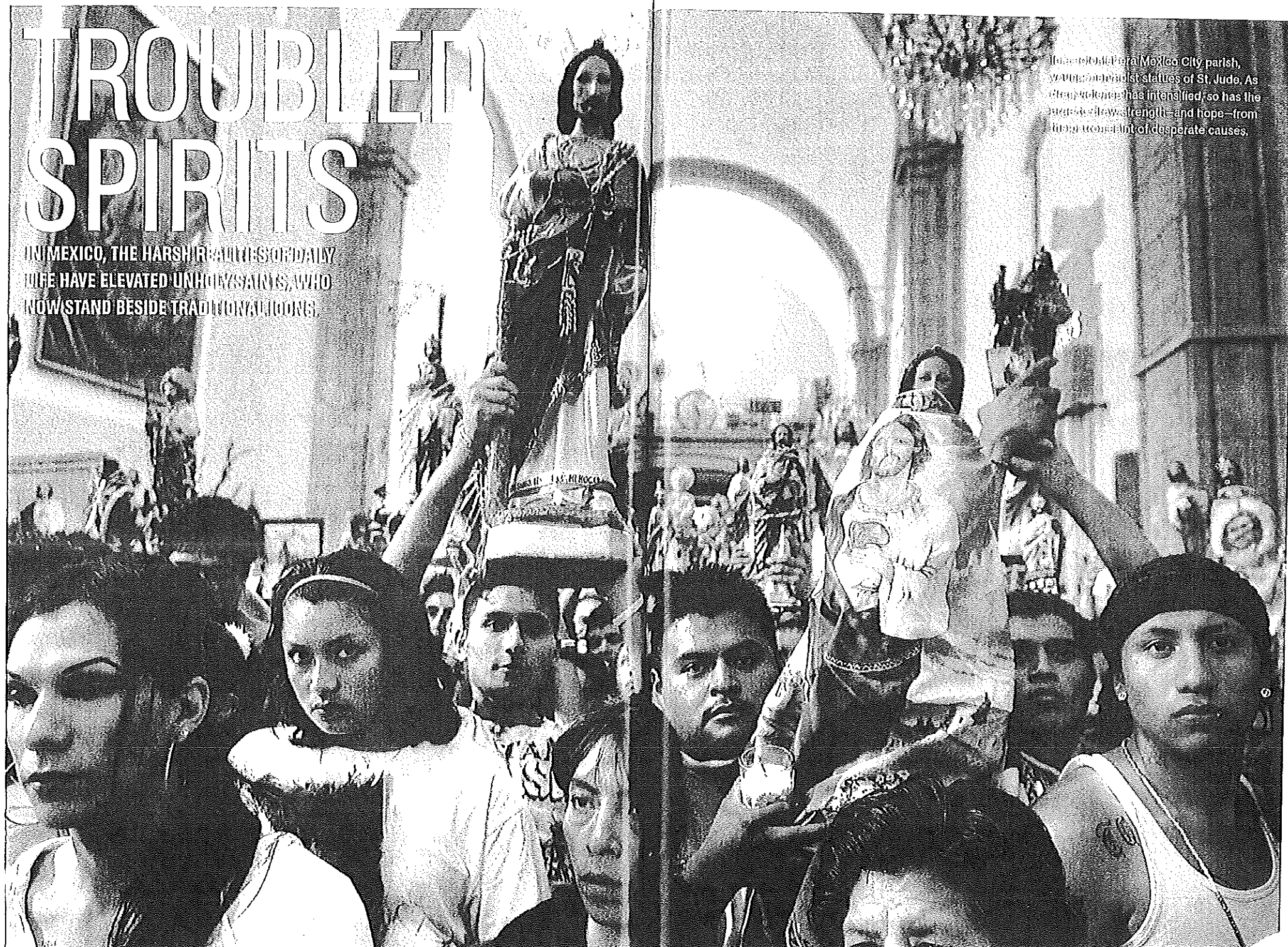


TROUBLED SPIRITS

IN MEXICO, THE HARSH REALITIES OF DAILY LIFE HAVE ELEVATED UNKNOWN SAINTS, WHO NOW STAND BESIDE TRADITIONAL ONES.

In a crowded Parisi Mexico City parish, young people hold statues of St. Jude. As their violence has intensified, so has the hope for a new strength—and hope—from their account of desperate causes.





Death is not the end of bravado for Mexican drug traffickers laid to rest in lavish mausoleums at a cemetery in Cullacán, heart of the Sinaloa cartel. The woman in the foreground is the wife of a construction worker.

By Alma Guillermoprieto
Photographs by Shaul Schwarz

he inmate known as El Niño, or Little Boy, entered the Center for Enforcement of the Legal Consequences of Crime nine and a half years ago. Tall and gangly, with a goofy, child-like smile, he appears never to have grown up, though the memory of his deeds would make another man's hair go white. Abandoned by his father when he was seven years old and raised by his maternal grandparents, he was 20 when he committed the murder that landed him in this prison in the north of Mexico. His buddy Antonio, neatly dressed, alert, quick moving, and round eyed, was shoved into the same holding cell, charged with kidnapping. "We've been friends since then," one says, as the other agrees.

