

THIRTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME. 2025

And All Saints' Day.

"FOR I AM ALREADY ON THE POINT OF BEING SACRIFICED; THE TIME OF MY DEPARTURE HAS COME. I HAVE FOUGHT THE GOOD FIGHT, I HAVE FINISHED THE RACE, I HAVE KEPT THE FAITH." (2 Timothy 4:6-7)

St. Paul was facing death simply because he preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He was imprisoned by command of the mad emperor Nero, and would shortly be beheaded (being a Roman citizen, he would not be crucified as St. Peter was). For St. Paul, preaching the saving news of absolution from sin and invitation into Eternal Life through Jesus Christ was a matter of life and death, well worth all the efforts of his life and the pain of his death. This is much more than a "competition." This is a fight. The Greek word Agon could arguably be translated as "competition", but that seems rather tone deaf in a passage that deals with life and death. The traditional translation "fight" makes much more sense here. A competition is not a matter of life and death, but a fight is. You don't sacrifice your life in a competition, but you do, if you have to, in a fight, when the cause for the fight is vital enough. For St. Paul, the cause of bringing people to know Jesus Christ was vital enough for the sacrifice of his life.

Now, something distinct from both competition and fighting is PLAY. Once upon a time, the celebration of "Halloween", which our civilization has completely messed up, was a basically healthy thing, something that brought together fighting the good fight of Faith and the sound human instinct for play.

All Saints' Day on November 1, All Souls' Day on November 2, and the day before these two religious feasts, are about the good fight of Faith and about play, not about competition. Worldly, workaday life has lots of competition, but it doesn't have nearly enough play, and it ignores the serious fight we face in this life. We need, sometimes, to put aside the normal competitions of workday life, and focus on the fight we have on our hands, a fight against sin and death that can only be won with the help of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Conqueror of sin and death.

On All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day we solemnly invoke the help of our Lord Jesus Christ, receiving absolution from sin in this present life and the promise of Life Eternal in the age to come. On the eve of those two feasts, we have a chance for holy play, play that is not bestial, but innocent, aware both of the seriousness of our fight and the certainty of our victory, if we stick with Jesus Christ.

All Saints' Day is a very old Feast in the Church, though its original date was not November 1, and it was not a feast that originated in the Roman Church. Just as Christmas was one of the Roman Church's original feasts, so All Saints' was one of the Syrian Church's original feasts, celebrated on May 13. As you can tell from the date, it was a spring festival, related to a primary feast that the whole Church celebrated, Pentecost Sunday, on the 50th day of Easter. All Saints' Day celebrates "the Assembly of the first born who are enrolled in Heaven" and "the spirits of just men made perfect" by Jesus, through His "sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than that of Abel." (Hebrews 12:23,24) All Saints' Day is a feast of the victory of the Lord's holy ones, by the Spirit of Jesus of Christ at work within them. From the Syrian Church, the feast of All Saints' Day on May 13 eventually spread to the Greek Church. Starting on May 13, 609, it was celebrated by the Roman Church as well. Roman missionaries brought the May 13 Feast of All Saints to England.

Meanwhile, in pagan, Celtic Albion, there had been an ancient harvest festival that centered around the practical need to slaughter livestock for meat during the coming winter months. This harvest festival involved big bonfires and general toomfoolery, which are always fun, as well as pagan sacrifices, occasionally of human beings, which is never fun. As Celtic Albion transitioned to Roman Britannia, and Roman Britannia transitioned to England, human sacrifices were suppressed, but pagan sacrifices to appease the dead remained, along with fun bonfires and tomfoolery. In the course of the 8th Century, the English Church decided to show people that they could still have the fun without the sacrifices, and solemnly commit the dead to Jesus Christ, instead of fearing the dead and trying to appease them, like pagans. The English Church did this by moving All Saints' Day from May 13 to November 1.

