

# The surprisingly Catholic origins of Halloween



[Philip Kosloski](#) | Oct 25, 2016



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**The way we celebrate it today is far removed from any Christian influence, but the holiday has deeply Catholic roots.**

When most people think of Halloween, the first images that come to mind are children dressed up in scary costumes going door-to-door to collect candy from as many houses as possible. At the end of the night delighted kids empty their “loot” on the floor and begin the feasting that often ends up with a stomachache and a trip to the dentist not long after.

What it evolved into in the United States, however, is now how Halloween began.

The word “Halloween” is a Scottish shortening of the phrase “Allhallow-even,” literally meaning “All Holy Evening” and dates to the 18th century. The English have a similar phrase, “All Hallows’ Eve,” with the same meaning. Both words denote the night before All Saints Day,

November 1, and refer to the celebration of the holy men and women who are recognized in the Catholic Church as residing in Heaven.

Pope Gregory III established the feast during the 8th century after consecrating a chapel named in honor of “All Saints” in Saint Peter’s Basilica. The feast was then extended to the universal Church by Pope Gregory IV and made into a holy day of obligation for all Catholics.

Along with its celebration, All Saints Day was given a special vigil Mass the night before (October 31), which led to that date being regarded by Catholics as a “holy evening.”



Invisible monks out to collect candy...

In addition to All Saints Day, the Church established November 2 as All Souls Day, dedicated to praying for the souls in purgatory. On this day Catholics pray for their deceased relatives and friends, visiting cemeteries to remember those who are no longer on this earth. It is with this celebration that many local traditions were created and became mingled with the festivities of All Hallows’ Eve when immigrants started establishing themselves in the United States.

In various cultures in Europe there developed a tradition of “souling” and baking “soul cakes” in honor of the faithful departed. These cakes were baked on All Hallows’ Eve and children would

go out on All Saints Day and All Souls Day, begging door-to-door for these cakes in exchange for praying for deceased relatives and friends.

It is believed that in some places there was a tradition of wearing disguises while souling that represented the various souls in purgatory who were seeking these prayers. And of course, the processional candles were carried sheltered from the wind in hollowed-out gourds or turnips, call Jack O'Lanterns.



Traditional Irish

Halloween Jack O'Lantern/Wikipedia

In France, the faithful created a *danse macabre* or “dance of the dead” that consisted of a representation of Death (typically a skeleton) leading a chain of individuals to the afterlife. The

scene would often be brought to life on All Souls Day, where actors would put on costumes representing the different people in the chain.

[According to some accounts](#), Irish peasants developed an “All Damned Day” on October 31 to complement the All Saints and All Souls Day. The theory is that “if the souls in hell are left out when we celebrate those in heaven and purgatory, they might be unhappy enough to cause trouble.” The Irish then banged pots and pans on October 31 to make sure those in Hell knew they were not forgotten.

All of these different traditions revolving around All Saints and All Souls were mixed together in the United States when immigrants started to intermarry and combine customs. The celebration of Halloween spread throughout the country during the early 20th century and quickly become a secular community activity that was devoid of its Christian origins.

Businesses then recognized the profitability of the holiday and started to promote it in their advertisements, taking over the day in a similar way to the celebration of Christmas.

In the end, while the current activities of Halloween appear to have no Christian significance, they have deep Catholic roots and are meant to remind people of their own mortality and the need to pray for souls in purgatory.

SOURCE: <https://aleteia.org/2016/10/25/the-surprisingly-catholic-origins-of-halloween/>

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## **It's Time for Catholics to Embrace Halloween**

by [Fr. Steve Grunow](#) October 30, 2017





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*As we near All Hallows Eve, aka Halloween, we fired some questions at the walking encyclopedia that is Father Steve Grunow, and he responded with everything you ever wanted to know about Halloween and its deeply Catholic roots.*

***QUESTION: I always figured that Halloween had pagan roots, but you are telling me they are Catholic. Huh? How so?***

**Fr. Steve:** The origin and traditional customs associated with Halloween require no other explanation than that they are examples of the kinds of festivity that served as a means of celebrating the various holy days of the Catholic Liturgical Year. This includes everything from masquerades, feasting, and the associations of a given day of the year with supernatural or spiritual truths.

