

Can Catholics celebrate Halloween?

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Can we celebrate it? Of course, we can celebrate it. We invented it.

Despite the claims of Wikipedia and various Protestant influencers (even ones I respect), Halloween is not a modern-day repackaging of Samhain, the ancient harvest festival that involved Gaelic pagans dressing up in costumes to ward off ghosts and evil spirits. Rather, it is the Vigil of All Saints Day, with the name, "Halloween," being just an abbreviated form of "All Hallows Eve," ("All Hallows Mass" was the name of the Feast in England).

The roots of Halloween go back to at least the fourth century, when Christian communities across the Roman Empire would set aside a day in the liturgical year to commemorate the martyrs—those believers who had willingly sacrificed their lives for Christ. In the Eastern Church, this commonly took place on May 13. Eventually the Church in the West also began celebrating the feast—which became known as the Feast of All Saints—on May 13. However, around 731 AD, Pope Gregory III moved the celebration of the feast in Rome to November 1 in union with his dedication of the All Saints Chapel in St. Peter's Basilica. Other bishops quickly followed suit, and about 100 years later, Pope Gregory IV made it a universal Church feast day. By the eleventh century the Feast of All Saints was celebrated on November 1, throughout the Latin Rite Church. Around the same time, All Souls Day was added to the calendar, as well. It falls the day after All Saints Day, on November 2, and is a special day of prayer for all the faithful departed.

Together, October 31, November 1, and November 2 are known as Hallowtide. On these three days, the Church calls Christians to contemplate the four last things: Death, Judgement, Heaven, and Hell. We do this by rejoicing in the lives of the saints, especially the hidden ones, who have no feast on the liturgical calendar, and by remembering all our beloved dead, asking God to welcome them into the company of saints.

As with all the Church's feasts, as time passed different regional traditions developed around the celebration of Hallowtide. For example, after the Bubonic Plague swept through France, survivors there began staging elaborate All Souls Day parades to help remind people of their own mortality and the importance of seeking holiness. These "Dances of the Dead" featured people dressed up in the garb of princes, popes, and paupers, all following the devil to the grave. Around the same time, in England, people walked from house to house on All Hallows Eve, asking for sweet cakes, dubbed "Soul Cakes," and promising to offer prayers on All Souls Day for the inhabitants' dearly departed. Later, after England became a Protestant country, revelers celebrating Guy Fawkes Night (on November 5) visited the houses of known (or suspected) Catholics and demanded food and drink. If the Catholics didn't want to see their homes or businesses vandalized, they supplied what the revelers demanded. The choice was simple: trick or treat.

Many of those traditions eventually died out in their country of origin. In early nineteenth-century America, however, immigrants from across Europe brought their various ways of celebrating the triduum of Hallowtide with them. In time, those traditions mingled together, giving us some of modern-day America's most beloved Halloween traditions, from bonfires and trick-or-treating to costumes, parades, and pranks.

Unfortunately, as America has become more secular, the religious significance of those traditions has been forgotten and the day itself co-opted by secular and occultist groups. This is true of the culture at large, which now considers Halloween an entire season—Spooky Season—that runs from early September right up through October 31. It's more disturbingly true of Wiccans, who resurrected the feast of Samhain in the late 20th century and declared it their highest of high holy days.

It's that occultist reframing, which has perhaps confused people the most about Halloween's origins. After all, Samhain was celebrated long before All Saints Day even existed. It predates Christianity by as much as 3,000 years. It too was celebrated in the Fall, and it too remembered the dead—not by praying for them, but by offering sacrifices to appease them and lighting bonfires to ward them off. It's for this reason that many people argue that Hallowtide is nothing more than a Christianized celebration of

Samhain. They see Samhain as the origin of the day and the reason why Pope Gregory eventually moved the feast to November 1.

Most Catholic scholars doubt that Pope Gregory III knew anything about Samhain (there's simply no evidence of it), but he likely did know about Feralia and Lemuria, ancient Roman feasts honoring the dead. Both were widely celebrated in Rome about the same time as the original celebration of All Saints. If Pope Gregory did get wind of pagan Fall festivals of in Ireland and elsewhere, that may have influenced his decision to move All Saints to November 1. But that doesn't make Halloween or any part of Hallowtide less Catholic.

It's important to remember that human beings after Christ and human beings before Christ aren't all that different from each other. Redeemed or not redeemed, we all share the same human nature, which means we are all inclined to hope for the same things, fear the same things, and wonder about the same things. We hope for peace, joy, and mercy. We fear suffering, death, and retribution. We wonder what has happened to those we've loved and lost, and we wonder what will happen to us after the end of our days. We also wonder if those who've left this world remember us, for good or for ill. Can they help us? Can they hurt us? Have the wrongs we've done to them been forgiven? And will they wrong us if we forget them?

It is deeply human to wonder about these things. It is also deeply human to do that wondering in the Fall, when the ground has yielded its last fruits for the year and the leaves are falling from the trees. The world always seems to be dying as October passes into November, so naturally our thoughts turn to death, too.

This isn't wrong. It's normal. It is, again, human. But before Christ, that human inclination to ponder death and judgment in the Fall of the year was not illuminated by grace. There was no Holy Spirit or Revelation or Magisterium directing people to the true answers to their questions or showing them how to rightly order their response to fears about their own mortality. And so people ended up worshipping creation instead of the Creator and trying to appease or frighten the dead like they might appease or frighten a difficult neighbor, with gifts and shows of strength.