When he will leave prison is anyone's guess, but El Niño has reason to feel hopeful: He relies on a protector who, he believes, prevented jail wardens from discovering a couple of strictly forbidden objects in his possession that could have increased his punishment by decades. "The guards didn't see a thing, even though they were right there," he says. This supernatural being watches over him when his enemies circle around—and she is there, as Antonio says in support of his buddy's faith, after all the friends you thought you had have forgotten your very name, and you're left, as the Mexican saying goes, without even a dog to bark at you. This miracle worker,

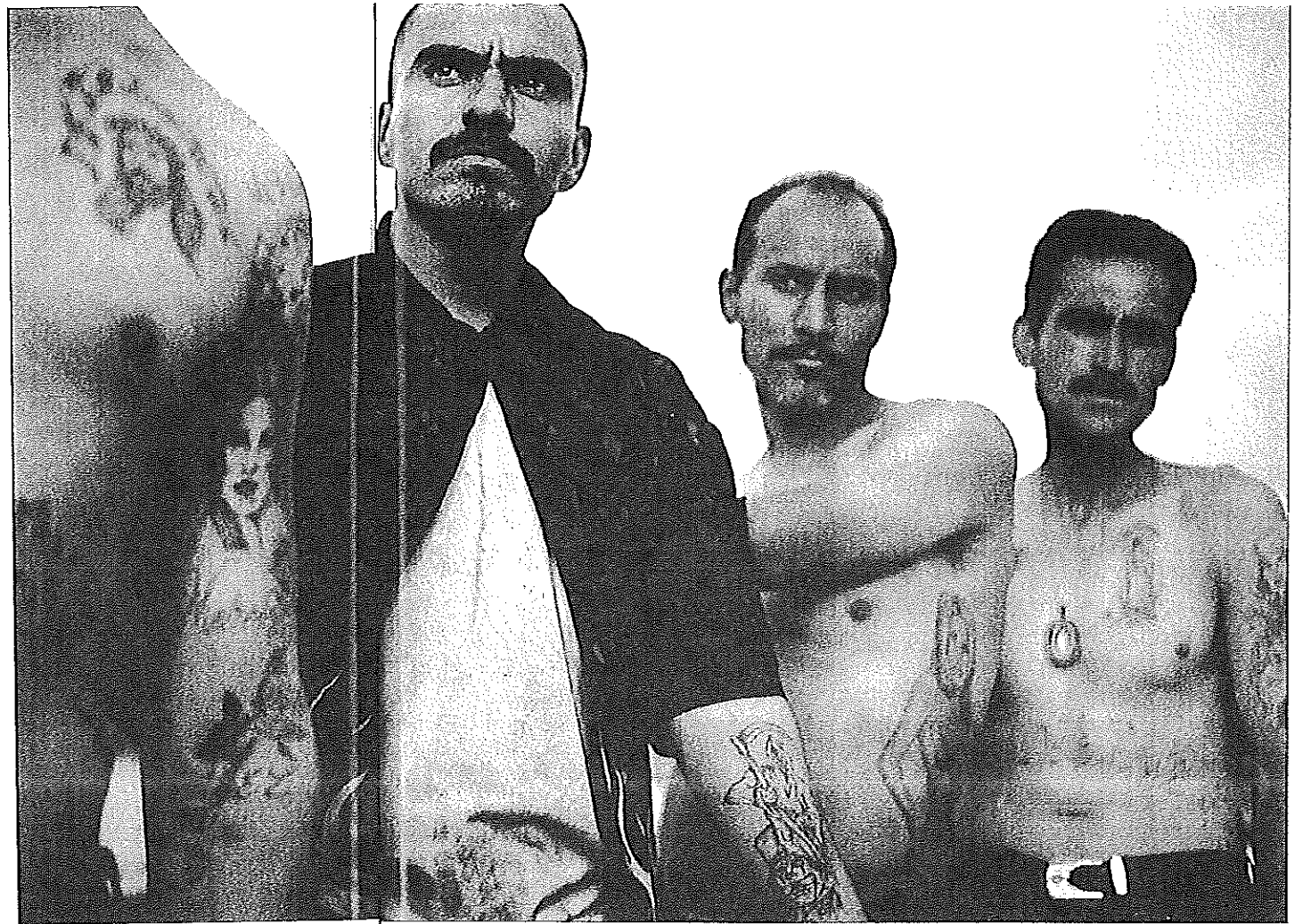
In an area of Tijuana where drug use is common, inked skin depicts callings of the flesh and spirit alike. On the forearm of the man in the black shirt is a figure holding a scythe: La Santa Muerte—Holy Death—icon of a growing cult. Devotees say that as long as vows to her are kept, La Santa Muerte accepts you without judgment, no matter what your crimes.

this guardian of the most defenseless and worst of sinners, is La Santa Muerte, Holy Death.

