# Eastern Catholic Life

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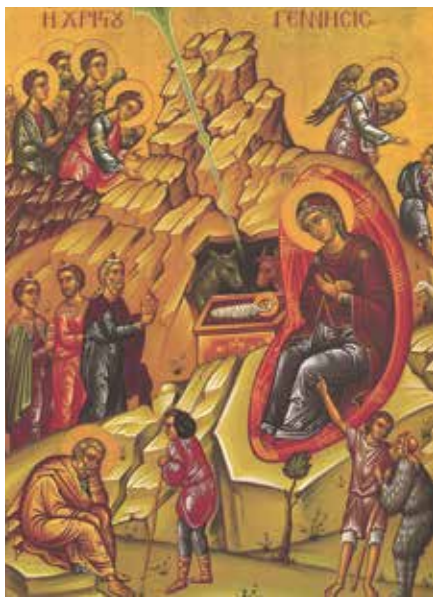
# Our Lady of the Snows and the Crib of Jesus

## Christmas Pastoral Message of Bishop Kurt

In a few weeks we remember the great Incarnation of the Lord Jesus, when the Son of God, "whom He made heir in all things, and through whom He created the ages," was born of a woman in a feeding trough in a stable in a cave in Bethlehem of Judea, the City of David. We know from faith, from signs and wonders, and from historical records, that Jesus lived 2000 years ago, becoming like us in all things except sin. It would seem that there should be some historical artifacts of his life, and indeed there are. The places where the events of his life took place, and where he taught and worked miracles, were remembered by the first Christians, and we can visit them today. In addition, they preserved things associated with his life and death, and many of them came into the possession of the Church. Of those items are five pieces of wood that are believed to be from the manger, the feeding trough of animals, where Jesus lay after His miraculous birth from a Virgin.

The church where the crib (or praesaepe) of Jesus is kept is one of the great Marian churches of the world with its own fascinating history. When arriving at the great church of Santa Maria Maggiore, even before approaching the doors, there is a great plaza or "piazza" with an enormous marble pillar and statue of the Virgin on top. The ancient Romans developed a style of building called a "basilica." You are familiar with the layout from many churches. After the entrance is a large central hall, perhaps with pillared aisles, and a rounded apse. These public buildings were used for public and private business including judging cases. The last great basilica built by the secular government of Rome was built in the forum and is called today the Basilica of Maxentius. It is by the Colosseum, also called the Flavian Amphitheater. Begun in 308 AD by Emperor Maxentius and completed in 312 by Constantine after he defeated Maxentius, it was the largest basilica in the forum, and the last Roman basilica built in the city. One side of the enormous building is still standing. It contained eight magnificent pillars, and only one was recovered intact a millennium and half later. The pillar was placed in the Piazza of Santa Maria Maggiore in 1615 by the great architect Moderno by order of Pope Saint Pius V. Moderno designed the imposing facade of Saint Peter's Basilica, as well as extending the nave. Many art critics would say that he ruined the design of Michelangelo, and indeed, if you see Saint Peter's Basilica from any other side you will see the beautiful church that Michelangelo intended. On top of the column is a bronze statue of the Mother of God, and the column is called the Column of Peace. Imposing as it is, it is easy to overlook when approaching this great church. The fountains at the base were also designed by Carlo Moderno. Don't get confused—for the rest of this article, "the basilica" will refer to the Church of Saint Mary Major, or Santa Maria Maggiore, not the basilica by the Colosseum.



*Icon of the Nativity of Our Lord, God, & Savior Jesus Christ*

According to an old legend, a Roman couple in the 300's dedicated all their property to the Mother of God. They asked for a sign from heaven to know where to build a church. In the year 352, their prayer was answered and snow fell on the Esquiline Hill, one of the seven hills of Rome. So the great church of Mary is called Our Lady of the Snows, in addition to its other names. Every year on August 5th, white rose petals are dropped from the ceiling to commemorate the miraculous snow fall in the scorching Roman summer.

*Our Lady of Peace — The Piazza at Santa Maria Maggiore contains the only intact column from the great Basilica built on the Roman Forum by Maxentius and completed by Constantine—the last secular basilica in the city.*

*Facade of Santa Maria Maggiore at night—only at night can one see the beautiful mosaics in the upper porch. During the day they are in the shadows.*

...continued on page 2

Christ is Born! Glorify Him! Christos Raždajetsja! Slavite Jeho!

*Ceiling of Santa Maria Maggiore—carved wood covered with gilt. Just above the pillars one can see the row of mosaics of scenes from salvation history, from the Bible. They are still brightly colored after seventeen centuries.*

The front porch of the great church is decorated with fantastic mosaics which are not visible in the daytime because of the shadows, but are beautiful at night, lit up by spotlights. Before electric lights, probably no one ever saw them, except those fortunate enough to climb onto the upper balcony of the porch.

On entering the church, one is drawn to the elaborately carved wooden ceiling covered with gold leaf. There is a popular story that the gold in the ceiling was brought back by Christopher Columbus. It is true that the kings of Spain donated generously to the Pope with the gold from the New World, so perhaps some of the ceiling is from Christopher Columbus.

*The Triumphal Arch of Santa Maria Maggiore seen over the baldacchino. Modeled after the military triumphal arches of ancient Rome, the King of Peace passes through this arch, victorious over sin and death.*

Below the ceiling, there is a row of mosaics on either side, showing scenes from salvation history, such as Moses parting the Red Sea. On my first visit to Rome in 1979, I was eager to see these works of art that I read about in a guide book. It said they were over fifteen centuries old. It took me a while to realize where the mosaics were because they were brightly colored, and I assumed 1500 year old artwork would be dingy. As I learned then, mosaics do not age like painting and drawings. The colored rocks do not lose their color over the millennia. They look as new today as they did in the 400's. This explosion of art honoring the Mother of God came on the heels of the Council of Ephesus in 431, declaring that we are allowed to call Mary the "Theotokos" or "God-bearer."

*The Tabernacle in the Blessed Sacrament Chapel — the tabernacle was designed by Ludovico del Duca.*

One of the great creations in this basilica is the "triumphal arch" between the nave and the apse. It would take another column to cover this masterpiece, but you can look it up on the internet. In spirit, it is based on the great triumphal arches of the Roman Empire celebrating military victories, copied by the French in Paris. These arches were built for armies to march through with their victorious generals, but the arch in Saint Mary Major is for the Prince of Peace to pass through when He brings you His Body and Blood, because He triumphed over sin and death. It is rich in Christian symbolism, and it has Bethlehem at one end and Jerusalem at the other end. Jerusalem appears as described in the Book of the Apocalypse.

