

The Worship of Death:

A modern Mexican phenomenon with antecedents in the religion of Mexico-Tenochtitlan

Presented by Keegan J. Dowling to the Colonial North Conference, October 2015

This is not an academic treatise. While it consults a number of prestigious primary and secondary sources in the fields of history and anthropology, there is but one book that makes us wise, that makes us say, “One thing I know: I was blind, but now I see!”¹ Of course, it’s the Bible. The Bible’s unique nature as *the tool par excellence* of the Holy Spirit for giving a person life, sight and friendship with God—for making someone a Christian and keeping them a Christian—is enshrined in the timeless motto of the orthodox Lutheran church: “Sola gratia. Sola fide. *Sola scriptura.*” And Scripture’s very power lies in showing us Christ: the unique God-man, the holy one whose bloody death alone has made us right with the Lord of heaven and earth.

The religion of the Aztecs (henceforth referred to by their indigenous name, the Mexica), was centred on blood propitiation of false deities. You may (or may not) be surprised to learn that the outright worship of violence and death—manifested most blatantly in the cult of Santa Muerte (“Holy Death” or “Saint Death”), though also connected to the cult of Jesús Malverde and the “scriptures” penned by drug cartel La Familia’s recently deceased leader, Nazario “El Más Loco” Moreno—is a disease killing millions of Mexican and Mexican-American souls throughout North America *today*. And it’s also worth noting: Just as Islamic extremism is not limited to its cultures of origin, so in today’s environment of rapid and global electronic communication a bizarre-yet-exciting religion celebrating death has the potential to infect the vulnerable—wherever they may live, whatever their culture, whatever language they may speak—through something as simple as a cell phone.

In short, the Mexican death religions construct a continuum of every type of death: *Spiritual* death initiates and is further confirmed by the worship of *physical* death... which results in the ultimate tragedy, *eternal* death. The one tool we have with which to fight this is the Sword of the Spirit: the Bible. Orthodox Lutherans follow the hermeneutical principle of historical-grammatical interpretation. On the grammatical side, we consult extra-scriptural lexicographical and grammatical works such as BDAG and Joüon-Muraoka, not in order to *critique* the words of the Bible, but so that we might have an accurate understanding of what those words are saying. Likewise, on the historical side of this hermeneutic, we consult extra-scriptural historical, geographical and anthropological works, not in order to *critique* the statements of the Bible (or foster doubt in the veracity of any of them), but so that we might form an accurate mental picture of the context of those statements.

This paper takes the historical side of this hermeneutic... but it doesn’t really use it as a hermeneutic. This paper does not employ history for the purpose of interpreting the Bible; it uses history—both of the Mexica and of modern Mexicans—in order to identify a deep-seated problem that pastors will be

¹ John 9:25b

encountering more and more, so that the Sword of the Spirit may then be targeted on it to wipe it out. It is October. We're familiar with the perennial conflict: Hallowe'en vs. Reformation Day. That's exactly what this paper is. It lays out before you the ugly details of a "Hallowe'en" religion of ghouls and death that haunts many souls around you. It cannot prove that a particular modern phenomenon is directly traced from a given aspect of the old religion of the Mexica. It will merely show that the worship of death is a problem among many descendants of the Mexica today... and that, sadly, this is nothing new. Let's be encouraged to take our knowledge of this "Hallowe'en" and to change it to "Reformation", by giving people the Word that substitutes light for darkness, peace for guilt, grace for works, life for death.

Part I: Modern Mexican and Mexican-American Death Religions

What has been your exposure to the death religions that claim millions of followers throughout North America today? Perhaps you've met someone with a grotesque tattoo of a female grim reaper, with scythe in hand. Perhaps you've seen articles of religious adoration on display in people's cars or in their homes. There might be a shrine in your city or even in your neighbourhood. Then again, perhaps you have encountered the North American death religions the way most North Americans have: through iTunes, Netflix or DirecTV.

Years back, the popular CBS television series *Criminal Minds* featured an episode in which the authorities sought to unravel the mystery of small shrines to La Santa Muerte, found at a campsite of human traffickers in the American desert. *Dexter* Season 6 took it further, with several episodes dedicated to tracking down a couple of drug smuggling devotees of Santa Muerte who had been responsible for several grisly murders and mutilations in Miami.² However, the televised portrayal of Mexican death religions that is most familiar is surely that of the award-winning (and culture-shaking) AMC series *Breaking Bad*. In *Breaking Bad*, Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agent Hank Schrader is assigned as the Albuquerque office's liaison for cross-border operations to the DEA's El Paso office. There, he finds a coworker with a little Jesús Malverde bobble-head figurine on his desk. "Know your enemy!" the coworker seriously intones. Later, a pair of twins who are important cartel hitmen crawl to a shrine of La Santa Muerte in a little desert village in Mexico. There, they present Santa Muerte with a sketch of "Heisenberg", and ask for her blessing on their mission to assassinate him. Perhaps what's most memorable are their pointy-toed, Juarez-style cowboy boots—much like my own, except that theirs had gruesome metal skulls fastened to their tips. As far as *Pensamientos*, the "scripture" written by Nazario "El Más Loco" Moreno, one of the three founders of La Familia Michoacana cartel (which has morphed into the Knights Templar cartel in the last few years), I don't know of its being portrayed in any prime time, dramatized format. Maybe I just don't watch enough TV.³

Let us now go beyond the broad strokes of pop culture and take a close-up look at three of today's most popular Mexican narco-/death religions. Because these religions' explosion in popularity is so recent—and still ongoing—the sources available for portraying them could not be more different than the sources used for the treatment of precolonial religion of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, in the latter half of this

² Contrary to stereotype, no chainsaws were involved.

