



Rocío: The Devotion of the Andalusians

In memory of Padre Quevedo (15 August 1926 - 2 October 2015)

“Hold on tight to the wagon and you will feel the breathing of the oxen,” Adelina told me during a stop to rest. That statement revealed to me the deep intensity of the devotion to the *Romería del Rocío*, one of the most important pilgrimages of the Catholic faith. More than one and a half million people gather each year, during

the feast of Pentecost, in a small Andalusian town located southeast of Seville, Spain. Since the 14th century pilgrims have come the village of El Rocío to venerate a statue of the Virgin Mary: La Virgen del Rocío.

Along the pilgrimage route, all activity revolves around the wagon that carries the *Simpecado*, a kind of Medieval banner embroidered with the image of the Virgin of Rocío, placed in a sort of shrine in the center of the wagon. Each *Hermandad* (religious brotherhood) of pilgrims has its own wagon and carries its own *Simpecado* as the group travels from its home village to the village of El Rocío. The *Simpecados* are presented before the statue of the Virgin in a show of the devotion of all the brotherhoods' home villages. At present there are 114 *Hermandades del Rocío*. The majority belongs to towns and cities in Andalusia, but there are also brotherhoods from places farther away like Madrid, Barcelona, and even, Brussels, Belgium.

The Pentecost Romería, also called “Rocío Grande”, is a journey that originates in the home towns of each brotherhood, with their wagons and their *Simpecado*, and ends in the village of El Rocío. Brotherhoods from places farther away begin their pilgrimages from starting points closer to the destination. The duration of the pilgrimage varies according to the distances covered and can last up to seven days. By popular tradition, the pilgrimage is known as “*El Camino del Rocío*” (The Way of Rocío).

«*El Rocío is a feeling that is so private and personal that at times it is difficult to translate into words,*» commented Padre Antonio, chaplain of the *Camino de la Hermandad* of the Andalusian municipality of Arcos de

la Frontera. Many people agree: *“El Rocío can't be explained. It must be lived.”* Thus, convinced that *El Rocío* had to be experienced first hand, I contacted the *Hermandad de Sanlúcar de Barrameda*, a town of approximately 65,000 inhabitants in the province of Cadiz.

The Brotherhood of Sanlúcar, whose origin dates to the 14th century, is one of the oldest brotherhoods in the Rocío pilgrimage. It is said to be the third oldest brotherhood but fell back several positions in the order of presentations of Simpecados because it was not able to attend one year due to heavy floods. In this way I met Adelina Bernet, a woman with long experience of the pilgrimage, almost “forty Rocíos”, who is in charge of organizing some of the pilgrims who accompany the wagon of the Brotherhood of Sanlúcar de Barrameda. It is a job she has done for twenty-five years and she has no intention of stopping. *“At first there were only four or five of us walking from Sanlúcar.”* This year, there were almost one hundred people in the group, quite a few less than in other years, due to the current economic downturn in Spain and, above all, in Andalusia. *“The thing that most impressed me the first time I did the Rocío,”* Adelina told me, *“was the faith of the people who were going to see the Virgin Mary, the fellowship of the people, how they helped one another; and later, when we arrived to the church, all of the group entered together, we prayed, we sang... And that touched my soul. That faith and that feeling I had never experienced. For me the high point of the entire Rocío is the arrival at the sanctuary. The fact of standing before the Virgin is fundamental, but later, the second part is the fellowship, being more generous, being a better person. I always return from the pilgrimage a better person than when I started.”* Adelina, furthermore, does the pilgrimage in a special way. Both on the way there and on the way back, she keeps a constant grip on the back of the wagon. *“For fifteen or sixteen years I have walked holding*

onto the wagon. The first day I get up very early to get my spot... If somebody took it from me, I'd die! In a way, there is the problem that you're breathing in dust along the way, but holding on helps you.” Adelina is well-known now in Sanlúcar and nobody would dare steal her spot from her behind the wagon. Along the way to El Rocío, Adelina speaks to no one. Even when they sing a sevillanas folk song, she only moves her lips. “It's my way of giving thanks to the Virgin. From the time my mother had her stroke, eighteen years ago, and was left in a wheelchair, my mother had no pain, she always laughed, she was happy... Even though she died three years ago, I still give thanks to the Virgin for how little she suffered. As long as I can keep going, I will keep doing this. Because, besides, it's an exercise in introspection, to be alone with yourself... to pray with my fellow pilgrims... I carry a notebook with names written down and along the way we pray as we go...”

(See the video Adelina breaking her silence in the sanctuary in: <https://vimeo.com/133185927>)

Sanlúcar de Barrameda –or simply Sanlúcar, as many people call the city—is located at the mouth of the Guadalquivir River, which is still navigable to the city of Seville. This strategic location allowed Sanlúcar to acquire great importance after the discovery of the Americas, between the 15th and 17th centuries, as it was the point of departure and arrival for the ships that traveled to the Spanish colonies, making Sanlúcar their headquarters for taking on provisions. From this place Christopher Columbus set sail in 1498 on his third voyage to the Americas. In 1522 Sanlúcar saw the return of Juan Sebastián Elcano, captain of the *Nao Victoria*, the first ship to sail around the world. From very early times religion was present in Sanlúcar, as evidenced by the great

cluster of convents and churches of the different religious orders that vied to participate in the evangelization of the Americas.

Regarding the name “Barrameda”, it is said to come from the Arabic “bar-am-ma’ida”, which refers to the stick which is dipped into the water to measure whether it is deep enough so ships won’t run aground on the “bars” of sand at the entrance of the port.

Sanlúcar lost much of its strategic importance after 1645, first due to the fall from favor of the House of Medina Sidonia, and later when the Casa de Contratación (The House of Trade) –responsible for the commercial relationships between Spain and the colonies– was transferred to Cádiz in 1717 and finally because of the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. Today the economy of Sanlúcar is based primarily on tourism during the summer months and is famous for its gastronomy, especially its manzanilla - a type of dry sherry - and its jumbo shrimps, captured at the mouth of the Guadalquivir, where the mixture of salt and fresh water gives them a special flavor.











