

Visions

The Monthly Newsletter of the
Holy Taxiarchai and Saint Haralambos
GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH

7373 Caldwell Avenue, Niles, IL 60714 Phone (847) 647-8880
www.SaintharalambosGOC.org

"Where there is no vision, the people perish." (Proverbs 29:18)

CHRISTMAS 2020



REJOICE!

SCHEDULE OF WORSHIP SERVICES

CHRISTMAS LITURGIES

Morning of the Eve of Christmas Thursday, December 24
8:00 am - Royal Hours and Vespelar Liturgy

Christmas Eve (2 Liturgies) - December 24

5:00 pm - Orthros
6:30 pm - First Divine Liturgy
9:00 pm - Second Divine Liturgy

Friday, December 25 – CHRISTMAS DAY (2 Liturgies)

THE BIRTH IN THE FLESH OF OUR LORD AND GOD
AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST

7:00 am – Orthros
8:30 am – First Divine Liturgy

10:30 am - Second Divine Liturgy

*Note: There is no fasting from Dec 25 through Jan. 4

Sunday, December 27 - St. Stephen the First Martyr

8:15 am - Orthros
9:30 am - Divine Liturgy

Friday, January 1, 2021 – Feastday of St. Basil the Great

8:15 am - Orthros
9:30 am - Divine Liturgy

Sunday morning, January 3

8:15 am - Orthros
9:30 am - Divine Liturgy

Tuesday, January 5 - Eve of Theophany

(Day of strict fasting)

9:00 am - Royal Hours of Theophany and
◆ Vespelar Divine Liturgy of St Basil
◆ The Great Blessing of the Waters

Wednesday, January 6 – THE GREAT FEAST OF THEOPHANY

8:30 am – Orthros and Divine Liturgy,
followed by The Great Blessing of the Waters

Thursday, January 7 - St. John the Baptist

8:15 am – Orthros and Divine Liturgy

Sunday, January 10

8:15 am - Orthros
9:30 am - Divine Liturgy

Sunday, January 17—St Anthony the Great

8:15 am - Orthros
9:30 am - Divine Liturgy

Monday, January 18 - Ss Athanasios the Great

8:15 am – Orthros and Divine Liturgy

Sunday, January 24

8:15 am - Orthros
9:30 am - Divine Liturgy

Saturday, January 30 - The Three Hierarchs

8:15 am – Orthros and Divine Liturgy

Sunday, January 31

8:15 am – Orthros
9:30 am - Divine Liturgy

OUR SISTER COMMUNITY OF ST BASIL in Chicago invites you to Great Vespers at 7:00 pm on Thursday evening, December 31st in honor of the Feastday of St. Basil, and to Divine Liturgy the morning of Friday, January 1st. (Liturgy WILL be celebrated at St. Haralambos on January 1st.)

HOLY TAXIARHAI AND SAINT HARALAMBOS GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH NILES, ILLINOIS

Proistamenos.....	Fr. Constantine P. Botsis
Synefimerios.....	Fr. George Lamberis
Pastoral Assistant.....	Deacon John G. Suhayda
Chanter.....	Nick Harisiadis
Parish Council Officers	
President.....	Richard Kozlowski
Vice President.....	Nick Andrews
2nd Vice-President.....	George Giolas
Treasurer.....	Tom Sikoral
Secretary.....	Krystal Ioannou
Phase III Chairman.....	Perry Giannopoulos
Stewardship.....	George Giolas
Audit Committee Chairman.....	George Anastasiadis
Budget Committee Chairman.....	Tom Sikoral
Building & Grounds Chairman.....Michael Pontikes and Theodoros Karabatsos
Decor Committee Chairman.....	Stephan Aliferakis
Finance Committee Chairman.....	Tom Sikoral
Outreach Committee.....	John Pierce
Inreach Committee.....Voula Asimacopoulos, and Elaine Loomos
Communication Committee.....	George Giolas
School Board Chairman.....	Olympia Bournias
Social Media Committee.....	George Houpis
Food Fest Chairman.....	
Iconography over Altar (Funding).....	Dr. Tom Bournias
Philoptochos President.....	Eleni Kozlowski
PTA Co-Presidents (Afternoon School)....Eleni Gonzalez and Mona Giolas
PTA President (Preschool).....	Anargyros Kereakes
PTA President (Saturday School).....	Georgia Bepis
Greek School Principal.....	Mrs. Anastasia Liapi
Saturday School Director.....	Mrs. Andrianna Panayiotou
Preschool Director.....	Mrs. Magda Kelesidis
Sunday School Directors.....Presvytera Georgia Botsis and Anna Sikoral
Athletic Director.....	David Loomos
Scoutmaster.....	Vasily Zimbrakos
Asst Cubmaster.....	John Frake
Little Angels.....	Anastasia Liapi / Presvytera Diana
YAL	Christina Botsis
Telos Project.....	Katie Anastasiadis
Sr GOYA President.....	
Jr. Goya Advisor.....	Father George
Family Night	Theodora Megremis
Bookstore Manager.....	Jolynn Ruggerio
Web Master and IT.....	George Houpis
Facebook.....	Elizabeth Kotis/Christina Botsis
Office Staff.....	
	Barbara Skaouris, Alexandra Grivas, Anna Sikoral



2020 STEWARDSHIP

A TIME FOR EVERY PURPOSE UNDER HEAVEN

2020 STEWARDSHIP UPDATE

As of December 16, 2020

580 Stewards have committed \$378,233

THANK YOU!

