

Halloween: One Vigil Two Holy Feasts For parents. *Plus the Story of Jack O'-Lantern*

How Halloween Can Be Redeemed

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YOUTH UPDATE OUT OF PRINT

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Halloween has grown into a major secular holiday in American culture. But for those who don't value devotion to the saints, the Eve has become "hollow" instead of "hallow." The purpose behind it has been lost—like celebrating New Year's Eve without a New Year's Day. Take away the saints and our beliefs about the dignity and destiny of human beings, and the only thing left is pre-Christian superstition regarding the dead.

Among many Christians, there has been concern that things have gotten out of hand. After all, doesn't Halloween glorify evil? Is it right to send our children out as devils and vampires, or is it better to emphasize the saints, whose nearly forgotten feast day is the reason for Halloween? *Hallow* is the same word for "holy" that we find in the Lord's Prayer, and *e'en* is a contraction of "evening." The word *Halloween* itself is a shortened form of "All Hallows Eve," the day before All Saints Day. In this *Update* we'll consider how Catholics can "redeem" Halloween. This holiday, properly understood and celebrated with all of its fun trappings, can be a way for us to deepen our understanding of our faith. The key to this understanding is close at hand for Catholics in our love of the communion of saints.

Martyr means 'witness'

Until the ninth century the Church celebrated the popular feast of All Saints on May 13th, during the season of joy after the Resurrection. This is the light in which we see all the faithful who have died, especially those whose witness to Christ is an inspiration. In 835 the date was deliberately changed to November 1 to Christianize the existing pagan time for remembering the dead—to bring light to the darkness, and hope to the most basic of human fears.

Before canonization was ever thought of, before the New Testament books even took shape, the human desire to remember deceased loved ones surfaced. And these were no ordinary loved ones, these were brothers and sisters who had died in Christ, as witnesses to Christ. (The Greek word *martyr* simply means "witness.") Their death was victory, not defeat; celebration, not mourning.

The same way people gather today at the site of a tragedy on its anniversary to talk to each other and to reporters, the first Christians gathered on the anniversary of a martyr's death to remember it the way they knew best: with the "breaking of the bread." They retold the stories to inspire each other at a time when faith meant persecution and more martyrdom. Not even death could break the unity in Jesus which Paul had named "the Body of Christ."

Anniversaries of local and well-known martyrs peppered the calendar. Then a pragmatic question arose: What honor should be given to martyrs whose names were unknown? Many Christians were thrown to the lions for witnessing to their faith, not all of them known to the community. By the mid-fourth century a feast of "All Martyrs" appeared on local calendars. As persecutions grew less frequent, the feast was extended to include non-martyr "witnesses," Christians whose lives were "the gospel in action," as St. Francis de Sales would later call the saints.

One vigil, two feasts

Meanwhile those who were not so saintly were also being remembered after death. The first Christians were heirs to the Jewish custom of praying for the dead and offering sacrifice for them as part of emerging Jewish belief in the resurrection of the dead.

Today's Christians sometimes forget that by the time of Christ many Jews, especially the Pharisees, had a well-developed belief in the resurrection of the dead, which included trust that the prayer of the living could benefit the dead. It was with this understanding that, 160 years before Jesus was born, Judah the Maccabee prayed and offered sacrifice for dead comrades who had sinned: "For if he were not expecting the fallen to rise again, it would have been useless and foolish to pray for them in death" (2 Maccabees 12:44).

For the first 1,000 years of Christianity there was no collective memorial for All Souls. Relatives and loved ones were remembered at Mass on the anniversary of their death, or until they passed out of living memory. But by the seventh century monasteries were celebrating an annual Mass for all the deceased of their order, an idea which spread to the laity. About 1048, an influential abbot chose November 2 to commemorate All Souls because it was an obvious companion date and extension of the Feast of All Saints. Both days are reminders that all of us, living and dead, are united in a living communion with Christ and one another.

In effect, Halloween became one vigil for two feasts celebrated by the whole Church. In the 16th century at the time of the Reformation, most Protestants discarded both the doctrine of the communion of saints and the practice of praying for the dead. All Hallows Eve became "hollow" for them, the vigil of an empty feast day.

Redeeming Halloween

How can we keep the religious connection and curb pre-Christian trappings? Many parishes invite the kids to dress up for an All Saints procession at the vigil Mass. A boy wearing a crown and a velour bathrobe is St. Louis, the King of France. A girl with an armful of silk roses is the Little Flower. These cute processions are certainly a wonderful way for young Catholics to learn about the communion of saints.

But many kids are more likely to excitedly put on ghoulish makeup to get ready for parties or trick or treat. Their instincts are right: Skeletons and jack-o'-lanterns and shocking costumes are very much a part of All Hallows Eve. It's the adults who shy away from eyeballing their own mortality.

