

## JESÚS MALVERDE

Every third night Florentino Ventura can be found sleeping outdoors, guarding the large blue shrine that honors the belief in a lawless man.

His faith keeps him there.

The summer when Florentino was twenty-three, he was working as an oyster diver in Mazatlán. One day he became tangled in his rope underwater. He wrestled with the cord and began to drown. Then suddenly the face of the bandit Jesús Malverde appeared to him. Florentino finally freed himself. He rose to the surface and came immediately to Malverde's shrine to give thanks. From the way Florentino describes it, the experience led to the kind of spiritual catharsis that makes people change their lives. Florentino changed his. He'd been on track for what would have been at least a minor political career. He'd been a PRI youth leader and won a scholarship to study political science in Mexico City. He was taking a break from studying law when the diving accident happened. But he gave it all up, and, now thirty-six, he's been here ever since. "The Mexican political system is useless. It was false, pure lies," he says. Florentino found more truth in Malverde.

Florentino Ventura is one of thousands of people who believe the bandit Jesús Malverde—"the Angel of the Poor," "The Generous Bandit"—works miracles in their lives. And all year long they come to his shrine here in Culiacán, capital of the Pacific coast state of Sinaloa, to ask Malverde for favors and thank him for those he's granted. They leave behind photos and plaques with grateful inscriptions: "Thank you, Malverde for saving me from drugs," writes Isaias Valencia Miranda, from Agua Zarca, Sinaloa; "Thank you, Malverde, for not having to lose my arm and leg," reads the dedication on a photo of a man in sunglasses identifying himself as Lorenzo Salazar, from Guadalajara. There are plaques from the Guicho Ríos family from Mexicali, the León family from Stockton, the Chaidez family from North Hollywood, and many more from the great Mexican diaspora in Los Angeles.

“Dear holy and miraculous Malverde,” reads one letter to the bandit left at the shrine. “I’m writing this letter so that you’ll help me with a problem I have with some friends I had, so that they won’t look for me anymore. Make them forget the problems we had. Make them please leave my parents and my sister and me in peace. This is what I ask of you, Malverde, that you do this favor. I promise that when I go to Sinaloa, I’ll go visit you and I’ll bring you what I can because I live in Los Angeles, California. Malverde. Your son, Ángel Cortéz. Sept 15, 1992.”

Sinaloa is one of those places in Mexico where justice isn’t blind and the lawless aren’t always the bad guys. Having the government as an enemy can improve a reputation. So maybe, then, it’s not such a stretch to understand how thousands of people could come to believe that Jesús Malverde, a renegade supposedly long dead, performs miracles in their lives.

Nor is it hard to understand how over the past two decades Jesús Malverde has also become what he’s now known best as: “the Narcosaint,” the patron saint for the region’s many drug smugglers. Mexican drug smuggling began in Sinaloa. Here smugglers are folk heroes, and a “narcoculture” has existed for some time. Faith in Malverde was always strongest among Sinaloa’s poor and highland residents, the classes from which Mexico’s drug traffickers emerged. As the narcos went from the hills to the front pages, they took Malverde with them. He’s now the religious side to that narcoculture. Smugglers come to ask Malverde for protection before sending a load north. If the trip goes well, they return to pay the shrine’s house band to serenade the bandit or place a plaque thanking Malverde for “lighting the way”; increasingly plaques include the code words “From Sinaloa to California.”



The story of Jesús Malverde takes place during the reign of dictator Porfirio Díaz (1877–1911). The Porfiriato, as the era is known, was a time when big business, especially foreign-owned big business, was encouraged above all else. Díaz saw himself as the rest of the world saw him: as Mexico’s modernizer. Yet progress passed by millions of Mexicans, who remained as impoverished as ever. As the century turned, the country fermented with the social anarchy that would explode in the Mexican Revolution. The hills and back roads of

Mexico were alive with bandits, some of whom would become folk heroes to the country’s poor.

The legend is that Jesús Malverde was one of these, a bandit who rode the hills near Culiacán. They say Malverde robbed from the rich and gave to the poor, a Mexican Robin Hood. It must have been true, for they say the government hung him and left him to rot in a tree. That was on May 3, 1909. Every year on that day there’s a great party at Malverde’s shrine.

There are two movies and one play dealing with Malverde’s life. But historians have found no evidence he ever existed; a likelier prospect is that Malverde is an amalgam of two bandits—Heraclio Bernal from southern Sinaloa and Felipe Bachomo, from the north part of the state. “If he lived, faith in him is a remarkable thing,” says Sergio López, a dramatist from Culiacán, who has also researched and written about Malverde. “If he never lived, it’s even more remarkable because people have created this thing to achieve the justice that is denied them.”

What does exist is a rich and fluid body of lore about Malverde’s life. Supposedly his Christian name was Jesús Juárez Mazo, and he was born sometime in 1870 near the town of Mocolito. In some versions he was a tailor. Others have him as a construction worker or a railroad hand, who built the tracks that were just then extending through northern Mexico and that brought with them the opportunities that made some men wealthy and other men bandits.

