Dead Reckoning or Reckoning with the Dead

Hispanic Catholic Funeral Customs

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Navigators refer to dead reckoning as an estimation of one’s current position in relation to previously known, fixed locations. Reckoning with the dead is the cultural phenomenon of estimating one’s proper location in the universe based upon one’s relationship to an entire society, living and dead, all of whom share certain fixed positions or perspectives concerning both life and death.

Many death rites among Hispanics have survived because they are congruent with both native pre-Christian and Spanish Catholic beliefs that allow the living to reckon with their beloved dead. Among these shared beliefs are: (1) since love is stronger than death, death cannot destroy family relationships; (2) the dead and the living can be of mutual aid to one another; (3) the faithful need not fear death, but can embrace it as a passage to another kind of life; (4) death is the great equalizer among the living, a lesson of unique importance to the powerful and proud; and (5) one can prepare for death by right living, prayer, amends, and penance. As different funerary customs highlight the importance of these five general beliefs, it is worthwhile to explore each belief along with a corresponding Catholic Hispanic tradition concerning death.

(1) Love is Stronger than Death: Days of the Dead

The Days of the Dead ceremonies are extensive and communal. They begin on October 27 in memory of orphaned or forgotten souls, continue on October 28 with the commemoration of those who died violently, on October 31 the angelitos or children who died are remembered, and on November 1 adults are recalled. The Days of the Dead taken together are a festival of hospitality where the divide between life and death is bridged by a liminal experience of family love that is stronger than death. The spirits of the dead are guided to the celebration by candles and incense, welcomed with the food and drink they enjoyed while on earth, and greeted by photographs and mementos memorializing their life. In general, the souls of children are welcomed at home while those of adults are received in the cemetery.

If the deceased died violently, some roadside cross was probably already
erected. A cross not only symbolizes Jesus’ passion, but even among the pre-Christian natives it symbolized the intersection of life and death because it brings together the four cardinal points. Such a cross, if there is one, will be visited and repaired or cleaned. Likewise the family cemetery will also be cleaned and maintained in a festival atmosphere not unlike the welcoming at home. After all, as the dead are honored in the homes of the living, so the living are patiently awaited by the dead who are helping to prepare that final and true home in the next life.

Both at home and in the cemetery, a joyful family reunion or fiesta is celebrated after a commemorative Mass. Like other fiestas, there are foods (pom de muerto) and flowers (marigolds) especially associated with the day. The dead are also recalled through stories and remembered in prayer.

Family bonds are renewed and the communal value of hospitality is offered in a tangible way. When death is a familiar part of life and the dead continue to be intimate members of the family, children do not learn to fear or deny it. Just like other rites of passage, death has its place in the pantheon of family customs and the child understands that in every moment of existence God and family are always present. Rather than some macabre routine, this is a culturally relevant experience of the communion of saints or “cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1).

The traditional days of the dead are always being adapted. Persons who migrate or emigrate may not be physically close to the burial site of their families (although it is not unusual that an immigrant who dies in the United States is buried in her or his hometown, despite the considerable expense). Less traditional and more commercialized celebrations such as Halloween attract the young away from the traditional days of the dead.

Unfortunately, church leaders who are not Hispanic often fail to recognize the importance of el día de los muertos. Even without church support, ethnic organizations such as ethnic museums or domestic ethnic celebrations continue and strengthen the familial love that conquers death, symbolized and celebrated among many Hispanic Catholics every October and November.

A number of contemporary commentaries on liturgical practice have indicated how the parish might help sustain this popular practice. For All Souls Day (November 2) the parish might create a catafalque with white pall and paschal candle. A book to remember the deceased could be included along with smaller candles representing those who died during the past year. The parish may also offer a special prayer service based on the Office of the Dead.

(2) Living and Dead Aid One Another: Altarcitos

Whether the parish chooses a communal catafalque or not, many parishioners will have small home altars (altarcitos) to express tangibly the belief that the dead and the living can be of mutual aid to one another. While every altar is highly personalized, each will also contain symbols of the four elements of indigenous belief in the connection between this life and the next, namely, earth (symbolized through fruit or flowers), wind (seen through a mobile constructed often of papel picado or the incense copal), fire (the obligatory candles), and water (often blessed). Symbols of these four elements are universal, while photographs, plaques, medals, trophies, toys, and many other personal touches
will also be present. In this way the altarcito is always both communal and personal.

Although altarcitos are closely associated with other celebrations of the liturgical year (Corpus Christi, Holy Cross), along with anointing by the priest and simple prayers of the family, in all cases the altarcito is a touchstone between this world and the next. As such it is an act of faith in the incarnation since it gives thanks to God through the material provided by the God who inhabits our physical universe. Again, both the personal and the communal are present and commingled.

