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Towards a Pastoral, Apologetic Approach to *La Santa Muerte* Devotion

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Towards a Pastoral, Apologetic Approach to *La Santa Muerte* Devotion

A thesis by

Henry Christopher Mendez Fajardo

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Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgments	v
Introduction	1
Chapter 1:	
Tracking Possible Origins of <i>La Santa Muerte</i> Devotion	6
1.1.- The Importance of Death in Pre-Columbian Cultures.	6
1.2.- The Perception of Death in Medieval Europe.	13
1.3.- A New Concept of Death in Colonial Mexico.	14
1.4.- First Vestiges of a New Devotion to <i>La Santa Muerte</i>	19
1.5.- <i>La Santa Muerte</i> in Contemporary Mexico.	22
Chapter 2:	
<i>La Santa Muerte</i> Phenomenon: a Contemporary Mexican Devotion	26
2.1.- Devotees of the Devotion.	26
2.2.- <i>La Santa Muerte</i> Devotion.	31
2.3.- The Importance of Colors in this Devotion.	34
2.4.- The Altar.	38
2.5.- Iconography and Symbolism in the Image of <i>La Santa Muerte</i> .	40
Chapter 3:	
The Need for a New Apologetics in Response to <i>La Santa Muerte</i>	45
3.1.- Patristic Apologetics as a Paradigm	45
3.2.- Holiness in the Catholic Church	47
3.3.- Biblical Insights About Death	53
3.4.- Some Discrepancies Between Catholic Dogma and Devotion to <i>La Santa Muerte</i>	59
3.5.- A Criticism of the Cult of <i>La Santa Muerte</i> from Moral Theology	64
Chapter 4:	
Some Pastoral Conclusions: Toward a New Evangelization	69
4.1.- A Need Expressed in Devotion	69
4.2.- The Strength and Importance of Popular Religiosity	71
4.3.- Pastoral Negligence	74
4.4.- The Real Holy Death	77

Conclusion	80
Bibliography	83

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Abstract

Death is and will continue to be a most intriguing reflection topic. It is interesting to note how the topic of death extends its reach to different areas of study which range from the most biological and material to the most philosophical and spiritual. Undoubtedly, death does not cease to be an event rooted in all aspects of our material reality, since life only makes sense in relation to death.

In recent decades in some Latin American contexts, devotion to the personification of death has increased significantly. In a special way, this devotion has gained greater strength and relevance in Mexico, a country in which it has been accentuated in a versatile way of celebrating, going from the simplest prayers to the most extreme commitment, for example, that of consecrating one's entire families to *La Santa Muerte*. This phenomenon has caught the attention of sociologists, anthropologists, moralists, theologians, and pastoralists, all of whom seek to understand and clarify its nature.

Although a thorough treatment of *La Santa Muerte* could be quite extensive and interdisciplinary, this thesis primarily studies the phenomenon from a biblical, magisterial, and the Christian Catholic tradition, similar to an approach surrounding the

eneration of saints and devotions pertaining to the afterlife. Among its major conclusions, it makes the case for the need for a more in-depth re-evangelization of Mexican Catholics, given some of the devotions' anti-evangelical tendencies.

Prof. Eduardo Fernández, SJ, Director Date

Acknowledgments

At the end of this thesis project, I first want to thank my gracious God, who in his divine grace and mercy, allows his work to continue to be carried out in me. I want to, similarly, thank my mother, a constant symbol of life and strength. I am equally grateful for the unconditional support of the Butterfields who have been my family in the United States. At the same time, I feel grateful to my teachers who have been a crucial part of the education I have received. Particularly I thank my director, Dr. Eduardo Fernández, for accompanying me on this path and being an example of life, testimony, and dedication. Dr. Mary McGann's supporting role as reader proved to be crucial and extremely helpful. In the same way, I thank God for blessings me with good friends, among them, Alfonso Tellez Fernández, José Manuel Camacho Hernández, Jose Carlos López Bravo, Adrian Soto Mendoza, and José Andrés Arellano Navarro. They have graciously accompanied me throughout my life, consistently offering me their unconditional support.

Finally, I dedicate this thesis to all those who did not believe in me, those who told me that finishing this licentiate would be impossible. Yes, them I also acknowledge because, as things turned out, instead of being an obstacle, they provided a reason for me to achieve my dream.

*Hubo un tiempo que no podía parar mis lagrimas
Pero levanté la cara y entendí.
Que no se puede vivir sin morir,
Y que no se puede despertar sin dormir.
En los momentos difíciles
recuerda que me tienes a mí.
Mírame! Me caí y me pisaron, pero no me aplastaron.
El dolor me golpeó, pero no me rompió.
El día para mí se apagó,
Pero entendí que la noche no era oscura, era de lentejuelas.
Porque la vida es así y se valora mejor lo bueno, lo hermoso y lo simple,*

*cuando eres un sobreviviente.
Porque la comida es más rica cuando se tiene hambre
Y un abrazo te conforta cuando el alma llora.
Porque te aferras más a la vida cuando sientes la agonía
Y las migajas son tesoros cuando no se tiene nada.
Y es entonces que te fundes con el que te dio una mirada,
Porque si fue de compasión o despiadada.
Esa mirada, hoy a mí me levanta.
Y les digo a todos aquellos.
A los que me odian y a los que me aman.
Que gracias a ellos estoy aquí.
Más fuerte y mas cabrón que él que era antes de caer.
Que los amo, los amo, porque sea como sea,
Para mal o para bien, hoy todos me miran.¹*

¹ There was a time that I could not stop my tears; but I raised my face and understood. One cannot live without dying, and one cannot wake up without sleep. In difficult times, remember you have me. Look at me!

I fell, and they stepped on me, but they didn't crush me. The pain hit me, but it didn't break me. The day for me was gone, but I understood that the night was not dark; it was sequined, because life is like that and the good, the beautiful and the simple are better valued, when you are a survivor. Because food tastes better when you are hungry, and because when the soul is crying, a hug is more comforting; because when you are dying, you hold on more to life, and crumbs are more treasured when you have nothing to eat. And it is then that you merge with the one who noticed you, either with eyes of compassion or ruthlessness. That look today lifts me up. I say this to all those who hate me and those who love me. Thanks to them, I am here, stronger and more alive than I was before I fell.

And I love you, I love you, because whatever it is, for better or for worse, today, everyone notices me.

Gloria Trevi, "Todos me Miran, Viña del Mar," YouTube video, 9:03, Posted by "Trevi Euan,"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5SUB9iXi2xc>. Accessed May 5, 2020.

Introduction

—*Where, O death, is your victory?*

*Where, O death, is your sting? (1Cor 15: 55)*²

I remember a childhood incident which sparked my curiosity and is somehow connected to the writing of this thesis. I recall how once, when I was a child, my mother asked me to get some clothes out of a closet in my brother's bedroom. When I reached the last set of drawers in the closet chest, I noticed that one of them was jammed and I could not open it. After a long struggle, I managed to do so. However, because of the struggle to open the drawer, the things that were inside the drawer fell to the floor. Soon, my mother's voice called me from the other room, wondering what had happened. I replied that everything was fine while collecting the objects that had fallen to the ground. Among the objects were some keys, photographs, toys, and some bags which belonged to her. Not wanting to get scolded, I quickly lifted things from the floor. I was about to finish when she entered the room and asked me what I was doing. I told her what had happened, after which she told me to finish up what I was doing. I felt relieved and started picking up the last object on the floor, which was her bag.

However, when lifting the bag, I did not realize that it was open, and the objects that were inside the bag fell to the ground. Among the things that fell, I saw something I had not seen before: a small black and white print of a skeleton. The figure had a scythe, an hourglass on his waist, a figure of the world in his left hand, and an owl next to his feet. It seemed strange to me that the image had a halo over his head. For an instant, I

² La Biblia Latinoamericana, Español and English.

thought it was a saint because my mother and grandmother had many holy cards with different pictures of saints. My mother entered the bedroom again and asked, “Have you finished what I asked you to do?” Instead of a response, I asked her about the image. My mom said it was *La Santita—La Santa Muerte*.

This was my first encounter with the image of *La Santa Muerte*. Years later, when I took biblical evangelization courses in my parish, I realized what was happening at my house. There was confusion around this small image that my mom kept in her bag. Little by little, my mother listened to what I was telling her about the courses that I was taking and one day she said that she no longer had the image of death in her bag. I asked her about this decision, and she told me that she changed her mind after our conversations. She said that we believe in a God of life, not in a God of death. “Before, I believed that death was like other saints, for example, Santa Rita or San Antonio. But now, I know that death is not a historical character like them, and therefore, death cannot be canonized by the Catholic Church.” Thus, this perspective signaled a change in my mother’s view of this devotion.

This Church smells bad, let us open the doors for new air to enter³ This was the slogan that Pope John XXIII used to start the Second Vatican Council. This council brought about many changes in the Church. Among the most significant was the promotion of the laity in the life of the Church and a new emphasis on the evangelization of peoples. These initiatives continue to mark the journey of the people of God, one aimed at announcing the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus in the gospels. This evangelizing

³ Maureen Fiedler, “It’s About That Fresh Air,” *National Catholic Report*, October 8, 2012, <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/vatican-ii-its-about-fresh-air>, accessed April 29, 2020.

work provides the motive and incentive for collaborating with God in working to help bring about the Kingdom of God on earth.

The following research presented here revolves around the religious phenomenon called *La Santa Muerte*. Indeed, in ecclesial literature, there is little information on the subject, the first studies on the cult of *La Santa Muerte* having been done outside of its scope. I have given myself the task of gathering information on the topic and relying on theological studies and other disciplines to approach the phenomenon attempting to be objective. My primary motivation when carrying out this research was to be able to help present a perspective in line with Catholic teaching, one which provides some distinct pastoral implications. More important than waging a campaign against this devotion, I seek to establish a possible dialogue with its devotees, trying to understand its appeal to these populations, especially raising the question as to whether it adheres to gospel values.

This thesis has four chapters. In Chapter One, I briefly outline some possible origins of the devotion to *La Santa Muerte* from a historical and cultural framework, particularly in the Mexican context. I analyze the worldview of death in the ancient Aztec civilization, its beliefs, and festivities related to death. Also, I examine death from the European worldview before the discovery of America and how the religious thought of the time influenced their worldview. I pursue the topic in the context of Mexico after the Spanish conquest, one which gave rise to a biological, cultural, and religious *mestizaje*. The chapter also explores the value which Mexicans place on death in the celebration of *El Día de los Muertos*. This holiday, considered by many today as a cultural patrimony which extends beyond her borders, shows a synthesis of ancient Mexican cultures and

Christianity. Finally, I present the first vestiges of devotion to *La Santa Muerte* in contemporary Mexico.

The second chapter deals with key elements found in the cult of *La Santa Muerte* necessary to understanding this religious phenomenon. Explained are its central manifestations, some similar characteristics of its devotees, the importance of colors in worship and how they work around the figure of death, the types of altars, and finally, the iconography of *La Santa Muerte* and its symbolism.

The third chapter takes a theological approach to the cult of *La Santa Muerte* from the perspective of Catholic apologetics, an ecclesial approach which attempts to give reasons for dogma and other beliefs. First, I develop the process that the Catholic Church follows for the canonization of new saints. Then I analyze the issue of death from the biblical context and its implications in the devotion to the “White Girl.” I examine, similarly, some phrases of the novena to *La Santa Muerte* to demonstrate how the devotion misinterprets certain Catholic doctrines. Finally, I approach the phenomenon from Catholic moral theology which helps spot several contradictions which appear in the cult, ones fundamentally opposed to basic gospel teachings.

In the last chapter, I view this devotion in light of Church teaching around evangelization, especially the so-called new evangelization and raise some concerns as to the lack of concerted pastoral efforts on the part of the Mexican Catholic Church regarding its contemporary growth. This chapter delves into some essential elements of pastoral ministry regarding evangelization and the role of popular piety. As I have throughout the thesis, I include some reasons for this devotion’s appeal. I conclude with some observations made from the perspective of Church teaching.

I want to make it clear, finally, that this is a phenomenon which can be studied through many academic disciplines. While I draw from some of these briefly, my own focus is more theological, especially one aimed at providing good pastoral care. My concluding critique of the Mexican Catholic Church's lack of vigorous, serious promotion of the new evangelization is aimed at demonstrating what can result when the essentials of gospel teaching are not emphasized.

Chapter I

Tracking Possible Origins of *La Santa Muerte* Devotion

1.1.- The Importance of Death in the Pre-Columbian Cultures

Death is one of the darkest events of human reflection. Many times people conceive this event as a reality that devours everything without an escape. Human beings have always wanted to resist this inescapable reality that they will sooner or later come to experience. All civilizations have a particular way of understanding death and creating their own interpretation of it. The countless myths, legends, and stories that are told about death in our world prove this fact.

In this first chapter, I will track the possible origin of the devotion to *La Santa Muerte*. Many of its devotees place its inception in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. Some people, without much certainty, claim its possible origin in the European reflection on death before the discovery of America. Others find some records of this cult⁴ in colonial Mexico, while there are people who believe that it is simply a complete modern devotion of the end of the last century. In this chapter, I will give an overview of the worldview about death in ancient, colonial, and modern Mexico.

The Aztecs⁵ were a civilization that was founded in the center of Mexico and which had a very strong influence on the peoples of Mesoamerica. Their large buildings,

⁴ Merriam-Webster. Dictionary. "System of religious beliefs and rituals," accessed February 12, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cult>. I clarify that I do not intend to use the term "cult" in a pejorative manner. My intention is to respect the definition of this phenomenon of devotion given by scholars and devotees.

⁵ The Aztecs conquered many inhabitants of the area from the coast of the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean, including south of Chiapas and Guatemala. Information taken from: León Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture: a Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind*, Civilization of America Indian Series (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 237.

advanced astronomy, and extensive knowledge of traditional medicine led them to be the dominant people

in the region. Regarding their beliefs about death, they believed that dead people would go to different places according to the way people died. Therefore, the fate of the dead was not determined by their moral pattern of conduct while alive, but according to the way each individual died. In fact, during their festivities, they had a particular date to commemorate those who had already left this world. These ceremonies were held on the eve of the ninth and tenth months, also known as *Tlaxochimaco*, *Micailhuitontli*, and *Xocotl Huetzi*, which would be August and September of our calendar today. In *Tlaxochimaco*, known as the feast of dead children, food such as cocoa, *copal*, and wax was offered.⁶

Women and men of the empire accompanied this celebration with dancing and songs in the courtyards of the temples. The elders, for their part, bathed the children, cut their hair, and put some decorations on them. All these rituals were done with the purpose that the children would not die:

It was August eighth in our calendar that these people observed the ninth month of the year. The festival celebrated at the beginning of the month was performed with great joy. It was called *Micailhuitontli*, which is a diminutive of the feast of the Little Dead. The second reason to use a diminutive name was that this feast was preparation or an anticipation of the coming festivity, called the Great Feast of the Death.⁷

On the other hand, *Xocotl Huetzi*, also known as the great feast of the dead, was one of their yearly festivities, in which a large timber called *Xocotl* was raised in the

⁶ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia General de las Cosas de la Nueva España* (México City: Editorial Porrúa, 1982), 167-174.

⁷ Fray Diego Duran, *Book of Gods and the Ancient Calendar*, tran. Horcasitas and Doris Heyden (Tulsa, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press Norman, 1971), 441.

temple courtyard with a bird made of amaranth on its cusp. This timber had to be demolished after the people danced around the *Xocotl* in which food and pulque were offered:

The Great Feast of the Death, which we are going to deal with now, fell in the tenth month. It was the most solemn day and included the sacrifice of many men. Mass sacrifices always indicated that a feast was on the highest rank.

Now on this day, with grave reverence, the priest and ministers of the temple lifted the pole from the ground at dawn. Then they raised it in the temple courtyard. On its top, they placed a bird made of dough that represented an idol. On this day, a new word was added to the idol and pole: *Xocotl Huetzi*, meaning the fall of *Xocotl*.⁸

As such, the Aztecs believed that the place where the dead would go depended entirely on how they died. Besides, they were certain that there were four specific places where the *tonalli* went after death.

The first place was *Tonatiuhichan*, the house of the sun, where warriors and also women who died during childbirth would go. Since they were considered warriors, all of them accompanied the sun all day long in their journey. The men did it from dawn to noon because they believed that the east was the masculine course of the universe as opposed to the west that represented the feminine course of the universe. The women who lived in the house of the sun accompanied the sun from noon until dusk. After four years, these warriors could return to the earth in the form of a hummingbird or butterfly. As Carmichael and Sayer claim, “warriors who died in the battle went to the region in the sky where they accompanied the sun-god. Also, to the celestial region went the women

⁸ Duran, *Book of Gods and the Ancient Calendar*, 444-445.

⁹ The Mexica commonly employed *Yolia* and *Tonalli*, terms that associate animating forces with one’s physical heart, the equivalent of one’s astrological sign. Jill Leslie McKeever Furst has a complete reflection on *Nahuatl* soul in her book *The Natural History of the Soul in Ancient Mexico* (London, Yale University Press, 1995), 229.

who died in childbirth. These spirits, the *Cihuateteo*, were considered to have had an honorable death as the warriors, and they accompanied the sun down to the western horizon.”¹⁰

The second place is *Tlalocan*, the place of Tlaloc, the lord of the heavenly waters, mountains, and fertile earth, where all those who died drowned or whose death was related to water would go. The *Tlalocan* was a kind of paradise in which all kinds of plants, flowers, green valleys, lush mountains, rivers, and lakes abounded.

To *Mictlán*, the place of death, of the stillness of the eternal rest, would go anyone who died of natural death. Before arriving at this land, they had to go through nine obstacles and dangerous tests known as the floors of the underworld. The first level was known as the *Apanohuayan*¹¹. In this place, they were accompanied and helped by their dog *Xoloitzcuintle* to go through the nine obstacles. The names of the levels go as follows: *Tepetl Monamicyan; Itztepetl; Itzehecayan; Pantecuecuetlacayan; Temiminaloyan; Teyolocualoyan, Apochcalocan* and finally, *Chignahuapan*. It would take four years for the deceased to get to *Mictlan*. During these four years, the relatives of the deceased would make offerings to the lord to the underworld. After four years, they would stop doing these rites, because they believed that the deceased was now with *Mictlantecutli*, the lord of the underworld.

