

Remembering those who have gone before us

The feasts of All Saints and All Souls have very special significance in the Catholic tradition

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Each Sunday at Mass we profess our faith in the resurrection of the dead. Each time we pray the Apostles' Creed we again speak of this select group as the Communion of Saints. How does the Church celebrate the saints and all those marked with the sign of faith who have passed before us?

On certain days of the liturgical calendar, specific saints are remembered in the Mass and Church prayer. The major celebration of the dead, however, is reserved for the month of November in the consecutive feasts of All Saints and All Souls. The history of the derivation of this special group celebration tells us something significant about the Catholic tradition we all share.

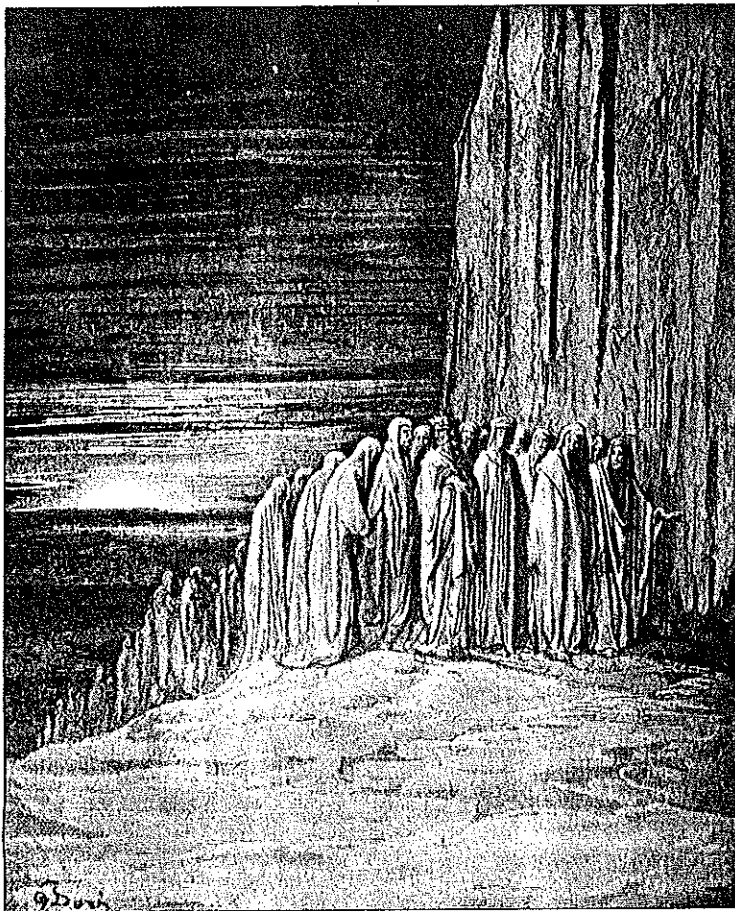
Few may realize that the feasts of All Saints and All Souls are celebrated as a triduum. Hildebert of LeMans (d. 1134) is the first to speak of the unitive nature of this celebration. In his sermons, he mentioned a three-day sequence of a festival — "All Halloween, All Hallows and All Souls." The memorial he proposed is continued today with the Vigil Evening prayer for All Saints, followed by the special Masses for each day.

The feast of All Saints

Martyrs have been venerated in the Church from the earliest days. Pilgrimages to the graves of martyrs were common, and relics were highly prized possessions. Martyrdom itself was considered the most noble form of death. We can read the accounts of martyrs' deaths and see the significance early Christian writers placed on this supreme sacrifice. The martyrdoms of Polycarp, Perpetua, Felicitas and Ignatius are all graphically detailed and can be read today.

This special veneration of the martyrs led directly to our present-day celebration of All Saints. Pope Urban IV (1261-1264) presented two specific purposes for the feast: (1) The merits of all the saints (martyrs and all faithful) can be venerated in common by this one celebration. (2) Any negligence, omission or irreverence committed in the celebration of the saints' feasts throughout the year is to be atoned for by the faithful, and thus due honor may still be offered to the saints.