This is not the Catholicism of dogma, but the dogma of the intimate (personal) as well as the universal (communal) presence of God in the world. All the abundant images of saints, angels, and especially Mary proclaim the importance of intercession through relationship. The church on earth is related to the church in heaven through a common journey on earth as well as a shared goal to be with God in heaven. The statues of the saints, as part of the sacred space of the altarcito, proclaim a belief in the family as more than nuclear, even more than extended, but inclusive of the communion of saints or cloud of witnesses.

Altarcitos express joyful exuberance or “...growth, abundance, and inclusion...” the only proper response to the overwhelming generosity of God. All the dead who are with God are freed from the isolation and selfishness so often found in this world. They now enjoy the unbounded divine abundance, which reaches even to the living, who enthusiastically respond through their equally enthusiastic devotion.

Just as one may have a favorite within the family without necessarily dividing the family, so one may have a favorite among the saints broadly understood as the saint to whom one has recourse in time of need. So there is a plethora of rituals that unite the living with their beloved dead, especially in moments of need or commemoration. People talk to their beloved saints, complain to them, and take them into their confidence. Altarcitos provide for a traditional and familiar way for people to relate to those they knew in this life and those they know only through the “Lives of the Saints,” but who all share one faith and, therefore, one family.

Though steeped in tradition, this is a dynamic cultural custom. Each death is a time to add new emblems to the altarcito, every stressful moment a reason to seek its solace, while it is always also a place to venerate all the dead on either communal, cultural celebrations such as the Days of the Dead or on the anniversaries of particular deaths.

(3) Death is Passage to Another Life: Novenas and Anniversaries

The anniversaries of the deaths of family members as well as the original rituals surrounding their death proclaim that the faithful need not fear death, but can embrace it as a passage to another kind of life.

When a Latino or Latina Catholic dies, the Mass of Christian Burial is celebrated to the extent that clergy are available. However, even without the Misa del Cuerpo Presente, beliefs in the passage to new life are ritualized at the velorio.
(vigil), novenario (novena of prayers), and aniversario (monthly or annual anniversary remembrances of the dead).

Ricardo Falla suggests that in general men take a cavalier attitude toward death while women a more resigned one, and that both are needed. That is why at the vigil men are usually more removed from the cadaver while women sit near it, and why women are more likely to pray while men are liable to talk quietly, drink, or eat. However, traditionally both genders will stay all night with the deceased and her or his family, expressing condolences (péame) to the living, and recalling the dead. All of these ritual expressions are means not only of consoling the family and strengthening communal bonds, but also a rite of passage that “initiate[s] the dead into a new way of participating in the life of the family.”

This initiation ideally begins when the person enters her or his final agony. They are accompanied by family and friends, who pray with them, caress, console, and kiss them, express or request pardon, and in general help the person accept death as an entrance into a new life.

Accompaniment continues at the vigil as well as through announcements of the actual death along with the time and place of death rites. Such announcements are often published in local newspapers. They might mention the nine days of prayer in the family home (sometimes reduced to three) following the velorio and called the novenario.

The nine days of prayer allow for even greater participation by family and friends, especially those who could not attend the vigil. With the body buried, attention is shifted to the cross and its promise to the faithful of new life. With each day there is increasing emphasis on that new life and the living’s hope to share it. This is not an obsession with death or an unhealthy prolongation of grief, but the rhythm of a community celebrating the fullness of life. Formal attire, traditional prayers, warm remembrances, kind reassurance, and shared table fellowship emphasize the life of the believing community that has changed but not diminished, just as the life of the deceased is transformed but not ended.

The novena may conclude with the first of many family visits to the burial site. Some people also observe the one-month anniversary of death, and most will celebrate annually the day the beloved died. Of course, the deceased is added to the pantheon of family members awaiting the living at the cemetery and are honored with the same dedication at altarcitos.

Since love is stronger than death, death cannot destroy family relationships: rather, the dead and the living can be of mutual aid to one another. That is why the faithful need not fear death, but can embrace it as a passage to another kind of life. However, this all presumes solidarity and mutuality within a community, rather than individualism, egotism, and the misuse of power. Reminders of the great equalizing or leveling effect of death, and therefore the primordial unity of the community, is part of the distinct humor Hispanics often bring to la muerte, their last and most faithful friend.

(4) Death is the Great Equalizer: Humor

Joaquín Antonio Peñalosa says that Mexicans laugh at what they find also most solemn: religion, politics, and death. Since it is a cultural sense of humor,
it is public. People write ribald verses about priests and nuns, print drawings of politicians caught in the act of corruption, and place skeletons on display as though mannequins of the latest fashion.

The latter is an ironic mix of silliness and sadness, that is, a display of the foolishness of pride and power attempting to dress up the inevitability of death. Such popular pokes at the powerful are not only three-dimensional. They may be printed broadsides (calaveras) in the tradition of José Guadalupe Posadas, popular proverbs, topics of amateur theatre troops, or even the subject of folk songs known as corridos.

But whether narrative, dramatized, printed, or displayed, all are examples of the popular classes leveling the differences between themselves and the powerful by humorously reminding all that beneath either pomp or poverty everyone is mortal.