But what makes Sanlúcar special on the Way of Rocío is that it is located at the southern entrance of the Doñana Natural Area. This trail is called the Cádiz Way of the Romería del Rocío, since it is the path used by all the towns to the south of the village of El Rocío. There are two other ways: one from Huelva, which connects all the towns to the northwest of the village of El Rocío and the other from Seville –also called the Royal Way– which ties together the towns to the northeast. (See accompanying maps). The Sanlúcar Way of El Rocío is the most colorful of them all since almost all of the forty-nine kilometers that separate Sanlúcar from the village of El Rocío pass through Doñana National Park, 54,252 hectares which the UNESCO declared a Biosphere Reserve in 1980 and a World Heritage Site in 1994. The wetlands of Doñana are situated in a privileged geographic location between two continents –Africa and Europe– that is a stopover on migration routes as well as a winter haven and a place to raise young for thousands of aquatic birds. More than three hundred different species can be observed in Doñana throughout the year. Also the park is home to the most endangered feline species on the planet, the Iberian lynx, declared a protected species in 1966.

(In its totality, the Doñana Natural Area covers 108,087 hectares, of which 54,252 correspond to Doñana National Park, the nucleus of the reserve with the highest level of environmental protection, created in 1969, and 53,835 hectares belong to Doñana Natural Park, which provides a buffer of protection –the pre-park– to the national park, initially established in 1989 and expanded in 2005. See the attached map below.)







The beauty of the Way of Rocío inside Doñana parkland lies in the variety of ecosystems pilgrims cross through in the three days of the Romería from Sanlúcar. At first light in the morning, after crossing the Guadalquivir River on a barge, the pilgrims enter the park by a sand track that follows the Guadalquivir on their right through a region populated by pinyon pines. This is the area of the *Marismillas*, where thick groves of pines are punctuated by flat floodplains that attract birds and mammals searching for food.

During the Romería del Rocío, celebrated between the months of May and June, the *marismas* (wetlands) contain very little water. This year they are especially dry due to a long drought, leaving a spectacular landscape of a red carpet of salty glasswort plants (chenopodiaceas). At this time of the year there are hardly any birds, but there are many red deer, fallow deer and wild boar, which take advantage of the early morning moisture to feed on fresh grass. To enjoy the marismas in their entire splendor one must return to Doñana in the rainy season, during the months of January and February.

As the pilgrims advance, little by little the sands become deeper, and walking becomes more difficult, making the 49 kilometers of the Camino –about 16 kilometers a day on average– especially hard on the back. For this reason the way from Sanlúcar is said to be the hardest of all because each step is three times more taxing than walking on firm ground. To this difficulty must be added the dust kicked up by the horses, cars and wagons, which gets into the lungs, making breathing more difficult the farther along you go. Walking next to or behind a wagon requires extra effort, since the pilgrim ends up literally biting the dust. At the end of the day, the mixture of dust, sweat and exhaustion accumulate on the faces of the pilgrims.

After spending the night of the first day at the Cerro del Trigo, the pilgrims leave the pine groves behind, and the landscape changes completely. The trail enters an area of shifting dunes before arriving to the Cerro de los Ánsares, where pilgrims might think they have happened onto the movie set of the desert sequences in the film “Lawrence of Arabia”. In fact, the movie's director, David Lean, chose this place to film some scenes in his 1962 film. The second day the pilgrims sleep near the Palace of Doñana, where Francisco de Goya in 1797 painted the famous paintings “*La maja vestida*” and “*La maja desnuda*” of his patroness, the 13th Duchess of Alba, which are currently displayed in the Prado Museum, in Madrid.

During the third and final day of the march, one passes through an area of eucalyptus, non-native but fast-growing trees, whose expansion is controlled so they do not invade other parts of the park. On leaving the park, the Sanctuary of El Rocío can now be discerned on the horizon. The pilgrims' delight at beauty of the journey thus far is now transformed into the joy at being so close to their destination. The pilgrims burst with emotion and begin to sing and shout, “*Now we see the Sanctuary! Sanlúcar has arrived!*”

For Victor Collado, 38 years old, a resident of Sanlúcar for many years whose first Rocío pilgrimage was in 2009, the arrival at the sanctuary is also a special moment. “*There is something there. It exudes energy. What I feel is so much joy, an enormous joy. There the only thing you do is receive. There what you receive is that joy at seeing the Virgin of Rocío, who is present. You feel her. I personally feel that she fills me on the inside. You feel great peace, great relief, great emotion. Memories from the whole way come to mind, but above all it is a feeling of peace and of joy, that you don't want to leave the place. I feel bad at that moment when I turn my*”

back and have to leave. That is when I begin to cry, because I don't know if the next year I will be able to come back again.”

The walk through the sand, alone or in lively conversation with another pilgrim, paying little or no attention to cell phones and far from the daily bustle of the work routine; the companionship during the midday meals and dinners; the stops along the way –known as “rengues” in gypsy dialect– to rest but also to sing and dance; and the moments of silence or prayer make the Way of Rocío for many people an encounter with themselves. The whole atmosphere attracts not only practicing Catholics but also non-practicing ones and the faithful of other religions.

For many people it is more than a religious ritual. Even so, the devotion is palpable. During the days of the walk there are stops to pray the Angelus, and later to celebrate mass. Also, at night the members of the brotherhood get together next to their wagons to pray the rosary. The majority of the people attend these celebrations, even the saying of the rosary, in spite of the weariness that builds up over the day.

(See a video of a rengue in the Camino: <https://vimeo.com/album/2810733/video/112484923>)

(Another video of a rengue after the praying of the Angelus: <https://vimeo.com/133738797>)

After mass on the third day, the baptism of the persons who are doing the pilgrimage for the first time occurs. The *rociero* baptism is a strange ritual, because while it is the priest who baptizes, instead of water, he uses manzanilla, a wine with between 15 and 17 percent alcohol content, a signature product of the Sanlúcar vineyards. Devotion and wine mix in Rocío. The godfather or godmother hold up the medal of the brotherhood while the priest pours over the head of the baptized person manzanilla, which falls onto a plate and which the baptized person should drink. Maybe the most charming part of the ritual is that the priest bestows a *rociero* name on the newly baptized. If he knows the person and has a certain amount of inventiveness, the name often reflects their personality, for good or for bad. My *rociero* name was “*Romerito de las Marismillas*”, which is a name without any special connotations, since the priest who baptized me did not know me.

