**From the Amen Corner**

**October 22, 2017**

It’s come to the time of the year when we have to talk about the great mystery of faith that engages all of us. It’s time to think about the groundbreaking truth of our lives stirring us to the very bottom of our souls and gripping our minds so much we are aware of the Divine and the blessed in our mere lives. Of course, I’m talking about the great question buzzing around this time of year all through the minds and hearts of our people: whether we should celebrate Halloween or not.

So, to clear the brush a little. Halloween is a combination of obsolete words, which were, of course, were not obsolete when they were first used. ‘Ween’ is simply the evening before, that is, the ‘eve’ of. And ‘hallow’ is a word first used to mean spirit or soul and eventually came to mean, specifically, ‘saint’. The old seminary in Ireland was known as “All Hallows” which meant to everyone there, without confusion or anxiety, “All Saints.” The ‘ween’ of all hallows, that is ‘Halloween’ is simply the eve of All Saints. And since Halloween is on Oct 31st and the Church celebrates All Saints Day on the 1st of November, it certainly makes sense. ‘Halloween’ is the evening when we get ready for All Saints Day.

Now, I know, you can ask whether the origin of a word or an expression in enough to settle our regard for it. And you’d be right to wonder if just because we use a word or an expression whether we’re really protected in our interpretation of it. Could Halloween have been corrupted so thoroughly we’re now celebrating what was never intended? It’s a fair question.

After all, how many people know that when we repeat the days of the week we’re invoking the names of pagan gods from the time when people really did believe in them? Sunday is the day of the sun, when people believed it to be a god who had to be propitiated if you wanted him to keep coming up and going down regularly. Monday is the moon’s day, Tuesday is the day of Tiw, the Nordic god of war and law, Wednesday is Woden’s day, etc; all the way to Saturday which is, of course, Saturn’s Day. We learn all of these names at our mother’s knee; not one of us thinks of the pagan gods who might be swirling around in the darkling mists outside of our houses, waiting to break the door down and come in. And certainly not one person imagines we have to get rid of those names just in case invoking them is going to bring the pagan gods back into our lives. Who among us thinks, when I tell my friends I love Tuesdays, I really delight in the Viking god of war? Not many.

So it might be the same, sort of in reverse, when we use the word ‘Halloween.’ Maybe its meaning has migrated so thoroughly away from All Saints Day it means nothing like the original. Perhaps Halloween has come completely off its mooring chains.

But I don’t think so. That it comes just before All Saints Day is something important. I know, I know, we live in a Protestant World in which All Saints Day is meaningless because their interpretation of the faith has cut itself off from honoring saints, although honoring those who have gone before us in faith is actually much older than the bible and was part of Christian practice long before anyone thought to put the documents we now know as the New Testament together. To say we’re getting ready for All Saints Day doesn’t do much for anyone in our environment here. Kids run around in costume and they don’t think a thing about the great saints in the Church. But I think it really does matter that Halloween is on the eve of All Saints Day.

On All Saints Day we are remembering those of our ancestors whose lives of extraordinary holiness set them apart. While we are all baptized into holiness and set on the road to heaven, not all of us are able to grasp the message of holiness as well as others. We’re all supposed to strive to be saints and in the New Testaments the term was used to describe any believer. But in every generation there are those whose circumstances or abilities make them different than the rest. We call those who fit into this category: saints. These are the special ones we recognize, those who have stood out in their examples of what we can all be.

We can all recognize that every child can run around on the playground and can line up and race to a finish line but we all know, when we saw Jackie Joyner Kersee win the Olympics, we were seeing what real running can be. We can all acknowledge that men on average have greater musculature than women and in an average-on-average moment men can run faster, jump higher and hit harder than a woman. And yet, when you watch Venus Williams play tennis and stretch her arms out to return a 100 mph serve, you know you’re watching a woman who can defeat 99% of the men who would care to play tennis with her; she is a tennis player in the way almost no one else is, male or female. She stands out. So it is with the men and women who are saints. We are all called to be holy but when we see these examples, we know what holiness really is.

