

GOD DIES OF HEATSTROKE

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Santa Muerte is a skeletal Mexican folk-saint whose influence has rapidly spread to cover the Americas. This religious movement is set apart in modernity due to how quickly Santa Muerte has become ubiquitous in so many places despite facing pushback from both the Catholic Church. Followers also face profiling by U.S. law enforcement, who often unduly target her devotees due to the social stigmas attached to her worship. FBI training documents link Santa Muerte to human sacrifice using examples of drug-war killing — though there is no clear case of a person being sacrificed to Santa Muerte — while promoting Christian spirituality to its agents to help them cope with the job. Law enforcement's view of her followers is driven by Robert Almonte who lectures police about Santa Muerte across the nation. His teachings have inspired a culture of anxiety and profiling, one akin to the fear of Satanic worship that was seen in the 1980s. As the border becomes increasingly militarized and the Catholic church wanes, the number of Santa Muerte's disciples will continue to swell and increasing clashes with law enforcement may accompany that change. Giving Santa Muerte a true treatment and rejecting the pervasive profiling of her followers is an important step in humanizing not only migrants and Latinx people, but also cartel members — as they are just as much people trying to survive caught up in a system that is both violent and against them as most in the U.S. are.

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Figure 1. Two young men ride on the back of 'la bestia', sometimes also called 'el tren de la muerte', a common way for migrants to reach the southern border of the United States. It is as deadly as the name suggests.

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OF
HEAT
STROKE

God Dies of Heatstroke

PREMATURE CODA (THE BLACK ANGEL'S DEATH SONG)

*“The Myriad Choices of His Fate Set Themselves
Out Upon a Plate for Him to Choose. What Had
He to Lose?”*

The message spelt death. She knew that. Had for a decade by then. She had come to know Death intimately in her fifty-odd years, but this visit did not come from her beautiful skinny lady, the one whose statue she looked dead in the eyes daily, as the lady stared back — or at least into the vacant sockets in which one has come to expect to find eyes amidst the clothes and face of another. This digital visit came as many do in the borderlands of Arizona. A green message illuminated her screen. This wasn't a message from an old friend or a relative south of the border, as most such messages are. She glanced over to the ever stoic lady, as the message's contents smoked out from the phone, making themselves at home in the undersized — it was still undersized even with the conversion of the garage to an extra room — Phoenix house she spent far too much of that biweekly-paycheck on, just like everyone else on the dusty street reserved for those who couldn't escape unless they missed one of those paychecks and found themselves without even the street, and choked up the air, the stress melting the stove into the long-jaundiced countertop as the space seemed to lose itself, cracking like the dirt of her lawn that had overcome the area's parched grass and the old, equally cracked asphalt behind it which often rippled in the summer months. Such was his power on streets such as these against people such as her. The message's sender was, in her life, at least, more spectre than anything alive. And he was back to haunt her.

He had kept an unseen eye on her, though exactly when the watching began she was unsure, and ever since he got her sent to prison on marijuana charges he wasn't the only one watching. But he was the one tightening a vice grip on her skull. Her ankle was only recently free. He must've known that. He told her in as many words where she would go. He offered neither carrot nor stick. No money. No threats. Those were better left implied. He knew that she knew what he was capable of. Only a few years before, her son had narrowly escaped a car crash orchestrated by the man. She couldn't gamble the lives of the children she loved. She had tried going to the police before, after the crash. But since the man was in Mexico, they said there was nothing they could do. They didn't answer her calls after that. The cops wouldn't protect her family. She had to.

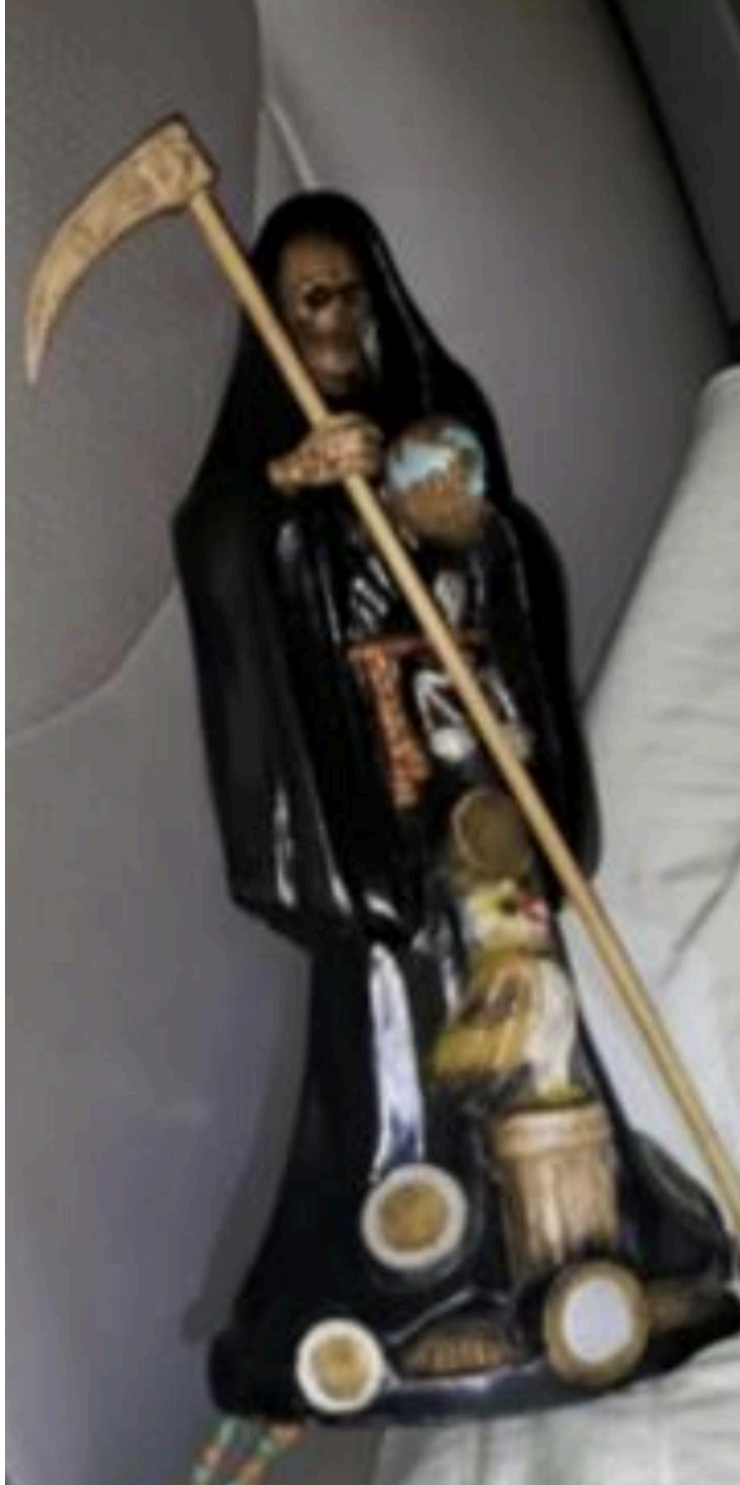


Figure 2. This statue, found in the woman's car, was photographed as evidence. It is unusual for religious paraphernalia to be treated as such. No citations will be given for anything presented in this chapter to protect the identity of the woman. This chapter's fictionalized narrative is conceived from those documents. All verbal exchanges are direct quotations and all events noted in those documents are portrayed here. The woman turned down an invitation to discuss her case when reached through her prison's warden, citing fears of retribution. Since there is no way to cite the sources without pointing directly to her, no citations will be given.

It had been over 18 hours since she started driving the car that wasn't hers north, only stopping for gas. She didn't have a car of her own. She didn't even have a license with her. That particular fact raced to the center of her mind as she passed the Santiam Junction Rest Area, hardly noticing it as her bleary eyes fixed behind her, clearing and locking onto the white car slithering off of the right shoulder just before the overpass and entering the slow lane she inhabited, closing distance fast. As the white of the headlights approached, it was patriotically joined by the flashing blue and red singing off the top of the Oregon State Police's Dodge Charger. She pulled to the shoulder. She saw the officer step out of his car, watching him in her rear view mirror until the mid-January night was pierced by the flashlight he held shining through the back glass, refracting off the case of waters in the trunk when he tilted the light down. The man walked up to the passenger window and introduced himself as Officer Miller. His eyes met hers, illuminated in the arc of his flashlight, before trailing down to the skeletal set between them. A statue of Santa Muerte rested in the passenger seat, buffeted by a pillow on her left and right. It was a familiar sight for the officer who had long patrolled this very northbound route and was an agent of both the Drug Enforcement Administration and his department. Based on the training he had received at an annual Texas seminar led by Federal Marshal Robert Almonte, a self-styled expert on both the skeletal saint and drug trafficking, the figure riding shotgun was instantly recognizable. The Officer's suspicion, already raised by the car's Arizona plates, grew further. She was moving drugs. And she, like many traffickers who had driven up I-5 before her, had expected her patroness to protect her. But Santa Muerte had failed.

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After a brief conversation regarding the car's ownership and the woman's destination, Officer Miller returned to his police cruiser to check her for warrants, driving status, and criminal history. There were no outstanding warrants. Her license was valid. And there was a single entry on her criminal record. She had previously served a stint in Federal Prison after a 2016 arrest for trafficking marijuana. There was also an arrest in a

human smuggling case from 2022, though that charge had been dropped. He called Detective Hargis back at the station, briefing him on the woman he'd be interviewing later that night. Officer Miller knew from the moment he saw Santa Muerte in the woman's car there was an arrest to be made. He had already arrested over one-hundred-and-twenty people with the skeleton saint's memorabilia — every follower he had thus far met on duty — and another had fallen into his lap. He smirked slightly as he walked the short, dusty distance between their cars again. Twenty minutes had passed since he first approached her passenger window. This time he asked her to step out. They both entered his vehicle, though she did not take his asking her to sit in the passenger seat as an invitation. The man had been respectful, but it was a command. She was, once again, in a police car.

The Officer asked her to go back over their previous discussion to confirm what had been said before. She stopped him after the first question. This situation was a familiar one for her, and she couldn't allow it to end how it did last time. If she went back to jail, her whole family would be in danger. The man who put her up to this was not the forgiving type. She was exhausted, but she looked the Officer in the eyes and began. She didn't know the name of the car's owner because she didn't know the name of her friend's husband, she said. She stuttered so much because she was afraid — afraid the officer would take the car because she didn't have a license with her. She began to tear up as she explained she didn't want to be stranded. She was so far from home... She wouldn't be, the officer told her. It wasn't quite a lie. She told him she was going to check into the Portland Motel 6 that night. She wouldn't be. Officer Miller didn't tell her that.

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The statue in the passenger seat of the car she borrowed landed her in this passenger seat and she knew it, choosing now to confront it head on. She knew he saw it. She told him that. The saint's effigy went everywhere she did and protected her. The statue was, in fact, the primary indicator of illegal activity the Officer had, but it wasn't the only one. She went on, explaining the reason for the minor traffic violation that had her pulled over

originally, going back to reiterate that she had driven from Arizona for over 18 hours without once stopping to rest and that explained why she had been so close behind the car in front of her as they each did 63 in the 65 that was the highway's limit and through the time they shared the road's right lane she had drifted ever closer to the car as she drifted towards sleep. It was hard to tell whether the man who held her fate just feet away was listening, as his face remained unchanged as her voice sped up and then, finally, fell quiet, after adding a plea to the end, saying she just wanted to reach the motel. She just wanted to rest.

No reply, no compassion was offered. He instead asked if everything in the car belonged to her. This time it was her face that offered nothing, the tears wiped from it as he asked the question. She turned from him to look at the car in front of them, shrouded in Stygian darkness except when a curious car passed by, shining its headlights upon the roadside's two inhabitants and watching them the way one watches an unhappy couple on a park bench, wondering both what the cause was and what the outcome will be, but knowing this fleeting moment in the middle is all of the spectacle they will catch. She watched their front-facing glow transform into painted steel then nothingness, coming her way then speeding away, nothing changing for them as everything changed for her. He watched her as she watched the parked car in front of them, watched Santa Muerte guard the untold illicit riches he was sure sat somewhere within the car's interior folds. Then she spoke. "Pillows, blanket... yeah. I would say yeah papa."

He noted a change as she considered the answer. Concern and fear and sadness all began to leak through all of her facial expressions, even as she attempted a brave one. He asked the question again. She shifted in the chair, moving to face him before affirming it was all hers. He was direct now. "Is there anything illegal in the car today?" She shifted, as a fish does once it's finished with its squirming, almost finished with moving, asphyxiating on a dock. Then, she looked again at the car before them and gently shook her head no. "No papa, not that I know of papa." He sank his teeth in and pointed to where the K-9 sat,

silently alert behind them. Then he asked what she had in the car. He knew she had something illegal in it and he would help her the best he could. This time it was a lie. Once they left that roadside they would never speak again. But she had been around and she knew it for what it was. After a few more seconds spent staring forward she replied. "There's no way you are getting me out of this one."

Fentanyl pills or powder, he asked, his recent years on this stretch of road guiding him towards the infamous drug. Pills. After saying that, the woman, spent, looked at the police cruiser's clock, her eyes taking considerable time and effort to place and decode the numbers the LED lines made up. It was almost half-past nine when Officer Miller began reading her Miranda rights, adrenaline fading from her body, punctured by each passing word. He asked if she thought they were pills or suspected it. Suspected, she replied. He asked where, and she pointed to the car's left, opposite Santa Muerte, whose presence still lingered for the both of them even as she stood silently out of their sight, facing forward, into the dark. He asked if there was cocaine, heroin. Not that she knew of. He asked if they told her it was just pills. "They didn't say anything. It just felt like it."

She wasn't handed it. She never touched it. She had left it where they told her to, until they told her to. But, of course, she never made it. She didn't know how many pills. She lied before. The bags were already in the car when she got into it. She was taking them to a man she had never met. No one gave her instructions telling her what to do, but 'they' would take care of it. She explained each of these things to the ever stoic Officer. He, in turn, called for backup.

They made, then, as Officer Miller saw it, small talk. Back-and-forth worthless words went over the console between them for the fifteen minutes it took a Trooper to arrive. Once the Trooper was briefed, Miller asked her if he could get the pills. She asked if he was going to help her. He would be getting the pills either way, but he was trying to be respectful, he replied. "Then go get them."

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The previous section comes in large part from Officer Miller's narrative form report. The following section is a segment taken directly from Detective Hargis' report regarding the interview he performed at the station later that night. He presented it as a bullet-point list with a brief introduction. I have lightly edited his report for brevity and clarity, and removed the woman's name for her safety. Here is the detective's quote:

At about 10:34 PM, I conducted a short interview with her in an interview room at the Salem Patrol Office. She was not handcuffed and had a bottle of water. She was allowed to stand up and move around and use the bathroom as needed. She was shaking and cried a few times during our conversation. She refused to allow me to record the conversation in fear of retaliation from "Jose." I had explained to her that I was looking for honesty and cooperation.

The following is a condensed version summary of the interview with her. She stated the following in substance

- *She is from Arizona.*
- *She has been to prison for Marijuana.*
- *She was working for "Jose" when she went to prison.*
- *She has delivered marijuana about 3-4 times for "Jose."*
- *She is not being paid to make this trip.*
- *She was going to Portland to meet her friend.*
- *She wanted to find a "man" she met at a gas station in Portland.*
- *She lives in Arizona.*
- *She borrowed the car from her friend.*
- *She doesn't know who owns it.*
- *She was delivering a "box" and doesn't know what's in it.*
- *She works for "Jose Rodriguez Vasquez."*
- *She is afraid Jose will kill her or her family.*

- *Jose lives in Mexico.*
- *She only calls Jose on her phone and uses WhatsApp.*
- *The name saved under the number is "Primo's Brother" and listed as a number from Mexico.*
- *Her boyfriend is Antonio and has hearts next to his name.*
- *She was going to stay in a hotel in Portland.*
- *Jose tried to kill her son a few years ago in a motor vehicle crash.*
- *She has three kids in their twenties. She also has grandchildren.*
- *She told Antonio and Jose she got pulled over by Trooper Miller.*
- *She told me I can search her phone.*
- *She was taking the box to Seattle, WA.*
- *She waits for a call from "Jose" when she gets there to know where exactly to deliver the box.*

The interview lasted about 45- min. She was polite and cooperated during the investigation.

GOD DIES OF HEATSTROKE

The Truth

*“CETERIS PARIBUS, MY MODUS OPERANDI
IS CARPE DIEM WHETHER DE FACTO OR
DE JURE, COMPRENDE?”*

Santa Muerte, whose name is most accurately translated as ‘Saint Death’, is a bony-yet-feminine personification of death itself who first emerged in mid-20th century Mexico, having sprouted from neo-pagan indigenous thought in the region being paired with Catholicism.^{1 2} Her image is worshiped, just as Catholics worship the image of Mary as well as other saints, but, unlike other saints, the skeletal lady was never alive. In recent times, her following has come to rival that of Guadalupe, fueled by the notoriety of her miracle, with merchandise featuring her visage accompanied by prescribed prayers lining Latinx markets throughout the Americas.³ Dr. R. Andrew Chesnut, widely considered the leading academic on Santa Muerte, estimated in 2017 that she had a following of twelve-million.⁴ In many parts of Mexico City and the borderlands she is ubiquitous and so are her followers, with temples dedicated to her worship dotted around, such as Doña Queta’s in Mexico City to which thousands flock weekly, though all attempts made to head a congregation of Santa Muerte followers have met little to no success.⁵ In other places devotees venerate her privately, most frequently at home shrines featuring purchased or crafted adornments alongside offerings of drinks and smokes. Just as the Catholic saints lack accompanying cults, there is no cult of Santa Muerte – there are no barriers to entry or exit, and religious adoration of her does not control how followers may live their lives – though that term is still frequently applied to her following due to their belief in a skeletal deity which is deemed sacrilegious and unnerving by the broader Christian public. There are numerous historical examples of leaderless Catholic offshoots, such as the Cathars, but as each of these fires has popped up they have been violently extinguished by the Church. In twenty-first century Central America, however, the Catholic Church lacks its previous authoritative control – so the battle against perceived unbelievers has been taken up by law enforcement in their stead.

¹ R. Andrew Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*, 27.

² R. Andrew Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2025), 33. All page numbers are from a digital copy of this book.

³ R. Andrew Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*, 9.

⁴ R. Andrew Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*, 8.

⁵ R. Andrew Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*, 187.



Figure 3. The statue of Santa Muerte at the Nogales temple.

This is not a story of Santa Muerte, so only that brief introduction will be given. This work serves to analyze the relationship between U.S. law enforcement apparatuses and Santa Muerte, though, unlike their colleagues south of the border, there are no public reports of officers worshipping the bony lady. So, specifically, this work will focus on how law enforcement treats Santa Muerte worship and Santa Muerte followers, a demonization that goes so far as to treat religious materials as evidence of criminal – or, more specifically, cartel-related – misdeeds. This issue of profiling, as seen in the previous chapter, is so severe that the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals overturned a 2014 case based on the presentation of Santa Muerte made by the prosecution and their law enforcement

expert witnesses. However, as this thesis will show, many individuals like the woman in the previous chapter have undergone searches and at the very least arguably spent time in prison due to law enforcement targeting this religious movement. The methods for this piece include extensive use of primary sources on these topics, documents obtained from FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) requests, court records retrieved using PACER, and numerous conversations with people relevant to the cases discussed as well as the field more broadly. The conclusions of this piece point to police discrimination targeting a vulnerable minority – a common tale – though the way in which this comes to bear in the case of Santa Muerte is nonetheless rather unique amongst the American pantheon. This is, as the first chapter demonstrated, not a traditional thesis by any means, but rather a stylized treatment of this particular socio-political issue. This thesis is simultaneously something of a cultural analysis paper, long-form news article, and polemic.⁶ With that being said, this is a story of people caught in a battle between laws and miracles with the walls closing in.

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The Catholic Church has called Santa Muerte blasphemous. Satanic. A symbol of narco-culture. Despite this intense disavowal, in the several decades since clandestinity was relinquished, devotion to Santa Muerte has become the fastest growing religious movement in the Americas,⁷ with the Church's countless regional rejects finding comfort in her bony solidity. The Catholic Church is an organization known well for the ostracization it forces upon those it others and those whose sins it views to be unforgivable. Nine years before Doña Queta's shrine, renowned as a place of Santa Muerte's popular debut, a rebirth of

⁶ Author's Note — It is important for me that I note here my own identity, and, in doing so, expose my positionality. The easy things are the things I know: I am white. I am a man. I grew up Presbyterian. I have done border/immigration work in addition to my studies in the area for five years. I speak alright Spanish. I learned of Santa Muerte while studying at the University of Oregon. I am going to start at George Washington University Law School this fall where I will study international law. Harder are the things I'm less certain of. I don't remember exactly when I was introduced to Santa Muerte. And I don't know if I believe in Santa Muerte. I would use the word ambivalence but it doesn't seem to capture the more fraught nature of my feelings on the matter. I have prayed to Santa Muerte. There is a shrine to her in my apartment, though offerings are a rarity, perhaps because I grew up in a culture without any similar sort of veneration. I do not fear that I will face the same consequences for having Santa Muerte paraphernalia or imagery as many others do because of my appearance. In different lights I am both a member of the in-group and the out-group. My split position has informed this work.

