



## *Girl Saints* Curriculum Guide

**Theme:** The lives and artistic representations of selected girl saints

**Objective:** Learn and understand about girl saints through discussion, questions and activities

## **Saints**

The term 'saint' derives from Christianity, but the concept of sainthood has been referenced in other religions and cultures. Saints are individuals who are worthy of honor through their model example as a selfless teacher, miracle worker, or having a connection to holiness. Within the Catholic Church, a saint is an individual who has been canonized or officially recognized by the Church and is believed to be in heaven. The public historically chose Saints. But when their stories and legends started to become distorted, after the 10th century, the bishops in the Vatican took over the duty of approving saints.

In the following curriculum guide, your students will be introduced to three categories of saints in the online exhibition:

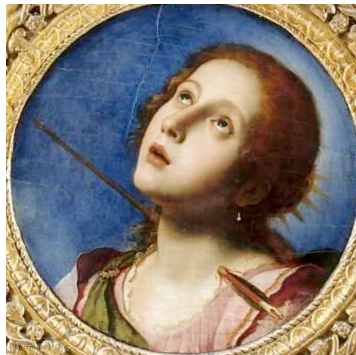
- Mythical Girl Saint
- Fantastical Girl Saint
- Real Girl Saint

After each girl saint is presented, there will be questions and activities to enhance and engage your students with the lesson.

## Mythical Girl Saints

Mythical Girl Saints are those whose stories are rooted more in legend than in fact. For these saints, many historians doubt that these girls even existed. Until 313 AD, Christianity was illegal in the Roman Empire, and many of the stories of the saints' lives were pieced together from cultural traditions and early Christian values. These girls lived in the early first millennium AD, a time when accurate written records were rare. This made it hard to verify stories about the lives of these saints.

*Saint Christina, died in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century*



*St. Christina*, Carlo Dolci, c. 1650, Oil on Panel, Kedleston Hall.

Christina's father was a wealthy pagan who had a number of golden idols. When she converted to Christianity, she distributed the idols among the poor and the needy. Upset by her actions and faith, her father then had her persecuted, imprisoned and tortured, which included being thrown into a pit of snakes, being shot with arrows, burned, and thrown into a lake with a millstone around her neck. Angels protected her through many of these tortures. She even outlived her father! In the end, she died as a result of beheading.

### Questions to consider:

- What message(s) do you think the story of St. Christina is trying to convey? Do you agree with the message(s)? Are there other aspects that are important? Why?
- How do you feel about the extreme violence exhibited in this story? What does that tell you about the time and culture this girl saint lived in – any differences with how some girls are living today?
- There is a great deal of similar violence in the world today, but very few people are nominated for sainthood. Why do you think that is?

- How was the Christian faith viewed during the lifetime of St. Christina? How does that compare to Christianity's influence today?

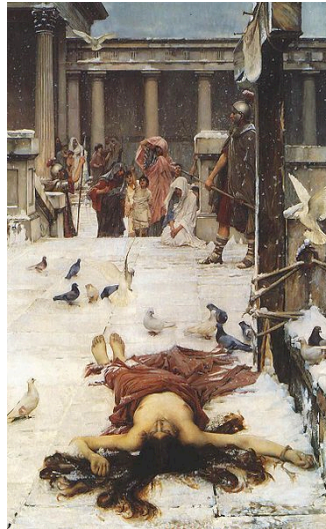
**Activities:**

- ✓ Compare this story to some of the stories of male saints. You can browse through the stories of many saints at <http://www.catholic.org/saints/>. How are the legends similar, and how are they different? Why do you think these differences occur?
- ✓ Read about the mythologies of other cultures, such as the Egyptians <http://www.egyptianmyths.net/>, the Greeks <http://www.greekmythology.com/>, and the Norse (<http://www.norse-mythology.com/>). Are there any girls in these stories that suffered like St. Christina? Create your own artwork comparing Christina and the mythical girl of your choice.
- ✓ Notice that most of the depictions of these saints include a portrait of the girl, as well as pictures that illustrate various parts of her story. What do you think of the details that have been shown, and what about the details that have been left out? Which is your favorite of these girl saints? Create a collage for that saint, including interesting details from her legend.

