

# GOSPEL OF MARK: ORGANIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Dr. Constance Tarasar was a professor of religious education at St. Vladimir's Seminary and also contributed to a great many religious education projects. She is one of the most extensive writers on the topic of Orthodox religious education and wrote her doctoral dissertation on *A Process Model for the Design of Curriculum for Orthodox Christian Religious Education*. You can find it at the St. Vladimir's Seminary library.

In her dissertation, she explains that the development of a curriculum for our church schools should contain well defined: content (What will we be teaching?), goals (What are we striving to achieve with these lessons?), and developmental levels (Have we properly developed the lessons for the intended age group?)

Additionally, Dr. Tarasar explains that we should develop the curriculum within the greater framework of worship, teaching, praxis. As Orthodox Christians, we learn and grow throughout our entire lifetime. It is an experiential process of attending services (worship), continually learning (teaching), and living our faith daily (praxis). It is within this model that the Church has taught and guided one generation to the next about their Orthodox Christian faith. Therefore, when we develop the teaching portion of our curriculum, it's important to always place it within the context of attending services regularly and living our faith everywhere we go as well.

On the following pages, I have listed the content, goals, and developmental levels of lessons over the Gospel of Mark. I also listed how this curriculum embraces nurturing attendance of the services, formal lessons, and connecting all of it to daily home life.

## CONTENT

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We chose to study one gospel each year for the next four years as our primary theme. The Gospel of Mark was chosen for our first year out of practicality for our parish because our hall was under renovation. We started our church school year in October and chose to start with the Gospel of Mark because it is the shortest of the four gospels.

We chose weekly sub-themes for each week's lesson in connection with our main theme, the Gospel of Mark. Each of our classes, as well as our parish community, learned about the same topic each week. There are 22 lessons in total for this curriculum.

## GOALS

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For the year:

- Develop a deeper understanding of the Bible
- Learn about Holy Tradition
- Develop a deeper understanding of the four gospels
- Learn about the life of Saint Mark
- Develop a deeper understanding of the Gospel of Mark

For each week:

- (Younger students) Hear the miracles and parables of Jesus through visuals, stories, felt board characters, and more!
- (Older students) Develop a better understanding of each chapter of the Gospel of Mark through visuals, discussions, and more!
- Learn about the major feast days shared in the Gospel of Mark
- Learn about the iconography of the parables and miracles of Christ, as well as, the major feast days

These lessons were developed with our teachers and students in mind. However, they can easily be adapted for use in other classrooms, homes, retreats, or camps.

## DEVELOPMENTAL LEVELS

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Each lesson was written for the developmental level of each class in mind. Our classes are divided into five groups - primarily because this is the number of classrooms we have available for our Sunday School.

Teachers are encouraged to make any necessary modifications, in regard to the developmental level of the lessons, given their knowledge and experience with the individual students in their class.

(Personalities, maturity, special needs, and prior knowledge of the material will vary from class to class.) We discussed and collaborated on teaching methodologies for each class during our weekly teachers' meetings each week on Thursday evenings.

It is beneficial and important that we present the lesson by incorporating more than one of the senses. Here are some examples of how we presented the lessons:

The most common delivery method for lessons is using the senses of hearing and sight. We explained, read, asked questions, discussed, showed maps, iconography, pictures, and more!

We also incorporated the other senses as well: touch, smell, and taste.

Touch - We did this by writing questions on an inflatable beach ball and tossing it around the room amongst the students. Whatever question their thumb was resting on was the question they answered before tossing the ball to another person in the room. We also had game buzzers for each table to press while practicing how to find passages in the Bible. Speed was definitely not the goal but it helped eliminate the discussions between children, "What page is it on?" They went from letting one peer do all the work for the table to everyone trying to find the Bible passage themselves so they could press the buzzer. (The goal was to teach them how to use the Bible and find the given passage themselves.)

Smell - We brought in leaven (sourdough starter) for each class to see and smell. We also brought in cotton balls soaked with spikenard oil for the children to smell from the woman who anointed Christ with this same costly oil. (This lesson was one of the favorites of the whole year!)

Taste - We brought in loaves of leavened and unleavened bread for the kids to eat.

## WORSHIP

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Our choice for the theme of this curriculum - *The Gospel of Mark* - was based on the goal of developing greater knowledge and understanding of the four gospels. Our children hear the gospel reading during every Divine Liturgy and often when they attend other services during the week too. These lessons are also a continuation of our curriculum from last year on the Divine Liturgy, but with greater focus on the gospels themselves.

It is critically important that we, as teachers, set the example of not only regular attendance at as many services as possible, but also arriving at the beginning of the service. We teach through our example as well as our lessons.

Please encourage your families to attend as many services as possible this coming year. Challenge the children to pay attention to which services have a gospel reading.

## TEACHING

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Lessons have been provided for the entire school year, but expanding your own knowledge beyond what is provided in this curriculum is highly recommended.

*“You can teach only that which you have made your own, and this means that there is always the danger that your personal mistaken judgment of insufficient knowledge will be reflected in your teaching.” - Sophie Koulomzin*

With Sophie Koulomzin’s words in mind, I fully admit that I do not know everything there is to know about the Bible. I encourage you to expand what has been provided in these lessons with what you have learned too!

These are some beneficial resources to supplement these lessons:

- *The Explanation by Blessed Theophylact of the Holy Gospel According to St. Mark*
- *The Gospel of Mark the Suffering Servant* by Fr. Lawrence Farley
- *Search the Scriptures* Podcasts by Dr. Jeannie Constantinou on Ancient Faith
- *The Crucifixion of the King of Glory* by Eugenia Constantinou

Additionally, it is important to have your lesson prepared and ready to go before liturgy begins on Sunday morning.

## PRAXIS

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Being an Orthodox Christian cannot be compartmentalized into the time we spend at church on Sunday morning. When we receive Holy Communion, we carry Christ out into the world within us. We are all called to be saints and it is within our daily life that we continually strive to develop and grow closer to God. Praxis is living our faith everywhere we go and at every moment. Praxis is a crucial part of taking what our children experience in the Divine Liturgy, what they were taught in their Sunday School class, and then implementing it into their daily life. What are the major feast days of the Orthodox Church? Why do we have them and where did we get them? How are we supposed to treat one another? What are the sacraments? Why do we have them and where did we get them? How do we read an icon? What is a 40 Day Blessing? Where did it come from? ...and so much more!