

Santa Muerte: The Skeleton Saint's Deadly American Debut

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Santa Muerte, the skeleton saint, recently made her shocking debut in the American public consciousness via the news of ritual human sacrifice. An impoverished family of her devotees in northern Mexico killed three acquaintances and offered their blood to the saint of death. Brief statements made to the press by the arrested devotees point toward blood sacrifice made to Saint Death in exchange for blessings of health and wealth. Moreover, the family of devotees apparently believed one of the victims, a 55-year-old woman, to be a witch. Self-appointed cult leaders in Mexico have been quick to condemn the ritual murders as abhorrent and aberrant. In contrast, members of the Catholic hierarchy in Mexico have used the incident to reiterate their blanket condemnation of the cult as satanic.

Having studied the cult of Saint Death on both sides of the border for the past three years, I feel compelled to respond to this abominable act perpetrated in the name of the Bony Lady, one of her common monikers.

First, most devotees, echoing the statements made by unofficial cult leaders, reject human sacrifice as a satanic aberration of ritual veneration of the Mexican folk saint. Sacrificial offerings such as food, drink, flowers and votive candles are a routine part of the devotion. As a parched skeleton, Santa Muerte is particularly fond of liquid offerings, such as water and tequila, but definitely not human blood. The murderous family of devotees took the logic of ritual sacrifice to a hideous extreme. As is the case in all Latin American folk religion, whether Christian or not, devotees believe the scope of the requested miracle or blessing is related to the degree of sacrifice made to the deity, saint or spirit. The destitute family of popsicle vendors, garbage pickers and alleged prostitutes must have believed that the ultimate ritual sacrifice, human blood, would prompt Santa Muerte to deliver untold blessings of health and wealth. In effect, this is the same logic, taken to a gruesome extreme, as the health and wealth gospel, which is so popular here in the U.S. and throughout the globe.

In seeking health and wealth from Saint Death, the murderous devotees mirror the great majority of Santa Muertistas who light purple and gold votive candles as part of their petitions for deliverance from sickness and poverty. Symbolizing health, the purple Santa Muerte candle is lit by tens of thousands of believers every day who seek to activate the curative powers of the saint. In all the time I spent at the famous shrine of Enriqueta Romero in Mexico City, I was struck by the great number of believers either petitioning the life-size effigy of the Bony Lady for health-related miracles or thanking her for ones already granted. In a similar vein, a drop in remittances from the U.S. and a tourist industry devastated by the ongoing drug wars, mean that the gold candle of abundance and prosperity has quickly become one of the top sellers of the colored candles, which are the cult's paramount ritual object. Kristina, originally from the state of Zacatecas, lights a gold candle at her home in Richmond, Va., so that she and her husband do well in their jobs as waitress and plumber.

While Kristina is far more representative of devotees of Saint Death than the twisted family of believers, there are a few aspects of the cult that do lend themselves to such aberrant extremes. As a folk saint, Santa Muerte isn't subject to Christian or any other type of codified morality so believers are free to make requests of her that violate the precepts of Catholicism and most organized religion in Mexico and the U.S. Indeed her non-judgmental attitude is one of her great appeals. "Santa Muerte doesn't discriminate" is practically a mantra uttered by devotees in explaining their attraction to the saint of death. If for example a cartel member asks the Grim Reapress to swing her scythe at a rival narco, there is neither fixed doctrine nor an official clergy to prevent and condemn such petitions of harm to others.

And part of the reason for the lack of an official priesthood is the Mexican government's ban on Santa Muerte churches since 2005, the year the first temple founded in the country had its legal status revoked. The National Action Party (PAN), which has governed Mexico since 2000 and is a close ally of the Catholic Church, not only has outlawed the founding of Santa Muerte temples but also has destroyed altars and shrines. In fact it was the Mexican army's bulldozing of some 40 shrines on the U.S.-Mexico border in early 2009 that prompted me to write a book on the skeleton saint.

Without access to the rights and privileges of a legally recognized religious group, the mushrooming devotion to Santa Muerte is expressed informally and semi-clandestinely at the margins of Mexican society. It is in this legally and religiously marginalized context that a very small minority of fanatical devotees commit heinous crimes in the name of Saint Death.