For us Byzantine Catholics, there is an extra treasure here, special to us. As you

*Blessed Sacrament Chapel arches*

*Blessed Sacrament Chapel dome — legions of saints and angels in heaven hover above the tabernacle.*

*Apse Mosaic in Santa Maria Maggiore — Jesus crowns his Mother above a mosaic of the dormition. Vines of life grow around them and glorious angels and saints worship. The Lamb with the book with seven seals is at the top.*

*Pope Pius the Ninth prays looking up at the altar*

enter the sacristy, the first door in the nave on the right, there is a large marble slab, actually two slabs in two different languages. These slabs commemorate that in the year 867, when Saints Cyril and Methodius came to Rome for the Pope's blessing on their missions, the Pope was so enthusiastic about our Liturgy and translation into the Slavic languages that he ordered our Liturgies celebrated in all the major churches of Rome. The commemorative marble slabs report the celebration of the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom in Saint Mary Major in the Old Slavic language thirteen centuries ago. There is a commemorative marble slab a block or two away where the brothers lived while they completed their translation work, before Methodius returned north for missionary work after the death of his brother Cyril.

Without doubt, the greatest treasure in this edifice of treasures is the Holy Eucharist, the Flesh of Jesus. The tabernacle with the Blessed Sacrament is in a chapel of condign splendor called the Sistine Chapel. The chapel is called the Sistine Chapel because of the tomb of Pope Sixtus V, not to be confused with the famous Sistine Chapel named after its builder Pope Sixtus IV. This chapel is in the right transept, the next great door after the sacristy. The interior is rich with art and in the center is one of the most magnificent tabernacles on earth, held up by four angels. Each angel is holding the tabernacle with one hand and a sanctuary light in the other hand to show the Divine Presence. The tomb of Pope Sixtus V is on one side, showing the Pope kneeling in adoration. (On a lighter note, there is a "Sistine Bar" on the Via Sistina near the Spanish Steps. I had a croissant and coffee there once with my friend Father Claude Franklin of the Maronite Rite so that I could tell people I was at the Sistine Bar as well as the Sistine Chapel). The tabernacle and the real presence are so riveting, it might be possible to never look up in this Chapel and see the stunning arches and the very elaborate dome portraying celestial angels and saints hovering above the Incarnate Word in the tabernacle.

Behind the main altar is a mosaic from 1295 in the apse of the great Basilica, showing Jesus placing a crown on his Blessed Mother. The mosaic is signed by Jacopo Torriti, a Franciscan Friar. Underneath is a mosaic of the Dormition of the Mother of God. It shows our Eastern version of the event with the Apostles gathered around the body of Mary, asleep in death, and Jesus taking the soul of Mary, portrayed as a little Mary in all white clothing.

Before getting to the great relics under the altar, one crosses to the other side of the nave to visit the very plain tomb of Pope Francis, father to the poor and to great sinners. Sometimes, the simplest things steal the show, and this ultra simple tomb stands out from all the elaborate tombs and artifacts in this elaborate church.

*Tomb of Pope Francis — the simples tomb in Rome is appropriate for this friend of the poor and father to sinners*

*Relics of the Manger — the precious wood from the manger where newborn Jesus lay in the cold winter. Still under progress after almost 2000 years, this great basilica is a fitting earthly home for this priceless relic of the birth of Our Savior.*

Finally, we come to the precious relics under the main altar. The tomb of Saint Jerome is also here. Saint Jerome is the greatest Christian scripture scholar of all time, except perhaps for Origen. He was a great linguist and spent his life studying every manuscript of the scriptures that he could find in their original languages. He also founded convents for women. Some say he shows that you can become a saint even if you are thin skinned. We know from his letters that he did not suffer fools gladly and did not take insults lying down. We come to these two treasures by descending symmetric staircases to the crypt beneath the main altar. There is a large statue of a Pope (I think Pius IX) praying gazing up at the main altar, and directly underneath the main altar is the reliquary containing what is left of the manger, or feeding trough, in which our Savior lay as an infant.

Soon we will remember, as we have for 2000 years, the birth of Jesus, upending the order of nature by His Virgin birth. We will remember that He was born as if homeless and poor in a stable with the animals. We will remember the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The ox knows its master, and the ass its owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand." What is this great mystery? The animals worship the newborn king, and those who study the scriptures do not recognize him. A cave in the earth holds the great God who created all the earth, and all the cosmos. In God's inscrutable plan, the simple wood of the manger is today housed in one of the most magnificent buildings on earth, a building built and furnished over a millennium and a half, filled with artistic masterpieces of centuries, adorned with the holy bodies of saints and the handiwork of artistic geniuses from every age.