(Watch a video of the baptisms: <https://vimeo.com/133741084>)













A bishop once asked Padre Quevedo, who at age 88 was a true institution in the festival of Rocío and an author of many songs sung along the way, what he found in El Rocío. *“What I like and what interests me about El Rocío, besides Christ and the Virgin,”* –responded Padre Quevedo–*“is the friendship that it engenders. Christ said to love your neighbor. Your neighbor is the person you lives with you. And you have to love that person.”*

And to love them you have to be with them, do things together, share things. If El Rocío leads to friendship, it's worth it.” Victor Collado confided in me, “For me, personally, every time I go, it's spiritual growth. The more I go, the more I want to go. I compare it to sport, for example: a person goes and lifts 5 kilos, but later 5 kilos isn't enough, you need to lift 10. For me, spiritually, it's the same. My spirit demands I go regularly, to continue to grow all the time. The spirit is growing. It's as if it were getting bigger. Every time I go, I grow. I fill myself up. When the next year comes around, it has gone empty so it must be filled up even more.”

Access to the park is highly regulated for environmental reasons. You can only access the region on foot or on bicycle and exclusively in the area of the beach that joins Sanlúcar with Matalascañas, some 30 kilometers to the north. Entering other parts of the park and overnight stays are prohibited. Access with motorized vehicles is very restricted, even for people that work in the park. Thanks to the cultural and religious traditions of the pilgrimages to El Rocío, these restrictions are relaxed during certain times of the year, permitting the faithful to cross the park on foot or on horseback. The passage of motor vehicles is subject to prior authorization and limited to a maximum number according to the size of the brotherhood. This easing of access to the park during specific dates is one of the attractions of the Way of Rocío, since it is impossible to travel the route and enjoy this marvelous landscape at any other time of the year. In fact, for many people, the combination of the food, the drink, the party, the dancing and the fun, enjoyed in an exceptional natural setting, is an ideal way to spend to a few days of holiday, with the devotion to the Virgin being just something accessory.

The earliest written reference to the devotion to the Virgin Mary in the area comes from 1337, when Alfonso XI, in his famous *Book of the Hunt*, refers to “a church that is called Santa María de las Rocinas” as having one of the best hunting grounds in the region. Some sources tie the devotion of Mary to some cults or deities of nature and water –like the cult the goddess Cibeles of the ancient inhabitants of the mythical and little-known city of Tarteso, which Herodotus placed at the mouth of the Guadalquivir River– but most likely it began during the Christian reconquest of these lands from the Arabs at the end of the 13th century, when a wooden sculpture of the Virgin appeared in the middle of a crossroads. It was known to be a custom of the Christians to safeguard the reconquest of the Iberian peninsula by hiding images of the Virgin in strategic locations so that the worship of her image would generate population centers and in this way consolidate victories in the lands won from the Arabs in the Reconquest. The legend, nevertheless, says that a shepherd who passed by the Rocina approached an *acebuche* –a type of olive tree, that often has large holes in its trunk– drawn by the barking of his dogs. There, inside the tree, he found the sculpture of the Virgin. He took it and headed to Almonte, but on the way fell asleep and on waking up discovered the statue was gone. He retraced his steps and found it in the same tree. This was interpreted as the Virgin wanting a church to be erected at that very spot.

In 1262 Alfonso X the Wise conquered Niebla –nowadays Huelva– which had jurisdiction over Almonte, a town closely linked to the story of El Rocío. It is known that Alfonso X the Wise was very devoted to the Virgin and it is very probable that the king ordered a sanctuary to be constructed for the adoration of María Santísima de las Rocinas, a name taken from the place where the church was built. Over time, the sanctuary grew into a communications, cultural and commercial hub for Lower Andalusia. In 1653 the town of Almonte named her as

its patron saint and she was referred to for the first time as the Virgen del Rocío, drawing a comparison between the action of the Holy Spirit and the fecundity of dew. This is the reason why the devotion to the Virgin of El Rocío is intertwined with the feast of Pentecost—a feast day with a variable date, 50 days after Easter Sunday—, which celebrates the descent of the Holy Spirit on the first Apostles. The Holy Spirit has been represented in Christian iconography as a white dove and that is why the Virgin of El Rocío is known as “The White Dove.” The figure of the dove is prominent also on the upper part of the wagons of several brotherhoods.

Discovering the different motivations of the pilgrims of Rocío was one of the objectives of this project. Within Spain and abroad there are many who associate the Romería with unbridled partying, music, dance, alcohol, sex and even drugs, and as a result, one arrives to the pilgrimage with many preconceptions. The overcrowding that started in the 1970s and the coverage in the media—especially on television and in the sensationalist press—is to blame for much of that. They offer, in just a few seconds, a distorted image of El Rocío. An example of this is the reporting on the tradition of young men climbing high over the iron altar railing of the Sanctuary of El Rocío, which is known in Spanish as “Salto de la reja”, literally, “The jump over the railing.” This takes place on the Sunday night to Monday morning of Pentecost. It is for many the high point of El Rocío. Approximately one hundred young people from Almonte—only men—wait inside the church, behind the railing that separates them from the statue of the Virgin of El Rocío, anxiously awaiting the moment to leap over the railing and raise the Virgin’s *paso*, or float, to take her from the church and carry her through the village of El Rocío. No one knows at exactly what moment this will occur, thus the collective nervousness is at a fever pitch. Thousands of

people form a human mass outside the sanctuary to see the Virgin leave the church. Television cameras broadcast each moment live.

