Introduction

Dirt—the holy dirt—is what the people go to see, to touch, to gather. Inside the adobe church, past the altar and sideways into a low-ceilinged little room, lies the pocito, the hole in the floor that goes down into New Mexico’s soil, source of the famous healing dirt at the heart of the Santuario de Chimayó. Some people go to get the dirt because they have always done so, since childhood, walking alongside their families. The familiar church in the familiar landscape remains a lodestone of faith, healing, and togetherness, generation after generation. Other people go because they are sightseers, tourists, or first-time visitors, but they, too, find themselves reaching into the pocito, letting the sandy earth trickle through their fingers, smelling the mineral richness of the ground, and wondering about the possibility of miracles. People go to experience the dirt, to pray in the Santuario, and to make a connection. Their aches and pains, the suffering they feel in their joints, the despair in their hearts, their hope against hope for recovery, and their memories of their beloved dead: all draw them to the dirt—the holy dirt.

Why dirt? Why does the Santuario de Chimayó, the most popular site of Catholic pilgrimage in the United States, feature a hole in the ground? As one popular version of the story goes, Bernardo Abeyta, a community leader and landowner in El Potrero, which is an area of the village of Chimayó, was in his fields near the Santa Cruz River sometime in the first decade of the 1800s. Noticing a glowing light shimmering in the ground, he discovered a large crucifix buried in the earth. Awed by the miraculous apparition of the crucifix, the devout Abeyta carried the object to the parish church in Santa Cruz, some eight miles distant. With the cooperation of the Franciscan priest, he placed the crucifix on the altar and returned home. The next day, he again found the artefact buried in his field, right where he had discovered it the day before. After repeating the journey to Santa Cruz, this time with mystified townspeople alongside, only to
have the cross return to its original position in El Potrero, it dawned on Abeyta that the Crucified Lord himself had chosen the spot where he wanted to be venerated. Construction began in 1813 on the Santuario and was completed in 1816. Almost immediately, people began to come to the shrine to venerate the miraculous Christ, to pray, and to gather dirt from the hole from which the crucifix had emerged. Abeyta identified the miraculous object as the Lord of Esquipulas, a popular image of Jesus in New Spain that had first originated centuries before in Guatemala.¹ The dirt in this hole, according to multitudes, has the power to heal.

These days, the Santuario de Chimayó receives hundreds of thousands of visitors every year, tens of thousands on Good Friday alone. Indeed, it is the largest site of Catholic pilgrimage in the United States. Many of these visitors are the descendants of those first Nuevomexicano devotees and health seekers. The Santuario is not only a pilgrimage destination and a site of worship for these people but also a tangible expression of their northern New Mexican Hispano heritage. But the Santuario de Chimayó is also important to others, who, in this peaceful and beautiful church, find that their own spiritual needs are met. The Tewa Pueblo people, who long predate the Hispanic population in the land, speak of Tsi Mayoh hill, rising behind the present-day church, and remember stories of openings in the earth and healing mud. More recent immigrants from Mexico, other Latin American lands, and even parts of Asia—especially Vietnam and the Philippines—come to the church in remembrance of similar shrines in their places of origin. Anglo Americans likewise come; they run the gamut from devout Catholics in practice of their faith to New Age spiritual seekers in search of energy and the perceived wisdom of so-called traditional peoples to buses and cars full of tourists who snap photographs of the picturesque church and who gather dirt as a souvenir. New Mexico, especially this part of the state just within the orbit of Santa Fe, is justly known for both its arresting physical beauty and
for its veritable glut of alternative and complementary medicine and religious experimentation. The Santuario, in this context, acts as a centerpiece both in New Mexico’s Hispano Catholic heritage and in the state’s seemingly endless offerings of healing, inner peace, and authentic experiences.

This book, a history of the Santuario de Chimayó, tells the story of this remarkable church, one of the most important religious sites in North America. And since it is nestled in northern New Mexico, this book about a church is also the story of the people who have made their lives in this place that is or has been the Tewa homeland, the northernmost province of the Spanish Empire, the fraying edge of an independent Mexico, and a unique region of the United States known as the Southwest. The village of Chimayó, in which the church is located, is important to the history of the state. It has been at the forefront of rebellion and self-determination against the several imperial and national powers that have laid claim to it over the centuries, from the Spanish, to Mexicans, to Americans. The Santuario thus serves as a linchpin of sorts, focusing the desires and needs of the Hispanic majority of the region even while highlighting the ongoing influence of the native Pueblos, of Anglos and tourists, and of the Catholic Church.

