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## **A Case Study of Folk Religion and Migración: La Santa Muerte and Jesus Malverde**

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A Case Study of Folk Religion and Migración: La Santa Muerte and Jesus

Malverde

Global Studies Capstone Project Report

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May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020

California State University Monterey Bay

## Introduction

Religion has helped many immigrants establish themselves in their new surroundings in the United States (U.S.) and on their journey north from Mexico across the US-Mexican border (Vásquez and Knott 2014). They look to their God and then to their Mexican Folk Saints, such as La Santa Muerte and Jesus Malverde, for protection and strength. This case study focuses on how religion— in particular Folk Saints such as La Santa Muerte and Jesus Malverde— can give solace and hope to Mexican migrants, mostly Catholics, when they cross the border into the U.S, and also after they settle in the U.S. Knowing that the chances of not only surviving in the borderlands, but also being able to assimilate without fear of deportation, are slim; many migrants look to their faith for motivation, protection and *esperanza* (hope). They look to what is sacred to them: their religious icons, their saints (Groody and Campese, 2008), both official saints of the Catholic Church as well as unofficial Folk Saints like La Santa Muerte (the saint of death) and Jesus Malverde (a legendary figure).

This report challenges the prevailing assumptions about two of these popular Folk Saints of the borderlands of the U.S-Mexico border: La Santa Muerte and Jesus Malverde. Since the turn of the century, La Santa Muerte has seen a surge of followers. These followers range from the middle to lower classes, and many are migrants. While a type of religious community has developed around these unofficial saints, non-believers—those that do not believe in these borderland saints— often look down on them and they often associate these followers with the cross border drug trade, prostitutions, and other illegal activities. This goes for Jesus Malverde as well. For the poor, he is seen as a Mexican Robin Hood, who robbed the rich to give to the poor, but Malverde has also been associated with being a narco saint, and the drug cartels of Sinaloa, Mexico.

## Literature Review

Researchers such as Manuel A. Vasquez and Kim Knott (2014), who study how migration has influenced faith, as well as the community practices of Mexican migrant Catholics, have highlighted the significance of faith and religion in coping with the stressful and dangerous challenges that are associated with migration. According to Vasquez and Knott (2014), religion is a critical factor in the lives of diasporic communities and cultural politics. Cultural politics refers to the way that culture is a big factor in shaping society and their political opinion. They argue that though religion is a key factor its role in migration is not adequately explored.

Martha Frederiks (2016) offers three different types of theory with regards to the religious aspects of migration. Aside from playing an important role in an immigrant's journey, religion also plays an important role in the assimilation of immigrants to their new home. One body of theory, according to Frederiks, addresses how migration impacts the personal and communal faith of the immigrants. The second body of theory focuses on the role and the significance of religious communities for migrants and lastly, the third category of theories is concerned with the migrants' transnational networks. These three types of theories are a part of an overarching global body of theory that focuses on how migration affects the personal and communal faith of migrants.

This study is on both religion and migration, but taking a step back from religion, one can see just how big migration can be. Jeffrey Williamson (2006) describes how world migration has been an occurrence for centuries, for the reason being that people want to improve their lives. He goes on to describe two major waves of migration, one before 1913 and the other since the 1950s, and how the first wave of mass migration raised the living standards in the poor sending countries, compared to the second wave. The reason as to why the second wave did not give the

same results as the first wave in terms of living conditions is because there is no longer “open borders” and the poor countries would have to have rapid productivity growth. In the case of Mexico, its intense poverty and economic conditions have compelled many poor workers to seek work “*el otro lado*” on the other side of the border (Tunali 2005). According to Phillip Connor and Catherine Tucker (2011), involving nearly 215 million people, international migration is a global phenomenon, as of 2010. They mention how there is a data gap between religion and immigrant integration, thus resulting in religious diasporas and how immigrant religion is forming the religious composition of the countries the travel to.

As Peggy Levitt (2004) has observed, many Americans expect immigrants to completely cut their ties with their home countries and cultures and assimilate to the “culture” of the United States. But most immigrants do not cut their ties with their original culture, in fact, they continue to practice their customs while assimilating to the dominant socio-cultural norms in the U.S. Since the U.S does not have an official religion, immigrants are able to still practice their original religion. This makes the process of assimilation easier, and their devotion to Folk Saints provides them with both an important connection to their original culture as well as a sense of spiritual protection and hope for their future. William Calvo-Quiros (2014) supports Levitt’s research with his own findings on how Catholic folk border saints are cultural artifacts from their original culture that embody the immigrant’s original religious beliefs and struggles. Calvo-Quiros’ argues that due to the large influx of Catholic Latinx immigrants, they no longer are the ones who need to assimilate to U.S. culture. Now, it may possibly be the other way around.