⁷ R. Andrew Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*, 8.

sorts, was made open to the public on 2001's All Saint's day,⁸ Sinéad O'Conner ripped a photograph of Pope John Paul II on Saturday Night Live in protest of the Catholic Church's many abuses, particularly those involving children. She was never invited back. This lit the match for an American reckoning that continues to this day within the Church, a Church that punishes, harms, and kills many, but, notably, rarely its own clergy. Many of these abused are then forced from their lifelong spiritual home, be that due to their suffering, their sexuality, their work, or socio-political disagreements. Amidst this trauma, Santa Muerte may greet them at the exit, her tongueless mouth voiceless, accepting all.



Figure 4. This scene from the hit TV show Breaking Bad depicts two cartel members worshipping at a shrine to Santa Muerte. ("Breaking Bad," Season 3, Episode 1).

The institutions of policing in the United States offer a similar condemnation of Santa Muerte and her followers, and similar rejection and abuse to the marginalized, driving many into her arms. In a 2024 case from San Antonio, a man, hired as a detention officer for the Bexar County Sheriff's Office, claims he had his job offer rescinded by Sheriff Salazar personally due to his wife's "religious adoration of *La Santa Muerte*."⁹ That civil case

⁸ R. Andrew Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*, 11.

⁹ Luis Rafael Borges v. Bexar County, Texas, No. 5:24-cv-01233 (W.D.T.X. S.A.DV. Oct. 25, 2024), Document 1, 8.

is still in early stages as of May 2025, and provides the only reported example of a Santa Muerte follower losing a law enforcement position due to religious discrimination. The examples of law enforcement profiling criminal suspects, however, are numerous and will be further discussed in the coming chapters. Unfortunately, the only examples that have made it into the media or the courtrooms have been cases in which the profiled individual was in possession of illicit substances, as a dubiously-legal search that doesn't turn up anything illegal is not headline-worthy, though when considering how widespread worship of Santa Muerte is and the fact that the vast majority of her followers are law-abiding, it is likely that most searches conducted due to Santa Muerte's presence turn up empty handed. In an unofficial phone interview conducted with the Federal Prosecutor who took on the previous chapter's case, he called it a mistake to believe the woman's story of her family being in danger, as she was carrying drugs. She should not be trusted. He refused to say what she should have done if her story was, in fact, true. He did not respond to the assertion that if she was telling the truth it would have been impossible to protect her family within the bounds of the law, and that someone, if not her, had most certainly been in such a situation. During the call the prosecutor also asserted that anyone who has Santa Muerte paraphernalia is a drug trafficker.¹⁰ Officer Miller, who performed the arrest, was reached by phone for comment as well.¹¹ The Officer claimed that out of the hundred-twenty or so people he had seen with such paraphernalia, all had been arrested. This is not surprising, as an ex-officer out of Oregon relayed to me a paraphrased version of something he was unofficially told during his late-aughts training — “If you're on I-5 and stop a Mexican in an SUV with fast food wrappers and very little luggage, call for a sniff by a drug dog.”

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¹⁰ After several attempts I was able to get through to the prosecutor, who spoke quite openly about both the case and Santa Muerte. I was unable to get into contact with the defendant's lawyer.

¹¹ Officer Miller was quite easy to reach as Oregon State Police put me directly through to him, and he was an open book. Although the case occurred almost a year before I reached him and didn't seem like it would have been especially notable to him, his recall of the events was almost perfect. He does not believe he acted improperly.

Although statistics to prove this assertion would be impossible to get, it seems a safe bet that the majority of cartel members out of Mexico, a nation with almost one-hundred million Catholics, belong to the Church rather than being followers of Santa Muerte, yet connections between the Church and cartels are never suggested. People seemingly prefer to look towards an unknown, laying accusations of evil and violence at its feet — rather than staring down a church that has played a key role in numerous genocides — many, including every individual with law-enforcement affiliations spoken to for this piece, would point conversations towards supposed ties between Santa Muerte and human sacrifice. A meaningful connection between her followers and human sacrifice has proven impossible to corroborate in every case analyzed. Interestingly, on the other hand, there is occasional overlap in allegiances. At a University of Oregon Día de los Muertos celebration, the old man leading the festivities, a devout Catholic who had braved the border's inhospitable lands a half-century before, offered that he had a wooden effigy of the dark saint at his home for his protection.¹² When the Church's pool of miracles seems to have run dry, and prayers go continuously unanswered, she is turned to. She is a voice for the voiceless and hope for the hopeless. And, such as in the old man's case, one more layer of protection and attachment to the ways of his native lands. Not a specter of death, not a fear of hell. Something much older.

Each saint has their specialties, areas in which prayer to them is expected to be most prudent. For Santa Muerte, these areas have evolved to be those in which her followers are in greatest need of divine intervention — specifically the realms of love, health, finance, protection, and safe passage. These powers are tailor-made for her ancestral birthplace, the borderlands, an area traversed by many of her most devout, protected by her supernatural capabilities — some even doing so professionally. As word of her purported miracles has spread throughout the Americas, carried by their recipients, Santa Muerte's powers have

¹² I pulled him aside after he spoke and, though he did not answer my initial question of whether Santa Muerte should have a place at Día de los Muertos celebrations, he told me he does have a reverence for her.

simultaneously broadened, servicing the needs of individuals from all walks of life.¹³ Even still, one thing remains the same. If a person loyal to Santa Muerte falls into law enforcement's hands, they will find themselves caught up within a legal system built not to care for them, but rather built to keep them from where they're going. Unfortunately for La Migra and their compatriots, however, Santa Muerte is most of all renowned for safely delivering devotees to their destinations, whatever their destinations may be.¹⁴

¹³ R. Andrew Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*, 59.

¹⁴ R. Andrew Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*, 177.

GOD DIES OF HEATSTROKE

Stolen at Gunpoint

*“MR. WILSON, DON'T YOU KNOW THAT WE
CAN'T BE BEAT? YOUR LITTLE PROP IT
TRIED TO STOP ME BUT I CAME WITH
HEAT.”*

The back windshield of the old Chevy SUV photographed driving alone down the highway is covered in words in a sort of medieval font, though only two of them can be made out through the image's rough pixelation. No citation is offered with it. No other instance can be found online. Centered both vertically and horizontally in bone white, the words "Santa Muerte" stretch across, filling the glass. This image sits just below the article's title: "Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic Killings."¹⁵ This article was written by the man who took the photo, Dr. Robert J. Bunker, who has a rather lengthy resumé and whose field is likely best described as counter-terrorism, though his clear fascination with and success in related fields makes it hard to pinpoint. This article was provided by the FBI, who commissioned it for training purposes, responsive to a FOIA request — one that would prove fruitful, offering new insight into the agency's view of the saint and her followers. This insight begins with the article's first four lines:

*Bloodbaptized—in a shroud of human skin.
Raise your wings—as we celebrate the dead;
Sacrifice—in the honour of your wealth;
Reward us now—in triumph we behead.*¹⁶

This opening is a primer. It tells the audience Santa Muerte is horror-movie-fodder, an ancient occult darkness once conquered by the Church and its emissaries, back from the grave for another round.

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If this was an FBI field agent's first impression of Santa Muerte — a page featuring an image of a car that one might assume was fleeing, based on composition, and talk of ritualistic killings both above and below — it likely remained with them, joining them as

¹⁵ Robert J Bunker, "Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic Killings," FBI, February 5, 2013, leb.fbi.gov/articles/featured-articles/santa-muerte-inspired-and-ritualistic-killings.

¹⁶ Robert J Bunker, "Santa Muerte."

they left the classroom and entered the world with their badges and weapons, each methodically piling statues and candles featuring her face into evidence lockers and their previous owners into cells. As to why the document opened with this quote, this is addressed rather unsatisfactorily by its first two endnotes;

1 'La Santisima Muerte,' performed by Necrophobic, from the album Death to All, Regain Records, 2009. The influence of Santa Muerte is expanding into some English-speaking musical genres. An additional concern is the promotion of alleged rituals, such as 'blood baptism,' derived from wearing bloody human skins taken from sacrificial victims.

2 Initial disclaimer: The opinions expressed here are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the FBI, DO, the Futures Working Group, Police Futures International, or any other institution or organization. Additional disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.¹⁷

The first endnote explains that the quote is pulled from a song written by Necrophobic. What it doesn't explain is that Necrophobic is a Swedish 'blackened death metal band', a genre notorious for lyrics that feature gore and ritual and the occult for little reason other than aesthetic and shock value. The band has never been to Mexico nor have they performed there, according to District 19, Necrophobic's management, who were reached via Instagram. This is a rather unpopular song from a hardly popular band — a band with absolutely no link to Mexico or Latin America beyond the extremely tenuous one provided by a single song in which they scream about a cartoonishly satanic iteration of Santa Muerte, a Santa Muerte that only exists in Western media. The claim that her "influence ... is expanding"¹⁸ to have a grip on the white skinned Nordic heavy metal types who have

¹⁷ Robert J Bunker, "Santa Muerte."

¹⁸ Robert J Bunker, "Santa Muerte."

always been known to traffic in Satanic imagery, a claim seemingly made based on this song's existence, is akin to claiming Salman Rushdie's novels spread the influence of Islam.

The second endnote casts responsibility (or, perhaps, blame) for all the content within this training document onto its author, Dr. Robert J. Bunker.¹⁹ Reached by phone, Dr. Bunker offered his perspective, remarking that by his recollection not only was this quote not in its current headlining position before it reached the FBI's editors — it hadn't been in the article at all. The title was not the one he had given the article either. A copy of his original draft was requested, though he was unable to produce one. If his memory is correct, that would speak to higher level people at the agency going out of their way to add this tangential quote, which could be read as an underhanded attempt to prejudice young trainees reading the document against Santa Muerte and her followers. It seems quite possible that this is the case, due to the unusual placement of the disclaimer below it in the endnotes, suggesting it was not in the endnotes of the document originally submitted by Dr. Bunker and therefore did not require a disclaimer ahead of it as every other endnote did. Though this lends credibility to his story, it has proven impossible to definitively determine what happened in this case, though the harmfulness and prejudicial nature of the quote's presence is crystal clear.

When asked further about Santa Muerte, Dr. Bunker was quick to mention the general good nature of her followers and the rarity of ritualistic killings. When reaching for an example, he turned, as many seem to do, to the infamous 1990s case of Mark Kilroy, an American Student ritualistically killed in Matamoros. His case, race, and nationality made for an international news story, the ramifications of which still linger across each of the nearly two-thousand miles of the border, and became the downfall of the cult of Adolfo Constanzo, who had already sacrificed between fifteen and twenty-five locals in haphazard rituals without rousing any attention. Though one statue of Santa Muerte was found lying

¹⁹ Dr. Bunker was extremely easy to reach and responsive throughout this process, a fact I deeply appreciate. His openness to share his work and his deep knowledge on Santa Muerte from a law enforcement perspective did a lot for this piece. He continues to work in this space running C/O Futures (cofutures.net) with his wife, Pamela Bunker.

alone in a shed at the cult's ranch, it is widely agreed that he drew his core inspirations from "various aspects of Santeria, Palo Mayombe, and voodoo as the mood struck him."²⁰ The sacrifices were likely a show for his followers, one put on by a man who simply wanted to kill. It is a gruesome case, to be sure, but it has never been seriously suggested that potential belief in the bony lady magnified the carnage in any way, and, with the borderlands swallowing thousands of lives annually, the viscera seems little more than window dressing — a stomach-churning act to be labelled as evil and pointed to and rubbernecked at while countless boring evils kill countless more.²¹

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There is an important differentiation to make between a killing that occurs specifically for the sake of a ritual — "a patterned, repetitive, and symbolic enactment of cultural (or individual) beliefs and values"²² — and one that occurs for other reasons but features ritualistic elements, such as "the acting, stylization, and staging that often give ritual its elements of high drama, the fact that it is performed and that it often intensifies toward a climax."²³ This difference, whether the action is a ritual or just has aspects reminiscent of one, is the difference between murder, an action taken to change circumstances directly, and human sacrifice, an action taken to change circumstances through some sort of magical or divine intervention. When the two are combined, this is most likely done because the perpetrator, who has already decided that this murder is in their best interest directly, believes that they can benefit from the murder further by attaching ritualistic elements. Because the situation didn't come about in a patterned way and most likely will not be repeated as such, it is not a ritual. The key here is that the murder's motive remains earthly, unchanged. To qualify as a human sacrifice the primary

²⁰ Gary Cartwright, "The Work of the Devil," Texas Monthly, June 1, 1989, texasmonthly.com/true-crime/the-work-of-the-devil/.

²¹ This fact is not too dissimilar from the case of Luigi Mangione. It is the news-worthy death amidst a sea of deaths linked to medical procedures that never happened due to health insurance companies refusing to cover the expenses.

²² Robbie Davis-Floyd and Charles D. Laughlin, *Ritual: What It Is, How It Works, and Why* (NY, NY: Berghahn Books, 2022), 6.

²³ Robbie Davis-Floyd and Charles D. Laughlin, *Ritual*, 9.

motive must be spiritual or magical. The document provided by the FBI semi-acknowledges this, saying, “It remains unclear if these violent killings represent the acts of secular psychopaths or those following some sort of ritualized spiritual purpose.”²⁴ No evidence is provided in the document to support the latter theory. Earlier, in just the second paragraph of the document, it is claimed that a narco-variant of the cult of Santa Muerte subscribes to an “evil value system that rewards personal gain above all else, promoting the intentional pain and suffering of others, and, even, viewing killing as a pleasurable activity.”²⁵ No evidence or citations are given for this claim, either.

Some examples, however, are given. This section, entitled “Killings in Mexico,” begins with a story from 2004, featuring a car thief from Tepito, Mexico City, who “killed virgins and babies once a year and offered them as sacrifices to Santa Muerte to gain her favor and magical protection.”²⁶ An alarming story, to be sure, and one that seems to prove ritualistic intent rather than personal desire due to the routine nature of the annual slayings. The story, however, is solely cited as having been “provided to a researcher by a local Santa Muerte follower.”²⁷ If such murders occurred, they seem to have occurred without leaving the slightest paper trail, as no mentions of such a case could be found in other sources. It is unclear whether this ‘researcher’ even existed, as, if they do, they have never published that work to the best of my knowledge and research. No other examples given are quite as nightmarish as annual virginal sacrifices, and each features couching language, such as:

*Links were inferred to Santa Muerte worshipers.*²⁸

²⁴ Robert J Bunker, “Santa Muerte.”

²⁵ Robert J Bunker, “Santa Muerte.”

²⁶ Robert J Bunker, “Santa Muerte.”

²⁷ Robert J Bunker, “Santa Muerte.”

²⁸ Robert J Bunker, “Santa Muerte.”

*Analysis by a U.S. law enforcement officer suggests that the perpetrators killed them as offerings to Santa Muerte.*²⁹

*Regarding one incident, authorities found at the crime scene the remnants of an apparent altar.*³⁰

One example given refers to occurrences of intergang violence, with Los Zetas members torturing and beheading those captured from the Gulf Cartel. The only link to Santa Muerte provided in this instance is the fact that “many of the group's members have tattoos of her image on their upper arm or chest.”³¹ And finally, one claims that the massacre of more than fifty such cartel members whose corpses featured Santa Muerte tattoos and paraphernalia, orchestrated by the Sinaloa Cartel following a failed 2007 incursion onto their turf by the very same gang members, “may represent the broadening of spiritual violence in Mexico,”³² a rather ludicrous claim considering the unambiguous territorial motive in this case. This section closes with the author speculating that, based on the ultra-violent methods of quid pro quo killing seen throughout the Drug Wars, Santa Muerte worshippers may have resurrected Aztec practices of human sacrifice.³³

In March 2006, two teenagers were killed in the border town of Nuevo Laredo by a teenaged assassin for Los Zetas named Gabriel Cardona Ramirez. Though this killing was South of the border — Nuevo Laredo is in Mexico while its counterpart, Laredo, is in the United States — his crime spree saw him commit murders on both sides. The article claims that this case is when Santa Muerte inspired killings first reached the United States, quoting a Free Republic article on the trial which notes Ramirez bragged on a call with a fellow Zeta that “he slashed the two teenagers with a broken bottle, gathered their blood in a cup and made a toast to the Santisima Muerte, or death saint.”³⁴ Regardless of the

²⁹ Robert J Bunker, “Santa Muerte.”

³⁰ Robert J Bunker, “Santa Muerte.”

³¹ Robert J Bunker, “Santa Muerte.”

³² Robert J Bunker, “Santa Muerte.”

³³ Robert J Bunker, “Santa Muerte.”

³⁴ Robert J Bunker, “Santa Muerte.”

veracity of the young Ramirez's braggadocious claim, a hit ordered by an organized criminal element is about the furthest thing from human sacrifice. The motive was monetary. Each following instance documented North of the border follows the same pattern — violence related to organized crime that features a follower of Santa Muerte as either the perpetrator or victim, entirely without suggestion of the bony lady inspiring the murder. Even still, according to Robert Almonte, "Santa Muerte informational training can prove so stressful for some law enforcement and public safety officers that they can become physically ill and pass out."³⁵ Therefore, in order to protect the brave boys in blue from Santa Muerte's ever growing and ever darkening power and influence, they must be given 'spiritual armor.'

³⁵ Robert J Bunker, "Santa Muerte."

GOD DIES OF HEATSTROKE

Murderers

“ ... ”

The United States prescribing ‘spiritual armor’ to its law enforcement agents is a strange, even alien, concept in this century. Almost as strange, to modern sensibilities, is the fact that during the Civil War Abraham Lincoln attended a number of seances held by his wife who, in her inconsolable grief, was attempting to contact their prepubescent Willie, lost to typhoid fever. The White House Historical Association claims spirituality “offered a coping mechanism that was necessary during a time when life was shrouded in death. While today's society looks at the ghost of Lincoln as a silly myth, it once brought solace to a wounded nation.”³⁶ Though the United States has always existed as a Christian nation — a fact written in stone by an 1892 Supreme Court decision³⁷ — it has been a driving force in moving the religion away from the realm of the spiritual as well as belief in the mystical, attempting to replace them with knowledge and facts. Christianity exists as a truth — not a belief — in the age of science. Evolution conquering the Garden of Eden is but one example of this.

Spirituality, a late nineteenth and early twentieth-century mainstay of cocktail parties, practiced in those sorts of dresses that absorb all nearby into their folds in effervescent rooms reeking of money has long been banished from the halls of power where it once echoed, be that the White House’s Red Room, the pulpits of the nation’s churches, or even just the hardly-changed cocktail parties of the rich and their accomplices. Those in power who still cling on to such spiritual beliefs do so in the dark, a commonality they share with Santa Muerte’s powerful believers, both at risk of ostracization. The United States, once a spiritually Christian country, has become a factually Christian country, and the ramifications of this are beginning to seep from ivory pillars across the nation, reaching the halls of police stations.

The most conservative corners of Christianity, the Catholics, Evangelicals, and the even more cultish fringes of the religion, have gone in exactly the opposite direction and

³⁶ Alexandra Kommel, “Seances in the Red Room,” White House Historical Association, accessed April 5, 2025, whitehousehistory.org/seances-in-the-red-room.

³⁷ *Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States*, 143 U.S. 457 (1892)

stand as an exception. In a time where many have turned away from the Church, these groups have turned towards older, more spiritual and mystical iterations of themselves in order to survive. The most striking manner in which this is occurring is the rising frequency of exorcisms, another example of horror movie spirituality, this one with a famous film of its own that helped resurrect the terminal practice in the early 1970s. Ever since, the popularity of exorcisms has grown. A New York Times article from 2000 noted their proliferation.³⁸ Dr. Chesnut, an expert on both Santa Muerte and the Catholic Church, claimed in 2020 that exorcisms are on the rise around the world.³⁹ In April 2018, a weeklong course at the Vatican began. Attendance consisted of approximately 250 priests from approximately 50 countries. The event, run by Sacerdos, has occurred annually since 2004 — though 2018's iteration is the only one that left a significant paper trail in the media. Why only that year's course received reporting is unclear.⁴⁰ In its current form it is known as the "Course on the Ministry of Exorcism and Deliverance."⁴¹ All in all, this is a mysterious event open solely to clergy, as the church remains wary of discussing exorcisms in the presence of those they perceive as gawking outsiders. Professor Giuseppe Ferrari, who lectured at the event, echoed Chesnut's sentiment.⁴² In the leadup to this course, an Italian exorcist by the name of Father Benigno Palilla claimed on Vatican Radio that there were 500,000 requests for exorcisms in Italy alone in 2018, a number which had tripled in recent years due to "an increased use of fortune tellers and tarot cards."⁴³ It is worth noting that Pope Francis was a vocal supporter of the use of exorcisms.⁴⁴ Though the Catholics'

³⁸ John W. Fountain, "Exorcists and Exorcisms Proliferate across U.S.," *The New York Times*, November 28, 2000, [nytimes.com/2000/11/28/us/exorcists-and-exorcisms-proliferate-across-us.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2000/11/28/us/exorcists-and-exorcisms-proliferate-across-us.html).

