

JANUARY 2017 Annual Report of the Rector

(Delivered at the Annual Parish meeting, December 4, 2016)

METRICAL RECORDS 2016 (since last annual meeting)

Baptisms	20	Chrismations	1
Weddings	0	Burials	1
Catechumens	7	Inquirers	3

Mention must be made that of the 20 baptisms recorded, the whole West family was baptized into the Church in April. And virtually all of the baptisms of Eritrean children are now done by their priest in their mission, which is served in our church building. I have no idea how many that may be.

THANKS

This is now my ninth annual meeting as Rector of St. Paul's. It becomes more and more difficult not to sound repetitive. Nonetheless, I have the normal litany of thanks for so many people: To all those who serve on the parish council and fellowship committee, to all those who serve in the sanctuary or raise their voices to the glory of God in our worship services, to all those who teach in and organize our church school program, to those who decorate, clean, and maintain our church building and the vestments, to those who watch over our kitchen and hall and help make fellowship each week enjoyable, to those who organize and volunteer in our charitable outreach projects, to those who gather to study the Word of God, to those who simply offer up our parish and activities to God in prayer – thank you! As always, I offer special thanks for my wife, who not only directs the choir, but makes my ministry here so much easier by her energetic participation and leadership in a number of areas, her support of me, and her love.

TOUGH YEAR

In many ways, this was a very tough year for me personally. My wife and I continued to be vexed by material problems with a house we still own in Connecticut. We actually thought we were simply going to lose it to the bank. I am facing some physical problems of my own, which, while not life threatening, nonetheless plague me with chronic pain and difficulties with my knees, one of which needs replacement. Life threatening, however, was my wife's diagnosis of breast cancer and her subsequent surgery and radiation treatment. And my brother passed away just a few weeks ago. All of this contributed to a very difficult year.

However, in God's goodness, we finally sold our house in Connecticut. With the parish council's knowledge and understanding, we will be making another quick trip back there on December 14 for the closing. My knees continue to bother me, but I now know what the problem is and the solution when I am ready to submit to surgery. I am not damaging it any more than it is – it's a matter of what I can tolerate. My wife, as you all know, underwent successful treatment of her cancer and all things look very positive for her. Finally, we did add a beautiful new grandson, Nathan, to the Dresko clan and his smile takes away any possible temptation to feeling sorry for ourselves! Many of you carried us in your hearts with prayer through all of these difficulties and for that we are eternally grateful.

2016

Our parish life at St. Paul's is very busy with a regular schedule of services, "normal," Lenten,

