

HALLOWEEN AND THE CONCERNED CHRISTIAN

*by Reverend Michael V. Reed
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There is growing concern among conscientious Christians and peoples of other faiths over Halloween. A day that twenty years ago meant costumes, school carnivals, children's parades, trick or treating and candy has come to be known by some as the "devil's day"; a day on which evil is condoned and glorified. For some people, Halloween means razor blades in apples, drugged candy, satanic activity and acts of violence against children and animals. These negative and frightening stereotypes, attached to Halloween in recent years, do a great disservice to Christians who, with no intent to encourage evil or the demonic, celebrate this day.

For Catholic Christians, Halloween is a day of preparation for All Saints Day. This day of preparation was first referred to as "All Hallow Evening" or "All Holy Evening", since "hallow" is a Middle English word meaning "Holy". (The Lord's Prayer clearly uses "hallowed" to point out that God's Name is "Holy".) With time the name was shortened to "Hallow Evening". Halloween always falls on October 31st and All Saints Day is celebrated the next day on November 1st. All Saints Day is the real celebration for Catholics, not Halloween.

Halloween poses problems for non-Catholic Christians who do not recognize or celebrate All Saints Day. Without All Saints' Day, Halloween has no point of reference; no purpose or significance.

Easter has the forty days of Lent as a time of preparation. Christmas has the four weeks of Advent set aside to get ready for Jesus' birth. If we eliminated Easter, then Lent would make no sense and Advent would make no sense without Christmas. Perhaps we can understand why Christians who don't celebrate All Saints Day have such a hard time with Halloween. Without All Saints Day, Halloween makes no sense. Consequently, it is only natural why Christians who come from religious traditions that reject All Saints Day reject

Halloween.

Catholics should know that the aversion some Christians feel toward All Saints Day goes back to the time of the Reformation. It is no coincidence that Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on the door of the castle church of Wittenburg on October 31, 1517. We recognize that date as Halloween. Luther's immediate concern was the selling of indulgences, an abusive practice tolerated by church officials at the time. His complaint can be specifically identified with a priest by the name of John Tetzel who in Luther's eyes was causing scandal with his indulgence campaign. It rightly upset Luther that German bishops just turned their heads to the abuses of Tetzel.

The sale of indulgences was especially brisk before All Saints Day and All Souls Day. Purveyors in indulgences took advantage of grieving families and the guilt ridden by using fear and fraud to barter certificates of time off from purgatory and entrance into heaven. Abuses were finally condemned at the Council of Trent which met from 1545 to 1563. Strict regulations were adopted to prevent any further abuses. We can, perhaps, understand how the association of the Reformation with Halloween continues to pose problems.

There were also theological differences between the Roman Catholic Church and Sixteenth Century Reformers when it came to saints. The Catholic Church considered it appropriate to recognize the spiritual holiness of members of Christ's Church who were declared to be in heaven with God. For Catholics, saints were to be looked upon as examples of virtue worthy of imitation and intercessors who prayed for our earthly needs from heaven. Saints were the success stories of Christian living. The saints allowed the light of Christ to shine forth in their words and actions like stained glass windows allowed the sunlight to shine in a marvelous kaleidoscope of colors. Their examples showed Catholic Christians that living a Godly life was not impossible or out of reach. In fact, because the saints came from different walks and stations in life, they were sources of great encouragement and hope for anyone who wanted to be a good Christian. Saints inspired all succeeding generations of Christians to do God's Will and obey God's Commandments. They demonstrated that the power of

God's goodness can and does prevail over the power of the devil and evil. They were people who lived the Christian life and received the reward promised to them by Jesus. Their reward? Eternity with God in Heaven.

In the same way that we asked others on earth to pray for us or our needs, so we asked the saints in heaven to talk to the Lord about bringing resolution to our concerns, our battles, and our struggles with darkness, discouragement, and weakness. This theology of the Roman Catholic Church goes as far back as Sts Peter and Paul whose names were often inscribed on catacomb walls asking their prayers and intercessions. Early Church Father, Origen, of the Third Century recognized intercession of saints as praiseworthy and commendable (Origen, In Lib. Iesu Nave, 16.5; PG 12:909 & De orat., 14; PG 11:464). By the Fourth and Fifth Centuries recognition of saints as partners with us on our journey to heaven was extended from "saints" who had died for their faith, martyrs, to those who had lived ascetic and exemplary lives of self denial and penance. Abuses in honoring the saints (*dulia*), which was distinguished from the adoration offered to God alone (*latreia*), did crop up from time to time. Councils such as Avignon in 1209 and the Fourth Lateran (1215) tried to stop exaggerated practices that developed in popular devotions of the saints.