Have you become a Steward for 2020 yet?

What's Happening at St Haralambos?

Holy Taxiarhai and St Haralambos GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH

7373 CALDWELL AVENUE, NILES, ILLINOIS 60714
PHONE: 847/647-8880

December, 2020

From Father Dean

Dear Friends and Stewards,

"It's the happiest time of the year." Maybe we need to be reminded.

Rejoice! As the song says, "It's the happiest time of the year!"

Maybe we need to be reminded. Our celebrations may be more subdued than other years, but commemorating "the Birth in the Flesh of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ," is a source of great power and joy that should take on GREATER significance during these stressful times. Christ is Born! Rejoice!

And what about the children? Their glee and anticipation should be enhanced, not diminished, in celebrating Christmas! Merry Christmas to all!

—+—+—+—+

I would like to thank everyone who contributed to our Holy Cross Fund. We succeeded in raising \$10,000 which has been sent to the Seminary in support of its needs. Our School, like all colleges, has been affected by the Covid Pandemic, and we were happy to offer our modest support.

Congratulations to our Philoptochos for a great success in the first ever Drive-Through Bake Sale! It was impressive to see their efficiency and creativity in preparing and packaging the baked goods—a sight to behold! Special thanks to Perry Giannopoulos in designing the online ordering format.

Congratulations to Angelo Demeros and his committee for a successful Men's Event! We are so grateful to all the participants for their generous support. A generous contribution was made to our Agape Ministry from the proceeds of this event!

Except for a few details, our new Community Center Expansion is ready, and we are expecting our occupancy permit to begin making limited use of it imminently. It is breathtaking! We are much indebted to our devoted and skilled Phase 3 Committee for their awesome energy and efforts to make this a reality.

We are pleased to report that our several Outreach Projects have continued their ministries through the pandemic in service to people in need. We are grateful to those who make these ministries happen! There have also been many donations (many of them online) to sup-

port Outreach ministries such as Agape. Thank you for your generosity. (I am impressed that very many donors help offset the processing fees in making online donations.) You can read more about our Outreach Ministries on page 7.

Commitment Cards for Stewardship 2021 are in the mail. Stewardship is the oxygen of our church! We are indeed grateful to all our stewards who have so generously supported the vision and ministry of our Holy Taxiarhai and St. Haralambos Church this year. The Covid pandemic has not only affected our church attendance and programs, but it has also affected our operating budget.

During these tough times, our church manifests to us that God is With Us.

During these tough times, our church manifests to us that God is With Us. In spite of the restrictions, our church remains strong to serve the needs of our people *because of your Stewardship!* Please give prayerful consideration as you make your commitment for 2021.

Our most valuable connection is Worship. We are doing our best to make our services as accessible as we can. Please note that we have 5 Liturgies scheduled on December 24 and 25 in an effort to serve as many people as possible! (See our Schedule of Holiday Services on page 4.) Even so, not much seating remains available at this time.

We are blessed that we are able to live-stream our church services into our homes. At the same time, it's not the same as attending church. I think we all look forward to the time when we will all connect by *being together* in church. Let us not be deceived to think that attending church and receiving Sacraments might not be important! We ask everyone to be patient, and look forward to the day when the restrictions will be lifted.

This Christmas issue of Visions also has some Christmas readings (pages 8 and 9) that you may find interesting.

On behalf of Fr George, Deacon John, Richard Kozlowski and the entire St. Haralambos family, we wish Merry Christmas to all!

Χριστός Γεννάται! Christ is Born! Rejoice in celebrating His Birth!

Fr. Dean

What's Happening at St. Haralambos?

- Letter from our Priest (pg 3)
- Schedule of Holiday Service (pg 4)
- What's Happening (Announcements (pg 4)
- Stewardship 2021 (pg 5)
- Reaching Out (pg 7)
- Christmas Readings (pp 8-9)
- Pictures of our new building (pg 10)

2020 CHRISTMAS SEASON WORSHIP SERVICES

Schedule Of Holiday Services- CHRISTMAS and ΕΡΙΦΑΝΥ

Sunday morning, December 20

8:15 am - Orthros
9:30 am - Divine Liturgy

Thursday, December 24

Morning of the Eve of Christmas
8:00 am - Royal Hours and Vesperral Liturgy

Thursday evening, Christmas Eve

5:00 pm - Orthros
6:30 pm - First Divine Liturgy

9:00 pm - Second Divine Liturgy

Friday, December 25 –

THE BIRTH IN THE FLESH
OF OUR LORD AND GOD
AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST

7:00 am – Orthros
8:30 am – First Divine Liturgy

10:30 am - Divine Liturgy 2

*Note: There is no fasting from Dec 25 through Jan. 4

Sunday, December 27 - St. Stephen the First Martyr

8:15 am - Orthros
9:30 am - Divine Liturgy

HAPPY NEW YEAR!!

