St. John of Damascus

For God is Life and Light, and those who are in God’s hand are in life and light.

In Wisdom 51
Mansour Sin Sarjoun
EDITORIAL

ow do we proclaim the birth of the Savior to people who may think that they can save themselves, or that they don’t need or want salvation, or who simply aren’t interested?

Not caring and not interested is indeed the culture and climate of our time. This is the mission field of our graduating seminarians and the Orthodox faithful throughout the world. This is the state of affairs inside and outside the hedge of our Church. A new hedonism — all about individual pleasure — is everywhere and permeates everything.
Nevertheless, we are sent forth from the liturgy to bring the good news to all nations. We are to baptize all in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Even when we are all "charged up," however, our audience is too busy with their own self-centered universe to even notice our presence. How can you engage someone so preoccupied with his personal device, or his own self-constructed and self-limiting world, that he can't hear you call his name?

Christmas time may offer us an infrequent opportunity. Perhaps in all the noise and images of the holiday season that bombard us we can find a little common ground, a common memory, of the infant Jesus with a glow from his stable. Perhaps in the eggnog or the mulled cider is a positive remembrance of gifts, loved ones, and church. Perhaps in this whisper of a nostalgic thought is a recollection of Christ in the life of our loved ones, or an encounter of God from our youth. Let's build on that memory to initiate an encounter that may call someone home to Christ, His Church and life itself.

Let us seize the moment to share and connect with those both inside and outside the Church, to see how our common bond is God Himself. Let us take the moment to invite each other to reexamine worship or prayer. Let us recognize the embers of God's Spirit warming our hearts. These embers need to be fanned into flame. With a little help, perhaps an encounter of God from our youth. Let's build on that Christmas time may offer us an infrequent opportunity. Perhaps in all the noise and images of the holiday season that bombard us we can find a little common ground, a common memory, of the infant Jesus with a glow from his stable. Perhaps in the eggnog or the mulled cider is a positive remembrance of gifts, loved ones, and church. Perhaps in this whisper of a nostalgic thought is a recollection of Christ in the life of our loved ones, or an encounter of God from our youth. Let's build on that memory to initiate an encounter that may call someone home to Christ, His Church and life itself.

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Let this Christmas time be one of hope. God is working as hard as ever to call us home. Let us invite each other and encourage each other as we worship the Savior born in a cave, buried in a cave, and who, out of the grave, is able to save.

Christ Is Born!

Bishop JOHN

"And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, for this purpose I have come to this hour” (John 12:27; cf. Mark10:45 and Luke 18:31–33). God created us to be body and soul together; thus their separation through death is a tragedy and tragedy. We were not intended for death but for life; we die because we habitually sin – any violation of the "Golden Rule" (Luke 6:31) and the "first and greatest commandment" (Matthew 22:37–39) – “For the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

Christ, on the other hand, was born specifically to die. The very Epistle read on His Nativity says so: But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive adoption as sons” (Galatians 4:4–5). This is reiterated in the Epistle read on the Second Day of the Nativity (Synaxis of the Theotokos): “Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of Death, that is, the Devil, and release those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage” (Hebrews 2:14–15).
THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

December 2019

The birth of Christ, though occurring to so many people as a gift, was far from being a gift. It was the most inhumane execution an individual could ever suffer. One must accept it when it comes, and then they can talk about it. When the Cross first appeared, people began to question it, and in the end, they were able to see it as a gift.

The birth of Christ is the beginning of our life. When we receive it, we receive our death. We receive our cross. The way of the cross of Christ is shaped according to our specific need as people, and unless we carry it we will never become Christ. The way of the cross is good for us, and it will be easy for us.

The energy which accompanied it. One of the prayers before sleep says, “If my bed should be my coffin...” Even the popular children’s prayer says, “If I die before I wake...” Thus the Church has always tried to keep us mindful of a sudden end, and how well or poorly we’re prepared for it.

Christ knew that every day of His earthly life brought Him one step closer to the Cross. And throughout that life He freely complied with the will of His Father, willing His death, even days. From the moment of His conception, the Passover Lambs were slain in the temple. Many, including the two thieves, had to endure far longer than He did. From the moment of His conception, the clock began to tick down to this seminal event. Christ embraced this fact, though, like any human, He did agonize over it before accepting that it was why He came and freely decided to go through with it. Like Christ, we are called to embrace death; not in a fatalistic, doomsday, “there’s-no-hope—we’re-doomed-let’s-get-it-over-with” way. This is exactly what St. Paul rejects when he writes, “But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13). For by His death, Christ has permanently broken the power of Death; death is no longer The End; there is life beyond it in Him.

Then do what we mean by “embracing death”? We mean accepting that it will happen, and there is nothing we can do about it. If we choose to make it happen, it will happen. Then what do we mean by “embracing death”? We mean accepting that it will happen, and there is nothing we can do about it. If we choose to make it happen, it will happen.

The spirit of the devil, not the spirit of God, dwells in those who pass their life in ease.1 The path to God is a daily cross. No one has as- cended into Heaven by means of ease, for we know where the way of ease leads and how it ends.2

I am writing this on my laptop from a comfy chair. I am looking forward to a vacation with the Missus, who just returned from the grocer with the week’s provisions in a recently acquired, used, but comfortable car. Thanks God, the bills are paid. I should add, I like air-conditioning. Call me a hypocrite, and I’ll say, “My friend, you don’t know the half of it!”

Try as I may, I cannot find in the Scriptures or the lives of the Saints where it is stated that the comfortable shall be saved. God saves whom He wills, but the salvation of the comfortable has not been revealed. Don’t take my word for it; here are a few snippets from the voluminous writings of St. Isaac the Syrian:

The spirit of the devil, not the spirit of God, dwells in those who pass their life in ease.1

Ease and idleness are the destruction of the soul and they can injure her more than the demons.2

The path to God is a daily cross. No one has ascended into Heaven by means of ease, for we know where the way of ease leads and how it ends.3

I have been blessed by the struggles of parishioners who bear various physical ailments: blind, lame, or deaf. While many among the hale and hearty might view these ailments as a hindrance, it has been my experience that oftentimes we are understood by those who bear them as a blessing. Take Cecilia, for instance. Though not born blind, Cecilia was without her sight by the time I met her. On more than one occasion she told me how losing her sight was the greatest gift. Until she was blind, she never knew how kind people can be.

Then there’s Christopher, who has the challenge of muscular sclerosis. This progressive condition is one that he bears with a strength that is unknown to most in the world. Once, back before he was confined to a wheelchair, I was hearing his confession when he dropped his prayer rope. Seeing him struggle unsteadily to bend down to retrieve it, without thinking, I bent to fetch it. “Father” he said, “Please let me rejoice in my sufferings.” He later explained that his sufferings united him to Christ and His sufferings.

Regardless of the condition our bodies, our soul needs spiritual exercise: asceticism. Asceticism is the practice of self-denial, self-discipline, and avoidance of excess. Our Lord says, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Thus, it seems clear that when it concerns our salvation, asceticism is not optional. We are all called to prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and acts of continual repentance. Denial of self is the way to the cross. Comfortable Christianity is not wanting to take up your cross.

In the early stages of repentance, the believer carries the small cross that God’s Providence, in His discernment and love for mankind, has foreseen in the life of each one of us. Our personal cross is shaped according to our specific need to be liberated from every form of passionate attachment, and unless we carry it we will never be able to love God our Creator and Benefactor with a true heart and run His course faithfully and steadily. In other words, we take up our cross in response to the commandment to repent, and it becomes the key to our entry into the great and eternal inheritance, which Christ gained for us through His Cross and Resurrection.