+Kurt Burnette

# People You Know Around the Eparchy

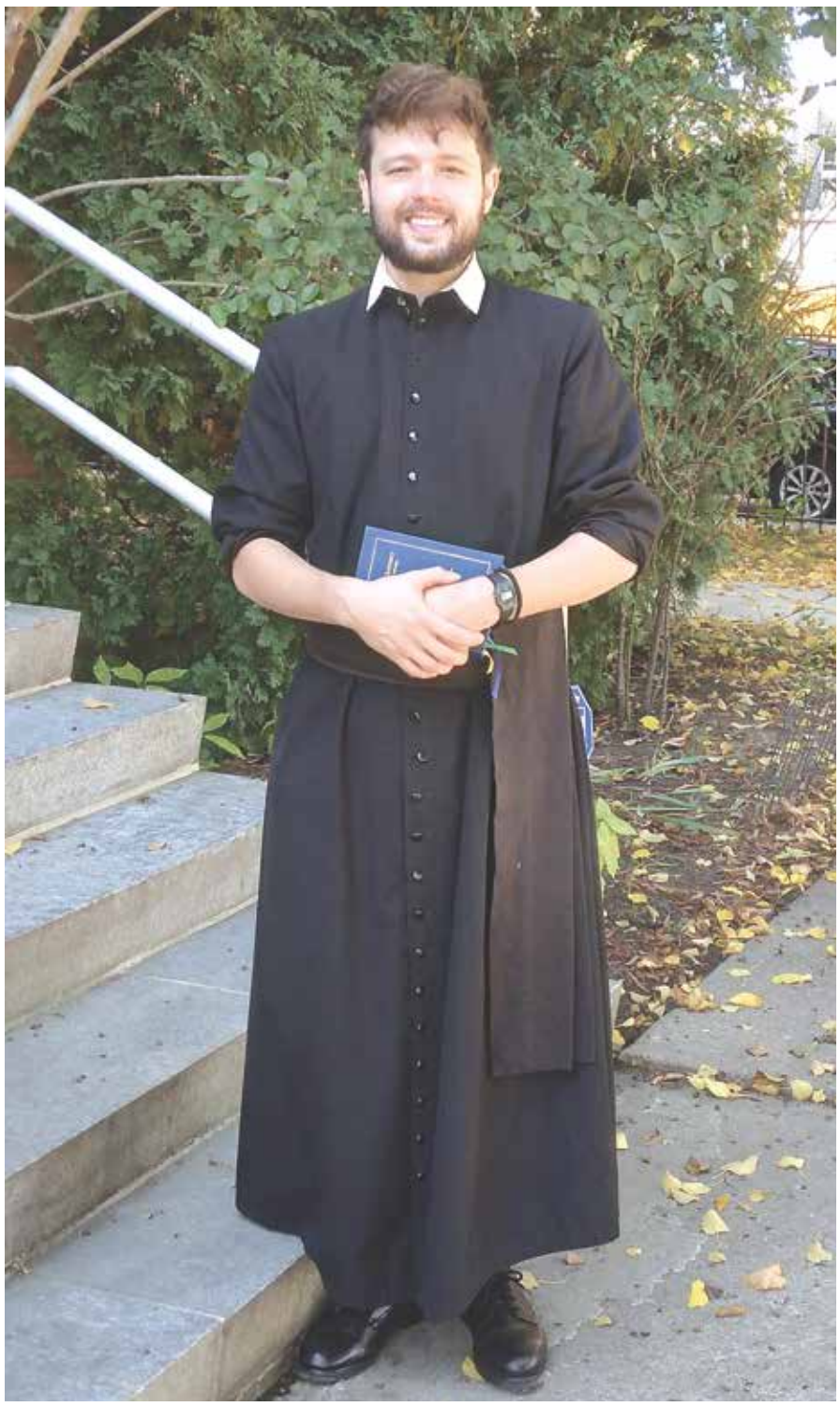
*Father Michael Popson of the Eparchial Building Commission with assistants Lenny and Noe after installation of the iconostas in Peekskill*

## In Peekskill...

*New Life in Peekskill*

In October, Saints Peter and Paul parish in Peekskill received the gift of Tradition in the form of a beautiful oak iconostas. Constructed in 1965, the parish's A-frame brick and wood sanctuary is typical of the "modern" and "American" style of the reign of Bishop Nicholas Elko. It features three mosaics and beautiful stained glass windows but was designed without an icon screen.

Peekskill's new iconostas comes from the Saint Nicholas parish in Meriden CT. In this way, the sacrifices of Saint Nicholas's parishioners have been preserved, giving these beautiful icons a new life in New York while restoring Saints Peter and Paul parish to a proper environment for the liturgical services of the Byzantine Catholic Tradition. Reverend Jack Custer is the Parochial Administrator of Saint Nicholas Church.



## In Perth Amboy...

*Parishioners' Son Ordained a Roman Catholic Priest*

Saint Nicholas Byzantine Catholic Church, Perth Amboy, NJ is pleased to announce the ordination to the priesthood of Reverend Brother Alexander Joseph Mosko, C.O., son of parishioners John and Pamela Mosko.

The priestly ordination of Brother Alexander Joseph was celebrated on Saturday, November 15, 2025, at 10:30 AM. His First Mass was Sunday, November 16, 2025, at 3PM.

The ordination and First Mass was celebrated at Saint Francis Xavier Parish at 2319 Green Street in Philadelphia, PA.

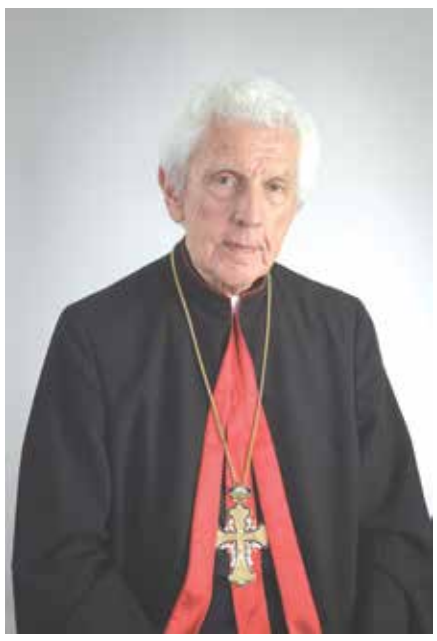
He has served at the Philadelphia Oratory at this parish for seven years and is permanently assigned there—as is the custom of the Congregation of the Oratory of Saint Phillip Neri.

Raised in Perth Amboy, NJ, Brother Alexander Joseph attended Ukrainian Assumption School and Saint Joseph's High School, and he graduated from the Catholic University of America in 2012. He worked in both finance and tech in New York City while discerning his vocation. Mnohaya Lita! The Reverend Edward Cimballa is the Parochial Adminisrator of Saint Nicholas Church.

## SAVE THE DATE

Wednesday, April 15, 2026, you are invited to a special event at our Cathedral Chapel in Woodland Park, starting at 2:00 PM. All the priests of the Eparchy will be present for historical lectures and prayers commemorating the birth of our Church, the Union of Uzhorod. Everyone is invited to this beautiful and educational event. Learn your history — take pride in your identity.

# +Monsignor Robert Paul Senetsky Falls Asleep in the Lord



+Monsignor Robert Paul Senetsky, 90, a priest of the Eparchy of Passaic who served at Saints Peter and Paul Byzantine Catholic Church in Peekskill, NY, fell asleep in the Lord at New York Presbyterian Hospital in Cortlandt, NY following a brief illness.

Monsignor Robert was born in Dickson City, PA on February 18, 1935, the son of the late Andrew Senetsky and Anna Labonick. He was Baptized and Chrismated at Saint Mary Byzantine Catholic Church, Scranton, PA. After his education in local schools, he attended Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, PA where he obtained a Bachelor's Degree. Following this, he attended the Byzantine Catholic Seminary of Saints Cyril and Methodius in Pittsburgh, PA where he completed his studies for the priesthood. He was ordained to the Priesthood of Jesus Christ by Bishop Nicholas T. Elko on April 23, 1960. Following his ordination to the priesthood, he served at Saint Thomas the Apostle Byzantine Catholic Church in Rahway, NJ; Saint John the Baptist Byzantine Catholic Church in Lyndora, PA; and Saints Peter and Paul Byzantine Catholic Church in Peekskill, NY where he served for over six decades. He also attended the Gregorian University and the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome and received a Doctorate in Canon Law in 1966.

