

# The Day of the Dead is also the day of life

by Marián Arribas-Tomé

Mexicans are not afraid of death. So much so that they celebrate with colorful enthusiasm two festivities deeply rooted in Christian tradition. These arrived in the so-called "new world" especially from Spain: All Saints' Day, 1st November, and All Souls' Day, the 2nd of November.

Some insist on its syncretic nature, and connections are drawn with pre-Hispanic cultures, such as the Mixtec, the Aztec and the Nahua culture. But others simply point out that these celebrations are versions of Christian cultural practices that have their origin in the early Middle Ages.

Whatever the origin, in Central and Southern Mexico it has developed unmistakable visual qualities. These are not only appreciated in how people dress those days, but also in the food and sweets that are prepared for such a special occasion. It is a real party.

In Spain, people also visit the graves of their deceased relatives, but the attitude towards death is not to normalize it and make it visible. There is a date on the calendar for death, but it is not a cause for celebration the way it is in Mexico. And this is a very significant difference, because in Mexico it does not go unnoticed at all, and sobriety and seclusion are not at all its characteristics.

Children are not hidden from death as is the case in most of the Western world. They also participate in the celebrations and learn from a young age that the dead do not really leave.

Popular symbols of these two days in Mexico are the *calacas*, or skeletons, and the skulls. Usually the *calacas* appear in a festive and humorous attitude, and the skulls can be sweet or appear as ornamental motifs. In Mexico death is looked at face to face and it is not a taboo, it is part of life. Death is not the end. And that is why the dead are remembered openly and happily, and thus they are also part, year after year, of this festival. It is a meeting of the living and the dead.

Within the country there are variations, affecting for example the bread that is made. *Pan Grande* is traditional in San Francisco de Campeche. However, in most of the country the most common bread is the *Pan de Muerto*.

Regarding the *Pan de Muerto*, @ jess.malteza sends me these photos, and gives me some details. It is a sweet and very aromatic bread that is only made for this season. It has orange zest and orange blossom, as characteristic ingredients. It is

generally accompanied with hot chocolate. What is on top of the bread, symbolizes the skull, the bones and the 4 cardinal points.

Jess Malteza also comments on the items and offerings on her altar and illustrates them with another photo she shares with Spanish Bytes. There are photographs of their loved ones, marigold and velvet flowers, sugar and chocolate skulls, *Pan de Muerto*, candles, colored confetti, copal and some food and drink that their deceased relatives liked very much.

Light is a fundamental part of this celebration. Light that guides the dead of the underworld so that they find the way that brings them closer to the living. Thus all truly meet in indissoluble community. Joy in the form of costumes, music, food and drink. Not for nothing is the saying "For all evil, mezcal; for everything good, too ... and if there is no remedy: a liter and a half ". In these two days the dead return with a leading role, and a presence that continues to be strongly linked to life is underlined, as long as there is someone who still celebrates the Day of the Dead. And in Mexico, the party continues.

Once you have read this article and watched the video, reflect and answer the following questions:

- 1. How would you describe the celebrations in Mexico?
- 2. What is it that strikes you the most?
- 3. Do you think something positive or negative? Why?
- 4. Is there a celebration of the dead in your country or region?
- 5. How would you define the word 'taboo'?
- 6. What words would you use to talk about death and the dead?