



THE DIOCESE OF BELLEVILLE

All Hallows' Eve and St. Nicholas

Almost every day for the last several weeks, I have accompanied Bishop Braxton on his pastoral visits to our Catholic elementary and secondary schools. I have watched with appreciation as he interacts with ease with the students of all ages and graciously expresses gratitude for the good work of the teachers. He is very much at ease patiently answering the students' questions which range from "please explain Purgatory" to "Why can't women become priests" to "why have some priests harmed children".

On Tuesday, while visiting Our Lady Queen of Peace School there was a discussion about All Hollow's Eve, All Saints' Day, and All Souls Day during his visit with the fifth and sixth graders. The Bishop was pleased that some of the students knew that the word Halloween was originally All Hollow's Eve, the day before All Saints Day and that in the past many Catholic children dressed as saints and not as ghosts, goblins and witches on that night.

In a passing remark the Bishop asked the students if they knew who St. Nicholas was and what his name has been changed to in popular culture. Several said that his name had been changed to Santa Claus. Then the Bishop explained that St. Nicholas was a Catholic Bishop of Myra in Asia Minor, who, according to tradition, loved children and gave them gifts, especially those who were poor. He said just as All Hollows' Eve was gradually changed to Halloween, so also the story of the good works of St. Nicholas was gradually changed into the story of Santa Claus, a jolly elf bringing gifts down the chimney to children. The Bishop did NOT make these comments to small children in the lower grades. He was speaking to fifth and sixth graders, who already knew the true story of St. Nicholas.

I was personally present in the classroom and I know exactly what the Bishop said and the context in which it was said. This is why I was quite surprised to learn that somehow some individuals incorrectly thought the Bishop was going around the school telling little children that there is no Santa Claus. This is simply not true! This complete misunderstanding led to a few calls and expressions of disappointment, even anger that had nothing whatsoever to do with what the Bishop actually said. Bishop Braxton explained to me that when he is speaking to young children about the true meaning of Christmas for a Catholic, he always focus on the birth of Jesus Christ and the need for Him to be born anew each day in the hearts of us all.

Jonathan Birdsong
Superintendent of Schools