In one sense, then, the history of the Santuario grapples with the waves of conquest and new regimes even as it navigates long eras of relative peace, seclusion, and even periods of de facto autonomy. But unlike a mere parcel to be bought, sold, or stolen, the Santuario is a place of worship, a place rich with symbolism. As the noted historian Robert Orsi has argued, religions are the stuff of relationships between heaven and earth, between humans and sacred figures.² At Chimayó, where the holy itself wells up out of the ground, people forge relationships with each other and with Jesus, both his suffering adult form on the crucifix and his boyish persona known
in the guise of the Santo Niño de Atocha. The Santuario is also a feature of a village, a political community with economic needs and desires. It is a meeting place, a marker of heritage, and a source of revenue because of its popularity. And the Santuario is a church, specifically a Catholic church, which carries its own host of meanings and associations. Of late, it is a destination of thousands—pilgrims and tourists alike—who come to make a connection with the place, to appreciate it, to interact with it, to feel what it feels like to be there. Because of this mass appeal, this book carries the title *America’s Miraculous Church*, however, it is worth noting that the bulk of the Santuario’s story is rooted in the history of Nuevomexicano Catholics. To recognize the Santuario as part of the patrimony of the entire United States, then, requires that we carefully consider the historical claims that many groups have made to the church, its miracles, and the land it sits on.

**Religious Ownership**

To help understand this church that attracts so many people, to make sense of its miraculousness, and to interpret its impact in New Mexico and beyond, it is helpful to use the metaphor of *religious ownership*. Like any metaphor, this one has its limits—the word “ownership” can often simply mean the legal right of possession. But here, despite the limitations of the metaphor, the words “religious ownership” are used as a term for the multifaceted and complex relationships, collaborations, and sometimes competitions between the groups and individuals who make use of religious places, rituals, narratives, and sense of belonging. While these features of religious places can intertwine in an infinite number of ways, in regards to the Santuario, this book focuses on two broad types of claims concerning religious ownership. First, we can speak of legal claims to church property, as well as to religious functions within that property. For instance, Bernardo
Abeyta was the original owner of the Santuario as a religious building on his property. But, it is less clear that he owned the rituals and movement of the pilgrims who had begun to come to his church to seek the holy, healing dirt adjacent to the Santa Cruz River. Later, in the twentieth century, when Abeyta’s descendants sold the Santuario, and it became the property of the Catholic Archdiocese of Santa Fe, the legal right to the land and building was transferred, but religious ownership is not so easily transacted. It took decades for the Catholic Church to exercise its authority of legal ownership, and even today, much of what happens at the Santuario remains insistently outside the control of Church oversight or even interpretation. The second broad type of claim at play with the metaphor of religious ownership has to do with belonging, meaning-making, and a sense of connection. Here, the claims made on a place like the Santuario emerge from the subjective experiences of individuals or groups that feel like they belong at the Santuario, and in turn, it belongs, in some way, to them. Like lovers who may speak of “our song,” religious sites, because of their emotional and spiritual connections between people and sacred figures, can become “our place,” the place where our lives were made more essential, where we were healed, where we experienced the ineffable. In short, then, one of the main arguments this book makes is that the Santuario de Chimayó is a place that, through its history, has been the object of many competing claims of religious ownership; these claims have been based in legal possession, community usage, and a sense of connection or personal belonging. A careful examination of these claims can tell us much about political or ecclesiastical regime change, racial and ethnic dynamics and conflicts especially between Hispanics and Anglos, tensions between institutional and popular forms of U.S. Catholicism, the impact of faith on healing and health, and the role of commerce at religious sites.
Indeed, the history of the Santuario and the people who have made various kinds of claims on it has long merited more scholarly attention. While the Santuario has been mentioned in hundreds—if not thousands—of feature stories in newspapers and magazines that play up its picturesque qualities, it has rarely been the focus of the historian, and until this volume, its history has never been the subject of an entire book. Before now, the most comprehensive coverage of its history was an article written by a Hungarian American anthropologist named Stephan F. de Borhegyi. First published in 1956 for the Spanish Colonial Arts Society in Santa Fe, Borhegyi’s article has been reprinted several times in booklet format to meet the needs of a public who wants to know more about the Santuario’s past.

