

**NOVEMBER 1**

## **FEAST OF ALL SAINTS**

The earliest certain observance of a feast in honor of all the saints is an early fourth-century commemoration of "all the martyrs." In the early seventh century, after successive waves of invaders plundered the catacombs, Pope Boniface IV gathered up some 28 wagonloads of bones and reinterred



them beneath the Pantheon, a Roman temple dedicated to all the gods. The pope rededicated the shrine as a Christian church. According to Venerable Bede, the pope intended "that the memory of all the saints might in the future be honored in the place which had formerly been dedicated to the worship not of gods but of demons" (*On the Calculation of Time*).

But the rededication of the Pantheon, like the earlier commemoration of all the martyrs, occurred in May. Many Eastern Churches still honor all the saints in the spring, either during the Easter season or immediately after Pentecost.

How the Western Church came to celebrate this feast in November is a puzzle to historians. The Anglo-Saxon theologian Alcuin observed the feast on November 1 in 800, as did his friend Arno, Bishop of Salzburg. Rome finally adopted that date in the ninth century.

### **Comment:**

This feast first honored martyrs. Later, when Christians were free to worship according to their conscience, the Church acknowledged other paths to sanctity. In the early centuries the only criterion was popular acclaim, even when the bishop's approval became the final step in placing a commemoration on the calendar. The first papal canonization occurred in 993; the lengthy process now required to prove extraordinary sanctity took form in the last 500 years. Today's feast honors the obscure as well as the famous—the saints each of us have known.

### **Quote:**

“After this I had a vision of a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue. They stood before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands.... [One of the elders] said to me, “These are the ones who have survived the time of great distress; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9,14).

**NOVEMBER 2**

## **FEAST OF ALL SOULS**

The Church has encouraged prayer for the dead from the earliest times as an act of Christian charity. "If we had no care for the dead," Augustine noted, "we would not be in the habit of praying for them." Yet pre-Christian rites for the deceased kept such a strong hold on the superstitious imagination that a liturgical commemoration was not observed until the early Middle Ages, when monastic communities began to mark an annual day of prayer for the departed members.

In the middle of the 11th century, St. Odilo, abbot of Cluny (France), decreed that all Cluniac monasteries offer special prayers and sing the Office for the Dead on November 2, the day after the feast of All Saints. The custom spread from Cluny and was finally adopted throughout the Roman Church.

The theological underpinning of the feast is the acknowledgment of human frailty. Since few people achieve perfection in this life but, rather, go to the grave still scarred with traces of sinfulness, some period of purification seems necessary before a soul comes face-to-face with God. The Council of Trent affirmed this purgatory state and insisted that the prayers of the living can speed the process of purification.

Superstition still clung to the observance. Medieval popular belief held that the souls in purgatory could appear on this day in the form of witches, toads or will-o'-the-wisps. Graveside food offerings supposedly eased the rest of the dead.

Observances of a more religious nature have survived. These include public processions or private visits to cemeteries and decorating graves with flowers and lights. This feast is observed with great fervor in Mexico.

### **Comment:**

Whether or not one should pray for the dead is one of the great arguments which divide Christians. Appalled by the abuse of indulgences in the Church of his day, Martin Luther rejected the concept of purgatory. Yet prayer for a loved one is, for the believer, a way of erasing any distance, even death. In prayer we stand in God's presence in the company of someone we love, even if that person has gone before us into death.

### **Quote:**

"We must not make purgatory into a flaming concentration camp on the brink of hell—or even a 'hell for a short time.' It is blasphemous to think of it as a place where a petty God exacts the last pound—or ounce—of flesh.... St. Catherine of Genoa, a mystic of the 15th century, wrote that the 'fire' of purgatory is God's love 'burning' the soul so that, at last, the soul is wholly aflame. It is the pain of wanting to be made totally worthy of One who is seen as infinitely lovable, the pain of desire for union that is now absolutely assured, but not yet fully tasted" (Leonard Foley, O.F.M., *Believing in Jesus*).

*Eternal rest, grant unto them, O Lord,  
and let perpetual light shine upon them.  
Amen.*