The fourth and last place was *Chichihuacuahco*, the place of the tree with tits prepared for babies who had died before getting breastfed. They went to a place where

¹⁰ Elizabeth Carmichael and Cloe Sayer, *The Skeleton at the Feast: The Day of The Dead in Mexico* (Texas: University of Texas Press, Austin, 2001), 27-28.

¹¹ The nine levels of *Mictlan* are part of Aztec mythology, for more information consult Alfredo Lopez Austin, *The Human Body and Ideology: Concepts of the Ancient Nahuas* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, Utah, 1980), 74-75.

there was a tree from which its sprouts produced milk so that they could drink. “The infant dead went to a place near to *Tlalocan, Chichihuacuahco*, where a tree dripped milk from its branches to feed them.”¹²

I have already talked about how the ancient Aztecs conceived death, and it is not surprising that among their pantheon, they also had a god who ruled the place of the dead; *Mictlantecutli*, the lord of death. It is important to first understand some Nahuatl etymologies before delving into the notion of *Mictlantecutli*. *Miquiztli* was one of the names given to their twentieth month.¹³ The same name was given to the sixth day of the same month. In the calendar system developed by the Aztecs, or the Stone of the Sun (*calendario solar*), *Miquiztli* appeared in a figure of a stark skull with yellow spots and red dots. These dots and spots symbolized the decomposition of the body after death. The word *Miquiztli* shares its etymological root with *Mictlán*, which is a combination of *mic*, meaning death, and *tlan*, meaning, place. That is, the place of death or of the dead. The same root, *mic*, is used to the word *Mictlantecutli*, which is a combination of three words *mic* (death), *tlan* (place) and *tecuntli* (lord), translated as the lord of death.

Regarding his physical attributes, the god was made up of disembodied bones with an open jaw that devoured the dead and the stars that would fall into his mouth. Also, he had ear lobes pierced by human bones with nocturnal eyes that would allow him to see in the darkness of the *Mictlán*, the place of the death. Part of his clothing was made

¹²Carmichael and Sayer, *The Skeleton at The Feast: The Day of the Death in Mexico*, 28.

¹³ For more information on the solar calendar, see David Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmology and Ceremonial Center Prospect* (New Mexico: Waveland Press, 1998), 79.

of cones and rosettes. In some representations, however, he had a flint from one of the ear lobes to his nose, meaning that the flint cut his breath when he died.¹⁴

Both in *Nahuaca* calendar, the solar calendar, and other ways that people used to measure time, dates, and hours, *Mictlantecutli* appears as the regent or patron of many events and festivities.¹⁵ The same happened among the Mayans who developed, like the Aztecs, a mythological worldview about death. For instance, for the Mayans, the lord of death is linked to the court where dead people played a ball game. Based on the *Popol Vuh*,¹⁶ which relates their cosmovision, people who were in the *Xibalba*, the place of death, liked playing this game very much:

In Mesoamerican mythology, the game is an important element in the story of the Mayan gods Hun Hunahpú and Vucub Hunahpú. The pair annoyed the gods of the underworld with their noisy playing and the two brothers were tricked into descending into Xibalba (the underworld) where they were challenged to a ball game. Losing the game, Hun Hunahpús had his head cut off; a foretaste of what would become common practice for players unfortunate enough to lose a game.¹⁷

Mictlantecutli, for its part, is associated with the myth of the fifth sun in which the last creation of humanity is carried out. According to this myth, a god called *Quetzalcoatl*

¹⁴ There are animals associated with the lord of death, such as owls, spiders, worms, bats, scorpions, and even butterflies. These animals have a relationship with the lord of the underworld, more information in Lopez Austin, *The Human Body and Ideology: Concepts of the Ancient Nahuas*, 27-34.

¹⁵ The Aztecs had different methods of measuring time. Although the solar calendar was the primary method, they also had the *Nahuaca* calendar and the Borgia codex, originally called *Tonalámatl*. For more information, Frank Diaz, *Sagrado Trece: Los Calendarios del Antiguo México* (México D.F.: Kinames, 2005), 53. See also, Frank Diaz, *El Calendario de Anahuac: La Cuenta del Tiempo Entre los Mayas Mexicas y Demás Naciones del México Antiguo* (México, D.F.: Kinames, 2009), 3; Elizabeth Hill-Boone, "Tiempo, Destino y Dioses en el Grupo Borgia," *Artes de México Códices Prehispánicos* 109, 38.

¹⁶ *Popol Vuh* is the Mayan people's book of the dawn of life. It tells us how gods were able to create humankind after three unsuccessful attempts. Alongside the creation narrative, *Popol Vuh* tells us of the adventure of the twin hero deities in the underworld, and their sacrifice in order to avenge their parents' death. Both stories share parallel timelines, ending with the heroes appearing on the horizon to the newly created humanity at dawn. Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and King* (New York: Simon and Shuster edition, 1985), 380.

¹⁷ Mark Cartwright, "The Ball Game of Mesoamerica," *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, September 16, 2013, <https://www.ancient.eu/article/604/> (accessed February 11, 2020).

and his twin brother *Xolo* descend to the place of the dead to obtain bones to create a new human race that had perished in the previous world. *Mictlantecutli* promises that if *Quetzalcoatl* passes the challenge that he gives, he will get the bones. *Quetzalcoatl* passes the challenges and obtains the bones from *Mictlantecutli*. However, *Mictlantecutli* changes his mind and murders him. Yet, *Quetzalcoatl* resurrects and manages to get out of the *Mictlan* with the bones, creating with them a new race of the fifth sun. Nevertheless, this new breed is subject to the material expiration known as death. Interestingly, even though *Mictlantecutli* is the lord of death, he cannot see the people of the new race when they come to him, because he dies before their arrival and goes to the house of *Tlaloc*.

It is essential to understand that *Mictlantecutli* in the Aztec worldview does not rule all the places where the dead goes. It should be reminded that, even though he is the lord of death, his dominion is limited because he constitutes only a part of the *Nahuaca* concept of duality: cold and warm, male and female, life and of course, death.

Finally, it is necessary to understand that *Mictlantecutli* is not the personification of death either. This god is only a part of the Aztec pantheon and he rules in his domain, also known as *Mictlán*. Besides, the Aztecs never thought that he had dominion on, and intervention in the world of the living. In the Aztec worldview, *Mictlantecutli* is the god of stillness, of the underworld, and the dead.

1.2 The Perception of Death in Medieval Europe

Like the Aztecs and other civilizations that flourished in the new continent, the inhabitants of modern Europe also had their own concept of death. However, it is important to consider that their vision and concept of death were totally different from those experienced by people living in pre-Columbian cultures in America. Put differently, the European worldview in the modern age was significantly influenced by medieval thoughts that ended with the discovery of the Americas.¹⁸

The European society of that time had just experienced one of the worst scenarios, the bubonic plague, also known as the black plague, which had reduced the population of the old continent. This plague was caused by the invasion of rats infected with a virus, which circulated through the sea routes of the old world and the poor hygienic conditions of medieval Europe.¹⁹

Faced by such a tragic event and feeling completely fragile, Medieval people took refuge in the ecclesiastical thinking of the time, which looked at the magnitude of the problem as a punishment of a sinful life:

*Ya establecida la Iglesia Católica y a causa de la gran mortandad causada por la peste negra que llevaba a un gran terror cotidiano a los pobladores occidentales en la edad media, se produjeron, en el pensamiento europeo profundas disertaciones filosóficas y teológicas acerca de la muerte.*²⁰

¹⁸ Heberto George Wells, *A Short History of the World* (New York: Macmillen,1992), 204. See also, William Hardy MacNeill, *A World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 98.

¹⁹ Joseph H Lynch, *The Medieval Church: a Brief History* (New York: Longman Publishers, 1992), 56.

²⁰ All translations that appear in this dissertation are mine. “Already the Catholic Church established and because of the great mortality caused by the black plague that led to a daily terror of the western settlers in the Middle Ages, deep philosophical and theological dissertations about death occurred in European thought.” J. Katia Perdigón Castañeda, *La Santa Muerte Protectora de los Hombres [La Santa Muerte, the Human Protector]* (Ciudad de México, DF: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2008), 23.

All these events marked the thought of this earlier era, extending to the time of modern Europe. At the same time, the Catholic Church, which tried to exercise absolute dominance over Europe, continued to maintain the conception of death as the product of the sin of the first parents, Adam and Eve, claiming that its consequences were still present in the world.²¹ According to the Church, one of the clearest examples of this consequence was the bubonic plague that had claimed the lives of a third of the entire European population.²² Hence, unlike the Aztec conception of death, the European interpretation of death was not subject to the way people died, but to their moral behavior while alive.²³ In this way, death in medieval Europe had a special Christocentric and Christological nuance, one that led to the conclusion that salvation was found only in Christ and his mysteries of redemption.

1.3 A New Concept of Death in Colonial Mexico

When talking about Mexico and its history, it would be absurd to think that Mexicans are a single race formed exclusively by the indigenous elements that characterized ancient Mexico. It would also be somewhat incongruous to affirm that Mexicans are European descent par excellence. These two statements are inaccurate since

²¹ Although people's moral responsibility was not neglected completely, the European philosophy and theology in that period had a strong theocentric focus, which influenced the way people understood sin and its consequence. This radical theocentric worldview was strengthened and maintained by the Church. Rik Van Nieuwenhove, *An Introduction to Medieval Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2.

²² Betsey Barker, *Medieval Thought: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Blackwell Ed, 1992), 84.

²³ *Ibid*, 85-87.

the new continent, or at least Latin America, is a multiracial and ethnic continent, even though there is a strong predominance of *mestizo* population.²⁴

When we say *mestizo*²⁵ we refer to the combination of races that, in turn, gives rise to a very different one, without forgetting the elements to which this new culture is rooted. Mexican people are, a *mestizo* and indigenous people in which other races such as African and Arab are involved in the consolidation of a country called Mexico:

Whit [sic] the Spanish conquest, a new set of mourning rituals was introduced into Mexico. The Catholic missionaries who fanned out across the land in the wake of the conquistadores brought a cosmology parallel in some ways to that of the Aztecs. Made familiar enough to be palatable, their ideas came to coexist with rather than supplant existing beliefs. Saints joined the hierarchy of gods; heaven and hell added new dimensions to Mictlan; All Souls' and All Saints' days merge with the harvest rites of Mictlantecuhtli. As Christianity replaced the gods of Rome, ancient rites were recast, All Saints' Day, November 1, was established as the time to pray for the souls of dead children; All Souls' Day, November 2, became the day to remember the adults. ²⁶

In the same way that the Mexican people are a mixture of many races and ethnicities, their culture and traditions are also combinations of different cultural elements of the different peoples that make up Mexican culture.²⁷

Therefore, when it comes to the issue of death, it is important to clarify that this topic is exceptionally inherent to the Mexican culture. The concept of death has a

²⁴ Christina A. Sue, *Land of the Cosmic Race: Race Mixture, Racism, and Blackness in Mexico* (New York: Oxford Press, 2013), 6-27.

²⁵ The term *mestizo* means "mixed" in Spanish and is generally used throughout Latin America to describe people of mixed ancestry with a white European and an indigenous. More information about miscegenation could be found in: Ana Gonzalez Barrera, "Mestizo and Mulato: Mixed-Race Identities Among U.S. Hispanics," *Factank, News in the Number*, "July 10, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/10/mestizo-and-mulatto-mixed-race-identities-unique-to-hispanics/> (accessed February 12, 2020).

²⁶ John Greenleigh, *The Days of the Dead: Los Dias de los Muertos*, (San Francisco, California: Collin Publishers San Francisco, 1991) 19-20.

²⁷ Christina A. Sue, *Land of the Cosmic Race Mixture, Racism, and Blackness in Mexico*, 6-21.

peculiar characteristic of indigenous, Arabic, African, and European cultures. All these cultural components have contributed to the birth of a special celebration called *Día de Muertos*.²⁸

Each year, cemeteries in Mexico are filled with color, aroma, and celebration in commemoration of those who are no longer among us. In many states, the inhabitants decorate the tombs with flowers, confetti, and candles. They also bring food to the cemeteries to share a special moment with their loved ones. Some pray next to the graves asking for the eternal rest of those souls, while others join this holiday singing the songs that their deceased liked the most. In other parts of the country, for example, relatives of the deceased build the famous altars of the dead, a tradition that remains today, and in which religious elements from indigenous and Spanish are combined.²⁹

*El Altar de Muertos*³⁰ is, therefore, the material representation that a whole town has about death and how, in an allegorical way, it leads witnesses beyond senses of

²⁸ Mexico celebrates a yearly tradition called the Day of the Death during the last days of October and the first days of November. As in all Latin American countries, Mexico commemorates the Day of the Dead or All Souls' Day on November 2. The legacy of past civilizations that is so vivid in Mexico distinguishes this country from the rest in the way this tradition is celebrated. It is a legacy of ancient civilizations graphically manifested on this occasion: death is a transition from one life to another in different levels where communication exists. This communication takes place once a year throughout the country. Differing from the Catholic Church imposed ritual to commemorate All Souls' Day, which is observed in countries other than Mexico, the customs established by pre-Colonial Mexican civilizations become a ceremony where the pre-Hispanic beliefs blend with Catholic beliefs. Therefore, The Day of the Dead in Mexico is not a mournful commemoration but a happy and colorful celebration where death is not a frightening and strange commemoration but a happy and colorful celebration. Mary J. Andrade, *A Través de los Ojos del Alma: Día de Muertos en México, Michoacán: Through the Eyes of the Soul: Day of Dead in Mexico, Michoacán* (San Jose, CA: La Oferta, 1999), 82.

²⁹ Idefonso Garcia, "*La Festividad Indígena Dedicada a los Muertos*," (Ciudad de México: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 2001), 13-23.

³⁰ Mary J. Andrade provides a good explanation about the tradition of the *Altar of the Dead*, which is a fundamental element in the Mexican traditions of the annual celebration of the deceased faithful. Also, in her book *Through the Eyes of the Soul, Day of the Dead in Mexico*, she gives us a brief description of the *mestizo* tradition of the offering of the dead. Mary J. Andrade, *A Través de los Ojos del Alma: Día de Muertos en México, Michoacán = Through the Eyes of the Soul: Day of Dead in Mexico, Michoacán*, (San Jose, CA: Pacific Rim International Printing, 1999), 82.

different implicit themes and represents them harmoniously within a single context. *El Altar de Muertos* is a fundamental element in the celebration of the Day of the Dead. The living has the belief that the deceased return from the world of the dead to live with their family. This belief makes people feel that their loved ones are present not only in their memories, but also in the actual “here and now.”³¹

Although *el Altar de Muertos* is a unique concept in the Mexican idiosyncrasy, each altar of the dead is indeed different according to the region of Mexico where it is made. However, there are elements that are very universal in the experience of this tradition.

First, *el Altar de Muertos* is placed in a room in which a table with several levels of steps is displayed, which represents the stages of existence. The two-level altars represent heaven and earth, but those who have three levels add purgatory with seven levels that symbolize the necessary steps to reach heaven and thus be able to rest in peace. This basic structure of the altar has been considered the traditional altar par excellence. There are some common elements found in the elaboration of the altar: for instance, the way that the steps are decorated. Each step is covered with a black-and-white cloth: on the first step, the image of the saint who is venerated is placed; on the second, the soul of the dead person goes to the souls of purgatory; on the third step, salt, which symbolizes the purification of the spirit and reminds us of baptism, is placed; on the fourth step, bread is offered, which means food to the animals that go to the underworld; on the fifth place, the favorite dishes and fruits of the deceased are placed; on the sixth level, the photographs of the deceased are placed in the middle of the altar;

³¹ Ibid, 36-37.

finally, on the seventh step, a cross formed by seeds and fruits is placed.³²

Certain elements play a vital role in the construction of the altar of the dead. For example, the image of the deceased to which the altar is dedicated. Other elements include the cross, which is an element introduced by the Spanish evangelizers to Christianize the meaning of the celebration. It goes on the upper part of the altar and can be of salt or ash. The image of the souls of purgatory is placed so that if the dead person is in purgatory, his or her departure is faster. *Copal* is a pre-Hispanic element that cleans and purifies the energies around the altar; incense sanctifies the environment; the arch is placed on the cusp of the altar and symbolizes the entrance to the world of the dead. The arch is decorated with flowers and is made of reeds; *papel picado* (a type of confetti used in the altar) is considered as a representation of joy and wind; candles are lights to guide the souls in their pilgrimage to the world of the living; water has great importance since, among other meanings, it reflects the purity of the souls and the regeneration of life; the glass of water also helps the deceased to quench their thirst throughout the journey; soap, towel, and mirror are for the personal hygiene of the dead;³³ *cempazuchil* flowers are the flower of the dead that, with its aroma, guides and revives the souls towards the world of the living; skulls are distributed on the altar with the purpose of referring to death, thus, remembering that death is always present; food is placed to please the deceased; bread is the representation of the Eucharist; alcoholic drinks represent joy; and lastly, personal

³² Andrade, *A Través de los Ojos del Alma: Día de Muertos en México, Michoacán = Through the Eyes of the Soul: Day of Dead in Mexico, Michoacán*, 36-37.

³³ Manuel Icaza, "Altar de Muertos, Elementos que Debe de Llevar y Significado," *México Desconocido* 3, no. 7 (September 2018): 22.

items remind the deceased of their life on earth. All these elements make up a whole tradition and the actual celebration of death in the contemporary Mexican worldview.³⁴



Fig. 1. *Tipos de Ofrendas de Día de Muertos* (Types of Offerings of *Día de Muertos*). Photograph from *Unión Yucatán*, October 17, 2019, <https://www.unionyucatan.mx/articulo/2019/10/17/cultura/tipos-de-ofrendas-de-dia-de-muertos> (accessed March 24, 2020).

