

# Our Parish Life Handbook

*A living, working document, representing the “work in progress” that parish life always is.*

St. Basil’s Russian Orthodox  
Church

Watervliet, NY

Last Revised November, 2018

WITH THE BLESSING OF HIS GRACE **MICHAEL**,  
ARCHBISHOP OF NEW YORK AND NEW JERSEY

ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA

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# **St. Basil's Russian Orthodox Church, Watervliet, NY**

## ***VISION – MISSION – VALUES***

**Our Vision:** To receive, accept, make known and share God the Father's love in all its saving power, through Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit.

**Our Mission:** To make present in this time and place the fullness of the Orthodox Christian Faith, so that all persons might come to the knowledge of the Truth. We carry out this mission through worship, stewardship, education, nurture, fellowship, charity and outreach.

**Our Values:** We are traditional: We value time-honored truths and morality. We hold to long-established patterns of worship, devotion and service. We value every person, family, and community. We believe that life lived rightly has boundaries—there are things that we should do and things we should not; but within the structure provided by those limits there is the opportunity for boundless growth, creativity and joy. Indeed, we affirm this apparent paradox: that the path to true freedom and eternal blessedness is to be a servant—to be a servant of God the Father, through Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit.

## ***Introduction***

### **Orthodox Christianity\***

What is Christianity and where does the Orthodox Church fit in?

#### **Christianity**

Christianity has become so fragmented that it is now almost impossible to summarize what Christians as a whole believe and still be talking about all who call themselves Christians. However, the Christian faith in the fullness of its traditional manifestation can be said to be based upon the following intuitions and affirmations:

1. There is “define-able,” recognizable Truth—relativism is unacceptable. (Truth)
2. Truth finds its ultimate expression in God, the One Who Is—“I am.” (Monotheism)
3. God has revealed Himself to Man—His creature—in history in various ways and ultimately through His Son, Jesus Christ. (Incarnation)
4. God has sent His Spirit to be with us until the end of this world when we will be received into His Kingdom if we are found to be His servants. (The Trinity/Eschatology)

#### **Orthodox Christianity**

The Orthodox Church is the original Christian Church established by our Lord Jesus Christ upon the foundation of the Apostles—He Himself being the chief Cornerstone—and enlivened by the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.

The Orthodox Church is nothing less than the Church, founded by our Lord Jesus Christ. Although the Orthodox Church judges the soul of no man, leaving judgment solely to God, the Orthodox Church does claim that the Orthodox Church, and the Orthodox Church alone, is the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church confessed in the Nicene Creed.

The claim of the Orthodox Church to be the one and only true Church (and by extension, therefore, the one and only true religion or belief system) is based upon four factors:

1. That the Orthodox Church has maintained an unbroken historical continuity with the original Church founded by Jesus in Jerusalem. (True History)
2. That the Orthodox Church has faithfully maintained the apostolic faith “once delivered to the Apostles” (Jude 3), neither adding to nor subtracting from it. (True Faith/Doctrine)
3. That the Orthodox Church faithfully and rightly worships God the Father in Spirit and Truth, providing mankind with personal access to the life and grace of the All-holy Trinity. (True Worship)
4. That the Orthodox Church has produced untold numbers of Saints throughout the centuries—persons who bear within themselves in true sanctity the uncreated grace of God. (True Sanctity)

All four of these factors—history, doctrine, worship, and spirituality—are all different aspects of the fullness of the true faith. None is sufficient without the others. It is the bold claim of Orthodox Christians that only within the Orthodox Church and Orthodox Christianity are all four of these factors fully and correctly present. It is the responsibility of the Orthodox Church to proclaim and define the truths (dogmas and doctrines) of the faith. In doing so, we must

understand that the Orthodox Church judges no one. God alone is the judge of the hearts and souls of individuals. While judging no one, we believe that the best place for us to be is in the Orthodox Church where we believe is the fullness of the truth. If you are at sea and there is a storm, the best place to be is in the saving ark. Outside of the ark you will drown and perish. The Church, the Bride of Christ, is the ark of salvation.

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*\* Much of this section "Orthodox Christianity" is taken from Clark Carlton's book "The Faith: Understanding Orthodox Christianity," (Regina Press, Salisbury, MA, 1997, ISBN 0-9649141-1-5), especially pages 19 and following. Throughout this Handbook, we are also indebted to the writings and teachings of (among many others) Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware), Archbishop Dmitri (Royster); Fr. John Behr, Fr. John Breck, Fr. Thomas Hopko, Fr. Paul Lazor, Fr. John Matusiak, Fr. John Meyendorff, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, and to the anonymous Monk of St. Tikhon's Monastery who compiled the book, "These Truths we Hold," published in 1986 by St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, South Canaan, PA.*

## **Our Parish**

St. Basil's Russian Orthodox Church, a parish of the Diocese of New York and New Jersey of the Orthodox Church in America, was founded in the hamlet of Maplewood in Watervliet, NY, in 1901 with the blessing of St. Tikhon, Patriarch of Moscow, who was serving at that time as Bishop of the Aleutians and North America. The founders were immigrants of Slavic descent from Central and Eastern Europe who came to this part of New York to work in local industries. Today the parish serves Orthodox Christians of diverse backgrounds from a wide spread of towns and cities in the Albany Capital District area of upstate New York, including Cohoes, Latham, Clifton Park, Troy, Colonie, Schenectady, Scotia, Guilderland, Spiegelstown, Melrose, Schaghticoke, Valley Falls, Saratoga and Niskayuna.

The cornerstone of the church was blessed by the missionary priest St. Alexander Hotovitsky on November 21, 1901. During the period of organization and construction, St. Alexander traveled from NYC to conduct services. St. Alexander returned to Russia in 1914 and was martyred by the Soviets in 1937. The present church building was consecrated by Metropolitan Theophilus in 1945. The beautiful white and gold iconostas, altar table, table of oblation and icon stands were hand made by parishioners. A new Parish Center was built in 1975, replacing the old church hall.

To understand Orthodox Christianity one must begin two thousand years ago at the dawn of the Christian era. In the years after Jesus' Resurrection, Apostles and missionaries traveled throughout the known world. They spread the Gospel, the Good News of life and salvation through Christ's death and resurrection. We affirm that the head of the church is no other than Jesus Christ.

Soon after the time of the Apostles five major locations were established as centers for the faith: Jerusalem, Antioch (located in present day Lebanon and Syria), Rome, Alexandria and Constantinople. These five patriarchal centers formed a cohesive whole and were in full communion with each other. In the year 1054 the Roman Patriarch (the Pope) was formally separated from this united church and five hundred years later Protestant churches began separating from Rome.

The four so-called "eastern" patriarchates (hence the term "Eastern" Orthodox Church) remained intact and are in full communion with one another to this day. Over the years other centers of the Orthodox faith emerged, joining these early patriarchates. These include Russia, Georgia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Albania, Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine, Finland, the Sinai Peninsula, and even Japan, Canada and the United States.

There are some 250 million Orthodox Christians worldwide and, perhaps, as many as 6 million right here in the United States. It is the second largest Christian communion world-wide. You may be aware of Orthodox Christians with an ethnic designation such as Greek or Russian. The astonishing thing about this ethnic multiplicity is its theological and moral unity. Orthodox throughout the world hold unanimously to the fundamental Christian doctrines and moral standards taught by the Apostles and handed down by their successors, the bishops, through the centuries.

Here at St. Basil's Russian Orthodox Church we are heirs of this unique and precious heritage and of the Orthodox Christian missionary efforts, sponsored by the Orthodox Church of Russia, which began in Alaska in 1794. In 1970 the Orthodox Church of Russia granted our Church in North America a decree of total self-government. The Orthodox Church in America became one of the fifteen Autocephalous (self-governing) Orthodox Churches that together make up the world-wide Eastern Orthodox Church.

The core of our life is centered on worship. Orthodox churches still use forms of worship that were practiced in the first century. Our worship is based for the most part on passages from Holy Scripture. We sing all services, joining our voices in simple harmony to ancient melodies. Musical instruments are not used in church. Services are in English with some Slavonic. Orthodox worship is filled with repentance, gratitude and unending praise. Guests are always welcome.

Every Saturday night beginning at 5:30 PM we sing Great Vespers, which begins our celebration of each Sunday as a feast of Christ's Resurrection. The community assembles again on Sunday morning at 9:30 AM for the Divine Liturgy, which is a Eucharistic service. It is here that the Church finds its vocation as the very mystery and sacrament of Christ's presence. Here we partake of the Kingdom of God in all joy and gladness. Come and see!