³ Oh, that's right: I don't watch any TV, except for seasons I purchase from iTunes; I'm *that* kind of hipster.

paper. While the religion of the Mexica is attested in voluminous works by some of the pioneers of modern anthropology, the story of modern Mexican death cults is still being written (or, rather, has yet to be written). A key source for this first portion of the paper is *El Narco*, a book written by British journalist Ioan Grillo. Grillo, who lives and works in Mexico City, has penned the most comprehensive, up-to-date book covering all aspects of the Mexican Drug War, from its origins to its crops, from its key players to its effects on everyday life in Mexico. A supplementary source is *Drug War Zone*, a book by University of Texas-El Paso anthropologist Howard Campbell. Campbell's book consists of ethnographic interviews with a diverse range of players—criminal and law enforcement and civilian—in the drug conflict that has raged for three generations in the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez conurbation. Even so, Campbell's book is geographically limited, and both his book and Grillo's book are already starting to show their age.⁴ Therefore, it was necessary to go to the press. I restricted myself (almost) exclusively to sources from the most prestigious members of the Fifth Estate, e.g.: the largest Mexican-American news network (*Univision*); the most widely distributed news magazine in Mexico (*Proceso*); and the most comprehensive news network in the United States (*National Public Radio*). (For good measure, I also consulted one article each from three of the West's most notoriously lightweight news sources: *Time*, *Huffington Post* and *The Daily Mail*. Hey, you never know when you're going to find *kopi luwak*!)⁵ Nazario Moreno's book presented a challenge: As the scripture of a violent drug cartel, it is a banned book in Mexico. After a good deal of online digging, I was able to find a grainy, electronically scanned copy of what appears to be excerpts from *Pensamientos*.⁶ At no point was Wikipedia considered as a source for this paper. In ruling out Wikipedia, the case could be made that this paper falls prey to a fallacy of logic akin to that of "appeal to authority". Call me old fashioned, but I just think that the use of Wikipedia, for all the benefits it might otherwise offer, would cheapen a paper that is already cheap enough! Finally, all translations of Spanish language sources were done by myself.

La Santa Muerte

So, Santa Muerte is the Grim Reaper, right? Wrong. Well, her name means "Saint Death", right? Wrong again, strike two. While both are skeletal, and both carry a scythe, the Grim Reaper is a boy, while Santa Muerte is a girl. In fact, she is colloquially referred to by her devotees as "La Niña Blanca": "The White Girl". (This no doubt has to do with the colour of her bones, rather than the colour of any skin she may once have had). Also, although non-devotee Anglos will typically call her "Saint Death", the name of La Santa Muerte might more accurately be translated "Holy Death". Rookie mistakes aside, however, we will see that our first instincts about this morbid lady are by-and-large correct: Like the Grim Reaper,

⁴ For example, Grillo's book does not even mention the Knights Templar cartel. This is because, at the time of the book's writing, this cartel had not yet arisen. Its antecedents were then known as La Familia cartel.

⁵ Besides, it was Grillo himself who authored the article for *Time*. He did not disappoint.

⁶ Grillo states that *Pensamientos* is over a hundred pages long. The copy I found was about 1/3 that length, but its content matches excerpts cited by Grillo. Frankly—as we'll get to in more depth under the relevant heading—I'm relieved only to be able to find a 1/3-length synthesis of *Pensamientos*: It is fairly boring, clichéd fare, especially coming from a passive-aggressive nutcase known to everyone as "El Más Loco". I expected more: something *interesting*, like works on Haitian vodou or portions of the Qur'an, not boring, like *The Book of Mormon* or *Zhuan Falun*. Instead, the book reads like a rambling manifesto written by a confused *opinio legis*. Not at all like this paper.

she is grim death (partially) incarnate; like a Roman Catholic Saint, she does inspire veneration, shrines and vows.

In an interview in 2014, Religious Studies Professor Andrew Chesnut of Virginia Commonwealth University stated that we have no hard data on the number of adherents to the cult of La Santa Muerte, but he estimates that the number is somewhere between 10 and 12 million followers throughout Mexico, Central America and the United States.⁷ If accurate, this figure would mean that the cult of Santa Muerte is far more popular than other successful narco-cults, such as those of Jesús Malverde, Saint Judas Thaddeus⁸ and the Knights Templar/La Familia Michoacana. In fact, it would make Santa Muerte the second-most revered non-divine religious figure among Mexicans, after the Virgin of Guadalupe.⁹ If today's number of Santa Muerte devotees is assumed to be 12 million, then their numbers would equate to roughly 10% of the population of the United Mexican States. Since Chesnut's estimate took in the United States of America and the nations of Central America as well, the ratio of Santa Muerte devotees to the population of Mexico would necessarily be something less than 10:100. Let's call it 8%. That's not an overwhelming number—but it is staggering, when you consider that the cult was not well known until the twenty-first century. And it leads one to wonder what percentage of the Mexican population is actively involved in the drug economy and its attendant war—and, then, how much of that 8% such people comprise.

Good luck finding the answers to such questions. Part of the difficulty is that the Mexican drug war is such a recent phenomenon. Although the stage was set by the drug eradication campaigns in the 1970s in the heartland of the narcotics business, Sinaloa state—which had the effect of dispersing rather than stemming the drugs trade, a process that a National Geographic article aptly describes as “trying to get rid of a virus by flushing it into the bloodstream”—and by the agreements made between Mexican and Colombian cartels in the early 1980s to traffick cocaine to “El Norte” through Mexico in the face of effective maritime interdiction efforts by the United States in the Caribbean region, the brutal drug war itself did not erupt in its full fury until the accession to power of Mexican President Felipe Calderón in December of 2006.¹⁰ If the DEA and the Federales tried to flush out the drug trade in the 1970s, then Calderón tried to stamp it out. Instead, the resulting violence led to a rapid collapse of social order throughout Mexico.¹¹

⁷ Interview on National Public Radio on 10 October 2014.

⁸ This one is actually an approved Catholic saint (one of the 12 Disciples). He is supposedly the patron saint of desperate causes; his cult has been eroded most by the growing cult of Jesús Malverde.

⁹ Of course, by now, I wouldn't put it past Pope Francis to have become popular enough to give those two a run for their money.

¹⁰ For almost the entire twentieth century, Mexican politics were dominated by the PRI party. In 2000, Calderón's predecessor, Vicente Fox, became the first president to break this dominance, by bringing his PAN party to power. After Fox had served his 6-year term, Calderón became the second Mexican president from the PAN. After his disastrous term in office, the PRI regained power, under current President Enrique Peña-Nieto. One wonders how much power the PRI ever really lost (and how much power a PAN president, like Calderón, could even exercise effectively). Well, at least I wonder.

¹¹ Since the accession of Peña, the fury of the drug war has died down a bit. However, for every step of progress made, at least another step is taken backwards, as highlighted most publicly in the capture, incarceration and swift escape of Mexico's most notorious drug lord, Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán.

