

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WHM - 22
The Day of the Dead

Hotel Ferrocarril
Cuzco, Perú
November 6, 1955

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

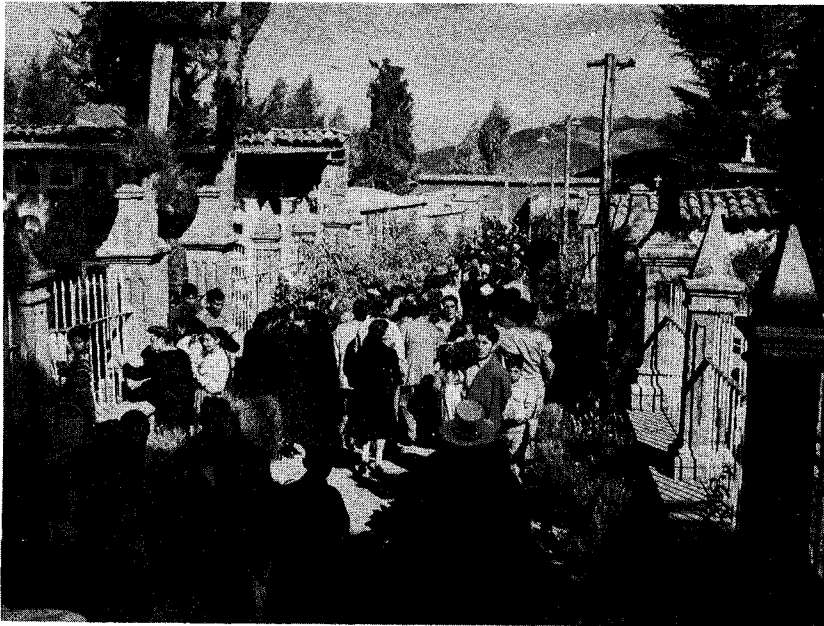
Dear Mr. Rogers:

The first and second of November are very important days in the religious life of Catholic Perú. November first, All Saints' Day, is on the list of national holidays; November second, the Day of the Dead, is not, but most Peruvians take the afternoon off to visit the cemetery, go to a party or get drunk, depending on their social status and personal inclinations.



The night of All Saints' Day was a noisy one in Cuzco. After a day of communing with saints and friends, roast pig and alcohol, the city's lower classes filled the bars and cafés for a long-drawn-out night cap. While the rich, the gente decente, held fiestas in their homes along Avenida Pardo, the crowds roamed the streets singing and brawling. The municipal hospital filled up with the debris of wounded from the continuous broken bottle, knife and fist fights. The faces of the drunks sleeping in the corners of the adobe walls were adorned with adhesive tape. All through the night the firecrackers rattled and the rockets exploded.

Despite the alcoholic excesses of the night before, the more pious cuzqueños were up with the sun on the Day of the Dead. There was holy water to be bought and priests to be found to say prayers



.....
 Cemetery entrance

of newly-made crosses gleamed.

During the noon siesta, the food and liquor venders made their way up the long, steep alley to the cemetery. On their heads and backs they carried trays of wawas, braziers for cooking antecuchos (barbecued beef hearts) and sacks of beer and aguardiente (pure cane alcohol). They set up their stalls by the cemetery gate under the shadow of the old jail and waited for customers.