Some say Malverde began a life of crime after his parents died of hunger. Some versions say he was finally betrayed by a friend, who cut off his feet and dragged him through the hills to the police to collect a 10,000-peso reward. Others have him betrayed and shot to death. His betrayer dies three days later, and the governor who wanted him put to death, Francisco Cañedo, dies thirty-three days later, from a cold contracted after going out at night without slippers.

López believes Cañedo may have invented the Malverde legend himself to keep the state’s hacienda owners thinking twice before indulging in the more extreme abuses of their peons. But there’s also a story that the governor challenged Malverde to rob him. Malverde, as a construction worker, slipped into the mansion, stole the governor’s sword, and wrote on a wall, *Jesús M. was here*.

Malverde’s first miracle, according to one version, was returning a woman’s lost cow. Eligio González, whose work to keep faith in the bandit alive has

earned him the nickname “The Apostle of Malverde,” tells still another story. “The rural police shot him in the leg with a bow and arrow,” González says. “He was dying of gangrene. He told his friend, ‘Before I die, *compadre*, take me in to get the reward.’ His friend brought him in dead and got the reward. They hung Malverde from a mesquite tree as a warning to the people.

“His first miracle was for a friend who lost some mules loaded with gold and silver,” is the way González tells it. “He asked the bones of Malverde, which were still hanging from the tree, to find his mules again. He found them. So he put Malverde’s bones in the box and went to the cemetery where the governor is buried. He bribed the guard to let him bury Malverde there. He buried him like contraband. No one knows where.”

Malverde’s shrine stands near the railroad tracks on the west side of Culiacán, well known to just about everybody in town. Nearby are Malverde Clutch & Brakes, Malverde Lumber, and two Denny’s-like cafeterias: Coco’s Malverde and Chic’s Malverde. Outside the shrine people sell trinkets, candles, and pictures. Inside the shrine are two concrete busts of the man. Malverde, supposedly a poor man from the hills, turns out to look a lot like a matinee idol—dark eyes, sleek mustache, jet black hair, resolute jaw. Near the main busts are stands of pendants, baseball hats, tapes with *corridos* to the bandit, countless picture cases with photographs of the bandit and a prayer to him in thanks, and rows of plaster busts wrapped in plastic.

To one side sits Doña Tere, rocking the day away. She is a cheerful, plump woman, made up with bright red lipstick. She, too, has her tale of faith. Eight years ago, doctors diagnosed Doña Tere with cancer. She decided not to take medicine. “I said, ‘Malverde, they say you do miracles. I’m going to ask you for a miracle. I don’t believe in you. I know I’m going to die.’” Doña Tere’s still around. “I have four Malverdes in my house,” she says. “One in the kitchen. One in the dining room. One going up the stairs and one in the bedroom. I bless myself every time I’m at the foot of the stairs.” Last time they operated on her, Doña Tere paid for two hours of music to be played to Malverde. “Rich, poor, sick, not sick—everyone comes here,” she says. “When they come here and pay for music to be played, people here say it must have gone well for them on their trip [sending drugs to the United States]. I don’t know. It’s their own private business. I don’t ask. But I’ll tell you. More people come here than

go to church. If you go to church asking for food, the priest will give you advice, but if you come here asking for food, you’ll get food.”

There was a time not so long ago when the Malverde shrine was a funky thing, awash in the artifacts of Mexican working-class life. You’d see piles of baby pictures and faded, out-of-focus Polaroids of men in cowboy hats and poorly spelled thank-you notes in twisted handwriting. There’d be slats of cardboard warping under the weight of pasted plastic flowers and photo collages of extended families. One man had left a Baggie of hair, thanking Malverde for allowing him to survive a term in San Quentin. There were artificial limbs and corncobs and a lot of photocopies of recently obtained passports. Fishermen would leave large jars containing enormous shrimp in formaldehyde—thanks for a successful catch. González remembers two different men—one left a pistol, the other an AK-47 rifle.

But that’s been changing lately. Families have built glass enclosures—in essence, shrines within a shrine. Malverde has gone a little more high-class. There isn’t as much room anymore for all those piles of homemade thank-yous and photo collages.

Still, faith in Malverde remains above all a private affair. There is no ceremony here. A constant stream of people arrive, place a candle near one of the busts, sit for a while, bless themselves, touch Malverde’s head, and leave. Some are poor. Others arrive in shiny trucks and cars, looking very middle-class.

Jesús Gastelo, a rugged, aging farmer, enters in sandals and a shirt buttoned halfway up his plump torso. In his arms is his newborn son, Sergio, now thirteen days old. Gastelo lights a candle. “I’m really old,” he says. “How old do you think I am?” Gastelo is sixty-four, once widowed, and he’s just fathered his eighth child, this with his new wife, a woman of thirty-one. A lot to thank Malverde for. “I’ve believed in Malverde since I was a little boy,” he says, dropping his index finger to his knees as an indication of how tall he was at the time that faith began.

Back then, faith in Malverde didn’t get the press it gets today. It centered around a pile of stones and pebbles, which is now about fifty yards away and across two streets. “It was just a pile of rocks and stones, like a grave,” says Gastelo. “It was where they say he was hung.”

