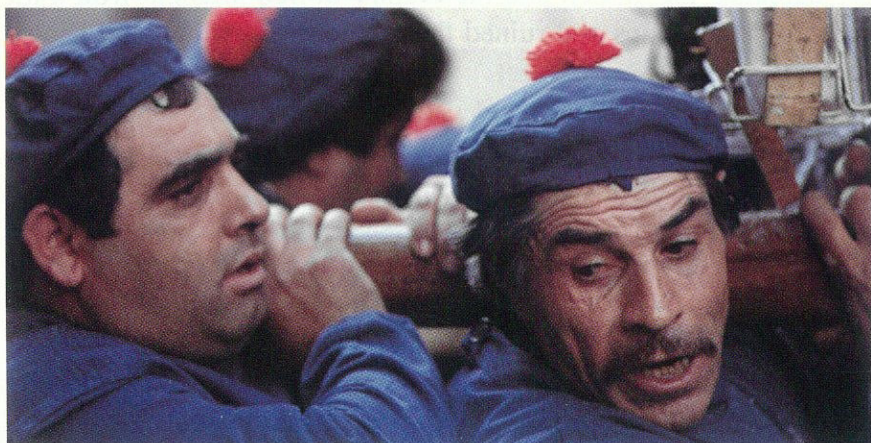
The present placement is not accepted by all the citizens both for

the difficulties of access to the oratory and for the crumbling structure which is a dangerous factor for the safety of the works.

If the procession continues taking place this is also due to the spontaneous efforts of some citizens who contribute by donations to the maintenance and ornaments of the groups. Therefore, it would be correct that they, all the keen people, the tourists, even more the Tradesmen's Union which arranges the exits, could enter there more easily and frequently than it occurs now.

The Tradesmen's Union is an association established in 1974 among the guilds which arrange the Sacred Groups of the Mysteries and *Le Madri Pietà* and, among its social aims, it includes the watch and the care of the groups, the organizing assistance to the guilds, the coordination of the procession, the management of the contributions given by the Organizations; the Union also plans the annual itineraries of the procession.

Moreover, a central part is played by the tourist Board of Trapani, through which the procession is known and appreciated in Italy and abroad. In this way its activity increases that kind of cultured tourism on which the whole province should and could concentrate.



Massari

The Mysteries were built in the course of two centuries about, drawing inspiration from the evangelic tales about the Passion and Death of Christ.

Following the logical order of the Gospels - and apart from the presence of the Mystery which introduces the procession, The Separation, and which doesn't draw inspiration from the Evangelists - it's really evident that there is not a sacred representation which should precede all the other ones: the Last Supper.

The Mysteries consist of almost full-sized figures and they were done from cypress-wood, for the structure and the limbs; cork, to shape the body; material and glue, with a technique from Trapani known a *carchèt*, for the characters' clothes. Every group has been adorned by the respective guilds with ornaments and precious furnishings, almost always silver objects.

The valuable silver objects of the Mysteries prevalently belong to the flourishing tradition of the 17th and 18th century local silver-smiths' shops. However, there are also works of exquisite workmanship done by the present heirs of that ancien art. During our century - perhaps in consequence of a more diffused economical welfare - precious *ex voto* have even been frequently offered the Sacred Groups by believers who have often chosen to remain anonymous.

The 19th century itself produced numerous, artistic works as a proof of the existence, in Trapani, of clever silversmith's shops.

Therefore, the skilful chisellers, on the guild's commission, used their abilities to create a lot of wonderful aureoles, crosses, crowns of thorns, goblets, jugs, plates, friezes, chains, bandoleers, belts, sceptres, armours, helmets, panaches; and moreover, swords, daggers, sabres, scimitars, lances, halberds. The most considerable piece, for its dimensions too, is surely the balustrade of the group known as *Ecce Homo*; it dates from 1881 and it's by the silver-smith *Giuseppe Parisi*.

In the course of the centuries the procession underwent a lot of changes and variations which constituted its inevitable, often positive, evolution.

However, between the end of the last century and the first half of this one, until the 1950's, there got lost some traditions regretted by a lot of people living in Trapani.

