



Mommy, what's transgender?

Help your kids with today's tough moral issues. Click Here.

[All Topics](#) [Radio](#) [Video](#) [Magazine](#) [Q&A](#) [Tracts](#) [Encyclopedia](#)
(/all)/(topic)/(audio)/(video)/(magazine)/(qa)/(tract)/(encyclonedia)

Magazine

[BROWSE \(/MAGAZINE\)](#)

[ABOUT \(/MAGAZINE/ABOUT\)](#)

[PRINT ARCHIVE \(/MAGAZINE-ISSUE\)](#)

[SUBSCRIBE \(HTTPS://WWW.PUBSERV.COM/SUBNEW PAGE.ASPX?PC=CT&PK=\)](#)

Why Catholics Should Embrace Halloween



Michelle Arnold (/profile/michelle-arnold)

[September 01, 2012](#)

[SHARE](#) [ASK](#) [284](#)

Halloween, the Evening of All Hallows, was once a time for Christians to mock the devil by reveling in the triumph of Jesus Christ over evil and death. That sound you now hear every October 31 is the devil mocking us. It seems some Christians, displaying a Grinchish dislike of the simple joys of dress-up and candy consumption, have literally demonized the traditional observation of Halloween as pagan—and worse.

Many Christians through the centuries have entertained an unhealthy fear (as distinguished from a healthy fear) of the devil. Dressing children in “scary” costumes

You can help bring the fullness of Catholic Truth to the world!

[Support Us \(/support-u](#)

for the amusement of the neighbors can defang evil by demonstrating that innocence is adorable and evil is but a damned parasite on all that is good and noble. But in a hyper-scrupulous environment, it can be difficult for Christians to appreciate that there is spiritual value in such a mockery of evil—or even that it is mockery of evil and not participation in it.

Perhaps that is why every Halloween the questions coming into our apologetics department fly thick and furious:

Can my child dress up as a ghost or goblin, or should she be a saint?

Should he be a “nice” saint like Francis of Assisi, or can he be St. John the Beheaded?

Should we open our doors to trick-or-treaters? If we do, should we distribute candy, Scripture verses, holy cards, coins for UNICEF, or all of the above?

Support **THE BIBLE PROJECT**

[LEARN MORE](#)

(<https://give.catholic.com/campaign/be-a-part-of-it/c186998>)

Are Halloween carnivals okay, or should we instead hold All Saints Day parties—or eschew acknowledgement of Halloween with a generic harvest festival?

Even Christians who participate in some modern secular aspects of Halloween are not immune to the confusion of the day, rightly recoiling from sexualized costumes that turn little girls into strippers and pregnant nuns but begrudging revelers at the door who don't meet their sartorial standards a miniature chocolate bar.

Halloween is a holiday Catholics should embrace in its original form. In understanding that form, it is helpful to

Newsletter

Get our latest content delivered right to your email inbox.

 email

Subscribe

consider a little history.

Incorporating the good

On May 13, around A.D. 610, Pope Boniface IV dedicated the Roman Pantheon to the Blessed Virgin Mary and to all Christian martyrs and set aside the day in their honor. Perhaps by evangelistic design, that date coincided with the Lemuria festival, a pagan Roman celebration intended to satisfy the restless dead. A century later, this Day of All Saints was moved to November 1. "All Hallows," "Hallowmas," "Hallowtide," and "Halloween" eventually joined the stable of popular designations for the time in the Church's liturgical calendar when the Church commemorates its saints (or hallowed ones).

While no direct link to the Celtic festival of Samhain (*SOW-win*) can be proven to have been intended by the Church's choice of the November date to honor its saints, November 1 was providentially close to the change-of-season feast celebrated by pagan Celts in honor of their Druid "lord of the dead," the god Samhain. The Celts' preparations for physical survival during the coming winter season culminated with celebrations marking a time believed open to a special closeness between the natural and the supernatural—and, to the extent of the pagan Celts' pre-Christian understanding, the preternatural—worlds.

Newly baptized Christians were not forbidden to build bonfires during the autumn months, or to carve gourds into lanterns, or to set out treats for the dearly departed. Realizing the missionary value of incorporating non-evil pagan folk practices into Christian customs, the Church allowed Christians to continue these old customs, seeing in them ways to pass on the Faith. If all this festivity and seasonal reflection got Christians to go to Mass for the feasts of All Saints and All Souls and reminded them to set aside time to pray for their beloved dead,

why raise hell over the idea that pagan ancestors may have done similar deeds for not altogether dissimilar reasons?

In the seventeenth century, all “popish” holidays were crushed when the Puritans ruled England and those areas in the American colonies where they settled. Christmas and Easter proved too important to the Christian liturgical year to be snuffed out permanently and were for the most part restored as Christian holy days. Halloween, on the other hand, never recovered. To this day, Christians from Fundamentalist Protestant to conservative Catholic remain at war over whether Halloween is a Christian holiday—and, if it is, to what extent Christians should celebrate it.