As the drug production and smuggling business became simultaneously more profitable and more violent, new players made their name felt in the game. While the established narco-clans of Sinaloa continued to be important, cartels like Los Zetas, La Familia and *Cártel del Golfo* gave them a run for their money. Until their decimation at the hands of other cartels, Los Zetas were particularly fierce. They were a clique of Mexican army veterans—many of them with special forces experience—who brought a military discipline and ruthless lethality to the trade. La Familia, as we will see, was particularly adept at using social propaganda to carve out a chunk of southwestern Mexico for itself.¹²

As conflict intensified—both among the cartels themselves and between the cartels and the authorities—cartels turned to increasingly horrendous ways of sending their messages. I don't recommend this, but if you were inclined to take a look, graphic photos of the tortures and the murders could be found from any Mexican media source. People were tortured and executed by being hung from a downtown bridge *en masse*. Drive-by shootings became common. Bodies left in public were booby trapped in order to cause secondary casualties. Bodies were left with messages scrawled on them, or decapitated, the heads replaced with pig heads. Mexico has been the site of mass killings and mass graves unseen since Bosnia and Rwanda and unmatched until the Syrian Civil War and the terrorist insurgency of Boko Haram in Nigeria. The most notorious act that seems to come up again and again in the sources (and, mind you, these were written before the recent tragedy of the mass disappearance of several dozen university students in Mexico) is the event of 6 September 2006, when La Familia cartel rolled five human heads onto a busy dance floor in Uruapán.¹³ As we helplessly note the horror of Syria, where Islamic extremists summarily decapitate people on a whim, as yet unchecked by the military forces of the West, it is easy to forget that this has been happening in our own neighbourhood for the last decade. Decapitation became a favourite method of execution by the drug cartels, for obvious reasons. If you hold a person's head in your hands, you hold their all. Beheading is a symbol of dominance and possession akin to rape.

So, did the cult of La Santa Muerte cause this explosion of torture and murder? No. The Mexican drug war can be explained by the simple human desire for money—along with the competition for that money—exacerbated by the desire of Americans and Canadians to escape their problems through drugs, as well as the conditions for “the perfect storm” being set by the actions of the Mexican and American governments as well as the structural weaknesses of the Mexican government. Santa Muerte did not initially cause the Mexican drug war, but it exploded in popularity in that violent context.

The proponents of Santa Muerte are adept at apologetics. In interview after interview, the cult's “leading lights” are keen to point out the fact that correlation is not the same as causation. However, neither does correlation discount causation; it says nothing at all about causation. The proponents of Santa Muerte point to her widespread appeal and its recent diffusion across all social strata in the Mexican community as evidence that the cult is not, at its root, a religion of violence in the thrall of the

¹² This, too, has inevitably backfired: Actions speak louder than words, and the cartel's extraordinarily violent ways have led to a grassroots backlash against them, spawning anti-cartel insurgencies. Of course, as in Central America and Colombia, vigilante insurgents are no sooner successful than they are tempted to use their military power to fill the vacuum left by their foes and start making some of that money for themselves.

¹³ Grillo, p. 196.

drug cartels. Although there are important truths espoused in such a defense of Santa Muerte's reputation, a little common sense is called for. Such a defense might suffice to convince a few trained anthropologists or social scientists. However, journalists and law enforcement and the man on the street know differently. If Santa Muerte is "La Niña", then the drug cartels are her "Niño". If she is the *novia*, then they are her *novio*.¹⁴ If Santa Muerte is "La Flaquita", then the cartels are "El Gordo".¹⁵

Because of the tight connection between the cult of Santa Muerte and the drug cartels, the Mexican government has been aggressive in its opposition to the cult. Likewise, because of the tight connection between the cult and the cartels, the government's efforts have achieved little. The Mexican government does not typically have too much trouble keeping the common people in line. However, its effectiveness evaporates in the face of forces that have coopted elements of the government. In today's Mexico, this means the drug cartels. When policemen and soldiers (many of whom happen to be devotees of La Santa Muerte, incidentally,) fall victim to small scale narco-violence, the typical public reaction is that these are by-and-large cartel business actions—the discipline of their own members or an attack against rival cartel members—rather than an assault on authority. In other words, so many of the government's troops have been corrupted by participation in cartel business, that most who die are "getting what's coming to them", rather than heroically dying in the line of duty. While the safest thing to say is that state and federal forces include a mix of corrupt and non-corrupt personnel, the Mexican government itself has perhaps tacitly shown its agreement with the prevailing view, by being selective in its use of forces for high priority missions. If a job really needs doing, the government will turn to Mexico's small-but-trusted force of naval commandos—rather than the Federales or the army—to do it.¹⁶

Some examples of measures the authorities have used to undermine the worship of La Santa Muerte include the following: revoking the cult's officially recognized status in 2005; demolishing shrines in the northeastern Gulf region, due to their connection with Los Zetas cartel; swiftly concluding that the assassination of one of the most prominent leaders of the worship of Santa Muerte in Mexico City—Jonathan "Comandante Pantera" Legaria—was not solvable, without conducting a thorough investigation; arresting another one of the most prominent leaders of the cult—self-proclaimed "bishop" David Romo—and arraigning him on charges of extortion and kidnapping linked to cartels.

Yet, through it all, the worship of La Santa Muerte has continued to grow. As her devotees point out, her popularity has spread beyond drug lords and their thugs. Millions of common, noncriminal folk now worship her. She is most popular among the marginal classes of society: addicts, the poor, sexual minorities and many who are at continual risk from domestic abuse or narco-violence.¹⁷ There are two

¹⁴ Literally, "girlfriend" and "boyfriend".

¹⁵ Literally, "the little skinny girl" and "the fatso". One of Santa Muerte's nicknames is "the little skinny girl" (again probably because she is a skeleton). *El Gordo y La Flaca* is a popular Mexican TV talkshow.

¹⁶ I'm not sure how much that depends on whether there is a PRI or a PAN president in office. Mexican bureaucratic politics are beyond the scope of this paper. Also, I cannot find the reference to the fact I just stated about the trust placed in the navy. I do know that I read it in a non-fictional context—not just in the Tom Clancy novel!

¹⁷ *Los Angeles Times*, 10 January 2011; Prof. Robinson Herrera, in NPR interview, 31 October 2011.

reasons for this: Those who are the least powerful are also the most desperate to find help wherever it is promised, and La Santa Muerte accepts all who come to her, without discrimination.

The sad thing is that you and I know that Jesus is the one who could fill both of these key longings. He is the one with the divine power to help those facing even the most “hopeless” situations: from being born blind... to having to feed thousands of people out in the wilderness with the contents of a boy’s lunch box... to—I don’t know—crawling into heaven through that needle’s eye. Jesus is also the one who accepts all who turn to Him, without discrimination. Think of the repentant criminal on the cross... think of the Syro-Phoenician woman... think of the Samaritan leper... think—most of all—about ourselves, being the individuals that we are.

