

THE LAST GREAT FEAST

Father Anthony Lentz, OFM

The Liturgical Year is soon ending, but like the mythical phoenix, it will arise from the ashes anew with the season of Advent. But before the Church reaches this climatic end with the Gospel account of the end of the world and the General Judgment, it celebrates the most sacred part of the Fall season – Hallowtide.

Hallowtide refers to the Triduum of All-Hallows Eve, All-Saints Day, and All-Souls Day. Even though in the 1950s Pope Pius XII suppressed the vigil of All Saints, we may still observe this day as one of spiritual preparation and, in essence, preserve Hallowtide. This celebration and commemoration contains the dogma of the Communion of Saints. It is an Article of our Faith expressly stated in the Apostles' Creed: "*I believe....in the Communion of Saints.*"

The Communion of Saints is defined as *the spiritual solidarity which binds together the faithful on earth, the souls in purgatory, and the saints in heaven in the organic unity of the same mystical body under Christ its head, and in a constant interchange of supernatural offices. The participants in that solidarity are called saints by reason of their destination and of their partaking of the fruits of the Redemption.* (*The Catholic Encyclopedia 1917*) As we observe, this dogma expresses the spiritual bond that connects all members of the Catholic Church, both living and dead. The members are divided into three groups known as: the *Church Militant* – those of us still on earth working out our salvation; the *Church Suffering* – those poor souls in Purgatory who are being cleansed of any remaining sin or stain of sin; and the *Church Triumphant* – those who have entered Heaven and eternal glory with God. Our communion with each other is not merely our sharing the same Faith but also the love we express for one another.

All-Saints Day is clearly dedicated to honoring the *Church Triumphant*, and All-Souls Day is clearly dedicated to praying for the *Church Suffering*. Although it is not stated in the Liturgy, we may, without fear of presumption, dedicate All-Hallows Eve to remembering the *Church Militant*.

Let us now delve into the history of each day and its spiritual significance.

All-Saints Day

The Feast of All-Saints originates with the Church of Antioch around the middle of the fourth century. It became the custom in Antioch that on the Sunday following Pentecost, a commemoration would be kept honoring the most holy martyrs. This practice spread throughout the Eastern Church and was finally introduced in Rome by Pope Boniface IV in the year 615. The date of this feast was May 13th. At some point, no later than 741, the commemoration had extended to include all the saints in Heaven. In the year 844, Pope Gregory IV transferred the date to November 1st. The reason for the change was not to be a substitute for the Germanic pagan feast of the demon cult of that time of the year. It was done for the practical consideration that more food would be available due to the harvest to feed the pilgrims who came to Rome for the feast.

Of course, nothing stops us from appreciating that on this day, we honor the friends of God to combat those who would invoke the demons, the enemies of God and humanity.

In his book *The Holyday Book*, page 123, Father Francis Weiser explains that the purpose of this feast is two-fold. He says: “*As the prayer of the Mass states: ‘the merits of all the saints are venerated in common by one celebration,’ because a very large number of the martyrs and other saints could not be accorded in honor of a special festival since the days of the year would not suffice for all these individual celebrations. The second purpose was given by Pope Urban IV: ‘Any negligence, omission, and irreverence committed in the celebration of the saints’ feasts throughout the year is to be atoned for by the faithful, and thus due honor may still be offered to these saints.’*”

Those unknown saints are truly wonders. They help to remind us that we are all called to sanctity and about what is necessary to achieve it. We are not all called to practice severe mortifications or to be an inspiration for the whole world but to imitate Christ in His meekness and humility.

All-Souls Day

Every Catholic should know the need and the duty to pray for the dearly departed souls. This was a custom known in the Church from the very beginning. The Scriptural reference is found in the Second Book of Maccabees 12, 46, and the practice of private and public prayers (Requiem Mass) was well known. This devotion was left to the private practice of the faithful and was not added to the Roman Calendar until after the Benedictine Monks of Cluny began the commemoration.

“*The memorial feast of all the departed ones,*” notes Fr. Weiser in the same book quoted above, “*in a common celebration was inaugurated by Abbot Saint Odilo of Cluny (1048). He issued a decree that all monasteries of the congregation of Cluny were annually to keep November 2 as a ‘day of all the departed ones.’ (Page 124)*”

Eventually, this practice was adopted by other Benedictines, the Carthusians, and other communities in various countries. It was not until the fourteenth century that Rome placed the day of commemoration of all the faithful departed into the official books of the Western Church. November 2nd was chosen “*in order that the memory of the ‘holy souls’ both of the saints in Heaven and of the souls in purgatory should be celebrated on two successive days, and in this way to express the Christian belief in the “Communion of Saints.” (Ibid., page 124)* It was in the year 1915 that Pope Benedict XV allowed the custom of priests to celebrate three Masses on All Souls’ Day. This was done to increase the help given to the poor souls.

The Poor Souls cannot pray for themselves, nor can they gain merit to decrease their time of expiation. They require our prayers to help them. We should develop a deep devotion to the Poor Souls and pray for them daily. They will return the favor and pray for us, especially when they have entered Heaven's glory.

All-Hallows Eve

On October 31st, we observe All-Hallows Eve, or the Old-English word, Halloween. This day is a Christian feast we can dedicate to the Church Militant. I should take a moment and make clear that

Halloween has no connection with the Celtic festival of Samhain (a Gaelic word pronounced “SAH-win”), *a pagan religious celebration to welcome the harvest at the end of summer when people would light bonfires and wear costumes to ward off ghosts.* (The definition is taken from the Library of Congress.) The name was stolen by those who still wish to celebrate this pagan festival. It is odd that a country that professes itself to be a “Christian nation” would even promote this as a holiday, even if it is not national. We Catholics must remember what this day is. It is the solemn preparation for the great feast of All-Saints. We Catholics should not waste our time with any of these worldly celebrations, even those that appear innocent. Instead, on this day, we should engage ourselves more earnestly with spiritual exercises – prayers and spiritual reading. Remember that our sole aspiration in life must be to become saints. On All-Hallows Eve, we should take stock of ourselves and our conduct. We should take extra care to examine our conscience and reaffirm our pious intentions to advance in virtue. It would be an excellent day to renew our Baptismal vows and to read something from the lives of the saints. Families could make this a custom in their homes. The father could lead the family in the Baptismal Renewal by following what is contained in the Missal on Holy Saturday. Then afterward, they can recite the rosary dedicated to all the saints. The family should place themselves under the protection of their Guardian Angels, patron saints, and, especially, the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Queen of All Saints. Finally, the evening could end with the hymn, *Come Holy Ghost*, because we can become saints by the inner dwelling of the Holy Ghost.

One final thought for our spiritual consideration concerning Hallowtide. Thanks to Pope Pius XI, we now celebrate the Feast of Christ the King on the last Sunday in October. This feast properly proceeds Hallowtide, just as the Eternal Word proceeds us creatures. He connects the Communion of Saints because He is the Head of the Mystical Body. He is the central figure of our creation and our redemption. He unites the Communion of Saints of the Old Testament with those of the New Testament. Through His infinite merits, we can become saints and share eternal glory with the Most Blessed Trinity.

“Jesus Christ yesterday, today, and the same forever.”