

Chapter **13****Latin America**

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**LATIN AMERICAN RELIGION:
MORE THAN JUST CATHOLICISM**

Catholicism was brought to Latin America during the fifteenth century by the Spanish and Portuguese, and it went on to become the most widespread religion in Latin America. By the 1990s Latin America was responsible for 42 percent of the world's Catholic population. Nevertheless, Catholicism goes far beyond stating one's affinity, obeying church rules, or going to church; it is more of a cultural identity that unifies heterogeneous practices across the region.

Despite their common Catholic identity, Latin Americans also have Amerindian, African, and popular non-Christian religious traditions inherited from Spain. Even today many Catholics incorporate practices and beliefs that are not accepted by the Roman Catholic Church, including devotions to Gauchito Gil¹ in Argentina and Jesús Malverde in Mexico, Brazilian Candomblé and Umbanda religions, the Pachamama and the Ekeko cults in Bolivia, Maria Lionza worship in Venezuela, and the Vegetalists' religious practices in the Amazonian and Andean regions.

Over the past few decades, the religious map of Latin America has been further enriched by the presence of new religions, predominantly Protestant denominations. The novel aspect of such groups is the way in which they expand rapidly or suddenly attain visibility; in addition, many such groups have a strong presence in the region. The growth of Evangelist churches among the lower classes² in countries traditionally known for Catholicism has been

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attributed to many diverse factors: while some claim that Evangelism is a U.S. imperialist conspiracy, others argue that it is the result of increasingly impoverished living conditions among the poorest Latin Americans. Because Pentecostalism shares various cognitive and emotional ties with African and indigenous religions, this may help to explain its popularity among indigenous inhabitants of rural areas and for those with a history in Afro-Brazilian religions.

When researching religious practices in Latin America, we find stories of miracles and different ways of soliciting the saints for help and later giving thanks; different hierarchies of “supernatural” or “sacred” beings to whom such requests are made; reciprocity, which includes promise and sacrifice; pilgrimages; popular celebrations; and a colorful variety of devotional practices. These practices are shared by diverse social sectors, in that religious folk as well as nonbelievers often participate, and these practices are common to both men and women, though in different ways.

TIME LINE

Sixteenth century:	María Lionza is worshiped in Venezuela.
Sixteenth–nineteenth centuries:	The Catholic Church is the only legal religious institution in most Latin American countries.
1830:	The first <i>terreiro</i> of the Candomblé is founded in Brazil.
Mid-nineteenth century:	Deolinda Correa and Gaucho Gil die and become popular saints in Argentina.
1895:	Vatican crowns the Virgin of Guadalupe “Empress and Patron Saint of the Americas.”
Late nineteenth century:	Jesús Malverde dies in Mexico and becomes a popular saint; Niño Fidencio begins to cure in Mexico.
1909:	First Pentecostal church is founded in Valparaiso, Chile.
1911:	The God’s Assembly Church is founded in the north of Brazil; it becomes the largest Protestant church in that country.
1920:	Umbanda religion appears in the southeastern Brazil.
1923:	Francisco Pancho Villa dies.

- 1928:** Padre Toribio Romo is killed by the federal army in Mexico.
- 1938:** Niño Fidencio dies.
- 1955:** CELAM's first General Conference is held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.
- 1960s:** Afro-Brazilian religions are introduced into Argentina.
- Mid-1960s:** Mexicans begin worshiping Saint Death in Hidalgo.
- 1968:** CELAM's second General Conference held at Medellín, Colombia.
- 1969:** Catholic Charismatic Renewal arrives in Brazil.
- 1970s:** Jesús Malverde becomes the saint of drug traffickers.
- 1970:** Catholic Charismatic Renewal arrives in Perú.
- 1971:** Catholic Charismatic Renewal arrives in Bolivia.
- 1972:** Catholic Charismatic Renewal arrives in Colombia and Chile.
- 1973:** Catholic Charismatic Renewal arrives in Venezuela.
- 1973:** First Latin American Catholic Charismatic Conference, in Bogotá, Colombia.
- 1977:** God's Kingdom Universal Church is founded in Rio de Janeiro.
- 1980s:** Pentecostalism is transformed into "Neopentecostalism."
- 1995:** Selena Quintanillo is murdered and becomes an object of devotion among Mexicans and Americans.
- 1996:** Gilda is killed in a car accident and becomes a popular saint in Argentina.

HISTORY

Although there were relatively few Catholic parishes in Latin America between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Catholic Church was the only legal religious institution in the majority of South American countries during the colonial period. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Church was separated from the national government in most of the newly drafted national constitutions. Gradually, some of the church's powers were taken over by the state (especially tasks related to personal records and education). However, toward the end of the nineteenth century and as part of nation building in the region, Catholicism's power began to grow once again. In some countries, in fact, the Catholic Church became one of the main pillars of national identity. This is the reason that the Vatican crowned the Virgin of Guadalupe "the patron saint of the Americas" at the start of the twentieth century. On the one hand, this represented the Church's efforts to make Catholicism "national" and to distance itself from colonialism because the Church wanted to appear as an ally in the institutional reorganization of the new states. On the other hand,

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countries sought a figure that could make sense of its heterogeneous identity, a figure that could represent both native populations, as well as waves of immigrants from different lands, including Africans during the period of the slave trade and Europeans starting at the end of the nineteenth century.

At the beginning of twentieth century, almost all Latin American countries were independent republics that guaranteed religious freedom to their citizens. At that time, the Catholic Church was officially separate from the national states, but it remained an important ally. Thanks to the supposed Catholic identity and culture of the residents, Catholicism was seen as the “official religion” of these former Spanish colonies. By imposing religious homogeneity, the state attempted to unify a geographically and ethnically diverse population.

From the beginning of the century until the mid-1950s, the Catholic Church was concerned with consolidating its position in national politics. To counter secularism, communism, and Protestantism, the Church brought in clergymen from Europe and also invested in schools to educate the children of the middle class and the elite. During this period, however, there were almost no anticlerical and secularization movements. In some countries, such as Chile, the Catholic Church had its own political party.

After World War II, the fight against communism and projects related to regional development created links between Catholic leaders and left-wing intellectuals. Important for Latin American Catholicism was the creation of the Latin American Episcopal Council (*Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano* [CELAM]). Its headquarters was installed at Bogotá, Colombia. After the Second Vatican Council, political concern with social justice and poverty grew among Latin American bishops, young priests, and laity. They were responsible for the main positions taken by CELAM's second general conference in 1968 in Medellín, where the “Theology of Liberation” gained an important pastoral influence. This socially committed position, more open than traditional Catholicism to ecumenism and modernity, was defined as the “option of the poor.” During the 1970s, and following this path, Basic Christian Communities were founded across the region; here, laypeople got involved in religion and participated in social movements.

At the same time, Catholic Charismatic Renewal was brought from the United States to Chile, Colombia, and Perú. Although the first Latin American Catholic Charismatic Conference took place in 1973 in Bogotá, the movement did not become widespread in South America until the 1990s. Charismatic Catholic groups have a special affinity with the media, and they have opened their own radio and TV stations. The Colombian priest Darío Betancur is very well-known; his show *Hablemos con Dios* is aired on *Televisa* and his books on intercession prayer and healing are top sellers. At the turn of

the twenty-first century, many Catholic Charismatic priests and laypersons stood out in the region because of their diverse contributions to regional liberation. Prophecy and healing are two fundamental features of the Catholic Charismatic priests, and leaders are often skilled preachers and singers.

