



EASTERN CATHOLIC LIFE

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I LIFT UP MY EYES

Pastoral Reflections of Bishop Kurt



MARY, THE ONE WHO POINTS THE WAY

When there is a newborn baby, he or she is an instant celebrity. I don't know why we say "bouncing baby boy" for only boys—it is probably for the alliteration. Is there a similar expression for little girls? In any case, the baby is a celebrity, perhaps for the only time in life. However, there isn't much to talk about with a baby, they don't talk and usually don't have much history, except with their mothers. So, our attention soon turns to the mother and father.

The same thing is true with Our Lord. There is no question who the celebrity is at Christmas. God the Father sent His only begotten Son to take flesh from a virgin of the House of David. He is truly the son of God, and Emmanuel, which means "God with us". He is the Anointed One, called Messiah in Hebrew and Christ in Greek. He is called Anointed because the ancient Hebrews made a man king by anointing, and Jesus is the heir to the throne of David, the one foretold by the prophets.

Although there is plenty to talk about at the birth of Jesus – the exotic visitors from the East guided by a star, the prophecies, the angelic choirs announcing "Glory" to the startled shepherds on the hillside – nevertheless, most of the narrative in the two Gospels that talk about the birth is about Joseph and Mary.

In the Gospel of Saint Matthew, most of the narrative is about Joseph. In addition to the prophecies from the Old Testament, there are five special revelations in dreams from God about the birth of the Messiah. Four of the five are to Saint Joseph himself, and the three that mention an Angel are all for Saint Joseph.

In the Gospel of Saint Luke, Joseph is mentioned by name only twice, and most of the narrative is about the mother of Jesus, Mary, or about her relatives, Elizabeth and Zechariah, and their son John. After Jesus turns twelve, Saint Joseph disappears entirely from the Gospels. Joseph's death is a matter of speculation or tradition. Pious Christians assume that if he died with Jesus and Mary at his side, what could be a happier death than that? And so, we call him the patron saint of a happy death.

Mary continues to appear in the life of Jesus throughout His life. She is mentioned in his public life in all four gospels, most elaborately in the Gospel of Saint John where she tells the servants, "Do whatever He tells you?"; and provokes His first miracle or sign. In the Gospel of Saint John, she is standing at the Crucifixion with Saint John, and Jesus says, "Woman behold your son," and "Behold your mother." Mary is mentioned yet again after the Ascension in the company of the disciples in Jerusalem as they pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

As traditional Christians, we can't get enough of Mary. When Jesus said to the Beloved Disciple, "Behold your mother", we took that to heart. Who doesn't want to be the Beloved Disciple? In fact, John is one the most common names on the face of the earth, because Christianity is the largest religion, and all Christians want to be the Beloved Disciple: to lean on His breast at the Last Supper, to sneak into the Praetorium after Him, to stand by the Cross, to race Peter to the empty tomb, and to eat broiled fish with Him on the beach after the Resurrection.

From the beginning we have given Mary many other names and titles, sometimes to teach ourselves the Faith, sometimes to honor her, and sometimes to commemorate an event such as an apparition or a victory. Mary might be the most popular name on earth, because it is used by both men and women, and it is a very popular name for both Christians and Moslems.

Perhaps the oldest name of Mary, not well known really, is the name *Hodogitria* which means "points the way". The name comes from an icon, which might



The most ancient Hodogitria icon was a full-length icon, probably destroyed during the conquest of Constantinople in 1453. There were contemporary copies that survived, notably in Torcella, Italy. This beautiful wooden icon is from the Heritage Center in Woodland Park, Russian 19th century.

be the oldest icon of Mary. It shows the mother ...continued on page 2

I LIFT UP MY EYES

Mary, the One Who Points the Way

...continued from page 1

Mary holding the infant Jesus in her left arm and pointing at Him with her right hand. By various traditions it was painted by Saint Luke himself, whom we know from the scriptures was a very talented and cultured man, and most certainly knew Mary person-

ally after his conversion. According to one tradition, the original icon was full length and ended up in a monastery in Constantinople. It was believed to be destroyed by the Moslems when they conquered the city, but we know what it looked like because there was a copy

in a church in northern Italy in Torcello Cathedral. There is not only a metal copy, but the apse mosaic is the same icon. We are blessed to have a similar icon in the Heritage Center, a full-length wooden 19th century icon from Russia, as shown in this article.

In the centuries since the original *Hodogitria* Icon was painted, over a thousand years, and perhaps almost two thousand years, it seems that the Church had a corporate memory that this original icon was so close to the original that some of it should not be changed. As artists took liberties, adding different symbols or details and changing the position or action of the infant, the hand of Mary remained unmoved and unmovable. A few years ago, I spent a lot of time trying to learn about all the ancient civilizations that appear in the Bible, and Egypt is the one where we know the most and can see the most, not just read about it. I was fascinated that the stances and gestures of figures could persist for two thousand years without change. In Christian art, the hand of Mary pointing to Jesus is a similar stable sacred symbol.

In the famous icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, familiar to all of us, we don't notice at first that position of the hand of Mary, because it seems to be functioning as a place for the infant Jesus to put his own hands. Only after it is pointed out by an expert in art do we notice that her hand has not moved from the ancient gesture of "pointing the way". In the sweet kissing icons where Jesus is leaping up to hug his mother, instead of sitting still and blessing us, we see that her hand is once

again in the same position, although it isn't pointing but is holding the infant. These medieval artists were aware that her hand hadn't moved for a thousand years, and they didn't move it this time either. For two thousand years, if we know how to read the signs, Mary looks at us and points us to her infant Son.

Our entire saving Faith is summed up in this great painting, the eternal Creator of all things sends His only begotten Son to be born in an ineffable way from a poor Virgin, to be like us in all things but sin. "He did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at, but emptied himself taking the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men." (Philippians 2:8) "Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." (Isaiah 52:1-2) Two thousand years ago, Jesus said to us, "Behold your mother." For two thousand years, Mary has been pointing at her Son.

"What is this great Mystery? The Creator of the Cosmos is in the womb of a Virgin. A cave in Bethlehem contains the infinite God. He who is without flesh takes on flesh. When Caesar Augustus ruled this world, the Author of Life was born in a manger. What is this great Mystery?"

+Kurt Bunette



This famous "sweet kissing" icon is called "Vladimir" after the city where the most famous one was located, and all others are based on it. The Vladimir is probably the second most famous icon in the world after the Rublev Trinity. These two premier icons are now located in the Tretyakoff gallery in Moscow near each other. When I saw them in 1996, there were no crowds around the icons. Most people in the museum had no idea of their importance, unlike the Mona Lisa and other famous paintings.



"Merciful" is written on this icon to the left of the Theotokos. The icon might be called "Merciful Mother" or "The Merciful One"



The *Hodogitria* is surrounded by other saints. Saint Nicholas, Saint Athanasios, Saint Modestos, and Saint Paraskeva. Saint Modestos was an Archbishop of Jerusalem and is considered a patron saint of animals. Below are Saint George and Saint Demetrius. Saint George is dispatching a dragon, and Saint Demetrius is dealing with a bad man.

EASTERN CATHOLIC LIFE EDITOR'S FAREWELL

Dear readers,

After a total of 17 years as assistant editor and editor, the time has arrived for me to announce my resignation, with Bishop Kurt's permission and approval, from the *Eastern Catholic Life*. It has been my honor to continue the legacy of my predecessors and now it is time to hand that on to Father Lewis Rabayda, who has served as layout editor for the past ten years, and has been appointed by Bishop Kurt as the new editor. I am certain that you will be pleased with this new direction.

I would like to thank Bishop Kurt, as well as the team of priests and laypeople who helped me edit this newspaper; our contributors for their faithful and thoughtful

columns; my brother priests and their lay collaborators who provided regular content for publication. Especially, I would like to thank you, dear readers, for your faithful and prayerful support.

