

I See Dead People: Halloween and the Communion of Saints

October 31 is Halloween, a day that's been celebrated for thousands of years, but not always by Christians. What was originally a Celtic feast¹ associated with the spirits of the dead became combined with two Roman feasts, and was finally replaced once and for all by All Hallows Eve (the eve or vigil of All Saints). In true Catholic fashion, the Church took something popular from the pagan world and Christianized it. This concept is really a fundamental element in evangelization: to find something that attracts people, and bring it to its fulfillment in Christ.

A New Feast

This is exactly what Pope Gregory III did in the 8th century when he established the feast of All Saints on November 1 (and its vigil on October 31).² Of course there was error and superstition in the pagan holiday, but the genius of Gregory lay in not utterly rejecting this holiday but building upon the fragmentary truth it contained. These ancient pagans had sensed that the dead live on, and they were right. What they didn't know was that the yearning for eternal life they all had could finally be fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

This is the point of the feast of All Saints: Jesus Christ has brought redemption and salvation to humanity. November 1 is the celebration of “the great multitude, which no man could number, from every nation, race, people, and tongue . . . [who] have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev 7:9,14).³ Those who had been pagans finally had a real reason to hope for life after death. This hope no longer lay in the animal sacrifices of *Sambain*, but in the Blood of the Lamb of God.

What is a Saint?

The coming feast of All Saints (and its vigil, Halloween) provides us with a good opportunity to think about the communion of saints (*communio sanctorum* in Latin). At every Sunday mass we profess that we believe in it, but what is it? Before we can understand communion, we have to understand what saints are. St. Paul often refers to Christians who are still alive as saints or holy ones (Greek: *hagioi*). So saints are not only canonized people. The idea is clearer if we look at the Latin word for saint: *sanctus*, which originally meant “holy, sacred, just”. So a saint is someone who has been justified and *sanctified* by Jesus Christ. *This* is the basis of the communion of the saints.

What is Communion?

If we have been sanctified by Christ, we are part of his body, which is the Church.⁴ We therefore have communion (think “*union*”) with everyone who is part of that body. Romans 6:9 tells us that “Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.” Whoever is part of that imperishable body will never pass away. So Christ's body – which is the Church – is made up of both living saints and saints who have completed their earthly pilgrimage. And within this body, the same blood flows throughout, nourishing and uniting.

In the Eucharist, we become what we are (since “you are what you eat”): the body of Christ. We drink the lifeblood of the Lamb and are connected to the entire body. According to ancient Catholic teaching, “the Eucharist makes the Church”. It brings about communion among all who take part in it, and communion is what the Church is. This is why in the Eucharistic prayer the priest prays “May we who

1 The feast was known as *Sambain* and also involved fortune-telling and animal sacrifice.

2 The term “All Saints” is used to distinguish it from all the other feasts of saints. Normally, the feast of a saint is celebrated on the anniversary of his or her death, but as the number of martyrs and saints grew, it became impossible to include everyone. All Saints was a sort of 'catch-all' to include those saints who didn't get their own feast day throughout the year.

3 *The Roman Missal* includes this in the first reading for All Saints day, November 1.

4 *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 946 puts it like this: “The communion of saints is the Church.”

share in the body and blood of Christ be brought together in *unity* by the Holy Spirit.” We are united to the whole Church throughout the world – every single member – and we are also united with the saints in heaven, who are part of that same body, composed of the same flesh and sustained by the same blood.

But the Eucharist, as incredible as it is, won't be celebrated in heaven. It is a sacrament (a sign pointing to something else). It is, in the words of John Paul II, “the sacrament of the bridegroom and of the bride.”⁵ It symbolizes and makes present (as a foretaste) the wedding feast of the Lamb (Rev 19:9), that final, perfect union with God that we will experience in heaven. In this way it also connects us with those who are celebrating that wedding feast already (the saints in heaven). This is why we sing the *Holy, Holy* at mass with “all the angels and saints”.

We are One

So how can the communion of saints have a concrete application for our lives? First, it reminds us that as Christians struggling on our way, we're never alone. We are surrounded by and connected to saints who are still struggling like we are, as well as saints who have finished the race (Heb 12:1). Of course, Jesus is always with us, but we never need to be afraid of being alone in trying to follow him. And since we are all joined through the body of Christ, we can help each other along the way.

This is probably what most people first think of when they hear “communion of saints”: intercession. Not only is it possible, but it is our duty as brothers and sisters in Christ to encourage and to pray for one another. The saints in heaven, utterly freed from the effects of sin, imitate Christ in making intercession for us. They are better pray-ers because they are more closely united to Christ. The saints do not *on their own* “do” anything for us; but they implore the help of the God who cares for each of us.

“We're in this together”: this is one way of summing up what the communion of saints means for us. We are part of a community (or, better, a *communio*). We are all affected by each other, and all can contribute to each other's good. This is why we can intercede for one another, and this is also the basis for indulgences. If we want to try to understand indulgences (something hardly spoken of today yet still taught by the Church), we need to look at the communion of saints.⁶ Indulgences are not simply about divine accounting,⁷ but about communion. An indulgence means that I can be transformed and changed by the merits of others, even when such a change would normally be beyond me. It is an expression of the free, undeserved grace of God, which can even be poured out through human beings. It means that once I am in Christ, who I am is not limited by what I can achieve by my own efforts. We are aided by God's grace, which flows to us through the communion of saints.

So Halloween, the vigil of All Saints, is approaching. Like the Celts, let's remember the dead, but let's also remember that in the communion of saints which is Christ's body, neither death nor distance can separate us. Let's celebrate all those holy men and women – both famous and unknown – who are now gathered around the throne of God, and with them let's acknowledge what the communion of saints is all about: “salvation comes from our God, who is seated on the throne, and from the Lamb.”

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5 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (On the Dignity and Vocation of Women), n. 26.

6 For an explanation of indulgences, see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1471-1477.

7 *e.g.*, the idea that the saints in heaven were holier than they needed to be to get to heaven, so I can pick up the surplus and credit it to myself.

Financial imagery like this was used during the Middle Ages to explain the doctrine of indulgences. I'm not saying that this was wrong at the time, but it isn't really helpful now.