Since the second half of the twentieth century, there has been a marked decline in the number of Catholics in Latin America. Regional estimates for 1999 show that Ecuador (90%), Perú (89%), and Colombia (88%) are the countries with the highest Catholic population, whereas Argentina, Mexico, and Venezuela (70%), and Guatemala (60%) have lower percentages.³ Uruguay is the least Catholic country, with just 52% of the population declaring itself Catholic. In any case, despite the Catholic majority, populations across the continent continue to maintain Amerindian, African, Spiritualist, and folk traditions. In Mexico, Bolivia, and Perú, aboriginal movements and cults based on ancestral beliefs continue to flourish. In Ecuador, there are more than a thousand religious institutions of all sorts and many diverse indigenous religions; this is also the case in Guatemala, where Mayan worship is still practiced by a high percentage of the population.

Popular Pentecostal Christianity

During the first decades of the twentieth century, most Latin American Protestants were European immigrants, and their descendents had no interest in converting the locals. However, there were also various "Protestant mission churches." In 1909 the first Pentecostal church was founded in Valparaiso, Chile, after an Episcopal Methodist church was closed. From that year on, many Pentecostal missionaries arrived, setting up churches across Latin America.

Even though the Pentecostal churches were built during the first half of the twentieth century, they received little attention until the 1970s. The flexibility and simplicity in the structure of the first Pentecostal churches, such as the *Assembléia de Deus* (God's Assembly), allowed them to adapt to different locations. Pentecostalism can be seen as the syncretism of Protestants and ecstatic religious traditions; the emphasis is on experiencing the supernatural.

By the 1990s the growth of Pentecostalism in Latin America had become much more evident. In fact, it has transformed into what some have called "Neopentecostalism," which involves the use of the mass media for the church's own purposes. Media presence and involvement in politics are trademarks of various Pentecostal and Neopentecostal churches across Latin America. Several other Brazilian, Argentine, and Colombian Neopentecostal churches also use the media and send missionaries abroad. Founded by Edir Macedo in

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1977 in Rio de Janeiro, the *God's Kingdom Universal Church* has stood out in Brazil and in Latin America as an exemplary Neopentecostal church. Besides owning radio and TV stations, this church has influenced elections in Brazil by lending its support to candidates favorable to its cause; it has also sent missionaries to other continents.

Afro-Brazilian Religions

Afro-Brazilian religions are urban phenomena that date back more than 150 years. Brought in by African slaves (especially the Yoruba of Nigeria and the Ewe from Benin and Togo), their religion syncretized with Spanish Catholicism, Kardecist spiritism,⁴ and local aboriginal beliefs. The different combinations of these four elements led to regional variations: *Catimbó*, *Tambor de Minas*, *Xangô*, *Candomblé*, *Macumba*, and *Batuques*.

The *orixás* (Afro-Brazilian saints or personal deities) have different Catholic saints as their counterparts and syncretize with them. The correspondence between *orixás* and catholic saints varies by geographical setting. Catholic St. George, for instance, is syncretized with Ogum in Rio de Janeiro and with Oxossi in Bahia. And Iansã, a female warrior *orixás*, is syncretized with Catholic St. Bárbara, St. Lucy, or St. Joanna D'Arc. Virgin Mary appears syncretized in two different *orixás*: Yemanjá (Our Lady of Navigators, Our Lady of Glory) and Oxum (Our Lady of Fátima). Even Jesus Christ is syncretized in Oxalá *orixás*, the humankind Creator.

The first *terreiro* (Afro-Brazilian religious temple) of the Candomblé, which is considered the most African and most traditional of these religions, was founded in the Brazilian city of Bahia in 1830. Another expression of Afro-Brazilian religions, the Umbanda, originated in the southeastern Brazil in the 1920s. Although the 2000 Brazilian census reports that only 0.34 percent of Brazilians claim to practice religions with African roots, most analysts assume that a greater percentage of such believers are actually listed as Catholics. These individuals prefer to identify themselves as Catholics even when they participate in both religions because the followers of Afro-Brazilian religions are often subject to discrimination: hegemonic social representation of this religion considers its followers as "poor, black and ignorant people because of its use of magical practices, which include rituals with animals' blood, baths with special herbs, offerings for *orixás* in public open places, and other such practices.

Mãe de santo (mother of saint) designates the female leader of an Afro-Brazilian religion temple, and *pai de santo* (father of saint) when he is a man, because they are understood to be the parents of the *orixás*. Participation within these religions involves many steps and different degrees of



Members of the afro-Brazilian religious group, Candomble, protest against religious intolerance in front of the Brazilian congress in Brasilia, September 23, 2009. (Photo by Corbis.)

commitment that are manifested in initiatory rituals. Those who go through all these rituals became *filhos de santo* (sons or daughters of saint).

Since 1980 participation in Afro-Brazilian religions has dropped. There has been a 20 percent drop in Umbanda followers according to the last census. At the same time, practitioners of Candomblé are on the rise. This is due, in many cases, to followers migrating from one such religion to another. The Brazilian sociologist Reginaldo Prandi attributes this movement to the social changes in Brazil over the past century. Umbanda reflects the type of society that gave birth to these religions, one characterized by nationalism and the aspiration to rise up the social ladder. Candomblé, in contrast, attracts a greater audience because it shares the values of the contemporary postmodern society: individualism, hedonism, and narcissism. The popularity of Candomblé, then, has been facilitated by the music and the media since the 1960s. The rediscovery of African culture, on the other hand, attracted the middle (and white) classes to Candomblé centers, and these new followers also helped the religion earn its legitimacy.

RELIGION AND DAILY LIFE IN LATIN AMERICA

In Latin America religion is constantly present in everyday practices. Religious practices accompany people in the broad cycle of life and in daily life as well, through rituals, feasts, promises, and miracles. It is commonsensical to examine this kind of religion in terms of its “function” for the poorest segments of the population. When religious practices are viewed as the result of poverty, they serve as a way to cope with educational, material, or spiritual deficiencies in contexts where there are no institutions such as the state or the Catholic Church to take responsibility for their welfare. Religion is often used to solve problems pertaining to other spheres. If there is no public hospital, for instance, then folk healers are visited. Similarly, where free, public, lay, and compulsory education fails in its mission, then beliefs in deceased people who perform miracles, cartomancy, or Afro-Brazilian priests will appear. In this respect, popular saints, pilgrimages, folk healers, and the new religious movements are not merely answers to anguish, privations, and despair. Nor is their use limited to protesting and resisting capitalist domination, the power of the state, or ecclesiastical control. Popular religion is more than an epiphenomenon in that it goes beyond political, economic, or even psychological needs. It reflects another way of inhabiting the world and another logic for understanding it. This cultural logic assumes the immanence and superordination of the sacred in the world as the relationships between heaven, nature, and human beings are articulated in a unique totality. The profane and the sacred are not considered separate, but are instead combined in a cosmic and harmonic whole.

Devotions

Within religion, devotion is the word used to refer to people’s relationship to the saints. It is based on a triangle that involves a request, a miracle, and a promise made in return. The devotee asks the saint for a favor and offers something in exchange (the “request”). When the favor is granted (the “miracle”), the devotee is obliged to fulfill his or her promise to the saint (the “promise”). The devotee looks upon the image as if it were alive and facilitating direct and personalized contact. Such devotion is not limited to a mere exchange of favors, but may be understood from the perspective of a specific cultural logic.

Neither a life crisis nor structural privation can fully explain popular devotion to the saints. A modern-day approach could posit that subjects turn to religion to make sense or deal with loss, mourning, or despair. For Latin American popular sectors, any success or failure immediately enters a sacred dimension of reality, which includes God, the supernatural, the saints, and

mystic elements. This dimension is not the ultimate answer or option when everything else is lost, but rather a variable that is always present in the world in which they live. A problem, illness, and personal or social crisis are reasons to appeal to the saints for help as opposed to variables that lead one to develop devotion. In turn, crises do not involve changes to one's faith or an increase in the religious practices per se. On the contrary, popular devotion remains steady over time and adapts to the new mores of the historical moment.

