

Sisters of Social Service

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Celebrating 90 years of working with and supporting people on the margins of our world through social services and advocacy

Día de los Muertos: A Celebration of Life

By Sr. Martha Vega, SSS



Sisters of Social Service Day of the Dead Altar, Encino

Día de los Muertos – or *Day of the Dead* – is celebrated on November 2 throughout Mexico, in particular the Central and South regions, and by people of Mexican ancestry living in other places, especially in the United States. This holiday is a day of remembrance and a day to honor deceased family members and friends. It is day acknowledged internationally in many other cultures. Prior to Spanish colonization in the 16th century, the holiday is attributed to the Aztec culture dating back hundreds of years.

In colonial Mexico, the people and Catholic Church rejected the celebration as a day related to syncretizing pagan elements with Catholic Christianity. The day corresponds to the Catholic feast of All Souls, November 2, in which Catholics honor deceased family and friends by attending mass and praying for their ancestors and loved ones. The Catholic Church attempted to separate the celebration of All Souls and *Día de los Muertos* but the tradition was still widely practiced.

Excerpt from our Sisters of Social Service E-news – January 2018

In the 1960s, the Mexican government officially made *Día de los Muertos* a national holiday based on education policies related to honoring national indigenous traditions. The celebration of the festival became more widely celebrated by both Catholics and non-Catholics and continues to be a festive celebration of life.

The holiday is observed in a variety of ways, includes festivals and gatherings of families at cemeteries to pray for their deceased loved ones. The burial site is decorated with *ofrendas* (offerings) or *altares* (altars). These altars are not set up for worship, but rather to honor the memory of the deceased. The *altares* typically will include pictures of the deceased, food and drink that she/he liked, and other mementos connected to the deceased person being remembered and honored. They also may include traditional *calaveras* (skulls) and *catrinas* (skeletons), colorfully and ornately decorated. *Pan de Muerto* or Bread of the Dead is also seen on many *altares*. This is sweet bread with anise flavor, decorated on the top of the bread with cross bones.



Offerings, including a sugar skull, various foods, images, candles, skeletons, and *pan de muerto*.



The particular flower associated with this *Día de los Muertos* are marigolds. Since ancient times the indigenous people used marigolds to adorn *altares* because of their bright yellow orange color and pleasant fragrance. It was believed that souls return to earth on this feast day. The two elements of the marigold flower are to help the soul of the deceased person find her or his burial site in order to "join" the family in this happy celebration.

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Families will also set up *altares/ofrendas* in the family home or in businesses, especially if the family is unable to go to a particular burial site. Family homes and businesses are thoroughly cleaned because in preparation for these important “visitors.” The *altares* typically have several levels on which the various offerings are placed.

Generally in Christian homes, the top level, is reserved for the images of Saints, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the Crucifix. For each deceased relative, a candle is set. Their light is thought to guide them on their way back. The lighted candles also symbolize Jesus Christ Reborn and the Christian faith. Salt and water are also essential; they are set to quench the thirst of the soul, tired from their long trip. Water also symbolizes the purification and cleansing of the soul.



SSS Day of the Dead Altar, Encino

Far from being a day of mourning or macabre, *Día de los Muertos* is a festive and happy celebration of remembrance, honoring our loved ones who have passed and sharing in the hope of being reunited with them in the future.



Sugar Skull, candle, and marigolds

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