



THE MESSENGER

ST. PAUL THE APOSTLE ORTHODOX CHURCH

JANUARY 2018

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE RECTOR

Delivered December 3, 2017
METRICAL RECORDS 2017
 (since last annual meeting)

Baptisms	7	Chrismations	1
Weddings	1	Burials	1
Catechumens	5	Inquirers	0

THANKS

Hard to believe, but this is my tenth annual report to the parish. As usual, I have the normal litany of thanks for so many people:

- To the members of the parish council, who work hard and diligently to coordinate the administration of the parish. A special thanks to Ginny Hood and Catherine Wilkalis, who become the first members to bump up against term limits, serving six consecutive years after our by-laws change. They will now take a well-deserved rest.
- To those who serve at the altar of the Lord. Father Stephen has been a great help here as he completes his two year priestly internship. We have watched him grow in his ministry, and as Jim Brophy said to me, "he's cooked — ready to be served." We anticipate him moving to a permanent assignment by June. We rejoiced with the ordination of Bill Demko to the subdiaconate, and he, together with Jim Brophy and George Demko, form the senior team of our altar servers. All the young men who offer their service to the Lord are also greatly appreciated.
- Our choir. The dedication, piety and joyful ministry of our choir are amazing. There are many times when we have weekday services and the choir outnumbers the rest of the congregation 2-1. Great Lent, Holy Week and Pascha

are virtually breathtaking in their beauty, as are most other services. Their hard work pays off in that beauty. A special thanks, of course, to Matushka Liz and Grace Brooks, who have led the choir to those heights.

- To our Church School staff. A special thanks to coordinator Amy McAuley and those who volunteer as teachers. Church School is challenging with a student body that seems constantly in "flux." The staff is dedicated and rolls with all the punches in order to edify our youth. Father Stephen's efforts at coordinating youth activities have been met with much success also.
- To all those who offer time and talent in various ways around the church. Cleaning, stepping up when something is needed, donating to projects, anything that promotes the health and well-being of the parish to the glory of God. There are virtually too many to mention individually. You all know who you are, and more importantly, God knows who you are.
- Finally, not as choir director, but as my wife, Matushka Liz deserves special thanks as not only my life partner, but as a vital partner in ministry here. There are so many little things that get done around here by her that no one notices. Most importantly, her support of me and my ministry has, for many years now, been a source of strength to me when times often get tough

2017: UNEXPECTED BLESSINGS/CHALLENGES

I do not intend to recite a list of parish activities the past year. You all know them. We do strive to have a balance of worship, fellowship and even fun. I do need, however, to annually remind you that I am busy, in addition to parish life, with diocesan and

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CHOIR DIRECTOR
Matushka Elizabeth Dresko

PARISH COUNCIL

Kevin McAuley, Vice-President
Karen Short, Treasurer
Ella Morozova, Secretary

Gregory Brooks
James Brophy
Kimbel Halliday
Karen Murphy
Litsa Osburn
Elena Stafford

SUB-COMMITTEES

Building & Grounds
Kevin McAuley
Kimbel Halliday

Eritrean & Ethiopian Outreach
Tekeste Nuguru

Russian Outreach
Natalia Minkoff

Church School/Youth
Amy McAuley

Fellowship Committee
Charity Committee

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), 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). Since last year, I have also been asked to serve on the Board of the Orthodox Church Capital Improvement Fund (monthly phone conferences and one annual meeting in Sacramento in February). I am asked to advise occasionally on various clergy matters. I have also been advising two dioceses who are struggling with developing stewardship programs. Your understanding of the Church in a broad, non-parochial way, and my responsibilities beyond the parish as actually part of parish life is vital.

What I do want to speak about in reviewing the past year are three truly seismic happenings that affected our parish deeply:

• **Ambrose Huffman.** Early in 2017, we were confronted as a parish family with a very difficult challenge. Ambrose was born in medical distress — severe enough that I rushed to the hospital to baptize him a few short hours after his birth. He was immediately transported to Salt Lake City for specialized treatment, and we did not know if he was going to survive. This was a shock and trauma for his parents, but also for our parish, which had rejoiced with the Huffmans in their pregnancy

and was anticipating watching him grow and thrive in his parish family. Our prayers were strong, but difficult, and we faced a severe temptation to our faith. In addition, the Huffmans had to stay in Salt Lake City for several weeks. Our parish not only lifted our voices in prayer and support, but we offered material support to help the Huffmans with expenses that were not covered by any insurance. We raised in a very short time almost \$8,000 to help them. Thanks be to God, Ambrose not only survived, but is now a growing, healthy baby getting ready for his first birthday. Our parish was strengthened, the Huffmans were strengthened, and God was glorified through all those challenges and the way we met them.

