All Saints Day in Spain (Todos Los Santos) takes place on November 1st. It is a very important national public holiday, one of the few that hasn't been politized and it is non-swappable to a different regional day.

People from all over the country return to their town or village to visit the graveyards and lay flowers on the graves of deceased relatives. There are few religious days that mean quite so much to the ordinary people of Spain as this solemn festival.

In Spain we consider ourselves fortunate in having two birthdays each year, rather like the British monarchs. Well, it is not two birthdays… but nearly. We have our customary birthday to commemorate the day we were born. But we also celebrate on the day of our personal patron saint, which for most people their patron saint will be the one after whom they were named. In my case, 19th March is San Jose, and my wife's is "el día del Pilar", 12th October (the day we married too). Some of them are public holiday, and it might be cake and even presents. My secondary school RE teacher used to write the Saint's name next to the date in the chalkboard. In other words, we are (or were, as this is shifting) quite aware of "our Satins".

However, on November 1st each year, the Feast of All of the Saints centres around remembering dead family members. Most people will visit the graves of relatives, clean headstones and dress them with all kind of floral displays, from simple bouquets to complex and elaborated crowns. The flowers mainly chrysanthemums, which in Spanish culture symbolise, on the one hand, life and death, and on the other, remembrance. The cemeteries are transformed into a sea of flowers and, in some places, burning candles. Roads around cemeteries will be crammed with traffic, flower sellers line the streets and, sometimes, additional public transport services might be organised. Although this might sound over-commercialised and hectic it is actually, for most people, a day of high emotions. The Eucharist, or Mass, will often be performed in the cemetery several times during the day.

The atmosphere is solemn, but not sad – rather warm and full of respect. It is a time for remembrance, prayer and contemplation. It is a way to honour the deceased… We say 'que bonito es recordar' (how lovely it is to remember). Behind is the underlying idea that The Only Dead Is the One You Don't Remember. It is somehow, a waiting room for the resurrection. The departed are "alive" because we all remember them.

The origins of this feast day, which is also celebrated today in many Spanish-speaking countries, dates back almost 1,300 years. Pope Gregory III dedicated a chapel to all saints in St. Peter's Basilica during his time at the head of the Catholic Church. He wished for all the saints would be venerated at least one day a year.

Who were the saints? Well, all those named by the Hebrews letter. "Those who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies." "Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were

sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented." But also, and all the martyrs who came later, especially in the early church, during the diocletianic persecution at the beginning of the 4th century. There were so many, that remembering each one of them on a particular date became impossible.

Later, in the mid-9th century, Pope Gregory IV extended this feast day to the entire Catholic Church in 835. This was in order to counter the many pagan celebrations that took place at that time. That is why the date of 1 November was chosen for the celebration of All Saints' Day.

Perhaps because of our Jewish inheritance, our festivals are linked to food too. Though this can vary a lot depending on the region, we have two that are spread across the country.

Huesos de santo – Their name literally means 'saints' bones' and refers to their distinctive appearance: white, elongated marzipan tubes that resemble bones – with a thick, yellow filling symbolising bone marrow. The filling is made from egg-yolk cream, and the whole thing has a sweet, almond-and-egg flavour. The traditional recipe was developed in convents.

Buñuelos de viento – these are light, fluffy doughnuts deep-fried in oil, which causes them to expand – hence their name, literally 'doughnuts made of wind'. They are dusted with icing sugar and cinnamon, and are often filled with custard, chocolate or whipped cream. According to an old legend, every buñuelo eaten frees one soul from purgatory, which gives this dessert symbolic significance. The tradition of making them at this time of year is documented in Spanish chronicles as far back as the 17th century and remains alive in many regions of Spain to this day.

I you go to the north of Andalusia or Extremadura, where my father was from, there, roasted chestnuts are a delicacy associated with Día de Todos los Santos and Día de los Muertos, which is the day after. It is said that the first to prepare them were the local altar boys, who wanted to warm themselves up and have a bite to eat whilst ringing the bells early in the morning on 2 November to summon the villagers to the cemetery. Chestnuts have become established as a snack associated with these festivals throughout Spain. By the way, they wouldn't need to warm themselves this year! 23 degrees!

There are other traditions on this day, like the staging of various performances of Don Juan Tenorio. A theatrical play in which two men bet over one of them, Don Juan Tenorio, marrying a nun. The plot carries the main character being hunted… and this is the link to All Saints. If you are lucky, you can see the play across different stages across the town, from squares to episcopal palaces.

In towns like Soria, where my mother was from, it is customary to carry out various literary activities. There is a very famous legend by Gustavo Adolfo Becquer, which perhaps one day, I can tell you.

There are many ways to celebrate this day in my country. But before I close this, I would like to share with you a reflection. It is from a Spanish Jesuit about The anonymous saints

There are anonymous saints – those who were not officially canonised, but whose lives were a true reflection of the Gospel. That is what we are celebrating today. This gives us food for thought. On the one hand, it suggests that throughout history there have been many more than we realise. And on the other, it suggests that even today there are many out there – anonymous men and women – who will probably never feature in the history books or on the liturgical calendars, but who are, nevertheless, saints.

What do they have in common? That their lives point clearly to God. That what they live, what they do, and what they say, reveals the spirit of God to whom they have given free rein in their lives. And that is why, when you see them, you sense that love, mercy, compassion and justice are possible…

How do they differ? In everything else. Surely there are young and old among them, the educated and the illiterate, women and men, those on the right, on the left, or apolitical… There will be shy and outgoing people, hyperactive and unhurried ones. Some will live out the Gospel through constant contact with people. There are surely others who devote their lives to science in the solitude of a laboratory or a library. They dance, pray, have a coffee, embrace, weep, love, get angry, make mistakes, get things right… because they are human, after all

Holiness is not neurotic perfectionism, nor is it virtuous behaviour undertaken merely to pat oneself on the back. It is a form of love: radical, possible, definitive. And it is not desirable simply so that one can feel proud of oneself. It is desirable because it is a way of improving the world, and one's own life and the lives of others. Sometimes I wonder if we still believe that it is possible to be a reflection of God in this world. Because it is possible. I'm sure there is someone very close to you who is an open window pointing in that direction. And you – why not give it a go?