

ON THE FESTIVAL OF HALLOWEEN

It is that time of the year when the secular society in which we live is preparing for the festival of Halloween. Because most of us are either newly Orthodox or newly aware of our Orthodoxy, it is absolutely necessary that we examine every aspect of our involvement in the world, its activities, festivals, associations and societies in order to discern whether or not these involvements are compatible or incompatible with the Holy Orthodox faith. This is a difficult task which leads to some pain when we realize that there are popular organizations and activities in which we are unable to participate. This pain becomes most acute when our friends and closest relatives do not share our convictions.

Though non-Orthodox Christians, our schools, our local community organizations and all forms of entertainment in television, radio, and the press will share in and capitalize upon the festival of Halloween, it is impossible for Orthodox Christians to participate in this event at any level. The issue involved is simple faithfulness to God and the Holy Orthodox Christian faith. Halloween has its roots in paganism and continues to be a form of idolatry in which Satan, the angel of death, is worshipped. As we know, the very foundation of our Holy Church is built upon the blood of the martyrs who refused under the painful penalties of cruel torture and death to worship, venerate, or pay obeisance in any way to the idols who were Satan's angels. Because of the faithfulness through obedience and self-sacrifice of the Holy Martyrs, God poured out upon His Holy Church abundant Grace and its numbers increased daily, precisely at a time when one would have expected the threat of persecution to extinguish the flame of faith. But, contrary to the world's understanding, humble faithfulness and obedience to God are the very life lines of our life in Christ through Whom we are given true spiritual peace, love and joy, and the participation in the miraculous workings of His Holy Spirit. Therefore, the Holy Church calls us to faithfulness by our turning away from the falsehood toward Truth and eternal life.

With regard to our non-participation in the pagan festival of Halloween we will be strengthened by an understanding of the spiritual roots and history of this anti-Christian feast. The feast of Halloween began in pre-Christian times among the Celtic peoples of Great Britain, Ireland, and northern France. These pagan peoples believed that life was born from death. Therefore, they celebrated the beginning of the "new year" in the fall (on the eve of October 31 and into the day of November 1) when as they believed, the season of cold, darkness, decay and death began. A certain deity whom they called Samhain was believed by the Celts to be the Lord of death and it was he whom they honored at their New Year's festival.

There were, from an Orthodox Christian point of view, many diabolical beliefs and practices associated with this feast which it will be clear, have endured to this time. On the eve of the New Year's festival, the Druids who were the priests of the Celtic cult, instructed their people to extinguish all hearth fires and lights. On the evening of the festival a huge bonfire built from oak branches, which they considered sacred, was ignited. Upon this fire sacrifices of crops, animals, and even human beings were burned as an offering in order to appease and cojole Samhain, the lord of death. It was believed that Samhain, being pleased by their faithful offerings, allowed the souls of the dead to return to their homes for a festal visit on this day. It is from this belief that the practice of wandering about in the dark dressed up in costumes imitating ghosts, witches, hobgoblins, and communion with the dead by what was, and still is, a ritual act of imitation, through costume and the activity of wandering around in the dark of night, even as the souls of the dead were believed to wander.

The dialog of trick or treat is also an integral part of this system of beliefs and practices. It was believed that the souls of the dead who had entered into the world of darkness, decay, and death, and therefore into total communion with and submission to Samhain, the lord of death, bore the affliction of great hunger on their festal visit. Out of this grew the practice of begging, which was a further ritual enactment and imitation of what the Celts believed to be the activities of the souls of the dead on their festal visit. Associated with this is the still further implication that if the souls of the dead and their imitators were not appeased with "treats", i.e. offerings, then the wrath and anger of Samhain, whose angels and servants the souls of the dead had become, would be unleashed through a system of "tricks", or as an Orthodox Christian would understand it, curses.

Obviously then, from an Orthodox Christian point of view, participation in these practices at any level is impossible and idolatrous, a genuine betrayal of our God and our Holy Faith. For if we participate in the ritual activity of imitating the dead by dressing up in their attire or by wandering about in the dark, or by begging with them, then we have willfully sought fellowship with the dead, whose lord is not Samhain as the Celts believed, but Satan, the evil one who stands against God. Further, if we submit to the dialog of "trick or treat", we make our offering not to innocent little children, but rather to Samhain, the lord of death whom they have come to serve as imitators of the dead, wandering in the dark of night.

There are other practices associated with Halloween which we must stay away from. As was mentioned above, on the eve of the Celtic New Year festival, Druid priests instructed their faithful to extinguish their hearth fires and lights and to gather around the fire of sacrifice to make their offerings and to pay homage to the Lord of Death. Because this was a sacred fire, it was from this that the fire of the new year was to be taken and the lights and hearth fires rekindled. Out of this arose the practice of the Jack O'Lantern (in the USA a pumpkin, in older days other vegetables were used) which was carved in imitation of the dead and used to convey new light and fire to the home where the

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lantern was left burning throughout the night. Even the use and display of the Jack O'Lantern involves celebration of and participation in the pagan festival of Death, honoring the Celtic god Samhain. Again Orthodox Christians must in no way share in this cultic activity, but rather we should counter our inclinations and habits by burning candles to Our Savior and to the Most Holy Mother of God and to all the Holy Saints.

