

# SANTA MUERTE



The History, Rituals, and Magic  
of Our Lady of the Holy Death

TRACEY ROLLIN

*Santa Muerte Niña Blanca*

*Santa Muerte, Blessed White Sister  
Come give me your aid and your mercy  
And cover me with your mantle of protection.*

*Keep me safe from harm and  
hidden from my enemies  
And free from the curses and evil intentions.  
For now and always, my blessed White Sister,  
I believe in and rely upon your power.  
Santa Muerte, please come and cover me with  
your mantle of protection now.*

*Amen.*



## Praise for *Santa Muerte*

“Tracey Rollin does an excellent job of laying out and explaining Santa Muerte. I particularly appreciate how she explores the history and beliefs of Santa Muerte while balancing the theory with practical magic and suggestions for how people can integrate Santa Muerte into their existing spiritual paths. Her instructions are clear and easy to follow but also encourage people to discover how to develop their own relationship with Santa Muerte. If you want the authoritative book on Santa Muerte, this is the book to read.”

—Taylor Ellwood, author of *Pop Culture Magic*

“Tracey Rollin’s *Santa Muerte: The History, Rituals, and Magic of Our Lady of the Holy Death* is a serious work dedicated to providing historical insight combined with spiritual application in the ways of the Holy Death. Rollin’s book provides sound research and a unique inside perspective into the customs and rituals associated with one of the fastest growing religions in the world. This book brings together two important perspectives of both a historical and magico-religious worldview without alienating either one. A valuable contribution to this area of study.”

—Tony Kail, author of *Santa Muerte: Mexico’s Mysterious Saint of Death* and *A Secret History of Memphis Hoodoo: Rootworkers, Conjurers, and Spirituals*

“Tracey Rollin’s very well written book, *Santa Muerte: The History, Rituals, and Magic of Our Lady of the Holy Death*, avoids a dogmatic approach to Santa Muerte. The author, who hails from New Mexico where Doña Sebastiana, Lady Death, presaged Santa Muerte, incorporates more research on Santa Muerte than other books aimed at devotees.”

—Professor R. Andrew Chesnut, author of *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*

“Do you have a friend in Death? You should and you can with Rollin’s new book. Rollin does an amazing, nonjudgmental job of relating the stories of Santa Muerte, but also gives the reader the practical goods on how to work with this powerful folk saint combining both traditional and modern ways of working with her. Her personal stories and experiences with St. Death are, more often than not, entertaining, and the book gives you more than a solid foundation to work with Santa Muerte. The only question you should have is how fast do you want your results?”

—Andrieh Vitimus, author of *Hands-On Chaos Magic* and  
podcast host of *Deeper Down the Rabbit Hole*

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*This book is dedicated to my brother, Chris.*



# Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	xi
1. Introducing Santa Muerte, the Skeletal Lady of Mexico	1
2. The Aztec Roots of Santa Muerte	25
3. The Sainthood of Death	41
4. Death's Feminine Ways	55
5. The Seven Colors of Santa Muerte	79
6. Preparing Your Ritual Space and Tools	87
7. The Rosary of Santa Muerte	135
8. The Novena of Santa Muerte	151
9. Niña Blanca, Sweet Sister Death	171
10. Niña Violeta, the Royal Queen	177
11. Niña Azul, the Gracious One	185
12. Niña Dorada, Lucky Lady Death	193
13. Niña Roja, the Queen of Passion	203
14. Niña Verde, the Just Judge	213
15. Niña Negra, the Mother of Tears	221
16. A Few Last Words	229
Glossary of Terms	233
Recommended Reading	237



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I hope that his work continues to inspire for generations to come.



# Introduction

Oddly enough, my first introduction to magic came as a result of my Catholic upbringing. When I was a child, my devout mother sent me to after-school classes at the local Catholic Church so that I could receive my religious education. The program taught by the church was designed by the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD), the branch of the Vatican that was dedicated to teaching the principles of the Catholic religion. Attending the CCD classes, or *catechism* as it is commonly called, is considered necessary for children to later receive the religious sacraments of Penance (confession), the Eucharist (communion), and Confirmation.

One of the things I learned during catechism was that Catholics believe in a wide variety of saints, with the Virgin Mary hailed as their chief (in fact, she is commonly called the “Queen of Saints”). To Catholics, a saint is a spiritual figure that is believed to have a special close connection with God. The primary role of saints is to act as a spiritual bridge between you and God, helping you communicate with him as well as helping you understand his divine purpose for you. Their secondary function is to act as spiritual intercessors, advocating to God on your behalf in order to receive divine concessions. Sometimes saints may even persuade God to perform miracles for you. Therefore, developing a

strong relationship with the saints is essential in order to receive their wisdom and continued favor.

I was taught to pray to the Virgin Mary and to the other saints using a rosary. A rosary is a special set of meditation beads that Catholics use to count prayers as well as to induce a peaceful and focused mental state. Because saints are so useful and because Catholics have so many of them, the CCD believed that learning about the saints during catechism was essential. As a result, the nuns who taught my catechism classes often gave me prayer cards dedicated to different saints. Each prayer card had a saint's picture on the front and a short prayer printed on the back. The nuns rewarded us with stickers and chewing gum if we memorized the prayers. I had so many prayer cards that my father started jokingly referring to them as Catholic baseball cards.

I was taught that a saint could intervene in any aspect of our lives, no matter how minor. When I was eight years old, I learned to pray to Saint Thomas Aquinas, the patron saint of students, for help with passing my spelling tests. (Given that I was the district spelling champion, it appears that my prayers were answered.) The nuns always stressed to me that the saints were not meant to be worshipped for themselves. It was not Saint Thomas granting me good marks for spelling tests, for he did not have the power to do so. Saint Thomas's role was carrying my desire for good grades to the ears of God as my spiritual intercessor. God himself was answering my request. The nuns explained that since I had developed a strong relationship with Saint Thomas by praying to him in the manner I was taught, he was helping me get a divine advantage. I was simply reaping the benefits of my Catholic faith.

Perhaps I was never meant to be a good Catholic. When I was a child, my only idea of God was abstract, limited to a picture of

an old man wearing a snowy white robe taken from a children's Bible. Even though I was told that I worshipped him, the church I sat in every week was oddly bereft of his image. By contrast, I studied the martyrdom and miracles of dozens of different saints on a weekly basis. I saw their statues, their prayer cards, and their sacred medals every day. The nuns fed me candy for memorizing their prayers, but not for memorizing ideas about God. In a way, it was almost like God didn't fit into the picture. Now that I am an adult, I understand that God's abstract character is an essential part of his nature, but when I was eight years old, that explanation had no meaning. God was less real than the saints who were presented to me every day. This realization planted in me the idea that saints had special powers of their own that did not depend on God's intervention. Naturally, I began to gravitate toward their worship instead.

I broke from the Catholic Church during my teens. My childhood lessons about the relationship between God and man quickly began to fade from my memory, but what I learned about the saints persisted. Studying the roots of my Catholic upbringing during my teenage years led me to understand that human belief carried with it tangible power and that those beliefs could be intentionally molded to meet a specific purpose. This understanding quickly led me to the study of chaos magic as well as a lifelong interest in the simple symbolic logic of witchcraft. I also learned that many of the Catholic saints I had spent years venerating had their roots in ancient gods, thus supporting my childhood notion that they had independent powers. I began to see my own childhood as early training in folk magic, instead of as years of religious indoctrination.

The need for plain seven-day candles for ritual magic has driven me to the novena candle section of the local grocery store on more than one occasion. A novena candle is a special seven-day candle that has a picture of a saint on the front and usually a prayer printed on the back. Catholics often burn novena candles when they petition a saint for their help. The novena candle section of the grocery store always reminds me of my childhood because I am visited by the faces of many familiar saints. Many local stores offer more than just the usual battalion of Catholic saints, however. Bright green Lucky Lottery candles, white and blue home blessing candles, and black and red hex reversal candles are also quite common. Some grocery stores even offer candles that promise to quench or inflame love affairs.

Around 2009, I began to notice that the candles of a rather unusual saint had joined the grocery store pantheon. These candles were dedicated to a friendly-looking lady skeleton named Santa Muerte. Her candles were offered in white, red, and black varieties, which meant that overall she had more dedicated shelf space than Jesus and the Virgin Mary combined. This was a saint I had never heard of, despite all my years attending CCD. Clearly, she was quite popular, but just who was she? Since I was unfamiliar with Santa Muerte, I decided to purchase one of her white candles. That evening, I printed out a picture of Santa Muerte that I found on the Internet and placed the lit candle on top of it. Because I had no idea how to proceed, I simply asked Santa Muerte to reveal herself to me. I didn't have to wait long.

I live in New Mexico, which enjoys close cultural ties to Mexico. The Day of the Dead festival (or *Día de los Muertos*) is a national holiday in Mexico that is popular here as well. It is celebrated just a few days after Halloween.

I have a friend who loves going to garage sales every weekend. A few days after I made my request, my friend brought me a box of Halloween stuff that she'd found and thought I'd love. Among the rubber spiders, paper bats, and toy coffins, I found a small Santa Muerte statue with a few prayer guides printed on rough newspaper. I was delighted. My prayers had been answered, and quickly, too. As I would eventually learn, Santa Muerte is famous for her short turnaround time. I soon incorporated Santa Muerte as a central figure in my magical work, and I hope now to bring my experiences to you.

Santa Muerte truly is a folk saint; her place is found in the homes and hearts of her devotees, not within the walls of churches. Working with the Saint of Death is rooted in both folk and indigenous magic and Catholic mysticism. My early religious and magical training was also rooted in Catholic mysticism, which I found invaluable during this undertaking. A few years later when *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint* by Dr. R. Andrew Chesnut was first published, I was delighted to find such a well-written analysis of my favorite spiritual figure. This variety of insights and experiences has been incredibly helpful in developing the methods presented in this book, which are examples of an authentic living magical practice.

Working with Santa Muerte is rooted in indigenous magic and folk Catholicism, neither of which implies rigid ritual structures or belief systems. I am not an anthropologist, nor do I wish to be one. Therefore, this work is less concerned with tradition than it is with practical, logical, results-oriented magic. I have spent several years researching and working with this powerful spirit, both alone and in the company of knowledgeable Santa Muerte devotees. These experiences have laid the foundation on which this book was built.



## CHAPTER 1

# Introducing Santa Muerte, the Skeletal Lady of Mexico



### Who Is Santa Muerte?

Santa Muerte, or “Holy Death” in Spanish, is a folk saint who is believed to be the feminine embodiment of death. Her modern form comes to us from Mexico, where she is styled as a female Grim Reaper figure. She is often depicted as a skeleton wearing a long robe and carrying a scythe, but with added feminine features such as jewelry, flowers, and flowing hair. Her devotees describe her as a warm, friendly, and convivial spirit who is delighted by the antics of the living and who enjoys interacting with them.

Santa Muerte has power over everything that can be touched by death and decay, which gives her an incredibly broad scope of influence. Since life flowers before it fades, Santa Muerte cures illnesses and addiction. Since fortunes can quickly change, she showers her devotees with money and prosperity and untangles legal problems. She also provides ironclad protection from harm, cutting short with her scythe the curses and maledictions of

others. Because death touches on everything, her knowledge and wisdom are unparalleled. She empowers her devotees to deepen their understanding and strengthen their creativity; like necessity, mortality is the mother of invention. Because death touches everyone, she may also throw open the doors of social influence as well as attract a wide variety of lovers. Santa Muerte holds the keys to the underworld as well as other planar realms, and she may unlock their gates to allow communication with spirits of the dead as well as other entities. Since death and dying both have the power to transform your consciousness, Santa Muerte is also a powerful patron spirit of magic. She may assist in shaping and empowering the consciousness of devotees, deepening their wisdom, strengthening their willpower, and expanding their awareness. These three things translate to increased magical power, making Santa Muerte the natural ally of both witches and magicians.

Even this is not an exhaustive list of Santa Muerte's broad portfolio of powers. Because she is the face of death incarnate, her capacity to act is limited only by her devotees' capacity to ask. It is deeply ingrained within many of us to openly deny what we really want because we are afraid of being viewed as greedy, sinful, or cynical.

For example, many people ask spirits for help with winning money in the lottery. Often these requests are filled with promises to use the winnings to help the less fortunate, such as giving large sums of money to charity. If this is done honestly as a form of spiritual bribery, it can be quite effective. Some spirits respond well to being paid for their services, such as with charitable donations made publicly in their name. However, making such promises to simply mask your greed will actually have two different effects. First, spirits tend not to respond well to deception. Not

only is being deceptive itself very rude, but you are also telling the spirits that you think they are stupid enough to be deceived. Since no one likes being insulted, spirits will respond poorly—if at all.

Second, making such promises also weakens the power of your request, since you are wasting time and energy trying to convince a spirit that you truly desire to donate millions to charity when actually you don't. Since this attempt will fail anyway, making these kinds of false promises is an ultimately self-defeating practice. Many people try these tactics because we believe that friendly and helpful spirits will not help a person whose desire to win the lottery is rooted in greed, as greed is thought to be destructive and evil. The kind of spirit that would fulfill such a request is often not the kind of spirit that many people would choose to ask for help.

Santa Muerte is notable because she is not concerned with the underlying motivations driving the requests of her devotees. She assigns no particular moral weight to any kind of request, because, to death, everything is a zero-sum game. Whether you dedicate your lottery winnings to feeding the homeless or to retiring to a beach in Fiji, you will still die in the end. Therefore, Santa Muerte is far more likely to respond to a greedy but heartfelt request than one that is diluted by fake feelings of altruism. Because she is so nonjudgmental, her willingness to intervene is limited only by her devotees' willingness to ask for her help. Because she assigns no moral weight to any kind of request, her response also extends to using her power to harm other people. This has led to Santa Muerte's condemnation by religious and civil authorities and to her followers often being considered suspect.

It is the destructive side of Santa Muerte that has helped her garner so much attention in recent years. The US Federal

Bureau of Investigation labels Santa Muerte as a “narco-saint” that is idolized by drug traffickers; it blames her cults for shocking acts of violence and ritual slayings committed on both sides of the US–Mexico border. Cults dedicated to Santa Muerte frequently operate within drug cartels because it is believed that she will grant their members supernatural protection and aid. The media often sensationalizes stories of her statues found in graveyards and at roadsides, apparently left there as components of spells designed to harm specific targets. Her veneration is *not* condoned by the Catholic Church. In fact, the Catholic Church condemns Santa Muerte as a Satanic figure.

To the police, the appearance of Santa Muerte at a crime scene presents a dark omen indeed. During an interview with a law enforcement official from New Mexico, I was told about a local drug bust conducted by the US Drug Enforcement Administration. While raiding a cartel compound, the agents found an entire room turned into a temple dedicated to the worship of Santa Muerte. The main feature of the temple was a Santa Muerte “statue” made out of a female skeleton wearing an elaborate black silk wedding dress. The official explained to me the primary reason that authorities fear Santa Muerte cults and thus specifically target them for eradication. It’s not that they fear supernatural repercussions. What they fear is how reckless and violent drug traffickers can become when they believe they have supernatural protection. Such a criminal is incredibly dangerous and capable of *anything*. In an attempt to curb cartel violence, the Mexican military specifically targets Santa Muerte shrines for demolition in an attempt to demoralize drug cartel members. Even if the authorities do not believe in Santa Muerte, they are forced to respect her power.

Santa Muerte's official condemnation has done little to slow her meteoric rise in popularity. Interest in Santa Muerte has exploded in recent years, fueled by increased immigration and sensationalized media reports linking her to the activities of drug trafficking cartels. This increased exposure has helped Santa Muerte successfully transition from being a mere folk saint to being a virtual pop culture icon.

For example, in the popular television series *Breaking Bad*, the season three episode "No Más" opens with two cartel assassins belly-crawling through a dusty village to pray at a Santa Muerte shrine. She has also been featured in the popular television series *American Horror Story*, *Criminal Minds*, and *Dexter*, among others. The character of La Muerte in *The Book of Life*, a 2014 movie, appears to be based on her.

Her image adorns virtually every kind of product imaginable, from ashtrays to gun grips to wall hangings, and the market is enormous. Since the emergence of her first public shrine at Tepito, Mexico, in 2001, the number of Santa Muerte devotees in the world has increased dramatically, currently numbering between ten and twelve million worldwide. In fact, belief in Santa Muerte is the fastest-growing new religious movement emerging in the world today.<sup>1</sup>

## Where Does Santa Muerte Come From?

The veneration of Santa Muerte comes to us from Mexico, where she is publicly celebrated as the patron saint of the Day of the Dead. Mexico is a predominantly Catholic country. Catholics

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1. Andrew Chesnut interview with Allison McNearney, "The Death-Worshipping Cult of Santa Muerte," *The Daily Beast*, 11/1/15, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/11/01/the-death-worshipping-cult-of-santa-muerte.html>

believe in a wide variety of saints. Saints are spiritual personalities who are believed to have an especially close relationship with God. Catholics pray to saints because they can use this special relationship to intercede in the lives of people. The Catholic Church recognizes over 1,500 official saints with new ones canonized annually. To become a saint, a deceased person must meet certain criteria, such as performing a number of miracles that can be directly attributed to him or her. Only after a lengthy investigation by a Vatican commission may a person be canonized and added to the official roll of Catholic saints.

However, the Catholic Church does not accept all saints. There are many saints whose ability to perform miracles is acclaimed by popular belief, but they have not been vetted by a Vatican commission. These kinds of saints are called “folk saints.” Despite their unofficial status, the Catholic Church tends to tolerate their veneration alongside the veneration of the official Catholic patrons.

One such example is the folk saint La Difunta Correa (“the Deceased Correa”), who enjoys a cult over two hundred thousand members strong in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay. La Difunta Correa is believed to be the spirit of a woman who took her infant child on a mission to rescue her husband in the 1840s; however, she became lost in the desert and died of thirst before she could reach him. Eventually, some ranchers found her body and discovered that her baby was still alive because he was able to feed from her eternally full breast. Considering this to be a miracle, the ranchers buried her body and told many other people about it. Soon La Difunta Correa’s gravesite became a shrine. Today she is venerated as a patron saint of cattle drivers, travelers, and small children. Her devotees bring her gifts of water

to slake her eternal thirst. La Difunta Correa is classified as a folk saint because she is not recognized by the Catholic Church, despite the popularity of her cult.

Santa Muerte is also venerated as a folk saint. Because death is the great equalizer, Santa Muerte is the patron saint of marginalized people who live on the fringes of society, many of whom suffer from rejection by the mainstream culture. These people include not only the working poor, but also criminals, drug addicts, gay people, prostitutes, single mothers, the homeless, and the mentally ill. She is also often considered the patron saint of people who work at night, such as taxi drivers, bartenders, exotic dancers, and after-hours cleaning and maintenance staff. These types of workers are at higher risk for accidents, assaults, robberies, and all types of violent death specifically because they work at night. Santa Muerte is often called *Senora de la Noche* (Spanish, “Lady of the Night”) because believers hope that she will protect them from these types of calamities. Since people who live on the fringes of society often feel that they have nowhere else to turn, Santa Muerte is sometimes also called the Saint of Last Resort.

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## The Different Names of Santa Muerte

Santa Muerte enjoys a large number of titles bestowed on her by her devotees. Following is a list of some of her more common ones, along with a brief explanation of each. Several of them bear a marked similarity to each other, so they are grouped together. Please note that none of these titles

refer to a specific color aspect of Santa Muerte, but to Santa Muerte in general.

**Holy Death:** The literal translation of “Santa Muerte” into English is Holy Death.

**Our Lady of the Holy Death:** Some believe that a strong relationship exists between Santa Muerte and the Virgin Mary. This title is a play on the name of one of the most popular versions of the Virgin Mary named “Our Lady of Guadalupe.”

**Pretty Girl:** Santa Muerte’s natural vibrancy is sometimes expressed through a girlish attitude. She is often called pretty, among other things, to flatter and impress her.

**Queen of Death/Saint of Death:** These two popular titles subtly imply the great overarching power that Santa Muerte possesses, as even the official Catholic saints overseeing death only manage steps in the process of dying, not the entire experience (more on this in chapter 3).

**Saint of Last Resort:** Because so many people find calling on death to be an act of desperation, Santa Muerte is sometimes called the Saint of Last Resort.

**Senora de la Noche** (*Spanish, “Lady of the Night”*): Santa Muerte is thought to be the patron of those who work at night and are at increased risk of violence and death for it.

**Skeletal Lady/Skeletal Saint/Skinny Girl:** Many titles of Santa Muerte refer to her thin and skeletal appearance.

**Sister/Mother Death/Bone Mother:** These popular terms usually refer to the gentler and more caring faces of Santa Muerte.

**White Sister/Lady/Mother**—These terms that call Santa Muerte white do not refer to her actual color, but to the states of newness and purity that she can create instead.

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Unlike La Difunta Correa, however, Santa Muerte does *not* enjoy the passive acceptance of the Catholic Church. In fact, the Church outright condemns veneration of Santa Muerte as a Satanic practice. The Catholic Church already has several official saints that are devoted to death, such as Saint Margaret of Antioch and Saint Michael, so there is no need for Santa Muerte to fulfill that role.

Another thing that bars Santa Muerte from being tolerated is that some of her devotees engage in illegal activities and practice black magic. Since Santa Muerte is the patron saint of criminals and those who are at risk of nighttime violence, many drug traffickers hail her as their personal patron and use spells and rituals to ensure their protection and success. While similar activity is sometimes performed in the name of Saint Jude, who is the patron saint of lost causes, this type of activity is frowned on at best and often condemned as Satanic. The criminal behavior of some of Santa Muerte's devotees makes it difficult for her cult to gain the acceptance and tolerance that the cults of other folk saints enjoy.

As drug-related violence continues to escalate on both sides of the US–Mexico border, Santa Muerte cults associated with the drug trafficking cartels are blamed for murders allegedly conducted in order to curry her favor. Some of her cults have even been accused of engaging in ritual cannibalism! This behavior has

caused Santa Muerte to become inextricably linked in the minds of many with violent slayings conducted to fuel black magic, leading to her condemnation as a Satanic figure. Despite the fact that these devotees would likely describe themselves as devout Catholics and Santa Muerte herself as being in league with God, these types of activities are understandably repulsive to the Catholic Church. Since the Catholic Church has no need to add an additional saint to its official register, especially one who is associated with violent criminals who practice black magic, the Catholic Church continues to denounce Santa Muerte as a Satanic figure.

Traditionally, veneration of Santa Muerte has been a private practice, partially because of condemnation by civil and religious authorities and partially because of the negative connotations associated with her worship. Because of the strong Catholic influence, Mexico also has strong cultural taboos against using witchcraft, especially for malign purposes. People who use witchcraft risk social ostracism or worse, as it is often equated with malevolence. Many perceive turning to the power of Death itself for aid as an act of desperation.

The Mexican government, like the Catholic Church, tends to tolerate the veneration of folk saints. There is even one folk saint, El Niño Fidencio, whose veneration has spawned its own offshoot religion called the Fidencista Christian Church with its own liturgy and church hierarchy. This church was founded in 1993, and its membership continues to grow to this day. Santa Muerte enjoys no such unofficial tolerance, however. Her first public shrine did not open until 2001 in Tepito, Mexico. The Mexican government continues to refuse to recognize the movement as an official religion, citing concerns that doing so would only legitimize veneration of Santa Muerte in the eyes of the

drug cartels. Thus, there is no “official” Santa Muerte cult or religion with a standardized body of prayers or ritual practice.

Although the Catholic Church has condemned the veneration of Santa Muerte, this has not prevented her from becoming the unofficial patron saint of the annual Day of the Dead celebration in Mexico. The Day of the Dead, or *Día de los Muertos*, is a national holiday when the souls of the dead are thought to return to enjoy the pleasures of life as well as the closeness of family and friends. Rather than a somber occasion, the Day of the Dead is intended to be a bright and jubilant one. People gather to celebrate the spirits of their deceased loved ones and the lives that they lived. This celebration is not only believed to strengthen the bonds of family but is also an opportunity to ask the dead for their assistance and protection. Cleaning and tending graves is a common activity as well, with many people leaving flowers, food, and other gifts for the dead to enjoy.

In many Catholic countries during religious festivals, the icons of cherished saints are removed from their shrines and paraded around streets and public squares so that they receive the adoration of the faithful. Because Mexico is a predominantly Catholic country and Santa Muerte is hailed as a folk saint, she enjoys the same treatment that the other saints receive. The Day of the Dead is held on November 2, which coincides with All Souls’ Day—a Catholic religious holiday when the faithful pray for the souls of their dearly departed dead. On the Day of the Dead, the Saint of Death makes her celebrated public appearance. Her statues are arrayed in richly embroidered robes and covered with garlands of flowers before being taken out of their shrines and paraded throughout town. Many such processions end in the local graveyard, often with much singing and dancing.

The Day of the Dead celebration is rooted in a much older religious festival that was celebrated by the Aztecs. When the Spanish arrived in 1519, the Aztecs dominated the Valley of Mexico. The Aztecs celebrated several of their gods of death and sacrifice during their end-of-year harvest festivals. They also celebrated the memories of their own dead, often equating butterflies or moths with the returning souls of family and friends. One deity celebrated during these festivals was the goddess Mictēcacihuatl, the Lady of Mictlan.

Mictlan is the Aztec underworld, a dark and dangerous place that the dead had to navigate to find her fortress to await their eventual rebirth. When the Spanish converted the Aztecs to Catholicism, the native population refused to stop the veneration of their dead. Eventually, the Catholic priests yielded—they were able to compromise by moving the calendar date of the Aztec festivals to coincide with All Souls' Day. In this way, elements of those ancient Aztec festivals survived to become the modern Day of the Dead celebrations.

The goddess Mictēcacihuatl is frequently cited as a mythic source of Santa Muerte, although some scholars point out that it is unclear why this particular deity was elevated out of the many available Aztec gods of death and sacrifice. Despite this argument, many devotees consider belief in this origin story to be a matter of cultural and ethnic pride, since an Aztec origin creates a tangible connection to Mexico's pre-Spanish past.

Many scholars and devotees point out that the idea of a female death figure was also not unknown to the Spanish who colonized Mexico. In the 14th century, a great plague known as the Black Death decimated Europe, killing 30 to 60 percent of the population. As survivors tried to cope with the horror of

so much widespread death, their cultural focus turned toward themes of dying, resurrection, and penitence. It also evoked a strong desire for a gentle and peaceful death. The idea of a Grim Reapress arose, a feminine face of death who would deliver such gentle and peaceful endings. The term and spelling “Grim Reapress” first appeared in *Devoted to Death* by R. Andrew Chesnut.

The Spanish recognized this figure within their culture, referring to her as *La Parca* (Spanish, “the parched one”). Europe’s population did not recover its 14th-century population levels until the 17th century, two hundred years after the Spanish arrived in Mexico. Thus, the concept of *La Parca* was still vibrant and relevant within Spanish culture when they established their colonies. Since *Santa Muerte* takes the form of a female Grim Reaper, in the same way as *La Parca*, many devotees cite this as evidence that *Santa Muerte*’s roots are European instead.

Although these two theories are the dominant ones concerning the origins of the Saint of Death, they are not the only ones. The decentralized nature of *Santa Muerte*’s veneration has given rise to a number of alternative theories of origin for the Saint of Death that draw less support but are believed just as sincerely by those who have adopted them. One such myth is that *Santa Muerte* is the elevated soul of a beautiful woman who committed suicide after being rejected by her lover. God denied her entry into Heaven because she committed suicide but took pity on her by giving her the task of collecting the souls of the dead instead of consigning her to Hell. This is why *Santa Muerte* is believed to have such a sympathetic and loving nature. This theory also makes it possible for *Santa Muerte* to have personally collected the soul of Jesus Christ, a fervent belief of some of her devotees,

but which makes little sense if Santa Muerte first arose in Aztec Mexico or late medieval Europe instead.

Another theory of origin places Santa Muerte's roots in Africa. When Yoruba slaves were brought to the Americas, they brought their religious beliefs with them, which eventually emerged as the African ritual traditions, Palo Mayombé, Santería, and Vodou. Since some traditional Santa Muerte practices closely resemble African ritual traditions, some devotees of Santa Muerte contend that she is related to one of the many African goddesses of cemeteries and rebirth.

In Santería, the African-diaspora tradition of Cuba, two *orishas* (powers), who are both goddesses, are associated with death:

- \* The orisha Yewa is the goddess of the underworld, who is charged with bringing the bodies of the dead to Oya.
- \* The orisha Oya is the goddess of cemeteries, as well as storms and rebirth.

Palo Mayombé, an African-diaspora tradition also arising in Cuba, has a deity or spirit named Centella Endoki, who is similar to Oya, as is Maman Brigitte, a spirit of Haitian Vodou.

Since Yoruba slaves were brought to Mexico as well as the Caribbean, believers in this origin theory of Santa Muerte cite it as the opportunity for yet another patroness of cemeteries to emerge as a result of the African diaspora.

These are just two additional alternative theories of Santa Muerte's origin. The decentralized nature of Santa Muerte's cult has allowed for many different myths to proliferate. Although Santa Muerte's modern face is undoubtedly Mexican in origin, her

diverse roots make it easy for anyone to relate to her in a manner closer to the cultural perspective in which they were raised.

For example, my mother is a Catholic immigrant from Germany. When I was a little girl, I learned from her about a friendly Norse goddess of the underworld named Hela. This goddess was supposed to be very lovely, except that half of her face was an exposed skull. Her divine duty was to care for the souls of the gently departed dead, which included women, children, and the elderly. This story became part of my personal cultural perspective and mythological makeup, as much as the Catholic saints that my mother also taught me to venerate.

Although I grew up in New Mexico, I did not learn about Santa Muerte until I was an adult. Even so, I found it easy to accept the idea of a friendly and beautiful skeletal lady saint because she reminded me so strongly of the stories of Hela that I had learned as a child. While my route to the veneration of Santa Muerte may have been an unusual one, it is a striking testament to the universal appeal that the Saint of Death holds. Once stitched together, the many different devotees of Santa Muerte make an interesting and varied fabric indeed.

## San la Muerte

San la Muerte is another major Latin American spiritual being associated with death. Similar to Santa Muerte, his name or title also translates as “Holy Death” from Spanish, albeit in a male-gendered form. San la Muerte, who is also portrayed as a black-robed skeleton with a scythe and an owl, is venerated in Paraguay, Argentina, and parts of Brazil.

The roots of San la Muerte are murkier than those of some other popular Latin American folk saints who are associated with

death—for example, La Difunta Correa, who was discussed earlier and who is reputedly the spirit of a woman who died in the 1840s; or Miguel Ángel Gaitán, who died fifteen days before his first birthday in 1967 and whose incorruptible body lies encased within its glass tomb in Chilecito, Argentina.

There are two competing origin stories for San la Muerte. One myth is that he was a particularly powerful *curandero*, an herbalist and mystical healer, who received his great ability from his devotion to Jesus Christ. After his death, this holy man's spirit persisted to help others. His cult elevated him to the position of Grim Reaper, believing that his position on the other side of death's veil allows him to see into the hearts of the living, and so he is capable of judging them. This version of the story creates him as initially both male and mortal, granted great power only because of his extreme dedication to his faith. This is very different from the origin stories of Santa Muerte, which almost exclusively describe her as being the face of a fundamental and universal power and therefore not the elevated soul of anyone in particular.

The other myth explaining the origin of San la Muerte is much more interesting. After Jesuit missionaries converted the Guarani Indians of Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil, they began to receive abundant offerings of gold and jewels. The Guarani also labored to build numerous churches throughout the region.

The legend goes that not all of the Guarani truly adopted the foreign God of the Jesuits. To continue their own practices in secret, they gave to the Jesuits a great carved statue of Jesus Christ, the Devil, and Death done in a native style. They included within the elaborate carvings symbols of their patron gods and spirits, hiding them right under the priests' noses. The statue was reputedly carved out of the heart of a palo santo (Spanish, "holy wood")

tree. The palo santo tree grows throughout Central and South America and is popularly believed to attract beneficial spirits and drive off malignant ones. It has particular significance for the Guaraní, who believe that trees possess great power to affect human beings because their gods had created the foundations of the world from special woods. Palo santo was favored for the most powerful or significant carvings because the wood of this spirit-attracting tree was thought to enhance the carving's power.

When the king of Spain grew jealous of the accumulated riches of the Jesuits, he sent troops to burn their foreign churches. This paved the way for a native rebellion. The Guaraní stole the statue before the advancing Spanish forces could destroy it. They broke it up into three pieces and hid them, their locations having now been lost to both time and memory. Cults of veneration sprang up around the three figures that the pieces represented, with San la Muerte being named the face of Death. This origin story also identifies Death as a male figure generally lacking the other personality characteristics particular to Santa Muerte.

In an attempt to forge a connection between Santa Muerte and San la Muerte, some have proposed that both figures are based on a commonly held cultural figure, one perhaps exchanged and strengthened by trade or warfare. This phenomenon itself isn't unusual—gods and spirits frequently get new names and new stories when adopted by a new people. However, the Guaraní Indians were separated from the Aztecs by a vast geographical distance. At the height of its expansion under Moctezuma II, the Aztec Empire barely stretched into the modern Mexican state of Michoacán, which lies about four hundred miles away from Mexico's modern southernmost border. The southward advance of the Aztecs was stopped by the fierce (and better armed) Purépechas

Empire, which further limits the possibility of meaningful contact between the Aztecs of central Mexico and the Guarani tribes of northern South America. Given as well that the stories surrounding San la Muerte appear to have no relationship with those surrounding Santa Muerte, there is no doubt that these figures have nothing to do with each other. However, their names do translate to the same thing in English because English does not generally use gender-specific nouns. Thus, the fact that Santa Muerte and San la Muerte are different figures, one male and one female, with vastly different portfolios and personalities, is sometimes misunderstood by nonnative Spanish speakers.

## Who Are the Devotees of Santa Muerte?

Santa Muerte's popularity continues to grow unabated despite condemnation from religious and civil authorities and the lack of an official cult. The Saint of Death's popularity is driven by a simple but immutable logic: death is a guarantee for us all, but that does not make it evil. Death and decay are necessary parts of the cycle of life because they make room for the creation of new things. Without death, life cannot renew itself. Since death drives the engines of creation, it is not inherently hateful, nor is it our enemy. Every choice we make will lead to our own eventual deaths, some choices more quickly than others. Since the Saint of Death herself already has an amiable attitude, why not make her a powerful friend? If death is your ally, you have nothing to fear.

Santa Muerte's broad portfolio of powers allows her to wield substantial influence in the lives of her devotees, and she does so generously. Why would the power of death be so favorably inclined? Santa Muerte has a warm and friendly personality because she understands that we are only human. We live in

bodies that get tired, feel pain, and grow old. We often make decisions based on our emotions rather than our reason. We also make mistakes. Since death is life's constant companion, Santa Muerte is always nearby, witnessing everything that we do. Because she sees everything, she understands our struggles and our joys better than any other spirit. Most importantly, Santa Muerte does not judge people for their actions. She knows that we are fallible creatures. Just as it makes no sense to blame the rain for making things wet, it makes no sense to blame people for acting like people.

Because Santa Muerte does not condemn people for being themselves, she also does not discriminate among her followers and considers each individual equally worthy. This belief system is in opposition to the teachings of so many social and religious authorities, who condemn certain behaviors as immoral. Different lifestyle choices and decisions may cause the individual to be rejected by family and community. Punishments may be quite severe.

For example, certain social institutions believe that homosexuality is unnatural or sinful. This is a particularly common point of view in predominantly Catholic Mexico. Gay individuals often conceal their sexual orientation, or else face discrimination, harassment, social ostracism, and possibly even violence or death. In some religions, divorce may be forbidden because it means breaking a vow made before God. This is especially common among Catholics, who are often taught that marriage is a holy sacrament. The newly divorced may find themselves shunned by other members of their community because their divorce is perceived as creating a rift with God as well as their spouse. The condemnation of drug users from the pulpit and by the media likewise ensures that addicts will not seek the spiritual and social support that they need to escape their addictions.

To the Saint of Death, none of these things matter. Santa Muerte is famous for her nonjudgmental nature, which is part of her popular appeal. Since death is the great equalizer, Santa Muerte is traditionally called the patron saint of people who live marginal lives on the fringes of society, such as criminals, the homeless, the mentally ill, prostitutes, and unwed mothers. She is also traditionally associated with classes of people whom society and organized religions have typically rejected, such as homosexual and transgender individuals. For this reason, Santa Muerte is also frequently called the patron saint of the gay community.

Many people involved in the drug trafficking trade pray to Santa Muerte for protection from the very real threats of violence and death that they face daily. Paradoxically, the very same kinds of threats have led those who fight the drug trade, including many members of the police and military, to pray to the Saint of Death for protection as well. Santa Muerte has emerged as the patron saint of *anyone* who faces violence and death, particularly at night. This includes the police and military, as well as paramedics and firefighters.

