

Life Events and Rites of Passage

The Customs and Symbols of
Major Life-Cycle Milestones,
Including Cultural, Secular,
and Religious Traditions
Observed in the United States

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QUINCEAÑERA

Alternate Names: Fiesta de Quince, Fiesta de Quince Años

Customs and Symbols: Altar Pillow, Court of Honor, Crown, Doll, Dress, Food, Medal, Missal and Rosary, Ring, Shoes, Sponsors, Toasts and Poems

An important event in Hispanic-American culture, the quinceañera marks a girl's transition to adulthood. The event takes place at the time of her 15th birthday and typically includes a church service followed by a reception. Both parts of the celebration are invested with objects and activities that symbolize the young woman's life-changing transition.

History and Significance

The word quinceañera (pronounced *keen-say-an-YER-ah*) derives from the Spanish words for 15, *quince* (pronounced *KEEN-say*), and years, *años* (pronounced *AN-yos*); it refers to both the celebration and the young woman. The exact origins of the quinceañera observance are uncertain, but these events have taken place since at least the late 19th century. Some writers have traced elements of the quinceañera back to ancient Aztec and Mayan initiation rituals as well as Christian initiation rites. Experts have also noted resemblances between the traditional first waltz of the quinceañera dance and 16th-century Spanish court dances. Yet, direct links are difficult to trace. Whatever its earlier sources, the quinceañera proper became common in Mexico and other parts of Latin America, as well as in those regions of the U.S. that had a large Hispanic population. In fact, in some areas along the U.S.-Mexico border, Anglo Americans also adopted the custom. Quinceañera celebrations have spread throughout the U.S. as the number of Latin American immigrants have grown. The tradition is strongest among the country's Mexican-American, Cuban-American, and Puerto Rican populations.

It is unclear why this coming-of-age ritual for girls occurs at age 15, rather than 16 or some other nearby age. One writer cites an old belief among indigenous people of Mexico that

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a child does not become a person until reaching the age of 15. Another notes a Mexican law that girls were recognized as adult women at age 14, after which they could legally marry.

The quinceañera is a major event in the life of a teenage girl, marking her transformation into an adult woman. It is often compared to her wedding day in terms of its significance. She may now be allowed to partake in adult activities, as well as share in adult responsibilities. Church services often stress that the girl will henceforward be considered an adult member of the congregation. In social terms, the event has much the same symbolism as an Anglo-American **Debutante Ball**. The party serves to introduce the girl into society as an adult, and paves the way for dating. It may be the first formal event at which she is allowed to wear high-heeled shoes and make-up and dress as a woman.

Observance

Preparations for the celebration are begun many months in advance, as there are often extensive logistics to be worked out, including the coordination of the many friends and family members who take part in the activities. The observance begins with a religious ceremony. Among Roman Catholics, this is a *misa*, or mass, which may be specially scheduled for the quinceañera or may be incorporated into a regularly scheduled mass at the family's church. The mass starts with the entrance of the friends and relatives who form the Court of Honor, or *corte de honor*, who sit in the front pews. Next in procession is the *madrina de cojin*, a young girl who carries the altar pillow. Then comes the quinceañera herself, either alone, with one or both of her parents, or with her male escort. Sometimes other sponsors are also part of the procession and carry symbols of earlier sacraments, such as a baptism dress, items from the girl's first communion, or photographs of earlier sacramental occasions (*see* **Baptism** and **First Communion and Reconciliation**). The female sponsors are also known as *madrinas*, and they are often responsible for providing the symbolic items used in the ceremony.

The service may include a number of different themes: the beginning of adult responsibilities in the church, family, and social life; the importance of family, community, God, and religion; and gratitude for life, love, and health. Indeed, the mass is often referred to as the *misa de acción de gracias*—the mass of thanksgiving. In addition, the girl may receive the sacrament of **Confirmation** during her quinceañera.

