

Celebrating the Readings of All Saints and All Souls

Remembering our beloved dead

By PAUL TURNER

All Saints Day bridges the battleground between Halloween and All Souls Day. Halloween has evolved into the national holiday for antiheroes. As the storylines of some popular movies, novels and video games hail the success of criminals, so Halloween cheers the forces of evil through tricks, masquerades and violence. It is the Eve of All Hallows, the hours when wrongdoing wrestles its dark reign before the Day of All Hallows shines its light of goodness. These days map out a battleground over the human spirit. The saints have all triumphed, but the temptation to sin perjures and seduces on Halloween.

On All Souls Day the church prays for those who have died and whose eternal salvation remains in doubt. We don't know for certain the divine judgment on those we have loved and lost, so we pray that God will have mercy on them, freeing them from the snares of death. We plead for their enrollment among the saints who shine on November 1, and not among the damned who prowl on October 31.

Some Catholics prefer a more positive spin to All Souls Day, acclaiming it as the day when we celebrate the salvation of deceased family and friends whom the church has not canonized among its saints, but its purpose is more sober. Their place in eternity sits in the balance. God's singular judgment has not yet been manifested. In that spiritual vacuum, we pray for mercy.

The readings for November 1 and November 2 bear out these parallel yet disparate views — celebrating the saved souls on one day and interceding for other souls on the next.

All Saints

All the readings for the Solemnity of All Saints come from the Christian Scriptures, a lineup we recognize more commonly during the Easter season. The allusion is subtle, but insightful. We celebrate the resurrection of Christ by basking in the post-resurrection part of the Bible for seven weeks of readings from the Christian Scriptures at Sunday and daily Mass. The practice returns on a day half a year after the Easter season has closed, when we celebrate the saints who share in the glory of the resurrection with Christ.

The first reading on November 1, taken from the Book of Revelation, proclaims John's vision of the mysterious

reality we celebrate this day: A great multitude stands before the throne and the Lamb, wearing white and carrying palms, crying out the message of salvation that comes from God. This selection moves us to meditate on the blessed future that awaits those whom Christ redeems, while it inspires us to faithful discipleship.

The Gospel is the Beatitudes, Jesus' template for discipleship. Those who carry out his plan are not just happy; they are numbered among the blessed. The Gospel, then, lays out the path to the vision of eternity that radiates from the first reading.

Even before the Second Vatican Council, the Missal positioned those two readings in the schema for All Saints Day. Since then, a third reading has been added to all Sundays and solemnities, and the post-Vatican II church has chosen an exceptionally appropriate selection from the First Letter of John to accompany the traditional readings for All Saints. This passage proclaims that we are now God's children, what we will be is unclear, but we will see God. That brings the celebration of All Saints home to people who have shaken off the dishonorable festivities of Halloween and yearn to be counted among the saints.

Psalm 24 expresses a similar sentiment asking who may ascend the mountain of the Lord. The sinless and the clean of heart may ascend, as well

as those who do not desire vain things. The psalm describes such people as those who seek God's face. As often happens with the responsorial psalm, the refrain improvises on one of the verses. Because the psalm proclaims that the blessed are those who seek God's face, we sing that that's what we want to do: "Lord, this is the people that longs to see your face." If God is looking for those who are searching, the refrain to this psalm essentially calls out: "Here we are." We pray that that longing will enable us to receive a blessing from the Lord.

In sum, All Saints Day does not merely celebrate a remote reality of exceptionally brave Christians who garnered God's pleasure. It raises hopes that ordinary Christians one day may stand by their side.

All Souls

For All Souls Day, the Lectionary permits a choice of readings from the collection assigned to funeral masses. This is wonderful and overwhelming all at the same time.



— Julie Lonneman



We may choose from a plethora of options. Prior to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, a priest celebrated three Masses on November 2 each year, each Mass having its own assigned first reading and Gospel. A priest still has the option of celebrating three Masses; in fact, the Missal distinguishes three sets of presidential prayers for such a case. But the readings may now be chosen from a broad pool. This permits the parish to select readings that are either much beloved at funerals or ones that are rarely heard. Inspired by these passages, preachers may rehearse familiar themes or branch out in new directions. The Lectionary distributes literally dozens of options among the first readings, psalms, second readings and Gospels for this day. Some liturgy planners freeze before this embarrassment of riches.