1.4 First Vestiges of a New Devotion to *La Santa Muerte*

In the first three sections of this first chapter, I have shown worldviews on the death of the two great cultures that participated in the formation of the Mexican people. We have already observed that the thinking of the Aztecs, as well as that of the Spaniards, were influenced by the religion that both cultures professed and are based on these religious beliefs and concepts. It should not be forgotten that, due to historical circumstances, most Mexican people are Catholic, and it is through this religion that the

³⁴ Manuel Icaza, “Altar de Muertos, Elementos que Debe de Llevar y Significado,” 22.

concept of death has its guidelines well framed.³⁵ Nevertheless, in recent years, Mexican society has seen a social and religious phenomenon emerge in the country. This phenomenon has been judged by many as one of the fastest-growing religious movements of the last decades. This phenomenon is known as the devotion of *La Santa Muerte*, and its adherents are trying to spread the devotion widely. As Chesnut argues, “as her name would indicate, *La 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.”³⁶ As previously stated, this devotion has managed to challenge and increase even within the ranks of the Catholic Church. It has certain elements that have managed to capture the attention of many who participate in this devotion.³⁷

Now it is important to delve into this phenomenon that some researchers call a cult. It is difficult to speak of an exact origin of this devotion since, according to previous researchers as Perdigon and Chesnut³⁸, the origin of this cult is somewhat uncertain and

³⁵ Being Catholicism the official religion of Spain during the conquest of Mexico, the Catholic faith manages to establish itself as the religion of New Spain, christianizing indigenous traditions and taking many of its elements to give rise to the Mexican Popular Religiosity. “Creencias Indígenas y Catolicismo se funden en rituales de México,” *El Universal*, Febrero 11, 2017, <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/cultura/creencias-indigenas-y-catolicismo-se-funden-en-rituales-de-mexico> (accessed March 24, 2020).

³⁶ R. Andrew Chesnut *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint* (US: Oxford University Press, 2012), 6.

³⁷ Sante Fe, New Mexico Archbishop John Wester is asking that Catholics stop worshipping the skeleton folk saint known as *La Santa Muerte*, or “Our Lady of Holy Death,” as he fears some mistakenly believe the Grim Reaper-like figure is a Roman Catholic Church-sanctioned saint. Russell Contreras. “Archbishop to Catholics: Stop Worshipping La Santa Muerte, ‘Our Lady of Holy Death.’” *Azcentral*, March 25, 2019, <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona/2019/03/25/la-santa-muerte-worship-among-catholics-should-end-archbishop-says/3269732002/> (accessed February 19, 2020).

³⁸ Anthropologist, restorer, and specialist in popular religiosity, Katia Judith Perdigon Castañeda, is a researcher at the National Institute of Anthropology and History in Mexico City and a precursor of research on *Santa Muerte*. See Castañeda, *La Santa Muerte Protectora de los Hombres [La Santa Muerte, the Protector of Humans]*, 3. R Andrew Chesnut holds the Bishop Walter F. Sullivan Chair in Catholic

not very clear. However, it is possible to give some historical backgrounds of how the skeletal figure of death appears in the religiosity of the Mexican people. For instance, in the sixteenth century, in the indigenous communities from Chiapas and Guatemala, a new devotion was born. This devotion was to *San Pascualito*, who was represented by a skeletal figure. In his study of *La Santa Muerte*, Chesnut claims, “This is most evident in Guatemala and Chiapas, where the sixteenth-century Spanish Franciscan saint, Pascual Bailón was syncretized with Mayan religion and became popularly, but not officially, represented as Rey (King) Pascual, a skeleton with a crown atop his skull.”³⁹

Also, Chesnut, in his book, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*, explains that among the indigenous populations of the Sierra Gorda in the Mexican state of Queretaro, the faithful had a special devotion to the image a *Justo Juez* (Just Judge).⁴⁰ However, the Franciscan friars of that time condemned this devotion because the natives of that area worshiped a human skeleton. As Chesnut alleges, “in 1793, in the present-day state of Queretaro, a Franciscan friar and vicar filed a complaint against a group of Indians, who in the middle of the Mass deposited at the altar ‘an idol whose name is a Just Judge and is the figure of a complete human skeleton standing on top of a red surface, wearing a crown and holding a bow and arrow.’”⁴¹

Studies and is a Professor of Religious Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. He is the author of several publications, among them, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*.

³⁹ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*, 31.

⁴⁰ Just Judge is an image of Christ, especially venerated in the cathedral of Quetzaltenango department of Guatemala. “La Historia que Inspira la Imagen del Justo Juez,” *Wemystic*, <https://www.wemystic.com/es/historia-justo-juez/> (accessed February 19, 2020).

⁴¹ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*, 32.

Finally, we find another record about skeletal worship in the Jesuit missions in the north of the state of Guanajuato. In the municipality of San Luis de La Paz, some members of the Chichimeca community in the area performed a ritual within which they became delirious with the consumption of peyote and whipped crosses, something considered to be sacrilegious. They also carried with them the figure of death, an image they considered *santo* (or holy):

Specific references to *Santa Muerte* first appear in the Spanish colonial record in 1790, almost a century and a half later than Rey Pascual. A 1797 document from the archives of the inquisition titled “Concerning the Superstitions of Various Indians from the Town of San Luis de la Paz” mentions *Santa Muerte* for the first time. Focusing on the Chichimec people of the present-day state of Guanajuato, the Church records speak of thirty Indians who “at night gather in their chapel to drink peyote until they lose their minds; they light upside down candles, some of which are black; they dance with paper dolls; they whip Holy Crosses and also a figure of death that they call *Santa Muerte*, and they bind it with a wet rope threatening to whip and burn it if it does not perform a miracle”⁴²

Other oral traditions reveal that the cult of *La Santa Muerte* may have arisen in the states of Veracruz or Hidalgo. However, because there are no specific documents on this, these traditions remain as oral traditions. The truth is that, as mentioned above, there is no explicit knowledge as to the origin of this devotion.

1.5 *La Santa Muerte* in Contemporary Mexico

Although the devotion to *La Santa Muerte* does not have a specific origin, the truth is that the cult of this image emerged forcefully in the past century. In Mexico today, this devotion has been extended to all the states of the Mexican Republic. It is important to remember that one of the places where this religious phenomenon has had

⁴² Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*, 31.

the most influence is Mexico City.⁴³ There are two specific locations in which the phenomenon is centralized; the first one is the famous Tepito neighborhood; the other is in the municipality of Tultitlan, which is located in the state of Mexico.

It is precisely on Calle Alfarería in the neighborhood of Morelos where Mrs. Enriqueta Romero lives. She is also known as *La Guardiana*, for being one of the first devotees to place an altar of *La Santa Muerte* outside her house.⁴⁴ Mrs. Enriqueta Romero proclaims herself to be *La Guardiana* of *La Santa Muerte* and says that she has been a devotee of *La Santa Muerte* for more than fifty-five years. Mrs. Enriqueta says that long ago, it was almost impossible to see statues of *La Santa Muerte*. The statues were found only in pictures that circulated clandestinely among some sectors of the population. Nevertheless, Mrs. Romero ordered two small statues of *La Santa Muerte* that can now be seen on her main altar outside her house. In the middle of the altar, there is a big statue of *La Santa Muerte* that is accompanied by two small statues. This big statue was a gift from one of her children. The gift served as a sign for her to build an altar dedicated to death. According to her testimony, it was never her purpose to promote

⁴³ "Brother Parka," a spiritual guide for the devotion of *La Santa Muerte*, whose real name remains unknown, points out that Ecatepec is the nerve center of a "Santa Muerte corridor," which runs from the Line 2 of the Metro in this Mexico State municipality through several colonies in Mexico City where the cult is also deeply rooted, like Morelos, Peralvillo, Santa Julia, and the neighborhood of Tepito, which is also a bastion of the devotion of *La Santa Muerte*. Christopher Woody. "Saint Death: the Secretive and Sinister 'Cult' Challenging the Power of the Catholic Church," *Businessinsider*, March 16, 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.com/what-is-santa-muerte-2016-3> (accessed February 19/2020).

⁴⁴ *La Santa Muerte* was brought in the public in 2001, according to AFP (*Agence France Presse*)'s Laurent Thomet, a woman called Queta brought her skeleton out in the street in Mexico city's rough neighborhood of Tepito. People soon flocked to the shrine. Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*, 32.

public worship of the statue. Suddenly, people began to bring candles and small images of brass, silver, or gold that in Mexican popular culture are known as *Milagritos*.⁴⁵

Very soon, this devotion began to gain strength to such an extent that the media set their sights on the image of *La Santa Muerte*. The phenomenon served as a means of publicity for the new icon of the Tepito neighborhood, although on many occasions, newspapers and television were not so friendly with this figure of death.⁴⁶ Media reporter curiosity began to capture the attention of the masses. This popularity was due to the devotion to *La Santa Muerte* from its devotees was often parallel to official devotions within Catholicism.

Another focus of this cult is on the metropolitan area of Mexico City, to be more specific, in the municipality of Tultitlán near the limits of the municipality of Coacalco of the state of Mexico. The international sanctuary of *La Santa Muerte* is located in this municipality. In the shrine of *La Santa Muerte*, there is a 22-meter-high sculpture built in 2007 by the preacher Jonathan Legaria who was better known as *El Pantera*⁴⁷. He was

⁴⁵ Tiny silver or gold body parts, animals, plants, and domestic articles are known in Spanish as *Milagros*, which literary means “miracles.” Because *Milagros* are primarily offered to a saint in thanksgiving for answering a petitioner’s prayer, these items serve to commemorate a miracle – a baby cured of an illness, a pig that has farrowed many healthy piglets, a soldier returned home safely, a crop saved from insects, and so on. Because they are a type of votive offering, *Milagros* also are often referred to *ex-votos*. Martha Egan, *Milagros: Votive Offerings from the America* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: MNM press, 1991), 119.

⁴⁶ Newspapers in the metropolitan area such as *Universal* and *La Prensa* have published articles with provocative titles for devotees of *La Santa Muerte*. “La Santa Muerte un Culto Popular que Resiste Críticas y Balas,” *El Universal*, Jan 11, 2017. <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/sociedad/la-santa-muerte-un-culto-popular-que-resiste-criticas-y-balas> (accessed February 20, 2020). Also, Jose Melton “Lo Matan a Balazos Frente a la Imagen de La Santa Muerte,” *La Prensa*, Aug 28, 2019, <https://www.la-prensa.com.mx/policiaca/lo-matan-a-balazos-frente-a-imagen-de-la-santa-muerte-4105694.html> (accessed February 22, 2020).

⁴⁷ Commander Pantera was a rising star among followers of the white sister. On the hardscrabble outskirts of Mexico City, in the area of Ecatepec, the young leader, also known as Jonathan Legaria Vargas, erected a black, seventy-two-feet-tall statue of the saint. Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*, 17.

shot on the Lopez Portillo Highway in Ecatepec, the State of Mexico. Two years after his death, his mother, Mrs. Enriqueta Vargas, took charge of the shrine and is now known as *La Madrina*.⁴⁸ Vargas oversees the temple, one visited by about 700 faithful each week.

Finally, it is important to note that this phenomenon has become more popular to the extent that people are building altars and shrines to *La Santa Muerte* in their communities. This phenomenon is proliferating, especially in Central and South American countries, even now being found in such English-speaking countries such as Canada and the United States of America.⁴⁹

In this chapter, I traced the origin of the devotion of *La Santa Muerte* with a brief overview of the understanding of death in ancient, colonial, and contemporary Mexico. Also, I addressed the religious components of this devotion, which still have a significant influence on the belief system of its devotees. In the following chapter, I will explore the devotion of *La Santa Muerte*, paying particular attention to the essential aspects of this cult. Some of the aspects include the main characteristics of the devotion, its devotees, places of devotion, the importance of colors in worship, the symbology of images, and finally, the several altars that exist in the devotion of *La Santa Muerte*.

⁴⁸ La Madrina Vargas began tending the Tultitlán shrine with vigor. Through her innovative use of social media platforms and digital communication tools, along with her charismatic Evangelical-style leadership, the organization has become a popular source for information on *Santa Muerte*, built upon a strong global community of devotees connected through live video coverage of regular worship services at the shrine and digital outreach on Facebook. Along with her ministry for *Santa Muerte*, Vargas reported a series of visions of her son acting as an intercessor and intermediary for *Santa Muerte*. “Leader Enriqueta Vargas is the Bony Lady’s Embrace,” *Skeletonsaint*, <https://skeletonsaint.com/2018/12/19/top-santa-muerte-leader-enriqueta-vargas-is-in-the-bony-ladys-embrace/>, December 12, 2018, (accessed February 24, 2020).

⁴⁹ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*, 6.

Chapter II

La Santa Muerte Phenomenon: A Contemporary Mexican Devotion

It is engaging how, at the end of the last decade of the twentieth century, the religious phenomenon called *La Santa Muerte* became a trend in the media of that time. This devotion, which was initially only practiced by disadvantaged and marginalized groups of people, started to gain devotees from other sectors of Mexican society.⁵⁰ In this second chapter, the intention is to help the reader better understand this devotion to the figure of death. For this reason, the chapter will explore some essential aspects of this religious phenomenon. Although these aspects will help us to understand the devotion in a broad sense, they are essential to comprehend the psychology of the devotees of *La Santa Muerte*. Hence, I will examine the importance of colors in this religious phenomenon, the different types of altars that exist to revere death, and finally, the symbols which are part of the image of the so-called *Santa Muerte*.

2.1 Devotees of the Devotion

The religious cult of *La Santa Muerte* is a phenomenon that, from its origins, has some particular connotations. One of the particularities is that this cult was not born as a religious movement within an institutionalized church. Instead, people from different churches and religious traditions embraced the cult.⁵¹ Thanks to its devotees who witness

⁵⁰ For example, Will Pansters claims that “some people from the criminal (under) world are indeed attracted to the cult and participate in rosarios. But there are many others, men and women, young and old, among the devotees who survive, make a living, and build social relations based on truthfulness and sincerity.” See Will G. Pansters, *La Santa Muerte in Mexico: History Devotion and Society*, (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2019), 2.

⁵¹ People of different religious denominations have adopted the devotion to *La Santa Muerte*. Today, it is possible to witness people who belong to institutional churches such as Catholic, Evangelical,

to favors they feel she has granted them, this devotion continues to grow. It leads us to think, therefore, that this devotion does not have a fixed structure to which its followers may adhere. Instead, some devotees simply come to pray for what they need—a sense of protection from a deity who shows them acceptance. Therefore, it is attractive to see how, at the end of the twentieth century, the cult of *La Santa Muerte* was practiced by people who were socially marginalized and lacked opportunities.⁵² Their dire socioeconomic context was an ideal breeding ground for this new devotion because people felt that God had forgotten them. Their situation of marginalization led them to seek a symbol of wellness that would help them reconstruct their identity and their faith:

*Emigración, marginación y exclusión son factores afines con el estado de anomia que prevalece entre la población más pobre, que para sobrevivir necesita reconstruir su identidad y proyecto de vida. Es por eso que la demanda de nuevos bienes simbólicos de salvación es particularmente fuerte en estos sectores. Por eso también la distribución de los nuevos templos se refuerzan en el espacio de la marginación y la exclusión.*⁵³

Thus, *La Santa Muerte* is an icon of justice and protection for its devotees' most essential needs that were supposed to be provided, according to her followers, by government and religious authorities. When they face inequality on the part of social institutions, as mentioned above, they resort to the figure of death who, holding a scale, sets the pattern

and Pentecostal, among others, and participate in the cult as well. Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*, 56.

⁵² “She (*La Santa Muerte*) used to be found only in the socially marginalized barrio of Tepito- and area of Mexico City associated with crime, violence, and prostitution.” Pamela Bastante and Brenton Dickinson, “Nuestra Señora de las Sombras: the Enigmatic Identity of Santa Muerte.” *Journal of the Southwest* 55, no. 4 (2013): 436.

⁵³ “Emigration, marginalization, and exclusion are factors related to the state of anomie that prevails among the poor population, who, in order to survive, needs to rebuild their identity and life project. That is why the demand for new symbolic goods of salvation is particularly strong in these sectors. This phenomenon also explains why more temples are being built in the space of marginalization and exclusion.” Jean-Pierre Bastián, *La Migración Religiosa en América Latina* [Religious Migration in Latin America] (México D.F.: FCE, 2003), 88.

of justice and makes no distinction between the poor and the rich, young and old, white and black, heterosexual and homosexual, and so on. Besides, as her followers affirm, the cult of *La Santa Muerte* helps everyone because people can find the necessary protection for their daily struggles:

*La proliferación de este culto posiblemente sea una manera de elaborar estrategias de supervivencia en medio de la desorganización producida por la crisis económica recurrente. O quizá se trata de factores endógenos, que condicionan y determinan la adopción de nuevos mensajes religiosos. Estos factores son ante todo de índole económica, Política y religiosa.*⁵⁴

In this way, at the dawn of the 21st century, the cult of *La Santa Muerte* ceases to be an act of private devotion and a cult of marginalized social strata but thrives within the entire social structure of contemporary Mexico. It is not strange to see how people like politicians, businesspeople, and others, have death as their protector. Also, the cult of *La Santa Muerte* has had a significant influence on people related to organized crimes and to those who are in prison in Mexico.⁵⁵ Similarly, Chesnut claims that: “In Mexican, Texan and Californian penitentiaries, the cult of the Bony Lady is so widespread that in many she is leading object of devotion, surpassing Guadalupe and even Saint Jude, the patron saint of lost causes.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Perdigón claims that, “The proliferation of this cult is possibly a way of developing survival strategies amid the disorganization caused by the recurring economic crisis. Or perhaps these are endogenous factors, which condition and determine the adoption of new religious messages. These factors are primarily economic, political and religious.” Perdigón, *La Santa Muerte Protectora de los Hombres [La Santa Muerte, the Human Protector]*, 44.

⁵⁵ “Those imprisoned feared the outcome and their safety. Many of them later visited street altars to give thanks to *La Santa Muerte* for having mediated on their behalf or on behalf of a close family member in a legal dispute and for protecting them while inside jail. They often promised *La Santa Muerte* something if she intervenes favourably in their legal process while they awaited the verdict.” Kristensen Regnar Albaek, “*La Santa Muerte* in Mexico City: The Cult and its Ambiguities,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 47, no. 3 (2015): 543-566.

⁵⁶ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*, 14.

R. Andrew Chesnut is right in pointing out the growth of the cult of *La Santa Muerte* outside Mexico. In other words, devotees of the White Girl are not only in Mexico but in many other parts of the world as well.⁵⁷ This religious phenomenon has transcended national borders, even reaching the states with a significant Hispanic population in the United States, mainly due to the phenomenon of Latina/o migration to the north. The truth is that this religious phenomenon is growing more and more. According to Mark Roques, “This is the fastest-growing religion in the Americas. There are approximately 10-12 million worshippers, mostly in Mexico, but also significant numbers in the United States and Central America.”⁵⁸ Followers of this cult are all around the world: the majority of the followers of *La Santa Muerte* are in Mexico. However, there is a sizable number of devotees in the United States because of the size of Mexican population in the country.

