

# Catholic Sentinel

## Students see saints as role models

By [Ed Langlois](#)

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EUGENE — Karl Kawders, a seventh grader at O'Hara School here, is now convinced that God can help him in any task, even slaying dragons —or whatever metaphorical dragons he encounters in life.

The confidence comes because Karl spent three months last year studying St. George and even portrayed the saint during an afternoon of living history in the O'Hara gymnasium.

He and each of his classmates picked a holy person, did research and then played the part. About 1,000 people came to meet the saints.

Karl could tell you, for example, that St. George was born in Asia Minor in 280 and was a Roman soldier stationed in Britain. When a hungry dragon ran out of sheep to consume and started eating a person a day, George stepped in against all the odds.

"That shows he had great courage and he really believed God could help him do anything," Karl explains, about to don a suit of armor made of fabric.

O'Hara's Living Saints project is in its 11th year and has gained national recognition. Catholic Teacher magazine cited the program in giving the school last year's top prize for total community involvement.

A main goal of the work is to have students see saints as role models, says Maryanne Obersinner, the sixth grade teacher who started the project.

The students write an essay on how their saint matters in modern life. Once, a boy chose St. Ambrose, a doctor of the church. Ambrose was generous, and that inspired the boy to clean up some of his extra bikes and give them away to people in need.

Over the years, about 500 students have taken part. Obersinner still hears from alumni who say the project has been an ongoing source of pride and personal formation.

"We are all hungry; we all want to grow closer to God," Obersinner says. "One way to do that is to learn about people who were close to him. They know this someone who will be by their side throughout their lives."

Last year, children chose saints from five continents. Among them was St. Nikolaus Gross, a newspaper publisher who died at the hands of the Nazis.

Others included St. Thomas More, St. Ambrose, St. Bernadette and St. Gertrude. There are those who became saints in North America, like St. Katherine Drexel, who served African Americans and Native Americans, and the Jesuit missionary, St. Isaac Jogues.

Samantha Weiland donned the garb of a nun, since she was taking the part of St. Frances Xavier Cabrini, the

first American citizen to be canonized. Mother Cabrini, who died in 1917, initiated a vigorous outreach to immigrants who had come to the United States and found that life here was harder than expected.

"She was a teacher and really loving," says Weiland, who plays soccer and enjoys the company of her cats. "She really taught me how to love others and treat others with respect."

Eric Parker became St. Ignatius of Loyola, who became a soldier for Christ after being wounded in battle.

Parker, when he was portraying the Jesuit founder, limped a bit because a cannon ball had smashed the saint's leg.

"I think he was outgoing," Parker says of Ignatius. "He was a kind person."

The sixth graders tend to get so excited about their saints that they spend free time comparing notes. As part of the work, they create an icon of their saint, after having sessions on icons and making a field trip to learn about the icons at Nativity Ukrainian Catholic Church in Springfield. Like traditional icon writers, the students fast during the period of creation, whether it be from food or video games.

"It encourages more introspection, more looking at their lives and how they can be more like their saint, but also just thinking about how their saint was a regular person just like they are," says Suzanne Graf, whose son took on St. Martin of Tours, a Roman soldier who set down his sword and renounced violence. "There is honor in being a saint, but they are not untouchable. This is something these kids could be some day."

In the weeks before the project, students spoke at parishes, inviting Catholics to come for the day. Meanwhile, Obersinner wrote to Archbishop John Vlazny and Pope Benedict about the event. Both sent official blessings.

The entire community comes forward in support. A University of Oregon art scholar works with students on their presentations and the university offers a tour of the icon collection in the art museum. The Reparation Sisters bring in their relic collection for look. Meanwhile, the Carmelite Sisters prayed for the sixth graders during the day of the presentation, as did the O'Hara preschool class.