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All Saints' Day in PHL a generally festive affair (Feature)

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MANILA, Oct. 3 – All Saints' Day in this predominantly Christian Southeast Asian country is, much like many of the other holidays in this nation of 98 million people, a celebratory affair.

It is a day of remembrance and honor for saints — and the names of these saints in the Gregorian calendar crowd each of the 365, if common, or 366, if leap year, boxes for days.

The Catholic and Protestant churches, including the Aglipayan sect — which has its roots in Ilocos Norte, where the first Aglipayan Mass was celebrated in the hill town of Pinili in the early part of the 20th century — celebrate the day on Nov. 1.

But All Souls' Day is also marked by the Filipino Catholics and the Aglipayans.

The Eastern Orthodox Church observes All Saints' Day on the first Sunday after Pentecost. Both All Saints' Day and All Hallows Eve, celebrated the day before, have roots in ancient Celtic beliefs and practices.

On Nov. 1, Filipinos, whatever their religious affiliations, do not just remember and honor the saints they have asked previously to intercede for them in seeking God's blessings.

They also go to the graveyards — the manicured greens of private memorial parks in the metropolis or the now urbanized population centers or the often heavily crowded public town cemeteries often outside the populated municipal blocks.

One graveyard arc north of the capital has an eerie message: “Dakami ita, dakayonto no bigat.” (It's us today, your turn tomorrow.) Another makes a humorist smile, as the legend, at the bayside Santa town cemetery in Ilocos Sur, suggests in bold letters, in English yet: This way to heaven.

Days before the celebration of All Saints' Day, kin of the departed troop to the graveyards and clean up the tombs or uproot wayward grasses including the "cadena de amor," the *Antigonon leptopus* Hook & Arn. coral vine which is abundant in Philippine cemeteries.

On the day itself, relatives — at least in some parts of northern Philippines — go to the graveyards to remember their departed kin 12 years and below, with those 13 years old and above to be remembered, with candles, food and masses the day after, or the better known All Souls' Day.

In the now highly congested metropolis, where Manila lies by the placid bay, the celebration — often complete with ferris wheels and bunches of imported and locally grown different petals — approximates the hilarity of town fiestas marked by marching bands.

In some towns in the Central Luzon Plains, the well- heeled surviving kin gather beside tombs or mausoleums of their departed and, among themselves, play cards, scrabble or mah jong, listen to CD music while killing time overnight until sunrise on All Souls' Day when they pack for home.

Remembering their dead, to them, had been done on All Saints' Day.

Elsewhere farther north, particularly in Ilocos Norte, surviving relatives go to the graveyards twice — the first on All Saints' Day and the second on All Souls' Day, particularly for the occasion, a regular holiday in the Philippines.

They never spend their time overnight from Nov. 1 to Nov. 2.

But on the hours they are visiting the tombs of their departed, they would often ask for prayers and blessings — if a priest is available, which is often, in the area — or ask a town band to play one or two funeral marches.

In either case, the surviving relatives hand to the priest or to the band master a sealed envelope.

In these areas, largely in the rustic countryside, the religious culture of the residents is starkly different from that being witnessed in grass carpeted cemeteries in urban areas.

But in either point of celebration, not many would even bother trying to honor and remember the saints whose intercession they often seek in other times.

To them, this is a day to remember their departed kin.

This is also perhaps, according to some religionists, an opportune time to inculcate yet again in the minds of Christian Filipinos the meaning of All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day, living the faith and examples of the saints as well as the relatives who died, as the parish priest always intones during masses, “in the hope that they will rise again.”

Some scholars, particularly those specializing in feminist theology, are in fact calling for a re-examination of the theology of saints, stressing more than 70 percent of the saints on the liturgical calendar are men.

They add that of the saints canonized in the past 100 years, nearly 80 percent are clergy, 21 percent lay and — this is the beef — a smaller percentage women.

Some 43 years ago, in 1969, Vatican II dropped more than 200 persons from the list of saints in the universal liturgical calendar.

They include Saints Filomena, Barbara, George, Christopher, Nicholas, and Patrick who are withal continued to be given profound respect and whose feasts are continued to be celebrated.

One person who was declared a heretic and burned to death on May 30, 1431 has been canonized as a saint in 1920. This is Joan of Arc.

Not all saints, of course, went directly to heaven after death. There were those who spent some time in Purgatory like St. Albert the Great and St. Severinus the Archbishop of Cologne.

And there were a few considered living saints while still alive. (PNA)

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