

Author explains significance of feast days

BY GREG TOBIN

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(Editor's note: The following on essay on All Saints/All Souls days comes from "Holy Holidays!— The Catholic Origins of Celebration," a book by Greg Tobin, published this year by Pallgrave MacMillan, a division of Saint Martin's Press LLC, New York. A former editor of The Catholic Advocate, Tobin serves as interim vice president, division of university advancement at Seton Hall University, South Orange.)

The post-Halloween period of Nov. 1 and 2 are commemorated as All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day, respectively. From the very first centuries and throughout the early Middle Ages, days were "assigned" to martyrs, sometimes (with the passage of time) to more than one. This became known as the "sanctoral cycle" or cycle of the holy men and women of the Church.

In this way, the Church exists in time—but outside or beyond the strictures of time—by reaching back to its origin and keeping alive the memory of the saints. One day in this never-ending cycle is set aside for special consideration to capture all those who have gone before who may or may not be given their own memorials and festivals as a kind of catchall day on which to commemorate all saints whose names may have been lost through time.

The Roman Catholic Church called this holiday the Solemnity of All Saints, a catchall to recognize all the canonized saints of Catholicism. In the United States it is a holy day of obligation (except, oddly, in the Diocese of Honolulu, Hawaii), as well as in Chile, Honduras, Peru, and Puerto Rico. In Bolivia the observance is transferred to the first Sunday in November.

In this way, the season of autumn, a time of harvest, is recognized as a divine harvest by God of all his good and faithful servants. November opens a season of the year when our thoughts turn toward the fear of death, the hope of eternal life, the gratitude

we feel for God's gifts, and the charity we owe to others. In the northern hemisphere, trees turn barren and the chill of late fall settles

in to stay. Laurence Hull Stookey devotes a chapter to the sanctoral cycle in his book "Calendar" and points out that All Saints' Day emphasizes the unity of the Church across time. He quotes the redoubtable G. K. Chesterton, who, in the early 20th century, wrote

some profound works about Catholicism: "If you want to know the size of the Church, you have to count tombstones."

Regarding the topic of death for the Catholic Church, the key is to focus on the transformative power of resurrection, as evidenced in the great Eastertide rising of Christ, then in the myriad resurrections of saints, which prefigure the resurrection of all at the end of days and for all eternity. Public festivals of the saints, as well as private devotions, ultimately are founded on

that principle, and are thus an expression of that faith. Nov. 2 is set aside as the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed, or All Souls' Day—which is a catchall of the catchall of the previous day: incorporating a remembrance of every single faithful Catholic or Christian who has passed, but who is not recognized by the Church officially among the canon of the saints.

The Roman Catholic Church venerates saints as those who have followed the words of Jesus Christ and been faithful members of His body. The Church is, indeed, in its own words the "Body of Christ" and the "Communion of Saints." We have seen throughout the year how saints' days are observed in their own right, as they have been for many centuries, or transmuted into secular holidays after further centuries of custom and tradition.

According to Saint Paul in the New Testament, any believer is called a "saint," one who has been sanctified with the grace of God, touched by the Holy Spirit, infused with faith. Paul calls the followers of Christ in Corinth "saints."

Most often, saints' days are chosen to coincide with the death date, or the day that saint entered into his or her new and eternal life. Chief in precedence among the saints are the Apostles—because they were the first witnesses to the person and ministry of Jesus. (Saint Paul is the exception, though he claimed a vision of the risen Lord after his conversion.) Saint Matthias was chosen by lot to take the place of the Apostle Judas, who betrayed Christ.

Therefore, from the earliest days, the Church that they founded (or, perhaps more aptly, the churches they founded in numerous cities throughout the Mediterranean region and western Asia) remembered and revered them and created the means to carry forward their reputations with festivals or "feast days."

Saint Francis of Assisi (1181/ 82-1226) is an example of a transcendent saint, one of the most well-known and beloved of all the Christian saints of the canon. His father was a successful merchant dealing in lavish fabrics and materials and he traveled far from home to acquire and trade his wares. Francis often accompanied his father and had many worldly experiences.

Francis's father was grooming him to take over the family business, but Francis had little interest in work and more in partying. He was generous with his father's money and shared it with his friends. In later years, Francis described his youth as a life of sin and debauchery. It took mayhem, slaughter, and prison to completely change Francis. After his town of Assisi was attacked in the feudal wars, Francis survived, but at a terrible price. He was imprisoned in horrible conditions for a year until his father found him and paid ransom for his release. Francis was then seriously ill and bedridden for another year. He wanted to join the Crusades and make something of his life, but he could barely walk and had no strength for battle. It was during this period that he had a spiritual awakening. A voice said to him, "Francis, don't you see that my house is being destroyed. Go then and rebuild it for me." Francis took that as instructions from God to fix the dilapidated church outside his village, and he stole money from his father to do it. Although this was the beginning of his road to God, stealing was not a very saintly thing to do.

It caused a permanent break with his father and Francis was now on his own, living in caves in the woods. He felt that he was an outcast and he decided that he wanted to share love and comfort with society's other outcasts, namely the lepers who suffered horribly. Francis could share only his comfort and love; he had nothing else to give them, but that, of course, was everything.

By reaching out to those less fortunate, to those who were hopeless, Francis was transformed. He finally understood God's calling. The message telling Francis to rebuild the Church was a metaphor instructing him to rebuild the soul of the Church, not the structure. The Lord made Francis "an instrument of His peace" and Francis not only attracted the birds and the beasts and the down-trodden, but one by one he built a band of brothers, friars who have grown into the Franciscan order. Today there are three main orders of the Franciscans and many thousands of monasteries and followers worldwide.



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