

Halloween

A Season of Saints

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We're so familiar with pumpkins, black cats, witches' hats, and skeletons at this time of year that we often don't give much thought to what lies behind this orange-and-black extravaganza. Halloween has become a huge secular and consumer holiday, at times rivaling Christmas in hype and popularity. From candy to decorations to costumes to elaborate parties, Halloween is now *the* big autumn celebration.

A quick look at costume choices on kids trick-or-treating through any neighborhood gives us some idea of what Halloween has come to mean. Superheroes are a perennial favorite, as are various animals, princesses, pirates, and clowns, as well as skeletons, witches, and mummies. Harry Potter and his mates from Hogwarts now roam the streets, and zombies are everywhere.

Each year, we hear Halloween is an ancient pagan festival that was taken over by the Church. Or we hear it's a celebration of evil and witchcraft and that Christians shouldn't take part in it. But from its earliest beginnings, this holiday was linked to the feast of All Saints. The word *Halloween* is a shortened form of "All Hallows Eve," the day before All Saints' Day. *Hallow* is the same word for "holy" that we find in the Lord's Prayer, and *een* is a contraction of "evening."

In fact, the connection between Halloween, the saints, and medieval Catholic customs may have been the reason the holiday has been criticized since the time of the Reformation. So let's take a look at why this day is something to celebrate.

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Costumes and Customs

The tradition of Halloween costumes has its roots in the Middle Ages as a reaction to the outbreaks of bubonic plague, now known as the Black Death. As Europe lost nearly half of its population, the survivors were deeply concerned about questions of the afterlife.

Historian Father Augustine Thompson, O.P., writes in a BeliefNet article about Halloween, “More Masses were said on All Souls’ Day, and artistic representations were devised to remind everyone of their own mortality. We know these representations as the *danse macabre*, or ‘dance of death,’ which was commonly painted on the walls of cemeteries and shows the devil leading popes, kings, ladies, knights, monks, peasants, lepers, etc. into the tomb. Sometimes the dance was presented on All Souls’ Day itself as a living tableau with people dressed up in the garb of various states of life.”

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