

☰ Topic Page: [All Saints' Day](#)

Definition: **All Saints' Day** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

In the Christian liturgical calendar, the day on which all the saints are commemorated. The feast is observed on November 1 in the West, and on the first Sunday after Pentecost (Whitsun) in the East. The eve of the day is celebrated in some western countries as Hallowe'en.



Image from: [1904 magazine illustration depicting All Saints'... in The Halloween Encyclopedia](#)

Summary Article: **All Saints' Day**
From *The Halloween Encyclopedia*

(also All Hallows' Day, All-hallowmas, Haliday) — Christian feast day observed on November 1, the eve of which is now celebrated as Halloween (from “All Hallows' Even”). The day celebrates all Christian saints (known and unknown); it's also the eve of All Souls' Day, so prayer for the dead figures in the days' rituals. A festival of the first rank, once with vigil and octave (an eight-day period celebrated after the festival, during which special prayers are said daily), All Saints' is also a holy day of obligation on which all Catholics are obliged to attend mass, and they must abstain from “work or business that would inhibit the worship to be given to God, the joy proper to the Lord's Day, or the due relaxation of mind and body.” The feast is held on the first of the octave, and is observed by Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and some other Protestant denominations.

Reference to a feast like All Saints' first occurs in the writings of St. Ephrem Syrus (a.d. 306–373), while St. Chrysostom (a.d. 347–407) assigned to it a definite day, the first Sunday after Pentecost (when it is still observed in the East). The day was not fully established until the consecration of the Pantheon in Rome to Christian usage by Pope Boniface IV on May 13, 609 (the Pantheon was originally a pagan temple first built in 27 b.c., and was given to the Church by the Roman Emperor Phocas; it was consecrated to the Virgin Mary and all the martyrs under the name Santa Maria Rotunda). The day was celebrated on May 13 until Pope Gregory III (whose pontificate ran from 731 to 741) dedicated a chapel in the Basilica of St. Peter to “All the Saints” on November 1. Gregory IV (pope from 827 to 844) ordered its universal observance, and Sixtus IV (1471–1484) added the octave (which was suppressed in 1955) and liturgical vigil. At the Reformation the festival was retained in the calendars of the Church of England and many of the Lutheran churches; in the latter, however, it has fallen into complete disuse. In the calendar in the *Alternative Service Book* (1980), the Octave Day (November 8) is assigned to the “Saints and Martyrs of England.”

The choice of date for All Saints' Day has spurred a considerable amount of debate among academics. Although many chroniclers of the Catholic Church believe the date was moved to November 1 (just after harvest) in order to more easily feed the many pilgrims who flocked to Rome for the celebration, most historians believe the date was shifted to assist Irish missionaries in turning the Celts away from observing their great festival of Samhain, which began at sunset on October 31. A famous letter from Pope Gregory I to a missionary on his way to England (dated 601) first discusses the doctrine of syncretism, or trying to co-opt pagan practices as opposed to aggressively stamping them out. Interestingly, one point in favor of this argument may be the original date for All Saints' Day: May 13 was once the final night of the three-day Roman festival of the dead Lemuria.

All Saints' Day has been celebrated all over the world for hundreds of years, and nearly every country which celebrates it has developed unique customs. Some of these customs have obviously contributed to the contemporary rituals of Halloween, while others remain unique to All Saints' Day. In some areas there was little actual observance of All Saints' since it fell between Halloween (Samhain) and All Souls Day; a few British areas, however, record specific All Saints' Day customs, such as a children's bonfire noted in eighteenth-century Leicestershire. In 19th century Derbyshire, it was a common All Saints' Day custom to decorate the graves of deceased loved ones with flowers. A medieval practice involved celebrating All Saints' Day with a procession around the church in which parishioners dressed as angels and saints (and even a few devils), and may have been a forerunner to the modern trick or treat.



Eleventh-century manuscript portrait of Pope Gregory I

In Britain the day was once celebrated by the ringing of bells and by souling.

