

THE MESSENGER

ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH

"Behold I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You.

The voice of one crying in the wilderness; Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight." Mark 1:2-3

February 2021

VISION:

Love God, Love your neighbor and spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ as an Orthodox Christian community.

MISSION:

The mission of St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church is to welcome and serve people with love, truth, joy and peace, and to create an environment that encourages all to seek salvation through Orthodox Christianity.

CORE VALUES:

Love, Worship, Community, Learning, Service

Pastoral Guidelines related to COVID-19

The Messenger goes to the printer on the 15th of each month for the following month. The calendar of events may or may not be reflective of what we will do in the month of February. As we have been doing each month, we lead off *The Messenger* with some pastoral guidelines related to COVID-19. Should regulations be made more or less strict, we will adjust accordingly.

We are now allowing up to 140 people to worship each Sunday, the first 85 who arrive will be seated in the church and the remainder in the hall. We still will ask that everyone sign up on SignUpGenius to attend services. It is safe for 85 worshippers plus 10 workers to be in the church at one time and still be social distancing. We will continue to celebrate the Divine Liturgy on Saturdays and Sundays, until it is safe for us to all return on Sundays, and until people feel comfortable all coming back together.

We will celebrate Paraklesis each Wednesday at 6:00 p.m. Thus, there will be Paraklesis on February 3, 10, 17 and 24, so that we can pray for each parishioner by name until we can all come back together as one.

Until the pandemic is over and we hear otherwise, we will continue to utilize SignUpGenius in order to attend the Divine Liturgy and other services. We will continue to check temperatures and seat people according to social distancing guidelines. We will continue to ask that people not congregate after services. Our Parish leadership meets on a regular basis to discuss taking the next steps, and proceeding cautiously as we open up "a little more" each month.

You may sign up for any Sunday or any other service where you wish to worship. Also, if you are able to worship not on a Sunday, please do so, so that we can reserve Sunday for those who can only worship on Sundays. If you sign up and can't make a service, please take your name off the list as soon as you know you can't attend, so make room for others to come. We want all services to have as many people as possible. **Also, the crew who helps outside at the check-in table will leave the outside table to worship at 10:15 a.m. We ask that if you are attending the Divine Liturgy, that you please be courteous and arrive on time. If you arrive after 10:15 a.m., please knock on the side door and someone will come outside to assist you. However, no one will be admitted to the church during the Gospel and the sermon as this is disruptive. This is approximately 10:20-10:30 a.m. Thank you for your cooperation on this.**

For those who are not able to worship in person, we will continue to live-stream all services. We will also continue to provide Sunday school materials for our children, our teens and our adults on-line until this pandemic is over, for those who are not worshipping in person. We will be offering in person Sunday school on Sundays. More on that below.

The latest information will always be available on our website and through Constant Contact. Both our Metropolis and parish protocols for coming back to church safely are on our website. Thank you for your patience in filtering through all of our constant contacts. It is really the most effective way to communicate news and comments during this time.

Finally, a big thank you for the small crew of volunteers who assist in order to make sure we are safe at every service—the nursing ministry, the welcome ministry, the ushers, the altar servers, and the guest chanters. Everyone has done a great job coming together to make sure we can offer regular worship, as well as these extra services in a way that is safe.

Rev. Fr. Stavros N. Akrotirianakis, Priest

2418 W. Swann Avenue, Tampa, FL 33609 Office: (813) 876-8830 Email: office@stjohntpa.org

Website: <http://www.stjohntpa.org>

Father Stavros' Message

I WILL - Trusting God in the Dark

(Adapted from a sermon by Tony Evans)

Tony Evans is the senior pastor of the 9,500-member Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship in Dallas, Texas. I listened to a podcast of his, entitled "Trusting God in the Dark." It was of a sermon he gave very shortly after his wife passed away. I heard this podcast nearly a year ago, and I took some notes on it as I listened. I, then, put the notes away and made a note to write on this topic for The Messenger in February 2021. I'm not sure why I picked this month out, exactly one year ago. One year ago was before COVID-19, social unrest and political upheaval. As I looked at my notes on this podcast, and the note in my calendar to use that as the topic for February 2021, I actually can't think of a more appropriate topic to write on right now. I'm thankful to the person who shared this podcast with me a year ago, thankful to Tony Evans who delivered it, and thankful to God for putting it in my mind to use this exactly a year later, at a time where we all need to hear this message. In order to give full credit, there are entire portions of this that are verbatim from the podcast, and other pieces that I have added in.



Many people have had to “wrestle” with God. Many people have been disappointed by God. In just about every life, at least one time, God has, in your opinion, let you down. He didn't come through for you. That's probably not something you'd say loudly, because it sounds unspiritual, it sounds like you lack faith, if you say that God has disappointed you, that God has let you down.

As we enter 2021 (I'm writing this message on January 11, so we are still in the early days of this year), there are a lot of concerns. The pandemic is a concern—whether we are going to get sick, or be a carrier that gets someone else sick, whether this whole thing has been overblown, or whether we are not being careful enough, whether we should get the vaccine, when we can get the vaccine, and will the vaccine bring an end to this whole thing. Social unrest is a concern. There is a lot of anger and disappointment in society. Some of it is justified. And the justification of much of it is debated. We debate how much protests and demonstrations can lead to a positive change and how much they are just destructive. As we have been in this posture for nearly a year for COVID-19 and 9 months on the other things, it is a fair thing to wonder, where is God in the midst of this?

We are not alone in the way we feel

One important message to consider is that we are not alone in the way that we feel. And this isn't the first year of struggle and strife. The Bible is filled with stories of people who didn't feel like God knew what He was doing, who felt let down and abandoned, who felt confused, who felt that God wasn't there when they needed Him. Look back at your life, and there is likely a time for many of us when something significant happened, when you felt that God wasn't there for you. Is this true for you?

We know that throughout history, there have been people that God has spoken to and revealed truths unknown to others. Before the time of Christ, God spoke through prophets, revealing to them the future plans for a Messiah, as well as revealing to them God's deliverance of His people from their suffering.

Job

One of these people wrote the book of Job. The author of Job is unknown, but the story of Job is well known. It is the story of a man who had truly been blessed in his life with many things and many important people. Most of all, Job was faithful to God. One day, Satan went to God and challenged God, regarding Job. He claimed that Job was only faithful to God because God had been so good to Job. Satan requested to do an experiment, to take everything from Job and see if Job would stay faithful to God. God allowed this to happen, telling Satan only that he could not kill Job. One by one, the people he loved were taken from him, the things he owned were taken from him, and he lost his health and everything that was good in his life.

The book of Job is 42 chapters long. All of these misfortunes happen to Job in the first two chapters of the book. From chapters 3-41, Job is in despair. He cries out to God. He asks that question that is on the mind of many: why do the righteous suffer? He didn't understand why he was suffering. His friends couldn't help him out. We'll come back to Job.

Many people wrestle with God, particularly in the instances where we pray for someone to be healed and instead they die. This happens a lot actually. Someone gets sick, and we begin praying for them. Sometimes many people pray for them. There may be signs that healing is about to occur, and then there is a disappointment that despite the prayers and the positive signs, it goes the other way and the person we love passes away. In Isaiah (another prophet who had visions from the Lord) 55:8, we read, “*For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, says the Lord.*” When we struggle with God, and His will, this verse becomes very real, when His idea and our idea for how things should turn out are totally different. And it leaves us confused, questioning God, questioning faith, questioning everything.

Habakkuk

There is a small book in the Old Testament called Habakkuk. It consists of three short chapters. It is buried between the books of two other minor prophets, Nahum and Haggai. The

Prophet Habakkuk prophesied in Judah about six hundred years before Christ, at a time when the South Kingdom of Judah was weakening and collapsing, before the arrival of the Babylonians in Palestine. The Babylonians captured Jerusalem in approximately 598 B.C. and deported the Hebrews to Babylon. They would not return to Jerusalem for eighty years. They would return to find their city in ruins and had to rebuild the temple of Jerusalem. Most significantly, because they believed that God resided in the temple, they believed that when Jerusalem was invaded, the temple was destroyed and they were forced into exile, that God had died.

Habakkuk lived and prophesied before the fall of Jerusalem, testifying about what was to come, even as he lamented the already collapsing society in front of him. He knew, by a vision of God, that the society of his day was in trouble, and was on the verge of being conquered by the Babylonians.

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and Thou wilt not hear? Or cry to thee "Violence!" and Thou wilt not save? Why dost Thou make me see wrongs and look upon trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.
Habakkuk 1:2

The opening of the short book of Habakkuk is a plea to God. How long am I going to cry out to you for help and only hear silence? How long will I cry out that there is violence and yet God will not intervene and save me? Why God, do I see only wrongs and trouble in front of me, why is there destruction and violence, strife and contention?

I hope this book has our attention, because these sentiments of Habakkuk that he expressed around 600 B.C. are similar to what we are seeing, experiencing and feeling in 2021 A.D. Like us today, Habakkuk wants to know how long this is going to last, and then he wants to know WHY? Why are bad things happening, especially to good people? Why, when people get sick, do they not survive? Why wasn't the problem of the coronavirus, or any other illness caught earlier?

The Prophet's Complaint and God's Answer

It will take you 15 minutes to read the book of Habakkuk, if that. You will see that in chapter one, the Prophet pours out his complaint to the Lord. There is nothing wrong with complaining to God, there is no sin there. To think we can live a life without complaint is unrealistic. In our fallen humanity, disappointment and the resulting complaint are part of life. Learning how to manage them is our challenge, and is our ultimate goal. If you have complaints to God about how this past year has gone, there is nothing sinful about that. The sinful part is when we stop the conversation with God. Habakkuk complained, but he never stopped the conversation with God. So did Job.

The second chapter of Habakkuk is about God's reply to the Prophet's complaint. God talks about the woes of the wicked. What is about to happen to the Hebrew society is not the fault of God. The Hebrews had replaced God with idols, and replaced good with wickedness. Corruption was widespread. Sounds a lot like our country in 2021!

The Prayer of the Prophet

The third chapter is a prayer of the prophet. In his prayer, he foresees the destruction coming upon God's people, even as he proclaims the might and power of God. The people have sown a path of destruction for themselves. It would take intervention from God to save them from the destruction they have brought

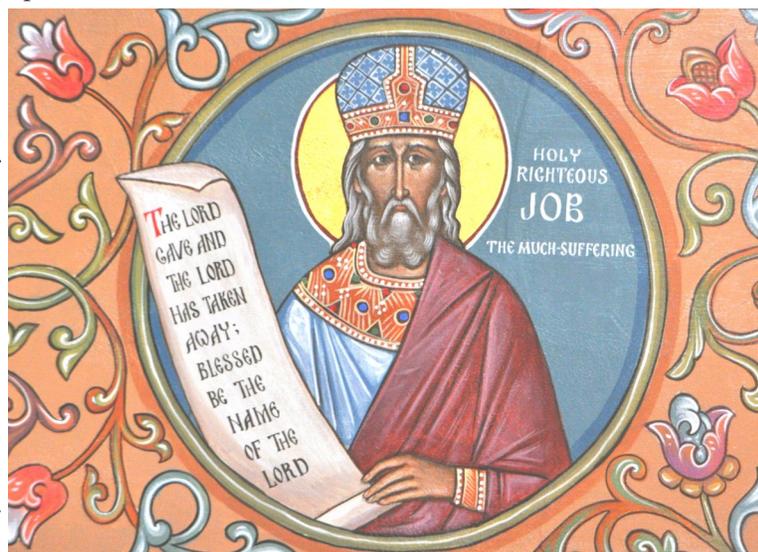
upon themselves. But God is silent.

I hear, and my body trembles, my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones, my steps totter beneath me. I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us. *Habakkuk 3:16*

God is about to bring judgment on His people because of their idolatry. And He is about to use the Babylonians to do this. Habakkuk can't figure out God's thinking, he doesn't understand why this is happening. He can't see God's perspective. He is actually becoming unraveled, as he sees what is coming. He feels rotten in his bones. His steps are unsure.

But the Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before Him. *Habakkuk 2:20*

The answer of the Lord, in His response to the prophet's complaint, is that all of his talking is not going to help the prophet figure this out. All the crying, weeping and complaining isn't going to yield and answer. Going back to the book of Job, in the 39 chapters of complaint and lament, Job was still not clear in his understanding of what had happened to him and why. Habakkuk is struggling with the "why" question, the "how long" question and the "not going to be able to figure it out" question and all he can do is be silent.



What do we do?

The answer the world gives

We have all be in the predicament of Habakkuk and Job. Many of us are in it right now. The secular world offers a number of suggestions for facing this kind of situation when the world doesn't make sense. Here are the worldly answers:

1. Encourage resignation. Just accept your situation, there is nothing you can do about it, that's just how it is and how it's going to be.
2. Detachment. This is another way that people deal with despair and disappointment. They detach. We don't want to think about our despair and disappointment so we go with some kind of distraction—music, entertainment, drugs, alcohol, pornography, watch TV, overeat, sleep. We become enmeshed in other things, so we don't have to think about our problems. The problem with detachment is that despair knows how to work around it, and still finds a way to seep in, still finds a way to bring the problem back to mind, so we have to keep finding more escape.

3. Bravado. This is where we tell someone else, or we tell ourselves, “get it together.” In bravado, we grit our teeth, and we are told that by sheer determination, we’ll overpower the thing that is crushing us. Except that doesn’t work either. Bravado isn’t going to cure the coronavirus, the social unrest or the political upheaval. Neither will detachment or resignation.

What do we do? Habakkuk’s Answer

At the end on the book of Habakkuk, the prophet offers us another approach when God doesn’t make sense. When we are disappointed with Him, frustrated with Him, in our quiet moments, when we might not even be particularly spiritual or religious, when we are trying to be honest and respectful, Habakkuk helps us out:

Though the fig tree does not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; He makes my feet like hinds’ feet, He makes me tread upon my high places.
Habakkuk 3:17-19

Habakkuk paints a picture of bleak circumstances in verse 17: the fig tree does not blossom, there is no fruit on the vines, no olives on the trees, no crop in the field, the flock is lost and there are no cattle left. For an agrarian society, which is what society was back then, this is indeed a very bleak picture.

The circumstances of this are beyond his control. They have to do with there being no rain. This is a circumstance beyond anyone’s control. Habakkuk can’t make it rain. There is nothing he can do to fix his situation, or else he certainly would. There are many times in life when we are like Habakkuk, working so hard to fix something, and yet that something is beyond our control, like we can’t make it rain.

However, the prophet makes a choice. He utters two important words: **I WILL!**

And in those two words, Habakkuk decides to go against how he feels. We know that in 3:16 that he is in distress. We know that he is close to hitting bottom. We know that his emotions are flat. He makes a choice: “I WILL.”

Faith and feelings, and why feelings can’t lead

Sometimes faith and feelings get along. Sometimes we “feel” faithful. It’s bubbling up in you, the joy of the Lord is tangible, palpable. Sometimes faith and feelings are working in tandem. Sometimes, however, they get divorced. They separate. Faith and feelings don’t always agree.

If our life was analogous to a train, our will must be the engine, and our emotions must be the caboose. We know that if the caboose were to pull the train, the train wouldn’t go anywhere, the journey would be in trouble. So we can’t let our feelings lead our lives, because we can’t always control how we feel. Feelings change all the time based on our circumstances—we can feel happy and in the same day we can feel sad. We can feel joyful one moment and distraught the next. Our feelings go all over the place and can fluctuate constantly. When we get emotional, it is usually without a schedule. We don’t wake up planning to laugh or cry, it just happens. We see or experience something that triggers an emotion. We can’t ignore the reality of emotions, so we shouldn’t dismiss them as if they don’t exist

or don’t matter. We just can’t let them control us. This includes both the good and bad emotions. Emotions are not always bad things. Laughter and joy are emotions and they are good.

