Introduction: Blue Candle

*Insight and Concentration*

**BECKONED BY THE BONY LADY,**
**AKA SAINT DEATH**

Some people become devotees on their own initiative, actively seeking out Santa Muerte upon the recommendation of friends or family members. Others receive an unexpected call or visit from the Skinny Lady (*la Flaquita*, one of her many nicknames) in which she offers to solve their problems. Such was my own path to the skeleton saint, a surprise visit in the spring of 2009. For several years I had been doing research on the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico’s patron saint. I had decided to study her as I neared completion of my second book. As a specialist in the religions of Latin America, I wanted to tackle a monumental topic for my next book project. As empress of all the Americas and queen of Mexico, the mestiza Virgin towers over the region’s religious landscape. Of course fellow researchers and devotees had already written many books and articles on her, but I was sure there was still much to say about the world’s most important avatar of the Virgin Mary. But as the semesters passed, first at the University of Houston and then at Virginia Commonwealth University, my enthusiasm for the project waned. The kind of passion that had driven my previous research and writing just wasn’t there, and I wasn’t sure why.

It was in this context of research malaise in the early spring of 2009 that the Bony Lady (*la Huesuda*, another common nickname)
appeared on my laptop and summoned me to contemplate her. More specifically, it was the news of a military assault against her on the U.S.-Mexican border that ultimately led me to replace Guadalupe with a figure who at first glance seemed to be her antithesis, a sort of anti-Virgin. In late March the Mexican army demolished some forty Santa Muerte shrines on the Mexican border with California and Texas, mostly on the outskirts of Tijuana and Nuevo Laredo. Army bulldozers had leveled the very same roadside altars that we had passed numerous times on our long road trips from Houston to Morelia, state capital of Michoacán and my wife’s hometown. I started making the eighteen-hour drive in 2006 and noticed that on each subsequent trip the number of makeshift roadside altars on the main highway linking Nuevo Laredo and Monterrey had multiplied. The crude concrete shrines, often obscured by the SUVs and pickups of the devotees, were our signpost on the return trip, letting us know that the Texas border was just a half an hour or so away. What on earth had Saint Death done, I wondered, to deserve such an aggressive desecration of her holy sites at the hands of the Mexican government?

As images of her shrines reduced to rubble flickered across my computer screen, I had an epiphany. My flagging passion for research on Guadalupe would be replaced by a quest to understand why the Mexican government had declared Santa Muerte a virtual enemy of the state. More broadly, I would seek to discover why in less than a decade devotion to her had grown so much that her popularity now eclipses every other saint in Mexico except Saint Jude. Never one to balk at an epiphany, I turned my back on the Virgin and decided to stare Saint Death straight in the face. What follows is my attempt to explain why devotion to Santa Muerte has transformed from an occult practice, unknown to most Mexicans, to a burgeoning public cult that counts millions of devotees in Mexico and the United States among its followers.
DEATH ENCOUNTERED

Some readers will have come across the White Girl (*la Niña Blanca*, another popular sobriquet) on trips to Mexico, while others will have encountered her as decals on cars and trucks or as votive candles in supermarkets in Los Angeles, Houston, New York, and other cities with large Mexican immigrant communities. But most, I suspect, are meeting the Godmother (*la Madrina*, also a common moniker) for the first time. I ask those already familiar with her to
bear with me as I briefly introduce her to who have not encountered Saint Death before.

As her name would indicate, Santa Muerte is a Mexican folk saint who personifies death. Whether as a plaster statue or on a votive candle, gold medallion, or prayer card she is most often depicted as a female Grim Reaper, wielding the same scythe and wearing a shroud similar to her male counterpart. Unlike official saints, who have been canonized by the Catholic Church, folk saints are spirits of the dead considered holy for their miracle-working powers. In Mexico and Latin America in general such folk saints as Niño Fidencio, Jesús Malverde, Maximon, and San La Muerte (the Argentine counterpart of Santa Muerte) command widespread devotion and are often sought out more than the official saints.

