

THE APOSTLE
MONTHLY NEWSLETTER
DECEMBER 2020
SAINT MARK ORTHODOX CHURCH
OF IRVINE

A Parish of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian
Archdiocese of North America
Metropolitan JOSEPH, Archbishop of New York
and Metropolitan of all North America
17840 Sky Park Circle
Irvine, CA 92614-6407
Tel: (949) 851-8933
Fax: (949) 851-0010
Email: frmlaffoon@yahoo.com
Website: www.st-mark-church.org

Very Rev. Father Michael Laffoon, Pastor

Residence phone: (949) 559-6133

Rev Fr. Patrick Irish, Attached

Rev. Protodeacon George Moubayed

Rev. Deacon Nicholas Mamey

Sub-deacon: Athanasius Fakhouri

Choir Director: Barbara Scholl

Chanters: Jacob Bahbah, Mark Ellis, Theresa

Joubran & Karim Youssef, Perry Ioannides,

Jason Ioannides

Teen Advisor: Fatin Fakhouri

2019 – 2020 PARISH COUNCIL

Chairman Kristin Chala {22}

Vice Chairman – Penny Skaff {22}

Secretary – Jerri Lynn Mamey {21}

Treasurer – Osama Kishek {23}

Assistant Treasurers- Michael Houry {21} &

Imad Alchammas {23}

Gisele Awayjan {23}

Lew Malouf {21}

Barbara Scholl {22}

Tammy Qutami {21}

[Number in brackets is the member's last year of his
or her current term]

Church School Co-Directors: Tammy Qutami and
Kristin Chala

Men's Club President: Ghassan Awayjan

Antiochian Women of St. Mark President: Vera
Bahbah

Teen SOYO President: Nadim Youssef

Pastor's Corner

Put the Dickens Back in Christmas

Fr. Stephen Freeman

In the late 1600's in colonial Boston, the celebration of Christmas was against the law. Indeed, anyone evidencing the "spirit of Christmas" could be fined five shillings. In the early 1800's, Christmas was better known as a season for rioting in the streets and civil unrest.¹ However, in the mid-1800's some interesting things changed the cultural response to the feast and, in 1870, Christmas was declared a federal holiday (which is to say that prior to 1870, Christmas was not a day-off in America). What happened?

American Christmas demonstrates the amazing influence of literature on a culture. The first important book was by the author, Washington Irving (of Sleepy Hollow and Rip Van Winckel fame):

In 1819, best-selling author Washington Irving wrote The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, gent., a series of stories about the celebration of Christmas in an English manor house. The sketches feature a squire who invited the peasants into his home for the holiday. In contrast to the problems faced in American society, the two groups mingled effortlessly. In Irving's mind, Christmas should be a peaceful, warm-hearted holiday bringing groups together across lines of wealth or social status. Irving's fictitious celebrants enjoyed "ancient customs," including the crowning of a Lord of Misrule. Irving's book, however, was not based on any holiday celebration he had attended – in fact, many historians say that Irving's account actually "invented" tradition by implying that it described the true customs of the season.

The second book, however, was, by far, the more influential: Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. When Dickens is dubbed, "the man who invented Christmas," it is not far from the truth. For the American cultural celebration of Christmas largely began through the popularity of Dickens' classic story. That same fact, though, accounts for much of the non-religious aspects of America's celebration.

Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* does not overlook the birth of Christ. It presumes the religious aspects of the day and its presence is woven throughout every part of the story-line. There is a brief mention of Bob Cratchett and his son, Tiny Tim, attending Church on the day. But it was not this part of the story that caught the popular imagination. All told, it was the "spirit" of Christmas that sold America on the importance of the day.

Dickens wrote in the depths of the Victorian era. That period was marked, both in England and America, by a rise of romanticism, a popular sentimentality for "old things," "traditions," and "customs." The century before had been dominated by the Enlightenment, when all things rational ruled the day. Indeed, it is not incorrect to see the sentimentality of the Victorian period as a reaction to the coldness of reason. It was a swinging of the cultural pendulum.

America's religious history has been a conflicted mix since the very beginning. The New England colonies (among the earliest) were settled largely by Puritans, dissenters from the Church of England, who wanted a radical reform of English Christianity. Unable to achieve their desires in England, they came to America and established their Churches here. They opposed Church festivals and frivolities of almost every sort. Their strict and dour form of Christianity waned and morphed over the decades, becoming a fairly moderate version of generalized Protestantism. The lower colonies (Virginia and to the South) were settled (officially) by Anglicans. However, migrations quickly populated those areas with dissenters, particularly the Scots-Irish who were largely Presbyterian with Baptists as well. Catholics were a tiny minority, restricted, for the most part, to Maryland.