Although they all fall under a single generic term, there are different degrees of the "miracles" granted by the saints. Gabriel, a Gilda devotee (for more on Gilda, see the sidebar titled "Two Singers Who Became Saints: Selena and Gilda" later in the chapter), explains it clearly:

There's a difference between a miracle and some help that She could give you to solve a problem you have. Maybe you meditate about, hear Her music, think on Her and you find the solution. . . . You ask Her for help and suddenly your path is opened . . . or you find inspiration to solve your problem. Another different thing is that case, the one of that little boy who was cured of meningitis. He asked Her to be cured. And I think this is a miracle, because the doctors said he wouldn't relief. And suddenly, he got better and better and they [the doctors] didn't find a reason why he was recovered. So, there's something that tells you that it is not possible. . . . It's believe it or not!⁴

Evidently, passing a test is not the same as recovering from a major illness. Losing weight cannot be compared to getting a job after a long period of unemployment. Obtaining the clarity one needs to solve a problem is not the same as meeting one's ideal mate. The differences among different types of miracles could be more a question of impact than of quality. Obtaining a favorable ruling in a lawsuit thanks to a good lawyer, winning the lottery when you are in debt, and receiving positive inspiration to solve a problem are also miracles. Some of these miracles are not visible to others because they occur within an intimate and subjective realm. In any case, there is no question as to the value attributed to the saints. No matter how small the miracle, granted requests make saints present in the daily life of their followers.

Miracles are regular, not extraordinary, events. Far from exceptional, the saint—be it a deceased miracle worker, Jesus, Gilda, or the virgin—is present and involved in the lives of his or her followers. The origin of daily problems and the solution to these problems can be attributed to the sacred, and the requests and promises made to the saints fall within the range of everyday options to address such problems. In this regard, the saints are considered to open up possibilities, grant permission, and lend assistance, which is more necessary than "extraordinary" in making good things happen and putting an

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end to bad things. It is the close collaboration between humans and saints that makes miracles possible as part of the “natural” and rational order, as opposed to an oddity or last resort when other theories fail. As Daniel explains, referring to St. Cayetano, Patron of Labor and Bread:

If you go to San Cayetano and you ask him for work, that doesn't mean that tomorrow the job is going to show up looking for you at your house. If you don't go out to look for a job, you'll never find work. . . . It depends on you, too Whether you're looking for work or something else, if you don't push for it, don't bother asking God to help!

God, saints, the deceased, and other extraordinary beings are sacred forces that participate in everyday life in a regular way and form a “natural” part of the world. Yet the presence and action of these forces is possible only when humans are also involved. From this perspective it is possible to understand, for example, the requests and promises made to the saints. Most of these are related to everyday aspects of life that could be resolved outside the scope of religion: “In general, devotees do not ask the saint to change the world, stop death or change the course of a river. Their requests are not related to nature's ‘laws.’ Instead, they are related to the insecurities of individuals or specific groups in a given situation” (Fernandes, 1982: 46–47). In exchange, the devotees do not commit to making a radical change in their lives, such as abandoning their worldly goods; however, they do promise to take actions or offer gifts that fall within their abilities.

Although there are no written rules for how to relate to the saints, the ways in which devotees interact with them are not entirely free or “spontaneous.” The practice of dealing with the saints involves certain rules of etiquette and standards, which can bring undesired consequences when broken. The rules vary depending on the saint, and what is allowed among some saints is prohibited for others. While the devotees to Odetinha, a young girl worshiped at a cemetery in Rio de Janeiro, can take roses from her grave to prepare healing infusions, Gilda's devotees are warned that taking something from the deceased brings bad luck.⁶ If drivers do not stop “to say hello” when they pass by the sanctuary of Gauchito Gil, they know that they may suffer an accident or a breakdown, whereas in the case of Deolinda Correa, there is no such interdiction.

The likes and dislikes of the deceased miracle worker, or the specific circumstances surrounding his or her life or death, are also taken into account when making an offering. In the case of prostitute saints, hair clips and makeup are among the offerings, whereas for DC, who died of thirst, bottles with water are the mainstay. Red objects are left for Gaucho Gil in homage of his spilled blood. Beer and cigarettes are the offerings preferred by Gardel and Pancho Villa, while marijuana cigarettes are left for Jesús Malverde.

MIRACLE WORKERS

Deolinda Correa lived in San Juan, Argentina, in the mid-eighteenth century. Following her husband, who had been recruited for the war, she crossed the desert on foot, carrying her child in her arms. After she got lost in the desert and died of thirst, soldiers found her body in the desert. Her son was alive and feeding from her dead breast. The *Difunta* (Deceased), as she is commonly called, is buried at the spot in Vallecito where her body was found, and a sanctuary was erected there in her memory. However, hundreds of altars have been constructed in homage to her along routes across Argentina and these altars are surrounded by bottles of water.

Francisco Pancho Villa (1887–1923) was the most popular and charismatic figure of the Mexican Revolution. He was also known as a social bandit who stole from the rich to help the poor. Currently, he is worshiped in several states in Mexico and by Mexican immigrants in Texas. Devotees ask for his assistance with regard to health and money, but also in love, as he was known for his luck with the women. His image is often found on domestic altars, next to Jesús Malverde's.

Antonio Gil was believed to have lived in Corrientes, Argentina, during the second half of the nineteenth century. According to some versions, he was a social bandit who was killed by an estate owner who was after him for robbery. In other versions, he was a heroic deserter of one of the internal wars who was killed by a provincial army because he refused to take up arms against his fellow citizens. However, both versions concur that he was brutally murdered in spite of his innocence. He was beheaded, strung up by his feet, and then abandoned without a burial. His first miracle, saving the life of the daughter of one of his murderers, led the assassins to hang a cross at the spot where he was murdered in Mercedes. Nowadays, there are countless altars that pay homage to *Gaucha Gil* in the homes of migrants from Corrientes in the lower-class neighborhoods of Buenos Aires.

Promises

Generally speaking, flowers, candles, cigarettes, and gifts are offered to win the favor of a saint. In some cases, the devotee makes a promise to do something that will be difficult, though never impossible. The importance of the promise lies in the possibility of fulfilling it, thereby maintaining the saint's trust in the devotee.

Of all the promises made, those that involve some type of personal sacrifice are the most common. A larger request or sacrifice inspires greater admiration among other devotees and pride for the devotee who has fulfilled the promise.

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In one instance, Jorge, a 40-year-old unemployed father of 9, promised he would visit the sanctuary of Difunta Correa on his knees if she granted his request. When he reached the sanctuary, his knees were bloody from the rough terrain. This pilgrimage was made to save his son who was dying. When Jorge returned home, his son was sitting up in bed. This type of promise is possible because of the close bond between Jorge and his son and because illnesses ultimately have a sacred explanation. Human beings are not considered autonomous (and thus responsible for their own destinies) here, but as links of a chain that binds them to a world in which sacred forces are constantly at work. Because of the blood ties that join them, Jorge's body is the place where the cosmic order broken by his son's illness is restored. By ripping his own flesh in his offering to Difunta Correa, and thanks to her intervention, his son's body was restored. Regardless of the medical explanations for his son's illness, Jorge understood that there could be something more in the etiology of the illness; something attributable to the sacred realm. And this cause could be addressed only within this sacred realm. This argument will be further developed below in the analysis of healing practices.

Personal sacrifice plays a central role in devotions to saints. Devotional actions can be both propitious (depending on the saint's will) and consecratory (on the part of the person making the request). They vary depending on the gender of the devotee and the seriousness of the issue at hand. When the promises are made by a woman, different personal sacrifices are involved. Graciela, a 45-year-old housekeeper who is married with 2 children and lives in a middle-class neighborhood in Buenos Aires, recounts that when her son was 5 years old, he fell down, hit his head, and suffered a cranial fracture. He was in critical condition, and his doctors predicted that he would suffer terrible neurological consequences. When asking for her son's recovery, Graciela promised the hair of her daughter Cecilia, then an infant, to the Virgin of Itatí. According to her mother's promise, her daughter would not cut her hair until the age of 15 and she would then take it to the virgin. Diego was cured, and Graciela constantly mentions how intelligent he is—the paradigmatic sign of his intellectual capacity being that he is “a genius with computers,” making it clear that the virgin amply responded to her request.