What Habakkuk did, in the midst of emotion, was say “I WILL.” He decided, despite despair, despite questions of why, despite emotions of sadness, he decided to make a decision to exalt in the Lord, “to rejoice in the God of my salvation.”

The decision of the Prophet

I WILL!

I have made a choice to praise Him anyhow.

I am not going to praise Him for what I’m feeling, but in the midst of what I am feeling.

THIS is one of the most critical decisions we will make in life, to praise God and to live for him, not for what we are feeling, but in the midst of what we are feeling. This allows us to praise God and to live for Him, even when we are feeling badly, even when we are in despair.

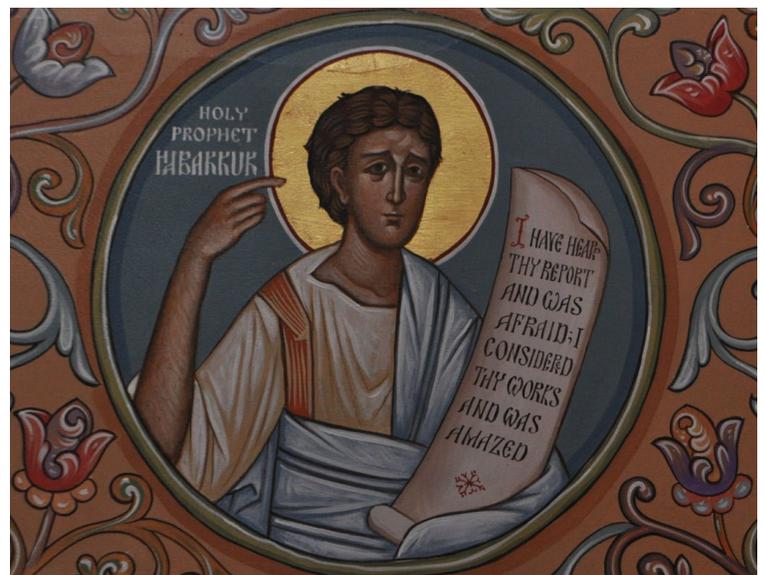
In the Psalms, we see David praising God while in the midst of feeling pain.

In Psalm 42: 9-11, we read:

I say to God, my rock: “Why hast Thou forgotten me? Why go I mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?” As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, “Where is your God?” Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him, my help and my God.

In the midst of distress, David cries out to the Lord, “I shall again praise Him!”

When God has disappointed us, let us down, hurt us and we don’t understand why, and He hasn’t at least answered our questions, the way we get through this is “yet I will rejoice in the Lord” (Habakkuk 3:18) If we’re looking at feelings to get through our trials, they can’t help us. When we look at the field of our lives and we see no figs on the tree, or we look at our barn and see no herd in the stalls, our feelings won’t give us the “oomph” we need to keep going. We might even come to church, and if the sermon is right or the choir is good, we’ll get a little “oomph,” but by the time we get home, it’s gone. That’s



because we are piggybacking on someone else. We tie our uplifted feeling to a sermon or to singing, rather than to our own will. Certainly it is necessary for other people and other circumstances to uplift us. However, at some point, our feelings can resist even encouragement from others. That doesn't mean we should ever stop encouraging one another. The decision "I WILL" can be encouraged and should be encouraged by others. However, ultimately, this decision comes from deep within each person.

The prophet says "I will rejoice," not because of a sermon or a choir but because of a will that comes from within.

The result of a choice to rejoice

What is the result of this choice to rejoice? First, there is a change of focus. Habakkuk talked about his problem, he didn't dismiss his problem, but he changed his focus. He doesn't deny the barren fields or the empty barn. He chooses to shift his focus, to "the God of my salvation. In spite of his circumstances, he finds a way and a will to praise God. In 3:19, he proclaims "*God, the Lord, is my strength.*"

When we are in despair, it weakens us, either physically, psychologically, circumstantially, emotionally or spiritually. Despair has an impact on us. The strength of Habakkuk didn't come because his circumstance changed, but because he allowed God into his circumstance.

Asking for strength to climb the mountain, not asking for the mountain to disappear

Continuing on in 3:19, the prophet writes "He makes my feet like hinds' feet, He makes me tread upon my high places." The image to call to mind here is of a mountain goat or a mountain deer. The high places are mountains. At times of despair and darkness, it often feels like we are climbing a mountain.

The beauty of a mountain goat or mountain deer is sure footedness while they climb. They have the unique ability because of the strength in their legs to climb the mountain without falling into potholes or pits, they are able to navigate the terrain of the mountain.

We would love to read "He makes my high places disappear." That doesn't happen. God doesn't necessarily move our mountains or flatten them. Rather, He strengthens our legs, He makes our feet like hinds' feet, He strengthens us, He changes our footwork, He shows us how to navigate the terrain of the mountain.

The bridge carries us over danger. It doesn't eradicate the danger

We've all had the experience of driving across a bridge. A bridge usually means that there is something dangerous below. The bridge connects two points of contact over something—like water or a valley, etc. Without the bridge we can't cross whatever is under without disaster. The bridge is not designed to eradicate danger, but as a path to get you across it. The bridge God gives is strength. The prophet writes that the Lord God is his strength.

What a wonderful idea it is to believe that when we follow God, the mountains disappear. Sometimes they do. However, there are many times when they don't, and we have to learn to be a spiritual mountain climber. This is when we have to ask God for strength, not to move the mountain, but to help us navigate the mountain. This is where we ask God not to take away the mountain, but to strengthen our legs and make us sure footed as we climb.

It is important to start the day asking the Lord for strength to navigate today. We have to come to a place where we say, despite all that is going on, "I am going to praise You anyway." We may have questions of why, or we don't understand, or we ask why now, or why this and that's okay. We all have "why" questions. If you haven't had one, keep living. There will be a "why" question. And when we get an answer we should praise God because many times He gives answers. However, there are many times when God doesn't explain Himself.

Conclusion

Going back to the title of this article, it is "I WILL—Trusting God in the Dark." This means trusting in God when there is a lack of clarity, when He hasn't made Himself clear, when our minds are riddled with thoughts of why now, why this way, why does it hurt this bad, and why does it hurt this long.

Ideally, we find a will to praise God when He gives us an answer, and in the words of Habakkuk, we find a will to praise Him even when He doesn't.

I feel like many of the rules that have governed my life are changing, like we are on a football field and society is moving the goalposts. When you play football, one of the things that is a constant is where the goalposts are, where the end zone is. Like many of us, I am tempted to tune into the endless news cycle, or to flip around stations until I hear someone that is saying what I want to hear. I am working hard to block out the noise, to not become anxious about an uncertain future, and instead to concentrate on how I can be the best version of who God created me to be, how I can best live out His call for my life.

When I focus on Him, and on today, and when I put the two together and focus on serving Him today, I find that I can praise Him in the midst of what I'm feeling, I find His peace in the midst of conflict, and I find additional strength in my legs so that I can climb the mountain with some degree of confidence.

I WILL is the mantra for a God-centered life.

I WILL keep praising Him even when I feel sad.

I WILL keep serving Him even when the rest of the world isn't.

I WILL keep climbing even when the mountain is steep.

I WILL believe that there is a reward at the summit, even if others don't.

I WILL believe that He will give me the strength to get there, even when I don't feel like I'm going to make it.

The mantra I WILL still requires help from one another. It still requires encouragement from one another. Because many times, we will struggle to say "I WILL." And many times the noise of the world will make it hard to hear God's voice. Hearing some spiritual encouragement will help us stay focused on the summit and will help blot out the noise and the distractions.

May God help us to move forward, to keep climbing, to keep our eyes on the summit. May we trust God in the dark times, just as much as we trust Him in the light.

I WILL keep climbing. Will you? I WILL need your encouragement. I WILL continue to give you mine.

With love in the Lord,

+Fr. Stavros

Pastoral Notes from Fr. Stavros

There are several pastoral issues that occur each month. Out of a desire to keep a good sense of order and serve you better, periodically I'll make some "pastoral notes."

Fr. John Stefero is working part time for our parish. Fr. John Stefero will be working for our church on a part-time basis. He will be doing some of the Liturgical services, including some of the Saturday Divine Liturgies during the pandemic. He will also be available for confession, counseling, visits to hospitals (when allowed), house blessings, and other pastoral duties. His cell phone number is 678-637-4425. If you'd like to meet with Fr. John, please reach out to him directly. His email is also jwstefero50@hotmail.com. We welcome Fr. John to our parish. Along with Fr. Stratton Dorozenski, who will also be serving our parish, it will be a wonderful addition to our parish to have additional clergy serving with us.

Please Schedule all sacraments and memorial services through the office. In order to serve you more efficiently, please schedule all sacraments and memorial services through the office. Please do NOT send sacrament or memorial requests directly to Fr. Stavros. Charlie and Alex will be the initial intake on the sacraments, going over the guidelines, filling out paperwork, etc. They will check with Fr. Stavros on available dates and Father will have the final say on dates. Then in the case of weddings, Fr. Stavros will meet with the couple for pre-marital counseling. Memorial services should also be scheduled through the office. The office staff knows which Sundays memorial are not allowed on. All other Sundays are open. The only exception to the scheduling of services is in regards to funerals. Please contact Fr. Stavros directly regarding scheduling of funerals. Thank you for your help in working more efficiently.

Liturgy Before a Funeral? A Divine Liturgy can be celebrated on any day of the year outside of the weekdays of Great Lent. There are certain days that are dubbed "liturgical days," meaning a day that a liturgy is traditionally celebrated, such as St. Athanasios (January 18) or the Presentation of Christ (February 2). If a funeral is scheduled on a liturgical day, we generally offer the family the option of having the body of the deceased brought to the church for the Divine Liturgy. If you wish to have a liturgy celebrated on the day of a funeral, so that your family can receive Holy Communion and so that the body of your loved one can lie in repose in the church, all you have to do is ask and we are very happy to accommodate. This is not a requirement (except for a funeral for a clergyman), but is an option for those who want it.

No Wedding Date without wedding eligibility. There are some requirements in order to be married in the Orthodox Church. One of those requirements is that one person of the couple be Orthodox and the other, if not Orthodox, must have been baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity. Another requirement if a person was married in the Orthodox church and subsequently divorced, they must obtain an ecclesiastical divorce before being remarried. There have been instances in the past, where a couple has set a wedding date and they are ineligible to marry, based on one of these requirements. Either they have not received an ecclesiastical divorce, or one of the parties is not baptized. When we schedule a wedding and these requirements haven't been made, and the person getting married drags their feet in either getting the ecclesiastical divorce (a process that is not difficult, but usually takes 3 months) or in getting baptized, this creates a difficult situation for all involved, especially the priest. In the case of divorce, it causes the priest to have to push through a process that takes time. In the case of baptism, it becomes like a "shot-gun" baptism, where the priest is essentially forced to baptize someone who doesn't come to church, or catechism, or doesn't express any interest in faith, just so that a box can be checked, so that a requirement can be fulfilled. With this in mind, effective immediately, no wedding date will be set without both requirements being fulfilled. If you have been married in the church and are subsequently divorced, you will be required to complete the ecclesiastical divorce process before a wedding date will be set. If you are marrying someone who is not Christian, who has not been baptized in any church, no wedding date will be set until a baptism certificate is obtained from another church, or sufficient catechism has occurred and the baptism has taken place in the Orthodox Church.

When to leave with a baby. Someone asked me the question recently, because they want to be in church with their baby, but also want to be respectful when the baby is fussy. We WANT all of our children of all ages to be in church to worship. We understand that babies get fussy and cry, that's what they do. We also understand that when a baby is screaming, it can become disruptive. Here are a few suggestions: If a baby is fussy for a minute or so, no worries, try to soothe the baby. If that doesn't work, try walking around a little bit. If that doesn't work, try stepping out for a few minutes. And some days, the baby is going to win. Every parent has gone through that, and you will end up outside of church for much of the service. And if that happens occasionally, that's okay. It won't be like that forever. For those who are nervous about coming with a baby, consider coming for part of the liturgy. Holy Communion is usually right around 11:00 a.m. Start by coming at 10:40, then back up to 10:30, 10:20, etc., until you can start off at 10:00 a.m. As a reminder, we have a nursery that is open on Sundays, and it also has the livestream feed from the church. The livestream is also working in the hall every Sunday as well. Keep bringing your babies. We want them in church. As with everything in child-rearing, some days will be good, and some will be challenging.

What the Green Bay Packers Have to Do With Christianity

By Alex Limberatos

I've spent 6 years of my life in Boston, and so far have spent 3 years in Florida. But I've lived most of my life (approximately 21) in Wisconsin, so yes, I am a "Packer's Fan."

Most Sunday afternoons were a big deal in my house. The TV would be on, and the Packers' game would be blaring throughout the house. Even at my grandmother's house or at my yiaya and papou's house you could hear the Packers playing. I wouldn't call my family zealots or diehard Packers fans, but there was a culture in our family to watch them play and cheer for them. For the especially important games we'd even coordinate what we wore, together wearing our Packers paraphernalia as though it were an offering we made on behalf of our team's "good luck."

Though I'd never seen them play in person, I remember one particular night that I felt especially invested in my team's effort. It was the Super Bowl XXXI, and the Packers were playing the Patriots (sorry Fr Stavros). I was 7 years old that game, and I couldn't tell you how we played or how we won it, but what I do remember feeling the thrill and festivity of our team making it to the Super Bowl and to beat the infamous Patriots. But as I reflect back on that memory, I wonder why I felt that excitement, and why that memory stands out from my foggy recollections of childhood.

I wasn't particularly interested in sports, let alone football, and to this day I can honestly say that lack of interest in sports hasn't changed much. If you ask me if I'm a Packer's fan, I'll immediately answer with "of course"...though I'd be embarrassed if you asked me the last time I watched them play; honestly the only TV my wife and I really watch is YouTube and Disney+. Truthfully, the last Packers game I probably watched was when I was 21 and still living with my parents, and ever since moving to Boston for school I've not really kept up. Currently, my participation as a fan is celebrating the golden "G" when its displayed on a hat or bumper sticker, and owning a single Packers t-shirt that has since seen better days.

So, am I really a Packers fan? Instead of answering this question, what's perhaps more pressing is how does being a Packers fan relate to our Christian lives?

This is a sensitive topic, but I think it's worth addressing: the way we treat sports is pretty religious. We watch the game once a week (typically on a Sunday), our attention is undivided on the game before us and we cheer and shout for what is happening, we wear together our team's colors, and we sometimes deify the players. Already we might see some parallels between our sports rituals to our church rituals: we hopefully attend church once a week, our attention ought to be devoted to what is happening in Church, we might wear our faith through our cross or prayer rope externally or internally through our "putting on Christ" in our actions, and hopefully we know more than a handful of names and stories from Scripture and from the Lives of Saints that we love and cheer for.

Now, I don't think we ought to be ashamed that we sometimes treat sports in a religious or ritualistic manner, because this ten-



denry we all have towards these rituals speaks to our human longing for community, custom, and transcendence. A sports team, not unlike our faith, gives a sense of kinship; we meet someone in another state who shares our same love for our team, and we instantly bond. A sports team provides us a kind of identity and custom, that informs our thinking and behavior kind of like an ethos or "phronema" that orients us. And a sports team has a kind of transcendence to it; even if our team loses, we proudly wear our colors, holding the "essence" of the team itself transcendent to its players, its fans, and its own record.

