

currents

religion & ethics • tv



THURSDAY
July 1, 2004



THE SAN DIEGO
UNION-TRIBUNE

WEEKLY OFFERINGS

SHORT TAKES ON BELIEFS AND BEHAVIOR



<WWYD?>

You overhear your boss talking about selling the company. You're wondering if you should tell your co-workers? What Would You Do?

From Rachel H. Almeleh of Clairemont: I would tell my co-workers because they have a right to know, too. They may start making arrangements for seeking employment elsewhere or get ready to accept the new change.

<OUR WORLD>

With this week's transfer of power in Iraq, Catholic bishops from the United States and Great Britain are urging Catholics to pray "for the people of Iraq, and for a region and world broken by violence and longing for peace."

"A brutal dictator has been deposed, but a year later Iraq does not appear to be a nation clearly on its way to security," Bishop Wilton D. Gregory, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, stated last week.

Gregory said that the United States had incurred a "grave moral responsibility" by preemptively invading Iraq, and that the war has raised "fundamental questions about the U.S. role in the world."

Foremost among those questions, Gregory said, is how to balance America's prosecution of a "war on terror" with abiding respect for the sanctity of human life.

"Our nation cannot accept a permissive interpretation of international law, the inevitability of civilian casualties or the abuse of human rights, or an over-reliance on military responses to the problem of global terrorism," Gregory said.

<SURVEY SAYS>

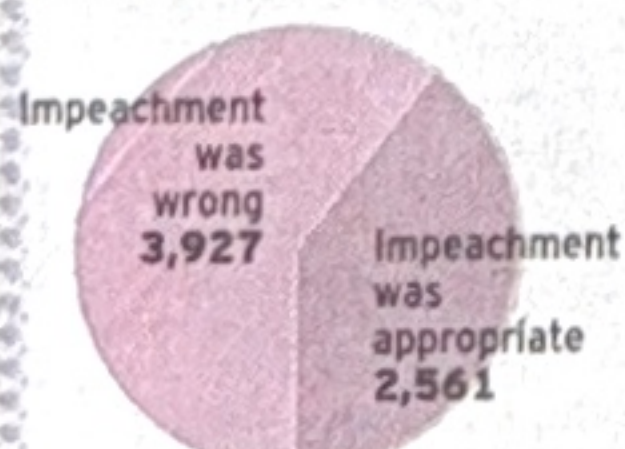
More than 85 percent of U.S. Christian men say they are not spiritually challenged, according to a recent survey by the international men's ministry Promise Keepers. Asked specifically about spiritual needs, many men either could not name any or identified superficial goals.

<WORDS TO LIVE BY>

"With great power comes great responsibility."
— Uncle Ben in "Spider-Man"; the sequel ("Spider-Man 2") opened yesterday.

<TELL US ABOUT IT>

Last week, we asked whether you agreed with former President Bill Clinton that the impeachment process was wrong. The more than 6,000 responses we received looks like a record. (Our previous high-water mark? A question we asked in 2000 about whether Taco Bell should reconsider and keep the Chihuahua.) The majority of you indicated that the impeachment was an abuse of power. Here are the results:



Total responses: 6,488

NEW QUESTION: Do you think the new Michael Moore movie, "Fahrenheit 9/11," will make a difference in the outcome of the election? The movie, which pulled in more than \$21 million at the box office last weekend, has become a lightning rod in the presidential campaign. But will its assault on President Bush's response to the 9/11 attacks register with undecided voters? Or are the people seeing it already committed to voting against Bush? Please call (619) 293-2506 by midnight Sunday and press the number that best fits your response.

- 1 It will make a difference.
- 2 It won't change anything.

Compiled from news services, Web sites, books, magazines and you, our readers. We like letters! Write us at re@uniontrib.com or Religion & Ethics, The San Diego Union-Tribune, P.O. Box 120191, San Diego, CA 92112.



Juan Lopez carried a statue of the Santa Muerte, or Saint Death, during a religious ceremony in Tepito, one of Mexico City's most dangerous barrios. Lopez attends the ceremony on the first day of each month. Luis J. Jimenez / Copley News Service photos

Emerging from shadows on the edge of Mexican society, devotees of Santa Muerte clash with Catholic Church

SKELTON FORCE

By S. Lynne Walker, COPLEY NEWS SERVICE

MEXICO CITY — In Mexico City's most violent neighborhood, two men are locked in battle for people's souls.

One is a priest. The other calls himself a priest. At the center of their struggle is a sinister icon who implores her followers to worship death.

Santa Muerte, or Saint Death as she is known, has sparked a rapidly spreading movement that is extending its reach from Mexico City to mountain villages and affluent northern cities like Monterrey.

