

The Day of the Dead - Día de los Muertos

A festival celebrating the reunion of Dead relatives with their families November 2nd.



While it's strange for most of us to accept the fact that "death" and "festivities" can go hand-in-hand, for most Mexicans, the two are intricately entwined. This all stems from the ancient indigenous peoples of Mexico who believed that the souls of the dead return each year to visit with their living relatives - to eat, drink and be merry. Just like they did when they were living.

This may all seem morbid and somewhat ghoulish to those who are not part of that culture. But, for Mexicans who believe in the life/death/rebirth continuum, it's all very natural.

Some families build altars in their homes; these usually have the Christian cross, statues or pictures of Christ or of the Blessed Virgin Mary, pictures of deceased relatives and other persons, scores of candles and an *ofrenda* (food and drinks). Traditionally, families spend some time around the altar, praying and telling anecdotes about the deceased.

The altar used to be built with seven levels representing the seven steps to reach heaven. The altar recalls the seven sacraments but at the same time reminds us of all we have to leave behind to ascend to heaven.

A common symbol of the holiday is the skull (colloquially called *calavera*), which celebrants represent in masks, called *calacas* (colloquial term for "skeleton"), and foods such as sugar or chocolate skulls.

The Altar of the Dead cultivates hope in everlasting Christian life for our beloved who have gone before us. It also recalls that death is not final and it helps us not to fear dying because our loved ones are with us in life and in death.