Entrance to the church is very restricted. While officially the Civil Guard regulates access, in reality it is the Almonte villagers who decide who can enter. In my case I got in with the help of an Almonte resident –Toni– who elbowed a path for me in the crowd. Jostling and arguments break out between those who are waiting to leap over the railing. Their elders call for calm and tell the young to control their tempers. The adrenaline is pumping.

There exists the unwritten tradition that only residents of Almonte can jump over the railing and carry the *Virgen del Rocío* in procession. For many from Almonte the *Virgen del Rocío* is first theirs, –belonging to the town of Almonte– and later to others. Some call this the “Law of Almonte.” Outsiders respect the tradition, not from a lack of devotion preventing them from climbing over the railing or a lack of desire to carry the Virgin, but rather because of the physical consequences they would incur if they went against tradition. People from Almonte have the reputation of being country people, strong and aggressive. In the year 2010, someone uploaded to internet a picture of the Virgin without her veil or “*rostrillo*”, with her head uncovered. Although the image was only on the internet for a few minutes, the “Law of Almonte” was implacable and for the first time in hundreds of years, the citizens of Almonte –divided and confused– did not take the Virgin to the house of her *camaristas*, whose duty it is to dress the Virgin and keep her deepest secrets. To be a *camarista* of the

Virgin is the greatest honor someone from Almonte can have, and it is handed down from one generation to the next. The camaristas, Carmen and her daughter, Carmen Rocío, were the inheritors of the tradition and only they had such intimate access to the Virgin. Their neighbors in Almonte punished them for supposedly violating that intimacy. Later it was shown that the uploaded image was a doctored photo.

When the Simpecado of the Hermandad Matriz (the parent brotherhood), that of Almonte, finally enters the sanctuary, it is the signal the men have been waiting for and they begin climbing over the railing. Then the battle royale begins: the struggle to leap over the railing and have the chance to grab the handles on the Virgin's float to be able to carry it outside. Continuous pushing, thrown elbows, shouts. A unique experience. Devotion? One asks if such a spectacle is necessary to show devotion to Mary. *"I think to take the Virgin outside, that isn't necessary,"* I was told by Margarita Espinar, rociera from the age of 14. *"It's madness to leap over the railing, but it is one of the pillars of the festival of Rocío. If it wasn't for that, it would be the normal exit of a procession, like any other image. That is what drives the people who have been coming their whole lives, that tradition, that goes all the way back in time... It is not something recent... The Almonte people have always leaped over the railing to take the hold of the Virgin. El Rocío would not be understood in the same way without the leaping over the railing..."* A very devout priest commented to me in much stronger words about the climbing over the railing, *"To me it seems insane. Clear as day. Because besides, I imagine, –some of them I know– that they don't go to mass, they don't practice fellowship with Christ and with the Virgin. And to top it off many, with their speech, offending God and the Virgin, in the days before. Is that to love a Father? I have heard many blasphemies here, in El Rocío".* Padre Antonio puts the matter in perspective, *"The jumping*

*over the railing” is orderly chaos. From the outside it looks like sheer madness, as excess, as fanaticism... Nevertheless, El Rocío transcends the merely religious. El Rocío has much of the cultural side, of the culture of a specific town called Almonte. To understand the town of Almonte, believe it or not, sociologically, you have to make reference to El Rocío. They have their universe, not only religious, but also social, cultural, around the devotion to El Rocío. The leaping over the railing is no more than a rite of social initiation of the Almonte man. He reaches a certain age, that marks the beginning of his maturity as a man, which is the leaping over the railing and carrying the Virgin for the first time”. This reflection coincides with that expressed by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim, in his book *The Elemental Forms of Religious Life*: “Religious rituals rescue the individual from chaos and disorder. Rituals reinforce the feelings of belonging to the group.” In fact, all religions, including the oldest, have some rite of passage to integrate individuals into the group. Jack Kornfield, well-known Buddhist spiritual guide, speaks of rituals as “one of the oldest languages of mankind and perhaps the most universal. The word “ritual” comes from the Latin (“ritualis”) “to fit/to unite/to join”. Rituals unite us with each other in one single framework with the fullest meaning of the cosmos.” Padre Antonio adds, “The Virgin has always belonged to the people of Almonte, creating one of the classes of people within civil society. The participation of the ecclesiastical estate has been an accident of devotion. The town of Almonte has always had a lot of influence in the devotion to El Rocío. So the act of climbing over the railing belongs to that town, and only to that town, because it’s theirs. It is their devotion, it is their patron saint. Why are they so purist in their devotion? Because with El Rocío becoming as popular as it has become by turning into a universal devotion, they are trying to protect the intangible heritage from outside elements. It is the townspeople who decide when to take the Virgin outside. No ecclesiastical authority intervenes. No priest is*



the one who says “now”.

Antonio Martín Naranjo, 76 years old, rociero “from the breast” –colloquial language for those who have been coming to El Rocío since their mothers were pregnant with them– told me, “...*another of the guilty parties is the television. Everyone wants to be on the television. There are many who raise their heads up while they are carrying the Virgin so they can have their picture taken. But there are also many who don't do it.*”

(Watch the video of the leaping over the railing: <https://vimeo.com/133142310>)













The privilege of carrying the float of the Virgin of El Rocío is also the exclusive heritage of the sons of Almonte. Antonio Martín observes that *"If we were to let everyone who wanted to carry her to enter, we would lose our ability to carry her. Because the crowds are so big... The privilege of only the people of Almonte carrying the Virgin is to preserve the tradition. We are not going to allow that they take it away from us. And that is what drives us. But if some guy comes with passion, and we know he comes for the right reasons, he can go inside... and he's inside for 5, 10 minutes... whatever he can. A woman, if she wants to enter, is allowed... and not only that, in fact she is more respected than if she were with God... that woman is not touched"*. This is how Antonio tells the story of the first time he went before the Virgin, *"I have carried the Virgin as many times as I could. Since I was 13, which is when I carried her for the first time. It was a Rocío Grande, actually in the Hermandad de Sanlúcar. The Virgin was falling down and there was a man, who is still living, who told me: 'Boy, boy, grab a hold here, hold on to me here... help me!.'* Of course the float didn't weigh what it weighs now, because the float today is heavier than the old one. But, well, there wasn't enough strength... —because of the lack of nourishment after the Spanish Civil War— and the Virgin was falling down. So I grabbed on to an edge, on one side... and I was there at least an hour with the Virgin. After that year, I would go to the railing. The railing was different from the one there now. It was easier to scale it. It was lower. Already at fourteen years old I was a boy who could jump over the railing too."