JANUARY 2017

St. Paul the Apostle Orthodox Church • Las Vegas, Nevada

<p>FAST FREE 1</p> <p>DIVINE LITURGY, 9:00 AM Hours: W. DEMKO EPISTLE: HOOD POST-COMM: WHEELER NO CHURCH SCHOOL</p> <p>CIRCUMCISION OF THE LORD St. BASIL THE GREAT</p>	<p>FAST FREE 2</p>	<p>FAST FREE 3</p>	<p>FAST FREE 4</p> <p>BAPTISM, 10:00 AM</p> <p>DAILY VESPERS, 6:30 PM ADULT FAITH FORUM</p>	<p>STRICT FAST 5</p> <p>ERITREAN SERVICE, 8:00 AM NO COFFEE CHAT</p> <p>VESPERS/BLESSING OF WATER, 6:30 PM</p>	<p>FAST FREE 6</p> <p>DIVINE LITURGY, 8:00 AM HOLY THEOPHANY BLESSING OF LAKE MEAD</p> <p>ERITREAN CHRISTMAS SERVICES, 6:00 PM</p>	<p>7</p> <p>DIVINE LITURGY, 9:00 AM SYNAXIS OF ST. JOHN OLD STYLE NATIVITY</p> <p>GREAT VESPERS, 5:00 PM CONFESSIONS</p>
<p>8</p> <p>DIVINE LITURGY, 9:00 AM Hours: YOUTH EPISTLE: YOUTH POST-COMM: YOUTH CHURCH SCHOOL</p>	<p>9</p>	<p>10</p>	<p>11</p> <p>DAILY VESPERS, 6:30 PM ADULT FAITH FORUM</p>	<p>12</p> <p>ERITREAN SERVICE, 8:00 AM COFFEE CHAT, 10:00 AM</p>	<p>13</p>	<p>14</p> <p>NO SLAVONIC LITURGY</p> <p>GREAT VESPERS, 5:00 PM CONFESSIONS</p>
<p>15</p> <p>DIVINE LITURGY, 9:00 AM Hours: HOOD EPISTLE: BROOKS POST-COMM: BITSKO CHURCH SCHOOL</p>	<p>16</p>	<p>17</p> <p>PARISH COUNCIL, 6:00 PM</p>	<p>18</p> <p>DAILY VESPERS, 6:30 PM ADULT FAITH FORUM</p>	<p>19</p> <p>ERITREAN SERVICE, 8:00 AM COFFEE CHAT, 10:00 AM</p>	<p>20</p>	<p>21</p> <p>GREAT VESPERS, 5:00 PM CONFESSIONS CHILI COOKOFF</p>
<p>22</p> <p>DIVINE LITURGY, 9:00 AM Hours: H. DEMKO EPISTLE: JARLSON POST-COMM: W. DEMKO CHURCH SCHOOL</p>	<p>23</p>	<p>24</p>	<p>25</p> <p>DAILY VESPERS, 6:30 PM ADULT FAITH FORUM</p>	<p>26</p> <p>ERITREAN SERVICE, 8:00 AM NO COFFEE CHAT</p>	<p>27</p>	<p>28</p> <p>GREAT VESPERS, 5:00 PM CONFESSIONS</p>
<p>29</p> <p>DIVINE LITURGY, 9:00 AM Hours: BITSKO EPISTLE: HUFFMAN POST-COMM: BROOKS CHURCH SCHOOL</p>	<p>30</p>	<p>31</p>	<p>Feb 1</p> <p>GREAT VESPERS/LITIYA, 6:30 PM</p>	<p>Feb 2</p> <p>DIVINE LITURGY, 8:00 AM MEETING OF THE LORD BLESSING OF CANDLES</p> <p>ERITREAN SERVICE, 9:30 AM</p>	<p>GREETERS</p> <p>JAN 1: DEMKO/MCAULEY JAN 8: CAMPBELL/OSBURN JAN 15: WHEELER/CHONG JAN 22: STAFFORD/MURPHY JAN 29: DEMKO/OSBURN</p>	

St. Paul the Apostle Orthodox Church

PO Box 12635
5400 Annie Oakley Drive
Las Vegas, Nevada 89112-0635
702.898.4800
www.lasvegasorthodox.com

RECTOR

Archpriest John J. Dresko
1747 Crystal Downs Ave
Las Vegas, NV 89123
860.833.4921 (Mobile)
fatherjohn@lasvegasorthodox.com

Father Stephen Osburn, Jr.
(702) 521-6988

CHOIR DIRECTORS

Matushka Elizabeth Dresko
Grace Brooks
Jarrod Huffman

PARISH COUNCIL

Virginia Hood, Vice-President
Karen Short, Treasurer
Catherine Wilkalis, Secretary

Gregory Brooks
James Brophy
Kevin McAuley
Karen Murphy
Litsa Osburn
Joseph Wheeler

