

Halloween is the 'holy day' Catholic kids shouldn't miss

Autumn is jam-packed with feast days and holy day celebrations as our liturgical year draws to a close. We're not even halfway through autumn, and we've already celebrated the feast days of at least ten of our favorite saints, and there are many more coming up.

But the *crème de la crème* are the trifold feasts of Halloween, All Saints Day, and All Souls Day. This trifold celebration reminds us of the three aspects of the Church: the Church militant, the Church triumphant, and the Church suffering—each its own good reason to celebrate.

All Hallows Eve: A time to recognize the reality of suffering and death

All Hallows' Eve (Halloween) reminds us that the battle for our souls is real. On this one day, evil seems to manifest itself (a small Dracula trick-or-treating next to a miniature fireman), but in reality evil is always walking by our side . . . and unlike our kids' trick-or-treat costumes, the disguises of evil are convincing.

Many Catholics don't realize that this holiday is meant to mock the "awful scoundrel," as St. Padre Pio would call him, because the battle is already won by our Lord. Much like many other calendar holidays, Halloween has been taken over by the secular world, but sadly, unlike Christmas and Easter, many Christians have bought the myth that Halloween is a pagan holiday and walked away from this *holy* day altogether, refusing to fight for this holy day whose Catholic roots are intricately connected to the feasts of All Saints and All Souls. There are so many opportunities on Halloween to

explore, teach, and share our faith. Just as there is no Easter Sunday without Good Friday there are no Heavenly Saints without earthly suffering and death, and that is what Halloween calls to mind. So let's not jump to the Feast of All Saints just yet! Here are some ways our family celebrates this day.

Let's talk about monsters, shall we?

Like it or not, there are some scary images thrown around this time of year, and kids notice. This triggers a lot of questions about monsters, zombies, skeletons, etc. What's real and not real? What should we be afraid of and what should we not be afraid of? And what should we do if we are scared? And more importantly, what should we *really* be wary of?

First off, did you know:

- Vampire stories were written to symbolize addictive behavior; Dracula in particular represents the antichrist.
- The story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde symbolizes the dual nature of fallen humanity: it drives home the point that one's sinful impulses are not compatible with a life of virtue.
- Zombies, or the undead, are huge right now in books, cinema, television and cosplay. Zombies are an apocalyptic monster: a human body without a human soul causing chaos, destruction, and death. It's not a stretch to see the parallels with today's society. Zombies traditionally feed off human flesh—sometimes only brains and hearts—but in no case do they gain new life, reason, or love.
- Frankenstein's monster is symbolic of the scientific pride of the Enlightenment: the belief that through science man can be his own god, his own maker, because

man is ultimately reducible to mere biology—a belief that ultimately leads to destruction. (Mary Shelly’s book is wonderfully Catholic; it was written 200 years ago this May.)

- Skeletons have long held an honored place in the tradition of the Catholic Church because they serve as a reminder of our brief time on earth. (Do a search for “Catholic skeletons”; it’s something to behold. Searcher beware.) The famous chapel of Santa Maria della Concezione dei Cappuccini in Rome, Italy, is beautifully decorated with the bones of deceased monks; it bears a plaque that reads, “What you are now, we once were; what we are now, you shall be.” Truth.

If you have older children, consider reading some of the classic monster stories with them this season, discussing the stories’ religious symbolism. Or talk about the martyrs! Did you know that Halloween was once known as the “Feast of All Martyrs”? I often feel a connection to Our Lady of Sorrows and the mother of the seven martyred sons in the Book of Maccabees. I am raising martyrs; I want them to know the heroic lengths the martyred saints went to . . . if for no other reason, so they know what they’re in for.

(Aside: There is a connection here to the Protestant Reformation. Numerous sources claim that the word *macabre* is derived from the Book of Maccabees, which Protestants dropped from the Canon of Scripture. Similarly, dislike of Catholicism’s many “macabre” practices led them to reject the celebration of All Hallows Eve. You can kind of understand where they were coming from. If you ask me, the term *incorruptible* is thrown about pretty loosely in reference to certain saints. Just ask my ten-year-old daughter her thoughts on the “incorrupt” head of St. Catherine of Siena.)

One of the ways we respond to the scariness of some of

Halloween's monsters is with this poem. When I found it a few years ago, I printed it out and framed it to use as decoration each Halloween season. It neatly sums up the attitude Christian kids can take toward all things scary on Halloween night:

*On the eve of All Saints Day,
Jack-o'-Lanterns light the way.
God's children need no longer fear
the ghosts and goblins gathered here.
For evil ghouls with icy breath
must bow to Him who conquered death.*

Jack-o'-lanterns: A way to evangelize, and a spiritual lesson

Speaking of Jack-o'-Lanterns, not only is this a fun tradition everyone loves, but there's also a new trend among Christians to use Jack-o'-Lanterns as an evangelical billboard. Choose a Christian or pro-life image to literally be the light in the darkness. (The same goes for neighborhood bonfires and hospitality, but more about that in a bit.)

You can also use the activity of carving pumpkins to teach a Christian lesson about letting God work in our hearts. Have you ever heard the beautiful image Michelangelo used when describing his work on the *David*? He started with a plain slab of marble. A number of artists had attempted to use the marble, but with no success. When asked how he managed to draw his *David* out of the stone, he replied that he just chipped away the pieces that were not David. If we apply this lesson to our lives, we can hand over our hard, seemingly useless souls to Jesus and let him chip away at everything that isn't who He intended us to be. Then we, too, will become magnificent works of art and a light in the darkness.

Trick-or-treating: Community building and evangelization made easy-peasy

Many Christians draw the line at trick-or-treating, but I'm telling you there's so much to work with here. Obviously you could do the Catholic thing and dress up the kids in saints' costumes. I'll never forget how, the first Halloween in our new neighborhood, we went trick-or-treating as St. Helen, a priest, and St. Francis. Trust me, it was great fun to explain to neighbors that my three-year-old son was a priest. (Read: Awkward silence followed by, "Candy?")

But there is so much more to tap into here. Halloween is a day just *begging* for evangelization. The days of neighbors opening their doors to each other are becoming rare. In Minnesota, Halloween is sort of a last call for block parties before we are shuttered inside our homes for the cold, dark days of winter. It's becoming a national trend that not only children receive a treat as they walk door to door, but parents as well. Neighbors have fire pits in their driveways, and open coolers for anyone passing by to enjoy.

Two years ago was an especially cold Halloween, and we didn't even make it around the block before we hunkered down at someone's fire pit for an hour before heading home for the night. What a great opportunity to fellowship with neighbors, building relationships that could be the foundation for evangelization. It's also not uncommon for our children to receive candy wrapped in Bible messages from neighbors. What a great way to evangelize! People are literally coming to your door—it's an evangelization no-brainer, hand them the Word of God!

When you get home and the kids dump out all their loot, don't just check their candy—bless it, too!

After our children have had their insulin shots (ha ha) and are tucked into bed, our home transforms overnight from

decorations of bats, monsters, ghosts, and skeletons to the “Pearly Gates and Land of the Saints.” The drama reaches a climax, and the real party starts—because the battle has already been won.