The Christian culture war

Christians have proposed numerous solutions for Christians to address the “problematic” aspects of Halloween. Unfortunately, these solutions are often offered not as options to be considered with rightly formed prudential judgment but as mandates handed down with the implicit warning that those who disagree with them are less Christian.

Saints' day parties

Catholics have noted that the primary focus of this time of the year is the saints, the heroes of the Christian Faith who strove for virtue, overcame vice, and triumphed in Christ. The usual Catholic solution to The Problem of Halloween is to organize saints' day celebrations on October 31 in anticipation of the solemnity of All Saints on the following day. Children are redirected from dressing up in “scary” costumes—devils, ghosts, and skeletons—to dressing as a favorite saint. If the child insists that he *wants* to wear a sheet or carry a sword like his friends, imaginative parents may suggest that he dress up as the biblical Lazarus or the dragon slayer St. George.

Questions sometimes arise about who counts as a saint and whether or not the saint is being portrayed with sufficient piety. Instead of redirecting junior firefighter and police wannabes from dressing as their favorite heroes to dressing as the heroes' patron saints (St. Florian and St. Michael the Archangel) simply because the parish party mandates that all participants must be saints, perhaps the definition of sanctity might be expanded.

The Solemnity of All Saints is not only for those saints the Church has named but for *all* the saints, including those who are "known but to God." If we can grant that heroic firefighters and police are in heaven—and given the events of 9/11, what Catholic could doubt this? —should we scruple over allowing a child to dress up as one? Stretching the idea of saintly men and women known but to God to all men and women who die in God's friendship, no matter their vocation or state in life, is an affirmation of the Church's call to universal holiness.

As for scruples over pious portrayals of saints, the Church has long displayed broad humor in its celebration of the saints. We belong to a Church that named a man roasted over an open fire (St. Lawrence of Rome) the patron saint of cooks, a man who was stoned to death (St. Stephen the Protomartyr) the patron saint of headache sufferers, and a man who wanted to call down fire to consume his enemies (St. John the Evangelist) an intercessor for burn victims. The Church considers the saints' sufferings, and even their foibles, proof of Christ's victory over death and evil. Why not let a young John the Baptist carry his own head on a platter door to door and explain to the neighbors that he lost it defending the sanctity of marriage?

Halloween carnivals

When I was growing up in the '70s and '80s, public schools sponsored Halloween carnivals for the students as an alternative to trick-or-treating. Kids would dress up as witches, ghosts, skeletons, and other traditional characters of the day—including a wide variety of other, less traditional costumes from the sacred (angels) to the profane (cowboys)—march around the playground for the parents and play standard carnival games. In essence, these carnivals became the kiddie version of Halloween bashes where adult revelers partied as dead rockers and disgraced politicians.

Nowadays, those same schools that won't allow Christian students to form Bible study groups on campus or offer prayers at graduation ceremonies will listen closely to ill-informed Christian gripes that Halloween is an occasion for proselytism of witchcraft. (*Halloween is a Christian holiday; Samhain was pulled from the dustbin of history by modern neo-pagan witches seeking to throw off the yoke of postmodern Christian culture.*)

This past Halloween, stories abounded in the press of public schools forbidding students to dress up or to hold parties on campus, in part at the instigation of Christian parents. Not only is innocent fun stamped out by postmodern puritanism, Christians themselves are supplying false information on Halloween's origins to institutions already hostile to any expression of Christianity.

Harvest festivals

Protestant Christians uncomfortable with saints and fearful of spooks needed to figure out how to appease their own kids' demands to commemorate October 31 along with their friends. Recalling that Martin Luther tacked his 95 theses to protest indulgences to the door of the Wittenberg church on October 31, 1517 (and overlooking the fact that Luther chose that day because of its historic Christian connection to the saints), they decided to make Halloween a time to celebrate the Reformation.

All well and good—but commemorating ideas, however revolutionary, does not satisfy a sweet tooth. To address that need, some Protestant groups decided to host harvest festivals. There is nothing wrong with celebrating the harvest and God’s bounty. But not only did these new festivals steal thunder from the Protestant harvest-festival-turned-American-holiday of Thanksgiving, they also echoed Catholic autumn saints’ days that had long been celebrated with harvest feasts (Michaelmas on St. Michael the Archangel’s feast day, September 29, and Martinmas on the feast of St. Martin of Tours, November 11). It would be especially strange for Catholic families to replace Halloween festivities, whether saintly or secular, with a generic harvest festival created as a means of honoring the Reformation—a Christian rebellion against the Catholic Church.

A plan of action

Where do Catholic families go from here? The only mandate I can recommend is Christ’s signature admonition: “Be not afraid!” (cf. Matt. 8:26, 28:10; Mark 4:40; Luke 5:10; John 6:20, 14:27). Beyond that, all I can offer are suggestions in the spirit of Pope St. John XXIII’s favorite dictum on religious controversy: “In essentials, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all things, charity” (*Ad Petri Cathedram* 72).

