

# Death as an Integral Part of Life

## Popular Religiosity for the Cult of the Dead



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*This article was previously published in Spanish and English in the Ordinary Time 2 2009 edition of Liturgia y Canción.*

Throughout their existence, human beings have expressed the close connection that exists between life and death by the use of rites, customs, myths, and symbols. As it expanded within the Roman Empire, Christianity encountered—and gave Christian meaning to—pagan traditions in the cult of the dead, thus making room for a Christian cult of the dead. Eventually the Catholic Church established a feast day dedicated to the cult of the dead in the liturgical calendar: November 2. After the conquest of Mexico by Spain in 1521, the missionaries searched for creative ways to Christianize the indigenous cult of the dead. This process of inculturation resulted in a great variety of rites and customs mixing indigenous and Spanish traditions, such as *ofrendas* (offerings or altars) on the Day of the Dead at homes and in cemeteries; the *velación* or *velorio* (wake); the *entierro* (interment); the *luto* (mourning); and the novena. Due to its immense size and wide variety of cultures, Mexico has several rites for the dead that can differ from region to region.

### Day of the Dead

The Nahuatl (Aztec) culture, prevalent in the central region of Mexico, devoted a good part of its religious calendar to the cult of the dead. In the ninth month of the Aztec calendar (*Tlaxochimaco*), which corresponds to the month of August, two feasts are celebrated to honor and remember the dead. The first, dedicated to the cult of deceased children, was called *miccailhuitlontli* or “feast of deceased children.” In this celebration the Aztecs presented offerings and sacrifices to honor children who had died. The other feast, celebrated in the second part of the month, was dedicated to deceased adults; this feast was called *heymiccayhuatl* or the “great feast of the dead.”<sup>1</sup> In their efforts to evangelize

the indigenous people of Mexico, the missionaries Christianized the Nahuatl cult of the dead by transferring the feast from August to November 2, the official day on the liturgical calendar of the Church. As we all know, the Church celebrates the feast of All Saints on November 1, but at the level of popular piety, the people continued dedicating one day for deceased children (November 1) and another day for adults (November 2). This is still the custom for some regions of Mexico, especially the more indigenous areas.

As part of popular religiosity, some people in Mexico believe that souls of the faithful departed have divine permission to visit their family once a year. The souls of children visit their family on November 1, and the souls of adults come on November 2. That is why families prepare to offer hospitality to their deceased relatives on those days. The most common way to welcome the souls of the dead is to build an *ofrenda*, a sort of altar that, in some regions, is erected in a room of the house. This *ofrenda* normally has a crucifix, images of the Virgin Mary and saints, photos of the deceased relatives, candles, flowers, fruit, and the departed relatives' favorite foods and drinks. The purpose of the candles and flowers is to illuminate the altar and, with their light, brilliant colors and aroma, attract the souls of the dead—that is, help them find their way home. This is how Elizabeth Carmichael describes it in *The Skeleton at the Feast: The Day of the Dead in Mexico*:

Flowers form brilliant mounds of colour. Predominant is the vivid orange and yellow of the *cempasuchil*, the “flower of the dead,” which has been associated with festivals for the dead since pre-Hispanic times. Both its colour and aromatic scent are important for they are thought to attract the souls towards the offerings. “Paths” of marigold petals are strewn

from the *ofrenda* to the door of the house to guide the souls to their feast.<sup>2</sup>

Since they have a long journey to make, the souls arrive hungry and thirsty to the home of their family. That is why the family places a variety of the souls' favorite foods and drinks on the altar. The family puts out toys and sweets for the souls of the children.

In some regions of Mexico, such as Michoacán and Oaxaca, the *ofrenda* is not done at home but on tombstones at the cemetery. Mary Andrade explains how the inhabitants of Patzcuaro Lake in the state of Michoacán arrange the *ofrenda*:

The new *ofrendas* on the recently opened tombs are beautifully decorated with Indian crosses. They form a kind of rectangular room with two or three additional ornaments. These ornaments are a sort of woven wall created with wooden reeds, leaving open spaces for hanging flowers, bread, and food. In the center and upon the tombstone, the women place the food on trays and pots, covered with napkins.<sup>3</sup>

The other tombs are simply cleaned and decorated with flowers, candles, food, and drink. As has been mentioned before, these rituals vary depending on the region.

### The Wake

The wake of a deceased person may differ depending on local customs, but the description offered in this article is more or less common to Mexican popular religiosity. When a person dies there are immediate preparations and rituals to place the body in a coffin and to have an all-night vigil; the body is buried the next day. Today the wake usually takes place in a funeral home.

Funeral homes in Mexico arrange for the family and friends of a deceased person to remain in the funeral home throughout the night. (In the United States, this would be unthinkable.) Sometimes, however, a family will host the wake in their home. This is more common in rural areas. If a child dies people refer to him or her as *angelito*, little angel. The child is dressed with his or her baptismal dress. If the baptismal dress does not fit anymore, the child is dressed with a white tunic, and a crown of flowers is placed on the head. The body of a deceased adult, because of the stain of personal sin, is purified by washing it and is wrapped in a new white sheet or simply dressed in regular clothes.<sup>4</sup> In some cases, if the deceased was a married woman, she wears her wedding dress. If the wedding dress no longer fits, they leave the back open and put it on her as a façade. During the wake, family and friends offer prayers for the soul's eternal rest and share anecdotes, jokes, and stories. Sweet bread and coffee are served throughout the night.

Normally the burial takes place the day after death and, if possible, Mass is celebrated before burial. Last farewells in the cemetery consist of saying some words or singing songs; usually it is highly emotional. When the coffin is placed in the hole, people throw a handful of dirt on it, tracing the shape of a cross. This signifies the fulfillment of one of the works of mercy (to bury the dead). The family and friends of the deceased do not leave the site until the burial has been completed. That same night the novena begins. For nine days the rosary is prayed for the soul's eternal rest. Family and friends observe a year of mourning, during which they dress in black, especially women. A black ribbon is placed on top of the main door of the

house of the deceased person. The mourners do not host or attend parties during that year. The end of the mourning year is marked by a day of fasting and by offering a Mass for the soul of the deceased.

### Conclusion

Popular religiosity makes great use of symbols, not only to actualize what they signify but also to express, in metaphorical forms, realities people can't explain with words and concepts beyond the physical realm. The cult of the dead is full of symbols and verbal and non-verbal metaphorical expressions. By these means, popular piety strives to proclaim that death is not the end, that even after death there is still some kind of unity between the living and the dead, that there is life after death, that eternal death has been conquered by the death and resurrection of Christ, our Lord, that through him, whether we live or die, we belong to him—thus we are one in Christ. For popular piety, death is an integral part of life.

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1 Nutini, Hugo G. *Todos Santos in Rural Tlaxcala*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988, pp. 59–61.

2 Carmichael, Elizabeth and Sayer, Chloe. *The Skeleton at the Feast: The Day of the Dead in Mexico*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992, p. 18.

3 Andrade, Mary J. *A través de los ojos del alma, Día de los Muertos en México: Michoacán*. San Jose, California: La Oferta Review Newspaper, Inc., 1999, p. 32.

4 Aranda, Alberto, "Religiosidad popular en torno a la muerte." Unpublished essay presented at the annual membership meeting of the National Hispanic Institute of Liturgy, on November 1, 1999, in Mexico City.