

Grandma's death generates thoughts about heaven

As we traveled down the New Jersey Turnpike recently during a mild autumn evening with the rain gently tapping our car, my son Bobby almost whispered from the back seat, "Is Grandma Kitty in heaven tonight?"

"Yes," my husband Joe and I answered without hesitating.

"Well," Bobby continued, "I don't ever want to go to heaven. I want to stay right here."

And 30 seconds later, having said his piece, he fell soundly asleep.

That day had been difficult for Bobby and for all of us who loved my grandmother. At the age of 96, she died peacefully after a long and wonderful life. Grandma's friends and family gathered in New Jersey for a funeral Mass that was a real celebration of her life.

My sister, my four brothers and I had all returned home to mourn the loss of a woman who had a remarkable influence on all of our lives. Although we had journeyed down our own roads in life, we were all united and connected by Grandma's love for her grandchildren. Could Bobby understand that all of our tears came from the same place in each of our hearts? "I don't want you to be sad," was all he said.

I told Bobby that I was sad because we were saying goodbye to Grandma Kitty and we would miss her. But I also told him that we should be happy because Grandma was going to heaven to be with Jesus.



By ELLEN MARX

family matters

"Where is heaven?" Bobby asked.

"I'm not really sure," I answered him. "It's a mystery, like when you play detective. But Jesus made us a promise that we will be happy there and no one will be sick or hurting ever again."

I heard Bobby tell his young friend Jilly that Grandma Kitty had died and gone to heaven.

"I think heaven is like a sandy beach," Jilly said. "And it feels so good when you squish your toes in the sand in heaven."

How much do children understand about death, dying and heaven? How much should parents tell them? Parents know their children's emotions and maturity better than anyone, and they should decide how to explain death and heaven to their children. But many times death catches us by surprise, and we're not ready with the answers to the most difficult questions about life and death.

Parents have a responsibility to teach

their children about death from a faith perspective, but it's a subject most of us aren't very comfortable with. Maybe it's because we don't have all the answers. Our own questions about heaven and eternal life are not all that different from our children's: Where is heaven? Is it up in the sky? Is there music there? Do we see things in color? How will we recognize each other without our earthly bodies? What will we do all day? It's great that everything will be so wonderful, but won't that ever get boring? Will we be able to read there?

There are some outstanding books on death and dying for children that are available from most libraries. There are also books written to help children understand why God calls us home to heaven. But one of the most helpful explanations I heard came from a wonderful friend, Father Al Barrera, OP, a Dominican priest who teaches theology and economics at Providence College in Rhode Island.

Father Al said, "To be united with God and to share in the eternal happiness and love of God, that is heaven. But we don't have to wait to die to start enjoying heaven. Jesus gave us the first installment of heaven by teaching us how to love and to be loved."

"The way Jesus preached, healed and served — that was all giving us a taste of God's love for us. Now that He no longer walks the earth, it's up to us to continue building the Kingdom of God. When we

reach out to help another person out of love and at the same time feel the love of God for us, that is already the beginning of heaven on earth. And it will come to its perfection when we meet God face to face."

We can teach our children that when they help someone in need, or forgive a friend who has hurt them, or bring food to a hungry child, or pray for peace in our world, the goodness they feel in their heart is a glimpse of what we will all experience in heaven. As Father Al said, "It's heaven on earth."

A few nights ago Bobby told me again that he didn't want to go to heaven.

"I think you're going to have to talk to God about that," I told him.

"Then I don't want you to listen," he said. He ducked under his covers and said, "God, I don't want to go to heaven, OK?"

When he resurfaced I asked, "What did God say?"

"He told me I didn't have to go."

And 30 seconds later, having said his piece, he fell soundly asleep.

Marx lives in Lawrenceville, N.J., with her husband and two children.

Films feature cartoon characters, 'saints'



NEW YORK (CNS) — The following are home videocassette reviews from the U.S. Catholic Conference Office

for Film and Broadcasting. Each videocassette is available on VHS format. Theatrical movies on video have a USCC classification and Motion Picture Association of America rating. All reviews indicate the appropriate age group for the video audience.

