



An Authentically Anglican Halloween

When I was a kid, Halloween was my favorite holiday. My birthday was just a few days after, so all of my parties had Halloween themes. I loved dressing up in costumes, going to haunted houses to get the bejeebers scared out of me, and, of course, there was the candy--what kid does not love candy?

Nevertheless, I grew up. And now, I am both a parent and a priest concerned with the faith formation of those in my charge, such that Halloween, with its emphasis on all things scary and evil, has become harder for me to celebrate. My desire to fit in with my friends and neighbors and to relive the memories of my youth stands at odds with my faith and family responsibilities. What do I do? How can I practice my faith and still have fun?

It wasn't until this year that I rediscovered a cultural practice that has become for my family and me, at least, a fun and authentically Anglican/Episcopal way to celebrate the weeks leading up to Halloween: the Day of the Dead or *El Día de los Muertos*. Though this tradition has a pagan origin, (it descends from an Aztec festival dedicated to *Mictecacihuatl*, the goddess of the Underworld), it has been appropriated by the Church to coincide with the church's commemoration of All Saints' and All Soul's (or the Faithful Departed), on November 1 and 2.



Traditional celebrations (practiced mainly in Latin-American and Hispanic countries and communities), include the creation of a family altar (or *ofrenda*)—a specially-placed table decorated with candles, flowers, personal effects and photos of loved ones who have died, and any necessary items for one who has been on a long journey. There are prayers, special food and drinks, and trips to the cemetery to clean and decorate the graves of loved ones, as well as religious services to commemorate the dead.



Probably the most distinctive symbol of this holiday is the colorfully-decorated sugar or papier-mâché skulls (*calaveras* or *calacas*). Far from the macabre ghouls normally used to decorate houses for Halloween, these skulls are happy, “friendly” faces, decorated to resemble the departed loved one(s).

The belief is that once a year (on October 31st), the gates of heaven open up and the souls of the departed return to earth to reunite with family and friends still here. The altar is the place where the souls of our loved ones can return to refresh themselves and commune with us once again. With help from the fragrant scent of the flowers, as well as the skulls with the deceased's name on them, the souls can “find their way home” again.

You may be thinking, “Well, it's an interesting cultural tradition, but how does celebrating Day of the Dead fit our Episcopal faith?”

Well, in our home, we have adopted a number of traditional Day of the Dead practices, and have re-(re?)-appropriated others so that they fit more closely our beliefs. This year our family decorated a beautiful altar, complete with photos of our departed loved ones, homemade *calacas* and flowers made of crêpe paper, and small (kid-friendly) battery-operated votive candles. We colored construction paper *calaveras* and hung them in our windows and on our front door, in lieu of traditional Halloween decorations. And since the idea of wandering souls does not fit our understanding of death and resurrection, per se, our altar is used more as a commemorative display. Therefore, rather than preparing food for weary souls to be placed on the altar, we spent the month gathering around the dinner table, sharing favorite dinners and desserts of our deceased loved ones, telling stories about their life, and praying this prayer found in our Episcopal Book of Common Prayer:



Father of all, we pray to you for those we love, but see no longer: Grant them your peace; let light perpetual shine upon them; and, in your loving wisdom and almighty power, work in them the good purpose of your perfect will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen (page 504).



All in all, our celebration of Day of the Dead has turned out to be an incredibly rich and rewarding experience for the whole family. Through the sharing of our family’s stories, (Grandpa loved custard pie! Uncle Raymond used to call everyone “George” for fun), my children are getting to know family members that they were unable to meet in this life, and are helping to keep the memories of those loved ones alive, as well as reminding us all that we did not get to where we are today without the many sacrifices and experiences of those who came before us.

This practice of prayer and thanksgiving for our loved ones also reminds us that we, as Christians, would not be practicing our faith today were it not for the sacrifices and experiences of that

great cloud of witnesses—the communion of saints—which has gone before us into God’s eternal kingdom, and which continues to intercede with prayers on our behalf.

As my children grow older, I look forward to delving deeper into and sharing the stories of our family’s past—stories of hard work and perseverance, the struggles with abuse and addiction, and the hope for a better future for the generations to come.

And in the meantime, I will continue to share with them another important story of theirs, God’s story of love and redemption: At the beginning of the month, while we were painting and decorating our skulls on the back porch, my then four year old daughter asked, “Mommy, are we going to die?” “Uh-huh.” “Well, why are these skulls smiling?” “Because, honey, they know that death is not the final answer. They know that because Jesus died and resurrected, one day, you and I and Granny and Grandpa and all of our loved ones will live together in heaven with Jesus. And that makes them very happy...” “Yeah, that makes me happy, too, Mommy.”

The Rev. Kiah Webster is a priest in the Diocese of Upper South Carolina. She is married to her best friend, The Rev. Phil Webster, and is mother to four beautiful, inquisitive, and energetic children, ages 7, 6, 5, and 2. She is presently practicing her ministry as a full-time stay at home mom, where, she says, she fields “the really hard questions” about faith and life.