I would draw a distinction between the violent, macabre imagery that characterizes the modern appropriation of Halloween as a kind of secular celebration and the more traditional customs that are characteristic of a Catholic cultural ethos. The descent of Halloween into the madness of an annual fright fest is a relatively recent development, but the true substance of Halloween belongs to the Church. Halloween (or “All Hallows Eve”) is the festive precursor to the celebration of the Church’s public commemoration of All Saints Day.

There has been an appropriation of the festivities of Halloween by modern pagans, but please understand that modern paganism is precisely modern and should be distinguished from the cults of ancient religions. The origins and practices of the modern paganism do not extend farther back than the late nineteenth century. Also, remember, the term “pagan” is a slippery one. What does it mean? The worship of the gods and goddesses from long ago? Those cults have long since passed away with the cultural matrix that once supported the world views that were the conditions for their possibility. You can’t just reinvent those cults without the culture that supported them.

The paganism that exists today is a romantic and very selective attempt at a re-appropriation of an ancient religious ethos, but it isn’t and cannot be the same thing that paganism was in its original cultural expressions. I think that the practitioners need to justify their beliefs by insisting on an association with what they are doing and ancient forms and styles of worship. This gives the impression that the modern pagan élan has more gravitas (especially in relation to Christianity) but it doesn’t make it the same thing as the ancient cults. The association that modern paganism makes between itself and the forms and styles of ancient culture is more about desire than it is about reality.

I think that the association of Halloween with paganism has much more to do with the Protestant Reformation than anything else. The Protestant reformers were concerned about the practices of medieval Christianity that to them seemed contrary to what they believed the Church should be. They knew that these practices had clear precedents in the history of the Church, but insisted that they represented a corruption of the original form of Christianity that had become degraded over time. The degradation was explained as a regression into cultural forms that the Protestants described as pagan.

I realize popular religiosity is a complex phenomenon and the Church in Europe did intentionally assimilate many cultural practices that were more ancient than it’s own practices, but it did so selectively and with a keen sense of discernment. The end result was not simply that a veneer of Christianity was placed on top of an ancient pagan ethos, but that a new cultural matrix was created, one that was Christian to its core. It is a gross mischaracterization and oversimplification to assert that you can just scratch the surface of medieval Christianity and what rises up is paganism.

And yet this perception endures in contemporary culture. You see it, for example, in works of fiction like Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *The Mists of Avalon*, which appropriates ideas from a lot of spurious, pseudo scholarship that permeated British intellectual culture throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Unfortunately, this has become a standard and widely accepted narrative of how Europe became Christian. It is a modern myth born of the prejudices and propaganda of the Protestant reformation that mutated into the secular critique of Catholicism. As an ideological construct it represents the simultaneous fascination and aversion to Medieval culture in general and Catholicism in particular. The reality is far more complex and interesting.

Protestantism was and is proposing what its adherents believe to be an alternative to Catholicism. This means that Protestantism will distinguish itself from the forms and styles of religious life that preceded their own culture and that this culture will be presented as a purified form of Christian faith and practice. One argument that is advanced to justify Protestant distinctiveness is that the beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church are pagan.

Placing all this in an American cultural context, the United States set its cultural roots in forms of Protestantism that were keenly aware of the distinction between themselves and a Catholic Europe that they had rejected and whose influence they had hoped to leave behind. Remember, the Puritans left Protestant England for the New World because England wasn't Protestant enough! The Puritans detested the residual forms of Catholicism that they believed remained in the state church of England.

The arrival of Catholic immigrants to the shores of Protestant America was a source of great cultural consternation. The public festivals of the Catholic Faith were characterized as a corrupting and dangerous form of paganism. Halloween with all its carousing and shenanigans was especially problematic, as it represented the incursion of a specifically Catholic cultural form into a public life that was supposed to be Protestant. Everything associated with these Catholic festivities was caricatured as pagan and the association stuck with even the Catholics internalizing the critique and believing that their own customs were holdovers from paganism.

