

CLIFF NOTES

by Fr. Clifford Smith

All Souls Day ... Dia de los Muertos

All Souls Day was founded to honor all the faithful departed. The Masses offered on that day are meant to assist the souls from Purgatory to Heaven. In the southern hemisphere of the New World many Pre-Columbian traditions surrounding death abounded. The Aztecs believed that after a person died, the soul would pass through nine levels prior to the place of the dead where a person's soul would either await transformation or linger, awaiting the next destiny. Two months of the Aztec calendar were devoted to the dead. The Spanish Conquest of 1521 brought about the fusion of Catholic attitudes and indigenous beliefs. The **Day of the Dead** became an amalgamation of Pre-Spanish Indian ritual beliefs and the ritual and beliefs of the Catholic Church.

Spiritual Significance

The **Day of the Dead** or **All Souls Day** is celebrated by in many different ways by Catholics worldwide. This celebration originated in the Catholic Church, and was established in the Catholic calendar as an official holy day. It is based in part on the theological idea of Purgatory, that after death, those not fully purified of the sins in this life have the work finished for them by the grace of a loving God, and that this process can be eased by the prayers of the living. This practice gives us an idea of the spiritual significance of honoring the deceased.

November 1st is the official **All Saints Day**, which honors all saints who attained the Beatific Vision, followed on November 2nd, by **All Soul's Day** honoring the faithful departed...especially those who have died in the previous year. Generally, people celebrating this holiday will attend mass, and assist the souls of their loved ones from Purgatory to Heaven through prayer. They will then sometimes proceed to the cemetery to visit, pray and decorate the graves. This used to be common practice in the U.S. on Memorial Day until after the World War II.

Traditions

In Latin American countries there are many customs are associated with **The Day of the Dead** celebration. In homes, and sometimes in churches, an altar is made with an offering of food, flowers, photos and mementos on it. It was believed in the pagan tradition that the dead partake of the food in spirit. In Christian tradition they symbolize all the good things at the Heavenly Banquet of God's Kingdom. The "*ofrendas*"- offerings, are often arranged with flowers, especially marigolds, which are the traditional flower of the dead. There are also candles for each dead soul, and other decorations.

Foods and the Altar of the Dead

Food is considered indispensable for the celebration. The foods offered in the memorial are different according to the wishes and social status of the deceased. Typical foods include: bread, fruits vegetables, and sweets. Other delicacies available for the celebration are: sugar skulls, candied fruit and pumpkins, tamales and maize dough cakes, as well as enchiladas and chalupas. Beverages, which are placed on the memorial, include: water, coffee, beer, and tequila. Depending on how elaborate the display is, it will show the status of the departed to neighbors. Over time the traditional foods have given way to more contemporary ones, but one thing has remained constant, and that is the use of bread. The custom of having a loaf of bread relates to the early custom in Spain of begging for souls. It has been written that the Zapotec Indians listed bread for the dead, among their death offerings for the departed souls. It is believed that this ritual dates as early as the colonial period of Mexico.

It is a mark of the history of the Catholic Church as it spread throughout the world, to take customs, both secular and pagan, of the people and in effect baptize them as a part of evangelization. Signs and symbols, once alien or pagan were re-envisioned in the light of the Gospel and Christ. What once amounted to ancestor worship in many areas of the world is transformed in Catholic Christianity into honoring and praying for the attainment of the Kingdom of God.