What Is Right vs. What Is Legal

**Directions:** Read the information below with a parent and then read the following biographies of holy men and women who were persecuted for doing what was right.

In the Beatitudes, Christ teaches us that the meek and the merciful are blessed. Also blessed are those who suffer in the name of what is right and just: “Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” That persecution for righteousness sake sometimes comes from other people and at other times even from the government. From ancient philosophers, to St. Thomas Aquinas, to modern citizens, individuals have regularly had to wrestle with the conflict between what is right and what is legal. Faithful and courageous individuals have chosen to face the consequences of their refusal to obey unjust laws.

“The citizen is obliged in conscience not to follow the directives of civil authorities when they are contrary to the demands of the moral order, to the fundamental rights of persons or the teachings of the Gospel.”

—CCC 2242
St. Thomas More

Thomas More was born in London. He went to good schools and impressed his teachers. One of his teachers said he spoke Latin as easily as he spoke English!

More became a successful lawyer. He was also a great speaker and a great writer. He served in Parliament, which makes laws for England. Later he became a helper to the king of England, King Henry VIII.

The king wanted to divorce his wife. He tried to use the Bible to say divorce was okay. More knew that the king was wrong. The king decided to break England away from the Catholic Church and start his own church. The king told More he had to stop being Catholic and be loyal to him. Instead, More said no, and the king put More in jail. He took away More's property. The king even took More's writing materials so he wouldn't be able to send letters to his family. Finally, the king had More beheaded.

More's last words were: “I die the good King's servant, but God's first.”
St. Catherine of Alexandria

Catherine was born in the year 287 in Alexandria, Egypt. When she was young, she read and studied as much as she could. She had a vision of Jesus and Mary, and so became a Christian. This was brave because at that time being a Christian was illegal. The penalty was often torture and death!

But Catherine had courage. Since she was the governor’s daughter, she could talk to the Roman emperor, Maxentius. She urged the emperor to stop persecuting Christians. The emperor brought 50 people to debate with Catherine. But Catherine was an eloquent speaker. She not only won the debate, but even won more than 200 converts to the Faith, including members of Maxentius’s own family. The emperor was furious. He had the new Christians put to death, and threw Catherine in jail.

Even in prison, St. Catherine gave every moment to Christ. Many people came to visit her, including the emperor’s wife. Many of these people became Christians after their meetings with Catherine. The emperor had them all killed. When the emperor saw that torture and imprisonment did not stop Catherine from speaking the truth about Jesus Christ, he tried something new. He offered to marry her if she would deny the Catholic Faith. She refused. Catherine told him, “I have become a bride of Christ.” So the emperor sentenced Catherine to death. She was 18 years old.

St. Catherine of Alexandria is a great example of courage. She is the patron saint of philosophers, preachers, and young female students.
Miguel was born in Guadeloupe, Mexico. His family was devoutly Catholic. Miguel was called to become a priest.

While he was preparing, the government in Mexico started making bad laws. It became illegal to be Catholic. Churches had to close. Many priests were killed. Miguel and his classmates escaped. He was made a priest in 1925.

Even though it was dangerous, Fr. Pro wanted to return to Mexico. He got permission to go. He began helping people in secret. He would wear disguises to stay safe. Sometimes he would dress as a beggar. Other times he dressed as a businessman. He even dressed as a policeman to give Holy Communion to people in prison.

Someone told the police what Fr. Pro was doing. He was arrested. The government lied and said Fr. Pro had tried to kill the president of Mexico. Even though he was innocent, Fr. Pro was sentenced to death. He forgave his executioners, and prayed out loud for God to forgive them. His last words were “Viva Cristo Rey,” which means “Praise Christ the King!”
St. Paul Miki was born 1562 and was the son of a Japanese military leader. His family converted to Christianity when he was a child and he studied under the Jesuit missionaries in Japan. He joined the Society of Jesus in 1580.

At that time in Japan, there were many political and religious tensions between the Japanese and the Christians that came from Spain and Portugal. The Japanese lord, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, ordered the arrest of 26 Christians at Kyoto. Paul Miki had just completed his eleven year training as a novice, and he was one of the 26 Christians arrested. The arrested Christians had their ears cut off as a sign of disrespect, and they were paraded through the streets of Kyoto. Paul Miki stood out among the crowd. They recognized him as the son of the nobleman and that he could even have been a Samurai if he wasn't a Christian. Many in the crowd felt pity for the Christians and some were even converted by their example.

The 26 Christians were then marched over 600 miles from Kyoto to Nagasaki. They were asked to give up their Faith to save their lives, but they refused. When they reached Nagasaki, they were crucified like Jesus was. Paul Miki gave a final sermon from his cross. He declared that he was Japanese born and that he was being crucified because he was a Christian. Then he forgave his enemies.

The 26 Christians than sang the Canticle of Zachariah from their crosses and the executioners waited for them to finish. Then they were put to death by the lance. The eyewitnesses in the crowd were impressed by the faith, patience, strength, and peace in which the martyrs met their death.

For the next couple hundred years, Christianity was forbidden and persecuted in Japan. When missionaries returned to Japan, at first they could not find any trace of Christianity. But to their complete surprise, they found thousands of Christians around Nagasaki, where the 26 martyrs had died, who had secretly kept the Faith.
St. Maximilian Kolbe

Raymund Kolbe was born in Poland. He entered a Franciscan monastery when he was 16. There he received the name Maximilian. He was ordained a priest in 1919. He taught men who were preparing to be priests, and opened a religious community in Poland. He traveled to Japan and to India and opened communities there, too.

When he returned to Poland, the Nazis had invaded the country. The Nazis were rounding up Jews and putting them in death camps. Fr. Kolbe organized a shelter for thousands of Polish people who had nowhere to go. In 1941, the Nazis raided the shelter. They took Fr. Kolbe and his companions to a death camp. Fr. Kolbe wrote a letter to his mother, telling her not to worry about him.

Life in the prison was very hard for Fr. Kolbe, but he always put the other prisoner's needs ahead of his own. The guards beat and tortured him. But he wouldn't ask for medical help until all his fellow prisoners had been treated. Though he was suffering, Fr. Kolbe helped the other prisoners. He would ask each one, “I am a Catholic priest. Can I do anything for you?” He heard their confessions. He told them about God’s love.

One day a prisoner escaped. The guards said that 10 prisoners would be starved to death as a punishment. The guards choose 10 men. One of the men cried out in grief for his wife and children. Fr. Kolbe stepped forward and volunteered to take the man’s place. Fr. Kolbe was put in a cell with the other 9 men. He prayed and read the Psalms with them. After two weeks of hunger and thirst, Fr. Kolbe was still alive. The Nazis injected poison into Fr. Kolbe’s arm and he died.

The man Fr. Kolbe saved survived the war.