May God bless you all!
S'nami Boh! God is with us!
 Gratefully,
 Father James Badeaux



THE LITTLE MISSION THAT CAN AND WILL

By *Andréa Kakuk, Petro Oros Byzantine Catholic Mission*

Being part of a mission church is tough. I should know. My first Byzantine church was a mission. As a kid in the 1980s, I watched my father and a few other families start a Byzantine Catholic mission in Indianapolis, Indiana. We didn't have a lot of money or regular meeting space for years. With the help of God, determination and a lot of faith, a ranch house and garage (converted into a nave), became our spiritual home. I watched my father build an iconostasis, a gold dome and sacrifice much more to bring Ruthenian traditions to the Midwest. I'm happy to say that church is thriving in the Eparchy of Parma.

My mission story doesn't stop there. Today, my spiritual life is a Progressive commercial, "We can't stop you from becoming your parents." It's not necessarily a bad thing; (thanks, Dad for set-

ting the example). Determined to grow our church in the Carolinas, I've taken on various roles with the Petro Oros Byzantine Catholic Mission (Charlotte Metro area).

If you're familiar with our mission, we were established in 2016, began holding weekly liturgies in 2018 and were granted a name in 2024. Sometimes it seems like a never-ending uphill climb, even with faith that we will outgrow and upgrade from the Roman Catholic ministry center. 2025 marks the 9th year of this on-going effort.

Sometimes I stop and think about that uphill climb. Why do my family and I spend four hours every Saturday driving, setting up, worshiping, and cleaning up a classroom when there's a church 15 minutes away? Surely, I'd save on gas by going to the Roman Rite Mass, but

something would still be amiss. What is it? The answer is simple, heart and family.



The Children Enjoy a Visit from Saint Nicholas

The heart of the Petro Oros mission lies in our parish family. I have a grandmother, an uncle, a sister, and cousins that I see every week. We are not related by blood or marriage. We are related through our love of Byzantine liturgy

and fellowship. I've never felt close to other Byzantines in previous places of worship. I never realized how lucky we are even though we lack: 1) A building with a dome and iconostasis, 2) A resident priest, 3) All the other luxuries of a larger parish.


What we do have is a family that will never stop the uphill climb: 1) Our priest, Fr. Vasyl Sokolovych, [home parish of Saints Cyril and Methodious, 4 hours away] rarely misses a Saturday, ensures we are never overlooked on feast days and is our champion throughout the eparchy. 2) Our deacon, Ron Volek, never hesitates to perform Typica. 3) Our cantors are determined to sing Old Slavonic hymns for the next generation. 3) Our parishioners consistently find unique ways to increase exposure.

The mission's founders established a legacy of heart and family during infancy stage. The legacy has been handed over to me and others at this adolescent stage. With the help of God and other influential individuals, I hope we enter adulthood and say goodbye the first two items we lack. Until the next growth stage, we continue the uphill climb with an optimist's mantra: "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can."

Fast Facts

- 50% of congregation under 30 years of age
- Celebrating weekly liturgy for 6 years
- Married priest draws on family experiences
- Mission produced 1st seminarian candidate in 2022
- Monthly potlucks with ethnic food
- Deacon celebrates Typica as needed
- 25 minutes from downtown Charlotte
- Divine Liturgy celebrated Saturdays:

St. Philip Neri Ministry Center
 292 Munn Road, Fort Mill, SC 29715
 Visit us at Carolinabyzantine.com or come see us in person!



The Byzantine Catholic
Metropolitan Archeparchy of Pittsburgh
 Office of the Archbishop
 66 Riverview Avenue Pittsburgh PA 15214
 (412)231-1000 Phone (412)231-1697 Fax

Assembly 2025 – Byzantine Catholic Metropolitan Church of Pittsburgh

July, 10, 2024

Preparations are underway for our Church – Bishops, Clergy, Monastics, Religious, and Laity - to come together in Assembly next year - from July 16-20, 2025. The gathering will convene at St. Mary Byzantine Catholic Church in Whiting, Indiana under the name and calling, "Come let us worship and bow before Christ"

Worship of the Lord includes our personal prayer and our liturgical prayer life. It is reflected in our relationships with each other and in the ways we live our faith as Byzantine Catholics of the Metropolitan Church of Pittsburgh.

The goal of the Assembly is to together discern ways to live our worship of Christ today in a real and practical manner while learning from the past and looking to the future. The Assembly will include formal presentations, interviews, panel discussion and round table exercises.

Special emphasis will be given to the distinctive contributions Byzantine Catholic have made to their Metropolitan Church.

The Assembly is a time to celebrate the unique contributions of each region and Eparchy while at the same time acknowledging the unity of the Byzantine Catholic Church in North America.

More information will appear in your parish bulletins and online at the Assembly website: byzantineassembly.org

Sincerely Yours in Christ,

+William C Skurla
 Most Reverend William C. Skurla, D. D.
 Metropolitan Archbishop of Pittsburgh

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BYZANTINE CATHOLIC EPARCHY OF PASSAIC STATEMENT OF ACTIVITIES FOR THE FISCAL YEAR ENDED JUNE 30, 2024

Operating Revenues

Eparchial assessments	\$692,489
Eparchial Stewardship Appeal	345,772
Donations, bequests and other income	43,353
Ukrainian Refugee Relief	43,418
ECL Newspaper Revenues	43,583
Hospitalization assessments and reimbursements	1,032,652
Life insurance proceeds, net of funeral expenses	48,915
Total operating revenues	2,250,182

Operating Expenses

Property, casualty, Auto and Workmen's Compensation insurance	115,519
Hospitalization	1,100,094
Pension and retirement costs	33,870
Administrative salaries and payroll taxes	120,222
Clergy salaries	69,587
Clergy subsistence	30,192
Stewardship rebates to parishes	75,615
Stewardship expenses - postage, printing and office expenses	14,539
Diaconate program expenses	17,243
Eastern Catholic Life publication - postage, printing and office expenses	57,652
Office administration and supplies - general	15,557
Office postage and printing - general	14,675
Legal - Other	121,844
Legal - Immigration	105,526
Accounting fees	96,000
Safe environment audit fees	2,569
Controller and consulting fees	73,588
Eparchial transportation and meeting expenses	133,685
Utilities and telephone	49,174
Maintenance and repairs - Chancery and Chapel	128,548
Assessments - NJ, US and Eastern Catholic Conferences	20,686
Continued education and well-being of priests	23,166
ECF Operating expenses - Eastern Christian Formation programs	72,831
Carpathian Village and Shrine expenses, net of income	184,285
Aid to Eastern Europe - Ukraine	30,750
Assistance to parishes	507,723
Depreciation - buildings and equipment	39,309
Total operating expenses	3,254,449
Net loss from operations	(1,004,267)

Investment income

Interest and dividend income	401,337
Realized and unrealized loss on marketable securities	1,659,772
	2,061,109
Net increase in assets as of end of year	\$1,056,842

**BYZANTINE CATHOLIC EPARCHY OF PASSAIC
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\$250.00 _____ Other \$ _____

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The 2024 Bishop's Appeal will run through the end of our fiscal year, June 2025.
Contributions received prior to December 31, 2024 will count toward your 2024 tax year.
Acknowledgement letter will be mailed prior to January 31, 2024.

New Address or Correction

Name: _____
Street: _____
City, State, Zip: _____
Parish: _____



PEOPLE YOU KNOW



IN BEAVER MEADOWS & NESQUEHONING...

Ukrainian Seminarian Visits the United States
by Michael Komishock

Saints Peter & Paul Church in Beaver Meadows and Saint Mary Church in Nesquehoning were blessed to have a recent visitor from Ukraine. Seminarian Bohdan Fesyk was graciously hosted and housed by Father Vasyl Chepelskyy, pastor of both parishes, and by Father's wife Mariia and their three children. With the Bishop's approval, Bohdan stayed as a guest of Father's family for three weeks from December 18 to January 8. Father's 12-year-old son Vitaliy said he enjoyed Bohdan's stay so much that he felt like Bohdan was an older brother.

Seminarian Bohdan, age 26, was born in Western Ukraine in the town of Zaliztsi. After completing his secondary education, Bohdan entered the seminary where he studied for seven years. He then entered the Pontifical Accademia Alfonsiana in Rome, Italy where he received an advance degree in moral theology. He is presently completing his doctoral degree at the same Academy. Although studying in Rome, Bohdan has an older brother and parents living in Ukraine.