As in the case of Jorge, the miraculous cure of the boy in exchange for the hair of Graciela's daughter reestablishes a cosmic order that falls within the family sphere and is made evident there as well. Through her mother's promise, Cecilia has inherited her mother's devotion to the virgin and at the same time, she *has grown up* as a woman and become a devotee. Devotion is transmitted by family ties that are gender marked. What is more, religious and gender experiences are constitutive of the self in a dissociated way. A girl learns

to become a woman by making a promise. Furthermore, attributes that are considered feminine, such as self-abnegation and patience, are appreciated by the saints. A boy learns that becoming a man involves making heroic sacrifices and risking one's physical integrity. Another lesson is that saints do not forgive devotees who do not keep their promises. In one's personal relationship to the sacred—in each singular practice—masculine and feminine are defined. And it is through gendered performances and contexts that individuals interact with the sacred.

Instead of fulfilling a single promise, Nilda, a mid-40s separated housewife and mother of two girls, “became a *promesera*.” (The term *promesera* comes from the Spanish word for promise, *promesa*, and refers to a promise maker or someone who is constantly exchanging promises and favors with a saint.) This defines her connection to Gilda because she became stricter in terms of her self-discipline; taking her responsibilities more seriously and extending them over time and for life. In the case of a promise, the debt to the saint is paid off once the promise is fulfilled. There is always a possibility of making additional promises, but the devotee may also opt not to do so or to make promises to another saint. Becoming a *promesera* creates a stronger and more lasting bond, as it involves a passage, or change of status based on one's personal devotion to the saint. *Promeseras* reveal their status by wearing special clothes during celebrations for the saint or visits to the sanctuary. Those devoted to Gauchito Gil, for instance, will wear traditional gaucho garb—pants buttoned below the knee, boots, a handkerchief at the neck, and a hat—in which the color red predominates. Gilda's followers choose purple, which is a color identified with the singer. The virgin's *promeseras* wear dresses and shawls similar to those used by the virgin on her statues.

Wearing the same clothes as a saint involves no mimesis or identification. Rather, in dressing like the saint there is an evocation, or acknowledgement and homage, evident in the dedication. A special and sacred status is assigned to such individuals, but the distance between the saint and the devotee is clear.

Because of the special status of promise makers, it is seldom necessary to make an explicit request. Often they need only establish some type of connection with the saint. When Antonia, a 58-year-old school assistant, watched her niece become ill, for instance, she did not make any request or promise. Instead she used her *promesera* shawl to cover the hospital bed where the girl was sleeping. When her niece recovered, she paid homage to the virgin by leaving holy cards with the virgin's image all over the hospital. As we can see in this example, being a *promesera* involves daily involvement, including the presence of the saint on home altars, daily “conversations,” and the knowledge that the

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saint is watching over the *promesera* at all times. The exchange of tokens of appreciation or offerings between the saint and the *promeseras* are, in this case, constant.

Official and Unofficial Sanctuaries

Sanctuaries are pilgrimage destinations. The importance of the sanctuary is not related to its history or aesthetics, so its size is irrelevant, as is whether it is managed by a religious institution or informally built by the saint's followers. Instead, its attraction is based on the people's devotion to the saint that is worshiped there. The quality of a sanctuary is based on the presence of the saint on earth, which gives the place a power of an entirely different nature. It is a place where miracles occur.

There are Catholic sanctuaries throughout Latin America. The most important involve basilicas for the virgin. However, there are also other sanctuaries for many different canonized saints, such as St. Cayetano, St. Expedito, and St. Anthony. The principal image of these sanctuaries is the saint or virgin, and greater power is attributed to them in fulfilling the requests of their followers.

The economy of large Catholic sanctuaries is generally based on religious tourism, either directly or indirectly (see the Chapter 30 in Volume 3, on tourism). During the celebrations of their patron saints, municipalities charge taxes for setting up street stands, and the church receives all sorts of donations. Most of the locals also receive extra income on such occasions. Some set up stands at the fair; young people get jobs as cooks or wait staff at street restaurants. Almost everyone rents a room, a garage, or even the patio of their homes where pilgrims can sleep. The locals charge for the use of bathrooms and showers; they sell food and beverages; they wash and iron the clothing of the pilgrims. One elderly resident in the towns of one sanctuary defined it in the following way: "Here we make our living with the virgin. If the virgin leaves, this town will die."⁷

For the locals, the sanctuary is seen as the guarantee of the success of their activity. The prosperity and happiness of a community are owed to the saint. This involves more than an economic interest, because a merchant's interest does not govern a sanctuary-based economy. The possibility of "making a living with the virgin" must be understood within a logic of exchange whose cosmic balance is maintained by a reciprocity, of the worlds of "up there" and "down here," between devotees and saints. Multiple forms of individual offerings are fundamental to legitimately obtaining celestial favors. Some go on a pilgrimage and travel substantial distances by foot, bike, horseback, or even on their knees.

Others light up the image of the saint on their home altars or leave the doors of their homes open for the prayer groups that accompany the procession of the saint's image across the city. Some go to the church every day, and others make donations on the days of their patron saint. All include the image of the patron saint on their home altars. Failure to reciprocate, or meet one's obligations to the virgin or the saint, breaks the cosmic balance. Maintaining the "sacred economy" helps to prevent new internal conflicts within one's own community, so the participation of both residents and saints alike is essential to the happiness and prosperity of the town.

However, there are some members of the sanctuary community who refuse or forget to reciprocate. Visiting merchants, religious authorities, or politicians may take advantage of local festivals for their own personal benefit or prestige without offering the saint anything in return. In these cases, such individuals may downplay their religious identity so local community members will continue to do business with them. Hugo, a fruit seller, says that although it is difficult for him, he does not admit to being a Baptist because "otherwise, no one buys your stuff. . . . The first thing they say to you when you admit to another religion is, how can you not worship the virgin when you owe her your livelihood?!"⁸

Hugo's complaint shows how the economic prosperity of local community members in sanctuary towns depends, either directly or indirectly, on the image that is worshiped there. It is impossible to deny the presence of the saint and outrageous to refuse to establish a relationship with him or her because of different religious beliefs. An economy based on bartering with the sacred means that all material benefits granted by the saint must be morally or materially reciprocated by all inhabitants.

There are also sanctuaries constructed by the devotees themselves to pay homage to the "little souls" (the souls of the deceased) or to "popular saints"—"popular" because the Church had no involvement in their consecration. The practice of constructing monuments or hanging crosses at spots where a tragic death has occurred is an ancient practice and very common across Latin America (and in the United States as well).

Unlike Catholic sanctuaries, which have cities built up around them and boast a tourist infrastructure to welcome pilgrims, popular sanctuaries can be found on isolated roadsides. With a small cross or a monument to the deceased, they do not have the infrastructure to support lengthy visits by throngs of devotees. Exceptional cases include Difunta Correa and Gaucho Gil in Argentina, María Lionza in Venezuela, and Jesús Malverde in Mexico, which have inspired groups of followers to organize to oversee activities, finances, annual commemorations, and offerings at these sanctuaries. The

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followers also take responsibility for other sources of income, such as the sale of souvenirs and books and charging fees for selling wares within the sanctuary. The funds are then used to improve the infrastructure, fund annual celebrations, and help the poor.

One feature of popular sanctuaries is that they generally do not have one central statue. Instead, there are several icons of the saint to whom the sanctuary is dedicated as well as images of other miraculous figures and piles of offerings that offer multicolored proof of the power of the saint. The sanctuary in honor of the Argentine saint Gilda is one of many examples of this type of sanctuary.