SHE IS ONLY ONE among several otherworldly figures Mexicans have been turning to as their country has been overwhelmed by every possible difficulty—drought, an outbreak of swine flu followed closely by the collapse of tourism, the depletion of the reserves of oil that are the main export, an economic meltdown, and above all, the wretched gift of the drug trade and its highly publicized and gruesome violence. Although the total number of homicides in Mexico has actually decreased steadily over the past two decades,

the crimes committed by the drug traders are insistently hideous and have so disrupted the rule of law that ordinary Mexicans regularly wonder aloud whether *las mafias* have already won their war against the Mexican state.

"The emotional pressures, the tensions of living in a time of crisis lead people to look for symbolic figures that can help them face danger," says José Luis González, a professor at Mexico's National School of Anthropology and History who specializes in popular religions. Among the helper figures are Afro-Cuban deities that have recently found their way to new shores and outlaws that have been transformed



into miracle workers, like a mythical bandit from northern Mexico called Jesús Malverde. There are even saints from the New Testament repurposed for achieving not salvation but success. In this expanding spiritual universe, the worship of a skeleton dressed in long robes and carrying a scythe—La Santa Muerte—is possibly the fastest growing and, at first glance at least, the most extravagant of the new cults. “If you look at it from the point of view of a country that over the last ten years has become dangerously familiar with death,” González says, “you can see that this skeleton is a very concrete and clear symbolic reference to the current situation.”

Unknown to most Mexicans until recently, this death figure resembles medieval representations of the grim reaper but is fundamentally different from the playful skeletons displayed on Day of the Dead—the day when Mexicans’ departed loved ones return to share with the living a few hours of feasting and remembrance. Her altars can now be found all over Mexico, on street corners and in the homes of the poor. Women and men alike are her followers. In the heart of Mexico City, in a neighborhood that has always been raucous and defiant, Enriqueta Romero leads a prayer session in honor of the skeleton every first of the month. Simultaneously flinty, foulmouthed, and motherly, Romero was among the first and the most effective propagandizers of a cult that some believe got its start in towns along the Gulf of Mexico but now covers a wide territory up and down the country. In California and Central America as well, young people light candles in La Santa Muerte’s honor and tattoo her image on their skin in sizes small to extra large. A few years ago the Interior Ministry revoked its registration of La Santa Muerte as a legitimate religion, to no effect. Newsstands sell instructional videos showing how to pray to the saint, and even chic intellectuals are beginning to say that the cult is *muy auténtico*.

IT’S NOT ONLY THE CRISIS but also the types of problems people face these days that have fueled the expansion of the cults. Let’s say, for example, that you live in one of the cities along the border taken

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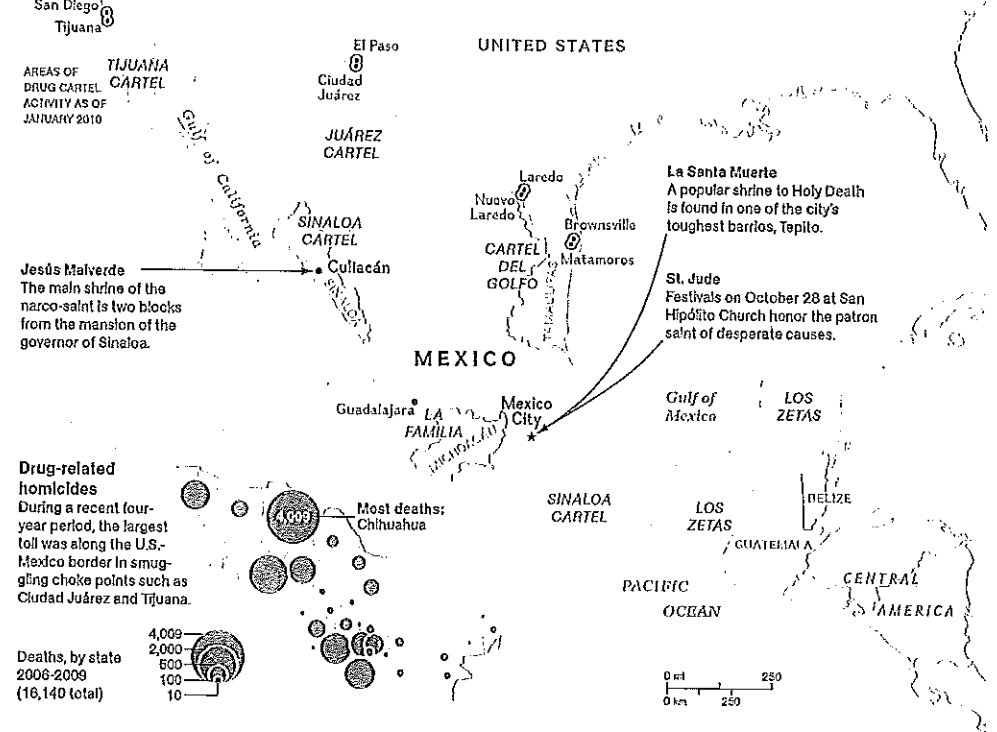
over by the drug trade and that the crackle of machine-gun fire bursts out every night, filling you with terror of stray bullets. Is it not understandable to pray for protection to someone like the outlaw narco-saint Jesús Malverde, whom drug traffickers revere? Mexicans who retain a strong connection to the Roman Catholic faith might turn instead to St. Jude Thaddeus. At a time when no-win situations abound, he is experiencing a rise in popularity comparable only to that of La Santa Muerte, perhaps because he is known in the Catholic Church as the patron saint of desperate causes.