This was Bohdan's first visit to the United States. While here he visited New York City and Philadelphia. One of Bohdan's hobbies is writing poetry. Bohdan even participated in a poetry reading event in Philadelphia. During his stay Bohdan participated in all the Divine Liturgies at both parishes by reading the Epistle and sharing Gospel reflections with the parishioners. Before returning to Rome, Bohdan thanked the parishioners for helping to make him feel welcome during his three weeks here, being his family during this Christmas season and for their hospitality and kindness and creating lifetime memories.

The prayer of everyone who was touched by Bohdan's visit is that he completes his studies in Rome and is ordained a priest so he can continue to give God glory and help people with their spiritual needs. God grant Seminarian Bohdan peace, health, and happiness for many blessed years! Mnohija i Blahaja L'ita!



Pani Mariia, Father Vasyl Chepelskyy with children, and Seminarian Bohdan Fesyk

IN HILLSBOROUGH...

Parishioner celebrates 101st birthday

Elsie Kurtz, née Popovich, a parishioner of Saint Mary Parish in Hillsborough, celebrated her 101st birthday on Saint Nicholas Day, December 6! Originally from Saint Elias Parish in Carteret, NJ, Elsie and her family attended Saint Thomas Parish in Rahway, NJ, for many years before she relocated to Warren, NJ. May God grant to His servant, Elsie, many happy years! Father Jim Badeaux is the pastor of Saint Mary Parish.



IN SAINT PETERSBURG...

Altar Server Awarded Server of the Year 2024

On Sunday, January 5, 2025, the altar servers of Saint Therese Parish in Saint Petersburg, Florida, were given a little surprise! Adam T., (second row, last boy on the right) was named Altar Server of the Year 2024. The parish is served by Father Robert Evancho, pastor, and Father Michael O'Brien, a retired priest of the Diocese of Saint Petersburg, Florida.

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AROUND THE EPARCHY



IN ROSWELL...

Theophany River Blessing—by Deacon John Reed

“Great are you, O Lord, and wonderful are your works; no word suffices to give praise to your wonders.”

The clergy and faithful of Epiphany of Our Lord Byzantine Catholic and Saint John Chrysostom Melkite Greek Catholic joined together in prayer for the Feast of Theophany.

Father Lewis Rabayda, Parochial Administrator of Epiphany parish was joined by Father Elias Dorham, pastor of Saint John Chrysostom Melkite Greek Catholic Church in the celebration of the Liturgy of St Basil.

Following the Divine Liturgy, Father Lewis, Father Elias, and Father Deacon John Reed, along with many faithful from both parishes, headed to the riverbanks of the Chattahoochee for the Great Blessing of Waters.

This is the third year that Epiphany parish has blessed the local waterway, and it was the first year that Atlanta’s Melkite Greek Catholics joined them.

The Eastern Catholic communities in Atlanta have been growing closer together in recent months and hope to have more inter-parish events in the future.



Abouna Elias Dorham, Father Lewis Rabayda, and Deacon John Reed



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Andrew Skitko is Cantor for St. Mary’s Byzantine Catholic Church in Trenton, NJ, director of Theoria Chamber Choir, and holds degrees in Vocal Performance and Voice Pedagogy from Westminster Choir College. He performs regularly with Opera Philadelphia and numerous professional ensembles and teaches singers of all levels.

Contact for more information:

(610) 220-3479

andrewskitko@gmail.com

NATIVITY CELEBRATIONS ACROSS THE EPARCHY IN McADOO...

Christmas Cookie Sale

Saint Michael Church in McAdoo, Pennsylvania, made the Christmas season extra special with a Christmas cookie sale on December 14. The dedicated bakers of the parish made a wide variety of delicious goodies that were enjoyed by all. Father Gregory Hosler is the pastor of Saint Michael Parish.



IN PERTH AMBOY...

Saint Nicholas Day-December 8, 2024

This year two parishes came together to celebrate the Feast of Saint Nicholas and Christmas. The joint liturgy, heartfelt prayers, and joyful gifts for the children created a warm, uplifting atmosphere.

During the festive meal that followed, a spirit of unity and fellowship filled the room. The celebration reminded everyone that, in Christ, we are one spiritual family. May this light of togetherness continue to shine in our hearts and communities.



Saint Nicholas Byzantine Church and Saint Michael's Byzantine Church, Perth Amboy, New Jersey. Father Ed Cimbala is Parochial Administrator and Father Vasyl Remitskyi is Parochial Vicar of both parishes.



IN TRENTON...

Saint Mary Byzantine Catholic Church Begins Jubilee Year with Multicultural Christmas Concert

On Sunday, December 29, 2024, Saint Mary Byzantine Catholic Church in Trenton joyfully started the Jubilee Year 2025 with a Multicultural Christmas concert called Christmas Journeys: Carols Across Nations. The event featured carols from different cultures, celebrating the diversity in our local Catholic community and sharing the universal message of Christmas.

The concert was followed by a delightful potluck dinner, offering attendees the chance to savor an array of ethnic dishes. The shared meal provided a wonderful opportunity for fellowship, allowing everyone to experience the unique culinary traditions of different cultures.

The Christmas Journeys: Carols Across Nations concert set a beautiful tone for the Jubilee Year 2025, embodying the spirit of hope, unity, and celebration that will guide us throughout the year.



NATIVITY CELEBRATIONS ACROSS THE EPARCHY IN PITTSTON...

Parish Holds 3rd Annual Christmas Concert

Saint Michael the Archangel Byzantine Catholic Church, Pittston, Pennsylvania hosted its 3rd Annual Christmas Concert on Sunday, December 29th.

At this year's concert, the sounds of traditional carols of Eastern Europe were performed by two groups to a full house audience. The first group, the guest choir of



Parishioner Group of Saint Michael and Saint. Nicholas Churches sang the time-honored messages of Church Slavonic and English language carols

Saints Cyril and Methodius Ukrainian Catholic Church, Olyphant, returned once again singing Ukrainian and Church Slavonic songs, along with a rendition performed in Polish. Throughout their selections, music director Patrick Marcinko, III also described the Christmas traditions intrinsic to the Carpathian region. In the interlude between the two singing groups, everyone's attention was riveted on the professional violin performance by a member of the Olyphant choir.

The second half of the program featured a parishioner group from both Saint Michael Church, Pittston and Saint Nicholas Church, Swoyersville. This group was led by Brian Bankovich, cantor, a member of Saint Nicholas Church. They sang a set of familiar classic carols as well as traditional Slavic Christmas carols in both English and Church Slavonic. During this part of the program the audience was encouraged to sing-along with the parish group, and the concert concluded with everyone raising their voices with Silent Night.



The guest Choir of Saints Cyril and Methodius Ukrainian Catholic Church, Olyphant, Pennsylvania was first of two groups singing