*Anyone* is free to form a connection with Santa Muerte because dying is a universal experience. Death is in no hurry to collect most of us, however, which leaves the Saint of Death free to enjoy the antics of the living. Being part of the machinery of creation, she prefers the brightest and most interesting flowers in the human garden.

Santa Muerte freely accepts people of every race, every religion, and every gender. The Saint of Death will not reject you for loving the “wrong” person, believing in the “wrong” faith, or being the “wrong” skin color. She will not punish you for cheating on your spouse or on your taxes. She does not require you to

be a Catholic or even to have faith in the Christian God. Santa Muerte happily accepts the attentions of Muslims, Buddhists, Pagans, curious agnostics, and anyone else who decides to seek a connection with her. The devotees of Santa Muerte come in every shape and size. The only common denominator between them is their mortality: one day they all will die. Santa Muerte accepts each and every person with the same loving grace, regardless of who they are. She is quick to apply her considerable influence in their lives, protecting them from harm and granting them peace, prosperity, and happiness. To her devotees, Santa Muerte is the Mother of All Answers.

Although her devotees see her as a generous, loving, and even maternal figure, these are not the only facets of Santa Muerte's personality. Mother Death's scythe is sharp, and she is known for her vicious streak. Death may strike at any time, causing destruction, fear, panic, and confusion. Every gift that Santa Muerte can give with one hand, she can take with the other. Curses cast in the Saint of Death's name can have devastating effects on their targets. Through her, it is possible to break up marriages and families, destroy businesses and property, and cause illness and legal problems. Santa Muerte may torment individuals with frightening visions to drive them mad, or surround them with nasty and violent spirits. She can certainly also drag someone into an early grave.

If Santa Muerte is supposed to be such a generous and loving figure, why is she willing to be so destructive? The reason is simple. We are all subject to illness and misfortune because we are mortal. Although unpleasant, these things are very much a part of life. As a constant observer of human activity, Santa Muerte understands our motivations better than any other power. She

renders no judgment on us for our actions. Whether we choose virtue or sin makes no difference to Santa Muerte. The Saint of Death views her own interactions with the living with this same neutral attitude because we leave this world just as naked as when we entered it and similarly lacking in possessions. You can't take it with you, as the old saying goes.

Santa Muerte's destructive capacity is not inherently evil. It is simply a reflection of the desires of the people who call on her. It is up to each individual practitioner whether to call on Santa Muerte for beneficial or detrimental reasons. Many practitioners actually routinely call on Santa Muerte's destructive power, but in a protective capacity rather than a malicious one. After all, no force is better suited to destroying curses and hexes or driving off harmful spirits than the power of Death herself.

## Learning to Love the Saint of Death

Although Santa Muerte is a folk saint who comes to us from Mexico, her appeal is as universal as death. The Saint of Death's power over this world is indisputable, since everything in it is affected by death and decay. The speed with which she acts is also legendary because nothing flies on faster wings than death. Even though she is stereotypically associated with fringe elements of society, in truth, her devotees are as varied as life itself. The Saint of Death is a warm and generous figure who inspires intense passion among her followers, causing them to embrace death as a friend, lover, and mother. To them, she is the source of all comfort and aid, the opener of ways, and the keeper of their secrets.

Santa Muerte's rapid rise in popularity has made many witches and magicians interested in working with her, but uncertain how or where to begin. Because her cult is so decentralized, the body

of knowledge regarding her is likewise decentralized. The Saint of Death has no central religious authority that dictates any particular required beliefs or rituals. This lack of doctrine is useful to magical practitioners because it frees them to adapt their veneration of the Saint of Death to their preferred style of magic rather than requiring that they follow a dogmatic ritual program.

However, because her veneration is so decentralized, it can also be difficult to find a starting point for working with Santa Muerte. This book is intended to bridge that gap:

- \* The book first describes the cultural and historical trends that gave rise to the modern veneration of Santa Muerte; then it explores each of her aspects in detail.
- \* Instructions on how to organize a Santa Muerte altar follow this description, as well as details on how to make offerings to the Saint of Death.

These elements combine to provide an effective foundation for the rituals provided in this book, which use the seven-color variation of Santa Muerte instead of the more traditional three-color system. Therefore, as a practitioner, you are encouraged to begin your exploration of the Skeletal Saint over a week-long period, with each day dedicated to a particular aspect of Santa Muerte. While this is how the rituals are presented in later chapters, you are also welcome to explore the different aspects of Santa Muerte as you are guided or see fit.

The common elements of the veneration of Santa Muerte are rooted in both Mexican culture and Catholic saint worship, which itself shares many characteristics with many of the simpler techniques of magic. Consequently, learning how to work

with Santa Muerte is easy for anyone who is already comfortable with basic magic skills like charging ritual candles and cleansing ritual tools. This book presumes you already have a basic understanding of the principles and techniques of magic.

Even though familiarity or faith in Catholicism is not required to work with Santa Muerte, I found my own upbringing as a Catholic to be helpful in developing these techniques. However, many traditional Santa Muerte rituals presume that the practitioner is Catholic and strongly reference elements of that religious system. Therefore, some of the logic and lore behind traditional Santa Muerte rituals can be confusing if you are not Catholic. Throughout this book, I have done my best to distill my many years of catechism into explanations that make these concepts accessible to someone with little knowledge of Catholicism. The rituals in this book are dedicated to Santa Muerte alone and are suitable for use by the Catholic and the non-Catholic alike.

Since Santa Muerte is also a patron of magic, she can easily be incorporated into any system of magical beliefs, even if her role is just to provide a conduit for the magical practitioner's own rebirth. After all, death and decay are universal facts of life. By providing an in-depth understanding of the Saint of Death's roots as well as a comprehensive ritual guide, this book creates a solid foundation on which you, as the magical practitioner, may build your own unique Santa Muerte practice.

## CHAPTER 2

# The Aztec Roots of Santa Muerte



While Santa Muerte is described as a Mexican folk saint, her influence and appeal are not limited to that cultural or ethnic identity. Since dying is a universal experience, Santa Muerte herself is famously accepting of devotees from every race, ethnicity, religion, and social class. You don't have to be Hispanic or even Catholic to connect to her. Because those who are interested in Santa Muerte may lack a common cultural connection, it is helpful to understand the circumstances that gave rise to the common beliefs surrounding the veneration of the Saint of Death. This way, you will be able to draw comparisons to your own personal and cultural history, enabling you to forge a genuine connection to this feminine face of death.

Santa Muerte is popularly considered the patron saint of the annual Day of the Dead celebration, despite her official condemnation by the Catholic Church. Because the Day of the Dead has its roots in ancient Aztec religious festivals, many devotees of

Santa Muerte believe that she also comes to us from pre-Spanish Mexico. This may be in part due to the unique set of difficulties the Spanish faced while trying to conquer and govern Mexico. Understanding these difficulties is key to understanding how belief in the goddess Mictecacihuatl may have influenced modern beliefs surrounding Santa Muerte. While we briefly touched on many of these ideas in chapter 1, a more complete explanation of how Santa Muerte may have evolved from Mictecacihuatl is included in this chapter.

## The Aztecs of Pre-Spanish Mexico

The Aztecs called the Valley of Mexico their home. It was a beautiful and temperate region covered by lakes and forest and blessed with fertile volcanic soil. The people grew maize, beans, squash, chiles, and tomatoes there, and they hunted wild turkey and deer. The lakes provided them with an abundant source of fish and shrimp. By the time the Spaniards arrived in the Valley of Mexico, it was the most densely populated place on earth, with well over a million people living there. The great Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan alone boasted over two hundred fifty thousand inhabitants, making it four times larger than Seville, the largest Spanish city of the time.

The Aztec Empire was an advanced society. The people had an excellent understanding of both mathematics and astronomy that allowed them to develop a highly accurate calendar. They had a complex written legal code. They had expert physicians who understood the basic principles of infection control, such as washing their hands and their surgical instruments before touching their patients, something that would not be practiced in Europe until the 1850s. The Aztecs even enjoyed a free public

school system that all children, regardless of social class, were expected to attend.

Despite these social advances, the Aztecs were a warlike people who expanded their territory through violent conquest. Part of the reason for this behavior was religious. The Aztecs believed that the rich bounty of the Valley of Mexico that they depended on was the land's sacrifice to their people. This belief placed them in debt to the earth. They thought that failure to honor that debt would cause the wheel of life to stop turning, making the sun cease to rise and bringing the world to a literal end. Sacrifice was the means by which the Aztecs honored their debt and avoided this calamity. They paid the earth by sacrificing virtually everything they had, including food, weapons, jewelry, art, clothing, and even household goods.

The Aztecs believed that the greatest sacrifice that they could offer was the life of a human being, usually in the form of either a captive or a purified slave. Since the need for captives was so great, the Aztecs became experts at waging war. Taking captives was compulsory for an Aztec warrior; his failure to do so within a few battles meant that *he* would be taken as a captive and sacrificed instead. For successfully taking captives in combat, the warriors were awarded honor and status as well as the right to drink the sacred alcohol made from the maguey cactus, and the gods were kept fed a steady diet of human hearts.

The goddess Mictecacihuatl held a special place in the Aztec pantheon. The origin story of Mictecacihuatl describes her as an infant girl who was immediately sacrificed at birth, which is why she has a skeletal appearance. The Aztecs believed that when people died, they had to make a dangerous journey through the underworld in order to reach its ninth deepest level. There the

dead would find Mictecacihuatl's frozen obsidian palace, where they would await their rebirth into the next age inside of her cold womb. Once all of humanity died, the Aztecs believed, they would all be born anew into a pristine new world created by the gods.

There is not much available information about Mictecacihuatl due to the widespread destruction of Aztec libraries by the Spanish. A few works have survived, however, since they were transported to Europe early during the Spanish conquest of Mexico. One such work, the Codex Borgia, shows Mictecacihuatl among a series of four goddesses who are nursing infants. Instead of feeding a baby like the others, however, she is feeding a corpse blood while receiving its heart in sacrifice. Given that the Aztecs thought that their lives were held in balance against the sacrifices of the earth, this image implies that Mictecacihuatl held a critical role in maintaining that balance. The Codex Borgia also places her as the ruler of the precise place where the sun had to descend through the earth each evening for its harrowing journey through the underworld. The Aztecs believed that the sun's nightly journey was not guaranteed and that a very real chance existed it may not rise again the next morning. Since Mictecacihuatl ruled the place of the sun's very dangerous (and possibly final) descent, this implies that she was a deity of considerable power indeed.

One of the most compelling arguments for Mictecacihuatl holding a special status among the gods is evidenced by their system of mask trading. To the Aztecs, gods represented distinct natural forces. They each had a special ritual mask that contained their power. By trading their masks with each other, the gods could combine their powers. For example, Xipe Totec was the god of force and the patron of war. By borrowing the ritual

mask of Tlaloc, the god of life-giving rain, Xipe Toltec would transform himself into a powerful god of violent storms and deadly floods.

Although the other gods traded their ritual masks freely, Mictecacihuatl and her husband, Mictlantecuhtli, did not lend their ritual masks to the others. The exact reason for this is unclear because of the nearly complete destruction of the body of Aztec religious knowledge by the Spanish. It surely does imply that Mictecacihuatl and her husband enjoyed a certain kind of protected or specialized status among the Aztecs, however, and possibly a dominant position relative to the other gods as well.

Because the Aztecs held a special reverence for sacrifice and strongly believed in rebirth, the idea that the veneration of the deities that embodied this concept survived in some way is not particularly surprising. The most closely held beliefs are the most difficult to change by their nature. In addition, the Aztecs enjoyed a very large, highly advanced society with an educated population. This means that they were nearly universally well versed in the cultures and traditions of their people, making their beliefs particularly difficult to erode.

This set the stage for the possible modern survival of not one but two Aztec goddesses. The first goddess is Tonantzin, the great Aztec mother goddess, whom many believe evolved into Our Lady of Guadalupe in the modern era. The second goddess is Mictecacihuatl, now believed by many to have become Santa Muerte. Of the two figures, Our Lady of Guadalupe is vastly more well known; hers is one of the most easily recognized images in the world. Why would one of these goddesses enjoy much greater prominence in the modern era than the other?

## The End of the Fifth Sun

The answer lies with the Spanish that conquered the Aztec Empire. The Spanish of the early 16th century were ruthless in their quest to establish a vast trading empire. They established military bases along coastal routes to protect and resupply their trade ships. These bases were established often after the local native population had been crushed underfoot by Spanish troops. With the troops always came the priests to convert the native population to Catholicism, and thus many traditional ways eventually became lost.

The Spanish conquistador whose arrival would herald the downfall of the Aztec Empire was named Hernando Cortés. Cortés was an alcoholic, a gambler, a liar, and a renowned womanizer. He had been sent to the new capital of the Spanish West Indies, Santo Domingo, by his parents after he failed law school in Spain. His cousin was the governor of Santo Domingo, however, which gave Cortés the opportunity to participate in armed raids against the local native population. He excelled at this, acquiring large amounts of wealth and quite a reputation as a successful—and bloodthirsty—conquistador.

Cortés was desperate to visit the Mexican mainland because he had heard of the vast riches of the natives. He also was looking for El Dorado, the legendary City of Gold. The governor kept refusing to give him the assignment, mostly because he had learned not to trust Cortés. When a member of the governor's own family went missing on an exploratory mission to the Mexican mainland, Cortés took advantage of the governor's grief and persuaded him to issue Cortés *carte blanche* to rescue the cousin. The governor realized at the last minute that giving a man like Cortés free rein to do as he wished was the worst of ideas and

rescinded his permission. Cortés merrily ignored the governor and sailed off to conquer Mexico like he'd always wanted.

The Aztecs' own beliefs played a role in the success of Cortés. They thought that every fifty-two years there was a slight chance that their god of wind and learning, Quetzacoatl, may return to them. His return would signal the imminent end of their current age of mankind, which they referred to as the Fifth Sun. The legend described Quetzacoatl as a white deity that would come from the east. The year that Cortés arrived, 1519, was such a year in the Aztec calendar. Cortés was also a white man who sailed to them from an eastern direction. This made many of the natives uncertain and uneasy, especially since he had arrived accompanied by great demonic beasts—the horses of the conquistadors, which the Aztecs had never seen before. True to his nature, Cortés convinced the natives that the great beasts ate only gold, and if kept hungry for too long, they would start tearing into human flesh instead. This story ensured that the natives brought him great armloads of golden trinkets regularly.

With little opposition, Cortés and his seven hundred men rode straight into the capital city of Tenochtitlan, where the Aztec emperor, Moctezuma II, received him graciously. Cortés returned the favor by slaughtering the palace guard and taking the emperor prisoner and, through him, control of the Aztec Empire.

When additional troops arrived in 1520 to arrest Cortés for disobeying the governor of Santo Domingo, he persuaded them to join him instead because he had seen firsthand the fabulous riches of the Aztec Empire. One soldier among the reinforcements was known to be infected with smallpox, a highly infectious viral illness that would wind up killing large numbers of the Aztec population. Those who were not killed instead found

themselves extremely weak, unable to even move from their beds. This plague caused crops to fail as they lay untended and unharvested in the fields, leading to widespread famine. Within a few short years, around a quarter million people had died, and the Aztec Empire completely collapsed.

## Our Lady of Guadalupe

Despite the widespread death and chaos, Cortés and his men were vastly outnumbered by an angry population that until only recently had a professional standing army. They were also a very long way from military reinforcements. This meant that the Spanish initially depended on the goodwill and cooperation of the still-living nobles and wealthy families that had social influence over the population. These families seized on the chance to ensure their survival and consolidate their power by intermarrying with the new Spanish regime. Their children of mixed European and native ancestry would be called mestizos, and they would form the backbone of the newly emerging noble class in Mexico. This set the stage for survival of some Aztec beliefs and customs.

One of the most striking examples is the large number of similarities between the Aztec mother goddess, Tonantzin, and an apparition of the Virgin Mary that would come to be known as Our Lady of Guadalupe. This similarity has led many people to speculate that Tonantzin herself survived in some way. Even if not, Our Lady of Guadalupe serves as an excellent example of syncretism, or the blending of religious and spiritual beliefs. She also serves as a model for how belief in Mictecacihuatl may have also survived to become Santa Muerte.

The story of Our Lady of Guadalupe takes place in the mid-1520s, just after the collapse of the Aztec Empire. A native peasant

named Juan Diego favored traveling over a certain hill near his home. One day as he went over the hill, a vision of a beautiful, richly dressed Aztec princess appeared to him. She asked in his native language of Nahuatl that a great church be built to honor her on that site. Startled, the peasant fled to find the local bishop. The bishop didn't believe the man's wild story, and he told Juan Diego to go about his business.

Every time Juan Diego traveled over that hill, the beautiful princess appeared to him and repeated her request. Soon he started avoiding the hill altogether. Not long afterward, one of his dearest friends became deathly ill. There was no shorter route to visit his friend than over that fateful hill, so Juan Diego steeled himself and made the trip. The princess appeared to him again, this time asking why her church was not being built. The peasant fearfully explained that no one, much less the local bishop, believed that he had seen her. The woman nodded and made a gesture. Suddenly, that cold January hilltop became covered in roses! The woman ordered Juan Diego to gather the roses in his cloak and take them to the bishop as proof of her influence and power.

The peasant filled his cloak and left to visit the bishop. When he arrived, he opened up his cloak to let the pile of roses fall to the floor, and they both were astonished. At some point during his trip, an image of the beautiful princess had appeared on the inside of his cloak. The bishop was also stunned: the beautiful native princess that Juan Diego had been describing was none other than the Virgin Mary herself! Just then, a messenger arrived to inform the bishop that there was no more need to prepare a funeral for Juan Diego's dying friend, because he had suddenly recovered from his illness. The bishop could recognize

miracles when he saw them. He fell to his knees in worship and ordered that the Virgin Mary's church be built immediately.

While the bishop may have recognized the image as that of the Virgin Mary, it's no surprise that Juan Diego described her as a native princess. The image inside his cloak shared a startling number of similarities with images of Tonantzin as well, even directly incorporating some Aztec symbols. Instead of a fair-skinned woman like most images of the Virgin Mary, this woman had a distinctly darker skin tone. Her long, loose hair coupled with the black cord wrapped around her waist were traditional Aztec symbols of pregnancy. Over her lower belly was painted a traditional Aztec symbol called the *nahui-ollin*, a four-petaled jasmine that symbolized the center of both time and creation. The crescent moon on which she stood may have referred back to the lands of Aztecs, who sometimes called their lands "the place at the center of the moon." Combined with her cloak of stars, which symbolized the complete heavens, the image contained many elements often used for the great Aztec celestial mother goddess. That the apparition requested her church be built atop a destroyed temple of Tonantzin only strengthened the legend of this goddess's survival.

How did this apparition of the Virgin Mary become known as Our Lady of Guadalupe? The story of Juan Diego has the peasant breathlessly describing his vision using the Nahuatl term *coatlxopeuh*, meaning "[she] who crushes the serpent." Because the Virgin Mary is often depicted crushing the head of a serpent, usually identified as Satan, the peasant's choice of words made sense to the Spanish. The word is pronounced "quatlasupe," however, which is similar to another word that was very near and dear to the Spaniards' hearts. That word was *Guadalupe*, which

is actually an Arabic term meaning “river of the wolf” that dates back to the Moorish occupation of Spain. It refers back to another specific face of the Virgin Mary called the Virgen de Guadalupe that came from the Extremadura province in Spain. The shrine dedicated to her there housed one of the most famous Madonna statues in all of Europe—that of a black-skinned Madonna purportedly carved by Saint Luke, one of Jesus’s apostles.

A number of dark-complexioned Virgin Mary icons scattered throughout Europe are collectively referred to as Black Madonnas. They are not generally believed to have been painted that way to represent a non-European ancestry. Instead, many people think that these Black Madonnas sit atop ancient shrines dedicated to the Egyptian goddess Isis, and the cathedrals that house them are built on her ancient sites of power. Several of these Black Madonna icons are associated with powerful miracles and have developed quite a cult of devotion.

The Virgen de Guadalupe herself is credited with many miracles and, even today, enjoys quite a large number of devotees. Cortés himself was fanatically devoted to her, having grown up in that region of Spain. In fact, he carried two battle standards with him. One was dedicated to Saint John the Apostle. The other was dedicated to the Virgen de Guadalupe, which he used as an official flag for many years. He also was known to carry an image of her in his pocket. Therefore, it’s understandable that the Spaniards assumed the dark-complexioned image Juan Diego presented was their own Virgen de Guadalupe coming to join her faithful servants in the New World. This conclusion is especially easy to understand because the term Juan Diego repeated—*coatlxopeuh*—was so close to their familiar term for the Virgin Mary.

Interestingly, there is some belief that Our Lady of Guadalupe and Santa Muerte are both emanations of the Virgin Mary! According to Biblical tradition, the Virgin Mary was present when Jesus was crucified and died, that she helped prepare his body for entombment, and that she was one of the three who discovered his tomb was empty and he had ascended into Heaven. The Virgin Mary not only brought her son into this world but also saw him out of it. This makes her his mother not only in life but also in death. Doctrine further indicates that the Virgin Mary is the mother of humanity by extension and that by acceptance of her son, a gentle rebirth into Heaven is assured.

Since Santa Muerte is seen as a maternal figure who either births us into the spirit world or into our next reincarnation, some believe that she is the Virgin Mary given a skeletal form, particularly Our Lady of Guadalupe. This is why some images of Santa Muerte are drawn to resemble that particular emanation of the Virgin Mary. Santa Muerte even has a common title that closely mirrors hers: Our Lady of the Holy Death. For this reason and the numerous other connections between Santa Muerte and the Virgin Mary, it is no wonder that some people think that they are aspects of the same figure.

## The Survival of Mictecacihuatl as Santa Muerte?

One of the basic premises of Aztec cosmology is that the ages of mankind cycled through a birth-death-rebirth cycle. All of humanity was destined to wait in the cold womb of the goddess of the underworld, Mictecacihuatl, until their restoration to life via Tonantzin and the other Aztec fertility deities. Both goddesses were critical to this cycle. If the goddess Tonantzin

survived in some way to become Our Lady of Guadalupe, what happened to her counterpart in death, Mictecacihuatl?

There is much belief that Santa Muerte's great annual festival, the Dia de los Muertos, evolved from a much earlier Aztec celebration that venerated their gods of death and sacrifice, which of course included Mictecacihuatl. Because the Spanish initially depended on the cooperation of the native population, they were forced to grudgingly accept some Aztec customs. One such custom involved their annual celebrations acknowledging the power of death and sacrifice as well as the souls of the departed. These festivals were the Miccailhuitontli (Small Festival of the Dead) and Huey Miccailhuitl (Great Festival of the Dead) that ran one after another, lasting from July 24 through September 1. Much like Catholic missionaries had to turn the Roman midwinter holiday of Saturnalia into the Christmas holiday celebrating Jesus's birth, the priests were forced to Catholicize these Aztec festivals. They moved their observance to November 2, or All Soul's Day, to coincide with the same day that Catholics remember their own dead. These beliefs combined to create the modern Dia de los Muertos festival. However, Mictecacihuatl was but one of the many Aztec deities of death and sacrifice venerated by the Aztecs during their original celebrations. Why would she have survived to the modern day instead of the others?

The goddess Mictecacihuatl may have enjoyed an elevated position relative to the other Aztec gods, as evidenced by the belief that she never traded her ritual mask with other deities. Given that the Aztecs deeply believed that death and sacrifice were necessary for the continuation of life, it is reasonable to believe that Mictecacihuatl was particularly revered as a dominant death deity. This would imply that she had a large cult following among

the Aztecs. If she was so popular, why isn't her modern form as Santa Muerte as well known as Our Lady of Guadalupe?

The veneration of Mictecacihuatl would have included vast amounts of sacrifices, including human sacrifices. Human sacrifice (and the cannibalism that reportedly sometimes followed it) was abhorrent to the Spanish. They condemned the practice as utterly Satanic, and it was the first thing that Cortés outlawed. By necessity, any veneration of Mictecacihuatl would have continued in secret, far away from the watchful eyes of the Spanish priests. Since the practices surrounding the gods of death and sacrifice were specifically targeted by the Spanish, it is amazing that any elements of these practices survived into the modern era, much less to become the widely popular Dia de los Muertos festival.

The Aztecs refused to stop celebrating their festivals of the dead, which forced the Catholic priests to adopt them instead. Since Mictecacihuatl likely held a central and special position during these festivals, many believe that her cult simply hid itself among the population when it was targeted by the Spanish. This is how Santa Muerte emerged as such a specific and powerful figure in such a relatively short period of time. Those who believe that Mictecacihuatl evolved to become Santa Muerte point to a number of similarities between the two figures. First, Santa Muerte is characterized as an extremely dominant maternal death figure with a powerful protective capacity. She is normally depicted as a skeleton wearing fine robes with ladylike adornments. This would also be an accurate description of the goddess Mictecacihuatl, who was often depicted as an elaborately dressed skeletal noblewoman.

Many of Mictecacihuatl's functions were highly protective. Not only did she hold dominion over the west, where the sun

sank into the underworld, but she was also the one who made it possible for it to rise the next morning. Her skeletal mouth was often shown hung agape to swallow the nighttime stars and the demons that dwelled between them, clearing the path for the sun. Mictecacihuatl was also a maternal figure. The Aztecs believed that those who died had to make the dangerous journey to her underworld palace to await their eventual rebirth. There they would wait within her frozen womb until the next age. In this way, Mictecacihuatl served as the mother of all humanity, despite being a goddess of death. Santa Muerte is likewise famous for her protective character and capacity. As the power of death who reaps the dying into the afterlife, she can also be viewed as a maternal figure.

Another simple but compelling argument for Mictecacihuatl's survival as Santa Muerte relates back directly to how Tonantzin may have influenced Our Lady of Guadalupe. The goddess Tonantzin may have been mapped onto her nearest closest analog within the Catholic faith, the Virgin Mary, thus creating Our Lady of Guadalupe. Aztec sensibilities would require there to be an opposing figure to complete the cyclical process of death and rebirth. Given that Mictecacihuatl apparently held a special place in the hearts of the Aztecs and that the Aztecs insisted on retaining their festivals of the dead, it follows easily that they likewise retained their goddess of the underworld. Their sense of order and balance required it.

Some view embracing the Aztec form of Santa Muerte as a matter of cultural pride and a way of embracing their ancestral roots. This has had an interesting effect on some magical practices associated with Santa Muerte. For example, Aztec-themed pictures and statues of Santa Muerte are commonly available, many

of them showing her dressed in elaborate robes and crowned with feathers. The preferred ritual weapon for many devotees is an obsidian knife, a choice that is clearly Aztec inspired.

As a strong, educated, and organized people, the Aztecs were in a unique position to preserve some elements of their culture despite Spanish colonization. This is readily seen in many aspects of modern Mexican culture, as with the veneration Our Lady of Guadalupe. How much of Mictecacihuatl's cult survived into the modern era is unfortunately difficult to trace. This lack of a connection has not stopped millions of devotees from associating Santa Muerte with this ancient Aztec goddess anyway.

Despite some of the Aztec imagery and practices associated with Santa Muerte, not all of her devotees believe her roots are in pre-Spanish Mexico. They argue that the Aztec-inspired elements of her modern worship, such as the obsidian knife, are common to indigenous cultures of the region and are thus not specific to the Aztecs or to Mictecacihuatl in particular. These and other discrepancies lead some devotees to believe that Santa Muerte is actually a European figure embraced by the Aztecs. What European death figures were available for the Aztecs to select? This question is explored in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 3

# The Sainthood of Death



Some scholars and magicians argue that Santa Muerte does not originate from pre-Spanish Mexico and is instead a European import adopted by the Aztecs. These folks contend that while undoubtedly the Aztecs were powerful and influential, they ruled by force over a large number of conquered tribes who did not necessarily share their beliefs. The Aztecs also expanded their territory quite rapidly, and their dominance lasted for only two hundred years. The tribes over which the Aztecs ruled were fractious and often chafed under the hands of their Aztec masters. To promote social cohesion, the Aztecs enacted reforms such as public education designed to teach the population about Aztec ways. Successfully establishing themselves as an Aztec nation failed, however, because many of the conquered tribes were quite willing to assist the Spanish in overthrowing them. Since the Aztec people and culture weren't unified, the survival

of their specific beliefs was at risk. How could one very particular goddess of death survive the Spanish purge of Aztec culture, then, especially one who would have been the recipient of many human sacrifices?

A question like this casts doubts on the survival of Mictēcacihuatl's cult. If Santa Muerte does not have her roots in pre-Spanish Mexico, then clearly she must have come from Europe. What death-oriented figures did the Europeans believe in and import with them into Mexico? Perhaps this is how the story of Santa Muerte developed instead. This chapter explores the European theory of origin for Santa Muerte.

## A Saint for Every Reason

The veneration of Catholic saints is a confusing topic for many non-Catholics. The reason for this is that Catholics profess their belief in the Holy Trinity, which consists of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. How then can they appear to worship so many different spiritual figures?

The answer lies within the Virgin Mary, who is often referred to as the Queen of Saints. Because she made it possible for God to attain a physical form as Jesus, she represents a unique bridge between humanity and the divine that can be crossed by having faith in her son. Those who have managed to cross this bridge of faith are saints, who function as spiritual intercessors for those who call upon them. They do not have the power to grant miracles, but they do have the special capacity to ask God for them on your behalf. This is why Catholics venerate saints, although strictly speaking, they do not “worship” them; worship is reserved for God alone.

Many saints are thought to have a particular area of expertise. For example, a woman on the verge of divorce might pray to Saint Priscilla, the patroness of loving marriages, for help in saving her relationship. A man struggling to make his dry-cleaning business succeed would pray to Saint Homobonus, the patron of business-people, tailors, and cloth makers. Catholics recognize over 1,500 official saints, meaning that a saint can be found for virtually any purpose. In the first eight or nine centuries of the Catholic Church, the process of confirming saints wasn't formalized. This leads many to believe that some ancient pagan gods were simply renamed and included alongside the Catholic pantheon.

The Catholic Church has a number of official saints who specialize in death and dying. For example, Saint Margaret of Antioch was brutally tortured to death at the age of fifteen for refusing to renounce her faith and marry a local Roman patriarch. She is one of the saints whom Joan of Arc claimed guided her. Some scholars doubt that Saint Margaret of Antioch ever actually existed, but she is considered important nonetheless because of her connection to the story of Joan of Arc. As another example of religious syncretism, scholars argue that her other name, Marina ("of the sea"), likely points to a remnant of an ancient goddess tradition in Antioch, one probably associated with Aphrodite. For her death by torture, Saint Margaret of Antioch became the patroness of the dying.

Another official Catholic saint that is strongly associated with death is Saint Joseph, the husband of the Virgin Mary. Because he died in the arms of Jesus and the Virgin Mary, he is said to guarantee an easy and happy death to any who venerate him. Saints Michael and Raphael, both archangels, are also considered death patrons. Saint Michael's duty is to protect the souls

of the dead, and Saint Raphael's duty is to guide them. Together, they are charged with taking souls to their appropriate afterlife realm, be it Heaven, Purgatory, or Hell.

Since death is a powerful and universal experience, it's unsurprising that the Catholics already recognize a number of spiritual intercessors dedicated to it. However, it's also pretty clear that Catholics don't mind if their saints have overlapping functions. What prevents them from adding Santa Muerte to their collection? It's not just her popularized associations with drug trafficking, violence, and black magic. Even if her reputation were spotless and pristine, Santa Muerte could never be adopted as an official Catholic saint. The reason for this is simple. After centuries of adopting saints by popular affirmation, the Catholic Church devised a formal canonization process that was finalized in 1588. The first and most important qualifier for sainthood is that the candidate is to have once been a verifiable living person. Since Santa Muerte does not meet this qualification, she cannot officially be canonized. The most that could happen is that her cult could gain official tolerance from the Catholic Church, a status that the cults of many other uncanonized "folk" saints already enjoy.

## The Origins of Azrael, the Angel of Death

One figure with whom Santa Muerte shares many physical characteristics is Azrael, the angel of death. In fact, sometimes Santa Muerte is mistaken for an alternate identity to Azrael. Both are skeletal robed figures carrying a scythe with which to carry out their eternal duties. Azrael often also features symbols such as hourglasses to signify how much time a person has remaining and scales to measure their sins. Another common symbol is that

of an owl, a creature whose unique wings allow it to fly nearly silently and who can also see in perfect darkness. This makes owls frequently associated with the underworld, often as messengers or as harbingers of fate. The wings of the angel of death are sometimes thought to be owl's wings, indicating his silent and swift speed. Santa Muerte also commonly features such symbolic elements as owls and hourglasses, and sometimes even sports a lovely set of wings. This often makes her appear to be an angel just like Azrael. Is Santa Muerte related to the angel of death?

The connection between Santa Muerte and Azrael is not a direct one. Azrael is one of the most commonly associated figures with mortality in the world. Most people assume that he is a figure from the Bible that made his way into mainstream secular culture, yet this isn't exactly true. Azrael is not even an archangel according to Catholic doctrine. While the angel of death is a common figure to all three Abrahamic religions, he's never actually given a name in the Bible or in the Quran. This has caused some confusion concerning the different roles he played, which in turn has given him a somewhat dark reputation. For example, he is sometimes identified as the serpent who tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden instead of Lucifer. The reason is that by taking a bite of the forbidden apple, Eve traded eternal life and ignorance for wisdom at the price of an eventual death. This would seem like a consequence uniquely suited for the angel of death to bestow upon Eve and her descendants. Since the serpent in the Garden of Eden is also associated with Lucifer, who is considered by many to be an evil and diabolic figure, some of these associations carried over to Azrael as well.

Where did Azrael get his name, if not one of the Abrahamic holy books? The name translates to "helper of God" in Hebrew,

which is unsurprising because some ancient sources indicate that God made death first before the rest of creation. The reason for this is that death moves the cycle of change, which made it necessary for God's divine order to move forward. Others contend that he ultimately derived his name from that of the prophet, Ezra. God gave Ezra visions of the end of the world, which was to end in chaos and slaughter. God tasked Ezra with returning the Hebrews back to their religious ways, which had been abandoned when the great temple built by King Solomon was destroyed. Ezra completed his task with zeal, writing the first twenty-four books of the Hebrew Bible, as well as an additional seventy books of wisdom that were intended for the eyes of the rabbis alone. For completing this task of bringing God's wisdom back to the Jews, Ezra was rewarded with ascension directly into Heaven without dying, one of the few mortals allowed to do so.

The story of Ezra has an interesting relationship to that of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. The serpent offered Eve wisdom, but by accepting it, man would become independent, forced from the Garden of Eden and subjected to decay and mortality. Ezra offered a reversal of this condition. By accepting and obeying God's law, man would go to the bright and beautiful gardens of Heaven after dying. He would be spared the ultimate final death wrought on the world by a vengeful God when the Apocalypse arrived. Because of this inverted relationship, some scholars believe that Ezra lent his name to the unnamed angel, who would wind up being known as Azrael.

## The Grim Reapress of Spain

The connection between Santa Muerte and the angel of death is made through the figure of the Grim Reaper. The Grim Reaper is

another title that is frequently given to the angel of death, although the Grim Reaper eventually evolved to become its own cultural figure independent of Azrael. Certainly, the two share the same imagery, both often depicted as winged male skeletons wearing tattered black robes and carrying hefty scythes and hourglasses. Even as the embodiments of a universal experience—death—it can be hard to imagine how the angel of death and the Grim Reaper came to be such common and popular cultural icons. The sorrow, grief, and pain that accompany Death rarely make it a welcome visitor. How then did the Grim Reaper gain such cultural traction to emerge as his own independent figure?

European culture became focused on death starting in the 14th century. Europe then was emerging from decades of bloody warfare only to face the Black Death. The Black Death was the name given to a series of epidemics of the bubonic plague that swept like wildfire throughout Europe, killing ultimately 30 to 60 percent of the population. The decimation was so great that Europe would not recover its 14th-century population levels for over three hundred years, well into the 17th century.

This decimation, in turn, sparked intense religious fervor throughout Europe. Many saw the plague epidemics as God's judgment for a variety of widespread sins, such as violence, greed, heresy, fornication, and worldliness, as well as the direct hand of the angel of death made plain. Predictably, Europe's culture took a dark turn during this period. An artistic theme called the *danse macabre* (French, "Dance of Death") began to dominate art and literature, and would continue to influence them for several centuries thereafter. This artistic theme frequently showed death in the familiar form of the Grim Reaper interacting with the living in their everyday lives. There are also many images

of dying people and the souls of the dead being accompanied into Heaven or Hell by the same winged skeletal angelic figure. Interestingly, danse macabre-themed artwork shows the Grim Reaper interacting as readily with kings as he does with beggars. The epidemics of bubonic plague did not discriminate between the rich and the poor, and neither did Death.