As a result, the distinctly Catholic nature of Halloween became more and more muted and it was Catholics pulling back from their own festival that gave rise to the contemporary version of Halloween. The goulsh version of the festival that we have today is in many respects a result of Catholic accommodation to a Protestant culture. And in another strange twist in the history of Halloween, most everything that the devout Protestant detests about Halloween have become all the more pronounced as a result of their protests.

***QUESTION: What is the relation of Halloween to All Saints/All Souls? Which came first?***

**Fr. Steve:** All Saints Day appears to have a more ancient genealogy than All Souls Day.

The practice of a festival day to honor the whole communion of Saints, rather than that just a single saint, seems to happen for the first time in the Catholic Church with the consecration of the Pantheon as a public place for the Church's worship. This happened in the year 609 (or 610) on May 13<sup>th</sup>. The Pantheon had been originally dedicated for the use of Roman religion as a place where all the gods would be honored. Boniface displaced the images of the gods from their shrines and gave the building over to the Saints of the Church, particularly the Martyrs. This was a kind of "in your face" to pagan culture. Boniface was saying that the old gods had been defeated and were defeated by the faith of the Church's Martyrs.

Also, May 13<sup>th</sup> was a day associated in Roman religion with what was called the festival of the Lemurs or ancestral spirits. It is likely that Boniface's choice of this day to claim the Pantheon for Christian worship was intentional and it was a way of saying that the Martyrs are the great

ancestors of all the baptized and it is their memory and witness that is rightly honored on the day that Romans recalled their ancestors.

How we get from May 13<sup>th</sup> to November 1<sup>st</sup> is interesting. The festival of All Saints seems to emerge from the dedication of another Roman church that was consecrated by Pope Gregory III. The church is named St. Peter and all the Saints. It was a subsequent pope, Gregory IV, who extended the annual festival that commemorates this church dedication to the whole Church as All Saints Day. The extension of festivals specific to the Church of Rome is an part and parcel of how the Catholic Faith becomes the underlying cultural matrix from which a new kind of European civilization would emerge.

All Souls Day (celebrated November 2<sup>nd</sup>) seems to emerge with the growth and spread of monastic communities and the practice of commemorating deceased members of monasteries. This practice gained broad cultural traction and in time was extended to the whole Church.

Halloween is the precursor to All Saints Day and as such is kind of like what December 24th is to Christmas Day. Remember, the calendar of the Church is filled with festival days, all of which were once associated with great, public celebrations. A holy day of obligation has not always meant spending 45 minutes in church for Mass and then going back to work. Holy Days were times for a party and if you look at the Church's calendar, past and present, with this ethos in mind you will discover that the reasons for a party happened with great frequency..

***QUESTION: I know that there are some Celtic or Germanic elements to the holiday that we've come to embrace as Halloween. Which traditions are Catholic and which are not?***

**Fr. Steve:** The festival is not ethnic or nationalistic. It is Catholic. Certainly there were regional appropriations of the festivals of the Church, and Halloween was no exception, but bottom line these festal days belonged to the Church as a whole which meant pretty much all of Europe. You might have some customs that were specific to regions, but the festival itself is a distinctly Catholic practice.

There are some folks that have come to believe that there is some association of Halloween with a pagan festival called Samhain, but I have come to understand that this association is more coincidental than actual.

In terms of customs that are specific to Catholicism, it is all pretty much derivative from the kinds of stuff that you find in the public festivities of Catholic culture. In this regard Mardi Gras is probably the best point of reference. We think of Mardi Gras and its attendant festivities as specific to one day, but it used to be that that kind of festival environment occurred with great frequency throughout the Church's year. Think of all the customs associated with Halloween as a Mardi Gras before All Saints Day and I think you get a perspective in regards to all the excess and tomfoolery. The party was meant to culminate in Solemn Worship, after which one returned



to the routine of life. Unfortunately, the Church has surrendered the party to the secular culture. It has happened with Halloween. It is happening with Christmas.

***QUESTION: What do you think of the trend of parents boycotting Halloween on account of it being evil? What would you say to them if they told you such? Not safety or healthy concerns keeping kids indoors, but abject opposition to something believed to be satanic or terrorizing?***

**Fr. Steve:** There is a lot that is unsavory about the contemporary celebration of Halloween. What does the singular focus on violence, horror and death have to say about our culture? The traditional, Catholic Halloween placed these realities within the context of Christ's victory over sin, death and the devil. The current secularized version of the festival has no salvific content and has been loosed from its theological moorings. It looks very much like a festival of death for a culture of death and for that reason I can see why parents might be concerned.