The great majority of folk saints, unlike the official ones, were born and died on Latin American soil. Niño Fidencio, for example, was a curandero (folk healer) in early twentieth-century Mexico, while Pedro Batista led a religious commune in the backlands of Brazil during the same period. Thus folk saints are united to their devotees by nationality and often by both locality and social class. A Mexico City street vendor explained the appeal of Santa Muerte to her, saying, “She understands us because she is a battle-ax [cabrona] like us.” In contrast, Mexicans would never refer to the Virgin of Guadalupe as a cabrona, which is also often used to mean “bitch.” Where the Skinny Lady differs from other folk saints, including the skeleton saints of Argentina (San La Muerte) and Guatemala (Rey Pascual), is that for most devotees she is the personification of death itself and not of a deceased human being.

The very name Santa Muerte says much about her identity. La muerte means death in Spanish and is a feminine noun (denoted by the feminine article “la”) as it is in all Romance languages. A few casual observers of the White Girl have erroneously attributed her female identity to the feminine gender of the word “la muerte” in
Spanish. However, the fact that both the Guatemalan and Argentine saints of death are male figures shows there must be other explanations for the saint’s female identity. In any case, she and the Argentine San La Muerte are the only saints in the Americas that actually include the word “death” in their names. For devotees and nonbelievers alike, it is obvious that the hollow stare of the skeleton saint is the gaze of death.

“Santa,” the first part of her name, is also revealing. It is the feminine version of “santo,” which can be translated as “saint” or “holy,” depending on the usage. For example, Espíritu Santo is translated as Holy Spirit, while Santa Bárbara becomes Saint Barbara. While many bloggers refer to the White Sister (la Hermana Blanca, yet another popular nickname) as Holy Death in English, I think Saint Death is a more accurate translation, which better reveals her identity as a folk saint. Santa Muerte is first and foremost an unofficial saint who heals, protects, and delivers devotees to their destinations in the afterlife. The word “holy” expresses her sacredness but lacks the personification implied by the term “saint.” Having said this, there is a variant of her name, Santísima Muerte, which is best translated as “Most Holy Death.” The difference here is the Spanish superlative suffix “-isima.” Devotees tend to call her “Santísima Muerte” in their rituals such as the Santa Muerte rosary. Thus her name, Santa Muerte, and her myriad nicknames neatly reveal her identity as a female folk saint who personifies death. Readers who speak Spanish will know that the “San” (an abbreviation of the masculine “santo”) in San La Muerte denotes the male identity of the Argentine saint.

No introduction to Saint Death would be complete without brief consideration of one of her most unique characteristics—her gender. While folk saints abound in the Americas, and other supernatural skeletons work miracles in Guatemala and Argentina, Santa Muerte stands alone as the sole female saint of death from Chile to Canada. Her asexual skeletal form contains no hint of femaleness. Rather, it is
her attire and, to a lesser extent, her hair that mark the saint as female. Devotees and manufacturers of mass-produced images of the Bony Lady usually dress her as a nun, the Virgin, a bride, or a queen. Red and black medieval tunics, white bridal gowns, and flowing bright colored satin robes normally cover her skeletal body, leaving only her bony hands, feet, and face exposed.

Like her male counterparts, San La Muerte and Rey Pascual, the Godmother typically sports a bald skull. However, following the lead of the great devotional pioneer Enriqueta Romero (affectionately known as Doña Queta), many devotees adorn their statuettes with brown and black wigs. In fact, one enterprising Santa Muertista runs a thriving business in Mexico City where devotees bring their statuettes to be dressed and coiffed so they look like the Pretty Girl (la Niña Bonita, yet another sobriquet). But more than just a Pretty Girl, Santa Muerte is most importantly the Powerful Lady (la Dama Poderosa) whose miracle-working skills make her the most potent of Mexican folk saints and a rival of the national patroness, Guadalupe.

DEATH'S DEVOTEES

It is precisely her reputation for being a prompt and efficacious miracle worker that has propelled the meteoric growth of her cult since 2001. A brief profile of the devotees of Saint Death will shed light on her tremendous popularity. Since her cult is generally informal and unorganized and only became public ten years ago, it is impossible to know exactly how many Mexicans and Mexican and Central American immigrants in the United States are among her devotees. The other great devotional pioneer, “Father” David Romo, founder of the first Santa Muerte church, in Mexico City, told me and members of the Mexican press, in separate interviews, that some five million Mexicans venerate the Angel of Death. When I questioned him about how he arrived at such a figure, he explained that he is in contact with believers throughout both Mexico and the
United States who give him estimates of the size of the cult in their cities, towns, and regions.