Naturally, the image of the Grim Reaper is frequently seen in artwork during this period. However, another figure emerged



*"Where All Is Vanity, Death Victorious"*  
by Hieronymus Wierix (1553–1619)  
Courtesy of Wellcome Library, London

along with the Grim Reaper whose duty was also to shepherd the souls of the newly dead. This figure was a feminine Grim Reaper (or Reapress, as coined by R. Andrew Chesnut). Predominantly seen in Italy, Portugal, and Spain, the Grim Reapress was sometimes styled as Death's wife and was seen to be a kinder and gentler form of Death. She was thought to hasten to the side of dying children to give them a soft and sweet

passing. Unlike her husband, the Grim Reapress could also be bargained with. She was depicted as a robed skeletal figure bearing a scythe, but with added feminine accoutrements such as flowers and jewelry. In other words, this figure resembles Santa Muerte rather closely.

Cortés and his men would have been well familiar with the Grim Reapress, who was referred to as La Parca (“the parched one”) in Spain. The idea that death had a feminine nature was easily acceptable to the Spanish because it was actually a very old notion. The ancient Greeks believed that three powerful goddesses called the Moirai spun the thread of a person’s life. The eldest of the Moirai, Atropos the Unturnable, cut their life thread when their life was over. These goddesses ruled the fate of man with iron fists; they could be bartered with but never commanded, not even by the king of the gods.

The ancient Romans adopted the Moirai along with many other Greek beliefs. These goddesses then became known as the Parcae, or the Fates. The leader of the Moirai, Atropos, was renamed to Parca Morta, the Fate of Death. It is from her name that we derive many terms surrounding death such as *mortality* and *mortuary*. Parca Morta was also thought to be a skeletal figure wearing dark robes, carrying various reaping implements such as a scythe, sickle, and scissors. Because she alone could judge a man and decide how much time he had remaining, Parca Morta also carried an hourglass and scales. Excepting sex, all of these elements are likewise common to Azrael in his guise as the Grim Reaper.

In Spain, death was easily personified as female. When the Roman Empire collapsed, the language and influence didn’t completely vanish. Even though the identities of the first two Fates eventually became lost to common knowledge, their eldest death-dealing sister, Parca Morta, left a lasting impact. The Iberian Peninsula, the location of modern-day Spain and Portugal, had long been a Roman province. The Spanish word for death, *muerte*, is also derived from Parca Morta’s name. Because the Spanish language is a gendered language, the word *muerte* is considered

feminine. Since the abstract concept of death already has a feminine tone, it is easy to conceive of death as being a woman.

For this reason, there is no doubt that Cortés and his men would have been familiar with the idea of a feminine death, and La Parca in particular. They also took her with them—and the practices associated with her—into the New World. Numerous accounts in the 18th and 19th centuries describe mestizo peasants dressing up skeletal wooden dolls and addressing them as La Muerte. The peasants would ask the skeletal dolls for favors, giving them necklaces if such favors were granted and viciously beating them if they were not. These types of practices are conducted by many Santa Muerte devotees, who also often make their own skeletal dolls! It is easy to see why many people believe that Santa Muerte's roots lie very deeply in Europe. However, why on earth would anyone treat a saint's icon the way the mestizo peasants did, alternately giving them lovely gifts and then beating them? The answer lies within the Catholic folk practice of saint humiliation.

## The Humiliation of Saints

Saint humiliation is commonly performed by Catholics for both official and unofficial saints alike. This practice certainly extends to Santa Muerte, since she is considered a folk saint. Many people form deep, strong bonds with the saints that they venerate. Catholics are encouraged to do this because the ultimate purpose of the saints is to draw you closer to God. It is therefore common practice to respect and celebrate the icons of saints because they are tangible symbols of the saints' connection with God. Giving gifts to the statues of saints is a time-honored practice, especially when a saint arranges for a miracle on the devotee's behalf. It is

also very common to see the statues of saints wearing elaborate gowns being paraded around the streets of Catholic cities during festivals, with thousands of the faithful following and singing, dancing, and throwing flowers. Santa Muerte herself frequently enjoys this treatment during the Dia de los Muertos celebration. After being bathed, perfumed, and dressed by her devotees, Our Lady of Death is treated to a day out on the town with a procession that often ends in the local graveyard. All these behaviors point to a common underlying idea: the statue is to some degree alive because it is empowered by the saint. Giving the statues gifts and treating them with love and respect are therefore the same as doing it for the saints themselves.

Of course, if a saint misbehaves, the opposite can easily happen. The statues of saints have been subjected to burial, drowning, burning, being faced toward walls or turned upside down, covered with cloths and excrement, and virtually every other form of abuse that you can imagine. For centuries, this saint humiliation has been practiced by clergy and laypeople alike. If the statue is believed to be the physical embodiment of the saint, then harassing and mistreating it are considered to be effective tactics to get compliance.

My favorite example dates back to 13th-century England and the monks of Saint Osyth. The monks took great care of their martyred saint, bathing her every day and ensuring that a monk was always with her at all hours praying. One day, the Bishop of London demanded from them a huge sum of money. The monks responded by emptying the shrine of Saint Osyth of its treasures, scattering ashes and mud everywhere, and throwing her statue outside into the snow. They gathered around, weeping and wailing that their saint had forsaken them. Within twelve hours, the

Bishop of London was struck both deaf and blind, and he was dead a week later. The monks of Saint Osyth promptly returned their martyr and her belongings to her newly cleaned shrine.

Although this practice was officially outlawed by the Catholic Church in 1293, the custom continues among many Catholics today. In fact, many of the traditional saint humiliation practices that I know I learned from the nuns who taught my childhood religion classes! For example, Saint Joseph is the adoptive father of Jesus Christ and the patron saint of laborers, particularly carpenters. When a person is desperately looking for employment, she will pray to Saint Joseph. If he fails to deliver in a timely fashion, it is customary to face him toward the wall like a naughty child. The nuns also taught me a little sing-song prayer to Saint Anthony of Padua, the patron saint of finding lost or stolen items. It goes, "Saint Anthony, Saint Anthony, return my lost item back to me." Statues of this particular saint are often produced with small removable statuettes of the infant Jesus. If this little piece of Catholic magic didn't work, the nuns explained, I was to harass Saint Anthony by stealing away his baby Jesus until he delivered! The nuns, of course, warned me strictly to not lose the baby Jesus myself.

Because Santa Muerte is treated as a folk saint, she is subjected to both categories of respectful and disrespectful practices. Santa Muerte is a particularly worldly spirit, enjoying all the fine and beautiful things that life has to offer. Thus, it is quite natural that she would respond well to being beautifully dressed and feted. My own Santa Muerte statues have quite an impressive wardrobe of satin gowns trimmed with beads, ribbons, and jewels. I make it a point every week to bathe, perfume, and dress my statues in order to strengthen my relationship with her. My behavior is not unusual in this custom among her devotees.

Of course, many devotees of Santa Muerte will punish her when she misbehaves as well. One popular method is to take her scythe away, which is thought to deeply annoy her and prompt her compliance. Turning her toward the wall, placing her in a closet, or covering her with an ugly piece of rough cloth (like burlap) is also common. I have been known to give my Santa Muerte statues stern lectures. In extreme situations, I will burn cheap, foul-smelling incense on her altar, promising only to return the normally sweet odors of her temple when I get what I need.

Some people balk at this treatment of Santa Muerte, arguing that Our Lady of Death should be treated like one's own loving mother and never subjected to any abuse. Others argue that respect is a two-way street, and after spending hours cleaning and praying and loving the Saint of Death, they should get something in return. After all, would one's own mother not do everything she could to help her child? Performing mild acts of saint humiliation may be the only means available of truly expressing your displeasure beyond mere words. This is the argument behind the mistreatment of Saint Osyth by her own monks when the Bishop of London demanded his money. The tactic is a time-honored one and, apparently, is also effective. It is up to you, of course, to decide whether you would like to use these kinds of methods yourself.

## La Muerte in the New World?

Many people believe that Santa Muerte's European roots run much deeper than her Aztec ones. After all, the figure of La Parca with whom Cortés was so familiar is ultimately based on an ancient Greek goddess. Since there are several documented cases of mestizo peasants addressing skeletal dolls as La Muerte

and treating them much like any folk Catholic might, it is argued that they adopted this practice from the Spanish. That means that the Spanish themselves must have been treating La Parca as a kind of folk saint and giving her either gifts or grief as necessary. Thus, it is possible that La Parca was the original model for Santa Muerte and that any resemblance to Mictecacihuatl is actually an adaptation of Aztec customs to Spanish beliefs.

Despite the supporting evidence for both the Aztec and European origin theories, they appear to be at odds with each other. They are likewise irreconcilable with other theories of origin for Santa Muerte that place her either as yet another face of an African death goddess or even as a soul saved from Hell by the mercy of God. The broad diversity of origin theories for Santa Muerte indicates that the tendency to worship a female death figure is certainly cross-cultural. This points to yet a third way of looking at Santa Muerte: not precisely as a god or even an individual spirit, but as the current face of a universal power, that of a dark feminine death current. This perspective is further explored within the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

# Death's Feminine Ways



While the Aztec and European origin theories of Santa Muerte are the most popular, they are also at odds with each other. They likewise do not account for the proliferation of variant theories of origin for Santa Muerte, such as her possible African roots or her status as a soul elevated directly by God for the purpose of collecting the dead. While these stories are very interesting, they may be of limited use to the magician who perceives spirits and their relationships in modern psychological terms.

The modern era has given us many new ways of looking at ourselves as magical and spiritual creatures, especially in the study of psychology. The language of magic is now peppered with familiar psychological terms. For example, we find ourselves discussing whether our subconscious fears get in the way of successful magic. We worry about whether our egos are interfering with the outcomes of our spells and rituals (the dreaded “lust of result” so often discussed by chaos magicians), and whether our

psychological traumas can cause the real blockage of our psychic energy. We often talk about our dreams not as communications from the spirits but as simple symbolic messages produced by our sleeping minds that need interpretation instead. The terms that we frequently now use to discuss these concepts would have been foreign among magical practitioners centuries ago, and possibly even damningly heretical.

## No God but Man

One modern concept that certainly would have been unpopular in medieval and Renaissance Europe is the idea that the gods and spirits suffer—or perhaps may not even exist—without the continued invested belief of mankind. This concept is held as the reason that gods whose cults were quite popular in ancient eras, such as the cults of Baal and Isis, were regarded as having such great influence. The invested belief of thousands over centuries bolstered their power. As their cults faded, so did their overall influential capacity.

This thinking has led some to even speculate that the gods and spirits do not exist at all independently of mankind and arose by popular collective belief instead. Certain human behaviors and needs are constant and universal. We need to eat as well as to procreate, and we also get sick and die. We feel desires such as the need to seek wisdom and to conquer our neighbors. Because these experiences are universal, every culture has thus developed its own gods of war and wisdom, as well as agriculture, the weather, and so forth. This is also the reason that the appetites and behaviors of the ancient gods so clearly mirrored those of their human followers. In other words, God did not create man in his divine image. Man created God in his own mortal image instead. Some magical

practitioners take this idea even further, indicating that all spirits are projections created by human wants and needs and empowered by human consciousness. Without humanity, the spirits have no cause to exist. Practical exploration of this concept has even led the enterprising magician to develop techniques to create artificial spirits called servitors out of nothing but desire and thin air.

If the gods and spirits are born out of human needs and desires, the commonality between these experiences likewise creates a commonality between the spirits themselves. After all, every culture has had to secure its food supplies, cure its illnesses, and deal with its dead. If we view spirits in this way, it becomes possible to see them in terms of the forces that they represent instead of distinct personalities that happen to have influence over a certain sphere. This view helps the magician uncover equivalencies between them, even if their parent cultures are widely disparate. This also has the effect of making the identities of the faces themselves less important than the powers that they represent. The magician then can tap and target these powers directly, instead of being forced to view and access them through a particular divine lens.

It goes without question that humanity would have a need to make gods and spirits of the dead. Death is life's eventual guarantee, even ahead of taxes. If we may choose to create a spirit of the dead with any characteristics at all, why might we be compelled to create a figure such as Santa Muerte? And why would her cult experience such a meteoric rise in popularity in recent times?

## The Turning of an Aeon

If spirits exist to respond to the inventive needs of humanity, it is possible to view them as different names and faces put on universal

forces. Giving them divine faces makes it possible to interact with those forces effectively. There is no point in begging the sky for rain if no god lives there to hear you. As the needs and desires of people shift, so do their religious and spiritual beliefs. After all, we dream about and pray for that which we need and desire.

When these trends shift, they bring about massive cultural, political, and social changes that shape the outcome of an entire aeon of history. The shifting of these trends is never driven by a single voice. Instead, as human needs and desires change, we turn our attention to the spiritual powers that will best serve us.

Our needs and desires are reflected by the rise of the powers that we produce. For example, securing a consistent food supply was of paramount importance to our ancient agrarian ancestors because of the constant threat of famine. Thus, worshipping a fruitful and generous Great Mother Goddess concept to ensure good harvests makes a lot of sense. This idea shaped much of early human history and gave rise to many different examples of Great Mother Goddesses.

As cities grew larger and there were empires to be conquered, many believe that mankind felt the need to embrace more aggressive and masculine religious and spiritual ideas. As these male-oriented concepts took a center stage, patriarchal religions likewise supplanted the role of the feminine divinity. Thus, it can be said that the earliest aeon of man was marked by recognition of female divine power, but the aeon that followed it can be recognized by the widespread absence of the female divine. This lack of recognition of female divinity has had a serious and widespread impact on our culture.

This trend is now turning back on itself. This shift is evidenced not only by the rapid proliferation of neo-pagan belief systems, many of which have either a balanced gender view or a female-dominant one, but also in more traditionally male-dominated belief systems. These systems point to an overall rapid rise in interest in the power of the female divine, which heralds the turning of this particular aeonic trend. As with all aeonic trends, no one specific female divine figurehead dominates the movement. Instead, as our culture feels the trending turn toward the divine feminine current, we seek out divine figures to match. This is why there is such a proliferation of different kinds of goddess-oriented spirituality, a trend that will help define the next aeon.

Santa Muerte's explosion in popularity is certainly emblematic of this change, with her veneration representing the fastest-growing new religious movement in the world. This growth is particularly notable because opposing cultural forces—namely, the Catholic Church and governmental organizations—are actively working to damage her reputation and discredit her cult. What qualities or characteristics does Santa Muerte embody that make her so appealing?

## Seeking the Divine Feminine

The changing of aeonic trends points at the unconscious embrace of a particular power or concept. What does that mean in the case of embracing the divine feminine? In most of nature, the male seeds the female of his species, enabling her to bear and raise her young. Feminine energy is thus often characterized as attractive and sexual, full of the creative fertile power that enables physical manifestation. It also encompasses the nurturing impulse, lending the wisdom and patience needed to raise

the young of any species. When provoked, the female animal can be incredibly ferocious in defense of her young.

Of course, humans enjoy a greater role than animals, and in humans, the breadth of the divine feminine can be wholly explored. Often a Triple Goddess model is used, since the three different ages of the Goddess—maiden, mother, and crone—illustrate the different ages of a woman's natural life span and the roles most undertake in their lives.

These are not the only characteristics that the divine feminine embodies. Children usually learn the language and stories of their people at their mother's knee, and these teachings lay the foundations for how we relate to people and society as a whole. As the creators and arbiters of these social connections, women also step into roles such as caregivers for the sick and for the elderly. When they themselves grow old, women become free to teach their grandchildren from the depths of their knowledge, or contemplate their own rebirth and renewal. When women pass on, they may take this depth of understanding with them.

Empathy and emotional intelligence are also both gifts of the divine feminine. These characteristics reduce conflict and maintain social cohesion, which can make the bonds formed between women incredibly strong. These strong social connections, coupled with the inborn desire to stay creative and a natural industriousness, created many lady merchants out of simple spinners and potters.

The underlying theme of all these characteristics is that feminine energy creates order out of chaos by giving chaos form and often by giving form in abundance. This is the idea behind goddesses of fertility, after all, who frequently found themselves associated with animals like pigs because they birthe particularly

large litters. The worship of the goddess Cybele from Neolithic Turkey is an excellent example. This mother goddess sprang into form from primordial chaos and then promptly gave birth to her own son and lover, Attis. With Attis's aid, Cybele gave birth to the rest of the gods and filled creation with her wonders. This concept is likewise echoed in the story of the Greek mother goddess, Gaia, whose own story is based on Cybele's.

This ability to create from apparently nothing echoes in the other common functions of early goddesses that were revered worldwide. Many ancient goddesses were revered as the mistresses of the hearth and home, as well as the technical arts such as weaving and pottery that were often produced by women. These basic technologies made it possible for early tribes not only to clothe themselves, but also to store food for long periods. This capability freed them to develop the stories and traditions that laid the foundations of every society. Because mothers teach their children not only these skills but also the language and culture of their people, the divine feminine is also associated with wisdom and learning. This is another way in which the divine feminine also creates stability and growth out of chaos, and likewise why it is associated with earthly manifestation.

Many of the characteristics of the divine feminine—such as creative industry, empathy, and wisdom—are typically attributed to goddesses of form and fertility, such as Cybele and Freya. Their underlying concept is that they create out of nothing. Santa Muerte obviously takes a feminine form, but can she really be considered a particularly feminine figure given that death's principal power is to destroy?

While the female divine current is usually associated with creation and fertility, it also has an undeniable relationship with

the force of death. The divine feminine current is recognized as the bearer of life and source of the earth's fertile abundance. It has likewise always been associated with the power of death. The animals that are born in the spring will be killed for meat that autumn, and the earth accepts the blood of their birth and slaughter both equally. The spilling of blood renews the earth's creative ability, preparing it for greener and more fertile crops in the coming spring.

The recognition of this ancient and powerful relationship dominated early human cultures. Some of the earliest recorded human rites were festivals dedicated to Cybele. These festivals featured soaking seeds in the blood of sacrificed animals to guarantee their strength and vigor. Male devotees of Cybele would even castrate themselves and bury their severed organs in the ground in an attempt to impregnate the earth itself. The idea that the earth was also the medium for human rebirth was likewise well established. This is also the reason some cultures buried their dead in a fetal position. Burying useful items such as food, clothing, weapons, and tools with the dead is also a common funerary practice. These grave goods were necessary for the dead's comfort and success in the next world.

Blood, birth, and death also have a special significance for people. In women, the relationship between blood, birth, and death is easily seen during their monthly menstrual cycles, a feature that is unique among humans. Childbirth itself is also a bloody and dangerous process. Birth trauma and puerperal infection have been leading causes of death for pregnant women even up until the 20th century. They remain a leading cause of death for women in poorer nations worldwide.

Numerous examples of birth and life arising from death and sacrifice exist within Aztec culture. The Aztec society was built on this fact. Without death, there could be no continuation of the cycles of birth and renewal. This idea was strongly represented in their mythology. One excellent example lies in the story of how the heavens and the earth were made. The Aztecs revered another goddess named Tlaltecuhli, whose body made up the universe. Desiring to create a place for mankind, the other Aztec gods descended on her and tore her to pieces, stacking the parts together in such a way that made the earth and sky. The gods tried to console her that she would be fruitful and covered in trees and flowers, but she wept and refused to blossom. The gods resorted to drenching her in blood to appease her, and so repeated offerings of blood were thought to be the only way that the earth would remain in bloom.

The ancient Aztecs in particular recognized the struggle between life and death that played itself out during birth. Women giving birth were seen as brave warriors who were fighting the force of death itself. Those who survived childbirth were hailed as warriors. Those who died were revered as if they had been slain in battle. Their spirits were thought to be especially fierce and powerful. They were called *mociuaquetzque* (Nahuatl, “warrior in the shape of a woman”), and they were thought to guard the western passage into the underworld into which the sun was forced to descend every night. This was the precise same location that the goddess Mictecacihuatl ruled, according to the Aztec calendar.

Death and birth also have a very specific magical relationship. Without death, nothing new can be created. Decay feeds new life. Giving birth also plucks a person awaiting birth (or

rebirth) out of the spirit world and gives him or her a body. Thus, goddesses of death become the gateway through which one passes at the end of life in order to be born into a new one. This makes goddesses of death just as necessary to turn the wheels of creation as the goddesses of life. The idea of creation requiring both birth and death is a common cultural concept.

While the goddesses of death make excellent gatekeepers to the next life, would you want them present at a birth also? Many cultures went to great pains to bribe the gods and spirits of the dead to stay away from birthings because both mother and baby were at risk of being taken by them. In some cases, their attendance was required, though. For the Romans, the three Parcae, or Fates, attended the birth of every child to measure and cut the thread of his or her destiny. The goddess that cut the thread was normally called Parca Morta, but in the circumstances surrounding a birth, she was referred to as Parca Partula instead. We derive words such as *postpartum* from the same goddesses from whom we get words like *mortuary*!

The vast majority of Santa Muerte's origin stories give her a strong maternal foundation. This nature is seen clearly in her European roots where the goddess who cuts the threads of fate lends her name to the words surrounding birth. Mictecacihuatl was charged with protecting all the future infants of the next age of humanity. The Codex Borgia also groups her among a variety of goddesses who are shown breastfeeding their infants. The orishas with which she is typically grouped among the African ritual traditions, such as the fiery patroness of the cemeteries, Oya, also have strongly maternal characteristics. The followers of Santa Muerte recognize that death is present at all times and therefore welcome her at the births of their children. Because

Santa Muerte is seen as fiercely maternal, many devotees routinely ask the Saint of Death to guard and guide their children.

Death alone might be characterized as a relentless and entropic force, giving neither credence nor care to anything that it destroys in its path. When death's capacity to destroy is tempered with feminine qualities, a far more selective form of death is created. This form is seen in Santa Muerte. Despite her having nearly limitless power to obstruct or destroy, her touch can be surprisingly gentle and selective. Because she is quite wise, she is able to empathize with the people with whom she interacts. This capacity inspires her to lean toward mercy and teaching instead of wanton destruction. Santa Muerte is less likely to viciously cull than she is to carefully prune, gently shaping the outcomes of people and their circumstances instead. Finally, the Saint of Death clears new ground so that life may flourish.

Some devotees find it useful to see Santa Muerte in terms of the common Triple Goddess model with which many magical practitioners are familiar. The most obvious association related her back to the crone because Santa Muerte is a patroness of death. Like other crones, Santa Muerte is well capable of teaching hidden wisdom and inspiring lasting spiritual transformations. She also encompasses the other two aspects of the Triple Goddess model. Santa Muerte can be easily viewed in terms of the Maiden. The reason is that Death creates the opportunity for change, allowing for new and fresh beginnings. This is a very Maidenly characteristic. Santa Muerte also famously lusts for love, beauty, and pleasure, which are things frequently attributed to the Maiden portion of the model. Finally, Santa Muerte is frequently seen as a gentle, nurturing, and empathetic character, all qualities that are commonly associated with the

Mother aspect. Thus, it is clear that Santa Muerte encompasses a full range of feminine characteristics in terms of the Triple Goddess model.

## Understanding the Gifts of Death

Death's defining feature is that it counterbalances the power of life and the forces of growth and generativity. Death is the darker but necessary half of life, living energy, and the sexual drive. Death and dying create a void that life must grow and evolve in order to fill. Thus, death drives life's creative and fruitful cycles. This relationship between life and death is foundational to understanding the workings of nature. Grass must grow so that deer may eat it, and later so that we may eat the deer. Without the death of the deer, our own children may not survive.

The twin powers of life and death are deeply respected in many ancient cultures and enshrined in their mythologies. For example, Inanna was the Sumerian goddess of sexual pleasure and fertility. She was also the twin sister of Ereshkigal, the goddess of the underworld (in some descriptions, these goddesses are but a single goddess with a dual nature, both light and dark). The Aztec goddess Mictecacihuatl also embodied the powers of life and death, being both the keeper of the souls of the dead as well as the mother of all of humanity in the next age. Santa Muerte herself likewise represents these powers combined into one figure. Certainly, as Death incarnate, she has the ability to erode, decay, and destroy. By simply withholding her destructive influence, Santa Muerte allows life to flourish.

To say that the power of death had immense sway over both the Europeans and Aztecs is an understatement. Europeans were still reeling from war and plagues that had decimated their own

population. The dominance of the *danse macabre* cultural trend that led to the evolution of figures such as the Grim Reaper and La Parca are testaments to this. The Aztecs practiced sacrifice universally in order to repay the debts that the living owed the power of death. After all, no one would survive for long without harvest and slaughter.

The idea that death embodies an all-encompassing and nearly unlimited scope of power was certainly nothing new to either the Europeans or the Aztecs. In fact, this concept is nearly universal in application already. As far as life and creation spread, death follows to curb and counterbalance it. Without death, there is no drive to fill the empty space it creates. Death is therefore not an inherently negative force. This doesn't change the fact that many people have a negative perception of death. The power it holds over our lives is both ultimate and total. When we feel its nearness, we do not like the sense of shock and loss that it brings. It also has a way of reminding us of our own inevitable demise.

What powers does death possess other than the ability to erode and take life? Death has the power to affect and change all things in creation. In certain early versions of Genesis, God creates the power of death first, even before dividing the heavens and the earth and creating all of the angels. This makes death itself the oldest force in all of creation, secondary only to the pure creative power attributed to God. Some even consider the power of death to be superior to that of God's own son, Jesus, since even he had to experience its transformative power before he could ascend to his own rightful position in Heaven. In many cultures, even our own, the power of death is accorded a nearly omnipotent status. After all, people frequently joke that few

things are certain except death and taxes. This notion is an echo of a much earlier ancient idea, promoted by the Greeks in the form of the goddess Atropos, the cutter of the threads of fate. No one and nothing, not even the king of the gods, was immune to the power of death and the change that it brings.

Death is also frequently seen as a balancing force that is capable of extracting an exact judgment. This idea is likewise ancient, reflected in the function of goddesses such as Atropos. There are two reasons for this. The first is that death knocks equally at the gates of poor men and at the palaces of kings. It does not discriminate in terms of social class or standing. The majority of ancient peoples were not members of privileged social classes—there were far more peasant shepherds than high priests and kings. Members of the upper class often had the right to brutally tax, conscript, and even kill members of the peasant class, and enjoyed a far broader range of privileges. The idea that all-powerful death could suddenly appear to strike down a cruel and petty lord must have had broad appeal to many people.

The second reason that death is seen as a judging force is that sentencing prisoners to death for even minor crimes has been a standard practice worldwide for millennia. One reason for this is that the threat of death is a great deterrent. If you know you are going to be hanged for stealing, then you must evaluate each theft in terms of its real risk to your life. For much of human history, we have killed or enslaved criminals instead of imprisoning them—the rehabilitation of prisoners is a modern idea. In addition, keeping large quantities of people confined to a small area for a prolonged period creates many practical problems, including providing adequate sanitation and limiting the spread of disease. Many of the technologies to make this possible were

not available until the 19th and 20th centuries. Thus, there was no way to keep prisoners, even if societies had wanted to. Therefore, death by execution was a practical means of dealing with the criminal population, and so death itself became associated with judgment.

The power of death is also frequently seen as a keeper of wisdom and learning. This idea is likewise an ancient one. The Fates, for example, wove the magic thread that outlined the course of a person's life. The course of man's fate was preordained. The Fates knew everything that had happened and was likewise fated to be. This power gave the Fates the enormous capacity to understand mankind and his foibles. Any leniency in their decisions was based on this massive depth of wisdom. The idea that death was purveyor of wisdom was also rooted in the ancient Jewish tales that deeply influenced Christianity. Because death was likewise thought to be created first, even before all of the angels and the earth, it is the oldest power in creation. The serpent in the Garden of Eden is also sometimes identified as the angel of death. This makes death the purveyor of wisdom as well as freedom from the perfect-but-limited cradle that the Garden of Eden represents. Thus, the consequence of seizing divine wisdom and leaving the divine cradle is the acceptance of death.

The power of death is also seen as having an incredibly transformative touch. Nature's renewal depends on it; rotting plant and animal matter makes the most fertile compost, and the desolate ash fields left in the wake of a raging forest fire quickly fill with new green seedlings. We also leave our bodies behind to be buried and decompose within the earth, or often to be burned to ashes in a funeral pyre. No person or thing escapes its eventual

touch. Even mythological exceptions to this rule, such as the Greek hero Hercules and the Biblical prophet Ezra, are rare.

Where does our consciousness go when we die? The idea that our consciousness continues in some fashion is an extremely common and ancient spiritual belief. For those who believe that the earth is the scene of our perpetual reincarnations, death is a necessary step in that process. For those who believe that after dying we are transported to Heaven, Hell, or some other sort of eternal realm, death is likewise a necessary step. In many cultures across millennia, the dead have been buried with useful grave items such as tools and food for their use in the next world. Some cultures even continue to make offerings to their dead such as food, water, perfume, and incense, either to appease them or to beg for their favor. These practices would be impossible to conceive of if a prevalent cultural belief about some kind of life after death did not exist. This idea is the foundation of the Day of the Dead festival and why family members return to the graves of their loved ones to celebrate them and ask for their protection and favor.

In more abstract terms, death also has the power to decay, destroy, and thus transform beliefs, habits, and attitudes. The sense of shock created when someone near and dear to you dies is a perfect catalyst for all kinds of personal change. An individual may suddenly decide to start seeking regular medical care after a cancer diagnosis kills a beloved grandmother, for example. A person may find himself or herself to be more patient and forgiving with other people when a family member dies with whom he or she never made peace. Of course, these changes may be more destructive as well. More than one person has collapsed into severe alcoholism thanks to the death of a loved one.

Understanding and accepting death's transformative power are often key steps to preventing such a terrible personal outcome.

Ultimately, the changes that death creates may be simple but profound, such as in the sudden death of a loved one. The death of a spouse, for example, brings not only a great deal of personal introspection, but also a profound change in family and community relationships. A grieving spouse loses the company, closeness, and emotional support of his or her dearest partner, and also loses the deceased spouse's practical backing. Funeral expenses create huge bills as the second income suddenly disappears, and one less person is available to help make dinner and get the kids to bed. This loss causes friends and family to suddenly come together to support the surviving spouse, which causes further changes in their own family dynamics. These friends and family members themselves may lose a large amount of their own personal time and income in support of the surviving spouse and children. These actions may strengthen family ties—or severely strain them.

Yet out of this experience, positive gains can be made. The shock and introspection brought about by a loved one's death can also clarify relationships, as well as inspire them to grow. Estranged family members often find a way of forgiving each other in death's wake, for instance, finding their way back into the fold. Individually, affected family members may also find new outlets to express their grief in ways that have lasting positive benefits. They may decide to take up a serious artistic hobby, such as painting or writing. A sudden death can also have a sobering effect on your future planning, such as the reality of needing to financially plan for your own funeral, or needing to cope with the eventual mortality of other friends and family

members. Even these common kinds of changes can have profound and lasting effects on the lives of those whom death has touched, changes that otherwise may not have occurred. This is why the death of a loved one is often remembered as a milestone event in a person's life.

## The Scope of Santa Muerte's Role

Santa Muerte is the feminine embodiment of the power of death. As soon as anything becomes manifest, it likewise becomes subject to the power of decay and death. This means that as the power of death incarnate, Santa Muerte holds sway over anything and everything touched by decay and death. This includes the lives of animals, plants, and people; the erosion of both business plans and mountains; the destruction of property, reputation, and relationships; and virtually any other thing you can think of. There is nothing so great or so small that it cannot be altered forever by death and decay. As some Santa Muerte practitioners would remind you, even Jesus Christ, the son of God, was not exempt from death's cold touch.

When death takes a feminine form, it is usually in the crone aspect of the Triple Goddess model. This stands to reason because this is the age of womanhood that is guaranteed to pass on into death. Sometimes death is seen in a more maternal light, likely due to the high mortality rates long associated with pregnancy, and rarely is death characterized as a young maiden.

Santa Muerte is unique in that she encompasses all aspects of the Triple Goddess model in ever-changing maidenly, maternal, and crone-like roles. For example, she is commonly described as young, beautiful, and vivacious; hailed as the sweetest of lovers and the assurance of passion and lasting joy. Statues of her are

often richly dressed, covered in attractive jewelry and feted with liquor and cigars. Yet she also is hailed as the careful and protective mother, and pregnant statues of Santa Muerte are readily available. There are even Santa Muerte statues in the pose of the Virgin Mary in Michelangelo's *Pieta*, embracing either the body of Jesus or a skeleton. Of course, Santa Muerte is commonly seen as the ancient scythe-bearer, having also become the wise and capable crone in her advanced years.

By embracing all aspects of the divine feminine within her lethal self, Santa Muerte grows beyond the role typically embodied by other feminine death figures. Not only does she have the power to take life, but she also has the power to renew it and rebirth it. This feature is by her complete embrace of her maidenly and maternal aspects and also from her mythological roots in Mictecacihuatl. In accordance with Aztec teachings, once the current age of man ended, the cycle would begin again and the dead would be reborn again from Mictecacihuatl's cold earthen womb. Thus, Santa Muerte's influence encompasses the entire cycle of birth, growth, decay, and rebirth. Like many of the powerful goddesses of old, Santa Muerte sows the seeds of renewal within her deadly wake.

These facts combined imply that Santa Muerte overall enjoys a much broader scope of power, beyond that of other death goddesses who only encompass one aspect of the Triple Goddess model. As she who has the power to remove, change, add, or renew anything within creation, she likewise embraces the fate-determining ability embodied by goddesses like Atropos. Her ancient and primal power to affect all things is likewise enshrined within ancient myth. This is thanks to mythological contributions such as the idea that death was created first before

the rest of creation, that even fate may change the course of the gods, and that even Jesus was subject to death's power.

Santa Muerte, therefore, is an ultimate spiritual arbiter of all earthly manifestation. Precious few other spiritual figures occupy this interesting "Lord of the World" niche. One comparable figure is Melek Taus, the Peacock Angel worshipped by the Yezidis. They believe that this world contains pain and suffering because it is not run by God. Instead, God gave control of the world to his most beautiful angel, Melek Taus. Unfortunately, the Peacock Angel's beauty goes only as deep as his colorful feathers. Lacking divine wisdom and compassion, Melek Taus toys with humanity as he sees fit and does not care if he causes either suffering or joy. Another such Lord of the World figure is Baphomet. He represents the balance and union of the spiritual with the physical, the masculine with the feminine, and thus the cycle of materialization. This also makes him a spirit to whom ultimate control of physical creation may be attributed, and thus also a Lord of the World figure. Since Santa Muerte has embraced the role of an ultimate mother-creator in death, she likewise falls into this category.

## Santa Muerte and the Magical Practitioner

Seeking death's gifts can present its own interesting challenges and rewards. Generally expressing an interest in death is often viewed as strange or socially unacceptable. Other people may think such a person is macabre or dangerous and seek to avoid him or her. At worst, the person may be suspected of harboring violent or suicidal thoughts. This behavior can lead to lots of uncomfortable questions and, at worst, even involuntary psychiatric commitment.

Pursuing a magical interest in the study of death may present additional problems. The practice of magic is already dogged with cultural misperceptions. Even those practitioners whose magical style is utterly benign and filled with good intentions can face accusations of demonolatry and black magic. Admitting a magical interest in death can be easily interpreted as the desire to harm others. This misconception may make it difficult for a practitioner interested in forming a balanced perspective on the powers of life and death. Information can be hard to find, as can likewise-minded individuals with which to study and practice.

Despite these issues, learning to work with death has many advantages for the magical practitioner. Great understanding and power can be gained from working with life and from within the earth's natural fruitful cycles. However, growth and generativity are only half of life's greater cycle; the other is occupied by death. Understanding both halves leads to a complete understanding of the whole. Of course, death's capability to confer wisdom is especially useful in this regard.

Death's culling power is also of particular interest for the magical practitioner. Death kills in order to create fertile ground for renewal. The devotees of Santa Muerte see beyond literal death to the death of our behaviors and values that are rooted in fear. We are all bound by these shackles of belief. Although these shackles may bind us, they do not define who we are. Death acting in the role of the transformer takes to the burial ground all of our false values and all of the things to which we egotistically cling. By accepting death as part of the natural transformative cycle, devotees are free to devote themselves to their own becoming. Our habits are the ties that bind us, and some would argue that they bind us eternally to the cycle of reincarnation.

Allowing death to transform the ego breaks these shackles directly, leading to the real possibility of escaping the reincarnative cycle altogether. Thus, Santa Muerte becomes the grand gatekeeper of initiation as well.