The fact is—and this is a fact that has dawned on Pope Francis, say what you will, and is in part responsible for his astonishing popularity—that the Roman Catholic Church, which has dominated the teaching and oversight of Christianity throughout Mexico’s history, has given people the impression that Jesus *does* discriminate. Or, at least, that He is tough on those who grovel before Him in worship. With the Babylonian Captivity of Rome’s sacramental system—very much alive in conservative Mexico, if not in liberal Canada and America—you might very well think that the priesthood forms a sort of “spiritual cartel”: controlling access to “the good stuff”, making sure the price is sufficiently high, keeping the troops in line, jealously guarding its turf. You might think that. You might very well think that. I could not possibly comment.¹⁸

People are drawn to a patron who doesn’t burden them with a lot of preconditions for his/her love and protection. The poor don’t have money to burn; Catholic prayer candles lit to Los Santos will not, however, “work” unless first the coin in the coffer springs. The battered wife does not want someone who tells her she must simply put on more makeup, go to the dentist and put up with “machismo” at home; the priests, however, do withhold divorce even from those few whose lives it is meant to protect. The unemployed father with half a dozen mouths to feed does not want a patron who tells him and his wife to either go without, or go without any form of contraceptive whatsoever.

As Lutherans, we have those things covered. Biblical theology is at odds with the examples of Catholic theology I just mentioned. However, there are plenty of other areas where the Catholic Church teaches what is right—and people also find problems with these teachings. Let’s go right back to sexuality. Although Catholic theology is fundamentally wrong in regarding all sex as a tainted thing—which is the reason why even sex between husband and wife is seen as something to be limited, a deep-seated attitude which Martin Luther himself was unable to shake, even though he confessed and taught the truth of sexual freedom inside marriage—some of its conclusions are correct. Homosexual sins of thought, word and action are ungodly. Fornication is ungodly. Lust is ungodly. Pornography is ungodly. Paedophilia is ungodly.¹⁹ Incest is ungodly. Adultery—whether with or without consent—is ungodly. (If I “missed” anything, don’t interpret that as an endorsement: We’ve got to keep moving, here.) If

¹⁸ Reference to the late, great Ian Richardson as Francis Urquardt in the original, British, superior version of *House of Cards*. If you think this reference is flippant because it’s so entertaining... well, again: I could not possibly comment.

¹⁹ Ironically, a teaching which numbers of priests—and not the general public—have a problem with.

people have a problem with these teachings, it is because each of us has a sinful nature that is inclined both to choose what is evil and to defiantly (though unsuccessfully) justify itself in the face of God. As committed enemies of God by nature, no one wants to accept the idea that they must change. In fact, it takes nothing short of the miraculous intervention by the Holy Spirit through the Means of Grace to make a person “switch sides” and become God’s friend; to *have* a change of attitude and action; and to even *want* to have a change of attitude and action. What are these “Means of Grace”? The Gospel in Word and Sacrament. So, what is this “Gospel”? It is the message that God had undeserved love (grace) for everybody, so much so that He sent His One and Only Son to earth—gave Him up to the travails of being a perfect human being and to the shame of hell on the cross—so that each individual who believes in Jesus won’t experience hell, but will live a happy life forever with God.²⁰ It is something that is “not from [our]selves—it is the gift of God”.²¹

This is the message of grace praised by the lips and damned by the practice of the Catholic Church. The Bible draws a sharp distinction between Law and Gospel and places Jesus firmly in the category of Gospel: “ὅτι ὁ νόμος διὰ Μωϋσέως ἐδόθη, ἡ χάρις καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐγένετο.”²² Yet, as in the days of Luther, Jesus is basically portrayed by the Catholic Church as a second, law-giving Moses albeit with a different style. (This can happen in our Lutheran classrooms, Sunday Schools and sermons, too, whenever we do not correctly both distinguish between and apply the Law and the Gospel.) At the end of the Seven Years’ War, a remarkable situation came about: A long-established nation of francophone Roman Catholics suddenly found itself subject to the British Crown across the sea. As a pragmatic solution to the difficulties this posed, the British allowed the clergy to have free reign over Lower Canada, to be the politically acceptable “face of France” in Québec. The theocracy was nothing short of repressive, playing the part of Rehoboam to people’s lives and consciences. The resulting backlash has laid utter waste to not only the Catholic Church but, indeed, to Christianity in general in Québec. A similar backlash may be occurring before our eyes in Mexico, another of Rome’s ecclesiastical bastions. People are confused by the Catholic Church’s mixture of truth and falsehood. They are confused by the mix of differences and similarities between the Catholic Church and protestant churches. Both seem harsh to the unregenerate flesh... and, finally, people just toss up their hands in despair and go to something simple, visceral and practical—like La Santa Muerte. Millions have turned their backs on Christianity. Were they ever really a part of Christ? Will they ever return? Or, will Mexico grow more defiantly anti-Christ, as have its northern neighbours?

The devotees of Santa Muerte seek a number of practical blessings from her. They can seek whatever they want, whether money or protection from death.²³ This is ironic, of course, because she *is* “Holy Death”! The irony is muted, however, by another common wish: that Santa Muerte would protect one from suffering a *bad* death. Since she is in charge of death, she is able to make your death quick and dignified and relatively painless. Imagine: “Dear holy one, all I pray is this: Please don’t let them hang

²⁰ See John 3:16.

²¹ See Ephesians 2:8,9.

²² John 1:17: “For the Law was given through Moses; Grace and Truth came through Jesus Christ.”

²³ She is also popular for granting the ability to seduce the opposite sex (or the same sex, for that matter: Santa Muerte knows no sexual taboos), NPR, 31 October 2011.

my body from a bridge, when my time comes! Or cut off my head and play around with it. Or beat and burn me for days beforehand. Or take vengeance on my family and my kids, as well as on myself. That's what I'd really like from you." Another reason someone might worship Death was seen in the example I mentioned from *Breaking Bad*: Petitioning for the successful assassination of your enemy. Every worshiper of Santa Muerte interviewed by my sources denied that this kind of crass petition is acceptable to La Santa Muerte. They implied or stated that this was a misconception or slur against Santa Muerte, alleged by her enemies. However, there is one vital aspect to the worship of Santa Muerte that must be made clear: Whenever one asks her for something, they must make her a vow—*quid pro quo*. They are then most strictly bound by three commands: No one who turns to La Santa Muerte for aid must ever turn away from her, or she will become their sworn enemy. No one who makes a vow to Santa Muerte may dare to fail to keep even the slightest aspect of that vow. And, finally, no one who makes a vow to Santa Muerte may ever, ever divulge the terms of their agreement. The logical question is this: If a faithful devotee of La Santa Muerte were to petition for an assassination or to promise a human sacrifice in return... how on earth could anyone ever know? Acts of violence cannot be conclusively distanced from Santa Muerte!²⁴ In fact, the Holy Death is the one to turn to, if death is what you need.