The wife of Antonio, Encarnación Vázquez Bejarano, had a miraculous experience in 1956, when she was ten years old, *"A sarcoma appeared on my right leg. And the Virgin appeared to me and the Child laid His hand on me, and I was cured."* The leg had been growing in thickness every day. The local doctor measured its thickness and it was growing a centimeter each day. After consulting with several specialists in Seville, Encarnación was diagnosed with an incurable sarcoma. "It is inoperable," the doctor told her mother, *"you must accept this as if you were going along the street*

with your daughter and a car ran her down and killed her.” “I had a dream in which the Virgin appeared to me,” Encarnación continued, “and the Child put His hand here, which was bandaged. He took off the bandage, put His hand here and cured me. After the miracle they dressed me in a white habit.”

The first time that I heard this story was in a documentary by Fernando Ruíz Vergara entitled “*Rocío*”, where Encarnación told the story. Nowadays she is a grandmother who still remembers the details of the miracle, despite her memory failing everyday a bit more. This documentary, produced in 1980, was the first film whose exhibition was forbidden in theaters in Spain since the fall of the Franco regime and the coming of democracy. The reasons for the prohibition had to do with comments about El Rocío and the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Like the rest of Spain, the town of Almonte suffered the fratricidal division of the war and this division crept into El Rocío, reflected in differences between the romería of the well-to-do class —“los señoritos”— and that of the lowest class, those who lost the civil war. The Church and the State have always been very united in Spain. Even today, during the Pentecost Sunday high mass in the sanctuary the Spanish national anthem is played during the consecration.













After leaping over the railing, the men of Almonte carry the Virgin through town to visit the brotherhoods. For many this is another of the high points of El Rocío. In the portico of their chapel, the parish priest of each brotherhood awaits them perched on the shoulders of brotherhood members so that those who carry the Virgin can see where the brotherhood is among the multitude. When the Virgin is placed before the parish priest, he recites the Salve in his loudest voice and the brotherhood breaks into shouts of “vivas” –long life to the Virgin. The bells of the brotherhoods' chapels ring and flower petals are thrown from the roofs. Everyone wants to come close to the Virgin to get underneath the float to help support it if one of the Almonte men permits it, to grab one of the handles of the float or to touch the cloak of the Virgin. The Virgin bobs up and down in a swelling sea. Some parents pass their children – some newborns– from person to person to sit them by the Virgin's side for a few moments or so they can touch the cloak. Although the majority of the children cannot stop crying because of the tumult and the shouting, their parents feel deeply moved when they are returned to their arms. *“Touching the sacred is an anthropological necessity of humankind,”* affirms Padre Antonio, *“since the human race began, they have felt the need to feel close to the sacred. This explains the need of my child to touch the sacred and be blessed and protected by the sacred. Devotion has many layers. The most popular layer –unformed– and the most primitive, makes people do these things. When faith is more developed, it has theological structure, it does not need this. It is a very popular, very simple substrate of the Rocío devotion. But because it is simple does not mean it is bad.”* Padre Antonio told me a local curiosity: In the brotherhood of Los Arcos de la Frontera, where he is parish priest, it is the tradition that the women raise the priest on their shoulders to await the Virgin in the brotherhood's chapel. A peculiar exception to the preponderance of men in the rituals of the festival.

(Watch the video of El Rocío and the children: <https://vimeo.com/album/2810733/video/112285149>)

All of the aforementioned activities stretch out until midday of the following day, Pentecost Monday. When the Virgin returns to the sanctuary, almost eleven hours have passed since the leap over the railing. El Rocío has ended and many people begin to count the days until next year's Rocío. There are people who divide the year into "before El Rocío" and "after El Rocío"... *"It is not a cliché, it's true,"* Padre Antonio tells me. *"The rociero lives from Rocío to Rocío until the eternal Rocío arrives. That is our life: a pilgrimage from Rocío to Rocío until we get to the Rocío of heaven."* In the afternoon, the wagons and Simpecados take the return road back home. But compared to the journey to El Rocío, the number of people that accompany them is much smaller.

"When I went to El Rocío the first time, there were only twenty-four brotherhoods", tells me Margarita Espinar, one of the people who has most helped to maintain the Sanlúcar brotherhood in recent years. *"Before we got the wagon, el Simpecado –an older one than the one we have now– went in automobile to El Rocío. What we carried –walking or on horseback– was the pennant. In the old days, when there was no brotherhood, one or two months before El Rocío we would get together in a bar and we would decide who was going to be that year's Hermano Mayor (Principal of the Brotherhood), Mayordomo (Head steward)... In the year 1975, that year's Mayordomo –Paco Fernández de la Hoz– decided to take the Simpecado in a wagon (see attached photo). The wagon was drawn by mules for a few years, but mules are a problem for the pilgrims, because they go very fast with very abrupt stops and starts."* (See old photos below. Margarita Espinar and Carlos Guerrero can be seen.)

