

# THE OFRENDA

The altar (or *ofrenda*) is a wonderful multi-cultural activity for home or classroom. Everyone can participate and put something, either traditional or symbolic, on the altar. The altar is where people can express their feelings for those loved ones being honored. Americans (and non-Catholics) are beginning to adopt this tradition and now altars are becoming popular in private homes as well as in public places.

In Mexico, the traditional family altar explodes with color during Day of the Dead when many special items are set out as offerings to the returning spirits. The entire family will work together in the decoration; much the same as Americans who decorate a Christmas tree together. Many families spend up to two month's earnings on the food & decorations for their *ofrendas*. Regional custom and tradition have a lot to do with what people put on their altars, but in Southern Mexico, several things are a must: an arch made of sugar cane, candles, copal incense, a glass of water for the weary traveling spirit, flowers ~ especially orange marigolds (*cempasuchil*) and red cocks combs ~ special foods like *tamales* and *mole*, skeleton decorations and sugar skulls.

The altar provides a feast for the visiting spirits. Favorite items of the person being honored are displayed on the altar. On November 1 ~ the day honoring children ~ altars are filled with everything in miniature: toys, chocolate, little glasses of milk & candies. On November 2 ~ the day honoring adult spirits ~ cigarettes, *mezcal*, bottles of soda, stacks of handmade *tortillas*, *pan de muerto* (a rich egg bread which is either decorated or braided), special turkey in *mole* sauce, nuts, *tamales* and special personal items of the muerto (like a hat or piece of jewelry) adorn the altar. An altar may honor more than one person and a cross made of marigold petals recognizes each person. Names of the honored guests are put on sugar skulls, oranges, apples and big loaves of bread. Little skeleton figurines and sugar skulls are used to decorate the altar and poke fun at death.

Members of the family never eat off the altar until the food has been enjoyed by the spirits and they have safely returned to heaven. But on November 3, the family enjoys a feast they've been waiting for all year!

## ALTAR CHECKLIST

APPLES (usually an expensive luxury item)	LOTERIA (Mexican Bingo)
ARCH made of tall sugar cane & tied to table legs	MARIGOLDS
ANGELS	MOLE SAUCE (w/turkey, pork)
ATOLE (traditional drink made of corn)	NUTS
BANANAS	ORANGES
CANDLES - VOTIVES	PAPEL PICADO BANNERS
CANDLESTICKS	PUMPKINS - SQUASH
COPAL INCENSE	PHOTOS OF DECEASED
COCK'S COMB (bright red flower)	PERSONAL MEMENTOS
CHICKEN	SANDPAINTING (or petal painting)
CHOCOLATE (candy as well as the drink)	SAINTS-RELIGIOUS DECORATIONS
CORN	SKELETONS
DAY OF THE DEAD BREAD	SUGAR SKULLS
GLASS OF WATER	SODA POP IN BOTTLES (tops off!)
INCENSE BURNER	TOYS
INSTRUMENTS	WATERMELONS

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