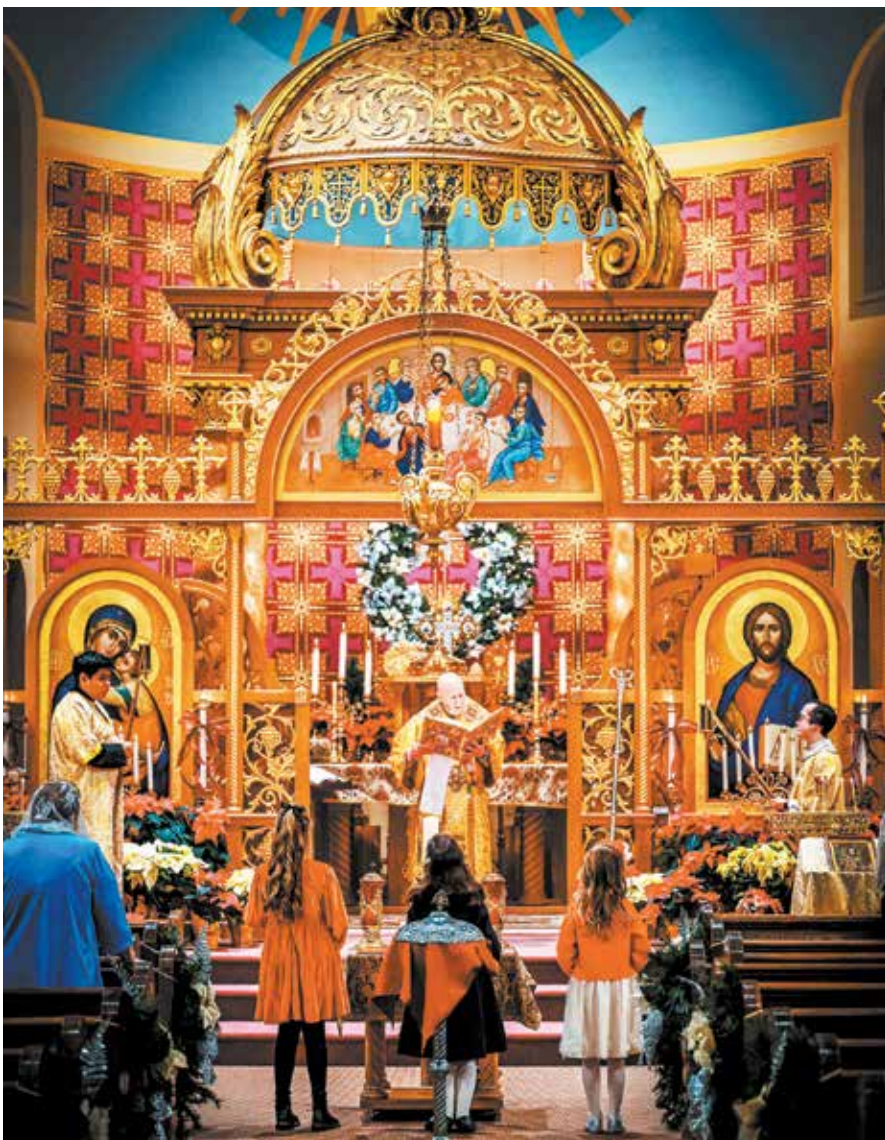
Children of the parish were excited to pose as a still life Nativity scene as guests entered. Father Andrii Dumnych, Parochial Vicar of both Saint Michael and Saint Nicholas Churches, in closing remarks extended gratitude and best wishes to all who attended, with a reminder for continued prayers for a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Ukraine, a peace we hope for in the new year.



Children of the parish welcomed visitors with their Nativity scene portrayal.

IN PASSAIC...

Nativity at Saint Michael's Cathedral





LIFE, LOVE, AND THE HUMAN PERSON

By Ann M. Koshute, MTS

WHERE DO YOU FIND GOD?

It's a new year, and some of us make resolutions, while others focus on goal setting, a slightly less high-pressure way to open ourselves to new possibilities, stretching us and helping us to achieve good things for our health, work, and relationships. Everyone must evaluate his/her situation and discern how to approach the new year with fresh eyes and a desire to make the most of a new beginning. I like to look at the year ahead and focus on some areas where I'd like to grow, and ways I can move outside my comfort zone to try new things. I look at my life and health, my marriage, my work in ministry, and my relationships. One of the most important things – something that I used to overlook (maybe you have, too) – is my relationship with God. Call it a resolution, a goal, or a desire; however I name it, the point is to grow closer to Him, allowing Him to work in me, and seeing Him reflected in all aspects of life. Below are some ideas on where you might be able to find God in your life, growing in an intimacy with Him that has can be transformative.

I encourage you to consider the three suggestions below and discover other areas in your life where you can find God or invite Him to be present to you. Remember this isn't a "resolution" that has to be so meticulously planned that, if not followed to the letter, must be abandoned. Jesus fell under the weight of His Cross and accepted the help of Simon to walk alongside Him. If you set a goal of seeking and finding the Lord more intentionally and fail at it, reach up your hand to Him and start again.

Spend time with God. Be careful, because this one is easier said than done. The time we spend weekly at Divine Liturgy is essential to our spiritual nourishment and relationship with God. So often, however, we view that hour and

change as an obligation, a duty to be fulfilled and checked off our list until the next week. Much more can be said about this sense of "obligation" around formal liturgical worship, but for now it's enough to say that the Liturgy is the place where we hear God's Word proclaimed, have a chance to meditate on it, and then be nourished by Christ's own Body and Blood in the Eucharist. Take a moment to look deep inside and ask yourself: "Is the Liturgy a duty I must fulfill – or a privilege I don't deserve, but God invites me to because He loves me?"

We can all be more attentive and present during the Liturgy, but there are many opportunities to nurture our relationship with God. What kind of spouse, parent, friend, priest or religious would you be if you ignored those you love and serve? Personal relationships take time and presence, and this is true of our relationship with God. Make time in your day to just be with Him. Developing a prayer routine is an excellent goal for the new year, and if it's not already part of your day, start off simply. Say good morning to the Lord when you wake up, pray before meals, and thank God at the end of the day, adding any special intentions. Talk to God as a friend, pour your heart out, share even the difficult emotions (anger, disappointment, fear). And don't forget to listen.

Invite God into your daily life. In his first Letter to the Thessalonians (5:17), Saint Paul instructs them to "Pray without ceasing." To us this seems unrealistic, except for cloistered monks and nuns. Perhaps a goal for this year can be expanding your notion of prayer, including when and how to do it. Certainly formal, intentional prayers – including during Divine Liturgy – are necessary for the spiritual life. But prayer is also being mindful of God's

presence in our lives and inviting Him to keep us on the path in pursuit of what is Good, True, and Beautiful. How can we do this? Think about all you do as a prayer, that is, an offering to God. Even taking out the garbage is a prayer when we remind ourselves that the mundane tasks of life are part of the stewardship to which God has called us from the beginning of time. Next time you feel annoyed by a task (whether at home or in your work), or find doing something for another to be inconvenient, stop for a moment and consider the great privilege given by God to care for yourself, your family and others, and your home.

for Him. (cf. Matthew 25: 34-46); and giving the "Golden Rule" (cf. Luke 6:31) and the "Love Command" (cf. John 13:34). Seek Christ in others by recognizing God's image in them as you'd treat Jesus Himself. And when a personal relationship is impossible because it is not safe (e.g. due to physical or emotional abuse), love them by praying for their conversion and healing.

These are just a few ideas, but I invite you to spend some time in prayer to discern where God is calling you into a deeper relationship with Him, and how



Mosaic of Jesus Washing His Disciples Feet

Find God in your relationships. This one may be even more difficult than starting a prayer routine, or keeping God present to us during our day. We must look for God in the people around us – and people can be difficult! For Jesus, this is a non-negotiable, as He shows us in the parable of the Good Samaritan; the healing of those considered "untouchables" (lepers, sinners, the hemorrhaging woman, to name a few); His admonition that when we love and serve others, we do the same

that can transform your spiritual life, your daily routine, and how you relate to – and serve – others. Where you find God? You'll only know if you start looking. **ECL**



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PRIESTLY REFLECTIONS

Father Paul Varchola West

SPRING TRAINING—PART 1

Spring??? Father, are you ok? Why are you talking about Spring? Look outside; it's dark and cold, dreary, and damp... far from Spring weather! Well, yes, fair; however, for us Christians – true spiritual athletes – we don't begin our training in Spring like most late summer and fall sports do. Rather, we begin our training now (in mid-winter) FOR Spring! More accurately, we are preparing for Pascha – the Resurrection of Our Lord. Yes, although it feels as if we just finished celebrating the Winter Pascha, and in many ways, this is true, let us not be taken by surprise as the Great Fast – our intensive, 40-day spiritual bootcamp – is rapidly approaching!

As with any athlete who desires to win a particular contest, we spiritual athletes who run the race of Right Belief must also prepare – physically, mentally, spiritually – in order to endure the trials of this life that we may indeed fight the good fight to the very last round and attain the promised crowns of victory befitting the martyrs, the righteous, and those who love the Lord. Indeed, our very lives are a training camp of sorts for the Kingdom to Come. Our coaches: the saints. Our playbook: the commandments. Our teammates: the Church itself. We, however, are not training so that we may hoist up some odd metaphysical Vince Lombardi Trophy at the fearsome and dread Second Coming and proclaim that the next thing we will be doing is going to the New Disneyland of the New Age. Not in the least! The victory we are (and will be) celebrating is Christ's victory over Death, and the trophy we raise is the trophy of the Cross and Eternal Life in Jesus Christ Himself.