Friday, January 1, 2021 –

Feastday of St. Basil the Great
8:15 am - Orthros
9:30 am - Divine Liturgy

Sunday morning, January 3

8:15 am - Orthros
9:30 am - Divine Liturgy

Tuesday, January 5 - Eve of Theophany

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9:00 am - Royal Hours of Theophany and
♦ Vesperal Divine Liturgy of St Basil
♦ The Great Blessing of the Waters

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-THE GREAT FEAST OF THEOPHANY

8:30 am – Orthros and Divine Liturgy,
followed by The Great Blessing of the Waters

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9:30 am – Divine Liturgy

CHRIST IS BORN!

ΠΡΟΓΡΑΜΜΑ ΙΕΡΩΝ ΑΚΟΛΟΥΘΙΩΝ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥΓΕΝΝΩΝ / ΘΕΟΦΑΝΕΙΩΝ

Κυριακή πρωί, 20 Δεκεμβρίου

8:15 πμ - Ὁρθρος
9:30 πμ - Θεία Λειτουργία

Πέμπτη πρωΐ, 24 Δεκεμβρίου

Παραμονή τῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ Γεννήσεως
8:00 πμ - Οἱ Βασιλικές Ωρες και Θεία Λειτουργία

Πέμπτη βράδυ, 24 Δεκεμβρίου

5.00 μμ - Ὁρθρος
6.30 μμ - (Πρώτη) Θεία Λειτουργία
9.00 μμ - (Δεύτερη) Θεία Λειτουργία

Παρασκευή, 25 Δεκεμβρίου

Η ΚΑΤΑ ΣΑΡΚΑ ΓΕΝΝΗΣΙΣ
ΤΟΥ ΚΥΡΙΟΥ ΚΑΙ ΘΕΟΥ ΚΑΙ
ΣΩΤΗΡΟΣ ΗΜΩΝ ΙΗΣΟΥ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ

7:00 πμ – Ὁρθρος
8.30 πμ – (Πρώτη) Θεία Λειτουργία

10.30 πμ – (Δεύτερη) Θεία Λειτουργία

Από τήν 25^η Δεκ. μέχρι τήν 4^η Ιαν. δέν νηστεύουμε.

Κυριακή, 27 Δεκεμ-Άγ. Στεφάνου Πρωτομάρτυρος

8:15 πμ - Ὁρθρος
9:30 πμ - Θεία Λειτουργία

ΕΥΤΥΧΕΣ ΤΟ ΝΕΟ ΕΤΟΣ!

Παρασκευή, 1 Ιανουαρίου 2021

Άγ. Βασιλείου τοῦ Μεγάλου, Άρχ/που Καισαρείας
8:15 πμ - Ὁρθρος
9:30 πμ - Θεία Λειτουργία

Κυριακή πρωί, 3 Ιανουαρίου

8:15 πμ - Ὁρθρος
9:30 πμ - Θεία Λειτουργία

Τρίτη, 5 Ιανουαρίου—Παραμονή Θεοφανείων

(Ημέρα νηστείας)
9:00 πμ - Οἱ Βασιλικές Ωρες τῶν Θεοφανείων
♦ Θεία Λειτουργία (Άγ. Βασιλείου)
♦ Τελετὴ τοῦ Μεγ. Αγιασμοῦ