Anyone involved in training, conditioning, or even dieting, knows: the struggle is good. It’s when we don’t
Where there is no struggle, the people perish.

The struggle that we become fat, lazy, and complacent. In like manner, without spiritual conditioning (asceticism), we become desperate. We become depressed. We become dependant. We lose hope. Given our comfortable American society; appreciating the truth that the struggle is good is difficult. We can become blinded by our own ignorance. Once I had a man ask me if suffering was necessary once he converted to Orthodoxy. Mind you, this was a man who'd been twice divorced, lost a child, and whose life was in a general malaise. Still, he wanted to know if suffering would come with Orthodoxy. What he didn't, perhaps couldn't, realize was that he'd been suffering all along without the grace of God imparted within the Church.

If you’ve read this far, you might be thinking, “This is basic Orthodoxy 101 stuff – you know, like they teach in catechism.” Generally, only adults converting to the Faith attend catechism class. Thus it’s possible that many Orthodox Christians live their whole lives never having to study the history, theology, and piety of the Orthodox Church. Granted, the academic study of such is not necessary for salvation, but the deposit of faith imparted explains, encourages, and unites.

Even more ironic is the fact that some converts, tempted by the example of their newfound family, may follow up the strenuous struggle of catechism by then trying to imitate the cradle faithful. For an example of this, one need only look at the attendance for Great Vespers or Orthros. On a typical Saturday evening, or early Sunday morning, one often finds inquirers and catechumens in attendance. Over time, however, the newcomers to the Faith realize that, whatever the excuse, most lifelong Orthodox don’t attend. Unfortunately, for some, the same can often be said about fasting, prayer, and repentance.

Then there is the comfortable parish. Here, you are surrounded by people who, with the least excuse, most lifelong Orthodox don’t attend. We tend to believe the lies of the Enemy. We excuse ourselves, most lifelong Orthodox don’t attend. We tend to believe the lies of the Enemy. We excuse ourselves; most lifelong Orthodox don’t attend. We tend to believe the lies of the Enemy. We excuse ourselves.

In Him we are satisfied, filled, judged, elevated, healed. In Him we see ourselves no more; others we see more clearly. In Him there is no darkness at all. In Him there is light. In Him is our salvation. Like the man who found the “pearl of great price” (Matthew 13:45–46), this work – the ascetic labors of prayer, fasting, alms-giving, and perpetual repentance – is our task. This is the way of the Cross. It is the way of Salvation.

There is much to be done, dear friends, on our Old Testament, and in our beloved parishes. Let us be faithful; for we are not called to be perfected in Him, the Physician and Healer of our souls. The Holy Synod of Antioch, chaired by His Beatitude John X, Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, held its eleventh ordinary session on October 3–10, 2019 in Balamand and was attended by the Metropolitans and Bishops from that, whatever the dependencies, were present, and others who we see more clearly. In Him there is no darkness at all. In Him there is light. In Him is our salvation. Like the man who found the “pearl of great price” (Matthew 13:45–46), this work – the ascetic labors of prayer, fasting, alms-giving, and perpetual repentance – is our task. This is the way of the Cross. It is the way of Salvation.

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HOLY SYNOD STATEMENT

The fathers considered the huge and multifaceted wards alleviating the impact of these crises on the members in the life of the Church. They listened to the reports of the various dioceses and bishops, that hosted priests, specialists, and active persons to find feasible solutions.

The fathers pondered on the matters of faith and human dignity, especially that these challenges that face the family nowadays, due to the eco-spirit, the role of the family in the life of the Church and the Church’s recommendations to the faithful. They considered launching pastoral support measures towards the “family” in the Archdioceses that would promote this message among the faithful. As for the pastoral frameworks of these measures in the parishes, they would be determined by each diocese.

The fathers discussed the challenges facing the various Orthodox Churches, and the dangers facing the unique Orthodox testimony in today’s world in case these challenges are not overcome. They called for multiple initiatives to protect, heal the wounds inflicted on the Church’s body through conciliar and common consultative work.

The fathers welcomed the initiatives aimed at finding a political solution to the serious conflicts. This solution ought to respect the unity of the state and the aspirations of the Syrian people. The fathers called upon the world to look at the scale of the human tragedy, and the expanse of human suffering caused by the war and the economic blockade. They called for serious actions to lift the sanctions imposed on Syria, whose citizens bear the burden on their livelihood and health, and to provide the necessary conditions for the return of displaced, migrants, and refugees. They also urged all people to work for national reconciliation and to contribute courageously to strengthening the cohesion and stability and cause growth, progress and prosperity. They also expressed their condemnation of any aggression targeting Syrian sovereignty and expelling its people to death, displacement and refuge.

The fathers welcomed the initiative of the Holy Synod requested that the government take whatever measures that would settle the difficult economic situation, alleviate the burdens on citizens and avoid imposing the more taxes on low-income people. They also call on all Lebanese officials to work for terminating the rampant corruption in the state administration, for this situation affects all areas of life and threatens the collapse of the government.

In view of formulating a Church discourse concerning the family related problems. The fathers examined pastoral ways to protect the family, help it remain steadfast in Christ, and immerse it with the spirit of the Gospel.

The fathers listened to reports on facts about the marriage and the Church’s approach to all these questions on bio-ethics, the role of the family in the life of the Church and the Church’s recommendations to the faithful. They called for a joint Antiochian Choir that included chanters from all the Lebanese and Syrian Archdioceses. The event was held on the main campus of Balamand University.

The fathers discussed the deteriorating environmental crisis due to the continued pollution with its various causes and the indiscriminate exploitation of the earth resources. Noting that this crisis is a threat to nature and life, including human life, they called for courageous living options that respect the environment, and reduce the greed of consumption that dominate nature for quick and easy profit. They also called for enforcing policies that guarantee the prospects for future generations and contribute to preserving the access by future generations to the goods of the earth.

The fathers expressed their prayers for the peace of the whole world and pray that the Almighty Lord may send His Spirit of peace to the world and preserve the faithful of the Holy Church of Antioch overseas, and call these faithful to preserve the Antiochian uniqueness, to be always rooted in the Gospel values, and to empower and strengthen their presence in the community life. The fathers decided to form a new Disciplinary Council for Clerical Appeal, after the resignation of its previous body, and approved the new body.

Within the framework of the Holy Synod of Antioch, His Beatitude Patriarch John X and the hierarchs of the Holy Synod participated in a Divine Liturgy on the morning of Sunday, October 6, and attended the Byzantine Music Concert entitled “Crown them With Glory and Honor,” presented by a joint Antiochian Choir that included chanters from all the Lebanese and Syrian Archdioceses.

The fathers decided to send a pastoral, educational, and instructional encyclical to the faithful in the coming weeks, entitled “Family: the Joy of Life.” This encyclical outlines the theological foundations of marriage and the Church’s approach to all these contemporary challenges, the questions on bio-ethics, the role of the family in the life of the Church and the Church’s recommendations to the faithful.

The fathers decided that the government should confirm with the confessional system’s distribution, not preferring one denomination over another. In this regard, the fathers assert that the existing of a clear mechanism allowing the most efficient candidates to be appointed to the positions remains the best option that takes the appointments away from the logic of quotas and cronyism.

