



Celebrating Día de los Muertos

Pastoral Communication

September 2024



Día de los Muertos—Day of the Dead

Día de los Muertos is a holiday celebrated throughout Mexico and Latin America around the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed (All Souls) on November 2nd. It is a time of remembrance of and prayer for deceased loved ones. The observance of the Day of the Dead has both religious and cultural aspects, not all of which are appropriate in the context of parish life. This guide is intended to help parishes celebrate the *Día de los Muertos* appropriately. Pastors will find the Day of the Dead a wonderful opportunity for evangelization on our Catholic tradition of prayer for the dead, and our hope for eternal life in Jesus Christ.

The Day of the Dead as we know it today is a result of the combination of Mesoamerican traditions with the Christian understanding of remembering the faithful departed. A key part of this celebration is the preparation of an *Altar del Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead altar). In Latin America, Day of the Dead altars are found in

homes, churches, public places, and in cemeteries. The purpose of the altar is for family members to place photos and their departed favorite foods to remember them. (To some, this may sound a bit reminiscent of St. Joseph's altars among Italian-Americans.) There are many traditions and many variations—some of the common features of the Day of the Dead Altar can be found on the next page.

Ultimately, the Day of the Dead is a celebration of life! We remember deceased loved ones and tell stories of the lives they lived among us. And, together with the whole Church, we pray that they may enter into eternal life with Christ.



So-called "Santa Muerte" images should **not** be part of a Catholic Day of the Dead Altar.

Images of Death and Día de los Muertos

Images of death are abundant in Day of the Dead altars. These images recall deceased loved ones but also invite us to look on death without fear, knowing that death leads to eternal life. *Calaveras de azúcar*, sugar skulls, are a typical feature. These brightly colored images, on which the name of a deceased loved one is often written, represent the "sweetness" of the deceased person. Images like "La Calavera Catrina" (the familiar skeletal figure dressed in finery) act as reminders that all of us, rich and poor alike, will one day die.

In recent years, a superstition has grown in Mexico as well as in the United States, of worship of Santa Muerte or "St. Death," which is a personification of death itself. The image of Santa Muerte, who wears flowing robes and holds a globe and scythe has been condemned by the Catholic Church. This grim reaper-like figure is not in harmony with the Catholic faith and should never appear in a Catholic Altar. Find out more about this superstition here:

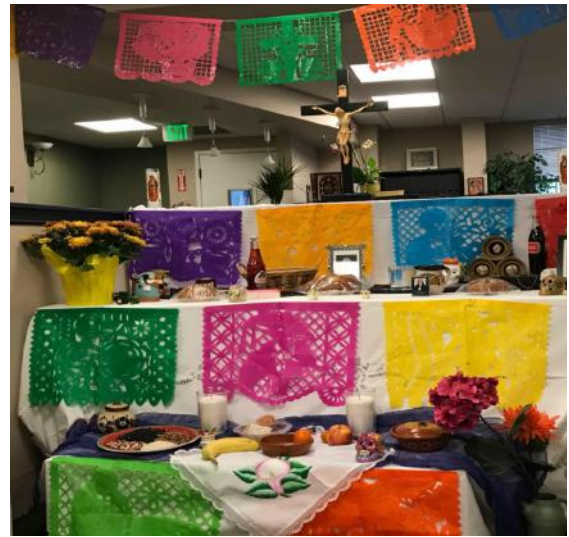
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZCAkWqu_jg

Questions? Contact the Liturgy office, at 206-382-4652
or the Office of the Vicar for Clergy at 206-382-2060

Best Practices for Parishes and Schools

The Day of the Dead is a civic and cultural observance as well as a religious one, and there are many non-religious aspects to the celebration—for example, skull-like makeup, costumes, and the like. However, rather than dismissing the celebration as a whole, a more pastoral response is to use this as a catechetical opportunity for families and the entire parish.

- **INVITE** parishioners to build a Day of the Dead altar in an appropriate place in the parish hall, gathering place, or in the church itself (make sure it does not obscure the altar of the church, the ambo, the font, or the tabernacle).
- **ENCOURAGE** the whole parish to place photos of deceased loved ones and traditional offerings (see below) at the altar.
- **PRAY** for the dead in the intercessions at Mass. Remind parishioners that the high point of the celebration of the Day of the Dead is the Mass of All Souls on November 2nd.
- **VISIT** local cemeteries to pray for deceased loved ones on and around November 2nd. Consider sharing the *Order for Visiting a Cemetery on All Souls Day*, found in the Book of Blessings, Chapter 57, so that people can pray with the Church as they remember their beloved dead.



Chancery Day of the Dead Altar / Ofrenda Prepared by Sisters Anabell Carmona & Neida Perez

A video from St. Vincent de Paul Parish in Petaluma, California, offers a glimpse of a festive celebration of *Día de los Muertos*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4NdyGoUuSxc>

This article from the Diocese of Phoenix offers a helpful grounding of *Día de los Muertos* in the Catholic tradition. <http://www.catholicsun.org/2017/10/24/dia-de-los-muertos-a-time-to-celebrate-life/>

Some guidelines on Day of the Dead Altars from the Diocese of Salt Lake City. <http://www.icatholic.org/article/symbolism-of-day-of-the-dead-altars-12135>



Traditional Elements in the Altar de Día de los Muertos

When it comes to creating a Day of the Dead altar, there are many traditions and countless regional variations. These are some of the most common features.

- **Cut paper** (*papel picado*): purple and orange cut paper (purple represents mourning in the Christian tradition; in the Aztec tradition orange represents mourning).
- **Pictures** of deceased loved ones are placed on the altar as a sign of remembrance.
- **Flowers of Cempasúchil** (*marigolds*) provide decoration and fragrance.
- **Candles & Votive Candles** (*velas y veladoras*) are used to illuminate the altar. **These should always be in safe containers and extinguished when the altar is unattended.**
- **The Bread of the Dead** (*Pan de Muerto*) suggests the Body of Christ which nourished the deceased, our food for eternal life.
- **Food**: the favorite dishes of the deceased loved ones can be placed on the altar to honor them. Parishes and schools should invite parishioners to bring **non-perishable** food items!
- **Sugar skull** (*calaveras de azúcar*): These brightly colored skulls, bearing the name of the beloved dead, may also be placed on the altar.