SUB-COMMITTEES

Building & Grounds
Kevin McAuley

Eritrean & Ethiopian Outreach
Tekeste Nuguru

Russian Outreach
Natalia Minkoff

Church School/Youth
Fr. Stephen Osburn, Jr.
Amy McAuley

Fellowship Committee
Charity Committee

and festal. We have education programs for both the youth and adults of our parish. Confessions are heard regularly and by appointment. We preach and teach – exhorting our faithful to prayer, fasting and almsgiving. We do our best to meet pastoral needs as they arise in our parish. As usual, I wish to remind you all that I am busy, in addition, with diocesan and national responsibilities. I serve on the Bishop's Advisory Committee and our Diocesan Council (four meetings or more per year), our Diocesan Finance Committee (one meeting, other phone conferences per year), was re-elected to another three-year term as the clergy representative of our diocese to the Metropolitan Council of the OCA (two meetings per year in New York as well as occasional phone meetings), and continue to serve as Chairman of the OCA's Finance Committee (adding one more meeting in New York per year plus phone meetings). I am also asked to occasionally speak at other parishes and to consult on various clergy matters. I have also been advising one diocese and two other parishes who are struggling with developing stewardship programs.

But besides daily and regular

activities, I wish to comment on a few other aspects of parish life as experienced this past year. First of all, we continue to attract a healthy number of inquirers about the Orthodox Faith, and many of these have become official catechumens, studying with me on a (mostly) weekly basis. I have four separate individuals that I meet with for instruction. One of our seven current catechumens, Michael Hayden, will be Chrismated into the Church on Christmas Day. Over the past five years, we have instructed and received about 35 people into the Faith.

We were very blessed to witness the ordination of Father Stephen Osburn to the Holy Priesthood on March 6 by His Eminence, Archbishop Benjamin. Father Stephen has spent the months since immersing himself into the various tasks that are required of a parish priest. He has been serving, preaching, learning administration and reporting to the parish council, baptizing and confessing. He writes reflections for our newsletter and manages the day-to-day life of our parish during the times when I must be away. He is getting a solid foundation for the time when he is assigned to his own pastorate. I am grateful to him

AT A GLANCE...

Jan 1: CIRCUMCISION OF THE LORD

Jan 5: (STRICT FAST DAY) VESPERS AND BLESSING OF WATER, 6:30 PM

Jan 6: THEOPHANY, LITURGY AND BLESSING OF LAKE MEAD

ERITREAN CHRISTMAS SERVICE, 6:00 PM

HOUSE BLESSINGS BEGIN

Jan 7: Divine Liturgy, 9:00 AM; SYNAXIS OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST

Jan 14: NO Slavonic Liturgy

Jan 17: Parish Council Meeting, 6:00 PM

Jan 21: Annual Chili Cookoff after Vespers

Jan 23-26: Father John out of town (OCA Chancery)

Feb 2: MEETING OF THE LORD

Feb 11-12: Visit of Archbishop Benjamin

Send email addresses and corrections to:
fatherjohn@lasvegasorthodox.com

for his service and can testify that he is progressing to a reasonable pastoral maturity with care and concern.

One very important task that was assigned to Father Stephen was the very first effort our parish ever made to send a team to Project Mexico. It was a difficult assignment, with many moving parts. He organized the whole project from start to finish with skill and a dedication to making sure that it went smoothly. And smoothly it did go! All of the faithful of our parish who went, both youth and adults, were grateful for the opportunity. It was truly life changing. Service to those who were assisted is nothing but Christ-like. A much larger group is planning for this year's trip.

The beautification of our temple continued also this year, when our iconographer, Vladimir (Vova) Krassovsky installed the final panels of the iconography that adorns our sanctuary. It is truly beautiful and inspiring. A minor glitch occurred because of the curvature of the walls, which was temporarily patched by Vova. He is coming next week to permanently repair the work and to install the final cherubim that completes the sanctuary. The next phase will be the adornment of the east side of the nave on both the north and south walls facing the congregation. We will fundraise for that project in earnest in 2017.

FELLOWSHIP SPIRIT

I firmly believe that one of the reasons our parish is healthy and growing is the spirit of our community. Our parish is warm and welcoming and truly enjoys being together, both inside and outside of worship. Little community projects like our Chili Cookoff, the first ever International Dinner, and the annual Oktoberfest, along with our parish picnics for various celebrations, offer time for simple fellowship and enjoyment of each other's com-

pany. Even our weekly coffee hours are enjoyable. It is not unusual for us to flick the lights and tell people it is time to go home!

