

# All Hallows' Eve

**ISSUE:** Is the celebration of Halloween a pagan feast? May a Catholic celebrate Halloween in good conscience? What is the history of this popular, American holiday?

**RESPONSE:** We celebrate Halloween on the evening before All Saints Day. The word itself is a shortened form of “All Hallows’ Eve,” which quite literally means “the eve of All Saints.” From the earliest days of the Feast of All Saints (mid-700’s A.D.), Catholics observed October 31 as the vigil of this November 1 celebration. This feast commemorates the lives of Christians who lived exemplary lives of faith. Pope Sixtus IV introduced an octave to the feast day in the 1400’s, which was celebrated until 1955.

In the United States, the secular celebration of Halloween combines the diverse holidays and cultural practices of the immigrants who settled here. The Church has not issued any prohibitions on celebrating Halloween, so Catholics remain free to participate in accord with their conscience. Naturally, such participation must not conflict with the faith or Christian charity.

**DISCUSSION:** As noted above, “Halloween” is a shortened term for the English title “All Hallows’ Eve.” A title given to the vigil celebration of the Catholic feast, All Saints Day. The secular practices in the United States associated with this night represent a mixture of practices taken from the various cultures represented in the United States. Christianity itself, Catholicism included, has contributed to these practices.

## An Initial Caution

Some hold the opinion that Halloween represents an occult holiday. Catholics and other reasonable Christians should take these accusations with a grain of salt. Many pamphlets, tracts, and books written against Halloween are written by *anti-Catholic* writers whose purpose is to discredit the Catholic Church! They assume that Catholicism itself is (at least partially) pagan and demonic, especially regarding the veneration of God’s saints. Because Catholics hold vigil on the feast of All Saints, such writers believe our practice to be evil. Other writers attribute the practices of Halloween to the Druids. However, the commemoration of Christian martyrs predates Christian contact with Druids, and celebrating the vigil of All Saints, All Saints Day itself and All Souls Day (a feast on November 2 which commemorates all the faithful departed) is certainly not “pagan.” Finally, anti-Catholic writings are notorious for their historical inaccuracies.<sup>1</sup> Be cautious about giving quick credence to such writings.

## The History

There are several influences, independent of each other, that contribute to the current practices celebrating Halloween in the United States.

Because they considered the beginning and end of seasons important, the Israelites celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles at the time of the harvest. The feast recognized God’s blessings and recalled His promise to care for them in need (Lev. 23:39f; Dt. 17:7). Furthermore, as an agricultural community, certain laws and practices of the Israelites involved the use of the land and animals under their care (cf: Lev. 25). Similarly, the ancient Celts of Britain and Ireland did have a festival on November 1. This date was the “beginning of a new year” and “the end of summer.” According to the mythology of these agriculturally minded Celts, the beginning of winter was also the time when the dead of the year were taken to the underworld, and awareness of mortality became acute because the coming winter season was dangerous.<sup>2</sup> The cultural recognition of the beginning and end of seasons is found in virtually every agricultural society. American Thanksgiving represents such a “feast.” It is no wonder that Christians have kept such important symbols, especially given the Jewish recognition of seasonal events.

Unrelated to the Celtic festival, Pope Gregory III dedicated an oratory on November 1 that commemorated all the saints (circa 731-41). This date became popularly adopted as “All Saints Day” in Ireland and Britain. Within a century, Gregory IV extended the November 1 celebration of All Saints Day throughout the Western churches. Christians have long commemorated vigils of special feasts, e.g., Christmas Eve Mass and the Easter Vigil, a tradition rooted in the Jewish practice that a day begins at dusk, not midnight. The October 31 vigil of All Saints Day was recognized from the earliest days of the feast.

Contrary to what some writers say regarding Halloween, historians are unable to substantiate a simple importation of “pagan” customs when the Irish and the Scots (who had been Christian for centuries) immigrated in great numbers to the United States during the 1800’s. The American holiday has roots which have no connections with the long past Druids.<sup>3</sup>