Now, although this victory has already been won by Christ Himself, this does not give us a free pass such that we can do whatever we want and still be a-OK come “game day” – the Final Judgement. Far from it! Yes, the Lord loves us, yes, His compassion is incomprehensible, and of course His grace is unbounded, but the wellness of our soul, much like the physical being of our body, needs to be cared for. We need to work out to remain spiritually healthy just as we do to remain physically healthy. People spend millions upon millions of dollars each year nationwide on physical health: gym memberships, doctors, supplements, surgeries, over-priced “organic” food, protein powders...you name it! The world's top athletes train year in and year out, working with the finest minds on the planet, the greatest of motivators, to ensure world class results. Yet, when it comes to our spiritual health, we often ask what the bare minimum is and leave it at that, figuring, eh, that's good enough.

This is, in my experience, not so much a matter of laziness or not caring, but has far more to do with basic human psy-

chology than anything else. In documents, and even here in the ECL, fasting regulations are often worded in a manner such as this [I'm paraphrasing, of course]: “The faithful are to abstain from meat on Wednesdays and Fridays of the Great Fast. While this is the minimum, the faithful are encouraged to do more as it is the Ancient Tradition of the Church to abstain from all meat and dairy products throughout the entirety of the Great Fast.” Learning models demonstrate time and again that given the average human attention span and the propensity to follow clear, delineated steps, the average reader would stop retaining the aforementioned instruction after the phrase, “this is the minimum.” This is because the brain is a powerful, yet fickle, organ. The brain is required to do so much and to store so much information in order for us to simply stay alive, although one might read all the words, and retain them to an

extent, the brain very well may simply hang on the “minimum” part as a means to save some hard drive space and the rest of the instruction gets wiped when the RAM of short term retention is cleared for the day. Worry not, as here is a great way we can overcome this!

This year let's try something a little different. Rather than thinking of this as a minimum/maximum type of thing, let us turn it on its head. Let us realize that the Church calls us to fast AND pray in a regimented way as a means of exercise for our soul and gives us benchmarks to guide us; not minimum and maximum gains, but rather a means by which to measure our progress. We have the best head coach anyone could ask for: Jesus Christ! Christ has given us His commandments and the teaching of the Church as our playbook, and we need little more than that. Our pastors and our spiritual fathers and mothers are

our offensive and defensive coordinators, and the bishop is the special team's coach. We have everything we need to succeed! This year, as we prepare for the Great Fast, let us examine ourselves and see where we'd like to be, spiritually, come Pascha. Sit down with your pastor, or your spiritual father/mother, and have them help you work out a fasting and prayer regimen that works for you. Do not let dietary restrictions, physical ailments, and medications deter you. Our bishop gives his priests the authority to give alternatives to dietary fasting if the need is true... so don't quit, don't give in ... fight the good fight!

This is the “watching the films in the locker room” and motivational pregame speech portion of our training camp. In the next installment, the rubber will meet the road, and we will find out how Christian ascetical practice and living a life in the sacraments of the Church will further help to prepare us for “game day” ... so stay tuned for Spring Training - Part 2 to guide us through the most difficult part of training camp... the dreaded mid-Lent!!! May God be with you all and may the Lord direct your steps as we prepare to journey into the Great Fast! **ECL**

ICONOGRAPHY WORKSHOP

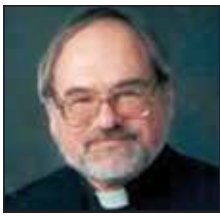
THURSDAY EVENINGS
IN THE GREAT FAST
2025

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Fr. Marek Visnovsky will be offering an iconography workshop at St. Michael's Cathedral Chapel, 415 Lackawanna Ave, Woodland Park, NJ 07424. This class will be on Thursdays, March 6, 13, 20, 27, April 3 and April 10 from 6 pm to 10 pm. We will paint the icon of CHRIST THE BRIDEGROOM. The cost of the workshop is \$450 and includes boards, paints, brushes, twenty-four karat gold leaf (food and accommodation not included). Beginners as well as advanced artists are welcome. DEADLINE to register is Wednesday, February 19, 2025. Find the registration online at www.stmichaelsarchangel.org For more information, please email Fr. Marek at marekvisnovsky@yahoo.com

Fr. Marek is a married Byzantine Catholic priest, serving as the Rector of the Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel in Passaic, NJ. With his wife Miriam they raise three children, Caroline, Elias, and Marco. For 25 years he has been teaching iconography classes in the USA and Europe. He has painted over 800 icons which are venerated in churches and private homes around the world.



THE BYZANTINE LITURGY

By Archpriest David Petras, SEOD

WHEN YOU FAST

Our Lord, when teaching about fasting, said, “When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites. They neglect their appearance, so that they may appear to others to be fasting” (Matthew 6:16). He did not say “if” you fast, but “when” you fast. Fasting at times from food is a human act, a deliberate choice to do what is not natural for spiritual reasons. Fasting is, therefore, a part of the discipline for every person who believes in God. Our Lord, however, teaches that fasting is not a reason for bragging, as the Pharisee did: “The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed like this: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of men, dishonest, unrighteous, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I earn’” (Luke 18:11-12). The Pharisees fasted on Monday and Thursday. The Christians changed that to Wednesday, because of the betrayal of Judas, and Friday, because that was the day Jesus died on the cross.

There were also longer fasts of forty days. Before our Lord began his mission, after his baptism by the Prophet John in the Jordan, he went into the desert for forty days and fasted. This was a common practice in antiquity as an ascetical practice for purity of soul. Moses fasted for forty days on Mount Sinai before giving the people the Law of God. Elijah fasted for forty days on Mount Horeb before beginning his prophetic mission. It is possible for a human being to fast for forty days, though for some it may be physically dangerous. Jesus fasted for forty days

to prepare himself for his mission of preaching the Gospel, the good news of God’s love for our salvation. In his fast, Jesus defeated the temptations of the evil one to self-love, to vainglory and finally to power. “The devil took [Jesus] to an extremely high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. The devil said to Jesus, ‘I will give you all of these things if you will fall down and express adoration to me.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For it is written, “You shall express adoration to the Lord your God, and to him only shall you serve”” (Matthew 4:8-10). The angels then ministered to Him by divine power. It was to become a point of the Gospel, that we do not take power over one another. Jesus taught, “You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all” (Mark 10:42-44).

The forty-day fast was to become the model of the Christian preparation for the feast of the Lord’s resurrection. This is called the Great Fast, and it lasts from Cheesefare Sunday to Lazarus Saturday. This is a spiritual preparation, in which we, as human beings, set aside our physical comfort to prepare ourselves for spiritual power. After the resurrection, Jesus proclaimed, “All power in heaven and on earth has been given

to Me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:18-20). Christian power is not physical or psychological power over others, but love in sharing the good plan of God for the building up of a kingdom of salvation, seeing the image of God in all people. This is difficult for us, because our simplistic human understanding sees “power” as domination over the other. This is why we prepare for our life mission as a follower of Christ by a period of self-denial. During the Great Fast, then, we pray the Prayer of St. Ephrem daily, “Lord and Master of my life, spare me from the spirit of indifference, despair, lust for power, and idle chatter. Instead, bestow on me, your servant, the spirit of integrity, humility, patience, and love. Yes, O Lord and King, let me see my own sins, and not judge my brothers and sisters.”