Τετάρτη, 6 Ιανουαρίου

-ΤΑ ΑΓΙΑ ΘΕΟΦΑΝΕΙΑ

8:30 πμ – Ὁρθρος και Θεία Λειτουργία
Τελετὴ τοῦ Μεγ. Αγιασμοῦ

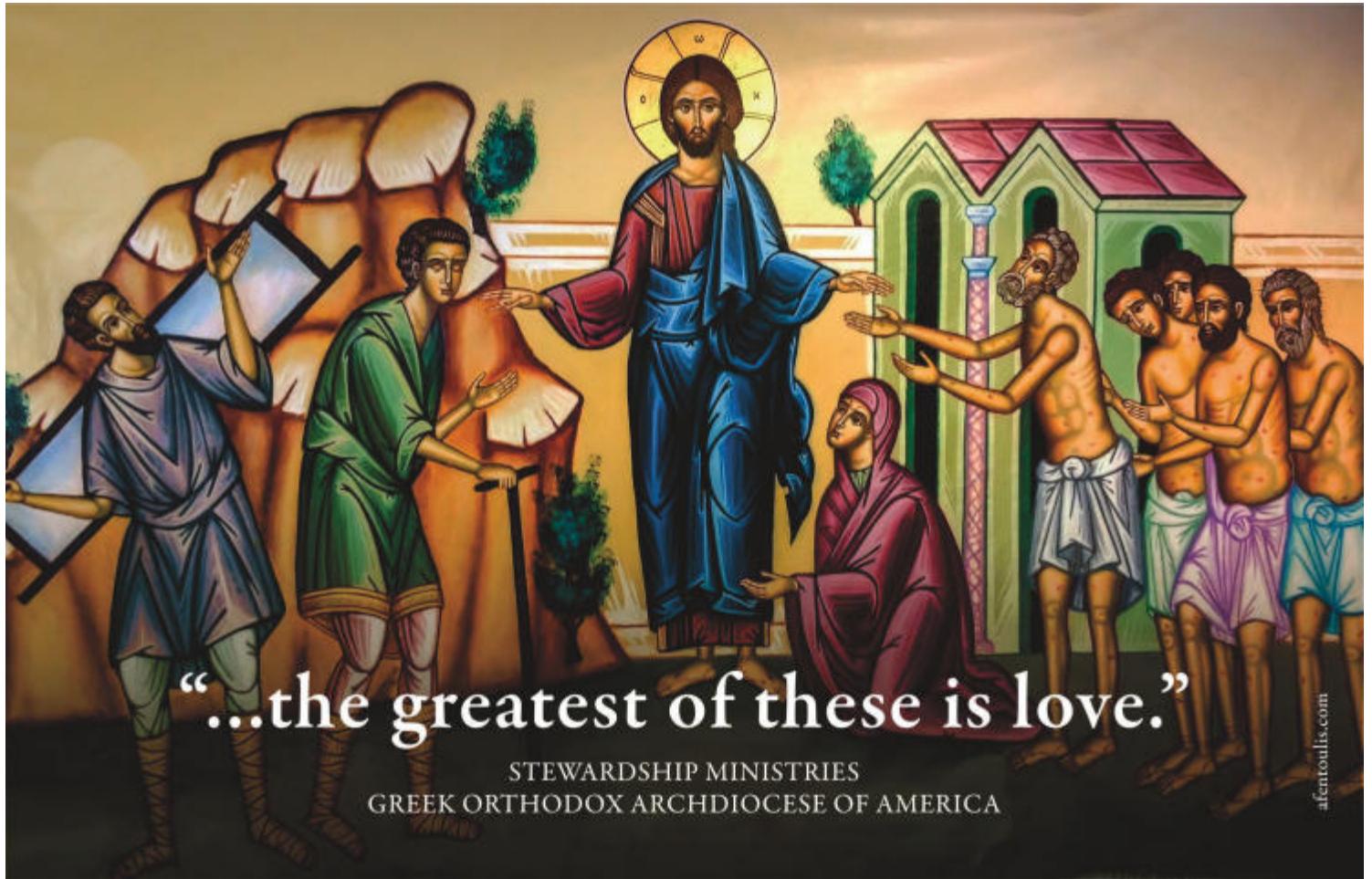
Πέμπτη, 7 Ιαν -Προδρόμου και Βαπτιστοῦ Ιωάννου

8:15 πμ - Ὁρθρος
9:30 πμ - Θεία Λειτουργία

ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ ΓΕΝΝΑΤΑΙ!

Stewardship 2021

Love Never Fails



“...the greatest of these is love.”

STEWARDSHIP MINISTRIES
GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AMERICA

afentoulis.com

Greetings, Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ tells us that the greatest commandment is to Love your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and the second commandment is Love your neighbor as yourself. Both of the greatest commandments instruct us to LOVE!

Why do you think we are instructed to Love? What is Love? The Bible explains it like this:

1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Love is patient, love is kind, it does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud, it is not rude, it is not self seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs, love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth, it always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always preserves. Love never fails.

If we applied all these in our lives we would then begin to live the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in Heaven.

*May the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.
Amen!*

**YOUR 2021 CHRISTIAN STEWARDSHIP FORM IS BEING SENT TO YOU.
AS YOU COMPLETE IT, LET YOUR COMMITMENT BE
AN EXPRESSION OF YOUR LOVE AND GRATITUDE TO GOD.**

What's Happening: Community News



THE MIRACLES OF OUR LORD

ST HARALAMBOS BIBLE STUDY

Every Thursday at 7:00 pm
with Deacon John Suhayda

Join from a computer or smart phone!

Meeting Link:

<https://meetingsamer15.webex.com/meetingsamer15/j.php?MTID=mdf46539600b8ddf18e153a683ba75dc7>

Meeting number: 620 736 188

Password: sthbiblestudy

(78424253 from phones and video systems)

Host Key: 293978

To join by phone: 1-408-418-9388

Access code: 620 736 188

Password: 78424253



XPICTOC ΓΕΝΝΑΤΑΙ!
CHRIST IS BORN!

OUR 2020 MEN'S EVENT was held virtually on November 25. The event was a great success, with over 220 tickets being sold! Many thanks to all who supported the event!

In a surge of generosity, many donated their winning \$100 tickets back to the church. This helped bring the net revenue from the Event to \$16,638.