The fathers praised the efforts of these institutes’ directors and the Antiochian Orthodox Media Center. Hoping that the Antiochian presence in the dioceses overseas and stressed the pivotal role of the Church, that constantly offers service to humankind in any place. They expressed the importance of the Antiochian presence in the dioceses overseas. Upon hearing the related reports, they commended the efforts of the all bishops and priests, who personally contribute to embrace all the faithful of the Church of Antioch overseas, and call these faithful to preserve the Antiochian uniqueness, to be always rooted in the Gospel values, and to empower and strengthen their presence in the community life. The fathers decided to form a new Disciplinary Council for Clerical Appeal, after the resignation of its previous body, and approved the new body.
Reflections on the Holy Synod on Family: Facing “Huge and Multifaceted Challenges”

Fr. Theodore Pulcini

Early in 2019 His Beatitude Patriarch JOHN X issued a call to hierarchs and other clergy, as well as lay specialists, to prepare papers for presentation at an upcoming Holy Synod meeting. These papers were to address the “huge and multifaceted challenges” facing the Christian family in all the regions of the Patriarchate. Like many other metropolitans, His Eminence Metropolitan JOSEPH responded to that call and assembled a delegation to represent the North American Archdiocese at the meeting, which took place October 3 through 10 in Lebanon at the St. John of Damascus Institute of Theology at Balamand.

Metropolitan JOSEPH led our delegation, which also included Bishop THOMAS, Bishop JOHN, Bishop ANTHONY, Bishop NICHOLAS, Archbishop Isaiah Gillette, Priest Theodore Pulcini, and Deacon John El Massih. Also in attendance from the Archdiocese were Dr. Daniel Hinshaw and Dr. Adnan Trabulsi, as well as members of the Archdiocesan Board of Trustees, Fawaz El Khoury (Vice-Chairman) and Salim Abboud (Treasurer).

His Beatitude opened the Synod the afternoon of Thursday, October 3, by meeting with the thirty-six metropolitans and bishops who had gathered from throughout the Patriarchate. The agenda for the Synod was finalized, and initial discussions on administrative matters were conducted.

The next morning, paper presentations began with reports on the situation of the family in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and the Gulf Countries. Later that morning Metropolitan JOSEPH presented his paper on the family situation in North America, followed by presentations from other hierarchs on the situations in South America, Australia, and Europe. After lunch and an afternoon break, participants re-assembled for papers on the sacrament of marriage in Scripture and the Church Fathers. Even though Archbishop Michel Najim of our Archdiocese was not able to attend the Synod, his paper, “Secularization and Globalization: Impact on the Members of the Church, the Family, and Marriage,” was included among the others presented by members of this panel. The evening concluded with Bishop JOHN’s presentation of his paper “Sociopolitical Economy: Effects on Family and Church.” The morning session on Saturday, October 5, began with Bishop ANTHONY’s presentation on “The Roles of Men and Women: Gender Issues in Modern Culture.” This was followed by several other papers, including that of Dr. Adnan Trabulsi on “Homosexuality” and that of Metropolitan Nikolaos of Mesogea and Lavrentki (from the Church of Greece) on “Ethics of the End-of-Life.” There were no evening presentations that day so that participants could attend Vespers at the Balamand Monastery.

Of course, the central event of Sunday, October 6, was the Patriarchal Divine Liturgy at which a host of hierarchs from outside of Lebanon and Syria (including Metropolitan JOSEPH, Bishop JOHN, Bishop ANTHONY, and Bishop NICHOLAS), priests (including Fr. Isaiah and Fr. Theodore), and deacons (including Deacon John) concelebrated with His Beatitude. The overflow crowd that converged on the monastery church included a number of pilgrims from the United States, most notably from Western Pennsylvania (accompanied by Fr. Joseph Hazzard) and California (accompanied by Fr. Samer Youssouf). The Liturgy was broadcast on Lebanese television. That evening home, a bit tired, but much exhilarated by our experiences at the Synod, I remarked to one of the bishops, “You are our American colleagues, and we respect you as such, but you have treated us as brothers in this assembly.” “Of course,” he responded, “if we are going to solve some of these problems, we are going to have to listen to one another and work together.”

The Patriarch reflected the same sentiment in his concluding remarks, in which he charged all of us “to honestly admit to the problems we have, without sugar-coating them, and then we find ways of confronting them.” One of the “homeland” hierarchs made especially noteworthy was the Patriarch’s description of how Balamand University, since its inception just thirty years ago, has eisen quickly to great prominence in rankings of Middle Eastern institutions of higher learning. Directing our attention to a large aerial photograph in his salon, he showed us how the University grew from the nucleus of the Monastery to a large surrounding area. The University is also home to two preparatory schools, one stressing French in its curriculum, and the other English. The evening reception drew to a close as all made their way to the University campus for a concert of Byzantine music performed by a joint choir of chantries from all the Lebanese and Syrian Archdioceses. Its theme was “Crown Them with Glory and Honor,” celebrating the Orthodox theology of marriage.

Presentations resumed the next morning, during the course of which Fr. Isaiah Gillette presented a paper, “Pastoral Therapeutic Interventions for Marriage and Family Conflicts,” submitted by Fr. David Alexander. (Because Fr. Isaiah had collaborated with Fr. David in producing the final version of this paper, he was asked to present it in the absence of Fr. David, who was not able to attend.) Later that same morning, Fr. Theodore Pulcini presented his paper on “The Lasting Effects of Divorce: Implications for Pastoral Work with Children of Fractured Families.” Other presentations in the morning session addressed issues of education, mixed marriage, cohabitation, and adscription. The effect of media – especially social media – on families was the focus of lively presentations made that evening.

The final day of presentations was Tuesday, October 8. In the morning session, Bishop THOMAS presented his paper on “Pastoral Care for People with Special Needs,” (no less than thirty-two of them!) and to be actively engaged in the discussions that would follow each of the panels. At several points His Beatitude expressed his satisfaction with the energetic exchange of ideas that took place. Of course, most of the synodal participants were hierarchs, but they did not minimize the voices of the other clergy and the laypeople in attendance. I remarked to one of the bishops, “You are our colleagues, and we respect you as such, but you have treated us as brothers in this assembly.” “Of course,” he responded, “if we are going to solve some of these problems, we are going to have to listen to one another and work together.”

The Patriarch reflected the same sentiment in his concluding remarks, in which he charged all of us “to implement all the beautiful things we have discussed.” One of my American colleagues remarked that this emphasis on the practicalities of pastoral care is typi- cal of our Antiochian approach to Church life: “We honestly admit to the problems we have, without sug- ar-coating them, and then we find ways of confront- ing them.” One of the “homeland” hierarchs made
The Fall Meeting of the Board of Trustees

There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all.

1 Corinthians 12:4–6

During the weekend of October 18–20, His Eminence Metropolitan JOSEPH presided over a historic weekend celebrating many joyful milestones: the beginning of the ministry of St. Raphaël in North America in 1895, the consecration of the current St. Nicholas Cathedral in Brooklyn in 1920, the 25th anniversary of the priestly ordination of Fr. Thomas Zain, and the elevation of Fr. Adrian Budica to the rank of Archpriest. The weekend was also the occasion of the fall meeting of the Archdiocesan Board of Trustees. Given the weekend’s daunting schedule, His Eminence and the Board could have considered shrinking down the scope and length of the meetings, but they seized the opportunity to engage in a series of full and fruitful deliberations.