Part of the fellowship spirit that exists in our parish also reaches others. Our Feeding the Homeless project continues, and we are investigating ways to improve it. Project Mexico is not only important, but also fun. We now have a toy drive for the Ronald McDonald House. We have provided school bags for orphans through IOCC the past few years. All of this charitable work is also fellowship!

STEWARDSHIP

Finally, we must mention the growth of the material care of our parish by everyone involved. Our stewardship of the parish that God has blessed us with is solid and growing. Financially, you will hear that we anticipate a surplus of approximately \$40,000 in our 2016 Operating Budget. This will allow us to pay down the bond issue even faster than the original terms.

Pledging is growing modestly, but generously. Our total pledged amount reached an all-time high of over \$180,000 in 2016. But the number of actual pledges is still small compared to the number who could pledge. Some people don't pledge because they don't necessarily care about voting. Some because they would have to be very modest in their pledge. Some because they are afraid they might not be able to fulfill their pledge. None of that matters. What matters is that one takes the time to prayerfully and seriously make a commitment to the support of the Church. Remember that our Lord exalted the widow who could only give two mites. But give she did – with a plan. The commitment is a spiritual exercise. The giving is simply the return of some of God's blessings in our lives in

gratitude for those blessings.

Pledging is also not just financial. We ask that everyone offer a gift of time and talent as well. There are many tasks that need attention to maintain the viability of our parish – cleaning, greeting, singing, reading, serving, repairing, and the maintenance of the building and our liturgical appointments. There are many jobs that one can offer to do. It just takes a little time and effort. Please help us by pledging and volunteering for some of these tasks.

St. Paul's is, in my opinion, in very good shape for today and the future. Please continue to pray for our parish and to offer yourselves in service to God and His Church!

Lastly, in the past year, there are many times when I have fallen short as a father, pastor, preacher, and priest. For this and any possible offense I may have committed against any one of you, I beg your forgiveness. May God continue to bless St. Paul's with His goodness and light. May the Lord bless you from Zion and may each and every one of you see the good things of Jerusalem all the days of your life.

Father John

FEASTDAYS

During January, we celebrate the following feasts:

THEOPHANY OF OUR LORD

January 6

VESPERS WITH BLESSING OF WATER,
6:30 PM (THUR)

DIVINE LITURGY, 8:00 AM (FRI)
BLESSING OF LAKE MEAD

SYNAXIS OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST (OLD STYLE NATIVITY)

January 7

DIVINE LITURGY, 9:00 AM (SAT)

FASTING

The period between the Nativity of our Lord (December 25) and January 4 is fast-free in the Orthodox Church. The Eve of Theophany (January 5) is a strict-fast day in the Church.

HOUSE BLESSINGS

Following the liturgy of the Feast of Theophany and the Blessing of Lake Mead on January 6, Father John will begin blessing the houses of those who wish to have him come.

A sign-up list is available in the vestibule of the church. Please sign up, indicate what time of day is best and any special request. Father John will then contact you about date and time.

ADULT FAITH FORUM

Our regular Wednesday evening adult discussion group resumes January 4. We begin with Daily Vespers at 6:30 PM, followed by one hour of discussion in the parish hall. This year's topic will be *The Parables of Christ*.

NO SLAVONIC SERVICES

Father Alexander is unable to be here in January due to his own parish commitments. He plans on returning as usual in February on the second Saturday of the month.

CHILI COOKOFF

Our annual Chili Cookoff will be held following Vespers on Saturday, January 21. Chili cooks are asked to inform Matushka Lindsey of your intention to compete so we can set up properly. There are guidelines for cooks re: everything you must provide.

