

Among the rites that are celebrated every year in Catholic countries and attended by hosts of believers, some are of particular importance on account of the strong hold they have on the masses and also because of their remarkable artistic and folklore qualities; these include the processions of statuary groups, often extremely dramatic in conception, representing the principal scenes of the Passion of Christ. The custom probably originated in Spain and then spread through other countries in Europe and especially in Italy; this can be seen from the name « Las Casazas » (Italianized into « Casazze » or « Casacce ») which was given to the first of the events of this kind here in the 16th and 17th centuries. As time went by after the end of the Spanish domination in Italy, these names disappeared and little by little the people forgot them and new names were given to the Sacred Groups; among the names that took the most hold in many parts of Italy was the term « Mysteries ».

This was the term (coming from the Latin *ministerium*, « ceremony », or possibly *mysterium*, « religious mystery ») that was applied in the middle ages, particularly in France, to sacred performances given by the « Confrères de la Passion » on subjects taken from the Old and New Testaments and from the lives of the Saints. Later on, by extension, similar manifestations of popular dramatic art in Spain, Germany, England and particularly in Italy, originating from the « laudes », were called the same and also sometimes by the terms « devotions » and « sacred representations ». Still today some of these representations are to be seen and often the whole populations of little towns re-enact the great tragedy of Golgotha; the most famous in the world is the

Oberammergau « Passion Play » but there are some interesting ones given in Italy and the islands as well.

A link between the ancient mysteries and the most recent sculptural figurations of the sacred event can be seen in the procession of the Mysteries of Marsala, in which the scenes of the Passion are interpreted by living people in silent groups that often have an impressive realism.

There are many towns in Italy and abroad that jealousy guard the heritage of art and faith that is represented by these works by which great sculptors and modest artisans, inspired by the same religious fervour, thought to portray the outstanding events of the drama of the Redemption. Trapani has the good fortune of having a greater number of them and therefore to be able to give life on the night between Good Friday and Holy Saturday to one of the most imposing and impressive of the processions which are held throughout Christendom on the days sacred to the Passion.

The « Mysteries » of Trapani came out of the flourishing artisan workshops that sprang up and prospered in the town during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries and were veritable forges of fine carvers and sculptors such as Annibale Scudaniglio, author of the marvellous bronze pulpit now in the Pepoli Museum, Pietro Orlando to whom is due the precious carving on the cupboard in the College Church, the Tipa brothers, authors of fine sacred statues and Giovanni Matera, famous also beyond the frontiers of his country his magnificent figures for Christmas cribs. Others from these workshops were Mario Ciotta, Baldassare Pisciotta, Antonio, Francesco and Domenico Nolfo, Giuseppe Milanti and Giacomo Tartaglia who, together with their pupils, sculpted the famous groups in wood, enlivening their composition with subdued sombre colouring and modelling the garments of the personages in the typical « canvas and paste » These

able artisans almost always showed a scrupulous fidelity to the story of the Evangelists, but at the same time they demonstrated a praise-worthy independence as regards the traditional iconography so that their works are not insignificant or grotesque copies of famous pictures but original compositions, often revealing a consummate ability and a lively sense of harmony. They devoted especial care to the modelling of the figures of the Christ, the Virgin and the Apostles; but they also portrayed the priests, dignitaries, soldiers and Jews with great skill, giving them terribly mocking and grotesque expressions, perhaps sometimes inspired by real people.

The Corporations, in other words the Guilds of Arts and Crafts, whose account the « Mysteries » had been built then proceeded to ornament them with attire and objects in silver (breast plates, arms, bandoliers, diadems, chairs balconies, crosses) which were often real masterpieces of chiselling; at their expense they had the second church of the Oratory of St. Michael built where the groups were installed in especially built niches protected by glass. During the last war, after a bombardment, the Church of St. Michael collapsed and some of the Mysteries were destroyed or badly damaged. At the end of the war, the Corporations with the assistance of the Sicilian Region had them restored or rebuilt in their original form by very fine artists such as Professors Cafiero, Fodale, Li Muli, and Messina and now the completed groups have found a new and worthy shelter in the Church of the Purgatory where they will be definitely installed.

The Procession of the Mysteries, the organization of which for a good many years has been in the hands of the « Ente Provinciale per il Turismo » (Provincial Tourist Board) of Trapani with the close collaboration of the Ecclesiastical Authorities, of the Municipality, of the ENAL and of the Corporations, begins in the afternoon

on Good Friday. The passage of the cortege is heralded by the blasts of trumpets and the spine chilling roll of muffled drums. At the head of the procession come the members of the historic Confraternity of St. Michael in red tunics and whit cowls; the twenty groups follow, preceded by the Corporations in black and by a band intoning funeral marches. The eighteen groups of the Passion, carried on the shoulders of men in uniform follow in this order: « *The Separation* », « *The Washing of the Feet* », « *Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane* », « *The arrest* », « *The fall at the brook of Cedron* », « *Jesus before Annas* », « *The denial* », « *Jesus before Herod* », « *The scourging* », « *The crown of thorns* », « *Ecce Homo!* », « *The Judgment* », « *The Ascent of Calvary* », « *The stripping of the clothes* », « *The reasing of the Cross* », « *The piercing of the side* », « *The descent from the Cross* », « *The transport to the tomb* ». The procession closes with an artistic urn symbolizing the transport of the body of the Saviou and an admirable statue of Our Lady of Sorrows draped in a long mantle of black velvet. The impressive cortege passes through the main streets of the old and new parts of the town during the whole night between ever chanting crowds of the faithful who come from the furthest points on the island, from the mainland and often from overseas; it is an unforgettable spectacle which, during the night, has an almost unreal aspect. The fanfares of trumpets, the lights and the perfumes create an atmosphere of mystical beauty that is almost supernatural and instills a deep and intense emotion in the hearts of all who watch it.