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A woman dressed up as "La Catrina," a Mexican character also known as "The Elegant Death" watches the La Catrina parade in Mexico City Oct. 26. (GSR photo/Helga Leija)



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I have found myself in Mexico City the last week of October. Everywhere I look marigold flowers frame doorways and petals carpet the sidewalks. *Papel picado*, bright tissue paper with handcut designs, hang overhead in the streets, along with elegant skeletons known as *La Catrina*. Joyful music mingles with the laughter of children and the calls of vendors. Every corner of the city hums with life, memory and celebration.

I did not come here alone, I brought my grief for the loss of a dear friend and mentor, Sr. Esther Fangman. In our Atchison, Kansas, monastery, I set up an altar for her, placing candles, photos and other offerings. The altar feels like something intimate and personal compared to what I've seen here. In Mexico City, surrounded by strangers with costumes and painted faces in the midst of one of their most exuberant celebrations, I felt something I had missed in the United States: connection. Being here, I have come to understand something about my culture. We do not grieve alone.

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Here, families set up altars as a community. They bring offerings to remember their dead: *pan de muerto*, marigolds, candles, photographs, candies, liquor. Here, grief is shared, held, witnessed, honored. I have been remembering all those I've lost — relatives, mentors, sisters, friends — and I have felt them close, their presence accompanying me.



A vendor sells wares for the annual Day of the Dead "La Catrina" parade in Mexico City Oct. 26. (GSR photo/Helga Leija)

When I was young, I learned to set up altars at school, at first like dioramas in shoeboxes, then, in large form for contests and celebrations. I learned to write *calaveras*, clever rhymes that speak of someone's death, in a humorous form. Back then, I didn't know anyone who had died, I did not understand the depth of our tradition.

So, this year, because I am in Mexico City, I decided to attend the *La Catrina* parade, despite my irrational fear of large crowds. It was a river of color and movement. Downtown Mexico City was packed with families preparing to attend the parade. I saw people in costumes and enormous hats gliding past, children running with tiny faces painted with skulls, their laughter carrying across the street. Vendors calling out, selling sugar skulls, candles, *Catrina* diadems and hats, and makeup artists painting spectacular faces for less than $5.

I followed the crowd, squeezing between people, drawn in by the music, the color and the joy. I walked past a plaza lined with more vendors and decorated with lights, marigolds and *alebrijes* — colorful figures of animals that reflect the duality of the real and the mythical.



People admire a Dia de los Muertos exhibit in downtown Mexico City. (GSR photo/Helga Leija)

The *catrina* parade in Mexico city was spectacular. *La Catrinas* were originally created by José Guadalupe Posadas as a social critique of Mexicans who rejected their Indigenous roots to be accepted by the European elite, when in reality, we carry nothing when we die and all skeletons look the same. His intention was to show that in death, we are all equal.

And yet, *La Catrina* also speaks of duality. She is both death and life — an elegant skeleton dressed in bright colors. She holds the contradiction of decay dressed as beauty, critique turned into art, mourning transformed into joy.



People in downtown Mexico City head to the "La Catrina" parade. (GSR photo/Helga Leija)

The *Dia de los Muertos* celebration reflects the same duality of my life — caught between two worlds. Under the shadow of politics that sometimes make me feel invisible or unsafe, I live with a constant awareness that my presence, my skin color and my identity as a Mexican American woman marks me as "other." I know that

many Latinos are experiencing the same fear and tension in the U.S. But here, I am reclaiming my place in life: I am unapologetically, fiercely and beautifully Mexican. I carry the courage of those who came before me, and their stories have shaped me into who I am.

Watching the *La Catrinas* and the families around them, I was reminded that life is worth living. Other cultures may not understand the joy that accompanies death in *Día de los Muertos*, but for me, it is life affirming. It reminds me that the souls of those we love continue to return to us, on the wings of monarch butterflies, as our Indigenous ancestors believed. This year, I felt Esther's presence in the celebration and in the joy of the people. My faith tells me that I will see my loved ones again, that resurrection is real, that death is not an end, but a continuation of the life we lived.

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Being here has helped to transform my grief into celebration, to accept that grief and joy are companions on this fantastic journey of life. So, after the parade, with Esther's memory with me, I stopped to drink tequila, toasting to her memory (although she preferred bourbon).

Being in Mexico City for *Día de los Muertos* has been a tremendous affirmation of love, memory and identity. Here I found myself in community — with the living, with the dead, with my culture, and with the rhythms of life that sustain us. I know that I am never truly alone, that I belong, and that life is always worth celebrating.

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