During the years of his priestly service, and in addition to his parish assignments, Monsignor Robert also served as Eparchial Protosyncellus (Vicar General), Eparchial Judicial Vicar, Eparchial Chancellor, Auditor and instructing Judge of the Tribunal, Eparchial Finance Officer, Eparchial Consultor, and Vicar for Priests. In 1973 he was appointed a Consultor of the Pontifical Commission for the Revision of the Oriental Code of Canon Law. In 1977, Pope Paul VI appointed him a Papal Prelate of Honor with the title "Monsignor." In 1983 he was appointed Consultor to the Oriental Congregation.

Monsignor Robert was preceded in death by his parents and siblings.

The Office of Christian Burial for a Priest was celebrated the evening of September 10, by local and visiting clergy. Bishop Kurt Burnette celebrated the Funeral Divine Liturgy with the Prayer of Absolution and Pouring of Oil at Saint Mary Byzantine Catholic Church in Scranton, PA on September 11. The Interment was at Saint Mary Parish Cemetery in Scranton. Father Roman Vasylynka is Parochial Administrator of Saint Mary's in Scranton.

"Well done, good and faithful servant …Come, share your master's joy!" (Mt 25)

# Don't miss out on GCU opportunities for your parish!

*By Melissa Jaggars, GCU Corporate Community Events Coordinator*

The Greek Catholic Union of the USA (GCU), with its roots in the Byzantine Catholic Church, continues to be a faith-based benefit society that builds community through service, friendship, and fellowship. As GCU's Corporate Community Events Coordinator, I organize activities like discounted shows, bus trips, and sporting events throughout the entire Eparchy of Passaic. We have taken bus trips to Sight & Sound, sporting events, shows, and even MLB Spring Training games in Florida. We also have our upcoming *"Miracle on 34th Street"* outing on December 13th in Bethlehem, PA (a trip packed with amazing extras for a fantastic price—reach out to me to learn more!).

In addition to inviting Eastern Catholic Life readers to connect with me about joining our events or activities—or wanting to learn more about GCU in general—I want to take this opportunity to remind all parishes to **make sure you aren't missing out on GCU funding with our *GCU Byzantine Parish Coordinator Program*.** Every Byzantine parish in the program will receive a $500 annual social grant debit card, a $1,000 donation to the church, and up to $2,500 in matching funds in 2026; GCU believes whole-heartedly in supporting parish events and community life.

We are also seeking Constellation Coordinators—a stipend-paid role (1–3 hours per week)—to help plan local events and connect GCU members. The GCU is more than a benefit society: it is a family, rooted in faith and service. I hope to see you at a GCU event or activity soon, and I encourage anyone to connect with me to learn more!

Melissa Jaggars
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## MARCH FOR LIFE

## 2026 ANNUAL

# PRAYER VIGIL FOR LIFE

*Come together as we pray and make a stand for life!*

**BYZANTINE CATHOLIC SERVICES**
**AT THE BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE**
**OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION**
**WASHIGTON, DC**

### JANUARY 22

**Opening Mass for the Prayer Vigil for Life**
Great Upper Church
5:00 PM

**Holy Hour for Life**
Crypt Church
7:00 PM

**Byzantine Catholic Compline Prayer**
Crypt Church
8:00 PM

### JANUARY 23

**Byzantine Catholic Divine Liturgy for Life**
Byzantine Ruthenian Catholic Chapel of Our Lady of Protection
lower level of the Basilica
9:15 AM

*Liturgies celebrated by Bishop Kurt Burnette*

## A Message from Bishop Kurt on the National March For Life

My dear friends and fellow Christians, in the 1930's, the people of Germany, the best educated population in the history of the world, started down a path into the "Valley of Death". Their dark journey began when Adolf Hitler decriminalized abortion in 1934. Within a few years, he authorized the killing of the sick and old under the name "Mercy Death" or "Gnadentod". The media and university professors were persuasive allies in this unholy war on life. By 1945, all the disabled veterans and the hospitalized mentally ill were killed by doctors and nurses. As the American army came through, they were liberating hospitals as the medical professionals were killing as many patients as possible. It was the prelude to racial genocide for jews, gypsies, and slavs. Within a few years, the world had its eyes opened to the cult of death that engulfed that proud civilized nation. Here in the United States, we made our first big step down that same road when the rich country club lawyers on the Supreme Court told everyone that abortion is part of our US Constitution. Satan has moved more cautiously in our country, but he has made great progress in the past few years. California, New York, and New Jersey have all legalized the killing of the sick and elderly with bills signed into law by governors with Catholic educations. Only the Orthodox Jews tried to stop this horror in New Jersey, and the Catholic governor and the legal establishment rolled over them without a glimmer of conscience. With the Supreme Court decision returning abortion law to the states, the March for Life doesn't seem as important as it used to be, but it is still a life or death struggle. Each state now has its own March for Life, and I encourage everyone to support these efforts, at least by prayer and fasting. The abortion industry is a multibillion dollar cash industry. Together with many of our wealthiest citizens, they promote the cult of death relentlessly. Please consider attending the March of Life in Washington DC, or in your state capital. The lives you save may be your own grandchildren or great grandchildren. If you can't attend a March, at least pray and fast.

# Searching the Scriptures

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

## Peace on Earth, Good Will to Men

How many Christmas songs do you know that include the angelic hymn: "Glory to God in the highest; and on earth peace"? I'm stopping there because the next three Greek words get translated all sorts of ways. *En anthrōpois* means "among men" (here as elsewhere in the Bible, this word includes humans of both genders; cf. Genesis 1:27). It's *evdokias* that causes trouble. The translation is easy: "of good will." The question is whose good will? "To men of good will" implies those of us who mean well, who are in the right moral or spiritual state to accept God's gift of His Son. That can come off a bit pharisaical. None of us deserves God's mercy! It is more likely God's good will, His desire to save us, that the angels (and Saint Luke) have in mind.

Our liturgical hymns frequently mention God's "will" or "plan" or "counsel" (*boulē* in Greek, *smotrenije* in Slavonic), as in Resurrection tropar tone 1: "glory to Your plan," to which our English translation rightly adds "of salvation" for clarity. Saint Paul speaks repeatedly about God's saving plan (Ephesians 1:5-9; Philippians 1:15, 2:13; 2 Thessalonians 1:11). The verbal equivalent of *evdokia* appears at our Lord's Baptism and Transfiguration, when the Father's voice proclaims Him as the "Beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17; 17:5). It is through Jesus Christ that we experience the Father's good pleasure, His plan to save us. All this was foreshadowed by the prophet Isaiah's prediction of the Suffering Servant in whom God is "well pleased" (Isaiah 43:1).