Since we could not gather for dinner, the portion of the ticket that normally covers the cost of the meal was committed as a donation to the Agape Food Ministry. We are happy to announce that \$2,027 was donated to the Agape Ministry!

STEWARDSHIP 2021 — “LOVE NEVER FAILS”

Our 2021 Stewardship Campaign is in the mail! As always, we ask you to give prayerful thought and consideration as you make your stewardship commitment for the New Year. Due to the Covid pandemic, we are especially grateful for your support.

Did you know that our annual operating budget for 2021 is \$740,000? This comes to \$2,027 a day. If 365 of our stewards committed this amount, our 2021 budget would be covered! Can you consider a stewardship level of \$2,027 for the year?

We are grateful for your stewardship support at any level!

Congratulations to.....

.....Mr. Arthur G. Demeros on the opening of Demeros Funeral Services, located at 7566 N. Milwaukee Ave. in Niles (847-302-7176). We commend the valuable service offered and wish him well !



Did you know you can make payments or donations from your cell phone or on-line from the convenience of your home? If you would like to make a Phase 3 pledge or payment, offer Stewardship, donate toward iconography, or pay Preschool or Greek School tuition on-line, visit our website(www.saintharalambosgoc.org) and click on the online giving image.



Reaching Out!

OUTREACH

Our ST HARALAMBOS OUTREACH COMMITTEE, under the chairmanship of John Pierce, has laid a foundation of service and awareness that has proven to be epic. In addition to ongoing participation at Bessie's Table, they offer ongoing and meaningful ministry through Meals on Wheels, food pantry collections, the Winter Coat and Glove Drive, Ministry to Homeless under Bridges, and other philanthropic services.

Volunteers and donations to support these ministries are always welcomed!

- Outreach Committee volunteers on the 4th Sunday of each month, by preparing and serving food at BESSIE'S TABLE in Des Plaines.
- We thank everyone who contributed this year to our WINTER COAT DRIVE, under the direction of Argy Koutsikos. We are happy to report that we collected 14 men's coats and 15 women's coats, as well as 5 vest and fleece sweaters! These items were donated to "Connections for the Homeless" in Evanston, where they will be distributed to people in need.
- "Connections to the Homeless" is located at 2121 Dewey Avenue in Evanston. If you missed our Coat Drive but would like to contribute, they are accepting new or gently used weather-appropriate men's and women's clothes. They are open Monday through Friday from 9:00 am to 4:00 pm.
- Our Outreach Committee also prepares and delivers meals to shut-ins and struggling families on Saturdays, once a month, in a program called MEALS ON WHEELS, under the guidance of Anna Prekas.



With the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic and its economic impact, the AGAPE MINISTRY was created earlier this year, as well as the Metropolis Humanitarian Aid ministry to help provide food for people who are struggling.

Our Agape Ministry continues to serve those in need in the greater Niles Community. In the weeks since we started our grocery distribution program, we estimate that we have given out about 25 tons of food to families in need. There are a great many people in need, and we will continue this ministry until such time as it seems the need has subsided. People can drive up in the front driveway to receive groceries each Thursday from 3 pm - 4 pm.

You can offer financial assistance online at our church website Saintharalambosgoc.org or by sending a check to the office and designating it as "Agape Ministry." We are grateful to all our volunteers and donors for their support of this ministry! Also, if you would like, please feel free to drop off groceries from the following list for distribution:

Bread	Apples	Oranges	Potatoes	Canned tuna
Canned or dry beans		Crackers	Pasta	Pasta sauce
Canned vegetables		Rice	Peanut butter	Jelly Cookies

- We are happy to announce that \$5,250 was raised by this year's Men's Event for the Agape Ministry!

PROJECT HOPE is a Metropolis Humanitarian Aid effort to assist persons in need within the Greater Chicagoland area. We are collecting 3 kinds of kits that are distributed as needed: Care Kits, Covid Kits and Winter Kits. We are pleased to announce that St Haralambos has collected over 700 kits so far! The next Donation Day will be January 8, 2021 from 1:00 to 3:00 pm in our church parking lot.

CARE Kits should contain toothbrush and paste, sanitary wipes, body soap, deodorant, feminine products, water and a granola bar.

COVID Kits should contain toothbrush and paste, mask and latex gloves, mini hand sanitizer, body soap, deodorant, tissues and feminine products.

WINTER Kits are composed of toothbrush and paste, body soap, deodorant, handwarmers, water, gloves, socks and winter mats.

Please drop of kits PRE-packaged in Ziploc bags. Our next collection will be on January 9 from 1:00 to 3:00 pm.

Your contributions to these ministries are appreciated and we thank you!

PHILOPTOCHOS

It goes without saying that our Philoptochos is the prototype of outreach. Nationally and locally, Philoptochos is engaged in numerous outreach projects. The St. Haralambos Philoptochos has supported many persons with financial needs, and also offers hands-on ministry. They regularly participates in the Feed the Hungry food kitchen, hosted at Annunciation Cathedral, and outreach to residents at the Greek American Rehabilitation Center in Wheeling, IL, as well as other programs.

