During the month of May we read from the Book of Acts how the apostles, sent by Christ, traveled, preached and ministered to spread the Christian faith.

Two saints commemorated in May also went to many places, working and preaching to build the faith. They are Saint Alexis Toth, a priest who lived in the 20th century, and Saint Brendan the Voyager (or Navigator), a monk of the 6th century.

This activity offers a brief life of each saint, and reflections on the Bible readings for his feast day. Finally there is a review of his life. Suggested answers to reflection questions are offered in parentheses, but we hope that families will consider together and come up with their own answers, too.

Saint Alexis Toth of Wilkes-Barre

Born to a poor family in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1854, Alexis Toth was the son of a priest of the Greek Catholic Church. The Greek Catholics were citizens of the Empire who had originally been Orthodox. As a result of political agreements, they were required to enter into communion with the dominant Roman Catholic Church, still keeping some Orthodox practices and customs.

Alexis excelled in his early studies, and then in his preparation for the priesthood. In 1878, the same year he and Rosalie (Mihalich) were married, he was ordained to the priesthood and assigned as pastor of a Greek Catholic parish. The couple rejoiced the following year when a baby girl was born to them.
But Father Alexis would soon be plunged into deep grief. His wife, and then their infant daughter, died. With a heavy heart, he humbly continued to serve God and his parish. He also taught in the local seminary until he was sent to the United States in 1889 to serve a Greek Catholic parish in Minneapolis.

The Roman Catholic bishop in Minneapolis had never heard of a priest who'd been married. He made life difficult for Father Toth, thinking he was somehow not a proper priest. But Father continued, as always, humbly serving a parish which was so poor that the people could barely afford to pay him anything. He supported himself by working in a bakery, and in spite of having so little himself he managed to help others in need.

Needing to establish his priesthood, Father Toth and his followers appealed to the Russian Orthodox Bishop Vladimir of San Francisco. In 1891 the bishop received him, and 361 parishioners, into the Orthodox Church.

In the following years Father Toth traveled across the country and preached the truth of Orthodoxy, bringing many people back to the faith and gaining new converts as well. His writings and sermons helped them all understand their faith more deeply.

Father Toth helped Saint Tikhon, then the ruling bishop of the North American Church, establish Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk Monastery and Orphanage in South Canaan, Pennsylvania. He died in 1909, and is buried behind the monastery's altar. In 1994, he was glorified as a saint.

Find more information about Father Toth, including activities, journaling questions, and other resources in the Activity Book "Saints of North America" produced by the Department of Christian Education, and available for free download at dce.oca.org.

Another resource from the Department of Christian Education is the "life icon" of St. Alexis Toth with the pictures explained, which is available at:
The reading for Father Toth's feast day, May 7, is Acts 3: 1-8. In this passage, a person expects one thing but receives another. Who is the person? What was the thing expected, and what was actually received? What three things did the person do in response? (*The lame man is the person who expected the usual handout of money but instead received healing. He responded by walking, leaping and most importantly praising God. This is in interesting contrast to the nine lepers who joyfully received healing but neglected to thank or praise God for it.*)

Father Toth had very little money to share with others, but he too offered something that may have been unexpected. What was it? (*Rather than any material gift, Father Toth offered to guide people to receive the greatest gift: the Orthodox Faith.*)

In Acts 8: 9-24 we meet another person who is amazed by what Peter and John are doing. He is Simon, who had practiced magic. How does Simon hope to share in the power of the laying on of hands? (*By buying it from the apostles.*)

Does Peter absolutely condemn Simon? (*No, he tells Simon to repent and pray.*)

Is there a difference between Peter and John's attitude toward power and Simon's attitude toward it? (*Yes, a great difference. Simon wants the power for himself; no doubt he enjoyed being praised by all as "that power of God which is called Great" and amazing everyone with his magic. Peter and John, on the other hand, always tell people that the power is God's not theirs, as in 3:12.*)

What do we know about Father Toth that tells us he was like Peter and John, not like Simon? (*He was willing to work at a humble job when he got little pay from his parish, and never looked for glory. He had no desire to impress or "amaze" people, but only to share the true faith with them.*)
Unscramble the words, and fill in each sentence with the one that fits. (Answers below)

rakbye ripEem hpranoega trala haspri trrune trencsvo dendoria

1. Father Toth encouraged people to ______________ to the Orthodox faith.

2. He helped Bishop Tikhon (later Saint Tikhon) establish a monastery and ______________.

3. To support himself, he worked for a time in a ______________.

4. He came to America to serve a Greek Catholic ______________ in Minneapolis.

5. He is buried behind the ______________ of the monastery he helped establish.

6. He was married, ______________, and assigned to a parish all in the same year.

7. He was born in the Austro-Hungarian ______________.

8. His preaching brought people back to the faith and created new ______________.

Answers:
1. return (trrune)
2. orphanage (hpranoega)
3. bakery (rakbye)
4. parish (haspri)
5. altar (trala)
6. ordained (dendoria)
7. empire (ripEem)
8. converts (trencsvo)
Saint Brendan the Voyager (or Navigator)