OCA MEETING

Father John, as Chairman of the OCA Finance Committee, will be attending the annual Chancellors/Treasurers Meeting at the OCA Chancery. He

will be away January 23-26. Father Stephen will be available for pastoral needs or emergencies.

PROJECT MEXICO

It's on! We are going to be sending another mission team to Project Mexico next summer to help build a house. We ask everyone for their prayers first of all, and the magnificent financial support shown this past year.

You can help support this trip by doing your Amazon shopping using our "smile" account:

<https://smile.amazon.com/ch/88-0242982>

Also, a gofundme page has been set up to allow direct donations. Please consider making a donation and sharing the link!

<https://www.gofundme.com/stpaulmexicotrip>

PLEDGE FORMS

Your 2017 Pledge Form is now **past due** if you have not returned it. We ask that everyone prayerfully consider making a pledge of time, talent and treasure to the Church. Please turn in your pledge form to Father John or Karen Short.

FEEDING THE HOMELESS

Our next Feeding the Homeless project will be scheduled on a date to be determined. We will construct the lunches and bag all of the items which we distribute at 10:30 AM. We then take them downtown and distribute them and are usually done by 1:00 PM. Please join us! If you can donate any of the items needed for the lunches (or funds to provide such), it would be appreciated.

ICONOGRAPHY

The next phase of our iconography project will be to complete the east walls of the church (to the left and right of the sanctuary). Renderings are

available in the church hall and you are urged to take a look. This is a MAJOR project which will require substantial funding. The two renderings posted in the hall will cost \$36,000 each, a total of \$72,000. **We are once again accepting donations to the Icon Fund. Please consider making an offering above and beyond your normal support of the parish!**

CHARITY

Our normal collections of food for Friends of the Desert continue. Needs: jelly, jam, peanut butter, canned fruit, canned tuna/chicken. Thank you!

ORTHODOX VENDORS

A list of businesses that our parish uses or are owned and operated by Orthodox Christians (some parishioners). We provide this information for you to consider if you need services.

CB Air Conditioning
Cedomir Blagojevic
(702) 493-0295

Dolphin Court Salon & Day Spa
7581 W. Lake Mead Blvd.
(702) 946-6000

Kyklos Café (Greek food)
Galleria Mall
Sophocles Frangakis
(702) 450-1515

Makeup and Hair Artist
Natalia Kasimtseva (Baker)
(I travel to client location)
Text or call: (702) 336-8300
View portfolio at:
www.facebook.com/NataliaKasBeauty

PRAYER FOR OUR PARISH

We ask everyone to remember our parish in daily prayer:
Lord, God and Savior of all, we thank You for the blessing of St. Paul parish in our lives. May Your word become

alive in each and every one of us who strive to follow You. Please bless and multiply all the gifts – time, talent and treasure – which are given in thanks to benefit our mission and glorify Your name. Bless and multiply the givers and help us all to make present Your Kingdom. For You are the Giver of all that is good, O Christ our God, and to You we give glory, together with Your Father who is without beginning and Your all-holy, good and life-giving Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.

SACRAMENTS/SPECIAL SERVICES

Please follow these guidelines.

- Baptisms. A personal meeting scheduled with Fr. John will be necessary to schedule any baptism requested.
- Matrimony. A date and time for weddings must be requested at least six months (preferably twelve) in advance. There will be premarital sessions for both bride and groom to attend.
- Memorials (Panikhida). Requests for a memorial must be made at least one week in advance. If possible, the service should be served on Saturday. Other requests will be met as pastorally possible.

PARISH COUNCIL SYNOPSIS

DECEMBER 20, 2016 MEETING

Rector's Report: Fr. John will be in New York Jan 23- 26 for OCA Chancellors/Treasurers meeting; leaving Monday, returning on Thursday.

Associate Priest's Report: reported his attendance at Deanery meeting in San Diego. Celebrated St. Nicholas Day along with 30 other people attending; got more acquainted with clergy including Bishop Daniel; felt the smaller meeting was more personal than the Diocesan Assembly.