But what is the proper response to a culture of death? To lock the Church behind closed doors or to let her out into the world? I think it is time for Catholics to accept the religious liberties that this culture claims to afford them and go public with their own festivals- and to do so dramatically and with a great deal of public fervor. What is holding us back? What are we afraid will happen? The reticence and fear that characterizes Catholics is costing the Church its unique culture and it is allowing the culture of death to flourish. Halloween should not be a day when our churches go dark and Christians retreat into the shadows, but when we fill the darkness with Christ's light and go out into the culture, inviting everyone to the prepare for the festival of the Saints with all the joy we can muster.

***QUESTION: What does the Catechism have to say about Halloween?***

**Fr. Steve:** The Catechism has a lot to say about the characteristics of heroic virtue and holiness of life that create the Church's saints. It also has a lot to say about Christ's victory over sin, death and the devil. These are the kinds of things that the festivities of Catholic Halloween should be celebrating with great gusto and panache.

***QUESTION: One of the appealing elements of celebrating Halloween as a child, aside from the candy and costume stuff, is the spookiness factor — the thrill of being scared without any real risk. From a Catholic perspective, is that important? Is the experience of being fearful or having an awareness of evil an essential element for a Catholic kid to learn?***

**Fr. Steve:** I think that all cultures employ cautionary tales which are replete with supernatural imagery and use this imagery as a means of teaching boundaries and inculcating a sense that there are dangerous people and situations that they could encounter and should be wary of. Further, I think that stories told to a group will have the ability to evoke a shared emotional

experience and as such bond the community together. It is not only Christian cultures that will employ a narrative, even a frightening one, to communicate their worldview and impart values.

I do think that Catholics need to learn from an early age to look at the world realistically and without the blurring lenses of sentimentality. The world is fallen and finite. People will hurt one another. We are sinners. But this darkness is illuminated by the light of God's revelation in Christ that makes the deepest truth of what it means to be human available to us in the Incarnation and Paschal Mystery of the Lord Jesus. Yes, look honestly at sin and death. Know about the lure and deceptions of fallen, spiritual powers. Realize that greater than all the fallen powers of heaven and earth is the power of God in Christ, which is a love that is stronger than sin, death and the devil. It is this divine power that is given to the believer in a personal way through Jesus Christ. He is victorious over everything that we are afraid of. His love is stronger than death. The power of his divine life dispels evil. Even as we gaze into the shadows we see his light.

***QUESTION: I read somewhere that Halloween is seen as the day when the veil between heaven and earth and purgatory is thinnest, hence the presence of souls. That seems like some seriously "new agey" stuff. Is this a Catholic thing or is that where Wiccans and imaginative Hollywood types step in?***

**Fr. Steve:** I don't know precisely the metaphysical precedents that one would use to justify the belief that there are on specific days thicker and thinner veils between the natural and supernatural realms. It seems esoteric and speculative.

I do think that the reality that such a perspective represents has great power as a narrative that explains for some folks how they think that the natural and the supernatural interact with one another. Is it true? I don't know how one would adjudicate such a claim definitively. As such, it remains a supposition or a possibility.

The Catholic Faith describes natural and supernatural realities existing in a relationship of communion or co-inherence that is called sacramental. This means that because of the Incarnation of God in Christ, natural realities can express supernatural realities. Physical realities can truly be bearers of divine grace.

The divine grace that is revealed in the Church's commemoration of Halloween should be our participation in what is called the Communion of Saints. This Communion of Saints means that this world is not all that there is and that those who have passed through the experience of death continue to love us, care for us and even through God's permissive will, can interact with us. It also means that that the Christian can hope that God's power in Christ to save and redeem extends beyond this world to the next and as such we can hope that few of us will be lost causes. The festivities of Halloween should affirm that these beliefs about the Communion of Saints are real and are also the deepest reality of what this world has become because of the revelation of God in Christ.

Source:

<https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/blog/its-time-for-catholics-to-embrace-halloween/2133/>