

What about Halloween?

by Phyllis Meshel Onest, M.Div.

What I Remember

When it comes to Halloween, life was a lot easier when I was a child. My sister and I dressed as characters from a fairy tale, or as clowns, or some other benign characters, as did the majority of other children. There may have been a few witches and skeletons, but nothing like the macabre characters that the '90's has produced; there was no sense of evil, blood and gore. The neighborhoods were safe, so we could go six blocks in any direction to "trick-or treat". At least this is what I remember growing up in the '50's and '60's in Canton, Ohio.

When my girls Michelle (18) and Maria (15) were younger, Halloween was still "trick-or-treating" in our neighborhood and my girls dressed much as my sister and I had done. Outside my sphere of influence, though, something else was going on.

School parties, which gained importance when neighborhood treat-or-treating became a safety concern, included a parade of all the students in costume, as well as games and treats. As I arrived at the school during the lunch hour for the afternoon Halloween party, (I had been a PTA Room Mother for nine years) a primary-age child came running around the school building in fear of someone named "Freddy Krueger." I came to find out that Freddy was not one of the older students, but a fictional movie character of the "Halloween" and "Friday the 13th" genre!

As I looked at the children lined up for the parade that day, I was disturbed to see how many characters were of a violent sort, maimed, bloody, ugly, evil. Fortunately for me, Maria was in her last year of elementary school. This would be her/my last Halloween party. Our family would find other activities to do on Halloween. Not long after, Halloween parties in Akron Public Schools became known as "Harvest Festivals." I was not alone in my concern with the dark side of Halloween.

So What's the Story about Halloween?

Over the years I have read about Halloween in Protestant and Roman Catholic sources. Something was missing. To help me in my search of the meaning of Halloween, I consulted a monk from an Orthodox monastery in the Midwest, who before becoming a monk, was interested in early medieval history and pagan cultures. During my interviews I received a crash course in pagan culture and its' influence on Christian feasts and our life in America in general.

To begin with, pagans sought to appease the natural "spirits of the earth" with pagan ritual, sometimes including human sacrifice. Both life and death were a normal part of pagan society. Since they preceded the Jews with whom God had a covenant, and therefore preceded Christianity, they could not understand "evil" and Satan as we do today. As Christians become more aware of the rituals and their meanings, we cannot help but see them as opposing Christianity. We must be careful not to be pulled into an area that is spiritually dangerous for us.

Celtic pagans celebrated four main festivals revolving around the seasons. As Christianity came to these and other lands, the Church attempted to Christianize the pagan celebrations that were entrenched among the people. If we think that once the Christian missionaries came to Europe all pagan beliefs ended, we are mistaken. In the fifth century, Druidism was still strong in England, and remained there well into the time of the Crusades! Merlin of King Arthur's court was a Druid wizard. Thus, while the Eastern Church was dealing with various heresies,

the Western Church was dealing with pagan beliefs and rituals.

February 1, the beginning of spring, was celebrated with fire. On the Christian calendar February 2 is the feast of the Presentation of Our Lord to the Temple. This became known as "candlemas" in the Western Church, while in the Eastern Orthodox Church, candles are blessed on this day.

May 1, the beginning of summer, was celebrated in two particular ways: [1] children would burn an effigy of "death," and [2] Druidic priestesses participated in a fertility rite involving the Maypole. May Day, with a modified Maypole, is still celebrated in Christian times.

August 1, the beginning of autumn, was celebrated by the male priests. It included athletic events for the men and cattle fairs. Our county fairs are an echo of this and other ancient harvest festivals.

November 1, the beginning of winter, was known as the "feast of death" or Samhain (pronounced Sowan). The pagan feast began at sunset the night before, October 31. To placate the "spirits of the dead," gifts of food, sweets or money were left at the graves or doors of those who had died the previous year. The children who were dressed as goblins (i.e. "spirits of the dead") to welcome "death," took the treats. If no treat was left when they arrived, they played a prank - "treat or trick."

"All Saints" was a deliberate attempt by the Western Church to Christianize the pagan "festival of the dead" with a memorial celebration for the dead. Much to my surprise I learned that the Celts included the people of what has become Belgium, France, central Germany, Holland, Denmark, the British Isles, northern Spain, Switzerland, as far south as the Po Valley in Italy, Moldavia, and parts of Asian Minor! It took centuries to for the pagan customs and rituals to die out and some of the Celtic ones are still with us in one form or another.

"All Saints" on November 1 celebrated the righteous departed [those in heaven, while on "All Souls" on November 2 a penitential Liturgy was offered for the "not-so-righteous" departed [i.e., those in Purgatory]. In the Roman Catholic Church the feast of "All Saints" or "All Hallows" [in English a "sainted" person is a "hallowed" person] was originally celebrated on May 13. Pope Gregory III (d.741) moved it to November 1, in conjunction with the dedication day of All Saints Chapel in St. Peter's in Rome, and if we read between the lines, as a means to offset the pagan festival of the dead. The night before "All Saints" was "All Hallows Even" or "Hallowe'en." [Catholic PARENT, Sept/Oct 1995, p.49]

What Is the Source of All the Halloween Customs?

In the 1800's Irish, Scots, Welsh and English immigrants brought the customs and rituals now associated with Halloween.

Black and orange: To contrast the pagan celebrations, the western Christians celebrated "All Saints" and "All Souls" during the day with Liturgies. On "All Souls" a penitential Liturgy was offered asking God's mercy on those souls. Dark vestments - black, brown or purple - were worn by priests. The candles used in penitential services were of unbleached beeswax, and therefore orange in color.