If we can recognize that we are all hard-wired towards ritual, then we can each ask ourselves what are some rituals, traditions, and cultures built into our own homes and personal lives. More than that, we can ask whether our Christian ritual is overshadowed by our sports rituals, if our oblation to our sports team is perhaps at the altar of where our sacrifice and offering to God ought to be. No, I'm not asking any of us to throw out our (insert team name here) paraphernalia and to do away with watching the game, but perhaps we can look at the time and money we spend towards these things and see how we can grow in our rituals and devotion to our faith in Christ.

To close, I'd like to reflect on two notes of my own personal story.

First, it is to my parents credit that I remain a Packers fan despite no longer being a Wisconsinite. My parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, all watched and rooted for the same team faithfully. No matter what home I was in on Sunday afternoon, if the Packers were playing then the game was loud enough to be heard in the house we were at. This kind of collective devotion

informed me who I belonged to when it came to football and informed my sense of identity. Miles away from the land of Cheeseheads and lapsed from watching any game, to this day I still consider myself a Packer fan thanks to my family collectively playing a part in my "Packers Fan Formation." So parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, please take notice of what you place value of before your children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews, and work towards putting this value and attention on Christ and His Church, so that wherever our children might go they may retain their Christian formation.

The second and more somber point, is that my lapsed status as a Packers fan perhaps runs parallel to some of us in our Christian life. While I can call myself a Packers fan and genuinely say "Go, Pack, Go," this level of participation is fairly unengaged from what it really means to be a Packers fan. The same holds true for us in our Christian life. We hear how in Matthew 7:21 that Jesus tells us, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who

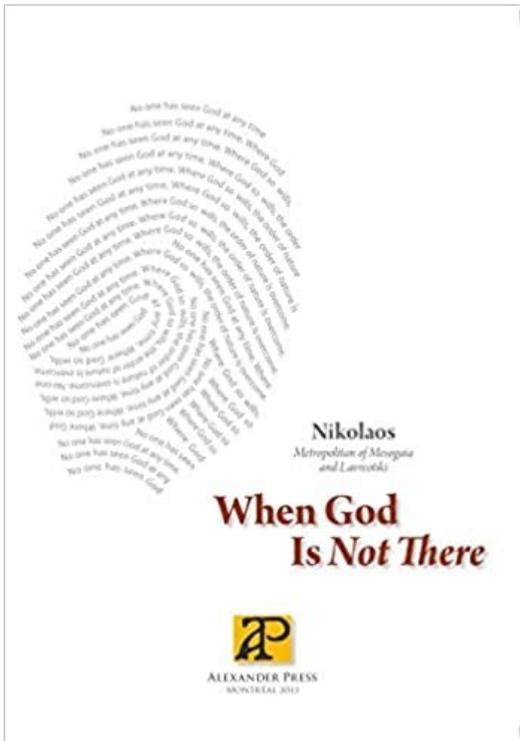
does the will of my Father who is in heaven." This is a sobering message, but perhaps one we need to sit with. Our faith should not be comprised of a mere sense of identity and profession of beliefs, but rather should be manifest in action and engagement. Thankfully our Orthodox faith offers numerous and beautiful rituals that can help mold us into Christ's athletes.

My fellow "fans of Christ," let's turn to the Super Bowl that occurs every week: His Resurrection. Let's participate in and pay attention to this game: attend Church, sing praises to Him, and pay attention to the words in the Liturgy. Let's create this ritual so that wherever we may go, this game will always be playing, that it may be heard wherever we go. Let us bear the name of our Lord and His saints on our spiritual jerseys by reading their stories and imitate their actions.

Wherever we go, let everyone see first that we are fans of Christ!

When God Is Not There, a Book Study on Suffering

February 2, 9, 16 at 6:30 p.m. via Zoom, Hosted by Alex Limberators

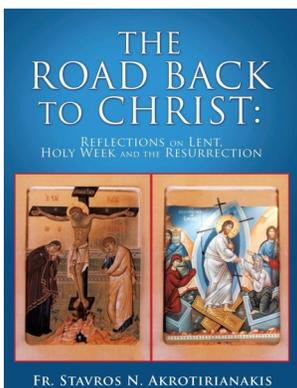


"The world we live in has been called a 'vale of tears', a 'place of weeping' -- perhaps with good reason. This book records simple events and conversations, all the while grappling with difficult questions. Its aim is to convey the sense of the discreet yet persuasive presence of the true God precisely in situations where He is not visible: in pain, in disability, in the tragedies of life, in inexorable death, as this comes across in true events and is reflected in the lives of real people".

Alex Limberatos will be hosting a Zoom Book Study on Tuesday Nights at (6:30 p.m) on February 2, 9,16; March 2, 9

If you are interested in joining, please e-mail Alex at alex@stjohntpa.org or call the office at 813-876-8830

The church has copies of the book, free of charge. You can also buy an electronic copy of the book for \$10 on the Google Playstore, Amazon Kindle, or the Barnes and Noble App, or buy a copy on Amazon.



The Road Back to Christ: Reflections on Lent, Holy Week and the Resurrection is now on sale! It is a series of daily reflections to be read from the beginning of Triodion (this year that is February 21) through All Saints Day (this year that is June 27). Pick up your copy today so you can begin reading it on February 21. This book costs \$18.99 and all monies taken in at the bookstore go to the church.

Liturgical Schedule for February 2021

Tuesday, February 2	Presentation of Christ in the Temple Orthros 8:45 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m.
Wednesday, February 3	Paraklesis Service of Supplication 6:00 p.m.
Saturday, February 6	St. Photios Orthros 9:00 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m.
Sunday, February 7	16th Sunday of Matthew Orthros 8:45 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m.
Wednesday, February 10	St. Haralambos Orthros 9:00 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m. Paraklesis Service of Supplication 6:00 p.m.
Saturday, February 13	Orthros 9:00 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m.
Sunday, February 14	Sunday of the Canaanite Woman Orthros 8:45 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m.
Wednesday, February 17	Paraklesis Service of Supplication 6:00 p.m.
Saturday, February 20	Orthros 9:00 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m.
Sunday, February 21	Beginning of Triodion - Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee Orthros 8:30 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m.
Monday, February 22	Evening Liturgy for St. Polycarp Orthros 5:45 p.m. Teaching Divine Liturgy 6:30-8:30 p.m.
Wednesday, February 24	Paraklesis Service of Supplication 6:00 p.m.
Saturday, February 27	Orthros 9:00 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m.
Sunday, February 28	Second Sunday of Triodion - The Prodigal Son Orthros 8:45 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m.
Wednesday, March 3	Paraklesis Service of Supplication 6:00 p.m.

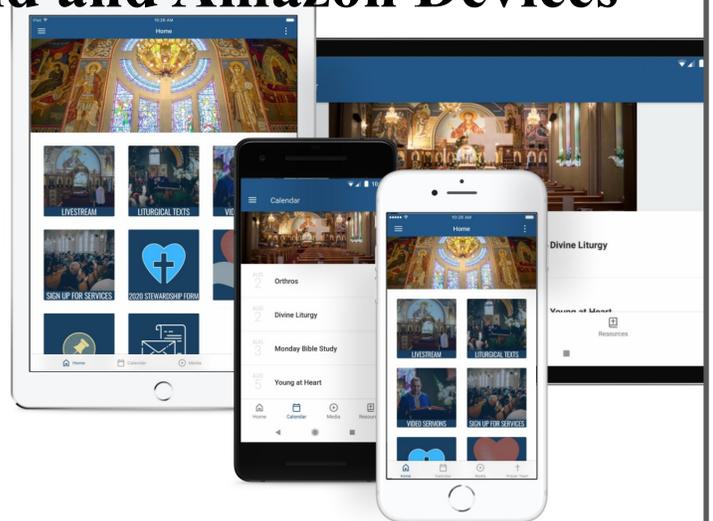
Download Our Church App Today

Available on Apple, Android and Amazon Devices



St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church

DOWNLOAD NOW



Liturgical Notes for February 2021

Divine Liturgy on Saturdays of February - In order to facilitate people being able to worship on a weekly basis, we will celebrate Divine Liturgy on all the Saturdays of February - 6, 13, 20 and 27.

Paraklesis to be celebrated every Week - We will continue to celebrate Paraklesis every week until the end of this crisis, at which point a Holy Unction service will be offered to mark the end of this crisis. In February, Paraklesis will be offered every Wednesday (February 3, 10, 17 and 24) at 6:00 p.m.

Tuesday, February 2 - The Presentation of Our Lord into the Temple



The Presentation of Christ is a major feastday of the church and commemorates the day, 40 days after the Nativity, when Christ was brought to the temple when He was 40 days old. According to the Law of Moses, every male child was brought to the temple on its 40th day, together with a sacrifice of pigeons or turtle doves by the parents, and the child was “consecrated Holy to the Lord.” Mary and Joseph brought the infant Jesus to the temple on His 40th day, because it was the law to do so. In the temple was a priest named Simeon, who was an older man, who had been promised by God that he would not die until he saw the Christ. When Simeon saw the baby Jesus, he knew in his heart that this was the Lord’s Messiah. He took the child in his arms and prayed “Lord, now let your servant depart in peace according to Your word, for my eyes have seen Your salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light to enlighten the Gentiles and for glory to Your people Israel.” (Luke 2:29-32) This prayer is recited over every child in the Orthodox Church when they are brought to church for the first time when they are 40 days old. That’s where this beautiful tradition comes from.

Saturday, February 6 – St. Photios the Great - Saint Photios was the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople from 858-867 and from 877-886. He is regarded as the most powerful and influential church leader subsequent to St. John Chrysostom. He led a renaissance in the spread of Christianity, helped quell a schism, and was instrumental in missionary work. St. Photios is the patron saint of the shrine in St. Augustine.

Wednesday, February 10 - St. Haralambos - St. Haralambos was a Saint of the first century and lived in Greece. He was a priest who was martyred. Our parish has a special connection to St. Haralambos since his relics were interred in our altar table when the church was consecrated in 1986.

Monday, February 22 - Teaching Liturgy in the Evening - As part of the Orthodoxy 101 Class, we will have a teaching Divine Liturgy from 6:30-8:30 p.m. on Monday, February 22. The service will be interrupted frequently for explanations and questions. Anyone is welcome to attend the Divine Liturgy, even if you are not taking the Orthodoxy 101 class.

What We Celebrate on the Sundays of Triodion and Lent

Pascha will be celebrated this year on Sunday, May 2. Holy Week will begin with the Saturday of Lazarus on Saturday, April 24. Forty Days prior to that is the start of Great Lent, which is Monday, March 15. And for four Sundays prior to that the Church has the period of the Triodion, or preparation for Great Lent, which will begin on Sunday, February 21.

Sunday, February 21 - Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee - The focus this Sunday is on the Gospel of Luke 18:10-14, in which two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, an externally decent and righteous man of religion, and the other was a publican, a sinful tax-collector who was cheating the people. Though the Pharisee was genuinely righteous under the Law, he boasted before God and was condemned. The publican, although he was truly sinful, begged for mercy, received it, and was justified by God. There is NO fasting this week, in preparation for our great journey.)

Sunday, February 28 - Sunday of the Prodigal Son - On this Sunday in the preparation for Great Lent, Orthodox Christians are to read Christ’s parable about God’s loving forgiveness (Luke 15:11-24). They are to see themselves as being in a foreign country far from the Father’s house and to make the movement of return to God, where we truly belong. The parable gives assurance that the Father will receive them with joy and gladness in their journey through Great Lent, their journey home.

St. John the Baptist Community News

Parish Registry

Baptism - Perseus Stavros Papadopoulos was baptized on Sunday, December 27. Simela Townsend was the Godparent! Na Sas Zisi!

Wedding - Adham Alqassis and Wafaa Elkhoury were married on Sunday, December 27. Milad Wehbe was the sponsor. Congratulations!

Funeral - Irene Kavouklis passed away on December 22. Her funeral was held on Monday, December 28. May her memory be eternal!

Funeral - Michael Kavouklis passed away on January 12. His funeral was held on Monday, January 18. May his memory be eternal!

Celebration of Theophany and our Feastday of St. John

Because of the pandemic, the celebration of Theophany and our Feastday of St. John were more subdued and much smaller than usual. The Divine Liturgy was celebrated in all the Tampa Bay area churches on January 6. The Cross Dive still took place in Tarpon Springs, and three young men from our parish participated—James Katzaras, James Kavouklis and Spiro Grapsas.

On January 7, His Grace Bishop Sevastianos celebrated the Divine Liturgy for our feastday, assisted by Fr. Stavros.

We are very thankful to Mary Nenos, who offered the Artoklasia for both the Vespers and the Liturgy. We are also thankful to everyone who helped decorate our church for our feastday. A big thank you for everyone who attended and who helped make our feastday weekend truly special!

Parish Council News

The Parish Council officers for 2021 will be as follows: President-Jim Armstrong, Vice-President-Euripides (Rip) Panos, Secretary-John Zelatis, Treasurer-Gary Ward. Edie Kavouklis is also leaving the Parish Council after many years of service. We thank Edie for her years of service on the Parish Council. Mike Xenick has been appointed to the vacant seat. As a reminder, there was no Parish Council Elections held in 2020. Everyone on the Parish Council has been granted an extra year added to their current term, and also an extra year of eligibility as per term limits. Those who are on the Parish Council right now would be permitted to serve a total of seven years, rather than the six year term limit, as per the decision of our Metropolitan in regards to the pandemic and Parish Council Elections.

Ministry News & Updates

GOYA – The GOYA Meeting for February will be Sunday, February 28. We will meet from 5:00-7:30 p.m. in the Kourmolis Center. Dinner will be served. Parents are welcome to join us.

Altar Boys - Until the end of the pandemic, we will not be having altar boy groups. We will reconstitute all the groups at the end of the pandemic.

Looking for Ushers - We are looking for more ushers to help at the Divine Services of our church. If you are interested, please email Fr. Stavros at frstav@gmail.com.

Men's Group - The Men's Group will meet on Sunday, February 21 at the church at 5:00 p.m. We will walk to a nearby restaurant, eat dinner, then return to the church for discussion, concluding by 7:30 p.m.

Women's Bible Study will meet in February as follows: Monday, February 1 (because of Divine Liturgy on February 2); Tuesday, February 9; Tuesday, February 16 and Tuesday, February 23. We are studying the Epistle of St. James. We meet via ZOOM. Fr. Stavros leads this group. If you would like to join our women's Bible study group, please contact Fr. Stavros at frstav@gmail.com and he will add you to the Zoom link. At some point, we will be resuming in person, however when we do, there will continue to be a zoom option.

Monday Night Bible Study with Charlie will be held on Mondays, February 1, 8 and 15, from 6:45 p.m. - 8:15 p.m. Bible study is held via Zoom. If you are not currently part of the Monday Night Bible study and would like to join in, please contact Charlie at chambos@stjohntpa.org and he will add you.

12 Disciples Program - In August, we started a program called "The 12 Disciples." There are twelve pages of names that comprise all the members of our parish. Father Stavros prays for all twelve pages of names each week at Paraklesis. The idea for this program is for each "disciple" to take one page of names and pray for that group of people every day. For every twelve "disciples" who sign up, every page of people will be prayed for. We currently have over 60 "disciples" meaning that each person in this community is being prayed for by at least five people every day. If you'd like to join this program and receive a page of people to pray for, please contact either Charlie or Alex.

