CHAPTER 4

Miracles in the Desert

> They reach a point at which they have nothing of their own. They have been robbed, raped, abused, and exploited. Even their dignity has been stolen. The only reality that people cannot steal from them is their faith. For instance, a migrant said to me recently, "Thanks to God I am alive." That is not thanks to my capacity, nor to my intelligence, but thanks to God.
>
> —Scalabrinian missionary

Javier Pérez left Guatemala City in 1999. He traveled most of the journey by public transport and in the company of fellow migrants whom he met on the road. He crossed the Guatemala-Mexico border without incident and went undetected through Mexico. In Agua Prieta, Javier and a group of other first-time crossers hired two coyotes to guide them across the Arizona-Mexico border. Their guides abandoned them a day into the journey. Stranded, lost, and disoriented in the desolate desert terrain of southern Arizona, the men wandered aimlessly before running out of supplies, including their last drop of water. They resigned themselves to death. Huddled in a group, they began to pray for their souls and for those of their families. In low whispering voices—parched from the sun and barely audible from dehydration—they recited familiar prayers and prepared for death. One among the group refused to give up and implored the younger among them to push a little farther in search of help. Javier and another volunteer mustered up what little energy they had remaining and set out.

Several hours later, the scouting duo saw what they first thought was a mirage but then recognized as a miracle: a landing strip, a four-wheel-drive truck, and several men. The strangers immediately came to their rescue and provided the dehydrated travelers with water. They carried the larger group

to a highway and gas station where they were eventually picked up by U.S. Border Patrol agents. Javier and his fellow travelers were deported to Agua Prieta in the Mexican province of Sonora. Despite his unsuccessful crossing, Javier, a practicing Catholic, went to an area Presbyterian church to tell his story and to give thanks to God for listening to his prayers and granting the miracle of the men in the desert who had saved his life and the lives of his traveling companions.

In 1951, when chronicling the hardships of the cross-Atlantic journey of the millions of European immigrants who came to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Oscar Handlin wrote:

> The conditions of emigration and the hardships of the crossing were immediate sources of confusion. On the way, in the ships, the terrible disorder made troublesome any ritual observance. The prolonged lapse of unsettled time obscured the calendar; on the move, no day was individual from any other. Without the ministrations of a priest, without the sustenance of a whole community, the worshiper was limited to his own humble sources of prayer.[1]

This passage from *The Uprooted* could also describe the psychological experience and the everyday coping strategies of contemporary migrants from Latin America during their overland crossing to the United States. Migrants on the road are separated from their family and church, and far from the reach of organizations that offer help to them. In the isolated and remote stretches of the journey, many migrants rely on religion and spirituality in the form of unfamiliar churches; belief systems and culturally familiar religious activities and transformed practices; and humble prayer to help them make sense of and make bearable the traumas and hardships they encounter and sometimes overcome. While individual and group traumas that migrants from Latin America experience on the road may differ in detail, the study found that the narratives, interpretations, and explanations of their experiences are generally framed in a Christian and popular religious discourse. However, many of the everyday practices on which they rely cannot be fully explained by the different religious orientations or ideologies of the migrant. Often, these everyday coping activities reflect cultural practices and familiar memories unique to their home communities, memories and practices that are often appropriated in times of need and transformed and shaped

by the social context of the journey. In this sense, religion is a dynamic process that cannot be separated from the journey or the actions of the traveling migrants.

The migration experience of Javier and others like him compels us to consider religion outside institutional settings and look at the many ways in which migrants practice their faith in their everyday lives to muster the psychological and physical strength to cope with their journey and derive meaning from their experiences. While the perspectives of religious leaders and faith workers help explain the ways in which institutions provide social and spiritual capital to sustain migrants, omitted from these narratives is the individual agency dimension—the rich diversity of cultural practices reproduced, borrowed, transformed, and even created or improvised by journeying migrants, and the way these practices form the context in which migrants express their faith on the road. In this sense, the rituals that migrants practice tell us much about identity and the struggles that shape individual and collective experiences and propel action. These also offer believers explanations and meanings during their period of crisis.[2]

In the pages that follow, I join the company of a number of scholars of religion who study what is termed "everyday religion" by some or "la religion vecue" (lived religion) by others, which puts emphasis on religion as practice, or what David Hall says is "the thinking and doing of lay men and women."[3] As Robert Orsi explains, this perspective constitutes a reorientation of religious scholarship away from static concepts of Catholicism and Protestantism, and from the academy's long-standing fixation on denominations and congregations, toward "a study of how particular people, in particular places and times, live with, through , and against the religious idioms available to them in culture."[4] In this chapter, I take the reader once again along the migrant trail, sometimes returning to shrines and clergy introduced in earlier chapters, but now telling the story of the spiritual and religious journey through the migrants' actions rather than those of institutional actors.

During their long treks across nations, over mountains and rivers, through towns and deserts, in the remote reaches of the migrant trail, nine out of ten migrants in the study practiced religion to help them cope with the journey north and, in some cases, to understand their own survival of near-death experiences. Some, including infrequent churchgoers, practiced what they knew from their tradition in their home communities and stopped at churches along the way to attend a religious service, say a prayer, light a candle, or seek spiritual assistance from clergy. Others strayed from their migratory route to visit a shrine to give thanks for making it as far as they had or to beseech further protection for the days ahead. In the absence of holy places sanctioned by the Catholic Church, some migrants visited shrines housing popular saints that had been erected by local residents. In the absence of these shrines, some migrants improvised and spontaneously erected shrines to revered icons from their home communities in order to reproduce those cultural practices with which they are most familiar and most comfortable and to recreate relations with their sacred icons. Still others called on the companionship and protection of revered local saints and icons in their home communities to whom they had prayed for protection before their journey; in transit they wore medals around their necks depicting these saints and carried holy cards in their pockets. Some, like Javier and his fellow travelers, coped with impending death through group prayer and then interpreted their rescue from death in terms of a miracle from God. These migration miracles provided meaning and hope. They manifested themselves in particular social contexts—during periods of crisis, such as times during the journey when migrants were spared death or capture.

In situations of crisis and loss of hope, migrants turned for succor to the familiar: Christianity, its traditional and more popular belief systems and rituals, and their most revered holy icons. Sometimes, these religious expressions are transformed depending on what resources the migrant trail offers. Unable to control the situations in which they found themselves and stripped of all social and material resources, these people were so desperate to communicate with God that at times they resorted to the most humble expressions of devotion, including drawing with simple stones on rock structures familiar religious images and etchings of pleas for comfort and salvation. The religious artifacts migrants leave along the trail, in desert camps and along frontier highways where they are picked up by coyotes or family, are further testimony to the importance of faith as both resource and identity in the migration process and the fundamental ways that values, belief systems, and everyday cultural practices organize the migration journey.

Churches, Shrines, and Sacred Places along the Way

Reaching out to clergy and revered holy images and saints for counsel and guidance in the preparation and departure stages of migration was a commonly reported practice. Many migrants continued to honor this tradition during the journey. Despite the obvious logistical and legal obstacles, one of

every four undocumented migrants, Protestants and Catholics alike, visited a church or shrine or participated in an organized religious event, such as a procession, during the northward trek. Half of those who reported traveling at least some distance alone (individuals who were unable to pay for coyotes or receive help from personal networks) were especially likely to turn to the church and religious workers and clergy for material and spiritual sustenance. The religious orientation of the clergy and church was not a practical consideration when it came to migrants' requesting assistance; Protestants regularly reached out to Catholic clergy in large part because of the Catholic Church's policies of promoting outreach to journeying migrants and establishing migrant programs and centers of refuge along the migratory route.

The churches and shrines where migrants stop are situated primarily in towns and cities along international frontiers, places where provisions are available and where journeying migrants would be most likely to stay for a period of time to rest and gather needed resources such as a *coyote*, traveling companions, and supplies to continue on their northern trek. In the eastern Guatemalan town of Esquipulas, which is located only a few miles from the Honduras-Guatemala border, Honduran migrants regularly navigate the frontier and then blend in with the groups of pilgrims who travel the route to pray to El Cristo Negro at the Shrine of Nuestro Señor de Esquipulas. At the shrine, they receive provisions and blessings and purchase mementos of protection and companionship to carry with them on their journey.

