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By Ed Langlois
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‘Saints alive!’ was cheer in this gym

EUGENE — For an afternoon, a group of sixth graders acted like saints. Literally.

When it was over, the students from O’Hara Catholic School here went back to their usual lives, shooting baskets, listening to music and eating impressive amounts of pizza. But they will never be quite the same. They spent months studying Christianity’s great heroes, using the Internet and even dusty old books. Then they took on saintly roles in a presentation earlier this month in the school gym.

The Living Saints Presentation, in its ninth year, combines religion, history, writing, public speaking and art. This year, the class portrayed 52 saints and blessed persons of the church who hailed from four continents. Students picked a saint to whom they felt some connection.

One student, who was a rather lithe St. Thomas Aquinas in Dominican habit, said playing the seminal Middle Ages theologian inspired him to want to live life more thoughtfully.

“In some ways, it was hard to be him because he thinks a lot,” he says. “If you say to him, ‘How are you?’ he would think it over a long time before he would say, ‘Fine.’ His theology talks a lot about what is deep inside your heart, so deep that you don’t understand it.”

Another sixth grader donned the simple Capuchin robe and long gray beard of St. Lawrence of Brindisi. This student, who knows the birth and death dates of the 17th-century Italian teacher and writer, says he will remember St. Lawrence the rest of his life.

“I think saints are people who give their entire life to God,” he says.

In the course of three months, students did research, created an artistic backdrop, practiced the persona, got in costume and gave dramatic profiles of the saints, fielding questions from hundreds of visitors. The strolling audience came from area parishes, other Catholic schools in Eugene and even Salem. Priests and women religious were on hand, too. Younger students looked for sixth-grade friends, sometimes not recognizing them through the robes, wigs and false beards.

For those who walked through the gym, it was like a living museum of sanctity. Saints on the scene included Andrew Kim Taegon of Korea, Brigid of Ireland, Hedwig of Poland, Marianne of Molokai and Blessed Marie Rose Durocher, a founding member of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary.

“Our whole family learned about saints,” says Colleen Bohrer, whose daughter researched and portrayed St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, a 19th-century widow who helped begin the Catholic school system in the U.S.

Bohrer and her husband became swept up in the saint talk, reading through biographies in the night and comparing notes.

Ellen Chapman, whose daughter took the role of the great theologian and reconciler St. Catherine of Siena, appreciates the span of the work.

“It helps them learn to manage a project,” Chapman says. “It has something for everyone to be good at.” For her part, Chapman learned about divisions in the church that St. Catherine helped heal. Three years ago, Chapman’s son played St. John Bosco, patron of school children. She has no doubt her children will remember the saints they picked.

Maryanne Obersinner, the sixth grade teacher at O'Hara, began the saints project in 1998 when she heard about the idea at a workshop concerned with integrating faith education into other disciplines. Obersinner has seen support grow steadily. More visitors come and more parishioners say they are praying for the students. At first, mostly parents took note, but now parishioners of all kinds are passionate about the project. Volunteers with expertise in costume design and acting have stepped forward to tutor.

Each year, Obersinner sends the archbishop and the pope an invitation and asks for their prayers. Each year, she gets enthusiastic letters from both men.

Younger students look forward to their day. Early in the year, eager sixth graders get after Obersinner, asking when they can start their research.

At a confirmation ceremony recently, the teacher came across a group of youths she had taught years before. As a patron saint, each student chose the same person they had portrayed in sixth grade.

Benedictine Sister Alicia Kleiman made the trip from Mount Angel to Eugene for the afternoon. She was impressed with how the project incorporated fields of knowledge and how the students did such high-quality work.

"I asked many of the 'saints' I visited what spiritual advice they would give me," says Sister Alicia. "In reply, I heard about the importance of prayer, of listening to and trusting in God, and of following and maintaining our hope in God's call even when faced with persecution or other great difficulties."