TWO SINGERS WHO BECAME SAINTS: SELENA AND GILDA

Born Selena Quintanilla Pérez in Lake Jackson, Texas, in 1971, *Selena* began performing when she was a child and had a successful career as a singer. She was considered the queen of tejano music (a genre that includes various forms of folk and popular music originating among the Hispanic populations of Central and Southern Texas), won a Grammy, and sold thousands of albums. In March 1995, at the age of 23, Selena was shot and killed by Yolanda Saldivar, the founder of her fan club. A few weeks later, Texas governor George W. Bush declared her birthday, April 16, "Selena Day," in her honor. Today, hundreds of pilgrims travel to Texas and leave offerings in places where Selena lived and performed. Like Elvis in Memphis, her grave is always covered with flowers, candles, and letters from her devotees, who also include her image on their home altars.

Gilda was born Miriam Alejandra Bianchi in 1961 into a middle-class household. She was a kindergarten teacher who married and had two children. During the 1990s she decided to start a career as a singer of "cumbia" music, which was very popular with the working classes. She never became rich or famous, and she died in a car accident on September 7, 1996. At the location of her death, 100 kilometers from Buenos Aires, her devotees erected a sanctuary. In the following years, the presence of Gilda increased. She received extensive media coverage, books were written about her life, and TV programs and documentaries were made about her. Gilda's assistance is sought for a wide range of affairs, but she specializes in questions related to love.

Gilda's sanctuary is constructed on a large, shady piece of land that was purchased and donated by a devotee in appreciation for her son's return to health. *La capilla* (the chapel) is a square building with a slanted roof. Inside,

it presents diverse Gilda iconography as well as the icons of other saints, deceased miracle makers, images of Jesus, and different advocations of the virgin. An elegant picture frame shows a smiling image of Evita. There are smaller sculptures of Gaucho Gil, St. Cayetano, Difunta Correa, and Virgin Mary, and hundreds of holy cards of popular saints. All of the images have been left by visitors to fulfill promises, and they are all welcome at the sanctuary. By being *present* in the sanctuary, the other saints receive the same gestures of devotion as Gilda. Visitors greet them, leave requests written on tiny sheets of paper, light candles to them, and pray to them. Here, to obtain a miracle, the devotees can resort to the aggregate powers, invoking several saints at the same time and even requesting the intercession of one saint into dealings with another. Such mediation, however, does not necessarily coincide with Catholic doctrine. For instance, devotees can ask Gilda “to take” a request to God or Jesus, or to those who are considered mediators by the Church, such as the virgin or another saint.

Hanging from the roof in separate groups are baby clothes, birthday dresses from *quinceañeras* (“Sweet 15” parties), First Communion and wedding dresses, soccer jerseys, and dozens of handkerchiefs. Shelves along the walls hold objects of all sorts: school notebooks, letters, key chains, lighters, toys, and pictures. The offerings are objects delivered to the saint in recognition of a promise made and favor received. Their presence is evidence of the favors granted and of the powers of the saint. Some offerings, following the Spanish tradition, describe the miracle on loose sheets of paper or framed texts, or replicate them by representing the parts of the human body that suffered some type of illness and were cured. Pictures, wedding dresses, and “Sweet 15” party dresses are offered in appreciation for having lived to see the specific moment and celebrate it. Pictures of babies and baby clothes are evidence of a successful birth. Pictures of children in their school uniforms, or school notebooks and exams passed, show that the devotee was successful in his or her studies. A lighter shows that the follower was able to quit smoking thanks to the saint. Keys reveal that the devotee purchased a house or a car.

Leaving pictures in a sanctuary has another purpose as well. Photography is considered a real representation, a sort of prolongation of the individual that involves the presence, in a strong sense, of the person in the picture. By leaving their pictures in the sanctuary, those photographed enter in direct and permanent contact with the saint by placing themselves before the saint so that he or she can watch over them. Images of the happiness of a couple married, or a girl celebrating her fifteenth birthday, or the health of a newborn, or the success of a student who passes, or the pride of a military

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cadet in uniform are implicit requests for the success displayed in the photograph to continue over time.

A SAINT FOR EVERYONE

Devotion to a particular saint takes on a special meaning in the case of migrants, many of whom take the image of their saint or patron virgin with them to their new city or country. The image will reign over their new home when it is placed on the home altar. This process allows migrants to maintain and renew their ties to their place of origin. Often, this devotion to the patron saint continues indefinitely. In addition, it allows the migrants to preserve their connection with others from the same place and with the generations born in the new land, transmitting their devotion to them and connecting the new generations to the homeland. In some cases, the devotees erect sanctuaries in their new residences as a way of bringing the saint closer and consolidating the bonds among the community.

Nora, a 35-year-old mother and wife who works as housekeeper, has been attending the annual celebration held in honor of the virgin since she was a girl. The event marks a time for coming together with family members and celebrating. Although Nora's mother lives in the same building as Nora and her cousin Nelly and visits them regularly, the festival represents a real *reunion* because an interruption of the secular year renews, redefines, and celebrates family ties. These ties reinforce the devotion to the virgin as a family heritage that she also hopes to pass on to her children.

While the saints, in some sense, also become migrants when they travel with those who move to new lands, there are other saints who specialize in protecting migrants. In Mexico, there are at least four saints who receive offerings from those attempting to cross the border into the United States: Padre Jesús de Chinantla, Juan Soldado, Toribio Romo, and Saint Peter the Apostle.

Padre Jesús de Chinantla is an eighteenth-century wooden statue of Jesus. According to the story, a procession that reached Chinantla in Puebla was welcomed by musicians, and the music moved the saint so deeply that when the missionaries decided to continue their journey, the statue would not budge. Similar tales of a statue's "decision" to stay in a certain place have their origins in Spanish Catholicism and are frequent at many Latin American sanctuaries. The devotees explain that Padre Jesús protects the emigrants because he also "decided to migrate" when he stayed in Chinantla. From that time on, the image was considered Chinantla's patron saint and renamed Padre Jesús. Hundreds of migrants return to Chinantla on January 25 for Padre Jesús's celebration and make good on their promises. In every case, the migrants

recount that even those without documents who ask for the saint's protection will have no trouble crossing the border.

Devotions to Juan Soldado increased noticeably toward the end of the twentieth century at his sanctuary in Tijuana, on the border with California. According to his story, Juan Soldado was accused of a crime he did not commit and then executed by a firing squad. His unjust death made him an object of popular devotion among the locals, and he is currently worshiped by migrants and their children, who return year after year to make requests and offer thanks to the saint. Another saint whose protection is sought by those who dare to cross the U.S. border illegally is Padre Toribio Romo, who was killed by the federal army in 1928 during the Cristero War. His appreciative devotees have constructed a sanctuary to him in Tulsa, Oklahoma.[here]

As for canonized saints who help undocumented Mexicans to cross the border, there is Saint Peter the Apostle from San Pedro Zipitajo in Michoacán. To obtain his help, emigrants promise to return the next year to hang a \$20 bill on his garments. This saint has proven so successful that his temple, dating back to 1523, was fully renovated in 2007 with the contributions of those who now live in the United States.

These popular and official saints do not necessarily reflect the ideal model of Catholic virtue. On the contrary, they may get offended or even take revenge against their followers when they feel they have not received the respect owed to them. If devotees do not follow the rules of etiquette, or do not keep a promise, the saints may become angry. Since saints do not demand significant sacrifices, their devotees must make good on their promises when requests are granted. Saints do not forgive those who do not keep a promise. Saints who give generously can be cruel when it comes to taking away what has been given, but devotees do not consider this behavior to be "bad." On the contrary, it is a sign of fairness. Not keeping one's word is paid for with blood, sweat, or tears.