The kids are right. Death is not cute. Halloween began with martyrs, after all, so strange makeup and skull masks are not out of line. Picture, if you will, an All Saints procession led by St. Thomas More with his head tucked under his arm. Next comes St. Lawrence, still attached to the skewer that couldn't keep him from joking at the very moment he was being roasted alive. Kateri Tekakwitha is there, her face scarred by smallpox, the white man's disease which decimated native American tribes.

Our tradition teems with stories of people who endured terrible things— but never let it interfere with an underlying joy and trust in God. (Of course, even the saints who weren't martyred deserve our recognition and imitation!)

Lessons and limits

At Halloween we need to use discernment to separate the symbols, to protect our children from very real dangers, to cut through the customs that contradict our relationship with God, including occult practices (see box below).

At this time of year violent movies with Halloween settings flood television and video stores; warped personalities copy malicious acts "for fun"; young people experiment with the occult because of publicity given to witches and warlocks.

It's precisely because Catholics do believe in the reality of evil that we promise to turn away from "Satan and all his works" in the baptismal rite. Here's a chance for parents (and godparents) to make good on that promise: Be vigilant about television and video games, don't give warped personalities the publicity they crave, choose carefully if and where your child will trick or treat.

Most of all, be free from fear. We who are in Christ have nothing to fear, and we should be ready with an answer to those who act as if the devil were the equal and opposite of God. There is no "equal and opposite" of God. Catholic tradition tells us that Satan is a created being, a fallen angel; if he had any "equal and opposite" it would be Michael the Archangel. Still, there would be no "equality" between Satan and any angel. Christ has conquered sin and Satan once and for all. All of us, saints and angels, people of faith living and dead, share in that victory. (See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #391, 395.)

Separating the symbols

So how do we separate the symbols of Halloween? Do we stop serving cider and doughnuts because apples were sacred to the Roman goddess Pomona, and doughnuts were once set out as "food" for the souls of the dead (their circular shape indicating eternity)? Of course not. Our gratitude for God's bounty eclipses all that.

What about trick or treat? In the Middle Ages there was a superstition that those who had died the previous year without being reconciled to you might rise to haunt you, appearing as will-o'-the-wisps or ghosts. The apparition jarred you so you would release them by prayer and forgiveness. You might also appease them with "soul cakes"—cookies, fried cakes, "treats"—so they wouldn't do you any mischief with their "tricks." Soon those who were living began to use the occasion for reconciliation. To wipe the slate clean for the coming year, they came, masked and unrecognizable, and boldly bargained for treats.

The connection between trick or treat and forgiveness deserves to be reclaimed, don't you think? While we wait for an imaginative catechist to draw up a format, we can allow our kids to enjoy the costumes, the goodies, the excitement of traipsing around after dark if we exercise prudence. Most communities now impose a curfew for trick or treat, and most parents select the houses of friends they know. Sometimes the PTA will sponsor a party. Avoiding costumes and decorations that glorify witches and devils goes without saying, but there's no reason to fear skeletons, skulls or Thomas More with his head tucked under his arm. After all, can't skulls and skeletons be healthy reminders of human mortality? Can't witches and devils symbolize the evil Christ has overcome?

Pumpkins as well as halos

Jack-o'-lanterns have a special place for Catholics on Halloween when we're able to tell the story. The saints in their costumes remind us of the great heights we can reach. Skeletons, skulls and trick or treaters remind us of our own mortality and the need to pray for the dead. Jack stands in between as a one-man morality play.

The folktale of "Jack o' the Lantern" arrived with early Irish Catholic colonists in Maryland. It quickly grew in popularity because of the independent spirit admired in this country. Jack has the cleverness to outwit the devil himself, but it isn't enough to get him into heaven (see box below). He must roam forever between heaven and earth, holding his pumpkin lantern high. (Originally the lantern was cut from a turnip; after the story crossed the ocean, colonists changed it to the colorful vegetable they found here, the pumpkin.)

As you carve your pumpkin (or roast the oiled seeds at 325 degrees for 25 minutes), tell others the tale behind jack-o'-lanterns. Talk about what it means to be a saint and why Jack didn't make the grade. Don't be afraid to point out the "moral of the story" (which is why it was told in the first place). Jack was so self-centered he never helped another human being. He was given a good set of brains, but he used this gift only for himself. He knew about faith and the power of the cross, but he used it like a piece of magic instead of as the way of Jesus (see Luke 9:23). The cross is indeed strong enough to vanquish the devil. But embracing the cross is what brings eternal life.

Halloween's positive messages

Halloween and its back-to-back feast days mean more than talking about our favorite saints who lived in another time, another place. It's also an opportunity to talk about what's needed for holiness now (perhaps even martyrdom now, sad to say).

