

Building a Día de los Muertos Altar

A Catholic Tradition of Remembrance, Prayer, and Hope

Why We Build Altars

A Día de los Muertos altar, or *ofrenda*, is a meaningful way to honor and remember loved ones who have died. Rooted in the Catholic observance of All Souls Day, the altar serves as a place for prayer, reflection, and remembrance. Through photographs, symbols of faith, flowers, and treasured mementos, families celebrate the lives of those who have gone before us while reaffirming our belief in the Resurrection and the promise of eternal life in Christ.

An altar is not an object of worship; rather, it is a visible expression of love, memory, and prayer for our faithful departed. It provides families and communities with a sacred space to gather, pray, and share stories that keep the memory of loved ones alive.

Selecting a Location

Choose a clean, respectful location in your home, parish, school, or community space. Your altar may be simple or elaborate, depending on the space available.

Common locations include:

- A table covered with a decorative cloth
- A shelving unit
- A dedicated prayer corner
- A community display area

The altar should be arranged in a manner that encourages remembrance.



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For altars displayed at Catholic Cemeteries & Mortuaries Día de los Muertos celebrations, altar spaces are assigned by cemetery staff. To ensure the safety of visitors and preserve the dignity of the cemetery grounds, personal altars may only be placed in designated areas. Altars, decorations, and displays are not permitted at gravesites unless specifically authorized by cemetery management.

Essential Elements of a Catholic Día de los Muertos Altar

Cross

The cross is the most important symbol on a Catholic altar. It reminds us of Christ's victory over death and His promise of eternal life.

Photographs

Photographs help us remember the faces and stories of our loved ones. Display photos of family members and friends for whom you are offering prayers.

Candles

Candles symbolize Christ as the Light of the World and remind us of the light of faith received at Baptism. They also represent our prayers rising to God.

Battery-operated candles are recommended for public displays.

Flowers

Marigolds (*cempasúchitl*) are traditionally used because of their bright color and association with life, hope, and heavenly glory. Fresh flowers of any kind may be used to beautify the altar.



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Images of Saints

Images of saints remind us of the Communion of Saints and our belief that the Church on earth and in heaven remains united in Christ.

Water

A glass or small container of water symbolizes purity, refreshment, and the gift of life.

Bread

Pan de Muerto or other bread may be included as a reminder of Christ, the Bread of Life, and the Eucharist.

Favorite Foods and Beverages

Families often place favorite foods or drinks enjoyed by their loved ones as a way of celebrating their life and preserving family memories.

Personal Items

Meaningful possessions belonging to the deceased may be displayed, such as:

- Rosaries
- Prayer books
- Military memorabilia
- Musical instruments
- Crafts
- Sports items
- Letters or handwritten notes

These items help tell the story of a person's life and legacy.

Papel Picado

Colorful cut-paper decorations symbolize the fragility of life and add beauty to the altar.



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Suggested Altar Decoration Ideas

In addition to the traditional altar elements, families may wish to personalize their altar with meaningful decorations that reflect their loved one's life, interests, faith, and cultural heritage.

Faith-Based Decorations

- Crucifix or cross
- Rosaries
- Prayer cards
- Sacred images of Jesus, Mary, and the Saints
- Holy water
- Scripture verses or inspirational quotes
- Battery-operated candles

Traditional Día de los Muertos Decorations

- Marigold flowers
- Papel picado banners
- Decorative sugar skulls
- Colorful table coverings
- Flower petals arranged around the altar
- Traditional Mexican pottery or baskets

Family Remembrance Items

- Framed photographs
- Items representing a loved one
- Copies of favorite recipes



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- Family tree displays

Personal Interest Displays

Consider items that reflect the hobbies, talents, or passions of your loved one:

- Musical instruments or sheet music
- Sports memorabilia
- Artwork or crafts
- Gardening tools
- Books
- Military service items
- Professional mementos
- Travel souvenirs

Interactive Memory Ideas

- A memory journal where visitors can share stories
- Prayer intention cards
- A remembrance tree with written messages
- Memory cards featuring favorite quotes or sayings of loved ones

Display Tips

- Create varying heights using boxes covered with fabric.
- Arrange the cross and religious symbols in a prominent location.
- Place photographs at eye level whenever possible.
- Use color and lighting to create a warm and inviting display.
- Avoid overcrowding the altar so each item can be appreciated.