• **Ginny Hood.** In a more than eerily similar way, our council vice president, Ginny Hood, who in her own words has “never been sick,” was diagnosed with squamous cell cancer on her back, which turned out to be much more serious and involved than expected. More problematic (!), was that she had no insurance to cover the thousands of dollars of expenses. Again, as a community we had to come together. First to pray for her health and recovery and then to once again, offer material assistance to the best of our ability. She has weathered the surgery, skin grafts and the pain involved with all that and is now enduring radiation treatments. We managed to raise almost \$15,000 to help the Hoods with some of their expenses and small regular gifts continue. That is a drop in the bucket for the expenses, but it is a serious gift of love and support. In the cases of both Ambrose and Ginny, we have

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been challenged in our faith. I believe that each of us is a stronger and better Christian because of the crucibles of suffering that we have shared with the Huffmans and the Hoods. I also believe our parish is a better Christian community through this co-suffering. Thanks be to God, who is glorified in the crosses and responses to those crosses that we all shared.

• **Generosity.** The third seismic event might seem, on the surface, to be a “good” seismic event. In my very first report to the parish in December 2008, I said this: “we have to eliminate the mortgage on our building. The mortgage literally sucks the life from our budget. I ask all of you to search your hearts and minds and help us find a way to do that. If anyone has the resources to make such a capital gift now or a planned gift for later to pay off our mortgage, please see me. It only takes one person or family with exceptional resources to make a gift that will change the entire future of the parish. It would be remembered for generations.”

So I had a two-step dream — the first step was to somehow get our parish out of the mortgage that was choking us. That happened when we paid off the mortgage through the bond program in 2015, choosing to pay ourselves instead of a bank. Once we completed the bond program, the second step was a simple one. Although the bond terms were a twenty-year amortization, I told anyone who would listen that I wanted the bond program retired before I was! I’m eligible in 2022. Most thought I was crazy. But I kept praying and insisting that it would happen. Then, in answer to my prayers, someone came up to me one day and said, “Father, you can retire whenever you’re ready.” I blinked tears and knew what was meant. Praise be to God! We then set in

motion a plan to receive the donation of \$450,000 to retire the bond program and restock the capital fund. On June 23, 2017, our parish became officially debt-free through this incredibly generous act. That alone, of course, is seismic, but the consequences had ripples that were more challenging than we expected. The combination of the retirement of the bond program (i.e., people knew we didn’t need to pay \$3800 per month for that debt anymore), and the relocation of a number of our most generous donors, has actually led to a monthly deficit of about \$6000 compared to before the debt retirement! Thanks be to God, we responded to the other challenges with faith and perseverance. My hope and expectation is that we will respond to this one the same way.

STEWARDSHIP

Which then makes us confront a difficult truth: we are at what can easily be seen as another seismic moment in the history of St. Paul’s. For the first time in a number of years, we have serious financial concerns as we move forward into the new year. During the calendar year 2017, we have lost seven families and individuals, mostly due to relocation of these families. Among these seven families were three of our top five giving families! If you have been paying attention lately, you have seen that we fall about \$1500-2000 short each week of the amount needed to support our budget. We cannot continue to bleed that type of cash. It has taken years for us to build a modest savings for “rainy days.” We do not want to tap that, but even if we do, it will only last a couple of months. Other funds are restricted to specific purposes and cannot be touched.

Now it is also true that God also has brought new people to St. Paul’s — I count at least seven

new people since last year’s meeting. We are currently instructing five catechumens and most will become full members shortly. We certainly hope, pray, and even expect, that they will help the parish face these new challenges. But it is clear that God has placed this challenge in front of all of us. Also in that very first report I gave to the parish, I said, “Please pray for me. But also please join me in making a sacrifice in your own life to help St. Paul’s be the place we all want it to be. It will not happen without prayer and sacrifice by each person. May we grow together in ever deeper love and peace.” I say those same words to you again today.

