

New light on the California Missions

by Rubén G. Mendoza, Ph.D.

The California Missions signify many things to many different people, not the least of which is their association with the conversion of native peoples to the Catholic faith. My own ancestors were among the many first converted to the faith within the hallowed halls of Mission Churches in Mexico and the U.S. Southwest. For years, boosters and historians alike have promoted the California Missions with a host of romanticized, and often politicized, images of life and culture in early California . And despite years of scrutiny by scholars, explorers, and history buffs, many mysteries remain. One such ancient mystery only came to light in recent years. On the morning of 21 December 2000, I had the extraordinary good fortune of witnessing for the first time a most unusual event, that being the otherworldly illumination of the altar of light at Old Mission San Juan Bautista. At that time, the Reverend Edward Fitz-Henry opened the Mission Church to those who wished to experience the extraordinary and magical illumination of the main altar and tabernacle of the old church at dawn on the Winter Solstice. With the story of Celtic, early Briton, and American Indian sun worship as his guide, the Reverend Fitz-Henry pronounced early that morning that we were all soon to experience something truly extraordinary. At that point, those assembled within the sanctuary of the Mission Church were directed to the forecourt of the church where on December 17th of that year, the bronze statue of Saint John the Baptist was dedicated, and would as such herald for the first time the new dawn of the Winter Solstice sun in the year 2000.

Winter's Light at San Juan

As the sun crested the saddle of two hills located immediately east of the Old Mission Church at San Juan Bautista on the morning of 21 December 2000 , I soon noted the coincidence of the larger peak to the south with the alignment of the window in the Church façade. As the amber light of the early morning sun struck the white walls of the Old Mission and enveloped the whole of the old Church in a warm glow, the Reverend Fitz-Henry directed the assembled throng back into the sanctuary of the Church. As I entered the Church, I immediately noted the particularly intense column of light penetrating the window in the façade of the Church and directed at the main altar, as well as the attendant window of light that manifested itself immediately to the right of the bulto or saint of San Isidoro at approximately 7:10 am . As the sun rose, the window of light dropped at a 45 degree angle toward the gilded gold tabernacle enclosure at the heart of the altar. At precisely 7:25 am , the window of light had traced a path that culminated in the most incredible illumination of the tabernacle enclosure. At that very moment, the Reverend invited those present to precede to the top of the altar for a firsthand glimpse of this most miraculous and curious event...and that from the perspective of the tabernacle enclosure itself. I recall from that time that as I approached the altar-borne tabernacle with camera at the ready, I was smitten by the most unusual sensation that I was soon to share two centuries of a most esoteric and spiritual experience. As I glanced back at the Winter Solstice sun then framed at the epicenter of the window anchored within the front façade of the Old Mission Church , I couldn't help but feel what many describe when in the course of a near death experience they see the light of the great beyond. For me, this was both an intense spiritual experience, and the start of a now seven year quest to document this extraordinary phenomenon in all California , Southwestern, and other New World Mission churches where these illuminations occur.

Lighting the Path

Since that first experience at Old Mission San Juan Bautista, I have gone on to discover and document the equally spectacular solstice, equinox, and feast day solar illuminations of main altar tabernacles at some twelve California mission sites; fourteen New Mexico Pueblo Indian sanctuaries, one Arizona site, three Texas Missions, as well as a

host of Mexican Mission churches including those in Mexico City and in the Sierra Gorda of Queretaro, Mexico. As with the Mission of Santiago de Jalpan, Queretaro, another Mission founded by Fray Junipero Serra, that of San Carlos Borromeo del Rio Carmelo right here in the Diocese of Monterey was determined to be oriented on an azimuth identified with the Summer Solstice. As such, on 22 June of 2003 I first documented the Summer Solstice at that site with the help of Diocesan Curator Sir Richard Joseph Menn, Father Emil Robu, and Carmel parishioner Lynn Carr. In that same year, I attended an early morning mass at San Miguel Arcangel in the early morning hours of October 19, and witnessed the full body illumination of the main altar bulto or saint at that site just prior to the Winter Solstice quake of 2003 that severely damaged the Old Mission; and thereby sparked a massive historic preservation campaign spearheaded by the California Missions Foundation and our lobbyists to save that Mission and others for posterity. More recently, Brother Bill Short and I documented the October 4 Franciscan feast day illumination of the painted nicho or niche situated immediately to the left of the tabernacle at that site. Ultimately, that early experience at Mission San Juan Bautista launched the makings of a long-term quest to more fully understand and appreciate the spiritual, academic, and technical skills of those Hispanic Catholic and California Indian forbearers who built such magical and extraordinary sanctuaries of light, life, and worship.

Further Information: For an overview of current research sparked by the discoveries at San Juan Bautista, see an article titled "Sacrament of the Sun: Eschatological Architecture and Solar Geometry in a California Mission" by Rubén G. Mendoza published in *Boletín: The Journal of the California Mission Studies Association*, Volume 22, Number 1, 2005; or, "Foreword: Hispanic Sacred Geometry and the Architecture of the Divine" by Rubén G. Mendoza (*Journal of the Southwest*, Volume 48, Number 4, Winter 2006). Whereas the first article provides a detailed overview of the solar geometry of Old Mission San Juan Bautista as this pertains to Franciscan and California Indian thought and belief; the second article provides an overview of sacred geometry and its relationship to those discoveries in the California missions, and includes the first ever publication of the discovery photo of the Summer Solstice illumination at Mission Carmel.

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