³⁹ Brian McNeill, "The Centuries-Old Practice of Exorcism Is on the Rise. Why Now?," *VCU News*, accessed April 5, 2025, news.vcu.edu/article/the_centuriesold_practice_of_exorcism_is_on_the_rise_why_now.

⁴⁰ "Exorcism: Vatican Course Opens Doors to 250 Priests," *BBC News*, April 16, 2018, [bbc.com/news/world-europe-43697573](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43697573).

⁴¹ "Course on the Ministry of Exorcism and Deliverance," *Sacerdos*, April 28, 2025, sacerdos.org/en/training-offer/course-on-the-ministry-of-exorcism-and-deliverance/.

⁴² Philip Pullella, "The Rising Demand for Exorcisms ... Even by Cellphone," *Sojourners*, April 16, 2018, sojo.net/articles/rising-demand-exorcisms-even-cellphone.

⁴³ "Demoniac Possession on the Rise: Vatican Hosts Exorcism Course - Living Faith - Home & Family - News," *Catholic Online*, March 1, 2018, www.catholic.org/news/hf/faith/story.php?id=76945.

⁴⁴ "Exorcism: Vatican Course Opens Doors to 250 Priests."

numbers are on a rather extreme upward trajectory, it is almost certain they remain outpaced by the rate at which exorcisms are performed by Pentecostals, an extreme evangelical sect. All together, though numbers are impossible to determine, it seems likely that exorcisms are more popular today than they have been at any other point in world history.⁴⁵

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Figure 5. A classic Goya painting depicting an exorcism. (Francisco Goya, “St. Francis Borgia Helping a Dying Impenitent,” 1788).

⁴⁵ Brian McNeill, “The Centuries-Old Practice of Exorcism.”

This ritual, fully legal and full-throatedly endorsed by the Catholic Church, has caused numerous deaths of its own. There is the infamous case of Anneliese Michel, a twenty-three year old German woman who died at the hand of a priest in 1976. Michel would die of starvation and dehydration after sixty-seven exorcism sessions over the course of ten months, her knees broken from unrelenting rounds of genuflections. Towards the end of this torture she began to refuse food, choosing death if she even had any ability to choose remaining in her by that point. The priests and her parents, who had taken her off prescribed medications, did not get her medical attention. Miraculously, as if by the hand of God himself, none would serve a single day in jail. None would repent, either.⁴⁶ This is a genuine case of ritual human sacrifice. All involved knew that they were slowly killing the young Ms. Michel through the rituals they were performing, but they pushed on as they believed they were doing what their God wanted them to do.



In the decades since, the Catholic Church has been far more careful when it comes to keeping ritual blood off of their hands, though Catholic parents have only become more likely to stain their own as cases seem to pile up. Here are three such cases, a small sample of the myriad from this century and country alone: In 2003, an eight-year-old autistic boy was at a Sunday service when the minister decided he should be exorcized. The boy's mother, with the congregation's help, smothered him in sweat-soaked sheets for two hours until he was dead.⁴⁷ In 2011, a two-year old girl was found in the master bedroom of her home, wrapped in a blanket and surrounded by bibles, killed by her father's attempt at a home exorcism.⁴⁸ In 2021, a three-year-old girl was pinned down, starved and suffocated by her parents and grandparents in San Jose, California.⁴⁹ Published in 2022 in the Journal of

⁴⁶ Michael Getler, "Cries of a Woman Possessed," Washington Post, April 20, 1978, [washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1978/04/21/cries-of-a-woman-possessed/94bf2fd3-8e64-482d-869d-1f929851ca8f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1978/04/21/cries-of-a-woman-possessed/94bf2fd3-8e64-482d-869d-1f929851ca8f).

⁴⁷ Monica Davey, "Faith Healing Gone Wrong Claims Boy's Life," The New York Times, August 29, 2003, [nytimes.com/2003/08/29/us/faith-healing-gone-wrong-claims-boy-s-life.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/29/us/faith-healing-gone-wrong-claims-boy-s-life.html).

⁴⁸ "Toddler's Exorcism Death Part of Dark History," NBCNews.com, June 7, 2013, [nbcnews.com/id/wbna52135225](https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna52135225).

⁴⁹ Summer Lin, "Bay Area Family Charged in 'exorcism' Death of 3-Year-Old Girl Will Stand Trial," Los Angeles Times, May 23, 2024,

Forensic and Legal Medicine, a paper about the death of a child victim of an exorcism closes with this: “banning such practices against children is a need of the hour.”⁵⁰ In the eyes of media and law enforcement, however, these occurrences receive little of the attention and backlash Santa Muerte related deaths do — as, although they have far more evidence showing they meet the criteria for ritual sacrifice, exorcisms are attached to one of the world’s most powerful and venerated institutions in the Catholic Church, whose standing has only been slightly shaken by revelations of vast, worldwide child abuse, such as that which occurred in residential schools.

Despite the rapid spread of Exorcisms across the United States, old Catholic spiritually still truly reins supreme just across the southern border, in Santa Muerte’s backyard. Even still, Santa Muerte is death, and death is change. Part of her meteoric rise can be attributed to the widespread popularity of spirituality across Mexico, which never really joined its northern neighbor on the journey away from mysticity. Mexican law enforcement is known to call curanderos, folk healers, to crime scenes where rituals occurred in order to clear out any spiritual threats that may remain before they will enter. Much to the dismay of impatient American officers who traveled south in support, this occurred in the case of Mark Kilroy.⁵¹ This spirituality is in large part due to the country’s conservative Catholic identity, though another factor is indigeneity. The United States views its indigenous cultures as uniquely dead among American nations, so ‘magical’ indigenous thinking (that which doesn’t line up with western christian science) is a fad where it can even be found. Many indigenous beliefs, customs, and rituals have, however, made themselves at home within the popular culture of Mexico. Día de los Muertos is representative of this. With these two factors combined, spirituality in Mexico is almost as culturally pervasive as death.

latimes.com/california/story/2024-05-23/bay-area-family-charged-in-exorcism-death-of-3-year-old-girl-will-stand-trial.

⁵⁰ Yalini Thivaharan, “Death of a Child Following a Superstitious Ritual of Exorcism,” *Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine*, November 6, 2022, [sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1752928X22001482](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1752928X22001482).

⁵¹ Gary Cartwright, “The Work of the Devil.”

Santa Muerte is not aloof. She was never alive. Far from perfect. Not immoral, amoral. One Mexico City woman said she's a *cabrona* (bitch) like us.⁵² And that is exactly why she is so beloved among believers. She understands her followers and she sees them through to their destinations, both spiritually and materially. They need miracles — simply getting by requires them — and she is known to provide. Many treat her as they would a revered family member, offering her their own favorite corner-store-vices of tequila and cigarettes and soda and slowly watching the liquid leave the glass and the cigarette ghost away as she accepts what lies within. She is trusted more than believed in. These are not sacrifices made to appease a vengeful Catholic God, ready to punish imprudence at the smallest slight. Santa Muerte never punishes, she has no enemies. In her, in death, all are made equal.

⁵² R. Andrew Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*.

GOD DIES OF HEATSTROKE

Worldwide Steppers

*“THE NOBLE PERSON THAT GOES TO
WORK AND PRAY LIKE THEY 'POSED TO?
SLAUGHTER PEOPLE TOO, YOUR
MURDER'S JUST A BIT SLOWER.”*

Every killer needs something to believe in. Even those who get medals and raises as their tally increases. This applies broadly — reaching to include those among the laymen who see how the system they participate in on a daily basis is killing people, a group which has led the rebirth of rebirths — though many have not reached a level of introspection that allows them to fully grasp the root of why, exactly, they crave spirituality. For the FBI, however, the motive can be written with confidence using government-issue pens pressed into their palms by their trigger fingers. They know that finger's twitch and how it itches to do so, spastic but intentional as it marks the paper with ink or a suspect with blood. They know the aftermath, the scenes. The paperwork. And they know the thoughts that linger, the ones they must be cured of, must have plucked directly from their brain, replaced by something beneficial to their health through the department's shiny, new agent-saving research, innovative new research to accompany the long running research into weaponry that allows guns and bombs to last longer and kill more. Research that lets agents do the same. This research, however, receives far less funding as agents are cheaper to replace. In Mexico, most law enforcement officers receive this through the protection of curanderos, who clear spaces of any and all spiritual entities, and through the relief of priests, who take their confessions and swear to them that they will go to heaven regardless so long as their tithings do not slack during however much time they have left before they take a bullet of their own and are lowered into the dead, barren land out behind the Church where they tearfully sit, staring into the woven wood dividing them from a man they watch every Sunday they can get off duty evangelizing over in the cathedral's pulpit, wearing their nicest boots which they hope to take with them when they go, all cleaned and polished to make perfectly sure they won't track any dirt into heaven, and knowing this will be their perpetual routine until then. In the United States, a land that believes itself free of superstition, a pamphlet of sorts was made. Published in the May, 2009 issue of the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, it was entitled "Beyond Survival."⁵³ It has five sections, each

⁵³ "FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin - May 2009," FBI, May 1, 2009, leb.fbi.gov/file-repository/archives/may2009.pdf/view.

written by a different attendee of the FBI Behavioral Science Unit's first and last Beyond Survival: Wellness Practices for Wounded Warriors conference.

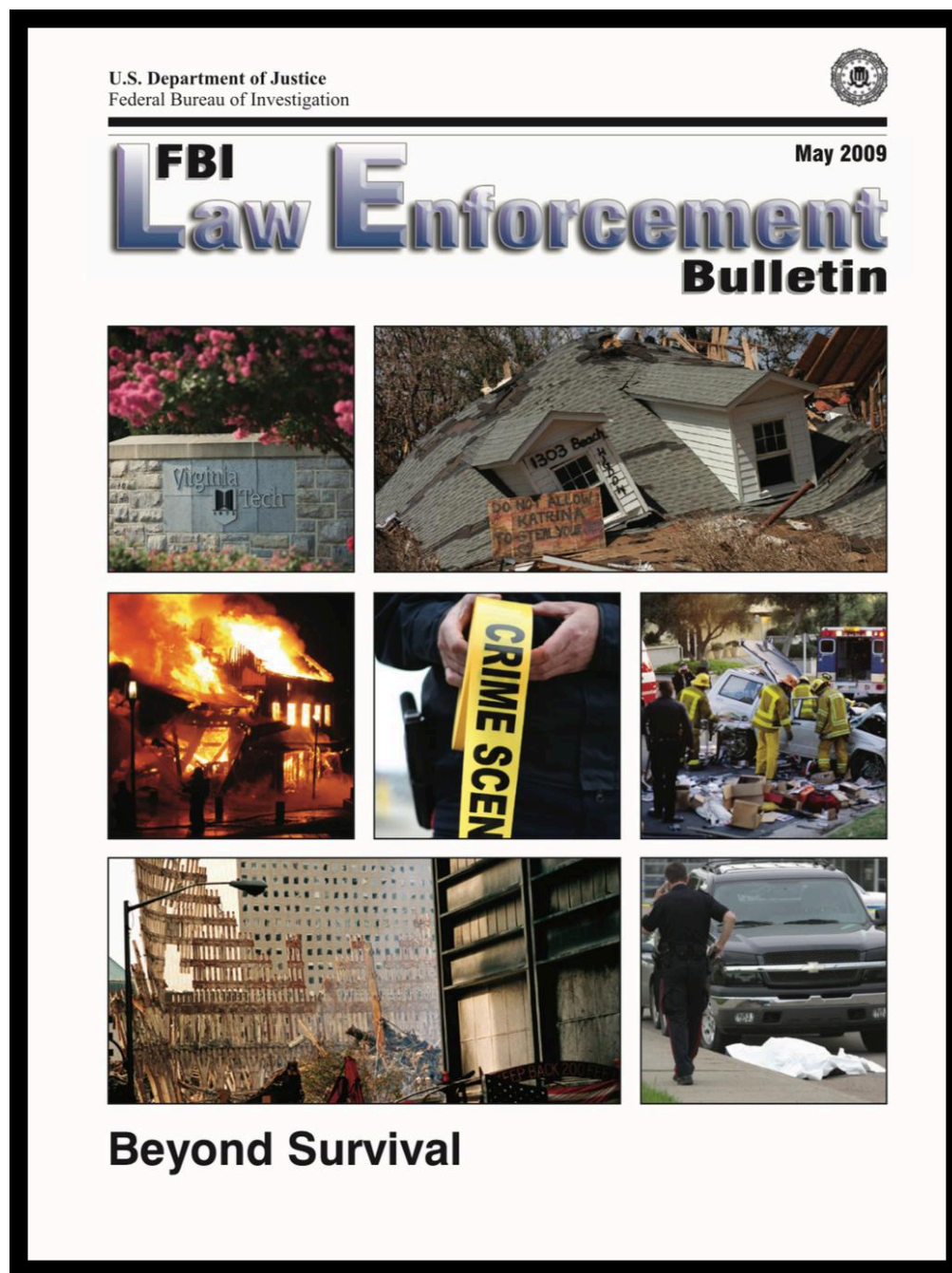


Figure 6. This is the front cover. ("FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin - May 2009," 0).

Beginning the bulletin is the piece by Samuel L. Feemster, a special agent from the Behavioral Science Unit. As is ostensibly department policy, Feemster opens with a quote.

“Too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart.”⁵⁴ This is from William Butler Yeats’ “Easter, 1916” which mourned the brutal results of Ireland’s Easter Rising and eulogized the revolutionaries who lost their lives fighting the British law enforcement that occupy their island to this day. It is ostensibly against department policy to understand the surrounding context of a quote that is used. Feemster claims data suggests that “exposure to crime can harm the brain” and inner spirituality is necessary in order to “combat the diabolical schemes and toxic complexities of criminal evil.”⁵⁵ Examples of ‘criminal evil’ given are violence, terrorism, and gangs. ‘Criminal evil’ is not a recognized term. The language choices here, the grammatically unnecessary use of diabolical and toxic and ‘criminal evil,’ speaks to this author’s perspective and goals — Feemster wants to create spiritual defenses to protect the good people who serve in law enforcement from the evildoers who have caused or want to cause them harm. “Spirituality in policing is not about adopting religious dogma or creeds, unless officers choose to embrace these worldviews,” Feemster wrote, interestingly noting the mistakes of the Catholic Church that fueled the rise of Santa Muerte in the following sentence, “Moreover, glib or authoritarian approaches to religious indoctrination can actually kill or suppress authentic spirituality.”⁵⁶ Later in the piece, Feemster defines religion as “a human attempt to control spirituality with sectarian rules, regulations, policies, and rituals,”⁵⁷ a definition which soundly places the unorganized worship of Santa Muerte into the current conversation. After explaining more of the conference’s happenings and the ideas that came out of some stuffy Virginia office rooms, he concludes with the claim that “protecting and serving ... is endemically spiritual.”⁵⁸

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Next on the docket comes Jeffrey G. Willets, who was, at the time, the academic dean of the John Leland Center for Theological Studies, a seminary. Though throughout the

⁵⁴ “FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin - May 2009,” 2.

⁵⁵ “FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin - May 2009,” 2.

⁵⁶ “FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin - May 2009,” 3.

⁵⁷ “FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin - May 2009,” 5.

⁵⁸ “FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin - May 2009,” 8.

bulletin various authors attempt to make it clear that this conference was a secular event, that idea is tainted by the fact that Christian clergy was invited. And Willetts does very little to hide his attempts at evangelism throughout his government-granted pages. First, he calls for police academy curriculums to discuss questions “concerning God, truth, and happiness.”⁵⁹ He then equates a “decline of spiritual language in the West” with a disbelief in the Judeo-Christian God, directly undermining the overall project’s premise that spirituality and religion can be disconnected.⁶⁰ He repeats this directly on the following page. He claims that spiritual concepts have declined, before immediately offering the example of declining belief in God. He then spends the rest of the page arguing in favor of the Christian God’s existence. Finally, Willetts brings the discussion to the idea of evil, which he describes as a “spiritual reality.”⁶¹ Humans are made aware of this reality, have it proven to them, he claims, when they experience profound remorse. How remorse proves the existence of evil is both cryptic and nebulous, but, he claims, “Law enforcement officers face the reality of evil ... all of the time.”⁶²



A nursing professor named Dr. Inez Tuck took the following section. According to her, if a law enforcement officer lives “on the edge” for too long, they may lose their “capacity to view people as fellow human beings, and only see the negative consequences of their actions or the harm they may subsequently cause.”⁶³ It is evident that her goals diverge greatly from the two authors before, seeking a semi-medical application of spirituality for law enforcement officers, one that will benefit not only them but the world as a whole by dealing with various types of stress, including the diagnosable spiritual distress, through spiritual beliefs and practices. Dr. Tuck cites a 1999 study which found “that when undergoing stress, people who had spiritual experiences, became calmer and

⁵⁹ “FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin - May 2009,” 10.

⁶⁰ “FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin - May 2009,” 11.

⁶¹ “FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin - May 2009,” 13.

⁶² “FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin - May 2009,” 13.

⁶³ “FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin - May 2009,” 14.

more tolerant; found more meaning in their lives; and we're more concerned with issues of social justice, less materialistic, less status conscious, and less likely to be racially prejudiced.”⁶⁴ Spirituality is important for those in law enforcement, Dr. Tuck writes, but it is also an important element of any complete person.

Table 2. Description of Spiritual Distress	
•	Questions the meaning of life, death, and suffering
•	Lacks sense of purpose, enthusiasm for life, feelings of joy, inner peace, or love
•	Demonstrates discouragement or despair
•	Feels a sense of spiritual emptiness
•	Shows emotional detachment from self and others
•	Experiences alienation from spiritual or religious community
•	Exhibits or reports mood changes (frequent crying, depression, apathy, or anger)
•	Displays sudden changes in spiritual practices (rejection, neglect, doubt, fanatical devotion, or increased interest)
•	Questions credibility of religion or spiritual belief system
•	Requests assistance for a disturbance in spiritual or religious beliefs

Figure 7. A table taken from Dr. Tuck's section. ("FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin - May 2009," 18).

Police sergeant Ginger Charles filled the bulletin's penultimate spot, in which she discussed a 2004 study she performed regarding spirituality in police work. Charles begins by laying out the importance of defining spirituality in a way that includes all faiths and spiritual practices. On the following chart, a profile of participants that lists each of the ten officers along with six different attributes. Religious affiliation is curiously absent. This is explained on the following page, where she writes, "all participants stated that their belief centered in Judeo-Christian beliefs, and that prayer constituted their main form of spiritual practice."⁶⁵ It is seemingly impossible to precisely cut the factors exclusive to a Judeo-Christian practice of spirituality when the studies lack even a single individual from outside that religious framework, a fact which passes entirely unlamented by Charles. She

⁶⁴ "FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin - May 2009," 20.

⁶⁵ "FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin - May 2009," 24.

writes that the group all believed in a larger plan, one solely known and controlled by God, and believed it was their role to surrender to that plan.⁶⁶ One of the officers participating in the study claimed that individuals either have a moral compass or they don't, implying the existence of the same sort of evil that has been referenced in the previous sections. The concept of evil and whether it even exists at all is a fraught philosophical debate best left to treatises, but here it must be noted that the idea of evil in the popular zeitgeist today has its roots in the Bible. Even still, Charles hoped "her study was not an anomaly, but, rather, a glimpse at an emerging police culture that embodies spiritual qualities, such as empathy, compassion, integrity, humanism, and love for all humankind."⁶⁷ Her hopes were, as time has shown, foolishly placed.



Finally, the bulletin is rounded out by an expert on the brain and cognition, Dr. Fred Travis. His use of jargon and the density of this section makes for a difficult read, and his credibility is undermined by his reliance on Albert Bandura's social learning theory and bobo doll experiment. "Police officers see the perpetrators of evil and the results of their evil deeds. The constant contact with evil is corrosive, and those effects are cumulative,"⁶⁸ a police officer told Dr. Travis, who jumps from that place to claim that experiences change the brain, something proven by violent video games which make children act more hostile and aggressive towards their friends. He based this assertion — an assertion that has been repeatedly disproven through studies — on Bandura's much maligned 1960s research, the Wikipedia page for which features a rather lengthy section entitled "Criticism of the experiments."⁶⁹ Regardless, Dr. Travis ends by concurring regarding the benefits of spirituality; "spiritual experiences enliven executive brain circuits to buffer the impact of nauseous experiences, and, therefore, could contribute to higher well-being."⁷⁰

⁶⁶ "FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin - May 2009," 24.

⁶⁷ "FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin - May 2009," 25.

⁶⁸ "FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin - May 2009," 28.

⁶⁹ "Albert Bandura," Wikipedia, February 19, 2025, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Bandura.

⁷⁰ "FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin - May 2009," 31.



Figure 8. A group of brown people stopped by immigration authorities in Phoenix.

This attempt at moving the law enforcement agencies of the United States towards spirituality has utterly failed through the intervening fifteen years, this is perhaps in part due to the institutions' commitment to Christian dogma during a time in which the church's influence is fading, a commitment displayed by the participation of Christian leaders (and only Christian leaders) in the conference, and, regardless of protestations that the project is irreligious, the repeated focus on religiously Christian spirituality throughout the project and its bulletin. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that worship of Santa Muerte is a

form of spirituality aligned with those promoted by these authors. Based on the following model, figure 9, which was produced by Research on Policing Reform and Accountability (RoPRA), it is shown that police departments tend to be far more conservative than their community, greatly increasing the difficulty of shifting their footing to one of spirituality that, as doctors Tuck and Travis wrote, would lead them towards being less prejudiced, more accepting, and generally healthier.