Devotees of the macabre statue, a life-sized skeleton wearing a fancy dress, jeweled rings and feathered hat, include drug traffickers, thieves, prostitutes and prisoners. But her defenders say the scythe-wielding saint has also attracted a hidden following of police, actors and even entrepreneurs with the promise of protection in exchange for devotion.

The only people who publicly worship Santa Muerte are those who live on the margins of Mexican society — uneducated peasants or the urban poor trying to survive in slums like Mexico City's Tepito.

SEE **Muerte**, E5



Since Enriqueta Romero placed a statue of Santa Muerte outside her house in Tepito, devotees have flocked to leave offerings and pay their respects in hopes Santa Muerte will protect them.



Statues of Santa Muerte in a Tepito gift shop. Followers adorn altars in their homes with her image alongside the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Ride-alongs sitting pretty with power-hungry mowers

By Mary Beth Breckenridge
KNIGHT RIDDER NEWS SERVICE

When Ken Boersma wants to relax, he climbs aboard his John Deere 4700 tractor, fires up the 48-horsepower engine and chews into a little dirt.

Aaarrrrrr.
To Boersma, his prized piece of equipment is part plaything, part necessity. With attachments that include a backhoe, a front-end loader, a tiller and a mower, he's used it

to level the ground and dig the foundation for the glorified barn that's his home until he builds a house, put in a driveway and a septic system on his seven acres in Bath Township, Ohio, and, of course, cut the grass — that is, when he's not opting for the 25-horsepower, commercial-type riding mower that John Deere dealer Len Shetler persuaded him to try out.

And when he needs to haul some gravel



Ken Boersma has a John Deere toy tractor to go along with his real lawn machines. Phil Masturzo / Knight Ridder News Service

SEE **Tractors**, E12

RELIGION & ETHICS



A statue of Santa Muerte underneath a crucifix in David Romo's Traditional Catholic Church of Mexico-United States.

► MUERTE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE E1

Many in Mexico say St. Death protects them

On the first evening of every month, followers gather on several streets for Santa Muerte ceremonies. At one, more than 1,000 grandmothers and tattooed teens, taxi drivers and small business owners crowded into graffiti-marred Tepito to leave offerings and pay their respects to the saint of death.

Laden with red roses, candles and Cuban cigars, they pressed their hands against a glass case that protected a statue of St. Death. They murmured prayers venerating death and beseeching Santa Muerte to defeat their enemies.

"We feel protected," said José Hidalgo, the 48-year-old owner of a shoe repair shop who brought his wife and three young daughters.

Hidalgo pulled up his T-shirt to display the image of Santa Muerte tattooed over his heart. "We have faith in her," he said. "She walks with us. She has done a lot of favors for us. That's why we come here every month."

For decades, small groups of Mexicans gathered in candle-lit homes after dark and worshipped Santa Muerte in secret. As the country has moved toward democracy and freedom of expression, however, the cult of St. Death has come out in the open.

David Romo, 45, the self-proclaimed leader of the Santa Muerte movement, says there are 1 million devotees nationwide — figures that can't be confirmed.

"People are disillusioned," said Romo, who has angered the Roman Catholic Church by calling himself a priest. "Here, people call out to death because they feel abandoned when they have problems. They want an answer to their needs."

Many poor Mexicans say they feel ignored by the Mexican government and the Catholic Church, two powerful institutions that are supposed to help them.

"The doors of the Catholic Church are open, but people don't find what they are looking for there," said Enriqueta Romero, 58, a housewife who runs a widely attended Santa Muerte ceremony in Tepito. "Their priests are not the priests we want. We don't believe anymore."

While the Catholic Church staunchly opposes this burgeoning adoration of Santa Muerte, some priests acknowledge the church has failed to meet the spiritual needs of the poor.

"People are looking for comfort, but sometimes we don't seem to have the time or interest to go out and attend to these people," said Father Candido Hernández, a priest at San Francisco Catholic Church in Tepito. "Now, death is being converted into another God. Our barrio does not believe in the government. People do not believe in the church. Here, people believe in death."

Clear rivalry

Nowhere is the struggle between life and death more evident than in the heart of Tepito.

Every Sunday, Romo, who says he is an ordained archbishop of the "Traditional Catholic Church of Mexico-United States," holds "Masses" worshipping Santa Muerte. Two blocks away, Father Fausto Zamora offers up prayers for his parishioners' salvation at the San Antonio Tomatlan Roman Catholic Church.

The two men have never spoken, yet the rivalry is clear.