A Special Thank You from Engie Halkias

I would like to "Thank" everyone who came to help decorate the Church for the Christmas season. It looked very "beautiful". Thank you very much to Charlie Hambos, Vickie Peckham, Skip Higdon, Despina Sibley, Brigham Sibley and Kalliope Chagaris. I wish everyone a very Happy & Healthy New Year 2021 with Peace, Love, Hope and Joy!
Thank you, Engie Halkias

GriefShare meets every Thursday In-Person and via Zoom at 6:30 p.m. It may be hard for you to feel optimistic about the future right now. If you've lost a spouse, child, family member, or friends you've probably found there are not many people who understand the deep hurt you feel. This can be a confusing time when you feel isolated and have many questions. "Going to GriefShare feels like having warm arms wrapped around you when you're shivering." GriefShare groups meet weekly to help you face these challenges and move toward rebuilding your life. Each GriefShare session has three distinct elements: Video seminar with experts, support group discussion with focus and personal study and reflection. We will meet from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. in the Administration Building Meeting Room on Thursdays, starting January 21, for 13 weeks, ending on Thursday, April 22. For January, GriefShare will meet February 4, 11, 18 and 25. For more information please contact Donna Hambos at 813-843-8412 or dhambos@msn.com. Books for the program will be provided. Donation for the book suggested but not required. Open to all family and friends. *Griefshare remains open enrollment with support towards healing and hope. You can begin at any time.*

Participate in the Oratorical Festival



Learning about our Orthodox Christian Faith is one thing. Practicing it is another. Getting up in front of a group of people and teaching them about it is one of the greatest ways to make it real in our life. This is the opportunity that the Oratorical Festival provides for every single participant. Our parish will be participating this year. The 2021 topics are available online. Although we are not having in-person Sunday School classes at the moment, we believe through Zoom and other socially distanced in-person meetings we can make the most of this season and get more people involved than ever. If you or your student is in the 7th thru 12th Grade and are interested in participating, please email Peggy Bradshaw at peggykbradshaw@icloud.com or call her at 727-244-1374 or email Charlie Hambos at chambos@stjohntpa.org or call him at 813-843-8471.

Virtual Vasilopita Cutting 2021

Instead of our usual Vasilopita Sunday, we held a Virtual Vasilopita with our ministry heads via Zoom on January 12. The Philoptochos got the coin this year. We thank Mary Nenos for again making the Vasilopita for us. A donation will be made from our parish to St. Basil's Academy.



Congratulations Philoptochos Society of St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church!

GO RED SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 14 - February is healthy heart month. We celebrate Valentine's Day. We get our hearts ready for Great Lent. And we recognize the need to live healthier lives. As a show of support for our hearts and an opportunity to do something together, everyone is asked to wear RED on Sunday, February 14, for Valentine's Day and for healthy hearts. We did this last year and it was great. See you in red on February 14.



Orthodoxy 101 Class will Begin in February

Fr. Stavros offers this class two times per year, in the spring and in the fall. This will be a Four-week course of study on Monday nights to make people aware of the basics of being an Orthodox Christian. The classes will be part lecture, part discussion, with lots of time for questions and answers.

Who should attend the Orthodoxy 101 class?

- Interfaith couples. This will help the non-Orthodox person understand more about what is going on in our church.
- Anyone who is considering joining our church. Going forward, this class will be a requirement for those who wish to join our Orthodox faith.
- New converts to Orthodoxy. For those who recently joined our church and who want to know a little bit more.
- Anyone who wants to know more about the basics of our faith, or who wants a refresher course in the basics of Orthodoxy is encouraged to attend.

The four sessions will be done as follows:

Monday, February 8 A Tour of the Orthodox Church: What we see in the Church and what it means

Monday, February 15 Orthodox Spirituality—Introduction to the Sacraments

Monday, February 22 The Divine Liturgy—This will actually be a “teaching” Liturgy on the solea of the church. If you have taken the class, or if you wish to only attend THIS session, please feel free to do so.

Monday, March 1 Orthodox Traditions—fasting, icons, prayer, and separating Theology from “yiayialogy.” Classes will be held on these three Mondays from 6:30-8:30 p.m. and will be held in the CHURCH Sanctuary. Please sign up with Fr. Stavros at frstav@gmail.com, so he has enough materials for everyone. There is no charge for this class.

Kolyva during the Time of the Pandemic

The Philoptochos will resume making Kolyva for those who wish to have Kolyva at memorial services. Here are the new guidelines:

1. The Kolyva will be made on a small tray that will be given to the family at the conclusion of the Divine Liturgy. The Kolyva will not be mixed or handed out in the hall until further notice.
2. Kolyva will be made as requested for 40 day memorials and 1 year memorials only.
3. The cost of the Kolyva will be \$50, with checks made payable to Philoptochos.
4. Kolyva is not necessary for a memorial to be done.
5. Once the pandemic is over, we will again resume making the larger Kolyva for distribution to the community at a cost of \$100.
6. If you wish to have Kolyva offered, please contact the office at least TWO weeks prior to the Memorial service you wish to request.



Using Amazon Smile to Donate to St. John - If you use Amazon Smiles, make sure to choose our church so a donation will be given to our parish every time a purchase is made. So far, since August 2017, we have made **\$864.59**. Every bit helps!



Need a Mask? We have many!

Through the generous donation of a few parishioners, we have reusable cloth masks available. We are thankful especially to Paula (Sakellaris) Weinburg, who made and mailed many of them from Virginia. If you need a mask, please contact the church office and we can arrange to get you one.

Thank you also to the many parishioners who have made and donated masks to us.

Fifty-Two Verses in Fifty-Two Weeks: The Bible Project

By Fr. Stavros

Most of us don't spend enough time in the Bible. Sadly, some of us don't spend any time. Each week since January 2019, we provide in *The Messenger* and then repeated weekly in the bulletin, a verse or two. I choose verses that are meaningful to me, or well known or ones that have meaning in contemporary times. You are welcome to submit verses via email to me as well, as many of you have.

If you want a challenge, do the following:

- Memorize the verse of the week.
- For a greater challenge, read the entire chapter of the book that the verse comes from.
- For a greater challenge, read the entire book where the verse comes from.

Another challenge to consider is to keep a journal and contemplate the verse each week. Read it, memorize it, and then contemplate it. Allow the Holy Spirit to move your mind and your thoughts and then write down those thoughts and keep them in a journal. If you do one reflection on Scripture each week, you will have the best book that could be. A book written by you, for you, guided by the Holy Spirit, who will guide your thoughts as you read the Scriptures.

Below are verses for the month of February. There is one verse for each week. I have written a few comments below each verse to get your mind going. Don't let my thoughts be your interpretation. Contemplate the Scripture each week and let it speak to you. Let the Holy Spirit speak to you through your reflection on Scripture.

In line with this month's theme of healthy hearts, this month's verses will focus on the word "heart" as found in Scripture.

February 7-13

The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit, a broken and humbled heart God will not despise.

Psalms 51:17

When I was in high school, and maybe even in college, there was this great pressure to have a "valentine" for Valentine's Day. When Valentine's Day approached, those who were single stayed inside with their broken hearts or lonely hearts, because on that particular day, only those who had someone were to be celebrated. For those who have a broken or crushed heart, those who feel alone, lonely, isolated, hopeless, like there will never be a better tomorrow, DON'T DESPAIR. God cares for YOU. It's not that God doesn't care for the hopeful and joyful people, He does. However, sometimes we become so joyful and so successful that we see the source of our success as us, rather than appreciating that all of the good and perfect gifts (James 1:17) are from God. When a person has a broken spirit, a broken and humbled heart, there is an emptiness. The best way to fill this emptiness is with God. When one chooses to fill their empty spaces with God, God will not despise them. When a person is so full (of joy or success, etc.) there are no empty spaces, no empty spaces for God to fill with His love and mercy. This is why we want to offer a sacrifice that is acceptable to God, a good place to start is with a spirit that has an empty space, with a longing for that space to be filled by God. God will not despise the humbled heart. Rather, He will exalt the humble in heart.

February 14-20

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Matthew 5:8

A successful garden starts with good soil. In looking over the dirt in which we want to plant, we have to first remove the rocks. We begin with the largest rocks that are easy to see. Then we go over the dirt again with a more discerning eye, and remove the smaller stones. And then we go over the dirt yet again, removing even the smallest of rocks, so that we can have dirt that is smooth, unpolluted with rocks, and ready to receive whatever seeds we are going to plant. We then plant the seeds, water them in, keep them in the sunlight, and make sure there is fertilizer to help them grow. A pure heart works in much the same way. In order to see God, one needs a pure and clean heart. This starts by removing the things that are obvious that keep us from God. This includes habitual sins and other bad habits. Then we move to the smaller things, forming good habits, guarding our mouths, taking time to pray and worship. Then we move to even more special things, like charity and generosity. The journey to the pure heart starts with eliminating the bad, then embracing the good intrinsically and then moving away from ourselves to love and serve those around us. If we want to have a pure heart, so that we can see God, not only for everlasting life but in this life, then we need to remove our habitual sins and bad habits. Then we need to commit ourselves to the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, Scripture reading and worship. And finally we need to commit ourselves to helping one another, serving one another. These habits will help us see God in this life and for eternal life.

February 21-27

So shun youthful passions and aim at righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call upon the Lord from a pure heart. II Timothy 2:22

We all had youthful passions. And no we aren't just talking about partying too much in college. In youth, most of us were more hard headed, more impulsive, more likely to bully others, felt like every defeat was the end of the world, and less focused. Unfortunately, some of us brought these things into adult life—some of us are still headstrong, like the four-year-old who throws a tantrum when he doesn't get his way. Some of us are still impulsive, we act first and think later. Some of us are still bullying others in order to put ourselves ahead. Some of us still think every defeat is the end of the world. Some of us still can't focus on our work, or we procrastinate until the last minute. And yes, some of us are still partying too much. In II Timothy 2:22, St. Paul tells us to shun those passions of our youth, and instead aim our energy at righteousness (what is right in the eyes of God), faith (a desire to grow towards God), love (serving God by serving others), and peace (those who bring calm into chaos, rather than those who bring chaos into calm). In doing these things, we will be able to call upon God from a pure heart.

Fifty-Two Verses in Fifty-Two Weeks continued on the next page...

Fifty-Two Verses in Fifty-Two Weeks continued...

February 28 - March 6

A cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones. Proverbs 17:22

Most of us have the experience of getting too much sun, perhaps we've even been sunburned. In order to avoid sunburn, one takes steps to protect oneself, such as wearing a hat and wearing a shirt. Whatever parts of us are uncovered, we then use sunscreen, to protect ourselves against sunburn. When we don't protect ourselves, our skin becomes hot and dry and uncomfortable. Our hearts are like our bodies on a hot day. When we are cheerful, our joy is a great way to protect our-

selves from sorrow and anger. When we are downcast, we become brittle, like the body that gets too much Sun without using sunscreen. And then it is easy to snap or break or get hurt. Many people feel that joy is a feeling. However, joy is a choice. Why is that? Because feelings come and go depending on our circumstances. When my dad passed away many years ago, as an example, I was sad. However, I still found joy in that he was my dad, he was a good dad, I had the privilege of being his son. And his death was not going to change those things. I had joy because I had gotten to spend over 42 years with my dad. I even felt joy that I would be doing his funeral, a unique gift for a son to give his father. That didn't mean I wasn't sad, or that I didn't cry, or that I don't miss my dad, because I did all three. However, choosing to bring joy into the situation helped quickly restore my broken heart to a cheerful heart.

SCHOLARSHIPS AVAILABLE for 2021-22 Academic Year

Students residing within the geographical area of the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Atlanta are invited to apply for one of three scholarships designated for students attending Holy Cross School of Theology. All students within the Metropolis of Atlanta are invited to apply for the Johnny N. Economy Scholarship which has no residency requirements. These scholarships are offered by the AHEPA Mother Lodge Chapter No. 1 Educational Fund (AHEPA ATL Scholarship) and will range from \$1000 to \$3000. The application **deadline is March 31, 2021**. Apply on-line at www.ahepaatlscholarship.org.

Prayer List: Lord Jesus Christ, Physician of our Souls and Bodies, visit and heal your servants: Gilda Parascandola, Kathy & Andrew Bouzinekis; Anastasia; Amanda, Andrew, Colton, Miranda, Charlotte Elizabeth, Nuha, Nabeel, Michael, Amal, John, Elaine, Olga, Virginia Georgiou, Ron Myer, Toula Tsaros, Fr. Pat Legato, Nellie Pringle, Yolanda Webb, Angela Bougas, Tony Ekonomou, Ron, Jason Vickers, Rex Garrison, Tina Chakonas, Ann Demas, Alex Martinez, Adriana Martinez, Aaron Martinez, Christina Noel Kouzes Houck, Evangeline Xeroteris, Nichole Ross, Daniel Ross, Daniella Ross, Ashley Henderson, Natalie Henderson, Chris, Debbie, James, Avery, Lily, Jacob, Jesse, Ann, Rosario, Antonia Caffentzis, Alissa, John, Angela, Joey, Christine Scourtes, Steven, Matthew & Family, Phyllis, John Zelatis, Reagan, Peter Zaharis, Alexandra Ferrarolis, Leon & Despina Botham, Cindy Xenick, Mary Ellen Evdemon, Marie Sofia Panagopoulos, Maria Hursey, Chris Vamvakias, John Myer, Mike Trimis, Robert and Alice Stoccardo, John Alexander, Michael Romero, George Hambos, Dean Kondilis and Family, Bill and Nancy Manikas, Patricia Costello, Anastasia Smyrnakis, Ekaterina & Anna Shushaalykova, Dora Koudouna, Ana Mourer, Debbie Phelps, Mary Voykin, David Voykin, Anne Sakellaris, Denise Badrane, Sia Blankenship, Don Payne, Zhana Temelkova, Stanislava Terzieva, James, Jude and all victims of war, terrorism, crime, natural disaster, and all of whom we are unaware.

St. John the Baptist is on Social Media!

Do you Like our Facebook page? Like our page and suggest it to your friends. Announcements are posted frequently so you are up to date with everything going on at St. John the Baptist. You can find our page at StJohnGOCTampa.

Live Streaming

All of our services are being video recorded and are available on our Livestream page.

To access this page

1. Go to our Church's website: stjohntpa.org,
2. Scroll the mouse over the "Multimedia" tab on the menu bar,
3. Click "View Liturgy,"
4. Then click on the link where it says, "Check out our live stream of the Divine Liturgy here <http://new.livestream.com/accounts/2454446>. **All of the services available to watch at anytime.**

Pictures Go to Flickr.com and search "St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church" or go to www.flickr.com/photos/stjohngoctampa



~ February 2021 Stewardship Message ~

“You are the light of the world!” Matthew 5:14

We deeply appreciate the offering of your Time, Talent and Treasure in 2020 and you continued offering in 2021.

Despite the circumstances and because of loyal stewards like you, we experienced another milestone year, with over \$615,673 in Stewardship Gifts from 403 Individuals/Families in 2020! We are deeply humbled and express sincere gratitude for the blessings our loyal parishioners have provided to our beloved church! The light of Christ shines bright in the hearts of our parishioners and our community has grown touching the lives of many with our mission to ‘Love God & Love thy Neighbor and spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ as an Orthodox Christian Community.’

We now continue to welcome 2021 with great joy, appreciation and faith we will continue to grow! **To date (January 15, 2021) we have received 189 pledge forms representing \$337,223 in pledges for the year.** Our goal to have every parishioner of St. John the Baptist complete a 2021 form which is available online and via our Church App. Paper forms can be mailed or picked up at the office or check-in table during our Divine Services.

Don't hesitate to call our office or one of the Stewardship Committee members to ask any questions.

'Do I need to complete a Pledge Form each year?' – YES! – per our Bylaws to participate & vote at Parish Assemblies. Additionally, our office retains key information including address, ministry interests and your talents that are needed throughout the year.

Housekeeping Notes: Please use the memo or comments field to identify Stewardship Year when submitting a check or via Subsplash. We still have many parishioners fulfilling 2020 pledges for which we are grateful. If you have a recurring gift via Subsplash, please login to you account to change the year so we can apply it appropriately.