When All Saints Day comes around we are remembering these extraordinary examples of men and women through all of the ages of the Church whose lives are inspirations to us. Most of them were examples of suffering and difficulty. Many of them were martyrs who gave their lives as witness to their faith in Christ. All of them are people whose lives made it clear what it meant to love Jesus and serve God in their circumstances. By celebrating them we can learn and understand what we could do to celebrate Jesus in our day. It’s why we celebrate them individually and why we celebrate them all together.

And what is the number one thing our recognition of saintliness should do for us? It is to make us aware God is victorious. It was St. Paul who said: if the powers of this world had known they were crucifying the Lord of Glory, they would not have done it. But they did do it and when they did God’s power was greater than their evil. Jesus was raised from the dead by the love of the Father in a display of the one great truth the Church exists to proclaim: nothing is more powerful than God’s love at work in the world.

So we can trust God can make all things work for good. There is no power of evil, no depth of darkness, no moment of despair beyond the power of God to achieve the Divine Goodness. That’s what All Saints Day is and is for. God is at work in the world to bring light to darkness and good out of evil.

It became pretty common in past days to acknowledge: when we celebrate the martyrs and the saints, the forces of evil in the world, who were fooled by their blindness and their vanity, would be included. What better time to make fun of the devil than when we remember the people he tempted and tortured actually triumphed over him? What believer wouldn’t delight in knowing the power of the devil’s temptation is blank in the face of the saints who can accompany us on our journey to God’s goodness and our road to heaven? The devil and the powers of evil were the butt of jokes on All Saints Day. They were the ones we could make fun of.

And so dressing up in red and black and hovering around the celebrations of the saints was part of the party. Why not? If we really do believe . . . . we have every reason to make it part of our laughter. Many of the saints have pointed out over the years, and I can testify to it in my own temptations, the thing the devil hates most of all is real, sincere, laughter – at him.

Think about it: when a little girl dresses in a black dress and a pointed hat and runs around telling everyone she’s a witch, is it because she’s in training to be a witch? I don’t think so. In fact, if witches were everywhere and we lived in mortal horror of being trapped inside of curses and spells and natural magic held us bound in everything, do you think anyone would let a child make fun of such things? Of course not. The only way we have the space to make fun is because we know we have the space to celebrate such things. We know the Norse gods are truly defeated, are no more than empty thoughts; we can invoke their names every day of the week without worry they will come for us. Kids dressed as vampires and Freddy Krueger, or as the Wicked Witch of the West, traipsing around looking and feeling outrageous is the healthiest way to understand and laugh at the prospects of evil in the world. God has overcome the powers of this world and to have the opportunity to know it is the proclamation we all want to make.

So, what about the celebration of the demonic? What about those make too much of this day and actually go for the devil part of it all? If we lived at a day and time in which we really were afraid of witches and spells and the terrible, dark powers of those who ally themselves with the elemental powers of the universe, I’d still maintain we’re better off celebrating as we do. Does anyone think dressing a child in a costume makes the child that person? Is anyone afraid dressing a girl as a princess will cause her to think she is one? Seriously? Do you think, when we read to a first grader the story of Winnie the Pooh or *The Wind in the Willows*, he really believes a bear can talk or a frog can drive a car? Does any child beyond about 7 years old really, actually think by putting on a Superman suit he really can jump off of the roof and fly away? When you put on a vampire costume when you were little, did you really think you were going to arise at midnight to go looking for victims? Did you think a zombie mask would turn you into one of the undead?

Wasn’t it really something else? Didn’t you want to have fun when you put your costumes on? Didn’t you delight in the moment when you could pretend you looked like someone else outside the limits of yourself and your world? Isn’t there a moment when putting on a mask and dressing up liberates you for a world somehow beside this world we see and know every day? And what better time to do such a thing than when the whole world is having fun with pretend and pretense? After all, the rest of the year is left for those who put on costumes, whether they’re Marines or judges or mechanics, and strive to enter seriously into the life those costumes are supposed to represent. The whole year is made of a bushel of days for costume parts; Halloween is one day of costume parties. All the rest of the year we’re angry if a man doesn’t become what his costume portrays; this is the time of the year when we laugh because no one becomes what his costume is. In both cases we’re pretending; we shouldn’t allow the pretense of serious adulthood to interfere with the pretense of childish celebration. How often do we remark as mature adults: “a man may put on a uniform or a robe or coveralls, for years; it doesn’t make him brave, make a verdict just or keep a transmission from slipping.”? How have we come to worry one night’s romp in a costume will cost a child her soul? Unless of course we have become terrified of childhood because we have so thoroughly failed at adulthood.

