



HISTORY AND CUSTOMS OF HALLOWEEN

Kids love holidays. Many parents do too. They remind us that there is more to life than work and obligations, that life should be cherished and enjoyed. Catholics believe that God is present in all things and in all times. That means that every day on the calendar presents another opportunity to encounter and celebrate the presence of God in our lives.

Halloween is rich in history and meaning, much of it religious, making it a great opportunity to combine fun and learning about values of our children.

Halloween gets its name from “All Hallows’ Eve” as October 31st was called in England centuries ago. It was a night when people prayed for the dead to prepare for All Saints Day, a celebration of Roman Catholic Saints, on November 1st. In the 5th century BC, in Celtic Ireland, summer officially ended on October 31st. The holiday was called Samhain (sow-en), the Celtic New Year.

In ancient festivals after the harvest and the cold winter was arriving, many thought that the disembodied spirits of all those who had died throughout the preceding year would come back in search of living bodies to possess for the next year. It was believed to be their only hope for the afterlife. The Celts believed all laws of space and time were suspended during this time, allowing the spirit world to intermingle with the living. Naturally, the still-living did not want to be possessed. So, on the night of October 31st, the villagers would extinguish the fires in their homes, to make them cold and undesirable. They would then dress up in all manner of ghoulish costumes and noisily parade around the neighborhood, being as destructive as possible in order to frighten away spirits looking for bodies to possess.

On All Hallow’s Eve the Europeans carved turnips and placed candles in them to represent the souls of people waiting to get into Heaven. The term jack-o-lantern comes from an Irish folk tale about a night watchman named Jack who was too selfish to get into Heaven, and too much of a trickster for the devil. So, according to the tale, Jack tricked Satan into climbing a tree. Jack made a deal with the devil that, if he would never tempt him again, he would promise to let him down the tree. After Jack died, he was denied entrance to Heaven and denied access to Hell. Instead, the devil gave him a single ember to light his way through the frigid darkness while wandering the Earth. The ember was placed inside a hollowed out turnip to keep it glowing longer – Jack’s lantern. Immigrants who came to America used pumpkins instead of turnips because they were easier to carve and more plentiful.

Trick or treating started in Europe with two customs called “mumming” and “souling” which merged into the lighthearted practice we know today. “Mummers” were mischievous revelers who dressed in outlandish costumes and demanded payment to restrain themselves. During the same time of year, families baked sweet cakes, or “soul cakes,” and gave them to family and neighbors in exchange for prayers for relatives who had died. Later, in Ireland, farmers went door-to-door asking for items for a village feast. Those who gave were promised prosperity. Those who did not got warnings of bad luck. Modern day trick-or-treating caught on in this country after World War II.

Ways to celebrate as a family:

1. Attend Mass together at Holy Family:

All Saints Day:

All Souls Day:

2. Have your children research their favorite saint or the saint they are named after and tell the family at dinner.

3. Tell your children that Halloween can be a festive day to kick off the celebration of All Saints Day. Ask the Saints to pray for us on our journey.

4. At breakfast, recite a short litany of family members who have died and whom you remember in your prayers.

5. Have fun! Make a special meal for dinner. (Example: put out bowls of olives, cucumbers, raisins, cheese sticks and cold cuts...they can make scary faces or funny faces and then eat their creations).

6. Make trick or treat bags together for the people that come to your house on Halloween. Put a Holy Card in the bag of a favorite Saint.

7. Make caramel or candied apples! Carve pumpkins! Embrace celebrating with those you love that you love them. Your time with your children is so short and so precious. Give them a childhood with tradition, love and faith.