Believers will tell you the reason there are so many of them is that Malverde

answers faith like Jesús Gastelo's. But there are other reasons. One of them is Eligio González, a fifty-year-old jack-of-all-trades who wears his "Apostle of Malverde" tag with pride. The other is a bright idea the state had in the late 1970s. Government officials decided to build new state offices on the land where people congregated to pay tribute to Malverde. Opposition to the idea was fierce. Newspaper columnists opined over the idea. "The protest lasted two years," says Gastelo. Finally, state officials were forced to provide land where the shrine now stands, and another plot for the stones and pebbles that mark his grave.

They say all of Culiacán turned out for the demolition of the pile of stones and pebbles. They say, too, that stones began to jump like popcorn and that the bulldozer operator had to get drunk to have the guts to roll over it; they say the machine broke down when it touched the grave. Finally, though, the job got done. The massive state government building now sits over Malverde's original tomb. The tomb itself was moved across the street from the shrine, at the corner of Insurgentes and 16 de Septiembre streets.

Researchers say it was during these years that the media christened Malverde as the Narcosaint. In the late 1970s Sinaloa was embroiled in the great military strike against the region's drug smugglers that was known as Operation Condor, during which the army went through the hills attacking traffickers and innocent ranchers with equal vigor; the state lost an estimated two thousand hamlets and villages during those years as people abandoned homes, land, and livestock and streamed from the hills to the cities. "The press, sharing the same view as the authorities, or perhaps so as not to be left behind when the graft was being handed out, added their two cents," says Luis Astorga, a researcher of the narcoculture who lived in Culiacán during this time. "They labeled Malverde as the 'Narcosaint.' The drug smugglers, due to their social origin, had inherited the belief in Malverde. But the media gave it a kind of yellow slant. They were really the ones who made Malverde into the drug smuggler's saint, forgetting how old the belief in him really was."

Today the pile of pebbles signifying Malverde's tomb now shares a vacant lot with Tianguis Malverde—Malverde Market—a consignment car lot where Víctor Manuel Parra and Marco Antonio Osuna will try to sell your used vehicle in exchange for a commission for themselves. The pebbles sit in the

middle of the lot, surrounded by weeds and Suburbans, Nissan pickups, Monte Carlos, and dented Volkswagens. Atop the pile is an iron cross and a weather-beaten bust of Malverde, now for some reason encased in a rusty birdcage. Like many parts of Sinaloan life, the car mart depends largely on drug money. In the fall, marijuana growers are tending their crop and about to harvest. So sales at the lot are slow, this being October. The men say they are biding their time until December and January, when the growers will have sent their loads north and have money to burn. So they have more than enough time to talk about Malverde and the tomb of stones they work around every day. "He'd rob from the rich and give to the poor. This is where they say he was hung," says Parra. "[The owner] wanted to build on this site, but he couldn't get rid of it. The soul of Malverde wouldn't permit it. They brought in machinery, but the machines broke down."

The truth, it turns out, is more mundane. José Carlos Aguilar, the lot's owner, says he wants to build a high-rise hotel or office building on the site but hasn't been able to find funding or a suitable partner. Still, if he did build on the site, Aguilar says he'd leave aside a corner of the building, or maybe a section of the hotel lobby, for the bandit's tomb. "You can't be inflaming people's sensibilities," he says.

The building dispute with the state government may have distressed many of Malverde's believers. But the faith emerged from it energized and publicized. Eligio González has built and added to the new shrine. Now it has what it lacked before: a true focal point.

González is protective of the faith's image. "All this stuff about the Narcosaint, they say it, but he's for people from all walks of life," he says. González is a small man with leathery skin and sandals. He says the outlaw Malverde cured him of gunshot wounds in 1973. But he punctuates his speech with the words "God first," so no one gets the wrong idea. "If it weren't for God, Malverde couldn't do anything," he says.

He spends his days driving through outlying villages selling newspapers and Pepsi-Cola. Pepsi-Cola, it turns out, is a stalwart Malverde sponsor. Local distributors often give González discounts so he can sell the soda at concerts and dances and keep the profits for Malverde. Once during a large encampment of campesinos outside the state building that lasted two months, he sold

four thousand cases of Pepsi. Not surprisingly, Coke products are scarce at the shrine. With the money González feeds his family, and the leftovers go to Malverde. Money taken in donations and sales at the shrine goes to help with burials—more than 9,500 so far—and to buy wheelchairs for the crippled and cots for the poor. Nor was faith in Malverde hurt when González won a raffle recently—a Volkswagen Golf car was the prize—which he promptly sold. Proceeds, he says, went to buy more cots, coffins, and blankets for poor families. (He's said to have won the national lottery twelve times.)

González is a controversial figure in Culiacán. Local reporters wonder slyly what else he might be doing with the money. There have been reports that González hasn't shared royalties from cassettes sold at the shrine with a crippled man who wrote ballads to Malverde. But if this is the case, González doesn't seem to be getting rich. He has no phone, and his clothes are humble.

"Thanks to God and Malverde, there's something for everyone," he says. "Not much, but something. Little by little we've built this. Before it was just tiny. People have put in a lot of faith. If there's no faith, there's no miracles."

—1997