

A Catholic's Guide to Halloween



What is Halloween?

The word “Halloween” comes from All Hallow’s Eve. All Hallows Eve is the vigil of All Saints Day—also known as All Hallows Day. The word “hallow” means “holy.” (In the Our Father we pray, “Hallowed be thy name.”) All Saints Day is a Holy Day of Obligation, and thus a major feast on the Catholic Church’s liturgical calendar.

Why celebrate on October 31st?

Pope Gregory III (731-741) transferred the Feast of All Saints from its former day of May 13th to November 1st to coincide with the foundation of a new chapel in St. Peter’s Basilica, which he dedicated to all the saints in heaven.

Halloween is on October 31st because All Saints Day is November 1st. All Souls Day is on November 2nd. These three days taken together are the “Days of the Dead,” a triduum of feasts called Allhallowtide, Hallowtide, or Hallowmass (*Hallow* meaning saint or holy and *mas* meaning Mass).

Is it true that the Catholic celebration of Halloween has some pagan roots?

Halloween is a Catholic holiday. It does not have origins in paganism, Samhain, Druidic festivals, the occult, or Satanism. This common misconception is relatively new anti-Catholic propaganda, with roots going back to the Protestant Reformation. It has no basis in historical fact.

Many people see the coincidence of dates between Samhain and All Saints Day and presume a connection. However, it turns out the date is just that: a coincidence.

Where did the various Halloween traditions come from?

English, Irish, and French immigrants brought their variety of local Catholic customs to America. Dressing up for Halloween comes from the French; Jack-o-Lanterns come from the Irish, who originally carved turnips; and the English begged from door to door for “Soul Cakes,” promising to pray for the departed loved ones of those who gave them these treats - this being the origin of trick-or-treating.

These traditions converged in the big American “melting pot” and eventually became popular nationwide activities for Halloween.

What can we do if Halloween has been hijacked?

It is true that Halloween has been badly corrupted and hyper-commercialized, just like Christmas and Easter. However, just as that should never stop Catholics from fully celebrating the great feasts of the Church the Catholic way, neither should it stop Catholics from enjoying Halloween as a vigil celebration of the great feast of All Saints.