In our Great Fast, we do not actually fast as did Moses or Elijah or Jesus, abstaining completely from food. The Fast for us means a strict abstinence from certain foods. The present law, for the sake of the welfare of the community of the people of God, is to abstain from meat on Wednesdays and Fridays, and from meat and dairy products on

the first Monday of the Fast and on Good Friday. The traditional fast was more severe, it meant abstaining from meat, fish, dairy products, alcohol, and foods cooked in oil for the whole forty days, except Saturday and Sunday, when wine and oil was permitted. (The Greeks considered fish as an animal because it had a backbone) It also meant fasting until Vespers in the evening (3-5 PM). It is admirable if we can keep a fast more than the minimum, but what we do depends on our humble abilities. The Church Father Dorotheus did not give strict rules, but said of the Fast, “Everyone who wants to purify himself of the sins of the whole year during these days must first of all restrain himself from the pleasure of eating. For the pleasure of eating, as the Fathers say, caused all men’s evil.” There are two serious cautions about fasting. The first is that we must not take pride in our fasting, as if we could glorify or save ourselves by our human efforts. All that we accomplish is by God’s grace alone. The second is that fasting is not only from food. This is what Dorotheus teaches very clearly, “We must not only keep a sharp watch over our diet, but keep away from all other kinds of sin so that as our stomach keeps fast, so also may our tongue as we abstain from calumny, from deceit, from idle talk, from railing and anger and all other vices which arise from the tongue. So also let our eyes keep fast. No looking for trivialities, no letting the eyes wander freely, no impudent lying in wait for people to talk to. The same with the hands and feet, to prevent them from doing anything evil.” **ECL**



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The liturgical year progresses swiftly, yet it does not abruptly transition us from one season to the next. A notable illustration of this is the pre-Lenten Sundays and the commencement of The Great Fast. The Feast of Theophany has concluded, but the forty days from Christmas to the Feast of the Encounter, which occurs on February 2nd as I write, are not yet over. The Feast of the Encounter also coincides with the Sunday of Zachaeus, our inaugural Pre-Lenten Sunday.

One discernible characteristic of this particular Pre-Lenten Sunday is the exclusive Gospel reading: there are no special troparia, kontakia, or other liturgical elements. Notably, even the Lenten Triodion, the book utilized during the Lenten season for Matins and Vespers, does not include an entry for the Sunday of Zachaeus. The Typicon of the Church prescribes two sets of readings: one set for the feast and another specifically for Zachaeus (some parishes may opt to utilize either set). However, with regard to our entry into The Great Fast, we are simply “advised” that a change is imminent.

The following Sunday marks a significant shift in the liturgical calendar, coinciding with the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee. While the Gospel reading remains the primary focus of the Divine Liturgy, we observe a notable change in the hymns sung. Instead of the Resurrectional Kontakion, we now sing the Kontakion for the Publican and the Pharisee.

Furthermore, the weekdays immediately following this Sunday are designated as fast-free days, one of the four Fridays that are exempt from fasting during the liturgical year. This observance serves as a reminder that fasting is not a matter of pride, as it was for the Pharisee, but rather a means of humbling ourselves and disciplining our bodies.

SEASONAL REFLECTIONS

Father Ronald Hatton



OUR ENTRY INTO THE GREAT FAST

The Sunday of the Prodigal Son intensifies the solemnity of the season, as the Epistle reading also draws parallels to the upcoming Fast. In conjunction with the Kontakion for this day, we sense the imminent approach of the fasting period.

The first of our five All Souls Saturdays occurs before the Fast begins, when we offer prayers and remembrances for all of our deceased loved ones. Finally, Meatfare Sunday arrives, marking the commencement of a period of abstinence from meat and meat products until Pascha. While many may not adhere strictly to this discipline, it is undeniable that we are called upon to exercise greater control over our bodies, particularly in the area of digestion.

Finally, we arrive at Cheese-fare Sunday, the eve of the commencement of the Great Fast in earnest. Not only is there a special kontakion for the day, but the prokeimenon is one of the most solemn that we can sing, serving as a reminder that the Fast and our solemn promises to God should not be taken lightly: “Make vows to the Lord your God and fulfill them!” (Isaiah 19: 21b).

From the Saturday evening Vespers through Matins and Vespers for this day, we are reminded both of our fallenness (this Sunday commemorates the Expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden) and of God’s profound forgiveness. Consequently, on this evening, we enter into the season of the Great Fast by gathering

together to pray what we call “Cheese-fare Vespers,” singing the Stichera of Repentance.

In numerous parishes, there is typically a ritual of mutual forgiveness between all members of the parish, both clergy and laity, to purge ourselves of any lingering resentment or lack of forgiveness in our lives before we embark on this sacred season. For if we fail to forgive one another fully and completely, how can we anticipate divine forgiveness? The text for this ritual is derived from the Office of Compline.

Thus prepared, we now embark on Clean Week, characterized by strict fasting and abstinence on “Clean Monday.” Traditions of services during this week may differ among parishes, but typically encompass Great Compline and Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts. The Typicon for our Metropolitan Province stipulates that the Presanctified Liturgy is to be celebrated on Wednesdays and Fridays of the Fast. Given that the Divine Liturgy commemorates the Resurrection, it is not celebrated during the weekdays. However, our bishops may authorize alternative services where Holy Communion can be distributed.

Finally, we enter the season of fasting. Depending on medical conditions or other mitigating circumstances, the Typicon prescribes abstaining from meat on all Wednesdays and Fridays. Some individuals may choose to fast completely

from all meat and dairy, consuming only vegetables; others may abstain from meat until Pascha. In some cases, fasting may not be feasible, and an alternative discipline may be assigned.

The primary purpose of fasting is to subject the body to the control of the spirit, serving as a reminder of the need to submit ourselves to God. Regardless of the specific fasting regimen, it is essential to remember the admonition given by the holy Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans: “One person believes that one may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. The one who eats must not despise the one who abstains, and the one who abstains must not pass judgment on the one who eats; for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on someone else’s servant? Before his own master he stands or falls. He will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. ... Whoever eats, eats for the Lord, since he gives thanks to God; while whoever abstains, abstains for the Lord and gives thanks to God. ... Why then do you judge your brother? Or you, why do you look down on your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God” (Romans 14: 2-10).

May our time of the Great Fast be productive and may we attain salvation through our humility before our Lord. **ECL**



SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

Father Jack Custer, S.S.L., S.T.D.

REAL MEN REPENT

On the Sunday after Christmas, the Church celebrates Saint Joseph the Betrothed, King David, and James, Brother of the Lord. They share a particular relationship with Jesus, but their lives also reveal another common feature. Each of them had to be willing to let God change their minds.

The selection from Saint Matthew’s Gospel read on the Sunday before Christmas recounts how Joseph reacted to Mary’s unexpected pregnancy while they were already engaged but before they were living together. Being a just man, Joseph could not countenance what seemed to be adultery but, out of kindness, he resolved not to expose Mary to the law, which could have condemned her to death. The angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, told him not to fear taking Mary as his wife, explained that she had conceived by the Holy Spirit, that she would bear a son, and that Joseph should name Him Jesus, because He would save the people from their sins. Even though

Joseph’s previous plans were both just and merciful, he changed his mind and complied with everything the angel said (Matthew 1:19-25). We have a name for such a change of mind, of heart, of plans and of life: repentance.

The same pattern is repeated after Jesus’ birth. An angel in a dream commanded Joseph to flee with his family to Egypt to escape Herod’s attempt to kill off the newborn King of the Jews. Another angelic message in a dream told Joseph when it was safe to return to Israel. Both times we see Joseph unhesitatingly obeying the angel’s command to undertake these arduous journeys but using his own resources, experience, and wisdom to work out the details. It is he who judged that Judea was no safer under Herod’s successor. His decision to settle in Nazareth was a practical one: there were active building projects in this region of Galilee where a house carpenter could easily find employment (Matthew 2:13-23).

King David was a larger-than-life character: a gifted poet, musician, warrior, and statesman. In a moment of lust for Bathsheba the wife of Uriah, he also succumbed to the double sin of adultery and murder. When confronted by the prophet Nathan, David confessed his guilt, and his prayer of repentance, Psalm 51, is still prayed frequently in the Church’s liturgy and recommended as a daily prayer for every Christian (2 Samuel 11-12).

James was one of Joseph’s sons by a first marriage that had left him widowed. While not one of the Twelve Apostles, he became one of the leaders of the original Church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13-21; Galatians 1:19) and the author of an epistle. Saint Mark (3:8) tells us that, early on in His ministry, Jesus’ family came to where He was preaching and attempted to carry him off back home because “they said: ‘He is mad!’” What change of heart was required for James to move from saying ‘my brother is crazy’ to proclaiming ‘my brother is the Messiah’ and being willing to die for that belief, as James did in

62AD? Perhaps the turning point for James was a personal experience of the Risen Lord (1 Corinthians 15:7).

