



# Epistle

Newsletter for St. Joseph Orthodox Church

Advent 2009

## Pastor's Corner

The Very Rev. Fr. Matthew MacKay

We are again in the season commonly called Advent. It can also be called St. Philip's fast or Pre-Nativity fasting period. Advent is a Latin word which means coming or arrival. This means, of course, that we are in a season of preparation. We are to prepare our hearts, minds, bodies, and souls for the coming or arrival of Jesus Christ at His nativity. We call this the incarnation - when the Word of God and Son of God comes into our human midst and exists. This feast of the Holy Nativity (Christmas) that we are preparing for is great because it means the great almighty God of creation has chosen to bend down and be with us. God is bowing down to His creation to become one of us and to be intimate with us. No other God of human history has ever done this. What we learn from this is that our God is a God of relationship and intimacy. This incarnation of God is the beginning of his earthly presence and it reveals the full expression of His love toward us.



The best way to prepare our person (heart, mind, body, and soul) and essence for this coming feast and celebration is that we are asked by the church to first enter into a time of asceticism: prayer, fasting, confession, and giving of alms. What this is supposed to do for us is to help us “let go” of things of the world and be open to the things of heaven. We are to change our focus from the material to the divine, from things temporal to things eternal. We are to be more spiritual than material. It is when we are most like God that we can best experience God in our midst and life. So the true gift of God at Christmas is His loving presence in our lives and we can help bring this about if we are prepared.

We are to let go of our self-centered, selfish ways and desires through asceticism. Prayer reconnects us with God and His will. Fasting helps us to resist and control our passions. Confession helps us see who we are and how we need to correct or improve our thoughts, words, and deeds. And all of this will lead us to a better relationship with God and others around us. The giving of alms also allows us to not be consumed or possessed by greed and materialism. We are being encouraged by Jesus Christ and His Church to share our good future with others so that they too can experience Christ in their midst. These are the things that we as Orthodox Christians are to do to prepare ourselves for the coming of Jesus Christ at His Holy Nativity and in our life during this Advent season. Let us all take the time and make the effort to prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ this year by entering into Advent first.



## From the Chair



Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

We are now into the Nativity Fast and have celebrated the Entry of the Theotokos into the Temple, both of which point us toward the Incarnation, the Nativity of Jesus Christ. The hymn to the Theotokos, commemorating her Entrance into the Temple, declares the “foreshadowing of the good pleasure of God.” Now we look forward to the birth of God in the flesh and “the beginning of the preaching of the salvation of mankind.” For the Orthodox this season is full of anticipation, expectation, and preparation!

We live in a society in which our Holy Feast of the Nativity has been hijacked by gross commercialization that demeans our holy Faith and our Lord. The sounds of “Jingle Bells” and cash registers drown out the song of the angels: “*Glory to God in the Highest, peace on earth, good will among men.*” Santa Claus is universally known, but not Saint Nicholas. Reindeer on rooftops trample down any reminder of the humble beasts who gave company to Joseph, Mary, and the infant Jesus in the manger. Indifferent, non-religious, political correctness favors “*Ho, Ho, Ho*” over “*Holy, Holy, Holy.*” Wimpy “*Seasons Greetings*” or “*Happy Holidays*” have supplanted the joyful proclamation “*Christ is Born – Glorify Him*” or even “*Merry Christmas.*” The ancient practice of Christian fasting has been scuttled by office parties, Holiday gatherings, and community winterfest celebrations that encourage excesses in everything from food and alcohol to mandatory gifts and needless debt.

Around us are many who have never heard the true message of Christmas. They have never peered into the darkness of Bethlehem’s cave in order to behold the Light of the world. We the faithful must lovingly offer prayers for their illumination and demonstrate our beliefs by living our faith. As with all the feasts and fasts of the year, the Nativity Fast is a blessing, a grace from God for our growth in holiness. Taking seriously our own faith, let us re-align our own priorities. Let us experience true **Metanoia** (μετάνοια): the changing of one’s mind, repentance, and once again turning one’s life toward the Light. Let us pray that our lives may always be faithful witnesses to the Truth, who was born into the world for our salvation.

Wherever you are this Nativity, may you and your families exalt the newborn Christ and celebrate these holy days - the *Reason for this Season!!* Christ is Born, and we will all Glorify Him! May each of you have a very healthy, happy and blessed 2010.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

Helen (Eleni) Norton,  
Parish Council Chair

## Advent Psalter Reading

Hilary Chala

A Protestant friend of mine asked me to explain how we as Orthodox Christians understand Scripture reading and fasting. This is a more filled-out explanation of what I wrote to her (although the more I look at these words, the more I want to write).

In periods of fasting, we understand fasting to mean to *pray* more, and prayer includes: fasting, reading scriptures, alms giving, etc. So for us one way to increase our prayer practice is to read the Psalter. This is a little history of how this came about.

In our Orthodox Monastic Tradition, the Psalter will be read weekly. We can see this in our own services. Saturday evening Vespers, which is the first service of the week, we hear the hymn “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, alleluia!” This is the first verse of the first psalm in the first Kathisma, the first psalm in the Psalter. In other words, we begin our worship cycle with the psalms, which are incorporated in our liturgical life. Indeed, this Psalm that is chanted marks where the first Kathisma would traditionally be read in its entirety during the Vespers service, and would still be read in Monastic circles. *Continued...*



# Be Careful What You Do

Fr. James Early

Be very careful what you do; you never know who will find out about it... and for how long they will remember.

