

# Day of the Dead Celebration

The celebration of the Day of the Dead not only lasts two days, but according to the grandparents the tradition also begins in this order:

- It begins on October 28 and the first light (white candle) and a white flower are lit to welcome the lonely souls.
- On October 29, another candle is lit, and a glass of water is placed dedicated to the forgotten and abandoned deceased.
- On October 30, a new candle is lit, and another glass of water is placed, and white bread (bolillo or telera) is placed for the deceased who left without eating or those who died in an accident.
- On October 31 another candle is lit, and another glass with water, another white bread is placed and a fruit is placed (mandarin, orange or guava) this is for the deceased of the dead (their ancestors) that is the grandparents of your parents that some of us did not have the pleasure of meeting (great-grandparents).
- The 1st of November is designated for the small deceased, or children, on this day all the food is put, sweet pumpkins, guava, chocolate, honey, flowers.
- November 2 is the day of the faithful departed or of the adult dead, on this day, the deceased's favorite dishes, cigars, beer, etc. are placed.
- Flowers are placed every day, preferably copal incense is burned.
- At the end, on November 3 the last white candle is lit, copal is burned, dismissing them in this way and asking them to come back the following year.

## **Symbols for the altar of the dead:**

The altars/ofrendas have several elements that are very important because they invite the spirits and welcome them on their journey.

The ofrenda is a tradition in Mexico. Depending on its size people can use a table, a shelf, or a whole room using elements such as boxes, chairs, bricks, or hay.

Three-level altars represent heaven, Purgatory and Earth. They can also represent Heaven, Earth, and the other world according to the Aztecs, or in the Catholic tradition, the three levels, are related to the "levels" of the Church:

**1<sup>st</sup> level** represents the militant Church, who live on earth.

**2<sup>nd</sup> level** represents the purgative Church, the souls of the deceased who are in purgatory to prepare for the beatific vision of God.

**3<sup>rd</sup> level** represents the triumphant Church, which is found in Heaven where the saints are and all those who have already reached full life in God.

**Pictures:** usually a picture, painting or image of the person who is being honored is placed at the top of the altar.

**The Cross:** every altar has symbolism that refers the cross; this element was added by the Spanish missionaries with the purpose of incorporating Catholicism. The cross usually is set next to the image of the dead person who is being honored. A small salt cross in the altar is meant to purify the spirits; an ash cross is set to help the spirits to get out of the Purgatory.

**Arch:** this is set in the highest part of the altar; it symbolizes the entrance to the world of the dead. It usually is decorated with yellow marigold, the symbol of death, also known as cempasuchil or zempasuchitl cempasuchil.

**Cut Paper:** this represents joy.

**Candles:** these are used as guides to this world. Four big candles are set, symbolizing the four cardinal points. Other candles are spread over the altar, representing the path for the dead to get to the earth.

**Water:** reflects the purity of the souls. It can reflect the regeneration circle of life and death. Usually a glass with fresh water is set in the altar so the spirits can refresh themselves and continue they journey.

**Flowers:** are used as decorations in every altar. Yellow mardigolds, also known as cempasuchil or zempasuchitl cempasuchil, are usually spread all over the altar, besides serving as decoration, their scent guides the spirits to this world.

**Skeletons:** this is a reminder that death is always present. The skeletons are very colorful and made of sugar, clay, or chocolate, with colorful decorations.

**Food:** days before the altar set up, people cook traditional dishes such as tamales so the dead can enjoy the smells.

**Bread:** this represents the generosity of the host and a gift from the earth.

**Alcohol:** some altars have alcohol, sometimes presented as small jars with tequila, others with beer, usually with the drink that the dead person used to enjoy.

**Personal objects:** these are belongings of the dead person that are set in the altar so the spirit can remember moments of his/her life. If the dead person is a child, usually toys are displayed.

<http://www.icatholic.org/article/symbolism-of-day-of-the-dead-altars-12135>