CHAPTER 15

Healed by Death
Santa Muerte, the Curandera

R. Andrew Chesnut

Introduction: Death Personified

Some readers will have come across Santa Muerte on trips to Mexico, while others will have encountered her as decals on cars and trucks or as votive candles in supermarkets in Los Angeles, Houston, New York, and other U.S. cities with large Mexican immigrant communities. But most, I suspect, are meeting Saint Death for the first time. I ask those already familiar with her to bear with me as I briefly introduce her to those who have not encountered skeleton saint before.

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

For the most part the Catholic Church in the region has looked the other way on these homegrown saints. However, when they have achieved a certain level of mass appeal the Church has moved to vilify and repress certain folk saints. Such is the case with Santa Muerte who in April of 2013 was condemned by the president of the Pontifical Council of Culture, Giancarlo Ravasi, who in a four day visit to Mexico City denounced the cult of the skeleton saint as ‘anti-religion’ and ‘blasphemy’ on four separate occasions (Chesnut 2013). Mexican bishops have recently followed suit with the archbishop of Oaxaca in October of 2013 threatening excommunication of Catholics who venerate Saint Death (Chesnut 2013).

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

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

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

No introduction to Saint Death would be complete without brief consideration of one of her most unique characteristics—her gender. While folk saints