That approximately 5 percent of the Mexican population of 100 million would be devotees of Saint Death doesn’t seem far-fetched in light of other evidence of her popularity. Sales of her paraphernalia (votive candles, figurines, prayer cards, etc.) at the thousands of shops (hierberias and tiendas esotéricas) and market stalls that sell religious articles, magic potions and powders, and “medicinal herbs” across Mexico and in many larger cities in the United States dwarf those of other saints. One shopkeeper after another told me that for the past five years or so clients have been buying more Saint Death products than anything else, including San Judas Tadeo (Saint Jude), one of the country’s most popular saints. In Morelia, Guillermína, whose father owns three esoterica shops in town, stated that since 2004 the Skinny Lady has accounted for approximately half of the total sales at their three stores. She occupied much more shelf and floor space than any other saint at each of the dozens of shops and market stalls I visited in the summers of 2009 and 2010. And the street vendors who sell a colorful array of goods to motorists stuck in traffic waiting to cross the border into the United States offer far more figurines of Santa Muerte than any other saint, even Guadalupe. Finally, the monthly worship service, called the “rosary,” at Doña Queta’s landmark shrine in the rough-and-tumble Mexico City barrio of Tepito, attracts several thousand faithful.

For the past five years the Bony Lady has been accompanying her devotees in their crossings into the United States and has established herself along the two-thousand-mile-long border and in cities with Mexican immigrant communities. Unsurprisingly, it is border towns such as El Paso, Brownsville, and Laredo where evidence of her cult is strongest. Her Grim Reapress image, in the form of black and white decals, rides on the back windows (often darkly tinted) of countless pickups and SUVs, announcing both the occupants’ devotion and
her growing presence. At the same type of religious paraphernalia shops as those found in Mexico, merchants along the gritty border do a brisk business selling Santa Muerte incense, lotions, and, above all, votive candles. Almost all of the TV news coverage of her rapidly increasing cult in this country has been provided by local stations in these border cities. As one might imagine, these news reports tend to be sensationalistic, playing up Saint Death’s alleged ties to drug trafficking, murder, and even human sacrifice.

North of the border area the Godmother hears the prayers and petitions of Mexican and (to a lesser extent) Central American immigrants who ask her for the favor of getting ahead in their new land. Los Angeles, Houston, Phoenix, and New York, with their large Mexican and Central American communities, are obvious places to find the Powerful Lady protecting her faithful. Home to the largest Mexican immigrant population in the country, Los Angeles is the American Mecca of the cult of the skeleton saint. In addition to at least two religious-article stores bearing her name (Botanica Santa Muerte and Botanica De La Santa Muerte), the City of Angels offers devotees two temples where they can thank the Angel of Death for miracles granted or ask her for the favors of health, wealth, and love. Casa de Oracion de la Santisma Muerte (Most Holy Death House of Prayer) and Templo Santa Muerte (Temple Saint Death) stand alone as the only two temples dedicated to her cult in the country. The latter offers “masses,” weddings, baptisms, and rosary and healing services. The gothic-inspired Templo Santa Muerte website (http://templosantamuerte.com) broadcasts devotional music and some of the masses.

Houston, where I lived for eleven years, doesn’t have any public houses of worship yet, but the White Sister appears on votive candles and packages of incense, among other products, on hundreds of shelves at local supermarkets and religious-article shops. In June of 2009, as I was exiting the parking lot of Fiesta (a large local supermarket chain catering to Latinos, especially Mexicans) in central
Houston, I spotted a four-feet-tall white statue of the saint riding in the bed of a late-model Ford pickup. The truck’s tinted rear window also sported a decal of Most Holy Death. Devotees in the Bayou City can choose from at least three religious-article shops that bear Santa Muerte’s name.

