

Day of the Dead
Reverend Cyndi Simpson
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Homily: ***Day of the Dead***

This month, our worship theme is “Death.” Today, we are exploring the spiritual meanings of the Day of the Dead, known in Mexico as *El Día de los Muertos*. I’m going to speak a bit about the Day of the Dead as a holy day. Molly is going to share a personal reflection on the Day. Then we are going to build an altar to our Beloved Dead and hear about how the dead can live on in our lives. And what that might mean for us.

People have celebrated festivals commemorating the dead for millennia. For many ancient people, the final harvest, the end of the agricultural and pastoral year, also marked the end of the calendar year. At this time they acknowledged the end of the cycle of the earth’s seasons and gave thanks for its gifts. Often this was a time to acknowledge the human lives that had come to an end and to give thanks for ***their*** many gifts of love and learning.

These celebrations were certainly religious in nature. For many ancient and modern cultures, there is no separation between the mundane, or the everyday and the sacred. It’s all one reality, with the sacred and the ordinary merged in all aspects of life.

Samhain, the Celtic New Year and beginning of winter, celebrated on October 31 and November 1, was the central feast in the Celtic calendar, a time when the barriers between this world and the Otherworld temporarily disappeared so that the living and the dead could meet. With the dead offering insight and wisdom to the living.

In the Christian tradition, the celebration of the dead wandered all over the calendar. In the sixth century, Benedictine monasteries honored their deceased members in late spring. By the middle of the ninth century, the Feast of All Hallows or All Saints was observed by Christians all over Europe on November 1, influenced by the contact with pre-Christian Paganism in Europe. All Saints Day honored all the saints gone before, known and unknown.

Three centuries later, the Feast of All Souls – those souls believed to be in Purgatory and in need of the intercession of the saints – was officially established as November 2. The nature of the celebration changed as well. In the European traditions, perhaps because of the association with the Christian idea of Hell, death came to be seen as truly terrifying. The thought of one’s loved ones or oneself finding the afterlife to be a time of eternal torment was a frightening idea and gave Death a new focus.

On these two days, November 1 and 2, people in many Latin American countries celebrate the Day of the Dead, a fusion of Catholic and indigenous traditions. The Day of the Dead is celebrated in Guatemala, Ecuador, Brazil, Haiti and Bolivia. The most prominent and familiar to us of these celebrations is that of Mexico, where the Day of the Dead originated and is a national holiday. It has its roots in the Aztec culture of central Mexico, combined with Roman Catholic observances brought by the Spanish.

The Aztec people of central Mexico celebrated a month-long period of honoring the dead and making offerings to them. This was late summer, around August. When the Spanish arrived in brutal conquest, they

forcibly converted most Mexican people to Roman Catholicism, but they could not eliminate the indigenous religions altogether. The two faiths blended in many ways. The original celebration honoring the dead was moved to coincide with All Saints and All Souls Days and became a blend of traditions known as ***Día de Muertos*** – the Day of the Dead. This holy day keeps involving and continues its spread in North America and beyond.

The Day of the Dead today is a combination of secular and sacred themes. One of the most important and long-lasting beliefs of the holy day is that death, including its symbols of skulls (***las calaveras***) and skeletons (***las calacas***), is not something to be afraid of. Rather death is a natural part of the cycle of life. People want to speak of the dead, to remember them in many ways and to feel an ongoing sense of connection to them. So, in observing the Day of the Dead, there will be sugar skulls to eat and playful skeleton figures everywhere.

The playfulness is a way of mocking death so as to refuse death any power over human lives.

Mexican people visit cemeteries and clean the graves of their loved ones and cover them with flowers and candles. The main flower for the holy days, the ***flor de muerto***, the flower of death, is the marigold, known in the Aztec language as the ***cempasuchitl***.

The marigold blooms profusely before the Day of the Dead. Its strong smell is believed to help the spirits of the dead find their way home to visit. Its bright yellow and orange colors are reminders of the Sun, warmth and life. In the Aztec tradition, it was the Sun that guided people to the underworld after death, so the marigolds can bring them back to visit.

