

# 2026 History Essay Contest

## Homeschool 7/8<sup>th</sup> Grade Winner

### The Incredible Convert: Olga of Kiev

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There have been many dramatic conversions in Catholic history. One of the most astonishing stories is Olga of Kiev's. Olga lived in Kievan Russia in the tenth century. For most of her life, she was a ruthless pagan ruler who terrorized her enemies. However, God changed her life in a wonderful way when she embraced the Gospel and became the first Christian ruler of Russia. Her noble example convinced her grandson Vladimir of the true faith, and he was able to establish Christian morals in his kingdom. The cruelty of Olga's bloodthirsty early reign hurt the people around her, but when she converted, she had a good Christian influence on Vladimir and all of Kievan Russia.

While she was still a pagan, Olga ruled with without mercy. When her husband Igor was murdered by another tribe, called the Drevlians, she ended up as queen regent for her son Svyatoslav, which meant that while her son was young, she was the most powerful person in her kingdom. Soon after her husband was assassinated, some Drevlian messengers asked Olga to marry their prince, Prince Mal. Olga pretended to consider it, but actually plotted revenge on the tribe who had killed her husband. She told the messengers that they should stay in their boats, no matter what, while she went inside to consider the offer, or so the messengers thought. The next morning, the queen's servants told the Drevlian messengers to come inside to see the queen, and the messengers demanded that they be carried in their boats, in order to follow Olga's commands exactly. The servants then threw them and their boats into a pit they had been

digging all night and buried the messengers alive. Before her conversion, Olga used her power to take revenge on innocent men.<sup>1</sup>

Olga's thirst for revenge led her to seek not only the destruction of the Drevlian prince, but also the destruction of his innocent subjects, and she used treachery to achieve this. After she secretly killed his messengers, she reached out to Prince Mal, pretending that she was no longer angry and was ready to accept his offer of marriage and union of their realms. But first, she declared she must put on a funeral banquet for her deceased husband, and five thousand Drevlian soldiers must attend it. At the banquet, she betrayed them, and her men killed all of the soldiers. After this, the prince approached her, surrendering and offering her all the riches of his land in exchange for peace. Olga agreed on the condition that the Drevlians send as tribute three pigeons and three sparrows from each house in Iskorosten, the capital of the Drevlian kingdom. They willingly obliged. In a horrible act of calculated murder, Olga and her men tied flammable material to each of the birds and then set fire to the material right outside Drevlian territory. All the birds returned to their owners' homes, causing all of Iskorosten to be burnt to the ground, killing many innocent people and destroying the city. Up until this point, Olga was more like King Herod than a holy queen, but that would change.<sup>2</sup>

As she neared the end of her life, Olga had one of the most dramatic moral transformations in Catholic history. She traveled to Constantinople, spent time with Emperor Constantine VII, and was converted.<sup>3</sup> Though she may have converted for diplomatic purposes, she became genuinely devout in her Christian faith.<sup>4</sup> To Kiev, she brought missionaries and holy items in order to share Christianity with her people.<sup>5</sup> The way she reigned also changed profoundly. "She was just and honest in the affairs of state,

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<sup>1</sup> Brendan McGuire, "The Conversion of Russia," Institute of Catholic Culture (lecture, St. Veronica Catholic Church, Chantilly, VA, June 13, 2013) <https://instituteofcatholicculture.org/events/the-conversion-of-russia>.

<sup>2</sup> McGuire

<sup>3</sup> McGuire

<sup>4</sup> Emily Woodham, "Saint Olga of Kyiv," Diocese of Boise, July 10, 2022, <http://www.duioceseofboise.org/post/saint-olga-kyiv>.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas J. Craughwell, "Sts. Vladimir and Olga: Unlikely Converts and 'Equal to the Apostles,'" *The National Catholic Register*, July 11, 2017, <http://www.ncregister.com/blog/sts-vladimir-and-olga-unlikely-converts-and-equal-to-the-apostles>.

...serving the poor and building churches.”<sup>6</sup> Olga died 969 after introducing Christianity to her people, but she did not live to see her country embrace it.<sup>7</sup> St. Nestor the Chronicler described Olga as ““a precursor in the Christian land, like the dawn before sunrise and the twilight before light.””<sup>8</sup> The “sunrise” St. Nestor mentions here is Olga’s grandson Vladimir, who would finish the work his grandmother had started.

Olga’s most effective act in bringing Christianity to her kingdom bore fruit after her death. Olga had raised and taught her grandson Vladimir from a young age.<sup>9</sup> When Vladimir was Ruler of Kievan Russia after Olga’s death, he searched for a religion to convert to. His messengers investigated many religions on his behalf and were most impressed by the Byzantine Divine Liturgy. When discussing it with their ruler, they said, ““If the Greek faith were evil it would not have been adopted by your Grandmother Olga who was wiser than all men.””<sup>10</sup> The memory of Olga convinced him, so he converted.<sup>11</sup> Vladimir praised Olga publicly on the day of his baptism, proclaiming, ““The sons of the Rus bless you, and also the generations of your descendants.””<sup>12</sup> Vladimir would never have converted without Olga’s good Christian influence.

Vladimir was able to bring Christian culture to Kievan Russia. He established the faith that would become the state religion of Russia until 1917. Also, under Vladimir’s rule, Russia became known for having the best social services in that era. Vladimir was noted for his abundant mercy toward the poor people of Russia, even criminals. For example, at Kiev he introduced the Byzantine law code, but Vladimir was more merciful and completely got rid of torture, the death penalty, and mutilation, while

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<sup>6</sup> Woodham

<sup>7</sup> “The All-Praised Olga, Equal-to-the-Apostles, Princess of Kiev,” The Greek Orthodox Church of America, <http://www.goarch.org/chapel/saints?contentid=121>.

<sup>8</sup> “Equal-to-the-Apostles Blessed Great Princess Olga (in Holy Baptism Helen),” The Orthodox Church of America, <http://www.oca.org/saint/lives/2046/07/11/102003-equal-to-the-apostles-blessed-great-princess-olga-in-holy-baptis>.

<sup>9</sup> “Sts. Vladimir and Olga (July 15),” Melkite Catholic Eparchy of Newton, <http://melkite.org/faith/sunday-scriptures/sts-vladimir-and-olga-july-15>.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Hopko, *Church History* (Yonkers: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1981), 120.

<sup>11</sup> Hopko, 120

<sup>12</sup> “Equal-to-the-Apostles Blessed Great Princess Olga (in Holy Baptism Helen).”

Byzantium still used both the death penalty and mutilation.<sup>13</sup> Bishop Timothy Ware emphasizes how the era remains ““that of a standard, a golden measure, a royal way.””<sup>14</sup> Olga’s influence on Vladimir profoundly changed history by bringing Christianity to the Slavic people.

Olga reigned with cruelty before she converted, but after embracing Christianity, she was a good influence on Vladimir and all of her kingdom. Her early reign was a dark period in Kievan Russia’s history due to her violent actions. When she converted and embraced virtue, she inspired the people around her. Her example touched Vladimir in a special way, causing him to convert. Vladimir was the image of generosity and mercy, and he transformed Kievan Russia’s culture by turning his kingdom to Christ. Even a thousand years later, Christians still marvel at how Divine Providence can use one woman to change a people’s ways.

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<sup>13</sup> Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, (Great Britain: Penguin Random House UK, 2010) 75-76

<sup>14</sup> Ware, 78

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