Beyond these big cities, devotees and the curious can even find the skeleton saint in towns with relatively small Mexican immigrant communities. When I got the call to write this book I was sure that I wouldn’t be able to find her in my new hometown of Richmond, Virginia. Unlike Houston and Los Angeles, where Latinos make up half the population, the capital of Virginia can’t even claim a population of 10 percent. Nonetheless, to my great surprise I found both votive candles and even statuettes of the Pretty Girl in two mini-marts in a part of town that is not predominantly Latino. The Salvadoran clerk at the grocery store catering to her paisanos (compatriots) eyed me suspiciously (probably thinking of the DEA, ICE, or FBI) when I asked her about sales of Santa Muerte votive candles and statuettes, but she nevertheless revealed that the former sell well, much better than the more expensive plastic figurines. Across the street at Bodega Latina, which caters more to Mexicans, the affable young clerk from Guadalajara didn’t seem to take me for an agent of the law and enthusiastically reported that the votive candles sell very well and that she sees more signs of devotion to Saint Death in Richmond than in Guadalajara. My wife, who was with me at the time, and I both suspected that she hadn’t been back to Mexico for a while. In any case, over the past five years, the Skinny Lady has accompanied tens of thousands of her devoted followers across the border and into the big cities and smaller towns of this country, wherever they try to make a new life for themselves.

Santa Muerte has devoted followers from all walks of life. High school students, middle-class housewives, taxi drivers, drug traffickers, politicians, musicians, doctors, and lawyers all are among the ranks of
the faithful. Rodrigo is a successful twentysomething lawyer whom I met at Doña Queta’s famous shrine in Tepito. He was there with a white candle in hand to give thanks to the White Girl for freeing him from kidnappers. Also at Doña Queta’s was Claudia, a thirty-three-year-old accountant, who became a believer in the saint’s miraculous powers on the operating table. Before an operation for a lung infection, Claudia’s surgeon gave her a statuette of the Powerful Lady and suggested that Claudia invoke her healing powers. Like so many others who come to the Tepito shrine, Claudia was there to give thanks to Santa Muerte for having been cured of an illness.

Because of her association with organized crime, especially drug trafficking and kidnapping, and condemnation by both Catholic and Protestant churches, more affluent believers tend to keep their devotion to the saint of death private. Home altars are where well-heeled devotees prefer performing the rituals that summon the saint to act on their behalf. According to Mexican novelist and intellectual Homero Aridjis, the Angel of Death had an ample following among high-ranking politicians, movie stars, drug lords, and even among higher-ups in the Catholic Church in the 1990s, before her cult went public. Aridjis includes a fictionalized account of attending a bacchanalian birthday bash in 2000 with such devotees in his recent novel La Santa Muerte. Niurka Marcos’s 2004 wedding lends some credence to Aridjis’s claims. The Cuban-born Mexican TV star had David Romo, founder of the first Santa Muerte church, perform her nuptials at an exclusive hacienda outside of Mexico City.¹

Still, in a country whose citizens have an average educational level of eighth grade, the majority of devotees are taxi drivers, prostitutes, street vendors, housewives, and criminals drawn from Mexico’s vast urban working class. Typical of most devotees is the godmother of the cult of Saint Death, Doña Queta. Before her historic act of displaying a life-size statue of the Grim Reaper in front of her home on All Saints
INTRODUCTION: BLUE CANDLE

Day in 2001, Enriqueta Romero supplemented the family income by selling quesadillas to neighbors and passersby. Often wearing the blue-and-white checkered apron that is the quasi-uniform of working-class women in Mexico, Doña Queta has no more than an elementary school education. Her colorful blue-collar Spanish, liberally peppered with vulgarities, reflects the tough barrio, Mexico City’s infamous Tepito, where drug gangs, kidnappers, prostitutes, and contrabandistas rule the streets. Doña Queta started off her Santa Muerte rosary ceremony in August 2009 with a warning to the faithful to return home quickly right after the end of the ritual lest they be accosted by “all the fucking thieves and thugs around.” One of her seven sons did time in prison, and Doña Queta attributes his release to the divine intervention of her Beautiful Girl (la Niña Hermosa).