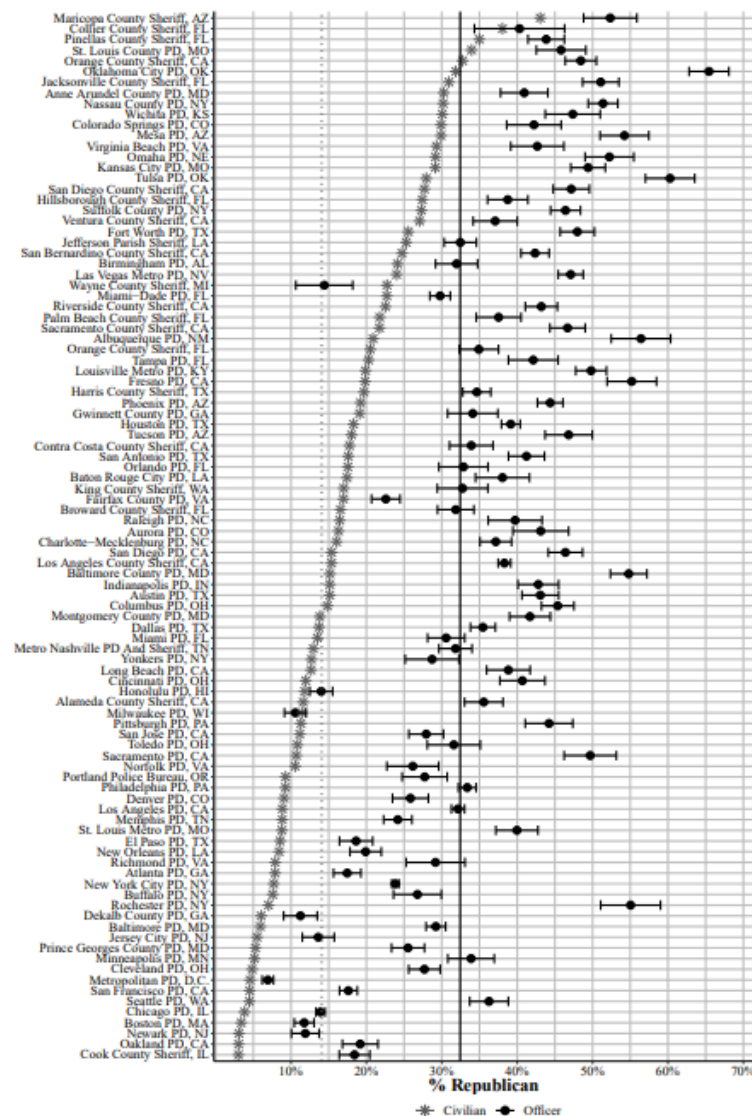


Figure 9. Average Shares of Republicans Among Officers and Civilians in the Same Jurisdictions.⁷¹

⁷¹ Ba, Bocar, Haosen Ge, Jacob Kaplan, Dean Knox, Mayya Komisarchik, Gregory Lanzalotto, Rei Mariman, Jonathan Mummolo, Roman Rivera, and Michelle Torres. "Political diversity in US police agencies." *American Journal of Political Science* (2023).

Research has shown that, among organized religions in the United States, Muslims experience an inordinate amount of policing and are most likely to file reports of police harassment.⁷² Muslim communities are, however, more likely than others to rely on the police for security due to the magnitude and frequency of religious hate crimes they face, a fact that creates a relationship between the two groups, thereby putting them on the same team against a common, criminal enemy.⁷³ This is not the case for Santa Muerte and her followers since there is no organization such as a mosque to be attacked or leadership for the police to interact with. Instances of housing discrimination against Muslims are quite common, but no instances against Santa Muerte's followers could be found in the media. Additionally, no discrimination complaints could be found through Freedom of Information Act requests made to various federal departments regarding both housing and employment, with replies from both seeming rather baffled by the requests.

The vast majority of people in the U.S. have no opinion on Santa Muerte, never having heard of her. Unlike the Muslim community, followers of Santa Muerte do not have enemies among the broader public who discriminate against them for their religion, something which serves as a crude counterbalance of sorts — the discrimination in this case comes entirely from within law enforcement agencies, and exists as the only interaction between the two groups. Above all else, one thing is made clear by the FBI's experiment. Narcos who follow Santa Muerte and police officers who follow the Christian God crave the relief of spirituality in the same way and can reap the same benefits from belief in the spiritual.

⁷² Jauhara Ferguson, Christopher P Scheitle, and Elaine Howard Ecklund, "Religion, Race, and Perceptions of Police Harassment," *Social Problems* 70, no. 3 (June 30, 2022): 735–54, doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spac040.

⁷³ Jauhara Ferguson, Christopher P Scheitle, and Elaine Howard Ecklund, "Perceptions of Police Harassment."

GOD DIES OF HEATSTROKE

Miranda That Ghost Just Isn't Holy Anymore

*“ALONG THE FALLEN SCOWLED A FENCE
OF BEAKS.”*

In November of 2022, four months before losing all of his column's funding due to his rather eccentric approach to racism and shortly after fleeing to Hungary following his divorce,⁷⁴ noted conservative commentator Rod Dreher would publish an article entitled "Santa Muerte & The Spiritual Realities Of The Drug War."⁷⁵ Though Dreher's writings clearly establish him as a white nationalist detached from reality – he is noted for acts such as mocking Aaliyah's funeral⁷⁶ and claiming the Christchurch shooter had legitimate concerns regarding the decline of ethnic Europeans,⁷⁷ Dreher clearly had the ears of many. Vanity Fair claims that his 2016 interview with J.D. Vance pushed *Hillbilly Elegy* up the bestseller charts, playing a major role in landing the now Vice President his senate seat.⁷⁸ This article bears so much importance because it likely introduced more American conservatives to Santa Muerte than any other piece of media has. The subtitle of the piece, the lady's first impression placed just above her visage in photo form, reads: "The occult Mexican folk 'saint' is a very old enemy, manifesting in a new way -- and it has come to America."⁷⁹



The basic premise Dreher begins from is that the "savagery and evil of the vanquished native religion,"⁸⁰ thought to have been banished by the conquistadors, continued to lurk in the shadows, and Santa Muerte is that very savagery and evil manifest. Dreher cites many articles, including one from the Dallas Morning News that attempts to paint both sides of the picture, writing "The FBI has called such beliefs part of

⁷⁴ Caleb Ecarma, "How Rod Dreher's Blog Got A Little 'Too Weird' for the American Conservative," Vanity Fair, March 10, 2023, [vanityfair.com/news/2023/03/rod-dreher-blog-weird-american-conservative](https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2023/03/rod-dreher-blog-weird-american-conservative).

⁷⁵ Rod Dreher, "Santa Muerte & the Spiritual Realities of the Drug War," The American Conservative, November 25, 2022, theamericanconservative.com/santa-muerte-the-spiritual-realities-of-the-drug-war/.

⁷⁶ Sarah Jones, "Rod Dreher's Race Problem," The New Republic, May 11, 2021, newrepublic.com/article/146758/rod-drehers-race-problem.

⁷⁷ Pallavi Singhal, "Everything Tarrant Identifies...Is True': Ramsay Centre under Fire for Speakers," The Sydney Morning Herald, March 20, 2019, [smh.com.au/education/everything-tarrant-identifies-is-true-ramsay-centre-under-fire-for-speakers-20190318-p5157y.html](https://www.smh.com.au/education/everything-tarrant-identifies-is-true-ramsay-centre-under-fire-for-speakers-20190318-p5157y.html).

⁷⁸ Caleb Ecarma, "How Rod Dreher's Blog Got A Little 'Too Weird.'"

⁷⁹ Rod Dreher, "Santa Muerte."

⁸⁰ Rod Dreher, "Santa Muerte."

a cult steeped in ‘deviant spirituality’ and used by drug traffickers to justify their criminal actions. Campbell, the anthropologist, said these beliefs aren’t the cause of criminal behavior but a ‘remedy to deal with their existential anxiety about the dangers of the business.’ Like the cab driver who carries with him a picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe.”⁸¹ Dreher responds to Campbell, an expert who was interviewed by the Dallas Morning News for their article, predictably. “There are some things so stupid that it takes an intellectual to believe it. A ‘simplistic conclusion’ about that horror scene? Describing these blood-soaked cultists as mere people whose ‘beliefs fall out of the mainstream,’ and who are doing this stuff to deal with their existential anxiety? Good Lord.”⁸² As for evil spirits, Dreher claims “This stuff is real -- and really dangerous. I have many, many such stories, and have seen some things with my own eyes.”⁸³ Throughout the article, no space is given for people who believe in Santa Muerte. There are only demons attacking good Christians and those dumb enough to have mixed pagan ritual into their Christianity who are depicted as suffering the infernal consequences of their mistakes. The implication of this is that Santa Muerte’s devotees are not human, not even subhuman, but purely demonic. To close, Dreher writes that “the drug war, with the *narcotraficantes*, is not just one of cops and drug dealers, cartels and guns, but also of demons and spiritual bondage. If I were that hexed DEA agent, I would get myself to an exorcist for prayers, and would commit myself to daily prayer against spiritual attack by malign forces.”⁸⁴

Though the aforementioned Dallas Morning News article made an attempt at fairness to Santa Muerte’s vast count of law-abiding followers, its headline — featured first in a list of Santa Muerte related headlines below — did not, a theme that is repeated by the majority of articles on this topic.

⁸¹ Kevin Krause, “Blood Cult or Religion? Feds Say Narcos Prayed for Blessings and Hexes in Dallas Houses,” Dallas News, November 23, 2022, dallasnews.com/news/crime/2022/11/21/blood-cult-or-religion-feds-say-narcos-prayed-for-blessings-and-hexes-in-dallas-house/.

⁸² Rod Dreher, “Santa Muerte.”

⁸³ Rod Dreher, “Santa Muerte.”

⁸⁴ Rod Dreher, “Santa Muerte.”

Blood cult or religion? Feds say narcos prayed for blessings and hexes in Dallas houses⁸⁵

Former Mexican Top Cop on Trial in NYC Worshipped the Devil and Santa Muerte⁸⁶

‘Drug trafficker shrine’ to saint fails to protect large scale Kennewick meth dealer⁸⁷

Tri-cities meth trafficker sentenced to 10 years after DEA finds Santa Muerte shrine⁸⁸

Handgun seized, Santa Muerte shrine found in student's home⁸⁹

DEA, Bexar County find various firearms, statue used to ‘protect’ suspect⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Kevin Krause, “Blood Cult or Religion?”

⁸⁶ Andrew Chesnut, “Former Mexican Top Cop on Trial in NYC Worshipped the Devil and Santa Muerte,” The Global Catholic Review, January 31, 2023, patheos.com/blogs/theglobalcatholicreview/2023/01/former-mexican-top-cop-on-trial-in-nyc-worshipped-the-devil-and-santa-muerte/.

⁸⁷ Annette Cary, “‘Drug Trafficker Shrine’ to Saint Fails to Protect Large Scale Kennewick Meth Dealer,” Tri-City Herald, August 15, 2022, amp.tri-cityherald.com/news/local/crime/article264512756.html.

⁸⁸ Karlee Van de Venter, “Tri-Cities Meth Trafficker Sentenced to 10 Years after DEA Finds Santa Muerte Shrine,” NonStop Local Tri-Cities/Yakima, August 11, 2022, nbcrightnow.com/news/tri-cities-meth-trafficker-sentenced-to-10-years-after-dea-finds-santa-muerte-shrine/article_f9a6fcde-19c6-11ed-a6f3-877876ba0c90.html.

⁸⁹ César Rodríguez, “Handgun Seized, Santa Muerte Shrine Found in Student’s Home,” LAREDO MORNING TIMES, January 30, 2023, lmtonline.com/local/article/santa-muerte-statues-drugs-found-raids-south-19863353.php.

⁹⁰ Angela Bonilla, “Dea, Bexar County Find Various Firearms, Statue Used to ‘protect’ Suspect,” KWTX, February 28, 2023, kwtx.com/2023/02/28/dea-bexar-county-find-various-firearms-statue-used-protect-suspect/.

**Man escapes failed human sacrifice to Santa Muerte in
Tennessee mobile home⁹¹**

**How a brutal Chicago gang and its cult of death left trail of
murder⁹²**

**Shrine to 'Santa Muerte' cartels' patron saint found inside stash
house near the US-Mexico border⁹³**

**Mexico's drug cartels: Female assassin 'La Flaca' killed and
stuffed in beer cooler by rival gang⁹⁴**

**2 MS-13 members convicted in 'satanic killing' of Houston teen
get 40 years in prison⁹⁵**

**Officials find cocaine, meth, items associated with Mexican
Cartels in drug trafficking arrests in Horry County⁹⁶**

⁹¹ AJ Abell, "Man Escapes Failed Human Sacrifice to Santa Muerte in Tennessee Mobile Home," WZTV, November 9, 2018, fox17.com/news/local/man-escapes-failed-human-sacrifice-to-santa-muerte-in-tennessee-mobile-home.

⁹² Steve Schmadeke, "How a Brutal Chicago Gang and Its Cult of Death Left Trail of Murder," Chicago Tribune, May 23, 2019, chicagotribune.com/2017/05/10/how-a-brutal-chicago-gang-and-its-cult-of-death-left-trail-of-murder/.

⁹³ MDP Newsroom, "Shrine to 'Santa Muerte' Cartels' patron Saint Found inside Stash House near the US-Mexico Border," Mexico Daily Post, March 29, 2023, mexicodailypost.com/2023/03/29/shrine-to-santa-muerte-cartelspatron-saint-found-inside-stash-house-near-the-us-mexico-border/.

⁹⁴ Ludovica Iaccino, "Mexico's Drug Cartels: Female Assassin 'la Flaca' Killed and Stuffed in Beer Cooler by Rival Gang," International Business Times UK, April 20, 2015, www.ibtimes.co.uk/mexicos-drug-cartels-female-assassin-la-flaca-killed-stuffed-beer-cooler-by-rival-gang-1497397.

⁹⁵ "2 MS-13 Gang Members Convicted in 'satanic killing' of Houston Teen Sentenced to 40 Years in Prison," ABC 13, May 27, 2021, abc13.com/amp/ms13-members-convicted-in-killing-teen-girl-killed-alleged-satanic-ritual-diego-hernandez-rivera-sentenced-miguel-alvarez-flores-to-40-years/10698789/.

⁹⁶ WMBF News Staff, "Officials Find Cocaine, Meth, Items Associated with Mexican Cartels in Drug Trafficking Arrests in Horry County," WMBF News, July 12, 2022,

Even beyond the use of scare quotes in titles — a practice used in headlines that has an effect similar to referring to the quoted thing as so-called — many of these headlines are quite loaded. In Elly Ifantidou’s “Newspaper headlines, relevance and emotive effects,” she claims that “Readers’ habit to glance over the news has spawned brief, creative and imaginative headlines,” a fact that is clearly displayed in the above examples. The goal of headlines, according to Ifantidou, is to “engag[e] the reader in the story, by sharing the emotion of the story.”⁹⁷ The emotion of stories that feature Santa Muerte regularly falls in a range between somber and panicked horror — a fact that is reflected in these headlines. In that way the headlines are doing their job, though the knock-on effect of this emotion-first gore-heavy approach is to present only two dimensional battles of good and evil, God and the Devil. A study published in *Nature* in 2023 found that “negative words in news headlines increased consumption rates (and positive words decreased consumption rates),”⁹⁸ a fact which may further explain the ‘evil’ depictions of Santa Muerte in these headlines. Further worsening this issue, researchers at Penn State found that about 3,000 links to false content were shared over 41-million total times without the user clicking to read the article.⁹⁹ More than three-quarters of these shares came from conservative users. Below are some excerpts from the articles that exemplify the American media’s treatment of Santa Muerte for those who bother to read beyond the headline:

— ★ —

Agents found items around a Santa Muerte shrine, which is “commonly associated with drug trafficking,” according to a press release from U.S. Attorney Vanessa Waldref.¹⁰⁰

wmbfnews.com/2022/07/12/officials-find-cocaine-meth-items-associated-with-mexican-cartels-drug-trafficking-arrests-horry-county/?outputType=amp.

⁹⁷ Elly Ifantidou, “Newspaper Headlines, Relevance and Emotive Effects,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 218 (December 2023): 17–30, doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2023.09.013.

⁹⁸ Claire E. Robertson et al., “Negativity Drives Online News Consumption,” *Nature Human Behaviour* 7, no. 5 (March 16, 2023): 812–22, doi.org/10.1038/s41562-023-01538-4.

⁹⁹ Ashley WenersHerron, “Social Media Users Probably Won’t Read beyond This Headline, Researchers Say,” Penn State University, November 19, 2024, psu.edu/news/research/story/social-media-users-probably-wont-read-beyond-headline-researchers-say.

¹⁰⁰ Karlee Van de Venter, “Tri-Cities Meth Trafficker Sentenced.”

Bexar County Sheriff's Office's Post



Bexar County Sheriff's Office

February 28, 2023 · 🌐

BCSO AND DEA ARREST GANG MEMBER FOUND WITH DRUGS AND ILLEGAL WEAPONS

On February 22, 2023, deputies from the Covert Unit, Gang Unit, K9 Unit, and DEA TAG worked in conjunction to execute a search warrant in the 1600 block of Terrell Bend in San Antonio, TX. When deputies entered the home, deputies immediately detained the suspect, Robert Salas, 43, without incident. While deputies were searching the residence, K9 Legis was assisting and alerted to several areas throughout the residence that indicated there were narcotics in the residence. Deputies located a large safe and found eleven firearms, ranging from glock pistols, Micro Draco, an AK-47 style rifle, and also a glock switch. Five of the eleven weapons were confirmed stolen weapons. As deputies continued the search, 65 grams of THC wax, 2.7 grams of methamphetamine, 17 grams of Vicodin, and 6 grams of fentanyl were found in the dining room. Drug paraphernalia was also recovered that included NARCAN, digital scales, and packaging. The search continued and deputies located a large Santa Muerte shrine with offerings. Drug traffickers commonly use this statue to "protect" them as they traffic drugs.

Robert Salas was arrested for unlawful carry of a weapon and possession with intent to deliver a controlled substance. Additionally, Robert Salas is a documented gang member. The investigation is ongoing.

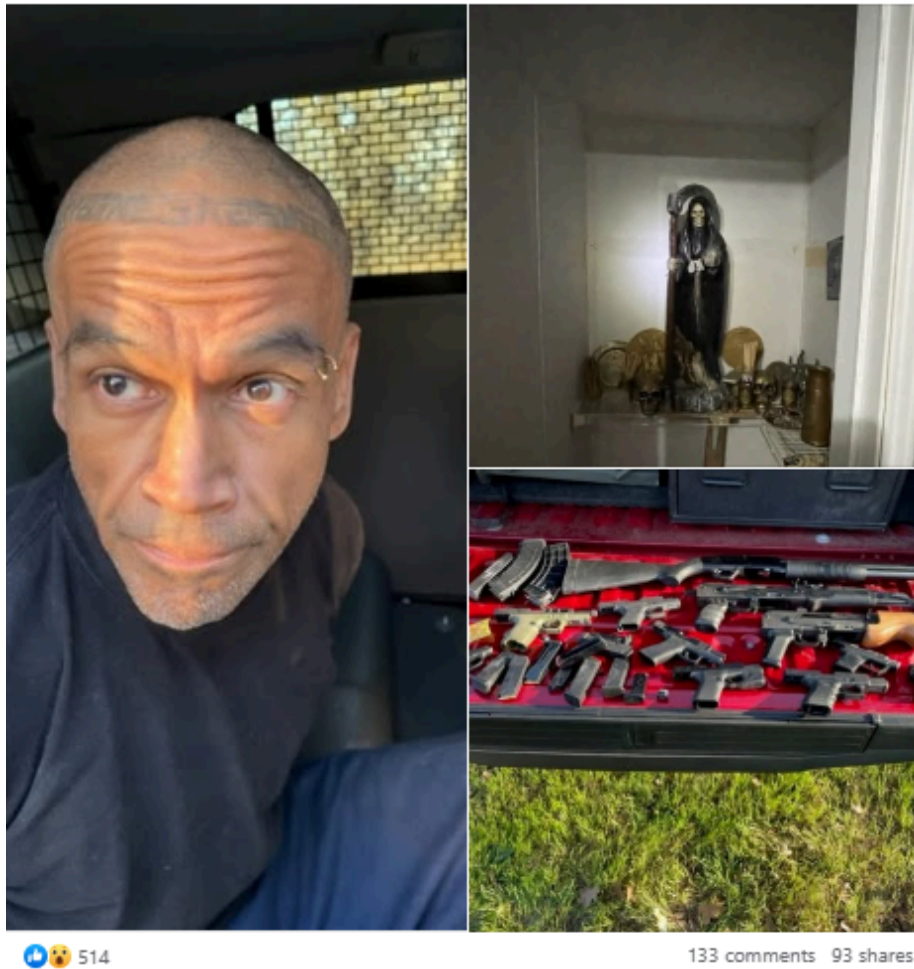


Figure 10. A screenshot of the Facebook post made by the Sheriff's department. It is notable that the eleven firearms retrieved are the final picture in the array, indicating that they are less significant than the man's appearance and the shrine to Santa Muerte. (Angela Bonilla, "Dea, Bexar County Find Various Firearms").