I never ask anyone to do something I am not willing to do myself, so I challenge each and every one of you, my beloved flock: my wife and I are raising our financial pledge 25% for 2018. Some find it difficult to discuss money, but my life is public to the parish, so I will say our pledge to the parish for 2018 is now almost 12% of my salary and housing. It also places us in the top two givers in our parish. That is nothing to be proud of; rather, I’m supremely confident that we are not in the top two earners in our parish. How can my wife and I be one of the top two givers?

Please brothers and sisters, look at what you give to the church to help facilitate the mission we have to each other and the world. Look at your financial gift and calculate what percentage that gift is of your income. Are you even close to the biblical tithe (10%)? Is your pledge to the parish the same as it was last year? Two years ago? Five? If a car payment today is \$500, and your gift to the church is \$50, what does that say? When the parish needs \$4000 per week to meet its obligations, what does \$20 do? What does \$100 per

month do? And we haven't asked in a long time: have you made plans to leave a gift to the Church in your estate?

The median family income in Clark County is \$52,070. If that amount were tithed, the annual gift would be \$5,207. If each median family gave \$5,207 annually to the parish, we would only need 36 families to fund the 2018 Budget. Conservatively, we have 75 active families (about 175 adults) who actively support the parish. We can rationally figure that we have families both above and below the median income figure. But the median figure seems reasonable when we look around our parish. We should have no problem funding our budget if we give in a Christian and biblical manner.

God commands us to give because He gives. We cannot starve the Church while feeding ourselves. My wife and I have never suffered — not one second — because we gave to the Church. The only time we have suffered is when we tried to rob God by using what is His for ourselves. An old friend used to say, "You can't outgive God." Try giving a tithe or at least proportionally and see if God doesn't bless and multiply everything you have. Please make a serious and generous pledge to the parish not because the parish needs you to give, but because you need to give. It is a basic Christian commandment and is blessed by God.

I am confident in God and each of you that we will meet this challenge with your generosity and His blessings.

As always, 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

The following feastsdays for January will be served (please note the special times for each!!):

CIRCUMCISION OF OUR LORD
PRAYERS FOR THE NEW YEAR
JANUARY 1

DIVINE LITURGY, **9:00 AM (MON)**

THEOPHANY OF OUR LORD

JANUARY 6
VESPERS/BLESSING WATER, 6:30 (FRI)

DIVINE LITURGY, **8:00 AM (SAT)**
BLESS LAKE MEAD (NOTE TIME!!)

FAST FREE

The Church is *fast-free* from Christmas until the Eve of Theophany (Jan 5), which is a *strict-fast* day.

This year, the Lenten Triodion begins on January 28 with the Publican and Pharisee, which makes Jan 29-Feb 3 *fast-free* also.

MEETINGS

Father John has one diocesan and one national commitment which will require his absence from the parish:

January 17-18, Advisory Council and Diocesan Council meetings in San Francisco.

January 22-25, Chancellors/Treasurers Meeting at OCA Chancery, New York.

Father Stephen will be available during Fr. John's absences for any emergencies or pastoral needs.

THEOPHANY/HOUSE BLESSINGS

Orthodox practice is to bless water in the church on the Eve of Theophany. We will bless water after Vespers on Friday evening, January 5. Please bring a container to take some home for your personal use. Then we bless "living" water on the Feast (see below).

Father John will begin blessing houses after the Feast of Theophany (January 6). A sign-up list is available in the vestibule — if you wish him to come and bless your house, please sign up.

Please note that the time for blessings is quite short this year with an earlier Lenten season plus some Church commitments, and it will be a challenge to accommodate all personal requests.

LAKE MEAD

We will bless Lake Mead as usual after the liturgy of Theophany. The feast falls on a Saturday, and to have enough time to accomplish everything, **we will begin liturgy at 8:00 AM** like a weekday instead of our normal Saturday 9:00 AM.

MANY YEARS!

After completing her catechism, *Frances (Susanna) Vanderploeg* will be received into the Holy Orthodox Church through Baptism and Chrismation before the Sunday Liturgy on January 7. May God

bless her with many fruitful years of service to Him in the Church!