After the religious ceremony, the party assembles at a private home or a dance or banquet hall for the reception. As at the mass, the honoree and her court, parents, and sponsors make a formal entrance. Most families retain either a musical group

or a deejay, who announces the arrival of the participants and begins the music. Traditionally, the first song has been the waltz, the “Sobre las Olas”; nowadays, it may also be “A Ritmo de Bals.” The quinceañera dances this first waltz with her father. The members of the court of honor join in the next dance, then all in attendance may dance. After the dancing, guests partake of the food, including cake, and there are also appropriate toasts.

Customs and Symbols

Altar Pillow (El Cojin)

During the church ceremony, the quinceañera is required to kneel at certain moments. A younger girl, in the role of the *madrina de cojin*, carries the pillow to the altar during the opening procession of the mass for the girl to kneel on. The pillow is specially decorated for the occasion and inscribed with the quinceañera’s name.

Court of Honor (Corte de Honor)

The traditional court of honor is made up of 14 friends or relatives selected by the quinceañera so that, when counting the quinceañera, there are a total of 15 attendants. However, a girl may invite fewer attendants or elect to have no court. The young men are called *chambelanes*, or escorts, and the young women are known as *damas*, or ladies. The honoree also chooses a male friend or relative to be her personal escort. The attendants play special roles during the mass as well as the reception, including a traditional dance at the latter. They practice for the event in several rehearsals ahead of time. Many Roman Catholic dioceses require the attendants to participate in religious education classes as well as the sacraments of reconciliation and communion prior to the celebration.

Crown

As part of a traditional outfit, the quinceañera wears a crown or tiara. This headpiece can be an arrangement of artificial flowers or made of rhinestones or glass beads or—for those who can afford the expense—crystal, silver, or gold. The crown has some religious implications. According to one writer, it serves as a “symbol of sharing in the mission of Christ as Priest, Prophet and King.” It’s also symbolic of the fact that, for this one special day, the young woman is treated as royalty.

Doll

As a symbol of her transitional status, the quinceañera is given a last doll at the reception, which often serves as a lifelong keepsake. One of the *madrinas* or

As a symbol of her transitional status, the quinceañera is given a last doll at the reception, which often serves as a lifelong keepsake.

sponsors, is typically responsible for selecting and purchasing this gift, which is presented to the quinceañera during the reception, usually after the formal dancing. This custom seems to have begun during the 1970s in Mexico and spread to the U.S. Sometimes delicate and large porcelain dolls, up to three feet in height, are given, though more modest Barbie dolls are also common. Whichever doll is chosen, it is dressed to closely match the quinceañera's outfit. In some cases, a large number of special ribbons printed with the girl's name and date of her celebration are attached to the doll. The honoree removes these and distributes them to the guests.

Dress

The quinceañera wears an elaborate ensemble rivaling that of a bride. In the United States, many girls wear beautifully embellished white dresses, similar to American wedding dresses. In Mexico, quinceañera dresses are more often created in pastel colors. The traditional quinceañera dress has a close-fitting bodice and a wide, belled skirt. The ladies of the court wear matching formal dresses in a color and style chosen by the quinceañera. The escorts wear matching suits or tuxedos.

Food

Traditional foods at a quinceañera feast include *pollo en mole* (chicken in a dark chili sauce), tamales, *pozole* (a stew made with corn and meat), *cabrito* (fried or roasted goat), and cake. Such foods are also standard celebratory fare for Hispanics at other special occasions, including baptisms and weddings. In past years, the meal was usually prepared by family members. Today it is more common for the meal to be catered, which means that traditional specialties are less commonly served than they used to be.

Medal

One of the important quinceañera gifts provided by the *madrinas* is a gold religious medal. When the celebrant is of Mexican descent, the medal usually contains an image of Virgin of Guadalupe, an apparition of the Virgin Mary who is considered a divine protector by many Mexicans and Mexican Americans. In wearing the medal on a chain around her neck, the quinceañera signifies her devotion to Mary and the Christian faith and also shows her wish for divine protection as she goes forward into adulthood. During the mass, the priest blesses the medal. Afterward, the young woman may go before a statue or image of the Virgin and make an of-

fering of a rose—the flower that symbolizes Mary’s purity. The medal is usually engraved with the young woman’s name or initials and the date of the quinceañera, so that it will serve as a keepsake of the event.