### **For Further Information**

Every week our parish publishes the weekly bulletin in which can be found the parish schedule, the parish prayer list, notes and comments from the rector, various announcements, and relevant texts from Holy Scripture. The official By-Laws of the Parish are available to all members of the parish.

### **Contact Details**

St. Basil's Russian Orthodox Church  
6 Lansing Ave  
Watervliet NY 12189-1845

Telephone: (518) 273-6262

On the Web at: [www.stbasilchurch.org](http://www.stbasilchurch.org)

Email: [polsen57@icloud.com](mailto:polsen57@icloud.com)

### **Useful Web Sites**

[www.stbasilchurch.org](http://www.stbasilchurch.org): Our parish's web site. Includes contact details, parish calendar, on-line edition of the parish bulletin, parish photos and more.

**www.oca.org:** The official web site of our Orthodox Church in America. Includes administrative information, news, clergy and parish listings, daily scripture readings, lives of saints, liturgical materials (music, etc.), and excellent catechetical materials.

**www.nynjoca.org:** The official web site of our Diocese of NY and NJ. Includes information about the diocese, the Bishop's schedule, "Lessons in Our Faith," a series of highly recommended videos of instructional talks given by His Grace Bishop Michael on matters of faith, belief, and the teachings of the Church, and the on-line edition of the Diocesan publication "Jacob's Well."

**[www.orthodoxfellowship.org](http://www.orthodoxfellowship.org):** The official web site of the Fellowship of Orthodox Christians in America (FOCA).

**[www.orthodoxinfo.com](http://www.orthodoxinfo.com):** An excellent source of information on the Orthodox Faith.

**[www.ancientfaith.com](http://www.ancientfaith.com):** Superb Orthodox Christian on-line radio, including contributions from some of the very best Orthodox Christian preachers and teachers in the English language—supremely worth a visit, an absolute treasury of Orthodox Christian preaching and teaching. Also includes Orthodox Christian music.

**www.stots.edu:** The official web site of St. Tikhon's Orthodox Theological Seminary, includes link to their press and bookstore.

**www.svots.edu:** The official web site of St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, includes link to their press and bookstore.

**[www.ocf.net](http://www.ocf.net):** The Orthodox Christian Fellowship (OCF) is the official collegiate campus ministry program of the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of North and Central America. The OCF, through its local college campus chapters, provides a vital connection and outreach for fellow Orthodox students through fellowship and prayer.

**www.iocc.org:** The official web site of International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC), the leading Orthodox Christian charitable organization in the world—the best place to donate money in response to any large-scale crises. A gift to IOCC is always appropriate.

**www.ocmc.org:** The official web site of the Orthodox Christian Mission Center (OCMC) an organization which sponsors foreign missions of the Orthodox Church, such as work in Africa and Central America.

**www.uncutmountainsupply.com:** A good on-line source for Orthodox Christian icon reproductions (mounted icons). They also sell books and gifts.

**[www.gallerybyzantium.com](http://www.gallerybyzantium.com):** A good on-line source for Orthodox Christian jewelry, such as baptismal crosses, Pascha egg pendants, etc. Gallery Byzantium has a strongly established history of providing extremely high quality work.

**www.istok.net:** A good on-line full-service Orthodox Christian supply store. Based in Canada, Istok primarily offers items made in Russia. This site is worth a visit if only to browse.



## **Worship**

### **Our Prayer Life and Fasting**

Prayer and fasting is the foundation and cornerstone of the Christian life. It is our channel of communication with God. Every parishioner should have a good Orthodox prayer book (such as “The Orthodox Prayer Book” or “Orthodox Daily Prayers” published by St. Tikhon’s Monastery, or the Jordanville Prayer Book published by Holy Trinity Monastery in Jordanville). These prayer books have the complete morning and evening prayers. With the guidance of our Spiritual father, everyone should have a daily “prayer rule.” These are the prayers that we pray every morning and every evening in our icon corner. A person who lacks prayer feels empty and lost. Prayer is our weapon to fight against evil and sinful thoughts, desires, and actions. If we lay down our weapon, we become a prey to all satanic temptations of anger, pride, judging others and all other filthy and evil thoughts. A person who does not keep their prayer rule and does not fast and then attends the Divine services is like an athlete who does not exercise or keep a certain diet but then expects to participate in the Olympics. It is unlikely that he will have any success or enjoy full participation, but instead will consider the event to be long, boring and tedious. We also need to nourish ourselves *daily* with the Word of God. One Elder recommends reading one chapter everyday from the Gospel. Start with Matthew, and continue until the last chapter of John. Then start the process again with Matthew chapter one. In this way, every day, the voice of God speaks to us. St. John of Kronstadt recommends that everyone should say the Jesus Prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” This is a short and powerful prayer that we can say anytime. Orthodox use a “prayer rope” (Orthodox version of the rosary) to say this prayer.

### **Liturgical Services**

The liturgical life of our parish represents a wonderful opportunity both within our parish community and within the broader community around us. The joy and gift of worshipping God freely and truly is something we should value highly. Indeed, the reason the Lord delivered the Israelites out of Egypt was because Pharaoh forbade them from keeping the sabbath. By not keeping the sabbath the Israelites would lose their connection with God and instead become assimilated by the idolatrous pagan culture around them. It is the same with us today. Attendance at church is not negotiable in our lives. Just as the body dies and withers without food and nourishment, our souls die and wither without the necessary spiritual nourishment of the Divine food which we receive in church. Not attending the Divine services, and especially not being in church and keeping the Lord’s Day will result in our being assimilated by the idolatrous and pagan society around us. Also, being in church on time and not coming late to church for Divine services is part of our stewardship of undistracted time to the Lord and His house. The early Christians understood very well the essential necessity to gather very week as a community of the Lord’s Day to celebrate the Eucharist. Some think that we can just as easily stay at home and pray and that attendance in Church is optional. This is a great deception and falsehood. There is a saying, “one Christian is no Christian.” Jesus said, “Where two or three

are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” To be a Christian means to practice individual prayer at home *and* corporate prayer. It cannot be just one or the other.

The Divine Liturgy is served every Sunday morning. The word “liturgy” (“leitourgia” *Greek*) means “the common act of the people.” Great Vespers is served every Saturday evening, the eve (beginning) of Sunday. The full Sunday cycle is, again, something we should practice. Indeed, the “vigil” we keep is not just the church service, but should extend from the Saturday evening services through the Sunday morning services in sober, prayerful, and quiet living.

We celebrate all the major feast days and some of the lesser ones as well. Usually the pattern for festal celebrations is that of Vigil (Vespers with Blessing of Loaves and Matins) on the eve of the Feast and Divine Liturgy on the morning of the feast. Additional services are often served as well. Check our website for a weekly and monthly schedule. During Great Lent we have a very full and fulfilling liturgical schedule that represents a tremendous opportunity for all of us to grow and develop our Christian lives of worship, praise and prayer.

## **Confession and Communion**

In our parish frequent and regular participation in Holy Communion has become the norm for most of those regularly participating in the life of the parish. This is, at core, a good thing. But, we must not abuse the privilege. Privileges always come with accompanying responsibilities. For as incorrect as it might be to refuse the call to “In the fear of God, with faith and love draw near,” it is at least as bad to receive the Holy Things in a thoughtless manner without due care and preparation. Certainly, we ought to be receiving Holy Communion regularly and even frequently. But we must do so with correct preparation, never feeling worthy to draw near, except insofar as our Lord’s love and mercy makes it possible for us to participate in His Broken Body and Spilled Blood.

Among other things, correct preparation for the reception of Holy Communion includes, as an absolutely essential part, participation in the Mystery (Sacrament) of Holy Confession. By Holy Confession, we are here referring not to the practice often termed “General Confession,” but to the traditional practice of what is usually termed “private” Confession. In order for confession to be beneficial, we must confess not in general but in a specific way as well, so as to truly experience sorrow for our sins. We must enumerate our sins and call them by name. St. Nektarios tells us that “Confession is a voluntary and sincere declaration of sins committed, without shame or reservation, but with self-reproach and contrition to the person who has been appointed by the Church to forgive sins...Confession must be voluntary and sincere in order for it to be true and effective. It must be performed without embarrassment and reservation but with boldness and self-reproach...It must be carried out with contrition of heart. This confirms a true change of mind and expresses sorrow for the transgression of God’s commandment...”

