

**Ramón y La Santísima Muerte (Ramón and the Holy Goddess of Death)**  
Stephan Lugbauer, Lagunilla, México D.F. 2006

***When was the first time you heard about La Santa Muerte and when did you first start believing in her?***

The first time was when I was about 4 years old - that was in the little village, where we lived - my mother introduced me to her, because she adored *La Santa Muerte*. In our house there were images, candles and shrines that my mother used to set up for her. At this time I didn't understand exactly what it was, but after I left my home - living on the street, I understood, that she was our mother - our goddess. At the beginning we took it as the other god let us down and that was why we were in that situation. So then on the street we saw a homeless kid standing next to an altar, which the boys build... they refuse to eat a fresh apple in order to offer it to *La Santa Muerte*. Because she is the one who gives us, when we ask her for a favor - she is the force responding to our needs. So the only thing that kept us going on with our lives was to adore *La Santísima*, because we knew that she responds to our needs. She has given us and what ever we will ask for, she will give us. I have been with *La Santísima* for around 20 years now.

***Is it true that people started to know about La Santísima Muerte only a few years ago? Ever since the capture of La Mochaorechas?***

The origin of *La Santísima* dates back to our ancestors, the Aztecs. They adored the god of the sun, the god of the moon, the god of the land, the god of the water ... and the god of the dead also originates from that period. Black animals represented the god of the dead: a black rooster, a black cat, a black dog. I mean this was the representation of *La Santa Muerte* within our ancestors. In fact, the smallest of the pyramids in *Teotihuacan* is dedicated to death more than anything - to the god of the dead. When the Spanish came to conquer us, a very important part of the conquest was religion: god will punish you, god is all this and that... They combined their gods with our gods in order for us to adore the catholic religion. This is why they could not handle *La Santísima Muerte*... well, with death and the god of the dead they had a problem. So they set a day - the day of the dead, because in our culture everyone worships death. Although it's the day of the dead, it's also to worship *La Santísima Muerte*. Here in *Tepito* the cult of *La Santísima Muerte* dates back to the 80ies, but it didn't originate from *Tepito* - the neighborhood of *Merced* is the origin of *La Santísima* and from there it started to expand to downtown and then it took over *Tepito*.

In the 80ies and 90ies, when delinquency started to gain power around here, the majority of people asked *La Santísima* for protection. The strong origins like *La Santísima* originated from *Merced* during the 80ies.

***Homero Aridjis wrote in his book, that La Santa Muerte is the image of a violent death, and he relates this cult to the myth of Coatlicue. He also talks about human sacrifice and assures that this is the dangerous part of the rite.***

In some radical cultures there are sacrifices that go to extremes and they do in fact sacrifice people. I have participated in some sacrifices, but they have been with animals: black cats, black roosters - which are very hard to find. If you are a devotee, that is how they baptize you: They draw a cross with blood on your forehead and you also offer some of your own blood to *La Santísima Muerte* - as a pact you signed with her. It means protect me and I will give you. That is why you will always find water, tequila, apples, cigarettes or cigars on the altars and those who are into drugs offer a rock, a joint ... it's a way of giving her something to receive something in exchange.

So there are extremes here in the neighborhood of *Tepito*. About six years ago they imprisoned a person which was stealing vehicles. For his protection he used to kill a virgin

woman once a year. Since it is hard to tell if a woman is still virgin, he used to kill little babies to assure that there weren't any mistakes while offering them to *La Santísima*. This guy was one of the strongest and most powerful here in the neighborhood, because of the protection he received. He had everything - cars, women, houses, drugs ... but he was deeply rooted to *La Santísima*. By offering lives, he could live his with all conveniences. So when they detained him and he couldn't do his yearly rite - they killed him, because he didn't have the protection of *La Santísima* anymore. This is part of *La Santísima Muerte* - if you are not sure that you can give her what you promised, it's better to stay quiet, because she is very jealous, so "if you offer me something, be sure to give it to me, if not I will take it away".