“I was wrong” and “I’m sorry” are two of the hardest phrases to say. Stubborn pride can keep us from uttering these words and can keep us from experiencing the grace of the sacrament of repentance, the personal confession of sins. Conversion from the error of idolatry to faith in Jesus Christ is one dramatic form of repentance. But David, Joseph, and James were already committed, observant Jews when they were challenged to change. Repentance isn’t just from sin to virtue; it can also be a move from good to better, from mediocre to mature. The Liturgy speaks directly to us churchgoers when it asks for the grace to “spend the rest of our lives in peace and repentance.”

As a new year begins, where might God be inviting us to hear a call to change our plans, our priorities, our feelings, our management of our time and resources, our level of commitment to Him and to His Church? Where might we need to find the strength to say “I was wrong” or “I’m sorry”? Saints Joseph, David, and James show us repentance and its result: the freedom (Romans 6:18; Galatians 5:1) to live more completely in Christ. **ECL**

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

Father Jack Custer, S.S.L., S.T.D.

THE PROPHETESS ANNA

What are we to make of the elderly woman who is given a “walk on” role in the story of Jesus’ encounter with Simeon in the Temple? Saint Luke identifies Anna as a prophetess, and it is at the prompting of the Holy Spirit that she appears in the Temple when she does, recognizes Israel’s Messiah in a 40-day-old infant, and speaks about Him to all who would listen (Luke 2:36-38). Eight other prophetesses are recognized in Scripture: Miriam the sister of Moses (Exodus 15:20); Deborah (Judges 4:4); Huldah (2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chronicles 34:22); Isaiah’s wife (Isaiah 8:3); and the four daughters of Philip the deacon (Acts 21:8-9). Two false prophetesses are also recorded: Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14) and Jezebel (Revelation 2:20).

Saint Luke tells us two additional things about Anna, both of them remarkably detailed for such a minor character. First, we learn her back story: she was married for only seven years and lived until the age of eighty-four. Anna is one of the many elderly, solitary Jews who had migrated to Jerusalem to die there. Her life so far seems sad, lonely, and unfulfilled.

We are also told her lineage: “daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher.” She is the only woman in the New Testament who is given a genealogy and the only person identified as being of Asher. Especially in the five hundred years after the Babylonian exile, the various tribes had been displaced from their ancestral territories, and there had been much intermarriage. Apart from the royal tribe of Judah and the priestly tribe of Levi, tribal affiliation no longer meant much. So, Saint Paul is really boasting if he can claim to have a pure bloodline in the tribe of Benjamin (Philippians 3:5)!

The name “Asher” means “happy” but, overall, being an Asherite wasn’t much to boast about. Asher failed to complete the conquest of the territory God assigned to them after the Exodus (Judges 1:31-32). Located on the coast, bordering the territory of the Philistines, the tribe prospered from good, fertile land and access to commerce on the sea. They were also much more easily tempted to imitate their pagan neighbors and compromise their covenant with the Lord. Along with the other nine tribes of the North, they were overrun and exiled by the Assyrian Empire in 722BC. The historical territory of Asher, including the cities of Tyre and Sidon (now in Lebanon), were Gentile country in Jesus’ time. “Phanuel” on the other hand means “face of God” and this is exactly what Anna beheld in the infant Jesus.

Our mental image of Anna cradling the infant Jesus is naturally poignant: this nice old lady gets to enjoy a moment with the child she may never have been blessed to have herself. You could read it as the generation that is passing away embracing a new one that brings

hope for the future. Simeon and Anna were brought together by the arrival of the Messiah. Simeon seems like a pure Jerusalem Israelite; Anna represents a spottier Jewish identity. Israel—north and south—divided since the death of King Solomon, are now reunited, as the prophet Ezekiel predicted (Ezekiel 37:15-28).

Simeon had already recognized Jesus as the Messiah who would be not only “the glory of Israel” but also “a light of revelation to the Gentiles” (Luke 2:32). Anna represents that sort of compro-

mised, alienated Israel where Jesus would choose to begin His public ministry: “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali ... Galilee of the Gentiles ... the people who walked in darkness” (Matthew 4:15-16 quoting Isaiah 9:1-2).

Simeon and Anna are both elderly, and both are anxiously awaiting the “consolation of Israel” (Luke 2:25; cf. Luke 2:38 and Isaiah 40:1-2). They reflect an old covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-33; Hebrews 8:13) in need of renewal, the tired expectation of a promise that has gone unfulfilled for centuries.

Anna has been widowed, abandoned perhaps, for more than sixty years! Could it be that Anna found in the infant Messiah not her child but rather her Bridegroom (Matthew 25:1-13; John 3:29; Ephesians 5:22-32)? Could it be that this encounter revitalized and restored the youth of these two faithful Israelites? From the darkest days of the exile in Babylon, the Psalmist had looked forward in hope: “I will go to the altar of God, the God of my youth” (Psalm 43:4). In the image of wizened old Simeon and Anna cradling the infant Messiah we see fulfilled what one of the Psalms of Matins announces: “Old men and children ... let them praise the name of the Lord” (Psalm 149:12-13). **ECL**

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FOR THE FULL DETAILED BROCHURE

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut. 6:4-5). This is the first, greatest, and most important commandment (Mt. 22:38).

Jesus invites us to follow Him, to love Him, and to be singularly devoted to Him. “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with Me” (Rev. 3:20).

To be a Christian is to love Jesus Christ more than anyone or anything else. “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me” (Mt. 10:37).

Our Lord says, “I have this against you, that you have left your first love” (Rev. 2:4, NASB), and “because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of My mouth” (Rev. 3:16).

Saint Paul says, “I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ” (2 Cor. 11:3), and “If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed” (1 Cor. 16:22, NKJV).

SCHOOL OF PRAYER

Father G. Scott Boghossian



TO LOVE JESUS CHRIST

Saint Paul the Apostle had a great love for Christ, a love that we should try to imitate (1 Cor. 11:1). “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21), “meaning by these brief words, ‘Jesus Christ is my life, for He is all my thoughts, all my intentions, all my hope, all my desire, because He is all my love,’” says Saint Alphonsus.

For Paul, nothing was comparable to knowing, loving, and serving Jesus Christ. “I also consider everything to be a loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of Him I have suffered the loss of all things and consider them as dung, so that I may gain Christ” (Phil. 3:8, CSB). Compared to Jesus Christ, everything is dung, refuse, trash, sewage, rubbish, and worthless dirt. Let us be devoted to Him above all.

The Holy Martyrs have been crucified, stoned, beheaded, burned at the stake, thrown to wild animals, flogged, burned, mutilated, drowned, starved, and exposed to the elements, all for the love of Jesus Christ. “No,” says Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, “it was not rashness which made the martyrs encour-

ter hot irons, nails, and the cruelest deaths; it was love for Jesus Christ.”

Saint Ignatius of Antioch (d. 108) writes, “Let fire and the cross; let the crowds of wild beasts; let tearings, breakings, and dislocations of bones; let cutting off of members; let shatterings of the whole body; and let all the dreadful torments of the devil come upon me: only let me attain to Jesus Christ” (Romans, 5).

Saint Alphonsus complains of the “many preachers and confessors, who say a great many things, but speak little of love for Jesus Christ: whereas love for Jesus Christ ought to be the principal, indeed the only, devotion of a Christian; and therefore the only object and care of preachers and confessors towards their hearers and penitents ought to be to recommend to them constantly, and to inflame their hearts with, the love of Jesus Christ.”

Do you want to love Jesus Christ more? Saint Alphonsus says, “It seems to me impossible for one that thinks often of His sorrows and of His Passion not to become full of love for Jesus Christ.”

Of all the profound spiritual wisdom in the Sayings of the Desert Fathers, perhaps the best advice is from Abba Paul the Great, who said: “Keep close to Jesus” (Ward, 205).