Miguel, a young nonpracticing Catholic from the Honduran coastal city of San Pedro Sula, was one of the fifty or so journeying migrants who stopped by the Basilica in Esquipulas one day. Motivated by the possibility of regular work and adventure, Miguel left his hometown in the fall of 2001. Unable to afford a coyote, he decided to travel the two-thousand-mile distance to Houston by bus, train, and on foot. After leaving his hometown, he boarded a bus to the loosely guarded Guatemala-Honduras border and from there proceeded on foot for six miles before arriving in Esquipulas. At the basilica, he walked the *camarín* (the path that guides pilgrims around the altar) and paid his respects to the Cristo Negro. He then joined a group of migrants who were being shepherded by the attending vicar to the sanctuary for a group blessing. Afterward, Miguel made his way to a little store located next to the church to purchase religious items. Books about the history of Esquipulas line the store walls and the glass counter shelves are crammed with religious images of the venerated Black Christ and other well-known regional icons. Miguel made several purchases, including a glow-in-the-dark medallion of the Black Christ that he has never removed from his neck. As is the custom in many Latin American Catholic communities, the petitioner often promises to wear the holy item for a certain period after the saint or holy icon has answered a prayer.[5] Miguel vowed to wear the medallion until it fell from his neck. He firmly credits his safe arrival to the miraculous powers of El Cristo Negro and La Virgen de Guadalupe.

After crossing the Guatemala-Mexico border, the U.S.-bound migratory route takes Central American migrants to the southern Mexican town of Tapachula, where many rest and recoup for several days in one of the shelters that provide beds, food, and a change of clothing. Here, migrants may exchange coyotes, wait for additional funds to travel further, and seek spiritual nourishment. While in Tapachula, many Protestant and Catholic migrants visit one of three area Catholic churches—El Cristo de Emmaus, the main church in Tapachula, or La Iglesia de Guadalupe—to seek comfort and protection before embarking on their precarious trip through Mexico.

From Tapachula the route forks and the trail migrants follow will depend on the mode of crossing and the resources available. Some will join other migrants and head toward the Texas-Mexico border and either cross the Rio Grande or navigate the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Others, the less fortunate, will brave the Mexico-Arizona desert crossing. Brianna, a Maya woman from a rural hamlet in the highland department of Totonicapan, Guatemala, crossed the Rio Grande under the guidance of a coyote. Shortly after what she thought was a successful crossing, she found herself stranded on the U.S. side, unable to proceed because of Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) checkpoints. She turned to the spiritual anchor from her home community, a trusted evangelical pastor who had counseled her before departure. They prayed together over the phone. Similarly, Mauricio, stuck in a detention center in Laredo, Texas, called his pastor back home who prayed with him and then assured him that he would care for Mauricio's family. Later, the pastor led them in prayer as well. On rare occasions, such as a failed trip, pastors told me that they have offered financial support to the family. In both these cases, migrants relied on migration counseling from clerics from home to sustain them in their journey. The familiar spiritual and cultural space transcends national borders.

Independent migrant streams also head north from Mexico's central and western sending provinces toward the California and Arizona borders. By all accounts, one of the busiest but most deadly crossing corridors runs through the Sonoran Desert along the Arizona-Mexico border, where the desert claims hundreds of migrant lives each year. In 2007 it claimed the lives of more than 400 migrants. Most cross-border trips through the desert are launched

from the Sonora town of Altar, where the population of 16,000 faces temperatures near 120 degrees during the summer months. Altar is one of several major ports of entry along with Agua Prieta, Nogales, and San Luis. All four towns are included in the Mexican diocese of Hermosillo, which in recent years has become very involved in promoting migration ministries, especially in parishes that are situated along the border.

On any given day, hundreds of migrants flock into the dusty and sweltering town of Altar and spend several days preparing for what will be no doubt the most dangerous segment of the journey; a sixty-three-mile taxi ride to the border town of Sasabe, followed by a harrowing trek through the Altar Valley, through the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge, and, depending on the route, perhaps through the Tohono O'Odham Indian reservation. The trek takes several days and can encompass more than seventy miles, depending on the final destination. Along the way, the lucky and fortunate may stumble across a Humane Borders water station. According to Reverend Robin Hoover, the founder and president of Humane Borders, sometimes the migrants will find antlers atop the water stations, a symbol used by the local Yaqui Indians to signify "God bless you and your whole lineage." Some migrants are escorted by their coyotes on foot all the way to Tucson; others walk part of the distance to one of the main Arizona highways where they then are picked up by coyotes; still others walk a portion of the journey and stay at safe houses until they are guided to Phoenix.

Like its southern border counterpart, Tapachula, Altar has developed in recent years a booming migration industry to capitalize on the thousand-plus transit migrants who are in town on any given day. Altar has attracted scores of short-distance coyotes and produced all sorts of local entrepreneurs, many of whom cater to the spiritual needs of journeying migrants. Vendors sell an array of religious artifacts, such as medallions, devotionals, T-shirts, gallons of "holy water," and even baseball caps adorned with the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe to protect them from the sun and other desert dangers.

While in Altar, transit migrants may stay at the Casa del Migrante, where Father Castaneda provides for their humanitarian needs and offers classes to educate migrants on crossing perils and their rights if apprehended. If at all possible, however, coyotes avoid the Casas del Migrante where they are not welcomed by religious workers, and instead place their human cargo in small guesthouses or private homes that have sprouted up in recent years to take advantage of the transit traffic. The coyote who guided Aleksy from her hometown of Chiantla, Guatemala, to Altar, Mexico, dropped her and the

rest of his cargo off at a private home where the migrants were instructed to remain indoors and wait for another group of coyotes who would take them across the desert to Arizona. Aleksy and her traveling companions spent much of their time "praying before a statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe," which rested on a small altar in the room where the migrants were being held. Aleksy explained to me the importance of the patroness of Mexico in her journey. "Before I left Guatemala, I prayed to my patron Virgin of Candelaria. Many in our group also carried cards of the patron saints of their communities. But in Altar, we turned to the Virgin of Guadalupe, as she takes special care of those crossing Mexico into the United States." Since Aleksy's arrival in the United States, however, she has returned to honoring her patron saint, La Virgin de Candelaria. Interestingly, then, the icon of devotion for Aleksy and other migrants transformed with place along the journey, which is shaped by culture and by situation and influenced by pending danger.

While in Altar migrants flock to the local church, Our Lady of Guadalupe, to seek comfort, protection, and guidance for what will be the most dangerous leg of the trip—the crossing of the Sonoran Desert. The church provides a sacred space where migrants can reproduce their relations with the sacred and create solidarity with other migrants. As is customary when venerating an icon, in a humble act of sacrifice migrants crawl along the marble aisle on their knees to reach the altar. Some fill the church to hear the daily mass by Father Castaneda, who includes in each service a special "Prayer for Our Migrant Brothers and Sisters." Others simply light votive candles to request safe passage and then settle themselves in pews to pray. Melissa, a young Honduran woman and Catholic who traveled alone with her child, prayed to the Virgin of Guadalupe to help her find the companionship of others on the road.

Amelia, a mother who left behind her children in her hometown in Guatemala in 2003 to join her husband in North Carolina, prayed for help with the concerns of any parent who faces an uncertain future, including the possibility of death. Summoning up her memories of the harrowing desert journey she had tried desperately to forget, Amelia told me of how in the Altar church she prayed that she would one day see her four children again (she still hasn't). She prayed that if she did not survive the trip, her children would forgive her and understand why she had done what she did. She prayed that she had done the right thing by not saying good-bye to them the morning she had departed. She prayed that her parents, sister, and brother-in-law would care for her children in her absence. Then she prayed for her safety and beseeched La Virgen to now care for and protect her sister-in-law

with whom she traveled, whose health had faltered in recent days and who grew weaker by the hour. Worried that the coyote would leave behind the pair, she also prayed that the coyote would be sympathetic to her sister-in-law's failing condition while crossing the desert. Amelia came to grips with the real possibility of death through private prayer with God. She surrendered to God's will and released control of the situation. "I realized that the decision as to whether we would live or die was in God's hands," she said. Amelia would later tell me that when her sister-in-law became too weak to travel further, the coyote and male fellow travelers took turns carrying the heavyset woman on their backs for several hours until they were picked up by another coyote driving a van along a highway in southern Arizona. She steadfastly credits God, La Virgen de Guadalupe, and her hometown patron, San Antonio, for granting them a trustworthy coyote, honest and respectful travel companions, and a safe arrival.

