

The word “Halloween” comes from the words “All Hallows Eve.” As a verb, “hallow” is an old word meaning to make something holy. We use it in the Lord’s Prayer. “Hallowed be thy name” means “May your name be held holy.” As a noun, “hallows” is an old word for people who are holy – those who are saints. In the church, we set aside certain days to honor individual saints. And just to make sure no one gets left out each year, we reserve one day for all the saints, a day that used to be called All Hallows, the day for all the holy ones.

The evening before this day was called All Hallows Eve, or to use today’s word, “Halloween.” Supposedly, it is a night when those who are not holy roam the earth while they can because the next day we will honor the saints, who give us a model for good behavior and who intercede to God on our behalf. Halloween promotes tricks, costumes, and in some places mayhem, while evil spirits lure unwary people to misbehave. We can celebrate Halloween responsibly, dressing up for fun, sharing treats with visitors to our door; we can take the evil out of Halloween and prepare to celebrate the joy and charity that marked the lives of the saints.

Just as the day before All Saints Day took on a character of its own, the day after All Saints Day did as well. On November 2nd each year we celebrate All Souls Day, when we pray for others who have died, people who maybe were not as saintly as those we remember on the 1st of November. Every saint in heaven had to face sin the same way you and I do. The only exception is Mary, who we believe was conceived without sin to prepare herself to become the mother of Jesus. Other saints committed sin, but they overcame their sinful ways and lived exceptionally virtuous lives. Not all of us are like that. Most of us are not saints when we die. On All Souls Day we pray for all the faithful departed that God will forgive their sins and grant them company with the saints.

In the United States, All Saints Day, November 1st, is a holyday of obligation for Catholics. This year it falls on a Sunday, but when it does not, the Church expects us to gather here to honor the saints and to rededicate our lives to pursuing the good as they did. No one should lightly excuse themselves from mass on a holyday. All Souls Day, November 2nd, is not a holyday of obligation, but it is a day on which many Catholics around the world come to mass primarily to pray for those from among their family and friends who have died. Attending mass on All Souls Day is a noble tradition, the best possible way we can pray for those whom we loved, and whom we hope to meet again at the end of our days.

As the days grow shorter and winter comes closer, as the leaves fall from the trees and animals hibernate, our thoughts turn to the mystery of death. The Church calendar helps us with these celebrations this week, and with the readings and prayers at mass throughout the month of November. Halloween may look like fun for the kids, but it has a very serious edge for everyone. It begins a season that makes us think about the gift of life, the shortness of our years, and how well we are spending the days we have received.