Missal and Rosary

Traditional Roman Catholic devotional items, the missal, or *libro*, is a small book of selected Bible passages, and the rosary, or *rosario*, is a beaded necklace with a crucifix attached that’s used in reciting the rosary prayers. In most cases, the quinceañera will already own children’s versions of these items, but for her quinceañera celebration, she is given adult-style versions.

Ring

Either her parents or a *madrina* gives the quinceañera a ring to wear, though in some cases a bracelet is substituted. If given by the parents, the ring is usually gold and is presented as part of the religious ceremony. If a sponsor gives the ring, it may contain the celebrant’s birthstone. Sometimes, grandparents pass along an heirloom ring. Regardless of its style, the ring stands for the quinceañera’s new ties and responsibilities to God and her community. She traditionally wears it on her left hand until she gets engaged or married, when a new life phase begins.

Shoes

The quinceañera wears flat shoes to the religious ceremony and to the reception. At the reception she ceremoniously changes into high-heeled shoes, or *zapatillas*, before the first waltz. Often her father or a male relative will change her shoes for her, as another signal that she is now a woman.

Sponsors

Many families invite extended family members and friends to be sponsors of the young woman—a role similar to that of being a godparent in a baptism. Male sponsors are called *padrinas* and female sponsors are called *madrinas*. The sponsors of a quinceañera assist and welcome the girl as she enters adulthood. They also help with the often enormous cost of a quinceañera celebration by taking responsibility for arranging and paying for various elements of the event. *Madrinas* traditionally provide such items as the doll, medal, and altar pillow. *Padrinas* often assume the duties of securing the reception site and decorations, music, cake, and champagne for toasts. But sponsors of both genders can contribute to any aspect of the celebration.

Toasts and Poems

At the reception, the quinceañera's father generally begins the toasting, although this can also be done by the girl's escort or a master or mistress of ceremonies. A customary toast recognizes the girl's transition into womanhood, offers advice, and expresses best wishes for her new role. Adults drink champagne, while younger attendees usually drink sparkling water. Other family members and friends may also recite poems written in honor of the occasion, either at the mass or at the reception.

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NEW ORLEANS JAZZ FUNERAL

Customs and Symbols: Grand Marshal and the Second Line, “When the Saints Go Marching In”

The unique jazz funeral of New Orleans arose from the confluence of many sources and has developed many of its own customs and institutions, which have survived and adapted to a changing society.

History and Significance

In New Orleans, a lively funeral tradition evolved from a merging of various cultural strands: funeral customs from Africa and the diaspora in the West Indies, the custom of public marching on important occasions, the rise of African-American benevolent societies in the late 18th century, the birth of jazz, and the city’s love of celebration and ceremony.

In early New Orleans, bands often marched in the streets for holidays, festivities, and special occasions. To honor the deceased during a funeral ceremony, bands accompanied the coffin to the cemetery with appropriately slow and mournful music. Across the Atlantic Ocean, in west Africa, it was also a tradition to accompany the dead to their burial places with chanting, dancing, and the beating of drums. The men and women brought to New Orleans as slaves also brought their funeral customs. In west Africa, secret societies took care of death rites. After the Civil War and emancipation, these societies were revived in New Orleans as social clubs, with part of their mission being the guarantee of a proper funeral for fellow members. The funeral was the chance for the social clubs to make their style public, their way of advertising themselves to the city and to prospective new members. The members wore matching clothes, and carried the name of the club on a banner and on sashes worn across their bodies.

Observance

A church service takes place, while mourners view the open coffin. Outside the church, a band assembles, its members dressed in somber black. The band leads the funeral procession away from the church, playing slow hymns such as “Just a Closer Walk with Thee” and “Nearer My God to Thee.” The musicians play the music note for note, allowing themselves no improvisation or display, no embellishment to make light of the most serious of occasions.