Nowadays there are 114 brotherhoods. The multitudes began coming to El Rocío in the 1970s, when the road was built from Almonte to the village of El Rocío and when the economic upswing in Spain meant a growing number of devotees could afford to attend. The village of El Rocío grew from a collection of shacks to include stately villas that today cost millions of euros. The first impression one gets on arriving to the village of El Rocío is that of being on the set of a Wild West movie. The streets are unpaved and are of sand. The horses and carriages share the road with all-terrain vehicles and women dressed in long flamenco skirts and men in riding suits. The villas of the brotherhoods sit next to open-air diners and food carts. It takes time to get accustomed to the scene. Up to a million and a half people are estimated to descend on the village of El Rocío during the days of the pilgrimage while the rest of the year barely 2000 people inhabit the village. The massive crowds have led to open controversy about the economic cost of the festival. To rent a house in El Rocío is beyond the reach of many people. The majority have to camp or sleep on the outskirts of the village because they cannot afford to rent a bed in El Rocío. A bunk bed in a room shared with 6-8 people, with use of a shared bath, meals and drinks, costs around 500 euros for a 3-day stay in the village of El Rocío, before beginning the return trip home. The houses mostly belong to residents of Almonte –the plots were auctioned off by the town government of Almonte in the 1970s– and they “make a killing” during the pilgrimage.

The sanctuary is surrounded by souvenir shops and candle shops that are run exclusively by the parent brotherhood of Almonte, the coordinator of everything that happens around El Rocío. It is estimated that every year the sales of souvenirs and candles reaches several million euros. The brotherhoods that do not have space in their houses to leave their wagons must pay a tax to the town government of Almonte to park roadside.

Regarding this issue, one of the most controversial measures instituted in 2014 by the local government of Almonte was charging a fee of 25 euros per vehicle to allow them to access –but not to park in– the village, including to house owners. Quite definitely, the feeling is that El Rocío, like other famous places of pilgrimage, like Fátima and Lourdes, is also a big business, in which the Almonte residents are the main beneficiaries.

The socioeconomic development of the society in recent decades, coinciding with the overflow crowds of El Rocío, has also had an impact on the way the Romería is carried out. Carlos Guerrero, rociero who in 2015 celebrated 50 years as a pilgrim, complains: *“Before no one took any beer, whisky, soft drinks, or anything... We took wine, warm. For water there were wells along the way. You had to take pills for diarrhea... No bed, shower, nothing like that... We slept under a truck, under a cart, or a tractor... What wasn't lacking ever was the pot of white broth and the coffee pot. The chickens were carried live, tied at their feet, and when we arrived to the camping ground, they we killed and put in the pot. A hard-boiled egg, a chorizo sausage from that year's slaughter... To Rocío we took nothing more!”* Nowadays the situation is very different: the *reuniones* –groups of fiends who get together to share expenses– buy or rent wagons up to 12 meters-long pulled by a tractor, with all the creature comforts like a shower, beds, refrigerator, etc...







FOTOGRAFÍAS

Sanlúcar

ANCHA N.º 44
SANLUCAR DE BARRAMEDA

Sanlúcar









“El Rocío is beginning to evolve based on economic lines. So, yes, there is a Rocío for the poor and a Rocío for the rich. That bipolarity exists in El Rocío”, admits Padre Antonio. But leaving aside the fact that there are people who participate in El Rocío to enjoy the food, the drink and the dancing or to show off their best horse while cupping a tall drink in their hand, money is not an obstacle to doing the Rocío pilgrimage. As Carlos and Margarita told me, *“A rociero does not need to have money, or a horse, or a car, or a house. If you are a rociero, you are devout, and you can be devout with a pair of rope-soled sandals or whatever you have. A person who has devotion is not conditioned by money”*.

Many rocieros, like Margarita, feel nostalgia for the Rocío of the old days. *“They have taken away our candelas. We now use motors... With the motors running you can't sit down to sing with your reunion group. When the night was silent, that starry night, so beautiful, you heard singing over here, over there... It was beautiful. Now people don't sing anywhere... We take coolers with ice. We didn't want to take motors... In the end, we got motors”*. The candelas –she refers to the bonfires that they made at night to warm themselves and to sing around– were prohibited at the end of the 1980s to avoid forest fires and accidents inside Doñana National Park. The “motors” are electrical generators to run the refrigerators, the lights and other electrical appliances which now no one wants to do without during the Romería. *“Nobody will let them take their motors away, because you are not going to take a step backwards now,”* says Margarita. Carlos adds, *“I would get rid of the all-terrain vehicles. I wouldn't leave a single one. I would leave the tractors. The all-terrain vehicles get stuck in the road. If you are going on horseback, they bump the horses legs or they honk so you get out of the way...”* *“I have been to El Rocío so many times, because of my devotion, and year after year, I have seen it changing,*

changing, changing, so much, that nowadays, I declare, if it wasn't for this Virgin who is there, I wouldn't go anymore”—concludes Margarita.

Carlos recites this *sevillana* for me about how he misses those times when candelas still existed on El Rocío:

«¿Dónde estarán las candelas,
aquéllas que yo encendía,
con la leña del Camino,
que recogía en el día?
Ramas de pino resacas,
entremezcladas con encinas,

Y mi gente alrededor,
cantándote amanecía.
¿Dónde estarán mis candelas?
¡Qué mi Rocío lo han cambiado.
Ya sólo me queda el rescoldo
que me da mi Simpecado!»

*Where are the bonfires,
those that I lit
with firewood from the way
that I collected during the day?
Dry pine branches
mixed in with oak.*

And my people around me
singing 'til the sun rose.
Where are my bonfires?
How My Rocío has changed.
Now the only embers that remain
flicker from my Simpecado!

The overcrowding and the changes caused by the modernization of society have greatly increased the environmental impact of the pilgrimage on Doñana National Park. During the Romería del Rocío the passage of people through Doñana reached 42,733 persons and the total number of authorized motorized vehicles rose to 4010. We should also remember that this transit occurs in the brief period of one week. If to these numbers we add the 69 additional pilgrimages that brotherhoods make to El Rocío during the rest of the year, the number of authorized vehicles rises to 4960.