His Eminence began the meeting by highlighting the indispensable contribution made by the hierarchs, clergy, and laity who had attended the recent “Antiochian Conference on the Family” that took place in Lebanon at the Balamand Monastery. His Beatitude at one of the concluding sessions. He emphasized the two themes that ran through the event: unity and universality. By coming together at the patriarchal throne. They gathered to study the presentations of our Archdiocesan delegations, ancient and modern. Ancient Faith Ministries was invited for the first time to present a full overview of all of its varied programming. Archdeacon Emile Sayegh announced the completion of the initial draft of the new model parish constitution which was shared with a committee of senior clergy from each of the dioceses. The next phase of review will be sharing the draft with the members of the Board so that members can discuss it fully at the spring Board meeting.

Towards the end of the full agenda, His Eminence discussed plans for enriching the Antiochian Village. He anticipated some of the questions that may be asked, and he reiterated the importance of a larger church to meet the spiritual needs of the Holy Mountain of our Archdiocese. He spoke of the importance of planning for the retirement home for the hierarchs and a new monastic community. His Eminence also shared initial sketches of the new buildings for the Board to see how this vision can be realized.

His Eminence thanked the Board members for their care and diligence with which all made their presentations, deliberated, and worked during the meetings. He spoke about how important it is for all of members of the Body of Christ to offer their gifts and talents to the work of the Church. All are necessary for the Body to function. The passage from 1 Corinthians, above, was used in the benediction to close the fruitful meetings that had exemplified this Pauline teaching.
LIVING THE LITURGY – A PRACTICAL REFLECTION

PART 4 OF 10

rom decorations, to the part given to the youngest kids in the Sunday School Christmas Pageant, angels play a huge role in our celebrations of our Lord’s Nativity, and rightly so. It was an angel that announced her bearing of Christ to the Theotokos. An angel visited Joseph in a dream. An angel called the shepherds to come and worship Christ. After the sermon, we sing what we call the Cherubic Hymn. That word, cherubic, comes from the word cherubim, which is a rank of angel. If you remember, in the book of Isaiah he talked about another rank of angel, the seraphim, surrounding the throne of God. In other places, the Bible mentions cherubim as well.

The Cherubic Hymn refers once again to the reading from Isaiah and the hymn of the angels: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” Having sung the thrice-holy hymn, in which we approach or to draw nigh or to serve thee, O King of All. During the beginning of the hymn, the priest prays silently: “No one who is bound with the desires and pleasures of the flesh is worthy to approach or to draw nigh or to serve thee, O King of glory; for to serve thee is a great and fearful thing even to the heavenly powers. Nevertheless …” We are being reminded that we cannot receive God without first putting those things aside that distract us. And what are our distractions?

In the survey mentioned last month, when asked to share up to four things that distract them, the top five answers were other people (36%), life (35%), family (27%), and food (27%). When asked to share up to four things that distract them, the top five answers were other people (92%), “thoughts” (39%), family/friends (31%), cell phones (26%), and school/homework (21%). We often think of distractions as “bad,” but none of these things are inherently bad. Nonetheless, they still distract us from God and must be set aside if we are going to receive the King of All.

The martyrs give us this example time and again. Take the life of St. Julita and her son, St. Cyricus, from the year 305, for example. Trying to persuade St. Julita to abandon her Christian faith, the governor took her son in his lap. Refusing to leave his mother, St. Cyricus broke free from the governor and ran to his mother declaring, “I am a Christian.” His mother watched as he was martyred, before being martyred herself. Our earthly cares, even this life itself, are not to be compared with what we have been promised. We have a foretaste of what is promised in the Eucharist. When influenced by the right community, we find the support we need to lay aside our earthly cares in worship, and to make difficult decisions in the world.

Gregory Abrahim, D. Min.

“…now lay aside all earthly cares ….”

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The Word   1716   December 2019
Grief is a normal, healthy response to any loss or perceived change. Sometimes, when there are multiple losses, untimely losses (in the case of younger people), losses that include income or involve children, grief can be complicated. As caregivers, we mourn the losses of our loved ones as he or she loses various physical functions, or anticipates losses to come. We may become physically exhausted and in need of relief from the pain in our hearts – and this in turn may produce conflicting feelings within us. I wondered what my own church (the Antiochian Orthodox jurisdiction) might have to say about all these feelings, so I called Bishop JOHN Abdalah of the Antiochian Orthodox Diocese of Worcester and New England and asked if he would share some insight and advice about grieving, from his pastoral experience.

JOHN is a pastoral therapist and facilitated a grief support group in Pennsylvania for twenty years. In his current role as Bishop, he continues to minister to those who struggle with grief.

R – What are some of the coping mechanisms you recommend to caregivers, and how do they differ from the strategies of those who are grieving loss of life?

Bp. John – Strategies for caregivers include the following:

**Connect with Others in Similar Situations**

The benefits of engaging in a support group outweigh much of the potential pitfalls. When caregivers connect with others who are living a similar life, there is usually an implicit understanding of the emotional, physical, and spiritual toll of caregiving. Not only can other caregivers understand because they are going through similar loss at the same time, but many have found ways to cope. In addition, hearing the stories of others validates our experiences; we can see that they’re normal. There are many formats for support groups these days – some may be conference-calls, others are online groups and forums – even social media offers a plethora of options when it comes to support groups. Caregivers may not have the ability to get out of their houses at a set time every week – or even every month – so, these alternatives may prove helpful.

**Q&A with Bishop JOHN Abdalah**

**Rachelle – Your Grace, as a caregiver, I find that feelings of grief are never far from my heart. Is this common among caregivers that you have met?**

**Bp. John –** When caregivers take care of people that they love, they share the losses experienced with the person for whom they care. They may experience all the grief-responses, and if they do, their feelings are as real as anyone experiencing grief directly due to loss. To complicate things, caregivers and those they care for are sometimes experiencing the stages of grief on a different schedule, because they are separate persons. By this I mean that even though, say, in marriage, two become one, each may still get hungry at a different time than the other, feel hopeful at a different time, and be depressed at a different time. This should be expected, but when one is hopeful and the other is depressed, the two will feel disconnected. This complicates our relationship with our loved one. As a condition worsens, each loss of an ability to care for oneself complicates the grief. When the one we are caring for is sick for a long time, we naturally become tired. When we anticipate the loss of life, we may even begin to grieve the loss in anticipation – “anticipatory grief.” This type of grief is tricky, in that it comes and goes, can distract us from the time we still have together, and leave us wondering how we are supposed to feel. Caregivers rarely get a reprieve from their duties, and for some, when that reprieve happens it may
**Share Your Truth**

In my experience, many caregivers are good at dealing with complicated situations efficiently and rarely ask for help – even when they are trying to work through feelings of grief. Maybe they’ve asked for help in the past and been burned, or maybe they’ve shared some of their struggles with friends and family, and have not been heard or felt supported. Males often feel that needing help is a weakness. That idea is not helpful.

If as a caregiver you can engage in a support group, or work with a therapist or clergy person, you may be able to get a different perspective on your feelings of grief, loss, and guilt. From there, you may expand your circle of trust and let in others who have shown a genuine interest in your life – and your struggles. Talking about grief is uncomfortable, but letting people in may help alleviate some of that burden. And when people genuinely care, they will be there for you even in those uncomfortable moments.

**Seek Professional Advice**

Sometimes the stress, sadness, and grief a caregiver feels are too much – and this may impact our overall health and well-being. If depression caused by grief lingers too long and impedes your ability to care for yourself or others – or if you have thoughts of harming others or yourself – seek out advice from a professional. Males often feel that needing help is a weakness. That idea is not helpful.