Catholicism in the Americas has been shaped by the assimilation of syncretic and indigenous beliefs (William Calvo-Quiros, 2014). For example, the huge Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe on Tepeyac Hill Mexico City, was built where the Virgin Mary supposedly appeared

and asked for a church of her own where the indigenous people of Mexico could worship her. Although the Virgin of Guadalupe is an official Folk Saint in Mexico, recognized by the Catholic Church, in many of the border cities and towns along the U.S. – Mexico border there are shrines for unofficial Folk Saints like La Santa Muerte and Jesus Malverde. These shrines help Mexican immigrants reaffirm their decision to cross the border. They pray to the saints at these shrines for a safe journey crossing the border and to live peacefully in the U.S. (Vasquez and Marquardt, 2003).

Personal spirituality is extremely important for immigrants, these border saints are not canonized or official saints, yet they both have a large following due to their supposed miraculous powers (Roush 2014). To follow these saints at first may seem daunting, as they are not official saints of the Catholic religion, but that does not stop their followers from being devoted to them. It is no secret that crossing the border without proper documentation is illegal, so how can an immigrant pray to the Virgin Mary for safe passage, if they are committing a crime. While this may not bother some Mexican immigrants, it does not appease others. La Santa Muerte is not an official saint, but that does not stop Mexican immigrants from following her, as she is a non-judgmental saint who gives Mexican migrants hope during their trek across the border. Tijen Tunali (2015) mentions how undocumented immigrants are not only easy pray for dishonest policemen, immoral human smugglers, thieves, sadistic U.S. Border Patrol officers, and rapist but they are also vulnerable and abused by shady lawyers, oppressive employers and shady lawyers once they have crossed the border into the U.S. That is not to mention the constant racism the immigrants would face in their everyday lives, while trying to live the American dream. With a bleak looking future in the United States, immigrants rely on their faith and spirituality to help them succeed in their goals.

Symbols that hold religious meaning are often looked to for support when migrants are found in difficult times (Hernandez and Campos-Delgado, 2015). These two borderland saints are drawn upon to demonstrate the spiritual resources that religion can provide, as well as to prepare Mexican migrants for the hardship and uncertainty that is the migration journey. The migration journey is difficult, but Mexican migrants continue with it because they have their religion and saints to give them strength, hope and to fortify them both spiritually and psychologically (Groody and Campese, 2008). *Ex-voto* is an example of symbols that hold religious meaning. They are physical objects that show a connection between the divine and the people. It is a Latin term that means “from a vow,” which implies that *ex-votos* are gifts for payment of the divine favors that these folk saints, and other religious figures grant (Tunali 2015). Figures 1, 2, 4 and 8 show different *ex-votos* that have been given to Jesus Malverde and La Santa Muerte. It is believe that by placing these objects at a shrine of the intended saint, their prayers will be answered, and the *ex-voto* will become the proof of said miracle. “They are objective testimonies to the reality of a specific time and place, as well as subjective religious connotations of the person who commissions the *ex-voto*” (Tunali, 2015, 246).

Known as *La Hermana de Luz* (Sister of the Light), La Santa Muerte is an eclectic figure known throughout not only in Latin America, but has also been gaining popularity throughout the globe. At the turn of the twenty first century, the image of La Santa Muerte changed from just being known as the saint of the prostitutes and drug dealers, to that of the lower economic class, an immigrants who leave their home communities. *Borderlands Saints: Secularity Sanctity in Chicano/a and Mexican Culture* by Desiree Martin, explains how La Santa Muerte’s popularity is possibly attributed to Mexico’s economic crisis of 1994—also known as the *efecto tequila* (tequila effect). During this crisis, the Mexican peso dropped sharply, adding to the

already weak economy, and forcing many to migrate to the United States. Due to her versatile non-judgmental nature, La Santa Muerte has this sort of charismatic aura that keeps drawing different people. La Santa Muerte is depicted as a female skeleton with a crown and scythe, not to be confused with San La Muerte, a folk saint that is venerated in Paraguay, Argentina and Southern Brazil. San La Muerte (Saint Death) is depicted as a male skeleton dressed in a hooded robe holding a scythe. Upon further observation, it seems as though both Folk Saints have similar rituals and powers, they are two separate entities.