In accordance with its policy of restricting the transit of motor vehicles, since 2007 the National Park has reduced authorizations by 25%, which adds up to a considerable decrease. The greatest environmental worry is the litter that pilgrims leave behind since, unlike the luminous and noise pollution, the solid waste stays in the park. Juan Pedro Castellano, director of the Doñana Natural Area, says that things have improved enormously in this regard, especially thanks to the cooperation between the park and the brotherhoods and efforts to improve environmental awareness among the pilgrims. *“We met a Principal of a Brotherhood, a lady with a strong personality, who halted her Simpecado on the way because after a lunch the people hadn't left the place as clean as she would have liked. That was unthinkable 30 years ago.”* In spite of the fact that the brotherhoods

and the leadership of the park have worked together on a campaign to stress the connection between rociero devotion and care of the environment –at least on a theoretical and regulatory level– in practice, this message has not gotten through completely to all rocieros. Juan José Negro, director of the Doñana Ecological Station, in charge of environmental research inside the park, complains: *“It’s true some cleanup occurs, but the cleanup plan doesn’t mean that the sweepers clean more than a few meters to the side of the road. When we did it ourselves, we found approximately 2000 beer bottles. A thorough cleanup could be done. Everything that comes in a package could go back to that bag, or backpack, no matter where it comes from, and should end up in the proper place. Right now, you see the culture is to leave almost everything on the ground for someone else to pick up: the Romero Plan or the workers hired by the brotherhood. I think that that should be a last resort. The pilgrim should be conscious of where they are and make an effort... really it is not so much effort. Comparisons are odious, but I have also done parts of the Camino de Santiago, which is another religious pilgrimage, at least for many, many people, that passes through natural areas of great ecological value, and normally –I am not saying always– it is a clean path. But I can say that there are other ways of doing it and they are comparable.”*

Dolores Escalona is mayor of *Aznalcázar*, a town close to Seville that more than half of the brotherhoods pass through and whose famous *“Paso del Quema”* –where many rociero baptisms occur– is within the Doñana Natural Area. In the year 2014, Escalona passed a municipal law that required a deposit of 3000 euros per brotherhood when they spend the night or stop for the siesta on land owned by the town government. Also she established a fee of 25 euros per motor vehicle. The mayor stated, *“It’s true that the Romero Plan, run by the*

provincial government, cleans up. But it does it badly and it takes too long. It is not good for the town government of Aznalcázar to have to choose between leaving things dirty or having to pay for the clean up. We don't charge if you are just passing through. We only charge for people stopping for siestas and overnight stops. The road is open to everyone. If the brotherhood doesn't clean up the place, the 3000 euros are used to pay for the cleaning and any money left over is given back. If the place is kept clean, the entire deposit is given back the next day.” In February 2015 the town government was able to enact the regulation, when they reached an agreement with the government of Andalusia and the provincial government to receive “new resources to make it possible to reconcile preservation of one of the traditions most deeply rooted in the province with the guarantee of environmental sustainability of the landscape typical of the municipality of Aznalcázar and the surroundings of Quema.”

Another of the aspects that could be improved during the overnight stays in the park, when thousands of people come together in the same place is the absence of toilets for the pilgrims, meaning everyone relieves themselves wherever they can. According to Juan Pedro Castellano, director of the Natural Reserve, this is one of the issues that is currently under review in the Plan of Rociero Transit, soon to be approved. Nor are receptacles available to separate waste and, above all, to avoid that certain wild animals –mainly wild boar and deer– break open the trash bags looking for food. *“There is always a need to improve,” says Mr. Castellano. “Even if there is just one leftover bottle, there is room for improvement.”* The European Council has taken note of this effort to improve and in 2010 renewed Doñana National Park's European Diploma for ten more years, highlighting the implementation of measures related with the control of the pilgrimages.

"From my point of view," Padre Quevedo commented to me, "the topic of the waste has to do with culture, with education." Nobody wants to ruin El Rocío. Both Mr. Negro and Ms. Escalona expressed this sentiment to me, and are critical on the topic of waste. "I don't want to take anyone's faith away from them," emphasizes Dolores Escalona. "Just the opposite. I want you to stay strong in faith, but you must respect the environment of my town." A document produced in a meeting of the leaders of the parent brotherhood leadership and signed by brotherhood and the Doñana Natural Area states: "The devotion to the Virgin of El Rocío cannot be understood without the privileged natural environment in which its Sanctuary is located; and we think that Doñana, can likewise not be understood without taking into account what it receives from this unique adoration of Mary. El Rocío and Doñana find their fullest meaning by being joined the one to the other." Thus, the effort would be to unite, at a practical and personal level, the rociero devotion with respect and care for the environment. Along these lines, Juan Carlos Rubio, former director of the Doñana Natural Area, argues in favor of embracing this view and creating the denomination "Sacred Natural Area" for Doñana, where both concepts - devotion and the environment—will be intimately linked. Pope Francis just published, the past 24th of May, 2015 —actually on the Feast of Pentecost— his encyclical "Laudato Si" on the topic of the environment. In the encyclical, he expresses his belief that "the Earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth," and he speaks of the need for a ecological conversion of Christians: "It must be said that some committed and prayerful Christians, with the excuse of realism and pragmatism, tend to ridicule expressions of concern for the environment. Others are passive; they choose not to change their habits and thus become inconsistent. So what they all need is an "ecological conversion" (...) Living our vocation to be

protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience." One clearly sees in Pope Francis' words a relationship between the concepts of "devotion" and "care for the environment", at least from a doctrinal point of view. Nevertheless, there is still a long way to go to transform this theory into a practical reality.











In El Rocío people drink and eat in abundance, there is a lot of dancing and singing, but not necessarily to excess. What's more, *“In Andalusia people pray singing... and by extension dancing,”* emphasizes Adelina. It is undeniable that in contrast with other parts of Spain like Castilla y León, where religious devotion is lived in a more austere and silent way, in Andalusia song and dance form a part of the culture and a way of expressing devotion. *“Sevillanas music is the theology of the people. You take all the lyrics of the sevillanas and they are the true theology of the people, which is the theology of the simple things,”* Padre Antonio tells me. While often times there is a certain exhibitionism in the *cante (flamenco religious songs)*, many others hide a deep devotion: to give thanks to the Virgin for a newborn child or say a prayer for a relative who died that year, as is the case in the following video.