By the year 1100, England's date for All Saints' Day had been adopted by the entire Latin Church, and All Soul's Day had been added. Now, in England, Ireland, and Scotland, there was a three day festival: bonfires and festive tomfoolery on October 31, praise to God for the holy dead on November 1, and prayers to God for the dead still on their journey to Heaven on November 2 (Mexico would eventually have something similar). The tomfoolery was of a particularly Christian kind, focused on costumed reverellers getting donations from the rich to support all of the public feasts from then until Candlemas on February 2, with some mockery for pompous rich men like the Pharisee in today's Gospel. The more religious celebrations of November 1 and November 2 kept people aware of the dead, but not afraid of them. These two feasts reminded people that the departed were still part of their community, linked through time by membership in the spiritual body of Christ.

This healthy mix of silly play and serious prayer was disrupted by the Reformation. While the German Reformation was, for good and ill, a genuine uprising of the German People against something that had, alas, come to feel foreign to many of them, the English Reformation was an uprising of the lawyers and professors, which meant that it was remorselessly serious about everything, and uninterested in the dead, who could neither be regulated nor lectured. Veneration of the saints and prayers for the dead were both banned. They were no longer part of our community! Toomfoolery was banned from England, at least officially, and bonfires were moved to Guy Fawkes Day, when the pope would be burned in effigy. Too bad for England. In less relentlessly regulated Scotland and Ireland, however, while All Saints' and All Souls' Days were banned, Halloween survived; but now the bonfires and tomfoolery were divorced from the solemn prayers of November 1 and 2, and became superstitious and spooky. Still, the superstition and spookiness were within a basically Christian culture, so that the dead were not merely scary; and the tomfoolery was still basically friendly.

It was the Scots and the Irish who brought their, now secular Halloween, to America. In America, of course, people saw a chance to make money from it, Halloween became capitalized. The tomfoolery also got nasty enough by the time of the World's Fair Halloween riot of 1934 that a major push was made, from the president on down, to make Halloween just a kids day, a chance for retailers to sell lots of candy and costumes to anxious parents. By the 1950s, this had produced the little kid "Trick or Treat" Halloween that some people think is an ancient tradition. It is really just a product of the American suburbs, silly but innocent. That Halloween is also as dead as the proverbial doornail. In the late 1970s, the troubled movie industry actually had an idea - imagine that! Let's release horror movies (which had been

around for a while) just before Halloween! Thus was Halloween twisted and distorted into being something ugly, something that insults human nature and degrades the human imagination.

To fight the good fight against sin, we must simply disconnect from the stupid and ugly thing that is contemporary “Halloween”. To have innocent play, we must reconnect with the solemn prayers of November 1 and 2. We praise God for His holy ones in Heaven and pray for those still on the way to Heaven because they and we are united in the mystical Body of Christ. They are part of our community. In Jesus Christ, we fear neither death nor the dead. In Jesus Christ, we face death as part of life, and celebrate our enduring bond with the departed. In that Faith and Hope, we can afford to play.

I strongly recommend that we ignore completely the secularized and commercialized Halloween, and create our own, one that truly looks forward to the solemn prayers of November 1 and 2. Have costumes, but only costumes that recall the honored dead, God’s saints above all. Spurn completely the entire genre of “horror” movies, and think of the dead with fondness and love, asking for the prayers of the departed in Heaven, and offering prayers for the departed in Purgatory. Look to the past, and to the future. Look to the past, and honor the dead who have gone before us. Look to the future, and hope confidently for the happy eternity that our Lord Jesus Christ has won for us.

In that spirit, play. There was much that was silly in the Medieval Church. Most, though not all, of that silliness was innocent and fundamentally healthy. It was typical of the professorial and lawyerly English Reformation to want to get rid of all silliness. If one is truly happy however, one sometimes plays, and if one plays, one is sometimes silly. A truly happy person is confident enough to be unafraid of being silly. The Holy Spirit enables us to be truly happy, and therefore, I say to you, laugh, and laugh confidently. Laugh, because, while death is real, it is temporary. It will pass, and we will not. There is One Who has conquered it. He shares His victory over death with the departed. He will share His victory over death with us. This, surely, is something to celebrate.

Fight, and play. Fight and play in the spirit of St. Paul: “The Lord will rescue me from every evil threat and will bring me safe to His heavenly kingdom. To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen.” (2 Timothy 4:18)