Fifteen years ago a sun-weathered man named Daniel Bucio first prayed to St. Jude, and six years ago, he says, the saint answered his prayers and granted his mother release from a long and painful illness. Now Bucio comes every month to a listing colonial church called San Hipólito just behind the main tourist corridor in downtown Mexico City to give thanks to a miraculous statue of St. Jude that was donated to the church some 30 years ago. (Historians of the drug trade might be struck by a coincidence: It was about 30 years ago that traffickers from Medellín, Colombia, who are famously devoted to St. Jude, first established trade relations with their Mexican counterparts.) St. Jude’s official feast day is October 28, and thousands of his followers feel inspired to come and pray to him on that day every month. Sixteen Masses are celebrated in the parish from dawn to evening, and worshippers crawl to the statue of the saint on their knees, praying for help, protection, and survival. The crowds are so large that police have to cordon off several traffic lanes outside the church.

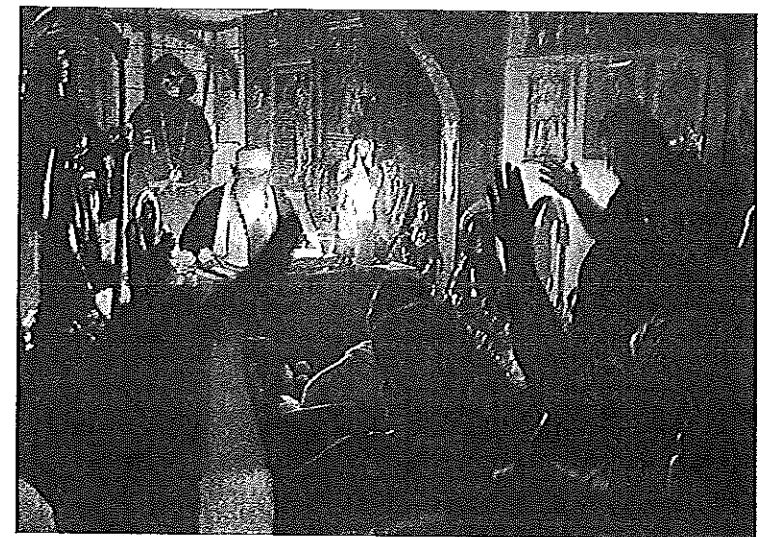
Daniel Bucio loves these *romerías*, or religious fiestas, what with the jostling crowds and the street food and the endless parade of statues of St. Jude—some as large as a man can carry, some small but fantastically decorated, like his own, which in obedience to the ancient religious traditions of his hometown is dressed in a glittering ankle-length robe and the feathered headdress of the Aztec emperors. In recent years, though, Bucio’s pleasure in the monthly pilgrimage has been spoiled by growing throngs of unsmiling young men and women with tattoos and chains who arrive in groups and push their way through the crowd, often exchanging what look like small, wrapped

DRUGS AND SAINTS

Drug cartels have destabilized many states in Mexico, where they are influencing popular culture and even religious devotion. Cartels have long fought bloody battles over narcotic supplies and smuggling routes but now may be linking up to fight increased federal efforts to curtail trafficking.

