

# El Cordero de Dios

*Robert A. Rees*

Driving from Hollister to Santa Cruz late morning, I  
stop at San Juan Bautista to grab a sandwich.  
All the signs point toward the Mission, so I keep driving.  
Brown-skinned Mexican kids swirl around the plaza  
and in and out of the Mission corridors. In the gift shop  
I buy a \$2 candle to carry to the chapel. The pious saleswoman  
says it will burn for two and a half days.  
By the bank of candles, a small boy kneels, crosses himself  
quickly, and then runs on to play tag with his friends.

I light my candle. Not a very Mormon thing, but I want to  
add mine to the small flames delaying darkness. More kids  
come in, wander idly around. One girl dips her hand  
in the large baptismal bowl, crosses herself,  
and goes out the side door into enormous sunlight.

When the church empties I kneel and pray—for  
these Catholics and their dead saints, for the crippled woman  
begging coins by the Mission entrance, for the missionaries and  
General Authorities, and all those in trouble and danger.

The swish of a priest's robe over worn terracotta tiles  
opens my eyes—across the dark chapel six reredos  
with backlit statues of saints, among them,  
St. John the Baptist, a shepherd standing over

the Lamb of God—who takes away the sins of the world,  
no matter how thick and dark, how gnarled and pocked.  
I kneel again, asking forgiveness for dark deeds, and darker thoughts.

Later in the garden, everything reminds me of El Cordero de Dios—  
the twisted olive trees his sorrows, these dark red roses his blood,  
a multitude of bright yellow day lilies his rising. At the garden's center  
a gigantic prickly pear, its heart-shaped pads teeming  
with melon-colored, trumpet-shaped flowers  
sounding the world's abundant glory.

Outside in the plaza the kids still chase one another,  
their indifferent teachers gossiping in small clusters.  
Inside, my candle burns on.