The following is the customary practice of the Orthodox Church in America and what we should try to do as best as we can in our parish as regards Confession and Communion:

- Those regularly and frequently receiving Holy Communion should endeavor to prepare themselves through prayer and fasting each time that they will be approaching the Chalice. This preparation properly includes attendance at the service the evening before the Divine Liturgy (especially on Saturday evenings), the keeping of the evening and night before the reception of Holy Communion in a quiet, peaceful and prayerful manner, usually including

the reading of certain prayers to prepare one's self for receiving the Holy Things the next morning, and complete abstinence from food and drink (and smoking, which itself is a sinful habit) from midnight preceding the morning of the Divine Liturgy at which one will receive Holy Communion. Children who are old enough to go to private Confession are expected to keep this rule as well. Those who are under doctor's orders not to fast before Communion should follow their doctor's orders. This is not a sin and they may still receive Holy Communion. If some issue or concern is particularly weighing on a person's conscience (such as an argument or grudge with someone else), he or she should endeavor to resolve this issue, as soon as possible and before receiving Holy Communion. The priest is always available for consultation. If anyone needs guidance in the matter of preparation through prayer and fasting for Holy Communion, please see the priest so that you and he might discuss the subject.

- Those regularly and frequently receiving Holy Communion should also endeavor to regularly participate in the Sacrament of Confession. Our Archbishop Michael gives the following guidance for how often to go to Holy Confession: "Sacramental confession before a priest, for serious sins and even for lighter ones, is recommended in the Orthodox Church during the fasting seasons of each year. Those who are receiving Holy Communion, as they should, on a weekly basis, should go to Confession once a month or once every six weeks." This is the "minimum," if we are so bold as to dare speak of such a thing as a minimum. In addition to Great Lent and the Christmas Fast (Advent), the other fasting seasons in the Orthodox Church are the Apostles' Fast (kept each year from the Monday after All Saints Day through to the Feast of Ss. Peter and Paul on June 29) and the Dormition Fast (August 1-14, each year). Some people who are facing particularly acute spiritual challenges in their lives may find it appropriate and helpful to confess privately and personally on an even more frequent basis. Over-scrupulosity, however, should also be avoided. In the end, each person needs to work out a regular rhythm in this regard that is compatible both with the regular reception of Holy Communion and the particular circumstances of his or her own life. To assist you in preparing for Confession, there is a "Guide to Confession" in the church narthex that you may take. There are also copies of "If We Confess Our Sins" by Fr. Thomas Hopko and "Strengthened Commitment to Christ through Holy Confession" by Fr. (now Archbishop) Michael (Dahulich) that you may read to help you better understand the Mystery of Holy Confession.
- At any time, if one falls into particular sin, one should, without delay, make an appointment and come for private, personal Confession. It is dangerous to put off participation in the Sacrament of Confession to a later time if one is either in an obvious state of sin, or carrying in one's conscience the remembrance of a particularly weighty sin. It is especially spiritually unhealthy to put off necessary participation in the Sacrament of Confession, while continuing at the same time to approach the Chalice for Holy Communion.
- With the guidance of your Spiritual Father, read the Prayer Rule before Holy Communion. These prayers can be found in any good prayer book ("The Orthodox Prayer Book" and "Orthodox Daily Prayers" published by St. Tikhon's Press and the Jordanville Prayer Book

published by Holy Trinity Monastery in Jordanville). We have available copies of the “Manual of Communion Prayers of the Orthodox Church” (Vol. I and II) published by Holy Myrrhbearers Monastery in Otego. On the day of Communion, it is imperative to come to church at the beginning of the Liturgy.

- We ask female parishioners to please not commune while wearing lipstick. Lipstick may look fine on lips, but it looks horrible on the Chalice, the Communion spoon, the Communion cloth, the cross, and icons.
- After receiving Holy Communion we are required to read the Thanksgiving Prayers after Communion. These prayers can be found in the prayer books already mentioned. If they are read out loud in church by a reader at the end of the Divine Liturgy, please remain in the church and listen to the prayers before you leave.

## **Communion and Intercommunion**

“As a Eucharistic organism, the Church realizes and maintains its unity through the act of Holy Communion. It is the Eucharist that creates the oneness of the Church” (‘Communion and Intercommunion,’ page 21). Participating in the Eucharist presupposes unity in the *faith*, *dogmatic* oneness, and unity in the local *bishop*. During the Divine Liturgy we pray that we may have “one mind and one heart.” Mere brotherly feeling is not enough; there can be no true oneness in sacramental life for those who are not one in faith. The technical term “intercommunion” is a word of modern coinage, not to be found in the Bible, the Fathers, or the Holy Canons. The Bible, the Fathers and the Canons know of only two possibilities: communion and non-communication. Admitting one to communion and to church membership are identical; to what Church one belongs is manifested where he receives communion, or where he is admitted to communion. So the concept of intercommunion is unknown to the ancient church.

Love and truthfulness in Christ compel the Orthodox to say that there are serious differences on matters of faith between Orthodoxy and the West, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant. As such, it is impossible for Orthodox to share in the Eucharist or in any sacraments with the non-Orthodox, and vice versa. The Orthodox and the non-Orthodox are *really* divided, and the possibility of communion in separation is *unrealistic* and even *untruthful*. From the very beginning of Christianity the order has always been first confession of faith, then admittance to baptism and then admittance to the Eucharist and the full sacramental life of the Church. During the Divine Liturgy, before the start of the anaphora (consecration of the Eucharist), we recite the Creed. The order is significant. We do not receive communion together, and then affirm our unity in faith, but the proclamation of the one faith comes first. In its statement “The Discipline of Holy Communion,” the Standing Conference of Orthodox Bishops (SCOBA) states: “Holy Communion will not be sought by Orthodox Christians outside of the Church, nor will it be offered to those who do not yet confess the Orthodox Church as their mother.”

In other words, the boundaries are that Orthodox Christians cannot partake of any sacraments in non-Orthodox Churches (this includes Roman Catholic and all Protestant churches); neither can non-Orthodox receive any sacraments in the Orthodox Church. Likewise, Orthodox clergy may not participate in non-Orthodox services and rites. Orthodox Christians who receive sacraments outside the Orthodox Church (including marriage) thereby “exclude themselves from participation in the Holy Eucharist, and therefore exclude themselves from full membership in

the Church” (“Guidelines for Clergy of the OCA,” page 16). The SCOBA and OCA statements reflect a sober and balanced “Eucharistic ecclesiology.” If the phrasing sounds outspoken, even harsh, this must be seen as the strictness of Christian love.

*\*Much of this section has been borrowed from “Communion and Intercommunion” by Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia, Light and Life Publishing, revised 2002.*

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## **Use of Candles**

Candles are available for sale at the Candle Desk located in the Narthex of the Church. Candles are used in the Orthodox Church as symbols and offerings during the liturgical services. In our parish we use traditional 100% beeswax tapers, as well as votive candles. In a general sense, the lighting of a candle in Church symbolizes the life of a Christian person. Until a candle is lit it is cold and hard. Once lit it is warmed and softened and then consumed by the flame. In the same way, we human beings can be spiritually “cold and hard” until our hearts and minds are “warmed and softened” by the grace of God. When we, faithful Christians, allow ourselves to become “on fire” with God’s love we can be consumed by that divine love in a beautiful and powerful way.

In a more particular and specific sense, the lighting of a candle in Church is an offering. The faithful purchase candles, thus making a monetary offering to the Church and then light those candles as an offering of prayer. The candles are set in stands in significant parts of the Church, usually near a particular icon of Our Lord, His Mother, or a particular saint or group of saints. When we offer a candle by lighting it and placing it in a particular place in the Church we should simultaneously offer a prayer. For example, we may light a candle and place it to burn near an icon of a particular saint and, at the same time, ask that saint’s intercession before God on behalf of our self or a person for whom we wish to pray. Additionally, candles may be lit not only as petitions asking for God’s blessings to be given, but as prayerful offerings of gratitude for blessings already received.

## **Choir**

The Parish Choir leads the singing and chanting of the responses at the Divine Services. Membership in the Parish Choir is open to every member of the parish. A musical background is helpful but not required. Our parish is blessed with a beautiful choir led by a professionally trained choir director. In order to fulfill their duties to the best of their ability the Parish Choir holds regular rehearsals as scheduled by the Choir Director.

