

Communities follow centuries-old tradition of blessing waterways in honor of San Ysidro

By Rosalie Rayburn / Journal Staff Writer

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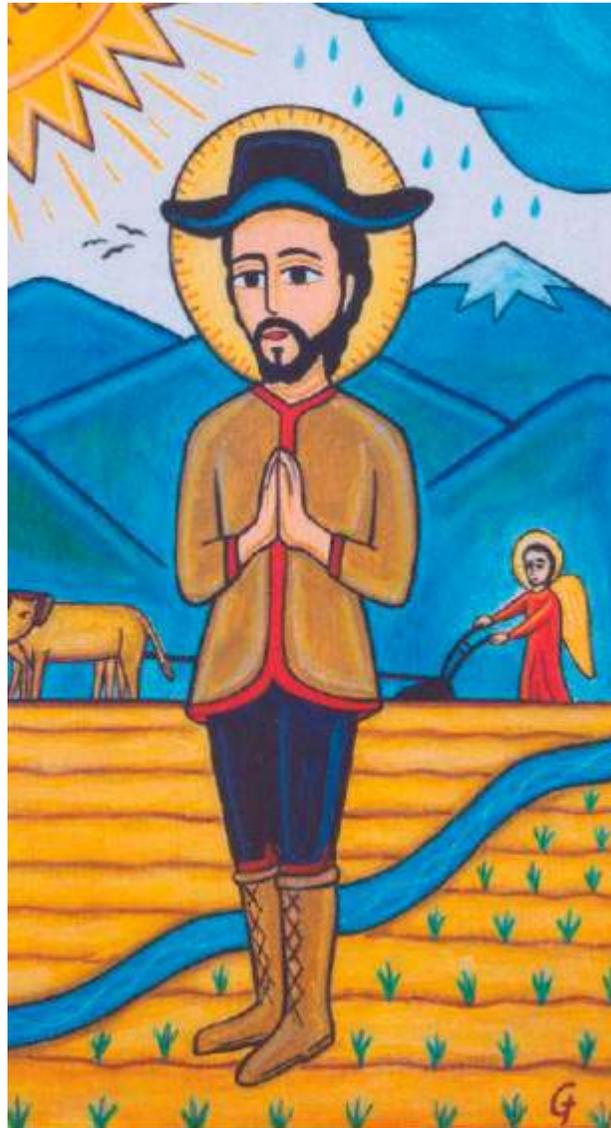
Lorenzo Candelaria of Albuquerque listens to a traditional blessing ceremony and prayers for rain during the 2013 San Ysidro y Santa Maria de la Cabeza celebration at the Sanchez Farm acequia in the South Valley. (Marla Brose/Albuquerque Journal)



A San Ysidro feast day tradition in Agua Fria is to throw flowers into the Santa Fe River when the water is flowing. (Courtesy of William Mee)

Communities in New Mexico still follow centuries-old traditions that came from Spain with ceremonial blessings for the waterways that give life to the crops.

They honor the May 15 feast of San Ysidro, patron saint of laborers and farmers, with processions, singing, dancing and a blessing of local acequias.



San Ysidro Labrador

An image of San Ysidro Labrador, the patron saint of laborers and farmers, is depicted on a prayer card produced for the New Mexico Acequia Association. The feast day of San Ysidro is on May 15. Many communities hold ceremonies to bless the acequias. (Courtesy of the New Mexico Acequia Association)

Historical sources say Ysidro, sometimes spelled Isidro, was a Spanish peasant born around 1070 who worked on the lands of Juan de Vargas near Madrid.

According to legend he was very devout and spent so much time praying that his co-workers complained.

But when De Vargas went to check on his work, he found an angel driving the oxen to plow the field so Ysidro could continue his devotions.

Ysidro is credited with miracles such as making a spring gush by banging the ground while plowing.

It's also said that when his only son fell into a well and Ysidro prayed, water rose in the well bringing the boy to the surface. Ysidro and his wife, María Torribia, known as Santa Maria de la Cabeza, are also revered for helping to relieve drought.