Caregivers are constantly being swallowed up by the needs of others – and that constant need to be fully present for someone else can trigger a sense of loss of self. Selflessness is a noble endeavor – but eventually, it renders the selfless person incapable of even caring for themselves. Getting away is very difficult for caregivers, but it’s essential to their well-being.

Do you have family or friends who can cover for you for a few hours each week? Bi-weekly? Even monthly? If you don’t have a reliable family member or friend, do you know a responsible high school student, or a local caregiver service in your area, that could come and sit with your person so that you might take a few minutes to yourself? Maybe there is a local house of worship that offers volunteers to visit with the sick or the elderly? When family or helpers come, get out of the house and do something – anything – for yourself.

Making time for yourself as a caregiver is essential to withstanding the grueling hours and physical demands that caregiving places on the individual. Use this time to do something that gives you pleasure, helps rest your body, or alleviates some of the pressure you are constantly under. It doesn’t have to be complicated – it just must be for you.

R – I’d like to close with a question that seems cheesy, but what is one piece of advice that you feel is helpful to caregivers who may not see an end to their grief?

*By John – Take one day at a time. You can change what happened or what will happen. We can only live in the moment we are in. Christ meets us here where we are, loves us, and loves those we love. We may not understand why things happen, but God is with us. – Rachelle Khalaf

Similarly, if the grief is overwhelming, it may cause physiological issues – heart palpitations, migraines, high blood pressure – and if you have any health conditions of your own, this high stress environment may cause your own symptoms to be exacerbated. Talk to your doctor about your feelings of grief – and how you are feeling generally. Caregivers need to take care of themselves – your life matters.

**Respite Is Essential**

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**Beloved Brothers and Sisters,**

“This then, is our task: to educate ourselves and our children in goodness.”

– St. John Chrysostom

Among the articles and notes on the following pages, you’ll read about the retirement of Blitty Randolph, Vasileik Oldziey, and our Administrative Assistant and Departmental Administrator for the Creative Festivals, Rosemary Shumski. There is a time for everything, according to the author of the book of Ecclesiastes, and we ask God’s blessings for these wonderful and dedicated women for the next chapter of their lives.

We shine the Volunteer Staff Spotlight on our two new Co-ordinators, Khoula Gigi Shadid and Deacon Elisa Long, who will share responsibility for the Diocese of Wichita and Mid-America.

One of the Two Holiest Days of The Year Has Been Compromised. With every December I am reminded of how Christmas has been commercialized. This year it was the announcement of 14 new Christmas movies coming to the Hallmark Channel. The holiday is big business for them – the channel airs Christmas movies starting in July! Can we truly say that “Jesus is the reason for the season?” Maybe once that was the case. When did this change, and how? Look for my essay on our website as “What Did We Trade for Christmas?”

Programs. We have recently posted two new programs as free downloads, “My Orthodox Church, for Middle School,” and “The Great Feasts: The Life of Our Lord.” We need your comments, suggestions or corrections. Please e-mail us at aodce@aol.com.

Finally, please look at the Training Updates to see if any events are occurring in your vicinity. Wishing you a blessed and holy Feast of the Nativity,

Carole A. Budge, Director

With gratitude, we acknowledge the contribution or the Order of St. Ignatius that partially funds the work of our Department.

**AOdce Social Networking Ministry**

To nurture the children God has placed in our care!

On our Orthodox Christian Parenting sites, we will continue our fall series on the book, “Blueprints for the Liturgical Year.” For Orthodox Church School Teachers, we will be concluding our series on Classroom Success by suggesting resources helpful to teachers working with students of varying abilities. We will also offer, on both sites, a handful of suggestions of new resources for children of different ages. These would make great Christmas gifts!

Kristina Wenger, Staff Assistant for Social Network Ministry

**Facebook.com**

Orthodoxchristianparenting

Orthodoxchristianchurchschoolteachers

Orthodoxchristianchurchschooldirectors

**WordPress.com**

Orthodoxchristianparenting

Orthodoxchristianchurchschoolteachers

Orthodoxchristianchurchschooldirectors

Orthodoxchurchofchristianityhomecoming

www.orthodoxmustardseed.blogspot.com

www.orthodoxchristianchurchschoolteachers.com

**www.pinterest.com/aodce**

**Orthodox Christian Church School Directors**

In our Church Schools, December is usually filled with Nativity play practices and performances. May your programs bring joy to all as students proclaim, “Christ is Eleni! Glorify Him!” January provides a chance for directors to exhale and focus on planning Creative Arts workshops, before the focus shifts to Great Lent.

On the Orthodox Christian Church School Directors’ Facebook page this month, we will discuss the 2020 Creative Arts theme and materials, as well as ways to organize workshops for PK-12th grade students. In January, we will review Of Such Is the Kingdom: A Practical Theology of Disability by Summer Kinard, as we educate our selves on making Sunday Church Schools welcoming for all students.

Anna Sarah Farha, aodce.cs@doctors.org
CREATIVE FESTIVALS 2020

“For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.” (John 3:17)

This year’s theme is “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.” (John 3:17) The deadline for submitting all entries is April 1st. If you haven’t begun using the theme and encouraging the students to work on their entries, January is a perfect time to start! Begin the New Year by introducing the theme, using the explanation and lesson plans we’ve provided. Another great resource we offer is the cross-reference of OECG texts that relate to the theme in some way. Decorate your classroom with the Creative Festival posters we provide and teach students the theme song. By using both audio and visual teaching materials, you can appeal to the various ways students learn. Encourage every student to enter something in at least one of the categories!

The categories include:

- A visual art entry
- A creative writing entry
- A musical entry
- A dance entry
- A drama entry
- A science and technology entry
- A history entry
- A music entry
- A physical education entry
- An oral presentation

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TRANSITIONS

KH. BETTY RANDOLPH
Coordinator for the Diocese of Miami and the Southeast

Betty began her career in Christian Education in 2005, and now she is taking the helm as the Coordinator for the Diocese of Miami and the Southeast. Betty’s leadership and passion for Christian Education have been evident throughout her career. She has served as an Administrative Assistant and Departmental Administrator for the Creative Festivals, and has been a valuable asset to the team. Her dedication to our Diocese has been unparalleled, and we are grateful for her contribution.

With love in Christ,

Carole Bulaza

Betty began serving the Department under Dr. John Bogojima. With her background as an educator and principal, she offered a wealth of experience to our Church School Directors through trainings, both in her own as well as other dioceses, and at The Orthodox Institute. She was an inquisitive traveler, attending almost every staff meeting and contributing ideas and always on a positive note. I am personally grateful for the encouraging words she offered me as I began my tenure.

Her dedication to our Directors was manifest in the many hours required to create and co-edit the Church School Directors Handbook – a vital resource for years now. You willingly gave your time and effort over so many years to Orthodox Christian education, and we are grateful to you!

“Note: Betty retired three years ago. We were able to give Betty her retirement award recently.”

VASILIKI ODLZEY
Coordinator for the Diocese of Wichita and Mid-America

After 15 years of volunteer service with the Department of Christian Education, Vasiliki Odlzye has announced her retirement. She has served the entire Diocese providing trainings, answering questions, facilitating the Creative Arts Festival, including writing lesson plans, and being the face and voice of the Department in her area. In order to facilitate the traveling to parishes, Vas has named two people to share the territory.

With curriculum, brainstorming and ideas. They are excellent, enthusiastic educators, ready and willing to serve you! Thank you, Vas, for your dedication to DOWAMA!