### Costumes

Masquerading and wearing costumes associated with death began in the 14th and 15th centuries. During that time, the bubonic plague broke out repeatedly in Europe. This incurable disease that severely decimated the population caused a keen awareness of human mortality. Men return to dust (Gen. 3:19), and the things of this world and the works of men are fleeting (1 Cor. 7:31; 2 Pet. 3:8). Although we have hope of resurrection in Christ Who has destroyed death (1 Cor. 15:54-55), it is good to be aware of man’s mortality to keep priorities straight. For this reason, art often depicts monks and hermits with skulls—“*memento mori*”—reminders of death.<sup>4</sup> The mortality of man was popularly illustrated during this period through the “Danse Macabre” or “the Dance of Death.” These songs, poems, prints, and paintings, depicted men of every age and social state being led by a skeleton into the grave. The Danse Macabre was a Christian allegorical theme warning that all men<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> young and old, wise and foolish, rich and poor, honored and shunned<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> die sooner or later (Eccles. 2:16, 5:15, 7:2). Over time these illustrations became “living”: people started to act out the Danse Macabre by dressing up—as men of all kinds in every stage of life, and even stages after death—on All Souls Day.<sup>5</sup> The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* notes the survival of the Danse Macabre theme in Halloween customs of the United States. Danse Macabre themes can also be seen in the Spanish and Hispanic decorations for “Los Dias de los Muertes,” (“the days of the dead,” November 1 & 2). Mexican crafts for those days include skeleton brides, grooms, nuns, priests, etc.

### Trick or Treat

Asking for treats door-to-door is probably derived from the English practice of celebrating Guy Fawkes Day on November 5. Between the 16th and 18th centuries in England, Catholics had no legal rights. Sometimes, Catholics resisted the oppression. One extreme example of resistance was the failed “Gunpowder Plot” that backfired<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> so to speak<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> on November 5, 1605. As a commemoration of this event, which became a national holiday, English Protestant revelers would wear masks and go from one Catholic home to the next in the middle of the night, demanding beer and cakes for celebration. The revelers frequently carried lanterns made of turnips, carved to mimic the heads of the beheaded conspirators. Over time more customs were added, including pranks by children the night before. To this day, children wearing masks beg for pennies and treats door-to-door on Guy Fawkes Day and people celebrate the king’s preservation with fireworks, bonfires, and burning effigies of the treasonous conspirators.

English Protestants carried the celebration of Guy Fawkes Day to the American colonies. These settlers included Anglicans, who also kept the feast of All Saints, and Puritans. Anglicans commonly called the celebration “Powder Plot Day,” while Puritans with more anti-Catholic tendencies preferred “Pope Day.” In these same colonies, Lutherans celebrated “Reformation Day” on October 31. Huguenots, and Presbyterians of other countries probably joined in later. The English colonists kept the customs of Guy Fawkes bonfires, masquerading and door-to-door begging, and general revelry with food, games, and dancing. Some settlers, records show (e.g. New Hampshire), also preserved the playing of pranks on the previous day. In Pennsylvania, the Guy Fawkes customs were adapted by Scottish children, who did their door-to-door masquerading on October 31 and asked “please to help the guisers,” which seems to be a variation of the English children’s plea, “pennies for the Guy.”

The American custom of “play parties” also contributed to the rise of modern Halloween customs. “Play parties” were fall festivals to which everyone would be invited. Some were task oriented and involved chores like paring apples, but many were for singing, dancing, corn popping, taffy pulls, playing “snap apple,” school pageants, and the like.

Other historians trace trick-or-treating to a 9th-century practice in which Christians went door-to-door begging for “soul cakes”—square pieces of bread with currants or other fruits. The recipients would, in turn, promise to pray for the repose of the gift-givers’ deceased relatives (cf. 2 Mac.12:38-46). Over time, the begging took the form of songs, which were later parodied by English youths celebrating Guy Fawkes Day.

The mixture of these various immigrant traditions took place in the United States between the 1600’s and the 1800’s. Both Catholics and Protestants had masquerading and begging traditions associated with this time of year, and nearly all agriculturally oriented people had harvest festivals. It is easy to see how the different popular practices were mixed into one holiday, and they came to be celebrated on the eve of All Saints, the last day before winter according to Irish and British custom. Except in European countries that are under significant modern American influence, there is no holiday in Europe quite like the American holiday of Halloween. If American Halloween customs have any origins in pagan ones, those customs are filtered through centuries of Christian use.

It was the greeting card industry which apparently added witch imagery to Halloween in the 19th century. The witch imagery seems to be a non-scientific attempt by a few folklorists to forge a link between supposed ancient Druid practices and the Halloween of America. The image gained popularity in the American holiday. While some celebrate Halloween with witch imagery and practices, the holiday itself should not be considered synonymous with witchcraft and occult practices. Because these practices oppose the natural order, they oppose not only Christianity, but the very customs upon which Halloween is founded.

