

The **CATHOLIC** *Educator*

Some Points
For Discussion. . .

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Halloween

- *What very old custom is reflected in "tricking and treating"?*
 - *What is the difference between superstition and magic?*
 - *Are children being superstitious when they dress up as "ghosts and goblins"?*
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Halloween

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Halloween is an ancient Christian festival, the Eve of all Saints ("All Hallows Eve" is the way the Old English would say it). The day also had special significance for the Celtic people of pre-Christian Europe because they reckoned November 1st to be the first day of their new year. They celebrated New Year's Eve with bonfires, costumes and the telling of ghost stories. Why would they tell ghost stories? Because they believed that on this night Saman, lord of the dead, summoned the spirits of the dead to roam the earth. To keep these spirits from doing them any mischief, the living placated them with gifts of food and drink. Obviously, Christians replaced one feast of the dead with another. We catch a glimpse of the old customs when we see little boys and girls tricking and treating.

Encouraging Superstition

Occasionally people frown disapprovingly on these little people dressed up as ghosts and goblins. "Don't you know you're encouraging superstition," they say. They have the right to their opinion, of course, but I really disagree. Superstition is the conviction that we can manipulate God by our words or rituals. In other words, it is an attempt to control God, to make Him dependent on us. Superstition is not confined to primitive societies. Even in our high-tech society we find people who hesitate to make important decisions on Friday the 13th.

Superstition and Magic

Moral theologians see a difference between superstition and magic. By "Magic" they do not mean the illusions of David Copperfield. The "Magicians" they refer to are those who believe supernatural power can be found in some object, word or ritual. This is the stuff of some of the spooky movies we encounter on the late show. The hero discovers a book of "spells" and wreaks havoc with his incantations. What can we say about people who place medals or statues on their dashboards? Is this magic or superstition? Not unless they believe that those little objects have some power all their own. In the church's eyes, medals and statues are merely symbols of the prayers we offer God or the saints asking for their help. They are not an attempt to manipulate God, nor do we see them having any power by themselves.

Obviously, little children dressing up as goblins or ghosts are not being superstitious any more than they are when they pretend to be Dorothy on her way to Oz. Parents may well object to tricking and treating for any number of reasons; and this is their right. To label the practice "superstitious" is to stretch the definition of the word.