

## **Sacred & Profane Season 2, Episode 5: “La Santa”**

[00:00:00] **Kurtis Schaeffer** I'm Kurtis Schaeffer

[00:00:02] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** And I'm Martien Halverson-Taylor, and this is Sacred and Profane.

[00:00:07] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Our series about religion in unexpected places.

[00:00:15] **Josué** Buenas noches

[00:00:17] **Jessica Marroquín** This is Josué.

[00:00:18] **Josué** Hola...

[00:00:19] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** And this is Jessie Marroquín. She's a PhD student here at UVA.

[00:00:24] **Jessica Marroquín** Hi, Martien.

[00:00:24] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Hi, Jessie.

[00:00:25] **Jessica Marroquín** Hi, Kurtis.

[00:00:26] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Hi, Jessie. Okay. We can't be distracted here. We have to get right back to Josué.

[00:00:31] **Josué** ¡Claro que sí!

[00:00:32] **Jessica Marroquín** Okay.

[00:00:33] **Josué** Gracias, gracias.

[00:00:38] **Jessica Marroquín** So Josué lives in Mexico. He wakes up early.

[00:00:42] **Josué** En lo mío, pues es levantarme temprano.

[00:00:45] **Jessica Marroquín** Does this chores.

[00:00:47] **Josué** Y empezar mis labores domésticas... (Josué laughs)

[00:00:50] **Jessica Marroquín** Takes his daughter to school.

[00:00:53] **Josué** Porque soy un padre de familia y tengo que..

[00:00:57] **Jessica Marroquín** And then goes to work for the family business.

[00:00:59] **Josué** Y me voy a trabajar.

[00:01:01] **Jessica Marroquín** On the weekends for fun, Josué rides his motorcycle with his MC, his motorcycle club.

[00:01:08] **Josué** (turns on his motorcycle). Mire, yo tengo tres motocicletas.

[00:01:15] **Jessica Marroquín** Before leaving the house, Josué prays to God and puts himself in his hands.

[00:01:21] **Josué** Me pongo en las manos de Dios que es el máximo creador.

[00:01:35] **Jessica Marroquín** Josué is a very devout man. Growing up, he says he even meant to be a priest.

[00:01:40] **Josué** Yo iba a ser sacerdote.

[00:01:42] **Jessica Marroquín** But it didn't work out.

[00:01:45] **Josué** Por circunstancias de la vida, ya no lo logré hacer.

[00:01:49] **Jessica Marroquín** In a country where 81 percent of adults identify as Catholic, it is not surprising that Josue is so religious. What might be surprising is that he also has an altar in the corner of his room devoted to the saint of death.

[00:02:03] **Josué** Yo tengo un altar en casa, a mi Santa, a mi Santa Muerte.

[00:02:13] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** So tell us who is Josué's Santa Muerte?

[00:02:17] **Jessica Marroquín** The short answer is she's a folk saint, meaning a saint who is embraced by believers but not recognized by the Catholic Church. If you've ever seen an image of her, she is very striking. Usually, she's shown as a skeleton draped in long robes, sometimes dark, sometimes colorful. She wears a crown. Sometimes a simple crown of flowers. Sometimes something more royal with golden jewels. And like the Grim Reaper, she often carries a scythe. And that skeletal image is part of what makes Santa Muerte so controversial. Take Josué's family.

[00:02:56] **Josué** ... de una familia muy religiosa.

[00:02:58] **Jessica Marroquín** They're devoutly Catholic. And some were shocked when he started venerating the Santa Muerte.

[00:03:03] **Josué** Porque, como le vuelvo a repetir mi familia no estuvo muy de acuerdo.

[00:03:08] **Jessica Marroquín** They told him that she was evil.

[00:03:11] **Josué** Me decían que ella era mala, que por qué la tenía.

[00:03:22] **Jessica Marroquín** Josué's family also isn't alone in their distrust of the Santa. In 2016, Pope Francis visited Mexico City and met with Mexican bishops in the cathedral at the heart of the city.

[00:03:35] **Pope Francis** Me preocupan tantos...