We already are experiencing an aeonic turn toward the recognition and veneration of the divine feminine. Why would we seek the influence and power of Santa Muerte in particular? In our modern times, we have come up with a fantastic number of ways to exploit and kill each other, and far fewer ways to work in peace and solidarity. With an overall turn toward embracing the divine feminine current, it is no wonder that we long for a figure who can bring about an abrupt end to this cycle of suffering. Yet, this impulse is not suicidal. Sometimes a field must be burned before new crops are sown. Because Santa Muerte embraces concepts of growth and renewal as well as death, she represents the ending of the now and the hope for a brighter and greener future. This is key to Santa Muerte's powerful appeal.

Analyzing the role of Santa Muerte as she relates to your personal paradigm is key to successfully working with her as a magician. If you adopt the point of view that she is an unofficial saint working on behalf of God, this is usually a relatively simple matter because she fits easily into that predefined role. In other words, your view of her is likely to be similar to that of another Catholic saint. If your magical practice already involves another death patron, such as Hades, you may wish to consider how Santa Muerte relates to these figures. For example, what are the differences (or similarities) between your concept of the god Hades and your understanding of Santa Muerte? How might your thinking be different working with the classically dour and taciturn Greek Lord of the Underworld, Hades, instead of the

vivacious and friendly figure of Santa Muerte? If your view of spirits is that they do not exist separately from yourself, what aspects of Santa Muerte appeal to you the most or the least? As you understand yourself now, how do you hope that working with Santa Muerte's concept will affect you? What impulse does it serve, and what lesson does it teach? These are the sorts of questions that are key to working with Santa Muerte, or indeed, any spiritual personality because they help define your relationship with that spirit. By keeping a record of how the answers to these questions change over time, you also can develop a much better understanding of yourself.



## CHAPTER 5

# The Seven Colors of Santa Muerte



Santa Muerte is typically perceived as possessing multiple aspects. Each aspect governs a certain area of expertise and is associated with a color. These color systems are based on two distinct models, which are used when working with Santa Muerte.

### The Three-Aspect Color Model

The first and more traditional model recognizes three distinct aspects of Santa Muerte that are associated with the colors white, red, and black:

- \* The white aspect is generally petitioned for matters regarding healing, protection, and purification.
- \* The red aspect is concerned with earthly pleasures and problems, such as acquiring lovers and fighting enemies.

- \* The black aspect is concerned with matters involved in judgment, the bestowing and removing of curses, and communication with spirits of the dead.

## The Seven-Aspect Color Model

The more popular model splits Santa Muerte into seven different aspects, each signified by a particular color. The origin of the seven-color model is unknown but may be an adaptation from magical traditions that work with the Seven African Powers.

Many practitioners prefer the expanded range of colors within the seven-color model because it lets them explore the different aspects of Santa Muerte with greater guidance and ease. Because of this and because of the fact that the number seven is sacred to Santa Muerte, I use the seven-color model in my own work.

## The Many Different Colors of Death

Each different aspect of Santa Muerte is depicted as a skeleton wearing a robe of her respective color. In the case of a seven-color statue, all seven colors are displayed. Although each color is discussed in more detail within its own chapter, here is a general list of the seven colors of Santa Muerte and their respective powers. They are given in the order they appear from top to bottom on a typical seven-colored statue:

**White:** This color of Santa Muerte is used principally for purification and is called on at the inception of major projects, both mundane and magical. She is also used for certain types of healing.

**Blue:** This color of Santa Muerte is the patroness of the activities of daily living and the relationships on which

our lives depend. This aspect increases social wisdom and increases patience. She is used to build long-term relationships and so is used to repair broken family ties, improve business partnerships, and gain new friends.

**Green:** This color of Santa Muerte is associated with justice, ethics, and law. She helps restore balance, imposes fairness, and can affect the judgment of both law courts and your peers. Because many people who pass through the criminal justice system are affected by addiction and mental illness, the green aspect of Santa Muerte is petitioned for issues resolving behavioral health issues.

**Gold:** Mining gold from deep within the ground is a dangerous occupation that can easily maim or kill; many gods of the underworld are associated with wealth and money for this reason, since mining was seen as taking gold from the pockets of the gods. As a goddess of the underworld, Santa Muerte has this relationship with money, and through it, vitality. The golden Santa Muerte is used to attract money and luck, create fortune in gambling and business, and heal where infusions of vitality are needed.

**Red:** The red aspect of Santa Muerte has a definite martial feel, governing issues regarding sex, lust, and passion as well as aggression and physical dominance. She also improves or impairs relationships, being commonly called on for this purpose.

**Purple:** The purple aspect of Santa Muerte is that of a goddess of both magic and initiation. She assists not

only with spells but also with the direct understanding of magic. This Santa Muerte also acts as a gatekeeper between different ethereal and astral realms.

**Black:** This color of Santa Muerte is very Saturnian, overseeing all forms of cessation, negation, decay, dissolution, and denouement. The black Santa Muerte is used to negate bonds and barriers, as well as destroy or dissolve spells, curses, or hexes. She is also used for necromancy, such as speaking with the dead.

Even within the seven colors of Santa Muerte, there is some variation and substitution. One common variation is to replace the gold aspect of Santa Muerte with a yellow or amber aspect that is primarily dedicated to healing. Some practitioners use a pink version of Santa Muerte instead of the red aspect for spells involving love and affection instead of lust. There exists also a brown version of Santa Muerte, chosen specifically for intervention in earthly matters and for the physical manifestation of the practitioner's desires. Some claim she is the mistress of all practical business matters, splitting this away from the blue aspect and thus isolating its knowledge and empathy-enhancing qualities.

## Choosing the Right Color

How do you choose which aspect of Santa Muerte will best resolve your problems? If your goal is relatively simple, such as erecting a constant barrier of protection around yourself, then the white or black aspects of Santa Muerte are likely to be your choices. What if your problem is more complex, however? Suppose John and Isabella are in the process of going through a nasty divorce. They've had several public fights, and now their

friends and family are starting to avoid them. They are also battling over control of their retail shop, which is starting to suffer because the couple's attention is devoted to their divorce instead of their business. Isabella's attorney has now informed John that she has a plan for guaranteeing that she gets full custody of their three children. Faced with losing his marriage, his friends, his business, and now his children, John decides to enlist the aid of Santa Muerte. But where does he begin?

John first needs to decide what his end goals really are. Is it worth salvaging his marriage with Isabella, thus avoiding all these subsequent problems? Perhaps John is unwilling to compromise with Isabella, and he wants the business and his children in addition to having Isabella completely out of his life. Answering these kinds of questions will guide which aspects of Santa Muerte will best aid him. Therefore, deciding what he really wants is a necessary first step.

Suppose John has the following goals. He wants to retain control of the business and make sure it doesn't suffer any worse during their divorce. He also wants to repair the relationships with the people around him, including his relationship with Isabella. He doesn't want to have any further romantic entanglements with her, but he would prefer to have a friendly relationship with his ex-wife, since this makes joint custody much easier. He does want to maintain control of their business, however. He feels that he has put the most work into it, and he does not want Isabella to reap the benefits. Lastly, he would like to erect protection around himself to make sure that he has no further problems with Isabella.

Looking over his list of goals, John is able to identify which aspects of Santa Muerte will best be able to help him. Repairing

and protecting social relationships fall directly within the realm of the blue aspect of Santa Muerte. She also provides the threads that tie the community together, so this aspect is also best invoked to protect the overall health of his business. However, deciding who gets both the business and the children is a legal matter ultimately decided by a judge. Thus, making sure he has the strong support of the green aspect of Santa Muerte is paramount. Without her aid, the rest of his plans will fall apart. Finally, he decides on the protective capacity of the white aspect of Santa Muerte instead of the black. Even though both have the power to aid him, the white aspect is also used to bless and protect new projects and new beginnings. Since John is looking to start a new life of his choosing, the protective power of the white aspect of Santa Muerte will best serve him.

John decides that he needs the continuous protection and aid of the white and blue aspects of Santa Muerte and the intermittent help of the green aspect. He then decides to say a pair of prayers dedicated to the white and blue aspects every day after saying the tail portion of a rosary. He promises to devote a full rosary to each aspect once a week for their continued protection and aid. When he needs the help of the green aspect of Santa Muerte, he begins saying a third prayer dedicated to her when he says his daily rosary. When the green aspect aids him, John decides to thank Santa Muerte with some candy. He buys her some green mint chewing gum and presents it to her altar. In the next few days he chews the gum for her vicarious pleasure, all the while thinking about how she's helped him. This is an example of how John might enlist the aid of these different aspects of Santa Muerte.

Details on how to work with each aspect of Santa Muerte are included in the following chapters. As mentioned previously, a chapter is dedicated to each of Santa Muerte's colors. The order in which they are presented is their intended ritual order if you are exploring the different aspects of Santa Muerte's power. I chose their order for the following reasons. The white aspect of Santa Muerte is dedicated to purification, protection, and rebirth. Invoked at the beginning, she protects the outcomes of the daily prayers said during the rest of the week. The next color invoked is the purple aspect of Santa Muerte. This aspect governs psychic insight and magical understanding, in which Santa Muerte readily lends her own authority and power.

The third day of the week sees the invocation of the blue aspect of Santa Muerte, which confers knowledge and opens social doorways. Given noble authority by the purple aspect of Santa Muerte, the blue aspect guides the practitioner toward wisely using this power to learn about the world and other people. This search grants valuable insight into how social relationships affect the outcome of other events—after all, it's not who you are, it's who you know. This is turned into wealth, vitality, and influence on the fourth day of the week by invoking the golden aspect of Santa Muerte. Wealth, wisdom, and power attract both lovers and enemies. The red aspect of Santa Muerte invoked next grants the prowess, both sexual and martial, to deal with both. The sixth aspect of Santa Muerte invoked is green, which grants justice and creates balance. This aspect helps mitigate any problems or sins that the magician incurred earlier in the week. It also has the effect of preparing the magician for a psychic reset and rebirth on the final day of the week through the black aspect of Santa Muerte. This makes the practitioner

ready to enjoy the rebirth again through the white aspect of Santa Muerte as the week turns over.

Of course, you are welcome to alter the given order in which these aspects are venerated in accordance with your particular ritual needs. It also does not matter which day of the week you begin saying a novena.

## CHAPTER 6

# Preparing Your Ritual Space and Tools



Traditionally, working with Santa Muerte is rooted in Mexican folk magic, which is a mixture of both native and European magical practices. How did folk magic come to be practiced in a region dominated by the Spanish, who were equally famous for their inquisitorial persecution of witches, heretics, and Jews in Europe?

### Importing European Magic to the New World

Belief in witchcraft was widespread throughout the indigenous tribes of the Americas. Witches were often thought to ally themselves with malign spirits in order to cast their spells. Many people believed that witches could turn themselves into coyotes or crows so that they could travel great distances to spy on others or that they could send their shadow to do the same. Sometimes people were accused of visiting witches to receive love potions or to buy poison to murder their spouses. Some early Spanish

reports even describe natives filling cornhusk dolls full of dung and sticking them with cactus thorns in order to curse a target. A shaman who practiced positive magic and allied himself with beneficial spirits had the power to reverse these curses, although sometimes not without lasting harm. Accused witches were often beaten and stoned, and many were even killed. In other words, native stories about witches really weren't that different from the tales also told in Europe.

The Spanish brought their beliefs in magic and understanding of esoteric practices with them when they conquered the Valley of Mexico. These practices included not only magical behaviors that were common among European Catholics, such as the practice of saint humiliation, but also more advanced esoteric concepts. Despite the frequent purges of accused witches and magicians throughout Europe's history, Europe had a thriving magical community that survived and was even encouraged by the religious authorities. For example, the earliest known version of the famous witch's flying ointment was recorded by a German physician named Johannes Hartlieb in the 15th century. An Italian priest named Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) was a famous astrologer as well as a Neoplatonic philosopher who translated the entire *Corpus Hermeticum* from Greek into Latin. The *Corpus Hermeticum* is a series of 2nd- and 3rd-century texts that describe how to use astrology, alchemy, and theurgy to form an advanced understanding of the self and of the universe. He may also have been responsible for the Tarot of Marseilles style of early tarot cards, which included the highly controversial *La Papesse* (female Pope) card.

During the Crusades, a number of magical and alchemical texts were brought to Europe from Arabia, where they had

been compiled and preserved in eastern libraries. Among the most famous were four books that were collectively known as the *Picatrix*. The *Picatrix*, which was compiled sometime around the 11th century, is a compilation of earlier works on magic and astrology. It stresses an understanding of magical and astrological theories before one attempts to make any of the talismans or invoke any of the spirits it describes. Those who have such an understanding may make a wide variety of magical talismans, with uses ranging from simply catching more fish and attracting the lust of women to swindling powerful men and inciting violent civil conflicts. As the most complete text on the subject ever produced, its influence can easily be seen on other European grimoires that would evolve in the medieval and later periods.

When the *Picatrix* was brought to Europe in the 13th century, it was first translated into Spanish before it was translated into Latin. Therefore, it and books like it were certainly available to wealthy and educated Spanish men, and certainly to the Spanish priests, well before their arrival in the New World. As discussed in chapter 2, the Spanish were also necessarily tolerant of a diverse number of native Indian practices because of the tenuous grip they held over the former Aztec Empire. Later, West African slaves were brought to the Mexican mainland, bringing with them the same religious beliefs that laid the foundations of the African-based systems of Palo Mayombé, Santería, and Vodou. In summary, there were no shortages of magical concepts or beliefs available in the New World.

Many of the traditional methods of working with Santa Muerte include the use of herbs, candles, anointing oils, magical statuary, magic cords, wax and wooden effigies, and the like. In conjunction with spells and prayer, magical efforts are rewarded

with Santa Muerte's assistance. The Saint of Death is rewarded for her aid, chastened for her recalcitrance, and generally treated as if she were physically present on the altar at all times. Thus, her veneration can be usually viewed as a form of shamanic witchcraft, although many of the other concepts generally related to witchcraft are typically not considered when working with Santa Muerte. For example, there is little emphasis on the influence of elemental powers or the cycle of seasons.

Because the traditional veneration of Santa Muerte is already rooted in a diverse number of magical sources, developing your own method of working with Santa Muerte is very easy. There really is no wrong way of doing it. The Saint of Death responds equally well to chaos magic techniques such as sigil creation and can also interact with servitors. More than one magical practitioner even uses Nordic rune magic to work with Santa Muerte, also with great success. Certainly, she also responds to a blend of these techniques. The techniques presented throughout this book are readily adaptable to whatever system or style of magic with which you are most comfortable. Substitution is appropriate, welcome, and even recommended. You also can use the techniques presented throughout these chapters in a stand-alone fashion. Everything that you need is here.

## Why Create an Altar?

Magical practitioners seeking to work with Santa Muerte commonly use an altar dedicated to her. It is a key element of the methods presented in this book as well. The altar is the site where you will conduct most prayers, spells, and rituals directed toward Santa Muerte. Many elements of setting up an altar space dedicated to the Saint of Death can be left up to individual tastes

or designed with a specific ritual style in mind. Despite individual practices in magical approach, several common practices surround elements that run throughout Santa Muerte altars.



One of the key concepts surrounding altar creation is that it establishes a special sacred space. The notion of creating a sacred space is a familiar magical idea. We often react to different spaces on either an unconscious or psychic level, altering both our mood and our behaviors. Consider that a church is just a building where people pray, but there often seems to be a special atmosphere when entering such a place. This atmosphere

is created by our knowledge that the space is sacred and by the lingering energy left by the people who pray there.

By creating a sacred space, you also create the necessity for its officiant to appear. A church remains just a building if no priest is there to hear confessions and lead Sunday Mass, after all. When working with Santa Muerte, you need to put your own mind into a sacred space to fill that role within the sacred space that you create. An altar helps this happen. When you stand before it, it is no longer the edge of a bookshelf or the top of your nightstand, but a temple in miniature in which Santa Muerte is always present. By treating it so, you create it to be so. The altar and the ritual items that you use will also retain some of the energy that you put into your work, which means that they will gain potency and power over time.

By repeatedly using the same altar space, you invest psychic energy not only into the tools on the altar but also in the space where the altar is contained. Therefore, the room or area where an altar is located becomes an ideal place to practice magic. The repeated investment of psychic energy into the same area empowers the spells cast within it. It also weakens the barriers between physical reality and different astral and spiritual realms. This means that summoning and communicating with spirits is far easier on a well-established altar than without one. Scrying is much simpler as well.

## Santa Muerte's Altar Mates

One common idea that runs throughout the several interpretations of Santa Muerte practice that I have seen is that Santa Muerte does not like sharing her space with the statues or symbols of other deities or spirits. Normally, practitioners report

that Santa Muerte simply becomes unresponsive when placed in direct company with other spirits or that requests made to her will go awry until she is moved.

There are a few spiritual exceptions with whom Santa Muerte is believed to be willing to share space. People sometimes pray to one major Catholic saint in conjunction with Santa Muerte: Saint Jude, who is the patron saint of lost causes. Since Santa Muerte is also called the Saint of Last Resort, the two appear to share in common a very specific sphere of influence—hopeless people at the end of their ropes. Because Saint Jude is also less judgmental of his desperate following, some believe that he and Santa Muerte are likewise tolerant of each other.

Another Catholic thought to be compatible with Santa Muerte is Saint Cyprian of Antioch, the patron saint of magicians and necromancers. The story of Saint Cyprian is that he was a renowned conjuror of demons and ghosts who used his powers to gain fame and fortune as well as to bed beautiful women. A man came to him requesting a charm to force a virtuous Christian girl named Justina to marry him. Her faith overpowered Cyprian's magic, and the magician decided to convert to Christianity since he had been defeated by its power. This conversion did not stop Cyprian from using sorcery, however, although now he used it for Christian aims. Both Justina and Cyprian were captured, tortured, and executed by the government of the Roman Emperor Diocletian in 304 CE. Since he is the patron saint of magicians and necromancers, Saint Cyprian of Antioch is believed to be on friendly terms with Santa Muerte because she is a patron saint of death with many witches and magicians in her following.

A few folk saints are directly associated with Santa Muerte. The most famous is Jesús Malverde, the Bandit Saint. He is considered to be the patron saint of narcotics traffickers. According to legend, Jesús Malverde lived in the Mexican state of Sinaloa around the end of the 19th century. He struggled to survive under the corrupt government of Porfirio Diaz, and he turned to robbery to survive. He shared his stolen goods with his equally unfortunate friends and neighbors in a manner similar to the English Robin Hood. He was eventually captured and killed by the forces of the Sinaloa governor, and his body was left to publicly rot as an example to others. Jesús Malverde is often referred to as a narco-saint along with Santa Muerte and is sometimes even considered to be her son. Sometimes cartels invoke the image of Jesús Malverde to promote a “good guy” image to their own communities, using their drug money to fund schools and build roads.

Another folk saint that is frequently associated with drug cartels and thus with Santa Muerte is Juan el Soldado (Spanish, “Soldier John”). He was actually a Spanish soldier named Juan Castillo Morales who was court-martialed in Tijuana, Mexico, in 1938 after he was accused of raping and murdering an eight-year old girl. He was executed by firing squad and buried minutes afterward in a pre-prepared grave. Soon afterward, locals reported that his grave had begun to leak blood and that his ghostly voice could be heard declaring his innocence. The rumor began to circulate that his unit commander had actually committed the crime and had framed Morales for it. Other people began reporting miraculous occurrences and attributed them to Morales, which caused a shrine to be built on his grave and a cult to form up around him. Juan el Soldado today is believed

to be the patron saint of the falsely accused and those who are attempting to cross the US–Mexican border.

These four saints either share a sort of professional relationship with Santa Muerte or are included within her spiritual household as the souls of the slain who have since been elevated to folk sainthood. For these reasons, sometimes they are included on the altars of Santa Muerte. Their veneration is not required for working with Santa Muerte, however.

Another exception to Santa Muerte's general reluctance to share altar space derives from the subset of practitioners who primarily practice African-diaspora religious traditions such as Santería and Vodou. These traditions often include a belief in the Seven African Powers (or sometimes just Seven Powers). One understanding of the Seven African Powers is that they are spirits of the dead, one each from seven different tribes that found themselves scattered throughout the New World. These spirits are given the task of serving as guides and teachers for those who have (or who seek) a connection with them.

The other idea regarding the nature of the Seven African Powers is a bit different. The West African slaves who were brought to the New World believed in a large number of powerful spirits called orishas that oversaw both nature and human activity. They wanted to keep worshipping their native patrons, so they substituted Catholic saints in their place so that they could continue their veneration in secret and avoid punishment. For example, the orisha Babalú-Ayé is the god of disease. He became associated with Saint Lazarus of Dives, a leprosy-ridden beggar from the Gospel of Luke who receives eternal joy as his reward when he dies while the rich man who denied him help during his life suffers in eternal torment.

From the first perspective, Santa Muerte is a natural ally of the Seven African Powers because she is the patron saint of death, and they are spirits of the dead. Given that they enjoy greater status, influence, and power relative to other ordinary spirits of the dead, the Seven African Powers typically aren't seen as subordinate to Santa Muerte but instead happily work in tandem with her. If the Seven African Powers are viewed as a group of orishas, it is important to understand that they are not the only orishas that exist. The Seven African Powers serve as primary teachers and gatekeepers. Depending on whom you ask, there are at least 401 (a sacred number in the Yoruba tradition) or as many as 1,400. Given there are a number of patronesses of the cemeteries already, such as Maman Brigitte, some think that Santa Muerte is yet another face of a cemetery orisha brought over from Africa. In either context, working with Santa Muerte in conjunction with the Seven African Powers (or other orishas) together on the same altar is appropriate.

## Selecting a Space

Although I am fortunate to have an entire room dedicated to Santa Muerte work, you really don't need a lot of space to set up an altar. In fact, the smallest altar I have seen was balanced carefully on a paper plate. The corner of a bookshelf or the top of a small nightstand is an excellent choice if you do not have a lot of room. My favorite place to set up a dedicated Santa Muerte shrine is on top of a small bookshelf. This will give you room to place not only a small Santa Muerte statue, but also a few candles, an offering dish, and a few other assorted items. The shelves below can hold small boxes of supplies as well as books and ritual tools, saving you additional space.

The placement of the altar space doesn't have to be perfect, either. Ideally, a Santa Muerte altar is placed in the center of a room so that the magical practitioner may walk around it. The next best location is placed against a western wall so that the practitioner may have his or her back to the rising sun. The third best location is placed facing a northern wall, which is the direction the Aztecs called the Place of Death. If none of these locations are available, any location will suit.

As with any altar, the most important characteristic is that its location is secluded enough that you can get five to fifteen minutes of uninterrupted privacy. It is hard to establish a sense of the sacred with the television set blaring and the cat constantly meowing to be let outside. Giving offerings or treats to Santa Muerte is also a frequent and recommended activity, so you must be certain that children and pets won't try to sample candy or alcohol left out for the Saint of Death. Also, tobacco is another common offering that is given to Santa Muerte. You can either smoke the tobacco yourself or burn it in an incense holder, but the smell is pervasive and the smoke can be hazardous. A well-ventilated space is recommended if you choose to make tobacco offerings.

Portable altars can also be an excellent choice, and they solve the problem of Santa Muerte's reluctance to share an altar with other spiritual powers. When you want to work with the Saint of Death, you just need to open up her portable altar. You can easily make such altars out of old cigar, jewelry, or sewing boxes. I take my portable altar with me when I have to do an extended Santa Muerte ritual outside my temple. It is made out of an old three-tiered expandable wooden sewing box. I covered the inside of each lid with prayers, silk flowers, and images of Santa Muerte. The trays in the box hold an entire rainbow of miniature Santa

Muerte statues, as well as tea lights, sticks of incense with a miniature burner, pens, paper, bits of string, and so forth. Portable altars also make for easy cleanup, since they are designed to contain everything.

## Preparing the Space

Preparing your Santa Muerte altar space first requires two rounds of cleaning. The altar and its area must first be physically cleaned. This means more than just dusting the top of the bookshelf or table. You need to dust, sweep, mop, and vacuum the area. Put away your books and your laundry, and make sure to get the dust bunnies out from beneath the furniture. This level of cleaning may seem excessive, but it really isn't. I am astonished how many people will scrub their house from top to bottom before their in-laws arrive for the holidays but won't bother to even pick up their soda cans before inviting a major spiritual power into their homes. Churches are not dirty places for a reason. Cleanliness not only shows respect for the spirit but also shows respect for the people present and the ceremonies conducted there. You want to develop this same sense of reverence for your own altar space. Santa Muerte is worthy of that level of respect, and so are you. Putting in the effort to clean your altar space goes a long way toward establishing it as sacred.

The second round of cleaning is to remove traces of psychic energy from the altar and the space surrounding it. The easiest and most common method is to wash the altar area with warm salt water (you can sprinkle water drops on nonwashable surfaces like rugs or lightly mist with a spray bottle). Many Santa Muerte practitioners, myself included, optionally add a few drops of an additional purification agent. Typically, essential oils

with known cleansing properties such as sage or rosemary are used. Florida Water is also commonly added for purification and to attract friendly spirits. If you are preparing your space for a specific purpose, you can also add a relevant essential oil, infusion, or something similar to the water. For example, if you are preparing to cast money spells, adding some basil essential oil or a fresh herbal infusion to the water is a great choice.

Florida Water is not a brand name but instead the name of a scent formula that was first produced in 1808 and remains popular today. The formula is called Florida Water because Florida is the legendary location of the Fountain of Youth, and many people find its light, citrusy-floral odor to be both refreshing and invigorating, rather like receiving a breath of youth. Because it is made with diluted alcohol, many people apply it to their pulse points during the summer months to help them cool off, as well as for its scent. It's also a common practice among sports teams to add some Florida Water to ice chests to help their players cool off. Interestingly, the oldest intact bottle of perfume found on a shipwreck to date is a bottle of Florida Water. The wrecked vessel in question was the famous ghost ship, the *Mary Celeste*, which was scuttled during an insurance fraud attempt near Haiti after her legendary crewless voyage.

The scent of Florida Water is also supposed to have strong magical cleansing properties, making it a staple among many hoodoo and Santeria practitioners. Its use has also spread widely among Santa Muerte practitioners because the odor of Florida Water is also supposed to be attractive to friendly spirits of the dead. Since Santa Muerte is the queen of death, she naturally likes the smell of Florida Water.

Only a few drops of Florida Water need to be added to a container of warm water to make a cleansing altar wash. You can readily purchase it at any occult shop or botanica, and it is frequently even available at drug and grocery stores. You can also purchase it cheaply online. If you prefer to make your own Florida Water, you can choose from many sample recipes. This is the recipe I use for making Florida Water, although I encourage you to experiment and find the one that you like best:

### FLORIDA WATER RECIPE

*16 oz. distilled water*

*2 oz. high percentage proof alcohol, such as distilled alcohol, vodka, or Everclear*

*6 drops bergamot or neroli essential oil*

*6 drops lavender essential oil*

*2 drops clove essential oil*

*2 drops lemon verbena essential oil*

After you have washed your altar space, you are ready for the second step of the process. Light either some sage or rosemary incense (either bundles or sticks will do) and waft the smoke over every available surface of the altar, as well as the space around the altar. The idea is to give the entire area a thorough smoke bath so it can “scrub off” any errant psychic energy. Filling the immediate area with cleansing smoke is also obnoxious to harmful spirits and will cause them to leave.

If your usual style of magical practice calls for an additional purification or purifications performed in a different manner,

you are welcome to substitute them for these given purification practices.

## Necessary Altar Components

After you complete these steps, you are ready to actually set up your altar. An altar dedicated to Santa Muerte requires only three components:

- \* An image of Santa Muerte
- \* A candle
- \* Water

Of course, many altar setups are more elaborate than this, because when you set up an altar dedicated to Santa Muerte (or any spirit), you want to create as pleasing and attractive an environment as possible. While the three items listed here are critical for a Santa Muerte altar, you are welcome to create as elaborate an altar as money, time, and space permit.

Generally, there is no correct way to arrange an altar dedicated to Santa Muerte. Practitioners who set up a mixed altar dedicated to both beneficial and harmful magic tend to place their beneficial items on the right sides of their altars and the harmful ones to the left. There is also a tendency to place altars on the west side of the room, if such a space is available. In both European and Aztec cultures, the direction west is often associated with death because the sun sets in that direction. Particular to the Aztecs, the entrance to Mictlan was supposed to be located somewhere in the west, as the sun was required to make a dangerous nightly trip there through the underworld every night.

All Aztec temples were oriented with the altars facing west, so the priests could face the same direction as the rising sun.

If your magical style normally employs altar items placed in a certain way, you are welcome to make adjustments as necessary. For example, if you are accustomed to using a lot of elemental associations in your altar setup, feel free to include and arrange items as you normally would. You may also use ritual tools and empowered items that you already own, provided that they are not already consecrated to an unrelated spiritual power. Remember that Santa Muerte is both territorial and jealous, so keeping other spirits out of her area is often considered essential. This may mean that you will need to make a second set of ritual tools for working with Santa Muerte, if your magical tradition requires their use. The methods presented here make no assumptions of additional ritual tools, however, other than what is explicitly stated.

### *Image of Santa Muerte*

An altar dedicated to Santa Muerte requires some kind of image of her, usually in the form of either a picture or a statue. The image primarily serves two functions. The first is as simple as it is obvious. It provides a focal anchor point for the magician's attention, which helps you focus and concentrate on a particular spirit. This function is useful when you're trying to forge a connection with the spirit, and it also aids with future interactions. A well-used Santa Muerte image is also a well-remembered one. Frequently focusing on her image allows for its easy memory recall, which makes it much easier for the magician to envision and thus interact with Santa Muerte away from the altar later.



The second function the image performs is equally important. When you set up an altar dedicated to Santa Muerte, you begin by ceding a portion of your physical space to her. Placing her image there claims it as hers, which is very attractive to a famously territorial spirit. By focusing your psychic energy on her image and asking Santa Muerte to come live on her altar, you invite a portion of Santa Muerte's spiritual essence to reside within the image and provide energy so that it can sustain itself. This effort provides an active "soul" for the image, turning it into a powerful magical object. Afterward the image is treated like a

living entity, being bathed, perfumed, and clothed, and offered food, drink, and refreshments such as alcohol, candy, and cigarettes. When you offer gifts to Santa Muerte, you leave them at the image's feet. When Santa Muerte is obstinate, you can punish her image by making it face the wall or by covering it with a cloth. Practitioners who own statues with removable scythes may take them away from her, similar to the manner of taking Saint Anthony's baby away from him, as discussed in chapter 3. All of these elements are common and consistent with the folk practice of Catholic saint worship and the manipulation of spirit images in general.

Statues of Santa Muerte are the most common kinds of images used on altars, although pictures and paintings are also common. There are many, many different styles of statues from which to choose, ranging in size from just a few inches to several feet in height. They also come in a wide variety of colors. Sometimes the statues are arrayed in special robes to denote a special use. For example, some available Santa Muerte statues have robes made out of dollar bills; they are used specifically for acquiring money. Statues with a strong Aztec character, often depicting Santa Muerte sitting on a throne wearing an elaborate feathered headdress, frequently make appearances as well. Statues sometimes also share imagery normally associated with the Virgin Mary. Michelangelo's famous statue of the Virgin Mary holding the dead body of Jesus Christ, the Pietà, is commonly reproduced with Santa Muerte holding Christ's body instead. Pregnant statues and statues with Santa Muerte holding a baby are likewise common. Many people also choose to make their own Santa Muerte statues, taking skeletal dolls and putting them in lacy dresses and giving them small crowns and scythes. This

approach is very traditional, hearkening back to the early days of La Muerte worship recorded by Spanish priests.

Since so many different kinds of Santa Muerte statues are available, it is easy to become a collector. I recommend that the first Santa Muerte statue you acquire is one displaying all of her seven colors, since that is the kind referenced throughout this book. It does not matter what size you get or from what material it is made. Santa Muerte statues are readily available online through retailers such as Amazon and eBay and are also often available locally at botanicas or occult shops. These shops can always order one for you! If you cannot afford a Santa Muerte statue or do not wish to invest in one at this time, a carefully colored and framed picture will suffice. You can also purchase, cheaply, small novena cards with Santa Muerte's image, and they have the added bonus of a prayer on the backside.

### *Candles*

Fire transforms as it consumes. Man has used this capability to his advantage since the dawn of civilization, capitalizing on its power to clear the land, to cook his food, and to defend him from his predators and enemies. Making light from the darkness is a fundamental transformation, creating not only our separation from darkness but also all the possibilities that can stem from it. Even the Bible starts with this concept: after declaring his self-awareness, God created light first.

Of course, the mystical associations and uses of fire are not limited to the western Abrahamic religions. Mankind has used fire to transform material offerings into spiritual ones since the beginning. Small stone lamps are found among humanity's earliest grave offerings, and the ancient practice of burning offerings

dedicated to the spirits is well documented. A single flickering flame has the power to push back the darkness, yet it creates dancing shadows. If something shrouded in darkness is considered to be unknown, unformed, and unmanifested, then something completely exposed to light is both known and completely manifested. The shadowy state in between light and darkness then becomes the place where possibilities exist half-created and can be manipulated. Because magic is used to make your desires real, the light provided by a candle provides an ideal vehicle. By seizing the power of the divine and making light in darkness, the magician can likewise seize the potential for creation. The sheer simplicity and effectiveness of this process has made it the single most commonly used ritual in the world today and quite possibly ever. Every time any person in any temple anywhere has lit a candle and offered up a prayer to create change, that person is using simple candle magic.

There is another, more practical reason that candles are thought to be effective when working with spirits. Spirits are attracted to energy that is dedicated to them (many practitioners believe that they consume it in some fashion). For instance, focused prayer gives a spirit the gift of your psychic energy in the form of your dedicated attention. Offerings of food are thought to be spiritually consumed when left on an altar. This is why there is frequently a taboo against eating food that has been given to a spirit, particularly a spirit associated with death; the food is considered psychically inert, and eating it is believed to risk illness or worse. Candles also create the interplay of shadows that naturally suggest images and forms. The presence of shadows makes it easier for the spirits themselves to manifest. The energy produced by the flame may directly nourish that manifestation,

conveying your desire to that spirit along with the fire's energy. In short, the candle becomes a simple way of delivering a note along with a meal.

Candles are frequently used in conjunction with Catholic saints, both official and folk saints alike—although most Catholics wouldn't call it candle magic. Special candles called novena candles are popular. They are large seven-day candles in a glass jar, usually white, that has a picture of a particular saint on the front and a prayer dedicated to that saint written on the back. Users can recite either that prayer or another prayer that they select when using the novena candle. A novena is a prayer that is recited once a day for nine days (from Latin *novem*, meaning “nine”), although desperate Catholics have been known to recite the prayer once an hour for nine hours when they need an answer soon. Although the candles used are called seven-day candles, you can easily extend their use to nine days because it is not safe to leave candles burning unattended. Catholics also often anoint their candles before using them, either with holy water or with olive oil.

Because candle magic is so effective and also so frequently used with saints, I recommend using candles when learning to work with Santa Muerte. Novena candles dedicated to Santa Muerte are ideal but not required. In the absence of an extensive candle selection, you can use a simple white candle for most operations. When using candles of a different color, many practitioners choose candles that match the color of the aspect of Santa Muerte that they are using instead of one that classically matches an intended goal. For example, when performing money magic, many people choose a green candle because green is often associated with wealth and fertility, and for Americans it is the color

of their money. However, with Santa Muerte, the color green is often used for dealing with legal problems. Unless you are using magic to seek justice from the tax authorities, a yellow candle is a better choice because it relates to the gold aspect of Santa Muerte that is associated with money. This is a standard practice among Santa Muerte practitioners and a convention that is retained here. Because the rituals suggested in this book are dedicated to each color of Santa Muerte, I recommend a white seven-day novena candle for your initial altar setup.

Preparing a candle dedicated to Santa Muerte is a straightforward process. First, clean the candle with a damp cloth and then anoint it with Florida Water, olive oil, or Santa Muerte oil. Santa Muerte oil is made with a blend of citrus and floral essential oils, often with a musky undertone added by either copal or tobacco essential oils. Some commercial blends also add a red dye to the oil to symbolize blood (these dyes do stain, so be careful). Santa Muerte oil blends are also readily available online or through your local occult shop or botanica. The oil blend recipe I use is as follows:

### SANTA MUERTE OIL BLEND

*1 tablespoon of a carrier oil, such as almond oil or fractionated coconut oil*

*¼ teaspoon rose essential oil*

*¼ teaspoon lavender essential oil*

*7 drops bergamot or neroli essential oil*

*2 drops copal essential oil*

*1 drop tobacco essential oil*

The candle is charged with anointing oil before it is used. If you normally use a certain method to charge a candle, you are welcome to use it here. Since Santa Muerte does not typically combine well with other spirits, you may wish to use an alternate method if your candle-charging procedure normally calls on specific powers.