So who is Jesus Malverde exactly? He is a folk saint of the border, yes but how did he gain such title? Jesus Malverde— originally known as Jesus Juarez Mazo (1870-1909)—came to be popular with migrants who were migrating from Sinaloa to Baja California. It is said that Malverde's parents died of hunger or a curable illness and that was the catalyst for Malverde to turn to the life of crime (Price 2005), as both causes mostly likely stemmed from the lack of money. As an adult, it was said that he worked on the railroads, as well as a carpenter, but soon joined a group of bandits that roamed Mexico's country side in the late nineteenth century. It was during this time when large-scale hacienda started to produce sugar and henequen, bringing greater economic inequalities to Sinaloa's large peasant population. As a result, Jesus Malverde began to steal from the wealthy hacienda owners, and gave the stolen money to the poor. His cause of death is not certain, but the popular thought is that he was ordered to be killed by Governor Francisco Cañedo, after Jesus Malverde humiliated him, by stealing the governor's sword in the middle of the night, and thus causing the Governor's masculinity to be questioned. Malverde soon became a transnational phenomenon associated with both narcotrafficking and migration to the United States but not limited to these contexts.



While La Santa Muerte and Jesus Malverde are well known Folk Saints in Latin American and the U.S, there are many other Folk Saints in Latin America. For example, in Argentina, there is Difunta Correa, Enrique Gomez, Gauchito Gil, Miguel Angel Gaitan, and San La Muere to name a few. In Brazil we see Padre Cicero, Antonio Conselheiro, and Menina Izildinha. Some folk saints from France are Saint Guinefort and Saint Sarah. Filomena Almarinez and Jose Rizal. These Folk Saints are revered for their miraculous nature and have become a part of people's culture. Folk Saints are not just seen in the Americas, but around the world as well. Just as migration is a global phenomenon, so are Folk Saints, though they are seen more throughout the Catholic religion.

### **Methodology**

As time moves on, research on different topics can become stale, in the way that the topic is looked at in the same way, with the same opinions, from the same group of researchers. The problem with this, aside from the staleness of the information, is that any new information that comes about, is applied to the outdated studies, and if it does not fit the outdated study, it is either disregarded or molded in a way that will fit, thus diminishing the importance of the new information. This type of case study allows for the researcher—in this case, me—to offer an opportunity to gather and demonstrate evidence that challenges the prevailing assumptions about the research problem, while also giving a different point of view to the practices that had not been examined very much or at all.

Due to the nature of this research, I had planned to conduct more field observations in the cities of Salinas and Watsonville, California. I had planned to visit some botanicas, which are the **stores** that sell folk medicines, religious candles and statuary, amulets, and other products regarded as magical or as alternative medicine. I also had planned to converse with immigrants

in these large Latino communities about their experiences with La Santa Muerte and Jesus Malverde and their place in their communities. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was unable to complete most of these field observations. Instead, I narrowed my field observations to the city of Salinas, and consulting with three key informants. Because of the County of Monterey's Shelter in Place order, I was forced to rely primarily on bibliographic research.

I would have preferred to have relied on more field research, as I was looking forward to conversing with people in these communities, but I conformed to the situation. Some of the problems that I had anticipated before the COVID-19 pandemic, included finding informants who would have been willing to converse with me about their beliefs. The preparations I had in place for these possible obstacles, had been the addition of two more people who have already consented to talking about their experiences. I did not anticipate a Shelter in Place order that would restrict my movement in my own home city.

### **Discussion of Findings**

My research thesis is that religion— in particular beliefs in Folk Saints such as La Santa Muerte and Jesus Malverde— ease the mind and give hope to Mexican migrants when they migrate across the US-Mexican border, and settle in their new communities in the U.S. Based on my bibliographic research and field observations in Salinas, California, religion, clearly is very important to most immigrants who migrate across the border and settle in a Latinx community in the U.S. When faced with discrimination, financial difficulties, crime and hostility, they are able to look to their religion and saints to give them strength. This is an important finding because many people in the U.S. tend to forget how important religion was in the early European settlement of the United States as a country, which has been built on immigration and is a

melting pot of people from many cultures. Not only do these immigrants have their faiths to rely on, but they also tend to settle in areas where there are other people like them, as seen in the east side of Salinas, CA.