This lack of attention is regrettable for a number of reasons, two of which I would like to mention. First, the history of the Catholic Church in the United States has often been overlooked or under told given its sheer numbers of adherents and obvious importance in the life of this country. This is especially the case when we consider American Catholics who trace the roots of their faith to the Spanish evangelization of what we now think of as Latin America and the Caribbean. Histories of sites like the Santuario that are, at least in part, the legacy of Spanish Catholicism need to be told so that we can better understand the complexity of the United States’ largest Christian body. This leads to the second reason why the Santuario’s history is so important: the largest racial ethnic minority population in the United States today (and for the foreseeable future) is Latinos and Latinas, people who trace their ancestry, recent or ancient, to the Spanish-speaking countries of the Americas. As with the history of the Catholic Church, the history of Latinos/as requires much more robust consideration. The religious history of Latinos/as is, of course, a significant piece of the story, and the history of the Santuario provides exciting insights into the religious experiences, beliefs, and heritage of one segment of the
Latino/a population of the United States. While both Catholics and Latinos/as deserve more historical attention, I would like to say this in the clearest possible terms: the history of the Santuario de Chimayó is not just important for Catholics and Hispanics; it is one of the United States’ most distinctive and visited religious sites and as such has the potential to educate all of us about essential national issues of religious identity, race, and the healing and peace we hope to eke out of holy ground. To begin to tell this story, I now turn to an introduction of the setting of the Santuario de Chimayó and a summary of some of the important events and periods in the famous church’s life.

The Place
One way to think about the location of the Santuario de Chimayó is to start at the place itself and zoom out. The Santuario lies along the bank of the Santa Cruz River and is surrounded with buildings, some of which are historic, others are new. Surprisingly, the church is adjacent to another chapel; this other church belonged historically to the Medina family but now, like the Santuario, belongs to the Archdiocese of Santa Fe and is known as the Santo Niño Chapel. Other old buildings in the immediate vicinity of the Santuario include an old house repurposed as a gift shop, the old El Potrero Trading Post, the ruins of Bernardo Abeyta’s house, and a few other older adobe structures. New buildings include a large visitors’ center, additional gift shops, and a number of ramadas near an outdoor gathering area. Just south of the Santuario, across route 98, there is a low hill with a cross at the summit. North of the Santuario, across the river, is a lovely
pasture that runs up to the foot of Tsi Mayoh Hill from which the town takes its name. Up the road near the intersection with highway 76 lies the “center” of Chimayó, the Plaza del Cerro, though Chimayó, like many northern New Mexican villages, is less of a cohesive unit than a line of settlements, each with its own chapel.

Stepping back, Chimayó is one of the cities or towns in what is now referred to as the Española Valley. Española, through which runs the Río Grande, is a relatively new city founded in the late 1800s around the railroad. The much older settlement, now nearly encircled by the city of Española, is what Diego de Vargas named in 1696 the “Villa Nueva de Santa Cruz de la Cañada.” For centuries the ancient Catholic Church at Santa Cruz was the center of Catholic administration in the region, and the Santuario, when it received the services of a priest, was served by Santa Cruz. “La Cañada” refers to the Santa Cruz River Valley, a relatively well-irrigated and verdant area of northern New Mexico. No doubt, the agricultural viability of La Cañada made it attractive to the Spaniards who returned to the region after their reconquest of the territory subsequent to the Pueblo Revolt (1680-1692), which had driven the colonizers back for a time to El Paso and out of Pueblo territory. Along with Santa Fe, and later Albuquerque, Santa Cruz de la Cañada was one of the major Spanish population centers of Spanish New Mexico. Chimayó, although in the orbit of Santa Cruz, lies at the eastern end of the valley before the terrain again rises toward the Sangre de Cristo range. According to the 2010 census, Española’s population was over 85% Hispanic or Latino/a, making it the city with the highest
percentage of Hispanics in northern New Mexico, a demographic trait common to La Cañada over all.\(^5\)

