

What Are the Origins of All Saints Day and All Souls Day?

All Liturgical Churches observe All Saints Day and All Souls Day. It has become a feast that is observed mechanically; but how many of us know why we celebrate these two feasts and it's background? Should you be interested please read on.

Both the Feast of All Saints and the Feast of All Souls evolved in the life of the Church independently of paganism and Halloween. However, elements of pagan practices were perhaps brought in by some cultures or attached themselves to the celebration of All Saints and All Souls.

Let us first address the **Feast of All Saints**. The exact origins of this celebration are uncertain, although, after the legalization of Christianity in 313 AD, a common commemoration of the saints, especially the martyrs, appeared in various areas throughout the Church. For instance, in the East, the **city of Edessa celebrated this feast on May 13; the Syrians, on the Friday after Easter; and the city of Antioch, on the first Sunday after Pentecost**. Both St. Ephrem (d.373) and St. John Chrysostom (d.407) attest to this feast day in their preaching. **In the West**, a commemoration for all the saints also **was celebrated on the first Sunday after Pentecost**.

The primary reason for establishing a common feast day was because of the desire to honour the great number of martyrs, especially during the persecution of Emperor Diocletian (284-305), the worst and most extensive of the persecutions. Quite simply, **there were not enough days of the year for a feast day for each martyr and many of them died in groups**. A common feast day for all saints, therefore, seemed most appropriate.

In 609, the Emperor Phocas gave the Pantheon (a Roman Temple) in Rome to Pope Boniface IV, who rededicated it on May 13 under the title of "St. Maria ad Martyres" (St. Mary and All Martyrs). Whether the Holy Father purposefully chose May 13 because of the date of the popular celebration already established in the East or whether this was just a happy coincidence is open to debate.

The designation of November 1 as the Feast of All Saints occurred over time. **Pope Gregory III (731-741) dedicated an oratory in the original St. Peter's Basilica in honour of all the saints on November 1st. and this date then became the official date for the celebration of the Feast of All Saints in Rome**. St. Bede (d.735) recorded the celebration of All Saints Day on November 1 in England, and such a celebration also existed in Salzburg, Austria. Ado of Vienne (d.875) recounted how Pope Gregory IV asked King Louis the Pious (778-840) to proclaim November 1 as All Saints Day throughout the Holy Roman Empire. **Sacramentary of the 9th and 10th centuries also placed the Feast of All Saints on the liturgical calendar on November 1.**

According to an early Church historian, John Beleth (d.1165), Pope Gregory IV (827-844) officially declared November 1 the Feast of All Saints, transferring it from May 13. However, Sicard of Cremona (d.1215) recorded that **Pope Gregory VII (1073-85) finally suppressed May 13 and mandated November 1 as the date to celebrate the Feast of All Saints**. In all, we find the Church establishing a liturgical feast day in honour of the saints independent of any pagan influence.

Along with the Feast of All Saints developed **the Feast of All Souls**. The Church has consistently encouraged the offering of prayers and Mass for the souls of the faithful departed. At the time of their death, these souls are not perfectly cleansed of forgivable sin or have not atoned for past transgressions, and thereby are deprived of the Heavenly Vision. The faithful on earth can assist these souls in attaining the Heavenly Vision through their prayers, and the prayer offering of Mass.

In the early days of the Church, **the names of the faithful departed were posted in Church** so that the community would remember them in prayer. **In the sixth century, the Benedictine monasteries held a solemn commemoration of deceased members at Whitsuntide**, the days following Pentecost. **In Spain**, St. Isidore (d.636) attested to a **celebration on the Saturday before Sexagesima Sunday** (the second Sunday before Lent, the eighth before Easter, in the old calendar). **In Germany**, Widukind, Abbot of Corvey (d.980) **recorded a special ceremony for the faithful departed on October 1st**. St. Odilo, **the Abbot of Cluny** (d.1048), **decreed for all of the Cluniac monasteries that special prayers be offered and the Office of the Dead sung for all of the souls in Purgatory on November 2, the day after All Saints**. The Benedictines and Carthusians adopted that same devotion, and soon November 2 was adopted as the Feast of All Souls for the whole Church.

Other customs have arisen over time in the celebration of All Souls Day.

The Roman Catholics in the fifteenth century instituted a custom of each priest offering three Masses on the Feast of All Souls. Pope Benedict XIV in 1748 approved this practice, and it rapidly spread throughout Spain, Portugal, and Latin America. During World War I, Pope Benedict XV, recognizing the number of war dead and the numerous Masses that could not be fulfilled because of destroyed Churches, granted all priests the privilege of offering three Masses on All Souls Day: one for the particular intention, one for all of the faithful departed, and one for the intentions of the Holy Father.

In Mexico, relatives make garlands, wreathes, and crosses of real and paper flowers of every colour to place on the graves of deceased relatives on the morning of All Souls. The family will spend the entire day at the cemetery. The Priest will visit the cemetery, read a portion from the Holy Bible and offer prayers for the dead, and then bless the individual graves.

Similar practices occur in Louisiana. The relatives whitewash and clean the tombstones, and prepare garlands, wreathes, and crosses of real and paper flowers to decorate them. In the late afternoon of All Souls, the priest processes around the cemetery, blessing the graves and reciting the Rosary (Roman or Anglican). Candles are lit near the graves at dusk, one for each member of the deceased. On All Souls day, special prayers are offered at the cemetery.

Nevertheless, All Souls Day as well as all Saints Day are rooted in Christian belief and arose in this life of the Church through a healthy spirituality, despite some pagan trappings that may have survived and have remained attached to their celebration.

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