This is why Pope Gregory's move of All Saints Day—which was, again, a holy day in its own right, with no connection to harvest festivals—makes so much sense. The change of date to November 1 reflects a deep knowledge of the human person, both in recognizing the questions people are prone to asking this time of year and then by effectively baptizing those questions, soaking them in grace and directing people towards the good. Together, All Saints Day and All Souls Day answer the questions that all those ancient Druids were asking when they danced around bonfires dressed up as animals. These holy days meet in full the need that pagan harvest festivals could only ever meet in part, quelling our natural fears with supernatural truth and showing us how to truly remember, honor, and help the dead.

And Halloween? It fills a need, too. It reminds us of that old pagan world, where darkness pressed close on every side and every bump in the night was something to fear. The bonfires in the blackness, the friends made unfamiliar by masks and costumes, the slight sense of danger for children as they walk through the night and approach strangers' houses, unsure of what they will find there—all that gives us the tiniest glimpse us of the emptiness of living in a world without Christ and the terror of living in a world without grace.

But the darkness is supposed to be brief. The main show is not supposed to be Halloween. The fear felt on the Vigil is supposed to quickly recede as hope comes on the Feast. The Feast is the point. Without the celebrations of All Saints Day and All Souls Day, Halloween does become nothing more than an over the top commercial holiday ... or an occultist festival.

All of which is why Christians don't need to ask, "Can we celebrate Halloween?" We absolutely can, and we absolutely should. It's an essential part of Hallowtide, and Hallowtide is an essential part of our faith. The whole of it celebrates core truths of what we believe: that God wants us to become holy; that He makes it possible for us to become Holy; that He invites us, through our prayers and sacrifices, to partner with Him in that work; that death does not break the bonds of communion between us and our loved ones; and that all who live in Christ will be reunited one day. Hallowtide is a great

festival of hope. It is a great celebration of community. And it is, above all, a great gift. It is a gift to know that on the other side of the darkness, is light.

So, the real question isn't "Can we celebrate it?" It's "How should we celebrate it?" And that's a tougher one to answer. There is no step-by-step guide for how Christians should celebrate Halloween. Different families in different places will do it differently, and we all have to exercise prudence as we discern what our particular area and circumstances dictate.

At minimum, though, it seems that all Christians should strive to put more emphasis on All Saints Day and All Souls Day than we do on Halloween. The vigil is not as important as the feast. It's the precursor, the opening act, not the main event. I'm not sure if spending small fortunes on Halloween decorations or trotting them out excessively early communicates that to the world. Going all in on gore and terror, with yard decorations straight out of a horror movie, doesn't do a lot to signal hope to people either (and often violates basic standards of human decency by terrifying small children).

Here, in my little corner of the hood, Chris and I choose to keep Halloween celebrations fairly tame. I decorate the house for fall—with leaves and branches, pumpkins and flowers, plus a few other cute little things (see picture above)—but not Halloween. In the days leading up to Halloween, we usually watch some fun, Halloween themed cartoons with the kids. We also happily plan costumes with the children and go trick-or-treating with them, but we say no to dressing up as anything too dark or scary, mostly because we don't think it's appropriate for small children. I would be fine if one of the kids someday wanted to dress up as a character from Harry Potter (because it's the fullness of the character that makes that kind of costume appealing), but would say no to one of them dressing up as just a generic witch or warlock (because as our friend Dave VanVickle points out in the latest episode of our podcast, real witches hate us and we don't dress up as things that hate us—not Nazis, not witches). Once or twice, we've had a few friends over for trick-or-treating, but most of the time it's just us. On the whole, we try to make Halloween a fun day for the children, but still keep it fairly low key ... especially because the costumes and candy make it high key enough.

Come All Saints Day, though, I pull out all the stops. Before the kids wake up, I deck the house out in dozens of pictures of our favorite saints (with many purchased from the wonderful January Jane Shop), then, on the next day, move pictures of loved ones we've lost into prominence as well. All those will stay up throughout November. This year, my family will be traveling on November 1, so I can speak at a parish in Cleveland the next day, but normally, in addition to a special breakfast and going to Mass, we have a big All Saints Day party and invite our friends and their kids to come and feast with us. On All Souls Day, we try to keep the celebration going by taking the kids out for dinner and going on a family walk through one of the beautiful old cemeteries in this area. Again, this year, that plan will be scuttled a bit, but maybe we'll just do it in Cleveland. Or the next day when we're home. Either way, all month long, we read books about the saints and talk about the saints' whose pictures are all over the house and pray, as a family, for the dead.

We don't do this perfectly. We're still figuring things out and adjusting as we go. I'm sure things will change as the kids grow. But our hope and our goal is to make all of Hallowtide, from first to last, a fun and sacred celebration for our whole family. We don't want to cede any part of it to the pagans. We don't want to give up Halloween, which is rightfully ours.

What we do want is to celebrate the day on our terms, as the vigil to a Catholic holy day and a joyful, integral part of Hallowtide. How others decide to do that will absolutely look different from how we do it. And that's fine. The Church gives us that latitude. I mean, if you're living in a neighborhood that has Wiccans up and down the street, I can see not wanting to go trick-or-treating there. That makes sense. I wouldn't either.

Regardless, your family doesn't have to celebrate Halloween the way my family does for it to be a joyful reclamation of the day. But don't be misled by the Internet: It is our day. Not theirs. And in a world that wants us to forget this or think it never belonged to us in the first place, it's all the more important for us to remember the truth about Halloween and celebrate it well. The best way to fight darkness, after all, is with the light.