Say your parish is holding a saints’ day party. Encourage your little ones to dress up as saints. Offer to pull together background material on Halloween for the parents. Not only will you have an informative handout to evangelize your parish’s families, you may help alleviate someone’s unnecessary scruples. Think of the extra work as a spiritual work of mercy.

Or say the neighborhood elementary school clings to its traditional Halloween festivities. Encourage the school’s plan by bringing your kids, either dressed in their saints day costumes or—if you’re feeling ambitious—in separate traditional Halloween costumes.

School Halloween carnivals are usually open to the public, making them available to those families whose children either are in private schools or are homeschooled. Do not let a public school suspect that its decision to continue to celebrate Halloween thereby gives full recognition to a genuinely Christian holiday.

Let's say the local Calvary Chapel has sent out invitations to its harvest festival, and your child's Protestant friends ask if your child can join their family for the event. When discussing the matter with the parents, you could smile and decline politely on your children's behalf. Or, if you are feeling brave—and ready to defend your Catholic Faith—you could ask in a kind way why good Christians would want to substitute a pagan harvest celebration for Christian holy day festivities.

Whatever other plans you make for the holiday, do not neglect to teach your kids the "reason for the season." Like Mardi Gras preceding Lent, Halloween ushers in a time of somber reflection—in this case the month of November, a time of spiritual preparation when the Church honors the saints and prays for holy souls. Not only does the universal Church do so on November 1 and November 2, but religious orders have their own commemorations throughout November for all deceased holy members of their orders. Many parishes have novenas of Masses in which you can enroll your deceased family and friends.

Traditionally, Catholic ethnic groups continue to keep alive pious folk Catholic customs to honor and pray for their deceased ancestors. As November marches to a close, the liturgical readings begin to speak of death, judgment, and the imminent Second Coming. As one liturgical year dies, the Church rises again for Advent in joyful anticipation of Christ's arrival.

“Somehow or other, it came just the same!”

When the Grinch plotted how best to steal Christmas in Dr. Seuss’s holiday classic, he thought it would do to pilfer its trappings: the decorations, the food, the presents. Much to his dismay, the Who townsfolk were unfazed by having their houses ransacked on Christmas Eve because the Grinch could not steal their thunder: their joy, with which they sang loudly enough to swell even the Grinch’s shriveled heart. They also had something else the Grinch realized too late he could not steal: Christmas. “Somehow or other, it came just the same!”

So it can be for Halloween. The decorations, the costumes, the games, the candy—they can add enjoyment to the celebration, yet they are but trappings. The true joy of the holiday is Christ’s victory over death, his triumph over evil, and the invitation he offers us to share in that victory and in that triumph. If we take back Halloween as a Christian holiday, if we are unafraid to confront the principalities and powers that struggle to wrest away our victory and our triumph in Christ, then those who seek to do so will realize that they cannot steal our Halloween joy.

Never forget that the *raison d’être* of Halloween is holy mockery of the devil. As St. Thomas More observed of the devil, “The proud spirit cannot endure to be mocked.”

Did you find this content helpful?
Please consider making a donation.

GIVE NOW!

([https://give.catholic.com/give/186998/#/!](https://give.catholic.com/give/186998/#/))

ABOUT

[News \(/news\)](#)
[Mission & Vision \(/about\)](#)
[Projects \(/projects\)](#)
[Leadership & Profiles \(/profile\)](#)
[Jobs \(/job\)](#)
[Advertise \(/advertise\)](#)
[Donate \(/support-us/presidents-club-and-founders-circle\)](#)

PUBLISHING

[Catholic Answers Press \(https://shop.catholic.com/\)](#)
[Book/Magazine Submissions \(/submissions\)](#)
[Permissions \(/permissions\)](#)

SITES

[Speakers \(http://catholicanswers.com/speakers\)](#)
[Shop \(https://shop.catholic.com/\)](#)
[Forums \(http://forums.catholic.com/\)](#)
[Conference \(http://www.catholicanswers.com/conference\)](#)
[Cruises \(http://catholicanswers.com/cruises\)](#)
[Chastity \(http://chastity.com/\)](#)

SOCIAL

 [Facebook \(https://www.facebook.com/catholicanswers\)](#)
 [Twitter \(https://twitter.com/catholiccom\)](#)
 [Youtube \(https://www.youtube.com/user/catholicanswers\)](#)
 [Instagram \(https://www.instagram.com/catholicanswers\)](#)
 [Pinterest \(https://www.pinterest.com/catholicanswers\)](#)

Copyright © 1996-2018
Catholic Answers



[Terms \(/terms\)](#) | [Privacy \(/privacy-notice\)](#) | [Contact us \(mailto:webmaster@catholic.com\)](#)

By continuing to use this site you agree to our [Terms \(/terms\)](#) and that you have read our [Privacy Policy \(/privacy-notice\)](#).