### Conclusion

There is nothing intrinsically “pagan” or “evil” in celebrating All Saints Day or its vigil, dressing up in costumes, playing games, having parties, carving vegetables, reminders of mortality, or collecting candy from willing neighbors. You are free to do any or all of these things if you wish, because none of them are intrinsically disordered, provided that there are no evil intentions in the act (Mk. 7:18-23). Halloween is not a philosophy or system of belief, good or bad, but a set of American customs and practices derived from European ones. And it should be noted that Christianity has *externally* borrowed from pagan customs—e.g., wedding rings, bouquets, brides wearing white, Christmas trees, and Easter eggs—but has transformed their *interior meaning* to conform with Christ. Just as the Church baptizes pagans and makes them into Christians by God’s grace, Christians can give old customs good, new, and richer meaning, e.g., Christmas and Easter replaced pagan feasts associated with winter and spring, respectively.<sup>6</sup> Halloween, given its legitimate Christian connections, can actually be an occasion to help others discover the significance of All Saints and All Souls Days, just as many point out at Christmas that “Jesus is the reason for the season.”<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, we do not want to use our legitimate freedom to alienate or scandalize our Christian brothers, which would be a violation of charity. St. Paul says that even though Christians may eat meat sacrificed to idols (a practice which wasn’t even Christianized) without sinning, they *should choose for the sake of charity* not to do so in front of those who do not understand this liberty (Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 10:23-31). We should not be a stumbling block for others. If your family members or friends choose not to celebrate Halloween, respect their decision and do not do anything in their presence which they would find offensive. If you choose not to celebrate Halloween in the common customs, you might consider replacing it with a celebration of All Saints Day or adapting the common customs to highlight All Saints Day, e.g., handing out holy cards with candy and/or dressing up your children as saints.

Halloween can be legitimate fun, but this kind of fun is not worth causing a brother to stumble. The decision of whether to celebrate Halloween should be made prudently, charitably, and in conformity with the faith. As St. Augustine said, in essential things there must be unity, in matters of opinion there may be diversity, but in *all* things there must be charity.

Some say that Halloween is simply an occult holiday of the Celtic Druids which has been foolishly adopted by Christians. They also say that Halloween is a celebration of demonic power and death in which Christians should not participate. Is this accurate?

<sup>1</sup> In addition to many mistakes about Church history, these authors (e.g. Jack Chick) make many mistakes about Celtic Druid history. Did you know that there is no evidence of actual, ritual human sacrifice among Celtic Druids *except* in the writings of their political enemies? The Romans, who *did* sacrifice humans, made this accusation. When St. Patrick condemned real Celtic religious practices, however, human sacrifice was never mentioned. See pp. 143-156 in *The Druids* by Peter Ellis (Grand Rapids; Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994).

<sup>2</sup> “Samhain” (rhymes with “cow pen”) was the name of the November 1 festival (c.f. *Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. III). Samhain means “summer’s end.” October 31 was not Samhain but “Samhain eve.”

<sup>3</sup> The history reported herein is based on various articles and books, including articles in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. See “All Saints,” “All Souls,” “Dance of Death,” “Fawkes, Guy,” and “Gunpowder Plot.”

<sup>4</sup> Eastern Christians usually keep a “memento mori” in their “bright corners.” The corner is decorated with icons and lamps for prayer, but it also includes the burial shroud of the owner. Christians are not “morbid” when they look death in the face honestly. On the contrary, it is a reality the rest of the world has trouble facing.

<sup>5</sup> See “Should Our Kids Celebrate Halloween?” by Fr. Augustine Thompson, O P., *Catholic Parent*, Sept./Oct. 1995; to order a back issue, call 1-800-348-2440.

<sup>6</sup> Pope Gregory I, who reigned from 590-604, said, “Let the shrines of idols by no means be destroyed. Let water be consecrated and sprinkled in the temples, let altars be erected...so that the people, not seeing their temples destroyed, may displace error and recognize and adore the true God....And because they were wont to sacrifice to devils, *some celebration should be given in exchange for this...they should celebrate a religious feast* and worship God by their feasting, so that *still keeping the outward pleasure*, they may more readily receive spiritual joys,” quoted in John Greenway’s *Folklore of the Great West* (Palo Alto, California: American West Publishing Company, 1970), p. 384, emphasis added.

<sup>7</sup> On the winter solstice (December 21), pagans celebrated the feast of “*Sol Invictus*,” the “inconquerable sun” that waned in winter-shortened days but was not “overcome” by the darkness. Christians chose to keep the natural timing of the holiday and replace its pagan meaning with the Christian message, the inconquerable Son (Jn. 1:5).

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