Even though her followers want to make it clear that this cult has no relation to organized crimes, some crimes seem to prove the close relationship between criminal organizations and the worship of la *La Niña Blanca* (The White Daughter).⁵⁹ One of the most famous cases, in which a specific relationship between *La Santa Muerte* and

⁵⁷ From Chile to Canada, *La Santa Muerte* has no rival in terms of the rapidity and scope of its expansion. Ruth Sherlock and James Frederick, “La Santa Muerte: Patron Saint of Narco’s Rattles the Catholic Church,” *The Telegraph*, December 25, 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/12/25/la-santa-muerte-patron-saint-narcos-rattles-catholic-church/> (Accessed March 09, 2020).

⁵⁸ Mark Roques, “Dangerous Faith in Santa Muerte,” *Thinking Faith Network*, Jan 10, 2018, <https://thinkfaith.net/realitybites/blog/dangerous-faith-santa-muerte> (Accessed March 9, 2020).

⁵⁹ The cult of *La Santa Muerte* is a devotion that conforms to any social status. Continuously, it is possible to witness the strength of this devotion in sectors of organized crimes to consecrate and pray to the figure of death. Saul Hernández Santana, “Santa Muerte, Herejía Viva. Crónica de una Visita a un Altar de la Santa Muerte,” *El Cotidiano* 26, no. 169 (2011): 107.

organized crime is found, is the case of kidnapper nicknamed “*El Mocha Orejas*.”⁶⁰ Daniel Arizmendi or *El Mocha Orejas* was one of the most fearsome criminals of the last decade of the twentieth century in Mexico. His violent way of mutilating his victims’ bodies gave him such a nickname. On the dawn of August 17, 1998, the judicial agents of the State of Mexico raided one of the many properties that the criminal had in the vicinity of Naucalpan and the Federal District.

After the arrest of Arizmendi, the agents proceeded to confiscate a large number of amphetamines, weapons, and other illicit objects. Although everything found at Arizmendi's house surprised the agents, what drew their attention the most was an altar that Arizmendi had on his property, which was dedicated to *La Santa Muerte*. The altar left the agents of the public ministry very surprised because until then, the cult of *La Santa Muerte* was not public or so well known. When they saw the altar, they related the altar to satanism and occultism:

The first exposure many Mexicans had to *La Santa Muerte* was through the crime pages of the daily tabloids. After kidnapping more than twenty people in 1990 and collecting more than 40 million dollars in ransom, Daniel Arizmendi López was arrested at his home in August 1998. Known as “*El Mocha orejas*” for this gruesome habit of sending several ears of his victims to their family members, Arizmendi made even bigger headlines for his devotion to then-almost-unknown saint of death. Mexican law enforcement agents discovered and 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.⁶¹

These types of situations cause an inevitable moral degradation of the devotion and give a possible association of the devotion with organized crimes:

⁶⁰ More information about Daniel Arizmendi in, J. Jesus Lemus, *los Malditos* [The Damned] (México, D.F.: Grijalbo, 2013), 19-41.

⁶¹ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*, 15-16.

*Casos extremos en el culto de la Santa Muerte han sido los llamados Narcosatánicos, quienes en 1989 fueron aprendidos por el asesinato de varias personas entre ellas el sobrino de un senador estadounidense- en rituales satánicos. Su sede de operaciones era la ciudad de Matamoros en Tamaulipas: su actividad principal, el narcotráfico, el secuestro, y la venta de armas. Además, este grupo tenía fuertes influencias políticas y se dedicaba al culto de la Muerte para asegurar el éxito en sus operaciones.*⁶²

Nevertheless, the followers of *La Santa Muerte* claim themselves to be ordinary people who have difficulties, mistakes, and successes like any other person. Their claim is right. The problem is, however, each time, there are more people involved in crimes who turn out to be devotees. Also, they say they answered the call of *La Santa Muerte* because they are not the ones who have chosen her, but she chose them to participate in her worship.⁶³ Perhaps this relationship based on “the divine calling” is the reason why the followers of *La Santa Muerte* come from different social classes, regardless of their economic position or religious background. This devotion is open for everybody and enjoys total autonomy in relation to other institutionalized religions.

2.2 *La Santa Muerte* Devotion

When talking about the cult of *La Santa Muerte*, the first aspect to consider is that there is not a specific pattern of a cult dedicated to the figure of death. For instance, her devotees claim that they do not need to follow any rules in this devotion because the cult

⁶² “Extreme cases in the cult of *La Santa Muerte* have been the so-called *Narcosatánicos*. In 1989, the *Narcosatánicos* were involved in the murder of several people, including the nephew of an American senator, in satanic rituals. Their center of operations was in the city of Matamoros Tamaulipas. Some of their main activities include, drug trafficking, kidnapping and sales of weapons. This group had strong political influences as well and they participated in the cult of death to ensure the success of their operations. Felipe Gaytán Alcalá, “Santa Entre Los Malditos. Culto a La Santa Muerte En El México Del Siglo XXI.” *LiminaR. Estudios Sociales y Humanísticos* 6, no. 1 (2013): 40.

⁶³ Equipo Paulino, *La Verdad Sobre la Santa Muerte* (Coyoacán, Ciudad de México: Ediciones Paulinas, 2014), 23.

of *La Santa Muerte* is not connected to any religion. It means that the most important element for them is to have faith, regardless of who they are and what they do.⁶⁴ There is openness and freedom so that each devotee of *La Santa Muerte* can carry out their acts of veneration according to what is best for him or her. However, despite its autonomy, it bears a strong resemblance to Catholicism: *La Santa Muerte's* followers have managed to make a parody of the popular Catholic religiosity. Some elements of the devotion of *La Santa Muerte* that share similarities with Catholicism are, for instance, patron saint festivities, prayers, dances, and music.⁶⁵

This similarity between popular Catholicism and the devotion of *La Santa Muerte* is not surprising since it is very likely that the first worshipers of death were members of the Catholic Church; they integrated all these elements into their practices and devotions. Today, it is not difficult to find numerous elements of popular Catholic devotion in the cult of *La Santa Muerte*. The use of candles, Catholic prayers, novenas, and pilgrimages are only some of the elements of Catholicism, which are used by *La Santa Muerte's* followers in order to worship their skeletal figure:

While Santa Muertistas usually recite novenas individually at altars in their homes, the second type of epic prayer servers as the cult's premier collective ritual. Pioneered by the godmother of the cult, Doña Queta, the rosary (el rosario) is an adaptation of the Catholic series of prayers dedicated to the Virgin. As in the

⁶⁴ As Perdigón claims, "Devotees are not much concerned with the origin of this belief or permitted practices, but with the efficacy of *La Santa Muerte*; they appropriate the symbol, reinterpret it in particular situations, without considering the mixture of the different cultural elements that it implies, to satisfy their needs." See Perdigón, *La Santa Muerte Protectora de los Hombres* [*La Santa Muerte, the Human Protector*], 72.

⁶⁵ "Because most of the devotees of *La Santa Muerte* pronounce themselves as Catholics, the liturgical aspects of this devotion are linked to Catholic piety. It is so that within the devotion to *La Santa Muerte* we find popular devotions such as the prayer of the rosary, novenas, Masses, pilgrimages, among others." Laura Roush, "Santa Muerte, Protection, and 'Desamparo': A View from a Mexico City Altar." *Latin American Research Review* 49, no. 5 (2014): 129-148.

case of Catholicism, Santa Muertistas also pray the rosary alone in the privacy of their own homes.⁶⁶

At the beginning of this century, the traditional Catholic Church Mexico-United States⁶⁷ has integrated the cult of *La Santa Muerte* into its devotional margins, making this new religious institution drag more followers. Thus, in 2003, this church founded the national sanctuary of *La Santa Muerte*, to offer possible sacraments to the followers of this cult. In this way, the participants of the cult of *La Santa Muerte* can now integrate Christian sacraments into their devotion, since many of them seek to be baptized, confirmed, and even married within this cult.⁶⁸

Although the devotion to *La Santa Muerte* does not have specific rules of worship, over time, the practices and devotions of this religious phenomenon have gained momentum and begun to take shape. Thus, it is possible that shortly, this cult will have a more structured and larger form of religiosity.

⁶⁶ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*, 84.

⁶⁷ Regarding the founder of the traditional Mexican-American Catholic Apostolic Church, Bromley notes: “David Romo Guillén founded the traditional Mexican-American Catholic Apostolic Church. Information about his early life is limited. It is known that he was born in 1958 and that he had some experience with several different religions. He knew the members of Jehovah’s Witnesses, whom he respected for their passionate commitment, and his family members joined a traditionalist Catholic group during the 1960s following the liberalization of Vatican II reforms. Romo went on to serve as a veteran of the Mexican Air Force, married, and had five children. Subsequently, he became the leader of a traditionalist group, the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart during 1980.” David G. Bromley, “Iglesia Católica Apostólica México-Estados Unidos,” *World Religion and Spirituality*, March 27, 2012, <https://wrludreels.org/es/2016/10/08/mexican-u-s-catholic/> (accessed March 12, 2020).

⁶⁸ More information about Niurka Marcos’ wedding in, Zulia Duran, “De la Santa Muerte, el Cura que Bendijo la Boda de Niurka,” *la Crónica*, February 23, 2002, <http://www.cronica.com.mx/notas/2004/110942.html> (accessed March 12, 2020).

2.3 The Importance of Colors in this Devotion

As previously stated, the devotion to *La Santa Muerte* was born with very particular connotations, which make this devotion unique compared to other religious cults. Since the cult of *La Santa Muerte* is a devotion that is deeply rooted in the work of the Roman Catholic Church, it can never be separated from its Catholic roots.

It is prevalent in Catholicism to assign patron saints to cities and towns. Also, saints serve as protectors and intercessors on different occasions. Catholics have a patron saint who functions as a guide or mentor throughout their earthly existence.⁶⁹ An example of this is the case of *Santa Rita de Casia*, who was appointed as a lawyer and patron of impossible causes.⁷⁰ The title was given to her after her death because her life was full of miracles. Her biography teaches us that all problematic issues and precarious situations are always gracefully resolved, thanks to her life of holiness and great faith. Similarly, many saints in the Catholic Church have been awarded a specific sponsorship by allowing the faithful to request their intercession in specific situations.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Barbara Calamari and Sandra Dipasqua, *Patron Saints*, (New York, NY: Abram Press, 2007), 8.

⁷⁰ According to Dipasqua, “The word *patron* derives from the Latin *patronus*, which means protector of clients or defender. The intercession of a patron saint is thought to help speed the efficacy of one’s prayers before God.” Barbara Calamari and Sandra Dipasqua, *Patron Saints*, (New York, NY: Abram Press, 2007), 8.

⁷¹ The underlying doctrine of patrons is that of the communion of saints, or the bond of spiritual union existing between God’s servants on earth, in heaven, or in purgatory. The saints are thereby regarded as the advocates and intercessors of those who are making their earthly pilgrimage. Down to the seventeenth century, popular devotion, under the guidance of ecclesiastical authority, chose as the titulars of churches those men or women renowned for their miracles, the saintliness of their lives, or their apostolic ministry in converting a nation to the Gospel. Pope Urban VIII (23 March, 1638) laid down the rules that should guide the faithful in the future selection of patrons of churches, cities, and countries, without, however, interfering with the traditional patrons then venerated. Henry Parkinson, “Patron Saint,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. Charles George Herbermann et al, vol. 11 (Albany, NY: The Encyclopedia Press, 1911), 562-567.

In this way, although all saints are intercessors before God, each of them has a specific focus. In the devotion to *La Santa Muerte*, there is an analogy between the devotion and the patronage exercised by Catholic saints. Although only its devotees proclaim death holy, it is important to know that in practice, *La Santa Muerte* has exceeded the standards of veneration that Catholics have for their saints. For instance, death not only possesses patronage, but she is also believed to have an omnipotent power capable of resolving any situation and any case; this omnipotence is possible thanks to the range of colors used to represent the figure of death.⁷²

Colors have a unique goal in the devotion to *La Santa Muerte* because they play a fundamental role in the lives of those who resort to it as their protector. Throughout the history of humanity, it is easy to know that colors not only have an aesthetic connotation within the artistic and expressive art fields. Colors go beyond the boundaries of what is “visual”; through colors, it is possible to show a full psychological expression of our emotions. Colors tell us a lot about our mood, our most profound feelings, and our characters.⁷³

Concerning *La Santa Muerte* religious phenomenon, colors mark a whole pattern of religious experience, which is associated with the particular need that each believer has:

La Santa Muerte herself has seven main colors: black, white, red, gold, green, blue and purple. Sometimes brown is included as an eighth color or as a replacement for one of the other colors, but this tends to be the exception rather

⁷² The devotees of Santa Muerte have given omnipotence characteristics to the figure of death. Santa Muerte has the ability to act at any stage of life and solve any difficulty. “See” P. Jorge Luis Zarazúa Campa, *La Santa Muerte el Mal de Ojo y Otras Supersticiones*, (Iztapalapa, Ciudad de México: Ediciones Apóstoles de la Palabra, 2004), 36-37.

⁷³ Joann Eckstut and Arielle Eckstut, *The Secret Language of Color* (New York: Black Dog and Leventhall Publishers, 2015), 2015.

than the norm. These colors are called aspects in the *Santa Muerte* community, and in addition of the seven main aspects (plus brown), there are a number of other colors and shades that have a popularity within the community, such as a copper, silver, orange, amber, yellow, and bone. But the main seven are really the only ones a devotee will ever need to do all magic.⁷⁴

It is in this way that *La Santa Muerte* exercises a powerful sponsorship, with different titles that empower it and make it closer to the needs of the “little people.” Therefore, *La Santa Muerte* is not only the patron saint of the sick, the poor, or the imprisoned. It is the saint of the people. It is, as her followers affirm, “*La que nos hace los paro*” (the one who helps us). This relevance and insurmountable omnipotence of death over Catholic saints are possible thanks to the symbology that is given to death through colors, which creates a feeling of supremacy at the time of making a request.⁷⁵

There is not a uniform and established pattern of devotion; instead, the popular piety of her devotees has forged a special meaning in the interpretation of colors in this religious phenomenon. The colors are shown in the garments of *La Santa Muerte*, candles, and other souvenirs of the devotion. The colors and their significance are as follow:

Gold: This color is related to luck and economic, financial well-being. Devotees who have economic needs go to *La Santa Muerte* in golden or yellow color, which ensures the well-being and prosperity of all their devotees.

Red: as in many other cultures, red in the devotion of *La Santa Muerte* represents everything related to passion and love. The devotees of *La Santa Muerte*, who have

⁷⁴ Tomas Prower, *La Santa Muerte: Unearthing the Magic and Mysticism of Death* (Woodbury, Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications, 2019), 83.

⁷⁵ Perdigón, *La Santa Muerte Protectora de los Hombres* [*La Santa Muerte*, the Human Protector], 77.

difficulties with their partners, acquire a statuette of this color, which ensures the well-being of their conjugal life and perfect harmony of sexuality and friendships.

Green: the green avocation of *La Santa Muerte* is known as the protector of legal cases and is invoked when the faithful have difficulties related to justice.

White: in the devotion to *La Santa Muerte*, this color is used as a purification tool; many families go to the representation of death dressed in white to ward off evil energies, especially in places where there are presumed envies and resentments.

Black: black symbolizes total protection of the faithful who are besieged by negative energies; many also use black to curse their enemies.

Blue: this color is known as the color of wisdom in the cult of death. This advocacy is used by students, teachers, and all those who work in the educational area.

Purple: it is prevalent to find *La Santa Muerte* dressed in purple in hospitals or houses where there is a patient because this color is used in the field of health. *La Santa Muerte*, with purple ornaments, combats illness and protects the welfare of families.⁷⁶

Finally, *La Santa Muerte*, dressed in seven colors, is known as *La Santa Muerte* of the seven powers. This figure of death is the most powerful, according to the devotees of *La Santa Muerte*, because it contains all the powers to perform any miracle and fulfill any request. When dressed in seven colors, death guarantees the effectiveness of its intercession and power: “*La Santa Muerte*, with her popular seven-color rainbow, can be

⁷⁶ More information about colors and *La Santa Muerte*'s cult in, Chesnut, *Santa Muerte: Devoteed to Death the Skeleton Saint*, 200; Perdigón, *La Santa Muerte Protectora de los Hombres [La Santa Muerte, the Human Protector]*. 77; Zarazua, *La Santa Muerte el Mal de Ojo y Otras Supersticiones*, 36-37.

used as a substitute for any color, while the rainbow aspect is only used when targeting all aspects simultaneously.”⁷⁷

2.4 The Altar

Although the devotion to *La Santa Muerte* has no official connection to any religion, some of its devotees are members of different churches. What cannot be denied is that this devotion has religious characteristics embodied in material substances that lead its devotees to a more in-depth approach to the invisible and the supernatural. One of the fundamental characteristics in the veneration of death is the altar, where an image of *La Santa Muerte* is placed. An altar represents a particular space where worship and prayer can be rendered. Hence building an altar contains a deep, religious meaning. According to *The Dictionary of Bible and Religion*, “[an] Altar is a place or structure for the purpose of making various forms of sacrificial offerings.”⁷⁸ The devotees of *La Santa Muerte* also find a place of worship through altars, which is a material sign elevated to the supernatural.

The altars of *La Santa Muerte* do not have an established uniformity. Rather, it depends on the preference, creativity, imagination, and style of each devotee.⁷⁹ What we can distinguish is that there are four types of altars in which the personality of the

⁷⁷ Tomas Prower, *La Santa Muerte: Unearthing the Magic and Mysticism of Death*, 89.

⁷⁸ William H. Gertz, *The Dictionary of the Bible and Religion* (Nashville, TN: Parthenon Press, 1986), 38-39.

⁷⁹ Although there is no definite, defined structure around the cult of *La Santa Muerte*, practices and writings circulate with very specific activities such as the construction of altars, ways of practicing this devotion, prayers to her, etc. Perdigón, *La Santa Muerte Protectora de los Hombres [La Santa Muerte, the Human Protector]*, 82.

devotees is denoted: home altars, altars for initiates, altars for healers, and the so-called narco-altars:

A home altar of *La Santa Muerte* is found in a privileged place of a house.

