



© MANUEL CRUZADO CAZADOR

THE PILGRIMS OF LES USERES

LES USERES, JUST 35 KILOMETRES FROM CASTELLÓ, TODAY HAS ONLY 1,250 INHABITANTS. CONTRASTING WITH THIS POPULATION DECLINE, THE ANNUAL PILGRIMAGE CONTAINS A NOBLE ELEMENT OF RESISTANCE TO THE BREAK-UP THREATENING THE VILLAGE AND A SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS COLLECTIVE TRADITIONS.

VÍCTOR GÓMEZ LABRADO TEACHER

The last Friday of April, just before dawn, the pilgrims file out of the church of Les Useres at the tail of the procession. They cross the village one by one, leaving a gap of fifteen paces between one another so as to emphasize the idea of isolation and of withdrawal of the individual into

innermost existence. Outwardly, each of them presents the same anonymous figure, repeated thirteen times. They file past, all dressed in identical capes with broad leather belts from which hangs a rosary. A crucifix bigger than any fist could grasp swings at the end of another enormous rosary made of beads

bigger than cherries and strung twice round their neck. A loose-hanging hood and a beard completely erase the pilgrims' identity. They walk slowly, grasping a carved wooden staff sitting easily in their hands to accompany their short steps. The men and women in the procession go before them along the pave-



© MANUEL CRUZADO CAZADOR

ment on either side of the street, while they walk in the middle of the street, treading barefoot a narrow path of ivy that the village women have lovingly prepared in their honour and out of pity for the feet that are yet to be worn and chafed by the almost eighty kilometres of unmade-up road on the round trip to the shrine of Sant Joan de Penyagolosa and back. The half-light and the dawn chill provide a fitting atmosphere for this solemn, elemental scene, with its rugged purity, like a living fragment from an ancient world. There are no documentary clues to the historical origins of this tradition, though they are evidently remote. The pilgrims of Les Useres appear in our world unannounced, from the unfathomable depths of a far-off time that leaves no apparent trace. Some say that the pilgrimage as we know it today is like a pre-Christian ritual that has been Christianized, and in fact it responds to needs that man has felt since at least the Stone Age.

The pilgrims go to Sant Joan to ask for health, peace and water, the basic means of survival. It's not hard to imagine that the ungenerous land they cross and represent has not always satisfied these needs, so they visit Sant Joan, a magical, holy place where they ask God for that minimum of generosity which, with careful administration by humans, makes the life of the community possible. The produce of Les Useres consists of almonds, vines, olives, carobs and wheat; this is the ancestral

Mediterranean, whose meagre resources are no longer enough to live on. A realist adaptation of the pilgrimage to today's needs would be to go to Sant Joan to ask for the factories of neighbouring Alcora to be kept open and for the state to keep up payment of old-age pensions, as these are the real source of income in Les Useres today. The economic connotations have changed, but the sense of responsibility towards the collective tradition grows each year. Les Useres, which is just 35 kilometres from Castelló, today has only 1,250 inhabitants, while in 1910 it had 3,464. The decline in the population has made it necessary to change the way the pilgrims are designated. Traditionally only heads of family took their established turn, but since the sixties anyone married to a woman born in Les Useres or descended from a local family is also included, so long as they keep a house in the village. The religious intensity of the ritual makes no concessions to picturesqueness, and the uniqueness of the experience doesn't allow the place of pilgrim to be occupied by the same set of people each year. The long march through bleak countryside, the self-imposed silence of the pilgrims, the stillness of the immensities where the only sound is the chant of the three singers who walk with them, all adds to the state of spiritual mellowness. The singing is an essential ingredient and also one of the greatest attractions for the enquiring spectator. The Latin chants of Les Useres, which

experts say are related to those of the festival of Elx, are a key element in the most venerable musical tradition of the Valencians.

After a long journey, the pilgrims arrive at Sant Joan, where they comply with a series of ceremonies, including the indispensable night of penitence in the cave and the ceremony of "Forgiveness" in the votive offering hall. These ceremonies are carried out in the most absolute secrecy and, so they say, produce enormously sincere and intimate confessions and often cause a high degree of spiritual perfection.

The pilgrims of Les Useres and the impressive ritual surrounding them are attracting growing attention. While access to the central element of the celebration is limited by kinship, there are several possibilities for participation at different levels of commitment. The highest level is undoubtedly that of the "Promises", who to achieve some kind of favour or in fulfillment of a vow can walk ahead of the pilgrims. Another small group of people often joins in spontaneously and follows behind at some distance. But most people normally prefer just to attend the mass at Les Useres or watch the procession pass in the streets or at some point on the route which can be reached by car, such as the shrine of Sant Miquel de Torrocelles, where the pilgrims have lunch on Friday. Here the public can watch, listen to the singing and share in the emotion and the silence of the pilgrims. ■