To win a saint's favor, rituals may involve flowers, candles, or other gift offerings, including occasional animal sacrifices. When saints take their time to fulfill requests, followers attribute the delay to various reasons: because they didn't make "the best" offering, or the devotee "didn't deserve it," or "the time wasn't right." In some cases, saints do not respond to the devotee's request in the preferred timeframe. On such occasions a devotee may try to pressure the saint by tying up its statue, threatening it, taking something away, covering it up, or hanging it upside down until the request is fulfilled. This practice is not recommended for certain saints because devotees run the risk of falling out of favor with the saint. As further signs of their power, saints may punish devotees who question them, do not respect their interdictions, or do not make good on their promises.

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Some saints are considered stricter in terms of ensuring the devotees make good on their promises or respect the interdictions. Santa Rita (who “can take away as easily as she can give”), the Virgin of Luján, Gaucho Gil, Santa Muerte, and Jesús Malverde can take back what they have given—even something as valuable as the life of a child—if they are transgressed. The saint’s followers do not condemn such actions by the saint, but see it is a just arrangement of mutual commitment. Thus, what is seen as fair or in their best interests does not necessarily reflect the dominant law or Catholic morality.

On the other hand, not all requests to the saints correspond to predominant morals. Nor is the type of request always within the realm of the legally acceptable or the morally “good.” There are saints, for instance, who protect thieves and those that help Latin Americans to cross the U.S. border illegally. There are *orishas* who look out for traffickers. There is even a virgin for paid assassins. One of the most famous saints who protects bandits is Jesús Malverde, who is renowned from Cali, Colombia, to Los Angeles, California, and across Mexico. According to legend, Jesús Malverde was a social bandit who lived on the Sinaloa Sierra during the late nineteenth century; he would hold up wagons and then distribute the takings among the poor. In a confrontation with a bounty hunter (or a policeman, in certain versions), he was shot in the leg but escaped. Knowing he was badly injured, he asked one of his fellow bandits to hand him over to the governor, take the reward money, and use the money to help the poor. He was condemned to death by hanging, and the governor ordered that his body be left unburied. Little by little, however, people began to pile up stones in a gesture that, disguised as aggression, was in fact meant to protect his body. The pile of stones soon became a site for worshipers, and later a chapel was built in honor of the bandit. The day of his death is celebrated every May 3. Starting in the 1970s, he became the patron saint of drug traffickers, after one trafficker claimed that Malverde had saved his life. The donations to the sanctuary by drug traffickers are generous, allowing those who manage the sanctuary to donate significant amounts to the poor.

As expressed by the French writer Georges Bataille, the Catholic Church refers to the sacred as the infinitely good and as God, while negative forces, the impure, the bad, and the demonical are attributed to the absence of God. Here, the saints perform “good” not only in the sense of the dominant morality as they are also called upon by those seeking “justice” and for individual happiness, and this may involve direct or indirect damage to others.

Marian Devotions

The significance of Marian devotions in Latin America is acknowledged by the clergy, politicians, and social scientists alike. Marian devotions are

considered a basis for national unity, in which ethnic or class differences are minimized. The devotion to Mary eradicates differences and brings people together. For the Church, there is only one Virgin Mary, and all of her titles have the same value and are interchangeable. "There is but one Virgin Mary; only her dress changes," say priests from different sanctuaries time and again. However, in spite of the fact that the figure is always the same, in each place the Virgin acquires a different appearance and character.

The Virgin can be white, black, Asian, mestiza, indigenous, blonde, or brunette. There are titles that are considered more propitious for certain requests. Our Lady of Good Childbirth helps future mothers or women hoping to get pregnant. Mary Untier of Knots resolves difficult problems, and Lourdes is known for curing illness. Some titles are considered more "serious" or "penitential," such as the Virgin of Luján, and others, such as the Virgin of Chiquinquirá and the Virgin of Caá Cupé, enjoy music and dance. A virgin's features can change. Virgins can represent diverse political interests, and their ethnicities can even transform during conflict. Some incarnations have met during wars while defending opposing armies on the battlefield, as between the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Virgin de Remedios during Mexico's War for Independence.

Unlike many patron saint festivities, which include dancing and fairs and may last for at least two days, the Virgin of Luján does not have a celebration. Instead, there are several pilgrimages to her sanctuary during the year. The most important is held in March, when devotees travel 68 kilometers from Buenos Aires to her sanctuary, where they attend mass and take communion before returning home. The devotees say that the Virgin of Luján does not have a celebration because she is serious, strict, and jealous. Any action that the virgin disapproves of can result in immediate punishment. During pilgrimages, nothing should distract those who make the journey. Followers recommend not going with one's significant other—to avoid arguments along the way. Although many of those who are on the pilgrimage bring music along for the walk, they should take care not to appear to be having too much fun, or the virgin could see to it that the player is lost or stolen.

Unlike the Virgin of Luján, the patron saint of the city of Maracaibo, Venezuela, the Virgen del Rosario de Chiquinquirá, enjoys festivities. The celebrations held in her honor on November 18 bring together crowds who participate in the religious rites as well as the fun. The virgin's celebrations here involve mass, processions, and prayer, and also bull races, dancing, baseball games, parades, and even a beauty contest that is aired on national television.

In Colombia, one of the most worshiped incarnations is María Auxiliadora. Her sanctuary in Sabaneta, near Medellín, is a pilgrimage site for the *sicarios* (paid assassins), who visit her every Tuesday or before going out on a job. Like

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other devotees, the *sicarios* ask the virgin for protection and success in their tasks. Since these tasks involve murder, it would seem paradoxical to ask the virgin for assistance. For the *sicarios*, however, María Auxiliadora is like a mother, their “old lady,” the one who cares for them, understands them, and forgives them even though she knows what they have done.

DEATH AS AN OBJECT OF WORSHIP

In Latin America, the worship of death is a blend of Catholic and Pre-Columbian rites. The Mayas and Aztecs worshiped death and the gods of death in various ways. The depictions of death, including skeletons and rows of human skulls left on display, were used by different religious groups. Meanwhile, martyr worship involving a dramatic death where suffering makes the deceased sacred, as early as Late Antiquity, gave the dead the power to work miracles. Intense or unjust suffering, or a tragic death, is a purifying rite of passage that can grant the deceased miraculous powers and make him or her into a saint.

Saints are commemorated on the day of their death, and not their birth, since it marks the passage from “this world” to “the other.” Among the lower classes of Latin America, there is a common belief that all of the dead, whether or not they are sanctified, can act in the world of the living. For this reason, favors are frequently asked of departed relatives, and miracles are requested from popular saints. In spite of having abandoned the earth, the saints and the deceased are both in heaven *and* present on earth, especially at their grave or the spot when they died. On the other hand, heaven is not “another world,” but merely a different dimension of this world.

On November 2 the Day of the Dead is celebrated across Latin America, though the Mexican celebration of this holiday is doubtless the most colorful and well-known. Starting at dawn, relatives visit the graves of dead family members and decorate the tombs with flowers. In some cases, they mount sophisticated altars on the gravestone to help the dead in the afterlife. The cemeteries are brightened by lights, voices, and colors in a grand celebration, during which time the border that separates the living from the dead is temporarily blurred. This strengthens the ties between those who have departed and those who remain in this world. Visitors stay at the graves and picnic there. They touch the gravestones and kiss them to show their affection for the deceased and also to “stay in touch,” or in contact.

