

BURIED AROUND THE ALTAR

Manuel Lasso*

Today, after breakfast, while placing the stoneware dishes inside the washing machine I realized that the Spaniards who lived in the city of Lima in the XVII century used similar plates, but probably finer and better decorated, because during those times they used to bring them from the Far East. The *encomiendas* provided for it and for more than that.

I thought that when they touched those cups and jugs, they had to feel the same. They had to notice what we perceive, including the emotions and passions, because humanity was alike. The water brought from the Cacahuasi springs to the Water Deposit of Saint Thomas had to be identical to the water I drank during my childhood. The same had to happen with the taste of the *sancochado* or the *cocido madrileño*, with the kiss of the beloved woman before getting into the bullfight ring, with the deep peacefulness felt while receiving the Holy Sacrament, with the wrath raised by an insult and with the hardness of the sword handle before the beginning of a duel.

But no testimony had been left about this. Because no attestation can be passed to posterity if it has not been written or registered in some way. They also were aware of the fear that rises when one is dying on a San Andres hospital bed, with the stertorous breathing of the agony and when one plunges into unconsciousness before being wrapped in a white shroud and carried away by two Indian assistants to the cemetery of the Santa Ana Church.

During the times of Saint Rose of Lima and Saint Martin de Porras, graveyards were located within the church grounds, where the pews are placed now. A sepulcher was rented for twelve months. If there was enough money the relatives could renew the rent for a longer period of time. When they could not pay anymore, the grave makers removed the bones and prepared the earth to receive a new deceased. As it happens in the Act V, Scene I of Hamlet, when the gravediggers disinter Yorick's skull and the Danish prince reflects over the fragility of life.

The rich had themselves buried around the altar. There was an affluent citizen, with a monstrous double-chin and a bandaged leg, because he suffered from gout, majestically dressed like the microscopist Antonie van Leeuwenhoek, who wanted to be entombed underneath the altar. To accomplish this, he tripled the sum of the annual rent and put on the table sufficient amount of money for a century lease. But the holy Jesuit, who said the dominical Mass, felt slighted with such a proposal and furiously ordered the altar boy and his assistants to throw him onto the street and leave him there until he would rot, very near to Plaza Italia or Plaza Raymondi, with his

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brown coat and his blond, long and wavy wig, like the ones used by the French aristocrats of the XVII century. Through the efforts of the Archbishop of Lima and the considerations of the Viceroy, the noble clergyman allowed an interment that was the closest to the altar, with a distance quantified by the measuring tape of an Andalusian tailor. The offered money went into the royal coffers. In that way the altar boy and his assistants lifted the heavy body of the rich merchant and rescued it from the gallinazos which, with their featherless black heads and necks, had descended from the dome of the church and very enthusiastically, opening their wings, were jumping around with the sincere desire of devouring the whole body in one single bite.

During that epoch entering the church to attend the holy Mass, was like setting foot in a nightmarish place from the times of Mary Shelley or coming into the Hell of Dante, because there were lighted candles and dry flowers left for the interred people all over the place. Thus, standing up, among the smoke scent of the incense and the memories of the ones who had gone belly up, the parishioners had to listen to the religious services, trying not to step on the graves of the recently departed. The ecclesiastics liked this scenario because it helped them in reminding the churchgoers that the visit to this world was only temporary and that after the priest there was only one God and nothing else but one God.