### ***Have you ever asked La Santa Muerte for a favor?***

Yes, I just had a legal problem. I was in jail, because I also stole cars and ended up in jail. Inside jail I talked a lot to *Santa Muerte*, I asked for protection, peace and patience to change things around me. And look at me! I was sentenced to 40 years in prison and I got out in five. I mean here is where you can see: You are getting a custodial sentence where you cry when you hear it: 48 years in jail! You cry in desperation, but instead of giving up and saying "I spend the rest of my life here" you stay calm and you pray to *La Flaquita* with fate and power. I see *La Flaquita* with a lot of power. She has given my daughter and me a lot of protection. When I talk to *La Santísima* I also ask for her, because I can't force my little daughter to believe in her. Just like my mother did when I was a kid - I was led to decide for myself, she never told me to believe. My daughter has to choose for her own which religion or what ever she wants to believe in.

To answer your question - yes, I have asked her and a lot. One of the biggest favors I have asked for was to be here and free. To resume a sentence of 48 years in prison in only 5 years that is where you can see her power.

### ***How is a mass held for La Santa Muerte?***

At a mass for *la Santa Muerte* there ain't no psalms like in church, a mass for *La Santa Muerte* is like a prayer - it's prayers more than anything to *La Santa Muerte*. There are leaders to *La Santísima*, you can call them a type of priest and they are the ones who guide the prayers to *La Santísima*, but in general it is not a mass where they tell you: "Go in peace". You say your prayers and each *Santísima* has a different oration and depending on your request there is also a different *Santa Muerte* that you have to pray to.

In the catholic religion there are different saints and for us there is one *Santa Muerte* but dressed in different colors. There is the black one, the white one, the purple one, the yellow, the green, the orange, the purple... depending on the favor you are asking for.

The white one is for purity and love - the purity of your home and interior and of your being. The black one is the most common here in *Tepito*, because she is the one we ask for the favors against society, I mean for delinquency and you ask things like: "Help me, lead my gunshots to their proper destination", "Don't let me get caught by the police", "Run over the guy that is behind my girl"... I mean these are requests to affect other people.

The yellow one is for money, you ask her for the abundance of money.

The green one is for the tranquility of your personal environment - of everything around you. She is similar to the white one. The purple *Santísima* forgives your trespasses that you have concluded with the support of the black one and then the blue one is for forgiveness towards *La Santa Muerte* herself, when you couldn't come up with what you promised her or when you don't give her - for example: If you didn't set up a candle in her altar.

Many of us have a tattoo of *La Santa Muerte*. If you set up a date to get her image tattooed and you don't follow through with this date, so then you have to ask the blue *Santísima Muerte* for forgiveness. So when the catholic religion has different saints it's the same here. They have a saint for highways, for love, etc. and we have the same but all in one image - *La*

*Santa Muerte*. For us it's the *Santa Muerte*, but the rest of the people, including the catholics are not gonna take her into account, because she has not been canonized and they are never going to canonize her - that is obvious. *La Santa Muerte* is just incompatible with their catholic beliefs. There have been protests and I have been part of these, to get *La Santísima* canonized, but we have gone unheard and we will never be heard.

Among us, among ourselves, among the believers, we set up a parish and this is how we put the altars in every alley here in *Tepito*. We have these altars almost everywhere. There we go to spend time with her, to talk to her and pray to her. When I am at home there is no need to go outside to talk to her because I have her tattooed.

***Can I have a look at the tattoo?***

Sure! This one has a lot of things combined in it, a scythe, a balance, the world and an owl for wisdom. Here there is justice in the balance and in her hands she carries the world, which means that she holds all of our lives in her hand. The scythe is so she can execute justice and to protect us from those who want to hurt her or us. The owl represents wisdom and it also gives us the wisdom to do things.

And here (showing his necklace) I also carry her in the different representations: This is a skull carved in a small human waist bone of a dead human being. There is the white *Santísima Muerte* for purity, the red one for love and passion and on this side I have the representations in purple, blue and red. The *Santa Muerte* is represented here next to the (skull).