English Churches outside of the Catholic and Anglican were non-liturgical. The "feast" of

Christmas was as absent as the "feast" of anything else. It was not part of their consciousness. Thus, the growth of a popular Christmas in the mid to late 19th century took place outside the walls of the Church. It became a cultural holiday, with an emphasis on family and the home.

Surprisingly, Christmas is probably far more a part of Protestant Church life in America today than at any time in our history. But the echoes of cultural Christmas remain strong. When Christmas Day falls on a Sunday, Christianity in America revisits its conflicted past. It is not unusual to see Churches of a more Evangelical background cancelling Sunday services, deferring to Christmas as a "family" celebration. For liturgical Churches (Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, etc.) such a practice seems scandalous in the extreme.

I might note, however, that the "power" of Christmas as an event in our culture, is rooted in the culture rather than the Church. In the Orthodox Church, Christmas is but one of twelve major feast days. If those feast days fall anytime other than a Sunday, attendance at Church will be thin indeed. And though Christmas is one of the three greatest of the twelve (Pascha, Christmas, Theophany), only Christmas and Pascha (always on a Sunday) receive great attention in America. Those of us who feel a certain superiority in our Church's celebration of the Christmas feast, would do well to reflect on our own neglect of the other feasts.

This is not an article about what "should" be. Cultures are what they are and got that way by their peculiar history. If America were an Orthodox or Catholic country in its beginning, many of the other major feasts would likely be national holidays and their customs would be widespread. Such is the case elsewhere in the world.

There are protests against the secular Christmas that say, "Put the Christ back in Christmas!" From a liturgical point of view I've wanted to add, "And put the Mass back in Christmas!" It is, after all, a feast of the Christian Church. Neither of these, however, will likely be dominant in a culture that once had little Christmas at all.

Another suggestion I might make is to "put the Dickens back in Christmas." I can think of no better

homage to the man who “created” the modern celebration of the holiday than to read his delightful A Christmas Carol. If you do not want to read, the single most faithful movie presentation of the book is (to my mind) the version with Jim Carrey .

But, more than this, would be the moral of Dickens’ story: Christmas is well-kept by a life of generosity and kindness. That dear story is one of profound repentance, the healing of relationships and the righting of wrongs. Dickens’ Christmas was synonymous with a life lived in accordance with the gospel. He said it well at the end of his story:

Bob Cratchett was very surprised, and so were many people who found Scrooge so changed. Scrooge became a better person. To Tiny Tim, who did not die, he was a second father. Scrooge became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city or town in the world could know. It was always said of Scrooge, that he knew how to keep Christmas well. May that be truly said of us, and all of us!

I absolutely think that Christmas should be a time for Christians to gather in Church to give thanks for the birth of Christ. But outside its doors, no one of us could do better than Scrooge. The busy-ness of Christmas, as well as the business of Christmas, could do well to listen to the words of Scrooge’s partner, Jacob Marley, the tortured soul doomed to wander the world in chains. Scrooge observed to him that he was always a good man of business. Marley replied:

“Business!” cried the Ghost, wringing its hands again. “Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!”

Would that such business were as popular as the tinsel and trees. Thank you Charles Dickens, for having said it so well.

The Advent (the Christmas Fast) continues through December 24. This fast, which lasts exactly 40 days, prepares us to celebrate the Feast of the

Nativity (Birth) of Jesus Christ, commonly known as Christmas. During this season we are reminded that the Christian life style must include alms giving (acts of charity), prayer and fasting. Therefore, we are asked to intensify these efforts. During Advent we should be praying more, giving more time and resources to those in need, eat less and more simply, and above all, seek to fast from sin.

The fasting rules are as follows: on all days we abstain from meat, poultry, dairy (milk, cheese etc. Fish, oil and wine may be eaten on Saturdays and Sundays (some also allow this on Tuesdays and Thursdays). The last four days of the Fast are strict fasting days (as in Great Lent). Fasting should always be combined with increased giving to the needy.

Last, but not least we should strive to fast from sin and come to Holy Confession before Christmas.

Feasts, Special Services and Events for December 2020

Sunday December 6, **Feast of St. Nicholas**

Wednesday December 2, 9 & 16, 6:00 p.m.,
Friday December 4, 11 & 18, **Advent Paraklesis**

Pre-Feast Vespers, December 20, 22 and 23; 6:00 p.m.