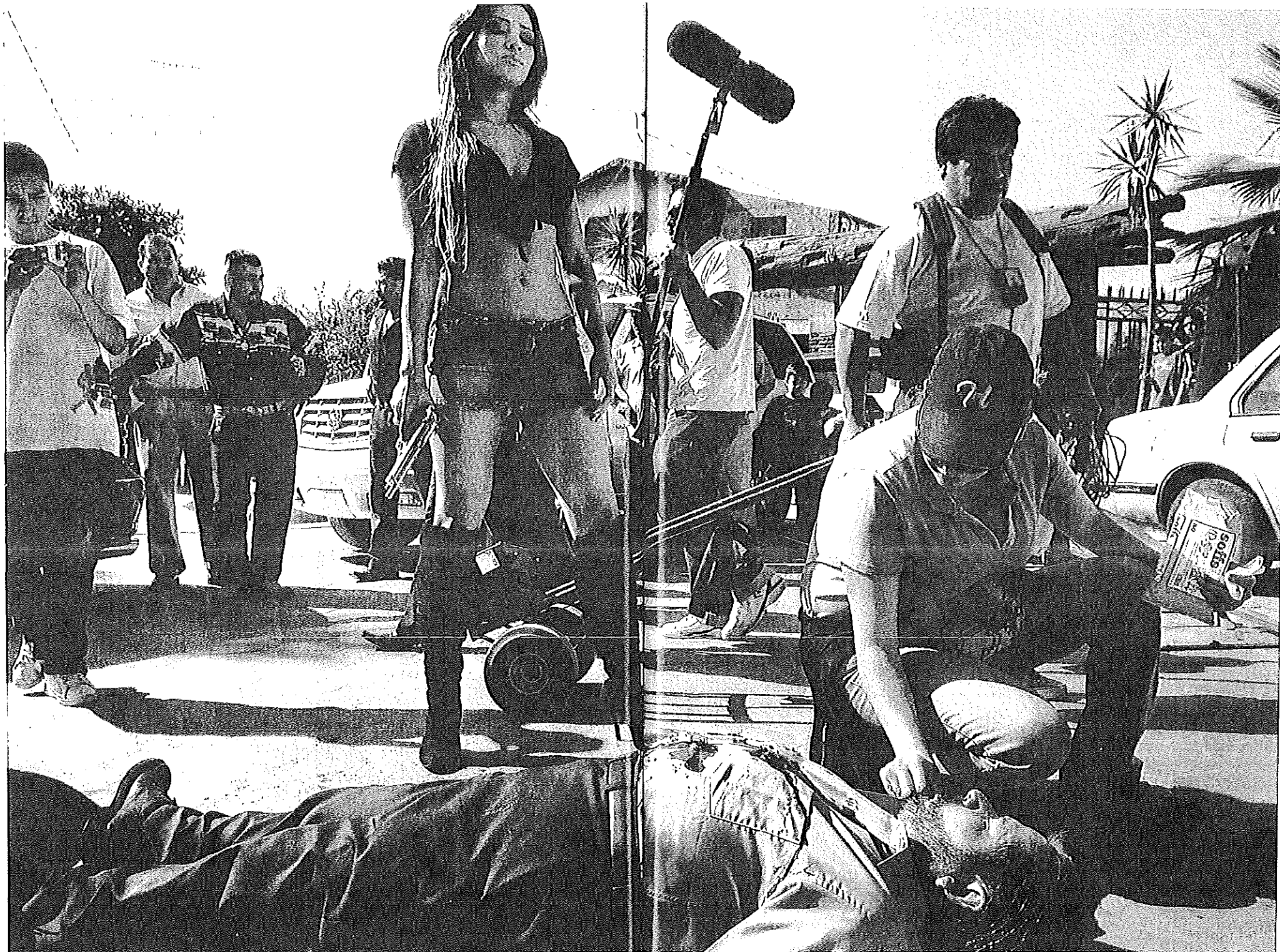


In a Los Angeles storefront “Professor Sisyphus,” the Mexican-born overseer of a shrine to La Santa Muerte, reads prayer requests. A growing number of worshippers in the U.S. seek cures or help for loved ones crossing the border.



Love, money, protection, all are offered to greet La Santa Muerte with the kiss. On the first of each month worshippers crowd a shrine in Tepito, a Mexico City barrio, despite the Roman Catholic clergy's denouncement of the icon.







Say you live in a border city taken over by the drug trade, and gunfire bursts out every night. Is it not understandable to pray to the narco-saint Jesús Malverde?

candies in swift transactions. Bucio thinks he knows what they're up to.

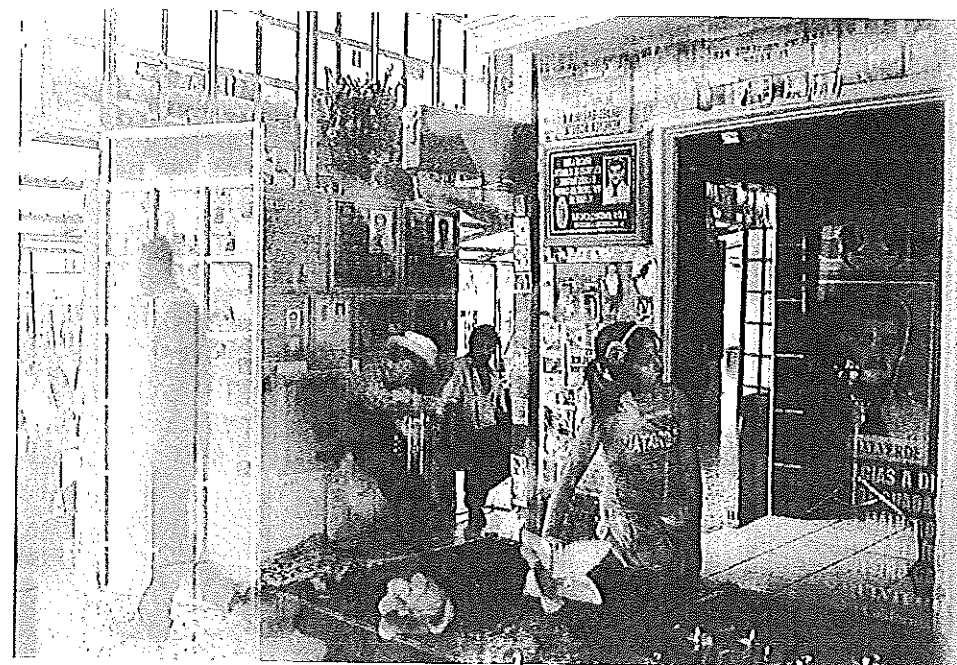
"Unfortunately a lot of these kids have taken to coming here," he says. "They sully the name of Our Lord and St. Jude's too—who have nothing to do with this *narcotráfico* thing. If everyone who came here came with sincere devotion, you wouldn't see this type of crowd."