If you do not have a regular way of charging a candle or would like to use a different method, my technique is both simple and universally applied. First, you clean the candle with a little water (honestly, I usually just rinse them in the sink). Then you place the candle on the altar in front of you. Put a drop of anointing oil on each index finger and rest them opposite each other on the top of your candle. If you are using a novena candle, rest your fingers on opposite edges of the glass rim. In the space between your fingers and above the candle wick, envision a brilliant ball of energy. If you are charging your candle for a specific purpose, focus your desire on that ball of energy. Once this is done, envision the ball of energy descending through the candle along the wick. Simultaneously begin to rotate the candle clockwise, drawing your fingers in a spiral down the outside of the candle. When you reach the bottom of the candle, release both it and your focus on the ball of energy. The candle is now charged and ready for use.

Using the candle can be as simple as lighting it while asking Santa Muerte for her aid. This request can be completely unstructured because the Santa Muerte image on the altar is considered to be alive for all intents and purposes. Thus, some people consider simply speaking aloud to her to be sufficient, since she is present. More frequently, a short spell is recited in the form of a prayer or a series of prayers. This prayer is often

repeated over a number of days, which is the basic essence of performing a novena. This book presents a number of spells formatted as prayers that are dedicated to different aspects of Santa Muerte, all of which can be performed with a charged ritual candle. Of course, please do not leave a candle burning unattended.

### *Water*

Offering refreshing or nourishing fluids to spirits is a practice that is as old as human ritual. Such offerings are commonly either placed on altars or poured out on the ground or otherwise expended. Spirits of the dead are often thought to particularly enjoy such gifts, since they are unable to obtain them with routine ease. This thinking drives the common practice of visiting the graves of recently deceased friends and family members in order to pour bottles of water and favorite alcohols on them.

Water is the most common offering given to spirits associated with death, for several reasons. The first is that water holds a special place of importance among the dead. We can survive without food for a few weeks but only for a few days without water. Since water is the key to life, it is what the dead miss the most. The spirits associated with death often visit us from the underworld, and the trip here is thought to be both long and arduous. Because the dead have had nothing to drink since they died, they are often thought to be very thirsty indeed when they arrive. The second is that water is most frequently associated with purification. After all, we wash things clean with water. This ritual is likewise attractive to friendly spirits of the dead. The third is that offering guests refreshments is a basic requirement of hospitality. As you are inviting Santa Muerte to come live in

her image on the altar, offering her a drink is both essential etiquette and an invitation.

I give Santa Muerte plain drinking water in a dedicated ritual glass after I light her daily candle. Because the statues on my altar are considered ritually alive, I dip my fingers in the water and put a few drops on the mouths of each statue to give Santa Muerte a drink. I then place the wine glass beside the burning candle. The water is left to accrue a magical charge during the day and can be used ritually as holy water. The next morning, I pour the water into my aloe plant. The reason I do this is that the aloe leaves are mostly water and thus contain mostly magically charged water. Lacking an optional aloe plant, you may pour the water on the ground outside. It will reach the underworld eventually!

## Common Optional Components

An image of Santa Muerte, a candle, and some water are all that is required for working with Santa Muerte. However, many items are also commonly included on Santa Muerte altars, and space permitting, I encourage their inclusion on your altar as well.

### *Aloe*

Aloe (*Aloe vera*) is sometimes mistaken as a cousin of the Aztec's sacred plant, maguey cactus (*Agave americana*), but their relationship is in appearance only. Aloe is native to sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East but has been easily cultivated and naturalized nearly worldwide because of its reputation as a miracle plant. The clear gel inside the leaves not only soothes and heals burns quickly, but it also contains antibiotic compounds, painkilling chemicals, and blood-clotting agents. Mexican folk healers turn to this plant to cure everything from canker sores to cancer.

Given aloe's natural vigor and healing properties, the plant has a reputation for bringing with it a powerful aura of renewal and purification. Magically speaking, the large fleshy leaves of the aloe plant retain large quantities of water, which is the element of refreshment and renewal. An aloe plant placed on the altar then becomes its living guardian, constantly cleansing the space of negative energy and driving off harmful spirits. Because it does this, it helps prevent a magician's intentions from become twisted, and thus the aloe plant becomes the reverser of misfortune as well.

Aloe is another example of the blending of some beliefs regarding Santa Muerte and the Virgin Mary. Early Christians associated aloe with the Virgin Mary; they used the plant's ability to soothe and comfort as a metaphor for passion in God. Since the Virgin Mary was considered the embodiment of that passion, the plant became associated with her. The aloe plant also acquired a strong association with death because of its use during funerals. Ancient Jewish tribes in the Middle East embalmed the dead by wrapping their bodies in large peeled aloe leaves, often adding large quantities of myrrh to make a fragrant gum. Since the expectation was that the pious would enter Heaven after dying, the aloe became associated with the concept of a beneficent or good death and delivery into Heaven. Because the Virgin Mary also saw her son out of this world, first being present during his Crucifixion and then helping prepare his body for the tomb in the traditional fashion, she also became associated with this deathly aspect. Since there is some cross-association between the Virgin Mary and Santa Muerte, aloe likewise became associated with Santa Muerte because of its relationship with death.

## *Apples*

Apples are frequently included on both Santa Muerte altars and Day of the Dead altars. The first reason for this is simple: apples are a fall harvest, which is also the right season for the Day of the Dead. Since giving food to Santa Muerte is common, giving her the fruit of the fall harvest makes sense. Why apples, though, and not corn or squash?

Apples are native to Central Asia but have been cultivated widely for thousands of years. The Spanish brought them to Mexico for the fruits, their wood, and the hard cider that they produced. To the Spanish, the apple was a symbol of salvation, virtue, and immortality. According to Christian tradition, humanity must suffer the consequences of Eve eating a forbidden apple in the Garden of Eden. Since salvation and acceptance into Heaven lie in acceptance of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary is often interpreted as a new Eve offering forgiveness instead of sin. This is why it's not unusual to find a picture of the Virgin Mary holding an apple along with her infant son.

Since salvation and acceptance into Heaven require dying first, apples thus became associated with funerals and with the dead in general. This is also why apple trees are planted on graves or sometimes found sprouting from a ruined grave where they were buried with the dead. Naturally, apples make quite a fine offering for the patron saint of death, and so make their way onto her altar.

## *Black Mirror*

A black obsidian mirror is the divination method of choice for many Santa Muerte practitioners, and a common scrying tool among other magical traditions as well. It is also used for

contacting spirits, in particular the spirits of the dead. In fact, the obsidian scrying mirror used by the famous English magician John Dee was said to have had an Aztec origin. Using a scrying mirror is simple. The magician gazes at the surface of the mirror, which is lit by an oblique light source (the light from your altar candle is an excellent choice). After clearing his mind and allowing his vision to soften, the magician enters into a light trance. Images will form in the surface of the mirror, which are then interpreted. In the absence of an actual obsidian glass mirror, a regular black glass mirror can be used. You can easily make one by removing the glass from a picture frame and spray-painting the back surface black.

### *Monarch Butterflies*

Monarch butterflies have a very specific association with the Dia de los Muertos, and with the spirits of the dead in general. It is a common belief through Central and South America that moths or butterflies are actually the spirits of the dead come back to visit the living. Whether this is for good or for ill depends on where you are. In Guatemala, for example, a white moth appearing in the house of a sick person signals his or her impending death.

To the Aztecs, however, butterflies were the returning spirits of the friendly dead come to visit their friends and family. This belief has carried forward into the modern era with the Dia de los Muertos. Monarch butterflies in one form or another are often featured on a Santa Muerte altar; I have a small one made out of feathers. The reason monarch butterflies are chosen is that their annual return to their breeding grounds in Mexico coincides with Dia de los Muertos, and so they have become associated with Santa Muerte as well.

## Censer

A censer is a small fireproof container, often made out of either brass or clay, that is used for burning loose incense. Many have lids perforated with small holes to let smoke slowly escape. There are two reasons to use a censer. The first reason is that one of Santa Muerte's favorite offerings, copal incense, naturally comes in small chunks because it is the resinous sap of certain trees. While copal incense sticks are readily available, they are normally just soaked in copal essential oil. Naturally, real copal incense is preferred. Other offerings, such as tobacco, are also easily burned in a small censer.

The second reason is that censers are also often used when working with spirits. When you burn something dedicated to a spirit, you are lending it your directed magical energy while the heat in the censer transforms the material offering into a spiritual one. Thus, filling the area with magically charged smoke aids in a spirit's manifestation. Censers tend to produce large quantities of smoke, which is why they are used. Sometimes offerings are chosen for the large quantities of smoke that they produce, which makes a censer quite useful. Burning copal incense tends to create large amounts of smoke, as does burning tobacco.

The favored herb of many magicians to produce strong spirit manifestations is Dittany of Crete (*Origanum dictamnus*). Dittany of Crete is a small shrub that is covered with tiny wooly leaves and is related to oregano and marjoram. When burned, it produces incredible plumes of thick, sweet-smelling smoke that is famous for its power to evoke physical manifestations, with shapes and figures readily appearing in the smoke.

The art of divining with smoke is referred to as capnomancy, in the same manner that divination via cards is known as cartomancy.

## *Dirt*

A plate of dirt is seen on many Santa Muerte altars. It may just be a dish of plain old garden dirt, or dirt that was acquired from a special place or under special circumstances. The reason for this is pretty straightforward. That which is dead will decay, returning to the earth and ultimately enriching it. A plate of dirt on the altar represents this process and is a tribute to it.

Graveyard dirt is a popular choice for inclusion on a Santa Muerte altar. It has an undeserved reputation in some circles as dangerous or misfortune-inducing because of the negative connotations associated with death. This belief strikes me as strange because the graveyard is the place where we lay our friends and family to rest, and is a place of solace, remembrance, and love. I use graveyard dirt for precisely these reasons.

Another popular choice is dirt taken from crossroads, since the crossroads represent the intersections of all places and states of being. It is also common to take dirt from places that are magically significant, such as a courthouse when doing magic targeted at the legal system. Of course, you can also use just plain old regular garden dirt, too.

## *Incense*

Several kinds of incense are routinely used with Santa Muerte. The first kind is aloe, which is often used in the absence of an actual aloe plant. Its effects are not as strong as those of an aloe plant, for the obvious reasons that a stick of incense is not alive, and its effects last for only as long as the smoke persists in the air.

The second kind of incense that is frequently used is copal. Copal incense is made from the sap of the copal tree (*Protium copal*) that grows throughout Mexico and Central America. It was very

sacred to the ancient Aztecs. They considered collecting the sap to be the sacrifice of the tree's living blood, and the sweet and spicy smoke it produced reserved for the gods alone. The type of copal produced around the Valley of Mexico, black copal, is a particularly dark and sticky variety that has a pine-like scent. Because this is the variety that the Aztecs used most frequently, this is the type that is most commonly used with Santa Muerte veneration.

Rosemary incense is also a popular choice. Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) is a woody evergreen shrub that is native to the Mediterranean. Rosemary is famous for its purification and healing properties. For millennia, it was called the “sickroom herb” because it has strong antibiotic and astringent properties and was used to wash the wounds of patients. Its strong odor was also believed to drive out the spirits that cause illness. This herb is considered to have a strongly female character and is associated with feminine authority, strength, and order. Common European folklore states that rosemary grows well in the garden of a strong woman, but poorly in the garden of a weak one, and not at all in the gardens of the unjust. As Santa Muerte is a strong and dominating female figure, rosemary suits her well.

Rosemary was brought over to Mexico by the Spanish, not only for its medicinal properties, but also because it is strongly associated with the Virgin Mary. According to Catholic folklore, the Virgin Mary was forced to flee to Egypt with the infant Jesus in order to escape the murderous soldiers of King Herod. At one point, they were nearly caught by the soldiers who heard her panicked footsteps in the underbrush. The Virgin Mary ran into a field full of rosemary bushes, which silently bent their branches so that she could hide among them. Later, she spread her wet blue cloak out over a rosemary bush to let it dry, giving

the flowers their beautiful rich color. Because it is widely favored by Catholics and Mexico is predominantly Catholic, rosemary is popularly grown throughout Mexico.

Despite it being associated with the Virgin Mary, rosemary has also gained an association with Santa Muerte in a similar way to the aloe plant. Rosemary has a long traditional association with death as well. Its pungent odor is thought to enhance the memory, and so it is known as the herb of remembrance. Since ancient times it was used throughout the Mediterranean during funerals because it was thought to help evoke and strengthen funeral-goers' memories of the recently deceased. This association with death was imported into Mexico, along with other traditional European folklore and magical beliefs. Thus, it also became frequently associated with Santa Muerte veneration, just like the aloe plant.

Myrrh is an extremely common incense choice as well. It is the resinous sap of the *Commiphora* tree species that grows throughout northeastern Africa and the eastern Mediterranean. Myrrh has been associated with death and funerary practices for thousands of years. Myrrh oil was a critical component of the mummification process and thus greatly prized by the ancient Egyptians. The ancient Jewish tribes also preserved the bodies of their dead by wrapping them in peeled aloe leaves packed with myrrh. Aside from its funerary uses, it was widely used as a temple incense and also as a penitential anointing oil.

Among Catholics, it is associated with the gifts brought to the infant Christ at his birth by the three wise magi. The gifts were gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The gold is typically interpreted to mean kingship because of its great value; the frankincense, to mean divine power because of its common use as a temple incense; and the myrrh, to symbolize death because it

was commonly used in embalming. Even among Catholics, myrrh is associated with death. Since Santa Muerte is a Catholic folk saint who is a patron of death, it is only natural that myrrh be associated with Santa Muerte veneration.

Lastly, sweet grass (*Hierochloa odorata*) was the incense of choice of Aztec priests for establishing a ritual space, and this use is reflected by some Santa Muerte practitioners. Spanish accounts describe that burning a ring of sweet grass was a standard practice among Aztec priests who were about to perform any kind of ceremony. The ring of sweet grass had four long tassels hanging off of it that were burned individually to symbolically purify the four directions before the central ring itself was burned. This procedure is difficult to emulate in most ritual spaces due to the number of burning embers that it produces. Sweet grass is specifically attractive to friendly spirits, and so its use to make Santa Muerte's altar more inviting is also common.

### *Salt*

A dish of salt is also a common component of a Santa Muerte altar. Salt is frequently associated with spirits of death because it represents the earth to which we will all return. Since it is also commonly used for purification, it appeals to spirits as well. Salt is also essential for life. A certain ration of salt was guaranteed to prisoners who were condemned to perform hard physical labor. By working hard and sweating profusely, they would not only dehydrate themselves but also lose the salt in their bloodstream. Low blood sodium levels can lead to vomiting, seizures, coma, and ultimately death. Because salt can be as necessary for life as water, it is something that the dead desire. Salt is often included on Santa Muerte altars (and Dia de los Muertos altars in general). Food is commonly shared with

Santa Muerte, as well as with ancestral spirits. The salt is provided to spice the food. Santa Muerte is appreciative of this particular offering because she enjoys the most spicy and interesting dishes in general. The salt is commonly kept in a small dish on the altar and periodically refreshed when it gets dirty or dusty.

### *Sugar Skulls*

Candy skulls made out of sugar are nearly synonymous with the Dia de los Muertos. They are often elaborately decorated with piped icing designs of flowers, diamonds, hearts, and other symbols of health, wealth, and good fortune. These candies are frequently placed on the altar around the Dia de los Muertos, usually with the names of any deceased friends or family members that you wish to remember written across their foreheads in icing. These sugar skulls serve as a way for the dead to be symbolically present in a special way during the Dia de los Muertos and to offer their blessings to the living.

Commonly referred to as *calaveras* (Spanish, “skull”), this term generally can apply to any elaborately decorated skull. Breads baked in the shape of *calaveras* and decorated with raisins and icing are common treats as well as offerings on the Dia de los Muertos. It is also a common decorative theme (the cover of this book showcases a sugar skull design, in fact). Because Santa Muerte enjoys candy and these skulls represent the blessings and goodwill of the dead, sugar skulls make an excellent offering for the patron saint of the dead and are frequently featured on her altar.

### The Ancestral Altar

It is commonly believed that our dead family members watch over us from beyond the grave and have some power to intervene

in our lives. Many also believe that our ancestors are protective of their living relatives and will go to great lengths to aid them. This is why setting up ancestral altars to venerate our dead is a frequent practice in many cultures. This technique is also often used when working with Santa Muerte. Santa Muerte knows the final or current location of the spirit of everyone who has ever died because she is the power of death incarnate. Therefore, she can facilitate communication with spirits of the dead. This concept is deeply embedded in working with Santa Muerte. The annual Dia de los Muertos event is even dedicated to this idea. When we take effort to remember them and tend their graves, the dead are enticed to return and watch over us.

The spirits that are closest to you are those of your relatives, as well as those of close friends. These spirits will be the most responsive to you and tend to be friendliest. Dead pets can also be incorporated into an ancestral altar, as many believe that our faithful friends will meet us again when we die. Establishing a space where these spirits can dwell in comfort in your home makes it easier for them to intervene in your life as well. Therefore, it makes sense to incorporate your ancestors into your altar setup if you can.

Place relics belonging to your ancestors alongside your other Santa Muerte items or in a nearby space that has been cleansed in the same fashion as your altar. Relics include their pictures, letters and birthday cards, favorite jewelry, and even their cremated remains, if available. If you are using a space separate from your main Santa Muerte altar setup, the ancestral altar likewise has core requirements of a candle and a glass of water. A simple white tea light that is refreshed daily works well. You place it alongside the relics, along with a small glass of water.

Again, I just use a shot glass. You are welcome to incorporate other items, such as incense, if space permits.

### *Using the Ancestral Altar*

Interacting with your ancestral altar is a simple procedure. The candle and water must be refreshed regularly, and it must be kept clean and free of dust. Paying attention to your deceased relatives is critical. By talking to them, playing them music, giving them gifts such as food, and remembering special events such as birthdays, you give them repeated gifts of your attention and energy. This interaction strengthens their spirits and their connection to you, which in turn enables them to better help and protect you.

When you are making a specific request of an ancestral spirit, it is common to either write the request on a slip of paper and place it underneath your ancestor's picture or to place a token representing the request on the altar. The request is often stated in simple terms, although this procedure is often altered in accordance with individual magical tastes. The chaos magic technique of creating a nonsense sigil out of a desire that is repeated as a mantra is a popular choice, for example. Often you can accomplish this by writing out your desire in simple terms on a slip of paper and then crossing out any repeating letters. You rearrange the letters that remain, and often add random vowels to aid pronounceability. The original desire is then intentionally forgotten. This technique masks the purpose of the sigil from your conscious mind but doesn't fool the subconscious, which neither truly forgets nor is fooled by the subtraction and rearrangement of letters. This technique allows your subconscious to use its full power to manifest your desire without interference

from the conscious mind, which is kept occupied by repeating the nonsense sigil.

Another magical technique that I have seen successfully used with ancestral altars is the creation of bind runes using the Futhark rune alphabet, which are then placed beneath the photos of the deceased. Again, since death is a universal power, the magical techniques that you can use in conjunction with ancestral altars (and Santa Muerte in general) are virtually unlimited.

After your ancestors have fulfilled your request, it is customary to thank them. If the request is small, simply setting apart some special time to spend with them may be all that is required. If the request is large, a gift may be necessary. After all, if your grandmother in life went to special effort to do something for you, wouldn't you be happy to give her a token of your gratitude? The same idea still applies, even if your grandmother has died. Common gifts are special candies, donations to your ancestor's favorite charities made in their name, extra candles, and so forth, as well as your sincerest thanks.

### *Consecrating Your Altar and Other Ritual Items*

Dedicating altars, statues, and other rituals for use with Santa Muerte is recommended and frequently necessary.

Why is consecration recommended? The word *consecration* comes from the Latin word *sacrāre*, which means "to devote." Using a ritual to devote an object for magical purposes does impart on it special properties. By declaring an object for magical purposes and continuing thereafter to treat it as special, you set it apart in your mind. After all, it just feels wrong to cut a jelly sandwich with a ritual blade, even if it is a consecrated butter knife. This makes it possible for an item to retain your psychic energy

in a way that an object treated casually does not and thereby to gain its own power. Consecrating items in the name of a particular spirit naturally strengthens and empowers them further but may also dedicate their use exclusively to that spirit. For my own practice, I have a specially dedicated set of tools for working with Santa Muerte. Since I have found that she is a jealous spirit, I prefer that she shares no tools with other spiritual powers, either.

If you would like to consecrate your ritual tools, you may use whatever method you normally employ, with obvious substitutions such as invoking Santa Muerte's name instead of any of your usual patron spirits. If you do not normally consecrate your tools or would like to try an alternate method, the one I use is both simple and effective. This method can also be used for consecrating your altar, your statues, and things such as magical talismans.

Depending on your individual circumstances, you may not need a specialized set of ritual tools dedicated to work with Santa Muerte. If you have a set of ritual tools that you are accustomed to working with that are already dedicated to another specific spiritual power, most practitioners would choose not to also use them with Santa Muerte. The reason for this is the issue of Santa Muerte's famous territoriality. Just as she doesn't like sharing space with other spirits, she likewise doesn't like sharing tools with them (and depending on whom your tools are consecrated to, that spirit may not like sharing with Santa Muerte, either!). However, tools that are consecrated in more neutral magical terms, such as those dedicated to elemental forces, are perfectly fine to use with Santa Muerte without first reconsecrating them. Purifying them by wiping them down with some salt water or a bit of Florida Water is all that is required.

## The Consecration Ritual

The consecration ritual has four necessary steps. The first step is to ask for Santa Muerte's aid and protection while performing the ritual consecration. Begin by taking several deep, cleansing breaths. Close your eyes and clear your mind of all thoughts and distractions. Envision Santa Muerte standing before you, either in her seven-color aspect or in her form as Niña Blanca (see chapter 5 for more details about Santa Muerte's different colors).

When you have Santa Muerte clearly pictured, ask her out loud to both protect and aid you while you consecrate your ritual tools:

*Blessed Santa Muerte/Blessed White Sister, please witness and aid this act of consecration that I perform in your name.*

The second step is to both mentally and magically isolate the item that you are consecrating. Isolating it establishes it as both special and sacred, not to be used for ordinary purposes. To do this, look at the item and imagine all the connections that tie it to this world as small glowing threads that trail off to their attachment points. Using either your index finger (or a neutrally consecrated ritual knife), sever those glowing connections. Then use a small quantity of either Florida Water or regular clean water to erase any lingering traces of psychic energy. The item is now ready to receive your psychic imprint defining its future use.

The third step is to create a mental duplicate of the item, which you accomplish simply by envisioning a perfect copy floating in space just above or behind the item that you are consecrating. When you have fully pictured the mental copy, imagine the duplicate copy merging with the real item, reinforcing

it and giving it both psychic substance and strength. State the following out loud:

*Under the watchful eyes of Santa Muerte/the White Sister, I consecrate and empower this tool to attain all of my magical desires. Neither it nor my will shall ever fail! Amen! (or, so “mote it be,” or other similar closings).*

The fourth and final step is to anoint the new ritual item with a variety of sacred oils, either those favored by Santa Muerte or specific to the item's purpose. I also perform a smoke bath with incense chosen with the same criteria in mind. This smoke bath is particularly helpful with larger items or things that have a lot of nooks and crannies or that might be damaged by the essential oils.

Once the item is consecrated, it is stored near or on the altar and used only for working with Santa Muerte. I often wrap my ritual items in cloth and place them in small boxes. Thrift stores are great places to get small pieces of silk and velvet to wrap your ritual tools in; look among the ladies' scarves and handkerchiefs.

## Establishing a Ritual Space

While certain types of magic are best performed on the fly, establishing a sacred atmosphere conducive to magic is a common ritual practice. This process includes both cleansing the area of errant psychic energy and driving out annoying or noxious spiritual forces. Once this is done, psychic energy is directed toward establishing a ritual atmosphere and invoking the correct patron spirits. Doing this prevents either lingering psychic energy or harmful spirits from influencing you or interfering with your work. That's why these types of rituals are frequently called banishing rituals. The most well-known example of this kind of

ritual is the Lesser Banishing Ritual of the Pentagram (LBRP), although many variations on this theme exist. Performing this step changes a simple bedroom to a temple, a change that can be felt in the atmosphere around you. Once this step is performed, you'll feel as if you are standing in a church, an untouched glade, or some other similar sacred space.

Generally speaking, you are free to establish a ritual space in a manner of your choice. The Lesser Banishing Ritual of the Pentagram and elementally cast circles are both popular choices. Some other kinds of rituals commonly used for this purpose may need some examination before using them with Santa Muerte. For example, the hammer rite used by some Germanic Heathen practitioners calls on Thor multiple times during the establishment of a ritual space. Since Santa Muerte is typically seen as a territorial spirit, this particular rite may be a suboptimal choice. This is why it is important to understand how Santa Muerte fits into your relationships with other spirits.

If you do not have a preferred banishing ritual, or you would like to use one particular to Santa Muerte, I give you this method that I use. Because the need to deflect psychic energy or harmful spirits is not tied to a ritual space, this ritual is designed to be both simple and portable. Thus, the pine, sage, or sweetgrass incense that I list is optional. The ritual directions normally faced are different from those in many banishing rituals and require some explanation. Frequently, banishing rituals such as the LBRP begin with the practitioner facing north or east and invoking those patron powers and spirits. The practitioner then proceeds clockwise, following the course of the sun and invoking the appropriate powers at each direction. Once the circle is fully complete, the ritual is usually ended by thanking the attending powers. The practitioner

then performs other rituals as needed. Frequently, the ritual space is closed by performing the cleansing banishing ritual again, or some version of casting the circle in reverse.

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## **What Is the Lesser Banishing Ritual of the Pentagram?**

The Lesser Banishing Ritual of the Pentagram, or LBRP, is one of the first rituals many new magicians learn. Originally conceived of by the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, its use has become popularized in the occult community, creating many variations based on a simple universal need.

The purpose of the LBRP is to cleanse and purify the aura, as well as banish the immediate space of any errant psychic energy that might impede magical or practical work. More than one magician has covertly banished his office after his aggravating manager has left, souring everyone's mood and making them unable to focus.

The LBRP is both simple to understand and to perform, which is why it's an ideal ritual for new magicians to learn. The first step is to draw spiritual energies toward you by performing the Kabbalistic Cross, drawing lines of power through you that connect you magically to both the spiritual and physical planes while intoning the ritual words. Performed correctly, this step integrates your whole being—mind, body, spirit, and focus—into a balanced whole. This first step has the effect of cleansing the aura, making you feel both alert and centered.

The second step of the LBRP is to send this energy out into the space immediately near you, likewise cleansing

and balancing it. You do this by drawing a line of power in the air around you in a circle. At each of the cardinal points, you draw a protective banishing pentagram while calling on the archangels that govern that direction to aid you. Once this circle is complete, the space is cleansed and you, as the magician, have established yourself as the master of it.

While this process may sound quite complicated, the LBRP takes less than five minutes to perform, making it (or a ritual functionally like it) a common daily practice for many magicians.

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Some practitioners do not banish after they perform ritual work, believing that doing so may interfere with any residual energies that are still in effect and active on their spell. In this case, banishing rituals are performed on a regular basis to clean out any truly lingering effects and to chase off spirits attracted by their energy. I am not a fan of this method, since I prefer to take the extra few minutes to keep my ritual area psychically clean and ready for work. Your personal magical paradigm will, of course, guide your beliefs on how (and how often) you wish to banish and ritually cleanse your space.

The method that I use is modified from traditional Aztec ritual practices instead. The Aztec step pyramid had twelve major sections ascending toward the top; these sections represented traveling through the heavens to Omeyocan, the Place of Duality, which was their highest heaven. This altar, often called the eagle altar, always faced west. At the apex of the pyramid, the officiating Aztec priest defined a sacred space using five directions while also facing west, with his back to the sun. The high

priest, as well as any attending priests, would open their rituals by calling on their four directions, but starting first with the eastern direction and proceeding counterclockwise, from north to west, and then finally to the south. They also included a fifth and final central point, which was often designated by a ritual fire. This point represented the hole through which they believed the sun descended every evening into the underworld. The high priest would burn a ring of sweetgrass with long tassels trailing in each of the four directions, letting the winds scatter the embers and cleanse their space. The attending priests would burn torches made out of fragrant pine pitch.

Burning torches and rings of flaming sweetgrass is typically a difficult feat to replicate, particularly indoors, but many of these other elements have been incorporated for the method that I present here. The titles associated with each of the four directions are likewise drawn from traditional Aztec practices.

## Santa Muerte Banishing Ritual

For the Santa Muerte banishing ritual, begin by facing east. If you are using pine, sage, or sweetgrass incense, light it now. It will help physically define the ritual space. If you are not using incense, your index finger will work instead.

Take a few deep, cleansing breaths. Clear your mind of any stray thoughts or distractions; then recite the following:

*I call upon blessed Santa Muerte, Queen of this World and the Next, to open and guard this space so that I may be free to do my Will.*

Hold the incense toward the east, or point your finger in that direction. Recite the following:

*Holy Death, the Queen that reigns from the Place of Light,  
come with your many spirits to guard me and guide me.*

Envision a mote of light descending on your incense or outstretched finger, received from that direction. Focus on it and use it to trace a brightly glowing trail to your left as you turn counterclockwise, toward the north. This trail is the boundary for your ritual space that you are forming with your psychic energy. Recite the following in the northern direction:

*Holy Death, the Queen that reigns from the Place of Death,  
come with your many spirits to guard me and guide me.*

Continue tracing your glowing boundary of energy toward the west, where you recite the following:

*Holy Death, the Queen that reigns from the Place of the Women,  
come with your many spirits to guard me and guide me.*

Continue on toward the south, reciting the following:

*Holy Death, the Queen that reigns from the Region of Thorns,  
come with your many spirits to guard me and guide me.*

Finish your circle by tracing the boundary all the way back to your starting point in the east. Now turn, facing your altar. Imagine the point of light ascending upward, as high up into the heavens and beyond as you can possibly imagine. The highest point is representative of Omeyocan, the highest Aztec heaven, and likewise

references death's primary place within the cycle of creation. Point your incense or finger skyward and recite the following:

*Blessed Santa Muerte, Queen of this World who dwells within the Place of Duality, I call upon your influence to protect me and aid me within this space.*

Now imagine the same point of light descending earthward through the very center of your ritual space, piercing the ground and descending into the deepest of underworlds that you can imagine. This would represent the descent into Mictlan, where the dead would gather to await their rebirth into the next age, or any other similar location if your personal paradigm prefers it. This is the point that Aztec priests would have marked with a sacred fire and that I often mark with a small candle for this reason. Point your incense or finger downward and recite the following:

*Blessed Santa Muerte, Queen of this World who dwells within the Middle of the Earth, I call upon your influence to guard me and aid me within this space.*

Now imagine the point of light returning to you, having completed its entire three-dimensional circuit. The point of light comes to rest within the center of your diaphragm, at your solar plexus. Imagine that its light and power are filling you and washing over you, and also through the rest of your space. Filling the space with energy in this manner cleanses it and drives out any lingering spirits. Recite the following:

*Blessed Santa Muerte, Queen of this World and of the Next, by your authority this place is established and by your power it is made complete. Protect me and aid me now so that I may do my Will, free from the influence of others. Amen! (or so mote it be, etc.)*

Now that the space is psychically cleansed, tuned, and free of lingering spirits, you are free to perform any other spells or ritual work that you desire. Normally, after performing this banishing ritual, I perform my daily novenas. This ritual can also be used daily, to psychically clean and protect both yourself and whatever space you choose. Performing this ritual daily over an extended period will leave a lingering effect because the atmosphere retains a slight charge from repeated cleansings and infusions of fresh psychic energy. This is why churches, even without a celebration in progress, often retain that certain sacred feeling in the air.



## CHAPTER 7

# The Rosary of Santa Muerte



While an altar dedicated to Santa Muerte can be used like any other magical altar, the modern incarnation of Santa Muerte is traditionally treated like a Catholic saint. This means that working with Santa Muerte for any kind of spell or ritual typically centers on using a rosary, often in conjunction with a candle. Praying a rosary with a certain intent in mind over a specified number of days, typically nine, is a time-honored Catholic practice called a novena. The methods presented in this book are adopted from this practice.

### Some Notes About the Rosary

Rosaries are associated with Catholicism in general and with the Virgin Mary in particular. The word comes from the Latin term *rosarium*, which means “wreath of roses.” They are so-called

because rosaries are traditionally draped on the necks of Virgin Mary statues along with actual wreaths of roses. Back in the 11th century, Irish monks brought rosaries to the European mainland. The Irish monks had been using them to count repetitions of the familiar *Ave Maria* (Latin, “Hail Mary”) prayer. Even the etymology of the English word *bead* points to this particular usage. It comes from the Middle English word *bede*, which means “prayer.”

While rosaries are the most popular and familiar kind of meditation beads that Catholics use, they are not the only kind. In fact, rosaries are part of a larger category of meditation beads called chaplets that Catholics use. A chaplet is a set of meditation beads that is dedicated to a particular personality within the Catholic pantheon, such as a saint. The rosary is just a very specific kind of chaplet dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

Wandering Christian monks used bags of pebbles, knotted cords, or strings of beads to count their prayers as early as the 3rd century. These were used to keep track of the *Our Father* prayer (in Latin, the *Pater Noster*) and were frequently referred to as paternosters for that reason.

## Why Use Meditation Beads?

The use of meditation beads is not limited to wandering Christian monks and those who followed them. Meditation beads are actually a common spiritual accessory. They have been used for thousands of years by people following a variety of spiritual beliefs worldwide. For instance, many Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs employ a long 108-bead strand of prayer beads referred to as mala beads. They are often used to count repetitions of short prayers called mantras, or the names of gods or saints. In fact, some Buddhists explain that using all 108 mala beads to recite a

mantra actually counts for only 100 repetitions, since inevitably a few mistakes are made. Muslims also use meditation beads, either in strands of thirty-three or ninety-nine beads, called *misbahah*. These beads are used to recite the ninety-nine names of Allah. Catholics use chaplets and are famous for their use of the rosary, but the use of meditation beads has spread to some Protestant denominations as well.

Why are meditation beads so popular? Meditation beads serve two practical purposes. The first—and most obvious—is that they are a convenient way of tracking the repetition of a large number of prayers without breaking your concentration. The act of repeating the same prayer (or reciting the same name) over and over again has the effect of inducing a light trance state, similar to that reached during meditation. When you are in a light trance state, your conscious mind quiets and disengages. This frees the power of your attention, normally used to occupy your conscious mind. When you repeat a spell or sigil, your focused trance will direct this freed psychic energy toward your purpose instead. This activity also helps your conscious mind from interfering with the outcome of your spell. The reason is that there is no opportunity to doubt, reconsider, hesitate, or amend your goals or plans. There is only the soft, constant chanting to achieve your desires instead.

The second reason that meditation beads are so popular and so effective pertains to the induction of the light trance state itself. As you begin reciting your prayers or spells, your conscious mind will sometimes resist being lulled into quiescence. The body will respond by trying to start fidgeting, such as shifting your position, scratching your nose, or tapping your fingers. If you succeed in distracting yourself with your own body, your

conscious mind snaps back to its full awareness, and the light trance state is interrupted. When you give your hands beads to play with, the body's natural tendency to fidget is pacified, and the inducement of the light trance is not interrupted. Buddhists even have a term for this: "soothing the monkey mind." Thus, meditation beads are actually useful for anyone trying to learn how to successfully meditate. Consequently, they are extremely effective tools for casting spells.

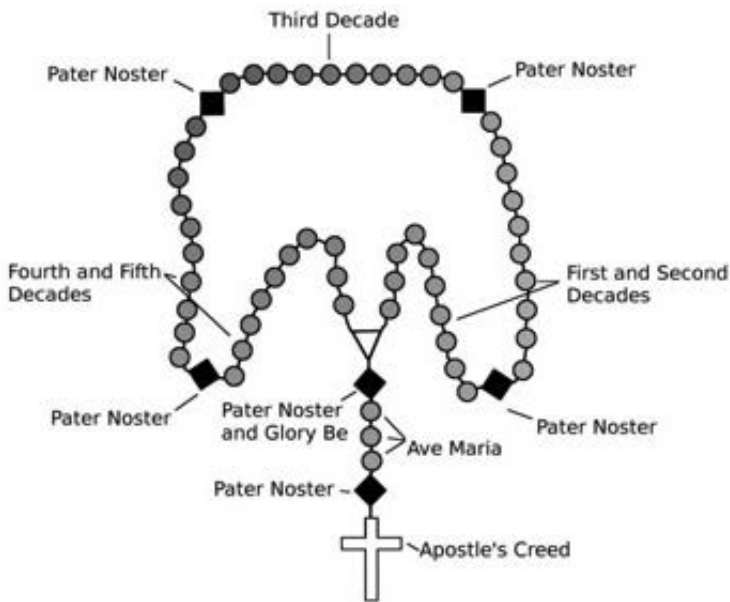
Using meditation beads to cast spells is a surprisingly traditional use. Certain Hindu villains, for example, are recorded as using their mala beads to recite the names of vengeful demons so that they could use their power to create disease and famine. Of course, the virtuous heroes called on to fight these demons use their own mala beads to call on protective forces and to reverse the curses of their enemies. Using a rosary to call on the power of the Virgin Mary and the Catholic saints to accomplish a particular goal can also be viewed as a spell, although Catholics would naturally resist calling it one. Because meditation beads are so useful for creating a light trance state conducive to magic, one that has been recognized for millennia, I strongly encourage their use.