Case in point: Long ago, in the greatest superpower in the world at the time, there was a governor who made a fateful decision. This particular governor served for ten years in one of the empire's most insignificant provinces. Eventually he was fired for incompetence and corruption... in an empire where a certain amount of graft was tolerated and almost expected.

Like all governors in this empire, this governor's main responsibility was twofold: maintain peace in his province and keep the taxes flowing in to the central government. In order to do the former, he had to occasionally crack some heads. He had to prove that he was boss, and that no dissent, much less rebellion, would be tolerated. If this required him to put a few thousand people to death, so be it! And this he did, with remarkable efficiency. Virtually none of this governor's victims are remembered today, and neither would *he* be remembered, except by scholars who focus on the history of the empire, had he not put to death one particular person.

That person's name was Jesus of Nazareth.

During the Divine Liturgy, while the Nicene Creed is being recited, I have often been struck by how the name of Pontius Pilate, this otherwise nondescript governor of a far-flung province of the Roman Empire, has been spoken by millions upon millions of Christians all over the world for nearly two thousand years. And if you think about just how many Orthodox and Roman Catholic parishes there are around the world, and how often Divine Liturgies and Masses are served (not to mention prayer rules and other services that include the Creed), it would probably be safe to say that Pontius Pilate's name is called out at least once every hour of every day.

When Pilate cowardly gave in to the will of the Sanhedrin and allowed Jesus to be crucified, could he have had any idea that his deed would live in infamy for the rest of human history? I seriously doubt it. To Pilate, Jesus was just one more Jewish rabble-rouser who would surely be forgotten within a few years. The governor had no way of knowing that that this peasant from Galilee would rise from the dead and ascend into heaven, and that the number of his followers would grow exponentially and spread throughout the world.

So the next time you recite the Creed and you say "and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate," think of course about the great self-giving sacrifice that our Lord made for us. At the same time, however, think about Pilate, and how this seemingly routine deed has been remembered and commemorated by an untold multitude of people, and will be forever. Then think about your own life and your own deeds. How long will your own deeds be remembered, and by how many people? For most of us, the answer will be "not long, and not many." But you never know...

## Prayer Request

If you have a prayer request for someone please contact Fr. Matthew or Irene Fedikovich and give either one of them the name(s) of those to be added to the list. Also, specify the type of prayer requested. Alternatively, you may fill out a Prayer Request Form located in the narthex.

**IOCC** Visit <http://facebook.com> and enter "International Orthodox Christian Charities" to learn more and get all the latest IOCC news!



# St. Joseph's Men

David Driver



The "unorganized" men's group has been as busy as usual! We hope all men will consider joining us when the next "organized" meeting is announced!!

To summarize our recent activities:

- On July 11 Tom Bennett hosted us at his home with fourteen members present. Fr Matthew got things started with prayer and blessing, after which we reviewed recent activities, which included: Church grounds work, painting of the Chapel, assisting the Bookstore move, and cleaning and sealing the steps to the Altar.
- A retirement plan for Fr Matthew is to be discussed with Rodger Conner.
- Jim Coody will discuss with Nouhad Bassila the possibility of having the area behind the Parish mowed regularly.
- Blair Birthisel is organizing us to sell tickets for the Mexico Concert fund raiser.
- Shannon Clark is exploring the possibility of our visiting the Monastery at Kendalia
- Michael Kendall and Terry Buford will host our August 22 meeting. Gary Lear and Blair Birthisel will lead a work day at the Church September 19.
- After all the business, we enjoyed great food and fellowship, as well as a video on the development of Christianity in what is present day Turkey, followed by a summary by Fr. Matthew of his recent trip to Syria.
- Michael Kendall and Terry Buford hosted us on August 22 for a stellar social gathering.
- There were some 15 men present to enjoy outstanding food (this seems to be a hallmark of our meetings!) The bulk of our time was spent eating and participating in a stimulating discussion concerning the state of the Church in this country.
- Eleven men showed up for the September 19 work day at the Church. Much was accomplished between 8 and 10 am. Hedges were trimmed, trees and shrubs pruned and mulched, many beds weeded and mulched. Sore muscles and soaring fellowship resulted from the exercise!
- Some of us then repaired to a local eatery for conversation and refreshment.

God is so Good!

## **Advent Psalter Reading *continued***

The next morning during the service of Matins (Orthros is the Greek word) two more Kathismatas would be read. In our lay tradition they have been removed to help the service move more quickly. In one Liturgical day then, three Kathismatas are read, thus during the week the entire psalter could easily, in its twenty components, be read during the monastic liturgical week. While outside of a fast the Psalter is read weekly, in the monastic tradition during a fast the psalter is read daily.

I cannot read the entire psalter by myself in one week, or even in one day. With our priest's blessing, we have extended the invitation for the parish to participate in reading the Psalter as a community so that we can, by working together, read it daily. This is a small exercise that lay people can participate in with the monastics to get a taste of what our spiritual athletes do. It is good exercise for our soul.

Also, it is a rich blessing to be praying in community, especially when we are apart, and this gives us the opportunity to participate in something that negates the distances between us. The "something" being the divinity of God Who transcends time and space and allows us to become part of Him that we may be able to do such things as please Him (like praying together).

Good Strength on your Advent Journey to Christmas!

**Visit <http://www.yamhouston.org/> for more information on Houston's pan-Orthodox Young Adult Ministries and activities.**

**Please remember to bring donations of nonperishable food to St. Joseph this season to be shared with a local food bank.**