VOLUNTEER STAFF SPOTLIGHT

KH. GIGI SHADID
Christian Education Coordinator, Diocese of Wichita and Mid-America (Deaneries: Southwest, and North, Central, and East Texas)

Khouria Gigi Shadid is no stranger to the Department. She has been an associate for five years, has traveled to various parishes for teacher development workshops, and has written Creative Festivals lesson plans and theme songs. Most recently, she conducted a teacher training in the Southeast Texas deanery, with a follow-up scheduled in January. The best way to reach her is at gigishadid@gmail.com.

Kh. Gigi also served her home parish as a full-time youth director for three years, teaching children ages Pre-K to 2nd grade. She has produced four Orthodox children’s music CDs, “to teach and help children grow in their faith in Christ and their love for His holy church.” She has also produced Vacation Church School programs and plans to continue to do so. She currently teaches at The St. Constantine School, an Orthodox Classical school in Houston, Texas, after years of teaching in the public schools. She writes, “I can now hear God’s call to focus my energy on Christian Education, including for the Department.”

VOLUNTEER STAFF SPOTLIGHT

DEACON ELISHA LONG
Christian Education Coordinator, Diocese of Wichita and Mid-America (Deaneries: Great Plains, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Rocky Mountains)

Deacon Elisha has served in the Department for over 10 years, teaching children ages Pre-K to 8th grade. He began his service as a volunteer, and has since become a full-time employee. His heart for Christian Education and the education of our children made it a natural transition when Vas asked him to take on a larger role. His first official training took place at St. Elijah, Oklahoma City, on November 9. He was able to meet and get to know better some of the teachers, Church School Directors and priests in his area of responsibility, in order to serve their needs. He can be reached at rongumaer@gmail.com.

Dr. Elisha has worked at a private, classical Christian school for 19 years, and currently serves as Principal. He has also taught Sunday Church School for almost 10 years and been the Church School Director for ten years. He has assisted Vas with various presentations at local parishes and the Parish Life Conference over the past 4 years.

Dr. Elisha adds, “St. Theophan the Recluse said that education was the holiest of works and I consider it a privilege to be a part of Christian Education in our Diocese and Archdiocese.”

DIOCESAN TRAINING UPDATE

The Department of Christian Education plans and facilitates teacher and Church School Director workshops across the country. Training covers classroom management, teaching techniques, adolescent needs, moral issues, creative resources and more.

Fall 2019 has been a busy training season.

Wichita and Mid-America

Vasiliki Odlzye conducted her final training for the Department at St. Elijah, Oklahoma City, in August, just before her retirement. Teachers from St. Elijah and Holy Ascension in Norman worked on topics related to the theme of this year’s Creative Festivals. The 15 participants discussed issues, creative resources and the meaning of the theme.

Dr. Elisha Long, one of the new Coordinators, was introduced to teachers in the Diocese during his first official training on November 9 at St. George Orthodox Cathedral, Wichita.

Dr. Elisha was invited to present workshops on Finding Christ in the Old Testament, and Teaching Techniques. Orthodox churches in the area were invited to participate.

Toledo and the Midwest

Director Carole Bulaza traveled to St. George Orthodox Church, West St. Paul, to present Overview of Orthodoxy, New Methods in Teaching, and Moral Issues to 19 teachers from four parishes in the area. Churches represented included OCA, Greek, and Antiochian. Teachers learned Icebreaker ideas for class, as well as lesson-plan templates, which were put to use the next day, including ways to measure our effectiveness! Learning that it’s okay to incorporate breaks into lessons, especially for the little ones, and allow multiple weeks to introduce and discuss challenging subjects with the older students, was really helpful.
St. Christopher addressed the 39 attendees and shop.

“Overview of Orthodox Christian Education,” if your parish is interested in hosting a work-
teacher development workshop. On Satur-
doay, November 16, Fr. Christopher presented
“Overview of Orthodox Christian Education,”
“Enhancing the Classroom Experience,” and
“Engaging the Unengaged.” Many churches
in the upstate New York region participated.

Miami and the Southeast

On Friday, September 6, Coordinator Anna-
Sarah Farha presented an interactive cyber
workshop with the focus on Middle School
curriculum for the DOSME Fall Retreat. She
introduced the group, which was meeting at
St. Ignatius Orthodox Church in Frank-
lin, Tennessee, to the Department’s newest
resource for middle school students – “My
Orthodox Church.”

Check our website (www.aodce.org/christianeducation), or Facebook to stay cur-
rent on upcoming events. Please contact
Leslie Atherholt at aodce.events@gmail.com
if your parish is interested in hosting a work-
shop.

Leslie Atherholt, Staff Assistant for Special
Projects

ARCHDIOCESAN OFFICE

ORDAINED

BARKER, Deacon Nicholas (Colin), to the holy priesthood by Bishop JOHN on August 25, 2019, at St. Ignatius Orthodox Church, Florida, New York. Fr. Nicholas is completing his studies at St. Tikhon’s Seminary in Pennsylvania.

BARKLEY, Deacon Timothy, to the holy priest-
hood by Bishop THOMAS on July 19, 2019, at Holy Cross Church, Linthicum, Maryland. Fr. Timothy is assigned to St. James the Apostles Church, West-
minster, Maryland.

JUAREZ-LUNA, Damian, to the holy diaconate by Bishop ANTHONY on September 22, 2019, at Holy Apostles Mission, Bowling Green, Kentucky. VLAS, Sergiu Cristian, to the holy diaconate by Bishop ANTHONY on August 25, 2019, at St. Ananias Church, Evansville, Indiana, where he is assigned.

ELEVATED

WAGGENER, Fr. Alban, to the dignity of Arch-
priest by Bishop JOHN on November 10, 2019, at Holy Trinity Mission, Lynchburg, Virginia.

APPOINTMENTS

Mrs. Mareena Boosamta BALL, as the Chair of the Department of Sacred Music

DEPOSED

MEFRIGE, John (former priest)

Correction: The photo on page 4 of the November 2019 WORD was of the Execu-
tive Committee of the Assembly of Bishops.
Salvation in the Incarnate Christ through Faith and Works

Christopher Holwey, M.Div.

As we near the end of December, once again, we are called upon to celebrate and remember the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ in the flesh, this Jesus of Nazareth, who came to us in our world as the pre-eternal, uncreated, incarnate Son of God to save us from our sins. It is right, then, to contemplate this mystery of our salvation in Christ, the Messiah, who was offered his son Isaac upon the altar? You see that Abraham our father justified by works, when he received the angel as a sign or seal of the righteousness which he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised (v. 11). His point was that for Jew and Gentile, “the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (Romans 3:21–22). Likewise, in our Christian understanding, we would compare it to baptism, and say that we are not saved, or justified with God, simply because we are baptized in the Orthodox Church. Baptism is not the end of our salvation. It is the beginning of a new life in Christ, which needs to grow and manifest itself in who we are and what we do. This brings us to the second understanding of “works,” as the fruit of our faith. Our faith is shown through the good works we do, “for we are created in Christ Jesus for good works, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10). This is what St. James means when he says, “If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead!” (James 2:17). Because we are saved by grace through faith, our faith must be a living and dynamic thing. Since we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, it is our faith working through love, manifest in that which we do for the least of God’s brethren, that brings us salvation and allows us to inherit the kingdom. Therefore, “faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead!” (James 2:17), for as St. Paul says, God “will render to every man according to his works” (Romans 2:6). It is not according to whether we are simply circumcised or baptized, or eating the right foods or not, but according to the fruits of the Holy Spirit we manifest in our lives, the love we share and show to one another, for the glory of God. May the Incarnation of the Son of God in the flesh inspire us to do what we do through faith in Him, that we may hear Him say to us: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).
The Doctrine of the Church
Through the Lens of the Epistles of St. Ignatius