As deputies continued the search, 65 grams of THC wax, 2.7 grams of methamphetamine, 17 grams of Vicodin, and 6 grams of fentanyl were found in the dining room. Drug paraphernalia was also recovered that included NARCAN, digital scales, and packaging. “The search continued and deputies located a large Santa Muerte shrine with offerings,” said Bexar County Sheriff’s Office. “Drug traffickers commonly use this statue to protect them as they traffic drugs.”¹⁰¹

Agents seized this La Santa Muerte statue in a York County cocaine sting. La Santa Metro translates to Death Saint and has become a “narco patron saint” within the Mexican drug community, officials said. Drug cartels believe this saint will protect them from law enforcement and from other drug cartel members. The shrines typically include money, lines of cocaine, or blood that are given as sacrifices to the saint.¹⁰²

Later, Paschal said, Sanchez was arrested after chasing her and two other workers with a knife. After he got out of jail on bond, he found the woman, kidnapped her at knife point and brought her back. Law enforcement found her in Sanchez’s mobile home in Jesup, where they also discovered a shrine to Santa Muerte, or Saint Death. The shrine was decorated with the woman’s hair and blood, and law enforcement say that Sanchez intended to murder the woman.¹⁰³

The Santa Muerte death cult was the crew’s calling card, prosecutors said — members had stickers on their vehicles, tattoos on their bodies, shrines in their homes and even Santa Muerte-stamped bands to hold their cash. “They were a team and that was their team logo,” said Assistant State’s Attorney Nina Ricci at Cerda’s March trial. The crew sold powder cocaine but also robbed and killed would-be customers, according to prosecutors, court testimony and records.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Angela Bonilla, “Dea, Bexar County Find Various Firearms.”

¹⁰² Jeffrey A. Johnson, “Six Alleged Drug Dealers Busted for Running \$4.8 Million Cocaine Ring in York County,” pennlive, July 31, 2013, pennlive.com/midstate/2013/07/six_alleged_drug_dealers_buste.html.

¹⁰³ Abraham Kenmore, “3 Men Sentenced in Federal Labor Trafficking Case in Southern Georgia,” The Augusta Chronicle, April 11, 2022, augustachronicle.com/story/news/2022/04/02/3-men-sentenced-forced-labor-conspiracy-farm-labor-trafficking-guilty/7244559001/.

¹⁰⁴ Steve Schmadeke, “How a Brutal Chicago Gang.”



Figure 11. Thomas Peipert, “2 Teens Killed Execution-Style.” Mugshot of a man with a murder charge with “Santa Muerte” tattooed beneath his eyes.

Marquez's mugshot shows a tattoo across his face that says "Santa Muerte" — "Holy Death" in Spanish. Santa Muerte is a skeleton folk saint often associated with violence and drug trafficking, but also has a following among a variety of people, including the poor, artists and immigrant small-business owners.¹⁰⁵

Ultimately, Santa Muerte had come back to haunt Cerda. He was convicted in part because security video showed a vehicle similar to his Grand Marquis — including its distinctive Santa Muerte window decal — leaving the isolated, industrial South Side area where the bodies were found in the car.¹⁰⁶

— ★ —

The most notable feature of these articles is how they seem to equate statues with arsenals of guns, the two often finding themselves in the same sentence and both being collected by law enforcement as evidence. If the statues featured any other religious figure this would almost certainly not happen — it is difficult to imagine police parading around a cross

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Peipert, “2 Teens Killed Execution-Style over Purse, 10 Arrested,” Chron, August 4, 2017, chron.com/national/article/2-teens-killed-purse-santa-muerte-death-cult-texas-11734146.php.

¹⁰⁶ Steve Schmadeke, “How a Brutal Chicago Gang.”

taken from a murderer's home — but certain people have worked long and hard to instill this attitude towards Santa Muerte throughout American police departments, and oftentimes news articles on crime are little more than law enforcement press releases.¹⁰⁷

— ★ —

Dreher's piece, discussed at this chapter's beginning, references a 2010 article published in the Small Wars Journal, an article written by Pamela and Robert Bunker, the latter of whom has found himself particularly relevant to this story as his article "Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic Killings"¹⁰⁸ was featured in chapter three. In this article the Bunkers claim that "ritual human sacrifice offered up to a dark deity" has "become far more frequent" in the time since the 1989 death of Mark Kilroy, though the only examples offered are "Severed heads thrown onto a disco floor in Michoacan in 2005 and burnt skull imprints in a clearing in a ranch in the Yucatán Peninsula in 2008."¹⁰⁹ The first example refers to the heads of rival drug dealers according to NBC,¹¹⁰ with no features that would distinguish these killings as human sacrifice. No references to the second instance were able to be found. The Bunkers do not cite their sources on either. When pressed over the phone for examples of human sacrifice, Robert Bunker turned back to the case of Mark Kilroy. It did not seem as if he had any others on the top of his mind. The Bunkers claim that cartels following Santa Muerte have begun offering the choice between following the dark lady or dying, "a choice historically associated with incidents of religious conversion at the tip of a sword. That technique is typically carried out by young religions, such as militant Christianity and Islam, during their expansionistic phases."¹¹¹ No evidence of such conversions having occurred, even anecdotally, is presented.

¹⁰⁷ Alec Karakatsanis, "How to Sniff out 'Copaganda': When the Police and the Media Manipulate Our News," Teen Vogue, May 8, 2025, [teenvogue.com/story/copaganda-when-the-police-and-the-media-manipulate-our-news](https://www.teenvogue.com/story/copaganda-when-the-police-and-the-media-manipulate-our-news).

¹⁰⁸ Pamela Bunker and Robert J. Bunker, "The Spiritual Significance of ¿Plata o Plomo?," Small Wars Journal, May 27, 2010, smallwarsjournal.com/2010/05/27/the-spiritual-significance-of-plata-o-plomo/. The link to download the article here does not work. A functioning link can be found here: scholarship.claremont.edu/cgu_fac_pub/279/

¹⁰⁹ Pamela Bunker and Robert J. Bunker, "The Spiritual Significance of ¿Plata o Plomo?," 1.

¹¹⁰ The Associated Press, "Gunmen Dump 5 Human Heads in Bar," NBCNews.com, September 7, 2006, [nbcnews.com/id/wbna14708092](https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna14708092).

¹¹¹ Pamela Bunker and Robert J. Bunker, "The Spiritual Significance of ¿Plata o Plomo?," 2.

GOD DIES OF HEATSTROKE

Rock ‘n’ Roll Suicide

*“DON’T LET THE SUN BLAST YOUR
SHADOW.”*

Robert Bunker sits between worlds that often find themselves in conflict — academia and law enforcement. On the academic side we find the previously noted Dr. R. Andrew Chesnut, a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University and the author of “Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint.”¹¹² Chesnut is arguably the preeminent Santa Muerte scholar in the United States. Across from him is Robert Almonte, whose website, mexicancartels.org, describes him, saying, “Robert Almonte was the United States Marshal for the Western District of Texas from 2010 to 2016. He had previously retired from the El Paso, Texas Police Department after 25 years of service.”¹¹³ Notably, it does not say he retired as a U.S. Marshal, as that is not the case. Almonte resigned. The El Paso Times writes that “Almonte was accused of misusing employee time by having an employee serve as his personal driver for nongovernment business, failing to get ethics approval for presentations made to law enforcement, not following management directives on the number and location of the presentations and asking subordinates to contribute money for various work-related events.”¹¹⁴ These presentations, often featuring Santa Muerte, have been his main business venture ever since, and he is often found teaching crowds of cops. His training video, “Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld”, has been shown to FBI trainees for over a decade now. Because of the reach of his teachings, it is clear that he has had more influence on American law enforcement’s relationship with Santa Muerte than any other individual. He proclaims that he has taught many thousands of cops and has testified in many court cases, though not all of his testimony has gone down easy.



On February 6, 2013 Rafael Goxcon-Chagal and Maria Vianey Medina-Copete both found themselves sentenced to a fifteen-year stint for drug and firearm charges. They

¹¹² R. Andrew Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*

¹¹³ “Mexican Cartels Training - Home,” Mexican Cartels Training - Home, accessed April 6, 2025, <http://mexicancartels.org/>. It is notable that through the entirety of the research for this piece the only person who fully dodged all my contact attempts was Almonte.

¹¹⁴ Daniel Borunda, “El Paso’s U.S. Marshal Robert Almonte Resigns,” *El Paso Times*, May 12, 2016, elpasotimes.com/story/news/local/el-paso/2016/05/12/el-pasos-us-marshal-robert-almonte-resigns/84298606/.

had been arrested two years prior following a traffic stop.¹¹⁵ One year later, their appeal, founded on the permitting of a certain expert witness, would find itself before the United States Court of Appeals Tenth Circuit. The decision, written by Judge Lucero, began with this:

These appeals, brought to us by Maria Vianey Medina-Copete (“Medina”) and Rafael Goxcon-Chagal (“Goxcon”) following their convictions on drug trafficking charges, requires us to consider an issue of first impression in our circuit. During the trial, the district court allowed a purported expert on certain religious iconography to testify that veneration of a figure known as “Santa Muerte” was so connected with drug trafficking as to constitute evidence that the occupants of the vehicle were aware of the presence of drugs in a secret compartment. In addition to qualifying a law enforcement official as an expert on Santa Muerte, the district court allowed the witness to wander far afield and render theological opinions about the “legitima[cy]” of Santa Muerte vis-à-vis other venerated figures.¹¹⁶

The testimony given by this law enforcement official was deemed both inadmissible and prejudicial, and the sentences were vacated. Neither of the accused were retried on these charges. It is unclear what became of them following the ruling. According to transcripts, the prosecution had presented Robert Almonte as an expert, describing him “as a ‘cultural iconography hobbyist.’ His research includes ‘visit[s to] several shrines of [Mexican drug traffickers]’ patron saints throughout Mexico, Spain, and the United States.”¹¹⁷ The district court permitted this testimony, finding that “the presence of personal items related to so-called narco saints can support a conclusion that a defendant was engaged in drug trafficking.”¹¹⁸ In court, Almonte’s description of Santa Muerte was as follows:

¹¹⁵ “Oklahoma Couple Sentenced to Fifteen Years in Prison for Conviction on Methamphetamine Trafficking, Firearms and Immigration Charges,” District of New Mexico, January 26, 2015, justice.gov/usao-nm/pr/oklahoma-couple-sentenced-fifteen-years-prison-conviction-methamphetamine-trafficking. The spelling errors of ‘immigration’ and ‘methamphetamine’ are theirs.

¹¹⁶ United States v. Medina-Copete, No. 13-2026 (10th Cir. 2014), 2.

¹¹⁷ United States v. Medina-Copete, No. 13-2026 (10th Cir. 2014), 8.

¹¹⁸ United States v. Medina-Copete, No. 13-2026 (10th Cir. 2014), 9.

Well, I think it's hard to say exactly what Santa Muerte is, but what I found is that she would be a spirit, or some people consider her the angel of death. Some people have given her saintlike status. Not to say that she's a Catholic saint, because she's not a real person, so she could never be a Catholic saint. But people have given her saintlike status, and that goes with her name Santa, which means saint or holy. A lot of people believe that she goes all the way back to the pre-Christian belief of the Aztec God of Death. . . . So, basically, I think, depending on who you ask, she's going to be any one of those, but pretty much one and the same. Not the Grim Reaper. The Grim Reaper represents death. Santa Muerte is considered the angel of death or saint of death or holy death. A lot of people believe that—they'll pray to Santa Muerte. She'll answer their prayers, whatever those prayers may be. In conducting my research throughout Mexico it became apparent to me that with a lot of people Santa Muerte became more popular than the Virgin Mary, and in some cases more popular than Jesus Christ himself.¹¹⁹

It is unclear whether the Beatles reference was intentional. Almonte claimed before the jury that the prayer to Santa Muerte found in Medina's possession would, in and of itself, "be a very good indicator of possible criminal activity."¹²⁰ The key question in this appeal was "whether an expert witness may offer opinion testimony ... about the connection between so-called 'narco saint' iconography and drug trafficking."¹²¹ The ruling: "the district court abused its discretion by permitting Almonte's expert testimony," specifically breaking the Federal Rule of Evidence 702(a), which requires "the expert's scientific, technical, or other specialized knowledge will help the trier of fact to understand the evidence or to determine a fact in issue."¹²²

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Almonte's testimony set out to connect Medina's prayer for safe passage to drug trafficking, but it was left entirely unclear how it did so as there wasn't a claim that Santa

¹¹⁹ United States v. Medina-Copete, No. 13-2026 (10th Cir. 2014), 10.

¹²⁰ United States v. Medina-Copete, No. 13-2026 (10th Cir. 2014), 11.

¹²¹ United States v. Medina-Copete, No. 13-2026 (10th Cir. 2014), 15.

¹²² United States v. Medina-Copete, No. 13-2026 (10th Cir. 2014), 15.

Muerte was worshipped in order to traffic drugs and there was no method offered to differentiate criminal worshippers from the rest. As the court notes, “His data comes from his work as a narcotics detective and his compilation of ‘several cases from law enforcement officers throughout the United States where these items have been involved in drug trafficking and other criminal activity.’ Mere observation that a correlation exists—especially when the observer is a law enforcement officer likely to encounter a biased sample—does not meaningfully assist the jury in determining guilt or innocence.”¹²³ The prosecution argued, in line with Almonte’s testimony, that the veneration of Santa Muerte is a tool of the drug trade. This argument crumbled with a single touch from the Appellate Court. A citation found in the Appellate decision offers this regarding the meaning of ‘tool of the trade’ in this context:

*The district court cited with approval another district court that held, “Jesus Malverde paraphernalia can be considered as ‘tools of the trade’: these items are perfectly legal, and yet can be used illegitimately in a drug trafficking scheme.” ... We reject such a broad definition of “tools of the trade,” which would logically include literally every legal item used or carried by a person who is committing a drug distribution offense. Our precedent requires some showing that a “tool of the trade” can be used as a “means for the distribution of illegal drugs.”*¹²⁴

In that case, Jesus Malverde paraphernalia was compared to ziplocs due to the potential use case of drug trafficking, but this court did not agree with that perspective. This court concluded that Almonte’s experience “did not render him qualified as an expert on the connection between Santa Muerte worship and drug trafficking, his knowledge did not assist the jury, and his opinion was not based on the proper application of reliable principles and methods.”¹²⁵ Though the court believed there was enough evidence to

¹²³ United States v. Medina-Copete, No. 13-2026 (10th Cir. 2014), 17.

¹²⁴ United States v. Medina-Copete, No. 13-2026 (10th Cir. 2014), 18.

¹²⁵ United States v. Medina-Copete, No. 13-2026 (10th Cir. 2014), 23.

reasonably achieve a conviction if the case was retried, they argued that “The highly prejudicial nature of Almonte’s testimony leaves us with grave doubt that the outcome of the trial would have been the same without it,”¹²⁶ going as far as to say his expert testimony “approaches psychobabble” and “painted the defendants in this case as heretics, holding beliefs ‘not recognized by the Catholic Church either in Mexico or the United States.’”¹²⁷ The decision closes as such:

V

*We **REMAND** to the district court with instructions to vacate all of Goxcon’s convictions and Medina’s convictions on counts one through three, and for further proceedings consistent with this opinion.*¹²⁸

¹²⁶ United States v. Medina-Copete, No. 13-2026 (10th Cir. 2014), 29.

¹²⁷ United States v. Medina-Copete, No. 13-2026 (10th Cir. 2014), 31.

¹²⁸ United States v. Medina-Copete, No. 13-2026 (10th Cir. 2014), 32.

GOD DIES OF HEATSTROKE

Dance With The Devil

*“A FEEBLE-MINDED YOUNG MAN WITH
INFINITE POTENTIAL, THE PRODUCT OF A
GHETTO-BRED CAPITALISTIC MENTAL.”*

Before Robert Almonte, there was another dubiously-qualified expert who went from one police department to the next: Lawrence Pazder. What started as a Canadian therapist treating a woman suffering from depression after a 1976 miscarriage would turn into a marriage, a \$342,000 book deal, over 12,000 unsubstantiated cases of abuse, and over 60 convictions in the United States alone that would eventually be overturned.¹²⁹ ¹³⁰ The book, entitled *Michelle Remembers*, told the story of patient Michelle Smith's childhood of satanic abuse — though this story was unknown to Smith until the memories were 'recovered' under Pazdar's hypnosis.¹³¹ Interviewed on television, Smith would say this:

*Basically, what I remember was a 14-month period of my life at age five where I was given to a group of people whom at first I wasn't aware of what they were doing, other than, to a child, they were adults doing things that I couldn't understand and that frightened me.*¹³²

She would go on to make claims of animal sacrifice and the ritual use of human fetuses. In the book, she tells a story at six of going for a drive into the desert with her mother, a man, and the dead body of a woman. The corpse was placed in the driver seat and the car set on a collision course with a rock wall, with Michelle remaining inside. No reports of such an accident exist. After piecing this story together in Pazder's office, Smith tells him this:

*"Okay, all these things that I'm... these words... they're all connected, they all flashed together in my mind at the same time. And it sounds to me like witches... I was thinking that if these people were witches, it somehow explains the things that happened to me, all the awful things."*¹³³

¹²⁹ Ed Cara, "The Most Dangerous Idea in Mental Health," Pacific Standard, November 3, 2014, psmag.com/social-justice/dangerous-idea-mental-health-93325/.

¹³⁰ "May Newsletter," The National Registry of Exonerations, accessed April 7, 2025, law.umich.edu/special/exoneration/Pages/about.aspx.

¹³¹ Sheila Flynn, "How a Doctor and His Patient Sparked a Global 'Satanic Panic,'" The Independent, March 14, 2023, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/satanic-panic-film-movie-michelle-smith-memoir-b2300716.html.

¹³² Sheila Flynn, "How a Doctor."

¹³³ Kerr Cuhulain, "Michelle Remembers," Witchvox, July 8, 2002, web.archive.org/web/20121128150734/http://www.witchvox.com/va/dt_va.html?a=cabc&c=whs&id=4351.

Smith then requested to go see a Catholic priest. Pazder did not hesitate to take her. The lack of documentation is only the beginning of the holes in her stories, many of which feature details not belonging to satanic rituals, but rather to a Catholic's perspective of traditional African rituals — a topic Pazder would regularly showcase his self-professed expertise on.¹³⁴ The fact that investigations found no evidence to support the allegations and much evidence refuting them did little to slow the headlines. And, though attacked by psychologists, reporters, and those who knew the truth of Smith's childhood, the book would receive a glowing endorsement from Pope Paul IV, the head of a church that was sitting on a mountain of genuine accounts of child abuse across the world.

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The McMartin preschool trial kicked the satanic panic, catalyzed by *Michelle Remembers*, into high gear, and Pazder and Smith were there to see the hysteria off. In 1983, a mother, who had previously been hospitalized for paranoid schizophrenia, would report that her child was sodomized by a teacher at the daycare. She would not live to see the trial — a tragic consequence of her chronic alcoholism.¹³⁵ After this, the children were interrogated. Their stories were odd, as they did not sound like any sorts of satanic rituals that were known of historically with the exception of one woman's experiences — Lawrence Pazder's former patient/paramour and newly betrothed: Michelle Pazder. This was not a coincidence, as Michelle Pazder was brought in "to counsel the youngsters as well as investigate and help litigate most of the cases."¹³⁶ "All the teachers at the school are sick in the head, aren't they?" is just one of the leading questions the children were asked.¹³⁷ One prosecutor, Glenn Stevens, would quit the case two years in, as he believed it was a hoax and the children were being coached to give false statements.¹³⁸ All charges were dropped

¹³⁴ Kerr Cuhulain, "Michelle Remembers."

¹³⁵ Margaret Talbot, "The Lives They Lived: 01-07-01: Peggy McMartin Buckey, b. 1926; the Devil in the Nursery," *The New York Times*, January 7, 2001, [nytimes.com/2001/01/07/magazine/lives-they-lived-01-07-01-peggy-mcmartin-buckey-b-1926-devil-nursery.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2001/01/07/magazine/lives-they-lived-01-07-01-peggy-mcmartin-buckey-b-1926-devil-nursery.html).

¹³⁶ Kerr Cuhulain, "Michelle Remembers."

¹³⁷ Kerr Cuhulain, "Michelle Remembers."