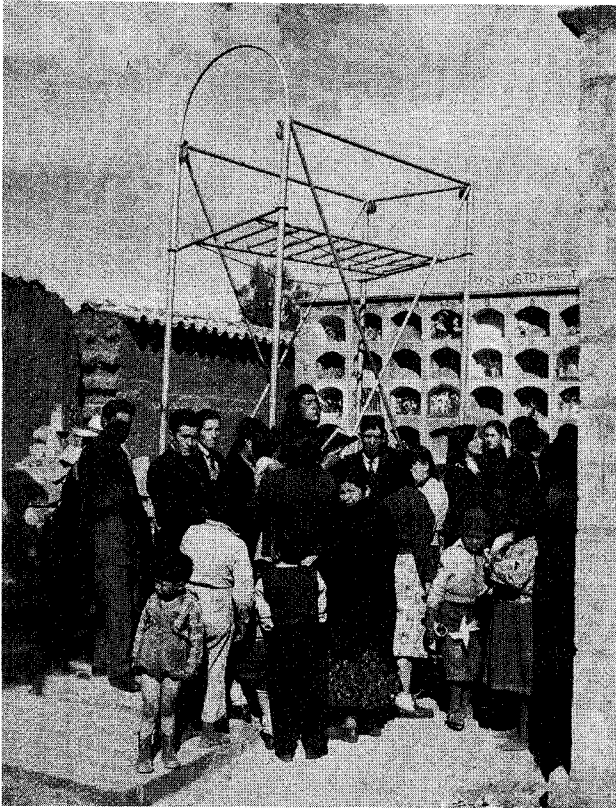
The march to the cemetery began in the early afternoon. A long line of the faithful, the curious and the drunk moved out of the city and began the slow, steep climb. The alley was filled with a jostling throng of pedestrians, buses and automobiles. A parked taxi blocking the path was pushed along by a hundred hands. Black was the common color of the crowd - black set off by the occasional flare of an Indian skirt or shawl. There were many who had lost a close relative during the past year, and these were swathed in black from head to foot according to the custom of mourning.

Mixed with the formless babble of the crowd were the frightened bleats of sheep and goats. The animals were being led by their owners to the graves of family relatives to be left there as offerings. It is the custom in Cuzco to offer to the dead the food and drink they liked best when alive. In the confused Catholicism of the lower classes, pagan beliefs are mixed with Church doctrines, and it is thought to be a good idea to appease the dead with offerings lest they do injury to the living. In the shawls of many mestizo women in the crowd were sweets, bottles of beer, eggs and meat to be placed on a grave in the cemetery.

The crowd swirled around the venders' stalls, then pushed through the gate into the cemetery, past a sign advertising last week's cremation prices. While little boys scurried through the crowd hawking

for each family's dead. In the bakeries of the city, flat loaves shaped like a child wrapped in a shroud were placed in the ovens. These wawas (Quechua for baby) would be filled with sweets or decorated with colored frosting and sold at the gates of the cemetery.

At noon the bells of Cuzco's ancient churches rang out, accompanied by a bedlam of firecracker explosions. Storekeepers locked their doors with great iron padlocks and joined the crowd shuffling home from work; in the gloom of the tiny cubbyholes of the candlemakers, foot-thick tapers decorated with colored bands hung from the ceilings, and in the carpenters' shops, the raw wood



ice cream, beer and water for the wreaths and bouquets that decorated the tombs, the priests made themselves available to the public. Price of a prayer for the dead: fifty centavos; price of a chant: one sol (US\$.05). The curas were in constant demand. Women plucked their sleeves and pointed to one of the hundreds of arched openings in the honeycombed walls. Members of the family and curious onlookers stood about the priest as he prayed or chanted, swinging his head from time to time to look for new customers. In each alcove the priests droned and chanted in bored voices.

Emotions in the crowd ran from grief to holiday spirits. The great majority were curiosity seekers, and these ate their ice cream and drank their beer with relish as they passed from alcove to alcove eyeing the pretty girls and commenting on the carvings and floral decorations of the tombs. A few black-swathed figures wept silently as they stood beside a chanting priest, but in general the crowd was in a Sunday-outing mood.

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 Hooded priest prays for
 family dead. Metal
 hoist lifts coffins to
 high wall tombs.

The social structure of the dead accurately reflected that of the living. The leading families had their special tombs, set apart from the crowded alcoves and decorated with statues of the saints. The rich had their plaques of marble and bronze with the inscription: "Here lie the remains of.....". The lower class

had their stone plaques and wilted flowers. And the poor lay underground in the Holy Field below the cemetery. Their relatives could not afford them the honor of burial in a wall tomb, for death in Cuzco is a very expensive proposition.

