

CHURCH STUFF

(A newsletter for Catholic cadets)

Week of 26 October, 2008

To my Catholic brothers and sisters in the Corps:

I was away for a couple of days at a family funeral earlier this week, so this CHURCH STUFF will be a little briefer than usual...but think about this:

If you look around at the mountains, you'll notice the red-orange-gold-yellow-brown in the trees. It's a magical motley time of year.

So lift your eyes from the textbooks and the drills and the formations for just a moment...and pray:

O extravagant God!

In this ripening, red-tinged autumn,
waken in me a sense of JOY in just being alive;
JOY for nothing in general
and everything in particular;
JOY in sun and rain
mating with earth to birth a harvest;
JOY in soft light,
in shyly-disrobing trees;
JOY in the acolyte moon
setting halos around processing clouds;
JOY in the beating of a thousand wings
mysteriously knowing which way is warm;
JOY in wagging tails and kids' smiles
and in this ancient valley of the Hudson;
JOY in the taste of bread and fruit,
the smell of dawn,
a touch,
a song,
a presence;
JOY in having what we cannot live without –
other people to hold and laugh and cry with;
JOY in love,
in YOU...
JOY that we have all of this free of charge.
It is Your GRACE, and no one can take it away from us.

May you not be so busy that God's WONDERS of autumn pass you by.

May transitory trivia not shrivel up your soul.

May God LIVEN YOU UP!

THINGS CATHOLICS CAN DO:

CATHOLIC CADET PRAYER BREAKFAST

The Fall Catholic Cadet Prayer Breakfast will be held Tuesday (28th) at 0615 at the West Point Club. It'll be the usual format: a brief Mass followed by a great breakfast. Voluntary donation: \$2.00. If you'd like to attend, please let your Company Catholic Rep know.

BOOK OF THE DECEASED

During November, we remember our beloved dead in a special way at daily Mass. Please feel free to stop at the Chaplain's Office and inscribe the names of deceased family and friends in our "Book of the Deceased". They will be remembered at daily Mass throughout November.

NO HOLYDAY

Because of its proximity to Sunday, the feast of All Saints (Saturday, 1 November) is NOT observed as a Holyday of Obligation this year.

DID YOU KNOW?

For all you HALLOWE'EN people:

HALLOWE'EN is one of those celebrations that has evoked lots of responses from Christians of every type. Some are for it; some are against it; some think it came from devil-worship; others think it's related to the Feast of ALL SAINTS (1st November) and to the Feast of ALL SOULS (2nd November) in the Catholic Tradition.

So it might be beneficial to consider what we know about the Christian history of this time of year.

The fact that ALL SAINTS and ALL SOULS occur at this time of year can be confusing because no one knows whether it's coincidental or was part of an early Christian desire to "sanctify" pagan customs.

And HALLOWE'EN is one of those pagan customs.

Here's how it developed:

The ancient Celts celebrated their New Year's Day on 1st November, the time of the autumnal equinox. It was the time when they reminded themselves that the earth would soon enter its hibernation and would be ruled by cold and darkness until spring.

It was the perfect time to think about the reality of DEATH, and the Celts spent the evening before 1st November honoring the god Samhain (pronounced "sow-en"). They believed that on that night, Samhain allowed the souls of the dead to return to their earthly homes. They also believed that the souls which had been imprisoned in animals could be freed by means of gifts and sacrifices on that night.

They also believed that other-worldly spirits roamed the earth during that night, playing tricks on people, and that they could be bribed by gifts or fooled by dressing up and looking like them.

It's easy to see where our HALLOWE'EN customs come from, but it's a mistake to equate the whole thing with "devil-worship" or "satanic practices" – because that's not what the ancient pagans believed.

The fact that ALL SAINTS' and ALL SOULS' DAYS occur at the same time is somewhat – but not entirely – coincidental. The early Christians were not always interested in "stamping out" pagan customs. Often, they simply "baptized" the customs, giving them a new meaning.

An example of this would be the custom of having children dress up as Christian saints and heroes rather than ghosts and demons on HALLOWE'EN.

The Feast of ALL SAINTS was originally a springtime celebration of all those saints who didn't have their own day in the Church calendar. It was transferred to the autumn because it was easier to feed the great number of pilgrims who were in Rome and in other pilgrimage centers after the harvest...rather than in the spring, before the planting of the crops.

The Feast of ALL SOULS is also an ancient one, and the original emphasis was "prayer for all departed souls who were not yet in heavenly bliss"; they were still being "purified" (this is where our idea of "Purgatory" comes from).