In fact, if in 1856 the prohibition to aggregate the "flagellants" to the procession was surely positive and if the prohibition, in the same period, to replace the choristers with bands was inevitable, instead it was surely deprecable the prohibition to the groups to go into the parish churches. During this rite in the rite the *Miserere* and the *Stabat Mater* were played.

However, most of the changes were inevitable and caused by the evolution of the times. So the presence of the bearers who, from the half of the 19th century, replaced the consuls of the classes in the transport of the groups; so also the change of the route which, including since 1947 *via Fardella*, extends it.

It's, instead, sad to notice the disappearance from the groups of extinguished guilds whose memory doesn't remain any longer in the Mystery that they arranged, adorned, loved for centuries.

Therefore, it's right at least to mention the guilds of the coopers, rope-makers and hemp-dressers, tanners, millers, riddlers of cereals, all categories which did play an important part in the social economic tissue of Trapani and in the history of the Mysteries Procession.

The extinguished classes which are instead mentioned in the Mystery belonged to them are: the cartwrights-makers and menders of carts-whose name is still included in the group "The Raising of the Cross", with joiners, naval carpenters and furniture-sellers; the rope-makers, whose memory lasts in the Mystery "The Wound to the Chest" with painters and decorators.

A different discourse concerns the coral-cutters, a declining category that in 1790 gave "The Transport to the Sepulchre" to the sal-

ters, before the social culture had the problem of the continuity and preservation of the traditions.

Today, however, we tend to pay bigger attention to these traditions, which make it possible to preserve historical continuity and memory.



The Mystery procession is a part of a series of rites which are, at the same time, presupposition and complement of it.

The *Scinnute*, one each Friday in lent, are the ceremonies most closely connected to the Mysteries. They consist in the exhibition - once with the Blessed Sacrament, today alone - of a Mystery or more.

On Palm-Sundays, then, the Easter period begins with the blessing of the palms and olive-branches. On Tuesday there is the procession of the *Madonna dei Massari*, also known as *Madre Pietà dei Massari*. It's a picture by an unknown painter, supported by a white neoclassic *vara*, which is carried through the streets of the centre to a wooden chapel built "ad hoc" in *Lucatelli* square, where it will be watched by the bearers' wives all night long.

On Wednesday, it's the turn of the *Madonna della Pietà*, arranged by the greengrocers' class, also known as *Madre Pietà del Popolo*. This painting too of the seventeenth century, attributable to *Giovan Battista De Vita*, is set in a white baroque *vara*.

At the end of the procession, the two paintings meet in *Lucatelli* square, in an evocative atmosphere.

The bearers themselves take the *Madre Pietà del Popolo* on their shoulders and carry it to the chapel, in front of the *Madre Pietà dei Massari*, where there is the exchange of the large candle between the two head consuls, and it is accompanied by a mutual offer of money.

The *Madonna della Pietà del Popolo* continues its iter to come back to the church of the *Addolorata* which houses it, while the *Pietà dei Massari* will come back late in the evening.

On Maundy Thursday, known as the "Sepulchres" day, people celebrate and commemorate the Last Supper. The rites take place inside the churches, crowded by visitors who admire and compare the various floral dressings.

On Friday, while in the *Purgatorio* Church the last feverish preparations for the Mysteries exit are well advanced, in the *Santa Maria di Gesù* Church there takes place the ceremony of the

“Descent from the Cross”. This Deposition, once very waited by the believers, is now losing followers and interest in favour of the Mysteries, despite the similar, ancient origins.



So, with the continuity of its yearly cadence, reassuring in its equality, apparently monotonous nevertheless always different in details and shades, the Good Friday's Procession, The Mysteries, start going through the streets of the town.

Early in the afternoon, from the main door of the oratory a roll of drums announces the procession of the reconstituted confraternity of St. Michael, red sack and white visor.

It's immediately the Mysteries turn. *La Spartenza* opens, by consolidated tradition, the passing of the twenty groups.

The consuls solemn, dressed in black, precede the *vara* which carries the Mystery while the sound of the *ciaccole* stress rhythms and tempos.

The floral ornaments, always different, are vivid and sweet-smelling; the scents start blending with the first melting of the large candles.

