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'Holy Death' sect, spreads, with drugs

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NCR Today

Among a small but growing portion of Los Angeles' vibrant Mexican spiritual community, a new but troubling object of worship is emerging: *Santa Muerte*, or "Holy Death." It is the latest, strongest and strangest sign of the powerful hold that the narcotics trade has on Latino culture.

A report in the Los Angeles Times this week outlines the still-developing worship services surrounding Santa Muerte. According to the Times, a handful of storefront churches have been set up in poor Latino neighborhoods to honor Holy Death, portrayed as a female grim reaper dressed in white with a skull for a face. Rites at these services that in some ways mirror Hispanic devotions to Mary.

Many people attending call themselves Catholic -- but there is no church cooperation with these storefront worship centers. In Mexico, where the Santa Muerte movement has grown over several years, followers have in fact increasingly clashed with church officials and government authorities.

Her first adherents, according to the Times, included Mexican drug dealers and other criminal elements that have been romanticized in Latino culture. "It's sort of like a Virgin for people on the edge," says Patrick Polk, a folklorist associated with UCLA.

If there is anything that marks the special fervor of Latin American Catholicism, it is devotion to the Virgin. My wife is Mexican-American, and among many friends and family members, pride and loyalty to the Virgin of Guadalupe is deeply-felt. The escalating strangle-hold that narcotic trafficking has on the Mexican economy seems to have tapped into that devotion and transported it over to the dark worship of Santa Muerte.

On this side of the border, the appeal of Holy Death services has spread out from drug dealers to the marginalized and vulnerable in L.A.'s underground economy of undocumented workers, people who face

the possibility of death and loss daily. Prayers at services even mimic those to Mary: "Blessed and glorious mother, Angel of Death, we ask you to protect us."

The Times reports that Catholic church officials have made no official statements regarding the Santa Muerte sect. The movement is still small in the U.S., and the archdiocese here may feel any comment or publicity will only raise its profile. But this troubling movement appears to target and twist believers with a special love for Mary -- allowing it to grow would be a betrayal of that belief and of a devotion that is central to Latino culture.

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