The deceased’s body is more than mere “remains,” because the individual is present even after death, with the same likes and dislikes, with the same sense of humor, and with the same quirks as during life. The dead family member’s

character remains intact and is still capable of action. In fact, those who celebrate the Day of the Dead believe that on November 2 the dead return to their homes to visit. Households are prepared in different ways to welcome visitors. Mirrors are covered up, oil lamps and candles are lit, and a special altar is mounted in the house and adorned with flowers, religious images, pictures, and some of the deceased's favorite objects. The dead relative's favorite food and beverages are prepared, and cigarettes and candies (especially skeletons and bone candies made of sugar and chocolate) are left out. Finally, the sweet *pan de muerto* (dead man's bread) is prepared on this special day. In this celebration, death is not considered an end to life. Instead, it is merely a transition to another phase. The dead are no longer in the physical world, but they nevertheless remain present.

Saint Death: La Santa Muerte and San La Muerte

The cult of the female Saint Death in Mexico (*La Santa Muerte*), and a male version of the same saint in South America (*San La Muerte*), has become more widespread and visible over the past few decades. It is difficult to trace the origins of these saints, and some researchers believe that their roots are found in pre-Hispanic cultures and that traditional Catholic features were incorporated later. However, little can be said of the history of Saint Death. The image is anthropomorphized by followers, though this is obviously not someone who lived in this world before becoming a saint.

In Mexico, *La Santa Muerte* is portrayed as a girl or bride. The South American version of the saint is a masculine figure who is often referred to as the "little saint" (*santito*), either out of the fear of pronouncing his full name or as a pet name. He is worshiped in Paraguay, northeastern Argentina, and southern Brazil. Starting in Argentina in the 1960s, migrants brought *San La Muerte* with them to major urban centers. Worship of this figure is especially common in the poor neighborhoods of Greater Buenos Aires.

In Mexico, people began worshiping Saint Death in Hidalgo in the mid-1960s. The celebration of *La Santa Muerte* is held on August 15 on the Day of the Dead, as in South America. In spite of the fact that the church expressly prohibits worshiping *La Santa Muerte*, the rituals around the figure of death take on aspects of Catholicism. For example, the statues of *La Santa Muerte* are dressed with special garments on the day before the celebration, which is a practice also common for celebrations of the Virgin Mary. Other Catholic elements include reciting a rosary on the saint's day and every Monday (All Souls' Day); seeking a blessing for the statues, medallions, and tattoos with the image of the saint; and prayer, resignation, and pilgrimages to the sanctuary. These are done just as if the object of worship were a canonized saint, Jesus, or the virgin.

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Like other saints, *La Santa Muerte* receives requests related to love, family, health, money, and work. As she is a powerful saint—and one whose morals are in some regard “neutral,” she is also sought by those seeking justice, power, vengeance, or death. Her staunchest followers claim that they are safe from harm, curses, accidents, and even violent murder by their enemies. These followers carry the saint’s image with them wherever they go in the form of an amulet or medallion, and it has also become increasingly common to tattoo *La Santa Muerte*’s image.

The home altars mounted for *La Santa Muerte* may have one image or several. These are made of diverse materials, and their size may vary. *La Santa Muerte* may be flanked by Pancho Villa, Jesús Malverde, flowers, candles, cigarettes, alcoholic beverages, and other gifts to seek her favor. As payback for a promise fulfilled, a statue of *La Santa Muerte* made of metal and resin was constructed in the city of Tultitlan, just a few kilometers from Mexico City. The lot where the statue is located was donated by a follower who had recovered from cancer. According to the media, the funds used to construct the monument were donated by narcotics traffickers. This is not the first time the media have established ties between the worship of *La Santa Muerte* and the world of crime. Members of the Mara Salvatrucha, a gang from El Salvador that has spread throughout Central America and even into the United States, are devoted to *La Santa Muerte*.

The association with the world of crime is common to both the South American version and the Mexican Saint Death. However, criminals are not the only ones who worship the saint. Anyone who runs risks, including police, prostitutes, or bus and taxi drivers, can seek his or her protection. Followers claim that *San La Muerte* can protect them from a violent death such as a bullet or knife wound. For this reason, some insert a tiny image of the saint carved in bone beneath their skin, generally, on an arm or leg. Ideally, the bone should come from a deceased child who was christened before death. It is said that the most powerful representations of this saint are made by prisoners. More recently, tattooing an image of the saint has also become popular. To enhance the protection, these amulets can be blessed by a Catholic priest. In spite of the Church’s repudiation of this practice, devotees figure out clever ways to get a priest’s blessing. They may hide the figure of *San La Muerte* beneath another more acceptable figure, or take it to mass and secretly bring it out when the congregation receives the father’s blessing.

The celebration of *San La Muerte* is held August 15–20 each year. That day, followers thank the saint for fulfilling their requests and make good on their promises. Though the celebration and rituals may vary at different

sanctuaries, the festivities of *San La Muerte* always involve prayer, rosary beads, processions, and a party with plenty of food, drink, and dancing.

HEALING

In the living room of Marta's house there is a coffee table covered with white linen. The table has images of the Virgin of San Nicolás and Mary Untier of Knots. They are surrounded by holy cards displaying Saint Expeditus, Saint Cayetano, and Gaucho Gil. There is also a picture of the Argentine singer and folk saint Gilda and a phosphorescent rosary. Candles burn down most of the way, and a bottle of holy water and plastic flowers are all on the altar. Marta, a middle-class, 50-year-old nurse who lives in a small town in Argentina, has put up a more private altar in her bedroom, including pictures of the people who are "in her prayers," flowers, candles, and small folded pieces of paper with her "intentions" or requests for the people for whom she prays.

The presence of images of the saints, the virgin, or deceased miracle workers is strong in households. This way the saints are always available to family members. People can pray to the saint or even talk with them as if the saint were yet another family member. The way in which these images are incorporated into the domestic sphere is similar throughout Latin America, especially in the homes of healers, prayers, and mediums like Marta.

Healing practices are handed down from generation to generation. They are gender-specific and have specific dates for initiation, such as Good Friday, Christmas, or the Day of the Immaculate Conception (December 8). However, healing involves more than simply learning the rituals, because a healer must be born with the gift. The call of a true healer can be identified in body language such as "a compelling look in his [or her] eyes." Since their gift allows them to counter forces that can be used for "good" or "bad" (depending on the will of the person wielding the forces), healers are highly respected, and sometimes feared, within their community. The ailments that healers can cure include toothache, migraine headaches, upset stomach, fear, and *mal de ojo* (the evil eye). In addition, some healers—like the ritual fathers and mothers of Afro-Brazilian religions—can free those possessed by entities; there are also exorcisms to rid people from spiritual possession, as in the case of *Niño Fidencio* in Mexico and *María Lionza–Simón Bolívar* in Venezuela.

At the end of the nineteenth century, *Niño Fidencio* began to cure people using various techniques such as brewing herbal infusions, concocting pastes used to heal wounds, swinging the patient on a hammock, covering the patient in mud and leaving him or her in a puddle, or throwing fruits, eggs, or other large objects at the patient (after being struck by the object, the patient was cured). *Niño*

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Fidencio also helped women give birth, removed teeth, and performed surgery with a piece of glass. His fame soon extended beyond the borders of the small town of Espinazo, where he lived, and he was sought after by the rich and powerful. He died in 1938, but not before sharing his gifts by “possessing” hundred of mediums known as “little boxes” (*cajitas*), most of whom were women. Through the *cajitas*, *Niño Fidencio* has continued to cure the sick ever since. Espinazo has become a pilgrim’s destination for thousands of people from across Mexico. The pilgrims generally arrive in the month of October, when the birth and death of *Niño Fidencio* is celebrated. As in all popular religious celebrations, the signs of devotion, prayers, and healing rituals performed by the *cajitas* are mixed with music, dancing, food, and general festivities.