Nicholas A. Papage

ECCLESIOLOGY: A VERY BRIEF OVERVIEW

Ecclesiology (εκκλησιολογία) is the study (λόγος) of the church (εκκλησία – the community of individuals “called out”). It is multi-faceted; it may be understood best by the metaphor of icon-writing. (I am indebted to Monica Antiochenos, an accomplished iconographer, for the following description of icon-drawing.) In the “writing” or painting of Byzantine icons, the first application of pigment provides a flat foundation for subsequent, multilayered applications. The second application outlines the volume of the shapes of the figures (that is, the body, face, and clothing with folds). The third layer of pigment highlights the image’s shape, when applied within the parameters of the second layer, by using geometric shapes. Said shapes reflect the light within the icon’s image; the underlying symmetry of the facets reflect the soul of the icon’s image.

Ecclesiology, too, is layered, but with several interdisciplinary studies: Church history, Scripture, eschatology, Christology, soteriology, pneumatology, and the Mysteries (μυστήρια). When carefully applied, the underlying symmetry of these multifaceted studies reflects an inner light, similar to icons. This inner light magnifies the heart of Ignatius’ ecclesiology. This Clare of Christ provides the reader, in painstaking detail, his understanding of the Church. It is supported with a firm foundation of church leadership, which exposes and expunges heresy while severing bonds linking Judaism and church leadership, which exposes and expunges this inner light magnifies the heart of Ignatius’ ecclesiology. This Clare of Christ provides the reader, in painstaking detail, his understanding of the Church. It is supported with a firm foundation of church leadership, which exposes and expunges heresy while severing bonds linking Judaism and church leadership, which exposes and expunges

This revelation seemingly binds the bishop to the Eucharist. He melodiously applies musical language to this nexus, writing, “Presbyters are attuned to the Bishop as strings to a lyre,” and “unity with the Bishop is akin to having a share in God” (Letter to the Ephesians). We come to learn, as we accompany him, how this revelation supports his ecclesiology centered on the Eucharist.

GUIDELINES

Ignatius required concise and unambiguous guidelines to contest and defeat those who believed false teaching. He was certain that Christ was human, a physical descendant of David, born of a woman, Mary, His Mother. Christ consumed necessities (food and drink) like all humans, as He was the Son of Man. Nails were driven through Christ to affix Him to a cross; He was pulled upright by the Holy Spirit, where He hung to die in the presence of all – including the author of the darkness beneath the earth and those upon above. He was the same sinless Christ, now raised from the dead by His Father; God, as He was the Son of God. Except for these actions, there could be no “renovation of eternal life” for Man (Letter to the Ephesians). Ignatius concluded that Christ’s birth, death and resurrection rescued Man from his Expulsion and Fall, and restored Man’s ability to live in perpetual harmony with God through Christ. Sin’s relentless onslaught would continue to seduce Man into conduct contrary to the goodness of God and grace of love. Man, however, was now equipped to engage the enemy through the Eucharist. Ignatius longed for the celestial food of life, the flesh and blood of the Son of God, convinced of its life-giving elements. He says it best: “I desire the drink of God, namely His Blood” (Letter to the Romans). He excommunicated stern caveats for those who strayed from the faith. “If they believe not in the blood of Christ, then to them there is judgment” (Letter to Smyrna).

CONCLUSION

Imagine for a moment Ignatius standing before an easel, a palette of pigments in one hand, a brush in the other, seeking to draw an icon of ecclesiology. He dips the brush into one pigment and applies it to the blank board preparation for subsequent, multilayered applications of pigments. One is known as Christology, the other soteriology, yet another referred to as pneumatology. Each application contributes to the image’s shape, when the perfect symmetry of the facets begins to grow. Suddenly a bright light within the icon’s image appears, reflecting the soul of the icon’s image. Look again and you’ll be blinded by an ecclesiology centered on the undivided Eucharist.
As a teenager myself, I can tell you that God has been with me on my journey of life, strengthening me when I know I need it, and when He knows I will need it and I am not aware of it yet. In this past year of high school, I had chosen the classes I needed to take, one of them being physics. A little secret: math and I, we’re not such good friends, if you know what I mean. Anyways, as a student should, I still went to every class, was assigned my first test, and studied what I thought was a decent amount of time to succeed. So I wrote the test, got the results and definitely was not satisfied with my mark. The first thought that came to mind was that I would drop the class, but when I told my parents that that’s what I was thinking, their answer was, “Where is your faith in God? If you try hard enough and put your mind to it, God will help you pass the class if He wills so.”

So I continued the semester with those words in my mind, and I prayed a lot about the whole situation. I asked God to help me succeed, especially after reading the following quotation by St. Moses the Ethiopian: “Throw your weakness before God, and the Lords will become your strength.” And let me tell you... wow! I finished that class with one of my highest averages this past year. Throughout the entire semester, it felt like the harder I worked, the more God saw how much effort I was putting into something I wanted so badly, that He helped me reach my objective. I constantly reminded myself, however, if I only had the faith, and didn’t study for any tests or work hard on any projects and relied only on God, I would not have succeeded. If I had only studied for tests and worked hard on projects without having faith in God, I also would not have succeeded. As St. James says: “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.”

This being said, our faith is the root of our eternal salvation and our goal on earth is to attain this salvation. The Trinity provides us with the ability to receive and gain God’s grace, for as we say in prayer, “The Father is my hope, the Son is my refuge, the Holy Spirit is my protection.” Through God’s grace, we are given the strength, help, and courage, as well as leadership, to fulfill our tasks. We must also keep in mind that He will not allow, nor strengthen us, in things that will not bring us closer to Him. Everything that is given to us, we must accept with an open heart, because Christ knows what each of us can handle. Therefore He will not put us in situations that we can’t manage. In order to accomplish all and everything, we must accept what Christ has given us, considering that He knows what we need and why we need it. It is through Him and His grace that we, by aligning our will with the will of God, are strengthened and thus are fulfilling synergy.

Maria Nacou Nateim
Fulfilling the Vision of Metropolitan JOSEPH
Antiochian Women Project

"We must build on the past and build the present and the future."

Metropolitan JOSEPH gave this charge to the Antiochian Women at their luncheon at the 2019 Archdiocese Convention as he outlined the 2020 North American Board (NAB) Project. This charge is in addition to foster vocations in the Church to assure the future of the Church, but is a part of it as well. As we grow, the Archdiocese needs space to pray and meet together to discern God’s will and develop the character of our leadership and membership.

Since giving the charge to raise funds for a new cathedral at the Antiochian Village in the 2019 NAB Project, His Eminence has developed further his vision for the Antiochian Village. In this he has been building on the foundation laid by Metropolita n PHILIP of thrice-blessed memory, and others. The Cathedral is the first phase of the project. His Eminence has chosen the location and will have plans to unveil soon. The Cathedral will hold a thousand people in worship and the same number of people in the adjoining conference room. There will be enough space to hold large gatherings of the faithful, including those attending Parish Life conferences and clergy symposia. As we enter the Cathedral, to the left we will see a crypt where our hierarchs will repose, including Metropolitan PHILIP, Metropolitan ANTHONY Bashir, and Archbishop MICHAEL Shaheen. To the right of the entry we will see a large baptistry for infants and for adults. There will also be a very special place for the sacred body of St. RAPHAEL of Brooklyn, which will allow the faithful to properly venerate our great Father-among-the-Saints.