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Suggested Altar Layout Ideas

Traditional Three-Level Altar

Top Level

- Crucifix or cross
- Image of Our Lady, Jesus, or a favorite saint
- Bible

Middle Level

- Photographs of loved ones
- Candles
- Flowers

Lower Level

- Favorite foods and beverages
- Personal mementos
- Pan de Muerto
- Water

This layout symbolizes heaven, earth, and our earthly journey toward God.

Cemetery Event Altar

Recommended for Día de los Muertos celebrations at Catholic Cemeteries & Mortuaries.

Back Center

- Cross or crucifix



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Center

- Photographs and memorial items

Sides

- Flower arrangements
- Papel picado

Front

- Water
- Bread
- Favorite foods
- Prayer intentions

Tips

- Keep displays stable and weather-resistant.
- Use battery-operated candles.
- Avoid valuable or irreplaceable items.
- Follow all cemetery setup and display guidelines.

Creating a Prayerful Atmosphere

Your altar should encourage prayer and remembrance.

Consider including:

- A Bible
- A Rosary
- Holy water
- Prayer cards



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- A prayer intentions book for visitors

Families are encouraged to gather around their altar to pray for the souls of loved ones and all the faithful departed.

Suggested Prayer

Prayer for the Faithful Departed

Heavenly Father,

We entrust our loved ones to Your mercy and love. Grant them eternal rest and perpetual light. May they be welcomed into Your heavenly kingdom and rejoice forever in Your presence.

Comfort all who mourn and strengthen our faith in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Display Guidelines

- Display only respectful and family-friendly items.
- Do not include anything offensive, political, or inappropriate.
- Use battery-operated candles whenever possible.
- Keep walkways and exits clear.
- Secure fragile items.
- Label personal belongings you wish to reclaim.
- Follow all event-specific rules provided by the hosting organization.



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- Altars displayed at Catholic Cemeteries & Mortuaries must follow all dates, setup times, removal deadlines, and guidelines established by the hosting cemetery.
 - Participants are encouraged not to leave items that are personal, sentimental, irreplaceable, or of significant monetary value, as Catholic Cemeteries & Mortuaries cannot be responsible for lost, stolen, or damaged items.
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Remember

A Día de los Muertos altar is more than a display. It is a visible expression of faith, love, remembrance, and hope. Through prayer and reflection, we honor those who have gone before us and reaffirm our belief that, in Christ, life is changed, not ended.

For information about annual Día de los Muertos observances, altar registrations, and event guidelines, please visit **CatholicCM.org/diadelosmuertos**.



SUGGESTED ALTAR LAYOUT IDEAS

These altar layouts are examples to inspire your own creation.
Adapt them to reflect your loved one, your family, and your faith.



1. TRADITIONAL THREE-LEVEL ALTAR

- 1 TOP LEVEL**
Crucifix or cross, image of Our Lady, Jesus, or a favorite saint, and Bible.
- 2 MIDDLE LEVEL**
Photographs of loved ones, candles, and flowers.
- 3 LOWER LEVEL**
Favorite foods and beverages, personal mementos, Pan de Muerto, and water.



2. FAMILY MEMORIAL ALTAR

- CENTER**
Family cross or crucifix.
- LEFT SIDE**
Grandparents and ancestors.
- RIGHT SIDE**
Parents, siblings, and relatives.
- FRONT**
Family heirlooms, memory book, and prayer intentions.



3. CEMETERY EVENT ALTAR

- BACK CENTER**
Cross or crucifix.
- CENTER**
Photographs and memorial items.
- SIDES**
Flower arrangements and papel picado.
- FRONT**
Water, bread, favorite foods, and prayer intentions.

TIPS FOR ALL ALTARS

- Place the cross or crucifix in a prominent and elevated position.
- Use varying heights to create visual interest.
- Use battery-operated candles whenever possible.
- Keep the altar orderly and leave space for prayer.
- Create an altar that reflects love, faith, and memory.