In Venezuelan neighborhoods it is possible to find healers who claim to have inherited the spirit of María Lionza. They are also in contact with the spirit of Simón Bolívar, who was known for curing a wide range of ailments. The origins of María Lionza worship date back to the fifteenth century but grew even stronger in the mid-twentieth century, when Venezuelan president Marcos Pérez Jiménez erected a statue to the saint on the side of a major highway. The followers make the pilgrimage to Sorte Mountain to make their requests during Holy Week and on October 12, the date marking the arrival of the Spaniards to the Americas. Devotees construct small altars there, where her image of is placed next to that of the Indian chief Guaicaipuro (who fought against the Spaniards) and Negro Felipe (the only black official of the Venezuelan army). Offerings include flowers, candles, rum, cigarettes, and tobacco leaves. The presence of the three saints is replicated at home altars across Venezuela, which also include Catholic saints and statuettes of Simón Bolívar, who is asked to perform miracles. Some authors claim that the combination of these characters represents racial harmony in Venezuela, making them a symbol of national integration and patriotism.

As a practice, healing has its roots in rural life and indigenous knowledge. The treatment of certain ailments involves specific techniques and prayers, and it may include the laying on of hands; rituals involving candles, water, or plants that are eaten (generally as an infusion or as a poultice) or kept near the body (placing rue leaves under a child’s pillow to keep nightmares away); and prayers that may or may not be of Christian origin.

HEALING BELIEFS

Evil eye produces a wide range of symptoms (headache, fever, nausea, diarrhea) and is the result of staring at someone with desire, envy, or hatred, or while wishing them harm. Wearing a red ribbon around the wrist, or

carrying holy cards and rue leaves, may serve to ward off the evil eye. Once struck by the evil eye, however, one must be treated. The cure may combine prayer with techniques involving water, candles, infusions, smoke, or one's own dirty clothing (or a parent's garment in the case of a child) to provide relief.

Upset stomach (*empacho*) involves digestive trouble, generally caused by overeating. It can be cured in two ways: by massaging the lower back or stomach of the person who is ill, or by "measuring the stomach" using a belt, measuring tape, or necktie, which allows the healer to reduce the problem during prayer by marking distances on the patient's stomach using a measuring tape. Purges and herbal infusions are two other possible treatments.

Shingles, or herpes zoster, is a rash that generally appears in a line along the patient's torso. In Spanish, it is referred to as *culebrilla*, or little snake, and it is believed that when the snake's head meets up with its tail, thus surrounding the patient's body like a belt, it can be fatal. Treatments include combining prayer with herbal poultices, applications in Chinese ink (or writing the words *Jesus*, *Maria*, and *Joseph* on the patient's body in ink), and rubbing a toad on the rash.

Fear (*susto*), which can be caused by nightmares, accidents, seeing ghosts, or losing a loved one, causes one's "soul to be lost," leaving a patient very weak. Symptoms include insomnia, lack of appetite, vomiting, and nausea. Treatments include prayers combined with herbal baths, holy water, smoke, and rubbing the body with ointments. In all cases, healers treat illnesses that cannot be cured by a doctor or psychologist, which are ailments that attack the body-mind-spirit as a single entity. Symptoms and treatments are not limited to mere physiology or psychology. This type of illness involves a suffering of a moral or spiritual nature that affects the body. The origin of the suffering can be attributed to gluttony, excessive desire, or sadness, so that the cure involves more than merely treating the symptom. For this reason, all healing practices involve prayer as well as other sacred elements (holy water, crosses, or holy cards), and they also require the healer's spiritual fortitude to beat the illness. Therefore, efficiently treating such ailments involves striking a balance between the body and a world in which nonhuman forces, energies, and powers are constantly at work. The body, mind, and spirit are indissoluble and closely connected to the sacred, thereby transcending any definition of the self that is restricted to the limits of body or consciousness.

DAILY RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH: CONFLICTS AND CHANGES

Over the past five centuries, the historic presence of the Catholic Church in Latin America has become a cultural paradigm of the region. In spite of the drop in their numbers over the past few years, Catholics are still the majority on the continent. In this regard, a distinction between “belief” and “practice” lies beyond the people’s concern. The gap between dogma and behavior represents a problem only for those who write the rules (i.e., the Church). In any case, as we have seen, Catholic dogma is ubiquitous in everyday practices.

In spite of the ubiquity of Catholic dogma, many of the daily religious practices of Latin Americans do not directly reflect Catholic doctrine, but mix Catholicism with other traditions or denominations. In popular Latin American experience, religious practices are hierarchically sacred according to specific powers so that different denominations can be incorporated and combined (while respecting the hierarchy and specific mandates) without followers considering this multiple affiliation, ecumenism, or constant conversion. Sacred forces predate all religion and have real power in the world. Catholics are merely “misbehaving” if they visit other churches and suffer no inner conflict, or ask a saint who is forbidden by the Church for favors, or visit a folk healer, or consult astrology, or believe in special energies or the evil eye.

Traditionally, the Church has dealt with different or opposing religious practices in two ways: it either prohibits them or appropriates them. When the Church opts to appropriate a different practice, it adapts them to Catholic doctrine, in effect making them Catholic.

In colonial times, evangelization was based on “cleaning the slate” of indigenous cultures, imposing what is sacred for Catholicism onto what was sacred for the native population. At that time, the clergy believed that the aboriginals needed to be enlightened, so their “diabolical” practices were prohibited. Their statues to the gods were destroyed and their temples replaced by Catholic churches. More recently, as the result of changes to the Church after the Second Vatican Council, practices of inculturation have increased. The post-council inculturation was based on the idea of acknowledging and negotiating with the other, though it does not involve accepting the other as a cultural equal:

Unlike the anthropological term *acculturation*, which refers to changes that results when two or more different groups come into significant contact productive of changes in all, inculturation refers to encounters whose outcome is a convergence that does not replace either of the cultures from which arose.

Both parties to the inculturative exchange undergo internal transformation, but neither loses its autonomous identity. . . . [I]nculturation occurs when a dominant culture attempts to make itself accessible to a subdominant one without losing its own particular character.⁹

Any practices that are foreign to the Catholic canon are considered “superstition” or “folkloric remains” and are viewed as deviations that can provoke unnecessary obligations and unfounded fear among believers. Thus, the Catholic Church tries to “channel” and “purify” the local culture to eliminate what it considers a denaturalized religion.

Sanctuaries clearly reveal the tension inherent to inculturation. The Church’s goal of becoming universal can be achieved only by making two major concessions: first, by allowing local churches more room to express their individuality, and second, by transforming a strictly theological message into a living ethics with an international scope. As we have seen, most of the manifestations of popular religion have some sign of institutional religious presence. The Catholic Church has incorporated different kinds of popular practices and symbols, in both the decision to develop policies of inculturation and in the everyday work of some priests. Thus, these relationships are more complex than the dichotomy between dominance and resistance, and they occur within an interstitial sphere of negotiation and conflict where concessions are fundamental for success.

NOTES

1. *Gauchos* are South American cowboys.
2. In Spanish, as in French, the term “popular sectors” refers not necessarily to the working class as such, but to the portion of the population with the least participation in hegemonic categories of power, income, and prestige.
3. Statistics are taken from Aurelio Alonso, ed., *América Latina y el Caribe. Territorios religiosos y desafíos para el diálogo* (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales, 2008), pp. 15–40: “Exclusión y diálogo en la confrontación de hegemonías. Notas sobre la relocalización de influencias en el campo religioso latinoamericano.”
4. Allan Kardec Spiritualism combines the belief in the soul’s immortality and the possibility to establish a direct communication with spirits of the deceased with Social Evolucionism, August Comte’s positivism, Hindu conceptions of reincarnation and karma, and Christian charity. Kardecism practitioners in Brazil have been traditionally from the urban settings and have had medium and high educational levels. Although Kardecism was created in France, Brazil is the country with the largest number of practitioners.
5. Author’s fieldwork.

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6. Author's fieldwork.
7. Author's fieldwork.
8. Author's fieldwork.
9. Michael Angronsino, "The Culture Concept and the Mission of the Roman Catholic Church," *American Anthropologist* 96.4 (1994), p. 825.

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