

# Demons and Saints



William Peter Blatty, the author of “The Exorcist,” described on more than one occasion the secret behind the novel that became arguably the most famous horror film of all time. In a world in which belief in God is fading, Blatty intended “The Exorcist” to be “a novel of faith in the popular dress of a thrilling and suspenseful detective story – in other words, a sermon that no one could possibly sleep through.”

“If there are demons, there must be God,” Blatty often said, but for the past two centuries or more, even many who have considered themselves good Christians have doubted the existence of the devil himself, let alone his lesser minions. But – to turn Blatty on his head – if there are no demons, then what becomes of God? We can’t really understand light until we’ve experienced darkness.

From a young age, I was fascinated by the interplay of darkness and light. Growing up in a small village in west Michigan, without the light pollution of an urban area, I knew what a night with a new moon meant. In those days before porch lights were largely extinguished, to be replaced by the flickering blue light of flatscreen TVs, I used to walk around the big block of our neighborhood at night, passing repeatedly from darkness into light, and back again. The darkness was cold and impersonal and even sometimes frightening, but porch lights and the yellow glow of picture windows meant safety, family and warmth.

And one night every year, all of those porch lights would come on, and I wasn’t the only one out walking. Or rather, all of us neighborhood children were running – running from house to house, ringing doorbells, crying out, “Trick or treat!”

I never had much of a sweet tooth – I was that weird kid whose Halloween candy lasted him more than a year, the one who would finish off the fried okra at Thanksgiving out at Grandma and Grandpa Richert's rather than have a second piece of pie – but I relished Halloween with a passion that I never fully understood until years after my last night wielding a pillowcase and a mask. I was walking the streets of our neighborhood in Rockford, Illinois, 20 years later with my own children when it finally hit me: What I loved about Halloween was the sense of community, the sense of belonging, the sense of everyone I knew drawing together in a world that constantly threatens to tear us apart.

Ironically, what drove that home to me when my children were young was realizing that Halloween night in our neighborhood was often darker than the average night, that more porch lights were off, more curtains were drawn. Between the early 1980s, when I last trick or treated, and the early 2000s, Halloween had come under attack from many different directions. That's a story for another column, but what's important to note is this: Rather than standing in opposition to the feast that follows it, Halloween at its best – even the seemingly secular ritual of kids collecting candy – always represented the triumph of light over darkness, of community over disunity, of good over evil.

I firmly believe it's no coincidence that, about the time Halloween began to fade, All Saints Day started to take on a different character. Rather than stressing the heroic virtue of the saints and calling us to imitate them, too many of the homilies we hear on Nov. 1 (and the songs that replaced the hymns of my youth) suggest that we are just as good as they are. God's grace is superabundant, but there was a time not that long ago when Christians of all stripes still understood that his grace isn't cheap.

"If there are demons, there must be God." But if we're already all saints, rather than men and women who must struggle every

day to put Satan behind us and to embrace the grace God freely offers so that we can build up the Body of Christ, what need is there for God?

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