



Image from: [In Langley Park, Maryland, young women wait to... in Gale Encyclopedia of Multicultural America](#)

Summary Article: **Quinceañera**  
from *Encyclopedia of Human Development*

La quinceañera is a Latina tradition involving a coming-of-age celebration for young women on their 15th birthdays. The word *quinceañera* comes from the words “quince,” which is Spanish for 15, and “años,” which is Spanish for *years*. Although the exact origin of the celebration is unknown, the tradition is thought to have Aztec and Catholic roots. Several centuries ago, girls were separated from other children when they turned 15 in order to prepare for womanhood and learn about their future roles within their families and community.

Today, the event includes a thanksgiving Mass, which represents a young woman's vow to serve her community, church, and family, and the event also includes an extravagant party to celebrate the special occasion. Planning for the quinceañera celebration is elaborate. Much like for a wedding, for her quinceañera the 15-year-old and her family send invitations, buy a formal full-length gown, reserve a reception hall or a party salon, order a cake, and hire photographers and possibly even choreographers. Also, just as a bride and groom pick bridesmaids and groomsmen, the young woman chooses 14 people to be the “chambelanes” (chamberlains) and “damas” (maids of honor) of her court. These 14 court members represent each year of the Quinceañera's life prior to her 15th birthday.

The most important part of a quinceañera is the religious Mass, which occurs at the beginning of the celebration. This ceremony recognizes religious customs and the virtues of family and social responsibility. At this time, the birthday girl thanks God for her blessings and asks for guidance and protection as she begins her new stage of life. She welcomes her role as a woman and defines her goals for the future. Parents and godparents may give a speech at the altar as well.

After Mass, relatives and friends gather for the social part of the evening. Traditionally, the Quinceañera dances her first dance with her father. She changes from flats into high-heeled shoes for this dance to symbolize her entrance into womanhood. She also reserves a dance, typically a choreographed waltz, for one or more of her chambelanes. For the rest of the celebration, family and friends are welcome to dance to the music of the band, which is often a mariachi band. Other highlights of the occasion include the cutting of the cake and a celebratory toast.

On her birthday, the Quinceañera also receives gifts that hold special meaning and indicate her loyalty and commitment to God, family, and community. Traditional quinceañera gifts may include a tiara to symbolize triumph over childhood; a bracelet or ring to denote the unending circle of life; earrings to remind the young woman to always hear and respond to the world around her; a cross to represent the Quinceañera's faith in God, her world, and herself; and a bible to keep close the word of God. The Quinceañera might also receive a personalized pillow to place under her knees as she kneels during the Mass or a Quinceañera doll that serves as a keepsake for the event. To show appreciation toward her guests, the birthday woman of honor, with the help of sisters, cousins, and friends, often gives commemorative favors to those in attendance.

The quinceañera rite of passage began long ago, but the ceremony is still observed in several countries, including the United States. Although some Latina 15-year-olds may prefer to receive a trip or even a

car to celebrate, the beginning of a woman's 15th year of life still marks a significant and symbolic life change. Today, the quinceañera remains one of the traditions that affirm the bond of Latinas worldwide.

## See also

Adolescence

## Further Readings and References

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