



Writer Wanda Medina turned to San Lázaro during the difficult birth of her son.

HOPELESSLY DEVOTED

ONE LATINA SECOND-GUESSES HER LOYALTY TO SAINTS UNTIL THE BIRTH OF HER SON REAFFIRMS HER BELIEFS.

BY WANDA MEDINA

■ IN ALL THE WAYS MY MATERNAL GRANDMOTHER HAS INFLUENCED MY LIFE (a can-do attitude, an independent spirit, a fondness for red lipstick) it's the devotion to saints that has had the most impact. While I am by no means a religious fanatic, my need to rely on a variety of idols for certain requests is deeply inspired by the woman who's known to family and friends simply as Mima.

When Mima was a single mother of three in Cuba, my mother came down with an ear infection so serious her doctors warned it would require surgery. Hoping to spare her baby the pain and suffering of an operation, Mima turned her faith to one of Cuba's most revered saints: San Lázaro.

The allure of San Lázaro is his supposed miraculous powers. He is regarded as the patron saint of the sick. It is not uncommon for family members of ill loved ones to turn to him when all hope seems lost. Mima made a promise to San Lázaro that if my mother was cured of her infection without surgery, she would join the thousands who make the annual pilgrimage to his shrine in a town just outside Havana to make good on promises offered him in their darkest moments.

My mother was cured of her ear infection without having to go under the knife and Mima went on to make the 11-mile journey on foot every Dec. 17 (*Día de San Lázaro*). Years later, when she and her family immigrated to the United States, Mima didn't let the lack of a shrine stop her from worshipping—she created one. San Lázaro became a permanent fixture in her home, as Mima literally put him on a pedestal. His statue—complete with crutches



Medina's 86-year-old grandmother, seen here as a teen and now, has always been devout. Medina on the day of her first communion.

■ “AS I BATTLED A 102-DEGREE FEVER AND A MYSTERIOUS INFECTION, I PRAYED TO SAN LÁZARO.”

and loyal dogs—was a sight to behold as it stood alone on an elaborate shelf in her living room. She even provided him with offerings. According to her, cigars and rum were his favorite. While I found this to be absurd even at an early age, I always marveled at the devotion she had for the saint and was often amazed to see her prayers come true.

As an adult, my logical self has often told me to rely on science. If it cannot be proven, it mustn't be true. But my emotional self insists on leaning on a few statues when things seem beyond my control. This was especially true when I was pregnant. After a few prenatal tests indicated that our baby was at a higher risk for a chromosomal abnormality, I turned to a statue of baby Jesus—given to me by my equally faithful aunt—for guidance, strength and a miracle.

And in the throes of a 20-hour labor, as I battled a 102-degree fever and a mysterious infection, I prayed to San Lázaro throughout the entire ordeal. Analytically, I know that it was modern medicine and the skills of a terrific obstetrician that helped me through. But in my heart, I can't help but believe that an old man on crutches and a baby prophet were vigilantly watching over me until I delivered a healthy baby boy.

My Anglo husband—who spent his formative years as an altar boy but is today borderline agnostic—finds this reliance pretty ridiculous. We've had countless arguments about religion and the idolatry of saints. Although he was raised in a God-fearing family that often went to church, his intellect prevailed. An unrelenting devotion to *santos* is rooted in my heritage, but my husband isn't exactly

running to offer cigars and rum to an inanimate object. We often engage in theological sparring with passionate discussions that almost always end in an argument. But so far, he has been wonderful about letting me introduce our son to my spiritual side. I frequently take our 18-month-old to Mass; afterward we stop at all the saints along the aisles to light candles and give thanks for our blessings. I've also made an introduction to the baby Jesus statue that helped us both through a difficult time. Every night before my son goes to bed, he gives it a little kiss and wishes it good night.

From time to time, however, my husband brings up the idea of raising our children without any religious affiliation. It seems neither of us will give up easily, so I'm not yet sure what the future holds. I may have to ask San Lázaro.