The Prayer Team will celebrate its 6th Anniversary on February 20!

For six years, Fr. Stavros has been writing a daily reflection. It comes out every morning at 12:30 a.m. via Constant Contact. From Monday-Friday, Father will be writing on the subject of “The Heart of Encouragement” and on Saturday - Sunday, Father is writing on the Scriptures of each Sunday.

Interested in Joining the Prayer Team?

Over 2914 people have! The Prayer Team is a daily message that Father Stavros has been writing for more than 5.5 years! Each day, a scripture verse, a reflection written by Father, and a prayer are emailed to the Prayer Team via Constant Contact. If you would like to join the Prayer Team, please email Alex at alex@stjohntpa.org and ask him to add you. If you receive the daily emails already and want to add a friend, please email Charlie or follow the link at the bottom of the daily emails to do so. If you want to forward to a friend, please use the “forward to a friend” option. Also, make sure prayerteam365@gmail.com has been added to your contacts so that these emails stay in your Inbox rather than going to the Junk or Spam folders.

**The Prayer Team has a new dedicated website: PrayerTeam365.com
Check it out! Search by topic and grow in your faith today!**

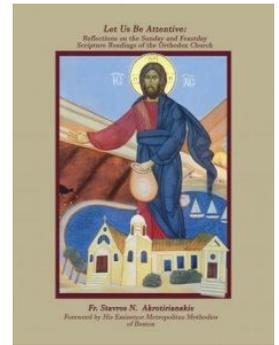
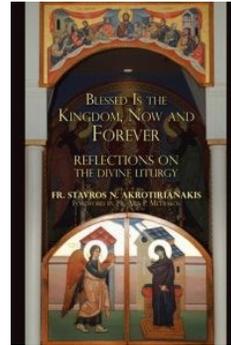
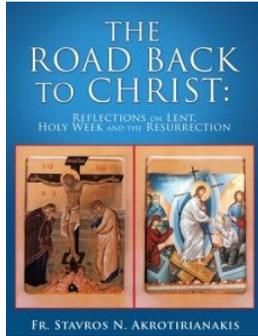
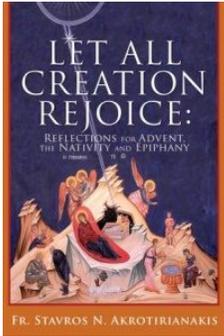
Father Stavros has authored four books that are available both in the bookstore and on-line. They are entitled:

Let All Creation Rejoice: Reflections on Advent, the Nativity and Epiphany

The Road Back to Christ: Reflections on Lent, Holy Week and the Resurrection

Blessed is the Kingdom, Now and Forever: Reflections on the Divine Liturgy

Let us Be Attentive: Reflections on the Sunday and Feastday Scripture Readings of the Orthodox Church

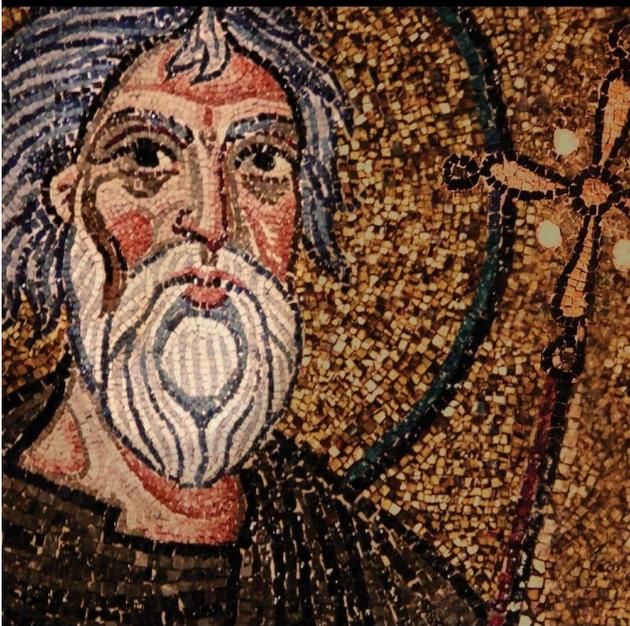


Featured Book of the St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church Bookstore:

“First Fruits of Prayer”

by Frederica Mathewes-Green

First Fruits *of* Prayer
A forty-day journey through the canon of St. Andrew



Frederica
Mathewes-Green

Join Frederica Mathewes-Green on a guided retreat through the classic Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete, a poetic hymn written in the eighth century and still chanted by Orthodox Christians during Lent. St. Andrew was a leading figure of early Christian hymnography. He was born in Damascus and spent his early years as a monk in Jerusalem. Then, he went to serve orphans and the elderly in Constantinople. Eventually, he was consecrated bishop of Crete and died in AD 740. St. Andrew is most honored for his hymns and, in particular, for devising a new form of hymn called a canon.

St. Andrew's Great Canon is divided into nine sections or canticles. This book rearranged the sections into forty readings. Lent, of course, is an ideal time to read this spiritual resource, but it could be used any time you want to deepen and challenge your faith as St. Andrew shows us a whole-hearted embrace of repentance as a path to self-knowledge and healing, and eventually to union with God.

This book is available in the bookstore. We would love to hear from you, particularly what you think of this book after reading it.

P.S. If there is an Orthodox Christian religious item that you would like the bookstore to order, please contact us. We are often able to get a discount as a bookstore.

Brett and Ana Mourer

February Sunday School Update

With great joy, IN PERSON SUNDAY SCHOOL started on January 24 for our Toddler 2's - 6th Grade students. These classes will take place right AFTER Holy Communion, on Sundays, for the remainder of the School Year!! Of course we understand that many families may not be ready to return to church quite yet. For that reason we will continue to send out our VIRTUAL SUNDAY SCHOOL lessons every week. We will not have classes for our 7th - High School students, but we do expect them to attend church in person or virtually, complete the weekly lesson on the Gospel Reading provided by Fr. Stavros, and attend GOYA meetings.

Alexis Scarfoglio and Denise Panos are teaching our Toddler 2's, Pre-K3, and Pre-K4 students. Debbie Nicklow and her daughters are teaching the Kindergarten, 1st and 2nd Graders. Vickie Peckham and some of our other teachers are teaching our 3rd - 6th Grade students.

Our topics for January were the Epiphany/ St. John the Baptist, the Vasilopita/St. Basil, Light of Christ - Making Faith Personal, Worship/The Divine Liturgy/ Holy Communion, and The Sacramental Life of the Orthodox Church.

Thank you Charlie Hambos for presenting a great lesson about St. Basil, Epiphany, and the Vasilopita Tradition on January 10. This lesson was well received by our Toddler 2 students through 1st Graders.

On Saturday January 30, the Sunday School Teachers participated in an IN PERSON - VIRTUALLY Retreat with Fr. Stavros. It was great to be together again with this great group of teachers, for the first time in almost a year.



Sunday School Calendar

We will continue to offer our programs online.

IMPORTANT UPDATE: We will offer IN PERSON SESSIONS ON SUNDAYS with the hopes, based on participation, that we will offer more and more opportunities for in-person lessons. Lessons will be on the solea in the church right after the Divine Liturgy which starts at 10 a.m. every Sunday. As the group gets larger we will split the groups with one class in the church and another in the hall with the hopes we can meet with all groups weekly once again. Please contact us with any questions or concerns.

Sunday, February 7

Hymns of the Orthodox

Sunday, February 14

Church 10 Commandments – The 2 Greatest Commandments

Sunday, February 21

The Publican and Pharisee

Sunday, February 28

The Prodigal Son

Community Outreach

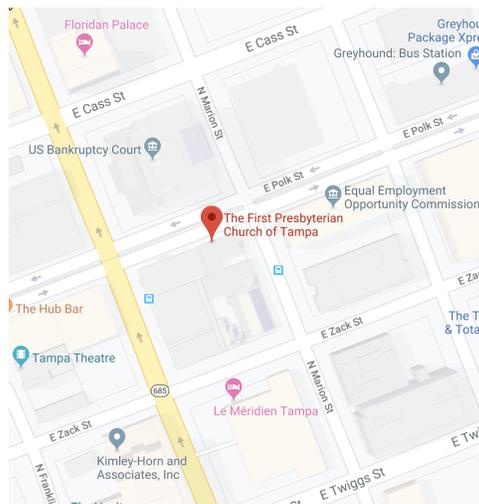
Saturday, February 20

We Want You to Serve with Us!

Hello and WELCOME! My name is Greg Melton and on behalf of our Community Outreach Ministry I want to thank you for your interest in participating with our group. **On the third Saturday of each month**, we volunteer our time to provide for those of our community in need in downtown Tampa. We partner with Matthew 25 local charity, USF Medical School, and Metropolitan Ministries to serve breakfast, provide clothing, and care for the medical needs for our guests.

To Volunteer: Go to our Sign Up Genius, see URL below or can the QR CODE and sign up.

Place: First Presbyterian Church @ 412 Zack Street East, downtown Tampa. The entrance for volunteers is on the Polk Street side of building.



Time: 8:00 a.m. to 10:30 a.m.

Volunteer Check-In Process:

- 1) Sign in and choose the job you want on the Duty Sheet
- 2) Prepare and wear your name tag
- 3) Don't be shy...if not sure where to go or what to do to get started, ask someone who looks like they know what they're doing.
- 4) Set up and Preparation 8-9 a.m., Serving 9-10:15 a.m., Cleanup 10:15-10:30 a.m..

Matthew 25 founders Peggy & Mike Kanter, as well as Bill Stone from Metro Ministries, are Go To people if you have questions or need direction on where you may be needed when you arrive.



Scan with your
Smartphone to
Sign-Up Today

Here is the URL for the Sign Up Genius for every upcoming 3rd Saturday of Month. Find the dates that work for you and sign up. <https://www.signupgenius.com/go/10c0f48a5a62da3f49-community>

Please don't hesitate to ask any questions. Thank you and God Bless
Greg Melton 813-967-2074 gmelt12@gmail.com

Our Food Pantry is very active helping people near and far in the Tampa Community.

Here are some special requests we have:

- Pasta
- Spaghetti Sauce
- Tomato sauce/chopped tomatoes etc.
- All kinds of white flour
- Canned Tuna
- Canned Chicken
- Canned fruits and vegetables
- Body Wash
- Gluten Free Foods and Flours
- Cereal
- Whole wheat rice and pasta
- Men's and Women's razors and shaving cream (travel size)
- Toothbrushes
- Gift cards in any amount for Publix, Walmart or Save-a-lot



All food items offered are accepted. Thank you for supporting those who need it the most. For more info and questions about our Food Pantry please contact Anetta Alexander at 813-758-2689 or exchange2861@yahoo.com.

St. John Greek Orthodox Church's Young-At-Heart Ministry

MEETING DATE AND TIME: We will meet on Saturday, February 6. We encourage everyone to attend the Divine Liturgy from 10:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. and then we will have our meeting afterwards. We will also meet on Saturday, March 6.

Please look for an announcement.

LOCATION: St John Greek Church in the **Kourmolis Hall** and we will also be on a **ZOOM Video Conference for those whom cannot attend.**

Everyone is welcome.

We welcome people of all ages to join our email list as a member or a friend of YAH.

We welcomed Fr. John and Presbytera Denise to our church and as members of the Young-At-Heart.

CHURCHES THAT TOUCHED OUR LIVES Program. List the Churches where we: 1) Grew up, 2) Married in, 3) Raised Children, 4) Moved to, 5) Vacationed and 6) visited. In addition, we asked people to share any blessing or miracles that had occurred. It has been indeed a moving experience.

Totals include:

- 42 Churches in Florida
- 40 Churches in the USA
- 23 Churches around the World
-
- 116 Total Churches
- We encourage people who have not, to present their list in the coming months.
- We continue to reach out to those who are homebound during the pandemic.
- We will continue with the theme how the "CHURCHES THAT TOUCHED OUR LIVES"
- We continue to learn more about our Church Family from the Churches and we attended during our lives.

For more information,
contact Michael Trimis, President,
813-784-4872 (vm/t)
TrimisM@gmail.com

OUR COMING EVENTS

- We will having our next YAH meetings to on **Saturday, Feb. 6**, March 6 & Apr. 3 at 11:30 AM
- We will have our socially distant IN PERSON YAH meeting with masks in the Church Hall and continue to use Zoom for those who cannot attend our meeting.
- For those whom had not spoken, we encourage you to bring your thoughts and blessing on how "CHURCHES TOUCHED YOUR LIVES".
- We are also planning on visiting our neighboring new Greek Churches in Clearwater and Palm Harbor.

Mary Nenos, Vice President
813-508-5553
MaryNenos@gmail.com

PASSED ACTIVITIES

- January 9, 2021 - We held a socially distant IN PERSON and Zoom meeting in the Kourmolis Center.
- December 5, 2020 - We held a socially distant IN PERSON and Zoom meeting in the Kourmolis Center
- November 7, 2020 – We held a socially distant IN PERSON and Zoom meeting in the Kourmolis Center.
- Aug. 5, Sept. 3 & Oct. 1, 2020 Our discussions were on the CHURCHES THAT TOUCHED OUR LIVES.
- July 2, 2020 – Revisited 60 years ago in the years 1960 to 1969
- March 5, 2020 - Visited St Michael Greek Orthodox Shrine in Tarpon Springs
- January 2, 2020 – Lunch at the new Psomi Bakery and Restaurant
- December 7, 2019 - Trip to the Show Palace Dinner Theatre featuring Elf the Musical
- October 5, 2019 - Ybor City Museum State Park and lunch at the Soup Stone Grill

The Historical and Orthodox Saint Valentine

By Dr. Alexandros Kyrou

Now a commercialized holiday celebrating modern Western courtship and romance, the ancient Christian origins of Saint Valentine's Day are largely forgotten. The actual Orthodox liturgical Feast Days of Valentinus (Greek)/Valentinus (Latin) commemorate two Early Christian saints, Saint Valentine the Presbyter of Rome (July 6) and Hieromartyr Valentine the Bishop of Interamna (Terni), Italy (July 30). Although the historical records for these two saints are not complete, and what we do know about their lives has often been subjected to considerable confusion, their martyrdoms are well known to us. Because of their refusal to renounce their faith in Christ, both Valentines were imprisoned, tortured, and executed around 270, during the persecution of Christians under the Roman Emperor, Claudius II.

