

**31<sup>st</sup> SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – C (October 31,2010)**  
**(Fr. Jerry Kopacek)**

On this last (weekend)/day of October, I imagine many of the youngsters are getting excited about Halloween and going trick-or-treating. It is rather remarkable to see how big Halloween has become in recent years, and not just because of the candy and the costumes. You see, for example, more and more house and lawn decorations—some in fact getting rather elaborate. And the stores start putting up their Halloween displays in the latter part of summer—I saw some in late August, with the school year having just begun! Of course you know what will happen: as soon as the Halloween displays come down on November 1, the Christmas display will spring right up. Don't you wish they would just let us catch our breath for at least a couple of weeks??

But back to Halloween for a moment: with all its emphasis on parties and treats, you would never know that its origin is found in the Catholic faith; specifically, in the feast of All Saints, or All Saints Day on November 1. This is a holy day in the Church calendar—however, because it falls on Monday this year, it is not a day of obligation regarding taking part in Mass. This is one of those holy days for which the U.S. bishops several years ago said the obligation to attend Mass was removed if it fell on Saturday or Monday. We will celebrate All Saints day, of course, at the usual Monday Mass time of 7:30 a.m.—you are certainly invited to take part.

All Saints Day has been a major Church feast since way back in the earlier Middle Ages. It was observed on November 1 since the 700's and in the mid-800's Pope Gregory IV directed this feast to be observed by the universal Church. A few centuries later the feast of All Souls came to be observed on November 2 throughout Europe (and later elsewhere) as a way to pray for the souls of the faithful departed. The feast of All Saints also had been known as the feast of All Hallows—to 'hallow' something or someone means to make it holy or sacred, to give great respect. Think, for example, how in the Lord's Prayer we say: "Our Father, who art in heaven, **hallowed** be thy name..." The saints are certainly the holy ones in heaven, and so they are to be hallowed—we honor them with great respect and devotion.

Well, if November 1 was observed as the feast of All Saints or All Hallows, then the night before was called All Hallows Evening (or Even)—think of how we call December 24 Christmas **Eve**. As the use of words and language changes over time, it does not take much imagination to see how the phrase "All Hallows Eve" was gradually shortened to "Halloween"—and thus it was. So that is where the word "Halloween" comes from and why it is connected to October 31. The costumes and the trick-or-treating? Those customs developed much later on for reasons not having much if anything to do with All Saints Day. In fact, most of the current Halloween traditions are mainly of American origin and are little known elsewhere if at all.

Our tradition of Halloween does, however, give us an opportunity to reflect on how well we respond to Jesus' call to holiness, to become saints. The youngsters love to dress up in costumes and masks of all kinds, shapes and sizes; I understand that some adults like to do the same thing...and can get very imaginative about it, to say the least! The masks often do a very effective job of hiding the child's identity—you have no idea who is ringing your doorbell with their plastic pumpkin already filling up with candy. And it is all in good fun to be sure.

But sometimes we all wear masks, so to speak, at any time of the year and we do so for reasons that are not so innocent or harmless. God created us all in his image and likeness and Jesus redeemed us all by his suffering, death and resurrection—but our words, actions and attitudes may well hide or mask these truths. Christ our light has shown us the way of love for God and others, but how often we can put on the mask of selfishness and "what's-in-it-for-me?" Jesus our Savior teaches by his own example the power and beauty of forgiving those who crucified him, but how often we put on the mask of bitterness and

stubborn determination to hold a grudge. The eternal Son of the Father challenges us to grow in conversion and holiness, but how often we hide under the mask of “everyone else is doing it—why can’t I?”

The gospel today gives us a powerful example of someone who stripped off his mask of sin and deceit as the result of his encounter with Jesus. Zaccheus was a tax collector—a profession often leading to great wealth because they would often keep some of what they collected for themselves. No wonder they were scorned and despised as great sinners by the people. But Zaccheus had heard about this Jesus and wanted to see him. When Jesus came to his town, he wanted to dine with this sinner—Jesus so often sought out the marginalized, “to seek and save what was lost.” That encounter radically changed Zaccheus: he received Jesus with great joy, promised to give to the poor and to repay fourfold anyone he had cheated. Off came the masks of corruption and selfishness—and Zaccheus showed his true self to Jesus and to the world, the man God created and intended him to be.

Jesus loves each and every one of us with an infinite and tender compassion; he wants us all to be among that numberless crowd of his great saints—All Saints—in heaven. This earthly life is given to us to prepare for that eternal gift of joy that mere words cannot even begin to describe. What masks do we still wear and cling to; in what ways do we keep trying to hide from God, from others and from ourselves what he has made us to be? God grant us the desire and the grace to be like Zaccheus: to strip off those masks to reveal to all—and perhaps most especially to ourselves—our true identity as his beloved children redeemed by his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.