A suggested plan appears on the web site for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (www.usccb.org). The USCCB homepage regularly provides a clickable calendar where people may view the readings appointed for any day. In the case of All Souls, the full list of options is too unwieldy to post. Therefore, the web site makes a selection: Wisdom 3:1-9, Psalm 23:1-6, either Romans 5:5-11 or Romans 6:3-9, and Matthew 25:31-46. All these are excellent choices. This article will comment on these, but the reader should realize that these selections are only a very partial listing of options. Besides the bishops' web site, some participation aids also pre-select readings for All Souls Day. Catholics accustomed to following the daily Scriptures at Mass from a booklet or a smart device may be surprised to hear different readings actually being proclaimed.

Some accuse the priest of making a mistake. He probably hasn't; he is exercising legitimate options.

Psalm 23 is a favorite at funerals. Many parishes sing a paraphrase of this psalm at every funeral Mass ("Shepherd me, O God") as if it were the only choice. There are nine more options from the psalter. Still, it is hard to argue with Psalm 23. It acknowledges the valley of darkness and proclaims the reliable leadership of a skilled shepherd. On All Souls Day, as at funerals, people respond with one of two refrains, proclaiming either "The Lord is my shepherd" or "You are with me." The first option comes from the opening verses of the psalm that sing *about* the Lord, the second option is from later verses of the same psalm that sing *to* the Lord. Perhaps one of the humanizing tendencies of this most popular psalm in the Psalter is its somewhat distracted approach to prayer.

Distracting, too, is death, as the Book of Wisdom avers. To the foolish, the dead seem to be dead, but wisdom proclaims that the souls of the just are at peace. These words resonate with the experience of many of the faithful, who behold the dead with human eyes, but see them living in

their faith-filled hearts. Especially regarding those who suffered at the end of their lives, the Book of Wisdom's comparison between them and gold in the furnace brings comfort to those who endured vicarious pain through the final days of the one whom they loved.

For the second reading on All Souls Day, the USCCB web site offers two alternatives from Romans. The second of these is probably the more familiar because of its starring role each year as the epistle for the Easter Vigil. In Chapter 6, Paul proclaims that we were buried with Christ in our baptism so that we might also rise with him. This passage offers tremendous hope for those who mourn a Christian's physical death. Because of the previous death to sin, which deceased Christians experienced in baptism, they may live in Christ, united with him in resurrection.

This view differs from the focus of the *Dies iræ*, the sequence formerly required on All Souls Day and within all funerals until the post-Vatican II liturgical reforms. The chant cited doom-filled prophecies about the day of the Lord's wrath destined to come upon humanity. The *Dies iræ* begged God's mercy upon the sinner. This sequence still appears as an optional hymn in the Liturgy of the Hours during the final week of Ordinary Time. There, it is broken into three sections distributed among the office of readings, morning

prayer and evening prayer each day. Although there is no requirement to sing it, it still forms part of the church's liturgical library and usage. Nonetheless, the *Dies iræ* has been removed from the Lectionary, and that has opened a path for more hopeful messages from the word of God at every funeral and on All Souls Day.

“Have I fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, and visited the prisoner? Am I really among the sheep? Have I put God’s grace to work in my life?” These relentless questions lurk behind every proclamation of Matthew 25.

Returning to the alternatives for the second reading, the passage from Romans 5 is less known but worth meditation. It offers consolation while facing the frank admission that some people die in their sin. In fact, all of us are sinners, yet our hope does not disappoint. Christ died for us while we were sinners. Sometimes, we withhold our kindness from a person until they first show kindness to us. But Jesus went about this differently. Not waiting for us to be faithful, he died for us while we were in sin. His love has opened the door for salvation.

Our complete relationship with God begins with grace. God takes the initiative. God offers grace to us, and we respond in love.