In the ancient Celtic rite, divination was also associated with this festival. After the fire had died out, the Druids examined the remains of the sacrifices in order to foretell, as they believed was possible, the events of the coming year. Since this time the Halloween festival has been the night for participation in all kinds of sorcery, fortune telling, divination, games of chance, and in latter medieval times, Satan worship and witchcraft.

In the days of the early Celtic Church, which was strictly Orthodox, the Holy Fathers attempted to counteract this pagan New Year festival which honored the Lord of Death, by establishing the Feast of All Saints on the same day (in the East the Feast of All Saints is celebrated on the Sunday following Pentecost). As was the custom of the Church, the faithful Christians attended a Vigil Service in the evening and in the morning a celebration of the Holy Eucharist. It is from this that the term Halloween developed. The word Halloween has its roots in the Old English of All Hallow e'en, i.e. the Eve commemorating all those who were hallowed (sanctified) - Halloween. The people who had remained pagan and therefore anti-Christian and whose paganism became deeply intertwined with the Occult, Satanism, and Magic reacted to the Church's attempt to supplant their festival with increased fervor on this evening. In the early middle ages Halloween became the supreme and central feast of the Occult, a night and day upon which acts of witchcraft, demonism, sorcery, and Satanism of all kinds were practiced. Many of these practices involved desecration and mockery of Christian practices and beliefs. Costumes of skeletons developed as a mockery of the Church's reverence for Holy Relics; Holy things, such as crosses and reserved sacrament, were stolen and used in perverse and sacrilegious ways. The practice of begging became a system of persecution to harass Christians who did not participate in the offerings to those who served the Lord of Death. One can see in contemporary Western society that the Western Church's attempt to supplant this pagan festival with the Feast of All Saints failed.

Today we will notice that the Roman Catholic Church, Episcopal, and Protestant churches of all kinds join together with the pagan secular world and its institutions, sponsoring costume parties, dances, trick or treat marches, etc. to celebrate the festival of the Lord of Death, who in ancient times was known as Samhain, but in this era is correctly known as Satan, the Angel of Death, who stands against God and the Holy Church. If in fact this day and its pagan festival had been Christianized, these churches would not be supporting and promoting the Celtic pagan practices honoring the Lord of Death; but, rather, they would on this Eve of All the Saints, as did the ancient Church, offer a service of vigilant prayer and thanksgiving, unto the one True God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with offerings of all kinds: the fruits of their labors, oil, candles, alms, prayers, and the chanting of psalms and hymns. And on the following day the faithful would gather again to celebrate the Holy Eucharist, which is God's own service of triumph over death through Resurrection in Jesus Christ unto communion with the One True God and the hope of eternal life.

As we can see in the churches of the West, this is not what happens. The Lord of Death has not only conquered the "churches", but the society in which we live. From what we can now see, it is obvious that contemporary Halloween practices have their roots in paganism, idolatry, and Satan worship. How did something that is obviously contradictory to the Holy Orthodox faith gain acceptance among Christian peoples?

The answer to this question is spiritual apathy and listlessness which are the spiritual roots of atheism and turning away from God. In today's society one is continually urged to disregard the spiritual roots and origins of secular practices under the guise that the outward customs, practices, and forms are cute, fun, entertaining, and harmless. Behind this attitude lies the dogma of atheism which denies the existence of both God and Satan and can therefore conclude that these activities, despite their obvious pagan and idolatrous origin are harmless and of no consequence.

The Holy Church must stand against this because we are taught by Christ that God stands in judgement over everything we do and believe, and that our actions are either for God or against God. Therefore, the customs of Halloween are not innocent practices with no relationship to the spiritual world, but rather they are demonic practices precisely as an examination of their origins prove.

Evil spirits do exist. The devil exists. Christ came into the world "so that, through death, He might destroy him that had dominion of death, that is, the Devil." (Hebrews 2:14). It is imperative for us to realize as Christians that our greatest foes are not our political enemies, but the Evil One who inspires nations and individuals to sin against mankind, and who prevents them from coming to a knowledge of the truth. Unless we realize that Satan is our real enemy, we can never hope for spiritual progress within our lives. "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the world rulers of the darkness of this age, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 6:12)

Today we have a revival of satanist cults; we hear of a satanic service conducted on Halloween night; everywhere Satan reaches out to ensnare as many innocent people as possible. The newsstands are filled with materials on spiritualism, supernatural phenomena, seances, prophecies, and all sorts of demonically inspired works. These works all serve Satan, for they are not the fruit of the Holy Spirit, but the fruit of the spirit of this world.

As Orthodox Christians, we must teach our children that Satan is the father of lies and deceptions, who uses many tricks to make us abandon Christ. In the Church on the night of Halloween we will celebrate a full vigil service with litia commemorating St. John of Kronstadt and Sts. Cyprian and Julian whose faithfulness is a triumph over sorcery and satanism. In the morning we will celebrate the Divine Liturgy in order that we might witness and feed upon the Resurrection of Jesus Christ which is wrought again and again by God's Grace in the supreme sacrament. It is undoubtedly an act of Divine Providence that St. John of Kronstadt, that saintly physician of our souls and bodies, should have his feast day on the very day of Halloween, a day which the world dedicates to the Destroyer, corrupter and deceiver of humanity. God has provided us with this powerful counterpoise and weapon against the snares of Satan and we should take full advantage of this gift, for truly "God is wonderful in His Saints."

Note: Much of the background history for this paper is from the World Book and Encyclopedia Britannica.