Candles, fruits, incense, water, cigarettes, and other elements can accompany her. It is also common to see her with some other religious figures on the altar:

Así mismo en estos altares pueden verse imágenes de Jesucristo, la Virgen de Guadalupe, San Judas Tadeo o San Miguel Arcángel, por citar algunos. El que la Santísima Muerte se encuentre sola o acompañada depende del dueño del altar, ya sea por creencias, herencia familiar o gusto.⁸⁰

Altars for initiates have the characteristic of carrying out a whole ritual for the consecration of the initiates. This consecration lasts nine weeks, and during this time, candles and incense are offered. This altar has well-defined characteristics:

Este altar por lo regular se coloca en un lugar privado, reservado, sin acceso a extraños. El espacio deberá tener los muros pintados de negro y el techo de morado. La zona destinada propiamente al altar se ubica en la pared oriental mirando hacia el poniente. Sobre una mesa se coloca un mantel negro, pegada a la pared se coloca una caja de madera forrada de terciopelo rojo, la cual lleva en su interior un paliacate morado con objetos de poder (huesos humanos, de animales nocturnos o pertenencias de algún difunto querido), al que en ocasiones se le añade tierra de lugares sagrados (cementeros) o de poder (zonas arqueológicas, panteones y parajes ceremoniales). También se disponen cuarzos para protección. Así, sobre la caja se coloca otro mantel negro y, arriba de este, la imagen de la Santa Muerte; a los lados de la imagen pueden estar flores, frutas, utensilios de barro con agua, sal, copal, incienso, dinero y cuarzos.⁸¹

⁸⁰ “Also, on these altars, it is possible to see images of Jesus Christ, the Virgin of Guadalupe, Saint Jude Thaddeus, or Saint Michael Archangel, to name a few. Whether *La Santa Muerte* is alone or accompanied depends on the owner of the altar, whether by beliefs, family heritage, or taste.” Ibid.

⁸¹ “This altar is usually placed in a private, reserved place, without access to strangers. Space must have the walls painted black and the ceiling purple. The area intended for the altar itself is located on the eastern wall facing the west. On a table, a black tablecloth is placed. Attached to the wall, a wooden box lined with red velvet is placed, which carries on its inside a purple paliacate with objects of power (human bones, nocturnal animals or belongings of a deceased loved one), which, in some cases, people can add land of sacred places (cemeteries) or power (archaeological sites, pantheons, and ceremonial sites). Quartz is also available for protection. Likewise, on the box another black tablecloth is placed and, above this, they put the image of *La Santa Muerte*; on her left and right sides, flowers, fruits, clay utensils with water, salt, copal, incense, money, and quartz might be placed.” Perdigón, *La Santa Muerte Protectora de los Hombres* [*La Santa Muerte*, the human Protector], 82.

Altar of Healers, as the name indicates, is exclusively for spiritual guides and healers:

En ellos, según se trabaje lo blanco o lo negro, la habitación estará iluminada o en penumbras. En caso de ser un altar de luz, se cuenta con una mesa exclusiva para uso ritual, con un mantel blanco, en donde se deposita a la Santa Muerte blanca

(en ocasiones se acompaña de Jesucristo, vírgenes u otros santos, lo mismo que de imágenes de guías espirituales que apoyan al curandero, como es el caso de indígenas americanos) a la que se puede decorar con cráneos u otra representación. Entre los elementos adicionales presentes en este altar destacan las cestas con pan blanco, con levadura o con llama de huevo, sin ser de azúcar; espejos en forma octagonal (para rechazar energías negativas), agua en una copa de cristal transparente, sal, flores (rosas o nardos). Además hay ofrendas especiales de agradecimiento, con frutas, verduras, miel, incienso, rosas y romero.⁸²

Finally, we have the so-called *Narco-altares* which have the peculiarity of being elaborated by those who are involved in organized crimes. As Perdigón contends, *en una mesa acomodan la escultura de la imagen en y junto a ella colocan las veladoras de rigor, una piedra de cocaína, una jeringa con heroína, un vaso de licor y unas monedas.⁸³*

2.5 Iconography and Symbolism in the Image of *La Santa Muerte*

There are many challenges that this devotion had to overcome in order to find public acceptance within society. For example, it is the iconographic part, which has been

⁸² “On the altars, depending on whether one works with white or black, the room will be illuminated or left in darkness. In the case of an altar of light, there is an exclusive table for ritual use. The table is covered with white tablecloth, on which a white *Santa Muerte* is placed (sometimes accompanied by Jesus Christ, virgins or other saints, as well as images of spiritual guides that support the healer, as in the case of Native Americans). The table can be decorated with skulls or other representation related to death. Among the additional elements present on this altar, there are baskets of white, sugar-free bread, with yeast or yolk, octagonal mirrors (to reject negative energies), water in a transparent glass cup, salt, and flowers (roses or daffodils). Besides, there are special offerings of thanksgiving with fruits, vegetables, honey, incense, roses, and rosemary.” Perdigón, *La Santa Muerte Protectora de los Hombres* [*La Santa Muerte*, the human protector], 83.

⁸³ “The sculpture is displayed on a table. In and next to it, they place candles of rigor, a cocaine stone, a syringe with heroin, a glass of liquor and some coins.” *Ibid.*, 83.

somewhat scandalous and macabre. Generally, people are reluctant to worship an image of a skeleton holding a scythe and dressed in a robe. Precisely, the image of death has been one of the most common problems of the devotion. Although some people have already become familiar with the figure of death, for others, this image is still scandalous and creepy. However, this religious phenomenon opens spaces between Mexican people because death has a vital role in Mexican culture: “The Mexican chases after death, mocks it, courts it, hugs it and sleep with it.”⁸⁴

As such, death is an essential factor in this culture. Therefore, it is also essential to have a material representation of it. When the religious figure of *La Santa Muerte* possesses a well-defined iconography and elements related to death, it becomes more representative and symbolic for its followers. It is worth to mention that some of these elements date from the period of bubonic plague in Europe. They represented human fragility in the face of disease and death. At the same time, these features show the power of death in the world of the living. In other words, the paintings or material representations of death, along with many of its characteristics, depict the intersection of human finitude and the power of death.

Since ancient times there has been a need to materialize the concept of death. Many cultures and religions have done so through a human skeleton, which is the last thing to decompose when a person dies. Also, skeletons have been used because they represented equality. As Prower rightly contends, “The skeleton also symbolizes our equality. There is no skin color, no fancy clothing, no expensive jewelry, just a single

⁸⁴ Stephen Woodman, “The Day of Death: How Death became a National Symbol,” *The Mexican Labyrinth*, October 30, 2014, <https://themexicanlabyrinth.com/2014/10/30/the-day-of-the-dead-how-death-was-made-into-a-national-symbol/> (accessed March 4, 2020).

common denominator that we all share at our literal core.”⁸⁵ Other elements that often appear in paintings of death serve as symbols with deep religious meanings. Thomas Prower’s interpretation of symbols in paintings of death is particularly useful to understand what each element stands for:

1. Cloaks: A type of garment used in many cultures, cloaks are related to discretion and religiosity. Women, therefore, used to wear a cloak more than men did, although, in some cultures, it was used by both sexes. It also has a meaning related to death: “The cloak represents death’s constant presence among us even though we cannot see her. Magic involving protection and safety often emphasizes her cloak during spell work.”⁸⁶
2. Halo: A halo is a circular ring that symbolizes divinity. It is sometimes represented as a geometric shape while other times, it appears as flashes of light only: “The halo is used to reinforce the divinity of *La Santa Muerte*.”⁸⁷
3. Hourglass: It symbolizes the measurement of small fractions of time: “The hourglass represents *La Santa Muerte*’s dominion over time. The finite amount of time we have here on earth in this form. The exact number of grains of sand, however, can vary and is never fully know, which reflects the varying number of years each of us has before we die and the impossibility of knowing our date of death.”⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Prower, *La Santa Muerte: Unearthing the Magic and Mysticism of Death*, 63.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁸⁷ Prower, *La Santa Muerte: Unearthing the Magic and Mysticism of Death*, 64.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

4. Owl: along with other animals such as ravens, snakes, and spiders, owls have a strong relationship with black magic and the occult: “Owl have a cross-cultural recognition as a symbol of wisdom. This animal reflects *La Santa Muerte*’s omniscient understanding of our world.”⁸⁹
5. Scale: It serves as a symbol of justice and power over human subjects: “The scale is the representation of justice and impartiality. Since death does not judge a person, the scales are in the impartial way of measuring the merits and goodness of a person.”⁹⁰
6. Scythe: This lawn mowing tool has always contained a religious meaning in religious art, particularly after the black plague in Europe: “The scythe is one of her most well-known and depicted symbols. In practically, a scythe is an agriculture tool used to harvest crops. In the same vein, *La Santa Muerte*’s scythe is used to harvest souls and end a person’s life.”⁹¹
7. World globe: finally, the world represents power. As Power claims, “*La Santa Muerte* is often shown holding the world in one of her hands to represent Death’s dominion over all life on earth. Regardless of borders, nationality, or location, the entire world is firmly in her grasp.”⁹²

Finally, by having a general overview of *La Santa Muerte*, it is possible to learn more about this devotion which continues to gain devotees within, and even beyond,

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 66.

⁹¹ Prower, *La Santa Muerte: Unearthing the Magic and Mysticism of Death*, 66.

⁹² Ibid., 67.

Mexican society. In turn, as mentioned above, this cult begins to cross borders and establishes itself as a whole new religious phenomenon. In the next chapter, I will offer a critique of the cult of death from the perspective of Catholic theology. Theologies from other Christian traditions also serve as a tool to elucidate the term “death” in the context of the devotion of *La Santa Muerte*.



Fig. 2. One of the earliest images of La Santa Muerte. Source: “Prayer to La Santa Muerte for the Protection of the Home,” Photograph from *La Niña Huesuda* June 20, 2017. <https://medium.com/@laninahuesuda/prayer-to-santa-muerte-for-the-protection-of-the-home-d26d0c987bfb> (Accessed May 05, 2020).

Chapter III

The Need for a New Apologetics in Response to *La Santa Muerte*

3.1. Patristic Apologetics as a Paradigm

The Catholic Church, as a divine institution, has had to grow and evolve over time. In this process, the Church, as mother and teacher, has the responsibility and authority to lead, advise, teach, and correct God's people as they progress and grow in faith through their encounter with Jesus Christ. "Its end is the kingdom of God, which has been begun by God himself on earth, and which is to be further extended until it is brought to perfection by Him at the end of time . . .".⁹³

In this chapter, I bring Catholic apologetics to critically examine the religious phenomenon called *La Santa Muerte*. I take an apologetic approach based on canonical, biblical, dogmatic, and moral theology. I focus on these aspects of Christian theology since, in the devotion to *La Santa Muerte*, certain aspects contradict the theological notions regarding doctrines of creation, grace and sin, redemption, freedom, will, and sanctity of life.

In the first centuries of Christianity, Christian communities were involved in conflicts with the Roman empire that, at that time, ruled the entire Mediterranean area and Asia Minor. The persecution and accusations were of all kinds, from those of morality to those related to religious doctrines. The nascent Church not only had to give testimonial answers of its faith, but it also had to establish doctrines, because, as a nascent church, it ran the risk of deviating and losing itself in a culture influenced by

⁹³ Paul VI, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, No. 9, Vatican website, November 21, 1964, accessed April 24, 2020, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

Greek philosophy. Nevertheless, it was the Church's constant need and effort to defend its faith and doctrines against outsiders, which helped the development of a method of engaging in rational conversations and apologetics about faith.⁹⁴ Then emerged within the patristic period, men who are known until now as the Church Fathers and Apologists. Figures like Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, Origen, Cyprian, and Irenaeus were crucial in defending the faith of the early centuries. Christianity not only had to deal with the bloody persecutions of the empire, where hundreds of people were subjected to trials that ended in martyrdom but, at the same time, Christians had to respond to heresies which circulated the confession of faith of the first Christian communities: heresies related to the nature of Christ that affected the entire dogmatic structure of faith.⁹⁵

Although those times were crucial for the Catholic Church, mainly due to the situations that the Church lived, the truth is that they were not the only challenges that this institution had to face. History teaches us that over time, the Church had to deal with new problems and respond to different religious movements and positions of thought that were not so closely related to Catholic doctrine. Thus, until today, the Church continues to face this type of circumstances and returns to its memories and traditions in history for reference. Being an apologist means to give a reason for what a person believes. It is not merely getting caught up in silly quarrels and endless arguments. It is a way to find a way

⁹⁴ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church: The Story of Emergent Christianity from the Apostolic Age to the Dividing of the Ways Between the Greek East and the Latin West* (New York: Pelican Books, 1967), 9-31.

⁹⁵ The following books provide more information about the beginnings of the Church: Mike Aquilina, *The Fathers of the Church: An Introduction to the First Christian Teachers* (New York: Our Sunday Visitor, 1965), 73-119. Also, Chadwick, *The Early Church: The Story of Emergent Christianity from the Apostolic Age to the Dividing of the Ways Between the Greek East and the Latin West*, 9-31.

to show the truth because the truth is not demonstrated; instead, it is “shown” because it has always been there.⁹⁶

3.2. Holiness in the Catholic Church

Saint Death is a more accurate translation, which better reveals her identity as a folk saint.

—R. Andrew Chestnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, The Skeleton Saint*⁹⁷

When someone hears the word “holiness” it is easy to connect the meaning of the word to its religious dimension, since it is in this context that the term acquires high relevance, as seen in the distinction between the sacred and the profane. Thus, in many religious traditions, the concept of saints—people acknowledged as holy—is recognized and defined, due to an a posteriori notion this word evokes.

Although the term “holy” or “holiness” is understood in different religions, there are different guidelines according to the traditions and ancient writings of each religious

⁹⁶ *La fe tiene un carácter racional, por lo cual exige un conocimiento (aunque sea mínimo) de las razones que la hacen creíble. La fundamentación científica de los motivos de credibilidad ayuda a adquirir un conocimiento teológico más pleno de la fe y a convertir en certeza refleja la certeza vulgar que muchos cristianos tienen sobre el hecho de la Revelación y sobre la obligación moral de creer en ella. Además, la apologética satisface el interés de los numerosos cristianos que no se conforman con tener dicha certeza vulgar y desean saber con precisión las razones por las que se conoce que Dios nos ha hablado, el modo como lo ha hecho y el valor de la fe. Por esto la apologética sirve también para estimar la fe y desearla* [Faith has a rational character, which is why it requires a knowledge (minimal, at least) of the reasons that make it credible. The scientific basis for reasons of credibility helps to acquire a fuller theological understanding of the faith and to convert it into certainty that reflects the low confidence that many Christians have about the fact of the Revelation and about the moral obligation to believe in it. Furthermore, apologetics satisfies the interest of many Christians who are not satisfied with such low certainty. They want to accurately know the reasons why God has spoken to us, the way God has done it, and the value of their faith. For this reason, apologetics also serves to estimate faith and to desire it]. Daniel Iglesias Grezes, “Reflexiones Sobre la Necesidad Actual de la Apologética,” *Razones para Nuestra Fe*, March 03, 2014, <http://www.infocatolica.com/blog/razones.php/1403031211-reflexiones-sobre-la-necesidad> (accessed March 20, 2020).

⁹⁷ Chestnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, The Skeleton Saint*, 7.

tradition.⁹⁸ For example, when it comes to saints, the Catholic Church has a process of canonization and beatification. This process has the purpose of scrutinizing the holiness of the faithful. Canonizing is the public proclamation that someone faithful has heroically lived the virtues and been docile to the grace of God in his/her life. For its part, the Church recognizes the spirit of holiness and promotes the witness of these exemplary lives as a model of Christian life for the entire flock.⁹⁹

According to a designation in Acts¹⁰⁰, all Christians are saints, and since the first centuries of Christianity, they have accepted this premise of faith.¹⁰¹ The early Christians were convinced that the apostles were saints since they had a close relationship with Jesus. Also, it is well known that holiness was linked in a particular way to martyrdom because this meant dying with Christ and participating with him in eternal life. The greatest glory of Christians who died as martyrs were mentioned together with Christ at the Eucharistic table, accompanying the Lord in his redemptive sacrifice.¹⁰² In this way, the acclamation of the martyrs, the veneration of their relics, and the inclusion of their names in private prayers made martyrdom the first way to reach the altars. However, after many years of Christian persecution in Rome, Christianity was received as the religion of

⁹⁸ Joel R. Beeke, *Holiness* (Pensacola, Florida: Worldview, 1999), 1-8.

⁹⁹ Ricardo Quintero Bescos, *Procesos de Canonización: Comentarios a la Instrucción Sanctorum Mater* [Canonization Processes: Comments on the Instruction of Sanctorum Mater] (Madrid: Facultad de Teología San Damaso Publications, 2010), 34-42.

¹⁰⁰ "Now as Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints that lived at Lydda." Acts of the Apostles 9: 32. *The Didache Bible*.

¹⁰¹ The word "saint" in the New Testament refers to Christians in distinction from nonbelievers. It also refers to Christians residing in particular places. See Paul J. Achtemeier, *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1985), 892.

¹⁰² Nonna Verna and David G. Hunter, *Suffering and Evil in Early Christian Thought* (Brookline, Massachusetts: Baker Academic, 2016), 17-18.

the empire. The faithful had to seek new forms of holiness since the death of Jesus could no longer be imitated. Now, the invitation was to imitate Jesus' life. This event marks an essential turn regarding the definition of holiness in the Church as we will find men and women who go to the desert to seek the will of God and live according to the gospel.¹⁰³

As regards the saints of the Church, for many centuries, there was no need for a formal process of canonization. If a person was acclaimed for his/her sanctity, it was the same people who proclaimed the virtuous life of these men and women of God whom the Church later made official:

In the first five centuries of the Church, the process for recognizing a saint was based on public acclaim or the *vox populi, vox Dei* (voice of the people, voice of God). There was no formal canonical process as understood by today's standards. Beginning in the sixth century and continuing into the twelfth century, the intervention of the local bishop was required before someone could be canonized.¹⁰⁴

Thus, the Church's list of saints included not only the martyrs, but also missionaries, bishops, monks and nuns, and people of the monarchy. However, there was a concern in the Church about whom the people prayed to and asked for intercession. According to the Catholic Church, the objective of canonization is not for the sake of the saints. The real intention is for the faithful to have models of holiness and intercessors who can help them interpret the experience of the gospel in their lives:

Art. 4 - § 1. The cause of beatification and canonization regards a Catholic who in life, in death and after death has enjoyed a reputation of holiness by living all the Christian virtues in an heroic manner; or enjoys a reputation of martyrdom

¹⁰³ The fathers and mothers of the desert taught us a different form of holiness after the Church became the official religion of the empire. See Philip Kosloski, "Quiénes eran los Padres del desierto y porqué eran importantes?" *Aleteia*, May 16, 2017, <https://es.aleteia.org/2017/05/16/quienes-eran-los-padres-del-desierto-y-por-que-son-importantes/>, accessed April 09, 2020.