Vice President's Report: Showed the council pictures and landscaper's proposal for laying down a border of rocks around the courtyard area to control the wind problem with the wood chip ground cover. Council will consider this proposal next meeting.

Treasurer's Report: Karen Short distributed our financials before the meeting:

Capital Fund: \$247.42

Rainy Day: \$31,841.22

Icon Fund: \$892.16

Income for November was \$21,938.63, with expenses of \$19,525.66 for a surplus of \$2,412.97.

YEAR-TO-DATE

2016 Inc \$ 268,846.98

2016 Exp \$ 227,770.39

Inc over Exp \$ 41,076.59

Karen reported that Accounts Payable is current. The 40K pay-down on the bond will be done in the new year.

A proposal was made to put money gained from social events into the Icon Fund. Council members agreed to earmark events funds alternately for Icon Fund and Project Mexico. The bake sale will benefit the Icon Fund; the Chili Cookoff, Project Mexico.

COMMITTEES

Buildings and Grounds:

Church and parish hall doors: Installed doors for parish hall, back door of church. They still need weather stripping and finishing touches.

Installation of double doors on church building planned after first of year.

Vandalism: HVAC unit for the hall was vandalized. Two ladders were stolen from back storage area. There are signs that someone is sleeping in a crate on the back property. A work party needs to be scheduled. Kevin will construct a cage for the HVAC.

Parking Lot Wall Repairs: Ma-

sonry repairs to the wall are complete. Kevin will schedule metal work for the fence, after the first of year.

Sound Panels: Fr John informed council he will order additional sound panels for parish hall in January.

Water District Complaint: Kevin inspected the back property. There is no visible water seepage on the church property; it is dry. Father John received another note from the homeowner complaining again about groundwater seepage on her property. The homeowner has already been in contact with 3 different water agencies. Kevin states he knows a geotechnical engineer he will consult about the problem.

Charity: A successful Feeding the Homeless project took place December 17. 150 bag lunches, hygiene kits and socks assembled. 110 of each were distributed downtown; 40 of each reserved for Guardian Foundation distribution in Bullhead City, AZ.

IOCC: Collection for IOCC Sunday was not planned or handled very well this year; we will try again next year.

Church School/Youth: Students were tested to assess how much information they retained; they did well. Frustration remains over lack of teacher support. Amy requested Father to emphasize that people need to take church school seriously. He commented that Amy is well organized and has good ideas, but more assistance is needed than the 6–8 people teaching.

Project Mexico: Fr. Stephen reports slots are now filled and there is a waiting list. Jamie and Pam Campbell are taking charge of the van rentals, which will decrease the final cost. A \$1900 deposit is due Jan 31. Fund-raisers are being set up.

Eritrean/Ethiopian: Eritreans will hold their Nativity service on January 6 from 6:00 PM until 2:00 AM.

Fellowship: a preliminary count of bake sale proceeds estimates about \$800 taken in. Since there are still items to be sold, a final account is not yet available. Chili cook-off will take place on January 21.

Outreach/website: Fr. Stephen reports he is still working on the new website.

Russian: no Russian Liturgy in January; otherwise status quo; no problems.

Stewardship: reported a lot of pledges have come in lately and has not had time to collate them all. Notable are 4 pledges over 10K.

OLD BUSINESS

Iconography: Vladimir Krassovsky has completed the icons in the sanctuary. They look lovely and will be blessed by the archbishop.

Greeters Training: no report.

Sunshine Group: no report.

Annual Parish Meeting: Minutes of the Annual Meeting December 4 have been reviewed by Father John and emailed to all council members for their review.

SHRB: The council was asked to adopt the “Statement of the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church in America on Sincerely Held Religious Beliefs Regarding Marriage”. Council agreed to adopt it unanimously.

NEW BUSINESS

Installation: The 2017 Parish Council will be installed at the end of liturgy on January 15.