In the flattening rays of the late afternoon sun, the cemetery took on a festive air. The brass polishers had done a landoffice business, and the plaques sealing the tombs of the well-to-do glowed in the fading light with a rich sheen. Fresh and artificial flowers replaced the wilted, dessicated bouquets. The crowd continued to move from alcove to alcove, and the little boys' pockets jingled with change from the sale of ice cream and beer or the rental of ladders to people whose dead lay in tombs high in the walls.



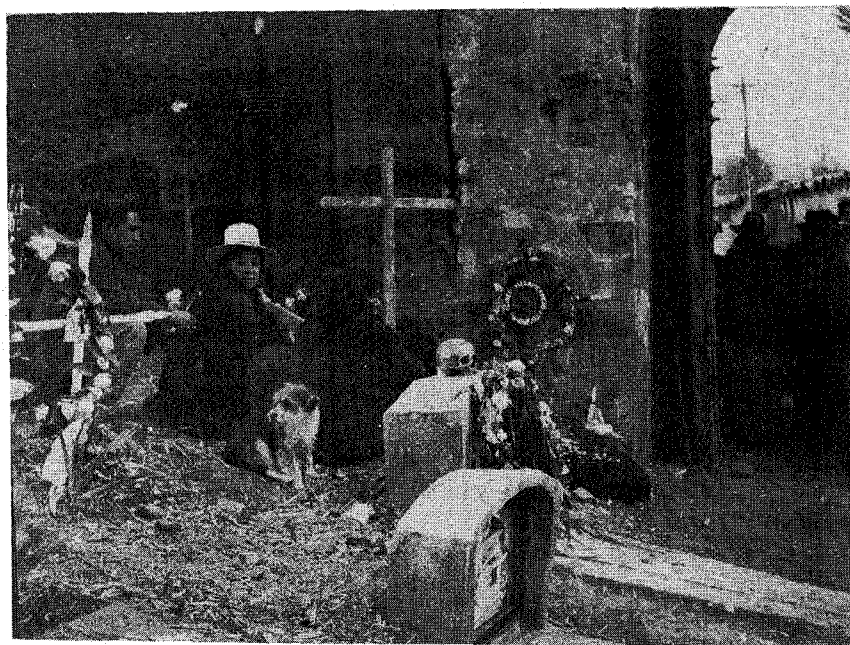
In the Campo Santo, the Holy Field, the poor were tending to their dead. Men brought in new crosses of wood and metal piping, and children carrying cans of black paint cried "¡Pintada! Pintada!"..... "Paint for your crosses!". Two mestizo women sat on a grave by the entrance, drunk and crying. A human skull lay beside them. Farther down the dirt trail, an old man stooped to pour aguardiente on the grave of a relative. A young woman leaned against a giant eucalyptus and stared down at a drooping cross, and near her a boy urinated on the dirt path. Groups of friends and relatives talked together in the shade of the eucalyptus trees, the sound of their voices measured by the beat of the hammers driving fresh crosses into the ground. Some of the men were very drunk, and they leaned together over a grave, crying and talking about the corpse lying under their feet. A wind came up and drove clouds of dust through the Holy Field, and the crowd moved slowly toward the gate.

At dusk the cemetery was nearly empty. The people had given the more valuable grave offerings to the priests to inspire their blessings, then started on the long walk back to the city. The paving stones in the alcoves were littered with the refuse of the crowd - orange peels, paper and the dried petals of flowers - sifted over now by the steady wind. Outside the earthquake-shattered walls of the graveyard, a few families sat in the lee of a rock pile talking and drinking and listening to an old man telling jokes.

Sincerely,

William H. MacLeish

William H. MacLeish



Received New York
11/9/55.

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Campo Santo
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