The Choir does not sing instead of the gathered faithful, nor are they performing a concert of liturgical music. The Choir’s role is to *lead* the singing and chanting. Indeed, all the faithful people are expected as they are able to sing the responses at the Divine Services. After all, many parts of the services are well known to all who regularly participate in the Church’s worship and, thus, we ought to all be able to participate fully, which include praising God with our God given voices.

## **Altar Servers**

The altar servers are young men who, at the discretion and by appointment of the Rector, serve in the altar during the Divine Services. In order to serve as an altar server a young man must be a fully participating member of the parish, which includes regular participation in the sacraments of confession and communion and regular attendance at Divine Services.

## ***Pastoral Services***

### **Baptisms**

The practice of Baptism is not uniquely Christian. Many religions have the rite of ritual washing. Almost always this washing symbolizes renewal, of dying to an old way of life and being born again to a new way of life. For Christians, Baptism takes on new and particular significance. It no longer remains merely a sign of moral and spiritual rebirth. Rather, it is understood to be the act of a person's death and resurrection in and with Jesus Christ. When a person is baptized he or she acknowledges himself or herself to be a follower of Jesus Christ. He or she acknowledges Jesus Christ as Lord, God and Savior and commits himself or herself to live in function of that confession of faith.

In the Orthodox Church, Baptism is immediately confirmed by Chrismation, the anointing of the newly baptized person with specially blessed oil called "Chrism." Christians understand this marking or sealing with Chrism to confer upon the one being chrismated the gift of Holy Spirit. As the Church was given the gift of the Holy Spirit on the Feast of Pentecost, so too the newly baptized is given the gift of the Holy Spirit of God, in order to live the new life in Christ received in Baptism. Finally, following Baptism and Chrismation, the newly baptized is admitted to Holy Communion – union in and with God through the receiving of the broken body and spilled blood of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, by partaking of the Eucharistic elements, consecrated bread and wine. In the Orthodox Church, children are baptized and chrismated and given Holy Communion as infants. Children are understood to be able to be fully members of the Church from infancy insofar as they are brought up and guided in the faith by faithful adults, usually their parents.

Given this understanding the following specific points can be made about the Orthodox Church's present practice of Baptism:

- Baptism in the Orthodox Church implies that the person being baptized wishes to be a practicing member of the Orthodox Church, confessing Jesus Christ as King and Lord. In the case of a child, Baptism implies, at minimum, that at least one of the child's parents is committed to raising the child as a Christian, in the Orthodox Church.
- Since Baptism involves a commitment to Christ and His Church, it follows that the sponsors (often called "Godparents") of the one being baptized are themselves Orthodox Christians. (After all, a person cannot sponsor another person for membership in an organization in which the sponsoring person is not himself or herself a member!)
- Though it is now traditional to have two sponsors at a Baptism, the formal requirement is that there be one sponsor of the same gender as the person being baptized. This sponsor must be a practicing Orthodox Christian in good standing that has appropriately prepared himself or herself for this awesome responsibility particularly by means of Confession and Communion.

The fitness of the chosen person to serve as sponsor must be confirmed by the priest who is the pastor of the parish in which the Baptism is taking place.

- As long as this basic requirement of one same gender, practicing, Orthodox Christian sponsor is fulfilled, it may be possible, with the prior permission of the priest, for others to serve as “honorary” Godparents. (The Church allows this as a concession to the realities of present life – it is not formally encouraged.) At a minimum, however, these “honorary” Godparents must self-identify as Christians, even if at the present time they are not actually living out their faith. These “honorary” Godparents will be allowed to participate in the Rite of Baptism in ways that will be determined in advance by the priest. Such participation may include holding the child during the portion of the Rite that comes before the actual Baptism. The spoken responses required of the Godparents during the Rite, such as the acceptance of Christ and the reading of the Confession of Faith (the Creed) must be performed by the actual Orthodox Christian sponsor.

Regarding the specific occasion of a Baptism the following points should be noted:

- The time and place of the service are to be determined in consultation with the priest. Normally, in our parish Baptisms take place on Saturday mornings or early afternoons before the celebration of the Saturday evening service.

For the Baptism itself the following should be provided by the sponsors, the family, the person coming for Baptism himself or herself (in the case of an adult), or other interested and helpful persons:

- A Baptismal cross: Often this is provided by the sponsor. Usually this is a small cross of gold or silver hung for the occasion of the Baptism on a thin, long white ribbon of sufficient length to be easily placed over the newly baptized person’s head during the course of the service. Among Orthodox Christians of Slavic descent these crosses are often fashioned according to the so-called “three-barred” pattern. The priest can help you with obtaining an appropriate cross. (It is traditional for a duly baptized Orthodox Christian to wear a cross – often this very same cross – for the rest of their lives as a sign of their commitment to Christ and His Church. This is not always practical in the case of children, but is a practice that should be encouraged, as the person grows older.)
- A Baptismal gown: This garment is also often provided by the sponsor, though parents and grandparents sometimes help with this. This garment should be long enough to cover the newly baptized person’s whole body and should be pure white in color. The person being baptized should not be brought to church for the Rite of Baptism already dressed in this garment. Rather the Baptismal gown is put on during the service, as part of the Rite, after the actual Baptism takes place. This garment should be used only for purposes connected with Baptism. (In some Orthodox Christian families there is a traditional garment handed down from generation to generation used for the Baptisms of all the children in the extended family.)
- Baptismal candles: During the service the one being baptized and/or his or her sponsor or sponsors hold candles. These candles can simply be the normal golden-colored beeswax candles used during all Church services, which are easily obtained at the Church. Sometimes,

however, specialized candles, often white in color and appropriately decorated are provided by the sponsor or family of the person being baptized.

The day of the Baptism:

- All gathering for the Baptism should be present at the Church no later than twenty minutes before the appointed time of the service so that any last minute concerns might be addressed.
- Those attending and participating in the Baptism should be appropriately dressed for the occasion. This is a solemn and prayerful occasion and should be treated as such by our attire and demeanor.
- The Rite of Baptism in the Orthodox Church usually takes about fifty minutes. This is longer than in some other Christian denominations, but in the Orthodox Church the full traditional rite is kept from the earliest days of Christianity. Those not familiar with the service should be aware, especially in the case of the Baptism of an infant, that the service does involve the child being completely disrobed and dipped entirely in the Baptismal font. The Orthodox Church follows the most ancient customs regarding Baptism and, therefore, does not usually baptize by pouring or sprinkling, but rather places the person being baptized fully into the Baptismal waters, just as St. John the Baptist baptized our Lord, Jesus Christ, in the waters of the Jordan River.
- In the case of infant Baptism, upon arrival at Church, pre-Baptismal prayers and rites will then be performed, including an anointing with oil (this is not yet Chrismation – that occurs after the actual Baptism – but a separate anointing). Then the child will be baptized. Prior to the Baptism, the child is entirely disrobed. A large towel at this point should be given to the sponsor of the same gender as the child being baptized. This same gender sponsor will receive the child from the font after the priest has baptized the child. Following the Baptism, the child should be wrapped warmly in the towel and dried off. Then the child may be dressed in the Baptismal robe and a fresh diaper (only—nothing else should be placed on the child yet, such as undergarments or socks, these can be added after the service). For warmth the child might also be wrapped loosely in a receiving blanket. It is a good idea for the child’s mother to help with this dressing and, perhaps, if the child is distressed, take a moment to comfort the child before the service continues. Once the child has been dressed and comforted, then the child should be returned to the sponsor of the same gender for the rest of the service. The rest of the service includes the anointing with Chrism, the cutting of a tiny bit of the child’s hair as a first offering to God (so-called “tonsure”), and the sponging off of the Chrism. This concludes the service and then the child may be fully dressed. Part of his or her attire for the rest of the occasion (for example, the reception or any other following festivities) should be the Baptismal gown.
- Regarding photography and videography: One person should be chosen to take photographs and one other to take video. There should not be excessive numbers of people crowding around to do this, as this is extremely distracting and not particularly pious. Usually if the two members or friends of the family acknowledged to be best equipped to do this will take responsibility for this task everyone is pleased by and can share in the good results. At the close of the service and during any following festivities there will be plenty of time for everyone else to take pictures and video.