## The Traditional Use of a Rosary

Using rosaries when working with Santa Muerte is common, since she is often petitioned as a Catholic folk saint. There are actually a wide variety of rosary styles, each with its own specific use. The standard Catholic rosary with which most people are familiar is referred to as the Dominican rosary.

The Dominican rosary consists of fifty-nine beads, fifty-four of which are arranged in a circular loop. The remaining five beads form a hanging tail off the main loop. A special y-shaped

piece holds these two sections together, often with the image of the Virgin Mary embossed on it. Chaplets dedicated to other spiritual figures usually have their pictures featured here instead. The beads on the loop are separated into groups of ten beads each, a grouping that is referred to as a decade. Each bead in a decade represents an Ave Maria prayer. Normally, a Dominican rosary has five decades, with a special separating bead between each decade. This special separating bead is normally reserved for reciting the Our Father prayer. The dangling chain itself has a group of three beads bracketed by two more special beads, which also represent different prayers. It normally ends with a crucifix.



When praying a rosary, the user normally recites four different prayers. The first prayer is called the Apostle's Creed, which is recited beginning at the crucifix on the dangling end. The user

then touches the next bead, which represents the first Our Father prayer. The next group of three beads represent recitations of the Ave Maria prayer and are touched for each recitation.

One prayer traditionally inserted does not have its own bead, and that prayer is called the Glory Be. It is said before the next special bead is touched. Once that prayer is complete, the user recites another Our Father prayer.

After reciting these seven prayers, the user proceeds around the left-hand side of the rosary, reciting ten Ave Marias for each bead in the first decade and repeating the Our Father for the special bead in between. This pattern is repeated all the way around the rosary's loop until the beads are completed.

According to Catholic teachings, the rosary should be prayed daily. Doing so will strengthen your connection to the Virgin Mary, who is the Queen of Saints, but by extension to the Holy Trinity as well. Normally, reciting an entire rosary takes half an hour to forty-five minutes to complete. Many Catholics will perform only the shorter tail portion of the rosary on a daily basis, stopping at the second Our Father. The rosary is always said in its entirety for special occasions, such as praying for a happy wedding or for the souls of the dead at a funeral, or in emergency situations, such as praying for someone who has just been diagnosed with a severe illness.

The way that a rosary is used in this method varies along similar themes. Of course, the most common and simple method is simply focusing on the problem at hand while reciting your prayers. For example, if your grandmother has suddenly been diagnosed with a pneumonia, you would pray your rosary while focusing on her speedy recovery. Some Catholics will formally recite their request out loud instead after praying the rosary's

tail and after reaching the y-shaped connector that attaches it to the main loop. This can be as simply put as, “Please, oh Virgin Mary, help my grandmother recover quickly,” or in more elaborate terms. The third option is to recite the request not only at the y-shaped connector, but also after saying each Our Father prayer. Provided that these requests are reasonably short, they do not add much time to saying a rosary.

The Catholic method of using a rosary to invoke the power of a saint is also a simple process. After praying the tail of the rosary, the user makes the prayer (or prayers) to the saint next. Sometimes these are just simply thoughts said out loud, but often people will use pre-prepared prayers such as those found on novena cards or candles instead. Many devout Catholics invoke the power of Santa Muerte using this method, as she is a folk saint.

Catholics also traditionally use beads dedicated to specific saints to invoke their power. These types of meditation beads usually call on the Virgin Mary intermittently, focusing instead on praying to the saint for their aid. One such example is the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, which is often prayed at funerals. It begins with a few prayers to Saint Faustina Kowalska, whose extensive visions of Jesus inspired this chaplet. The tail portion of the rosary is recited in the normal way to call on the Virgin Mary. The rest of the rosary is replaced with short prayers to Saint Faustina requesting her help in getting mercy and forgiveness for the deceased.

This method of praying to Santa Muerte for her aid is also often used with chaplets that are dedicated to her. You usually can identify these chaplets because they have a Santa Muerte-specific medallion on the end instead of a crucifix and often have

septades of seven beads instead of decades of ten. The number seven is sacred to Santa Muerte, and so prayers invoking her aid are sometimes repeated in sets of seven.

## The Rosary from a Magical Perspective

The rosary first and foremost is an extremely effective tool for spirit communication and invocation. Even among Catholics, this is its primary function. After all, the rosary is prayed to establish and strengthen the user's connection with the Virgin Mary, and through her, the rest of the Holy Trinity. Once this connection is established, the rosary is then used for both purposes of seeking spiritual guidance and resolving practical problems.

The rosary's design makes it an effective ritual method for calling on a spirit's aid. Analyzed from a magical perspective, the way it works is actually quite ingenious. The first prayer that is recited, the Apostle's Creed, is a summarization of the teachings of the Apostles. It includes statements about believing in God, his incarnation as Jesus via the Virgin Mary, his death and miraculous resurrection, and so forth. Magically speaking, it has the effect of aligning the user's beliefs with the basic tenets of the Catholic faith, and by extension the spirits that are associated with it.

The next prayer, the Our Father, helps establish the rosary ritual by further defining the breadth and scope of the spiritual powers involved. It contains statements indicating that God can affect all the heavens and the earth and that his ability to do so is absolute. It also specifically indicates that he has the power to affect the life of the person saying the rosary. This is not only a direct acceptance of his aid but also a further means of defining within the person's mind how he or she relates to the spiritual

powers involved. This prayer helps direct and shape the psychic energy that is generated by praying a rosary.

The three Ave Marias that follow form the core of the rosary ritual. The Ave Maria is a familiar prayer to many people, since it is frequently referred to in pop culture. It begins with the words “Hail Mary, full of grace” and continues to describe her relationship to God in terms of her son, Jesus. Its repetition serves as a means of calling on her specifically, which is usually the point of completing a rosary. The rosary, after all, is commonly dedicated to the Virgin Mary. The numerous repetitions of the Ave Maria, both here and throughout the rest of the rosary, are what help you slip into the light trance state that is so common while using meditation beads. By keeping your mind focused in this way, you are feeding your directed psychic energy into both your connection with the Virgin Mary as well as the rosary’s intended purpose. This connection greatly strengthens and empowers the ritual.

After building up belief and power in the Virgin Mary, the user then recites the sixth prayer. This short prayer is called the Glory Be, which is also known as the Lesser Doxology. It is one of the oldest prayers in Christianity, originally recited to affirm the relationships in the Holy Trinity between God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. The nature of these divine relationships was under dispute for centuries until it was finally decided on at the First Council of Nicaea in 325. The Glory Be prayer came as a result of that decision, recited to combat early conflicting beliefs regarding the Holy Trinity. Its placement here within the rosary is to reconnect the Virgin Mary back to the Holy Trinity. Since its original purpose was to keep the mind free from heresy by focusing it on orthodox doctrine, it also functionally serves as a prayer of purification and protection.

The seventh prayer completes the cycle of invocation with another Our Father prayer. At this point, the daily prayers are finished, and half of the ritual is complete. Some Catholics continue the entire loop of the rosary, however. The ten Ave Marias separated by an Our Father prayer serve as a strong and repeated invocation of the Virgin Mary's power.

Now that the Virgin Mary's power has been invoked, the user is free to perform other magical operations as desired. This includes presenting requests to her, often sweetened with a promise to perform a favor for her in return. As the Queen of Saints, she also serves as a gatekeeper to other entities within the Catholic belief system. After invoking her aid and protection, the user may now also invoke the other saints as well.

The rosary represents a simple method that can be easily adapted for calling on any spirit. The purpose of each prayer remains the same, even if the words themselves are replaced. Suppose a person with Germanic Heathen beliefs was trying to gain the help of Loki, the Norse god of trickery and mischief. He might decide to try a Viking rosary, replacing all of the Catholic prayers and symbolism with Pagan ones instead. The first prayer, the Apostle's Creed, is a literal summarization of a person's beliefs in the Holy Trinity. The Germanic Heathen would use a prayer that describes his beliefs and how they align with the Norse gods and with Loki in particular. In this case, the Viking rosary might begin with a statement about the world being born from fire and ice and its eventual destruction during Ragnarok. This would replace the Apostle's Creed.

Establishing the logical structure of the belief system comes next. Just how is the world arranged, what gods or spirits hold power there, and how might they affect a person's world? The

original Our Father prayer designates God as living in Heaven, and having power over all the heavens and the earth. Furthermore, God holds the power to grant us our physical and spiritual survival. A Viking rosary, on the other hand, may cite a belief in the power of the runes or about Odin being the chief deity within the Nordic pantheon. This would replace the Our Father prayer.

The next step would be to replace the Ave Maria with a prayer to Loki instead, which would be repeated over and over to get his attention. The sixth prayer would be reserved for a prayer of protection, possibly against unfortunate side effects of the ritual itself. This replaces the Glory Be prayer. As with a normal rosary, the cycle of invocation is reinforced and completed by another repetition of the prayer that originally replaced the Our Father.

## How to Say a Rosary to Santa Muerte

The rosary has been established to be an effective tool for spirit communication. Since working with Santa Muerte is a spirit-centered practice rooted deeply in Catholicism, I favor using a rosary with her. As a baseline, you can call on Santa Muerte in the same manner as any other Catholic saint. After all, many people already regard her as an unofficial folk saint. This means using a rosary normally, first reciting the series of prayers associated with the tail beads and then reciting a specific prayer made to Santa Muerte at the rosary's connector. Then you make any specific requests and continue the rosary as normal in the Virgin Mary's name.

However, since I am no longer a practicing Catholic, I do not work with Santa Muerte using any Christian imagery or prayers. I have developed a method of saying a rosary dedicated to Santa Muerte, and to Santa Muerte alone. Other than its use of a rosary, which is really just a specialized set of meditation beads,

this method is neutral with regard to other belief systems and can thus be combined freely with them.

Rosaries dedicated to Santa Muerte or intended for use in her devotion are available in the marketplace. Some variation exists, such as rosaries in different colors to match her different aspects. Another common variation is that the decades are shortened,



from ten beads to seven (a septade). The reason for this is many practitioners believe that the number seven is sacred to Santa Muerte, and so seven beads are used instead. Another common variation is a pocket

or decade rosary. These short rosaries consist of just the tail end of the rosary attached to a single decade of beads. It is sometimes looped around with a clasp to form a bracelet. These kinds of rosaries are obviously very portable and are designed just for that purpose.

The rosaries themselves are made out of a wide variety of materials, ranging from simple knotted cords to beautiful art pieces made out of precious metals and gems. My own favorite Santa Muerte rosary is made out of gold, with beads of polished black jet. If you are unable to obtain or do not wish to purchase a Santa Muerte rosary, they are easy to make as well. All you need is about twenty feet of yarn. You can easily find tutorials for making knotted rosaries online. Of course, you may not wish to finish your rosary with a crucifix, but add a Santa Muerte pendant instead. If such a pendant is difficult to obtain, you can instead

substitute a skull, owl, hourglass, or other similarly themed pendant to represent Santa Muerte and her power.

Another option for keeping track of prayers that some Catholics use is a rosary card. These small paper or plastic cards have holes of varying sizes punched in them to be used in place of beads. To use them, you feel along the holes in the card and say the associated prayers. While they do not quite have the soothing effect particular to meditation beads, they are certainly useful for keeping track of the different prayers. Rosary cards are popular among people who wish to be able to pray during the course of their day, but are at a high risk of breaking or losing rosary beads. They are particularly popular among soldiers and the police. Whatever kind of rosary you use, you cleanse and consecrate it in the same manner as any other magical tool.

## The Rosary of Santa Muerte

Performing the rosary of Santa Muerte takes anywhere from ten to forty minutes. The time depends on whether you say just the shorter tail portion of the rosary or you complete the entire loop. It can be said as a daily ritual to strengthen your connection to Santa Muerte or for an intended purpose. That purpose can be for something as general as asking for Santa Muerte's guidance or for something as specific as getting a job promotion. The rosary's purpose is the focus of your meditation, so establishing that beforehand is necessary.

1. Find a quiet place where you can be alone for ten to forty minutes. Clear your mind of all stray thoughts; then think about the purpose of your rosary. You will keep this purpose in mind while you recite the prayers, which helps direct your energy. You may

consider performing a banishing ritual of some kind, either the one listed in the previous chapter or one appropriate to your magical paradigm. When you are focused and ready, continue.

2. Begin the rosary by touching the end of the short tail on the medallion that represents Santa Muerte, which replaces the normal crucifix. Recite the following prayer, which replaces the Apostle's Creed.

*I believe in the power of Santa Muerte,  
the Holy Queen of Death,  
Who is the keeper of the living and protector of the dead.  
I believe in the power of Santa Muerte,  
the beautiful Skinny Girl,  
Who sees all things and forgives all sins.  
I believe in the power of Santa Muerte,  
the Royal Bone-Mother,  
Whose authority is vast and her power absolute.  
I believe in the power of Santa Muerte,  
the Wise Old Woman,  
Whose judgement is both sure and swift.  
Santa Muerte, most beautiful Queen of Death,  
I accept your power under the mantle of your protection  
And ask that you guard me and guide me now.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

3. Move your fingers to the next bead, which is the first special one. This bead would normally represent an Our Father, but the following prayer replaces it and all other Our Fathers in this rosary.

*Santa Muerte, Holy Queen of Death,  
There is no place you do not know,  
No doorway you cannot cross,  
And no thing you cannot touch.  
Please keep me safe beneath your cloak  
And secure behind your scythe  
For now and for ever.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

4. The next grouping of beads normally represents a trio of Ave Marias. The following prayer replaces them and every other Ave Maria in this rosary.

*I call upon Santa Muerte, the Holy Queen of Death,  
Who commands all influence and authority.  
Please grant me your power and your protection,  
Blessing me and keeping me now and always.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

5. Between the trio of beads and the next special bead, the following prayer is inserted to replace the Glory Be.

*Hail Santa Muerte, my beautiful and kind-hearted Queen!  
I am grateful for your protection, your influence, and your blessings.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

6. The next special bead ordinarily represents an Our Father prayer, and is replaced by the prayer listed in step 3.

7. The next part of the rosary is the y-shaped connector that attaches the tail to the main loop. If you wish to contemplate in silence the purpose of your rosary, now is the time to do it. Some practitioners will speak out loud to Santa Muerte, just as if she is in the room with them.

Alternatively, this is the appropriate point to orient the energy gathered by reciting the rosary toward a particular goal or spell. This usually takes the form of a prayer or a more typically worded spell. If you are saying your rosary to become lucky in love, for example, you may recite a prayer to the red aspect of Santa Muerte, which governs such things. You could also do things like meditate on a drawn sigil or a picture, wind string around a wax figure, knot cords, or do any other of a number of magical operations. It depends, of course, on the purpose of your rosary.

Once you have completed this step, you may either stop the rosary now, thanking Santa Muerte for her assistance, or complete the main loop of the rosary as well.

8. Continue around the left-hand side of the rosary, touching each bead in the decade as you recite the Ave Maria replacement prayer listed in step 4.

9. When you reach the special bead between each decade, recite the Our Father replacement prayer listed in step 3.

10. Repeat this pattern all the way around the main loop of the rosary, stopping when you reach the y-shaped connector again. This is the stopping point for the rosary of Santa Muerte. Don't forget to thank her for her attention and assistance!

## CHAPTER 8

# The Novena of Santa Muerte



Performing a novena is a popular Catholic practice. As described in previous chapters, a novena is a series of prayers that is often said over nine days. The purpose may be something as simple as praying for the souls of the dead or something more specific such as asking a particular saint for help. Performing a novena is actually an ancient, pre-Christian habit. The ancient Greeks and Romans had a custom of saying funerary rites for nine days after a death. The earliest Christian novenas were also nine-day funerary masses. Although the term originally (and correctly) refers to prayers said over nine days, it has also become more generalized to mean a series of prayers said every day for an extended period. Thus, a novena can actually last five days, ten days, or even much longer. There is even a traditional novena called the Miraculous 54-Day Rosary Novena, as given in a vision to a young Italian girl named Fortuna Agrelli by the Virgin Mary. The term *novena*

is therefore used here and elsewhere to mean a series of prayers said for a number of days, not just necessarily nine.

## Some Notes on Traditional Novenas

Novenas are traditionally said for four purposes:

- \* Mourning novenas are often recited in anticipation of a burial. This was the original purpose of novenas, and they are still frequently said today.
- \* The second type of novena is said in preparation of a religious holiday, a sacrament such as marriage, or a similar spiritual event. A novena honoring a particular saint leading up to that saint's feast day is a common novena rite. The purpose of this kind of novena is to prepare the soul for that spiritual event.
- \* The third type of novena is said for the remission of sins or acts of penance. These novenas are used for contrition as well as to try to stop bad habits such as smoking or drinking.
- \* The fourth kind of novena (and by far the most popular) is the intercessory novena, said to petition God or other spiritual powers for intervention, signs, or other help. These kinds of novenas are said for every reason imaginable and to every kind of spirit imaginable; remember that the Catholic list of saints includes patrons for just about everything!

Novenas can be said for a variety of reasons, not all of them for higher spiritual purposes. Any saint or combination of saints can be invoked for their aid using a novena. The long list of Catholic saints allows for some very interesting (and official) permutations.

For example, there is a saint for protection from hangovers (Saint Bibiana) and one to prevent sexually transmitted diseases (Saint Fiacre). Combined with Saint Cajetan, the patron saint of gambling, these three seem the guardian spirits of a great trip to Las Vegas, not of eternal salvation or higher ascendance.

A novena is typically said over nine nights, with the novena itself repeated once a night. For those who desire or require intercession more quickly, spending a day in prayer is a common tactic. The novena is then repeated once an hour for nine hours. Since saying a whole rosary takes half an hour to forty-five minutes, this is a marathon of prayer. Sometimes the truly desperate will repeat this nine-hour long process for nine long days.

When a novena is complete and the desired effects are delivered, saints are often rewarded for their efforts. Rewards can be big or small, in accordance with the size of the favor. Some saints are famous for liking particular kinds of gifts. La Difunta Correa, for example, died of thirst and so appreciates being given bottles of water. Saint Jude likes to be publicly acknowledged for his aid. If you ever open the classified ads section in a newspaper and see an ad saying something like, “Blessings and thanks to St. Jude—AB,” that is why the ad was placed. When saints perform well, they are frequently given lavish gifts, feted, and special acts of devotion are performed. When saints underperform or behave badly, they are sometimes scolded or even humiliated by being turned toward the corner or covered with a cloth.

A novena is often prayed with the aid of a novena candle. As you learned earlier, novena candles are tall wax candles in glass jars with the pictures of saints on the front of them, with a prayer printed on the back. They are designed to be used in tandem with a rosary. The prayer printed on the back is normally not

said by itself. Candles designed for specific novenas are widely available, with intended purposes ranging from healing long-term illnesses to winning the lottery. Lacking a special candle, many practitioners either use a large candle in a color particular to their purpose or a plain white one instead.

To use a novena candle, a person lights the candle as the first step before saying any prayers. Then he or she recites the tail of the rosary and then finally any prayers directed toward that saint. This includes, of course, the prayer printed on the back of a saint's novena candle. Once these steps are finished, the user then makes his or her specific request. The user may either stop at this point or continue around the loop to complete the entire rosary. The novena candle is either left burning or blown out when the prayers are finished.

## The Magical Novena

What is really the difference between a traditional Catholic novena and an extended magical ritual invoking a Pagan spirit?

- \* If a woman lights a candle and says a prayer over nine days to Saint Anne, the patroness of mothers, for a healthy pregnancy, she is a good Catholic.
- \* If she lights a candle and says a prayer over nine days to Frigg, the Norse goddess of childbirth, then she is a Pagan witch.

A good Catholic would argue the locus of change is God, in accordance with his divine plan. Saints tend to get credited with their ability to either broker miracles or grant them directly, depending on the point of view. In this case, the person praying

is the locus of change because her prayers set the change in motion. Likewise, the Pagan witch is also the locus of change, since it is her prayers that also set her spell in motion. She's simply enlisting the aid of different spirits. From the point of view of the magical practitioner, there's very little difference at all.

A novena is a series of prayers that is said in order to achieve a change in reality. Can a prayer be considered a spell? Absolutely. Although some balk at equating prayer with spells and magic, reciting short phrases or poems directed at spirits in order to get their attention and aid has been a magical practice in every culture for millennia. As such, saying a novena is a kind of extended ritual. The act of repeating a prayer or spell for a number of days as an extended ritual is, of course, familiar to most magical practitioners. Peter Carroll, the famous English chaos magician, gives the adage of "enchant long, divine short," and it certainly applies here. The more psychic energy you apply over time, the more likely it is that your spell will be successful and that your results will manifest.

Likewise, promising a spirit payment in exchange for services is a common magical act. It is an enticing and an empowering act. Whether it is an act of bribery or simply paying the bills depends on the point of view. Often, spirits are paid with tributes of flowers and gifts of food, liquor, tobacco, and coins. Statues of saints are frequently adorned with jewelry or flowers, or bathed in liquor or perfume. Sometimes a promise to repeat the novena for an extended period, say once every Friday, is offered and accepted in return for aid. Thanking the spirit by name in a public forum is also a common tribute, such as ads placed thanking Saint Jude. Performing acts that the spirit would like in return for help is another common tribute. Someone praying to Santa

Muerte for the returned health of a sick dog might offer to work seven shifts at a local shelter caring for abandoned animals.

A novena candle is a ritual candle, and it is treated like one. You can purchase a novena candle decorated with Santa Muerte's image online or at your local occult shop or botanica. I have been known to simply put Santa Muerte stickers on the outside of regular seven-day glass candles. If you use a regular seven-day glass candle, remember that colors that are frequently associated with certain goals in candle magic—green candles for wealth magic, for example—are not the same colors normally used when working with Santa Muerte. The color of candle chosen normally corresponds with the aspect of Santa Muerte with which the practitioner is working. Thus, the color green is normally reserved for acts of judgment, arbitration, and the enforcement of balance. If you don't have the correct color or are unsure which candle to use, you can use a plain white candle instead. You cleanse the candle like any other ritual candle by using some water or some Florida Water. Then you often dress and charge it as described in chapter 6.

## How to Use the Spells in This Book

The spells in this book are presented in a prayer format because Santa Muerte is considered a folk saint. A rosary is helpful but not required. These spells are normally performed before a Santa Muerte altar, following a banishing ritual, as described in chapter 6. However, they may be performed anywhere and as needed. More than one person has prayed at the bedside of a sick friend, for example.

The simplest method of using the spells in this book is to first perform the banishing ritual in chapter 6 and then light the

candle on your Santa Muerte altar. Take a few moments to carefully consider the reason for your spell; then recite the corresponding prayer. Thank Santa Muerte for her time (I often kiss her statue) and that's it. It really is quite easy.

The more time and focus you put into your spells, the more effective they will be. This is why extended rituals are popular. An extended ritual dedicated to Santa Muerte often takes the form of a novena, since she is an unofficial saint who is venerated in a Catholic style.

A novena to Santa Muerte is normally said over a seven-day period rather than nine days. The number seven is frequently associated with Santa Muerte. As the power of death incarnate, she has an extraordinarily broad influence over the shape and outcome of all physical manifestation. The number seven is also often associated with these things. The reason is that it is composed of three, the number of sides of a triangle, and four, the number of sides of a square, which are the two basic geometric shapes. The number three is also often associated with the concept of divinity and the number four with materiality (the number four is frequently also associated with the earth element). Combined in the number seven, these two principles become the bridge between the physical and the spiritual. Because death naturally also forms this bridge, the number seven is also associated with Santa Muerte.

There are two ways to use the novenas presented in this book. Since this book presumes the seven-color form of Santa Muerte (see chapter 5) and there are seven days in a week, you can say a prayer dedicated to each aspect each day. This approach is useful if you are trying to strengthen and explore your relationship with every aspect of Santa Muerte. The order of the following

chapters regarding each color is their intended order during the week. It doesn't matter what day of the week you start.

You also can perform a novena if you would like to devote an entire week to exploring a single aspect of Santa Muerte or to a particular magical goal. For example, if you are trying to call on the red aspect of Santa Muerte to get lucky in love, then you would, of course, perform a love-attracting novena. Even when you're saying a novena dedicated to just a single aspect of Santa Muerte, you still say the novena over a week-long period. Of course, in times of desperation, you can use the speed method of saying the entire novena over seven hours instead.

You are welcome to use these spells and rituals modified in accordance with your magical needs. I commonly place sigils beneath novena candles when I use them, for example. I have also performed bindings by wrapping a corn husk doll with yarn and then saying a week's worth of prayers over the doll to strengthen the binding each day. Purification and protection spells can easily be combined with magical baths, since a statue and a tea light are easy to take into the bathroom with you. The different possibilities are limited only by your experience and imagination.

## The Gifts of Death

Offering something to Santa Muerte in exchange for her aid is common and customary, even when you're performing the simplest of spells and certainly after performing an intensive ritual. Because Santa Muerte is the patron saint of the poor and dispossessed, she is not famous for requiring expensive or difficult-to-obtain gifts. A common offering to Santa Muerte is to promise to say a week's worth of thank-you prayers. Sharing your evening meal with her for a week afterward is another common offering. Additionally,

seven pennies, seven drops of liquor, or seven spritzes of perfume are appropriate small gifts to offer Santa Muerte.

Many people also adorn their statues with jewelry or give them small trinkets. Leaving small trinkets representing the aid received is common with Catholic saint worship. When you visit shrines, you are frequently able to buy small tin charms called *milagros* (Spanish, “miracles”) as gifts to give the saint in the shrine in return for prayers answered. This is also a common practice with Santa Muerte as a folk saint. For example, when my brother’s truck was stolen, I performed a spell dedicated to the green aspect of Santa Muerte in order to obtain justice for him. The police found the truck undamaged and with gas still in it less than a day later only a mile from his home. In return, I bought a small gold truck trinket for Santa Muerte and placed it on a chain around my statue’s neck.

Spirits are thought to enjoy (and in some senses, consume) the offerings that they receive. Thus, sharing your dinner with Santa Muerte has more meaning than just placing some food on the table. You are sharing a meal with a friend, and you should do it with this attitude in mind. Some degree of play-acting is common with the icons of Catholic saints and with the statues of spirits in general. It is common to rub alcoholic beverages on the mouths of statues or drip liquor onto them, light cigarettes and place them at the statue’s mouth before being allowed to burn, and so on.

Often small portions of food and candies are left on the altar as offerings. Some people choose to take a symbolic bite of an offered meal on Santa Muerte’s behalf. However, others have a strong cultural taboo against “eating off of death’s plate” or otherwise consuming the food of the dead. Consuming the food of the dead is sometimes thought to invite sickness, misfortune,

and death. Some people believe that the life-giving energy of the food is consumed by the spirit and replaced with negative energy. Thus, eating the offering can then make a person sick or worse. This taboo is a common one and echoed across several ancient myths. For example, the Greek goddess Persephone was forced to spend a period of time in the underworld each year because she ate some pomegranate seeds from a tree grown there. The Semitic god of fertility and life-giving rain, Baal, died after eating at the table of his brother, Mot, the god of death and drought.

There are generally two ways to handle this situation. The first way is to keep Death's plate separate and for the living not to eat from it at all. Of course, this means something has to happen to the food that's left on the altar. Usually, it's either thrown away or left in a graveyard or at a crossroads for an animal to eat. I am not a fan of this method when working with Santa Muerte. The typical relationship you try to build with her is a friendly one. Since I would not hesitate to share food with a friend, sharing food with an omnipresent spirit whom I have invited is not problematic to me. Also, since Santa Muerte is the patron saint of the poor, it doesn't seem right to me to waste food when there are people who don't have enough to eat. If the food is supposed to be filled with harmful negative energy, leaving it for some poor unwitting animal to eat likewise seems cruel to me. Therefore, I rarely throw away the food I leave on the altar and take at least a small symbolic bite instead.

So what kinds of things does Santa Muerte like? Santa Muerte is often described as a beautiful and elegant lady with a strong and worldly personality. Thus, she likes classically feminine gifts such as perfume, chocolates, flowers, and jewelry. She also like fine things, such as pretty altar cloths. My Santa Muerte statues

have acquired quite a collection of colorful silk scarves in thanks for their aid. I like to drape them around the necks of the statues or use them as altar cloths, changing them out after I dust.

Because Santa Muerte is so worldly, she also enjoys life's more sinful pleasures such as alcohol and tobacco—it's not like they are going to kill her. While these items are frequently consumed on behalf of Santa Muerte as well, this isn't strictly necessary. It is also appropriate to choose gifts based on your request. A woman having difficulty getting pregnant might perform a ritual dedicated to the golden aspect of Santa Muerte to receive an infusion of her living vitality. After becoming pregnant, she might give Santa Muerte the gift of a few decorative ears of corn, an ancient symbol of fertility.

Santa Muerte also enjoys sweet, spicy, and strong food and drink, including black coffee, sugar candies, and red and green chiles. Because she enjoys the antics of the living, Santa Muerte also enjoys music, singing, dancing, and even sex. She is also famous for her love of marijuana, an indulgence that I recommend only where it is legal to do so.

Here is a list of some of the most common gifts given to Santa Muerte.

### *Alcohol*

Alcohol is commonly given to Santa Muerte, in a different glass from that used to give her water. I use an ordinary shot glass. Santa Muerte loves the pleasures of the living, and alcohol often tops the list. You give alcohol to Santa Muerte in the same way as water—by dabbing a few drops on the image's mouth. Alternatively, many practitioners take a sip of alcohol into their own mouths and then evenly spray the altar, taking care not to spit.

This method has the effect of sampling the alcohol on Santa Muerte's behalf without actually consuming it. If you wish to avoid drinking, sprinkling alcohol on the statue is acceptable.

Tequila is the alcohol most frequently given to Santa Muerte. Tequila is actually an invention of the Spanish conquistadors who began making it after their favored drink—brandy—became difficult to obtain. Since it was produced on a large scale by the Spanish, it easily found its way into their magical practices as well. This is why tequila is used with Santa Muerte instead of the more traditional Aztec pulque which is difficult to produce, transport, and store.

Santa Muerte is also often given red wine. Because it has sensuous and feminine associations, it is considered appropriate for a sensuous and feminine spirit. It also resembles blood, and some use it as a substitute for blood in certain rituals.

### *Chocolate*

Santa Muerte's love of chocolate has much deeper roots than her feminine styling. The Aztecs believed that the cacao tree was a direct bridge between the heavens and the earth. The cacao bean, from which chocolate is derived, was the means and the route by which their god, Quetzalcoatl, gave humanity his gift of wisdom. It must have been a precious gift, indeed, since the other gods severely punished Quetzalcoatl for sharing it with mankind. The beans were valuable not only because they granted wisdom, but also because the bitter drink they made was thought to impart great sexual prowess. Cacao beans, while enjoyed by the Aztecs, were not produced by them. Instead of learning to cultivate cacao, they simply conquered cacao-producing tribes and levied

a heavy tax on them to be paid in the form of the beans. Thus, cacao became a form of money in the Aztec empire.

In religious rituals, cacao beans became a metaphor for the heart torn out in human sacrifice because the seeds inside the cacao pod were thought to resemble blood spilling out of the body. Cacao drinks were sometimes dyed red with annatto (or mixed with human blood) to underline this point. Since cacao possesses such deeply rooted associations with wisdom, death, and sacrifice, chocolate has likewise become associated with Santa Muerte.

### *Copal Incense*

Copal incense occupies a special place in traditions rooted in Aztec mythology. It is made from the sap of the copal tree, *Protium copal*, that grows through Central and South America (other species of copal trees exist, but their sap is used to make things like wood varnish). Aztec priests used copal extensively, with Spanish priests describing how it was often used to open religious ceremonies. The Aztecs recognized the sap as the living blood of the tree, and the fact that it gave such a sweet odor when burned clearly meant it was sacred to the gods. The sweet “blood sacrifice” of the copal tree is now a favorite offering given to Santa Muerte. Because it has this direct association with blood, some practitioners use copal incense in place of blood when it is called for during a ritual.

### *Marigolds*

On the Dia de los Muertos, family members gather in the cemetery to visit and maintain the graves of their relatives. Often, they drape their headstones with garlands of bright orange marigolds. The reason for this is both simple and beautiful. Marigolds

bloom in the fall, attracting large quantities of butterflies. Since butterflies are thought to be the souls of the returning dead, the marigold became known as the *Flor de Muerto* (“Flower of the Dead”). Of course, families are eager to see their loved ones in any form, so the graves are decorated with these flowers. Since marigolds attract the spirits of the dead, and Santa Muerte is death incarnate, marigolds are a flower dear to Santa Muerte.

### *Money*

Money and death have long been associated with each other. The reason for this is twofold. First, things that are used for money are usually themselves rare and often valuable. Often their rarity and value are increased by the fact that getting them is quite risky. Gold and silver are perfect examples. Used as money for millennia, these metals are largely acquired by mining, which is a very dangerous occupation (even more so in ancient times!). Salt has also been used as money for the same reason. Since these valuables are taken from deep within the earth, they are frequently thought to belong to the gods of the underworld. Because mining can be deadly, the gods sometimes take their belongings back.

Even the Aztecs had an association between money and death, even though their money did not come from within the ground. As mentioned previously, cacao beans were often used as currency, which also had strong death and sacrifice associations. As a face of the force of death, Santa Muerte likewise has an association with money. A common method of giving her gifts of money is to place coins in a jar on her altar. Once the jar is full, take the money out and buy her a gift, like some candy or

a small bottle of perfume. Thus, Santa Muerte gets to enjoy the money that she makes.

### *Rosemary*

Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) is a woody perennial herb with a long history as a very dominating yet feminine plant. It was often called the “sickroom herb” because the strong odor was thought to drive off both disease and disease-causing spirits. Patients were washed in rosemary infusions to restore their health; since rosemary contains strong astringent, antifungal, and antibiotic properties, there was more than just superstition to this practice. The plant has long been associated with the Virgin Mary, and before her, the goddesses Isis and Astarte—all powerful and regal figures within their own cosmologies. Thus, rosemary quickly also became associated with feminine noble authority. This is why some manuals of magical herbalism recommend that a female witch plant large quantities of rosemary around her home.

Rosemary is a strong protective herb associated with feminine noble authority. Because it was associated with the Virgin Mary, Spanish colonists brought it to the New World. Santa Muerte is also a dominating female authority figure who has acquired a cross-association with the Virgin Mary to some practitioners. Thus, Santa Muerte has gained a connection to the rosemary herb as well. Rosemary incense is how this gift is commonly given to Santa Muerte.

### *Tobacco*

Tobacco (*Nicotiana rustica*) has a long history of use among the Aztecs, who considered it a sacred plant. Smoking tobacco was a status symbol among the upper class, who often combined

tobacco with flowers and amber resin before smoking it in a long hollow tube. The strong aromatic odors produced were to be enjoyed as much as the flavor.

Tobacco is an entheogen, which is a mind-altering substance that is consumed for religious or spiritual reasons. In small quantities, it is a mild mental stimulant. In large quantities, it can cause deep trances or hallucinations. Ritually speaking, however, Aztecs used tobacco more frequently as an incense, burning it in great big pans alongside mounds of copal. Today tobacco smoke is commonly used in healing rituals, where the purifying smoke is blown over the patient's body.

Santa Muerte enjoys gifts of tobacco not only because of her cultural roots, but also because it is one of life's sinful pleasures. Cigars and cigarettes are typically smoked, with the cigarette occasionally held to the statue's mouth. Sometimes they are left burning in an ashtray on the altar. If you don't wish to smoke, you can shred gifts of tobacco and burn them in a small censer instead, although you may wish to do this in a well-ventilated area.

### *Syrian Rue*

The following three plants all share "rue" in their common name and are sometimes confused for each other: Syrian rue (*Peganum harmala*) is not the same herb as common rue (*Ruta graveolens*) or goat's rue (*Galega officinalis*). Common rue is a popular and well-known magical plant called the "Queen of Herbs" because it has powerful cleansing and protective properties. Goat's rue is popular because it stimulates milk production in breastfeeding women and reduces insulin resistance, which improves the symptoms of diabetes. Syrian rue is very different from these other two plants.