Groups such as the Cathari and Waldenses of the Thirteenth Century denied intercession of the saints. Later the Confession of Augsburg (1530) recognized saints as examples, but not as intercessors. Luther, Zwingli and Calvin likewise rejected the Catholic Church's Doctrine of Intercession. In response to the reformers, the Catholic Church called for a council at Trent (1545-63 A.D.) It was there that the council members appealed to the Tradition handed down by the Apostles and declared that it was "good and useful" for the faithful to invoke the saints in order to obtain benefits from God through Christ, the sole Redeemer (Denz 1821; also see CCC #956-957; #2683).

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Festivals commemorating saints find their origin in the Fourth Century with celebrations for heroic martyrs. In the East, All Saints Sunday was celebrated the week after Easter or the Sunday following Pentecost. In the West,

All Saints Day evolved from a variety of feast days dedicated to saints. Pope Boniface IV (608-15 A.D.), tried to consolidate many different saint days. He tried to combine them into one celebration and in 610 A.D. found occasion and opportunity. Pope Boniface dedicated the Pantheon, the old pagan temple to the gods of Rome, to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus, and the martyrs. This dedication of the Pantheon as a Christian church was a great victory for Christians who were once martyred and persecuted by the Roman Empire. The new Christian church was a monument to the death of the Roman Empire and pagan religion. It was made holy by the martyrs' bones brought to the church from the Christian catacombs. In 735, Pope Gregory III (731-41 A.D.) established a feast day of all saints by building a chapel in St. Peter's to their honor. This action of Gregory III seems to have served as the inspiration for a feast of All Saints in England and Ireland on November 1st. Finally, upon the recommendation of Pope Gregory IV (824-44 A.D.) and with the approval of his many bishops, mandated the feast of All Saints to be celebrated throughout his empire. From this time, All Saints had a vigil or day of preparation and by the end of the Fifteenth Century eight days were set aside commemorating "All Saints". By the Eleventh Century Pope Gregory VII set aside November 1st as the date for universal celebration of All Saints Day. This was a day for Christians to glory in the fulfilled promise of resurrection. Resurrection and going to heaven was not just a dream, but a reality worthy of celebration. Proper celebration of this day also made-up for anything that may have been lacking in the commemoration of a saint's feast day during the rest of the year. Today, All Saints Day continues to be a Holy Day of Obligation for Catholics.

As a day of preparation, holy evening or "Halloween" was marked in the Christian Church with Mass. This evening was to be like a mini-Armageddon (Rev. 19:11-21; 20:1-15). It was to be the final battle between the forces of evil and the forces of God--the battle of Archangel Michael with his army of "white robed" saints against the devil with his demons and evil spirits. Catholics knew how it would all end. God would prevail and the good would be victorious. This is surely something to celebrate! What better way to commemorate this battle than with the Eucharistic Celebration in which we are reminded that with Jesus' body and blood sin and evil are defeated. It is precisely Jesus' victory that we celebrate on "All Saints Day" and because of His

victory His followers (saints) are led triumphantly into heaven.

Some of the present day traditions surrounding Halloween began with the conversion of the Celts to Christianity. The Celtic lands of present day Ireland, Scotland, England and Northern France allowed Christian missionaries to Christianize their superstitious and pagan holiday of Samhain, their god of death. This was certainly not an easy task for missionaries who worked and prayed hard to wean the Celts from their superstitious ways.

Samhain was not only a reminder to the Celts of the inevitability of human death, but also reminded them of the death of all creation. How could they forget the encroaching season of winter cold, darkness and decay? This was their new year's day. (Perhaps there was wisdom in beginning the year with the harshness of fall and winter so that the year ended with spring and summer.

Prior to Christianity, the Celtic New Year was marked by people extinguishing their personal hearth fires. Their leaders called Druids, would then build a large bonfire of oak branches. Participants superstitiously believed that if they built the fire in a way pleasing to their gods that winter would not come or, at least, not be harsh. The fire served also to chase wandering evil spirits back into their graves. Often sacrifices of crops, animals, and human beings were offered in these bonfires often referred to as bonefires because of the human sacrifices offered in them.

