Three Days Giving Us a Perspective on Life & Death

As the leaves began to fall away and the weather turns outside, this time of year typically takes up a bit of extra gloom. In fact I'm one of "those people" who puts up their Christmas stuff the last week of October just to brighten things up, so perhaps by the time this is published the rectory will be looking a little more festive.

With the change in weather and seasons, coinciding with the near end of the Liturgical Year in late November, the Church has traditionally had November as a time where we reflect a bit on mortality and death. Ultimately of course this leads to life; and for the barren landscape that will soon be before us, there will be the promise once again of resurrection and new life (hence Easter being in spring).

In particular, there are a few days coming up that each have a different take on death and the afterlife, namely Halloween, All Saints Day, and All Soul's Day. Each is worth celebrating in it's own way.

With respect to Halloween, The holiday's history is the eve of All Saints Day. It was known as a time for Christians to mock the devil by reveling in the triumph of Jesus Christ over evil and death. To borrow from the website "catholic.com" ***That sound you now hear every October 31 is the devil mocking us. It seems some Christians, displaying a Grinch-ish dislike of the simple joys of dress-up and candy consumption, have literally demonized the traditional observation of Halloween as pagan—and worse…Many Christians through the centuries have entertained an unhealthy fear (as distinguished from a healthy fear) of the devil. Dressing children in scary" costumes for the amusement of the neighbors can defang evil by demonstrating that innocence is adorable and evil is but a damned parasite on all that is good and noble. But in a hyper-scrupulous environment, it can be difficult for Christians to appreciate that there is spiritual value in such a mockery of evil—or even that it is mockery of evil and not participation in it."***

Looking at history a little more deeply, about the year 610, Pope Boniface IV dedicated the Roman Pantheon (still a lovely place to visit) to the Blessed Virgin Mary and to all Christian martyrs and set aside the day in their honor. The day coincided with a pagan Roman celebration to satisfy the restless dead. A century later, the day of All Saints was moved to November 1st. "All Hallows" eventually joined the stable of popular designations of time in the Church's calendar when the Church commemorates the saints.

The animosity among some towards Halloween, notably these days from some fundamentalist Christians, stems from John Calvin, the Protestant reformer who wanted to remove all Catholic holidays.

So the bottom line is Halloween is a day to celebrate with kids and do the traditional wearing of costumes, and "trick or treating" (in fact we added a "Trunk or Treat" this

year after Mass Saturday night before Halloween) and really is a day where we take on the one hand a more lighthearted approach to death; saying we are not going to be consumed by fear, but celebrate in a sense that death does not have the last word.

This leads us to All Saint's Day, November 1st. Over the years I have celebrated hundreds of funerals, and at each one, I meet with the family who gives me a portrait of their loved one. So many stories share actions of love and hard work and passing on the faith. Many of us know or experienced deep love from people in our lives we've lost. Most people though do not go through a formal canonization process; where a cause for their being declared a saint is opened. Of course there are many people in heaven whom are known only to God; and we ask for their prayers and intercession. This day honors that connection and of how these people remain connected to us. While I pray for those I've lost, I also ask for prayers from loved ones who I really believe are in heaven; just recently when going through some stress, I asked for their intercession and felt some comfort and peace. I also strive to learn from their incredible example in that just as the canonized saints did powerful actions of fortitude, justice and mercy, so too do the uncanonized saints we've known over our lives teach us so much too.

Lastly we have All Soul's Day. This is the following day, and it is a day where we pray for all of our beloved dead. We do this because we believe that there is a journey to heaven.

For some when they die, they have already learned to love God fully; they go to heaven. For some, they may have rejected God completely, and they go to hell, which is the absence of God; hence the eternal frustration of someone who can do nothing to undo a completely closed heart. However, we also believe in purgatory. And as I've noted before citing then-Cardinal Ratzinger who wrote on the subject, purgatory is not some type of concentration camp. This is why I'm not fond of the term "poor souls in purgatory" as it implies just that. Rather, it is a process, known to God, where His love purges us of those sins and things we cling to. We can go to confession, and sin is forgiven, but there is still sometimes in us the tendency or temptations to do those same sins again. After we die, God helps us through that so that its permanently removed. Purgatory is not pain; only love. Just as a coach or teacher encourages us for what we've done good, they also challenge us to become even better. This takes work though. In those same funeral meetings I've had over the years, for the many good stories I've heard, in some families there is nagging pain and tension because there is hurt going on in that family. Some people did things to hurt loved ones, which is why it's important to work through that for the living, but also we pray for those who have died that God will help them to become the saint that they have the potential to be. We pray ourselves too and work through the pains, even the anger we may have towards them. People are human, and humans sin. Sometimes a person doesn't see their drinking problem, their nasty temper, their cold demeanor, the bad things they did to loved ones, that they ignore Mass and prayer, etc. But God does; there's no hiding this from Him. And that would be pretty scary if God was out to get us or took delight in seeing us suffer. Rather, God takes delight in liberating us from our sins, and that will happen after

death - so we pray for those who have died on All Soul's Day, and indeed many Masses are often offered for deceased people we have known.

Death is understandably not something we like to think about, and for most of us we try to ignore it. But perhaps a better way is to make peace with it. We all face our Good Friday, but this leads to Easter Sunday. So let us turn our fears and anxieties over to God, and also never forget our connection to our beloved dead never ends, for Jesus' Passion and Resurrection change everything. Our God is awesome indeed, and is truly a God of life.

Have a wonderful week ahead (and never forget Peanut Butter Cups, Snickers and Kit Kats are a perfect combo for any trick or treater's bag).

God bless,

Fr. Paul