Early accounts show a memorial for



PURGATORY: Their souls receive great relief from our prayers

all martyrs in the East as early as the third century: A Chaldean calendar of

411 mentions a special commemoration for all confessors on the Friday after Easter. John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople (d. 407) annually preached a sermon titled "Praise of all the Holy Martyrs of the Entire World" on the first Sunday after Pentecost. By the seventh century, records show that a "commemoration of the holy martyrs" had become a public holy day throughout the Church.

The established feast as we know it today has its origins in the Pontificate of Boniface IV (608-615). On May 13, 609, the Pantheon in Rome, formerly a pagan temple, was presented to Boniface by the Emperor Phocas. The Pope consecrated the building as a Christian church in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the martyrs.

The practice of including in the memorial not only martyrs, but all the saints, began to spread in the mid-eighth century. By 741, the practice was sufficiently recognized that Pope Gregory III dedicated a chapel in St. Peter's

Basilica in honor of Christ, Mary and "all the apostles, martyrs, confessors, and all the just and perfect servants of God whose bodies rest throughout the world." In dedicating this chapel, Gregory changed the date of the special feast to Nov. 1 for the Roman Church. The practice was universalized by Pope Gregory IV in 844.

Two theories exist as to the reason for shifting the date of the celebration. The most accepted idea is that since past pagan practice had made Nov. 1 a day of festival, Christian practice should fill the void created by the virtual death of paganism in Western Europe.

An alternative, more practical theory, does exist, however — to feed pilgrims. Because so many people came to Rome for the celebration, it was difficult to feed them. Shifting the celebration to a time after the harvest would help to alleviate the problem.

The feast of All Souls

Devotion to, and prayers for, the dead comes to Christianity from the Hebrew tradition. Private and public prayer for

the dead was customarily recited on the day of death, the day of burial and the seventh and 13th days after death. Christian practice, as stated by St. Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386), indicated that "We pray for all our communion who have departed from this world, believing that their souls receive a very great relief from the prayers offered for them in the holy and redoubtable Sacrifice of the Altar."

Early Christian efforts to celebrate the dead were centered in remembrance. In the era of St. Jerome (d. 420) the names of the dead were entered in the diptych, a kind of notebook. The names were read aloud by a deacon or other minister at Mass. Sometimes the presider at Mass mentioned the names in prayers; sometimes the diptych was placed on the altar. This procedure was discontinued in the 12th century, but the practice has been reinstated in various parishes during the month of November.

The establishment of the contemporary feast of All Souls occurred in the Benedictine monastery of Cluny. In 998, Abbot Odilo ordered all monasteries under his authority to celebrate a festal memorial of all the faithful departed on Nov. 2. He wrote, "If anyone else follows the example of our faith-inspired innovation, may he share in the good prayers of all." This commemoration quickly spread. Evidence shows that Benedictines and Carthusians were celebrating the feast before 1137. Devotion spread to France, Germany and England, but was only accepted in Rome in the 13th century. In the 14th century, the feast was placed on the official calendar.

Nov. 2 was chosen as the date for the feast to bring unity in celebrating the dead. In this way, the memory of all "holyspirits, both of the saints in heaven and of the souls in purgatory, should be celebrated on two successive days and in this way express the Christian belief in the 'communion of saints.'"

Honoring the martyrs who have returned to God, and all the dead, has been a Christian practice since the post-apostolic period.

The feasts of All Saints and All Souls today stand as a unitive celebration to honor men and women who, marked with the sign of faith, gave us an example of God's presence through Christian love and devotion.

Let us allow this celebration of all deceased Christians be a catalyst for us to be saints to one another in word and deed. Let us honor those who have gone before us by imitating their lives of selfless Christian service. □

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