- The child must be brought to Divine Liturgy the next day for the “churching” and to receive Holy Communion. Why be baptized if you are not then going to participate in the central act of the Church— the Divine Liturgy and the reception of Holy Communion? The “churching” takes place before Holy Communion. In this very brief rite the priest takes the child to the front of the Church and presents him or her to God. The child’s mother should then come forward and receive the child from the priest.
- The newly baptized Christian is brought to Holy Communion by his or her sponsor and, if possible, by his or her parents. If the child has a non-Orthodox honorary godparent, it is not appropriate for this person to bring the child up for Holy Communion. All those receiving Communion must have prepared themselves appropriately. There are cases and circumstances that do not allow all these people to accompany the child to Communion (the rector will make this determination), but the primary sponsor must be prepared to bring the newly baptized to Communion and to himself or herself also receive Holy Communion. When approaching Holy Communion for the first time the newly baptized person should be wearing his or her Baptismal gown.
- If any Church facilities are desired for the purposes of a reception this should be discussed and arranged well in advance with the manager of the Parish Center.

#### Final Notes:

The Gospel tells us that Christian activity is marked by prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. It is, therefore, appropriate for all participants in a Baptism (the one being baptized, the sponsors, the family) to prepare themselves through prayer. It is also appropriate that they would fast. Fasting implies not simply restrictions in diet, but primarily means that in the days preceding the Baptism, those involved would seek to live and act in a moderate fashion concentrating on preparing themselves for the occasion. Finally, almsgiving implies that those involved would seek at this time to share their bounty with those in need, as a way of appropriately marking this occasion. In this context it is entirely appropriate to make a donation to the parish church in which the Rite of Baptism will be taking place. Baptism begins a person’s life in Christ, and in His Church. Therefore, the one being baptized, his or her sponsors and his or her family are truly obliged by God to ensure that the Baptism is not simply a one-time event, but rather that it is the beginning of a process of Christian life and participation in the fullness of the life of the Orthodox Christian Church. Baptism is a gift and a privilege. Acceptance of Baptism carries with it responsibilities. Let us be mindful of this reality.

### **Weddings**

Marriage in the Orthodox Church is the sacramental union between one adult man and one adult woman, united by God for eternity. The Church only blesses marriages on the grounds that the couple wishes to be united in Christ. The Church does not bless marriages to legitimize sexual relations and/or the children stemming from those relations, for social/societal reasons, or for legal reasons. Also, the Church does not bless marriages between persons of the same gender or between children or between a child and an adult.

In order for a marriage to be valid there are a number of conditions that must be met. Among them are the following:

Both parties to the proposed marriage must freely consent to marry. One cannot validly marry under compulsion. God values, nurtures and honors the freedom He has given us.

In the strict sense, unity of faith, i.e., a joint commitment to the Orthodox Church, is formally a condition of Church marriage. Strictly speaking, the Fourth and Sixth Ecumenical Councils forbid marriages between an Orthodox and a non-Orthodox, and stipulate that such marriages, if concluded before civil magistrates, must be dissolved. In the spirit of “*economia*,” the clergy guidelines of the OCA tolerate mixed marriages between an Orthodox Christian and a non-Orthodox Christian who is baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and who confesses the unique Lordship of Jesus Christ. “The Church tolerates this because of her pastoral concern and love for the faithful. Thus, a mixed marriage is not the norm, but is permitted in the hope that the non-Orthodox spouse will seek entrance into the Church. A petition for a mixed marriage must be submitted to the diocesan hierarch for his blessing. In a mixed marriage, both partners must promise to have children of the union baptized only in the Orthodox Church as a pre-marriage agreement and promise that any children from the union will be raised as Orthodox Christians. Toleration of a mixed marriage does not extend to marriage between an Orthodox Christian and a non-Christian person, such as a Christian Scientist, Jehovah’s Witness, Jew, Mormon, Moslem, Unitarian, etc. Active participation of non-Orthodox clergy in this service, as in all the mysteries of the Orthodox Church, is not allowed” (“Guidelines for Clergy” OCA, page 14-15). It is the norm that at a time close to the marriage the Orthodox Christian parties to the marriage participate in the Sacraments of Confession and Holy Communion.

The prospective bride and groom may not be related in any way (blood or spiritual) that precludes marriage. There are degrees of relationship that preclude marriage. For example, one may not marry a sibling or a closely related cousin.

Strictly speaking, marriages other than first marriages are not encouraged by the Church. Widows and widowers are, in particular, encouraged to remain faithful to their departed spouses. Nevertheless, trusting in God’s mercy and compassion, under certain circumstances subsequent marriages are permitted. The rector will question the prospective parties to marriage to determine if either one of the prospective partners has been married previously and, if so, how many times and under what circumstances. Obviously, those previous marriages must be ended before another marriage can be entered into. If there has been a previous marriage or marriages, documents substantiating legal divorce must be presented to the rector and the rector must examine the reasons for the dissolution of previous marriages. Second marriages are usually allowed. Third marriages are sometimes allowed. Fourth marriages are never allowed. The decision to allow second and third marriages is not the rector’s, but rather the Diocesan Bishop’s. He must provide the blessing for those marriages to take place.

The prospective bride and groom must desire to have children. It may happen subsequent to marriage that they are not able to have children, but they must be open to the gift of procreation. The prospective bride and groom must agree that all children of a marital union blessed in the Orthodox Church are expected to be baptized and raised as Orthodox Christians. The procreation of children is not the only reason for marriage, but it is certainly a wonderful fruit of the union of marriage.

(At this point, it should be mentioned that the Church does not bless sexual relations outside of or before marriage and that this activity, technically termed “fornication,” is even considered to be an impediment to marriage. Why come to the Church to have your marriage blessed by God if, in fact, you are already living after the fashion of married people!)

The primary sponsor/witness of the wedding couple (either the “best man” or “maid/matron of honor”) must be a practicing Orthodox Christian in good standing in his or her parish community and that if he or she is married, he or she must have been married in the Orthodox Church.

Marriages in the Church must take place in the Church building (halls, gardens and other places are not appropriate), following the set order of the Orthodox Church’s traditional Rite of Marriage at a date and time determined in consultation with the pastor. Marriage takes place on Sunday after Divine Liturgy. If the couple for some reason wants to request that the marriage take place on Saturday, permission must be obtained from the Diocesan Bishop. The Order of the Service, that is the Rite of Marriage, is set by the Church. Before a date and time is set for a marriage or any arrangements for marriage are made, such as the rental of a hall for the reception, etc., these things must be discussed with the rector. Dates and times are subject to the norms of the Church—there are many days and times on which marriages cannot be performed. For example, marriages may not be celebrated during the Church’s fasting seasons. The rector will guide the prospective couple in the selection of an appropriate date and time for their wedding. As already mentioned, marriages in the Orthodox Church are usually celebrated on Sunday afternoons, the prospective couple having participated together, to the degree possible, in the Sunday morning Eucharistic Divine Liturgy that same Sunday morning in the parish where the marriage will take place later that same day.

The parties to the marriage must adhere to all relevant civil laws pertaining to the licensing and registration of marriages.

Both parties to the marriage must agree to and participate in pre-marital guidance with the rector of the parish. This means they must be willing to meet with him as he sees fit. This process of pre-marital guidance may include the commitment to read and discuss with the rector various materials provided by him.

At the present time at St. Basil’s Russian Orthodox Church, Watervliet, NY, we use the book “The Journey of Marriage in the Orthodox Church” by Philip Mamalakis and Charles Joanides, published in 2012 by the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. There are seven sessions, each lasting about 60 minutes, but may be shorter or longer, as deemed fit by the rector, during which the couple and the Pastor will meet for marriage preparation. Some of the topics that will be discussed include marriage and family from a Christ-centered perspective, strategies to deal with differences (no two people, no matter how compatible, are identical), how to avoid marital meltdown, family of origin (your perspective of marriage and family life has been significantly shaped by the family in which you were raised), problem solving, finances, parenting, in-laws, sex, inter-Christian challenges, friends, personal time, couple time, communication and listening skills, and above all the basics of the Orthodox Christian Faith and the Orthodox understanding of marriage—What does the Orthodox Church teach about God, the world, human beings, salvation, the Church, eternal life, and more.

## **Anniversaries of Marriage**

On the occasion of significant anniversaries of marriage, after consultation with the rector, it is possible to arrange for the celebration of a Service of Thanksgiving. This service is not a “renewal of vows,” but rather an expression of gratitude to God for blessings given and received. Upon request made to the rector a copy of this service is available for review.

## **Funerals**

The Funeral Service of the Orthodox Church is for practicing Orthodox Christians, those who regularly participated during their lives in the sacraments of Confession and Communion and who, at the time of their deaths, were in communion (“good standing”) with the Church.