Syrian rue is not actually a member of the rue family. It is a Central Asian plant species that only superficially resembles some rue varieties. The most common use of Syrian rue was as a powerful protective herb, particularly against harmful spirits. Users would pop the seeds like popcorn and waft the highly aromatic smoke around. Syrian rue also contains large quantities of a class of alkaloids called beta-carbolines. This class includes entheogenic chemicals such as dimethyltryptamine (DMT) and plant-based monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs) like those found in ayahuasca. These chemicals act as serotonin antagonists in the brain much as lysergic acid (LSD) does, although the hallucinations experienced are different. Ingestion of Syrian rue is thought to have given rise to the legends of flying carpets particular to Middle Eastern lore.

*Please note that I do not personally recommend any experimentation with drugs or other psychoactive substances. The information provided here is for informational purposes only.*

Why is a Central Asian plant associated with Santa Muerte? Syrian rue is sometimes referred to as “ruin weed” because it springs wild in old ruins and cemeteries, thus giving it a strong association with spirits of death and decay. It was used for purification after sorrowful rites, particularly funerals, and as a powerful protective ward against the evil eye. The use of Syrian rue for magical purposes, especially those related to death, is well embedded in Middle Eastern folklore and even makes its appearance in

Catholic mysticism; Syrian rue is the favored herb of Saint Cyprian of Antioch, the patron saint of magicians and necromancers.

When the Spanish priests came to central Mexico, they brought their style of magic with them, one that evolved from knowledge brought back from the Middle East during the Crusades and from the Moors that came to the European mainland. Thus, the magical uses of Syrian rue were well familiar to the Spanish priests. They cultivated this plant in the New World for another reason, however; its seed pods make an excellent red dye. Syrian rue grows well in the arid climates of northern Mexico and the southwestern United States. It grows too well, in fact. The plant has rapidly become an invasive weed throughout New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, California, Nevada, Oregon, Montana, and Washington. This makes Syrian rue easily available to practitioners of this tradition, and so its use has risen to prevalence among some Santa Muerte devotees. Those who do not take Syrian rue in the traditional method often burn it as a protective incense, or create a tincture with it, which is used to anoint candles and other ritual items.

## Taking Gifts to Death

It is common and customary to present Santa Muerte with a gift in exchange for her aid. For most things, your time and attention are a fine present. Your gift can be something as simple as saying an extra rosary or spending extra care and attention cleaning her altar. Playing music is also a common way of thanking her. Since you may already have alcohol, music, and food, you may as well throw her a little party. If she's helped you, she deserves it. Things like trinkets and money are easily left on the altar. Their continued presence serves as a reminder of her aid, and the

items themselves often become talismanic. For example, at one point I purchased a large brass skeleton key for Santa Muerte in exchange for her aid in gaining access to a business contact that I desperately needed. Because it was used to open a doorway and has since been left on my altar, it has accrued the type of energy that makes it useful for that kind of ritual work.

For extensive help or difficult problems, it is a common practice to bring offerings to either a graveyard or a crossroads instead. When you're working with Santa Muerte, bringing offerings to the graveyard is an obvious choice. That not only is a natural place for death and her power but is also filled with spirits of the dead, who can assist you. Thus, many people will go to the graveyard to cast their more important spells and certainly to leave offerings to Santa Muerte as well. This particular practice is what helps fuel hysterical media accounts of black rites conducted in the graveyards at late hours.

If you do visit a graveyard, please be respectful by not creating a spectacle or harassing others. It should go without saying that you should not litter or vandalize any gravesites, nor take any items already left there by other people. If you enlist the help of the local spirits to help you, make sure to thank them before you leave as well. A common practice is to leave seven copper or silver coins in the graveyard as payment.

Crossroads are also popular places to both conduct rituals and to leave offerings. The crossroads of streets or paths have long been associated with death. The crossroads often symbolize a place where opposing or divergent realms briefly meet. Thus, the crossroads are a place where the mundane and magical worlds can briefly come together, crossing paths and allowing magical events to take place. Since the realms of the living and

the dead are also normally separate from each other, the crossroads are a place where the two may briefly converge. Crossroads are particularly good places to summon and speak with spirits of the dead. The nature of the crossroads allows fast travel from the realms of the dead, bringing the spirit to you quickly.

Please keep in mind that when you are leaving offerings, it is quite possible that your offerings may be picked up by another. Most practitioners do not consider this a great loss. Once something is given to Santa Muerte, it's hers—if she wants to give it to someone else by leading him or her to it, then that's her prerogative. After all, the offering now belongs to her.

However, there may be practical considerations—and repercussions—depending on what offerings you leave and where. Seven miniature bottles of tequila may make an excellent gift, but not if they're left in front of an elementary school. Likewise, being caught praying to a notorious narco-saint in a graveyard at midnight can lead to serious embarrassment, if not legal charges. Plan your excursions accordingly.

## CHAPTER 9

# Niña Blanca, Sweet Sister Death



Niña Blanca is the white aspect of Santa Muerte. Arrayed in snowy white robes, she is the first ray of light that cuts through the darkness. Her light illuminates the clear and safe path, lending her power and protection to new projects and new beginnings. This is also the aspect of Santa Muerte that drives back the darkness, allowing for cleansing, forgiveness, and renewal.

This aspect of Santa Muerte includes cleaning the lasting effects of bad memories, the results of bad decisions, and negative personal trends in general. As the single ray of light that illuminates your personal darkness, Niña Blanca sees all of your personal problems and grants you the insight to recognize and diagnose these problems yourself. She then grants you the power necessary to find your way to absolution and freedom. It does not matter what you have done, to whom, or for how long you

have done it—her ability to cleanse and purify you is absolute. The idea that Niña Blanca is complete in her ability to forgive and purify is key to this powerful aspect of Santa Muerte.

You cannot (or should not) embark on major projects, either mundane or magical, while in a state of personal turmoil. If you do, this will have a significant impact on the outcome of your project, and it's likely to be a bad one. Therefore, resetting to a magically, psychically, and spiritually clean state is necessary. You don't cook with dirty pans, do you? Of course not. The same logic applies here. Niña Blanca is always called on before beginning any major new project or magical working for this reason. She is also invoked as a shield against the sins, hubris, and evil plans of others, neutralizing and deflecting such influences. She acts as a protective barrier against these negative forces and trends, neutralizing and deflecting them from the aims of your project just as she would deflect them from you personally. If you must begin a project in a state of unrest, then Niña Blanca affords you the best protection.

Because Niña Blanca is the best guard for major extended projects, because she grants a particular kind of personal insight, and because she performs the function of an illuminatory light within any realm of darkness (personal or otherwise), this aspect of Santa Muerte is called on for magical initiation. She is particularly helpful to the solitary practitioner, as this aspect of an already maternal and loving spirit is quite friendly to someone who may be seen as an "orphaned child." This concept is often combined with the symbol of a lamp, consistent with the idea that she can guide her followers through the darkness.

Niña Blanca is called on for rites of cleansing, purification, and protection. She can also be called on to exorcise people or

places and to neutralize and banish malign forces or spirits. She is an effective shield and is often the first aspect of Santa Muerte that is called on during a protective working. Maintained, these kinds of workings with Niña Blanca can be used to repel negative forces and so establish magical sanctuaries, free from the view and influence of your enemies.

Niña Blanca can be appealed to alone in healing spells or in conjunction with Niña Dorada, the yellow or golden aspect of Santa Muerte. Since Niña Blanca heals indirectly by cleansing and purifying disease-causing agents, she allows the body to renew itself naturally without impediment.

Niña Blanca has her negative aspects as well. The intense white light of Niña Blanca neutralizes your enemies by extreme purification, blinding them and collapsing their plans, often in your favor in accordance with her benevolent demeanor (especially if you have established yourself as her child). Her white light can also be used to blind and dazzle your enemies, obscuring your plans and casting theirs into obvious view. Thus, Niña Blanca's white cloak can become as much a burial shroud for your enemies as it is a protective cloak for you.

### *Favorite Offerings*

Like all aspects of Santa Muerte, Niña Blanca likes flowers, candles, and candies that match her color. Therefore, Niña Blanca favors white flowers, candles, and candies. This includes things like pure water, dishes of salt, and sage and rosemary incense. She also likes offerings that represent renewal and growth. This makes her very fond of eggs and apples. She also particularly enjoys spritzes of Florida Water.

#### DAILY NOVENA

*Niña Blanca, my most holy Mother of Death,  
Powerful White Lady, look at me with mercy  
And compassion as I call upon your power now.  
Niña Blanca, gather me close with your powerful right hand,  
And push away my enemies with your powerful left hand.  
Cover me in your mantle of protection as a shield against all dangers  
And with your bright shining heart, light my path  
To knowledge, wisdom, and power.  
Niña Blanca, my most loving and powerful protector,  
Please guard me and guide me now.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

#### PRAYER FOR STARTING A NEW PROJECT

*Blessed be to Niña Blanca, my powerful White Sister  
Who turns the wheels of both life and death.  
I call upon your immense influence and power now.  
Holy Lady of rebirth and renewal,  
I ask that you bless this project born out of my desires,  
Sheltering its growth from the envy and hatred of others.  
May its roots cause no harm to me or my loved ones,  
And may it bear sweet fruits in my favor.  
Niña Blanca, you are my beautiful girl  
Who is both powerful and wise.  
Please aid me now during the start  
And through to the finish of this new project.  
Amen. (or so mote it be, etc.)*

#### PRAYER FOR SELF-ILLUMINATION

*Hail unto Niña Blanca, the great White Mother,  
Who swallows the darkness to make way for the light,  
Yours is the way toward renewal and rebirth.*

*Please open my mind as you lead me securely into wisdom  
Making my road clear of both barriers and frustration  
So that I may be reborn into consciousness and clarity.  
Great Bone-Mother, please shine your perfect light upon my journey  
And guide me to others who travel upon similar paths.  
Niña Blanca, you see all things as they begin  
And all things as they end.  
Please help me see my way now.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

#### PRAYER FOR PURIFICATION

*Hail Santa Muerte, my skinny White Lady,  
Who is my gentle and forgiving mother.  
Please wash me clean of my guilt and of my doubt,  
Of my errors and of my many sins.  
Make me new and clean and whole again  
In your eyes and in the eyes of others.  
Please wrap me in your white cloak of protection and purity  
So I may walk my path safely and with an open heart.  
I believe in and rely upon your power, Niña Blanca,  
And know that you will purify me and protect me always.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

#### PRAYER FOR PROTECTION

*Santa Muerte, Blessed White Sister  
Come give me your aid and your mercy  
And cover me with your mantle of protection.  
Keep me safe from harm and hidden from my enemies  
And free from the curses and evil intentions.  
For now and always, my blessed White Sister,  
I believe in and rely upon your power.  
Santa Muerte, please come and cover me with*

*your mantle of protection now.  
Amen. (or so mote it be, etc.)*

PRAYER FOR PHYSICAL HEALING

*Blessed be to Niña Blanca, my lovely lady of death,  
Who is both the soother and the purifier,  
Please protect me and aid me now.  
Gentle healer, please remove the sickness and pains  
That follow me and plague me.  
Please cleanse me and purify me  
Of the negative energy that saps my strength,  
And drive out any spirits that seek to do me harm.  
Niña Blanca, I believe in the power of death to remove  
My illnesses and my suffering.  
I ask for your blessings and aid now.  
Amen. (or so mote it be, etc.)*

PRAYER FOR EMOTIONAL HEALING

*Santa Muerte, my pure White Lady,  
Mother of mercy and righter of wrongs.  
I ask for your blessings and your aid.  
Please heal my heart and soothe my conscience,  
Cleansing me of my guilt and of my past sins.  
Lift from me the weight of my past transgressions.  
And grant me your wisdom so I don't repeat their mistakes.  
May you cleanse me of my doubts and fears  
And plant within me the seeds of mercy, insight, and love.  
Santa Muerte, I believe in and rely upon your  
Compassion, your mercy, and your power.  
Please bless me and aid me now.  
Amen. (or so mote it be, etc.)*

## CHAPTER 10

# Niña Violeta, the Royal Queen



Niña Violeta is the purple aspect of Santa Muerte. This aspect is associated with wisdom, magical knowledge, and authority. Niña Violeta brings the gifts of spiritual insight and psychic power to those who call on her, allowing greater capacity to evaluate decisions with the heart as well as the head. She also helps the magician develop the commanding strength of will needed to support magical intentions. In addition, she brings the magical knowledge and experience necessary to use that power wisely.

When you are thinking of this aspect of Santa Muerte, it is useful to compare her to the mother of teenagers. Having shepherded her children through the basic tasks of childhood, she is now faced with preparing them for the lifelong evolution of their spiritual and psychic growth. However, the mother of teens is no longer tightly confined to the hearth and the home. As her

children become more independent, she is free to expand her leadership role from the household into the wider community. She expands her personal influence and power to benefit not only her family but also herself. With the vitality of her youth still fueling her, she approaches these decisions with maternal patience and wisdom. As the aspect of Santa Muerte who mirrors this process, Niña Violeta likewise represents this sovereign element. Niña Violeta does not command by fear or force. She rules by her own royal authority.

Naturally, Niña Violeta is herself a master magician. She is called on to increase psychic insight and magical power. She can also grant the knowledge and understanding created by a particular experience. Niña Violeta is also adept at creating access to magical learning, bringing books and teachers to the practitioner at their request. This is also the aspect of Santa Muerte that is called on to create magical talismans. In many complex or long-term rituals, I find myself invoking the potent aid of this aspect of Santa Muerte. Niña Violeta's ability to reveal hidden wisdom and increase psychic insight also makes this aspect of Santa Muerte an excellent partner for divination. It is with this aspect's aid that I use either my black glass mirror or my pendulum when looking for answers.

Niña Violeta grants wisdom and insight and strengthens the will of the magician. Armed with knowledge, insight, and mental discipline, the magician takes on himself the mantle of noble authority. This aura is often subconsciously recognized by others, who lacking the magician's strength will tend to defer to him instead. This is the other gift of Niña Violeta. Combined with the social access created by Niña Azul, this is a potent gift indeed.

Niña Violeta can also bind and dominate the will of others, confound psychic abilities, and redirect and alter spells. She saps her victims of their wisdom and their willpower, leaving them incapable of making good decisions or enforcing their desires. This strips them of any real or perceived authority, wreaking havoc at work and at home and leaving them vulnerable to predation. It also seriously impedes their ability to perform their own magic.

Although any aspect of Santa Muerte can be invoked at any time of the day, Niña Violeta is most frequently invoked at night because of the nature of the work typically performed with her. Most frequently she is invoked around midnight, which some believe to be the “witching hour” when spells are best performed and occult secrets divined.

### *Favorite Offerings*

The same rule about color-themed offerings applies to Niña Violeta as it does to Niña Blanca. The gifts Niña Violeta favors represent wisdom, insight, and the magician’s dominant magical will. This includes offerings like black coffee and tobacco, which both are mental stimulants with a strong taste and smell. Rosemary and myrrh incenses are frequently used in combination with this aspect of Santa Muerte because both have the ability to raise the psychic energy level of an area. Gifts that represent magical learning and authority, such as small books and crowns, are also quite appropriate.

### DAILY PRAYER

*Oh Niña Violeta, beautiful Queen of Death,  
By your royal authority, you command the entire world.  
Gracious Lady, I call upon your mighty influence.*

*I ask that you grant me knowledge of all things good and evil.  
Reveal to me the truths I must see and face  
And grant me the wisdom I need to understand them.  
Guard me and guide me, oh Holy Death of Truth,  
Let me not fall prey to lies, gossip, and rumors.  
Reveal to me my true hidden enemies and those who wish me harm,  
Grant me the power to sow turmoil amongst my rivals,  
And lend me your lovely charm to dominate and win them to my side.  
Oh Niña Violeta, sovereign Queen of Death,  
I rely upon your strength and power to achieve these desires.  
Within you, all these things become possible.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO CONSECRATE A TALISMAN

*Hail to Niña Violeta, the Queen of the Crossroads,  
Blessed be unto you, oh Lady of Secrets!  
I recognize and rely upon your mighty influence  
And ask for your protection and aid  
To make sacred and successful this work.  
Niña Violeta, my lovely Skinny Girl,  
Please bless this talisman and lend it your power,  
Strengthening its cause to bring forth my desires  
To [increase my wealth, attract great love, destroy my enemies, etc.].  
Niña Violeta, my beautiful skeletal sister,  
Please come forth to aid me now.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO ATTRACT A MAGICAL TEACHER

*Thanks be to Niña Violeta, the wisest of the ancient powers,  
Who rules from her throne in the graveyard and at the crossroads.*

*Niña Violeta, you are the keeper of all the things that are secret,  
And of all the ways that are hidden.  
Mistress of the Art and Keeper of the Keys,  
I call upon your mighty authority and gracious aid now.  
Please grant me the gifts of insight and knowledge,  
Opening for me the closed circle,  
Drawing close to me wisdom of others,  
And revealing to me my hidden path.  
Thanks be to Niña Violeta, the holy power of death.  
My sweet sister, please protect me and guide me always.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO GAIN ROYAL AUTHORITY

*Hail to Niña Violeta, my crowned and beautiful lady of death,  
You rule over all things with a wise and just hand.  
I trust in your power to aid me now and always.  
Royal Saint of Death, please lend me your purple mantle  
To crown me and grant me your voice of authority.  
Let others recognize your mantle about my shoulders  
And the touch of your grace upon me  
So that they will recognize and submit to my leadership,  
Giving me instead their true counsel instead of their hatred  
And giving me their support in all things.  
Niña Violeta, you have power and authority over all things.  
Within you, my desire can be made possible.  
My lovely Saint of Death, please help me now.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO HAVE A PROPHETIC DREAM

*Niña Violeta, my wise and lovely lady,  
You are the knower and revealer of secrets.*

*Mistress of the hidden way, I call upon your guidance  
When I pass into the small death of sleep tonight.  
Niña Violeta, please reveal to me [subject of divination]  
So that I may choose my next action wisely,  
Guided as always by your counsel  
And protected by your mighty power.  
Niña Violeta, you are the queen of the crossroads  
Where all people and things must pass.  
Please show me what I desire to know.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO EMPOWER A PARTICULAR MAGICAL GOAL

*Oh Niña Violeta, my Holy Saint of Death,  
Mistress of magic and keeper of powers absolute,  
Within you all things are made possible,  
All doorways are opened,  
And all things are revealed.  
Please add your strength to my own,  
Making certain and successful this spell of mine  
So that my will to [short description of spell's purpose]  
Can be made complete.  
Niña Violeta, I trust in your wisdom, your guidance, and your love  
Now, always, and forever.  
Mistress of magic, please empower my spell now.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO EMPOWER A DIVINATION

*Niña Violeta, my precious girl,  
Mirror of wisdom and mother of intuition,  
I call upon you to separate wisdom from folly,*

*Reveal to me the true nature of [your divination purpose],  
Showing me all of its hidden secrets  
And all of its hidden ways.  
Help me understand the true meaning of its purpose  
So that I may understand all the things that affect it  
And how in doing so, they affect me.  
Niña Violeta, within death the fate of all things is written.  
Please reveal that fate to me now.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*



## CHAPTER 11

# Niña Azul, the Gracious One



Niña Azul is the blue aspect of Santa Muerte. She can be viewed as a counterpart to Niña Violeta. Whereas Niña Violeta is concerned with spiritual and psychic matters, Niña Azul is the patroness of practical knowledge and day-to-day relationships. She is the teacher of students, the protector of children, and the facilitator of communication. She also enhances both the practitioner's perception and empathy, which are qualities needed to enhance and smooth human interactions.

The relationships we have with other people form the foundations of our lives; no one exists in a vacuum. Being able to understand and relate to other people makes these relationships both healthy and strong. A husband must understand his wife; a mother, her children; a shopkeeper, his customers; and a doctor,

his patients. When these relationships exist in a state of understanding and harmony, they can work together toward a mutual goal. Children learn better when they can work with their teachers and with each other. Businesses are more prosperous if the owner has good relationships with his customers and knows how to anticipate their needs. Households run more smoothly if a husband and wife can work together as partners and friends, not just as lovers. These are but a few practical examples of the kinds of relationships that Niña Azul readily affects and how. This is why traditional prayers to Niña Azul fall in such a broad range of categories, from students looking for help to better their grades to distraught family members trying to bring a wayward member back into the fold.

Tension, suspicion, and sometimes outright hatred can easily form between groups of people. Often the reasons these problems form have little to do with the actions of the hated group themselves, but with a perceived threat or problem that they represent. This can make certain groups of people outcasts within the larger whole. For example, some gay and lesbian people report being threatened or harassed because of their sexual orientation. They are passed over for job promotions, have difficulties with business owners, and deal with similar social problems. Because this aspect of Santa Muerte facilitates communication and smooths human interactions, Niña Azul can help resolve problems that are rooted in these types of issues.

This is how Niña Azul comes into her role as the patroness of daily living. Her function is especially important considering that Santa Muerte is worshiped primarily among the underclasses of Mexico, those who feel they have been dispossessed and ignored by the established ruling forces of the country. Since

they cannot rely on legitimate social institutions for support, the underclasses turn to each other—and through each other, Niña Azul—for the relief that they need.

Most of our social interactions occur along nonverbal paths; it's estimated that 80 percent of our communication comes from body language and subtle facial cues. Thus, much of our communication occurs in the realm of subtle perception. Increased awareness of this subtle feedback grants increased insight into what other people are thinking and feeling when we talk to them. With that insight comes understanding of their thoughts and feelings; you understand wholly what they are trying to communicate and understand clearly how your answer will affect them.

The dark side of Niña Azul is very destructive. By impairing social awareness and communication skills, Niña Azul sabotages every relationship she touches. She ruins families, friends, business partners, and work relationships. She can also affect every mundane aspect of an individual's life: damaging property and possessions; causing trouble at work, school, and church; and draining a target's finances. Like all aspects of Santa Muerte, Niña Azul is well capable of directing supportive spirits to this cause.

### *Favorite Offerings*

In addition to the typical gifts of appropriately colored candles, candies, and flowers, Niña Azul likes gifts of things that are shared. This means she likes things such as bread and pieces of chocolate and alcohol such as tequila and beer. This aspect of Santa Muerte is particularly fond of cigarettes and lighters—there is an instant camaraderie born between smokers when one of them bums a light, and lighters have a way of traveling among groups of people. She also likes gifts that represent sweetening

situations as well as the tongue, such as dishes of honey. Niña Azul also enjoys sweet and stimulating odors, so lemon and passion flower incenses are popular choices.

#### DAILY PRAYER

*Oh Niña Azul, most merciful Queen of Death,  
Lady who forgives all sins and rights all wrongs.  
Gracious friend and guardian, I call upon you now.  
With your gentle right hand, open wide my eyes  
So that I can see the patterns between myself and others.  
With your gentle left hand, hold your finger to my lips  
So that I may listen and understand instead of speaking.  
Oh Holy Death, you are the greatest champion of life.  
Grant me the wisdom to protect my friends and identify my enemies.  
Set me upon the road to perfect health and prosperity.  
Defend me from my rivals and remove all obstructions from my way.  
Powerful Lady, there is nothing impossible for you.  
I rely upon your strength and power to achieve these desires.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

#### TO CREATE A FRIENDSHIP

*Thanks be to Niña Azul, my sweet and loving girl,  
Who is the friend of the friendless,  
And the keeper and protector of all.  
Blessed Niña Azul, I ask for your loving influence and protection  
In gaining the friendship of them that will love me  
And value me for who I am.  
Niña Azul, I crave the friendship of [person].  
Bring them close to my heart and close to my hand  
So that we may support and defend one another,  
Happy and content with each other's company.*

*May our friendship never sour, and may  
The gossip and malice of others never drive us apart.  
From now until the very end.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO FIX A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PEOPLE

*Niña Azul, blessed and merciful lady,  
You are with us from the moments of our birth  
Until the moments of our death  
And you know what dwells within our hearts.  
Niña Azul, I rely upon your power and understanding  
To sweeten the bitterness felt between [targets].  
Please sever the ties that bind them to their hate  
And bury their troubles in the graveyards of their heart.  
Niña Azul, Sweet Lady of Mercy,  
Give your compassion unto [targets]  
So together they can find the strength to bridge their differences.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO KEEP PEACE WITHIN THE HOME

*Blessed be to Niña Azul, the Creator of Peace,  
Who holds power over all the people on this earth.  
My lovely and generous lady, I am crying out for your aid.  
Please bring your sweetness here to me now,  
To fill my home with serenity, peace, and mutual love.  
Drive away from here the corrupted spirits and polluted energies  
That darken my doorway and sour this place,  
Driving we who live here to distraction, sleeplessness, and hate.  
Blessed Niña Azul, bring me instead your comfort and your mercy,  
Your harmony and your peace,  
Filling our home with the serenity and joy that we need*

*So I can also find both safety and refuge there.  
Blessed be to Niña Azul, the Gracious Lady!  
I trust in and rely upon your power to help me now.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO PROTECT YOURSELF FROM A SPECIFIC  
PERSON OR GROUP

*Hail Niña Azul, Sweet Lady of Mercy,  
Beautiful Sister, please come forth to aid me now.  
I come to you seeking sanctuary from the hatred of [target]  
Who seeks to rob me of my friends and disrupt my home,  
Who seeks to harm both my name and my honor,  
And who seeks the ruin of my life in any way they can.  
Sweet Niña Azul, shield me from the malice of [target].  
Grant me protection from their curses and their hexes  
And the spirits that they send to harass me.  
Grant me immunity from their gossip and their lies  
And grant me safety and unity within the shelter of my friends.  
Niña Azul, you have the power to see and touch all things.  
Please hold me safe and my enemies at bay.  
I trust in and rely upon your power.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO LEARN A DIFFICULT SKILL

*Niña Azul, my mother and teacher  
Who stands at the doorway of death  
And at the threshold of all knowledge.  
Niña Azul, I come to you as a student  
Seeking to know and learn the ways of [skill].  
Please open my mind to understanding.  
Please make available to me the tutors that I need.*

*Please guide me through my studies  
So that I may learn this thing fully and understand it,  
Passing all its tests and trials in your holy name.  
Santa Muerte, my wise and generous Saint of Death,  
Please open the doors of knowledge to me now.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO PROTECT CHILDREN AND FAMILY  
*Hail to Niña Azul, the Compassionate Mother!  
My Skinny Girl, please drape me and my family  
Securely within your great blue cloak.  
Oh Niña Azul, you are my lady and my protector.  
As my mother in death, I ask that you guard my family always,  
Keeping safe my children from predators and bullies  
And helping them do well in school,  
So they can live a full and rich life of learning  
Instead of a life of ignorance and fear.  
Niña Azul, please protect the health and lives of my family  
And keep sweet and generous the people that they know.  
Keep harmony and love within my home,  
And arguments and debt far without.  
Queen of this earth, please make us prosperous,  
And open our hearts to others  
So that the blessings that you give us may freely flow to others,  
Enriching and blessing us all.  
Blessed be to Niña Azul, my loving Queen!  
I thank you now for your kind and generous aid.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*



## CHAPTER 12

# Niña Dorada, Lucky Lady Death



Niña Dorada is an immensely popular form of Santa Muerte, often depicted wearing a beautiful golden gown and standing atop a huge pile of coins. Her immediate association is with the acquisition of money and, indirectly, with wealth and prosperity. She is strongly associated with the concepts of fate and fortune, making Niña Dorada the favorite of gamblers as well as anyone who needs a lucky break. Because she represents a fun-loving, youthful, and vigorous form of Santa Muerte, her inherent vitality makes her a first choice when performing healing spells.

The difference between money and wealth must be explained because their applications are rooted in different capacities of this aspect of Santa Muerte. In ancient times, the wealth of a person was rarely measured in how much gold he had, but in how large his herds were and how abundant his crops. Wealth was not expressed in terms of cold hard cash but, instead, in terms

of the fertility of the land. Thus, wealth is often seen in terms of living vital energy, a gift of the earth that is often associated with the divine feminine.

The first coins ever used were not used to exchange goods but were actually tokens designating membership in a particular community. Membership in the community meant that a person worked its common fields and herds and therefore was entitled to a share of the harvest and slaughter in the autumn. When Neolithic men began making offerings to the earth-mother, Cybele, they included these coins as well as seeds and the blood of sacrificed animals. The purpose was to bless the fertility of the community as well as to ensure their success in farming that year. These kinds of coins, found in Turkey and elsewhere, were usually struck with the likeness of the local king. The reason is that he often filled the role of either high priest or primary contributor of sacrificial goods, since he was normally the wealthiest person in terms of lands and herds.

Money is related to wealth through death. For thousands of years, money has meant gold, silver, and copper to most people. These metals are even referred to as “coinage metals” for this reason. Whether gold or sea shells, money itself typically has no real practical use. You can’t eat gold and silver, you can’t burn them for fuel, you can’t make a shelter out of them, and they make useless tools and worse weapons. However, that which is used as money is often beautiful . . . and always difficult to acquire. If items used as money were easy to get, then everyone would have too much money, and the money itself would become useless. Thus, that which is used as money is almost always acquired at risk. The coinage metals make perfect examples of this principle. Gold, silver, and copper are most often mined from the earth,

which is and always has been a dangerous occupation. Gems, which are also torn from the earth, also meet the criteria of being beautiful and difficult to obtain, and are often used as money as a result. Acquiring certain lovely sea shells and pearls in the ocean runs the risk of drowning or attack by predators. Even the islanders of Yap, who used stone disks as money, operated under this principle. The island on which they resided lacked a particular kind of lava stone, which made any piece of it rare and thus valuable. The islanders would risk both death and shark attacks by crossing thousands of miles of open ocean on rafts to the islands where the lava rock was available. To this day, naval engineers are unsure how a Stone Age civilization succeeded in moving some stones which weighed over a ton across such a vast distance and with such poor equipment. No doubt, many such stones lie on the ocean floor, their couriers the victims of rough seas and much worse.

Even though money is useless, people still risk death and worse to acquire it. The primary use of money is as a medium of exchange. You can exchange money for food, shelter, medicine, entertainment, protection, and virtually every other thing you need to live. This was money's great early appeal that led to its widespread adoption. As populations grew and people became more mobile, it was often easier to carry a pouch full of small valuable objects to trade for the things needed to survive. Because money itself cannot sustain you in the way that a bushel of apples or a bowl of fish stew can, money is not the direct equivalent of these kinds of things. Instead, money is their symbolic inversion. You cannot eat gold, silver, paper, or plastic, but you can exchange them for that which you can, which creates a negative balance on the system, and so an inverted relationship between

money and vitality is formed. Money can then be seen as the symbolic representation of death instead, but one that is often necessary for life to continue. This relationship is further reinforced because the classic form of money—precious metal—is something taken deep from within the earth itself. This is the underworld, which is often considered to be the realms of the gods of death.

Overall, Santa Muerte as the face of death has an inverted relationship with the power of life and growth, as discussed in chapter 4. This aspect of Santa Muerte has a direct connection to life and living vital energy because of the specific relationship between money and death that Niña Dorada represents. This is why she is petitioned for healing, growth, and fertility. Her relationship to money makes her predisposed toward gambling, and so she is also called on for luck in these circumstances.

The practitioner's personal relationship with money must be healthy before calling on Niña Dorada. This does not mean you have to be in great financial health to call on her—Niña Dorada doesn't care about your credit rating. However, money is often seen as a dirty and impure thing and a source of guilt. There is a strong cultural connection between having money and being seen as greedy—after all, money is the root of all evil. The other idea is that money is difficult to understand and therefore unapproachable, and so people refuse to read business or financial news or educate themselves on basic personal finance. As such, many practitioners are averse to casting spells that deal with money directly, opting instead to practice “wealth magic” instead of “money magic.” They find themselves surrounded by the trappings of wealth—a nice home inherited from a relative, a poor student's scholarship to a good school, and a friendly

neighbor nurse practitioner who will treat their kids for free—but they have woefully empty bank accounts and can't figure out why. They are successful in performing wealth magic but are failing to perform adequate *money* magic.

If you somehow see money as a dirty thing that only greedy people have, or something incomprehensible and not worth learning about, then you won't have any money. It's really that simple. This will complicate your relationship with Niña Dorada, not only with her ability to generate money, but also health, wealth, and luck. The reason is obvious: why would she be helpful or cooperative toward a practitioner who finds her dirty, ugly, greedy, boring, or incomprehensible? Changing this way of thinking is necessary if you seek to work successfully with Niña Dorada, particularly with increasing the size of your bank account. Simply wanting money does not make you evil, nor does money itself possess a morality. It also does nothing to assuage your guilty feelings about casting spells for money by promising to donate a certain amount to charity, unless you are the sort of person who routinely donates money to charities already. You do not need to impress Niña Dorada with your charity and piety, but you do need to be honest with her. Fortunately, Niña Dorada may be called on to correct your relationship with money, and she is quite helpful in doing so.

Money can be used for good or for ill, and Niña Dorada is similar. She can quickly be turned to aversive measures. Anything that can be marked by money or its loss is under her domain. In our society, that power is incredibly vast. She can empty out bank accounts, destroy access to money, impose crippling gambling habits, rack up huge debts, severely damage credit ratings, and ruin prized personal possessions. Niña Dorada can also sap

spells and opponents of their vitality, making them feel drained, tired, and susceptible to domination, curses, and disease. She is also quite capable of directing spirits to this purpose.

### *Favorite Offerings*

This youthful and vivacious aspect of Santa Muerte enjoys lively things, as well as all the experiences and pleasures that money can acquire. What you give Niña Dorada doesn't necessarily have to be expensive, but it must be pleasurable, sensuous, or fun. This is the aspect of Santa Muerte that enjoys sangria and chocolate, live music, and dancing. She loves gifts of flowers, especially marigolds, as well as the usual themed candies and candles. Gifts of coins, seeds, and apples are frequently given to Niña Dorada as well. Popular incense choices include copal incense, as it is the life-blood of a tree and thus the blood of life, and bergamot, which has a sweet, stimulating scent that is renowned for its ability to attract money.

Because of her own natural vigor and her relationship to living vital energy, I prefer to call on Niña Dorada around noon.

### DAILY PRAYER

*Oh Niña Dorada, most treasured Queen,  
My shining mother, both lovely and precious,  
I ask for your sweet and generous aid.  
Bless me with rich vitality and perfect health,  
Protect me from financial strains and drains,  
And let a flow of silver, gold, and green rain down upon me now.  
Holy Death, please smile upon my bets and wagers,  
And reshuffle Fortune's deck in my favor.  
Help me acquire the things that will please and serve me*

*And by your grace and power may I protect and keep them.  
Oh Niña Dorada, who is Death most influential,  
You have great control over this world.  
I acknowledge your vast leverage and authority.  
I ask for your blessings and guidance now and always.  
Amen. (or so mote it be, etc.)*

#### TO GET MONEY

*Hail Niña Dorada, my beautiful Skinny Lady,  
And most generous Saint of Death.  
Come forth quickly from the underworld  
And make merry your way upon this earth.  
Let your rains of gold and silver fall down upon me,  
Filling my pockets with riches and my bank accounts with cash.  
Bless me with the flow of money  
So I can pay my way and pay to play  
Safely and with your protection.  
As always now and forever, Niña Dorada,  
I thank you for your sweet attention and aid.  
Amen. (or so mote it be, etc.)*

#### TO GAIN EMPLOYMENT

*Niña Dorada, my Shining Lady Death,  
You are the reaper of all things made by human hands.  
By your hands the foundations of wealth are laid  
And yours are the fruits of my labor harvested.  
Blessed Niña Dorada, please bless me with  
A job that pays my bills and more,  
Work that is safe and steady, and  
Employment that is always guaranteed.*

*Niña Dorada, please take me in your hands  
So the results of my own efforts will not go wasted  
And the fruits of my labor left to rot in the fields.  
I trust in and rely upon you for your protection  
And your loving aid.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN GAMBLING

*Oh happy Niña Dorada, my golden Lady Luck!  
You determine the fate and fortune of all things on this earth.  
I call upon you, my gracious and pretty lady,  
To turn fate toward my favor  
And grant me fast fortune  
In all games of luck and gambling  
So that I can fill my pockets with cash  
And my heart with happiness and gratitude.  
Lovely Saint of Success, grant me fast fortune  
And your certain protection and help  
Now, forever, and always.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO HEAL AN ILLNESS OR AN INJURY

*Blessed be unto Niña Dorada, the Golden Girl,  
Keeper of the flow of life unto death,  
Come to me from under the western horizon,  
To remove from me the injuries that cause me pain  
And the sicknesses that sap my strength.  
Blessed Niña Dorada, my eternal skeletal mother,  
Please give me your holy blessing  
And cover me with your mantle of protection*

*Returning to me my lost vitality and vigor  
And returning me to a state of purity and health.  
Niña Dorada, my blessed mother of wonder,  
It is you that I rely upon and thank  
For granting me the gift of my returned health  
And a continued long and happy life.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO ENSURE HEALTH AND WEALTH  
*Hail unto Niña Dorada, my holy Saint of Death,  
You are the keeper of all in life  
And the mother of all in death.  
Yours is the power that affects the whole of the earth.  
Please hold me close to your heart, my beautiful Skinny Girl,  
And bless me and my family with health, wealth, and your loving care.  
Please grant that my home is always safe and beautiful,  
That my cupboards are always full,  
That my children grow straight and healthy,  
And that my loved ones return home securely every night.  
Please walk with me in grace, Niña Dorada,  
Help me to stand straight and tall and free  
From illnesses and misfortune,  
From hardships and from pain,  
And always from the curses and maledictions of others.  
I place myself into your care and protection  
And rely upon your mercy and your aid.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO TURN LUCK IN YOUR FAVOR  
*Oh graceful Niña Dorada, my Golden Lady Luck!  
My precious Saint of Success, you are both mighty and wise.*

*You stand at the doorway of death  
And at the end of all things.  
You alone know whom fortune favors  
And you alone can cut the final threads of fate.  
Niña Dorada, I call upon your aid and favor now.  
Please cover me with your cloak of grace,  
Ensuring for me the success of my plans  
And the fruitfulness of my labors.  
Please break the chains that bind me to my misfortune  
And grant me the freedom of your favor instead.  
Thanks be unto you, oh Niña Dorada,  
My precious Saint of Success, please bless me  
With your protection and your lucky aid now.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

## CHAPTER 13

# Niña Roja, the Queen of Passion



Niña Roja is the red aspect of Santa Muerte conceived of in a fiery and passionate form. She is famous for her ability to quicken hearts, inspire love, and inflame lust. Many people call on her to kindle new romances—or to interfere with the love of others. This aspect of Santa Muerte enjoys the quick and illicit embrace as much as those born of lasting romance. Niña Roja is just as quick to retrieve cheating husbands from the arms of their mistresses as she is to ignite the lusty passions of otherwise uninterested or inaccessible targets.