Nineteen-year-old Raquel, an unemployed high school dropout from the gritty outskirts of Mexico City, is another typical devotee. Looking anorexically thin when I interviewed her at Doña Queta’s shrine, Raquel said she had became a devotee after the Powerful Lady appeared in the midst of a gang fight and pulled Raquel back a few steps at the very moment a switchblade was about to be thrust into her stomach. Raquel, like so many other believers, was at the famous Tepito shrine that day with a gold Santa Muerte votive candle. Before talking to me about her devotion she placed the lighted candle at the base of the altar, alongside scores of others, and asked the life-size skeleton saint standing behind the protective glass for a miracle of employment.

By all accounts, Raquel fits the normal profile of devotees in terms of sex and age. Unlike the United States, Mexico, with an average age of twenty-four, is a country of young people. The godparents of the cult, Doña Queta and David Romo, confirm that the majority of believers are teens or in their twenties and thirties. Likewise, both said they see more women and girls at their shrines than males. Father Romo stated that more than two-thirds of those who attend weekly services at his church are female. During the many days that I
hung out at Doña Queta’s shrine interviewing devotees, I also noticed that about twice as many girls and women came to see the regally dressed saint.

Doña Queta’s monthly rosary services, however, are practically all-male affairs. No more than 20 percent of devotees at the service in August 2009 were female. The most likely explanation for the dearth of women and girls is Tepito’s notoriety as the Mexican capital’s most crime-ridden barrio. Doña Queta’s words of warning at the beginning of the service only confirmed such fears. Security concerns during the summer of 2009 compelled the cult’s godmother to change the late-night monthly services to late afternoon. This way, devotees can make it out of the dangerous barrio before nightfall, thus avoiding nocturnal assailants.

DEATH OF CRIME AND PUNISHMENT
Not so paradoxically, Santa Muerte has a special appeal to assailants and others who live on the margins of Mexican and American law. After all, the very origins of the public cult are tied to crime. Doña Queta’s life-size effigy of the saint, which is the object of devotion of tens of thousand of chilangos (a slang term for residents of Mexico City) was a gift to her from one of her sons to thank the Powerful Lady for his speedy release from prison. Along with the infirm and pregnant women, “those in prison” are the object of special collective prayers at the monthly rosary service.

In Mexican, Texan, and Californian penitentiaries, the cult of the Bony Lady is so widespread that in many she is the leading object of devotion, surpassing Guadalupe and even Saint Jude, the patron saint of lost causes. My nephew Roberto has been working as a guard at the maximum security state prison in Morelia for the past three years. Over a couple of beers in June 2009, Roberto not only detailed the devotion to Saint Death among prisoners but also painted a picture of an entire penal system involved in her veneration. Of the roughly 150 cells in the
prison, Roberto estimated that in approximately forty inmates had erected makeshift altars to the Powerful Lady whom they trusted could free them sooner rather than later. Lines of cocaine, prison moonshine (known as turbo), cigarettes, and marijuana joints figure among the common offerings at her altars. Offerings are also inked onto inmates’ backs, chests, and arms by fellow prisoners who charge between four and thirty dollars per tattoo. Tattoos of the Angel of Death, according to Roberto, are more popular than ones of any other saint.

In addition to those who are there to serve time, many guards, social workers, and even attorneys belong to the cult of Santa Muerte. Roberto said that ten of his forty-eight fellow guards are devotees and that it is not uncommon to see lawyers and social workers at the prison sporting gold medallions of the saint on their chests. In such a dangerous workplace, full of drugs and prison shanks, one can imagine the appeal of supernatural protection offered by the Powerful Lady. In less than a decade she has become the patron saint of the Mexican penal system and is also increasingly popular in American prisons, especially in the Southwest and California.

Many of those yet to be caught for their crimes look to the Skinny Lady for supernatural protection from their enemies. The Santa Muerte votive candle that exclaims “Law, stay away!” (usually printed bilingually in Spanish and English) is found at shops throughout Mexico and the United States. Likewise, “Death unto my enemies,” the seven-colored candle, sells well among those whose line of work brings them in close contact with death on a regular basis. Indeed, even before the astronomical growth of the cult initiated by Doña Queta, the godmother of devotion, the first exposure many Mexicans had to Santa Muerte was through the crime pages of the daily tabloids. After kidnapping more than twenty people in the 1990s and collecting more than 40 million dollars in ransom, Daniel Arizmendi López was arrested at his home in August 1998. Known as “el Mochaorejas” (the Ear Chopper) for his gruesome habit of
sending the severed ears of his victims to their family members, Arizmendi made even bigger headlines for his devotion to the then-almost-unknown saint of death. Mexican law enforcement agents discovered an altar to Saint Death at his home and bizarrely allowed him to take his statuette of her to prison where he could continue his devotion behind bars. Thus, three years before Doña Queta initiated the public cult, one of the most infamous kidnappers in the country's history violently introduced Santa Muerte to the Mexican public.

