

*An annual reminder of the Four Last Things*

# CAN HALLOWEEN BE CATHOLIC?

For a long time I have believed that Catholics ought to strive for a way of life that was unified around the Faith that we profess. We should attempt, for example, as much as possible, to observe holidays in a Catholic manner. Christmas for Catholics should be primarily a religious feast. This does not mean that we need to forego gift giving or parties, only that in some way they should be related to the reason that Christmas exists: to celebrate the Incarnation of God the Son into the human race. And even during other seasons Catholics can do much to sanctify the year. We can make Advent, Lent and Easter-holy seasons, for example, and even observe our name days, that is, the feasts of our own patron saints.

I have always tried to promote this in my own family. Thus we observe Advent as a preparation for Christmas, not an anticipation of Christmas. We celebrate St. Nicholas' day (December 6) and we even have a little carnival festivity on Mardi Gras (or Shrove Tuesday), the last day before Ash Wednesday. I think that these celebrations have given our children some sense of the year as sacred time, not simply going from one secular week and month to another, with nothing to mark the days except empty civic holidays.

But there is one day in the year that I have never figured out how to integrate into Catholic living, how to "baptize" it. This is Halloween. Of course, the name Halloween is of Christian origin, it means All Hallows' Eve, that is, the eve of All Saints' Day.

Other than the name, how does Halloween relate to the Faith? Its customs, as far as I can determine, have their origins in Irish paganism. But although I have never been comfortable with Halloween, we have always participated in it, judging it simply to be a concession to living in America today.

Recently, however, I heard a suggestion as to how to integrate it into the Christian year. I cannot claim credit for this myself, since I heard it in a homily in our parish on All Souls' Day. The homilist suggested that Halloween can be seen as a "non-threatening Christian meditation on death." And he went on to explain that dressing up as ghosts or skeletons is a way of reminding ourselves that we too someday must die.

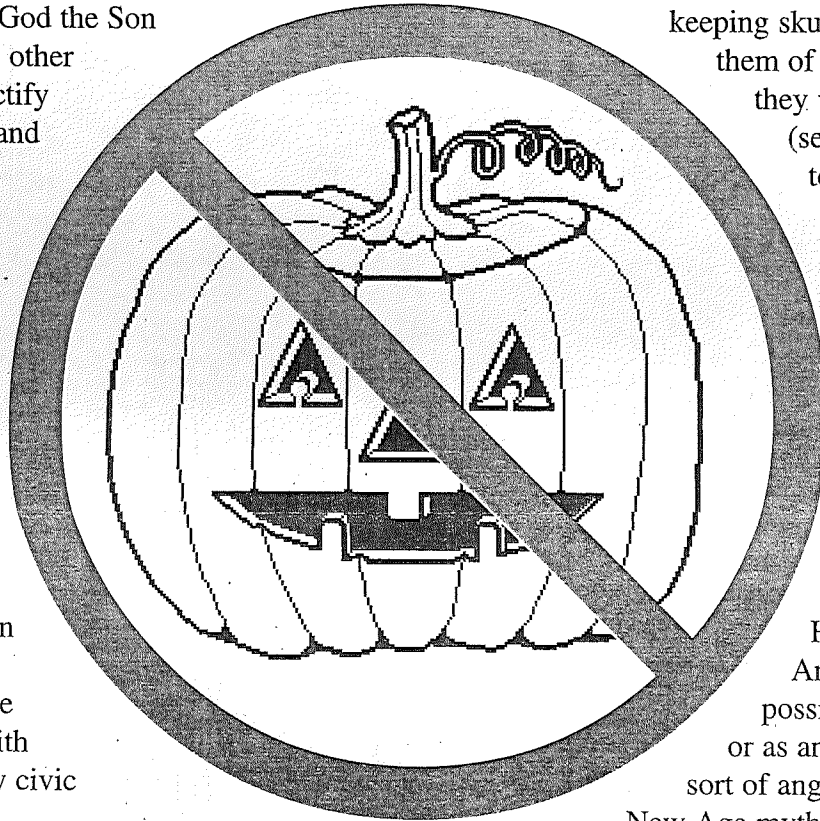
By "non-threatening" I assume he meant that the idea of death was presented to us in a way that was not morbid or frightening. After all, a littled kid dressed as a skeleton is decidedly not scary, but if we think about it a bit, it might remind us that "it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment," (Hebrews 9:27).

It is a bit like the traditional practice of monks keeping skulls around their monasteries to remind them of death. And as for ghosts, traditionally they were considered as souls in Purgatory (see Shakespeare's *Hamlet*), and Purgatory ought to bring to mind for us all the Four Last Things: death, judgment, Heaven and Hell.

I was delighted to hear a suggestion for baptizing Halloween, making it part of the Catholic year. It is true, of course, that kids dress up as much more than skeletons and ghosts, and that many of these costumes have nothing to do with death. But I suppose that dressing up as a devil could be justified, since Hell is a reality connected with death.

And on the other hand, another obvious possibility is dressing as one of the saints or as an angel (I do not mean the feminine sort of angel), so common to church skits and New Age mythology, but the real biblical angels, always masculine and strong, as in Michael and the other archangel.

Just as it usually takes some time and effort to prune secular practices from our Christmas observances, I realize that we will not make Halloween Catholic overnight. But we do have something to aim at. Halloween need no longer be something we just accept because it is too hard to say no to the kids or because we think that somehow a day with as beautiful a name as All Hallows' Eve must have some Catholic connection. Now we can try to make the evening really Christian--a meditation on death. And that is something that would be very healthy for this society. For even though we live in the "culture of death," as the Holy Father has called it, we try to hide the fact of death as much as possible. So one night of the year we can focus on death--in the "non-threatening" company of candy and Jack-o-lanterns and other good things of this passing life.



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