Father Jesús García, a small, cheerful member of the Claretian Order who officiates at many of these Masses in honor of St. Jude, is aware that certain people who look as if they hope to earn a great deal of money fast come to this church to pray to the saint. But he is at pains to point out that the new devotion to St. Jude cuts across all social classes and occupations. "The other day a

politician came here asking me to help him pray for victory in the elections. Just imagine!" he exclaims, amused, shrugging off the suggestion that St. Jude might be a narco-saint. "They say that when the statue of San Juditas shows him carrying his staff in his left hand, it means he's working for the drug traffickers, and nonsense like that." Father Jesús prefers to focus on the many new worshippers of true piety.

ON THE FACE OF IT, Mexican traffickers are the only ones who have no reason to feel desperate in the crisis currently obsessing their compatriots. Mexican traffickers, who are ideally placed to ship nearly all the cocaine consumed north of the border, also grow and smuggle much of the marijuana and an increasing percentage of the chemical stimulants U.S. consumers favor. They use violence as a particularly effective means of communication, disfiguring their victims horribly and displaying their corpses for all to see, so that everyone will know how powerful the drug lords are and fear them.

Once a small group of country folk knit together by family relationships, the original traders hailed mostly from the small northern Mexican state of Sinaloa. Sandwiched between the Gulf of California and the Sierra Madre



In Tijuana a man visits a modest roadside chapel (left) honoring the folk saint Jesús Malverde, a legendary outlaw said to have been hanged by officials in Sinaloa a century ago. Sinaloan drug traffickers adopted Malverde as a Robin Hood-like symbol of honorable thievery. Worshippers come to his main shrine in Culiacán (above) to pray and leave votive offerings.

Occidental, at least 300 miles from the U.S. border, and largely agricultural and poor, Sinaloa was an ideal location for a clandestine trade catering to the U.S. market. The early traffickers' operations were restricted largely to growing marijuana in the mountains or buying it from other growers along the Pacific coast, then smuggling it into the U.S. for a neat profit. For decades this was a comparatively low-risk and low-volume operation, and violence was contained within the drug world.

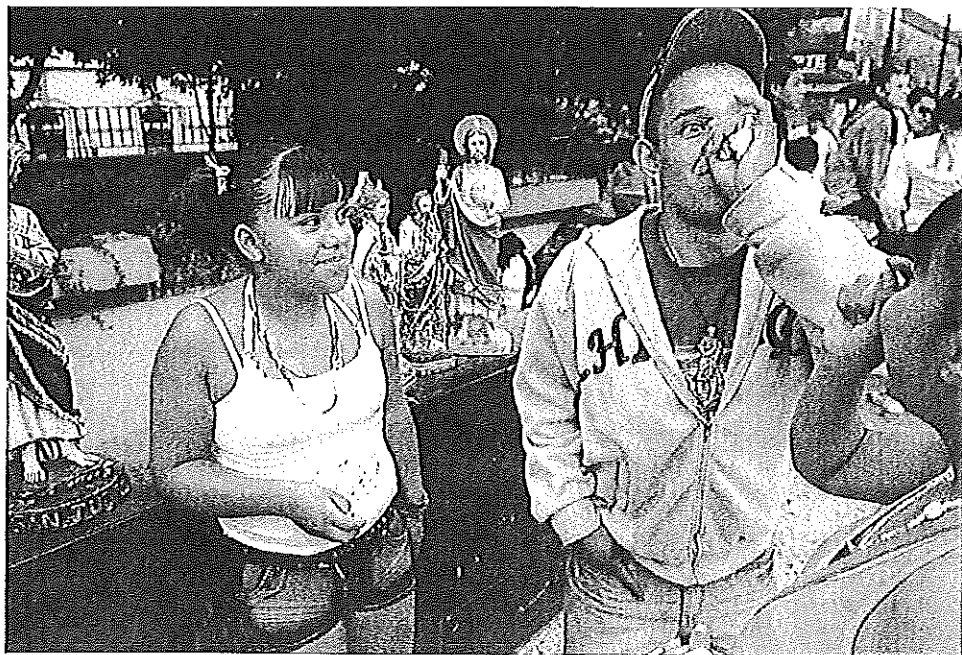
In the 1970s the Mexican government, in coordination with the U.S., carried out a series of offensives against the Sinaloa traffickers. It was like trying to get rid of a virus by flushing it into the bloodstream. A number of drug "foot soldiers," as they were beginning to be called, were imprisoned or killed, but most of their leaders escaped Sinaloa unharmed and set up operations in neighboring states and in the major cities along the U.S.-Mexico border. With every new military offensive, the traffickers slipped into a new region and became stronger. As the stakes