People build ***ofrendas*** or altars of their dead at the gravesite and also in their homes. The ***ofrendas*** are covered in flowers, religious symbols, photos of the beloved dead and some of their possessions. Foods and other things enjoyed by the dead will also be on the ***ofrenda***. It is believed that the spirits of the dead return at this time, so their relatives wish them to be happy and have their favorite foods and drinks.

A traditional ***ofrenda*** food is ***pan de muertos*** – the ‘bread of the dead.’ It is a round loaf with decorations like bones on it, with the bones arranged like the rays of the Sun.

On the evening of November 1, people go to the cemeteries and hold vigil for the entire night.

They pray to and for their dead family and friends. They will often eat a festive meal together. They might hire a mariachi band to serenade the dead with their favorite songs. They share stories and anecdotes of the dead in a way that is loving and humorous and sorrowful – all together.

The Day of the Dead truly is a celebration of love. It is both a happy time and a sad one. The grief is still there and it is real. Yet the dead are not considered scary, but loved ones to be honored and addressed directly during this sacred time. These concepts of death are a bit alien to the dominant culture of the United States. We tend to think of death as only negative and frightening and sad. Most of us don’t like to talk about it and often don’t want to talk about those who are dead. This certainly has to do with our concepts of Hell and suffering, but also with cultural beliefs of ghosts and how they are dangerous and scary.

There is some reality in our beliefs – grief and sadness about death is normal, natural and understandable. Death is final and is terrible in that finality. The people of Mexico and central and south America of course feel

all the grief at death that anyone does. At the same time, they place that sadness in a context of remembrance and joy. They invite their loved ones back to visit for this one sacred time of the year.

More and more non-Mexicans are celebrating the Day of the Dead in the United States and elsewhere. Because there is something very good and even healing in celebrating the love we have for those who have died. So today we will spend some time with our living community and our Beloved Dead – honoring the bright spirits of both. And honoring the importance of life **and** death in our whole lives.

We will now hear a story about the Day of the Dead from Molly Kliment-Jenkins, our Director of Religious Education.

A Day of the Dead Story by May Herz

I hold close to my heart and in my soul those good old days of November when I, as a child, and would help my *abuelita* , grandmother, commemorate our loved ones who had passed away. Beginning in October I would ask:

- ***Abuelita, when will we go to the market to buy the papel picado*** (paper with cut-out figures)?
- ***Abuelita, how many days until we go to the cemetery?***
- ***When are you going to get the table ready for the altar offering?***

And she would patiently respond, ***Very soon, sweetheart, but remember that first we have to clean the house really well for their visit. They're our most important visitors and we have to welcome them in to a very clean and organized home!***

I thoroughly enjoyed those afternoons when, after school, we would go to the market to buy everything we needed for the holiday. By that time the market would be packed with things for the Day of the Dead. I remember that before, just like now, flowers were sold everywhere, especially the ***cempasuchitl***, that orange flower that is only sold during this time of year.

There were stands where practically everything for the Day of the Dead was sold everything – candles, black ceramic candlesticks, and the fruit of the season: squash, sugar cane, and bananas. The bakeries prepare “ Pan de Muerto” , day of the dead bread and other special types of bread as offerings; for example, the golletes, a pink doughnut-type of bread, which symbolizes the cycle of life and death.

Get ready, sweetheart, my grandma would tell me, ***Today we have to get up early to get everything ready.***

October 31 had finally arrived, the eve of the big celebration. First I would help her put aside the living room furniture to get the table ready. Then we would cover the table with a white cloth, my grandma’s favorite.

This one, son, I embroidered when I was 16 years old, just before I married your abuelo, your grandfather, she told me.

I preferred putting out the brightly colored ***papel picado*** and the ***calaveras*** that made me laugh more than they scared me.

Once the tablecloth and ***papel picado*** were ready, we would carefully place the little toys for the angelitos – that’s what we called those close to us who died as children.