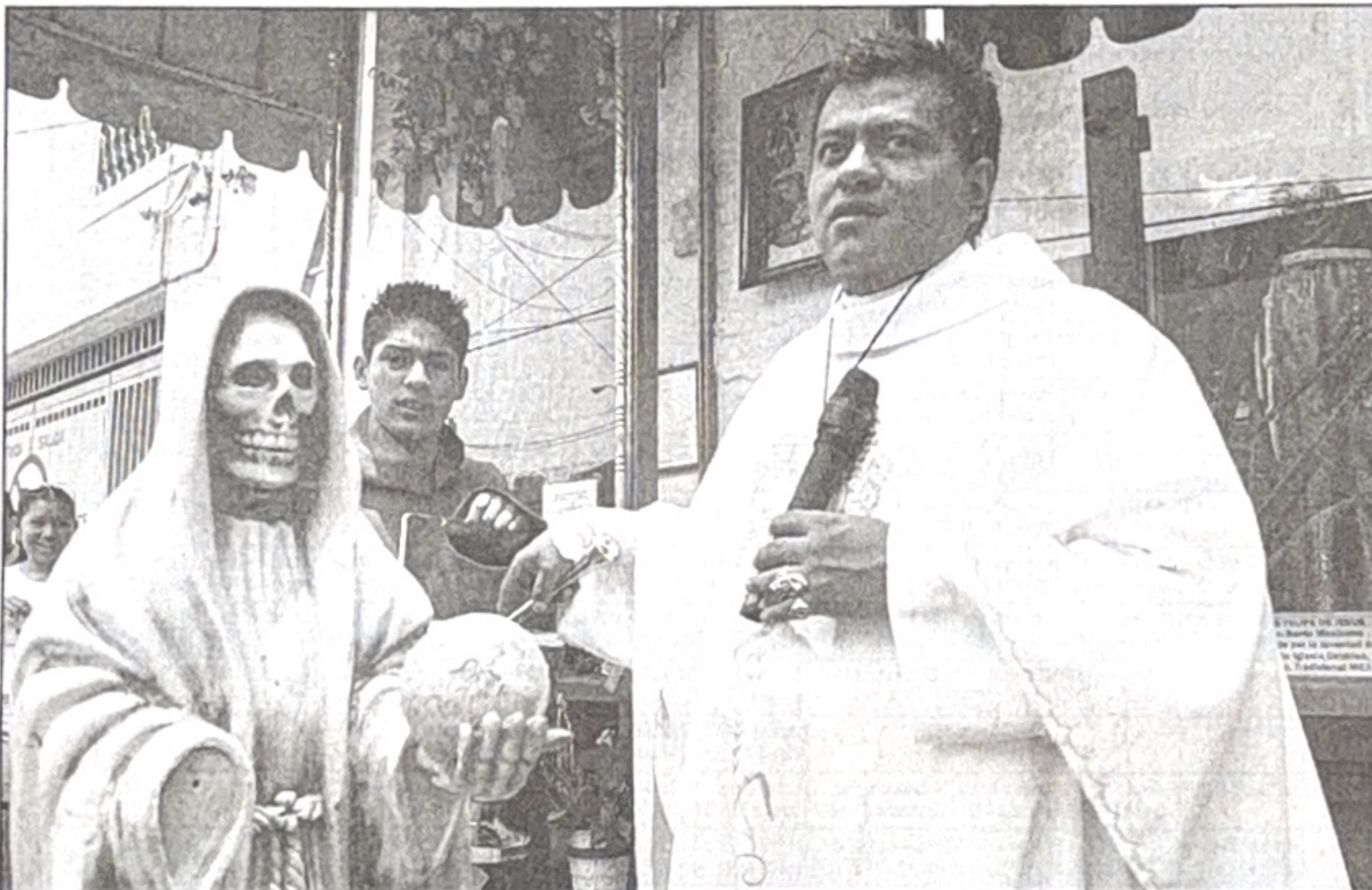
"It is a daily battle," said Zamora, 38. "This has nothing to do with Catholicism. It is an adoration of malignant forces."

Santa Muerte's powerful appeal comes from its blend of cultic worship and Catholicism. At home, many of her worshippers have altars to the Virgin of Guadalupe alongside statues of the skeleton.

"It is a strange cult because it's a religious one," said Homero Aridjis, a Mexican novelist and poet who recently



Jesse Ortiz blew cigar smoke into the face of a statue of Santa Muerte in a purification ritual. Once the saint of drug traffickers, thieves, prostitutes and prisoners, Santa Muerte now is embraced by some impoverished Mexicans who are living at the margin of society. Luis J. Jimenez / Copley News Service photos



David Romo, the self-proclaimed leader of the Santa Muerte movement, outside what he has named the Traditional Catholic Church of Mexico-United States. He claims there are 1 million followers of Santa Muerte throughout Mexico.

published a book titled "Santa Muerte." "It is very inoffensive for some people, but for others it is like witchcraft, invoking very powerful forces."

At Santa Muerte services, followers clutch rosary beads as they read from devotional books. They profess their belief in God and Jesus Christ. They receive Communion.

But the ceremony becomes startlingly different when devotees invoke "the spirit of the Santa Muerte" and utter the phrases, "Glorious death, powerful death."