My three primary immigrant consultants will be referred to as Brigitte, a 59 year old female who has lived in Salinas for more than thirty years, Claudia, a 64 year old female who has lived in Salinas for about forty years, and finally Jose, a 49 year old male who has lived in Salinas for more than fifteen years. While they were not particularly shy when it came to talking about their Folk Saints, they were a bit camera shy and wanted to remain anonymous with aliases.

Brigitte identifies as a Roman Catholic, and does not believe in La Santa Muerte nor in Jesus Malverde. What she did have to offer though, was her experience living with someone who did follow Jesus Malverde. Her husband—who passed away four years ago— was a follower of Jesus Malverde and had a bust of the Folk Saint in their shrine. When he passed away, she threw away the bust of Jesus Malverde that he had, but still kept some of the picture of the unofficial saint, such as a bracelet picture in figures 5 & 6. Brigitte said that, while she was not a follower, she did not mind her husband following Jesus Malverde; in fact, on one of their yearly trips to Mexico, back in the early 2000's, they stopped by the official shrine of Jesus Malverde in Culiacan in the Mexican state of Sinaloa, pictured in Figure 1. Brigitte mentioned that she was not sure when exactly he started following Jesus Malverde, but from the time they went to Culiacan, to the time of his death, they had the bust of Jesus Malverde in a shrine in the house, a bust similar to the one seen in figure 2 (see Figures 1 & 2, pictures provided by Brigitte).

In addition to the Jesus Malverde's bust, they also have statues of the Virgin Mary and of Jude the Apostle. She believes that he may have become a follower because of his best friend

who was a *coyote*, the colloquial name used for smugglers of people who cross the border illegally. With him also being an immigrant who crossed the border illegally, it makes sense as to why he would follow someone who was known to help the poor and the migrants cross dangerous terrains. When asked about La Santa Muerte, Brigitte immediately told me that she did not wish to speak about her, as she does not believe at all in her, nor did her husband. Brigitte's belief is that Jesus Malverde is more respectable than La Santa Muerte, even though both borderland saints are not official saints.

Brigitte also mentioned that her friend, a hairstylist in Salinas, CA, had asked her about Jesus Malverde because she knew that Brigitte's husband was a follower. When asked why she was asking about Jesus Malverde, her friend replied that a picture of Jesus Malverde manifested on the corner of her store window. Her friend mentioned that she was wiping the windows in her salon when a customer brought the image to her attention. She did not know much about the folk saint, but she said she found that she had received more business after the image was seen. S

My second informant is Claudia who is a follower of La Santa Muerte, and has been since the 2007. Her story is similar to that of Enriqueta Romero—founder of one of the earliest shrines for La Santa Muerte. Both asked the folk saint La Santa Muerte, for protection while in prison and after they were freed. Claudia was imprisoned unjustly, just as Enriqueta's son was. After prison, she wanted to live a better life in order to be able to raise her youngest children. She said La Santa Muerte welcomed her with open arms, despite her background, and has helped her since. Claudia was living day to day in fear of being deported because of her felony. After a certain appointment in San Francisco, she was allowed to stay in the U.S, and she thanked God and La Niña, a.k.a. La Santa Muerte. She told me about her daily prayer that she recites, and it goes like:

“Niña Blanca, Santisima Muerte, bendice mi dia, bendice mi suerte.  
 Traeme alegria, tambien a mi gente. No me abandones, cuidame siempre,  
 aleja lo malo que no se me acerque. Y mis enemigos que de mi se alejen.  
 Que hoy en este dia, el éxito sea latente, y la prosperidad me acompañe  
 siempre. Escucha mi ruego Santisima Muerte, que yo cada dia lo hare  
 nuevamente. AMEN.”

The prayer roughly translates to “ Saint Death, bless my day, bless my luck. Bring joy to my people and myself. Don’t abandon me, always take care of me, and keep the negative away from me. And keep my enemies away from me. This day will be successful, and prosperity will accompany me always. Listen to my prayer, Saint Death, that I will always repeat it daily.”

Claudia said that she is still a Catholic, as that is the religion she grew up with, but that she also worships La Santa Muerte simultaneously. This surprised me, because from what I had heard, La Santa Muerte was a jealous folk saint, who did not take too kindly to not being the center of attention. Claudia was quick to inform me that was not the case with her. Since Claudia pays tribute to both the Virgin Mary and La Santa Muerte, but she avoids the folk saints’ anger. She says that the folk saint becomes angry when she is forgotten and only looked for when someone needs something, instead of being there constantly with her.