Although most of the journeying migrants in the study limited their visits to churches in towns they passed through on the migratory route, some took additional steps to visit Catholic and popular shrines of their most revered icons, saints, and *almas* (souls). By far the most visited shrine on the journey was the Basílica of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the national icon of Mexico, which sits in the enormous compound of the same name on the hill of Tepeyac, just outside Mexico City. Some of the migrants who visited La Virgen had flown to Mexico City from their home countries (e.g., El Salvador) and made a point of visiting La Virgen before embarking on the next stage of their journey; others, such as Mexican migrants, had gone out of their way to pay their respects to the Queen of Mexico and most revered icon in all of the Americas. Once at the basilica, visiting migrants followed the customary pilgrim tradition of purchasing and lighting small votive candles in honor of their patroness and leaving handwritten petitions seeking her protection on the journey. They also purchased commemorative artifacts of the Virgin of Guadalupe to carry with them on their journey. It was in the basilica shop that Arturo, a young Honduran, purchased an international phone card with the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe on one side of it.

Not all the established shrines visited by journeying migrants are erected or sanctioned by the Catholic Church. In the northern Mexico border area, a popular cultural tradition practiced by many area residents involves seeking assistance from almas, or victim intercessors who have suffered at the hands of the larger society and are believed to have been judged innocent by God, and thus possess supernatural powers. Although they are not recognized as saints by the Catholic Church, these almas—Pedro Blanco, a gambler; Jesus Malverde, a bandit; and Juan Soldado, wrongly accused of murder—are familiar popular saints of the people.[6] In the northern Mexican town of Tijuana, several popular shrines have been raised in public spaces by area residents in honor of these almas that protect border crossers. By far the most revered of these border saints is Juan Soldado (John the Soldier), whose colorful image sits in one of two rundown but heavily visited shrines in a public cemetery. Each year on June 24, the cemetery is packed with pilgrims who come to request petitions or to pay a *manda*—a debt for a favor granted by their alma. As is tradition, Juan's followers are often accompanied by musicians who serenade him in thanks for a favor granted.

According to legend, Juan Castillo Morales, a private in the Mexican army, was wrongly accused of raping and murdering a young girl. The real culprit was allegedly Juan Soldado's commanding officer who, in order to keep him from testifying against him, shot him while trying to escape, a common practice at the time also known as *la ley de fuga* (the law of the flight).[7] According to the legend recounted to me by Rosario, the vendor of religious artifacts at the cemetery, Juan's commanding officer told Juan that if he could manage to run the distance across a marked line, he would be set free. Juanito, as he is affectionately referred to by his followers, managed to cross the line, but nonetheless he was executed. To many of the faithful, like Jesus, Juanito's betrayal allowed him to cross the distance from alleged criminal to revered icon. At the same time, the line that Juan Soldado himself crossed has come to symbolize the border separating Mexico from the United States. Over the ensuing years, Juanito came to be known as a source of comfort and hope among the poor, destitute, and illegal migrants in particular, to whom he comforts and protects in their border crossings. Among border residents, from towns in northern Mexico to Los Angeles, California, he is recognized as the patron of the migrants. Juan Soldado's well-established popularity equals if not exceeds his southern counterpart, St. Toribio in Jalisco, and he is revered as a new and popular coyote saint of migrants. Crowds of people, including many traveling and returning migrants, flock to the shrine of Juan Soldado, erected above his gravesite, to leave ex-votos, petitions, and other religious artifacts.[8]

To Juanito's devotees, he represents a companion on the undocumented trail, someone to protect the migrants from authorities; the migration miracles he has granted crossers are legendary. According to Rosario, in 1999 a young woman left her hometown in El Salvador for California, where she had family. Under the guidance of a coyote, María and a group of other migrants traveled across two international borders before arriving without incident in

a small town in southern California. From there she and several of her fellow travelers boarded a bus for Los Angeles, where she had plans to reunite with her sister and brother-in-law. To avoid detection, the migrants strategically separated from one another. María sat in the center of the bus and shortly thereafter fell asleep. She was awakened by the commotion of several persons boarding the bus, and immediately recognized them by their uniforms as U.S. Border Patrol agents. The officials made their way down the aisle, questioning persons and asking some for identification. María closed her eyes and prayed in silence. Just before reaching her seat, the agents stopped abruptly, turned around, and left the bus. Relieved but nonetheless stunned by her good fortune, María turned to her right and was greeted by the gentle and reassuring face of a young soldier. Several days later, in the safety of a Los Angeles apartment, she recounted the miraculous story to her sister who, upon hearing the account, quickly rushed to another room and returned with a card bearing the face and name of Juan Soldado. Some time later, after obtaining legal residency in the United States, María traveled to the shrine of Juan Soldado in Tijuana on June 24, the Day of Juan Soldado, to thank her guardian angel for the migration miracle he had granted her, a safe and successful crossing.

Located on the side of the main road to Tecate, some ten kilometers outside the city of Tijuana, sits the crude and neglected shrine of Jesus Malverde, the Mexican Robin Hood, an alleged bandit from Sinaola who, on May 5, 1909, was hanged for his crimes. The small, rundown shed in which the frame of Jesus Malverde hangs is chock-full of candles, pictures, and handwritten petitions. Two of his devotees we interviewed at the shrine had come to beseech their alma for good fortune on their jobs, but the shrine is also a frequent stopping point, we were assured, for migrants, coyotes, and drug smugglers. As one of the men told us, "For many he was a thief, but for the poor he is a saint. He robbed from the rich and gave to the poor." Because Juan Soldado and Jesus Malverde are seen by supplicants as poor victims of an unjust society, these almas provide a persuasive spiritual and moral narrative for undocumented crossers.

Commemoration, Companionship, Solidarity, and Prayer on the Journey

Journeying migrants not only visit but also create shrines. They erect them to remember and honor companions who have died along the trail and to provide for themselves and those who come after a sacred place to rest and nourish their bodies and souls during times of desperation. Sometimes the shrines are erected spontaneously and with religious artifacts the migrants carry with them, such as hand-size crosses and *veladoras* (glass-encased candles with images of saints). Other times, the migrants rely on the objects available to them along the trail, such as stones and rocks. In migrant campsites in southern Arizona, desert areas where migrants wait to be picked up by coyotes for the last or next-to-last leg of the trip, weary travelers are often forced to abandon the many supplies and artifacts they have brought with them. At these sites alongside empty water jugs, cans of sardines, and baby carriages, they leave prayer books, Bibles, candles, crosses, scapulars hanging from tree branches—ample materials to spontaneously create, when necessary, makeshift shrines along the way. A number of migrants also reported coming across small shrines made of stones memorializing those that died on the trail, usually crosses adorned with the remaining belongings of the victim and sometimes a holy artifact. Some of the deceased had been buried; all that remained of others were skeletons. It is customary for traveling migrants to stop and pay their respects to the dead who have gone before them.[9]

It is also customary to stop and pay respects to shrines of revered icons migrants encounter along the journey. Carved into the exterior wall of a migrant shelter in Altar is a mosaic of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Below it stands a small altar made of stones and crosses in memory of people who died in the desert trying to reach the United States. Migrants regularly pay their respects to those who have perished before them before continuing on their journey. On the road from Altar to Sasabe in the Sonoran Desert sits a small shrine that houses a concrete altar, a wrought-iron cross, statues of La Virgen de Guadalupe and St. Jude, and dozens of small votive candles, some lit, some long melted. Nobody knows who erected the simple shrine—perhaps a devout area resident, a religious worker, or family member of a migrant whose life was claimed in that desert spot—but it is visited by hundreds of migrants each day as they make their way to Sasabe. From here they will begin their dangerous trek through the desert. By all accounts it is now customary for the van taking the migrants from Altar to Sasabe to stop at the five-foot-high makeshift shrine, perhaps the last place migrants worship before they attempt to cross the border, and for riders to descend to say a prayer for the miracle of a safe crossing and pay their respects to the patroness of Mexico and the Saint of Lost Causes before heading north.