Valentin Sanchez, a resident of the Spanish city of Salamanca, said cities and villages in Spain still celebrate San Ysidro's feast day with processions carrying a statue of the saint through the streets, blessing the fields and asking for rain. Spanish settlers who came to New Mexico 400 years ago brought the tradition of building irrigation waterways known as acequias, and the custom of venerating San Ysidro.

"It's very much a celebrated part of acequia culture," said Pilar Trujillo, director of community projects for the Santa Fe-based New Mexico Acequia Association.



Santiago Maestas, front, Deacon Leroy Sanchez, left, and Deacon Joseph Segura, right, lead the 2013 procession to the acequia at Sanchez Farm during the San Ysidro y Santa Maria de la Cabeza ceremony. (Marla Brose/Albuquerque Journal)

South Valley procession

In the South Valley, residents will honor San Ysidro with a procession on Saturday, May 14.

The procession will start at 10 a.m. at the Carousel at the intersection of Isleta and Arenal and proceed along Arenal to the Sanchez Farm Open Space at Lopez Road.

Once there, dancers from the Aztec group Circulo Solar Ollin Xochipilli will perform, South Valley native Deacon Leroy Sanchez of Rio Rancho will say a blessing and children will throw rose petals on the waters of the nearby acequia.

Some of the San Ysidro celebrations around New Mexico:

- Albuquerque South Valley: Procession starts at 10 a.m. Saturday, May 14, Carousel de San Ysidro at the intersection of Isleta and Arenal and will proceed to the Armijo acequia at Sanchez Farm Open Space at Lopez Road. Aztec dancers from Circulo Solar Ollin Xochipilli will participate. Blessings of the acequia and land.
- Corrales: Fiesta de San Ysidro, Sunday, May 15, 10 a.m. Mass at San Ysidro Church 5015, Corrales Road, followed by procession to Historic Old San Ysidro Church at 804 Old Church Road. Matachines dancers from Bernalillo will perform. Volunteers will carry a statue of the saint. After a blessing ceremony the procession will return to the church on Corrales Road which is celebrating its 50th anniversary.
- San Fidel, near Grants: residents of the village will gather at 4 p.m. Sunday, May 15, at the acequia San Jose de la Cienega where a priest will bless the acequia and people will drop rose petals in the water. After the blessing ceremony there will be a potluck at the home of Leon Tafoya whose land is along the acequia.
- Agua Fria, Santa Fe: Noon Mass Sunday, May 15, at San Isidro church, 3552 Agua Fria St., Santa Fe, followed by procession from the San Isidro Church Community Center to the San Ysidro Crossing of the Santa Fe River. There will be musicians, singing and a blessing of the water and throwing flowers into the water.

Each year, a different family in the community has the honor of safeguarding the statue in their home and keeping it supplied with corn and atole, a cornmeal drink, said Santiago Maestas, president of the South Valley Regional Association of Acequias.

Maestas said anyone is welcome to join the procession and offer a blessing.

A big feature of the procession is a statue of the saint, his oxen and an angel. “We have even had a Buddhist blessing,” Maestas said.

Other celebrations

In Corrales, residents will be celebrating the saint’s day on Sunday, May 15, as well as the 50th anniversary of the San Ysidro Catholic church at 5015 Corrales Road.

Following 10 a.m. Mass, there will be a procession to the Historic Old San Ysidro Church at 804 Old Church Road.

Volunteers will carry a statue of the saint and Matachines dancers from Bernalillo will perform. After a blessing ceremony at the old church, the procession will return to the current church where there will be festivities until 5 p.m.

The community of Agua Fria, near Santa Fe, will celebrate on Sunday with Mass at San Isidro church. Afterward, a procession with music and song will head north from the church community center to where the street crosses over the Santa Fe River.

A local priest will lead prayers asking for good rains and bless flowers that children will then throw into the river. The priest will also bless donated packages of seeds and hand them out to those in attendance.

Leon Tafoya of San Fidel, a tiny rural community near Grants, said his community will celebrate San Ysidro's feast day with a potluck dinner, a blessing of the Acequia San Jose de la Cienega, and casting rose petals upon the water.