The order of services for the funeral of an Orthodox Christian may follow one of two patterns. Which pattern is followed will be determined at the discretion of the rector, following consultation with the family of the departed. Departures from these patterns require the blessing of the priest.

In our parish the more usual pattern is as follows: On the eve of burial, usually in the evening, a memorial service (panikhida) is sung over the body of the departed. The best scenario is that the body of the deceased has already been brought to the Church and the panikhida is served in front of the body in Church. Then, on the day of burial the Funeral Service over the body of the departed is sung in Church, followed by burial. A memorial supper usually follows the burial.

A second possible pattern is as follows: The body of the departed is brought to the Church on the eve of the day of burial and the Funeral Service is sung at that time. Then, the next morning, the day of burial, the Divine Liturgy is celebrated in the presence of the body of the departed. Then the burial and memorial supper follow, as usual and customary. This practice may be followed as long as the liturgical calendar allows for the celebration of Divine Liturgy (Divine Liturgies are not celebrated on Lenten weekdays) and as long as the family members of the departed are members of the Orthodox Church who have prepared themselves to receive Holy Communion on the day of burial.

The Funeral Service takes place in the Church and—in keeping with traditional Orthodox Christian practice—the casket is to remain open until the end of the service when it is formally “sealed” with reading of the assigned prayer from the Funeral Service and the accompanying blessing of Holy Water.

The Funeral Service follows the Church’s set order for this Rite. Items may not usually be added or deleted to or from the service. During the service the Sermon will be delivered by the rector or a visiting Orthodox clergyman with the rector’s approval. Funerals are not to be served and the bodies of the departed are not to be brought to the Church on Sundays (that is from late in the day on Saturday until the evening on Sunday) or on major feast days of the Church. This is also the case on Holy Friday, Holy Saturday, and Pascha Sunday.

The burial of departed persons other than practicing Orthodox Christians may take place as follows:

In the case of a person who was an Orthodox Christian, but not in communion with the Church at the time of his or her death for reasons of willfulness or discipline, the burial and solemnities preceding it are to take place at and from the funeral home. The priest, vested in stole

(*epitachelion*) only, may serve a memorial service including the reading of scriptural readings for the dead.

Non-Orthodox persons may be buried by the pastor from the funeral home. An appropriate memorial service may be served by the priest at the funeral home before burial.

There are some special cases that should be mentioned.

In the case of a person who has committed suicide the Orthodox Church usually does not allow the full funeral rites to be followed, since suicide is a rejection of life, which is a gift we have been given by God. Nevertheless, special pastoral considerations may allow a determination to be made, in consultation with the Bishop, to permit the use of the Funeral Service.

The practice of Freemasonry constitutes an impediment to full communion with the Church. Thus those Orthodox Christians who chose to be Freemasons, when they die, if they have not repented and returned to the communion of the Church, are not buried from the Church with the Church's full funeral rites. They may be buried from the funeral home as described above in the sections concerning the burial of those not in communion with the Church.

Cremation is not an accepted practice in the Orthodox Church and cremated remains are not to be brought to the Church. Cremated remains may be prayed over and buried only after consultation and direction from the Bishop.

It is the tradition of the Orthodox Church that a cross is placed as a marker on the grave. There is no prayer in the priest's "Book of Needs" for the blessing of a stone, a monument, or a marker at a grave. There is only a prayer for the blessing of a cross at the grave. The deceased is buried with his/her feet facing the cross, so that on the final day when we all will rise from the dead, we will be facing the Life-Giving Cross of our Savior Jesus Christ.

## **Memorial Services**

Memorial Services ("Panikhidas") are served by appointment on Saturday afternoons before the celebration of the weekly Saturday evening Great Vespers. On those Saturdays designated in the Church calendar as "Memorial Saturdays," the Divine Liturgy is served in the morning with commemoration of our departed loved ones. On Memorial Saturdays there is usually no panikhida served in the evening.

Please note that in the Orthodox Christian tradition Sundays are given over to the commemoration of the Resurrection and thus Memorial Services are not generally served on Sundays.

## **Hospital and Shut-in Visitation**

Whenever a parishioner is hospitalized the rector makes every effort to visit that person, promptly and regularly. These visitations will always have as their main purpose the saying of appropriate prayers on behalf of the hospitalized person. These visitations may include, at the rector's discretion, participation in the holy sacraments, especially the sacraments of confession, communion, and anointing with holy oil (unction).

Shut-ins, both in institutions and at home, are also visited on a regular basis and certainly during the four fasting seasons of the year (Great Lent, Advent, the Apostle's Fast and the Dormition

Fast). These visits always include time for prayer and, at the pastor's discretion, participation in the sacraments.

Please be reminded that because of civil privacy laws the only way you can be sure that the rector is aware that a person is hospitalized or in another health care facility such as a convalescent home or rehabilitation facility is if the person in question informs the rector of his or her situation or officially authorizes another person to let the rector know on his or her behalf. Please do not assume that the rector knows that you are in the hospital or another health care facility. Make sure that he has been told if you want him to know about your situation.

## **Home Blessing**

The Annual Blessings of Homes takes place each year following the Feast of Theophany in January. Because of the widespread geography of the location of the homes of our parishioners, the rector will set up specific days to visit certain areas. Please try to be home and available on the day scheduled for your area. If you cannot be available, then an appointment may be made to have your home blessed on a different day.

When the Priest comes to bless your home, the following should be arranged:

A table should be set in a central place, covered with a clean, preferably white, tablecloth. Often the dining room table, cleared of nonessential items, is used for this purpose.

On this table should be placed:

- A candle in a candlestick, lighted. This candle will be used by a member of the household to lead the priest through the house during the service of blessing.
- A bowl filled with Holy Water that was blessed during this present year's celebration of Theophany.
- An icon, if the place where the table is does not have one visibly nearby.
- A list of names of the living and departed members, relatives and friends of the household whom you wish to have mentioned during the service of blessing.

During the brief service of blessing the following points should be observed:

- All radios, stereos, televisions, VCRs, computers, etc., should be turned off.
- All members of the household should be gathered, standing and appropriately attired (neat, clean casual clothing is fine, but no dirty work clothes or T-shirts with slogans, etc. should be worn), at the table where the service will begin. Non-Orthodox and/or non-believing members of the household are asked to be respectful during the service or, if they are not able to do so, to respectfully absent themselves.
- Pets should be appropriately secured.
- The doors to each room of the home should be opened and, if necessary, lights should be turned on throughout the house. A member of the household should be selected ahead of time to lead the priest through the house during the blessing. This person should have determined his or her route ahead of time and should carry a lighted candle during this portion of the

service. Children usually enjoy being invited to do this task. More than one child can certainly participate in this part of the service, if they so desire.

- It ought to go without saying, but when the time comes for the visit of the priest, the house should be in “bless-able” condition, not necessarily pristine, but neat and presentable.

## **Parish Cemetery**

Our Parish has a Parish Cemetery, which is located on Elm St. off of Route 32. The Parish Cemetery operates under its own by-laws, procedural rules and administration. For further information, please contact the Cemetery Chairperson or the Rector. A brochure with rules and regulations for our cemetery is available upon request.

## ***Education***

### **Church School Education**

We use a graded classroom approach to parish education. Our classes cover school ages ranging from “pre-K” through to high school, depending upon the age of the children in the program and the need. Church School Education takes place on Sunday mornings in the fall, winter and spring immediately following the reception of Holy Communion. Our Church School Director is certified by the OCEC and all of our teachers are encouraged to receive training and certification through the Orthodox Christian Education Commission (OCEC) as well. We offer a scholarship to all Church School students who are entering college. The criteria to receive a scholarship is participation in Holy Confession and Holy Communion and to write an essay, the topic chosen with the priest. The scholarship is funded by Church School fundraisers and donations. It is to be noted that our Church School education only supplements the main education our children receive, which is by attending the Divine services in Church and by the teaching, prayer life and example set by their parents at home.

### **Bible Study**

Our weekly Bible Study meets for an hour and a half once a week except during Great Lent and Bright Week. We read books of the Bible in their entirety, commenting on and discussing those writings as we proceed through the text. These study sessions are led by the Rector. This has been a fruitful program for those who have participated in it.

### **Catechesis**

By request or (especially in the case of those preparing for entrance into the fullness of communion with the Church) at the initiative of the rector, personal, one-on-one, education and catechesis sessions are scheduled, as deemed necessary. In addition, catechetical, educational articles and inserts are often included in and with the weekly parish bulletin.

