Day of the Dead Altars
By Vanderbilt Center for Latin American Studies

The Day of the Dead (known as *Día de los Muertos* in Spanish) is a holiday celebrated throughout Latin America where people honor their dead ancestors and celebrate the cycle of life. An important part of the holiday that is used in most countries in Latin America is the altar.

The altar is the sacred site where the living souls honor the dead. Each of the materials used to build the altar has a special significance. The portrait of the departed shows the spirit where to go, and a small cross of ashes helps spirits in purgatory find their way out. Candles, especially purple ones, represent grief. Four candles formed into a cross represent the four cardinal points, so that the soul may orient itself and find its path. The smoke of copal incense cleanses the space of evil spirits, allowing the soul to enter its home free of danger. The large cross of ashes allows the soul to atone for its unresolved sins once it arrives at the altar. The soul uses the basin, soap, and towel on the altar to wash its hands after the long journey. Favorite foods are arranged on the altar to entice the soul to visit the living.

Liquor, preferably tequila, reminds the soul of the wonderful experiences of life, and a jar of water quenches the spirit’s thirst and moisturizes its lips for the long journey. Skulls made of sugar, placed on top of the altar, serve as an allusion to the constant presence of death. Three smaller skulls at the base of the altar are dedicated to the Holy Trinity, and a larger one is dedicated to the Eternal Father. Lastly, the space is decorated with flowers to make it more beautiful and appealing to the spirit.