

Introduction and Foreword

As Orthodox Christians, our primary goal in educating children is to introduce them to the Kingdom of God. This can be a very natural process taking place in daily home life, and supported in supplementary religious education programs such as Sunday School, parochial school, or Vacation Bible School. The young child is innately open to the world around him, curious about its many forms. The spiritual eyes of his soul are eager to see how the world is created, to become acquainted with everything good that is in it. It is our task to thoughtfully guide this process, creating a comprehensive environment in which the spiritual reality of God's Kingdom is consistently reflected to him, thus nurturing his whole being in the way of truth.

This book was originally written to be used with the Children's Garden of the Theotokos Kindergarten Curriculum, first released in 2001. However, it contains the kind of material that clearly can be useful for a much broader audience. Therefore, by God's grace we have expanded this edition to cover the entire liturgical year, in the hopes that anyone engaged in the spiritual education of Orthodox children might find this volume and the ideas it contains a worthy resource for that holiest of tasks.

In parishes and families throughout the world a great variety of traditions, crafts, music, and activities enrich the lives of the faithful and help to bring our children into the living beauty of our faith. This volume, of course, only represents a very limited compendium of feast days and creative ideas. Our hope is that we may have a further expansion of this book in the future, with aid and input from others who would like to contribute their traditions and ideas.

May God bless our efforts to bring up our children within the rich environment of the holy Orthodox Church. And may we be ever guided in these efforts by the Theotokos and Mother of God, and all the saints whom we commemorate and hold dear.

September 1
Indiction of the New Year
Lesson, Prayer Activity

Lesson

Teaching Note: *this lesson introduces and opens the school year. It's best if the entire family or families who will be schooling together for the year can gather to mark the occasion with prayer; it's also a good time to invite grandparents or others who support your homeschool. If your priest is willing to come and bless the beginning of your year in your own home, even better. The lesson does not have to be done exactly on Sept. 1, but as near as you can get.*

Materials Needed
<i>Bible</i>
<i>Icon of the Theotokos that will be central in the school prayer corner</i>
<i>A regular calendar</i>
<i>A parish or liturgical calendar</i>
<i>Prayers of the Hours for Children prayer book</i>

This is the beginning of our school year. We will be going on a journey together, exploring the world God has made for us. We are going to learn about many saints and all the great Feast Days of the year. We are also going to learn about the alphabet and numbers. We will have lots of time to learn and make things and play together. God has given us some special time to learn all these things and it is going to be wonderful!

When we go on a journey we need to bring some things with us, don't we? If you are going on a hike what kinds of things do you need? (*good shoes, water bottle, snacks, map, etc.*) Well, we are going to need some special tools for our journey, too. Here are some of the things we will need.

This is the Bible; it is the book God gave to us. Can you tell me some things you know about the Bible? (*Let children express themselves, reinforcing and embellishing their comments.*) It's the book that tells us the story of God's people and it tells us all God's ideas about how we can live as His children.

Another tool we will use is the icons. What can you tell me about them? (*As above.*) This will be the prayer corner where we spend little bits of time praying and talking to God, our Father, Jesus, the Theotokos, and all the saints. Sometimes, when it is an important Feast Day we will have a special icon, too.

There are lots of other tools we will use on our journey: things like crayons, puppets, paints, glue, paper, picture books, clay and lots of other things. You will see all of them later.

Now let's think about mothers for a few minutes. What are some really wonderful things that mothers do for us? (*Children's comments.*) Mothers are people who *nurture* us. Now that's quite a big word. When mothers *nurture* us, what does that mean? It means that they give us all the things we need to grow big and strong: things like a warm place to live, good food to eat, a safe place to play, nice toys and books that delight us. They teach us how to be safe, they help us learn how to pray and talk to God, they teach us many things about the world around us. But especially, they love us, don't they? Do you want to tell me what your mother is like?

Did you know that the Church is also our Mother? She does the same thing for us that our earthly mothers do. She gives us good things to make us healthy and strong, things like communion and confession, a priest to care for us and all the people in the church to love us and teach us many things. Our Mother the Church also gives us wonderful Feast Days to celebrate and many many stories about God the Father, Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit, the apostles and all the saints.

One of the very special things that our Mother the Church gives us is a calendar. (*Show monthly calendar.*) Do you see all the little squares on this page? Each square shows us a different day. This is the day we are on now. Here is the day we will be on tomorrow. If I turn the page, what do you see? There are many more squares, aren't there? Each page shows us a different *month*. Do you know how many days there are in a month? There are about 30. Each month has about 30 days. Twelve months together make one year!