Saint Luke (2:1-3) reminds us that Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem because Caesar Augustus had ordered "a census of the whole world." Augustus ruled an empire that stretched from Spain to Armenia and from North Africa to the North Sea. Historians speak of this period as the Roman Peace (*Pax Romana*) but it would be fairer to say that Rome kept its expansive empire pacified by brute force. Early Christian writers like Origen (3rd century) see God's plan in this: a peaceful, unified empire with a common language (Greek, not Latin!) made it easier to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19).

A hymn at Christmas Vespers by the nun Kassiane compares Augustus with the newborn King: 'When Augustus became supreme ruler of the world, the many kingdoms among the people came to an end. Likewise, when You became incarnate of the Immaculate One, the worship of many gods had to cease. The cities came under a universal power, and the Gentiles believed in one supreme Divinity. Nations were registered in the name of Caesar Augustus, and we the faithful were registered in Your divine name, O Incarnate One. O Lord, great is your mercy, glory to you." The census Kassiane has in mind is the heavenly Book of Life (Psalm 87:5; Isaiah 4:3; Luke 10:20; Philippians 4:3; Hebrews 12:23; Revelation 3:5.8; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12.15; 21:27; 22:19).

Unlike our nativity scenes and our carols, the Gospels do not paint Christ's first days on earth as particularly peaceful. Angels are singing up a storm, curious shepherds intrude on the Holy Family (Luke 2:8-20), a mysterious star is moving across the sky, strange astrologers arrive bearing even stranger gifts (Matthew 2: 1-12) and, worst of all, Herod orders a massacre to eliminate the Child who threatens his precarious kingship (Matthew 2: 16-18).

So where is that peace the angels announced? Exactly where the "good will" is: in the person of the Incarnate Christ. Isaiah promised a "Prince of Peace" (9:6); Micah (5:5) predicted, "He will be peace." Saint Paul (Ephesians 2:14-16) agrees: "He Himself is our peace," who broke through the barrier between God and men, reconciling both Jews and Gentiles to God in the "one body" of the Church through His sacrifice on the Cross (see also Colossians 1:20).

In our own lives, as in the Roman Empire, peace doesn't just happen—it must be made. Saint Paul describes our internal conflict against sin and death (Romans 7:13-25) and reminds us again and again that the only one who can win that war for us is Jesus Christ: (Romans 8:1-4; Galatians 4:4-5). His Cross becomes "a weapon of peace" by which we pacify our own inner struggles (Galatians 5:16-25) against what later spiritual writers call the "passions," and accept His kingship over us (Matthew 6:33). Thus, the ektenia we pray at Vespers, Matins, and the Divine Liturgy, urges us to "spend the rest of our lives in peace and repentance." Only by 'guarding our hearts and minds' can we ever attain "the peace of God which passes all understanding" (Philippians 4:7). **ECL**

# Priestly Reflections

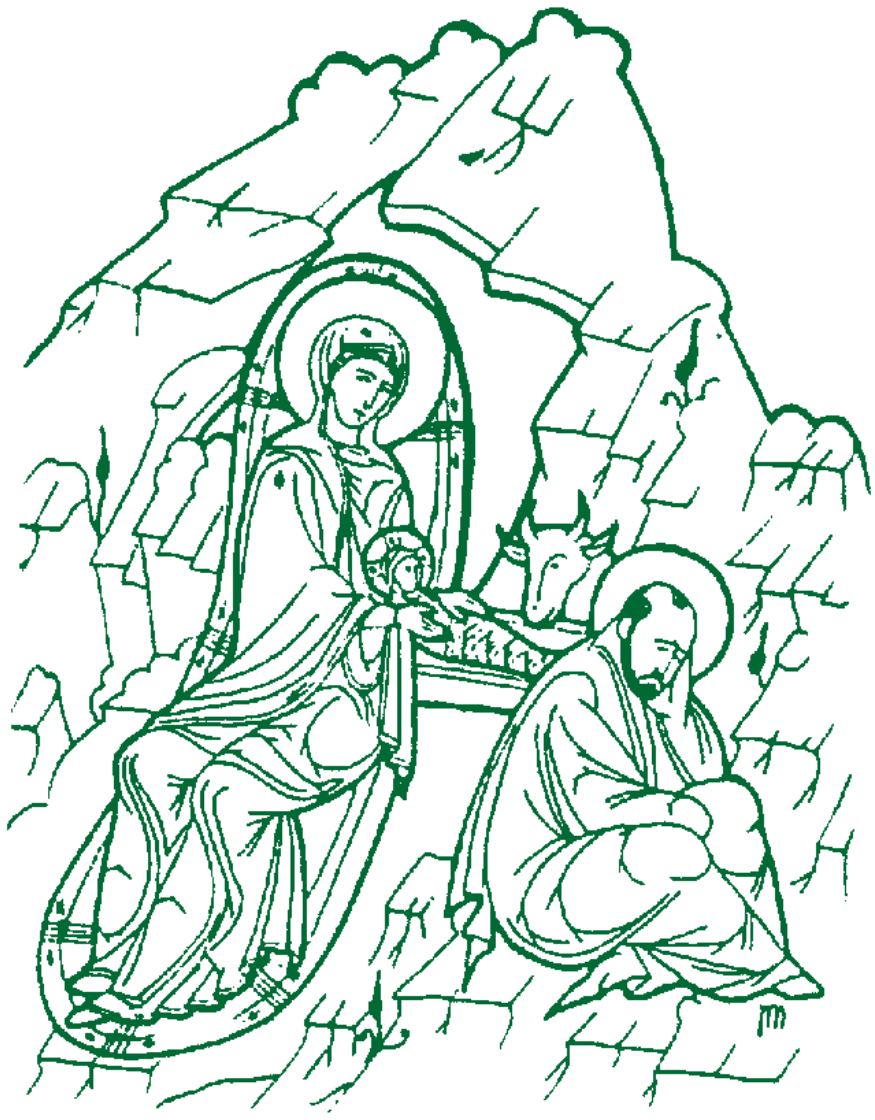
*Father Paul Varchola West*

## "Don't Miss Out!"

At the Vigil Divine Liturgy of St. Basil on Christmas Eve, we are blessed to hear the following words from the Gospel of St. Luke:

"But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart (2:19)"

Simultaneously profound yet simple, just as the Incarnation itself, these words give much insight as to how we Christians living in the modern era need to approach not only the "holiday" of Christmas, but the entire season following the universally exalted day of December 25th.