In addition we have a chance to face up to differences that still divide Catholics and Protestants, maybe even a chance to evangelize. "I believe...in the communion of saints," we say every Sunday in the Creed. How many of us know what this doctrine really means?

Do we "worship" or "adore" our beloved saints, as some non-Catholics think? Not at all. We honor them and learn from their example; adoration belongs to God alone. We ask the saints to pray for us the same way we might ask a good friend to pray. A favorite quotation about prayer begins, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name" (Matthew 18:20). The "two or three" aren't necessarily limited to the living. It's comforting to have friends always available to pray with you, a whole "cloud of witnesses," in fact! (see Hebrews 12:1).

Halloween also invites us to talk openly about death in a culture that labors mightily to deny it. Seventy-five percent of Americans do not have a valid will, much less a Living Will or an organ donor card. "If I die..." people say, instead of, "when I die." Do we think death is optional? Death is a fact of life. When St. Francis of Assisi lay dying he said, "Welcome, Sister Death," recognizing that death was just another creaturely thing in a world that would one day pass away.

Occasionally we must push the "pause" button in our busy lives to consider our own mortality with all its spiritual and practical consequences. The Church gives us two feasts and the whole month of November to do this.

Halloween is like our Mardi Gras before a very serious Lent. We should be able to laugh at the dark side and dress up in costumes and have parties. Let's reclaim our heritage with all the story power, creativity and joyous good fun that we can. Let's use it to help us become the saints we are each called to be.

Halloween is a victory celebration, after all!

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The Communion of Saints

"In the communion of saints, a 'perennial link of charity exists between the faithful who have already reached their heavenly home, those who are expiating their sins in purgatory and those who are still pilgrims on earth. Between them there is, too, an abundant exchange of all good things.' In this wonderful exchange, the holiness of one profits others, well beyond the harm that the sin of one could cause others...."

"We also call these spiritual goods of the communion of saints the *Church's treasury*....In the treasury, too, are the prayers and good works of all the saints, all those who have followed in the footsteps of Christ the Lord and by his grace have made their lives holy and carried out the mission of the Father entrusted to them." (*Catechism*, #1475-77)

Why Christians Reject the Occult

"All forms of divination are to be rejected: recourse to Satan or demons, conjuring up the dead or other practices falsely supposed to "unveil" the future. Consulting horoscopes, astrology, palm reading, interpretation of omens and lots, the phenomena of clairvoyance, and recourse to mediums all conceal a desire for power over time, history, and, in the last analysis, other human beings, as well as a wish to conciliate hidden powers. They contradict the honor, respect, and loving fear that we owe to God alone." (*Catechism*, #2116)

The Tale of Jack O'Lantern

A Read-aloud Story

Jack, the Irish say, grew up in a simple village where he earned a reputation for cleverness as well as laziness. He applied his fine intelligence to wiggling out of any work that was asked of him, preferring to lie under a solitary oak endlessly whittling. In order to earn money to spend at the local pub, he looked for an "easy shilling" from gambling, a pastime at which he excelled. In his whole life he never made a single enemy, never made a single friend and never performed a selfless act for anyone.

One Halloween, as it happened, the time came for him to die. When the devil arrived to take his soul, Jack was lazily drinking at the pub and asked permission to finish his ale. The devil agreed, and Jack thought fast. "If you really have any power," he said slyly, "you could transform yourself into a shilling."

The devil snorted at such child's play and instantly changed himself into a shilling. Jack grabbed the coin. He held it tight in his hand, which bore a cross-shaped scar. The power of the cross kept the devil imprisoned there, for everyone knows the devil is powerless when faced with the cross. Jack would not let the devil free until he granted him another year of life. Jack figured that would be plenty of time to repent. The devil left Jack at the pub.

The year rolled around to the next Halloween, but Jack never got around to repenting. Again the devil appeared to claim his soul, and again Jack bargained, this time challenging him to a game of dice, an offer Satan could never resist, but a game that Jack excelled at. The devil

threw snake eyes—two ones—and was about to haul him off, but Jack used a pair of dice he himself had whittled. When they landed as two threes, forming the T-shape of a cross, once again the devil was powerless. Jack bargained for more time to repent.

He kept thinking he'd get around to repentance later, at the last possible minute. But the agreed-upon day arrived and death took him by surprise. The devil hadn't showed up and Jack soon found out why not. Before he knew it Jack was in front of the pearly gates. St. Peter shook his head sadly and could not admit him, because in his whole life Jack had never performed a single selfless act. Then Jack presented himself before the gates of hell, but the devil was still seething. Satan refused to have anything to do with him.

"Where can I go?" cried Jack. "How can I see in the darkness?"

The devil tossed a burning coal into a hollow pumpkin and ordered him to wander forever with only the pumpkin to light his path. From that day to this he has been called "Jack o' the Lantern." Sometimes he appears on Halloween!

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