

FAITH *Matters*



Legend tells us that the Gaelic festival of Samhain (“sah-win”) started around 400 BC. It began on Oct. 31 and continued into the early days of November. The word *Samhain* literally means “summer’s end,” and it anticipated the dark season of winter.

Halloween is soon approaching, so a brief history lesson is in order.

The word “Halloween” comes from the phrase “Hallow’s Eve,” which falls on the eve of All Saints Day. In 610 AD, Pope Boniface IV converted the Roman Pantheon into a church and dedicated it to Christian martyrs around the world. This occasion became known as All Saints Day, which honored the saintliest Christians on May 13. But, on Nov. 1, 735, Pope Gregory III dedicated a chapel in St. Peter’s Basilica, which would hold the relics of apostles and various martyrs, thus shifting the date of All Saints Day to Nov. 1. This date was formalized by Pope Gregory IV in 834, mandating all Latin churches to celebrate the festival on this date.

But where do goblins and ghouls come into play? Whence the “trick-or-treating”?

The Celts believed that Samhain was a “between time” when the worlds of the dead and the living overlapped. The souls of the dead — some hostile and some friendly — wandered around the villages and towns, and people were encouraged to glean wisdom from the friendly ones, often setting milk and cake outside their door for the spirits to eat, which would ensure that next year’s crop would be bountiful. But in Scotland and Wales, people would often dress in costumes to look like the spirits, and they would go door to door taking the cake from their neighbors’ porches. This practice was known as “mumming.”

The history gets a little murky from there, but some historians believe that mumming evolved into a *Christmas* tradition known as Belsnickel (from the German *Peltz Nickel*, “Nicholas in furs”). Belsnickel was a rugged, disheveled version of Saint Nicholas who wore tattered clothes and carried a switch to whip naughty children and candy to reward good children.

Somewhere along the way, the kids created “Belsnickling.” They would disguise themselves and go house to house, offering to do “tricks” (usually singing or dancing) in exchange for “treats.” It’s sort of like mumming, but with a Christmas twist.

Given the shared date between Samhain and All Hallow’s Eve (Oct. 31), these traditions effectively merged to create a modern version of Halloween. Like so many other things, it’s a syncretized mash-up of traditions. And I find it fitting. Here’s why ...

According to Christians, the departed saints are “dead in Christ” and await the general resurrection. At funerals, I always pray for a “sure and certain hope in the resurrection from the dead” — a certainty that arises from the fact that our departed loved ones gave us a preview of the resurrection through the lives they lived. They remind us that death is not the end.

So, when we wear scary costumes on Halloween, we are putting on cartoonish caricatures of demons, devils and death, effectively lampooning them. It’s an act of mockery! It’s a way of saying we’re not afraid!

We are all haunted by demons. Halloween is a good time to satirize them. It’s a good time to lampoon the forces of death by donning their images and saying with our children, “Where, O Death, is thy sting?”



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