In the Imitation of Christ in Book 2, Chapter 8 on “The Intimate Friendship with Jesus,” Thomas à Kempis writes:

“When Jesus is near, all is well, and nothing seems difficult. When He is absent, all is hard. How dry and hard you are without Jesus! How foolish and vain if you desire anything but Him! Is it not a greater loss than losing the whole world? For what, without Jesus, can the world give you? Life without Him is a relentless hell, but living with Him is a sweet paradise. If Jesus be with you, no enemy can harm you. Of all those who are dear to you, let Him be your special love. Let all things be loved for the sake of Jesus, but Jesus for His own sake. Jesus Christ must be loved alone with a special love for He alone, of all friends, is good and faithful.” **ECL**

SCHOOL OF PRAYER

Father G. Scott Boghossian

GOD SEES YOU

God sees you. To realize this simple truth is to pray. To maintain this realization is to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). To live constantly with this awareness is to become a saint.

Holy Scripture teaches that God sees us, looks at us, and observes our every action.

“The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good” (Pr. 15:3 RSV).

“The LORD sees everything, whether good or bad” (Pr. 15:3 CEV).

“For He looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens” (Job 28:24).

“The LORD looks down from heaven, He sees all the sons of men; from where He sits enthroned, He looks forth on all the inhabitants of the earth, He who fashions the hearts of them all, and observes all their deeds” (Ps. 33:13-15).

“The LORD looks down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there are any that act wisely, that seek after God” (Ps. 14:2).

“Nothing in creation is hidden from God’s sight, but everything is uncov-

ered and exposed to the eyes of the one to whom we must give account” (Heb. 4:13 Mounce).

God maintains us in existence by the very fact that He sees us.

Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) prays, “I am because Thou dost look at me, and if Thou didst turn Thy glance from me I should cease to be” (Vision of God, 16).

This gaze of God is personal and intimate. Saint Augustine (354-430) says, “Our God observes every action, every word, every thought of each of us, as if He forgot all His other creatures, and had to attend only to us.”

The thought that God sees us moves us to repentance and reformation of life. “If we always thought that God was looking at us, we would never, or scarcely ever, do what is displeasing in His eyes,” says Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274).

Saint Alphonsus (1696-1787) writes: “If men will not dare in their presence to transgress the commands of princes, parents, or Superiors, how could they ever violate the laws of God if they thought that He was looking at them?”

“Every evil,” says Saint Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), “happens to us because we do not reflect that God is present with us, but imagine that He is at a distance.” If we realized that God was observing us, we would be careful never to sin.

Saint John Chrysostom (347-407) says, “If we keep ourselves always in the presence of God, the thought that He sees all our thoughts, that He hears all our words, and observes all our actions will preserve us from thinking any evil, from speaking any evil, and from doing any evil.”

After our conversion, the idea that God sees and watches over us fosters a continual conversation with Him. If, with the eyes of faith, we see God always watching us, we will want to think of Him and to praise, thank, and petition Him.

“I keep the LORD always before me; because He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved” (Ps. 16:8).

Remember, God is looking at you. Blessed Henry Suso (1295-1366) “applied himself with so much attention to this holy exercise that he performed all his actions in the divine presence, and thus continually conversed with God by tender affections,” says Saint Alphonsus.

The Holy Fathers assure us that this simple spiritual practice will make us great saints.

Our Lord said, “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). God appeared to Abraham and said, “I am God Almighty; live as in My sight, and be perfect” (Gen. 17:1 Knox). Contemporary translations say, “Walk before Me, and be blameless” (RSV).

Saint Dorotheus of Gaza (505 – 565) taught his disciple Dositheus that remembering God always sees us is the secret to sanctity. Dositheus asked Dorotheus what he should do to become a saint. Abba Dorotheos gave this advice:

“Consider that God is always present, and that He is looking at you.”

Dositheus, who had been a soldier and lived a sinful life, put this advice into practice and acquired great holiness in only five years. After his death, he was seen “in heaven seated on a throne of glory equal to that of the most holy among the anchorites.”

There are many ways to remember God and keep ourselves in His holy presence. Every follower of Christ should seek the one that works best for himself. For many, the simple truth that “God sees me” will be enough to live in His presence and thus break with sin, live a prayerful life, and even become a saint.

Remember, God sees you. **ECL**



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Carpathian Village is presently taking reservations for group retreats, ski weekends, family vacations, day of recollection weekends, parish or group picnics, and private retreats. To schedule your event or for more information call or email Father Michael.

2025 Summer Camp Dates

July 6-10, 2025

Camp Theodore Tyros—Teen Coed Camp, Ages 13-17

July 13-17, 2025

Camp Theotokos—Girls Camp, Ages 6-17

July 20-24, 2025

Altar Server Congress—Ages 6-17

Aug 10-14, 2025

Camp St Nicholas—Preteen Coed Camp, Ages 6-12



Southern Summer Camp Survey!!!

We value your input as we plan exciting new youth camps in the southeastern United States! To help us tailor these camps to best meet your family's needs, please take a moment to fill out our quick survey. You can access the survey by visiting the link provided or by scanning the QR code. Your feedback is essential in shaping an unforgettable experience for your children. Thank you for your time and support! Please complete prior to February 15th, 2025. <https://bit.ly/passaiccampsurvey>

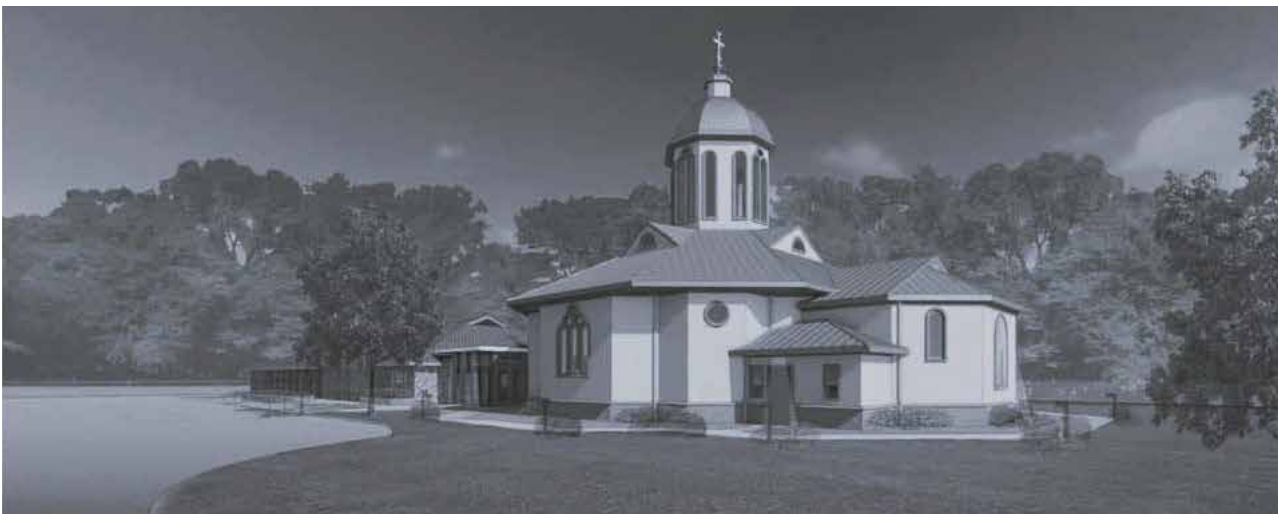
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Eastern Catholic Life

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UPCOMING EPARCHIAL AND PARISH EVENTS

JANUARY, 2025

- 1 Circumcision of Our Lord
Our Holy Father Basil the Great
*Solemn Holy Day * Chancery closed*
- 5 Sunday before Theophany
- 6 Holy Theophany of Our Lord, God, and Savior, Jesus Christ
Holy Day of Obligation
- 12 Sunday after Theophany
- 23-24 Prayer Vigil for Life
Washington, DC
- 30 Three Holy Hierarchs
Simple Holy Day

FEBRUARY, 2025

- 2 Sunday of Zacchaeus
Encounter of Our Lord with Simeon
- 9 Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee
- 16 Sunday of the Prodigal Son
- 17 Presidents' Day
Chancery closed
- 23 Sunday of Meatfare

THE BYZANTINE CATHOLIC EPARCHY OF PASSAIC
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Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People

adopted by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The Eparchy, within all its parishes, institutions and programs, is committed to assuring a safe environment in ministry for its children and young people that conforms to Charter requirements. For further information regarding the Eparchial Safe Environment Program please contact:

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