[00:03:38] **Jessica Marroquín** He spoke about his worries that the drug trade is leading souls into temptation and demise.

[00:03:44] **Pope Francis** Que seducidos por la potencia vacía del mundo...

[00:03:47] **Jessica Marroquín** Although he never referenced the Santa by name, it was clear she was on his mind as he spoke of chimeras in macabre symbols connected to drug trafficking.

[00:03:58] **Pope Francis** ... exaltan las quimeras y se revisten de sus macabros símbolos que al final comercializan la muerte...

[00:04:11] **Jessica Marroquín** Symbols that commercialize and glamorize death and seduce followers away from true Catholicism. To Pope Francis, she embodies what is wrong in Mexico today.

[00:04:26] **News reel 1** Y hablamos de México, ya que al menos nueve muertes es el saldo preliminar de la guerra urbana entre el demoninado cartel del noroeste y las fuerzas del orden.

[00:04:35] **News reel 2** Last year was the deadliest year on record for Mexico's drug related violence has infiltrated all parts of society and all parts of the country.

[00:04:49] **Jessica Marroquín** Officially, two hundred and seventy-five thousand people have been murdered in the last 24 years, and that doesn't count the tens of thousands of people who've disappeared.

[00:05:05] **Jessica Marroquín** It's not just Pope Francis who sees the Santa as a symbol that glorifies that violence. The Santa has been known as the patron saint of the drug trade, a kind of shorthand for violent death.

[00:05:21] **News reel 3** These are pictures the detectives have taken from various crime scenes. A shrine to Santa Muerte complete with food and drink.

[00:05:29] **News reel 4** Es bien sabido que la Santa Muerte ha sido venerada por criminales. Hecho que ha dañado la imagen del culto.

[00:05:37] **Devotee of the Santa Muerte** Muchos lo tienen como algo malo. Nosotros no, nosotros lo tenemos como algo bueno.

[00:05:43] **Kurtis Schaeffer** And that's what we're going to talk about on the show today. Because despite the Santa's association with crime and violence as a kind of narco saint, her devotees have created one of the fastest growing religious movements in Mexico and the western United States, one that is not just compelling because of what's going on in Mexico today, but because of what her followers see as deep roots going all the way back to Aztec tradition.

[00:06:10] **Jessica Marroquín** And she is way more complicated and interesting than what you see on TV.

[00:06:22] **Andrew Chesnut** What she really is is the patroness, the spiritual patronus, of the narco wars in Mexico.

[00:06:30] **Jessica Marroquín** This is Dr. Andrew Chesnut.

[00:06:32] **Andrew Chesnut** I'm professor of religious studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. And what do I mean by that? Yeah, she has a robust following among cartel members, but also among Mexican law enforcement at all levels. At municipal, state, federal judiciales. I know I know for a fact that she is very popular also among law enforcement. So it's both sides. It's both sides.

[00:07:04] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Can you explain the distinction between being a narco saint and a saint of the drug war? That's a fascinating distinction.

[00:07:11] **Jessica Marroquín** So a lot of the news articles report on her being found on crime scenes. We start associating her with drug lords and the idea that killers are leaving her to sort of mark the scene of the crime. What Dr. Chesnut has studied is that she is really associated

with anyone involved with the effects of the drug wars. And there are a lot of people whose lives have been touched by it, not even just law enforcement and traffickers.

[00:07:37] **Kurtis Schaeffer** So there's this sense that multiple kinds of people find meaning in her. It's not just people perpetuating violence, it's people who are victims of violence. People who are bystanders. I wonder if there's a sense that she helps people in times of uncertainty and that image of death provides a very realistic sense of certainty. We know we're all going to be there. And ironically, it provides some stability in the midst of a life that may seem profoundly unstable.

[00:08:14] **Jessica Marroquín** Absolutely. And I think that that is what we see in the veneration of the of the Saint in Mexico. Given the state of violence that the country has faced in the past 20 years, it is not surprising that people are turning to someone who is outside of the traditional church for protection. The church has not protected them. Catholicism has not been the answer for comfort or for certainty. In this case, people are turning to someone outside of the institution.