What does the worship of Santa Muerte look like? It looks pretty "goth", for one. She is pictured as a gruesome skeleton icon worthy of any heavy metal band. Sometimes she wears a flowing pink skirt. She is portrayed in murals—long a beloved Mexican art form—and in statues and tattoos. Makeshift shrines may be built to her anywhere, by anyone. Devotees leave an assortment of offerings for her at her shrines: cigarettes, liquor, candies and apples, a fruit of which she is particularly fond.²⁵

There are disputes as to her origins. Prof. Robinson Herrera stated in an interview with NPR that the three most prominent schools of thought are that she originated in colonial times in the tradition of San Pasqual, or that she began sometime in the 1960s in the state of Hidalgo, or that she has existed ever since the conquest of the Mexica in the 1520s, flourishing underneath the accepted culture all along.²⁶ There are three grand centres of Santa Muerte worship, all either in or claiming origins in El Barrio Tepito, a notoriously hardscrabble neighbourhood of Mexico City. The first is an altar established by a tough, no-nonsense woman named Enriqueta "Don Queta" Romero. Nearby is a more formal venue of worship established by her chief rival, David Romo. At least, he was her chief rival until he was arrested by the authorities in 2011 for allegedly kidnapping and extorting people under the guise of working for Los Zetas cartel.²⁷ Romo was known for dressing in ecclesiastical garb, performing masses and heaping criticism on the Roman Catholic Church for its supposedly discriminatory practices. The third major shrine to La Santa Muerte is on the north side of Mexico City. It includes a sixty-foot tall statue of Santa Muerte built by Jonathan Legaria. Known as "Commander Panther" to his followers, he claimed a tough

²⁴ Of course, the corollary—"Acts of violence cannot be conclusively ascribed to the worship of Santa Muerte"—holds true as well.

²⁵ *Proceso (Edición Jalisco)*, 26 February 2011.

²⁶ Prof. Robinson Herrera, in NPR interview, 31 October 2011.

²⁷ *Daily Mail*, 5 January 2011.

background fending for himself in Tepito. His mother has since disproved those dramatic claims, even as she has taken over the leadership of the shrine after her son's untimely death.²⁸

Whether or not the cult of La Santa Muerte is in any way a descendant of the gruesome, death-focused religious practices of the Mexica, it is clear that Roman Catholicism has made her rise possible. The key feature of Catholicism among native, slave and mixed race communities in the Americas is that it was a veneer applied over a paganism that was never truly uprooted. (The same can be said of Catholicism's advance in Europe in the latter days of the Roman Empire, and of Orthodoxy's advance in Kievan Rus in the tenth century). The clergy—including pioneering anthropologist Fr. Diego Durán—very well knew this to be the case and lamented the fact. Most Europeans who founded the settlements of the West Indies and Mexico came for one reason—to get rich—and they weren't about to waste time or even cause problems with those races they exploited, by seeing to it that they learned Christianity. (The Americans found swifter, more brutal means to satisfy their greed, further north). Idols who had been coopted by demons could now be thought of as saints. Catholicism's idolatry of the saints—justified by the sophistic dichotomy it draws between worship and veneration—has allowed the worship of evil spirits to continue in Haiti and Brazil, and it allows devotees of Santa Muerte to worship this evil patron, while still telling themselves that they are good, Catholic Christians. An exchange from an interview (26 February 2011) between *Proceso* reporters Julio Ríos and Anna Lozano and Santa Muerte priestess Daena Vázquez:

Interviewers: How important is Christ for you (pl.)?

Priestess: The most important. We ask God for permission before beginning our ceremonies. La Santa Muerte is venerated, but God is the one whom we worship.

The other folk saint most identified with the narco-culture of death and violence is Jesús Malverde. We now turn to a quick overview of his cult.

Jesús Malverde

Whereas Santa Muerte may be a concept²⁹, Jesús Malverde has both a Christian name and a portrait—both of which are as fake as a three-dollar bill.³⁰ There is no evidence that he ever existed, and since he is alleged to have met his end during the rule of dictator Porfirio Díaz in the early years of the twentieth century, this means that he probably did not exist. “Malverde” is said to be a nickname rather than his original surname. According to drug war expert Ioan Grillo: “[Malverde's] shrine lies inside a simple

²⁸ Grillo, pp. 193-4. Jonathan Legaria died when his Cadillac SUV was given a Swiss cheese paint job by unknown assailants wielding machine guns; it is not known whether or not he was ever a rapper.

²⁹ Her adherents—especially David Romo—claim that she has a personal essence: The Angel of Death from the Old Testament. (How she changed genders, I don't rightly know. Everything she does is a mystery, frankly.)

³⁰ Or a three-loonie coin, if you live in my neck of the woods.

brick building painted dark green and decorated with green tiles. *Malverde* in Spanish literally means ‘bad green’; in Sinaloa, *verde* can also refer to the green of marijuana, as well as the green of dollar bills.”³¹ Malverde’s shrine is in Culiacán, the capital of the northwest Pacific state of Sinaloa, directly across from the state government building. It is his status as a local Sinaloa folk saint that has led to his popularity among the cartels, many of whom—for example, the Tijuana Cartel and the Juárez Cartel—had their origins as affiliate offshoots of the Sinaloa Cartel.

Although Malverde has been venerated for about a century, his shrine in Culiacán has more recent origins. According to a *National Geographic* interview with his son Jesus, shrine founder Eligio González almost died from knife and gunshot wounds he sustained in a robbery, while working as a driver in 1976. He prayed to Malverde for survival, and when he survived he kept his vow to build for Malverde a proper shrine.³² What about Malverde’s portrait, since no photograph of him existed? “In the 1980s [Eligio] González asked an artisan in the neighborhood to create a plaster bust: ‘Make him sort of like Pedro Infante and sort of like Carlos Mariscal,’ Infante being a famous movie star from Sinaloa and Mariscal a local politician.”^{33,34}

Malverde looks like an honest, straightforward man with neat, dark hair, a mustache and a simple-yet-dignified white suit and cravat. (He looks rather like an older version of “Pedro” from the movie *Napoleon Dynamite*.) His legend paints him as upstanding as well. It is said that an injustice of some sort or other forced Malverde into a life of crime, in which he faithfully robbed from the rich and gave to the poor. There are many variations on his legend, but all of them say that he met his earthly end at the hands of the cruel authorities. His bones performed a miracle for a petitioner, and there you have it: folk saint. The three key things about Jesús Malverde that have transformed him into a popular narco-saint are: He grants petitions for advantage or protection, in exchange for vows (like Santa Muerte); he hails from Sinaloa, the heartland of the Mexican drug business; and his legacy is one of conflict with the government authorities. You might also add a fourth feature: Since Malverde’s legend is so fluid, he can be for you whatever you want him to be for.

