

## 31<sup>st</sup> SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (October 31, 2021)

The big sugar-filled weekend has arrived: Halloween is (tomorrow) here, and the youngsters are looking forward to trick-or-treating. It's good to remember, however, that Halloween finds its origin in the Catholic faith; specifically, in the feast of All Saints—All Saints Day—on November 1. This is a holy day on the Church calendar; but because it falls on a Monday this year, it is not a day of obligation in line with the U.S. bishops' decision several years ago. We will celebrate All Saints Day on Monday, Nov. 1, with Mass at Riceville at 5:30 p.m. At that Mass we will also have our annual remembrance of our cluster parishioners who have died during the last twelve months. All are invited to this special Mass.

All Saints Day has been a major Church feast for well over 1000 years—back in the early Middle Ages. It had also been known as the feast of All Hallows; to 'hallow' something or someone means to make it holy or sacred, to give it 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, those holy souls in heaven, are indeed to be 'hallowed'; though we do not worship the saints (we give worship to God alone), we do 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 Eve (or Even)—think of how we call December 24 Christmas **Eve**. As words and language change over time, it's easy to see how the phrase "All Hallows Eve" was gradually shortened to "Halloween"...and so it was. The costumes and the trick-or-treating and candy galore? All those things developed much later for reasons having little to do with All Saints Day. In fact, most of our current Halloween traditions are mainly of American origin and are little known elsewhere.

Halloween actually does give us an opportunity to think about how 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. And the masks in particular often do a very effective job of hiding the child's identity—you often have no idea who is ringing your doorbell with their plastic pumpkin already filling up with candy.

But sometimes we all wear masks, so to speak, and we do so for reasons that aren't so innocent or harmless. And I'm not talking here about the face masks that have become part of our lives and world during the covid pandemic. Christ our light has shown us the way of love for God and others as the gospel today reminds us, but how often we 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 refuse to remove 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?"

I recently came across the remarkable story of a Frenchman, Jacques Fesch. He grew up in the mid-1900's in a wealthy family in Paris and became a very self-absorbed young man who abandoned his Catholic faith and cared for no one but himself. He turned to crime; and in 1954, in the course of running away from a store he robbed, he shot and killed a policeman who was pursuing him. Fesch was caught by others and was convicted and imprisoned for murder. In

April of 1957 he was sentenced to death and, at the age of 27, was executed by guillotine later that year.

Why am I telling you such a hideous story of what seems to be such a horribly wasted life? Because Jacques Fesch is a powerful example of the truth that God's grace and love can touch and convert the heart of even the most hardened criminal. During his imprisonment and before he was sentenced to death, Fesch experienced a profound conversion and returned to the God who was calling him to repentance and to return to the Divine Mercy. He begged the prison chaplain to hear his confession, and he did. Fesch began to pray and tried to reconnect with his estranged family. He realized he had been living a lie on so many levels; by the grace of God, he removed the masks of sin and selfishness he had worn for so many years. In a letter he wrote to his mother shortly before he was executed, he said: "Be confident about me. God has given me the great grace of drawing me to himself, and when you read these lines I shall be looking upon our Lord Jesus Christ....Abide...in the love of Christ and you will see God. Goodbye dear Mama, and may the Lord keep you, you and all yours. I embrace you in Christ and Mary."

The gospel today presents the scribe who asked Jesus about the most important of all the commandments. Jesus responds with that well-known call to love God with your whole heart, soul, mind and strength—echoing Moses' words that we heard from Deuteronomy in the first reading. Jesus then added the second great commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. The love Jesus talks about here is not simply a strong feeling of affection or attraction, though it can certainly include that. Instead, love is making the gift, the sacrifice of yourself in some way to another for the good, the benefit of the other—and not just for the good feelings that may result in us. Love in this gift-of-self sense is at the very heart of the call to sanctity and to holiness because it is the very heart and essence of God himself; as St. John reminds us in his first letter, "God is love." And this sanctity, this holiness is not impossible for any of us. Pope Benedict said that "to be a saint requires neither extraordinary actions or works nor the possession of exceptional charisms"; rather, it simply means "to listen to Jesus and then to follow him without losing heart when faced by difficulties." That is indeed something that, by the grace of God, we can all do...if we want to.

Jesus loves every one of us with infinite compassion; he wants us all to be among that numberless crowd of his saints—All Saints—in heaven. And he gives us this life on earth to prepare for that gift of infinite value. 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? May God grant us the desire and the grace to be like Jacques Fesch and like all the others who have left this world in the knowledge and joy of the saving embrace of God's merciful love—no matter how sinful their past lives had been. May the Lord help all of us to strip off those masks to reveal to all—and maybe most of all to ourselves—our true identity as his beloved sons and daughters who are redeemed by his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.