

The Catholic roots of Halloween, the Vigil of All Saints' Day

By Christopher Wells

In the modern world, and especially in English speaking countries, Halloween has become one of the most important holidays of the year, with millions of children and adults dressing up as their favorite heroes, superstars, ghouls and goblins. While some people have connected Halloween to earlier pagan celebrations of the new year, Halloween actually has significant Catholic roots. The name itself comes from All Hallows' Eve – that is, the Vigil of All Saints' Day, when Catholics remember those who have gone before us to enter our heavenly home. Immediately afterwards, on November 2, the Church commemorates all the faithful departed still detained in Purgatory and prays in suffrage for them. The memory of those who have gone before us naturally leads to thoughts of mortality, and the liturgical focus on the end times during this period of the Church year adds to the atmosphere of gloom.

In a “Memorandum on the Celebration of Halloween” issued for his Diocese, Bishop David Konderla of Tulsa, Oklahoma, stressed the importance of “maintaining the Catholic meaning and purpose of all holy days, especially those which have been adopted and adapted by the culture around us”. He explains the how customs such as dressing up for Halloween and appealing to frightful imagery can be done in a Catholic spirit, while warning that “we want to intentionally avoid those things that are contrary to our Catholic faith but have become popularized through the secular adaptation of Halloween”.

Vatican News spoke with Dr. Marcel Brown, of the Alcuin Institute for Catholic Culture in Tulsa, about the Catholic roots of Halloween. “The feast of Halloween is one of those feasts on the Catholic calendar that is celebrated on the eve of a great solemnity”, he said.

Dr. Brown explained that the word Halloween refers to the Feast of All Saints. The word itself is taken an older English term, “hallows,” meaning “holy”; and “e'en”, a truncation of the word evening, in reference to the Vigil of the feast. “So really, Halloween is the feast of the celebration of the feast of All Hallows’”, he said. “So it’s a day when Catholics celebrate the triumph of the Church in heaven, and the lives of the saints on earth”.

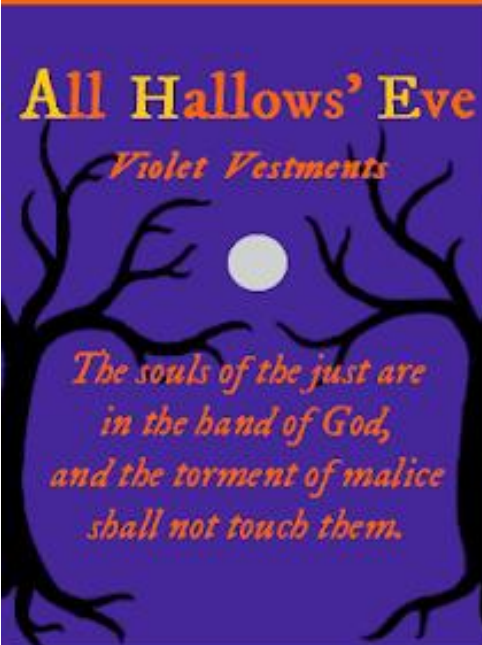
The modern focus on the eerie or mysterious also has a Catholic aspect. “When we think of Halloween, I think we often think of ghosts and goblins, and ghoulish faces”, Dr. Brown said. “But even these, in the Catholic tradition, are supposed to be reminders of death and of the last things”. He continued, “So just as we commemorate the feast of All Saints on November 1st, beginning with All Hallows' Eve on Halloween, we also think about and turn our minds really, to the last things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell. And really our focus should be, since we all must die and are destined to judgment, how then we to live?”

In his Memorandum, Bishop Konderla invites to the faithful to “urge one another this Halloween to express in every detail of our observance the beauty and depth of the Feast of All Saints”. “Let us make this year’s celebration”, he says, “an act of true devotion to God, whose saints give us hope that we too may one day enter into the Kingdom prepared for God’s holy ones from the beginning of time”.

THE TRIDUUM OF HALLOWTIDE

All Hallows' Eve

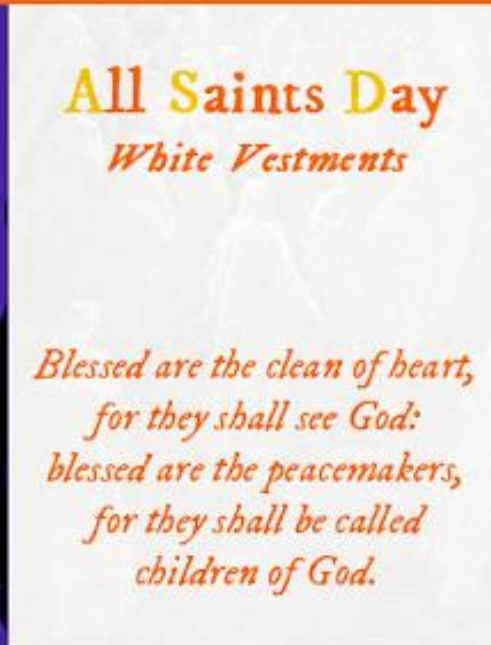
Violet Vestments



*The souls of the just are
in the hand of God,
and the torment of malice
shall not touch them.*

All Saints Day


White Vestments



*Blessed are the clean of heart,
for they shall see God:
blessed are the peacemakers,
for they shall be called
children of God.*

All Souls Day

Black Vestments



*May eternal light shine upon
them forever, O Lord,
with Thy saints forever,
for Thou art kind.*