(See a video of the “cante” folksongs in: <https://vimeo.com/album/2810733/video/112273640>)

El Rocío, growing from a commercial crossroads between the cities of Huelva, Seville and Sanlúcar, has served as a meeting point between different regions of Andalusia, transmitting cultural aspects of one place to another, like for example, the cantes –sevillanas, fandangos– and the typical *faraloes* dresses. Rociero women have the custom of changing their dress everyday of the pilgrimage and this includes also different accessories –a flower, earrings, shoes– that have to match with each dress. Quite a logistical challenge and quite expensive.

(More videos of the “cante” folksongs:

<https://vimeo.com/133179770>

<https://vimeo.com/133214681>

<https://vimeo.com/album/2810733/video/112271588>

<https://vimeo.com/133215112>)



















What about the sex, the drunkenness, and drugs and other excesses of El Rocío? Unlike other crowded Spanish festivals, like the famous *Sanfermines* of Pamplona or the *Fallas* in Valencia, during the Romería I did not observe any kind of openly sexual behavior, nor people vomiting on the footpaths of the village of El Rocío from binge drinking. It is possible that inside the houses there could have been sex, drinking and drugs, but there was no sign of it outside. Nor did I observe any kind of improper behavior due to excesses with alcohol or other substances in the youths of Almonte who were waiting anxiously inside the church to climb over the railing. One night I went to the Ajolí bridge, an out-of-the-way place close to the village of El Rocío, where it was said couples went to engage in amorous trysts. I only hear the sounds of someone snoring amongst the pines... However, Rafael, a Seville native of about 40, who shared a room with me in a house in the village confessed, *“I come here for the atmosphere, the partying and the fun. I never set foot in the church.”* Padre Antonio commented, *“In El Rocío you are going to find what you come looking for. If you want to find the Virgin, you are going to find the Virgin. If you are looking for frivolity, drunkenness, a blast... you will find that too.”* Adelina expressed it in a different way, *“A million people go to the festival of Rocío. I always say that in that million people there are a million Rocíos. There is a Rocio inside everyone, but I think that in all of them, there is something of faith, even if it is very small, something they carry. And the majority of the rocieros show their faith openly.”* Padre Quevedo, 88 years old, is also a veteran rociero, known for the lyrics of the *sevillanas* he has written. In the year 1984, he wrote these words for the *sevillana* *“Ese tío no es rociero”* (*“This man is not a rociero”*):

«Si te hace daño el relente
Ni tienes fe rociera,
Ni te gusta nuestro ambiente
Quien te obligó a que vinieras
Si aquí lo que sobra es gente.

Una estampa en el sombrero
Lleva una jaca bonita
En la juerga es el primero
Pero no reza en la Ermita.
Ese tío no es rociero.»

*“If the cold bothers you
and you don't have faith in Rocío
and you don't like our ways.
Who told you to come?
There are already too many people here.*

*A holy picture on his hat
And a beautiful horse.
He's the first in the party,
But he doesn't pray in the church.
That man is not a rociero.”*

The obvious vanity and exhibitionism in El Rocío are on display: showing off the horse one rides, pride in the clothes one wears, feeling one sings better than anyone else, or boasting about how many years one has done the El Rocío pilgrimage. Maybe these behaviors are common in any similar manifestation, be they religious or secular. It is only human. Devotion is like an onion: It has many layers. People go to these types of events for different reasons, apart from those related with religious motivation, like the party atmosphere, the colorfulness of the ritual, or the beauty of the region. Nonetheless, I would venture to say that what mainly draws the majority of the people to El Rocío is their openly-declared religious devotion to the Virgin. For a few days, the rocieros take a break from their normal routine, put to one side their businesses, their families, their successes and their failures, to enter into contact with something sacred, eternal and transcendent, which is their faith.

Although from the point of view of reason I subscribe to the definition of religion that the American writer Ambrose Bierce set down in his “Devil's Dictionary”: “*A daughter of Hope and of Fear, explaining to Ignorance the nature of the Unknowable*”, –my heart admits there is something more in El Rocío. As Padre Quevedo says, in another of the many *sevillanas* he wrote:

**«Hay quien dice del Rocio
Que es mentira y vanidad
Y yo le digo que vaya
Para saber la verdad.»**

*“There are those that say about Rocío
that it is all lies and vanity
And I say they should go
to find out the reality.”*

Postscript: Padre Quevedo died on October 2, 2015. I had just sent him a draft of this article, but I doubt he had a chance to read it. He was a good priest, a Jesuit, theologian and poet. But above all, he was a good *rociero*, as he himself described in this poem, which was the one he liked best of the many he wrote in his lifetime:

*“Quise escalar lo más alto,
soñé con fama y renombre,
pero me ví pobre y sólo,
pregunté a gritos mi nombre,
yo quise saber quien era
y lo supe: sólo un hombre.*

*Mi cuerpo es de trigo y mares,
mi alma de cal y luz;
aprendí a rezar, cantando
a un Cristo muerto en la cruz.
Hablé como habla mi gente.
Me dijeron: andaluz!.*

*Ví a la noche con mantilla
y la luna por peineta;*

*escuché hablando de amores
al aire con la maceta.
Se lo conté yo a la gente
y me llamaron: poeta.*

*Y al cabo de mucho andar
bajo el sol, por el sendero,
alegre y cansado a un tiempo,
ahora ya sé lo que quiero:
que pueda decir la Virgen
que he sido un buen rociero.”*

*“I wanted to climb the highest peak,
I dreamed of fame and renown,
but I found myself poor and alone,
and I called out my own name in shouts,
I wanted to know who I was
and I found out: just a man.*

*My body is made of wheat and seas,
my soul of lime and light;
I learned to pray, singing
to Christ dead on the cross.
I spoke like my people speak.
They said: andaluz!.*

*The night wore a mantilla
with the moon as its peineta;*

*I listened to the wind
talk of love to the flowers.
I told the people about it
and they called me: poet.*

*And after much walking
under the sun, along the path,
happy and tired at the same time,
now finally I know what I want:
that the Virgin may say
that I have been a good rociero.”*

At this link Padre Quevedo can be seen reciting this poem:

<https://vimeo.com/112911186>