The entire region, stretching along the Río Grande from Santa Fe north to Colorado is often referred to as “Río Arriba,” or the upper part of the river. (“Río Abajo” correspondingly refers to the settlements south of Santa Fe down to Albuquerque and beyond.) The northern area, which was the original focus of Spanish settlement and Franciscan evangelization, is the heartland of several Pueblos including Ohkay Owingeh, Nambé, and Santa Clara. (In this book, upper-case “Pueblos” refers to the various groups of people who share this tribal identification and the lower-case “pueblos” refers to their towns and dwellings.) There is no mystery as to why both the Pueblos and the Spanish settled along the river and its tributaries; aerial views show the stark difference in the green irrigated landscapes of the agriculturally rich river valleys and the arid and semi-arid high desert and mountain peaks that surround them. Ohkay Owingeh, long known as San Juan Pueblo, just north of Española, is the principal pueblo of the Tewas and was Juan de Oñate’s first capital in the territory. Other nearby Tewa pueblos include San Ildefonso, Tesuque, Pojoaque, Santa Clara, and nearest to the Santuario, Nambé. Farther up the Río Grande are the related Tiwa-speaking Pueblos of Picuris and Taos. Santa Fe, Los Alamos, Española, and Taos are the largest non-Pueblo cities in the Río Arriba area. Residents of Chimayó often work in one of these cities and commute back and forth to their homes in the village.

The Action
A brief outline of important events and breakdown of time periods can help to orient us to the main characters and occurrences in the Santuario’s past. Histories of New Mexico are often broadly divided into eras based on the governing regime: pre-Hispanic times, the centuries of the
Spanish Empire (interrupted by the interregnum of the Pueblo Revolt), the Mexican period, and the contemporary era as part of the United States. The religious history of New Mexico likewise corresponds to New Mexico’s various governmental jurisdictions. Spanish conquest and Spanish evangelization went hand in hand. The Franciscan Order was the most important ecclesiastical presence in early New Mexico and left an indelible imprint on the Catholicism all throughout the northern missions of the Spanish Empire from Texas to California. In the years leading up to Mexican independence, the Franciscans had begun to decline and were eventually replaced, for the most part, with diocesan clergy, first under the Diocese of Durango and later the Diocese, then Archdiocese of Santa Fe. The Santuario’s history is inextricably intertwined with the political and ecclesiastical histories of New Mexico, and therefore, in some ways, this book also offers a history of New Mexico with particular emphasis on the Catholic Church.

With that said, the Santuario de Chimayó is hardly one of the oldest churches in New Mexico. It was built between the years of 1813 and 1816 in what would soon be acknowledged as the final years of the Spanish Empire in Mexico. Nonetheless, at the time of its construction, the Santuario lay almost at the very northern end of a vast political, religious, and economic network. It is no coincidence that the miraculous crucifix of the Santuario is named for a similar crucifix in distant Guatemala for north/south trade routes united the Empire up and down the continent. Northern New Mexico was distant from the metropolitan centers of the Empire, but it is not quite correct to think of the region as isolated. Business people and clergy members alike operated within international organizational structures and markets.

But the writing was on the wall for the Spanish, throughout the Americas, as one-by-one, Latin American countries gained their independence. Mexico’s own successful bid for self-rule in 1821 did not have an immediate effect on Bernardo Abeyta’s Santuario, though new measures
to centralize authority in Mexico did incite a spate of rebellions in northern New Mexico to maintain the relative autonomy the region was accustomed to, including one in 1837 that arose in Chimayó itself. One important feature of the sometimes rebellious autonomy of the region was the famous lay order that oversaw Catholic life in many New Mexican villages, the Fraternidad Piadosa de Nuestro Padre Jesús Nazareno, popularly known as the Penitentes. Abeyta himself was a leader in the Brotherhood, and it is more than likely that the Santuario was a bastion of this independent-minded religious confraternity. In fact, the years under Mexican rule were a time of great vitality for the lay leadership of the Penitentes as other forms of oversight, in terms of both church and state, lacked continuity and did not always extend into more rural areas.