¹⁰⁴ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Saints*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Website, accessed April 09, 2020, <http://www.usccb.org/about/public-affairs/backgrounders/saints-backgrounder.cfm>.

because, having followed Christ more closely, he has sacrificed his life in the act of martyrdom.¹⁰⁵

The formal process of canonization of a saint cannot begin until at least five years after the death of the person, although there have been cases in which the process started almost immediately after death.¹⁰⁶ This period of time ensures that people's reputation for sanctity is maintained over time. The postulator must present the petition at first to the diocesan bishop of the place where the candidate died. This first step is to start the cause for those who are going to be possible saints. The documents to be presented will be a biography of the candidate, his or her writings if there are any, and witnesses who can attest to the virtues or martyrdom of the person in the process. This first step is called the diocesan investigation, and it collects pieces of evidence and testimonies about the candidate. Thus, the candidate will be called a "servant of God."

When the diocese of the religious community has a first draft of the process, a rapporteur will be appointed within the commission of rapporteurs, who will be in charge of supervising the cause from the beginning to the end of it. Then a commission of theologians is appointed. These theologians will work together with the rapporteur, and both will be in charge of preparing the *Positio*. *Positio* is a document that summarizes the

¹⁰⁵ Congregation for the Causes of Saints, Instruction for Conducting Diocesan or Eparchial Inquires in the Causes of Saints *Sanctorum Mater*, Art. 4 - § 1, Vatican Website, 2007, accessed April, 13, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/csaints/documents/rc_con_csaints_doc_20070517_sanctorum-mater_en.html.

¹⁰⁶ "The feeling that it is just a little bit too soon to elevate John Paul II to sainthood has been echoed by many Catholics who prefer a longer *post mortem* waiting period to make sure the potential saint's earthly record holds up. John Paul II will be the fastest tracked saint in the history of Catholic saint-making, beating out [Mother Theresa](#), who previously held the record by just 15 days. When he died in April 2005, cheers erupted calling for "santo subito" or "sainthood immediately," but few actually thought it would be—or should be—this fast." Barbie Latza Nadeau, "The Seedy Side of Sainthood: Was John Paul II Canonized too Fast?," *Daily Beast*, July 12, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-seedy-side-of-sainthood-was-john-paul-ii-canonized-too-fast>, accessed April 23, 2020.

life and recounts the virtues of the now servant of God. Upon receiving the *Positio*, the Congregation for the Cause of Saints will dictate the approval or disapproval of the process.

If this was approved, the servant of God would become venerable. To achieve beatification, the Church demands a miracle, one God, of course, grants through the intercession of that candidate. This so-called miracle will be subjected to medical and scientific tests by a commission of doctors and scientists who work for the Congregation for the Cause of Saints to determine that the cure is miraculous, complete, and inexplicable according to the parameters of science. If so, the Pope proclaims the beatification of the servant of God and designates a day for his or her veneration. This veneration will be only for some particular Churches. After the beatification the same process is followed for the canonization. In this, a second miracle is expected for the proclamation of the possible new saint.¹⁰⁷

The process of canonization in the Church has been taking the form it has now after several modifications and adjustments through centuries. For example, in 1121 Pope Callixtus II determined that a biography of the candidate be attached to the process; in 1170, Pope Alexander III decreed that no one could be declared a saint without the authorization of the high pontiff, being incorporated into law in 1234 by Pope Gregory XIX. The centralization of the processes of beatification and canonization in the Church

¹⁰⁷ Congregation for the Causes of Saints, *New Laws for the Causes of Saints*, Vatican Website, 1983, accessed April 14, 2020, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/csaints/documents/rc_con_csaints_doc_07021983_nor_me_en.html. See also. Matthew Bunson, Margaret Bunson, and Stephan Bunson, *Our Sunday Visitor's Encyclopedia of Saints* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1998), 57.

of Rome was essential. This centralization was to avoid abuses on the part of the parishioner who, on many occasions, inclined to fanaticism, worshiping, and venerating people who were not approved by the Church.¹⁰⁸ In the case of death and its connection to holiness, as in when people pray for a holy death,” death is not a historical figure whose virtues and holiness can be examined and admired. For this reason, it is canonically impossible to speak of the sanctity of death in terms of the process of canonization. However, it is possible to refer to death as a holy encounter with God, whereby one goes home to one’s Creator. Saint Paul says: “For if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord; so then, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.”¹⁰⁹ Therefore, death in this spiritual and allegorical sense is referred to as sister. In this way, death is linked with the redemptive passion of the Christ. St. Francis, the “poor one” of Assisi does this in his *Canticle*.

San Francisco no llama “hermana” a la muerte porque la personifique, ni ignora su carácter inexorable idealizándola falsamente, sino porque lo une a la muerte redentora de Cristo y por eso la acepta, la acoge y se hermana con ella. En el Cántico de las Criaturas, compuesto en su lecho de muerte, afirma que a la única muerte a la que hay que temer es a la “segunda muerte”, que es la que nos aleja eternamente de Dios.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution on *Divinus Perfectionis Magister*, Vatican Website, January 25, 1983, accessed April 14, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_25011983_divinus-perfectionis-magister.html.

¹⁰⁹ Rm 14:8 (The New American Bible).

¹¹⁰ Saint Francis does not call death "sister" because he personifies it, nor does he ignore its inexorable character by falsely idealizing it; but rather because he unites it with the redemptive death of Christ and therefore accepts it, welcomes it, and becomes intertwined with it. In the *Canticle of the Creatures*, composed on his deathbed, he affirms that the only death to be feared is the "second death," that which distances us eternally from God. Franciscanismo en Breve, “San Francisco y la Hermana Muerte,” *Espíritu y Vida: Teología y Espiritualidad Franciscana*, Noviembre 03, 2017, <https://espirituyvidaofm.wordpress.com/2017/11/03/san-francisco-y-la-hermana-muerte/>, accessed May 05, 2020.

3.3. Biblical Insights about Death

Jorge Francisco Alegría Blas, hijo de luz de La Santa Muerte dice: La Santa Muerte no es vengativa ni mala. Por el contrario, explica, que fue creada por Dios como un ser de luz y concede sólo cosas buenas a quienes la adoran.

—Karla Cancino, *A quienes adoramos a la Santa Muerte nos agreden mucho*¹¹¹

Because the subject of death is significant within the Bible, the word “death” in the Bible appears almost a thousand times in the Old Testament and about a hundred times in the New Testament. The theme of death is intrinsically related to the idea of life, which occupies a privileged place in the Word of God.

From the first chapter of the book of Genesis, the sacred author narrates how God calls creatures to exist when God’s powerful word “and God said”¹¹² was announced, giving importance to each one of them in this divine manifestation of creation. However, within creation, God also provides a vital characteristic to some of the creation called into existence: life. According to Genesis, life is perfect in every nature. In the story of creation, there is no room for death because the creation of God comes from God’s providence and goodness that ratifies the absence of any evil.¹¹³ With the divine claim,

¹¹¹ “Jorge Francisco Alegría Blas, son of light of *La Santa Muerte* says: *La Santa Muerte* is not vengeful or evil. On the contrary, she was created by God as a being of light and grants only good things to those who worship her.” See Karla Cancino, “A Quienes Adoramos a La Santa Muerte nos Agreden Mucho,” *Diario de Xalapa*, Noviembre 2, 2019, <https://www.diariodexalapa.com.mx/local/a-quienes-adoramos-a-la-santa-muerte-nos-agreden-mucho-xalapa-culto-santa-muerte-cumpleanos-mananitas-mariachis-4400488.html>, (accessed April 10, 2020).

¹¹² In many other passages, the expression “God said” not only affirms the divine origin of law; instead, there is something else: God has come out of his mystery to speak and interact with his creation. For example, see Gen. 1-2.

¹¹³ Creating the first man and woman in God’ image and likeness, God conferred on him and her extraordinary gifts, some far above human nature: the supernatural, by divine grace, made him and her a participant in God’s nature; and the preternaturals, common to the nature of angels, such as integrity, immortality, impassivity, absolute dominance over animals, and distinguished wisdom. With the gift of immortality, man would not suffer death -which is the disaggregation of the various elements of all living matter- and would live for some time in the Earthly Paradise, being transferred to heaven (beatific vision),

“God saw that it was good,¹¹⁴” the sacred author discards the dualistic and theistic idea of God which circulated in the neighboring towns of ancient Israel and later in early Christianity:

But who is the god of this world? Those that are diseased with Marcion’s ideas, declare that this is said referring to the Creator, the just only, but not good. For they say that there is a certain God, just but not good. But the Manichaeans say that the devil is meant here, wanting to introduce, from this passage, another creator of the world besides the true One, quite senselessly.¹¹⁵

Although death has no place in God’s creation, the Scripture mentions that the concept of death is known and contains a particularity. This particularity is that the word “death” is closely linked to disobedience. The Scripture records, “except the tree of knowledge of good and evil. From that tree you shall not eat; when you eat from it you shall die.”¹¹⁶

The two terms (death and disobedience) play the role of cause and effect as opposed to the term life and obedience, which are also linked to God since the Divine plan is that human beings have an enduring and eternal life which can only be achieved through obedience.¹¹⁷ To the first binomial disobedience-death, the figure of the devil is

without going through the terrible and painful trance of death. Barbara Honorio, “El Pecado Original y los Dones Preternaturales,” *Gaudium Press, un Instrumento Para la Nueva Evangelización*, Abril 17, 2012, <https://es.gaudiumpress.org/content/35677-El-pecado-original-y-los-dones-preternaturales->, (accessed March 24, 2020).

¹¹⁴ Gen. 1:10 (The New American Bible). Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced here employ The New American Bible.

¹¹⁵ de Wet, Chris L. “John Chrysostom on Manichaeism.” *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 75, no. 1 (2019), 78.

¹¹⁶ Gen. 2:17.

¹¹⁷ God warns human beings against the consequences of eating of “the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil.” Death was, of course, an unknown entity for them at that point. But they must have had some premonition of what it would be to die. John Schultz, *Commentary to the Book of Genesis* (Toronto: Bible Commentaries, 2002), 15-16. Note that judicially and implicitly, Adam did die on the day that he sinned. He thereupon became a mortal, dying creature. His doom was fixed, his fate sealed. He passed under the irrevocable sentence of death. His life was forfeit, and he began to die. Although he might live on for an hour, a week, a year (or 930 years, as Adam did—Gen. 5:5), it was a respite under condemnation, a

added. The devil takes advantage of the tools of disobedience and pride to lead humans to their fatal destiny, death: “Now the snake was the most cunning of all the wild animals that the lord God had made. He asked the woman, ‘Did God really say, “You shall not eat from any of the trees in the garden”?’”¹¹⁸ In the text, the serpent’s question sounds very provocative: he tempts the man and the woman, the very personifications of God’s image, to question the divine mandate and challenge it.¹¹⁹

The pericope (Genesis 3:4-5) writes, “it is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, ‘You shall not eat it or even touch it, or else you will die.’” But the snake said to the woman: “You certainly will not die! God knows well that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, who know good and evil.”

It is clear that the devil calls God a liar, telling the woman that they will not die, and offers her the most tempting option for any human being: to be like gods. Hence there is a link between sin, death, and the ancient serpent. The devil appears as the

delay, or stay, of execution. If, however, he was to live forever, there must be a rescue, a redemption, an act of amnesty and grace. Otherwise, the death debt incurred must be paid in full. He must, in due time, die. Leroy Edwin Froom sees this as a fundamental point. See his essay, “The Penalty of Death for Disobedience,” *Truth According to the Scripture*, September 17, 2008, <https://www.truthaccordingtoscripture.com/documents/death/death-for-disobedience.php#.XoPNRi2ZPGL>, (accessed March, 24.2020).

¹¹⁸ In OT literature, serpents usually have a negative connotation. The older story of creation which explains the sinfulness of the human race, has as its villain the serpent. Also, the serpent represents the devil and chaos. Achtemeier, *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, 982.

¹¹⁹ The author provides a short, but powerful narrative about how the disobedience happened. The woman and the snake discuss God as “provider” and “withholder.” The snake asks whether God acts exclusively as withholder. The woman says, “No.” God acts first of all as provider. But we notice that even the woman overemphasizes the withholding action of God: neither shall you touch it (v. 3). Apparently neither are persuaded that God wants most of all to provide. So the talk turns to the reason for the withholding. The serpent suggests that God’s withholding is motivated not by the danger of death, but by the threat of people becoming like God, possessing knowledge which unlocks all the mysteries of the world or knowledge which controls human destiny. Eugene Roop, *Genesis: Believers Church Bible Commentary* (Kitchener, Ontario: Editorial Council, 1987), 43.

tempter, sin as the act of breaking with God and a posture of submission to the temptation produced by the devil, and death as a consequence of deliberately disobeying divine plans.¹²⁰

In this way, sin will be an echo throughout the history of salvation, and its last consequence will be death understood not only materially, but also in the spiritual stratum. Therefore, it is possible to affirm that death has never been a product of God's creation; instead, it has been a cause. The book of Wisdom illustrates this point forcefully: "Because God did not make death, nor does he rejoice in the destruction of the living. For he fashioned all things that they might have being, and the creatures of the world are wholesome; There is not a destructive drug among them nor any domain of Hades on earth, for righteousness is undying."¹²¹ The sacred author wants to make it clear again that death is not created by God. He affirms it by referring to the book of Genesis, where the divine intention of creation is clear: the gift of immortality from the Maker of things bestowed upon humans, which is lost in the fall due to the envy of the devil.¹²²

Although there are vast differences between the Old and New Testaments, according to Church teaching, all the theological themes presented in the Bible are connected. Thus, there is an absolute complementarity in which the former makes sense of the latter, and vice versa. The Second Vatican Council in its *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)* number sixteenth records:

God, the inspirer and author of both Testaments, wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and the Old be made manifest in the New. (2) For,

¹²⁰ Susan Brayford, *Genesis* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2007), 238.

¹²¹ Wisdom 1: 13-14 (The New American Bible)

¹²² Sean P. Kealy, *The Wisdom Books of the Bible: Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Ben Sira, and Wisdom of Solomon: A Survey of The History of Their Interpretation* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2012), 268.

though Christ established the new covenant in His blood (see Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25), still the books of the Old Testament with all their parts, caught up into the proclamation of the Gospel, (3) acquire and show forth their full meaning in the New Testament (see Matt. 5:17; Luke 24:27; Rom. 16:25-26; 2 Cor. 14:16) and in turn shed light on it and explain it.¹²³

It is in this sense that there is a profoundly important characteristic in consideration of the New Testament and its relationship with the Old Testament. This characteristic is, in turn, the pattern that illuminates and gives meaning to the entire Scripture. This pattern is called Jesus Christ and the culmination of the Revelation that occurs in him. Thus, every theme in the Bible will revolve around the image of Jesus, the Messiah.

Addressing the issue of death in the New Testament, this theme takes on two special meanings. The first is an echo of the Old Testament's conception where death is the fruit of disobedience and neglect (Mt. 25: 1-13),¹²⁴ and the second, death as a door to the encounter with God (Phil. 1:21).¹²⁵

Although we already know that the fruit of sin is death, and its consequence is that we will all experience death at some point, Jesus Christ speaks of it not only from the physical aspect, but addresses it considering the meaning of condemnation or eternal death. There are not a few biblical passages in which Jesus Christ speaks about this

¹²³ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, Vatican Website, November 18, 1965, Accessed April 14, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/index.htm.

¹²⁴ See its parallel pericope Luke 12: 35-38. The oil in the pericope represents good works . However, foolish virgins lack these actions. Therefore, their poor actions cause them condemnation and condemnation means spiritual death.

¹²⁵ Philippians 1:21 records, "For to me life is Christ, and death is gain."

reality, as he compares death with the place of despair and gnashing of teeth (Mt. 25:14-30; 25: 31-46; 22: 13; Luke 12:41-48 and 19: 11-27).

Although the behaviors and reactions of the characters in these parables are different, it is essential to note that there is a common denominator among them, which is sin. From this perspective, therefore, sin seems to be the absolute cause of eternal damnation (Romans 6:23).¹²⁶

The second position about death in the New Testament is approached from a different perspective. Death is interpreted as a challenge taken by Jesus for the sake of the salvation of the human race. Death from this conception has a connotation of abandonment and suffering (John 12:24).¹²⁷ In this context, the evangelist shows the self-knowledge of Jesus about his subsequent death, but he also shows the positive attitude of Jesus. By illustrating Jesus' attitude of acceptance of his future destiny, the biblical interpretation speaks of suffering as a fate of those who want to follow Jesus.¹²⁸

Finally, Saint Paul makes the connection between the two positions of death, which the Gospels have spoken. Paul, in his letters, emphasizes that death is a

¹²⁶ Rom. 6:23 writes, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

¹²⁷ The commentaries of *The Didache Bible* analyze the passage (John 12:24) as follows: "The image of the grain of wheat is loaded with meaning. The grain of wheat points to the Holy Eucharist in which the Sacrifice of Christ becomes really present. As we die to ourselves in union with him, especially in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, we become other christs." See, Ignatius Press, *John*, in *The Didache Bible: with Commentaries based on Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Downers Grove, IL: Midwest Theological Forum; San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2014), 1436.