Jose is the owner of a botanica located in Salinas, California. I was able to consult with him before the Shelter in Place order was issued, though I was not able to follow up after the first consultation, as we had planned. His response was probably the most surprising for me, as Jose said that he himself was not a religious person, although he did mention that many of his customers liked to chat with him about their experiences and their faith. His store is small, but

packed with many statues and figurines of different saints, religious symbols, as well as rocks, crystals, prayer cards, and candles.

When asked about La Santa Muerte, he pointed to a statue of her, that had money offerings that had been placed around it by various customers. Figure 8 is a photo of the shrine dedicated to La Santa Muerte in Jose's botanica store. Jose explained that one day a customer left a money offering, and it just continued to grow as other customers added more money. Out of respect for his customers' beliefs, Jose did not stop their actions. Figures 7 and 9 are photos also from Jose's botanica

Jose said that while he was not religious, he was intrigued by La Santa Muerte and why people followed her. He told me about a response to this from one of his customers, who said La Santa Muerte is a non-judgmental folk saint who gives people strength to continue on with their lives, even though they have left much of what they knew back in Mexico and are constantly dealing with discrimination and racism. It is really unfortunate that due to COVID-19 restrictions, I was not able to do more of this kind of observational field research. As mentioned, I had planned many more consultations with my informants, but this was not possible due to the circumstances.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, I found that religion and migration are closely intertwined and this phenomena should be a major field of research in global migration studies. There are significant misconceptions about borderland saints and their followers. Yet, they are an important source of spiritual and psychological support for many migrants. It is difficult and often frightening to leave one's homeland and migrate to somewhere unknown, most often without one's family.

However, their spiritual beliefs can give migrants hope and the mental strength to make their challenging journeys. Through rituals, faith, and the usage of *ex-votos*, immigrants do feel more hopeful when crossing the U.S-Mexican border, and when they begin to assimilate in their new communities. La Santa Muerte, while she may seem scary and a dangerous Folk Saint, immigrants have looked to her for guidance and a helping hand. Jesus Malverde, while thought to be less frightening than La Santa Muerte, is also a Folk Saint that's reputation of being a miraculous saint has gained him many devotees.

This case study was unfortunately limited because I was not able to complete my field observations due to COVID-19 and the Shelter in Place orders in Monterey and Santa Cruz Counties. This topic should be further explored, since it is clear that religion and migration are often closely intertwined. As I mentioned in this report, the older studies tend to often go stale, and that is why this topic should be updated and further explored. While I believe this report has contributed some recent information on this topic, much more research is needed—not just on the two borderland saints I examined in this study, but on the majority, if not all of them, of the folk saints—such as the ones listed earlier— and similar religious phenomena associated with migration around the globe.

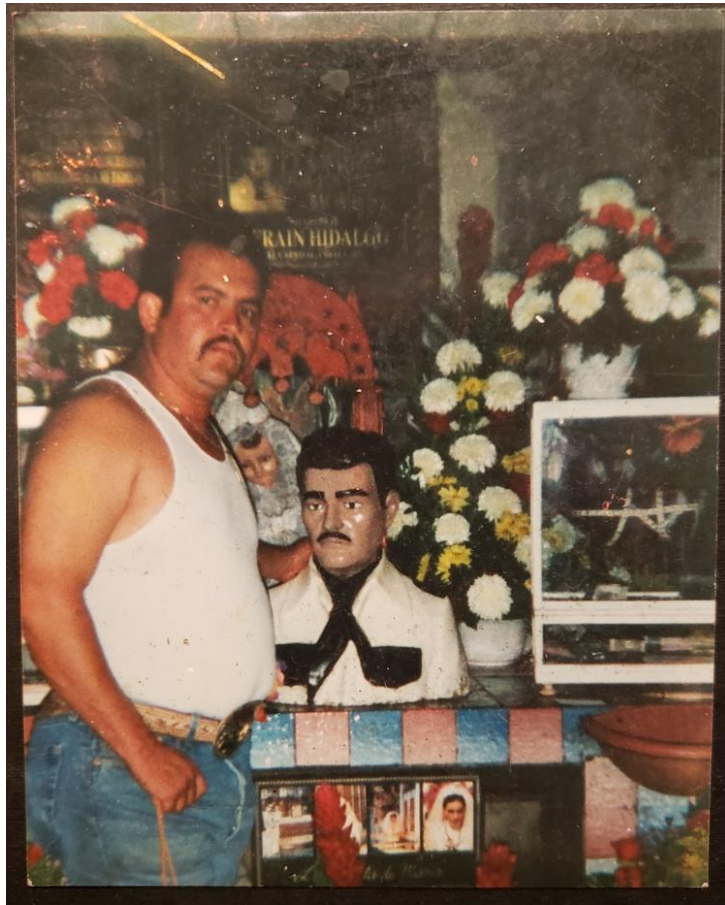
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## Figures