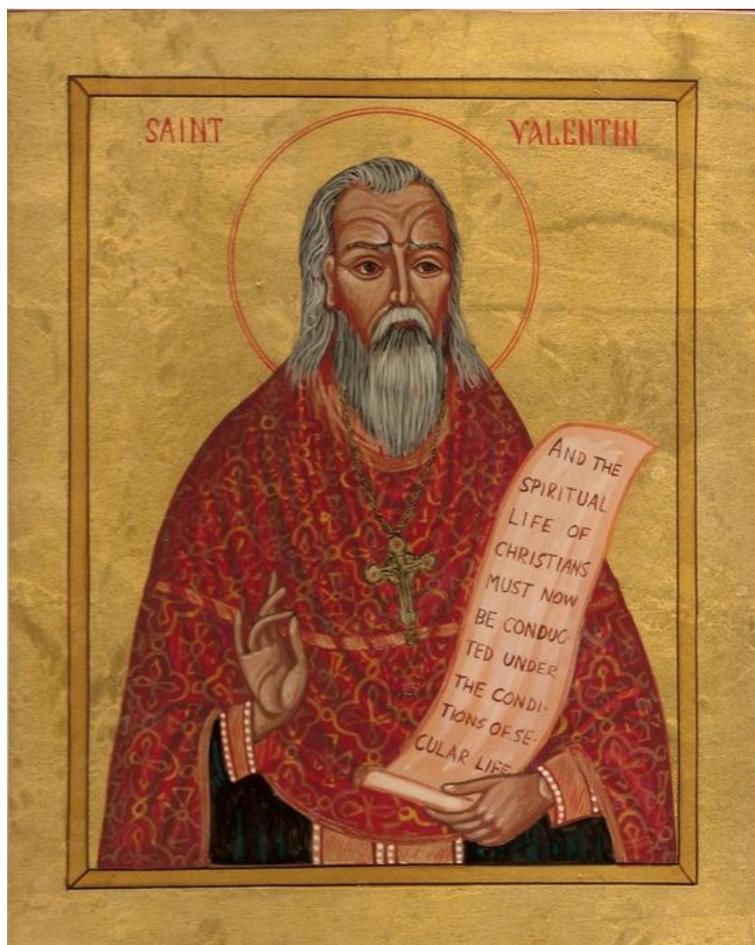
Because they shared the same name, were contemporaries, resided near each other in central Italy, and ultimately, shared similar fates, the two Valentines' personal histories were intermingled and conflated over the centuries, producing inconsistencies and puzzlement in many accounts of their lives. What most sources indicate, however, is that Bishop Valentine was renowned during his lifetime as a healer of the sick and blind, while Valentine the Presbyter would become notable in the historical memory of Christians, originally both Eastern and Western, as a courageous steward of marriage. Indeed, because of his connection to the sacrament of marriage, it would be the latter Valentine, the Presbyter from Rome, who would serve as the inspiration for the Late Medieval Western literary foundations for what would by the nineteenth century evolve into today's popular, secular Valentine's Day.

According to the most common narrative, Presbyter Valentine, a priest in Rome, drew the ire of Emperor Claudius by ignoring the imperial ban against allowing men who had not fulfilled their military obligations to the Empire to marry. Remaining loyal to his moral commitment and beliefs as a Christian priest, Valentine refused to compromise the sanctity of marriage to the will of the state. In defiance of imperial edict, Valentine continued to unite and bless Christian couples, which were legally barred from marrying. This association with young Christian beloveds became the muse over several centuries for an increasingly fictionalized, romantic expropriation and reconstruction of Saint Valentine in the West, one that has led to the modern Saint Valentine's Day. Indeed, the memory of Saint Valentine became so distorted and uncertain over the centuries, that the Roman Catholic Church ended its commemoration and veneration—traditionally associated with mid-February in the West—of him as a calendar saint in 1969, effectively surrendering the historical Valentine to his appropriation and exploitation by Western popular culture.

As in other matters of reverence and faith, the Orthodox Church's veneration of Saint Valentine remains immutable. Secularization in the West accounts in large part for the Papacy's move to discard the memory of Saint Valentine's martyrdom in the face of commerce and frivolity, but Orthodoxy still honors Saint Valentine, the Presbyter from Rome, for his martyrdom—and as for all its saints, the Orthodox Church honors St. Valentine as a model of the life in Christ.

For Orthodox Christians, Saint Valentine's Day is most fully understood as a celebration of romantic love and of God's love. Indeed, Valentine was willing to sacrifice his life not for Eros but in order to sanctify and make whole the union of young couples through the blessing of God's love. Demonstrating our love for God and reaching our fulfillment in Christ through our relationships with our spouses, families, and communities, is a way of life that is at the heart of Orthodoxy. By living a life in emulation of Christ, Saint Valentine shared this fundamental truth of Orthodox Christianity with the world, one that is more beautiful and lasts longer than flowers and cards—it is eternal.

Dr. Alexandros K. Kyrou is Professor of History at Salem State University, where he teaches on the Balkans, Byzantium, and the Ottoman Empire.



Renewing All of Creation

Feast of Theophany 2021



Prayers of Protection from the Coronavirus

www.goarch.org

A Prayer To Be Offered in the Morning

Lord our God, You who are rich in mercy, and with careful wisdom direct our lives, listen to our prayer, receive our repentance for our sins, bring an end to this new infectious disease, this new epidemic, just as you averted the punishment of your people in the time of David the King. You who are the Physician of our souls and bodies, grant restored health to those who have been seized by this illness, raising them from their bed of suffering, so that they might glorify You, O merciful Savior, and preserve in health those who have not been infected. By your grace, Lord, bless, strengthen, and preserve, all those who out of love and sacrifice care for the sick, either in their homes or in the hospitals. Remove all sickness and suffering from your people, and teach us to value life and health as gifts from You. Give us Your peace, O God, and fill our hearts with unflinching faith in Your protection, hope in Your help, and love for You and our neighbor. For Yours it is to have mercy on us and save us, O our God, and to You we ascribe glory: to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and forever, to the ages of ages. Amen.

A Prayer To Be Offered in the Evening

Lord Jesus Christ our God, You traveled through towns and villages “curing every disease and illness.” At Your command, the sick were made well. Come to our aid now, in the midst of the global spread of this virus, that we may experience Your healing love. Heal those O Lord who are suffering with this pandemic's illness. May they regain their strength and health through medical care. Heal us from our fears, which prevent nations from working together and neighbors from helping one another. Heal us from our pride, which can make us claim invulnerability to a disease that knows no borders. Lord Jesus Christ, healer of all and physician of our souls and bodies, stay by our side in this time of uncertainty and sorrow. Be with those who have died from the virus. May they be at rest with You in Your eternal peace. Be with the families of those who are sick or have died. As they worry and grieve, defend them from illness and despair. May they know Your peace. Be with the doctors, nurses, researchers and all medical professionals who seek to heal and help those affected and who put themselves at risk in the process. May they know Your protection and peace. Be with the leaders of all nations. Give them the foresight to act with charity and true concern for the well-being of the people they are meant to serve. Give them the wisdom to choose long-term solutions that will help prepare for or prevent future outbreaks. May they know Your peace, as they work together to achieve it on earth. Whether we are home or abroad, surrounded by many people suffering from this illness or only a few, Lord Jesus Christ, stay with us as we endure and mourn, persist and prepare. In place of our anxiety, give us your peace. For You are the Physician of our souls and bodies Christ our God and to You do we offer glory, thanksgiving and worship together with Your eternal Father and Your all-holy, good and life-giving Spirit, now and forever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Another Prayer, To Be Offered At Any Time

O Holy Father, God of unknown, uncreated depth, You are beyond all description and expectation. You are the Creator of all worlds, physical and metaphysical. As You are only love, in love You created everything that truly is. Through Your Son, everything has form and purpose, and through Your Spirit, everything lives and moves back toward You. O Father, we are troubled by this scourge that is infecting Your people around the world. From the ancient Fall away from You, there are many consequences that we cannot begin to understand. As traces of this pestilence are being studied in labs, we shiver at its demonic malevolence for destruction, especially of the frail and the elderly. Our hearts are open to You, loving Father; we come to You as children, meek and lowly. We beg You to help the doctors who work to find a cure. We beg You to help our leaders to put away childish things, to forget political advantage, and to be good stewards of their people. We beg You to help us to be wise ourselves and to care for human life in the least of those around us. We cry out to You as One Who did not send this plague. We cry out to You as One Who only heals and redeems. You did not send this, but we know You can destroy it. So Father, cease this plague, and turn it back to the abyss from which it came. Heal Your people, the humanity of this earth, cleanse us and strengthen us toward You. We are weak, but You are strong, and in our weakness Your strength is revealed. Help us, we beg You, in the Name of Your Son, the Great Physician, Who, together with You and our Comforter, the Holy Spirit, Are due all glory and honor, to the ages of ages. Amen.

Beware of Emails Asking for Gift Cards

This is a common and very scary thing that is happening. People who are impersonating as Fr. Stavros have been emailing people and asking them to buy gift cards, scratch off the back to reveal the code, take pictures of the code and email them the pictures. Fr. Stavros would never under any circumstances ask for a gift card via email. If you receive an email like this, please call Fr. Stavros, Charlie, or Alex immediately. Many people these days are falling victim to scams like these. Please double check and even triple check any emails or phone calls that ask for money even if it looks real. Any questions? Please contact the office.

Opt-in on *The Messenger* - In an effort to be more environmentally conscious, we will be mailing *The Messenger* **ONLY** to those who ask. If you wish to receive *The Messenger* by mail, you certainly may. We just ask that you indicate on your stewardship form, or let the office know, that you wish to receive *The Messenger* by mail. We will no longer be mailing *The Messenger* unless you ask us to.

Have questions?

Just need to talk?

Worried? Sad? Happy?

We are here for you.

Fr. Stavros

813-394-1038

Fr. John

678-637-4425

Charlie

813-843-8471

Alex

262-370-0586

Happy Birthday!

Nina L'Hommedieu - February 1
Walter L'Hommedieu - February 1
Nicholas Reddie - February 1
Paraskevas Serbanos - February 1
Sophia Crassas - February 2
Peter Hanhan - February 3
Max Malatin - February 3
John Kolovos - February 4
Taylor Parker - February 4
Andrew Findlay - February 5
Louis Mantzanas - February 5
Pheobe Sengsouvana - February 5
John Nenos - February 7
Tommy Reace - February 7
Alexandria Colado - February 9
Leo Lenardos - February 9
Ekaterini Sheridan - February 9
Nicole Voisey - February 10
Christina Cardy - February 11
Sam Lenardos - February 11
Marianna Giallourakis - February 12
Sophia Ioannidis - February 12
Katerina Kataras - February 12
William Sotiropoulos - February 12

Thomas Phillips - February 13
Wren Robinson - February 15
Lambros Papaconomou - February 18
Charles Katsaros - February 19
Emory Brewer - February 21
Joseph Hambos - February 21
Stephanie Owens - February 21
Jazmyn Singh - February 22
Alex Halikoytakis - February 22
Anna Galin - February 23
Andrew Mellon-Lynn - February 23
Stylianos Sheridan - February 23
Alexandra Frantsvog - February 24
Margarita Kyros - February 24
Melanie Letobarone - February 24
Christian Cole - February 25
Mia Lenardos - February 25
Penelope Markowski - February 25
Katie Spirides - February 26
Kaitlin Zelatis - February 26
Anetta Alexander - February 28

If we missed someone or if we need to know about a birthday, please call or email the office to let us know at office@stjohntpa.org.

Please do your best to support local businesses in general, and of our parishioners in particular.

Below, please find a list of small business owned and/or operated by our parishioners.

ABC PIZZA

(Owned by Anthony and Carole Fotopoulos)
1242 WEST HILLSBOROUGH AVE. TAMPA
(813) 237-3324 Take Out Only

Accustar Accounting Inc.

Fran Prokos, Founder and CEO
Tax Preparation, Business and Personal
Accounting, CFO services, Business Consulting, Business Start Ups.
Working from Home Office during Covid 19
Direct: 727-510-7378
Office: 813-886-4644
Fax: 813-888-8097
AccustarTax@gmail.com/AccustarTax@aol.com

AlexRoyEvents Music Entertainment.

Email alexroyevents@gmail.com
Ph. 813-455-2461 Website:www.djalexroy.com
Facebook: Alexandros Roy
Instagram : @djalexroy
Live Streams on Facebook and Instagram daily.

Bavaros

514 N Franklin St Downtown Tampa
813-868-4440 Bavarospizza.com
Tues-Sat 11-9pm
We offer Uber and Bitesquad for delivery and curbside pickup with call ahead ordering/payment.

Bradenton Flower Shop

(Owned by Maria Geis)
5262 East St Rd 64
Bradenton FL, 34208
941-727-4111 www.bradentonflowershop.com
bradentonflowers@gmail.com
We are taking online and phone orders for curb side pickup and no contact delivery.

Peggy Bradshaw

https://peggybradshaw.floify.com/
(727) 244-1374
Branch Manager of Van Dyk Mortgage South Tampa
3502 Henderson Blvd. Tampa, FL

George S. Chagaris, CPA, P.A.

2901 W. Busch Blvd., Ste. 405
Tampa, FL 33618-4582
(p): (813) 282-1990 e-mail: GChagarisCPA@aol.com

Homeschool Educational Resources & Usborne Books Consultant

Jenivieve Elly Jenivieve@homeschooleducationalresources.com
https://www.homeschooleducationalresources.com/
https://n10680.myubam.com/1753738
My homeschool advocacy website provides encouragement, materials, free lessons plans, and research to empower current and potential homeschooling families. As a former teacher, it's my mission to support those interested in the journey. I also offer homeschool consulting and mentoring services. Usborne Books are quality, engaging, and educational books. They are a favorite in our home and pair well with homeschool education.

John Demas - Classical Guitarist - Greek Bouzouki

813.240.5199
https://sites.google.com/site/livemusicintampa/
Instagram:https://www.instagram.com/john.demas.music/
https://sites.google.com/site/johndemasthemeoproject/

EVOS South Tampa

For other locations near you visit evos.com
Open 7 days for lunch and dinner
Order Delivery: UberEats-EVOS or evos.com

Order Takeout: EVOS/Toast app or evos.com
Text/email an EVOS gift card: EVOS eGift Cards
EVOS is locally owned and operated by the Crassas family.

Alexandra Fitos

Weichert Yates and Associates
Cell phone 813-943-6464
I am a realtor specializing in residential and commercial sales in Hillsborough, Pinellas and Pasco counties. I am currently working remotely Via virtual consulting and appointments.

JoAnn Hartung

Realtor with Fazzini Group at REMAX Realtec
Residential agent specializing in Pinellas County
727-432-0228

Markissia Touliatos Portraits and Other Fine Art

www.markissia.com
markissiat@gmail.com
727-560-8161
I am a freelance artist working from home in my own studio. I specialize in corporate and private original oil painted portraits. I do art restoration as well. I work from photographs that can be emailed to me.

Qvita Health and Wellness

Primary Care and Cosmetic Services
Peggy Demetriou, FNP, APRN-BC
2734 Windguard Circle, suite 101
Wesley Chapel, FL 33544
813-501-4130 www.qvitahealthandwellness.com

Retina Vitreous Associates of Florida

(Dr. Karina Findlay)
multiple offices throughout Tampa Bay
retinavitreous.com
(813)987-2000
Open 8:00-5:00 M-F with on call physicians nights and week-ends Retinal care and urgent ocular needs

Robinson Essentials -Young Living Essential Oils

text: 813-278-7450
www.TanyaRobinsonEssentials.com
Products for immune support, emotional support, and various other things

The Sakkis Group / KW Tampa Properties

Full service real estate with over 30 years experience
813-309-1073 ksakkis@sakkisgroup.com sakkisgroup.kw.com/

South Tampa Sugar Mama

Home baking business owned by Maria Xenick.
Custom homemade, hand-decorated cookies for holidays and special events. I operate under the Cottage Food Law of Florida, and during this time, I am also offering free delivery for contactless transactions.
maria@southtampasugarmama.com
https://www.facebook.com/southtampasugarmama/

True Life Wealth Management (Owned by Alex Skijus)

www.TrueLifeWealthManagement.com
We are a financial services business that specializes in reducing unnecessary taxes for individuals and business owners for their retirement.

Zomesa, LLC

John P. Zelatis
Accounting, Bookkeeping, Payroll, Taxes Back Office Support
15459 Martinmeadow Drive. Lithia, FL 33547
P: (813) 654-5144 F: (813) 433-2516 C:(813) 727-2271
jzelatis@zomesa.com www.zomesa.com

Take Advantage of the Parish Assistance Program

St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church is excited to share that, beginning May 1st, we will be offering a Parish Assistance Program, PAP, with BayCare Behavioral Health. The PAP program will provide our parishioners access to free and confidential counseling services - offering additional support when life's challenges become overwhelming. The PAP utilizes a network of faith-based providers and are sensitive to the values and beliefs of those they serve and provide compassionate care to children, adults, parents, and seniors.