Malverde’s shrine in Culiacán is filled with messages of thanksgiving and cryptic petitioning from his devotees throughout Mexico and the United States. There is a band on hand that will play folk songs about Malverde, for a fee. The shrine is the scene of partying in Malverde’s honour on 3 May, the anniversary of his death, and at other times. Small-time commoners and big-time hoods alike make trips from all over North America to give honour to Malverde. Like the cult of Santa Muerte, the cult of Jesús Malverde has been successfully commercialized: Besides the usual array of candles, statues and posters, you can even now buy Malverde Beer. “Drug smugglers drink it like holy water,” says Sergeant Rico Garcia, of the Houston Police Department narcotics division.³⁵

³¹ Grillo, p. 188.

³² *National Geographic*, May 2010, p. 70.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Yes! I really wanted an “Ibid”: Now this is a *real* paper!

³⁵ *The New York Times*, 8 February 2008.

For devotees, the cult of Malverde and cult of Santa Muerte hold much of the same appeal. Their devotees also worship them in a superstitious, syncretistic way similar to the worship of saints officially approved by Rome. Neither of these “saints” is approved by Rome, but, in these desperate times, millions of common people have defied the church out of a sense of immediate need: “If Malverde worked for the drug lords, then maybe he will work for me.” While not every devotee of Jesús Malverde is involved in the cartels’ deadly trade, “[c]ourts in California, Kansas, Nebraska and Texas have ruled that Malverde trinkets and talismans are admissible evidence in drug and money-laundering cases.”³⁶ That is worth noting. The next time you see Malverde hanging from a rearview mirror, you can make a safe bet that the vehicle’s owner is either dangerous or—much more likely—at risk from added perils that face them in their lives.

The “Scriptures” of the La Familia/Knights Templar Cartels

The biggest adventure that I ever had during my time at Seminary—apart from Arbor Day with Prof. Quandt—was in Mexico, in January 2010. For Winterim, I joined a group of other Spanish-speaking students on a two-week Spanish language immersion trip³⁷ to Puebla, a major state capital two hours south of Mexico City. During the second week, a multi-day excursion was planned, and one of the two professors leading us was keen to see where the monarch butterflies spend the winter. We trekked up a slippery, wooded hillside in the pouring rain... we saw clumps of soggy orange butterflies clinging pathetically to a few branches... and I foolishly bought a taco from a roadside stand and ended up sicker than a *perrito*.³⁸ “Wow. Exciting,” you’re saying to yourself. “Is it break time yet?” That, of course is not the exciting part. The exciting thing is that, in order to see the pretty butterflies, we had driven into the humid, mountainous heartland of the southwestern state of Michoacán: the homeland and possession of La Familia, the craziest and most violent of Mexico’s drug cartels. Along with burros drawing carts, we passed through several military checkpoints in the hills. But it was in the evening that we understood why our experience had been so “authentic”, with no other tourists around. Our hotel was a rural complex of buildings and an empty swimming pool surrounded by a stone wall... which we shared that night with about a hundred Federales and their motor pool. We were the only guests at the hotel, but we felt honoured to be guarded by the troops, who patrolled and stood watch with their machine guns all night long.

Michoacán means “Land of Fish” in the Náhuatl language of the Mexica. It is a hot, wooded, mountainous state fractured by numerous valleys and large lakes. Perhaps we should have known better than to go there. Ioan Grillo writes: “Hailing from the western state of Michoacán, La Familia [cartel] sprung to world attention with spectacular acts of violence... After one of its lieutenants was arrested in July 2009, the family also demonstrated a great capacity for small-town warfare, waging simultaneous attacks on a dozen police facilities and killing fifteen officers. Startled pundits dubbed it a kind of Tet Offensive.”³⁹ Naively, we’d been wandering around a backwater that had turned into the

³⁶ Ibid. (This time, I could not possibly comment.)

³⁷ It was called “SPICE”. I’m better with military acronyms than WELS ones, so I couldn’t tell you anymore what “SPICE” stood for; suffice it to say that it made for great advertising.

³⁸ Hey, I’m not a wimp: The back alley food in China never made me sick, not once!

³⁹ Grillo, p. 196.

current hot spot of Mexico's drug war. And this was before the "first death" of La Familia's propagandist and enforcer: Nazario "El Más Loco" Moreno.

Moreno ran La Familia along with two other young men: Servando "La Tuta" Gómez and José de Jesús "El Chango" Méndez.⁴⁰ As an even younger man, Moreno had crossed into California and eventually found work in the drug business. He was frequently beaten in the head during various scuffles with rival gangs, so much so that he became even more "loco" than he'd already been. However, Moreno would be the poster boy for the phrase "loco like a fox". He developed a systematic program of psychological indoctrination of his recruits and pro-cartel propaganda aimed at the local populace. He also faked his death in 2010, after authorities failed to kill him in a shoot-out; he was finally killed for good—a "second" time—in 2014.

The cult-like style of the cartel's leaders is reflected in both its original name ("La Familia Michoacana") and the name that succeeded it ("The Knights Templar"). What is a cult, without its own book of scriptures? It is a very young cult: For those who seek to control not just human actions but also human minds and loyalties, some kind of manifesto is essential.⁴¹ Moreno wrote La Familia's manifesto: An aphoristic book of self-help "wisdom" that even included illustrations of Moreno's visions, drawn by himself.⁴² The book is known as *Pensamientos*, which means "Thoughts". The excerpts that I was able to obtain, as well as those I saw quoted in secondary sources, do not seem particularly bizarre. This makes sense, because people who are mentally sound are unlikely to subscribe to bizarre visions. They are more likely to be swayed by the straightforward and the practical.⁴³

Pensamientos reads like a hackneyed book from the "self help" aisle. It is written as aphorisms, a style which both makes it easily digestible to those with poor literacy or attention spans and lends it an air of "wisdom". (Most famously since Nietzsche—and certainly long before—writers have taken to aping the style of the biblical wisdom books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, in order to lend weight to their thoughts.) If it bears a resemblance to any system of thought, it would be to semipalagian Catholic theology. Do good. Do what is in you. Work things out with love. Roll up your sleeves and let your *opinio legis* get to work—and we will do all this together, as a family. Doesn't that appeal to you, farmers of Michoacán? *Pensamientos* even calls for an end to such cartel stocks-in-trade as kidnapping, rape and extortion. This was merely for propaganda: La Familia itself continued to take all of those horrors to new lows, to the

⁴⁰ Grillo, p. 197.