*Figure 1 Pictured above is Brigitte's husband, at the shrine located in Culiacan, Sinaloa: Source Brigitte.*

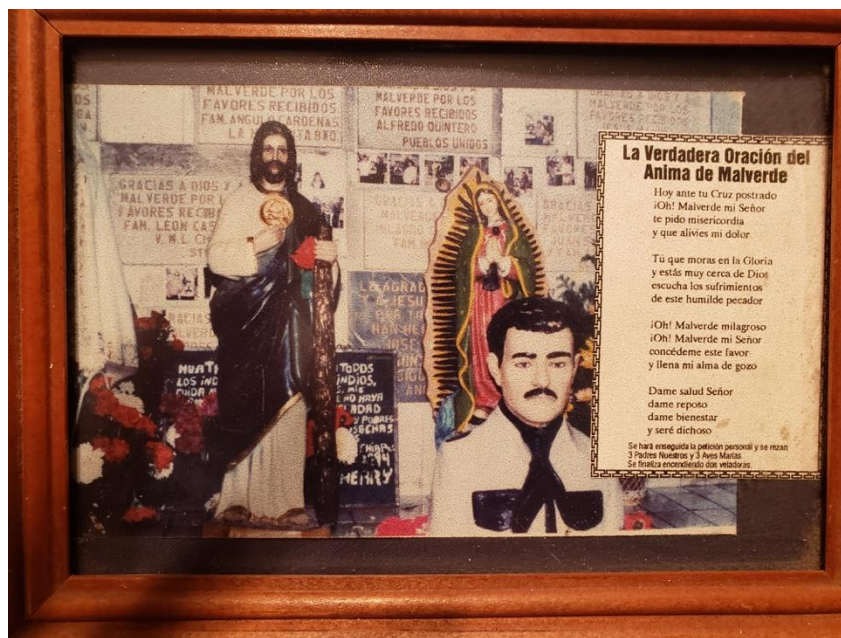


Figure 2 shows another part of the shrine with the bust of Jesus Malverde, who is accompanied by Jude the Apostle and Our Lady the Virgin of Guadalupe, the official national saint of Mexico. Source: Brigitte.

**Jesús Malverde**

Jesús Malverde image

**Angel of the Poor, Generous Bandit, The Narco Saint**

<b>Born</b>	15 January, 1870 Sinaloa, Mexico
<b>Died</b>	3 May, 1909 Sinaloa, Mexico
<b>Venerated in</b>	Sinaloa; Folk Catholicism
<b>Major shrine</b>	Culiacan, Mexico
<b>Feast</b>	3 May
<b>Patronage</b>	Mexican drug cartels, drug trafficking, outlaws, bandits, robbers, thieves, smugglers, people in poverty

Figure 3 shows the birth and death date of Jesus Malverde, as well as what he is known for. Source: Wikipedia.



Man sleeping in Jesus Malverde capilla. Tecate highway, Mexico

Figure 4. Man Sleeping in Jesús Malverde Roadside Chapel. Source: Morgan Smith, "New Mexico Mercury."



Figure 5 pictured on the left is a prayer for Jesus Malverde, located behind his picture, seen in Figure 6, pictured on the right. Figures depict a bracelet. Source: Brigitte.



Figure 7 Jose's botanica, in Salinas, CA, La Santa Muerte, with a picture of Our Lady the Virgin of Guadalupe. Source: Zulema S.



Figure 8 Santa Muerte shrine in Jose's botanica. Offerings include cigars, lit candles and money. Source: Zulema S.



Figure 9 Another picture from Jose's botanica of La Santa Muerte. Source: Zulema S.



Lorena Mendoza with La Santa Muerte, Tijuana, Mexico

Figure 10 La Santa Muerte in Tijuana, Mexico. Source: Morgan Smith, "New Mexico Mercury."