The second phase of the project will include a residence for our bishops, so they will have a place to stay when they come to the Village for conferences, and so forth, and a place to live after they retire. Our bishops are men of prayer and ministry. Once they retire from their diocesan duties, they have a vocation of prayer and spiritual guidance. Visiting hierarchs will also have quarters in this structure, so their spiritual discipline will not be hindered as they journey to the Village for conferences and symposia.

The third phase will be a women’s monastery. A monastic presence is necessary for the growth of the Church in North America. It is by the holy prayers of a monastic community that we will grow the church and increase the number of bishops and priests to serve the faithful. We often refer to the Antiochian Village as being our “holy mountain.” A mountain is high visible to all who look up to it. The expansion of the Antiochian Village, its cathedral with all the other facilities, will announce the presence of the Orthodox in this community. It will be a beacon to draw us closer to our spiritual roots, a place of pilgrimage, and a witness to our holy Orthodox faith.

So let’s immediately start our fund raising for this inspirational building project, fulfilling the vision of Metropolitan PHILIP, Fr. John Nurnie, and others who have gone before us. Let us “build the present and the future.” On behalf of the entire North American Board of the Antiochian Women, I thank you in advance for your tireless labor for this worthy cause.

First Annual Pacific Northwest Deanery Retreat
Brotherhood in Conciliarity

The clergy of the Pacific Northwest Deanery of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese held their first annual deanery retreat at St. John the Forerunner Monastery in Goldendale, Washington, during the week of September 24–26, 2019. Twenty-five members of the clergy came together for this retreat, which began with dinner, followed by Vespers and Compline at the monastery. The first session began on Tuesday evening, entitled “The Deanery as a Brotherhood,” led by Fr. Michael Habib, Dean of the Pacific Northwest and Pastor of St. Ignatius Church in Twin Falls, Idaho. It was instructional, but also informal, in that Fr. Michael encouraged questions, and basically dealt with some of the practices of the clergy, emphasizing the importance of the unity of the brotherhood.

Wednesday started early at 4:45 a.m. for the Paraklesis service. After breakfast, the second session began, led by Fr. Gregory Horton, from Bonney’s Ferry, Idaho. His teaching was on moral issues and how to deal with them in a Christian world. The discussion involved many of the current issues in the world today and how we as clergy deal with them in the parishes. All the clergy agreed that these emerging issues in the world are also creeping into our Church life. It was agreed that they are difficult to deal with, but they have to be dealt with. They are not going away; actually they are becoming ingrained in society, and we must take a position.

On Thursday morning, September 26, our clergy joined with the monastic community to celebrate the Divine Liturgy for the Feast of St. John the Theologian. Fr. Michael Habib celebrated the Liturgy with Fr. Joseph Copeland, Fr. Gregory Horton, and Protodeacon Nathaniel Haglar. It was indeed a joyful celebration and the perfect way to begin our final day together.

In our third session, on Thursday morning, we heard Fr. Jeremiah Vollman, from Brier, Washington, on the subject, “The Priest as Preacher and Teacher.” His presentation centered on taking the gospel message and delivering it to the faithful. Fr. Jeremiah explained that we need to be centered in Christ, and to be vocal, and to be heard in our messages. The people of our parishes need to hear a clear and Christ-centered message that deals with the gospel and epistle readings, and also applies to the current issues of our time.

The atmosphere of the Monastery was perfect for fellowship and dialogue among the clergy. There were common meals, along with the services that allowed much discussion time. The clergy also stayed together in the large guest house, which also served as a meeting room for the sessions and the discussion that followed each of the teachings.

The sisters of St John the Forerunner Monastery were wonderful hosts to our clergy. The food was fresh, delicious and plentiful. They also brought refreshments for our sessions that allowed us to break and enjoy home-made cakes, fruit and other light food. All of the clergy benefited from our first retreat. All agreed that this was something that should be done each year. The date for the next retreat has already been set, and it will be held again at the Monastery.

Geographically, the Pacific Northwest Deanery is the largest deanery. It extends from Alaska all the way down to Utah. It also includes the states of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. It was truly a blessing to have such a gathering, and with the effort of our Dean, Fr. Michael Habib, and the work of Fr. Gregory Horton, in making the arrangements with the Monastery, this first annual retreat was a huge success!
The Hand of God

By Fr. Andrew Harmon

ut life as a parish changed dramatically on the morning of November 11, 2017. St. Matthew the Evangelist of North Royalton, Ohio, suffered a devastating fire that destroyed our beloved church building. Many of us stood there, heartbroken, as we watched the firemen break through the roof to let the smoke escape. We watched the stained glass windows being smashed, the icons melting right before our eyes, the iconostasis, which had been built by hand by one of our parishioners, go up in flames. We wept as, minute by minute, more of our house of worship was disappearing.

In addition to the loss of our church building, our hall was severely smoke damaged, and we lost much of our furniture, our classrooms, educational supplies, office equipment, kitchen items, and books. Though the interior damage required extensive renovation.

Shortly following the fire, many people asked, “How could God allow such a holy place to be destroyed? What will happen to our parish? Where will we worship?”

Two weeks following our devastating fire, the epitome that was read during the Divine Liturgy was from Ephesians 2:19–22, which was fitting for our parish at that time: “Now therefore you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the Apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.” Fr. Andrew encouraged us to remain steadfast and faithful, knowing that all of us working together is our true Temple in the Lord.

Personally, I have never witnessed more evidence of the hand of God in a time of crisis as I saw in our church since that fateful day. It began with our Priest, Fr. Andrew Harmon, who spoke with unshakeable faith in a television interview that day; “We will be OK. God will help us.” We have been more than OK. We have come a long way! Our most recent accomplishment has been the renovation and completion of our fellowship hall, education classrooms, kitchen, and offices. After almost two years, we are finally home and worshipping in our new hall. Our next and final step in our journey is to see our new church constructed. We are working hard and have much to do to make that a reality. God’s hand is still very much apparent, because we are blessed with a very dedicated and faithful parish Priest, Parish Council, building committee and generous, dedicated parishioners who are working together to help us reach our goal.

The parish of St. Matthew is well known for our outreach. Two of our most recent accomplishments have been the renovation and completion of our fellowship hall, and the use of our building to meet and worship. Those include our Christian education programs, Bible studies, feeding the homeless, serving the poor, sending our children to camp, and meeting on parish family night, just to name a few.

God stepped in, took control of every one of our concerns, and has turned them into blessings. He provided places for us to worship while keeping us bonded to one another. In the past two years, we have met in three different church buildings, two funeral homes, an American Legion Hall, and a monastery. Not only have we gained several new families throughout our journey, we currently have four catechumens. People and churches have prayed for us and provided us with items so that we can continue to worship. God has continued to guide our Priest and Parish Council through some very tough decisions.

The Hand of God is still very much apparent, because we are blessed with a very dedicated and faithful parish Priest, Parish Council, building committee and generous, dedicated parishioners who are working together to help us reach our goal.

May God bless each of you who have joined us on our journey in some way, either through prayer, physical help, or financial contributions. Please keep the parish of St. Matthew in your prayers. We look forward to the day that, as a family of believers, we can realize God’s vision. We want everyone in the Archdiocese to hear our story, and to see and experience the glory of God at work.