Santa Muerte's followers pray their enemies will be vanquished. Still, Romo denied they seek anyone's death. "We say, 'Death to my enemies' so they will stop bothering us," he said. "It is not for the physical destruction of our enemies."

Salvador Cuellar, a 33-year-old mechanic, said he was threatened by people who wanted to kill him until he invoked Santa Muerte. "I believe in the Virgin and other saints," said Cuellar. "But the one who has helped me more is the Santa Muerte."

To show their appreciation, Santa Muerte devotees blow cigar smoke on her statue in a purification ritual and offer her bottles of tequila. They bring red apples. St. Death likes red, they say.

"Every man is going to be face to face with her one day," Romo said. "We don't want to have to die to get to know her."

Outreach to outcasts

Romo said he's had visitors from Brazil, Germany, Australia and Japan, all drawn by Santa Muerte. "It makes us happy, but at the same time, it worries us because we want to be prepared to maintain this."

He is building a seminary in the church to train new "priests," who will be taught philosophy and English, Hebrew and French. "This movement will grow even more," he said. "Nobody can stop it because there is freedom of religion."

In Tepito, Romo has found fertile ground for extending the reach of Santa Muerte. Marked by burned-out cars and rough-looking men loitering on street corners, the neighborhood is swept up in an aura of danger.

"When you live on the edge, you stop believing in things," said Carlos García, a 30-year-old paramedic. "I don't believe in God, in Jesus. None of those religions fill me. With Santa Muerte, I have found peace."

Residents of Tepito are outcasts in Mexico City, labeled criminals because

of the neighborhood where they live and threatened by drug dealers and roving bands of criminals. Because they are poor, their children grow up in an environment of rancor and fear.

"Here there is prostitution, there are broken families. There is not a true formation of moral values," said Father Zamora. "Tepito is where all the ills of society are concentrated."

Romo runs his church from a donated house on Calle Bravo, or Feroocious Street, in Tepito. There are no crosses marking the doors of his church. Instead, two life-sized statues of Santa Muerte guard the portal.

A father of five, Romo said he doesn't recognize the authority of Pope John Paul II. "We have never confused ourselves with the Roman Catholic Church," said Romo, who runs his church with money and jewelry that his followers hand over.

He holds a service at midnight, but he denied claims by his detractors that he practices witchcraft at the late-night ceremonies.

"There is nothing magic in the rituals. There is nothing strange that people must do to receive a miracle," he said.

Romo accused the Catholic Church of "stigmatizing" his ministry, which he said reaches out to destitute Mexicans

looking for a sympathetic ear.

"This is a church that walks alongside the people, that suffers with the people," Romo said.

"They want a companion who will listen to them. They need concrete answers. They need someone to say, 'Here is the door.' People who have legal problems, people who have financial problems, they come to tell her and she helps them go forward."

But if Santa Muerte is benevolent, her followers also believe she is vengeful.

"If you make a pact with Santa Muerte, if you hand over your soul, you can never leave," said Felipe Gaytán, a doctoral candidate at Mexico City's prestigious Colegio de México whose thesis includes a chapter on Santa Muerte.

"You don't have to give anything else, only devotion. But if you stop being faithful, then death follows you and your family."

Dueling scenes

When death arrives, even Santa Muerte's most devoted followers often turn back to the Catholic Church. Zamora has been called to their homes to pray for the soul of the dead.

"People are so conscious it is evil that when they want to ask for eternal salvation, they look for the Catholic Church," Zamora said.

Sometimes he is angered because he sees Catholicism being manipulated to confuse Mexico's poor. He is saddened by the growing devotion to Santa Muerte, which he sees as "the forces of evil covering the forces of good."

"People allow themselves to be deceived, and they pay such a high price," he said.

Zamora speaks openly about his opposition to the Santa Muerte movement, even though some in Tepito are so frightened by Romo that they fear for their priest's safety.

"I am not afraid, because I have faith in God," Zamora said. "If I am not going to be announcing good and denouncing bad, then I am failing as a pastor."

Romo and his followers try to avoid Zamora. But during Easter Week, the two men crossed paths as they led processions of followers through the streets of Tepito.

Zamora's followers were carrying images of a crucified Christ and the Virgin of Guadalupe. Romo's followers held aloft statues of Santa Muerte nailed to the cross.

After a tense standoff, the Catholic procession moved forward.

"We cannot get in a fight. That is not the role of the Catholic Church," said Zamora. "We are going to pray for them."



Father Fausto Zamora sprinkled holy water on worshippers outside San Antonio Tomatlan Roman Catholic Church in Tepito. He struggles to convince the urban poor to reject the worship of Santa Muerte.



Adriana Cortez offered candles to Santa Muerte as mariachis played a tribute during a service in Tepito. Worship of Santa Muerte has been condemned by Roman Catholic clergy.