

EUROPE | FEMALE FACTOR

A Spanish Brotherhood Includes Women in Holy Week Procession

By RAPHAEL MINDER APRIL 20, 2011

SEVILLE — Ana María Ruiz Copete, a sister in the oldest religious brotherhood of Seville, has been anticipating this Easter celebration for 30 years.

On Friday, the Brotherhood of Silence will include for the first time Ms. Ruiz Copete and 25 other women in one of the traditional processions of hooded penitents that have put the Andalusian capital at the center stage of Catholic celebrations of the Holy Week. Over the course of the week, 60 brotherhoods follow different routes across Seville, holding giant candles and walking alongside richly decorated floats, which are lifted by teams of strong men and on which wooden religious sculptures are placed.

“When I joined this brotherhood 30 years ago, the only reason that some women were allowed in and actually required was to sew tunics for the penitents, so this is really going to feel like a very special day for me,” Ms. Ruiz Copete said.

While most Seville brotherhoods gave women access to the most spectacular event in their religious year as long as 26 years ago, the Brotherhood of Silence, which has about 3,000 members, was one of three that refused to change its rules until last February, when Seville’s archbishop, Juan José Asenjo Pelegrina, issued a decree to put an end to gender-based discrimination.

The brotherhoods, some of which, like the Brotherhood of Silence, date from the 14th century, exist all over Spain. Besides their religious dimension they also act as charitable organizations that provide services for the destitute and other

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renown in Seville and other parts of Andalusia because of their large and solemn Holy Week processions.

Among the first Seville brotherhoods to include women in its procession was Los Javieres. It is also breaking ranks this year by having for the first time a woman at its helm, Maruja Vilches, albeit as a replacement for an ailing senior brother.

Ms. Vilches will hand back the leadership once the senior brother recovers from illness. But she is expected to stand for election when his mandate comes to an end in 2013, in what would be another milestone in her lifelong crusade to promote the role of women within brotherhoods.

As a girl, her father had barred her from brotherhood involvement, while encouraging her brother to join one. “He felt it was better to keep me at home and sheltered from others,” she said.

Ms. Vilches eventually joined Los Javieres, after meeting one of its founders and her future husband, José Jesús Márquez Guerra. Encouraged by him, she was then among five women who secretly took part in a procession in 1984 — a year before Los Javieres officially allowed women to join.

“It felt a bit like a commando operation,” she said, “but all we wanted to prove is that the presence of women would not disrupt proceedings — which we did since nobody guessed that we had taken part until we told them much later.”

Ms. Vilches and Ms. Ruiz Copete share the desire to raise women’s profile within Seville’s traditional network of brotherhoods.

But the two differ in their vision of what role women should attain within the Catholic Church.

Ms. Ruiz Copete hopes to see women climb the ranks of the Church and would welcome eventually the election of a female pope.

Ms. Vilches, on the other hand, insisted that she would never challenge the Vatican and described as “completely inappropriate” the idea of having women serve as Catholic priests. “We remain obedient and have absolutely no intention in intervening in what our pope orders,” she added.

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Even so, changes in Seville are also prompting some of the male faithful to yearn for greater flexibility from the Vatican. Jesús Gútiérrez Gómez, the ailing senior brother of Los Javieres, said that “Seville is giving a small example in terms of promoting women, but major changes often come from such small beginnings.” He added: “I think the church should make more room for women, even if it is really not for me to decide how much.” More broadly, he suggested, “the church needs to consider why, despite doing such a huge amount of charity work, it is generating so much resentment and even sometimes hatred.”

Following the archbishop’s decree, Ms. Ruiz Copete said that she was confident that any hostility toward women within the most conservative brotherhoods had come to an end.

Corroborating that view, Luis Miguel Onieva, the senior brother in another congregation, the Brotherhood of the Sacred Burial, said that he would have voted against allowing women to join his procession for the first time this year but “the archbishop’s decree changes everything and we have enough humility to recognize our mistake, since we are here to follow the orders and the guidance of our church.”

Mr. Onieva said that his reluctance to allow women in his brotherhood’s procession was not based on discrimination but “on a profound respect for maintaining our traditions.” He added: “There was no need to change things since there was absolutely no dispute within our brotherhood, but this has been completely blown out of proportion by outsiders. Had this been the other way round, with a sisterhood in this city that had not allowed men, I’m sure that nobody would have kicked up a fuss and men would simply have joined other brotherhoods.”

As to her own choice of brotherhood, Ms. Ruiz Copete, who is 50, said that she had felt from an early age inspired by the Brotherhood of Silence, whatever its stance toward women and despite the allegiance of her family to another, more lenient brotherhood. Offering a less spiritual comparison to explain her calling, she said that it was “a bit like wanting to root for a football team when your family and everybody else tells you to support another.”

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on Friday: “I could never understand why my sister, being so tolerant and liberal, would want to be in the kind of brotherhood where some people pretended that she did not even exist.”

More tolerance toward women has also helped bolster the membership of brotherhoods like Los Javieres, which now is about 40 percent women.

“I chose them because they had decided to allow women in their procession and because they impose silence,” said Fatima Delgado, who joined 20 years ago.

In fact, there are several differences in the rules that brotherhoods set for the Holy Week procession. The strictest ones, for instance, impose a minimum age to ensure that their penitents are disciplined enough to maintain complete silence, as well as keep staring straight ahead, as they march for as long as 14 hours to the sound of drums and trumpets. Others, however, allow their procession to turn much more into a gathering of family and friends, with participants chattering as they escort their holy images and statues around Seville.

On Tuesday, however, the procession plans of Los Javieres and several other brotherhoods were ruined by intermittent downpours that added to the intense and emotional atmosphere of the day. After a long wait, Ms. Vilches told her penitents to get ready to march out of their church, triggering wild applause. Twenty minutes later, she was back at the altar to cancel the procession because the rain had returned — this time prompting tearful embraces among disillusioned brothers.

“However hard we pray to make our wishes come true, it is always God who ends up deciding,” she said.

Correction: April 23, 2011

Because of an editing error, a picture caption on Thursday about the participation of women in Easter week processions by religious brotherhoods in Seville, Spain, that had once practiced gender-based discrimination misidentified the brotherhood of the women shown. It is Los Javieres, one of the first to end such discrimination, not the Brotherhood of Silence, one of the last to do so.

A version of this article appears in print on April 21, 2011, in The International Herald Tribune.

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