⁴¹ Why don't the cults of La Santa Muerte and of Jesús Malverde have their own "scriptures"? Because they are more diffuse religions, in which no individual or clique has succeeded in demanding obedience. With La Familia, however, the goal is to make believers personally subservient to the leaders of the cartel.

⁴² How I would have liked to have found these. Searches did not turn up any, and, besides, I don't know how I would have verified anything I might have found.

⁴³ In my opinion, this further underscores the need for a miracle performed on the heart by the Holy Spirit, in order for anyone to put their trust in portions of Scripture such as Ezekiel, the latter half of Daniel and Revelation. Perhaps what you've observed is different, but in my experience people who naturally gravitate toward and obsess on these parts of Scripture turn out to be mentally unsound individuals. This is not to say that their faith cannot necessarily be authentic, but it is to say that wherever authentic faith in the vivid visions of Scripture is found, it is a triumph of the superior mind of God over the inferior mind of humans (however rational we like to think we are).

point where the common people had no choice but to see through the propaganda and organize themselves as vigilantes to protect themselves from the do-gooders of “The Family”.

What I found most interesting about *Pensamientos* were El Más Loco’s cryptic, *Godfather*-like exhortations to loyalty, cooperation and communication. Rather than give you a comprehensive run-down of what I found, I’ll just list one example here (since we haven’t got all day, and I’ve got to get to the Mexica). El Más Loco advises, “If some day you feel like you’ve got many reasons to weep, tell me. I don’t promise to make you smile, but I am able to weep with you. If some day you feel sad, seek me out. I don’t promise to make your day happy, but I can be with you. If some day you want to talk about something with somebody, come running to me, and every time I will be able to listen to you, my friend.”⁴⁴ Like the Godfather, El Más Loco wanted to be the one his foot soldiers would confide in first.

Part II: The Primacy of Death in the Religion of Mexico-Tenochtitlan

This is the shorter “half” of this paper, because you are far less likely to meet a follower of the ancient Mexica religion than a devotee of a modern drug saint.⁴⁵ The culture and history of the Mexica have been a key interest of mine since the fall of 2012, when it suddenly dawned on me that, although the Mexica built a fascinating civilization, in fact I knew almost nothing about them. Since that time, I have amassed (and read) an extensive library of both primary and secondary sources on the Mexica, which have served to inform this paper. The primary sources that I have consulted are the *History of the Indies of New Spain*, by Fr. Diego Durán, and the 12-volume *magnum opus* of Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún: the *Florentine Codex*. Both of these men were Catholic priests who lived in sixteenth century Mexico from an early age; Sahagún went there just a few years after the Conquest, while Durán moved there about a decade later while still a young child. Both men are famous not only for being servants of Christ, but also for the pioneering work they did in the nascent field of anthropology. Fluent in Náhuatl, they conducted many interviews with those who had lived in Mexico prior to the Conquest, and they employed teams of native researchers to help them amass their data. Durán’s book is basically a linear, historical narrative. Sahagún’s work is organized in topical volumes. Durán’s book was written in Spanish. Sahagún’s book was written in both Spanish and Náhuatl, side by side, and includes numerous full colour illustrations. It is fortunate that these men wrote the books they did, since Cortéz had burned all the Mexica codices he could get his hands on. Only a handful of these beautifully painted books remain, and since the Mexica did not use writing *per se* (although they used pictographs employing the rebus principle for portraying personal and place names), interpretation of these books would have needed the guidance of Mexica trained to “read” them in the pre-Conquest years.

The secondary sources I consulted are too numerous to be listed here. They include the writings of such leading scholars on the Mexica as Michael E. Smith, Francis F. Berdan and Michael D. Coe. For a highly entertaining yet comprehensive introduction to the civilization of the Mexica and its demise at the

⁴⁴ Excerpt from *Pensamientos*, p. 10.

⁴⁵ Before you laugh, I should point out that there *are* some believers in the old religion to be found online. In this shallow, retro-crazed post-postmodern world, this probably comes as no surprise. However, I will be giving an overview of the centrality of death in the ancient practice of the religion, not a treatment of those few lost souls who think that they are following that religion today.

hands of Hernando Cortéz, I highly recommend *Conquest* by Hugh Thomas; it served as my own introduction to this fascinating world.

The Architecture of Death

To understand the centrality of death in Mexica culture, you only have to visualize the architecture of the capital city of Tenochtítlan. With an estimated population of around a quarter of a million at the time of the Spanish Conquest in the 1520s, Tenochtítlan was certainly one of the largest—perhaps even the largest—city in the world at that time. It was built on largely man-made islands (in a style that reminded some of the conquistadors of Venice) in Lake Texcoco, the largest of a series of five connected lakes in the Valley of Mexico.⁴⁶ Why would the Mexica build their capital city in a swampy lake? Because they were late-comers to the valley, and there were no other options open to them. The name of the city meant “Place of the Cactus on the Rock”, because the original migrants saw an eagle perched on a cactus growing from a rock on that island, and their priests said it was a sign from their chief god, Huitzilopochtli, that this was where they should build his temple.⁴⁷

The temple, which was begun in the mid-fourteenth century, was added to by each successive emperor. Typically, an emperor would build a new, larger structure covering the existing one. This temple became a sacred complex—a city-within-a-city, from which the rest of Tenochtítlan spread out in a grid of canals, neighbourhoods and causeways. Pyramidal temples dedicated to human sacrifice had long existed in Mesoamerica, among a variety of cultures. Mexica pyramids are visually recognizable for featuring twin staircases, at the tops of which were twin shrines: one to their chief god, Huitzilopochtli (“Hummingbird On The Left/South”), and one to their rain god, Tlaloc. The staircases were set at a precipitous angle, because at the top of each staircase, before the enclosed shrines, were sacrificial stones. Priests would hold a victim down onto the stone, quickly excise the beating heart with an obsidian blade, toss the heart into a ritual basin and then throw the victim’s body headlong down the staircase to the ground. The bodies landed on a ritual stone which has been recovered by archaeologists in Mexico City. The stone pictures the dismembered body of Coyolxauhqui, sister of Huitzilopochtli, whom he supposedly vanquished and slew.