Thursday December 24, 9:30 a.m. Royal Hours of the Nativity

Thursday December 24, Orthros (8:00 p.m.) and Divine Liturgy for the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ (9:00 p.m.) No Services Christmas Day

Thursday December 31, Evening Services for the **Feast of our Lord’s Circumcision and St. Basil Day:** Orthros 5:45 p.m., Divine Liturgy 7:00 p.m.

January 2021 Advanced Calendar

January 1 New Year’s Day, St. Basil’s Day

January 6 Feast of Epiphany

January 17 St. Anthony the Great

January 25 St. Gregory the Theologian
January 30 Feast of the Three Holy Hierarchs

Selected Saint of the Month

**St. Spyridon the Wonder-worker of Trimithous
(December 12)**

Spyridon, the God-bearing Father of the Church, the great defender of Corfu and the boast of all the Orthodox, had Cyprus as his homeland. He was simple in manner and humble of heart, and was a shepherd of sheep. When he was joined to a wife, he begat of her a daughter whom they named Irene. After his wife's departure from this life, he was appointed Bishop of Trimythous, and thus he became also a shepherd of rational sheep. When the First Ecumenical Council was assembled in Nicaea, he also was present, and by means of his most simple words stopped the mouths of the Arians who were wise in their own conceit. By the divine grace which dwelt in him, he wrought such great wonders that he received the surname "Wonderworker." So it is that, having tended his flock piously and in a manner pleasing to God, he reposed in the Lord about the year 350, leaving to his country his sacred relics as a consolation and source of healing for the faithful.

About the middle of the seventh century, because of the incursions made by the barbarians at that time, his sacred relics were taken to Constantinople, where they remained, being honoured by the emperors themselves. But before the fall of Constantinople, which took place on May 29, 1453, a certain priest named George Kalokhairetes, the parish priest of the church where the Saint's sacred relics, as well as those of Saint Theodora the Empress, were kept, took them away on account of the impending peril. Travelling by way of Serbia, he came as far as Arta in Epirus, a region in Western Greece opposite to the isle of Corfu. From there, while the misfortunes of the Christian people were increasing with every day, he passed over to Corfu

about the year 1460. The relics of Saint Theodora were given to the people of Corfu; but those of Saint Spyridon remain to this day, according to the rights of inheritance, the most precious treasure of the priest's own descendants, and they continue to be a staff for the faithful in Orthodoxy, and a supernatural wonder for those that behold him; for even after the passage of 1,500 years, they have remained incorrupt, and even the flexibility of his flesh has been preserved. Truly wondrous is God in His Saints! (Ps. 67:3 5)

Parish & Organization News

All of our Organization activities are suspended until the State restrictions on gatherings is lifted.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY

- Christina Aldada 12/1
- Ramzi Ammari 12/10
- Khalid Ammari 12/6
- Naheda Artoul 12/16
- Christopher Azzam 12/22
- Vera Bahbah 12/19
- Daniel Chami 12/29
- Jerald Donvan 12/5
- Charlotte El-Hinn 12/31
- Salim Elsayegh 12/21
- Jerise Elqura 12/30
- Mary Fasheh 12/18
- Efstathios Geronikolaou 12/15
- Adele Habeeb 12/21
- Haitham Hanna 12/6
- John Jirjis 12/19
- John Karam 12/29
- Patricia Khamis 12/8
- Hilda Khamis 12/6
- Antoun Khoury 12/27
- George Khoury 12/15
- Fayez Khoury 12/18
- Melody Khoury 12/16
- Antoine Maalouli 12/17
- Susan Mitri 12/27
- Claude Mokbel 12/28
- Marina Najjar 12/12
- Lana Nino 12/10
- Jacob Qushair 12/29
- Nour Salameh 12/21

Manuel Salameh 12/25
Elias Sliheet 12/31
Shouki Sourì 12/27
Majida Sourì 12/11
Christiana Tarazi 12/26
Charlie Wakileh 12/17
Ed Wong 12/31
Michael Yaghnam 12/26

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY

Ghassan & Gisele Awayjan 12/16
Joseph & Salwa Bahbah 12/27

*The Apostle is a monthly newsletter of St. Mark
Antiochian Orthodox Church. **Parish
Organizations are to submit articles by the 15th of
the month to the Church office (949-851-8933)***

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IRVINE, CA 92614
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