SLAVONIC LITURGY

Father Alexander Shkalov should be here as usual on Saturday, January 13. Russian language confessions start at 9:00 AM, followed by the Slavonic Liturgy and fellowship.

CHOIR REHEARSAL

The choir will be rehearsing following Vespers on January 13 and 20. All choir members are asked to make every effort to be present.

PROPERTY CLEAN-UP

The county has once again informed us that the vacant back lot of our property must be cleaned up or we face fines. **We need hands, shovels and gloves on Saturday, January 13, at 8:30 AM to accomplish this. Please help!**

COUNCIL INSTALLATION

Our 2018 Parish Council will be installed on Sunday, January 14, during the Divine Liturgy. Congratulations and Many Years to: *Kevin McAuley (VP), Karen Short (Trea), Ella Morozova (Sec), and Gregory Brooks, Jim Brophy, Kimbel Halliday, Karen Murphy, Litsa Osburn, and Elena Stafford.*

CHILI COOKOFF

Our annual Great Chili Cookoff will take place on Saturday evening, January 27, following Vespers. There will be a sign-up list for those who wish to enter the competition and try to knock off defending champ Bill Stafford.

PLEDGE FORMS

Every parishioner is asked to prayerfully consider and then make a generous financial commitment to the parish. Please return your signed pledge form to Father John or Karen Short no later than December 15. As always, be assured

that the form remains completely confidential.

HOOD FUND

We continue to ask for your help in a charitable outreach to the Hood family. We ask you to consider a donation by check, card, or online, earmarking it for the Hood Collection.

OurYouCaring Page:

<https://www.youcaring.com/vigini-aginnyhood-899443>

OUTREACH

Daron (Basil) Clanton, son of Maria Clanton, is incarcerated in prison in Indian Springs, NV. If anyone would like to correspond or send a card to cheer him up it would be greatly appreciated. His address is:

Daron L. Clanton, #1185388
HSDP
PO Box 650
Indian Springs, NV 89070

ADULT CLASS

Our Adult Class continues with a serious look at the Miracles of Christ. As usual, we begin with Daily Vespers at 6:30 PM, and then have discussion 7:00-8:00 PM. Please join us and learn your faith!

FEEDING THE HOMELESS

Our next Feeding the Homeless project will be held on a date to be determined. We meet at 10:30 AM then construct the lunches and bag all of the items, which we then distribute downtown 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. See Cathy Wilkalis for more information.

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 (New!)

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

Edward Yee
Doctor of Ophthalmology
2980 S. Jones Blvd., Suite A
(702) 362-3937

Jon Failla, NP
Axis Health Care Clinic
www.axishccvegas.com
(702) 331-1800
Focus Mental Health Solutions
www.focusmentalhealth.com
(702) 790-2701

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

Maximos Horton
Tesla Solar Inc.
www.teslasolarinc.com
(435) 922-9771

Taffer Computers

Website Design, Marketing,
& Computer Repair
Fr. Stephen Osburn
(702) 521-6988

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 19, 2017 MEETING

Rector's Report: Fr John 1) Welcomed Ella Morozova, who will take over the duties of parish council secretary in January. Thanked

current parish council members for serving, and especially those leaving the council, Virginia Hood and Catherine Wilkalis, who will have reached term limits at the end of this year.

2) Reminded council that we are now scheduling Theophany house blessings for January.

3) Informed council that he will be attending Diocesan Council in San Francisco, CA Jan 17-18, and Chancellors'/Treasurers' meeting in Syosset, NY Jan 22-25.

Associate Priest's Report: Fr Stephen informed council that two weeks ago he attended an IOCC sponsored clergy meeting open to all Orthodox clergy dealing with the psychology of crisis management, especially for events involving mass casualties.

Vice President's Report: Ginny thanked everyone for all their help and support as she served as Vice President; is grateful to be able to take time off. Her course of radiation treatments is going well, but is long and fatiguing.

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

Capital Fund: \$28,813.55
Rainy Day: \$76,798.99
Icon Fund: \$6,032.29

Income for November was **\$9,407.83**, with expenses of \$15,494.03 for a **deficit of \$6,086.20.**

2017 YTD FINANCIALS (11/30)

2017 Inc	\$ 237,569.38
2017 Exp	\$ 239,201.07
Exp over Inc	\$ 1,631.65

This is the first time in a couple of years that the operating budget is in deficit. Accounts Payable is current, but the parish is staying solvent only because money has been transferred from savings.

