

A Note to Christian Educators
Concerning the Value of Presenting Lives of Saints in Dramatic Form
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The parables that Jesus told to the people are stories that embody spiritual truths about the Kingdom of Heaven, a reality that might be incomprehensible to them if spoken plainly. The lives of the saints are another doorway into that same reality. We often refer to the saints as the friends of God. The saints know Who they lived for and Who they died for. The plays that we have been creating and using in children's education for more than two decades are, likewise, opportunities for the saints themselves to teach us this knowledge of God. The example of their lives, their presence with us when we participate in or watch their lives enacted, serve to awaken in the children and in us the zeal and the will to struggle against evil and towards virtue more fervently. In the enactment of the play, the victory of the saint becomes the children's victory as well. It is not symbolic. They taste the reality of it. *"Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good."* (Psalm 34:8)

A primary goal in the work of a Christian educator is to equip a child with the knowledge, understanding, and desire to follow their highest ideals: to seek the Kingdom of Heaven and to desire, like the saints themselves, to live a life dedicated in love to our Lord Jesus Christ. Such a task may seem monumental. It is a comfort, therefore, to realize that we are not alone! First, we have the reality of God calling the children to Himself. Second, we have the living presence of the saints about whom we teach. Furthermore, we have the children themselves, whose natural love for the heroic is an echo of the deep yearning within each soul for its Creator. This gives us a tremendous beginning!

Children see the world differently than do most adults. They tend to absorb everything around them without filtering it with a lot of mental concepts. They live in experience rather than the mind. They drink in who we are, not just what we say, or what we want them to understand. When a child perceives that we do not truly believe what we are telling them, we undermine their faith and trust right from the beginning. So, our first step in teaching about God and His saints, is to simply acknowledge within ourselves that we truly do believe and know that this otherworldly reality is real to us.

Little children have no trouble believing that Jesus is real, that He really lived here in this world and said and did the things we read in the Holy Bible, that He rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and that He loves them. As they observe the "real world" around them, however, and learn from us and others how to respond "appropriately" in social situations, the heavenly worldview may be challenged. It will certainly be challenged in other areas of their lives, but our goal is to confirm that our Christian faith is not only for church school, or merely a subject to learn about intellectually, but, rather, a life to be lived.

The plays of the lives of the saints that, with God's help, we will be publishing in this series have been created in an attempt to give children the opportunity to step out of the seeming reality of our everyday world and into the spiritual reality that the saints lived. When children turn off the various electronic media by which they are so often absorbed and "entertained", and pour their energy into learning the life of a saint, they enter a new world. They must work hard to understand the story and what is happening so that they can enact it, and thereby honor and come to know the saint as a real person like themselves. As they do this, they are able to understand, for example, that a martyr's death is not a failure in this life, but a crown of glory that the saint has won. This is a complex concept, and yet, children can know it, and participate in the wonder of it. Performing the play is a joy for them!

The lives of the saints have long been a source of inspiration in children's religious education. These plays have been written to honor the saints of the Orthodox Church. They offer a lively activity for Sunday schools, youth groups and summer camps for learning about, and presenting to others, the life of

the wonderful saints of God. Performing the plays accomplishes two goals: our youth experience, in their own words and deeds, the life of a saint; and by doing this, tell the story to others, making the children teachers and evangelists as well. As it is said, “*Wondrous is God in His saints.*” (Psalm 67:35 LXX)

Every effort has been made to be faithful to the actual facts in the life of each saint, according to authentic Orthodox written tradition. Where available, the recorded words spoken by the saint have been faithfully preserved and form the basis of dialog. Some characters are added, but in all scenes, the situations portrayed follow the type of events known to have happened during the saint’s life.

The plays have been presented at summer Orthodox family conferences of one week duration, and in parish based school programs, over a period of weeks. At the week long family conferences, children ages 9 to 13 did the play. Somehow, it never occurred to us that it was impossible to do all of this in one week. Just as a language immersion course works to impart solid learning in a short period of time, the children are immersed for a week in the play – that is to say, in the life of the saint – taking home with them afterward lifelong memories. In one week they learn the story, build and paint props and sets using sheets, cardboard and poster paint, learn where to stand, when to come in, and how to speak more loudly than a whisper when on stage. They learn at least the majority of their lines, and victoriously present the play to the other guests at the conferences. Sometimes we had never actually finished our full dress rehearsal before the performance, and the children read a significant number of their lines. But always, the performances have carried a vitality that inspired children and adults alike, and brought into the hearts and minds of our children the valiant lives to be lived by true Christians. Just think what you can accomplish, with a little more time!

Because it is important for all involved to remember that the work of the play is the telling of the life of a real saint, that the things they are saying and doing really happened, it is good to have the icon of the saint in a prominent place, and to begin each rehearsal with all present singing the troparion of the saint, and praying to the saint to be with us, looking over our shoulders, to aid us in presenting the story of their life. The saints want to have their lives told, to help those who pray to them, and to gather the next generation to the Lord.

A few years ago I overheard a mother reminding her child that the vigil for St. Xenia was coming up, and the mother began to remind the child who St. Xenia was. The child interrupted his mother and said, “Mom, I *know* Saint Xenia. I was in her play!” This is why we want to present these plays—so that our children will know our saints, and learn to live among them.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. ~ Hebrews 12:1-2