Jack-o'-lanterns: The ancient Celts carved out turnips and put fire in them to light the way for the spirits of the dead. The Irish immigrants found pumpkins to be a better lantern than turnips.

Children were encouraged to guarantee a "lucky year" by bobbing for apples in a tub of water. The child who captured the apple with the coin in it would be the lucky one.

What Is the Relationship between Halloween and the Occult?

The existence of Satanic cults and their activities are no secret to us. Most Satanic groups, according to the monk, are anti-Christian rather than pagan. Since Halloween is a pre-Christian celebration, Christ is not the focus, so satanists can celebrate their "alternative religion." "Present-day satanists and witches still consider Halloween the ideal time of the year to cast certain spells, see into the future or communicate with the spirits of dead relatives and friends," says Mike Warnke, a former satanist who's now a Christian author. [Group, October 1990, p.40]

The growing interest and belief in occult powers is one reason Halloween celebrations - with their emphasis on dark powers and death - are so popular today. For one night, obnoxious, mean-spirited behavior is in vogue. It is interesting to note that "a Gallup Youth Survey found that nearly one in three teenagers believes in the power of witchcraft, and one in five believes in ghosts." Also, "almost all teenagers surveyed believe in some supernatural phenomena." [Group, October 1990. p.41]

What Do the Scriptures Say?

I Corinthians 6:12: "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable." How does it profit us to be part of a celebration where Christ is not the focus?

II Corinthians 6:14-18: "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?... And what agreement has the temple of the living God with idols?... Therefore 'Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord.'" Does not our "innocent" participation in a celebration rooted in pagan ritual and the dark side unite us with unbelievers, lawlessness, idols and ultimately, therefore, with the devil? Christ says, "He who is not with Me is against Me." [Matt 12:30] Neutrality is not an option.

Matthew 18:6: "But whoever causes one of these little ones who believes in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea." If participating in Halloween causes one of our children to be confused, led astray, or doubt God, are we ready to take the responsibility?

Alternatives to Halloween

[1] Plan a "fall festival" either at home, school or church. This is a "tradition" at St. Nicholas Church [OCA]/Mogadore, OH, where there has been a "Fall Family Festival" for nine years. From 4:00 - 8:00 PM, there are games with prizes, candy, a cover-dish dinner, door prizes, entertainment [such as a magician, puppet shows, musicians, etc.], vespers, hayride, and ends with bonfire to roast marshmallows, drink cider, and eat donuts. Everyone in the parish is welcome to attend. A fall theme is used for the decorations: red, yellow and orange colors; multi-colored leaves; bales of hay; bundles of corn stalks; pumpkins, etc. There are no costumes involved. You can't help but have a great time!

[2] Some families preempt the entire holiday by taking off together for a special trip. They go to another city, or to a hotel with an indoor pool. The children get so much attention and have so much fun that candy and costumes are poor competition.

[3] Have teenagers plan and lead a "game night" for children in the church. Even though we as Orthodox do not celebrate "All Saints" on November 1, have group members help children create costumes of saints, Biblical characters, or "fruits of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22-23). Then organize an hour of active games and a creative

scavenger hunt for candy. End the evening with a hay ride or night walk that features storytelling and singing.

On a side note, Orthodox from the Mediterranean offer a counterpart to the Halloween costume party - the pre-Lenten Carnival. In the past, Carnival involved dancing, costumes, and foods that would not be eaten during Lent. The costume balls were fun, but there were guidelines. When participants of both Carnival and Mardi Gras took on pagan characters and lost site of their purpose, the two festivities took on a base undertone.

Because we are not always aware of the spiritual ramifications of our actions, the monk shared guidelines for costume parties. We can dress in folk costumes or as angels or saints or characters from the Old Testament, and other "good" characters. One can pretend to be younger or older, but not male if female and vice versa. In Byzantine times, wearing women's clothing, acting effeminate, was considered adultery! St. Paul also makes strong statements about this.

Since there are sociologic ramifications to mask wearing with far reaching consequences, masks are not permitted. We are left vulnerable to the spirits connected with the masks. If they are demonic spirits, we are inviting them to be a part of us. Since masks allow us to be anonymous, we can do things that we would not normally do. As Christians we are not to "put on" another persona. Each is to keep his/her own identity.

What Do We Do Now?

It seems that what was once a pagan festival celebrating the release of the dead, was Christianized in the west to a time when the sainted dead were remembered with joy and the unsainted dead with prayers. With the decline of the Christian veneer of society in the 20th century, the pre-Christian culture is seeping through and we are back to paganism. Halloween has come to be associated with non-Christian entities, evil, and more. As Christians we understand this to be demonic because it pulls us away from Christ and His Church.

A priest friend shared what was done in his home. "We have decided to tell them (our children) that as a Christian family striving to love the Lord and to do His will, we cannot participate (in Halloween). We can find other family activities for that evening or afternoon of 'trick-or-treat.' If there are school activities for the children, then at least we can set some guidelines and limitations for costumes. The guideline is found in 1 Thessalonians 5:22, 'Abstain from all appearance of evil.'... We do not make this decision lightly. We hope and pray that it will be an experience in which our children learn that sometimes we are called to be different than the world tells us to be when we strive to live God's plan for our lives."

However you choose to handle this issue, it should be done in prayer, in a positive and informative way, one that will not undermine the teaching of the Church or the personal convictions of other parents and teachers. Take advantage of children's interest in this holiday to affirm your own faith in God's loving authority in all areas of life and His approval of all that is good and helpful.

I leave you with St. Paul's words to the Romans 12:2 - "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

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