[00:08:45] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** So she's sort of like a Saint Christopher. Is she viewed as protective?

[00:08:49] **Jessica Marroquín** Yes, definitely. You ask her for protection, but also for revenge, but also for good health. She's all of those things. She's very malleable. Whatever you need. You ask her to give you and provide.

[00:09:02] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Interesting.

[00:09:04] **Kurtis Schaeffer** So she's the antithesis of the Grim Reaper. She's not bringing death to you. She's using the power of death for you.

[00:09:13] **Jessica Marroquín** And I think that that's a really good point, Kurtis, that the Santa Muerte is... you're asking her - or devotees are asking her - for a good life. Right. That's all that they want. Whether that's through health or through protection, it's really not about death, even though her name is literally holy death.

[00:09:34] **Kurtis Schaeffer** In a Buddhist context in the Himalayas or on the Tibetan plateau, people expect to see images of skeletons or even body parts in temples. And often they either represent deities or actually are deities that have power. And if you make offerings to that power, they can bestow that protection upon you. If you don't, they can come and get you.

[00:10:02] **Jessica Marroquín** And that's a similar attitude to the Santa Muerte, you make her a promise you have, you should keep that promise.

[00:10:10] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** You should keep that promise because she's awesome,

[00:10:12] **Jessica Marroquín** Because she is awesome and produces awe and miracles

[00:10:18] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** And fear.

[00:10:19] **Jessica Marroquín** And fear.

[00:10:24] **Jessica Marroquín** Also, something that is very important to know is Mexico is very much a place of huge diversity in cultures, right. We have such a a past that lingers very much in our present in terms of our indigenous diversity, those histories and those traditions and customs and beliefs that have fused with European Catholicism. So it's not just the violence. It's also that Mexico itself is already a place where it's very much open to mixed religions.

[00:11:01] **Jessica Marroquín** For her followers, that's a lot of her appeal. You can turn to her for anything for help with love, wealth, protection. She also represents a link to Mexico's pre-Hispanic past.

[00:11:15] **Josué** Cómo explicarle...

[00:11:22] **Jessica Marroquín** Josué explains that she is an angel of God.

[00:11:26] **Josué** Ahorita es conocido como el arcaangel, como el arcángel Azrael.

[00:11:32] **Jessica Marroquín** But also an embodiment of the Aztec or Mexica dieties of death, Mictlantecuhtli and Mictecacihuatl.

[00:11:40] **Josué** Nosotros veníamos con Mictlantecuhtli y después fue Santa Muerte.

[00:11:48] **Jessica Marroquín** Josué says that after the conquista, the Catholic Church spoke ill of these gods and banned their worship.

[00:11:54] **Josué** Sí, entonces, hay muchísima, muchísima gente fue asesinada por creer en Mictlantecuhtli.

[00:12:03] **Jessica Marroquín** In this way, he believes how the Church approaches the Santa Muerte now is really similar to how the Church tried to suppress indigenous religion centuries ago,

[00:12:13] **Josué** La iglesia, la Iglesia fue la empezó a hablar mal de ella... empezó que, pues puso en mal a la Santa Muerte.

[00:12:30] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** So what's what's the appeal to people now to make that link?

[00:12:33] **Jessica Marroquín** Well, I think that we talk about the pre-hispanic duties or culture as something that is exactly that, "pre-Hispanic," but it's actually something that is very much in our present in Mexico today. And I think that how you create the identity of Mexico is very much tied to the pre-Hispanic cultures. The Santa Muerte for devotees could be a mix of Catholicism and indigenous practices. It's a way to maintain that identity of Mexico as this melting pot that is fully inextricable from this past. So it's not a past. It's a present.

[00:13:13] **Kurtis Schaeffer** What kinds of evidence do people point to when they connect Santa Muerte with the Mexican past?

[00:13:21] **Jessica Marroquín** Right. That's funny that you say Mexican pass because devotees in Mexico City are literally connecting her to the Mexica or what we call the Aztec past. So I have that same question. And I spoke to an archaeologist in Mexico City who took me to archeological sites to show me some artifacts and see if there's a connection between that past and the Santa Muerte.