That same hope surfaces in the Gospel that the USCCB suggests for All Souls Day. The symbolic separation of sheep and goats in Matthew 25 lodges in the collective memory of Christians, partly because the structure of this passage is so repetitive. To hear it once feels as though you are hearing it twice. We know where it is headed. Yet, each time this passage holds the power of unsettling the hearer. "Have I fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty,

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Perhaps these self-scrutinizing questions best define the character of All Souls Day. Twenty-four hours yet light-years away from the day of assurance that we have saints in heaven, All Souls Day reveals the underbelly of concern that not every mortal may join them.

The living feel the tug of both Halloween and All Saints. Do we follow the example of the wicked? Or do imitate the blessed? All Saints Day bridges these two days, squaring itself into the spiritual battleground, quelling the impact of demons while offering hope to the fallible faithful.

Incidentally, the tradition behind the origins of All Saints Day lies in the honor that living Christians bestowed on the dead. In the early seventh century, the Roman emperor Phocas obtained a marble column and erected it in the forum, making it the newest artifact among the ruins of once thriving downtown ancient Rome. Phocas, perhaps in gratitude, donated one of Rome’s greatest monuments, the Pantheon, to Pope Boniface IV. The Pantheon, the oldest most complete monument in the city, first served as a temple of all the gods. Under Boniface, it was rededicated to the saints. Caravans carried the remains of the martyrs from the catacombs to the Pantheon on November 1. Living Christians honored the dead. The annual commemoration gave us the date for All Saints Day. To this day the Pantheon is one of the parish churches in the diocese of Rome. Its connection to the origins of All Saints Day is little known.

In fact, many people assume that the day has more to do with the turn of seasons. Halloween, All Saints and All Souls Day come at the end of the calendar year when — in the northern hemisphere of their origin — the days are growing shorter, nights lengthen and leaves have fallen. When we turn the monthly wall calendar from October to November, December’s inset rises into view. The year we have lived is drawing to its close.

Within this framework the church invites us to meditate on our ultimate purpose, what we hope to accomplish in life and why. We find historical testimony and present-day inspiration in the readings that the Lectionary offers on, before and after the Solemnity of All Saints.

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Planning for All Saints and All Souls by Lawrence E. Mick

Before the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, both All Saints and All Souls got considerable attention from average parishioners. On All Souls Day, three Masses were offered by priests, and many parishioners tried to attend all three. Some went from church to church offering prayers for the souls in purgatory, hoping to gain special indulgences. Others visited cemeteries to pray for deceased relatives and friends.

Today, the situation is much changed. Except among Hispanics, who observe Dia de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead (which is really three days), neither celebration seems to get the attention it did in the past.

The Feast of All Saints is a holy day of obligation; All Souls Day, while not an obligation day, is still a good day to encourage people to gather and pray for those who have gone before us. What Mass schedule would allow the largest number of people to celebrate both days? Perhaps you can encourage people to come for an evening Mass for All Souls. Consider inviting all those who have lost a loved one to death while encouraging the entire parish to come and support them in prayer for the deceased.

You might also think about ways to highlight images of saints in your worship space and in the entryways. Children could be invited to dress up as various saints and join the entrance procession. If you plan this in advance, some of them might even use the same costumes for trick-or-treat the night before!

Remember that there are multiple choices for readings (Lectionary #668) on All Souls Day, so let the lectors and musicians know which ones will be used.

The texts for All Saints and All Souls are found in the sanctoral part of the Missal at November 1 and 2. For All Souls Day, the Missal offers three sets of prayer texts. While priests can celebrate three Masses today, that does not mean that all three sets must be used. Of the opening collects, the second seems easiest to proclaim, as does the second prayer over the offerings (which also links Eucharist and baptism). For the preface, all five of the Prefaces for the Dead are options. Any of the first four seem clear enough; the fifth one is open to misinterpretation when it says, “By our own fault we perish.” That could be taken to mean that we die because we don’t take care of our health or commit suicide, etc. The 1998 version was clearer: “We had deserved to perish because of our sins, but through your loving-kindness when we die we are called back to life with Christ, whose victory is our redemption.”

Editor’s note: Parts of this planning column have been previously published in *Celebration*.

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