

The celebration of All Saint's Day began in the third century as a way of honoring martyrs of the Christian Faith. However, by the seventh and eighth centuries, the tradition evolved in accord with mistaken theology of sainthood and had become a way of honoring Christians who had attained the "highest levels" as saints. In line with this thinking, the following day, November 2nd was reserved to pray for those who were still in purgatory. The hope was that prayers interceding on behalf of these deceased might increase their chances of gaining entrance into heaven.

Thankfully, Martin Luther and other Reformers challenged such wayward theology. We know from scripture and their demands for truth that God doesn't hold God's faithful own on an eternal merry-go-round hoping for grace. Our gift of grace has already been won for us through the death and resurrection of God—in Jesus Christ, God's only Son. We have already been given crowns of sainthood through God's grace—and live as freed sons and daughters of the God most high.

Despite their reforms and rejection of purgatory, Martin Luther and other Reformers did not do away with the celebration All Saint's Day. It was kept in the Lutheran and other Protestant traditions as a way of celebrating the heritage of Christians who had passed on the faith to successive generations.

Today's popular mythology and superstitions of Halloween actually entered Western Culture from Celtic pagan practices in England and

Ireland through immigrants of the 19th Century. In the combination of Halloween and All Saints Day, we are left with a strange amalgam of the sacred and the profane. On Halloween, or the *Eve of Hallows = Night before Saints*, U.S. culture celebrates the ghoulish, ghostly, and macabre.

South of the Border, these same influences have brought about traditions of All Saints Day unique to Mexico and its largely Roman Catholic citizenship. *Día de los Muertos*, or *Day of the Dead* is the enormous cultural festival that has developed in Mexico. Some years ago, I had the opportunity to travel to central Mexico as part of a wedding celebration and observe multiple days of festivities. The same combination of sacred and profane is found in this holiday, but in sharper relief, where remembrances of the dead are held as nightly vigils of family gathered around graves of family members covered with orange marigolds, candles, and framed pictures.

All Saints Day is a thin place. A place where heaven and earth are a bit closer and the Holy Spirit is present. In Christ we are united across time and space and even the grave and that is part of what we celebrate today. We are connected despite what is in between us.

That is Good News. Especially now. Especially this year, in this pandemic. When we are much too separated.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek... Jesus words of blessing help us to identify and remember the times, the places we saw Jesus in our loved ones. And we remember. And that draws us together. Across time and space—and the grave.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

These somber sittings in Mexican cemeteries are sometimes bordered with street festival food, games, and selling stalls—creating an atmosphere simultaneously beautiful and bizarre, sacred and profane. The marigold's golden yellow color reflect the soft glow of candlelight all through the cemetery and in each spot the flowers sit, they appear bright, shining in the darkness.

Almighty God bless us, bind us, draw us close, defend us from all evil, and bring us to everlasting life. Amen.

Pastor Joshua Rinas