

New Mexican Catholicism

Throughout *Bless Me, Ultima*, Antonio, a devout Catholic boy, contemplates life as a priest. While regularly praying, he begins his formal religious training in preparation for his first Communion. The Catholic faith, with its intricate doctrine and practices, plays an integral role in Antonio's story.

One of the largest and oldest institutions in the world, the Roman Catholic Church dates to Peter the Apostle in the first century AD. According to the gospels, Jesus entrusted Peter with the "keys of the kingdom" and gave him special authority to govern the Church. At the end of the fifteenth century, Pope Alexander VI issued a series of papal bulls, or letters, concerning the conversion of the people of the Americas from their native religions to Catholicism.

In what would later become Mexico and the southwestern United States, Spanish priests of the Franciscan Order established missions in the sixteenth century to spread the teachings of the Catholic Church to the indigenous peoples. While many of the native peoples converted, they maintained some of their ancient beliefs. Native practices would come to intermingle with Catholicism.

The Church grants special authority to the pope, his bishops, and their priests, since they belong to the legacy of Jesus's apostles. Catholicism is based on the belief in the Holy Trinity: the Father (God), the Son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith.

Catholics believe in Seven Sacraments, viewing them as signs of grace and gifts of God. The Sacraments parallel the phases of life: birth, adolescence, marriage, and preparation for death. In Catholicism they are Baptism, Reconciliation (Confession), Eucharist, Confirmation, Holy Orders, Matrimony, and Anointing of the Sick. A young person is initiated into the Catholic Church through Baptism, usually in infancy, which absolves one of original sin. Children at age seven or eight participate in their first Communion, where they receive the Eucharist for the first time. In the Eucharist, the body and blood of Jesus Christ are present in the forms of consecrated bread and wine, which Catholics eat and drink during Communion at Mass. In adolescence, a Catholic is "confirmed" by willfully accepting the Catholic faith and its traditions and rituals. As a young Catholic matures, it is important to demonstrate moral fortitude and commitment to Catholic ideals by doing good works. A strong faith means not only understanding the religious tenets of Catholicism but also acting to reflect those beliefs.

Antonio, as he learns more about his faith, questions what these tenets mean. He is further challenged by what appears to be supernatural—the Golden Carp, Ultima's owl, and Tenorio's daughters. Still, we see the Sacraments infused into *Bless Me, Ultima* when Antonio devotes himself to attending catechism and preparing for his first Communion.

Prior to receiving this sacrament he must take part in Reconciliation, where he confesses his sins, is absolved by the priest, and does penance. On several occasions in the novel Antonio becomes a surrogate

priest, “absolving” the sins of Narciso and playing priest to the children in his class. He later participates in his first Communion, where he receives the Eucharist. Antonio’s spiritual maturity is hastened both by the tragic events he witnesses and the supernatural elements to which he is exposed.

The Land of Enchantment

For centuries New Mexico, known as the Land of Enchantment, has drawn travelers and settlers from all directions. The cultures of Native Americans and Spanish Catholics who arrived in the sixteenth century often conflicted. Later, this clash of cultures was further complicated by the introduction of Anglos, who journeyed west after New Mexico became an American territory in 1850. Although these disparate peoples inevitably adopted new ways of living from each other, they also struggled, sometimes violently, to protect their freedom, language, and sovereign traditions. They often fought over land and religion. At other times, the native, Spanish, and Anglo peoples coexisted peacefully and harmoniously.

Indigenous peoples have been living in the Southwest for thousands of years. The Pueblo Indians of northern New Mexico settled in villages of small stone dwellings in what we now call the Four Corners region (where Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah converge). The people in these villages irrigated the land, tended crops, raised fowl, made pottery and woven baskets, and fashioned sophisticated tools from stone. Their lives and art were intimately connected with the seasons and resources of the land. The Navajo people traveled along trade routes, exchanging maize and cotton for bison and other materials. The Navajo believe that life itself is connected to the land, and that a balance between earth, sky, and spiritual people is the source of life. All living things share a common connection among their inner spirit, and this connection gives order to the world.

The freedom to roam the land is an aspect essential to their well-being, and an expression of their reverence for the land as a sacred being underscores the independence of the Navajo people, who retained much of their culture after the arrival of the conquistadors. When the Spanish brought sheep and horses up from Mexico, the Navajo people quickly adopted them for their own purposes. The ranchers and nomadic tribes came to share a love and respect for horses and the open land, the *llano*. We see this balance of independence and respect for the land among the Spanish *vaqueros*, the cowboys whose legacy of tough-willed independence survives in our imaginations today.

From the native peoples the Spanish adopted the *curandera*, a spiritual healer who uses herbs and plants to cure the sick. The *curandera* preserves ancient traditions handed down from one generation to the next through personal teaching and oral tradition. The *curandera* is a kind of *shaman*, a person of insight and sensitivity who learns the healing arts from a master teacher, often a relative or a distinguished person of wisdom and age in the community. Rituals include steeping herbs in water to prepare special teas and mashing herbs into a compress to heal wounds. Because the Spanish adopted these healing traditions from the Native Americans, the *curandera* also represents the point of intersection where culture was exchanged and shared by people of different religions. From their indigenous ancestors, New Mexicans inherited not only a reverence for the great spirit that unites all living things on earth but also a desire to know this spirit intimately. The work of the *curandera* acknowledges the spiritual connections among plants, earth, people, and dreams, weaving a tapestry of mystery and sacred magic that remains important to New Mexicans to this day.

- * *Discuss the history of New Mexico as one of both cultural conflict and cultural exchange.*
 - * *Where do the religious beliefs of Catholic explorers and Native Americans overlap?*
 - * *Where do they diverge?*

- * *Identify important myths in your own cultures, either local or national.*

- * *Recount a myth in your own words, and then discuss what religious or cultural values the myth addresses.*
 - * *Why is this story useful or meaningful in your culture?*