We are beginning in the month of September today and we are going to be looking at this calendar a lot for our school year. (*Show church calendar if different from above.*) Do you know why? It's because this is the calendar that our Mother the Church gives us. It is called the Church Year Calendar. All these little words in the boxes tell me what we are celebrating each day: which Saint and which Feast day. This calendar also shows me which days we fast on (*Show the colors or symbols that denote fasting.*)

So our Mother the Church gives us a plan for each day of the year and we are going to be following her plan in our school. She also teaches us how to pray every day. She gives us something called "The Hours". At certain times throughout the day, she says it is time to pray. We'll be doing little prayers of The Hours in our school, too. Here is the book we will be using. (*Show children Prayers of the Hours for Children.*) This is the prayer book especially for you.

There is another Mother that we have to help us, especially in our own school. Can you think of who that is? Yes, it is the Mother of God, the Theotokos. Our school is going to be named "The Children's Garden of the Theotokos". This will be her garden where beautiful things grow. We will ask for her prayers every day and learn some songs that she loves to hear us sing.

Mary was the name of Jesus' mother. But we call her *Theotokos* sometimes. Do you know what *Theotokos* means? It means "the one who carried God inside her". Jesus grew inside Mother Mary just like you grew inside your own mama, so Mary carried God inside her. She is like a Mother for everyone who is Christian. She prays for us, especially when we ask her to. Her prayers are very special because Jesus loves her so much.

She is very quick to hear us and help us whenever we cry out to her. Do you know how to pray to Mother Mary? You can talk to her just like you talk to your own Mama or Papa. You can talk to her anywhere: when you're at church, when you see an icon, when you are outside, even in your own bed at night. Whenever you want to, you can talk to her and she will hear you. You can tell her how you feel and ask her for whatever you need.

A little prayer to Mary that we say a lot is very simple. Shall I teach it to you? OK. It goes like this: *Most holy Theotokos, save us.* Can you say it with me? *Most holy Theotokos, save us.* Very good. Anytime you want to pray to her and don't know what to say, you can use that little prayer. Anytime that you feel afraid of something or lonely or sad, you can say, *Most Holy Theotokos, save us.* She will help you to feel better. She loves you very much and will always help you when you ask her. She is going to be our own teacher and guide in our school and we will pray to her every day.

What do we find in a garden? Flowers! One thing we will need in our Garden of the *Theotokos* is pretty flowers to put in front of her icon every day. This is something beautiful we can give to the *Theotokos* so that she knows we remember her. (*Make a weekly schedule in which each day a different child is responsible for providing a bouquet or appropriate decoration in honor of Mary for the table: ie: Monday==mother; Tuesday==eldest child, etc.*) For now, why don't we all go out and cut a bouquet for our table together.

After decorating the prayer corner with a bouquet, light the candles or lampada, and some incense if you wish, and use the prayers on the following page to dedicate and begin your school year.

Prayers for beginning the School Year

September 1--Prayers

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

O heavenly King,
the Comforter the Spirit of truth
Who art everywhere present and fillest all things
Treasury of blessings, and Giver of life,
come, and abide in us,
and cleanse us from every impurity.
And save our souls, O Good One.

Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us (3x)
Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.
Now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

O Most-holy Trinity, have mercy on us.
O Lord, cleanse us from our sins.
O Master, pardon our iniquities.
O Holy One, visit and heal our infirmities for Thy name's sake.

Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy.
Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.
Now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be Thy name.
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.

Through the prayers of our holy Fathers, Lord Jesus Christ our God, have mercy
on us. Amen.

Almighty God, our Help and Refuge, Fountain of wisdom and Tower of
strength, who knowest that we can do nothing without Thy guidance and help;
assist us, we pray Thee, and direct us to divine wisdom and power, that we may
accomplish this school year, and whatever we may undertake to do, faithfully
and diligently, according to Thy will, so that it may be profitable to ourselves

and others, and to the glory of Thy Holy Name. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen

O God, our heavenly Father, who lovest mankind, and art most merciful and compassionate, have mercy upon these, Thy servants, (*name each child*) for whom we humbly pray Thee, and commend them to Thy gracious care and protection. Be Thou, O God, their guide and guardian in all their endeavors, lead them in the path of Thy truth, and draw them nearer to Thee, that they may lead a godly and righteous life in Thy love and fear; doing Thy will in all things. Give them grace that they may be temperate, industrious, diligent, devout and charitable. Defend them against the assaults of the enemy, and grant them wisdom and strength to resist all temptation and corruption of this life; and direct them in the way of salvation, through the merits of Thy Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, and the intercessions of His Holy Mother and thy blessed saints. Amen.

And then perhaps one or both parents would like to add a prayer in their own words for their children. End by singing a short hymn to the Theotokos that you already know (such as "It is truly blessed (or meet)" or even "The Angel Cried"). And then:

Through the prayers of our holy Fathers, Lord Jesus Christ our God, have mercy on us. Amen.