Parishioners can contact BayCare to request up to three free and confidential counseling sessions from a licensed mental health professional. The BayCare helpline, 800-878-5470, is answered 24/7 by mental health professionals. Many BayCare therapists are also offering telephonic and virtual counseling sessions to help parishioners maintain their emotional wellbeing during these trying times.

Through BayCare Behavioral Health, parishes enrolled in this program allow access to services for their parishioners who are suffering from emotional turmoil that results from the challenges of everyday life which span a lifetime. The BayCare network of providers understand the importance of compassionate care and are sensitive to the values and beliefs of those they serve.

You can get more information on the BayCare Behavioral Health Community Services Program on their website at: <https://baycare.org/services/behavioral-health/our-specialties/community-health-services>

Help is available for life issues including:

- Stress
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Family discord
- Marital problems
- Substance abuse issues
- Behavioral issues



BayCare
Behavioral Health

Thank You to all of Our Friends!

George & Maria Andros - Birmingham, AL
Barbara Akrotirianakis - Whittier, CA
William J Camarinos - Alexandria, VA
Richard & Mickie Bass - Asheville, NC
Jason & Kelly Bangos - Clearwater, FL
Gabriel & Irene Hurst - Tampa, FL
Nicholas & Anna Karnavas - New Port Richey, FL
Michael Kapetan - Ann Arbor, MI
John & Cathie Koch - Tarpon Springs, FL
Perry & Fay Stamatiades - Asheville, NC
Melvin & Violet Tamashiro - Kaneohe, HI
Wesley & Melissa Thompson - Clearwater, FL
Demitrius & Katherine Klimis - Boardman, OH
Bessie Bliziotis - Palm Cost, FL
Suzanne Alvarez - Tampa, FL
Lazarus & Maria Kavouklis - Tarpon Springs, FL
William & Kane Chapman - Palmetto, FL
Lillan Thomas - Highland, IN
Kathleen Mendez - Ponte Vedra, FL
Theodora Poletis - Baltimore, MD

Basil & Dorothy Nosal - Fredericksburg, VA
Nicholas & Vaso Anton - Dunedin, FL
Kay Nastopoulos - Atlanta, GA
Katherine Beasley - Vero Beach, FL
Artemis & Eric Mellen - Longwood, FL
Charles Nastopoulos - Atlanta, GA
Pete & Carol Caldwell - Ringgold, GA
Judith Jogerst
Ms. Nadine Raheb
Victor & Cynthia Cucuz - Tampa, FL
Nicholas & Doris Andreadakis - Lititz, PA
Christopher & Georgette Tsavoussis - Dunedin, FL
Ron & Maria Gregory
John & Deanna Palmer - Greenville, SC
Emmanuel Chrysakis - Palm Harbor, FL
Tommy Koulouris - Tampa, FL
Rev. Fr. Michael Massouh - Seminole, FL
John & Deanna Palmer - Greenville, SC
Luke & Arianna Quinn - Arlington, MA

Friends of St. John the Baptist - Some of you who receive *The Messenger* do not live in the Tampa Bay area or are members of other Greek Orthodox parishes. We would like to ask for your support of our parish by being a "Friend of St. John the Baptist." Your contribution as a "Friend" will help offset the cost of mailing *The Messenger*, among other things. Being a "friend" does not make one a steward of St. John the Baptist or afford membership rights and responsibilities, but gives one who is a member elsewhere, an opportunity to make a gesture of financial support to our parish.

Thank you for your consideration of our parish.

Friend of St. John the Baptist:

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

I wish to become a Friend of St. John the Baptist. I am enclosing a contribution in the amount of:

_____ \$50 _____ \$100 _____ \$200 _____ Other

Please mail this form and check to: St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church
2418 W. Swann Ave Tampa, FL 33609.

The COVID - 19 Vaccine

By Lisa Alsina, BSN, RN, Nursing Ministry

Both the Pfizer and Moderna-BioNtech COVID-19 Vaccines currently available in the United States have been shown to be highly effective at preventing COVID-19. Clinical trials of all vaccines must first show they are safe and effective before any vaccine can be authorized or approved for use in the US, including COVID-19 vaccines.

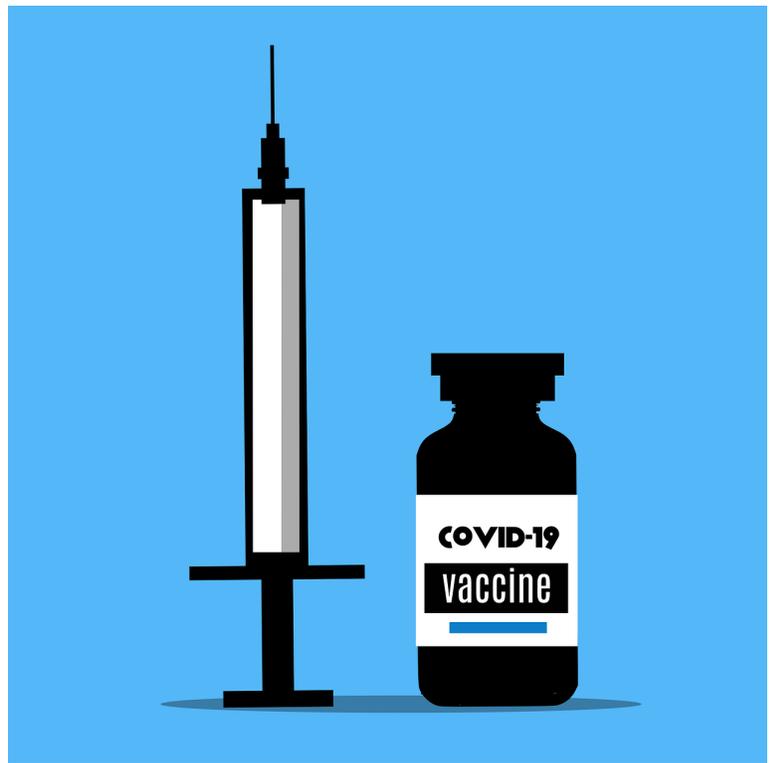
These vaccines, called Messenger RNA vaccines or mRNA vaccines, give instruction on how to make a protein, or a piece of protein that triggers an immune response inside our bodies. That immune response, which produces antibodies, is what protects us from getting infected if the real virus enters our bodies. The mRNA does not affect your DNA because it never enters the nucleus of the cell, which is where our DNA (genetic material) is kept. mRNA vaccines do not use a live virus to trigger an immune response so mRNA vaccines **cannot** give someone COVID-19. The COVID-19 vaccination will help protect you by creating an antibody (immune system) response without having to experience illness. As with all types of vaccines, the body is left with a supply of “memory” T-lymphocytes as well as B-lymphocytes that will remember how to fight that virus in the future.

It typically takes a few weeks for the body to produce T-lymphocytes and B-lymphocytes after vaccination. Sometimes after vaccination, the process of building immunity can cause symptoms, such as fever. These symptoms are normal and are a sign that the body is building immunity.

COVID-19 can have serious and life-threatening complications and there is no way to know how COVID-19 will affect you. If you get sick, you could spread the disease to friends, family, and others around you. Getting COVID-19 may offer some natural protection, known as immunity. Current evidence suggests that reinfection with the virus that causes COVID-19 is uncommon in the 90 days after initial infection. However, experts don't know for sure how long this protection lasts, and the risk of severe illness and death from COVID-19 far outweighs any benefits of natural immunity.

Important things to remember when getting the vaccine:

- Side effects may feel like flu and even affect your ability to do daily activities, but they should go away in a few days.
- The most common side effects of the vaccine include: pain, swelling and redness in the arm where the shot was administered as well as fever, chills, fatigue and headache.
- If you have pain or discomfort, talk to your doctor about taking an over-the-counter medicine, such as ibuprofen or acetaminophen.



- With both COVID-19 vaccines, you will need 2 shots, 3 to 4 weeks apart. Get the second shot even if you have side effects after the first shot, unless a vaccination provider or your doctor tells you not to get a second shot.
- It takes time for your body to build protection after any vaccination. COVID-19 vaccines that require 2 shots may not **fully** protect you until a week or two after your second shot.

If you have already had the COVID -19 viruses, **reinfection is a possibility**. The vaccination is expected to provide added protection for those who've recovered from COVID-19. However, you should wait to get vaccinated until your symptoms of infection have resolved and you have completed the quarantine period recommended by the CDC. In addition, if you received monoclonal antibody therapy or convalescent plasma to treat your COVID-19 infection, you should wait 90 days after receiving those treatments to be vaccinated. After symptomatic infection, natural immunity appears to persist for at least 3 months. Therefore, you **may** choose to defer vaccination for 90 days if you desire. If your infection was asymptomatic, it should not factor into your decision to be vaccinated since you may not have effective immunity.

It's important for everyone to continue using all the tools available to help stop this pandemic as we learn more about how COVID-19 vaccines work in real-world conditions. Cover your mouth and nose with a mask when around others, stay at least 6 feet away from others, avoid crowds, and wash your hands often.

Inspirational Sayings

SEVEN Promises from God

I am your strength
I will never leave you
I have plans for you to prosper
I hear your prayers.
I will fight for you
I will give you peace
I always love you

“The answer to our anxiety is not drugs, alcohol, tranquilizers or psychiatric treatment. It will not be cured by Yoga, or some eastern meditation practice. The problem is that we have lost God at the center of our lives. Once we make our love for God the primary focus of our lives, and allow His Grace to work through us, then we will be comforted and embraced in His love — no matter what circumstance we encounter in life. All anxiety disappears. This is the aim of the Orthodox way of life: to put God first and seek the Holy Spirit. The anxieties of modern life are only symptoms our separation from God.” -St. Paisios

The Bible is meant to be bread for daily use, not cake for special occasions.

The biggest communication problem is we don't listen to understand. We listen to reply.

What if we began to treat our Bibles the way we treat our cell phones? What if we. . .

- . . .carried it with us everywhere?
- . . .turned back to get it if we forgot it?
- . . .checked it for messages throughout the day?
- . . .used it in case of emergency?
- . . .spent an hour or more using it each day?

If you give all your life to the earth, the earth will give you a tomb. But if you give your life to heaven, heaven will give you a throne. St. Ephraim the Syrian

You can't go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending.
~C.S. Lewis

The most wonderful places to be in the world are: In someone's thoughts, in someone's prayers and in someone's heart.

The average person tells 4 lies a day or 1460 a year; a total of 87,600 by the age of 60. And the most common lie is: I'm fine.

Those who leave everything in God's hand eventually see God's hand in everything.

Relationships don't last because of the good times. They last because the hard times were handled with love and care.
~Anmol Andore

The giant in front of you is never bigger than the God inside of you.

The greatest test of faith is when you don't get what you want, but still you are able to say, “Thank You, Lord.”

Satan tries to limit your praying because he knows that your praying will limit him.

On the lighter side

Strength is the ability to break a chocolate bar into four pieces with your bare hands and then eat just one of those pieces.

During an interview a half glass of water was set in front of me. I was asked if I was an optimist or a pessimist. . . I drank the water and said I was a problem solver.

When we're young, we sneak out of the house to go to parties. When we're old, we sneak out of parties to go home.

They say 40 is the new 30 and 50 is the new 40.
All I know is the older I get, the more 9 PM is the new midnight.

Airlines are sending me “we're in this together” emails. . . Um, where were you when my suitcase was 51.5 lbs.?

Sadly I do my best proofreading after I hit send.

Science Tip—You can distinguish an alligator from a crocodile by paying attention to whether the animal sees you later or in a while.

Science says that we need at least four basic elements to survive:

Water
Air
Food
Light

And look what the Bible tells us about Jesus

I Am the Living Water
I Am the breath of life
I Am the Bread of Life
I Am the light of the world

Science was right, we need Jesus to live.

The Pastor Stole Our Spoon!

A pastor had dinner at the home of a couple in his church. After he left, the wife said to the husband, “I think he stole our spoon!” This bothered her for a whole year. A year later the couple had the pastor for dinner again. Unable to resist, the wife asked “Did you steal our spoon last year?” The pastor replied, “No, I put it inside your Bible.”

Community

By Theodora Morgan

Community

Without community, a church is empty.

Community is the most important element in the whole picture.

We need to believe, support, and praise our community.

A community small or large is considered the family of the church.

Without community a church could exist, but it will be without harmonious sound.

The community gives a happy life to the church.

So believe it or not the community is the fresh breath of everything in a church.

Every church needs to constantly engage with all ages in the entire congregation and all groups of ages should be respected. The young are learning, the middle age tries to understand the deep meaning of our orthodoxy, and the elders bring their experience and wisdom.

The community is the main body of our church, of any church.

Community is the living foundation of every church.

The priest, as a good shepherd, is teaching, counseling, and guiding his congregation (the community) about the Word of God, but his flock is the one that will spread throughout the world the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God. They are the new disciples that the church counts and depends on.

The church cannot survive without congregation – community – and the congregation (community) without the church.

Theodora Morgan has been a member of St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church for many years. She presented this article at the Young at Heart Meeting on January 9, 2021. Thank you Theodora for this beautiful article.

Χρόνια Πολλά! Happy Nameday!

February 1

BRIDGET, FILIKITA, TRYFON

February 10

HARALAMBIA, HARALAMBOS,
HARIKLIA, HARILAOS

February 19

FILOTHEI

February 2

IPAPANTI

February 11

AVGI, THEODORE, VLASSIS

February 22

ANTHOUSA, THALASSIOS

February 3

ASIMAKIS, ASIMINA, SIMEON, STAMATIA, STAMATIS

February 12

MELETIOS, PLOTINOS

February 23

POLYCHRONIS, POLYKARPOS

February 4

IASIMOS, ISIDOROS

February 13

PRISCILLA

February 25

RIGINOS, TARASIOS, TARSIS

February 5

AGATHI,

February 14

CHLOE, VALENTINI

February 26

ANATOLI, PHOTINI, PORFIRIOS, SEBASTIANOS

February 6

PHOTIS

February 15

EFSEVIOS

February 27

ASKLIPIOS, NISIOS

February 7

PARTHENIS

February 16

PAMFILLIE, PAMFILLOS, SELEFKOS

February 28

KYRA, MARIANNA, CASIANOS

February 8

ZAHARIAS

February 17

THEODOROS,

Source: www.namedays.gr

February 9

MARKELOS, NIKIFOROS,
PAGRATIOS

February 18

AGAPITOS, LEON

Mental Health Improved for Only One Group During COVID: Those Who Attended Church Weekly

By Mary Margaret Olohan

Poll results show that mental health improved for only one group of people during the coronavirus pandemic, and it's a group that Democratic lawmakers repeatedly restricted.

Gallup polled a little over a thousand Americans over the age of 18 from Nov. 5–19 and found that only those who attended religious services weekly saw a positive change between 2019 and 2020 in how they rated their mental health.

In 2019, 42% of Americans who attended religious services weekly rated their mental health as excellent, the poll showed.

In 2020, 46% of Americans who attended religious services weekly rated their mental health as excellent — a percentage increase of four points.

No other Demographic group in the Gallup poll, which had a margin of error of ± 4 percentage points and a confidence level of 95%, saw a percentage increase in rating their mental health as excellent.

“Houses of worship and religious services provide so much more than just a weekly meeting place — they are where so many Americans find strength, community, and meaning,” the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty’s Director of Research Caleb Lyman told the Daily Caller News Foundation. “Findings from this year’s Religious Freedom Index — that 62 percent of respondents said that faith had been important during the pandemic — align with Gallup’s findings on the importance of religious services to Americans’ mental health.”

The Gallup poll results are particularly striking in contrast to Democratic lawmakers’ restrictions on houses of worship. Governors and mayors across the United States have issued orders throughout the pandemic that restrict or prohibit religious services, and the Department of Justice has pushed back against such restrictions on multiple occasions.