In the absence of religious artifacts with which to erect shrines to communicate with God and their saints, migrants seeking guidance, protection, and

respite transform their surroundings into shrines of worship and comfort. Under several trestles along a southern highway of Arizona, migrants regularly make camp after the long desert trek from Sasabe, and wait for coyotes and transportation to take them to an interior urban city such as Phoenix or Tucson. Here, with the sharp edges of rocks and stones, the migrants have engraved their pleas for help from the divine. Worn and shadowy from wind and weather, some images and words are too faint to make out; other messages are clear, and their themes and images are powerful reminders of the fundamental presence of faith among those who journey north. As we traced migrant art and shrines along the Arizona-Mexico border, on one trestle we came across crude life-size engravings of the image of Jesus. Carved with stones into the concrete wall under and alongside the images are messages of hope, pleas for help, and calls of desperation: *"Fey"* (misspelled faith); "I am in your hands Lord"; *"Paz en Cristo"* (Peace in Christ); and in English, "God is Love."

Migrants also find comfort and safety in the religious artifacts they carry with them on the journey. One young missionary who directs a shelter for migrants along the Mexico-California border, emphasized the regularity of this custom and explained the crucial role that these sacred objects play in the dangerous migration journey: "Migrants always carry something with them. It is God on the road. A religious artifact represents companionship. It keeps them close to God on the road, especially in times of despair, when they are lost or stranded."

We recall how Cecilia and her travel companions relied on their holy cards and the prayers written on the back of them to cope with and endure the psychological and physical trauma they underwent in their crossing. The symbols of divine companionship are numerous and include rosaries, crosses, holy cards, medallions, scapulars, amulets, devotionals, Bibles, candles, and statues. Sometimes family members provide migrants with the artifacts before their departure, such as personalized scapulars. Other times the journeyers purchase them during visits to pilgrimage sites. More often, however, religious leaders from the migrants' home communities provide departing migrants with artifacts commemorating familiar patron saints and icons, in part as protection and companionship and in part to encourage the migrant to remain spiritually and materially connected to his or her hometown long after departure. Sometimes the religious artifacts ward off dangerous situations. One young Mexican man who was stopped by INS in southern Arizona reported that he was being repeatedly kicked by his apprehender and

attacked by the agents' dog until the migrant turned over and revealed a Bible pressed closely to his chest. The agent immediately called off the dog and stopped the beating.

The objects that Catholics and Protestants carry with them differ, reflecting their distinctive religious traditions, though exceptions to this rule were abundant in the study. While evangelical Protestants simply wore crosses and carried Bibles with them on the journey, Catholics carried a litany of sacred objects—crosses, rosaries, devotionals, scapulars, and holy cards. A number of migrants who were raised Catholic and later joined Pentecostal churches reported that they, too, carried medallions of saints and revered Catholic images with them, revealing the lasting cultural influence of local religion as well as their need to exhaust all sources of strength and comfort, regardless of religious identity. On the dangerous journey, it was not uncommon for Protestant and Catholic devotional cultures and practices to converge.

Sometimes indigenous culture trumps religious identity. Maya Guatemalans followed traditional cultural customs and often wore homemade amulets containing special herbs believed to protect them on the journey. As one young Maya woman from the western highlands of Guatemala explained, "This practice is part of our culture. I know that our local priest wouldn't approve of it, so we didn't tell him. But my mother made it for me and I wore it. It was a comfort during the long train ride in Mexico, when I was forced to hide for many hours in a large spool in a train boxcar." Another Maya woman, from southern Mexico, reported that before she left her mother placed around her neck an elaborate coral and glass-beaded necklace interlaced with *dijes* or *pixcoy* (detailed silver miniature objects such as bells or coins) to keep her from harm. Like Miguel, who promised to wear his medallion of the Black Christ until it fell from his neck, Marta promised to wear her necklace until she returned home and could give it back to her mother.

When visiting the Centro Madre Assunta, a Scalabrinian shelter for female migrants in Tijuana, Mexico, I interviewed eight women who had sought temporary refuge there while working to earn enough money either to hire a coyote to cross into the United States or return to their home communities. The traveling companions of some had sought refuge in the adjacent shelter for men; others, however, had traveled in groups formed on the journey or with their children, who sought temporary refuge with them at the shelter. The women identified themselves as practicing Catholics and hailed from different countries, including Venezuela, Colombia, El Salvador, and Mexico. Their reasons for migration varied as did their future plans.

What bound the women together in solidarity on the trail, however, was their reliance on shared Christian belief systems and cultural customs in preparing for and coping with the journey, including the practice of carrying religious artifacts of revered virgins, Christ, or patron saints for companionship. All the women reported that before departing their hometowns they had visited shrines to request protection from local patron saints. Several also requested final blessings from attending pastors. Three of the women had visited the sanctuary of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. All but one of the women carried an array of religious artifacts in sealed plastic baggies to protect them on their journeys. One young woman from Venezuela produced a rosary and prayer book containing the prayers of St. Peter, who is known in her country as the guardian of travelers. She reported that when she found herself in a situation of danger or fear, she turned to her rosary for solace and safety. The women from Guadalajara carried rosaries along with holy cards of the town's Virgin of Zapopan who, as they said, was their spiritual companion during the journey. One young woman proudly displayed her medallion featuring the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe; inscribed on the back were the words "La Virgen siempre me cuida"—"The virgin always takes care of me."

The narrative of a familiar patron saint or icon as companion on the road was a recurrent one told by migrants. Recall that at the shrine of St. Toribio in the dusty town of Santa Ana de Guadalupe, Jalisco, we interviewed seasoned migrants, some of whom had a long history of migration to the United States. They frequently referred to their "coyote saint" as a "spiritual companion" on whom they relied during the journey. Several of the migrants referred to St. Toribio as a new saint, who in part now replaced or at least competed with the role of protector previously played by the Virgin of Guadalupe or the Virgen de San Juan de los Lagos, located in the nearby town of the same name. Carlos, a thirty-year-old man from Aguas Calientes, Jalisco, and a seasoned migrant, claimed that he "felt him" during the journey. The comfort of St. Toribio's companionship gave him the strength to "travel back and forth between California and Mexico without fear." Others firmly believed in the miraculous powers of St. Toribio who, they steadfastly assert, grants safe passage to migrants who travel with scant resources. These beliefs are reaffirmed through folklore and narratives of his unexplained appearance to stranded migrants and miraculous powers of guiding them to safety, which are recounted over and over by the shrine's priests, keeper of miracles, and throngs of devotees. As one young man related, "I hear of many people

who have made it safely on their trip, and they all pray to San Toribio and the Lord. They believe they made it to the United States because of San Toribio. And so do I. It's a miracle." Like so many of the miracles recounted by migrants, these, too, are manifested during periods of crisis, episodes during the journey when migrants are spared death or apprehension. Their steadfast belief in the companionship powers of St. Toribio allows his believers to transcend place—the state-imposed boundaries separating Mexico from California—and enter into a spiritual space where they feel they can derive protection and companionship.

To fill the long stretches of time and loneliness during what must feel like an endless journey, both Catholic and Protestant migrants in the study drew strength and sustenance from reading familiar passages from their Bibles and prayers from the devotionals that were provided to them by their clergy or by religious workers at shrines and shelters they visited. From southern Mexico to the U.S. border, numerous Mexican churches, pilgrimage shrines, and migrant shelters sell to their departing Catholic flock for a few pesos the *Devocionario del Migrante* (Migrants Prayer Book), introduced in chapter 1. Each version of the devotional varies somewhat, reflecting the concerns and needs of individual dioceses, but most include at the very least a series of prayers to meet the needs and allay the concerns of journeying migrants, including individual prayers for parents, children, and spouses in home communities and for those who fall ill or perish on the road. The devotionals also contain prayers for migrants who miss services while traveling, and include prayers to encourage national and local level allegiance (for "my country and government") and an introductory letter from diocese archbishops in which migrants are encouraged to remember and to stay in touch with local patron saints or icons. The more recently published devotionals are more sophisticated in language and have been expanded to include special migrant rosaries, Migrants Acts of Contrition, and even a Migrant Way of the Cross.

All the devotionals include contact information for shelters and human rights and legal aid services along the border, and have empty lined pages for making notes and leaving messages to family and hometown priests, especially in case of death. These devotionals recognize and may even be said to embrace the mobility of migrant flows, especially their transnational character, and as such help migrants reproduce Catholic belief systems and local veneration. They help as well to keep the migrant spiritually and emotionally linked to Catholicism and home, both during the journey and in the places they eventually settle in the United States.

