

Along the track

Halloween

Halloween can be fun for young and old. Some years ago, there was a lot of grumbling about importing this American custom but the smiles and laughter of the children visiting the homes for Trick or Treat removed many a frown and silenced many a grumble (mine included). A couple of years ago, even pouring rain did not dampen the visitors' enthusiasm. Last year, a group even came in a bus!

I wonder how many know the origins of this day? *Halloween* can be traced back to medieval Christianity. The word *hallow* is derived from the Middle and Old English words for holy. As a noun, it was also used for *saint* so All Saints' Day was also called All Hallows' Day. The evening before that feast day was All Hallows' Eve and that name eventually got shortened to Halloween. During the 4th century, in Rome celebrations honouring the Christian martyrs and saints were held on this day. Various popes over the centuries changed the date until Pope Gregory IV added All Saints' Day to the universal Christian calendar, officially extending the celebration from Rome to churches everywhere. November 2nd became All Souls' Day on which we remember all those who have died and gone to their place of rest. For Pope Francis, the two celebrations, All Saints' and All Souls', "remind us of the bond that exists between the earthly and heavenly Church, between us and our loved ones who passed on to the next life."

So where did the monsters and ghosts come from? The ancient Celts, who were polytheists, celebrated the festival of Samhain on November 1st as that day marked a pivotal time of year when seasons changed. The long summer days had gone and the long, cold wintry nights were upon them once again. They believed the boundary between this world and the next became especially thin at this time, enabling them to connect with the dead. This is also where the history of Halloween gains its "haunted" connotations. They believed that during the night of November 1st, demons, witches, and evil spirits roamed the earth freely to greet the arrival of "their season"— the long nights and early dark of the winter months. The demons had their fun with mortals that night, frightening, harming, and even playing all kinds of tricks on them. The only way, it seemed, for scared humans to escape the persecution of the demons was to offer them things they liked, especially fancy foods and sweets. Or, in order to escape the antics of these demons, a human could disguise himself as one of them and join in their roaming.

Today it can be a controversial celebration – some see it as pagan, even promoting false beliefs, promoting a negative culture about death and the dead, which is at odds with the Christian view. Others bemoan its heavy commercialisation.

It can be all of that but it can also be a time for:

- Reflection and prayer as we recall the lives of those we call saints, we give thanks for their courage, their perseverance, their generosity, their example. In Pope Francis' words: Remembering the Saints leads us to raise our eyes to Heaven: not to forget the realities of the earth, but to face them with greater courage and hope.
- Rejoicing in the goodness of creation, in the joy of being alive, in the gift of family, companions and friends.
- Giving thanks for those who have gone before. We believe that, in some way, we are still connected, still part of their lives and they ours. Pope Benedict wrote: "We believe that the ties of friendship and affection which knit us as one throughout our lives do not unravel with death." It can be a reminder that we owe so much to those who came before us and Halloween invites us to pray for them, to give thanks for the gift they have been.

A prayer for Halloween Visits:

God of ancient times and God of our times, bless all the people we will be visiting tonight.
May we be good news to them and may our visit bring comfort, happiness and laughter.
As we celebrate this special Feast of All Hallows God, the giver of hope, we trust in you, and we give thanks for the faith, the hope and the courage of those we call saints.
Fill us too with joy and peace, so that we may have a living hope through the power of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Regards
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