Near the stone at the bottom of the pyramid was a zone where, for certain rituals, captured enemy warriors were tethered to a pole and then made to fight the priests, using a sword whose obsidian blades had been replaced by feathers. (The swords of the priests, however, were very real indeed. A Mexica sword was a club inset with rows of razor-sharp (yet brittle) obsidian blades.) Of course, the victims always lost. As is the worship of death, so drugs also are no newcomer to Mexico. Sometimes the priests would give the victims hallucinogenic mushrooms or pulque (the fermented sap of the maguey plant—from which tequila comes—and the only alcoholic beverage known to their culture), in

⁴⁶ Mexico City occupies this valley today. All that remains of the once-great system of lakes are a few canals among traditional *chinampas* (artificially raised fields) in the southeastern suburb of Xochimilco. The Spaniards intentionally drained the lakes in a misguided attempt to make more room for agriculture; the city that grew up in the valley now occupies inherently unstable ground in an earthquake-prone, volcanic region.

⁴⁷ This story is the inspiration for the modern Mexican flag. The original sources don’t say anything (that I could find) about the eagle holding a snake in its mouth, however, so I’m not sure where that comes from.

order to deaden their pain and gain their compliance. This was especially the case during festivals in which a young man or woman avatar of a god was slaughtered, in which it was ceremonially necessary for the victim to meet their fate with joy. However, when children were sacrificed, they were meant to cry: Dedicated to Tlaloc, the goggle-eyed rain god and denizen of a nearby peak bearing his name, their tears were a form of sympathetic manipulation, meant to call forth Tlaloc's rain clouds at the approach of the wet season. Mushrooms were also ingested by priests and by the emperor, in order to help them see visions of the future.

The Mexica empire only thrived for a little less than a century before the arrival of the Spanish. Although they shared the Náhuatl language and a common religion with most of their neighbours, Mexica dominance was a new thing. The empire is technically known as The Empire of the Triple Alliance. Of the three allied cities, Tenochtitlan was unquestionably the boss. As Tenochtitlan sought to expand and to assert its growing power, the volume of human sacrifice was taken to a new level. For great events—such as the dedication of a new temple—the Mexica would “invite” the leaders of all their vassals and other surrounding lands (allied and enemy alike) to attend the ceremonies. There, thousands of captured warriors would be slaughtered by the priests (who made a fearsome sight, being painted in black, nearly naked, with long hair which they were never to wash, caked in blood from their daily exercises of “penance”, in which they would spear their tongues, ears or private parts with maguey spikes. They offered their own blood—as they also offered the blood of their sacrificial victims—to the sun, in order to keep it moving on the cycle of day and night, until the present “fifth era” would come to an end in a cataclysm). It is interesting that scholars who plead for an ambivalent assessment of Mesoamerican human sacrifice (a scientific, though not a moral, imperative) are nonetheless critical of the empire for its use of the practice for political intimidation.

Most victims of temple sacrifice were dismembered post mortem. A leg or an arm might be given to the rulers or to an esteemed noble to ritually eat with beans and maize. The head was severed, and the skull placed on a large structure in the sacred precinct: the *tonalpohualli*—the skull rack. Thousands of these skulls remained on display. How different is the message they sent, from the messages sent by Mexican drug cartels in the twenty-first century?

Human sacrifice occurred daily, but there were also special festivals held during each month of the year, in which people were sacrificed in various ways. In some months, children might be strangled for Tlaloc. In another month, a handsome youth who had been chosen a year before and pampered with luxury during that time ascended the Great Pyramid, where his heart was cut out and his skin flayed. The priest then wore the skin like a suit, in honour of the god Xipe Totec, whose name means “Our Lord the Flayed One”.

The original occasion of a Mexica priest doing the “*Silence of the Lambs* dance” is worth relating. When the Mexica were first allowed to build a temple—initially a pathetic little earthen thing—to Huitzilopochtli on their swampy island, they sent a message to a powerful neighbouring king, saying that their god had requested his most beloved daughter to be his bride. The king was flattered. He willingly sent his daughter to the Mexica, to become the bride of a god. Shortly thereafter, the Mexica invited him to attend the wedding ceremonies. He ascended the temple and went into the pitch-dark shrine.

There, he gave offerings and worship to his daughter, who was now divine, and to her new husband. Then, by the dim fire light, he saw that his daughter was not in front of him—but a Mexica priest, dressed in her flayed skin. The king stormed from the temple and promptly decimated the Mexica in a war. But the Mexica had made clear what they were all about: Conquest or death, and nothing in between.

You certainly don't have the time—and perhaps not the stomach—for more details of the Mexica and the centrality of death in their worship life. Let us conclude this section by noting a psychological similarity of the Mexica religion to the ethos of La Santa Muerte and narco-cults in general. It was considered an honour for a person to be sacrificed at the temple—not only by the sacrificers, but (supposedly) by the victims themselves. Although the fact is that devotees of all of these religions are human beings, with an instinct to hang on to every last scrap of life, the official propaganda is that death is not something to fear. In fact, death is something to be worshiped and embraced. In this reversal of values, perhaps the Mexica could be called the first postmoderns. And those who venerate death today continue to soldier on.

Conclusion

Mexicans today are looking for something practical. Shouldn't we, too? How can we use our knowledge of the worship of death in a Mexican context to help real people in our ministry to them today? The first thing we can do is open our eyes, and begin to notice the worship of death that exists around us. Look for the tattoos. Notice the statuettes. Notice the posters, the portraits and the bobble-heads. Now, when we see these things, we will have a basic sense of where this individual might be coming from, spiritually. And this may cause us to access our experience as Gospel ministers, to formulate a plan for reaching that person or their loved ones.

Secondly, let's not plug our ears to the complaints that have turned people to the worship of death. The perception of discrimination—or, even worse, discrimination in fact—is a tool by which Satan wins hearts for himself. Do we exacerbate it? When people come to hear my sermons, do they hear me preaching *about* homosexuals, rather than *for* homosexuals? When people come to hear my sermons, do my words accidentally give the impression that those dealing with drug abuse are some pathetic community “out there” that we need to help... the implication being that Christians themselves don't struggle with these problems? Is outreach socially framed in terms of “us” and “them”, the dichotomy going unnoticed?

Let our model be Jesus, who taught both the Law and the Gospel in their full, respective horror and glory. He never has held back, in His proclamation. In the Gospels, He also used appropriate tactics: Preaching His “woes” in the faces of the self-righteously Bible-educated, and speaking to the conscience and leading by induction the Samaritan woman who didn't know her right hand from her left. Let us practice preaching the Law... and let's always be ready with the Gospel, which alone gives us the power to sing, “I am, I am / I am, I am / I think I am / I'm glad I am: I am a *real* religious man!”⁴⁸

⁴⁸ A reference to the main theme of the blockbuster film *Nacho Libre*. Eso es todo.

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