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“God’s Magnates” English Translation

BY GERARDO REYES

Introduction to the 3-part series...

Millions of low-income Hispanics in the United States and Latin America donate 10% of their monthly income to evangelical churches. It is what is known as the tithes. The faithful or the sheep, as the shepherds often call their followers, also provide cash offerings in each service and work for free for fundraising events of the same churches.

A Univision investigation that followed some of these congregations reveals that their handling of the millions of dollars donated by parishioners is not transparent and little or nothing is known about how the money is invested.

What is apparent is the luxurious lifestyle of the pastors and their families. Private airplanes, mansions, luxury cars and expensive clothing are part of the life of these spiritual leaders, some of whom justify it by explaining that wealth is a blessing from God, a philosophy known as the prosperity gospel.

Guatemalan shepherd Carlos ‘Cash’ Luna summed it up like this:

"I was taught by an apostle, who told me, ‘Cash’ one always carries two things to church, Bible and checkbook, the Bible to learn what God will tell you, and the checkbook to worship him".

Although they are exempt from taxes, the excessive informality with which the congregations manage their finances has led the authorities to open investigations.

GOD'S MAGNATES (1st of 3 parts)

“The dark side of Casa de Dios (House of God)”

Sources claim that Pastor ‘Cash’ Luna took advantage of his close friendship with Marllory Chacón, convicted in the U.S. for drug trafficking.

BY GERARDO REYES

Cash Luna lets his voice break in front of the microphone, remembering the humble beginnings of his church, the House of God. The pastor recovers from this sadness slowly lifting his face in search of the spotlights of the stage to exclaim jubilantly, that thanks to his perseverance everything succeeded.

The 12.000 parishioners who listen celebrate the pastor's words this first Sunday of October 2018 in the immense temple of Guatemala City, the largest of its kind in Latin America.

"Is it a coincidence that we now have bread and word (of God) of this size (noting the immense church building they now have) here (compared to) when we came to a single (small, humble) house?" asks Luna claiming all their achievements are a product of his tireless spirit of service to the church under the hand of God.

This version of Luna's success is incomplete for some. Testimonies obtained by Univision point out that there was another worldlier hand that lifted the pastor and his church: that of a woman who presented herself as an investment manager in Guatemala but whose real fortune came from drug trafficking and money laundering.

Chacón, according to the sources, delivered significant amounts of money to the pastor. She was sentenced in 2015 in the United States to 12 years in prison on charges of drug trafficking, a business she handled that ran along the length and breadth of Central America. She was known as the Queen of the South. Although the case records are to a great degree under summary concealment until a future date, the released documents do not mention Luna's name.

Meetings with Chacón

Chacón's organization was infiltrated around 2010 by the (US) Drug Enforcement Agency—DEA. Colombian pilot Jorge Mauricio Herrera, who says he worked transporting cocaine for a powerful cartel in his country, told Univision that he infiltrated Chacón's organization under instructions from the DEA.

According to Herrera, Luna was present at the first meeting he had with Chacón in mid-2010 in Guatemala. This and other encounters were recorded by him with a video camera given him by the DEA which he wore camouflaged on a button of his shirt, he explained.

"They were basically talking about money deliveries because Pastor 'Cash' Luna said they needed to start building and advancing because the work was on the foundations," Herrera said.

According to the pilot, Luna was close to Chacón.

"The type [Luna], believe me he was Marllory's right hand [...] He was Marllory's advisor. He is a man, for me, a manipulator," explained Herrera.

The pilot clarified that Luna was not interfering in matters of drug trafficking but that the pastor was well acquainted with what business Chacón was in and that he received money from her.

"He knew that a drug pilot was coming to talk to them, he knew there was an organization, he knew that the other person with me was a partner, he knew Marllory was a drug dealer. He knew absolutely everything," said Herrera.

At the time of the meetings that describes Herrera, Chacón was a thriving drug trafficker of Central America. During court testimony for the United States against two Guatemalan brothers accused of drug trafficking, she explained that she assumed her husband's drug business after he was arrested in 2002.

"I had my own workers, I had my own cocaine suppliers in Colombia, and I had my own buyers who were the Mexican cartels," Chacón said.

The prosecutor asked how much money she had laundered for the cartels. She said more than 200 million dollars.

Infiltrated

A document of the case of Chacón in Miami, prepared by the district attorney's office, gives an account of a Colombian informant, only identified as CS1, who attended a meeting at the residence of Chacón in Guatemala City at the end of 2010.

During that meeting, the informant asked her if she could make the (smuggling) infrastructure available in Honduras in order to land with a shipment of 800 kilos of cocaine, the prosecution said.

The document describes what was captured by the video.

Chacón is seen and heard on video using two cell phones to coordinate the receipt of the shipment," says the document. "Chacón gave instructions on the phone for tracking specifications, and how much fuel was necessary to supply (the planes)," he adds.

Herrera claims he's the informant who recorded that meeting. The DEA does not disclose any information about its confidential sources. In a memorandum addressed to a U.S. immigration judge, Herrera explained his infiltration in the organization and said that Miami lawyer Joaquin Perez put him in touch with DEA agent Paul Cohen. Perez told Univision that he facilitated

Herrera's contact with the DEA, but gave no details. A Miami DEA spokesperson said that this organization "is not going to comment on the case."

In 2010, when the covert operation that culminated with the delivery of Chacón to the United States authorities was advancing, the building project of the Temple of the House of God continued.

