



The Perfect Ten: A Report on the Children's Programme at the 2017 Deanery Conference and Festival by Ginka Mastoridis

"The perfect ten, the perfect ten, God gave the perfect ten"
I can still hear the refrain marking the last May Bank Holiday weekend I spent helping with the Children's programme at our Deanery Annual Conference and Festival.

"Let Us Attend! Attentiveness to the Word of God in Prayer and Everyday Life" was the Conference theme this year, so when the children's programme coordinators started brainstorming ideas it led them to the Ten Commandments. Do we know them? Do we follow them? How can we display them? Can we create art based on them, or act them out? How do you present abstract ideas with children? The answer was through skits and sketches.

Supplied with various scripts for different ages, a song and enough fabric for costumes and props (provided by our favourite scrap bank in Watford, North London), arts and craft materials and movies about

Moses and the Ten Commandments, we thought we were ready for the weekend.

On Friday, the children watched a film about the Ten Commandments. This proved to be a good transition from a busy week at school, for most of them, to three days spent with friends - some of whom they only see once or twice a year, if they are old enough to attend Summer Camp with their extended Orthodox family.

With forty-four children, aged between nine months and sixteen years attending the conference this year, twenty-nine of which actively participating, this has been the largest children's programme in the last ten years. So, finding a good balance between structured activities and free/creative play underlined by the main topic was one of the main jobs of the helpers.

On Saturday morning, we had Father Stephen from York and Father Augustine from Glasgow speak respectively to the older and younger children about the Ten Commandments. Find a child in your parish who was there and ask them about it – I hadn't listened to a more informative and at the same time entertaining speaker, Father Stephen, and more caring and patient one, Father Augustine.

At the end of the first session we also had time to start learning the 'Perfect Ten' song and knowing from previous years how musically talented our children are, that was a safe activity to introduce, something the children would be performing at the party on Sunday evening.

Part of the magic of the children's programme is that it creates itself and the children supported by the helpers take it as far as it can go. Keeping an open mind and being flexible usually helps, and eventually things fall into place, as happened this year too. The children prepared three main acts which we used to learn about the commandments and get them ready in time for the Sunday entertainment.

The younger children, aged five to eleven, prepared nine short sketches (the opening one combining the first two commandments) for 'The Perfect Ten', with Moses and a child presenting each one of the commandments. We had the best Moses and children characters

we could wish for. They all practised hard, listened to feedback and improved upon it, and showed us even more of their personalities. They overcame shyness and nervousness and stepped in at the last minute when some of the youngest actors realised they needed to wait maybe another year to perform on stage. A special mention goes to Naomi, Abi and Gilly who were our props and costume designers, makers and coordinators. They didn't need to be asked or reminded to come up or help with writing words, drawing, painting or cutting. They readily helped some of the younger performers practise and improve their acts.

Last year we had our first children's Vespers organised by Anne-Marie and James Angus. We couldn't miss it this year, it was one of the main features on the children's timetable and took place alongside the adult Vigil service. It was a pure joy taking about thirty children to the chapel to be anointed, and seeing the delight on the faces of the adults making way for them.

The second performance was by friends, Nicholas and John. After doing a rap and beatbox song last year, this year tried a new genre and presented a sketch where John played a school teacher and Nicholas a vampire learning about the ten commandments. Everybody enjoyed the humour and appreciated their artistry, Nicholas' expressive voice and John's ability to keep a straight face. Can good actors be good Christians? They surely can!

The last performance was a puppet show, with Sebastian and Sam as puppeteers and Christopher and Agathe doing the voice over. What excellent team work it was, skilfully guided by our experienced helper Aphrodite Demetriou, from the Parish of Saint Bega, Saint Mungo and Saint Herbert in Keswick. Both actors and audience had fun watching the sketches and we saw a few more good examples of the commandments.

Lastly, the oldest group of children, as we call them the HELP team, also had a meeting. After leading a very successful fund-raising campaign for Citizens UK, they needed to decide what to do next. First, they had Carol Graves from the Parish of Saints Peter and Paul, Clapham, London talk to them about the new "Jungle" in Calais, she had visited and helped earlier on. She also brought pictures to share.

The youngsters decided to continue with the campaign for another year. Thank you on their behalf!

This report won't be complete if I don't mention the rest of the helpers, Susanna Bennigsen and Theo and Kalina Boev, who with lots of patience and creativity supported and guided the children, and hopefully had some fun too; and, last but not least, Viktor Mastoridis from the Parish of the Dormition in Holborn, London, without whose hard work and dedication the children's programme won't be what it is.

What a weekend! Someone told me, "After this weekend, I doubt that the children will ever forget the Ten Commandments." I'm already looking forward to Festival 2018. Didn't I finish my last year's report with the same sentence? Hm.

Ginka Mastoridis