¹²⁸ See the commentary about "The world will hate the disciples," in Raymond E. Brown, S.S., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., Roland E. Murphy, O.Carm., eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), 976.

consequence of the fall of humans (Romans 5:12), which has been the result of sin.¹²⁹ Although Paul is very clear about the origin of death, in a purely spiritual sense, he speaks of it as a definitive moment of the encounter with the Lord, for which he longs (Philippians 1, 23-24).¹³⁰ Paul does not stop emphasizing that human's life is entirely linked to their life with God (Romans 14:8) and that death does not have dominion over the children of God because "Jesus, the firstborn from the dead, has overcome her with His resurrection (2 Timothy 1:10)." Finally, John, in his prophetic and eschatological vision, mentions that death will be overthrown (Rev 20:14) and with this overthrow, there is the certainty that death is not the product of the Divine will.¹³¹

3.4. Some Discrepancies Between Catholic Dogma and Devotion to *La Santa Muerte*

Jesus Christ, the conqueror who was conquered on the cross, please conquer (name of a person) ...so he/she might be overcome by me

—J. Katia Perdigón Castañeda, *La Santa Muerte Protectora de los Hombres*¹³²

Throughout the history of the Church, dogmatic theology has been present as the specific branch of theology that studies the constructs of faith related to reflections about God and God's work in the history of salvation. It is essential to consider that dogmatic

¹²⁹ Romans 5:12 indicates that the sin of Adam has ramifications for all his descendants—all of us are subject to death, inclined to sin, and vulnerable to temptation. See Ignatius Press, *Romans*, in *The Didache Bible: with Commentaries based on Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1516.

¹³⁰ "I am caught between the two. I long to depart this life and be with Christ, [for] that is far better."

¹³¹ "Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire; This is the second death, the lake of fire."

¹³² Jesucristo vencedor, que en la cruz fuiste vencido, vence a fulano (a)... que este vencido conmigo; the epigraph is a prayer excerpt originally written in Spanish. Perdigón, *La Santa Muerte Protectora de los Hombres* [*La Santa Muerte, Th Human Protector*], 141.

theology, or also known as systematic theology, has different divisions according to the study on which it is focused. Although all these small divisions of dogmatic theology have a specific centrality, all of them are interconnected and reveal the Trinitarian and Christological mystery, because ultimately, God is the central object of the study of dogmatic theology:

If we are illuminated by divine power and fix our eyes on the beauty of the image of the invisible God, and through the image are led up to the indescribable beauty of its Source, it is because we have been inseparably joined to the spirit of knowledge. He gives those who love the vision of truth the power which enables them to see the image, and this power is Himself. He does not reveal it to them from outside sources but leads them to knowledge personally.¹³³

As it has already been said, in the first centuries of Christianity, various heresies emerged, such as adoptionism, Docetism, Arianism, Nestorianism, among others, which called into question the Trinitarian mystery in regards to the identity of the second person of the Trinity. Others fell into error when they wanted to know the essence of the Holy Spirit. The trouble was that a lot of people were wrong in the process of understanding the Christian doctrine. However, this type of misinterpretation has continued to occur throughout the history of Christianity, with the Church having to respond to each misinterpretation.¹³⁴

Nowadays, it is easy to find new religious movements that, through their premises of faith, contradict the dogmatic theology of the Catholic Church. Although the religious phenomenon of *La Santa Muerte* is proclaimed to be a separate devotion without any

¹³³ Guilles Emery, *The Trinity: An Introduction to Catholic Doctrine on the Triune God* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 10.

¹³⁴ James L. Papandrea, *The Earliest Christologies: Five Images of Christ in the Postapostolic Age* (Illinois: Press Downers Grove, 2016), 23-37.

official connection to any Church, her followers are members of different sects and religions. For this reason, the cult of *La Santa Muerte* has a strong relationship with Catholic piety as well, which can be found in the way people pray and practice this devotion. However, through their prayers and beliefs, it is easy to identify a contradiction against Christian doctrines.¹³⁵

For instance, on November 14 of 2019, journalist Gustavo Adolfo Infante interviewed Enriqueta Romero, well known as *La Guardiania*. In the interview, he asked her about the power of *La Santa Muerte*. She said: “*para nosotros primero es Dios y luego la Santa Muerte* (for us, God comes first and *La Santa Muerte* is next).”¹³⁶ She assures that in all rites and prayers, they first ask God for permission to ask favors to *La Santa Muerte*. With the confession of Mrs. Enriqueta and of other devotees of *La Santa Muerte*, we realize that there is an entirely different notion about the person of Jesus in the history of salvation. One of the follower’s prayers says:

*Jesucristo vencedor, que en la cruz fuiste vencido,
Vence a fulano(a)... que este vencido conmigo;
En el nombre del Señor: si es animal feroz, manso como un cordero,
Manso como la flor de romero, tienes que venir; pan comiste,
De el me diste, quiero que me traigas a fulano(a).... Por la palabra más fuerte
que dijiste,
Quiero que vengas a mí humillado, rendido a mis plantas llegue
a cumplirme lo que me ha ofrecido; así como creo, Señor, no me será imposible;
te suplico encarecidamente me concedas esto que te pido, con esta novena,
prometiéndote ser tu mas fiel devoto(a) hasta el fin de mi vida. Amén. (Padre
Nuestro y gloria)¹³⁷*

¹³⁵ More Prayers of *La Santa Muerte* in, Sophia DiGregorio, *Grimoire of La Santa Muerte: Spells and Rituals of Most Holy Death, the Unofficial Saint of Mexico* (San Bernardino, CA: Winter Tempest Books, 2013), 107.

¹³⁶ Gustavo Adolfo Infante, “Tepito Entre la Virgen de Guadalupe y la Santa Muerte,” YouTube Video, 13:34, posted by “Imagen Televisión,” November 14, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MeKbjyZNVlQ>.

¹³⁷ “Jesus Christ, the conqueror who was conquered on the cross, please conquer (name of a person) that he/she might be overcome by me. In the name of God, if that person be a ferocious animal,

The first sentence of this prayer to death presumes a different perspective of the mysteries of Christ's salvation compared to that of the Catholic Christological conception. Devotees to death seem to indirectly affirm the defeat of Jesus on the cross through death. In this affirmation, Christology loses all its meaning in the mysteries of salvation. If Christ is defeated on the cross, then other mysteries of faith, such as his incarnation and resurrection, do not make any sense.¹³⁸

In the same way, if Christ is overcome by death on the cross, the mystery of the incarnation would have no reason to exist nor any meaning. The resurrection would not have been possible in the face of the total victory of death over Christ. Also, the Trinitarian mystery would be entirely distorted since the divine nature in the persons of the Trinity would be an impossibility:

If anyone will not confess that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have one nature (*phusis, nature*) or substance (*ousia, substantia*), that they have one power (*dunamis, virtus*) and authority (*exousia potestas*), that there is a consubstantial (*homoousios, consubstantialis*) Trinity, one Deity to be adored in three hypostases (*hypostaseis, subsistentiae*) or persons (*prosopa, personae*): let him be anathema. For there is only one God and Father, for whom all things come, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things come, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things are, and one Holy Spirit, in whom all things are.¹³⁹

may they come back to me a tamed sheep, mild as a rosemary flower, you have to come to me. You ate bread and gave me bread, I want you to bring (name of a person)... With the most powerful word you told me, I want him/her to come to my feet humiliated, that just as I believe in you, Lord, it will not be impossible. With this novena, I strongly ask that you grant me what I am asking for, promising that I will remain your most faithful devotee until the end of my life. Amen. (Our Father and Glory Be)." The devotion to *La Santa Muerte* is a cult without a specific theological structure. Yet, some of her devotees have composed prayers to her. Some of these petitions are now part of a novena dedicated to her as the anthropologist Perdigón illustrates above. See, Perdigón, *La Santa Muerte Protectora de los Hombres* [*La Santa Muerte, the Human Protector*], 141.

¹³⁸ Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism* (New York: Harper San Francisco a Division of Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), 441-446.

¹³⁹ Emery, *The Trinity: An Introduction to Catholic Doctrine on the Triune God*, 83.

With this impossibility, it is not possible to speak about the personalities of the Trinity, their processions, and with them the great missions in the salvation of humanity either. The pneumatology would also be affected since there would be no participation of the Holy Spirit in the mystery of the incarnation. In short, the religious interpretation of the devotes of *La Santa Muerte* runs a serious risk of distorting all the dogmatic work of the Church.

Although *La Santa Muerte*'s followers say that Christ died, it is essential to remember that Christ's death was possible thanks to his hypostatical union. It means that he had two natures, divine and human. Christ, by having human nature, experienced death. However, as Jesus said, "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again. This command I have received from my Father."¹⁴⁰ The action of death of Christ was a voluntary act of salvation in Christology that is also known as justification.¹⁴¹

The statements of faith in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed show that Jesus took the human condition, and in it, he experiences death. He took death, which was Satan's weapon, and used it to bring life and redemption:

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed states expressly that Jesus "*for us men and for our salvation* came down from heaven" and was "*crucified for us.*" The salvific significance of the events of Jesus's life as a whole and of his crucifixion in particular is clearly highlighted: all this took place for us and for our salvation. Jesus did not just die; it was for us He died. ¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ John 10:18.

¹⁴¹ Justification detaches man from sin, which contradicts the love of God, and purifies his heart of sin. Justification follows upon God's merciful initiative of offering forgiveness. It reconciles man with God. It frees from the enslavement to sin, and it heals. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, accessed April 16, 2020, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c3a2.htm, 1190.

¹⁴² Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Crucified and Resurrected: Restructuring the Grammar of Christology* (Tübingen: Baker Academic, 2015), 236.

Finally, Jesus' victory over death occurs in the resurrection event. In this action, God does not abandon God's son; God is with him and encourages him to be an example of oblation. At the same time, Jesus teaches all Christians a pedagogy of death. "The resurrection of Jesus reveals the destiny of those who died in communion with God; it is a sign of God's solidarity with all the victims of history. They also will not be forgotten."¹⁴³

3.5. A Criticism of the Cult of *La Santa Muerte* from Moral theology

I ask, most Holy Death, that you cause my enemies to repay me for the evil they have wrought. I ask that they be made to suffer the tortures I have suffered, Let the perpetrators suffer and die a terrible, tormented death.

— Sophia diGregorio, *Grimoire of Santa Muerte*¹⁴⁴

Among our most current topics in our society are axiological issues, that is, those which search for universal values among human beings. Although a worthy topic, this pursuit could give the impression that it is rather challenging to arrive at any given consensus because it could be tainted with permissive and subjective elements, to the degree that it could lead to a wide range of different interpretations and applications. Also, the panorama of morality looks less and less encouraging. The lack of transcendental values¹⁴⁵ has not only broken the social order, but it also has unleashed a

¹⁴³ Thomas R. Rausch, SJ, *Eschatology, Liturgy, and Christology: Towards Recovering an Eschatological Imagination* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Michael Glazier Book, 2012), 81.

¹⁴⁴ diGregorio, *Grimoire of Santa Muerte*, 94.

¹⁴⁵ According to Max Sheler, transcendental values are those that transcend time and space. These values, being generational, set the tone for the well-being of the person in all aspects of life. One of the most forceful examples of the lack of transcendental values is found in the subjective attitude towards the value of truth. Euphemistic attitudes make truth seem ambiguous and subject to relativism. See Daniel

domino effect that increasingly extends its reach to political, educational, economic, and economic stages, even to religion. It is well known that religious institutions frequently lose credibility because they often fail to follow guidelines and standards of morality.¹⁴⁶ Fields which explore ethics and morality seek to foster human flourishing in light of rationality.

In this section, I try to analyze some aspects of the devotion to *La Santa Muerte* from a Christian perspective, to be more specific, from the perspective of Catholic morality. First, it is important to define moral theology since it is the definition that reflects a specific direction of moral theology. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* describes moral theology as a “Christian theological discipline concerned with identifying and elucidating the principles that determine the quality of human behavior in the light of Christian revelation.”¹⁴⁷ Just as Catholicism has its moral constructs determined, other religions also have their moral norms, which lead them to specific ends. These ethical constructs in different religions have been forged over time.¹⁴⁸

Although the religious phenomenon called *La Santa Muerte* does not have a well-defined moral code, there are elements which help to interpret the type of morality to which the followers of *La Santa Muerte* aspire. Firstly, there is a dualistic conception of

Rodríguez, “Valores Trascendentales: Definición, Max Scheler y ejemplos,” *Lidefer.com*, March 20, 2019, <https://www.lidefer.com/valores-trascendentales/> (accessed April 15, 2020).

¹⁴⁶ Robert Perrucci, “The Good Society: Core Social Values, Social Norms, and Public Policy” *Sociological Forum* 17, no. 11 (March 2014): 27.

¹⁴⁷ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “Moral Theology,” accessed April 14 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/moral-theology>.

¹⁴⁸ Kenneth Shouler, *The Everything World’s Religions Book: Explore the Beliefs, Traditions, and Cultures of Ancient and Religions* (MA, USA.: Adams Media Publishers, 2010), 49-51.

La Santa Muerte. This duality or double character, is best interpreted in the black iconography of *La Santa Muerte*:

Returning to the plane of individual devotees, the black devotional candle also figures in the important business of witchcraft. Keeping in mind the simultaneous offensive and defensive capacity of the Grim Reaper's scythe, we see that devotees ask the saint both to perform dark deeds against rivals and enemies and to prevent spells and hexes from taking effect on themselves.¹⁴⁹

It is in this iconographic representation where the dualism to which its devotees have become accustomed can be seen more clearly. It is important to note how the devotees of *La Santa Muerte* ask for protection and security from the black iconography of death and the kind of protection they ask. The prayers that the followers of the cult recite in front of the altar of death reflect their particular wishes:

O Most Holy Death, Almighty Queen of the Underworld.
I come before you to seek justice. My enemies seek to destroy me,
They speak evil against me, they assail me with the evil eye.
Great Mother of darkness, I ask that you use your holy scythe to destroy them.
Use your cloak to form a protective shield around me and my loved ones.
Destroy my enemies and let their bones turn to dust.¹⁵⁰

The prayer asks for the extermination of their enemies. Also, one notes the dualistic and immanent¹⁵¹ aspects of the cult. People do not only pray for protection against evil or for well-being, but also for the punishment of and harm to those they consider enemies. While most of the devotees of the *La Santa Muerte* proclaim

¹⁴⁹ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, The Skeleton Saint*, 116. See also, Perdigón, *La Santa Muerte: Protectora de los Hombres [La Santa Muerte: The Human Protector]*, 80.

¹⁵⁰ diGregorio, *Grimoire of Santa Muerte*, 63.

¹⁵¹ The Merriam-Webster Dictionary describes "dualism" as a doctrine which holds that the universe is under the dominion of two opposing principles, one of which is good and the other evil. Accessed April 24, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dualism>.

themselves as Christians, some of their prayers go contrary to the teachings of the gospel.

For instance,

You have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same? So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.¹⁵²

Similarly, there are also devotees of *La Santa Muerte* who are involved in organized crimes. It is noteworthy that they also go to the black figure of death for the protection and success of their criminal actions. “She is the patron saint of *narcos* who plays both defense and offense for the cartel members that venerate her.”¹⁵³

Finally, both morality and social ethics support the value of human freedom, one which ideally plays an important role in human action. It is precisely on the subject of freedom, where the cult of *La Santa Muerte* contradicts this value. The following sentence of the invocation of death dressed in red color shows a complete violation of a universal principle that was granted to creation from the beginning of time, at least within a Judeo-Christian framework, as implied in the previously presented scene from Genesis:

Speak to the spirit of my beloved, N., turn his heart to me,
So that he shall forget his present pursuits and return humbly to me in meekness
and submission.
When he sleeps, let his sleep be restless and fraught with nightmares.
Put thoughts of me into his mind, so that he dreams of loving me.
Allow him no peace until he returns repenting, groveling at my feet.
In the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Matthew 5:43-48.

¹⁵³ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*, 102.

¹⁵⁴ diGregorio, *Grimoire of Santa Muerte*, 105.

The value of freedom is violated by the supplicant's desire to force someone to love her or him.

Throughout this chapter, I have addressed some points regarding death in the theological context of the Catholic Church. I have also covered, in a very general way, the problem of death and why the cult to *La Santa Muerte* is problematic within this biblical and theological understanding. In the last chapter of this thesis, I will explore further this religious phenomenon as well as outline a Catholic response.

Chapter IV

Some Pastoral Conclusions: Toward a New Evangelization

4.1. A Need Expressed in Devotion

The religious phenomenon called *La Santa Muerte* has only grown in popularity. While devotees of *La Santa Muerte* have been heavily influenced by the skeletal iconography of the famous saint of modern Mexico, others raise different opinions regarding this phenomenon which is gaining devotees as a rising form of popular piety. It is monopolizing followers among many of those who call themselves Christians and causing discontent and indignation to leaders of the traditional churches.

In this panorama, a question arises: why is the devotion to *La Santa Muerte* so attractive? To answer this question, it is important to consider the environment in which the devotion was born. In previous chapters, I explained that the first records of the devotion to *La Santa Muerte* appeared in a context of social marginalization. This particular social context indicates that the devotion to *La Santa Muerte* has often developed in environments lacking in basic human dignity: education, access to housing, public health care, economic justice, among others.¹⁵⁵

Such marginalized people lacking basic needs often look for a way to forge links between the material and transcendental worlds. Put differently, in the face of social and economic adversity, people frequently seek out different symbols, ones which seem less abstract and metaphysical. In this context, for example, beings seen to have more dominion in both this world and that of the beyond become more attractive. Thus, for

¹⁵⁵ Desiree A. Martín, “Santísima Muerte, Vístete de Negro, Santísima Muerte Vístete de Blanco: La Santa Muerte’s Illegal Marginalizations,” *Religions* 8, no 3 (2017): 36.

some, *La Santa Muerte* meets this need. Conceived as a rational entity that circulates between the two worlds and as someone who brings justice, *La Santa Muerte* becomes the protector of the underprivileged: of those who lack the minimum to survive; of those who feel abandoned by a God who does not hear them; and of those who are rejected by society for being poor. As opposed to an abstract God, this deity, Death, hears them, protects them, and above all, does them justice. This socioeconomic and religious marginalization becomes part of the evolutionary character of a religious phenomenon that is born in the times of “weak thought”¹⁵⁶ and in a sector of society which seeks to be accepted, welcomed, and loved as it is.