Some migrants we spoke to chose not to carry religious items with them, claiming no need for these artifacts since their savior was, as some put it, "in my heart when I traveled." For these migrants, some of whom are evangelical Protestants and believe that the spirit of God is within them, individual prayer alone was their coping strategy. Graciela left her hometown in the department of San Miguel, El Salvador, in 1992. She traveled the distance with a group of *paisanos* from her home community. Along the way, the group, which was largely Catholic, stopped at the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico City to pay homage to the patroness and request protection. Several of her companions purchased medallions of the virgin but Graciela chose not to. As she explained, "God is in my heart and my soul, and he was with me all the way. Every hour of every day I prayed to him for my safe arrival. I lost track of time on the journey, we all did, but at least I had God with me."

José, a young Mexican migrant, crossed the Nuevo Laredo-Laredo border in 2001. Before he left Nuevo Laredo, he, his companions, and their coyote attended mass and silently prayed for their safety. As he explained, prayer became his coping strategy to alleviate the unbelievably stressful situation in which he found himself once the group set out for Houston. "I was placed under the floorboard of the car, where passengers rest their feet. I lost track of time and all that kept me going was prayer. I prayed that I would not pass out, that we would not have a car accident. I counted the number of rosaries I said on the way to Houston."

Both José and Graciela experienced what Oscar Handlin referred to as a period in which a "prolonged lapse of unsettled time obscured the calendar."[10] Hours and days become indistinguishable and the journey can no longer be measured in terms of time. Numerous migrants in the study sample couldn't remember how long the journey took, but they could recall their regimens of prayer and ritual. At some point, then, only their faith, belief systems, and religious and spiritual practices sustain the migrants on their journey. In the case of Graciela and José, prayer defined time and structured the journey. For some, then, migration becomes a spiritual journey.

Group prayer was also a common resource on the road. In times of desperation, stranded migrants drew on their shared belief systems and the strength of the larger group to cope with the fear and gain some control over their situation. Praying together enhanced group solidarity through providing a common identity.[11] María, a young Protestant woman from Mexico City, traveled to the Arizona-Mexico border with a group of strangers and under the guidance of a coyote in 2000. Once they reached the border, they were transferred to a pair of coyotes, whom they followed across the desert. As she explained, "We were lost. We had been in the desert for too long and we all knew we were in trouble. We lost track of time. One among us asked that we pray together and so we did. Even one of the coyotes prayed with us, and then asked us to forgive him for the hardships he had inflicted upon us. We were at the point of passing out when I thought I saw a cross. The sign inspired us and we continued. We were saved."

A religious worker recounted another story in which a group of migrants were traveling together and found themselves in a near-death situation. One among the group asked the others to join him in prayer. He then told the group, "If you are not a believer, then leave the group." No one left the group; they arrived safely in the United States, but were later deported to Mexico. Here, a shared belief system established a sense of moral order and control within the group; believers provided both social support for one another and guidelines for religious observance on the road.[12] Again, common belief structures were essential to controlling the situation, and an important element in that structure is the belief in miracles. Stranded migrants repeatedly interpreted escapes from death and safe returns as miracles—as signs of hope that fortified them and agents that propelled them to try again. The powerful effect of miracles on hope, fortitude, and action was expressed over and over. "If I made it once, I can make it again, since God is watching over me," or, "We wouldn't have gotten as far as we did if we hadn't been watched over by God. Next time, he will let us get closer to Houston."

Summary

Faith, which nurtures hope, fortifies migrants with the strength to cope both psychologically and physically with their journey. Far from home communities and the familiar and trusted institutions on which they have always relied, they depend on one another and their common belief systems and familiar religious customs and practices, especially prayer, to help them overcome, understand, and make bearable the traumas and uncertainties they face. Whenever feasible, migrants seek out churches and shrines for spiritual sustenance from clergy and their revered icons. Visiting shrines along the migrant trail allow migrants to envision and re-create their relations with God

and their trusted icons. Absent these institutions, they endure long stretches on the road, thousands of miles and days and weeks during which they regularly face isolation, loss of hope, and too often loss of life, in situations that are beyond their control. To cope with the loneliness, the despair, and the physical danger, they rely on divine companionship, invoked through collective rituals, and group and individual prayer. These practices, observed far from the walls of organized religion, show us how migrants find their miracles in the desert.

CHAPTER 5

La Promesa

After coyotes sealed Cecilia and her sister Margot in a poorly ventilated truck and then exposed them to a near-death experience with drug smugglers, they finally guided the two women across the Mexico-California border. There Cecilia was reunited with her husband, Juan, at the Days Inn in San Isidro, California. Juan had arrived without incident and a day ahead of the women; the extra protection purchased at considerable cost had not, after all, guaranteed a less dangerous journey for Cecilia and Margot. Upon their reunion at the hotel, the three migrants got down on their knees and gave thanks to God and the Virgin of Guadalupe for their good fortune. Cecilia then called her mother to let her know that her daughters and son-in law had arrived safely. When her mother heard the joyful news, she knelt before the home altar and also gave thanks to the Virgin of Guadalupe. Then she blew out the two white veladoras of the virgin's image that she had lit before her daughters' departure to illuminate the path that would guide them to safety in the United States. Her mother then relayed news of their arrival to the local priest in Puebla who had blessed the young women before their departure. Once family and clergy had been notified of safe passage, Cecilia, Margot, and Juan made their way to the home of Cecilia's aunt in Los Angeles, who accompanied them to her Catholic Church. Again Cecilia gave thanks to her savior for safe passage. "Each week while I was living in Los Angeles I went to mass and there I always thanked God and La Virgen for protecting me and making sure that nothing bad happened to me on the road."

When I first met Cecilia in 2003 and told her of my project, it was several months before she mustered up the strength to tell, for the first time, her harrowing experience in the desert. In her account, which she told in tears, she pledged a continued vigil to her guardians who had protected her during her journey. Until she could return home, she frequently prayed to her

the arrival of the Undocumented Christ and created a cultural space for his followers. For many, the ceremony represented the long-awaited reunion with their national patron from whom they had been separated since leaving their native land.

Summary

The promesa is a powerful force in the northbound migration of many to the United States. Before leaving their home communities to undertake the long and risky journey, most migrants, Catholic and Protestant alike, make vows of reciprocity. In exchange for a safe passage, migrants, their families, and their clergy pledge favors to sacred figures: to privately observe a religious ritual at a home altar; to publicly enter a sacred place on one's knees to demonstrate a sacrifice; to send an ex-voto of thanks to a religious shrine in the home community; and/or to observe simultaneous rituals with family in home and host communities. Some migrants promise the extraordinary—to embark on a costly and long pilgrimage to the home community to thank their protector personally and to leave an ex-voto drawing, a lock of hair, or other cherished object as fulfillment of the vow.

Migrants may temporarily fulfill these promises by visiting shrines that house replicas of familiar images that have been brought to the United States by other migrants, priests from home communities, and international brotherhoods. Sometimes immigrant devotees reproduce their revered icons in their own images, which indirectly promote civic engagement and common membership that cuts across ethnic and national groups. In recent years some of these images have been transformed by followers to reflect the plight of the undocumented people that honor them.

The promise is not completely fulfilled until the migrant returns home to pay homage to the sacred figure in the original shrine in which the pledge was made. By then vows of reciprocity have been transformed by new achievements and milestones for which the migrant may be thankful as well. These, too, are included in the promises that have now been transformed through the migration experience, becoming more expansive over time and all powerful in helping the migrant sustain ties to the homeland. In this way, promises nurture spirituality through the journey and beyond.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

Myrna left her home in El Salvador in 1990. Before departing for the dangerous overland journey to the United States, her mother gave her a cross to wear for protection and then together they went to the local church to pray. She, her cousin, and a friend traveled by bus to San Salvador and by air to Mexico City, where they planned to meet the coyote who would guide them through Mexico and across the Mexico-Texas border. While in Mexico City, the trio made their way to the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe, where they joined other pilgrims and made their way to the image to pray for their safety. At the basilica's store, Myrna's cousin and friend bought holy cards of the virgin to accompany them on their journey. Myrna chose not to purchase a religious memento, instead relying on the cross given to her by her mother and on the presence of God, who she said is always in her heart and soul. The trip from El Salvador to Washington, D.C., their final destination, took several weeks. Along the trial, they experienced exhaustion, heat, and hunger, but survived, as she said, through God's will. Since Myrna's arrival in Washington, she has married, become a naturalized citizen, visited her mother in El Salvador, and arranged for her son to join her in the United States. She credits her safe journey and all her subsequent migration milestones to God.