There is a narrow groove at the base of many larger Santa Muerte statues around which devotees can wrap string or cord soaked in coffee, tequila, blood, or a variety of other offerings. A common folk spell to ensure that a husband remains faithful is to soak a white cord in the couple's combined sexual fluids and

then to wrap it around the base of a red Santa Muerte statue. A novena is said and regular offerings are made to Niña Roja, who then binds the husband to the wife—or a cheating husband to his mistress, depending on who is the better witch!

The greater the stakes, the more intense the conflict. In a predominantly Catholic culture that frowns on or outright forbids divorce, a wife seeks to maintain her home, her marriage, and her social standing by keeping her husband from going astray. His mistress, on the other hand, enjoys the attention, gifts, and time of a man whose socks she doesn't have to sort and whose children she doesn't have to feed. Both of these women may resort to magic to maintain their position. They may engage in an intense bidding war with Niña Roja, giving lavish gifts of flowers and perfume and rows on rows of red candles to her in an attempt to bind and seal him to her side.

This conflict isn't about anyone peaceably finding true love, nor is it a story about reconciliation between lovers or finding one's destined soul mate. Trapped between the two witches, the man will be magically compelled to cross one witch's threshold and stay there. The winning witch will dominate the husband's free will after routing her opponent, possibly even destroying her in a fit of impassioned rage (hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, after all). While it may have been his wandering habits that landed him in this scenario, the situation has evolved out of his control. What the husband wants may no longer matter at all. Of course, tired of the warring women, he may find a third lover instead!

The theme of this story is as much about force, conquest, and control as it is about love, sex, and passion. These elements are as central to Niña Roja's character as are her interests in romance. Sex and violence are opposite faces of the same Mars-stamped

coin, and this aspect of Santa Muerte is very much a fiery martial figure. Niña Roja is young, strong, courageous, and passionate. She revels in flirting, seduction, sex, and passionate play. She is also very partial to acts that prove strength and courage as well as leadership and dominance. She commands compliance by virtue of intimidation and upheaval, not by empathetic communication toward mutual gain (that's Niña Azul) or by natural leadership guided by wise insight (that's Niña Violeta). Niña Roja seeks to win and dominate, and so she is very effective in controlling situations in which an aggressive style of leadership is necessary.

The favorite of both the love-struck and the lovelorn, Niña Roja is called on to set the target's heart aflame with an all-consuming ardor. She enhances the libido and increases sexual pleasure and potency. Niña Roja strengthens loving and passionate relationships, and is called on to create such relationships and protect them from outside influences—this is the power of Niña Roja that the slighted wife would call on. Niña Roja supports and fuels spells that require honor, courage, and discipline. A practitioner seeking the courage and power to face down a domineering boss would seek the aid of Niña Roja. Niña Roja is also the winner of contests, particularly strategic physical games, and so she is a favorite of competitive athletes. She is called on to enhance physical and martial prowess, including learning target shooting and practicing martial arts. She is a very effective shield against aggressive people and violent situations. Niña Roja is called on to immediately intervene in situations in which actual physical harm is threatened, such as in abusive domestic relationships.

The destructive capacity of Niña Roja cannot be understated. This aspect of Santa Muerte is called on to force others into compliance with the practitioner's desires, especially if the

base impulses of the practitioner are rooted in aggression and the desire to sexually dominate the target. This is the power of Niña Roja called on by the mistress seeking to control the husband. Niña Roja may also incite hatred and rage among the target's nearest and dearest loved ones, destroying their relationships and everything that goes with them. This means in addition to causing extreme emotional harm, the target can lose his home, his job, access to his children, access to money, access to friends, and much more. Niña Roja also destroys property, creating expensive repair and replacement costs. This aspect of Santa Muerte also is well capable of causing physical harm, especially in sudden and violent ways.

### *Favorite Offerings*

The favorite gifts of Niña Roja are those you would give a lover—for instance, things like chocolates, perfume, red wine, and jewelry. Sexual acts performed in her name are particularly effective offerings, especially since the orgasm at the end is often referred to as *la petite mort* (French, “the little death”). This aspect of Santa Muerte loves receiving flowers like any lady, especially red roses. Of course, she is a great fan of red candles and spicy red candies as well. She also loves cinnamon and copal incense.

### DAILY PRAYER

*Oh Niña Roja, most passionate Queen!  
Sweet Lady of Love, may your light shine down upon me.  
Cut low with your loving scythe all things that threaten my way  
So that courage and desire may bloom in the garden of my heart.  
Provoke me to excellence, sweet Mother of Death,  
Lend me your strength to face my challenges and overcome them.*

*Guard my bed, my heart, and home from the curses, hexes, and spells  
Of all rivals that seek to dominate and destroy me.  
Reverse all tides that threaten to sweep away my friends and lovers  
And let them surge forth to break upon and drown my enemies.  
Your power and your love command the whole world.  
Great Saint of Death, I rely upon your loving power to aid me now.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO ATTRACT A LOVER

*Hail Niña Roja, my beautiful and lusty lady,  
I pray to you to bring me a treasure and a gift.  
A faithful lover is the jewel that I desire,  
A sexy and seductive wo/man  
Who desires to touch me and to caress me,  
And who lusts after pleasing me,  
Someone who will be faithful with their passions  
And honest with their needs.  
Someone who will protect me and honor me  
And will encourage me to be my best.  
Someone who will never seek to do me harm  
And will always hold me close within their heart.  
Sweet Sister Death, you can bestow anything  
And take everything.  
Please take away my loneliness now,  
And give me the gift of a lover instead.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO STRENGTHEN COURAGE

*Niña Roja, my Saint of Strength,  
Your power conquers all,*

*Laying low the mighty and making equals  
Of warriors and of cowards.  
Santa Muerte, my red-stained saint,  
I seek that courage which knowing death can bring.  
Please lend me your potency and your power,  
Giving aid to my resolve  
And giving me the strength to face  
Both my enemies and my fears.  
Niña Roja, your power is vast  
And your force is mighty.  
Please lend me your potency and your power now.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO INCREASE SEXUAL PLEASURE

*Oh Niña Roja, my lovely Queen,  
You understand the needs of the living  
Better than any of the lords of the dead.  
Blessed Sister, I seek your assistance and your aid  
In finding the pleasure of the little death  
Which makes the body sweat and shake  
And which makes the heart burn.  
Please bless me with the sexual bliss that I seek  
With the partner whose touch slakes my thirst  
And whose attentions open the  
Paths of bliss within me.  
Niña Roja, please bless me with your help,  
For in you I know all things are made possible.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO PROTECT A RELATIONSHIP FROM INTERFERENCE

*Niña Roja, my elegant Skinny Sister,  
You hold both the powers of hatred and love in your heart  
And death and deliverance in your hands.  
Holy Death, you see everything and you know all.  
My lover is my partner, and my partner is mine.  
Please protect us and strengthen our relationship.  
Give my partner faith in my fidelity  
And give me faith in theirs  
As you lead us away from those whose jealousy and misery  
Would seek to drive us apart.  
Niña Roja, my sweetness and my joy,  
Please protect and strengthen my relationship with [partner]  
For now, forever, and always,  
As we will always seek to honor you in return.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO PROTECT YOURSELF FROM VIOLENCE

*Thanks be to Niña Roja, the Lady of the Night,  
Who by death's power commands all authority on this earth  
And who can overcome all obstacles in her way.  
Blessed be to Niña Roja, my powerful protector and guide  
Who keeps me safe today and always from the harm caused by others  
From those who would hit me to hurt me,  
Or otherwise cause me pain.  
Please turn away from me the weapons of  
my enemies, oh Saint of Strength,  
And turn away from me their curses and their harmful intentions.  
Niña Roja, I call upon you to be my guardian and guide  
So that I may always remain secure and whole*

*Underneath your great red cloak of protection.*

*Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO HAVE A NEW LOVE AFFAIR

*Niña Roja, my elegant and seductive queen,*

*Yours is the whole kingdom of this earth,*

*Over which you have the power to do with what you please.*

*Holy Niña Roja, I come to you asking for a favor*

*To start a new and interesting new affair.*

*Please bring to me a spicy and sexy lover*

*Whose voice makes my knees weak and my heart race*

*Whose touch fills me with insatiable lust,*

*And whose skills leave nothing to be desired.*

*Please give me the wisdom to judge my new lover wisely,*

*And please keep all problems at bay.*

*Holy Death, I thank you for your swift aid.*

*Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO RETURN A LOVER TO YOU

*Niña Roja, Queen of Love and Queen of Power,*

*I call to you now out of my desperate need.*

*I have lost the love and affection of [target],*

*Who does not return to my door,*

*But instead seeks love in the arms of another.*

*Sweet Sister Death, please help me and aid me*

*In the return of my dear lover, [target],*

*So that they may hold me and comfort me again,*

*Seeking the pleasures of my bed and of my company.*

*Please cut the bonds that tie them to another*

*And return my lover home to me soon.*

*Niña Roja, please aid me swiftly and thank you,  
For my heart cannot stand the wait.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO GAIN A CERTAIN LOVER

*Niña Roja, my sexy and seductive Queen,  
Mistress of passion and knower of all pleasures.  
Niña Roja, please come forth from the underworld  
Bringing with you the fires that consume the heart  
With lust and love and desire.  
Holy Death, I ask for your aid and protection  
Acquiring the love of [target].  
Make them rise with my name upon their lips  
And sleep with my image behind their eyes.  
Make my absences cause a fever in them  
That only my return will remedy.  
Niña Roja, within you is the power to  
Attract and draw [target] to me  
And give to them a thirst that only I can quench.  
Please aid me and protect me now.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*



## CHAPTER 14

# Niña Verde, the Just Judge



Niña Verde, the green aspect of Santa Muerte, is frequently called on to win legal cases. Since Santa Muerte herself is often linked to drug cartels, this is an important and popular function. Niña Verde is called on to decide all matters of justice, balance, truth, and fairness. While these issues are frequently decided in courts, the legal system is not the only means by which our laws and moral codes are enforced. These things are also enforced by our religious and spiritual beliefs as well as our social customs. Breaking a moral code may not land you in jail, but it may land you in Purgatory or endanger your karma instead. Likewise, a boy forced by social expectations to fight for his sister's honor in the schoolyard is also enforcing a moral code.

Finding balance between the different sources of law and morality that influence is the great power of Niña Verde and often

why she is depicted carrying a set of scales. She can enforce justice, balance, and fairness in any situation, or tip the balance in the practitioner's favor. She has the ability to impart clarity of perspective, as well as the ability to help the practitioner understand how the interplay of opposing ethical forces led a situation into being. This ability is particularly helpful in divination because she can help clarify the "why" of a situation and not just the "how."

Niña Verde is famous for her ability to influence the legal system. This includes all kinds of proceedings, not just the criminal matters for which she is most famous. She can quickly turn civil suits toward your favor as well, and even manipulate legal systems that never go in front of a judge. She can open the doors and smooth the way toward getting licenses and certifications, passports and immigration documents, and business registrations, and she can even get common civil complaints handled quickly and efficiently.

Niña Verde also resolves the kinds of legal problems that are tried outside a secular court. If you find yourself sentenced to social ostracism because of a wrongdoing you did or did not commit, such as adultery, Niña Verde can help you. Likewise, if you find yourself forced unfairly out of a job promotion (or out of employment altogether), Niña Verde is a good choice for seeking balance and restitution. She can also prevent a person from being judged unfairly, either by a normal court or the more vicious court of social peers, affecting the outcome of court cases, human resources complaints, and the like. Niña Verde has the power to dispel false rumors and thus normalize relationships negatively affected by them, allowing readmission into social circles.

This aspect of Santa Muerte is effective protection against those who are willing to disrupt or break laws or ethical codes,

and so she prevents the actions of thieves, rapists, murderers, con artists, habitual liars, and the like. Police officers and paramedics call on her in the line of duty for protection from these kinds of elements, which they encounter daily during their patrols. Ironically, these same criminals call on her for protection and success during their activities in addition to protection from the law.

As the Just Judge, Niña Verde has the power to overturn the sentences that both you and society impose. For this reason, this aspect of Santa Muerte is often hailed as the undoer of bad or destructive habits, such as gambling, alcoholism, and drug abuse. She is often counted among the small crowd of saints that are brought into psychiatric wards and treatment centers, her novena cards clutched in the hands of the desperate and the hopeful (her sometimes-ally, Saint Jude, also makes frequent appearances). Since those suffering from addiction and mental illness often end up incarcerated, Niña Verde is also called on to aid these conditions.

The negative power of Niña Verde is insidious, pervasive, and all-encompassing. She is just as capable of placing chains as she is at removing them. Her targets find themselves suddenly at odds with organized society, the victims of everything from petty traffic tickets and harassment by the Internal Revenue Service to imprisonment for breaking some unknown law. The targets find themselves prey to increasingly perverse rumors that arouse suspicion in their social circles and subsequently cause the damning and inescapable judgment of their peers. Once a person is unfairly judged to be an abusive drunkard, he will always be thought of as an abusive drunkard. These kinds of social sentences may take a lifetime to appeal, depending on their severity. Niña Verde may cause the target to run afoul of those already

disinclined to follow social order or common ethical codes. This means a person may be robbed, be targeted by con artists, be the victims of identity theft, and so forth. Niña Verde may also cause people to pass harmful judgments on themselves and others, inciting confusion, addiction, paranoia, and more. Of course, she may also compel a target to commit illegal acts.

In deference to Niña Verde's balancing nature, she is commonly called on during the time when night and day are balanced—in other words, at dusk and dawn. Some practitioners prefer to call her at noon or midnight, depending on their intent. She is also often called at a courthouse or a crossroads.

### *Favorite Offerings*

Niña Verde is frequently given offerings of bread, salt, and water, the traditional diet of both the ascetic and the prisoner. The kind of flower this aspect of Santa Muerte likes is marigolds, which have long been associated with justice and insight because their juice clears the vision. Juniper incense is used because it is thought to help guard against theft, and it is also associated with death because its fragrant wood is frequently used to make coffins. In addition, Niña Verde favors sage incense, along with the usual green candles and candies. She also enjoys the gift of keys, since they symbolize the freedom that she offers.

### DAILY PRAYER

*Oh Niña Verde, most holy magistrate,  
You preside over the greatest court of them all.  
Just Judge, all things fall within your jurisdiction.  
Please protect me from censure and false contracts,  
Dismiss each and every charge filed against me*

*And make rulings in my favor.  
Grant me your clear and impartial eye  
To see the truth in all matters and treat them fairly.  
Break both the chains of habit and circumstance  
That bind me to untrustworthy people and places.  
Please protect me, my family, and my home  
From violation by criminals or rivals.  
Holy Death of Justice, your court is the highest authority.  
I rely upon your favor and power now.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO WIN A LEGAL CASE

*Hail Niña Verde, who sits upon her black throne of judgment  
The wisest and fairest among the dead,  
And my last and greatest defense.  
Just Judge, I ask that you hear my appeal.  
Please balance the scales of justice in my favor,  
Sweetening the court's opinion of me  
And casting doubt upon my accusers.  
Niña Verde, let me walk free of all sentences and fines  
So that I may continue to walk with you,  
In your grace and with your protection,  
For Saint Death's decisions are final  
And no court exists that can overrule you.  
Blessed Niña Verde, the Just Judge,  
Please help me and aid me now.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

FOR PROTECTION AGAINST CRIMINAL ACTIVITY

*Niña Verde, Queen of the Crossroads,  
Who sees and touches all things,*

*Please wrap me up within your watchful mantle,  
Protecting me from the criminal activities of others.  
May thieves fail to find me or my home,  
May I never be the victim of random violence,  
May I be targeted by no one,  
May no brutes harm me or my family  
And may I always slip away free.  
Within you, all these things and more are possible.  
Niña Verde, I place within your hands  
My protection and safety.  
Please guard me and guide me always.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

FOR PROTECTION FROM LEGAL PROCEEDINGS

*Hail to you, Niña Verde, the Just Judge  
That sits upon the highest bench of all.  
Great Saint of Death, I come asking for your aid.  
Please listen to my plea now.  
I stand before you as the victim of the courts,  
Soon to be sacrificed upon the altar of law,  
Tangled in legal proceedings without end,  
And at risk of losing much more  
Than just my reputation.  
Just Judge, please oversee the actions  
Of this fallible court of man,  
And stand ready to overrule them,  
If they decide against me and my favor.  
Niña Verde, you are the final decision-maker,  
And I place all my trust within you  
To help me and to aid me now*

*So I can be free to walk my path in yours.*

*Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO OVERCOME AN ADDICTION

*Blessed Niña Verde, Keeper of the Skeleton Key,  
Please unlock the shackles of misery and addiction  
That bind me to [specific drug, alcohol].*

*I find myself powerless to overcome this addiction  
That holds my family and my future hostage  
And that destroys my health and wastes my life.*

*Niña Verde, please grant me mercy  
By breaking me of [specific drug, alcohol] addiction.  
Lift the sentence I have imposed upon myself,  
And upon the people who love me,  
And grant freedom to us all.*

*Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO PROTECT AN INCARCERATED LOVED ONE

*Blessed Niña Verde, the Key-Keeper,  
Please come and aid me swiftly  
For I call upon you with an urgent need.  
Oh, Saint of Desperation, your touch reaches everywhere  
And can touch everything.*

*Please reach within the [name of correctional institute]  
And place your hands upon [name],  
Protecting them from the constant threat of danger  
And keeping them from becoming the prey of others.  
Let them pass their time quickly and quietly,  
Without illnesses, injuries, or pain.*

*Blessed Niña Verde, I call upon you now*

*To protect [name] until their release  
So that they may return to me soon  
Safe, sound, and whole.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO LIMIT THE DAMAGE FROM ADVERSE  
LEGAL PROCEEDINGS

*Hail, Holy Niña Verde, the High Magistrate.  
You are the Saint of Final Appeal,  
And I ask that you review the sentence  
That has been placed upon me now.  
I stand accused and now judged  
Within the courts of man.  
Please limit the damage that this will cause me  
And lessen any fees and time that I might serve.  
Please protect my reputation and my property,  
My employment and my rights,  
And above all, my merciful Saint of Death,  
Please protect my family from ill will of others,  
And may the sins for which I have been accused  
Not harm them in any way,  
And harm me no longer.  
Please help me now, Niña Verde.  
I put my faith and trust within you.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

## CHAPTER 15

# Niña Negra, the Mother of Tears



Niña Negra is the black aspect of Santa Muerte, and the one most sensationalized and feared. Her reputation as the bringer of ruin and death is appropriate, since that capacity falls well within Niña Negra's purview. This is a woefully limited scope of view of Niña Negra, however, because her maternal and protective impulses are just as strong as any other aspect of Santa Muerte's.

As discussed in chapter 4, the uniquely female process of childbirth has killed women for millennia and continues to be a leading cause of death for women to this day. In addition, the females of many species, including the human one, are famous for their aggressive and bloody actions taken to protect their young. Thus, this aggressive and killer instinct is deeply embedded within the divine feminine and is expressed within Santa Muerte through Niña Negra. Death seen as a protective and

maternal figure is an idea also deeply embedded in Aztec culture, as seen in the goddess Mictecacihuatl.

When Death wields her scythe, she uses it with considerable and decisive force, and often cuts down to the very root. If you ask Niña Negra to make you late for a boring work meeting, she can destroy your ability to be there by innocently catching you in a traffic jam. However, she might also have a hand in causing the accident that leads to the jam in the first place. To Santa Muerte, such an accident is just another round in what is forever a zero-sum game. Thus, care must be exercised on behalf of the practitioner who invokes the power of Niña Negra, and the impact of her potential influence considered most prudently.

As the reaping form of Santa Muerte, Niña Negra has the ability to end all living things, but the definition of what is considered living must be expanded. In addition to people, plants, and animals, all active forces, principles, trends, currents, spells, and so forth have a form of life by virtue of being active. Having a form of life makes them then subject to the force of death, and so Niña Negra oversees all systems of cessation, negation, decay, dissolution, and denouement. Because she tends to cut things off at the root, Niña Negra is very effective at negating spells and curses, forcing harmful or disruptive situations to end, and banishing unwanted spirits or people. As her destructive impulses are ultimately rooted in her maternal character, she is often used in protection rituals. No one but a fool gets between a mother and her children, it is often said.

As the gatekeeper between life and death, Niña Negra can also open the doorway to the spirit realms, allowing both astral travel and communication with spirits. Many magical practitioners believe that our existence after death holds its own interests

and trials. Preparing for and undergoing this lifetime-in-death, which some call the bardo, is therefore an activity of interest for many. Niña Negra holds the keys to pursuing these types of initiatory interests, providing the insights into death and the self that are necessary to undergo this kind of work.

Because this aspect of Santa Muerte governs death and decay, she likewise embodies the destructive and retributive principles. Niña Negra is likewise used in spells used to bind, obstruct, and harm one's enemies. She is called on to completely kill a situation, spell, or even a person. She can also be used to take spells, spirits, and opponents deep into Mictlan or other shadowed or necromantic astral realms, causing them nightmares and illness. Properly persuaded, Niña Negra may prevent a rebirth cycle, keeping the target trapped in the underworld forever. Niña Negra may also direct spirits used for these purposes.

Niña Negra is called on at night, ideally around the midnight hour at a crossroads or a graveyard.

### *Favorite Offerings*

This aspect of Santa Muerte likes dishes of salt for purity and dirt to acknowledge where we will all return. Niña Negra enjoys both water and red wine; the latter symbolizes blood, and together the two represent the preparation of the earth for renewal after death. She also enjoys Madonna lilies and carnations, flowers that frequently appear at funerals because their strong and sweet scent is thought to spark remembrance of the dead. Aloe and myrrh incenses are also common choices, since both have long associations with funerals as well. Niña Negra also enjoys black candles as well as dark chocolates and bitter black licorice candy.

DAILY PRAYER

*Oh Niña Negra, the Mother of Tears,  
Black Lady, I invoke your presence to shield me  
From the harm others seek to inflict upon me  
And from the harm I seek to inflict upon myself.  
Holy Death, there is no door you cannot open.  
There is no barrier you cannot cross.  
Connect the realms of the living with the realms of the dead.  
Fly me past my obstacles and guide me along my way  
So that I can receive your power and your strength.  
I pray to you to give me your kindness and your mercy  
For I will certainly meet you some day.  
Just as you watch over everything on this earth,  
Niña Negra, watch over and protect me now.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO STOP CURSES AT THEIR SOURCE

*Oh Niña Negra, Fierce Saint of Bone,  
Arise quickly and come at my call,  
Bringing with you your scythe of office  
To cut low the curses and problems that plague me.  
Holy Niña Negra, come swiftly on your silent owl wings  
And swing fast your reaping blade  
To sever now and permanently the ties that bind me,  
The forces that harass me, and the  
Spirits that dog my path.  
Fierce Mother Death, there are none who  
Would dare raise their heads against you!  
Please aid me and protect me now.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO HAVE A DREAM ABOUT A SPIRIT OF THE DEAD

*Blessed Niña Negra, my lovely lady reaper,  
You are the gateway to this life and many others,  
For many have felt your touch, as we all will one day,  
And I ask that you call forth the spirit  
Of one who already knows your grace and presence  
Having met you already in death.  
Blessed Niña Negra, please bring to me the spirit of [target],  
So I can speak to them and touch them  
Within the realms of my dreams.  
Allow them to speak with me freely,  
And should their intentions be malicious,  
Lock them deep in the underworld instead,  
Unable to come to anyone's call.  
My lovely Saint of Death, please help me and aid me  
In communicating with this spirit now.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO CALL FORTH ANY SPIRIT

*Blessed Niña Negra, Holy Queen of Death,  
Guardian of the threshold between all worlds.  
Ancient and wise lady, please open the doorway now  
And call forth to me the spirit of [target],  
To come swiftly here to aid me  
Without deceit and without harm.  
Blessed Niña Negra, please keep safe  
The natural boundaries between this world and the next,  
And myself from any harm [target]  
May intentionally or accidentally cause.  
Thanks be unto you, Blessed Niña Negra,*

*For your continued power and aid.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO DISMISS A SPIRIT

*My Niña Negra, Fast Lady Death,  
Nothing is more guaranteed or final  
Than the touch of your bony hand.  
Holy Death, please come peaceably now to aid me  
By quickly returning the spirit [target]  
Back to their home beyond the threshold.  
And if they refuse to obey your ancient command,  
Please swing low your reaping blade  
And take them with you anyway,  
For nothing can escape death's power.  
And I ask that you use that power for me now.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO STOP A RECURRENT PROBLEM

*Niña Negra, my wise and beautiful Queen,  
You travel to all places and know all things.  
My holy Saint of Death, please come and aid me now  
To stop the cycle of harassment and vexation  
That wastes my times and interrupts my concentration.  
Niña Negra, my lovely Skinny Girl,  
Please remove from my life the constant annoyance  
Caused by [source]  
Without causing harm to them or harm to me  
Or harm to any whom I care about.  
Blessed Mother Death, please come and aid me swiftly,  
And your name I shall always praise.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*

TO PROTECT YOURSELF AGAINST  
THE SERIOUS THREAT OF HARM

*My Niña Negra, Mother of Bones,  
You are the face of death incarnate  
Whose authority none can deny  
And whose power none can withstand.  
I call you forth from the underworld now  
In this direst of circumstances and  
With the most urgent of needs.  
I now fearfully face the threat of harm  
Brought to me by [target],  
Who has every desire to hurt me  
And every resource to destroy me.  
Blessed Niña Negra, my fierce Saint of Bone,  
Come to me now and quickly!  
I need your protection and your mercy,  
Your vigilance and your care  
For none can protect me from this threat save you,  
And your power to do so is final and absolute.  
Niña Negra, Mother of Bones,  
Please walk with me during these dangerous hours  
And keep me safe from any and all forms of danger.  
I humbly place my faith in your protection now.  
Amen. (so mote it be, etc.)*



## CHAPTER 16

# A Few Last Words



Santa Muerte, the famous Saint of Death from Mexico, is the central figure of the fastest-growing new religious movement in the world today. Some may find her meteoric rise in popularity surprising, given her lack of a centralized religious cult and her strong association with the criminal elements of society. It is easy to find familiarity and thus comfort in the form of Santa Muerte because she draws from common and familiar cultural roots.

Our understanding of the relationship between the divine feminine, birth, and death is primal in origin. For aeons, humanity has sought the comfort of the deathly divine feminine figure to guide us along the next step on our great adventure. In many cultures across the world, this figure has taken different faces and different forms, from Kali to Isis to Atropos, and many goddesses in between. We need the power that this aspect of

the divine feminine represents because she turns the wheels of renewal and creation.

Santa Muerte comes to us as the new face of this ancient force, and she comes to us with open arms. She accepts everyone without reservation, regardless of their crimes or creed, creating an opportunity for acceptance and even redemption without judgment or condemnation. This is an amazing gift in a world where our guilt and remembered sins have a way of following us for years. Santa Muerte represents an opportunity to find peace that many could not find otherwise. Coupled with her familiar imagery and broad scope of influence, this has allowed Santa Muerte to escape the geographic and cultural confines that keep other folk saints such as La Difunta Correa relatively contained. It's no wonder the Saint of Death is becoming so popular so quickly.

I strongly encourage you to experiment using your own method of working with Santa Muerte. She is a strong and dynamic spirit who relishes new things and new people. Thus, approaching her with a method developed using your own magical techniques makes a special and unique kind of offering to her.

My best advice when learning to work with Santa Muerte is to keep a record of your work. Keeping some form of magical journal is essential. A grimoire is far more than just a book of spells; it is a record of the thoughts, feelings, and experiences you have surrounding your spells, which helps give them both context and power. Your magical journal over time will become its own magical talisman, the living documentation of your memories surrounding your moments of focused energy. More than once I have used one of my own grimoires for divination, letting the book fall open to a random page to see how I felt about a topic or situation and what I had done about it in the past. More often

than not, I find my own good advice recorded in some experience I might have otherwise forgotten without the record. Reading through your own magical records should be a fascinating, self-narrated tale of successes, failures, and magical adventures, not an aching cry of remembered boredom. Record your spells, why you did them, and most importantly, why they mattered to you. The seed of your own myth will grow within your magical journal, which is why it is so essential that you keep one.

My own interest in Santa Muerte has served me well. She has brought me excellent health, easy and well-paid employment, a sweet and thoughtful lover, and comfort in the face of great personal pain. Plus, she has even opened the doorways of new magical opportunities for me. There is little the Saint of Death has not done for me that I have asked of her. The methods presented here are the result of my experiences working with Santa Muerte. The completion of this book is my way of saying thank you to her.



# Glossary of Terms

**Aeon:** The massive shift in cultural trends that define a period of history.

**Banishing ritual:** A magical ritual designed to cleanse the area of errant psychic energy and drive out annoying or noxious spiritual forces.

**Bardo:** Tibetan term referring to the period between death and reincarnation, believed to be an alternate form of life or existence.

**Black Death:** An extended outbreak of the plague that killed 30 to 60 percent of the population of Europe in the 14th century.

**Calavera:** The general term for a skull that has been ornately decorated with drawings of flowers, diamonds, hearts, and other images. These usually take the form of skull candies made out of white sugar that have been decorated with colored icing.

**Danse macabre:** (French, “dance of death”) The artistic theme that emerged in Europe as a result of the Black Death. Emphasized the idea of dying as a universal experience.

**Day of the Dead:** (Spanish, *Día de los Muertos*) Held on November 2, which coincides with the Catholic All Soul’s Day. The Day of the Dead is a festival celebrating the lives of deceased friends and relatives.

**Folk Saint:** A figure whose sainthood is attested by popular appeal but is not formally canonized by the Catholic Church.

**La Parca:** A feminine form of the Grim Reaper that emerged out of medieval Spain during the Black Death.

**Lord of the World:** A spiritual niche filled by figures who are the ultimate arbiters of all earthly manifestations.

**Mictecacihuatl:** The Lady of Mictlan and Queen of the Aztec underworld.

**Mictlan:** The Aztec underworld, which was a dark and dangerous place full of monsters. Successfully crossing the badlands of the underworld was necessary if the dead wanted any chance at rebirth in the next age.

**Moirai, the:** (Greek, “the Fates”): The three Greek goddesses who first spun the thread of life, measured it, and then cut it.

**Nahuatl:** The language spoken by the native Aztecs prior to the arrival of the Spanish.

**Narco-saint:** A folk saint that has been linked to the drug trade: for example, Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde.

**Novena:** A series of prayers traditionally said over nine days, often with a rosary and a novena candle.

**Parcae, the:** (Latin, “the Fates”) The three Roman goddesses who determined the outcome of all fate and fortune.

**Parca Morta:** (Latin, “the Fate of Death”) The Roman goddess responsible for cutting the threads of fate.

**Prayer:** A focused and directed request aimed at a god or a spiritual personality. Often used as a form of spell.

**Rosary:** A specialized set of meditation beads used to count prayers, often to the Virgin Mary.

**Saint:** A spiritual personality who is venerated because she or he is thought to have a special relationship with God. Saints are thought to be able to use this closeness to help grant miracles.

**Saint humiliation:** The practice of punishing the icons of saints to gain their compliance.

**Scrying:** A divination technique whereby people and places can be viewed remotely, often performed by gazing into a black mirror, pool of ink, crystal ball, or similarly reflective surface.

**Syncretism:** The process by which differing religious systems merge and combine in order for a third different religious system to emerge.

**San la Muerte:** (Spanish, masculine “Holy Death”) A male folk saint from Argentina. Often confused for Santa Muerte among native English speakers unfamiliar with gendered nouns.



## Recommended Reading

*The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe: Tradition and Transformation*, by Małgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 2007.

*Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*, 2nd Edition, by R. Andrew Chesnut. Oxford University Press, New York, 2017.

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*Prime Chaos: Adventures in Chaos Magic*, by Phil Hine. New Falcon Publications, Tempe, AZ, 1993.

*Santa Muerte: Mexico's Mysterious Saint of Death*, by Tony Kail. Amazon CreateSpace, 2010.

*Witchcraft in the Southwest: Spanish and Indian Supernaturalism on the Rio Grande*, by Marc Simmons. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1974.



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William Bledsoe/Sweet William Photography



Tracey Rollin was born and raised in New Mexico. She grew up enjoying the strong cultural influences from nearby vibrant Mexico as well as from her own mother's German heritage. She has practiced chaos magic and witchcraft for over twenty years dedicating herself to the advancement of consciousness, spiritual understanding, and personal power. Tracey has studied with a wide variety of magical practitioners and has enjoyed teaching her techniques to her private students. She hopes now to share her experiences in order to promote knowledge and growth among those who seek it. Privately, Tracey is a registered nurse with years of emergency room and trauma experience. She currently lives and works in Albuquerque, New Mexico, with her partner and two dogs. Visit her at [www.traceyrollin.com](http://www.traceyrollin.com).

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## *Santa Muerte Niña Roja*

*Niña Roja, my Saint of Strength,*

*Your power conquers all,*

*Laying low the mighty and making equals*

*Of warriors and of cowards.*

*Santa Muerte, my red-stained saint,*

*I seek that courage which knowing death can bring.*

*Please lend me your potency and your power.*

*Giving aid to my resolve*

*And giving me the strength to face*

*Both my enemies and my fears.*

*Niña Roja, your power is vast*

*And your force is mighty.*

*Please lend me your potency and your power now.*

*Amen.*



# DEATH WELCOMES EVERYONE

Santa Muerte (Holy Death or Saint Death) is the female personification of death. This powerful and mysterious folk saint provides blessings including safe passage to the afterlife. Santa Muerte is the patron saint of those who live on the fringes of society, as well as those who face violence and death. She is hailed as a potent and powerful guardian and protector. Death is the great equalizer, and Santa Muerte potentially grants miracles to anyone and everyone.

*Santa Muerte* is a complete ritual guide to working with this famous—and infamous!—Mexican folk saint. Go beyond the sensational headlines to discover the truth about why Santa Muerte is so beloved by so many. Author Tracey Rollin presents simple, straightforward methods for working with Holy Death that may be used alone or easily incorporated into your own magical practice.

"Tracey Rollin's very well written book *Santa Muerte: The History, Rituals, and Magic of Our Lady of the Holy Death* avoids a dogmatic approach to Santa Muerte. The author, who hails from New Mexico, where Doña Sebastiana, Lady Death, presaged Santa Muerte, incorporates more research on Santa Muerte than other books aimed at devotees."

—Professor **R. ANDREW CHESNUT**,  
author of *Devoted to Death:*  
*Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*



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