

Monastic Scribe LXI: October 27, 2023

TRICK OR TREAT

Halloween is a beloved event for children. When I was a kid, it was a big one night happening that brought a lot of excitement. The emphasis was not so much on collecting candy but rather on playing pranks on one's neighbors. The group of us boys were out on our own, certainly not chaperoned by parents, and we tried to create some mayhem without getting caught. Take gates off their hinges, place stink bombs in post boxes in front doors, upset the status quo in some ways. Go fast forward and you have a different creature. Store and house decorations go up weeks before October 31st. Fancy costumes entertain on the night itself.

We have come a long way from the derivations of this feast. Some Christians lament the pagan origins of the day. But the so-called "pagan" origins were really very religious. Halloween comes from the Celtic feast of "Samhain" (pronounced "sow-win.") It was one of four major feasts that began the new seasons. Imbolc began Spring around February 1st; Beltaine began summer around May 1st; Lughnasa was the start of Fall on August 1st; and finally, Samhein on November 1st which not only began winter but was the new year's feast. Just as with the ancient Hebrews, the day began with sunset and the year began with the darkness of winter. The Celts celebrated, on these four feasts, the beginning of new seasons. The actual days of Equinox or solstice were mid-summer or mid-winter and were not celebrated to the same degree as the above days of the new season.

At Samhain, when the two succeeding years, the old and the new, collided, it was one of those "thin times" when the spirits of those ancestors who have gone before us to the afterlife are free to roam the earth. The Celts had a very strong belief in the afterlife, unlike many ancient civilizations. Some even wore masks to disguise themselves from spirits who might be unfriendly.

Many other customs with Halloween may or may not be Celtic in origin. Ghosts, pumpkins, vampires, skeletons, zombies, haunted houses, as well as begging for candy to avoid a trick became common. I have a premonition that there is something in our human psyches that likes to be scared. When I was a kid, I loved to see the movies with Boris Karloff, Bela Lugosi and Lon Chaney (aka Frankenstein, Dracula and Wolf Man). I don't really know, but I wonder, whether

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this comes from our need to find something beyond us, something preternatural, ultimately something supernatural and, whether we know it or not, for God. Any different thoughts on this phenomenon?

In all events the Church saw something good in the Samhain celebrations. The feast of All Saints gradually took root in many places. It began to be celebrated on November 1st. And, as feasts always began in darkness at sunset of the night before, the eve of All Saints was celebrated (and is still celebrated) as Halloween. The word means "Hallows Eve." The word "hallows" is old English for holy ones. The pagan Celts had believed in the closeness of all our ancestors who have gone before us. They are always around us. But there are special times and places when the thin veil that separates us from them completely dissolves. These are thin times and thin places. We know the dead are with us. Islands, mountain tops, certain sacred places on earth, are recognized as these thin places. They are "liminal" when we are not sure what side of the veil we find ourselves. And there are thin times such as anniversaries, communal feasts, weddings and funerals when we recognize the presence of our deceased ones. On the anniversary of my parents' deaths, I speak to them and feel their presence. Every celebration of the Eucharist is a thin place and time when time dissolves, the past is present, and in the consecratory prayer, we call upon the angels and saints (whom we know are present) to acclaim God with us. "Holy, holy, holy..." we proclaim with them.

I love All Saints Day as a wonderful thin time. I once thought of the day as one to honor all the Saints that we don't know about or do not have a special feast day of their own. No, this feast is the celebration of the "communion of Saints," one of the great doctrines of our faith. The Saints (and this includes our own ancestors and departed ones) are with us, are around us, pray for us and with us. We are not alone on this earth and in our time. In Christ, our risen Lord, all our departed ones are alive and present to us.

Halloween is a great feast of autumn and impending darkness. It fascinates children and invites them to be involved. I do not advocate dismissing any of this. But, on All Saints Day, think of the Saints, of our oneness with them, of them being alive with us. In some way honor them, speak to them, celebrate them. Mexicans and other Latino people celebrate the "Day of the Dead" with all sorts of festivities. When I lived in New Orleans, I witnessed the attention given to festive altars with food for the deceased, in spruced up cemeteries, in group

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praying. Our Puritan, Anglo-Saxon forbears have not left us much festivity. Give some thought to what Halloween is really about. You can share with me at joycet@glastonburyabbey.org

Fr. Timothy Joyce, OSB, STL

Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.