

This weekend, we celebrate three holidays, each with its own way of seeing beyond the horizon of this life. Let's explore the history and meaning of Halloween, All Saints Day, and All Souls Day and how they help us navigate the reality of our mortality.

Halloween is the oldest of these holidays and takes us back to a Celtic tradition found in Europe around 800 BC to 50 BC. The Celtic religion was nature-based, recognizing the four seasons of the year, and tied to an afterlife. Each year the Samhain (saw win) festival occurred at the transition from Summer to Winter, kind of like the transition we are experiencing with Daylight Savings time this weekend. It was believed that spirits were free to roam between heaven and earth the night of this transition. In the evening of the Samhain (saw win) festival, Celts dressed up in costumes to conceal their identity and protect themselves from evil spirits who might come looking to harm them.

This religion, practiced in Europe and tied to the fear of spirits, is in contrast with Judaism practiced in the middle east based on a trust in an all-powerful God. Our first reading comes from the Book of Wisdom which was written between the year 200 BC and 50 BC, at the tail-end of the Celtic era in Europe. It says, "The souls of the just are in the hand of God, and no torment shall touch them. Those who trust in him shall understand truth, and the faithful shall abide with him in love."

Here God calls His people to Himself and offers them protection from evil spirits not through evasion, but through power and truth. Our second reading is from a letter that Saint Paul wrote to the Romans, the empire that eventually conquered the Celts. It says, "Those who are led by the Spirit of God, are sons of God. You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption through which we cry, Abba, Father." Again God relieves us from the fear behind the tradition of Halloween and adopts us as His children to become saints, to share his divinity. This adoption is further solidified by Jesus, sent by the father, to become our brother, and die for our sins. His resurrection navigates us across the barrier between earth and heaven and offers us eternal salvation, or sainthood.

In our gospel reading, Jesus demonstrates his power of salvation by bringing a widow's son back from the dead. Jesus not only saves the son, but saves the widow from becoming destitute by restoring her male heir. The people are amazed, and the reading says, "Fear seized them all and they glorified God, exclaiming, 'A great profit has arisen among us', and 'God has visited his people.'" This is a people recognizing the presence of God and embracing a better way of life, focused on the person of Jesus Christ to be their savior. This is a reminder for all of us that Jesus holds our lives in His capable hands both here and in the next life.

This takes us to our second holiday, dedicated to respecting and revering the saints, a tradition that began in the 2nd century when early Christians remembered the holy people who came before them. In the 9th Century, All Hallows Day was officially celebrated on the day after the

Samhain (saw win) Celtic holiday. Since the Celtic holiday was now on the eve of All Hallows, it was named, "All Hallows Eve" and later shortened to just, "Halloween."

Over time, All Hallows Day became All Saints Day, a day when we remember both the Saints recognized by the Church and the unnamed saints who have also been admitted into heaven. These women and men accepted Jesus' call to, "Follow me." We look up to them as our heroes and role models. We honor their commitment as Christians, and we remember that many of them were martyred for their belief in Christ.

If Halloween was about hiding from EVIL spirits, All Saints Day is about remembering the HOLY ONES, the saints who lived a life of heroic virtue. If Jesus is, "The Way" to heaven, our saints paved the way for us to follow. And saints continue to be recognized by our Church. There is a website called "Modern Day Saint" where you can find photos and biographies of Catholic men, women, and children in the Vatican canonization process. For example, the site shows a photo of Guido Schäffer, a Brazilian physician and seminarian, surfing a wave in Rio De Janeiro. The site says, "Guido combined his passion for surfing with a commitment to his faith, volunteering his medical services to the Missionaries of Charity and organizing care for the homeless in Rio de Janeiro." Tragically, at the age of 34, Guido drowned in a surfing accident. His beatification process began in 2015, and in 2023, Pope Francis recognized his heroic virtues, declaring him "Venerable." Guido, known as the "Surfer Angel," continues to inspire many, particularly within the surfing community, for his faith and dedication to the poor.

This takes us to the final holiday, All Souls Day. Also dating back to the 2nd century, when Christians began formally praying and celebrating the Eucharist for our beloved dead. Remembering the dead on the 2nd of November was started by a Benedictine abbot in the year 998 and practiced throughout his monasteries. In 1915, Pope Benedict XV granted permission for priests to celebrate several Masses on All Souls day in response to the immense loss of life during World War I. These liturgies gave needed hope to loved ones left behind by highlighting the Paschal Mystery, Jesus' victory over sin and death, the same power we see in today's gospel.

On this day, we pray for ALL souls, and we ask for God's mercy especially for the souls in purgatory. Today, give some thought to your loved ones who have passed, offer this mass to them, remember them in your prayers, and ask the saints to also pray for their well-being in the next life. Our faith is a beautiful gift from God, it gives us grace and courage to overcome our fears, and leads us on a path to join the saints in our heavenly resting place. We conclude with the "O my Jesus" prayer, given by our Blessed Mother to the children at Fatima in 1917. This prayer, said with every rosary decade, remembers all souls. Feel free to join me. Oh, my Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell, and lead all souls to heaven, especially those in most need of thy mercy. Amen.