"The King Will Reply, 'I Tell You The Truth, Whatever You Did For One Of The Least Of These Brothers Of Mine, You Did For Me.'

Matthew 25:40

BibleWordings.com

CHRISTMAS HOPE

Presvytera Melanie DiStefano

Among the most hope-filled experiences of my life was hearing my child's first little trumpet of a cry. With the birth of a baby, an array of possibility and potential has come through us and into its own beautiful, autonomous existence. As we open the precious gift of new life, we are filled with joy and hope. How much more hope is offered to us then, when the child being born is The Child of the Most High God?

The Lord's Nativity – no matter what state of mind, body, or soul I find myself in – always brings me hope. In good times, this hope overflows into joyous celebration. In harder times, I may merely detect a glimmer of light. But it remains hope nonetheless, replete with the possibility of some future, fuller fulfillment.

Thinking back to my early childhood years, Christmas was filled with wonder and joy. One of my earliest memories is of our tinsel-laden Christmas tree aglow with colorful lights and ornaments. I remember a rustic nativity scene hand crafted by my dad. I spent many lengthy periods examining the figurines within it. Mary, Joseph, and Baby Jesus were the central figures, and the wise men, shepherds, and even animals all surrounded the holy family with reverence. An angel was fastened to the front peak of the thatch-looking roof. The scene was quiet and small like me; but it imprinted a message so warm, deep and vast into my soul: The Christ Child was so little, and yet He was so central.

One of my most treasured Christmas memories is as a five year old. I can picture the details vividly – including the dress I wore to Christmas Eve Divine Liturgy that my mother let me choose for myself. I recall the tree in my yiayia's house that had eclectic ornaments with hand-painted, detailed scenes of snow-covered houses and holly leaves. I can almost taste the lemony, savory Petakia (our familial reference to Kefthethes) bursting with flavor as I bit into them and broke the fast.

It was a custom in my father's extended family to attend midnight Liturgy and then gather at his parents' house immediately following, to celebrate the great Nativity Feast together. Grandparents, parents, uncles and aunts, siblings, and cousins abounding in numbers and joy, came together and celebrated the birth of Christ. I don't remember any of the physical presents I received – though there were plenty of them. What I remember most is the deep joy of knowing I belonged: I belonged to a loving, large, culturally-rich family, I belonged to a celebration of life, I belonged to my church and all the people who came together there to pray, I belonged to Baby Jesus who kept making His appearance in Nativity scenes in every home and place I went. Talk about hope running over!

There were less joyful Christmas celebrations over the years, for sure. Some were wrought with self-focus, insecurity, and emptiness. I went through the motions of attending church services and family gatherings, but the pure childhood delight had become tarnished by painful life events and my searching for meaning in this life, without searching for real Life. Even then, though distanced from Christ, I still knew the Light existed, because I began to realize I was in want of it. I didn't think I deserved God's goodness, but I knew it was...

One Nativity season as a young woman, I met my parents for Christmas Eve Liturgy. My life circumstances were dim at the time and I couldn't see a way out of them. The church service was peaceful, and I felt deeply grateful to be with my parents. When it was over, I watched my concerned parents waving as I drove away from their love and back toward my broken life. I wished I could go back to them and my family of old. The Christmas lights on the homes I passed shone with their wit-

ness of another, enduring Light. Jesus Christ was born. No matter what my external circumstances, that would not change.

Many Christmases followed and brought with them new opportunities for growth. On one in particular, my husband and I had planned to make the 2-hour drive to spend with our family following morning Divine Liturgy. We had a busy holiday season with planning church events, dealing with our child's health issues, and preparing for large gift exchanges. The presents were wrapped, and all our things were packed. One by one however, my husband and I became squeamish and overcome with a horrible stomach bug. My son was somehow miraculously spared.

Though I felt disappointed that we wouldn't be celebrating in the physical presence of our extended family, I can say it was one of the most serene Christmases we have ever shared. No feasting or family members abounded. We each lay on the couches in our living room listening to my son's Baby Mozart music streaming from his iPad, gazing at the large, softly falling snowflakes outside our picture window.

Lying there sick and weak, cut off from holiday hustle and bustle, I connected even more to the experience of another Family who also had been separated from family that first Christmas. Far from their home, the Holy Family made do with the humble resources God provided. No room for them in the inn but not without hope, for a shepherd's cave sheltered them. No warm blankets or bed in which to lay a newborn baby; nevertheless not without swaddling cloths and a hay-filled manger to warm Him. Extended family wanting - both Mary and Joseph's own parents had long since passed away – yet not without company when shepherds were ushered in by angels, and kings were led to them by a Star.

There in the quiet, rustic shelter far from the bustling, census-laden Bethlehem, lay Baby Jesus. He was small and vulnerable. Consistent with how He revealed Himself in the gospel narratives, He entered the scene of our life circumstances humbly. Hope seems to come with humility. Sometimes it takes sickness to quiet us down enough to experience calm and peace. Sometimes it takes being away from our community to realize the great gift of belonging.