So HALLOWE'EN basically comes from Celtic "New Year's customs and their belief that the Otherworld comes closest to this world at this time of year. Christianity located two of its earliest celebrations – ALL SAINTS and ALL SOULS – at this time of year, and the resulting mixture has given us an example of "religion influencing culture".

Let's see: what did I leave out?

Jack-o-lanterns.

As a matter of fact, jack-o-lanterns didn't originally have anything to do with HALLOWE'EN. An old Irish legend tells the story of a man named Jack, who died and couldn't get into either heaven or hell. Nobody wanted him.

So the devil threw Jack a lighted coal, which he put into a turnip that he had hollowed out and had been eating. With the lighted coal in the hollow turnip, Jack supposed roams the earth until Judgement Day, when his fate will be decided.

In England and Ireland, people still use turnips or large beets and potatoes from which to carve jack-o-lanterns, but in the USA., we've substituted pumpkins. The Irish brought the custom to the USA, and it's been part of our culture ever since.

Another example of "religion influencing culture"...which is pretty much the whole history of HALLOWE'EN.

GOT A QUESTION?

Q: Father, where does the Catholic doctrine of "transubstantiation" come from? Is it biblical, and/or is it part of the tradition of the Church. Also, why do most other Christian denominations deny "transubstantiation" and believe in a mere symbolic nature to the Eucharist?

A: The word "transubstantiation" has caused a lot more confusion than it was ever meant to. Basically, the word itself was a vocabulary invention that made its appearance among Catholic philosophers in the 1130s.

The word was not used in the Scriptures...but it was an attempt to clarify to the Catholics of the 1100s (and afterwards) what Scripture says about the Eucharist and what the Eucharist really is.

At the time, Catholic thinkers were trying to sort out differing opinions about the Presence of Jesus in the consecrated bread and wine at Mass, and the word “transubstantiation” was their solution to explaining how Jesus is truly present in the bread and wine even though both bread and wine still appeared to the naked eye to be just bread and wine...and nothing more than that.

Keep in mind that at this time in Western history, people were fascinated with philosophy and were always trying to “get to the bottom” of things. Hence, the tendency to come up with new words and concepts to try and explain older beliefs.

Anyway...by using that particular word, what they were trying to get across was their belief that even though the appearances of bread and wine remained the same, the “substance” of both bread and wine became Jesus...truly present.

“Substance” was “the essential nature” of something, after the “appearances” were taken away.

So their conclusion was to explain that while the appearances of bread and wine remained, the “substance” of both bread and wine became Jesus.

Nowadays, some thinkers find the word burdensome and confusing because we don’t use the word “substance” in the same way as those thinkers of the 1100s and 1200s.

Still, it’s a helpful word because it focuses attention on the traditional Catholic belief about the Eucharist: namely, that after the priest repeats the words of Jesus at the Last Supper (“This is my body...This is my blood”), Jesus is present in the bread and wine in a mysterious but very real way, even though the bread and wine look, feel, smell and taste the way they did before the words were spoken.

Catholics also use the words “Real Presence” to describe this belief.

The main opposition to the word “transubstantiation” came at the time of the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s. The Reformers felt that Catholics had attached a lot of superstition to their belief in the Eucharist...and the word “transubstantiation” represented that superstition, in their opinion. So they refused to accept the word or its meaning. Some of the Reformers reinterpreted Catholic belief about the Eucharist and claimed that the bread and wine only “symbolized” Jesus, and of course, this has led to one of the main differences between Catholics and Protestants over the centuries.

Catholics understand that there certainly is symbolism attached to the Eucharist...but our belief goes ‘way beyond symbolism. Essentially, we believe that in receiving the Eucharist, we receive the glorified Jesus as he now exists with the Father. It is a mysterious but Real Presence, but we don’t claim to understand how it happens.

We simply believe that this is the unbroken faith of the Church as it was intended by Jesus and as it has been preserved in the Tradition of Catholicism.

It’s not magic or superstition; it’s the power of God acting within the sacred setting of our common worship, the Mass.

And between Catholics and Protestants, the whole issue has had lots of emotional baggage attached to it over the years, and people have lost sight of what the original purpose of the word “transubstantiation” actually was.

It was simply an attempt (among many) to try and explain what the Holy Eucharist really is.

UNSOLICITED SPIRITUAL THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK:

“Expertise in technology
can never be a substitute
for holiness of life.”

Letter to Catholic Priests
from the Congregation of the Clergy
Rome
19 March, 1999

And that’s the way it is, a day like all days, filled with those events that alter and illuminate our time...

And YOU ARE THERE!

All good wishes for the weekend.
Maybe make some time for a nap at some point...
and know that you’re always in my prayers.
Woodie