This little doll was your Aunt Margarita’s favorite, my grandma would remember as she hung the old doll above the altar. One by one, we would take my ancestors’ special belongings out of their box. Each one would

remind us of a familial anecdote. Discovering the contents of that old cardboard box was for me like opening a treasure chest.

We would place the candles that we'd bought in the market one by one on the altar: one for grandpa, another big one for Mother, another for Aunt Margarita...My grandma said that their light would guide their souls to our house, and each one had his or her own candle because there was something special to remember about each one of them.

Grandma, I'll place Baby Jesus and Mary, I would say as she held the bench so that I could climb up to put them in their places at the highest part of the offering. Then we would put **cempasuchitl** flowers and some sugar **calaveras**, the kind that have the name of the deceased on their forehead..

We would also take out our treasured family pictures of our dearly departed and hang them on the altar. Oh! I couldn't forget the glass of water and the little plate of salt...they say it's to relieve the thirst of the souls that return.

The rest of the day my grandma would spend in the kitchen preparing our lost loved ones favorite dishes. Meanwhile, I took the petals off the **cempasuchitl** flowers to make a path to the offerings. In the afternoon, the house would be filled with the aroma of the food grandma had prepared: mole with chicken, red rice, little zucchinis. When I was younger I used to think that food would really be eaten, but then they explained to me that it was just so that the souls could enjoy the delicious aroma.

When everything was ready, we would go to the cemetery with more candles and flowers to wait there for the souls. To call them, the church bells would ring all night.

How time flies! Today I prepare an offering with my children and I see in them the same excitement I felt as a child. Today I light a candle in honor of my grandma and I know that, even if only for a few moments, we'll be together again.

Let us honor of our dead by building an altar to our Beloved Dead. If you brought pictures of other mementoes of those you have loved, please bring them forward and place them on the altar now. If you did not bring a picture, you may write the name of your loved one on the pieces of paper with the skulls on them that were left on your chairs. Don't need to hurry. Let us take our Sacred Time. Let's go from front to back.

*****ALTAR*****

Prayer for our Dead

Spirit of Life, whom we know best in our own loving and being loved,

Hold us as we remember those we have loved, and those who have loved us.

May our gratitude sparkle in our lives, may our tears lubricate our souls. Help us to know that we are not alone in our sorrow.

Help us also to come to that peaceful place where we can take into our own lives what we learned from those who have gone before us.

Remind us that we, too, are mortal; and that the only enduring legacy we leave is the love that shines through our lives.

Amen and blessed be.

Homily – They Live On

We know that the dead can live on in our brains and our memories, affecting how we live, behave, think and feel. Affecting the very patterns of our lives. As do all our memories.

So what does this mean for us? Knowing that the dead can live on as patterns of behavior, as lessons learned, as love given and received – what do we do with that?

For our future, we have to trust that our lives have had and will have meaning. We must trust that the experiences we've had. Everything we've felt and learned and been passionate about. Including the stuff that didn't go too well. That all our experiences will lead, in some way, to something important for us. We have to trust that our lives have purpose, if we're being true to ourselves.

A huge part of our experience is the people and other beings we've known. And what we have learned from them – even the hard lessons. The love we have shared. The habits of speech or behavior or thought or feeling that we have inherited from them by blood relationship. Or friendship.

So one way we might be able to increase the chance that our lives will have purpose, focus and meaning is through our honoring of and reflection on our memories of those who have died. By remembering what it is that we learned from them, how they have loved us and how we have loved them.

We keep those experiences alive and fresh in our bodies, our spirits and our minds. We can share them with others, going forward into the future, and keep experiencing their wonder and their goodness. Not only is this healing, it is enriching for us. It helps us to keep on growing in goodness and wholeness. And it honors those who have died by keeping them alive.

I invite you to spend some time over the next days thinking about how you will continue to connect with all the precious people and other beings in your life who have died. In this way, you will honor them by taking their legacy of love and influence forward in our lives and the lives of others. Thus do they continue to live on through us and with us. It is the only way they can.

May it be so. Amen. Blessed be.