Each year hundreds of thousands of unauthorized migrants come to the United States in search of work. Most are poor laborers from Mexico and the Central American countries of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, who usually have no recourse but to leave behind family and community and attempt the increasingly dangerous journey. Until now, scholars have explained their migration undertaking and experiences along the journey in economic and social terms, reflecting in large part the type of questions social scientists have developed to understand and justify migration experiences. I, too, found

that under questioning, most migrants will cite some combination of push-pull economic factors to explain their migration, such as declining opportunities in the home community coupled with higher wages in the United States; when asked why they migrated to a particular U.S. town or city, they most often told me the choice was made because of friends and family who live there. But when I asked how they managed to survive the hardships of the crossing, their most frequent and fervent answer was, "God's help."

This book has focused on an unexplored dimension of the migration undertaking—the powerful influence of religion. Religion does not explain why the individual people decided to migrate, nor does it directly determine whether they successfully made it to the United States. Yet, as a powerful guiding, coping, protective, and mediating force, religion did shape how these migrants formed their decisions, how they decided on the timing of their departures, how they experienced the journey, and ultimately how they made sense of their place in the migration process. And, for some, their faith, expressed in the everyday religious and cultural practices along the migrant trail, and with the help of mediating religious institutions that provided for them, did, in fact, fortify them with the willpower to persevere and ultimately reach the United States.

To date, historic and contemporary literature on religion and migration has focused on how religious institutions shape the immigrants' incorporation experience, highlighting how places of worship comfort newcomers and ease their adaptation to the United States, while at the same time helping them to maintain their ethnic roots and stay connected to their homelands.[1] In their comprehensive survey of the scholarship on religion and migration, Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut show that the classic and contemporary literature offers abundant accounts of the buffering, integrative, and at times transformative roles of religion in immigrant incorporation. Absent from this scholarship are any studies devoted to how religion interacts with earlier stages of the migration process, in sending communities and along the journey.[2] In *Migration Miracle* I have illustrated the powerful reflexive role of religion in earlier and unexplored stages of the migration process, including decision making and the departure, the journey, and the arrival. I have also shown how religion—in its role as protector, companion, and mediator in the migration undertaking—is itself transformed, becoming stronger and more dynamic during the course of the journey.

Within this larger narrative, I have portrayed migrants as agents in the creation and transformation of religious and cultural practices, highlighting

the centrality of practices that Central American and Mexican migrants perform outside the structure of organized churches, in sacred spaces, in public displays of commemoration, in the privacy of their homes, and in the long stretches of the northbound journey. For many Latinos, including migrants, religion is foremost about practicing folk, popular, and domestic activities that, while influenced by institutional context, are often expressed in ways that are shaped by place, time, and circumstance.[3] Reaching beyond traditional church membership lines, prospective and journeying migrants alike often undertake these cultural and everyday religious practices with those they most often depend on and have come to know and trust—spiritual companions, family, clergy, community, and fellow travelers. Thus this study not only moves beyond the story of religion in the settlement and adaptation experience of immigrants, but also represents a departure from denominational, congregational and institutional studies that have dominated much research on religion and migration.[4]

In this final chapter I revisit the stages of migration and discuss the ways in which the religious dimension of migration interacts with its economic, social and cultural dimensions. Within this discussion I highlight what I believe are the major mechanisms and processes through which religious institutions and local clergy, but especially the everyday religious and cultural practices of migrants, influence how and when migrants make the decision to migrate, prepare for the undertaking, negotiate the journey, and ultimately understand and interpret their migration experiences.

Religion as Guide and Support

Neoclassical theory and the new economics of migration are models that rely primarily on economic factors to explain why people move. According to these microlevel accounts, individuals alone or in conjunction with family members in the home community make a cost-benefit analysis between the places of origin and potential destinations, including an assessment of intervening factors, the psychological costs of leaving family and community, and the difficulty of making the trip; they migrate if the net benefit anticipated—usually higher wages—is greater at the destination.[5] Network theory complements economic models of decision making and broadens the social actors involved in decision making.[6] According to network theory, when migrants are all set to move, they will, if they can, activate their personal networks at areas of destination. That is, once the network connections linking sending

and receiving communities reach a critical level, prospective departing migrants draw on the assistance provided by friends and family in the United States, which reduces the costs of migration and initiates departure. Cultural models of migration incorporate community tradition into the decision making process. According to the culture of migration explanation, in migrant sending communities with an established history and strong tradition of international migration, aspirations to migrate are elevated, and for many young adults the event becomes a rite of passage.[7]

Yet the decision to migrate in the contemporary world is even more complex than presented in economic or social network models of decision making. For the undocumented migrants in this study, intervening factors weighed painfully on their minds. The psychological cost of leaving family in the face of a real possibility of not seeing them again because of the risks of crossing two heavily-guarded borders was a fundamental consideration. Thus the decision as to whether to migrate was too great to leave solely to self or family. Even the practical help of seasoned family and friends in receiving communities could not resolve the balance of enormous psychological and human costs. In other words, the social capital—financial assistance and information about the journey—derived from the migrants' personal social networks seemed insufficient to substantially reduce the physical and psychological costs associated with today's more dangerous journey. As a result, these migrants increasingly turned to religion and its resources for spiritual support and guidance in the decision-making process, and clergy and places of worship in home communities adapted to the needs of their flock.

The presence of religion as a source of guidance and support reveals itself to different degrees and in various ways during the decision-making process that evolves as migrants' considerations shift with changing sets of opportunities, attitudes, and social relations.[8] Throughout these deliberations, migrants regularly turn to God and to clergy for counsel and sustenance. For some, this will consist of saying simple prayers for safety and fortitude, but for others who have a strong religious foundation in their home communities, the religious interaction is much greater and more intense—even to the point of perceiving divine intervention via a "sign" or "message from God" indicating that migration plans may move forward. The very religious may postpone trips until they receive these messages. Among migrants in this study, divine signs or messages took many forms, ranging from confirmation through reading the Scriptures, to approval by a local pastor, to endorsement from a family member, to securing a coyote and even borrowing a visa. Signs

can be variable and are influenced by faith, place, and culture. Signs are important not only because people believe in them but because they are powerful agents of action, in this case influencing the timing of migration.[9]

Religion as a guiding and supporting force reveals itself in the second stage of the migration undertaking—leave taking. The decision to leave is more than an individual or household affair. Migrants rely heavily on migration counseling from those they know and trust: local clergy. Approval from local clergy, often in the form of final blessings, offers enormous psychological empowerment to prospective migrants. These official blessings constitute a spiritual travel permit that, in the mind of the receiver, may come close to if not exceed the value of an official visa or passport. Migration counseling sanctions what is otherwise an unauthorized act. So powerful is their faith in God's sanction that it is invoked in a popular Guatemalan ballad, "El Mojado" ("The Wetback"). The following verse was recounted to me by Aleksy: "If the universal visa is extended the day that we are born and expires at the time of our death, then why do they persecute you, el mojado, since the consulate of the heavens already gave you permission?"[10]

Migrants and their families are active agents in leave-taking rituals, practicing, reproducing, and even transforming popular religious rituals so that revered saints and icons will guide and accompany migrants on their journeys and so that travelers may remain connected to homeland and family. Like most of the religious practices observed by the migrants in this study, departure rituals are strongly shaped by place and culture. In rural Catholic communities in Mexico and Central America, for example, many mothers light candles and place them on a homemade altar alongside a revered icon before a family member's departure, and keep the flame burning until their child's safe arrival, providing hope, presence, and finality for the journeying migrant.

Migrants and their families also seek protection on the journey by traveling the sacred geography of their homelands, making pilgrimages to national and local shrines and sacred places seeking counsel before departure. These pilgrimages are also influenced by faith and culture. In evangelical sending communities in Guatemala and elsewhere, prospective migrants turn to ayunos, retreats, and prayer camps to prepare for the journey.[11] In Catholic communities throughout Central America and Mexico, departing migrants often make pilgrimages to familiar shrines where they deposit petitions requesting safety during their trip and well-being for their families, and make promises to national and local saints in exchange for safe travel.