grew, so did armaments and the number of traffickers, and in each new city and region they bought off more politicians and police. There was no stopping the drug trade itself, because it was run according to a perfect formula: Sell illegal goods at a huge markup to consumers with money, and recruit your labor force primarily among young men with no money and no future, who are desperate to look sharp, act tough, and feel powerful. By the 1980s a new order was in place. The drug lords controlled the underworld and key members of the security forces in cities like Guadalajara, Tijuana, and Juárez. In a shaky peacekeeping arrangement that nevertheless lasted for years, the drug lords parceled out each city to a particular family.

In the 1990s the fragile peace among the displaced Sinaloa families broke down. They fought each other for control of the major border transit points and then began fighting sometimes with, and sometimes against, an upstart trafficking group with no Sinaloa connections. This was the self-styled Cartel del Golfo, from



In a prayer to La Santa Muerte at his private altar in Tepito, merchant Luis Demetrio Pérez Díaz blows smoke clouds redolent of indigenous American rituals. Scholars debate the death saint's origins—Mesoamerican, European, or both?



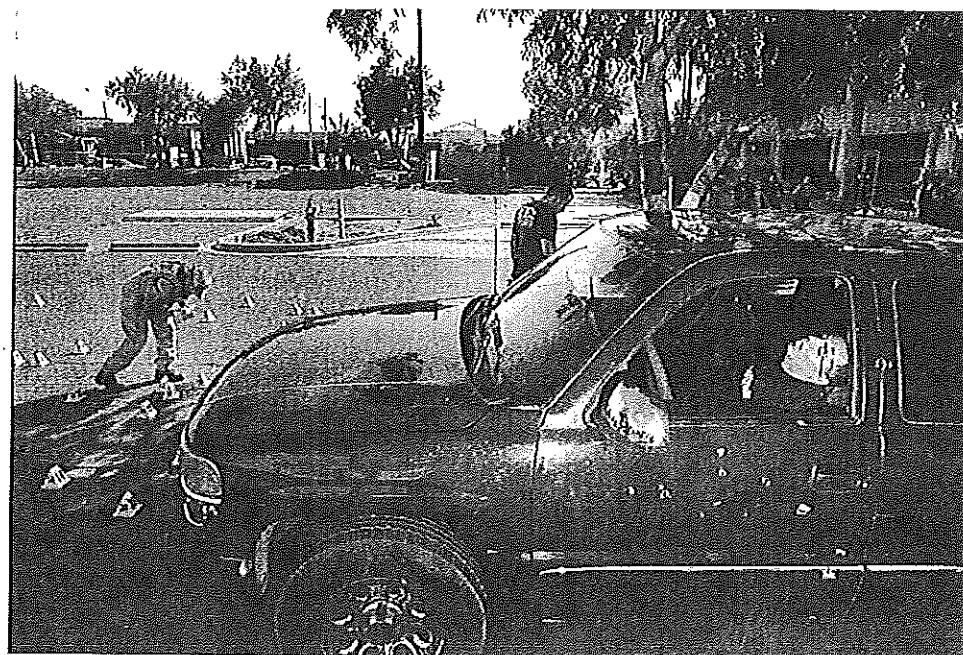
The new era had arrived, and the foot soldiers in the escalated drug wars, facing the prospect of a terrible death, increasingly turned to death itself for protection.

the Gulf coast state of Tamaulipas. An offshoot of this group was the Zetas, a band of rogue military personnel originally trained as elite antinarcotics forces. Ordinary Mexicans had their first inkling of how much more brutal the drug violence was going to be in September 2006, when a group of men dressed in black walked into a roadside discotheque in the state of Michoacán and dumped the contents of a plastic garbage bag on the floor. Five severed heads came rolling out.

THE NEW ERA had arrived, and the foot soldiers in the escalated drug wars, facing the prospect of such a terrible death, increasingly turned to death itself for protection. It was during the

first antidrug campaigns that the myth of Jesús Malverde, the original narco-saint, spread beyond the borders of Sinaloa. According to legend, Malverde was a 19th-century outlaw who robbed from the rich and gave to the poor, was hanged for his sins, and then worked miracles from the grave. His cult took off in the 1970s, after a former street vendor, Eligio González, began praying to him. Sitting outside the Malverde shrine in Culiacán, González's sturdy, relaxed, and unsmiling young son, Jesús, told me the story of the miracle. Eligio had been working as a driver in 1976 when he was knifed and shot in a holdup and left for dead. He prayed to Malverde, whose only monument at the time was a pile of rocks where his grave was said to be, promising to erect a proper shrine in Malverde's honor if the saintly bandit saved his life. When he survived, he kept his word.