... humor which reveals the sense of perspective that is at its core ... our humor surrounding the subject, taboo in much of the industrialized world, reveals a combination of these ostensibly opposite stances of mockery and respect. The combination is as paradoxical ... as an equalizer, death renders all this relatively trivial ... ?

It is the personification of death that is culturally unique to this humor and which allows it to make death personal, not as the grim reaper but as the great leveler. Death is portrayed as La Flaca, a thin but alluring woman. Since she comes for all, it is best to make peace with her as the proverb suggests: “Consejos y ejemplos que obligan, los que los muertos nos digan.” “Translated: “Advice and examples that are obligatory are what the dead tell us.”

In a society in which the very language is hierarchical and sometimes more direct, attacks on the powerful can be dangerous. Popular and often anonymous humor has played a venerable role in humbling the proud and exalting the poor. After all are buried in the cemetery or camposanto, and death has destroyed both pride and power, who can tell rich from poor?

(5) One Can Prepare for Death: Camposanto

Originally the camposanto was the cemetery ritually reserved only for Catholics (through consecration) and ethnically segregated for Hispanics (through isolation). Although these customs have been modified, the camposanto remains the one funerary tradition whose material aspects can be most easily traced across generations. Thus although this “field of the saints” has greatly changed since World War II due to migration, commercialization, and acculturation, it still testifies to traditional belief and documents those beliefs that are most enduring today.

Consecrated burial fields have always been used by poor Catholics and even by wealthy ones when choice spots within the church itself were no longer available due to crowding or structural concerns. The camposanto is blessed by clergy and often is close to the church. The camposanto demonstrates strong boundaries. Not only is the entire site fenced and gated, but individual graves are demarked by mounds, markers, or borders. This material religion reveals
the *mestizo* (Spanish and indigenous) roots of the community as well as their particular way of being Catholic, which has been greatly influenced by an historic lack of clergy.

Hispanics who are *mestizos* bear the influence of both Spanish and Amerindian cultures. From native cultures they received a conviction that life depends on death. From Spain they received the certainty that life is preparation for death. Both cultures believed that death was a portal to a different but authentic existence.

Various lay societies were traditionally charged with both penitential practices for the living as well as Christian burial for the dead. Hence from the earliest influence of Catholicism, death and right living were related. One can prepare for death through a virtuous life that includes prayer, amends, and penance. This is why even today the most common decoration in Hispanic Catholic cemeteries, as well as in their penitential practices, is the cross or crucifix.

In addition to the various boundaries (*cerquitas*) and crosses, the *camposanto* usually also includes *nichos* or recesses built into the grave marker for the display of either holy objects and personal mementoes. Although there may be handwritten notes and photographs, artificial flowers, as well as other items, traditional and domestically produced symbols are still preferred to either literary inscriptions or manufactured items. Like the *altarito*, the grave site symbolizes both universally understood ethnic meaning (*crosses*) as well as personal touches unique to individual families (*mementos*).

The universal ethnic markers are influenced by both the shared Catholic faith and also the available local materials. Crosses were initially wooden, but as metal or concrete became more readily available and thus less expensive, those materials began to dominate. The constants are always the shared symbol of the cross itself and the commonality of the material used to construct it.

Personal touches are created with recycled material from the home of the deceased, such as photographs or favorite clothing. However, as noted above even these personal touches of material religion are “used far more extensively than words.”

Exuberance as well as traditional order prevail (e.g., four universal elements), and important days for the deceased (e.g., birthdays) are often celebrated by the family at the grave. It is a festive moment of human interaction that includes all the family both living and dead. By moving through the communal boundary of the graveyard and into the family plot also obviously demarked, people personalize rather than isolate the dead. Thus the boundaries are really “emotionally meaningful framework[s] . . . directing communications of love toward the deceased.”

As all Hispanic popular religion, the *camposanto* is noted for its use of natural rather than manufactured symbols, anonymous rather than professional design, and authentic rather than contrived emotion. The *camposanto* is a liminal social space created by popular religion, a secluded but not isolated place, and alive even when not animated. It is exuberantly Catholic in its appeal to the imagination through symbol while also touchingly familiar in its personalization. It continues to represent the spirituality of the penitential and burial *confradias* (*confraternities*) that originally created the *camposantos* to “. . . communicate outwardly the mystery of death to which the Spanish-American
people give themselves so completely, and make the gain of heavenly happiness compatible with earthly loss . . . .”

Hispanics have been accused of fatalism, but actually they believe in destiny. Reckoning with the dead is an Hispanic Catholic cultural phenomenon of estimating one’s destiny or proper position in the universe based upon one’s relationship to that community of faith as well as the author of faith. This presumes certain beliefs concerning life and death that are not incompatible with Catholicism, but are rather cultural expressions of it. The church on earth does not forget the cloud of witnesses but is guided by the latter through traditions which might be referred to as dead reckoning.

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