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Mexican shrine reflects concern for soldiers

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PLATEROS, Mexico - The faithful begin arriving before sunrise on foot and by charter buses from throughout Mexico and the southwestern United States.

By the thousands they come to a shrine to pray to a statue of a cherubic boy dressed in a feathered hat and Spanish cloak, Santo Nino de Atocha, who, his followers say, grants miracles.

Pictures, scraps of paper and elaborate drawings fill every inch of the sanctuary's outer rooms, thanking Santo Nino for curing a son's pneumonia, for helping a father recuperate from a car accident, for blessing a local politician's campaign.

But increasingly, a different type of prayer has been appearing on the sanctuary walls: pleas from relatives of Mexican-born U.S. soldiers asking that their loved ones fighting in Iraq come home unharmed.

On a recent morning at the shrine, leaning against a layer of aging prayers, was a framed wooden picture of a stern-faced Marine standing in front of an American flag.

"We are on our knees thanking you for the arrival of our brother Jesus Rincon," the note said. "And we continue praying for all those families who have children who are soldiers away from home, that you return them safe and sound."

Aiming for the American dream

More than 8,000 Mexican-born troops serve in the U.S. military and a much higher number of U.S. military personnel are of Mexican descent. To join the military, foreign-born applicants must be permanent legal residents and have a green card.

The prayers at the shrine began appearing a few months after the war started, brought by some of the more than 3 million visitors a year.

Several months ago, a soldier returning from Iraq made the sanctuary his first stop, said the Rev. Francisco Javier Carlos Cardenas, the Catholic priest who oversees the Santo Nino de Atocha shrine, about 35 miles north of Zacatecas city. The soldier was a helicopter mechanic from San Antonio, Texas. "He said, 'I promised that if the Santo Nino let me come back, I would come here first thing,' " Cardenas said. "He was happy like a little boy."

According to the Pentagon, nearly 160 Hispanic or Latino men and women have been killed in Operation Iraqi Freedom, and according to some estimates, the majority were Mexican or Mexican-American.

"They are seen as men and women trying to achieve the American dream," said Carlos Humberto Toledo, a Mexico City newspaper columnist and expert on military affairs. "Being Mexican, but fighting for the United States, the idea of treason is completely nonexistent."

Toledo said that while the Mexican government and a majority of the Mexican people oppose the war, "that doesn't change the basic reason why people go to the United States."

For some Mexicans, the war is seen as a path to U.S. citizenship. "A lot of kids around here just don't have the means, so they say let me go and fight," said Timoteo Quintanilla, a lay worker at the Santo Nino de Atocha shrine.

Faster path to citizenship

After Sept. 11, 2001, Congress passed the National Defense Authorization Act, which made it easier and faster for soldiers to become citizens. The law makes service members eligible for citizenship after one year of active duty instead of three, allows service members to be naturalized overseas and provides for posthumous citizenship for service members who die in combat. The law, however, does not confer citizenship on family members.

So far, 15,875 service members have become citizens through the expedited process, according to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

The area around the shrine of Santo Nino has the highest migration rate in Mexico. One in three natives of Zacatecas state has gone to the United States.

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