The caretakers of these shrines and other churches throughout the region have also created rituals and transformed sacred images to mark the departures of their flock and to encourage them to stay close to home and to their faith. In this sense religious institutions in sending communities foster spirituality and sustain emigration. Recognizing that migration is a way of life in their communities and motivated to keep their flocks linked to the home community, local dioceses, parishes, and the priests who care for these shrines increasingly accommodate emigration. In many parishes, clergy counsel migrants and provide departing blessings to them. In many parishes throughout Mexico and in some sending communities in El Salvador and Honduras, clergy celebrate the Day of the Migrant to commemorate in part the hardships that journeying migrants endure; the Day of the Absent Sons is celebrated to provide solace to parents and to encourage a homecoming. Increasingly, dioceses, churches, and clergy have adapted to the realities of undocumented migration and the dangers of the migrant trail. Some churches and shrines also promote migration devotion through framing migration miracles, and profit from its material aspects by selling to migrants physical mementos—medals, devotionals, scapulars—to comfort them on their long trek north. Local religious leaders, especially in well-established sending communities, also promote migration by incorporating the plight of migrants into their weekly services and transforming and then framing local saints as protectors and companions of migrants.[12] In Santa Ana Guadalupe, the local diocese transformed St. Toribio, a martyr of the Cristero Wars, into a coyote saint, thus providing a powerful spiritual and moral narrative for undocumented migrants.

Devotion to saints to commemorate the plight of the migrant, however, is not always bound by place, time, and in the control of the church. Hermano Pedro, for example, has been symbolically appropriated from the local shrine in Antigua, Guatemala, by his believers and transformed into a transnational saint, worshipped by members of a global brotherhood who pray for the safe passage of undocumented followers. Other times, churches and religious leaders in sending and receiving communities work across borders and with these transnational brotherhoods to mark the danger of the journey and commemorate the migrants. In some cases, the journey is reproduced by the migrant at the spiritual level and fortified by the church.[13] In other cases, the dangers of the journey are symbolized by holy images and icons actually carried on undocumented journeys, such as was done in the 2003 trek by foot and bus of El Cristo Mojado (the Undocumented Christ) from his home in

Esquipulas, Guatemala, across two international borders, to the largely Latino congregation of St. Cecilia Church in Los Angeles, California. Created in the image of the undocumented, these holy figures tell us much about the ways in which migrants turn to religion for the strength to leave all they hold dear and embark on the uncertain journey that will carry them to a new land.

Religion as Mediator

The significance of social networks in reducing the costs of migration extends beyond decision making to the journey. Scholars have largely conceptualized the journey from Central America and Mexico to the United States as a social process and have used social network theory to explain how unauthorized migrants gain entry into the United States. Social networks consisting of family and friends, built on notions of trust and reciprocity, provide journeying migrants with the companionship of seasoned travelers, contacts, and information about how to cross, sometimes including access to coyotes.[14] Sometimes these networks are so powerful that they overcome attempts by the state to control migration.[15]

Yet, as many scholars have noted, migrant networks are not foolproof. Like all human relationships, they can change over time and, under particular circumstances, can weaken and erode. Sometimes seasoned migrants exploit their newcomer counterparts. Other times, because of gender inequalities and sex-based work patterns, networks may provide differential resources to group members. Moreover, under conditions of poverty and marginality, these networks may be inaccessible to many, or they may be unable to provide resources to those who need them. In short, in particular situations, migrants' personal networks simply cannot deliver the social capital that the literature assumes.[16]

The means and strains of the undocumented journey further test the weakness of migrants' networks. The increased enforcement in recent years along the US.-Mexico and Mexico-Guatemala borders has raised the human costs of undocumented migration, resulting in enhanced risks of physical and social problems, including death. Because the crossing experience has become more dangerous and more expensive, seasoned family and friends are far more reluctant than in the past to accompany first-time crossers or are unable to provide the necessary social and financial support to mitigate danger. Migrants who possess the financial resources (which network members often supply) rely increasingly on the crossing services of both trusted and unfamiliar coyotes who have grown in number and kind and have raised their

fees according to demand.[17] Yet, as this study demonstrates, many first-time crossing migrants, especially young, unattached, and unseasoned migrants from Central America, do not have access to either personal networks or financial resources to hire coyotes to assist them on their journeys. Lacking the social protection and support that family, friends, and even coyotes provide, many transit migrants suffer at the hands of gangs, corrupt officials, and predatory coyotes, all of whom are part of a for-profit transit migration industry that exploits the conditions of transit migration in the context of fortified borders. The migration industry that operates along the migrant trail from Central America to the United States represents a local and contemporary expression of a global enterprise composed of for-profit entrepreneurs and businesses, often with the participation of national governments that provide services to facilitate and sustain international labor migration.[18]

It is at this juncture in the migration process that religion as mediator takes on importance. The changing conditions and social infrastructure of the undocumented journey—disrupted and weak personal networks, militarized borders and increased dangers, the rise of a migration industry that preys on transit migrants—has resulted in the growth of religious and humanitarian organizations that provide for transit migrants. Many migrants, lacking the resources or personal networks to assist them in their travels, now turn to churches, shelters, and religious workers to perform network functions. In recent years, these organizations have become part of the social infrastructure that sustains transit migration in the region. As the number of transit and returning migrants has increased in the region, so has the number and type of institutional resources available. Once limited to occasional churches offering migrants help, now multiple organizations, churches, and migrant programs along the migratory route provide for the needs of journeying and deported migrants. These social actors and the social capital they provide are important in understanding how the undocumented navigate the journey and crossing experiences, a process that has largely been explained through social network theory.

Faith-based shelters provide numerous services to migrants to facilitate their journey north. First and foremost, these faith-based and humanitarian migrant programs provide direct material assistance in the way of food, shelter, clothing, and medical attention. But these shelters and the faith workers who staff them do more than offer material assistance. They also provide migrants with the spiritual, psychological, and social capital to continue on their journey. The clergy who care for these shelters offer services, blessings, and

counsel to migrants to sanction their migration, help them endure the separation from family and community, and fortify them for the hardships of the remaining journey. Prayer and consultation with clergy along the journey gives meaning to suffering and strength to persevere and continue. From trusted faith workers and lay staff who run the shelters, migrants learn about the dangers of crossing international borders and, in some cases, are directed to alternative and safer routes than they would otherwise use. At these shelters, migrants also receive devotionals that include a directory of shelters and legal services that migrants may draw on if necessary during their journey, when human support alone is not enough to sustain the travelers through the hardship of the journey. Indeed, sometimes these small religious items are the only things found in the pockets of dead migrants pulled from the Rio Grande or picked up in the Arizona deserts.

New migrant-based networks are also created and nourished along the journey. Migrant shelters such as the Scalabrini Casas del Migrante offer a networking resource to transit migrants where they can connect with one another and exchange ideas and information about the journey. From deportees who are returned to the shelters by government officials who rely on the shelters, unseasoned migrants learn the ropes of crossing the border. Those who travel alone sometimes link up with other migrants at these shelters. Such nonkin migrant networks, forged in the shelters, buffer against the disruption and isolation, offering solidarity, social support, and protection on the road. They also provide first-time emigrants with access to a host of emotional, psychological, and material resources, from companionship to financial help from their more seasoned fellow travelers. In sum, religious institutions and organizations assume a constant mediating role in the migration process. They provide guidance and counsel to departing migrants in sending communities, material assistance, social capital, and spiritual sustenance on the journey, and, as others have found, comfort and assistance on arrival.

Religion as Sanctuary and Advocate

Religious organizations in the region that provide for the needs of undocumented travelers have also become advocates for the rights of migrants and watchdogs of state policy. At multiple levels of church hierarchy, from bishops conferences to interfaith organizations, to local churches and shelters in Central America, Mexico, and along the U.S.-Mexico border, faith workers

are increasingly involved in issues of human rights and international and transit migration that often challenge the rights of states to regulate and control migration. Transnational in scope, the public face of these organizations and their mobilization efforts have grown substantially in recent years as they have developed their own migrant programs and human rights offices along the migrant trail, from Guatemala to the southwest United States. Motivated by a theology of migration, and advocacy for the rights of migrants to cross borders to find work, these religious workers and the transnational hierarchies in which they operate have emerged as important vehicles for contesting nation-state activities and monitoring the regulatory practices of state institutions and policies. They challenge the state by documenting human rights abuses and the crossing risks associated with current border enforcement policies.[19] These organizations have become so effective that in some countries, such as Mexico and Guatemala, governments invite them to the table when formulating migration policy. Along the U.S-Mexico border, cross-border interfaith coalitions challenge U.S. immigration policy by providing humanitarian assistance to crossing migrants and encouraging social and political protest among followers.[20]

Collectively, these religious groups and organizations assume an important responsibility in the organization of undocumented migration in the region and their activities suggest the emergence of a new cross-border sanctuary movement that resists state policy. This new movement is unlike the Sanctuary Movement in the 1980s in the southwest United States and southern Mexico, which was largely limited to national efforts and geared toward providing refuge for Central Americans fleeing political strife.[21] Today's sanctuary efforts transcend national borders, focusing on the human rights of transit migrants and receiving the sanction of multiple levels of church hierarchy, from the Vatican to transnational religious congregations, bilateral bishops conferences and diocesan efforts, and local religious workers. In the absence of a retreat in state enforcement policy, these sanctuary efforts are unlikely to recede as they constitute a countervailing refuge from the transit migration industry and military operations with which they share the migratory route.

