

# What's the Point of All Saints Day?

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Every December, the secular, cultural celebration of Christmas overshadows the religious holiday on which it is based.

Essentially the same thing happens at the end of October, when the way American culture celebrates Halloween overshadows All Saints Day.

**There's nothing intrinsically wrong with costumes and candy**, but in the minds of most people Halloween has become so detached from its religious roots that they have no idea where it comes from.

The old-fashioned word Halloween contributes to this. People may have an inkling that it's short for "All Hallows Eve," but that doesn't help much—because they don't know what a hallow is or what it means to celebrate the eve of something.

English has an unusual double vocabulary, with many words based on Latin roots but others based on German roots. That's why we have two words for so many things. One example is cat (derived from a German root) and feline (derived from a Latin root). The word hallow belongs to one of these German/Latin pairs. But it's much less familiar to us than the parallel word from Latin: saint.

Hallow comes from the same root as holy, and a person who is hallowed is a saint—someone who has been sanctified or made holy. Thus in the Lord's Prayer we say "Hallowed be thy name." If we said that in using words derived from Latin, it would be something like, "Let your name be sanctified"—i.e., may people treat God's name as something holy and thus honor the holiness of God himself.

The -een part of Halloween is similarly old-fashioned. "E'en" is a contraction of the word even, an older way of saying "evening." Halloween is thus "All hallows e'en" or "the evening of All Saints Day," and it came to be celebrated as an early anticipation of the day that followed, the same way people celebrate Christmas Eve in anticipation of Christmas Day.

**But why celebrate All Saints Day in the first place?** Some of our Protestant friends object to the Catholic custom of celebrating certain saints and giving them special attention. Aware that there are liturgical days commemorating individual saints, they want to know why there aren't celebrations for all the other people in heaven.

After all, in Revelation John describes the population of heaven this way:  
After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Rev. 7:9-10).  
Don't all those other people deserve recognition, too?

The answer is that they do, and this is why we have All Saints Day. Since there are only 365 days in the year, not every person in heaven can have his own liturgical commemoration, but

they all should be recognized for the way they cooperated with God's grace. Thus All Saints Day was created to commemorate every last individual in heaven, even those who salvation is known to God alone.

So if your departed grandmother is in heaven, even though she's never been canonized, on All Saints Day the Catholic Church commemorates her and the work God did in her life. She, too, has a place in the liturgical calendar, alongside the more famous saints.

**Precisely when that day occurs** will depend which liturgical calendar you are using. In many Eastern Catholic Churches, the commemoration of all the saints is held on the Sunday after Pentecost, which has a certain logic since Pentecost was the event that led to the evangelization of the world and the salvation of so many souls.

In the West, November 1 became the date on which all the saints are commemorated. Sometimes people will try to tarnish this with pagan associations, claiming that it was based on the Gaelic holiday Samhain, as celebrated in the British Isles.

But All Saints Day didn't originate in the British Isles. The reason November 1 was picked is that Pope Gregory III (731-741) dedicated a chapel in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome to all the saints and fixed its anniversary as November 1.

Later, Pope Gregory IV (827-844) extended this celebration to the whole of the Western Church. This led to the commemoration of the evening before as All Hallows Eve, and it led to the following day—November 2—being celebrated as All Souls Day, when we pray for all the souls who are still being purified on their way to heaven.

Though we disagree about various matters, both Catholics and Protestants say the Apostles' Creed, and when we do so we profess belief in "the communion of saints." The celebration of All Saints Day is one of the ways Catholics live out this profession.

**All Saints Day came to be a very important** liturgical day, and today it is a holy day of obligation, meaning that Catholics must observe it by going to Mass, as they do on Sundays. This makes All Saints different than the commemorations of individual saints. None of the saints living after biblical times are commemorated with holy days of obligation. However famous saints like Augustine, Aquinas, and Thérèse of Lisieux may be, they don't have such an important day on the liturgical calendar.

But the whole body of the saints in heaven—sainted grandmothers included—do. The Catholic Church thus not only remembers individual saints; it takes seriously its profession of the entire communion of saints.