The bearers support the weight and go on, with the typical oblique walk known as *annacata*, following the rhythm of the funeral marches played by the bands: The funeral march from Chopin's work 32, Poor flower, Baptism of blood, Poor dead of Amba Alagj, Thought, A tear on my mother's grave, by the *Maestro Vella*, Jone, from *Petrella's* work and others more by famous or unknown composers, but all intense and played with profound feeling.

The guilds, the believers follow in procession, while the crowd move aside as they pass.

At least two hours until the slow, mystic procession is all through the streets.

The twenty Mysteries, eighteen of the historical orthodoxy, followed by the Urn and the Sorrowing Holy Mary, which now in every respect are part of it, are living the date with the town once again.

A town which seems to divide its spaces to make room for the imposing procession, through the narrowest streets of the old centre. In the shops, main doors, balconies there is crowd, crowd everywhere.

And the bearers, guided by the consuls, often please this great crowd anxious and curious to watch the most outward, but not for this reason less integrant, forms of the great show: suddenly, one of the groups starts a small run; it's *l'arrancata*, a sudden acceleration by the bearers to make up for the eventual detaching from the foregoing group. Moreover, meeting or passing under the house of a supporter, or of a person considered influential, here is *l'attunniata* or *vutata*, a quarter of a turn of the whole *vara* towards the chosen man, always guided by the sharp and clear rhythm of the *ciaccole*.

After going along the meanders of the old centre, at nightfall, the Mysteries arrive at *Vittorio* square, where during the long stop there will be the blessing.

The *vare* are put on the trestles, the already tired bearers have a rest. The bands are silent, to start again at dawn.

After going along a part of the "new town", via *Fardella*, the Mysteries get into the old Trapani, again through another route.

It's, perhaps, the greatest moment of moving intensity. No more inattentive or just curious spectators are there, but only those who, with the Mysteries, do have an almost visceral, surely emotional link.

The rhythms are slackened, the urban spaces and the time itself seem to have had an unusual expansion, dividing and mixing at the same time. The half-consumed large candles illuminate almost surrealistic sceneries. Weariness marks the face and bends the bearers' shoulders. The stops are more frequent.

The bearers, at intervals, are replaced by young men who, apparently for fun, live in this way an unconscious form of initiation to the Mysteries, which will often accompany them in their life.

And there comes Saturday's dawn. The procession goes on winding through the streets.

It's already full morning and the first Mystery begins coming back to the *Purgatorio* oratory.

Some consuls replace the bearers supporting the group and, in spite of the great weariness, all together consuls and bearers don't disappoint the spectators, once again very numerous. Every group is *annacato* for a long time, two steps forwards and one backwards, in the classical *trasuta e nisciuta*, before being put again in its place.

The entry of the Mysteries lasts hours. Some groups prepare carefully a more lively and typical choreography.

There intervene numerous supporters - it's now a consolidated tradition - to support some *vare*, in particular the Ascent to Calvary and the Sorrowing Holy Mary, which the citizens have a strong link with.

The Mystery procession, as always, ends with the scenographic, slow, very slow entry of the Sorrowing Holy Mary, after which the doors of the *Purgatorio* close.



Once again the arcane rite happened, which, celebrating death, exalts life.

The efforts of the past twenty-four hours bend into a cathartic collective weariness.

Never as on this Saturday morning does the procession reveal its pagan origins: individuality has given way melting once again in the collective ego.

Upset, people hardly go out from the total involvement which permeated them.

Their mind is already projected to the Resurrection, but the Mysteries leave for hours, for days, their mark on the people who have lived them.

The sad and obsessing music of the funeral marches will still resound for a long time, concrete, in the memory; the smell of the large candles, that sweetish one of the faded flowers, of humanity itself which crowded, will insinuate its tangible trail into the houses, shops, through the bright and slippery streets of melted wax.

Weariness has given that lightness of mind of the day after the feast, that empty bewilderment of those who have long waited for an event.

The gestures are slow; the modesty of a common feeling almost prevents every word, every comment.

Everyone starts going away slowly, with full senses, tired limbs; a *déjà vu* which occurs again collectively: time and reality sense are found again.

And they are found again when we say and feel strongly, interiorly, that until Trapani go on existing, every year, on Good Fridays, the Mysteries will continue going out.