COMMITTEES

Buildings and Grounds: HVAC: The new system has been installed in the parish office and is working well.

Doors: The last door has been installed but needs some minor adjustments to facilitate closing and locking. All doors will be painted this Thursday and appropriate signage will be placed.

Courtyard: The architect has submitted a topographical design map for the courtyard project. It will be placed in the parish files.

A bid for \$3995 was received from King's Landscaping for removing all trees including the roots and leveling the ground. Council members discussed pros and cons and resolved this should be done sooner rather than later. Motion to accept the bid — approved unanimously.

3) Property clean-up: The parish was issued a citation on December 2, to clean up the back and remove weeds, etc. by December 10. Fr John was able to negotiate a delay into January. Noncompliance will result in fines of \$100 - \$1000 per day. A parish work-day will be scheduled in January. It is hoped the youth will take an active part in helping.

Charity: Reported the account for the homeless feeding project has been zeroed out for the end of FY 2017. The last remaining amount of \$52 has been spent on washcloths for hygiene kits.

IOCC: Frances Vanderploeg has volunteered for the position as IOCC coordinator and will probably start during Lent. Father will meet with her to coordinate.

Church School/Youth: 1) Informed council that Ivy Tesfay and Lidia Abraham have both been accepted as summer interns for Project Mexico. They will be spending the summer of 2018 helping with the

project. Their room and board will be covered but they will need extra spending money; \$300/month each is recommended for approximately 3 months. (Total of \$1800). Suggestions were made to earmark parish coffee hour funds for Project Mexico. Father John and Father Stephen will discuss ways and means with Ivy and Lydia.

2) Fr Stephen reported on the youth "snow day" and retreat. A group of 30 people including youths and parents from St. Paul's and St. John's participated in a retreat and enjoyed a visit to the Pinball Hall of Fame. The retreat included a lively question and answer session, and they hand-crafted individual Nativity icons, which were blessed. St. John's donated all the food for the event. Everyone had a good time, and future youth events will be planned.

Fellowship: 1) The Christmas Bake Sale on Sunday, December 17 did very well; \$750 was collected.

2) The parish Chili Cook-off is planned for January 27. It was decided to make this an annual event, scheduled on the last Saturday in January.

Outreach/website: no problems.

Russian: Father Alexander cancelled the Russian Liturgy scheduled for December 9.

Stewardship: Subdeacon Wes Jarlson has taken on the task of cleaning the church and is doing a fantastic job.

Pledge Analysis: to date, 29 pledges have been received compared to 44 last year. Some pledges from council members are still due. The total received from pledges to date is \$107,000; compared to the annual budget of \$188,000. People have made an effort to increase their pledges; the average amount is ~\$3400.

OLD BUSINESS

Sunshine Group: no report

Annual Parish Meeting: (Fr John) The Annual Parish Meeting was conducted in an orderly and timely manner without conflict or other major issues; however it was noted that nominations and election of a lay delegate to the All-American Council in St. Louis, MO, July 23-27 was inadvertently omitted from the agenda. A special parish council meeting will be convened to perform this task.

Bookstore: Debra Sancer has assumed charge of the Bookstore and is doing a great job. Christmas items have already been stocked.

NEW BUSINESS

Background checks: for council members, senior altar servers, and teachers are due in January. These will be done through a link on line by the Diocesan office. Policies and procedures on sexual misconduct also require an annual review and affirmation by parish council members, senior servers, and teachers in January.

Installation of the new 2018 Parish Council will take place on Sunday, January 14, followed by the first meeting of the year on Tuesday, January 16.

Lenten Dates: Some important Lenten dates include:

February 18, Forgiveness Sunday.

February 25, Orthodoxy Sunday Vespers hosted by St. Paul's.

March 10, Lenten Retreat hosted by St. Paul's and featuring Father Chad Hatfield, president of St. Vladimir's Seminary as speaker. Father Chad will also serve Liturgy with us and preach on Sunday, March 11.

Next Council Meeting:
Tuesday, January 16, 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.