In France the day is known as Toussaint; graves there are decorated for the week prior to November 1. In one French custom, children ask their neighbors for flowers with which to decorate the churches on this date. In Brittany, macabre pranking is popular, with children putting up candles in graveyards or rattling bones in pails on Halloween night.

In many European areas candles and lanterns are lit on All Saints' Eve and left burning through the night. In Germany, where the day is known as *Allerheiligen*, they call these "lights of the holy souls" *Seelenlichter*.

One of the loveliest All Saints' Day celebrations is found at the contemporary site of the notorious Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz in Poland. Each November 1st, visitors to the Auschwitz I site place thousands of lighted candles around the camp in commemoration of the camp's victims during World War II.

In Belgium, it's called *Aller-Heiligen Dag*; there the traditional observance includes cemetery visiting,

grave decorating and candle lighting on the Eve.

In Spain at dark on Halloween cakes and nuts are laid on graves to bribe the spirits not to disturb the vigils of the saints.

In the Portuguese Cape Verde islands (off the west coast of Africa), the Day of the Faithful Dead (*dia di fiel difunt'*) was celebrated three days after All Saints' Day. Families offered small amounts of money to priests to say a prayer for any departed relatives who had died at an age when they'd been "old enough to sin" (likely 12 years of age or older); ghosts were thought to be in attendance, and it was believed that lame ghosts had set out three days earlier to arrive in time. Children were warned to avoid a large plant called the *palh' fed'* on All Saints' Day; playing near the plant, which held white blossoms large enough to hide under, might cause the unwary child to be caught by the *finad' pÉ quebrad'*, a ghost with a broken leg.

In certain areas of North America (e.g. New Mexico), All Saints' Day is celebrated by bringing food for the parish priest. In Acoma, New Mexico, boys once went about in groups uttering an invocation which translated roughly to:

Let's pray, let's pray,

We are little angels,

From heaven we come

If you don't give to us

Your doors and windows

We will break.

(See Days of the Dead for other references to angelic children on this day). The Acoma boys also rang a bell and uttered the prayer: "*Padre spirito santo amen.*" Food was placed in the cemetery for the dead.

In Mexico it's *El Día de los Santos*, or simply *Todos Santos*, and is celebrated as part of a larger festival (which incorporates both the Catholic tradition and pre-Columbian themes) known as Days of the Dead.

In Trinidad, families visit graves on All Saints' Day, then return home, where they knock three times and then enter saying, "Good night, good night. Who is here? I come, I come." Food prepared for the dead is unsalted, and families save the wax from candles burned on this day to cure colds, rheumatism, and other ills.



1904 magazine illustration depicting All Saints' Day (by E. Friant)

In the Philippines the day is called *Undas*, and families spend the day and night at graves, decorating, lighting candles, and even playing bingo or mah-jongg.

In Guatemala, the Santiago Atitlan Indians celebrate All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day with a kite festival, since they believe sending the kites up to the heavens helps them to communicate better with their deceased kin. The kites are very large and colorful.

In Bolivia it is *Kawsas Qanchis* ("Our Living with the Dead"), and the following day is *Kachaypari* ("send off"), when souls are sent on their way by the pounding feet of many dancers. Families feast, with a table set just for the returned souls' meals. Special foods include boiled beans, grain, and baked potatoes. Designated eaters called *Mihuq* even eat on behalf of the dead.

In New Orleans, All Saints' Day in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a festive time, with visits to graveyards to clean and decorate tombs, mixed with feasting, partying, and gossiping; in fact, a 1904 guidebook to the city says that "New Orleans has two great festivals— the Carnival, when she invites strangers from all parts of the world to come and make merry with her, and 'All Saints,' the great home festival, when, heart to heart, the entire city meets on common ground to pay its tribute to the loved and lost." Graves were decorated with huge bouquets of chrysanthemums, and boys often earned extra money by offering grave-cleaning services. New Orleans's state of Louisiana remains the only one in the U.S. which recognizes All Saints' Day as a legal holiday.

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