¹³⁸ Kerr Cuhulain, "Michelle Remembers."

except those against two individuals, who would both go on to be found not guilty at trial. The case would cost the California tax payer about \$15,000,000.¹³⁹

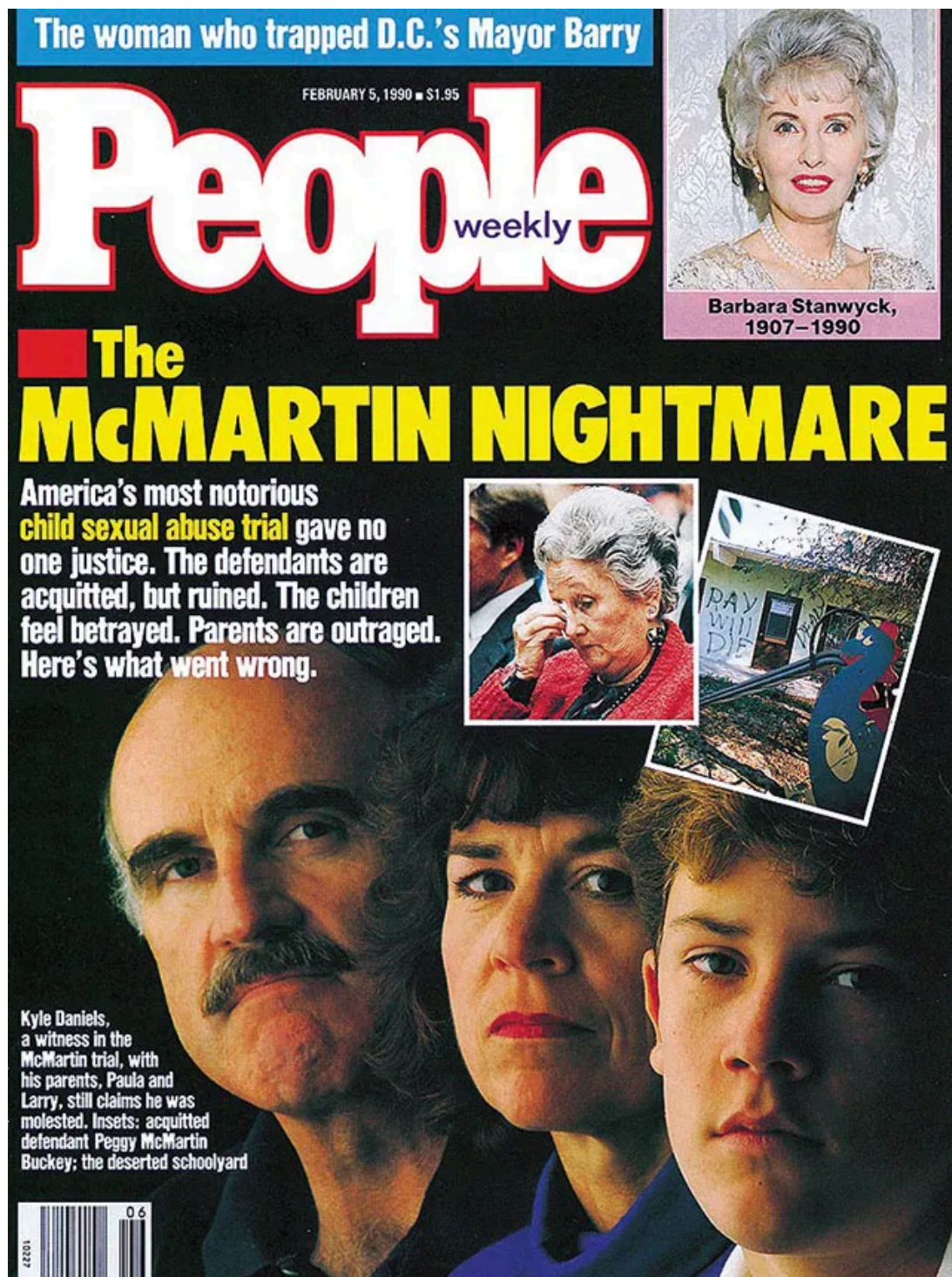


Figure 12. People Weekly, February 5, 1990. Magazine front page referencing the McMarten case.

¹³⁹ Kerr Cuhulain, "Michelle Remembers."

On September 9, 1986 at the Holiday Inn in Fort Collins, Colorado, a weekend-long seminar began. The event was being held by the North Colorado-South Wyoming Detectives Association, with that year's exciting topic being "The Emergence of Ritualistic Crime in Today's Society," featuring superstar host Lawrence Pazder.¹⁴⁰ In the years following the McMartin trial, the Pazders would be frequent hosts of such events nationwide, though numbers on the total count of these events and their attendees are difficult to find.¹⁴¹

*Conferences, seminars, training sessions warning of the imminent threat of Satanic Ritual Abuse. One child trauma expert told a local California paper in the late 80s, "There isn't a conference on the topic on child abuse now that doesn't include a seminar on Satanic cults." The seminars were attended by members of law enforcement and justice departments, along with social workers, counsellors and teachers. This was one of the key ways the panic spread.*¹⁴²

The effect of Pazder's work didn't exactly take the form of a ripple, slowly spreading out from him. Pazder went directly to people who investigate crimes professionally and instilled the fear of satanic child abuse in them himself. The following is an excerpt from the Winter 1989-1990 Research Update from California's Office of Criminal Planning:

Cult Satanists are often accused of sacrificing humans, especially infants. Currently, such sacrifices are more commonly known as ritualistic abuse. Beginning in 1980 with the publication of Michelle Remembers by Dr. Lawrence Pazder and Michelle Smith, a new type of occult crime was postulated: ritualistic abuse. In the book, Michelle and her psychiatrist recount how in the course of her continued therapeutic sessions as an adult, she remembered involvement in a Satanic cult in Vancouver, British

¹⁴⁰ Kerr Cuhulain, "Michelle Remembers."

¹⁴¹ Julia Yost, "The Return of Recovered Memory," Compact, March 18, 2024, compactmag.com/article/the-return-of-recovered-memory/.

¹⁴² "Transcript: Uncover: Satanic Panic - EP 5 | CBC Radio," CBCnews, April 29, 2020, cbc.ca/radio/uncover/transcripts/transcript-uncover-satanic-panic-ep-5-1.5549041.

Columbia when she was five years old. Her account tells how her mother was forced to surrender her for sexual Satanic rituals and how she was forced to participate for an extended period of time during which the group unsuccessfully tried to convert her. Soon thereafter, similar stories began to appear, linking for the first time, traditional accounts of specifically Satanic involvement to ongoing physical, sexual, emotional and spiritual child abuse. The result was the emergence of a particularly heinous type of crime which generally became known as ritualistic abuse or, more specifically, as ritualistic child abuse. The alleged perpetrators of such abuse are most often the Cult Satanists.¹⁴³

The FBI, however, in their Investigator's Guide to Allegations of Ritual Child Abuse takes a far more skeptical tone towards Pazder's work, stating that very few stories like the one showcased in *Michelle Remembers* are linked to known crimes.¹⁴⁴ The guide's author, Ken Lanning, had been to multiple seminars with Pazder and came away unconvinced, as when questions were asked of Michelle's experiences, Lawrence was always the one to answer.

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Chapter three discussed Robert Bunker's article for the FBI: "Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic Killings." Just below the conclusion, Bunker writes "The author would like to thank Robert Almonte, U.S. Marshal, Western District of Texas, whose 'Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld' training provided additional research and law enforcement practitioner insights used in this article."¹⁴⁵ Bunker, when asked, said he has met the man several times at his conferences. It seems likely that when Almonte says he has taught 'thousands' of officers that is a vast undercount, and, though exact numbers are impossible to discern and multiple requests for an interview were ignored, the numbers (including those taught through video form) are likely closer to 100,000 than 1,000. First on the list of 2025's keynote speakers for the National School Safety Conference is none other than

¹⁴³ Gayle Olsen-Raymer, "OCCULT CRIME: A LAW ENFORCEMENT PRIMER," State of California Office of Criminal Justice Planning, accessed April 8, 2025, oajp.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/124094NCJRS.pdf.

¹⁴⁴ Kenneth V. Lanning, "Investigator's Guide to Allegations of Ritual Child Abuse," OJP, January 1992, oajp.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/136592NCJRS.pdf.

¹⁴⁵ Robert J Bunker, "Santa Muerte."

Almonte, and that is a conference specifically designed for school resource officers.¹⁴⁶ In June he is hosting a weeklong “Mexican Cartels and Gangs Drugs and Human Trafficking Seminar” in addition to November’s “International Summit on Mexican Cartels and Gangs.”¹⁴⁷ The satanic panic infamously spread to each department touched by Pazder, leading to them theorize about things they did not understand and poison their cases and the juries hearing them, only to have many such decisions overturned on appeal. This pattern is being repeated, if only on a smaller, less publicly-visible scale. And a mandate of continued education for police ensures the problem will only continue to grow.

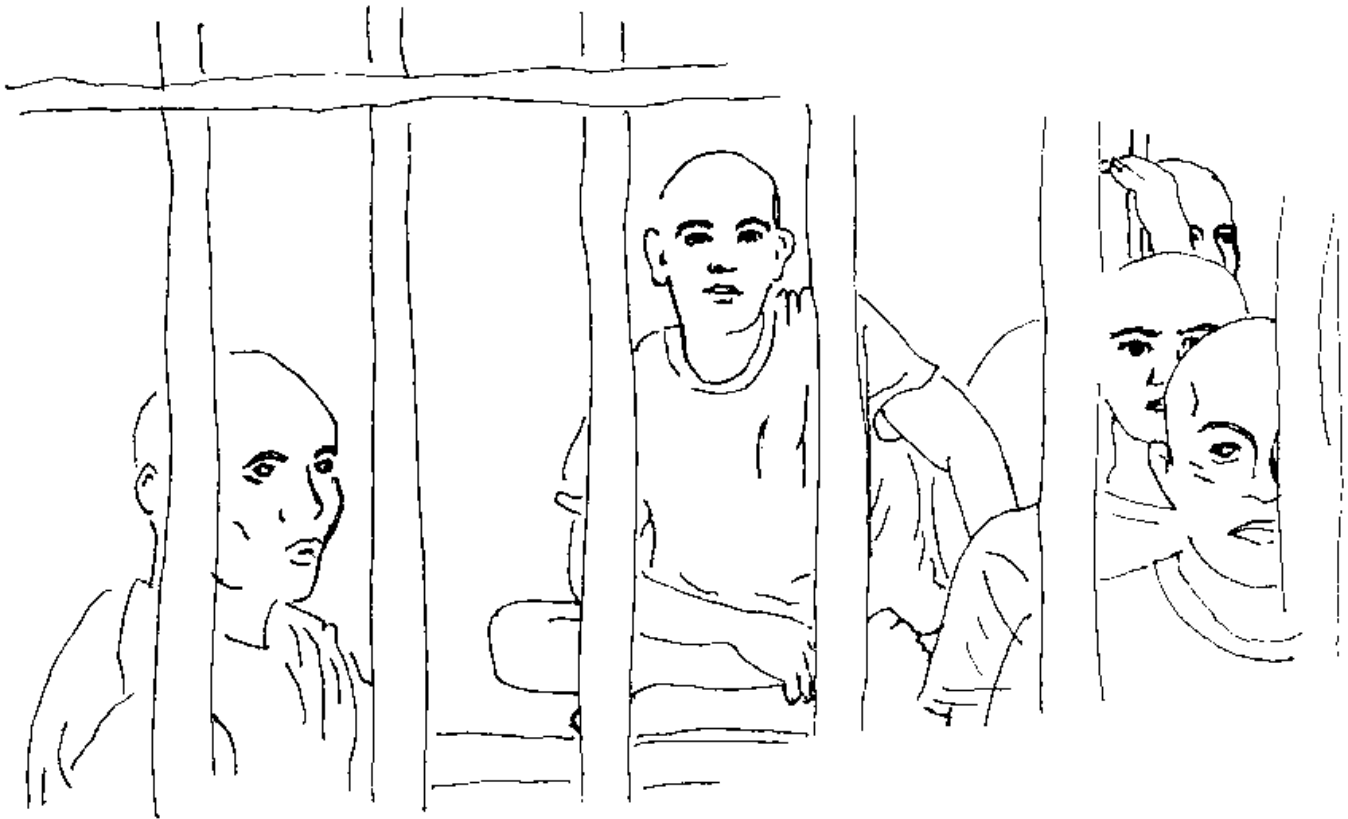


Figure 13. A group of men, presumed cartel members, sit in El Salvador’s CECOT prison. Most have never been tried let alone charged with a specific crime.

¹⁴⁶ “Conference Information: National Association of School Resource Officers,” National Association of School Resource Officers, accessed April 7, 2025, nasro.org/conference-landing-pages/conference-landing-page/conference-information/.

¹⁴⁷ “Upcoming Events,” Mexican cartels training, accessed April 7, 2025, mexicancartels.org/default.aspx?MenuItemID=12&MenuGroup=Public.

GOD DIES OF HEATSTROKE

The Last

*“I JUST WANT TO BE A LIFELESS SET OF
EARS.”*

Scholarship attempting to forecast Santa Muerte’s future is extremely lacking. Considering that, forecasting Santa Muerte’s future, which is the goal of this chapter, would be difficult at the best of times. It just so happens that this moment, the May of 2025, is the absolute worst of times in terms of forecasting the border’s future,^{148 149} so what is to follow will necessarily be heavily speculative. This chapter will begin by analysing the borderlands, so a good place to start would be to check in with the U.S. Border Patrol, who have laid out the following goals for 2024-2028:

USBP 2024-2028 STRATEGY OVERVIEW	
GOAL 1: SECURE THE BORDER	
1.1 Predict, Detect, and Identify Threats	Establish a comprehensive operational picture to enhance our ability to predict, detect, and identify threats by leveraging appropriate, timely, and relevant information and intelligence, predictive data analytics, and strategic foreign partnerships.
1.2 Influence and Shape the Operating Environment	Optimize the deployment of personnel, equipment, and infrastructure and reinforce tactical mobility to improve response times to emerging threats in the field.
1.3 Classify, Prioritize, and Mitigate Threats	Develop a standardized methodology to classify threats and prioritize their associated risk to efficiently and effectively mobilize operational assets to respond to and resolve threats.
GOAL 2: ORGANIZATIONAL EXCELLENCE	
2.1 Invest in Our Workforce	Recruit, train, retain, and support a diverse and inclusive workforce that readily adapts to an evolving mission space, cultivates future leadership, and maintains resilience in the face of personal and professional challenges.
2.2 Optimize Mission Readiness	Establish and refine methods that produce an accurate picture of required resources, link budgets to operational requirements, and enhance accountability mechanisms for deployed resources in the field.
2.3 Capitalize on Innovative Solutions to Meet Organizational Needs	Capitalize on industry partnerships and foster a culture of innovation to advance border security and enhance organizational efficiency by implementing creative solutions for operational challenges.
GOAL 3: EFFECTIVE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS	
3.1 Improve Communication and Collaboration with Internal Stakeholders	Increase communication and collaboration with stakeholders across CBP and DHS by expanding joint assignments, touchpoints, and information-sharing platforms to foster a holistic and integrated approach to border security.
3.2 Foster Relationships with Governmental Stakeholders	Expand partnerships with governmental partners, including law enforcement agencies, federal partners, and international allies to access shared expertise, information, and resources, while actively collaborating on border security efforts.
3.3 Engage Non-Governmental Organizations, Private Citizens, and Oversight Organizations	Increase transparency, strengthen public trust, and generate support for our mission by improving public engagement through strategic communications, feedback loops, and comprehensive reporting measures in addition to partnering with NGOs and local communities to exchange information and expertise on the border environment.

Figure 14. Strategy overview for USBP. Surprisingly, AI is not mentioned a single time in the entire document. (“U.S. Border Patrol 2024-2028 Strategy,” CBP, cbp.gov/sites/default/files/2024-08/usbp-strategy_051424.pdf, 9).

¹⁴⁸ Edward Alden, “Trump’s Immigration Orders Will Bring Chaos to the Border,” *Foreign Policy*, January 23, 2025, foreignpolicy.com/2025/01/23/trump-immigration-orders-mexico-border-control/.

¹⁴⁹ Tarek Anthony, “Three Additional UO International Students Face Deportation,” *Daily Emerald*, April 8, 2025, dailymerald.com/163668/campus/three-additional-uo-international-students-face-deportation/. As of today, 4/8/2025, four University of Oregon students have had their F-1 visas revoked — a clear showcase of how unstable the moment is. This chapter’s contents were planned prior to November 2024.

To state it plainly, the goals do not include making the borderlands less deadly or more humanitarian. As digital methods advance — a key future strategy is “Advancing the Digital Border Patrol”¹⁵⁰ — it will only become harder for individuals to cross without the help of coyotes, or guides, who, for their part, have spent the last two decades increasingly falling into line with cartels under threats of death. In 2022, the New York Times claimed that the cartels’ control of coyotes netted them over thirteen-billion dollars.¹⁵¹ One way this can be seen is in the near-constant changing of which areas of the border are busiest, statistics that had previously stayed stagnant for decades.¹⁵²

Next, we turn to analysis of the border in 2024 and its future. According to the U.S.-based NGO Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), these were the five key trends seen at the border in 2024:

- 1. Crackdowns temporarily lowered numbers.*
- 2. Children and families made up 43 percent of migrants encountered.*
- 3. The geography of migration has undergone rapid post-pandemic shifts and moved west since the end of Title 42. Texas’s crackdown did not cause this.*
- 4. Migrant deaths may have declined. But deaths as a share of the migrant population have not.*
- 5. Fentanyl seizures dropped for the first time. It’s not clear why.*¹⁵³

It seems likely that attempted crossings will continue to slow in 2025, though this will certainly only increase suffering, especially of those who would qualify for asylum in the United States if given the chance to apply for it. As of this year, border patrol surveillance in part consists of “33-foot telescoping pole[s] built by Anduril Industries, the defense contractor run by Oculus founder Palmer Luckey and funded by PayPal co-founder and

¹⁵⁰ “U.S. Border Patrol 2024-2028 Strategy,” 14.

¹⁵¹ Miriam Jordan, “Smuggling Migrants at the Border Now a Billion-Dollar Business,” New York Times, July 25, 2022, [nytimes.com/2022/07/25/us/migrant-smuggling-evolution.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/25/us/migrant-smuggling-evolution.html).

¹⁵² Adam Isacson, “Five Migration and Security Trends at the U.S.-Mexico Border.” WOLA, December 14, 2024. wola.org/analysis/five-migration-and-security-trends-at-the-u-s-mexico-border/.

¹⁵³ Adam Isacson, “Five Migration and Security Trends at the U.S.-Mexico Border.”

GOP megadonor Peter Thiel [which are] capable of recording night-vision images and spotting human beings up to 1.7 miles away” — one part of what is rapidly becoming an electronic wall.¹⁵⁴ Significantly, the theme of 2024’s Border Security Expo (which, of course, featured the attendance of one Mr. Almonte) was automated surveillance and artificial intelligence.¹⁵⁵ Elbit Systems, a defense contractor that boasts their surveillance products have been field-proven by their use in Palestine, designed and built an even larger iteration that can be found on the Tohono O’odham Nation in Arizona. It is 160-feet tall and can monitor people up to seven miles away. The border patrol has plans to build ten of these on a reservation the size of Connecticut, at a cost of twenty-six million dollars. Members of the nation told The Intercept that some who had left the reservation for economic reasons avoided return trips home due to fears of surveillance and harassment.¹⁵⁶ All indicators point to a hardening border in the coming years.¹⁵⁷ Some people will get very rich off of it. Far more will get very dead.

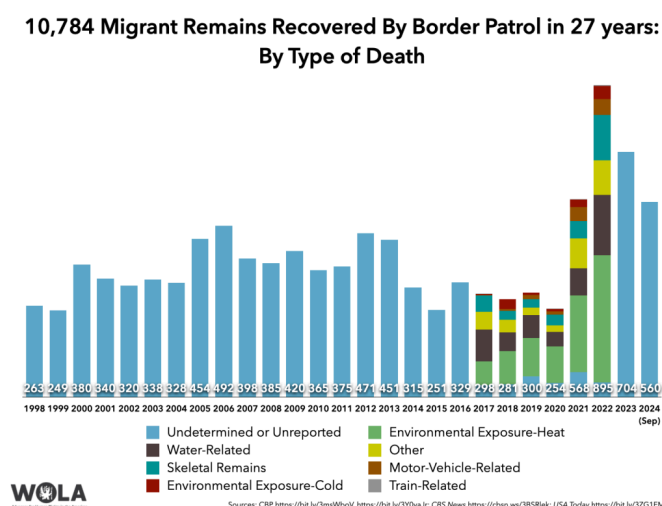


Figure 15. Adam Isacson, “Five Migration and Security Trends at the U.S.-Mexico Border.”

¹⁵⁴ Lauren Markham, “The Future of the Border Is Even More Dystopian than You Thought,” Pulitzer Center, August 8, 2024, pulitzercenter.org/stories/future-border-even-more-dystopian-you-thought.

¹⁵⁵ Lauren Markham, “The Future of the Border Is Even More Dystopian than You Thought.”

¹⁵⁶ Will Parrish, “The U.S. Border Patrol and an Israeli Military Contractor Are Putting a Native American Reservation under ‘Persistent Surveillance,’” The Intercept, July 27, 2023, theintercept.com/2019/08/25/border-patrol-israel-elbit-surveillance/.

¹⁵⁷ This is being written shortly after the Ukrainian drone attack that was launched from within Russia and damaged much of their strategic bomber fleet. That attack and its method seem like an ideal pretext to increase surveillance both at the border and within the U.S. broadly, with major news sources already writing of the U.S.’s vulnerabilities.