So, fellow pilgrim of life, do not lose heart if you are missing and longing for family to celebrate life with. Just follow His Star, and you will find a Holy Family. Do not give up if you get sidetracked and become isolated, for deep within you something is telling your soul that there is a Light and a love waiting to be embraced and nurtured. Do not fear that you don't belong to the celebration of life: keep striving to do what it takes to survive and in the fullness of time, like the shepherds, you will be invited by a host of angelic powers proclaiming "good tidings of comfort and joy" that will cause you to proclaim that indeed "He is the Christ!" Do not be troubled if doubts assail you as they did Joseph, for God will send His angels to reaffirm His truth and show you where to go for safety. Do not despair when you fear insignificance, pain, sickness or even death, because you belong to the One Who came to share in all these hardships with you. He has made suffering a pathway to eternal life.

There is no problem too big that He cannot overcome, no sin too heinous that He cannot forgive, no pain so great that is immune to His comfort. He has not left us alone, nor will He ever leave us alone. He is Emmanuel, "God with us," and no matter what life's circumstances, that will not change.

Presvytera Melanie DiStefano is the Resource Coordinator of the GOA Center for Family Care

THE WORD BECAME FLESH

A Sermon by St John of Kronstadt on the Nativity of Christ

The Word became flesh; that is, the Son of God, co-eternal with God the Father and with the Holy Spirit, became human – having become incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. O, wondrous, awesome and salvific mystery! The One Who had no beginning took on a beginning according to humanity; the One without flesh assumed flesh. God became man – without ceasing to be God. The Unapproachable One became approachable to all, in the aspect of a humble servant. Why, and for what reason, was there such condescension [shown] on the part of the Creator toward His transgressing creatures – toward humanity which, through an act of its own will had fallen away from God, its Creator?

It was by reason of a supreme, inexpressible mercy toward His creation on the part of the Master, Who could not bear to see the entire race of mankind – which, He, in creating, had endowed with wondrous gifts – enslaved by the devil and thus destined for eternal suffering and torment.

And the Word became flesh!...in order to make us earthly beings into heavenly ones, in order to make sinners into saints; in order to raise us up from corruption into incorruption, from earth to heaven; from enslavement to sin and the devil – into the glorious freedom of children of God; from death – into immortality, in order to make us sons of God and to seat us together with Him upon the Throne as His royal children.

O, boundless compassion of God! O, inexpressible wisdom of God! O, great wonder, astounding not only the human mind, but the angelic [mind] as well!

Let us glorify God! With the coming of the Son of God in the flesh upon the earth, with His offering Himself up as a sacrifice for the sinful human race, there is given to those who believe the blessing of the Heavenly Father, replacing that curse which had been uttered by God in the beginning; they are adopted and receive the promise of an eternal inheritance of life. To a humanity orphaned by reason of sin, the Heavenly Father returns anew through the mystery of re-birth, that is, through baptism and repentance. People are freed of the tormenting, death-bearing authority of the devil, of the afflictions of sin and of various passions.

Human nature is deified for the sake of the boundless compassion of the Son of God; and its sins are purified; the defiled are sanctified. The ailing are healed. Upon those in dishonour boundless honour and glory are bestowed.

Those in darkness are enlightened by the Divine light of grace and reason.

The human mind is given the rational power of God – we have the mind of Christ (Cor. 2, 16), says the Holy apostle Paul. To the human heart, the heart of Christ is given. The perishable is made immortal. Those naked and wounded by sin and by passions are adorned in Divine glory. Those who hunger and thirst are sated and assuaged by the nourishing and soul-strengthening Word of God and by the most pure Body and Divine Blood of Christ. The inconsolable are consoled. Those ravaged by the devil

have been – and continue to be – delivered.

What, then, O, brethren, is required of us in order that we might avail ourselves of all the grace brought unto us from on high by the coming to earth of the Son of God? What is necessary, first of all, is faith in the Son of God, in the Gospel as the salvation-bestowing heavenly teaching; a true repentance of sins and the correction of life and of heart; communion in prayer and in the mysteries [sacraments]; the knowledge and fulfillment of Christ's commandments. Also necessary are the virtues: Christian humility, alms-giving, continence, purity and chastity, simplicity and goodness of heart.