Over the past few years, I have come to increasingly marvel at the pictures I see all over social media in which are featured piles of presents, each one larger than the last; pictures of full tables; large gatherings; full churches that are often far less attended the rest of the year; and the list goes on. And it is not just one picture per post, but sometimes dozens, with the activity being given the perhaps not so affectionate title of a "photo dump." What this implies is that all these pictures are simply being thrown out for the world to see, oftentimes without even being looked at before posting. The pictures are simply thrown into a collage and posted; no keeping of any to oneself, no pondering of the beauty of the liturgical celebration, the generosity shown in gifts, or the familial love that is seemingly showcased in these images.

Further, the ubiquitous and incessant need to post all the images of "how great the day is" creates, without a shadow of a doubt, an increased amount of FOMO — the **F***ear* **O***f* **M***issing* **O***ut*! This, in turn, creates a runaway "keeping up with the Jones" effect in which each individual must post just as many, or perhaps a couple more, even more exciting photos than the last. Then, before we know it, the day concludes and we sit with bloated bellies bemoaning the fact that "Christmas is over" and "all that prep for one day…just look at this mess!" In our excitement for the day, and our dread of experiencing guilt-laden FOMO, we tend to forget that December 25th is the *START* of the Feast, not the end. As society moves on to Valentine's day, we stand with our heads spinning.

I shudder to think of what the birth of Christ and Mary's response would have looked like if it occurred in the present age. Selfies of Mary with the newborn Christ Child, and pics with the shepherds giving Joseph bro hugs, replete with the hashtags: #nativity #yesididknow #glorytogodinthehighest #emmanuel #perpetualvirginity #saviorintraining.

While I say these things in jest, I also think we need to take this seriously. What we hear on the *Vigil of the Nativity* in Luke 2:19 is probably the thing we see the least of in our society today. We have become so engrossed with a fear of missing out on something that we are actually missing out on the whole "reason for the season:" access to Salvation and the fullness of time, to use the language of St. Basil.

Instead of worrying about our FOMO, we need to PO–MO: Ponder More! While all the events of the Nativity of Christ are occurring around Mary, as we hear, she is keeping all these things and pondering them in her heart. Let us, then, do the same. Rather than incessantly posting pictures of our day, let us keep those moments in our hearts, pondering the gift of generosity, the gift of full tables, the gift of family and loved ones, and most importantly the gift of Salvation.

I write all this to remind us that the pondering of these wonders should not stop at 11:59:59 PM on December 25th, but rather, *MUST* continue on throughout the *Winter Pascha*, encompassing *Theophany* and continuing till the close of the season on February 2nd with *The Presentation of Christ in the Temple*. Although December 25th will have already come and gone, the festive season of rejoicing has not! Don't miss out…*PONDER*! **ECL**


# National Religious Retirement Office Announces 2025 Retirement Fund for Religious Collection

*by Robin Cabral*

The National Religious Retirement Office (NRRO) is announcing that the annual Retirement Fund for Religious collection will be held in parishes throughout the Eparchy of Passaic on the weekend of Dec. 13-14.

In 2024, Catholics across the eparchy contributed $10,000 to the collection, mostly through their home parishes. "The generosity of U.S. Catholics continues to make a profound difference in the lives of aging religious," said John Knutsen, NRRO director. "This year, we invite all Catholics to help provide the care and dignity these women and men of faith so richly deserve."

Rising health-care costs and the absence of traditional retirement plans have placed significant financial strain on many religious communities. The Retirement Fund for Religious helps address this need, supporting more than 21,000 religious over the age of 70. In 2024, the average annual cost of care was about $56,600 per person, with skilled nursing care averaging $96,000.

Since its establishment in 1988, the collection has raised over $1 billion, with nearly $900 million distributed for direct care and over $103 million allocated to retirement planning projects.

In 2024, the appeal raised over $28 million, providing financial assistance for the retirement needs of 266 U.S. religious communities. Beyond financial aid, the collection supports educational programs, empowering religious communities to plan for their long-term needs.

The NRRO coordinates the annual national appeal for the Retirement Fund for Religious and distributes financial assistance to eligible religious communities. It is sponsored by the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. For more information, visit retiredreligious.org, or contact Robin Cabral, by phone at (508) 685-8899 or by email at campaign@retiredreligious.org.

# Life, Love, and the Human Person

*By Ann M. Koshute, MTS*

## In Darkness, Light

'Tis the season when the darkness of shorter days is pierced by the glow of twinkle lights, Christmas stars, and gigantic blow-up Grinches, Santas, and even the Holy Family. The commercialism of this time of year – which seems to begin right after Labor Day and end abruptly with the pop of the last champagne cork on New Year's – is a mainstay in our culture and will likely only continue to get worse. Christ has already all but vanished from Christmas in popular culture, making it more difficult for Christians to resist the temptations of materialism, endless social engagements. Perhaps we've already had our fill of Christmas cookies and candy, rich dinners and fancy cocktails, all before the Wise Men can find there way to the Cave where the infant Jesus lay. Waiting is not a comfortable stance in our society, and if we're honest, waiting, silence, *darkness*, is not a comfortable place for us, either.

Some two thousand years ago the darkness that had overcome the world through sin was pierced not by a star on a Christmas tree, but by a Star that led men, both common and kingly, to seek the Lord. Imagine the busyness of that time, people hitting the road not for holiday festivities, but to be counted in the census. Crowds of people, no rooms to be found in the small town of Bethlehem. How tired Mary must've been, heavily pregnant and feeling uncomfortable during the long journey. And Joseph, protective of his wife, frustrated that all he could provide for her when they arrived at their destination was a cold and lowly cave. No family welcomed them, no table laden with food fit for a king, or a well-appointed cradle to lay the newborn Jesus. Yet in that quiet simplicity, Love in the flesh was born into the world, changing history, and changing us forever. How awestruck Mary and Joseph must have been, as were the shepherds and kings who soon came to pay homage to the tiny King cradled in the animals' manger. Imagine if that first Christmas was truly the model we followed for every Christmas celebration to follow. How different would our world be, and how much more would we appreciate the magnitude of what happened that cold night so long ago?

What makes holiday celebrations, gift exchanges, family gatherings, and indulging our sweet tooth (within reason!) so wonderful is that they bring people together and remind us of the importance of relationships, especially in this technological age where connections are often mediated by screens. The problem arises when we become so caught up in the material aspects of the holidays that we let the spiritual (and true) significance of this time fall away. In some families, holy supper becomes just another celebration of ethnic heritage, and Liturgy for the feast of the Nativity of our Lord is part of "what we do" when visiting relatives. Yet those of us who take our faith seriously must be careful not to become complacent, or to fall into a routine of food, faith, and forgetting what this great feast is all about. Our holidays may not be as quiet and solemn as that first Christmas in Bethlehem, at least outwardly, but what about in our hearts and our souls? What would it take for us to spend at least ten or fifteen minutes in our day to put ourselves in Bethlehem's cave? It could mean missing a quarter of a football game, waking up earlier than usual, even after an evening of celebrating, or pausing in the midst of the hustle and bustle of shopping and cooking, just to go there for a short time.

