THE CATHOLIC MEANING OF ALL SAINTS AND ALL SOULS

Catholic Customs Contrasted to Halloween

Many of the customs of Halloween have to do with fear of the dead. It was believed by the Celtic people that evil spirits roamed the earth on the last night of the Celtic year (October 31) and that they worked mischief among the living. Part of Celtic belief was that one could live safely through the night by dressing up as a ghost, witch, etc., or bribing the evil spirits with treats.

Communion of the Saints

In contrast, the Catholic feasts of All Saints Day and All Souls Day offer a much more pleasant opportunity for recognition of the Communion of the Saints. We Catholics believe in a communion or fellowship between those who have passed on into eternity and those still here on earth.

It seems that when most non-Catholic Christians talk about Communion of the Saints they mean fellowship among the living local church members and/or members of other churches or denominations. This is a fellowship for people who are living in this see and touch world. The Catholic Church emphasizes that with Christ at the head the body of the Church, the people who make up the Church, living and dead, cannot be separated. Therefore, Communion of the Saints has a much broader meaning in the Catholic Church.

The Catholic Church teaches that the Church exists in three different states. One is the pilgrim Church struggling to live faithful lives in this earthly existence. Another is the triumphant Church of saints already in Heaven. The other state is existence in purgatory or the suffering Church. In purgatory, the faithful are purified for entry into the triumphant Church. The Feast of All Saints Day on November 1 and the Feast of All Souls Day on November 2 reminds us of our relationship to those in the other states. These are days of celebration, remembrance and prayer.

Feast of All Saints

The Feast of All Saints is the celebration of our relationship with those in the triumphant church – those who have preceded us in entry to heaven. It began with local festivals in the early Church. In the sixth century, Pope Boniface IV proclaimed May 13, 610, Feast of All Holy Martyrs held in Rome to honor all martyrs not listed in local records. In 835, Pope Gregory IV changed the date and name to November 1 and Feast of All Saints. A theory for the change in date is that since the feast was large and popular, it was easier to have a fall date to take advantage of the fall harvest for the food supply.

The change in the name of the event from Feast of All Holy Martyrs to Feast of All Saints probably became about because there was a change in the customs regarding who was listed as a "Saint." In the early years of the Church, only martyrs were given that title, but after the Roman persecutions ended the title was given to others who had led meritorious lives and who were credited with miraculous intercession.

Feast of All Souls

While the Feast of All Saints is a day to remember the glories of Heaven and those there, the Feast of All Souls on November 2 reminds us of our obligations to live holy lives and that there will be purification of the souls of those destined for Heaven – in this life or in purgatory.

II Maccabees 12:42b-46 is a wonderful lesson about eternal life and caring for the souls of the dead, "The noble Judas exhorted the people the people to keep themselves free from sin, for they had seen with their own eyes what had happened as the result of the sin of those who had fallen. He also took up a collection . . . and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin offering. . . . Therefore he made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sin."

The Feast of All Souls owes its beginning to seventh century monks who decided to offer the mass on the day after Pentecost for their deceased community members. In the late tenth century, the mass for All Souls moved to November 2, the day after the Feast of all Saints and was promulgated by the Pope for the whole Church. Catholics still honor customs related to the relief of the souls suffering in purgatory through the offering of masses and the prayers for the dead. This often sounds strange to some Christians who do not believe in the exchange of "spiritual goods" and charity among the living and the dead.

Mass for All Saints' is as follows:

Wednesday, November 1 at St. John Parish, Edgar at 8:15 am and 6:30 pm

Wednesday, November 1 at Holy Family Parish, Poniatowski at 7:00 pm. Celebrant Father Charlie Hiebl