



All Saints' Day: How to talk to children about martyrs

Those who have given their lives for the Faith offer inspiring examples to us all – no matter our age.

Martyrs are the shining sign of the power of the Holy Spirit. They were not superheroes endowed with extraordinary powers or with an unusual capacity to resist suffering. If they were able to endure the suffering of martyrdom with indomitable serenity until the end, it was because they put themselves in the hands of the Spirit of God, who filled them with His strength. They offered their fragility to God and, through this fragility, the Holy Spirit manifested His Omnipotence. Let us not hesitate to tell children about the value and strength of these saints, especially if they are one of our children's patron saints.

How should we present these saints to our children?

It is not necessary to go into much detail about the horrible details of the torture inflicted on Christians. This can traumatize especially young or sensitive children; moreover, it is not the essential point. Many martyrs are known only by the circumstances of their death. There is no reason to invent a life for them that we know nothing about, but we can describe what the historical, geographical, and social context was like for that saint.

It is also necessary to insist on the role of the Holy Spirit, to make it clear that the martyrs find their strength in God. The Holy Spirit gives them invincible Faith. When they are questioned, He inspires them with answers of surprising sharpness and steadfastness (recall the example of when Joan of Arc was prosecuted). The Holy Spirit gives them the strength not only to endure a thousand beatings, tortures, insults, and humiliations, but to do so even with joy and peace, as many stories report. You should explain that this joy is not indifference to suffering, but absolute trust in God.

Martyrs, examples for all Christians

Why talk about martyrs to children? Martyrs are good examples and a source of inspiration to us. Perhaps we are not called to offer our lives in one fell swoop, to endure physical torture and execution (that said, you never know). But, in any case, we are all called, even little children, to offer our lives on a daily basis, at every moment. It is less spectacular, but not necessarily easier. What then do the martyrs teach us to help us offer our lives to the Lord?

It's no use worrying in advance about what might happen. Whatever it is, the Holy Spirit will give us the strength and peace to overcome it all. God, who makes the crosses, also makes the shoulders that bear them and there is no greater expert on proportions. The young St. Blandina of Lyon knew in advance the torment that awaited her, and she no doubt believed herself incapable of bearing it, but when the time came, God gave her everything she needed to face it.

God is all-powerful, He only asks us to let him give us His strength. All we need to do is allow him to act, to make ourselves available to the Holy Spirit and, to do so, the first thing we need to do is recognize our fragility. We should help our children incorporate this attitude into specific incidents in their lives. It is not by force, by sheer will, that John can become more courageous in his work, Amalia more prudent in school, Victor less disobedient ... and mother more patient. It is necessary to make an effort, that is true, but with God's help, recognizing ourselves as sinners, knowing that we are weak, recognizing our mistakes and our failures along the way, always maintaining our trust in God.

Do not be “ashamed” to be a Christian

It is important to explain to children that martyrs also teach us to have the courage to stand up for our faith without fear of ridicule, insults, or beatings. Perhaps it is very difficult for a child, and no doubt even more so for a teenager, to dare to say they are Christian and to behave as such in a hostile environment. Because of these difficulties, they may withdraw, become anxious, or become defensive by putting on a protective shell of intransigence, judging others. It is up to us, parents and educators, to teach them to be proud of their faith, not as “ashamed” Christians for the sake of tolerance, but proud from an attitude of peace and charity. That is why it is important that children talk about it with their parents, through compassion ... and a little humor.

Teach them that we cannot be heroes in the area of faith and at the same time lacking in the area of charity. They cannot be dissociated. To bear witness to our faith does not only mean affirming our convictions but also, and above all, to behave as Christians, that is, as disciples of the One who gave us charity as our first commandment. The Spirit who gives strength also gives sweetness.

By Christine Ponsard