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Life is Worth Giving

THE TRUE SPIRITUALITY OF HALLOWEEN AND THE CELTS

BY Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

Few youngsters who prowl the dusky gloom on Halloween to ring doorbells for "trick-or-treat" requests are aware that they are celebrating a Celtic tradition that goes back some 20 centuries. Much of the tradition, however, has become obscured by the passage of time. But when the Church turned the celebration into All Hallows Eve (Oct. 31st) and the next day into All Saints Feast, the custom^s and celebration were given a new meaning and spirituality.

All Saints Feast

It is still debated how All Saints Day began as a replacement the Celtic fe^stival which marked the beginning of their New Year and the advent of winter. About the year 610 A.D., the Roman Emperor Phocas gave a gift of the Roman Pantheon (where the pagan Roman gods and goddesses were worshipped) to Pope Boniface IV who then ~~re-dedicated~~ re-dedicated the place under the title "Santa Maria ad Martyres" (St. Mary of the Martyrs). Other scholars point to Pope Gregory III (731-741) as the originator of the feast when he dedicated an oratory to "All Saints" in St. Pater's Basilica in Rome.

But noted scholar J. Hennig places the origin for the Nov. 1st date in Ireland where there is an allusion to the feast of "all the Saints" in the oldest Irish Martyrology.

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It was only natural for the Celtic Irish to assign Nov. 1st as a date for all saints since this was also Celtic ^NNew Year's Day. _≡

Irish Influence

Even today in Ireland, one of the few countries where ancient Celtic customs still survive, All Hallows Eve (Halloween) before All Saints Day is known as the Eve of Samhain (pronounced "sowen"). Samhain is the beginning of the Celtic New Year in their agricultural society, and marked the end of the grazing season. According to their ancient custom, all fires had to be extinguished and new ones lighted to mark a new year which would bring abundance and light, and another victory for the sun over the powers of darkness.

But Samhain Eve was also a night of danger and dread when otherworld spirits roamed freely and sometimes disastrously. They could return to this world, perhaps to even an old score of injustice, or simply to visit their dear ones. It was also a time when the future could be told through the custom of bobbing for apples. Costumes were worn by those who had done an injustice to the deceased, and didn't want _{to} to be visited by them.

And behind the masks and mischief of present-day Halloween, Jack-O-Lantern and "trick or treat" offerings, still lurks the ancient fear of malevolent spirits and the need to placate them or simply to make them feel welcome.

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Although there were no pumpkins in Ireland, there were plenty of oversized rutabagas and turnips, or even potatoes if necessary, that could be hallowed out, carved with a face, and illuminated by a candle to ^guide the spirits home to visit with family and friends.

Black cats are also associated with the celebration because the ancient Celts believed that cats were once people who were changed into animals as a punished ^{MENT} for their having done evil. The Celts also believed that spirits lived in trees, and would, therefore, "knock on wood," to assure that their good luck would continue. They also believed that spirits lived in an image, and bad luck would follow breaking a mirror.

Arrival in America

The Irish, and other Celts, brought their celebration of Halloween to America in the mid-19th Century following the Great Famine in Ireland. The ^S energetic and inventive people introduced iron to Northern Europe and are credited with creating the first major industrial revolution and common market, along with the first international court of arbitration north of the Alps. They also brought with them to America a deep and personal belief in God and in the goodness of all creation. The ^Ir belief in an after-life goes back before their conversion to Christianity. And their missionary spirit brought faith in Christ to many parts of the world.

And, also, they brought Halloween to America to honor All Saints, and for the enjoyment of children.