[00:13:45] **Kurtis Schaeffer** So what did you do with the archeologist?

[00:13:48] **Jessica Marroquín** Yes, so Lorena Vasquez is an archaeologist that I met at the Templo Mayor museum that has amazing artifacts. And if you haven't been, you should absolutely go.

[00:14:00] **Jessica Marroquín** And she walked me to this side street right next to the Zócalo. So you see all these people, hear all these noises. And she moved this piece of wood, just this plank off of this historic building. And we go up the second story. And this place used to be an apartment building. And they discovered an enormous tzompantli.

[00:14:34] **Lorena Vázquez** Sí, entonces buscábamos los indicadores arqueológicos para poder decir que aquí había un tzompantli, no?

[00:14:39] **Jessica Marroquín** An Aztec skull rack. This particular tzompantli has about a thousand skulls.

[00:14:46] **Kurtis Schaeffer** And tell us what a skull rack is.

[00:14:48] **Jessica Marroquín** Yes. So the skull rack is where the Aztecs used to display publicly skulls of children, women, and adults...

[00:14:58] **Lorena Vázquez** Hay muchísimos que no se ven.

[00:15:00] **Jessica Marroquín** We still don't know exactly why we go based off of the descriptions of the Conquistadors, or the Spaniards, who arrived and described their awe.

[00:15:11] **Lorena Vázquez** Leyendo a los conquistadores, a los cronistas.

[00:15:15] **Jessica Marroquín** But our interpretation is that the tzompantli was part of the religious sacrifices to the dieties of death. Visually, it's easy to see a connection between the Aztec tzompantli and the Santa Muerte.

[00:15:28] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Right. So you have these these powerful divine beings closely associated with skulls and skeletons and with death.

[00:15:37] **Jessica Marroquín** Right. But academics debate whether or not there is an unbroken link from the Aztec cult of death to the Santa Muerte today.

[00:15:45] **Lorena Vázquez** Yo veo que son dos cosas diferentes porque además es una deidad que es distinta a estas deidades.

[00:15:53] **Jessica Marroquín** You could say this sort of personification of death is an idea that came about in two separate belief systems. In fact, the Santa's long black robes and scythe also point to roots in la parca, medieval Spain's version of the Grim Reaper, who's also female.

[00:16:11] **Kurtis Schaeffer** So you talked about this idea of death in two different traditions. We can see the connection visually between Aztec tradition and the Santa. Even if we don't fully understand the ritual behind things like tzompantli. So can I ask, is there any historical evidence that she has related to La Parca beyond the robe inside?

[00:16:29] **Jessica Marroquín** There is evidence in the sense that there are religious texts that have drawings or illustrations of skulls and skeletons that accompany sermons or moralizing texts.

[00:16:44] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Santa Muerte is the Grim Reaper. Right?

[00:16:47] **Jessica Marroquín** I think that that's too simple to say.

[00:16:49] **Kurtis Schaeffer** OK. Yes. So tell us about that sameness and difference.

[00:16:53] **Jessica Marroquín** I think the difference is the Grim Reaper is not venerated as a god or goddess. The Grim Reaper is coming to get you when your time comes. You better be good because your time will come and you're either going to have to suffer the consequences after you die or you're going to welcome it since you've led a good moralizing life. You followed the code, but the Santa Muerte has no code to follow. They're promises. The devotees make her a promise. She protects them. So there's very... even though esthetically looks similar. I think that

that's why it's so confusing. Right? Just because you have skulls and skeletons doesn't necessarily mean they're one and the same. It means that maybe they're connected in some ways, but they gain different meaning depending on the time and context.

[00:17:42] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Okay, but despite this, it seems like people, or followers like Josué are interested in making a connection between historical Aztec deities and the Santa Muerte.

[00:17:55] **Jessica Marroquín** Right. And I think that that is both because that is such a relevant past in the present, but also it legitimizes the Santa Muerte, right? If she's connected to these ancient old traditions, beliefs, customs, then the Santa Muerte is technically older than the Catholic Church. Right? Or has been present for such a long time that their veneration is valid or legitimate.

