

## The Days of the Dead

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Both Halloween and The Days of the Dead (*el día de los muertos*) are traditions and ceremonies related to the observance of dates in the religious calendar of the Catholic Church; November 1 is All Saints Day and November 2 is All Souls Day. For many people, part of the tradition is going to the cemetery and making sure the burial places of family members are clean and well-kept.

Halloween is a contraction of All Hallows Eve, the evening before All Saints Day (October 31), with “hallows” being an older English word for saints.

Pre-Christian traditions taught that around these dates the division between the world of the dead and the world of the living opened briefly and the dead could visit among the living. Some of the visitors could be friendly ghosts looking in on their families, but there could also be spirits who had been killed who bore malice toward their attackers and might wish to frighten them.

Much of the observance in the United States seems to have come from Irish customs which placed emphasis on frightening experiences and jokes and pranks which could be blamed on the activities of visiting ghosts.

In Mexico before the arrival of the Spanish, the indigenous people also believed in the return of the dead. Because these traditions were so strong, the church encouraged observance of prayers and the remembrance of the saints and of the dead at this particular time of year.

The indigenous people added parts of their pre-Christian rituals to the visit to the cemetery, taking flowers to the graves and leaving offerings of the dead person's favorite food and drink on the gravestones. The living family members brought a sort of picnic to the cemetery. They believed that the souls of babies would visit on November 1 and of adults on November 2.

Another observance was added for November 2, the eating of a special bread, a yeast bread with added eggs, cinnamon and sugar. The rolls are sometimes decorated with a skull and cross bones, or formed in the shape of a ghost. The bread is often eaten as part of an evening meal.

Except in areas where there is a strong U. S. influence, these observances do not feature witches and costumes are not used, nor do the children ask for treats or threaten tricks. Instead, there are figures of clay, wood, tin, and papier mache, all representing skeletons, each one doing the work they did in life. Skeletons may dance, play instruments, sell items in the market, pull teeth, and carry wood. Artists may create a wedding scene with all the participants portrayed as skeletons.

Tables with pictures and favorite things of family members who are no longer living are displayed, forming a sort of altar.

The bones come to life and life goes on as always. The young man buys a skull made of hard sugar candy with his sweetheart's name on the forehead. The observances are part of a culture where death is a normal part of human existence, coffins are sold openly in shops on the streets, and the dead are often fondly remembered.