## ***Fellowship***

### **Sunday Morning Coffee Social**

On Sunday mornings, following the conclusion of the Divine Liturgy, we have a Parish Coffee Social Hour to which all are invited. It is hosted by weekly hosts who sign up in turn to host the event. The fare is usually simple—coffee, juice, bagels with toppings, a few pastries or cookies, but is enjoyed by all. We ask a small donation from participants to defray the costs.

### **Soyuz**

All male members of our parish are invited to join the Soyuz, which is a men's organization comprised mainly of parishioners. In addition to social activities, in the past the Soyuz has sponsored an annual Superbowl Sunday party and the parish Maslenitsa (Sunday Dinner before the start of Great Lent). The Soyuz has also from time to time made donations to church projects and repairs.

### **Sisterhood**

All female members of our parish are invited to become members of St. Basil's Sisterhood. The Parish Sisterhood takes on occasional events, such as a harvest Fest, garage sales, and ethnic festivals, usually with the goal of raising funds to help meet the costs of general church expenses. The Sisterhood has also donated to the Distinguished Diocesan Benefactors Fund (DDBF) to support the needs and work of our diocese.

## ***Stewardship***

### **Financial**

In the most literal meaning of the word, a "steward" is a person employed to manage another person's property. Stewardship, therefore, is the process by which we care for that which is not ours on behalf of the person to whom it belongs.

When we consider the place of the human being in God's creation we find that humans have been called to be stewards of the whole creation. The first words of the Bible concerning human beings confirm this insight:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." (Genesis 1:26-28)

The very first calling of the human being is to "have dominion" over God's creation. Human beings have been given stewardship of that which is not theirs, but God's. We will answer to God for how we exercise this dominion, this stewardship. We alienate ourselves from God by consuming the good things of His creation, rather than caring for them. Remember this parable told by our Lord, Jesus Christ:



And the Lord said, "Who then is the faithful and wise steward, whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master when he comes will find so doing. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed in coming,' and begins to beat the menservants and the maidservants, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will punish him, and put him with the unfaithful. And that servant who knew his master's will, but did not make ready or act according to his will, shall receive a severe beating. But he who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, shall receive a light beating. Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required; and of him to whom men commit much they will demand the more. (Luke 12:42-48)

Notice in the parable that much will be expected of those to whom much has been given. We have been blessed in the Church to know the fullness of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Certainly much will be expected of us. Notice, also, how proper stewardship is the measure of a faithful servant. We are all servants of God. We must accept that designation and make sure that we are faithful stewards.

Faithful stewardship concerns absolutely and completely those things that we "have." Hear this parable of our Lord:

And Jesus told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man brought forth plentifully; and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns, and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." (Luke 12:16-21)

In this parable God asks us the question: "The things you have prepared, whose will they be?" The answer is that they never were ours and never will be ours. All that we "have" is from God. Listen to the witness of Holy Scripture, here from the Book of Psalms:

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep. (Psalm 127:1-2)

God provides us with both the means and opportunities to "possess." Since the things we treat as being our own are not actually not ours, but God's, we must steward them, that is, care for them, in a manner in accordance with the will of God and not just to satisfy our own desires.

However, the point is even broader. For our stewardship does not encompass only material possessions. It involves much more than that. Hear again the words of our Lord:

I tell you, on the Day of Judgment men will render account for every careless word they utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." (Matthew 12:36-37)

God has given us everything, not just the possessions we have outside ourselves, but also the capabilities we possess within our persons—our intellect, our physical strength, our very being. We will answer to God for our stewardship of these things, too.

What then is required of us, right now, in the concrete sense? An insight into the answer of this question might also be found in the words of our Lord:

And Jesus sat down opposite the [temple] treasury, and watched the multitude putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came, and put in two copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him, and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living." (Mark 12:41-44)

God requires of us everything—all that we have and all that we are. To give only what is left over—“out of our abundance,” as the Lord puts it—is not sufficient. The “minimum” required of us (our “dues”) is everything, all that we have. Giving is something we should notice because it costs us—it should actually impact our standard of living. In another place in Holy Scripture, our Lord reinforces this point:

And a ruler asked Jesus, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.'" And he said, "All these I have observed from my youth." And when Jesus heard it, he said to him, "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." But when the man heard this he became sad, for he was very rich. Jesus looking at him said, "How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." Those who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?" But Jesus said, "What is impossible with men is possible with God." (Luke 18:18-27)

How these words challenge us! Who among us can say that we do not “become sad” like the questioner of Jesus when we hear them? We must be thankful for the mercy shown to us by Christ in His words “what is impossible with men is possible with God.” Each of us must also allow our conscience to be troubled and ask ourselves: What is my attitude towards this passage of the Gospel? Do I struggle to accept it? Or, do I try to find ways to say that it does not apply to me? Do I truly seek to use all that God has blessed me with in accordance with His will? Or, am I as yet unable to accept this high calling—the call to stewardship—upon which my eternal salvation apparently depends?

What is a practical first step in the right direction? How can I begin to bring myself into accord and agreement with the Gospel? How do I become a steward, that is, a person who understands and accepts that I am only caring for that which is someone else’s and do not in fact possess anything that I can truly call my own? The following passage from the Old Testament’s Book of the Prophet Malachi may strengthen us in this regard and give us the courage and resolve necessary to (re)dedicate ourselves to a life of stewardship:

From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. But you say, 'How shall we return?' Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How are we robbing You?' In your tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me; the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house; and thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, [see then] if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. (Malachi 3:7-10)

Malachi lived among the people of Israel centuries before God fully revealed Himself to His People in the person of His Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ, two thousand years ago. Yet, Malachi was already called to remind the people that they had stepped away from God and from what God had taught them regarding their responsibilities towards Him. The people are not giving God what he deserves. They are “robbing” Him. But, we must notice God’s promise in the words of His prophet, Malachi. He tells the people, “return to me, and I will return to you.” He tells the people that if they only would “bring full tithes,” that is if they would only give God what He deserves, that He, in return, will pour out “an overflowing blessing.” He even tells the people that they are to “put [Him] to the test” through their giving and to see how richly He will bless them in return.

St. Paul in his Second Letter to the Corinthians summarizes in one small phrase what our attitude must be in regard to the things of this world: “as dying, and behold we live,” he says (2 Corinthians 6:9).

What does this mean? It means that if we are only living for the things of this world we are already dead because we are not fulfilling the calling for which we were made by God. If, however, we instead “die” to the things of this world—if we are not “owned” by the things that we have made the mistake of thinking are ours—we actually live. We live because we are doing the will of God, which, for us, is life. To do God’s will in all things is to fulfill the vocation to which God has called us. That vocation is to accept and embrace the call to steward God’s creation on His behalf and to His glory. This for us is life and light and joy and peace.

Let us, therefore, commit ourselves with courage and resolve to fulfill our calling to Christian stewardship.

## **Parish Dues**

Our parish currently follows a “dues” system. Although we have set minimum dues, many of our parishioners practice stewardship by making an honest assessment of what is possible and proper and then give as they are able. This is often above the minimum amount. Those who have a financial hardship and find it difficult to contribute the minimum amount may seek an exemption and still be in good standing, as long as he/she still participate in the Holy Mysteries of the Church (Confession and Holy Communion). This requires a written request to the Parish Council. We remember, as related in St. Mark’s Gospel (Mk. 12:41-44), how Christ honored the poor widow’s tiny contribution to Temple treasury, for she gave all that she had. We all receive more from the Church than we can possibly give. After all, salvation is a free gift of God—it cannot be bought! Membership in the Orthodox Christian Church is determined by active participation in the sacramental life—participation made possible by a life of repentance and love in response to the sacrifice our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ made for us on His Holy Cross. It is not a financial matter.

Nevertheless, we do have the practical need and definite responsibility of providing for the financial needs of the Church, in general, and our parish community, in particular. To meet this need and fulfill this responsibility, the faithful members of our parish all make annual contributions of financial support—some large, some small. Those blessed with wealth are particularly accountable and answerable for being generous and supportive.

The parish asks each person for a freewill gift, a generous gift offered in love, responding to God’s love—a gift that, hopefully, goes far beyond the mere payment of a fee or tax and far beyond the mere fulfillment of an obligation.