Saint Brendan was born in County Kerry, Ireland in 484. One of his earliest teachers was Saint Ita, a woman. His parents wanted him to have a good education, so when he was six he began attending a monastery school. There he learned the exciting stories of Saint Patrick and the others who had brought Christianity to Ireland. Some of them traveled to other lands, both those nearby and those over the sea, to share the new faith with people beyond Ireland's borders.

As Brendan was growing up, he must have been inspired by those great champions of the faith. In 512, at the age of 26, he was ordained to the priesthood. He then traveled by sea to islands off the coast of Scotland, to Wales, and to Brittany on the northern coast of France. He founded monasteries in these places, and prayed for the people living in them to know and love God. He would later become known as one of the "Twelve Apostles of Ireland", a group of monks who all lived in the sixth century and who had all studied with the great Saint Finian. These twelve did a lot to spread the faith by building churches and monasteries, by teaching, and in some cases by doing miracles.

Saint Brendan made many sea voyages, but the most famous one was the "epic journey" with a group of other monks he called to join him. They constructed a wooden boat, covered with hides tanned in oak bark and softened with butter. Next they fashioned a mast and sails. Then they fasted for forty days, prayed together, and were ready to embark. They set out on the Atlantic Ocean in the name of the Holy Trinity, hoping to find the "Isle of the Blessed."

Accounts of their epic journey say that they saw "mountains in the sea spouting fire" (perhaps volcanos) and "great crystal pillars" (perhaps icebergs). We are told that they once came upon a huge rock in the sea, and decided to celebrate the Liturgy on it, having been at sea for a long time. As the monks were singing the hymns, the "rock" heard the music and moved. It turned out to be a whale.

The voyagers did see many beautiful and awe-inspiring things and places on their journey, and having spent seven years at sea Saint Brendan and the others were ready to come home again. After returning, he founded more monasteries, including one for his sister Briga at Annaghdown, in County Galway.

It was while visiting Briga that he died, in 577. Saint Brendan was buried at the cathedral in Clonfert, one of the places where he had founded a monastery.

Saint Brendan is the patron saint of mariners, boatmen, elderly adventurers—and whales.

Find more about Saint Brendan, including other activities, journaling questions and maps of his travels, in "Saints and the Animals That Served Them", an Activity Book produced by the Department of Christian Education. It's at dce.oca.org, and downloadable for free.
The reading for Saint Brendan's feast day (May 16th) is Acts 6:1-7. We read that there was some disagreement among the disciples. The Hellenists (those Jews who practiced some Greek customs) felt that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. Jobs had to be assigned, some perhaps more "prestigious" than others. While some people would preach the word of God, others would serve tables.

Would it be possible for some to feel that they would prefer a different, more prestigious job than the one they were given? Could that apply to our lives, too? (Yes, and people might give different examples here.)

Perhaps the monks on Saint Brendan's epic journey had a similar situation. On a boat, someone has the "cool" job of steering, but someone else has to take care of the garbage.

Our Lord had something to say about this. Read Luke 22:27. How does Jesus challenge the usual thinking about prestige? (He acknowledges that the one who sits at table is considered "greater" than the one who serves. But then He completely undercuts that idea of greatness by saying that He has come to serve.)

In what ways might Jesus' statement affect things in your life, or in the lives of people you know? In what ways might His words challenge the thinking of people in our society? (There are many possible answers here.)

Read Psalm 107, verses 23-32. What was Saint Brendan's "business" on the sea? (It wasn't commerce, but building monasteries and churches, and spreading the Christian faith.)

Do you think some of the things described here might have been part of the monks' experience on their epic journey? What would they thank God for? (Certainly a voyage on the sea can be perilous, as the verses describe. The monks, and anyone in danger, should thank God for bringing them out of peril safely.)
Add the following numbers. The correct total is given at the end.

1. The year Saint Brendan was born
2. The age at which he went to a monastery school
3. The number of the "Apostles of Ireland"
4. The age at which Saint Brendan was ordained
5. The number of years the "epic journey" lasted
6. The number of days the monks fasted before embarking on their epic journey
7. The year Saint Brendan was ordained
8. The year Saint Brendan died

What's your total?

Correct numbers and total:

1) 484
2) 6
3) 12
4) 26
5) 7
6) 40
7) 512
8) 577

Total: 1664