Since then the White Girl has become a regular on the crime pages of Mexican tabloids and often makes the news reports of local TV stations on the border. Mexican and, increasingly, American police routinely discover Santa Muerte altars and devotional paraphernalia at the homes and in the possession of suspected criminals,
especially drug dealers. Mexican police arrested Angel Jacome Gamboa in March 2009, charging him with murdering twelve police officers in Rosarito Beach at the behest of his reputed boss, one of Tijuana’s major organized crime figures. One of the hitman’s weapons displayed to the press was a revolver with a gold embossed image of Santa Muerte on the handle. The saint of death couldn’t have been any closer to the hired gun as he squeezed the trigger and dispatched his victims to her bony embrace.

Violence has also visited the major figures in the cult. Born and raised in Tepito, Comandante Pantera (Commander Panther) was a rising star among followers of the White Sister. On the hardscrabble outskirts of Mexico City, in Ecatepec, the young cult leader and motorcycle enthusiast, also known as Jonathan Legaria Vargas, erected a black, seventy-two-feet-tall statue of the saint. Even before construction on it was completed, the gargantuan effigy and its patron became embroiled in controversy. Municipal officials, alleging that it violated zoning laws, ordered Comandante Pantera to remove the impressive statue, which can be seen from one of the major avenues crossing the city. Ignoring the complaints of parents in the neighborhood who claimed their young children were so spooked by the larger-than-life skeleton saint that they couldn’t sleep at night, Legaria not only refused to comply with municipal demands but hinted that violence might erupt if law enforcement agents attempted to forcibly remove the monumental statue. Both American and Mexican media gave ample coverage to the controversy and its charismatic protagonist. Devotees and curious residents flocked to the temple grounds in Ecatepec to get a firsthand look at the “world’s largest Santa Muerte statue.”

Violence, but not the kind that Comandante Pantera had in mind, struck in the early morning hours of July 31, 2008. The Bony Lady came for one of her most prominent devotees just a few minutes after he had finished his late-night radio program dedicated to her devotion. Several gunmen sprayed Legaria’s Cadillac Escalade
with almost two hundred bullets, some fifty of which struck the twenty-six-year-old cult leader, killing him instantly. Saint Death spared his two female companions, who were critically wounded but survived. Such overkill is typical of drug-related assassinations, but like so many other homicide cases in Mexico, more than a year afterward it remained unsolved.³

Another unsolved cult-related murder, allegedly involving human sacrifice, compelled its devotional godfather, David Romo, to literally change the face of death, or at least the image of her venerated at his church. In early 2007 assassins working for the Gulf Cartel, one of Mexico’s most powerful drug syndicates, murdered three handcuffed men in front of a Santa Muerte shrine on the outskirts of Nuevo Laredo. Well aware that the shrine-side murders could be interpreted as an act of human sacrifice, Romo took almost immediate action to distance his Saint Death church (Iglesia Santa Católica Apostólica Tradicional Mex-USA) from what he regarded as a horrific sacrilege, an abomination of the faith.

Just a few months after the executions in Laredo, the articulate and politically savvy priest of Saint Death unveiled a radically new image of her at his temple in the Morelos district of Mexico City. A life-size statue of a beautiful brunette angel with a porcelain complexion and feathered wings replaced the traditional skeleton saint in the main sanctuary. Romo baptized the new icon as the “Angel of Death” and asked church members to replace their images of the Bony Lady with the pretty new face of death. Three years later the rest of the church remains filled with figurines, paintings, and votive candles of death in her skeletal form and the sales booths, both inside and outside the temple, sell almost nothing but images of the Grim Reapress depicted in her traditional skeletal form. Romo blamed the lack of Angel of Death paraphernalia on vendors who aren’t interested in proffering the new image when the old one sells so well.