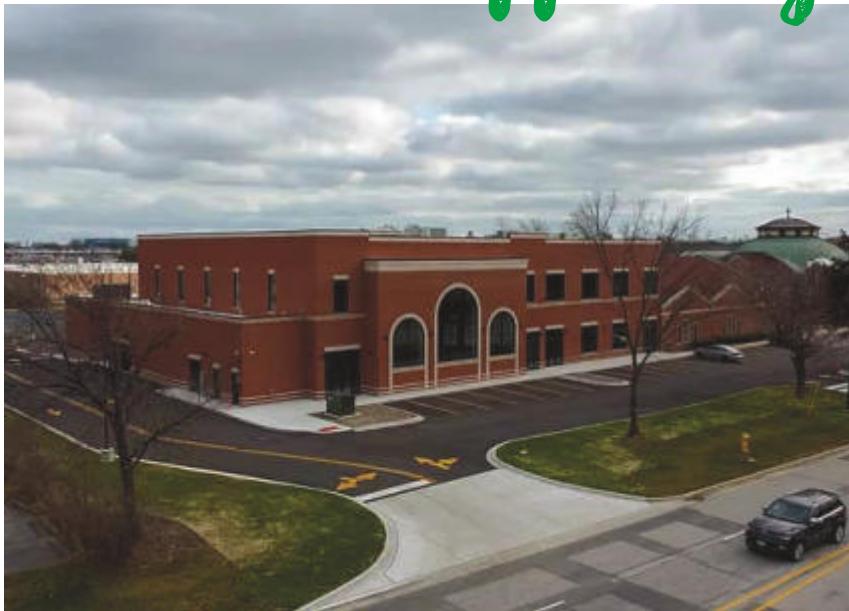
Let us, then, O brothers and sisters, bring these virtues as a gift to the One Who was born for the sake of our salvation – let us bring them in place of the gold, frankincense and myrrh which the Magi brought Him, as to One Who is King, God, and Man, come to die for us. This, from us, shall be the most-pleasing form of sacrifice to God and to the Infant Jesus Christ.

Amen.

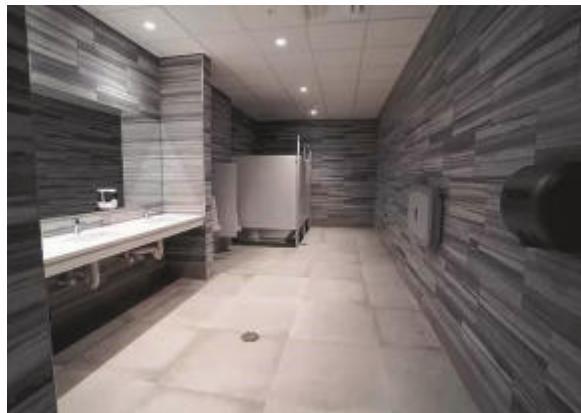
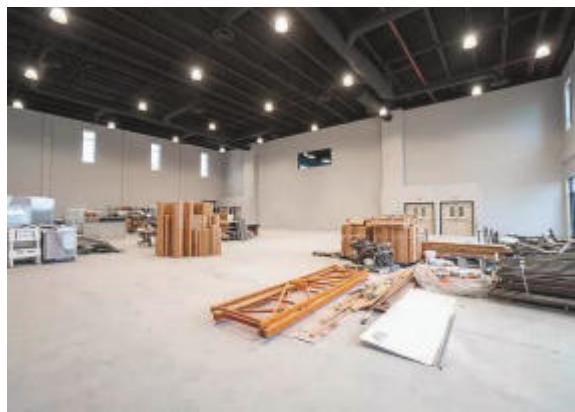


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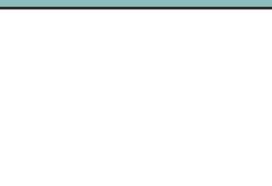
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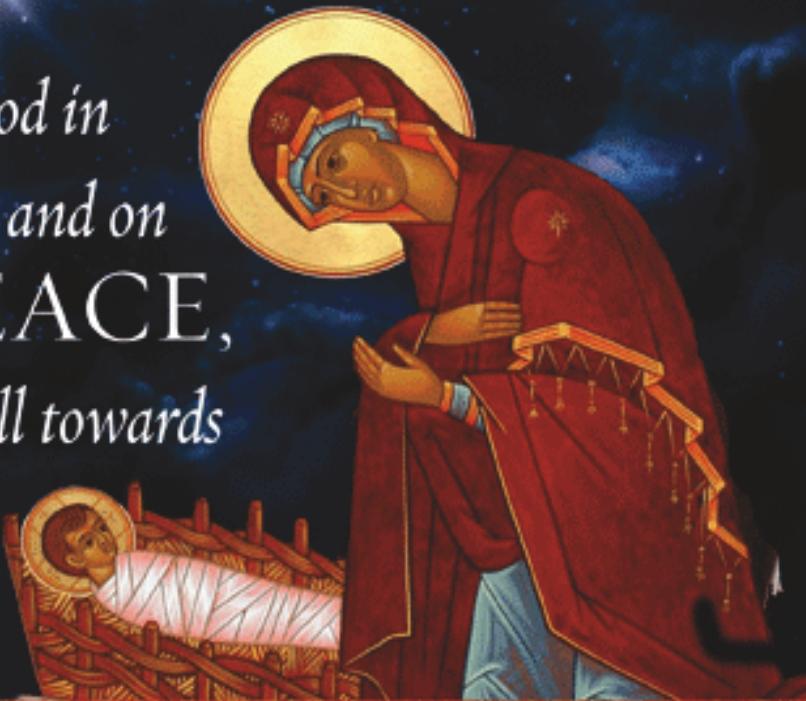


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