For the most part, however, religious practices in the Mexican period (1821-1847) in the Río Arriba region were in continuity with those of the latter years of the Spanish Empire. This cannot be said for the next big change in government, when in 1847, during the Mexican American War, U.S. forces swept in and seized power in a mostly bloodless takeover. Not long afterward, the Vatican transferred the Catholic churches of New Mexico from the Diocese of Durango, Mexico, to a newly formed ecclesiastical administrative unit in the new U.S. Southwest. This unit would soon become its own diocese (1853) and then archdiocese (1875) under the decisive guidance of Jean Baptiste Lamy, a French-born priest, whose administration was much more “hands-on” than what New Mexican Catholics were accustomed to. The Santuario is relatively unmentioned in the historical record during the territorial period, which is to say, the decades after the U.S. takeover but before New Mexico attained statehood in 1912. It persisted as it had for many years as a mission outpost of the Santa Cruz de la Cañada parish, and it also continued to receive health-seeking pilgrims from the surrounding villages and pueblos. Abeyta died in 1856, but the Santuario stayed in the family, now owned by one of his daughters,
Carmen Chávez. Throughout the territorial period, the church belonged to the Chávez family, who made it available to pilgrims as well as to local clergy for celebration of Mass and other religious services.

The railroad spread around northern New Mexico in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and the economics of village life began to change as more and more people began to seek work away from home. Chimayó’s local employments such as agriculture and weaving waned even as the village’s population thinned. Along with the passing of the years, these changes took their toll on the Santuario. Even as it became more difficult economically to maintain the art and physical structure of the church, greater numbers of Anglo settlers were making their way to the Southwest. In 1929, on the eve of the Great Depression, the Chávez family arrived at the need to sell the Santuario. The newly formed Spanish Colonial Arts Society, a group of Anglo artists and upper class Nuevomexicanos dedicated to the preservation of New Mexico’s folk arts, arranged to purchase the Santuario and immediately transferred the deed to the Archdiocese of Santa Fe. Since the sale in 1929, Abeyta’s chapel has belonged to the Catholic Church, but it would be some decades until the Church placed a full-time priest at the Santuario. In the interim, it remained a much visited focus of popular devotions and unorganized, small-scale pilgrimages.

It was not until the postwar years of the twentieth century that the massive Holy Week pilgrimage first began. Its genesis was with a group of Nuevomexicano World War II veterans who had survived the Bataan Death March. In the 1950s, the Santuario also received its first permanently assigned priest in its history, a Catalan named Casimiro Roca. Roca would go on to serve the Santuario and other nearby parishes for most of the rest of his career. Under his tenure, the Santuario’s appeal to both pilgrims and tourists grew exponentially, making Chimayó
one of the largest pilgrimage destinations in North America. Rising devotion to the Santo Niño and recognition of the holy dirt is part of the story; the other part has to do with New Mexico’s growing importance in terms of tourism as well as alternative healing and healthcare.

* The contemporary state of the Santuario is prosperous and promising, if not totally free from conflict. With half a million visitors a year, the current clergy have felt the need to greatly expand the infrastructure around the Santuario to serve the needs of the crowds. To fund these projects, the presence of gift shops at the historic church is more notable than in the past. Critics find that these new levels of commercialization at the shrine detract from the church’s peaceful and rustic ambience as well as its purported religious mission. Supporters answer that continued growth is probable and that administrators must be pragmatic and even have a vision for new development to accommodate still higher numbers of pilgrims and other visitors.

As a history of the Santuario, this book cannot pretend to make predictions for the future other than to note simply that the Santuario has long existed as a place of healing and peace in a context of competing claims not only on its sacred precincts but on the entire region. The objective of this book is to tell this story and to reflect on these competing claims of ownership and belonging. As will become clear, the Santuario—as a key part of New Mexican history and experience—is a useful case through which to understand developments in the contemporary U.S. Catholic Church as well as current demographic trends in the United States. Contestations over space, meaning, religious devotion, and ethnic identity markers serve as fruitful points of departure in further studies of how Hispanics and Hispanic religiosity are integral parts of the national religious experience. Despite these very real contestations and occasional conflicts, the Santuario remains a generous and welcoming gathering place for many different varieties of
people. Perhaps the best word for the Santuario’s future is a familiar *dicho*, or saying, common in Chimayó: “*El pan partido, Dios lo aumenta.* God multiplies bread that is shared.”6