Religion as Companion

Yet migrants are not always able to find sanctuary on the road. To understand how they cope with the despair and danger along the trail we must shift attention from the mediating role of institutional actors and examine how, as

Peter Berger suggests, individuals live through religion to find meaning and create order in times of crisis.[22] This change in perspective reflects the agency component of the migration experience and also constitutes what scholars call "everyday religion," or "lived religion."[23] Religion as practiced emphasizes how people in particular social contexts live with or through the religious idioms available to them.

To help them with the loneliness, despair, and danger, undocumented migrants do indeed live religion on the road—both as a means to survive and as a way to find meaning in the journey. The ways in which migrants live their religion on the journey reveal much about their undocumented identity and the struggles that shape their individual and collective experiences. During their long journey across nations and over mountains and deserts they turn to the familiar and reproduce, borrow, and even create a rich diversity of cultural and religious practices to help them cope and ultimately survive their migration. Indeed, as large numbers of migrants told me, their faith was their sustenance during the journey and their relationship with their revered icons was strongest then, when they were stripped of all resources, including the identities they had left behind in their home communities.

When feasible, migrants turn to churches and clergy for help and blessings that fortify them for the path ahead, when specific religious affiliations become increasingly less relevant as Protestants and Catholics, believers and nonbelievers alike, turn to the same clergy and pray under the same roof. More often than not, however, journeying migrants practice religion outside the institutional walls of churches and their representatives. While some visit shrines and popular saints recognized specifically for protecting migrants, others spontaneously erect popular shrines to revered icons from their home communities to reproduce those cultural practices with which they are most familiar and comfortable. Many rely on their spiritual companions for protection, the images pasted on holy cards carried in their pockets or engraved on medallions worn around their necks. Recall Arturo in chapter 4, the young Honduran who purchased an international phone card adorned with the image of his revered Virgen de Guadalupe. Though the phone account had long been spent by the time he showed it to me in 2003, the laminated card remains safely in his wallet where Arturo has kept it since the day he had purchased it some two years before.

Migrants also draw on their memories and recreate companions, engraving their images on stone features. Some, facing the possibility of impending death, turn to group prayer and later interpret their rescue or successful journey as a miracle from God. These miracles provide meaning and hope to

migrants who believe their trips have been sanctioned by God. They also propel and sustain action by providing migrants the psychological will to move forward. Migrants also leave religious artifacts—rosaries, devotionals, crosses—along the journey as personal testimonies of faith and markers of their imposed undocumented identities.

Religion as the Link to Past and Future

After arriving in the United States, the migrants in this study continued to make sense of their migration experience through religion, drawing once again on familiar cultural practices. A number of migrants, like Samuel, described their migration outcomes in religious terms and interpreted their safe arrival as divine intervention: "If God and La Virgen didn't want me here, I wouldn't have survived the journey and I wouldn't be here talking to you now." Some, then, believe that religion actually made migration happen, and so in return for protection and safe passage to the United States they now must pay their debts to God, the virgin, or a saint. These devotional rituals manifest themselves over time and through multiple individual, family, and group activities, most of which occur without institutional support. Some observe a ritual at a home altar; others enter a sacred place on their knees in a sign of reverence and sacrifice; still others send ex-votos of thanks to a religious figure in the home community.[24] Many migrants pledge the extraordinary: to return home one day to give thanks to their revered icon. While unable to do so because of their undocumented identity, some will call on family members, such as Aleksy, who asked her mother to perform this ritual for her. "I couldn't make the trip, but she could in my place," Aleksy said. "Now I send her money each year to make the pilgrimage where she regularly thanks El Cristo Negro for my safety, Emilio's safety [her brother who has since joined Aleksy in North Carolina], and the good fortune of our lives."

Yet immigrants do not need to go to shrines in their home communities to feel the presence of their saints. They can visit churches in the United States where images of their revered icons have been reproduced by believers. In these re-created shrines they come to give temporary thanks for safe passage. So important are these icons to the faith and the religious practices and identities of Mexican and Central American communities in the United States that parish priests and the church hierarchy in sending and receiving communities regularly arrange for images of patron saints to be brought to immigrant communities and their places of worship in the United States. Sometimes

immigrant devotees reproduce their revered icons in their own images. As this book has shown, the plight of the undocumented has been personified in the construction of popular saints such as St. Toribio and Juan Soldado, whose followers believe them to be protectors of migrants, and the dangers of the border crossing are symbolized by holy images and icons actually carried on undocumented journeys, such as was done in the 2003 trek of El Cristo Mojado.

Facing an uncertain period of family separation and life in the shadows of an illegal residency, the act of fulfilling the promise enables undocumented migrants to maintain an ongoing sense of belonging to their home communities, to their faith, and to their culture. In this sense, promises reach across time and space, linking past with future and children with their parents. Some migrants, like Cecilia, are unable to make it home for a year or more. With the passage of time vows of reciprocity are transformed by new achievements for which the migrant may be thankful as well. These are also included and in this way the promises are transformed into processes that nurture spirituality through the journey and beyond.

Faith Reaffirmed

At each stage of the migration process, many migrants practice familiar cultural and religious acts to cope with the traumas of the undocumented journey. With each religious practice and each small success along the way their faith is reaffirmed. Religious institutions in sending communities and on the migrant trail promote and foster this spirituality. In unexpected ways, then, the migration journey strengthens and intensifies religious commitment and becomes a spiritual journey. It is this strengthened faith that then fortifies migrants with the willpower to persevere and ultimately reach the United States. Fulfilling the promesa represents the final religious marker in the journey, but faith persists long past this ritual act. In a new and sometimes hostile land, migrants continue to seek refuge and find solace in the familiar. None of those in the study completely abandoned their faith after arriving in the United States, though some converted while others "mixed and matched" religious practices and denominations.[25] While some reported attending formal religious services with less frequency over time, most continued to practice their religion away from institutionalized settings. Faith and the construction and reproduction of familiar cultural and religious practices help many migrant believers not only endure their journeys but also face

challenges and overcome misfortunes as they struggle forward in the United States; the sense of still being a part of their home communities and the spiritual fabric of their lives there, provides a powerful anchoring and integrative force during the psychological and emotional disruptions of adaptation. The narrative told in this book helps us to understand why, for many, migration is very much a religious experience.[26]

Certainly Cecilia believes her relationship with God accounts for escape from the deadly Arizona desert and the success she and her husband now enjoy: they eventually moved from California to their current home in New York where they joined family and friends who had already settled in the emerging Mexican community in Newburg. There, Cecilia and Juan have thrived. They became active members of a local Catholic Church that provides religious and social services for the Mexican residents in the area, and Cecilia helped form the church-sponsored Mexican folk dancing group that has performed around the state. She believes it has helped her maintain her Mexican and Catholic identity. Cecilia established her own domestic cleaning business and Juan became a cook and then a truck driver. Together, they bring home $6,000 a month, all through legal means. They have one young son and another on the way. She admits that she is no longer as active in her church as she once was, but still attends services and prays every day to God and La Virgen de Guadalupe. Despite all her good fortune since settling in the United States, she has never forsaken her "guardian angels" who she believes made it all possible. It was only natural, then, that Cecilia should include her good fortune in observances of thanks at the local church when she made the pilgrimage home to Puebla in 2006 after receiving her green card. Cecilia, like others, credits her success in the United States to her faith, which she says has grown deeper and stronger through the migration experience. "If you have faith," Cecilia insists, "you can do anything."

NOTES

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