The need is to support an annual parish expense budget that at the time of this writing is between \$144,000.00 and \$146,000.00. In recent years, we have had about 117 adult members capable of making a pledge to pay “dues.” So, if we “do the math,” we understand the need.

The guideline is this: give a first portion, percentage gift. This means, whatever our gross annual household income, that we pledge ourselves to make a contribution to our Church based on a percentage of that income. This contribution is honored with the first place in our personal or household budget. We make such a commitment even if we are retirees and the living we receive

is in the form of pensions, Social Security, interest from investments and funds drawn from savings. We certainly do this if we are wage earners.

If each one of us makes a commitment to give at least 5% of our gross annual income to the Church, we should certainly be able to meet our financial needs. A 5% contribution is half of the Biblical tithe, which is 10%. Also, such a contribution is not all that much when we consider that everything we like to think of ourselves as “owning” is from God and is to be used to help ourselves and others grow closer to God! There is nothing we have that has not been made possible for us by the love and grace of God.

## **Restricted Funds**

In addition to the General Fund, we have a number of additional funds which are restricted that are also destinations for giving. These include the Restoration Fund (for repairs, etc.) the Cemetery Fund and the Distinguished Diocesan Benefactors Fund (DDBF). Often donations are made in memory of departed loved ones.

**The General Fund:** This fund is used by the Parish Council as needed to help pay any general needs or expenses of the parish.

**The Restoration Fund:** The money in the Restoration Fund is restricted for use to repair, improve and maintain the Church building, the rectory, the Parish Center, the cemetery and the property on which they stand.

**The Cemetery Fund:** The Cemetery Fund consists of monies that have been donated to the Church with the restriction that the money be used for purely cemetery repairs, needs, and maintenance.

**The Cemetery Perpetual Care Fund:** The Cemetery Perpetual Care Fund can only be used for cemetery maintenance and care in the event that the church was closed and the cemetery was no longer cared for by parishioners' donations of time, talent and monetary contributions.

**The Needy Box:** The Needy Box, located in the narthex near the church office, is a way for parishioners to fulfill the Gospel commandment to help the poor and the needy. Funds are distributed at the discretion of the Parish Council with the suggestions and input of parishioners. In the past funds have been donated to needy seminarians, parishioners who have fallen on hard times, the Orthodox Prison Ministry, our local Open Table Soup Kitchen, our local Rescue Mission and Orthodox Christian missions and charities in America and throughout the world.

**Rental Property:** St. Basil's owns a property with two rental apartments. The rental property must maintain a balance of \$5000.00 in its account. Anything above that amount is donated to the General Fund of the church for general expenses. Any repairs or maintenance of the rental property is expected to be paid for by the money in the rental property account.

## **Wills and Bequests**

Please consider leaving a gift to St. Basil's Russian Orthodox Church when you make your estate plan. Part of estate planning is having a valid will—every person should have a will so that they and not others will determine how their assets are used and by whom following their passing

from this life. You can remember the church in your will, giving back to God some of what He has blessed you with during your lifetime. Another part of estate planning is making of significant gifts and donations to worthy causes before the time that one's will comes into effect. A planned gift is a wonderful way to leave a legacy and often offers significant tax benefits. Please see the Pastor or Parish Treasurer if you have any questions about planned giving.

## **Time and Talents**

Our parish depends on the time and talents of volunteers who do so much to meet the needs of the parish on a daily basis, in all its aspects. We currently pay to have our church cleaned, grass mowed and snow plowed. During Great Lent we ask for volunteers to help give the church a special cleaning in time for Pascha. Examples of other aspects of donating ones time and talents are: mowing and cleaning the cemetery property, teaching in the Church School, assisting at Parish Center rentals, serving on the Parish Council, sewing and ironing church vestments and covers, singing and reading in church, visiting the sick and shut-ins, cooking, cleaning and serving at parish dinners, sponsoring and assisting at Coffee Hour, legal work, painting, minor church repairs and carpentry work, electrical work and landscaping.

We strongly suggest that every faithful member of St. Basil's Russian Orthodox Church consider it part of their personal commitment to the parish to volunteer a portion of their time and talents to the maintenance and building up of the parish.

## ***Parish Administration***

### **By-Laws of the Parish**

This content of this Parish Life Handbook reflects the By-laws of the Parish, which in turn regulate the administration of the Parish. Whereas this Parish Life Handbook is a living, working document, subject to change on a regular basis in response to the day-to-day realities of parish life, the By-laws are a more permanent document, which can only be modified by means of a rigorous process involving all members of the parish and requiring the blessing of our Diocesan Bishop. Copies of the Parish By-laws are available to members of the Parish upon request.

### **Parish Council**

The Parish Council is the board of trustees of the parish as a legal corporation. The Parish Council consists of the priest and the elected lay members. The mission of the Parish Council is to keep, practice and proclaim the Orthodox Christian Faith pure and undefiled. As such, the organization and administration of the parish are subject to the Holy Canons of the Orthodox Church. The competence of the Parish council is to implement the decisions and resolutions of the All-American Councils of the Orthodox Church in America (OCA), the OCA Diocese of New York and New Jersey and of the parish assemblies and to see to the cleanliness, maintenance and upkeep of all parish buildings and property. The Parish Council is entrusted by the parish to manage the real property, securities and other temporalities of the parish. It is not within the competency of the Parish Council to discuss liturgical or pastoral issues, which are the particular competency of the rector. The By-Laws of the Diocese of NY and NJ stipulate in Article V: "The parish meeting (Annual Parish Meeting) shall elect a Parish Council to assist the Rector in the administration of the parish and to execute the decisions of the parish meeting. At

the head of the parish is its Rector who is assigned by the Diocesan Bishop. The Rector is the spiritual father and teacher of his flock and the celebrant of the liturgical worship as established by the Church. He teaches and edifies the People of God entrusted to his spiritual care and assures that all activities within the parish serve the mission of the Church. No activities in the parish can be initiated without his knowledge, approval, and blessing; neither should he do anything pertaining to the parish without the knowledge of his parishioners nor duly elected parish officers, so that always and everywhere there may be unity, mutual trust, cooperation and love. In conformity with his teaching office, the Rector shall have final authority over the church school. The parish Rector presides at the parish meeting. No meetings of the Parish council may be held without the knowledge and blessing of the rector who, as the head of the parish, must take part in the discussion and resolution of all parish affairs.” As “proestamemos,” the Parish Priest is the chairman of the Parish Council and therefore leads the Parish Council meetings and discussions. Parish council meetings are held once each month, July and August excluded, provided that the business of the parish can be maintained during those two months without a meeting. Parish council meetings are open to all voting members of the parish who may attend as observers only. Discussions and voting on any issue is restricted to members of the parish council. Parishioners may request permission to address the Parish Council at a Parish Council Meeting, but this must be arranged beforehand with the Parish Priest. At its discretion, the council may deem it necessary to hold closed meetings, restricted to parish council members. The duties of a parish council member include regular attendance at divine services and participation in the sacramental life of the Church, thereby setting an example for the parish. Parishioners are often nominated as candidates for the Parish Council because of their education, business experience or legal background. However, the best parish council members are not necessarily those who are business-oriented, but rather, those who are Church-oriented and Christ-centered. To be a good council member, one must be active in the worship and sacramental life of the Church. The best candidates are easy to find – they are in church.

## ***BECOMING A MEMBER OF THE PARISH***

### **How to become a Member of our Parish**

If you are interested in becoming a member of the parish or if you are considering becoming an Orthodox Christian, please speak to the pastor. He will assist you with your journey and, with the assistance of the parishioners, will endeavor to make your integration into parish life a joyful, spiritually-rewarding experience.

To become a parishioner of St. Basil’s Russian Orthodox Church, you are requested to:

- Be or become an Orthodox Christian
- Complete a personal data questionnaire for parish membership
- Partake of the Sacraments of Confession and Holy Communion
- Make a financial pledge for the current year
- Commit yourself to use a portion of your time and talents on behalf of the parish so that you might then enrich your life and at the same time help the parish in its journey to

proclaim, teach, defend, strengthen, and preserve the Orthodox Faith, by giving back to God some of the time and talent He has entrusted in your care.

### **A Note of Thanks**

This “Parish Life Handbook” is mostly based on the Parish Life Handbook of Saints Cyril and Methodius Orthodox Christian Church, Terryville, Ct. (OCA). I am indebted to Fr. John Hopko for allowing me to borrow from his handbook for our parish.

Archpriest Peter Olsen, rector of St. Basil’s Russian Orthodox Church

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