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 EACH MAN'S LIFE TOUCHES SO MANY OTHER LIVES

In continuing from last month's reviews of Christian themes in today's culture, music, art, movies, and media, I've decided to cover what is considered by most as the best Christmas movie of all time. (Yes I'm aware this is Janu-

ary Reflection but the last week of December and first week of January is the Christmas time.)

No, I'm not talking about *Die Hard*. That movie is terrible and the movie has nothing to do with Christmas, unlike *Lord of the Rings - Return of the King*, my personal favorite Christmas movie, *Die Hard* has no allegory to the Nativity nor does it contain any Christian themes. It is just a typical action flick based on old western flicks that premiered in December. Any movie that wants to qualify as a Christmas movie needs to, at its base, be regarded as a celebration of joy and peace. Peace is not yelling cheesy one-liners and blowing everything up. Mini-rant aside, this month I will be going over the Christmas classic: *It's a Wonderful Life* and it's place in understanding culture through the lens of the Nativity.

Sadly, I should preface before we get too deep into this movie, like most Christmas media, *It's a Wonderful Life* is not rooted directly in the story of Jesus Christ or His birth. Sure, it is set during that time of year but the actual narrative isn't openly tied with any of the allegory that we often see in Christian movies. It can be argued that this movie is one that a secular audience could watch, see some of the moral values, and find it a fulfilling experience. However, as Christians, what we can take from this movie, from a deep and profound watching of it, comes down to a type of hidden theme within the movie. This movie is a movie about sacrificial love and that alone places it in the category of the Christmas story.

Jesus Christ, by coming as a Man to enact God's plan of Salvation, came to restore Creation to its proper place; but more so, Christ also set the groundwork or foundation in how we are to live our lives as Christians going forth. When

we look at the life of Christ and our own baptism, taking on Him and bearing our crosses, we spend our lives with a renewed sense of life that lives to serve and give to others, turning away from our own self and directing it to others.

This is exactly the kind of story we are presented with in *It's a Wonderful Life*. George Bailey, our protagonist, is a man who is feeling down on his lots. He sees that his hard work is not paying off for himself but that only others around him are rich and comfortable. The story has a really interesting narrative that shows us George sacrificing throughout his life and then what life would have been life if he had never been born. It shows us the kind of impact we can have on others but more so, and to summarize it shows us that the greatest richness one can have is a life of sacrificial love.

Throughout the film, we see George's life lived simply in the most sacrificial manner; whereas, his life is one where he always puts others before himself and does so in a really humbling way. The humility that George expresses, which he doesn't initially realize until he is brought to the alternate timeline is done because it's the right thing to do, not speaking to be special or take credit for it. The power of this flick has George discovering the meaning of life is sharing his blessing to care for others, realizing that the most joy and happiness in life is giving of ourselves for others.

As much as it may help to see this further by giving more to the story, I'm not about to spoil this film for those who have never seen it. I will say, however, that what we can all discover here in the story of *It's a Wonderful Life* is that the Christmas theme of renewal is done through sacrifice and humility. Christ in His Incarnation became an example of sacrifice and humil-

ity. Likewise, no matter how good we think we are or what generosity we try and show, we can never become too proud. We can never think too highly of ourselves. This will lead us to despair and because of our failings, will only lead us away from Christ and ultimately away from salvation. In a loving way, God set the standard and the path to how we are to return to Him in Communion. Such a path has to be done so by shedding our own pride and egos. One of my favorite themes from Fr. John's preaching and what the Church teaches is that there really is only one sin: that of pride. If we hope to really experience the inspiration, the guidance, and the hope of God, and to grow more in Christ's likeness, we have to shed off who we are and embody more of who Christ is.

This essentially is what *It's a Wonderful Life* vividly portrays to audiences. It is a touching story of redemption that leads to a renewed life for which Christ came to initiate in sacrifice but most of all, this classic film speaks to us in a way in which we can realize the importance of sharing our blessings with others and what we might not see in front of us at that very moment may have more impact that we realize. It helps us put proper perspective in our lives and most of all, shares the real Christmas spirit which is seeing Christ born to bring God's plan of salvation to all of us who are willing to separate from themselves and focus entirely on Him. This is the wonderful life that God promises but we must then ask ourselves, will we look to a renewed commitment to Christ, striving to be more like Him, giving ourselves to others, or do we merely just jump off the bridge into darkness and die?

Christ is Born!