

# Altar de los Muertos

Paul Turner

Many Hispanic families and communities observe All Souls Day by erecting an Altar de los Muertos or Altar of the Dead. It commemorates the faithful departed through a variety of symbols.

Inside a home or a church, a table or altar is set aside where photographs for the deceased are arranged together with items that remind the living of the ones they have lost.



Altar decorations may include mementos of the work, activities, and favorite foods that the dead enjoyed. There may also be images of the saints who

served as inspirations, as well as symbols of life and death, ranging from flowers to skeletons. Incense may

be lighted at the altar to add a delightful scent to the presentation, in hopes that it will please the spirits of the dead. Some altars have simple decorations; others become works of art.



The custom celebrates the belief that death is a part of life. Death is embraced, not removed from one's vision. Some of the images on an Altar de los Muertos may be comical – they show one's ability to accept death, to laugh in spite of it, and to look beyond it in hope.

Placing these articles on a piece of furniture called an altar both honors and prays for the dead. An altar is a place for offering sacrifice. Placing images of the dead on an altar is a way of entrusting their memory to God. And setting the altar in a place of respect gives honor to the dead.

Although All Souls Day is observed on November 2, the altar may be erected a little in advance and remain in place for a time afterward.