

INTRODUCTION TO THE FEATURED DEVOTIONS

NINO FIDENCIO

José Fidencio Síntora Constantino, known as Niño Fidencio, rose to national prominence as a *curandero* (healer) during the early decades of the twentieth century. His subsequent identity as a folk saint was directly derived from his reputation as a curandero, and today his huge cult in northeastern Mexico and southern Texas is based on faith healing by *materias* (mediums) who channel his powers. Niño Fidencio's principal shrine is in Espinazo, Nuevo León, Mexico.

DIFUNTA CORREA

Difunta Correa is the most prominent of the many Argentine folk saints. Her principal shrine, in Vallecito, San Juan, is a vast complex with several chapels and devotional sites, restaurants, gift arcades, picnic areas, a Catholic church, a museum, and a hotel. The site is visited annually by more than half a million devotees. Shrines to Difunta Correa are also an occasional sight along highways throughout Argentina. The characteristic offerings of water bottles (and, more recently, car parts) commemorate the ill-fated journey that resulted in Difunta Correa's death and inaugural miracle. While pursuing her sick husband who was forcibly conscripted into the troops of Facundo Quiroga around 1835, Difunta Correa died of exhaustion and thirst on the desert. Her infant son survived by nursing at the breast of her dead body.

GAUCHO GIL

Gaicho Gil, whose cult now rivals that of Difunta Correa in national popularity, is the most prominent of the many gaucho folk saints who have emerged in the province of Corrientes, Argentina. The characteristic narrative of gaucho sanctity is one of noble banditry. A marginal figure, often a deserter from the troops of unjust war, is pursued by authorities for Robin-Hood crimes that he commits on behalf of his exploited people. The hero's unsaintly life, when it is known or referenced at all, is praised by devotees for its justifiable, even saintly, defiance of corrupt authorities. When he is finally apprehended the gaucho becomes the victim of a summary execution, often gruesome, and out of this injustice—what is frequently described as “the spilled blood of innocents”—his sanctity emerges. Gaicho Gil's principal shrine is just outside of Mercedes, in Corrientes.

SAN LA MUERTE

Devotion to San la Muerte (St. Death), originally a tiny amulet (*payé*) often carved in human bone, is most prominent in the Argentine provinces of Corrientes, Chaco, and Misiones. San La Muerte is a complex and enigmatic object of devotion, functioning at once as a *payé* (the image itself contains magical power) and as a saint (a soul in heaven interceding on behalf of devotees). Annual fiestas are held in August at San La Muerte shrines throughout northeastern Argentina.

NINO COMPADRITO

Niño Compadrito is the skeleton of a child dressed in saintly attire and displayed on the altar of a domestic shrine in Cuzco, Peru. Devotion to Niño Compadrito began in the 1950s, went underground after a bishop declared it heretical in 1976, and reemerged in 1982, with gradual growth thereafter. Over the years Niño Compadrito has revealed his wishes and identity to devotees in dreams, and these revelations have modified the saint's image and the rituals of devotion. The hair, teeth, and glass eyes that currently embellish the image, for example, were added in response to requests made in dreams. Andean beliefs in the benevolent and malevolent power of skulls and bones provide a context for Niño Compadrito devotion, and there are notable similarities between Niño Compadrito and the syncretic Christ child known as Niño Manuelito.

SARITA COLONIA

A now widespread urban devotion emanating outward from Callao, near Lima, Peru, began in the 1940s with Sarita Colonia as a patron of such outcasts as thieves and prostitutes. Her current cult is well institutionalized and encompasses innumerable devotees from all walks of life, many of whom are—as Sarita was—migrants to the capital. The official biography disseminated and defended by Sarita's family depicts her as a poor, abnegate, devoutly Catholic girl who distributed alms until her premature death of natural causes. This narrative is challenged by the more imaginative legends of popular devotion, in many of which Sarita, cornered by rapists, commits suicide (by jumping into the ocean, for example) in order to protect her virginity.