## Fantastical Girl Saints

Fantastical Girl Saints are those girls who actually existed in the past, but whose stories have been greatly embellished. These girls are historically documented and lived at the same time or later than the mythical girl saints. Many of their legends are beyond the realm of human possibility.

*Saint Eulalia, lived approximately 290-303*



*St. Eulalia*, J.W. Waterhouse, 1885, Oil on canvas. Tate Gallery, London.

Eulalia was just twelve years old when she refused to renounce her Christian faith under threat of Roman persecution. She suffered a dozen tortures, including having her breasts cut off, suffering crucifixion, and being rolled down the street in a barrel lined with knives; however, she survived each time. Finally, Eulalia was decapitated, and as she was dying a dove flew from her neck.

### Questions to Consider:

- What message(s) do you think the story of St. Eulalia is trying to convey? Do you agree with the message(s)? Are there other aspects that are important? Why?
- What does this story tell you about life in the Roman Empire at this time?
- What parts of each story do you think really happened, and what parts were made up?
- Why do you think the stories of these real girls were embellished?

- Why do you think the Church chose to praise the suffering of these young girls, instead of focusing on the effects of violence?
- Why do you think the theme of virginity and refusal of marriage comes up in so many of these stories? What does that tell you about Christian values at that time? Was this a carry-over from the girls' culture and other dominant religions?

### **Activities**

- ✓ Most of these girl saints were martyrs. Can you think of a girl or woman you admire who was punished for their beliefs? Write and illustrate their life story.
- ✓ Can you think of any real-life stories of girls who stood up for their beliefs and were not persecuted, but instead managed to change people and their attitudes? Write and illustrate their life story. Which do you think is more powerful and a more positive influence – the girl you chose who was punished, or the girl who made a difference?
- ✓ Which is your favorite of these girl saints? Create a collage for that saint, including interesting details from her legend.

## Real Girl Saints

Real Girl Saints are those whose lives have been accurately documented in history. Some religious elements have been added to their life stories – for example, it is claimed that God visited them, or that they appeared in visions after their death – but for the most part they are ordinary girls who accomplished extraordinary things. These girls lived in the recent millennium, during times when historical accounts were verifiable.

*Saint Bernadette, 1844-1879*



Bernadette Soubirous, Unknown photographer, c.1860

Saint Bernadette was born in Lourdes, France. When she was fourteen, she began having visions of a young woman who later identified herself as Saint Mary, the mother of Jesus. During one vision, Mary told Bernadette that she would provide water, even though the place where Bernadette had these visions was dry; eventually, a stream began flowing in the spot, and some people claimed to have been healed by that water.

Another time, witnesses claim that Bernadette was holding a candle that burned down to her fingers, yet she remained unharmed. Many people in her hometown assumed she was foolish, but a small group of people believed her and began following her. When she requested that a chapel be built in Lourdes, as per Saint Mary's wishes, she was initially thought to be a heretic, but eventually many churches were built in her honor. Today Lourdes is a major Catholic pilgrimage site.

### Questions to Consider:

- What message(s) do you think the story of St. Bernadette is trying to convey? Do you agree with the message(s)? Are there other aspects that are important? Why?
- What does this story tell you about the life and times that these she lived in?
- In what way is this story different from the stories of earlier girl saints? Why do you think these differences arise? What does that tell you about how Catholicism has evolved?
- Are there any parts of this story that you think may be exaggerated?
- How important do you think saints are to people in the modern world? How do you think this compares to the past?
- Even though there are millions who belong to the Catholic Church in Africa, Asia and South America, there are a relatively small number of saints not of European descent. Why do you think that is? Could it be related to the length of time involved in granting sainthood? Other reasons?

### Activities:

- ✓ All of the earlier girl saints were of European origin. However, as Catholicism spread across the world, the Church began recognizing people of different races as saints. Kateri Tekakwitha from New York is a good example of this recognition. Take a look at some other saints from non-European cultures (you can browse through the stories of many saints at <http://www.catholic.org/saints/>). How do their stories reflect their unique cultures and their differences from the earlier saints?
- ✓ Research other faiths (for example, Islam, Buddhism or Hinduism) to see whether they also honor girls who have made contributions to their faith. How are these girls similar to the Catholic saints, and how are they different?
- ✓ Which is your favorite of these girl saints? Create a collage for that saint, including interesting details from her legend.