González appears to have understood that people would grasp Malverde's real importance only if there were an image of him they could worship, but unfortunately no photograph of Malverde existed—and, in fact, no evidence at all that he'd ever lived. In the 1980s 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



Outside a Mexico City church that holds monthly festivals, or *romerías*, honoring St. Jude, young people (left) huff solvents. After an ambush at a shopping mall in Ciudad Juárez, a driver (above) and two passengers joined more than 2,600 murder victims last year in a city where drug-related killings have become terrifyingly commonplace.

being a famous movie star from Sinaloa and Mariscal a local politician.

The Malverde shrine is a makeshift cinder-block temple directly in front of the Sinaloa state government office complex, and its green walls are covered, inside and out, with testimonials left by the faithful. The plaster bust is enshrined in a glass case and surrounded by dozens of flower bouquets, mostly plastic. Many accompanying photographs and engraved plaques feature the image of a marijuana plant or a "goat horn"; an AK-47 rifle. No one seriously disputes Malverde's status as a narco-saint—in Sinaloa it is stated as fact that whenever a major trafficker wants to pray, the entire street is closed down so he can worship in peace. But as a warden of the Culiacán prison pointed out, Malverde is now so popular among Sinaloans in every walk of life that he is really more of an identity symbol.

IN MEXICO CITY the director of penitentiaries refuses admission to reporters unwilling to sign a statement promising that they will not write

"propaganda" in favor of the cult of La Santa Muerte. At the Center for Enforcement of the Legal Consequences of Crime, on the other hand, the director of the prison lets me talk without preconditions to some of the prisoners about their faith. Escorted by the prison guards past a series of checkpoints and corridors, I am startled to end up in a long open-air corridor whose left wall has been decorated with cheerful cartoon images of Snow White, Tweety Bird, SpongeBob SquarePants, and the like. These were painted at the prisoners' request, a guard explains, so that children might feel less terrified when they came to spend the holidays with their fathers. Facing the cartoon wall is a high wire fence and behind it, a collection of hangarlike buildings surrounded by grass and even a few trees.

This is where Antonio, the accused kidnapper, writes *corridos*, or outlaw songs, a couple of which have even been recorded. And where El Niño, the convicted murderer, sticks pins into black velvet and winds brightly colored threads

She is there after all the friends you thought you had have forgotten your very name. This guardian of the worst of sinners is La Santa Muerte, Holy Death.

around them in elaborate patterns to frame cutout images of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Jesus Christ, and La Santa Muerte. He first learned of Holy Death through television, which might seem a strange source for such a spiritual revelation, but it was the path open to him behind his wire enclosure. Now nothing can break his faith in his new protector.

We talk in the shade of a leafy tree in the prison yard, several of us sitting around a rickety table a couple of prisoners have brought out and carefully rubbed clean. A host of other inmates who initially had closed looming around us eventually stand quietly, nodding in agreement as Antonio explains what gives La Santa Muerte her powerful attraction: "La Muerte is always beside you—even if it's just a little postage stamp that you put up above your cot, you know that she's not going to move, that she'll never leave."

El Niño's grandmother has told him that if he ever gets out of jail, she doesn't want to see him, and she doesn't want his daughter to see him again, ever. But unlike his flesh and blood, La Muerte needs him: "If you promise her a white flower, and you don't bring it to her, you feel bad," he says. "She weeps, and so you feel bad." And therefore he makes promises to her that he keeps.

Midday approaches, and the heat is rising fast. The men nudge each other, and one goes off to fetch a cracked plastic jug of water, which he serves with unexpected courtesy to the unusual guest. I ask about rumors flying around that the rituals for La Santa—the Santísima, the Little Skinny One, the White Child—involve human blood and even human sacrifice. A prisoner in another facility, where conditions were infinitely worse, had told me that this was true.

El Niño and Antonio say just that La Santa

Muerte will grant your prayers—but only in exchange for payment, and that payment must be proportional to the size of the miracle requested, and the punishment for not meeting one's debt to her is terrible.

The men and I have been in conversation for a while, and despite temperatures that must be turning their cell blocks into furnaces, there is something about the openness of the prison, the grass, the trees, even the comradely way the inmates treat the lone guard on duty, that makes the place seem almost pleasant. ("He spends 12 hours a day here," Antonio says. "He's as much a prisoner as we are.")



A woman sprinkles lime to absorb blood from another Juárez drug murder. For families trying to live normally here, such measures can't hide the reality: Violent death is everywhere. Meanwhile, traffickers jockeying to feed the U.S. appetite for drugs seek solace in narco-saints, who symbolize the hope of a holy death after a brutal life.

As the men relax, their courteous ways with me even make it possible to imagine that they are not guilty of terrible crimes, that their faith in La Santa Muerte is merely a matter of preference and not born of desperate need. Then I ask El Niño if he thinks that when he gets out, it will be possible to lead a normal life.

His face twists into a bitter smile. "With everything I've done?" he says. "There's going to be people waiting to take me down the moment I walk outside the gate." We shake hands, and he and Antonio thank me for the chance to talk. I return to the other Mexico, where hope also requires a great deal of faith. □