Even though they worship death, the followers of *La Santa Muerte* are conscious that they live in the here and now. Doing so, they continuously seek to fulfill material needs and gain acceptance in the wider society. Therefore, the followers of *La Santa Muerte* seem to be caught in a somewhat ironic religiosity: they rely on the transcendental power of death to achieve prosperity and well-being in their earthly lives. Their reliance on death does not necessarily mean their detachment from life. On the contrary, they depend on death for material well-being.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ By “weak thought” I refer to the decline of an emphasis on rational foundations which have served as foundations for thinking. For instance, Gianni Vattimo and Aldo Rovatti argue: “*pensiero debole* (weak thought), that is of a particular type of knowing characterized by a profound rethinking of all the notions that served as foundations of western civilization in every field of culture. According to this view the traditional values became such only because of precise historical conditions that do not exist anymore; for this reason, their pretension of truth must reach a state of crisis. At the root of the *pensiero debole* (weak thought) lies the idea that the thought is not capable to know the state of being and therefore it cannot even determine values which are objective and valid for all men.” Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, *Weak Thought*, trans. Peter Carravetta (Albany, New York: University of New York Press, 1983), 37.

¹⁵⁷ “Sus adeptos desean redimirse en el mundo, pues sus razones y apetitos hunden sus raíces en su territorio al que se niegan a reconocer en su versión de valle de lágrimas.” [Her followers want to redeem themselves in the world because their reasons and appetites have roots in their territory, which refuses to

The truth behind this irony is that the unfulfilled material needs will continue to be the central point of why people seek new religious symbols. In the case of this particular devotion, death plays the role of protector and friend, characteristics which ideally both church and state should embody:

In stark contrast, for most devotees the Godmother is neither grim nor satanic. Instead, she is a saint who is familiar to Mexicans as death itself. And her familiarity is reflected in her most common monikers: Skinny Lady, White Sister, Godmother, Co-godmother, White Girl, and Pretty Girl. As godmother and sister, the saint becomes a supernatural family member, approached with the same type of intimacy Mexicans would typically accord their relatives.¹⁵⁸

4.2. The Strength and Importance of Popular Religiosity

The term popular religiosity comes from two words: religiosity,¹⁵⁹ which is equivalent to the practice and dedication to fulfill the religious obligations, and popular,¹⁶⁰ meaning something related to the people, in other words, something that comes from the people, and in the case of Latin America, not just any people but generally poor people. For example, in Spanish, *un barrio popular* would denote a poor neighborhood. At the same time, people, in general, need to express their faith, something they do intuitively, symbolically, festively, and communally. People and communities express their love for God in different ways which differ from one context to another. Thus, different contexts of faith create different ways of bonding oneself with God and

recognize their version of the valley of tears]. Perdigón, *La Santa Muerte: Protectora de los Hombres [La Santa Muerte: the Human Protector]*, 11.

¹⁵⁸ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*, 54.

¹⁵⁹ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "Religion or Religiosity," accessed April 17 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/religion>.

¹⁶⁰ *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. "Popular," accessed April 17 2020, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/popular>.

popular religiosity appears in that particular way of expressing one's relationship with God.¹⁶¹

Popular religiosity provides a vital life force for ecclesial communities. It is a set of expressions and experiences whose origin is less formally structured and institutionalized. This difference from the more formal is enacted against a background of a symbiosis of traditional beliefs and the culture of the people. The objective of popular religiosity is to find a way to manifest the relationship of the people with the Divine. In other words, it is an expression of how people communicate with the Divine. These expressions take various material forms such as dance, music, costume, dramatization, pilgrimage, procession, image, food, decoration, etc., many of which normally take place around specific days or seasons.¹⁶² Even the names of towns in some Latin American countries, for example, ones whose earlier indigenous names has been combined with that of Catholic saints, demonstrate this synthesis.

Hence it would be a mistake to say that popular religiosity, in and of itself, is wrong or misguided. At the same time, these expressions need to be properly discerned and evangelized lest they embody elements which distort the gospel message:

Pastoral discernment is needed to sustain and support popular piety and, if necessary, to purify and correct the religious sense which underlies these

¹⁶¹ "Popular religiosity" refers to a universal experience: there is always a religious dimension in the hearts of people, nations, and their collective expressions. All peoples tend to give expression to their totalizing view of the transcendent, their concept of nature, society, and history through cultic means. Such characteristic syntheses are of major spiritual and human importance." Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy Principles and Guidelines*, art. 10, Vatican Website, December 2001, accessed April 18, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20020513_vers-direttorio_en.html.

¹⁶² Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, art. 48, Vatican Website, December 08, 1975, accessed April 18, 2020. http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html.

devotions so that the faithful may advance in knowledge of the mystery of Christ. Their exercise is subject to the care and judgment of the bishops and to the general norms of the Church.¹⁶³

History teaches us that the phenomenon called popular religiosity has been a challenge for evangelizers at all times. In the case of the Americas, for example, a continent composed of many civilizations as well as polytheistic religions and diverse worldviews over the centuries, this religiosity did not come about overnight. From the beginning of the introduction of Christianity to the New World, the first evangelizers understood that the only way which Christianity would take root was if it incorporated certain indigenous elements, thus helping to forge a new popular religiosity born out of the encounter of European and Indigenous cultures. One of the most difficult challenges for them was to take the positive elements of the pre-Hispanic cultures and understand that, in this worldview, there was a deep relationship with the divine.¹⁶⁴

Over the centuries, from the perspective of those charged with the ongoing task of evangelization, one of the biggest challenge, nonetheless, has been how to rid popular piety of some of its less evangelical manifestations, such as a superstition which does not promote the gospel vision of a loving and gracious God who wishes to save the world, or liturgies which disregard the Church's long tradition of liturgical worship.

Notwithstanding, one cannot ignore the fact that, at its best, popular religiosity embodies a faith that has helped shape a culture. As the Latin America bishops noted in their last

¹⁶³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, accessed April 16, 2020, <http://www.schorromeo.org/ccc/para/1676.htm>, 1676.

¹⁶⁴ Teresa Eleazar Serrano Espinosa, *Sobre Religión y Cultura en el México Virreinal* (Ciudad de México, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2019), 40-45.

synod, Aparecida, held in May of 2007, these popular expressions often provide a way for believers to experience God.¹⁶⁵

Popular religiosity, often perceived as being simplistic by those with more theological sophistication, is capable of being very profound, especially to the extent that it provides a path for living out one's faith in daily life. We should not, therefore, devalue people's experience of it for it has often brought them closer to the mysteries of salvation, as in for example, those of the incarnation or the passion and resurrection of Jesus. It is important to note, thus, that well evangelized, popular piety will continue to protect people from deviating from contemplating and following the person of Jesus Christ in the gospel.

4.3. Pastoral Negligence

The Church, as a community of believers, continues the mission initiated by Jesus Christ and vitalized and maintained by the Holy Spirit. Christ sets the tone for the continuation of this mission in the words of the gospel: “[Jesus] said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ “Hence, the missionary disciple must be ‘sensitive to it, know how to perceive its interior dimensions and undeniable values.’ When we say that it has to be evangelized or purified, we do not mean that it is devoid of gospel wealth. We simply want all members of the believing people, recognizing the testimony of Mary and also of the saints, to try to imitate them more each day. Thus, they will strive for a more direct contact with the Bible and greater participation in the sacraments, come to enjoy the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist, and express even better the service of love in solidarity in their lives. This is the way which will make it possible to draw on the rich potential of holiness and social justice encompassed in the people's mysticism.” General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, *The Aparecida Document*, art. 262, CELAM Website, May 2007, accessed April 18, 2020, <https://www.celam.org/aparecida/Ingles.pdf>.

¹⁶⁶ John 20: 21.

It is because of this mandate that the discussion as to whether the Church should or should not evangelize is out of place. Evangelization is part of the Church's nature, since this is what the Church has been doing since its birth. "The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father."¹⁶⁷ Different documents of the Church, particularly, the Second Vatican Council, echo this divine mandate in reference to the word of God.¹⁶⁸ From this inexhaustible and divine source, therefore, the Church takes her role in the process of evangelization:

"Pero la Iglesia es también depositaria y transmisora del Evangelio. Ella prolonga en la tierra, fiel a la ley de la encarnación visible, la presencia y acción evangelizadora de Cristo. Como Él, la Iglesia vive para evangelizar. Ésa es su dicha y vocación propia (EN 14): proclamar a los hombres la persona y el mensaje de Jesús."¹⁶⁹

It is necessary to underline the missionary and evangelizing nature of the Church to understand her mystique. While the methods surrounding pastoral ministry might change, these must always remain faithful to the Spirit present in our communities. Thus, in this process of evangelization, all people, as members of this ecclesial body, are called

¹⁶⁷ Vatican II, *Decree Ad Gentes: on the Mission Activity of the church*, art. 2, Vatican Website, December 7, 1965, accessed April 20, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html.

¹⁶⁸ Matt. 28:18; Mk 16:15.

¹⁶⁹ "But the Church is also the depositary and transmitter of the Gospel. Faithful to the law of the visible incarnation, she prolongs the presence and evangelizing action of Christ on earth. Like Him, the Church lives to evangelize. That is her happiness and vocation (EN 14): proclaiming the person and message of Jesus" The Latin American Episcopal Council, *Conference at Puebla*, art. 224, CELAM.org, January 28, 1979, accessed April 20, 2020, https://www.celam.org/documentos/Documento_Conclusivo_Puebla.pdf. See also, The Latin American Episcopal Council, *Santo Domingo Document*, art.125, CELAM.org, 1992, accessed April 20, 2020, https://www.celam.org/documentos/Documento_Conclusivo_Puebla.pdf.

to spread the Good News of the Kingdom of God. While each of the local churches has its share of challenges in light of this goal, they must adapt themselves to the needs of their communities.¹⁷⁰ Regarding the phenomenon of *La Santa Muerte*, the Mexican Church needs to ask herself why this devotion is growing so rapidly. Might she be accused of have rendered a weak and ineffective ministry, one in which she has not effectively re-evangelized her flock?

Although in recent years there has been an increase in the evangelizing activity of the Catholic Church, much more attention is needed in the area of the practical. The problem of the growth of the religious phenomenon *La Santa Muerte* has, as a background, the low interest of the Church. The Church has become accustomed to its faithful cradle-Catholics who attend mass only on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation. This negligent attitude of some communities makes newly evangelized people unsure about their faith and the teachings of the Church. Many pastors, in turn, lack leadership and an entrepreneurial attitude to foster the proclamation of the gospel in their communities. As a consequence, they have let their sheep perish and fall into the hands of predatory wolves.¹⁷¹

An example of some of the problems alluded to above is the impact that devotion to *La Santa Muerte* has had on the Mexican Church. Although various bishops and priests have claimed on different occasions that they oppose this devotion, at times

¹⁷⁰ *Catechism of Catholic Church*, accessed April 20, 2020, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p123a9p4.htm, 905; 927.

¹⁷¹ Msgr. Michael F Hull, "The New Evangelization: The Holiness of the Church," *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, April 22, 2013, <https://www.hprweb.com/2013/04/the-new-evangelization-the-holiness-of-the-church-2/>, accessed April 20, 2020.

calling it demonic, their concrete response has lacked serious attention. Proof of this disinterestedness is the little response from the ecclesiastical authorities, even though it is their responsibility to guide the faithful, working to free them from error. Today, religious condemnations and opposition in words are not enough to avoid confusion on the part of the faithful. Condemnations should be accompanied by careful instruction and pastoral planning aimed at sensitizing them to the errors of the cult.¹⁷²

4.4.- The Real Holy Death

According to Catholic teaching, death does not have the last word. Before we die, we live, and after it, we are even more alive. For the believer, life does not end; it is only transformed. When we speak of death, we are referring to life because when we reach death, we know that we will be more alive than ever.¹⁷³

As for *La Santa Muerte*, Catholics do not worship it as an entity that existed, or as an example of holiness. Seen in this light, Death is not a historical figure, nor was it

¹⁷² “Presenting itself as the saint for the desperate, *Santa Muerte* turns many souls away from the truth. It is proof that it is time to set aside a certain naturalist irenism that regards all religious manifestations with goodwill, in order to reaffirm that the Church is truly the unique ark of hope and salvation, willed by the true God, that far from any macabre representation, there is no other salvation than in Jesus Christ and His mother, the most holy Virgin Mary, the most beautiful and all powerful protectress of souls who entrust themselves to her. In the country of Our Lady of Guadalupe, there is no need to turn towards phantoms and idols.” Torres Ramos, “The Church Challenged by Santa Muerte,” *News: Information and Analysis on the Life of the Church*, April 08, 2018, <https://fsspx.news/en/news-events/news/church-challenged-santa-muerte-46928>, accessed April 20, 2020.

¹⁷³ The following preface is said in Masses for the Dead: “It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation, always and everywhere to give you thanks, Lord, holy Father, almighty and eternal God, through Christ our Lord. In him the hope of blessed resurrection has dawned, that those saddened by the certainty of dying, might be consoled by the promise of immortality to come. Indeed, for your faithful, Lord, life is changed not ended, and, when this earthly dwelling turns to dust, an eternal dwelling is made ready for them in heaven. And so, with Angels and Archangels, with Thrones and Dominions, and with all the hosts and Powers of heaven, we sing the hymn of your glory, as without end we acclaim: Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts . . .” See “Preface I for the Dead,” in *The Roman Missal*, 3rd ed. (Washington D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), 622.

canonized by the Church at any time in history.¹⁷⁴ Instead, as I have argued, death is the product of sin. However, although we do not have a feeling of reverence or devotion to death, the Church, in its official prayer called “Liturgy of the Hours,” teaches us to entrust our spirit to God and ask God for a holy death.¹⁷⁵

Thus, a question remains, what does it mean to have a holy death? The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches us the following: “The dying should be given attention and care to help them live their last moments in dignity and peace. They will be helped by the prayer of their relatives, who must see to it that the sick receive at the proper time the sacraments that prepare them to meet the living God.”¹⁷⁶

The Catechism teaches us that to achieve a holy death, we must strive to live a life of holiness. This does not mean that we are not going to make mistakes and fall. Instead, although we are prone to error, we are invited to trust in God’s mercy and live under his divine plan. That is why death is not to be considered something unpleasant: it is a requirement for the definitive encounter with the God of life. For example, saints who possessed the beatific vision, teach us that death was a long-awaited event. This event guaranteed the moment in which they would pass into real life. Saint Teresa of Ávila once wrote:

I live without living in me, and I expect a life so high, that I die because I do not die.

I live already beside myself since I am dying of love; because I live in Him, who wanted me for Himself: when I gave my heart to Him He placed this sign in it,

¹⁷⁴ Zarazúa, *La “Santa Muerte” el Mal de Ojo y Otras Supersticiones*, 47.

¹⁷⁵ International Commission on English in the Liturgy, *The Liturgy of the Hours: According to the Roman Rite* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulinas Publications Africa, 2013), 1137.

¹⁷⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, accessed April 21, 2020, <http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/para/2299.htm>, 2299.

that I die because I do not die.

This divine prison, the love in which I'm living, has made God my captive,
and my heart free; causing in me such passion, to see God, my prisoner, That I die
because I do not die. Oh, how long is this life! How hard this exile, this prison,
these chains which my soul has entered! Just waiting to get free causes me so
much fierce pain,
that I die because I do not die.¹⁷⁷

In this way, we see that the problem is not death, but how we live this life. That is why it does not matter the type of death or the moment of it, but the state of our souls at the moment when it arrives.

As I already mentioned, for those who believe in Christ, death is only one step forward to be closer to the Creator. This chapter has sought to focus on the problematic situation of the believers of *La Santa Muerte*, their need to have a symbol of help in the face of difficulties, the lack of response on the part of the official Church regarding this religious phenomenon, and a summary of ecclesiastical teaching around our final passage from this earth.

¹⁷⁷ Teresa de Avila, "I live Without Living in me," in *Poetry Chaikhana, Sacred Poetry from Around the World*, <https://www.poetry-chaikhana.com/Poets/T/TeresaofAvil/ILiveWithout/index.html>. Accessed April 21, 2020.

Conclusion

Although the devotion to *La Santa Muerte* can be studied from many angles, I chose to focus on some of its theological and pastoral relevance. This research has been multifaceted. For example, I drew from numerous published interviews conducted by scholars who are experts in the subject. Among them, an interview conducted by anthropologist Katia Perdigón Castañeda captivated my attention. Here, Perdigón makes it clear that her study of *La Santa Muerte* uses an anthropological lens focused on the phenomenon we describe as popular religiosity. The fact that her work comes out of a non-theological discipline caught my attention. It soon became clear that other scholars from various disciplines were writing on this subject. Lacking, however, was a more theological view.

One of the criticisms I made in this work is that Church officials have not significantly moved beyond a condemnation. The result has been confusion among its ranks, a result of not enacting serious efforts in evangelization initiatives. However, there is still a glimmer of hope. Personally, the research has made me think about the importance of religious dialogue. Mexico and the United States are vastly different countries, not only culturally, but religiously. While the religious landscape in the U.S. looks more diverse, in Mexico, most people still profess the Catholic faith. As Mexico is a country originally colonized by Spain, the Catholic faith has been the prominent religion throughout the centuries. Because of this religious monopoly, other minority religions have been stigmatized and frowned upon in Mexico, and interreligious or ecumenical dialogue is still almost non-existent.

In the face of such imbalance in religious discourse, this research on the devotion of *La Santa Muerte* suggests that the Mexican Catholic Church must open itself more to these types of dialogue, especially with persons who belong to other denominations, religions, or espouse non-orthodox beliefs within the Catholic Church. At the same time, I believe that this openness would improve the preaching of the gospel because it resonates with the faith and diverse practice of people's lived religion, echoing Jesus' treatment of the religious "other."

In this thesis, I developed a pedagogy aimed at helping the reader understand the religious phenomenon of *La Santa Muerte*. The chapters reflect, in a general but straightforward way, the most important aspects of this devotion: aspects ranging from the historicity of the phenomenon to those which deal with the nature of the devotion. In addition, I briefly analyzed the devotion theologically by examining it through the lens of the teachings of the Catholic Church. The observations from multiple angles help to understand the discrepancies that exist between the beliefs of these devotees and those of the Roman Church.

This work concludes by arguing that this cult of *La Santa Muerte* poses serious challenges for the Mexican Church. I have sought to demonstrate that this devotion not only gains adherents who used to confess the Catholic faith, but also challenges its theology while revealing the shortcomings of its evangelizing ministry. Finally, I hope that this investigation can contribute to future research and pastoral practice. Further studies might focus more on what concrete steps the Church might take in this regard, especially in terms of helping the growing numbers who find themselves religiously confused. For now, a concrete pastoral solution is hardly in the horizon. My desire,

however, is that far from worshiping death as a saint, we more deeply embrace Jesus' message and invitation to life.

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