In April of 2025 the Small Wars Journal released an article entitled “Employing Information Operations to Challenge Cartel (Narcocultura) Derived Santa Muerte Propaganda.”¹⁵⁸ It is authored by a “former US Army information operations officer with four deployments” whose “research specialty is in propaganda and information warfare.”¹⁵⁹ His name is Douglas Wilbur. In the article, Wilbur argues that Santa Muerte, as worshipped by cartel members, is a “powerful narco-propaganda symbol that is enhancing the quality of their information warfare campaigns.”¹⁶⁰ The central point of the article is that this narco-propaganda must be neutralized by “dealing with the cartel appropriated Santa Muerte narrative.”¹⁶¹ Wilbur lays out three strategies he recommends to exploit the vulnerabilities in what he deems narco-propaganda and, thereby, the faith of Santa Muerte’s followers. This is the first:

*Eliminating belief is difficult, but reducing it is a more feasible goal. Marketers understand that simply creating doubt is sufficient to achieve some of their goals. For instance, if a certain cartel leader brags about the Santa Muerte protecting him from law enforcement, prioritize his arrest and extradition to an American supermax prison. Then create messages that cause doubt about Santa Muerte’s ability. However, attacks on this vulnerability need to be specifically focused on countering belief in the granting of criminal favors, such as the protection from law enforcement.*¹⁶²

Here Wilbur directly states that law enforcement entities should target their actions in order to stop the spread of a religious movement. The scale an operation such as this would require speaks to just how fearful some in law enforcement are of Santa Muerte’s continued

¹⁵⁸ Douglas Wilbur, “Employing Information Operations to Challenge Cartel (Narcocultura) Derived Santa Muerte Propaganda,” Small Wars Journal by Arizona State University, April 22, 2025, smallwarsjournal.com/2025/04/21/employing-information-operations-to-challenge-cartel-narcocultura-derived-santa-muerte-propaganda/.

¹⁵⁹ “Douglas Wilbur, Author at Small Wars Journal by Arizona State University,” Small Wars Journal by Arizona State University, accessed April 29, 2025, smallwarsjournal.com/author/douglas-wilbur/.

¹⁶⁰ Douglas Wilbur, “Employing Information Operations to Challenge Santa Muerte Propaganda.”

¹⁶¹ Douglas Wilbur, “Employing Information Operations to Challenge Santa Muerte Propaganda.”

¹⁶² Douglas Wilbur, “Employing Information Operations to Challenge Santa Muerte Propaganda.”

spread throughout the Americas. The form which these messages would take in order to reach the desired audience without being received as law enforcement propaganda by the target audience is not made clear in this article. Next, Wilbur shifts to doctrine:

*Santa Muerte is vulnerable to the development and insertion of various beliefs and claims that can subvert meanings important to cartel propaganda. For instance, one could create uncertainty about a point of doctrine, which creates discomfort worshippers seek to eliminate, and then offer an alternative point of doctrine with evidence to reduce uncertainty.*¹⁶³

Changing the beliefs and doctrine of a religion in order to accomplish political goals is a near cartoonish use of soft power, though, considering the truly cartoonish historical exploits of agencies such as the CIA, it is not beyond belief that an agency would attempt to pull this off. This would be such an intentionally insidious use of propaganda that it makes what Wilbur deems a campaign of narco-propaganda — which (for the most part) consists of cartel members worshipping Santa Muerte and living in a public, online, disorganized fashion, as any culture does — seem laughable. Finally:

*The third vulnerability is Santa Muerte's relatively weak narrative, which allows for challenges by counter-narratives ... subversive narratives that challenge and alter certain aspects of belief can be employed. In order to avoid provoking psychological resistance, only anti-social elements that facilitate narco-culture and propaganda should be challenged. For instance, a narrative conflict between normal believers and narcos could undermine the normalization of narco-culture.*¹⁶⁴

The final suggestion made by Wilbur is to rewrite the entire story of Santa Muerte in order to create a law-abiding, pro-social deity. Such proposed counter-narratives range from embracing the Catholic view that Santa Muerte is demonic and it is wrong to worship

¹⁶³ Douglas Wilbur, "Employing Information Operations to Challenge Santa Muerte Propaganda."

¹⁶⁴ Douglas Wilbur, "Employing Information Operations to Challenge Santa Muerte Propaganda."

death, the very thing Jesus conquered through his resurrection, to educating followers on the ways in which science disproves her existence. Wilbur finishes, writing, “The optimal solution to undermine Santa Muerte’s narco based narrative is to use several counter-narratives that simultaneously work together as a single strategy.” The implication of this statement is that ‘defeating’ Santa Muerte in the coming years will require cross-agency, cross-border strategization and cooperation. In this, Wilbur inherently acknowledges her power and forecasts her spread.

Simultaneously, the future of organized religion in the United States is looking quite grim. Pew Research Center projects that Christians will fall from 64% of the population to 46% by 2070,¹⁶⁵ and even Catholic sources predict that the church will shrink further in the Americas in the coming decades.¹⁶⁶ In conjunction with this ongoing shift, as conservatives continue to consolidate power within the church, even more fringe Catholics, such as the LGBTQ+ community, will find themselves pushed out.¹⁶⁷ The death of Pope Francis will almost certainly worsen this issue and make the church more conservative. Pope Leo XIV has not had much time to make his policy aims clear as of writing, but his previous remarks against gay marriage and the “homosexual lifestyle”¹⁶⁸ alongside his abhorrent handling of cases of child sexual abuse¹⁶⁹ have alarmed many. It is likely that as many people fall away from the church in the Americas, a portion will find their way to Santa Muerte, continuing to fill her flourishing ranks of devotees.¹⁷⁰ In fact, many sources report on the bony lady’s swelling popularity across the Americas as of late:

¹⁶⁵ Reem Nadeem, “Modeling the Future of Religion in America,” Pew Research Center, September 13, 2022, pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/.

¹⁶⁶ Rev. Dorian Llywelyn, “Global Christianity: The Future of the Catholic Church,” Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies at USC, April 1, 2024, dornsife.usc.edu/iacs/2022/04/30/global-christianity/.

¹⁶⁷ Tim Sullivan, “‘A Step Back in Time’: America’s Catholic Church Sees an Immense Shift toward the Old Ways,” National Catholic Reporter, accessed April 8, 2025, nronline.org/news/step-back-time-americas-catholic-church-sees-immense-shift-toward-old-ways.

¹⁶⁸ Robert Mackey, “Unearthed Comments from New Pope Alarm LGBTQ+ Catholics,” The Guardian, May 9, 2025, theguardian.com/world/2025/may/09/pope-leo-xiv-lgbtq.

¹⁶⁹ JD Flynn, “Why Prevost’s Papal Prospects Prompt Pushback,” The Pillar, May 5, 2025, pillarcatholic.com/p/why-prevosts-papal-prospects-prompt.

¹⁷⁰ It would not be surprising if the sexism inherent in Catholicism — as well as Christianity broadly — would drive more young people towards a female deity.

Ecuadorian police have increasingly encountered shrines dedicated to "Santa Muerte," or Saint Death, a folk saint associated with death worshipped by some across Latin America, including criminal groups in the region which have adopted the figure as a source of spiritual protection. Some are even allegedly performing human sacrifices, believing it will increase their fortunes.¹⁷¹

I first met Santa Muerte in 2002 during fieldwork with undocumented migrant transgender sex workers from Guadalajara, Mexico, who lived in San Francisco. Santa Muerte featured prominently on home altars in their single-room occupancy hotel rooms. I had not encountered the saint before and was surprised by her obvious importance in their lives. Thus began over a decade of following Santa Muerte to Mexico, California, the US/Mexico Border, and even small towns in northern Wisconsin. In the early years of my research, few people in Mexico would talk to me about her, and few in the US knew of her; she was either underground or unknown. Now, the Bony Lady is "out" and very visible.¹⁷²

Nonetheless, the Church sees it as terrible competition, and the Church in Mexico and Latin America has already been losing millions of members to Pentecostal churches, and now you have this new heretical folk saint, who is wildly attractive to folks as well.¹⁷³

This growth stems in part from the unique characteristics that define the times during which LSM's popularity took off—decades in which death, vulnerability, and precarity have become increasingly normalized for more and more people. The movement's expansion has also been facilitated by its remarkable heterogeneity: with no central organizing structure, rules, or even forms of worship, a

¹⁷¹ Demian Bio, "Gangs in Ecuador Are Allegedly Performing Human Sacrifices to 'saint Death' as They Look for Protection," *Latin Times*, February 8, 2025, latintimes.com/gangs-ecuador-are-allegedly-performing-human-sacrifices-saint-death-they-look-protection-574681.

¹⁷² Lois Ann Lorentzen, "Santa Muerte: Saint of the Dispossessed, Enemy of Church and State," *Hemispheric Institute*, accessed April 8, 2025, hemisphericinstitute.org/en/emisferica-13-1-states-of-devotion/13-1-essays/santa-muerte-saint-of-the-dispossessed-enemy-of-church-and-state.html.

¹⁷³ Mary Kate Brogan, "Scholar Says Santa Muerte, 'the Newest Plague Saint,' Has Been a Beacon of Hope during COVID-19," *VCU News*, accessed April 8, 2025, news.vcu.edu/article/2022/08/scholar-says-santa-muerte-the-newest-plague-saint-has-been-a-beacon-of-hope-during-covid-19.

*multiplicity of practices and beliefs has blossomed instead, tailored to each community of worshipers or even each individual's needs and desires.*¹⁷⁴

*With an estimated 12 million devotees, the majority in Mexico but also large numbers in the US and Central America, Santa Muerte has become the fastest growing new religious movement in the West for several reasons. Most importantly she has the reputation for being speedy and efficacious in performing miracles, the great majority of which are related to health, wealth, and love.*¹⁷⁵

*This research has reminded me that life is incredibly short. I have several things I hope to accomplish in the near future, and I look forward to the day when I can return to Mexico City and spend more time with devotees. But, as the saying goes, I would also like to “have a life.” As Juan Carlos once insisted, I should enjoy a cold beer, or maybe get off the couch and flail my arms about in an attempt to “dance”—Santa Muerte’s orders.*¹⁷⁶

All things considered, it seems likely that the spread and persecution will continue to intensify in tandem in the years to come, the two being near inextricable at this point. But if one element of the future is certain, it is that the Americas in the coming years will see more poor, more marginalized, and more dispossessed. And, if they turn to her, Santa Muerte will welcome them.

¹⁷⁴ William A. Calvo-Quirós, “La Santa Muerte,” *Undocumented Saints*, December 1, 2022, 216–69, doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197630228.003.0005.

¹⁷⁵ Andrew Chesnut, “Leading Santa Muerte Expert Interviewed on the Fastest Growing New Religious Movement in the West,” *The Global Catholic Review*, February 6, 2020, patheos.com/blogs/theglobalcatholicreview/2020/02/leading-santa-muerte-expert-interviewed-on-the-fastest-growing-new-religious-movement-in-the-west/.

¹⁷⁶ Kathryn McDonald, “‘we Will All Look like This Someday’: Santa Muerte in Mexico City,” *Portal magazine*, September 6, 2017, sites.utexas.edu/llilas-benson-magazine/2016/08/05/we-will-all-look-like-this-someday-santa-muerte-in-mexico-city/.

GOD DIES OF HEATSTROKE

Sing About Me, I'm Dying Of Thirst

*“AND IF I DIE BEFORE YOUR ALBUM DROP,
I HOPE— [GUNSHOTS]”*

I recently, for the first time, dreamed of La Muerte.

For background: I believe in her and respect her greatly, but never really made the step to worship her or leave her offerings. I have a multicolored statue of her, two of her candles and a snow globe of her that were all my dad's before he went to prison. He has worshiped her for many years and I respect that, so I try to keep his Santa Muerte items clean and upright in our altar space.

I don't think of her often, but recently in my dreams I saw what I think was her in all black, which somewhat scared me for a second, and then the scene changed and I was explaining her to my English teacher while standing at her (La Muerte's) altar. I saw a bigger statue of her (that I don't have/never have seen before) and it's knocked down, so I pick it back up and then she appeared in front of me, but didn't say anything. After that, I woke up and when I went into the room with her altar in it, one of her candles was knocked down, along with the multicolored statue of her. They were knocked down in exactly the same place that I picked up the dream statue from.

My guess is that she wanted to be placed back in the right spot on her altar and since she knew I took care of her, she visited me in my dream to get my attention and remind me to tend to her. I'm not sure if there's a deeper meaning¹⁷⁷



Figure 16. R. Andrew Chesnut, "Images of Most Holy Death," Most Holy Death, May 5, 2022, skeletonsaint.com/images-of-most-holy-death/. A headstone featuring Santa Muerte.

¹⁷⁷ Reyna, Most Holy Death, September 28, 2021, skeletonsaint.com/share-your-experience-with-most-holy-death/.

Altaries del cuerpo...I had got to a point in my life when the thought of my death was the only warmth in my soul. On the eve of my suicide I had randomly watched a documentary on Mexico which featured Santa Muerte.I went to bed nonplussed but mused that I had asked both Heaven and Hell for direction, why not Death?....So I did, plain and simple.....I slept and on waking felt reset. Calm, rational and with a potent sense of intervention....And a need to remunerate this personal miracle. At 49 years of age and a poco loco life I had no tattoos. On my 50th birthday I sat for six hours having my life saver tattooed the length of my back. I smiled through 5.49 minutes of it[I'm only poco loco!] .I have another 4 sessions of 6 hours booked to shade and colour MY alter of flesh...After a life time of silent dogma an answer IS a lifeline. It was and IS mine. Mil gracias jamas serian suficiente.En depto y en agradecimiento,a tu amade hijo.¹⁷⁸



Figure 17. R. Andrew Chesnut, "Images of Most Holy Death." A young boy selling Santa Muerte statues on the streets of Mexico City.

¹⁷⁸ Adrian Knapp, Most Holy Death, February 23, 2023, skeletonsaint.com/share-your-experience-with-most-holy-death/.

I came upon Madrina by what ; for me as a highly skeptical and science oriented person, was purely by random chance. .. I have explored numerous mystical paths throughout my life, and each time I found similar results, empty psycho/drama that in no way fulfilled the goals at hand. ..

The death goddess archetype has had resonance with me since my teens (in my 40s now) , beginning with Hel in the Norse pantheon, and much more so Lilith. . I would identify myself as an atheist only due to the disillusionment of my prior attempts to find that “path” I was searching for. .. while on a trip to Juarez Mexico for what became an Ill-fated attempt at marriage with an Argentinian lady, I found myself blindly walking the gritty back alleys of Juarez towards the end of my time there. . I found a Catholic church that I was obsessed with because of its ornate beauty, but it was gated and locked each time I went. .. on a Thursday, a bit past noon, I rounded a corner and saw the church was open... yay!! Opportunity for good pictures! !

Upon entering the church, I said a very generic prayer for my son that was stillborn as I do with nearly any catholic oriented place of worship, I have zero personal experience with the Catholic Church one on one... my prayers were not born of any remote belief that there is a connection between the living and the dead beyond the memory that resides in the living. .. there are no gods and there are no goddesses in my eyes, after kneeling before any I felt called to, I found emptiness.... as I sat upon the pew and randomly invoked Ella , Madrina, Lilith. . In that order, with no great intent, only passive humility in respect of the dead... it was not fire coming down from Heaven, nor did the damned wail up from Hell... but it was the most transformative moment I have ever encountered through any spiritual route , It was, for lack of a better word, transcendent... holding a steadfastly to my convictions that there is a scientific explanation for everything, my sense of ” reality ” as it were” was shaken to its core. . So , in spite of having stuck my nose into various aspects of western occultism , eastern philosophy, psychology, finally coming to atheistic/humanism. . Kindness for the sake of kindness, human decency, all the warm and fuzzy crap.. that warm and fuzzy is my core , balanced by something else. ..

After that afternoon in Juarez, what was a simple scholarly curiosity crossed a line into an immersion in the veneration of the Holy Death. ..

It was and still is a conflict for my psychology to accept the clear and present evidence of Her actions in the mundane world and in my own personal sphere ... this shines a spotlight on my elementary understanding of her deeper Mystery. . Knowing how to drive a car is far different than knowing how to design and build a car. .

I was given the nickname Chivo a number of years ago by a Mexican coworker as an insult, I quickly took it as my own, if you accept the totem animals concept, the American Black Vulture and the Goat would be mine. ..

Neophyte that I am, I approach Madrina with profound humility with pleading for clarity of vision. .

Chivo Loco¹⁷⁹



Figure 18. A statue of Santa Muerte hand-molded by a Reddit user. (TheBottomsOfOurFeet, “R/Santamuerte,” r/SantaMuerte, reddit.com/r/SantaMuerte/comments/1g1nmi7/couldnt_afford_a_statue_for_her_altar_so_i_made/).

¹⁷⁹ Hank Vine, Most Holy Death, October 17, 2015, skeletonsaint.com/share-your-experience-with-most-holy-death/.

I'm from West Ireland and I struggle to recall how la Santa Muerte entered my life, but She showed up for me as a long and intense period of reflecting on Death was coming to an end. I consider myself a "Pagan" and see the world primarily through the eyes of Heidegger and Kirkegaard. Although I'm Irish and She is Mexican, I became a devotee with the aim of slowly transforming that relationship into Ireland's corresponding Goddess. I started a Facebook group for Her in Ireland and I spent a little cash and devoted some space to a shrine today. That's my experience of Saint Death.¹⁸⁰



Figure 19. An individual noticed that the bubbles in the drink they offered Santa Muerte resembled her. (Electrical_Bat_537, r/SantaMuerte, reddit.com/r/SantaMuerte/comments/1ei0x23/do_yall_see_it_or_am_i_delusional/).

I became interested in the Santa muerte thru an ex that was in prison and was always praying to her. As I ask my parents lil things about her.. All the had to say was she was a very powerful saint and they did not want to mess with her...I started reading and reading about her for weeks...I was scared and confused...But I took the chance and made her an alter at my apartment. Some friends of mine would not go in my room bse they were scared...but I talked to her everyday. And I never got a sign from her till one day when I promise my kids brand new shoes for school and at that time I was struggling bad...as I drove to the school to get my kids...i cried so much bse I didn't have the money by to buy them shoes that they needed n I was breaking my promise tI made to them... I was so hurt cause I didn't know how to tell my kids that I couldn't keep my promise to them..when I was driving I

¹⁸⁰ Eclectic Vibrations (@EclecticRadio), Most Holy Death, September 13, 2017, skeletonsaint.com/share-your-experience-with-most-holy-death/.

asked can u rase show me sign that your real and help me keep my promise to my boys. I sat in car and cried some more then I walked I side and sat in the bench to wait for them.. it was about 1am. My phone goes off and it's a alert from my bank ...I had gotten a deposit right there and then at 11 am from some money that was going to take a couple of months for me to get... My banks direct deposit went in early in the morning never at this time...I couldn't believe my eyes of the amount I had gotten ...as I looked up crying I said thank you so much for allowing my to keep my promise.. I see my kids running g to me and hugged me ...I got up n said thank you again..now let's go get them shoes.. I couldn't believe it.. so I know she is real ¹⁸¹



Figure 20. Features the user alongside the legendary Doña Queta who brought Santa Muerte to the world at large at her Mexico City shrine. (Green-Obligation-625, r/SantaMuerte, accessed April 6, 2025, reddit.com/r/SantaMuerte/comments/1gjs1q9/me_and_the_one_and_only_do%C3%B1a_queta_i_think_we/).

She made her presence to me by purchasing a beautiful pendant necklace from a Latino small-business last night. She isn't necessarily calling me, but wants me to continue— as my other spirit guides have been encouraging me— to continue growing in the wisdom and knowledge that was lost by the conquistadors and Europeans who said our way of living was wrong. That our worship of OUR gods

¹⁸¹ Lupe castro, Most Holy Death, November 5, 2019, skeletonsaint.com/share-your-experience-with-most-holy-death/.

was wrong. That's when in, 1531 la Virgen de Guadalupe appeared to Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin as a means to bridge the loss of our native culture, and give us Mestixs, Latinxs, indigenxs, the will to survive. I feel a very strong connection to what my ancestors felt and lived through hundreds, and thousands of years ago. It's like I was there when this happened. Women converted to Catholicism as a means to survive as a race that was viewed inferior to the spanish. They wanted as many of us dead as possible.

Santa Muerte and Guadalupe are sister spirits. While I may not be interested in Guadalupe, this is where Santa Murte comes in. She has always been there— we observed Mictlantecuhlti and his wife Mictēcacīhuatl, the gods of Death. Death is not bad, death is just like living. The condemnation of altars, Mexican traditions, the observation of Santa Muerte by the head European churches (Vatican, etc), evangelical white Christians, basically any affiliation with “that energy” will continue to condemn our practices as they have condemned us in 1521+. But things are different now. They cannot hurt us, they can only make noise from their mouth.

Times are different, and it is OUR time to rise.

There is much yet to know about the afterlife and spirituality. Thank you for reading.¹⁸²



Figure 21. A user's altar featuring a Día de los Muertos Build-a-Bear. (ihategrapes0da, “New Addition to Her Altar,” r/SantaMuerte, April 3, 2025, reddit.com/r/SantaMuerte/comments/1jpwddw/new_addition_to_her_altar/).