Governors like Democratic Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam banned gatherings of 10 or more people through initial stay-at-home orders, restrictions which effectively banned church services. Authorities have arrested multiple religious leaders for defying coronavirus orders, such as Pastor Tony Spell of the Louisiana Life Tabernacle church and Florida megachurch pastor Rodney Howard-Browne.

Religious organizations in New York most recently took Democratic New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo to the Supreme Court over his restrictions on houses of worship, accusing Cuomo of “targeting Orthodox practices.”

Conservative justices, including Justice Amy Coney Barrett, sided with religious organizations in the 5-4 ruling the night before Thanksgiving, while Chief Justice John Roberts sided

with the liberal justices.

The majority said that Cuomo’s coronavirus restrictions on religious communities are “far more restrictive than any Covid-related regulations that have previously come before the Court, much tighter than those adopted by many other jurisdictions hard hit by the pandemic, and far more severe than has been shown to be required to prevent the spread of the virus.”

“New York’s restrictions on houses of worship not only are severe, but also are discriminatory,” Justice Brett Kavanaugh wrote in his concurring opinion.

“In light of the devastating pandemic, I do not doubt the State’s authority to impose tailored restrictions — even very strict restrictions — on attendance at religious services and secular gatherings alike,” Kavanaugh continued. “But the New York restrictions on houses of worship are not tailored to the circumstances given the First Amendment interests at stake.”

Cuomo’s office did not immediately respond to a request for comment for this story.

Earlier this year, the court sided 5-4 in favor of the liberal justices on COVID-19 religious restrictions in California and Nevada, according to CNN.

The DOJ has fought back against many of these restrictions. Attorney General William Barr set the tone for the DOJ’s attitude towards religious freedom during the pandemic by warning in an early April statement that “even in times of emergency,” federal law prohibits religious discrimination.

“Religion and religious worship continue to be central to the lives of millions of Americans,” Barr said. “This is true more so than ever during this difficult time.”

“Government may not impose special restrictions on religious activity that do not also apply to similar nonreligious activity,” the attorney general added. “For example, if a government allows movie theaters, restaurants, concert halls, and other comparable places of assembly to remain open and unrestricted, it may not order houses of worship to close, limit their congregation size, or otherwise impede religious gatherings.”

Barr also promised that the DOJ would be watching for any state or local government that “singles out, targets, or discriminates against any house of worship for special restrictions.”

Since this statement was issued, the DOJ has intervened in multiple cases of government crackdowns on churches and pastors, specifically in Nevada, California, Oklahoma, Illinois, Virginia and Mississippi.

The DOJ did not immediately respond to a request for comment from the Daily Caller News Foundation for this story.

Donation for ribbons -We are looking for one more donation for altar ribbons, to decorate the icon screen during the various seasons of the church year. The set we are wanting to purchase is green and will be used during the season of Pentecost—In June and July, as well as on Palm Sunday. If you are interested in donating, please contact Fr. Stavros.

God, Can I Ask You A Question

Me: God, can I ask You a question?

God: Sure

Me: Promise You won't get mad

God: I promise

Me: Why did You let so much stuff happen to me today?

God: What do u mean?

Me: Well, I woke up late

God: Yes

Me: My car took forever to start

God: Okay

Me: at lunch they made my sandwich wrong & I had to wait

God: Huummm

Me: On the way home, my phone went DEAD, just as I picked up a call

God: All right

Me: And on top of it all off, when I got home ~I just want to soak my feet in my new foot massager & relax. BUT it wouldn't work!!! Nothing went right today! Why did You do that?

God: Let me see, the death angel was at your bed this morning & I had to send one of My Angels to battle him for your life. I let you sleep through that.

Me (humbled): OH

GOD: I didn't let your car start because there was a drunk driver on your route that would have hit you if you were on the road.

Me: (ashamed)

God: The first person who made your sandwich today was sick & I didn't want you to catch what they have, I knew you couldn't afford to miss work.

Me (embarrassed): Okay

God: Your phone went dead because the person that was calling was going to give false witness about what you said on that call, I didn't even let you talk to them so you would be covered.

Me (softly): I see God

God: Oh and that foot massager, it had a shortage that was going to throw out all of the power in your house tonight. I didn't think you wanted to be in the dark.

Me: I'm Sorry God

God: Don't be sorry, just learn to Trust Me.... in All things, the Good & the bad.

Me: I will trust You.

God: And don't doubt that My plan for your day is Always Better than your plan.

Me: I won't God. And let me just tell you God, Thank You for Everything today.

God: You're welcome child. It was just another day being your God and I Love looking after My Children...

I'm Worried

By Fr. Niko Tzetzis

I'm worried.

I'm worried that nearly a year of isolation from other people has led us to a place where we have started to believe that we can live without one another.

I'm worried that the most contentious election and most irresponsible rhetoric in recent American history has brought us to a place where we're ready to cut the ties that bind.

I'm worried at how easy it is to pull the loose threads that will unravel the imperfect, messy fabric of our society. I'm worried that when it unravels, no one will be interested in weaving it back together better than it was.

I'm worried that so many believe their hope is in one man who can lead the people to someplace they believe existed in the past. I'm worried than so many others believe we can hack away at the heads of a hydra to solve our problems.

I'm confident in a God who endured suffering for our sake. I'm confident that the pain we endure as a people has meaning and teaches us. I'm confident that the love of God and our love for our neighbor will emerge like light into this dark world in time.

In the meantime, I'm not worried about that suffering for myself. As a new father, though, I worry about the world my son will know. It's so much harder to raise a child into a world where he will undoubtedly suffer than to live in that world myself.

So if not for me, then for my 6-month-old boy, find a way to lead with love. Find the narrow path.

Fr. Niko Tzetzis is the Assistant Priest of Holy Trinity-St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church in Cincinnati, OH.

Does Wearing a Face Mask Displace Trust in God?

Dr. James Emery White

I was recently at a farmer's market, and a particular family stood out to me. In a sea of face masks, they were the only ones not wearing them. Then I glanced down at the woman's shirt, and emblazoned on the front were the words "Faith Over Fear."

Then I got it.

They were apparently among those who feel that wearing a mask displaces trust in God. They may have even carried sentiments of "freedom over control," "facts over hype" or even "right over left." You'll understand if I don't touch those other sentiments with a 10-foot pole—I just won't take the bait—but I will not walk away from "faith over fear."

Not as a theologian, much less as a pastor.

You will not find a single case in the biblical record of God wanting people to throw responsibility and common sense to the wind in order to demonstrate faith in Him before a watching world. Yes, you find God calling people to do things that make no sense before a watching world as an *act* of faith—from making a boat on dry land in preparation for a flood, to walking around a city for seven days blowing horns.

Yet you won't find a case where someone presumes upon God's protection independent of God's promise of protection in a flagrant disregard of the reason and rationality He's employed them to use.

Do Not Test the Lord

Going further, what you will find are clear admonitions that we are not to take it upon ourselves to test God in ways He has not directly advised. In fact, the phrase "Do not test the Lord" is a common refrain. In the great critique of the sins of Israel in [Psalm 78](#) the phrase "they put God to the test" is mentioned not once, not twice, but three times.

In the Old Testament book of Numbers there is a telling story of the men of Israel wanting to confront the Amalekites and Canaanites in the name of the Lord. Moses warned them against it; the advantage would be their enemy's, and the Lord had not said He would be with them in their actions. The scriptural description is revealing: "... in their presumption they went up toward the highest point in the hill country, though neither Moses nor the ark of the Lord's covenant moved from the camp" ([Numbers 14:44](#), NIV).

Result?

"Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and attacked them and beat them down..." ([Numbers 14:45](#), NIV).

They presumed God would be with them. God wasn't. He never said He would be.

And lest we forget when the devil took Jesus to the holy city and had Him stand on the highest point of the temple saying: "If you are the Son of God... throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they



will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone" ([Matthew 4:6](#), NIV).

If that is not a "faith over fear" moment, I don't know what is.

Jesus' reply?

"It is also written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'" ([Matthew 4:7](#), NIV).

Foolishness over Wisdom Is Not Faith over Fear

I am a person of passionate faith. I have not once "feared" COVID-19, nor stayed awake at night trembling with anxiety. But I also wear a mask, practice social-distancing, and have led the church I have been entrusted with to engage in online services for the foreseeable future.

Out of fear? No. It has been out of a deep faith that reminds me to not test God, to not presume on God, but to use my very God-given faculties and reason to honor and glorify Him and care for myself, my family and His people.

Just as it is not fear over faith when I put my grandchildren in a car seat, get an annual medical examination, lock my doors at night and turn on my alarm system, wear a seat belt or any one of a thousand other things that add safety and protection and health to my life and the lives of others.

Purposefully choosing to avoid such things—such as using a car seat for your child—is not putting faith over fear. It would be putting foolishness over wisdom. And to do any such thing in the name of God?

You are then doing the one thing He has said you must never do.

Which is to test Him.

James Emery White is the founding and senior pastor of Mecklenburg Community Church in Charlotte, NC, and the ranked adjunct professor of theology and culture at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

~ February 2021 ~

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
	1 Women's Bible Study 10:00 a.m. Bible Study 6:30 p.m.	2 Presentation of Christ in the Temple Orthros 9:00 a.m. Liturgy 10:00 a.m. Suffering Book Study 6:30 p.m.	3** Paraklesis 6:00 p.m.	4 Griefshare 6:30 p.m.	5**	6 St. Photios Orthros 9:00 a.m. Liturgy 10:00 a.m. Young at Heart 11:30 a.m.
7 Orthros 8:45 a.m. Liturgy 10:00 a.m.	8 Bible Study 6:30 p.m. Orthodoxy 101 6:30 p.m.	9 Women's Bible Study 10:00 a.m. Suffering Book Study 6:30 p.m.	10** St. Haralambos Orthros 9:00 a.m. Liturgy 10:00 a.m. Paraklesis 6:00 p.m.	11 Griefshare 6:30 p.m.	12**	13 Orthros 9:00 a.m. Liturgy 10:00 a.m.
14 Orthros 8:45 a.m. Liturgy 10:00 a.m. Wear Red Sunday	15 Bible Study 6:30 p.m. Orthodoxy 101 6:30 p.m.	16 Women's Bible Study 10:00 a.m. Suffering Book Study 6:30 p.m.	17** Paraklesis 6:00 p.m.	18 Griefshare 6:30 p.m.	19**	20 Orthros 9:00 a.m. Liturgy 10:00 a.m. Community Outreach
21 Orthros 8:45 a.m. Liturgy 10:00 a.m. Men's Group 5:00 p.m.	22 Orthros 5:45 p.m. Orthodoxy 101 Teaching Liturgy 6:30 p.m.	23 Women's Bible Study 10:00 a.m. Parish Council Meeting 6:30 p.m.	24** Paraklesis 6:00 p.m.	25 Griefshare 6:30 p.m.	26**	27 Orthros 9:00 a.m. Liturgy 10:00 a.m.
28 Orthros 8:45 a.m. Liturgy 10:00 a.m. GOYA 5:00 p.m.						

St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church

2418 W. Swann Avenue

Tampa, FL 33609-4712

Office: (813) 876-8830 Fax: (813) 443-4899

office@stjohntpa.org

www.stjohntpa.org

NONPROFIT ORG.

U.S. POSTAGE

PAID

TAMPA, FL

PERMIT NO. 461

St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church

Timetable of Services

Saturdays: Orthros 9:00 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m. **Sundays:** Orthros 8:45 a.m. Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m.

Weekdays: Orthros 9:00 a.m. Divine Liturgy: 10:00 a.m.

Parish Priest Rev. Fr. Stavros Akrotirianakis

813-876-8830 (Office) 813-394-1038 (Cell)
frstav@gmail.com

Retired Priest in Residence Rev. Fr. Stratton Dorozenski
813-876-8830 (Office)

Retired Priest in Residence Rev. Fr. John Stefero
813-876-8830 (Office)

Pastoral Assistant Charlie Hambos
813-876-8830 (Office) 813-843-8471 (Cell)
chambos@stjohntpa.org

Pastoral Assistant Alex Limberatos
813-876-8830 (Office) 262-370-0586 (Cell)
alex@stjohntpa.org

Parish Council

Jim Armstrong, President 954-295-6665
Euripides Panos, Vice President 813-352-3972
John Zelatis, Secretary 813-727-2271
Gary Ward, Treasurer 813-846-3898
Demosthenes Mekras 786-417-7256
George Chagaris 727-420-1920
Amin Hanhan 813-846-2957
Nick Katzaras 863-581-2430
Jimmy Konstas 813-220-7352
Marilyn Sandborn 813-855-8678
Mike Xenick 813-340-8737

Office Staff

Debbie Bowe, Bookkeeper
debbie@stjohntpa.org fax:813-443-4899

Adult Greek School

Magda Myer 813-909-2327

AHEPA

Thomas Sakaris, President 201-819-2319

Altar Angels

Engie Halkias 813-932-5859
Sia Blankenship 813-968-8855

Basketball

Perry Katsamakias 516-403-3118
Jimmy Konstas 813-220-7352

Bible Study

Charlie Hambos 813-843-8471

Bookstore

Brett Mourer 813-376-9315

Suffering Book Study

Alex Limberatos 262-370-0586

Buildings & Grounds

Euripides Panos 813-352-3972

Chanter

Charlie Hambos 813-843-8471
Alex Limberatos 262-370-0586

Choir

Pauline Spencer, Director 813-390-1782
Ruth Losovitz, Organist 727-688-2782

Community Outreach

Greg Melton 813-967-2074

Connect Through Christ - Special Needs Ministry for Children

Dante and Lindsey Skourellos 813-765-9534

Dance Groups

H XAPA MAE, Alexandra De Maio 813-340-9668
Bessie Palios, 813-523-0347
Maraquet Edquid 813-422-8963
IIAPEA, Marina Choundas 813-877-6136
IIANHITYPI, Alexandra De Maio 813-340-9668

Daughters of Penelope

Nicole Leontsinis, President 703-585-7490

Finance Committee

Gary Ward 813-846-3898

Food Pantry

Anetta Alexander 813-758-2689

GriefShare

Donna Hambos 813-843-8412

Gasparilla Parking

John Kokkas 727-992-4165

GOYA

Michael & Bessie Palios 813-523-0346
goya@stjohntpa.org

Hope/Joy

George & Zackie Ameres 813-245-3813

Junior Olympics

Dwight Forde 727-685-9028

Men's Fellowship

Rev. Fr. Stavros N. Akrotirianakis 813-394-1038

Parish Nursing Ministry

Marcelle Triantafilou 612-396-5026

Orthodox Christian Fellowship

Charlie Hambos 813-843-8471

Oratorical Festival

Peggy Bradshaw 727-244-1374

Photography Ministry

Karina Findlay 813-476-9632

Philoptochos

Jeanie Nenos 813-451-9116

Stewardship

Chris Kyrus 757-672-1920
George Mitseas 813-748-1220

Sunday School

Vickie Peckham 813-758-3102

12 Disciples

Charlie Hambos 813-843-8471

Usher

Tom Georgas 813-985-0236

Welcoming Ministry

Maria Xenick 813-765-3587

Women's Bible Study

Rev. Fr. Stavros N. Akrotirianakis 813-394-1038

Young Adult

Charlie Hambos 813-843-8471

Young at Heart

Mike Trimis, President 813-784-4872
Mary Nenos, Vice President 813-935-2096

Youth Protection

Catherine Mitseas 813-571-0658

The Messenger of St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church is published on a monthly basis. Publication is the first of each month. Deadline for notices and announcements for The Messenger is the 10th of each month.

“May the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God the Father and the Communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.” From the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom.