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Seasoning the Seasons™

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The Days of the Dead

The Days of the Dead: All Hallows Eve, All Saints Day, All Souls Day

In the Catholic Church, November is a month when we especially honor and remember the faithful departed, those who have died. November 1 is the Solemnity of All Saints, or All Saints Day. A solemnity is the highest ranking feast day in our Church. All Saints Day is also a Holy Day of Obligation in the United States. This means that all Catholics are to celebrate Mass on All Saints Day. But did you know that All Saints Day really begins on Halloween?



The word "saint" comes from the Latin word "sanctus" which means "holy." Another word for "holy" is "hallow." Remember that when we pray the Lord's Prayer (the Our Father), we pray "hallowed be your name." Well, a long time ago, All Saints Day was called All Hallows Day, or Halloween. Now, as we know, All Saints Day is a solemnity. A solemnity begins at sundown on the eve of the feast day. The eve of All Saints Day was called All Hallows Eve, or Halloween! So Halloween is technically a celebration that begins the month of November!

But what is it we are celebrating on All Saints Day? We are celebrating all those who have died and who are now experiencing the fullness of God's glory in heaven. The Catholic Church has formally stated that some people who have died are saints in heaven. On our Church Calendar, we celebrate the feasts of many saints. For example, October 4 is the Feast of Saint Francis of Assisi, and November 13 is the Feast of Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini. But there are many others who have died and who are saints in heaven whose names we may not know. So on November 1 we celebrate all these saints who lead holy lives – or All Saints Day!

The very next day, November 2nd, we celebrate the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed, or All Souls Day. On this day we remember all those who have died. It is very good to pray every day for those who have died. This prayer can be said:

*Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord,
and let perpetual light shine upon them.
May the souls of all the faithful departed,
through the mercy of God,
rest in peace. Amen.*

Now think about the communion of saints. When we pray the Apostles' Creed, we profess our belief in this communion of saints. Followers of Jesus, both living and dead, belong to the communion of saints. When a Catholic Christian is baptized, we receive a lighted candle. We receive the light of Christ. We believe that Jesus is the light of the world. And when people die and go to heaven, they live in that light forever. That is why when we pray for the dead we pray that "perpetual light" (light that never ends) may shine upon them.



Since we are part of the Communion of Saints, we pray not only for those still living, but also for those who have died. Did you know that Trick or Treating used to be connected with praying for the dead? Centuries ago, beggars would go "souling." The beggar would go from house to house, and the people who lived in the house would give the beggar a "soul cake" (a little like a scone or a muffin) if the beggar would promise to say a special prayer for those of their household or family who had died. Sometimes the beggars would sing a chant such as this:

*A soul cake, a soul cake,
Pray, good missus, a soul cake,
An apple, a pear, a plum, a cherry,
Any good thing to make us all merry,
One for Peter, two for Paul,
Three for Him who made us all.
Up with the kettle and down with the pan,
Give us good alms and we'll be gone.*



Since during the month of November we remember our dead in a special way, All Hallows Eve, All Saints Day and All Souls Day (October 31-November 2) are sometimes called the Days of the Dead. Different cultures celebrate these days in different ways. Light (candles, bonfires, Jack-O-Lanterns) is usually part of this celebration. Some people set up altars or shrines in their homes to honor their family and friends who have died. Some people have big celebrations on these days at the cemetery where their relatives are buried. Why not find out more about these customs and traditions, and then adapt these in your own home and family?