¹⁸² Tezcatlipoca, Most Holy Death, March 3, 2021, skeletonsaint.com/share-your-experience-with-most-holy-death/.

Today I am going to share my story on how I become a devotee of Holy Death. I want to focus on why

I am grateful to Santa Muerte till this day. Back in 2015 and 2016, I was going through a lot: depression, anxiety, and I was close to suicide. I was in such a bad state. I kept on binge eating. My thoughts were of the darkest kind. My self-esteem was so low I stopped taking showers, sometimes for a month at a time. My family had to push me to take a shower and told me “como puedes irte dias sin bañar te?” (how can you go for days without showering?) “Can you not smell yourself?”. I would say “I do not care about that”. I felt guilty and disgusting inside of myself. I was abused as a young girl. I thought: what is the purpose of me taking a shower if I still feel disgusting and dirty inside? And how could my family understand that?

Then I discovered Greek witchcraft. I also dabbled in English sorcery but it was so distant from my own Mexican culture that I did not know where to begin. I began talking to a bruja (witch) and she told me to look up Santa Muerte. So I did. I read just one sentence about la Madrina and I felt a huge, warming, peaceful, joyfulness within my soul so pure that I wanted to burst into happy tears. I knew this was my calling. I started to slowly pray to her and turn to her and with each day my faith grew stronger.

Even though in the current generation of my family nobody believes in la Santa, in previous generations they had, such as my grandfather and it was as if she had called me back to her, my family returning to her. My grandfather was a devotee of Santa Muerte, he may not have had a fancy altar but he always bought her candles, gave her simple offerings, prayed to her and asked her for protection.

When I met her, she knew where I came from, and everything I had been through. From my multiple suicide attempts to my debilitating anxiety. I had gone from Catholicism to Atheism to Agnosticism to witchcraft, going through so many religions trying to figure out where I stand. She knew I was searching and she picked me up and showed me how to love myself again, regain my self-esteem, how to take care of myself and be a woman, the woman I was always supposed to be. She made me fall in love with my culture.

Back then, before I met her, I hated my culture because of the abuse, the trauma I had endured. I was raised in a very vicious household where there was lots of machismo, where they believed that the woman had to do the chores in the house, the woman has to make the food, the woman has to serve the man, that the woman has to stay inside and do all the housework and not go out, serving the man anyway he wants. There was so much abuse in my house and violence that I said I am not going to ever be with anyone from Mexico and especially not from San Luis Potosi, because I had endured too much. Santa Muerte made me realise that just because one person is like that it does not mean everyone is like that.

Most Holy Death made me make a contract with her that I will be fine with life until it is time for her to take my soul, because when I was in my dark depression mode I wanted to meet her. Yes, I wanted to meet Death because then all my problems would be solved. Santa Muerte told me “you don’t have to die in order for you to meet me, you can still live and be with me, your Most Holy Death.”

Her name may be death, but she wants us to live and she does not want us to die until we have lived fully, and once we have lived, then we will be ready to be at her side forever.¹⁸³



Figure 22. AtomicJennyT posted this image onto the Santa Muerte subreddit with the simple title “Prayers answered”. (AtomicJennyT, “Prayers answered,” r/SantaMuerte, November 22, 2024, reddit.com/r/SantaMuerte/comments/1qxn84o/prayers_answered/).

¹⁸³ Kate Kingsbury and M., “Seeking Suicide, Death Gave Me Life: A Santa Muerte Devotee in Texas,” Most Holy Death, August 6, 2021, skeletonsaint.com/2021/07/19/when-death-gifted-life/.

I have firsthand knowledge of profiling in the Colorado jail/prison system. Tattoos are photographed after arrest during intake processing. A person with Santa Muerte tattoos is classified as a gang member which affects where they are housed, certain privileges, and their treatment while incarcerated. I was in the Denver County jail, 2016-2017, a woman who took me in under her protection, she devoted to Santa Muerte and was treated so badly. A correctional officer ripped up a drawing of Santa Muerte. She was not allowed to have a rosary which is allowed for religious purposes. She also had an injury playing basketball and was taken to a hospital. She came back with a boot on, but that was taken 'because she could use to smuggle contraband'. I wish there was a way to have evidence of these things. A woman was also forced to give birth in a cell on a puppy pad. Only that incident made news. I was not classified as a gang member because at this time I did not have Santa Muerte related tattoos.¹⁸⁴



Figure 23. "Santisima Muerte (Holy Death) Sachet Powders ... \$8"
(forum.luckymojo.com/santisima-muerte-santa-muerte-holy-death-spiritual-supplies-t5365-360.html)

¹⁸⁴ This story was relayed to me privately over Reddit by someone who wanted to be left anonymous.

My introduction to La Santa Muerte was ironically from my very religious Christian mother. Growing up she would accuse me of being demonic and satanic (she sees La Santa as a satanic being), one day, at 15 she started accusing me of worshipping La Santa Muerte, she gave me an hours long lecture on how she was going to take my soul and make me kill my family. This was the first time I had ever heard of La Santa Muerte. I started doing my own research and I fell upon multiple documentaries that described her as the patron of outcasts, anyone and everyone who is casted out from the church. I am a transgender queer individual who was shamed by my religious family and church for who I was so since I found out of her, she was always in the back of my mind.

The day I became a devotee, I was 18, my friend and I were driving home in a very scary storm. I was genuinely scared we were going to get in an accident. We ended up stopping at a park to wait out the storm. I remembered from my research that La Santa likes cigarette. So I lit a cig for her and prayed to her for the very first time. I asked her to get us home safely and that if she would have it I would be honored to be her devotee until she deemed my time was up.

Once the rain calmed down we decided to leave. On the way to my friends house an owl flew in front of the car, my friend pressed the breaks abruptly. We both stared at this white barn owl in shock. The car was only a couple of inches from hitting this owl. The owl stared at as and flew up on a tree branch as we drove away. Up the street a big branch had fallen onto a car , I believe that owl was her. And if she hadn't stopped us that branch would've hit us.

This story is about my younger brother, Isaac. When he was in high school he regularly asked to wear my Santa Muerte rosary. He never had a problem until an officer took him to the office and was interrogating him about it, claiming it was gang related. My brother explained to me that the officer thought the scale and scythe she was holding was gang and drug trafficking symbols. Isaac told him no it wasn't but the officer did not believe him and told him to take it off and throw it out. The officer called in a teacher who knows about religious symbols and asked her about it. She informed the officer

that the symbols were not gang related but a religious symbol that meant justice and balance and wasn't anything bad. My brother said that the police officer let it go but kept an eye on him. The officer followed him around the rest of the day and was generally annoying about stalking him around school. My brother felt uncomfortable wearing her again and stopped wearing my rosary as often to school. Though he would wear it often whenever he went out. Mi Santísima saved him from a car accident in June 2024. This rosary is now retired and sitting on La Flaca's altar covered in dried blood from my brother.

-Alejandro and Isaac Acosta¹⁸⁵



Figure 24. "Fresh flowers for Santisima Muerte" (Even-Plankton953, "Fresh flowers for Santisima Muerte", r/SantaMuerte, May 22, 2025, reddit.com/r/SantaMuerte/comments/1kt4fp3/fresh_flowers_for_santisima_muerte/.)

¹⁸⁵ This story comes from Reddit user ex0-14 and their brother.

I'm from Texas, I've heard/read that seeing Santa Muerte could be probable cause to pull you over. I'm a firm believer that it's religious persecution. I've wanted a decal of her for almost a year now. The way the US is right now, it makes me want to lay as low as possible. I have nothing on me and I drive safe. I just don't want to open a can of worms. I still keep a rosary around my mirror and a statue but nothing is visible from a far¹⁸⁶



Figure 25. A Santa Muerte rosary tattoo as done by the author of the Pinterest article. (pinterest.com/pin/31-santa-muerte-tattoos-the-meaning-behind-this-powerful-design-body-artifact--991003092989572673/)

Several years ago, my roommate at the time called my mother because he couldn't reach me (my phone had died), and she overreacted and called the police. It being a small town, about half a dozen officers came to my house and, my roommate told me later, looked in my bedroom, in which were openly displayed a statue of La Santa Muerte and also a statue of Jesus Malverde. Though I was worried, the cops kept any suspicions they might have had to themselves. Of course, this was in New Jerseys, so cops here are probably less familiar with Santa Muerte.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ WhoWantsMyPants, "Police Profiling of Santa Muerte Followers," r/SantaMuerte, May 19, 2025, reddit.com/r/SantaMuerte/comments/1kqip8e/police_profiling_of_santa_muerte_followers/.

¹⁸⁷ Patty_Danvers81, "Police Profiling of Santa Muerte Followers," r/SantaMuerte, May 19, 2025, reddit.com/r/SantaMuerte/comments/1kqip8e/police_profiling_of_santa_muerte_followers/.



Figure 26. From a fanfic in which Santa Muerte and her 'children' are inserted into the Percy Jackson series.
 (camp-halfblood-fanon.fandom.com/wiki/Santa_Muerte_Cabin)

In 2018 my home was raided here in a little town in Texas . Our home had been investigated due to profiling , not specifically for mamita but for a few other reasons . Yet when they found the shrines altar and different sculptures in our house they went on a witch hunt , seizing every electronic device in the home even crawling underneath , it was on stilts , along with charging us with not only possession for prescription drugs prescribed to us but coming back and charging us with child neglect with bodily injury and later even roping in our defense attorney who happened to be the prosecutor for this small town for about 8 years before switching to defense attorney(who was a Purple Heart highly decorated army veteran who even had to leave as he was Paul bearer to George w bush sr during his defense for our cases) yes big bucks for this and the cops turned around and filed against him and us along with some other people in high up places as being a “criminal enterprise “ , needless

to say the cops were sure we were up to something even implementing high ranking members of the town with distinguished and honorable status in the small town , they later said we had shrines linked to the cartel etc , my charges were completely dropped and my ex only faced a small misdemeanor charge with all other charges refused . Mamita got hers tho the charging sergeant who led the witch hunt was disgraced ultimately ending up fired and bringing charges against the local police for discrimination and sexual harrassment . She was ran out the town and now works for some cyber security and surveillance company according to linked in¹⁸⁸



Figure 27. “my mom did this today! It was almost finished burning until she smashed it.” (Matthew1, forum.becomealivinggod.com/t/santa-muerte/86498/28)

¹⁸⁸ Commercial-Air-2505, “Police Profiling of Santa Muerte Followers,” r/SantaMuerte, May 19, 2025, reddit.com/r/SantaMuerte/comments/1kqip8e/police_profiling_of_santa_muerte_followers/.

Well, I don't really know if I'm allowed to share this here, I don't even know if it's the right thing to do, but here I go. Since the first time I listened to this song, I haven't seen life the same. This song right here has changed my life perception, it made me appreciate it the most, almost every night I play this song before I go to sleep, cause' it brings me peace, makes me think about everything going on around me, and also, makes me thank God because I haven't lived those experiences, that kind of life, reminds me how lucky I've been.

I'm from Venezuela, I'm still here, I wanna stay here. I'm not really sure if you know what's happening here right now. Country is fucking falling to pieces, Life was worth shit before, now it's even worst than that. Cops and Soldiers are killing us, neither the students or the citizens have any kind of protection, just ourselves. Just look it up in Twitter, you'll see hundreds of things, videos of cops actually shooting at students, killing them with no mercy. Government has all the media on their side and they all say everything is ok around here, IT'S NOT. The only thing we have to know what's happening inside our country it's Twitter and CNN (international). We want a change, It's no secret that country was going down on all aspects, but this is madness.

I'm not asking for any kind of help, I just needed to express this pain, this anger we all have, and how Sing About Me, I'm Dying Of Thirst is helping me deal with this situation. Although Venezuela is nowhere near the US in terms of Gangs, we all get robbed and killed daily, like if it was game (not saying it does not happen in other places, just that here, it's just crazy, even way before all this protests and shit) People are always scared of going out, they all are ready to be killed at any moment. The whole I'm Dying of Thirst part is IDENTICALLY the thing that is happening here, cops killing their brothers, the ones who they should be protecting.

I'm sorry if I shouldn't have to post this here, I really needed to express myself, I'm scarred of what's gonna happen, No one knows. Also sorry if my grammar is not good enough, I wish I could tell you more (If I'm allowed to of course), but I can't think clearly. My home is dying, in the hands of coldblooded murders and corrupt people. I wish I could write like K.Dot, or at least have the guts to try.

Again, I'm really sorry if I'm not allowed to post this. Sing About Me, I'm Dying Of Thirst is and ode to life, it's like an embracing/rejection relationship between death and ourselves. In these troubled times, it'll help me to get by, and if I die soon, I'll be calmed, thinking about this same song. Thank you for this chance.¹⁸⁹



Figure 28. This man (who has face tattoos that many law enforcement apparatuses would associate with organized crime, specifically the DOJ under Trump and El Salvador under Bukele) just received a Santa Muerte statue and seems quite happy about it. This user unfortunately deleted their account so I am unable to cite them properly. (Unknown, [r/SantaMuerte](https://www.reddit.com/r/SantaMuerte/comments/1e4ysgd/package_arrived/), accessed April 6, 2025, [reddit.com/r/SantaMuerte/comments/1e4ysgd/package_arrived/](https://www.reddit.com/r/SantaMuerte/comments/1e4ysgd/package_arrived/)).

¹⁸⁹ Xmas, Kendrick Lamar - Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst, accessed April 6, 2025, genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-sing-about-me-im-dying-of-thirst-lyrics. This is the top comment on this genius page with 2,487 upvotes at the time of writing. Though not directly about Santa Muerte, its themes are quite tied to this piece and it felt worth including.

God Dies of Heatstroke

POST-SCRIPT

(DIDN'T KNOW WHAT I WAS
IN FOR)

“Couldn't Save Those TV Refugees.”

It's a classic cyberpunk trope, questioning whether it is acceptable to survive amidst a system that ensures your mere survival, the work you accept a paycheck for, means the suffering and death of others. I would argue that setting so many such stories in a futuristic dystopia does a disservice to a modernity which has already found itself in such a position. The first chapter's example shows this perfectly, with the woman having to choose between risking the lives of her children and delivering drugs that could spell death for users. But this is not isolated to criminals. Take the nine-to-five worker at any given health insurance company who follows the written standards to deny a customer a procedure that could greatly prolong their life. Or even take my family's Christmas tradition of going out with a charity to impoverished areas to give them food and gifts — the sorts of food that the more affluent would describe as vices. The sorts of food that will, over time, inevitably eat away the health of these people who are far from able to afford healthcare for themselves. And that isn't even accounting for the unfathomable destruction that has been globally wreaked by the American tax dollar. Maybe just surviving as an American, as a part of the system, is a sin entirely unforgivable. Maybe every good American to ever live has already been killed and the only question is who will die next.

From conception, one goal of this project, though it diverges from the primary theme that the connections police paint between Santa Muerte and drug trafficking are inaccurate profiling, was to humanize everyone caught up in the cartel world. To show that they are simply choosing to survive within an obscene system, and that's none too different from what Americans do. To be reading this in the United States means that you are necessarily taking part in a system that is one of history's most violent and has assuredly killed far more people than the cartels ever could — and that is without mentioning all of the drugs that have been trafficked by the federal government, from Saigon to Managua. And that is not necessarily a strike against Americans. Next to none have any agency to alter the situation. This is just to say that the vast majority of cartel members are in the same sort of situation. Even if they murder people faster than you or me, we are all killers.

My hope is that this thesis adds to the discussions of the police misconduct and profiling that is all too common against Santa Muerte's flock, show specifically where law enforcement is going wrong, and introduce readers to the Santa Muerte that is loved and trusted by millions. This thesis is not meant to change the world but rather to open the door to a conversation that I feel is worth having, and to open it to as many people as possible. To close I would like to thank Tobin Hansen, Ph.D. and Dawn Marlan, Ph.D. who have continuously supported me despite the fact that I have never made it easy for them. They have dealt with me for years and I am forever grateful for that but with this complete they are, at long last, rid of me. Their guidance has been far more concrete than Santa Muerte's wordless glare, and I doubt anyone but them could've made it this far in the early versions of this thesis. Not only have they continuously supported and inspired my work — it is their suffering that has made this readable for you. I would also like to thank all the people who took the time to talk to me and relay their knowledge and stories. I have attempted to do them justice. With that being said, thank you for sacrificing the time to read this. Take a piece of it with you.

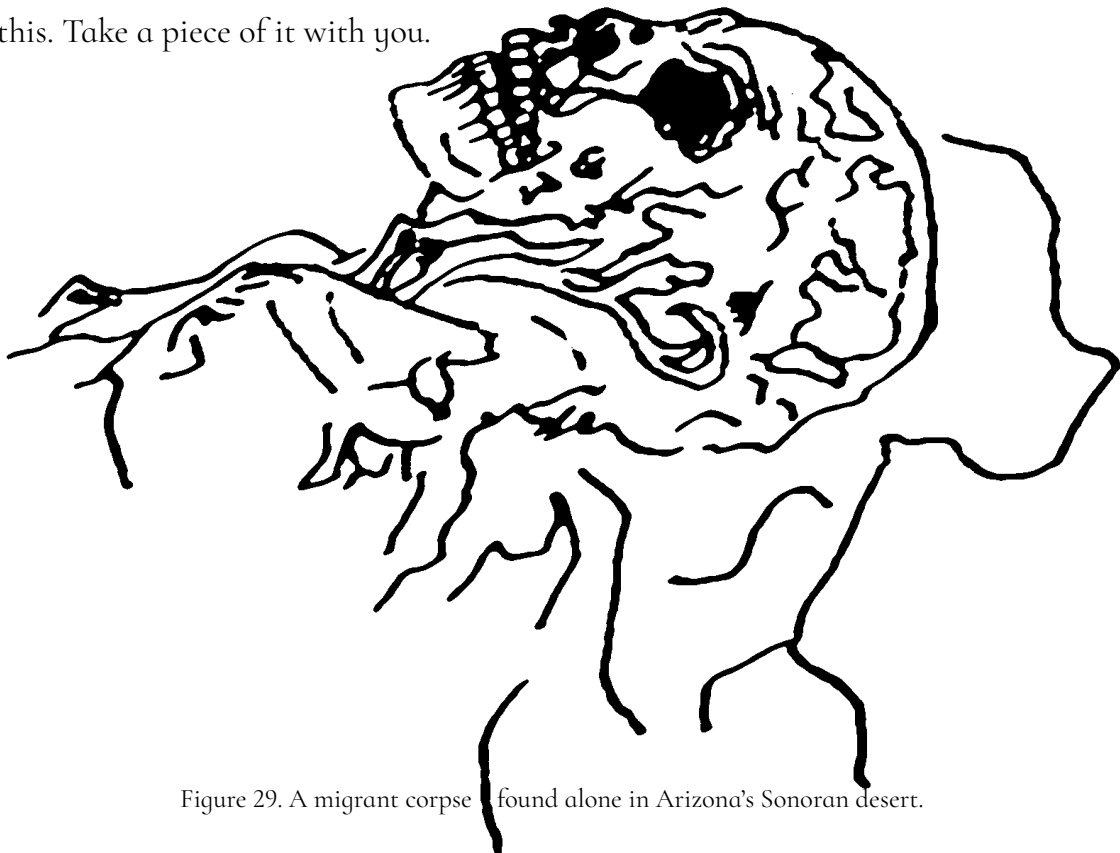


Figure 29. A migrant corpse found alone in Arizona's Sonoran desert.

01. The Black Angel's Death Song.....The Velvet Underground, Nico
02. The Truth.....Handsome Boy Modeling School, Róisín, J-Live
03. Stolen At Gunpoint.....Tijuana No!
04. Murderers.....John Frusciante
05. Worldwide Steppers.....Kendrick Lamar
06. Miranda That Ghost Just Isn't Holy Anymore.....The Mars Volta
07. Rock 'n' Roll Suicide.....David Bowie
08. Dance With The Devil.....Immortal Technique
09. The Last.....Microwave
10. Sing About Me, I'm Dying Of Thirst.....Kendrick Lamar
11. Hot-House Rag.....Tyler Bates Timothy Williams
12. Born to Lose.....Johnny Thunders & The Heartbreakers
13. In the Summertime.....Mungo Jerry
14. Cigarettes and Coffee.....Otis Redding
15. Ain't it Funny.....Danny Brown
16. Reborn.....KIDS SEE GHOSTS
17. 1-900-Dial-A-Crook.....Convicts, Mr. 3-2, Big Mike, Geto Boys, Scarface
18. The Widow.....The Mars Volta
19. Dope Fiend Blues.....Allen Ginsberg
20. Nothing Gets Crossed Out.....Bright Eyes
21. Gravel Pit.....Wu-Tang Clan, RZA, Method Man, Ghostface Killah, Raekwon, U-God
22. Semi-Charmed Life.....Third Eye Blind
23. El Chapo - Bonus Track.....The Game, Skrillex
24. Chelsea.....Phoebe Bridgers
25. L'Via L'Viaquez.....The Mars Volta
26. Real Death.....Mount Eerie
27. Didn't Know What I Was In For.....Better Oblivion Community Center

Figure 30. The sources for all chapter titles and the accompanying quotes are the songs listed above, though 11-26 went unused as titles. They can be found on a playlist here: tinyurl.com/gdhsst.