



BLESS THOSE BACKPACKS

By Marilyn Sharpe

I am with you always...
Matthew 28: 20

It's almost time for school to start. For some children, this is pure joy – new clothes, new school supplies, anticipated reunions with old friends, opportunities to meet new ones, and returning to the classroom, which has been a happy and successful place in the past. For some children, this day has been dreaded since school got out in June. For some, they are going to a new school, not sure how they will be received by children or teachers. For some, there wasn't money for new clothes or backpack or the supplies to go in it, so there is shame and fear, as they return to school. For some children, school is a daunting place, in which they don't have good friends and don't learn easily.

For all of our children – those who are going to daycare or nursery school, public or private or Lutheran school – they need the adults who love and support them to understand that learning is the “job” of our children. It is fulltime. It goes on for many years. And, as children, they don't have the option to change jobs. So how can we support this central enterprise of childhood?

The gift every loving adult can give to children is the gentle reminder of Jesus' last words to his disciples, young and old, then and now – “And remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Always. Everywhere.

How can we make that promise live for our children? We can start by blessing their backpacks or bookbags. A simple prayer over the bag. A gift of a zipper pull in the shape of a cross or a carabineer in the shape of a fish, the early church's symbol of Jesus. Making the sign of the cross on the beloved child's forehead before the child heads off to school, reminding the child the he or she is a child of God, named and claimed in the waters of Baptism, promised that Jesus is there always. Put a love note in the lunch bag or backpack, reminding the child of your love.

But, it doesn't need to end there. The night before school begins ... and every night thereafter, pray for the child as a learner, as a teacher to others, as a friend to other children. Before your child leaves for school in the morning, say, “I will be thinking about you today and praying for you. What would you like me to pray for today?” When the child comes home from school or daycare or after school care, greet the child first. “I have missed you today. I love you and can't wait to hear about your day.” Then or at dinner or before bed, listen, really listen to what they share about the day. Sometimes, a simple, “Will you tell me about the best and the hardest part of your day?” opens them up to share. Please, don't diminish those things that were their challenges. Please, celebrate the joys and triumphs. Find the things to affirm in each child you love.

This is a powerful way that Jesus is present with your child, through your loving attention and affirmation and care. God bless you both.

FAMILY ACTIVITIES

- When you are shopping for school supplies, buy any extras that you can afford and donate supplies to a school that can provide them for students, who would otherwise struggle to purchase needed supplies.
- Contact your child's school and see if you can anonymously adopt a student and provide school supplies for that student.
- Before you and your family donate school supplies, bless them, by saying a prayer over them for the child who will receive them.
- The night before school begins, lay out the full school bags or backpacks, placing your hands on them, bless the learner, the learning, and the teaching that will go on this year.
- As adults, model being a lifelong learner. Add your school bag or work bag or computer case to the pile, and bless it, too.