

SAINTS & SUPERHEROES

Hollywood loves to blur the line. One of the things I disliked the most about the Star Wars prequels is how it took a clear cut conflict between good and evil (Rebels/Jedis were good, Empire/Stormtroopers were bad) and turned it into a moral quagmire. This is a constant theme in Hollywood: make the good guys evil and make the bad guys good.

But these past few years, a new genre has emerged that speaks to the heart of what it means to be good, the virtue of sacrifice, and the responsibility that comes with power. They are known as, 'superhero movies.'

Superhero films have dominated the box office for the past few summers, and this year saw more of them than ever. You could go into any Cineplex and see Thor swing his hammer or Captain America throw his shield—even in 3D! Most of our teenagers watched these films.

But did they get the message?

In *Ad Gentes* (the Vatican II decree on missionary activity) the Church encourages missionaries to, 'gladly and reverently lay bare the seeds of the Word which lie hidden among their fellows.' (AG 11) As missionaries to the culture of youth, we must not only point them toward heaven but also show them where the Word of God can be found in their daily lives. And I propose that these superhero movies are a great opportunity to do just that.

Many blockbusters are now arriving in a video store near you. So here are a few main themes that you can pull from those movies to encourage a spiritual heroism in the teens you minister to.

The need for grace. Almost every superhero movie starts with someone who is weak and can't accomplish something on his or her own. Then something happens and they gain the power to do so. (Peter Parker gets a spider bite and becomes Spider Man; Steve Rogers is injected with the Super Soldier Serum and becomes Captain America, etc.) As Christians, we also must admit our own weaknesses so that we can accept the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. As St. Paul wrote, 'I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.' And in his letter to the Philippians he wrote, 'I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.' (Phil 4:13)

The virtue of sacrifice. Another theme of superhero movies is that the hero willingly sacrifices his or her life for the sake of others. Usually, the hero doesn't end up dying—but they think they are going to (Thor takes on The Destroyer without his hammer; Green Lantern uses up all his power to throw Parallax into the sun, etc.) Jesus said, 'No one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends.' (John 15:13) And He also said, 'Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it.' (Matthew 16:25)

'With great power comes great responsibility.' That's what Peter Parker's uncle told him before he died, and it is a theme not only with Spider Man but also with all superhero films. Once the main character gets the power, how does he use it? Some characters start using their gifts for their own glory (Spider Man, Green Lantern.) Others debate whether they should use their power for good or for evil (X-men.) But they all come to a moment when they realize that their powers are not for themselves but to help others. This is reminiscent of the words that Jesus spoke, 'To whom much is given, much will be expected.' (Luke 12:48)

Finally, these fictitious stories of superheroes can open the door to the real heroes: the saints. Do you think it's cool that Super Man can fly? So could St. Joseph Cupertino. Were you moved when Captain America crashed the plane he was in to save lives? Then listen to the story of St. Maximilian Kolbe. The things we find attractive in superheroes we find present in the saints.

This summer, our young people learned some great lessons about the need for grace, the virtue of sacrifice, and the responsibility that comes with power. But it's up to you to make the connection from the secular to the sacred, and show them that we can all be superheroes, a.k.a. saints, through the power of the Holy Spirit and through being in Jesus Christ. ✠

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