[00:18:25] **Kurtis Schaeffer** The Santa's primary strength seems to be that she can embody so many contradictory traditions and values.

[00:18:32] **Jessica Marroquín** Absolutely. Andrew Chesnut would definitely agree with you.

[00:18:37] **Andrew Chesnut** She is malleable. I mean, there's no doubt that she is the result of religious syncretism. The Spanish bring La Parca that these indigenous groups view through their own religious lens and so turn the Spanish grim repressed into this miraculous, miracle working, supernatural figure that she is today.

[00:19:05] **Jessica Marroquín** Whether or not she has unbroken roots to the Aztec past believers are mixing a lot of traditions indigenous, Catholic and even secular into one avatar. For example, it is now common to see a rosary service for the Santa on the 1<sup>st</sup> of every month at some public sanctuaries, places of gathering or chapels.

[00:19:26] **Andrew Chesnut** We all know that the rosary is the epic prayer dedicated to the Virgin Mary and the Santa Muerte rosary is basically the same, just substituting out some of the lines, dedicating it to Santa Muerte instead of the Virgin.

[00:19:43] **Jessica Marroquín** In the past, people used to venerate the Santa Muerte behind closed doors. Today, walking around Mexico City, you can see her on street corners. There are murals, altars, and shrines devoted to her. And she's also on people's bodies; on tattoos, clothing and jewelry, and phone cases. She's become a part of everyday life.

[00:20:11] **Josué** ¿Quiere que le prenda mi moto?

[00:20:21] **Jessica Marroquín** That's the bike that Josué rides as a member of the Santa Muerte Motorcycle Club. He says every time he rides, she rides with him.

[00:20:31] **Josué** Como favor, se lo pido a mi Santa, a mi Santa Muerte.

[00:20:36] **Jessica Marroquín** Literally, on his jacket, watching and protecting. Josué was a rider before he was a believer. One day he was riding with his old motorcycle club and he saw a group of 200 riders arrive in a parking lot. They all had black leather jackets on with a female skeleton figure on their backs. It was the Santa Muerte motorcycle club. Josué admits he was afraid of them.

[00:21:09] **Josué** Me daba miedo. En primera, porque era algo que yo no conocí. En segunda, por lo que le comento, que aquí es conocida la Santa Muerte para gente mala.

[00:21:25] **Jessica Marroquín** I tell them it must be wild. Now that he's one of them, to see people's reactions when a large group rides up in jackets with skeletons on their backs.

[00:21:34] **Josué** Exacto. (laughs)

[00:21:36] **Jessica Marroquín** Josué laughs and admits that like he did at first, some roll up their windows or walk away. But he says people mostly ask him if they can give the Santa cigarettes.

[00:21:48] **Josué** Ofrezco cigarros, veladoras, tequila, cerveza, a la Santa que es lo que, como ofrenda.

[00:21:57] **Jessica Marroquín** They want to make offerings to her. Say hi to her. Even take selfies with her.

[00:22:06] **Jessica Marroquín** Despite what the historical evidence may say, the pope may say or what family members may say. There are devotees from all walks of life who are turning to her, have faith in her, and believe in her. Josué is obviously one of them, and his faith has not dimmed after nine years of writing with the sentence where the motorcycle club. He is currently waiting impatiently for the club's next vote. If approved, he will tattoo the Santa on his body and carry her with him wherever he goes.

[00:22:44] **Josué** En este caso, la Santa Muerte es una intercesora, es una intercesora como otros seres divinos.

[00:23:16] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Sacred and Profane was produced for the Religion, Race and Democracy Lab at the University of Virginia. Jessica Marroquín reported this episode for us. Our senior producer is Emily Gadek. Our program manager is Ashley Duffalo. Kelly Jones is the Lab's editor.

[00:23:33] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Music for this episode comes from Blue Dot Sessions. You can find out more about our work at [religionlab.virginia.edu](http://religionlab.virginia.edu) or by following us on Twitter @thereligionlab. You'll also see pictures of the Santa from Jesse's original reporting. And, if you like the show, please head over to iTunes or the platform of your choice to write and review us. It really makes a difference for new shows like ours.