Since the Druids were not just religious leaders but also enforcers of justice, the human sacrifices offered were criminals who had committed heinous acts against the Celtic peoples. Not only was the bonfire used to rid the world of the harshness of winter but also used to rid the world of the harshness and cruelty of inhumanity. It was the responsibility of the Druids to dispense justice and consequently during their Samhain celebration groups of people were sacrificed or purged from society because of their bad and evil ways. This was the Druid way of capital punishment.

The Celts during this celebration of Samhain would use every resource they had available to ward off the evil spirits whom they believed

would try to undermine any good that they were striving to accomplish. For the unprotected, a demon might possess them and take their body for itself. (The technical phrase for this is transmigration of the soul.) Protection was found behind terrifying and ghastly costumes. People would dress up in hopes of scaring away the "body hungry" demons and tormented souls who were desperately taking this last chance to find a new home. Horrible costumes fooled the evil spirits into thinking that those who wore them were one of them. Dressing poorly with rags and old clothes was another way evil spirits were chased away back into their graves. No spirit wanted to take over the life of a poor person. For the Celtic people this was a great drama which made the devil and his evil spirits look stupid and shallow. The celebration of Samhain made a mockery of the power of evil which only judged people by their outward appearance. What a glorious trick for Celtic people to dress in costumes and scare away evil spirits and the souls of the dead.

We can see why this custom of costumes on Halloween was continued by Christians who warded off the powers of darkness in clever disguise. Christians were to be as "wise as serpents" (Mt 10:16) and know that their Almighty God could see beneath the costume and read their hearts (I Sm 16:7; Ps 44:21; Acts 8:21; 15:8). For Christians the trick is on the devil who is no match for God and His army of clever and cunning saints.

While bonfires were one way of celebrating Halloween there were still other ways Celtic Christians prepared for All Saints Day. One of these ways was to plant seeds of charity, like the yeast or mustard seed mentioned in the Gospel of Luke chapter 13 verses 18-21. Planting seeds and not allowing the weeds to destroy or choke them was the goal (Mt 13:1-23; Mk 4:1-2; Lk 8:4). Christians were ready to accept this goal with uncompromising zeal. The end result of the tiny, but good, seed planted on Halloween was that All Saints Day would be a day devoid of evil, filled with nothing but blessing. It was to be a day without conflict, war, hunger, and hatred. It was dedicated solely for glorying in the goodness and sovereignty of God.

Poverty and hunger had always been a problem among the Celtic peoples, as it was in other places in the world. There were famines and selfish

people just like anywhere else. But on "Holy Evening" the evil of hunger was to be overcome through generosity. No one was to go hungry or steal for food on All Saints Day. The custom began that those who were poor would go from house to house on Holy Evening and be given by the more fortunate, food and goodies to eat. These goodies were often referred to as "soul cakes". Besides meeting a physical need, "soul cakes" encouraged the soul and spirit of a person. This gesture on the part of Celtic Christians witnesses to the goodness of humanity--that the world was not totally selfish, God-less, and forlorn.

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Up until the last few years, the custom of providing for the hungry on Holy Evening was kept alive by UNICEF (United Nations Children's Emergency Fund). Children would volunteer to collect money on Halloween by carrying the orange and black UNICEF cartons from house to house. The money collected was used to provide food, medical care, and other services to poor children throughout the world. Today UNICEF has moved its efforts from Halloween to the Christmas Season.

"Trick or Treating" is the remnant of the foregoing "Holy Evening" tradition. The trick is on the devil who does not recognize the costume clad youth or adult as a Christian. The treats are the candies or trinkets that give an example of generosity.

One of the most recognizable symbols of modern-day Holy Evening is the pumpkin. Unbeknownst to most Christians, the legend of the pumpkin or Jack O'Lantern is a moralistic story. It is certainly an Irish story as is easily ascertained by the O'Lantern of Jack's name.

The legend is as follows:

There once was a very rich man named Jack. He was a very successful business man if you judge by his wealth, material possessions, and money. Yet, everything he had came from the victimizing of the poor and needy. Because of Jack, the rich became poor and the poor became poorer. To those who knew or heard of him, he was the greediest and

most selfish man who ever lived. No one was immune from his abuse, manipulation, and scheming.

