

## TRADITION OF THE ALTAR OF THE DEAD



The altar of the dead is set in many Mexican households and is celebrated in other countries in Latin America. The first missionaries used the Aztec's culture to help them understand the salvation message that Jesus brings to humankind, that's why it uses elements of the prehispanic culture. Each of the symbols and objects used in the altar has a specific meaning.

### **SYMBOLS OF THE ALTAR OF THE DEAD:**



**The cross:** Represents Christianity and Jesus's victory over death.

**Natural elements:** Wind, water, fire, and earth are represented on the altar one way or another.

**Salt:** Represents an element of purification.

**The arch:** Represents the entrance to the world of the dead and is generally decorated with flowers and fruits.

**Levels of the altar:** If the altar is two levels, they represent heaven and earth. If it's three levels they represent heaven, purgatory and hell.

**Candles:** The light represents Christ and hope. In some indigenous communities, each candle represents a loved one.



**The flowers:** They give color and joy to the altar, and decorate and give fragrance to the place. Cempasúchil, alhelí, and cloud are the most common ones.

**Food and personal objects:** It's common to put the most treasured personal objects and belongings in the lower levels. It's also common to put the favorite meals of the deceased.

**Pictures:** It is the custom to put the loved one's picture on the upper level of the altar, just in the middle of it.

**Skulls:** They represent the family's loved ones. They can be of sugar or chocolate. They remind us to accept death as something unavoidable and as a part of life itself.



**Copal:** This comes from prehispanic times where it was used to worship the gods. It symbolizes the area's purification and it creates a nice environment for the loved one.

The idea of the altar of the dead is to create a place where our loved ones are remembered. It's without a doubt a ritual that emphasizes the remembering over the forgetting. Through this vision, all together as a family, children and elders, all have a different way to remember the ones we loved who are no longer with us.

November 2<sup>nd</sup> is also a day to pray for our loved ones, and most of all, and if possible, to attend the celebration of Mass, in communion with all the saints. It's a day to celebrate the life of those who preceded us in the path to God the Father, believing in the firm hope of everlasting life.