In a jazz funeral, onlookers begin walking and dancing and strutting behind the band, and the music turns joyful. The dead have passed to the afterlife, and the living celebrate the life that remains.

The band waits again as the body is interred and the last words to honor the dead are spoken in the cemetery. The interment takes place above ground—the city of New Orleans lies below sea level and the high water table prevents underground burial. The mourners walk from the gravesite in silence, and band members hold their instruments quietly at their sides before a respectful distance is reached. At a gesture from the grand marshal, the trumpeter gives the signal and the drummers begin to beat time.

A great crowd may form, with people dancing, singing, and shouting, as the music grows raucous. The band breaks out in vigorous song—a traditional favorite is “Didn’t He Ramble?”—in order to mark the gusto and well-lived life of the deceased. The musicians begin to improvise, allowing their emotions free play, adapting and embellishing the music. Members of the second line wear hats or white handker-

chiefs, and wave them in the air in time to the music while they sing and dance. The handkerchiefs, no longer needed to wipe away the tears, are used instead for a happy celebration.

The New Orleans funeral has survived and adapted. In some of these celebrations, newer music is heard, including popular songs, current dance music, and even rap songs. The quiet and somber march to the grave is also sometimes forgotten, with the dancing and liveliness taking over as soon as the church services finish. While the “jazz funeral” of the past usually took place to honor a jazz musician, in modern times anyone can have such a funeral arranged.

The jazz funeral has also been performed for non-human dead, such as funerals for Hurricane Katrina. The storm devastated New Orleans in the late summer of 2005, shutting down the city, closing many funeral homes and churches, and scattering many of its residents. The observance was meant to usher the deadly storm away from the city permanently.

Customs and Symbols

The Grand Marshal and the Second Line

The grand marshal may be the band leader, or the head of the social club which has made arrangements for the funeral. During the funeral, he is dressed in fine clothes, sometimes wearing white gloves, holding an umbrella to signal those who follow. As he leads the band, onlookers join a second line behind the musi-

cians. Anyone may take part; onlookers begin walking and dancing and strutting behind the band, and the music turns joyful. The dead have passed to the after-life, and the living celebrate the life that remains. On the occasion of a famous or widely respected figure, thousands may take part, clogging the city's streets.

“When the Saints Go Marching In”

The traditional finale of the New Orleans funeral is “When the Saints Go Marching In.” This song began as a traditional spiritual, sung and played in a slow tempo. The lyrics below were collected by Alan Lomax in *The Folk Songs of North America* (1960):

O when the saints go marchin' in,
O when the saints go marching in,
O Lord I want to be in that number,
O when the saints go marching in.

O when the sun refuse to shine,
O when the sun refuse to shine,
O Lord I want to be in that number,
When the sun refuse to shine.

O when the moon goes down in blood,
O when the moon goes down in blood,
O Lord I want to be in that number
When the moon goes down in blood.

O when the stars have disappeared,
O when the stars have disappeared,
O Lord I want to be in that number
When the stars have disappeared,

O when they crown Him Lord of all,
O when they crown Him Lord of all,
O Lord I want to be in that number
When they crown Him Lord of all.

O when the day of judgment comes,
O when the day of judgment comes,
O Lord I want to be in that number
When the day of judgment comes.

At one time, “When the Saints Go Marching In” was only heard at Sunday church services. According to a New Orleans legend, one day a jazz band was performing

A Holiday for the Dead

On All Saints Day, November 1, the people of New Orleans tend to their famous cemeteries. The above-ground tombs get a coat of whitewash and garlands of “immortelles” (immortals) which are permanent wreaths made of metal wire or plastic, glass beads, and artificial flowers and fruit. People come to pay their respects to the dead, leaving white candles and bouquets of chrysanthemums, and tidying up the photographs, flower vases, plaques, and other objects used to decorate the tomb and mark it as a place of permanent rest. (See **All Souls Day**.)

it while returning from a funeral. Played quickly, the music caught the ear of those inside a church, who rose from their seats and walked out the front door to listen. It was never sung again as a part of their church services.

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