In our day and time the world has become populated with evil fictions. Perhaps it has always been so and we haven’t taken the time to notice, but these days our stories seem to have no firm boundaries between the natural and the supernatural. The more we are a people tired of religion reminding us our lives are embedded in a universe populated by meaning, suffused by divine power and filled with spiritual beings and so banish it from our days, the more we turn to our artists and authors to create a world on screen where such things do live. We presume everyone dies and goes to heaven, no questions asked, yet our TV programs are full of present evil in which there is no hope of any life beyond judgment. When we stopped believing in angels and demons and saviors in the bible we decided we would invent them ourselves and put them on TV. We live religion in our bones and if we can’t have it one way, we’re going to have it another. St. Paul assured us that the role of Christ was to bring salvation to the whole universe groaning under the weight of sin; we have now invented an entire world of those who are simply beyond salvation. It almost makes you think we can’t live without the drama of salvation, even if the best we can do is the thin gasps of *World War Z* or the *Twilight* saga.

Still, a world in which we can laugh and have fun is a world in which we can channel these dread currents. Knowing we can laugh at the pretense of evil, especially when someone tries to convince us there’s nothing to laugh about, is the greatest act of faith of all.

I will concede; there is one thing truly dangerous about how we celebrate Halloween. If we stop laughing at the pretenses of evil, if we continue to stir ourselves with the morbid fear of evil creatures lurking on this night to drag us into the darkness where God is afraid to go because we’re afraid to go, then we’ll start believing evil does have the upper hand. It doesn’t matter if it doesn’t; our lives will change if we start thinking it does. If we’re convinced this is a night so dangerous and so dark, a time so fragile and so awful we should close our doors and throw away our masks, then we will have abandoned faith in what God has wrought. There is nothing more powerful than laughter, celebration and fun. Let’s have fun on the feast of all hallows. After all, the saints certainly are.

And I’ll add a final caveat. If we’re afraid of real evil, then we shouldn’t worry when kids dress up as Thor or Dracula or zombie wild men. We should be much more afraid of a teenager who would put on a bespoke suit and a quiet tie to imitate a Wall Street CEO who helped to crash the economy and destroyed the savings of half-a-billion people worldwide. Or we would truly quake if a daughter decides to dress in the modest blouse of the president of the largest women’s health organization in the US that has presided over the death of 50,000,000 children in their mother’s wombs over the last 45 years, for profit. Or we might grow terrified if one of the boys decides he’d rather prefer the white lab coat of a geneticist who is working on altering the genome of small pox so it can travel in aerosol form and thus become a weapon able to infect and kill by the tens of millions. Real evil looks remarkably like the people you see on C-SPAN and not at all like the ones you see on the *SyFy* Channel. The greatest horrors of the 20th Century were led by three men (in order of the number of corpses-Mao, Stalin and Hitler) who dressed in army uniforms, not blood-stained rags, and wielded the greatest terror weapon in the history of the world so far, not chainsaws or spells or talons, but a pencil.

If we want to hold on to our faith in God who does overcome evil with good and damnation with salvation, let’s also hold on to the truth that God is the one who has taken the initiative and has come to rescue us because we can’t do it on our own. In fact, if we don’t remember, if we don’t celebrate and remind ourselves, if we don’t laugh, we’ll think perhaps nothing can save us. The moment we begin to think evil lies in costumes and can be controlled with a little stern discipline, then we’ll begin to find it’s in all of the places where we refused to laugh and frolic.

Halloween, the eve of All Saints - I’m celebrating. I hope you are.

 Fr. Don Wolf