OCL: The Orthodox Christian Laity will be holding their annual meeting at our parish on February 10–11. This will overlap with Archbishop Benjamin’s visit, but should be completed by Saturday afternoon. The meeting

is Pan-Orthodox with 15 members attending. They are planning to conduct a symposium.

Archbishop Visit: His Eminence, Archbishop Benjamin, will visit our parish on February 11–12. His visit will include social and dinner events to be planned.

Next Council Meeting:
Tuesday, January 17, 2017, 6:00 PM

PARISH DIPTYCHS

This list of parish departed is to remind us all of those whom we love and miss and to spur us to remember them in our daily prayers. They will be remembered in the proskomedia before each liturgy.

MONTH OF JANUARY

- Mark Medick
January 6, 1991
- George Gavrilov
January 10, 1991
- George Menas, Jr.
January 11, 1992
- Martha Jean Simmons
January 14, 1993
- Mehret Berhanu
January 15, 2009
- Natalia Lissenkoug
January 17, 2000
- George Zonitch
January 19, 2001
- Louise (Ljubica) Ford
January 20, 1994
- David Vranesh
January 21, 1991
- Helen Hoffman
January 21, 2003
- Roy Babich
January 22, 1989
- Frank Theodore Walko
January 22, 2002

Cornell Lazar
January 25, 2015

Ethyl Caras
January 28, 2008

Stana “Stella” Kekich
January 30, 2008

FATHER STEPHEN’S CORNER MAKE ORTHODOXY GREAT AGAIN!

I should preface this month’s reflection by stating that I have always believed that neither political party has a real platform that we as Orthodox Christians can fully support. I am not registered for either party and have always believed that the best ideas should dictate the political process. Like many, I followed the election process this past year all the way from the primaries to the presidential election. I did vote in November as I have been doing since I was 18 and I want to say that as a priest, I have prayerfully tried to make sure that this doesn’t sound partisan.

That said, this last year’s election has been one of the most, if not “the” most controversial of election cycles. As a republic it is what we were presented with two people and one won, one lost. Yet, I’d like to unpack something stated by Fr. John in his Sunday homily after the election that sums up what I’m going to speak about in this reflection: “The one Kingdom that matters is the Kingdom of God...every presidency...is all going to fade into history when Christ comes again...government is government and none of it will lead us to salvation...”

Our faith is one of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. However, as evident by social media, personal conversation/interactions, and mainstream media most of us tend to easily get wrapped up in the world’s reality and not in the reality of God. There is a large amount of focus on the politics of today and little on the politics of God. More people are familiar with the hashtag #fakenews than #liveorthodoxy and I believe that is a problem we need to address. Regardless of who is president or who is running this country, we have to get back to focusing on living the commandments Christ gave us.

When Christ says “I was hungry, you gave me food, I was thirsty, you gave me drink, I was stranger, you welcomed me, I was naked, you clothed me, I was sick, you visited me, I was in prison, you came to me,” (Mt 25:31-46) that wasn’t a suggestion for how are to live our lives, that was an order. That was a direct command from Him to focus our attention on loving and servicing our neighbors. Christ never said, “let the government handle it, you worry about your own issues”; rather Jesus is pretty clear when He specifically tells us to be servants of one another. There is no “if, ands, or buts” on the matter. Christ expects us if we want to be members of the only Kingdom that matters to live this fully to the best of our ability.

It is easy with the size of our country and the amount of wealth it has to allow ourselves to let others take care of those various list of things. However, all of us Orthodox Christians are expected to follow what Christ says regardless of the richness of the country. We are not to leave this to the government to handle. When presented with situations where we must offer service, like seeing a homeless man on the side of the road (or getting more involved in the bi-monthly homeless feeding drive that Cathy does a wonderful job of organizing - shameless plug), we are called not to ignore them and let others handle it, but to make every effort possible to provide a service to those in need. Certainly there are times when we are not able to help and not everyone is fully capable of providing all of these services at a whims notice, but it is our duty as Christians to put every effort forward in putting our faith into practice.