Right now, set aside this column and ask the Lord to take you there, to the stillness and quiet of that first Christmas night. Like the animals in the Cave just doing what animals do, make a space for Jesus to enter and be part of your everyday life. Let the shepherds, ordinary men keeping watch of their flock by night yet attentive to the message of the Angel, be an example of listening for the Lord's call and where He is leading. Follow the Wise Men to the Cave, bringing to the newborn King whatever gifts you possess, including the one most precious to Him–yourself. Open wide your heart to ponder all that God has done–and is doing–like Mary. Persevere in faith, as Joseph did, even in those times when God's ways seem too mysterious and unbelievable. And finally, imagine yourself like the Star shining in the heavens and leading to where our God Incarnate lay. Light the way for those around you, show Jesus to them by your word and actions. Be a light in the dark corners of our world and allow the Light of Christ during this season to shine on through you. **ECL**

# Saint Nicholas European Christmas Market

Dec. 12-13

NC State Fairgounds

The 18th annual Saints Cyril and Methodius Saint Nicholas European Christmas Market will be held on Friday, December 12 from 5:00 PM to 9:00 PM and Saturday, December 13 from 10:00 AM to 5:00 PM at the North Carolina State Fairgrounds- Kerr Scott Building.

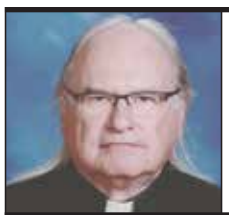
Plenty of FREE Parking and FREE Admission. Donations gratefully accepted. All proceeds benefit "Building our Future." Come sing and dance with the acclaimed Little German Band on Saturday and sip, shop and dine in the European Christmas Market Tradition!

Questions? Call Saints Cyril & Methodius (919) 239-4877 or email: sscyrilmethodius@gmail.com

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/SaintNicholasMarket/

website: https://saintnicholasmarketnc.com.





# The Byzantine Liturgy

*By Archpriest David Petras, SEOD*

## The Priest and Spiritual Guidance

When a man is ordained a presbyter (priest), the bishop prays for him, "that he may be worthy to stand blamelessly before your holy altar, to proclaim the gospel of your kingdom, to sanctify the word of your truth, to offer you gifts and spiritual sacrifices, and to renew your people by the bath of rebirth." To stand before the altar and to offer gifts and spiritual sacrifices is how we usually see the priest, as he functions in his office of conducting the services of worship of the Church. How he relates to the spiritual life of the faithful is seen in his ministry of proclaiming the gospel, sanctifying the word of truth (from Ephesians 1:13), and renewing the people by the bath of rebirth. More concretely, this refers to the ways that a priest relates to the people by preaching, by baptizing, hearing confessions, giving spiritual guidance, and directing lives toward God's kingdom, leading a life of integrity and truth with God at the center of our lives. Interestingly, this does not refer directly to one of a pastor's main duties, which is the physical administration of the Church's building and properties. However, the Holy Spirit is needed even in this secular realm, so that the properties of the Church are used for the welfare of souls; not only those of the parish, but of everyone who is affected by the Church, either directly or indirectly.

The most important service of the priest is to "sanctify the word of truth," from Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians 1:13. This phrase is repeated in both of the prayers of the ordination of the priest. Commenting on this passage, the Father of the Church Athanasius the Great wrote, "let us vie with each other in observing the purity of the fast, by watchfulness in prayers, by study of the Scriptures, by distributing to the poor, and let us be at peace with our enemies. Let us bind up those who are scattered abroad, banish pride, and return to lowliness of mind, being at peace with all men, and urging the brethren unto love" (Festal Letters). Our Lord, the Word of God, is "the truth," and he has sent us the Spirit to make us holy. Saint Athanasius sums up here the ways in which the priest assists in this mission. The priest should serve as both the model and facilitator of Christian life in the community entrusted to his care.

Ἀναχωρηταὶ τῆς Αἰγύπτου

One of the most important way he does this is through preaching. The Second Vatican Council underlined this, "Because the sermon is part of the liturgical service, the best place for it is to be indicated even in the rubrics, as far as the nature of the rite will allow; the ministry of preaching is to be fulfilled with exactitude and fidelity" Constitution on the Liturgy 35). It is an essential part of his ministry, "In the Christian community (…) the preaching of the word is needed for the very ministering of the sacraments" (Decree on the Priesthood 4). The proper word for the sermon is homily, which in Greek means a "communication," a "word," an "utterance." It is an essential part of the Sacred Scripture, for when the inspired word of God was read in the community, the presider was then expected to comment on it. We see Jesus doing this in the synagogue in Capernaum (Luke 4:16-21). It is the priest's role, as a part of the gift of the Spirit given in ordination, to communicate the meaning of the scripture to the actual congregation gathered in its hearing, for God's word may have a multiplicity of meanings according to time and place. It is the priest's duty to explain it and to apply it according to the best of his ability. Of course, the men charged with this ministry have different talents, and some are good preachers while others are not so adept. The Council acknowledges, "priestly preaching is often very difficult in the circumstances of the modern world. In order that it might more effectively move men's minds, the word of God ought not to be explained in a general and abstract way, but rather by applying the lasting truth of the Gospel to the particular circumstances of life" ( Decree on the Priesthood 4). I think, though, that in some way the Holy Spirit speaks to us through the words of the priest, even if poorly spoken. Priests today do usually reflect on Scripture, though for a time before the Council, sermons were often moral exhortations or pleas for money.

