

# Keep Hold of Good Instruction

This weekly bulletin insert complements the curriculum published by the Department of Christian Education of the Orthodox Church in America. This and many other Christian Education resources are available at <http://dce.oca.org>.



**The Forty Martyrs of Sebastea are an appealing group because of their youthful courage and their unyielding faith.**

The story is well-known to many of us. The forty were brave and disciplined soldiers in the Roman army, and were sometimes referred to as the "Thundering Legion" because of their energy and strength. They also were Christians. When a persecution of Christians began, the young men staunchly refused to deny Christ even when threatened with being stripped of their military status.

Such an act of defiance could only be bad for army morale. Their commander decided to make an example of them. On a cold winter night he had them bound and thrown into a lake. He also had warm fire-lit baths built where they could see the hot steam rising from them. He told the young men they could escape to the inviting warmth if they would pay homage to Rome's idols.

We read in the soldiers' story that throughout the terrible night they didn't curse their captors or blame God, or express self-pity. They sang hymns, recited prayers, and called out encouragement to one another.

What enabled these young men to sustain their faith in such extremity? Proverbs 3:34-4:22 gives us some clues. We read there, "Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commandments and live; get wisdom, get insight. Do not forsake her (wisdom), and she will keep you. Keep hold of [good] instruction; do not let go."

In these words a father exhorts his son to "keep hold" of what he has been taught and not to let go, and that is precisely what these young men did in their ordeal. We have the similar but much more recent story of a man consigned to hard labor in a Soviet prison camp with Father Arseny, the priest who comforted and saved from despair so many fellow prisoners. As he watched Father Arseny save another man's life, this man writes, he unexpectedly remembered the long-forgotten prayers his mother had taught him as a child, and rediscovered sustaining faith in that awful place.

The passage from Proverbs also contains these words: "She [wisdom] will honor you if you embrace her. She will place on your head a fair garland." This was exactly the experience of the forty soldiers. A light shone from heaven and wreaths appeared above their heads. Though one of them denied Christ for the warmth of the baths, a guard was overwhelmingly drawn to the heavenly sign, and ran to take his place and join the others in martyrdom.

On the Sunday of Orthodoxy we remember many who gave their lives for the faith. Perhaps, like the forty, they were strengthened by the Christian instruction they had received. If we are granted the privilege, as parents or teachers or friends, to guide and instruct others in the faith, let's be sure that we have learned the truths of that faith. Then we can provide to those others sound teachings they can "keep hold" of no matter how dark the times.