Each and every day God tests us with scenarios where we have to interact with our neighbors. Those scenarios are meant to help draw us closer to Him. It is in a way, God giving us an opportunity to work for our own salvation by helping us understand that His love is fully realized in the communion we share with Him. These chances are vitality important for us because if we are to really understand what God’s love means, we have to take each and every situation that much more

seriously.

So when we look at the state of our current government, regardless of where we line up on the political spectrum, we have to realign our focus on the government to the Kingdom of God. That is really what matters most for us as Christians. Not who is president. Not what the government is doing for others. But how we are doing our part to take care of others and love our neighbors the way that Christ asks us to “Love one another as I have loved us” (Jn 13:34-35). It is what truly will Make Orthodoxy Great Again and will ultimately be what sets us aside as sheep or goats with God.

RESOLUTIONS

Although the church year begins in September, our civil new year in January is an important moment in how we mark and experience time. Many people will celebrate the New Year in a festive way. Some may use it as an opportunity to reflect on the past year and to think about the one ahead. What happened to us in 2016? What will happen in 2017? Where have we been? Where are we going? What would we like to do? As Christians, we ought, of course, to be at least a little bit concerned about our spiritual life, our spiritual journey. What has it been like? Where should it be going? What could we do to nurture it, to cultivate it, to encourage it? To get some traction and get moving?

Among the resources for an engaged spiritual life in the coming year, we have - above all - the opportunities and disciplines given to us in the life of the Church. We have, for example, the church calendar with its seasonal and liturgical rhythms, commemorations of the saints, program of scripture reading. Making personal and domestic use of a church calendar is a fundamental tool of spiritual engagement. With it, we can grasp the big themes of scripture, make friends of the saints, follow the fasts and the feasts, make the story of salvation our own.

Another important resource is our liturgical worship. Liturgical worship not only serves to educate us in Christian doctrine and history; as we listen to the readings and hymns, it also draws us into an experience which - in proportion to our effort - can be profoundly transformative. We listen attentively and hear and learn. We can also be taken out of ourselves. We can be touched deeply. Liturgical worship draws us into

another dimension, in which the presence of God, of His grace, and the communion of the saints, define a consciousness of what is truly real and significant and important. It is a new consciousness, an alternative consciousness, a taste of the unseen Kingdom of God!

Our sacramental life - our participation in the Holy Mysteries - is a critical component in spiritual life. If we propose with this new year to take steps to seriously nurture our spiritual life, if we understand that there are things that we can do to enrich it - that there are things that we can do to make our spiritual life authentic - then there is absolutely nothing more important than paying attention to how we approach Holy Communion. Proper preparation - reading our pre-Communion prayers, regular Confession, reconciliation with everyone (to the best our ability), prayerful fasting - will bear much fruit in our lives, and take us to places we have only known vaguely and theoretically when thinking and talking about Communion. It is like love: one can talk a lot about it, but until you embrace it in all its practical, lived meaning love is just a wonderful idea. To take our participation in Communion seriously and intentionally, not casually, is to tap the fountain of Life.

Finally, helping one another is both a responsibility and an opportunity. The Lord directs us to help one another. In helping one another, our hearts and minds can be transformed, we can be drawn out of the fallen, default setting of self-centredness which is such a stumbling block to spiritual growth. It is important that such acts of compassion, such practical good works, be undertaken regularly. We can, for example, support and take part in the ministries of FOCUS, or food pantries, the IOCC, and Orthodox prison ministries.. We can sign up with Meals On Wheels or a community literacy program. Getting involved is really important. It is not enough to just dream about being kinder and better this year; we have to act, and the best way to ensure consistent, valuable action is to become involved.

Attention to the Church calendar, our liturgical life, to how we prepare for Communion, to good works - these things come highly recommended to us as New Year resolutions! May God help us in the year to come!

*Archpriest Andrew Morbey
St. Mary's Cathedral Newsletter
January 2017*