George of the Jungle

Engagingly silly comedy based on a 1960s animated TV series about a jungle-raised primitive (Brendan Fraser) smitten with a beauty (Leslie Mann) on safari to escape her overbearing fiancé. This good-natured spoof of Tarzan movies is amusingly self-mocking and drags only when the action moves from the jungle to the big city. Some mild sexual references, toilet humor and occasional slapstick violence. The USCC classification is A-II — adults and adolescents. The MPAA rating is PG — parental guidance suggested.

Pippi Longstocking

In this animated adventure, the spunky 9-year-old girl of the title (voice of Melissa Altro) awaits her father's return from being lost at sea while engaging in amus-

ing encounters with neighboring children, an interfering busybody and a pair of bumbling burglars. The production has colorful but unexceptional cartooning, though Pippi's high jinks should delight young viewers and lead some to Astrid Lindgren's books recounting other of her adventures. The USCC classification is A-I — general patronage. The MPAA rating is G — general audiences.

Entertaining Angels: The Dorothy Day Story

Compelling dramatization of the early life of Catholic Worker founder Dorothy Day (Moira Kelly) as a young journalist whose agonizing over a failed love affair leads her to reflect on her life. In doing so, she discovers God, then meets Peter Maurin (Martin Sheen) and puts his ideas of social justice into practice during the Depression. Directed by Michael Ray Rhodes, the biographical movie depicts a woman's spiritual journey in convincing dramatic fashion, though it is largely interior, deeply religious and specifically Catholic in its sensibilities. Realistic treatment of love affairs, an abortion and a suicide as well as some coarse language. The USCC classification is A-II — adults and adolescents. The MPAA rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned that some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

Saints' Gallery of Heaven's Heroes, Volume IV: Early Church Leaders

This installment of the series opens with St. Peter of the Gospels, then profiles three medieval Italian saints — Clare of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas and Catherine of Siena — before returning to the age of the Apostles for a look at the life of St. Paul. Produced by Oblate Media, the 43-minute program encapsulates the lives and virtues of each saint, through a variety of visuals ranging from classical art to original drawings, as well as maps showing their historical context. The result is as interesting as it is uplifting, making it a video to be shared by all the family.

Witness Against Hitler

Dramatized account of how German aristocrat Helmuth von Moltke (James Wilby) used his position in military intelligence to organize resistance to the Nazi regime and, though he opposed the 1944 plot to kill Hitler, was arrested, found guilty of treason and executed shortly before war's end. Written by Jack Emery and directed by Betsan Morris Evans, the 90-minute British production succeeds well in portraying von Moltke's anti-Nazi activities as motivated by his Christian conscience, love of family and sense of patriotism. It's an important subject, sensitively treated and worth seeing by all but the youngest.

Parish offers aid with grief

St. Joseph's Parish, Penfield, will host a program entitled "When a Child or Young Person Dies" at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 15, in the parish resource center, 43 Gebhardt Road.

Featured speakers are Dr. Michael Henrichs, a private practitioner in clinical, child and school psychology, and the founder and president of KATS (Kids Adjusting Through Support); Virginia Henrichs, KATS director for family and community services; Scott Logan, school psychologist at Penfield High School and Our Lady of Mercy High School; and Jean Woodarek, a guidance counselor at Penfield's Cobble Elementary School.

The program will include discussion of concerns surrounding parents, grandparents, siblings and friends who have suffered the loss of loved ones. Joint sponsors are KATS and the Morningglory Support Group of St. Joseph's Church.

According to Sister Patricia Switzer, RSM, a pastoral associate at the parish, a key point emphasized by Michael Henrichs is that while children may seem to readily forget when deaths take place, they actually do not.

"They don't forget, and it comes out somewhere else later on," she said.

The session is open to the public free of charge. The center is handicapped accessible. For more information, call 716/586-8089.

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