After a hard day of taking advantage of people and swindling them out of their goods, Jack would often walk by the beggars on the streets. He stared at the beggar with cold and coal studded eyes of contempt. Compassion and pity were emotions about which Jack knew nothing. Scowling and name calling were more Jack's style in dealing with the hungry. He was even known to kick a few clinging beggars away from time to time. He always covered his nose with a scented handkerchief to keep the stench of the street people from irritating his sinuses. Yes, Jack was perhaps the most despicable man who ever lived.

One day while counting his money, Jack died.

He woke up on a pebble road in a very dark meadow. Everything was dark--there were no colors, just shades of black and gray.

The pebble road went up hill on one side of the meadow and went down on the other side. Jack decided to go up hill and see where it would lead. As he went over the hill he began to see a bright light which was still far up the road. As he came close to the light he had to cover his eyes. A soft and warm voice spoke to Jack from the light and told him to return down the road, for he did not belong.

"You see, Jack," said the voice, "this is Heaven and your life on earth says you do not belong here and are not worthy of heaven."

So Jack turned from heaven and went down the road. As he went further and further down the road, he saw another light. This time instead of being a bright light it was reddish in color, like flames. This was Hell. He was still quite a distance away when the devil saw Jack coming. It's hard to believe, but Jack even scared the devil.

"I've got all kinds of rotten and terrible people in Hell," the devil menaced, "but no one as despicable

as Jack. He's too bad, even for Hell!" So the devil picked up clumps of red hot coals began to throw them at Jack. The devil yelled and screamed for Jack to stay away.

Jack now rejected by both Heaven and Hell decided to use the coals to help him see better in the dark valley. He picked up a gourd. (Some say it was a large potato or turnip since Ireland doesn't have pumpkins.) Jack caught one of the hot coals with the gourd and created a lantern.

With lantern in hand, Jack heard the soft, warm voice again. The voice told him that he must wander the dark valley until the end of time and on "Holy Evening" he would be allowed to roam the earth with his lantern as a warning and sign to all that this is what happens to those who are greedy, miserly, and selfish in their lives on earth.

So the lantern is a reminder to Christians and all people of faith and morals that we must be generous with our lives and resources--especially generous to the poor and needy. THE END.

Stories such as that of Jack O'Lantern have important messages for young and old alike.

It is my hope as a Christian and as a priest that more people will look into the rich Christian message of Halloween and All Saints Day. These are certainly days worthy of appropriate Christian celebration.

I'm of the reasoning that just because something is misunderstood or abused, it does not have to be abolished. If we abolished every celebration that was misunderstood or abused then we'd have nothing left to celebrate. Just think about it. What would happen to Easter and Christmas?

Easter has already become more the Easter Bunny, colored eggs, colorful baskets of candy, pretty dresses and bonnets than it has the Day of

Jesus' Resurrection. There are some religious groups who do not celebrate Easter because of its secular innovations. So if people misunderstand and abuse the meaning of this day, should all Christians give it up? Should my Christianity be defeated by a secular world which has tried to water down or change religious holy days into bunnies, bonnets, and bunting?

Christmas has also become a time of Santa Claus, reindeer, elves, sleigh-bells, carols, parties, shopping, presents, trees with colored lights, outdoor decorations and egg nog. There are more family disturbances during the Christmas season than at any other time of the year. More people commit suicide at this time than during any other season. People in shopping centers often show little Christian charity as they push, shove, slap and strike at their crying and weary children. If you look only at the secular trappings or the human tragedies then one could easily forget that we as Christians celebrate Jesus' birth and second coming during the Christmas Season. Slogans such as "Keep Christ in Christmas" remind us that religious meaning can easily be forgotten or lost in a busy and changing world.

All Saints Day and Halloween do require renewal of religious meaning. What becomes most clear is that "Halloween" is rightly a celebration for saints. It takes commitment to sanctity and great courage to declare the message that God's power is greater than any other. Perhaps only saints can persevere and live the power of faith in a cynical and disparaging world. As Christians we are all called to be saints, to be heroes, and witnesses of light in darkness. Celebrations such as All Saints Day and Halloween can open our eyes to the light of God's glory and help us as Christians to better live what we profess.