

HONORING THE DEAD

A Mexican Tradition

On November 2 of every year, the souls of the dead receive divine permission to visit their living loved ones, who light the way with candles to the altar laden with offerings of bread, *atole*,¹ fruit, cigarettes and all the kinds of food, drink and personal belongings they had been fond of when they still inhabited their bodies.

Mexico's death worship dates from the pre-Hispanic era and is closely linked to the Mesoamerican peoples' dualistic conception of the universe. In this world view, life and death were not two points on opposite ends of a straight line, but two points facing each other on a circle. "There can be no life without death before it, and there can be no death without life before it."²



Photos by Eduardo Sepúlveda Amor

¹ A sweet, thick hot drink made with cornstarch.

² Alfredo López Austin says that death worship had profound agricultural significance: when groups of hunter-gatherers learned to cultivate corn and became planters; the life cycles of the earth—the dry and rainy seasons—became a fundamental part of their world view and are reflected in their gods and rites. See "Los Mexicas y su cosmos" in *Dioses del México Antiguo*, Ediciones del Equilibrista, Mexico City, 1995, p. 25.

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Mexicans go to cemeteries November 1 and 2 to honor their dead.

The celebration is based on the common belief that the souls of the dead are able to visit their relatives in this world.

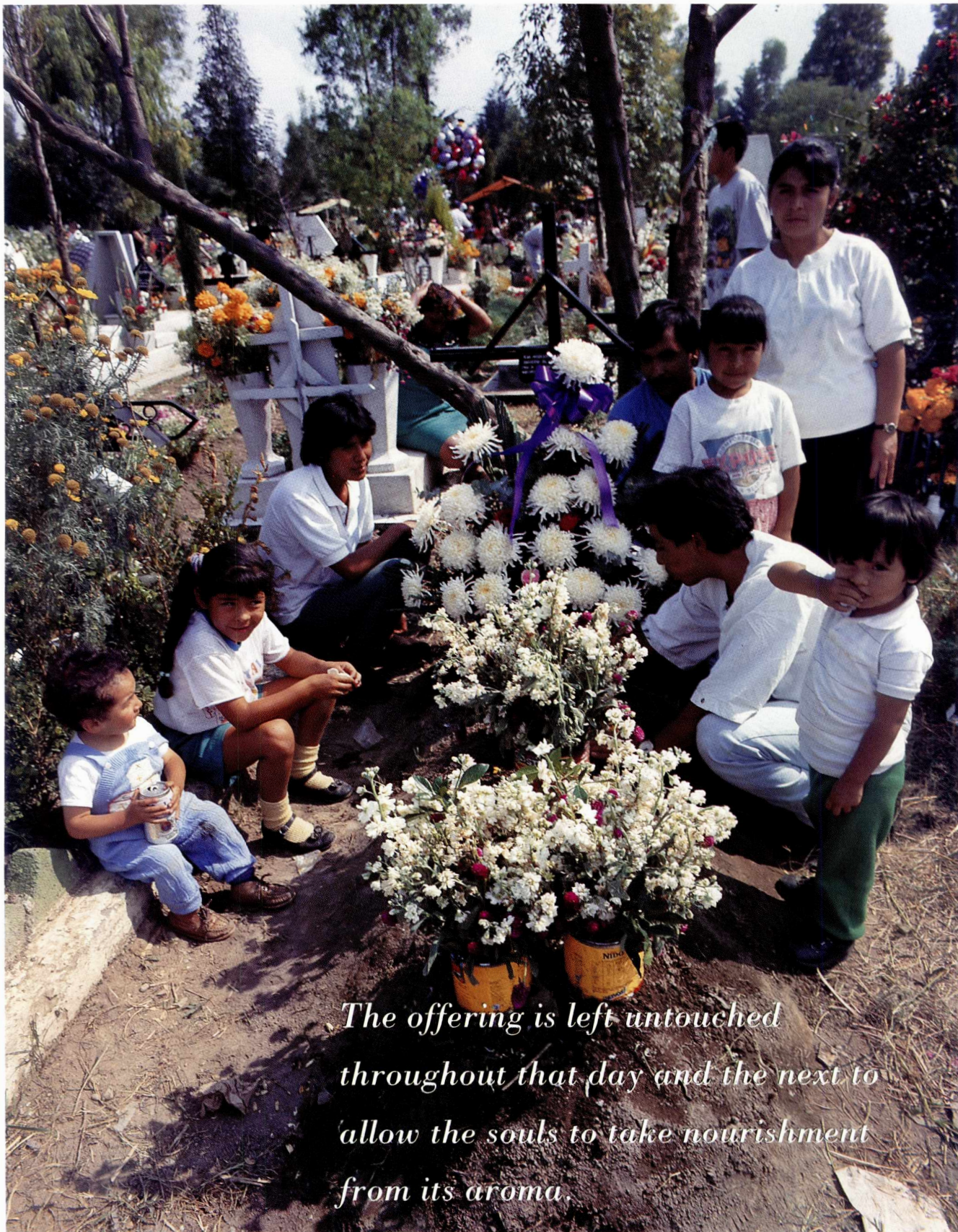
The Mesoamerican peoples believed that when warriors died, they accompanied the sun in its ascent to the heavens to overcome the stars of the night. Women who died in

childbirth were thought to accompany the sun from midday until sundown. But, those who died of natural causes had to go through the nine underworlds, fraught with

danger, before they arrived at *Mictlán*, or the land of the dead. The cave through which the world of the dead was reached was also where men were born.

The Colonial Period brought with it the Catholic view of death: enjoying Heaven or burning in Hell were the reward or the punishment awarded to the souls of men depending on their behavior here on Earth. The Catholic Church picked November 1 and 2 for honoring the dead, in answer to the indigenous fertility ceremonies in the months of *ochpaniztli* and *teotleco* at the end of October and the beginning of November, when the harvest was brought in and offerings made of *cempasúchil* flowers and corn tamales. Two ritual traditions merged into one, and that has survived until today as a mix of pagan and Christian rites.

In our time, with variations from one region to another, the celebration is based on the common belief that on the first and second days of November, the souls of the dead are able to visit their relatives in this world, who must prepare themselves to guide them here and give them the reception they deserve. That is the origin of the altars and offerings to the dead found in Mexico's graveyards and homes at this time of year. These offerings must include candles—one for each departed loved one—to light the way for the souls to reach their altar; fruit, food and water, so the spirits can calm their hunger and thirst; salt for purification; cem-



The offering is left untouched throughout that day and the next to allow the souls to take nourishment from its aroma.



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pasúchil flowers, tablecloths and paper ornaments cut like lace; and belongings of the dead.

The *cempasúchil* is sprinkled from the door of the house to the altar.³ The souls come on November 1 and are welcomed with music, dances or prayers; the offering is left untouched throughout that day and the next to allow the souls to take nourishment from its aroma. Toward midday of November 2, they again leave for the world of the dead and their living relatives then eat and drink the offering, after adding con-



The tradition also includes joking about death.

³ In the pre-Hispanic tradition, the fruit, water, cut paper and candles represent, respectively, the four elements: earth, water, wind and fire.

diments to the dishes which presumably have lost some of their flavor after being "consumed" by the dead souls.

In many towns and regions of Mexico, the Day of the Dead continues to be one of the year's most important festivities. And, even though much of its significance has been lost in urban areas, every October 31, people continue to build altars, make offerings and visit the dead in graveyards all over the country. ❧

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