The priest also gives spiritual guidance on a personal level to the faithful committed to his care. Having a spiritual father and seeking guidance from the Church is an essential part of living a Christian life and of the presbyteral ministry. Priests are called "elders" because they are to have the wisdom to lead the people to Christ. Spiritual direction is a requirement for those living in religious and monastic communities. This is not as true for the faithful in a parish. A small minority actually seek active spiritual direction. Others receive some spiritual guidance through the sacramental mystery of confession, called penance or repentance. There is, of course, a practical limitation: one pastor simply does not have the time available to individually direct all his people. Often, direction is given in groups, such as Bible studies or adult education. These can be very helpful and reach many people. Sadly, though, for many a spiritual life is one's own individual responsibility, as we live in a culture of individualism, while for others the life of faith is only something on the periphery of their lives, and they are content to leave it to the priest "to pray for them." As in preaching, priests have differing levels of ability to direct others. Some let their ideologies get in the way of a genuine empathy for the needs of their people. Good spiritual direction requires humility, an ability to listen and the grace of God in a spirit of discernment. **ECL**

# School of Prayer

*Father G. Scott Boghossian*

## The Bible is the Word of God

You may not know it, but the Catholic Church urges us to read the Holy Bible. If we look to scripture, the Church Fathers, the popes, and the saints, we see that the Holy Bible is paramount in the Christian life.

Many Catholics don't bother to read the Bible because they believe that it is simply not accurate or trustworthy. For example, notorious "biblical scholar" Father Raymond Brown (1928-1998) said that the New Testament doesn't teach the Virgin Birth of Christ, that Christ never instituted a Catholic priesthood, and that the events surrounding the Annunciation and the Birth of Jesus Christ as recorded in Matthew and Luke probably never happened as described. Father Brown died in 1998 after retiring and spending his last years and hours outside San Francisco. He did significant harm to the faith of many Christians (cf. Mt. 18:6).

But we know better. "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17, RSV). Saint John Chrysostom tells us: "All that is in Scripture we must thoroughly examine; for all are dictated by the Holy Ghost, and nothing is written in them in vain" (Hom. XXXVI. in 8. Joan.), and Saint Gregory the Great says, "The Author of the book is the Holy Ghost" (cf. Mk. 3:29).

Contrary to Father Brown, we know, according to the Catholic Encyclopedia, that "since the fourth century, the


teaching of the Church concerning the nature of the Bible is practically summed up in the dogmatic formula that God is the author of Sacred Scripture." If God is the author of the Bible, then it cannot contain any errors. "Everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit" (Dei Verbum, 11). The Bible is the only book the Holy Spirit Himself has written. Don't claim to be "filled with the Holy Spirit" if your heart is not full of the Holy Bible.

You say, "But the nuns never told us to read the Bible." Yet, Pope Clement XI (1649 – 1721) said, "it is useful and necessary at all times, in all places, and for every kind of person, to study and to know the spirit, the piety, and the mysteries of Sacred Scripture."

The Third Council of Baltimore in 1884 decreed: "it can hardly be necessary for us to remind you, beloved brethren, that the most highly valued treasure of every family library, and the most frequently and lovingly made use of, should be the Holy Scriptures. (…) We hope that no family can be found amongst us without a correct version of the Holy Scriptures."

Pope Saint Pius X (1903-1914) said, "Nothing would please us more than to see our beloved children form the habit of reading the Gospels—not merely from time to time, but every day."

Pope Benedict XV (1854-1922) wanted "all the children of the Church, especially clerics, to reverence the Holy Scriptures, to read it piously and meditate on it constantly." And said that, "in these pages is to be sought that food, by which the spiritual life is nourished unto perfection."

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux (1873 – 1897) loved reading and meditating on the Holy Bible. She writes, "I am rescued from this helpless state by the Scriptures and *The Imitation*, finding in them a hidden manna, pure and substantial; but during meditation I am sustained above all else by the Gospels. They supply my poor soul's every need, and they are always yielding up to me new lights and mysterious hidden meanings."

Even today, there are indulgences for Bible reading: "A Plenary indulgence is granted to the faithful who read the Sacred Scriptures as spiritual reading, from a text approved by competent authority and with the reverence due to the divine word, for at least a half an hour; if the time is less, the indulgence will be partial." (Manual of Indulgences, 30)

In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, we read that the Church "forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful (…) to learn 'the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ,' by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures. 'Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.'" (CCC, 133).

Read the Holy Bible with faith, reverence, and devotion, because it is the very Word of God. **ECL**




You are invited and welcome to join us for

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**(Fulfils Sunday Obligation)**

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# Carpathian Village Saint Nicholas Shrine

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Father Michael J. Salnicky, Director

**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.**

## Charleston Area Outreach Interest

Are you a Byzantine/Eastern Rite Catholic that has relocated to the Charleston, SC area and miss attending the Divine Liturgy and other services? The Byzantine Catholic Eparchy of Passaic is exploring the possibility of establishing an Outreach Community in the Charleston area. Currently the closest Mission is in the Myrtle Beach area. I'm working with one of the priests in Passaic to help gauge interest. If there is sufficient interest, the plan would be to have a Liturgy somewhere in the Charleston area in the next few months. If you are interested, please send me an e-mail at michael-meador@sbcglobal.net.

## 2026 Marriage Jubilarian Dates

**January 17, 2026 (Saturday)**

Marriage Jubilarians - Southern States
Saint Nicholas - Orlando, FL
11:00 AM – Banquet to Follow on Premise

If you are celebrating a special Wedding Anniversary – 5-year increments, Please submit your name to your pastor to be included in this year's Jubilarian Celebration.



# Carpatho-Rusyn Society

MANIFESTING CARPATHO-RUSYN CULTURE AND HISTORY

*The mission of the Carpatho-Rusyn Society is to preserve and perpetuate the distinct culture, history, language, and heritage of the Carpatho-Rusyn people.*

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The society offers regular educational Zoom presentations, genealogy help by professional Rusyn genealogists, a monthly newsletter, Our People, and scholarships to students. Also offered is an online/mail-in Heritage Store with books and gift items. Listen live on Sunday afternoons to Rusyn music on our Rusyn Heritage Program (also archived).

Visit the headings on our new website where you can find our chapters, genealogy forum, newsletter, events, Heritage Store, our Rusyn Heritage Program and much more information including how to become a member. The dues have not changed in 30 years!

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*Maureen French*
*ECL circulation editor*


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# Upcoming Eparchial and Parish Events

## December, 2025

6 Archbishop Nicholas of Myra
*Solemn Holyday*
8 Maternity of the Holy Anna
*Solemn Holyday*
24 Christmas Eve
*Chancery Closed*
25 The Nativity of Our Lord, God, & Savior Jesus Christ
*Holyday of Obligation/Chancery Closed*
26 Synaxis of the Theotokos
*Solemn Holyday/Chancery Closed*
27 Protomartyr Stephen
*Simple Holyday*
31 New Year's Eve
*Chancery Closed*

## January, 2026

1 The Circumcision of Our Lord, & Saint Basil the Great
*Solemn Holyday/Chancery Closed*

The Byzantine Catholic Eparchy of Passaic
subscribes to the
*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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*Safe Environment Program Coordinator* • 732-280-2682

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