Pastoral Reflection
Oct.31-Nov. 2, 2026

Several years ago I was in Japan in August at the time of their Obon Festival, which celebrates the belief that the ancestors' spirits come back to their homes to be reunited with their family. This is a time of great celebration and family gatherings. People go to their family's grave to call the spirits of ancestors back home. They place gifts of food in front of a *butsudan* (Buddhist altar) in their homes. Incense is burned. Lanterns are lit. Fires are lit at the entrance of houses so the spirits can find their way back home. After 3 days of festivities the spirits are guided back to their world. In Kyoto this is done by lighting huge bonfires in the hills surrounding the city. The bonfires can be in the shape of boats, Japanese characters, or other designs to guide the spirits back to their world. The sending forth is an amazing sight as people gather on balconies and roof tops to watch the home-directing bonfires.

Most cultures have religious traditions which honor the ancestors and provide a time for the different worlds to intersect. An internet search of this topic shows many similarities across history and geography. Our celebration of Halloween, All Saints, and All Souls Day is largely rooted in the Gaelic festival Samhain (SAH-win), which marks the end of the harvest season and the beginning of winter or the darker half of the year. Early Gaelic culture believed that on the night before All Saints, All Hallows Eve, the graves opened up and those who had died were free to roam the earth again. People lit bonfires and wore costumes to ward off the ghosts. One tradition included preparing Soul cakes so the spirits would have something to eat, the original Halloween treat. In the 8th century Pope Gregory III set Nov. 1 as a time to honor all saints and martyrs, and some customs of Samhain were incorporated into the celebration of the feast.

While many of these customs have evolved and even become secularized, the Church still sets aside the holiday to honor our ancestors. Possibly you have experienced the awareness that family members and friends who have died continue to be present, possibly even closer to us than the time we shared life together here on earth. Maybe you have even had the experience that the person has come back to offer comfort or encouragement or direction. The Gaelic belief is that at some times the veil separating our various worlds is very thin and we are able to pass through the curtain that separates us.

Again this year at St. Cronan's you are invited to add pictures of your loved ones to our Altar of Saints. You may also want to do this in your home where you as a family can celebrate the lives of your ancestors, those who have influenced your life – good and bad. We all have a few strange relatives in our families whose lives can also be celebrated. They too made us who we are today. Blessed Saints Day!

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