The impressive coliseum in the form of a Holy-Spirit-dove with a capacity for 12.000 spectators cost 45 million dollars, according to Luna when he told the BBC. The temple performs two large services on Sunday with a massive display of light and sound technology. It was inaugurated in 2013 by (former) president Otto Pérez, who is serving a sentence on charges of corruption. Luna has said that the temple was built with contributions from its faithful.

At the end of the religious service on October 7th, Univision requested an interview with Luna through its spokesman Marly de Armas, letting him know about their interest in knowing the origin of church funds. She told us that the pastor would be very busy for the next two months, which would make it almost impossible for him to accept the interview. Based on the declarations of the sources interviewed, Univision sent Luna a questionnaire with 26 questions, including some asking for his version of the relationship with Chacón. More than three weeks later, Armas replied:

"We regret that you have been deceived in good faith by an unreliable source, since the information you claim to have received from that person is false."

Sacks of Money

Another person close to the Chacón family, but who asked not to be identified, told Univision that he took cash to Luna's house on the orders of Chacón.

"It was half a sack," the source said, explaining that it was a bag of felt used for transporting valuables. The bags contained dollars and he delivered them in a place that was known as the "House of Horses," he added.

According to the source, Luna constantly asked Chacón for money, which she disliked.

"That son of the great p... said, every day he wants more," the source recalled what Chacón said.

Chacón and Luna shared the same entrance to their homes in Guatemala City, as Univision was able to verify through the images of a drone. It is a piece of land south of the city near the

highway to El Salvador where there are only both residences, separated by less than fifty meters and surrounded by an imposing wall.

"They had the same gate but used different intercoms," the source explained.

Herrera also remembers that, according to him, the first meeting with Chacón was in the the woman's house. The pilot described the residence as an "extraordinary mansion" surrounded by a zoo "in the style of Pablo Escobar". He was struck, he explained, that outside the house, in the open air, fragrance atomizers were intermittently activated to neutralize the smell of animal excrement.

"We arrived to the front entry, there was tremendous security. After we passed a first ring of safety, we were locked between two sets of bars," said Herrera, "the first to give permission to enter was Mr. Cash Luna. He gave his authorization and we entered."

Lifestyle

The real name of 'Cash' Luna is Carlos. The charismatic pastor of 56 years has explained that the reason people ended up calling him 'Cash' was because he could not pronounce his name correctly as a child and instead of Carlos said 'Cash'. His critics have said that it is a name that perfectly fits he and his family's sophisticated lifestyle in one of the poorest countries in Central America.

His fortune has been a constant object of criticism and suspicion. Luna, 56 years old, travels in a Cessna Citation with American registration (N-200LH). It was acquired in September 2014 under Glory Wings 3, a company registered in Delaware, the paradise of corporate anonymity in the United States. Next, he transferred it to Casa de Dios and finally registered it under a trust of the Bank of Utah that does not reveal the owner's names. In an interview with the BBC network, Luna said the plane is owned by the church. A person familiar with the transaction, who asked not to be identified, explained that the aircraft was purchased for \$2 million. After the purchase, Luna made some improvements for about \$250,000 dollars and painted a biblical passage reference "Mark XII" on one of the turbines.

In the last six months Luna has used the plane to travel to Colombia and Mexico. In these countries the pastor presented campaigns on stage platforms known as Nights of Glory attended by thousands of followers in which he imparts controversial healing blessings to the sick.

Many of Luna's fans don't seem to be worried about his lifestyle. Robin Martinez, who was a photographer for the congregation, told Univision that what is important is the message that God sends through the pastor.

"If he misuses the tithe (people's donations) he will realize that, but I go to the word that transformed me and that he gave me," said Martínez who now does reporting on a bicycle in Guatemala City. "I can't just put my eyes on money management," he added.

The Delivery

Herrera, the Colombian pilot, said he had decided to work with the DEA because he knew that the entity was keeping tabs on his boss, Daniel "The Madman" Barrera, and sooner or later would catch up with him. His (Herrera's) work at that time consisted of smuggling cocaine shipments in executive planes to Central America and Africa from runways in Venezuela, where he said he had the protection of the Governments of Presidents Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro.

"I believe that 90% of Colombia's cartels moved to Venezuela, all of them. We met many there in restaurants working for different groups," recalled Herrera.

According to Herrera, Cohen, the DEA's supervisory agent, approved the infiltration operation after the pilot explained Chacón's power and importance in Central America.

"Marllory (Chacón) was the new drug trafficker of a new era and was even above "Chapo" Guzman, says Herrera.

The infiltration operation into Chacón's organization was so effective, Herrera said, that he did not have to spend a single day in federal prison. Public records consulted by Univision do not show any charges for drug trafficking against him. Other sources familiar with his passage through the drug cartels confirmed to Univision that Herrera was a discreet and daring pilot. According to them, he flew dangerous routes from airports on the Venezuelan coast to Guinea, West Africa, with planes that had to refuel in mid-air.

In an interview last July in front of Univision cameras, Herrera explained that his relationship with Cohen was complicated because the agent withdrew him from the operation in Guatemala without any explanation. Herrera questioned that the DEA had not at least interrogated Pastor Luna. After his relationship was broken with the DEA, the pilot was left in a migratory limbo.

Less than two weeks after the Univision interview, ICE agents broke into his Miami residence and transferred him to the Krome detention center. On October 31st he was deported to Colombia where he fears for his life.

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